

Interviewee: ZARINE M. BALSARA

Interviewers: TARA PATEL (rising fifth year); GABRIEL WANG (rising junior)

Date/Time of Interview: July 17, 2014, at 10:00 AM

Transcribed by: TARA PATEL; GABRIEL WANG (Edited by: Taylor Ginter 5/7/17)

Audio Track Time: 1:38:10

**Background:**

Zarine Balsara was born in Karachi, India in 1934, which later became Karachi, Pakistan after the Partition in 1947. There, she owned a ballet studio and was trained in education before her immigration to the United States in 1975. She stayed in Moraga, California for only a few months before coming to Houston for her husband's business. In Houston, she has spent most of her time teaching in her own Montessori school. She is also involved in the Theosophical Society and the Zoroastrian Association of Houston's senior group.

**Setting:**

The interview focuses on Zarine Balsara's life in Karachi during the time of the Partition of India, as well as her ideologies on education and her belief in the Montessori method. It also touches on her children's experiences as immigrants, and the modern state of Pakistan.

The interview was conducted at Mrs. Balsara's home in Cypress, TX. In the middle of the interview, their home phone rings and Mrs. Balsara's husband, presumably in the other room, picks it up. A few minutes later, Mrs. Balsara's husband approaches Mrs. Balsara and whispers inaudibly to her about the call; Mrs. Balsara wordlessly motions that she is busy. He leaves and the interview continues.

**Interviewers:**

Tara Patel is a rising fifth year at Rice University and has lived in Houston most of her life. She is one of the HAAA summer interns, and is majoring in history and economics.

Gabriel Wang is a rising junior at Rice University originally from Seattle, Washington. He is one of the HAAA summer interns, and is majoring in chemistry. He is also pre-pharmacy.

**Interview Transcript:**

**Key:**

TP	Tara Patel
GW	Gabriel Wang
ZB	Zarine Balsara
—	Abrupt stop, false start
-	Speech cuts off
...	Speech trails off, pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc) or interview notes

**GW:** This is Gabriel Wang.

**TP:** And this is Tara Patel.

**GW:** And we are here today, July 14th, 2014, to interview Mrs. Zarine Balsara in her home for the Houston Asian American Archive. [to ZB] Can you just begin by telling us about where your family's from, and where you were born?

**ZB:** I was born in Karachi. It was, uh, the undivided India at the time, in 1934. And, uh, my family were all born there.

**TP:** Could you tell us about your childhood? What your neighborhood was like, what your experiences were like?

**ZB:** Uh, Karachi was a very nice place at that time, and a very safe place. Um, my parents were wonderful parents, and we lived in a very big house. Uh, the neighborhood was very calm, very safe. And, uh, kind of in the middle of the city, actually, but still, very orderly. Um, I had four brothers. And so I was a tomboy, you might say. [laughter] I was second from the eldest. And, uh, my older brother was a great cricket fan, playing cricket. And, uh, he had his own little cricket team of boys that from in the neighborhood, and I used to play with them. And, uh, we had a big backyard. And all the kids from the area would come there, we'd play cricket, and we had a swing set, we had a table tennis table, and we had a lot of fun.

Very free, very safe childhood. 'Cause, I never had to say to my mom, 'I'm going to go here, go there.' I got on my bike and I went *anywhere*, all over Karachi. And nothing bad ever happened to me. So Karachi was a great place. Um, there used to be carriages, with horse carriages, that you could go in for transport. There were trams, buses. We went everywhere. And, uh, as I said, I was, uh, free, like the girls and boys are not anymore, not even here. They have to be watched, supervised, et cetera. We weren't. We were so free, we were so safe. And, uh, all the people were very, very nice. The local people were Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, and a lot of Parsis. And then...

Well, I will tell you my school was, what my school was. Um, first I went to the first Montessori school in India, started by my mother, who was trained by Maria Montessori, who came to India in 1939 at the invitation of the Theosophical Society, and my mother was in charge of her—um, Maria Montessori's welfare. And she took the first training course Maria Montessori gave in India, which was held in, uh, Madras in Adyar, in the Theosophical Society's International Headquarters. Well, after that, my mom started the first little school. And I guess I was about five years old. So I went for a little time there, and then I went to the Mama Parsi Girls' School. Just for, I would say, couple of years.

Because then my mom and dad put me in, uh, the Grammar School. The Grammar School was the most prestigious school, and, um, teachers were from, um, England and so forth. And I was there till we finished school, and I did the Senior Cambridge exam, which, the papers come from England. And when I was there my school was 100 years old. It was started by missionaries long, long ago. It was a wonderful school. And the day I had to finish school I cried. [laughs] I had such a good time in school. Um, we had a lot of sports, athletics. I got colors for my blazer in gymnastics, tennis, *and* hockey. [laughs] And, uh, I was, uh, captain of my house, which was Napier house, for about two years. And I was, uh, voted *victrix ludorum* when I finished school.

**TP:** What does that mean?

**ZB:** [Overlapping] Which is the same as, uh, same as what you call, uh, valedictorian.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** It was a boys and girls—the only school that was, uh, boys and girls. It was great fun.

**TP:** Was this college, sorry?

**ZB:** School.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** And, uh, it ended with, uh, Senior Cambridge exam. So the Senior Cambridge exam was two years more than, um, the O-Levels, this was an A-Level. So when I went to college I did my Bachelor's in two years, not four years. Because already it was like the first two years of college. And, uh, that was the St. Joseph's, uh, College for Women, uh, run by Catholic nuns and so forth. [pause] Well, that was not as much fun as my school. Um, the girls mostly were from the convent, and they had not been in the co-educational setting. So there was one teacher who was male, and oh my god. [laughs] These girls were so crazy! [everyone laughs] They—they made him blush all the time, you know. [everyone laughs] But, uh, I mean, coming from a co-ed school myself, I thought that was crazy.

Um, anyway, that was two years of college. I did a Bachelor's Degree in Arts, and I majored in English and Psychology. And, uh, previously to that, before I went to that college I had gone to the Mama School's technical, which was for girls to learn all kinds of, uh, girl things, like cooking, sewing, and all that. And I was not too impressed with that place, because [laughs] I was used to the grammar school. Anyway, um, around that time I guess I met Fali. And, uh because I used to go every evening to our Parsi gymkhana. Gymkhana is like a sports club. And played tennis every day. Loved to play tennis. Oh yes, I got colors in tennis, too. And, uh, that was a lot of fun. I went every day, and met Fali. And, so we were going steady, kind of.

Um... The most exciting thing I can tell you is that both of us saw a real flying saucer. We had never read about these, or even heard about them. Nothing. So one evening, it had turned dark, and I was waiting for my uncle to come down from the bridge room, 'cause he used to drive me home. And we were just standing outside the building, waiting for him, and all of a sudden, we saw this great big thing, huge, round thing, lit up like your airplane windows all around. And it was there, I would say, and we said, 'Look at that!' And we both saw it at the same time. And, uh, it was there for a few seconds, and we were looking at it, and it was, [whistles] gone. Just like you see them now, talk about it, but we had never seen a picture, heard about it, read about it. And up to this day I will never deny that I saw it. It was there. Then we kept reading in the newspaper, 'Flying Saucer Seen over Karachi,' flying saucer seen over here, there, and the other. So yeah, we really did see it.

**TP:** After you saw it did you try and figure out what it was?

**ZB:** Well, I read a lot about it because it was in the paper all the time. But it was a fairly new thing happening at that time, I would say that it would be in, um, the early part of the 1950's. Between '52 and '55, I would think. So it was very interesting. I'm very interested in science and I'm very interested in all these space things. I do believe that there are people—in other parts of this universe, and I do believe that they do travel here.

One time, when I was, um, going to Mexico City with my mom, and we were in the airplane approaching, approaching Mexico City, we saw all these spiral designs in the ground. Very interesting. I mean, who could make those spiral designs? I don't know. But you—you read a lot about those, too. And, uh, this, uh, what's this place in America where, uh, the spacecraft had, uh, crashed? Can't remember the name. In, uh, New Mexico?

**TP:** Roswell?

**ZB:** Roswell. My daughter's gonna go there. So, [laughs] she and my grandson are about to go there pretty soon. I said, 'Oh yeah, that'll be lovely.' Because I've read a lot about that, and they actually found a body. Read a lot about the people that were there, sworn to not talk about it. But one man did talk about it, on his *deathbed*. So, um, I suppose for reasons of not causing panic in the American, uh, population, the government was covering it up. But uh a body was found. That's all very interesting, I like all that.

**TP:** I'd like to go back a little bit. You discussed going to many different types of schools. How'd your experience differ—differ between the Montessori school, the Parsi school, the grammar school?

**ZB:** Um, the Montessori school was just basically very little, because I was already five years old and it was just a beginning school. So it was not like Montessori schools are today, just the very first part of the program was there. Then I went to the Mama Parsi School, and, uh, it was alright.

And my—one of my brothers, Farad, who was, I would say, one, two, three, *fourth*, was brilliant. So he was, uh, he was not put in Boy's Ma—uh, Parsi Boy's School, he was put in the grammar school. And, uh, he was quite a bit younger than I am, I would say five years at least. So, my parents put me there so I could give him a ride on my bike. [TP laughs] That's how I was put in the grammar school, because he was the brilliant one. When he was about two years old he went to a movie, and there, there was a sort of song. He came home, and on our piano he—he [tapping on the table] played that tune with his finger, with his one finger. [laughs] He plays the piano beautifully. And we all had piano lessons. Um, so the school was fine, but I was there very—a very short time. So when I went to the grammar school, I was only in the second grade. So I went there very s—very young. And I'd ride my bike, and he would sit on the back. And, uh, I loved the Grammar School, really did. It was, uh, very nice, very, very nice in those days.

**TP:** What was the name of the grammar school?

**ZB:** Karachi Grammar School.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** It was a very big building, and classes were allowed on the second floor *and* the third floor, not like here. And, uh, it was a school that had children from kindergarten all the way to the end. So there was one second grade, not three or four or five, like here, you have thousands of children in a school. No, over there, it was not like that. One classroom had, like, 25 children, I guess. And we had really wonderful teachers. So school was great fun. And m—*no one* ever had to tell us to do our homework. We were just, I guess, fond of learning, my brothers and I. And all of us did very well there.

**TP:** Were you very close to your siblings, growing up?

**ZB:** Yeah, very. Uh, my oldest—older brother was only 15 months older than me, the one younger than me, 15 months younger than me, and the same for the next one. So my mother had three or four children very close together. But the last one, Jimmy, came a few years later. And that's why he—he grew up without the company of his siblings, we were all, you know, busy with our lives and school and everything. When he was born, I guess I might—might have been nine years old. So I, I was like a little mother to him. I used to, uh, feed him his v—bottle, and take care of him and all that, I enjoyed doing that.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** But the rest of us, uh, especially myself and the two brothers younger than I, were very, very close and still are. And we're the only last ones that are living, because the older brother passed away, and the youngest brother passed away. So the three of us are still around. [laughs] One is in Cincinnati, the other one's in Birmingham in England, and I'm—I'm here. But thank god there's phones.

**TP:** What did your parents do?

**ZB:** My dad sold real estate, and it was so different from what happens now. Um, they talked, they—they made a contract verbally, shook hands, and that was it. Um, I was—I was buying a property here, and the gentleman who was working with me, he said, 'That's how we used to do it here. We talked, we—we negotiated, and we shook hands.' What you have to do today with all the legal paperwork, because my daughter does real estate, is so different. So very different. The whole world is so different—so different today. [tapping on table]

**GW:** Um, so how old were you when the partition happened?

**ZB:** I think I was, uh, that was in '47, I was thirteen. Um, there was a lot of unrest, because at this time in Karachi there were a lot of Hindus. And Karachi being a majority-not Karachi, but this area becoming Pakistan, I changed my, uh, country without changing my house. [laughs] It was a lot of unrest. Um, people were being killed, one lot killing the other lot, Hindus and Muslims, Parsis not co—not involved in any of this. Uh, so the Hindus left with whatever they had on their backs, and whatever they could take. And the Muslims also, from there, came into—into Pakistan. Although now, even today, there are more Muslims in *India* than there are in Pakistan. But as—as they came with, you know, with nothing on their, to bring with them, they came like refugees, Karachi was overwhelmed. Because naturally they came where the city was, to find jobs and things like that, and built all these little shanties and shacks and things. There's no hygiene, no, um, sanitation and all that. Too many people, all at once. And the government could not cope. But the sad thing is, that now, after so many years since '47, they have not *still* coped. It is *still* chaos, and now much more, um...

When we left in '75 to come to America, it was still okay. I had never heard this word 'Taliban' ever. It was not—I never heard it. And there was nothing like that in Karachi. Um, I believe that, um...since we left in '75, there was a great deal of influence from Saudi Arabia. Especially when one of the presidents was ra—rather the, um, orthodox type, he invited that kind of influence from Saudi Arabia. And they started this, uh, Islamic Law, and all that. We weren't there, but we hear all the things that are happening, and it never was like that before. Never was. But, uh, it's very different today for women. And that little—brave little girl, have you—you must have seen her on TV, the one who said she *will* go to school.

**TP:** Malala?

**ZB:** Yeah. I—when I've gone there, I've heard stories that in the s—in the s—suburbs and in the rural areas, the government tries to open a school, and these orthodox people go there and tell the teachers, do *not* come to school. Do *not* come. They don't want girls to go to school. And, um, they're violent. They just are so violent that they deter a lot of girls from going to school, like this little Malala was injured, wasn't she? Yeah. But she was brave. Um, I don't think there's much law and order, so people aren't very much, uh, able to speak up, even though they may *not* want things to be the way they are, speaking up is not very smart today, because there are people who will come and kill your family, or something like that. So there are a lot of good Muslims, a lot of very educated Muslims, um, I'm sure, who don't agree with anything that's going on, but they really can't [do] too much about it. Or, there isn't very much, um, freedom to speak up like here. Like here, it is established that you can speak up. There, it is kind of not yet happening. So, um, a lot of violence and a lot of unruliness is getting—going on.

But, uh, the best school was the Karachi Grammar School. It still exists. And people reserve their child's spot when he—when that child is born, [laughs] because everyone wants to go there. I'm sad to say that all the schools, nearly all the schools that people go to, are private schools. The government of Pakistan has perhaps tried to have schools, I don't know. But most of the schools that one hears—hears of are private schools, where most people want their k—child to go, because it is a higher standard. English is taught. The other schools may not have English and all that.

I had two experiences when, uh, when I was married and we had our family and we had, uh, a driver—a servant, and we also had a nanny. And she had a son, and the driver had a son. Two lovely boys, and they must have been five years old at that time, when I'm talking about. And, you know, it's so sad! These children have no place to go to school—they don't have a school to go to! So I went to two schools, and I said that I would pay the fees for these boys to go to school, and that, you know, my driver would take them to school. And they didn't admit them.

**TP:** Why do you think that was?

**ZB:** Because I guess that they were, uh, children of the servants, I have *no* idea. But those things do count, I guess, over there. And they take people from, you know, more wealthy families, or well-to-do families, but I would—I said I was going to pay for it, and still they didn't take these boys, but I taught them a little bit, how to read a little bit. They were so smart, such good kids. And you know, the—the poor people there, they don't want their child to grow up and be a domestic like themselves. If these domestics didn't have the positions they had, they had *nothing*, *no* job. Because [chuckles] most of them don't read or write. I think the illiteracy in Pakistan that I'd knew of was seventy to eighty percent or more. And you know what that means, that they can't write or read their own name. Pathetic, isn't it? And it's not much, much better today, I don't think. But, um, these—these people, who are domestics, *want* their child to be educated. And since they really don't have many [laughs] places that take them, or they can't afford it, or there is no school for them, they go to the mosque's schools. [whispers, inaudibly] Where they learn all this [gestures with hands]... I don't know if I should say all that.

**TP:** This will be public, so just keep that in mind.

**ZB:** Yeah, that's why I'm saying. So I mean, that's the only option they really have.

**TP:** Mm-hmm. When you were growing up, was it unusual for women to attend college?

**ZB:** It was unusual, definitely, because the well-to-do, um, Muslims definitely went to college. And, uh, I can say that the girls always did better than the men, academically, and they were always interested in study. And, uh, they went to the science college, they

went to the—the arts college, but that’s not even one percent, you know, not even point-five percent. The rest of the country is more or less, um, farmland and that sort of thing. Um, in big cities like Lahore and Rawalpindi and all, yes, women went to college, and they—they had lots of schools and colleges. But as I said, not enough, that they didn’t even, um, most Muslim girls, I don’t know, of the poor classes, didn’t have school or college.

The wonderful thing is that when my mom passed away, and she was the pioneer of Montessori education in, uh, Pakistan, she was awarded the highest honors of this country for her service in social service and education. My brothers opened a school for her in the northwest, mountainous regions, where there’s *nothing* for girls. You must have heard of, uh, *Three Cups of Tea* or something, who was that? Uh, I forget his name, but I’ll remember it in a minute. The American who went and opened schools in those northern areas. Well, we opened a school in our mother’s name, and it is existing still. Yeah. Because there, they want the girls to go to school, but very often the schools are closed, not allowed to go on, et cetera. [Home phone rings] But, uh, people are trying, I guess, more and more to have education for their girls, as much as they can.

There’s a lot of, uh, Afghan in—infiltration into Pakistan, you know, in the northern areas, [ZB’s husband heard speaking on phone] because, um, Afghanistan has always had some unrest. First the British were trying to conquer Afghanistan, didn’t work. The Russians were there for 10 years maybe, now the Americans have been there for maybe 10 years. Afghans are very, very strong people. And their country has, uh, the kind of a, uh, landscape that it’s not easy to, uh, fight in, and they know all the places, all the caves and things. So there are caves that go from there to Pakistan. Osama Bin Laden, I believe, crossed through one of those caves. And, uh, actually, when we were in northern Pakistan—

[ZB’s husband walks up with the phone and whispers something to ZB; ZB motions that she is busy]

**ZB:** Uh, we—we were told, if you go to see the Khyber pass or the Bolan pass, you go at your own risk. Because they’re—they’re law unto themselves, the government of Pakistan does not have much control of those northern areas, these people are a law unto themselves, like tribal laws. And the only way into Pakistan from the west or north is through these two passes. You can’t come through the moun—uh, mountains of the Himalayan Range, you have to come through either the Khyber pass or the Bolan pass. And we wanted to see these historical places, but we were warned, ‘Do not go there, it’s at your own risk.’ Girls can get kidnapped and so forth, so.

**TP:** What did you do after graduating college?

**ZB:** After graduating from college... It's funny, I went *back* to that Mama Parsi School for the Technical. And, uh, that was really an experience. Some of it was very nice, some of it was not as nice. And, uh, then what did I do? I did the Montessori training. Much later, of course, I got married, I had two children, and then in 1971, my mother had taken the teacher's training to train teachers. She was a trainer of teachers. And the first course of, uh, teaching people to become teachers was held in '71, and I did that one. And I loved that. That is what I loved. And that has been the love of my life, [TP and GW laugh] and that is what I have done ever since. I have been involved in Montessori since 1972 when I graduated.

Uh, during our course, there was a fight, a real f—battle between India, Pakistan. Our, uh, classes were disrupted, uh, bombs were falling, there were blackouts, and all these things. And through it all, we finished our course. Uh, my daughter was already, like, twelve years old, I think, at that time, or eleven years old. My son was about three years older. It was quite an experience to have bo—bombs falling in your yard, because our home was, uh, close to the port, harbor. And bombs were falling. It was, uh, quite scary.

And then there was, uh, one before that in se—'65, also. India, Pakistan have been fighting over, uh, Kashmir. Because Kashmir, according to this, uh, standard of dividing the country up, the Muslim majority populations went to Pakistan, and the In—Hindu population majority went to India. Well, Kashmir is majority Muslim population, but it still went to India. So all kinds of, um, you know, fights and this and that. So they're still fighting about it, they—they did appeal to the United Nations and all that, but nothing much has happened. And now it's, what, 67 or odd years since that day? I believe, uh, in places where they have the border between India and Pakistan, I believe, the Indian soldiers on this side of the line, the Pakistan soldiers on this side of the line, they have a nice chat, [TP and GW laugh] they also exchange cups of tea, I—I've heard. But the governments are still, uh, sometimes friendly, sometimes not friendly.

So, before partition, um, my mother, being very, very active in the Theosophical Society. We used to go to Adyar, Madras, where the international headquarters are. And they are the ones who invited Maria Montessori to come. And we used to go there almost every year by train, from Karachi to Madras and Bombay. So, I have seen a lot of India, by railway, and seen all the palaces, all the forts, and all the historical places in India. But after partition, it was for a long time no visa to go from one country to the other, and you know, then I got married, I had kids, I—I had no reason to go. The last time I've gone to India is on my honeymoon, in '57. Can you believe that? [GW and TP laugh] Nobody can believe it!

Um, even now, in Houston—and I'm a U.S. citizen for years and years and years. But I was *born* in Karachi, you see. If you go to the Indian consulate to get a visa, it's a run-

around. It's not so easy. You were *born* in Karachi. But it was—I was born in Karachi, India! Doesn't matter—it's Pakistan now. And I—and we lived in Pakistan for some years, so.

**TP:** Why did you decide to immigrate to the U.S.?

**ZB:** Well, my husband had a business. It was a hi-fi business; he was the sole representative for Akai tape recorders, and things like that. Hi-fi, he had a hi-fi store. And, uh...it was not very easy to do business there. Lots of, uh, um, don't know how to say it. A lot of, uh, people who are in government and all that, bribing and this and that. And the taxation system is different. You don't say what you owe, like here. They—they come, and they look at your store, and they say, 'You owe this.' [laughs] And it was not very easy. So he decided that he would like to emigrate. And one brother of his, is a—who came here right after college, and he is a—has a doctorate in nuclear engineering. So he's working, he's—he had been working for the U.S. government, actually. And when we asked him [someone sneezes in background] if he would sponsor us, he sponsored us. Our papers came in six weeks, and we were free to, you know, do all the passport and all the stuff, and take the shots, and ready to go. So, that's how we left.

**TP:** What was your first impression of the United States, when you got here?

**ZB:** I loved it from the first day. I sort of fitted in—I've never *not* fitted in, I've always fitted in. So, uh, I'm just happy to be here from the first day. We landed in Los Angeles one night, and we had to take a commuter to San Francisco, because he had already spoken to some person in—in Karachi who has a business there, and he had a tentative job already offered. So we went there. And we were there, [someone sneezes in background] I guess, from July or August, but in December, the boss asked my husband to come to Houston and open an office for them, [someone sneezes in background] in Houston, which he did. But, uh, he w—he stayed with them a very short time, downtown Houston in the Milam building. Um, he didn't care for the kind of business it was. It was, you know, uh, quoting on this and that, rice, this, that, you know. I don't know what, trading, shipping, and all that. He's a pers—a people person, and he very soon got himself a manager's position right away in RadioShack. And they gave him a store on Memorial Drive, where he was there for, I would say, years and years and years.

So that's what he was doing, and I came and, [sighs] while in California, I had called up a Monte—all the Montessori schools that I could find in the Yellow Pages, close by, close to Moraga, where we were. Moraga is just east of the Bay Area. And we were there from August to December. So I had gone and substituted in some schools. But you know, they already had teachers because the school year had started. And then we went away to Houston. So when—in Houston, we came in December '75, and I had, uh, done the same thing, I contacted Montessori schools. And I got a place in one, I think in, uh, the spring

of '76. Somewhere off Westheimer, I can't remember the name of the school, but it was a big school. Uh, I was there just for a few months, for the spring until the end of the school year in May.

And I did not, uh, I did not care for the management of that school. I did not think that they were honest to the Montessori method. [laughs] So, that is very important for me. I don't compromise on that, ever. So—because you know Maria Montessori was around, I didn't tell you, but the war broke out and she was in India 'til the end of the war. She came in '39 and couldn't leave 'til '45 when the war ended, because she was Italian. She was a prisoner of war! And a house arrest type of conditions. So, Maria Montessori was around, my mothers and us, and her son Mario was with us. And we were very connected to this Montessori method.

And anyway, I didn't work at that school afterwards, but I applied to other schools, and I started to work at a Northwood Montessori school, which is off of [F.M.] 1960, and still is there. And it was their first year in a building that the—it was parent-owned school, that the parents had, uh, taken a loan and built this school. And it was their first year when I joined them, in the spring of '77. And before that, they had had one year in some kind of shopping strip, and this was their first year in their own building. And, uh, I got a position over there, and I was there for seven years. And that was a really nice school, really nice school. There were just two classrooms, mine and another one.

And, uh, they are also an AMI Montessori school, which means that they are connected to Association Montessori International, which is also my diploma. Uh...there are 100 other Montessori societies [laughs] training sch—teachers, which, forget. [TP laughs] They, uh, they take this, they take that, they add their own, they—they do it their own way. It's not the Montessori way, mostly. And mostly, uh, in—in Houston, and even everywhere, the school is like a daycare center but calls it itself Montessori, has some Montessori materials, but does not really follow Montessori, as it should be done. So anyway, after seven years I opened my own school.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** And, uh, I had it for twenty years.

**TP:** Where did you open that school?

**ZB:** In Spring Branch, close to my house. I used to drive, uh, fifty minutes to this one, and I drove five minutes to my own, and I'll show you some pictures.

**TP:** Okay! Oh, [to GW] should we wait 'til after the interview?

**ZB:** Afterwards.

**GW:** Oh, yeah.

**TP:** Why did you choose to open your own school?

**ZB:** I chose to open my own school, uh, because this was a parent-run school, the people on the parent board would change, you know. And for seven years, we had a very... a nice parent board that, uh, that believed that the teachers knew what they were doing, and we did it our way. And then there was one person on the board that was, you know, difficult. And, uh, the directress, who was Mrs. Inglesmith, and I, we both quit. Mrs. Inglesmith had helped them to open their own school, the Northwood Montessori school, and then she helped me to open mine. She herself was trained, uh, by a person in Mexico City, Mrs. Hanroth, who was trained by Maria Montessori. So we both had that background: we were trained by people who were trained by Maria Montessori and so we were sort of very true to the method, and true to the philosophy which is very important.

Because it's not just materials, it's philosophy. Why you're doing all this, the way you're doing it. Understanding the child, understanding the, the laws of development of the child, which Maria Montessori studied the child for forty years. She was not only a medical doctor, the first in Italy, first woman doctor in Italy, but she was a biologist, she was a psychologist, and she took an interest in the study of children. And, she's written wonderful books, *The Discovery of the Child*, *The Absorbent Mind*, and all these things which people have to take into account when they are dealing with the children. But, uh, I have—I have been in schools where their—their name says they are so-and-so Montessori School, but the Montessori part is *zero*, I'm sorry to say, it's a daycare, it's not a Montessori. There are Montessori materials, which nobody does anything with. And that's very sad. It's a—it's a business, um big fees are charged. Parents don't know one thing from another. And they don't educate the parents on Montessori because they themselves have never had a Montessori training themselves; the owners, the director, nobody.

**TP:** So when you opened your own school were you motivated by the financial benefits of having a business or just pure passion for Montessori?

**ZB:** [laughing] Pure passion for Montessori. Didn't think one thing about the money.

**TP:** Have you and your husband ever experienced financial struggles in the U.S.?

**ZB:** Oh yes. Very m—very much so.

**TP:** What was that like?

**ZB:** Difficult. Because in Karachi... Oh, I forgot to tell you that I had, after school, I, uh did ballet, and when my ballet teacher left for England she left me her school. And I had

that ballet school for sixteen years, 'til I left Karachi. I had about a—a hundred students. So, when I spent for anything, my—my right hand didn't know what my left hand was spending [laughter], I mean I didn't have financial difficulties. And, uh, it was difficult, uh, financially, because RadioShack was not very, very much money. And I opened my school with three children. [TP and ZB laugh] People thought I was nuts! For a long time I had no more than ten children. I had a classroom with 25 tables and chairs made. But that took a long time to come. But, anyway, I was happy, because I was doing Montessori. And my school was called, 'The *Montessori* School.'

**GW:** Could you just briefly explain what the Montessori, you know, method is?

**ZB:** The Montessori method, you can say in simple words, follows the child. Um, it allows the child to use the inborn tendencies to develop himself and to become a man. Who does it? The child does it. Who teaches the child to talk? Who teaches the child to walk? Or to reach any of the levels of, uh, development? So, there is an inner guide, and that guide leads the child to certain activities, at certain times of his, uh, age. So the Montessori classroom provides a home, a house, it was first called 'Casa di Mam—Bambini,' um, provides the house where the *child* is active. And all the activities satisfies this desire of the child to do work. So the m—the materials are teaching materials as well, and also they're materials of practical life, because the child wants to do work. And what does the child see in his house? He see the mother's, uh, sweeping, mopping, dusting, cooking, all that. All these things we provide in miniature size for the child to do: pouring, mixing, preparing snack.

You know that these children are the happiest children on Earth. They're so fulfilled, and so happy, that you know they—the mothers will come and say, 'My child says, 'Why isn't my school open today?'' On a Saturday and a Sunday, 'Why can't I go to school today?'' And you know, uh, they don't want to even go home at six o'clock, when, uh, their parents come to pick them up. They're ready to still stay and play with their friends. So, the Montessori method provides the *keys* to learning, in—in language, in math, in geography, in all the natural sciences. Provides all these things for the child to be invited to do—activity. The child is motivated to take these things and work with them.

Now, what the teacher does is the teacher is not a teacher like the other teachers, she is a different teacher. She is a guide. So the Montessori guide gives lessons to one child at a time, because the child is always wanting to be the center of his family. His mother and his father. Their lives are rotating around this child. That is how the child wants to feel when he's so young at age two and a half, three, when they come to the Montessori school. We give the lessons to the child individually, because also if you have three or four children, their attention span is not there. You can only have their attention when they're one-to-one with you. Then we allow the child to take the material and do the

lesson as it was shown, and we observe. We should not correct, because it's not going to be perfect. But people who don't know that will go and say, 'No no don't do it like this, go do it like that.' So what will the child do then? He'll put it away, and they won't even touch it again. So you don't correct the child, but by observing, you see where the child has not got the lesson, and you give it again. And you point out those things that the child didn't get the first time. So you lead the child to perfection. And the child, if allowed to choose his own work, which he does, they choose their own work. They come to class and they go and choose their own work, because they have the inner interest towards that work. So it's no use *us* saying, 'Go and choose this,' or, 'Go and choose that.' They choose what they're interested in, and they work with it and they repeat it, and they perfect it. So that is very big difference.

The children are, um, taught reading and writing in a totally different way. Uh, they're not taught, uh, A-B-C-D's, they're taught, uh, phonics, they have sandpapers to trace, because they have the interest of feeling things, then they say the sound of the letter. And when they know a few sounds, they have a box of letters, that they can pick up and make words. So they are writing without having to use a pencil. And they can be writing at age three-and-a-half. They can be writing words that they think of, by—because they know the sounds, and they connect the sounds, but they don't always get it right, but we don't correct that.

And soon, you know, they teach themselves. We have, uh, lots of, uh, exercises to use the hand, and, uh, they teach themselves how to write. It's—it's a discovery journey for the child. The child is, uh, going to—from level to level all by himself; auto-education, you might call it. With a guidance, but we don't teach in the same way that teachers teach. In the conventional school there's a teacher, and there's all these children, the teacher talking, they're listening, they're bored, they touch each other, they mess up with each other, they have behavior problems.

In our system, the material teaches. The Montessori materials are mathematically made, uh, correctly, s—scientifically, so that the error is easy to see, or feel, through your senses. You—you see the error, the child finds the error. And, um, so when we pr—when we give the lesson, and the child repeats this lesson, he—he discovers the abstraction of that material. It could be the length, it could be the weight, the color. By using the material, he discovers what it's all about. *Then*, we give him the words. This is light, this is heavy. This is long, this is short. And we name the colors, and this and that. So, the words come after the experience, the sensorial experience of using his own body.

The children, uh, by the age of five they're reading, they're writing, they're doing, uh, additions, subtractions, in numbers up to thousands. They can read you a number 5,786 and bring you the material in beads and in, uh, cubes, and in materials. They can give you

the material, put the material together, three of them, all by themselves. Put it all together and do an addition sum and bring you the answer. At age five. So they understand mathematics, truly. When I used to give parents, uh, these lessons at parent's night, they would say, 'Oh my god, mathematics. I've never, never got to do mathematics, I was awful at it. But I wish I had ever learned it this way.' You know?

**TP:** Mm-hmm.

**ZB:** Or even, uh, spelling. Montessori children are wonderful at spelling. And [laughing] I've come across a lot of adults that can't spell anything. So, uh, the Montessori method is really remarkable, and that's why many of us are so hooked on this, that, I mean, I supposedly, uh, retired, ten years ago. I'm not retired, ever. [laughs] I'm always going to Montessori schools and, uh, consulting, or substituting, or helping out in any way. So I'm involved in the Montessori. And I guess I always will be, yeah.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** And my other love is the Theosophical Society.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** Which, the theosophical...uh, philosophy is Montessori is Theosophical Society's, um, same philosophy, of the spiritual aspect of the human being. Maria Montessori became a member when she was over there. And, uh, I've r—I've read a lot of theosophists write *their*, uh, opinion of how children should be educated. It is entirely the Montessori method. So, these two things are very, very close to me.

**TP:** How does-

**ZB:** [Overlapping] I'm also involved in this ZAH.

**TP:** Yeah.

**GW:** Mm-hmm.

**ZB:** Yeah.

**TP:** How did you get involved in the ZAH, the Zoroastrian Community Center?

**ZB:** Um, because I'm Zoroastrian, and, uh, we never had an association 'til about the year 2000, two hundre—you know, 2000. That's when they built the building and all that. And I'm not terribly involved there. I'm only inv—involved in one aspect of it, and that is I take charge of the Zoroastrian, um, senior's group, which we call the 'Golden Group.' [TP laughs] And it was handed to me by somebody who knew me, and she said—uh,

she—she had tried to have a Golden Group, and, uh, must've given the name Golden Group. I didn't name it! [everyone laughs] But, uh, they used to sort of try and have a dinner at so-and-so's house, and then another one at so-and-so's house, and play cards and all that. And she's—she found that it wasn't working too well and she told me, 'Please take it over,' and all that. So I did. And I—I've been, uh, handling it for about, I don't know how many years, but much more than ten years. Um... what I do is I organize some sort of program once a month. We have a program on the fourth Sunday of every month. We get together, we have a potluck or we do something, we eat together, we have lunch together. And, uh, then, you know, we have some program or we watch a—some DVD or something in the library, there. Have you been there?

**TP:** The Center? Yes.

**GW:** Mm-hmm.

**ZB:** Yeah. So, we use the kitchen, and we use the library, and we just pass some time together. Uh, one of the main reasons for having it is there are many, many people who don't drive or have a car. Especially as they're getting older. So the ones that do drive, pick up these people who don't drive and bring them there, so that they have a nice outing, and a nice social day with, uh, people they know. And, uh, eat a lot of good food, because I'll tell you, we have some good cooks there [everyone laughs] in our Golden Group. So, uh, that's what—that's my involvement in there. Nothing really more than that.

**TP:** So what would you say your social circle looks like? Is it Zoroastrians, Theosophists, other teachers?

**ZB:** Family.

**TP:** Family, okay.

**ZB:** Yeah, family. We have two children, and, uh, my son has four. The oldest, uh, lives in Indiana, and he got married and he's got a little girl, so we're great grandparents.

**TP:** Okay.

**GW:** Mm.

**ZB:** Yeah, she's one year old now. Uh, his other three are all in college in, uh, Austin. So he's got three in college at the same time.

**TP:** [laughs] Oh.

**ZB:** Um, one is—one will graduate next year. The other two have only done one year, so now they'll do a second year. And they're twins. A boy and a girl, twins. They don't look anything like twins [GW and TP laughs] they look totally different. Um, my daughter has two, um one finished Austin four years, and she did—she was a Biology major. And then she did two years nursing school in Houston, which she just finished in May. And tomorrow she has to do that test that allows you to work, but she already has a job. She got a job at, uh, Texas Children's in their ICU.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** So, uh, she's an RN.

**TP:** That's your granddaughter who's an RN?

**ZB:** Yeah.

**TP:** What do your son and your daughter do?

**ZB:** My son is in outside sales. He sells for NewBath, these renovations of baths. Um, my daughter, she has a job at, uh, Alta Mesa, which is an engineering and oil drilling company. She has a job there, plus she does real estate in her spare time.

**TP:** Were they both born in Pakistan?

**ZB:** Oh yes. My daughter was about, um, she was born in '61, so we left in '75. She was like thirteen years, she—when we left. And my son—she just entered, uh, when we left she entered ninth grade. And he was in twelfth grade. But they were in the American school in Karachi. They had been there for a couple of years, in the American school. And, uh, he—poor thing, had to change three schools in twelfth grade. It was awful. And uh, she had to change too, because we first went to Moraga in California and then came to Houston the same year. It was very hard for them. Very very hard for them. In '75, Houston was not as, um, ethnically dif—dif—divi—different. As it is now. And, uh, it was difficult for them in school, which was mostly white. And, uh, it was a hard time for them, because you—you know, children at that age don't—don't become friends very easily. Like, you know if you're about five years old and you're riding your bike you're going to be friends with everyone in a couple of days. It was hard.

**TP:** Can you give us some examples about the struggles they faced, after immigrating?

**ZB:** Mm-hmm, they had a lot of struggles. Uh, we bought a home in Spring Branch because we were told that Spring Woods is a very, very good school. And, uh, they went there. One in ninth grade and the other in twelfth grade. Um, yeah, I mean, uh... I think—I think my daughter said that they called them 'camel jockeys.' [laughs]

**TP:** Oh.

**ZB:** Because, uh, that's what they called, uh, people from Arabia and Middle East. Also they thought that they were Mexican, so they called them 'wetbacks.' Um, and—there were kind of aloof. The—uh, the ones that were friendly were... not of *our* standard, I would say, of social life. But, we knew no one else. We came and we lived there, and there was no one we knew. There were, uh, two or three other families, Parsi families, but they lived in S—uh, near... Southwest Houston, where they still live near where our center is. So, and they had children that were four, five years old, where ours were, you know, in ninth grade and twelfth grade, and not another one was of that age. It was very hard, so they had to have friends, uh, whoever would talk to them. And, uh, there was a lot of drugs. There was a *lot* of drugs. A lot of children who didn't do what they should do in school. And of course our children also followed that way. So they didn't, uh, I mean we entered them in college but they didn't stay in college. They had a very hard time because of not having college. They've had a hard time ever since, for not having done college. But, that's it, that's their very hard life they've had. Yup.

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**TP:** Were your Zoroastrian values or even your theosophy values very important when raising your children?

**ZB:** No we were very busy, just raising them. [TP and GW laugh] No—no real, uh... we're not a very religious type of person, or *formal* religion. Theosophy, yes, but formal religion? I'm not in that sense a Zoroastrian. I'm not that—in that sense *any* religion at all. Because, uh, what you do when you go to church? You sing some songs and all that, and you come back, and you, you do whatever you want with—with—without, uh, really—really doing what y—the *essence* of your religion is. Same with the Parsis, I mean. They say their prayers, and they live like everyone else.

So I mean, I think much more of the spiritual life, myself in my own life. But I'm sorry to say, uh, that I didn't pass it on to anyone. I mean that is in you or it's not in you. When I was five years old, and my mother had gone to do her work with Maria Montessori, our cook brought a chicken and killed it in our backyard, which he was not allowed to do when my mother was there. And from that day I'm a vegetarian. So, it's in me. You can't put it in other people, you know. I raised my children, uh, first to be vegetarian, my daughter is vegetarian. But you know, my brothers, they were vegetarian after I became one, but the later brothers were vegetarian; my mother said, 'Oh well, let's give them a try.' But when they grew up, and they went to the gymkhana and the club and all, and there was nothing there to eat. You know, mutton sandwiches, mutton samosa, this, that. They ate it. You can put anything in front of me, if I—if I don't eat it, I don't eat it. And I never eat it, from that day.

**TP:** Is your husband a theosophist as well?

**ZB:** No. Far from it. So...

**TP:** So you're involved with—you're kinda involved with the Zoroastrian Center, and you're involved with your—

**ZB:** My theosophical lodge.

**TP:** Okay. So those are both very small communic—communities. So when you come to a place like Houston, a very large city, how do you seek out those very small communities?

**ZB:** I don't know, they just happened along. I didn't seek them out. They came to me. The theosophical group, uh, I heard there was a theosophical group, and I went there, to their meetings, and, uh... My mother had made us—we would—as children we were members, in Karachi. But not, of course, active members. We were members at the child level. And then when we were teenagers, we were just busy with our own lives, you know, playing tennis, meeting boys or whatever. But, as you get older, what you really are comes to you. And so you know, I mean, we're not very social, like the people who live in S—Sugar Land. They made a Zoroastrian community there, and I think they must be eating out every single day, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with each other. That just doesn't, uh, interest me, so we live here. And we like living here.

**TP:** What do you like about this neighborhood?

**ZB:** Well I like it because it's so beautiful, so safe, and nice people. Everything is here. I don't have to go anywhere to have a dentist, don't have to go anywhere to go shopping. I go to Premium Outlets, or HEB, or... They weren't always here, these things. But, uh, we came here because, uh, my daughter got divorced and the job that she had, the company stopped after 9/11. She lost her job and she got divorced, and she had these two teenage, or pre-teen children—they were not teenage yet, they were small still. So I decided that I will sell my school and my house, and buy one house where we can all take care of these children and, uh, my daughter. And I didn't want to raise them in the same place where my children grew up in that Spring Woods s—neighborhood, which is really bad.

**TP:** In what way?

**ZB:** It's got, uh, too many children of, uh, people, uh, who are not very moral, I would say. And lots of the girls are pregnant, even in the school, but here too, but not as much as there. But, drugs and all. Over here, the average homeowner is a more educated person. Over there, not cultural person. So, my grandchildren met nicer, uh, friends, and that was our purpose to buy this house. The upstairs is complete for—for another family,

that's where they were. And we, Fali and I were downstairs, of course we had the same kitchen and we were one family. For seven, I think seven years. Then my daughter got remarried and they also went to college, so it all worked at the same time.

**TP:** Mm-hmm.

**ZB:** I think that, uh, somebody's been watching over me all my life. I don't know, things just happen well for me. So, I mean, all the financial troubles that we had, I don't take it seriously, because, uh, it was never my—my, uh, goal in life, anyway, to start with, when I had my school. My school charged such low fees. Even then people couldn't pay, around there in Spring Branch. So we were never very rich from the school. So...

**TP:** Has your husband been very successful?

**ZB:** For some years, but then 9/11 came along, and, uh, their business, which was a computer business, and was doing very well, and, uh, providing computers to the jails, to the schools—schools. So the government was, uh, buying these things for the jails and schools. So all that dropped substantially right after 9/11, they cut all that down a lot. Apart from that, the vendors who used to buy from them had difficulties and never paid. Their company had to, uh, close down. And both my son and daughter were in there. Everyone lost everything. But I, uh, sold my two properties, my house and my school, and we bought this one. But then, you know, that's what we have and [laughs] nothing much else.

**TP:** So the sale of your properties is kind of what got you through that big financial difficulty.

**ZB:** Yeah, yeah, and helped my kids along as well.

**TP:** Okay. Did you teach your children, um, Gujarati or Urdu? [ZB shakes head] No?

**ZB:** No. No, I went to the Karachi Grammar School, and all I spoke was English. And, uh, my mother spoke mostly English with me. And, uh, when I got married, my mother-in-law spoke English. We spoke some Gujarati, but the children picked up—they picked up Gujarati. They speak Gujarati. But, uh, reading and writing, no. But I, uh, I left the Mama school when I was only in second grade. But I taught myself, again, how to read a little Gujarati, so I can read a little bit, especially if I—if I happen to know the gist of the [laughs] invitation or something like that, I can read it. I can't write it.

**TP:** Okay.

**ZB:** But I can write Urdu, and I can read Urdu because I learned it in school, as a second language. Guess who taught us Urdu? Our principal, who was, uh, Reverend Haskell of

the Protestant Church. And he taught us Urdu with his lovely English—English accent. [everyone laughs] But, uh, also there was another teacher who taught us Urdu. Anyway, it was—it was great, the grammar school was wonderful.

**TP:** Well, as you know, this recording is going to be used for research, um, for anyone who wants to research the Asian-American immigrant experience in Houston.

**ZB:** Mm-hmm.

**TP:** Is there anything that we haven't asked you that you think would be really important toward that cause?

**ZB:** Uh, I—I would say that the people in Houston are very, very nice and friendly. We lived a little while in California, but they're more aloof people. Uh, the—the people here are just so warm and so friendly and so helpful. And, uh, we've always had very nice neighbors. Um, I've always met *very* nice people because I've been in Montessori and I've been in theosophy. So, I haven't met some who—who may not be as nice. But I haven't met them personally, or been involved with them.

I am, uh, very against all these guns. I think it's very sad that there are so many guns. By the way, my husband was working in Academy after retiring, and he was selling guns in Academy. People are buying guns for their five-year-olds. Just lunacy. I consider it lunacy, but they think it's wonderful to go—go and shoot animals. Of course, I hate that. And, uh, I would never, never think of harming another person or an animal, so I just don't understand that people can shoot each other *so* readily. Without *any* thought. They just shoot people. For—uh, I mean if—they say guns don't kill, people kill. Oh yes, but they use the guns *to* kill. And if they didn't have the guns, they would not be killing, they would be *talking*.

So, this is terrible, this is the one thing I don't like about America, the guns, and the violence. And I lived in Karachi, where nobody had guns, and of course there were all these crazy people who did stab their wives, and all these very, very poor people. But, otherwise, as I told you, I rode my bicycle all over this big city, and never had a bad experience. So that's how different it was. And the freedom I had as a child, and the safety I had, my grandchildren I have—we've been watching them, we don't let them play anywhere. Because of all this sex—sex, uh predators and god knows what all.

I think that, uh, people believe in freedom to read, freedom to write, freedom to talk, freedom to do, but Montessori had the right idea. We had freedom in our classrooms; the children had freedom to do what is right. They did not have freedom to do what is not right. So, here you have freedom to watch horrible things, and that influences people to

do horrible things, because—in Zoroastrianism there's one thing that I really like. They believe in good thoughts, good words, leading to good deeds. That, in my opinion, is the A and the Z of religion. There's nothing ne— else. All the else, you can do without, it's all man-made. All ceremonies, rituals, all that is not necessary. Only these rules of ethical living. But, pornography, horrible movies, all these things, you think that is freedom? For what? Freedom for what? Um... I think there should be freedom to do what is right. I mean, after all, they have laws and they arrest you if you j—if you break a law when you are driving. So there are laws to do the right thing. But, you have freedom to do things that are wrong. And that is why society is so unruly here. And you have to watch your grandchildren every minute. You can't allow them to go freely riding their bikes. In Fairfield they can.

But, um, the reason that there is no safety is because people go to church, they believe in—uh, or they say they believe in all these things, but they do things that their Lord would never, never say is right. You would *never* say it's right to go to war and kill people. Or to hate people. So all these things, you know, I mean, religion is a lip service in most cases. So, I have nothing to do with religion, at all. It's not—it's—it's a waste of t—waste of your life to do all this reading and reciting and just mouthing off and, that's nothing. So, all that is just things I don't do. If I don't believe it, I don't do it, that's it.

**TP:** Okay, [to GW] anything else? All right, well thank you very much for doing this interview.

**GW:** Yeah, thank you so much, yeah.

**ZB:** Thank you.

**[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]**