

 **by Maeve Quigley**

BERNARD Phelan knew it was a risky trip but as a travel agent who had been to Iran four times already, he was fond of the people there and had always felt relatively safe.

He could never have imagined that a few short days into his trip in 2022, he would end up a prisoner in an Iranian jail, accused of crimes he had not committed.

The softly-spoken 65-year-old had fallen in love with the country and its culture – he had even visited twice with his husband Roland.

‘The people are fantastic, friendly and open,’ explains Bernard. ‘It’s a very modern country, the Germany of the Middle East and central Asia.’

Born in Tipperary but brought up in Dublin’s Stillorgan, Bernard had left Ireland in 1986 to go to Paris, where he initially worked for the Irish Tourist Board. He was working as a marketing consultant for travel destinations that were off the beaten track when himself and his colleague, an Iranian called Mike, were approached by security.

‘I was helping an Iranian client, Adventure Iran, to work on a programme to do the Silk Road by train,’ Bernard says, explaining that he had flown to Turkey and travelled through by train before meeting Mike at the border and continuing their trip.

They had witnessed some of the unrest and protests caused by the death of Mahsa Amini, who was tortured and beaten in prison for not wearing a hijab.

BUT it was in Mashhad, where Mike had been taking pictures of Iran’s biggest mosque, that the pair were suddenly approached by two men who instructed they follow them and the interrogations began. The pair were first held in a prayer room for three hours before being moved into separate cars to an interrogation centre and placed in the cells.

The last time Bernard ever saw Mike was when he was being driven away.

‘I was lying on the floor with a blanket and I heard a cell door opening,’ Bernard says. ‘I heard the noise of someone being beaten and screaming and then I knew I was in serious trouble.’

It was October 3, 2022, and in those dark moments in solitary confinement, Bernard decided he would write a book about what was happening to him.

‘I was lying on the floor of my cell and I thought, I have to write a book about this, because it was too incredible,’ he recalls. ‘I tried to memorise as much as possible, everything that was around me and happening to me.’

There was no way to keep a diary and in any case this would have been dangerous, but through coded messages he managed to send details of his days inside the prison.

‘I was able to send letters out of prison but I never got a letter when I was in prison,’ he says.

‘I could dictate messages over the phone to the French Embassy in Tehran and I was able to dictate coded messages to a friend with dates and incidents that were happening to me while I was

How I survived prison in Iran – for a crime I did not commit

Bernard Phelan spent 222 days in a hellish Iranian jail, where he was told by a judge he was going to die



Freedom: Bernard with husband Roland, President Michael D Higgins and dad Vincent. Above, with sister Caroline and Roland

in prison. I was able to write all this down when I got out and then correlate that information of what was happening in Ireland.’

After almost a month, Bernard was taken to Vakilabad, the Central Prison of Masshad, where he was held for 222 days – just over seven and a half months.

The huge prison holds over 20,000 inmates and Bernard and a number of other foreign hostages were held in Six One, Satan’s Block. It also held political prisoners who had protested against the regime and some who were of a different faith than the Shia religion approved by the government.

‘Our block had the two cells for executions,’ Bernard says. ‘It was very difficult – you could hear the guys crying in the cell and the phones would be cut off so no one could contact their families and tell them their son or brother or

father was going to be executed after prayer the next morning.’

There was permanent light in the prison, to the point where Bernard didn’t know if it was day or night, no darkness except that of the soul. He was being held with co-hostage and fellow French citizen Benjamin Briere, and it was reading books that got them through.

‘I didn’t know what time of the day it was,’ Bernard recalls. ‘When I met Benjamin he had French books, and family and friends would send me books – I read 47 when I was in prison.’

‘There was a book club in Keny’s bookshop sending me books but I didn’t know this was happening until I got out because if there was a letter with the book, security would take it away.

‘The books were a great help and dictating letters over the phone and writing letters to my

dad also helped, as did hearing back from him.’

Iranian law states foreign prisoners are entitled to phone their family once a week but inside prison, this was not the case.

‘I spoke to my father once, my sister twice and my husband twice and that was very difficult,’ he says. ‘You would go down to make a phone call and be told the phone wasn’t working and every call was supervised too.’

MESSAGES came from home via the diplomats at the embassies but Bernard had no idea of the work Roland and his sister Caroline and both the French and Irish governments were doing to free him.

The first inkling they had that something was wrong was when the October 10 flight Bernard was

supposed to be on landed in Paris without him. He was eventually charged and sentenced for a crime he did not commit.

‘The first time I met the judge in Revolutionary Court, I was in my prison uniform, wearing flip-flops, handcuffed, with shackles on my feet,’ Bernard says. ‘I had to climb up three flights of stairs to get to the judge’s office, where he wanted me to sign some papers which were in Persian.’

‘I refused to sign as I said I would only sign papers in French or Irish. He looked at me, a guard tried to force me to sign but I refused and the judge told me to get out of the office. As I was going out, he said to me, “You will die in prison”.’

This was to become the title of Bernard’s gripping book that recounts the tales of his days in prison and subsequent release. Months went by and though both

Benjamin and Bernard had a lawyer, the court refused to recognise her. In turn the two men refused to recognise their court-appointed solicitor.

‘Eventually I was brought to court in a big trial with television cameras, lights and the whole works with a court-appointed lawyer who I refused to accept,’ says Bernard.

‘There, I was sentenced to three and a half years for sending information to an enemy state. I asked if France was regarded as an enemy state and the judge told me: “Not yet”.’

He was subsequently told that he was to receive compassionate release because of his age and his health – Bernard has a heart condition and is living with HIV.

‘But a week later, we went back to the same place to be told, “You aren’t getting compassionate leave and the sentence is six and

a half years.” That was a big shock,’ he says.

The psychological torture was hard and a regular occurrence but, as a hostage, Bernard knew his health was related to his value as a prisoner.

‘I knew I would get out,’ he explains. ‘What I was worried about was that there is a big difference between prison in Iran and prison in the west.

‘Here we get sentenced and there is a date when you get out, in Iran the dates are a joke for political prisoners.

‘At one point, Benjamin was supposed to be being released and he left the cell, took his things and went off to meet his lawyer to greet him at the gate, got to the gate and he wasn’t allowed out. You just don’t know what they are going to do.’

He believed he would get out eventually but his plan from the



Traumatised: Bernard Phelan says he still suffers from PTSD after his ordeal

his release came, it was the French government who flew him and Benjamin out of Iran, though the Irish had been essential in the negotiations with the Iranian government. In a meeting at the prison on May 1, Bernard had told the then Irish ambassador to Tehran Sonya McGuinness that he couldn’t take much more, and on May 12 he was finally flown out of Iranian airspace.

Bernard, quite understandably, still gets emotional when thinking about the moment he saw Roland and his sister Caroline waiting on the tarmac.

Writing the book was something he set about to tell the story of Satan’s Block, draw attention to those who are still there, and to also try and increase the help available to hostages once they are freed.

‘I liked writing the book and doing the work,’ Bernard says. ‘Putting it all down on paper helped to draw things out and get them in the right order.

‘Once you get released though, everyone says goodbye and that is it. There wasn’t much to help us. The French have a good system in place for victims of terrorism, which Benjamin and myself are now going to benefit from, but it took about a year to get that organised. I wanted to put that down on paper so that governments could see they need to help people like us, not just when we were being held hostage but when we got out, to get your life back on track. It’s not easy.’

INDEED Bernard still suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and has been advised not to go back to work yet.

‘I am a bit better now than I was when I came out,’ he says. ‘Seeing violence or war on the television would make me start crying or even just seeing the Iranian flag would set me off.

‘I was in a TV studio once and there was an Iranian flag on the screen behind me and I just started to tremble when I saw it.’

His health has suffered too – his heart condition worsened due to the fact he didn’t take his medication, he developed glaucoma and has back issues due to a prison accident and also the fact that he had to sleep on a bed with no mattress, just a blanket.

‘I could never go back to the Middle East,’ he says. ‘Now I want a quiet life, not taking risks. I am spending a lot of time with my husband. I promised myself in prison I would write the book and get a Labrador again so as soon as I got out, I got an Irish Labrador called Ulysses and he is great company. I am enjoying life. I missed a lot of nature.

‘When you are in a prison cell and a courtyard which is like an empty swimming pool with high walls and barbed wire and guards, you see the sky and you can see the aeroplanes flying past and that’s it.

‘So getting out to see trees and grass under your feet and to feel the wind was what I was most looking forward to. I spend a lot of time in the country now.

‘I am out. I have a husband, my family and my dad, who is 99 this month. When

you go through something like this, you know what love means.’

■ You Will Die In Prison by Bernard Phelan is out now

