

Gabriella Roostaie

“Giving Up Was Not an Option”

Interviewer: Gabriella Roostaie

Interviewee: M (Anonymous)

M is a 50-year-old middle class professional, an Iranian immigrant. He owns two real estate offices and runs a management company as well. He is a father to two children. M was forced to flee Iran when he was 14 years old because of his mother’s fear of him being drafted and ultimately killed in the Iran-Iraq war. Already emotionally scarred by the war horrors, M was sent off to Germany with hardly anything to his name. While there, he was forced to adapt and live for years in a land, language, and culture he had no prior knowledge of before he was able to come to America. I spoke with M about this incredible transition, the stress weighing on him at the time, and the pain of never being able to return to his home country.

Interview:

GR- Describe to me your life in Iran, along with some special cultural traditions that you reminisce about happening there.

M- I enjoyed going to all of my family gatherings. Every Thursday night all of my aunts and uncles would come over and I would get to spend special time with my whole extended family, cousins too. I miss the close family time I used to have with all forty or so of my family members, and we all used to sleep over on Thursday nights, too. My family would pull out many mattresses so everyone had a comfortable place to sleep. Us kids never really slept because we would stay up playing all night. In Iran houses usually had plenty of bedrooms as well. Even the poor had multiple bedrooms in their homes.

Every morning I remember being forced, rain or shine, to get up and buy fresh bread for my dad from our local bakery. I was so tired and wanted to sleep in but as the boy in the house, I was the one to get up at 5:30 am to get the bread. I also really miss my after school activities. As soon as I did my homework, I could go outside to the basketball courts with my friends and we played basketball and soccer everyday for hours. There was a little sandwich shop around the corner and me and my friend Hassan would split a sandwich. Then, if we were lucky and the weather was good, we could jump on our bikes and play on those. Usually, my friend Romseen’s mother would come outside and call us to come inside for supper.

GR- Please describe some of the war horrors you witnessed in Iran.

M- There was a circle two blocks from my house called “Second Circle”. It was very close to the most well-known monument in Iran, Shahyad, near the airport. Every week, they were bringing truckloads of dead soldiers’ bodies, in dump trucks, and they would open the back and bodies would all roll out on top of each other. They would give us face masks so we could dig through the body piles to identify our family members in

order to take them and give them proper burials. I remember having to do this for other families who were unable, and I remember the horror of identifying four of my own cousins and an uncle.

The other horror was during the revolution, which was prior to this event. I remember seeing about twenty college students rush outside shouting and making crazy noises. And then all of a sudden we saw two military trucks pull over and soldiers come out warning the students to cease their protests. The students did not stop and the soldiers then pulled out machine guns and shot them down right in front of me. I had to duck low to the street in order not to be shot. The water from the stream next to me began to become red with their blood. When I was able to get up, my entire body was covered in their blood. I was thirteen years old. I was so scared I literally did not move for over two hours until people started coming to remove the bodies, since the soldiers would just leave them there once they were done.

Last one, and this is not a war horror, I was once visiting my grandfather, my mom's father, in a state of Kurdistan. I had a step-uncle who was two months older than me. My grandfather used to be a sergeant for the police department. There was a lot of tobacco and arms smuggling in this area. The borders were being monitored for this reason, and the terrain was very mountainous. After we had our breakfast, my uncle and I would walk to the police department to visit our grandfather, who would wake up by 4 a.m. to do his interrogations. He would take us both to an ice cream shop next door. We would do this every day in this small, poor town. Hardly anyone here had cars, everyone rode on busses. The son of the mayor had a very beautiful bike, he was slightly older than us. We used to see him sometimes in the morning biking around and ringing this little bell he had on the bike, and it sounded really nice. My uncle and I were always jealous of him. One day we were going up a tall hill while walking our normal route to the police station, and we saw the mayor's son holding on to the side of a dump truck going up the road. One hand was on his bike and the other on a bar on the dump truck, which was pulling him. Once the truck started going downhill, it began gaining speed. We saw it coming down, and it was going really, really fast. All of a sudden, he came to the bottom of the hill. He applied the break quickly, and the mayor's son lost control and his head hit the back of the truck with a vicious force. I don't want to describe this, but his entire skull came off his head and his whole head came off. His brain was all over the road, and only his skin was hanging from his neck. Picturing it now brings me back to all the years after that this image haunted me.

GR- Describe the time when you first found out you had to leave on your own and travel to a foreign country. What were your feelings?

M- I was not even fifteen yet. I had to leave my country before my fifteenth birthday because the government would not let any boys above fifteen leave the country since it would exempt them from the draft for the war. My mom was the strongest force in this, because she would not allow me to be drafted, since my first cousin Ali was just killed in war. My brother was already studying in the U.S. for two years. I left in 1979. My mom wanted me to leave because she did not want me serving in an army without a purpose, since she didn't believe in the war that was happening. I felt very confused. I was too

young and worried about “what do I do?” I had only been outside of my country once, but for a very short time. My worst worry was the difficulty of language barriers.

GR- What did you know about Germany prior to this?

M- I knew nothing of Germany. I only knew BMW came from there. (Laughs). Back then Germany was divided into West Germany and East Germany.

GR- Tell me about the moment you arrived in Germany. What were you feeling? How was your assimilation into Germanic culture? Did you feel like you “fit in”?

M- I ended up in a city called Hamburg. I didn’t really feel anything. I was anxious and uncertain about what was lying in front of me. I was brave and I was never scared or homesick. I missed my family, but I didn’t miss my home. No, I did not feel like I fit into German culture. The Germans were very dry and not very welcoming, very secluded. I only felt like Germany was a “pit stop” for me, since I was only supposed to be there for one week until I got my student visa to go to the United States and be united with my brother.

GR- What events happened to you in Germany? How did they make you feel? How were you able to cope with these? Confronting this sense of hopelessness, what made you want to continue?

M- Due to the hostage crisis at the time, the U.S. was on the defense and did not honor any of their regular policies toward Iranian applicants. I was forced to stay in Germany for almost three years. My father thought that our family friend who lived there would help me out, but he abandoned me. He dropped me off at a motel, like a hostel. I became extremely sad, because it was so unexpected. I thought he was going to welcome me into his home and show me around this new country, but no one ever did. I could not find a way to cope with this at first. I called my parents back home to let them know I was there. I cried for a long time on the phone with them, telling them I had no idea what to do. The will I had and the fact that I did not want to return to Iran helped me to continue. I saw no future for myself back home and I knew it was unsafe and unstable for me to be in Iran.

I grew up so fast. By age 15 I had the experience of someone who is 30. I had to grow fast. I knew that wherever I was heading would be worth it because I could never turn back anyway. I was kind of forced to cope with what was happening to me, because I felt that giving up was not an option. I was rejected from the U.S. embassy three times, and had to wait years before I could reapply. I had no money and was working so hard just to live where I was. At one point I was surviving on a single sack of potatoes for a week. I worked in the church. I was unable to afford the hostel anymore, and someone I knew told me that this church would take in students. I cleaned the floors and washed the dishes and toilets in order to earn my stay.

GR- When you were finally able to leave and come to the United States, how did you feel? What did you do when you found out?

M- When I realized that I was finally able to get my visa, I was extremely happy. I couldn't wait to pack up and leave. I made a phone call to my family to let them know the good news. They secured me a ticket to Boston, MA. I took the first plane to Boston, with my few belongings. When I arrived to the U.S., I was so happy and could not wait to start a new life here.

GR- After coming here, how did you find a way to live through what had happened to you?

M- I always stayed positive. I had a vision of what kind of a life I wanted to have. Living on my own at such a young age gave me the ability to shovel my feelings around and I literally put my feelings in a storage bank in the back of my memory. From time to time, I sit down and experience a flashback. I think about it, and I realize what I have been through and I am thankful for where I am now.

GR- Do you feel like this experience changed you? If so, how and what changed you?

M- Of course it has. Of course those experiences have changed me. I think wiser on everything that I do. My survival mechanisms are very different than people the same age as me. My reactions are totally different. I always have a smile on my face because I know how hard life can be and I appreciate these moments of happiness even more.