

Born in Evin: A careful meditation on the nature of trauma and memory

By Daniel McIntosh

Maryam Zaree's autobiographical documentary film, *Born in Evin*, screening at the Diaspora Film Festival in Toronto, opens with a flashback to her at seven years old in Frankfurt, recording a video message to her father, imprisoned in their native Iran. In 1979, as the Shah was overthrown and replaced by the Islamic leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini imposed a brutal crackdown on dissent. By 1983, Zaree's parents, young revolutionaries, were jailed in Evin, a notoriously ruthless political prison, notable for its methods of torture and mass executions. Zaree's mother was pregnant with her at the time. A stark voiceover cuts through the VHS home movie, "I was born in that prison, that's basically everything I know." In her directorial debut, Zaree sets off to uncover the roots of her personal narrative. The result, *Born in Evin*, reveals many truths about the inner workings of trauma and memory.

Zaree's quest takes her throughout Europe and America, retracing her childhood for clues that would provide insight to the circumstances of her birth. When she probes her mother about her time in prison, she is met with silence and tears. She connects with other Iranian expatriates and survivors of Evin, many of whom are similarly reluctant to discuss the memories of collective trauma they faced. But memory often operates by subterfuge, triggered by seemingly innocuous instances. The film reflects that well. Zaree relays the feeling of a panic attack on a bus in Morocco, a reaction to hearing surahs play out loud. The surahs are used as an acoustic torture method in Evin to break the non-religious prisoners. "That was the moment I realized what I was experiencing was related to my prison experience," the director recounts, in conversation with the BBC. The conception of postmemory, that is, the intergenerational imprint of trauma, gives insight into her mother's desire to remain silent. But "even silence demonstrates something," as Shadi Amin puts it. She's one of many psychologists who provides guidance to Zaree in the film. The desire to not retraumatize the next generation of Evin-born survivors is a valid reason for the silence of some former political prisoners and, for the most part, it is a successful campaign. She meets with scholars and filmmakers, all under similar conditions, all working to undo the knots of trauma in their own way.

Zaree's camera understands the secretive and isolating nature of repressed trauma, of not wanting to re-experience distress. Throughout the film, Zaree is distinctly transient and alone. Alone in France in a cafe, alone on a bus, alone even when she tries to engage. She visits the National Assembly for Former Political Prisoners, hoping to connect and confide with other survivors. They are immediately

wary of her intentions and her camera, refusing to be filmed and shutting her down in the process. Similarly, following a callout for interviews at a conference of Iranian women in exile, she is revealed to be sitting alone, waiting for the audience of former prisoners to validate her experiences.

The success of Zaree and her contemporaries— actors, novelists, filmmakers, psychologists and researchers— begs the question of those who did not make it. Brief mention is made of the young survivors of Evin who succumbed to their trauma, lapsing into homelessness and drug addiction. Their non-presence in the film suggests that their perspective is only collateral to the themes of trauma. In order to move on, have the ones who bear history's burden more heavily been discarded as well? Nonetheless, the discoveries in *Born in Evin* are far more revelatory than the director's initial goal. As Zaree renews her kinship to her family and other survivors in the difficult conversation, one hopes that the documentary can break the silence between other survivors. This documentary is a must-see at the Diaspora Film Festival this year.