THE AFGHAN EXODUS: ORAL HISTORIES OF AFGHAN REFUGEES DURING THE 1980'S SOVIET OCCUPATION OF AFGHANISTAN

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PROJECT

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Abstract

THE AFGHAN EXODUS: ORAL HISTORIES OF AFGHAN REFUGEES DURING THE 1980’S SOVIET OCCUPATION OF AFGHANISTAN

by

Aideen Aisha Rahimi

Statement of Problem:

Afghans for most of recorded history have been an isolated and non-migratory people. This began to change in the late 1970’s when the government’s shift to communism and the Soviet invasion in December 1979 caused more than half of the population in Afghanistan to flee and eventually scatter all over the world. Many Afghans immigrated to the United States, and as with many immigrants before them Afghans are beginning to change the culture of America by mixing their traditions with the culture of their new home. This project involves recording the experiences of some of these Afghan refugees as they fled Afghanistan and as they settled in the United States.

Sources of Data:

Oral histories were obtained from interviews with four Afghan refugees who emigrated during this historical period of Afghan exodus in the 1980’s. Two of the interviewees are family members of the author. Secondary materials were obtained from the California State University Libraries and from the online archives of local and national periodicals and journal resources.

Conclusions Reached:

This project provides additional research material for scholars interested in the events surrounding the migration of Afghans during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The project successfully recorded and preserved individual experiences to complement written documentation regarding the flight of Afghans to Pakistan and then to the United States.

__________________________, Committee Chair
Christopher J. Castaneda

__________________________
Date

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my mother, Bibi Rahimi. Without her help this project would not have been possible and without her courage I would not be here today.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this project, *The Afghan Exodus: Oral Histories of Afghan Refugees during the 1980’s Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan*, evolved out of the author’s own experience as an Afghan immigrant and her family’s migration journey from Soviet occupied Afghanistan. Initially, the author was somewhat apprehensive about including her family in the project, but the research into the history of Afghanistan and the circumstances surrounding the 1980’s Soviet invasion revealed the consistency with which her family’s emigration story echoes the Afghan refugee experience at large. The focus of this study is around two families, a total of four people, residing in the Bay Area who agreed to be interviewed for the project. The two female narrators, Bibi Rahimi and Alia Alcoza, are of the older generation, and were interviewed in Dari (the Afghan dialect of Farsi, the Persian language) and their interviews transcribed in English. The two male narrators who are sons of the female narrators, Sayed Rahimi and Mohammed Alcoza, were interviewed in English.

The author’s interest in conducting an oral history project of Afghan immigrants began while taking an oral history course in 2007 in the Sacramento State Public History Program. There she began to understand the usefulness of oral histories to researchers of historic events.

Afghanistan has received a lot of attention in the past few decades, mainly in the form of journalism but also in literature, science, and art. Some has also been in the form of creative oral history projects of Afghan refugees. There is, for example, the impressive
California Afghan Artists Oral History Series, a project launched by the University of California, Berkeley’s Regional Oral History Office, which records the experiences of some of the most significant Afghan artists residing in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Berkeley project addresses the refugee community, which draws its roots from the events of the late 1970’s in Afghanistan, and focuses on the important role of California as the site of the reconstruction of Afghan art and culture in the U.S. However, the primary creative interests of Afghanistan have been journalistic; such as the very poignant documentary, View from a Grain of Sand, filmed in 2001 and shot in refugee camps of north-western Pakistan and war torn Kabul. Seen through the perspective of three Afghan women, it is the story of international intervention, war and the rise of political Islam, which have stripped Afghan women of their freedom over the last thirty years. ¹ Despite the attention that Afghanistan has received, the practice of oral history has been largely unexplored, which urged the author to pursue such a project.

While conducting research the author began to develop the focus of the project on issues surrounding four themes: the social, political, and economic reasons behind Afghanistan’s conflict and exodus; the refugee movement from Pakistan to the United States; assimilation to America; and women’s part in the conflict. These themes helped the author better understand the social structure and the climate in Afghanistan that led to the Afghan exodus and to life in America.

Significance of Project

Afghanistan has seen many invaders in its ancient and modern history. Its geopolitical significance as a crossroads in the middle of central Asian, which connects India, Iran, Eastern Europe, Russia, China, and the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, has attracted many world powers over time. The people of this region rose up and revived their country’s independence after each invasion. Such resistance and revival are characteristic of Afghan history. Varying ethnic tribes and diverse people have migrated into Afghanistan seeking refuge in its isolated and protective terrain but rarely ventured out. Emigration starting in the late 1970’s to the 90’s, however, marked the first large-scale exodus from Afghanistan. Nearly all of the world’s Afghan population had resided in Afghanistan until the rise of communism in the Afghan government. Due to the internal conflict and the war with the Soviet Union in the 1980’s, Afghans became the single largest refugee group, accounting for approximately 5 million refugees in 1987, which was more than half of the world’s refugee population and over one-third of the total population of pre-war Afghanistan.2

Objectives of Project

There are many benefits to conducting an oral history project for such a topic. According to Donald Richie and the oral history community at large, “oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex – more interesting.”3 As mentioned above, the interest and attention given to topics surrounding the events in Afghanistan are

sizeable, but oral histories of ordinary Afghan Americans which can give the topic much
more human depth are rare. Oral Historian Valerie Yow tells us that deep layers of our
thinking are revealed when recounting events, and even when narrators recount wrong
dates, for example, they might be revealing something more important about their
cultural development. 4

Despite the country’s past as a cultural crossroads, after the Soviet invasion and
nearly four decades of armed conflict later, Afghanistan today evokes only images of
dangerous fanatic tribes and the mistreatment of women. Conducting oral histories of
Afghans such as the ones completed for this project will contribute to the understanding
of this complicated people, especially as they become assimilated in American society.
The memories recorded in this project give a unique view into the first Afghan
immigrants and the circumstances that led to their escape from their homeland.

The goals of this project are to record high quality oral history accounts of Afghan
immigrants to the United States; to provide current and future historians with better
insight into the historical period of the first Afghan immigration to the United States; and
to give voice to ordinary people who found themselves in extraordinary situations and
whose story would otherwise be lost to history.

**Research Method**

The author began this project by broadly researching Afghanistan’s political
history from its inception as a constitutional monarchy in 1919 to the end of the Soviet /
communist regime in 1992. For the specific scope of this project however, the author paid

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special attention to the 1978 coup that brought the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to power and the subsequent invasion and occupation by the Soviet Union in December 1979 that caused the mass exodus over the next decade.

_Afghanistan_, by Louis Dupree, is regarded as the standard text on the history of Afghanistan prior to the Soviet invasion, and the author used this book as the main secondary source for the political and social changes in Afghanistan during the early 20th century. For information on the climate of Afghanistan during the rise of Afghan communism and the Soviet involvement, two specific sources were consulted: the prominent Afghan historian, Hasan Karkar’s _Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982_, and a more recent work titled _Afghanistan: Mullah’s, Marx, and Mujahid_ by Ralph Magnus and Eden Naby. Articles written by the historians mentioned above and other Afghan historians such as Kathleen and John Merriam, Grant Farr, and David Edwards provided for deeper analyses of Afghan-Soviet relations.

The author began to see that women played a much larger role than she was initially aware. Many of the imprudent radical social reforms enforced by the communist Afghan government, concerned forced unveiling and educating of women, which touched the sensitive core of the tribal and patriarchal social order of Afghanistan and some argue caused the resistance. This theme was present in almost every source used. _Disposable_

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People? The Plight of Refugees and Afghan Resistance by Judy Mayotte proved to be an excellent source on Afghan immigrants, especially pertaining to Afghan women.\textsuperscript{6}

Articles that focused on Afghan refugees and migration patterns provided statistical information on the numbers of Afghans immigrating to the United States. The sociological study by Maliha Zulfacar, Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany supplied crucial social statistical data of Afghan refugees in the United States.

While conducting the research for the historical context, the author also set to develop a plan to for the oral history interviews. The author consulted many of the oral history study guides and literature from her oral history course. Valerie Yow’s book, Recording Oral History provided much of the basic techniques in conducting oral history and a was also great source on the discussion of memory. Doing Oral History, by Donald Ritchie was used for oral history guideline as well as the online “Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History,” by Judith Moyer. The Oral History Reader, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson was visited for discussions on deeper theoretical and methodological issues from a variety of oral history projects.\textsuperscript{7}

Chapter 2

ORAL HISTORY METHODOLOGY

Developing and Completing an Oral History Project

To begin and complete the oral history project, four basic steps were followed: first, the author obtained narrators for the interviews; second, she prepared for the interviews by contacting the narrators for a basic profile and making lists of questions for the interviews; third, she conducted the interviews; fourth, she transcribed and edited the recordings.

Although oral historians leave room for innovation and imagination in developing and conducting oral history projects, basic principles and standards in the process are there for good reason. The steps accounted above set a basic guideline, the details within the steps, however, can differ from project to project.

Obtaining Narrators

The inclusion of the author’s own family members sets this project apart from traditional oral history studies that often include complete strangers or acquaintances. Valerie Yow suggests one begins by conducting preliminary research through texts written on the topic and to find individuals involved with the topic.8 The author knew from the start of the project that the best “gatekeepers” would be members of her own family. The author’s mother, Bibi Rahimi and her eldest brother, Sayed Rahimi, are very much involved with the Afghan community in the Bay Area and expressed eagerness to be interviewed as well as help find others. During her oral history course, the author had

8 Yow, Recording Oral History, 69.
interviewed one of her brothers, Mehmud (Moe) Rahimi and although his transcript is not included in the final project, his interview was nonetheless the springboard for the project.

Getting e-mails and phone numbers of Afghan family friends from Sayed Rahimi, the author sent out approximately four e-mails explaining the project and including the mission statement (Appendix A). Unfortunately, the responses she received were all negative. This reluctance to be interviewed was not only a sign of the importance of privacy within the Afghani people, but is also a common problem encountered by oral historians when working on sensitive projects that are political in nature and/or involve recounting trauma. Gay activist and oral historian, Horacio N.R. Ramirez, in his essay, “Memory and Mourning: Living Oral History with Queer Latinos and Latinas in San Francisco,” came against such reluctance and “great trepidation among potential narrators...about what it would mean...to tap into memories that centered on suffering, pain, and death.” 9 Finding narrators willing to discuss their traumatic experiences, therefore, became quite difficult as it also did for the author.

Upon her mother’s suggestion the author made an appointment at the Mount Diablo Adult Day Care Center in Concord where the weekly meetings and events for the Center for Empowering Afghan Immigrant Women are held. She put together a short speech relating the mission of the project and giving details on the interview process. The speech was given in Farsi because many of the Afghan women present did not speak

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English. She ended her speech by asking for volunteers and received only confused and apprehensive looks. The instructor of the Afghan program consoled the immigrant women by telling them that they could trust the author because she is Afghan like them and wants to help the Afghan community. With the encouragement from the instructor, two of the nine or so women present agreed to be interviewed. One of the volunteers however lost interest after the author contacted her to set up an interview. She said her daughters advised against doing the interview and she no longer felt comfortable. We are reminded by Valerie Yow that many surprises and/or set backs can arise in obtaining and meeting possible narrators. She stresses the importance of preliminary meetings, however brief, in building rapport with potential narrators in order to be less of a stranger. In the case of the Afghan woman who decided against being interviewed, simply meeting the author would not be enough. The author made additional efforts by getting one of her daughter’s addresses and sending her a letter and the mission statement, but did not receive a response.

Over the course of 2009, the author arranged interview dates with the narrators she had obtained. During her interview with Alia Alcoza her youngest son who had come by for a visit also agreed to be interviewed for the project. Taking the advice of Donald Ritchie on welcoming “innovation and imagination,” the author decided to make the project a comparison of the two families, rather than her initial plan of the project

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10 Yow, Recording Oral History, 92.
consisting of Afghans from the four various ethnic tribes: Pushtun, Tajik, Uzbeck, and Hazarah. The narrator’s belong to the Pushtun and Uzbeck group.  

In preparation for each scheduled interview the author typed up and printed out a list of questions based on the four focused themes of the project. During preliminary phone conversations and during the interviews she gathered enough information to fill out a Biographical Sketch (Appendix B) of each narrator to better formulate interview questions and also to include with the transcription.

**Conducting Interviews**

Doing everything possible to make the narrator feel at ease helps in building rapport and in establishing the “character of the relationship between interviewer and narrator.”  This was why the interviews were all conducted at the narrator’s home where the comfort of being in their own surroundings helped the narrators feel more at ease when recounting personal memories. The interviews were conducted in Walnut Creek, Concord, and Tracy. The project was mainly confined to the East Bay Area of the greater San Francisco Bay Area because of the difficulty of obtaining Afghan immigrants willing to be interviewed as well as the author’s lack of funding for travel.

To each interview, the author brought with her a hand held digital recorder and fresh batteries, along with an extra set of batteries, a pad of paper and a pencil for note taking, and a short list of questions to be covered. She came to each interview with the intention of letting the narrators take the interview in the direction in which they felt comfortable and tell the stories they most wanted to tell, while leaving room for

11 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 16.  
impromptu questions brought on by the narrator’s reflections. In fact, Yow concludes that “people, whether young or old, remember what is important to them.” After the first two interviews she felt this was the best method as it made the narrators comfortable in revealing their story, and along with a few open-ended questions the author noticed most of the questions on her list were elaborated upon without being asked. 13

Memory is a primary issue when it comes to oral history and when asked open-ended questions within the topic, the narrators, especially the aged, are given the chance to recall what is important to them. Sufficient time has also past since the events the narrators were asked to recall, which may seem ironic but memory is at its best after the first five years. Much is forgotten in the early years but recalled easily after fifty years or more. The narrators in this study were recalling events that were at least 20 years ago.

The interviews began after the author explained again the scope of the project and after finding the most comfortable area of the narrators’ home that lessened the chances of background noise picked up by the digital recorder. With the exception of Mohammed Alcoza’s interview, all of the other interviews were recorded with minimal interference. Mr. Alcoza’s interview was conducted at his mother’s apartment, and she would occasionally come into the living room to clean. The two women narrators had both immigrated to the United States in their 50’s and 60’s and overtime learned to speak English at an elementary level and therefore they were interviewed in Farsi. The other two narrators were interviewed in English.

After each interview, the narrators were given a release form to sign (Appendix C). The form was created based on examples taken from Yow’s book, *Recording Oral History*. The author explained that the interviews and transcripts would be available at the California State University, Sacramento’s library and could be used by researchers. Bibi Rahimi and Sayed Rahimi were able to contribute photographs to be included with their interviews, which provide great visual perspective on their lives in Pakistan and the changes as they assimilated to American life. In their hasty escape from Afghanistan because they had to pack light and many of those photographs were left behind.

**Transcribing and Editing Interviews**

The last part of the oral history project was the long process of transcribing. After completing each of the interviews the author transcribed the digital audio. She used a laptop computer and the digital recorder’s software to listen at a slow rate and type the conversation verbatim, frequently stopping and rewinding to listen closely to difficult or garbled areas and to catch up with the typing. The transcription took anywhere from six to eight hours depending on the length of the interview.

After the completion of each transcription the author listened to each interview again to make sure the transcript accurately reflected the audio recording. She then edited the transcript by removing the false starts and filler words such as “umm.” She also edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and the general flow of sentences. Noise, laughter and distractions were put in brackets. This mild editing was done in the hopes to make the transcripts readable to future researchers. There are differing views to the editing approach in the oral history community, but many historians such as Valerie Yow, Jean-
Pierre Wallot and Normand Fortier suggest the level of editing based on the needs of the project, the audience, and how the author wishes to present the transcripts. Although there are merits to verbatim transcript writing, which gives the reader every nuance of speech in place of listening to the recordings, for the purposes of this project, the author wanted to present the narrator’s stories with light editing for ease of reading. She also included a brief transcript summary / table of contents before each transcript for the ease of finding specific topics discussed in the often long interviews.

Each interview are digitally recorded on compact discs and will be placed in the CSUS library. All table of contents of the transcripts, biographical sketches, release forms are included with each interview transcription.

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Chapter 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Origins of Communist Power in Modern Afghanistan

In order to understand the Afghan exodus, one must start with the emergence of the communist power in Afghanistan, which has its roots with the western minded Afghan reformists of the 20th century. A small group of assertive and educated political elite who were nationalistic and constitutionalist in their outlook began to emerge with the dawn of the new century. The establishment of the Habibiya high school in Kabul in 1903, which adopted many methods of the British school systems, has been seen as the origin of the reformist movement.15

Perhaps the first champion of modernist reform was King Amanullah Khan, who after launching what is known as the Third Anglo-Afghan War with the British, came to power in 1919. It soon became clear that Ammanullah wanted to modernize Afghanistan. Ammanullah introduced the country’s first constitution in 1923 which highlighted his reform program and transformed Afghanistan from being a pure monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. His reforms were in the areas of education and industry. For example, he made primary education compulsory by law and passed other laws to encourage expansion of trade and private investment. His impatience with Afghanistan’s long established religious traditions and tribal leaders however cost him his throne. He hastily imposed reforms that hit at the conservative core of the tribal and patriarchal society of his country; the mandatory removal of “purdah,” and “chadri,” the veil worn

by Muslim women, introduction of western dress, and forced coeducation. His reforms were seen as anti-Muslim and pro-Communist by the conservative religious leaders, and he was dethroned in 1929 and all his reforms removed.  

Progressive reform in education, nation-state building, and revival of the orthodoxy stagnated following the downfall of Amanullah. The influence of religious groups such as the extremely conservative Hazrat began to grow and many religious appointments were made in the Afghan cabinet, senate, and embassy. The educated elite of Kabul in the meantime grew increasingly impatient and resented the political dominance of religious groups.

Amanullah’s economic programs continued to some degree. The Afghan National Bank was established in the early 1930’s and joint stock companies for export and import were subsequently set up. By 1946 more than fifty such companies existed in Afghanistan. Education, however, continued to stagnate and was not pursued by the authorities for the fear that it might produce leftist radicals. The country during this time was governed by the various uncles of King Zahir Shah, who was declared king after his father, Nadir Shah was murdered in 1933, at which time he was only fifteen and did not take the throne for himself until 1953. During that year he appointed his first cousin and brother-in-law, the ambitious Mohammed Da’ud Khan to the post of Prime Minister.

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Many agree that Da’ud Khan held the real power and unwittingly opened the doors for a Soviet takeover.¹⁹

**Era of Mohammed Da’ud Khan and the Soviet Influence**

During his tenure as Prime Minister from 1953 to 1963, Da’ud held the real power behind the monarchy/government. He is often seen as the Amanullah of his time because he shared many of the same values with that first reformer. He instituted many laws that affected education and women. In 1959 he lifted the sanction on mandatory veils for women but unlike Amanullah he made the veil voluntary. He also allowed women to run for public office in 1965.²⁰ The reforms on women’s issues however, did not spread outside of Kabul however, which was an indication of how much Kabul was drifting away from the social context of the rest of the country. Unlike modernizing Kabul, the rest of the country’s population continued their lives in traditional tribal customs and local governments lead by religious leaders.

After World War II, Afghanistan’s foreign policy changed dramatically and the country came into the arena of world politics by accepting aid from the Soviet Untion and United States. Da’ud believed Amanullah’s error was in having a weak military and therefore pursued foreign aid in funds for socioeconomic and military modernization of Afghanistan. U.S. poured aid into building dams, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure as well as providing American doctors, teachers, and engineers. The Soviet Union also aided Afghanistan with infrastructure projects but focused large portions of

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their aid in military arms and officer training. Da’ud would have liked military aid from both countries, but in 1954 U.S. foreign policy did not allow for military aid for Afghanistan viewing its neutrality with the communist issue as pro-communist. This allowed for a much bigger relationship to develop with the Soviet Union rather than with the U.S. Da’ud insisted on this relationship as necessary economically and militarily and signed an economic aid agreement with the Soviet Union in January 1956 that provided Afghanistan with over 100 million dollars in economic and military support. Soviet assistance accounted for 95 percent of the aid supplied in Afghanistan from 1955 to 1972.

Because of his close ties to the Soviet Union and his autocratic policies, Da’ud was asked by King Zahir Shah to step down in 1963 but came to take full control again on July 17, 1973. The coup was bloodless; Da’ud exiled Zahir Shah and declared himself as the President of the new Republic of Afghanistan.

During Da’ud ascendancy to power from Prime Minister to President, the educated elite were coming in constant contact with the Soviets; Afghan officers were trained by the Soviet military and hundreds of Afghan officers and the Afghan elite were converted to communist ideologies. These officers were central to the events of the 1970’s that overthrew the monarchy and that later brought the communist PDPA to power and the subsequent Soviet invasion to fruition.

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Communist Coup, Soviet Invasion, and Resistance

Da’ud kept friendly relations with the Soviet Union but once it became evident that the Soviet government wanted to dictate the acts and decisions of Afghanistan, Da’ud began to shed the PDPA by removing well known members from office. He also secretly attending numerous meetings with the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan exploring the option of building an anticomunist front in the Middle East. In this way Da’ud betrayed his Marxist allies within the Soviet Union and the PDPA of Afghanistan.

On April 27, 1978, Da’ud went to his office to deal with some arrested PDPA members, but by dusk that day Da’ud and his family lay dead in the palace. A small group of PDPA officers in the Afghan army and air force, with the approval from Moscow, had initiated a coup d’etat against President Da’ud. Afghanistan was launched into death and destruction. The new PDPA government was ruthless and intolerant of opposition. During the reign of the PDPA from April 1978 to the invasion of the Soviet Union in December 1979, thousands of people were tortured, imprisoned and executed. During this brief period the PDPA passed decree after decree which hit at the heart of conservative Afghanistan. These decrees were in three areas: land reform, women’s rights, and literacy. The reforms seem noble but they were forcefully enforced using coercion, dominance, and execution to enforce the reforms.

The reforms regarding land involved taking land from landowners and parceling it out to the peasants. The PDPA government sent urban officials to rural areas of

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25 Kakar, Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 14; Magnus, Naby, Afghanistan, 118-119.
Afghanistan to enforce their reforms using brutal measures. The rural society which had been set in their age old form of collective government had to accept an involuntary new way of conducting affairs without their own personal involvement. Any who objected of course were executed, especially religious elders of rural communities who were trusted and consulted by the rural people.

The lack of foresight and understanding was also evident in the other two reforms; women’s rights and literacy for all. The decree for women’s rights lifted the practice of “purdah” (veiling) and also the bride price which had been part of the rural economic and social system for centuries. In traditional marriages the couple had no say as to whom they would marry and the groom’s family paid a sum to the bride’s family for the bride. The lifting of this traditional practice enraged the rural countryside. The same reaction was seen when urban communist party workers came to the rural villages to coerce the community to adopt co-education. Largely illiterate, the rural people did not want their women to be educated in the same room as men. The literacy classes were used as vessels for propagating communist ideologies. Louise Dupree explains that “while these classes were worthy objectives, in practice the literacy classes were mainly political meetings in disguise. Instead of beginning with A, B, or C, Lesson No. 1 began with ‘jim,’ ‘dal,’ and ‘alif’ for Jamhuriyat-I Demokratiki Khalqi Afghanistani—the Dari equivalent of PDPA.”

Resistance in rural areas as well as in Kabul grew and in order to avoid the eventual collapse of the government, the Soviet Union sent in troops on December 27, 1979, further aggravating the already escalating situation. The conflict at this time no longer remained internal and the civil war gave way to the declaration of *jihad* by the people of Afghanistan against their western invaders and to rid the forceful and brutal 120,000 Soviet troops from Afghanistan.²⁹

This resistance against the Soviet Union swept the entire country which had not happened in Afghanistan before. Even the Afghan-British wars, which put Afghanistan in decades of open revolt, did not reach the Afghans in the mountainous northern regions.³⁰ The *mujahidin* (holy warriors) came to existence during this period to fight against the Soviet troops. They also used much the same brutality as the Soviet troops and although they supplied the necessary resistance, once the Soviet Union retreated in 1989 and the Marxist government was ousted in 1992, the mujahidins fragmented and intraregional rivalry destroyed the Afghan landscape and its people and tarnished the term “holy warrior” by giving rise to the fanatical *Taliban* mujahidin.

The communist ascendancy and the Soviet invasion propelled Afghanistan into continuous strife and for the first time Afghans began to leave their beloved country with the fear of death and persecution following them and with the knowledge that they may never return to Afghanistan.

²⁹ Mayotte, *Disposable People?* 140.
**Brief History of Afghan Emigration**

Prior to the Marxist ascendency in Afghanistan during the 1970’s, emigration to foreign lands was not common and generally resulted from economic factors and labor needs. For example, during the 1850’s approximately 3,000 Afghans emigrated to Australia as laborers for three year contracts in order to support their family in Afghanistan and often left with the intention of coming back to their families. 31 The immensely large Afghan exodus from the events surrounding the communist takeover however resulted from desperation and fear rather than a personal choice based on economic factors. Despite Afghanistan’s history of international wars and internal conflict, it had been a peaceful country for the most part until 1973. The rise of Da’ud Khan and the creation of Afghanistan as a national republic marked the end of the post-war era stability and the start of an escalating era of seemingly never ending violence and strife in Afghanistan.

Afghan flight began in the period of Da’ud’s reign. Some political and wealthy elites, from fear of persecution and from the rising violence, fled Afghanistan at this time and resettled primarily in the west, especially the United States and Germany. 32 This trickle continued in 1978 when Da’ud was ousted. Many of the country’s moderate elites and intellectuals waited to see the outcome of the new government but once it became clear that the country was in overwhelming control of the Soviets and when the violence escalated they began to flee the country. By the end of the first year of the communist

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31 Zulfacar, *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany*, 56.
32 Zulfacar, *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany*, 58.
government in 1978, approximately 25,000 fled the country. This trickle however quickly became a flood once the Soviet troops invaded the country. Again, the wealthy Afghan’s sought their refuge in far off western countries where they had family links and occupational and educational connections. The less advantaged rural Afghans who constituted approximately 90 percent of the country’s population had to seek their asylum in neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. The most disadvantaged, the rural nomads who depended on cooperative trade and exchange of goods with other local merchants and tradesmen and who had little or no money became internally displaced wandering from place to place in the unwelcoming terrain of Afghanistan. The fate of many of these unfortunate refugees was death from starvation or bombardment.

The period of Soviet occupation and Afghan resistance, 1980 to 1989, created the largest number of Afghan exiles in the world representing one half of the world’s refugee population. Over three million fled to Pakistan in the east and two million fled to Iran in the west. In addition to these refugees, more than two million people were internally displaced and nearly one million died. The refugees and the internally displaced added to more than half of the prewar population of Afghanistan.

The camp refugees consisted mainly of women - those whose husbands either died in the fight or stayed behind to fight - children, and the aged, all with little hope for resettlement. A large number of these refugees however “self-settled” in their host countries and integrated with the Pakistanis and Iranians. Despite the openness with

which Afghan refugees had been accepted in Pakistan, the local inhabitants saw the self-settled refugees as a threat to their already fragile economy and local community. Unlike the camp-settled refugees, the self-settled refugees became integrated in the local economy and their experiences became more like those of voluntary migrants.35

A small number of these refugees, who, either had the monetary means for visas, were sponsored by their employer, or found some way to “smuggle” themselves, sought refuge or asylum in western countries. These countries openly accepted them, especially, because they were victims of communist violence.

**Afghan Refugees in the United States**

The main difference between immigrants and refugees are that immigrants are voluntary migrants. Although there have been many reforms in immigration law and refugee admittance, conventional refugees are generally granted status under the 1951 Geneva Convention, which defines a refugee as follows:

> Any person who owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country…36

This definition has led to widely different interpretations from the host countries, but it quite succinctly defines a refugee. According to A.R. Zolberg, a prominent refugee

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36 UN Convention of Refugees: Geneva, 1951. Taken from Zulfacar, *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany*, 54.
analyst, all refugees share in common one essential experience: that they have all been subjected to violence.\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, Afghan refugees also share this common trait.

Unlike other immigrants and refugees of the world, Afghans have not settled in one primary country. The United States however comes close to having the largest population of Afghan immigrants. The former US Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) reports that the majority of Afghan refugees settled in California followed by New York. In 1993, 536 Afghan refugees settled in California and 129 settled in New York.\textsuperscript{38}

The decades of 1970 and 1980 show a dramatic influx of Afghans leaving Afghanistan as well as their host countries of Pakistan and Iran. after the Soviet Invasion. The Annual Statistical Yearbook of the INS in 1994 projected a total of 542 Afghans granted refugee or asylum status from 1971 to 1980. The next decade however, from 1981 to 1991, a total of 27,128 Afghans were admitted. An additional 5,000 refugees were admitted through the year 1994. The dramatic influx was without a doubt an effect of the Soviet invasion and the refugee’s attempts at seeking better conditions and more stable countries of residence.\textsuperscript{39}

This number admitted to the United States is very small in comparison to the number of Afghans who fled their war-ridden country. The Afghans that were admitted however were permitted under the Refugee Act of 1980, which established a uniform admission procedure for refugees from all countries. Most Afghans entered the US under

\textsuperscript{38} Zulfacar, \textit{Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany}, 77
\textsuperscript{39} Zulfacar, 73-74
the various categories of the 1980 Refugee Act; the top two are family-sponsored immigration and immediate relatives of US citizens.\textsuperscript{40} The majority of Afghan exiles continue to live in their initial host countries of Pakistan and Iran. Those fortunate few who had most of their family members with them have resettled to the best of their ability, yet the majority of Afghan exiles: widowed women, young children and the elderly with no monetary means for migration, continue to live in meager conditions in Pakistan and Iran with no hope of resettlement to western countries or even repatriation to Afghanistan.

\textsuperscript{40} Zulfacar, 68-69, 75-77.
Chapter 4

NARRATORS’ PERSPECTIVE

**Project Themes**

The focus of this oral history project is on the migratory movement of Afghans from Afghanistan to Pakistan and their final resettlement in the United States. The questions and the direction of the interviews centered on four themes: 1). the climate in Afghanistan that caused the Afghan exodus; 2). their life in Pakistan; 3). their resettlement to the United States and adjustment to life in the US; and 4). women’s part in Afghan society and in the conflict.

**Narrators’ Exodus from Afghanistan**

The narrators in this study had unique yet similar experiences in Afghanistan during the 1980’s Soviet occupation, and as refugees and immigrants of war. All of the narrators expressed a nostalgic feeling toward their country before the communist regime of the 1980’s. When asked what life was like in Afghanistan before the Soviets invaded, almost all replied with the same sentiment as Mr. Alcoza, “we had some good times and some bad times, but we lived and we were happy.” Their general experience was one of living in peace yet having to work hard.

The narrators in the study belong to two families, the Rahimi’s and Alcoza’s, and in Afghanistan they differed in social status and ethnicity. Both had a large family, but the Rahimis, who were in the minority Turkic ethnic group of Uzbecks, were of the poor merchant class and lived most of their lives in northern Afghanistan populated by other Turkic migrants, whereas the Alcoza’s, who were in the majority Pashtun ethnic group,
were in the upper educated class and lived in the urban capitol of Kabul. Class differences dictated when and how the exodus took place. The rich had the monetary means to not only escape Afghanistan for Pakistan during the start of the upheaval, but they were also the first ones to seek resettlement in a Western country such as the United States. Although the Alcoza’s had the means to leave early, they choose to stay in Kabul because most of their kids were still in college and according to Mohammed Alcoza’s testimony they wanted to stay and help in the fight by providing the mujahidin (freedom fighters) with lodging in their home. They left in 1987 only when the war escalated and it became too dangerous to stay. The Rahimi family however, were not of the upper class, and wanted to leave Afghanistan to seek their fortunes elsewhere long before the Soviet occupation. They were only able to leave when they had procured enough money by selling all of their belongings and paying someone to help them escape in 1984.

The refugees’ reasons for leaving ultimately came down wanting to flee war. Historian Kerry Conner found that for the 5 million Afghan refugees and migrants who went to neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan it came down to a few reasons: the fear of losing their life from the heavy bombardment; to avoid the military; fear of arrest and imprisonment; and general anti-communist sentiments. The first two were the reasons used by the narrators in this project. The Rahimi family’s main reason was to avoid the army and the mujahidin. Bibi Rahimi had five son’s at the time and two of her

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41 Zulfacar, *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany*, 76.
oldest sons were teenagers which increased the chances of the two boys being taken by either the communist Afghan army or the mujahidin. In fact, Sayed Rahimi missed his last day of exams at his high school in Mazar-e-sharif and missed his graduation day as well because the army was planning on being at the graduation. His family proceeded to hide him in their house for almost a month while planning their escape. Dr. Conner shows in her study of approximately 700 Afghan refugees, that twenty-five percent cited avoiding the Afghan military as the reason behind their escape.43

The Alcoza’s on the other hand had different reasons. They stayed as long as they could. Mohammed Alcoza was an important player on the national soccer team and was left alone for the most part. Like many educated Afghan’s in Kabul who opposed the communist government, the other Alcoza men were imprisoned. Mohammed’s oldest brother was imprisoned to provoking fear. A majority of the bombing, especially in isolated villages, along with the arrests were intended to provoke fear and break the resistant spirit of the people.44 Mohammed himself along with his father was arrested for questioning, but unlike many Afghan’s they were fortunate enough to avoid torture.

**Life in Pakistan**

The majority of Afghan escapees fled to Pakistan seeking asylum in the refugee camps of the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan, bordering Afghanistan. Refugees living in the camps consisted of widowed women, children, and the elderly. A considerable portion of the escapees did not go to refugee camps but resided in the city of

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43 She also states that this number is likely to be much higher. Kerry Conner, “Rational for the Movement...” in *Afghan Resistance*, ed. Farr and Merriam, 166-7.
Peshawar and either self-settled there or moved on to other cities of Pakistan. The Rahimi and Alcoza family did not reside in the refugee camps. Both families had with them their immediate family and they were able to avoid the refugee camps and seek work. Like many of the self-settled, they sought their tribesmen or family members in Pakistan. Sayed Rahimi had a friend in Pakistan when he arrived with whom he lodged until his family arrived a month later. Mohammed Alcoza and his older brother had a sister in Pakistan who took them in to her home while they searched for work and a larger place for the rest of the family.

Despite the fairly unproblematic experience of self-settled refugees such as the Rahimi and Alcoza family, there was undoubtedly some conflict within the local communities and violence towards the refugees. Unlike camp-settled refugees, self-settled refugees and immigrants throughout history have been perceived as crowding already dense urban areas, and gaining employment in a scarce job market, frustrating the local people. The sentiment was the same towards the immensely large Afghan exiles and refugees. Mehmud (Moe) Rahimi recalls a “very terrifying life” in Pakistan where there was a lot of racism and no protection for the Afghan refugees. He recalls being afraid of the police who had the tendency of kidnapping Afghans. While going to work they would travel in large numbers and Moe recalled a memory of a friend who left work alone one day and was abducted by the police. Unlike the Rahimi’s, the Alcoza’s testimony of life in Pakistan was quite different. Their status in life played a large part in how they experienced refugee life. The Rahimi boys were able to find work in a match factory.

working 14 hour days, where as the Alcoza’s who were all college educated eventually found work as Engineers and with companies from the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s). The Alcoza’s stayed in Pakistan for approximately four years, and the Rahimi’s eight years.

**Afghan Women**

Much of the conflict in Afghan history has been in one way or another centered on issues of women. Many of the reforms that were introduced, and in some cases, forced upon, have been largely unpopular with the tribal and patriarchal society of Afghanistan. These reforms called for the unveiling of women, education and literacy for women, and indeed for all Afghans. As noble as these reforms may be, they call for time and diligence which neither the modern Afghan elites nor the communist invaders showed. The tribal society of Afghanistan’s culture and economy has depended on the separate roles of women and men for centuries. By hastily and brutally executing their reforms, the communist regime killed any chances of progress for the next few decades.

Both of the women in this study expressed interest in the progress of women’s issues in Afghanistan. When asked about the lifting of mandatory “chadri” by Da’ud Khan both women felt he had the interest of the country at heart. Alia stated that it is difficult for women to work if they wear “chadri,” it is hard to move in the full body veil and peripheral vision is obscured. By eliminating the veil as mandatory, Da’ud showed that he wanted his entire country, not only the men to succeed. However, even during the brief period of Da’ud’s rule, Alia had to keep it a secret from her father that she was going to town without her chadri. Progress was going to have to be slow.
Afghan society is extremely patriarchal. Women are not encouraged to leave the house for work nor do they choose their own husbands. Women are symbols of honor and the chadri, or “purdah” is the means of defending that honor. In fact, Sayed Rahimi’s first memory of the conflict with the Soviet invaders was the appearance of two battered and raped women from his community, who were abducted by some Soviet soldiers. He recalls them coming to the town center and pleading to the men that they were dishonored. After many months of compliance this finally roused the men of his town to plan a resistance in the following few days. This first recollection by Sayed shows the ingrained territoriality Afghan society has of their women. Needless to say, outside invaders enforcing changes in women’s issues that involved the complete overhaul of Afghan society enraged the entire rural populace.

**Resettlement and Adjustment to Life in the United States**

Both the Rahimi’s and Alcoza’s arrived in the U.S. in 1992. The way they came to the U.S. differed immensely. Again, their social status and amount of education and connections played a major role in the process of their emigration to the U.S. Alia Alcoza’s husband was employed by Ariana Afghan Airlines while they were in Kabul, an airline company that was owned by Pan Am at the time. The Alcoza’s were in the rare minority that got sponsored as refugees by an American organization. In Maliha Zulfacar’s study, she found that only one percent of her study group fell into this category.\(^{47}\) The Alcoza’s got sponsored by Ariana and after getting accepted as refugees arrived in California.

\(^{47}\) Zulfacar, *Afghan Immigrants in the USA and Germany*, 106.
The Rahimi’s on the other hand went through a different process. Sayed’s father paid someone to create a fake passport to send him to the U.S. It was a very risky and desperate attempt in finding a better life for the family. The attempt worked largely due to Sayed’s charisma and because of the anti-communist sentiment that was very prevalent in the U.S. Once arriving in Los Angeles, Sayed was incarcerated for three months for carrying a fake passport. The pattern of settlement for refugees was dictated by pre-existing kinship ties. Sayed was able to get in touch with a family friend already residing in California and with their help was able to expedite his citizenship process and to apply for the sponsorship of his family as refugees within a very short three years.

Like many immigrants to the U.S. the people interviewed in this project expressed a sincere gratitude for their host country that they now call home. Bibi Rahimi’s experience with Americans had started earlier in Pakistan when, through her own resourcefulness, she found a group of American female doctors in the outskirts of Karachi. At this point she was in desperate need of medical attention from a previously failed operation that cost the family their savings. The American doctors paid for her expensive operations and were very attentive and caring to her, which helped create a positive image of Americans and the U.S.

The process of adjustment in the U.S. was neither difficult nor easy for the narrators. Like many immigrants and refugees they already had pre-existing ties and were helped tremendously by the Afghan community in the Bay Area. In response to his adjustment, Mohhamed Alcoza said that “I already felt rich,” meaning that he and his family had the help that they needed and his stable life in the U.S. in comparison to
volatile Afghanistan made him feel rich. Sayed Rahimi found Engineer Amin soon after his release from jail in Los Angeles. Amin was familiar with Sayed’s father and employed him at his wife’s flower shop, helped him find additional work, helped him with paperwork from the various organizations such as Social Security, and helped him apply for immigration visas for the rest of his family in Pakistan. The Rahimi’s adjustment period was helped by Sayed already being in the U.S. for three years. The male narrators in this project started adjusting to American life slowly with jobs in liquor stores, and gaining employment from their fellow Afghans, attending adult school at night, eventually getting married, furthering their career, and providing for their children.

In America, the Afghan community continues to maintain its traditional roots as a patriarchal society. Parents continue to arrange the marriage of their children, and women are discouraged from working and encouraged to wear a head veil. With the exception of Moe Rahimi, who adopted an American lifestyle and married an American woman, the rest of the narrators in this study associate largely with their own community of Afghan’s in the Bay Area and maintain the practice of their Afghan traditions.

American customs are largely accepted and adopted, but some differences are harder to deal with than others. For example, both Bibi Rahimi and Alia Alcoza, expressed dislike for the individualistic elements of American society. They live alone and most of their children are married. In Afghanistan, the parents would never be left alone, either the oldest would take care of the parents, or more traditionally in rural communities, all of the men of the family would continue to live in their parent’s house
along with their bride and continue to expand the family. All of the narrators have come
to regard California as their home but consider themselves more Afghan than American.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Limitations and Strengths

This project was limited in its geographical access to a wider range of Afghan immigrants. The author was limited to the Bay Area due to monetary restrictions on travel. Donald Ritchie reminds us that the cost of an oral history project depends on how much one can afford.\textsuperscript{48} The funding for this project came from the limited income of the author. Interviews from refugees in Southern California would have proved advantageous and added to the depth of experiences. Nevertheless, the San Francisco Bay Area contains one of the largest populations of Afghans outside of Los Angeles.

Another limitation, which can also be seen as strength, is the fact that the project focused on two families. Afghans include many differing ethnic groups but the project was limited to two groups: Pashtun (the largest majority), and Uzbeck (one of the minority groups). One of the author’s goals was to include a variety of Afghani narrators belonging to the four primary ethnic groups including the Hazarah and Tajik. This limitation was due in large part to the sensitive nature of the project. As discussed earlier, traumatic experiences such as surviving war are too painful to recall and may deter possible narrators from being involved. Oral history projects can often change and the historian may need to take a different approach. The limited focus on the two families was unplanned but proved to give the project an unexpected strength. The differences and

\textsuperscript{48} Ritchie, \textit{Doing Oral History}, 50.
similarities between the two families in class standing, education, and emigration pattern gave the project more depth in discussion.

A particular strength, which the author was again skeptical of initially, was the interviews that were conducted in Farsi. Many oral historians encourage creative ways in selecting narrators. Yow mentions different ways in creating a sample of possible narrators that spans stratified techniques to quota and purposive, but none of these techniques answered the question of selecting non-English speaking narrators.49 Many Afghan immigrants that would recall best the events surrounding the 1980’s are in their old age and do not speak English. Recording their stories seemed imperative and interviews in Farsi branched out the range of the project.

**Unplanned Discoveries**

Discussion of the varying ethnic tribes was prevalent in almost every secondary history source on Afghanistan. Control of governmental power between varying ethnicities has caused much conflict, civil wars, and death. However, when the author asked questions pertaining to ethnic differences, the narrators brushed this aside or did not see it as a big difference in their daily lives. Bibi Rahimi, for example, was surprised when the author asked about the fighting and hostility between ethnic groups of Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbekcs, and Tajiks. She answered that everyone was treated the same with the exception of the Hazarah, whose mistreatment she compared to those of Mexican Americans or Black Americans in U.S. history. There was obviously a discrepancy between the narrator’s experiences and the literature of Afghan history. Many traditional

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49 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 82.
Historians have argued that the oral history documents can be faulty because the narrators can “slant” stories. However, Yow reminds us that even in situations without an interviewer, such as recounting an experience in a diary, the writers will often make themselves the heroes, and justify their actions to protect their egos.\textsuperscript{50} The narrators in this project were doing the same; describing themselves and their people in the best light. Their differing circumstances also have a lot to do with their experiences with ethnicity. The Rahimi family lived most of their lives in the isolated terrain of northern Afghanistan and did not come across any race differences that were more prevalent in urban Kabul. The Alcoza family, however, lived most of their lives in Kabul, but did not experience racial prejudices because they were part of the majority Pashtun race.

The differences between interviewing family members verses non-family members produced some interesting dynamics and outcomes. Yow gives many reasons why an oral history of one’s own family is beneficial: to create a bridge across generations, to increase appreciation of one’s own cultural heritage, and to become aware that history doesn’t just happen to others. Many traditionally trained historians have looked at individual family histories with disdain because they can be narrow in their application to the larger historical context. However, Yow states that if a family history is researched thoroughly and “confronts and deals with serious concerns, presents an honest account, and places the individual family in a wider historical context (then it) can be enlightening.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Yow, \textit{Recording Oral History}, 19.
\textsuperscript{51} Yow, \textit{Recording Oral History}, 254.
Initially, the author was not sure if she would get the kind of candid and open discussion with her family than one gets when interviewing strangers, but found rather that it was the opposite. The deepest insight and candid recollections, such as rape and the role of women, came from the interviews of her family members. There was no comfort zone to breach, they already felt at ease with the author, whereas the Alcoza family members required a preliminary visit where dinner was served and the project discussed. It was difficult to get much information on the Alcoza family’s adjustment to life in the U.S. They did not want to discuss divorce for example, which a few of Alia Alcoza’s son’s have experienced and which is also a very new development in the younger generation of Afghan immigrants and first generation Afghan Americans.

**Recommendations**

Immigration has shaped American society since long before its inception as a nation. The influx of the recent Afghan immigrants has added tremendously to the cultural, social, and linguistic diversity of urban America. Afghans are different from other immigrants in that they have not made one specific country or region their primary residence; they have dispersed all over the U.S. Europe, and Middle Eastern countries. Oral histories of Afghan refugees and immigrants in Southern California should also be considered since many Afghans immigrated to California through Los Angeles.

**Contributions to History**

Afghanistan entered the world arena after World War II, and today the country dominates the foreign policy conversations of many Western and Eastern countries. In

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order to move forward with relations between the U.S. and Afghanistan, an understanding of the history of Afghanistan and its people is crucial. The events and experiences discussed in this project will continue to be useful to scholars interested in Afghanistan and immigration. These oral histories will provide a unique insight into the subject that traditional sources often ignore. The addition of an older generation of Afghan refugees in this project who do not speak English and have been interviewed in Farsi has added a great deal of beneficial scholarship to Afghan American studies and oral histories.
APPENDIX A:

Mission Statement
MISSION STATEMENT

In order to obtain a Masters Degree in History from California State University, Sacramento, a thesis project must be completed. The project will be reviewed and approved by the Chair of the History Department and the Assistant Director of the Capitol Campus Oral History Program.

The project consists of oral history interviews of two Afghan refugee families who fled during the former Soviet Union occupation of Afghanistan.

The goals of this project is to record the memories of the interviewee’s to get an understanding of the circumstances in Afghanistan during the 1980’s Soviet occupation that led them to emigrate, and their emigration journey from Afghanistan to Pakistan and finally to United States.

The interview sessions will be between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. Each interview will be recorded on a hand held digital recorder, transcribed, and included in the final project. These interviews and their transcripts will be archived at California State University, Sacramento, for future academic use by historians and researchers of Afghan “muhajirins” (refugees).
APPENDIX B:

Sample Biographical Sketch Form
Biographical Sketch

Full Name:

Address:

Telephone:

Place of Birth: Birthdate:

Occupation:

Mother’s name and place of birth:

Mother’s occupation:

Father’s name and place of birth:

Father’s occupation:

Siblings:

Spouse’s name (if married):

Date and place of marriage:

Children’s names:

Year of emigration - to Pakistan: to United States:

Schooling/training:

Reason for emigrating:
APPENDIX C:

Sample Oral History Release Form
This interview is done in consideration of an oral history thesis project for the Capitol Public History Program at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) for the purpose of obtaining a Masters Degree.

We hereby submit for educational purposes all rights, title, and copyright interest in the audio recordings, transcriptions, and their contents of our interview conducted on __________.

The compact disc (cd) and the accompanying transcript are results of one voluntary recorded interview. Any reader should bear in mind that he/she is reading a spoken, not written word and that the cd, not the transcript is the primary document. It is understood that the audio recording and transcript will be placed at the CSUS library in Sacramento upon completion and may also be placed on a CSUS online database at a future date.

Signed:

_________________________   __________________________
(Narrator)      Name in Print

__________________________   ___________________________
(Interviewer)      Name in Print
APPENDIX D:

Photographs of the Rahimi Family

(Pictures from Afghanistan were unavailable due to the hasty escape)
Rahimi family in their apartment in Karachi, Pakistan. 1987.
From right: Sayed, Moe, Haron, Barllas, Haji, Max, Bibi, Hakem (Bibi’s brother), Aisha

Haji Rahimi (3\textsuperscript{2nd} from right) and his friends in Saudi Arabia. 1967.

Rahimi boys at the beach in Pakistan. 1987.

Sayed Rahimi vacationing with his wife Jamila at Lake Tahoe, California. 2001.
From left: Haron and Moe Rahimi at the front desk of Moe’s first store. San Leandro, California. 1995.

From left: Moe, Max, and Haron Rahimi in Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, California. 2005.
APPENDIX E:

Bibi Rahimi’s Transcript
This interview is done in consideration of an oral history thesis project for the Capitol Public History Program at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) for the purpose of obtaining a Masters Degree.

We hereby submit for educational purposes all rights, title, and copyright interest in the audio recordings, transcriptions, and their contents of our interview conducted on 7-18-2004.

The compact disc (cd) and the accompanying transcript are results of one voluntary recorded interview. Any reader should bear in mind that he/she is reading a spoken, not written word and that the cd, not the transcript is the primary document. It is understood that the audio recording and transcript will be placed at the CSUS library in Sacramento upon completion and may also be placed on a CSUS online database at a future date.

Signed:

Bibi Rahimi
(Name in Print)
(Narrator)

Aileen Jahan Rahimi
(Name in Print)
(Interviewer)
Biographical Sketch

Full Name: Bibi Aisha Rahimi

Address: 1316 Las Juntas Way, Walnut Creek, CA

Place of Birth: Shreentagow, Afghanistan  
Birthdate: Jan 2, 1942

Occupation: Unemployed

Mother’s name and place of birth: Uzbekistan

Father’s name and place of birth: Uzbekistan

Siblings: Four brothers, four sisters

Spouse’s name and Occupation: Haji Rahimi / Self-employed / Deceased 1991

Date and place of marriage: 1960, Shreentagow, Afghanistan

Children: Five sons and one daughter

Year of emigration - to Pakistan: 1985  
to United States: 1992

Schooling/training: Adult school while in the U.S.

Reason for emigrating from Afghanistan – Escape the Army, boys young and army age

Reason for emigrating from Pakistan – Wanted a better life
Bibi Rahimi’s Transcript Summary

Interview Date: July 18th, 2009 / 4:00 p.m. / Track 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Page</th>
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<tr>
<td>4:00 p.m. – Birthdate. Shreentagow. Marriage and Mazar-e-sharif. Ethnic differences in Afghanistan.</td>
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<td>4:05 – Life in Afghanistan as a woman. Parents business. Working for her family in her youth and later as a seamstress</td>
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<td>4:10 – Leaving Afghanistan. Son missing graduation for fear of the army</td>
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July 18, 2009 / 4:17 / Track 2

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<td>4:22 – Her husbands trip to Saudi. Move to Kabul. Move to Sheberghan then Mazar-e-sharif again before fleeing Afghanistan</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:27 – Her life in Maza-e-sharif while her husband was in Saudi. The death of her first daughter</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>4:32 – Leaving Afghanistan for Pakistan. The troubles on the road. Her oldest leaving for Pakistan first</td>
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<td>4:37 – Refugee camps (they did not go to one). Life in Pakistan. Her surgery due to a miscarriage</td>
<td>65</td>
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<td>4:47 – American doctors in a village in Karachi, Pakistan. Another surgery paid by the American doctors. Sending her oldest to America</td>
<td>67</td>
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<td>4:52 – Leaving for America. Life in America</td>
<td>69</td>
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<td>4:57 – Living alone. Going to the refugee program in Concord. Her husband’s death in Pakistan. Why she didn’t remarry</td>
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</table>

Interview ends on July 18th, 2009 at 5:03 p.m.
Bibi Rahimi’s Interview Transcript

Interview Date/Time/Location: July 18th, 2009 / 4:00 p.m. / Walnut Creek (Bibi’s house)

Transcription and light editing: Aideen Rahimi

Aisha Rahimi: Let’s start with where you were born and when?

Bibi Rahimi: Shreentagow.

AR: In Afghanistan, not Uzbekistan?

BR: No, no, it was Afghanistan.

AR: I thought you were born in Uzbekistan.

BR: No, my father and mother were born in Uzbekistan. I was born in Afghanistan.

AR: Why did your parents go to Afghanistan?

BR: There was war in Russia and who ever had land got hassled for their land. So they decided to go to Afghanistan. They made their lives there and I was born there.

AR: What year were you born?

BR: January 2, 1942.

AR: Did you grow up in Shreentagow?

BR: Yes, and at age 20 I moved to Mazar-e-sharif after I got married.

AR: How old were you when you got married?

BR: I was 18.

AR: And who was that with?

BR: My aunt’s son.

AR: What did your husband do then?
BR: He sold makeup products.

AR: Did he sell it at a market?

BR: No, he had a little shop. Before marrying me he was a personal assistant for a few rich people. He was a personal assistant there for pay. After marrying me he opened a shop.

AR: You are Uzbek and in Afghanistan how were you treated? The large portions of ethnic people in Afghanistan are Pashtuns and there weren’t that many of them in Mazar-e-sharif.

BR: There were, there were Pashtuns, but they lived in the villages.

AR: How did you get along?

BR: It was good with Pashtuns we got along.

AR: What about other ethnic tribes like Tajiks or Hazaras?

BR: We all got along. We got along with every one even with Hazaras. My husband had Hazarah friends and we would be invited to their house. Some Pashtuns even came to our weeding and sang.

4:05 p.m.

AR: You got along well with other ethnic tribes but what about others around you?

BR: There was fighting mainly over land. If someone crossed over a border then there would be killing. Other than that all tribes got along with each other. The Hazarahs and Turkmans and everyone, we all got along.

AR: It was the same from Shreentagow to Mazar-e-shrif?
BR: Yes, the people in Kabul were a little stuck up. They were city people and educated and thought they were better than everyone else.

AR: How was your life like growing up as a woman in Afghanistan?

BR: Well my father was a merchant and he and my uncle sold fabrics. It was good growing up. My mother would buy some fabrics from my father’s shop and she would sell it out of our house for profit. When it was time for harvesting raisins and pomegranates people would use that as payment. My job was to go and pick up the food people used as credit from their homes. I was very good with money and accounting, even though I’m not educated I was still very good with numbers. So my mother trusted me to weigh the food properly for the fabric they bought.

AR: You would trade fabric with them for raisins?

BR: No, they would come and pick up the fabric themselves. But once the grapes dried in the summer and they harvested raisins then I would pick up that payment. My parents had hired an older woman to escort me. It was dangerous I was a young woman like 10 and there were young men around so they wouldn’t let me go by myself. This was when I was a young girl.

AR: Why wouldn’t these people pay when they picked up the fabrics?

BR: They didn’t have any money they were poor. They traded the foods they harvested and I would pick them up. When I turned 12 I started with the sewing machine.

AR: What kinds of things did you sew?

BR: I would make “chapans” (traditional Afghan winter garb for men). I would also make the designs for the chapans.
AR: You started this at age 12?
BR: Yes, I still make clothes, still a seamstress.
AR: You sold fabrics from your house?
BR: Yes, my mother did. The chapans that I made would be sold at my fathers shop. I know how to make many things.

4:10 p.m.

AR: Where was your fathers shop?
BR: It was in his shop in town. My father would travel all over and bring exotic fabrics. He would sell them in his shop. My mother would also buy some fabrics and sell it for a little more from our house. So my youth is over, are you going to ask me about coming to Pakistan? (both laugh)
AR: Okay let’s get to that then. Why did you leave Afghanistan?
BR: The mujahiden’s came, war came, the Russians came. My son Mehmud wasn’t even 15 yet and they wanted to take him to the army. Ahmad was in 12th grade and only one day of his test was left and his uncle let him know that the army was going to be there and as soon as the boys graduated the army would take them then. That day his Pashtu exam was left and he stayed home. He stayed home for 20 days and he didn’t leave home at all for those days. If he went outside and if he saw a car he would come running back home. Your father had a friend who was a general or something, he was pretty high up in the military, he was in Kabul. When he came back form Kabul to Mazar-e-sharif your father asked him to help Ahmad. So this general friend hired him as his assistant.

AR: What was the biggest reason for your flight from Afghanistan?
BR: The biggest reason was to avoid the army for the boys. You were two and a half and the rest of my boys were either army age or pretty close. Mehmud was almost 15. Since he was 12 he would get stopped and hassled. They would ask to see his leg hairs and if he had a lot that meant he was a man and army age. He was 15 when we left.

AR: Do you remember the date that you left?

BR: No, I’m not good with the dates.

AR: That’s okay, so Mehmud was 15 when you left Afghanistan.

BR: Yes, 15, he is now 40. (They left Afghanistan for Pakistan in approx. 1985)

AR: You left Afghanistan mainly for the boys who were army age. Were there any other reasons?

BR: No we didn’t have any other problems it was mainly the boys and fear of them getting taken for the war.

AR: So there wasn’t much fighting in Mazar-e-sharif?

BR: No, not with us.

AR: Did you know where the fighting was? Were you aware of what was going on? Did you get any information about what was going on?

BR: We lived in Sheberghan for some time and when the war came we couldn’t even go out to the street. There was a lot of noise outside. We went to a party at a friends once and we were on the way when the bombing started and we turned around and slowly hiding under what ever we could and along sides of walls we came back home. About a year and a half later we left Sheberghan and came back to Mazar-e-sharif.

AR: Why did you go to Sheberghan?
BR: My husband had bought a house there.

AR: Do you remember when? Or how old were your son’s maybe?

BR: Maqsood was in 3rd grade, he was 8 years old. (Phone starts ringing and we decide to take a short break)

**End Track 1 – 15 minutes 34 seconds total, end 4:15 p.m.**

**TRACK 2: July 18, 2009 / 4:17 p.m. (same day)**

BR: When I had my third child we were planning on moving to Saudi Arabia and we sold everything.

AR: Where were you? Was this before Sheberghan or after?

BR: Before Sheberghan. Maqsood wasn’t born then. We got our passports. Zair Shah was king then. Your father got a separate passport and me and our 3 kids got one passport. He got a separate passport because he wanted to come back and forth from Afghanistan and Saudi to sell Afghan carpets. We spent about 14,000 afghani which was a lot of money at that time. We sold everything and it was for nothing.

The night that he sold his shop and took the money the next day we wake up to soldiers everywhere. We find there’s war and Zahir Shaw was dethroned and Da’ud took this place and told him not to come back otherwise he would be killed. The same night of the coup we had sold the shop and were going to leave in a few days passing Iran to get to Saudi. Your father went out to figure out what happened and what we could do. Our passports weren’t honored. They were letting the tourists leave and the sick leave. Our passports were to go many places; we were going to Iran then Pakistan and many places before Saudi. They weren’t honoring that kind of passport.
AR: Why were you taking those routes?
BR: My husband wanted to see these places and for us to have a vacation before we settled in Saudi.
AR: Why did you want to go to Saudi at this time?
BR: The business in Arabistan was very good at the time and everyone wanted to go there. But it didn’t happen, we stayed behind. All of our things were sold that New Year during “Jandabala”.
AR: What’s that?
BR: It’s a 40 day celebration in Mazar-e-sharif for the New Year. During Jandabala and under a shrine in the temple of Mazar-e-sharif the blind and crippled were cured. There were other celebrations and it lasts 40 days. Wednesday’s were for women only, no men were allowed in the town center and in the mosque. The men bothered women a lot when we went out in public. We had to have our men with us so as not to get hassled and that’s why they had this day only for women.

4:22 p.m.
BR: So one day, much later, I told my husband, I had gotten pregnant again, that he should try to go to Saudi on his own this time. What he had done one day was that I had made a potato dish and he threw it all away. I said why did you do that? The boys would have eaten it. He said it upset him that he can’t even buy some meat for his boys and that he was done with potato’s. I told him to go to Arabistan then. He asked me if I could take care of the boys alone. I said of course and he got up and left right away. He left with one of my brother in laws and bought some carpets and took them to Arabistan. He sent
money right away and told me to buy a refrigerator and a washing machine. I wasn’t sure. I had never seen a refrigerator or washing machine but the boys told me to go ahead and buy these things. I felt really fancy. Your uncle was in Polytechnic then and he was studying engineering.

AR: Polytechnic was the college in Kabul?

BR: Yes, it was the best college in Afghanistan and many engineers and doctors graduated from there. There was Pantun which was close to our house.

AR: This was a college too?

BR: Yes, it was a very large school and it was in Kabul.

AR: When did you leave Mazar-e-sharif?

BR: We left when Maqsood was 5 months old. We stayed in Kabul for 8 years.

AR: Where were you when you left Afghanistan?

BR: We were in Mazar-e-sharif.

AR: You were in Kabul for 8 years then you left for Mazar-e-sharif?

BR: Yes.

AR: Why?

BR: We went to Sheberghan first where we had bought a house then we left for Mazar-e-sharif within a year.

AR: Why did you leave Sheberghan?

BR: The boys did not like it there, the school wasn’t very good. They had high marks in school but fell behind in Sheberghan.

AR: How long were you in Mazar-e-sharif before leaving for Pakistan?
BR: Maqsood was 8 years old when we went to Sheberghan and Mahmood was…

AR: That’s okay, if Mahmood was 15 when you left then it must have been 1985.

4:27 p.m.

BR: Yes, anyway my work, my life was spent sewing things. I made traditional hats for Jandabala and Afghani dresses for young girls. When Jandabala was over I made clothes for men for $40 afghani. He would sell it out of the store. I also made clothes for soldiers and it would go for $10 afghani and I made 6 a day. The monies from that would go for the kids their doctor’s visits and maybe I might buy some jewelry here and there. Women could make their own money; we weren’t entirely dependent on our husbands. We would sew. I’ve made a lot of clothes especially during our poor times. When he went to Arabistan I’ve seen a lot of hard times. I had a little girl and she got phenomena when she was born. The boys would go to school and I had to take the little ones.

AR: You couldn’t take her to the doctor?

BR: No, I took her but the doctor said to leave her in the hospital and I couldn’t do that. I did my best at home but I who could take care of her. Barllas was one years old and she died then. I couldn’t take care of her or take her to the hospital. Your father came back and then you were born. She died when she was 6 months. She was your total opposite. You were born with light red hair and she had very dark black hair. I had told him I could take care of things and the kids but I couldn’t take care of her. It was hard to get a servant. If a family member had come from Mazar-e-sharif then I could have done it but there was a lot of poverty. Everyone needed money. I couldn’t even pay for their bus ride.
4:32 p.m.

AR: How did you leave Afghanistan finally?

BR: We went through the Hazarah’s area. Mahmood was captured on the road. They wanted to take him he was 15.

AR: Who wanted to take him?

BR: The mujahiden. Your father cried. The bus driver had told us to send him a different way around the direction and meet us later. At one stop when he caught up that’s where they caught him. His father started crying and fell to their feet and was begging for his son. One of them slapped him across the face and until his dying day his ear hurt. That’s how hard they hit him but he still fell to their feet. (Emotional moment for Bibi).

AR: They didn’t take him.

BR: No, they didn’t. They hit him in front of his kids.

AR: It was a terrible time people lose their humanity.

BR: Yes, Ahmad wasn’t with us then. He had left by then. He traveled with is from Mazar to Kabul. On the way they tried to take Ahmad saying he was a soldier. Both your father and I got up at that time. Ahmad mistakenly gave them his army papers when they asked for his identification. They said they were going to take him off the bus and take him. Once I got up they saw I was distressed and pregnant and took pity on us. They left him but they took some one else from the bus and it wasn’t even 5 minutes until we heard a gun shot. I think they killed him because he was taking letters and information back and forth. They even killed women because they were taking sensitive information back and forth. They’ve even burned men alive.
AR: You saw all this on your way?

BR: Yes, I saw it on the way and we heard about it. Women starting smuggling letters and forms and things.

AR: From where to where?

BR: Everywhere, from Shuburgan to Mazar, and Mazar to Kabul. If we had shown them his mujahiden identification then they would have left us alone.

AR: So they thought he was with the communist army?

BR: Yes. Ahmad and his father went somewhere in Kabul and he left after that. The times were so hard.

AR: Then you all went to Peshawar?

BR: Yes, Ahmad went a month before us. We went a different way which was longer and went through all sorts of areas. He left through a better way and went as a Pakistani.

4:37 p.m.

AR: Then did you go to a refugee camp in Peshawar?

BR: No, we didn’t go to a refugee camp. We went through many different areas. We went through border cities between Afghanistan and Pakistan and slept in the motels with many people.

AR: So you avoided the refugee camps?

BR: No, we didn’t go to “muhajirin” (refugee) camps. We’ve seen them but didn’t stay. We came with our own money. The muhajirin were flown out and the government helped.

AR: Did you know anyone that left as refugees and stayed in the camps?
BR: We knew about them. We had heard about this Turk he was very well known. His brother’s son’s son brought many people over to Pakistan. He brought over Turkmen, Uzbeck, Hazarah, all of them to the refugee camps.

AR: What was Pakistan like?

BR: Pakistan was very hot. Our lives were very hard. I was pregnant and about 4 months later when he was due our neighbor told us that Pakistan wasn’t like Afghanistan that they would operate on me if I felt any pain. I got scared and your father got scared. We decided to get some midwives and did it at home. All of my children have been very large babies and I’ve been in the hospital and I didn’t think. He died in my stomach. We brought a family friend over and he told us that the baby was dead and we needed to go to the hospital.

Your father got really worried and fainted. Mehmud brought some ice to put on his chest. Once he got up he went and got a taxi. All of the boys were at work, I think Mehmud was there. They take me to the hospital and your father is ghost white by this time. He was very scared that they wouldn’t take me because we were Afghan muhajirins and it was a private hospital and he was afraid they wouldn’t care about us. So they told us they couldn’t take me and that we had to go to a government hospital in Cadir.

4:42 p.m.

BR: On the way to the government hospital I fainted from fear of dying. Cadir was a long way and I wasn’t conscious the entire time. They took me up five floors. Once I got up I asked about my dead son and they wouldn’t tell me. I went to the window and saw how high up we were. Ahmad came after he got off work.
They asked me how many kids I have and Ahmad said I have six children and it’s enough. I came home after a week. Four of the kids worked and their clothes would get dirty so fast. It was a desert and dusty place. I would wash everyone’s clothes by hand and during one of these washes a stitch on my stomach came out. I went to the doctor and she asked me to cough and once I coughed a handful of my insides came out. They brought a special belt from Cadir which had wood on the sides and I wore that and kept working. There was a lot of work.

I was taken to the hospital again to get stitched up again. The operation was a in a small area and for that I sold almost all of my gold jewelry. It was about $7,000 rupees. The first stitches weren’t done well and I had to go back again and spend 20 days in the hospital. It still wasn’t done well. The boys did all of their work themselves. He wanted to send Ahmad to Arabistan for work. We had raised $5,000 rupees for that but Ahmad refused because he wanted me cured. We spent all of the money on me and your father got very bitter by this time. I didn’t get better all of our money was spent on me. He changed after that, he was angry at all of us for a long time.

4:47 p.m.

BR: I heard about some American doctors who came to a village outside of our city (Karachi). I went there, I took Barllas with me, and you must have been with me too. I went to them and they enrolled me in their program. I told them I was Uzbeck and they hadn’t meet an Uzbeck before and we got really close they loved me. They would come to my house so I could teach them Turkish. They came after my operation. One day the head of Pakistan died, what was his name?
AR: I’m not sure who you’re referring to.

BR: Well the day that he died my operation was set up. Your father was objecting he said no place would be open. I wanted to check anyway, if I had listened to him I would have missed my opportunity. When I went to this village the bus was waiting for me. They had waited for like an hour to make sure I would come. I took Barllas with me, the poor child was so afraid of his father, he would hit him. He cried and cried, he didn’t want to go with any of the people to go back home. I had to take him with me, they were against that because I was going to the hospital and would be in bed. He cried so much saying he didn’t want to go home. My brother heard about it and meets me there in the hospital during my operation. The boys were at work.

AR: The American doctors took you?

BR: Yes, to fix me. It took $16,000 dollars and they paid for it. I saw them pay it. Once they left when I was in the hospital they even paid for continued visits. I got operated on that way and go well. After I got better I came home and my boys told me not to do any hard labor. They washed their own clothes and would dry it themselves. They even made me promise not to fold the clothes. That’s how I got better.

So we started saving up more money to send Ahmad to Arabistan but God made it possible for him to go to America instead. An Afghan helped us. It took a lot of money. It took like $10,000 American dollars. Most of the money was given to this person and some money on his clothes and luggage and things. He went to America that way. He spent a month in jail and after that it took like 5 months and we were able to come too as refugees. Everyone was surprised that it happened so quickly.
4:52 p.m.

AR: How did you get accepted so quickly?

BR: People had to go to New York to go through the process but somehow Ahmad found a way and with help brought us over as refugees. During this time there was a war with Iraq and another country which held us back over a year. Otherwise we would have come earlier.

AR: When you came to America, how did you adjust to American culture?

BR: Ahmad was here already for 3 years and he knew how to get around and get us situated. He had a little car and would take us everywhere. He worked at night and during the day he took us everywhere to government offices like Social Security office and schools for the kids. Four of the boys were older so they were working and we put Maqsood, you and Barlas in school. Slowly slowly we made it here. The boys all have houses and you went to college and will make it and be happy. God will see.

AR: Thanks, if you have the opportunity to go back to Afghanistan would you?

BR: I do, I want to go right now because there is my house that’s left in Shubargan. I want to see it again and see my family but my life is here.

AR: Your life is here.

BR: Yes, but just to go once again. One of my brother’s is in Arabistan and I would like to go see him. I live alone right now in my apartment. I buy my own food, take the bus everywhere. I get about $800 dollars from the government to pay for my expenses.

AR: Would you have lived alone in Afghanistan?

BR: No, there no matter what one of the kids would stay with the parents.
4:57 p.m.

AR: People live alone here, how do you deal with that?

BR: Most old people especially Afghans aren’t happy here living alone. Being alone is hard, it’s depressing. Even if you get a servant or helper you are still alone. Some of my family friends have died just from falling and couldn’t get help because they were alone like Nasira’s mother. Another person fell twice and broke four places on her body, another person broke her wrist and then again her feet. She was at the program; you know the Afghan refugee center I go to. Living in Afghanistan wasn’t bad, at least you weren’t alone. I’m lucky I’m happy I still have my children around me. My children are here that’s why I wouldn’t be happy in Afghanistan.

AR: What helped you in accepting these American customs?

BR: The program that I go to helped a lot, in the begging I didn’t like it. Maqsood had suggested once that we look into an old home. That really upset me. The boys were all moving out at that time, Maqsood was getting ready for the Navy and you were in college and the other boys had their own homes. The feeling of being lonely started to come. I talked to Mehmud then that I was going to be left alone. I was very upset then. I didn’t want to be separated from everyone so I went to Hamid’s house and lived there for two years. Being alone was very hard then, it’s still hard but I’m used to it. We were seven people when we started here living together.

AR: When you came to America how long had it been since your husband’s passing away?

BR: It had been 40 days that he died, right before coming to America.
AR: How old were you?

BR: I was 41.

AR: So you were young, why didn’t you remarry?

BR: I didn’t have plans to marry again. I had all my children and we were busy. In Afghanistan if you had any kids you wouldn’t remarry. It was very rare. There was seven of us.

AR: Was it mainly because of your culture because you are Afghan. If you weren’t Afghan and weren’t afraid of what it would look like would you have remarried?

BR: No, I had six children, I wouldn’t.

AR: Alright, do you anything else to add?

BR: No, unless you have more questions that’s good.

END 45 minutes (1 hour total)
APPENDIX F:

Sayed Rahimi’s Transcript
This interview is done in consideration of an oral history thesis project for the Capitol Public History Program at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) for the purpose of obtaining a Masters Degree.

We hereby submit for educational purposes all rights, title, and copyright interest in the audio recordings, transcriptions, and their contents of our interview conducted on 6-9-2009.

The compact disc (cd) and the accompanying transcript are results of one voluntary recorded interview. Any reader should bear in mind that he/she is reading a spoken, not written word and that the cd, not the transcript is the primary document. It is understood that the audio recording and transcript will be placed at the CSUS library in Sacramento upon completion and may also be placed on a CSUS online database at a future date.

Signed:

[Signed in Print]

[Narrator]

[Signed in Print]

[Interviewer]

[Signed in Print]

[Ashen Agha Rahimi]

[Name in Print]
Biographical Sketch

Full Name: Sayed Ahmad Rahimi

Address: Mountain House, California

Place of Birth: Shreentagow, Afghanistan    Birthdate: 1964

Occupation: Manager at a cosmetic dentistry company.

Mother’s name and place of birth: Bibi Rahimi, Shreentagow, Afghanistan

Father’s name and place of birth: Haji Rahimi, Shreentagow, Afghanistan - deceased, buried in Pakistan

Siblings: Four Brothers, one sister.

Spouse’s name (if married) and Occupation: Jamila Rahimi, Housewife

Date and place of marriage: 1998, California

Children: One daughter

Year of emigration - to Pakistan: 1985 to United States: 1990

Schooling/training: High school in Mazar-esharif, Afghanistan. Adult school in California

Reason for emigrating from Afghanistan: Escape the army

Reason for emigrating from Pakistan: To make money and bring rest of family
Sayed Ahmad Rahimi’s Transcript Summary

Interview Date: June 9th, 2009 / 7:30 p.m. / Track 1

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June 9th, 2008 / 9:45 p.m. / Track 2

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Interview ends on June 9th, 2009 at 10:40 p.m.
Aideen Rahimi: Today is the 9th of June, I will be interviewing Sayed Ahmad Rahimi. We are at his house in Mountainhouse near Tracy, California. Can you tell me a little about when and where you were born?


AR: What about your family, how many siblings do you have?

SR: I have 4 brothers and 1 sister.

AR: What was it like growing up in Afghanistan?

SR: Growing up in Afghanistan there were good times and bad times. It was more fun. After my childhood it got rougher.

AR: When did it start getting rough?

SR: When the Russians came. I think I was in 9th grade.

AR: How was that change? How did things change?

SR: Things changed after the Russian soldier and army invaded Afghanistan. After 6 months or so they took over Afghanistan and they start looting and going to people’s houses and taking their women. We saw hard times and had hurt feelings. (hard to hear Sayed, recorder not close enough to him for the first 5 min)
7:35 p.m.

AR: How did you personally experience the change that came with the Russians?

SR: I was a free willed kid and I was doing lots of exchanging with the Russian army. Actually I was making money from them, giving them nail clippers or naked playing cards or stuff like that in exchange for soaps or tires, car parts, and sometimes heavier stuff. (both laugh).

AR: So when you say you had some rough times, can you give me an example?

SR: Yes, when we were in Esidu-Ker-Kana, the town we were living in. When the Russians came to Afghanistan I was in 6th grade. The incident I’m going to tell you about is about a year and a half after they were in our country. There were two girls who came down hill from the base of the Russians where there were thousands of soldiers. The two girls came down to the center of town at a crossroads, there were no lights but one person who was called “traffik,” who guided cars. The two girls came there and stood up and they were bleeding and their clothes were ripped.

Everybody was shocked, there were hundreds of people and they go to that spot. These two girls started talking, and the words that hurt me at that time which I still can’t forget. One of the girls said “brothers and sisters, we as your women, we grew our breasts for you, for Afghans not Russians. These Russians took us and kept us for many days.” That night and for the past three nights the whole town was in a difficult time and everybody was gathering and screaming. The third night everybody stood up on their roofs, I did too, but my mom kept calling me down afraid I might get shot. So that was the first incident but there were many more.
7:40 p.m.

AR: When did you start getting involved?

SR: I got involved when I was in the army. I was 17 or 18 and was in the army for a year and half.

AR: Was this your choice?

SR: No, it was not. After I graduated from High School, I didn’t even get my diploma. I missed my graduation day because the Afghan army was there and they would take you and send you to war against the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen were the good guys at the time; they were fighting against the Russians. One day my dad and I sat down and he told me the situation, that they would be there and he would not be able to find me. He told me to stay home until I could find a good spot to send you. Either I had to go to Army or I had to go to the Mujahideens. If I go to the Mujahideens I had to fight the Russians, which is what I wanted but to tell you the truth I wasn’t strong enough or I was too close to my family and I was not ready to be a Mujahideen. So, my father found his good friend in the Army and sent me to Mazar Sharif to be a clerk and I had a good spot. I was translating 2-3 languages and also I was working after a while with my uncle giving him some reports.

AR: Was he also in the Army?

SR: No, he was a Mujahideen. He was in a gorilla group. I was in the Army, but I was getting some information from my source in the Army and sending it to my uncle. That’s how I got involved in the war. After a year and a half they found out I was giving
information to the gorilla groups. So, my dad came to my base and told me I had to leave either that night or tomorrow night.

**7:45 p.m.**

AR: What would they have done to you?

SR: They would have killed me and my family. The Afghan Army and the government were working with the Russians, and the gorilla groups, the Mujahideen were against the communist government.

AR: Why (was) the government working with the Russians?

SR: They wanted to control the country. The government was one of their puppets. There were like 7 or 8 Afghan communist groups, some were working for Russia and some for China.

AR: What happened after your father told you that you had to escape?

SR: That night I escaped and came home, I was in my grandma’s house for 14 nights and then my dad sold everything in Mazar Sharif and we moved. We had three days to take care of everything. We moved to Kabul. We took the bus and I was with them. But I had a paper from both sides. I had papers from the Russians and papers from the Mujahideen. If ever there was a time Afghan soldiers stopped the bus I would take the papers from the government and show it to the soldiers, or the papers from the Mujahideens. I remember another incident in the bus. The gorilla groups stopped our bus and the Russian tanks were crossing the other way and these guerrilla soldiers and the government soldiers were like 10 or 15 feet apart but they couldn’t see (eachother) because it was dark. They were on the bus and checking for communists, they unfortunately picked me, and they said,
“you look like a soldier, you look like your working with the Russians because your hair style looks like a soldier’s,” I said, “yes I am a soldier but I’m escaping, I don’t want to work for the Russians.”

7:50 p.m.

SR: From the inside of the bus my mom starts screaming and crying and they let me go and we traveled towards Kabul.

AR: I interviewed your younger brother, Moe, and he remembers when you guys traveled that he wasn’t allowed to. Father told him that he was so close to becoming of age for the Army and he ran from station to station.

SR: That part was when we left Afghanistan for Pakistan. We had to escape a different way because I was a soldier and I had to go a different way. I traveled with them from Mazar-e-Sharif to Kabul, but from Kabul I had to travel alone.

AR: How was that?

SR: That was pretty difficult and scary. I was with one of my uncle’s people. He was Pakistani, he came from Peshawar to Jallalabad to pick me up and go back to Peshawar. Still I had a hard time, I had to change my face and grow a beard and wear different clothes. My father traveled with me from Kabul to Jallalabad. It took like 6 or 7 hours in car, what would take 45 minutes here, but the road was bombed and so damaged by tanks so we had to travel for so long. In Jallalabad I had a classmate who was going to be a doctor; we were in the same class in 7th grade. He was six months younger than me and went to the University of Jallalabad. He was there and he kept me in his dorm for 11 nights until I grew a beard and a mustache. My father came once or twice from Kabul to
Jallalabad to check up on me. Then this person from Peshawar came to take me. It was a short distance. Peshawar is in Pakistan.

7:55 p.m.

AR: Did your family come soon after?

SR: They came after a month. I was in my father’s friend’s place for a month. I worked in their store until my family came to Pakistan. I was in a restaurant eating pillow, Afghan rice, and it was the first time my dad saw me smoking and he just passed by, he wanted me to see him so I could throw my cigarette away. That’s how we saw each other after a month.

AR: Why did it take them a month?

SR: Because they had to travel threw the mountains and change money and buses, they had to hide under the busses with lots of different products which traveled from Peshawar to Jallalabad. My brother told me that they made a box under the bus for him and he could not stretch his legs, it was like 3 feet by 3 feet. That’s how they traveled, they had to hide during the day because if the Russian helicopter’s see someone traveling through the desert or mountains they would bombard them and kill the people who wanted to cross the country from Afghanistan to Pakistan. They had a much harder time crossing Afghanistan.

AR: Why was that? Because you were just one person?

SR: I was just one person but also because I was crossing the border which was like a 100 feet and that doesn’t take much time. (Took a break because visitors came by)
END TRACK 1 – 30 minutes total, end at 8:00 p.m.

TRACK 2: June 9th, 2008 / 9:45 p.m. (same day)

AR: We are recording again. Let’s talk about when you were in Pakistan. How did you assimilate?

SR: In Pakistan from the beginning everything was up to my dad. He was like the head. After he sold everything at home and all the travels when we crossed the country with all his family his kids and wife, he spent all the money on crossing the boarder. We were looking for work and luckily in Pakistan we were able to work. We all brothers worked at a company making matches. We all four brothers had to work and my mom had to prepare our dinner because we were working late until the morning. So, everyday she made us, for energy, she always cooked ground beef in korma (curry). She was giving us lots of breads, and that was the only type of food we had, we couldn’t afford to make our food different and change it up. So for seven days a week we had the same food, and that’s why as you can see all of your brothers don’t like meatballs, because that’s what we had for seven days lunch and dinner.

AR: You went to work seven days?

SR: Yes, we had to. I worked seven days everyday for 12 to 14 hours and we came home just for sleep.

AR: This was necessary to sustain the family?
SR: Yes, because the income from making matches was very low, that’s how we survived. My youngest brother started work at age of 10, Max. Things got a little bit better after I became a leader of a group of 80 to 90 people. Yea, I became the manager. I made the company gives us a raise 3 times.

9:50 p.m.

I got pretty good then my dad and my mom decide to send me out of Pakistan. My dad’s idea, even in Afghanistan his mind and his idea’s were one step ahead of all the other families. When we moved to Pakistan all of our relatives were still in Afghanistan, when we came to the United States they came to Pakistan. All my relatives moved after us, that’s why my dad was always trying to move us towards the bright side of life.

AR: Were you happy in Pakistan?

SR: Yes we were. We had some good times and we were in martial arts, all brothers. Then after so many years we took one day off and that one day we would have fun and go out with friends.

AR: How long were you in Pakistan?

SR: I was in Pakistan for 4 years. Then yea I forget, my parents decide to send me out of Pakistan, anywhere, any country because I was the oldest son of the family and I had to go out of the country.

AR: Why?

SR: To support my family because the way we were living in Pakistan…until the day you die you’re going to work. My dad had a friend and his son had a group to whom he could give some down payment and he sent me to United States. But before I came to United
States, because I was a good cook, which I learned from my father and my mom and I go
to give a test to some people from Saudi Arabia to be a chef. So I go and give a test and
they except me and I went to my dad, and I said “dad there are some people from Saudi
Arabia, they excepted me and they are going to take me to Saudi Arabia as a chef, I
passed the test and I don’t have to pay anything they will take care of everything.” Then
my dad said, “Son, I have been in that country for four years and worked for the Arabs
and I don’t want you to go to that country. Go anywhere else, go to Australia, or go to
United States. I will help you if you won’t go to that country.”

9:55 p.m.

AR: Why did he feel that way?
SR: Because he went to support his family before the war before the Russians came to
Afghanistan. He went to support his family and worked in Saudi Arabia. The way the
story was said is “there is no value in humans except the original Arabs.” That’s why he
didn’t like that country. The people who are rich, they don’t respect you, and my father
was very intelligent and a respectful person. He was writing songs in two languages, he
was writing poems, he was a good musician. He was a good person and I love him, I will
always remember him, what we are and where we are right now is mostly him.

AR: So he convinced you not to go to Saudi Arabia?
SR: Yes, he told me if I want to leave and go to work another country he will help me
and find a way. We all, me and dad, I think Moe was there also, and my mom sat down
one night and we decide to go to this son of somebody and give him 30,000 Pakistani
rupies. My dad borrowed the $30,000 and give it to him. At that time $30,000 rupies was
like $1,000 dollars and that was only the down payment. He made me a passport as an American citizen and sent me to United States. They told me that after the flight before I came to United States I was supposed to tear the passport up and throw it in the bathroom. So that’s what I did, I went to the bathroom and shaved and got clean and threw away my passport.

I came to the airport in Los Angeles I went strait to customs and I said “I’m here!” and they said, “You’re here for what? Where are your papers?” I said, “I don’t have papers,” they said, “well what you want to do here? Where did you come from?” I said I came from Afghanistan. “What do want to do?” I said I can do anything just put me at work. I remember there were these two police officers who laughed at me and said,” We cannot do that!” I thought in Pakistan that as soon as I arrive in United States and I could go somewhere and ask for a job and I could work. The police officer told me that it’s not going to work that way and you have to go to immigration. They handcuffed me and they even handcuffed my feet and they shackled me with another 20 or 25 people. We were in line and one police officer was pulling us. After that we slept somewhere that was part of immigration and the next day they sent us to jail. But, I’m going tell you that I spent 3 months in jail in Los Angeles and I had the greatest time of my life! (laughter)

AR: Jail is not supposed to be fun.

10:00 p.m.

SR: I know. Your thinking what the hell is he talking about, it’s jail! We couldn’t go out but everything was available for us: if we wanted to volleyball, boxing, watch movies, we had excellent breakfast, lunch, and dinner, parties once in a while, class for English. Until
two o’clock in the morning we were allowed to play chess and cards as long as we weren’t playing for money. So in three months I had to go in front of the Judge 3 times. Each time they would ask me, “Why are you here?” Then I would tell them truthfully about 95% of my life and why I came here.

AR: How did you communicate with the Judge?

SR: We had translators.

AR: How did you get out of jail?

SR: I told them if you want to send me back to Afghanistan it’s up to you. But I thought United States was one of the greatest countries, one that loves life. If you send me back to Afghanistan I will get killed. They accepted me after 3 months. 12 o’clock at midnight they gave me my I-94 and let me, at 12 o’clock midnight. When I was in jail they told me to watch out, when you go outside there are people who if they see you with a bag they will hurt you and steal your stuff. Fortunately, I had nothing. I came to the U.S. with 51 dollars. That $51 I spent in jail buying cookies. My parents had given me $51 dollars from their savings. Now I come out and at midnight, but I don’t know anybody and where to go. I actually did have $100. There was a guy in jail, an afghani, he gave me $100 and his family’s phone number. He told me to give $100 to another person someday like you in this situation or any hard situation. I will never forget that.

10:05 p.m.

SR: So I stopped this taxi and asked him if he knew any afghan’s here. He said yes but that it’s got to be day time that he can’t knock on someone’s door at midnight. So I was walking around on the streets waiting for daytime. By that time there was another taxi
driver who was Pakistani or Indian. He told me that there is a church and you can sleep there and I think it was two in the morning. So I said okay and he helped me and I gave him money and he said no, “you need those 100 dollars.” For someone new to the country seventeen years ago and I saw this kind of help from people which I don’t see anymore.

The taxi driver dropped me off at the church and knocked on the door himself and talked to the person because I don’t speak English. He told them I was from Afghanistan and need help. I slept in this church for over a month and during the day time I would go and buy flowers and make bundles and sell them for a small profit. Then I found a mosque and it was in Van Ness in Los Angeles. I went to talk to the manager at the mosque and slept there for a month and a half and I thought the kids martial arts for like half and hour or forty five months. The manager asked me if I have paperwork and started asking me about my family. He told me that I could bring my family to United States because I have the perfect paperwork.

AR: What do you mean by paperwork?

SR: I had an I-94 and I could apply for my family and they could come to United States. I was out of jail for like 4 months and thought this was great news. He said he could take me to the office, actually he did everything for me he got me my Social Security Card, my ID. He helped me a lot I will never forget that too.

So you know when I spent three months in the immigration jail and that person who gave me $100, I still had a connection with him. He was a smoker and he asked me to bring
him a carton of smokes. After I drop off the cigarettes I saw Engineer Amin, the man you saw here tonight during our break.

10:10 p.m.

He was there to bail my friend’s younger brother in that jail. He came from Alameda in the Bay Area to Los Angeles with his family to bail him out. He asked me who I was and I told him my father’s name and he said he knew my father and my family. He told me to call my father that night and tell him I meet him and go back with him. So I went back to the mosque and called my father and he told me he had worked with his father. He told me that they were a good family and to go where he says. I followed my father’s advice and I took a grey hound bus from Los Angeles to Alameda.

On the way the bus was not numbered seats and only empty seat was at the end of the bus and I have two bags. I put one overhead and I put one under my feet and I feel asleep. After I wake up I saw my bag has been torn and all my clothes are on the floor and asked who did it, I don’t speak any English and I get upset but nobody said anything. Suddenly somebody grabbed me from my back and choked me. Oh, before that they asked me in English if I had a gun, and I said “no gun.” They asked me if I had a knife, and I said “no.” They grabbed me and asked for my money. There was like seven of them, they were big guys black and white. They grabbed me and they looked in my pockets and they took my wallet. I had my money somewhere hidden. They couldn’t find any money and I fight with them. Each time I would yell for help and when people in the bus look back they would stop. That’s how I came from Los Angeles to Alameda, I got beat up by seven guys.
AR: The whole time?

SR: The whole time. The bus stopped at many places, no body was going to help and I was scarred also. I didn’t know how to get back if I leave this bus and I already called and told them when I was going to be there. I was afraid that if I don’t get there in time and they come and I’m not there, then what am I going to do.

10:15 p.m.

AR: What year did you come to America?

SR: 1990. Grey Hound dropped me off in downtown on 3rd street in San Francisco. Engineer was there, who I consider an older brother now, came with his wife and took me to their home. I lived in their home for almost six months. I lived their just as if I was one of their sons, they had four sons, so I was like the oldest. They gave me a job in his wife’s flower shop. I consider her my older sister. She gave me the flower shop to manage. Since I was already making flowers in Los Angeles I picked it up very quick and worked for them for six months. I was also getting welfare while working for them and said that I want to bring my family, I don’t want to work for cash, I wanted to work for paychecks and pay taxes and bring my family. So that’s what I did, I went to the welfare department and told the lady I want to cut the welfare and find a job. Engineer Amin found me a job at a 7-11. I worked there for two and a half years.

I was working for 10 hours seven days everyday, 70 hours a week plus 35 hours I was working at a hot dog stand. So, 105 hours a week. At the hot dog stand I was working only six days. I would get my sleep a little here and there. That’s how I worked and I paid
off the person who sent me from Pakistan to here $7,500. It cost him maybe up to $1,000. I worked hard to pay him off and plus I was helping my family in Pakistan.

10:20 p.m.

So in 7-11 I got robbed twelve times and I got beat up twice.

AR: Where was this 7-11?

SR: In Oakland, Harrison and Bay Street. They knocked me down and they tied my hands and feet during the second year of the Rodney King incident. They stole everything from the store, broke everything, and broke the cash registers. The funny thing was that they were asking me for my wallet, Engineer Amin’s wife had bought me baggy pants which had many pockets everywhere. I said what they wanted with my wallet just go to the cash register. That’s what they did. And I caught four of the robbers (when they were) behind the window in downtown Oakland jail. That was the funny times and great times of 7-11.

AR: That does not sound very funny (laughing). Were you frightened when you were being held up?

SR: Actually when I was in the Army, war makes these people who came with the guns just funny to me. Well not funny, it was just nothing because I’ve seen dead people in Afghanistan in front of my eyes not ever farther than 2 feet. Okay I will tell you another story in Afghanistan. I was in the Army there was a “khatt” it’s like a KGB department and like 20 feet away from us there was a killing place, when they would catch guerilla groups they would kill them.

AR: Point blank?
SR: Point blank, and shot them in the eye. I could see the person who gets the bullet and
their body, like three feet the body would move back. We could see that and it was like
wow! That’s how many types of deaths and in many different ways was in Afghanistan.
I’ve seen a dead body that got killed twice. You’re not going to believe the person is dead
already and they were putting a hang grenade under his body. When they try to take the
dead body to put him in the car and the hang grenade blew up. That’s the many types of
killing I’ve seen in Afghanistan. So in 7-11 two guns were nothing. The first couple of
times I tried not to give the money and there was a couple of times when my partner who
was working with me from Sudan, two guys came and asked for the cash register money
and I tried not to and said no, my partner almost got a heart attack. The owner of the 7-11
she told me it’s not worth it “I know you feel like this place is your own you don’t want
to give it up, but I don’t want you to do that. Just give them the money.”

10:25 p.m.

AR: Let’s talk about when you got your family here. How did you do that?

SR: After about 2 years, my family, my mom and my four brothers and my sister, they
came in March 22, 1992 to United States. It took two years. Again Engineer Amin’s
father in law, they did all the work of bringing my family here.

AR: That was very quick, two years.

SR: Because they were here before and they knew the places and knew people. If I was
by myself I don’t think it would be that fast. Every day that passed it was getting harder
to bring family members. So that was again why I always give thanks to this family for
what they did for me and my family. First because of God and second because of this
family, Engineer Amin and Nazira, his family is why my family is here. I always thank them and appreciate them and until I die I will never forget that.

AR: What’s your life like now?

SR: It’s great, everyday I give thanks for the morning when I wake up until I go to bed.

AR: Are you glad for this transition from Afghanistan to U.S?

SR: Yes, of course, I appreciate this country and love this country.

AR: Many people did not have as good of an experience as you did when you got here. How do you feel your experience differs from other afghani immigrants?

SR: You mean (how it’s different in) the short time I came to United States to the time I’m here with my family? Well, it was all about being with the good people and knowing the people and always the communication…be nice and good, if you’re unhappy or sad and don’t like people and not a people person, then you don’t know you will just stay behind. For example, when I was in 7-11 and the customers who came to 7-11 and if they had the time I would try to talk to them first of all to get my English better and second, right there right then I was asking them for an application for where they work. If they could help me and take me to their job because I knew I was working for like 4 dollars an hour in 7-11.

That’s why I had to work 105 hours a week to collect $7500 to give that person in New York and plus help my family in Pakistan. That’s why I wanted to talk and was nice to people so they could help me. You know because like I said in Afghanistan I never worked I just found my money in the way of…I don’t know, maybe you would say it’s cheating or manipulating other people, I was getting a product for cheap and selling to
another place. So, I knew how to talk and deal with people and as soon as I learned English I tried to use that language in a much nicer way, an honest way.

I always asked people to give me a job and that’s how I, in this country I worked, I don’t think there is a job you can ask me that I didn’t do. I did everything, I did. I worked at 7-11, I did the flee market, I sold flowers, I did carpets, I painted, you name it I did it. I drove cars, I’ve been a truck driver, I’ve been a security guard. Finally, my last job, I was a dental technician and I’ve been working in this job for almost 15 years and I’ve been here 17 and a half years but after 2 and a half years I got this job and I’m still in this job. During that 2 and a half years I probably worked in 15 other jobs. So, what was your last question? I don’t remember.

AR: It’s okay. Do you have any last thought?

SR: Oh you asked me about my family and how I bring them here. My wife is from Turkey and she grew up in Turkey but really she’s an Afghan. And it’s the truth, she is my cousin which is okay in our culture. It’s kind of a half arranged marriage and it was the work of my uncle and my mom which I always appreciate. I love my wife to death and she loves me the same and we have one child, 10 years old just two weeks ago. We are a happy family and I like to keep it this way.

AR: Good. Well thank you very much and I will call you if I need to have another session.

SR: Thank you.

Total TRACK 2: 49 minutes, end at 10:40 p.m.
APPENDIX H:

Alia Alcoza’s Transcript
This interview is done in consideration of an oral history thesis project for the Capitol Public History Program at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) for the purpose of obtaining a Masters Degree.

We hereby submit for educational purposes all rights, title, and copyright interest in the audio recordings, transcriptions, and their contents of our interview conducted on 9-21-2008.

The compact disc (cd) and the accompanying transcript are results of one voluntary recorded interview. Any reader should bear in mind that he/she is reading a spoken, not written word and that the cd, not the transcript is the primary document. It is understood that the audio recording and transcript will be placed at the CSUS library in Sacramento upon completion and may also be placed on a CSUS online database at a future date.

Signed:

[Signature]
(Narrator)
[Signature]
(Interviewer)

[Signature]
Name in Print

[Signature]
Name in Print

[Signature]
Name in Print
Biographical Sketch

Full Name: Alia Alcoza

Address: 1384 Contra Costa Blvd. # 84, Pleasant Hill, Ca

Place of Birth: Kabul, Afghanistan

Birthdate: 1936

Occupation: Unemployed

Mother’s name and place of birth: -------------------

Father’s name and place of birth: ------------------

Father’s occupation: -------------------

Siblings: ------------------

Spouse’s name and occupation: husband deceased, worked for Ariana as a steward in Afghanistan

Date and place of marriage: 1951 / Kabul, Afghanistan

Children: Fives sons, four Daughters. Mohammed Alcoza youngest son.

Year of emigration - to Pakistan: 1980 to United States: 1984

Schooling/training: Elementary schooling in Kabul

Reason for emigrating – from Afghanistan: Fear for life and continued threats from the Communist government

Reasons for emigrating – from Pakistan: Wanted a better life.
Alia Alcoza’s Transcript Summary

Interview: August 27th, 2009 / 4:10 p.m. / Track 1

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August 27, 2009 / 8 p.m. / Track 2

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Interview ends on August 27, 2009 at 8:12 p.m.
Interview Date/Time/Location: August 27th, 2009 / 4:10 p.m. / Pleasant Hill (Alia Alcoza’s house)

Transcription and light editing: Aideen Rahimi

Aisha Rahimi: Today is August 27th, 2008 and we are at Alia Alcozia’s house. We will be speaking in Farsi and my mother is here with us. Alright, Alia jon, you were born in Afghanistan and what year was that?

Alia Alcoza: It was 1324.

AR: This is from the Islamic calendar. Do you know what year that would be in the Christian calendar?

Alia: No, no I don’t (laughter).

AR: That’s okay (laughter). How old are you?

Alia: My age? Right now I’m 73.

AR: Okay, I can figure it out from there. (1936)

Alia: I just can’t remember.

AR: It’s okay. You only have to talk about what you can remember.

Alia: So I was born and about fifteen I got married.

Bibi Rahimi: How young! (Everyone laughs).

Alia: At sixteen I had a son. Then year after year at my house I had a child, thanks to God, I have nine children. Five sons and four daughters.

Bibi: And only one daughter is here with you?
Alia: Yes, only one. One of my sons is in Toronto, two of my daughters are overseas too, my other son is still in Pakistan, and four of my children are with me; three sons and one daughter in America.

AR: They went all over the place…so you’ve had a long journey, where did it all start?

Alia: It started when we all came to Pakistan…in…

AR: That’s okay about the year. Do you remember about how old you were when you went to Pakistan?

Alia: No, I can’t remember how old I was…It was in 1980 that we came to Pakistan and we were there for four or five years. My husband worked with the government and when we went to the interview (for coming to the U.S.), my married children who had kids could not come only my single kids were accepted. When we got accepted we came to America.

AR: I’m sorry you came to America or went to Canada first?

Alia: We came to America, California. My oldest son’s friend had him sponsored and he went to Canada. One of my daughters got married and her husband worked in Milan, my other daughter went to Germany. So three boys and one girl is here with me in America.

4:15 p.m.

After spending one year here I went to Pakistan. Because two of my kids were still there and I arranged the marriage of one of my sons in America and about five years later she came, my bride came. When there was all the fighting and shooting I went from Pakistan to Afghanistan. I traveled during the night and through the mountains and rivers.

AR: When was this? Was it when you left America?
Alia: It took me two days. No, it wasn’t after America. It was when we were all in Pakistan (1980). I went from Pakistan to Kabul. One of my son’s was still in Afghanistan. He was refusing to come and I went back from him. I went during the night and walked all day through the mountains and water. I crossed the river and had slipped and a man got me out and I started crying. Some women came over to help me and asked me why I was crying I was just rescued. I said I was crying over life. I’ve seen so much fighting, so much.

AR: When you were in Afghanistan, were you raised in Kabul?

Alia: Yes, I was.

AR: You were in Kabul when the Russians came?

Alia: Yes.

AR: What was everyday life like before the Russians came to Kabul?

Alia: Before the Russians it was very quiet and we were very happy. My husband worked and my children were all in school and three of them have gotten their degree in Engineering. All of my kids have been through college.

AR: What was your husband’s profession?

Alia: “Ariana.”

AR: Was he a pilot?

Alia: No, not a pilot. He worked behind on the plane in the air for the airport of Kabul (Steward). We were very happy. My kids were in college and two of them were working.

AR: When the Russians came did you know why it was happening? What were you thinking about what was happening?
Alia: Well the communists came first and things got bad and my oldest son was jailed because he was an Engineer. (In many Persian culture’s, men attach their profession before their name, which can also replace the person’s name; such as Engineer Mohammed becomes just Engineer). He had no guilt except that his name was Engineer. So they threw him in jail and gave us no explanations. My other son they took him out of college.

4:20 p.m.

AR: How old was he? Did they take him out for the Army?

Alia: No, they would take the college students in case they were enemies of the communists and Russians. So they took him and he was in jail for a two or three days. My brother was in the military then and that’s why they left him alone. He told them that his nephew had no guilt and my son got out. We saw many hard times.

AR/Alia/and Bibi: (trying to figure out time periods between Afghanistan, Pakistan and America)

Alia: So we went to Pakistan and to a strange village, we found an afghan family and paid rent to stay at their house all of us unemployed. But since my kids had all went college they found jobs easy. Four of my kids got paychecks and our lives got better. When we had left Afghanistan we had left everything behind, all of our money and furniture.

AR: How did you get to Pakistan from Afghanistan?

Alia: We wore “owgani” (nomad) clothes. We came by “qulchi”

Bibi: “Qulchi” is like a covered wagon.
AR: Thank you.

Alia: We didn’t bring anything with us and about $2000 rupies which was quickly gone in Pakistan.

AR: Where you on foot?

Alia: No, in a car. We were on foot for like five hours.

AR: When you came to Pakistan you came with your entire family?

Alia: Yes, except for one son that stayed behind in Kabul. When it was time to go he told us that he wasn’t going to leave his country. When he became desperate only then he came. I was afraid that they would kill my children or jail them and told him that I was going to leave with all my children whether he was coming or not. He didn’t come.

AR: Your son that stayed behind in Afghanistan, did he come to America on his own accord.

Alia: Yes, he finally came but I left Pakistan to go back and forced him to come.

4:25 p.m.

AR: When you went back for him how long did it take him to follow you?

Alia: I went back four times for him when we were in Pakistan. When his grandfather left Afghanistan I felt I had to bring him back once and for all. I went and told him that we would go to America, he said “what am I going to do in America?” But I said just come with me this once and see for yourself. My son in law was with me the fourth time. It was very hard bringing young men across the border. They would take them on the way.

AR: Why was that? Was it for the Army?
Alia: Yes, they were the right age for the military and the Mujahiden would snatch boys as well. We were in a car through the valley but on foot on through the desert. One of the times that I went to Kabul, I went with two women and two men, one of the men was white. We walked for hours and then got on some donkeys. I got on a sick donkey and as he went it to the river I went with him (laughter). That’s when this man I was telling you about earlier pulled me out of the water. I was soaking wet and I went the rest of the way wet. I only had the clothes on me. All for my youngest son.

AR: Where is this son now?

Alia: He’s here. He just bought a house.

AR: Is he happy that he came with you finally?

Alia: Oh yes, I ask him how his life would be if he had stayed. He always says that yes mom you made the right choice for forcing me and taking me. His grandfather didn’t even leave for a long time, nobody wanted to leave their country.

Bibi: That’s right, none of us did.

Alia: It was only me that was forceful in getting him out.

AR: Yes, the point is to stay alive.

Alia: Yes, my life was for my children.

4:30 p.m.

AR: When you were in Pakistan for four years, how did you come to America?

Alia: We went to Islamabad and filled out some forms and since my husband worked as a flight attendant they accepted us quickly. It took about 18 months, we got interviewed 2 or 3 times. When my youngest son finally came our interviews were already over it was
the last month. We went to the judge to tell him our son was here and my husband spoke a little English and explained that our son was in Kabul and that he was finally able to come. He told us to go and bring him, his luck was turning. They asked him where he was. He told them that he was captured by the Communists and when he was able to escape his mom convinced him to come. He got accepted at the last minute he didn’t even have to give interviews.

Bibi: Your luck was bright.

AR: That’s great that he was able to come with you.

Alia: Thank God I was able to bring my children.

AR: When you were in Pakistan and your children found work and things were getting better you said, why then didn’t you stay in Pakistan?

Alia: The help stopped. When the Communists were in Kabul, I don’t know what happened but the help stopped and all the work stopped. So we were desperate to leave.

Bibi: Were you in that village in Pakistan?

Alia: No, we were in Peshawar at that time.

AR: I will stop the tape now and start it after our break.

END TRACK 1 - 23 minutes 50 seconds total, end 4:33 p.m.

TRACK 2: August 27, 2009 / 8 p.m. (same day)

AR: We are back and it is 8 p.m. My mother and Alia had taken a break for prayer. Is that your fourth prayer for the day?
Alia: No, it was the fifth and last one.

AR: We were talking about wearing “chadri” (or burqa, a full body garment), you started at age 7.

Alia: No, it was in the 7th grade.

AR: Why this time?

Bibi: When you are done with the 7th grade you are 14 years old and when you become 14, a young woman, you had to wear a “chadri.”

Alia: Yes, by 9th grade I was married. I was 15 and by 16 a boy was born in my home.

AR: When you were wearing the chadri…

Alia: We wore the “chadri” until the age of Daoud Khan.

AR: How old were you when that happened?

Alia: I don’t know but I had like 4 kids. Even during the time of Daoud Khan I still couldn’t wear chadri, my father in law didn’t like this new change and I would sneak out and go to town “luch” (the word “luch” translates to naked and is used to refer to going out without your head scarf).

AR: So you had to be without your head scarf, what would happen if you were without it?

Alia: It didn’t matter. A lot of people still wore them.

AR: Why do you think Daoud Khan brought this change? How did you feel about this change?

Alia: I think he wanted to make good changes. Open the country, and our country to progress. He wanted to have colleges. Even women with chadri would go to college.
Even so, it wasn’t to be, poor Daoud Khan tried though and you know they killed him still. He wanted everyone to succeed, his country to succeed and be educated and with a chadri you couldn’t become a doctor or an engineer or a professor, you couldn’t get ahead. This was what Daoud Khan did. He was in power for four years and in his fifth year they killed him.

AR: When you came to America and had to leave behind some of your children, can you talk about that?

Alia: Yes, four of my kids remained; 2 girls and two boys. My two girls got engaged. So we told them and they couldn’t come with us.

AR: They wanted to come with their fiancés?

Alia: Yes. That’s okay, they figured out a way, one went to Canada, one to Germany. But it just hasn’t worked out for one of my kids, poor boy his luck didn’t change. He has five kids. Luck ran out with him.

AR: He tried to leave? Does he want to come?

Alia: Of course he wants to leave, but how can he.

AR: It hasn’t gotten any better there.

Alia: No, just worse. It was good when we were in Pakistan. Now, it’s gotten worse. How long were you all in Pakistan?

8:05 p.m.

Bibi: Seven years.

Alia: Seven years, we were there for four or four and a half years.

AR: My oldest brother was also there only four years before coming here.
BiBi: When the fighting started we were still in Afghanistan for three years.

AR: When you came to America as a refugee what was that like?

Alia: We applied for refugee status and were accepted we were given a place and money for rent. After six months the young people were cut off so they could work. Me, my husband, and my grandchild still got aid for a few years.

AR: This was in California?

Alia: Yes, it was in California. We were in a little house for about 7 years and when my kids got married we left.

Bibi: You brought your grandchild from Pakistan?

Alia: Yes, he was sick and def and we adopted him and he was with us.

AR: Whose child is he?

Alia: He’s the child of my son’s who stayed behind in Pakistan. He was def and couldn’t speak. Now he’s all grown up and speaks very well and is very smart with computers and with everything. He works and finished school.

AR: How long have you been in America, in California?

Alia: 16 years.

AR: What was it like when you first came here? Learning English?

Alia: We lived for a while with my sister, my sister was here. Then they found a little house for us and we all went to adult school. My husband got sick and I couldn’t go. One of my sons went for about two months and then went to college after that, he was very smart. Little by little my kids English got better and they found jobs. They work with computers.
Bibi: How many kids does this son have?

Alia: Two boys. He got married to my niece.

Bibi: Oh, that son. That’s the one that got a divorce? Same thing happened to my Max, everyone loves him but I married him to an Uzbek girl.

Alia: It was my youngest son.

AR: The divorce was really hard on Max.

Bibi: He was a very happy person but not now.

AR: Yes, he became very depressed.

Bibi: He’s talking to someone else now, as long as he’s happy. It’s hardest on the children.

Alia: Yes, it is very hard on the children. His two boys are sometimes with him and sometimes with her.

AR: Was this your first experience with divorce.

Bibi: No, we’ve never seen divorce. In Afghanistan there was very little divorce, maybe 1 out of every 100 or so.

AR: What were the reasons behind these few divorces?

Alia: There was no law that said a woman couldn’t divorce a man, but only men divorced women. Most women understood that they depended on their men and would let them do whatever they asked… (garbled speech).

Phone rings and ends our interview – **Total Track 2: 12 minutes 35 seconds, end at 8:12 p.m.**
APPENDIX I:

Mohammed Alcoza’s Transcript
This interview is done in consideration of an oral history thesis project for the Capitol Public History Program at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) for the purpose of obtaining a Masters Degree.

We hereby submit for educational purposes all rights, title, and copyright interest in the audio recordings, transcriptions, and their contents of our interview conducted on 3-2-2609.

The compact disc (cd) and the accompanying transcript are results of one voluntary recorded interview. Any reader should bear in mind that he/she is reading a spoken, not written word and that the cd, not the transcript is the primary document. It is understood that the audio recording and transcript will be placed at the CSUS library in Sacramento upon completion and may also be placed on a CSUS online database at a future date.

Signed:

[Narrator]

[Name in Print]

[Interviewer]

[Name in Print]
Biographical Sketch

Full Name: Mohammed Alcoza

Address: Petaluma, Ca

Place of Birth: Kabul, Afghanistan

Birthdate: 1965

Occupation: Computer Engineer

Mother’s name and place of birth: Alia Alcoza

Father’s name and place of birth: Father deceased. Kabul, Afghanistan

Siblings: Four brothers, four sisters.

Spouse’s name (if married) and Occupation: Divorced

Date and place of marriage: -------------

Children: 2 boys

Year of emigration - to Pakistan: 1979       to United States: 1984


Reason for emigrating from Afghanistan: Fear of life

Reason for emigrating from Pakistan: Desire for a better life
Mohammed Alcoza’s Transcript Summary

Interview Date: May 3rd, 2009 / 4:44 p.m. / Track 1

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<td>– Journey to Pakistan. Interrogation by the Mujahideen.</td>
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<td>– Involved in the Afghan community in the Bay Area. Life in Afghanistan before the Communist took over and Russians came.</td>
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<td>– Resistance in Afghanistan. Problems with the Mujahideen after the Russians left. His trip back to Kabul after being in Pakistan for 4 years. Trip to Afghanistan from America in 2007.</td>
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Interview ends May 3rd, 2009 at 5:29 p.m.
Mohammed Alcoza’s Interview Transcript

Interview Date/Time/Location: May 3rd, 2009 / 4:44 p.m. / Pleasant Hill (Alia Alcoza’s house)

Transcription and light editing: Aideen Rahimi

AR: I like to start my interview off by asking some background information about where and when you were born.

Mohammed Alcoza: I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965. A long time ago.

(laughter)

AR: Not entirely. (laughter) Did you stay there for awhile?

MA: I stayed there until 1987. I went to school there and University there in Kabul.

(noise from Alia placing food and tea on the table next to the recorder. I move the recorder)

AR: How was that for you, growing up in Kabul?

MA: It was good in a way but it wasn’t good because when I was in 7th grade when everything changed and the communists took over.

AR: You were in 7th grade?

MA: Yes, we were in 7th grade.

AR: Did you stop going to school?

MA: No, we never stopped because we were in the capitol.

AR: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

MA: Four brothers and four sisters, with me it would be five brothers and four sisters.
AR: So you were with them in Kabul the entire time?

MA: Until 1987. We decided to leave because the situation changed completely. We had to leave the capitol, we left Afghanistan for Pakistan.

AR: Tell me about your journey a little bit. The route that you took, where you went, and where you ended up in Pakistan? (Sound interference on the recorder is from Alia cleaning up and turning on the television).

MA: We couldn’t just take the bus and get out of the capitol because they wouldn’t allow that so we had to do it secretly. What happened, there was a bakery that was supplying bread to all the government workers. The people in the outskirts of Kabul which was Arghandeh, they were coming everyday, the night shift was coming to work in the factory and in the morning we were taking the bus, the same bus back to Arghandeh. Arghandeh was half way in the control of the government and half in the control of the Mujahideen, the freedom fighters. My oldest brother, he had a friend and he told us that he was going to get us out of Kabul. What he did was he found somebody, the driver of the bus he said that “you cannot take them too.” But the bus was always, the last stop was by the government checkpoint. So before people go to their village they would check who was coming and who was going and the bus would stop right there. He told us to put something in your bag like old clothes and as soon as you get off the bus don’t look at the checkpoint or the soldiers or anything. Just look at the ground and follow the line.

AR: Was this the instruction he gave to your entire family?

MA: Just me and my brother.

AR: So just you and your brother were going to leave first?
MA: Yes, that’s what we did. Early morning, at six ‘o clock we got on the bus and we went there, stopped right by the checkpoint, the government. So we were very calm like other workers, just followed them.

4:51 p.m.

MA: As soon as we got in Arghandeh we were introduced by the same guy, we were introduced to a group of Mujahideen freedom fighters. But they were not the people that we knew. They start asking weird questions because they want to know where we’re going, are we part of the government or communist, who we are or are we just ordinary people. So they start asking weird questions like, “Where are you going?” “What did you do in Kabul?” “What was your job?” So we answered all the questions and then they asked us where we were going. We told them we were going to Jalrez and my cousins they were part of Islamic sect.

AR: That’s in Afghanistan?

MA: Jalrez is in Afghanistan. That’s where mostly Hazarah’s live. From Arghandeh it took us two days walking to Jalrez. It was constant walking, we didn’t stop. We went to Jalrez and we were there with our cousins for like 3 nights or so and then we came back to Arghandeh. There is upper Arghandeh and lower Arghandeh. So we came back to Arghandeh and from there we went to Lowgar, and it’s all walking.

AR: And it took two days?

MA: It took another two days to get back to Lowgar. Some places we walked some places we took car. We went to Lowgar, it was a long time ago I still remember (laughter). We went to another place called Dubandy, just another place, we went there
we just had to walk and over there we took a pickup truck and they took us all the way to Trey Mangal, which is on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Luckily we got on the car on the pickup truck he took us all the way to Trey Mangal, nothing happened on the way, it was a long drive but everything was okay. So we got to Trey Mangal by 11 or 12 'o clock. We stayed there and the next day we went to another place in Pakistan and then we took a bus and went to Peshawar. So that was my journey starting from Kabul to Pakistan.

AR: It took about a week?

MA: About a week, it took us about a week. It was short because we were lucky we found a car from Dubandy to Trey Mangal, if we didn’t have that car we would have walked another 3 or 4 days.

AR: So you and your oldest brother.

MA: He’s not the oldest one but he was older than me.

AR: You decide to journey out first, but what about the rest of the family?

MA: The rest of the family stayed in Kabul.

AR: Were you apart from them for long?

MA: We were apart from them for seven or eight months. (phone rings and Alia picks it up)

AR: What did you do in Peshawar in the meantime?

4:56 p.m.

MA: I had a sister she was there before us. She went to Pakistan in 1982. We stayed with her but in the mean time we were looking for a job because the currency from
Afghanistan to Pakistan was completely different and we didn’t have that much money to spend so we were looking to find a job, then I got a kind of an educational job…how will I say it…the company was MPT, Man Power Technology. What they did, it was like school but they were paying for your food. It wasn’t a Pakistani company; it was one of the NGO’s (Nongovernmental Organizations). They were paying like 1,800 rupees which was like, it was good money, good to study and get money.

AR: You were studying there at the same time?

MA: Yeah, I studied electronics. Some people were studying computers.

AR: Were you working there at the same time?

MA: We were just studying, we were just learning, we were just students. The first six months we’re just students but after that they could send us just for experience, they were sending us outside for jobs but it was just for experience not work. They had different programs. They had computer programs and everything. But I liked electronics because my background was in Mathematics. I was part of their electronics department for 18 months or so and then there was another program by IRC (International Rescue Committee), what they did was they hired engineering faculty of Afghanistan and they opened actually seven engineering departments there and I had to go there and take their exam. It was much better than this one which was just electronics and that was civil engineering. I was there for two and a half years (studying) civil engineering before I came here.

AR: What year was that when you came to the States?

AR: That’s the same year that I came. So you were in Peshawar the entire time before you came to the United States. Why did you and your brother feel you had to leave Afghanistan? I know the situation, the war with the communists was tough but why did you leave, obviously you furthered your education, but did you leave for educational purposes or for work or was life just getting bad?

MA: Life was getting really bad, it was scary. We were supposed to leave the country earlier, much earlier, but we didn’t do it because some people had to stay. We actually helped the freedom fighters in Kabul so we had to stay.

AR: How were you helping?

MA: When they were coming to Kabul they couldn’t just go to hotels or something. They had to know people to go to their houses. Sometimes they would come and we were in the heart of Kabul completely under the control of the government. But when they would come we sheltered them because that’s the way it is. We were under occupation and everybody had to do something.

5:01 p.m.

AR: Tell me more about that. What did you as a family feel about what was happening to you and your country that you felt you had to leave?

MA: As I said it’s a really bad situation when you are under occupation. I remember most of the things. Maybe the communists were happy but nobody else.

AR: What happened to you personally? You were going to school at the time and then the Russians came then things started going downhill. Did you leave school then?
MA: We did not leave school. Maybe we were lucky because all five of my brothers, well my oldest brother he got in trouble. They put him in prison for nine months or so.

AR: This was when you were in Kabul?

MA: Yes.

AR: Why was that, did he not want to join the army or something?

MA: It was just a political issue. They couldn’t find any evidence but they put him in jail for nine months. I was arrested once, it was Ede Mubarak (Islamic holiday). Everybody would go visit family. So I went to go to my aunt, my father’s sister, we went to their house and we knocked on the door and boom they got us. We said that we came for Ede. They said no, that they were leaving the country today and you guys came to say bye. They held us for like nine hours because I was going to University and my brother was going to University and they didn’t have anything on us so that’s why they said we could go but they took my father with them. My father was working for Ariana (an Afghan airline). They kept him for another week or so and they released him. That was the only time I was arrested, well I wasn’t arrested but they held me for a while.

AR: So you felt you had to leave, conditions would be better elsewhere?

MA: Everybody was thinking that way. But some people had to stay and help as much as they could.

AR: So 1987, you stayed there for a long time. A lot of people were leaving; you probably had a lot of family and friends that left. Was ‘87 a long time to stay behind?

MA: Yes, yes it was.

AR: What about your passage to United States?
MA: It worked out because my father was working for Ariana and Ariana used to be together with Pan Am. So the people that worked for Ariana because they worked for America they had the privilege to come as a refugee.

AR: I’m sorry I forget, was your father a pilot?

MA: No, he was just working there. Since he was working for America they told us we could fill out the application at the refugee office.

AR: So he came to United States first?

MA: No, we all came together. We filled out the application in the refugee office in Islamabad.

AR: I don’t remember that whole process, that's a reason why I’m doing this project. What was involved, if you remember, about the refugee process? How did you get accepted, what were the conditions?

MA: One of the conditions was that if you work for an American company or used to, like University instructors, engineering faculty, or Ariana people, people that worked for Intercontinental Hotel. They could fill out an application and come here.

AR: You came as refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan…

MA: No, we came to Pakistan first and then from Pakistan as refugees here.

5:06 p.m.

AR: What was your experience coming to the United States?

MA: As far as?

AR: As far as assimilating in the first years?

MA: It is a different world. For me honestly it wasn’t that difficult.
AR: You are the youngest right, of your brothers?

MA: When I came I knew that I’m rich.

AR: When you were at the IRC you were studying English as well?

MA: Yea, I studied English and Engineering. That really made it easier for me. If you know the language it’s much easier to find a job. Two months or something passed I found a job, it was a gas station job but I found a job. That’s how that started.

AR: Those were the kinds of jobs you started with?

MA: You had to start somewhere.

AR: The people that hired you, did they know you? Were they from your country?

MA: Yea the first one knew me. The second job also, you know often we all knew each other, they knew me too. My third job I started working for Radioshack. I didn’t know anybody but I just applied and they interviewed me and I got a job at Radioshack. That was the time I was going to school. Then I graduated from school and as soon as I graduated my first job was a temporary job for People Soft. Then I got hired as a permanent employee by a company Wang. I started with Wang in 1997.

AR: So your studies in Pakistan really helped you with the market here.

MA: Actually yea, it did. But I changed my major. I didn’t go for civil engineering, I went for computer technology.

AR: Why did you do that? Did you think there was a better future in it?

MA: Yea, I thought maybe computer technology is better. I’m working in the computer industry and I still have a job so I’m happy.

AR: You came with your entire family to United States?
MA: Not entire, but some of them.

AR: Your immediate family, father and mother, brothers and sisters?

MA: Two brothers and a sister and my nephew.

AR: Were some of your brothers left behind?

MA: My oldest brother, my two oldest brothers because they were married and my two oldest sisters they were married so they couldn’t come.

AR: Did they want to leave as well?

MA: Yea, they did, they did want to leave.

AR: What were the reasons for your leave, I mean it seemed like you were doing okay in Pakistan, you were going to school?

MA: Yea, but overall when you think about the future, you want to make sure you go somewhere you can have a good future. In Pakistan we knew today was not going to be tomorrow, it’s not going to be like that, everything could change.

AR: What about your family, how long did it take them to adjust to American life? Was it difficult in the beginning or was it just the language barrier, I know you already spoke some English but what about the culture, how was it to deal with?

MA: Honestly, since you know we were dealing a lot with our own Afghans so it wasn’t that big of a change. We knew a lot of the Afghan community. But we have to just learn the other stuff too. Going to the workplace there’s different culture, different people, we just have to respect other cultures.
5:11 p.m.

AR: What about now. Are you still more involved in your own afghan community as a family? I understand that (community) must be tremendously helpful, did you start assimilating at what point or does that keep you attached to your country?

MA: You know that always depends on what age you go to a different environment and how much you can adopt from that environment. I spend most of my life in Afghanistan with my people so I’m really attached to the community over here and to my people in Afghanistan but as I said it’s all about since we live here we are citizens we just have to respect the differences.

AR: You went through the citizenship process as well?

MA: Yes.

AR: What about the Afghan community here, they were tremendously helpful getting you started and…

MA: Yes, you know Afghans are always helpful. If we can we help each other. I’m sure you know most of the people too. Afghans (in America) are doing much better now than 16 or 17 years ago when we came. You can see a lot of people going to Universities, kids are going to University and graduating and very good Universities. 16 or 17 years ago it wasn’t like that. Afghans are doing good.

AR: Would you ever consider going back to Afghanistan?

MA: To live there. Yes, there is something there in the back of my head but you know not now.

Alia brings snacks and there is some light conversation
AR: Well I’ve asked a lot of my questions, let me see I think I would like to know more about your life in Afghanistan. What life was like there, culturally, socially, economically? I know things changed tremendously when the Russians came.

MA: They way I see it, it was a very dynamic life in Afghanistan, it was never the same. I even remember before the communist government everything was good. I remember one time one person was killed somewhere; everybody in the region they already knew somebody was killed because it didn’t happened that often. Now people really don’t care who’s killed or who killed who. Back then it was very good. Everybody had some food on their tables, good clothes and everything. But it was just the last five years of Da’ud Khan’s government. Then the communist government came and they tried to change. The Russians wanted to change the culture of Afghanistan and they did to an extend.

AR: Is that why they got the resistant?

5:16 p.m.

MA: That’s why the resistance started because they attacked people’s religion and culture. Then when the freedom fighters started the resistance it was good for a while, but then it changed. Other countries got involved based on their own interests: Pakistan, Iran, America, they all got involved, they wanted to help Afghanistan but they had their own agenda on the war and that changed a lot. It changed the line of jihad because now people their not just thinking about fighting Russia but they were thinking of being powerful and being rich selling guns and everything just to make themselves rich so that’s why it changed.
Then after they started, especially in our neighbor’s country, they started to put Afghans in a situation that created between them a lot of differences like religion differences, language differences, location differences. So once Russians left Afghanistan and the reason freedom fighters couldn’t seize the communist government was because they had a lot of problems between themselves. They weren’t one hand anymore like they used to be in Russian times, or beginning of Russian time. So that’s why the communist government was in power for another four years. We thought it would just be for a week and they (Mujahideen) would come and take over but they couldn’t because they had a lot of problems themselves.

That problem grew so big that when the communist government had no choice couldn’t feed people Russia turned their back to them. They had to leave and that was when the real problems started, poor people, first couple months I think it was kind of okay and then they started between themselves killing each other. Actually I did go to Afghanistan in 1992 before I came to America. I was doing my internship for Care International in Pakistan because I was going for civil engineering, no not internship it was my practical training. I was doing practical training for Care International and in the summer I got two weeks off and I went to Afghanistan to Kabul.

AR: Why did you go?

MA: Just to see my country, I was away for like 4 or 5 years and I just wanted to see my country.

AR: You knew you were leaving for the United States?
MA: Mhm, that’s why I wanted to see. I went there to the place we used to live its called Kuchal Khan close to Cilo. I could see there was one group of freedom fighter…a place called Acompany, they were hitting the people, another group in the mountains of Afshar, they were hitting them back there in between the houses. We’re not talking about one or two or ten, but thousands of houses and they were using very heavy artillery, not like a machine gun or something. I could see this with my own eyes. I was supposed to be there for two weeks but then I ran away. I heard afterwards what happened it was very bad situation.

AR: This was your hometown?

MA: Yea.

AR: Do you have any idea what condition your hometown is in now?

MA: Right now it’s fine. I went there in 2007, it’s fine.

AR: Did you go to see your extended family, or your brothers?

MA: No, my brother’s in Pakistan. He still lives in Pakistan. But my relatives and family the place we used to live it’s back to normal but it’s still, well you can see the differences. We used to have streets which were fairly clean but now it’s really in bad shape. People they rebuilt their houses but not their streets.

AR: There’s no money for infrastructure?

MA: There’s money but they just don’t want to do it.

5:21 p.m.

AR: So how do you feel about being a refugee? For most of your live you had a country you could call your home but the rest of your life, at least for a short period of time you
were on the run, and you got this refugee status, from Afghanistan then Pakistan. How does that change you, or your family?

MA: It’s different everywhere. Refugees in Pakistan they could just arrest you for no reason just to get some money from you, they can do that. Luckily they never did that to me but I’ve seen a lot of people that they did that to and still they are doing it. That’s a different story; over there you don’t have the rights of a refugee. But over here in the United States at least the refugee’s they have their own rights. You start as a refugee like for 5 years then we were citizens after 5 or 10 years. After 5 years I think we could apply for citizenship and then we were citizens. We don’t feel, after a while actually, you don’t feel like a refugee anymore because you are a taxpayer like everybody else (both laugh). Maybe the situation is different if you are getting government aid, but for me after a month I started working and since then I’ve been a taxpayer and I feel like it’s my home.

AR: Sounds like your experience wasn’t as bad as it could have been. In a sense you are pretty lucky. It’s good to hear. So the rest of your family went through the same experience you had?

MA: To an extent, yes. My brothers they always worked and my sister graduated from University and she has a good job with Genentech. The rest of the family, of course my mom she’s not going to work, (both laugh) so they are fine. We are fine.

AR: Do you think that being a refugee and going through the hardships that comes with being a refugee brought your family closer together or was there a lot of tension?

MA: Actually, not just, the way I experienced it didn’t just bring the family closer it actually brought the whole community closer. Honestly it does, to me it does, I know
some people complain about their own people but the way I see it brought the Afghan community together. Right now see we have a soccer team with over 90 players from age 5 to age 19 or 20. Every year you can see these people coming and sitting by each other drinking tea and talking and their kids are playing soccer.

AR: These are Afghan’s playing soccer?

MA: All Afghans. That’s just one example of bringing the whole community together, we are relatives helping each other.

AR: Do you meet new refugees or Afghans?

MA: It’s open for all Afghans. They bring their kids.

AR: Did you play soccer in Afghanistan?

MA: Yes I did. One of the reasons that I could stay in Afghanistan for along time was soccer because I was part of the University team and I was part of the national youth team. That’s why we were able to hang on the capitol because of soccer even though if you had to go to military service, which I did for a while like 8 months or so, we still didn’t have to go to war because of soccer we were in the capitol playing our game.

AR: Why was that?

MA: Because it wasn’t for everybody, it was just of r national team players and some experienced players. There were like 3 different organizations under military; the police, the special…I don’t think we called the special forces, intelligence services and also the army.

AR: They had their own teams?
MA: They all had their own team. I was part of a military team and I didn’t have to go to war, I did it for 8 months or so.

AR: Was that required?

MA: That was required after University but I didn’t have to go to war because I was a soccer player and I was playing for their team. That was as I said soccer was one of the reasons that held us in the capitol. Even the communists in the University they attempted a couple of times to pull me into their organization but I refused. Not everybody could refuse but I refused and they couldn’t do anything because I was part of the University.

AR: Sounds like that was a one constant in your life and it carried on to here too (referring to soccer).

MA: Yes, that’s something that stays with me.

AR: That’s good we need things like that. Okay well thank you for speaking with me. Is there anything you would like to end with that you feel people should know about your experience as an Afghan refugee?

MA: No, I think we said everything. If you want to get more information you can give me a call and we can chat.

Total Track: 43 minutes, end 5:29 p.m.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


*Print Articles*


Other Sources
