
INTERVIEWEE: MR. HOMI ERANI (H)

INTERVIEWERS: MRS. ARNAVAZ SETHNA (A) AND MR. RUSTOM ENGINEER (R)

DATE/TIME OF INTERVIEW: MAY 3, 2014 at 11:55AM

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: ZOROASTRIAN HERITAGE AND CULTURAL CENTER (ZHCC), 8787 W. AIRPORT BOULEVARD, HOUSTON, TX 77071

TRANSCRIBED BY: RUSTOM ENGINEER

AUDIO TRACK TIME: 1:15:50 hrs.

Background: After retiring, Mr. Homi Erani and his wife Aban (Abby) moved to Houston in 2004 and have been an integral part of the Houston Zarathushti Community. Frequent visits to their three children and grandchildren in different states, visiting family and friends in India and making new friends in Houston have kept them very busy. Having found many other retirees in Houston, Abby and Homi agree that Houston is the best place for them to retire.

Setting: The interview was conducted in the Library Room of the Zarathushti Heritage and Cultural Center in Houston. Homi was one of the first 12 Zarathushtis in Houston to be interviewed under this Oral History Program.

Interviewers:

Arnavaz Sethna and her husband Hoshang immigrated to Houston from Karachi, Pakistan in 1978 and since then both of them have served the Zoroastrian Community in many ways. Prior to the construction of the Zarathushti Heritage and Cultural Center, for over 17 years, Arnavaz and Hoshang generously opened their home and their hearts and conducted Sunday-School, once a month in their home.

Rustom Engineer came to USA in 1971 for Graduate Study in Mechanical Engineering, got married to Yasmin in 1975 in Illinois and later worked in Michigan with his wife Yasmin and children Eric and Diana in 1990. Since their arrival in Houston, over 10 Zarathushti friends with their families from Michigan have followed them to Houston after retirement.

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Interview:

R: Hello! I am Rustom Engineer and this is Arnavaz Sethna with the Zoroastrian Oral History Project at Zoroastrian Heritage and cultural Center. Today is May 3rd, 2014 and the time is 11:55, it's almost noon. So can you please state your name?

H: My name is Homi Erani

R: OK. And I guess I have already introduced Arnavaz. XXXX....

A: Hi Homi, Hi Rustom. And yes this is this is Arnavaz Sethna and I am really excited about this History Project.

R: OK. Can you tell us about yourself, your childhood, your background...whatever you think would be of interest to all of us?

H: Well I was born in Karachi before I guess before Pakistan was created and I would call undivided India and before I was a month old I moved to Bombay India, where my parents lived. And pretty soon after that my parents moved to Hyderabad, under the Nizam because my father wanted to put up a factory over there. And he sort of started a company called Alwin under there. And it went on and some snippets and some pictures and XXXX.. This is my grandfather with a cricket team, my grandfather right in middle, the tall guy. Yep, can't miss him and that was taken in Calcutta probably in 1925 or so. (...paper shuffling sound)

R: So did they travel as a team?

H: I don't know if they travelled or not. I am not even sure if it was in Calcutta. My older brother who is 10 years older to me assured me that they lived in Calcutta...I am assuming that. My grandfather spent most of his life in Hong Kong and Shenghai in his working career.

R: I see. What did he do?

H: He was a warehouse supervisor at a company called Tie Hing Knitting Company that used to make wooden articles for a British Company. He used to be their quality guy who saw that the stuff that was packed and shipped out to England what was ordered. This is a picture of my grandfather and my father on the right and my grandmother with the girls.

R: Em..What year you think it would be about?

H: This picture would about be taken in 1914..may be 1912 or 1914. Around that.

R: OK..So your father would about 12 years or so?

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H: Yes he was born in 1904 or so...This is a picture of my father, myself and my sister Veera and Grandmother. My youngest sister was not born yet. (...paper shuffling sound)

R: Wow. People look similar..

H: My father's grandparents, straight out of Tehran, Iran...

R: So they were the one who came from Tehran.

H: Yes. And his name was Kaikhashru.

R: So this is Kaikhashru.

H: I don't know my Grandmother's name.

R: So this is a truly studio picture that similar ones we have in the past.

H: Some old pictures. (...paper shuffling sound) these are my father's old pieces of paper I found. These are some receipts from Hong Kong where he went to school.

R: So your father studied in Hong Kong?

H: Yes, he studied in Hong Kong.

R: So that was British time so it must have all been in English that time. So he also spelt your name Erani? We'll come back to it. So it was in 1922 it was already Erani?

H: Even before that.

R: Because the spelling is normally Irani...

H: Even my grandfather spelt Erani.

R: Oh really!

H: If you look at the cricket picture, even there.

R: So what year was that?

H: This would be around nineteen ...

R: Twenty-five?

H: No it would be even earlier. He looks like a young person so it would 1918 or 1920. Long time ago..

R: Are these copies for us?

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H: Yes

R: Thank you.

H: I am just trying to sort them out in order according to interest. Then I shift you over... when my Dad does AllwynOne of the interesting things I found in Newspaper just now, because the elections are going on in India, the first ballot box for the first election in India was made by my father's company.

R: So the name of your father's company was Alwen.

H: Allwyn Metal Works, Hyderabad (India).

R: So they made safes and...

H: They made strong rooms so the ballot box.

R: That was in 1951.

H: Yes the first general election.

A: May I ask one question? Is your uncle Roy, did he pick up the name Allwyn from you?

H: Yes.

A: Because we had Allwyn in Pakistan.

H: And he used to make car parts. Pistons and things like that. Bearings,

R: So are you saying that a part of his family was in Pakistan?

A: His mother was from Pakistan.

A: Those days there was no Pakistan

R: Correct. Just one India....

H: Let's shift to slightly modern times. (..Paper shuffling sound). Then in Secunderabad, my mother was socially quite adaptive and this is her dance troop. This is my mother in the middle and others dancers. And the ladies must have passed on by now. This picture must have been taken around 1940 or 44.

R: Wonderful. And these are all Parsi ladies.

H: All Parsi ladies.

R: You could have never imagined a picture like this so old Parsi ladies dancing troop.

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H: This is in our car with driver Pentayun(?) with my father and grandmother.

R: And what car is this?

H: No idea, I was too young (laughing)

R: Today it would be worth a fortune for sure. Beautiful

H: So much for the old pictures.

R: We will give some more chance to give us some more pictures.
So obviously, you were in Hyderabad.

H: Secunderabad.

R: Secunderabad. That's in India.

H: Until I was eight years old.

R: So later on did you live among Parsis?

H: No not much. We always lived outside but never in a Parsi colony where a lot of Parsis live.

R: So talking about your education, you did your degree....

H: I don't have a degree.

R: OK

H: I have an Associate Degree.

R: That was all there was in olden days. So later you went to England. When was that?

H: That was 1961. No that was in 1963. I was there from 1963 to 1964, two years. That's where I did my Associate Degree. Before that two years of Inter-Science in Bombay.

R: So where did you do Inter-Science?

H: First year at Xavier's (College) and the second year was in National College in Bandra, because Xavier did not want me back unless I took Biology and my Dad said, in our profession, we don't want any Biologists...(laugh..) So better take Mathematics.

R: Focused! (Laugh) Especially with a Factory, a businesses like that.

H: Making bearings and all.

R: Correct.

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H: So that was basically how it all started. Then I moved around quite a bit. I have a little cheat sheet here. Then when I went to England I worked in the day time at the Chub Walton Safe Company and then went to evening school 5 to 9 every evening and Saturday mornings sometimes. And over there I learnt how to make things, tool making, how to run machines, ergonomics, office systems. The apprentice job I had at the Chub Walton Safe Company was basically tuned for foreign students who were sent by companies Chub was associated with in different parts of the world. So there were about 7 or 8 of us there in training program. And what we got to do was to decide to go to night school. In the day time we had to spend 3 months in every department. So we got an overall kind of view of what the company did and we basically started right at the bottom, we sweeping the floors, cleaning the machines and then growing from there we finally ended up in the Board room and attend Director's Meetings and all kinds of stuff like that.

R: The idea was to make you an all rounder and...

H: To give an exposure to everything to help go back and run the company that sent you and do everything when I went back. And when I went back to India, I did courses in packaging, Labor Law, Negotiating Contracts, and Accounting and all kind of stuff. Finally working in the tool room in Bombay as a supervisor and setting up factory to make chairs and tables and things like that which was our own part of my company. And there was recession and it was merged back into the main factory.

R: What year was that, the recession?

H: Nineteen Sixteen Fifteenish..

A: Recession in India?

H: Yes. It was about the year I got married. And went on from there and to building tools, furniture, setting up a factory, developing processes for that. Then I got a little tired and with lack of sales and not going well, my father suggested that I move to their Hotel in Kodaikanal in South India and run because that their manager was to retire and he was like in his eighties and he just wanted to retire.

R: It must have been quite a change for a guy who had returned from England and...then looking after a hotel!

H: It was OK.. I already had two children by then and so I thought why not? I was really you and Kodai (Kodaikanal) was really very nice. So we did that. I have some pictures from Kodi. And here is a picture of our Hotel that ran from the lake and fifty seven rooms.

R: Oh it's beautiful. When was it built?

H: It was built in 1852 by the English as a Holiday Camp for the British Army people and eventually just became privatized when a lot of people were leaving in 1947 when independence was declared. And my uncle Firoze over there

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sitting on my Grandmother's arm, when 18 and honeymooning there, liked it so much that he ended up asking my Dad if he could buy it for him to make it his business! Well he did not do too well at running it and so my Dad asked that I had to take it back and find a professional manager.

R: You were older than your cousin by several years, correct?

H: About 10 years. And you might not have heard of Firoze himself, but he was the guy that ran the Empire Movie Theatre and the Strand Movie Theatre food service. Then he started the Sizzle Restaurant.

R: I have heard about that.

H: Then he started a place called Tiki Room and he was just an unending entrepreneur and he used to run a Mirabelle Restaurant. And that was his lifestyle. Then he moved away to the Isle of Man eventually.

R: So how long were you there in Kodai?

H: We were there for four or five years but I continued to run the Hotel with a Manager for another 10 years after that.

R: So how did you reach Kodaikanal? Is it by car or is it by boat?

H: By car usually. We went by car. It was exactly a thousand miles from Bombay and it took 3 days and we would stop at Belgaum at a Dharamshala. Before that, the lunch was at Satara at a Government Guest House where my Dad used to stay when he was doing his Engineering Degree. We would have Chicken Curry-Rice, the best in the world! So we would always stop there for the chicken curry-chaval. In Belgaum, we stayed at the Dharamshala. The Dastoor's (priest's) wife would cook up some Parsi food. The next day we would spend the night in Bangalore, at my cousin Shireen's house. That was my uncle Tim was her Dad. Then the next day at night we would reach Kodai.

R: So it was like a 4 or 5 day journey.

H: Three days. That's about 320 miles and 330 miles a day. That's what you could go in those days. Maximum speed you could go was about 35 miles per hour. (Laugh)

R: And the roads were nothing like...

H: This is another picture of the Hotel. This is actually a copy of a promotional ...that they would sell in the hotel Lobby. And it's a picture of a Kodaikanal Lake with the inset of the hotel that was located in there.

R: So it was off the water, coast.

H: Yes.

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A: That's why I asked if they could go by boat. They could go by boat.

H: No! No! It is a small lake.

R: It's an in-land lake.

H: So before I went off to Kodai, I designed and built my first ever machine all on my own. And that was my first ever attempt at building my own machine. It was a specialty machine to cut keys.

R: Wow!

H: Because that the method at Chubb's was very inadequate so it took me about 6 months to design and have this machine built.

R: It looks pretty fancy with so many dials and all.

H: I worked at nights in Dad's workshop and built it myself so..

R: Did you market it later on?

H: No, only one was ever built, despite request to make another one...never got out

R: It was all handmade...

H: I could have duplicated it I suppose.

R: So where did you go after...

H: Subsequent to that, after spending 4-5 years in Kodai, there was an opportunity to make fire-extinguishers for my Dad's company so I requested that if I could be involved in some way and basically he said yes that there was a need for my kind of skills and they wanted to put up a factory so I proceeded to Madras because that was the spot that was chosen as being ideal for exports to Middle East as well as Far East..So I went over there and over a period of about a year, built a factory. (Showing Photograph) The factory is at the back. The building is at the back. This is the office building and this big hole (?) over here was my office..

R: Umpf.. Impressive!

H: And of course while the construction was going on, I spent my time designing fire-extinguishers and that was the range we built, I designed the label entirely, which was supposed to meet all the requirements and I found that some of the equipments were not available in India. So I finally found a guy in Delhi, Old Delhi, who on a one acre plot of land was building machines duplicates of American Machineries at about a hundredth of the price!

R: Manufacturing Machines.

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H: Yeh! Like this big press. So I sat with him and he built this in a space of about 3 months. And so this became.....his was the machine that formed the tops and the bottoms of the extinguisher.

R: It's a pressure vessel so it has to be....

H: The meets it ...

R: So did anybody else make fire-extinguishers before that?

H: Oh yes. Lots of people made that

R: Lot of competition...

H: And this was the process I invented all on my own (Showing pictures) making this high pressure seals to carbon dioxide cartridges, from little ones to big ones like this. It was the process I designed to close the bottoms. It was a big cylinder over here and it swung a roller over the heated end of the tube and closes the bottom...

R: sealed it...

H: yeh! And at the same time the specification required at the bottom twice as thick of the wall. So this did that.

R: So that's where the joint was...

H: Because that automatically did that. Because the point pinch the end off and the end would fall off and be completely rounded.

R: Who used the Carbon Dioxide cylinders?

H: We used for our fire-extinguishers. They will be filled with liquid CO₂ and put inside the extinguisher, so that when you fired it the co₂ would propel the contents and

R: extinguish the fire. Wonderful.....So did you make anything else in the factory there?

H: well, we did a lot of things afterwards. I bough extra land and after I came away to America, 3-4 years later, they added on with another big building. When I was there I we had about 70 people working in the factory, 8 or 9 in the office. And when I visited about 20 years ago, it's a long time ago, I haven't been there since, and they had about 250 people working. So felt satisfied that I had created employment for all these people. There is a pride there.

R: So what made you leave all this life in India and come to America?

H: I don't know what, but I was always dissatisfied with everything and always looking for something better and something better. I wasn't exactly happy about the situation in India. When I was leaving

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India....when I left in 1980 for America, I had decided about 2 years before to move and one of the reasons was the violence that was taking place. Indira Ghandhi was put in jail at that time and Morarji Desai came and said: *let everyone vent their feelings*, and I saw people being killed in the street, and my own supervisors were beat up and put in a hospital one time. It was just a very...and I just said to myself that why am I suffering this? And having lived in England and said hey I could move my family to England....

R: or anywhere else...

H: Anywhere else. I don't have to live in a fear and have a watchman at the gate 24 hours and you know...it was just a feeling of insecurity. That said say I need a better place to stay and bring up my children.

R: How old were your children?

H: They were about...when we moved here my elder daughter was 12 and my son was 10 and my youngest daughter was 7. She had learnt to have her own bath... (Laugh)

R: Was it an emotional experience, leaving India?

H: No...Not at all...

R: You were all happy, looking forward to the new life?

H: It was exciting. Because my children less that 3 days being in Pearsall, South Dakota, they were in school.

A: Just asking, did you come with a job or just came?

H: No just came. My sister lived in Pearsall, South Dakota; she had married Jerry way back in 1966-67. She sponsored us and it too about a year or year and a half for our turn to come. It took another 6 months because the Iran crisis was on and the Immigration department was busy processing political refugees. So we had to wait our turn, we just got a simple letter telling us that because we are busy processing this we cannot attend to you.

R: Your sister had come before you.

H: Much before...about 15 years before.

R: What brought her here how did she come?

H: She married Jerry and he lived in South Dakota. He was with Peace Corp and my sister was in England studying to be a secretary. She was in a degreed course, a 4 year course. My mother was a strong

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believer in Shashtriji, the fortune teller. She would take out tapkas (fortune log) which was written at our births regularly for advice. And this fellow told her that my sister would marry a foreigner and it did not sit well with her and she called her daughter, my sister back from England, hoping to reduce the chances of her marrying a foreigner. And that did not work because she went to work with the Peace Corp in Bombay, met Jerry and married him.

R: They married in India, in Bombay?

H: Yes. And both were in Peace Corp and married in India only?

R: In Bombay.

H: And after about a month or so the term with the Peace Corp was over and they packed their bags and they went of to South Dakota in the middle of nowhere. Nearest neighbor was 20 miles away.

R: How old was she?

H: Oh Gosh, she could not have been much more than about 19.... 18 or 19 years old.

R: So here is a girl grown up with all the fineries and luxuries of life in India and here suddenly comes to...

H: How to cook or look after a home, anything...She came here and she had to drive a pickup truck and round up sheep because that's what his parents did, it was sheep farming. They had 20,000 acres of nothing in South Dakota, in the middle of nowhere. And she just learnt to live a rugged life. She used to tell us stories about the winter, the house would be covered with snow and they would open the sliding windows and use it as their refrigerator because there was no electricity (laugh)

R: So what year would that be, when she came to this country?

H: It would be about 1967 or 8. Right after they got married.

A: So you told her you wanted to come here...

H: So I picked up the phone one fine day and told her you want to sponsor us. She said YES...It must have been pretty lonely I guess. By then the farm had been sold and they moved into town and they both had jobs in Pearsall. She used to work at a hospital as something or the other. He used work with the State Department as a journalist. He used to publish a magazine; he used to be the editor of that magazine. So that's...

R: Did she work for a Senator or something?

H: Yes... That was much later. She became the Secretary to the Senate and she was in that position for a long time for 15 or 16 years.

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R: Did that help you to move here.

H: No! No! Not at all! That had nothing to do with it. Except that when we arrived, we were introduced to the local big-wigs and the senators and all that kind of things. We arrived in March, the Senate was in session, so she took us to one of the sessions and she introduced us to the whole Assembly... It was kind of interesting, you know.

R: So what was your first impression of America? Did you face any....any...I should not say discrimination. But being an outsider, not an American born person? Especially where you were?

H: Not really. When I first arrived here, there were no industrial peers at all and so I said well, you know, I wanted to do something. So my sister ended up co-signing the note at the bank and we ended up with a little fast food joint that someone wanted to sell for 10 years and could not find a buyer, and we arrived from India and bought it. We ran that for about a year and a quarter or so and then sold it for basically for what we had in it. And I was kind of at a loose end for about a year during which time I invented a bicycle seat and started making them those in my garage and selling them by mail order.

R: Anything special about the seat?

H: It was my own invention, I had a patent on it and I had a small write-up in Newsweek magazine.

R: Wow. This is Newsweek of July 25, 1983. That must be something to be for a magazine like this to publish. So bike seat that rolls for comfort. So what was special? Roll means it on...

H: It just stuck to your butt and it would move with you so no rubbing anywhere.

R: I see.

H: It was very comfortable because it was supporting you like..

A: Did you sell a lot?

H: No, not that many. I wasn't making enough money to make it worthwhile. So finally when I got a good job in Aberdeen, South Dakota, we moved. I just folded the business down eventually.

R: Is anybody using a similar idea?

H: No. Not that I know of.

R: It was an intelligent design, because of the fact the way it takes the pressure point the way you sit and the way it would slide.

H: And this little latch here allowed you to adjust it in three positions, depending on the way he was sitting in an upright or bent over. And this thing in the middle rolls so as your legs went up and down it would roll and did not create any friction.

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R: Oh so it is a cylinder. I see. So no rubbing, that's the main thing. Rubbing was taken over by bearings.

H: Yes.

R: It's a good design.

H: I had a patent on that and if you go to the patent office, and punch in my name Erani, you will find this one and a couple of other patents.

R: What are the other ones?

H: The others came a little later when I.....but any way...two patents... (Shuffling papers....)

R: So innovative design was already in your blood.

H: Yeh...That's all I did really, I designed and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

R: Do you still do something at home?

H: Yeh...Little bit. I still play. These are the two I got patents on also with the company I worked with and it was like my first proper job.

R: Ummm. This is a carbide tipped saw sharpening fixture.

H: Yeh...

R: I see...I know...OK

H: I just made copies of these.

A: The second one is Flex-O-Grind!

H: Yes...

A: Aggressive(!) machining system.

R: This is a big machine.

H: Well, basically what it did was part of what I did, was you could do was replace the grinding wheel with a belt. It would allow you to do that. It was a simple thing. Not a big deal. Then, before I joined them, for three months, I worked for this guy in Rapid City in the Black Hills, and we made jacks for the Air Force. It was an Air Force Base in the Rapid City, and they used to make these jacks for the big bombers and fighter planes to change the tires. So when they wanted to change a tire, they would use this jack.

R: So this end would lift it up.

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H: This was the handle with a wheel in front.... It was just bottled gas and it would stand on a stand. And what we did was to change it from a handle to an air pump that would actually work with compressed air. So instead of sitting and doing tik-tik-tik for ever, we would just press a button and it would go up in a second.

R: So this would go up?

H: No. it's the bottle.

R: So this was just a cylinder that had compressed air.

H: So that was an interesting job and I learnt a lot while I was there. But the guy never paid anybody! That was the interesting part! Everyone was paid in Kind! So at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, everyone would come at 8 or 9 in the morning to work, but suddenly everyone would stop working and disappear. I was wondering what was going on for the first few days. No one told me what....Then I found out that everyone had their own projects going. There were three of them building race cars, somebody else was melting aluminum scrap and recycling it, somebody else was doing something else.

R: That's America, isn't it? Nowhere else you will find this type of personal pursuits.....33:55

H: He never paid them. His payment was in kind and he allowed them to use his workshop and his facility. And of course even though he had an agreement to pay me every month because I had to rent an apartment and drive that 85 miles every week to stay and to work. His checks would unendingly bounce because he would continually move his address and he was always hiding from somebody (laugh).

R: So while you were a recent immigrant at that time, was there any body, any local person that influenced you're your sort of life and family? And that helped you?

H: Not at all. It was just I on my own and would do whatever I liked doing. It was the difference from India where the family controlled you.

R: And their influence was always there. And now you were on your own.

H: So then I told Jack basically, Jack, I cannot afford to work for you. I said, your checks keep bouncing and the Bank keeps charging me \$20 for your checks,... (Laugh)

R: That's costing me more than your check! (Laugh)

H: So I quit them and went back to Pearsall and about a month later I got a job with a company called Kaoli Company in Aberdeen, South Dakota. And I spent 6 years with them and I did all these little things for them. And then I spent my time designing things. This was one of the bigger machines for them.

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R: There is electronics, I see.

A: When you designed for them, the patents became yours or theirs?

H: Theirs. They owned it.

R: That's always the case unfortunately.

H: As a matter of routine, there was a document for me to sign, and they would give me a check for one dollar for the ownership to make sure that I couldn't...suppose there was some grey area over there! Then after spending six years with them, I used sail on the lake over there, myself in the back and there is my nephew, Sunny, you have met.

R: Yes I have met him.

H: We used to sail every evening on the lake over there. The evenings are long over there. For the daylight till 11 o'clock in the night!

R: So your nephew was also there with you then?

H: No. In summer only. In the winter the lake would be completely frozen.

R: So by that time, or even now, do you think you miss anything about India?

H: No. Not at all! In fact I grew, my family grew, and my wife went to college which she never imagined she could do, because in India once you finish you are done. Whereas here she went back, she did her two Master's Degrees and became a School Principal, the children grew, my son has a MBA and is a Vice President at Hallmark, my one daughter became a Doctor, she practicing in Sioux City and my eldest daughter Khuzana became a School Principal like her mother, 700 children in her school.

R: So you think, if you had stayed in India, you think that all this drive to excel in their field would have been there or the drive came because you were in America?

H: I think being out there on our own was the incentive to rise up above the crowd.

R: It was all you; nobody was there to pull you up.

H: The only other people of our color, I would say, up there, were the American Indians, the Sioux and they were not considered an up tee group and there was a lot of discrimination against them and so Aban and I always told the children that never let yourself be missed up or

R: Misidentified ...

H: Misidentified as the Sioux. Make sure you rise above them and you be better than everybody and studied hard.

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R: But you or your family feel that either, may be your color or your background from another country like India come into their way?

H: Not at all. In fact it promoted us to some extent because up in South Dakota, up till us, there were no other people from India. We were the only Parsis in the whole state. There was nobody else and the Indians were usually highly respected because they were usually Doctors or College Professors or you know...and so by being associated with those people we got a lot of respect.

R: But I am sure nobody knew about Zarathushtis or Zoroastrians, where you were.

H: No. No. Absolutely not! They would just say we were from India. And that was all.

R: And did that help you being a Zoroastrian? You had to, of course educate them, I imagine, since they had never heard of...

H: It was difficult to even to educate them because it was like they had never heard of. It was only lately when everything started showing up on internet, that I was able to explain to a couple of my fellow engineers at work that this is my background, this is where I come from. Otherwise it was just oh you are India, we just grouped.

A: It was more a nationality than a religion.

H: Yeh... Religion was never an issue. Even at work we were not supposed to ask about religion anyway, it was illegal.

R: Correct.

H: So no one even wanted to know.

R: Or their mouth and ask whether you are Hindu or Muslim or what. But you felt that having a background or having an identity of being a Zoroastrian, do you think it might have helped you in some way?

H: I don't know. I wouldn't know. Not having that kind of experience. I know that in India we were always looked up to, to some extent, because we Parsis were, at least we considered ourselves a notch above everybody else. But once in a while I would meet people in India, especially when you are in South India, very highly cultured people from old families, who thought they were superior. So you are OK. You know. No big deal!

R: Did you learn anything special from Americans?

H: Living in South Dakota, what I did learnt was a lot of humility. Because the people there are very very humble. One of the first pieces of advice someone gave me over there was, you know, don't show off,

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keep a low profile and work hard. That is what we all do. And so I stuck to that throughout my career also.... Kept a low profile and work the hell out of me.

A: And you brought up the children the Zoroastrian way? Their Navjotes were done?

H: Yes their Navjotes were done before we left for America. But as far as, I think only my eldest daughter up to this day does her Kasti or anything. The boy did not care about the religion anyway and still doesn't and my youngest was too young to learn anything anyway so all of them first become Catholics, because they married Catholics, but then my son decided that Catholic was too elaborate and too painful and he became one of these Evangelical Church Members.

R: Christian?

H: Christian. And his wife who was a Catholic, switched with him and that did not sit well with her parents so they did not communicate for about a year but then everyone came home after that.

R: How about your grand children. Do they know anything about Zoroastrianism?

H: Oh yeh...We have taught them all that. We teach them the good thoughts, good words, good deeds. We tell them the History, we keep them informed but they are basically Christians.

R: Correct. Correct.

A: But your daughter wears sadra-kushti, she...

H: She goes to Catholic Church, because...You know you have to understand that the church up there, up North, it is more like a club, it is their social group.

A: That's right.

H: And you cannot be outside the social group.

R: And you are surrounded.

H: You are totally surrounded, you are immersed and if you are to survive in a community which is so small. There are only about 4000 people where my daughter lives and to be friends with everybody and be a part of the community, she is actually active in her church because she is a great organizer, become a school principal.

A: I was just going to say that she is the one who became a principal?

H: Yeh..She is just a lot like Aban, always organizing.

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R: I am surprised that in today's time, especially when a lot of young people even if they are surrounded by Zarathushti community and still don't wear sadro-kasti, does she wear sadro-kasti?

H: I don't.

R: I know.

H: Yeh, She does.

R: She does! So what do you attribute it to?

H: I have no idea.

R: So it just came in from within?

H: Probably.

R: Do you think you might have treated her differently? (Laugh) or gave her more...

H: I am not a particularly religious person. I just happen to be a Parsi. So, I live with that kind of feeling.....

R: So she must be a sort of religious person in her own way.

H: To some extent. Our youngest daughter is more, not into religion so much as philosophical, she for the past year or she has been following Deepak Chopra around and attending all his courses and classes and now she has done a whole six months of work with his group, and she is learning about alternate medicine and she started an alternate medicine group in Sioux City where they practice yoga and exercise and for a medical doctor trained under the American system it's creditable that she has been able to add this to her portfolio as a doctor.

R: You as in particular, as a Zoroastrian born, who is a Zoroastrian surrounded by other Zoroastrians and practically live like the way other Zoroastrians live, is there anything, any principle of Zoroastrian religion or tradition that means the most to you?

H: I was taught never to lie and that was absolutely my number one thing that I even impressed upon my children that never, never, never tell a lie. That is probably the greatest sin that there is. And then you follow that with the good thoughts, good words and good deeds and then automatically you live a good life and you are kind to other people, you know....

R: You make your own choices.

H: And everything follows. And we taught that to our children. In fact my eldest grandson is now 20 yrs old, 21 years old this December. He is not a church going person at all and he says I believe in God but I do not believe in religion because there are too many religions. (laugh)

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R: He can't make up his mind! (pause) So if you were to convey something, what would you say to the next generation about being a Zoroastrian or would you say, just be a good man?

H: I would say it's a way of life. I would say it's a good way of life. You don't have to go to a church, you don't have to bend and pray to somebody. You just lead a good life and be content within yourself and that is the main thing really.

R: But I know you said that your children basically are not really classified as Zoroastrian in a technical term.

H: Not at all.

R: So does it bother you in any way that you grew up and all your generations grew up in a Zoroastrian way of life and..

H: No it does not bother me because my mother was quite religious, I think, she went regularly to the Agiyari in Bombay, like literally every month or so she would go. My grandmother went every month like religion, I 'm to. But my father was like, if he went once year on his birthday, it would be a miracle. He was not particularly inabud(?) by priests and all that kind and he actually did not want anything to do with that whole crowd. So having grown up with this split thing, there was no real pressure on us children to even go the Agiyari. So we would go on our birthdays as we would go on Navroze or twice a year.

R: How about relatives and friends? They were usually Parsis in India?

H: 99% all Parsis, except when we went to Kodai (Kodaikanal) where there were no Parsis but there was an elderly couple the Engineers, and with your name....(laugh) They were college professors from Allahabad or somewhere and they had retired in Kodai and so that would be the only Parsi contractors, so we would take the children to visit them.

R: So what influenced you was the life in Kodai and not as much in Bombay where there were more Parsis.

H: You know in Bombay it was funny because (I) went to work, came home, we were young and the crowd with which we mixed with was the same people we went to school with and some of the people would be Kelly (Kelly Mama - a mutual friend in Houston), over here.

R: So they were Parsis, in short, is what you mean?

H: Hundred percent! And they were mostly the people I went to college with or made friends with and the Parsis I think tended to stick together and those were the people we socialized with. And it was a very small group, may be about 10 or 12 of us all together. We went to the beach and half of them were relatives, usually cousins or something, you know, and that was it, a very small group.

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R: So you did not have to identify yourself ...you were already that.

H: You were already a part of that. That was it. In Madras it was different. We stayed 5 years in Madras and there were very few Parsi families over there. And socially we would only meet at a Parsi's home typically. But we used to belong to a club called the Roundtable, where everyone was under 40, and interestingly, except for one couple, everyone was non-Tamilian. They were all Punjabis and Sindhis, and it was as if they were expats in another country and so tended to group together. So we became part of that group and we had some good times in the 5 years we were there.

R: It was because living in South and coming from other parts of India, it was like living abroad.

H: Oh totally because the culture in Tamilnadu was so different from the rest of India. Completely different culture, different language..

R: And Kodai is a smaller place too. It's not like Bangalore or Madras or something.

H: Yes very tiny. And in the off season there would be nobody. I mean the whole town would be so empty, so empty, you know.

R: But pretty, I know.

H: Very pretty.

R: So if you could put 3 things you own, in a time capsule, what would they be? Have any thoughts on that? Tough question!. Even I can't think...Something you would say, oh my God! I want my great grand children to look at this item or look at this piece and think of me or define me or something like that.

H: (Laugh) I don't have anything like that. In fact I have always said, I should not be remembered at all.

R: Why?

H: I don't know, it has always been like that. That you live your life and you do whatever you can for everybody and if they remember you for your deeds, it's fine. But I don't think that for any material possession that I have or wish to have that I want to leave to anybody or anything, you know.

R: So let's forget about any material part, but let's say something about your deed, what you did, what would you be remembered for what your deed?

H: Well, for my children, I think, would be, I bringing them to America despite the fact that I would have been much better off in India, with the style of life I had.

A: Financial?

R: Financially and socially in relative terms.

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H: Absolutely! Absolutely! So it was a small sacrifice on my part for them.

R: You do not think it was a big sacrifice even thou you said it was a small sacrifice?

H: No. No. I mean for whatever we are here on the Earth for. If we had to do good for somebody else, you may do good for your own children to start with. And I have been very happy with that decision. So I will probably be remembered for that. (laugh)

R: It's really interesting how people have come from different backgrounds and here as a community in Houston as we live, it seems that we all seem to be doing the same things, enjoying the same things and defining ourselves as one homogenous community but you don't think that by living in Houston as a community, lost your individuality, the individual strengths have been mellowed down to the main stream community?

H: No, I don't think so. It's all our little little differences make up the community, really.

R: But you have lost that, like you said, you came out of a fairly elite background, and now here we feel, in America, you do not have that elitism; at least you don't see it as much.

H: Actually, I was actually glad that I did not have to be special. Because there was a lot of responsibility attached to that, you know, that when you are looking after a lot of people, employing so many people. I could go back and see my Dad at Allwyn Metal Works, 5000 workers in his factory! I mean that is a huge responsibility because there are 5000 families that are dependent on you on their daily bread.

R: And the pressure on you.

H: And the pressure. The responsibility is always there and I could never understand why when you have this responsibility of looking after all these people, yet they would fight with you all the time? Because if not one thing, then there was another! Everyday there would be something new to fight over. I spent my fair time in Labor courts and not defending myself but defending principals and I took the sales tax department to court and took the income tax department to court and I won both times.

R: You had to fight for your rights.

H: I had to fight for my rights. I was fighting for my principals. Like I remember, the sales tax guy wanted to assess me of a ten backward years of sales taxes on tips collected for the staff. And I had to go to court and prove to the court that these are tips that people have given and is distributed to the staff, I do not keep it. It's not a sale of anything. How can you sales tax it? So I won the case, much to the relief of the whole Hotel and Restaurant industry because it became a test case. And then another time it was an issue of spending money for the maintenance of the Hotel. The income tax would not accept the write-off on maintenance and they said no, you got to capitalize it, it's too much money and I said I can't afford to capitalize it because if you do not give me relief from my taxes immediately. I said I will have to borrow money for my taxes and so I took them to court. I had no recourse. And I had a nice idea, I got

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my architect involved and he wrote me a certificate saying that so many square feet of space on this premises and therefore the cost per space is 2 Naya Paisa per square foot.

R: Which is two hundredths of a Rupee and a Rupee is like in today's time is like 2 pennies, or less than 2 pennies is a Rupee.

H: So presented with this evidence, the tribunal looked at the income tax people and said where are you coming from? What can you buy for 2 Naya Paisa per square foot? Even a carpet is a Rupee a square foot. So they backed off then and that was the end of it. And again the Hotel Industry heaved a sigh of relief because it became a test case. That required the Income Tax people to come up with some kind of a standard as to which point you become a capitalization and which point you can write it off.

R: So you did make a difference while you were there, fighting for your own rights but at the same time it made a difference to a lot of others too. Now, we know the differences in political systems and legislative and law enforcement systems between India and what we have in America here. Do you think India was really bad in comparison to that or was still emerging as a new economy?

H: It was still learning. And we unfortunately became the guinea pigs. And this was the time when India was converting from a British Raj type of situation I saw the courts move from English to local languages. I had an incident where I got held up on a highway by some kids and one of them had a shot gun with him which became an armed highway robbery and was punishable by hanging in India. And they caught the three boys and I had to go through that over about a year and a half of going backwards and forwards to a court to which I did not understand what was going on. It was completely conducted in Tamil and even though I had my secretary with me, half the time he would whisper what was going on I could never figure out what was really going on until the last session at which I found out the police being as corrupt as they are, they were doing the prosecuting and I was just the witness. And there were a couple of other witnesses also in the case but they had thrown in two more guns and all kinds of evidence which was not even belonging to the case and they were trying to hang these boys. And I told that police inspector working with it and I said this is not right. And I said what you are doing is not right and that until now I had not realized since you have been conducting everything in Tamil and he said, *Oh Mr. Erani, what can you do? You just have to stand on the thing and nod your head!* I said I am not going to. I am not going to let it continue like this. He said, *if you do not show up we will prosecute you for contempt of court and put you in jail with the same guys.* I said OK. (laugh) So when my turn on the witness stand finally showed up and requested judge that it be conducted in English, with a translator. The lawyer for the defense fortunately spoke English, and so it went off quite nicely, at least in my opinion, because the guys were let go with five year probation, since they had already served one year in jail. They were let off with 5 years of probation and to report every month to the local police officer.

R: Do you think justice was done?

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H: I think it was a little severe. Because the kids were only 17 or 18 or 19 years old and they had borrowed their uncle's shot gun for hunting and not got anything and so were up to no good. That's all. It was mischief.

R: They had not killed anybody?

H: No, No. Because it was highway robbery! Because almost 3 months after that, no one was allowed to use that road through the mountains as they thought the Naxalite activity (Terrorists?). So everything had to be in a convoy of six to 8 cars or buses, with a police Jeep in the front and a police Jeep at the back with the armed people. And for six months they ran this routine till they finally realized that these were kids up to no good.

R: So they wanted to get even with the kids more or less.

H: I know that the inspector just wanted a promotion and he if I get to hang these people, I will get a promotion. That was all his goal and I said thank you very much.

R: How sad.

H: Anyway, I never did finish my career because then I went on a Kaoli Company and joined FMC.

R: Same FMC as here?

H: Yes, same FMC as here. In fact I used to come here for some conferences. Over there I focused on the environment and I was their Manufacturing Lead Engineer. I did all kinds of things. So many things that I can't even remember! But I built them ... (shuffling paper). This list is so long.

R: What type of things that they built?

H: Well, we built mainly stuff for the US Navy and NAATO. And most of it was related to missile launchers. That's OK. Most of that were missile launchers we built in Aberdeen. It was a very laid back lexidesicle(?) setup over there because we were subcontractors to Martin Marriot and the real manufacturing was actually been done in Israel by the Israeli Defense Industry people. And, so some questions (were) being asked in Congress about letting our armament being produced abroad and not in America. So they passed a law requiring that anything that was for our defense industry to be made in this country. And that's when we had to get serious about what we were doing and so we had to start bidding for these jobs on a serious note and we very fortunately landed up 5 year contract and put the Israeli company out of business. Not the whole company but that particular product. And since I was the lead manufacturing engineer at that time in Aberdeen, it fell on my shoulders to basically make sure that we could meet this kind of demand that was suddenly imposed on us without expanding our space, we only had about 100,000 square feet of space. And so we undertook this program of ergonomics and we shortened the cycle time from 72 days down to 11 days and thereby created so much extra space inside the plant that we were able to take on four times the volume of work because we installed

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machine tools and all kinds of stuff. I was busy installing robots and welding and just automated the whole space that the same 100 people that we had there were producing 4 times as much gross. And that company is still running very well.

R: With all these things you have done in your life and now that you have retired, what do you do now?

H: Well I started a small hobby of woodworking and now it has translated into some glass fusing and it keeps me busy.

A: His garage is his workshop.

R: I know I have seen your garage. You got a big lathe and some equipment that I do not even know what it does.

H: I built them myself, my own CNC router.

R: That is fancy, the CNC is always with some electronics and..

H: I grew up with it so you know.

R: Yes. You look like a master of machine industry.

H: Back in 1981, I took a course with NRE, Electronics Correspondence Course. It took me 2 years to finish it and over one and a half year through it, I built my first computer back in 1983.

R: Wow.

A: Desktop?

H: Yeh. IBM clone.

R: So how would you like to be remembered for generations to come? I know, I think you answered it somewhat.

H: I think for being a person that kept everybody happy, I tell my jokes which I learnt from my father. (Laugh). You know, I was lucky, when I was looking through my old stuff, I do not remember half of it, I found all this stuff which I had done, when I was asking for a wage raise at FMC, so basically right until 1997, it got my career, from the Hotel to my fire extinguishers, you name it, all my certificates are here.

A: So based on that, did you get the raise?

H: Oh yes. In fact they doubled my wage and reprimanded the Plant Manager for discrimination.

R: For bringing you up.

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H: Well, the thing was, all the engineers were paid the same pay but when I asked him, the manager for a raise, he said ah ah, that raise is not in my hand but you will have apply to the committee. OK. What committee you are talking about? He said there is a committee of peers which is made up of other engineers from all over the country with FMC and there will be 12 of them sitting and you will have to make a presentation to them as to why you should be given a raise and for whatever. So, it took me about 45 minutes and basically this was my presentation, that colored slide that I had put up for them. And back in 1997 when very few of them even knew how to make a presentation. So, the first question that one of them asked me was that you did this yourself. And I said yes. Oh, OK. (laugh). So.....

A: They were impressed.

H: So they were impressed, and then it just went from there and....

A: And so they (????) in your manager?

H: Yeh... In fact they doubled my salary and then they gave me a 10% raise after that every year until I reach some number, I can't remember what it was. But then I retired before that happened, so....

R: So you retired from FMC?

H: No by then FMC was sold the division and became United Defense and right after I left it was sold again and became BAE.

A: Did you just want to retire or was it.....

H: Partly that same old urge for wanting to do something else but then my health went on me. I had some major surgery on my stomach and things like it just broke my drive. I just sort of sat back and said what am I doing?

R: Why....

H: Why am I doing! I don't need the money, why am I working? This is some other stuff.....This was an article in the FMC magazine and see my picture over there with a couple other people.

R: (Reading the papers....) Helping Hand for the Ozone Layer, that is for the environmental...

H: Yes. Back in those days we had a big tri-chloride ethane degreasing plant, a vapor degreaser which contained about 43,000 pounds of tri-chloride ethane and we would lose 25,000 pounds of it every year, which would cost us a small fortune to replace. Besides that for having 43,000 pounds in hand at work and the Government was trying to get rid of Ozone layer destroyer, we had to pay \$180,000 a year in excise tax for that. So, I said let's get rid of it. And had to fight a little bit and took 6 months to convince the people to give me the \$80,000 to build this degreaser.. ..(It's at the back over here....) and we built it ourselves basically in the plant because at that time they were laying people off and as I said, look I'm going to write in 5 people of my choice that I want to retain for this project. So I wrote their salaries into

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my project so that they could have a job for another 6 months. So we built it and then we got work and they stayed on. And two of those guys became engineers. This guy here became a maintenance manager at the Presentation Collage; this girl became a buyer in the office. Everyone benefited by staying on otherwise out of the hundred people we had on the shop floor, we were going to lay off 80. And, interestingly, because we were team based plant, the manager was mostly a figure head. You could think of the plant hierarchy to be an inverse pyramid where the bulk of the people were on the top and they were in teams. There were welding team, machining team, painting team, assembly teams and they chose their own team leader who performed the functions of a supervisor, the co-ordinations and things like that. And it was an interesting place because you could always talk to each other as adult to adult. And that was about the only relationship you were allowed to have with everybody else. Adult to child was not considered good and child to adult was not considered good. You had to talk to everybody as equal. And as engineers, we were 5 of us, we had no boss. And each of us was assigned to a different team. Me, I had to look after everybody because I was designing so I was designing for everybody so I was not just stuck with one particular group which caused hard feelings in some cases because people wanted my time into 2 or 3 places at the same time sometimes. For the 14 years I was there, out of that about 12 years I was Emergency Coordinator which meant that every time the alarm went off I had to get up and go to work and reset the alarm, meet with the cops and socialize with them at 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning and there were days it would be snowing and other days it be thunderstorm and the fence would be electrically charged and if you went near it, sparks would jump at you.

R: So you had a lot of varied experience for sure. So before we close, do you have anything Arnavaz? Any question?

A: Just want you to know that I knew his mother.

R: Is that right? How nice!

A: I was a child of course. And I had been to his wedding....I am sorry, I take back. The wedding was in India and there was some reception or Adarni (pre-wedding celebration) or something like that I remember attending.

R: How our paths cross here after so many years all the way from India or Pakistan to America. Things are strange.

A: And I have seen his as a baby. Because Nargesh came to Karachi for a baby and my mother and my parents were quite close to family. Baby Aayouchh (Gujarati - baby is born) and we must go and see them. So you were a baby at that time!

R: Well anyway, is there anything special you would like us to remember of you?

H: Well, I feel so privileged to be interviewed and honored.

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R: It's our pleasure. I'd talked to you before and the day I talked to you, we did not have this program then. In fact the day I suggested it, I said I know why we need this program and I had heard about your sister and you had mentioned, how she came here was married to a Peace Corps volunteer in India and came here.

H: And he is still up there and they are retired now.

R: And I believe I have met her when she was here last month.

H: in January this year.

R: So it really boggles my mind how people have come from such varied backgrounds and come to this country

H: And we have all survived and flourished.

R: Survived and flourished of course and thanks to the country that gave all these opportunities to be ourselves. It was not that you did not have lack of opportunities in India, that was not your issue, but the way you flourish here.....

H: The freedom....

R: When we talk about freedom, many never really understand what it means until they talk to people like you.

H: In my case, because I design things and build things, in India, things are a hundred time more difficult because if I needed a switch, I had to design the switch and build the switch. Here I could go out and get one from a catalogue.

R: You do not have to reinvent everything. Like that machine, you had to get it build everything.

H: In 1965, every one of those rotary switches was built from scratch.

R: Correct. That's the difference. That's why America is where America is today.

Well, thank you very very much Homi. We really appreciate this. It was our privilege.

H: Thank you so much.

A: I really enjoyed it very much

R: I enjoyed every minute of it and thank you agreeing to be with us.

H: Thank you.

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