

John Halani

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Announcement

John Halani: “My father came from India, probably in 1934 or ’35. Got married there, he was a businessman, and we all grew up in Masaka, my family too, my brothers and sisters, until we came here in ’72. I did a lot of non-profit work in Uganda. I was president of the Council, Ismaili Council at that time, and His Highness the Aga Khan came in 1972, February, and I had the privilege to host him at my house. So actually, jamatkhana we had people from Masaka and Mbarara. That was a good visit.

Then ’72, sometime in June or July—no I think after the expulsion order came—we met the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees representative who came to see us and we met them, about four of us. We talked about the order and all that, and the advice we got was all Asians, whether Ugandan or not Ugandan, should leave the country. As a result of that we advised people to start applying and fortunately the Canadian government opened their offices and they took about five thousand people out of the fifty thousand. Five thousand and the majority of them were Ismailis who were selected to come to Canada. Some of the Asians went to India, Pakistan, England, Australia, some went to Australia and New Zealand as refugees. We came here straight. So we landed in Montreal, then after, they were meeting the people who came, we decided to come to Vancouver and ever since I’ve been here.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “What did your parents do back in Uganda?”

John: “My father was a textile merchant. He was quite successful in his own way, and initially I think he must have worked in the school or something. Then probably in the 1940s, or ’41, he opened his own business and it went until the end.”

Shezan: “When the expulsion order happened, what was your family’s immediate response?”

John: “Well immediate response, everybody thought that the majority of the Ismailis and Asians were Ugandan citizens so this order did not apply to us, that’s what the impression was. Later on we found out that his intention was to ask all the Asians out, so this is what we started planning after I met the UN representative.”

Shezan: “Then what was the response? Because you were part of the Council, and I guess there was also Sir Eboo Pirbhai and all you guys trying to navigate how to get all the Ismailis out. What happened on the ground?”

John: “When we came here?”

Shezan: “In Uganda, first.”

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John: "In Uganda, the majority of the people were born there or lived there their whole life, so their reaction was they were going to stay, and since they had become Ugandan citizens they would have no trouble and they can settle down. Or, some of the people thought that if they leave the country up to three months, six months, it will settle down and people can go back, but I think after coming here we realized that the situation in Uganda wasn't going to settle down quickly."