Two Irans and One Holocaust

Jacqueline Saper | Originally published by Breitbart News, April 11, 2018

The word “holocaust” refers to an all-consuming fire, and complete destruction.

Seventy-three years since the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp by the Soviet Army, some still deny this darkest human tragedy.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the “Supreme Leader” of Iran, has said that “the Holocaust is an event whose reality is uncertain and if it happened, it’s ambiguous how it happened.”

Mahmoud Ahmadinekad, the former president of Iran, has called the Holocaust a “lie and a mythical claim.” In 2016, Iran held its most recent Holocaust Cartoon contest to undermine the murder and suffering of six million men, women, and children.

Such rhetoric has presented a negative image of Iran and Iranians around the world. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has recently commented that “Iran’s supreme leader is worse than Hitler.”

But before the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, there was another Iran. This Iran, contrary to the current regime’s antagonistic stance towards the United States and Israel, had a close alliance and friendship with both.

My first-hand knowledge on the subject of the Holocaust comes from two separate cultures: that of my British mother, and that of my Iranian father.

When Britain declared war on Germany, my mother’s family resettled in Birmingham to escape the London Blitz. My mother, Stella, told me about her two cousins who had fought in the war. Her older brother, my Uncle Philip, had received a medal for his bravery during an aerial attack by the Germans. He had been guarding the gates of a factory that manufactured ammunition, and despite being wounded, he had managed to save the lives of a few innocent bystanders.

But it was my other uncle that made my mother’s retelling of the war more intriguing. My grandparents, Harold and Miriam, had agreed to take in and care for Alex, a German Jewish boy of ten who had been brought to England by the Kindertransport, which was the rescue operation of children from Nazi-occupied lands.

My grandparents and Alex were introduced to each other by a few women who led children by the hand and knocked on doors, crying out, “Take a child. Take a child.” My grandmother bought Alex English clothes: a blazer with a badge, grey shorts, and knee-length socks so that he would blend into his new surroundings. Uncle Philip would take Alex to the boys’ club to play table tennis, and my mother, who was around ten, would accompany him to school. She become upset that he wouldn’t speak to her.

At that time, Alex spoke German, and his familiarity of the English language was poor. But he knew enough English to tell my grandparents that he had witnessed young murderous members of the Hitler Youth stone his twelve-year-old brother to death in the street.

On another occasion, when my mother was older, she had met a Polish Jewish girl by the name of Helene Katz, who had been in three concentration camps from the age of sixteen to twenty until she was liberated at the end of the war. Helene had arrived in England on a domestic service visa to be employed as a household maid. Initially, she wanted to work in a factory, but she was prevented from doing so, since that would have taken away the job from a British subject.

Helene had lost her parents, sisters, cousins, and every member of her extended family in the Holocaust; even her sisters' children were gone.

My mother's hero had always been Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Mom would often reenact his most famous quote. Holding her hands up and deepening her voice, she would exclaim, "We will fight in the streets, we will fight on the beaches, and we will never surrender."

My Iranian relatives told me about the Holocaust from a different perspective. My father grew up in Iran and lived far from the devastation of wartime Europe. The ruler of Iran of that era, Reza Shah Pahlavi, had taken unexpected measures to modernize his nation. For example, in 1936, he issued the decree of kasfh-e hijab, banning the wearing of the veil for women and encouraging them to dress like the women in the West.

He also emphasized equal rights for all Iranians, regardless of their religious identity.

Reza Shah was the first Iranian Monarch in 1,400 years who paid respect to the Jews by praying in a synagogue when visiting the Jewish community of my father's hometown, Isfahan. In 1946, my father, Rahmat, was awarded a full scholarship to advance his education in chemical engineering at the University of Birmingham in England, where he met my mother.

My father's hero had always been Abdolhossein Sardari, who, in 1942, was the Muslim diplomat in charge of the Iranian consul in Paris. We are familiar with Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist who saved the lives of 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust and was portrayed in the 1993 Steven Spielberg film, Schindler's List.

Sardari, also known as 'The Iranian Schindler," rescued the sizable Iranian Jewish community of Paris, as well as their European Jewish spouses and relatives, by issuing them new passports that did not state the passport holder's religion, thus saving their lives.

(Sardari's nephew, Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, served his country as the Prime Minister of Iran from 1965 to 1977. On April 7, 1979, Mr. Hoveyda was convicted by the newly founded Islamic Republic revolutionary court on charges related to his prominent association with the prior regime. He was sentenced to death by firing squad.)

During the war, Iran also welcomed hundreds of Polish Jewish children as Nazi Germany was carrying out its systematic murder of the Jewish people in Europe. These children, who came to be known as the 'Tehran Children," remained in Iran until they found a safe passage to travel to Mandatory Palestine.

The term "genocide" did not exist before the Holocaust. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish lawyer, created the word by combining geno–, from the Greek word for race, and –cide, from the Latin word for killing.

Genocide has a quantitative element: to destroy and kill as many people as possible. In recent history, we have witnessed the massacre of the Armenian and Assyrian Christians during World War I; the killing fields in Cambodia during the 1970s; the killings of Tutsis in Rwanda during the 1990s; and the ongoing violence in Syria.

However, the Holocaust is different because it was an attempt to annihilate the Jewish people systematically based on the ideology of natural selection that was deeply rooted in religious, economic, scientific, and social theory.

Remembering the Holocaust is about learning from past mistakes and honoring the upstanders, liberators, and survivors. The young generation of today has a responsibility to understand why so many educated and sophisticated civilians collaborated with the Nazis, and to confront those who blatantly deny the Holocaust or claim that the tragedy has been exaggerated.

The Holocaust also highlights the growing problems of today's youth, such as bullying, intolerance, and treating a group or a single child as an "other." Any one of us at any time is susceptible to be categorized as such.

Perhaps the next time we hear another hateful comment about the Holocaust from an Iranian official, we can remind ourselves of the two pre- and post-revolutionary Irans.

I remain optimistic that, with the advent of the Internet and the ongoing progress of technology, the world will become a smaller place — a place that will bring people closer to each other.

It is time for us to treat each other with dignity and respect, and I hope that we do not have to wait a long time for that to happen.

Jacqueline Saper is an author from the Chicago area whose forthcoming book, From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Pre- and Post-revolutionary Iran, is scheduled to be published by the University of Nebraska Press – Potomac Books in spring 2019.