

The People Who Helped Us Were Killed

Name: Palwasha

Arrived in Sweden: 2006

From: Afghanistan

Aspiration: To work with human rights

My name is Palwasha and this is my story.

In Afghanistan, my parents were teachers and they were politically active. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, they took us to a camp somewhere between Kabul and Parwan. The women and men were separated from each other, and it took 7 years before I saw my father again. The camp was awful, but there were about 40 of us who managed to escape out the back when it was dark. I remember that we ran through mud and water. My mother dragged us and said that we had to be quiet. I know that the people who stood guard for us when we escaped were killed. I have pretty terrible memories from my childhood. The nicer memories disappear more quickly.

We came to a house where I was able to sleep over. The family weren't even Tajiks like us; they belonged to the Pashtun people group. Even so, they sent us off with bread, eggs, and dried fruit. We walked for 2 weeks over the mountains and slept 4 hours a night at the most. I was about 6 years old.

We arrived in the city Jalalabad, and there we were able to work in a family with two wives. The older wife was angry and hit me. I had to sweep and do the dishes, whilst my mother made food, washed and ironed clothes, and took care of the small children. I also had to go and get water a few times each day. Sometimes there was a queue for several hours at the well. And the water had to be boiled before we could drink it.

You get used to anything. The abnormal becomes normal. I have never been a child, since I've always had so much responsibility. But we never complained; we didn't know any different. Since my mother was a teacher, she gave private lessons to other children. Often, I played that I was a teacher too, and sometimes the other children came to me for help with their homework. We only had one notebook, so we had to erase everything when it was full. I remember I was very thin as a child. We grew our own food, red beans for example. We seldom ate meat, because it was too expensive to buy. I also remember it was hard to walk in a burka. We fell over all the time.

Dad was captured by the Taliban. He had to work for them in the kitchen. But at the time we didn't even know if he was alive or not. I never gave up; I hoped that he would come back one day. In the beginning, my siblings and I cried a lot, but after a while we got used to him not being there. When the American army attacked the camp, my father was finally able to escape. Afterwards, he managed to find my brother, who'd managed to get a job as a baker.

My mother and my sister were the first ones to flee to Sweden. They travelled via Iran, Turkey, and Greece. From Sweden, they were able to call another family in Jalalabad who had a phone. We got to go there to talk to mum sometimes. We always cried because we missed her so much. In the beginning, we were also angry that she'd left us. But the money had only been enough for them.

I was 16 years old when I was able to travel to Sweden. My brother, who was one year older, had to stay. That was difficult. We had always been best friends and he had always comforted me when I was sad. "But you have to go; otherwise they'll marry you to a Taliban", he said. I remember very clearly that I cried the whole way to Sweden. I thought about him all the time.

When I finally met my mother and sister, I was really happy. It felt like a dream. The first thing that struck me was that Sweden is so beautiful and so clean.

I am 22 years old and am studying Economics, but in the future I'd like to work with human rights. Recently, my brother also came to Sweden. Now we're all reunited. But that doesn't make everything easy. Dad doesn't want to talk about everything he's been through in the Taliban camp. He says that we wouldn't know how to deal with it if he told us. But I know he has many wounds on his body.

I used to be daddy's little girl, but now he's cold. His thinking disturbs me; it's almost like the Talibans'. For example, I can't tell him that I have a boyfriend, since he belongs to the Hazara people and my father doesn't like the Hazari.