

TERROR IN TEHRAN

Iranian-born Zoë Neirizi, was 23 years old and heavily pregnant when active campaigning for democracy led to her imprisonment and torture. Three decades on, she talks exclusively about her struggle

When the despotic Shah (1941-1979) was overthrown during the 1979 revolution, I was 23, newly wed and, like many other Iranians, had never been more positive about the future of our country. Three years earlier I'd fled Iran's brutal regime, and come to London to study at the International Film School. In March 1979, my husband and I returned to our homeland full of hope.

However, despite the buzz of the revolution still humming in our ears, our dreams of a new, free-thinking Iran were short lived. The oppressive Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989), whom many believed to be more extreme than the Shah, had returned from exile and seized control of the country. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, life was comparatively relaxed, but then the political arrests started again.

CIVIL CAMPAIGN

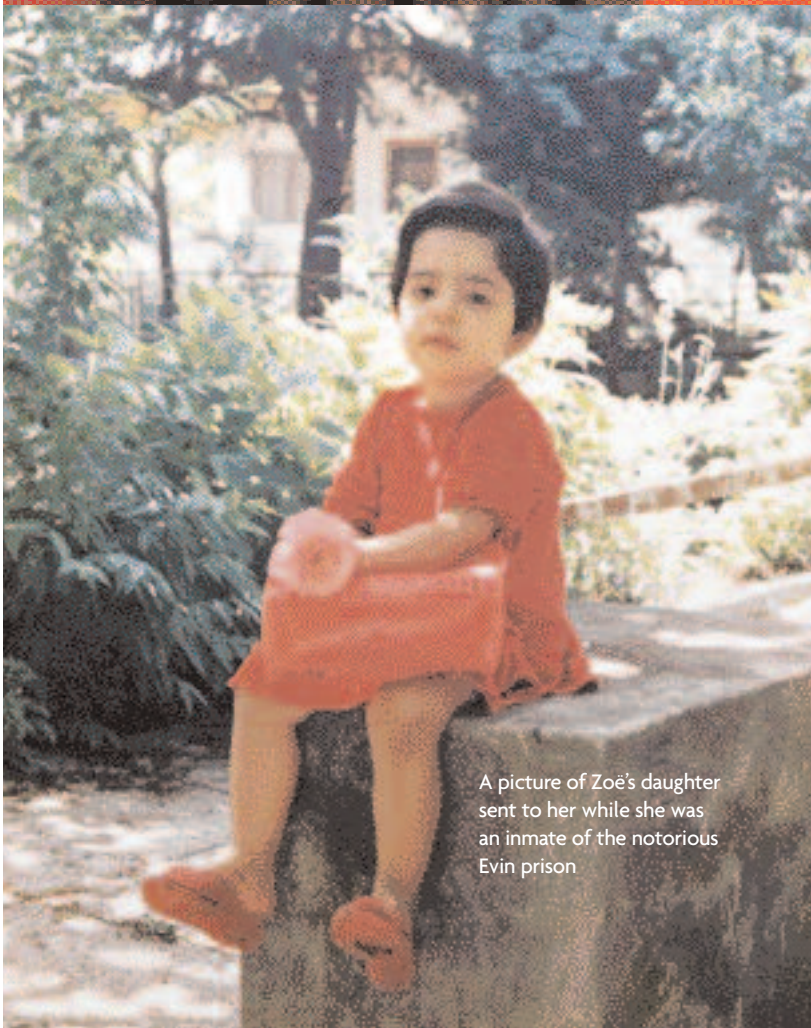
My husband and I lived in hiding in Tehran – where more than half of the country's industry is based – and continued our secret battle for a free Iran. Our work involved daily visits to factories, disguised as workers, to distribute leaflets, mobilise the people, open their eyes to the horrors of the Khomeini regime, and to campaign for women's rights. We lived and worked like this, for nearly a year, until our cover was blown. We learned later that our betrayer was the husband of one of my closest friends. He had been arrested and become an informer; even betraying his wife, leading to her execution. So, almost seven months pregnant, I found myself subjected to the full brutality of the regime that I had been so desperately campaigning against.

I always knew that we might get arrested but when it finally happened, on Valentine's Day, 1983, it still came as a complete shock. It was early evening when six or seven cars pulled up outside my house and a small army of Islamic guards burst in. Armed with guns, they started pushing us around, then raided our papers and belongings. Vulnerable and unable to defend ourselves, we were at their mercy. They arrested and blindfolded us. It was crazy; all this for a heavily-pregnant woman who could barely walk.

At first I was so stunned that I couldn't take in what was happening but I'd heard so many terrifying things about what happened to political activists in prison in Iran under Khomeini that I was afraid of the fate awaiting us. I'd heard of people being repeatedly beaten and of being locked in cellars filled with cold water or locked in tiny boxes for long periods, which, as a result, led to many suffering from mental illnesses or committing suicide.



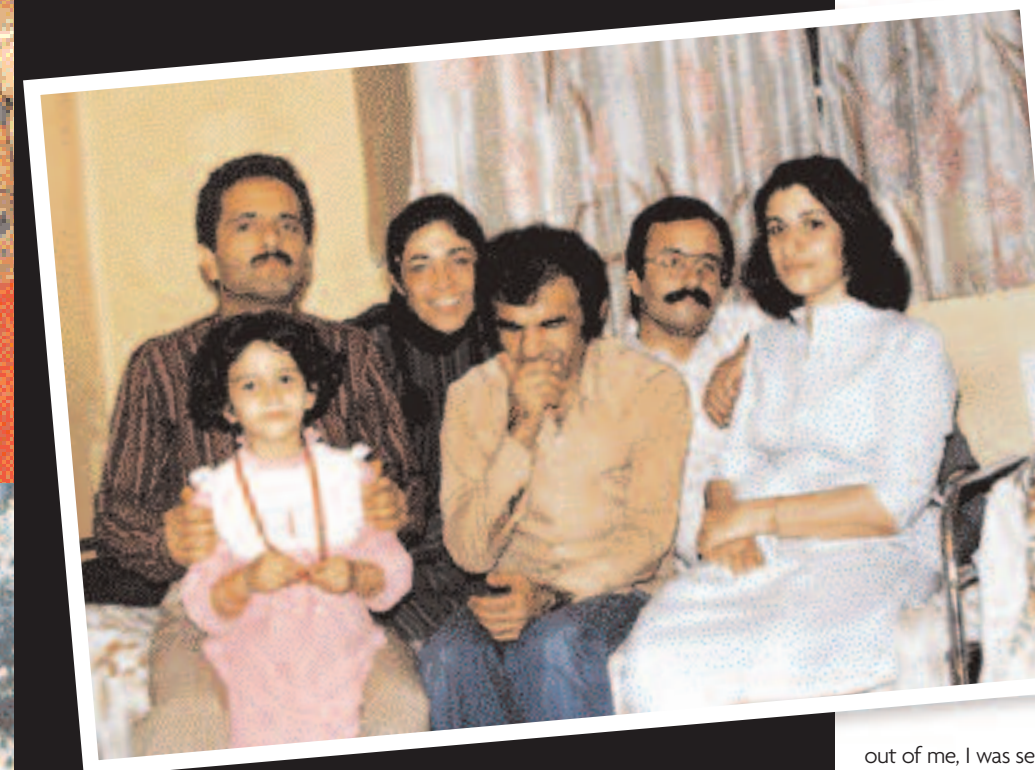
Political rights lawyer Zoë speaks to REAL in her North London home



A picture of Zoë's daughter sent to her while she was an inmate of the notorious Evin prison



“THESE PEOPLE WHO TORTURED ME EMPLOYED A HOLY IMAGE TO JUSTIFY THEIR VIOLENCE, SAYING, ‘WE DO IT FOR ISLAM’”



TOP Happier times: Zoë with her dad and brother before the arrest
ABOVE Zoë pictured here with her ex-husband (FAR LEFT) and family friends
BELOW Zoë took a picture of her sister (FAR LEFT) marching in Iran's annual Shah birthday parade, 1965



Shaking and scared, we were bundled into a car and taken to the Islamic Guard Interrogation Headquarters, where I was forced to sit down in a cramped room. I could sense a lot of people around me. They demanded information about my political activities and the names of other activists, however, despite their shouting and physical abuse to my head, I didn't crack. I didn't betray my comrades.

THE KILLING FIELDS

After this first short interrogation, I was separated from my husband and, for the next two weeks, a mat in a corridor became my home. When I wasn't enduring forced questioning, I sat there, silent and blindfolded. Outside, I could hear gun shots. I later learnt that these were executions. It was a form of mental torture; my husband had endured it for two months. I have been asked many times why I was not executed but I honestly don't know why I was spared. Although I sorely felt the injustice and irony of our capture and arrest – we were only interested in peaceful protest, justice and democracy – I also understood that people who had done much less campaigning than us had been executed.

The tactics the Komeini torturers inflicted were savage. Many merciless things were performed, in the name of Islam. (Some muslims believe that certain things must be punished because they go against the ideology.) These torturers employed a holy image to justify their violence, saying, 'We do it for Islam'. During interrogation, they flogged the soles of my feet, using different sized hard plastic cables to vary the amount of pain inflicted because they believed that pain to the feet affects the whole body. As they struck me, they chanted verses from the Koran. It must have given them a kick thinking they were doing something good for their beliefs. They were desperately trying to weaken my resolve and make me talk; they wanted me to give them information so that they could weed out other political opponents. It was extremely painful and my whole body was in trauma. After several days of torture, my womb began to bleed and I was hospitalised. Once the guards of

the regime realised that they weren't going to get anything out of me, I was sent to the Evin Prison, in north Tehran, which had been founded by SAVAK under Shah and was notorious for its political prisoners' wing.

BIRTH BEHIND BARS

While awaiting sentencing (for my political activities), I was put in a filthy cell with around 60 others. We were so jammed in that it was difficult to find a space on the floor to sleep and we suffered from many epidemics and skin diseases. During the day, we were forced to watch TV programmes about Islam, or have interviews with prisoners who had returned to the regime. It was like a kind of indoctrination. If you left the room, the informers would report you and you'd be interrogated and beaten. We had to guard what we said because there were lots of these informers: ex-political activists pressured into betraying comrades.

“AFTER SEVERAL DAYS OF TORTURE, MY WOMB BEGAN TO BLEED”

Two and half months after my arrest, I gave birth. There was very little medicine available so I had no epidural and they couldn't induce me. In the end, I endured a 48-hour labour, virtually alone. A fellow prisoner acted as a midwife but there was little she could do. Towards the end I was even told not to shout out in pain as it was considered indecent for a woman. Eventually, my baby arrived. She was small and fragile but a perfect little angel. ➤

“ DURING INTERROGATION, THEY FLOGGED THE SOLES OF MY FEET – UP TO 100 TIMES, USING DIFFERENT SIZED HARD PLASTIC CABLES

Soon after my daughter's birth I was told that I would be sentenced for three years. Even though I had expected more, all I could do was cry because I knew that within six months, the regime would separate me from my daughter. Each morning, I had to have her ready, because I didn't know when I would lose her. Each morning, I would get her ready, desperately hoping I'd be given one more day with her. Then, finally, she was taken away from me. I remember thinking about my comrades who had been killed. I wondered which was worse: waiting for your execution or waiting to have your baby taken from you. For me, the wound of the separation has never healed.

I served my full sentence – a total of 38 months – thinking constantly of my baby, just to give me hope. I believed that freedom would offer our family a new beginning.

LIFE SENTENCE

However, my release turned out to be the beginning of another sentence. The day I was freed, my husband – who had received a much lighter sentence – announced that not only had he met someone else; he wanted a divorce. Worse still, he refused to return my daughter. Four days later my mother died. The desperation to get my daughter back was the only thing that kept me going. I fought for seven years in Iran but I was never allowed custody; in Iran, a woman who has been in prison has no legal rights, so I could not fight for my child in court. The separation from her made me a different person forever. I have never recovered from the pain or loss.

Meanwhile, my political activities continued as I campaigned for women's rights, helped female workers and supported political prisoners' families. Then, in 1993, two of my colleagues were arrested. I could not risk being betrayed a second time; it was just too dangerous. My only choice was to flee Iran and come to the UK as a refugee. The most painful part of this was not being allowed to take my child with me. I continued to fight for custody, but it was only in 1997 that my persistence paid off and she was able to move to England.

In London, I turned to writing and began studying law. The day I qualified as a lawyer – 1 March 2005 – was one of the happiest of my life. Finally, I cried tears of happiness. Today, I fight for people seeking political asylum. I hope to go on and specialise in human rights abuse. As well as qualifying in law, I have made a film, *The Corridor*, about my experiences in Iran, which I wrote, produced and funded. I did it, in part, to face my past suffering, but also to show people in the West what life was like for women in Iran under the torturous Khomeini dictatorship. I want as many people to see this film as possible. I've also set up a forum for refugee filmmakers called Black Swan Films so that others can tell their stories; the black swan is symbolic of isolation. It's about feeling as though you are different. My life has been hard, but at least today I am able to help others overcome their individual suffering.

TYRANNY IN TEHRAN

THE SHAH Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi – enforced a strict regime, imprisoning hundreds of political activists, and enforcing censorship laws. He authorised the creation of the SAVAK secret police, infamous for its ruthless persecution of dissidents.

THE SAVAK (1957–1979) was formed to protect the Shah of Iran and control opposition, especially political. It had virtually unlimited powers of arrest and operated its own detention centres, such as Evin Prison, which routinely subjected detainees to physical torture.

THE OVERTHROW OF THE SHAH On 12 December 1978, over two million anti-Shah protesters filled the Tehran streets. The majority of the population was loyal to Khomeini, and when he called for a complete end to the monarchy, the Shah was forced to flee the country on 16 January, 1979.

THE NEW PRESIDENT The Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini rapidly created an Islamic Republic with himself as Supreme Leader. Under his reign, the 'morality police' also made life extremely difficult for opposers and there many allegations of systematic human rights abuses, including mass executions, and torture.

Source: Wikipedia



ABOVE LEFT Campaigning for change: Zoë holds a picture of her Law graduation day – one of the happiest days of her life

TOP RIGHT Two months after her release, Zoë spends a rare day with her daughter

ABOVE RIGHT A scene from Zoë's film, *The Corridor*, re-enacting her traumatic birth behind bars

FURTHER INFORMATION

■ *The Corridor* will be shown at **The Curzon**, Soho, London in December Call 020 7734 2255.

■ For more information on **Black Swan Films** visit www.blackswanfilms.co.uk

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