

**INTERVIEW: “God helps those who help themselves!”**

**Arash and Azy (Arash’s sister and one of the protagonists)  
in an interview with Dagmar Haier**

**What inspired you to make *Exile Family Movie*?**

**Arash:**

Actually I decided to make this film the day I had spent half of my life in Iran and the other half in Austria. I was 18 at the time and full of those classic questions that occupy all foreigners. I wanted to know who I am now. Am I Austrian or Persian? Am I becoming more Austrian every day, or is it just impossible to deny my Iranian side?

**What was your approach?**

**Arash:**

I started taping my relatives’ first visits to Austria from Iran in 1994. At first they were only a few videos meant as mementoes, the kind that every family makes. Over the years I filmed more and more material until somebody had the idea of the entire family meeting in Saudi Arabia, disguised as pilgrims. But since my father wasn’t able to come, I promised to tape everything so he’d be able to experience the journey afterward.

**When did it become more than just a private family video?**

**Arash:**

When I viewed the material after the trip to Mecca, I realized that I wanted to turn it into a film. I discussed it with my family, so that everybody could be included in the decision of whether to show the film to the public or not.

**Did you have problems during filming?**

**Arash:**

In Saudi Arabia it was never clear just what you were allowed to film. It started on the first evening: We just wanted to film the exteriors of a couple of hotels when a policeman came up and tried to take our camera away.

Of course another problem was that this was a secret meeting, and while I was filming things were said that you wouldn’t normally say in public.

**Didn’t your conscience bother you?**

**Arash:**

Absolutely! The decisions during editing—what to use, what not to use—were sometimes very difficult. I didn’t want anyone to suffer because of the film, and I didn’t want to “censor” it any more than necessary either. This balancing act was the real problem.

The movie was triggered by an inner need, I simply had to make it, despite its delicate nature. After our parents gave up their lives in Iran so we could live comfortably in freedom, I saw it as my duty to give something back to them and continue their fight for a more humanistic world. That’s why I didn’t want to give up even though there were constant obstacles to overcome. For example after the meeting in Saudi Arabia my cousin from America suddenly decided that he didn’t want to be in the film. He had assumed that it would be a fictional film with actors playing us.

In the end, however, all of them understood why the film’s important, not only for our family but also for other people living in exile, whether they’re Iranians or the millions of others who have to escape from somewhere. The film’s meant to be a symbolic story for those people, and I hope they’ll be able to see themselves in it.

### **So this isn't a film about Iran specifically?**

**Arash:**

Of course it's primarily about an Iranian family. However I believe that the film tells a story which many people, even Europeans, can identify with, because this one family represents every family whose members are separated. You don't have to be a refugee to understand that. It could also apply to people in Europe whose grandparents, for instance, tell similar stories from the Nazi era, when many families were separated as well.

### **What are some of the negative things that an "exiled Persian" experiences?**

**Arash:**

Mainly the stereotypes regarding Persians. For example that all Persians sell carpets or study medicine. Or we're all terrorists. The worst thing for me was entering the United States. Even though I'm an Austrian citizen, it took three hours at the airport because I was born in Iran and had a stamp from Saudi Arabia in my passport. You can imagine what that combination means after 9/11. Obviously I didn't have a good explanation for spending two weeks in Mecca.

### **Azy, did you experience a similar identity crisis as your brother?**

**Azy:**

Not like his. I've always felt both Austrian and Persian. Sometimes it gets fuzzy because it's really difficult to say which culture you feel more connected to; Austrian culture has become part of my culture, which probably always happens when you spend a long time in a country where you're fairly comfortable and go to school.

### **Do you see yourself as being fully integrated?**

**Azy:**

I don't like the word "integrated" at all because it's rarely used in connection with respect. The definition of integration should point toward a context in which respect for other cultures is important, respect for the laws and rules intended to prevent people from hurting others. That's a big topic today, and I believe that the film's not only intended to communicate the fact that we have this particular background, but that everyone has the same problems, that there will always be certain obstacles when different cultures meet, language, religion or rituals. Ultimately everyone has yearnings, everybody has fears, a family from which they may or may not be separated, which they may or may not love.

**Arash:**

Everybody's talking about "integration," but it's often equated with assimilation. If integration means that people have to give up their identity and all cultural characteristics, their religion and the life they've led for decades, just so they can live here, that's the worst-case scenario. It just can't mean that. We can demand that everybody live in such a way that no one else is hurt. I'm against radical Muslims and fanatics who want to destroy the free world too, but I'm not against my relatives being Muslims. My film's definitely an appeal for living side by side and accepting one another. When I think that all political views and opinions are represented in our family; but since we're all related, we get together and listen to one another and accept each others' opinions, even if we don't adopt them. That's the basis of democracy in my opinion. If it can work on the small scale of a family, it can also be a functioning model for society.

### **Are there any advantages to a family being scattered all over the world?**

**Azy:**

One possible advantage is that we could travel to all the places where some relative lives, such as Sweden or the U.S., but that's only a small consolation.

**Arash:**

If you don't completely conform to the society you live in, there will always be a desire to see your family. That outweighs any possible advantages. Of course it's the most difficult for our parents, older people who lived in Iran for 30, 40 years and had to leave everything behind. Life here's very comfortable for us. We live in freedom—I wouldn't want to live in Iran at a time when people are being tortured, when human rights are disregarded.

**Everyday things, such as Persian food and drink, don't you miss that?**

**Azy:**

No... Not as long as our parents cook!

(laughter)

**Speaking of typical Persian humor...**

**Arash:**

I knew from the very beginning that I didn't want to make a serious, sad refugee film, where the audience has to suffer too. Laughter and humor are a strategy to overcome life's sadness. That's something I've learned from my mother and which is part of our family and maybe even our Persian mentality. People like us can't go back to our home country, but we try, somehow, to be happy. For example when everybody in our family was sad or depressed, my mother just started laughing extremely loudly until we all had to laugh along with her. That's a strategy I can definitely recommend.

**When you consider the situation in Saudi Arabia, that must have been quite a culture shock. How aware were you of the fact that your family reunion was dangerous?**

**Arash:**

Maybe it wasn't so dangerous after all, because arranging a family reunion in an Islamic country, of all places, as a refugee from another Islamic country is such an absurd idea no secret service would have ever thought of it.

Anticipation of our reunion was so great that we didn't even think about whether it might be dangerous. Only in Mecca did we realize how little we knew about how to act properly. A policeman caught me filming at the very beginning, and I was more afraid than I've ever been in my life. There were already scenes from our meeting in the hotel room in the camera, during which critical statements were made, and I knew that if this material was confiscated and translated, we'd all end up in jail or worse. That kind of danger was always there, but I had promised my father to tape everything.

**You don't just go on a Hajj unless you're a practicing Muslim. How did you manage that?**

**Arash:**

The first obstacle was proving that we were Muslims, since only Muslims are allowed into the medina in Mecca. We couldn't just go to the Iranian embassy to have that confirmed because nobody could predict what might happen. The second alternative, which worked, luckily, was to go to the Saudi embassy with our birth certificates, along the lines of: once a Muslim, always a Muslim.

The second problem was how to act in this world, because we grew up in Austria and knew nothing about it. All we knew was that my sister and mother had to cover themselves. But precisely how much wasn't quite clear. You can see in the film that there was some discussion about it. The strange thing was that my brother and I immediately assumed the roles of censors. We constantly had to say things like, "cover your hair," or "too much of your arm's showing," etc. Ridiculous little things which were still necessary for safety reasons. It's surprising how quickly you take on a certain role. How was that for you, by the way?

**Azy:**

Unbelievably annoying. On the one hand I understood why it was necessary, on the other it was

extremely strange to suddenly have this problem. It was new, and it constantly got on my nerves, but then I got used to it somehow because there was obviously no other way. And it was dangerous pretty much all the time, but I wasn't so aware of that at first. The police presence and the constant feeling of being watched eventually started to make me afraid.

### **Would you go to Saudi Arabia again?**

**Arash:**

Once the trip to Saudi Arabia was over, we said we'd never meet in a country like that again, even though it was emotionally overwhelming to see all my relatives. But now that some time has passed, I'd be willing to do something like this again. How about you?

**Azy:**

I've become more fearful over time. I don't think I'd go there again.

**Arash:**

And if I promise not to film?

**Azy:**

Maybe in that case.

### **Has this meeting changed your family in any way?**

**Azy:**

Not as far as the way we deal with one another's concerned, but there are fond memories. The family has grown. And it was interesting to slip into a different role and be one of the people wearing a veil for a change, who I didn't understand before that.

### **Would you like to go back to Iran for a while or even permanently?**

**Arash:**

The experience in Saudi Arabia with my family has, to a certain extent, strengthened my desire to go to and live in Iran, because I experienced how warm and pleasant it is to have everybody around me. However when we had to leave the hotel and felt the presence of this oppressive atmosphere which is prevalent in dictatorships, where you always have to watch what you say, I thought that I could never live like this.

The trip has certainly strengthened the feeling of togetherness in our family. In a certain way we all became a family for the first time. Since we were all kids when we fled with our parents, we couldn't remember quite a few of our relatives, only those we knew from photographs. This trip widened the circle of the family for us.

**Azy:**

Though our extended family has always existed in theory, it hasn't in reality. The trip also brought us closer together because now we have more memories than before, and both beautiful and sad moments were added.

**Arash:**

At the beginning we didn't even know what to talk about. It was mostly small talk. Only after a week did we start to discuss things, understand each other and exchange opinions. The trip was worth it for that reason alone, because now I have a much better understanding of how someone can spend their entire life in a country like that.

### **Do Iranian relatives ever try to convince you to let them come stay with you in Austria?**

**Arash:**

The desire's expressed now and again, but unless you're politically persecuted and your own life's in danger, nobody wants to leave their country for good, even if life isn't always comfortable there.

### **What would happen if you tried to enter Iran?**

#### **Arash:**

That's not easy to say. Of course we often ask ourselves that question. There are people who disappeared after entering the country or were found dead, probably because somebody didn't want them to leave again. Others have tried to escape through the mountains into Turkey. And then there are others who just return. But the risk is too great, and our parents wouldn't want us to take it either.

#### **Azy:**

Occasionally I do want to go to Iran, but only for a few months. I definitely couldn't live there. The two weeks on our trip to Saudi Arabia were enough to see what life is like under such restrictive conditions. Just the feeling you have when you're completely ignored as a woman while trying to order in a fast-food restaurant. Not being able to do even the simplest things in public as a woman was a drastic experience for me. I constantly bumped against boundaries, which made me angry but also aware of the fact that I grew up in a free country.

### **What's most important thing about your brother's film in your opinion?**

#### **Azy:**

Apart from the extremely personal aspect it should show what binds people together as well as their differences, which simply exist. The fears, which can be felt more and more often in society, involve being different: your looks, the way you talk, etc. The film should also make people aware of these differences because it might make them think about the things they're afraid of. On top of that it should simply bring people together. I believe that a functioning family is the basis for all future relationships and friendships. The film should show people where boundaries exist and how to cross them without losing yourself or having to give up your identity.