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# Broken Threads

A Family from Empire  
to Independence

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'You'll be utterly enchanted by this meticulously researched story'

**Jon Sopel, author of *Strangeland***

# Broken Threads

*A Family from Empire to  
Independence*

MISHAL HUSAIN

for br Mahatir  
and family  
with respect and  
salam

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Husain



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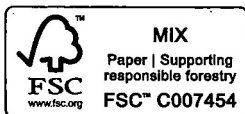
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*For my mother Shama, who kept the past alive*



PERDANA  
LEADERSHIP  
FOUNDATION  
YAYASAN  
KEPIMPINAN  
PERDANA



Freedom's Morning  
August 1947

This stained daybreak, this morning after a pain-filled night  
This is surely not the dawn for which we waited  
For which we set out, with desire in our hearts  
Convinced we would reach our destination

Somewhere in the heavens is the stars' final resting place  
Somewhere is the place where the night tide washes in  
An anchor for the ship of heartache

*Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-84)*  
Part of the poem 'Subh-e-Azadi',  
translated from the original Urdu



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*Mishal with her parents, 1973*

# *The Family*

**Syed Shahid Hamid**, born in Lucknow in 1911. Educated at Aligarh Muslim University and Sandhurst and commissioned into the Indian Army in 1934. Died in Rawalpindi in 1993.

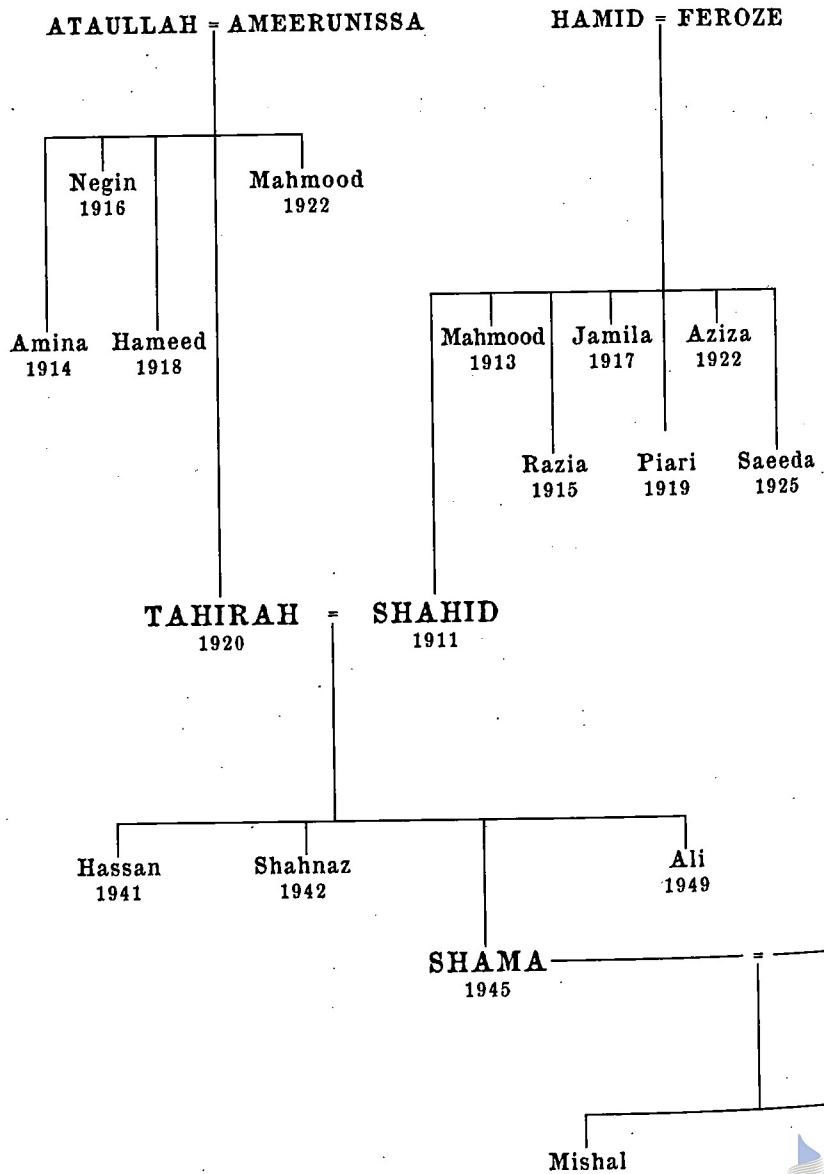
**Tahirah Butt**, born in Aligarh in 1920. Educated at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi and married Shahid in 1940. Died in Islamabad in 2011.

**Mumtaz Husain**, born in Multan in 1920. Educated at King Edward Medical College in Lahore and joined the Medical Service of the Indian Army in 1943. Died in Karachi in 2007.

**Mary Quinn**, born in Narsipatnam, in south India, in 1922. Trained as a nurse at Mayo Hospital, Lahore, before marrying Mumtaz in 1942. Died in London in 1984.

Shahid and Tahirah's children: Hassan, Shahnaz, Shama (my mother) and Ali.

Mumtaz and Mary's children: Imtiaz (my father, known as Tazi), Ejaz, Niaz, Saleem and Arshad.



**MOHAMMED = SARDAR**  
**ALI = BEGUM**

**FRANCIS = MARIAMMA**

Sakina  
1922

Anne  
1924

Josephine  
1930

Rosemarie  
1935

Louisa  
1928

Joseph  
1932

**MUMTAZ = MARY**  
1920 1922

Ejaz  
1944

Niaz  
1945

Saleem  
1947

Arshad  
1948

**IMTIAZ**  
1943

Haider

## Other Characters

**Syed Ahmad Khan**, Muslim intellectual who lived through the 1857 Indian Mutiny and then founded a college at Aligarh, near Delhi, dedicating the rest of his life to improving his community's prospects through education. Knighted in 1888.

**Syed Ross Masood**, his grandson. Studied at Aligarh and Oxford and later led his grandfather's college after it became Aligarh Muslim University. Inspired E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

**Mohammed Iqbal**, poet and philosopher, known in Pakistan as 'Allama' Iqbal, the great scholar. Regarded as a founding father because of a 1930 speech calling for the formation of a single 'North-West Indian Muslim State'. Died in 1938.

**Mohammed Ali Jauhar and Shaukat Ali Jauhar**, brothers who led the 'Khilafat' movement in India during and after the First World War, campaigning to preserve the authority of the Turkish Sultan as Caliph and leader of Muslims around the world.

**Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi**, Hindu lawyer turned activist who developed campaigns of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience in South Africa and then in India from 1915.

A leader of the Indian National Congress political party, he was assassinated by a Hindu extremist in 1948.

**Mohammed Ali Jinnah**, Muslim lawyer turned politician who was for a time involved with both Congress and the Muslim League party. Sought to secure rights for India's minority Muslims and then became the founder of Pakistan in 1947. Died in Karachi in 1948.

**Fatima Jinnah**, his sister and close companion. Worked to safeguard his legacy and ideals after his death and ran for President of Pakistan in 1965, two years before her death.

**Liaquat Ali Khan**, Muslim League politician and Pakistan's first Prime Minister. Assassinated in 1951.

**Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah**, member of the Muslim League from 1940. Became one of Pakistan's first female parliamentarians and represented the country at the United Nations.

**Jawaharlal Nehru**, Cambridge-educated son of a prominent Hindu lawyer. Joined Congress and became a key leader of the party during and after the Second World War. Independent India's first Prime Minister from 1947 until his death in 1964.

**Abul Kalam Azad**, prominent Muslim member of Congress and close associate of Gandhi. Became a minister in India after independence.

**Stafford Cripps**, member of the Churchill and Attlee governments who became involved in missions to India in 1942 and 1946, attempting to forge agreements on self-rule.

**Claude Auchinleck**, last Commander-in-Chief of the pre-independence Indian Army. Led Allied forces in North Africa in the Second World War, halting Rommel's advance in Egypt in 1942. Created a field marshal in 1946. Died in Morocco in 1981.

**William Slim**, British general who oversaw the retreat from Burma in 1942 and then led the forces which recaptured it from Japan in 1945.

**Archibald Wavell**, Commander-in-Chief, India, 1941–43 and then Viceroy. In 1945 he began the talks with Indian politicians which led to the formation of a pre-independence interim government. Sacked in favour of Mountbatten in 1947.

**Louis Mountbatten**, Viceroy from March 1947. Ten weeks later he announced the partition plan which was carried out that August. Became independent India's first Governor-General. Assassinated by the IRA in 1979.

**Cyril Radcliffe**, barrister, arrived in Delhi in July 1947 tasked with drawing the India–Pakistan border through the provinces of Punjab in the west and Bengal in the east.

**Christopher Beaumont**, former Indian Civil Service officer, appointed to assist Radcliffe. Lived as well as worked alongside him in Delhi in the summer of 1947.

**Winston Churchill** and **Clement Attlee**, British political leaders and prime ministers.

# *Names, Places and Language*

Much of this story occurs before 1947, the year India gained independence and Pakistan was born, and place names have been left as they were at the time: Bombay rather than Mumbai, Calcutta rather than Kolkata, Allahabad rather than Prayagraj, and so on.

One shorthand reference remains the same: the area of north India where my mother's family came from continues to be known by the initials UP. In my grandparents' day it stood for 'United Provinces', whereas today it is the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

As far as people's names are concerned, Muslim families in South Asia would traditionally choose one or two given names for their child. Surnames did not exist and were not necessary in close-knit communities where everyone knew how people were related by blood or marriage. Thus my paternal grandfather was called 'Mumtaz Husain' because his parents liked these two names; amid the influence of British norms in the colonial era, 'Husain' then became the surname of his children and grandchildren.

My maternal grandfather was given the first name 'Shahid', which he used alongside 'Hamid', his father's first name. 'Hamid' then became the surname of my mother's family.



Many other sources of surnames were possible: 'Khan' signified descent from the Pathans (or Pashtuns) who came from the north-west and migrated to many parts of India. Clan names such as 'Chaudhry' might also be used, as could terms like 'Dehlvi', meaning a person from Delhi.

Girls were given first names, often used with the suffixes 'Bibi' or 'Begum', respectful terms for woman or lady.

'Syed' or 'Syeda' are prefixes for men and women who can trace their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad. My grandfather Shahid was a Syed.

On language, I have often referred to Urdu words or phrases. Urdu developed in the north of India over many centuries and includes elements of Hindi, Persian, Arabic and Turkish. It was the native tongue of my maternal grandparents Shahid and Tahirah and is today the national language of Pakistan. Urdu and Hindi speakers can converse together with ease, given the many words common to both. On my father's side, my grandmother Mary grew up in the south of India speaking English and Telugu, while my grandfather Mumtaz's mother tongue was Multani (also known as Saraiki). He then acquired Urdu and English, and gained some proficiency in Punjabi after studying in Lahore.



## INTRODUCTION

# *The Wedding Present*

In the searing heat of the month of May, in 1940, a wedding took place in the town of Aligarh, south-east of Delhi. It was far from an ideal time of year for a celebration, given the discomfort of early summer in northern India, but the moment came as a relief for the family of the bridegroom, my grandfather Shahid. At twenty-eight, he was at the outer limits of acceptable marrying age, and the onset of war the previous autumn had given his parents a new reason to fret. A wife, they reasoned, would give their soldier son more to live for when facing the perils of battle, and they gave each of his five younger sisters a sari to mark the happy occasion.

The saris were made of a heavy silk brocade in shades of beige and gold, embossed with repeating patterns and flecked with threads that shimmered when they caught the light. There is no photograph of the sisters, my great-aunts, wearing them but six decades later a fragment of one made its way to me in London, as a present for my own wedding. It had come from the sari given to Jamila, one of the five, and then inherited by her daughter Shahmeen. While most of the fabric had frayed badly over the years the embroidered border, the most robust part, was relatively intact, and Shahmeen had used it to edge a plain, woollen, sand-coloured shawl. This was her gift to



## 2 *Introduction*

me, a tangible link to a previous family wedding and to the people who connected us both.

I marvelled then – and now – that any part of the original sari had survived the disruption and dislocation of 1947, a seismic year in South Asia and one that forever changed the lives of my parents as young children. Our family story spans India, Pakistan and Britain, and the sari would have been in Lucknow, in India, when Shahid's family made a panicked departure for Pakistan. Shahmeen was then a six-year-old, in the care of her grandmother as her own mother had died a few months before, and I knew the entire household had packed and moved quickly at a time of insecurity. They took only the few possessions that could be easily transported by train and ship, but someone had thought to pack this particular sari and safeguard it for Shahmeen to have one day. Given the circumstances, she may have had little else that had once belonged to her mother.

Decades later I had the opportunity to visit India myself for the first time, to front a week of BBC News coverage from Delhi. The visa involved extra paperwork once I had ticked the box declaring I had relatives who had migrated to Pakistan, and the process was longer than for my colleagues. But the resulting trip was deeply resonant. I soaked up the atmosphere of a great city loved by my grandparents, and lost to them after 1947; I used my Urdu, was replied to in Hindi, and found common understandings as well as language everywhere I went.

After that my family story crept into the edges of my broadcast work on a few occasions: in 2007 when I reported from Pakistan on the sixtieth anniversary of independence; in 2009 when I travelled across India to make a BBC series on Mahatma Gandhi; and in 2020 for a piece about the Indian Army in the Second World War. I knew that the threads of our story lay far more in India than in present-day Pakistan because three of my four grandparents were born on that side of the border; the searing legacy of 1947 meant that for the rest of their lives they had little contact with the people and places of their youth.

I came at the story from a different perspective, born in England in the 1970s to a father who had come to train as a surgeon in the NHS and a mother who had joined him after their marriage. Both imagined they would return to Pakistan after a few years, but when I was two they moved to the Middle East and my brother Haider and I grew up in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. At boarding school in the UK I became conscious of the deep roots all my English friends seemed to have, embedded into a network of similar families and closely attached to places and homes that went back generations. I had no such connection to the fabric of the land: I came and went from England, to parents who were themselves part of an expatriate community, almost as if I had no history of my own.

My one constant point of reference in those years was the home of my mother Shama's parents, in Rawalpindi in the north of Pakistan. Today, it is almost a suburb of the capital Islamabad, but my early memories date from the period before that city was built. The house had odd-shaped corners and split levels, both inside and in the garden, and an underground study where my grandfather Shahid would vanish to write books. Upstairs, one room had a floor-to-ceiling bookcase which swung out to reveal the secret cupboard where my grandmother Tahirah stored jewellery and silver. To be allowed to accompany her in and have a peek while she sorted things out was my great treat – and also a source of terror when it was followed by nightmares about the heavy door slamming shut, trapping me in the darkness, alone.

In truth, it was a house where people were rarely alone, which was part of its charm. There was a near-constant buzz of activity: uncles, aunts and cousins coming and going, gathering for the meals that happened strictly at set times, and each sharing bits of news and information about their day. Haider and I were only ever there in our summer holidays, when lunch would be followed by the afternoon siesta, a deep stillness descending on the house until the squeak of the tea-trolley wheels at 4. At night, Tahirah, whom we grandchildren called 'Achi Ammi' – the good mother – would place saucers of tiny



#### 4 Introduction

white flowers by our bedsides, spindly blooms of star-shaped *motia*, a local jasmine, which would perfume the entire room. On those holidays there was always a moment of drama, when the sight of black clouds on the horizon signalled that the monsoon was rolling in. The rain would briefly cool the air before the heat resumed, this time humid rather than dry, but there was something soothing in the way the monsoon made the garden gleam with a suddenly fresher, almost neon, shade of green.

Both house and garden are long gone now, built over after they were sold in the 1990s. But even in the years when they seemed immovable and everlasting, I knew that the equivalent places of Shahid and Tahirah's own youth were lost to them, inaccessible across the India–Pakistan border. My grandmother was wistful about this at times. 'You never saw what we left behind,' she said to me on more than one occasion, and I knew she meant left behind in India. Shahid, though, was stoic. 'Guria,' he would say gently, using her nickname, which meant doll. 'No regrets.'



My father's parents Mumtaz and Mary had a life of different complexities. They had married across ethnic and religious lines, as he was a Muslim from the province of Punjab, on the territory of present-day Pakistan, and she was a Catholic from the south-east of India. Knowing the importance of faith in both their lives, I asked him once how that worked. 'We understood each other perfectly,' he said, looking puzzled. 'It would have been much more difficult if one of us had had no religion.'

Still, I wondered about Mary. She died when I was eleven, so I never had the chance to ask for her version of their life together, but the key dates told their own story. When they married in 1942 their families were poles apart in language and culture as well as faith, but they did at least belong to the same country. Five years later, when independence took place, Mary had her life with husband and children on one side of the border while her mother and siblings lived

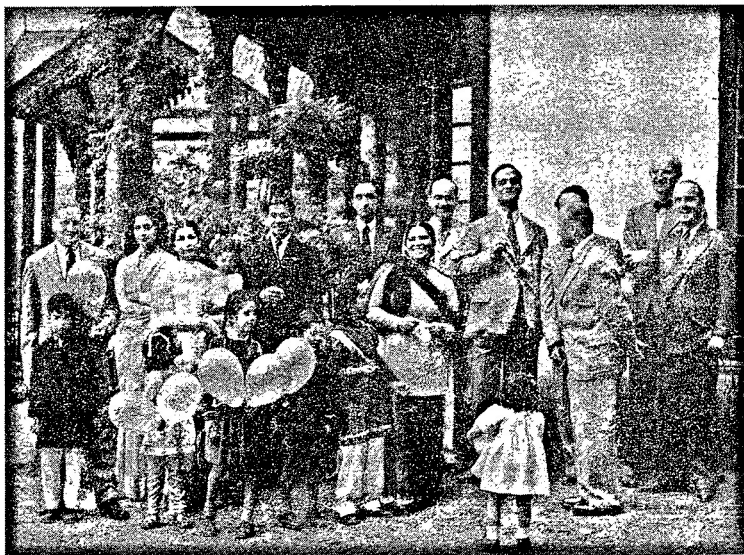
more than a thousand miles away on the other. And, as a military wife, travelling to see them was a politically tricky undertaking as well as an expensive one.

One day, I thought, I will go to the places in India where Mary, Shahid and Tahirah grew up, walk the streets that they knew and try to understand more of the environments that shaped them. But when I dipped into this in 2014 while covering the Indian elections, I found that Tahirah's childhood home had just been demolished. I thought the same might well be true of key places in Shahid's and Mary's lives – assuming I could even find them, given how population growth and urbanisation have changed South Asia's landscapes and neighbourhoods.

I did have sources though, written ones as well as family memories, and as I thought about my grandparents' lives I realised that their generation were eyewitnesses to a great global shift, as the age of empire made way for the nation state. I knew some basic details: both couples had made the journey to Pakistan in difficult circumstances in 1947, and Shahid had observed the politics of pre-partition Delhi up close, as an aide to the last Chief of the British-era Indian Army. It was a time, he said, of some remarkable leadership and also of 'small men playing with the destiny of millions'. It was also a period in which women's lives were changing and thus my two grandmothers' experiences and opportunities were markedly different from those of their own mothers.

One photograph I found seemed to encapsulate that moment of transition and how it came amid a post-war camaraderie that was starting to cut across barriers of race, religion and rank. It was taken in the hill station of Simla in July 1947, where a group of family and friends had gathered for a child's party. It was the fifth birthday of my aunt Shahnaz, who is in the foreground of the picture with a white ribbon in her hair, looking up at my mother, in Tahirah's arms. I gazed at the scene in the knowledge that, within weeks, the group standing on the hilltop would be pulled in different directions: the British generals battling to contain outbreaks of devastating violence





*Claude Auchinleck (far left), Indian Army Chief, with the Hamid family and other friends, Simla, July 1947*

and the young Hindu officer standing next to Tahirah shepherding her and the children to safety.

Shahid had written about this period, and I knew there was an account of my father's family's experiences too, because my other grandfather had spent time on his own, unpublished, memoir. When Mumtaz died, my uncle retrieved the text from his computer and shared it with us, but I had only ever skimmed through part of it. As I looked at it properly, I saw that it covered more than thirty years of his life, and I felt ashamed to see that, as he wrote, he wondered if any of us were even interested. 'There must be an inner hope that it will be worthwhile for anyone who comes across it, has the time to spare and the desire to – at least – glance over it,' he said. 'Otherwise why go through the exercise at all?'

He was writing in the years after he had lost Mary to cancer, when she was only sixty-two. It was partly because of her that he pressed

on, concluding that this was a way 'to pay a small tribute to a person who stood by me through a turbulent life like a rock of stability and faith.' It would also, he thought, mitigate his 'abysmal loneliness', and he hoped that detailing his ancestry would be a resource for his children, grandchildren and future great-grandchildren, 'that they might know what made their existence possible'.

I knew then that my grandfathers had left me enough to get started, but comparable material on Tahirah and Mary would be more difficult, as is so often the case with records and sources on women. They had been first and foremost wives and mothers, and I remembered their letter-writing: the best hope had to be that some correspondence had survived. Of Mary I had only a few lines in a childhood birthday card and an inscription in a book given as a present, but Tahirah had written to me throughout my years at boarding school and university and I had bundles of these letters, tied up with string, stored in a cupboard. When I took them out and looked at them again, I remembered they were not always easy to decipher: her flowing handwriting was small, the Biro was sometimes smudged, and the lines were close together, covering every available inch of the lightweight airmail writing paper. There was, however, a familiar pattern, as each letter began with an expression of love, and how much she was looking forward to the next reunion, in England or Pakistan. Beyond that she wrote about the everyday: who was coming and going from the house and what was growing in the garden.

These letters would not give me what I sought, but within a separate cache preserved by my mother I discovered one sheet of paper that looked different. Here, rather than addressing a person, Tahirah had begun with a quotation. 'Reality is never new, but we are new to reality', she had written, ascribing the words to the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and following them with a paragraph about herself and what she saw as the contradictions of her life. There was her attachment to home, hearth and loved ones – 'one life seems too brief a span to enjoy them to my heart's content,' she wrote. 'The other side of the picture is my mental involvement and suffering at

the political turmoil around which my generation seems fated to live. Undoubtedly some nations that also achieved independence in the recent past have lived through much worse, and in comparison may consider this a Utopia, but that is poor consolation.'

There was no date, but from the events she went on to describe I could place her words in the late 1980s, as Pakistan moved from military dictatorship to an era when corruption and democratic politics went hand in hand. 'As a young army officer's wife I went through the Second World War,' she said. 'We had seen the emergence of Hitler, and it was nothing short of a miracle to witness his fall. The emergence of a personality like Gorbachev, endeavouring to put an end to Russian expansionism, is yet another miracle which may bring endless peace to mankind. And so one lives in the hope that to every action there is a reaction.'

It was, to my delight, intended to be the start of a memoir. 'For some years now I have felt the urge to put my reactions to so much that happens around me on paper,' Tahirah said. 'In years to come it may become a comprehensive and objective account of events that have shaped our destiny.' She planned to look right back, to periods she had lived through but whose significance she had been unable to appreciate at the time. 'Going back to when the concept of Pakistan had been accepted, a separate Muslim state to be carved out of India, I was politically not mature enough to realise the gravity of events taking place around me,' she wrote.

For several more paragraphs she continued, in longhand, with some crossings out as she rethought and reworked phrases before she copied out a neater version on a second sheet of paper. Then the account petered out: whether she was interrupted too often, lost heart or found it too emotional to look back, I will never know. But it meant that I was left with a tantalising fragment rather than the complete story I craved.



It was my mother who came to the rescue when she told me she had found something else: two cassette tapes labelled 'Ama [Mother] talking' in her handwriting. She had a vague memory of recording Tahirah, but at first we couldn't even check what was on the tapes: neither of us owned a cassette player anymore. Once we found one I was able to put in the first tape and press play and, sure enough, there was my grandmother's voice, heard for the first time in years.

She was speaking in 1993, I realised, not long after Shahid's death, and the content turned out to be an audio letter that I had carried back to my mother after a trip to Rawalpindi. 'Writing has been a bit tedious so I thought I would talk to you instead,' she said to Shama. 'Let me tell you the greatest thing that's happened to me in the last few months is your little daughter accompanying me to Pakistan. It's been such unmitigated and undiluted joy. I'm happy she's going back to you. Don't worry about me little one, I'm sure I'm going to be all right. I know I have your love, each one of you. I'm as well surrounded as one could possibly be, with your brothers and sister around me.'

It was, to my delight, a version of what she had intended in the fragment of written memoir I found. This time, as with my grandfather Mumtaz, the loss of a life partner was spurring her forward. 'I keep thinking to myself, what can I do to make him come to life again?' she said of Shahid. 'I know what it is: I have to pay a debt of honour and write something for him. Because that is what he wished me to do all the time. I can hear him say, "Writing comes so much easier to you than it does to me. You owe it to your children, you owe it to your country, to write." And now that he is not with us, I feel that maybe I can.'

She spoke mostly in English, interspersed with occasional bursts of Urdu, especially as she related her early years in the university town of Aligarh. 'I feel that before Pakistan came into being we had a complete life,' she said. 'Countries have their problems, whether they're ruled by others or by people that actually belong, and nothing is perfect. All I know is that the life I had before the partition of India was as beautiful and as rich as it was afterwards.'



Some of this she went on to detail, including her student days in Delhi, her wartime experience while Shahid was serving in Burma, and her post-1947 worries about the ageing parents who remained in India and the cross-border friendships that were impossible to maintain. 'In certain ways people of my generation were not complete for a long time,' she said. 'We were used to a pattern of life, friends that we had made and kept despite prejudices of life, like religion. But these things don't really matter, the human values do.'

It was, again, an incomplete record but I knew as I listened that I could fill in the gaps with my own journey into the past, putting what felt like a jigsaw of the family story together. 'We said good-bye to Delhi,' my grandfather Mumtaz wrote of August 1947. 'And, although I did not know it then, also to the parts of India where I had spent most of my service life and was not destined to return to, ever.' It was as though a crucial thread in all of their lives was broken that year, as freedom came alongside separation. The break was more definitive than they could imagine at the time, and its legacy continues today in the lack of contact between most citizens of India and Pakistan. But my grandparents' story is one of Britain, too, as their lives were directly affected by choices made in London about how to govern, and then cast off, the colonies. These were the threads I picked up, to set individual lives against the backdrop of their times.

PART ONE

*Citizens of Empire*



PERDANA  
LEADERSHIP  
FOUNDATION  
YAYASAN  
KEPIMPINAN  
PERDANA

**'Vital history, which just happens  
to read like a great novel'  
Sathnam Sanghera**

August 1947. As new nation states are born out of the dying British Raj, two couples face difficult choices, with consequences they cannot fully know. Mumtaz and Mary have already crossed religious lines to marry, while Shahid and Tahira witness the politics of partition at close quarters in Delhi.

Decades later, Mishal Husain uses diaries, letters and audio recordings to follow her grandparents through a century of change. Born citizens of Empire, their lives are shaped by the impact of two world wars and the dawn of independent India and Pakistan. As freedom comes, bonds fray and communities are divided, but the shared heritage of the past is never forgotten.

**'One of the best books ever on the epochs  
that shaped three nations. A triumph'  
*iNews***

**'Husain has written an arresting family memoir ...  
her explanation of partition is more level-headed  
than that of many professional historians'  
*The Times***

**'A beautiful book, informed and informative,  
cool and factual, poetic and elegiac'  
*Financial Times***

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