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Author Discusses New Iran That Few Truly Understand

By: Julia E.M. Halewicz

Last Sunday, the Iranian government arrested more than 30 women in Tehran for peacefully demonstrating for the equal treatment of women under the law. A nation focused on the situation in Iraq and Iran's potential nuclear threat may have little noticed, but the news had special resonance for at least one Connecticut resident, Roya Hakakian.

The author, who read Tuesday from her memoir at a Women's History Month event at Northwestern Connecticut Community College in Winsted, said of the protest and its cause, "This is what feminism has always been about. Everyone needs to become aware of it and that is how history becomes history."

"Essentially they protested, to make sure it becomes law, that women no longer are stoned to death," Ms. Hakakian said. Currently, girls as young as 9 can be stoned or executed for moral crimes; for boys the age is 15.

Problems run deep in Iran, the country that 30 years ago offered equal education for women, mixed religious services and cities decidedly absent of veils. Today, Iran's oppression of women, intellectuals and those rebelling against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government is complicated by its threat of nuclear armament.

With Iraq in what some call a civil war, and with the United States' commitment in that country uncertain, American liberals appear unwilling to enter what they suspect would be the punctuation mark to the Bush administration's Middle East policy-conflict in Iran-no matter what the reason.

"I think what gets lost in our efforts to perpetuate the culture of peace is the realities on the ground," said Ms. Hakakian, who described herself as a liberal. " ... What we need to do is not only stop war but also to demand a solution to a problem that the people of Iran are facing, which is this regime, and I cannot image that anything in this world in the 21st century can happen without a sense of camaraderie in global community."

The book that brought Ms. Hakakian to Litchfield County, "Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran" (Three Rivers Press 2004), is in part her effort to correct misunderstandings about the events that surrounded the 1979 revolution that forced out Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi and gave the country to Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini. Having returned from exile in France, the Ayatollah eventually reversed the progress of the prior decades, including women's rights, and continued the censorship that had galvanized students and intellectuals to join the revolution against the shah.

" ... There was so much misunderstanding around that, there continues to be so much misunderstanding about Iran and the revolution, and I was living through that. ... It felt wrong to have to sit through it and watch so much misinformation"

In the book, she describes her journey to the U.S. not as a physical one, but says, "It was the journey from 'no,' from the perpetual denials."

A few years ago, Roya Hakakian was enjoying the routine of her CBS News job, sipping a latte at her desk, perusing stacks of newspapers and watching CNN when she received a phone call that would change her life-an editorial writer at The New York Times wanted to hear her perspective on the largest pro-reform demonstration Iran since the revolution.

A native of Tehran, Ms. Hakakian was not comfortable speaking about her memories and she was uneasy being a source for a newspaper whose editorials could shape public opinion and possibly American and international policy toward Iran when her perspective was so personal. She is Iranian, but also one of the 100,000 Jews of Iran whose identities were challenged during the entanglement of religion and politics under the Ayatollah. It was too personal, and until then, she had the "full-time occupation" of keeping her memories alive in her head, but also protected from the public and the possible misuse of her experiences by anyone wanting to promote an agenda.

But that phone call from the Times forced her to reconsider and that moment became the opening scene in her critically acclaimed memoir, which she dedicated to the unknown number of Iranian women who, between 1982 and 1990, were raped on the eve of their executions by guards who believed killing a virgin was a sin in Islam. "Journey from the Land of No" earned a 2006 Connecticut Book Award and a Publishers Weekly's Best Book of the Year.

"My relationship to the memories changed, it went from being a private affair to a public affair. I talk about them now, people question me about them," said Ms. Hakakian in describing how writing the memoir has changed her perspective.

Young and a member of an intellectual family with a poet-teacher for a father, Ms. Hakakian's mind was open to the revolution. The shah's secret police, SAVAK, punished dissenters and banished publications with anti-shah editorial content. As a child her brother read her stories from "The Little Black Fish," about a stubborn fish who wanted to see more of the world. It was a symbol of the cause and its author was believed to have been murdered by SAVAK for being a revolutionary.

Ms. Hakakian used tales from the book to set a beat to her youth, substituting the metaphorical stories for her own explanations of her personal growth. The revolutionary spirit swelled in her and her brothers and they were happy to see the Ayatollah in power, although her brothers were sent to safe harbor in America because their views put them at risk of death.

It wasn't long before the Ayatollah negated any signs of Westernization in Iran and created an Islamic state-one in which even Ms. Hakakian had to be covered in a veil, her education was limited and her family gave up their home to live in a Jewish ghetto. When the Ayatollah named Israel the number one enemy of Iran, anti-Semitism took root, catching the Hakakians offguard and was one of the final catalysts for the family leaving for the United States. Initially the Jewish population felt secure under the Ayatollah's promise

that Iranian Jews were separate from Israelis, but it became clear that conversion and marginalization of Jews were aims of his government.

Eventually, Ms. Hakakian learned that the author of "The Little Black Fish" was not in fact murdered, but that he drowned accidentally. The story had been created by revolutionaries to turn the people in their favor.

While many Americans who are her contemporaries blame the Carter administration for using the shah as a puppet and believe the Ayatollah is the result of what the people of Iran wanted, Ms. Hakakian wanted to tell the story of the revolution by showing that responsibility for what came of it lay in the hands of those who supported it.

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