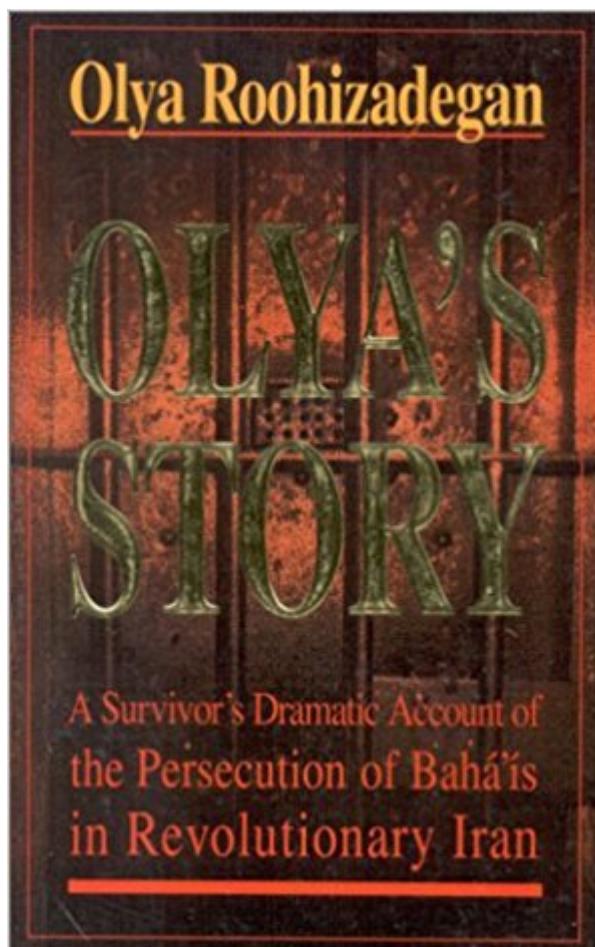


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Olya's Story



Synopsis

A moving story of one woman's experiences at the hands of Iranian revolutionaries. A triumphant example of faith, humor, courage and love.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A remarkable witness account of the systematic persecution of the Baha'is in Iran" Oxford Times
"makes compelling reading" The Friend

As an Iranian and non-Bahai - Olya's story was truly a story that touched my heart and my mind. I always knew about the persecution and oppression of Bahai's inside of Iran; but Olya's story goes a step further and explains the details and harrowing tales of the oppression, summary executions, and terror inflicted upon the Bahai people and Bahai community inside of Iran through a tyrannical and fanatical terrorist regime. I highly recommend this book for everyone. It is a good read and more importantly, it helps one truly understand the true horror and terror inflicted upon Bahai's inside of the Islamic Republic.

I have probably read this book over five times, and every time I read it, the emotions are as raw as ever. As someone whose family has been affected by the Iranian government's persecution of Baha'is, reading this book reminds me of my history as well as what Baha'is are currently going through. I strongly recommend this read to EVERYONE, regardless of race or religion as it reminds us of the horrible atrocities taking place in our world that the media doesn't cover.

I picked this book up and was caught by the mention of Iran on the front cover. She covers events following 1978. This to me had significance because she explained life in Shiraz, Iran. I lived there for a couple of years as a child and got out of there about that time with part of my family. I did not even know what Bahai was. I did not really understand what was going on. Bombs and gunfire could be heard in the distance. I was too young to really comprehend. This book is so full of executions and murders it is at first shocking but then just incomprehensible. I am not native to that country but do not understand why given so many opportunities she didn't leave immediately and bring everyone she could with her. Trying to reason with people with a fixed mindset who are violent is really dangerous. I would have put my three year old, husband and grown sons in a higher priority. I just don't understand the obsessive part of religious beliefs. This frustrated me. I spent a lot of this book thinking - get out of there. My family was divided doing just that. I don't understand resigning yourself to suffer atrocities to prove how deeply you believe in your religion. The martyr aspect simply escapes me. I felt sorrow for the three year old boy who was lost without his mother and confused when she was standing her ground on her religious beliefs in prison. I am really sorry for what all of those people went through. I am however a big fan of running away from a bad situation when it is really the right moment. I am grateful for the account of what went on. It really clarified a lot for me. I am glad I left when I did. This is a good account of what happened after I left. I wish the author left as I did. You can uphold your religious beliefs in other countries other than Iran. For me standing your ground under those circumstances is all too high a price to pay.

Earlier in 1978 a religious march in the city of Qum protested a newspaper article critical of the exiled Islamic leader, Ayatullah Khomeini, at which the police opened fire, seventeen seminary students were killed, and the government was denounced as anti-Islamic. As religious fundamentalism swept the country, Iran's largest religious minority, the Baha'is, became vulnerable; their houses were looted, livestock stolen, shops attacked and many were taken to mosques to be forced to accept Islam by those who considered the Baha'i faith to be a heretical sect. Although Baha'is were obedient to the government and their religion does not allow them to take part in politics, they were considered a threat; burning and looting spread and Olya's house was filled with refugees. There had been phases of intense persecutions previous to this, in the 1950s, the 1920s and in the last century when 20,000 early believers were massacred. When the Pahlavis left Iran, the streets exploded in jubilation and two weeks later Ayatullah Khomeini proclaimed the birth of a new state where all were to be free: "Interrogating people about their beliefs is forbidden. No one can be

persecuted or punished purely for holding certain beliefs." Official recognition and freedom to practice their religion, educate their children in their faith and be represented in parliament was extended to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians but not to Baha'is, although recognized as a separate religion by the United Nations. The belief that a new messenger of God had come to herald the long-awaited regeneration of humanity was considered a wicked heresy just as Christ's proclamation had been 2,000 years earlier. When interviewed for US television the head of Public Prosecution in the Revolutionary Court of Iran said: "We have never killed anyone because of their religion. The Baha'is we have executed were either leaders of this political sect or they were spies for Israel. We are going to continue our efforts to eliminate all their leaders, and so far we have been very successful. Then we will put pressure on the other Baha'is, and no doubt they will all come back to Islam in time." The pogrom began in earnest; the House of the Bab, one of the most holy places for Baha'is, was destroyed; Baha'i houses were demolished and families forced to live together; many were killed or executed, often after prolonged torture; Baha'is were banned from jobs in teaching and in government; children were suspended from schools and universities; eleven prominent Baha'is were kidnapped by the Revolutionary Guards, disappearing without trace. On April 30, 1981 three Baha'is were executed. A Muslim whose car broke down close by, secretly witnessed the scene and recounted what he saw: "They were only a few steps away from death when the guards tried for the last time to get them to recant their faith. They were told that if they denied being Baha'is they would be allowed to go back to their families at once. Their reaction was incredible. Mr. Mihdizadih, who seemed perfectly composed, said: 'Now that I'm captive and you know I don't have a weapon with which to defend myself, please uncover my eyes and tell me who is the person among you chosen to give me the drink from the water of eternal life.' One of the guards uncovered his eyes and introduced himself as the soldier who was about to kill him. Mr. Mihdizadih held the guard's hand and kissed it, then with indescribable excitement he looked at the sky and said: 'I praise God that I can, in the last moments of my life, be obedient and carry out what He has asked me to do - to kiss the hand of my killer.'" Increasingly concerned about opposition from political factions such as the mujahidin, communists and tribal populations, it was pronounced illegal for more than two families to gather in one house under threat of prison and confiscation of property. The Baha'is complied but Olya was asked to be unofficial messenger to keep everyone informed, a dangerous job with guards everywhere. Olya's children were at school in the UK and her boss offered her advice: "Now that you have finally managed to get permission to leave Iran after all these difficulties, Olya, you'd better stay in England. The government has plans for you Baha'is. You know how they have fired your friends from their jobs under false charges! The Public Prosecutor's

office has called me a few times to ask about you, but I don't give them straight answers. I have told them I am very happy with your work in the office, and that seems to pacify them a bit. But one of these days I'm sure they'll manage to dismiss you. I'll be glad to issue a few months' leave of absence for you, on top of your paid annual vacation, while we wait to see what happens under this terrible government. Maybe things will change!" Olga returned after the planned two weeks because something strange had happened to the Baha'i community. Under persecution, life had become more meaningful; they felt they had something priceless that brought true happiness. They enjoyed their material loss and envied those who gave their lives. They looked upon their children as the hope for the world; adults had to play their part in being a good example and in preparing their children. On May 18, 1982 Olya's employer was forced to fire her, the personnel manager saying at the farewell gathering: "Friends, why are you crying?" he began. 'We are proud to have a colleague who is leaving her job because of her principles. She has not lost anything - she has gained something. Olya Roohizadegan is leaving this office with her head held high.'" That was the day Olya's Story began; a story that lead to her dramatic escape from the hangman's noose and escape to Pakistan and the West.

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