

Anwer Omar

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

Anwer Omar: “We ended up in Montreal on the 24th of October '72. They were interviewing each one of us to see, “Okay now, where would you like to go?” and so on. A lot of people had friends who had gone to Toronto or Vancouver. They said, “Okay, I wouldn’t mind going there because my friend has gone there.” The only place I wanted to go was Cornwall, which is seventy-five miles from here, because I had one friend who had come here before all this trouble had started. He was here a year before. So I said, you know, it would be easier for me—and I had his contact so we used him as my contact address so anybody who went anywhere in the world wrote to him, and he eventually passed me all my letters and that’s how we connected. But at that time, Cornwall was in a big recession in that particular area, very depressed, so they had like seventeen percent unemployment. The immigration officer, he says, “No, no, no, I can’t send you there because there’s no jobs. Any other choices?” I said, “No, send me anywhere.” So he says, “Perth.” Now, obviously from our geography, we knew Ottawa, we knew Montreal, we knew Vancouver, but Perth, I said, “Where the hell is that?” I tracked it down, a little town. But that was one of the best things that happened to me.

Anyway, so we ended up in Ottawa for a night and then there was a bus that arrived in Perth and there was a guy from—in the old days they used to call them Manpower offices. Burke Brisson, I remember him very well. He became a very good friend of mine afterwards. He was there to receive us. They put us up in a motel, and with me was an Ismaili couple, Mr. and Mrs. Shamji, and there was another single guy, he was from Masaka or Mbarara. The four of us ended up there and the three of them had only high school education, so really the only jobs they could get were factory-type jobs at that time. Within a week, they all had jobs. Now I was struggling. It took me ten days to find work because I had education and of course, they could not give me a teaching job because I would have had to get my teaching designation, right? After ten days, I told the Manpower guy, I said, “I don’t care, just get me a factory job. I don’t care.” I was at a stage where I needed to get started. He said, “Oh that’s easy.” He says, “We’ve got lots of jobs here.” At that time, Perth was a booming town, had a lot of industries there. You know, a little town, lots of industry.

They got me into this company called Code Felt. When they interviewed me, they said, “Now, work for six months, we have an office opening coming up, and we’ll consider you for that then.” Very nice people at that time, right? They gave me a job in the factory and I enjoyed it. I had never worked with my hands before so it was an experience in itself and I met all these old timers from Perth who had not even been to Toronto. You know, they had never left that little hub of the town. So it was terrific. Within six months, they had an opening in the office and they offered me the job. It was a bookkeeping job. I had never done bookkeeping. He says, “Don’t worry, we’ll teach you.” From there, I developed, then I became the office manager and I started to do well. They put me into a little bit of sales, marketing, eventually they were opening up branches so I became the manager and I went to Toronto. That’s how I ended up in Toronto in 1979.

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I had lived in Perth for seven years and the reason I said that was the best thing that happened to me was because even back in Uganda, even when I was young, I was very active—the motor club, being on the executive there. I also was on the board of Uganda Schools' cricket association, that was the body that controlled all the cricket within the country and if you wanted to choose a national side, I was part of that as well. So I was always doing those types of things without ever thinking that all these little experiences I had would come in handy.

So when I arrived in Perth, within the second day, I had an interview with a radio station. When they heard me speak English, they were shocked, and I spoke reasonably okay, I was able to express myself. From that interview, I started to get invitations to various clubs like Lions and Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, and Jaycees, and Canadian Club, to go and speak to them. From there I started to make friends, and I joined one of the clubs and slowly got active in that area and started to do community work. The other Ugandans who were with me, within six months they left. They said, "This is not for us, there's no life here, nobody to really interact with." I said, "No, this is great for me." Yes, I was removed from the community, but then to me, that was my community and my main aim was to bring my mother and brother down so I just focused myself on that and within six months, I was able to bring them down. The criteria were very simple in those days as long as I had a job and all that. By that time, I had established myself within six months. By that time, I had made some good friends and they all helped me—these are all Canadian people right? My mother and brother arrived in Perth as well, and he was fourteen so he ended up going to high school there in Perth. So that's basically how we started."