

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project
An Oral History with Azim Sarangi

Archives and Research Collections
Carleton University Library
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Narrator: Azim Sarangi
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Abstract:

Mr. Azim Sarangi arrived in Canada during the 90-day expulsion period along with both of his parents. One of his brother's was accepted to be resettled in the United States but would later rejoin the family in Canada. Mr. Sarangi was just about sixteen and seventeen years old when he arrived.

He reflects fondly on his childhood in Uganda recalling the pleasurable experiences of attending an Aga Khan school and growing up in Majanji. His family was resettled in Edmonton where he spent a number of years where he became a founding partner of Intercity Packers Limited (ICP).

Currently, Mr. Sarangi works and lives in Vancouver. He volunteers heavily both within and outside of the community. He is also the President of the Shukhar Philanthropic Foundation which he founded in 2011 which seeks to improve the living condition of impoverished families in rural India.

This oral history was conducted at a local Starbucks in Vancouver, BC.

Shezan Muhammedi: “So this is an oral history being done on July 15th and Mukhisaheb [title given to religious leaders in the Ismaili community] I'll let you take it away.”

Azim Sarangi: You know um when I was in Uganda we lived in a very small town. And we were probably originally in a little town that were maybe 5,000 people but only, and 5,000 people spread of 10 miles. Umm but uh only maybe 50 Asians and 2 Ismaili families, sorry 3 Ismaili families so but 5,000 people living in the same town. So it was pretty close knit community and uh my parents had a gas station and uh a retail shop, more like 7/11 and they also, also sold products to all the smaller little shops around, around I would say the community. So my dad would drive probably, 100 miles taking orders filled his truck his small truck and deliver and then he would replenish the order form a city called Mbale, Mbale and we were actually Majanti, we were right on the shores of Mbale. Beautiful little town, beautiful lake, never really appreciated the beauty of the lake because we were always there when I was born. You know you take it for granted and uh the fish was bountiful people would bring in fish to exchange for products many many times. Those small towns bringing things. Probably our staple was fish maybe 3-4-5 times a week. And people generally from across the country would come and visit us because of the fish. And now it is called Tilapia here but there it was called *kege* and uhm it was a great. I grew up very young and we had a small school so I was in grade 4 and I never spoke any English. It was Gujarati which is what we spoke and in grade 5 my dad moved me to a town called Mbale because he wanted us to go to school. So my other brothers, I'm part of 5 other siblings, so my other brothers, one was younger and 5 others were older, were all out and studying. And so my younger brother who was probably in grade 3 at that time and myself move to Mbale and uh you get into from a town of maybe a little village where we were of maybe you know 1000 people not even 1000 people, it expanded to 5000 if we included a 10-mile radius. So probably I dunno 20-30-40 thousand people right in the centre. Pretty overwhelming and uh I remember living as a boarder at somebody's place. So right from home where you have all the care and attention as a little boy you are now in a little place where, you know, literally no care and attention. You're just staying there because somebody is, all you're being given is your food and shelter and you're going to school. And when you go to school you

don't know anybody you don't know English and classes are in English because it's an Aga Khan school. And I had uh, the first class, never thought about it until now, the first class I go to, you know there's all these kids running around talking in English and I'm just you know shell-shocked and so there was a teacher and she's actually here, G.M. And she, you know, I talked with her and she took me under her wings and said, "look you gotta read you know, you just try and read as much as you can in English in Gujarati it doesn't matter and you'll get better and better and better". And within you know six months, I had a good working knowledge of English and within a year, you know, I was extremely proficient and I was up to everybody's level. And then excelled in school because you are coming from a smaller town and you are competing with all these people, the only way you can get noticed is if you do well. So you are working hard and excelled in school and uh so those were the memories that I had of school. And I also remember, you know, where it was, the places we used to live in my brother and I, my younger brother and I. The family that we used to live with had a number of children and she also had some other boarders and you would go and eat at night and uh her children would of course be fed first and then the boarders would come and eat. We would have a set amount of food between 5 or 4 of us and then if another boarder was added the amount of food just stayed the same except the water was added right? So it was you know, and you couldn't even go back and tell your parents that this was happening because they are sacrificing all this effort and money to send you away to school. So only after we came to Canada, and when we grew older, we would discuss this, and my parents would be like why didn't you tell us? Well we couldn't tell you. So you know I finished Aga Khan school, Aga Khan school was probably the best thing that happened to me honestly in Uganda. From a smaller, a tiny school to an Aga Khan school and it uh gave me the ethics, it gave me the uh grounding it gave me a little bit of a religious background but not a whole bunch. But really it made a grounding and seeing all these people. And we had a principle of the school and he was probably instrumental, single handedly instrumental in making sure that the standards of the school was held right to the top. And the people in Aga Khan school in Mbale, it doesn't matter where they went it doesn't matter they were taken in, it doesn't matter what school they went to they were taken in because the

standard used to be so high. This man, we used to call him H. Master, his name was H. M.yderali Merali and they've got a son in Ottawa Z. M., he is I believe.”

Yasmin Jamal: “Is he the one that is at the university of Ottawa?”

Azim: “Yeah university of Ottawa, Yes.”

Yasmin: “I have heard of him. I have not interviewed him but I met him last year.”

Azim: “Yeah he's a good guy because he would remember. He's a little older than I am and he'll remember a lot of things that his dad did and he has a couple of sisters who are even a little older. Z. and all them. But a lot of people in Mbale ended up here. So if you look around in Uganda, in Vancouver in particular, the P.'s are from Vancouver, Z. V.'s, are from Mbale, a couple other people are from Mbale. Other children who are uhm if you look around at people who have done well are from Mbale and the reason for that I think is the school. The Aga Khan school that gave them the grounding you know. You either studied or you get beat up basically. The headmaster was very very strict and he had a cane and nobody wanted to go to his office. So and then from there, from the Aga Khan school went right to grade uh I guess grade 8 and then I went to secondary school which was a government school which wasn't run very well. And then when I finished grade 12, this was called senior Cambridge and then you had a choice of what was called HSE, which was another 2 years which I would call pre-university or you can go to university if you chose to. If the university chose to take you after grade 12. So I decided to go to a college that was in Kenya. It was an agriculture college, I had just started. So I skipped 2 years and then I went into it, I was only there for a year. Then again that was a culture shock, I went from a smaller city to a big city and then you went to a college when you were on your own. I was only there for a year and then I heard about the Ugandan situation. Idi Amin had just come in and Obote was overthrown and people were jubilant and although the Asians were a little bit concerned because Obote was pretty good for the Asians. They didn't, they were, they didn't have a choice but to support the military. But within a year or two within Idi Amin had

come in, the expulsion happened and I wasn't home. I was very young 18 at the time or 16-17 at the time, the maturity level of a 18 year old or a 16 year old today compared to a 16 year old 40 years ago was different. So I had no idea, when it happened I'm think ok, I had a sister in Canada who had come to study a long time ago and I knew a little bit about Canada. So my path, I was hoping was that I would end up in Canada, so the excitement, never did I imagine we would lose everything. So by this time, you know we were fairly comfortable as a family. My family had worked hard and we were doing, you know, very well in Uganda and uhm I had no doubt that we would end up somewhere, and then I'll either continue in my school or do whatever. Well the university I was at, the agriculture college said any Ugandans that are here could continue their studies if they wanted to. They could get their visas, meanwhile my parents had to apply for Ugandan immigration and Canadian immigration or another immigration. A week after that I heard that, you know, we had to leave in 60 days or 90 days. And then we heard that you couldn't take anything. Meanwhile I'm not with my parents, and I just cannot imagine what they were going through. And we, my parents asked me to go back and say ok, we've started applying for all these places so we had no idea where we'll end up. People were applying for Canada, people were applying for UK, people were applying for India, you know everywhere and we had Ugandan passports so we had no idea where we were gonna end up. We had a British passport originally which was renounced and then we became Ugandan citizens. So now we are starting to apply everywhere. My dad wasn't very proficient in English, he could read, barely read, he couldn't speak very well. My mom didn't even read English, so I decided not to stay and finish school. I decided to come to Canada. Part of it was it was exciting that I would end up in a new country and part of it was my dad not being able to speak English and I should be with them. And my other brothers, everybody else was away. My older brother had actually finished his medical school and had come back to Uganda and uh he had been posted to a smaller town in Uganda called Kabale. So he was in Kabale about a year, year and a half. Young child, he had a young child. So he was also in the same state as my parents were and he was also trying to get his own immigration going. And uh, when he applied to Canada, he realized that he would have to redo his medical school so instead he applied to the US and because of his degree he would be able to get into the US. So he went to the US and

we were finally after lineups, after a lot of trauma in Uganda we were told that we are now able to go to Canada. I had an uncle in Uganda and he had Ugandan citizenship also, while everybody was applying, he wouldn't apply. He had uh yeah he had three young children or four young children with him and he just didn't want to leave. He said, "I'm a Ugandan citizen, his thing was, you know, Hazar Imam [His Highness the Aga Khan] has said that I should stay here, you should become a Ugandan citizen, and I'm not gonna move. You guys are crazy to be applying everywhere". Meanwhile, the army was shooting people and there's blood on the street many times. He just wasn't gonna move and in the end, we moved in October of '72 and he ended up moving probably in November on a refugee plane and ended up somewhere and we didn't know. And he came to Canada within a few years. We had no idea whether he was killed or whether he survived. So we got the immigration to Canada and our first stop was in Montreal. We get on the plane, I never travelled on a plane, my parents had never travelled on a plane and you get on the plane. First of all, you try to get to the plane and so you get on a bus, the Ugandan, the Canadian High Commissioner had a bus set up for a safe transportation because people were being hassled and looted and beat up when they were traveling from their homes to come to the airport. The airport was maybe 50-60 miles away from Kampala, from the city. And uhm it was uh a harrowing journey going from Kampala to Entebbe but you get on the plane and you sit down and now you know you're safe. And you've gone through umpteen army stops, people have come on the bus and the Canadian high commissioner had set up the buses. They couldn't have been barred from the buses, so the army had the rule. Anytime they could stop the buses they would say get up, take you out on the street, go check your bags, check your pockets you know, if you had something they would take it. So all these things were going on. And then you get to the actual, you have to go through immigration Canada, Ugandan immigration to depart. You go through there, so the army and they are going through everything that you have. If you have anything of value, they wanted to take it. So you go through that. You get on the plane and there's this sigh of relief that everybody has and the things of value that people had brought with them were radios, transistor radios just little things that you know people knew they couldn't take money with them, they would take them as mementos from Uganda. I vividly remember people around me had all these radios on,

different stations, they were trying to hear what was going on in Uganda, listening to the news and stuff and it finally says ok strap yourselves in it's time to depart. Nobody knew how to strap themselves in. So the stewardesses are very empathetical because everybody is going crazy, there's all these children running around all these isles, all these people crying, all these things its its I can't even imagine how we took off. So I would imagine that every flight was like that. Finally, she gets us settled down, we get up to get off and everybody's radio's come on and so flight is still in turbulence and trying to get off and I guess the pilot is having problems with his instruments so he tells the stewardess saying get these guys to turn off their radios. So they come back yelling shut the radio off, shut the radio off! And it was, now it's funny but over there we didn't know what was going. Why are they telling us to shut the radio off. Now everybody is scarred, that you know what is going on. Finally we get off, and now we are off on cruising altitude and out comes the tea and the food and everybody calms down and I can't, I can't remember the journey. Going through the flying altitude to Montreal. It was long but I don't remember any part of it. And uh my, I had uh, I had uh an aunt who was also in Uganda and she was in a different city. And she was traveling from one city to another to get to Kampala and they were stopped on the way and she was wearing a necklace and that you know. They stopped her, the necklace was hidden, they of course saw it, took the necklace and you know hit her with the butt of the gun and uh she was lucky, she didn't get killed. But the, lots and lots and lots of stories like that which we heard on the plane. People would say this and this happened on the plane and when we got to Montreal.”

Yasmin: “Can I just ask you because your family did not live in Kampala, you had to take the same journey from your home. You had to go from Mbale to Kampala, how did you get there?”

Azim: “So what had happened, so I missed that part. So we were in Majanji, uh the army had taken over and uh Majanji was the safest city, the most safe city and Uganda was really very very safe before the army took over but Majanji where we were. Everybody knew everybody, 5,000 people a mixture of you know Asians and Africans. People knew everybody, people used

to go to each other's houses. Although the mingling wasn't there. There was discrimination between the two but the people knew each other intimately and uh you know they looked after each other. Within months after the army took over, uh we had a break in, in our house. I wasn't there, my mom and dad were there. My dad's mom who was 90 some odd at the time was there. And so they actually came in with axes and machetes and all that. Broke down the door and when my parents heard, there's no phones, so you couldn't phone anybody, we had guards outside but the guards were beat up and tied up and uh so they went and hid in a little shack in uh outhouse that we had in our yard. And uh, the thieves came into the house, but they couldn't get into the outhouse because we had three large dogs that had kept them at bay. The dogs actually, the thieves had machetes, they had actually hurt the dogs quite badly but the dogs wouldn't let them get to the outhouse so the dogs saved my parents lives. They couldn't take them and they couldn't really get in. When this happened my parents decided to move to Kampala. So you know, it was probably as traumatic, if not more, for my parents to move from Majanji to Kampala because this was their life and this was their family. All the, all the town people were their family. These people would come and borrow money from my parents, come and borrow product, they would come and bring gifts, I mean it was family. So when they said it is not safe anymore here, my brothers and sisters who were older than me, who were away, found out that this happened they said you can't live here anymore you need to just move to Kampala at the time. What they had found out, it wasn't the local people that had done this, it was some of the army guys that had done and the whole town, when my dad and mom were leaving, came out and literally cried. Because my dad and mom were, once they left, there was hardly anybody that was going to be there that was going to bring any products and supplies and all that. They supplied all that stuff. So that's probably more traumatic for my parents than coming to Canada at the time. So within a year of moving to Kampala they were told to get out, so they had two traumatic moves. So moving to Kampala and then this."

Yasmin: "So this would be 1971? End of '71"

Azim: "Yeah, '71 was when they moved to Kampala and then '72 is when it happened. So we got to, you know we got to Montreal and you know it was an army base that we landed in

Montreal you know. Actually, I often thought about going to this place, where exactly was it? I'm trying to figure it out, now I'm interested in going back. I've been to Montreal and I have family in Montreal so I'm trying to figure out where it is. But we landed in the army base and this is the part I remember. People got out and my parents, my mom and dad and myself and my little brother at the time, got out and uh we are on this tarmac and they are taking, and it's cold, it's October. And they're taking out all those bags for us from the plane right on the tarmac for us to identify. They had brought in a whole bunch of cadets and that's the first kind act we saw from Canada was when we went for the interviews with the Canadian high commissioner, how nice they were, and how they put us to ease. The second act was in the plane were the stewardesses, so to us this was all Canada. The stewardesses and the families and so kind. They were frustrated but kind to the people on the plane. And the third kind act was a funny one that I'll never forget. My so, I'm standing with my dad, my mom has been whisked to this holding area and we are waiting for our baggage and we see our baggage come out with the rest of the baggage. And so we just walked towards it to get it and uh there was a cadet, he must've been 15, looked fairly big and asked us where is your bag. And so I pointed to my bag, that one and that one and that one and he picked the bags up. I have never seen my dad so angry, no, no, and uh so the guy just dropped the bags and then my dad went and took the bag, heavy you know, took the bag and asked me to pick the bag up. So this guy came back and said let me help you sir, let me help you, no! And to my dad it was I have been robbed and this is a guy in an army uniform and he is going to take my bag, I'll never see my bags if he takes them. He had lost his trust toward, anybody in uniform you know. At that time, it was traumatic for everybody including the cadet I'm sure, he didn't know what was going on. As a family we laugh about it all the time. As to how my dad reacted. He was going to give up his life before he was going to give up the rest of his belongings that he brought with me. You know you go into this holding area and there's apples, and grapes, and all these different snacks and food and coffee, and it was like heaven you know. Apples and grapes is something we never saw in Uganda, you only got it as a treat. So you know that was our first foray into Canada and said wow this is a land of plenty, you know this is great, we are in the right spot. And then we were given bunks and things and we stayed there for two or three days while they were processing

us. And they were asking, where we should go, where we wanted to go? And my sister was in a little town in St. Albert, called St. Albert. So if somebody had family, if you didn't have anybody in Canada, the government would say ok we'll try and put you up somewhere until you get settled down. If you had family, or if you had the means then the government would say ok, we'll get you there and then you are on your own. So we said we had family, my family was in St. Albert. So uhm we went to a little uh processing area and they said where do you wanna go? We said St. Albert and they said, St. Albert? Yup! Where is that? Canada. Alright so he looks up and he says oh that's not very far, we'll get you there. Somebody else, you're finished he gets you a ticket and you're told wait a couple of days and here's where we'll take you to get back to your family. Ok you have a telephone number or something? Now this is the third person, after we had our airline tickets and now they are trying to connect you. Meanwhile my sister doesn't know we are here. So they said do you have a telephone number and we take out this little piece of paper and this girl was going through it, and says that's not a Saskatchewan phone number. So we have no idea what she's talking about, no, no this is the right telephone number and she says ok. So she phones the number and she is laughing. And she comes back to the guy who issued the tickets and tell him something, and they are howling and now there's a whole bunch of people involved and we don't know what's going on. And they come back and they said that we almost sent you to Prince Albert and you wanted to go to St. Albert in Alberta! And uh so luckily we end up, this is you know Edmonton is the city where you want to go to. That's where the airport is, there's no airport in St. Albert and stuff. So we end up in Edmonton, and my sister picks us up and takes us to her place and uh I was lucky you know so at this point I was the only breadwinner in the family. So I said ok, I will just get a job and get things going. My sister said don't worry you guys can stay here as long as you want, my brother-in-law had also told us that you guys can stay here as long as you want and then we'll do something. So she gave me a paper and said you know look through here circle anything that you like and start making phone calls. So the next day, I start making some phone calls and the guy, there was a company called uh, oh boy it will come to me, it was uh a distribution company that distributed newspapers and magazines and all that stuff to wholesalers around the city and the wholesalers would give it to the retailers. It would be magazines, I didn't know what the

company was, it was called provincial news, so I phoned provincial news and I said hey, I would like to get a job. How old are you? 18, ok? You have a social insurance number? Yes I do. So come down, and, but you have to be here at 6. Okay no worries, and I asked my sister and she said yeah there's a bus that should be leaving and she explained to me how to get to work. So I wake up at 6 o'clock in the morning in October, end of October, it was cold! So while I had my jacket which my sister had given me, in fact we were given parkas in Montreal and we were given uh little slips to go to the Bay and Sears and pick up clothes if you need to, to get by, and uh skates. I can't, you know, it was very thoughtful of the government at the time to give little coupons for little kids to go to you know, I think it was the Bay and Sears, I think they were the two places they were given to, to go pick up skates. We didn't even know what skates were. I remember going and getting all fitted up and picking up skates. And uh but in October the shoes that I was wearing, were the shoes from Uganda. So they were thin soled, leather soles, no protection, no grip. I go to the end of the street and I see this bus leaving. And the street is full of snow and the street is bustling so I missed it. And I stand there and I wait for the next bus. I don't know how long it is until the next bus. I stand there for half an hour and there's no bus. I see somebody driving by and I hitch a ride. The guy stops and takes me, where do you want to go?"

Yasmin: "You were brave?"

Azim: "You know you don't know, you were a kid, you don't know. So he says where do you wanna go? I show him the address and he says yeah that's on my way. There's a traffic circle, he says where are you from? I'm the only brown guy from the city. Where are you from? Uganda. He said when did you come in? I said I just came in and they had all read about the refugees coming in and so he says I'll give you a ride but it's a little bit off my way. So what you do is I'm going to go around a roundabout and then you go 1 block this way and 1 block that way and you'll find it. Ok, great! So he drops me off and I start to walk and then I had to cross the road. So I cross the road and that's another thing that's embedded in my mind. I'm crossing the road, it's dark and there's cars coming from the wrong side of the road and guys are honking and

realize quickly, at that time, I tried to run across that road and I fell down. I grazed my hand, I grazed my hand. If I hadn't had to cross the road again I would have gone home. So I'm crying, in the middle of the street and hurt and I say ok, I don't want to go back because I'm going to have to cross the road again. So I go in and I find the place and I find this guy Jack who takes me in here's what you do. Put your jacket here and all that stuff and away you go. And at the end of the day he calls me and I say ok I'm in trouble. He says you know Azim, you did really well today, great! But you need to change a couple things. So I said ok. You don't need to wear a suit when you come to a warehouse, hahaha. And I had no idea that I was gonna be working in a warehouse, I was in a full suit with a tie and I didn't even realize that I was the only one in a full on suit. I never realized it until he said you don't have to wear a suit. Look around you, nobody is wearing a suit. Wear your jeans and wear your clothes. So my job was to pick up the magazines that were being returned from other, they were stale right? And you take a top copy, tear it for credit. So the company, Provincial News would then send it to the manufacturer to get a refund saying that we couldn't sell this it was stale. Then the magazine would be thrown into the bin. That was the best job because all these magazines that were thrown into the garbage bin I could take home! And you know I would be, every day I would take you know stacks of books and magazines and stuff that I would then read at home. And pretty soon, within a month or so, they took me on a shipping line and within a few months they put me right at the front of the line. I was there about a year and uh meanwhile we had moved out from my sister's place and my dad found a job also and uh we uh got a little apartment."

Shezan: "Do you remember what your dad was doing?"

Azim: "Yeah, you know I didn't know until, I didn't know what he was doing until about 2 or 3 years into it. He never spoke, he never said what he was doing. Then probably uh, I would say probably 4 or 5 years, yeah 4 or 5 years into the, into when we were here, he got really sick. Dad got really sick. He was working for a company, we knew it was called Maple Leaf Food Company but we never knew what he used to do. He ended up in the hospital and he had

pneumonia. We didn't know, I didn't know, my sister didn't know and the doctor said you know he's working in a damp environment, he must've got it from somewhere that he is working and it is very damp. And it was in a turkey plant and his job was to pull feathers. So the last 4-5 years he would go early in the morning to his place and pull feathers from turkeys you know. The way it works, it's quite ironic that I ended up in the meat business in my life after, so I know exactly what would happen. The turkeys would be slaughtered, go through a scalding area, very hot steam and heat and most of the feathers were stripped but at the end of the line the turkeys come and there's still a fair amount of feathers stuck on those turkeys and you would have a bunch of people pull the feathers off the turkeys. So we didn't know what he was doing, he worked at Maple Leaf but that's all that we knew. So we asked what do you? He said I pull feathers. And why didn't you tell us? What was I gonna tell you?"

Yasmin: "How old was your dad at that time? 60's you think?"

Azim: "No, he was 60, let me just think, he must've been just under 60, around 60. A proud man who had all these people work for him forever. Owned his own business and done very very well and uh so obviously we all stopped it. So he never went back to work and then he was getting bored and uh he would off and on work in parking lots. He would go and work in a parking lot, he didn't want to stay home, so. Meanwhile, I got promoted from where I was and I was going to get a supervisor position in the Provincial News. And I saw a man, an Indian man at Provincial News that had been there forever, he probably worked there for 20 some odd years. It seems to me like forever, his job was to drive a forklift around and he was very good at his job and very well respected and so I had asked him you know, where he was from? And he was from India and he had come here, and he was educated, quite educated but he couldn't find a job when he came, he didn't know English and therefore he ended up in this warehouse and now he ended up being a supervisor of this area and forklift and you know he was proud that he made it there. But uh he had no other ambitions and I looked at that and I said this is you know, I will be the king of the, my little area and this is it. That's as far as I can get and the position I was up for paid good and was offered to the youngest person there and I thought

about it and I said no. I decided to look for another job that I could actually go and go to school. So I went into an accounting night school. So at that time, it was called RIA, it's now amalgamated with CGA and CAA, and all that stuff but uh I went to night school and I found a job in an office and uh worked there for about 3 years and uh was getting bored.”

Shezan: “You were early 20s?”

Azim: “Yeah early twenties at the time yeah. And I wanted to, I also had to advance in my career if I wanted to graduate from RIA because you had to be doing certain things in your work to get the degree. And I found this uh add, that said cost accountant in manufacturing area and I applied for it. It was a company called FG Bradley company who was a meat factory, meat processing plant. And so I found, when I found out it was meat processing, I said no I won't come in for an interview and he said why? Because I don't want to work for butcher shop and he started laughing. He said it's not a butcher shop, why don't you come and look at it, and if you like it then we can talk. So when he gave me a tour of the plant. When the gentlemen G. M.s who ended up partnering with me and we opened up a plant of our own later on. He interviewed me and took me around the plant and he said look, it was a huge plant it was a manufacturing plant and the person we are looking for is a cost accountant. We need to set up a system and you know with your background in agriculture and meat it's perfect. So he hired me and I did the job and I worked there for about uh 3 years and then G. myself and a bunch of other people decided to go into our own business and uh so”

Yasmin: “So that was pretty young? Mid-twenties or so?”

Azim: “Yeah just mid-twenties around there. So we had, uh you know, entrepreneurship just runs in your blood because you've seen your parents do it, your grandparents do it and uhm we saw some things in the company that I was working with that we could improve on. And the company that I was working with was very successful and Mr. Bradley the person who had established the company was brilliant and he had figured out that the large companies weren't

providing service. And so portion control, meaning if a restaurant wanted to serve, we are talking about in the '80s or even late '80s, '78-79. At that time, almost 35 years ago, the restaurants were cutting their own meat. They would buy large cuts of meat and they would cut it themselves into steaks, and roasts, and ground it themselves and stuff. And this man, who was working for a company called Swifts at the time who was supplying all these large roasts figured out that if he provided a service of pre-cutting the meat the restaurants would do well. So he started that in Toronto, expanded that, one in Vancouver, and then expanded to Winnipeg, and Edmonton. So I was in Edmonton. I had traveled to Toronto as a cost accountant. At that time computers were just coming in and I was very interested in computers so I was able to go and help set up computer systems where we were. So I was very fortunate and saw what was going on. People didn't travel, you know. You didn't get to travel that much at that time. I was able to go to Winnipeg, I was able to go to Toronto, I was able to see what was going on in other cities and other plants. And G. and I became good friends and we had a general manager at the time, uh that uh we weren't quite happy with for various reasons and we decided that maybe we can just go into our own business and G. said yeah sure jokingly and get some money. And meanwhile G. and I had invested together in a small condominium in Edmonton. So any money we had saved we had put towards this condominium and we had also, my dad and I had uh invested in a duplex. And we had moved into this duplex, so one person, one other person owned one half and we owned the other half. And we uh, we had found a very good deal. So it was as if we were paying rent basically and so I said to G., I have equity, we have equity in this business but let's see. And then I heard an announcement in jamat khane that IPS was coming in and if anybody wanted to go into business we will be in Edmonton on such and such a date. So I went and talked to them and explained to them what our business was. And uh there was this gentleman this very wise gentleman who I talked with, his name was Herb and he had an assistant, his name was R. M., you probably know him. They both came to Edmonton and interviewed me. So we had put together a plan, he and I, here is what we think we can do. They were quite impressed and they said ok, we need to get more funding, we need to do this, we need to do that. Give us a proper plan and then we could start going to the banks. So that took us almost 6-8 months to put together and then went to various

banks who were still uncomfortable giving us the funding because of the amount of equity. So they said do you, maybe we need more partners and I knew there was an Ismaili gentlemen in Vancouver that had a meat plant. So I researched and found out what his name was, his name was Z. L., the Larco group. So in the '70s they used to run a small plant out of West 6th, so 2nd Avenue, 2nd street, 6th Avenue, right near Cambie and 6th and they had a small warehouse that they were running about 12-15 people and uh so I phoned him. I didn't know what his plan was. So I phoned him up and I said Z. do you want to partner with us in Edmonton? Here's what happening, I think we can do well here. And he said look I've just had a heart attack so I'm going to sell my place, you guys thinking about moving out, then come and see my place and let's talk. So we said we want to have a plant in Edmonton, I don't know about Vancouver but G. and I flew out. And we looked at the place and came to an agreement in combination with IPS, so IPS partnered with us, a couple other people, Ismaili families partnered with us in Vancouver and Z. and his family, the L. family gave us the priority on that place for 2 years and we were able to put a deal together. Unfortunately, some of the partners who were going to come with us from Edmonton dropped out. So we originally, G. was a sales manager, I was the controller of the company. We had a production manager, we had a uhm production manager, direction manager, sales manager, not a sales manager but another top salesman who was going to come with us. So the production manager dropped out, the sales manager dropped and mainly because they didn't want to move the family to Vancouver and they decided they didn't want to take the risk and G. and I and our family, I had just gotten married, G. had children so we all moved out. And uh the plant in Vancouver, where we were did very well and within a year or two we were ready to move out and buy another place on Boundary and 1st and that place is still there. Intercity packers.”

Yasmin: “So this was in 19? When did you move to Vancouver?”

Azim: “So the year was, January of 1980.”

Yasmin: “So that means it would have been 8 years here in Canada?”

Azim: "Yeah '79 we started talking to IPS"

Yasmin: "So that means 1972, 8 years you have been here."

Azim: "So end of '72 so 7 years, '73 was when we got settled in Canada. So very lucky, we were very lucky. Different people had gone into various businesses. The reason IPS was very excited about this kind of business, was that it was in manufacturing business and that's what they wanted. They didn't want these small, you know everybody was going into the small businesses, we used to call it *dukawallah* business. They said look you know his Highness' vision is for people to go into industries and manufacturing. He doesn't want everybody to be in *dukawallah* again, and people were. They had little laundries, print shops, so little things were happening and they were looking for something that somebody would go into manufacturing. So you know the company that survived and thrived and we opened up a plant in Toronto, we opened up a plant in Edmonton and we sold about uh, almost, well now about 7-8 years ago. So we were at 12 employees when we opened and when we sold we had probably about 300 people across the country and the company that bought us was bought GFS Canada. The same philosophy, one of the reasons we grew was that we treated our staff well and we treated the staff like family."

Yasmin: "When did you sell this one, about 3-4 years ago?"

Azim: "No about 7 years ago."

Shezan: "So then you met your wife here in Canada?"

Azim: "I met my wife in Edmonton, actually Toronto."

Shezan: "Can you tell us that story?"

Azim: "I can't tell you everything about it, hahahaha. I was lucky being able to travel so I knew someone in Toronto that uh we were friends with. I used to go out and so every opportunity I used to go to Toronto, it was great. You know one of the, I've been very fortunate in my time. I worked for Northern Canada Power Commission, my second job from Provincial News as an accountant when I went there to the Canada Power Commission and I was in accounts payable. In accounts payable you go, I had an audit to do so Northern Canada Power Commission had power plants in the North in Northern areas so Yellowknife, Whitehorse, Nunavut, you know all these little towns. So they said you need to go out and go and audit these power plants that we have. To go and look at how much equipment we have and use the inventory. Basically gave me, they had to often deliver different supplies. So basically gave me uh plane. And a pilot and uh we went from city to a little town to town to town. So I was able to see the whole of the North and it was you know. Edmonton was cold, when we flew from Edmonton to uh Yellowknife we got there and you know I'm roaring to go out. So when I found the plane I had a parka and I had some fairly warm shoes and gloves and a scarf and all that. The pilot who I had never met before, looked at me and said where is your gear? Uhh what do you mean? Where's your gear, where's all the stuff? Where's all the warm stuff? I said I brought it. He said are you ok with it? I said yeah. Ok, so we took off. We get into, it was probably about 20 below when we left Edmonton, we get into Yellowknife and you know the pilot looks back and he says wow it's a cold night. Wow it must be 50 or 60. I have no idea what he's talking about and he you know radios that we are here. And you see all these little you know skidoos that come through to pick you up. So I'm excited I want to get on a skidoo. So he opens the door and the first waft of cold air and oh my god. My ears, my eyelashes froze, my mouth, my lips, hands froze, and I was wearing everything I had. So I got down and the man who comes to get us looks at me and he says are you crazy? And I just look at him, I'm frozen and he says get back on the plane and he goes back and gets a warm suit, literally, and it's all down filled and you know it's big. I wasn't a big, I was a small guy and this was big probably an extra-large, bundles me up in this thing and the only transportation is the skidoo. So we went from the plane to this little hotel. So yeah we get there and uh so I was lucky that I was able to experience that. And uh then in uh when I was with the B.'s I was able to travel to Toronto quite often and one of the fondest stuff

that we did was D. B., the son of the owner had a plane and whenever we needed to go to Toronto we would fly from Edmonton to Toronto. In this little you know four seater. Took forever to get to Toronto and you had to make a stopover and you had to overnight somewhere and stuff so that was great because you know when you're a kid and you go with all these stories to people and your friends, you know I flew on a private plane. So I went to Toronto, so I would go and do the work in the plant in Toronto. And uh I had a cousin in Toronto that I would meet up with and he introduced me to this girl and he said hey you should go out together. And uh so this girl her name is Yasmin so we met up and we became good friends and uh and then she came to Edmonton. She came just for a visit, so yeah that's how we met. So you know, I had this little feather in my cap, I came in a private plane. How did you get to Toronto, I came in a private plane. It felt really really good. And one time we were flying in this little private plane and D. says, oh shoot we are out of fuel. And uh I think he's kidding, hahaha. He says no we are out of fuel and we gotta land. Mayday Mayday, da da da this is the plane number da da da we are out of fuel we need to land. We need permission to land. And uh you know he is doing his thing and you can hear you can't land here you need to go to the US, so he says where in the US. I don't even remember the name of the city. He says ok, do you have your passports with you. He says yes, he said do you have your passport. No. You didn't take your passport with you? I said no, I'm going to Toronto. He says always travel with your passport, shit. He says you guys have your papers with you, the guys saying, you need to go to the US. So yes, he says so we land and barely make it. We land and we go through immigration and D. says just make sure that you keep a straight face, don't say anything, I'm brown so as soon as I get there the guy comes towards me and says do you have your passport with you sir? I said no, you can't come into the US. I said we ran out of fuel you know. He said sir do you know it's an offence to come into the US without papers. Well he was I don't know, we were on the plane, I didn't know. He says ok well you can't leave the airport. They said you can do sir but you can't go. So I stayed at the airport while the refueled and then took off again."

Yasmin: "Such exciting stories."

Shezan: "So then did you have kids?"

Azim: "No, I never had kids. One of the things that we wanted to do was travel. So literally we travelled vastly, I guess over the last 40 years, I always wanted to travel. I always wanted to go back and you know do something, you know since we had done well we wanted to go back and give back to the world. So I was lucky that I was able to go to India and I was able to go to Mali. Mali I went with IPS actually, we did some TKN work. So it's been ten years since I did that."

Yasmin: "So you guys have done a lot of *seva* [volunteer work]?"

Azim: "*Shukar*, [a humble expression for 'thanks to god's grace' in this instance] it has been good, so but traveling we've been well. Literally every holiday in every city with any company it was very exciting 28 years and every year we would take a nice holiday. But even during the year, we used to bring products from all over the world. Products from Australia, products from Costa Rica, products from Uruguay, products from the US, New Zealand, so we, uh no, I was usually on the purchasing side of it. I was an accountant but eventually moved into sales and also looked into purchasing stuff. So I was able to go and visit all these places, set up supply chains, so it was great. So I got to travel and I am still, so that was one of the, so Yasmin would come with me usually and she was, she worked in a place that was very flexible like that. So we would take off for a couple weeks, you know two three times a year. And all these trips were exotic and long and some we would also take once the company was stable we would also take a month long holidays right. So we were very very blessed."

Yasmin: "So I have heard of some of the schools that you are sponsoring in India or something or in Uganda?"

Azim: "Yes, you know we, I fell into it because we were on holiday in India. It was probably about 10 years ago. I never, I had never wanted to go to India because of poverty. I never really felt comfortable around poverty and I didn't want to. So I figured if I didn't see it, it would affect me. You know I, from Uganda, I always associate myself as a Ugandan Asian, but Ugandan when

I came to Canada. I always associated myself as Canadian you know I was a Canadian, I wasn't gonna go and change that. So this is it, I didn't have any desire to trace my roots or anything like that. Ten year ago I took a trip to India, for the first time, and Yasmin and I went on a luxury trip. The only way I was gonna go was a luxury trip. I didn't want to go, I didn't want to see anything. So I wanted to see all the touristy areas. I came back and brought all these pictures and it was fantastic. It was amazing, beyond my imagination what India was. I came back excited and I lived in Vancouver, and my mom lived in Edmonton and my dad passed away. I went and showed her the pictures and she said where are the pictures from Gujarat. I didn't go to Gujarat, there's no vacation spots in Gujarat, there's nothing to do there. She was taken aback and you could see a little tear in her eye. She said you know I'm from Gujarat, your dad was from Gujarat, we still have family in Gujarat and you should see what it was like, where we lived. And it moved me deeply, so I said ok you know what I'll go back. So next year I went alone. I went to Gujarat, no in fact Yasmin came back with me next year. I convinced Yasmin to go with me again and this time we were gonna go and visit India but also do Gujarat. So we did other parts of India that we hadn't done in India and visited Gujarat and then saw poverty in different parts of India and uh I wanted to do something. So the intention was to do something, feel good and give some money to the schools and uh or hostels and there were a lot of hostels. Aga Khan hostels in India. When I went there, I realized there weren't actually run by our institutions, they were run privately but the names were still being used as Aga Khan hostel and some of the hostels were run great and other ones weren't run that well. And so I wasn't comfortable with just giving cash because I wasn't sure how the cash was going to be used. And so I was frustrated on my, literally on my second last day or the last day that I was leaving. My friend was there S. R. and he was teaching there and I met up with him and he said how did it go and I explained to him my frustrations. He said you should meet mukhisaheb here. His name was A. so I met him and uh and he asked me and I told him. You know I want you to meet some people. And went and uh met a family and uh they so I talked to this family. They live in this place, they're not very well to do and maybe we can do something for the family. So they lived in a, what looked like an apartment building, very old very run down. When you went up the stairs, they were concrete stairs but they were broken so they were dangerous, 2-3 level

buildings, I guess 2 or three story building. So we sat in their room, one room, you know 5-6 people and we were talking to this family and the older lady, the uh so they mother stands up in the middle of our conversation because I had, I had just asked them, and she stood up in the middle of the conversation and said I have to go and she left. So we continued the conversation and then half an hour later she comes back and I didn't know whether I had offended her. So I asked her, did I offend you? She said no, I had to go. And uh we you know we don't know everyone in the room is uncomfortable including mukhisaheb. And I don't know what I'm asking and I continue to press. What I found out was that she had to go, uh to the washroom and she had to go out of the building and there was no washrooms so she had to really do it on the street and she had to wait until dark and then had to time it so the trains were going at certain times. They couldn't do it while the trains were running and on and off. So it was like a complicated system that everybody knew about it. Like they used it and not everybody in town but people who didn't have this. And I thought the washroom was downstairs in an outhouse and uh so on our way out mukhi, so I've said to mukhisaheb, like what's going on here, don't they have an outhouse. So you open the outhouse it is full of filth and people are lined up to go in. So normally people went out. So he said, you know I didn't want you to see that but now that you have maybe you can do something. Maybe your family, and I said what about the rest of the people? They're all the same thing. So we started to talk about it. He says I know a place that we can buy and we can move these people there. So he took me on his motor bike. Whizzing through the trees you know, dangerous to me, and he took me to this place and showed me the building. And that building was old and its run down so I'm saying this building is pretty run down and I wouldn't want to do anything here. He said no, we would buy this place, demolish it and rebuild it. I said, I can't do that, I'm not here so I'll help you. I don't have that much cash and I don't know who this guy is and I don't have that much cash and you know let me think about it. And so he drops me off, he phones me and I'm supposed to take a flight the next morning early. He phones me early in the morning and says what times your flight? I said 8 in the morning and he said ok I'll come before work. He gets here and he says what do you think. I said I'll think about it. He says everybody I talk to says I'll think about it, once you leave here you won't get back. So either you, if you really want to do something and I thought

you were earnest that you wanna do something then do it. Or if you think about it, then you'll think about it for the rest of your life. So he was very blunt about it so I said ok that makes sense. I want to do something, I can't do it myself, let me go back, let me do some research and I'll get back to you within a month. I come back and I talk to S., is he for real. He says no no this guys' good. So I said S. this building is available now and this guy is pressuring me, yes or no. You are there, will you go and negotiate. Will you be there every step of the way. So I talked to a few people when I got back here. So we had six people here and we bought this building and rebuilt it. And we have 23 units in that building now and 100 people moved in. So this woman died about 2 years or 3 years ago and when I went, and when I used to go before I was Mukhi, I used to go see the family, not just the family but everybody but I used to go every year. Our intention was not to just move them into a spot but give them a quality of life where their children were educated. So there was an interview process, you need to make sure your children have good grades and you have better jobs now and help them with that. We did micro loans in the area and moved everybody. And uh the lady who died her daughter in law phoned me up when she died and she said I want to tell you about it. So this lady was my mother-in-law and she always used to tell me that she always wanted to live in a place where there's a washroom. And I used to say to her, then go find a palace. And when she died, on her death bed she said you were telling me to find a palace. Now I am dying in my palace. You know that's, those are the stories you say wow. So since then I've been involved with little things that happened but I've got some partners who work with me who are way beyond what I do. R.R., who's there, she does a great job, and B.L., and S.R. The three of them do amazing work."

Shezan: "I guess sort of my last question is, you kind of touched on it a bit before, when you said that you felt Ugandan Asian and then you came to Canada and you feel Canadian. So how do you feel now so what would be your identity?"

Azim: "Canadian. I'm you know I have the Ugandan part in me. I went back to Uganda, I actually went back to where I was born. Yasmin had never seen Uganda so we went on a holiday and I went back to Uganda and uh went to Majanji and I didn't think it was gonna be that emotional.

We get there and the driver who was driving us, pulls up and from these different towns we went Kabale, Mbale, we went to Majanji it's really bad roads when you go there and you stop in Majanji and all of a sudden all of these people gather around the car and it's scary. And it's dark and it is starting to get dark and we get out of the car and uh there's this, people start to talk and who are you. I'm Juma's son and oh I know you and I used to work for you and all of a sudden there's buzz in town and there's a 1000 people around you, literally. And uh I walked to where I was born, the little house that I was born in. It was a duplex actually. We had my sister living in one area, my sister and her husband and our other family, me and brothers were living on the other side with my dad and my mom and his mom. And there was people in this house and they literally stood outside and didn't want us to go in. And they asked us who we were and we told them. And you could see the apprehension and the scariness in their eyes and I quickly understood what they thought. They thought that we were there to reclaim our house, because now you can go and reclaim your property. Nobody had been there for 40 years and all of a sudden this guy shows up and says this is my house. So I explained to them who I was and I was just here to see. I didn't want the place, it's your place and so they were ecstatic about that. Alright, c'mon in, you know I couldn't, I saw, I never realized all these emotions that are built in. I just couldn't stop crying and we got out and there was a guy coming down on a bike from lake, which I still remember, which was quite far away but it was only 5 minutes away by car. So I could see the guy in a bike coming down. There were people around me but I could see this guy and he comes out and he stops and says Azim and gives me a hug. And I'm trying to figure out who he is. He had half the teeth missing, and gray hair and hands all callused, and I'm trying to figure out who this guy was. I thought he used to work for us and uh he looked 70 maybe even older. And he says you know I'm Usman and I still don't figure it out. It says don't you remember we were in class together, he was my classmate. I look at him and I say what a difference in life between the two of us. You know he stayed and he's still living a life of hardship. I asked him what he was doing and he says he's job. He says he's very happy, I have this bicycle and I deliver goods from one area to another. He would pick up goods from one shop and go and deliver it to different little towns and that was his life. So yeah I did go back.”

Yasmin: "How many years ago was this?"

Azim: "We probably went back around 15 years ago."

Yasmin: "But you haven't been back since then?"

Azim: "I did go back but it was 10 years ago that we first went. So my wife's sister they're from Tanzania so they had never been to Uganda so they went to Uganda to start a business. So they have an air conditioning business in Uganda. So because of that connection we went back a couple times."

Yasmin: "And she's still there?"

Azim: "Yeah she's still there in Kampala."

Yasmin: Now when you went to you home town, did you find any Ugandan Asians there?

Azim: "No, my home town was still all Africans. In Mbale and Kampala there were Ugandan Asians. The majority of them were from India. There were some who were East Africans who have returned but the majority are from the brand new wave."

---interview ends ---