

Persecuted for her faith, woman 'never became bitter'

Baha'i adherent, kin fled Iran after killings, beatings

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MADISON - The arithmetic of the life of Oliya Aqsanoshohada, who was about 85 when she died last week (she never knew her exact birth date), involved the use of subtraction only, a family formula that began long before her birth near the Persian city of Shiraz in what is now Iran.

Her grandmother saw her father executed in the morning and her husband in the afternoon by fanatical vigilantes incensed over the family's adherence to the new Baha'i faith. Baha'is believe that men and women deserve equal respect and that all faiths fit into a developing understanding of the essential unity to be found in God.

When Abdu'l-Baha', the leader of Baha'is after the death

Life stories

of the faith's founder, Baha'ullah, learned of the deaths, he sent a letter of condolence, giving the family the title, "Aqsanoshohada," which means "Branch of the Martyrs," a title that would prove to be prophetic as well as descriptive.

"The only thing she experienced was loss," Ruhiiyyih Hiebert said of her mother, Oliya, at the funeral in Madison Wednesday. She came to live with her daughter and son-in-law in Madison a few years ago. "But she never became bitter. She dedicated all her life to serve people and to love people."

When Oliya was 4, her mother died in childbirth. Oliya's infant sister would die soon afterward. One of Oliya's earliest memories, Hiebert said, was of sitting in her father's lap when

she was 6, her head on his shoulder, as the family rushed him to the hospital. The child felt the man she adored die during the trip.

"She carried a pain here," Hiebert said, laying her hand over her heart.

Oliya repeatedly lost property to resurgences of persecution against Baha'is. Once, the family home was saved only when neighbors surrounded it, telling the mob, "This house belongs to all of us," Ruhiiyyih said Oliya believed the neighbors protected them because of the countless acts of generosity and kindness her mother had done, carrying food to the hungry, sitting with the sick, and scrupulously guarding jewels and money for people who were traveling.

Oliya buried three infants and, later, an adult son and daughter. She worried when Ruhiiyyih, at 20, was arrested, beaten, released, and then arrested again for providing classes for Baha'i children who had been expelled from schools for their faith. Oliya herself raised

several foster children, keeping them in her home in a city that would allow Baha'is to attend classes before persecutions intensified.

The only photograph surviving from that period is the one taken when Oliya was about 50, as she and Ruhiiyyih and another daughter, Pari, prepared to flee the country. The three women sold Ruhiiyyih's car to hire a guide to help them escape. For three days, they walked by night and hid during the day, walking through desert and over the mountains to Pakistan carrying nothing from their old life except a picture of Baha'ullah rescued from their home after it was ransacked.

They left behind Oliya's husband, who was unable to get a passport and, because he was blind, unable to risk a run to freedom with them. Though they would speak on the phone, they never saw him again.

That pain, too, Oliya carried silently.

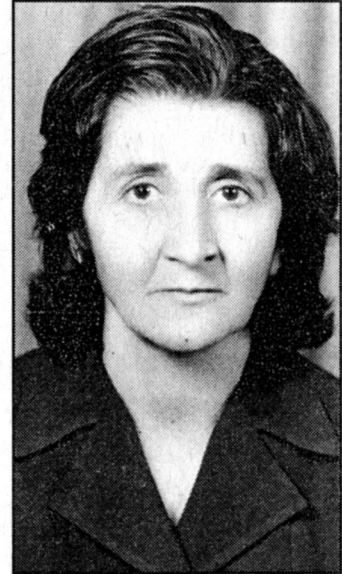
"Never in her life, never, ever, did I hear her complain,"

Ruhiiyyih said. "Wherever she was, she was grateful for that. She taught us to be grateful."

After a year as United Nations refugees in Pakistan, the three women were accepted for asylum by Canada. Oliya, who had been regarded in the family as a genius for her near-photographic memory, began English classes to add to the Arabic, Persian and French she spoke.

The language barrier in Canada did not keep her mother from finding ways to help people, Ruhiiyyih said. She and Pari would return from college classes to find their tiny apartment filled with a circle of children enjoying cookies and tea with the Persian woman with the deeply lined face and the kind eyes, a slight woman scarcely taller than they were.

The last thing to be taken from her mother, Ruhiiyyih said, was her fierce intelligence when Alzheimer's nibbled at her brain. The woman who had known all the answers no longer knew her own daughter's name, Ruhiiyyih said. Then, all Oliya



Oliya Aqsanoshohada died June 29 at the age of 85.

had left was her faith.

"She would tell us, 'Give away your money; don't be attached to it,'" Ruhiiyyih said. "My mother was always a very strong person. Her strength always came from believing in her faith."