Hear My Story: Hammad Siddiqi transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:20

See, mine is 40018, my sister was 40017,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story - so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations.

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:40

I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Anne Thompson** 00:59

I'm Anne Thompson, my guest today is the relative of a woman who showed incredible bravery as a British secret agent during World War Two. She volunteered to serve. She was descended from Indian royalty, and she ultimately lost her life for the cause of freedom. I'm thrilled to have Hammad Siddiqi here with me today to tell about her incredible story. Hammad, thank you so much for joining us.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 01:22

Thank you for having me, Anne.

**Anne Thompson** 01:23

I want to start with just you and getting to know you a little bit. And our audience can get to know you, tell me a little bit about yourself. Your family. Are you from the area?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 01:31

So yes, thank you, and pretty much from the area. At this point, I have been a Cincinnati, and now for almost 25 years I grew up. I was born and raised in Pakistan, so my side of the family actually migrated from India when the country of Pakistan got created in 1947 so our branch of the family kind of migrated there. So that's where I grew up. And came to the United States when I was almost 19 for college. Went to the University of Cincinnati, and 25 years later, here we are, you know, and loving where I live and loving what I do, and just, you know, privileged to be a part of this community.

**Anne Thompson** 02:10

That's great. Well, I'm so glad we got to keep you in town. Tell me, when did you first hear about Noor story?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 02:19

So Anne, Noor was kind of a, you know, a family legend growing up. So she was a cousin of my grandfather, my paternal grandfather, my dad's dad. And, you know, he came from landed aristocracy as well in United India, as we called it, pre partition India. So growing up, we just heard about, you know this fantastic great aunt who went and volunteered for the SOE (Special Operations Executive) and, you know, fought the Nazis and in her own special way, and then when, unfortunately, you know the tragedy that befell her. And you know the family I grew up in, we've always been adherence to a form of religion which is believes mostly in humanity. So she was always held up as an example, as kind of like a poster child of how we should all live our lives, and, you know, stand up when it's needed, even when it's not something that directly concerns us. If it's right, you stand up for it. So she was like, as I said, like, kind of like a, you know, poster child for us to look up to growing up.

**Anne Thompson** 03:24

So do your did your your grandfather share memories of her? Did he know her personally?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 03:31

I believe so. So he was a little bit younger, and I believe that she spent most of her life in Europe because of her own father's career. But I assume that there was interactions, you know, family growing up. I mean, you're talking about the the early 1900s right? So 19 she was born, I believe in 1914 he was born in 1916 so, you know, they her, her dad was very involved with this, the Sufi, the Sufi movement of Islam, and travel the world. Ironically, that's where he met her mom, who was an American Ora Ray Baker. So was her name, and I believe from Albuquerque, but I could be wrong. So yeah, there was interactions. You know, she was always a an older, you know, kind of a model for my grandfather as well, and my grandmother to kind of hold up to us. So that's lovely.

**Anne Thompson** 04:20

What can you tell our audience about the Sultan who? What would that be important for them to know?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 04:26

So you know, my complete understanding of the genealogies might be a little tenuous, but I do know that there was a direct link to Sultan Tipu, who was the ruler of Mysore, stayed in India, and I believe her mom was the daughter of Sultan Tippu, and my grandfather had his own links to different royal families that ruled United India at that time. So, yeah, Tipu himself was, you know, he's an he's a hero for both Pakistanis and Indians, because he was one of. The primary resistance fighters against colonial and British rule. And I think he was kind of like the thorn on the side of the British for many, many years. And you know, when he was eventually conquered by the East India Company, a lot of the trophies from his palace were taken and are still at the Royal Museum in in London where, you know, they're kind of like war trophies. So, but to us subcontinental folk, you know, Southeast Asians, he was, you know, a war hero. Like he was not a rebel per se. He was more of a freedom fighter. So, you know, semantics is important, sometimes

**Anne Thompson** 05:34

Absolutely, absolutely. So by by virtue of that, she was a very upper class Person. Came from very well-to-do family?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 05:42

Absolutely so just, you know, remember a story my grandfather told about his own upbringing. So the land that they were responsible for encompassed 116 villages in India. So you're talking about hundreds of 1000s of acres that were ruled by these families under, you know, the nobility laws of India, as they were called at the time. And then I think India did away with titled nobility sometime in the 50s. But until then, these these folk were very privileged, to your point, you know, lived a very different life than the rank and file, you know, population of both countries. So, yes, very privileged, uh, foreign educated, uh, none of the restrictions that time in history, at that time created for people of color or for women or for anything like that, they were kind of above that. So kind of incredible. It was, yeah, absolutely. So it's interesting to think that these bubbles that were existing even, you know, at those times when we hear about so many different stories about either anti semitism or civil rights, there was folks that kind of transcended that because of economics.

**Anne Thompson** 06:51

That is a very unusual story that doesn't always get told. So I'm glad you're here to speak to that. So let's go to when you know, war comes to to where they're living. Paris falls to the Nazis in 1940 and her family fled to England. As you mentioned, she and her family were of the Sufi faith. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that would have meant for them?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 07:14

So I think the best way to explain Sufism, it's, it's definitely within the confines of the Islamic faith, but the adherence of Sufism generally are very pacifist. There's, I remember a Sufi saying that it always resonated with me that if you believe that everything comes from God, then how can you not love everything? And that is sort of encompasses the philosophy, right, that that humanity is the biggest religion that rules us all, that you know, we are all linked, and we're all tied by these bonds of just being human and everything else, color, creed, religion, that's next, the first, the very essence of our existence is that, you know, we are the same, and that's what Sufi philosophy really teaches. And I know I'm doing a huge disservice, because there's a massive school of thought, but that's how I've always believed it to be. And you know people here, but you know Sunni ism or Shiaism, and those are the two main sects, but Sufis, I've always held a very strong place within the entire belief system of Islam as well.

**Anne Thompson** 08:19

And that's important, because that plays into part of what makes her story so incredible,

**Hammad Siddiqi** 08:24

exactly right, and because she grew up a pacifist, and the entire idea of war or hurting somebody, or killing somebody, or watching folks you know, or being part of something that could result in the death of another human being was abhorrent. So, yeah, it was definitely a, you know, one of those, this crises of conscience and everything else that you know, you could term for her to do what she did.

**Anne Thompson** 08:48

So all the things that we've heard about her up until now lead you to say she would likely have taken any action other than what she did, right?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 08:58

Yes, absolutely. I mean, I could see her because she was highly educated, you know, spoke multiple languages, maybe writing or maybe leading a protest back in India, you know, against that would have seemed more, I would say, you know, logical for, you know, somebody coming from privilege, and somebody had a lot of lot to lose, sure, you know, in with a position in life and everything. So that would have been, you know, I think maybe the easier way out, but, but what she did was, that's what makes it even more remarkable to your point.

**Anne Thompson** 09:29

So let's get to that part. In the fall of 1940 she enlists in the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force. I cannot only imagine what her parents must have been thinking. And, you know, I think I this envisioned in my mind of like them, maybe trying to talk her out of it, or something along those lines. But she was undeterred.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 09:52

She was

**Anne Thompson** 09:53

and so she spent a couple of years as an enlisted person. Yeah, and then she was recruited to join this covert operation, right? So I a little bit of information about this SOE, because I had to look it up. It was a new term for me, Special Operations Executive, set up by Winston Churchill,

**Anne Thompson** 10:18

right? Their role was to go into Nazi occupied countries to spread prop propaganda, collect information and sabotage and send information back. So this was not a low stakes job that they wanted her to do

**Hammad Siddiqi** 10:33

Exactly, very well put. Yeah, it was as real as it gets, you know? I mean, you think about, you know, what Hollywood has popularized, MI-6 and the Secret Service. And then you'll see, I mean, this was literally embodied, that this is what you sabotage, espionage, you know, propaganda, code breaking, you name it. And really being in the thick of the action, not doing this from like, you know, somewhere in Westminster or, you know, somewhere in England, it was truly in the heart of where the the actual violence and the war was taking place. So

**Anne Thompson** 11:10

I know you've looked up a little bit more detail about her story. Are there, were there specific anecdotes, or anything that you remember being passed down to you about her time?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 11:20

You know, it's good question. And really, you know, with family folklore, it's always interesting, right? Because you have to kind of separate some of that. And you know, we were always taught about Noor as a lesson, right, about equality, about, you know, how women's rights are just as important as any other rights. And you know, I grew up with three sisters, so anecdotes about her were just that she was very frail, that she was just a tiny little thing and very feminine, you know, so it just always, my grandfather would talk about it. He said, you know, mighty things come in small packages, and never let anything or anybody ever hold you back because of your size or because of your upbringing, or because of anything like that? Because all, every one of us has it in, within us to do amazing and great things. So really, the anecdotes were more about how tiny she was, and, you know, she was musically inclined and, you know, artistic, and the last person anybody would have expected to like, you know, get into the rough and tumble world of, like, international espionage.

**Anne Thompson** 12:24

And from what I have read and listened to about her, that sounds like that may have helped her, because maybe they seemed like they didn't know who they were looking for,

**Hammad Siddiqi** 12:33

Right. Yeah, and you're absolutely right. Maybe that's what helped her kind of, you know, fly under the radar. You know, pun intended, right for that, yeah. And you know, you asked a question, really, like it was her parents. I mean, her father had passed by. Then her father had passed away, and Noor found herself, you know, kind of the matriarch of the family, because her mother, being of a another generation, you know, late 1800s you know, was not, I would say, maybe as accomplished as her and the death of her father had, from my understanding, had really kind of set her back. So Noor had to step in and take care of her three other siblings, and so had already assumed a, you know, an independence and a leadership role within the family. So for her, I think it was just maybe a continuation of where she was already going, and her life was leading her to, you know, go this way as well. And but I would like to imagine that, you know, her father probably, or should have supported that. And that's what I would like to think, you know, because I have daughters myself, and I don't know what, how much more proud I would have been, you know, that my daughter had done something like that. So.

**Anne Thompson** 13:43

So in June of 1943 she was sent behind enemy lines in France. And from what I read, she was given a portable radio to transmit messages like she carried around in a suitcase, right? And she was literally the first female wireless operator in France.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 14:04

That's true.

**Anne Thompson** 14:05

That is an incredible accomplishment.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 14:10

I mean, I honestly like it just boggles the mind. It does right, like for somebody who, on paper, should never even be anywhere close to the peripheries of this conflict, you know, of this, of the scenario, that's where she found herself. And, you know, raised her hand. She was multilingual, like many of us who grew up in that part of the world. So she spoke fluent French, English, Urdu, Hindi, I think, also Portuguese and German. So it was she, she was very attractive to, you know, the SOE because of the linguistic skills, and then she was intelligent. So, you know, the Morse code is not something that's easy to master, and most of the messaging at this point was done in Morse. So to have a command of that skill, as well as languages. Is. And to your point, you know, kind of not being what your typical idea of like a secret agent would be, right? I think all combined, she made for the perfect agent.

**Anne Thompson** 15:12

The conditions under which she entered were incredibly difficult. From what I read, I'm sure that you've read the same thing, that the average lifespan of an radio operator that they would have dropped behind enemy lines at that point was six weeks.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 15:30

Can you imagine?

**Anne Thompson** 15:30

I cannot.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 15:32

Yeah, that is. And knowing that, right? And the other thing that's really so remarkable Anne about her story is that throughout her training by the SOE. She failed it. She failed every physical test that was put to her. She couldn't jump, she couldn't run. She used to, you know, like she'd start panting and get breathless and physical activity. There was some remarks I read from her commanding officers that she was just too sweet, too nice, too feminine. I mean, there was all these things. So at every step of the way, her own instructors were deterring her from doing this, and even until the last moment, when she was literally being sent on the plane, she was being told, like, you sure you don't want to change your mind because like, what you said, six weeks average, and the way you're going, you're probably gonna be half that survival way. But you know, there was just, there was a steal to this woman that you know is just as incomprehensible, where, despite seeing or knowing the facts, knowing her own inexperience and what her betters are, telling her you're not up to this, to still have that. You know that that commitment to the to what is right, and to still do that is just, it's just fantastically incredible

**Hammad Siddiqi** 16:53

Wow, that I did not know I,

**Anne Thompson** 16:53

The resilience just comes through over and over and over again. Um, she was given the code name Madeleine. I love that her. I love her, that French name for her, right? And then, did you also read that i She aided in the release of 30 downed airmen back to safety?

**Speaker 1** 17:13

I mean, wow, for the short amount of time she was there, right? Is

**Hammad Siddiqi** 17:19

the impact that she made is

**Anne Thompson** 17:21

incredible. So she would carry the suitcase around, and after collecting whatever information she could collect, she would have to set up this apparatus and then transmit these signals back to British intelligence

**Hammad Siddiqi** 17:37

Exactly, exactly.

**Anne Thompson** 17:38

And so that requires a also tremendous amount of ability to think on your feet and ingenuity, which, again, there's nothing in her upbringing that indicates that she would be good at, you know, sneaking or any kind of so it's, it's something that she must have just taken to, or felt that, you know, she could do because she needed to,

**Hammad Siddiqi** 18:02

Exactly right? You know, you know, there's that saying in English and and I am English as a Second Language person, so I pardon me if I'm butchering the saying, but cometh the hour, cometh the man. Right? In this case, come with the hour, come with the woman. Like you don't know what you have in you until you're actually pushed or that hour comes upon you to actually deliver, and I think that's she probably surprised herself, you know, with the strength that she found in herself. Because, to your point, again, like there was nothing leading up to this with her life. I mean, everything was privilege and everything was aristocracy, and so education and literacy and music and paint, everything that's, you know, nice and pretty and travel and all the good stuff. And, you know, for the first time, she was faced with this situation where, you know, people were being murdered and just horrible atrocities were happening in Europe. And cometh the hour, cometh the woman, you know, she just found it in herself that I have to do something about this. And just sitting around and, you know, and talking about it or writing about it is not going to cut it. And she just took that step, which is, again, just remarkable that she had, she found that inner strength, yeah,

**Anne Thompson** 19:12

so she is, is doing this work for, for many weeks. She lasted three months. From what I understand is that yeah, and then she was captured. Do you have you read anything about how that came about?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 19:26

You know, again, going back to family folklore, I read that she was betrayed, that that was kind of what we were always told that, you know, somebody sold her out, or there was a person within the SOE that reported on her basically, and then, you know, just doing research this past year, or I shouldn't call it research, maybe just reading articles. You know, there's some indication about, you know, a potential, like a person who is a co-agent. And also a female who basically took some money from the Nazis to sort of give her name up, but I couldn't comment on the on the accuracy of that,

**Anne Thompson** 20:12

but at any rate, she does end up captured, and she wasn't the only one, many of the other members of this resistance group were also arrested, you know, taken away. And from what I understand, after many of her colleagues in this organization had been arrested, she was given the option by the British to return be like, This is enough. You've done more than we asked of you. We will send a plane and come get you. And she said, No, yeah.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 20:49

Can you believe that? Wow, I know, right. It gives you chills. Because just just that level of bravery is you wonder, what would I do right in this situation? I think all of us wonder when faced with these kind of scenarios, but it just shows the measure of who she was, well,

**Anne Thompson** 21:08

and the decision at that point is is is even different than the decisions that she had made prior, because she's been there, right, seen it. She knows that the city is crawling with Nazis who are intent on hunting her down, right? And so that just makes it all the more remarkable.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 21:28

I think Anne, you know, I like to think that when she was there and she saw the impact of the work that she was doing, I think she always knew that this is going to be an important job that, you know, or an important role for her to play in the overall effort to resist the Nazis. But I think when she actually saw it firsthand, the impact she was making, it sort of overshadowed any fear for her own life or anything like that, which, again, tells you what a human, a remarkable human being she was, that you know when, when you see the difference you're making and you weighed against the risks that you're taking and you come out against, you know, in favor of the difference you're making, and just shows how selfless you are, you are. That's why I like to think that she was at so...

**Anne Thompson** 22:11

I like that thought as well. Yeah, so she, while she is captured, I read that she tried to escape twice, not once, right, twice, right. While she was imprisoned, they were interrogating her, obviously trying to get information, she was tortured, from what I understood, and this went on for the better part of a year. Yes, which is horrific. I know.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 22:38

Yep, you know. You hear stories of grown, trained military men buckling under like, you know, a couple hours of it, of torture, and you have this slight, feminine, unsuitable woman, right, who held out for a year, and from what stories we heard that she was continuously shackled and manacled, not once was she actually given, you know, like a free reign of the facility where she was being kept, like she was actually considered a dangerous person by the Nazis, to the point where she was shackled throughout and, yeah, the torture was ongoing and just horrible to think about, truly,

**Anne Thompson** 23:19

And but despite that, she gave up no information,

**Hammad Siddiqi** 23:22

nothing.

**Anne Thompson** 23:26

Ultimately, she and some of the other Resistance members were sent to Dachau, where they were murdered. They did not survive the war, and I was very moved to see that a statue has been created of her in London, Princess Anne unveiled it herself, which speaks to just the kind of person that she was

**Hammad Siddiqi** 23:55

and the esteem that you know, that She's finally finding, right, yes, people's memories, collective memories, absolutely, yeah, this is, and it's fantastic, you know, just to see that recognition. Because, yes, from a from a perspective of somebody who you know, can claim some level of you know, relation to her, it's, we're very proud. But I think on a larger note, right? For somebody like myself, who's the father of two girls, right? Who's the brother of three sisters, it just, I love that she's getting this recognition, because it tells that story that you know, nothing should hold you back from doing what's right. And so to see this, you know, this light being shown on her over these last several years has been really fantastic to see and to hear about art projects being done on her. And you know, this, this exercise so grateful for, because if we can inspire one or two people out of this right to do what's right in the wake of the media or, you know, world affairs. And just do what's right. It's that's what's important. So I'm really, really happy to see these things happening. Finally,

**Anne Thompson** 25:09

I think that's part of what always touches me about this work that we do, is that it can feel like it was a very long time ago, and even now still, we continue to learn new things and people continue to be recognized in new ways. The book that came out about her, I think it was in the early 2000s

**Hammad Siddiqi** 25:30

I believe so yes, and then PBS documentary, is that correct as well on her? And I'm ashamed to say I haven't read the book. It probably should. There should be on my next thing to do. But yes, I mean, there, there's documentaries, there's stories, and I said there's a lot of you know folklore about her back in the subcontinent, Indian subcontinent. I think all of it's great. I think all of it as much you know socialization, of her story, and you know of what she did and her sacrifice and standing up for what's right that needs to be illuminated more.

**Anne Thompson** 26:04

So we would definitely refer to her as an upstander. That is the terminology that we use in this museum and in this throughout the center to describe people who stand up for themselves and for others, and they use all of the character strengths that are available to them to do that. And so as I was reading about her and listening about her story, strengths that I saw in her, that I have to imagine you did as well, bravery, perseverance, leadership, do other words come to mind for you?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 26:42

Yeah, I mean, I think you summed them up, determination, you know, just, just a single minded determination to do what's right. So

**Anne Thompson** 26:52

absolutely agree that book about her life is called Spy Princess, which I, you know, for some, for some, might feel like maybe that was, like, you know, a little bit of embellishment, but it's really not in this case.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 27:04

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, the best spies, I guess, are the most ordinary, you know, normal rank and file folk. So yeah, and she was a princess by birth, so it was a pretty cool title, and I must read. You have the author by any chance.

**Anne Thompson** 27:18

Shrabani Basu, I don't know if I'm pronouncing that right, so forgive my pronounciation.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 27:22

That's perfect, yeah. So I'm gonna definitely have to look that up and get that book. That's shame on me for not having. Well, okay, let's have we'll

**Speaker 1** 27:31

have a book club. There we go. When - do you share about her story with other people?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 27:38

Not really, and that's on me. I never really have had the opportunity until I came to the, you know, to the museum a few weeks ago. And you know, Jackie was talking to me about the upstanders and and immediately I thought of Noor because, you know, we grew up with her. And I mean, I've told my own girls about her many times. And you know, they, like my grandfather did and my father did with my sisters and I so but no, but again, I think that it's a lesson for me that you know these are stories that need to be told more eloquently and more often so well.

**Anne Thompson** 28:12

I love that you have that piece of connection to your grandfather and his family, and family folklore can hold a special place true in your heart, truly. I guess I would just like to finish by asking you when, when people hear Noor's story, what do you want them to remember the most?

**Hammad Siddiqi** 28:37

It's a great question. I think her story just encompasses like what I said earlier about humanity. I want people to understand that we're all the same, whether we may look different in the mirror or we may have been raised in different environments or in different geographies. At the heart of it all, humanity is the biggest thing that links us, and I think her story really illustrates that, because here is a woman who, by any shred of imagination should not have been where she was. She was economically very privileged. She was socially very privileged. She had her own responsibilities with her, her siblings, you know, and her parents and the father passing away. So everything we we tell ourselves, I can't do this right now because I'm too busy, or I've got family responsibility, or I will have too much to lose, or, you know, all of that existed for her, yet she founded within herself that steel, that determination to do what's right. And I feel that is the lesson we should all learn, is that you know the media and the world and global affairs will tell us one way, or we know what's right in our hearts because of our humanity. We know when things are wrong, and we should stand up for it as best as we can. I think that is the lesson that everyone should take from her story. Stand up when you need to.

**Anne Thompson** 30:02

Well, Hammad, it was lovely to meet you, and thank you so much for sharing your story with all of us.

**Hammad Siddiqi** 30:09

It was such a pleasure. Thank you so much

**Jackie Congedo** 30:10

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