



Wilmette resident Jacqueline Saper, born in Iran in 1961 and named for Jackie Kennedy, is seen on the cover of her first book, a Westernized teenager just before the Islamic Revolution. | Provided photo.

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On Nov. 4, 1979, the United States Embassy in Iran was located on Tehran's Takht-e-Jamshid Street in a neighborhood of upscale stores. Which is why Jacqueline Saper, now of Wilmette, happened to be a block away at the start of one of the epochal events of the past half century: the Iran hostage crisis.

Saper was 18 "and a half," a newlywed, shopping for cologne for her husband.

"The embassy was huge, with red brick walls and a dark green iron fence," she said. "The American consulate always had long lines. I noticed the crowd was different. They were very angry, shouting 'Death to America! Death to America!'"

America, if you aren't old enough to remember, had welcomed the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, deposed that January, to be treated for cancer in New York. President Jimmy Carter allowed him in with reservations.

"What are you guys going to advise me to do if they overrun our embassy and take our people hostage?" the president asked, with the half-foresight of those who see the pitfalls they will topple into.

'They cannot relate' — 40 years since Iran hostage crisis

A new book by a Wilmette woman details what it was like to be in Iran when students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979, roiling world affairs to this day.

By Neil Steinberg | Nov 3, 2019, 12:29pm CST

Opinion





At 21, Jacqueline Saper, though Jewish, couldn't leave her house in Tehran without covering her hair according to Islamic law. | Provided photo.

Young Iranian radicals scaled the walls and cut open the gate. The Marine guards, ordered not to fire, spread tear gas and fell back. The invaders initially planned to hold the embassy three days. Most of the hostages ended up being held 444 days.

Saper sensed this wasn't the usual street drama.

"Living through the Islamic Revolution earlier that year, I was used to seeing unusual things," Saper said. "This seemed worse. I was afraid of stampede or tear gas. The embassy was guarded by armed Marines."

What did she do?

"I had three options," she said. "I thought of going back to the shop to hide. I thought of going toward this crowd."

The third option was to hail a passing orange taxi and get out of there, which she did.

Saper was an unusual Iranian: first, because her mother was British and had met her father while he was studying chemical engineering in England in the 1940s. Second, she was Jewish.

"Most of the members of the Jewish community left Iran in 1979," she said. "I remained in Iran for eight more years."

What was that like?

"There was a lot of fear," she said. "It was scary. Things changed very fast. I went from having the freedom of a girl my age in America to having 10% of that freedom. My rights were stripped as a woman and a Jew. I went from wearing a miniskirt to a party on Saturday nights to, months later, not daring to leave the house without a hijab."

Saper has written a book, "From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran" (Potomac Books: \$29.95), documenting her unusual mixed cultural upbringing, the revolution and her "Argo"-like flight to freedom.

She wrote her book because people "need to know what happened in Iran to understand what's happening in the world today."

She's got that right. The fallout of 40 years ago defies easy summarization. The crisis dominated Carter's last year in office, his haplessness sealed by a failed rescue mission. The hostages were freed as Ronald Reagan was being sworn in to replace him, though the impact didn't end there, rippling through American history from the Iran-Contra affair to the anti-West fervor that fed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, right up to Brexit and Donald Trump, who scrapped the carefully-constructed Iranian nuclear deal after parlaying fear of immigrants like Jacqueline Saper into a narrow electoral victory over a vastly more qualified opponent.

Saper and her family left for the reason many immigrants leave their homes. "There was no future for the kids ... We had a beautiful home, we just locked the door of my home, four of us left with two suitcases, left everything behind forever."

The embassy, by the way, still stands as it was on that day.

"In Iran, since the hostage taking, the former USA Embassy compound is called 'The Den of Spies' and is a cultural center," she said. "Every year on the anniversary, the day is called 'The Fight Against Global Arrogance.' There are rallies against American imperialism, speeches, kids are off school. They burn flags, though I feel to the younger generation, this is ancient history. They cannot relate to what happened on that date."