

BAHA'IS OF IRAN

Roya Eshraghi: The Young Baha'i Woman Hanged with Her Parents

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KIAN SABETI

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📷 Ezzat Janami was 57 when she was executed because she refused to abandon her Baha'i faith

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"The news that my family, all three of them, have been executed together, was like my head had suddenly been hit with a sledgehammer. I could not eat for days. My body rejected everything and I was in total shock. But today, I feel better, because my family stood by their beliefs until the last moment of their lives and taught me, their children and thousands of others, to never submit to tyranny and injustice, even if one has to pay with their lives. Great causes demand great sacrifices," says Nahid Eshraghi, whose father, mother and young sister were executed in 1983 in Shiraz for their belief in the Baha'i faith.

The Eshraghi Family

"My father Enayatollah Eshraghi and my mother Ezzat Janami were both born to Baha'i families in Najafabad in Isfahan province," says Nahid. "My father was born in 1921 and my mother in 1926. My father was hired by the Oil Company after finishing his military service. He was first stationed in Bandar Bushehr and spent most of his leaves of absence at his parent's home in Isfahan. It was during one of these trips that my parents got to know each other, and were eventually married, in 1947."

After their second child was born, Nahid's father asked for a transfer; he was sent to Kazeroon in Fars province. In 1957, the family moved to Shiraz and lived in this city for 13 years.

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his wife and their other daughter moved to Shiraz as well.

Life in Shiraz

The Eshraghis lived in a house they had bought in Shiraz the last time that they were there: by now three of the children lived abroad, Roya was studying and the parents lived in peace in retirement.

But the peace did not last. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the father's pension was cut and Roya was expelled from university, both because they were Baha'is. At the same time, the arrest and the execution of Baha'is across Iran had started and Shiraz was no exception. Revolutionary Committees confiscated properties that belonged to the Baha'i community in Shiraz. The Eshraghi children living abroad became extremely worried about their parents and asked them to leave Iran.

"My parents were against leaving Iran," says Nahid. "My father said 'Now that the Baha'i community in Iran is under pressure, they need each other's help to cope with it. We must stay together and help each other.' My parents asked us to encourage Roya and Rosita to leave Iran, but they were against it as well, and said 'In this situation, when the Baha'is need solidarity, how can we leave Iran for our own comfort?'"

The First Eshraghi Arrests

During the Iran-Iraq war, Eshraghi's home hosted Baha'i families who had lost everything to war and were homeless. These families lived in the home of Enayatollah Eshraghi until they could find a place of their own and, in the meantime, Eshraghi family catered to them.

These comings and goings attracted attention and on November 26, 1981, agents of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) raided their home and arrested Eshraghi, his wife, their two daughters Roya and Rosita and two guests. They were taken to the IRGC's detention center and were released after three days.

The Second Arrests

A year later, on 29 November, 1982, agents of the Revolutionary Guards raided the homes of a group of Baha'is in Shiraz, took 41 of them into custody and transferred them to its detention center. Roya Eshraghi, 22, and her parents were among the detainees. After a search of their home that lasted three hours, they put them in a car and took them to the detention center, insulting and abusing them. The father was then transferred to the men's ward and the mother and the daughter to the women's ward.

The Eshraghi family were blindfolded and interrogated together. By humiliating and insulting one member of the family, they tried to put pressure on other members. They often invented false quotations from one member of the family and told it to another member.

One day, when Roya was walking in the prison yard, a voice over the loudspeaker summoned her. The guards, who were standing close to her mother Ezzat, spoke in a way that Roya would hear them. They said that her mother had been taken to be whipped. Roya returned to the cell after a few hours and said: "They blindfolded me and took me to a room where they kept me for four hours. The interrogator repeatedly came to the room and threatened me with torture and execution. I was told that my parents had renounced [the Baha'i faith] and if I did the same all three of us would be released immediately. I said that 'I am a Baha'i and I will not denounce it.' The interrogator then threatened to whip me, but I was not flogged during the four hours that I was in that room."

On 4 January, 1983, the Eshraghi family and a number of other detainees were transferred from the detention center to Adelabad Prison in Shiraz.

Investigations

The family was investigated during their time in Adelabad Prison. Interrogations were conducted by examining documents and evidence, but they focused on convincing the detainees to abandon their Baha'i faith. At the end of questioning, bail

Roya was pretty, lively, affectionate and loved animals. She was kind to her fellow inmates regardless of their beliefs or their crimes. There was a sickly old woman in prison whom they called Mama Maryam. She was charged with murder. Nobody visited her; but Roya went to her cell, and took care of her. She fed her and, because she was ill, managed to get her medication. Mama Maryam later recovered and was released after being found innocent of her alleged crimes.

Trial of the Shiraz Baha'is

The cases of Baha'is who had not denounced their faith, or who had not been able to post the required bail, were sent to court.

On 12 February, 1983, the local newspaper Khabar-e Jonoub reported that the Revolutionary Court of Shiraz had sentenced 22 Baha'is to death. The next day Hojatoleslam Ghazaei, the Sharia Judge of Shiraz, confirmed the report and warned the Baha'is that they must convert to Islam or face the consequences.

After each trial, the Baha'is were asked one question: "Islam or death?" Enayatollah, Ezzat and Roya refused to renounce their faith and accepted the death sentence. A cellmate of Roya remembered how she described the trial: "After the indictment was read, Hojatoleslam Ghazaei asked me to choose between Islam and a death sentence. I smiled and said that 'I accept Islam but I am a Baha'i.' 'Get lost!' the judge said angrily. I left, but suddenly I remembered that I had not said goodbye, so I opened the door again and said 'Sorry, sir, to waste your time. Goodbye!' Mr. Ghazaei became even angrier and as he was grinding his teeth he said 'Get out! Out!'"

On 12 June, 1983, Chief Prosecutor Hojatoleslam Mir Emad visited Baha'i prisoners and told them that "Your repentance starts tomorrow. You have to go through four phases of guidance to convert to Islam; otherwise you will be executed." The "guidance" sessions started the day after: but the Baha'is signed testimonies that they refused to repent and to change religion.

Execution of the Eshraghi Family

A few hours after sundown, on 16 June, 1983, Enayatollah Eshraghi, aged 62, and five other Baha'i prisoners, were hanged in Chogan Square in Shiraz.

Two days later, during a visit at 5pm on 18 June, Ezzat Janami and Roya learned that Enayatollah had been executed. On their way back to the ward, this mother and daughter, and eight other Baha'i women, were separated from other prisoners and were put on a minibus. In the evening of the same day, these 10 Baha'i women were hanged in Chogan Square. At the time, Ezzat Janami was 57 and her daughter Roya Eshraghi was 23.

Four months later, the Revolutionary Court ordered the confiscation of Eshraghi's home. Their remaining daughter appealed: without success. In 1992, this house and few others around it were razed to the ground and the land was put on sale by the **Mostazafan Foundation**. Currently a multi-story residential building – called the "Delta" building – stands on the confiscated land of Eshraghi family.

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