

ZEIT MAGAZIN

Nika Shakarami

"Just Take Care of Ur Self"

In Leipzig, Nele is suffering from the effects of the lockdown. In Tehran, Nika is fed up with the regime's strict rules. The two meet over Instagram. And fall in love. Then, the uprising begins in Iran. Von Luisa Hommerich

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They were both fascinated by the same serial killer, which is how they found each other on [Instagram](https://www.zeit.de/thema/instagram). Nele had posted something about him – some guy named Ramírez, a satanist who would break into homes in California in the 1980s. She was going through a rough patch back then in May 2021, she says, and she developed an interest in the depths of humanity. Nika must have seen it. "She wrote to me: Hey, interesting profile!" Nele recalls.

So, they started chatting. Nele was 14 at the time, a child from the middle-class Südvorstadt neighborhood of [Leipzig](https://www.zeit.de/thema/leipzig), her mother a physical therapist, her father a psychologist. And Nika Shakarami, a 15-year-old from a suburb of Tehran, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, her mother a housewife, her father a bookkeeper at a mining operation. Two teenagers looking to get a foothold in life, 3,500 kilometers from each other yet suddenly joined through the internet. For both, black was their favorite color, they loved the same true-crime stories, the same animes and the song "Say It Right" by Nelly Furtado. They fell in love.

Rumors of Nika and Nele have been circulating in Persian social media channels for weeks: Nika Shakarami, it is said, had a German girlfriend. In early October, the 16-year-old became an icon of the protests in Iran. A video showing her belting out an old Persian love song, full of passion, circled the globe. Her face is now being printed on T-shirts and mugs. Her name has even appeared in the German media.

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JETZT ANMELDEN →

ZEITmagazin approached Nele for an interview via Instagram, and she replied using WhatsApp: "We can certainly talk about Nika. But I want to be careful." Over the phone, she speaks hesitantly, almost shyly, about Nika. She sounds like she is weighing every word. She says she wants to share Nika's story with the world, but adds that she is afraid of saying too much. That there will be nothing left that only the two of them share. It's surreal, she says, to suddenly see her girlfriend's face everywhere. "My Nika, she's suddenly all over the TV," she says. And then, as if Nika is still with her: "We are very, very close. She's my other half."

A week after our telephone conversation, Nele is sitting in the bright, Leipzig loft apartment where she lives with her parents and little sister. She sets the ground rules – namely that she is allowed to keep details that are too private out of this story. She is now 16 years old, a thoughtful young woman with dyed red hair and heavy eyeliner. The sleeves of her oversized sweatshirt of the metal band Slipknot are pulled down over her knuckles as she sits scrunched up at the kitchen table, her arms wrapped around her legs and head resting sideways on her knees. Next to her is her mother Grit, a congenial 50-year-old in a white blouse, her hair tied in a bun. She speaks up every now and then, but mostly she just sits there and strokes her daughter's back when she grows too agitated.

Nele says that when she got to know Nika in May 2021, she was mired in a deep crisis. Her best friend had just left her class in high school and she was suddenly alone. During homeschooling in the corona lockdown, she lost her way in a number of subjects, she says. She found herself racked by fears and could hardly find the courage to go to school again. "I was sitting at home the whole day," she says. That's when Nika entered her life.

If you ask what it was about Nika that she found so immediately attractive, a grin brightens up her face and she glances at her mother, as though she finds it a bit embarrassing. She briefly holds her

breath. Then, it bursts out of her with a laugh: "Everything!" First, she says, it was her hair, her style, the way she dressed. The fact that they had so much in common. Then, within just a few days, they started chatting about more serious things. How they were really doing. How they came to be the way they were. Nika had also had some difficult phases, Nele says. "We told each other things that nobody else knew about and pulled each other up." And it all happened via WhatsApp, using just the chat function at first because she was initially too shy to talk to Nika on the phone. And in broken English. She says she doesn't know where this bond came from, but there it was.

Nele says she knew little about Iran when she first met Nika. "Just that it is a country with strict rules. And that women are oppressed there." Still, though, she says she didn't find it at all surprising that young people lived there who were just like her.

Her mother Grit says that Nele had already told her several years ago that she is mostly attracted to women, and that it wasn't an issue. Initially, though, she had been a bit skeptical: Was it good for her daughter, or even possible, to develop a close relationship with a stranger through the internet, through chat. With a girl from Iran, so foreign and so far away. "Later, I realized that I wasn't being fair to Nele. What the two of them had was unique."

And it becomes clear in the many hours of conversation with Nele just how intense her connection with Nika must have been, even though they were never able to meet each other in person.

Whenever Nika wrote, says Nele, it filled her with happiness. "I was constantly seeing things that reminded me of her. She liked everything that was dark. Autumn, Halloween, rainy days. I was constantly taking pictures of those things and sending them to her." Early on, she decided to tell Nika what she was feeling. She says she typed a message into WhatsApp, and then deleted it again. Then she tried again. Finally, she says, she was able to do it, though she doesn't want to share what exactly she wrote. She does say, though, that her heart was racing as she waited for Nika's response. But it turned out to be no big deal. "Nika wrote that she also really liked me, but that she didn't want to get into a committed relationship because of the distance." It took another half a year before Nika would also say she loved her and began referring to Nele as her girlfriend.

Nika Shakarami was born in October 2005 in Khorramabad, a city with a 3rd century citadel in western Iran, this according to two childhood friends of hers who are reachable via WhatsApp. She moved with her family to a Tehran suburb when she was 11 or 12. She was part of a generation that is presumably much more at home in global youth culture than in the culture that Iranian rulers seek to impose upon them. Women must wear a headscarf. Alcohol is forbidden, as is extramarital sex - never mind same-sex relationships. If two men are discovered having sex together, they can be sentenced to death. Lesbians, meanwhile, could face a penalty of 100 lashes.

Screenshots from her now deactivated Instagram account make it clear that Nika was interested in art and graffiti, that she drew skulls, wore black clothes and, for a time, short, dyed-blond hair. In the video that would later be viewed by people around the world, she is clutching a microphone at a garden party, her legs spread wide. Beckoning to the camera, she sings in Persian with her bright, strong voice. "Part of my heart tells me: Go! Another part tells me: Stay!" A woman singing alone in front of others: Like so much else in Iran, that, too, is forbidden.

There are many young women like Nika in today's Iran. The average age in the country is just 32, and fewer and fewer people are sympathetic to the religious rules that govern everyday life. But until recently, Nika's generation hadn't yet experienced first-hand the regime's brutality. Nika was a small child when people across the country protested against the 2009 re-election of hardliner

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, a movement that was crushed by the police and pro-regime militias. She had just turned 14 when the masses took to the streets against rising fuel prices, chanting anti-regime slogans. The authorities killed hundreds of people in response.

Nika's friends in Iran say that she wasn't happy about the headscarf mandate and all the other rules in Iran, but otherwise she didn't talk much about politics. She did, though, have a rebellious nature, they say. Nika's closest confidante, her father, died when she was 10, say her friends. She felt abandoned and grew secluded and became independent early on – too early, they say. Shortly after getting to know Nele, when she was only 15, she moved to Tehran and moved in with her Aunt Atash, a painter. She also stopped going to school, even though she had been a talented student. Instead, she began taking drawing lessons from her aunt and started waiting tables in a café to earn her own money. She wanted to be independent. Her friends say that Nika had been open about her relationship with Nele and that many people had known about it. ZEITmagazin contacted both Nika's mother and her aunt, but without success.

Nele recalls being extremely nervous before talking with Nika on the phone for the first time. But hearing Nika's voice was magical, she says. Before long, they started talking on the phone almost every day, sometimes for seven hours at a stretch, through the night. Both were on summer break at the time and they had plenty of time on their hands. Their English improved over time, but Nele says they would have understood each other anyway. "When one of us got stuck, the other would say: Yeeeahhh, I know what you mean."

Nele's mother remembers that she often heard laughter and squealing coming from her daughter's room during this period. Nele and Nika would laugh hysterically together for hours, just talking about stupid stuff – like about how Nele couldn't pronounce the name of one of Nika's friends, calling her Galala instead of Ghasaleh.

"Or she would laugh because of my laugh, and I because of hers. We almost died one time giggling on the phone."

Nele says that Nika became part of the family during that period. Nele would walk through the apartment with Nika on a video chat: Look, Nika, this is my mother, say hello! Nele would often arrive late to the dinner table. "But it was OK. She had to talk on the phone with Nika," says her mother.

Nika would sing Nele Persian bedtime songs, she would draw her and send her kiss-selfies. Nele bought a heart-shaped pendant on the internet and put a photo of Nika in it.

Nika loved the moon, and it became an important symbol in their relationship, says Nele. When they missed each other, they would say: "We don't live in the same country, but beneath the same sky." Sometimes, Nika would tell Nele over the phone that she was looking at the moon, saying: You should go outside too, Nele, so we can look at it together. They even called each other "my moonie." Or Niki and Neli. Or Haku and Chihiro, like the main characters in the anime film "Spirited Away," which both of them loved. The story involves a courageous boy helping a shy girl escape a world full of monsters.

"That was us," Nele says today.

Nika was the bravest person she's ever known, says Nele. When they spoke on the phone as Nika was heading home from work at night through the streets of Tehran, young men would sometimes try to chat her up. Nika would always immediately start yelling at them, cussing them out. At moments like that, says Nele, she would always fall even deeper in love with Nika.

When school started again late in the summer of 2021 and Nele was afraid of going, Nika encouraged her. "She said: Do it for me!" Nele says she thought about Nika, and then gathered up the courage to go to school. And she even spoke to new people at school, finding two new friends, the twins Malina and Julika. Without Nika, Nele believes, she never would have been able to escape the abyss she was in. "I felt so secure with Nika," Nele says. "She was my home."

Her mother also says that she slowly saw the heavy weight lifting from her daughter's shoulders.

It has grown late in the living room in Leipzig. Nele's mother makes tea and lights a candle as Nele scrolls through her chats with Nika. Endless messages in English, voice messages and photos. It's all that she has left of Nika.

May 8, 2022:

Nele (12:56 a.m.): *Im gonna protect you forever*

Nika (9:38 a.m.): *Ma bebsiiii*

Nika (9:38 a.m.): *I love u soooo much too*

May 23, 2022:

Nika (9:41 p.m.): *I'll always love u neli always idc if ur not w me idc if ur not here*

U have the mostly pure n beauty souls

I've ever seen (...)

Nika (9:42 p.m.): *Ur so special to me U can always count on me*

June 21, 2022:

Nika (12:22 a.m.): *Good night ma darling*

Nika (12:22 a.m.): *I miss u*

Nele (7:24 a.m.): *I miss u more*

Nika (11:26 p.m.): *bebzi im home now*

Nika (11:59 p.m.): *Ma little fairy I luv u so moch*

Nele glances up to the left, reflecting, and then swipes her hair behind her ear. It always helps her, she says, to read the old messages and talk about the nice moments she had with Nika. But, she says, she wants to be honest: There were also difficult times. Nika could be fickle. She would sometimes tell her she loved her more than anything, only to then say that she wasn't sure. That maybe she didn't feel anything at all. That she was independent and didn't need a relationship. That was deeply confusing, says Nele, and hurtful.

One time, Nele went elsewhere looking for intimacy and kissed a girl in Leipzig. Nika grew extremely jealous, she says.

But their worst fight took place in summer 2022. Nele doesn't want to say what started it, just that she unintentionally really hurt Nika with something she said, and things just kept getting worse and worse. "Nika would always get angry extremely quickly, while I would quickly grow sad," says Nele. It wasn't a good mix, she says. "I always wanted to clear things up immediately, but she wanted to be alone when there was a conflict." Suddenly, Nika blocked her on all channels. Nele

says she cried. A lot. Two weeks went by. Then three. Nele started contacting people in Nika's circle over Instagram, her friends, her mother, her sister, asking them how Nika was. "Nele was really low," Grit recalls. "As a mother, I thought it was the worst thing that could happen." Nika only got back in touch with Nele after the fourth week. On the surface, everything was back to normal. But Nele says their relationship wasn't quite the same. She says it was difficult for the two of them to trust each other again.

In the final weeks, they had grown closer again. And Nele was doing better even beyond her relationship with Nika. She had changed schools and was getting better grades. Nika, meanwhile, was waiting tables from early in the morning until late at night in the Godar House café, a hipster oasis at the northern entrance of the University of Tehran. Photos on Instagram show a sunny terrace with a fountain and tables full of women, their headscarves tied loosely, drinking nonalcoholic cocktails. Nika, says Nele, had to work really hard to make ends meet, and they didn't have much time for each other. But Nika would call her during almost every one of her five-minute breaks. They would often make plans for the future. The distance between them was a heavy weight, says Nele. They wanted to finally be able to embrace.

Her parents didn't want to let her travel to Iran, says Nele. But Nika wanted to leave Iran. "She often said that she hated the strict rules and that you had to be rich in Iran to lead a good life," says Nele. Once, she told Nika about the political party system in Germany, and about the right-wing AfD – and that she would sometimes join protests against the party. Nika was stunned to hear that there were serious conflicts in democracies as well.

Nika wanted to come to Germany when she turned 18. Her favorite seasons were autumn and winter, and she was looking forward to the cold and the rain, says Nele. Nika imagined living alone in a house with Nele, and a dog, either a Great Dane or a husky. Nele wanted to move with Nika into a shared flat with Malina and Julika, and sometimes the four of them would even join a call together. Nika was considering becoming a tattoo artist, while Nele wanted to become a childcare worker. Nika was planning to start German classes in October, though she could already say quite a bit in the language, says Nele, things like "I love you," "good night," "shut up," and: "My little fairy."

Nele figured they'd somehow find a way to get Nika a visa. They could always get married if they needed to.

But then, on September 16, 2022, everything changed. That day, a 22-year-old woman died in the intensive care unit of Kasra Hospital in Tehran. Her name was Mahsa Amini. She had been taken into custody by the morality police because she allegedly hadn't been wearing her headscarf correctly. A CT scan of her head showed hemorrhage, a brain edema and a fractured skull. A courageous journalist, who is now in prison, reported on the case, and the news of Mahsa Amini's fate triggered an upheaval in the country. Thousands of people took to the streets – against the headscarf mandate and against the morality police, which had been even more forceful in the previous months in enforcing the country's religious rules. And they were protesting against the regime, calling out "Death to the dictator!" and "Woman, life, freedom!" The most vehement wave of protests in the 43-year-history of the Islamic Republic had begun. And the regime set about trying to crush it with violence.

Nele says she cried when she read about Mahsa Amini's death. But she wasn't able to speak with Nika about it because she was working in the café. On the evening of September 18, a Sunday, she was suddenly gripped by a vague feeling of fear. She was scared, she told Nika in a voice message,

that they might not ever meet in person after all. That Nika wouldn't make it to Germany. "Don't lose ur hope we're gonna see each other one day", Nika responded via chat the next morning, September 19.

Nika (10:23 a.m.): *I'm fucking sure about it*

Nika (10:23 a.m.): *Like I won't*

I won't let it go until it happens

I won't give up until I see that day

That evening, the protests arrived in front of Godar House and it had to close. "We just hear screaming and shotguns outside," Nika can be heard saying in a voice message from 7:16 p.m. that night, a message that Nele plays in the living room in Leipzig. In the message, Nika says they were waiting for taxis. "I called my aunt and she said that they sprayed the pepper spray when she were outside, her eyes are hurt. I really don't know what should I do right now." She sounds concerned. Then, her voice serious, she says: "If I didn't called you, then I'm gonna die."

Nele (7:48 p.m.): *R u okay?*

Nele (7:48 p.m.): *I swear im gonna freak out if u dont answer*

Nele (9:08 p.m.): *Niki nikiiii*

The messages didn't get through. Iran had shut down the internet.

The next day of Nika's life can nevertheless by partially reconstructed with the help of videos that made it out of the country despite the blocked internet. And based on what Nika's aunt later told BBC Persia.

According to her aunt's account, Nika left their apartment on September 20 at around 4:30 p.m. local time. She had packed an identification document, a bottle of water and a towel in her backpack, likely for the teargas. Nika went to the area surrounding Laleh Park, not far from Godar House, where university students were protesting. A video from that evening, which Nika posted to Instagram, shows her at 7:13 p.m. standing on an upended garbage can burning her headscarf. Then, she runs forward to the street and throws rocks at the police. In another video that was sent to CNN, she is taking shelter between two cars, hiding from the police. You can hear her yelling to the drivers: "Don't move! Don't move!"

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Only later that evening did a sign of life from her make it to Leipzig. It was just before 1:30 a.m. in Iran. Nika had reception again.

Nika (10:55 p.m.): *U have no idea what happened tonight*

Nele's phone rang four minutes later. She remembers that in this final telephone call, Nika was speaking from a quiet place. No cars could be heard in the background, and no people. But Nele doesn't know where Nika was. She was smoking, though, says Nele, so she might have been somewhere outside. She told Nele that she had just been at a demonstration. That it had been brutal and that she had seen people die. She said that she had thrown rocks at the police and even hit them – she had been armed with a branch or a piece of wood, Nele didn't totally understand. A friend who had been with her, Nika said, filmed a lot of it, and she could be seen on some of the videos.

Later, Nika went on, the police had wanted to arrest her because she was carrying a weapon. (Clarification by the editors: The word "weapon" in this sentence refers to the branch or piece of wood mentioned in the paragraph above). The friend saved her, though, saying that it was his weapon. So he was arrested instead of Nika – along with all of the videos on his mobile phone.

She then ran from the police in between the stopped traffic, throwing the branch or piece of wood behind her and hitting a police officer. Then, she told Nele, she jumped into a stranger's car, which is how she got away. Still, she said, she was planning on joining the demonstrations again the next day. Nele says she begged Nika not to go.

Nika told her, says Nele, that a lot of people who had wanted to leave the country had changed their minds and were now planning on staying in Iran and fighting for freedom. When Nele asked her if she now wanted to stay too, she insisted: No, she wanted to come to Germany to be with Nele. That it was her only hope at the moment.

At the end of their conversation, they spoke about their relationship and cleared up a couple of things – Nele doesn't want to say what, exactly. After about an hour and a half, they said their goodbyes. Nele says that afterward, she was unable to sleep.

Nele (1:29 a.m.): *I dont even know what im saying but seeing all of this videos in iran*

Nele (1:29 a.m.): *I swear to god they broke my heart*

Nele (1:30 a.m.): *Like it really feels like someone smashed my heart
I swear it hurts me sm*

Nele (1:36 a.m.): *I never wanna lose you or live without you never*

The answer arrived 34 minutes later, at 4:40 in the morning, Iran time.

Nika: (2:10 a.m.): *Just take care of ur self*

Nika (2:10 a.m.): *I know that my only wish is seeing u save n happy*^[1]

Nele (6:34 a.m.): *But why does this all sound like a goodbye*

But the messages that Nele sent to Nika at around 6:30 a.m. German time never reached her. Nika's Instagram and Telegram profiles were also deleted during the night or in the morning. It is unclear why. After Nika's aunt realized that morning that her niece wasn't at home, she and Nika's mother began canvassing the city's hospitals, police stations and prisons, but they found no sign of Nika. That is what the two of them would later tell foreign media outlets. At some point, according to their recollections, an unknown caller reached them claiming to be from the Revolutionary Guard, a particularly pro-regime element of the Iranian military. He told them that Nika had been interrogated and was now in Evin Prison. That, though, proved to be inaccurate: Nika wasn't on the prisoner list there either. It still isn't clear what exactly happened to her.

Nele says that a lot of what Nika told her and wrote to her during her final days sounded like she was bidding farewell. Did she commit suicide? Or did she know that the police would track her down sooner or later – with the help of the videos that her incarcerated friend had made with his mobile phone?

Ten days after she disappeared, Nika's mother and her brother finally found her lifeless body in a morgue in southern Tehran. Nika's cheekbones, her nose and her teeth were shattered, and the back of her head was crushed, her mother would later tell the foreign broadcaster Radio Farda. Her death certificate notes that she died on September 21 from "injuries sustained from multiple strikes with a blunt object."

It can't be conclusively proven that regime forces killed her. It is clear, however, that from this point on, state agencies expended significant effort to prevent Nika from becoming a martyr of the protest movement. Her death had nothing to do with the protests, a Tehran public prosecutor quickly insisted, adding that Nika was likely shoved off a roof by a stranger. A state media outlet released images from a surveillance camera, allegedly captured at around midnight of the night in question. They show a girl who looks like Nika entering a tall, half-finished building. State media wrote that neighbors heard a loud noise at 3 a.m. before then finding a dead body in the building's courtyard at 7:30 a.m. One image shows a girl who could be Nika lying on the ground in a pool of blood.

Nele says that Nika did like to climb onto roofs in her neighborhood to smoke. But she couldn't have fallen at 3 a.m.: She sent her last message to Nele at 4:40 a.m.

More strange things happened after that. According to her mother, regime forces hastily buried Nika's body in a small village against the will of the family, likely out of fear of protests at her funeral. Her aunt and uncle were forced to go on state television and read out clearly coerced statements. The aunt said that Nika had been lured into taking part in the protests by videos on the internet while her uncle said that he condemns violence against the police. In the video showing the uncle's condemnation, you can hear an unknown figure apparently whispering to him what he should say.

The effort, however, wasn't ultimately successful. Nika's face circled the globe. Her story spread extremely quickly on social media networks, with millions of people seeing the video of her singing the Persian love song. Protesters in Berlin, Toronto and Tehran now chant her name at demonstrations along with those of many other girls and women who have died since the beginning of the protests. It has been estimated that approximately 300 people have been killed

thus far, including around 40 minors. Some have been identified by name, with images of their faces circulating on social media as a kind of shorthand for the regime's brutality. Every additional face triggers new protests.

During a ceremony at Nika's grave not far from her hometown of Khorramabad, hundreds of people protested on October 27. Nika's mother held a passionate speech in favor of the protests. Videos show women without headscarves chanting: "Death to the dictator!" And: "We are all Nikas, we will fight to the end!"

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In the living room in Leipzig, after three hours of talking, Nele says she needs a break. She has red eyes; her makeup is running. She started crying when talking about how she learned of Nika's death – first from a voice message sent by a friend of Nika's and then from news sites. She says she collapsed and could hardly breathe. She wouldn't wish such pain even on her worst enemy, she says.

Saying she wants to be alone, she goes outside to smoke a cigarette. Her mother Grit remains seated and talks about how she desperately tried to find a taxi to get home to her daughter when she heard about Nika's death. How she found Nele in bed, curled up in misery. How Nele said over and over again: "Mama, I can't do it," and "I won't make it without Nika."

Grit says that it was the first time that she had ever seen Jan, Nele's father – a rather levelheaded sort, as she says – really crying. "I ask myself: How many people live in Tehran? With all those people, why does it have to be precisely my daughter's girlfriend?" Nele, she says, hardly sleeps anymore. She is constantly on her phone reading news from Iran. Most nights, she says, she sleeps with her daughter, otherwise she doesn't get any rest at all. "I'm really afraid that Nele won't be able to bear it," she says.

Nele's mother says she can't stop thinking about what really happened to Nika. Whenever she reads the news about what's going on in Iran, she starts imagining the worst. Sometimes, Grit

says, she is angry with Nika, who was extremely brave, but also reckless. When it comes to regime forces in Iran, though, she is filled with intense fury. "How am I supposed I tell my children that they are also human? Are they human?" After Nika's death, she and Jan began wondering what they could do to wake up the German public. In their circle of acquaintances, they have the impression that many aren't paying any attention at all to the struggle of the Iranian people. Grit and Jan each set up a Twitter account after Nika's death and use them to retweet news from the country and they follow each other. "This anger, there has to be an outlet," says Grit. But all their tweets are only seen by a single follower.

"For many, what is taking place in Iran is far away, because they don't know anybody there," Nele's mother says. She adds that she and Jan have taken a similar view of other crises. "With the wars that are happening everywhere, you have an opinion about them, but otherwise you just think: OK, that's just the way it is." But as soon as you are personally affected, she says, everything changes.

A bit over a week after our discussion in Leipzig, on a sunny Saturday morning in early November, Nele, her parents and the twins Malina and Julika are standing at the Brandenburg Gate in the heart of Berlin. Nele is holding up a poster reading: "Say her name - Nika Shakarami." Next to it is a photo of Nika in a white blazer.

Nele made the poster together with her friends, and they then drove 190 kilometers to Berlin to take part in a demonstration expressing solidarity with the Iranian protests. Around 200 people have gathered, many of them Persian speakers. A revolutionary song is playing.

Nele seems tired. She says that last night she dreamed that Nika had actually written her again. She was gripped by extreme fear in her dream, she says, and startled awake. There are now days when she thinks: I will stay strong for Nika, and she posts small messages on Instagram: "Niki + Neli forever," for example, a message she recently carved into a wooden door. Or messages about the protests in Iran. On other days, though, she sinks into a feeling of helplessness. "That's when I realize that nothing will bring her back, even if thousands of people are protesting for her."

Nele glances around the demonstration. A short Iranian man walks by, a poster hanging from a lanyard around his neck. Nika's face is on the poster. "Nele, look!" Julika cries. Nele sees the poster. "Nikaaaa!" she yells and smiles. The man smiles back at her. When an activist asks Nele to write a word on a banner, she spells out in large letters: Solidarity!

She is chatting a lot with Nika's friends back in Iran these days. She says that when freedom comes to Iran one day, she wants to travel there. Or maybe even before. She has decided to be more courageous in the future. "I have the feeling," she says, "that Nika, who was such a brave person, will then stay more alive in my heart." She has already taken a few small steps. Earlier, she says, she never would have dared to speak with a reporter - and that Nika gave her the courage to do so.

Maybe, she says, she herself has turned into Nika. Just a bit.

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