

Jitu Tanna

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Announcement

Jitu Tanna: “When Idi Amin came to power in 1971, I had just decided at that time and my parents had decided that I should, for further education, for better education, try and study in England, so I had applied and got the admission in the UK. They were just in the middle of making plans to move to the UK anyway, and this thing with Idi Amin broke out and it changed everything. In the beginning, we didn’t think that he was serious, and it seemed like it was just one of those things that he will change his mind and say, “I was just joking,” because he used to do that. Nobody took it seriously in the beginning, but as days wore on toward the deadline, people realized that this is serious.

He had said, “You won’t be able to take anything with you,” so either it was a matter of selling everything or if you had money in the bank, because most of the banks were British banks, then at least your money is there and in the future there’s a chance that you’ll get that back, right? Because if you have stuff lying around and it’s just going to sit there, somebody’s going to take it. So frantically trying to sort of, whatever we could send off in little parcels, we would start doing that right away.

After about the middle of the time, maybe about a month and a half before the deadline, we realized that, you know, this is serious, now we have to start making plans. We started selling stuff that were in the shops, furniture, everything, and started putting money in the bank. When the day came—I think the deadline was the ninth of November, and we left just a day before the deadline. That’s how close it was because I think my father was always thinking that, “No, no, this can’t be happening, I think he will change his mind,” but I think it was just wishful thinking.

Even on the day we were leaving for the airport, even along the way, there were checkpoints because they want to make sure that you’re not taking jewellery and gold and stuff like that with you, so they would search you. It was a body search done on the way in and one at the airport as well. Whatever they could find, they could just grab it. It was very trying circumstances. Once we were on the plane, we said, “Okay, now we’re safe.” And I think at that point, we had no idea what was going on in Uganda with Idi Amin and the number of people that were being slaughtered, the Africans. We had no idea at all. We just thought that we were leaving behind a beautiful life, a beautiful country, and hopefully something will happen to him or he’ll change his mind and maybe we will come back. When he realizes that Uganda has suffered because of this, then he will say, “Okay, well I made a mistake,” and we’d come back. Everybody was hopeful of that.”