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we lived to tell: political prison memoirs of Iranian women

Azadeh Agah, Sousan Mehr, Shadi Parsi and Shahrzad Mojab, McGilligan Books, Toronto, Canada, 2007, 229 pp., ISBN 978-1894692199, \$22.95 (Pbk)

In Iran, the period between June 1981 (when the newly formed Islamic regime began a vigorous crackdown) and the summer of 1988, bloodied by mass executions, was particularly bleak for civil liberties. These years stand out even though waves of protest and violent suppression of dissent continue to this day in Iran, and even though the human rights record of the Shah's secret police prior to the 1979 revolution was itself abominable. The rate at which people were rounded up and detained and the increasingly trifling reasons for incarceration, evermore-savage torture and maltreatment of detainees, and a horrific tide of state-sponsored killings mark 1981–1988 as a shameful era. At the notorious Evin Prison, just north of Tehran, women activists were key targets of this state rage, punished for their audacity as females acting in the public sphere. Three new books in English and one recent movie all focus on women's experience of prison in Iran: Manijeh Hekmat's feature film, *Women's Prison* (2002) explores the experience of Iranian women incarcerated for non-political reasons from the 1980s until today; Marina Nemat's Evin memoir, *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007) will be discussed briefly below; and Zarah Ghahramani's *My Life as a Traitor* (2008) describes her 30-day stint in Evin in 2001 – replete with harsh interrogations and torture – for her political activities as a college student. So, *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison* (2002) exploration of Iranian Women joins these other works in building a portrait of women's experiences of imprisonment, especially at one infamous facility. In key ways, it is the strongest of these offerings, and I would urge curious readers to begin here.

We Lived to Tell brings together three short narratives composed in English, all testimonies to their authors' experiences as political prisoners in Evin during the 1980s. Their lyrical titles – 'Years of Fire and Ash' (Sousan Mehr), 'As Long as There are Poppies' (Azadeh Agah), and 'The Five Seasons' (Shadi Parsi) – exemplify the oddly persistent beauty in these depictions of a grim breach of justice.

Shahrzad Mojab's very useful introduction provides historical context for the lay reader and wards off the kind of aggressively Islamophobic dichotomizing that characterizes so much North American commentary on Iran. From her first words, Mojab places these memoirs in a broader setting of oppression

1 Shahrzad Mojab, 'Ziba: A Memorial,' Lecture Concordia University, 9 July 2004. Recorded at <http://www.zibakazemi.org/shahrzadmojab.html>, a memorial site for Ziba-Zahri Kazemi, a photo-journalist murdered in front of Evin Prison in 2003.

and resistance, citing West Indian sugar plantations during slavery, and today's Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. She insists that the theocratic brutality of 1980s Iran cannot be understood without being placed in this wider frame; elsewhere, Mojab has redefined Bush's 'axis of evil' as 'capitalism, religious fundamentalisms, and US imperialism'.¹ The women who tell their stories here were all relatively secular, enthusiastically left-wing activists committed to the revolution but then, in the aftermath of the Shah's overthrow, dismayed by what they experienced as a fundamentalist hijacking of the movement and of state power.

Sousan Mehr describes '[t]wo mothers, awaiting execution, saying farewell to their children under a sky framed in barbed wire.... I will write about this one day, I think to myself. This is not a myth or a legend; this is true, and one day I will record it all' (p. 61). Perhaps this urgent call to witness is the motor that drives all three authors in this volume. Their sensibilities, though, and their age when detained, their educational and class background are all palpably distinct. At the time of arrest, Azadeh Agah was a mother (of one) and already a professor, Shadi Parsi was only eighteen, and Sousan Mehr well-travelled and in her twenties. Mehr begins and ends with dreams of a lost lover and the scent of cyclamens. Agah's essay, the longest, seems the most carefully comprehensive in its presentation of day-to-day life at Evin. Parsi's piece, perhaps the most lyrical, dedicates itself to portrayal of psychological experience.

Despite the markedly distinct voice, perspective and project of each author's contribution, the narratives share many features because they write from the same place and time, and Evin's strategies were forced on all of them: executions (counting gunshots); torture, especially flogging of the soles of feet; violent institutionalized misogyny; extreme overcrowding and underfeeding; blindfolds; camphor in the tea (to suppress sexual longings); babies and young children kept with and then removed from imprisoned mothers; a preponderance of prisoners in their late teens; 'trials' that defy any notion of justice – that would leave Kafka gasping; hours of enforced 'educational programming' each day that turn the jailhouse version of Islam into something unrecognizable, unwelcome to the devout and the secular alike.

For all this horror, solidarity predominates in all three narratives, taking many vital forms. We hear of enterprising, canny, communistic sharing of all available resources; tender comforting when despair grows too great; ingenious, gracious extensions of privacy or some semblance of it; a remarkably earthy, life-sustaining humour (the women even make light over backed-up sewage in one gruesomely mordant scene (p. 119)); and shared projects – like teaching one another French, embroidering or carving for one another using contraband or reappropriated materials (photos of the resultant artworks are included in the book). Also shared is poetry: whether embroidered on a piece of scavenged fabric for a friend, scratched on a wall, composed in a notebook or recited from

memory, shared poetry sustained these three different women during their ordeal, and it makes up part of this book just as it became part of the fabric of survival woven by the thousands of women being 'processed' by the Evin machine.

This sustaining sisterliness unfolds in the face of a much more stressful parallel dynamic, to which much space is necessarily devoted in all three essays. Some – often half – of the women in a room, whether a small cell (five or six women living in a cell meant for one) or a large ward (housing as many as ninety women in one room), were *tavvabs*, 'repentant sinners' who (often as a consequence of torture) had renounced their beliefs and decided to live as informers and facilitators of the regime that was detaining them. All three authors treat these women with disdain, not just because they made day-to-day life immeasurably more difficult for their fellow inmates, but especially because, as Shadi Parsi suggests, like 'dark sides' made manifest and placed right in their midst, 'they demonstrated to us how low each of us could potentially sink' (p. 164).

In a recent review of two other memoirs from Evin Prison, Sarah Wildman remarks on what she calls a 'weird sameness' as the authors recount a chain of degradations that become, for the reader, 'depressingly familiar'.² Of course Wildman is right, the dehumanizations of blindfoldings and solitary are purposefully rote: they are 'weird[ly]' the same because all these afflictions are routinized for mass application, and their first function is to strip away the dignity of individuality and uniform reiteration on the punisher's part makes its stamp on the detention memoir. Two points need to be made, though. First, memoirs that *present* themselves as part of a 'depressingly familiar' oeuvre may prove controversial in their truth claims, as scandals of the last years have proven all too well.³ One of the texts reviewed by Wildman, Marina Nemat's 2007 *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir*, has been greeted with angry scepticism by some of her fellow survivors of Evin for what they describe as self-serving distortions and inventions: these critics claim that much in her memoir was fabricated.⁴

Second, the commonalities among the three essays assembled in *We Lived to Tell* are not merely depressing. The *Bildungsroman* story of an individual spirit not broken may be what we expect as readers, but it is not the only note to be sounded by a resistance testimonial. Part of what we hear, as these three voices braid together, is the unmistakable and very moving aesthetics of the 'we', whereby the overweening obsession with individual experience that so dominates literary convention is overshadowed by the language of collectivity. Shadi Parsi describes prisoners pouring into the hallway to accompany several beloved fellows on the walk towards their executions, singing:

When we finished singing the song, we moved on to *Masouleh*, and then another. We had come out of our room and were moving along the hallway. Other rooms were having their

2 Wildman (2008).

3 Daniel Engber offers one depressing catalogue: 'Worst Publishing Week Ever' 4 March 2008, Slate.com, <http://www.slate.com/id/2185746/>.

4 <http://www.utoronto.ca/prisonmemoirs/Protest.pdf> A letter of complaint to Penguin Books, Canada.

own farewells and stepping out, and in a short time, all the prisoners in the rooms were together, strong, marching towards the main exit of the ward, seeing off the departing friends. It looked and felt so much like a demonstration: everyone marching along with a common purpose and a feeling that united them. The atmosphere was emotionally charged, ready to erupt in fire. Other rooms joined in our singing.

When we reached the main exit, we stopped. Those who were leaving turned back towards us with a long, meaningful glance at our crowd. For a split second, we stopped singing and breathing. Then suddenly someone in the crowd started to sing the *Internationale*. This was a different song: it wasn't one to sing aloud in prison.... It began as a feeble, unnoticeable voice, and then got stronger and stronger. We all forgot where we were, and heedless of the consequences, felt solidarity wrap itself around us, a warm blanket.... As calm as a gentle breeze, each of the prisoners looked back at us...

And then they went to die. Many were interrogated and flogged in the wake of this action. But the submersion of each 'I' in that profound experience of solidarity invents a different protocol of telling, an aesthetics of collectivity that must reshape our expectations of the memoir genre, capable of conveying not just the depths of suffering and brutality, but 'the power and the strength in the prison hallways when we were singing that song to our friends for the last time' (Parsi, 2007: 184).

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