

Mahine Latif

If the Walls Could Speak

Five years in the mullahs' prisons

In the course of summer 2009, the world was shocked by the pictures of the bloody attack on Ashraf Camp by the Iraqi forces and the bare-handed resistance of these members of the Iranian opposition who had taken refuge in Iraq.

Who are these men and women ? Where do they come from ? What was their destiny ? Whence comes the People's Mojahedin's perseverance against the current regime in Iran ?

The story of Mahine, who passed long years in the mullahs' prisons, enables us to understand better these reasons and the courage that animates the resistance and, beyond them, the Iranian people as a whole.

Mahine Latif was born in 1962 in Tehran. She took part at a very young age in the revolution and belonged to the People's Mojahedin. This resulted in years in prison where she experienced the execution of her brother and of one of her sisters. Freed by chance, she did not abandon her convictions and joined the Iranian opposition in Ashraf Camp on the other side of the frontier, in Iraq.

Foreword

There are experiences and events in life that the passage of time hardly effaces, such as memories of prison, among the most serious of them.

The moment of arrest, the farewells to the last drop of freedom, to what surrounds us in the streets, and that no doubt one is already regretting, the faint hope of being saved. The instant where one finds oneself like a prey in the enemy's claws and the killing instants when one waits to be tortured. The instants when the body breaks and the spirit triumphs. The instants of intense pressure when a woman is afraid of not being able to surmount her fear. The instants when one receives the blows of those wild beasts who are the mullahs, the revolutionary guards (pasdaran) or the interrogators who crouch in the shadows to make a woman know the worst of horrors. The instants when one hears the screams of the victims of torture behind the walls and one would like to be in their place. The instants of farewell to the friends who are going with a smile on their faces to their death. The salvos of the execution squads, the counting of the fatal shots, with the memory of the fallen friends that submerges you ...

First notebook

Eleven months of pursuit and flight

The spring in Tehran after the anti-monarchist revolution did not last long. One in power Khomeiny started by targeting the political opposition to him, the media and free expression. The wave of arrests of the opposition began in 1980, a year before 20 June 1981¹ and has never ceased since.

First, the Hezbollah² attacked with daggers, American fisticuffs, chains, nunchakus [a weapon consisting of two pieces of wood tied together by a chain] and clubs and wounded everyone. Then the official organs of repression such as the Pasdaran³, the Komitehs⁴, the Islamic Revolution's prosecution service and others, intervened and arrested the wounded. Then they tore the newspapers we were distributing from us and tore them up before our eyes because they denounced the exactions of their leaders and bosses.

Like thousands of sympathisers with the People's Mojahedin (PMOI)⁵, we suffered twice as much pressure, blows and restrictions, because under Khomeini's regime being a woman was a crime. The criminals who vowed nameless hatred to women let themselves go with savage harassment. For example, they tore girls' clothing in the streets or tore off their headscarves, as a way of humiliating them. Besides, in our families, we Mojahedin girls had to confront our brothers and fathers. There were always arguments at home. My father, retired from the Air Force, was in touch, as soon as Khomeini came to power, with the mullahs and Hezbollahi in our district. He was fiercely opposed to my political activities, and to those of my sisters. He insisted over and over again that we must stop everything. Altercations broke out almost every day at home and our father threatened to cut off our food supplies and throw us out into the street. Sometimes he even beat us and we had to justify every one of our outings.

Some of my friends suffered from the same problems. I remember one of them who took part in political activities with us. Almost every day her husband, who was close to the Hezbollah, beat her and threatened her with death. She had traces of blows on her body, but refused to stop. Others suffered the same abuse from their brothers.

¹ A peaceful demonstration bloodily repressed by Khomeini, which marked the beginning of the Resistance.

² Groups of religious hatchet men with fascist behaviour directed by the "party of the Islamic Republic".

³ Revolutionary Guards, a parallel ideological army formed by Khomeini immediately after the Revolution.

⁴ An observation post set up in each district by the population immediately after the Revolution but very quickly seized and cordoned off by Khomeini's pasdaran.

⁵ The principal opposition movement which proclaims a tolerant Muslim vision favourable to secular democracy.

Spring 1981 had turned out difficult. We could no longer sell the movement's papers in the street or set out stands, because the Hezbollahi immediately attacked and lynched us. However, the circulation of the newspaper "*Mojahed*", the PMOI's organ, had reached hundreds and thousands over the country. Every morning when we left home, we said our goodbyes because we did not know whether we should come back safe and sound or wounded, whether we should be arrested or whether our bodies would be found in the street. The cosh-wielders monopolised the tarmac and nothing stopped them.

At that period my little sister, who was a schoolgirl, was expelled from her school with her friends who sympathised with the movement. All the buildings and PMOI centres in Tehran were closed and even its medical centre was not spared. Sit-ins, the mothers' great protest march and other demonstrations had no result, as Khomeini had decided to suppress the PMOI, which he tried to do on 20 June 1981, as clearly as possible.

These bitter events, and the spectacle of the wounded and swollen faces of our wounded friends, transformed my attraction towards Khomeini into hatred. I had a deep feeling of having been betrayed. I saw in him a wolf in sheep's clothing coming to attack the people ... Ah, if we had been able to turn time backwards and begin all over again !

The bloody repression of the demonstration of 20 June 1981

On 20 June 1981, on Ferdoussi Square in Tehran, in the middle of an immense crowd, we were awaiting the arrival of the demonstrators. The pasdaran surrounded the square and they too were awaiting the demonstrators. They came from Hafez Bridge in a long, dense flood that covered the whole avenue. You couldn't see the end of it. Mad with joy, I started to shout slogans, carrying all those who surrounded me along with me to encourage them. Moments that were engraved in memory.

When the crowd arrived on Ferdoussi Square, suddenly volleys of gunfire rang out. For two and a half years, under Khomeini's power, I had seen a great many crimes. But there, I couldn't believe that they were shooting at the crowd to kill and I told myself that it was just to frighten people. With the others, I fled towards Fisherabad Avenue. Suddenly I saw blood everywhere, I couldn't believe my eyes. People on the ground, dead, with a bullet in the head, the chest; wounded people carried away by passers-by to right and left and everyone looking for an ambulance ... The volleys didn't stop. I prayed to God. What was happening ?

That evening, when I came home, shocked, I learned that my sister Parvaneh hadn't come back. I knew that she had joined in the demonstration. So she had been arrested or even ... I couldn't imagine it.

So that my father shouldn't find out about Parvaneh's absence, I put a pillow under the sheet to make it seem that she was asleep. Next morning, my mother went

on a search through all the Komitehs and prisons to find her, but in vain, because nobody had given her name at the time of the arrests.

After 20 June, the attacks on the centres and homes of the Mojahedin started, causing round-ups. Like many others, we left our house. I went to my uncle's and then, on the advice of a friend from the organisation, Farideh, I went to a sympathiser who had a little house in the suburbs of Tehran and stayed there for a few months.

A week after he had left the family home, my brother Akbar was arrested at the home of one of his friends. So two members of my family were in prison, and my mother, my four sisters and I were outside.

Daily life was difficult; our hosts, a couple with three children, had trouble making ends meet, so my eldest sister Farzaneh decided to go to work to help them.

Then conditions grew worse still. All those who had the slightest sympathy for the Mojahedin were arrested, the blind repression knew no bounds and people were executed in hundreds, a bloodbath in the true sense of the word. All the innocent people arrested from 1980 onwards according to that regime's laws were massacred after being savagely tortured.

Every day, in the regime's newspapers, we read the list of executed Mojahedin, sometimes with their names and sometimes with no name but with a photograph. One day my friend Farideh didn't come home. We didn't know what to do. The security rule made it necessary for us to leave the house, but we had nowhere to go. A few days later, photos, including one of Farideh, were shown on television in order to ask the population to identify them. Farideh's face was swollen and pale because of torture. Even if her face was a painful sight, I admired her courage and I was proud of her. Such a brave girl who hadn't even given her name to the torturers! Knowing that, we were reassured, they hadn't denounced us and we stayed for some time in the same house.

On 12 September 1981, we participated, with my mother and Farzaneh, in a demonstration on Bahar Avenue with shouts of "Down with Khomeini, the criminal". In the middle of the street, the pasdaran attacked us and I escaped down an alley. Behind me, I heard gunfire and I expected to be hit at any moment, so I ran as fast as possible. In my flight, I saw through a window a present I had bought with Farzaneh a few minutes before the start of the demonstration. I was therefore reassured that Farzaneh hadn't been arrested and that she had been able to escape and take shelter in that house. At the end of the street, people had gathered to see what was happening. Suddenly a young woman opened her door and said, "Get in quick." Without thinking I went in, but I could still hear firing. Later on, she went out and when she came back she told me that the pasdaran had gone further off. A little later, in spite of her insistence that I should stay, I left the house. I went towards Shariati Avenue; first I found my mother and then waited for a taxi. We took the taxi together and I tried to comfort her, saying that I had seen the present I had given my sister just before the demonstration and that therefore she was alive. My mother said nothing.

She was anxious; if Farzaneh had been taken, it would be the third of her children arrested during the demonstrations. I told my mother: “Don’t worry, no doubt Farzaneh went to a friend’s.” My mother still kept quiet. That evening, I couldn’t close my eyes because if my sister had been arrested, we should have to leave the house and we had nowhere to go.

Next morning, my mother told me calmly that Farzaneh had been taken. During the demonstration, when she was running away, my mother had gone into a shop and from there, she had watched her arrest. She was being given blows but hadn’t stopped shouting “Death to Khomeini !”

[Illustration]

My sister Farzaneh Latif, aged 23, member of the People’s Mojahedin, executed in summer 1981 at Evin Prison.

When giving details of the arrest, my mother said that, even if she was executed, we must accept it, that it was a sacrifice. It was with these words that she calmed my other sisters, saying also that her arrest would change nothing.

That was how I found myself with greater responsibilities, because my three other sisters were merely sympathisers. However, I was convinced that Farzaneh would be executed.

A week later, on 19 September, in a newspaper, Keyhan or Etelaat, we saw the name of Farzaneh Alizadeh among 88 executed people. My sister was to give that identity in case of arrest. My mother managed to obtain her will from Evin Prison. I tried not to cry in front of my sisters, but it was impossible and they cried too, especially little Roya who was only 5 at that time.

A few days later, going to Behesht-e-Zahra Cemetery, my mother was able to find her tomb by showing her photo and asking for help from an employee. He told my mother that the Pasdaran had forced them to bury the executed people, and as Farzaneh’s face was smiling, it had struck him and he hadn’t forgotten it. In her will, as it happened, Farzaneh had written that “it is with a smile that I go to martyrdom”.

Some time later, I had a new contact with the movement. She was called Zahra Nazari. She was a very joyful and highly motivated girl. She came originally from North Iran, and was pursuing her first-year studies at Tehran University. Later, in prison, I was able to get to know her strong personality better. With Nahid, Mahnaz and Zahra we formed a team. In November, Zahra and Nahid were arrested and I was cut off from the PMOI, but a little later I found friends who were able to reconnect me with the organisation.

After the arrests, we were obliged to leave the house and we rented a room in Ressalat Avenue. Above us, there was a young couple and on the ground floor there was only our room. The lavatories were in the yard. We lived there, my mother, my three sisters and a new team member, Shadab, for two weeks.

Then we decided to leave that house because the quarter wasn't safe. One day when my mother had gone out with one of my sisters to look for a new lodging, there was a sudden knock on the door. I sent my little sister, but she came back dreadfully pale and half dead with shock. "It's Pasdaran, they want mummy, but as you told me never to tell the truth to the Pasdaran, I told them that mummy was at home ..." I was in an impasse, I took a chador, I went to the door, I was very frightened, my heart was beating at top speed. I told the Pasdaran that I was Roya's mother. They told me they were looking for a middle-aged woman, a mother of four. Their information indicated that they were looking for us, because, when they showed me their cards, they told me they came from the prosecutor. However, seeing a young woman (me) and only one child, they had doubts. I had only an instant in which to make a decision. I told them that a family like that lived on the first floor. They gave me a military salute and went up the stairs. I rushed into the room and told Shadab that we must leave the house quickly. I very quickly gave some advice to my two sisters, and gave Afsaneh some documents for her to throw down the toilet and left with Shadab, as the pasdaran were knocking on our neighbour's door.

Quickly and calmly, we went out into the street, then we turned down another street and began to run; I didn't know where to go but I wanted to leave the district. As I ran, I thought about my mother and my sister who were outside at that moment and I didn't know what would happen when they came home. I reached the wide Ressalat Street and took a taxi. Later my mother told me that the Pasdaran, who had felt baffled, had come back to our studio and broken everything, but without finding anything, and arrested everyone. Afsaneh had put the documents in her pocket! My mother and my sister were arrested when they came back, and when she left the house, Afsaneh discreetly threw away the documents. Roya, my little 5-year-old sister, served as their contact during the interrogations and thanks to her, they were able to coordinate what they said. Thus the interrogators had nothing with which they could reproach them. My sisters were transferred to Evin but as the pasdaran hadn't got much out of them, they were freed and entrusted to my father.

In April 1982, I entered into contact with Puran, in the Mojahedin. She was very hard-working, very affectionate and very sensitive. We moved for a few days into a flat with two other friends who were nurses, Maryam and Mahine.

A few days later, we noted suspicious signs in the surroundings of the house, and had the feeling of being tracked down. We agreed that I should stay there alone for the night, and on 3 May we decided to leave.

The arrest

On 13 May, towards 1 o'clock in the afternoon, someone rang the doorbell. I was with Maryam and her mother who had come from Shiraz to visit her. Mahine was on duty at the hospital. Maryam opened the door, I heard voices and I knew that someone had come to arrest us. The only way of escape was the roof. I rushed to it, but there were about ten pasdaran there. I looked down into the street, that too was full of pasdaran on alert because they thought we were armed; but all we had was communiqués, cassettes of Mojahedin songs and the identity card of a sympathiser. We couldn't believe that they needed to mobilise such forces to arrest two girls.

Within a few seconds they pushed Maryam, hit her, entered and started to search the house with violence. They broke everything, tore everything. We had hidden the documents in a doll, and I prayed that they wouldn't touch it. Unfortunately, they found them. We pretended to know nothing, we protested. Pleased with what they had captured, the pasdaran went on searching. Maryam's mother asked permission to go to the lavatory because she didn't feel well. Permission being granted, I asked to go there too so as to destroy the documents I had on me, but the pasdaran refused. They made us go down the stairs and get into a car.

The street was full of people who had come to watch the arrest. I was in the back of the car between Maryam and her mother; two men in civilian clothes were in front, watching us. I tried to find a hole in which to put the documents, but in vain. Then I asked Maryam. She found one and I passed the documents to her.

After a time, the pasdaran asked us to lower our heads and we entered a large courtyard. But as we got out of the car the documents fell to the ground, because Maryam had put them between the door and the seat. Seeing that, the pasdaran started to laugh. They led us into a room and after searching us, they separated us, put a bandage over my eyes and I was led to Evin Prison.

On the way, I tried to concentrate. I thought: one stage of the struggle has ended, another is beginning; I don't know how long it will last, but I think it will be short. I also thought about Farzaneh and Farideh, telling myself that I should be executed like Farzaneh. But what was important from now on was to make a success of this stage.

Second notebook

The interrogation

As soon as I arrived, a man called me in a brutal voice. He took my chador and pulled it violently, saying "*Follow me*". He led me to the basement. With my eyes bandaged, I couldn't see his face, but from the way he spoke and breathed, I imagined that he was fat. He began by hitting me on the head with a bayonet. I protested. "Don't you know where you are ? This is Evin, here I 'm the one who does the talking, and you must shut up, understood ?" he shouted at me, while continuing to hit me.

When we came to the basement, the moans of the people being tortured never stopped. The people arrested the same day were taken there. Some undergoing torture in their cells, others awaiting their turn behind the door. I was put behind the door. "Sit down and wait for your turn", the man said to me. I heard the cries of a woman and of her torturer. A man in the corridor was being whipped on his feet, his torturer shouted at him: "You a sportsman ? No ? Then you must put up with it", while hitting harder.

An interrogator was forcing a Mojahedin prisoner, whose feet had been almost shredded, to remain standing. As he didn't manage it, he was being beaten to make him get up again and his feet were being whipped.

Right beside me, a young woman had been tied to a chair and several interrogators were hitting her with a whip. She was shouting as hard as she could.

I realised later that I was in the basement of Section 209. A mullah came up to me.

"Do you hear those noises ?"

I tried to stay calm.

"Yes, I hear them."

"If you don't answer the questions correctly, you will suffer the same fate."

"I've nothing to say."

"Remember I warned you," he added before he left.

A few minutes later, two men came to ask me:

"Who's Mahnaz ?"

"I don't know."

"So why was her identity card at your place ? Who's Mahnaz ?"

"I don't know."

A violent kick in the ribs made me fall off the chair. One of them shouted at me, with insults: "We'll see each other later."

I told myself: what I heard about prisons is happening to me, you must be ready to face it. I was afraid but I was sure of myself. The cries of the tortured people were extremely hard to bear and made me suffer cruelly, but at the same time they encouraged me to resist. I drew strength from that. I prayed for them, and

above all I wasn't alone, hundreds, perhaps thousands of Mojahedin were in the same situation as I was.

Later on, I was led into a room. One of those present asked for my size. I answered, "37". Laughing, they said, "They can go up to 50." I didn't understand. They untied the girl who had been tortured before me and threw her on the ground. I tried to look at her but every time I moved, I was hit on the head. The girl was grimacing and her feet were bleeding. Before I was taken to the torture bed, at my request, I was given a glass of water, which I drank to the last drop, then they forced me to drink about ten glasses and while they hit me, they said it was compulsory.

They pushed me down brutally on the torture bed, they tied me up, they threw a dirty blanket over my head, they dipped my feet in water, one of them sat down on my head and two others started to whip my feet. They said: "If you've decided to talk, make a sign with your hand", and they went on hitting me. From time to time, I made a sign so that the man sitting on me should get up so that I could breathe. I tried with all my force to hit my head against the wall so as to die, but in vain. During the torture, Mullah Guilani⁶, then Lajevardi⁷, the "Butcher of Evin", appeared. Lajevardi asked my torturers, "You haven't any problems, have you?" One of the interrogators asked Guilani with a smile, "Is it torture?" and they laughed. Guilani answered them, "No, it isn't torture, because you're seeking the truth."

I was very angry, I wanted to kill them and I shouted: "Truth? It's not the truth you're looking for." I was then given several strokes lashes, but I felt relieved.

After a moment, the number of the torturers diminished and those who remained, tired of torturing me, untied me and ordered me to jump. I couldn't do it, so they forced me to. It was to reduce the swelling of my feet and prepare them for the next whipping. To forget the pain, I hummed Mojahedin songs.

When the evening came, I was proud to see that, in spite of the torture, no prisoner had given way. I had hardly any doubts: I had at most one week to live before being executed.

In that basement, everyone had been tortured, nobody had been spared. A young Mojahedin, not very far from me, had been wounded by a bullet when he was arrested. In spite of that, he had been tortured. As soon as an opportunity presented itself, he told how the pasdaran had attacked his house and killed everyone. He was the sole survivor.

I loved and admired all those people who were there, without even knowing them. Several times, I looked out from underneath my bandage, a girl beside me was smiling at me, I smiled at her and so we encouraged each other.

During the night, I had an internal haemorrhage, and I urinated blood several times.

⁶ Ayatollah Mohamadi Guilani, then the religious judge of the Islamic revolutionary tribunals of Iran.

⁷ Assadollah Lajevardi, head of Evin Prison and former director general of the regime's prisons.

A young sportsman, tied to the bed in the corridor, begged to go to the lavatories, in vain. He relieved himself in the bed and as he was losing blood, all his clothes were soiled. When the torturers came back, they hit him in front of everyone because he had soiled his clothes and the corridor.

No-one could sleep because of their suffering. During the night, one of the interrogators came to order me to get up, which I did, painfully. He led near to that young sportsman. Taking off my bandage, he asked me if I knew him, I said no. Apparently, that young man hadn't given his name and address. Bringing me back, that interrogator tried to press himself against me and take advantage of those moments to satisfy his vicious desires, but I managed to keep him away from me.

Until dawn, the interrogators came, naming certain people with high responsibilities among the Mojahedin, saying that such and such people had been killed, and asked us if we wanted to go and see the bodies, adding: "You've all had it, even if you resist." They showed the following days' newspapers with the pictures of the dead bodies of the people in responsible positions⁸. In my heart of hearts, I was laughing at them, because even when they spoke of those killed, one felt their fear of the Mojahedin, and that calmed me.

They led me away, in the morning, with many others, to a three-storey building. The first two were reserved for interrogations. The third was a so-called tribunal.

I was led to the second floor, Section 7. The corridor was full of tortured people, their feet bloodied and swollen. Everyone was obliged to keep absolute silence. The slightest noise was punished by blows. One heard moans, cries, lashings. The feet of one woman prisoner were completely shredded, she could no longer move. So that she could go from one place to another, they brought her a wheelchair, but later an interrogator ordered that it should be taken away from her. Every time she wanted to go to the lavatories, I tried to help her. In the queue, I stood in front of her so as to support her. Seeing that girl, I forgot my own pains.

In that 7th section, there was a woman, Bahareh, and her baby, a few months old. As long as she was in the torture chamber, her child didn't stop crying and we could do nothing about it. On her return, she calmed him, but she was forced to take him to the lavatories herself to change him, and that redoubled her suffering.

Today, two decades later, Bahareh has rejoined the resistance and is in the city of Ashraf⁹. I was mad with joy when I saw her again among us. I reminded her of prison. At the time, even in my dreams, I couldn't imagine that one day we should find each other here, in the city of the resistance, and that Bahareh would become a fighter.

⁸ On 2 May 1982, the pasdaran attacked the Mojahedin's homes and bases with heavy weapons and helicopters. Tens of people, including those in responsible positions, among them the high commandant Mohammad Zabeti, were killed.

⁹ Ashraf camp is situated in Iraq, 70 km from the Iranian frontier. 3,500 members of the PMOI live in this camp. On 28 July 2009, at Tehran's request, the Iraqi forces attacked this camp, which had been unarmed ever since 2003, causing 11 deaths and 500 wounded.

We stayed down there for six days. Every day with its portion of torture and interrogations. Then, we were sent away, some of us including myself to Section 240, the others to Section 246.

There, we met again in Room 5. As soon as we arrived, the long-term inmates hugged us and led us to our places. One of them, who was a nurse, dressed our wounds. We had very little room, but we devoted 1m to the most severely tortured women. I was so happy to see my companions that I forgot my pains.

The next day, I met Zahra Nazari, who had been responsible for me before the arrest. From something she said, I understood that she had resisted. She told me how she had been denounced. She had an appointment with someone for whom she was responsible, but, under torture, the latter had given away the meeting-place.

With her large eyes, her small face, her particular way of speaking, she was nicknamed “the mouse”. She behaved in such a way that in her presence I didn’t feel I was in prison, but on a mission. She was very disciplined and caused order to reign even among those surrounding her. Zahra, Shahnaz and I had agreed to use our time to the maximum. For example, at the time, three official newspapers (Keyhan, Ettelaat, Jomhuri Eslami) were available in the section. Each of us read a newspaper and then reported the essential points to the others, especially the news concerning the Mojahedin.

Zahra’s personality was a source of encouragement. She was outwardly calm and malicious, and glowed with inward joy. She was on good terms with everyone, you could talk to her and be given advice.

Two days later, Zahra was called to an interrogation. On her return, she told us that it wasn’t an interrogation, but a trial. During the so-called trial, she had been asked if she was ready to collaborate and denounce the others, to give a televised interview to say that she hated the Mojahedin. As she had refused, she had been condemned to death. Telling us this, she smiled and imitated the mullah who had served as a judge. She made us laugh, but I was filled with a deep feeling of sorrow because soon Zahra would leave and not come back. Several times, I imagined her execution, and every time it broke my heart and I cried.

In Indian file for execution

Three days after I arrived in the section, I was taken away for a series of interrogations during which I was told about my activities. That’s how I learned that I had been denounced. In the torturers’ logic, that was enough to condemn me to death. I tried to pretend to be ignorant of everything, but without success and the interrogations went on for several days, sometimes until late at night.

One night after having interrogated me, they left me in the corridor, waiting to be taken back to the section. The corridor was calm and I heard nothing but the voice of a pasdaran who was shouting an order: “Take them away !” I thought that some people were going to be tortured. Then he shouted, “Write your names on your feet

with a felt-tip !” Then I understood that they were condemned people who were going to be executed. The pasdaran went on: “Take off your watches, your jewellery, your wedding rings and all the rest !”, then, in Indian file, they passed in front of me and from underneath my bandage I saw eight young men, between 20 and 30 years old, one behind the other, barefoot, all showing traces of torture and some of them, even, walking with sticks. My heart overflowed with sorrow and I wished, seeing them, that it could have stopped beating. One of them tried to take off his bandage, but the pasdaran hit him hard on the head saying; “Don’t touch the bandage !” The young man answered: “We’re going to the execution squad, leave us in effing peace !” But the pasdaran hit him again. Another murmured something, probably suras from the Qur’an. These pictures are engraved for ever in my memory. I saw the pitiless torturers and their victims, so calm and sure of themselves, so confident that one was a thousand leagues away from thinking that they were going to be executed.

I should have like to shout out my anger and stop those crimes, but I could do nothing, not even cry, and I only wished I could take their places.

The Trial

During the winter of 1983, I appeared in front of a court with just one mullah as my judge and a pasdaran as his assistant. The mullah read a series of lying accusations against me. The trial lasted less than ten minutes, then they threw me out with insults. A month later, they called me to a new trial with the same scenario, and at the end of it I was insulted and beaten. It wasn’t a trial. The prisoners were asked to give public interviews on television and those who refused were condemned to death.

At the Iranian New Year in 1984, two years after my arrest, one day in the afternoon, I was called to be interrogated. I was frightened. I asked myself what was going on and why I was being called. I asked myself if the arrest of a friend had earned me this interrogation or whether fresh information had been given, and a thousand other hypotheses came to my mind.

I prepared myself to leave the section. Shahnaz, my close friend, begged me to come back the same evening. As if it depended on me ... But to calm her, I answered, “It’s nothing, I’ll come back,” but I was asking myself what was going to happen.

On my arrival in the 7th section, an interrogator asked my name. As soon as I had answered, he started to hit me, then he led me into the torture chamber. I didn’t know what was going on and what had been revealed. I tried to concentrate, but a rain of blows fell on me. However, I wanted to concentrate so as not to say anything stupid and I suddenly decided to use the formula “I don’t know” to answer all the questions. The interrogators asked me, Who is Jamshid ? Who is Mohammad Karami ? What did you want to do in the radio-television building ? Where are the weapons ?” I answered, “I don’t know, I don’t know” and every time I was given blows. One of them came close and asked me: “How old are you ?” I answered, “21.” He continued: “I could be your older brother. I advise you to tell everything

or it will be so painful that heaven will weep for you.” I should have like to push my fist into his face. That piece of filth who was calling himself my brother reminded me suddenly of my own brother in prison whom I should so much have liked to see again, if it was only once.

Finally I was tied very firmly to the bed so that I couldn't move. They threw a blanket over my head and started to whip me. There were three of them. Two of them hit me and the third took over when they got tired, insulting me without stopping. That day, several time, they untied me so as to put a piece of paper under my eyes and order me to write. But as I answered that I knew nothing, the torture started again.

During the night, they called a pasdaran, asking him to take me to solitary confinement, making sure that I didn't enter into contact with anyone. As I was getting off the bed, a torturer shouted, “Don't put your dirty feet (covered in blood) on the ground !” Some shoes were brought to me, but my feet were so swollen that they wouldn't go into them.

The “dormitory” section

That night I went into an isolated cell in a building with four storeys, of which the first two were reserved for women and the other two for men. The pasdaran woman who had made me go into the cell told me, “Not the slightest sound, here the rule is total silence.” But in order to avenge myself and because I was suffering horribly, I started to scream without stopping and the guard's warnings had no effect. At dawn, I was injected with a tranquiliser and fell asleep.

The next day at noon, a woman came to find me for the interrogations but I said that I could no longer move. She lifted me up, but blood was pouring from my feet and she took fright.

“What shall I say to your interrogator ?”

“Nothing ! Go and tell him that I'm very ill and that I can't come.”

After several comings and goings, that day I was left in my cell. A pasdaran came to bandage my feet, but as soon as she had left, the bandages were once again filled with blood.

My cell measured 2.5 m by 3 m, with a WC, a basin and a bit of moquette on the ground, and each prisoner had the right to two small blankets. I put one under my feet to lessen the bleeding. It was cold and I didn't manage to sleep. That day of rest enabled me to concentrate and prepare myself.

The next day, they came to tell me that even if I was dead I must go before the interrogators, on a stretcher if necessary. I was led behind the door of the torture chamber and I heard the screams of the prisoners. Every time the pasdaran passed, I was given my allowance of kicks and I was told I would be the next victim.

That day a mother was undergoing torture and she was being reproached for having sent her daughter abroad to the Mojahedin. But the mother didn't know about it. One of the interrogators said to her: "We have three ways of treating prisoners: 1, to kill them under torture, 2, to hang them from trees in front of this building, 3, to shoot them on the hills of Evin. We've chosen the first method for you and we'll hit you until you die." Then, in a vulgar tone, he threw at her: "Those flowers in front of the building grew on your blood."

A young girl was on the torture bed and was howling without stopping, so violently that she had disturbed the torturers. They led her in front of me, telling her: "If you don't speak, your feet will be like that." Even the torturers didn't know what to ask her. She had been arrested in the street, but she didn't appear to have done anything. At every lash, she said, "But what do I have to say, tell me, I'll say it," but the blows went on.

Then they left her in a corner and my "turn" began. Shortly afterwards, my feet bled so much that they couldn't go on hitting them, so then they aimed at my back. At the same time, they went on hitting that young girl, but she screamed less. Seeing me, she had a feeling of solidarity.

There were a lot of people like her in prison, who weren't political. In our section, there was a girl who had done nothing, but had been arrested. She had been tortured so much that, for the sake of peace, she had admitted to having participated in armed demonstrations and operations. But the tortures went on so as to make her denounce her friends, to such an extent that she was taken to hospital where she underwent many operations on her feet.

One day, I heard the sound of blows against the wall without knowing what they meant. Suddenly an interrogator came into the cell shouting: "You're banging your head against the wall so as to die in peace? No! I shan't let you die like that!"

Insults and Humiliations

One day, in the interrogation chamber, I was standing in front of the table. I saw a thread which ran across the room. Following it, I discovered that it was tied to a man's neck and from time to time, the torturers pulled on the thread saying, "Are you writing?"

That scene, which impressed me greatly, remained engraved in my memory, because it was with that sort of method that they tried to break the prisoners down.

One day, I saw a young man mutilated by torture, covered in blood, whom they had obliged to sit down between two cupboards. The interrogators ordered him to get up and sit down and every time he fell, he was given blows and a torturer said to him: "You must do what I tell you."

That kind of behaviour wasn't necessarily used to obtain information, but rather to break and humiliate, and the torturers drew a sadistic pleasure from it.

One evening, there were just two interrogators who were torturing me. One of them went out and ordered a prisoner to help him tie another prisoner to the torture bed. At his refusal, he ordered him to sit on his head, but he refused again. Then the torturer hit him, howling: "If you refuse to obey me, I'll kill you and throw your body on his face." But in the end, he wasn't able to make use of that prisoner. He was a young man about 20 to 22 years old. I admired him and told myself that this was what one expected from a Mojahedin.

The Evin infirmary

A week later my feet became infected and the whole cell stank. The woman who was bandaging me said I must be taken to the infirmary. I was taken there on a stretcher. There, Dr Chams said that I must be taken to hospital and operated on, but the head of the infirmary said that it was impossible without authorisation from my interrogator. The latter accepted on condition that I was in a room by myself. But the head of the infirmary had said that he only had three rooms and that they were full, so I was taken back to my cell.

A few days later, in view of the state of my feet, they were obliged to take me to the infirmary and put me in a room with two other prisoners. One of them, Azadeh Tabib, was one of the People's Mojahedin. In spite of her wounds and the traces of torture, she had steel nerves. A lioness who didn't cry out in front of her torturers. She had been arrested for the second time, because she had been in touch by telephone with a friend overseas while her telephone was tapped.

At the end of a month, one morning, in a hurry, together with Azadeh, we were taken to the interrogation section and during the night we were put in solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement

All my life, the worst torture I could imagine was to be alone. Before I was imprisoned, I had sometimes joked with my friends that torture was an isolation cell.

As soon as I entered the punishment block, to overcome my fear, I told myself that I had no right to give way to a phobia. I had to expect to stay there for at least three months. Two or three months in solitary are like at least ten years of ordinary prison. And three months later, I was still there, but I was adapting to the situation.

Twice a day I did some sport, then I reminded myself of some of the organisation's books which I had read, I walked and even, some time later, I found some friends thanks to Morse code, which enabled me to communicate with my neighbours in the cells nearby. Two or three times, they changed. Once, it was someone from the Toudeh communist party, and as I knew that the members of that party collaborated with the regime, I didn't tell her that I was one of the Mojahedin. Three days later, I was called and tortured, so as to find out what I was saying in Morse to my neighbours. That's how I knew that this Toudehi had denounced me.

Once, it was a girl of 18 who was my neighbour. She had been arrested when she was getting ready to leave the country secretly. She wasn't political, but was seeking adventure. Afterwards, she was set free. She knew nothing of the Mojahedin but while she was there, I told her a little about them. Just before she left, she said to me: "I'm going to find the Mojahedin." How I should like to know where she is now and what she's doing.

During that period of solitary confinement, it was only at mealtimes that a little opening was made in the door to let the food in. From time to time, I was taken to be interrogated and then, as I had no watch, I didn't know what time it was nor what day we were in. Sometimes I heard the Meli University's clock and was able to tell the time. That sound reminded me of the university, the students and the good times I had had at university, and I tried to establish a sort of relation with the pretty streets and the people in them.

One day in August 1984, several cells were opened and we were taken, with our eyes bandaged, into other buildings. We were put in a large room, made to sit facing the wall and pasdaran were watching over us. In spite of that I was able to recognise Tahereh Samadi who had lost her mental balance under torture, her sister Nadereh and Azadeh Tabib.

I told myself that the Mojahedin had certainly struck a severe blow to the regime and that it wanted to be revenged on us. Lajevardi, the "Butcher of Evin", had told us once: "One day we'll kill you all."

We stayed there, sitting with our faces to the wall, until late at night. I had the feeling that this room was the antechamber to death. I saw on the wall some little words, poems, names and dates, a sentence: "on the ... /08/1984 we are a group of 19 people who are leaving to be executed."

I don't remember what day it was, but I thought that if the walls could speak, they would tell how many heroes had passed through there. I remembered that poem of Molana's: *All the particles of the world speak discreetly to you, saying that we are the sense of hearing, eyesight and touch, but with enemies, we are speechless.*

It's true that in this world which has a goal and laws, a human being is the most responsible creature. Can he commit any action without leaving a trace? Can any act remain hidden and not be revealed? Then a day will come when the walls of the prisons of Evin, of Ghezelehesar, of Gohardacht will begin to speak and say how our people and their children were tortured, for the sole crime of wanting freedom.

In short we stayed quite late in that building and then we were taken back to our cells in Indian file. There, right in the middle, lay our things, in a rubbish bag. Later, when I was transferred to the collective section, I learned that a delegation from I don't know which organisation had come to visit the prison, without meeting a single prisoner.

During the first few days which followed my leaving the infirmary, I was taken to the third floor of the 7th section before a kangaroo court. The interrogator

asked the judge to give details of the ordeals to which I was to be subjected because I didn't speak. The judge asked me why I didn't speak. I answered that I had no information to give. "You don't know where you are and who's in front of you," the judge threw at me. He prescribed 500 lashes as a first stage, then an infinite number of blows until I spoke. "But where do you want to whip me? My feet are in shreds."

Then the judge told the interrogator to do whatever he wanted and the other man thanked him, and the torture began again. Then I was taken to a so-called judge who definitively condemned me.

Shahnaz and her fate

After a year and a half in solitary confinement, one day I was taken into a collective cell where I met Shahnaz Ehsanian, whom I had known at the beginning of my incarceration.

Shahnaz came originally from the Mazandaran region, in the North of the country. She was full of spirit and had such simplicity that all the prisoners loved her. After her arrest, she had been hung up by her hands and her wrists were badly damaged.

Shahnaz was always reciting revolutionary poems in her regional dialect. She had taught me one of them which I often recited to her and I still remember it today.

From mid-1985 until the autumn of 1986, we stayed in the same section. In the autumn of 1986, Shahnaz was freed. When she left, I felt immense joy. With the means available, we had organised a little leaving party. We had agreed that when we left we would join the Mojahedin and would denounce the crimes committed in the prisons.

Shahnaz respected her commitments and joined the Mojahedin and the national liberation army. She fell on the battlefield during the Eternal Light military operation¹⁰. Shahnaz showed great courage during that operation when she tried to

¹⁰ The opposition army made an attack in 1988, from the frontier, penetrating 170 km into the interior of Iran.

help a woman combatant wounded under enemy fire. She was cut down by a bullet straight through her heart.

Third notebook

Evin, Section 240, upper floor

I was transferred to Section 240, on the upper floor, Room 5. The first thing that shocked me on taking off my bandage was the number of prisoners. In that room intended for 10 to 12 people, there were 90 and in rooms only slightly bigger, they numbered 120. We had no room to sleep or sit down. In a six-room section, nearly 800 people were crammed in.

The corridors were always full of people, it was difficult to walk in them. There were only six lavatories for the whole section and usually 2 to 3 of them were out of service. It was therefore necessary to queue all day. When we asked the pasdaran in charge of the section to repair the lavatories, he answered us: "It's you who did it, we shan't repair it."

In the evening, in order to sleep, each of us had room to lie down on one side without moving. Every room had someone in charge of "sleeping". Her work consisted of making sketches of sleeping arrangements and fixing everyone's place. According to arrivals or departures, the sketch changed. If someone who had been tortured arrived, the situation grew worse, because we gave her more room, we stretched out right up to the lavatory doors and those who had breathing difficulties or asthma suffered martyrdom.

As a joke we said "sleeping like a book or a blind" and when we wanted to turn over, a girl said, laughing, "Pull the blind !" and people turned over.

At first, we had only one walk per week, but later on, because of illnesses, the length of the walks was multiplied by two or three. However, the yard was very small for the number of prisoners and we couldn't have any physical activities.

The sanitary situation in the section was catastrophic. We only had hot water twice a week and then it was at night. In the early hours, the water was so boiling hot that we couldn't use it for washing ourselves, so we used it to make tea (so that twice a week we drank tea without any Kafur). Afterwards, we used it for showering. But often, at midnight, we had no hot water and the only water left was ice-cold.

The lack of water and the very great number of prisoners were conducive to the rapid propagation of various skin diseases in the section. All the prisoners had at least one dermatological illness and some had several. They kept the traces of them forever.

For a time, scabies spread in the lower section, then in ours. This illness caused violent itching which made us scratch so hard that we tore our skin off. To combat it, we were brought a large pot in which we boiled our clothes.

During the first two months of my imprisonment, I contracted skin diseases, then scabies. I itched so much that I was given tranquilisers so as to make me sleep.

The rice with chicken whose chicken had flown away

The prison meals were so small in quantity that we were always hungry and of such poor quality that they gave very little nourishment. The best meal was the “rice with chicken”, but the prisoners who came from the North jokingly said of it, “the chicken’s flown away”. It consisted of rice with little bits of meat and chicken bone. We separated bits of chicken and bone to give them to the victims of torture and illness, then if there were any left we divided them up among us.

On 11 February 1982, for the first time, we were given rice with a lot of red meat and everyone ate well. But during the night, everyone was hit by vomiting and diarrhoea with stomach pains. Some lost consciousness and were taken to the infirmary. In the section, some girls were put on drips. Those who weren’t affected were obliged to wash the lavatories and washbasins. It lasted for two days, then we learned that the whole of the prison had been affected.

The situation in solitary confinement

In the solitary confinement section called the “dormitory”, there were two small showers for 50 cells. Every 7 to 10 days, a cell had the right to a 15 minute shower for washing oneself and one’s clothes. If we didn’t leave the cell on time, we were shut in there for hours. The cell had no heating and we had to stay there in the cold. I was punished that way once.

Having a watch, a pin and more than two items of clothing was forbidden in the cells. Books, writing paper and newspapers were forbidden too.

After a time, in the solitary confinement section, the men’s and women’s storeys were changed over and we were taken to the fourth. There, in each cell, there was a little window measuring 15 x 15 cm. Every two or three nights, I heard the screams of a man who was asking for his medicines, then the shouts of a pasdaran insulting him.

In that sector, the pasdaran and the interrogators considered everything that we did, sport or manual work, as a crime intended to keep our spirits up. One day I tried to make a soap dish out of some bits of plastic and suddenly a pasdaran woman opened the cell door and saw me. After a report to my interrogator, he obliged me to stand upright on one foot for three hours. My feet were wounded, I couldn’t stand on them. The pasdaran women led me outside the cell and obliged me to.

The punishment section

In the autumn of 1985, I was transferred to the collective section, but once, on a trumped-up excuse, I was led into the punishment section with another girl. The doors of the cells in that section were always shut and in a room measuring 5 x 6m, there were 60 to 70 people, most of them coming from Ghezel-Hessar Prison.

In that sector, the cells were opened twice a day, for a period of 15 minutes each time, to go to the lavatories, wash, and wash dishes and linen. We had to programme and minute everything in order to make it and often time ran short and we squabbled with the pasdaran so as to get more time.

The shock group search

One evening after lights were out and everyone was asleep, the light was suddenly switched on and the pasdaran attacked us without a word. We were thrown outside without having time to dress or put anything on our heads. We each took a sheet or a piece of cloth, then they led us into the yard in icy cold. The prisoners from each floor were facing a wall, so that no contact could be made. We spent nearly three hours in the yard. Then, we were ordered to go back to our cells. All our things were in the middle of the room, completely mixed up, and it took us until dawn to sort them out. It was a surprise search. In the morning we also noticed that the money sent by our families had been stolen by the pasdaran. That kind of savage search was repeated from time to time.

The inspection commissions

One day when I was in the Evin infirmary, we were ordered to sit down correctly and put on our headscarves. A commission comprised of mullahs and others, such as Lajevardi (the “Butcher of Evin”, then director of the prison) and his assistants, came to see us. This commission was inspecting the prisons on Montazeri’s behalf¹¹. They stayed for 10 minutes and asked a few questions, addressed me and to Azadeh Tayeb. But it was Lajevardi who answered in our stead. The chief mullah asked me:

“How many strokes of the whip were you given?”

“I don’t know, in the situation I was in I couldn’t count them, but my feet are totally wrecked.”

One of Lajevardi’s assistants quickly added:

“Hajj Agha¹², a maximum of 100 strokes, but as they were weakened, they were brought here.”

“It’s better to tell them how many strokes they were condemned to,” said the mullah.

¹¹ The ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, then Khomeini’s designated heir.

¹² That is what the regime’s people usually called a dignitary, meaning “one who has been to Mecca”.

“They don’t know how many strokes they’ve had !” exclaimed another in astonishment.

This delegation and the reactions of its members were so unreal that it was funny. Later and for a long time afterwards, we joked about it, mimicking them. That fool of a mullah imagined that one could count the strokes while being tortured.

Another time, in the section, the loudspeakers announced: “Everyone to put on her headscarf and sit down correctly in the cells.” Then pasdaran women came to check. After half an hour, Mullah Mohammad Khamenei (the brother of the present supreme guide) arrived with two or three people. They went into every room and cell, but the dialogue which took place was stupid.

In our room, Mohammad Khamenei said: “We have come to see the situation in the prisons. If you have any complaints, tell us. But watch out, we don’t accept complaints concerning blows or strokes given for the silly things you did.”

That day in the cell, there were two or three victims of torture, including Azam Youssefi who was accused of participating in the section’s internal organisation because of false denunciations by the spies. She had been savagely tortured. The torturers knew very well that she was innocent, but because her spirits were high, they had fastened themselves on her. We showed her to Mohammad Khamenei, asking him: “Are those your religious rules on sentencing ?”

Mohammad Khamenei went towards her.

“Why were you punished ?”

“I’ve already been judged and my sentence pronounced, but I was accused of belonging to a section network, without the slightest proof. Here we are savagely beaten, perhaps up to 1,000 strokes of the whip.”

“!,000, that’s exaggerated. You must have resisted. But it’s not serious, you’ll recover, if God wills it.”

That criminal had certainly never had one stroke of the whip, not even a slap, or he would have known how painful it was. One couldn’t see the slightest trace of pity on his face. We knew that it was only a comedy or a tragedy, caused by international pressure.

[Illustration: Azam Youssefi, member of the People’s Mojahedin, killed in 1988.]

When information on the hell of the prisons, notably at Evin and Gohardacht, was revealed after quarrels between different factions in the regime in 1986 and 1987, several enquiry missions were sent by Montazeri. The members asked each of the prisoners to what punishment he had been condemned. The line Khomeini took was pitiless execution and torture. His ex-heir Montazeri’s line was that with a little pity, more prisoners would turn their coats and collaborate.

Towards the end of 1987, a delegation from Montazeri came to ask us what our sentences were. Then they called some of us to announced reductions in our punishment. I was called too, to have my punishment reduced. I couldn’t believe it

Fourth notebook

“Don’t be afraid, I’m not going to a bad place”

A week after Zahra Nazari’s return from the court where she didn’t agree to repent, the loudspeakers spat out ten names. “Zahra Nazari, Farah Torabi, Fatemeh Assef ... to come with all their things to the section office.” When we heard “with all their things” there were three possibilities: either we were to be transferred to another section, or we were to be freed, or we were to be executed. In the section, we understood at once that they were to be executed because there was no liberation after a refusal to repent.

That day, the same scene was reproduced. There was no room in the corridor. Everyone came to say “goodbye” to her cellmates. Quite simply, before our eyes, they were led to the execution squad. We could do nothing. I wished I had the power to make them disappear from the executioners’ sight.

I had a particular feeling. It was the best of us who were leaving, companions of great worth, above all Zahra Nazari who had established a deep connection with everyone. She was leaving for ever and I couldn’t bring myself or didn’t want to imagine that this girl was going to be shot. It was impossible. It must be just a transfer. But, with the smile she always had, she murmured in my ear, “If you manage to get out of here give my greetings to Massoud (Rajavi, the leader of the Iranian Resistance) and the others.” I promised.

I wanted to cry but I couldn’t show any weakness in front of the traitors and the pasdaran.

During the last moments, I never stopped looking at her. I wanted to remember all the details of her face and I didn’t let go of her hand. We took an hour to reach the door, some of us were crying, but Zahra was smiling with great courage and said, “But why are you crying ? Smile, or I shan’t go.”

At last we reached the section door. One last time I took her in my arms. I had a thousand things to say to her but I found no words and stayed mute. All I could do was to squeeze her very hard in my arms and kiss her face. I told her that I should find it hard to bear her departure and that she was a sister, a teacher and much more for me. Her eyes shone and with her eternal smile she said, “Don’t worry, I’m not going to a bad place.”

Farah Torabi was among that group of ten. She was always calm and quiet and most of the time she read the Qur’an. She knew most of the suras by heart. We felt so close to her that we would never have wanted to leave her. We were in the same room and I have kept the memory of her face. Every time we caught each other’s eyes, she smiled. When I took her in my arms for the last time, she murmured in my ear, “Mahine ! Pray for me, don’t forget !”

Fatemeh Assef in room 4, unlike Farah, was jovial and noisy, and joked with everyone. During the programmes we organised in the prison, she put on a little number to entertain us. She could whistle any tune and when we were in the yard, she would whistle songs at the prisoners' request.

All ten left the section and the door was shut. An icy silence fell. No-one made a sound or moved. Suddenly, we heard Fatemeh whistling the melody "Hamsafar" (my travelling companion). It was her message and tears flooded our smiles.

That evening, until late at night, I stayed standing in front of the window. I wanted to hear their last cry before their execution. In the middle of the night, when the shots rang out, my heart stopped beating for a moment. To think that just a few hours ago, they were there in my arms, and that now their bodies were riddled with bullets and lifeless ... My tears welled up and flowed with the final shots. We counted 85 of them that evening, 85 final shots.

Almost every evening, our task was to go up to the window facing the yard to hear the shooting and the victims' last slogans, then to count the final shots. Sometimes we couldn't count them.

When the torturer kneels down

During the month when I remained in the Evin infirmary, there was a smiling but very weak girl beside me. Later I learned that she was Azadeh Tayeb, a Mojahedin heroine. She had been savagely tortured and had fainted several times. The torturers had even believed she was dead. They had wrapped her in a sheet and transferred her to the infirmary. Under torture, Azadeh didn't move and didn't scream. Her torturers had opened her mouth and howled at her that they didn't want any information, but just to hear her screams. Her legs were bleeding up to the thighs and she had no skin left. She was seriously infected and feverish, and during the night she was delirious.

I remember that one night when I couldn't sleep, she suddenly said "hy ? Why ?" I thought she was talking in her sleep.

"Is it all right, Azadeh ? Why what ?"

"Why are people being tortured ? For what crime ?"

I didn't know what to answer and I wanted to cry but she was waiting for an answer, and I said "Don't worry, it'll be all right." Then she grew calm and went to sleep.

If one didn't look at her legs, but just her face, one couldn't know that she had been tortured and in spite of her situation she was in good spirits and even calmed those around her.

[Illustration: Farah Torabi, student, executed on 17 July 1982 aged 26.]

The epic of the resistance

At the Evin infirmary, I knew a girl called Sakineh. She had been savagely tortured after her arrest so as to make her give away information. After several hours of torture, she had agreed to give the address and the time of an appointment in a busy street and the torturers, pleased at being able to obtain information, had taken her in a car to the place of the appointment. And there, at a given moment, she had thrown herself under a lorry which was passing and which had completely crushed her legs. Even in that situation she hadn't screamed and her torturers were thunderstruck. However, once, just once, I don't know what had been done to her, but she started to scream.

In spite of the need for it, they didn't operate on her. The pasdaran said that it wasn't worth while. She went to be interrogated every day and was tortured. Finally, not having been able to get the slightest bit of information from her, they took her to the execution squad on a stretcher.

Beyond endurance

At the infirmary we kept hearing the screams of a girl in a room whose door was always shut. She asked for her mother or insulted the pasdaran. From her screams, we could understand that she was unbalanced. When she screamed loudly, the pasdaran women went in to whip her, then we heard screams of pain.

I was intrigued to know who this girl was and what had been done to her to make her fall into that state. I wanted to put a face to those screams.

Once, when I wanted to go to the lavatories, the door of her room was ajar and I saw a pretty young girl with blue eyes and fair hair, but repellently dirty, who hadn't done her hair for a long time. Later on, I heard it said that she had completely lost her reason, to the extent of not even understanding what was said to her. She didn't go to the lavatories, and every time she relieved herself in her room, unconsciously, the pasdaran thrashed her and threw her under the cold shower, with blows.

Later on I learned that she was called Tahereh Samadi. A cellmate who knew her told me that Tahereh was an active supporter of the Mojahedin at Isfahan. She had a very joyful and active nature. Nobody knew what had been done to her, but one day all those horrors will be revealed.

Later, when I was transferred to solitary confinement, Tahereh was in a cell next to me, then in one facing me. Through a hold in the door, I could see how the pasdaran treated her. In her cell, there wasn't even a piece of moquette, on the pretext that she dirtied everything. As she screamed and threw herself against the

wall, she had been chained to the heating pipe and the pasdaran whipped her regularly.

Once, in the corridor of the interrogation section, I heard that her mother and sister had been arrested, but they knew nothing of Tahereh's state. I recognised Tahereh's sister in the corridor behind the door of the torture chamber. She looked like her. She was called Nadereh. Later I learned that the two sisters had been put in the same single cell and for several months, Nadereh had to care for her unbalanced sister. I never knew what was done to those two sisters, but a few years later when I saw Nadereh again in the collective section, she too was unbalanced. She stayed sitting down, staring at the others, then suddenly started to cry. If we tried to help her, she started to scream and the pasdaran took her away to be whipped. Then she started crying again.

I haven't had any more news of Tahereh, but later on I heard that she had been transferred to a psychiatric hospital. Those two doves, two victims in the hands of those savages, were savagely broken.

Fifth notebook

The meeting with Akbar

The years wore on in prison with their share of events of a harshness which I should never have thought myself able to bear. Sometimes anger burned our bodies and we would rather have died, but we had to bear them in silence.

In 1986, my sister Parvaneh, who had been arrested on 20 June 1981, was transferred from Ghezel-Hessar Prison to Evin. She arrived in our section. I was seeing my sister again after five years, but as a cellmate. We had a great many things to tell each other. I told her that our sister Farzaneh was dead and that our brother Akbar had been arrested. I also told her all the rest. She was set free that year.

During a visit, my mother told me that Akbar had been transferred to Gohardacht Prison, but having caught tuberculosis very badly, he had been transferred to the Evin infirmary. My mother had asked several times for permission to go and see him, unsuccessfully. I myself, knowing he was in Evin Prison, had tried to meet him, but in vain. Now one day I was allowed that visit. I very quickly took the socks and scarf I had knitted for him and Farzaneh's photo (my mother had brought it in secret). The meeting took place in a corridor of the interrogation section. The pasdaran told us, "You've only got ten minutes." I had so many things to say to him that I didn't know where to start. I simply asked how he was. Seeing a packet of cigarettes in his pocket, I knew he was smoking.

"You're smoking? Why?"

"You don't know what happens at Gohardacht and what Lajevardi did to us," he answered, a little ashamed. "That's why I smoke, but not too much, I'll stop, I promise."

"No problem," I answered and passed him Farzaneh's photo, putting it into his packet of cigarettes without the pasdaran noticing. I told him how Farzaneh died.

Towards the end of 1987, one day I was called along with others. When my turn came, I was told that my prison sentence was being reduced by three years. In theory the sentence began with the first appearance before the judge and when sentence was pronounced. Now I had appeared before three judges. But the people who were deciding on the reduction of the sentence didn't know it and I had told them that I had already served my sentence and that I should be freed. Astonishment. Freed? How was that? I gave explanations, then they asked me to leave. Then one of them came up and said to me, "Go back to your cell while the administrative steps for your freedom are being taken." I didn't believe what I had just heard and I prayed that my interrogator wouldn't hear the news, otherwise he would make difficulties. There were so many dossiers that they mixed everything up and that's how they ordered me to be set free.

When I returned to the section, I told a few girls what had happened. Hengameh¹³, the most experienced of us, advised me not to speak of it again as I would run the risk of it being heard by the spies who would repeat it to the interrogators, who in turn would prevent my being set free.

On 17 March 1988m I was called to the section office and told to gather up my things. I couldn't believe it. The pasdaran prevented me from saying my goodbyes. Only Hengameh, on the pretext of bringing my things, came with me. She murmured in my ear: "Hurry up and don't say anything to anyone and when you've got out go and rejoin the organisation (of the People's Mojahedin). Try to get a radio code so that I can rejoin them when I get out." Then the pasdaran separated us.

You might not think so, but the day of my liberation was not a day of joy. In my head were the faces of all my fellow-prisoners from six years of prison. The faces of those executed, the face of Zahra, Fatemeh, Farah, Mahboubeh, Sakineh, Nadereh, Tahereh and the others. I didn't think about my liberation and I felt no joy.

After I had signed several papers and committed myself to coming to Evin once a week, we were put, men and women, in a minibus and taken to the Luna-park pleasure park where our families were waiting for us. There I saw my parents and my sister and we came home. My heart was heavy and I didn't feel free. As soon as I came home, I contacted friends who had been freed before me and I was able to see Tayebeh Hatai and Zohreh Jamchidi again.

I felt I had lost something that I must find again. Every day I listened to Radio Mojahed for half the day, and the rest of the time I spent looking for friends in order to rejoin the organisation.

A few days after my liberation, I heard the news of "Operation Aftab", a very important military operation of the National Liberation Army against the regime's military forces, then I heard the news of another operation. This news stimulated me even more to rejoin them.

The sister and brothers of the political prisoners had the right to visit them once a year. The day I visited my brother, I wrote the news on a piece of white cloth which I sewed into the inside of my jacket. During the visit, I showed him this news. He was very happy. I told him that at the first opportunity, I would go to rejoin the organisation. "Courage, and give my greetings to the organisation," he called out to me.

After that meeting, I tried, unsuccessfully, to cross the frontier to rejoin the organisation.

At the time of the "Eternal Light" operation, I joyfully spread the news around me, but I deeply regretted not having been among the Mojahedin fighters.

¹³ Hengameh Hadj Hassan, author of "Face à la Bête" ["Face to Face with the Beast"], Editions Jean Picollec.

After that operation all visits to the prison were cancelled and my mother, who wanted to see my brother, was told there were no more visits. The families were told that they would be informed. My mother, like other mothers, didn't know what crime was being committed behind the bars and that their children were being slaughtered.

His watch had stopped on 8 August

One Thursday evening, the door bell rang. We knew that in general the executions of prisoners were announced to their families on Thursday evenings. Being afraid of hearing bad news, nobody moved and everyone was thinking about Akbar's execution.

My mother went to open the door and a few minutes later she came back to ask my father to go and hear what they were saying. Some pasdaran had come to tell us to come to the Komiteh of Khavaran next morning at 9 o'clock, without giving us a reason.

"Surely you want to say that you've executed my son, so why are you playing hide and seek?" shouted my father in exasperation.

"We've been doing this ever since this morning without knowing why," they answered, showing us a long list.

"Then go and tell whoever knows why, that a regime can go on blaspheming but it can't go on with oppression."

[Illustration: Ali Akbar Latif, aged 31, was executed with 30,000 other political prisoners in 1988 during the massacre ordered by Khomeini.]

That's how we learned of my brother Akbar's execution. My mother was crying and so were we. My mother shouted, crying: "It's eight years now that I've been undergoing every kind of humiliation to see my son. They've taken my daughter and now it's my son who's gone! I've lost the hope of my life. It's not just. After eight years, four months away from his liberation, they've murdered my son and my hope." She told us her memories of Akbar and Farzaneh, then she screamed with pain, tearing her hair: "Criminals! Why have you murdered my innocent son after eight years, why has that criminal Khomeini killed defenceless prisoners?" Nobody could sleep until dawn.

In the morning we got into the car and my father drove us first to Farzaneh's tomb, perhaps to comfort us. Then we went to the Komiteh of Khavaran and arrived towards 11 o'clock. A few hundred metres away, a pasdaran stopped us and nobody could go any further without permission. The pasdaran asked my father's name, which he transmitted. Then he told us to come back towards 2 o'clock. My father grew angry: "What do you want to do apart from giving me my son's things? So give me them! What's the point of this game?" Being afraid of rebellion and families gathering together, they had programmed the arrivals, so that the news of the mass executions should be propagated slowly.

We came back towards 2 o'clock and presented ourselves at the entrance. Only my father was allowed to enter. After an hour, he came back with a little bag, completely broken and without saying a word we got back in the car, our hearts overflowing with grief.

Shortly afterwards, he began to tell us. They had led him into a room where there were some mullahs:

“After the Mojahedin’s attack during Operation Mersad (the name given by the regime to Operation Eternal Light), the prisoners revolted and killed some guards. So we decided to execute them.

“We are alone together. In reality, you couldn’t do anything to the Mojahedin and to revenge yourselves you executed innocent and defenceless prisoners. You yourselves condemned my son to eight years in prison. He had only four months left, but you killed hi.”

He had been obliged to sign papers promising not to organise any funeral, not to show his photo, etc.

“Perhaps you’ll be told later where he’s buried.”

They never did so, because the bodies had been thrown into common graves.

In the little bag, there were the socks and the scarf that I had knitted for him and also his watch which had stopped on 8 August. Did his heart stop beating on the same day ?

The missing companions

Afterwards I managed to pass a code to the organisation’s radio. I spent days waiting and hoping, listening to the radio to hear my code. The first time I heard it, I jumped for joy. A radio message for me telling me to get ready, a messenger would come to look for me.

[Illustration: Tayebah Hayati, after being freed, was arrested while trying to rejoin the Resistance. She was shot, after having been violently tortured.]

On the day of my departure, I agreed to a meeting with Tayebah Hayati and Zohreh Jamchidi, then I took a bus and they took another bus, to go to a frontier town and leave the country.

On arrival, I waited for three days. A hellish wait. In vain; I didn’t see them coming. I telephoned Tayebah’s home, but her family had no news. They had been arrested.

Later I learned that Tayebah and Zohreh had been arrested in the bus on the road and transferred to Evin. After having been savagely tortured, they had been executed.

With the organisation's help, I left for the frontier and three days later we reached the first Mojahedin base. Then I joined the Ashraf base to the north-east of Baghdad. The instant when I entered that base was the finest moment of my life. I cannot describe either my joy or my feelings. But I told myself that I missed friends like Tayebah and Zohreh, that I missed the martyrs.