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HEADLINE: Death in the name of religion. In the early eighties fundamentalists attempted to wipe out Iran's largest religious minority. Stephen McGinty describes one woman's fight for her faith

BYLINE: Stephen McGinty

BODY:

LITTLE Mona kissed the rope that hanged her. The 17-year-old student had asked to be the last of 10 Iranian women sentenced to death because of their belief in Baha'i. Her wish was granted and as Aktar, Izzat, Mahshid, Nusrat, Tuba, and Roya, Tahiri, Simin, and Shirin walked to their death she prayed to Baha'ullah, the founder of the faith.

The arrival of the red blindfold and the quick walk to the gallows was the end of a short life and long interrogation for Mona, whose only crime had been the teaching of Baha'i children's classes. For two months she had been tortured and interrogated with 100 other women at the Sepah Prison in Tehran in a bid to break their belief. The bid failed.

The trap-door dropped. The 10 women died. All on June 18, 1983.

In a time of anniversaries including VE-Day, the liberation of Belsen, the end of the Vietnam War, Sunday will pass unnoticed. Only the few hundred Scots who follow the Baha'i faith will remember the women in their prayers. And remember too that religious intolerance continues worldwide.

Recently the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Edinburgh welcomed Olya Roohizadegan to speak. Mrs Roohizadegan survived the interrogation and escaped to write the story of the women and Iran's persecution of the Baha'is in her book, Olya's Story. Hollywood is still tinkering with it.

In the early eighties Iranian fundamentalists attempted to wipe out Iran's largest religious minority. The Baha'i faith, which preached religious unity, oneness of humanity and equality between the sexes, was branded subversive by Iran's clergy.

Homes were torched, beatings administered, and hundreds of Baha'is were executed or killed by mobs.

All followers were refused employment and education. Educated women were targeted to be tortured until they recanted. "All we had to do was recant our faith," said Olya Roohizadegan, "But how could you deny what is true, what you know in your heart?"

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It was a question met with silence from a crowded room. In the chaplaincy centre of Edinburgh University members of Scotland's Baha'i community -- had joined with interested students to hear the story of one remarkable woman and through her, the story of the hanged 10.

Olya escaped to Britain in 1985, testified before the European Commission for Human Rights, and published her book in 1993. Today she works as a freelance beautician and hairdresser, while travelling the world giving talks in sincere but slightly broken English. It is, she said, her duty to her lost friends (she carries their pictures).

Olya is always at pains to stress the ordinariness of her friends. How each had a wish to eat ice cream, visit relatives, even dine at a restaurant if they were released. Yet none of them would utter the simple words which the uneducated Islamic guards wished, despite being beaten by electric cables.

Mrs Nosrat Yaldai saw her son, an economics graduate, hanged and was herself beaten with cables 250 times and spent 55 days in solitary confinement. Just one woman broke down when her young child was shown to her for the last time, her captors claimed. She recanted.

The interrogators attempted the same tactics with Olya. Her three-year-old son Payam was brought before her and the judge, who asked that she take pity on her child. "I love him very much, but I will never recant my faith." The judge wrote on her file in red ink. "Sentenced to death. To be Hanged."

"In prison I saw light in darkness. In prison there was no material life just spiritual life, it made me more strong because I was so close to God, it completely changed me. It is why I wrote this book. I'm not against the Iranian Government, I forgive them, I pray for them."

Olya's tenuous release was secured only when her husband put up their house as a security bond. But it was a plot to trap other Baha'is using Olya as bait. Instead husband, wife, and young son fled over the mountains to Pakistan and begged refugee status at the United Nations office in Karachi. Their flight had taken six days and nights. But the worst was over.

"Leaving my friends was terrible. I thought: Oh my God! How can I leave them? But one thing had a purpose to me, make me leave. Come out and tell the world, then they were all happy, believe me . . . And still their faces are clear in my mind, 'Go Olya, go, give the message to humanity'.

"I believe my God looked after me. But I felt bad when they came to release me. We go through same pain, same food, same cell, we share everything together. I wished we were all released . . . How can I leave them because they loved their lives. But they loved God more."

It was only upon reaching Karachi and the United Nations office that she learned the fate of her friends. "Eleven months later, we were granted asylum in Britain as our two older children were studying here." It was her eldest son, Fuzlullah, now an engineer, who helped translate his mother's book. Though free in Britain, a noose hangs over her head in Iran, where her parents still live.

During her talk Olya asked one young Scottish Baha'i to read a letter which Sharin, a graduate with perfect English, had written. She was imprisoned with both her parents, and described the prison as where "souls mightier than the walls lie chained".

Around the world the chains are still fastened.

GRAPHIC: Olya Roohizadegan: "How could you deny what is true, what you know in your heart?" Picture: MIKE WILKINSON

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