



CANADA II. IRANIAN COMMUNITY IN CANADA

The immigration records of the organization Statistics Canada for the period between 1896 and 1915 date the arrival of the first Iranian immigrants to between 1901 and 1902. Although the following year saw a steep rise to forty immigrants from Iran, the numbers fluctuate considerably over the next sixty years, reaching an average of around 100 annual immigrants by 1961. By 1970, the average had risen to 660, a change that, according to the publications of the Government of Canada, was due to the “massive flow of students to North American Universities that began after 1965,” and the fact that many of these students chose to remain in Canada after having completed their studies and having obtained immigrant status. According to the same source, “The earliest immigrants from Iran quickly joined the professional ranks as medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, nurses, and dentists.”

A marked change in the pattern of migration is perceptible after the 1979 revolution. Statistics Canada records reveal that the number of Iranians in Canada increased to 5,000 by around the mid-eighties, and by the mid-nineties it had risen steeply to 60,000. The census records between 1991 and 1996 indicate a 28 percent increase in the number of Persian-speaking Iranians living in Canada, reaching 62,385 in 1996. This dramatic change is attributable to the political climate in Iran after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The government’s persecution of members of the old regime forced former officials, military personnel and supporters of the Pahlavi monarchy to



emigrate to Canada. Religious and political persecution, the Iran-Iraq war and the economic devastation that it caused, and the imposition of a strict Islamic dress code for women are all cited as reasons for the migration of educated and professional middle class Iranians to Canada.

Unlike the first wave of immigrants, these later arrivals have mostly joined the ranks of entrepreneurs and owners of private businesses. It is estimated that approximately 12% of Iranians who came to Canada in the nineteen seventies were entrepreneurs and investors. Although countless others left Iran with little economic means, entering Canada as political refugees, they were able to find a niche for themselves in Canadian society. For instance, Iranian immigrants have been found to be involved in “the creation of construction companies, restaurants, bakeries, dry-cleaning shops, grocery stores, repair shops, and computer stores” (Ibid.). The Business Directory of the Iranian Yellow Pages of Canada (an online and continually updated directory) (<http://www.iranianyellowpages.ca>)lists the following entries: Automotive, Business Services, Computers and the Internet, Education, Entertainment, Finance, Health, Home and Garden, Personal Care, Real Estate, Restaurants, Shopping, Sports and Recreation, and Travel. The most notable examples of successful Iranian entrepreneurs in Canada are the Ghermezian brothers who built the West Edmonton Mall, reputed to be the largest shopping mall in the world, and the Khosrowshahi family, who founded the Future Shop chain of electronic and computer stores. These recent trends notwithstanding, after Germans, Iranian represents the second most educated group of immigrants to Canada <plurivox.ca/iranafku.htm>.

The population of Iranian immigrants in Canada is marked by its relatively low average age: “The 1996 census revealed that about 12% were under the age of 10, while 22% were between the ages of 10 and 24. The largest age group was between 25 and 39, representing about 35% of Iranians in Canada. Only 6.5% of Iranians were over the age of 60” (Rahnema, p. 1189). Although the majority of Iranians in Canada are Muslim, there are also members of other religious and ethnic groups among them. In the 1998 edition of the Canadian Encyclopedia, Baha Abu-Laban noted that “the eastern Christians [Assyrians] and Baha’is are over-represented proportional to their distribution in Iran,” (Abu-Laban, p. 1091. Most Iranian immigrants have settled in large urban centers in Canada. In the late 1980s, the distribution of the Iranian immigrant population in Canada was estimated to be 50% in Ontario, 20% in Québec and 20% in British Columbia (Ibid). Some slight changes in these



settlement patterns can be observed over a decade: “The vast majority of Iranian immigrants come from urban areas, particularly large and medium-sized cities, so they have chosen to settle in major urban centers of Canada. Ontario, particularly Toronto, has the largest concentration of Iranians. According to the 1996 census 56% of Iranians lived in Ontario, 15% in Quebec and 23% in British Columbia,” (Rahnema, p. 1189). In Toronto, the majority have settled in the city’s North York suburb, where one can find Iranian grocery stores, mosques, restaurants, travel agencies, bookstores, and other services catering to the local population, just as one can find in the other localities where Iranians have chosen to settle.

Information provided by the government of Canada stresses the symbiotic relationship between the Iranian business community and cultural institutions, such as Persian-language journals, magazines, radio, and television programs: “Advertising revenues bolster the production and free distribution of many group publications and programs. The Iranian-Canadian business sector is also a leader in hosting a number of live cultural events including poetry readings and musical events” <collections.ic.gc.ca/heirloomxseries/volume7/countries/iran.html>. Amir Hassanpour has provided the following list of Persian-language publications in Toronto in 2000: *Iran Star*, *Iran-e Javān*, *Iran Tribune*, *Iran Post*, *Javānān*, *Salām Toronto*, *Sarmāya*, *Sepidār*, and *Šahrvand*. He characterizes them as “secular, privately-owned, financed primarily through advertising income, and distributed free of charge in places frequented by the targeted readership (grocery stores, restaurants, video and bookstores),” and he provides the following overview of their content and focus: “Browsing through these papers, one notes immediately that the coverage of Canadian news is minimal – most of the cited papers are sharply focused on Iran. The limited space devoted to the Canadian-Iranian community is also centered on issues and activities related to Iran and being Iranian” (*ISIMNewsletter* 8 (online only), Sept 2001).

Across Canada, Iranians have also formed professional, student, and cultural associations such as the Canadian Society of Iranian Engineers and Architects, the Iranian/Persian Student Associations and Organizations (ISAO) of Canada, and the Ferdowsi Association of Canada. The Iranian Writers’ Association of Canada, the Persian Artists’ Association of Ontario, the Centre Culturelle et Communautaire des Persians in Montréal and the Vancouver Pars National Ballet stand out as the most prominent organizations devoted to Iranian



cultural and artistic expression. The most prominent Iranian writers residing in Canada are Rezā Barāhani and Mehri Yalfāni.

Cultural and social cohesion is also maintained in smaller cities across Canada. Saeed Rahnema has noted the establishment of many support organizations for the Iranian community, such as the Iranian Associations in each of the provinces, which provide services to new immigrants, organize classes and maintain Persian libraries. Rahnema also mentions the several family counseling organizations, women's associations and magazines catering specially for Iranian women. Persian language classes are also held in all of Canada's major urban centers, primarily for the benefit of Iranian children. Many Canadian agencies and organizations have sections that specifically provide services to Iranian-Canadians (Rahnema, "Iranians," p. 1189).

Two Canadian universities, University of Toronto and McGill University, have a tradition of teaching Persian language courses in addition to others devoted to various aspects of Iranian social, political and cultural history. As the Iranian population in Canada has grown, other major universities have begun to incorporate the study of the heritage of this relatively new immigrant community into their curriculum. Iranian-Canadians are also well represented in the Canadian post-secondary educational system, both as students and university instructors. Iranians have not made their presence felt strongly yet on the political map of Canada, although Rahnema notes that in the 1997 provincial elections in Ontario, there were two Iranian candidates on the NDP (New Democratic Party) list, and that several Iranian candidates also ran for the Board of Education. However, many Iranians, the majority of whom came to Canada as political refugees, are still preoccupied with Iranian politics. In addition to political opposition groups and organizations, numerous human rights organizations dealing with the situation of political prisoners and political refugees have also been established, such as the Organization for the Defense of Political Prisoners in Iran, the Society for the Defense of Refugees and the Council of Refugees (Ibid.). A prominent example of Iranian representation in Canadian associations is the role of Barāhani as the current president of PEN Canada, the Canadian chapter of PEN International (Poets, Essayists and Novelists), the aim of which is to support freedom of expression and opinion throughout the world.

Canada remains among the most popular destinations for Iranians seeking to emigrate, and Iranian immigrants to Canada are the fifth most numerous of any nationality <<http://netiran.com/Htdocs/Clippings/Social>



/010624XXSO01.html>. Citing reports from the Iranian Deputy Culture and Higher Education Minister in July 1999, this source also notes that among Iranian university faculty members seeking to emigrate, eleven percent have indicated that Canada is their preferred destination. This pattern confirms the overall impression maintained by Canadian government sources that Iranian immigrants are among the most educated new arrivals.

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