

12 Nov 2008

Calgary Herald



MANSOOR LADHA

# Sad, yet memorable stories of new Canadian writers

Early last year, it was a great privilege to be invited by an editor of a book publisher to write about how I came to Canada. I was told then that her proposed project was to invite 36 other writers, novelists, poets, journalists and scholars to write about how they came to Canada.

Their fascinating stories, expressed with joy and humour, have been published as a book entitled, *The Story That Brought Me Here: To Alberta from Everywhere*, edited through the hard work of a former Edmonton Journal reporter, Linda Goyette, and published by Brindle & Glass, which last month held the book's launch in Edmonton.

The writers, who contributed to the book came from every corner of the world. They came from Iraq, Brazil, Hong Kong, Mexico, Sudan, Afghanistan, Hungary, Nigeria, the Netherlands, the U.S.A., South Korea, Sierra Leone, Peru, India, South Africa, Vietnam, Ireland, China, Burundi, England, Poland, Singapore, Australia, Scotland, Lebanon and yours truly, from Tanzania.

Each one of us were given a passage selected beforehand by the editor to read from our chapter in front of an audience packed into the theatre of the Edmonton Public Library.

Judging from the thunderous applause that followed each presentation, the audience simply loved the readings, which were collections of happy, and some sad, but memorable stories of some recent Alberta settlers. A few years from now, the book may be a valuable historical document or a prescribed book in some history classes, but the initiative taken by an aggressive former reporter is highly commendable.

Jalal Barzanji, from Kurdistan, Iraq, who had the distinction of being the first PEN Canada Writer in Exile, talked about how he lived as a writer under Saddam Hussein's totalitarian regime. Never having used a gun in his life, he says, "my pen was my only weapon to fight for a better world," which eventually brought him to Canada.

Thuc Cong from Vietnam described how her husband, Sonny, escaped in a boat with 14 other people and when the captain became severely seasick, without any knowledge of navigation, had to grab the steering wheel and managed to take the boat to safety in Malaysia, where they stayed as refugees at Pulau Bidong. Sonny came to Edmonton and was later joined by his wife Thuc, who got a job in the library of a college.

"I wish I had come to Canada sooner. There was so much to learn, so much to do, and so much to enjoy. I regretted all the activities and opportunities that I had missed. I had to catch up with the lost years. I had to race with the clock, taking any chance to live my life to the fullest."

Seven-year-old Athiann Makuach Garang, said goodbye to his war-ravaged homeland, Sudan, with his uncle and cousins as gun shots were still being heard in the background. Prior to that, Arabs from northern Sudan had attacked their village and he had to witness the killing of one of his uncles and the abduction of women, and children of the village before fleeing. They journeyed by night to avoid detection.

"My feet could not carry me but still we carried on. Our souls needed peace and safety," he writes.

It took the Garang family four months to cross Sudan to reach

Ethiopia, where they were placed in a refugee camp. But then there was a change of government in Ethiopia and they were sent back to Sudan. As the war was still on, Athiann and his family went to Kenya, where they were placed in another refugee camp. From one refugee camp to another, they were finally granted permits to come to Canada.

“Here in Canada, life is tough, but at least I have found a place I can call home, where there is some peace. I plan to finish school, find a way to serve my new community and my people back in Sudan.”

A.K. Rashid, an intellectual from Afghanistan, who had to flee his country due to the atrocities brought about by the feuding warlords and the mujahedeen. “Kabul was burning; hunger and death ruled the city,” he laments and under these terrible circumstances, he and his family took refuge in India. In 1996, they were about to go back when they heard that the Taliban had taken over. Under the new regime, music and dancing was banned, theatres and television stations were closed. Men were ordered to grow full, untrimmed beards, and women were forced to cover themselves completely. They were not allowed to be seen on the streets without a man who was a near relative.

They came to Canada in 2002, but sadly, writes Rashid, “in terms of finding jobs, up until now I have noticed that no place except McDonald’s welcomed us.”

I recall my own experience, narrated in the book, in the early '70s when it was impossible to get a job without Canadian experience, making many immigrants wonder if employers were using it as an excuse to bar them from getting jobs.

Newcomers and refugees from every country around the globe have been fleeing from totalitarian regimes, wars and famines to better their lives and to find peace and prosperity in Canada. Canada has provided refuge to them. They have been welcomed with open arms. Some do very well, others not so well, but that’s part of life.

These are personal stories of joy, sadness, regret, humour, homesickness, sacrifices and new beginnings of Alberta’s new Canadians and a testimony to Canada’s pluralistic society.

MANSOOR LADHA IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN CALGARY. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK ENTITLED, A PORTRAIT IN PLURALISM: AGA KHAN'S SHIA ISMAILI MUSLIMS, PUBLISHED BY DETSELIG.