



DANIEL PEARL AWARD

for Courage and Integrity
in Journalism

Once a Prisoner, ALWAYS A VOICE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Jason Rezaian, the Recipient of the Press Club's Daniel Pearl Award, Has Long Sought to Bring Cultures Together

BY ADAM ROSE

There's a bitter irony in the fate suffered by *Washington Post* correspondent Jason Rezaian. At the same time, there's a sense of inspiration and even triumph, the kind that makes any journalist wonder whether he or she could have survived what the reporter endured.

Rezaian, who was born and raised in Northern California, always had a love for Iran, the country of his father's birth. In 1980, when Jason Rezaian was a small child, the United States and Iran broke off diplomatic relations. They've never been restored.

Undeterred, Rezaian would become a de facto ambassador between the two countries and cultures. He learned Farsi. He drove around with a license plate holder proclaiming, "Powered by ghormeh sabzi" (a popular Iranian herb stew). He obtained dual citizenship and moved to Tehran.

And he wrote. Rezaian spent five years covering Iran from within, becoming the *Washington Post's* correspondent there. His stories ranged from nuclear negotiations to more traditional American concerns: burger joints, baseball teams and water parks.

"It's home," he told chef and CNN personality Anthony Bourdain in June 2014. "It's become home."

A few weeks later, on July 22, Rezaian was arrested. He soon found himself in one of the country's least hospitable places: Evin Prison. He was just two miles from his home.

Rezaian remained locked up for 545 days, much of it in solitary confinement. He was released this past January as part of a prisoner exchange. Tonight, he receives the Los Angeles Press Club's Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism.



Bill O'Leary/Washington Post

During the first seven months in prison, Rezaian was not even allowed to see a lawyer. Eventually, he would be sentenced on vague charges, including espionage and "propaganda against the establishment."

Rezaian's wife, Yeganeh Salehi, was also arrested, though she was freed after 72 days. A print journalist, she was working in Tehran as a correspondent for *The National*, a publication based in the United Arab Emirates. Salehi had only Iranian citizenship. Not that Rezaian's U.S. citizenship was any help—Iran refused to recognize it.

Details of what prompted his detention were never officially explained. Media speculation raised questions but provided no real answers. Was it an effort to silence his reporting? Did certain powers want to use him as a bargaining chip? Ali Rezaian, Jason's brother, recalled two pieces of evidence that were presented in relation to the espionage charge: an American



visa application for Salehi, and a form letter to Barack Obama's 2008 transition team offering support in improving U.S.-Iran relations. Neither seemed like much cause for Iran's concern.

Rezaian, however, always knew that he had reason to be wary. According to one account in the *New York Times*, he had noticed a man on a motorcycle following him for weeks before his arrest. The surveillance was so obvious, Rezaian even got a picture of the license plate.

"It's like walking a tightrope," he said during an interview before being detained. "When you fall down, it is over."

Despite the risks, Rezaian pressed on.

"While most of us counted ourselves itinerant adventurers, always with plans of going back home to the States, Jason was different," wrote fellow Iranian-American expatriate Shervin Malekzadeh in *The Atlantic*. "Jason viewed his Iranian citizenship, granted through his late father, as both a privilege and a responsibility. The ability to travel without restriction between the United States and Iran seemingly obliged him to serve both homes, to act as a bridge between these two estranged countries, constituent parts of his identity. To do this properly, to see his project through to the end, he would have to remain in Iran."

During his imprisonment, Rezaian received an outpouring of support from world leaders and celebrities. In remarks to reporters on World Press Freedom Day, Secretary of State John Kerry observed how, "Jason did not go to Iran to advance an ideology or to make a political point. He actually went there to explain to his own country what life was really like in the country of his ancestry. And he wanted to



replace misconceptions with accurate perceptions. That is all. But that is everything."

Bourdain praised Rezaian and his wife, describing them on that June day as "open-minded ambassadors of understanding."

In the *Washington Post*, Bourdain wrote, "Jason and Yeganeh helped me to look at their country more deeply and with an open heart."

After being freed in a deal that required negotiation between top-level officials in Tehran and Washington, Rezaian was joined by his wife on the flight out of Iran. The two now live in California. Rezaian has since accepted a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, where he plans to spend a year exploring the possibilities and challenges of diplomacy between the U.S. and Iran.

"I tried to make [Iran] understandable for American readership," he said in April while receiving the Hugo Shong Reporting on Asia Award. "I would be doing readers and myself a big disservice if I didn't finish the loop on that."

Far left: Secretary of State John Kerry greets Rezaian at the grand opening of the *Washington Post's* new building.

Top: Rezaian and wife Yeganeh Salehi at the White House.

Above: *Washington Post* Editor Martin Baron and Wolf Blitzer, CNN, flanking Rezaian and Salehi.

DANIEL PEARL AWARD JASON REZAIAN

He added that he still loves Iran and intends to return eventually, but not any time soon.

On June 4, Rezaian's byline appeared in the *Washington Post* for the first time in two years. He wrote after the death of boxer Muhammad

their stated ideology of upholding Islamic values and lifting up the oppressed. There's one problem: He's American."

Rezaian added that Ali "was always a hero who transcended faith, race and borders. He

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Ali, who had also called for Rezaian's release. He said that Ali's support came during some of his darkest days, and not only lifted his spirits, but even caused the prison guards to treat him better.

In typical Rezaian fashion, he seized on the opportunity to show what unites and divides his two cultures.

"As he is everywhere, Ali is revered in Iran," Rezaian wrote. "The people love him as a champion of sports, but also charity, and authorities have a deep attachment to him as representing



Bill O'Leary/Washington Post

never belonged to anyone, but he is part of everyone."

As a journalist and cultural ambassador, those words could also describe Jason Rezaian. 🇺🇸

COURAGE, INTEGRITY AND IMPACTING THE WORLD

Judea Pearl and the Award Named for His Late Son

Every year the Los Angeles Press Club, in partnership with Judea and Ruth Pearl, hands out the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. It is named for the Pearls' late son Daniel, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, who was killed by Islamic terrorists in Pakistan in 2002.

This year's recipient is Jason Rezaian, who served as the *Washington Post's* correspondent in Tehran, Iran, from 2012 to 2016. Rezaian was kidnapped and spent 545 days in Evin Prison, Iran's worst. He was released in January in a prisoner exchange.

Previous Pearl Award recipients include the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, Richard Engel, Robyn Dixon, Anna Politkovskaya, Anne Garrels, Michael Kelly and Bob Woodruff.

Judea Pearl, who is a Chancellor's Professor of Computer Science at UCLA and winner of the prestigious Turing Award, heads The Daniel Pearl Foundation. In an interview with Devra Maza last year, Pearl noted that when he and his wife present the award, they feel like they have "another family of journalists in L.A."

Journalists, Pearl believes, can have a significant impact on the world. He noted that the Daniel Pearl Award focuses on the most courageous journalists.

"Each of them can access hundreds of thousands of readers," he told Maza when talking about the prize last year honoring *Charlie Hebdo*. "This is our future, how we can reach moderate Muslims to try to have them listen less to their mullahs and imams and more to journalists. They're more effective. We respect our religious leaders here,

but we don't have the same expectations for them, while we know there are journalists who fight against corruption and are sacrificing their lives in an effort to speak the genuine truth with no strings, no pressure from politicians, religions or donors."

The work the Pearls do in honor of their son is not limited to the award. The Daniel Pearl Foundation seeks to create respect for different cultures via a series of fellowships, programs and forums. Even music is part of the effort.

"[Daniel] really loved the violin and mandolin and wherever he went, he carried these instruments with him and made contact with the local cultural scene," Pearl told Maza. "It's what enabled him to form connections in every place that he was stationed."

Pearl sought to draw a larger circle, and to find the connection between music, the satire of *Charlie Hebdo*, journalists in general and others.

"Everyone has their own mode of expression and we're trying to leverage all of these modes into one thing: To say that we are together and we will not give up our values," he told Maza.