Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan reminisces about his days at Harvard

"In 1954 I came to the United States for the first time in my life and entered Harvard College as a first year student. It was an experience that I will never forget. All of my formal education up to that point had been in French, and although I had studied English, my command of the language was not up to the demands of Harvard's curriculum. Fortunately there were several of us in the same position and we worked together to find French editions of as many of the assigned readings as possible. We wrote our papers in French, translated them into English, and waited in fear for our grades.

"By a quirk of nature, although I was born right-handed, I had the good fortune to come into this world left-footed. Soccer players who could kick with their left foot were very rare in the United States in those days. This meant that I was able to make the Freshman Soccer team as the left wing. We were a distinguished group; we turned in an undefeated season, and also had the distinction of all being on a list in the Dean's office, not to be confused with the Dean's list, although we were never troubled to explain that fine distinction very fully to our parents. To this day I am convinced that I owe my Harvard degree to my left foot.

"I can tell you that I had many a sleepless night during that first year at Harvard, and when sleep came, it was often accompanied by a dream (nightmare might be more accurate). In it I was hauled up in front of a senior authority figure, thoroughly scolded about my performance, told that I was unfit to be a member of the Harvard community of scholars, and then sent back to my room to pack my bag to return home. Not knowing anything about the structure of
educational institutions other than my boarding school in Switzerland, I always imagined that authority figure to be the head of the institution, or in the case of Harvard, its President. Memories of the fear I felt at having to face only one university president then, gave me little comfort as I prepared to face a room full of you here tonight.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2001 Association of American Universities Centenary Celebration address (Washington D.C., USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5920/

Paul Evan Ress: Actually, [Karim] is so nearsighted that he usually wears contact lenses.

Aga Khan: I had 20-20 vision when I entered Harvard. I don't know why, but my eyes deteriorated there rapidly....

Paul Evan Ress: Karim eventually ended up with fair grades at Le Rosey but, even so, he says.

Aga Khan: I was thoroughly lost when I got to Harvard. I had done my secondary work in French and was poorly read in English. My reading capacity in English was deplorable. I was unaccustomed to finding myself a number in a big bowl. I knew no one. So I got into the freshman rut: to bed at 4 in the morning after a terrific bull session and up at noon. I cut too many classes. I found my feet only at the end of my sophomore year.

Paul Evan Ress: In a sense, Karim found his feet in his freshman year, but that was on the soccer field.

Aga Khan: My legs were particularly strong and in Europe I had naturally been thoroughly trained in soccer's techniques. I made the freshman team, and we went through the season undefeated. I played outside left and scored occasionally. I think I skied once for the freshman team in a meet. I was not nearly good enough to make the ice hockey team, and I did not make the crew either. I was too heavy for the 150-pounders and not big enough for the regular crew.
As for watching athletic events, I never did go to see a baseball game. American football puzzled me. Either I bothered my neighbors for explanations all the time or I understood nothing. If you cannot fathom a game, it is a bore....

**Paul Evan Ress:** In June 1959 Karim graduated with a cum laude degree in history and his varsity H for soccer.

**Aga Khan:** Cum laude at Harvard is not very impressive but it did make me feel as if I had progressed since my fumbling freshman beginnings. Had my grandfather not died, I intended to study for a doctorate.

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**Sandeep Unnithan:** If you were not the Imam of the Ismailis, what would you be?

**Aga Khan:** (laughs). I would have to think back to when I was a junior in college. That was a long time ago.

**Sandeep Unnithan:** Would you have been an architect?

**Aga Khan:** I don’t know, I don’t know. I was aiming in doing a doctorate in Islamic studies. I was fascinated by the relationships between the Western world and the Muslim world, particularly in Spain. So that would have been my area of doctoral research, but I never got there, not for my own fault, I didn’t have a choice. So I really don’t know. Generally speaking, when you’re doing a doctorate, you become an academic and I don’t think I could have become an academic (laughs) -- I don’t think so.

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*His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1964 Sports Illustrated Interview with Paul Evan Ress (United States)*
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10341/

*His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2013 India Today Interview with Sandeep Unnithan (Delhi, India)*
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10653/*
Philip Jodidio: Is it true that you had originally considered studying architecture or engineering?

Aga Khan: No, neither architecture nor engineering specifically. My grandfather had wanted me to study the sciences, because at that time he felt that the Islamic world did not participate in the development of modern science. The history of the Islamic world, on the contrary, had been meshed with the environment of science and astronomy, medicine and so many different fields. I did all of my secondary school with the intent of going into the sciences. In fact, I applied first to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) because that was the normal destiny for a student who wanted to specialise in the sciences at the time. I was admitted to MIT, but then when I met up with my grandfather before going to university, he said: 'I think that the sciences field is too narrow, therefore I would like you to go to Harvard.' I had to backtrack on my education up until then, including language, because Harvard had much more rigorous English-language requirements than MIT did. I had done most of my education in French at the time. I did apply to Harvard, and in the first years there I spent a lot of time in the sciences. At the end of my sophomore year, I decided to move into history. I did my junior year and whatever was left of my senior year in history.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 Interview for the book ‘Under the Eaves of Architecture’ by Philip Jodidio (London, United Kingdom)

Nicholas Tomalin: Do you have any hobbies?

Aga Khan: Yes I collect East Indian china, old silver, and bound books, both oriental and Western.

Nicholas Tomalin: Any sport?
Aga Khan: No, none. I skied in the Olympics and that was that. I’m lucky if I get eight days skiing in the whole year. The only exercise I get is some times I run in the woods at Chantilly at weekends. One has to have some exercise, if one is used to it.

I learned my way of working at Harvard. Eighteen months before I got my degree my grandfather died and I became Imam. I had to leave to visit the Ismaili Communities round the world. But after a while I thought, well, I can take the risk. If I don’t get my degree now I never will. I set myself a target of nine months to do the year and a half’s work. At the same time I had all my grandfather’s responsibilities, and I wanted to make the Harvard football team. So you see I had to work out a pretty violent time-table. That last year at Harvard was a lot tougher than anything else I’ve been through since. It would be difficult to do it again. My health wouldn’t stand it....

Nicholas Tomalin: Was it your grandfather who made you to go to Harvard?

Aga Khan: Yes, I originally had put down for Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Nicholas Tomalin: When he asked you to change, did you suspect he wanted you to be his successor?

Aga Khan: No the succession is secret until the Imam’s Will is read. My grandfather had equally prepared my father (Aly Khan), my uncle (Sadruddin Khan), my brother and my self to succeed. None of us knew who it would be.

Nicholas Tomalin: Not even when you switched from engineering to Islamic History at Harvard?

Aga Khan: No, I did that because there were outstanding Arabists at Harvard at the time. And although my maths was very good for engineering, my physics and chemistry were lagging a bit. I simply suddenly felt the urge to study Islamic History.
ITV: Let us take a leap forward in time to the United States, to Harvard University. How old were you when you went there and what did you study?

Aga Khan: I was 17 when I went to Harvard and I started in what I wanted to do was engineering studies, technical studies and then I switched to Islamic history.

ITV: Why didn't you go to either Oxford or Cambridge because you are a British citizen?

Aga Khan: That was my grandfather's decision and my father's decision and both of them were agreed that they wanted me to go to an American university.

Question: But you transferred from civil engineering to studying Middle Eastern history didn't you? That was earlier wasn't it?

Aga Khan: That was earlier than when I was nominated [to be the Imam], oh! yes.

Question: Didn't that give you some inkling of what was in your grandfather's mind?

Aga Khan: No, because I chose the subject myself.

Question: Oh you did! Why?

Aga Khan: Because it was a subject which interested me and because I had taken Islamic History at school before going to
Question: You have had, haven’t you, all your life, a pretty strict training in Islamic thoughts and principles?

Aga Khan: Yes, that I have. Very much so.

Question: Could you detail your regime at all? Could you tell us how it happened?

Aga Khan: Well, it began in East Africa with a private tutor in Islamic history and in the principles of Islam and then at school we had -- that is my brother and myself -- had a tutor also.

Question: A religious tutor?

Aga Khan: A religious tutor and a tutor in history. And then, when I went to Harvard I took Oriental courses there too.

Question: Do you speak Persian yourself?

Aga Khan: No, I don't, no.

Question: Now, your being educated at Harvard which, of course, is a top ranking American university -- did you have any say in the choice of this particular education? I mean, was there any possibility of your having gone to Oxford? Were you consulted at all?

Aga Khan: No. My grandfather was very insistent that I should go to an American university.

Question: Did he say why?

Aga Khan: Yes, he did. He wanted me to see what he considered the modern world and he wanted me to have as modern an education as he felt was possible. And I at first applied to M.I.T. and finally went to Harvard.

Question: But the thing about this is that your grandfather was always very -- always often said that he ought to create a bridge between East and West. Now, in his time that meant creating a bridge roughly between Britain and the Middle East. Do you think
the fact that you went to Harvard means that the bridge has changed, that it is now between the Middle East and America?

**Aga Khan:** I don’t think so. It is very hard for me to discuss the reasons that my grandfather sent me to Harvard, but I think it was more that he wanted me to see the modern economic structure of the country and the pace of life. I think those were the thing that really interested him. The scientific discoveries particularly.

**Question:** Do you like the pace of life?

**Aga Khan:** Yes, I find it fascinating....

**Question:** Is it at all practical for you to go back to your studies at Harvard with this tremendous new responsibility you have got?

**Aga Khan:** I think so. I think so. I think that Harvard would give me very good preparation in the various fields which are important....

**Question:** I don’t understand why Harvard at all -- I mean, you are studying Middle Eastern history and so on there. Now isn’t that rather like the King of England studying English history in Bangkok?

**Aga Khan:** I don’t think so. Harvard has got a very, very fine set of Oriental scholars. A very, very fine set.

**Question:** You mean the best in the world perhaps?

**Aga Khan:** That I wouldn’t say. I don’t know what the other universities have, but I know that Harvard has got a very fine set of...

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"I left Harvard for a year and a half, toured all the main centres of
the community, and then decided it was the last chance I would have to complete my university studies. So I went back to Harvard and completed the year and a half in half a year. But of course at the same time was handling community matters which was a lot to do.

"Harvard is a tremendous training [sic] and I think it also teaches you to work under very heavy pressure if you want to get the best out of it. It is, I think, very unique to be able to listen to the greatest authorities on practically any subject which you can imagine. There were some 350 courses being given at Harvard. I audited as many as I could. Of course, I didn’t know that I was going to become Aga Khan so that before my grandfather’s death I audited and followed the courses which interested me. Then after his death I audited all those courses which I thought could help me in my work and I think was very lucky to be able to go there."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1967 interview for the documentary, ‘Pacemakers: A Man of the World -- The Aga Khan’ (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10214/

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