

Interview with Mohammad Ishaq Paiman

Interviewer: Fatima Framarz

Question: Welcome, Mr. Paiman. I'm very glad to meet you. To start, should we use your full name, or would you prefer another name to be used?

Answer: Thank you, and in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. My name is Muhammad Ishaq, and my last is Paiman. I was born in 1336 according to the Afghanistan's calendar, which corresponds to 1957, into a religious middle-class family of economic standing. Unfortunately, I lost my father when I was one year old, and my mother when I was three. Until about the age of fourteen or fifteen, my life was in the care of my paternal grandfather.

Question: After your father died, your mother was still alive. What else do you remember about your family's history? For example, did you have a paternal grandmother as you had paternal grandfather? What about your uncles?

Answer: Let me tell you this: my paternal grandfather had six sons. Four of them were married, and two were still unmarried. Later, we learned from them how the family had been affected by various events. There was a disease called tuberculosis, which people at that time called "sil." About three-quarters of our family was lost to that illness. At that time there were no doctors, no treatment, no medicine, and no real way to help people. My father and mother both died from tuberculosis, along with those who had the disease. Four of my uncles also died with their families. Only six children of my grandfather's family remained: three daughters and three sons. Later, two sons and two daughters also died from tuberculosis. In the end, only I remained, along with one sister and one cousin of mine. From that large family, only three of us were left.

Question: Since your father and mother died very early and you lived with your paternal grandfather and grandmother, was there any story, tradition, or custom passed down from the older generation to your generation?

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Answer: In all societies and among all peoples, traditions pass from one generation to the next. The same happened with us naturally. Traditions that existed among the people, especially ceremonies such as Eid, New Year, funerals, and burials, were passed down from earlier generations to us. The way our elders celebrated Eid, celebrated Nowruz, and observed historical days was also passed on to us, and these traditions are still alive. We continue to observe the same customs in our own families.

Question: What kind of work did your grandparents do to provide their family?

Answer: They were landowners. We had a great deal of land, and my uncles worked on the land as well. Later my paternal grandfather also hired tenant farmers, and at one point we had three farmers working on our land. When the harvest was collected, the tenant farmer would take one-third as his share, and the rest would go to the landowner. That was the main source of income for our family: agriculture and livestock. We also had livestock, including about one hundred sheep, twenty cows, and three horses. We were especially interested in horses because at that time horses were used in two ways: as transportation for travel from one place to another, and for recreation. There was also a recreational activity called horse racing. After the harvest was gathered in late Mizan (September/October), people from very distant villages would gather in one place, bring excellent horses, and decide which horses would race. The participants would place bets on the horses. For example, someone would say, "I bet a certain amount on the horse Qarah," and another would say, "I bet on the horse Surkhu." When the race started, the horse that reached the designated point first was the winner, and then people collected their winnings from one another. My paternal grandfather was very fond of having an excellent racing horse because he was a landowner and had plenty of fodder and barley, so he could raise good horses. Therefore, horse breeding was one of the traditions left from earlier generations in our family. I myself had a horse until I came to Kabul to enter university. When I went from home to school, I used a horse.

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Question: How different is horse racing from Buzkashi, which is more common in the north? Is Buzkashi also held using racing horses? And after winning or losing the bets, did the losers readily pay the winners?

Answer: The difference between Buzkashi and horse racing is that in Buzkashi, a goat is thrown into the middle and about twenty to thirty horses rush toward it, and whoever picks it up is chased by the others. In Buzkashi there is a circle called the *halal circle*, and if someone can take the goat from the middle of the field three times and throw it into that circle, that person is the winner and receives something according to custom. But in horse racing, two or three horses start running and cover a distance, for example three kilometers, and whichever horse and rider reaches the designated point first wins.

Question: Did the horses also have riders?

Answer: Yes, there were three horses and three riders, and all three riders tried to get their horses to the destination as quickly as possible.

Question: Did your father and mother ever tell you how they met, how they got married, and whether the marriage was arranged within the family or not?

Answer: To be honest, I do not remember anything from my father and mother, because I lost my father when I was one year old and my mother when I was three. Later, when I grew up, my uncles (maternal uncles) told me that my paternal grandfather had gone to their house to ask for my mother's hand in marriage, and then, following custom and tradition, they married.

Question: Were your parents related before marriage, or were they strangers?

Answer: They were strangers.

Question: If you are comfortable with it, it would be very helpful for us to hear the names of other family members so we can draw a family tree.

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Answer: During my paternal grandfather's lifetime, my sister married my cousin. When my paternal grandfather died, I was still a student, while my cousin was working on the land. I was in 11th grade when they decided to migrate to Iran. They have lived in Iran ever since. My cousin has since died, but my sister is still there with her three sons and two daughters.

Question: What do you remember about your life in Afghanistan, from childhood until the time you migrated to Canada? Please begin with your childhood and schooling, and share any memories you have.

Answer: Let me share my memories of school, because they are interesting. In 1343 according to Afghanistan's calendar, or 1964, the government established a school in our area for the first time. The headmaster used to go from village to village to recruit students. In our region, five villages were located close together. Our valley was called Gandaab, and our own village was called Rashak. These five neighboring villages were collectively known as Miyana Malik. This area is located in Punjab district of Bamiyan province. When the headmaster came to our village, he gathered the elders and told them that at least one student from the five villages should be sent to school. He asked the village elders to consult among themselves and give him one name. After discussion, the elders told my paternal grandfather that because I had no father or mother, he should let me go to school. They said they needed to free their own children from the headmaster's selection, since one child had herding duties, another farming duties, and another might have to work as a laborer. In the end, the people convinced my grandfather to give my name — Muhammad Ishaq, son of Muhammad Musa, from the village of Rashak in Gandaab — to the headmaster for admission to school.

Question: Did this newly established school have primary, middle, and high school all together?

Answer: No, at first it only had primary school, and later it was upgraded to middle school. In fact, before the school was upgraded, I had already graduated from 6th grade. At that time, the government had created a dormitory in Punjab district so that students with higher marks could study in a boarding-school setting and graduate through grade 12. So I went to the provincial

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center in Bamiyan to take the exam, passed, and was admitted to the dormitory to study in a boarding school. At that time, Zahir Shah was ruling Afghanistan. I was just in 9th grade when the coup happened, Zahir Shah was overthrown, and Daoud Khan came to power instead.

Question: What did the historical background look like in your area?

Answer: I should tell you this historically: before Zahir Shah came to power and up until then, there had been deep oppression and ethnic discrimination against the Hazaras throughout Hazarajat. For example, the area was known as Dāy Zangi, and Dāy Zangi had a large autonomous government with its center in Punjab district of Bamiyan province. But when Zahir Shah came to power, he decided to divide the Hazaras up. So the unified Hazara administration was dismantled: part of Hazarajat was attached to Ghazni, some to Maidan Wardak, some to Baghlan, and another part remained with Bamiyan, while the administrative center was moved to what is now central Bamiyan. This discrimination also affected Hazaras' social life. The kuchis were given control over Hazara areas, and the kuchis with their sheep and camels considered all land above the irrigation stream as their own. During Zahir Shah's time, the kuchis did not oppress the local people too much. They grazed their animals on the upland pastures above the irrigation water and then left. But when Daoud Khan came to power, the governor of Bamiyan ordered the kuchis to eat even the rain-fed fields. After that, the kuchis' animals also ate Hazara rain-fed farmland. At that time I was in 10th grade, and our feelings were very intense: if they ate the grazing land, that was one thing, but grazing the rain-fed fields was unbearable. A number of young men gathered and decided to go to the district center to speak with the district governor and tell him either to stop the kuchis or we would take action ourselves. The governor ignored us and said the rain-fed land was the kuchis' right and they could do whatever they wanted with their own property. The governor and the kuchis were all Pashtuns. Even the lower-level employees in Bamiyan province and district offices, in this Hazara-majority area, were all Pashtuns. Hazaras did not have educated people who could become government employees. More than half of the teachers who taught us came from outside Bamiyan province, mostly Pashtun or Tajik. So the Hazaras were educationally behind.

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Question: What happened after you heard the district governor's refusal?

Answer: After hearing the governor's answer, we decided to beat the kuchi *maliks* — there were three of them. One was named Malik Naim Kuchi, who later became a prominent Taliban commander and settled in the Akhzaraat area. The second was Malik Orang, and the third was Malik Towl Marjan, who lived in Tagab Berg, in Punjab district of Bamiyan. We decided to wait until they came to the district center. Two days later we heard that Malik Naim had come to the district center, and we waited for him to come out so we could beat him in the bazaar. In the late afternoon someone reported that Malik Naim was in the market. All the Hazara boys in the dormitory ran toward the bazaar and found Malik Naim. We beat him severely, broke his car, and kept beating him until the police arrived and the district authorities found out. The next day a provincial delegation came to identify those who had instigated the incident. I and seven others were identified as the main instigators, and all of us were taken to the district center and imprisoned. There they began investigating and questioning us. We all clearly wrote that since the district governor had encouraged the kuchis to graze the Hazara rain-fed fields, we had no other option. I can still identify the names of the seven others who planned with me to beat the kuchi *maliks*: Yaqub Rezaei, Nowruz from Zarin Yakawlang, Hashmat from Yakawlang, Sakhidad from Punjab, Shir Hasan from Wars, and Hussein Bakhsh from Sangriz. When they imprisoned us, they also ordered that we be expelled from school. I, who had neither father nor mother and no proper future, wandered for a whole year. In fact, all seven of us were barred from school for one year. Of the seven, three of us were able to enroll in another school the following year. I personally went to Deh-Sorkh High School in Yakawlang. No one dared give us approval to enroll because we had been branded as rebels, troublemakers, and agitators. The principal of Deh-Sorkh High School was a very sympathetic man named Mohammad Reza. When I went to ask him for approval, he said he would give it only on one condition: that once I went to school, I would not disrupt it. I promised him I would not cause trouble and would only go to study properly. After taking that approval from the school to the education office in the Bamiyan center, I was able to complete grades 11 and 12 at Deh-Sorkh High School. During grades 11 and 12 I had many difficulties, and one of the biggest problems was that for up to three months,

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because I had no acquaintance in the area, no one would give me a place to stay. Every day I had to walk from the district center of Yakawlang, called Naiak, to Deh-Sorkh High School, which was a three-hour walk each way. At night I had to work in a labor hotel to survive. My job was carrying water for the hotel, and in return I was given food and a place to rest. Once I became familiar with the area, I found a room for myself and lived there until I graduated. Life had many such events. After graduating from school, I passed the university entrance exam in 1356 and entered the Journalism Faculty of Kabul University, graduating in 1359.

Question: While you were living in Bamiyan, how did you interact with other Hazara families and communities? Which gatherings did you celebrate together with others?

Answer: My paternal grandfather was a very senior, well-known, and influential cleric in the area. So much so that all the disputes among people eventually came to my grandfather to be settled. Even when people took their disputes to the district center, the district governor would refer them back to my grandfather. Whatever my grandfather decided was acceptable to both sides in the dispute. Because of that, my grandfather had very wide relations with many people in the five neighboring villages. For example, on Eid mornings, people from all around would gather and come to greet my grandfather and offer Eid congratulations. After that, they would go with my grandfather to visit people who were in mourning. Likewise, when Muharram began, everyone would come to consult him on how to organize the ceremonies. They also came to seek his advice for Nowruz celebrations. Based on this, our family's relations across the whole region — including the three valleys called Gudar, Gandaab, and Akhzarat — were extensive. In the five nearby villages, all relations were close and shared. The five villages had one *mulla* together, and in winter that *mulla* taught the children. Everyone together provided flour, oil, and firewood so the *mulla* could spend the winter in the village. They also shared in funerals, processions, and burials, and later these shared practices expanded to other villages as well. In other words, if there was a memorial gathering, everyone would hold the condolence ceremony in one mosque.

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Question: During your childhood, which of the holidays — Nowruz, Eid al-Fitr, or Eid al-Adha — was celebrated with more excitement? Which one created more fun for children?

Answer: Honestly, all ceremonies and holidays were celebrated in a similar way. For children, Nowruz was more entertaining because there was a game called *Kampirak*. Someone would turn into a *baba* — an old man — carrying a stick and a begging bowl, and children would accompany this *Kampiark* as they went from house to house collecting gifts. When they entered each house, the family members were expected to give them something. *Kampirak* and the children would go around all five villages in one day, and along the way one would sing, one would tell stories, and another would create some other kind of amusement. That is why Nowruz was very enjoyable for children.

For me, none of the holidays had the same appeal as for other children, because I had no father to buy me new clothes or encourage me to go enjoy myself with the other children. I also had no mother or brother, and that made me feel sad.

Question: In your family, how was Eid al-Fitr celebrated, for example? After a month of fasting, what did you do?

Answer: My paternal grandfather had two main ways of marking Ramadan. One was the nights of Qadr — the 19th, 21st, and 23rd nights of Ramadan, which are commemorated because of the revelation of the Quran and the martyrdom of Ali, especially among Shiites. On each of those three nights, he would sacrifice one sheep and feed the people. First there was iftar, then the main meal, and after the meal the night-of-Qadr ritual took place, including prayer, supplication, and devotional worship. All of this took place inside our house. As the night came to an end, people were also given *sahari*, (an early breakfast for those who fast the whole day) and after the morning prayer everyone returned home. The other was the Eid ceremony. To mark Eid, people came beforehand and asked how they should celebrate it. My paternal grandfather always invited people to his house on the first day of Eid, and afterward they would go visit those in mourning, then visit the elderly and the sick. For Eid days he would also sacrifice a sheep so that people

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could come after the Eid prayer for the lunch. People would also consult each other about bringing a gift to the house of the *akhund* — my paternal grandfather. They would bring *bashorag* — dried local bread fried in oil — or a kind of candy known as *qand-e kheshti*.

Question: Where was the Eid prayer performed?

Answer: The Eid prayer was performed early in the morning by the people of the five villages together in the mosque.

Question: Was preparing the lunch for the whole village difficult for the women of the house?

Answer: No, we had good facilities. For example, we had three types of cooking pots: one for preparing food for the family members, another for when we had guests and needed to cook more than the family needed, and a third very large one for public gatherings. The usual food for large gatherings was *shorba*, made with sheep meat. Preparing dried bread was also not very difficult. We had a large Tanoor (oven) that could bake twenty breads at a time, and with three ovens we could make sixty to seventy breads, which was enough for the guests.

Question: Were these Eid celebrations mixed, or were men and women separate? Or was the gathering only for men?

Answer: Women did not go to the Eid prayer, and they did not go with the men to visit people's houses either. They had their own separate group and made their own visits.

Question: What stories, songs, proverbs, or advice do you remember from childhood and from your paternal grandfather and grandmother? What was your grandfather's reaction when you were expelled from school?

Answer: When I was expelled from school, my paternal grandfather had already died, and my uncles were my guardians. One piece of advice I remember from my grandfather was that he used to say I should not stretch my legs beyond my grandfather's rug when I went anywhere — meaning that when I sat in a gathering, I should first listen to what others were saying, speak

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less, and not say anything that would disturb the gathering. He also had a verse about life: “One should cry for the person whose income is nineteen and whose expenses are twenty.” He meant that if you earn nineteen rupees and spend twenty, people will naturally grieve for your condition, because you will always be poor and in need of others. He also said: “Remember never to be dishonest, because grass is from rain, and man is from honesty.” He explained that if rain does not come, plants do not grow; and if a person has no honesty, he will never see goodness or happiness. We can now see Afghanistan: there is division, and everyone can see the fate of the people.

Question: The foods you named were for gatherings, but naturally meat was not always available. What was your regular daily food?

Answer: One of the common foods was *qoruti*: dried bread topped with thick heated yogurt, with hot oil poured on top. *Piyawa kachaloo* was another common food. *Piyawa tokhm-e morgh* — potato with egg — was also common. *Halwa-ye sorkh* was a treat, made only rarely for special cravings. *Deldah* and *kachi* were also common foods. All the foods I mentioned were for the evening meal, because during the day the children and other family members were all out working. For lunch, each person ate whatever they could find, and most often it was dry bread with tea, yogurt, or buttermilk, after which everyone went back to work. But any good food that was prepared was eaten at night, when the whole family was gathered.

Question: You mentioned dry bread with tea, but was sugar common?

Answer: No, there was no sugar. In our family, only my paternal grandfather added sugar to his tea, but no one else in the family was allowed it.

Question: Where did sugar and other sweets come from? Was there a market in the village, or did they have to come from far away?

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Answer: Near our village there was another village called *Dahan-e- Golar*, located along the Kabul-Ghor-Herat road. In that village there was one shop that brought in goods from elsewhere, and people bought supplies there.

Question: At what point did you personally realize that you were Hazara, and that you lived in a society that was not only Hazara, but also included other ethnic groups such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Qizilbash, Bayat, Nuristanis, and others? At what point did you realize that the kuchis were ethnically Pashtun? If another Hazara had damaged your crops, would that have upset you as much as when the kuchis damaged them, or did the ethnic identity of the destroyer matter in a different way?

Answer: In the village where I was born, generations of families had been born there, grown up there, died there, and been buried there. For example, when I grew older and went to the cemetery, I was able to trace my family through seven generations. Starting from the grave of my father Musa Khan, I found Karbala'i Akhund, my paternal grandfather, then Allah Dad, my grandfather's father, and so on, seven generations back. In the area where we lived, there were no other ethnic groups besides the Sayyids. Sometimes a migrant from Behsud or Ghazni would come and live there; for example, there was someone known as Khalifa Ramadan Ghazni-Chi, who was a tailor. He had a donkey on which he loaded his sewing machine, and every day he would go from village to village sewing clothes for people. But he was Hazara, and the people of the area made no distinction and respected him. The story of the kuchis was different: they were oppressive. When they came, they ate the crops, ate the grass, beat people up, and no one was there to ask why. And it was not only the kuchis. Two groups of Pashtuns came to our areas: one was the kuchis, with their flocks of sheep, goats, camels, and dogs, and the other was the traveling merchants known as *Afghan-e bazari* — Pashtuns. These merchants came from Peshawar on camels and sold goods throughout Hazara areas. They were so oppressive that if their goods were left unsold, they would force other kinds of payment out of the Hazaras.

We had a roof opening in our village called a *mori*. The market Pashtuns would place their goods on the roof near the *mori* and tell the house owner that they had left the goods there and would

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come next year to collect payment. The householder was forced to accept the goods and then prepare the money before the merchants returned the following year.

Question: Where did this power of the market Pashtuns come from?

Answer: From the government. The government of course forced people to pay the price of whatever goods the merchants had left on their roofs. If these market Pashtuns complained to the government that they had left a certain item on the roof of a Hazara house last year and had not yet been paid, the government would pressure the Hazaras by whatever means possible to pay them.

Question: Were the kuchis who came to your area ethnically only Pashtun, or did they belong to other ethnic groups too? At what age did you realize that you were Hazara and that the Pashtun kuchis were not Hazara?

Answer: Well, that itself is a story. From birth, a Hazara child was told that if he cried, they would say, “Be quiet, because *Awghu* is coming” — meaning the Afghan, or in today’s usage, the Pashtun. This fear existed in every Hazara household. Personally, when I learned my own name, I also understood that there was a people in Afghanistan called *Awghu* who would come and do those things in our area. When I grew up, I saw with my own eyes who the *Awghan* were, what their characteristics were, and how they treated us.

In the village where I grew up, the people shared the same body type, the same accent, the same expressions, and the same customs and traditions, so that itself told me we were Hazara. Our physical appearance was different from the Pashtuns, different from the Tajiks, and even different from the Sayyids who lived among us in the region. The Sayyids also had larger eyes, a longer and more prominent nose, and taller stature.

Question: What was the relationship between the Hazaras in your region and the Sayyids?

Answer: It was very good. The Sayyids considered themselves an exception in religious terms. Even though in Bamiyan the majority of people were Shiite, and the Sayyids were also Shiite,

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they considered themselves superior to the Hazaras. For example, when greeting them, you had to kiss their hand, and when in need, you had to ask the Sayyids for help. That help was also religious in nature. If a Hazara child became ill, people would say to take the child to a Sayyid so he could recite prayers over him. There was even a Sayyid named Sayyid Shah Kazim who exploited people by virtue of being a Sayyid. If you brought a child to him for prayer, he would spit into the child's mouth as if to cure him, and no one would say anything because they believed the child would be healed. In this way, the Sayyids gained privileges from the Hazaras. The Sayyids said a Hazara had no right to marry a Sayyid daughter, but they themselves married Hazara girls. The first person who broke this taboo was a *mulla* named Sheikh Nataq, who married a Sayyid daughter. Believe me, throughout Hazarajat the Sayyids told one another that Nataq must either be killed or his wife must be taken away from him. But Sheikh Nataq was a stubborn man who said that even if he were killed, he would not allow anyone to take his wife away.

Question: Did the woman marry Sheikh Nataq with her family's consent?

Answer: Yes, both families agreed to the marriage, but the other Sayyids objected and even took the matter to the government. The dispute lasted six months, but neither the government could force the wife to divorce Sheikh Nataq, nor could the Sayyids make her flee. Both families remained neutral, and the other Sayyids were the ones who fought with Sheikh Nataq. Because the girl's family had consented to the marriage, the government could not really do anything.

Question: Although there were no other ethnic groups besides Sayyids in your neighborhood, what were Hazara relations with the kuchis like before things got worse under Daoud Khan? Was there friendly interaction?

Answer: No, there was not much interaction, because the kuchis were not settled in the area. With the Pashtun traders, the interaction was only commercial, because Hazaras needed goods such as cloth from them and bought fabric from them. These fabrics were for men and women. These Pashtun traders wanted only cash for their goods and would not accept goods in exchange

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from the local population. Sometimes, if you needed something and did not have cash, they would let you take it on credit and return the next year to collect payment.

Question: At the broader level, how did you interact with other Hazara communities?

Answer: Our interaction with other valleys was limited to funerals, burials, and memorial gatherings. If someone died, people would also go from the other valleys to attend the funeral and burial. If someone had a wedding that was celebrated on a large scale, the people from the other valleys would also be invited.

Question: Have you or your family ever faced problems or hardship simply because you were Hazara? When you took part in beating Malik Naim of the kuchis, if you had not been Hazara, how likely would it have been that you would be expelled from school for a year? What challenges did being Hazara bring in Kabul University?

Answer: To be honest and realistic, I have faced many challenges because I was Hazara. In 1356, when I entered the university, there were four people living together in each dorm room. When they assigned us to the rooms, they placed me, a Hazara, with one Tajik and two Pashtuns. Believe me, for three months we did not speak to each other in the room. We were afraid of one another. Gradually we got to know each other and lived together through the four years of university.

When I graduated from university, I was called up for military service. At that time, anyone over the age of 20 had to serve two years in the army. In 1359 I graduated and entered military service. The law at the time said that if someone had a bachelor's degree, he would do only six months of military service. Those with a 14-pass diploma had to serve one year, and those with 12-pass or no education had to serve two years. When I went to complete those six months of service, the government decided that people with a 12th-grade education, 14-pass, or bachelor's degree should be directly made officers. They forcibly made me an officer, and that brought me into political life and into the structure of the state. That was when I began to see strange things:

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Hazara boys from the Military University and Military School would be recruited into units right from the start, but they would not rise in rank.

For example, someone would be a block commander and remain a block commander for four, five, or six years without being promoted to company commander. Or if someone was a company commander, he would not be promoted to battalion commander. Or if someone was a battalion commander, he would not become chief of staff or regimental commander. I experienced this myself. I spent five years in the 17th Division in Herat. Then I transferred myself to an air unit. There I carried out my duties in the best possible way, but I was never given the kind of rank that would count as a reward. My rank was *dagarman*, and I was deputy of the political forces in Bagram. When Shah Nawaz Tanai, the defense minister at the time, launched a coup against Najib, many officers were transferred after the coup failed. Someone named Tariq Shah came from the General Directorate of Political Affairs at the Ministry of Defense, with the rank of second *breidman*, from a lower post than mine. He remained under me there for three years, but later in the republic he became minister of defense, while I was never promoted beyond the rank and post of *dgarwali*.

Question: How did promotion work? Did you have to apply, or how did it happen?

Answer: Promotion and advancement were controlled by higher authorities. For example, the Ministry of Defense could promote me, send me into reserve, or force me into retirement. The fact that retirement was also in the hands of the higher authorities is why we were not promoted, because those higher authorities were all Pashtuns. On that basis, there was no real opportunity for Hazara advancement. Unless you had a very strong patron among Pashtuns or Tajiks who would lobby for you, there was no chance of promotion.

Question: How likely was it that a Pashtun or Tajik would lobby for a Hazara's promotion?

Answer: The chance was very low. For example, while I was serving, the garrison commander was Pashtun, the political officer was Pashtun, and the chief of staff was Tajik. In that situation, we had to serve them and flatter them so much just to attract their attention and get promoted.

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Question: How did Tajiks treat Hazaras?

Answer: Tajiks did not have the same authoritarian power to oppress others, but they also lacked a spirit of cooperation. Think about it: when Najib's government fell, the Bagram Air Force came under Ahmad Shah Massoud's control, and when Massoud arrived, the first person he sent into reserve was me. He gave me a letter saying to go into reserve, because they no longer needed me.

Question: What did people in reserve do?

Answer: In reserve we did not receive a salary, so we had to go home and create some kind of livelihood for ourselves. Reserve status was basically a way of making people idle until they were needed again.

Question: I'm interested to know, during university as a Hazara boy, what challenges did you face? Especially since there were very few Hazara students at Kabul University at the time. How did the professors treat Hazaras?

Answer: We had our own strange experiences there too. We had a professor named Dr. Mirazai. He was so prejudiced that he would not even speak one sentence in Persian. He taught in Pashto, wrote exam questions in Pashto, and wanted answers in Pashto. For his classes, I had two notebooks. When he lectured, I took notes in Pashto, then later translated the Pashto into Persian in the dormitory so I could study. On exam day, I first read the questions, wrote the answers in Persian, and then wrote the Pashto translation on the exam paper.

Of course, there were also kind and decent professors. There was a female professor named Gohari.

Question: During the republic period, when we were at university, around 80 to 90 percent of the students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Kabul University were Hazaras. When one ethnic group makes up such a high percentage of a class, naturally there are many talented students among them. In the first years, Hazara students usually got better marks and higher

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rankings, but later they were identified and the professors would make sure that each student failed one or two subjects somehow. The point was that if you failed even one subject during your studies, the university professor would not later allow you to continue easily. Did this kind of thing exist in your time? Was there deliberate failure of Hazara students?

Answer: I personally did not encounter that.

Question: After going directly from university into the army, your service in the system became your permanent job. What exactly did you do?

Answer: I handled press and media duties. There were newspapers called *Haqiqat-e Sarbaz*, *Haqiqat-e Enqelab-e Sabz*, and another one whose name I no longer remember. What I did was write articles for those newspapers, and those articles were published there. My work was a civilian responsibility in a civilian position, but carried out inside the military system. During the republic, I was also the general director in the Ministry of Defense, which was a civilian post and job.

Question: What made you decide to leave Afghanistan?

Answer: I had already retired in 2018, but my daughter Rahima worked as an employee with a Canadian organization. When the republic collapsed, the Canadian government told that organization to send a list of the people who had worked with it so they could be transferred to Canada. Through my daughter's work with that organization, we were transferred to Canada.

Question: What do you remember about the trip to Canada?

Answer: Honestly, the trip was very difficult at first. On the first day we went to the airport, there was so much crowding that we could not get in. At 12 noon my daughter received an email telling us to go to the airport, and we had four hours. When we reached the airport at 4 p.m. and still could not get inside because of the crowd, we waited until night and then returned home. We spent the night at home, but at 4 in the morning we went again. From 4:30 a.m. until 9:00 a.m. it took us just to get inside. It was extremely hard. After entering through the gate, there was a very

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large ditch in front of us. We jumped into the ditch and reached the wall where a Canadian soldier was standing. We showed him the email we had. The soldier checked the email and matched it with the one he had. After checking our passports, he pulled us out of the ditch and allowed us into the airport and then to the Canadian camp.

Question: How did you get from home to the airport? What did it feel like to leave the home you had worked for so many years to build?

Answer: Honestly, it was both exciting and frightening. Our fear of the Taliban was very strong. I have three daughters, and they were the main reason for my fear and worry. I knew the Taliban and understood what they would do if they got hold of people. I should say something here: in the past, Pashtuns gave one a sense of security regarding honor and women; that is, if an *awghan* attacked an enemy, he would not commit sexual violence. But the Taliban are so vile that they had no concept of honor. My main worry was that if my daughters remained there and fell into the Taliban's hands, what would I do? My daughters had the same fear and concern. Rahima had completed her master's degree in Turkey, had worked with a Canadian organization, had been deputy director of the Office of the Administrative Reform Commission, and later became head of domestic trade in the Ministry of Industries and Commerce. Everyone knew her through the jobs she had done, and I was terrified that if, God forbid, the Taliban found out, what would happen? I was under enormous pressure because of that. When the email came to my daughter, it was a very emotional moment, and we decided to leave as quickly as possible. I entrusted the house to my brother-in-law and set out. From Kabul airport we were transferred by military planes to Kuwait, then the next day to Dubai, and after that to Canada.

Question: How much did your belief that the Taliban would not reach your daughters help you?

Answer: I have always been a strong believer, because whenever I have faced a problem, I have found a solution that I never imagined beforehand. For example, during the civil war with the mujahideen, I had returned from Bagram and was going home. My house was in Afshar, Kabul. At the Bagh-e Bala checkpoint, people from Sayyaf's forces would stop cars and pull out anyone

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who was Hazara, then take them away, imprison them, or kill them. When they pulled me out of the car and saw that I was Hazara, I showed them my officer's card and said I was a government employee, but they said that even if I were a government employee, I was still Hazara and they wanted Hazaras. They took me to a school called Dur Khani High School, and I found that about 300 other Hazaras had been gathered there as well. Toward evening they brought buses, filled them with those people, and took them toward Paghman. They filled four buses, but then no more buses were available, and I was left with about 20 others. They brought taxis for us, put six people in each taxi, and took us to Kot-e Sangi, where they imprisoned us in a complex called Sarai Heratiha. There, every room had 100 Hazara prisoners. I asked some of them what the problem was, and they said not to ask. Apart from waiting for death every moment, there was no other option. They told me that many Hazaras had been loaded into buses without windows and taken away. The bus was driven at high speed, and when the back opened, everyone fell headfirst onto the road and their brains were crushed.

Question: Were these Hazara prisoners military personnel who had been captured?

Answer: No, they were all civilians gathered from streets, roads, and markets and removed from vehicles. We spent the night imprisoned in that compound, and the next day at 3 p.m. they said that a peace delegation from the Hezb-e Wahdat had arrived and was in talks with Sayyaf's delegation to exchange us. They put us into buses and took us to Ibn-e Sina High School, which was in Karte-e-Char. After they had placed us there, they said the delegations would also arrive. Some time later gunfire started. They said that Hezb-e-Wahdat had declared: either we will free the Hazaras by force or the exchange will not happen. From 4 o'clock onward, fighting began, and all night there was gunfire and rockets. By 4 a.m. Sayyaf's forces fled and did not have time to enter the prisoners' rooms and kill them; otherwise, that had been the plan. After they fled, Hezb-e Wahdat arrived at 8 in the morning. From each very small room they would bring out about 30 people. There I realized that belief in God ultimately gives a solution in a difficult situation. The email we received for transfer to Canada was exactly that kind of thing, beyond imagination and expectation, because no one had told us in advance. Only one of Rahima's

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colleagues had told her that their list had been sent for transfer to Canada and that they should wait and see what would happen.

Question: After you were released from Sayyaf's people, did you return to your government job or not?

Answer: Yes, but I returned to work only after Ahmad Shah Massoud sent me into reserve.

Question: What does being Hazara mean to you now in Canada's multiethnic and multilingual society?

Answer: I still think that having a Hazara identity is something to be proud of. Being Hazara is an identity, and I am happy that I am Hazara. The reason I am proud of Hazara identity is that our community, despite very difficult conditions and many forms of deprivation, has not resorted to criminal behavior. For example, Hazaras, despite severe poverty, have not turned to theft. They have been poor, but they have not begged. They have lived by being content with what they have. In addition, Hazaras have always been hardworking. In the geography where Hazaras live, without much technical support or technology, they have created living conditions for themselves and their families. They have provided suitable homes and warmth in both cold and hot seasons. Moreover, wherever Hazaras have had the chance to shine, they have done so well. They have shown excellence in fields such as education, sports, and the military. General Musa was a Hazara who found opportunities in Pakistan and performed very well, and today the Hazaras of Pakistan have a very good standing with the Pakistani state, partly because of General Musa's good and honest work.

Question: What is your current relationship with Afghanistan and your hometown of Bamiyan? Do you sometimes wish that one day there will be no Taliban and that you can return and see your homeland again?

Answer: Naturally, wherever a person is born, grows up, and matures becomes bound up with one's blood and feelings, and whatever is bound up with blood and feelings never becomes weak

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or disappears; it always remains alive with a person. For that reason, the memory of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and our people remains with us in every circumstance. Whenever conditions allow, I would like to return and see the people again and speak with them.

Question: What is your message to future generations of Hazaras in Canada? What traditions would you like to see preserved among Hazaras in Canada? Which customs should continue?

Answer: The customs and traditions that have a positive effect on our people's spirit and functioning should be preserved. One of the family traditions among Hazaras is obedience to elders and family seniors, and I always thought that was a very good custom. When I was a child, my paternal grandfather always said that when I sat in front of family elders, I should not stretch my legs toward them. In other words, stretching one's legs toward elders was considered disrespectful, and it is a good culture if it is preserved. Even now, when I am at home and a guest comes, my children do not speak while I am speaking. When I am not speaking, each person takes turns sharing what is on their mind, and this etiquette should be maintained. Likewise, close relationships within society are also an important tradition. The stronger these internal relationships are, the greater the unity and solidarity. Celebrating Eid and Nowruz, commemorating Ashura, and observances like these connect people and strengthen social relations. For that reason, I am in favor of preserving our good traditions, because they help preserve our identity.

Question: Hazara children born in Canada may not have a strong connection to Hazara identity. As someone who has a strong bond with Hazara identity, what would your message be to them?

Answer: I currently have two grandchildren. My emphasis to their parents is that they should first make sure their children learn their mother tongue and the Hazaragi dialect, and second, that they remember their religious traditions as well.

Question: What gives you hope in Canada, and what worries you?

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Answer: What gives me hope is, first, that Canadian society is an aware, educated, and knowledgeable society, familiar with technology, and in such a society people live well. Second, the Canadian government cares for the younger generation. For example, right now my daughter and son are both studying at university, and they both received money through the OSAP program, where part of the amount may never need to be repaid and part must be repaid. This is the best environment for young people to study in. Children also receive monthly cash support; if parents save that money for their children's future, then when the child goes to university there is a savings base. Universal healthcare is also the greatest blessing, because it gives everyone peace of mind. The multicultural nature of Canadian society is also a strength. I spent the first six years of the Taliban period as a migrant in Iran. In Iran I was insulted in the market, on the bus, in the bread line, and in shops. I was not alone; all Afghans who migrated from Afghanistan, especially Hazaras, were humiliated and insulted. But in Canada, when I get on the bus, even if there is no empty seat, a Canadian girl has stood up and offered me her place. Canadian culture is excellent because you never see anyone looking at you with contempt. When I go into a shop, if I look at something and then put it back without buying it, there is no problem. In Afghanistan, if you pick up an item and then put it back, someone grabs your collar and asks why you took it in the first place. There is no sign of insult or humiliation in interactions here. At the same time, there are also worries, such as what happens if our children become detached from their culture or religion.

Question: What is your message to other Canadians?

Answer: Cultural integration in Canada has, in my view, gone well. A Canadian, while being Canadian, is also Italian, Chinese, Mexican, and so on. My message to other Canadians is that they should accept Hazaras as part of Canadian society, learn more about Hazaras, not withhold their trust from them, and support Hazaras.

Question: Is there anything you would like to add that we did not ask?

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Answer: One thing I had been thinking about beforehand was to speak about ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan, and I think I already brought it up during the conversation: someone who later became defense minister had previously been subordinate to me, and I never forgot how much discrimination I faced. During Daoud's time, a man named Abdulkhaliq Rafiqi came and became governor of Bamiyan, and another man named Sarbaz became the provincial police chief in Bamiyan. Those two themselves ordered the kuchis to eat the Hazara crops and rain-fed fields. One time he said that if the kuchis would not eat them, then we would turn into cows and go eat them ourselves. They did not want anyone to do anything other than what they said.