



## Witness to history

Wilmette resident discusses native Iran, 1979 hostage crisis in memoir, Page 27

Jacqueline Saper, of Wilmette, signs copies of her book, "From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran," at a book event, Synagogue in Chicago. PHOTO SUBMITTED

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**COVER STORY**

# Local author relives escape from Iran during tense times

**ERIC DEGRECHE, Editor**

For many Americans who were alive in 1979, the events that occurred at the U.S. Embassy in Iran that began in November of that year conjure up a mix of emotions. For Wilmette resident Jacqueline Saper, the memories of 40 years ago are much more personal as she found herself right in the middle of it all in her native country.

Saper recently wrote a memoir about her experience, "From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran."

The Iran hostage crisis was a diplomatic standoff between the United States and Iran. It all started on Nov. 4, 1979, when a group of Iranian college students belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, who supported the Iranian Revolution, took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The group held 52 American diplomats and citizens hostage during the takeover.

Saper recalls that the embassy was located in an upscale neighborhood near a long street filled with many boutiques. The 18-year-old newlywed was shopping for cologne for her husband when the shouting began on that fateful day.

"I wasn't paying much attention [at first]. I heard a crowd and a mob. They were raising their fists and yelling, 'Death to America.' They kept repeating this," Saper said. "I sensed something was unusual."

Nine months prior, the Iranian Revolution had succeeded when the United States-backed monarchy and government of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown and replaced with an Islamic republic under the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Saper realized fairly quickly she only had a few options to escape from the growing dangerous scene at and near the embassy. One option was going to the back of the store and hiding. Another option was going toward the crowd to see what was going on.

"I was afraid because I knew the Marines that guarded the embassy were armed," Saper said. "I was afraid of tear gas and stampedes."

Luckily, there was a third option for Saper. She hailed the first taxi she saw and because her home wasn't too far away, she got there safely.

Saper, named after Jackie Kennedy, was born in Tehran in 1961 to an Iranian father and a British mother. She grew up in a Middle Eastern country where its people are predominantly Shia Muslim, while her family belonged to a Jewish community that made up only about one-third of one percent of the population of 35 million at that time.

"My family was also a rarity within this minority community because, in my father's generation, marrying across continents was a practice that was unheard of and not done," she said.

Soon after, Saper returned home on Nov. 4, 1979, she turned on the television, which was only available at night time. Like others, she was shocked by what she was seeing transpire that day and for the many months ahead.

"I saw the Americans blindfolded and handcuffed as people in this country saw it here [in the United States]," Saper said. "Obviously, I saw it from the other perspective. The hostage-takers, the government and everybody said it was only going to be two days or so."

As Khomeini supported the radical students, the American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days from Nov. 4, 1979 to Jan. 20, 1981. It ended 20 minutes after new U.S. President Ronald Reagan concluded his inaugural address.

"It was a very tumultuous time in Iran. Many Iranians that belong to the previous regime were executed," Saper said. "I knew

**FROM MINISKIRT TO HIJAB**  
A Girl in Revolutionary Iran  
JACQUELINE SAPER

Saper is the author of "From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran."

Jacqueline Saper, of Wilmette, is shown in her native Iran with her fiancé, later husband, at the time of the hostage crisis in 1979. PHOTOS SUBMITTED

**INSET LEFT:** Saper was 18 at the beginning of the Iran hostage crisis in 1979.  
**INSET RIGHT:** Saper, forced to wear a hijab, at 24.

Please see **SAPER, 28**