

prisoners

Simple truths

Evin Prison: summer 1988

by *Moniereh Baradaran*, from her book
chronicling the prison massacres ten years ago



The warm summer months appeared normal. We were allowed out into the prison courtyard as before. Fruits and other goods were on sale. Life went on with its normal order and rhythm. The rota to clean and serve the cell-block was the same as before. The fact that there was less of us had not made a difference in this. The daily classes were not disrupted. We began classes, like school children at 8 am. We would study a language, a book or articles that we had archived from newspapers. Silence was compulsory until lunch was brought.

But beneath this apparently calm life there was also something else. An anxiety and fear that showed itself at night in nightmares. We would wake up suddenly by the strangled wailing of someone, and dazed would look at each other in search of the source. We would trace the voice, wake up its owner, and give her some water. Then there was sleep and nightmares once again. The painful feeling of being lonely and defenceless. Death was this side of the wall. Did those on the other side know? No. Perhaps the calamity this side of the wall was no more than a small pebble thrown on the calm waters of those on the other side. Or, perhaps, the turbulent waves of life "outside" rolled and broke on one another drowning the cries of our slaughter.

At dusk I would stand and stare at the other side of the wall between two iron bars. A youth flew his pigeons, and they would circle a little while before returning to their shed. On Fridays, people continued to pour onto the mountainside [1]. In those summer months the happy cries of children and grown-ups mingled with the loud music of the Luna Park [2] not far from us.

That August and September of 1988, the presence of balloons in the sky, was a sign that the International Trade Fair was on again. On one of the highest the British flag was displayed. The logic of the trading world was not to be disturbed by the gloom of our loneliness, the cruelty of the hangman's noose and the pain of a whipping which appeared to have no end.

It was in the small world of the prison that I learnt that I have a larger motherland. You could not trust the papers for internal news. You could find more news and articles from other worlds. I read, and in advanced Europe, besides the technology whose

pointed me, I found myself alongside striking British miners; in mysterious Latin America, I found myself agreeing with the Sandinistas in their search for peace and sympathetic to the Farabundo Marti Front [of El-Salvador]; in the Middle East in empathy with the anger and defencelessness of the Palestinians; and ... But in those days I saw myself, and us, as the forgotten in the age of communications. In its noisy clamours and trumpeting it ignored us. An huge and naked tragedy was unfolding in the silence of the "free peoples" of the world and the applause of politicians rewarding the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

Yet I will assume, and let us assume, that at that moment the prisoner felt the course rope round the neck, he or she did not have my bitter feeling; that they murmured songs which began with the pronoun "we" so that our "free" consciences do not commit suicide from despondency and disillusion.

Questions

From time to time they would come from judicial authorities with questions which only called for a "yes" or "no" reply. Once we were having lunch and they came asking: "do you pray?" and "will you give a videoed interview?".

We put down our spoons and one by one said "no" and waited for death. The two who had said "yes" had such a bitter and angry tone that the judicial authority doubted his own ears. Next day they came back and introduced themselves as being an amnesty commission charged with investigating our files. They had said the same thing before. A number of times they took away some prisoners with a life sentence. They had kept them waiting for hours in the interrogation building and then returned them. Fardin [3] who had for years been under a death sentence was kept for weeks in one of the solitary cells of 209 [4]. Every night she waited her turn. She had heard and seen that every night they take some prisoners away and next day replace them by new ones. When she returned to us a deep groove had been added to all the groove on her face, and she hid a mysterious something in her pale smile.

In August we got a newspaper cutting from cell-block 2. They had begun to supply newspapers to block 2. We read that the spokesman for the Supreme Judicial Council, after much cursing at the "discredited" commu-

nists had asked for the "maximum penalty" for them. He had said that "after the hypocrites [Mujadedin] it is the turn of the non-believers" [5]. The words were clear and needed no analysis etc. But there are times when knowing something and being informed is not the same as actually believing. One fights with oneself not to believe, not to be overcome, to stay alive.

From the second week in September the whipping of the leftist women began. The news reached us by a women who had been arrested for being a Baha'i. We did not believe until it was confirmed by another news form block 2. The news was: with the first light at 4 am, with the sound of the muezzin's call to prayer, the cell door opens, the prisoner is taken out, laid out on a bed in the middle of the corridor, and is whipped. Five lashes. The cell door is then locked and another door opened. The second prisoner is laid out on the bed. The third, fourth and it takes about an hour. The next turn is with the mid-day call to prayer, another five lashes, the third about four p.m., the fourth at nightfall about 8 o'clock and the last before midnight. Twenty five lashes on five occasions.

In the first days Mojtaba Sarlak came personally. The prisoners inside their cells could hear the whistle of the whip, and the squeaks of the bed when the lash hit the prisoner's body. Later it was the old female pasdar Taleqani, with her large build and masculine face, also whipped, and her whip hand was no less strong than Mojtaba's. In subsequent weeks other pasdars, male and female, came and lashed. They even gave the whip to Yusefi, an old woman who had excused herself that she does not know how.

At first we could not make out who they whipped. New prisoners or veterans? A complementary report came. They were veterans who had long finished their sentence [6] and had been transferred to solitary. after one or two weeks some of them were returned to block 2. The news spread like wildfire. We jumped on top of the cupboard and saw them from the gap in the window. Thin and bent, they walked with difficulty. It was as if they were ashamed. They did not lift their heads to look at us. They send us news that they had agreed to pray; regarded themselves as defeated. They had been told in their trial that the punishment of a non-believing woman is death under the lash, or repentance. They wished they had been given a death sentence rather

than a slow death. They saw no hope for an end to whippings. How sad and disappointed they looked.

Analyses and judgements on those who had accepted to pray under the lash had barely began when this time the draw fell on us. We had expected it. They took away seven or eight. Anxiously we saw them off. They were returned near noon so that they could give us the exact news. They had been taken to court and asked: "are you a Muslim?", "do you pray?". They had all answered in the negative. The religious judge had given out a verdict of death under the whip or repentance. They had announced there and there that from that moment they will go on a hunger strike in protest at the judgement. A dry hunger strike. This took immense courage, especially under the circumstances, and it seemed that they were prepared to stick out their decisions. They were all prisoners of 5th Branch who had been arrested in relations to the Tudeh party and the Fada'i majority.

When the muezzin sounded they were taken away. The judge had said that the whipping will start from that noon. From then on we would be transfixed to our spot whenever the call to prayer sounded. Silence threw its shadow everywhere. I imagined the cell doors opening one by one. They were laid out on the bed. The whistle of the whip would resound along the long corridors. They were returned to the cell. The wait for the next turn. It would have been less painful if they had been dealt the 25 lashes in one go. They said themselves that the wait was much worse than the whipping itself. They could not sleep at night. The gap between the last lash, around midnight and the early morning whipping, between 3.30 to 4 am was too short. They later learnt to sleep between the morning and noon lashings, which was longer.

One or two weeks later they took another group of prisoners. Now we knew what it was for. They came back. Their court case had not come up. Next morning they were ready and prepared for their names to be called out, and they all waited like this for some days. We all waited. One of them who was young, daring and courageous used to dress up every morning and walking past the door ironically joked "Pasdar of our block! What ever happened to this lash of ours?"

In the end they were taken away: it was a Monday, September 23rd or 24th. A time for school opening. That

prisoners

same humorous young girl told us as we were saying goodbye: "we are going to school. We will either pass or fail". They too went on hunger strike in protest at their judgement. A dry hunger strike. They would not drink even water. Hunger, thirst and the whip. We now knew what days they are holding the courts. If I remember rightly it was Mondays and Wednesdays. Days of waiting and more anxiety.

All but one of the second group were also supporters of Tudeh and the [Fadai'] Majority. Strike was their unanimous decision. It was not clear why they were taken before we were. Was there a special reason? It did not appear so. The previous group that were taken from block 1 had belonged to various political groups. In vain did we search for a specific reason. Yet this sort of question inevitably occupied our minds. Sharareh, who had a phenomenal memory and was the encyclopaedia and accurate memoriser of prison events, and usually got it right, remembered that when lists were being prepared their names were on top of the list and by each other.

Les Miserables

In the slow-moving hours and difficult days of waiting, everyone normally occupied themselves with something - and usually alone. One had set up a carpet waving posts between two bedsteads, another with infinite patience was placing dots on a paper pattern for knitting. In those days two beautiful carpets were woven. Two others insisted on sewing a dress for me - from a trousers which would, under no circumstances, yield enough material for a dress. Every day I stood for an hour, motionless and they moved the material against my body this way and that. They sewed something that would not fit me. Then with a thread from a stocking of the same colour as the cloth they weaved a patch and sewed it on. It was no use telling them that I did not need a dress. In the end they produced something that I never had the courage to wear.

In those days *Les Miserables* was the only novel available to us. A momento of Ghezel Hesar. It had been gathering dust for months in the cupboard for everyone had read it at least once. It was back in circulation in those days and was being passed hand to hand. In the evenings, now that we had no television to while the time, we used to gather in one of the rooms. The assignment was novel reading. Each

person had to recount a story that they remembered. It was not easy. It was many years since we had read those books. Laleh had this unique power to not only remember novels she had read in detail, but to recount them in the most delicious way. She "read" the novel "Passage from sorrows" over several nights. She did not change the order of events, was true to the original and created the personalities as they had been developed by the author. Laleh was a true artist. She knew music and had a warm voice. She then went to the long novel, *Jean Christoph* (by Romand Roland). We listened all ears. Another friend, after she had recovered from the tablets which she took to take her own life, recounted *Gadfly* (by Sadegh Hedayat). In these moments we found solace. We came out of ourselves, and for a brief moment forgot the reality of those days.

Jokes also spiced our days. In moments we would laugh our fill. The topic of the day was the whipping, our destiny, and revolved over ways of escaping that fate. One said she would tie a pillow on her back and would pretend she was a hunchback from the beginning and wanted us, if the need came, to support her story. Showkat said she had made a shield from tin cans. She said that the noise of the whip on tin will not only make Mojtaba suspicious, but he will put it down to his prowess. It was said that whipping only applied to those born to Muslims. If someone could prove that their parents were not Muslims they would not be considered a renegade non-believer [kafar mortad]. I said I will tell them at court that my parents were both Marxist. The kids were shocked. I laughed and said "don't worry they are both long dead". Another pointed out "then they may ask you the beliefs of your ancestors". I had not thought of that. After a few moments I shouted excitedly "I will say my grandmother and father were utopian socialists".

One say Sharareh and another sat in the corner of the yard worrying over Eshrat. She was one of the oldest of the "melli-kesh" prisoners (one who had finished her sentence footnote 6) and suffered many illnesses. She was a diabetic, had kidney problem and backache etc. Sharareh was worried as to what will become of Eshrat under the whip with all her ailments. What will happen to her insulin injections?... Roghieh joined them and they told her of their anxieties and fears. Roghieh

bursts out laughing and recounted the story of an infertile couple. One day riding a cloud of fantasy the woman becomes pregnant. After nine months of pregnancy she gives birth to a girl. They call her Safieh. They bring her up in their imagination. They see her pregnant and after nine months she faces death during labour. They begin to cry and beat their head and breast "what will happen if Safieh dies, woe on Safieh...". we were drawn to their corner of the courtyard with their laughter.

Silent cries

That morning when I suddenly woke at the sound of the Muezzin I heard the weeping of a woman. It was from a cell-block below us. It had an indescribable burning and pain. It was not a cry, it was all pain. It compressed your heart such that you hated the dawn of another day. I thought the noise is from block 2. Perhaps a woman had heard of her husband's execution, or a nightmare. We later learnt it was Nazi. She had recently been brought from the solitary cells. She had resisted days of lashings. In the end she could take it no more and prayed. They had sent her and a few others who had given in to prayer under the whip to one of the rooms in block 1. The pasdar would enter the room at each prayer time and would not leave until they had done their prayers.

That strange burning cry on that dawn was the pain of the wrecking of a human being. Nazi was 19 when she was arrested six years before. She was tortured a lot and had withstood it all. Though her prison sentence she had held her head up with pride. She was kind, and her kindly smile gave her pale face a special flavour. She had finished her sentence some years back but remained incarcerated because she had refused to submit to the humiliating conditions for release. After the massacres of 1988 she was sent to block 2 separated from her old friends. I would see her from the window when she went into the courtyard. She looked bent and extremely dejected. She was released later that year.

Resistance

Ozra resisted for thirteen whole days under the lash. On the thirteenth day she cut her wrist. The pasdars found out and took her to the dispensary and sewed up her wrist. The lashings began the next morning. After a few more days she too prayed.

For the last one or two years, Ozra had unfortunately come under the attention of Zamani, the prison's security chief. As her sentence was drawing to a close, Ozra was taken for interrogation, where she was noticed by that man who was provoked by her straight answers and uncompromising tone - or perhaps he had made a bet with himself - to break this arrogant young girl. Ozra was also startlingly beautiful. For a time she was regularly called up to him for debate. In the closed environment of a prison this method could be trap. Young Ozra had quickly realised this and avoided falling into the trap of debating. Zamani went on calling her and at times used Ozra to convey his threats and views to us. He said that Ozra would in the end give in. She had been regularly sent to solitary cells. She had been lashed. Finally she was taken to block 2 to separate her from her friends.

She too stopped praying as soon as those black summer days were over. It was in spring of 1989 that she was freed, after another spell in solitary.

Silent scream

Mahin had been alone for years. That is after she had endured the "boxes" [7] for ten months. Ten months of sitting cross legged between two boards, chador and blindfold on, motionless and wordless. She had sat and not surrendered. She was taken out of the coffins after Ghezal-Hessar's governor changed. Afterwards she rarely communicated with anyone. She eat alone, walked alone, read alone, was totally alone. After some years she stopped talking altogether. Her room was next to mine. Whenever I went there, her silent presence screamed at me and made me ashamed of my chatter and laughter. She never protested, however. Never. Nothing made her happy, nor sad. That is how I saw it. Sometimes I doubted if she actually saw events outside her. But she did and she smelt.

In those summer days of 1988 she was desperately restless. Anxiety and dread were making waves on the calm sea of her looks and face, and it was probable that she would commit suicide. Quietly she was observed and followed wherever she went. When she went to the toilet or the bath her friends waited outside and if she took a long time they would find an excuse to enter. On a number of occasions when she locked herself in and refused to open they climbed the wall and pre-

vented her suicide attempt. She had tried to cut her wrist. The last time when she resisted and pulled her bleeding wrist angrily from their grip, they had to inform the pasdar. They should not have done this, but now there was no stopping her. The next day, or a few days later, she finally succeeded to cut her wrist and kill herself. Killed by them. The prison guards who had ground away her psyche and caused her illness. They did not even do anything to save her life.

Mahin Bedui's beautiful face was a scream. A silent scream.

No hope

One September morning, whose dawn bore no ray of hope, yet we had no choice to get up, clean the room, reply to the repetitive greeting of fellow prisoners, for the day's worker to prepare breakfast, one person on the bed above remained asleep, oblivious of the daily activities. I pulled myself up on the bed bars to wake her. She was in deep sleep. I called but she did not reply. It was then that I noticed her unusual breathing. I pulled the blanket back. Her face was swollen and dark. We banged on the door. The pasdar arrived quickly. It seems they too expected unusual happenings in those days. With difficulty we took her down, semi-conscious and flaccid, put on her blindfold and chador, and since there were no stretchers, the pasdar allowed a few of us to take her down to the first floor dispensary, which lacked any medical facilities. In those days no one was taken to Evin's central clinic.

It transpired that soem days ago she had quietly collected sleeping tablets from here and there. They brought her back two or three days later. Her face still was swollen and purplish. The despair and bitterness of her looks were so painful that for days I did not have the will to approach her. ... any one of us could be in her place, and even had thought of doing as she did. Despair is also a human emotion. Everyone understands this except those who have an ideal vision of the political person.

In that ominous August we heard that Raf'at in block 2 had committed suicide with cleaning powder. She had been in our block until recently. They had taken her away with the Mujahed prisoners. She came back two weeks later. As usual she had not said a word. Where had they taken them? What had happened? What became of the others? She had said nothing before she

took the cleaning powder.

She had severe psychological derangement. She was always alone and silent. And plagued by obsessiveness. She spent most of her time by the sink or the bath, her sleeves and trousers rolled up, washing herself, her clothes or a pot. The previous summer her brother had hanged himself in prison but her psychological history dated to before this. Perhaps to the time that she was taken for further interrogation. She was part of those Mujahedin who had won the confidence of the interrogators by pretending to be repentant and willing to cooperate. They had performed tasks for the Mujahedin such as getting news of the inside out of the prison. When the authorities uncovered this venture for a long time they were placed under solitary and pressures. Some were executed. The rest were given life sentences. Raf'at was given life.

Her sad blue eyes, in the midst of her pale child-like face, are hidden among these lines.

On October 6 a news spread like wildfire: "the prison governor had changed". Perhaps this was a ray of hope....

Part of chapter "Summer of 1988" in book 3 of *Haghighat Sadeh (Simple Truth)* by Monireh Baradaran. A German translation by Bahram Choubine and Judith West: *Erwachen aus dem Alptraum* has recently been published by Unionsverlag August 1998.

Footnotes

1. Evin Prison lies on the foothills of the Alborz mountains which spans the north of the capital [tr].

2. Funfair, close to Evin [tr].

3. Fatemeh (Fardin) Modarress Tehrani, Tudeh Party, executed March 1988

4. Prison cell blocks are known by their telephone number [tr.]

5. Kafar, meaning the communists [tr].

6. In prison jargon they were jokingly known as *melli kesh* - literally "nationalised victims" [tr].

7. Prisoners were placed in wooden "boxes, not much larger than coffins. They wore blindfolds all the time, even when eating, violently woken up at dawn, had to sit bold upright and still, facing straight ahead till evening, in total silence. Penalty for any infringement was the whip. This went on for months, almost a year for some, until the prisoner broke. Some went totally mad [tr].