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Survivors and their Memories

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1. Oral history with Khalida Ghousia Akhtar, 2016 February 25

Title:
Oral history with Khalida Ghousia Akhtar, 2016 February 25
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Akhtar, Khalida Ghousia, 1937- and Saleem, Sobia
Author (no Collectors):
Akhtar, Khalida Ghousia, 1937-, Saleem, Sobia, Saleem, Sobia, and Saleem, Sobia
Description:
Mrs. Khalida Ghousia Akhtar was born on November 7th, 1937 in Jammu, Kashmir. Mrs. Akhtar's family can trace their family history at least a hundred years back to her grandparents. Mrs. Akhtar's family is of Rajput descent: her grandfather and his brothers were warriors. Mrs. Akhtar's Rajput ancestors, descendants of royalty and known for their bravery, had helped the British beat the local people, and in return, they had been given huge lands that they had willed to their descendants. They were the type of people who valued history and bravery more than wealth. Mrs. Akhtar describes an indepdent in which her ancestors, four brothers, had been told to race their horses as far as they could from dawn to dusk, and all the lands that they traversed would be their property. They weren't very religious people and didn't want their father's lands. When someone came to have them sign papers to give away their lands to her, they asked her servant where the rifle on his shoulder came from. He said he found it on the land, and they recognized it as belonging to their ancestors—this rifle is still in Mrs. Akhtar's family's ownershipd. They signed away this enormous property simple to retrieve this ancestral rifle. Moreover, Mrs. Akhtar's grandmother was from Tashkent, Russia from before WWI. During the first World War, they moved to the state of Kashmir. Mrs. Akhtar's grandfather was from Jalinder, Punjab, but he was posted in Jammu in the legal department. At the time, Kashmir had two capitals: Jammu, which was the primary capital, and Srinagar, which was the summer capital. Kashmir was a Muslim majority state with a Hindu king, Maharaja Hari Singh. This was a king that everyone respected, Mrs. Akhtar recalls. They felt honored to have him as a king because he seemed to truly care for his people, even if it put himself at risk. Mrs. Akhtar shares that two of her grandparents died of the black plague, which was common and quickly spreading I the area from lack of hygiene and disease carrying vermin. Maharaja Hari Singh would go through the back alleyways and small streets himself, on foot and on horse with his pant legs rolled up to his knees, to see how people were doing and if the hygiene of his kingdom was being properly handled. His advisors would repeatedly caution him not to go, lest he get the plague himself, but he was concerned more about his people than himself. He personally made sure that the streets were sprinkled with a layer of limestone to counteract the plague. Other than standing with his people during difficult times, he also joined peoples of all faiths during times of festivities and holidays; Mrs. Akhtar remembers that he would stand with the Muslims during their Eid prayers and celebrations. Kashmir seemed be happy and well cared for under the Maharaja Hari Singh.Mrs. Akhtar's own family was also quite strongly involved with the politics of Kashmir: her father's older brother, her thaya, was Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas, the man who would eventually become the Supreme Head, the akin to the Governor General, of Azad Jammu and Kashmir after the 1947 Partition and the struggle that would ensue in trying to allocate Kashmir. Mr. Abbas was very well known in the political circles of South Asia at the time—he was good friends with

Jawahar Lal Nehru, Liaqat Ali, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the two men who would become the leaders of the new states of India and Pakistan respectively. Mr. Abbas was good friends with another political leader of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah; however, soon, the friends and political allies founds themselves on the opposite side of a major issue that still sends ripples of political turmoil and violence in the area: Which new country should Kashmir join? While Kashmir's leader was a Hindu, it was a Muslim majority state, and Muslim majority states that bordered the soon-to-be Pakistan area were generally joining Pakistan; conversely, Kashmir also bordered India, and it had a Hindu leader, so what would be his place in a Muslim-led country? Sheikh Abdullah was of this latter view, believing that Kashmir should go to India; whereas, Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas, Mrs. Akhtar's thaya uncle, was of the view that Kashmir should join Pakistan. When Mr. Abbas was released from jail, despite their political differences Mr. Abdullah was the one who helped him get into Pakistan: he would be taken safely with military personnel; however, he would have to be blindfolded.Mrs. Akhtar shares the poignant and personal story of Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas's daughter, Mrs. Akhtar's own cousin, and her abduction. A few weeks before the Partition, Mrs. Akhtar's family members realized that the political tensions in Kashmir were increasing daily and that it might be safer for them to leave the country. Several of Mrs. Akhtar's family extended family members were escorted with Sikh army trucks to Pakistan—but only 12 or 13 miles from the border, everyone from all of these trucks was unloaded. All the men on the trucks from the ages of 14 to 50 are slaughtered right then and there; all the girls from the ages of 10 to 40 are abducted, including Mrs. Akhtar's Rahat, the daughter of Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas. When his 17-year-old daughter was abducted, Mrs. Akhtar's uncle was in jail because of his political views. When he got out of jail, Mr. Abbas did everything he could to retrieve his daughter, and although his friend Mr. Nehru was his political opponent, he would still call and apologize to Mr. Abbas about his daughter's abduction. He also helped in the efforts to retrieve Rahat, saying that these types of things were not supposed to happen. Once Rahat's kidnapper, a Hindu man by the name of Jagdeesh, realized that she was the daughter of a political honcho, he decided to marry here. It was eight long years before Mr. Abbas's family was able to locate their precious Rahat, but by that time, she was living in an Indian village with her husband as the mother of three Hindu children. In fact, she had been re-cultured as a Hindu woman as well. She told her family, "I don't want to go back. I am settled here. Jagdeesh is taking care of me and my kids. I can't leave my kids behind." Still, some of her family insisted on at least being allowed to visit her—and they did. She welcomed them but begged, "Please don't touch this subject of me returning anymore. I know this culture now."Mrs. Akhtar's thaya, Mr. Abbas, wanted to meet Jagdeesh, but he feared that he'd be shot; Mr. Abbas, however, wanted integrate Jagdeesh into his family. Mr. Abbas said, "No, I don't want to shoot you—I want to bring you and your family to Pakistan," where they had migrated by the time, "so my family can be all together again." In 1955, Pakistan offered open visas for Indians to attend a cricket match in Lahore. Mr. Abbas told Jagdeesh and his family to take advantage of this visa and come to Pakistan—ad they did. First, Rahat came, then her children, and finally Jagdeesh. She was sort of made Muslim again. Her children and her husband were given Muslim names: Jagdeesh became Khalid. None of the family, however, was happy in Pakistan. As former Hindus, they weren't accepted as truly Muslim; even Rahat herself was no longer accepted, and she cried all the time. During the wars of 1965 ad 1971 between Pakistan and India, Jagdeesh was under constant observation; because no one trusted him and his loyalty to Pakistan, it was difficult for him to get and keep a job. Rahat and Jagdeesh had three more kids, but two of their six children went crazy because no one in their society accepted. People accepted the songs, eager to marry their daughters into good families, but no one wanted their sons to marry to daughters from a former Hindu family.In that convoy of twenty trucks protected by Sikh soldiers transporting Muslims from Indian to Pakistani territory, there were two more members of Mrs. Akhtar's family that survived: her uncle and his wife—who was also Rahat's mother sister. Mrs. Rahat's aunt, who was 22 or 23 three at the time, was abducted by a person who took her to his home. As she sat there, his father walked by and he recognized him. The kidnapper's father was a friend of her own father—they book did decorative paintings together. From that point onwards, her father's friend treated her like his own daughter, and he made sure that she was safely taken to Lahore. Once there though, she had no way of reaching her family, but she was a smart young woman, and she announced her name and location on the radio a few times—"I am so-and-so. Where is my husband? I am in the Jesus-Mary Convent"—until a family friend was able to alert her family to come fetch her. When that refugee truck convoy was attacked, Mr. Akhtar's uncle, ran and hid under a nearby bridge. He said he stayed there for a day or two; he would spend all night walking way from the bridge,

but still wake up under it, in the same place. A former servant of Mrs. Akhtar's family found him and took him to join the rest of his family in Pakistan. By the time they reached there, they were in terrible shape, but slowly Mrs. Akhtar's family would reach Pakistan.Mrs. Akhtar is very attached to her extended family because they lived together for many years before (and eventually after) the Partition; her family divided its time between three main cities in Kashmir. Mrs. Akhtar's father was an inspector of police, and he and his six brothers all lived together in the same house, maintained by her uncle who was a foreign-educated, well-off engineer. As a child, Mrs. Akhtar spent much of her time between Bhadarva, Ranbeer Singh Pura, and Hiranagar. Bhadarva is were she spent a majority of her childhood; in order to reach Bhadarva, which was 200 miles from the main capital of Jammu, her family would rent a bus to a middle city, Batowt, where they would sometimes spend the night. From Batowt, once the path got too narrow, they would take horses on a 12-hour journey. Ranbeer Singh Pura was only 12 miles from Jammu, and Mrs. Akhtar studied there in third grade. Hiranagar was a three-hour bus ride from Jammu; in order to reach it, they had to cross a large river by going around it.Mrs. Akhtar was Batowt when, at the age of nine, she heard that the Partition had occurred, and her family began their migration journey. Although she wasn't very political conscious at that time, she remembers that it was after the announcement that people in their region started to turn against each other. The Sikhs in the region attacked their house in Jammu. Because they were a part of Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas's family, they were under strict observation and not supposed to leave the kingdom state—but they new that they would danger if they didn't. Mrs. Akhtar's family took their bus to Jammu, but they didn't go to their Uncle Abbas's house, where they usually stayed—they went to a hotel instead. One of their Hindu servants/friends, Mouni, came to their hotel room. Panicked, he told them, "They're watching you. On the side of your house, it says, 'Your house will be raided, and you will be killed.'" Mouni told the Mrs. Akhtar's family to leave the city and go to Ranbeer Singh Pura, which was only 12 miles from the Pakistani border. They stayed there for a week. Her whole packed their few belongings in only four suitcases and packed into four tongas to go to the Pakistani border, which was only two hours away.Once there, in the middle of the night, Mrs. Akhtar's father and uncle patrolled and scouted the area to figure out how to enter Pakistan undetected. The best time to cross the border would be between 10 AM and 2 PM, when some of the officers took their lunch. During that time, the whole extended family ran the three miles to cross the border and reach the closest village on the Pakistani side of the border. Mrs. Akhtar remembers that all the women were crying, and her father and uncle were telling them to save their tears for later and just run; everyone was carrying children who were too young to ran fast enough, including herself. Mrs. Akhtar was carrying her one-year-old sister while others were carrying her five-year-old brother and her six-and-a-half-year-old brother. On the way, they drank dirty pond water to survive. Mrs. Akhtar's father and uncle paid three months rent upfront to a landlord to get a place to stay for their family. Mrs. Akhtar recalls that banks were still accepting checks at least two months after the Partition because that was the currency that her family used to pay people and to withdraw money. To avoid arousing suspicion from their neighbors that they were political refugees on the run, they acted like they lived there. They had no food, so they boiled black stones in clay pots. A few poor land tillers came forward to offer them blankets and food. When an army truck passed through the area, full of ammunition to transport to Kashmir in the ensuing battle to follow for ownership of this northern state, Mrs. Akhtar's father and her uncle managed to convince the truck divers, after paying them handsomely, to let their family board their empty trucks. The trucks took them to Sialkot, where Mrs. Akhtar's family would stay for in a hotel for a few days before all 25 or so of them would move for 6-8 years to a villa in Sargoda, given to them in exchange for their lost properties and homes now in India Occupied Kashmir. (Note that Pakistanis now call their portion of Kashmir Azad (Free) Kashmir and the India part of Kashmir Occupied Kashmir—and Indians similarly call their portion of Kashmir Azad Kashmir and the Pakistani portion Occupied Kashmir.) Mrs. Akhtar's thaya Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas would be moved to Rawalpini, the army headquarters of Pakistan, where he would be make the Supreme Head of Azad Kashmir, Pakistan.After the Partition, Mrs. Akhtar would spent much of her time living her uncle and his British, Jewish wife, Olga, because their home was closer to better school—this couple would become like a second set of parents for Mrs. Akhtar. Ogla Auntie, especially, was like a second mother to Mrs. Akhtar, who calls her a Sufi saint; she would always encourage the girls in their family to student to their heart's content. Mrs. Akhtar's mother and father also supported her a great deal, by providing her with resources and strong character traits. When she was a child, Mrs. Akhtar's father would bribe her to do things by offering her short, ten page long stories to read. Mrs. Akhtar realls a Kashmiri folk tale about "Lil Dilli," a

patient, saintly woman. When she got married and when to her in-laws, her parents would ask her, “What did they give you to eat?” When she wouldn’t answer, they would lift her stomach flap and see nothing. The pious woman that Lil Dilli was, she prayed and asked God to make the stomach flab smooth and un-openable, so that her mother-in-law wouldn’t be dishonored because of how little she had been able to feed her. By the age of 16, she had read through her father’s library, and so he began teacher her to use a revolver, how to fire, and how to ride a horse, the police offer that he was. Mrs. Akhtar says that her mother taught her compassion while her father taught her confidence and courage.Perhaps as a result of Auntie Olga’s support, Mrs. Akhtar went on to complete medical school, with an emphasize in gynecology and surgery, and open her own clinic in the Korangi area of Karachi, the city she moved to after she married her husband. After she got married, Mrs. Akhtar put all the wedding got she had received as a part of her dowry and as presents into the bank, and she took a loan against it. She remembers that people cried at her doing this, but she said the gold did not matter—she needed the capital to create her clinic in this underserved part of Pakistan. Mrs. Akhtar’s clinic, named Khalida Hospital after her, soon became quite popular in the area, and she would see upwards of 200 patients a day. Although she had three doctors working with her and a staff of 37 personnel, including nurses and others, under her, her patients and community only wanted to be treated by her. Soon, people in her community were coming to her not only for medical matters, but social and economic ones as well, writing her letters from as far as Dubai to seek her advice and opinion on personal matters. In the beginning, before she was able to afford a car, she commuted 2.5 hours daily by public bus to reach her clinic. She was the first lady doctor in a ten-mile radius in that region. Although she worked there for 11 years, she had to stop because she couldn’t afford to pay political parties, like the MQM, the bribes they demanded to keep from harassing her clinic. When she finally had to give up her practice, she donated her clinic to Al-Shifa, a hospital and organization dedicated to handicapped children in Karachi.These days, Mrs. Akhtar lives with her daughter in the U.S. Here, she spent her time volunteering at Kaiser Permanente and John Muir Hospitals. She also enjoys her time painting, writing poetry, making pottery, reading, drawing/sketching, playing piano, among other activities—she says she’s finally able to do all those things that she wanted to do when she was ten and couldn’t because the Partition, that she personally believes never should have happened, made her grow up too fast. “United,” Mrs. Akhtar says, quoting the first President of India, “South Asia could have been the largest democracy. The people there have lived together for at least 1000 years, and religion shouldn’t be the basis for nationhood because it allows for the possibility of extremism to creep in.” Even now, Mrs. Akhtar’s family cannot return to India Occupied Kashmir, although they can visit India. Mrs. Akhtar truly hopes she is allowed to return to her homeland and visit it one day. She shares a message for future generations in memory of her own parents: “Live your life every day with courage, confidence, and compassion. They are the three things that have helped me all my life. Keep your mind open, and never fear what tomorrow brings—refine yourself and all of humanity.”

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