

In Memoriam

Khalil Mostowfi (b. Tabriz, 1941–d. Tehran, 20 February 2020): Bookseller, Assessor of Manuscripts, Lithographs, and Rare Titles in Iranian Studies



Khalil Mostowfi

Khalil Mostowfi was born in the old Khiābān neighborhood in Tabriz to a merchant family with a keen interest in books and trading relations in the Caucasus.¹ In 1948

¹In recollections of his childhood, Mostowfi always fondly remembered his father's library at home which included Baku editions of many Persian volumes he grew up with. See *Jām-e Jam Online*: <https://jamejamonline.ir/fa/news/788759/> پاتوق 50-ساله

he began his studies at Kamāl School in Tabriz, where he completed both his primary and secondary education. In these early years, and while still at school, he also worked as an apprentice at Soroush Bookstore, owned by a relative, Hājj Hossein Soroush Tabrizi.²

Around 1963, Mostowfi and his family moved to Tehran, where he first worked at the Tehran branch of Soroush Bookstore and then, following the recommendation made on his behalf by Hājj Hossein Soroush, also worked at Adabiyeh Bookstore, owned by Hājj Vali Adabiyeh Tabrizi. This bookstore was located at Nāser Khosrow Street, which at the time was one of the main centers of the book trade in Tehran.³ It was at Adabiyeh Bookstore that Mostowfi initially acquired firsthand knowledge of manuscripts and of the market for antiquarian books, in which he eventually became an expert. In 1966 he opened his own shop, Ketābkhāneh-ye Mostowfi, at 185 Shāhābād Avenue, between Sa‘di and Zahir al-Islam streets, near Parliament Square (Bahārestān) in central Tehran. Gradually the shop became a meeting place for collectors and the literati to discuss and to acquire or transact old books and manuscripts—which was perhaps an indication of the very close relationship that traditionally existed between booksellers and scholars. Literati used to frequent certain bookshops, sit and socialize, and in some cases even used them as their postal address.⁴

In the 1960s Shāhābād Avenue, within walking distance of the old Dār al-Fonun college and Tehran University’s off-campus Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, was already established as a center for bookstores. Some of these bookstores had branched out from the older outlets in Tehran bazaar. For instance, in the same vicinity there were bookstores, such as Asadi (also near Bahārestān Square) and Ramazāni.⁵ Within a short walking distance were the Ibn Sinā bookshop at Mokhber al-Dowleh Square and Ketābforushi-ye Dānesh in Sa‘di Street, founded in 1935 by Sayyed Nurollāh Irānparast (1910–92).⁶ Other bookstores in the same vicinity who were also publishers, included Eqbāl, Safi-‘Alishāh, and Amir-Kabir

²At the time Soroush Bookstore was well-known and had branches in Tabriz and Tehran located respectively at the Bazaar-e Shishegar-hā and Bazaar-e Soltāni.

³Although the accurate pronunciation of the name is Nāser-e Khosrow, in colloquial usage the *ezāfeh* is often dropped. Other well-known old bookshops in Nāser Khosrow Street that survived into later periods included Eslāmiyeh, Marvi, and Mortazavi (the last mentioned situated at Hājj Nāyeb Alley, off Nāser Khosrow Street).

⁴There were also occasions in which booksellers would delve into their own inventory to compile and compose miscellanies. For one such example in late Qajar period, see Tehrāni, *Fawāka al-Basātin*; and Gheissari, “*Fruits of Gardens*.”

⁵Asadi was responsible for many reprints of valuable books from India and elsewhere, including al-Bundārī’s early prose translation of the *Shāhnāme* into Arabic. For Ramazāni, see Sa‘dvandīan, *Ebrāhīm Ramazāni*.

⁶For Irānparast and Dānesh bookstore, see Qāsemi, *Dānesh*. Irānparast also regularly held meetings and book talks at his bookshop. For his earlier years and his assistance with the printing of the *Armaghān* periodical, see Vahid-Dastgerdi, “Āqā Sayyed Nurollāh Irānparast.” He was the son of Sayyed Mohamad-‘Ali Dā‘i al-Islam (1875–1951), who was a noted author, translator, and lexicographer and a long-time resident of India. In his earlier years Iranparast had studied in India and later maintained close business relations with Indian suppliers and in turn also supplied books to a number of European bookshops such as Thornton’s in Oxford.

that was founded by ‘Abd al-Rahim Ja‘fari (1919–2015) and soon became a leading publishing house.⁷

Mostowfi Bookstore was a small and modest shop with shelves on three walls from the floor to the ceiling that were filled with a selective range of classics in Iranian studies from history and genealogy to literature and geography; it also housed an oversized lithograph edition of popular titles that were mostly printed in the nineteenth century in India, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, as well as in Iran. There was a special section on the shelves within easy reach of his desk with a clearly visible notice “These Books Are Not for Sale”—these mostly consisted of early editions of catalogues of rare books that worked like a toolkit for him. This sign often perplexed casual customers, who would soon realize that this was not an ordinary bookshop. Soon after its inauguration the shop became a favorite haunt for small circles of the literati and Iranologists from home and abroad who would, over the next five decades, frequent the shop to inspect private collections that had come up for sale or discuss manuscripts and old books. His years of direct exposure to various library collections and firsthand experience with manuscripts and lithograph editions provided him with an opportunity to be closely associated with or consulted by many luminaries of his time, such as Jalāl al-Din Homā‘i (1900–80), Jalāl al-Din Mohaddes Ormavi (1904–79), Sayyed Mohammad Mohit-Tabātabā‘i (1901–92), Mojtabā Minovi (1903–77), Khān-Bābā Moshār (1900–80), Mohammad-Taqi Dānesh-Pazhuh (1911–96), ‘Ali-Naqi Monzavi (1923–2010), Ahmad Monzavi (1925–2015), Iraj Afshār (1925–2011), Sayyed ‘Abdollah Anwār (b. 1924), and Javād Safinejād (b. 1929). Among them Mostowfi was more regularly in contact and in company with Moshār (who lived near his bookstore), Dānesh-Pazhuh, and Afshār.⁸ His most regular and enduring association, however, was with ‘Abd al-Hossein Hā‘eri (1927–2015), who was arguably the doyen of Iran’s librarians and a longtime head of the Majles (Parliament) Library. Mostowfi collaborated with Hā‘eri for close to forty years at the Majles Library—he was a member of the Majles Library committee for the authentication, appraisal, and acquisition of manuscripts and rare titles.⁹ He was also a member of the Council for the Registration of National Heritage at Iran’s Ministry of Cultural Heritage.

Mostowfi’s expertise combined with a professional manner usually devoid of superfluous interjection of peripheral topics of conversation, combined with his signature verbal economy and focused gaze, inspired confidence within both private clients and institutional circles.¹⁰ Mostowfi also regularly and routinely dealt with domestic collections. Once his reputation was established as an expert and honest assessor with access to potential buyers, private collectors turned to him to appraise or sell their material. In good

⁷For a lucid survey of bookstores in Tehran in the first half of the twentieth century, see Marashi, “Print Culture and Its Publics.” Amir-Kabir was founded in 1949 and at first was located at Nāser Khosrow Street; see Ja‘fari, *Dar Jost-o-ju-ye Sobh*. For a detailed survey of bookstores and publishers, see Āzarang, *Tārikh va Tahavvol-e Nashr*; see also Haddādi, *Tārikh-e Shafāhi-ye Ketāb*.

⁸For Mostowfi’s receollections of Moshār, see Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, “*Khānbābā Moshār*,” pp. 83–87.

⁹See Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, “Darbāreh-ye Ostād Khalil Mostowfi.”

¹⁰For additional information on Khalil Mostowfi and his bookstore, see Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, “Safar be Hend,” Parts I and II. See also *Ruznāmeḥ-ye Shahrvand*, “*Goftogu bā Khalil Mostowfi*.”



Mostowfi Bookstore, 185 Shāhābād Avenue, Tehran

measure such a market resulted from a certain set of social variables, such as the inevitable generational change in book collector families, downsizing residential settings, and inheritance matters. Such private collections often consisted of property deeds, privately arranged documentation (such as promissory notes and affidavits), business accounting books and ledgers, or nineteenth-century lithograph editions of popular titles such as prayer books, various lithograph editions of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and *Romuz-e Hamzeh*, or literary classics such as volumes by Rumi, Sa‘dī, and Hāfez, and bound issues of old periodicals such as *Sharaf* (1882–91) and *Sherāfat* (1896–1904) published in Tehran or bound issues of *Habl al-Matin* that was initially published as a weekly in Calcutta (1893–c. 1930) and later also as a daily newspaper in Tehran (1907–9) and in Rasht as well.¹¹ At a rela-

¹¹Gradually the upkeep of private papers became a challenge to new generations as almost all of these items, for practical purposes, were now obsolete, yet they had significant potential value for research and archives. For the significance of private papers for Qajar historiography, see Gheissari, “*Khatt va Rabi*.”

tively smaller scale there were manuscripts of the *Qur'ān* or the literary Persian classics with tangible market value; here Mostowfi's expertise was often solicited.

His passion for manuscripts and rare books motivated him to travel to various places around the country to secure new acquisitions. For the same purpose he also regularly traveled abroad, mostly to India. For instance, during 1971–78, he frequently traveled to India (twenty times by his own estimation) in order to acquire Persian manuscripts, lithographs, and rare books.¹² In addition to his acquisition of and trade in rare titles and assessment of manuscripts, from time to time Mostowfi also worked as a publisher—for instance, during the period 1980–2000 *Ketābkhāneh-ye Mostowfi* published some twenty titles.¹³

Over the years Mostowfi closely collaborated with a number of major Iranian research libraries such as Tehran University's Central Library and Documentation Center; National Library of Iran; Majles Library, Museum, and Documentation Center (which, in addition to its own collection, also housed the stacks of the former Senate Library); Rezā 'Abbāsi Museum in Tehran; and the Malek Library, also in Tehran. In 2008 he donated some seventy-three volumes of rare books and manuscripts to the National Library of Iran. This was followed by another donation, in 2018, of some 500 manuscripts and rare titles to the Āstān-e Qods-e Razavi Library at Mashhad.

During his lifetime Mostowfi was widely recognized for his expertise in and contributions to the preservation of manuscripts and rare books relating to Iranian studies. He was acclaimed as "Distinguished Expert" by the National Library of Iran at its inaugural Ceremony in Recognition of the Preservers of Manuscripts (2000); as "Distinguished Bookseller" by the Ministry of Culture at the Annual Book Week (2009); and, shortly before his passing, as an outstanding "Book Donor," by the Āstān-e Qods-e Razavi Library at their Fourth Ceremony in Recognition of Book Donors (January 2020).¹⁴

Khalil Mostowfi passed away on Thursday 20 February 2020 and is buried at the Behesht-e Zahrā Cemetery south of Tehran.

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¹²Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, "Darbāreh-ye Ostād Khalil Mostowfi." See also Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, "Safar be Hend," Parts I and II.

¹³Some of these titles included Esfahāni, *Tazkareh-ye Khatt va Kattātān*; Karimzādeh Tabrizi, *Asnād va Farāmin*; Garmrudi, *Ruznāme-ye Mousum be Chahār-fasl*; and Zahir al-Dowleh, *Safarnāme-ye Zahir al-Dowleh*, among others. See further Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, "Darbāreh-ye Ostād Khalil Mostowfi."

¹⁴Sādeqzādeh Vāiqān, "Darbāreh-ye Ostād Khalil Mostowfi," and Gholāmi-Jalīseh, <https://t.me/s/jalise?before=138> (posting under: February 21, 2020).

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