

Interview with Towfig Arjmand

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Interviewer: Susan Crowe

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Crowe: This is Susan Crowe at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, August 2, 2010. I am interviewing Dr. Towfig Arjmand, who immigrated to the United States from Iran. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's Immigrant Stories project. The first question I have is where were you born, and what were your parents' backgrounds?

Arjmand: I was born in Iran, in the western part of the country, the province of Kermanshah, which is not too far from the Iraqi border. My mother was a housewife. My father had a position at the British Consular in Kermanshah. The fact that he knew English...He studied English in school, and he was hired [in] the early part of his age. He stayed with that position for many years.

I had my grammar school, elementary school and high school. Up to the end of the high school, I spent the time in Kermanshah. The primary school was a well-known institution on Alliance Israélite. This is a non-governmental institution, which was started in the 18th century in France. Their purpose was to educate the minority in North Africa, in Middle-East, since France had a great deal of colony in North Africa. The school extends to Iran, Iraq.

The first organized school in my city of Kermanshah was Alliance, Alliance Israélite. This school provided up to the ninth grade, middle high school. Teachers used to be local teacher that they were hired by the Alliance, but they were sent [a] principal, director. [He] originally used to come from France or perhaps, later on, from Lebanon. They did a good job, because they

were able to teach the local people a foreign language. French was the language. In fact, my father graduated from that school, and he had some background in French. Later on, on his own, he learned English.

After the middle high school, I went to the public high school, which was provided by [the] Ministry of Education in Iran. I had three years of school there and then to Tehran to medical school. I finished high school by 1948.

In order to get to the university or any type [of school], you had to take an entrance examination. I was fortunate enough that I was accepted into the medical school. The pre-med and med school, as we have it in this country, are combined. In other words, there was no college and then after that, university. The program was together, pre-med and medical school, an total of six years. After that they would give a degree in medical degree.

Crowe: Did you have any siblings?

Arjmand: I had five. We were three brothers and three sisters. Out of the six of us, I have lost two sisters, my oldest sisters. One [was] lost in California; she lived in Berkeley area with her family. She was passed in 2009. My second sister, she passed about eight years ago. She was in Montreal; she migrated to Montreal.

Of course, you might ask, why in such a different area[s], in California and Montreal and Springfield and some other siblings that I have in Los Angeles, California? The revolution of Iran changed the picture quite a bit for a good number of people, including my immediate family. It did not affect me personally, because I had come to the United State in 1956, some fifty-four years ago.

Crowe: What was Iran [pronouncing the word with a long "I"] like when you were growing up?

Arjmand: During the time that I was growing up, Iran—we called it Iran [said with a short "I"]—was ruled by a constitutional monarchy, the shah. He was the ruler. Of course, we had the constitution, which was established after the revolution that they had at the beginning of the 20th century. The constitution was quite a copy of the British. But unfortunately the style is this that the monarch would interfere, would influence the election and so forth. That lasted until 1941.

In 1941, it was necessary for the Allied, British and Soviet Union, to supply arm[s] to Russia, to Soviet Union, after the invasion of the Nazi Germany of Soviet Union. Iran, their geographic position was such that they have to have transit through Iran, because, as you know, the shipment of the arms, ammunition, supply from the United State would have been very difficult through Atlantic to the North Seas because of the German submarines. To [the] Mediterranean Sea, [it was] the same situation, and from the Far East would have been difficult.

So, [the] Persian Gulf became a very convenient route for the supply of arms and ammunition coming from the United State to the top of the Persian Gulf, [using] Iranian transit trade and [the] regular road[s] to supply Iran, to supply Soviet Union with the arm[s].

We were invaded by the Soviets in the north and the British from Iraq, and the country was occupied during the war by the two powers. The United State, later on, they also being occupied a part of Iran. The constitution was at hold, and they had the Tehran Conference. That was the first time [Joseph] Stalin had left Soviet Union. [Winston] Churchill and President [Franklin] Roosevelt, they had a conference in Tehran. At that conference, of course, this was a strategic conference in regard to the war, the development, the second front and so forth. In the meantime, [it was] a gesture to Iranian monarchy that they would leave Iran six months after the war is ended.

As we know, the war was ended in 1945. The British and the United State left country, but the Soviet Union, they created some situation that they didn't want to leave. One province of Iran, which is north of Iran, province of Azerbaijan, they declared themselves independent, which, of course, it was the Soviet intrigue. They wanted to separate Azerbaijan from Iran. As you know, there is another republic of Soviet Union at that time called Azerbaijan, so there were Soviet Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan. At any rate, the issue came to the United Nation[s] and eventually the Soviet Union left Azerbaijan, and the Iranian country became whole; they didn't lose any territory.

The shah ran the country with some resemblance to democracy. We had election[s]; we had parliament and so forth. Iran almost had a situation with the oil industry. The oil industry was a monopoly of the British. Unfortunately the British interests always dictate their interest, not only for the oil, also for the protection of the biggest colony they had, which was India. This is prior to independence of India and Pakistan. As you know, up to 1948, India was a colonial possession of Great Britain.

Russia always had something to say about the policy in Iran, either directly or indirectly. This probably goes back even to the time of the tsar, the Russian tsar. They created a sphere of influence for themselves. The south of Iran was a sphere of interest for Britain; the north was a sphere of interest for the tsar, Russian tsar.

But the revolution of 1917 changed that picture. The Soviet [Union] was created. They had no colonial ambition, and Iran had a period of more or less [being] left alone. But the oil issue was always something that created problem for the government, for the people, until [the] Iranian people, they decided to nationalize the oil industry. In other words, they took the concession from the British and made the national interest for themselves.

The British, they didn't like that. The issue came to the United Nation Security Council. There was a prime minister, which was well-respected, well accepted by the people, by the name of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh; he was a nationalist. He was well-liked, and he was not willing or able to come to some kind of agreement with the British. The British, they pulled out, but they never stopped their intrigue. They were finally able to convince the United State administration that Mosaddegh is a communist, is a socialist.

Of course, in the United State we had such a fear of socialism and communism, finally to a point that, unfortunately, United State became directly involved and created a coup by [the] CIA. The coup was able to eliminate Mosaddegh. A general became prime minister, and [the] concession of oil was divided among the outside interests.

From 1953, things were totally changed. The shah became extremely powerful and power hungry, in spite of the fact that there was a constitution. He disregarded that, and American, they increased their interests. They sold a great deal of arm[s] to Iran, and there was some unhappiness in Iranian. Of course, the clergy, the fundamentalist religion, they took advantage of the dissatisfaction of the people.

It came to a head in the late '70s, and the charismatic head of religion, Ayatollah Khomeini, he took power. From then on, of course, the fundamental, they wrote a new constitution; they created a theocracy. We have a parliament. This parliament is a number [of men] that they are elected by the people, but the supreme power is the hands of the clergy.

Crowe: How was your life in Iran affected by the shah's power?

Arjmand: Well, I wasn't there. I came to United State in '56. At that time, the shah was very popular at the beginning, but then, unfortunately, people were unhappy. Things were making great deal of changes. The gap was getting bigger and deeper. There were lot of corruption. That was one reason of the people being unhappy.

Finally, it came to a point that in 1978 and '79 that finally [the] shah left. I was not in Iran at that time. My family were there, and things were changed after the fundamentalists came to power. A number of my family, they felt that the attitude of these fundamentalists to the minority would not be as friendly, so they left Iran.

Crowe: Why did you decide to immigrate to America?

Arjmand: I decided to come to United State after I finished my medical school. At that time, I planned to specialize in some field, because [of the state of] medical facilities in Iran. It was adequate to a point of getting medical degree, but was limited in regard to [becoming] a specializing in certain field.

I came to United State and then decided to specialize in anesthesiology. I went to University of Illinois in Chicago and spent two years and some more study. Finally [I] became a specialist in anesthesiology. Opportunity came at the St. John[s] Hospital in Springfield. [They] were looking for a second anesthesiologist. I joined him [the first anesthesiologist]. Two of us, we practice anesthesiology at St. John Hospital. I spent over thirty years at St. John.



Dr. Towfig Arjmand, Senior Anesthesiologist at St. John's Hospital

Crowe: Wow! Where did you first live when you came to the U.S.?

Arjmand: [When] I first came to United State, the city of Chicago was the first city that I came to.

Crowe: Did you stay with friends or relatives who had already immigrated?

Arjmand: No, I stayed at the facility that the hospital would provide. The hospital had what they called interns' quarter[s], residents' quarter, and I lived there at the hospital.

Crowe: What was the most difficult aspect of becoming acclimated to the U.S. culture?

Arjmand: I would say I was not affected a great deal. Of course, get[ting] used to the food, the culture and all that, it takes a little bit of time. But it did not affect me very much. I was able to adapt very easily.

Crowe: How would you compare the living conditions here with those in Iran?

Arjmand: I don't think I could be a judge in that regard, because when I was in Iran I was a student, and I had a relatively protected life. But I came to United State, it was totally different. I was on my own, and I have to make decisions for my own and so forth. I would imagine it would be very difficult to make comparison.

Crowe: Do you have family members who still live in Iran?

Arjmand: I don't. I don't. They all either passed away, or they left. My siblings, they came to United State; my father passed away in the '60s. Of course, he did not see the change of the government. My mother also came to United State after the revolution, and she lived in California for a number of years.

Crowe: Where in California?

Arjmand: In the north, northern California, the Oakland-Berkeley area, because I had two sisters that they lived in Berkeley. [Based on] the fact that their children were at school there, my mother decided that she wants to be close to her daughters.

Crowe: What was the naturalization process like for you?

Arjmand: For me it was no big deal, no big problem. There was some study, which was relatively easy for me. Naturalization process was quite smooth. At that time, I was in Springfield, and my friend, they give a little party and invited a few other friends in honor of my naturalization. I was very pleased.

Crowe: Were you married when you came over?

Arjmand: No, I was not; I was not married. I was single.

Crowe: Did you experience any restrictions as an immigrant?

Arjmand: Well, I have to elaborate on this a little bit, because when I came to the United State, I was not a immigrant. At that time, the State Department used to issue visa to the student; they called it exchange student. It was a limited time. It was supposed to be for the benefit of the foreigner that the United State would like them to come to the State[s] and be exposed to the United State and learn American ways and so forth, and learn American school, American knowledge and go back to their home. But I decided to stay. It was very not a difficult decision. I said, "Well, I really like it here, and I would like to stay."

Crowe: Before you came to the U.S. had you had any opportunities to travel outside of Iran?

Arjmand: Outside of Iran, no, no. I [had] never been outside of Iran until the time I came to the United State. But travel inside the country... The country [Iran] is quite large and has a great deal of historical places. The culture and the history of Iran is quite old, something like 2,000 or 3,000 years old—

Crowe: Wow.

Arjmand: And, of course, during this period of time, it makes it very, very difficult history lesson for us as a student, because of the centuries of change of government, change of system, change of everything. In fact, Iran, at the beginning that I knew of, they were follower[s] of a religion by the name of Zoroastrian[ism].

Crowe: I've heard of that.

Arjmand: Zoroastrian is a monotheistic, believing in a single god and was dominant in Iran. And Iran was also quite larger than what it is now. For instance, part of Afghanistan, part of Iraq, Arabia and so forth, they were part of Iran.

Zoroastrian was the religion of the country until the Islam invasion of Iran, which occurred some 1,400 years ago.

At that time, the dynasty was defeated, and Islam was introduced to the Iranian people. The majority of Iranian[s], they accepted Islam, and they became [Muslim] ever since. But a great many of them, they did not, and they moved out to India. The remnant of those Zoroastrian that migrated from Iran to India, they are still there in India. They did not accepted the new religion, and they became a minority in India. They call them Parsi; these are the Parsi.¹

Crowe: Parsi.

Arjmand: Yeah, because their origin was from Iran.

Crowe: Were there any organizations, besides the university, that helped you settle in the U.S.?

Arjmand: No. No, it was then purely on my own to apply to the hospital, different hospital[s] in the United State. This was the time that the United State, they were short of manpower for the facility. There were many new hospitals being built in this country after the war. The famil[ies] were expanding and so forth. The number of the physician that they were being introduced, they were not enough. So, therefore, they needed foreign doctor to come in and help with the manpower.

Crowe: Have any religious affiliations played a role in helping you in the U.S.?

Arjmand: No. No, I don't think so.

Crowe: I guess the last few questions I have are, how would you identify yourself now, as both Iranian and American, or one or the other?

Arjmand: I identify myself purely as American. After all, it is a lifetime that I have been in the United State. I know, I hope I do, know the country. I have opportunity to travel in the country. I know the culture of the country. I know the politics of the country. I think I consider myself American. But I will never forget the fact that I am still Iranian, because my mother-tongue is Persian. I still like their literature; I still like their music, so this won't change.

Crowe: You have children, yes?

Arjmand: I do.

Crowe: How do your children view their heritage?

¹ The Parsi, also spelled Parsee, are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who immigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. The name means "Persians."

Arjmand: They're American; they're American. Of course, they're fully aware of me being from different culture. But I hope they accept me.

Crowe: What are your hopes for your descendants here?

Arjmand: To be happy and fruitful and happy...successful.

Crowe: What has been the most rewarding part of living in the U.S.?

Arjmand: The most rewarding is really the freedom, the freedom of speech, freedom of expression. And you don't have to be concerned about any organization watching you, looking over your shoulder. As long as you commit yourself to what you are doing and you do it well, that is the most rewarding aspect.

Crowe: Do you have anything else you'd like to add here today?

Arjmand: I, really don't. I'm very pleased to be able to express my feelings, and I'm very pleased that I have met you and was able to help in any way I could for the library.

Crowe: We appreciate you being willing to have an interview here today, and I wish you the best of luck. Thank you so much.

Arjmand: Thank you. Thank you indeed.

(end of transcript #1)