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# A Christian Convert, on the Run in Afghanistan

By AZAM AHMED JUNE 21, 2014

KABUL, Afghanistan — In a dank basement on the outskirts of Kabul, Josef read his worn blue Bible by the light of a propane lantern, as he had done for weeks since he fled from his family in Pakistan.

His few worldly possessions sat nearby in the 10-by-10-foot room of stone and crumbling brown earth. He keeps a wooden cross with a passage from the Sermon on the Mount written on it, a carton of Esse cigarettes, and a thin plastic folder containing records of his conversion to Christianity.

The documents are the reason he is hiding for his life. On paper, Afghan law protects freedom of religion, but the reality here and in some other Muslim countries is that renouncing Islam is a capital offense.

Josef's brother-in-law Ibrahim arrived in Kabul recently, leaving behind his family and business in Pakistan, to hunt down the apostate and kill him. Reached by telephone, Ibrahim, who uses only one name, offered a reporter for The New York Times \$20,000 to tell him where Josef was hiding.

"If I find him, once we are done with him, I will kill his son as well, because his son is a bastard," Ibrahim said, referring to Josef's 3-year-old child. "He is not from a Muslim father."

For Josef, 32, who asked to be identified only by his Christian name to protect his wife and young child, the path to Christianity was only one segment on a much longer journey, a year of wandering that took him through Turkey, Greece, Italy and Germany, seeking refuge from Afghanistan's violence.

But at each stop he found misfortune. He was detained in Greece and deported from Germany, and he lived on the streets in Italy before he truly understood that there would be no happy ending in Europe, where his application for asylum has gone nowhere. He voluntarily left Italy for Pakistan to be with his wife and son, but that is no longer an option.

Neither is reverting to Islam. "I inherited my faith, but I saw so many things that made me discard my religious beliefs," Josef said. "Even if I get killed, I won't convert back."

In official eyes here, there are no Afghan Christians. The few Afghans who practice the faith do so in private for fear of persecution, attending one of a handful of underground churches that are believed to be operating in the country. Expatriates use chapels on embassy grounds, but those are effectively inaccessible to Afghans.

Only a few Afghan converts have surfaced in the past decade, and the government has typically dealt with them swiftly and silently: They are asked to recant, and if they refuse, they are expelled, usually to India, where an Afghan church flourishes in New Delhi.

In a country of crippling poverty, ethnic fault lines and decades of war, Islamic piety offers many Afghans a rare thread of national solidarity. To reject Islam is seen as tantamount to treason.

"Religious identity is the only thing that Afghans can claim," said Daud Moradian, a professor at the American University in Afghanistan. "They do not have a national identity, they do not have an economic identity, and there is no middle or working class here."

That leaves Josef almost nowhere to turn for protection. The police would be no help. Converts report being beaten and sexually abused while in custody. His family in Afghanistan is also a dead end: His uncles are hunting for him now, too.

Josef said he lost his faith well before he knew what would replace it. Most of his siblings emigrated to Germany when he was a teenager, but he stayed behind to look after his aging, ailing parents. He drove a taxi at night and studied medicine, earning a degree from Kabul Medical University.

He hung on through civil war, repressive Taliban rule and Western

invasion, but a senseless shooting he witnessed at close range in 2009 that left an 8-year-old boy dying in his mother's arms finally shattered his resolve to stay.

He borrowed money from his family and worked double shifts until he could pay a smuggler to get him to Europe. He left behind his mother, who died soon afterward, and his pregnant wife, who moved to Pakistan to be with her family.

His memories of the journey are flashes of elation and despair: The sights of Istanbul; the fence at the Turkish-Greek border, with his fingers laced in the wire; a field of sunflowers; three sickening days on rough seas in a boat to Italy, and a last-minute swim to shore; a road trip to Germany using the passport of a Pakistani who looked nothing like him; and the desolate Hamburg street where his brothers picked him up.

In Hanover, close to where his siblings lived, Josef found a Protestant church for Farsi speakers, and began attending services, at first just to watch.

“When I threw away my Islamic beliefs, I was living in a space of spiritual emptiness,” he said. “During that time I was studying different religions — Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. I was studying Islam as well.”

After 15 days in Germany, he turned himself in and applied for asylum, and was held in a refugee camp where the monotony was broken by visits from missionaries.

“I think I was impressed by the personality of Jesus himself,” he said. “The fact that he came here to take all of our sins, that moved me. I admired his character and personality long before I was baptized.”

When he was released to live with his sister in Kassel, he returned to the church in Hanover and converted, a decision his siblings accepted with open-mindedness.

The reprieve was short-lived; the German authorities rearrested him and deported him to Italy because he had not sought asylum in the European Union country where he was first processed, as required. Without family or friends in Italy, he sought aid from churches and charities that

offered him food but no shelter.

Homeless, broke, depressed and in deteriorating health, Josef gave up and went to live with his wife and her family in northern Pakistan.

Knowing the stakes of his secret, he put digital copies of his asylum paperwork and mementos of his conversion and baptism on a flash drive he carried in his pocket, finding some comfort in having them with him.

But one day in March, he left the flash drive at home. While he ran errands, one of his wife's brothers borrowed the flash drive to save a file, and discovered what was on it.

When Josef came home that evening, his in-laws grabbed him by the throat and beat him. "We tied his hands and his legs and we wanted to kill him," Ibrahim said. "It was my father who intervened, and said that he wanted to talk to his family first."

The father said they would contact Josef's uncles for guidance, and in the meantime Josef would be locked in a room at the side of the house, bound hand and foot.

In the middle of the night, Josef managed to escape, sneaking out of the house without a final goodbye to his wife or son. He caught a night bus to the border with Afghanistan. On the way, he phoned a childhood friend to ask for help, and then called his sister in Germany, weeping into his cellphone.

Reached in Germany, his sister, who declined to be named for fear of giving a clue to her brother's pursuers, said she hasn't heard from Josef since then.

"I've been worrying about his life and his whereabouts," his sister said. "It will be one of the biggest achievements of my life if I can help him get somewhere that he can practice his new religion openly."

To aid a convert is nearly as despised here as to be one, but his friend helped him anyway, hiding him in the basement of an empty house and bringing him food once a week.

"When times were good, he was always generous with me," said his friend, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the danger. "Now he's at risk, and needs my help, and I have no choice but to give it."

For Josef, who has recently changed hiding places, the time passes slowly now, with little company other than his Bible. He can hear the muezzin calling Muslims to prayer, a reminder of danger's proximity and the paradox he lives now.

“When I threw away my convictions, it was hard to speak with people about it,” he said, a red ember pulsing on the tip of his cigarette. “It was like an imaginary prison.” He paused, the light from his propane lantern casting a long shadow on the wall. “Now it is the other way around,” he said at last. “My body is in prison, but my soul is free.”

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