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Oscar de la Renta: At long last, a new design for living

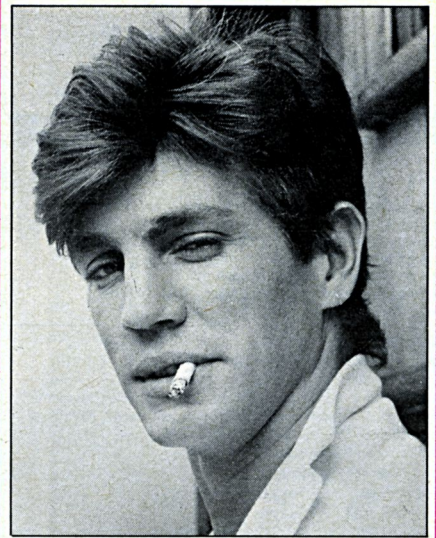
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Jahanpour wore a *chador* during the taping of a rock video that dramatized the execution of her former cell mate, Mona.

REFUSAL TO GIVE UP HER FAITH LED TO IMPRISONMENT, TORTURE AND EXILE FOR AN IRANIAN BAHÁ'Í

by Ruhiyyih Jahanpour

Ruhiyyih Jahanpour is petite, dark-eyed and seems always on the verge of a smile. Her English is imperfect, devoid of nuance, but seems only to intensify her story, one filled with fear, harassment, imprisonment, torture and death. Jahanpour is a Baha'i, a member of Iran's largest—300,000 adherents—and most persecuted religious minority. For 24 of her 26 years she lived in Shiraz. Then, fearing for her life, she escaped to Canada.

Baha'is, who have no clergy, follow the teachings of Baha'u'llah, a 19th-century Persian nobleman. He preached equality of the sexes, racial harmony and that all religions, including Islam, are progressive steps in a continuing pattern of divine revelation. This notion, heretical to Muslims, who believe that Mohammed (who died in 632) was the last prophet who will

ever live, has resulted in the killing of many Baha'is by the Khomeini government.

Since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, 192 Baha'is have been executed. Some 10,000 are homeless, more than 700 are in prison and about 50,000 have fled Iran. Baha'is are not permitted to hold jobs, their children are refused education in state-run schools and, because Baha'i marriages are not recognized by law, Baha'i wives are considered prostitutes and their offspring bastards.

The goal of Ayatollah Khomeini and the other mullahs is to eradicate Baha'ism in the land of its birth, whether through forced recantations or executions. Jahanpour talked with Assistant Editor Bonnie Johnson in the belief that publicity and expressions of outrage from the rest of the world are the Baha'is' only hope.

Persecution of the Baha'is is not new. In 1910 my mother's father and grandfather were first shot in the legs and then hanged because they were Baha'is. Her grandfather did not die immediately, so they put some sticks under his feet and burned him.

When my parents were first married, their crops were confiscated and their house was burned. My older sister, Parvin, and brother, Soheil, and I grew up during the Shah's rule. The situation wasn't as bad as now, but we didn't have a nice time then either. The other children called us bastards. They wouldn't let us drink from the water taps in school, and the teachers made us sit in a separate place in the classroom. They said we were unclean.

I was almost 21, studying chemistry at the University of Shiraz, when the revolution took place. Soon after I graduated, all Baha'is were prohibited

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from going to school. I taught for only a few months before I was dismissed. No one in my family was allowed to work, and my father's gas station was confiscated. Around that time the House of the Bab, the most holy Baha'i site in Iran, was vandalized and later completely destroyed. They also destroyed our local cemetery and desecrated the graves.

The first time I was arrested was Feb. 6, 1982. As part of my service to the Baha'i community, I was going to visit a family who had relatives in prison. Because I had a car, the local assembly asked me also to visit Baha'is who were in prison to try to find out how they were. I had to pose as a member of their families. Soon I was being followed frequently by revolutionary guards. One day a guard stopped me, showed me his identification and his pistol and told me to stand against the wall. I was forced into a car, blindfolded and taken to a building where I was kept for a few hours. Then the guard took me outside and told me to stand against a tree. I heard his gun click, and I thought, "Now they are going to kill me." At once I started to pray, but he just wanted to break my spirit. This went on for an hour before he took me to Seppah prison.

There they finally removed my blindfold and put me in a cell about 15 feet by 21 feet. It had very small windows near the ceiling, but they were covered all the time. About 30 women were locked in the cell, though at other times there were as many as 100, and it would be too crowded even to sleep. People often ask if I spoke out against the government or did something else to attract their attention, but I never did. My religion forbids it.

Three days later I had my first interrogation. When I told the interrogator we believe in the equality of men and women, he became very angry. He accused me of lying and said I was teaching spying and that our leaders were working for other countries. He screamed, "I will kill you and all Baha'is!" The interrogation lasted for an entire day, from 8 in the morning to 10 at night.

I had heard from the other prisoners that the beatings took place in the basement. The next day I was led blindfolded down steps, and they tied me to a bed and started beating me on the soles of my feet with a wire cable. After a few lashes they stopped to ask if I was

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a Baha'i and if I would convert and tell them the names of other Baha'is.

The lashes were so painful, but I didn't want to show them I felt pain. So I started to pray. Thinking about being a Baha'i made me so strong, but after 20 or 25 lashes I fainted. When I came to, they started again. They said they gave me a total of 74 lashes. Then they forced me to walk on my injured feet back to my cell, where the other prisoners washed my feet with water and put ointment on them. It was a month before I could walk without pain.

After another week in Seppah I was transferred to Adelabad prison, which is older and dirtier. Sometimes there were mice and cockroaches, and we had no heat. The food was very bad, mostly watery soup. After 10 days I was taken to court. The mullah leafed through my file, on top of which I saw written, "Crime: Baha'i." He asked if I was a Baha'i and, when I said I was, he called me foul names. That was all. The whole thing took maybe 15 minutes. Two days later I was suddenly released. My father had to bring the deed to our house as a security bond.

Even though I was no longer visiting prisoners, I was arrested again eight months later, this time at home. A friend, Shirin, was staying with us, and she was arrested too. That night in Seppah prison there were about nine Baha'i women, but others kept arriving. Finally we were 21. We knew each other. They called us the Army of Deniers because they thought we were denying Islam. The youngest was named Mona. When she and her father were arrested, her mother pleaded with the guards, "Why are you taking my 16-year-old daughter?" They said, "Because one day she will be a great Baha'i teacher."

After six weeks we were transferred to Adelabad prison and put in with thieves, prostitutes and those prisoners condemned to die. I was there three weeks when, for reasons I still don't understand, they let me go.

Three days later they came for me again. I was out, and my parents escaped by the side door when they heard the guards knocking. We couldn't return home after that, and soon our house was confiscated. It was decided by the Baha'i community that my sister and I should leave Shiraz and go to Tehran. But when I heard from a relative in another city that guards were looking for me there, I realized

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Jahanpour, center, was joined by, from left, actor Alex Rocco and singers Dash Crofts, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Jimmy Seals on the set of the rock video about Mona.

Coping

there wasn't *any* place in Iran for me to live and serve the community at the same time.

Three months after my sister, my mother and I escaped, we heard on the radio about the hanging of 10 Baha'i women and six men in Shiraz. Shirin and Mona were among them. I felt so empty, as if I had lost my heart. I couldn't talk for several hours. I couldn't even cry. I knew that if I had stayed, I would have been killed too. I miss them, but I am so proud and happy that they died without recanting their faith.

It took us 11 months to get visas to Canada, and at that time it was easier to get in there than into other countries. Recently my sister and I passed our English proficiency exams and will enter the University of Guelph this fall. We'll both be working toward our master's in chemistry.

I am not sure if I can ever go back to Iran. I would love to, because it is my native country. But I lost many friends, and just remembering these things is so painful. If I went back, maybe I couldn't bear it. □