

Anwer Omar

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Departure

Anwer Omar: “In ’72 is when we were asked to leave, that’s when we went through all the drama and traumatic experiences, but we were fortunate. As I recall, not as many Asians were killed as blacks were. Over three-hundred thousand blacks were murdered by Idi Amin. Three-hundred and fifty is the estimation. Asians were being picked up, few were killed. I know of three families—there was an Ismaili family, they had a gas station, and they were just randomly picked up by the army. I had a very close friend who had a thriving tour operation. Tourists would come and he would take them to safaris. All they wanted was his Mercedes car. That’s what they were doing in the army, because don’t forget, the army that was there—when you think of the army, you think of educated and all that, but Idi Amin had his own tribal people, uneducated, most of them were all very criminally-minded people. They really hassled everyone from the time he made his proclamation that Asians should leave, until we left. I’m sure your mom has probably related some of the stories, the things we had to go through. Like this particular friend of mine, they just picked him up. Right in the city, daylight, threw him into the trunk of the car and drove away. We were all searching for him. Finally, we found his bullet-ridden body at the side of the street. They just killed him. But I think maybe twenty people at the most were murdered by Idi, Idi’s goons, but they beat up a lot of people, they stole. They would come in the evening, every evening if you’re sitting at home, they would show up at your door and you had no recourse because who would you report to? The police were frightened of them. The police was an educated entity, they had to go through proper processes, but they would not tackle Idi’s goons, right?”

They would come into your homes. Fortunately, they came twice to our place, didn't do anything. They just came in and said, “We hear you’ve got monies” and all this. And we said, “Okay, go ahead, look around.” They did and then they just left. There have been cases where they would come, hassle the women, grab their jewellery—very common. See, we were okay, when you’re in the city there were not too many roadblocks, but anybody coming from any of cities outside Kampala, like Jinja, Mbarara, Masaka, and all those places, when they would be travelling to Kampala, which you had to do when you were getting your clearances for paper, there would be roadblocks. They would stop you, they would steal money from you, they would hassle you. Even when we were leaving, we had three roadblocks just in the twenty-one miles. But fortunately, what the Canadian government did, they were pretty smart. In the end, they had Canadian diplomats driving with the buses and the army did respect that a little bit. They had hired a bus. I left on the twenty-third of October very close to the deadline. I think it was the ninth of November, the deadline, I forget now, so I made it very close to the time. They said, “Okay, meet at seven o’clock at this hotel, there will be a bus,” and they had two diplomatic cars. Still, we were stopped three times. The army would come in, they would open your suitcases and if they didn’t take anything away, they did when you went to the airport.

I had a few things, but I told them, "Just take it." I got to the stage where I said, "Keep everything if you want." You're going with one suitcase, you've left your house open, you've left your cars open there with the keys, so you had to have that attitude. There was one girl that I knew, she was an Ismaili girl, she had just gotten married and she had put on a lot of jewellery. I told her, I said, "This is not going to work out." She said, "Well, I'm going to try." They grabbed everything from her. They put people through a lot of traumatic experiences like that. Fortunately, they didn't beat up anybody at Immigration but they took whatever they wanted. You had no recourse.

Somebody just sent me a clip the other day of the last days. It was a British guy, a BBC guy, who did the interview, and they were showing how they had pulled off a lot of Indian luggage and stuff like that, just sitting on the tarmac. I don't know if those people ever got anything or not, but the Canadian government did a fantastic job. We didn't even have to buy an airline ticket. At one time, what happened was, when they started to take people, you had to buy a ticket. You needed so much money, but you go to the bank and they had stopped giving you monies. So what do you do now? The government said, "We'll take you. You can pay us later," which they never asked for. They basically brought us here for free."