

# Iranian Baha'i Refugee Women

**A** new country, a new culture, a new language. Starting life over with memories of your loved ones left behind struggling to survive in Iran, others, dear friends, respected teachers, executed for their faith. How is it possible to face these challenges and survive successfully?

*This plight has faced many Baha'i refugees from Iran who, because of religious persecution, have had to suddenly leave lives of comfort and accomplishment. How have these people, especially the women, risen to this awesome challenge? How have they managed to maintain their family structure, self worth, and lifestyle in this new environment? What is their perception of Canada and Canadians? What do they feel are the greatest challenges and most valuable lessons in this experience?*

*In the following article Mina Sanaee, herself a Persian Baha'i refugee, presents her story.*

Writing about your own life, and about dear friends is not easy. When we get together with other immigrants we usually talk about our problems, worries, difficulties, and our challenges. But when it comes to writing about these issues, it is much more difficult — our minds go blank! What you are about to read is the the story of how I became a refugee in Canada.

Due to the persecutions all Baha'is face in Iran, my husband and I left our homeland for a neighbouring country about six years ago.

What I will write about in a few sentences was in fact a major change in our lives. Before we left Iran I was working at the United Nations office in Teheran, in addition to working as a columnist with a women's magazine. At that time my life was so

secure that the thought of change never occurred to me and every moment of my life was so tightly scheduled that I had hardly a moment to stop and think about what was happening around me. After the Islamic revolution in Iran, I lost both jobs and within a month I was arrested and put in jail for two weeks because of my belief in the Baha'i Faith. Following this, all our belongings were confiscated.

Losing everything overnight was a major adjustment for me. I had always planned ahead for the next three or four years. How could I accept that my world had collapsed? Before that time I considered even the simplest change in my routine to be a disaster.

Until recently a number of Persian Baha'is left Iran through the border since they could not leave the country through official channels. (The Iranian government requires that a person's religion be stated on their passport. Passports with the word "Baha'i" were not valid.) Some crossed the border to a neighbouring country by car, some on camels, and some, like us, on foot. Leaving the last village in Iran, we had to hide in the mountains all day long, and start our trip in the desert as soon as the sun set, so that we would not be seen by the patrols of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

Maybe if our guide hadn't lost his way, or even better, if there hadn't been a hole in the water container we were carrying, that trip wouldn't have seemed so long and impossible to us. Finally, after three days and three long nights stranded in the desert we reached the first village in the country of our destination. I was totally dehydrated and the only thing I thought about was a drink of water. I was so glad to hear the guide talking about a nearby cafe. You could perhaps imagine my disappointment when I

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found out that the cafe he kept talking about was a hole in the mountains, and the drinking water he promised us was from a pond where they saved the water from the previous rainy season, which various creatures now used as their home! But, believe me, a glass of that water was the most delicious I had ever had in my life.

The only person who was left for me was my husband, as we had left our family behind. He thought of me as a mature, grown person and it was up to me to prove it to him. Suddenly I, who all my life had been pampered by my immediate family, found myself confronting endless problems which had to be solved. I had to make important decisions, something I had never been faced with before. No one could imagine what I went through during that period. It was not an easy time;

adjusting myself to it was not simple at all. Even now, after so many years, I am still exploring the weak points of my personality and trying to improve and adapt myself to life in North America.

Changes in life have never been easy for me. But during those years our life was filled with so many major changes and tests that there was no time for me to panic. However, I don't think I am unique in this regard. I think that when the changes and tests come we all rise to the challenge. Maybe the greatest lesson I have learned over these years is how to cope with problems and face changes.

About 2,500 Persian Baha'is have come to Canada as refugees under the sponsorship of the Baha'i Community of Canada since 1979. Persian Baha'is also went to other countries and were also sponsored

by relatives. Making new friends has never been an easy job for me and I always thought I just wasn't lucky enough to meet the right people. One of my major challenges in Canada was finding new friends. I learned from painful experience that all these years I had been too selfish to admit that the fault was with me. Now I can see that all relationships are based on give and take. But finding out what the problem is doesn't always mean that you have found a solution to it. I should admit that I am still working on this, and certainly my husband is a great help to me. But I am now more sociable, more understanding of other people's circumstances, and can more easily offer help when it's needed. These efforts have enabled me to make a few wonderful friends who I love as members of my own family.

**FLAVIA COSMA**  
**Translated by Don Wilson**

**Glory**

My glory is that I am alive,  
That I contrive to camouflage my face  
And closing my eyes to counterfeit death.

My glory is that I am not hanged  
In the market-place  
In the midst of the barrels and carrots.  
That I sold out my courage for fright  
And my fright for nothing.  
That I cannot speak  
And that I think only at night

on tiptoe.

My glory is that I exist without the sun,  
Wanted, watched, haunted,  
Held in contempt and contemptuous.  
All would rip out a fragment from my cursed body,  
And scatter me before I managed to spit in their faces.  
Because we are similar, mortals,  
We have to hate one another for not being the same.  
Everybody has a father, a mother,  
But I have no kindred on earth.

My glory is that I still am  
And that if they judge me among them,  
No one else could take my defense.

**Migration**

They have been in ghastly dread  
And fled away long years with no stopping,  
In a hurry setting down unburied the dead  
And throwing life to the following ground.

I live on here in no one's homeland,  
In this house hundreds of years old  
Which does not wish any more to grow;  
Gigantic, acacia flowers hide its forehead gnawed by time  
And the mouth, a window.  
Outlandish shadows, ancient fossils  
Timidly penetrate the garden,  
The reek of rotting fruits dances tall,  
Silence too full drops down.

I am drunk with wanting people, a word.

In the darkness toward daylight  
The throat of ghosts is torn by hysterical cats heard  
Screaming.

*(From I Want to Laugh and to Sleep on the Water: Forty-Seven Poems)*