

Born in Evin: An intimate portrait of identity, trauma and history

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We all possess an idea of what our parent's lives entailed prior to and during our earliest years, but very few of us venture deeper. What happens when the circumstances of your birth are out of the ordinary yet remain undisclosed to you? This question is the catalyst for the journey Iranian filmmaker Maryam Zaree takes in the new, touching documentary: *Born in Evin*. An actress and now documentarian, she attempts to uncover the facts of her birth as it followed the aftermath of the 1978 Islamic Revolution in which those opposed to the leader Ayatollah Khomeini were sent to Evin: the most notorious political prison in Tehran. Among the plethora of people tortured and imprisoned under this regime were Zaree's parents, with her mother Nargess giving birth to Maryam during their sentence in 1983. Her mother managed to seek refuge in Frankfurt, Germany two years later, with her father, Kasra, remaining in confinement for another seven years. Over thirty years have past and the Zaree family has cultivated a better life. Nargess Zaree is becoming the first migrant to run for mayor in Frankfurt, Kasra Zaree is living a comfortable life in his own apartment and Maryam is finding work as an actress, although portraying some racially biased characters. The family has obviously triumphed in spite of the enormous hardships but Maryam wishes to locate the truth of what her early life was really like, and in doing so offers us ninety-eight minutes of a raw, emotional reconciliation of identity, trauma and history.

"What good does it do to know the truth?" Throughout the film, Maryam comes up against these kinds of sentiments from various family members especially her mother. We follow Maryam, armed with her camera and her determination, as she navigates difficult conversations with her aunt, her father and other family friends. She meets with experts in the field of trauma studies, attends conferences discussing the reality of 1980's Islamic imprisonment and contacts other children with similar backgrounds. Details regarding what pregnant women were unjustly subjected to in Evin emerge through first hand accounts: one woman bit down on her tongue during her delivery so as not to draw attention from the guards. Only a handful of photographs of the violence inflicted on prisoners is utilized, with the film being much stronger for it as the cultural/historical context is communicated verbally through the people Zaree encounters. The psychological complexity of trauma is not explored in depth, but rather it is experienced as Maryam recalls how she could not listen to a song on the radio because it may have been connected to her brief time in Evin. But she is uncertain. Her bravery and love for her parents is on full display throughout the film whether through a tearful conversation with her mother or sharing a laugh with her father as they hear vintage family audio tapes. The documentary is deeply real yet displays a cinematic

intelligence, with symbolic scene transitions to establish Zaree's emotional state including diving into water and landing in a desolate, sandy field after parachuting. Music is used sparingly with the significant exception of "Sar Oomad Zemestoon," an Iranian song expressing political freedom, perhaps invoking another meaning for the film: Maryam's search for personal, truthful freedom.

Born in Evin is situated profoundly in the continued study of Iranian diaspora. We hear other Iranian people's accounts of hardships and trauma post-revolution, learning along with Maryam as she documents these challenging but necessary discussions. It offers a compelling portrait of the contemporary individual lives and culture of Iran yet remaining so relatable that its autobiographical portrait extends beyond any differences in culture. We empathize and understand Maryam Zaree's search for meaning because it is one we must all take. This documentary is highly recommended and needs to be seen.

Works Cited

1. Zaree, Maryam, director. *Born in Evin*. Real Fiction, 2019.