AR: Good morning Vehishta. We thank you for coming. And my name is Aban Rustomji. We have invited you to be part of our ZAH Oral History Program that is posted on the Rice University Woodson Archive section. We are very happy that you are here. And
YP: I'm Yasmin Pavri. I'm going to be your co-interviewer.
AR: And we would like to start off by you telling us your name and a little bit about your childhood.
VK: So my name is Vehishta Kaikobad, married to Sarosh Kaikibad and my maiden name was Vahishta Dotiwalla. I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, and I attended St. Joseph's Convent School where I graduated with a diploma from the University of Cambridge, England as an overseas student. I attended the St. Joseph's College for women and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Cambridge. I had the most beautiful years that anyone can recall both in school and growing up in my Parsi compound. So, uh, I uh, have a beautiful recollection of memories related to my, uh, my childhood with my Parsi friends playing downstairs. With them but also with my cosmopolitan friends who have been very dear to me since the years we were together. it also uh, taught me to be more um, accepting of cultures around me and I pursued as my extracurricular activities, I pursued art, even in my spare time, held little clubs to help the people in need. Um, enjoyed ballet, and...
AR: So Vehishta, tell us a little bit about the Parsi compound that you talk about in Karachi. What was that like, growing up?
VK: It was like a, it was like one big family. The doors opened in the morning and...
AR: And how many families lived in that compound? And was it a high-rise building? Just give us a little picture.
VK: If you consider three floors as a high rise then that’s what it was. The apartments or flats as we called them were rather large, they’d be comparable to townhomes right now. Or, at least condominiums. Not town homes but condominiums. And we kind of grew up, like I said as one large family. We were one of the few families that had a phone in our house so everybody would come over to use our phone. My mother was a social worker so we’d have a lot of problem people just coming in, walking into the door, at any time of day. So I just grew up, uh, meeting everybody and we became part and parcel of each others’ lives. So it was very comforting uh, feeling.
AR: So, you had a wonderful family life, you had a great educational background, what brought to America?
VK: Times were changing, after I got married, I realized that things were not what they were supposed to be or what we had envisioned them to be. We saw, even though my husband came from a land owning class, in his own right, he is a highly educated person and his potential was not really being met. Uh, at the same time, my brother who was based in Houston was inviting us over, but in the meantime my husband, Sarosh, got a call from the University of Milwaukee, and they wanted to sponsor him. So we took the opportunity and eventually landed up in the United States.

AR: Take one step back and tell us about your marriage. Because your husband, did he grow up in Pakistan? Was he from the same city and the same compound? Or, just give us a little information about that.

VK: Sarosh was born in Karachi but raised in Rawalpindi and Murree Hills at the foothills of the Himalayas. Uh, and we met in Karachi. I guess, when I saw him, I knew he was the one that I would spend my life with. So, (laughs). The first glimpse I knew even though I was in college.

AR: Who proposed to whom?

VK: Sarosh.

AR: (Laughs)

VK: He said he would wait two years until I finished college, but he went home and the next thing I know is, he calls me up and he says: "Will you marry me?" (laughs) so two years was..

AR: How romantic.

VK: But, I guess we are like soul mates and he uh, he has a lot to do with my later education and life so I owe a lot to him. And I lived in Pindi and Murree Hills for about thirteen years before moving to the United States.

AR: Ok, OK, So in Pindi, did you do your art work and your teaching and…

VK: I actually did some tutoring there for a Parsi family who could not afford a, any kind of monetary tutoring outside. And, to the point where one of the students ended up becoming a teacher. So it was a great satisfaction for me to realize that whatever help I could give to my community member was proved to be fruitful.

AR: Ok, so fast forward to coming to the US. How emotional was it to leave your family behind, I mean, did your mother and father, were they upset that both kids were gone?

VK: Actually my mother passed away in 1980 and uh, after that, uh, she had a thriving business – embroidery business. I continued with that business for three years, helped my father out. My father was an eighth army veteran from World War II and he had lost his hearing in the war. So, I helped him out although he was always highly independent. And I continued the business for another three years. And then eventually in 1983 when we moved here, uh, it was, we did not anticipate, making the move so fast. It just happened. And, one thing led to another. I actually met this little black girl who became my, who IS at this point my godchild. Uh, who wanted to learn how to wear a sudra-kusti (laughs), but I guess we just encouraged to follow her own faith. …she is a Christian. But a..

AR: How did you meet this girl and…

VK: I just saw an ad in the local neighborhood newspaper. At that time I was pursuing my Montessori training. And since I was, uh, studying at home, I needed some monetary uh, you know

AR: Help.

VK: Help. I took on the little baby-sitting job. It didn’t end up being baby-sitting because the baby taught me how to conduct myself. So it really ended up to be a much, much closer bond and up to this day the family and I are very, very closely connected. But emotionally it was, we did have our hearts back home, we did not burn our bridges so to speak. But things happened which were not going to be beneficial for us to go back there. Uh, my husband was deprived of his property, of his monetary um, inheritance. And we had nothing to look forward to going back there. We did visit because of my father-in-law being there, my father in the mean time had made it into the States so from my, for me, that was a saving grace because my father was already here. My brother was here. But for my husband, he still had part of his family there and it was only his father that he really wanted to go back and meet because his other siblings did not take our transition to United States very gracefully.

AR: Um, um.
VK: So, eventually, sorry go ahead. Eventually we began to understand why it was important for us to just stay on and, uh, everybody uh, you know, uh, started getting back with each other and have a nice happy relationship.

AR: So you know, this is very interesting facet that you sort of adopted this black child and the child, you know, took to you. Was there any, any, shade of discrimination of any sort or did you ever feel that people said: What is this woman coming from another country coming up and you know, doing something with the black community, leave alone. It's one thing to have with the mainstream and there's another thing. So can you tell us – is there anything you need to share about that?

VK: What is interesting is that the child's family embraced us whole-heartedly and not just Sarosh and me but also my brother Kaemerz and his wife and his family as it grew. So we were always part and parcel of their family. Uh, for strangers though, sometimes we would get these stares from some orthodox black people when they saw Sarosh and me walking with this little girl between our, you know, holding our hands. But on the whole we were treated very respectfully by the black community. And anyone else who happened to be connected with their family.

AR: Did the Zoroastrian community know about this?

VK: Some of them did. Actually I would bring Blair with me to some of our uh, practices for kids and she'd sit and watch everything. In fact, she did a little presentation at one of our Zoroastrian Sunday schools. And she always grew up knowing about Zoroastrians and she uh, even when she was just about nine or ten, she spoke very beautifully and that was the time when Dr. Hinnels was here. And we had a little a little community get-together at the clubhouse at Arnavaz's Missouri City area. That's when Blair was invited to speak and she spoke beautifully. And she has always held Zoroastrians in great esteem.

AR: So, um, you seem to have fit in with the lifestyle. Were there any little wrinkles, did you have any problems?

VK: The only problem I ever encountered was the antagonism from back home.

AR and VK: (Laugh)

VK: I have found the American community very accepting, uh, very respectful, very honest, and that's what I appreciate most about interacting with the community at large over here.

AR: So tell us a little bit about all your undertakings here over the years. You've been active with the Zoroastrian community, and you do Sunday School, you're a fine arts, member of the museum and the Asia Society and it seems every place there is an art oriented thing you are involved, so how do you get there and how do you have so much patience with little kids. So just tell us little bit about that.

VK: One word: Passion and commitment. So (laugh). But, uh, it just happens, Aban. Uh, uh, I started here with my Montessori education, but my mother, uh, because her business was art based, she did exclusive embroidery business, I actually grew up looking at how, in the morning when I woke up I saw her sitting and creating beautiful patterns and art work. So, I just kind of got this, I absorbed it from my own childhood. And I guess I had the inclination towards art because I took art as a subject for Cambridge, which was no easy job. Art, if anyone wants to pursue art as a subject, they have to work as hard as they would for math or science. So I had to spend endless hours ...

AR: So when I did my Cambridge tests, final exams went all the way to England, there was the Suez crisis and our results weren't out for so many years. Did you experience that too? I mean.... later on did it go to England too?

VK: It did, it did. And in fact the only situation we had was with our Geography papers because ours maps were so accurate that the examiners couldn't believe that ...(laugh).

AR: The changes had taken place.

VK: Yes. But no, actually so, having art as one of my subjects helped me because I integrated my entire Montessori curriculum based on art. To the point where I became the curriculum coordinator of the school I worked for. And I taught art over there as well. I did several workshops for the Montessori community at large ending up as a mentor teacher for them with the Houston Montessori Center. I started showing an interest in the museum as a Montessorian. And eventually I ended up being a docent, from there I moved on to being a senior docent and in the meantime there was an opening, well there were, they created an opening and they created a position to integrate me into their family programs. So thanks to one of their directors, who was
passionate about Montessori, she just came over and visited the classroom and before she
left that day, she just offered me a position there. (Laugh). I did not …
AR: You have received some awards even haven’t you, from the Fine Arts Museum(?), tell us
about that.
VK: I got the Spiro Martell Foundation Award for docent of the year, I guess it was two thousand
and one or later, maybe 2006. I am not sure of which year. But, it was an honor, truly an honor, I
did not expect it. Uh, I was very sick when they told me that I had to attend, uh, a lunch. And
somehow I made myself go and I, it was a total suprise
AR: Oh, ho, how wonderful. So you know you’re so talented and you fit in so well, how do you
identify yourself? Do you identify yourself as a Parsi, a Zoroastrian, a Pakistani, an American? If
somebody were to ask you that question what is your identity what would the first thing that come
to your mind?
VK: Zoroastrian. I’m a Zoroastrian first, and at this point, American second. I have fond
memories of Pakistan but with the way things are back home I’m not very comfortable about
stepping forward and saying I’m a Pakistani. Which is unfortunate. I wish I could do that. So
sometimes if people say: “Are you from India?” I always tell them I’m from Karachi, which is in
Pakistan, but sometimes they identify me as an Indian and I just leave it at that. (laugh).So..
AR: So, uh, fond of Zoroastrianism and passionate as you are about that, what is the one
principle or tradition that means the most to you? And how is it that you convey it? There are a
whole lot of principles, of course. How do you convey this through your Sunday School kids?
VK: I believe in nurturing the spirit of the child. By nurturing it the way I know best through some
Zoroastrian doctrines but also some, keeping in mind the universality of things. So to me the
element of respect, and, I don’t want to use the word tolerance because I feel tolerance always
has a little edge to it. So, I feel that showing respect being so my whole aim is to help the child
and the families feel strongly about their faith. Uh, to imbibe the basic tenets. So that they can
pass it on a daily basis to the students – to the children. Just once a month is not enough. But
they should feel so good about who they are that they can be strong Zoroastrians without, uh,
without looking down on others, always being very respectful and very open to what other faiths
have to offer. And, also, sticking by traditions because that always helps in building up that little
ethnicity or ethnic pride. Uh, and learning about the hidden history. My goodness that is so
important that not even our community members know about. My whole uh, motive(?), and my
whole passion is to educate our community members not just the kids. But teach them about
how much we have passed down historically to the world at large. And how much of it, how much
of it is hidden. How much of it we need to study about and let the world know about.
AR: First I want to ask you, you talked about the important principles so if you were to just, off the
bat, name a few principles, what would those be, and then secondly, I want to touch back on you
have so much wealth on the history, hidden history so are you talking about both these things a little more in detail.
VK: When I say principles it’s simply just following a daily routine. Uh, I definitely believe in
wearing a sudro-kasti, and I feel once the child’s navjote is done, they should pursue that. The
parents should be a good role model for that, you know. They should be good role models. And,
just following basic things of doing a divo (oil lamp) for example, making sev (vermicelli) and ravo
(semolina) on a good occasion. And following the basic tenets of Good Thoughts, Good Words,
Good Deeds. Trying to keep up with our traditions of Jashans and prayers. Um, going back and
learning at the knees of our elders. Following through with some of the back home traditions I
feel would be enough for someone to just follow without getting too caught up in going to any kind
of extremes. And if this can be pursued by families by Zoroastrian families at large then the
children will naturally get ingrained with that.
AR: So does it bother you that children out here that they may grow up with different sets of rules
and social customs, who have never been home and never followed the rituals? Does that bother
you?
VK: It doesn’t bother me, but I’m very hopeful that they will learn it at some point. So for me the
glass is always half full. So, I love the kids who are here, I have the greatest respect and a lot of
hope that they will always follow their Zoroastrian …. Whichever way they see their principles, I
always hope they are good Zoroastrians and pursuing what has come down to them through their
families.
AR: So let's go back to the hidden history part now. Tell me a little bit about that.
VK: For that I have to thank the museum. Um, I started researching, I conduct a lot of workshops so I started researching on bringing China into the classroom. And starting with China I discovered the Silk Road. That became my greatest guiding force, and I realized how much there was for us to discover. Uh, up to this day I continue doing multiple workshops on the Silk Road, and um, the more I discover the more I realize how much we have to pass on. And I would like to share that knowledge with our children, with our adults with our youth, and because just learning about our heritage develops that sense of pride as a Zoroastrian. So, for me, more than the uh, religious part which I guess is naturally ingrained in me through my family, for me, uh, what I would love to do is just develop cultural pride. And that alone fits into the American agenda of identity. For me that's how I guess we can make it happen.
AR: Have you ever thought of writing a little manual or something for other Sunday School teachers to follow or
VK: I've been asked several times because I made a little booklet on, I've based all my Sunday School teaching based on the Montessori method. So I actually have had hands on material. And over the years I have been asked to put it together in a booklet form. I've just not had the time to do that. But hopefully I will at some point.
AR: Vehishta if you were asked to put three things in a time capsule that was to be opened say fifty years from now what three things would you think of?
VK: Uh
AR: To represent, in remembrance of yourself, you know. Three important things that people would like to know fifty years from now.
VK: About myself? Or
AR: About yourself. Or for your work or whatever you know.
VK: Continue uh, being an asset to the community, continue being good Zoroastrians I guess. Continue being good human beings with a lot of respect for everybody around you. Do not go to any extremes, uh and uh, just keep educating yourself through history. And you will see
AR: And art.
VK: And art. Oh yes absolutely.
AR: So do you, you know there are people that say that the future of Zoroastrianism is bleak and some say no it's not bleak. What, what is your take on it?
VK: As I said, I always see the glass as half full so, for me as long as the parents can provide(?) continuity, and therefore I throw the responsibility directly at parents. And I firmly believe that if parents can continue just practicing their faith in whatever way possible they feel it's convenient and practical. That alone will create a uni... That alone will lead on the continuity. It should be done in small ways. I don't believe in doing, you know just proclaiming things, and saying we should do this or that. I just feel just take one step at a time, start in a small simple way, and on daily basis. And if each family continues to practice their Zoroastrian life style, the Iranian life style, the Parsi lifestyle, uh, it's just, you can just put together a whole larger picture based on these little small parts. And I feel continuity would be there. Maybe I'm being too idealistic, but (laughs)
AR: Are there any other any other things you would like to share with us? Any important facets or
VK: I would, I would
AR: Any words of wisdom?
VK: I would like our youth, I would like our, our community at large to continue with their traditions. I feel traditions are important I would like the young parents to be able to pass on the Zoroastrian traditions to the children besides what we do at Sunday School. And I would like children and parents to be educated about the wealth of uh, uh, history hat we, that we have. So that we can pass on, and to be proud of who we are. Religious pride will take care of everything else.
AR: Yasmin, do you have any questions for Vehishta?
YP: I just wonder how you have the time to do everything that you do? (Laugh). Do you ever sleep?
VK: I get by with five hours and I'm happy. (laugh).
YP: That's' wonderful.
VK: Passion and commitment. For me it’s a cause. It’s a sense of devotion. Uh, so when you’re passionate about something, when you’re motivated and when that devotion that intrinsic devotional element is involved, all time is available.
YP: That’s wonderful.
AR: Ya. Well, Vehishta we thank you very much and we really appreciate all your candid opinions and we know that the community really values you.
VK: Thank you
AR: And please continue carrying on all your good work.
VK: Thank you.
YP: Thank you,