

## Former Iranian political prisoner shares her story

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter

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For Marina Nemat, right, “life was good” as a young teenager growing up in Tehran.

But that was before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, after which she was thrown in jail and tortured for taking part in protests against the new Islamic regime.

Nemat, author of a memoir called *Prisoner of Tehran*, spoke to about 20 staff and volunteers earlier this month at the Toronto offices of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center (FSWC) about growing up in Iran before the revolution, and she shared painful memories of the torture she suffered as a political prisoner in the infamous Evin prison for two years starting when she was only 16.

She was attending a campaign committee meeting to promote the FSWC’s Spirit of Hope Benefit in May.

“It may surprise you, but life in Tehran in 1965 was normal, and by normal, I mean, it was comparable to what you see here in Toronto today... People’s religion was never an issue,” Nemat began, adding that she was brought up in a Christian Russian Orthodox home in downtown Tehran.

“Life was good. My parents owned a cottage by the Caspian Sea. That was where I spent all my summers. I partied with boys and I listened to music and I was just having fun.”

But all of that quickly changed in 1978, when people began to protest against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

“Bearded men and women wearing the hijab were walking down the streets, yelling slogans against the United States, against Israel, against this person and that person and against the Shah. I remember looking out my bedroom window and looking out into this crowd... and thinking, ‘What is going on?’ I couldn’t understand... Within three or four months, a very normal life turned into this nightmare of soldiers and tanks and shooting,” she said.

When the Shah was sent into exile and the new government took over in 1979, there was anarchy, said Nemat, who was born in Tehran in 1965.

“There is always anarchy after a revolution. Anything goes. All these ideas were just floating around... I started to think, you know, maybe revolution wasn’t such a bad idea. But then, things began to change. Being in school, the first thing I noticed was that one by one, very good teachers were being replaced by members of the revolutionary cause.”

She said that rather than history, calculus and biology, high school students were being taught about Islam.

Nemat said she grew tired of the propaganda and challenged her teacher to teach calculus instead of preach about Islam.

“She said, ‘If you don’t like what I teach, leave.’”

Nemat did leave, but she had no idea that this act of defiance would lead her to the most excruciatingly painful and terrifying episode of her life.

When her classmates followed her out of the classroom, it was the beginning of a three-day strike. When the school principal approached Nemat, she told her that the students didn’t want to hear any more propaganda.

After numerous discussions, the principal called Nemat’s house and said, “‘You either go back to class, or I call the revolutionary guards and they’re going to shoot you all.’ When she said the words, ‘shoot you all,’ it suddenly clicked. We realized that this woman was not kidding.”

They went back to school, but nothing changed. Throughout the next year or two, she said, she took part in almost every rally she could against the Islamic regime.

“When you are 14 and 15, you think you are immune. You think you’re invincible. You see people getting shot, but you get home and you think, ‘I’m OK.’ Every time you make it home you have a rush of adrenaline.”

Then, in 1981, when Nemat was 16, the government began to arrest thousands of young people between the ages 15 and 20. Nemat said she wasn’t the first person in her class to be arrested.

“But there was a sense of denial. Somehow, it just didn’t click. We all thought, you know, it happened to her, it’s not going to happen to us... I have talked to many Holocaust survivors and they all told me the same thing. When it starts happening, you don’t get it until they come for you.”

Two armed guards came for her in the middle of the night. She said she was blindfolded, taken to the prison, and dragged down hallway after hallway until she lost all concept of time and space.

Her interrogators wanted to know the whereabouts of a girl she had met once before. They tied her to a wooden bed, took off her blindfold and her interrogator showed her a thick black cable that he said he would beat her with if she didn’t tell him what he wanted to know. But Nemat didn’t have the information he wanted.

“He started lashing the soles of my feet... He was a grown man. He wasn’t being kind. He put his full force into it. And he looked happy about it at the time. There was so much pain, I couldn’t think.”

She said she slept that night in a dirty, cold, smelly room and woke up the next day to someone kicking her. She was then blindfolded and she and four others were taken to “the middle of nowhere. They took off the blindfolds... They tied us to wooden poles and... then we saw the guard’s gun,” Nemat said.

“That’s when it dawned on us, that they were going to shoot us. There was one girl who panicked and she ran and they shot her. All of this was happening, they were tying us up and none of us reacted.”

Nemat said that soon after, a car pulled up with her interrogator inside. He untied her and told her to look away and then she heard gunfire. She had been spared by the man who tortured her.

“All of these years, I have refused to believe that the people who were with me that night are dead.”

She was sent back to prison and didn’t hear from her interrogators for five months. She was eventually called back to see her interrogator, who told her that if she didn’t marry him, he would arrest her parents and her boyfriend.

“I entered this nightmare of being raped over and over under the title of marriage.”

She said that after more than two years in prison, she was released after her torturer-husband was assassinated by a rival faction of the government.

Nemat later married her childhood sweetheart, and, after bribing officials to get a passport, she moved to Canada with him and a son in 1991. She said it took her 20 years to break the silence and face the reality of what she went through.

Nemat said that the situation in Iran today isn’t much different than it was in 1979.

“Iran is a very well-educated country... But being educated has nothing to do with freedom or democracy, because the government of Iran is a terrible, horrible dictatorship and it has injected a population with sheer fear... When you know that if you speak up against the government, even in the mildest way, you’re going to be arrested and tortured, you’re not going to do it.”

After Nemat’s captivating address, Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of the FSWC, announced the speakers for the organization’s Spirit of Hope Benefit on May 29.

The annual event, which raises money to fund FSWC projects throughout the year, will be held at the Sony Centre and will feature Glenn Beck, a host on CNN’s Headline News and author of *An Inconvenient Book – Real Solutions to the World’s Biggest Problems*; Richard Gephardt, a former Democratic member of the U.S. Congress and an economic adviser and co-chair with Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign; and Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

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