

Interview with Essi Zahedi

March 26, 2022

Summery keywords: Iran, Iranian, Iranian Revolution 1979, publication, theology, Unification Theological Seminary, Kingston, accounting, accountant, computerization, construction work, Minnesota, American culture, recession, IBM, nature, immigrant, soccer, hobby, revolutionary guard, translation, C.I.A., anti-communist, anti-American, prison, raid, Committee Center, psychological torture, Pakistan, Zahedan, Iran-Iraq War, smuggling, escape, caravan, Balochi, checkpoint, Quetta, train, Red Hook School, Emery Bank, ecumenical book, inter-religious, Persian culture, Persian New Year, Christmas, Arabic culture, Iranian culture, Universalism,` Russian Orthodox

[00:00:00] **Anna:** Hello, my name is Anna and I'm a student in Bard College. And I'm going to conduct the interview today. Um would you like to state your name and tell a little bit about yourself?

[00:00:12] **Essi:** Yes. My name is Essi Zahedi and I am originally from Iran. And my story is basically how I ended up here. Uh, and the situation happened in 1979 - Iranian Revolution - and my involvement in some kind of publication and activities - in connection with the government. That's, that's my story.

[00:00:49] **Anna:** Okay, thank you. So you lived in the Iran before coming to the U.S., is it correct?

[00:00:57] **Essi:** Yes. I was born there [00:01:00] and then I grew up there and I lived there for thirty-three years of my life.

[00:01:09] **Anna:** So there wasn't any place in between—like the U.S. and Iran—where you lived?

[00:01:15] **Essi:** No.

[00:01:16] **Anna:** Okay. Um, when did you come to Kingston?

[00:01:20] **Essi:** Um, I came here in 1986 to study that—that's why I came here.

[00:01:33] **Anna:** What did you study?

[00:01:34] **Essi:** I studied theology.

[00:01:35] **Anna:** Oh, great. And what university did you study?

[00:01:39] **Essi:** At U.T.S. [Unification Theological Seminary] The other side [of the river]—next to Bard College.

[00:01:46] **Anna:** Why did you choose this area?

[00:01:48] **Essi:** Um, because I wanted.... I did some publication—even though I was not academically trained. So, [00:02:00] Then, I was interested in writing and then.... Especially in ecumenical subjects like inter-religious activities and this—Theology.

And that's why I decided to study - to be trained academically in order to do some work in writing.

[00:02:31] **Anna:** Was there any particular reason that you chose like Kingston as your place to set up?

[00:02:37] **Essi:** Here, it was—because it was easier to set up, compared to Dutchess County. So, way easier to rent a place.

[00:02:53] **Anna:** Thanks. Um, was there any person or organization who was helpful with you getting [00:03:00] settled here?

[00:03:01] **Essi:** Uh, no. No, not that. It was just myself, with my wife and then we started—we came here, started to work.

[00:03:12] **Anna:** Okay. Did you come here with your wife or did you meet here?

[00:03:16] **Essi:** Here with my wife—yes.

[00:03:20] **Anna:** Okay. Was there anyone who helped you with employment or was it after college? Like how was your college life at Kingston?

[00:03:30] **Essi:** Uh, no, I was—I graduated... I had the undergraduate degree in accounting. Kind of like old style [Anna laughs]. I worked in Iran for ten years or thirteen years in accounting firm—or actually in a company as an accountant.

So when I came [00:04:00] here, my experience there was not everything had become computerized and [in] the system. So that's why I didn't immediately go into accounting. I started to do odd jobs like painting, construction work, and this kind of thing.

[00:04:18] **Anna:** Oh wow, that's nice. Were there any challenges or barriers that you faced since coming here?

[00:04:28] **Essi:** No, I didn't feel because—because my wife is American. She was born in Minnesota. And so culturally I was very kind of comfortable, I didn't have big challenges.

[00:04:46] **Anna:** And you met in Iran?

[00:04:48] **Essi:** Uh, no—I met her in New York in 1978. And then we wrote to each other [00:05:00] before... For a couple of years. Yeah.

[00:05:02] **Anna:** Nice. So you felt comfortable here with the culture. Was there something particular that you really liked about the American culture?

[00:05:11] **Essi:** I was familiar with American culture through movies, so.... And the impact I did not—I had some struggle in staying with Iranian society, I mean culture. So, I.... Even during my high school time, I was just saying, “I'm not going to live in Iran all my life” because I had some struggle with my own culture.

Because I didn't have this kind of, uh, limited.... Kind of a busy body—in a culture like that, you know—[00:06:00] into intervening into your private life and everything and stuff like that.

[00:06:06] **Anna:** Yeah. I see. Was there anything that—I don't know—disappointed you in Kingston or things that you hoped would be better?

[00:06:16] **Essi:** Uh—no, not actually. We went through some difficult time, um, financially—economically—because Kingston in the early 1990s went

through some kind of recession because of IBM—move out from this area and then everything, economically kind of like, uh, um [stammers], not in a good situation for about ten years or so.

So we went through that struggle, but other than that—nothing. [00:07:00]

[00:07:01] **Anna:** Uh, was anything that surprised you in a positive way about Kingston and about living here?

[00:07:08] **Essi:** Um, yeah—the environment is good and nature. And you know quiet—in some aspect—and the beautiful nature of it.

It is good area to live, to raise children... Yeah.

[00:07:33] **Anna:** Yeah. How were—when you just first came to the U.S. as an immigrant, were you feeling any pressure or was there any (I don't know)... Did you find friends easily in university?

[00:07:50] **Essi:** Uh, yes. Yeah, we have—we had friends—and you know, we are—with [00:08:00] my fellow students, we had very good times.

We inviting to our house and, you know, had the social activities. Yeah.

Also, I play soccer with the local... [trails off]. So that was my hobby. And also I - my children, I coached them soccer. This was kind of like a hobby for me to play soccer and then coach my children.

And in fact, my daughter—who graduated from Bard—she was top scorer in Bard College. And if you go to the gym, you will see her picture there.

[00:08:51] **Anna:** Okay. I'll look it up. I often go to the gym. [Both laugh] That's great. Yeah. So you're playing soccer. Was it like more [00:09:00] professionally or was it more like...?

[00:09:03] **Essi:** No – just hobby.

[00:09:04] **Anna:** No, that sounds great. It's all thanks to you.

[00:09:10] **Essi:** Yeah, but just to tell you my main story about Iran—how I ended up to here.... That was the main part of my story. If it's okay to say that one?

[00:09:31] **Anna:** Yeah, of course.

[00:09:32] **Essi:** Yeah. So, um, I was, uh.... In 1979, there was a revolution in Iran. And then they—the monarchy was overcame by Revolutionary Guard or revolutionary people who were kind of religious and uh [pause]... Leftist and religious [00:10:00] people united to overthrow the Shah.

So during this unrest, there was a period of relative freedom, that people could write and do whatever they could do. And I worked—I did some translation of some books—from English into Persian—that was under[minding] communist.

And this was one book I wrote. And then—because in the revolution, there was some kind of a unity between the leftists (the communists) and the religious people—then they (the communist) reported to the government I was a C.I.A. agent because I wrote—I was anti-communist. [00:11:00]

So. That's why they—I mean, actually there were two incidents. They raided my home, they got the report and they raided my home and, uh, uh.... The report the leftist (or the communists) they gave to the government that this person is a CIA agent.

So when they came there, the whole purpose was to just basically take me away and execute. Because at that time, the whole sense or kind of feeling of the Revolutionaries were anti-America. So [long pause] being accused as a C.I.A. it was just equal to death. That's why they [00:12:00] arrested me.

And then they took me to prison and when they came - that was in the middle of the night. And when they came, they knocked at the door (they hit the door) and then they asked me to open the door because I was scared, you know, "Who are in the middle of the night is just coming to our house."

I tried to escape up to the rooftop, from there to go to the neighboring country. Because it was revolution time and the many groups that had weapons so they could attack. We did not know who are these people—that's why my two sisters and myself just escape to the night.

And then they started to shoot. [00:13:00] And there were kind of like gunshots from both sides because they surrounded us and, uh... But anyway, we thank we were not shot. So we went to the neighbor and they tried to call the police.

And the police said that, oh, these are revolutionary guards. So then you have to give up. So we just gave up and then they took us, and while they're taking us through, we saw that they're taking a lot of stuff in my house. They brought it to the place that they called the Committee Center, which was like a temporary headquarter for the Revolution Guards.

So that was the time that, uh, um, they, uh, you know - they just put me in [00:14:00] a in a cell for three days and they just.... Every time they're coming said that "You're going to be executed..." and they were showing - from the window - that was, uh.... The tree and the rope and said, "They're going to hang you." So there was a lot of—kind of like psychological torture.

But then the interesting thing was that after three days—in a very strict situation—then when my mother came and then start to shout, "Why - why you're taking my son" and this and that, they started to review the case that some other people who are not involved in there the raid (at night).

So then they found out that the report they received that I was a C.I.A. agent was [00:15:00] not correct. So then - what happened was the person who was in charge of raiding my home, he started to make some kind of force, some kind of document against me. And then there was—unfortunately I had some help from some other people who were the relative of some of our friends who were involved and then they, they cleaned up the file. But anyway, it took a few months until I was released. Okay.

So after that—then there was this whole situation with the government and the new government, everything became more tight and more kind of like extreme.

So some friends in there, um, [00:16:00] some friends in there in the government they told me that it's better to leave the country. So I try to just find out how to leave the country and after a few months kind of researching, finally said, "Okay, we just go to the south Eastern part of Iran - the Southeast of neighboring Pakistan."

So the city was Zahedan, which is a border city. One of my friends, we went there and started to just research how we can get out of the country. At that time, also, the war between Iran and Iraq has started. And then because of that um, [00:17:00] nobody could exit get exit visa to leave the country.

That's why I had to escape and because my life was in danger because the government—they said that the government will come after you, even when you you're released and you are not... So because...

[00:17:16] **Anna:** So it was like a mobilization, so no men were allowed to leave the country.

[00:17:20] **Essi:** Yeah. So when you came to the border city immediately the revolutionary guards—who are now controlling the whole country—and they were there and then they arrested us again...

[00:17:38] **Anna:** Oh my god!

[00:17:40] **Essi:** [laughs] And then they brought us to prison. They said, “What are you doing in this town?” So, we said, “We’re just traveling” and they said, “No, you're leaving. You're trying to leave the country illegally.” I said, “No, we’re not going—this is free place and I just.... We’re traveling.”

But [00:18:00] anyway eventually they released us at night—that night. So um [pause] then it took a few days for us to find out how we can find some people who are smuggling people through the border.

And we found one—finally some people, some smugglers, who were.... You know like local people who were—their village was near the border. And, uh, so they said that they will help us to escape.

And in one evening we went to the border—near the border and to that village. So this person said that, “Okay. I have a pickup truck and I drove through the border there—the [00:19:00] post, the border guard post that....” Um, [pause] what do you call it.... Ah a checkpoint. “So you have to walk around and to meet me on the other side of the line—the borderline.”

And he told—he was a boy, fourteen year old boy who was—his cousin. He said that, “They’re desperate,” and my cousin will bring you to the other side. And then I pick you up and bring you further inside Pakistan.

So this boy brought us to, um [pause] there was like dried river. We went through that and then we just went to go—just cross it—and just then he said that “You have to—don't make any noise, be careful because last night there are some people were arrested in this area.”[00:20:00]

And so I said, “Why you are going directly there? Let's turn around.” He said, “No, we have to go this direction.” We went there and then suddenly one point there was a big gunshot, several gunshots. And then he said, “Who are you? Why what are you doing here?” There were some voices—loud voices—saying “What are you doing here?”

So we were just stopped. And then my friend and I was just standing there and this boy—immediately after this, he heard that—he just went back the same way we came. So it just basically disappeared. And then my friend and I were there and so I didn't know what to do. If I get arrested that would be the end of me.

So that's why I said that I [00:21:00] cannot give up. So I looked around and I saw one place. It was like a cave kind of thing—the water washed away and it was just lower. So like a hole. And then I laid down there and I told my friend to return the other way. So my friend, when he saw me there and then he started to shout “Don't shoot don't shoot—I am... I surrender.”

So I was not happy with what he did, but actually what he did was he wanted to sacrificed himself for me to get out because that was me whose life was in danger because the situation was very tense. I could not stop him doing that.

Then what happened was I suddenly—from the place I was hiding—there was three [00:22:00] lights (two pair of lights of the three cars) that were standing—waiting there. And then they turn on the lights of the cars and then the whole area was light. And, uh, so there's people—I saw that these people with guns—just coming closer and then told my friend to take off his shirt. And then it was if he has any weapon, whatever.

Then he said, “No, I don't have any weapons.” They asking where's your friend. And he said, “He ran back this way, he'd returned.” But anyway, they arrested him. And then came over to where I was hiding. They just came few feet close to me, but because I was just still—standing still completely, no noise, nothing.

And because it was.... The light, didn't go all the way deep to that hole. So that's why they couldn't see me. And then after a while, [00:23:00] then they went back to the cars and they drove away. So then I was alone by myself. And this started to, um [pause] I knew what was the direction to the east. So I started to go towards the east, which was Pakistan.

I walked for a long time, until the morning. And then during morning I started to walk, but then, um, then I was.... I didn't have water, no food, and I was thirsty and I just thought, “Okay, it's too hot to continue to walk.” I sweat a lot and I'm thirsty. So that's why I stopped. And then.... [long pause] Anyway then the next night, I just tried to continue traveling tours at night.

And then the next day [00:24:00] I came to the place that it was just laying down and they noticed that there was a—you know what this caravan is? The line of camels that—they're just.. That was like a desert place. So I noticed that there was a man that was with some camels that were just passing by.

And I took the opposite direction to find a place.... To find one man with one child. They were collecting some pieces of wood among the bushes and the people in that area—they are some kind of ethnic group they called Balochi, which is different from where I come from.

So there were just, uh, um, I, I [00:25:00] told him - I asked him, “Can you help me to just give me some water?” And he was surprised, “What are you doing here?” And then he first said that, “Oh, I have to report to the border guards that you are here. Otherwise it would be big trouble for me.”

But anyways, I somehow convinced him that he can just give me some water and give me some direction where to go. He was then become very helpful. And then he brought me to the tented houses on the other part of the side of the hill. And there they had the well and then gave me water.

And then he said, “How much money you have?” I didn't have much money - so whatever money I had - and then he said they can help me. So he and his

cousin [00:26:00] then they put me in a—they usually have a pickup truck in that area—pickup truck that night in the evening. And then it started to drive me all the way through the Hills.

And I don't know, for two hours, they drove around. And then they stopped one place and they said, “Okay, here's the Pakistan. So you have to—you are free from the revolutionary guards and the Iranian government, but now you have to watch the army—the soldiers from Pakistan.”

So because I came in—entered illegally to Pakistan.... Even though I had the passport, it was not stamped.

[00:26:44] **Anna:** Yeah. You didn't have a visa or any entry...

[00:26:45] **Essi:** Yeah. So I couldn't show my passport to.... That's why it was kind of somewhat a challenge for me to get to the main city. But anyway, [00:27:00] these people, they brought me to a point and I said, okay. It was like around eleven o'clock at night. And I was.... They said—they told me that you can go through this track. And then after half hour, you will see a little village and then you can go that village and then you can get help from there.

I did exactly that. I came to the top of the hill and I saw some lights. Down the hill was a small village. So I thought, “You know, so what can I do in the middle of the night with all this light?” So then I decided, okay, so now I just pick one light. And just go to exactly to that light.

So I pick a light and still went there and I saw an older man [00:28:00] with a boy was sitting inside the—you know, like the houses have three walls and a roof, and the fire was in the middle and they were making tea.

So I went there and then I asked, “Do you accept a guest?” Of course, they were surprised and said, “Oh, come in here...” And they gave me tea and they were really friendly. But anyway, this is what happened—this person I picked was actually the mayor of that village. And then he said he is going to help me.

And he was the one... I don't want to—I don't know how long you have for this?... This person the next day went, it was—the village was on the route to the main city. It was a road there. And then he said that “I would want to find

somebody to help you [00:29:00] to bring you to the main city.” And then at noontime, he came and said that, “Oh, I find somebody.”

Then went there and it was a little coffee shop island next to the road. And then, this person who was a merchant who traveled between the main city and to Iran. So this route was basically his route of doing business. And this man said yeah, he will help me. Now the situation was that you come to the road that they have a checkpoint because in that area was kind of like—it was not so safe and then the government, the soldiers, they have to control all the activities. [00:30:00]

But because this person was a merchant and knew all the checkpoints, all the soldiers knew him, so he could drive through and then wave. And then they didn't check me as a passenger.

So anyway... That was actually twenty-two hours from the place we started to go to the main city, which was - they call it Quetta. It is a main city in Pakistan that has a train to go to the capital city where I had some address for our friend—our mutual friend with my wife (at that time was my fiancé) who was in New York.

So. [00:31:00] So when uh.... Anyway, we came to that city, Quetta, and I went to get a train ticket and.... So in the train ticket, there were soldiers that were checking anyone who were buying tickets, they'd check the documents. So I was on the line to get a ticket and the soldier was checking somebody's document and this person was showing. And I couldn't show him any document to that soldier.

And then there was another soldier right at the entrance. When I can't—I was just thinking myself, “What can I do? I cannot show any document to this—because I illegally here.” So then at the time that this person before me bought the ticket, this soldier [00:32:00]— soldier at the entrance—called his friend and this soldier went to the entrance. Then there was nobody to check the documents [laughs] and I got ticket.

[00:32:14] **Anna:** A-ha, that is very lucky.

[00:32:15] **Essi:** Yeah. So then, I could get ticket and then started to.... Around two o'clock I took a train that was, again, three days ride. Because the train

from there it was just going all around the south of Pakistan, going to the east, to the far east of Pakistan, then going to the north where the capital city was.

So eventually I got there and then called my friend [00:33:00]—went to that place and I called my wife also (my fiancé). And then she could give me that clear address to the friend. So I went there and so.... Then I could, you know—that that was a big help to be there until my fiancé from New York came to Pakistan. And then we legally married and then I could get the green card and then come to America. We came to Kingston. That was—that was my story.

[00:33:41] **Anna:** So that's how you—okay, I see. Well, that's great. So you get married in Pakistan and that's how you came to Kingston. No, no—that's terrific [laughs]. Thank you so much for your story.

If you want to share something about how [00:34:00] like your life in Kingston now—how's it going now and looking back at your life in Iran and all this crazy adventure, do you have any regrets for coming like directly here? Are there any plans to go somewhere else?

[00:34:17] **Essi:** No. At one point you were planning to move because economically we're not doing good, but then my wife got the job as a teacher.

And eventually she continued her education and become a principal at Red Hook School. And then I got the job as an accountant. And then eventually I became a controller of company, Emery [sp] Bank. And so then both of us have good job. And then we raised children. We had four children—two girls, two boys.

[00:35:00] And, uh, so.... We are now settled. Yeah. And I am very satisfied.

[00:35:10] **Anna:** That's great. Yeah. In what ways has immigration changed your sense of identity? Maybe like you're inner feelings about your identity?

[00:35:20] **Essi:** Um, I [long pause] - you know, of course it opened my eyes to look at everything from the more international way.

From a religious aspect—because I was just studying theology and also I'd wrote book in Iran (ecumenical book) - my view basically was more inter-religious. You know - all religions. And throughout all this part, I [00:36:00]

became more kind of like a universal—I feel everything from a universal point of view.

Not that limited, you know—American, Iranian, but more universal. So that is kind of like a growth I think that I had throughout these years with sharing ideas with my wife and, uh.... But anyway, one thing is that there is a certain part of each culture it's worth to retain. I dunno if you know so much about the culture in Iran or Persian culture. The Persian culture goes back to 2,500 years. Okay. And there are certain [00:37:00] traditions that stays there—when I grew up with that. I keep that tradition here with my family. So my children, they love Iran. And my mother was here for part of the time when my kids were small and she babysit them. And also she shared her culture with them. So that's why my children are—they love the culture. They follow the traditions.

[00:37:38] **Anna:** What traditions, for example?

[00:37:40] **Essi:** One example is like for instance, New Year. The Persian New Year is just the beginning of the spring. When everything renews - you know. And that's a burst - a burst of earth.

Okay. Also we have our [00:38:00] main celebration – except from like Christian Christmas and the New Year - we have this tradition to celebrate the Persian Year. So all my children they love this tradition. So that's the main part of their Persian culture.

[00:38:33] **Anna:** Were there some traditions that you've given up or that you don't—like can't—follow anymore?

[00:38:40] **Essi:** There are certain traditions—religious traditions—that I felt it was kind of like more connected to Arabic part of the culture. Because Islam comes from Arab and Saudi Arabia [00:39:00] and there's certain Arabic culture that influenced Iranian culture.

That is a one that I'm just giving up because I feel is kind of like a backward or something. And it opposes my view of Universalism.

[00:39:25] **Anna:** I see. Um I'm also—I also came from Russia and so I also like were involved in some politics, but not as much as you, I think. So it's very nice

to hear your story and how it was long time ago and how [pause]—compare how it's going to be for me now.

[00:39:45] **Essi:** Oohh gee. Yeah.

[00:39:47] **Anna:** Yeah. No, it's really nice. Thank you so much. And were there any like American traditions that your wife—I dunno—taught you or that you've embraced?

[00:39:57] **Essi:** Yeah, of course. The Christmas is, you know.... [00:40:00] And then of course I, as I say [long pause] my view point changed and I hope is evolved since I have moved here. So love of Christ is one of the things that I developed and my children are also all universal and have [that] view. And my son actually—my older son—he is into a Russian Orthodox and he studies and he goes to the church in Poughkeepsie, they have one. Yeah. That's...

[00:40:53] **Anna:** That's very interesting. Thank you so much. I think that was great! That was that a good, very good story. Thank you so much.

[00:40:59] **Essi:** Oh you're welcome. [00:41:00]

End 41:02