

Fred Tcharmtchi arrived in Canada as a teenager from Iran in 1966 after spending several years in Germany. Now 36 and a prominent businessman, he owns a successful chain of auto dealerships in Ontario. (The interview was conducted in 1985*)

Q: What was your first impression on arriving in Canada?

A: My family, that is, my mother and I and three sisters arrived in London, Ontario on a weekend when everything was closed. We knew no one, had nowhere to go, no one to speak with since there were no Iranians here and we hadn't yet learned English. We felt very strange and alone and immediately wanted to go home. The immigration department sent a representative (Harry James) to meet us and help us settle in. This man became our friend, guide, teacher and family. He helped us with everything, from the smallest things that most people take for granted, like shopping for food and furniture, to taking me to school my first day and trying to find someone who could speak German to me. Since he was our only close contact, soon after our arrival while we were so desperately unhappy, we asked him to help us return to Germany. In his wisdom, he advised us to stay for several months before deciding whether to leave or not. What good advice that turned out to be.

Gradually, we became acquainted with our new environment. We bought a house, mother got a job and I began school. We started a new life in the real sense.

Q: What incidents do you remember most from that early time?

A: Some things stay in the memory. For instance, the first time we took a bus, we were so unfamiliar with everything that we offered the driver a \$100 bill. The driver smiled and asked us for change. When he realized we didn't understand, he gave us the bus tickets and he told us that the bank was where we could get change for our \$ 100 bill, then drove us there though it wasn't at a bus stop. This behavior so impressed us, I still remember it. It was the first light in our hearts, when we began to like it here.

Someone else impressed me in those early days. We met a bank manager who found out that we had some money with us which we kept at home. I will never forget, he came to our house at ten o'clock at night to open a new account for us. He said we shouldn't keep money at home since it might be dangerous. At that time money was very dear. The hotel we rented when we first arrived cost \$10 a night for the six of us.

The banker told us that Canadians like to help other people. We found this to be true. Even before we came to Canada, we were highly impressed by the behaviour of the people at the Canadian consulate in Germany. Originally we had decided to go to New York, but when we met with the consul and saw how sympathetic he was, we changed our plans. They even told us they would pay our travel expenses to come to Canada.

Q: Did you have trouble communicating at first?

A: At first, yes. The immigration representative, who helped us when we arrived, tried to find someone to speak German with us, at home or at school. When I began school (Grade 10), he found a youngster who had originally come from Germany. That person is still my friend; his family became our family friends. They helped us a great deal with everything, especially translating.

We found that, because Canadians have come from different parts of the world themselves and have had their own experiences as newcomers, they are sympathetic and helpful to others in that position. On the other hand, in our two to three years in Germany, we learned nothing from people in the community apart from what we studied in school.

The important thing we discovered is that in Canada, you are forced to stand on your own feet. You are challenged to work hard and become successful.

Q: Do you have a message for newcomers from Iran?

A: Iranians who come here must be willing to forget whatever they worked at before, and start over. They must study the situation in Canada and learn to work within it. Even those who brought wealth with them must learn how business and investment work here, otherwise they risk losing their capital. Recently an Iranian emigrant came to my office and asked me how he could establish a business like mine. I told him, "It's very easy. I can give my business to you. The hard part understands how to run it." Capital means nothing here, but knowing how to work is fundamental. Work - in this case, a thriving business - is not something that can be bought. It must be created.

Q: How did you get into the car business?

A: Even as a teenager I alternated between attending school and working in an automotive repair shop. After I finished my diploma, I took civil engineering courses in the evening. With my civil engineering degree from the University of Western Ontario, I got a job with the Ministry of Roads and Construction. But I went to university only to make my mother happy. I wanted rather to go into business. Even while attending university, I used to buy cars, repair them and then sell them for a good profit. I used to drive to university in a Cadillac. Because I was involved in buying and selling, I became familiar with dealers and also with buyers. My dealings with these people encouraged me later on to go into the car business. After I was with the ministry a year, a friend invited me to sell cars for his company. I told him I would take two months off from my job and try it out. He was unwilling to accept those terms. He said, "You've got to destroy the bridges behind you if you want to work for me. You must be 100% in the new job." I resigned from the ministry and the rest is history. Interest in the job you choose is the most powerful motivation to drive you ahead. I worked from morning to ten at night till I was the department manager. I have been in this business since 1975. My success has been such that even those with twenty years experience in the field are surprised at it. But I wake up every morning just for the love of my work. Iranians are rarely successful in partnership with non-Iranians because of cultural differences, but my partner and I are exceptions. I have been friends with John Woytkiw for seven years and have been partners with him for five of those. We are successful because we understand each other. We discuss everything, exchange ideas, then we decide.

Q: Could you describe your relationship with your employees?

A: The door of my office is never closed to anyone. There is no gap between me and my employees. Even the car washer comes to my office to talk to me. My staff dedicate their lives to my organization. They work with their hearts for me; they share in my happiness and my sadness.

Q: How did you acquire such loyalty from your employees?

A: I have 350 people working for me. They know that I regard human dignity with respect. I consider them as members of a family. They also get extra compensation apart from their salary - the key employees share some percentage of total sales. We believe in job training and education. We exercise it among our employees. I train my people for the future so they can take over management in any new branches of business I acquire. That way, I know the rest of the chain will be managed well. There is therefore the feeling that if they work like I do then they can attain the same success.

Q: How would you describe your relationship with your clients?

A: I think it is important to listen to people. It not only makes the client happy and creates trust, but sometimes you can get constructive ideas from them. I consider all people, whatever their nationality, to have the same dignity.

We regard every client not as just a customer, but as someone who will spread the word of our business and so open the market for us. It is our respectful treatment of clients that has made our business so successful. We are one of the largest volume dealerships in Southern Ontario. For example, until three years ago, Steel City in Hamilton belonged to someone else who could not make progress. But since we've bought Steel City Chrysler, we have made it one of the most successful dealerships in the area.

Q: Do you have any advice for Iranian newcomers in the social sphere?

A: Iranians are an individualistic people, but they must know that if they take part in social activities, they should exercise a social attitude. Everybody, Iranians and Canadians alike, must follow the code of society when in that society. At home, those rules are relaxed. Iranians should try to adapt themselves to their new environment while simultaneously preserving their Iranian heritage. In their private lives they belong to themselves, but when they take part in society they should have an open mind. Likewise, when in business, they should be business-minded.

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