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A day Iranian exiles remember

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On the morning of April 10, 1997, Berlin's Turm Strasse was cleared of traffic and blocked to anyone but pedestrians. Snipers were stationed on every rooftop leading to Nos. 91-92.

That is the address of Berlin's highest criminal court. It is also the site of one of the least known, yet most momentous events in the contemporary history of Germany and Iran.

The 1992 assassinations of four Iranian Kurdish leaders at a restaurant called Mykonos led to a trial that took nearly four years and culminated in a verdict that implicated the Iranian leadership - the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei; the president at the time, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani; and the foreign minister, Ali Velayati - as the masterminds of the crime. An arrest warrant had already been issued for the minister of intelligence, Ali Fallahian.

Those who were there on that day remember thousands along the street. The crowds were ready for mayhem - armed with bullhorns, boom-boxes and loudspeakers - if the verdict were lenient toward the assassins, who had been members of the Hezbollah, or if it failed to address the role of the Iranian leadership in the murders, the latest in a chain of assassinations of Iranian dissidents throughout the world.

A few with mobile phones anxiously awaited calls from a handful of spectators who had managed to get inside the court. At nearly 9:30 a.m., Parviz Dastmalchi, one of the survivors of the Mykonos shootings, finally had a call from a friend: "They named them all."

Suddenly, the Iranian opposition was united. From one end of Turm Strasse, members of the People's Mujahedeen crossed the street to embrace monarchist sympathizers on the other side. Dastmalchi and other political activists who had observed the trial with stoicism began to weep. The widows and children of the victims, who had wept for years, were jubilant.

The verdict resulted in almost all the European Union's members recalling their ambassadors from Tehran for several weeks. The diplomatic blackout is one reason Mohammad Khatami, who was lagging behind the incumbent, Rafsanjani, in the last weeks of the presidential campaign, pulled ahead. However dead the reform movement

now seems - though many insiders consider it only dormant - it began with the election of Khatami and reached its pinnacle in 2000.

That is when the investigative journalist Akbar Ganji published his series of books on the assassinations of political leaders and writers within the country. These books, which set off a debate about civil society and the rule of law among Iranian intellectuals, may have never existed without that verdict, the indefatigable German prosecutor, Bruno Jost, and the extensive volumes of testimonies and records that were released.

Tyrannies strip nations of dignity, as do exile and war. And I have experienced that unholy trinity. I am an exile who has lived through the Iranian regime's tyranny and the early years of the Iran-Iraq war.

The verdict in the Mykonos trial was a victory for every displaced or oppressed Iranian. Through this trial, the German judiciary restored dignity to Iranians by insisting that we were not dispensable beings. By extending their laws to these immigrants, by giving them justice, the German judiciary gave Iranians a taste of what they could never have in their own country. Former political prisoners, whether under the shah or the current regime, saw how a real court operates.

In this particular case, it was also highly therapeutic. For once, Iranians had the pleasure of proving to Westerners - who are perpetually consumed by atrocities committed against their own - that the first victims of the Iranian regime and Hezbollah were Muslim Iranians, and that their war with the Western world began much later than their war against Iranians.

What the Mykonos trial did for the cause of democracy and rule of law in Iran cannot be accomplished by military might. The 1992 case is still open, as are the cases of several other murders throughout Europe. Solving these murders and bringing justice to their victims are among the most effective steps the international community can take to strengthen the hands of the democratic forces in Iran.

Roya Hakakian, the co-founder of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center and the author of "Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran," is writing a book about the assassinations at Mykonos.

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