Interviewee: Piloo Ilavia  
Interviewers: Aban Rustomji & Percy M. Master  
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Transcribed by: Percy M. Master  
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Background:  
Setting:  
The interview took place at the Zarathushti Heritage & Cultural Center, 8787 W Airport Blvd, Houston, TX 77071 at the Zoroastrian Association of Houston (ZAH). The interview is part of a project spearheaded by the ZAH Library to document and record oral history of Zarathushties who have settled in the USA from India or Iran.

Interview Transcript:  

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AR: This is the Asian American archive project and we are interviewing…

PI: Piloo Ilavia

AR: So, thank you, Piloo, for coming here and taking the time out. Let’s start by asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself, tell me about your childhood, growing up in Gujarat, India, just a little bit so that we get warmed up.

PI: OK. I was born in Gujarat, but since the age of 2 I lived in Udaipur, Rajasthan, and that’s where I was till 1961. I am born in 1940; so I was there till ’61. I grew up in a very loving family, one brother and one sister, and growing up we lived in a distillery, my dad was a distillery manager, and so we grew up in a factory-type environment, more like a
business environment. Our house was right there on the campus, and after I got my bachelor’s degree from Udaipur, I moved to Baroda and got my master’s degree, and then I stayed and worked there in Baroda for ONGC, which is the National Oil & Gas Co., and in 1968, immigrated to the US.

AR: So when you were up in Rajasthan, at your dad’s, where he was the distillery manager, did you have a Zoroastrian neighborhood or background, who did you play with?

PI: In Udaipur, which was a fairly good-sized city at that time, there were only four Parsi Zoroastrian families. One was ours, one was my dad’s cousin, one was a teacher and one was a businessman who had a shop there; so these were the only four Parsi Zoroastrian families there and that’s how we knew each other, and maybe much to your surprise, until the age of 16 or 17, I could not read or write Gujarati, so the only thing I knew was Hindi, and English.

AR: But did you follow any religious practices, and did your parents model it and did you follow them, and would you do sukhar-loban?

PI: Always, always. Two things I remember, in the morning, and in the evening, my mom or dad would put the loban and go all around the house, my dad prayed in the morning, we were required to do kusti before eating or drinking anything in the morning, we, of course, do kusti after our bath, we do kusti before eating dinner, and we do kusti before going to bed, and that was the practice in our family.

AR: When did you decide to come to the US and why did you decide to come to the US?

PI: Well, that’s a very interesting question for me, because when I graduated from Baroda, Gujarat, I worked for ONGC, and I quickly worked in the Operations side, and I was very fortunate that I worked for a gentleman who had a master’s degree in Geology from Harvard University, and he took me under his wing and kept telling me that if I wanted to pursue the Engineering side of the business, I should go to the US because that’s where the biggest oil and gas development was at that time. We are talking about the early sixties. So I looked at it and he did mention that if you want to do some good in the US you also need to get a degree from the US, and that’s when I applied to various universities – Rensselaer was there, UT was there, Missouri School of Mines, there was one other School of Mines in Boulder, Colorado, and they all accepted me, and I decided to join Missouri school of Mines, Rolla, because that was the cheapest for me.

(0:05:00)

AR: Yes, all of us that come to the US, we need to have financial backing and the dollar’s always stronger, no matter when. Was it a hardship for you to do that, or did you have to take loans? How did you manage that?
PI: I had a very tough life in the beginning when I was a young man, about 17 years old, my dad lost his job in the distillery, and from the age of 17, I had been on my own. One of the biggest things that I looked for were the Zoroastrian associations, the charities in Bombay, and they gave me very good scholarships and all that, so when I did my master's in Baroda, I got a loan and that's how I survived, and that was an educational loan, and when I decided to come to the US those same charities offered me the maximum those charities would loan out, and I took that advantage; so I had scholarships and a very big loan when I came to the States; so it was OK.

AR: Besides that, what was the climate like – you came from India, a warm climate, and not just the physical climate, but you had to cook and clean and wash your own clothes, how was that cultural adjustment for you as a student?

PI: One of the things, particularly for me, as I had told you since 17 I had been on my own, and I did not have any support until I went to Baroda and I lived with my brother when I did my master’s in Baroda, and I have worked all my life, even while going through undergraduate school, graduate school and working at ONGC, I kept my own apartment, kept it nicely. So, I was pretty much used to doing the work, as opposed to many Indian families that had lots of servants and all that. Until I was 17, we had half a dozen servants in the house, because of the distillery, but after 17 I was on my own. So when I came to the US, it was not that very difficult for me to get out in the yard and mow the lawn, and take care of the house, and sweep and clean, and all that. The other advantage that I would say I had was that my wife and my son were with me when I came to the US.

AR: When did you get married, did you get married in India?

PI: Yes, we got married in 1966, we had our son, the only child I have, Adil, born in '67, and in '68, we came to Rolla, Missouri.

AR: What did your wife do while you were a student?

PI: She took care of the house, and the little boy, and when (I think it was the very first break) she was offered a part-time job at the hospital if she wanted it, and by then we had our immigrant visa approved, so she could work. She worked in the hospital at late night, graveyard shift for some time.

AR: You didn’t have that feeling of isolation because you had your family right here.

PI: Right. My family, and also growing up under harsh conditions, made me ready to tackle the issues.

AR: Did you have any particular family that helped you, while you were in the US, sort of like a mother image?
PI: Yes there were two families that helped. There was one lady – we all called her “Tucker Mom”; her name was Mrs. Tucker. She never married, but she always took interest in the foreign students, and since I had a wife and a little boy, she took particular interest in me. Then there was another couple – he was a professor of Civil Engineering and married to an Indian lady from madras, a Christian lady, “Gewn C”; so when they saw us on the campus and living in Rolla, they helped us quite a bit too. So these two families were really very kind to us.

AR: Rolla, Missouri in the sixties – sixties were really trying years, Martin Luther and the riots. Did you face any discrimination ever, or did you have any problems with that?

PI: No, I did not. With God’s grace, I never experienced anything where I felt I was not allowed in, or not allowed to do certain things. Now, there might have been instances they knew what they were doing, but at least it was not apparent to me. I did not feel anything I was discriminated against.

AR: Did you go back to India while you were studying, and how many years was it when you were living here before your first visit back?

PI: We couldn’t afford to go back in those days; I think we went back after 7-8 years. I went after 7-8 years. In Rolla, between semesters, there was a professor of English. He had a Christmas tree farm, and he hired students. Me and my friend, we would go out in the Winter months and plant Christmas trees on his farm. And worked with him and all, and the only time that I saw something was one time we were going in a coffee shop and the professor said, “Well, let’s not go there; we’ll eat outside, sit outside,” and later on I found out that that was kind of a clannish place and he did not want us exposed to that. It was very noce of him.

AR: So he was protecting you. So after Rolla, where did you go for a job when you graduated?

PI: When I graduated, there was a recession in this country in 1970, and so they would come and interview me on the campus, but nobody offered me a job at that time. So I went to Dallas because Dallas was the oil center of the US at that time, and I quickly got working for a company – Continental Resources, and they put me in Oklahoma, so I spent 6 months – 8 months in Oklahoma City working, and then Dresser offered me a job, and that was in Houston; so I relocated to Houston in 1971 – April, May time.

AR: Are you still working with Dresser?

PI: No, I worked for Dresser from 1971 through 1976, and working at Dresser, the work was very interesting, related to oil and gas Engineering-side, and so I moved into the Operations side of the business. Dresser was a service company – service-provider to oil and gas; so I moved into a oil and gas company – Superior Oil & Gas Co., now
called Exxon-Mobile. So I worked at Superior Oil and then in late seventies, things improved quite a bit and there were lots of phone calls from headhunters and so I joined a small company that ultimately became Enron. I was with them till '97 and then I joined what in now Chevron (Unocal).

AR: Are you still working?

PL: Yes, I am working with them, but I left them in 2001 because I was in Bangladesh – they put me there as a drilling manager to take care of their operations in Bangladesh (Unocal), and in 2001 when I came back, I thought everything was fine, so I did not pursue anything with them. Did little bit of consulting work and in 2005, they called me back and said, “We want you back.” So I started working for them as a contract person.

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AR: You had other overseas assignments?

PL: Yes, for Enron, or EOG Resources as it was called back then – Enron Oil & Gas, I worked in Syria for about 2-3 years, lived in Damascus. I worked in Malaysia, lived in Kuala Lumpur for about 2 years and for about 6 months in a small town called Labuan, Malaysia. It’s on a small island off the big island of Borneo. For Enron, I was stationed in Bombay, India, for offshore - setup an exploration plant for offshore, and then I left them and went to work for Unocal, and Unocal, looking at my experience, they sent me to Dhaka, Bangladesh, because they were setting up their shop there. So went there as Drilling Manager and came back in 2001.

AR: How many years have you lived in Houston, proper?

PL: If you count 2014, then ’71 – 2014. 40+ years, 44, 45.

AR: Living in Houston, you’ve gone through all the changes the community has gone through, so throw us some light on that, what your feelings were, before we had the center and how instrumental you’ve been to get a place.

PL: When we came to Houston in ’71, there were very few Parsi Zoroastrian families. Once in a while we would get together, and in that time even the Indian community in Houston was very small, very small. We used to get together every other weekend or so in a lecture theatre in University of Houston to watch Indian movies – that was the small Indian population back then. When the Zoroastrians decided to set up an association, I was very instrumental in setting up the initial Zoroastrian Association of Houston. We felt that we need a place that we can call our own. So we got involved in a Building Fund, what we used to call a Building Fund, and I was a founding member of that fund and, of course, Pervez was there, and we all worked very hard. But then after some time when I started working international, in ’89, I lost touch because I was gone most of the time. The only time I would come back is for a short vacation; so from ’89 to 2001, I was gone most of the time from Houston. But ZAH has done very well; we have
a very nice community, we have a place that we can call our own, we feel proud of it, and we wish we could do more for it.

AR: I want to pick up on something you said a little earlier, when you mentioned about being a Parsi and being a Zoroastrian, how do you identify yourself? Do you call yourself a Parsi, a Zoroastrian, an Indian, or is it a composite?

PI: It’s a composite, because for most Americans, Zoroastrian religion is not something that is well-known, like Islam, Hindu, Jewish or Christianity. So identifying myself as a Zoroastrian, in the very early phases was difficult. In the early seventies, it was a little tough. But mostly they ask the country of origin, “Where are you from?” So I’d say, “I'm from India”, and if they get into the religious side, I do say, “Zoroastrian”, I proudly say that.

AR: You’ve raised a son out here. He’s mostly been in Houston, even though he was born in India. You’ve gone through parenting, and you’ve gone through a cycle of his life and your life. Tell us a little bit about that.

PI: When he was born, he was just growing up when we came to the US, so that’s all he knows. He doesn’t speak Gujarati; broken Gujarati he can understand. He grew up in the US and that was our love and joy, raising him. He grew up to be a good father, he got married to a local girl, and he asked me, “Dad, I’m dating this young girl, and would it be OK for me to get married?” and I said, “Son, that’s between you and her – that’s whom you’re going to love and cherish for.” So he got married and then he had sons, but he kept the religion and we got the navjote done of the boys and they wear the fravashi very proudly, displaying it on their racing helmets, and they’re very proud of the religion too. But they don’t practice the religion as we would have thought; things change, you know, and different religions are also suffering like that.

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AR: Well, there are traditions and rituals, and then there are values. Values are always there.

PI: Both my grandsons and my son, they are very stringent about values, about honesty, integrity, truthfulness, helping people, and I see them in these two young boys growing up and I feel very proud of them. One time, and they both race go-karts – both my grandsons, one time a boy got into a very bad crash on the track, and my older grandson – he pulled his cart off the track and went to help him, even though he lost his position – he was running 2nd or 3rd. But he did not care about that. So that tells me that the values are there. I emphasize values and good education.

AR: As a family, do you get together regularly? Do you have any siblings here – do you have an extended family out here?
PI: Yes, to some extent I do. I have my sister here. She has lived here for the last 30 years. She has one son and one daughter who live in Houston. She lost her oldest son within two years of coming to the US – he dies of cancer, leukemia. She has another son who lives in India. My wife has a distant cousin who lives here too. So that’s the extended family. As far as getting together, we see my son and his family just about every weekend, either at our house, or their house, or on the racetrack.

AR: A number of us that don’t have extended families out here, we consider community members to be our extended family. Is that your impression as well?

PI: Yes, 100%, and I feel very proud in Houston, barring a few, just about all the Zoroastrians in Houston are very, very good people – very nice, down-to-earth, well-meaning.

AR: Let’s go back to your grandchildren, who are being raised as ethical Zoroastrians, even though all the rituals that you practiced growing up are there. What do you see for them and their generation Zoroastrians? What is the future going to be for them, not just in Houston, because we have come from our motherland and made a new place for ourselves? What I’m trying to get at is do you see changes, and do we adopt changes, what’s your take?

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PI: It’s inevitable; it’s absolutely inevitable. For example, most pof the Zoroastrian ladies in India wore sarees. But now here, because we are in a different country, you dress accordingly. My kid – my son and their two boys do not practice any rituals to speak of, but the Zoroastrian principles I had instilled in my son, and he instills in his two sons has really helped. As far as seeing what they will grow up, and when they have their own kids, I don’t think religion is going to be of a very big significance to these guys, at least with the family I have. Yes, they will claim they are Zoroastrians or whatever, but I don’t think they are going to pursue the various religious things and all that.

AR: Does that bother you?

PI: To some extent, yes. But it is inevitable because we live in a society where we don’t have a joint family system, everybody lives on their own. My son has his own family. These grandkids, pretty soon, they will get out and have girlfriends and all that. So it is difficult to pursue something that you believe in, and think that they will also follow. So I feel that it is inevitable and I feel that some of our very orthodox-thinking people in our community here need to wake up; because they may claim to be the pure, pure Zoroastrians, but soon their sons and their grandsons or granddaughters may be embracing somebody from another religion, and that’s inevitable.

AR: So what is it that we really want for generations coming down the line, if really our emphasis is going to be on one major thing, what is it that we aspire?
PI: Ethics. The Zoroastrian religion teaches us to be very honest, truthful, and like we say, good thoughts, good words, good deeds, as there is a saying in India, and Mahatma Gandhi always said that “Hear no evil, speak no evil, hear [sic] no evil”, all three principles, and they are very similar to what we are saying. I'm seeing that in my son and grandsons the honesty and truthfulness is very predominant. Now, when they do something stupid, they don't jump up and say “Yeah I did that”.

AR: But they're children.

PI: Not only that. I can see that, if they make some mistake, by and large, they own up to it.

AR: Take a minute to tell me of one instance or a story of your life which you consider to be a big success in your profession and in your own personal life. Give me two small scenarios and take a minute to think about it.

PI: Professionally, I think when I joined Dresser here, I got a very good, diverse background into the various facets of oil and gas. When I left them and I joined Superior Oil, I think that was very big and encouraging – it was very favorable to my career. I give credit for that, to some extent, to the people I worked with at Dresser – they were very well thought of, they were very broad-minded, they wanted good people to work for them. They did not hesitate to let me leave, in an indirect way, they encouraged me to be part of the operations. The only downside to this is that even today I miss a lot of family members, my close family that I left behind, to some extent the culture if India, which is very, very good, if you look at it in detail, very tolerant people, religious or otherwise. I think that is one of the drawbacks in my life, that I think I left the country I grew up in and left all my relatives and friends.

(0:30:02)

AR: Give me a success story of your family.

PI: I consider myself very lucky that I have a very nice son. He's married, of course he's married to an American girl, but she's very much a part of our family. She's raised two very good children. I consider that a success for me, as far as my life is concerned, because if I am dead and gone tomorrow, there will be some people who will be there.

AR: What else can we gather from you, that's important to you?

PI: I consider myself very lucky, Aban. Really I consider myself lucky. God has given me good health; I'm 74 years old. I don't take any medication. I still work a full 9-hour day. I enjoy life. I eat everything; I am not on any diet. In all respects I feel I am very lucky.
AR: If you were to put three things in a time capsule, that was to be opened 50 years from now, what would they be? You don’t have to answer any of the question you don’t want to.

PI: No, no. I think one thing that I would definitely put in my time capsule my US citizenship certificate, because this country gave me a very good opportunity to grow, be myself, and do the things that I wanted to do. And this country has given me every opportunity at every stage, as far as freedom or anything like that. So I would put that thing as one of my remembrances. I became a citizen of this country in the bicentennial year, so it was a very auspicious occasion. The other thing I would, maybe put, would be my master’s degree, my certificate that I got from Rolla, Missouri, because that really helped me in my career. The only other thing I can think of would be the picture of me and my wife and the kids (sic) and the grandkids all together, so maybe somebody would someday remember this guy had all these kids.

AR: Let me pickup on the US citizenship, because you value freedom.

PI: Very much.

AR: And that is a concept which is very Zoroastrian – freedom. Along with freedom and choice, there comes…

PI: Responsibility.

AR: Exactly. What do you feel about that?

PI: Very important, and it should be. For example, a lot of times people talk about not paying taxes, or not respecting the system that we have. The only thing they need to do is go to other countries where there is no freedom of any kind, whether it is freedom of speech or thinking, religion or anything. I think that is one of the biggest things we are very fortunate to have in this country. I’m not saying that because you are interviewing me, but I feel that strongly. Way back, I don’t know where it was, but there was a group of people, and I spoke to them. One of the things I mentioned to them was that one of the things this government can do, is not bring the draft back, but fully pay the expenses for two years, for young people to live overseas and come back. Because that’s when they will start realizing how good they got it here, which many people don’t realize.

(0:35:00)

AR: Piloo, do you go over the speed limit?

PI: Yes, I do sometimes, but I have been a very strict law-abiding person. Sometimes I have speeded up and got caught, and all that. But, no, I believe in abiding and following the law, and it has helped me in my life to be a good, law-abiding, tax-paying citizen.
AR: Another thing that interests me, and which if you’d care to share, is your years in Syria, because Syria is a very interesting country for us, as Zoroastrians. You’ve lived in areas, where perhaps, you could give us some insight on that.

PI: In Damascus, Syria, we lived, but because I was the Drilling Manager, I had to go to the field, and the fields were to the east/northeast of there. Much to my surprise, I did not know where Syria was before I went there, really, I found out that there are people in Syria who still consider themselves Zoroastrians. They are known mostly by the name “Kurds/Kurdish”.

AR: Which area are you talking about – Palmyra, Aleppo? Which area?

PI: This is northwest of Aleppo, Syria. There are communities which I visited, and again, because of persecution of non-Islamic people in Islamic states, and I have to tell you that there is persecution, even today, by the Islamic fundamentalist government, these people did not come out and openly say, “We pray to Zoroaster”. A lot of them don’t even have a picture of Zoroaster in their house, and they can’t keep it because they are afraid they may be persecuted for that. But I found a very small village, a little farther from that village, there was a small cave, and there was a priest who went there everyday and lit up a small divo, you know a light, an oil lamp, to pray to the god and that was Zarathushtra, and this was inside a very small cave. The people of that village called themselves Zarathushti, but they did not know anything about Zoroastrianism. There is a place not too far from this village, a town called Afrin and there were a lot of followers of Zarathushtra there; but again they don’t know the religion as such. One of the things that me and my wife, when we go to these villages, we mention that we as Zoroastrians, do not smoke, and that came to them as a very big surprise; because most Middle East men smoke, and even ladies smoke. Before I left, it looks like a lot of the people in that village slowly cut down on their smoking. I could get that because one of my drivers was a Zoroastrian who told me [that], and they realized that they don’t know much about the religion, but if someone told them this, there has to be something about this. So, a lot of people cut down on the smoking as we said we don’t worship fire, but we don’t disrespect fire; so they understood that. Syria was an eye-opener to me; it’s not a dry desert, by the way. If you go to the northwest part of Syria, there are nice orchards, a lot of grapes and olives, they are on the Mediterranean coast.

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AR: They have the best-preserved cashews. You’re still in excellent health, you’re still working, what do you see yourself doing in the next few years?

PI: One thing right now is that oil is booming, and much unlike what we went through in the mid-eighties, there is a big demand for people of my background, particularly the operational background where you’ve actually done the thing. So the oil companies really need people like me, so I think this is a good opportunity for me to continue to work, make money, save money, and stay busy, mentally and physically. But it comes a time when one has to hang up, and retire, and I think once I retire I plan to do some
volunteer work, teaching in schools and colleges, not for any renumeration, but just to stay busy. My wife, in fact, right now, for the last 3-4 years, she works in two schools’ libraries. She doesn’t spend a lot of time, just to stay busy, you know. Another thing after I retire, I’ll be able to devote a little more time to ZAH center, if nothing else cleaning and mopping, changing light bulbs.

AR: One of the big components that we as Zoroastrians are associated with, is that we are very charitable-minded, and some of us like to announce our charity, and some of us are anonymous. I sort of have an inside track, so my question is what’s your philosophy on that?

PI: There are a couple of things to keep in mind. Let’s say that if I were to give a $100,000 donation to the ZAH, being a human person that I am, I’m going to go to the IRS and tell them, “Hey guys, I’ve made this donation, so I need a tax deduction for it.” I’m not that shy of that. But moreover, if you do something for others, you should not expect anything in return, even recognition. I see a lot of homeless people in downtown Houston, I’ve been working in downtown Houston since nearly ’84, in and out, and these people really need some help. So whenever I can I do give them whatever I can, without any reservation or anything. The same way, I think the small things you do, you don’t want to publicize it, but the major contributions you make, you should declare it so you get a break from Uncle Sam.

AR: All of these qualities are embedded, and they are good. Do you have any questions?

PM: No, I think you covered it well.

AR: Do you have anything else you’d like to tell us? What do you think about this oral history project?

PI: It’s good. You should pursue it. In many respects, we are doing good as Zoroastrians in this city, we are doing well. We need to stay together. As I said, there are some frictions, there are some orthodox people. I’m seeing a little bit of a change.

AR: A good kind of a change?

PI: Yes. A good change. I think the community will do very well. Aban, way back when I was in the Building Fund, one of the most respected or rich guys of this community told me, “What are you going to do if you build a Zoroastrian Center? All you’re going to do is get together on Navroze and Papeti time, and maybe Christmas. The thing is going to lie furloughed. Nobody is going to come there.” I told him at that time, “No, you are totally mistaken. You have to have a place where people can get together, and be with each other. Once you have that place, there are going to be a lot of people coming in, a lot of things are going to be happening, and you’ll be surprised.” He said, “Yeah you have some vision, but I don’t think that’s going to be feasible, anyway.”
AR: So the end of the story is that it is true.

PI: Yes, it is true. Once you have a place, people will do a whole lot of stuff, and we have been doing a whole lot of stuff over here. I wish I could be of more help, not monetarily, but physically, if I could assist. My work, I work a 9-hour day at age 74; it’s a little bit taxing, but I still manage.

AR: You don’t look that. So we thank you.

PI: You’re welcome.

AR: If there’s anything else that you’d want to say, because this is going to be recorded on file for generations to come.

PI: The only thing is that we should all work together, pull in the same direction, but never ever let go the basic principles of our religion – honesty, integrity, truthfulness, kindness to others, don’t expect anything in return when you do some kindness, be kind to others, whether they are from your own religion, or others, and be helpful to each other. That’s what I would say.

AR: Piloo, thank you very much for your time, and your observations, and we appreciate what you do for the community, and we recognize that.

PI: Thank you.

(0:47:05)
[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]