

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON****ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT****Interview with: Dr. Mazhar Kazi****Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi****Date: January 16, 2007****Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola**

UQ: Oral history interview of Dr. Mazhar Kazi conducted by Uzma Quraishi of the University of Houston, January 16, 2007.

MK: This is Dr. Mazhar Kazi. I have spent more than 35 years of my productive life in Houston and I consider myself one of the pioneers of coming to Houston. I have before me a list of 17 to 18 questions. I will go through them and try to answer them as best as I can. The first question is, "Exactly when did you come to Houston?" To the best of my knowledge, it was August or September of 1963 that I came to Houston. I was a graduate student at the University of Houston and I was doing my masters in biology. I stayed at the University of Houston from 1963 to 1966.

Now, the second question is, "Did you feel forced to leave your home country or did you want to come here?" No, nobody forced me because in the 1960s, America was known, for one thing, that anybody who wanted to do his graduate work, like a doctorate, America was offering too many grants and scholarships and citizenship, so the majority of the Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshi came to America for doing their Ph.D. So, I also came to the United States by getting some kind of financial grant from the University.

“Why did you come?” I came here to get my doctorate in biology.

“What made you first think of migrating?” Migration was a slow process. It was not something that I made myself . . . I did not come here with the intention of migration. I went back to Pakistan in 1966 and in 1969, I came back to get my Ph.D. but at that time, I came to know that the American Embassy was giving immigrant visa to those persons who had some kind of connections or financial support back in the United States. So actually, I was coming back to get my doctorate but since it was possible for me to get an immigrant visa and I had very good connections in Houston; I had an American family whom I used to call as my mother and father and I was virtually like a son to them. So, they sponsored me in terms of taking care of the financial responsibility. So, I came back with the immigrant visa but still I went to school and continued my school and I got one more Master’s, then I got a degree in Clinical Pathology. Then, I got a degree in Allied Health Sciences; rather, I got a doctorate as well. So, by this time, I lived here 6 or 7 years as an immigrant. So then, I decided that since I completed my degrees here and I was already living as an immigrant, why not get settled down here? So, it was a gradual process of settling down here.

“Was it a joint family decision or independently?” No, it was a joint family decision.

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“Why did you choose the USA?” The only reason I chose the USA was that in the 1960s, the United States was the only country which was giving financial aid to those students who were trying to get their Ph.D. In England or Australia or Canada, we had to pay for our education but in the United States, we were offered teaching or research fellowship and it was easier to get our Ph.D. here.

“How did you apply for visa and did you really have any obstacles?” The first time I applied for a visa, I had to get some kind of security for the financial support. So, my financial support was the partial scholarship that I got from University and then in the institution where I was teaching, they gave me a letter saying that they would support me financially as well. So, on that basis, I got my student visa. For the immigrant visa, the condition was that I should have a clean police record in Houston and back in Pakistan, so I got these records. Then, the U.S. government wanted to have some kind of financial security that when I came to America, I would not be a burden for the country. So, my American-adopted mother and father sent a letter of sponsorship and that helped me get my visa.

“Did you speak English before you arrived here?” Yes, anybody who comes from Pakistan is fluent in English and we do not have any problem in speaking except the fact that we don't have the American accent but we can understand.

“Did you keep a journal of your experiences?” For the first few days, I kept it. Then, I became disinterested.

“Did you write letters home and to whom?” The first few years when I came home, I was *so* homesick that one time, I started crying to my professor. I told him that I was so homesick, I didn't know what to do. Monday was the day that I received a letter from home and it was so sure for me that the letter will come from home that every day after 1:00 or 1:30 when I would go to my office, the secretary would let me know if the letter was there. So, my relationship with my mother and father was so strong that they will receive a letter from me every [week] and I will receive a letter from them every [week] and remember, I am talking every week. And remember those days in the 1960s, that a phone was a luxury. It was very difficult for a common man like me to call Pakistan because it was so costly that you could not even dream of it. So, maybe in the 3 years of my stay in America, I called my family just 1 or 2 times by phone but the rest of the time, it was communication by letters and it was very regular communication. And then, as I told you, calling by phone at that time was almost impossible because we were all students.

It is very hard for me to recall those days. My take home salary was \$160 a month and on this \$160 a month, I survived. You would not believe it but I did it. I rented an apartment. The rent of the apartment was \$80. It was rather like a cabin and in order to reduce my expenses, I shared the apartment with somebody else. So, I was virtually paying \$40 for the apartment. So, out of \$160, \$40 went for the apartment and then maybe \$15 or \$20 will go for the bills and I could live a very comfortable life on \$100.

The only thing about that - we did not need a car at that time because I came in 1963. In 1964, I bought a bicycle I think at \$39, something like that. And that bicycle for me was a luxury because I used to buy groceries, go to the grocery store, pick it up and then go back to my home with the groceries on my shoulders. It was very difficult to carry the groceries during the winter time. So when I got the bicycle I had a basket right in front of my bicycle. So, I could carry my groceries and it was really a luxury for me.

“When did you purchase your first home?” Now, the second chapter of my life begins from 1963 to 1966. Let me recall a few things that were very remarkable in my life. That was a time that we did not have any kind of political polarization between Indians and Pakistanis. I think at that time, I was the only full-time [Pakistani] student. There were 3 more Pakistani students but they were only half-time students. And so, as far as India is concerned, I think there were about 3 or 4 full-time students and the rest were all part-time students. So, we used to have a very good relationship with Indians and Pakistanis. Both groups were very homesick. We would sit together for hours and hours and talk about our families. So, this was the stage that was between 1963 to 1966.

In 1965, there was the war between India and Pakistan. At that time, one of my closest friends was an Indian and somehow the local newspaper came to know that I was from Pakistan and I was very close friends with an Indian. So, they came to my house and took an interview - how come India and Pakistan are fighting and you are friends to each other? So, for the first time, I think it was in 1965 that my interview was relayed by newscast or TV stating that . . . I said in my interview that as human beings, Indians and

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Pakistanis have no problem with each other. The fighting which is going on is political and we still maintain good relations. So, this was something, sweet memory. And then, in 1966, I went back to Pakistan.

I came back in 1969 as a [student] and then, again, as I told you before, I came not as an immigrant but I came as a student. So, from 1969 to 1977 or from 1970 to 1977, I went to school. It took me 7 years to get my doctorate but by 1971, I had started working full-time and I bought my first home in 1975. And then, immediately after that . . . rather, I bought my first home in 1974 and immediately after that, something happened that I would like to relate here just like a sweet memory. In 1974, I bought a very nice home close to town and then immediately after a few days, I bought another home in Alief. In both cases, the agent was the same. So, when I bought the second home, I remembered that white, American, Caucasian, beautiful lady, she could not swallow that an immigrant had bought a second home. She said, "How come you came to this country and bought 2 homes in such a small time?" I said, "Look, if you are smart, you should beat me." So, in a way, she got so jealous that I got 2 homes in a very short time.

"Describe your relationship with neighbors when you purchased your first home?" In talking of those days in the 1970s, I understand the people were more humane and more friendly. So, my next door neighbor, I remember very well when I moved here where she brought a big, homemade bread and she gave it to us saying, "We are your neighbors." And then, we became very friendly. So, for now, I am feeling that we are getting more and more self-centered. When I bought the home, I was very close to my

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neighbors. My children used to play with the neighbors but now, I feel that their relationship is not so cordial. People are getting more and more self-centered. So, let me stop here and find out to what more should I speak.

UQ: Will you talk about the American family that sponsored you? Where did you meet them? Who set that arrangement up?

MK: So, in the 1960s, it was a common problem that when you came here, there was a system of host family. And every graduate student was assigned a host family. Yancy was the name of the person who became my host family. They were a middle-aged husband and father [wife], and the two children. So what happened was for every occasion of their festivity, like Christmas or New Year's Day, they would invite me and I would spend my festivity with them. And then, they took me to different places.

I can never forget that incident that I had a very good American friend who had some good connection in Crockett, the small city, Crockett. And then, she took me to Crockett to spend 2 or 3 days there. And then, she told me that I was the only foreigner who had ever visited that small city. So, this lady went to the mayor and said to the mayor that there was a graduate student who had come from Pakistan. So, the mayor came down to my house and he gave me the key of the city and he also gave me an honorary certificate saying that it was an honor for Crockett to have an international student of Pakistan. So, those were the good days that when you went as just a student, people would give you that respect.

At that time, I can recall it very well that most of us were so involved in our study that . . . I am talking of those young days when I was a young man . . . if one of our friends got a date, that would be big news for the whole Indian, Pakistani community that such and such person got a date because, you know, it was impossible because we were studying, we didn't have any car, we didn't have any kind of association with the American boys and girls. But those persons who were kind of aggressive, sometimes they will get a date. So, that was very big news in the Indian Pakistani community that such and such person got a date. When he came back, I said, "What did you do? What did you do? What did you do?" and so on and so forth. So, you know, the whole community was very excited that one person got a date.

But, you see, nobody had a car and especially in my case, I recall those days that on weekends, I was the first person to enter the library because the library would open at 2 o'clock and I was the last person to leave the library when it closed at 12 o'clock. There was nothing I could do. I could not go anywhere. I didn't have any friends. I didn't have any money. And you know, sitting home made me so depressed. So, at 2 o'clock . . . you see, at that time, the University of Houston had one small library that was two floors rather than 3 or 4 floors, with a big glass door gallery. So, I was just waiting when the University opened. So, on Sunday, the library would open at 2 o'clock. So, I would leave my home around 12:30, 1:00, and then I will be the first person to go to library and then until late at night, I will just sit there and look at the faces because at least you can see human faces. And I remember very well, there was a girl who was kind of ugly but

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she was the only girl who would be there besides me, but I did not have the courage to talk to her but we were the only two people who would always go out [to the library]. I think sometimes I said hello to her but, you know, I was so lonely at that time that I still remember the face of this girl. She was sitting like me and watching through the window what was happening outside. But maybe she didn't get any dates. I couldn't afford to have a date because I didn't have a car. So, those were very sweet memories. I don't know what else could I talk about? But I really cherished those memories.

I am very much pleased to say that I was the first person who started the Muslim Students' Association at the University of Houston and I was the first person who started the Pakistan [Students'] Association of the University of Houston. I suppose you know that *Eid* [annual Islamic holy day] Prayer is something so great in the life of Muslims that usually you have 10,000 to 15,000 people on average in each prayer. So, the first time I organized the *Eid* Prayer at the University of Houston, it was 3 persons including myself. So, this is something that one should remember, that today, when you go to a *Eid* congregation, if you go to that Reliant Center or any kind of downtown center, you will see a good 10,000 to 15,000 people there. But I recall very well that the first *Eid* festivity was 3 persons including myself.

UQ: So, overall, your experience when you look back was a positive experience?

MK: Very positive and very rewarding because I made the best use of my stay in America, both in terms of learning and earning because by the grace of God, I have 3

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master's degrees, I have a degree in Clinical Pathology, I have a degree in Medical Technology, I have a doctorate in Allied Health. I have given lectures that my first job in this country was as a bus boy for 70 cents an hour. When I came to the third year of my study, then I had saved some money and then a chance came that I could work as a waiter. So, my roommate was an Arab and these Arabs are more aggressive than Pakistanis so he just bought the car in a few days. So, he wanted to sell his old car and it was a 1953 Ford Galaxy. So, he sold that car to me for \$450. And man, it was a very good car. So then I got this car for \$450. Then, I started looking for a job. In Pasadena, I got a job at a pizza restaurant. So, I started my job at 70 cents an hour as a bus boy. And later on, I was promoted to a waiter and I was making \$1.00 an hour. So, I would work only Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays for 3 days and my total gain every day was about \$8 to \$10 which was a very great amount of money for me at that time because, you know . . . I am talking about tips because if I worked 6 hours, the salary was \$6 but my tip would be about \$8 to \$10 [a day]. So, the last year of my stay at the University, I had the experience of having odd jobs and then making about \$8 to \$10 a night in tips. At that time, it was good money. When I went back to Pakistan, I could buy a car, I could buy several other things and then I saved the money as much as possible.

UQ: Did you send some of that money back to support your family in Pakistan?

MK: Yes, off and on, I had to send some money back to support Pakistan but the point of that was that God has been very good to me, that I never took life for granted. I always took life as a challenge for me and I made the best with the time and the money

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that I made. And I think that I have nothing but sweet memories of my stay in this country. And one thing more, I can recall because I was just . . . there were only a few students there. When Billy Graham came to the University, I was the president of the MSA, so I was given a special call, "go and meet Billy Graham." Of course, I knew who Billy Graham was but I was very glad that I was presented to Billy Graham and I had the honor of shaking hands with Billy Graham. And I said to Billy Graham, "Billy Graham, I am very proud to have met you and I am very aware of the fact that you are very aware of what Islam and Quran is but let this be a gesture of my love and respect to you so I am presenting Quran to you by my own hands." So I presented the Quran by my own hands, and I am very happy that he shook hands with me and he took the Quran from me.

UQ: Do you recall any difficulties specifically in coming here - whether with the people or the culture?

MK: Oh, yes. In 1960, there were so many racial problems and I am a brown person, you see? One time, I went to Telephone Road to get my haircut and the man kicked me out. He said, "Don't come inside." Then, I could see that these were the areas that I did not have to go. See, there were certain areas that I didn't know what area it was and I just . . . that area, I had my own bicycle so I drove there. He just kicked me out. He said, "Don't enter my shop." That was one of the bad experiences.

UQ: So, there were certain neighborhoods in Houston where you could enter and other places . . .

MK: I cannot say there were certain neighborhoods but I recall that there was a certain area of shops on Telephone Road that I went there and then I could see that that area had some kind of poor shops and some kind of low quality stores but one time, I went there and from then on, I did not go there anymore.

UQ: And the University - did you ever experience any segregation like that?

MK: Not at the University because that was the time that foreign students were very much prized because we behaved well, we had good grades, and our full-time job was a student. And then we had the [teaching] fellowship when I was teaching and everybody gave me very high comments because I was a very good teacher and by the grace of Allah that everybody who came to my class was happy, so much so that people used to look towards my class and be part of my class. But again, what I am saying is that the situation now has totally changed because I could not conceive . . . you can try to understand what I am saying. On Saturday and Sunday, there was nothing for me to do. No dating, no picnic, no picture, nothing because I was a full-time student and so were all around me . . .

Before I left this place, you know, I did not mention this to you that, you see, I was working on a grant that was given to my professor and then that grant was to find something, very special thing that may help bananas from rotting. My research has been patented because I was paid for . . . no I did not get the money out of that but my

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professor got the name because every week, day and night, day and night, day and night, I was busy doing research. And in 3 days, I published 2 big papers and still I am very proud to say that my research has been patented. But again, once you get money, you cannot get any benefit out of that. But the point of that . . . life was so busy and productive that my professors respected me, my teachers respected me, the international advisor respected me. Everybody knew me on campus. It was very funny because we had one Office of the International Student and I used to work on bananas. So, when the bananas would get ripe, I would take the whole box and take it to the International Office and they would shout, "Hey! Banana-man has come, banana-man has come! So, I put the whole box in the office and everybody would jump and get lots of bananas. I used to get bananas, crates and crates of bananas to do research and what will I do with them? So, every week, I would go to the International Students' Office. There was a big office. Students from different countries were there. I put the box there and everybody was happy to see. So, I lived not just a life of an average man, I was known, put it this way. I was known and active and productive and I left the country with very good credit. And, you know, the testimonial that my head of the department told me, I still remember that he wrote down that "several students came to my department. Mr. Kazi is one who is one of the most model student of my department," that I still have with me.

UQ: Did you spend most of your time on campus then?

MK: 99% campus because there was no way, what can you do? The point of that . . .

in the fourth year, I got the car but the car also I could not go much out of the school

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because there was so much pressure at the time in research that there was no time for goofing around.

UQ: And how did the other students treat you, the white students?

MK: Oh, they were very happy with me because sometimes I would use British English and they would correct it. One of the students taught me some dirty words so I said it but that person told me that, you see, this is the dirtiest slang in America, you should not use it. So, they made fun of me. And I remember one thing very, very well . . . that one time, an American student took me for dinner to a place and I did not even know that . . . so, he brought a big dish and in that big dish, the sweet and the sour and all the things were in the same plate. So, I didn't even know what to do so I mixed everything and I ate the whole thing with no idea that the food was so bad. When the food was over, the man said, "You see, you mixed the salty and sweet together. You are not supposed to eat like that." I said, "Why didn't you tell this to me before?" So, there have been such occasions in my life where I was not familiar with the food and I was not familiar with the drinks or something, so sometimes I'd do such simple mistakes.

UQ: O.K. Is there anything you would want to say in closing as far as . . . since you have been here for many years, how your overall impression of America has changed, or of Houston?

MK: Houston has become more cosmopolitan because at the time when I came to America, Bellaire was the end of Houston at that time. No, Sharpstown was at the end of Houston. And at that time, life was not so fast and we didn't have so much crime. I used to walk . . . my house was on Calhoun. It was not a house. You can say it was like a cabin. So, I would stay in the library until 10, 11 o'clock at night. At that time, I would walk down to my house and night and I never felt anything like being mugged or being raped or being murdered. It was so nice and comfortable. But now, the things are changing. And moreover, at that time, the majority of the students were graduate students. So, they were very busy in doing their research and studying. But now, I see the majority of them are undergrads. Undergrad students are not so serious.

UQ: This is the end of the interview then.