

News & Views

“No influence”

“The Social Democratic Party has become the impregnable fortress of ethnic Swedishness,” says MP Juan Fonseca in a frontal attack on his own party.

Fonseca complains among other things that the party has not sought to make use of his experiences as an immigrant.

“The party wants a few dark skins as public tokens. But we wield no influence,” he says. Also, xenophobia is deeply rooted in sections of the Swedish labour movement.

“No-one in the present party leadership has any real feeling for a multicultural Sweden,” he adds.

Fonseca feels that immigrants have a lot to learn from the women’s movement. “Power is not something you are given, you have to go out and seize it,” he says, “and that takes time.”

The Social Democratic Party has run into a lot of tough criticism from within its own ranks. Göran Johansson, municipal commissioner of Gothenburg and a member of the national party executive, has accused the Government of surreptitiously abandoning welfare policies and being out of touch with “the rest of us out here”. Among those who have supported this view is Bertil Jansson, head of the Trade Union Confederation, LO.

Taking a stand against racism

“This Parliament, comprising the elected representatives of the Swedish people, will never allow discrimination, xenophobia and racism to get a foothold in our country,” pledged Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson when delivering the Government’s formal statement of intent at the official opening of Parliament last week.

He also asserted that the worst was now over for the Swedish economy. But, he added, state finances would not be in proper balance until 1998.



A Swedish bestseller

She came to Sweden when she was 32 — now Azar Mahloujian has written an autobiographical book in Swedish that has delighted both the critics and the book clubs. The *Torn-Up Snapshots* was published in the spring under the pseudonym of Nahid. “I didn’t want to be a celebrity the media would chase for glib statements about immigrants and refugees,” says Azar Mahloujian. Now, though, she has elected to go public. (Photo: Pressens Bild/Lennart Eriksson) **Page 3**

“I don’t yet dare call myself an author”

Azar Mahloujian wrote a successful book in Swedish

“I’ve begun to accept the Swedes for what they are,” says Azar Mahloujian. “Perhaps their outlook on life is due to the cold climate and the fact that they haven’t experienced war.”

Last spring, Azar Mahloujian’s first book, an autobiography entitled “De sönderrivna bilderna” (The Torn-Up Snapshots), was published by Bonnier Alba, one of Sweden’s most respected publishing houses.

She wrote it under a pseudonym, Nahid. Only now has she decided to go public under her real name.

She has collected 34 reviews of the book in a file. Dagens Nyheter wrote: “A strong account of the pain of fleeing your country”. The book has been included in several book club catalogues and will also be published as a talking book next spring.

Azar Mahloujian came to Sweden in 1982. In Iran, she had been persecuted, her friends had been jailed and she had finally chosen to flee.

When she had been living in Sweden for five years, her account of her flight was published in Vi, a highly-regarded weekly. A couple of years later another of her stories was published in the arts journal Ord och Bild. A publisher asked her to write a book.

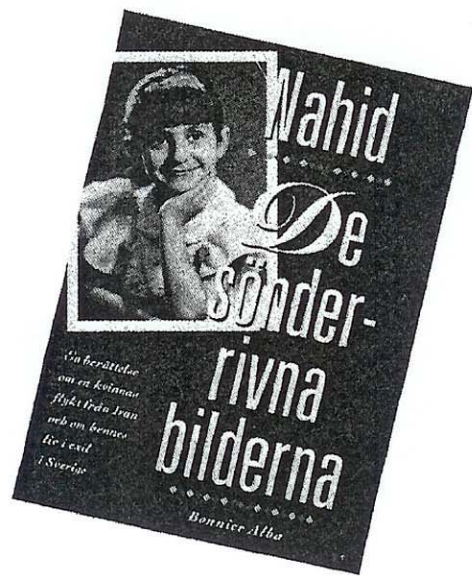
“But I got writer’s cramp,” she says. “The whole thing overawed me. I wasn’t an author and I still don’t dare call myself one. I have such great respect for authors, perhaps because they are so highly regarded in Iran.”

For four years, she mulled the idea over. Then suddenly, after a holiday trip, the words began to come.

Second-class citizens

In the book, Azar Mahloujian describes life in Iran, her flight from the country and her life of exile in Sweden.

She tells how foreigners in Teheran were given the best housing and the best jobs. Being a foreigner was in itself an advantage. Despite having the same education and experience, Iranians could not compete with them. They were second-



Not until now has the pseudonym “Nahid” chosen to reveal her real name.

class citizens in their own country.

Then she herself becomes a foreigner — in Sweden. And suddenly she is a second-class citizen all over again. “It’s called the irony of fate,” she writes.

She learns Swedish and goes out looking for work. She has good qualifications and professional experience and wants a skilled job. But she clashes with the employment office when she refuses to work as a cleaner. Her job applications result in a boxful of letters of the “Thank-you-for-applying” variety.

She begins studying at university but is surprised at the dullness of student life there. In Sweden, people have freedom of expression and freedom of opinion but they fail to use it, she concludes. There are no discussions during lessons, for example.

In the book, Azar Mahloujian is critical of various aspects of life in Sweden. No doubt many people — immigrants, refugees and native Swedes — recognize much of the criticism.

What relationship do you have to Sweden and the Swedes nowadays?

“I feel more at home now than when I wrote the book,” says Azar Mahloujian. “Time helps a lot and I now have more contact with the community. Much of what I heard tell of the Swedes in the beginning, or caught my attention, I now consider superficial. It’s said, for instance,

that Swedes don’t care about each other. But they have a different way of showing their feelings.

“There are of course days when I feel depressed, though, and wish I were home.” She still uses the word ‘home’ about Iran despite having lived here for 13 years.

Does she often yearn for home?
“Quite often,” she says. “Especially when I get letters and phone calls from Iran, and at the Iranian New Year.”

Azar Mahloujian now has a job in her own profession, as a librarian. She is also an interpreter, a journalist and a translator, as well as a member of a working group set up by the Council for Cultural Affairs.

Her Swedish is impressive, bearing in mind that she was 32 when she arrived in Sweden. She says she was lucky enough to get a good Swedish teacher.

“She treated us as individuals and not just as a group. This meant a tremendous lot to me. She has also helped me go through my manuscripts and corrected my grammatical errors. My knowledge of English and French has come in useful, too.

“Another thing is that I have no family. I’ve been able to devote my time to myself and developing my command of the language.”

New book?

We talk over the phone. She sounds like a warm person, curious about life. She laughs a lot. Her book makes you want to know more — about life in Rasht, her home town in Iran, about the student life there and so on.

Will there be any more books? A novel?
She has continued to write, but does not know what the result will be, or when. She is still intoxicated by the response touched off by her first book.

“It stole so much of my time. But I’m going to try to get myself together and have another go. I lived in Teheran for more than a decade. Lots of things happened there that are still close to me and might be good material.

“The last book took a long time to write. I’m hoping I’ll have more confidence so that the next one won’t take as long.”

EVA JÄRUP