

Letter from Zhinus Mahmoudi (April 5, 1980) to Homa Ehsan

My dearest Homa,

On the second day of the New Year, I finally received your letter—the one I had been awaiting so eagerly. I couldn't manage to answer it sooner, and since Artin was coming to stay with us for ten days before returning, I thought it best to wait and send my reply with him. You know how unreliable the post is—everything is easily monitored, and given our circumstances, that could only bring us more trouble.

How I longed to sit and speak with you at leisure! I had suggested that you might come visit us, for there are things that cannot be written, and besides, there is simply too much to write. You, with your keen and beautiful discernment, would take it all in with a single glance. In two or three weeks you would see and understand everything. Truly, given all this, I cannot be much of a guide through letters alone.

As for books and newspaper clippings—I will try to send you some. But which newspapers? You must know that they have seized all the papers by force, changed the editorial boards, and now every one of them merely echoes the ruling powers. During the revolution, people were so hungry for news that they would grab the papers from each other's hands—it was astonishing, this thirst for newspapers, for news, for radio and television, for anything that spoke of the times. But now—now even I, who was addicted to newspapers from childhood—when there was only one in all Iran—no longer buy any. At times, from old habit, I pay for one, but I throw it away unread, and most people do the same.

When I go to a friend's house—one of those who still think and understand—and the news hour comes, I ask out of habit, "Aren't you turning on the radio or television?" They look at me sideways and say, "We haven't listened to the news for months." Some hate the very idea of news because it contains things they do not wish to hear. Many more have simply lost all trust in what is said. Everyone believes it is all lies—more lies than under the Shah. Everything is falsehood—more than before, more than ever.

I won't expand on this for now. Books are being printed without limit. Every day a mountain of them appears on the streets—of every kind, as though freedom of the press had suddenly descended. It seems that every thought in the world has been poured into this land all at once. Everyone has something to say, and everyone is speaking—as if they alone know this country. And our youth—those who have yearned for years to hear and to speak new words—now rush in without pause. But where will it lead? They are like the hungry,

who after long starvation find themselves before a table overflowing with food—good and bad—and, not knowing moderation, eat until they fall ill or grow weary of eating altogether.

And yet, in this chaotic bazaar of freedom, the Bahá'ís are forbidden to publish even a single book. The Bahá'í Publishing Center was seized, and for months the officials shredded the books by machine. Those who loved their books hid them; many lost them altogether. Now one searches in vain for a single volume. Tell me, how should one feel? Glad that the prisons have opened, or sorrowful that, in the midst of this turmoil, one must fear for the fate of a community that has offered nothing but goodwill to the world?

You said you could not discern my state from my last letter—and you were right. As you said, that cramped envelope could not contain much, and my condition—like that of so many others—cannot be captured in words amid such a tempest. I am stunned, like everyone. I am weary, like everyone. And yet, I am not anxious. Because the feeling I have now is unlike anything I have ever experienced in my life. I am certain—certain even at the height of the storm—certain and hopeful, and so utterly surrendered, so ready to accept a thousand more upheavals, that at times I think this feeling is unnatural. Those around me—especially the dear friends I work with—all say the same: that my calm gives them calm, my composure, my laughter. Truly, I never had such peace before, even though outside there is a storm—rebellion, fear, anxiety, and “nervous breakdowns” (forgive me for writing the English phrase in Persian).

And I am glad, as you once said, because I am witnessing the path this nation takes. I watch as history is written before my eyes—how nations move, surge, err, test their ways, hope, and despair. Tell me, is it not a strange joy to live history instead of merely reading it—to see, to feel, to touch, and perhaps even become part of it? I think you, too, would have liked to be here—you wrote that you wished you could have been. And yet, as you said, you might have only brought trouble upon yourself! For neither of us truly knew what was unfolding—and even now, we do not fully understand it. I still search for the material causes of this storm, but in my heart I am sure: its true force is divine will. Even those who once governed admit this—though they draw other conclusions from it.

My dearest Homa, I am convinced that nothing you or I could do would change the fate of these people. In this raging flood that crushes mountains and cities alike, neither you, nor I, nor anyone can play a part. You, my passionate one, think perhaps that through journalism or radio you could say something, make a difference. You ask what should be said, how it should be said. And here again I repeat my invitation: come and see. There is so much you must witness—things that cannot be written. All the talents and strength you

possess should not remain without fruit, for if their energy is not directed, it will consume you.

As for me, I long to come visit. My daughter is expecting this summer. But I have no visa—they say none are being issued anywhere. I've asked her to see if she can help; if it becomes possible, I'll come. One of my plans is to see you properly. But your coming here would be something else entirely—because there, you would only see me and my impressions; but here, with your sharp and beautiful insight, you would see everything. If it's possible, it would be wonderful—truly wonderful.

A few words about myself. Last Esfand, when the revolution had just succeeded, I was summoned to the committee for “mobilizing women against the veil.” The story is long, but it ended with my requesting retirement from my post. Since the start of last year, I no longer went to the office, though because of my Bahá'í identity, there were complications in processing my retirement. Eventually it was approved, but this Esfand my pension was once again cut off. A few days ago, after more than a year, I set foot once more in that office—a place I had wished the world would collapse so I'd never have to go to again. The result of the discussions was that instead of retiring me, they had decided to dismiss me outright (in other words, fire me!)—and now they still plan to do so. Of course, I will follow the matter, but my only feeling was one of lightness and satisfaction. I was glad no longer to take a salary from them! It was as if the walls of a narrow room that had long pressed upon me had suddenly fallen away, leaving me in an open space where I could do anything.

Since leaving the office last year, I have been busier than ever—there is no end to my work. I travel, almost once a month. I can't describe it all to you, but everything is so full of beauty and new feelings that I am deeply content. My insistence on seeing you, dearest, is that I might at least share some of this world with you—a world so full of wonder it must be seen to be believed. Everything has changed so completely that I can hardly describe it. The events unfolding around us play their part in these wonders in ways beyond imagining. Each moment is strange, extraordinary. Visiting the dear ones imprisoned in Evin—those who have lost everything with radiant joy—old men, old women, so full of innocence, so full of immense, unreachable strength—and then tasting a drop of the wine that has made them so enraptured—ah, it cannot be described. I'll try, at times, to write you of such things. I remembered, as I was writing, that I have a copy of a report I prepared from one of these journeys. I'll send it to you—for now, it is but a drop from an ocean.

Zhinus