

## The death convicts and we the others

*Mitra Lager, former political prisoner who survived the mass executions of the 1980s. She has written her own memories in a book entitled "God wants you to die".*

To end up in a prison where torture and executions are a daily reality is almost like being on board a boat in the middle of the vast, stormy ocean, or in any other disaster in which death comes so close that you can almost touch it. In such a situation, it is easy to think only of yourself. You see atrocities, but you're still glad for every moment that you live.

### **This is how the things work most of the time**

But of course different individuals react in slightly different ways. I can talk about how I felt myself in that situation. There were those among the prisoners who had been betrayed and started to work with our torturers. I was aware that it could have been easy to end up there. Have you heard of "Stockholm syndrome"? It has studied a great deal about the phenomenon that comes into the mind of victims who have been exposed to extreme and frightful situations.

In such a situation, some seek protection with the perpetrator, sometimes at the expense of their comrades' lives. I am glad that I have not ended up there. I was really anxious not to reach this state. Some prisoners had completely lost their mental health. Every night, one or another prisoner began to shout and cry so that there was an echo throughout the ward. At best they were given a sedative. Sometimes there were attempted suicides. I did not end up there, but it was close.

Depression was not an uncommon phenomenon in the Iranian prisons and, of course, was experienced by those sentenced to death. I want to tell you about my co-prisoner Fereshteh, and how her depression was treated. Fereshteh means angel in Persian. In my thoughts she became a symbol of love. Fershteh was a university student who met the love of her life, Shahram, whilst she was in hiding. Shahram and Fereshteh married but a few months later they were hunted down and imprisoned. Shahram was sentenced to death, Fereshteh to ten years imprisonment. Fereshteh could not believe her husband would be killed and as the time of his execution drew near she became more and more distressed. There was a time when imprisoned couples could spend a few days together in a cell. Fershteh wanted a baby desperately. She hoped that they would mitigate Shahram's sentence if they had children. Fereshteh became pregnant, but soon she had a miscarriage. The miscarriage as well as the thought of Shahram's execution drove her completely mad. She was crying all the time, did not talk to any one, did not eat proper food and lost so much weight. Suddenly she got an idea. She began to scream and insist that if Shahram were to be killed she wanted to die alongside him. She could not imagine living without her beloved husband. Eventually the prison authorities tired of Fereshteh's shouting – they had executed thousands of innocent people, so what difference would one more make? Fereshteh Shabani was executed together with her husband.

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It is difficult to reach out to comrades sentenced to death. You do not want to talk about memories before the prison because you know it just hurts. You know that many are already dead. The future is nothing to talk about. The condemned person knows the time of execution is approaching. You can not even console your friend. There is no hope. The most difficult of

all is the last moment. My best friend, Azam, 18, whom I had known for years, came to my cell to embrace me for the last time.

Behind her stood the guards who would take her to her execution. As usual, I had no words at such a moment. I struggled and spoke a few words with a trembling voice: - You will be in my thoughts for ever. In prison, I longed to come out. I was young and believed that life will return to normal again. Even a couple of weeks after the release, I noticed that it was not so simple. Everything felt so ridiculous. I noticed that I was only a spectator of life, that I have not really lived like others. Nothing in life could give me joy. I could not understand other people who seemed concerned about the smallest things. The most serious problems talked about by others were, in my view, mere bagatelles. Such a strange feeling, I had not previously had.

I longed for the prison. I felt that I had betrayed those who remained there. Sometimes I became very depressed; I was not able to have a normal life anymore. I wanted to be there. Among those who knew what happened, amongst the broken hearted. Among people who knew what pain was. Here people were disgustingly happy. I felt bad to see people laugh. As a twenty year-old young women, I felt old and thought that I lived on borrowed time. I had feelings of guilt and shame for a long time because I had survived. Even visits to the torture and trauma centre of Gothenburg didn't help me. In the end, there was only one thing to do, to take a pen and start writing. It resulted in my book "God wants you to die" which came out in April.

My book is a tribute to the memory of the many comrades who were imprisoned or lost their lives in battle. The dimensions of this human tragedy are much bigger than I can tell. In the book 'God wants you to die', I've tried to give a little picture of my reality.