

## La Prisonniere\*

By Malika Oufkir and Michele Fitousi

Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf

Malika Oufkir's phenomenal story is worthy of the best political thrillers - but sadly, it is no fiction. It is the account of one family's rise to power, its sudden downfall into a 20-year process of annihilation and then its incredible journey to freedom.

A well-established Moroccan family, the Oufkirs were very close to the royal court; so close in fact, that Malika, the eldest daughter, was "adopted" at the age of five by King Muhammad V to serve as companion to his daughter, Lalla Mina. This adoption, which conveyed the king's affection for Malika, was nevertheless a forced separation from the girl's family, bringing her into a life of utmost luxury and lavishness, but also into a knot of complex relations between her adoptive and her true family. Although she enjoyed a top-notch education, sternly dictated by a German governess, and was treated as family, she was secluded and deeply suffered from the separation with her mother. This, she insists, helped her gain a higher level of tolerance compared to the other members of her family, when their actual imprisonment came about.

On August 16, 1972, General Oufkir, Minister of Defense and General of the Royal Air Forces, attempted a coup on the life of King Hassan II of Morocco. That same evening, he is taken to the King's palace in Skhirat, and the official announcement comes out that General Oufkir had killed himself (regardless of the fact that his body had 5 bullets, including a deadly one in the neck). His wife and six children (the youngest hardly three years old) are immediately arrested

and imprisoned without trial, despite their having no prior knowledge of the coup d'état attempt. This episode opened the way for the subsequent years of moral, emotional and physical affliction. But also, it marked Malika forever in the sense that it was her father, whom she had come to know and adore in her last years at home, who had tried to kill her adoptive father. And her subsequent "punishment" for her father's act had been perpetrated by the king, who had always shown her boundless affection.

*I still respected the adoptive father he had once been, but now I hated the despot he had turned into the day he started persecuting us. I hated him for his hatred, I hated him for my shattered life, for my mother's sufferings, for my brothers and sisters' mutilated childhood. I hated him for the irrevocable crime he committed when he locked up, for so long and in such inhuman conditions, a woman and six children, the youngest of whom was not even three years old.*

The ensuing account of the years in prison is really the heart of the book; Malika, her two brothers, her three sisters and her mother were first held in an abandoned fort, where the detention conditions were relatively lenient, as they immediately tried to resume a simulacrum of their former lives, helped by the presence of books and clothes, and where food and air were unrestricted. But as soon as they were transferred to the remote desert prison of Bir-Jdid, the worst torments began; the family members were immediately separated from each other (the young child with his mother, the three girls together, Raouf, the eldest son

alone, and the two faithful governesses together). They spent over 10 years separated by their prison walls, without being able to meet or to see each other - doomed to their cells, left to starvation, darkness, disease and rats. Only their incredible resilience, their humor and inventiveness allowed them to survive. To the point where, when they finally saw each other, they were hardly able to recognize each other ...

Another vital rescuer was a radio, which they had managed to keep and conceal from their guards ever since the time they were arrested; its programs were in fact their sole pledge to sanity, keeping them informed about the outside world, listening to "normal" topics, people, games. At one point during a talk show, the name of "Oufkir" would pop up; for Malika, this was enough to prove that they still existed, that "they could, one day, be reborn again."

At many times however, the Oufkir's hopes were harshly crushed. One of the book's strongest moments is when the author recounts the terrible night of March 3, 1986. This date marked the 25th anniversary of the King's coronation; the family firmly believed that the King would pardon them on this occasion. Nevertheless, his failure to do so threw the family into utter despair and concerted suicide attempts.

Finally, teetering on the edge of madness and aware that they had been left to die, Malika and her siblings managed to tunnel out using but their bare hands and teaspoons.

### Endnote

\* La prisonniere won the French Award of Maisons de la Presse in 1999 and has been published in the USA in 2001 under the title Stolen Lives. It is a remarkable book of unfathomable deprivation and the power of the human will to survive.