



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PARIVASH ROHANI

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KEITH LUDDEN

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TRANSCRIBER: SHANNON HARRINGTON

Reviewed by: Keith Ludden

KEITH LUDDEN: So, let me start with a little bit of housekeeping. It is January twenty-sixth, and we are in Portland, and we are talking with Parivash Rohani.

PARIVASH ROHANI: Yes.

KL: Do I have your name correct?

PR: Parivash Rohani.

KL: Okay, great, and we are going to be talking about immigrant experience.

PR: Yes.

KL: ...and things like that.

PR: Sure.

KL: Parivash, do you mind if I ask what year you were born?

PR: Yes, sure, definitely. I was born in Iran.

KL: What year?

PR: In 1959.

KL: 1959. Okay.

PR: Yes.

KL: Baby boomer like me.

PR: Yes. [Laughter] 1959.

KL: Okay, and you were born in Iran?

PR: That's right.

KL: Okay and where in Iran?

PR: I was actually born near Isfahan which is the bigger city in the smaller county called Ardestan, and because my father was in the army we travelled all over Iran.

KL: Can you spell that first one for me?

PR: Sure, A-r-d-e-s-t-a-n.

KL: And the one before that?

PR: Okay. Isfahan is I-S-F-A-H-A-N, and then the city that I was born is Ardestan. A-R-D-E-S-T-A-N.

KL: Okay, so did you spend most of your childhood in Ardestan?

PR: No not at all actually. I was just born there. When I was an infant my father was transferred. Transferred to northeast of Iran, so almost like fifteen years of my life I lived in a little town. We bordered Russia in the northeast of Iran, so the climate was very much similar to Maine actually, very cool in the snow. Then at the age of fifteen, we moved to Shiraz which is another city in Iran, and finally, actually, in Shiraz my house was burned down in 1979 because

of my religious beliefs. I belonged to [the] Baha'i community, so my house was burned down and I had to escape the country. But the last place I was, was Shiraz.

KL: So, you were near the Russian border?

PR: Yes, I grew up near the Russian border, at the time, northeast of Iran.

KL: That must have been interesting.

PR: It was interesting, but because of the political situation, we never had the opportunity to actually travel. Although sometimes when we would go to the little village that my father used to work, a electrician in army. You could actually go climb the mountain and you could see the Russian villages, but you couldn't really go, because you couldn't. Just (because of the) the political—

KL: So, you never traveled in Russia?

PR: No, I never went or travelled to Russia, no.

KL: The border was pretty, pretty tight?

PR: Yes, protected. Exactly, yes.

KL: Okay. That is interesting. So, this was a mountainous area?

PR: Yes, very much. Very much mountainous, yes. Because Iran, contrary to what people think, that it is hot and dry, it is, we have places that are hot and dry, but in the north, it was really very similar, especially where I lived in the northeast, (I haven't traveled to northwest of Iran) but in the northeast where we lived it was very cold. We had a lot of snow, just like Maine so... But as you go down to the south, of course, it become warm and dry.

KL: So, tell me a little bit about what life was like when you were a little girl.

PR: When I was a little girl, because my father was in Army we had to travel a lot, and most of the time, of course, because it was an army, they would station him in little areas that, maybe some of them didn't have running water or even, we didn't have school in those little villages. My mother always stayed back in a bigger city because she wanted us to continue our education, so my father would go to the little village for a few months, come back for a month, go back, so it was hard childhood just because of the demand of the job that my father had.

He was not always there. We always had to travel and of course because we were a minority we had a double hardship, so we were not accepted into the community. We were considered sub-human and all kinds of really problems growing up. When we started school, we realized, "Oh my god, life is different!" because when you were little you were protected, you didn't feel, that you are any different because we looked Iranian. We talked the same language. We couldn't see anything be different than anybody else. But of course, then we went to school, we realized that because of our faith, people considered us so differently, although we look like them, but because of our religion, the teachers didn't deal with us right, the students didn't, so it was really hard growing up with that kind of prejudice towards us, as small kids who didn't realize what is all this about. [Laughter]

KL: Now, much of Iran, if I understand correctly, is of course, Muslim.

PR: That's right.

KL: How did your family find its way to the Baha'i faith, which I think it started in the nineteenth century, is that right?

PR: That's right. It started in 1844 in Iran, and actually it was a faith that was born in Iran. So, my parents they're Baha'i and my grandparents were Baha'i, but their parents were not. So, most of the Baha'i were Muslim because of course, you live in a Muslim country, so most of the, almost 80% percent of the Baha'is were Muslim. I don't know accurate stuff for this thing, but we have a lot of people who were Jewish and became Baha'i's a lot of people who were Zoroastrian, because of course Zoroastrian faith also was founded in Iran, so they have the profit founder or Zoroastrian religion also was from Iran.

So, I think some people because Baha'u'llah, the also the founder of Baha'i faith was from Iran, maybe they had more, they were more curious to explore the teachings of this new prophet who was from Iran. So, we had lots of Zoroastrian actually who became Baha'i, and Baha'i faith was the largest minority religion in Iran, of course we have Christian, and we have Jewish people, and Zoroastrian in Iran, and maybe some Buddhist, or Hindus, recently, but when I was growing up there weren't really any other minorities. But the difference is that the other minorities, although they didn't have an easy time in Iran either, but because their faith is mentioned in the Koran, they are people of book, so they had it easier time than we did.

And legally they could go to the court, if there was a problem and they would listen to them. But for Baha'is we are considered completely sub-human and infidel because of course, the Baha'i faith is a religion after Islam, and that's the problem. They believed that Mohammad was the last prophet, and like any other religion, all of them believe their prophet is the last. [Laughter] So that's why we have a harder time.

KL: So, you said a number of religions are mentioned in the Koran, is that right?

PR: That's right. Like Christianity, Judaism, are mentioned in Koran. So that's why they have this security, not full security because when we were in Iran, even those minorities have a hard time. Many of them left Iran, like big number of Jewish people left Iran during the revolution after we left, and many Christians left Iran. So, it is not easy for, really, the minorities but, much harder for us than others.

KL: I meant to mention in the beginning that if there is a subject that I touch on that is difficult for you to talk about, tell me please.

PR: Yes, no, no, no, sure.

KL: Okay, okay. So, you spent a lot of your childhood in small villages?

PR: Yes, like especially Quchan, which is in province of Khorasan, which is near the border, so almost fifteen years of my life I lived there and then my father transferred to Shiraz for three months and then from there he was transferred to Shiraz, for three months and then from there he was transferred to Ahvaz which is in the southern portion of Iran, which is very hot. So, my father had a lot of migraine headache because of the heat, so he retired early. Then we moved to Ardestan for a year, so they could make up their mind where "really" they wanted to go.

Because my mother was tired of moving and she said, "We have to take a break. One year, we take a break. We go to our parent's and live in Ardestan, and then make up our mind where we want to go, because that would be the last place we are moving to." Because my mother was tired of moving, and she didn't know, we moved to Shiraz and we built a home, then like less than six months after we built the home it was burned down and we had to relocate again so, yes.

KL: What was the village like when you were a little girl? Can you describe it?

PR: Yes, it was very, very nice. Like to me, it seemed so big. I went back to that village that I grew up that I thought it was the whole universe revolved around that little town and I was shocked to see how small it was. It was very nice because you knew everybody in your community and... this sense of community. Besides the fanatical, issues, it was a good feeling.

And at Baha'i community, we were about twelve Baha'i families, and we tried to live near each other to protect each other, because it is very hard when you are that kind of minority that everybody has this hatred towards you. You don't want to be singled out or live somewhere that you're isolated from your own community. So, we tried to live in the same actual street, almost, so all of the Baha'i family lived almost like both sides of this famous street in Quchan. So it was nice because we had that protection, and we had like almost a Baha'i community. We had about eight kids who were my age. So, we did a lot of things together.

You had this beauty of the nature that you could go hiking, we were very close to mountain and rivers. So really our childhood, besides other things, when we live in our own community, it was very nurturing and because we all were experiencing the same thing, we could talk the same language, which connected us more, in a sense. And the families were the same thing. For New Year's Day, all the women got together and baked cookie together, or they all did like, pickled things together. They buy everything in large quantity and make it together and then divide it. So really growing up was beautiful. All my memories, when I am really sad or I feel like kind of, "Agh!" sometimes you have those moments, I try to close my eyes for a few seconds and just remember those days that we were little, and the community was so protective, and it was very nice, actually. [Laughter]

KL: Okay. I am going to make one adjustment here.

PR: Okay.

KL: Okay, yes, so were there shops on the street?

PR: Yes, there were. There were little, little shops, and in Iran where I was growing up, there was no supermarket. I mean now, when I went back after thirty-five years, I might go out, I could not believe it, but when I was growing up, especially in that little little village, they were all specialty shops, so you couldn't go to one shop and do your shopping. You had to go to the butcher to get your meat, to have place to get your fruit, another place to get your bread. It all was all within walking distance and there was specifically a little little shop actually on our way to school that they sold nick knacks, so we always had to stop there to buy candy or in Iran it is very popular that we buy dried fruits like apricot or whatever. Those were our snacks. We didn't have any fancy really snacks. So, we would go to this shop and older man, eighty-six-year-old

who barely really, very old, he couldn't hear us sometimes, but he was very kind. So, we would do a little shopping or sometimes we all collect our money because maybe I didn't have enough money to buy something, but my friend did, so we put all of our money together and buy something and then divide it. So, all of those little things that we took for granted now it's such a nice memory when I look back. [Laughter]

KL: That must have been nice.

PR: Yes.

KL: And there was a school (inaudible)? You went to school as a little girl?

PR: Yes, I went.

KL: What was the school like?

PR: The school was nothing fancy like here. I mean usually the classroom was filled with the student, like forty fifty. If you were lucky you would be in a classroom of thirty students, but it was a lot of student in there, and we had to wear uniforms, which is really good. We didn't need to change or compete or anything. In Iran, the schools are not co-ed so we were all in all girls' school. You want some water?

KL: No, I am fine. Thanks.

PR: So, I went to an all-girls school and it was good. The only thing is that when in Iran like when you are in a classroom, usually one of the thing that the teacher would ask no matter what grade you are when they come in the first day in the school they ask who is not Muslim. This is a very generic question and they would ask whether you were in elementary school middle school or high school. I know for American mentality it's hard to fathom because, what does have to do with anything with student? You usually want their name and last name but nobody would ask what religion. So, they would say, "Who are not Muslim?" and always was not somebody who would hide who I am or what religion I would raise my hand or other kids too and then if you were Baha'i it would be different story, but if you were Jew or Christian you would be dismissed during the religious study, because you have to take a religious study, so you would be dismissed if you are Jewish or if you are Christian, but if you were the Baha'i, you had to attend it because they thought that you—that they are going to guide you to a straight path, and you have gone astray, and you were [Laughter] spiritual belief, so that wasn't important because of Baha'i they believe to all of the religion, so they teach about Koran and I mean most of the Baha'is most of the, I'm sorry...

[There is an interruption here as visitors come into the room]

KL: I am not interrupting your meal, am I?

PR: No, no, no, my friends, they don't have a garage, so he knows how to repair the car for himself, but because it is cold outside, we told them to come and use our garage because we are not using, that is why I told you to put the car there because they were in the garage repairing the car. They have so much formality, the garage is not really costing me anything, for you guys to

come and use the garage but they are so... they have lots of formality. So anyhow, where were we?

KL: You were talking about how religion was treated in the schools.

PR: Yes. So, if you were, like, we always had to go to those classes, but for us we always, when we attended those classes, we were always, our grade was A+ because we were taught at home about other religions. So, we knew what this Christianity, Judaism, and, some of our families were Muslim still, They didn't become Baha'i, so we were very much in touch with Islam.

But the problem attending those classes was the fact that they would disrespect us in their religious class. Like, they would, and we didn't have a right to say anything. So, they would say, "Oh the Baha'is are dirty," or "The Baha'i, they marry with their brother and sister." All kinds of things that were not true and you have to sit there. Imagine as a six-year-old, you really are not very strong in your religion or you don't have that much knowledge, but that much, that in your faith when your parents are telling you, that you have to be kind, you have to be honest, you have to be truthful and then people tell you all of this. It would break your heart to think, "How can they say that?" And so it was really very challenging and hard. Sometimes I would in my childhood, I would say, "Oh God if you're really true, do something right now." Because nothing else you can say to them that make them feel what you are saying is true. Because they are not accepting whatever you are trying to tell them. But as a child I was thinking with that some kind of, I don't know, something would happen, something falls or the lightning comes in, the—I don't know, in your mind you are thinking something would prove to them that what you are saying is really true. So, it really, I don't know. It just that... I can't even—

I'm 57 and sometimes I look at those times and I say, it's really hard because I wouldn't understand why, I was—looked Iranian and spoke the same language. I couldn't see the difference between me and any other kids. But just because of my religion I had to go through so much hardship and you don't fathom it, it just, I don't know. You cannot digest it. I guess.

KL: What was the attitude toward educating girls? Was there resistance to educating girls?

PR: Not really, I mean I don't really remember, but of course in Baha'i faith education is compulsory. Because Baha'u'llah the prophet/founder of Baha'i faith, brought the teaching that *only true education can get rid of the fanatical ideology* and actually in Baha'i faith, education of girls is priority. So if there is a family that have financial means to educate one of the children and they have a boy and a girl the preference goes to educating their daughter, because we believe that the primary educator of the children are women, and because we believe education is started from the time of conception, not at the time that the kids actually go to school, of the mother, from the time of conception, the education begins, and because mother carrying the child, so they are primary educators. So actually, the preference in Baha'i faith goes to girl, because we believe if the mother is educated the generation to come would be educated.

So, in Baha'i family we didn't have problem with that, and actually if the Baha'i family cannot educate their kid the Baha'i community have the responsibility the education of that child. So, we, so there is no excuse for any Baha'i family to have a child which is not educated because the community would pay, because it is so important. And I think that one of the reasons why we suffered more in Iran was because of that. Because our community was educated so most Baha'is had very high position, and because education was important many Baha'i family who had means they would send their kids out of the country and then they get their education and come back to Iran and so many of the factories many of the thing that was really first brought to Iran were brought to Iran by the Baha'is.

KL: Was there a different attitude towards educating women in the Islamic community?

PR: I can't say that, but if there was some resistance, it was from those community more than it was from minority community, and really Iran before revolution was very advanced country... like, education was important to everybody, so some segment of the community didn't have education because they lived in the area that there was no education, the small village that didn't have school, so they were, they didn't have access to education. And some, well, family that were very fanatical of course, they didn't want the girls to go to school. But majority of people in Iran were not against education, really. I mean very, I think maybe, very small number of people maybe they were against education of girl, but it wasn't rampant like it is in Afghanistan, not in Iran.

KL: What was Iran like under the Shah?

PR: Iran under the Shah, for Baha'is it was better, a little bit better but not that we didn't have hard time. Like for example my father was in army and he work in army for a long time but he never was promoted from where he was. He was never promoted to higher position because of the Baha'i. That was very common that once you got a job, they thought that they have done you a big favor, that even they have given you a job so now that you have a job, promoting you would never happen," unless you have your own businesses, like people who were doctors or engineers that they had their own company. But if you work for government, all things, you always had to deal with lot of discrimination, so even during the time of Shah, Baha'is were not really free, because at the same time that Shah, maybe westernized, or very open minded, but when it came, that people were criticizing, the religious community were criticizing Shah for giving revolutionary idea about woman, equality and all of that.

They would always portray that to the Baha'i faith. The would say these are Baha'i ideology westernized ideology and for Shah to separate himself from all of the things that rumored that maybe he has Baha'i ideology. Always now and then you would hear that there is some hardship to the Baha'i community because when my house was burned down in Shiraz it was during the transition, so Shah was still in Iran when five-hundred Baha'i homes were burned down to the ground.

KL: Now was that in 1979, or about?

PR: Yes. 1979. So we had to relocate, so really for Baha'i, from the time of the birth of Baha'i faith in 1844 to this day, really nothing has changed that much. Maybe sometime they better than other times, but we never had a good time, you know? Like in the beginning, two thousand Baha'i were executed, murdered, and even the prophet founder, of the Baha'i faith, forerunner of the Baha'i faith was executed in Iran. So, we never had an easy time in Iran in Baha'i religion. Even to this day we have about one hundred Baha'is in prison. The youth cannot vote for higher education in Iran. None of the Baha'i youth can vote for higher education, so we have created our own underground universities, so they study, our own universities, which is not recognized in Iran so they cannot get job with those documents, but they want to get educated. So, it has never been easy for our community.

KL: You said you built a house and in a few months later it was burned down?

PR: Yes.

KL: Can you tell me about that?

PR: It was in '79.¹ I told you that my father was in army so we travelled a lot, and my mother said that, "We have to take a year to make up our mind where we actually want to live for good." Then they decided to go to Shiraz because we were there for a few months and then my father was transferred to another city, and we all loved Shiraz. So, the consensus was after a year taking a break to go back to Shiraz. So, we went back to Shiraz and we were renting and then because my mother always bugged my dad that, "You have to build a home, and I don't care how big how small, how fancy, I just want a roof over my head," and my father finally bought a piece of land. My uncle who was in construction came and built us the most beautiful home. It was really beautiful, and my mom was so happy because she finally had this house that she wanted, and it was less than six months almost, I don't think it was a year, I think that it was around six months that they burned our home.

KL: What happened?

PR: Yes, I remember it was early morning, like it was maybe five thirty, six o'clock, somebody rang our bell and my father went and there was a young boy. He came and said to my father that they started burning Baha'i home from the north of the city, and he said, "We don't know how far they are going to go, but we wanted to make sure that Bahai family who have young girls are aware, so they take their daughters out of their home, because they didn't know what would happen if they attacked the home, what would happen." So, they came and said to

¹ See David Burnett, *44 Days: The Iranian Revolution*, <http://www.davidburnett.com/gallery.html?gallery=44+Days:+the+Iranian+Revolution>. Freelance photojournalist David Burnett has assembled a gallery of photos with captions documenting the revolution.

my father, that, because they knew us, they all knew the Baha'i community, we all knew each other. They said to my father, "Is better for you to take Parivash out of the house."

So, my father, after this guy left, my father came and said to my mom, and we all woke up now, because they woke us up, and said that, "This is what is happening. They say that they are burning Baha'i home, we don't know when, if they come here or not, but for safety." So, then my mother was saying, "Okay where to take her, because all people, most of the people that we can trust and we know are other Baha'is." So, my mother says, "Where can we take her because we don't know if she would be safe there." So then finally, my father, and my mother has a cousin who was at the university in Shiraz, so she lived in the dorm, so when my father said, "Oh the best place would be for us to take her there because nobody would go to burn the dormitory, it is a university nobody would do that." And that is what happened actually. My father took me there and I stayed with her.

It was in the evening when my father came back, he said our house was burned down. So actually, when he went back after he dropped me, he said when he went back to go to where we lived, he saw the smoke coming out of the house, and he at the time, my mother, my grandfather who was almost a hundred years old, and he lived with us, and then I had two brothers, so they lived, one was five years old and one was fifteen, so they were at the house.

My father said it was so many people, that crowd of people, that he couldn't actually drive to come to where we lived, so he parked his car in the street and he walked toward the house and he said when he saw the smoke and the crowd, he said that he froze in his place, and he thought that like his foot was rooted into the ground. He said he didn't have the power to lift his leg. He said he stood there and he just... felt that his tears were coming down...

KL: Are you okay? Do you want to take a break?

[There is a pause here as the recording is turned off and Parivash collects herself]

KL: So, it was shortly after that you went to India?

PR: That's right. So yes, when my father was saying that when he saw the crowd and the first thing in his mind was, what happened to my mother and his father and the kids? Because he thought probably they were inside when they burned the house and he said that really almost his heart almost stopped working, he felt, and then he heard my mother and he realized that they must be alive and he said that, "At that point I just accepted to stay there and not do anything," because I guess they were asking my mother to recant her faith. They were asking her, "If you do that we will call the fire department to set the fire to take care of your house." My mother at that point was telling them that, "This is my belief and you cannot change my belief, so if you want to burn my house, kill me, do whatever, I'm not going to change my belief."

So, at that point, my father knew that my mother is safe, and I guess what happened later on, I found out that they came and my mother said [anything of] value that were in the house they

took it. Like anything that was of value that they could carry, they carry that, and then my mother said, like, we had had a hutch with a lot of crystal and lot of things like that. She said that they took all of those, but they couldn't take the big cabinets so they threw it on the ground. And it was all we had, everything was, like ceramic and all of this, it made so much noise that my brother, five-year-old, I think he goes and hid himself in the closet because he was so afraid. To this day now he is forty-six years old man with two kids of his own, whenever he hears any big bang or big noise or fire, he really almost (inaudible) because memory of his childhood. So, my mother said that it was very barbaric the things that they did. You think, "Okay you want to burn our house," but in the midst of all this they were taking advantage of the stuff that was in the house. Removing the carpet, anything that was of value.

But then they asked my parents my mother and my brother and my grandfather to get out of the house. So, which was very good, they didn't burn the house while they were in there. So, they had to get out of the house barefoot in the winter. So, my hundred-year-old grandfather, in the cold and all that. But they were safe, nothing happened to them and then in the evening my father came because all of these houses, five hundred homes were burned. So, most of them they got together and travelled to places that they had relatives. So, we traveled to Isfahan, so my uncle and my aunt lived there.

But many people went to other places in Iran. My father sent my mother and two brothers with another family to Isfahan who were going to Isfahan, and he came with my grandfather and me, and then my mother's cousin who was at the university, we were worried about her too, because the situation was getting bad, and we didn't know. We thought, "Oh we better take her with us too." So, we took her with us and we went to Isfahan, and then she went back because it was in the middle of the university for her. We thought maybe for a week or something, she can take Sundays off to make sure everything is okay, and then she can go back, and that's all really, we did in a day.

Sometimes now I think that when they came to our home and said that it was a possibility, I could not fathom it, that it can really happen, otherwise I would have taken some valuables, books, pictures, I don't know, like, things that really, I mean my birth certificate. I don't know all of those things that you cannot replace what I mean, like pictures? But I could not believe that it would happen, and even in my mind I was thinking even if something like that would happened my neighbors wouldn't let it happen. Because my neighbors, we helped the neighbors. I don't know, if they needed anything at all, if in the middle of the night they had to go to the hospital, they come to us. If they had to travel and they had to give their kid they wouldn't give them to their Muslim neighbors, they would give them to us. So, I would not think that they would let this happen. That's why when I left home I didn't take anything with me, I just went, and then when my father came and said our house is burned down, I thought, "You must be kidding! You mean everything, everything we own is gone?!" My father said, "Everything we own is gone." I couldn't believe it. I was thinking, I wished like I would have taken that, oh I

wish I had, because I didn't think that It would be a reality. To this day sometimes I think, "Is this really a dream that it happened?" So, it was, it was very, unbelievable really.

KL: And then you went to India?

PR: Yes. I came, we moved to Isfahan and actually started going to high school, again, and then my uncle, when of course they heard that our house was burned, everybody came to see us, so my uncle came from northeast of Iran to see us and he had two girls at the university in Tehran and he said to my father, "You know, you better let Parivash go with my girls," because he decided to send the girls out of the country. So he came to my father and said, "I'm sending Neti and Nasri," his daughters, "and you try to send Parivash so the three of them can go to India." So, when revolution happened nobody would have thought that it would last long. Like, the rumors and then the country was, in six months, didn't get better, because nobody thought that religious, like figures, can run the country. They said they don't know anything about politics, they said no, and because we had a history of Iran before that Shah left and somebody was chosen democratically by Iranian[s] and then for whatever reason it wasn't something that everybody liked as an international community, the Shah came back, the same thing people thought, "Shah is coming back." So, we thought, "Okay we go to India, and in six months we go back to Iran."

KL: So, you did not think that it would be that long before you would go back?

PR: No, no. We didn't think, we thought it was six months. Because, but we knew that we cannot go for higher education, so that was the reason my uncle wanted us to leave Iran, that if in case is more than what they were calculating we are still can continue our education in a country like India. Yes.

KL: So that must have been a tense day for you, leaving Iran.

PR: Very much because, like I never entertained the thought of leaving Iran, because the wrong people that do, from the time they are kid they want to leave the country go to other countries [and] explore. I never had. I always wanted to stay in Iran close to my parents. So, it was really—I never was separated from my parents because I was still in high school. But my cousins they were like a few years—they moved to Tehran to go to university. So, they were already independent and on their own, but for me I always lived at home. This is the first time I am going to be away from my parents and it would be in another country, so it was really very intense, to make that decision and really, I didn't. I just did it because of my parents. Because I knew that they lost a home, they lost everything that they, they work for, and now they have to worry about me. So, I thought if I leave at least they have peace of mind and they don't need to worry about me. And that was the reason that really, I left, not because I wanted to leave. I wanted to give them a peace of mind in the midst of all these things that they had to think about.

KL: And where was it in India that you lived?

PR: We travelled a little bit in the beginning, because for one we had to get admission for college, because you could not stay in India if you are not a student, you have to have some reason to be in India, so we travelled a little bit and then finally we were able to get admission from college in Kerala, which is [most southern] state in India. So the three of us actually moved to Kerala and we went to university and the studying and that's how we end up in south actually, south India.

KL: And Kerala, you can you describe that for me?

PR: Yes, we lived in a city called Trivandrum and it is in Kerala. It's really a beautiful state. So, of course it was contrary to where I lived in Iran in the northeast, very warm, humid, lot of rain but you never see snow. So, it very tropical kind of, and we were near the ocean, beautiful. They were lots of tourists come, especially European because they had the area that it was famous for... I don't know how to describe it, but it was like people would say that the sun rises and I think set in the same spot, so people came from all over for that, I don't know, it was a specific time of the year that you could see all the Europeans come to Trivandrum to go to the ocean.

Beautiful people. Were amazingly kind and accepting, and in the south people are highly educated, actually. Like you see mostly with master degrees or doctorate and most of them speaking English and the papers are in English, because of course they were under British. I don't know somehow it seems that is more influence in the south.

But they were very traditional so they all wear sari, so wouldn't see people, people in the north people wear punjabi which is a top and bottom, you wear pants and long like dresses almost. So, you do see that in Kerala a lot. They are very much traditional wearing sari, and using lot of fresh flower for their hair and the food is very spicy. Spicier than in the north, and they use a lot of fresh coconut and because they are near the ocean, sea food. The food is to die for. In the beginning, it was very hard for us to get used to it, but then we would crave it all the time.

[Laughter] So I actually started making some Indian food and one of my cousins that we went to India got married actually, with a gentleman from Kerala. It was really nice time. We have very good memories of India.

People were very kind and of course, the diversity, and the color the culture, and it's surprising to people because many people think that India because it is near Iran, maybe we have a lot of similarity. It was hardest thing to get used to, that culture. I think that if I would have come directly to U.S. it would have come to U.S, it would have been a breeze. During time of Shah when I left I didn't need to wear veil, and very modern. In Iran, those times that those are growing up but of course in India the culture is completely different. The languages, the food is completely different than our food. Because Iranian food we don't use a lot of spices and this is drastically different. Even like stuff that you want to make your own food, it wasn't really available in India as much, so we have more similarity here than in India.

Although they are our neighbors, so it was, had a harder time, for example one of the funny thing when we were going to India we all cut our hair short. We thought. “Okay, we go to hot place, warm, and we don’t know where we are going, we better have short hair. Is easier for us to handle it. We don’t need to worry about it.” So, when came to India we noticed that people would look at us very differently in the south and we didn’t realize why, and then after a while one of our Indian friends from Kerala said, “Why because this is not a good sign when you have short hair. Is not good woman would have short hair.” Or, for example, in Iran it’s okay to show your leg, to wear a skirt, not now, but when I was there. In India, it’s not good. But like in India, it’s okay to show your belly but not in Iran, it’s not good to show your belly.

So, we had these—because whatever we brought [from] Iran [we were]- scared to dress with our legs showing, so we would go out shopping and everybody would look at us and we were center of attention, and we would say, “Why?” We were thinking something is the matter with the way the way that—we knew that—so we finally realized that it’s because it’s not good to show your legs. So very quickly we actually just bought saris, all of us, the three of us and then all problem was that, in that community, there were Iranians who didn’t like it, that we wore sari because our belly was exposed, but finally, really, we were thinking, “When at Rome, do as Romans do.” We thought, “We have to go to school, we cannot every day our hassle with that people looking at us and we get uncomfortable. The best thing to be, just change, just the clothes.” You know, and it’s nothing against, the ideology that we have. It made our lives so much easier, and we grew our hair, and we never wore earrings, but it’s very customary in India, you wear [them], so if you don’t have [them], they feel pity for you. “Why don’t they have these earring or jewelry?” So actually, our first, we pierced our ears, the three of us, at the later age in life because we wanted to be accepted (inaudible). [Laughter] Pierced at age nineteen! Twenty, and twenty-four, we pierced our ears. After I left India I never really wore earrings, but when I was there I would.

KL: Now did you speak English before you left?

PR: No, no we didn’t no.

KL: So, you learned English in India?

PR: In India. You know, in Iran they teach English so we knew the alphabet. We could read and write, but we didn’t know what we are writing or reading, you know what I mean? So, we could read. It wasn’t that we had to learn everything from scratch. But the conversations, we didn’t have, but my two cousins who were at university they knew little bit because of the university, it’s somehow, it’s more advanced, and you have the opportunity to practice a little bit. But definitely learned it when we lived in India.

It was so funny even we would go shopping and sometimes, because in India not everything is there if you go to market. If you go to store to the shop, something is hidden, so if you can’t see it, you don’t know what to say to the shop keeper, so we used to always keep one thing. Like, if we have potato, we always make sure we save one, so when we go shopping we go with a full

bag of stuff to show or sometimes we draw, I remember one time we wanted the egg and we couldn't for the life of us tell the shop keeper that, "We want egg." So finally, my cousin said, "Bok bok bok bok!" [imitates chicken]. She made all of these noises of all of these things, so finally after a few minutes the guy said, "Oh!" So, he brought chicken for us and we say, "No!" Finally, "Ohhh!" So, he brought the egg, even, shopping was an adventure for us. It was funny that we would go with a basket full of stuff just— like a show and tell, "We want this." It was funny.

KL: That is a pretty good solution.

PR: But then we learned later on we have to take paper and pencil, we could draw because after you experience life, you learn so we learn to go not with the stuff, sometimes but with pen and paper to draw, because it was easier. We needed the basket to bring the stuff back, but when it was full, because we wanted to show them it was harder to [go] shopping.

KL: Now were you in India when Indira Gandhi was assassinated?

PR: Yes, we were.

KL: Do you remember that?

PR: Yes. It was a really horrible time. Because when that happened actually we were traveling, oh we were traveling to come to New Delhi where Indira Gandhi died, assassinated. We were coming to New Delhi, and of course they said that the Sikh was responsible for, so they would come to the they stopped the bus or if you were in the train and they would stop it, and they would pull out all of Sikhs out of the bus or out of the train. So really some of the things we saw, too hard to even to explain but it was a hard time. A very hard time because the same thing they were pouring kerosene over the Sikhs and put them in fire or do horrible thing, because they thought, yes...²

KL: These were things you witnessed?

PR: My husband witnessed that, not me, but I witnessed the fact that they pulled them out of the bus. They come in and whoever is Sikh, and they knew, they would bring them out. It was hard time.

KL: Now you met your husband in India, is that right?

PR: In India, yes. Yes. I met him in India. He didn't go to India because of persecution. He was in an engineering program in Tehran University and he decided to go to India for education, so he left Iran in '76 so three years before revolution, yes. Yes, so sometimes it's funny he tells me that, "You escaped the hand of the regime and you fell into my hands in India."

²See *India Today*, November 30, 1984, "The Violent Aftermath," <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/indira-gandhis-assassination-triggers-off-unprecedented-backlash-of-violence/1/310824.html>

KL: Tell me about when you met him.

PR: Yes, I met him actually it was funny, we were attending a conference and then it happened because, we were all student, we didn't have much money because sometimes the government of Iran would prevent for the money to come out of the country, so it was, we had hard time so, that's why when we travelled we always stayed with people that we knew, they were Baha'i. They knew us, they say, "No no no, don't go to a hotel come to our house." So, when I wanted to attend this conference, I was staying with the family, who at the time I didn't know that they were related to my husband, so they were also coming, he was coming with his sister to stay with them and three four of us were going from Kerala to their house as well to these people home so that's how for the first time we met.

Actually, I thought he and his sister, they were so good together, like his sister would take care of everything he needed. Iron his shirt and pants, and I thought oh this probably is his wife. I didn't know [Laughter] that it was his sister. Then later on, "No I'm not!" "Are you newly married?" She said, "No it is my brother!" So, we met there and actually that's how, it started and then we were far away I was at Kerala and he was in Pradesh, which is far away, three days almost to get there, so we communicated a lot by letter. And those days it would take a month for my letter to get there and his letter to get to me, for a month, that's how we continued for a year or something and then we got married. Yes.

KL: Now one thing I am curious about when you were in India, you studied business and economics, and now you work as a nurse?

PR: Yes.

KL: I am curious how that happened.

PR: Yes, so in India I studied that, and we came here, and it wasn't really, I mean, you know, you cannot get job really with degree in economics, unless I mean you continue to be PhD or something, and when I was in Iran I wanted to study law. So then when revolution happened and I came to India, we were in state of, we didn't know, we wanted to go back in the beginning, we were not really thinking seriously what we wanted to study, and then when I went to college, I didn't want to study law because I knew I need to be fluent in whatever language, and I wasn't, so I studied that. Came here and I knew that I cannot get an employment with that, and I didn't want really, at that time, I wasn't really thinking of law either because I was thinking I have now daughter, my daughter was born, and I wanted to study something where job was guarantee, and now we have to work, we have to build a life for this child, and for us, so I couldn't like, study whatever. So that's why I went to nursing because I thought, "Okay if I become a nurse, it would be my job is guaranteed," And... Then it is a job that I'm really service oriented. I was thinking I need to do that because my husband, in India, he was doing his PhD in cooperative banking, so when we came here, it was like nothing to here, so he had to go back to his school to get his some for engineering, because he couldn't do anything with that credit that he brought form

India. So it wasn't easy. We had to rebuild everything again, even our life, but our education, everything.

KL: I want to stop for a minute and make sure that you are okay.

PR: I'm okay.

KL: Now your brother came to you—First of all, I want to, as when you came to the U.S., you came to California first?

PR: Yes, I went to California because if you have relative, the process would be shorter. But if you didn't have a sponsor, then they had to find somebody that was willing to take you in. So sometimes they would take longer, so because I had an uncle in California, all process of coming here was really short. So, we went to California. Actually, there was a huge Iranian community in California. Like, if I would remain in California, I would be in this small Iranian community within the U.S.. And I didn't want that. I didn't want. I said, "I have come to America, I want to assimilate into the community, now, what if it that I come from there and then I still am involved with my own community, so, what is this?" [laughter] So, I didn't like that idea. Not my husband, or me didn't like that because we thought that "No. We have to build our home here because this is our home." And I want to tell you that truly, we always, every single day if not once, you know more than once, we thank God to be here because when I was in Iran, although I am Iranian, but I was never respected as a human being in my own country. I was born there, everything that was there familiar to me, the language, everything but I never felt that I belonged because I have no respect as a human being in my country.

In India, I knew that I was there just for short period of time because we were still thinking we go back, and then when it was finalized we are not going back, we knew we cannot stay there because they don't need more immigrant. They didn't have any program to support the immigrant, so when we came to America, at age I think was, when I came here I was twenty-four, for the first time in my life I felt I'm human. Like I was born, really, I always say I was born in America because that was the time I realized, "Oh my God, this country, as long as I'm law obedient and I'm productive and I'm not harmful to the community, I am no different than any other American who was born here. The only qualification is that I have to contribute, and I have to live my life on my own to support myself." Otherwise really, I mean, I don't know, I don't consider sometimes, like, I know I was born in Iran, but really, my home is here. Because that's where people give me respect. I'm free if I want to go have any education. If I want I bought a home, okay as long as I pay my mortgage, nobody say you cannot because you are Iranian or you are Baha'i, you know so it's really amazing place to be, and every single day there is not a day that goes by and my husband and I don't look at each other and feel so thankful to be here really, it's just amazing.

KL: There are a lot of people going around saying, "We don't like immigrants. We don't want any more immigrants." How do you deal with that?

PR: It doesn't bother me, because I feel sometimes maybe that is out of ignorance, but sometimes unfortunately that's because of the individual experience of the immigrant. So, I feel sometimes immigrant, we have a responsibility to prove it wrong, and I, so many times, because I feel, okay, if for example I decided to come to this country. I knew everything about this country, especially America is nothing that nobody knows anything everybody knows everything about America, so nothing is hidden. So even with this knowledge I come and I accept to come to this country I need to be law obedient, so I choose to come here. There are other countries I could have chosen if I didn't like the rules and regulations in America. I could have chosen some other countries that maybe, it would be more in line with what I do, or I want to do.

So sometimes I feel, an immigrant community, we have to take that responsibility, and I know so many people say, "oh no." But who's community also, I think it is a two-way street, but I think some of that responsibility falls more heavily on the immigrant community. They have to prove that they have come here to make it their home, and they want to you know, get education, they want to work, and they want to contribute to the community. I think that this is very normal in a global community, this is, if you do all of those things, I think there is always room for you. Because I don't think that Americans, I feel Americans are very, just, in many cases, so even if it isn't American who would not contribute to the betterment of the community, or whatever that is the same situation. It's not because we are immigrant and they are American, it is not. I mean ultimately, I think you are looking to see the community that is productive, and it is positive, and advancing the civilization. So, I really—I don't know I feel that we have definitely have immigrant community, have responsibility.

KL: Now your brother came to the U.S. as well?

PR: Yes.

KL: And you have not seen him for a long time?

PR: At all. I haven't seen him at all when he came, because when I left I had two brothers, and then when I left I think, two years—no, three, four years later my mom got pregnant with him. So, he was born and I never saw him. I never saw my brother till he came here. So he was only two years older than my daughter when he came, and it was so funny, not funny, but it was, I was very, tense because I didn't know, I never see him. I have nothing that I shared with him. No holiday. No birthday. It was really, was really weird to see him for the first time. But [the] amazing thing is that I think, just knowing that he is your brother, as soon as I saw him I felt, "Okay he is my brother." Other than that, I didn't have any memory, because that was the first time I'd seen him. I think he was twenty-one or twenty-two when I saw him for the first time.

KL: That must have been strange.

PR: It was very strange. Yes, and for him too. And the brother that I have in Iran, that when I left he was five years old, you know for the longest time I would talk to him like he was a five

years old, and one time when he was married, and he has his own daughter, I was talking to him in the same way, and he said to me, “You know, I’m married and I have a child and you are still talking to me.” I said, “I know. I don’t know why because that was last image of you I have. That’s what, I will always think you are that five-year-old, but of course you have grown and married and have kid, but for me, that image is stuck in my mind.”

KL: And you went back to Iran recently, did you not?

PR: Yes, I went back after thirty-five years actually two years ago, I went to Iran and that was a quite an experience because I left Iran in ’79, so really my culture froze in ‘79 because I never went back to the defrost it. So going after thirty five years to a culture that is so drastically different than thirty five years ago was very shocking. Because when I left Iran, I didn’t need to wear veil. Now I have to go back to Iran, I have to be conservative, I have to wear veil... all of these things and then, not only the culture has changed you know even the language have been revolutionized, because it’s more Islamic so there is more Arabic words in their language. Then because of the technology, when I left there was no computers or cell phone, or all of these things. So now they have to create words for all of this technology that have been developed since I left Iran. So many of these words, I don’t know what they are. Like they say like a computer in Persian, and I say, “What is that?” or “Cell phone,” “What is that?” So, a lot of the change was drastic, and of course, like the older generation that I knew when I went back to Iran, they are all gone.

Like my grandparents, great aunt and uncle, and then then new generation who are thirty-five and younger, I don’t know them. Because when I left, they were born, so I mean it’s really hard, like, if somebody would introduce me, “This is so and so, daughter of your cousin, or son of your cousin.” “Okay.” Like you have no connection so really, I was saying to somebody, it’s like all your landmarks are disappeared. You go there and you say “Okay who is here that I can connect to?” Because my friend that that I had they all went out of Iran, and few of them were executed during revolution in ’82. Some of my friends who worked in different community were executed in Shiraz. So, they were executed, some left Iran. So I go back it’s not that I go to the home that I was grown in you my house was burned so I go to a new city that my parents moved [to] and I had no recollection I never—I mean this is a house that I had no memory [of]. I go, “Okay, this is the living room.” It wasn’t that I went to the house and I said, “Oh, this was my bedroom we sat here for New Year or we went here shopping or I went there nothing like it really was so strange and then you realize although you don’t want to, you realize you don’t belong, because nothing connects you there, nothing. Like, it’s just a very strange feeling. Although, that, in your mind you know that when you have been absent from a place for thirty-five years, you know that you probably are little uncomfortable, but when you go there you realize that it is more than uncomfortable, it is just, you have been out of the picture, so there is no place for you, now you go back and you can’t fit anywhere in this. It really, it’s hard when you realize it, but I think that there is a realization give you peace of mind, at the same time that you realize, okay it feels you

finalize something, that you carried with you all these years and say, “Oh maybe, maybe, maybe,” or “if,” and go there and say, “Okay.” It’s hard but I have to accept it.

KL: That must have been a very strange feeling. I want to go back for just a moment to your childhood, again, and pick up something that you mentioned, you mentioned making cookies.

PR: Yes.

KL: Were there holidays where you did special things?

PR: Yes. Yes.

KL: Can you tell me?

PR: Nowruz is the new year in Iran and some part of Russia and China and Afghanistan. But for Baha’i community, Nowruz has a religious significance. Because Baha’is start fasting from second of March and till twenty-first of March, so really twenty first of March is end of our fast, but also the beginning of our new year. So traditionally it’s not a religious—these cookie and things, traditionally in Iran, for Nowruz there are things that happened, you always have to buy a brand-new shoe, brand new dress, everything new, and then cookies are special food that you prepare for Nowruz, for cookies, you know what I mean? I’m talking about almost fifty years ago so it wasn’t that where we were, there were pastrie store, you couldn’t buy anything ready-made and if there was they were very expensive and if you lived on a budget, so you wouldn’t spend a lot of money for things like that. It was a luxury item, so they baked their own cookies especially for Nowruz, there were special cookies that the women come together and make, like cookies that ware made form chickpea powder, or rice powder. or almond powder or walnut powder, something like that. So they would buy this in bulk, the Baha’i community ten, eleven families, women come buy that, and they have one day that they all make all of these cookies together.

It was so funny because one of the tradition of Nowruz is that the younger people would have to visit the older people, as respect. So, you would always, the first person you would see, would be the oldest person in the family. So, you start with [the] oldest and you just go down to the youngest, so the youngest family member usually was your last to visit, so it was too funny because we would go, and we always had the same cookies everywhere we went because we all made it together! That much of variety, everywhere we went the same typical cookie.

[Laughter] It was funny but we had fun.

We had fun. Like they would make tomato paste. They cook tomato paste together or jam or different jams, so they bought all of the these. For example, I don’t know, fig or cherry that we all help clean or cut or peel and then the older people would cook it, and once its cooks, it is distributed. But it was so fun because you would peel and eat, or you know, and just, as kids would have so much fun. They would buy this, buy this big big feta cheese—[In] Iran [it] comes in big pieces, huge, so they buy it and when they buy it fresh, it doesn’t have any salt. Just big

huge feta cheese. So they buy these, I don't know fifty or sixty of this huge pieces of feta cheese, and then they put salt and water, and they cut these, and put it there, so we always look for it. We loved it before it was salty. So they buy all of this before they all get together, we all kids go and cut pieces and run away, things like that of children. We really were looking forward to all of these occasions.

KL: I always tell my wife that I am doing quality control. [Laughter]

PR: Yes, quality control. Before and after. We did. Yes. It was fun. [Laughter]

KL: What did you find most difficult to adjust to in the U.S.?

PR: In the U.S.? One of the biggest thing that it was, that we have so many choices, like that adjusting to, that was very hard. Like you go, for example, to grocery store and you want to buy just yogurt, and if you are not aware that there are this many yogurt, you would be in trouble because I remember my first experience, I made Indian food and it required yogurt, and in the food, of course, you make this yogurt because the Indian food is spicy. You always have yogurt to subside the spiciness. So, you put—cook, tomato, onion, things in the yogurt. So I was in hurry. I go to Hannaford, I think it was. I go and I grab this yogurt that I was thinking it was plain yogurt. I come home and it was vanilla yogurt, and I was so upset, because I put it in my mixture, and I taste it to taste if it is salty enough, and I realize, “Oh my god, this is vanilla yogurt!” I was furious! [Laughter] You cannot go shopping in hurry in America because you have choices.

There, you want yogurt, the only yogurt is plain yogurt. You want feta cheese, that's the only one. Here, you want just cream cheese? Pineapple, chai, this, that, and so many! I mean, oh my god, it's just so much stuff! Sometimes I walk, today, as a matter of fact, I was walking in Shaw's, and I was saying “Oh my god, of all the things! All these things, and this is only one store! This is one of many in Portland area, that we have!” So much stuff, oh it just, that is I think the hardest thing, that plenty of everything, but otherwise everything else is really very easy to get used to; freedom and all of that thing.

KL: You have been very generous with your time. I appreciate you taking some of this time with me. I do want to ask if there is anything you want to tell me about, that I have not thought about to ask, that I might be overlooking?

PR: Oh, no, not really, I don't know if you think that there is something that you...

KL: No, I have not.

PR: Because you cannot...

KL: I have enjoyed talking with you.

PR: Oh, thank you!

KL: It's been a pleasure

PR: Thank you so much; same here. It was really nice to have the opportunity.

KL: You have been so generous with your time.

PR: Oh no, that's okay. I would be happy any time to talk to people and share their stories.

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