

The Loving Censor

By *Alexandros Kypriotis*

Translated from the German by *Jonathan Becker*

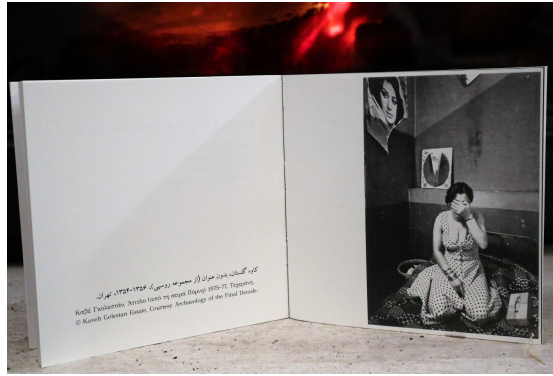
My colleague Mohammad Hemati and I first met in 2018 at the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium (EÜK) in Straelen. Before long, we were both delighted with each other's poems. For the past five years, I have had twenty-five short love poems sitting in a drawer. My publisher of choice said they were good, but that I would need twice as many for them to be turned in a book. Hemati's poems also sat in a drawer, some of them for as long as fifteen years. He never sent them to a publisher, he said—because his poems have a right to be published uncensored.

He was the fourth Iranian I had ever met, and the third who spoke of literary censorship. As though literary and censorship are conjoined twins in that country! It is impossible to have one without the other.

I suggested to him that we should start a translation workshop for contemporary Persian and Greek poetry, with German as the pivot language. First, we would work on our own poems, then translate those of other poets. It was a very intense, fruitful collaboration. Hemati encouraged me to submit my writing to other publishers. A week later, I received a letter of acceptance. I was overjoyed and inspired by this joy an idea was conceived to edit a collection of Hemati's poems—to be published as a Greek-Persian bilingual volume.

Two weeks later, we organised a reading at the EÜK, then I returned to Athens, Hemati would spend another month in Germany; we would see each other again at the EÜK the following spring. We were able to sign the contract for his first book of poetry with Skarifima publishing house even before his return home.

We continued collaborating via Skype. In one late-night work session a poem came up that was accompanied by a picture. The photographer Kaveh Golestan's widow had sent it to Hemati in an email years ago. For the publication, we wanted to have it in a higher resolution. We could have contacted the photographer's agent in England, but Hemati was looking for the photo online—it was nowhere to be found. I began searching for it myself, and within three minutes I had found it. No way! Yeah! No way! Yeah, yeah, here is the link! I cannot open the link! Why? The link cannot be opened inside Iran!

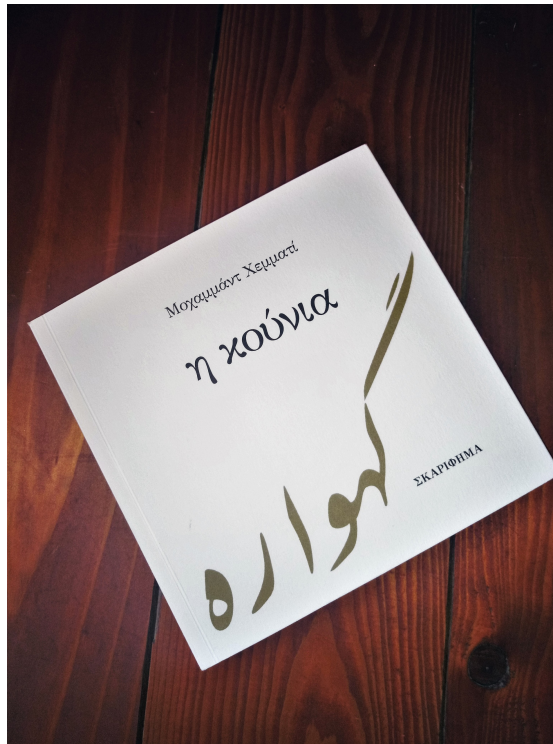


Kaveh Golestans Foto in Mohammad Hemati: »Die Wiege«

In that moment I realised what censorship actually is. It is a witch who silences poets and blinds them. I began considering whether my Iranian friend should be more careful in selecting his poems. Publishing them was risky.

When we met again at the EÜK and continued working, I would frequently ask him if this poem or that poem could be dangerous. Whenever he was in a good mood, he would say it was not dangerous at all; "Don't worry!" he would add, accompanied by a characteristic gesture. When the news had him feeling dejected, he said everything was dangerous, and "everything" sounded bigger than the world itself. Then, he would choose another poem, read it to me and ask whether I liked it. Only then would we begin working on it. To me, they were precious diamonds, meant to be excavated.

One day, he read me a harrowing poem. It was titled "Statistic", inspired by the PEN center's figures on acts of violence committed against writers, journalists, and publishers in the first half of 2007. After we had finished the translation and I read his own poem to him in my native language, I heard myself say: No! I'm not doing it! I can't do it! It was difficult to admit, to myself and to him, that I wanted to defuse the poem, to censor it. If anything were to happen to him because of "Statistic", I would feel forever guilty. It was a delicate situation.



Mohammad Hemati: »Die Wiege«

Mohammad Hemati's book of poems *Die Wiege* [The Cradle] was published—without "Statistic"—as a bilingual edition in November 2019, the poet attended the first reading in Athens. One of the verses read was:

Nur die Sprache der Kugeln verstehen wir nicht

die Sprache ihrer Gewehre,

die nicht mehr den Feind vertreiben,

sondern auf die Brust des Freundes zielen.

[It is only the language of bullets we do not understand
the language of their rifles,
which no longer drive out the enemy,
but are pointed at the chest of a friend.]

At the same time, protesters were shot to death in Iran.



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Alexandros Kypriotis is a freelance author and translator and lives in Athens. His translations into Greek include the works of Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Ernst Weiß, Hans Erich Nossack, Thomas Bernhard, Mario Wirz, Jenny Erpenbeck, and Katharina Bendizen. In 2019, he was *Translator in Residence* at the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium in Straelen. He co-founded the international project *Abolish Borders With Words*, in which more than 40 poets and translators are involved.

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