

My Journey as a Recently Arrived Refugee to America

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“Land of the free,” “the melting pot,” “land of opportunity.” These are some oft-used terms that describe the quintessential American experience for hopeful immigrants. Generations of newly arrived immigrants to America have dreamed it, lived it, retold it, and chronicled their contributions in the annals of history dating back to the founding of the nation. My story could be one such example. It is the story of many of us naturalized Americans who have had our hands held and pulled out from amongst the countless “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” And today as I reflect on it, I feel very fortunate to have been given the once-in-a-lifetime chance to live the American dream.

I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. The first ten years of my life were relatively unremarkable. My family hailed from what was regarded as a distinguished class. While my father was a self-made man, by the time I was born he had built a fairly successful import-export business, securing financial stability for the family. The world, as I knew it, consisted of socializing with cousins and extended family, mostly at various gatherings – some spontaneous, but mostly around holidays and special occasions. My father was frequently out of the country for business, and my mother was a schoolteacher – something she did to keep herself occupied as she didn’t have to work. As the fifth child of six, I didn’t get much attention from my parents. So the three older brothers – 5 to 10 years my senior – were role my models, and an older sister was a confidant. Enrollment at an elite school for boys run by the French ensured that we had access to good education, and a home library filled with great books of Western literature translated to Farsi was my afternoon refuge for as long as I can remember.

Beginning in 1978, the foundations of this simple world began to crack. Aided by the Soviet army, a band of communists staged a military coup, toppled the autocratic – though relatively benign – president Daoud Khan’s regime, and declared a “democratic socialist” government. Soon after, under the Leninist banner of “proletariat revolution,” they undertook a large-scale brutal Stalin-like campaign to confiscate farmlands and undo the thousand-year old feudalistic traditions in the country. The socialist revolutionary assault on the country was further exacerbated by their perverse mocking of Afghanistan’s deeply held traditions of Islamic beliefs and institutions – all done under the banner of modernizing the society. Soon, an uprising in the countryside began and rapidly gained momentum, swelling into an all-out resistance war against the regime. In response to the growing resistance, and after another round of regime change in 1979 brought on by infighting amongst the communist factions, the Soviets invaded the country in January 1980.

The war against the Soviet occupation had begun. It was then that the first of a series of personal tragedies struck my family. Early in March 1980, a day of general strike was called in the central business district in Kabul. My father needed to check on his business office and got into his car early in the evening. Accompanying him were his two boys, then 20 and 18. That was the last I saw my father – or his body. While the details were sketchy and truth hard to

know, for no investigation was done, his car had come under Soviet fire. He was instantly killed, and the younger of my two brothers was shot in the chest. The older escaped injuries, only to be taken to jail for violation of nighttime curfew. My father's body was never found, only weeks later someone pointed to a shallow grave. The younger brother's life was miraculously saved by the only female surgeon in Afghanistan who had trained in the Soviet Union and happened to be on call at the military hospital where their bodies were dumped. She recognized my father; he was her cousin.

The horrific loss of my father, who was the family patriarch, suddenly plunged our lives into chaos. What made matters worse was the inability to mourn his loss, and we feared for the safety and lives of my older brothers. Soviet soldiers were roaming the streets in Kabul and would randomly pick young men who appeared to be of conscription age and deploy them directly to the fronts to fight the resistance. Cousins and extended family who had the means began to escape the country. Those who were fortunate and could manage so did it by plane, but most fled on foot, crossing the border to Pakistan or Iran in search of safety. The world's attention was focused on Afghanistan when the US and many other western democracies boycotted the Moscow Olympics of 1980. Afghanistan was front page news and the term *mujahideen*, meaning "freedom fighters," was introduced into the English lexicon.

Tragedy struck our family again when my second oldest brother, then 19 and a medical student, died crossing the border into Pakistan. Again, we never saw his body or held a funeral. According to my oldest brother who was accompanying him, the group they were traveling with was stuffed 20-plus deep in a false compartment of a freight lorry by the people smugglers. The journey from Kabul to the nearest border town in the Northwest province of Pakistan was no more than 150 miles but would take 7 to 8 hours. It was early June, and though morning temperatures were in the 60's in high elevations around Kabul, they soared to 110-plus degrees in the afternoon in the valleys closer to the border. My brother died of asphyxiation after several people apparently collapsed on him. He was hoping to go to Germany to continue his medical studies. Instead, he was buried by kind strangers along a dirt road. I visited his grave three years later after the rest of us younger siblings and my mother had managed to flee the country. My mother had to learn the news of his death through the youngest of the three brothers, then 17, who was now the family patriarch. She never found the courage to visit his grave.

By the autumn of 1980, my oldest brother had managed to come to America under a special refugee status for Afghans fleeing the Soviet war. At 21 and without any other family members, he settled in Jacksonville, Florida, where several other Afghan families had also recently arrived. The rest of us – my mother 50, my sisters 15 and 5, my brother 17, and I, barely 12 at the time – moved to various homes around Kabul for the next 2 years. Late in 1982, one of my dad's office managers decided he had better save his family's lives by fleeing the country. We tagged along with him. Under the pretense of a wedding party, we rode straight into the heart of Afghanistan – high into the mountains not far from the location of the since-destroyed giant Buddhas. The 200-mile journey to Pakistan took us weeks – walking on foot, riding in the back of trucks and

farm equipment and sleeping in makeshift dirt structures. We were young, and although the fear of being attacked by the Soviets was the motivating force, we were also hopeful.

For 18 months in Pakistan, we waited for the US immigration process to be completed under the family reunification with my brother as the sponsor of our application for refugee resettlement in America. It seemed like an eternity to me then, but now it feels like a fortnight. It was then, at the age of 14, when I learned my first words of English. While we weren't allowed to attend local schools, my mother managed to hire a teacher to introduce me and my older sister to English in anticipation of coming to America. For three months, one hour every other day, "the master," as we called him according to tradition in the former British colonies, would patiently teach us simple English language syntax, conjugation, nouns, and verbs. "Repeat after me," he'd say, "I am sitting cross legged under a shady tree," with particular emphasis on the "correct" pronunciation of t's and d's customary to the Indian subcontinent. The rest we had to learn on our own. By the time we were getting ready to leave for America, I had read and translated into Farsi enough children's stories (Robin Hood was my favorite) and watched old Chinese movies with English subtitles on Pakistani TV that I could cobble together simple English phrases in writing. Correct pronunciation, however, had to still wait.

Landing at JFK airport was definitely the most exciting day of my life to that day. Looking out the airplane window as it approached New York, I tried unsuccessfully to locate the Statue of Liberty. I had seen photos of the Manhattan skyline and simply imagined us also living high up in a skyscraper somewhere in Jacksonville, Florida. Well, it turned out to be a quiet two-story apartment complex in a wooded area 15 miles from downtown Jacksonville with no tall structures in sight. But it had a pool, we had a car, and every morning, a big yellow bus actually drove by to pick me up and take me to school! It would only get better from there. After all, this was the America I dreamed of and now lived in!

My first day in American high school coincided with Halloween. Needless to say, a powerful bolt of cultural shock had struck this poor 16-year-old teenager. But I was focused laser sharp on my studies. How could one not be focused, be appreciative of the safety, security and freedom, and take advantage of the land of opportunity? Just as if having the safety from Communist oppression and freedom of speech weren't enough, Americans, through their generosity, handed me books, pencil, and paper, and they brought me to school, fed me lunch, and took me back home. I knew immediately then all I had to do was the right thing to succeed.

And boundless opportunities I found. Within two and a half years of arrival in the US, I was a freshman at the University of Chicago sitting amongst an elite group of the best and brightest high school graduates. Did I have the academic preparation, scholastic background, and family support of a typical Chicago student? Definitely not. But someone in the admissions office must have understood the challenges I had to overcome to get to that point. I was given a chance to prove myself. This is what we immigrants would call the quintessential Americana.

We all owe our success to many generous people we meet in our lives. I was lucky to have met the late Professor Leslie DeGroot, a renowned endocrinologist and expert in thyroid disease

soon after I started my premedical studies. Dr. DeGroot had spent a year in Afghanistan, a landlocked country where goiter is endemic, conducting research on dietary deficiency of iodine in the country. By the mid 1980's, the Soviet-Afghan war was in its peak, causing thousands of civilian casualties on a monthly basis. Dr. DeGroot had become actively engaged in spearheading medical relief efforts to provide care for select wounded civilians brought to the US under a special humanitarian assistance program. The medical staff needed an interpreter; I was able, I was available, and I was eager to get involved. Having learned of my interest in medicine, Dr. DeGroot took me to his lab to meet postdocs under his supervision. This was the beginning of a multi-year guidance, mentorship, and support on his part that culminated in my acceptance to the university's medical school. In 1994, 10 years after arriving in the States as a political refugee from Afghanistan, I had a medical degree in hand. As I entered clinical medicine, many more mentors helped me along the way, notably Dr. Stan Freeman, an outstanding clinician at Scripps in La Jolla, and Dr. Carl Grunfeld at UCSF. Beyond clinical medicine, I learned clinical investigation, writing and executing research protocols, and conducting sophisticated metabolic studies at the CRC in San Francisco. I felt I had reached a major milestone in my life as an American.

For newly arrived immigrants, the "American Dream" is about success, freedom, and being able to control your own destiny. In the summer of 2001, I accepted my first clinical research dream job at the pharmaceutical giant Bristol-Myers Squibb in New Jersey. I boarded a flight from San Francisco to Newark. As we approached the New York skyline, I instinctively looked out the window, locating the Statue of Liberty. This time I didn't have to look very hard. She was there holding her torch for me.