

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Our Immigration to Canada

The story of our immigrating to Canada is still a mystery to me. Why did I leave all my relatives and in a way obliged my innocent wife to give up her side of the family for a land she knew nothing about? How could I decide to give up my country and my heritage particularly my mother, for a land far away, cold and unknown? When looking back, I cannot convince myself of the logic behind it, considering my situation at the time, my own family and particularly my mother and mother-in-law. At that time I was as successful as I wanted and nothing terrible was hurting us.

All I can remember as the major factors contributing to such a decision were the following: my own unique adventure seeking personality, looking for more challenge. My disapproval of the political system at the time, which later proved to be wrong, when the system changed. The continuation of being under surveillance by the secret police. My desire to seek a much better future for our children in a better environment. My application and its rapid acceptance by the Canadian Government to move to Canada as immigrants. And finally my very first look at the port city of Halifax in Canada in 1959, and the fairly good life I had when I lived in New York City. All those cannot be said without mentioning fate or destiny, which I believe, sometimes plays a role in our lives.

The whole story unfolded like this. One afternoon a close friend of mine who was working with me in the same office named Abolghasem Ehteramian, began telling me about opportunities in Canada. He asked me to inquire or to investigate about it. I picked up a piece of paper and typed a few lines, addressed it to the Canadian embassy in Tehran, dropped it in the mailbox and forgot about it. A month later I received a package from the Canadian Immigration head office in Vienna, Austria. After studying its contents, which looked promising, I filled out the enclosed application forms and mailed it back.

Six weeks later I received a positive reply. They had made an appointment for me to meet their immigration officer coming to Tehran the following month. At the time of the interview, the officer approved me and encouraged me to go ahead with the application process. He assured me that all would be ready for me and he even suggested that we should go directly to the city of Calgary in the province of Alberta. He even stood up and showed me the mountains in the north of Tehran and said Calgary had a good mountain chain like Tehran. However, he never mentioned that Calgary had the worst weather, temperature wise, and Tehran had the best weather in the world those days. He also failed to bring to my attention

that in Calgary or any other place in Canada we would not have anyone to associate with, but in our country Iran, we were constantly surrounded by our relatives. The officer told me that I would have no problem finding a job in an office or in a bank and asked me to proceed for medical examinations. A month later I received a phone call in my office, from the Canadian embassy in Tehran that our visas were ready and I could come to pick them up. The caller also informed me that the visa was good until the end of the year of 1965, meaning we had to reach Canada before the end of that year.

At this stage, I had reached a turning point. What should I do now? Should I go ahead or miss the opportunity? All kinds of thoughts began struggling in my head. My innocent young wife did not have much of an opinion one way or the other. Obviously she did not want to depart from her family and she did not know much about North America. I began bringing up the possibility of moving to Canada and naturally everyone in our family opposed it. Among them my parents and my wife's parents. My older brother Nasser and my famous cousin Mr. Moosavi tried very hard to change my decision.

Everyone else tried, but for some unknown reason I had become as stubborn as never before in my life. I kept telling everyone that we would go for a visit to assess the situation there and return. I had a place to live and a good job that I did not wish to give up. On the other hand I was not sure if the secret police would allow me to leave the country again. Therefore, I applied for a month of vacation from my employer, for the month of December, on the pretext of visiting Europe. With that letter in my hand I applied for my passport and waited anxiously.

I returned to the passport office after ten days and was told that my passport was not completed and that I should talk to the officer in charge. Soon after that, the officer showed me a short letter from the Iranian secret police (Savak) and asked me to phone a particular telephone number if I wanted to peruse the matter further. I became quite worried and acted as I was told to do. The person on the other side of the line asked me to visit an address in one of the main streets the next day if I wished to follow up on my case. I did not let my wife or anyone else to know that I had to go and visit those guys. I told only a close friend of mine to be aware of where I was going and the story behind it. When I reached that office located in a big building with no name on it, I knew where I was. The person at the desk told me to sit in the waiting room. About 30 minutes passed and nothing happened. I informed the receptionist that I had another appointment to attend and he telephoned somebody else and asked me if I could return the next day at 4 p.m. We agreed and I left with some relief. The next day I was there just before my appointment and was asked to take a seat in another room. Five minutes later a gentleman, well dressed and very polite, first knocked at the door, then

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walked in and greeted me with a nice smile. As he walked in the room I noticed a thick file of at least 100 pages under his arm. He introduced himself to me with the last name of Mr. Vaziri and thanked me for taking time to come and see them. He then began asking me why I had requested a passport and asked where I had in mind to travel to.

I referred to the letter my American employer had given me for a month's holiday to pay a visit to Europe with my family. He listened carefully and started looking in the file, then pulled out a large picture of me standing among a crowd of Iranian students in front of the United Nations in New York City holding a large placard saying "We Demand Free Elections in Iran." I immediately realized who took that picture and tried to remain calm and understood clearly what he had in mind and what was in the rest of the file on his desk. I wasted no time and reminded him that I was a teenager raised in lower middle income family in Tehran who happened to become very interested in politics. When I found myself among some of the real enemies of the regime in New York, I was influenced by them. However, I had changed my mind and decided to return to my country to appreciate it and to contribute to its progress. I also asked him to consider my performance during the last three years in Iran which could prove my intention.

Mr. Vaziri, who seemed to be a professional interrogator and apparently had already known what kind of person I was, assured me that there was absolutely no reason that I should be afraid of them now. He did not have to show me any other pages of the file as I had told him the bottom line and had apparently accepted my explanation. He asked me if I could write my confession down on a sheet of paper and I agreed. During the next 30 minutes, he asked about 20 questions and I wrote my answers on the paper. At the end of the meeting Mr. Vaziri seemed happy, thanked me for coming to his office and gave me his last name and a postal address. He asked me to be kind to him and in the event I received any information from any suspected group, to just drop him a note in the mail. I replied I would do my best and he told me that I could revisit the passport office and to pick up my passport anytime.

When I walked out of the building, I could hardly believe I was so lucky and so fortunate. One could expect anything from them. We all had heard brutal stories about the Savak. Now it was proven to me that either some power out there was looking after me or I just happened to be lucky so far. But I gave the most credit to my innocent wife, our baby, as well as my mother. I did pick up the passport couple of days later and went into the Canadian embassy in Tehran to receive our immigration visa. My wife and the baby were included in my passport. The Canadian Embassy officer told me that Iranian passports clearly indicated that such passports were not valid for the purpose of immigration, so he would issue a regular tourist visa in our passport. He continued to say that the immigration papers would be placed in an

envelope, given to us and we had to present it to the Canadian officers at the time of our arrival in Canada. They did as they said and there was no charge at all. I received the visa and the envelope and he wished me good luck. This was the middle of October 1965. We had six weeks to reach Canada.

Absolutely no doubt, from then on, I reached such a crisis or a dilemma as I had never experienced in my entire life. The pressures from all sides to change my mind increased. The idea of leaving our close relatives behind was digging into my conscience. The opportunity of a life experience in Canada and a better future for our children was pounding into my head. My own intuition from the unknown was that such great move would change our lives for the better. However, what about all those emotions, the begging and attachments surrounding us? I thought I had to be very selfish to turn a blind eye to my dear relatives and their wishes for us to remain with them. At the same time I thought I might not be permitted to leave the country if the secret police found out that I was immigrating to Canada rather than visiting Europe only. Therefore, I told everyone that we would go to Canada and I would keep my job and our residence as it was and would return in a maximum of six weeks.

I honestly believed that within that period of time I would have a good idea about Canada and could return to my family and job without difficulty. After I sold my car and used all my savings, we had enough to fly to Canada, stay there for a month, and to fly back if we had to. I purchased one way tickets from a travel agency in Tehran for three of us to leave Tehran on the 15 of December 1965 by Sabena Belgian Airlines to the capital of Belgium. From there to the city of Koln in West Germany to visit our friends Mr. and Mrs. Hessmer for a few days and to proceed from the Belgian capital of Brussels, to Montreal, Canada, on December 20, 1965. We decided to leave our place of residence as it was, lock the door and the key was given to my mother-in-law.

The departure date was approaching fast and we all were in great conditions of distress. The evening of the departure day from Tehran and the gatherings of many of our close relatives in my father's house to say farewell to us, was and will always be a time I will never forget. If there are five incredible occasions in my entire life, no doubt, that night was the most unforgettable of all. I might never forgive myself for showing that much selfishness and disharmony to my close relatives. Among the persons who lectured me again were my father, my mother and my brother Seyed Nasser. My famous cousin Mr. Moosavi made a speech as well.

They all had given up hope of changing my mind and were trying to persuade me to return to my family as soon as possible. When my older brother began reciting and singing

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some poetry about separation and family members moving away from each other, everyone had tears in their eyes and our mothers and sisters were crying out loud. The tape-recorded voices of that night is still with me, but I cannot listen to it without losing control. Just remembering those moments brings sorrow to my heart and tears in my eyes every time I think about it.

When the actual moment of farewell came up, the first one who jumped to kiss me was my youngest stepsister Shokooh. In that particular moment I was just about to burst and tell everyone that I was not going. But again for some unknown reason, I controlled myself. The kissing and separating from my mother was as hard as the time I was kissed by my father. He was standing in the courtyard of the house to be the last one to see me off...He hugged me and asked me not to forget about God and told me that I would not see him again, and that is exactly what happened. The atmosphere was so full of emotion and distress that I cannot recall the rest of the events. I think my other brother Morteza took us to the Tehran Airport and we boarded the plane.

To my surprise I had no trouble leaving the country and the plane took off. My wife and I and the baby Fereshteh flew away well knowing that our hearts were left in our home country while flying towards a destiny full of uncertainty in a faraway land... No doubt my intuition of the future and my vision of the life in the Western world were not corresponding correctly at that time. Even if I made the right decision that night and eventually Canada served us better, it was the prayers from all the well-wishers that followed us here.

After 39 years I am writing about that evening and assessing our general family situation in Canada, considering what happened to my country after the so-called Islamic revolution and the eight years war with Iraq. I think the factors that pushed us in this direction and the fact that we tried hard to return, but were prevented, because our passport was taken away from us, in the long run, worked to our advantage. Our great children and their gains and achievements in their lives have given us enough strength to remain calm and happy. Otherwise, I would have never forgiven myself for the selfish and unwise decision of immigrating to Canada and separating ourselves from our loved ones and our beloved country.

The plane kept flying and five hours later we landed in the capital city of Brussels. Then we boarded a small plane and reached the city of Koln in half an hour and were welcomed at the airport by our good German friends Mr. and Mrs. Hessmer. They drove us to their house in the town of Sost, about an hour's drive, and let us rest and enjoy a few days of relaxation before reaching our final destination. I cannot recall exactly what we did during the next 3 or 4 days visiting them. My head was still full of stress and my soul was full of emotion. How

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could I forget the night of farewell and the tears and cries of my loved ones? This indeed is a force that will not leave me alone until the day I depart this world and an emotion that will remain inside me and hope to pass on to my children and children of my children can take a note of that one day.

“I only speak to you in words of that which you yourselves know in thought.”

Kahlil Gibran