

Emerging from Prison

Opening the enormous metal gate, the guard suddenly took away my blindfold and asked me, tauntingly, if I would recognize my parents. With my eyes hurting from the strange light and anger in my voice, I assured him that I would. Suddenly, I was pushed through the gate and the door was slammed behind me. After more than eight years, here I was, finally, out of jail, in this other world, and there they were, my parents, older and smaller yet still familiar. Holding me in their arms, they were simultaneously crying and laughing while I was still frozen, in shock. The pleasant summer breeze was gently penetrating the chador covering me, drying the sweat of prison on my body. "Let's get out of this hellish place," my mother said. No car was allowed to drive into the street on which the prison was located except for those of the prison employees. We walked toward the main street where we could take a cab. My father was almost running, but my feet felt so heavy, as if I were walking in mud or some invisible threads were pulling me back.

I did not get the chance to say good-bye to my cellmate or leave my money for her. I had none of my clothes or other belongings, many of which were my beloved lost friends' last possessions. "Darling, don't even think about what you've left there. Nothing in that hell is worth thinking about. You're out and that's what matters; put everything else behind you," my mother advised. But I was preoccupied with the reality inside the prison cell. My heart was torn between contradictory feelings: guilt for putting my family through so much fear, hardship, and humiliation, and anger for feeling betrayed because my father had negotiated my temporary release against my will. My thoughts were interrupted by my parents' voices, telling me that everyone was waiting for me at home.

"I will not go home before I go to the cemetery," I responded, and continued the rest of the sentence in my mind, "to visit Hamid, my husband, and my other friends' graves as I have promised them." The deep fear in my parents' eyes became more transparent as they feigned calmness and content. I felt angrier and guiltier at the same time. I had seen and lived all this years before, in 1978, the first time out of prison, when my parents did everything humanly possible to make sure that nothing would upset me, terrified that prison had already pushed me to the edge and if pushed further, I could easily go mad. This fear had resurfaced now even more intensely than the first time, though more subtly. There were of course uncanny similarities between my first and second arrests and releases. Both times, my arrest occurred after the harshest crackdown on opponents under each regime, yet at the beginning of changes in prison conditions.

My arrest in 1977 took place at the end of the most severe phase of political suppression by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime, which followed the first armed struggle of a leftist guerrilla group, Sazman-e Cherikha-ye Fadayee-e Khalgh-e Iran (Iranian People's Self-Sacrificing Guerrilla Organization) in 1970, and was intensified between 1974 and 1976 when the leftist-leaning Islamic organization, Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalgh-e Iran (Iranian People's Warriors' Organization) also joined in militant activities against the regime. During this period, arrests and executions reached a new pinnacle and incredibly horrific means of torture were utilized to force the detainees to confess even to the most trivial "accusations" or "crimes."

For instance, Goli, the woman I met in jail then had been severely tortured and sentenced to ten years for having owned, read, and passed along a book of fiction, *Cheshmhayash* (Her Eyes), written by the leftist-leaning author Bozorg Alavi. Her story was, however, by no means an exception. Within prisons and the country, which had itself turned into a larger prison, the ambiance felt deadly suffocating. The regime appeared stronger than ever; the facade of stability erected under an iron fist made the country the most appealing place in the region for foreign investments

and the geopolitical interests of the United States. It was due, however, to this very illusive sense of stability and the consequences of the brutal treatment of opponents that by the end of 1976 the regime found itself under pressure from the outside world, particularly from Jimmy Carter, at the time president of the United States, the regime's closest ally.

My arrest coincided with the end of this period of extreme brutality and the beginning of a new phase when physical torture was less commonly employed during interrogations. Obviously, this did not prevent the regime from subjecting prisoners to this so-called white, or soft, torture. It did not stop the regime, for example, from forcing prisoners to stand on their feet for days and nights, violently waking them up every time they seemed to have fallen sleep or when moving one leg up to give it a rest. I still remember a woman who had been subjected to these techniques. She was brought to my cell, only for about half an hour, in the early weeks of my imprisonment in 1977. I never found out whether my encounter with her resulted from a simple mistake by a guard or if it was an intentional act to intimidate me by making me witness the gruesome consequences of this "white" torture. Either way, my heart ached, and still aches, at the sight and the memory of her horrifyingly swollen legs, which no longer fit in her pants. I could not assess the extent of the impact those sleepless days and nights of standing on her feet had had on her mental being and her body. Yet her confused stare, disoriented demeanor, and robotic gestures, along with her inability to verbally communicate her ordeal to me, were indicative of the suffering she had to endure as long as she lived, if she were to live.

As I tried to gently massage her dark blue feet and legs, which looked more like two deformed tree trunks, the skin began to tear, and I felt the blood about to gush out. I asked her whether she was the woman I had been seeing since the day of my arrest every time I was taken out of my cell for the toilet or interrogation. She moved her eyelashes up and down as a way of offering a positive response to my question, but suddenly her eyes took flight, perhaps to the dream world. For a few minutes, her stare remained frozen on the wall. Did she fall asleep with her eyes open? Was

she able to sleep with open eyes during all those days and nights while standing in the hallway?

But while in the hallway, her face was covered with a jacket, a piece of prison uniform. This meant that her eyes were not exposed to the guards and that she could not see her surroundings even with her eyes open. In order to sleep without the guards noticing her, she had to remain alert to every movement. She must have learned to sleep while awake, and remain awake while asleep. I did not have the chance to ask her, nor was she able to communicate to me, whether she had in fact acquired this skill. Later, during my second imprisonment (1983–1992), under the Islamic Republic, I would meet several prisoners who had mastered this “skill-trick” of sleeping while awake and being awake while asleep. Pori, who had spent ten months during 1983–1984 in the so-called *taboothera* (graves) or *dastgahha* (machines), the extreme punishment ward in Ghezel Hesar Prison, was one of those prisoners who had challenged the boundaries of sleep and waking states, stretching their threshold.

I was unable to discover the consequences of the torment or the future of the woman I met in 1977. However, deeply submerged in my memory, her frozen stare returned to haunt me; I became acutely aware of it especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. This was particularly in response to the fact that, time and again, I came to hear debates about the practice of enhanced interrogation techniques exercised on detainees arrested in relation to the U.S. “War on Terror.” Rather than a discussion of ethics, these debates basically revolved around such questions as whether or not these measures could be considered torture and if they were effective. Politicians concerned with such techniques mainly asked, for example, whether or not performing waterboarding on a detainee more than eighty times produced the kind of result that was worth damaging the image of the United States in the world. Those who discussed and wrote about these techniques in so much detail did so perhaps without having ever been haunted by the frozen stare of a woman or a man subjected to these methods of torture.

By the time of my arrest in early 1977, when I met the woman whose name I never learned, the old-style, hard-core torture was giving way to

the white, nonphysical interrogation techniques. The regime could now claim that prisoners were no longer tortured. As long as one's legs were torn apart not by the heavy strikes of cables on the soles of the feet but rather by forced standing on them, no torture had occurred. In today's world in which machines, technologies, and devices seem to be doing all the work, where hands have nearly become the extensions of technology rather than the other way around, any production without devices and machines may easily be construed as nonwork, nonproduction. By the same token, in the apparent absence of devices, the exerted pain is claimed as nontorture. But when I was arrested, I knew nothing of these changes. The atmosphere in the society out of which I was taken to jail felt heavier than ever. My knowledge of prison and torture amounted to no more than a few banned books and pamphlets I had read; some horrific stories I had heard on the underground radio broadcasts from outside Iran; and plenty of rumors circulating within Iran, which were substantiated during family gatherings by whispers about distant young male relatives who had emerged from jail but remained mute and lost, with deformed feet and their toenails having fallen off.

No wonder therefore that when I found myself in the Komiteh-ye Moshtarak-e Zedd-e Kharabkari (United Anti-sabotage Committee), a notorious detention center built under the Shah's regime on the site of the former central prison, my then young heart vacillated between pausing for breath and pounding heavily. I still vividly remember that as I read the carved writings of legendary dissidents on the walls of the cell into which I was thrown after my interrogation, I simultaneously felt proud, burdened by the responsibility of living up to the level of their resistance, and somewhat out of place. But the timing of my arrest would save me from witnessing or being subjected to some of the most horrific devices of torture that had severely scarred many women arrested earlier whom I would meet in jail in the next two years. For since early 1978, having agreed that political prisons could be inspected by the Red Cross, the Shah's regime could no longer use its old torture devices to inflict overt torture or enduring pain on detainees.

It did not take long for this place to once again fully function as a torture chamber, now by the Islamic Republic and under a new title, Komiteh-ye Touhid (Unity Committee). If under the Shah the function of this torture chamber was to use the regime's penal system against its political dissidents, whom they tortured or eliminated under the guise of fighting *kharabkari* (sabotage), under the Islamic Republic the interrogators crushed their opponents under the pretext of extracting Satan from their souls. Through torture or killing, they brought the lost souls of dissidents into unity with God, or so the name Unity Committee implied.

A Haunting Detour

I did not experience interrogation under the Unity Committee, for my arrest in early 1983 was not made by the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Republic, who ran the infamous Unity Committee and oversaw all its interrogations and torture. Rather, I was hunted down by the Revolutionary Public Persecution of Tehran, which ruled over the notorious Evin Prison. In 1983, on the way to Evin, I was driven through the *piche toubeh* (repentance curve), the name the agents who arrested me used to refer to the last curve of the road before reaching the prison. In Evin also, as *piche toubeh* suggested, prisoners were to either be killed or become repentant. Although I never repented nor was I killed in prison, at least not in the conventional sense of these terms, I trembled with a range of mixed emotions when after eight years, in 2004, during my return to Iran to conduct my field research, I visited the Unity Committee.

By 2004, the Iranian sociopolitical landscape had changed. A reformist, Mohammad Khatami, was president. The Unity Committee was now opened to the public as Moozeh-ye Ettela'at (Museum of Information). I visited this site of death and torture, which until recently had been in use by this very regime. From the ominous clouds that were rapidly gathering over the Iranian political scene, one could easily anticipate the rising of new waves of state violence. With an eerie feeling, I thus read my name on the wall of this once horrific dungeon, along with the names of many others who had inhabited this place under the Shah's regime. To visit this

museum, I had to make a reservation in person—I had to write down my name and the time and date of my visit. Hesitantly, I signed my name, fearful that the guard might check the records and realize that I had been a prisoner of both regimes. In this place only a few years earlier the interrogators of this very government had ushered many of their opponents into “unity with God.” These detainees were either eradicated or were forced to live a “bare life,” as walking dead. It was partially a result of this brutal suppression of dissidents in the first ten years following the revolution that, in the early 2000s, the Islamic Republic felt confident enough to make a spectacle of the Shah’s torture chamber while remaining entirely silent about the death, suffering, and destruction that occurred there by its own hands.

In this journey through the labyrinth of the Museum of Information I was accompanied by a woman friend, Ferdous, who was also a former political prisoner but interrogated and tortured in the Unity Committee. The bitter taste in my mouth from witnessing the nearly absolute erasure of the history of the leftists’ resistance and suffering under the United Anti-sabotage Committee and an exaggerated predominance of religious clergy presented in this museum became unbearable when Ferdous recalled the different spots where she had been interrogated and beaten.

We strolled back and forth between our own realities and memories and those we saw portrayed in front of us in this bluntly selective depiction of a particular history, when a large group of junior high school boys swarmed in. They had obviously been brought here on a school field trip to learn about the atrocities of the former regime. Yet soon, only the tour guide’s voice disturbed our thoughts while the boys began to play hide and seek in the mazes that not long ago were the site of a bloodbath for so many men and women not much older than these boys. They ran around, laughed loudly, and screamed almost hysterically and playfully as we shivered to our bones at the horrific sight of the human-size statues that too closely represented victims of torture and their torturers. The boys’ mockery reminded me of a more bitter parody, that of a dream that was once expressed by some of us during those elated moments of the victory

of the Revolution of 1979 of the possibility of a day when all the Shah's prisons would be turned into museums.

Now here we were, walking around this prison-museum, whose opening to the public felt like a slap in the face, considering that both Ferdous and I had lived through the torture chambers of this regime. I was dumbfounded by the cynical depiction in this prison-museum, not merely in its blunt silencing of some experiences while highlighting others but also by the way it continued to exercise violence in other prisons when turning this one into a museum. Through transforming this jail into a museum while maintaining and even expanding others, the regime at once ignored and reenacted the beheading of all those dreams of a brief moment in the "spring of freedom," following the 1979 revolution, when the idea of closing prisons and opening them to the public as museums was envisioned. Soon, however, I would realize that compared to what was to come after 2004, this period, though itself cynical, was, relatively speaking, a semi-spring of freedom.

For the Sake of the Friend

At the time of visiting this museum, nevertheless, while wary of the dark clouds, I was still unaware of the scale of violence that was to reemerge. Preoccupied by the sufferings and resistances of the past, I vaguely heard the whispers of the ghosts of the future whose cries have just recently shaken the entire world. The new wave of horror was near, waiting just around the next corner, perhaps to claim even these playful boys, who seemed so oblivious to the shrieks of the ghosts that haunted this place, demanding to be seen, to be heard, and to be remembered. Suddenly, I felt as if I had gone deaf to all that was going on around me.

All I could hear was the howling of my many tortured friends amid the cacophony of laughter and threats of interrogators of both regimes. I do not know if it was caused by these voices in my head, the disgust I felt at the regime's ruthlessly selective narration of the past, even the boys' obliviousness to this, or all these combined, but I suddenly felt nauseous. I looked at Ferdous, her now utterly bloodless face, her rapidly moving

eyelids, and her forehead covered with sweat. I whispered, "Let's go." We almost ran out of this hellish place where each of us had been an inhabitant, I under the Shah's regime and she under the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As we left the Museum of Information, I thought of the double connotation of the term *ettekla'at*, which means both "information obtained, upheld, and revealed by the secret police," and "information as knowledge whose purpose is to raise consciousness." We passed the Museum of Coins nearby. A strange sense of abhorrence toward these two museums of money and violence overtook me. Sitting close to one another, their interconnectedness and similarity were further emphasized. I thought of the contaminating power of violence and money, of the way they both often spoil whoever or whatever comes their way. Had I survived the contamination by violence? Had my soul survived its tarnishing effect? I would remain wary and, I hope, sensitive to these questions, perhaps as long as I live. I hence write today for the sake of all those friends—whom I either knew personally or my soul knew of their spirit of resistance and desire for justice—whose refusal to submit to the power of money and violence cost their lives. It is in the spirit and for the sake of these always present friends—ghosts of justice and freedom—that I live.