

State TV series shows Nazis murdering Jews



IranTimes: State television has a new hit program, the theme of which is a direct repudiation of President Ahmadi-nejad's denial of the Holocaust. The new television series is a drama grounded in part on the true story of how an Iranian diplomat in Nazi-occupied Paris issued Iranian passports to more than 1,000 European Jews to save them from the Holocaust. The program is a major production with period costumes and 1930s' cars rumbling across the screen. Outdoor scenes were shot in Paris and Budapest.

The women wear cloche hats, covering most of their hair and generally complying with the rules of hejab. The series is billed as the most costly ever filmed by state television in Iran. The underlying premise of the 22 one-hour episodes, broadcast each Monday night at 10 p.m., is that European Jews were threatened with death if the

Nazis got their hands on them. That is an outright repudiation of Ahmadi-nejad's 2005 remarks questioning whether there ever was a Holocaust and suggesting it was a Western invention intended to justify the creation of the state of Israel. Ahmadi-nejad, however, has actually backed away from those remarks—although he has never repudiated them. Several weeks after making them, he simply shifted gears. He stopped asserting there had never been a Holocaust. Instead, he focused on two points. First, he said, the West was no bastion of freedom of speech since it forbids people to question the Holocaust. Second, he said, even if the Holocaust was all it is described as being, that did not justify creating Israel on Arab land. If Germany did murder 6 million Jews, then German land should be taken for a Jewish state.

Or, if the Americans feel so strongly about the issue, then why don't the Americans give the Jews Alaska, Ahmadinejad has asked. But he has not said there was no Holocaust in more than a year. The new state television series was written and directed by Hassan Fatthi, 48, who has produced many fictionalized works based on history for state TV. Fatthi sidestepped the Holocaust debate to make a different point when discussing his program with The Wall Street Journal. "Iranians have always differentiated between ordinary Jews and a minority of Zionists," he said. "The murder of innocent Jews during World War II is just as despicable, sad and shocking as the killing of innocent Palestinian women and children by racist Zionist soldiers." The distinction between Jews and Zionists is a point made constantly in the Islamic Republic, which is anxious to counter any suggestion the regime is anti-Semitic and to adhere closely to the religious and nationalist sentiment that Jews and Christians are "people of the book" and have enjoyed protection in Iran over the millennia. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenehi never picked up on Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denials, and there is speculation he privately ordered the president to change his tune and avoid any hint of anti-Semitism.

The TV program helps to make that point—but at Ahmadinejad's expense, by pointing out every Monday night that what he said in 2005 was dead wrong. State television comes under the direct control of the Supreme Leader, not the president or his cabinet. Iran has been home to Jews for 25 centuries since Cyrus the Great freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity in 529 BCE. While there has been some anti-Semitism in Iran over the centuries, it has been limited compared to what were common European practices.

The number of Jews in Iran has now fallen to fewer than 30,000 with migration to Israel and the United States, but Iran still contains the largest Jewish population in the Islamic world. The television program is titled "Zero Degree Turn." It is not a documentary, but a love story between

a French Jewish woman and an Iranian-Palestinian Muslim man.

Over the course of the weekly series, the man—played by Iranian heartthrob Shahab Hossaini—rescues his love from Nazi camps and eventually makes contact with Abdol-Hossain Sardari, the real and sole Iranian diplomat in Paris during the war. In the TV series, Sardari prepares passports for the woman and her family so they can board planes to refuge in Iran. In real life, Sardari issued passports to more than 1,000 European Jews, telling the Germans they were all Iranians. Sardari was an uncle of the late Prime Minister Abbas-Amir Hoveyda. Sardari had a stack of passports in the embassy and began issuing them to Jews in 1942 when the Germans started rounding up Jews in France. All communications with Tehran had been cut and he had no approval to do so, but he felt confident his action would be approved after the war. And it was. Sardari died in London in 1981. He is sometimes called "the Persian Schindler" after Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who saved about the same number of Jews during the war. Maurice Motamed, the Jewish deputy in the Majlis, says he is a devoted follower of the TV series. "It's captivating," he said. "No matter where I am or what I'm doing, on Monday nights I find a television set and watch the show. So does every Jew I know here." The program makes a few passing references to Israel, but in a context that reinforces that all Jews are not Zionists.

In one episode, a rabbi states that Jews should not settle in Arab lands. In another, a French Jew turns down a marriage offer from a cousin who is an ardent Zionist. The Jewish Association, the independent community group, also helped Fatthi in his filming to authenticate the coverage of Jewish culture. The series can be viewed on the Internet at www.tv1.ir/ir/barnameha/sharheilim.asp?code=0011109036106.

Baha'is show a letter expelling students

The Baha'i International Community last month released the text of a letter ordering that all Baha'is be expelled from Iranian universities. The letter directly contradicts officials in the Islamic Republic who have said they do not bar members of any religious sects from Iran's universities. The letter was sent by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, which oversees higher education, to all 81 universities in the country, the Baha'i office in New York said. The date is unreadable, but the Baha'is said it was sent in 2006. Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations, said, "The letter exposes a duplicitous campaign by Iran to pretend that it does not violate the internationally recognized right to education." The letter says, "If the identity of Baha'i individuals becomes known at the time of enrollment or during the course of their studies, they must be expelled from the university." Baha'is were banned from universities after the revolution. But two years ago, Iran received much positive publicity when it eliminated the religion line on applications for the college entrance exams. Baha'is, who are instructed not to lie about their faith, then began to take the exams. But most universities still require students entering to state their faith on entry. Diane Alai of the Baha'i International Community, said that last year about 200 Baha'is entered Iranian universities, but 128 of them were expelled over the course of the school year.

Esfandiari finds pot out of place as she returns home



IranTimes: Haleh Esfandiari says she feels no ill will toward the government of Iran for its treatment of her, but she senses that the regime feels itself to be weak and fragile, and she is convinced that it has swallowed its own rhetoric and is deceiving itself. Esfandiari went back to work at her old job running Middle East programs for the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, D.C. She took time out for a news conference where she discussed her treatment and interrogation.

She said she was never mistreated physically or psychologically and was always treated respectfully.

She said only one interrogator ever raised his voice with her. And when Esfandiari promptly—and loudly—told him not to shout, the interrogator immediately lowered

his voice and never again shouted. But Esfandiari, 67, found her eight-month ordeal raised many questions about the Islamic Republic.

She said she wondered whether the regime felt so fragile that it was unable to tolerate open debate. "That was my question to them.... I said, 'You are a strong government. You are a government with so much power and authority in the region. Why can't you tolerate workshops for women? Why can't you accept an exchange of scholars? Or why can't your university professors go abroad and take part in a conference?'" Esfandiari said the response she got was that such openness started the downfall of the Soviet Union and changed the governments in Ukraine and Georgia. She said she concluded after months of interrogations that the regime really believes all the rhetoric that many people around the world just dismiss.

"After several months of exchanges with my interrogators, it became clear to me that elements in Iran's Intelligence Ministry believed what they have said publicly—namely, that the U.S. government, entangled in Iraq and elsewhere, no longer contemplates a military attack on Iran and that they [the Americans] aim at this revolution in Iran like the ones in Georgia and Ukraine—and the instruments for this goal are think tanks and foundations."

She said the questions posed to her over and over again were concerned simply with ferreting out information about what the Wilson Center does—information she said was available in detail on the Wilson Center's website.

She arrived home last week and quickly fell in with her normal life again. She said she walked from room-to-room in her house in Maryland and "I turned around to my husband and I said, 'Why is this pot here?' And he said, 'Oh, she's back!'"

She was greeted by her two granddaughters, aged 6 and 4, who had never been told she was in prison. The first thing they asked was for grandmother to make them their favorite dish, adas pollow. At 4:30 a.m. the next morning, Grandmother Esfandiari got up to start work in the kitchen.

Woman not ugly, but her firm is

by Vida Ghaffari

IranTimes: An Iranian-American woman is running a New York-based film production company with the improbable name of Ugly Productions. Nicky Arezu Akmal has been at it for eight years. Her goal is to bridge the gap between documentaries and narrative features. Ugly Productions has won numerous awards. "August the First" won the Audience award at the Urban Film Festival in June. This film had a screening at the San Francisco Black Film Festival and won best feature. It will also be screened at The Martha's Vineyard African-American Film Festival and the Karlov Vary International Film Festival in the Czech Republic. "Plead" was selected to compete as an official selection for the 2001 Milan International Film Festival and the 2002 Black Point Film Festival. Akmal also wrote and directed "ARFF," which was in several film festivals. Akmal is the epitome of an independent, do-it-yourself filmmaker as she wears many hats with jobs as associate producer, line producer, production manager and unit production manager on projects with major production companies both in New York and London. As for why an attractive woman chose the name Ugly Productions, Akmal said, "It's not a pun, but I wanted a name that people would remember and I thought it would be fun." The name is fun. But Akmal acknowledges, "Financing is really hard [for independent filmmakers].... It's a lot of work.... The fact that I'm a woman, and look young, makes it even more difficult." As for giving advice to aspiring young Iranians who want to work in film production, Akmal says, "I would tell them to go for it. Shoot for the stars but also keep in mind that it's a hard road. It doesn't happen right away—and money is not forthcoming." Akmal was born in Washington, D.C. Her BA was in English literature from the University of Maryland at College Park. Akmal is currently working as a co-producer on "Dirty Hands." This film starts shooting in Los Angeles this fall. At the same time, she is working as an associate producer on "The Understudy." For "A Shot in the Dark," a documentary currently airing on HBO, Akmal worked as an associate producer.

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Quran: Sura 2, Verse 136

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