

Anwer Omar

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Immigration

Anwer Omar: “The immigration process was just—we must have stood in lines in front of every embassy you could think of. I tried the Indian embassy, Pakistan embassy—none of them wanted you. That really sort of troubled me, that you were of that origin and they didn't want to take you. They just said forget it. Thank god people... of course, British, the majority of people who were there were still British subjects. Maybe now I call them smart because they never took up Ugandan citizenship.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “And you guys had [Ugandan citizenship]?”

Anwer: “I was born there so I was a natural citizen. This is what had happened Shezan. When he [Idi Amin] said, “Leave,” you had to go through a verification process. Miles and miles of lines you stood in just to verify your citizenship. Now here I’m born there, I have a Ugandan passport, and the guy tore it up and said, “No, no, no reason.” Some, they would let them go through. That verification process was in itself very traumatic. So now, you were stateless. If they had said, “Yes, you can stay,” I would have probably still stayed. I don't know how that would have ended, but they made us stateless. So now, I had no documents, nothing in that sense, so we were standing in line in front of every embassy. Now fortunately, my mom had found a British Protectorate passport. This was issued by the British government when they had brought [people from India] so you were still under their umbrella. I showed it to one of the lawyers and he said, “Yeah, you've got good grounds for her to at least be able to go to England,” because we were running out of time. My brother was under twenty-one, so in those days, anybody under twenty-one, you could put them on your parent's passport so that really worked out well.”

Anonymous: “Wasn’t he about ten years younger than you?”

Anwer: “Yeah, so I couldn’t. But to get in the line and get through to the British embassy took us two days. My friend and I, we would sleep overnight and my uncle didn't live far so I would go and sleep there and we would take turns and we finally made it in two days. Once we reached there, they were able to give her a British passport, so she got it and we sent her and my brother to England. I didn't know where I was going at that time, but I had a good friend of mine who had already got his papers. My closest friend stayed back until my mom got her papers and he went with her, so he was able to establish contact and let me know where they were. In that time I must have gone to the Swedish embassy, American embassy, German, every embassy you can think of just applying. The Swedish embassy in the end did come and took a few people, Australia came and took a few, but Canada really—and thanks to Hazar Imam, again he opened up the doors. Trudeau said five thousand, as you know, at the time, five thousand, the majority was for the Ismaili community and a little bit for the Goan community, but then many of us got the opportunity in that process. When they were showing that number

Anwer Omar

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Immigration

system that they had, I had that number but my number would not come. It would not come, and I said, "What the heck is happening here?" There was no way you go could go again and stand in line to find out. Fortunately, one of the girls who was helping in there was a neighbour of ours. Somehow, she had lucked into helping the embassy. I went to her house and I told her, I said, "Listen this is my number," and she said, "Okay let me see." My application had just fallen at the bottom somewhere, so it would have never come up. She managed to pull my application up and within two days, I got my application, and then, when I go to the interview, the girl who interviewed me, I knew her.

I mean at that time it was just automatic because once you got there, they were going to take you. That was the attitude the Canadian government had. They had to go through this formal process, because in the end they even set up little labs for medical [screening] right there. As soon as they said, "Yes," I went there. There was an x-ray technician, there was, you know, taking the stool samples, they were doing the tests right there, and I don't know if they really had the results, but they said, you know, "You are through." So anyway, this girl I had met, and I didn't see her again until 2010, I knew her from my childhood but we had lost contact over the years and so on. She then had come to study in Canada and married a Canadian, so she had come back to teach there [in Uganda] with her Canadian husband. So she was a Canadian in that sense, and when I went for the interview, she was the one who interviewed, and we connected there so it worked out nicely. It's one of those things of being in the right place at the right time."