

Moris Farhi and I went to Paris on 30 October 2003 to meet Nizar Nayouf, a Syrian dissident and honorary member of English PEN.

Nizar Nayouf was sentenced to ten years in prison in early 1992 for membership of the banned Committee for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights (which he co-founded) and for being involved in the production and distribution of a leaflet calling for human rights reforms in Syria. Nizar is also a poet and one of his three volumes, *A PIPE FOR SMOKING DREAMS*, is overtly political in content. Nizar was released from prison on the night of 6-7 May 2001, after nine years in detention. His release, granted by President Bashar-al-Assad, coincided with the Pope's visit to Syria. He was initially held under house arrest and on one occasion he disappeared. After a mass of urgent appeals from English PEN to President al-Bashar he was released. After international pressure, he was allowed to come to France for medical treatment in July 2001.

When Nizar first came out of prison he was on crutches (fashioned by himself whilst in prison) so it was a relief to find him walking relatively freely, although, he is not allowed to walk more than 500 metres at a stretch and can't lift anything heavy. On his release Nizar was also treated for Hodgkin's disease and has regular checkups every 4 months. It is hoped he will be given the all clear in 2007. The cancer developed while he was in prison. At the time it was first diagnosed, his jailers tried to strike a deal with him. Nizar was asked to sign papers recanting what he written about mass cemeteries and missing Lebanese citizens. In return he was offered "treatment anywhere in the world". Nizar found it hard to refuse but thoughts of his young daughter, Sara, and the fear that she might think him a collaborator if he signed gave him the strength to refuse. Eventually, due to international pressure, a doctor (also a political prisoner) was allowed to examine Nizar and he diagnosed the necessary chemotherapy. Nizar's friends and family got together the money that enabled Nizar to undergo a series of treatments for the cancer.

One of our main reasons for meeting Nizar was to talk about the treatment of political prisoners in Syria. Nizar recounted horrific scenes of torture that he had undergone whilst under interrogation. As he pointed out – torture in the prisons itself is not usual - although he witnessed horrific scenes in Palmyr- a prison, in the desert where breeze blocks were dropped from a height and victims' skulls were crushed. At the time he was there he witnessed this happen to about 275 victims. Nizar likens this prison to Dante's Inferno and calls it "Hell on Earth". He also believes there are mass cemeteries in the desert where the remains of some 17,000 victims (political prisoners – mainly Syrian and Lebanese) are buried - their bodies so mutilated as to be unrecognisable and unidentifiable.

Whilst in detention, before he was sentenced, Nizar suffered extreme forms of torture. As well as being beaten by steel cables after being saturated in water (which increases the pain), Nizar was also suspended from his ankles. Both Nizar and Faraj Bayraqdar (another honorary member released in November 2000) were victims of the "German Chair." A cruel mode of torture invented by the Nazis during World War II, adopted and developed by the Iraqi and Syrian military intelligence.

It involves stretching your spine out, resulting in temporary paralysis. Nizar's back problems, which still cause him pain today, are a direct consequence of this torture.

He suffered nerve damage to the base of his spine and a build up of calcium. There is no medical treatment in prisons but after international pressure, Nizar was sent to a military hospital where he was treated for the paralysis in his hands but not for his backbone. On his release he has had laser treatment for this in both Germany and France.

Nizar Nayouf was internationally recognised as a prisoner of conscience but in all the reports there were discrepancies about his age. As he pointed out, most people thought he was much older when he was imprisoned. Born in 1962 he was sentenced aged 29, and spent his best years in prison – he was actually incarcerated, at some point, in all 3 of the main military prisons. Most of the time he was held in solitary confinement. Nizar is prematurely grey but is still a handsome man and his steely determination to survive and carry on the fight is evident in his demeanour and in the passion with which he talks about freedom of expression abuses.

We had many questions to ask Nizar, but I was particularly struck by his eagerness to talk about the fate of other prisoners of conscience, before himself. Faraj Bayraqdar, he described as “the champion of prisoners”, a man who never broke.

Another man, a lawyer, Riad Turk, who spent about 18 year in a solitary cell and was released in May 1998, Nizar referred to as “the Mandela of Syria”.

He continues to campaign for the release of many other political prisoners.

One of the most shocking revelations we heard was about the testing of chemical and biological weapons on political prisoners. Nizar had been investigating this before he was himself detained, (in fact, since 1985) but had no proof or documentation. He believed this was happening to political prisoners and was being carried out by Air Force Intelligence. In February 1992, when Nizar was himself under interrogation, he met Sami Ginzarly in the toilets of branch 235 of the Military Intelligence Department. Sami was evidently suffering from some sort of brutal torture but Nizar did not recognise the signs of the more usual forms of torture. Sami’s face was distorted, in spasm, his skin was red and blotchy, with what looked like boils and white burns, and he was suffering from impaired vision and a loss of hair. Nizar asked the man what had happened to him He informed Nizar that he had been injected with something but did not know what it was.

Years later, Nizar helped this same man get to France for treatment. He showed us the French Medical report, which described the man’s skin damage, “thoracic eczema of toxic origin linked to old contact with unidentified chemical toxic products, leaving [retractiles] scars on thorax with ulcerations and repeated oozing, as well as a state of chronic [astenie]. The state of health of Mr Sami Ginzarly requires appropriate treatment with dermatological advice/opinion and specialised biological check-up.”

They were unable to identify what could have caused the condition

Nizar also showed us photographs of the man’s back – this was covered in weals and boils.

Nizar informed us that there are four main intelligence systems in Syria – all are independent and apparently they do not all share with one another the methods of torture they use in their interrogation procedures.

Nizar spent time in Syria's three major prisons. In each prison, he met people who had witnessed chemical or biological testing on prisoners. The victims suffered from deformed, very red skin, impaired vision, boils, white burns and loss of hair. It was thought Air Force Intelligence were mainly responsible for this particular "programme" of torture. The main victims seem to be Iraqi Ba'athists, Lebanese citizens and soldiers, Palestinians and Jordanians.

Nizar understood that certain prisoners, sentenced to death, were asked, as a last "patriotic gesture" to sign papers that said they were willing volunteers for the Ministry of Health who were testing new drugs.

Whilst in Palmyr-a (hell on earth), Nizar suffered a broken jaw, after being knocked unconscious by an iron bar. He was also burnt with cigarettes and administered electric shocks on sensitive parts of his body. His tormentors had tried to force him to kneel down and worship a picture of the Syrian President before beating him round his face and head. He woke up in a military hospital the following day with a broken jaw and teeth. He showed us the dental bridges – both top and bottom – on the left hand side of his jaw.

Nizar is evidently a courageous man; he carries on his work, highlighting abuses against freedom of expression in the Arabic world, but particularly in Syria. He is continuously harassed in France. On one occasion he was denied a visa to visit the UK, despite letters from English PEN and Amnesty inviting him to talk. A news conference to be held in Paris, where Nizar was due to speak on various abuses was suddenly cancelled by order of the Presidential Palace. His family in Syria also continue to be harassed.

Nizar also told us about the loss of his daughter, Sara, and the breakdown of his marriage which he wishes to remain confidential. He does not know the whereabouts of his ex-wife but believes she is still alive. However, everything points to the fact that his daughter probably died when denied necessary medicine for a lung condition, while detained by the Military intelligence. Nizar heard that in November 1998, when Sara and her mother were attempting to leave Lebanon via Beirut airport, they were arrested by the Syrian Intelligence working in Lebanon, led by General Rustom Ghazali. Ghazali apparently prevented Sara from receiving the necessary drugs for her lung condition. Nizar carries a photograph of her in his wallet.

Moris and I were moved to tears when he spoke about his solitary confinement and how he would talk to insects and prison cats to keep himself sane.

Whilst in Paris Moris and I also met Ibtissam Berto Sulaiman Al-Dakhil, an Iraqi journalist formerly married to a Kuwaiti citizen, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in June 1991 for allegedly writing for an Iraqi government paper during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. She claimed being threatened that she and her daughters would be assaulted if she did not cooperate. She was adopted by the Writers in Prison committee of English PEN in 1999.

In September 2002 she was conditionally released under a deportation order and in March 2003 was granted asylum in France.

We introduced Nizar and Ibtissam on our last day and it was heartening to see them both get on together so well. We trust that the friendship will continue. They came to the Eurostar Gates to see us off. It was heartrending to leave them behind – we kissed and hugged and waved to them until we could no longer see them. In just a few days we felt we had really come to know this courageous man and brave woman. And it was our privilege. But we hope that it will not be long before they will be able to travel to England and visit, as our guests and as free persons.

