

Nayriz were my family and many others, clustered together in one part of town for mutual support and protection. It was somewhat of a ghetto, but we cared for one another and our environment. Our daily lives were marred by insults, obscenities, and harassment in the streets. We were also subject to systemic discrimination. A telling example was the use of the public bath, from which Bahá'ís were barred every day except one. Another would be the mullahs encouraging the populace to shun Bahá'í businesses and destroy their orchards.

Drawing of the author as child in Nayriz, by Anna Myer

On less frequent but very memorable occasions during the month of Muharram, crowds filled the streets attacking any Bahá'ís they could find or damaging their property. During one of these rampages, when I was five years old, a clamoring mob could not get to us because we were inside with the door bolted. Unfortunately our dog was still outside and was stoned to death by a blood-thirsty mob.

In this oppressive environment, you may ask if there were any positive factors to offer a chance of succeeding in life. And I would answer with an emphatic “yes.” I was nurtured by the women in our home including my mother, my aunts, and my grandmother. The lives of these women were indescribably difficult. They lived at a time and in a place where education for girls was not stressed beyond a rudimentary level. Their lives were occupied with running a household with modest resources at their disposal. Yet, in the midst of their struggles, they carved out a loving place for me where I could experience a fulfilling childhood. A testament to the solidarity of our friends and family is that when I was born and my mother had to travel to Shiraz for medical treatment, I was collectively breastfed by dozens of women in our community from day to day.

My father was first and foremost a Bahá'í scholar. He served the Bahá'í community as a teacher and public speaker as well as carrying out various administrative functions. He spent much time in prayer. When I asked him why he prayed so much, he answered, “for you,” and, in the succeeding years, I often felt that I was being helped by the prayers that he had uttered for me.

Deconstructing the village of Nayriz and reconstructing Manhattan, drawing by Simina Rahmatian.

The Bahá'í faith and its community provided a refuge from the difficulties of everyday life as well as realistic hope for the future. Bahá'í gatherings offered joyful moments where we could relax and laugh, drink tea and express ourselves openly. Chanting the Bahá'í sacred writings filled us with anticipation of a brilliant future free of the orthodoxies and prejudices of the past. We discussed the changes the world was undergoing, thereby broadening our horizons beyond those of a small agricultural town or village. This lifted us up above the drab two-story clay and mud houses and dusty alleyways of our narrow world, helping us to become broader-minded people and aiding us to withstand the torment we underwent daily.

Bahá'í principles had a profound effect on me. Among them are the necessity of universal education (for girls as well as boys), the importance of acquiring a skill or profession, the guidance to be engaged in improving the world we live in (as opposed to waiting for Resurrection Day or something similar), the value of the individual, and the requirement to investigate, to analyze, and to think.

Stated briefly, the persecution I endured toughened me; my family and the Bahá'í faith gave me a sense of self worth and a reverence for knowledge and achievement, and an enlightened world view. This may partly explain why my proudest professional accomplishment is to have served as Assistant Headmaster of Harlem Preparatory School from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. The school's mission was to prepare students the system had failed (the majority of whom were black and financially disadvantaged) into college-ready candidates.

So what finally pushed me out of Nayriz into the broader world, and away from a place of stagnation, religious bigotry, and corruption? Interestingly enough, a mullah. His name was Falli, a rogue who used his prominent clerical position to steal and extort. My father had been a frequent target of Falli's intrigues because of his eminent position in the community, and particularly because he was a secretary of the local governing body. On one occasion, a few of his thugs who lived up in the mountains near Nayriz kidnapped my father while he was on his way to his orchards. Our relatives and friends spread the word of this aggression, a group of young Bahá'í men with rifles positioned themselves on our roof in case we needed protection, and several of our Muslim relatives rode out to rescue him. My father was brought back greatly bruised and with a broken nose. The ringleader was killed a few days later, probably by an associate with whom he had clashed.

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Every individual has his limits, and the kidnapping convinced my father that his family had no viable future if we stayed in Nayriz. The constant grinding away of sources of income, public dignity, family, and future plans left many Bahá'í families with few options, and those families who had the means became part of the emigration. We joined the exodus.

So one day, my father and I boarded a truck headed for Shiraz with our old suitcases, two blankets, and a bag of bread and feta cheese. Sitting on almond bags that had been loaded on top of the truck, I thought about my dog the mob had killed out in the street years before, the young Bahá'í men who had gone up onto our roof with their rifles to protect us during our father's kidnapping, and the constant petty harassments in the streets and alleys of this little town. That was the life I was leaving behind, ultimately for one far better as a foreigner in America.

And while the reality of America was definitely not what I had seen in the movies, during my early years here, I tasted freedom, met incredible people, learned a new language, struggled and suffered, built a wonderful life, and

ultimately survived.

This article is based on the author's book *Foreigner: From an Iranian Village to New York City and the Lights that Led the Way*, which was published by George Ronald Publisher in February 2019. The author hopes that the book offers precious glimmers and hopes for oppressed people, forced to leave their homeland.

See also Hussein Ahdieh in conversation with Nwandi Lawson, former PBS producer and broadcaster and Chief Cultivation Officer for the Virtues Collective.

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