

“Faouzia and Farid Mitiche: Hope in Exile,” Arab Indianapolis, December 13, 2020, ArabIndianapolis.Com.

By Edward E. Curtis IV

In December, 1991, Farid Mitiche of Algiers, Algeria, was elected to his country’s parliament. Days later the Algerian military overthrew the government and began to hunt down its leaders. “Our party, the Islamic Salvation Front (or FIS), was banned and all its members and followers tracked. Many were killed after being tortured.” Over the next two years, he remembered, “many of my friends and colleagues were sent to concentration camps in the Sahara Desert.”

He had to “flee the country to save my life,” he said.

Farid Mitiche went underground and then crossed the border illegally into Morocco. It was a terrible blow. “I left my wife behind with our three children, including a new born of two months.” He also left behind the career for which he had worked so hard. Farid Mitiche was not a career politician. He was a surgeon.

His wife, Faouzia Mitiche, has a degree in the same field. She had grown up in a “very conservative Muslim family” east of Algiers in a “beautiful small town by the beach.” It was the kind of place where everyone knew and looked out for one another. “I had a very happy childhood,” Faouzia Mitiche said.

In the early 1990s, she said goodbye to the dream of raising her children, as she had been raised, in a happy Algerian home. She waited for word from her husband as he sought political exile in France and Belgium. They would not help him.

Farid Mitiche was surprised but relieved when the United States offered him a visa.

It took two years but the family reunited in Indianapolis. Two of Faouzia’s brothers lived here. Faouzia and Farid Mitiche spoke both French and Arabic, but they had to learn English. It was not easy. “Language was a big barrier for me,” Faouzia remembered. “I am still learning English,” her husband chuckled.

Faouzia Mitiche worked as a substitute teacher and taught biology and algebra for a year at MTI School of Knowledge, an Islamic school associated with Al-Fajr Mosque on Cold Spring Road. She then trained as a cardiac sonographer.

Farid Mitiche became a cab driver. “Sitting all day at the airport, waiting for fares had... a high psychological toll on me,” he said. “One day, I was working as a general surgeon, and then suddenly I found myself literally at ground zero, having to start from scratch, learning the ABC’s of a new language, accepting any trivial jobs just to get by.”

Eventually, he became a medical assistant, then a clinical research coordinator, and more recently, a medical interpreter for French- and Arabic-speaking hospital patients.

It would have been too much without his Islamic faith. “Faith is the essence of my life,” he explained. “It is faith that allowed me to navigate through all these years in very troubled waters. It is also faith that helped give sense to the earthquake that shook my life.”

Faouzia Mitiche said that even now, she still had not “completely adjusted.” She is not alone in that feeling. Exiles and refugees, those violently torn away from their homes, sometimes feel out of place their whole lives. “I still miss my country,” she declared. “My siblings, my friends, my culture. I think about it every single day.” She would like to return home, but her children are now American, and she would miss them, too.

As powerful as it is, this feeling of being betwixt and between, neither completely here nor completely there, doesn’t mean that exiles are unhappy or ungrateful.

Farid and Faouzia Mitiche are deeply thankful to God for one another, for the chance to immigrate to the United States, and especially for their children. Faouzia loves how their children are “so respectful, considerate of others, good Muslims, very intelligent, and kind.” Farid admires his kids’ commitment to principles over appearances, to sincerity, to responsibility.

They are also understandably proud of their children’s accomplishments. Their daughter, Imen, has a master’s in child psychology. Mohammed is getting his doctorate in Islamic studies from the University of Medina. Zakarya is working on his PhD in anthropology from Columbia University. Layla is an IUPUI Honors College student.

Faouzia and Farid Mitiche hope that their children and grandchildren, and all those who trace their roots to the Arab world, will embrace their heritage and the stories of their ancestors. “I just want them to understand who they are and where they came from,” said Faouzia. “The diversity they bring should be perceived not as a handicap but rather as an enrichment to this land,” asserted Farid.

Faouzia Mitiche hopes that Arab Americans will be “engaged; active; effective in their community; fight for justice; value education; be proud citizens of the United States.” Farid added that while the United States is a land of opportunity, it also suffers from poverty, inequality, racism, and a foreign policy that makes war on too many other countries. Arab Americans should do their part to solve these problems. This is what would “make America great again,” Farid joked.

Farid Mitiche’s hope for a better, more just, more compassionate country is what got him in trouble in the first place. The kind of hope that led to his and his family’s exile from Algeria. But even after the painful experience of displacement, almost two decades later, Farid and Faouzia still believe in that hope—and in the children and the grandchildren that, with God’s help, will make it a reality in America, Algeria, and beyond.

Thanks to IUPUI Honors College student Layla Mitiche who interviewed her parents for this article.