

# A Long Way from TEHRAN



*The story of Pooyan Mehrshahi*

*In addition to pastoral responsibilities and LTBS duties, the editor tutors a course in Elementary New Testament Greek at the Whitefield College of the Bible in Northern Ireland. The class often includes those from outside the Free Presbyterian Church and, indeed, outside the United Kingdom. One member of the current group is Pooyan Mehrshahi. This is his story.*

The Islamic Republic of Iran occupies some 1.65 million square kilometres in the Middle East. Bordered by Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, several former Soviet republics to the north, and Turkey and Iraq to the west, Iran has substantial southern coastline on the Persian Gulf. After the pro-Western Shah was deposed in the Shiite Muslim revolution, a theocratic Islamic republic was declared in 1979. Regional loyalties and widespread anarchy brought the country close to civil war and economic ruin. But worse was to come. In 1980, Iran was invaded by her Iraqi neighbours. The invasion heralded the beginning of eight years of war and the death of some one million Iranians.

Pooyan Mehrshahi was born in the Iranian capital, Tehran, in September 1980. A city at war, Tehran suffered frequent bombing raids, and the family was often forced to shelter in the basement. Times were uncertain, but Iranians took refuge in religion. The Mehrshahi family was no exception, but its religion was different from that of the overwhelming majority of Iranians. Iran was then and is now ninety-nine percent Muslim. A tiny minority of its people, including the Mehrshahis, were followers of Zoroastrianism, Persia's ancient pre-Islamic religion.

Pooyan remarks, “I was raised in a society where everyone acknowledged the existence of God. Religion was part of everyday life, part of our culture and even our language. But there was a coldness about it all. Many people had a view of life built upon a kind of fatalistic predestination—things happen and nothing could change them. We Zoroastrians could trace our religion back to the days of Darius and Cyrus in Old Testament times, but our God was abstract. He couldn’t be reached or known. We had no communion with him. Much of what we did was governed by superstition, and the fear of suffering punishment if we stepped out of line.”

Pooyan was soon joined in the family by two younger brothers. Further changes came about when Pooyan was five. His father accepted a position as lecturer in geology at a university in the city of Yazd, some nine hours’ drive to the southeast of Tehran. After the family relocated to Yazd, Pooyan began to go to school. His first school was Zoroastrian. Every class was influenced by religion, no other faith was taught, and there was the usual observance of rites and rituals. Assemblies and prayer times were jealously guarded with everyone expected to pray the Zoroastrian way—facing toward the sun or fire (a long-standing practice in false religion—see Jeremiah 8:1–2 and Ezekiel 8:16; note the divine prohibition in Deuteronomy 4:19 and 17:3).

Things became more difficult for Pooyan a few years later when he continued his education at a public school, which was Islamic. Non-Muslims were disadvantaged, a situation that continues today despite the fact that the rights of religious minorities are constitutionally guaranteed. Pooyan did not reveal his Zoroastrianism willingly.

“I knew it would be difficult,” he recalls. “My father believed that there would be no harm in attending the school and becoming familiar with Islamic customs. After all, we had to live amongst these people. But I knew there would be bullying and so I kept quiet. I learnt the Koran, participated in

didn’t have much time to adjust for he was enrolled in school just two days after he arrived in England!

“Yes, it was very strange,” he remembers. “I started in school with virtually no English. Just about the only thing I could say was that I didn’t speak English! Communication for quite a while involved



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the rituals, and fasted at Ramadan with the rest. Towards the end of my days at the school it was discovered that I was Zoroastrian, and I was then forbidden from attending Islamic classes. Things were different now. I was an outsider. I was mocked and called names by some Muslim students.”

More dramatic change was imminent, however. In September 1993 the Mehrshahi family moved to England. Pooyan’s father had decided to pursue Ph.D. studies at Sheffield University, and the family settled in the Yorkshire city. It was Pooyan’s first time outside Iran, and it was quite a shock to him. He

a combination of sign language and drawing pictures. Math[ematic]s wasn’t a problem, however. We seemed to be ahead in Iran. French, too, was useful. The grammar was less complex than English, and sometimes it was easier to communicate in French. Still, there was one bonus—I had a full year without homework!”

Other aspects of English life surprised the young Pooyan. The culture was very different. He had been taught to see America as the source of all evil and to have an almost equally hostile attitude towards Western Europe. He was struck by the absence of reserve in standards of dress (particularly that of women), in