

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Jalal Jaffer

Archives and Research Collections

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Abstract:

Mr. Jaffer was born in was born and raised in Uganda along with his eight other siblings. Both his parents migrated to Uganda in their teens from the Gujarat region of India. He remembered his upbringing in Uganda fondly with memories of attending Aga Khan schools but most importantly the Aga Khan sports club.

He was an avid athlete playing both basketball, badminton, tennis, and cricket at a high level. After completing his high school education he attended the London School of Economics and completed both an undergraduate degree and Master's degree in Economics. Upon returning to Uganda, Jalal worked for the Diamond Trust managing finances and then moved on to becoming the education administrator for the government when the expulsion decree was announced.

Jalal became close friends prior to the expulsion decree with a Canadian immigration official, Michael Molloy, who encouraged him to apply to Canada immediately following the expulsion decree. Upon arriving in Canada, Jalal and his wife spent some time working for CIBC in Toronto before moving to Vancouver. In Vancouver he attended law school at the University of British Columbia and completed his law degree. Jalal and his wife have two children and are both continuing to their respective careers in Vancouver.

This oral history was conducted at a local restaurant in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Shezan Muhammedi: “This is an oral history being done with Jalal Jaffer. I’ll let you get started with your family history in Uganda.”

Jalal Jaffer: “So my parents – both of them – were born in Gujarat in India, and at a very early age, they were not even in their teens yet, they came to Africa. And even I’m a little vague about what exactly encouraged them or pushed them to come to Africa other than the fact that I read about how Sultan Muhammad Shah used to encourage a lot of the pretty poor villagers in Gujarat to migrate to Africa. So in shiploads they came not knowing where they were going to go. And somebody or other would hold your hands and lo and behold in some small villages others were growing bigger villages and before you know it a thriving community develops. So my parents were in similar situations but I’m not... I’m told my mother was only thirteen when she got married and had her first child at the age of sixteen and between them they had nine children, I am one of nine children.

We were a relatively... what I would say is a lower middle class background in the sense that my father always provided for the family, always worked in different appointments and I was perhaps the first one from the family to take any postgraduate, post high school studies, so I went to university. My life in Uganda was entirely in Kampala and centered around the Aga Khan school, centered around the Ismaili jamatkhana, centered around sports in a very active sense but Aga Khan sports club, active sports in Aga Khan school. So my worldview was in and around the community which when I’m looking back rather than trying to remember all, that was pretty much my worldview as a child growing up. The Aga Khan schools were extremely well staffed by largely British teachers and one of my headmasters, who really was almost like a second dad to me. He took such a personal interest in me it was unusual, not everybody had that.

So my growth became a little unusual from others because he gave me an enormous amount of responsibility and let me put out my leadership qualities and my variety of interests, particularly sports and non-academic stuff in school... I was reasonably good at school work, completely as an uncorked true situation if you like. The idea of going to the London School of Economics was something that registered with me only because some of the great people that I had read about or heard about had gone to LSE so it was like hmm I would like to go to LSE. So that was pretty much finishing off my O-levels and A-levels and I was called to study. What do I do? Hmm LSE. And my teachers – British teachers – were a little surprised, they said, “Jalal are you sure you want to do that?” Because they figured I’d never make it. And lo and behold LSE said, “We’ll take you in.”

So with the Aga Khan bursary, the education board bursary I was able to go to London to finish my BSc [Bachelor of Science] in Economics and then I went on to do my MSc [Master of Science] in Economics but at Queen Mary College, not at LSE. So I finished doing four years of MSc econ then back in Africa, always thought that that was my home. I’m jumping along but I’m not sure what kind of might interest you...”

Shezan: “No this is perfect. Did your parents have a family business or were they working?”

Jalal: “No he always worked. I was talking earlier... my family, five of my sisters are all older than I. They went to school and the first two ones may not have even gone to secondary school, at the age of eighteen or twenty they all got married. The three sisters older than me, they all went to secondary school and after secondary school they started working. So there was just enough money to keep the family going. We never felt wanting, it was just simple, simple, straightforward, normal loving family,

that's how I grew up. I have two brothers who are younger than I so life was what it was. I never thought about it, the idea that now you think about the younger generation is spoiled sick with everything that they need. Here you had no choice but to make your life interesting from what you can based on your own creativity. If you wanted to fly a kite you made your own kite, if you wanted to play with the kids around you found your own little ball and made your own cricket bat with a plank of wood that you could carve into a cricket bat.

So that's how my life would have been different from someone who might have been better with more discretionary income. The idea of holidays or something like that would not surface readily. But activities like scouting and camping and doing everything in sports. In fact I was so, so active in sports that in spite of my handicap with my hand which I had at the age of six. I had broken left forearm and through a terrible medical attention never got salvaged. I played basketball not only for my school team, but I played for Uganda in basketball. I played cricket for not only from school but for the Aga Khan club in premier league, but I was still in high school. I was selected to play cricket for Uganda Muslims, it used to be what they called pentangular games, Indians or Hindus, Muslims, Goans, Africans, and Europeans. Now because Indians were so powerful they broke it up into Muslims, Goans and Indians, meaning Hindus. So the five ethnic groups we would play cricket as a tournament and I happened to get selected to play cricket – now remember with my stump hand – for the Uganda Muslims. So sports was so much part of my life growing up. I obviously played some tennis and squash and badminton and was school champion in tennis as well as badminton.

And when I was going to London to study the Uganda loan association secretary was a British guy... he used to take a very personal interest and he would say, "Are you really excited about going to England?" And I would say, "You know, my dad is a little concerned that I might go astray," in that I would completely give up on the values system and become whatever their fears were. He said, "You know what? You are going with a tennis racket in your hand. And when you're involved in sporting activities there's no fear of you getting off the track." I mean this was an English guy that was telling me and reassuring me. So that was my background."

Shezan: "Did you play in one of the games? Were you still in Uganda at the time? The games between the five communities?"

Jalal: "Sorry?"

Shezan: "Did you play in the games between the five religious communities?"

Jalal: "Yes, yes, cricket."

Shezan: "Can you tell me about one of the tournaments? I'm really curious."

Jalal: "Well cricket was a very well attended sporting event. There were some wonderful stadiums in Kampala. The Goan stadium was a terrific cricket venue. The Europeans had their Kampala Sports Club, beautiful sports grounds, Makerere University had their sports ground, Aga Khan club did not have its own sports field, but there was the Indian Recreation Club. So there were wonderful cricket fields everywhere and the premier league meaning you know... these were various teams. This was not the ethnic based ones. So this was called the Lowis club, L-O-W-I-S was one of the Brits inaugurated in the 50's. So that was like premier club... premier league and Aga Khan Sports Club always was a participant. Many times they won tournaments. The league... tournament is not the right word but having won the

league Lowis cup is the top ranked cricket thing. It was the same thing in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Ismailis always played cricket and they were pretty good at it. So as a fourteen year old, fifteen year old, I used to play for Aga Khan Sports Club first division Lowis club.

So that was in a sense my real sports commitment, and then from amongst all these players you get selected for Uganda Muslims. Because there were people... teams in Mbarara, teams from Mbale, Masaka, Jinja, tough teams. And every Sunday there was a cricket match, we would travel with some of the team players all the way to Mbale to play a match, or to Jinja to play a match. This is as I was growing up. So when you play for Uganda Muslims in the five team tournament is on, it's a round robin so you play each of them and whoever wins the most matches wins the trophy. So it was... kind of team building when you think about it to be in team sports at that high level by Uganda standards."

Shezan: "Yeah, that's so fascinating. Because I had heard that they had competitions based on religious communities, but I didn't know it was split up into those five exact categories. That's really good to know."

Jalal: "Cricket might have been the only sport where the grouping is done in this fashion."

Shezan: "When you came back to Uganda, what did you start doing? Did you start working right away, or?"

Jalal: "I had a fairly common role in the school partly because the headmaster had such a strong connection with me. But also I was active in jamatkhana, sang ginans, gave wisdom so a fairly good profile there. So the expectations of me were very high, you know within the jamat, that this is somebody that we have to nurture. So then I came back not surprisingly Diamond Trust which is an Ismaili jamati institution... without any hesitation picked me up. And within a matter of... I started off I'm twenty four back in Kampala, so the Diamond Trust picks me up as assistant manager... an institution which is known as a very stayed, boring, old fashioned institution. And there was a... one of the guys had gone to Columbia, Amir Kassim-Lakha. So Amir Kassim-Lakha was also with the Diamond Trust and he was very active in making sure I joined them rather than other opportunities.

So the two of them, we really changed the culture of that organization so quickly. Within six months I was elevated to manager of the Diamond Trust. Here I was a young kid managing a financial institution, a large trust company by Uganda's standards. So that was really my... and initially I got involved in community service, volunteer work. So I became a deputy administrator for Uganda, an education administrator. The government... through the education ministry I got appointed as a member of the board of governors of my own school. So here my headmaster who used to be my father figure, now I'm sitting on the board that is supervising him. My experience was a little different from other kids that you might encounter. I was just lucky, I just happened to..."

Shezan: "And so... I guess you were probably in your late twenties during the expulsion?"

Jalal: "Twenty six, twenty seven."

Shezan: "So what was your initial reaction?"

Jalal: "None of us took it seriously at all. We thought this is a joke, how can you throw away eighty thousand plus Asians who had been second or third generation Africans? They have no connection with India, no connection with any other country. So nobody took it seriously. We ourselves were completely

mocking it, “Idi [Amin] is crazy, a dream?” And it wasn’t until two or four weeks in it that people started galvanizing and then different people had very different experiences. Some could be horrible by our standards at the time, but if you were to look back in hindsight compared to what some of the other countries have gone through it can hardly make the same level of what I consider pain or fear and so on. You know within the Indian community if one person is robbed the whole community goes ballistic. If one person is beaten up it’s like, whoa, what’s happening? If one woman is raped it’s like the most despicable thing you could ever hear of, right? So the emotions rise because we’d never been exposed to that.

So it was very new to be targeted, to be molested, to be beat up. So it might be a handful of cases, but the impression would be the whole community is completely under enormous threat. So your fears go to a silly proportion. I mean we’re talking in hindsight, at the time we were feeling that fear and the only concern was how the hell do I get out? Nothing mattered in terms of your assets or your things, possessions. You wanted to be out, that’s all that mattered. And that’s exactly what most people aspired to do.”

Shezan: “And then your family’s response was pretty much the same I guess, everyone thought it was a joke and then took it a lot more seriously after that three or four weeks. So where did everyone try to apply? Did you all end up here in Canada, did you guys split up?”

Jalal: “Again I got a... unusual story compared to many others. Unusual in the sense that the year before – that’s ’71 – as I said I was fairly active in the community and enjoyed a reasonably good profile. Mike Molloy was in Uganda a year before and he connects with somebody who says, you know met up with a bunch of... because he wanted to meet some youngish people. I don’t know if he specifically asked for Ismailis – I doubt it – and lo and behold I was given the opportunity to meet him. This is a year before and a bunch of our friends... now today we are all part of Mike’s closest group. If Mike comes to Vancouver he will come and have dinner with us. I mean it’s that kind of relationship.

Now ’71 is when we met and we socialized, I played squash with him, I took him to play squash in Kampala. He was less fat then, he ran better. So we would play socially and we went out for dinners. This was about a week and a half or so... we probably saw him three, four, five evenings in a row. So he said, “You’re the types of people I would love to have in Canada. So then he says, “Why don’t you come to Canada, immigrate?” and I said, “I’m so well set, I love what I’m doing. In case anything changes, I’d rather go directly to Canada and apply there rather than go through this six or nine month’s process of going through Beirut and interviews and forms and so on, it doesn’t attract me.” I was very candid. He said, “I understand but keep in mind if at any time you want to come to Canada let me know.”

So I was not remotely interested in Canada at the time. We had heard about some very few individuals who had gone two or three years before, a couple of years before and at that time you could apply for immigration status in the country, you didn’t have to apply from outside. You could just come as a visitor and apply. So anyway nothing further happened. ’72 now this expulsion order... Mike is in town, I didn’t know that. He phones me and he says, “Well, I’m here. Is there anything I can do for you?”

So I was a Ugandan citizen but my... what is called a renunciation certificate, because at the age of twenty one I had to renounce my British citizenship, because I was born in Kenya I had a British colonial status but I applied for Ugandan citizenship immediately when it was available. But at twenty one I had to renounce, nobody knew about that, I didn’t know about that. So I hadn’t renounced so technically I

was no longer Ugandan, I was British. So when the expulsion came in I said, "Look, I think I've got a British colonial passport and I'm sure I'll be able to go to England." England is the only place I knew other than Kampala because I stayed four years there, right? And as a student you love London, it was the place to be. My wife was also educated in England, she went to Redding University. So we both studied in England and no questions, no worries, no fears. I said, "I'm not interested really, I'll probably end up in England."

So he says, "Jalal, here is my suggestion to you, why don't you take your Canadian visa, if you don't use it, don't worry. But if you want it, you've got it." So I said, "That's a wonderful insurance policy," I said, "What do I have to do?" He said, "Look, I will consider our sports game as our interview, all you need to do is come here and get your medical." I didn't have to line up, he says, "When you are arriving, phone me before you come and I will get you at the door, you don't have to line up." Now that's the kind of relationship we had got to, right? So I didn't have to go through the hassle of lining up and getting the forms and getting an interview, which a lot of people went through a lot of difficulties and I felt badly that I was jumping the queue if you will. But it wasn't my doing, it was jump or my life. And if I didn't take it, it wasn't going to go somewhere else, right? So I rationalized it.

So the next day, the following day Shamsad and I arranged that we are coming at two thirty in the afternoon, we go there, he comes and picks us up we went to medical and got our visas. So now we had Canadian visas but we would like to go to England also. And that again... I tell you sometimes it doesn't matter, who you know matters. Because I had started squash, I learned squash in England... very few people played squash in Uganda, at the Kampala Sports Club, exclusively the whites. Now if you play squash and you beat them, they respect you. Lo and behold this is '71 and a British squash team is visiting Kampala as... just some exhibition matches. The British High Commission throws a dinner in their honour, I happen to be a member of the Uganda Squash Association Executive Committee, I was on the committee.

So I get invited to the British High Commission for a party for the visiting British team and in that process I happened to strike up a conversation with one of the British officers there. And I just happened to mention I was lining up for my visa and so on and issuance of the passport... because I only had the Uganda passport, I didn't have a British passport. I had British citizenship and I would like to go to England. He says, "Let me see what I can do," and again he managed to get my stuff, all I would do... at the Diamond Trust we had what is called peons so they would run errands for you so I would just send it with one of the peons to deliver it and he would say, "Okay, here are the documents you need to provide," and you do. And bingo, I get my passport.

So to arrive I was so, so lucky in both respects. In both countries I could walk in, and quite literally we thought we were going to London and we were going to stay there. Both of us started looking for a job from September til November... we didn't live here. And as time started to went by London started to wear thin on me, I felt so claustrophobic I said, "Is this where I really want to live?" As time went by and I was looking for a job I didn't quite get what I thought I might get. I started going to Canada House in Trafalgar Square and I started reading newspapers and Globe and Mail was my daily reading, The Financial Times and so on and I started learning and understanding politics, economics, and so on. You know it was not rocket science to say, "Let's lump London and go to Canada with our visas."

So come November we gave up London and initially we thought Toronto because Toronto is where the hub of financial institutions are. So within two weeks of landing we had jobs at CIBC. I was on what was

called the accelerated management program which would guarantee me virtually a manager in one of the branches within one year and Shamshad was on what was called the... not the accelerated but the regular accounting management program. So we had two incomes, eight hundred dollars a month for me and six hundred dollars a month for her. So we seemed pretty lucky, and the rest as I say is history."

Shezan: "My mom actually ended up working for CIBC too when she came."

Jalal: "Did she?"

Shezan: "Yeah. So she started as... initially before she was a teller she was doing the big ledgers, because it was all hand written. So she was working on that and then she moved on to being a teller. As things kept getting more and more automated she started slowly moving up and eventually she ended up being a risk analyst by the end of it all. They had sent her on a lot of courses so it was great, she loved it. The bank was good to her, which was nice."

Jalal: "See one of the... one of the unusual things was we couldn't take anything out from Uganda, we basically left with two suitcases but we managed to get what is called MCO's, these are travel vouchers, airline travel vouchers. See if we had cash... let's say we had twenty five thousand shillings in cash and we can't take money out, what can we do? You can't buy things and go, right? So we had the bright idea, let's get travel vouchers. So we got twenty five thousand shillings worth of travel vouchers which means you can get airline tickets with those vouchers anywhere, for any airline... so that was a lucky thing to do. We were in Toronto with these vouchers and we hear about Vancouver so we said, "Okay let's go for a little break." Because by this time some very close friends had moved here and Shamshad's parents had moved here and we thought Vancouver... let's go for a holiday. So it just happened to be August, now August in Vancouver is like heaven, right?"

So we come for a visit for what's supposed to be seven days and in five days we decided to go back, wind up in Toronto and move to Vancouver. We said, "If we're going to be in a country... Toronto is not really the winter we spent there you know, all the hustle and bustle. Vancouver is so pristine, so heavenly, what are we doing in Toronto?" We go back and both of us go to our HR person and I remember... Derek Henry was his name. I said to Derek, "Derek, I want to go to Vancouver." He says, "Alright Jalal, we'll try to get you there." I said, "No, when can you get me there?" He said, "We'll get you a relocation, give me a year or so," he says, "Give me a year and I'll get you a transfer." I said, "Derek, I don't have a year. I want to go next week." He says, "That's crazy." I said, "No, I really have decided I want to move to Vancouver." He says, "You're just a new immigrant, you've been here for less than eight months and you've got a really good potential for your career and you're going to dump it to go and give up your job?" I said, "Look, I'm going to struggle through if it takes me three months, six months so be it... I think that's where I want to make my life." He says, "I am sorry to let you go, but I have no choice, I can't make it happen."

Within two weeks of going back home we bundled up whatever we could, we hit the road and we drove across... we got to know Canada first hand. We took seven or eight days and it was fascinating. That was my greatest firsthand experience, of how vast the country was, how different it was in each location... each geographical area was so different from the others. And you really got a sense of how beautiful, how exciting and incredibly scenic from the northern shores of the Great Lakes to the flat prairies to the beautiful mountain ranges in the west and the Rockies and of course the Okanagan and so on. We had such a great time watching this and feeling so excited about it. So here we were off in Vancouver

starting fresh looking for a job, finding payment again. The typical answer was, “You’re overqualified, we can’t give you a job because we know you won’t stay here long enough.” So you have to underpay sometimes, but it didn’t work. So it took me a while before I got into consultancy and then in the meantime started a real estate course book and both Shamshad and I became realtors, and becoming a realtor was just a childhood feeling to go into a legal profession because I recently applied... I didn’t think I could afford law school. Because with my parents I was responsible for them.

So Shamshad said, “Apply, if it doesn’t work, don’t go.” So I put in an application to UBC [University of British Columbia] Law School and initially the response was, “We’ll put you on a waiting list and if anything changes, we’ll let you know.” Now this was in ’74 and already had gotten involved in institutions [Ismaili Muslim institutions], I became the honorary secretary of the National Council right away. So it was fairly high demanding work, right? Sir Eboo [President of the Ismaili Council for East Africa] – you heard of him – he was visiting in August of ’74, September second he spent at Law school starts. Around the twenty eighth or so he was still around, I get a phone call from UBC, “We’ve got a space for you but we need to know by tomorrow. If you want to come to law school we need to know tomorrow, bring a cheque for two hundred and thirty dollars for your term’s fees and away you go.” Now I had twenty four hours... if I had a longer time I would have talked myself out of it because you always find reasons why you can’t do certain things. So again Shamshad was very encouraging because we are risking two hundred and thirty bucks. See what happens and if it doesn’t work, so be it.

You know on that basis I accepted. And I was still a realtor, I said to myself, “I’ll continue being a realtor,” and went to law school. So I was in the law school and I only took those courses which happened to all be on one single day so I went one day a week to law school. Some courses I never even attended a single class. I wasn’t afraid from an academic point of view because I had gone through a bachelor of arts and you had that maturity behind you. Everything that is important is already out in textbooks anyways. So here I was national council, law school, realtor. So that’s my story.”

Shezan: “Very, very busy. And when your parents left Uganda they went straight to Canada, or they went somewhere else?”

Jalal: “I had a sister who lived in the Congo, so my fear was how do I first safeguard my parents? So somehow it dawned on me, why don’t I send them to my sister until things settle down. And that was the best thing I could do frankly because it gave me no... I wasn’t hindered by having to look after older parents at the same time I was struggling hard to settle down. So they went to the Congo and within a year they were able to come and join me.”

Shezan: “Had you sponsored your parents to Canada?”

Jalal: “Yeah, they moved into Vancouver.”

Shezan: “How was that first Ontario winter for you guys? Because you had seen some cold in England.”

Jalal: “Well you never see much snow in London, although, somehow I had taken a holiday in Switzerland so we had done some skiing in Switzerland. She comes from a relatively well established family from Uganda, I don’t know if you heard the name Pareckh Pirani, your mom would probably know. So that’s her dad, so she came from that class of family. So she had gone to Switzerland and so

on. I had gone as a student from London to Scotland and had gone to my first ski slope was in Glenshee which is just outside of... not Edinburgh, what's the other main city?"

Shezan: "Glasgow?"

Jalal: "Glasgow, right outside Glasgow. It's a mountain resort called Glenshee, that's when I first ever saw a skiing slope. But Toronto was fiercely cold and both of us coming from London managed to get some afghan sheepskin coats. They were unusual like hell, they were conversation pieces in Toronto all the time, but they kept you really warm. One interesting thing for us was they asked us at the immigration department if we would be interested or willing to stay with a family until we settle down. Because some families offered billeting for new immigrants and they said, "We would like you to stay with a family." And guess what? We got picked up from that famous Ford Hotel which was a crummy little hotel downtown in Toronto the day after we arrived by a wonderful couple Michael and Vera. To this day we are close friends. They put us up for two weeks, we became part of this couple's family. He was with United Way some non-profit organization well connected with the left leaning or liberal part of the political world, he probably was an NDP [New Democratic Party] at the time. So we would have long discussions on politics.

Within the first week he has a dinner at home and he had four or five guests, one of them was professor named Iacobucci. I didn't know the name, he was the Dean of the law school at... not Western, just outside of Toronto a law school. And we started chatting and he really had a long chat with me, he started talking about law and what it does. I must have said to him that as a child I used to think about law as a profession but I could never really tell myself that I could do it in Uganda because the judiciary was in my mind so corrupt and not principal and so on. And I couldn't practice law in an environment like that so I never pursued it. So he says, "What's stopping you now?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Why can't you go to law school now?" I said, "How can I? I've just arrived in this country, I've got no means, how do I support myself?" He says, "Look if there's anything I can do for you, let me know." Now that was just a conversation, and he says, "You will do really well."

I didn't pay much attention to that, never pursued it until I was in Vancouver and that conversation came back to register with me, what professor Iacobucci was telling me. He was the Dean of the faculty of law, now he went on to become a Supreme Court of Canada justice, he is retired now. Turns out he is originally from Vancouver, Italian background. And the funny thing is about fifteen years ago the Italian community was celebrating Iacobucci's services to the community. I happened to go... unbeknownst to me at the time I happened to go as a member representative of the Ismaili community at that function. I didn't know that they were celebrating something, and it's Iacobucci. I hadn't seen him so when I got an opportunity I went to talk to him and I said, "You won't remember me..." and I gave him a quick background on it. He says, "You know what? I remember that conversation, did you go to law school?" I said, "Yes, I am a practicing lawyer." He was so delighted, he actually spoke about that in his speech."

Shezan: "What a sweet story."

Jalal: "It was really unusual."

Shezan: "So it was all meant to be then."

Jalal: "I don't know whether you have gotten the material from the symposium at Carleton University or the University of Ottawa, 'Journey of Hope.'"

Shezan: "Journey of Hope, I think that was the thirtieth anniversary? Yeah, so Mike Molloy sent me all of the stuff. Do you have some stuff as well."

Jalal: "I was one of the speakers there."

Shezan: "You were one of the speakers? Okay, awesome. I haven't gone through any of it, but I'll look out for that. I think some of it was filmed..."

Jalal: "It's really was about in the sense... representative of different communities. There was a girl from Ontario and I who was asked by the council to be representatives of the Ismaili community, and the mandate was to talk about the settlement process in Canada. What is amazing to recall, there are representatives from the Bora community for example, other Muslim communities, Goan communities, everyone recounted their so called success stories but in an unusual sense everybody's story had such a sense of hurt feelings and emotional baggage they were carrying. They've never really quite come to terms having been thrown out from their high pedestals in Kampala, particularly as it has affected their families. Then you know this Murad chap, there was a Sikh guy who was very well placed in Africa and had parents who were living like you know *Nawab Sahibs* there and suddenly they are working in a parking lot, or having to cart their own groceries. Some who had servants galore and so on, right? The pain of seeing that happen to their parents was really painful and many of them started crying like babies as they were speaking. In the audience there wasn't a single dry eye. It was almost like a catharsis of sorts, complete letting down your emotional hurt feelings. It was quite a spectacle. So we heard so many stories in those two days."

Shezan: "What was your general impression... how did you feel at the Journey of Hope conference?"

Jalal: "My story was far more palatable compared to many others that I heard. I was lucky that my family didn't suffer unduly and I was not coming from a highly placed family background. So my strongest blessing was that both of us, Shamshad and I were both educated, we could take a few knocks if we got any, and we didn't receive any knocks. So it was a really painless journey for us, but for some it was agonizing. I think people can handle personal hardships but the emotional trauma is much tougher to deal with and many of the stories recounted emotional turmoil, emotional hardships, and that was very painful to hear. These are likely to be very similar sentiments that you might have heard from others."

Shezan: "A lot of it has been making a conscious effort to let go of the past, to let go of what had happened and not sit there and think why me, why us? And just embracing what they have in Canada in order to do well and get past it, raise their family here or take care of their parents here and sort of break that stigma. A lot of people talk about how... the only reason they were really able to do well because they had to let it go and they realized that they had no other option. Sitting here and feeling sorry for myself won't get me anywhere, I need to pick myself up and just go. Yeah it sucks being a shoe salesman compared to what I was back in Uganda but I'll do it, put in my time and hopefully get some capital and then I can get out. It was very interesting, a lot of... a deep sense of hope and perseverance amongst a lot of people. I haven't met anyone yet who... I don't know how to say this properly, maybe I guess caught up in the hurt emotional side to the point where they weren't able to make something of themselves. I think that might just be a generational thing. If we look at like when my grandmother came... she was really resistant to Canada, she was skipping English language training classes and really giving my mom a hard time because she had really felt a sense of hurt when she left Uganda."

Jalal: "I can understand that. From my generation, our generation would have really... sort of difficult to set up in a place but for our parents and grandparents or whatever, they would have to give up something they had known and cherished. I can imagine that would be much more difficult because they also would have started seeing what I loosely talk about or explain as the disintegration of the so called 'family units' becoming much more nuclear families and for the elders. My parents lived on their own and I'm sure deep in their hearts they never, ever liked it – I'm guessing. They never talked about it but I'm sure they never would have given up the idea of living with all the children... and that could be vague."

Shezan: "I could see how that sense of family is something that's completely missing here in Canada. They were like, "We used to live fifteen, sixteen of us in a house and that was normal. My cousins were my brothers because we all lived together, share rooms." And they said that they missed that a lot, that sense of community they say isn't the same here as it was there like, "Now I see my brother twice a year, I used to see him every day of my life.""

Jalal: "Separations... you get used to it, but if you hadn't given up the other one it would have been tougher."

Shezan: "How was raising your children here?"

Jalal: "We have two sons both born in Vancouver. Both managed to go through university, both have been away from home for many years now. Would it have been different in Africa? Maybe, maybe not, because I am one of those who thinks that when children have wings they have got to fly. We've got to let them fly, the direction, that's their choice. You can nurture and help make them good human beings but that's all. I've got a very pragmatic view of that. My mantra to my boys as they were growing up was, "If you do well at school I'll be very happy for you but what would make me sad and very unhappy is if you grow up into not good human beings." So my primary, primary message was good human beings. Everything else is a bonus, but that is your basic what I would say is the most... if you want to please me, that's what it would be. And if you don't do well at school or don't make success in your career, I can understand that. Do the best you know and you'll be the best you can be but not being good human beings would hurt me more so. So they grew up with that mantra all the time."

Shezan: "Especially within our community it's always been a push to really educate yourself as much as possible, a push towards a profession... things like doctor, lawyer, educator. But that's nice to hear though."

Jalal: "It's not that I don't want a doctor for a son, but I'm just saying that not at the cost of being a good human being. Some of the doctors you encounter I don't particularly care for, they're not good human beings."

Shezan: "I guess one of the more difficult questions I have is, after all this time in Canada, how would you identify yourself? Would you say you're a Ugandan Canadian, a Canadian Ugandan, Ismaili Canadian? There's no wrong answer."

Jalal: "I think one... again, I think it's your experience that dictates how you feel. If I had felt a strong sense of persecution like racism or looking down upon me and so on, my outlook would have been different. Having been educated and having the ability to stand up to anybody and everybody with the education that you have and the upbringing that you have and the... even qualities that you have, you

feel much more comfortable under your skin, right? I remember early in the days at Canada house and the immigration services when they'd meet the Caucasian Canadians when they are trying to make conversation some people will ask the question, "Is it a privilege or is it a right for you to be in Canada?" It offends me, that question. And I would say, "You know if you think Canada has made a great gesture in welcoming a whole bunch of people, I understand that. But I want you to know that some of us who have come bring very valuable attributes that also is a benefit to Canada." And I would say that.

The question... I don't like the premise of the question. It is not an either or, and I would say you can certainly ask me do I value things about Canada? And I would have overwhelmingly say yes, I love the country and everything it stands for. Everybody has got its own little skeletons but overall I am quite proud and happy to be in Canada. So I don't like this dichotomy. I would say let's change that frame and are there things about Canada that you like or dislike, I would happy to respond in a very positive way. I love a lot of wonderful things about Canada. And this is in my seventy, seventy-two time period we're talking about, so when you say how do I see myself? If you look at the background born in Africa, virtually in an Indian environment, being brought up in an Indian environment although we lived in an overwhelmingly majority of Africans. But our world was really an Indian community, we married within the Indian community, we socialized within the Indian community, we played sports within the Indian community – except basketball, which was much more African. But tennis, badminton, squash and so in, it was all very much Indian or white.

Having come from that... so do I have an affinity towards India? Not really. But do I have cultural ties to India? Yes of course. I love Indian music, in fact I play the harmonium and I sing, but that's part of my cultural baggage and heritage – heritage is positive, baggage is a little negative. But this is what makes me tick. And having studied in my formative years in England, those are really influential kinds in your outlook formation, university days. So that was England and then the moment I went back I was thrown out.

So where does my loyalty lie? It is tough for me to say I am African. I can't and I don't, right? And the reason is not because I don't love the country. When I go back to Africa it does put a lovely feeling around you, but I cannot really say honestly that that is my country, even when I went to university I was such a proud Ugandan, I would stand up for Uganda any time. If I had a choice in the whole residence to share a room and I had a choice between another Indian from India or a black African, I'd chose the black African instinctively. I didn't think about it, that's how I was at the time. But then of course the fact that you got booted out, you know... it does leave a blemish on yourself. And then Canada, so of course I feel strongly Canadian but I truly believe in strong multi backgrounds which influenced me into making me who I am.

My Ismaili faith is very important and very profoundly influential on me but that doesn't make me anything other than... it doesn't speak to nationality, right? An Afghan Ismaili in Canada is not particularly distant from an East African Ismaili in Canada. So I say to myself... I again don't like this what I call narrow definition because it doesn't really give me the ability to say exactly who I am. If you say, "Do you feel Canadian or do you feel Ismaili?" Well that dichotomy doesn't go well with me, right? I would say I can't answer that question and I question the narrowness of the question because it doesn't give me the ability to express myself fully.

So I am certainly Ismaili, certainly very Canadian, I've got cultural heritage which is Indian – which I am not at all defensive about – so I am a combination of all of that, and proudly so. But if you say does my

absolute loyalty go to Canada as a country, of course it does, vis a vis India, vis a vis Africa, of course it's Canada, right? But to identify me or put me in a narrow hole, "Are you Ismaili, Are you Canadian, What does Canadian mean?" Canadian to me incorporates all of these, the value system, the cultural background, the attitudes... whatever. So that's a long winded answer to a simple question, but I'm questioning the question."

Shezan: "Exactly, yeah. That's what I've found a lot is that... even myself when someone asks me that simple question, where are you from? I always wonder what they're getting at. I am born and raised in Canada and I don't know anywhere else. And then I tell them my mom is from East Africa and my dad is from Burma and oh, my great grandparents, they're from India. And they're always like "Oh okay, that makes sense." And I always wondered what the intention was behind that question, I always thought that is the beauty of Canada, you can be a whole bunch of things all at once and the fact that people understand that, you can be a member of a local religious community, you can have multiple backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, tradition, nationalities, and Canada accepts that."

[End of transcript].