OPINION

# Farzad Salehi's journey from Iran to Canada full of close shaves

**20 years later: He celebrates freedom with tales of his adventures**

**Pete McMartin**

In October, Farzad Salehi, barber, former political refugee and now Canadian citizen, will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the moment he first stepped on Canadian soil. He had fled Iran in the wake of the revolution.

"I can't go into too much detail because of the immigration case and people back in Iran, but basically I left because of freedom. Freedom of speech, freedom to be a human being."

He lives in Gastown with his wife, Shelley. As was the case with much of his journey to Canada, Shelley's place in Farzad's life appears to be a case of kismet and improbable good luck.

"I would not be who I am today without her," he said.

After a decade of finding what work he could here, and cutting hair for other barbers, he saved enough money to open his own place in 2005. He and Shelley now run Farzad's Barber Shop in Yaletown, a two-chair establishment so busy the shop's appointment book is filled days in advance. Farzad's specialty is his expertise with a straightedge razor, a skill learned in Iran. He gives close shaves. And survived them.

To leave Iran, he hired the services of a smuggler. He crossed the country's northern border into Turkey using a fake passport. He made it to Istanbul, and from there crossed into Bulgaria. From Bulgaria, he crossed into Serbia using a fake Bulgarian passport. The name on the passport was Bikof Isdravkov Kirilov, a mouthful Farzad practised saying over and over.

Serbia was then at war with the other breakaway provinces of what used to be Yugoslavia.

"I didn't think about it at the time, but I hate to think what they would have done with me if they discovered I was an Iranian travelling on a fake Bulgarian passport."

From Serbia, he took a train to the Hungarian border. The train was stopped and its doors locked; a border guard entered his cabin and took his passport. He started questioning Farzad. Farzad had no idea what the guard was saying, so he said the only thing he could:

"Bikof Isdravkov Kirilov."

"I was so nervous. I thought, this is where I'm going to get caught. But apparently he must have been asking me what my name was because he stamped my passport and gave it back to me."

From Hungary, he took the train to Vienna, Austria. Here, more luck.

"I went up to this cab driver, and using a kind of sign language, I told him I was Iranian and I needed help. And he was Iranian! And he cried. He was a refugee himself. And I said, 'I want to go west, as far west as possible. I don't want to stay here.' So he took me to his place where I stayed the night, and the next night we drove to the border and (I) walked across the border into Germany through the bush."

He made his way through Germany to Holland. He ran out of money. He phoned home to Iran and asked his family there if they knew anyone in Holland. They did — a distant relative of a neighbour. Farzad would stay at this man's apartment in Holland for the next two years, making money cutting hair in the apartment. He made just enough money, he said, to get out. He had always wanted to come to Canada.

"There's always a best place. Canada was my best place."

He bought a fake Israeli passport for $2,500. He had to fly through London. At the airport, before boarding, the attendant at the gate asked him for his visa. Farzad, who knew just a little English, pleaded that he didn't need a visa. She felt otherwise and believed — possibly because of his accent, Farzad guessed — that he wasn't Israeli. She wasn't going to let him board. Again, Farzad thought he was at a juncture when he was going to be found out and deported back to Iran. His heart sank.

And again, more luck.

At that moment, a man — a customs officer or an airline superintendent, Farzad had no idea what his position was — approached the boarding desk and asked what the matter was. "I could understand a little, and (the man) asked, 'What's going on?' And she said, 'He doesn't have a visa.' And he said, 'Where's he from?' And she said, 'Israel.' And he said, 'He doesn't need a visa, let him go.' And she said, 'But he's not Israeli.'

"When she said that, I was pretty much convinced my world was crumbling."

Finally, he was allowed to board. But walking down the ramp to the plane, the attendant, trying to catch him up, called out to him using the name on his passport. As he had done before, Farzad had memorized it, and turned around and acknowledged her. He got on the plane.

He landed, he said, at exactly 3:30 p.m., Oct. 26. "How could I forget it? It's like my birthday."

He claimed refugee status. He was questioned, fingerprinted and allowed to leave the airport by 11 p.m. He phoned a fourth cousin who lived in Vancouver who told him he could stay at his apartment. The cousin had a roommate.

Her name was Shelley.

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Farzad Salehi and his wife Shelley relax in their barbershop in Yaletown Wednesday.

WAYNE LEIDENFROST/PNG

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DONATIONS

# Telus gives $8 million to local charities to improve lives of children and youth

**GERRY BELLETT**
VANCOUVER SUN

Telus, which has been a major donor to The Vancouver Sun's Adopt-A-School campaign, is giving more than $8 million to Lower Mainland charities this year.

The company held its annual Telus Celebration of Giving event this week at the VSO School of Music on Seymour Street, handing out awards and cheques for $2,500 to charitable organizations that have made a "sustainable social impact within their local community."

The winners include Kwantlen Polytechnic University Foundation's Inside Out Prison Program, Coquitlam School District's Miskwaa Maengum Spirit Adventures, DreamRider Theatre Society's The Planet Protector Academy: Keep Cool program, and SportAbility's Introduction to Sport.

"This is an annual event that shines a spotlight on the many dedicated individuals and organizations who work tirelessly to make a significant social impact in the lives of children and youth throughout the Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley," said Telus official Liz Sauvé.

Executive chairman Darren Entwistle told the gathering that it was Telus' policy to "give where we live to improve the lives of Canadians and their communities through the power of technology."

"In 2014 alone, Telus has contributed an outstanding $8 million to charitable organizations throughout the Lower Mainland," he said.

The music for the event was provided by the Saint James Music Academy, whose students attend schools in the Downtown Eastside.

The academy is looking for donated instruments to offer free music lessons to children in the DTES.

"They are looking for instruments that were once loved and played but could now be collecting dust in someone's basement," said Sauvé.

Anyone wishing to donate instruments can contact the Saint James Music Academy at instruments@sjma.ca or call 778-709-7731.

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