"EAST PAKISTAN BECOMES BANGLADESH"

TRANSCRIPT

NARRATOR **Shaheen Rushd**

RUN TIME 6:44

RUSHD My father was a believer in Islam, but secular. He, he didn't pray five times a day, but he still believed in Allah strongly. He, he was born when it was British India. Calcutta was part of British India at that time. He was very much involved in supporting the creation of a Muslim nation, the creation of Pakistan. He felt — he, and I think most Muslims felt that they would have better life chances in a Muslim country rather than a Hindu-dominated country.

STRONG Your family came to the U.S. in 1970, is that right?

RUSHD In 1970.

STRONG And 1971 was the war, and then the independent — no longer East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

RUSHD Right.

STRONG What were your father's perspectives on that transition? Did he want to be independent, or was he hoping to stay a unified Pakistan?

RUSHD He came as a, as a diplomat from Pakistan. He was the educational and cultural attaché, and the civil war started the next year, in 1971. It was a bloody civil war, and the Pakistanis slaughtered Bengalis. There was no — it was very hard to have any sense of Muslims brothers and sisters in that context. But nevertheless, it was not easy for him, because he really believed in the idea of, of a country for Muslims. But once the civil war started, even though it was a hard decision for him, he, he did not want to be part of Pakistan, and it was a traumatic time for us. There were a number of diplomats at the Pakistani Embassy who were from what was then East Pakistan, and now is Bangladesh.

They all abdicated on the same day. At that time, there was no Bangladesh. The civil war was still raging. They became the representative of the government in exile. Actually, you know, in terms of legal status, I don't know — I think the U.S. government had to figure out what to label them. Ultimately, I think they were called foreign agents. [laughter] So it was a very exciting time, and a hard time, not only because you are giving up a citizenship of a country you really believed in but you're — but you — but you're experiencing the horror that was — well, let's, let's — I'll change that a little bit. We weren't personally experiencing the horror, because we were here. We were safe. But our — but many of our friends and relatives and our country people were getting butchered, so it was a very hard time.

STRONG As a young person, did you know anyone personally who was affected by the war, or who was killed?

RUSHD The death that really stands out is the brother of a friend. He was very idealistic, and, you know, I had a crush on him when I was growing up. He was handsome. He was an actor. He was killed when he went to join the freedom fighters, and his body was never found, and I still think about that death. And he was — you know, he — and it's not clear whether the — how he was killed and who killed him, but, but that death just stands out for me, and I still feel it, because he was such — this young man, with so much life, with so much vision, and then dead, and a body that was never recovered. Can't imagine what his mother feels like. I can't imagine. Anyway.

STRONG You were in the U.S. when you got that news. How did you relate to other students around you who have no experiences like that?

RUSHD It's so interesting, because at that time my focus wasn't so much on my contemporaries at school. My focus was at going to the meetings where people were discussing what to do in the context of the civil war. There was a lot of drama in terms of getting ready to abdicate, and then there was a lot of drama afterwards. So I was so involved with, with that process that it doesn't really matter to me that I wasn't sharing my experience with my contemporaries here in this country.

STRONG How were you involved? What did, what did you do? What was that like?

RUSHD I was a little kid. I was — but I would go to the meetings. I would go with my father when, when he met with the other diplomats. I wasn't privy to all their conversations, but I was hovering near them. And so I was getting not only a sense of what they were going through but I was also getting news of what was happening back home through that process. It was such an exciting time, thinking about a new country, thinking about Sheikh Mujib [Rahman], who was the Bengali leader. He was such an amazing speaker. He would just get us so riled up. I would just be — get goose— goose bumps listening to his speeches. So when I think back to those times, I'm focusing on, on — within the bracket, you know, my family and my — their friends, and my father's colleagues — and my father's colleagues.

BIO **Shaheen Rushd was born in 1956 in Chittagong, Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and came to the United States in 1970 when her father was stationed in Washington, D.C., as a diplomat. When her parents returned to the newly independent Bangladesh, Rushd remained in the United States to complete high school, and went on to attend Kalamazoo College in Michigan and New York Law School in Manhattan. After earning her law degree, Rushd joined a Manhattan law firm that specialized in securities litigation. She and her husband raised their children in Cobble Hill. Upon retirement, she became involved in local social justice organizations and in the Democratic Party.**

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