

Memorial service planned for slain women

Refugee recalls persecution of Baha'is in Iran

By STEVE ARNOLD
News Editor

Persecution and murder in Iran will be more than just empty headlines in newspapers for at least one of the local Baha'is who will gather for a special memorial service next week.

Shahla has been in Canada for less than three weeks now. For her the 8 p.m. service at the library, will be a chance to remember an uncle hung by the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Iran because he would not recant his Baha'i faith.

Although she is willing to discuss some of her experiences under the persecution which the Ayatullah Khomeini ignited in Iranian life, she still fears for members of her family who remain in the land of their birth.

For that reason she asked her surname not be published. She told her story with the assistance of an interpreter.

According to Shahla, prejudice against members of the 150-year-old Baha'i faith

has long been a feature of life in the predominantly Muslim nation of Iran.

Like most types of religious prejudice, however, the intensity of it has ebbed and flowed with life in the country.

The revolution wrought by the fanatical Holy man, however, has intensified the always simmering hatred against those in Iran who have chosen a faith other than Islam.

Shahla was in the final year of a university program in physics when the exiled Shah of Iran died and Ayatullah Khomeini closed her university.

When the institution was opened again "the Baha'is were all told we weren't allowed to come back."

The Baha'is students, however, were given the chance to continue their studies if they would publicly recant their faith.

Imposed Belief

Shahla, among others, refused, because she would not accept a belief imposed on her against her will.

"I believe in the Baha'i faith and I'm not ready to change that. I know what the truth is for me and I'm not willing to change that," she said. "I'm not going to change for something I'm not sure is right."

That choice cost her the completion of her university training, but it was only the start of her problems.

The new religious Iranian government began a systematic effort to exorcise the Baha'i elements from the country, starting with the arrest of community leaders at all levels.

The men and women were rounded up and imprisoned, often without formal charges and rarely with the knowledge of their families.

When they refused persisting offers to save their lives by abandoning their faith they were executed.

Outside of the university Shahla found life increasingly difficult because job applications, especially for the civil service and for private companies which rely on the

government, all require applicants to state their religion.

During the "lenient" days under the Shah it was permissible for applicants to simply leave that question blank, but that provision has been blocked by the new regime.

As the arrests for Baha'is continued Shahla began to fear her name was quickly rising to the top of the list of those to be taken.

For 18 months she moved between the homes of several Muslim relatives, hiding from the Revolutionary Guards and the others in the vanguard of the new Iran.

"My uncle was among the first people the arrested because he had been involved in local religious activities in our city," she said. "I was afraid they would be coming for me next."

"It's hard to explain these feelings. I lived with a suitcase always packed and sitting by the door so I could escape quickly if I saw anything strange happening on the street," she added.

As is the Baha'i custom, Shahla chose the faith for herself when she was 15, following the path of her father who was a convert from Islam.

For her, the faith's emphasis on world salvation through unity and peace were

powerful attractions, despite the hatred and disunity which surrounded the Baha'i faith in the land of its birth.

"We are dedicated to the idea of unity and we will not give that up because of money, or persecution or even execution," she said. "By force of our example maybe some people will see the truth of what we believe."

"I've realized technology isn't going to build world peace," she added. "That will only happen through teachings which bring unity and equality. I can't see that happening any other way."

Despite her own losses, Shahla believes the suffering of the Baha'is who remain in Iran will be catalyst which will bring about the unity her faith seeks to build.

"By these sorts of sacrifices and executions the changes are happening fast," she said. "The more that Islam persecutes us the change comes about."

Shahla is reluctant to speak of the way she left her homeland, because others are using the same route to escape their persecutors and tell their story to the world.

For the moment she is staying with a family in Milton. In the future, she said, she would consider working in Africa as a missionary.

Students tackle crime prevention

The best way to lower the crime rate is through crime prevention, and Janice Hay and Maria Jelinek are setting out to make good headway in the prevention area.

Funded by the Solicitor General in conjunction with the Halton Regional Police, the girls and a team of six are working throughout Halton.

Their area is Halton Hills and Milton, working with crime prevention officers Dave Crawford and Bob Ustrycki.

The two 19-year-olds began their tasks May 24 and will be working until Aug. 26, primarily out of the Georgetown office. They have to report to the Oakville headquarters every morning however.

Besides doing smaller crime prevention duties, such as selling bicycle licenses and making calls on homes which the police have noticed are high crime risks, they also work on major programs.

A hit and run program was their first major project. By going through statistics, they were able to come up with ways to increase the clearance rate for people involved in fail to remain offences. They discovered that just 28 per cent of those leaving the scene are apprehended.

Vandalism (wilful damage) is another major problem they will be working on. This program will be presented to high school students in September. By going through records, Janice and Maria should find out how much damage is done and how many are arrested.

Many times an officer on patrol in the middle of the night will see a garage door open, or a window open, inviting a crime to take place. They will make a note of the address and the girls will visit the place the next day and explain the risk they are creating.

They have had displays at Halton Centennial Manor for senior citizens, and have spent a few days in court watching the criminal justice system in operation.

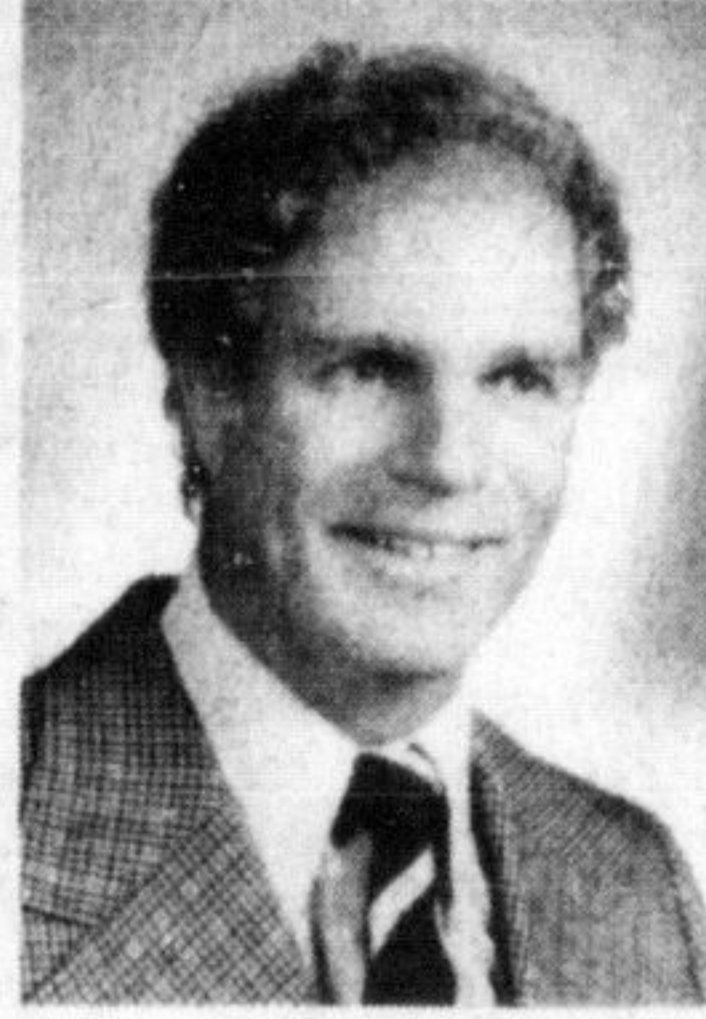
Tours of Chubb Alarms and the Ontario Police College in Aylmer are also on this summer's agenda.

Janice is studying social work at the University of Waterloo and Maria, niece of Halton MP Otto Jelinek, is taking sociology and psychology at the University of Western Ontario. Both are interested in criminology and the court system, and this summer's experience should help them decide exactly what they are going to do when they are finished school.

The police and the public have been very receptive to the girls' program.

Janice and Maria are available to do home and business security checks. Anyone

interested can contact them at 878-5511, extension 292.



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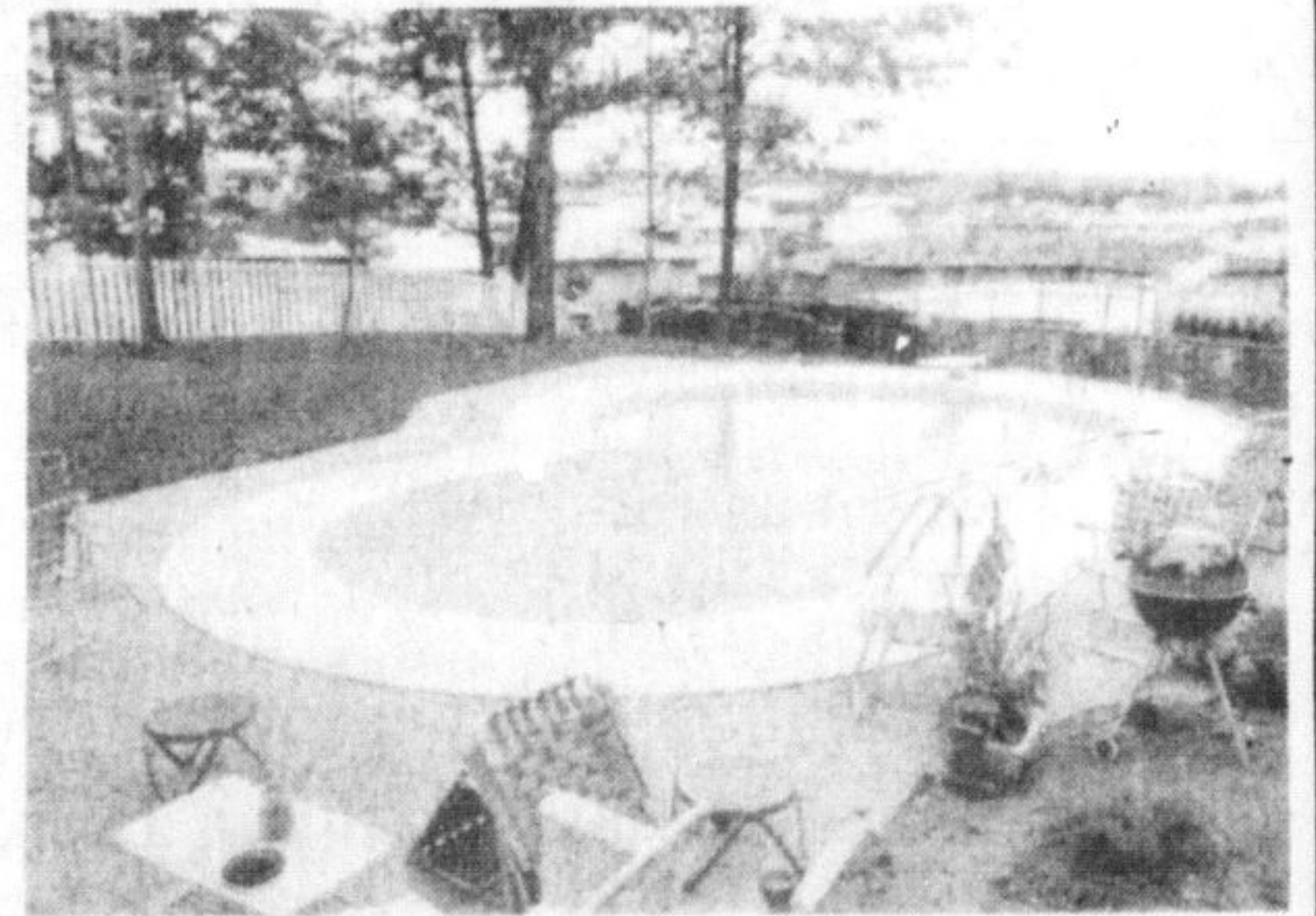
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