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How I Ended Up Interpreting at GTMO

First, a little bit about my background. I am originally from India, and so it is rather unusual to work as an Arabic interpreter. When I was young, my father was an army officer in the Indian army. After retiring from the military, he wanted to move abroad and settle down outside of India. He later landed a job to represent Indian textile companies in the Middle East at its head office in Baghdad, Iraq.

In January of 1962, we moved to Baghdad. My father decided to enroll us in Iraqi public schools as there were hardly any foreign run schools. The few foreign run schools accepted only western children of diplomats and other western organizations and companies. We had no choice but to rough it out in the Iraqi schools. It was very hard in the beginning, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Every subject was taught in Arabic: math, science, etc. As a foreigner, I learned Arabic grammar from the very beginning. I also learned English at home and my father made sure that we become members of the British Council and the American Center libraries which we visited regularly.

After spending eight years in Iraq with two years in the northern Kurdistan, we moved to Beirut, Lebanon. There I went to what is now called the American Lebanese University. The Lebanese Civil War started and I spent part of this time working in Saudi Arabia during the early oil boom.

After another eight years in Lebanon and after completing my university education in business management and computer science, I moved to Saudi Arabia and worked there as a computer and software trainer. I married my wife, also from India, while working in Saudi Arabia.

I worked in Saudi Arabia for approximately another eight years until the oil boom was over, and the oil prices crashed. I moved to India for one year hoping to do something there. India was a different world then. I wouldn't have left India if it were booming like it was right now. I almost started a photography business in New Delhi until I found a job as a software trainer in Muscat, Oman. My son was born while I was in India and my daughter was born while I was in Oman.

I worked for exactly eight years in Muscat, Oman and then my U.S. green card granted, and I moved to the United States in August of 1995.

When I moved to the U.S., I decided to revamp my resume and decided to remove as much as possible about whatever there was about Arabic in my background. This task was impossible, but I tried to reduce it as much as possible. I knew there is an extreme anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bias that exists in the U.S., one that is almost impossible to remove. President Obama's election removed some of that stigma of having any connection to Islam or Arabs. Things are changing here in the U.S., although slowly.

I first moved to Boise, Idaho to live for a short while with my younger brother to get over the jet lag and find a temporary job. On my first Sunday in the U.S., I saw an ad in the local newspaper from a contracting company that was looking for software experts to work for Microsoft

Corporation. The ad stated among other things "...individuals with extensive software background and the following foreign languages..." The languages were sorted alphabetically, and therefore, Arabic was at the very top.

I mentioned it to my brother, and he suggested that as there was no harm in trying, why didn't we send my resume to Microsoft and see what happened. We emailed my resume that Sunday evening. The next day I received a call asking if I could travel to Redmond, Washington for an interview as soon as possible. I was in Seattle on Thursday morning where my elder brother worked with the Boeing Aircraft Corporation. He drove me to the main Microsoft campus at Redmond, and I had a full day interview with five different people. I received an offer from them as an Arabic software quality assurance person for their Arabic Windows 95 and Arabic Office 97. I couldn't believe that my work required Arabic expertise as one hundred percent of my job qualification.

Those who have worked with me know that I am not a snob. The culture at Microsoft is such that you are a misfit if you don't consider yourself to be a little god or maybe a little mightier. Since I didn't feel comfortable in that environment, I looked for a job outside and found one with MCI in Colorado Springs, CO, and moved there and then moved again to Denver after spending less than two years at MCI.

At that point, I was convinced that I would never work with anything that has to do with Arabic, as I had decided that I would never work for Microsoft again, and there are very few other companies that will require Arabic.

After moving to several companies and going through the Y2K and then the dot com bubble, the 9/11 terrorist attacks changed everything. During the third week of September 2001, I was laid off. I initially thought that I was laid off soon after 9/11 because of my name. My last name is not very different from President Obama's middle name; therefore, it is easy for people to guess what my background is. However, I soon saw people were getting laid off right and left.

A few months after I was laid off and while I was driving around town looking for a job, I saw a respectable executive with a sign hanging from his neck on Broadway road in Denver, with the message "Will work for food." I knew that although I was being discriminated against, I was not the only one who was going through hard times.

One thing that shocked me was an email from a recruiter—which I still have in my inbox. This recruiter had helped me find an earlier job and was working to help me find another one. One day he called me and asked my permission if I would like to apply for a specific job. After getting my approval, he supposedly prepared an email and emailed it to the vice president of that company that stated, among other things, "Don't be scared of his name. I know him very well. He is a good person."

However, he made a big mistake; instead of putting the vice president's email address in the "to" field, he put in my email address, so that email reached me instead of the vice president. I will not go what communication we had after that, but it proved to me what kind of situation exists in the

U.S. for people with names like mine. I thought of changing my name to Mason Hansen, but thankfully my conscience did not allow me to do that.

What lifted my spirits for good was a famous book recommended by a friend, entitled “Who Moved My Cheese.” I have never been depressed since reading it; it has changed my life forever. It is a must read book for everyone, even those who are not going through hard times. For those who haven’t read it, the gist of it is this: “Keep looking for new opportunities no matter what, and always be prepared to move on.”

This applied to me. A few years after that, while I was working for a contracting company, there were some issues going on while they were trying to renew my contract. They found out that I had my resumé posted on several job sites on the internet. They called me and threatened me with all sorts of things. My simple reply to them was this: “Can you guarantee me with legal papers that are acceptable to my lawyer that I will have a job and a pay for the rest of my life? If you do that, I will remove my resume from all the job sites.” My employer can always move my cheese any day. I am not going to complain about that because that is the way life is, but I have to be ready and be prepared for that and be ready to move on.

When I was unemployed in Denver, I did not believe that networking would take you anywhere professionally. However, I wouldn’t be where I am now if it was not because of networking. I was talking to my elder sister-in-law who had now moved to Salt Lake City from Seattle, and she mentioned that one of her friend’s husband was laid off and found a job with a company as an Urdu interpreter working at GTMO interpreting for the government. They are looking for people with foreign language background and U.S. citizenships. I had my citizenship by then. They were paying good referral bonus to those who refer.

I applied and within a few days, I was called to Washington, D.C. for an interview. However, I failed the security clearance interview. I was devastated. The reasons given were that while holding a U.S. passport, I also had a valid Indian passport that I could use while traveling. The other reason given was that I had a foreign bank account in India. I had that account for convenience in case I travel to India. I had fifteen dollars in that account to maintain it. I called my wife, and asked her to FedEx my Indian passport to me overnight. Another interpreter who lived in the D.C. area gave me the directions to the Indian Embassy. I went there the next day and got my Indian passport cancelled, losing my Indian citizenship in a matter of minutes. I returned back to the company and presented to them the cancelled Indian passport. Their response was that they would try, but they knew for sure that once rejected for security clearance, it is a rejection for life. I was devastated. But what a lie!

While having dinner that night, one of the other interpreters who had passed the security clearance interview gave me a business card of an executive of another contracting company that needed interpreters. Networking helps.

To make the story short, I contacted the bank in India, closed my account and obtained a letter from them that the account was closed. I applied again to the other company, and it seems that something must have happened, although I never received a response.

I kept calling the first company and they kept telling me that opportunities are coming but I had to wait. I gave up all hope of ever getting a job as an interpreter.

Sometime in late October of 2002, while I was browsing the job sites, I saw another vacancy for a software quality assurance job at Microsoft. I applied, and they responded to me. Microsoft has a satellite office in Denver, and they do conduct interviews from there through video conferencing, but they preferred that the candidate fly to Redmond at his own expense. I was NOT ready to do that. I didn't pass the interview, and the recruiter insisted that it was because I had declined to travel, that video conferencing interviews almost always fail. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise.

I was in very low spirits. I decided to call the first interpreting company, and as usual they said they did have something in the pipeline, but I still had to wait. I called the second company and they said I had to wait as well. I don't know why, but for some heavenly reason, I said to the second company, "Okay, another company has something ready for me. Should I pursue that?" The executive on the other end said, "Hold on, let me talk to another department."

After a few minutes, he came back and asked, "When can you join us?" I said, "Now." He informed me that they had a project starting in South Carolina that has something to do with Iraq. He asked me if I could join that project from next Monday. I said, "Sure." This was Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2002, two days before Halloween. I had been laid off now for almost thirteen months. We had a very nice Halloween, and I have never looked back since then.

I would not like to go into the details of the projects that I did for reasons that you should understand. I made several trips to few locations, including a few trips to Iraq that included weapons training, which I enjoyed the most. While holding a U.S. military issued pistol and a M4 rifle for the first time, I was amazed that I would ever be in this situation. It is a different feeling when you have a weapon on your body and walk around in Baghdad, the city where I grew up and spent some of my most cherished years.

I saw first hand why the U.S. was losing its war in Iraq. These contracting companies have only one goal, and that is to make as much money as possible, as this opportunity will not be there again for them. People have become millionaires because of the war in Iraq. They have millions in their banks but blood on their hands. I decided to quit.

I decided to freelance and work for myself. I felt that it was possible to remain in this field and do productive work, for example, defend the homeland, fight for justice, bridge the gap between the East and the West, educate both the Christian Right and the Muslim extremism and try to remove some of the hatred that both have for one another and still make reasonable amount of money to support my family.

In late 2004, my wife and I decided that we would move from Denver to the D.C. area. I put my home on the market during March of 2005. The sale deed was signed in mid June 2005. I filled a truck with my belongings and drove to the D.C. area.

I was looking around for an apartment, but every apartment complex I went to required pay stubs or a signed employment contract. I had none of these. I had quit my job seven months ago. But I was still hung up and determined to make it in this area no matter what.

After finding the apartment that I wanted, I continued looking for more apartments that would not require job security. Ten minutes after that and while driving around, my phone rang. It was a CACI recruiter. She said that she found my resume on the Internet and would like to talk to me about a great opportunity in the D.C. area, if I was interested in flying to D.C. for an interview. She assumed that I was still in Denver. I informed her that I was in the process of moving to the D.C. area and I was indeed looking for an opportunity.

She got excited to hear this and asked me where I was and when could I meet her. I said I was driving on Route 28. I gave her the next exit name. She said that that was the exit to their office, and if it was possible, to take that exit and gave me further directions to her building.

I had a job interview in half an hour and they offered me a “contingent” job and handed me the signed contract within two hours. I immediately went to the apartment complex, showed them my job offer, and signed the lease. I am glad it was a contingent offer.

A week after moving into the apartment, my family asked me what I was going to do in D.C. My response was that we would drive around and explore the area. They were shocked and doubted if I was serious.

One nice day, I received a call from a translation/interpretation company in New York. The recruiter said that he found my name and contact information on the Internet and had a short assignment at a secure facility to translate a document from Arabic to English and asked if I was interested in doing that in a few days time. They were paying on hourly basis and reasonably well. I agreed.

The assignment was not one document, but several documents and required several days. The more the better. While working at the secure facility with the paralegal of the law firm, I became friends with her, and she offered to send my contact information to the list serve of the lawyers who were defending the detainees at GTMO. Networking helps.

The ball started rolling and it has been rolling since then. Thank God.