



Anas

Hamrah, together on a journey— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation.

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Anas. I'm 17 years old. I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Kabul is a big city and I would say Kabul is very, it's also dry. It's green too. It has a lot of places to visit, a lot of places to hang out with friends, family. But currently I live in Chicago. I miss Kabul. My parents are from Panjshir. Panjshir is a great place too. I love going there. Yeah.

Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood? What was it like growing up in Kabul and probably visiting Panjshir?

I would say my family, we lived with our uncle, so I lived with my, I mean uncle were our neighbors, so it was really nice to have our cousins. We were always hanging out. I was always hanging out with my cousins. As a child, I'm the first child, so it's very, I would say everything I do, my other siblings learn from me, so I have to always be careful based on what I do. Also, Kabul, I was born in Kabul, but most of the time I loved going to Panjshir. Panjshir is a very green place. It has a lot of mountains. It's really nice to go there, especially during summer. I remember with my cousins, I used to go there and especially go for swimming. It was really nice.

What is your favorite memory from your childhood?

I was in Panjshir. I have this cousin, she is a couple years older than me sometimes. Once she pushed me in the water and then I was really mad about it and I decided to take revenge the next week. I think I saw her by the water and I just pushed her in the water. It was really funny. And then she went to her mom, actually, which is my aunt. She went to my aunt and talked about it, and then she came to my dad and then me and my dad, we started laughing about it and chatting about it. It was really good memories, I remember, but this is what I remember.

When did you leave Afghanistan?

I left Afghanistan I think by the start of 2021, I believe. I'm not sure.

Who did you live with and who did you leave behind?

I lived with my family, my whole family. I left with my mom, dad, my siblings, and I left behind a lot of stuff. I left behind my grandma, my grandparents, my cousins, uncle, a lot of relatives also, a lot of memories. Sometimes when I think about it, I really feel very sad about it. I really miss everything that I left behind when I left Afghanistan.

How old were you when you left?

I was about 12 to 13 when I left Afghanistan. I was a child when I left. I'm glad I remember a lot of stuff from then. It's been almost five to six years since I left.

Did you understand why your family wanted to leave or is that something you learned later?

I would say when I was 12 to 13, I didn't know. I wasn't really mature enough to understand why we left. As I grow up and I started talking to my parents and I learned that we left my parents, my mom and dad decided that we're going to leave because of me, because of my siblings, so we could have a better life. So we could educate ourselves in a better country, a country full of opportunity, a better education. Especially that women, children, are not allowed to go to school in Afghanistan. It's very hard for my sister. It's very hard to imagine my sisters not going to school, for them staying at school and me going to school. It's really hard to think about it and imagine it.

How was your journey from Afghanistan? Where did you go next and how did you arrive in Chicago?

My parents, especially my dad, we were in danger when the Taliban took over the country because there was a lot of things that my dad had written, poetry that was against Taliban, didn't like Taliban. They could arrest you, take you from your family. Even for very little things. Taliban took over and what they did first were taking revenge from the people, especially from the people like my dad. So we lived in Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover for about two months, my dad got an offer from the University of Chicago to be a visiting professor and come to America. So it was a plan to go to Mazar-i-Sharif. It's a city on north side of Afghanistan. I think it's northwest side. So we went there for the hope that we're going to leave Afghanistan and to live peacefully, but we didn't manage to leave Afghanistan and it was a hard time. So while we were in Mazar, we stayed there for about, I believe, two months. And before that my dad had applied for a case to live in Germany and that case was accepted by the German government and we were Germany accepted to help us come to get out of Afghanistan and come to Germany. So we actually really got excited and happy about that. So we talked to people that were in Chicago and we told them that we're going to go to Germany

and then decide whether if we wanted to come to Chicago America or not. So we came back from Mazar-i-Sharif after two months to Kabul. In Kabul, it was a decision that we had to take. You had to make, to get visas to go to Pakistan. So there was no direct flights to Germany. So we had to go to a nearby country, which is Pakistan, a neighbor from Afghanistan. We had to go to Pakistan so we could be able to go to Germany. A challenge that we faced was getting visas to leave Kabul, Afghanistan to Islam about Pakistan. So it was hard. We had to spend a lot of money.

We did spend a lot of money. We applied multiple times, but each time only one to two person in our family got their visas, and after about a month or two, we were able to get everyone's visa except me. So it was really frustrating for my parents and I was thinking about it too, even though I was 12 and 13.

Yeah, so after a couple months, I mean after two months my dad managed to get a visa for us to move to Pakistan. We were so happy that day when my dad got it, we actually, we celebrated and after that, in about a week we left Afghanistan. The day when we left, it was really hard. I said goodbye to my grandma, my cousins, my uncle. It was really, really sad leaving them behind. We also didn't have any choice though. We were in danger, so we left. We flew to Islam, Pakistan, Pakistan. It was a nice place. Islamabad, the Capitol, they had a hotel reserved for us. So we went there. We stayed for about 20 days. After that they got us visas, so we went to Germany. Yeah, and there's a whole lot of another journey, a lot of things going on in Germany. And then after that we managed to come to America.

How were those two months in Afghanistan? After the Taliban came back and a lot of people started fleeing, do you have any memories from those two months?

I don't have a lot of memories, but I have a lot of things mean. It was actually my first impression of Taliban is, I was hanging out with friends right next to our door, and then I saw a bunch of Taliban in these cars with guns. I was kind of scared. Then actually I went home, but they were just hanging around. Well, it was very scary. We weren't scared and we were trying our best to get out of Kabul because we knew it was the more we stay that Taliban is going to come and knock on our door. And we heard from other families, other people that they're searching houses for people that did bad stuff to Taliban, that did stuff to Taliban. So yeah, we were definitely scared.

Which city did you arrive in Germany and how did your life change from then on?

When we left Islamabad, we left Alumba. We came to a city. I mean it was in an airport, it was a night. It's called Hanover. So I don't know a lot about the city, but that exact night they took us to took to a camp from the airport. It was really exciting. So after that, in this camp, there was a lot of refugees, people, Afghan people, people from different countries, like people from Ukraine. It was really nice. I met a bunch of friends. I made friends. Also, after a week it was time

to, so they take us to our actual city that they assigned us to. So they took us to a nearby city next to Colin. It was a small place, but I really loved it. And then we went to our apartments, the place we were going to live for the next one year.

It was exciting. And another thing that we actually lived with another Afghan family, but it was a big house, so we were sharing it. It was really nice. I met new friends after a month, I believe. I was actually really learning very hard how to speak German. How am I going to speak in schools? When I was in Pakistan, there was a tutor teaching little children how to speak German, how to count in German vocabulary in German. So in Germany, after a month, they registered us in a school. So it was my first day in the school. It was really nice. It was actually very funny. I remember the first day when I got into classroom, a lot of students gathered around me and one of my other friend, he was from Afghanistan. We were both the same. As I said, we both lived in the same place. So there was these students that came. Were asking a lot of questions, where you guys from? And then it was really fun that day. I really loved it. After that, I came home, I talked to my parents. I was like, I really love this school and about that, and I really loved it. And I went to that school for about eight months. It was a really, really good experience.

What did you like about that school and that year in Germany?

I would say that school was very, very diverse. There was people, people from Syria, people from Kurdistan and people from Iran. Also, there was a couple of students from Afghanistan. It was really nice and there was people that, there was a lot of students that went through the same situation as us. Also, another thing about the school that it was very different from schools in Afghanistan. It was very clean. They had a very large field, like a soccer field. I loved it. And after two, three classes every day the teacher would take us outside to play some soccer. It was really nice. I really learned German very quick, especially the last couple months before we left Germany, my German got very improved. It was really before that. If anyone asked me a question, I would say my German is very bad. I mean, my German is not really good, so I don't speak German and German though.

And so that last two months, it was really nice. I was booking appointments for my parents in German and my mom and dad were really proud of me, me and my sister and my little brothers. They were speaking German too. They made a lot of friends. So when my dad, one night, it was this night, about a month before we were leaving, we gathered and my dad to me, my sister, my two other brothers, he told us that we decided we were deciding to leave Germany. And then that day my little brother, all of them started crying. I don't want to leave. I love staying here. All of them were really sad. I was sad too, leaving a lot of stuff behind. Transitioning from a country into another country was hard. Now from Germany to another country, it's a lot. So yeah, after a month we actually left Germany. It was really hard to say goodbye. My whole class, we took a picture. I mean, they had planned to take a picture, so we took a picture of a whole

classroom. They handed to me. They bought a lot of stuff so I could eat in the plane. It was really nice. It was really sad when I left my last day of school in Germany. So yeah, that's it.

Are you still in touch with some of those classmates?

Absolutely, yeah, absolutely. I still talk to my friends in Germany. I FaceTime them sometimes. We actually play video games together. Sometimes I have to stay awake late night so they could be able to play games with me because of the time difference. But yeah, I'm still in touch with him.

And what happened next from Germany? You came directly to Chicago, right?

Yeah, after Germany, we came directly to Chicago. When we arrived to Chicago airport, my first impression was nice. There was a lady, her name, this lady, she was waiting for us in the airport so she could take us to our home. She was really nice. She was actually from Germany when she met us. She hugged all of us, my mom, my dad. She was really happy to see us and then we were happy to see her too. We started speaking in German. My English was really bad at that time. It was about three years ago, and she took us to our house, our apartment in Hyde Park. She took us to Hyde Park. So it was really nice that night she took us to our apartment. She told us that there is two other Afghan families that live in here in Hyde Park. Four families actually, but two of them lived very close to us.

So I got excited, these two other families. So the first night we met the first family. They were nice people. They brought us food for dinner. They came to our house, welcomed us. Then the second day, the other family brought us dinner. They were really nice people. And that second day I met this guy. He was my age. He was a nice guy. He didn't really speak Farsi. I didn't really speak Pashto. He spoke Pashto. So it was hard for us. He didn't speak German or Farsi, so it was hard. So his family, his dad, all of them came to our house. We met each other after a week. So they registered us to a nearby school. So based on my age. So I was supposed to stay seven months in elementary school and then go to high school. My first impression of American school was really, really bad. I didn't really like, in my mind, I was comparing it to German school.

I expected a lot, but it was not a good school. So I stayed at this middle school for eight months. But the teachers in there, especially my own teacher from eighth grade, which I stayed for eight, seven months. She was really nice. She welcomed me in the class. She introduced me to the whole class. It was really nice. I met the guy, the staff guy from this, which I told you guys from the second night, right? He came, he didn't speak. So I met him. He was a really nice guy. So as we kept talking and talking, I understood that he spoke a little Farsi. So he started speaking in RC. It was really nice. So after this eight months, I actually learned English. So after that in high school, me and him started speaking in English. So it was nice. It was nice. When I came to high school, I met his brother. His brother was a really nice guy. Yeah.

And how has your life changed since you came to Chicago?

My life has changed more like a lot these past six years. Transitioning from a country, from one country to another and then to another country, it is really hard. We were really tired of transitioning and moving from different countries. So I learned about new culture, new people. I experienced a lot of new stuff and it made me very mature, I would say.

What has been the most challenging part about moving multiple times?

The most challenging part would be leaving your friends behind, friends, relatives, behind. It's really hard being separated from friends and family. That would be the hardest.

What was the hardest thing about learning to live in Chicago?

A hard thing would be actually the cold winter in Chicago. It was really, really, really cold. I've never been to a place this cold before, and when it came to summer, it was really, really, really hot in the summer. So Chicago's a really great city.

Do you ever dream of going back to Afghanistan?

I would say I would go back to Afghanistan and go to visit family, but I don't think I'm going to go back to live in Afghanistan permanently. I think I have adapted a lot to Chicago, to America, to American life, then Afghanistan. Yeah. But I really miss my family in Afghanistan a lot and I would definitely go back and visit family very soon.

Is there anything that you miss about that culture that you don't have in your life in Chicago?

I would say having a lot of relatives around you is the hardest part. I don't have anyone that any relatives around in Chicago, so it was really nice when you were, I was going to my grandparents' house two to three times a month going to visit. But in here you just only FaceTime them on a phone.

How do you identify yourself at your school in Chicago, in the U.S.?

Well, I'm always proud of who I am, and I don't really deny or just lie to people where I'm from. Even though Afghanistan is a very complicated country, especially in American. American's view people from America. There's people that in my school, when they hear about Afghanistan, they think about terrorists, they think about Taliban, they think about bombing a lot of these stuff. And sometimes I'm kind of scared of saying, I'm from Afghanistan and people starting to judging you. But I actually haven't really faced that type of discrimination. Yeah.

So do you identify as an Afghan, as an Afghan American, as someone from the Middle East or as someone from Central Asia?

I identify myself as an Afghan.

Does Chicago feel like home to you right now?

Yes.

So if someone asks you, 'where is home?'

Yeah, if someone asks me 'where's home?' I would say Chicago. I have really adapted very well to Chicago.

How is it when you talk to your cousins who are still in Afghanistan, what do you notice that has changed about you or changed about them when you reconnect with them? After five years?

I actually don't really see any changes. I think when they talk to me, they talk to me the way, in a way. I am very young, a 12-year-old since the last time since they saw me, but sometimes I tell them that I'm older now.

What hopes do you have for the future, both for yourself and for Afghanistan and in general?

I hope that my country will be free. I hope that one day I'll be able to go back to Afghanistan, visit family, serve my country in a good way, help my people. Also hope that I will reach my goal to go to college in America, meet new people, also go back to Germany and visit my other friends in Germany. That's my hope.

Do you have any personal goals for yourself?

Personally, I hope that I will in the future, I will become a doctor. First of all, I know it's a very big process to become a doctor in America. I hope. I believe I can manage it and I really hope that I will reach my goal one day.

If you remember yourself when you had just arrived in the U.S., if you could talk to your seventh grade self, what would you tell him?

I would tell him to ask a lot of questions. I would say ask a lot of questions. Think about it before making a decision. Also love your parents. Always listen to your parents, love your siblings. That's it.