

Interview with Mr. Mohammad Juma Adel

Interviewer: Fatima Framarz

Question: Thank you very much, Mr. Adel, for agreeing to talk with us.

Answer: I am also very happy to speak with friends and chat with friends. Although for almost 50 years my tongue has been sealed and locked away, there were almost no circumstances in which I could speak to anyone. Even now, when I do speak, my Persian words have almost completely slipped from my memory.

Question: You can speak in whichever language you want.

Answer: I do not speak English at all. I used to know Persian a little, but that too has slipped away from me. Even the sentences I should say, and the things I should tell you, are slowly disappearing from my memory because I am getting older. So, if you have any questions I can answer, I will be happy.

Question: Let's start with your full name. What is your name, your surname, where were you born, and in what year?

Answer: My name is Juma. When we came to Canada, we adopted the surname Adel. I added "Muhammad" myself in grade six at school, because "Juma" alone felt incomplete to me. Either it should be Muhammad Juma or Juma Khan. Juma Khan was not really a thing, so I added Muhammad in front of it myself. It is not like that in the official identity card, though.

Question: And in what year and where were you born?

Answer: I think in 1352 [solar Hijri], maybe.

Question: If you do not remember, that is okay.

Answer: No, I am 75 years old. I was born in Kabul. Yes, I was born in Kabul, and I spent my life in Kabul. We came to Kabul because of the poor economic situation we had in Bamiyan province, or in the Shibar district. Economic pressure forced us to migrate to Kabul. We spent a long time in the poor neighborhoods and houses of Kabul. My father was a shoemaker. At first

he sewed new shoes. Later, when business became harder and he could not find a market, he worked as a cobbler.

Question: Is there any story you remember that your father passed on to you, any Hazara story or tale?

Answer: Unfortunately, that kind of situation was not common in our house, where a father would sit and tell stories. My father himself was under heavy economic pressure, came home exhausted from all the trouble, ate a glass of tea or a bite of bread, and sat in a corner to rest. He was not literate. He could read a little, just the alphabet. He could not write. And he was not much of a storyteller either. Some people, even though they are illiterate and cannot read, are very good storytellers. We were not like that. I also learned from my father that I have never sat with my children and told them stories about how we lived, what hardships we had, or how much we struggled so they could study. From the very first day we came to Canada, I started working, and I still work to this day. I told my children to study so that they would not end up saying, “We left school and sat comfortably just to get through life.” I told them no, study. My eldest son has a master’s degree in electrical engineering. My second son studied engineering but then had a condition and could not continue. My third son has a master’s in microbiology. My fourth son works in a bank. This year, after graduating from college, he took a few more courses in Europe. Another son, after finishing school, did not continue going to school and worked in personal business. My daughter graduated from college in dentistry and is now a dental assistant. So that is roughly how life has gone for me here in Canada.

Question: What do you remember about daily life in Afghanistan, the thing that stood out most?

Answer: In what sense?

Question: In every sense. For example, what was daily life like?

Answer: Daily life was very poor economically. In our family there were eight people who attended school, but until we grew up, we did not finish school and did not do any work. That responsibility belonged to my father and my mother. My mother worked very hard, because she

was extremely interested in education. She made enormous efforts so her children would succeed and study. She worked to the limit of her ability and provided the conditions for our education.

Question: You said your father was first a shoemaker, then when he could not find a market he became a cobbler. What did your mother do?

Answer: At first, when we had just come to Kabul, my mother worked as a laborer in Kabul houses for the people of Kabul. Why? So that we could have a little room to live in. Even that room was not really fit for sitting or for living, but it was a shelter. Later she found work with foreigners. She worked for foreigners and earned a better wage, so life was better. It was still a hand-to-mouth existence, but not the kind of life where a person could really enjoy themselves. Still, with all she did, I personally was very satisfied with my family.

Question: When you were a child in Kabul, which ceremonies were most attractive to you? For example, we had Nowruz, and we had two Eids.

Answer: To tell the truth, everything depended on the financial condition. If you had no money, then Nowruz was not really Nowruz, and Eid was not really Eid. That is why it was not very exciting for me. There is a poem, in Pashto I think, but I do not remember it. Its meaning is this: whenever you are happy, whenever you have something, that day is Eid for you. Otherwise, all days are no different from one another. Of course, as children we were happy because we thought, “This is Eid, we are free, let’s go eat a cookie.” It was childish stuff. But there was never really anything so attractive that I felt fully satisfied by it. Even later in life, when we grew older, it was the same. Even now, Eid, Nowruz, or other days have no special meaning for me, by God.

Question: How were weddings? Were you invited to weddings? Did weddings take place at home? How attractive were they?

Answer: Yes, we were invited, usually. Weddings, until the time I got married, were generally held at home. Even if the house was too small, the wedding would be extended to a next door neighbor’s house. That was fine too — it was a kind of cooperation, and people allowed it so the ceremony could be held.

Question: Was it only if the neighbor was from the same people — Hazara, of the same group — that they allowed it, or would a non-Hazara neighbor also allow you to use their house for a wedding?

Answer: Mostly where we lived, we were in an area where everyone was from the same community. Everyone was from our own people. So, they usually allowed it, and they were happy to help in that way.

Question: How did you meet Mrs. Adel? How did you get married?

Answer: We were very close familywise. We used to go back and forth. Honestly, I was practically declared an outcast among my own people. No one wanted their daughters to marry me.

Question: Why were you an outcast?

Answer: The reason was that I wanted to encourage people toward freedom. My family, as I said, was all educated. The friends I had were all educated people. They had been to university. Even if they had not gone to university, they were still thoughtful and informed. There was a person named Shamboli, if you have heard of him, who used to visit your community a lot. He wrote a lot, though he was not very educated. He was capable. He could speak well on many issues. Our friends were like that too. Because of that, our mullahs and our sayyids did not like it. They wanted to suppress the growth of the intellectual class in society. The people themselves were very sheep-like — ignorant, or simply followers. Whatever those people said, they accepted. If someone said “he is a disbeliever,” they would say yes, that must be true. Once, when I was with two or three close friends, I said the Earth is round, floating in the sky. They said, “What are you saying? You mean the Earth is like a melon.” They could not understand the idea of how gravity works. I said we are drawn toward the Earth, and that is why we do not fall. It was very difficult to explain such scientific things to people who came from an environment of sheep and cows, excuse the expression, or people who had come to Kabul from a life of herding or simple trade and had only found a small income. They had not gained much from education. These kinds of ideas were very hard for them to accept.

Question: Was it easy for them to say you had become a disbeliever?

Answer: It was very easy for them. Very easy. So, what did they say? Either they would call you a communist. But what does communist even mean? “Komun” means God, “ist” means “no”, altogether, God is not there. Then when the communists came, those same people were among the first to join them. At first, they set traps for them, then they associated with them and traded with them. They went on with life that way.

Question: Did your wife come to you because your family or relatives introduced her, or did your mother find her?

Answer: First, our house was here in this lane and theirs was over there. Also, my wife was my aunt’s brother-in-law’s daughter. We were in very close contact. Then I told my mother to go and ask for her hand. I tried hard for two reasons. First, because I was the eldest son, I said I did not want to burn the rights of others — that is a normal concern. My younger brother was behind me, and behind him was my sister. So, I thought I would do this and be fine. By fate, we got married. We have lived together for 40 or 45 years, more than that. It turned out well.

Question: Do you remember any stories or proverbs?

Answer: No, not proverbs, not stories. My mind is so tired and broken that nothing remains. Or poetry — the moment I begin to recite a poem, I forget the second line. Even when I was in school, I was not very good in Persian, Pashto, and foreign languages. What I liked was science. I liked those things because they stayed in my mind. Even now, many of the formulas I studied before, I discuss with people here who have graduated from college or elsewhere, and they cannot solve them.

Question: You studied in Kabul, right?

Answer: Yes, everything I studied was in Kabul.

Question: Which school?

Answer: Qari Abdullah School. Then there was a mechanical school in Kabul. The Institute of Auxiliary Engineering.

Question: Where did you study at university?

Answer: I did not go to university. I graduated from the Institute of Auxiliary Engineering after grade 14. At that time, I took the entrance exam three times before I got in.

Question: In the society where you lived, how did Hazaras in general, and you yourself in particular, express your identity? How did you show others that you were Hazara ethnically and Ismaili religiously?

Answer: It was obvious that we were all of one group, meaning ethnically Hazara and religiously Ismaili. There was no question about it. In those matters, no one really spoke or argued; there was none of that.

Question: What was it like outside that community?

Answer: Outside, yes, we would say we were people of the Aga Khan. It was not very tolerable or acceptable outside.

Question: What were your relations like with non-Hazaras, with Tajiks, with Pashtuns?

Answer: For me personally, they were good. Whoever I was friends with, I was their friend too, and they liked me a lot. Very much. In 1352 I had a job in Shibarghan. I had a Pashtun friend there who respected me enormously. After I studied again and continued, I went to the Ministry of Mines, where that friend also worked. He was a Parchami (affiliated with Parcham political party) and had advanced a lot. He said, "What are you doing?" I said I had just finished school. Suddenly he fixed my paperwork and introduced me to the Ministry of Mines. From the Ministry of Mines, I moved to work as a teacher in Gulbahar Textile for a while. Although they paid me very well, because I was not used to being far from home, it was hard for me. Still, I had a place there, a room, and they paid me about four times what I had made in government service. Then I left there because I was going to military service, I submitted an application and went to the

Boost Company. I spent a year or a year and a half there, then went to military service. After the first round of military service, I became a government employee again.

Question: What difficulties did you and your family face in Afghanistan as Hazaras and Ismaili Hazaras?

Answer: Many times, physical confrontations happened, physical attacks happened, and it was unpleasant for us that someone would behave so violently. What had we done to you that you would treat us so harshly? We had done nothing to you. The people themselves were not to blame. Their background, or among their own people, was such that they were fed a narrative, warned, and brainwashed. In the same way, many people today are brainwashed. Look at the Taliban — they risk their own lives because they think they are going to heaven

Question: Can you tell the story again about the Qizilbash family, so we can record it properly?

Answer: I was about three or four years old, not yet in school, as far as I remember. In the afternoon, around four o'clock — at that time four o'clock was quite late — they (my family) found a house. We went down into their lane and house. My mother went and baked bread and prepared dinner for them. After the dinner was finished, she washed their dishes and we ate a little bread that had been left over. Or rather, she washed the dishes in the kitchen. They asked my mom, "Madam, where are you from? Which people are you from?" And since my mom was a modest woman, simply said, "We are from this people" — meaning Ismaili. When she heard that we were from that community, she was extremely offended and said, "You have made everything filthy. Leave everything and get out of the house." She said, "All right, I will leave, but it is night. Where can I go at 10 or 11 p.m.?" My mom came and said that the lady of family she was supposed to work for, had terminated her, and said, "Leave." So we said, fine, she is the owner of the house, we have no power over her. In the morning we dragged our belongings into the lane. I had an aunt who was disabled in one leg and lived with us. Across from that house there was a field, and we sat in the lane under the hot sun. My mother and father went to look for another house. Until one o'clock they searched back and forth to find some house or some person. Finding a house is not easy. They came back and brought us some food: a little grapes

and two dry loaves of bread. We ate them in the street and in the field, because there was no lane. After we ate, they went back to look for another house. By around four o'clock, they found a house in a motor garage. It was full of damp and dust and so on. We accepted it and said, well, at least this is a shelter. We moved in and my mother again baked, prepared dinner and washed the dishes for them. We stayed there for a while. The good thing was that whatever leftovers they had, they would bring it to us, and we would eat it. That was a great blessing — being satisfied with their leftovers. At some point my father went back to the hometown, to Bamiyan, I do not know whether for work or for something else. After one month or maybe more or less, I do not know what happened, my mom was terminated again.

Question: Why? When you were taking this house, did your mother work in their house, like in the Qizilbash story you told?

Answer: Yes, they were Qizilbash too.

Question: She cooked and did all that work for them. Did you have to pay rent for the room they gave you?

Answer: No, no. That room was not even fit to live in. It was basically a place like a motor garage, with so much moisture and dust and all that. We had one thin carpet and spread it out. When my father went back to the hometown, or maybe they sent us away, after a lane or two — there is a narrow alley going up from Qala-e Fathullah toward Taimani, if you have seen it — in that area we found a Hindu house. The work there was extremely hard, cleaning dishes and doing those chores. We were there for about a month or maybe less, I do not remember exactly. My father was no longer there. It was just my mother, my aunt, and me. There the main problem was food. We could not eat their food. What were we supposed to do? My mother would take a copper pot or any other vessel we had at home, sell it, and use the money to buy us a little dry bread. In the end, after that I do not know where we moved to. I do not remember what happened after that. But this incident is still clearly in my memory: what hardships we had in Kabul.

Question: You spoke about military service. How was it?

Answer: My military service was good. I had already worked a bit, and then — by coincidence — my brother and I went into military service in the same year. I was delayed into military

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service. I was delayed for some years. Then I went into military service, and my younger brother also became a soldier. He served in Jalalabad and I served in Reesh Khor, Kabul. We did one year of military service. My life in the army was good. The commanders respected us a lot. We completed military service well. After that I became a paid employee and then built my life.

Question: You mentioned earlier that Hazaras were often not allowed to get high rank or be promoted.

Answer: Absolutely. They allowed very few people into higher positions. When I finished engineering, by the end I was an engineer at an electric tower where I worked. It was something like this: people from the neighborhood and market treated me well because, in that job, I would work one day and then have a day off. One day I would do my personal business, and with two or three days of personal business, I could make several times the salary of a government employee. Also, because the shift was 24 hours, I got twice the salary. My salary was good. Then life changed. These were the days before Najib and Babrak — before the communists. During Babrak's time, two of my brothers left Afghanistan and came toward Canada.

Question: Why did they leave Afghanistan?

Answer: Because of military service. My brother talked to ask for my advise. He said, "I cannot kill anyone and I do not want to be killed either." I said if that is the case, he should leave the country. My other brother was also an engineer. He worked in Hairatan. He said he was not getting good work, things were not good, and maybe they would send him to military service. Since he had already done one military service, and the second one would be reserve duty, he said he could not do it again. I said, all right, go ahead, you should also go to Iran. Then he came to Iran. My younger brother had already been in Iran. I think he stayed there for a year or a year and a half. After that they got passports and went to India. There were many of our people in India. They stayed there for a while. Then from India they came to Canada. Their lives became good, while I stayed in Kabul.

Question: During the civil wars, when people were grabbing one another everywhere, what kind of period was that?

Answer: Before anything happened, my wife said, “Let’s go. The situation is bad, let’s leave.” I said okay, but without a passport it is not possible. So, I went to the Ministry of Interior to get a passport. There I was standing in the crowd when someone came and said, “Compatriot, come here, the commander wants you.” I said okay. What does this commander want with me? He said he has work for you. I said let me first pick up my identity card from the counter, then I will come. When he went that way, I turned around, slipped out of the crowd, took my bicycle, and went home. I saw that the situation was very bad at that time. There were also people from the security services at the Ministry of Interior, and they were torturing Hazaras a lot.

Question: Were they arresting people right from there?

Answer: There was no difference. I said the crowd just stood there confused, and everyone watched saying that they were going to arrest this poor man. I escaped and went home on my bicycle. I found someone, and during the period when I said I was doing private business, I had good income and money. I found a person, paid him, and he brought my passport to my house. One day later, in the same way, I was on my way from the Ministry of Interior side toward Sheerpoor. I reached Sedarat Square — actually about 100 meters ahead of me a soldier signaled me to stop. As soon as he signaled, I panicked. I was on my bicycle. A bus almost hit me as it passed by. That bus came, I braked, and turned around. Then I was confused about where to go. I finally made my way home by taking back roads through Nowabad and other routes.

Question: Your wife was right to say you should leave.

Answer: Yes, because I had a project going with one of your people, from Turkmen Valley in Parwan province. Let us say a company, a project, or whatever — I had that work in hand, and I thought once that was finished, life would be good. But later I saw it was no use to me. And a lot of my money was burned away in the Pashtani Commercial Bank. My partner had gone to the Soviet Union. Without his signature, they would not give me the money.

Question: What was your work? What people was your partner from?

Answer: He was from Turkmen valley, a Shi'a Hazara. We were very close friends. Very close. May God keep him wherever he is, with warm bread and cold water (a good wish). He trusted me a lot. But I said, well, if it is not working, there is no choice. Money is not everything in life. Then we wanted to go toward the Soviet Union, toward Germany, because our family was in Germany. When I went to Mazar for a Soviet visa, my wife came one week later and said a message had arrived from Pakistan saying we must come to Pakistan. My brother had sent a letter. When they arrived, I asked how they came. They said yes, something like that. Then one night we were in Pul-e Khumri, and from there we moved back toward Kabul. We wanted to go from Kabul to Peshawar. But how could we go? There was no way. Why not? Because of being Hazara.

Question: Would you be stopped?

Answer: Yes, of course they stopped us.

Question: Was it Sayyaf? Massoud? Or...?

Answer: All of them, all of them. I managed with great difficulty to get a visa from the Pakistani embassy. The Pakistani embassy was at Tora Baz Khan Square. To get to the airport we struggled a lot. Very hard. Otherwise people would rent a car for 50 thousands and take all their belongings to Peshawar. We took a plane ticket worth over 800 thousands or something to go to Peshawar. But after we reached Peshawar, we stayed for one or two weeks at one of my friends' houses.

Question: Good thing nobody caught you at the airport.

Answer: No, the airport was not like that then. It was on the roads that these people were dangerous.

Question: How long did you stay in Pakistan?

Answer: Three years.

Question: What was life like there?

Answer: Life there was good for us, because everything depends on financial condition. My life in Kabul was good and we had money, so we could spend well in Pakistan. And if there was a shortage, my brothers would send money to me from Canada.

Question: And then you also came to Canada?

Answer: Yes, that was the goal.

Question: Leaving all that aside, what does being Hazara and being Ismaili mean to you today?

Answer: Being Hazara is an ancient honor for us. Because this people, let me say, worked with everything they had. They did not bow their heads for money. Their history was not shameful; they did not beg, did not steal, did not do bad work, and forgive me for saying it, their women did not do improper things. We were far from those things. And that is our greatest pride. Beyond that, Hazaras are very intelligent, very wise, and thoughtful people, despite enormous oppression. Especially during the 20 years of Karzai's time (Hamed Karzai presidency in the 2000s), I saw the Hazara rise from the ground to the sky. Wherever I looked, people were no longer left behind; nothing was left undone. Hazara people moved forward like a car driving smoothly on a road. Everywhere, on social media, wherever you looked, Hazaras were at the top. That is a matter of pride. For me, I am not that religious a person, meaning it is not so important to me whether I am Ismaili or Twelver Shi'a. What matters to me is humanity. I am very happy that among Hazaras this issue has gradually faded away. The suspicion that people used to have is no longer there. Now there is a son-in-law in our family who is from your community. He is the nephew of Dawood Sarkhosh. Zakarya! When we were talking with Zakariya recently, we were speaking very well together. That is very pleasing to me.

Question: What Hazara stories and traditions do you want young Hazaras in Canada to preserve? What should they do?

Answer: I do not take stories that seriously. If I ask something, then these Hazara traditions, culture, and customs that we speak of are not fixed realities. They are subjective realities that change over time. For example, in the past we used to hold weddings at home. Now we do not do that, because the culture we call culture, customs, traditions, and so on is affected by several things: it is influenced by economics, by environment, and by political conditions. If you think about it, it is always changing over time. Political conditions change, economic conditions change. Can you wear the same high heels in Hazara regions here? Environmental conditions

matter too. I cannot speak too much about these things because they are subjective realities that change in every period. At one time, if I saw you in these kind of clothing in Hazara regions, my mind would not accept it. I can tell you one thing: mindset has a huge effect. In Kabul, everyone wore the blue chadari [burqa]. Gradually that became the norm. When you saw someone with an uncovered face, even though I was small, maybe six or seven years old, I would say, “Oh God, how can someone walk around with an uncovered face?” Now my mind has changed completely — how does someone live under that chadari? How do they move? What need is so severe that they are bound like that? Who created these bindings? These days I listen to cultural topics on YouTube too. One of our people had gone to Iran, written a few books, and then spoke about these matters. The journalist asked, “What does being Hazara mean?” and he spoke at length. I do not remember much of it.

Question: One thing I really liked was that you said Hazaras have worked hard under every condition.

Answer: Certainly. Hazaras have always been able to move their lives forward under every condition, in every condition, with full meaning. I remember that in Kabul, the life of a Hazara porter was better than the life of many government employees. I had a job at the North Substation. There was an older man there who was the manager. He complained all day. His name was Rashid. I said, “Uncle Rashid, now that you have a free day, go and do some work like me.” Work? I am a manager — why would I go work? They were ashamed of work, but Hazaras were not ashamed of work. Now that I came here, on the day when work was equal for me, I did not say, “I am an engineer, I will not do this job.” I started from there, and that is how I built my life, and my life has gone very well. Not excessively, but as much as is needed, my life has gone well.

Question: Would you give the same advice to Hazara grandchildren growing up in Canada, that they should work hard and not be ashamed of work?

Answer: That is one of the essential parts of life. One must work. I cannot say absolutely for everyone, but most people from our community who came here — young and old — worked, did personal work, and their lives have become so good that they now live several times better than many Canadians who studied here and learned the language. They have nice houses, luxury cars, and good businesses. Just look: they have very good ideas, and if any job is given to them, they can do it well.

Question: What would you like other people in Canada to understand about Hazaras?

Answer: That is difficult, because Hazaras do not even make up one percent of the population here. So I do not think I should expect much from them.

Question: Is there anything I did not ask that you would still like to talk about?

Answer: Honestly, as I said before, I do not have much left in my mind. Whatever I said, more or less, I do not know how useful it is for your project. But these are the hardships of life, and we should understand that these people have seen so many hardships. When we came to Canada, I did not come here for pleasure. The pressure of life, the pressure of history made me leave — my living period in Kabul was done and for the safety and protection of my children I had to leave the country. Otherwise, I would work 12 hours a day here. In Kabul I worked four hours a day, and the money I earned was saved day by day. I had a good life. It is not pleasant for me that my children or I should die because of that life. It is better to work a lot, eat little, and live without burden or dependence. And there is one thing: in Canada nobody says you are Hazara, nobody says you are Afghan, Shia, Ismaili, Sunni, Muslim, or unbeliever. These are personal matters. Whatever you believe, whatever suits you, that is your own business. Those matters are private and have nothing to do with me. I have no need to ask you, “Fatima, what sect are you?” or “Fatima, why are you Hazara?” Those things here are honestly something I find reassuring and pleasing.

Thank you very much.