

Anthony Salazar 0:04

[intro music] Hello, and welcome to the Harrisonburg 360 podcast. I'm your host, Anthony Salazar.

The Harrisonburg 360 podcast is an attempt to capture and record narratives of immigrants living in the Harrisonburg community. Using past and present voices of Harrisonburg immigrants, students in our JMU English class have collaborated to create a space focused on the importance of listening to each other's voices. Every person deserves a chance to share their story, and we, as a class, are privileged to share these stories with you in hopes of expanding perceptions of what it means to be an immigrant in Harrisonburg.

Each week Harrisonburg 360 is produced by a different team of students. This week's episode, Bravery Displaced, was produced by Candy Foster, Anthony Salazar, Molly Boucher, and Rachel Hoffman. And this week's episode, we'll be examining what caused each of our interview subjects to leave their home country to seek asylum in the United States, the impact of educational opportunities, and the importance of women's rights. Both interviewees are from the Kurdistan region, which encompasses eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and Western Iran, as well as, smaller parts of northern Syria and Armenia. Osman is from Iran and Salwa is from Iraq. Although Kurdish people consist of less than 15% of the Iranian population, they also make up about half the number of people in prison for political reasons, and have been subjected to political persecution for many years in Iran. Following the 1991 uprising of the Iraqi people against Saddam Hussein, many Kurds were forced to flee the country to become refugees. Our podcast will examine the courage and resilience of our two interview subjects as they fled their home countries of Iran and Iraq to seek political asylum in the United States.

[transition music] Our first interview was conducted with a man from Iran named Osman Rezain as part of the Shenandoah Valley Oral History Project. Osman was specifically from the region of Kurdistan, an area that underwent Islamic Revolution in 1979 and this was heavily reflected on the country's new culture and made things difficult for non Muslims like Osman, Osman's education was greatly impacted by the cultural revolution, because the educational focus was religious rather than focus on traditional subjects like mathematics, science and history.

Daniel Brennan 2:48

School.

So, when did you start school when you're in Iran?

Osman Rezain 2:52

When I was like 6 years old when I started school until like - I go to school almost like 10 years and after that I stopped.

Daniel Brennan 3:02

And then you stopped?

Osman Rezain 3:03

Yeah.

Daniel Brennan 3:04

Did you enjoy your time in school or with any subjects? Or was it -

Osman Rezain 3:08

No, my country - The school is actually isn't nothing, you know, all time is just talking about Muslim, those kind of thing. Not talking about, like something. I don't know, like the United States.

Daniel Brennan 3:19

Oh, so school was clearly religious based. That must have been hard for you.

Osman Rezain 3:22

Yeah, it's different.

Daniel Brennan 3:26

And did your parents, especially father who worked in construction, did he have any type of education or not at all?

Osman Rezain 3:32

No, he died last year.

Daniel Brennan 3:33

Oh, really? Sorry to hear that.

Osman Rezain 3:34

Yeah, he's like - yeah, it's okay. Yeah. He's at 80, like almost 85 years old. The whole life he's working construction. He's not having nothing like -

Daniel Brennan 3:42

Really? He just kind of grew up and went straight in the workforce?

Osman Rezain 3:46

Yeah.

Daniel Brennan 3:47

And your brothers, did they have any type of education or did they also go straight into work?

Osman Rezain 3:51

No they - sometimes they have a job, sometimes they don't have it. Yeah, yeah, my country, I told you, like 80% people's is poor people, they don't have nothing. Only maybe like 20% are rich people.

Daniel Brennan 4:04

So, there's a huge gap between the rich and the poor there.

Osman Rezain 4:05

Yeah.

Anthony Salazar 4:06

As a non-Muslim Osman suffered under the Iranian regime controlling Kurdistan. This made him sympathetic to the plight of other persecuted groups and caused him to become involved in a feminist organization, which supported the rights of women. Iranian women face discrimination and personal status matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. It's possible that an Iranian woman could face death if they committed adultery. Here Osman describes his government's view of women and his participation in a feminist organization that protects the rights of women.

Osman Rezain 4:40

Because my country you know, the whole Muslim country, the woman is two women equal one man for everything.

Daniel Brennan 4:47

Wow.

Osman Rezain 4:48

Yeah. Two women equal one man.

Daniel Brennan 4:50

So, I bet that led to a lot of problems.

Osman Rezain 4:51

Yeah. For a woman - is Muslim for woman is too bad. You know. All the time, they hit woman, they kill woman. You know, if you go the police said, "Oh, he's okay. It's his wife. It's no problem."

Daniel Brennan 5:04

A lot of abusive relationships went on?

Osman Rezain 5:05

Yeah. Sometimes they kill her. Yeah, a lot of time. A lot of time has happened. I have a - I have a friend. You know, whenever she, she lives in California, you know, she's from Iraq. But she's, she's Kurdish too, you know. She was like 17 years old, you know, 17 years old. One day, she says, one guy, the old guy, like 60 years old, she can - he come to my house. She said to me, you know. And then her father said, you have to marry with this guy. The guy - he's 60 years old. She's 17. Between the guy - the, her father is like something like, sell something. The guy is 60

years old. Sure. He has another wife. His wife is gonna have a baby, you know? Because he wanted this girl only for baby

Daniel Brennan 5:52
Just to have kids?

Osman Rezain 5:53
They want a contract for four years.

Daniel Brennan 5:55
For her contract? Of marriage?

Osman Rezain 5:57
Two, three a baby and then bring back to the girl, to her father house.

Daniel Brennan 6:01
Wow.

Osman Rezain 6:02
They don't say nothing to the girl. She said after like four years, she had three kids. Two boys and one girl. You know, she's say, one day my husband is coming after four years. He says, we go to your father house.

Daniel Brennan 6:19
Just kicked her out?

Osman Rezain 6:19
Yeah. He don't say to the girl like this, say, "Come on, go change your dress". They're saying, "We want to go". "To where? I want to bring my kids to it." He said, "No, no, just you, you and me." And then he go to her father house and then say, "This is your girl". That's it. The contract is finished. Four years. When she come back, her father - her father, mother, they're separated, divorce. You know, her mother is married with another guy. Her father is married with another woman. When she go to her father house, her father's kick her out again, saying "I don't want you, you go where you want to go, go". She go to her mother house, the same thing. They kick her out. I was working with the feminist in Iraq for five years. We save the woman's - they trying to kill her. We save her. We have a big building, you know. A lot of different companies, they help us, they give to us money for - to help those kind of woman's, you know. Then, we saved this girl. We saved her for a couple years and then we sent her to them. She comes to - move to Canada. And then she married with another guy in the California National border. She never see her kids.

Daniel Brennan 7:32
Oh, so she's never seen them since?

Osman Rezain 7:34

No.

Anthony Salazar 7:34

It was Osman's involvement with this feminist organization, as well as ,a rebel group that fought against the Islamic government that forced him to flee Kurdistan for fear of death to seek asylum in the United States. In this next clip, Osman discusses his transition into the American workforce.

Daniel Brennan 7:52

No, just right away?

Osman Rezain 7:53

No, I'm really happy. Yeah, with the people. All the time, I was working for a company. I was working Banta, it's making a book. Rent a Book.

Daniel Brennan 8:02

Okay, what'd you do there?

Osman Rezain 8:03

We're making a book.

Daniel Brennan 8:04

On what? What's the book about?

Osman Rezain 8:07

It's book, book - all kinds of books.

Daniel Brennan 8:09

Oh, Okay.

Osman Rezain 8:09

Yeah, it's a big, big company. Right now it's Donnelly, no more Banta. You know Donnelly?

Daniel Brennan 8:14

I've never heard of it.

Osman Rezain 8:16

They're making a book. That's all kind of book. And then afterwards I work and making a cabinet for kitchen. And then, yeah. All the time, I talked to people. I had a lot of friends. Black, White, Spanish, you know, all kinds of different.

Daniel Brennan 8:33

So you had no problems -

Osman Rezain 8:35

No, no problems at all. No, I don't like problem because all the time I do, I do the right thing. I know do something to hit some people, you know, some wrong thing. I hate those kinds of things. I don't like trouble actually, you know.

Daniel Brennan 8:47

You try to stay away from that?

Osman Rezain 8:48

Yeah, I don't like trouble -

Daniel Brennan 8:52

Have you had any help from any type of refugee organization to help you, kind of, learn about American culture and customs or anything like that at all? Or -

Osman Rezain 9:00

If this is the first time that you come they told us, this is America. Like this, you have to work or you have to talk to people like this. Some just talk to us some ideas and then -

Daniel Brennan 9:11

And were they helpful with helping? Were they helpful with getting you moved in and everything?

Osman Rezain 9:16

Yeah, the first time you come, like almost like two months, they help us. Yeah, for everything. Yeah. They come to us sometime that you need something or they took us to some of us we're looking for job, they help.

Anthony Salazar 9:27

Osman now runs a windshield repair business and finds satisfaction in the many new opportunities offered to him both economic and social.

Osman's story's one of daring and bravery. But he's not the only one who is forced to leave the Kurdistan region for fear of retribution by the government. In our next segment, you will hear from Salwa Mahdi, who lived in Iraq where because of "morality" police and vigilantes, enforcing their country discriminatory laws against women and non Muslims forced many citizens to seek asylum in the United States. Salwa Mahdi is from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. She has an undergraduate degree in business with a focus on statistics from a university there. She was forced to leave Kurdistan when Saddam Hussein declared the organization she worked for were criminals. She fled to Guam with her brother, where she waited five months before being given asylum to the United States.

Candy Foster 10:28

Why did you leave Kurdistan and Iraq?

Salwa Mahdi 10:33

My immigrant status. I'm asylum. At that time, we used to work for some organization in 1996 and Saddam Hussein was in your power. And he was decided to, if those organization leave Iraq and go back to the country, he was saying, "I will kill everybody work with these organization and help them."

Anthony Salazar 11:05

Unlike Osman, who had very limited educational opportunities in the Iranian region of Kurdistan, Salwa's family had the means to provide a university education for all their children, including their daughters. The foundation of her educational opportunities, was the decision made by her parents to send her to elementary school, where she would also learn Arabic, the main language of the Arabic world. Salwa describes how and why her parents introduced her to Arabic.

Candy Foster 11:33

I understand that you speak multiple languages. What are they and when did you learn them?

Salwa Mahdi 11:41

I speak Kurdish and Arabic. Kurdish is my mom's language.

Candy Foster 11:46

Uh huh.

Salwa Mahdi 11:46

And I learned Arabic at school.

Candy Foster 11:50

At elementary school? Or did you start when you were very young learning Arabic or was it - ?

Salwa Mahdi 11:50

That's a - [laughs]. That's a long story, too.

Candy Foster 11:58

Yeah?

Salwa Mahdi 12:01

My, my dad was against Saddam's system. Okay? And, he escaped from military. Then, he moved - Saddam Hussein moved those people from their city, that he moved them to a bad area, the area they not used to it like in the - in South, the area where it's very hot, no water, no electricity. It was - we lived a life, it was so bad. It was in a little village and we all are like little. I don't even know like I wasn't in school yet.

Candy Foster 12:50

Uh huh.

Salwa Mahdi 12:51

And, my dad was trying to move us to, at least, to the city of that area, not in that village. Then, when we went to the city, the population that they speak Arabic, no Kurdish people unless like these few family moved down there. And, when I went to city, I mean, when I went to school. I - the curriculum was in Arabic. So, I learned Arabic there. Like we stayed a few years. Then when we - we went back, they agreed to go back. They let us to go back to where I used to live. Sulaymaniyah. [?] My, my mom said, changing these - like curriculum in from Arabic to Kurdish, it will confuse you guys. So he let us - she let us to stay in Arabic school. Like the school where all the subject is Arabic.

Candy Foster 13:56

Like this school where all the subject is Arabic. Uh huh.

Salwa Mahdi 13:58

So that's how I learned Arabic language. It was a long story. [laughs] Sorry.

Candy Foster 14:02

Yeah. No, no, it was an interesting story. So, it's like your mother tongue is Kurdish. Is that what you would speak at home with your family?

Salwa Mahdi 14:11

Yeah.

Candy Foster 14:12

And then, where you lived, they had a school that was only taught in Arabic, and so then you went to school - it's kind of similar to here in the United States, where people move here with their mother tongue and then schools only in English.

Salwa Mahdi 14:30

Correct. Yes.

Candy Foster 14:31

Yeah. So was that an advantage or how was that? Was it an advantage to, to be able to speak Arabic? Did you have more opportunity?

Salwa Mahdi 14:43

[unclear]. No, when I was a child, I learned the language so fast.

Candy Foster 14:48

Yeah.

Salwa Mahdi 14:49

Before I go to school, my mom used to tell us, "They call this, this. They call this of that". Like she's telling us, what is these words in Arabic. Then after I learned Arabic, and grammatically, I was even better than my mom. I used to make fun of her. I said, "No, that's wrong." [laughs] You don't know what they call this because there is a lot of - Arabic is a hard language like -

Candy Foster 15:19

Yeah, I can kind of - yeah wow. When you were in college where your courses in Arabic or in Kurdish?

Salwa Mahdi

Arabic.

Anthony Salazar 15:27

Once Salwa completed her elementary and secondary education, she began her university education. In this next clip, she describes her university experience in Iraq.

Salwa Mahdi 15:38

School is different, much different. Over here, high school is required. High school degrees required for everybody. Over there's not like that. Back then, like, it's the, the curriculum is a lot different. I see a lot harder when I see my daughter and other kids what they do at school now. Over here, it goes by semester, but in my country is not by semester, like you have a subject from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Right, like nine months you study, same thing. If you did not pass, you have to repeat a whole year, not just that subject for the whole thing.

Candy Foster 16:29

Oh, wow.

Salwa Mahdi 16:30

It's much harder over here. I like this system. It's different. It goes by semester. And if you don't pass one subject, you will repeat that not the whole year because of that subject. So I like this system they educational system here, over there, it's not like that.

Candy Foster 16:50

And then you mentioned earlier, it's for you college was free, and then they even gave you much spending money.

Salwa Mahdi 16:58

Yes.

Candy Foster 16:59

So is that so how would you compare the university opportunities in the United States with the way the university opportunities are in Iraq, now, as it has that changed, or

Salwa Mahdi 17:16

Oh, over there, you have more opportunity, because everything is free. And even the dorm you go, they give you like, a room for free. They give you a little bit. They used to like I'm talking about like 20 years ago,

Candy Foster 17:32

Right

Salwa Mahdi 17:32

They give you a little bit of money for your expense and the tuition free book spray everything. Like people have more opportunity to go there. But sometimes, like people, they don't finish college over there, they say because there is no a lot of opportunity to be higher. As the degree like to be higher, to working with that degree, then some people say, Well, I'm going to go to college if at the end, I'm not going to get hired, I'm not going to get like, paid good, I have to do other jobs not working in my field.

Candy Foster 18:16

Right.

Salwa Mahdi 18:17

So yeah, that's why make people not going to college, or sometimes some family issue. For example, it's a boy or a girl. They need to work before they go and finish college to support their family. So and others stuff the war or other stuff, make them not happen college today.

Anthony Salazar 18:43

While the rights of women were limited in the area of Kurdistan where Salwa lived, due to the support of her family, Salwa was able to obtain a university degree. In this next clip Salwa describes common issues for women in the region.

Candy Foster 18:57

What was life like for women there was a different than what life was like for men.

Salwa Mahdi 19:04

In the past, it was a little bit hard. Like the culture is different completely. If we compare the culture here, over there, it's different but the north part is kind of better. From the other part of Iraq, that's what I considered like. There respect woman more but still like women in those countries facing a lot of issue.

Candy Foster 19:32

Yes, so you're so I saw it. Let me see if this is correct, again, like the northern part of Iraq or Kurdistan that Kurdistan it was maybe a better place for women to live.

Salwa Mahdi 19:44

Yeah, woman has more freedom, like allowed to work, outside home. And somehow, in some families, you're allowed to choose your husband choose the person you married too. Um, I don't know, the family I came. Like my family was like that, like it was there was very restricted about like, who I choose, or they allow me to go to college. Yeah, a lot of others. At that time it was like that.

Anthony Salazar 20:26

Salwa's life as a woman living in the Iraq region of Kurdistan, was very different from the oppression faced by women who lived in Iran, as described by Osman. Salwa was able to complete her university education and get a job with a company working with the United States. At the time, Saddam Hussein was in power. Because of her employment, Salwa forced to leave the only home she had ever known, and was thrust into uncertain circumstances. Upon her arrival, she had to take jobs that didn't require university education. But she still set educational goals for herself. In her adopted country, the United States. Her first job was in a factory.

Salwa Mahdi 21:04

And when they told me you need to work, and the first I worked in this company they make me screw it was a little bit hard. I work eight to five, and I'm not used to this much working hours.

Candy Foster 21:21

Yeah.

Salwa Mahdi 21:22

And this is one side. And the other part, I missed my family a lot. It was hard, I can tell you I cried everyday

Anthony Salazar 21:34

Later, Salwa became a hairstylist and opened her own salon. She now works as an interpreter in our community. Both of these occupations require training and had a certification process. Salwa demonstrated her courage and resilience, as she undertook two new careers after her arrival in the United States. Salwa is still willing to take risks as she prepares to embark on a new career path.

Candy Foster 21:58

So what are your job or career goals for the future? You seem like you have so many skills.

Salwa Mahdi 22:05

Thank you.

Candy Foster 22:05

Yeah.

Salwa Mahdi 22:07

I was, um, I was planning to do teaching certificates cause I have a bachelor's degree in a different sales. I sent my transcript to to the state. And they sent me back you classes, I have to take, but I haven't since all these happens. Viruses, the business, and I don't know, I was so busy at that time. They gave me the state gave me three years. Like I can do it through, like any colleges, three years. So maybe I'm doing that. I don't know.

Candy Foster 22:56

Well that that sounds like a great opportunity.

Salwa Mahdi 22:59

Yeah. So I get teacher certificate in math. Then I can teach in high school, middle school.

Candy Foster 23:07

We need good math teachers, that's for sure.

Salwa Mahdi 23:11

That's what everybody say.

Anthony Salazar 23:13

As you can see, Salwa is a lifelong learner. Her educational journey began with the support of her family in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and continues here in Harrisonburg. Her first job was in a factory. And now she plans to work on her degree in education to teach math in middle or high school. Courage and resilience have been important in Salwas' life.

Courage and resilience are common themes in the narratives we have heard today from both Salwa and Osman. These themes are also seen in literature, such as Dean an Aries novel, The ungrateful refugee, we have no debt to repay. Like Salwa who had a university degree from Iraq, but could only first find work in a factory because their English language skills were weak. Mary talks about how our mother, who was a medical doctor in Iran could only find work in a pharmaceutical factory, where her bosses and co-workers would question her intelligence daily, though they had a quarter of her education. Her accent was enough if she took too long to articulate a thought they stopped listening and wrote her office unintelligent. This is a common issue that immigrants face when they first arrive in the United States, the inability to speak English. While Salwa could already speak two languages fluently, Kurdish and Arabic, she was just beginning to learn English. Because of her courage and resilience she began her journey to become a fluent English speaker as soon as she arrived in the United States. Additionally, so it did not stop pursuing better job opportunities. As she perfected her English speaking skills. She achieved her professional goals as a hairstylist and business owner and entrepreneur. Her perseverance is a strength that serves her well and will continue to benefit her as she studies to become a teacher. Both Salwa and Osman are from Kurdistan and faced oppressive governments in Iraq and Iran, which were determined to limit their human rights. The two of them were forced to leave their homes and request political asylum simply for what they believed in. For Salwa it was something as fundamental as your place of employment. She worked for a company that didn't support Saddam Hussein's government. For Osman, it was

his unwillingness to let women be treated as second class citizens. His respect for women and his courage to protect them from abuse, or femicide is heroic. In a similar fashion, Salwas' family protected the rights of women by guaranteeing their daughter a university education. While Osmans' and Salwas' educational opportunities are distinctly different, both have experienced professional success as citizens of Harrisonburg. Osman is a business owner and Salwa is pursuing her dream to become a math teacher.

After listening to these two stories of courage and resilience, I think that it is important to reflect on the individual immigrant stories in our community. Stories of bravery risk taking perseverance and determination, our title, bravery displaced, comes from this idea. Both Osman and Salwa fought for their respective causes, and were forced to leave their homes for this bravery. They uprooted their lives because they value their freedom and the freedom of others. They're willing to fight for freedom and the human rights of all citizens. Even if it meant starting a whole new life in a foreign country. So it is important to share and honor stories like these because we often forget how common they are. Thank you for joining us today on Harrisonburg 360. We're grateful to Salwa Mahdi, Kate Morris, Bodeene Amyot, Sarah Roth-Mullet, Kirsten Mlodynia for helping make this episode possible. Our host today was Anthony Salazar. Interview with Salwa Mahdi was conducted by Candy Foster. Our research and content producers were Candy Foster and Rachel Hoffman. And their audio producers were Molly Boucher and Rachel Hoffman. Join us next time for another episode.

Harrisonburg 360 27:19

Harrisonburg, 360. Real people, real stories, one community.

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