

Political Imprisonment in Tehran

Marina Nemat

I was born in 1965 in Tehran, Iran. Both my grandmothers had migrated to Iran from Russia after the 1917 Communist revolution and I was raised according to the Russian Orthodox faith. My childhood was relatively normal. By “normal” I mean it was comparable to the life of a child in the West. My father was a ballroom-dancing instructor, my mother was a hairdresser, and we lived in an apartment on top of a restaurant and a furniture store in downtown Tehran. I went to a wonderful Zoroastrian school for girls where students from many different faiths attended classes in a peaceful and friendly environment that was far removed from prejudice and fundamentalism. My family owned a cottage by the Caspian Sea where we spent a couple of months every summer. During the last summer before the success of the Islamic revolution, when I was 13, I enjoyed spending time at the beach, wearing bikinis, riding my bike, attending parties and dancing to the tunes of the “Bee Gees”. Then, within a few months, my world fell apart. I knew nothing about the Islamic revolution until the summer of 1978 when an 18 year old friend told me that the Shah of Iran was a dictator and that he imprisoned those who spoke against him, torturing and killing them at Evin prison, a political prison located just north of Tehran.

When my family and I returned to Tehran at the end of that summer, we were surprised to see thousands of demonstrators fill the streets, yelling slogans against the Shah and the United States. My mother’s eldest sister, Zenia, warned me to stay away from the demonstrations and told me not to trust the revolution. She had been a teenager when she had left the Soviet Union with my grandparents, and she vividly remembered the violence and the horrors of those years. I took her advice to heart. The Islamic revolution of Iran, which began the new era of Islamic fundamentalism in the world, succeeded in February 1979. Soon, the schools, which had been shut down as a result of the political turmoil in the country, re-opened and we went back to class. The way of life that I was accustomed to was gone and the new regime of Ayatollah Khomeini was struggling to establish itself. At the beginning, it wasn’t too bad. The Revolutionary Guard and the Islamic committees had not yet gained control over everything, so there was some freedom of speech and press. I had no idea what a Marxist was, and suddenly, Marxist and Marxist-Islamist groups, which had been illegal during the time of the Shah, were everywhere. Their followers were selling their publications at every street corner. All students were excited about the new world that had

suddenly appeared – it was wonderful to learn new things about the world and to discuss new ideologies. But slowly, the government began to tighten its grip: newspapers that had even slightly criticized the government were shut down, Western novels were banned, the hijab became mandatory, and, one by one, our teachers were replaced by fanatic young women, many of whom were members of the Revolutionary Guard who were not qualified to teach at all. These newly appointed teachers spent most of the class time spreading the government's propaganda. I was a very good student and wanted to go to university to become a medical doctor, so this situation upset me.

One day I asked my Calculus teacher to teach calculus instead of propaganda and she said, "leave if you don't like what I teach". I did, and most of my classmates followed me. We went to the schoolyard and refused to go back to class for three days, and many students from other classes joined us in our protest. On the third day, the principal, who was also a member of the Revolutionary Guard, called me and two other students to the office and told us that if we didn't go back to class, she would call the Revolutionary Guard and they would either arrest us or shoot us. We decided to go back to class. I was very angry after this as I had witnessed that the revolution had not brought us democracy but a horrible dictatorship that was worse than the one of the Shah and was getting stronger by the day. I began a school newspaper and wrote articles against the government. I was a devout Christian and attended mass everyday. However, the country seemed to have become divided into extreme political streams: Fundamentalist Islam, Marxist Islam, Marxism, and Monarchism, and even though I wanted to belong, I didn't have anything in common with any of them and felt like an outsider. As a result, I took part in every protest against the government regardless of who had organized it. During these protests, I witnessed peaceful demonstrators being violently attacked by the Revolutionary Guard, beaten, arrested and even shot. However, I was a naïve teenager, and I somehow felt that I was invincible and that nothing bad would happen to me. But I was wrong.

I was arrested at home on January 15, 1982, and was taken to Evin prison. I was 16. Upon my arrival at the prison, I was blindfolded and then interrogated. They wanted information from me that I didn't have. So, as it was the norm at the time in the prison, they tied me to a bare wooden bed and lashed the soles of my feet with the length of a cable. The pain was

beyond belief. I couldn't understand how the human body could tolerate so much pain. The torture went on for a while and I realized that if I had the information they wanted from me, I would have given it to them. I was not a hero. Once they couldn't get anything out of me, they took me, along with four other prisoners, into a field and tied us to wooden poles. I realized they were going to shoot us. This was when a car came speeding toward us and one of my interrogators, Ali, stepped out of it. He gave a sheet of paper to the guards, untied me from the pole, threw me in his car and drove away. People have told me that maybe this was a mock execution. Yes, maybe it was. But to me it was very real. After all, thousands of people were executed in Evin in the eighties. Ali told me that he had believed that I didn't know anything and that he had used his influence and his family connection to Ayatollah Khomeini to reduce my sentence from death to life in prison. He sent me to a women's cellblock in Evin, named 246, where I was in a room with about 60 other girls. During the time of the Shah, this room held 6 or 7 prisoners. During my time, about 95 percent of the prisoners were under the age of 20, and we lived under the constant shadow of torture and death. The living conditions were horrible. There wasn't much food and hygiene levels were terribly low. Evin was simply a place between life and death. We had no future and the present was horrific, so we always talked about the past and our memories of our families to create a beacon of hope to help us survive. We developed amazing friendships that gave us strength.

After five months at 246, Ali called me to the interrogation building. I was terrified, but even after all this time in Evin, I had not been able to predict what was about to happen to me. He told me that I was a prisoner with no rights and that he wanted me to marry him, and that if I didn't comply, he would arrest my parents and my boyfriend. I told him I would do anything he wanted me to. All this time, I had survived by believing that my nightmare would somehow end and that I would one day go home to my family. If he arrested my family, I would have no home to go back to. He also forced me to convert to Islam, saying that his family would not accept a Christian daughter-in-law. So I converted to Islam and married him. I felt like I had betrayed God and Jesus, but I also had hope that God would forgive me. So under the name of marriage, Ali raped me over and over again. I was still a prisoner and was in solitary confinement most of the time, spending most of my days alone and my nights in the cell with him. I hated him.

He sometimes took me on short leaves of absence from the prison to see his family. I had expected them to be cruel to me, but his mother was always very kind and pretended that I was a normal person. She served me food, was very respectful and never mentioned anything that would make me uncomfortable. She gave me a sense of normalcy I had not experienced in a long time. Soon, I found myself liking Ali's family and my feelings confused me beyond words. I felt even more confused when Ali's mother told me that he had been a political prisoner in Evin during the time of the Shah and that he had been tortured. It was very difficult for me to see him as a victim. But then it all made sense. Ali had been given the chance to seek revenge. He believed that he was protecting his religion and his way of life, and he had allowed himself to justify horrible things for the so-called "greater good". Somehow believing that God would save me, I promised myself that I would never become another Ali, that I would rise above the cycle of hatred and violence that had engulfed my country for a long time. I made a conscious decision to forgive him, but I believed and still believe that one should never forgive a system that creates torturers and kills innocents.

Ali was assassinated by a rival faction of the government 15 months after our marriage. After his death, his family arranged for my release and I went home after more than two years in Evin.

The first night I was home, I sat at the dinner table with my family and watched in astonishment as they talked about the weather. They were so terrified of the horrors of my past that they could not face it, so they decided to pretend it never happened. And I accepted this silence and became its prisoner for about 20 years, during which I too tried to forget the past.

It astounds me that some people believe that one can step out of an extremely traumatic experience and immediately talk about it or write a book on it. Extreme trauma can easily lead to Post Traumatic Stress disorder and other psychological problems that are very difficult to overcome. Especially when you are very young when experiencing trauma, you put the trauma in a bubble, you put it on your shoulder, you walk through your life, and you avoid anything that threatens to burst that bubble, and, as a result, you avoid life and all it offers. You avoid any extreme emotions or anything that might remind you of the past. As a result, you never truly love, hate or enjoy anything and live in a state of emotional numbness. Another good metaphor to describe this situation is to say that the traumatized person

is a marathon runner who cannot stop and has no finish line. The runner keeps on going until she either dies or trips. I finally tripped. After being released from prison, my family never asked me about my ordeal. Not that I was ready to talk about it, no, but it would have been helpful if someone had said, “when you’re ready to talk, we’re ready to listen”. However, this invitation never came, and, like my family and friends, I believed that the past could be thrown away and forgotten. I was wrong.

For years, I tried to look ahead and live a normal life. I married the man I loved, Andre, who was the organist at my church in Tehran, and we eventually managed to leave Iran. Once we made it to Canada, we struggled and worked very hard to build a new life even though we had no money. We had kids and raised a family, and began to feel like real Canadians – sending our boys to good schools, watching them play sports and the piano, making friends, and trying to enjoy all the things Canada has to offer. Then my mother became ill with cancer. My mother and father had followed us to Canada in 1993. My mother died in March 2000, and I realized that she never knew the real me. No one knew the real me. The truth was that I had lived a lie for 16 years. That was when I began suffering from flashbacks and nightmares about the prison and the symptoms of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder began to surface in me. Many victims of trauma never show symptoms of psychological disorders until years later. Examples of this situation are the victims of the Holocaust who avoided talking about the camps for many years. After my mother’s death, I had a few psychotic episodes during which I locked myself in the bathroom, and began screaming and banging my head against the wall. That was when I realized I had to face the past or it was going to kill me. I either had to jump off a bridge or tell. I decided to tell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marina Nemat was born in 1965 in Tehran, Iran. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, she was arrested at the age of 16 and spent more than two years in Evin, a political prison in Tehran, where she was tortured and came very close to execution. She came to Canada in 1991 and has called it home ever since. Her memoir of her life in Iran, *Prisoner of Tehran*, was published by Penguin Canada. *Prisoner of Tehran* has been short listed for many literary awards, including the Young Minds Award in the United Kingdom and the

Borders Original Voices Award in the United States. On December 15, 2007, Marina received the inaugural Human Dignity Award from the European Parliament and in October 2008 she received the prestigious Grinzane Prize in Italy. In 2008-2009, she was an Aurea Fellow at University of Toronto's Massey College, where she wrote her second book, *After Tehran*, which was published by Penguin Canada in September 2010.