

Family endures great loss to come to Canada, surviving member still not safe



Nasrullah Zamani, now 21 and a privately sponsored refugee living in Surrey, recounts the story of his family's fateful journey and its aftermath

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The last memory Nasrullah Zamani could recall when he woke up in a hospital in eastern Turkey was the cold. The rain. The unforeseen dangers of the trek through the mountains of northwest Iran.

Nasrullah's journey had been a bid for a better life than he had lived — both in Iran as an illegal immigrant in fear of being caught, and in his home country of Afghanistan, where his father had been killed by Taliban militants.

Walking in step that day with the then-20 year old were his widowed mother, his two brothers and one of his three sisters. The family had dressed lightly for what their smuggler had told them would be a swift walk across the Turkish border.

Were it not for a sudden, unexpected storm, they might have made it.

From the Vancouver home of his sister Fatemeh Zamani, Nasrullah, now 21 and a privately sponsored refugee living in Surrey, recounts the story of his family's fateful journey and its aftermath. The lives of the Zamanis were uprooted when Nasrullah's father was murdered in 2016. He was a Shia mullah, and a believer in ideas antithetical to Taliban ideology, such as the inclusion of girls in schools.

After his father's death, life in Kabul for Nasrullah and his family was difficult.

“Especially in a country like Afghanistan, when you lose someone, if you don't have (money), you will lose everything. ... You cannot easily find work or jobs. And if you cannot find work and you don't have money, you can't go to school. You can't go to college. You lose great opportunities in life,” Nasrullah says.

There was also constant fear about what might happen in the near or distant future.

For many Shia people in Afghanistan, Iran is thought to be a greener pasture — a neighbourly place with a similar culture, Nasrullah explains. With that vision in mind, he, his mother, and three of his five siblings left Kabul for Tehran in the winter of 2016. One sister remained in Afghanistan with her family. The other, Fatemeh Zamani, was already in Canada, having arrived in 2007 as a government-assisted refugee.

But the Zamanis found life in Tehran as illegal immigrants an ordeal. They were treated badly and not permitted to work or study, says Nasrullah.

Nasrullah worked under the radar selling clothing, and his brothers also found jobs. But they were perpetually worried about being nabbed by what Nasrullah describes as plain-clothed soldiers.

“I was always afraid that maybe today they'd take me, or tomorrow they'd take me. If you don't have money with you in your pocket, that makes the situation worse,” he says.

One night, after they had been in Iran for a year, Nasrullah's eldest brother addressed the family.

“Here, we are not happy,” Nasrullah recalls him saying. “We cannot easily work. You and others cannot study.”

His brother said he had been in contact with a man from Urmia, near the border between Turkey and Iraq, who told him they could live a full life if they went to Turkey. The man said he could sneak them into that country via an overland route for about one million Iranian rial (C\$40) per person. He said the price was higher than the standard rate because it included food and vehicle passage for part of the trip.

Fatemeh Zamani knew she was one of the lucky ones in her family when she came to Canada in 2007 from war-torn Afghanistan, via Iran, with her husband and his family.

The smuggler told them the trip would end in a three-hour walk across the border and advised they needn't dress warmly. Nasrullah says most of his family opted for pants and light jackets. It was autumn.

The drive through mountainous terrain toward the border took several hours, says Nasrullah. Then the smuggler dropped the family off to continue their journey alone by foot.

Soon after they began walking at around 3 p.m., a storm gathered and it started to rain. After an hour or two, the wind and rain picked up. As darkness set in, the soaking-wet family had no protection from the harsh weather, and despite the promises of their smuggler, they were still many hours away from Turkey.

Fatemeh, at home in Vancouver, had been in contact with her family via WhatsApp until around the time they started walking. The family lost cellphone reception in the mountains and Fatemeh spent the night pacing and keeping an eye on weather reports.

Nasrullah says he can't recall what happened deep into the journey and he does not remember a moment when the family members split up. He can only say that he was cold and wet and at some point, he must have lost consciousness.

When Nasrullah awoke in a hospital in Hakkari, Turkey, he was in poor condition, but assumed he would rejoin his family once he recovered. But a policeman soon entered his hospital room and asked him whether he had travelled alone or with others. When Nasrullah replied that his family had been with him, the officer asked him what they had been wearing.

It was at around 4 a.m. in Vancouver, some 10 hours after she had received the last WhatsApp message from her family, when Fatemeh's phone rang. It was Nasrullah, calling from a mobile phone he borrowed from a doctor.

"When I heard his voice, I was so happy," Fatemeh recalls. But her brother could barely speak.

After Nasrullah had told the officer how his family members were dressed, he was taken to another room in the hospital. There, the policeman asked him if he recognized any of several bodies. Nasrullah recognized all four of the family members who had left Iran with him. Everyone but Nasrullah had died on the journey.

"Come to Turkey. Please come right away," Nasrullah told Fatemeh. At first, he would only tell her their mother did not survive the trip. It wasn't until later that he could bring himself to tell her their siblings had also died.

Fatemeh flew to Turkey, then on to Afghanistan with the bodies of her family members to attend their funeral. It cost Fatemeh around \$9,000 — some of it borrowed — to repatriate their bodies. Nasrullah could not leave Turkey.

Back in Canada, word started to spread about the tragedy that had befallen Fatemeh's family, and the story reached North Vancouver couple Dave and Wilna Parry in the summer of 2018.

Dave believes God's hand played a role in connecting them to Fatemeh, and said when they heard what had happened, "It wasn't as much that we felt that we could help as we had to help."

The Parry family are members of St. Clement's Anglican Church and have worked on several private sponsorships of refugees in the past.

Months later, with the help of the Parrys and donations from Christ Church Cathedral and from many individuals, Nasrullah was accepted to Canada and arrived safely in Vancouver in July 2019.

Fatemeh's trip back to Afghanistan for her family's funeral was brief and fraught with fear. Before she left, her 10-year-old son pleaded with her to be careful. "He came to me and said, 'Mommy, I know you have to go, but please be careful. Stay somewhere safe. I don't want you to go there. You might get killed.'"

Fatemeh knew there was a risk that there could be a bombing at the funeral or that something similarly horrific could happen. During the trip she saw how her lone surviving sister had been living.

"They were so scared. The kids didn't attend school anymore. Whenever they left the house they said goodbye to each other as if they wouldn't see each other anymore," Fatemeh said. Home for the family had become an underground basement.

Fatemeh's sister and her family fled Afghanistan for an undisclosed neighbouring country in October. Now, the Parrys, who have grown close to Fatemeh and Nasrullah, are part of an effort to bring her, her four children and her husband to Canada through a sponsorship submitted by the Canadian Memorial United Church.

More than \$30,000 has been raised so far through donations from members of the region's Afghan community, and from other individuals. Another \$25,000 is needed to support the family for their first year. The Canucks Family Education Centre has taken a lead role in [gathering donations](#) and the centre can be reached at jean.cfec@gmail.com.

Nasrullah was one of more than 2,215 privately sponsored Afghan refugees to come to Canada between January and November 2019, according to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. By comparison, 220 government-assisted Afghan refugees were accepted to the country during that same time period.

Nasrullah reflects on his time here. "I'm happy in Canada. Everything is good. I go to college. ... I like everything except the weather." He has nearly reached his Grade 12 equivalency in English and after that he'd like to study computer science. In his spare time he plays soccer with friends.

Among the last photos Fatemeh has of her family members who did not survive the trip is of them eating dinner together at the home of their smuggler. She has tried calling that person many times, but he only picked up once. After learning the travellers had died he expressed surprise and hung up. The call brought little closure.

Fatemeh says she hopes that if her remaining sister makes it to Canada, she will settle with her family in Vancouver, or perhaps in nearby Burnaby.

“When my family passed away, I thought everything was over,” Fatemeh says.

“I don’t want to lose any of them again.”



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