

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Youshita Fathi. She is a world traveler and human rights activist originally from Iran. She grew up in Tehran until the age of 13 when her family became refugees and received asylum in Europe and she has now lived in nine different countries. She has also traveled to 110 countries on her quest to visit all 193 UN recognized countries. She is also an activist who regularly speaks out on issues ranging from the genocide in Palestine to human rights abuses of the Iranian regime. Her activism as part of the [Women, Life, Freedom movement](#) was featured in the Washington Post, the BBC, Reuters and 200 newspapers around the world.

Youshita, welcome to the show.

**Youshita Fathi:** Thanks for having me Matt. I'm very excited to be here.

**Matt Bowles:** I am so excited to have you here and so much stuff I want to talk about with you. But let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. We are not in person. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina on the east coast of the United States today. And where are you?

**Youshita Fathi:** I'm in the south of Spain in a little town of San Roque, a couple of kilometers from Gibraltar, overseeing the African continent and the beautiful city of Tangier in Morocco.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. I love Tangier. I have spent probably about a month or so in Morocco. I've been a couple of times. Tangier is such a special city. I have not done the arrival by boat, though. I flew into Marrakesh and then taken the train up to Tangier. Have you taken the ferry across from Gibraltar to Tangier?

**Youshita Fathi:** Yes, absolutely. So, if you want to do that, this area where I live is the best place. We've got two places, Tarifa and Algeciras in Spain where you can take the ferry and within an hour when you're in Morocco. You can literally go from there and have your lunch and come back for the evening.

**Matt Bowles:** That's so amazing. I really want to do that. Well, I think a good place to start off would just be to talk about how and where we met. We need to give a shout out to [Ric Gazarian](#), the Global Gaz who Maverick Show listeners know. He was the organizer and host of [The Extraordinary Travel Festival](#) in Bangkok, Thailand. And that is where you and I met. Do you want to share the story about how we connected at the conference?

**Youshita Fathi:** Sure. So, I decided very last minute to visit ETF because I happen to be not too far from Bangkok. I was for a work trip in India and traveling to Bangkok suddenly was very easy and I decided to join the conference. I know I will be seeing a lot of travel friends, a lot of people I know from the extreme travel community, from social media, from people. But I visited, and I had the chance to connect to a lot of new people and travelers. You are one of them. You were one of the people who had a talk, a very inspiring talk. You talked about digital life and how you started living this life and about your podcast and everything.

And I was really inspired by everything you said and extra on top, very touch when you started talking about the Palestine situation and Gaza, which was not something I was expecting at that moment, but having a platform and a space and using that to raise the voice of others was really nice of you and really happy that we got connected and became friends since then.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, there were over 250 people at the conference. It was totally sold out. And the way that I think I initially connected with you is because after my talk and as you mentioned, you know, if I have a platform and my government and my tax dollars and my elected representatives are funding, arming and

backing a genocide, I am of course going to use any platform that I have to try to speak out against that and raise awareness and talk about that publicly.

And so, as I was doing that right after my talk, you had posted a story with a picture from that portion of the talk and had some really nice things to say about it as well. And so, I saw your Instagram story and then immediately wanted to find you and connect with you. And then we spent a whole bunch of time at the conference and connected on many levels. And I as well, in learning about you, was impressed and so inspired by all of these amazing things that you are up to as well. And I said, I have to have you on The Maverick Show. And so, we have finally put that interview together. And I'm super excited for the conversation we're about to have today.

I feel like it would be a really good place to start, maybe just even giving people a sense of your travel lifestyle to just simply talk about from the end of that conference until today, which has been less than two months since we were at that conference, to the time of recording in the last two months. Can you share what some of your travel experiences have been since the conference? And I think this will both give folks a sense of your travel lifestyle and the types of things you do and the places you go to. But I think it will also be really interesting to hear what those experiences were like. So maybe just start with the first place that you went after the conference.

**Youshita Fathi:** So, after the conference, because at the time I was based in India for a work trip, I used that time period to travel in the countries around India. So, after Bangkok, I went to Sri Lanka and Maldives for a week. I spent the weekend in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and then my time in India ended. I came back to Europe for a couple of days, home and Christmas days with families, and then went all the way to the Caribbean to Jamaica for a week, back to Europe and to Libya. I just came back less than two days ago from a trip to a country that I wanted to visit for a very long time.

**Matt Bowles:** Let's talk about Jamaica first. Can you give folks a context of why you went to Jamaica? And I think this will be interesting for people as well who are not familiar with the community of people that are traveling to 193 countries and how tight knit that community is. So maybe just share a little bit about what brought you to Jamaica. And then once you were there for your very first time, what types of experiences did you have in Jamaica? What was it like?

**Youshita Fathi:** The very special reason of going to Jamaica was that one of my very good travel friends, Zuzana Berensky, who is a traveler from Hungary, she literally traveled the world and Jamaica was going to be her very last country from all 193 UN recognized countries, as you mentioned, to visit. And she had purposely planned her last year of travel to achieve this goal to live one country from each continent and finish off every country by visiting the last country of that continent. And Jamaica was going to be the final country.

And I have known since a couple of months that we are going to spend the Christmas holidays and the New Year's Eve there celebrating this amazing achievement that she has done over years of traveling to every single country. It is not an easy journey. It really takes a big chunk of your whole life, a lot of energy and resources and people who follow this dream. They know that there are very few people in the world who have done this. They say that there are less people who have been to every country than to space. It's known that maybe around four or five hundred people have done this. So, it is a truly big achievement. And I was so happy and lucky to be there and celebrate this with Susie.

**Matt Bowles:** So, full disclosure, I have actually not yet been to Jamaica, which is completely crazy because I have a whole bunch of Jamaican friends. I love Jamaican culture, dance hall music, the whole thing, I have been into it for so many years. I have actually been attempted to go to Jamaica. I literally booked an Airbnb for April of 2020 for a month in Kingston and then obviously had to cancel that because the pandemic came in March of 2020.

So, I've made the effort, I just haven't actually arrived in Jamaica yet. But I have so much deep love for Jamaican people and Jamaican culture. And I was following your Instagram stories, and I was just smiling at all the different experiences you were having and all these different things. Can you share a little bit though, for other folks like me that have not been what for you were some of the highlights and the experiences there that really impacted you and stood out.

**Youshita Fathi:** I would say Jamaica is probably the most prominent Caribbean Island, probably the best known, probably because of Bob Marley the man. I would say that there's no one on this planet who hasn't heard his name or listened to his music. And because of him, Jamaica has a big name in the world, and he is truly a very big part of the culture, and everything related to the music, Rastafarian reggae and all of that. But the country obviously has much more to offer than that.

So, we spent a week there and we had rented a car driving around different parts of the island. So, since this was a celebration week, we had a lot of time just spending together, celebrating days in different very beautiful locations. It's a very tourist-oriented island. There's a lot of people coming over especially from U.S.A or Canada. And since it was during the Christmas holidays, there is a lot of Jamaican people who live in these countries who coming back home to see their families. So, you will find a lot of beautiful resorts, a lot of nice Caribbean beaches, etc. So, we visited all these touristic places at the same time. I always love to connect and see the very authentic life of people in the world, and I can't have it just going from one resort to another.

So, I also visited some parts that are known to be the most dangerous places or the ghettos if you want to call it, that are very much connected to gang violence and different kind of crimes that people usually try to avoid, like flankers in Montego Bay region, etc. So I really wanted to also see this part of the country and I was lucky enough to connect to some locals who agreed to take me there, which also was a very special experience to see that part of Jamaica as well and make some really good friends there who ended up joining our party on the last day, my friends at 197 celebration. So, we had some good time spending a couple of drinks and nice chats in their neighborhoods and. And then they ended up being at our party which was a very good memory from the country.

**Matt Bowles:** Let me ask you a question about that because I really appreciate that about you and I appreciate that about how you travel and the things that are important and the way that you connect with people, not just that you want to go and experience the non-touristy areas, but the way that you do that through actual meaningful local connections and friendships and so forth. But I want to ask you a little bit about that because I think as we travel the world and you've been to more countries than I have, there is an industry, maybe if you will, coming up, of tourism. Some countries, they call them slums or they call them like you said, ghettos or favelas in Brazil.

Areas that are some combination of low income or perceived to be currently or formerly high crime areas or things of this nature. And I'm wondering what you've observed just in terms of industries rising up around that and what types of ethical considerations with regard to voyeurism or objectification of people in

vulnerable positions or things of that nature that travelers need to be aware of. And then I'm curious how you personally think through that and navigate that because I think you do it very well and I'm Wondering if you have any tips for travelers who would like to experience the non-touristy things when they go places, but also how they should navigate some of those ethical dynamics.

**Youshita Fathi:** I think the most important thing is the purpose you are doing this first of all, and people understand this. Whenever you go to a place and visit, the way you react and talk to people, people quickly understand why you are there and what you're doing and it's important to let them know. So, if your purpose is just about understanding how normal life there is, how are the living conditions, how are people living? The most important thing is once you go there and make this connection, you make people comfortable with you and make them understand that I'm not here to see how different you are or how we come from different parts of the world, that your life is so different, etc.

So, when I go to these places, first of all, I always try to go with a local person. You have to be aware of where you go. You cannot just show up in this kind of neighborhood as a tourist and just go around. You really need to understand how the situation is there and where you're going, who you're going with, etc., and then I always try to make connections with people, but this is how I do it anyway. In every place that I go, some little chat, I tell them where I'm from. I usually ask them if they know anything about my country, which I'm genuinely interested to know.

And I always get the most interesting answers from people all over the world, not only in these areas. And then you just go with the flow. And when people have distrust in you that you are not there to harm them or you're not there to shoot your videos or make any content because you know, there are a lot of people who unfortunately use these places just for these kinds of things. People also treat you as one member of a normal friend or someone from there and then it's a different situation.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to ask you about your trip to Libya. I have spent a very good amount of time in North Africa. I've spent over a year, I would say, in North Africa, but I have not yet been to Libya. And I want to ask you, you mentioned that you had a long-time interest in Libya and wanting to go there.

Can you share a little bit about that, what your interest was or connection with Libya and then share a little bit about the trip maybe just starting also with what is involved in actually going to Libya and how someone could experience Libya today.

**Youshita Fathi:** So, I've been wanting to go to Libya for a very long time because Libya is one of those countries that you don't hear a lot about it. It's one of the least visited countries and these places always trigger my curiosity because you just haven't seen or heard a lot about it. And you might see a lot about these countries, but it's mainly from the news headlines because of the war situation, everything happening there. So, I was very curious to go and see. I knew that the country has a lot to offer. It's very beautiful North African country, just as beautiful as its neighbors, which are very common for visitors to travel to.

And it has actually some of the best preserved Roman and Greek sites in the world. Some ancient thousand years old Berber villages which are very unique in the way they were built and they are very well preserved. And they would blow every tourist mind, and people would love to visit. So, it was long on my list to visit. But as we know, the country isn't very open to tourists. So, the country actually has never been.

So, we know Libya is a country that had Gaddafi, the crazy dictator who ruled there for 42 years till 2011, where a revolution happened.

And unfortunately, after the revolution things didn't go in the direction that people were hoping for it to go. So, a civil war started in the country and ever since things haven't been stabilized yet. So, since 2020 the situation is much better, much calmer, there's no real conflict or war in that way happening at the moment. But the country has been divided into two groups ever since to the east and the west government ruled by two completely different systems. And everybody knows that this situation is not definite, and things will have to change. The country needs to be united and that's what everybody wants. But how and when that's going to happen, it's unclear.

So, prior to 2011 there were more people who were allowed to visit the country. But even back then you were required to go with a travel agency and have a pre-arranged itinerary, etc. So, you weren't allowed to travel independently then obviously during the years of war nobody could visit the country. There were some ways in the last few years is to go as a businessman with a business visa, etc. But the country literally opened up to tourists this year, but you still have to go with a pre-arranged tour with a tour agency.

And on top of that you still need to have at least one or two security officials from the government following every single step of you in the country, which was something very unusual for me. And I've been to a few other war countries and places where you needed security, but I had never been in a country where you need to be literally escorted every single minute, and the escorts are going to sleep in the same hotel with you. You can't just go out for a walk around the block, or you go to lunch with a friend of yours, etc. You can do all of this, but you need to have the escort with you all the time.

**Matt Bowles:** So, in your Libya experience, how long were you in the country and what were some of the highlights? You've been thinking about going for so long, when you finally got there, what were some of the best moments of your trip?

**Youshita Fathi:** So, I was there for eight days. Let me tell you maybe how the trip even started before it really started. So having in mind, I'm going to a place that people don't usually travel to. I know this is going to be a high security country. I'm not going to be able to travel freely all of these. I'm not expecting to meet a lot of locals as I usually do on my trips. I cannot just hang out with whoever I want, etc. So, I'm going with this mindset that I'm in a little group and I'm not going to divert a lot from the plan, which is usually not the way that I travel.

So, I take a flight from Malaga to Rome, where I'm going to stay one night and take a second flight from Rome to Tripoli, the capital. And once I land in Rome and I turn on the mobile data on my phone, I send a voice note to a friend of mine explaining to him that tomorrow I'm going to Libya. And the lady who was sitting to me the whole flight, she overhears that I'm going to Libya and she's like, oh, you're going to Libya? I am from Libya, and that's really cool that you're going there. This is my number, this is my name, name. I'm flying to Libya tomorrow as well. If you need any help, anything, you can reach out.

And I'm like, wow, friend number one, already done before even getting to the flight to Libya. And the next morning I went to the airport to take the actual flight to Tripoli. And I find the gate that I have to go. And once I get there, I realize there's something unusual happening at the gate. There's a big crowd, there are a lot of people from the press, microphones, cameras, there's a lot of people dressed up in suits and ties and they're speaking. There's a huge cake; there's a lot of drinks. And I realized this is an inaugural flight, the

first flight from any European airline from ITA going to Libya after 10 years because, you know, things starting to get a little bit more normal now. And ITA is starting this flight, it's the first flight ever.

So, there are a bunch of important people there and they're celebrating and I'm just like, wow. And the smile on my face is just getting bigger and bigger. And a guy approaches me and he's like, wow, you're going to Libya? Why are you going there? Who are you? And I explained, I'm just a tourist and I'm going to travel. The guy was a Libyan person who moved to Sweden 15 years ago and he was going back to see his family. And he's like, here's my number, here's my name. If you need anything, if you want to hang out in Tripoli, just reach out. And I'm like, wow, friend number two. And I haven't even boarded the flight to this country yet.

And in my head, I'm already thinking, how do I explain to the securities that I need to meet all these people while I'm there? Because this is not part of the plan. So, when we got on the flight, we arrived, the red carpet rolled out of the flight because this is a special flight. And I go to the immigration queue, long queue. And while I'm standing there, I realize that I forgot to download my visa into my phone. And I realized there's no Wi-Fi in the Tripoli airport.

So, I turned back, and I asked the two gentlemen behind me if they have any Internet that they can share, which they luckily had. And these two men, they were from Italy and Croatia, traveling frequently to Libya for petrol related work. And they are like, what are you doing here? I was, you know, the majority of people there that were from Libya, there were a few businessmen. And it was very clear that I didn't look like being from Libya. From the way I was dressed with the backpack, it was obvious that I wasn't the business woman.

So, like, what are you doing here? But people don't travel to this country. And I explained to them that I'm very excited to be here, etc. And they're like, oh, here's our number. You can reach out if you want to hang out, if you want to do this, if you want to have a glass of wine in Libya, you know, here is where you can find us. I'm like, I haven't even been stamped in yet to the country. And I already have three different friends and contacts that I can reach out. And from that moment you could see on my face the smile was just too big; excitement was popping out of my eyes. Even though in these places you're always told, try to not stick out, try to be calm and blending, etc., you could see from a kilometer line that this person is a tourist and she's here, she's different and she's very happy to be here. And that's how the trip started.

**Matt Bowles:** So, once you got into Libya, over the course of those eight days, having these friends already established as you enter the country, what then were the eight days like? And what were some of the moments on that trip that you most remember?

**Youshita Fathi:** We did a road trip to Ghadames, which is around 600 kilometers south of Tripoli. This is somewhere where you get very close to the Algeria and Tunisia border. The trip there itself is very beautiful. There's a couple of very nice old Berber villages that you can stop and check out. And we spent two days in Ghadames, which is I think, truly one of the most beautiful places I've seen in Africa. So, we spent there visiting the desert as coming back to Tripoli. And then Tripoli itself is on the coast of the Mediterranean. And along that coast, both east and west of the city, there used to be a lot of ancient Roman sites which you can visit.

So, I did day trips to Sabratha and another day trip to Leptis Magna. Both of them are some of the best-preserved Roman sites that you can visit, which were really impressive. And on all of these sites, me and two of my friends, we were the only tourists there. The whole week I did not see another tourist, which

sometimes is a privilege because you're standing in these very beautiful places where you can take a million pictures and spend as much as time you want without having anyone on the side. And you just feel like, wow, I am a special guest.

Just enjoying all of this for myself a little bit. How things, you know, were during the pandemic and yeah, a lot of amazing cuisine. It just is a place with a lot of North African wives as you know it from Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, etc., with the difference that you just don't have the tourists, you don't have all this, you know, if you visit the old towns, etc., you don't have all these souvenir shops or people trying to sell you something. It just feels a bit more authentic, but definitely with North African, Mediterranean and a pinch of Italian influence.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. Well, Youshita, at this point I would love to go all the way back and give folks a little bit of sense of your backstory. And I would love to start in your home country of Iran with your experience growing up there as a kid up until the age of 13. Can you take us back and just share a little bit about where exactly you grew up in Iran and what was that like for you in your first 13 years being a kid in Iran? What are some of your memories from that period?

**Youshita Fathi:** I was born in Tehran. The capital of Iran is a massive city with, with maybe 15 million population. Growing up in Iran, I mean, that was the only country I knew. I never had a comparison. So, I thought the whole world is as I know it there. It's a country that has a very special history, let's say, and it's been going through a lot of struggles in the last few decades. There's a lot of restrictions growing up in the country that are very highly restricted by the government for a lot of people like my family. People are very open minded in a lot of senses, but the government imposes a lot of restrictions.

And you growing up in this double identity where you can do a lot of things at home, but as soon as you open the door and you go on the streets, you have to change the way you are dressed, you have to change the way you appear, the clothes you put on, the way you speak, the things you say. You have to always be careful what you mention in the school or not. If you're talking about a gathering in your house, you're always told by your parents, do not mention that we have alcoholic drinks at home or. Or that if when our families meet, we have mixed parties or we listen to western music, some very simple things that in most places you wouldn't consider as something strange.

**Matt Bowles:** And did you get the opportunity to travel around Iran? I mean, this is an enormous country for people that are not familiar with the size of Iran. Did you get a chance to travel outside of Tehran and see some other places around the country as you were growing up?

**Youshita Fathi:** We did travel a lot when I was a kid, but as you said, it is just a massive country. And now that when I look back, there are so many places that I wish we had visited and that I would love to go back and visit. But we have visited the north region very often. That's the place that the majority of Iranians head as soon as they have some free time. The northern region across the Caspian Sea is the green part of Iran. It's a very mountainous region and it has very nice weather throughout the year. I have been to the major cities like Isfahan, Shiraz, and to the south to a lot of cities. But as I said, there's still a lot of the country that I haven't been able to see.

**Matt Bowles:** So, for people that have never been to Iran and would like to visit, what would you put people onto or recommend? And also, any tips or advice you would have for people that might want to plan a trip to Iran.

**Youshita Fathi:** The good thing about Iran is that it really offers anything that you as a traveler could be interested in. So, if it's nature, it has really from desert to mountains to beautiful beaches to waterfalls, it has different parts to offer. If you're into historical places, there are some really beautiful historical sites. If it comes to culture, you have really different places. So, it really depends on your preferences. But as a must, if you go to Iran for at least 10 days or 14 days, you have to visit the two cities of Isfahan and Shiraz and usually Yazd and Kerman are what travelers add on.

And then I would always recommend doing the traditional route of visiting these three or four cities and then adding something depending on your interest. For example, I personally love the southeast part of Iran, which is the Balochistan region, which has completely different vibe to the whole country. The language, the traditions, the customs, everything, the food, everything is very different and is one of the least visited parts of Iran. And usually, people do not go there. But for me it's my favorite part. But yeah, depending on your interest, I would add something specific that is out of the very common itinerary.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to go to Iran so badly. I have not yet been, and I have wanted to go for so long. All the way back in high school. One of my best friends was Iranian. He had moved to the U.S. when he was, I think about 12. His parents, his family had moved over, and he became one of my best friends in high school. This is a Buffalo, Buffalo, New York. So, I would get invited to the Iranian community barbecues. I would go out there and then they'd be like, who is that white dude who's eating all of our food? Right? But Iranian food I fell in love with. I have all of these Persian friends. And then of course, I lived in L.A. for many years, which folks may know is referred to as Tehrangeles because of the sheer volume of Persian folks that live in Los Angeles.

So, I feel like I have had so much Persian cultural immersion over the years in these different ways. It's one of my favorite foods in the world. And I will say that literally 100% of The Maverick Show guests that I have interviewed that have been to Iran have just raved about how amazing and how special and how incredible it is and just recommend it so highly. So, it is really at the very tippy top of my list. So, I will definitely be consulting you, Youshita, when I start to plan my trip to Iran, but I want to continue with your journey. So, you lived there up until the age of 13. Can you talk about what then changed for you at the age of 13 and what happened with your family?

**Youshita Fathi:** I'm the only child of the family, and me and my parents were living together. My mom did not want me to grow up in Iran because growing up as a woman there, she faced all these restrictions throughout her life. When she was a young woman, 18, 19 years old, the revolution happened in Iran and things change overnight. So, a lot of people don't know that pre-1979 things weren't great. That's why the revolution happened. But a lot of things took a very wrong turn after that.

And for people like my mom in her generation, they suddenly had to go from the freedom of dressing the way they wanted to, covering their hairs and not being able to do a lot of things like riding a bicycle or attending a sports stadium. There was a period that wearing sunglasses or in a different color and your nail, that would cause you problem and trouble with the police. So, all these little things made life and still make life very difficult for a lot of people.

So, my mom didn't want me to grow up in an environment like this. And we had decided to leave the country. And at a time, we had planned to immigrate to the United States of America, we had applied for a work visa, and everything was in progress. So, we couldn't wait for the visa to be issued. So, we decided to leave in Iran and wait in a second country where there is an U.S. Embassy and just wait for our visa to be



issued. We traveled to Austria, Vienna, and this was in 2001, on September 9th. It was just two days before September 11th.

We had no idea what's going to happen. Two days later. I remember we switched on the TV, and I saw these airplanes crashing the World Trade Centers. And it was the day that we all remember Quiet Bull. At that age, I couldn't really understand what this exactly means. Nobody exactly knew what's going on, but I could clearly see from that TV that whatever is happening is not good. And I had the feeling this is going to impact us. And it did in a way that couldn't continue with our journey to the United States. And we kind of got stuck in Europe.

Now, years later, I'm really happy about the fact that we did stay in Europe, but at the time, it meant that we had to stay there and improvise and change the plan and apply for refugee status and go through a lot of troubles. But eventually things worked out and we ended up staying in Austria.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I would love for you to share a little bit about that experience. I think it's really important for people to understand what refugees experience in trying to seek asylum in these different places. And I know you initially tried to get asylum in the Netherlands. And so, when you're 13 years old and you're there with your family and you're trying to get asylum in the Netherlands, can you share with folks what your experience was like and what you remember from that experience?

**Youshita Fathi:** It depends how you enter a country, but once you're in a country, there's a place that you go and say, hi, I want to apply for refugee status. And then the police from there take it on. So, in the Netherlands, we went to this place, and we said that we are refugees. They took us to a place where there was a huge tent set up where they would temporarily keep people for a couple of days. From there, they would take you to a place where they would interview you very briefly. They would take each family member to a room. There were two sections, the place for interviewed people and non-interviewed people.

They would take you from one place, they would interview you, and then you would either pass to the next step or they would set you outside of the door if they would, for whatever reason, think that you're not eligible to be there. So, you were a lot of families there. And I remember we met another Iranian family who are very good friends of us still today. They had a very small baby. Their baby was a couple of months old. I was a teenager. And every family that was passing, we didn't know what's going to happen to them. We just knew either you passed through, or they put you out.

And I remember we had a little bit of cash with us, and my mom gave that money to this family, and she was like, in case they put you outside, at least you can buy some food for your baby. They went through, they passed through this question box, and they managed to get to the next step. We didn't pass through this question box. We failed. And we were the ones who were set outside, and they just gave us a little paper with some text on it. And they were like, you can get on the train with this and bye-bye. If you're not happy with this rejection, you can appeal the decision. And that's it.

So, we went back. This was a city, you know, far from Amsterdam. So, we just hopped on the train going back to the city where we came from. And I remember we were just showing this paper with some Dutch text on it to the persons who were controlling the tickets on the train. And every time they would read this, and they would put us outside the train, and we would just get on the next train. Later, we realized that the

paper was just, we are refugees. We don't have paper; we don't have money. Let us just be on the train for free.

So, it took us the whole day to go back a distance of three or four hours on the train just to reach the next city. And this was just the first day of becoming a refugee, something we hadn't planned. We weren't really come for this. We weren't really mentally prepared for this. And from that moment on, we had to stay a couple of months at our own cost and resources in the country, trying to appeal the decision, which didn't work out. And then we decided to go back to Austria. And then the same process repeated, and it took around two and a half years in Austria till we were finally, finally approved asylum.

And usually in this period, till there's no decision made on your case if you are an approved refugee or not. You're not allowed to work; you're not allowed to have a normal life. For the first year, I was not allowed to go to school. So, your life's on pause. And this process for us took two and a half years. I know people that have been through this process for 10 years and more, and their life has been this bubble, just waiting for a decision. And at the end, they may be deported to their country, they may be put on the street, they may be finally approved.

**Matt Bowles:** So, you're 13. This is your first time out of Iran to go to any other country. So, you have the European cultural differences, which are obviously quite a change for you. And then you have this treatment of your family going on at the same time. So, when you think back to that period of your life now and what you experienced, what lessons did you learn in general about the treatment of refugees in this world, and how did that period of your life and those experiences start to shape your worldview?

**Youshita Fathi:** When I look back, we went through a really tough time, which was not easy at all at the same time, without really understanding. I was learning and developing so many skills that helped me later on in my life to live the life that I'm living today. And one of them was just being super adaptive to the environment. In the first year that we left Iran, imagine in my brain, we were going to immigrate from Iran to U.S.A. Then this was changed to the Netherlands. Between going from Netherlands to Austria, we were actually planning to go to U.K. We paid someone a lot of money to take us to U.K. That person disappeared, so we had to go back to Austria.

So, in my brain, there were four completely different locations that I was going to get adjusted to. And at the end, we ended up in a completely different place. And at the same time that all of this was happening, we were in these refugee camps meeting a lot of people from different parts of the world. And this was giving me the opportunity to see and understand a lot of things I had never seen. For example, at the time, the Chechnya war in Russia was happening and there was. There were a lot of refugees coming from Chechnya. I had never heard the name before. I was like, where is this place in the world? You people are Russian, but why do you look so different? Why are you all Muslims? And why is your country killing you?

And, you know, why are you here? There are a lot of people from Afghanistan. There were a lot of people from Iran, but different parts of Iran, religious minorities of Iran that I had never met, a lot of African countries. So, at the same time, I was learning and meeting all these people and hearing their stories and understanding the world in a much better way and seeing the treatment that these people were getting. And people were there with different financial situations. Some people had some personal resources that they could spend on themselves. But if you didn't have anything on you, you were fully dependent on this refugee situation. And you were usually given not very good living conditions, a place to live, some food.

I hear a lot from people in the west that they say, refugees come, they take our money, they receive a place to live for free. There is food, money, et cetera. But once you go through that and see how those conditions look like, it's nothing that anyone would ever wish to leave. And we were talking about some of the best countries actually in the world to accept refugees. People are given a very small space to live. I remember, for example, in a place that we had to stay for two years, it was a guest house run by a family, and the government would give a lot of money to this guest house to provide to the refugees.

But they weren't really the nicest people to the refugees. They weren't treating them well. A lot of people there, for example, had Muslim backgrounds and they had a lot of food restrictions, but they would just cook food for them and serve five times a week pork, which they knew exactly these people are not going to eat. So, it would make them end up going to bed hungry. And these people do not receive any money or are not allowed to work, etc.

**Matt Bowles:** So, Youshita, eventually you do get the asylum in Austria, and eventually you are able to go to school in Austria. Can you share a little bit about that acclimation experience? Both the cultural acclimation to a completely different place and then as you started interacting with students and with people there, what did you find? How did that go? And what sorts of stereotypes about Iranians did you come up against in Europe and things of that nature? What was that experience like for you in your teenage years?

**Youshita Fathi:** So, the experience of going to school in Austria was so different. First of all, coming from Iran, the schools are separate. You're not allowed to have boys' and girls' school, et cetera. So, I was going to this school as a teenager and suddenly everything is mixed. People are doing a lot of things that you couldn't even imagine doing in Iran. I remember I was maybe 14 and 15 at the time, when I look at my diaries from back then, I have text written like, oh my God, these people in my class, they consume drugs and what they were doing, they were smoking weed, which was not the craziest thing ever. This is crazy. They smoke this green thing, and they get high and.

But for them it was the same thing. I come from a country that most of them have never heard about. They had no clue what Iran is. For them, it was just a far place, further away from anything they had seen or traveled to. And they had all these misconceptions about my country. Asking me, this is in early 2000s, there's no social media, there's no Instagram, there's no ChatGPT. And people kept seriously asking me questions like, do you guys drive cars in Iran? Do you know what football is?

I remember we were going to go on a ski trip, which is a very common thing in Austria. And they were asking me, do you know what skiing is? Have you ever touched snow? And all I was thinking, I come from Tehran, it is a city surrounded by so many four or five thousand mountains, which is very common to go on a ski trip at that age, I hadn't been to a desert in my whole life. I hadn't seen a camel, you know, from close by, but I had been on ski trips, etc. So, I was always wondering, why do people have all these crazy ideas about Iran? Why do they think that we ride camels or do completely different activities than they do?

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know that you eventually started working as an interpreter and working to help other religious minorities emigrate out of Iran and did some NGO work. And I'm curious if you can share a little bit about that experience, what it was like and what you learned from that experience.

**Youshita Fathi:** Yeah. So, the first main series job I ended up having was, I think, probably the longest job I ever had. For eight years, I was working as an interpreter for an American NGO that was helping Iranian

religious minorities immigrate to the United States. These were Iranian Jewish people, Iranian Christians who are usually from Armenian or Assyrian descents. These are Iranian Baha'is, Zoroastrians and even Mandeans, you know, a religion that I had never heard before and is not known internationally and even locally in Iran.

So, working there for a couple of years and as an interpreter was a great opportunity for me to understand, first of all, all the struggles these people were having to go through. Because my job was mainly to sit and interpret the stories of eight families per day. They would be interviewed by the officers of the Department of Homeland security from the U.S. consulate. And they had to explain all the experiences throughout their life, how they had been treated in Iran, what they've been through.

And these people would be some very well-educated people from major cities. These were people who worked in the parliaments, who were doctors, engineers, but also a lot of people from smaller villages with less education, young people, older people, so from all parts of society. But what they all had in common was the religious discrimination they had been through. And it was mind blowing for me to hear how much of struggles they had to go through and not being able to live a normal life, which a lot of it overlaps, even with people without being a minority in Iran, people like me or any other people who live there. And it was a very enriching experience to be able to help these people and listen to their stories and learn from their experiences.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. Everything that we have discussed in this episode is going to be linked up in [the show notes](#), as well as all the ways to find and follow Youshita on social media. Just go to one place at [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) and go to the show notes for this episode. And be sure to tune in to the next episode to hear [part two](#) of my interview with Youshita Fathi. Good night, everybody.