

Born in Evin: A Review

By: Allison Hannaford

Born in Evin, to be screened at the Diaspora Film Festival in Toronto from November 1-3, is a moving documentary which depicts one woman's quest to find out more about the events surrounding her birth in the Iranian political prison, Evin. She faces a community shrouded in silence, unwilling or unable to discuss the conditions surrounding her and other births in that notorious prison.

For her first two years, **Maryam Zaree** lived with her grandparents in Iran. When her mother, Nargess, was released from prison, she fled with Maryam to Frankfurt, Germany. Zaree's father, Kasra remained a political prisoner in Evin. She didn't meet him until she was about nine but bonded with him quickly and they remain close.

Zaree, who has grown up in Germany, works in the entertainment industry. She is an actress. Oftentimes, she is cast as a Muslim woman and is required to wear the chador for her roles. Frustrated at having to depict this stereotype, Zaree wants to present Iranian women through a more progressive lens. Her own mother who has a degree in psychology and is running for public office is an example of how Iranian women are breaking out of traditional roles. Zaree sets out to make the documentary, determined to make sense out of the intergenerational memory of trauma faced by Iranian political prisoners and their families.

Throughout the film, Zaree seeks out people in and around her life that would have insight into her birth, and the experiences of others like her who were born and may have spent much of their infancy in Evin. What she finds are people who remain so traumatized about their experiences that they even fear speaking about what it was like to have lived in the prison. As a viewer, we can sense her frustration as she investigates what happened behind those prison walls, all the while being respectful of the survivors' reluctance to discuss this very painful part of their lives.

The shroud of silence that Zaree faces in her research is reflected in her filmmaking. By editing in shots that include those where the camera is seen, she reminds us that we are watching a film. The audience is invited to witness what Zaree learns about life in Iran and surviving the cruelty of the prison but is never intimately invited in. She makes it clear that we are watching a film; we are outsiders who have been allowed a superficial access. She wants us to witness the trauma that her family and other Iranians have endured, but we are just visitors. The omnipresence of the camera, the film crew and the repeated references to the construction of the documentary keep us at an arm's length.

As tensions between the U.S. and Iran continue to increase, films like *Born in Evin* are important as they remind us of the human aspect of Iran. We see that Iran continues to be a conflicted nation within itself. A dialogue about the experiences of the people inside Iran humanize an otherwise faceless adversarial country.