

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Nazneen Kharas-Khumbatta**

Interview Date: 07/13/2013

Interviewer: Amy Pena

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Location: Sugar Land, Texas

7 Pages



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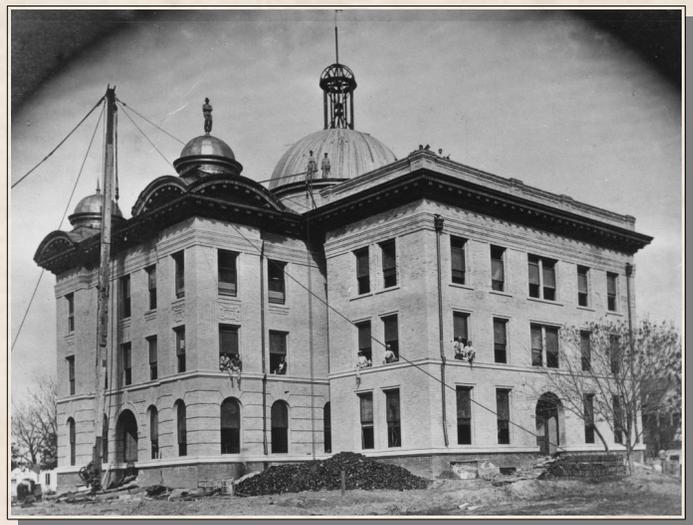
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Transcript

PENA: Nazneen, what is your date of birth?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: My date of birth is July 27, 1962.

PENA: When did you come to Fort Bend County?

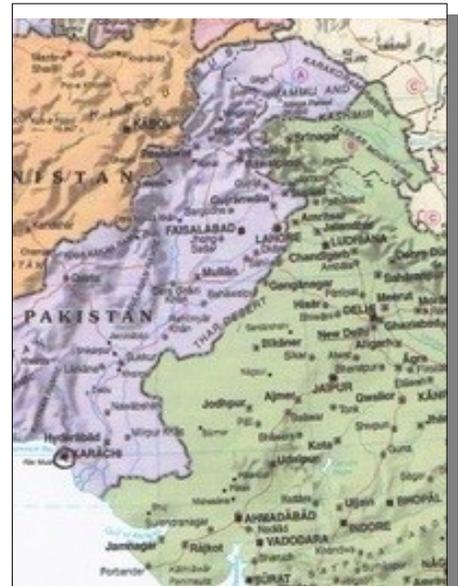
KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: I arrived here in 1985, as a student at the University of Houston.

PENA: What was your life like before you came to Texas or Fort Bend County?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: I came straight from Karachi to Fort Bend County, essentially my life was in Pakistan and then in Texas. Those are the two places I have lived in my whole life.

PENA: What was your life like in Karachi?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: When I was in Karachi, my life was very good. We had a typical middle-class life. I went to high school, and then I went to the University of Karachi. I finished my bachelors degree in geology, and then I came here to do my masters at the University of Houston. We used to go to college, study, go hang around with our friends, go to the movies, go out for dinner on weekends, and have parties at somebody's house or the other. We would all get together. I remember the VCR had come out in the late 80s, so the highlight was to go someone's house and watch a VCR movie. When I think back now, it's very similar to the life that my kids enjoy in Sugar Land. It's the same kind of feeling.



Nazneen's birthplace, Karachi, is shown on the southwest coast of Pakistan.

The only difference, I would say, is that we socialized more within our own community. Our after-school socializing was more with the kids from our own community. When I say our own community, it's really our own religious sect. That's the only real difference that I can think about. It is so fun.

In Houston, there are so many of my school friends from Karachi. They are not from my community. They are other sects of Indian Pakistan, and they all live here. They have their kids here, and we have socialized together for the last twenty years. I really can't miss Karachi because I have my family here. I have my school friends, and of course we have been here 28 years, so we have a wonderful group of people that we have become as close to as family.

PENA: That's wonderful.

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: In fact, our school had their reunion in Houston, if you can believe it. My high school from Karachi had its North American reunion, and I think about three hundred ladies showed up.

PENA: Wow, that is amazing. Can you tell us why you chose the Fort Bend County-Sugar Land area?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: When I was coming to the states as a student, I had a few choices because I had gotten into a few universities. Basically, my dad felt a little more comfortable with me coming to Houston because he knew a few people in Houston. It was that particular reason which made me decide to come to Houston, and then, of course, I stayed on.

PENA: Your whole high school was here?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: At that time, I had no clue of that. We all met up accidentally. We ran into mutual friends. As people came over, they said, "Oh, do you know this one is also here?"

PENA: So there was quite an Indian Pakistan community here when you came?

KHUMBATTA: Yes, already in 1985, when I came, there were quite a few. But the community that I was focusing on was my sub-community, which is the Zoroastrian population.

PENA: Did you have any problems adjusting? I am assuming what could be different, the weather?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: No Karachi is exactly like Houston, hot and humid. I can only say the first four years when my husband and I were here, we missed our parents and our siblings. My mother-in-law and my father-in-law came to visit for the first time for 10 days. After we dropped them at the airport and came back to our apartment, I can remember sitting and literally crying because I missed them so much. The first four or five years, of course, you still miss the familiarity of the city you grew up in. After that, you make more and more friends, your children are born here and this becomes home.

PENA: You experienced no prejudice or ignorance regarding your customs or traditions?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: I wouldn't say I experienced any prejudice at all. Maybe there was some ignorance because people did not know who Zoroastrians were. They knew who Indians were, but they didn't know who Zoroastrians were. In America, by and large, I think people evaluate you based on your actions and your demeanor. They are not worried about where you come from.

PENA: You have children?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: I do. My daughter is twenty-two, and my son is twenty.

PENA: You don't look old enough to have children that old. I expected you to say they were young.

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: On no, no, no. (laughing)

PENA: Have they ever had any problems in school, or are they just like everybody else?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: No, they have never had problems in school that I know of. They are American. They were born in Fort Bend County (chuckle). They went to private school at The Village School in Harris County, on the west side of Houston. There were a lot of expatriates, oil and gas people, and a lot of Indians.

PENA: Did you have particular expectations about the states that didn't meet with the reality when you got here?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: I think maybe after ten, fifteen years, we may have realized those things. Immediately, it was not evident. I remember when we came here, it was believed to be a much faster, more modern, maybe a less moral life style. I don't think that now.

We are very driven; I think that is our choice as first-generation immigrants. It's not the United States as such, it's just us as first-generation immigrants. We push ourselves very hard to excel in everything that we want to do. So, we forget to sit back and smell the roses. Life is different from what we thought. My husband and I never thought we would have this much economic and financial success. We worked hard and it happened.

PENA: Is there something else that you would like to share?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: My earliest memory of wanting to come to the United States is when I was nine or ten years old. My dad had taken us to the Pakistan American Cultural Center in Karachi where they were telecasting the Apollo Eleven flight to the moon.

I can remember seeing the film, and my dad saying, "When you grow up, you must make an attempt to go to America. It's a wonderful place." That's my earliest memory of remembering and wanting to come here.

I am a Zoroastrian by religion. It is an ancient religion which predates Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It's the first monotheistic religion in the world. It started in central Asia. My people left Iran and came to the Indian subcontinent maybe fifteen hundred years ago when Iran was invaded by the Arabs.

We think about coming to America as another migration from India and Pakistan to the states. This country, of course, affords us much more religious freedom, its great in every way.

PENA: When did the first group from your religion start coming to the United States?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: They probably first came to New York possibly in the 20s-30s. A lot of ladies my Mom's age came through the United States Exchange Program where they had a host family. They spent a year with the host family, went to high school, and then they went back to Pakistan. This must have been in the early 50s. They had wonderful experiences and wonderful memories, and many kept in touch with their host families.

The first wave of actual immigrants from India and Pakistan must have begun in the early 60s. Basically, qualified people were offered jobs, or they came here to study for higher education. Then they got a job here and got sponsored, and stayed on.

One gentleman I know is in his seventies, and he is an engineer who came here in the 1950s. In the late 70s, four or five families set up the Zoroastrian Association of Houston. In 1980, they incorporated it as a body. They started gathering funds and established their own cultural center in 1994 on Gessner and West Airport. Now we have a very large building. We hold Sunday School there on the second Sunday of every month. We have our prayers there and the kids have a lot of cultural and religious classes. A lot of things are going on. At present, we are about seven hundred in Houston in number. A lot of retired Zoroastrian couples from different parts of America are now choosing to come to Houston because the climate is so similar to India and Pakistan and they are used to it. They are choosing to come here, and housing up to now has been very much more affordable. By and large, Houston is very welcoming to us. Our association is doing well, and we are all happy.

PENA: You got a degree from the university that you went to...

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: Yes, I got my bachelors from the University of Karachi in geology, and then I came in to do my Masters in Geology from the University of Houston.

PENA: Did you just decide to do that, or were you offered some kind of fellowship?

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: I wanted to do my Masters in Geology, and yes, I did have a research assistantship while I was doing my masters. Otherwise, I could not have afforded to come here. There is no way I could have paid for it myself. I had loans from Karachi from our community funds, and then, of course, once I came here, I was working as a research assistant.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Assistantship: a paid academic appointment made to a graduate student that involves part-time teaching or research.
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I had what they call the 'hunger in the belly.' We have been here twenty-eight years now. I see our kids are very different from that. That's okay, it's whatever is destined for each of us. It was our destiny to come here, and have all the challenges, and have all of the benefits of it.

This is a different time. It is a different continent, and it is a different culture. There are three differences that exist between me and my children. Pakistan and India are no longer the same as they were when we were growing up. They are different cultures. That's it, you take the good with the bad. But especially for Zoroastrians, it's not a hard adjustment because our culture is, in general, very westernized.

We are believed to be the first monotheistic religion, and a lot of our tenets have influenced teachings in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. For us to fit into the western world is very easy. We do not have any of the religious bars that others may face, MAY face, I say. There is still a bit of a culture difference. We still have a little bit of the east in us, but by and large, our kids are doing well and are very comfortable. They are getting married, having children, and holding down good jobs.

PENA: It has been very nice talking to you. I enjoyed our time together.

KHARAS-KHUMBATTA: Thank you.

Interview ends