

## Hassan Hirji

### Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

**Hassan Hirji:** "We were here in October 1972. I was one of the first ones to arrive in Canada. Of course, we arrived in Montreal. As soon as we arrived, they put us into this temporary army barracks and they had put us there in good accommodations—mind you, you don't expect five-star hotels. We were fortunate that we were able to get that as soon as we were. I always will say that there was quite a bit of involvement of Hazar Imam with the Canadian government. They sent planes. I've never seen refugees being picked up by planes. Refugees were picked up by planes—planes after planes. Air Canada planes came to Entebbe airport, and we basically, you know, boarded the plane. I mean, a lot of people had some challenges but we did not have any challenges because we were just following the rules. A lot of people were doing different things and they were going into some uncomfortable moments, you know. People were taking things they were not supposed to take. We did not do any of those things. Our transitions were just as smooth as you can think.

We arrived in Montreal and settled into the barracks. The next day they gave us—it was snowing at that time, you know in the seventies, it used to start snowing in October, not like this, not like these changes in the weather. They gave us the warm clothing, the warm boots. You know, there was so much food they gave us. I'd never seen in my life the food they had displayed there—the fruits, sandwiches, hot dishes, and everything. I was just flabbergasted with the treatment they gave us. Absolutely, very, very appreciative. The very next day, they told us we had to go to these stations where you have to register, and they say where you want to go and where they would let you go. At that time, the only two places I knew in Canada were Toronto and Vancouver, so they said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "Toronto." They said, "You know what, we want you to settle down so we're going to send you to a small town." So they sent me to Brockville, Ontario. I was there for almost two and a half years or three years."

Shezan Muhammedi: "With your parents?"

Hassan: "With my parents, yeah. And then, you won't believe it, as soon as we arrived in Brockville by train from Montreal—at that time immigration officers in Brockville came to receive us at the train station—they accommodated us in a hotel in Brockville and within one week, they accommodated us into a nice two-bedroom apartment in Brockville. Our picture was in the newspaper that these Ugandan families have come and we need to help and support them. You should have seen—at that time, Christmas was approaching—our kitchen was full of food. Boxes and boxes of tinned stuff, milk and bread, and we literally had to say that, you know, "Don't bring any more, we don't have any place to put it. There's so much." People were so generous."