

Errol and Delphine Francis

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

Errol Francis: “Montreal was like the distribution point. You stayed the night at the barracks at Longue-Pointe when you first arrived. That was really nice about the Canadian government, they didn’t check your papers, nothing. They said, “Listen—” They took us to this hall, had all this food laid out, you know, “Eat, drink. You had a long flight, you’re under a lot of stress. In the morning, we’ll process your papers.” You know, everybody wanted to go to either Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver, right? They were convincing you to go here, go there. Well, when we came on the fifth of October, they saw that I speak French, I had studied French in school, so they said—and she was, you know, at that stage...”

Delphine Francis: “I was not well and there was slight bleeding so they said, you know, “You better stay here, be stable.” And he made up his mind, you know what, we’ve got to make sure that this baby’s fine, once the baby arrives then we’ll worry about going.”

Errol: “And I think overall, Montreal did the best for the people because they put us all up at the YMCA or the Windsor Hotel—there were two places—and they gave us the boarding, all the food, everything—it was all complimentary—and free transportation on the subway system.”

Delphine: “And then they put us into an initiation course. By going to the initiation course, which was supposed to last for two weeks, you would go and learn about the history and the transportation because there were a lot of people who had never left Uganda so they were initiating us into the—an orientation. They paid us ten dollars per day for every day you attended. Yeah, so I was not feeling well, I was sick as ever, I was out of sorts. I had been to Canada, I had an idea, but I sat on that chair so I got my ten dollars and I could use the ten dollars to buy diapers and buy stuff for the baby. They were amazing. Montreal was very good.”

Errol: “Yeah, so that’s what happened. We stayed in Montreal and then her mom and dad arrived and they sent them off to what’s now called Cambridge. At that time, it was called Galt. They combined, I think, Galt, Preston, and Hespeler became Cambridge—they were the three towns. We were in Montreal and this initiation course was the most boring thing you could have gone to, but at the end of the day, they gave you money. Fortunately for us, after three days, they said, “You know, there’s going to be a strike and the teachers are going on strike so there will be no more initiation classes until they reach an agreement.” So I put my hand up and said, “What about the payment?” They said, “Oh, you get your money.” I said, “Oh, okay that’s good because I can go job hunting.”

So right enough, after three days we stopped, I went job hunting and I ended up with two, three offers in the travel business, which was great, and I said to Delphine, “There’s no point in you going to work now, you’re seven and a half months and you’ve got to take care of the baby and everything.” So what happened is I actually ended up taking the job which was not in the

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travel business because it was paying me a little more than the travel business and every dollar mattered at the time.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “Yeah, of course.”

Errol: “And so we were staying at the YMCA in Montreal, which is right on Drummond Street, right downtown Montreal just off, I guess René Lévesque now, it used to be Dorchester, it’s now René Lévesque, right down by the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, right in the heart of things. So when I started working, she was wandering around, walking around with some friends of ours also from Uganda, and they noticed in a store—maybe you can tell the story.”

Delphine: “Yeah, in a store they were selling these beautiful, new kind of pants that had come out for ladies, palazzo pants, you know, wide at the bottom and all. I did sewing at home but I never went to any courses or anything. I happened to say to the girl, “Oh, I love those!” And of course, everything we saw, we multiplied by seven because at that time, seven shillings to the dollar, so you know, you bought a toothbrush, it was a dollar but we said times seven, seven shillings, you know. So we saw this thing and I can’t remember how much it was, but times seven, and I said, “Oh my god, that kind of money?” I said “Don’t worry, Valerie, Gladys, if you want to get it, it’s not difficult to sew that. We can go get the fabric and I know there’s a place called Fabricland where they sell rejects.” I said, “If I only had my scissors,” because my scissors are back home, “I could hand cut it.” So this guy called me aside and he said, “Excuse me madam, do you sew?” I thought he was upset because I was not encouraging a sale. I said, “Yes,” and he said, “Would you like a job?” My eyes lit and I said, “I’d love a job but I’m pregnant.” He said, “Oh, how pregnant are you?” Because I had a long coat. I said, “I’ve got still about six weeks to go before the baby arrives.” He said, “Madam, if you’re willing to come and work here, you don’t have to worry, just come here tomorrow and I’ll give you something to sew, you can sit. There are these machines, I just need help and I’ll pay you ten dollars a day.” So I thought, “This is marvelous, every day I go I can get ten dollars,” but I said, you know, “I’ve got to check with my husband.”

I checked with Errol, Errol came with me and talked to the guy and he said, “Listen, no more than five, six hours a day. She’s welcome to stop when she wants to stop and whatever, but I’ll give her these jackets and some skirts and I just need her to do the basic sewing machining and then you pass it on.” It was like a factory thing at the back. So I said, “Look, Errol I’m going to take that job.” I did it, I took it for three weeks, so I got a hundred and fifty dollars, and it was a lot of money because I timed it by seven, and I said, “Now we have enough—” At least I thought it was enough money to start doing the basics for the baby that was arriving because we had nothing.”