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AZARS' BUSINESS EMPIRE SPRANG FROM CIVIL WAR

[Spokesman Review, The \(Spokane\)](#), [Dec 13, 1998](#) by [Oliver Staley Staff writer](#)

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As their neighbors' homes were destroyed in the battle, the Azars made room for them, until 30 people were crowded in the shelter. Finally, when the war ended, Najeeb Azar had made up his mind. "We should go to America and that's it," he said. The back office of the 7-Eleven at the corner of Nevada and Empire doesn't look like a royal headquarters. The small desk is dominated by a computer. The shelves are filled with cigarette cartons. But from this narrow office, Najeeb and Najla Azar have nurtured a modest family empire. What began as Najeeb's humble job of minding a convenience store during the graveyard hours no one wanted to work grew into the ownership of a business, then into businesses for four children. The number of enterprises has risen and fallen over the years, but the Azar family's holdings have included two restaurants, five gas station-convenience stores and 19 rental properties spread across Spokane. Now, 25 years after arriving in the United States and 20 years after opening their first store, Najeeb, 78, and Najla, 64, are retiring, weary but proud authors of a success story that's unique, yet classically American. Despite living with the constant threat of war, the Azars' decision to leave Jordan did not come easily. Najeeb Azar was president of the Seventh-Day Adventist's Jordanian Mission. A minister, Najeeb was active in building churches and schools for thousands of Seventh-Day Adventists sprinkled throughout the predominantly Muslim Middle East. Najeeb's position meant the family enjoyed wealth and status, living in Amman's best neighborhood and employing maids to help Najla with the housework. But violence was never far away, particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, given Jordan's perilous position as a nation wedged between Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Between 1967 and 1973, when the Azars finally left for the United States, Jordan saw six wars, ranging from the Six Day War launched by Israel to the 1970 civil war. In the civil war between the government and the PLO, Amman became a battleground. The government installed a 24-hour curfew and broadcast the message that anyone on the streets would be shot on sight. Christian and Muslim neighbors joined the Azar family in the shelter, which became so jammed that everyone had to sleep sitting up. "Amman was on fire," Najla said. "The bombs were coming from everywhere. For 12 days, we were in the shelter together. Those neighbors who came to us, they had no food, they lost everything. We were crying and praying." At one point, a bomb landed in the Azars' back yard but did not detonate. After the war, Jordanian military authorities gingerly removed it. "It was the only house that wasn't bombed," Najla said. "It was a miracle. Everyone said it was." The neighbors thanked Najeeb for saving them, but he refused to take credit. "I said 'I didn't save you, but I prayed to Jesus and he protected you,'" Najeeb said. But despite the harmony between Christians and Muslims that prevailed in the bomb shelter, religious differences helped drive the Azars out of the Middle East. As a Christian family in a country that is 90 percent Muslim, the Azars were frustrated by Jordan's lack of religious freedom. "We wanted our children to live in a Christian country, where freedom was enjoyed," Najeeb said. Although they are reluctant to discuss the persecution they experienced, not wanting to offend Muslim friends and customers in Spokane, it was clearly a concern. Sam Azar, 32, youngest of the Azar children, said Christian children in Jordan often were tormented. "Kids would get beat up every day just for being Christian," he said. Widespread ignorance about the practices of Seventh-Day Adventists made matters worse. "The Seventh-Day Adventists kept Saturday (holy), which was considered to be Jewish, so we were considered to be Jewish," Najeeb said. "And Muslims don't eat pork and we didn't eat pork, so the Christians were against us." Because the Seventh-Day Adventists provided the Azars with a home in Amman, they had few assets. The family left Jordan in 1973 with just \$3,000, all that was left from the sale of their car after buying six plane tickets. The Azars' immigration was sponsored by Najla's brother, a doctor in Los Angeles, but the

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family decided it would be better to raise the children in Spokane, near Najla's sister in Tekoa, Wash. Another of Najla's brothers, Foad Elaimy, came to Spokane several years later and opened the Niko's restaurants. Najeeb assumed he'd find work as a Seventh-Day Adventist minister, but when he arrived in Spokane, he was told no job was available. While he waited for an opening, he worked menial jobs, including the graveyard shift at 7-Eleven. "It was a different program for him, that's for sure," said Lois Francen, who co-owned the convenience store at Mission and Argonne. "I knew this was just a stepping stone for him." While ringing up midnight sales, Najeeb volunteered as a guest preacher, filling in for ministers who were sick or on vacation. He was a hit among local parishioners, said Viola Azar, the couple's oldest daughter. "He comes from the Holy Land," said Viola, 41. "He has rich experience." Najla became a seamstress for Pacific Trail Sports in the Spokane Industrial Park, and the children struggled to fit in. "The school system was different; the food was different," said Katy Azar, 36. "I got fired out of McDonald's," said 42-year-old Victor, the oldest son. "I didn't speak the slang." After 3-1/2 years, it became apparent the Seventh-Day Adventists would not hire Najeeb. "They said to me that they didn't have the money," he said. "I was very disappointed. I was depressed. I thought about getting away from life." Disillusioned, the couple decided to start a business, in part to guarantee employment for them and their family. They investigated running a group home for the developmentally disabled and buying a laundromat, but buying a 7-Eleven was the first opportunity that came up, in 1978. "7-Eleven treated us better than the Seventh-Day Adventists," said Najla wryly. In retrospect, it seems the Azar family was made for small business. For 20 years, Najeeb and Najla ran the North Side 7-Eleven, which is once again owned by 7-Eleven's parent company, the Southland Corporation, after the couple's retirement. Viola owns Azar's Conoco at Second and Thor. She ran Azar's Cafe across the street from the 7-Eleven for years with her husband Kareem, who she later divorced. Katy owns Azar's Restaurant on North Monroe with her husband, Rae'd. After spending time as a bank executive in Pennsylvania and California and working in Jordan, Victor has returned to Spokane and opened Azar's Mini-Mart at Trent and Evergreen. Sam owns a 7-Eleven on Argonne. "Whatever you do, you find an Azar," said Najeeb proudly. The family's success was built on years of sacrifice. They often worked 20-hour days at the store. "Our sales were \$500 a day," Najeeb said. "Lower than low. We couldn't afford outside help." As they scratched out a living selling magazines, potato chips and beer, the Azars discovered a community of friends. "For us, it was fun," Najeeb said. "We loved it. People came to us, we would talk to them. We made a family with everybody." By 1980, the business was prospering. Najeeb bought the North Pole Diner, across Nevada from the 7-Eleven, to provide jobs for his daughters and son-in-laws. It didn't always go smoothly. During the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, the Azar family received harassing phone calls threatening them with deportation. They responded by posting their naturalization papers in the store window. By the time Persian Gulf crisis boiled over in 1991, attitudes had changed dramatically, said Katy, who by then was running Azar's Restaurant with her husband. "When the thing happened in the Persian Gulf, I thought 'Oh my goodness.' We thought they would take it out on us," she said. The opposite happened. Customers asked if anyone had been bothering them. Neighbors stopped by to make sure they were OK. "We were totally overwhelmed by the great response," Katy said. Retirement won't be easy for Najeeb, but it's necessary, Katy said. Najla has been in poor health and recently was released from the hospital after struggling with pneumonia. "Mom basically sacrificed her health for the business," Katy said. In retirement, Najeeb and Najla will look after their rental properties and try to publish a book Najeeb wrote 20 years ago describing his experiences in the Middle East. They'll also have more time to prepare for Christmas, which takes on added significance this year. "It's very special, because I was in bad shape," Najla said. "We thank God that we have retired safely and in good health and that everybody is happy."

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