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Dialogues at Peace Museums – Making Peace Museums More Interactive

The Treasures of the Tehran Peace Museum

“An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.”

Gene Knudsen Hoffman

Introduction

The Tehran Peace Museum (TPM) in the Islamic Republic of Iran opened its doors to the public in 2011. The Museum is located in the city’s central park – the Park-e Shahr - a serene and peaceful location which offers tranquility and space for reflection in the midst of the country’s bustling capital city. The TPM’s objective is to develop a culture of peace through the medium of sharing the inhumanity caused by chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. The TPM’s philosophy is that peace is much more than the absence of war and by simultaneously educating visitors about warfare, the Museum opens a dialogue with visitors with a mutual knowledge-sharing of warfare and its consequences to open a discussion on how to achieve global peace. The TPM’s unique feature is what it calls its “treasures” – the veterans and chemical weapons survivors of the Iran-Iraq War – peace activists who act as guides within the Museum and share their personal experiences with visitors. Their role is to start a compassionate conversation with guests, listen to what they have to say and open the many doors to friendship and peace.

Opening Dialogue – The Role of Veterans and Chemical Weapons Survivors

During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi forces used Sulphur mustard gas as a weapon of mass destruction despite its prohibition under the 1925 Geneva Protocol. By the end of the war, approximately 20,000 chemical bombs had been deployed on the Iranian military and civilians. Consequently, over 100,000 Iranians were exposed to chemical weapons. Today, approximately 65,000 of these survivors continue to be treated for the long-term health effects of exposure to chemical weapons: respiratory difficulties; skin burns and lesions; impaired sight; reduced mobility causing diabetes and obesity; reduced immunity which

leads to heart disease and the risk of cancer; temporary sexual dysfunction; and the psychological stress and social stigma that accompanies a life as a perpetual invalid.

The TPM is privileged to have several of these survivors who volunteer in playing a crucial role in the Museum. Not only do these “treasures” take an active part in the management and day-to-day running of the museum, their most significant contribution is being engaged as tour guides. In guiding visitors around the museum, the survivors share their personal and very harrowing and painful experiences of warfare. Visitors, therefore, are offered a singular opportunity to share the first-hand visible and non-visible experiences of conflict and open a dialogue which often leads many visitors to share similar experiences about themselves, family members or friends.

Visitors to the TPM have commented on the multi-dimensional experience they encounter. For visitors, it is not simply a quiet walk around a museum, but an interactive journey where shared views and opinions are openly welcomed. The opportunity to discuss the content of the displays, ask questions and make connections not only enhances their understanding of Iranian military history, but also enables visitors to share their perspectives on war and peace.

The Catharsis of Conversation

In opening such solicitous conversations between the survivors and the visitors, the TPM has witnessed the benefits brought about by such interactive dialogue. The catharsis of conversation empowers both the guides and the visitors to be able to openly share both painful and happier experiences within the safe and non-judgmental environment of the Museum. This creates a knowledge exchange, which eventually leads to another conversation about how to attain the aspiration of world peace.

For the survivors, however, this is especially important in empowering them with the self-confidence they have hitherto lacked incurred by the social stigma prevalent in a society that often sees war veterans as a burden on the taxpayer and the social security system. Many share their experiences of such public prejudice for their appearance and constant coughing. However, in coming to the TPM to volunteer, this has opened doors for the survivors to engage with others, feel socially accepted and respected. Many of the survivors have participated in the TPM’s [Oral History Project](#), and have shared their personal stories which are available to read on the Museum’s website.

The TPM also welcomes the families of survivors and provides a support base for the entire family unit. Families have been offered *Life Skills Classes* by a professional medical practitioner, who provided an inclusive forum for the veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and bipolar disorder. The veterans and their wives learned techniques and strategies to overcome depression and cope with anger management. Families were also given the opportunity to improve their inter-personal communications skills through interactive problem solving sessions.

Overcoming Stigmatization



Ali Askhari, TPM Volunteer Guide and War Veteran: “I have friends and family members who won’t even shake my hand. They are repulsed by my injuries and my constant coughing. When I come to the TPM I tell people we must share our medical knowledge and share our understanding with other countries, so that they can help save the lives of other people too, whatever country they live in.”

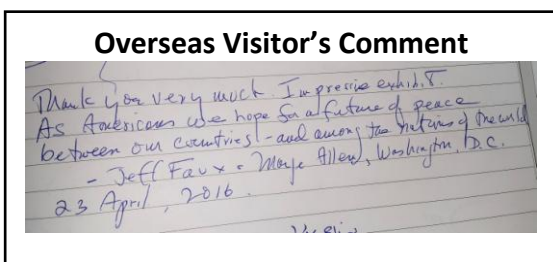
Veterans' wives have also participated in entrepreneurship classes, where they have learned handicraft skills and how to set up their own small business selling their art work. As well as the economic benefits, these classes have enable the members to engage in meaningful discussions and form new friendships.

The TPM offers a safe environment for survivors and their families to openly communicate with others and make new friends. Such opportunities have enabled the veterans to confidently open dialogue with visitors (both local and foreign) and in doing so, they begin to build bridges and make new connections.

Building Bridges

In talking to the visitors, the veterans also have an opportunity not only to share their experiences and their culture, but also to learn about other countries. In this way, barriers are broken down, old prejudices fade away and new friendships are formed.

For many foreign visitors, it is true to say that they come to Iran with a historico-political perspective of the country gleaned from biased reporting and a circumscribed knowledge of the country's recent history. After visiting the TPM, foreign visitors invariably leave Iran with a completely different perspective from the one they had when they arrived. Visitors to the TPM have said that they leave having made an emotional connection to its members, feeling that they have a deeper understanding of Iranians, their history and, for some, a war they had never even heard about.



The parallels between Iranian and foreign visitors are remarkably similar. At the beginning of each tour, all visitors are astonished at the cruelty of chemical weapons and are initially perplexed that a museum exhibiting the horrors of warfare is, in fact, a vehicle of peace education. For Iranians – many of whom are able to make personal

connections with a war that is within living memory - peace education is not taught in schools, where the Iran-Iraq War tends to be glorified. Consequently, local visitors begin to see the War from a different perspective and, along with foreign visitors, begin to question why countries must go to war in the first place. This opens a dialogue about the various avenues towards achieving peace.

As visitors reach the end of their tour, there is a mutual understanding that everyone is part of a global community working collaboratively towards peace. It may be the end of the tour, but it is the beginning of a new journey. Many local visitors are so highly motivated by their experience that they stay in touch with the museum through social media and others volunteer and becoming involved in the Museum's many peace projects. Foreign visitors stay in touch via e-mail and recommendations to friends to visit when they come to Iran.

The TPM welcomes all visitors and actively encourages younger visitors, children from Kindergarten to High School, to come to the museum and learn about peace.

Younger Visitors

The TPM actively encourages younger visitors to the museum not only to visit but also to participate in its many peace education projects tailored to suit young people. School-aged children, and even little people under the age of 7, are frequent visitors to the museum. Their journey normally begins with an age-appropriate film about peace and friendship by the late Iranian film director, Abbas Kiarostami. Children are encouraged to ask their own questions and engage in meaningful and relevant-to-them discussions.



The Under-7s

For the very young children, an indirect approach to teaching peace is employed. The war veterans spend time with the children but do not discuss war with them. In addition, the lights to the display panels are switched off so that this age-group are not exposed to disturbing images. The Museum's educators encourage the children to play participatory and collaborative group games and encourage conflict resolution through dialogue and mutual understanding. One particular exercise is known as *Finding My Emotion*, whereby the children are invited to express how they would feel in certain situations, how they would like to treat their friends and how they would like to be treated. The TPM's volunteers read appropriate "problem-solution" picture-books and invite the children to offer their own solutions and ideas. The children are also invited to reflect their ideas through painting and drawing.

Talking with Young People



Hassan Hassan Sa'di- Veteran & Guide

"You know, the young people ask us really difficult questions. Things we had never really thought about before. But we respect their perspectives and we have to think about what is important for them to know."

School Children

School-aged children are regular visitors to the museum and are given tours by the veterans, who invite them to freely ask questions, opening up frank discussions about warfare and how the children can take ownership in constructing a culture of peace in their own everyday lives. The TPM's volunteers have witnessed for themselves how the children's perspective of war and peace changes during these visits.

The Young Reporters

One successful youth project is [The Young Reporters](#) – a mixed group of middle and high-school students from Tehran who have spent their last two summer vacations developing – with the support of their teachers and the volunteer guides – their own peace education project within the Museum. Their project includes a variety of media to share peace education with their peers including educational videos, information cards on chemical weapons and their consequences and posting infomercials and peace messages on social media.

This rich tapestry of ideas shared in the Museum through the visitors and guides is also instrumental in developing and enhancing the peace education programme that has evolved within the TPM.

Peace Education

The TPM has pioneered a multi-generational peace education programme, earning the place as a community focal point for peace studies. When the Museum opened to the public 10 years ago, speaking openly about peace within Iran was not common. The cultural narrative tended to favour the glorification of war. Gradually, through the work of the TPM and its connections with other global peace networks and museums, this perspective has begun to change. This positive change in attitude has made it much easier to speak openly about peace education.

The TPM continues to be the venue for a variety of workshops hosted by local and overseas experts, introducing new interactive methods of education and communication. Participants include university students as well as members of civil society, all of whom have reflected that taking part in such inclusive activities has empowered them with the self-confidence to make changes in their own lives and in their own work-place to create peace-filled environments inspired by cooperation and mutual respect. Most recently, the TPM has been approached by a number of universities within Tehran wishing to explore including peace studies within their curricula.

Within the Museum, there are a large number of [peace education projects](#) involving volunteers, local artists and members of the public who are regularly invited to join. As well as these less formal activities, the Museum is also home to a more formal peace education group.

The Peace Studies Group

The TPM is home to a group of individuals who are installing a more structured approach to developing a peace studies programme. This *Peace Study Group* is more formal and academic in nature with members being invited to join annually representing different fields of expertise. Each member of the group is expected to facilitate a session by preparing a presentation on a peace-related topic. The presentation is followed by a discussion session, where local experts are routinely invited to participate.

Peace Education Workshop



Participants involved in a group discussion in a workshop co-facilitated by members of the Berghof Foundation from Germany.

As well as such a formal discussion forum, the TPM is also home to a less formal and free discussion group.

Free Discussion Group

Twice a month, the TPM hosts a free discussion group which is currently conducted in the English language for anyone wishing to practice English and engage in interesting dialogues covering a variety of topics including, but not exclusive, to peace. The

group's objective is to bring people together, both Iranians and non-Iranians, to share ideas and perspectives on pre-agreed subjects and to develop debating skills in a mutually respectful and friendly setting. This initiative has been successful in providing opportunities for people to feel confident in discussing subjects that were not always encouraged to be discussed within the country. Participants enjoy preparing for each session and report that the challenge of discussing subjects out of their comfort zone, not only empowers them with knowledge but enables them to change theirs, and others', attitudes.

The TPM is planning to hold a similar free discussion group in the Persian language in order to attract more people to join in peaceful dialogues.

The TPM's peace education is an ongoing journey. Many of the ideas have been inspired by visitors after visiting the museum and starting conversations with the veteran guides.

Conclusion

The Tehran Peace Museum is on a journey of peace, enhanced by the participation of its own "treasures" who play a central role in opening dialogues and starting conversations about how to attain a culture of peace both within each individual and globally. Gradually, since its inception, the Museum has seen a positive change in attitudes towards peace education through teaching about war, with the veterans themselves as living testimony to the cruelty and futility of warfare, especially chemical warfare. The Museum feels that currently, it has reached a situation where peace is seen as a value to be cherished. The Tehran Peace Museum aims to continue this journey and work towards building more bridges and opening dialogue in the future.