

■ By **CHRIS ATCHISON**



Journalist tells personal tale

*Nelofer Pazira's new book, **A Bed Of Red Flowers**, discusses her life growing up in war-torn Afghanistan and her efforts to find a childhood friend after the country was overtaken by the Taliban.*

Journalist Nelofer Pazira has built her career writing stories about people living under oppression and she may have found her best story yet - one filled with a family's struggle to survive and a daring escape from a war-torn country. It just happens to be her own story.

In her memoir, *A Bed of Red Flowers*, released this month, Pazira shares her experiences growing up in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation and describes the events leading up to her family's escape to Pakistan when she was 16.

"People don't know enough (about Afghanistan)," Pazira told Metro. "Different publishers wanted me to do something quick like a diary. I was totally against that. I didn't feel I could do something quickly."

Now a Toronto resident and freelance journalist for the CBC, 31-year-old Pazira tried to remember as much as she could herself, and then spent two weeks with her parents, who live in Ottawa, interviewing them about their past.

"When I was working on the story I'd phone them and say, 'I just have one more question,'" Pazira said. "They just got used to it."

Pazira's most vivid memories involve her family's decision to leave their homeland. Although her father, a family doctor, realized this was necessary in order to keep his family safe, he would have no part in the planning.

It was Pazira who lined up day after day at government offices with fake IDs for her family in order to get passports. She met with contacts to find someone who could smuggle them to Pakistan, and then negotiated the price of the voyage.

"It's not something I would have chosen to do," Pazira said. "It's not something I wanted to do. I was forced to grow up fast."

Growing up fast meant while other girls were celebrating their sweet 16 birthday parties, Pazira was fleeing her homeland. An 18-year-old female guide led Pazira, her parents, and younger brother and sister on a 10-day trek through Afghanistan's desert-like landscape to its Pakistani border.

But Pakistan proved to be no safer than Kabul. On one occasion, Pazira was shot at for leaving a friend's house without a head covering. Luckily, it was a warning shot.

When the Paziras were offered refugee status by Canada a year later, the family jumped at the chance to move, and were sent to Moncton - where she said the people were fantastic and welcomed the family.

"If I had continued to live in Pakistan as a refugee, I'd probably be married with a couple of kids by now," Pazira said. "But I don't think I would have had the chance to go to university or do what I do now and enjoy it."

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