

[00:00:00] **Madoris:** Alright. So, tell me a little bit about yourself. What's your name? Anything that you would like for me to know about yourself?

[00:00:10] **Maya:** My name is Maya Hassan. I'm forty-seven years old. I've been living here in Ulster County for about twenty-four years now. I'm a single mom of three teenagers and I work at Kingston High School.

[00:00:28] **Madoris:** That's nice to know. And where did you live before you came to America?

[00:00:34] **Maya:** I lived in Riga Latvia, which is really good as a capital of Latvia, which is in the Baltic States. A lot of people ask where it is. It's a tiny country of two million people. We're bordering Poland and Russia, you know - over there.

[00:00:52] **Madoris:** And did you live somewhere else before living in the U.S. and your home country?

[00:01:00] **Maya:** I was involved in a church for a while. So, I had an opportunity to travel with the church and stay for like three, four months in different countries. I've been to France for about three months, lived in Finland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, visited many other countries, but not really for a long, long time.

[00:01:23] **Madoris:** Wow, that's amazing. And did you come by yourself to America? Did you come with someone else?

[00:01:32] **Maya:** I came by myself as a student, but also at the same time, my future husband to be also came to study as a student from a different country. So I kind of came alone, but with someone for future.

[00:01:50] **Madoris:** And when did you come to Kingston?

[00:01:53] **Maya:** I came actually to Berrytown, which is right across - it's near Bard College over there. So that's where [00:02:00] I landed. And that's where I spend about four years for my master's degree at first.

[00:02:07] **Madoris:** Where did you learn your master's degree?

[00:02:09] **Maya:** At the Interdenominational Seminary - a unification theological seminary.

[00:02:15] **Madoris:** And why did you pick this place out of all the...

[00:02:19] **Maya:** I didn't pick it, it was kind of - the church I was involved with gave me a half tuition scholarship and I was able to get like a student visa to come to this particular - because they own the seminary. So that's how I landed here. That was the only option.

[00:02:37] **Madoris:** Well, we have similar stories. I came to Bard because of that too.

[00:02:40] **Maya:** I was going to Bard for the Atlantic Alliance so we could use the gym and the pool [laughs].

[00:02:47] **Madoris:** Oh, wow. And what was your first impression of Kingston? What did you think when you saw it first?

[00:02:51] **Maya:** Actually, Kingston reminded me so much of Riga, which is where I'm from because of the historical buildings and the architecture and [00:03:00], you know, parks and stuff. And it's not such a huge city - Riga is also kind of a small, it's like a million people city, but it has a very relaxed feel to it. So... Kingston is just like very, very cool - with all the artists and just very nice. Nice hiking trails around. And I just feel very much at home here for some reason.

[00:03:25] **Madoris:** Wow, amazing. When you came to Kingston - I know that you said that the environment was nice, that it reminded you of home - were there any organizations, anything that you joined in the community that made you feel more at home or helped?

[00:03:43] **Maya:** Well honestly, when you come as a student - and I came with one hundred dollars in my pocket and no other resources or people that they knew of - your pretty much stuck on campus. I couldn't really go out too much, unless we were riding a bicycle to Red Hook to get some DVD [00:04:00]... Uh, no, at that point it was video tapes from the video store.

That was like our biggest outing in nineteen-ninety-eight [laughs], back in the day. But I didn't have - I was twenty-four - I didn't have driver's license because in my country most people were using public transportation. You don't really need the car and...

[00:04:18] **Madoris:** ...and public transportation here is not the same. [Both laugh.]

[00:04:20] **Maya:** No, definitely not.

[00:04:22] **Madoris:** So, would you say that it was most like people in the school, people who were....

[00:04:26] **Maya:** Yes. In fact, we were very welcomed by Africans too. We had a very international community - Africans, Japanese, Koreans, Eastern Europeans. And Africans were the most welcoming. They even gave us an old van to travel to Colorado first Christmas so I can go across country a little bit and see places.

So no, they were very nice and they were like trying to help us out in any way they could.

[00:04:52] **Madoris:** So, like other immigrant populations...

[00:04:53] **Maya:** Yes, definitely, definitely.

[00:04:57] **Madoris:** And... [00:05:00] What are some of the challenges that you faced coming here?

[00:05:05] **Maya:** Well, snowstorms and trying not to kill myself [laughs] and driving in a snowstorm and just learning all about skiing downhill in Belair and knowing how to stop. Because the first time I hit the picnic table going down like fifty miles an hour, [both laugh] because I didn't know how to stop.

Umm, definitely just being strong in terms of figuring out how to get your first car, how to, get transportation from A to B, landing the first few jobs, feeling confident as you go, as you feel comfortable in the same country - because we literally had no points of reference and....

[00:05:55] **Madoris:** What did you say you studied?

[00:05:59] **Maya:** I [00:06:00] studied.... Well I got masters in divinity, specializing in marriage and family counseling. So, we had a lot of courses in psychology, philosophy, paths of faith, different.... You know, we actually - from the seminary - we went to different churches and temples to see how other religions function here. [Pause]. In fact, my favorite outing was to - I think it was Woodstock to see some of those old stone houses with Japanese students who were starting English as a second language, which my ex-husband was part

of that ESL group. So, I got to go with them on the field trip and see those old stone houses. That was very interesting.

[00:06:47] **Madoris:** I was actually in Woodstock yesterday -and I had never been in Woodstock. I was like, “Oh my God, this is so amazing.” And they keep the history too...

[00:06:55] **Maya:** ...right.

[00:6:56] **Madoris:** ...which is nice. [00:07:00] Is there anything that you didn't like about Kingston or that disappointed you or made you feel.... Or that would have helped you better?

[00:07:06] **Maya:** Kingston specifically? Um - what didn't I like about Kingston? [pause] The potholes [pause] in the road [Madoris laughs, then Maya laughs too] and uh [long pause] yeah because you know....

Like now - I'm a single mom. I don't really make that much money. And when you destroy your tires, like, like [stammers]... Who is gonna pay for it [Maya laughs] - the guns out of your pocket?

Um [pause]. Dead cats that lay on the road for three weeks. You know - I'm very outspoken. So, I would even go call department of transportation and tell them that there's a dead cat that's been [slight laugh as Maya continues] laying there for like three weeks and they would clean it up eventually. But, um, what else? I dunno.... [Loud car exhaust] Pretty good [inaudible – tent or town] basically.

[00:07:54] **Madoris:** Anything that culturally you felt like was missing or that could have made your experience - would have made your experience - so far [00:08:00]better or...?

[00:08:03] **Maya:** Well, over the years I discovered all these places that exist here -like theaters and all the sorts of theaters at Bard and different concert venues - that made it more enjoyable to live here. Because, growing up, we used to go to so many concerts in Latvia and theater... It was part of your life, you know? But here I was initially suffering a bit because - to me - it was like here you're just supposed to work and go to Walmart [laughs] shopping [laughs] and then go home.

And like, nobody's really that friendly, you know? It's a different culture. So maybe that was a little bit of a culture shock that people are not as welcoming and stuff.

[00:08:45] **Madoris:** Yeah. Um, which other – I know you're talking about cultural celebrations or things that you did before coming here - are there any practices or any traditions that you keep?

[00:08:58] **Maya:** That I keep here?

[00:08:59] **Madoris:** Yes.

[00:09:00] **Maya:** Ummm [pause]. Maybe a little bit New Year because for us - growing up - New Year was more important than.... We never really had Christmas or anything like that. So [pause]. Maybe that. And I always tell the kids - but I never really practiced that - that on solstice, the twenty-fourth, twenty-third of June, Latvians jump over the fires and stay up all night and drink beer and eat cheese and look for some magical flowers in the forest.

So that's like a biggest celebration, but I never really did it here, but I just tell the kids about it [laughs].

[00:09:41] **Madoris:** Is there any other traditions that you had to give up?

[00:09:44] **Maya:** No - not that I had to give up anything. I think I acquired more than I gave up, like we started celebrating Thanksgiving... Basically, you blend in with the culture. I never knew about anything like Easter egg hunts or Halloween.

So we never really had any of this [00:10:00] - Thanksgivings. Now, we just do it because that's what Americans do, I guess. [Both laugh.]

[00:10:05] **Madoris:** Is there any food stuff from your homeland that are important for you?

[00:10:10] **Maya:** Well, the food though - I was always suffering because of the lack of this native food [Both laugh.]. The Russian stores carry a lot [of] the Latvian breads, leavens and stuff. The closest is two hours away. So, I have a hard time getting there. [Long pause] I do the best I can, you know? But Adams is great.

And I used to fly to Latvia pretty consistently. So when I was younger and the kids were younger, I used to fly once a year for a month and just enjoy all the food and culture I could get.

[00:10:48] **Madoris:** What types of food?

[00:10:49] **Maya:** Well, we're very agricultural country. So, it's a lot of pork, potatoes, very good quality kielbasa, a rye bread - that's amazing, that's
[00:11:00] like made in fire ovens by.... It's just like - amazing. That's why I can't eat the American bread here [Madoris laughs], even the one that they call [pause - stammers] with the Indian bread or something. It's not the same at all.

I miss that - you know. I miss the smoked eel. That's probably my favorite food. Latvians - we even have eel festivals over there in the summer. The fishing industry is very, very large and well.... We have spreads and stuff, but I don't really miss that too much. You can find them here.

[00:11:30] **Madoris:** Okay. Um, let's see. [Long pause]

What part of your culture would you like people to embrace, like, let's say someone who's American, if there's anything from your culture that you feel like they could embrace or celebrate.

[00:11:51] **Maya:** Well, honestly, I'm very mixed culturally, so I'm not very typical person for my country. And in my country, there are a lot of different
[00:12:00] - there's ethnic Latvians that are like kind of Russian speaking, people who are Latvian people also, but they have different culture.

There are some Lithuanian-Polish, a little bit. So. [Pause] I am half Jewish, half Latvian, with Russian speaking. So. For me, it's very difficult. I've never felt part of any culture, like personally. But I think people here would totally embrace since they love beer so much [Madoris laughs]. There's a solstice festival - when you put like oak tree wreaths on and you jump over fires, people whose names... OH!

So celebrating name day in Latvia is a big thing instead of your birthday, almost people prefer celebrating their name day. And Latvians named their kids by the Langham calendar - there's a special name calendar. In fact, even one of my kids are named by the Latvian name calendar - it was just so cool.

And so [00:13:00] then the people whose name is on the twenty-third of June is John and Eve (Jānis and Ieva in Latvian way)? So, they're being celebrated and

lifted up because - I guess – this is one of the most common names. So, they wear the wreaths and they jump over the fires and everyone's just drinking beer, eating cheese with little seeds in it and just having a good time. And you're not supposed to sleep.

[00:13:27] **Madoris:** Oooooooh [laughs].

[00:13:28] **Maya:** Yeah, so I think...

[00:13:30] **Madoris:** ...that's like a fun festival!

[00:13:31] **Maya:** I think people would totally [laughs] dig it over here [laughs].

[00:13:34] **Madoris:** Yeah, I've heard of other cultures that also name according to a specific day or things like that. I think in Africa it's the same too. That depending on which day of the week you are born, you get a different name.

[00:13:47] **Maya:** Right.

[00:13:48] **Madoris:** That's amazing. Thank you for sharing that. [Long pause] How welcoming do you think Kingston is to immigrants?

[00:14:00] **Maya:** How welcoming Kingston is? You really have to [pause] spend a significant amount of time here and kind of get to know people.

For me, the most friendships came from the YMCA. I can tell you that - some friendships that are thirteen, fourteen years long. And just from YMCA – from going to some kids' swimming classes or just hanging out with people in the gym. Honestly [pause], if you just start walking around the streets -like trying to make friends - nothing much is going to happen.

You really have to become part of a community, almost... You have to have kids and from the school events and meeting other parents, you could really kind of thrive. I don't know how single people can really find their way around. You know, I really don't know. Maybe from the gym and meeting other singles.

But as a person with kids - that's how I made the most friendships - school events and the gym.

[00:15:00] **Madoris:** What do you think will make it more welcoming for people who don't have kids?

[00:15:04] **Maya:** That's what I mean - probably the [stammers] the gym also like the YMCA, the pool, ummm, maybe some... [Long pause.]

Like Kingston in particular [pause – trails off]. I don't really know what else to tell you. [Both laugh.]

It's really hard. Nothing really rings a... Maybe some festivals over here, you know, by the river, when they have Hooley On The Hudson, or some big festivals where people sit and they're more relaxed in the summer - they actually talk to each other.

[00:15:34] **Madoris:** Yeah, yeah, I agree.

Do you have any favorite story about being an immigrant or anything that relates to it? Then - as an immigrant - any favorite story?

[00:15:45] **Maya:** Ohh, story?

[00:15:46] **Madoris:** Yes.

[00:15:47] **Maya:** Story.... Ohh story of living here - specifically in Kingston, or just like living in America...?

[00:15:53] **Madoris:** Yeah, just being an immigrant...

[00:15:55] **Maya:** Being an immigrant... And it should be [laughs] a positive story or a negative story [laughing]?

[00:15:58] **Madoris:** Whatever you want [00:16:00]– a favorite story!

[00:16:01] **Maya:** [Barely audible] A favorite story, in America... Ummm [long pause followed by a sigh].

Okay, well maybe favorite story is how I was given birth because it's just so exciting to tell people [laughs].

I was at work late at night and started having contractions and then had to drive myself to the hospital, you know, and the cop of course was stopping me

because I was speeding. And then, luckily - I had to get a hospital bag from my house and I called my kid's godmother – she came at two o'clock in the morning with me in the parking lot and drove me from there, with a cop kind of standing by. It was kind of exciting, trying to get my boss - call him at two o'clock in the morning to come and relieve me because I was the only one at work.

So [pause] [00:17:00] I don't know [pause].

I'm big on collecting mushrooms - edible mushrooms in the forest. So, I have a lot of stories from just going to mycological society - different walks, just... Exploring different trails, finding new, exciting.... I get excited when I learn about native mushrooms here and like getting some big hauls from that.

[00:17:26] **Madoris:** In what ways you think Kingston itself has changed who you are or your identity or that things you like?

[00:17:36] **Maya:** Did Kingston changed me? No, no - I think I was fully formed at twenty-four when I came here. I have to add that I came to America many times before. I came here when I was fifteen, I was like one of the first to exchange from Soviet Union and I came here to summer camp. Um, I came here a couple more times prior to coming here for good. So [00:18:00] no - I think I was fully formed and Kingston just feels like home away from home, you know?

[00:18:08] **Madoris:** That's it for my questions. Is there anything else that you think will be useful or anything that you want to share that I didn't ask or anything else?

[00:18:19] **Maya:** Anything else? Well, I think it's just [pause] important to understand -especially now - my daughter is eighteen. And they had a class in the high school learning about immigration and different things. And I was shocked, like my own daughter, she had no clue how difficult it was. She thought it was like magical - that I was there. Then all of a sudden, I was here and I had the green card and stuff. They don't understand how difficult this is for us – immigrants - to go through all this, hoops and different permits...

Every time I have to travel, you have to pay like hundreds of dollars for travel permits and people so easily in America, they say, “Oh, well, why don't you become [00:19:00] legal - you know - why don't you become a citizen?” Or like, “Oh, why this? Why that?”

They have no clue how many hurdles there are for other people. I was lucky, but even being lucky, I wasn't really lucky. We already had the house and we had - all of a sudden got the letter in the mail saying you'll have ten days to leave the country because our numbers were revoked because the government changed the eligibility and numbers for certain work visas.

So we went through a lot of different, different challenges. It took maybe seven, eight years to actually get the green card. A lot of suffering, a lot of legal fees and the immigration fees.

I think it's important for Americans to understand that it's not a walk in the park - that not everybody can just magically become a legal resident.

[00:19:54] **Madoris:** Yeah - like a documented resident. I feel you with that.

[00:19:59] **Maya:** Right. So yeah [00:20:00]. So...

[00:20:01] **Madoris:** Well, thank you so much. I'm going to stop recording.