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Event Recap: Miniskirts to Hijab – The Life and Experiences of an Iranian – Jewish Woman

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By Joshua Heine, Public & Global Affairs Intern

On March 25, Niagara Foundation was pleased to welcome Jacqueline Saper, a noted speaker on Iran, to speak at a Friends in Faith event. Saper was born and lived in Tehran for many years, including during the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, before coming to the United States. She is a Certified Public Accountant and translator for both Farsi and English, and has served as an adjunct faculty member for Oakton Community College. More information and future event details can be located at www.jacquelinesaper.com.

Jacqueline Saper is unique among Iranians in that she has an Iranian Jewish father and an English Jewish mother. Iran does host a Jewish minority, but its society is largely homogeneous, which created difficulties for Saper during her youth in Tehran. Her parents' marriage was controversial even in the 1960s, a much more Western-friendly period in Iran, and she did experience some judgements due to her ethnicity. Despite this, her family were loyal citizens and proud to be Iranian. She noted that one of the most important family treasures during her youth was a picture of the Shah visiting the classroom where Saper's father, a university professor, taught.

In order to properly discuss her life as an Iranian-Jewish woman, Saper began her presentation with a historical background of Iran. Iran is the eighteenth largest nation and is bordered by Turkey, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Though Iran is a Middle Eastern nation, it is significantly different from the Middle East for three main reasons. First, Iranians are of Persian rather than Arabic heritage and speak Farsi. Iran also adheres to Shia Islam, a minority in a Sunni-dominated Middle East. Finally, Iran hosts a significant Jewish minority. A constitutional monarchy consistently governed Iran for over 2500 years, and culminated with the reigns of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah.

"Before the Revolution", Saper stated, "things were very different". She grew up during the "Golden Age" of Iran during the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Iran enjoyed incredible prosperity and exported approximately 5 million barrels of oil per day compared to 1 million today. The country was also more secular and allowed for greater religious freedom and tolerance of minorities, including Jews. Moreover, Iran enjoyed a strong relationship with the United States: Jacqueline noted that her parents named her after Jacqueline Kennedy, President John F. Kennedy's wife.

Despite the prosperity, the Shah was an autocrat and faced opposition from many groups, including Marxists, mujahadeen, minorities, constitutionalists, intellectuals, and the clergy, who created the most opposition towards the Shah. These groups desired a new

government, such as the one under Prime Minister Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh before he was deposed by the CIA in 1953. In 1964, Ayatollah Khomeini started an uprising in Qom that increased tensions and caused the Shah to strike back. Khomeini fled to Iraq, but returned to lead all opposition against the Shah.

Saper stated that living during the 1979 Revolution was “extremely difficult” due massive “civil unrest”. The Revolution lasted nine months and created loss of utilities, transportation failures, riots, protests, martial law, and curfews. In addition, Iran became increasingly hostile towards the West and animosity and antagonism was directed towards Westerners, supporters of the Shah, and religious minorities. Khomeini then installed a new autocracy that banned everything considered Western, instated Sharia law and law of hijab, and reduced rights for women. The new regime also orchestrated executions by firing squad for former generals, certain religions, homosexuals, and other “unacceptable” individuals. Moreover, militias, revolutionary guards, and morality police were created to maintain social order and combat enemies without and within.

Despite the impact of the 1979 Revolution on Iran, Saper continued to live there even after her family and friends departed. She said that she stayed so long after the 1979 Revolution due to marriage, her husband’s studies, border closures due to the Iran-Iraq War, and need for funds due to economic difficulties. Saper did note that it continued to be difficult living in Iran due to the anti-Western hostility caused by the capture of 52 American hostages for 444 days and the destruction wrought by the Iran-Iraq War that lasted from 1980 to 1989.

While acknowledging that Iran still has serious human rights and diplomatic issues, Saper stated that Iran is far more prosperous and “relaxed” than during the 1979 Revolution. She has friends who visit Iran frequently and said that women have more rights now, the education has improved, and the country is becoming prosperous again. However, Saper said that more changes need to be made, and that a revolution is not the right method. She said that a second revolution “would be far more violent” and that Iran needs to elect

leaders that will create reforms to benefit the people and return Iran to a more free, modern society.

We thank Jacqueline Saper for her insightful talk, and hope to continue to work with her to fulfill Niagara Foundation's mission of promoting global fellowship.