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Baha'i persecuted in Iran

Behind bars

By Joseph Mapother
Staff Writer

WALTHAM — The quiet Iranian voice coming across the Myrtle Street living room related a story of religious persecution in a careful, almost detached manner. Fear, or maybe simple uncertainty flashed occasionally in the attractive brown eyes of the storyteller.

Mofarah Forsythe's 22-year-old brother, Soroush Fadiani, has disappeared into the bowels of a jail in Tehran, snatched off the street by Iranian authorities. "He was a very well known Baha'i," relates Mrs. Forsythe. She learned of the arrest a few weeks ago.

Her father lost control of his business shortly after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his minions of mullahs came to power in 1979.

The details of how the father came to spend his day sitting around the house are not discussed in terse telephone conversations that are the main link between Mrs. Forsythe and her family.

International telephone lines are not the most secure means to discuss what is happening to Mrs. Forsythe's family and the other 300,000 members of the Baha'i faith in Iran.

A 28-year-old cousin of Mrs. Forsythe is also occupying a Tehran prison cell, said the recently married computer student. She expressed fears that her one remaining brother at home, a teenager, would be the next to disappear.

Her parents? "They are not safe," came the reply.

The authorities? "They say 'tell us your not Baha'i' and we'll let you go."

Early Christians faced much the same choice on the way to the Coliseum in Rome.

Sixteen Baha'is were hanged this month despite a late-May appeal from President Ronald Reagan and other world leaders to spare them. Among the 16 dead were 10 women. Three of the women were actually adolescent girls.

There were no official charges levied against them. They were Baha'is.

Baha'is around the world carry on a 140-year-old religion founded in Persia that claims unity among the people of the world as its basic tenet. Non-involvement in politics and subservience to the legal, local government are also ways of the Baha'i faith.

The official count of Baha'is killed since Khomeini took office in 1979 is 156, but conservative unofficial estimates range around 200 persons, according to Henry B. Lawrence, a Waltham spokesperson for the Baha'is.

Those figures do not include the Baha'is in Iran who have simply vanished.

Members of the faith, including Mrs. Forsythe's mother, have been prevented from leaving Iran. The mother had her passport and birth certificate confiscated recently when she applied to visit her daughter in Waltham, said Mrs. Forsythe. On the application was a slot asking what religion the applicant was, she said.

Since he disappeared in mid-April, no official notification from Iranian authorities that Soroush Fadiani was arrested has been received by the family, said Mrs. Forsythe.

Confirmation that he is in jail and alive comes from a receipt that Fadiani signs for pocket money delivered to him from the family, related Mrs. Forsythe. The receipt is returned to the family without explanation after each visit.

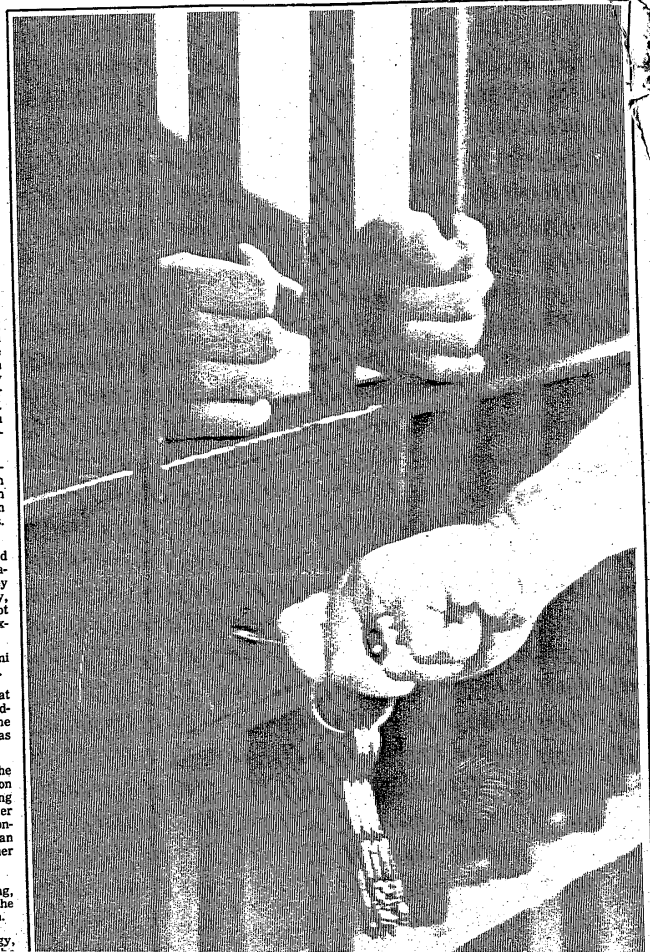
The memory of Soroush Fadiani is kept alive through his signature.

It was family detective work that traced Fadiani to his present address after he failed to return home and the car he was driving was found on a Tehran street.

Several time zones away, the educated young woman sitting on the sofa in the Myrtle Street living room pauses to reflect on why her family and her religion are considered so dangerous by the Iranian authorities. At her side sits her American husband, Jimmy.

"Our faith, from the beginning, said things that would annoy the Iranian authorities," she began.

Baha'is do not believe in clergy.





Moffarah and James Forsythe look at photo of Baha'i Shrine in Haifa, Israel, in their home. Photo by Art Illman

American husband, Jimmy.

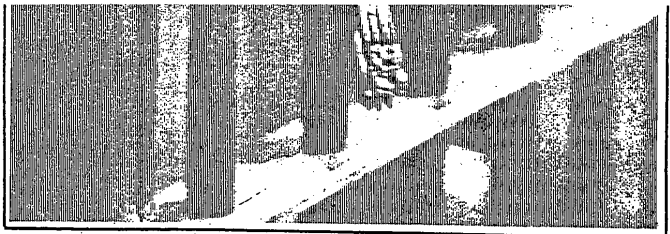
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Baha'is do not believe in clergy, which would appear to be anathema in a country whose political shots are called by the Islamic clergy.

Women were accepted as equals in the early writings of Baha'i founder, Baha'u'llah. That statement and others earned the founder a lifetime in jail, according to a history of the faith. Baha'i women are not bound to wear the traditional veil that has again become popular among Islamic women in Iran.

Baha'is believe all world religions are divine in origin. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and Baha'u'llah are all prophets. There is no one, true prophet.

In addition, because the founder spent so much time in jail there, Haifa, Israel, holds one of the major shrines to the Baha'i faith. Israel and Iran share a relationship akin to that between water and oil — they don't mix.



Historically, the Baha'i have been objects of religious persecution since the religion was founded. Waltham Baha'i Henry Lawrence likened the persecution waves as appearing in five and ten year cycles.

As a minority, and because they were different, Baha'is found themselves blamed for epidemics, famines and other natural disasters throughout Persian history.

The late Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi refused to reopen Baha'i schools that had been closed during the reign of his father. In 1955, his government announced the Baha'i religion had been banned.

Violent attacks on Baha'i followers and landmarks including rape, looting, burning and murder followed. International outcry helped reinstate the Baha'i in Iranian society.

With the coming of the Ayatollah's Islamic Republic, Baha'is were again barred from schools and universities in September, 1981. For Mrs. Forsythe's brother Soroush, it meant the end of two years of medical studies, she said.

He was working in a factory before his disappearance, she added.

Shrines of the faith have been destroyed during the past two

years. The home in Takur of Baha'i founder Baha'u'llah was destroyed and the land put up for sale. The shrine of another Baha'i prophet, Bab, was bulldozed over in 1979.

It is the increasing scale of the latest persecutions that led Henry Lawrence to add a postscript to his theory of cyclical persecutions of the Baha'is.

"The fear is of genocide this time."

After several minutes of careful thumbing, Mrs. Forsythe added her own postscript, quoting the words of Baha'u'llah: "Every one of us looks forward to the day when the earth will truly be one country and mankind its citizens."

Baha'i leader demands halt to harassment, torture, killing

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The leader of the Baha'i religion in the United States recently told the House Human Rights Caucus that Washington should take the lead in gaining worldwide condemnation of the persecution of Baha'is in Iran.

The suffering of the Baha'i community in Iran could be reduced if the public would "express its indignation and demand the cessation of terror against the innocent," said Dr. Fritz Kazemzadeh, secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is in the United States.

Otherwise, "the Baha'is will be continue to be harassed, maltreated and killed in a country where jail and the hangman's noose have become common instruments of persuasion," said Kazemzadeh.

Shiite Moslems, the current rulers of Iran, believe that the Baha'i faith is a heresy — that Islam, out of which Baha'i partially developed, is the "final" religion and that Mohammed was the last prophet to appear on earth.

The Moslem hatred of the Baha'is, Kazemzadeh said, "is further fed



US President Ronald Reagan UPI file photo

Earlier this month, 16 Baha'is — six men and 10 women, including three teenage girls — were executed by hanging despite a personal appeal for their lives from Pres. Ronald Reagan

by Baha'i belief in the unity of mankind, the equality of races, the equality of sexes, universal peace, universal education and the harmony of religion and science."

Kazemzadeh told the Human Rights Caucus that since last September's congressional approval of a resolution condemning Iran's persecution, 27 more Baha'is have been executed.

Earlier this month, 16 Baha'is — six men and 10 women, including three teenage girls — were executed by hanging despite a personal appeal for their lives from President Reagan.

The Baha'i leader asked that the U.S. government push for the U.N. Commission on Human Rights to intercede with Iran on behalf of the Baha'is, and that immigration

rules be eased for Iranian Baha'i refugees.

In the three years since the Iranian revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power, more than 150 Baha'is have been executed, thousands of Iranian Baha'is have lost their jobs, and thousands more Baha'i children have been deprived of formal education, Kazemzadeh said.