

John Nazareth

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Departure

John Nazareth: “People are going and getting—they had to leave jobs, they had to start verifying their citizenship. If you were a Ugandan citizen, you had to queue up and get it verified that, “Yes, you are a Ugandan.” I remember when we started queuing, pretty soon we stretched a mile long. We started having to sleep on the streets because if you got out of the line and said, “I’ll come tomorrow,” well the next day, there’s another huge line, so we ended up—I know I had to queue up thirty-six hours on the street to verify my citizenship. Then, they gave orders to the people who were verifying citizenship to withdraw as many citizenships as they could for whatever pretext they could find, and so they were doing that.

I know in my case, I couldn’t find the original of my citizenship certificate, I just don’t know what happened, and so one day, just before the Expulsion—actually, maybe during the Expulsion—I didn’t have anything so I went to my friend, an African friend who worked in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I said, “I can’t find it, I don’t know where it is, can you help me?” He said, “I’ll help you, I’ll get your original.” He gave it to me, he put it in a newspaper, he said, “Go and ask a friend of yours to give you a photocopy.” Luckily, my cousin was working in the next building so I took it to her, made a photocopy, and I returned this to him. This guy, you know, he took a big risk by giving it to me, but I took a copy. Here I am verifying and all I had was this photocopy, and the guy told me, “You know, you’re going to have to get your original.” And I said, “I can’t find it.” He said, “Okay, I’m going to rip this up.” I said, “No, no, give me some time,” because from the corner of my eye, I noticed that one of the guys verifying citizenship was my classmate from my old school in Kisubi so I immediately went to him. I left this guy, went to him, and he said, “Hey, Nazareth, how are things?” He pulled the thing out and stamp, stamp, I was through. Mind you, I ended up finding the certificate. What had happened was, when I was working for the government, they sent me on a course to New York for three months and it was to do with trade, and I had to give my citizenship certificate and then I put it all in a scroll and I forgot it in the scroll. Regardless, I found it many months later. Anyway, thank goodness to my old schoolmate, I was verified.

My younger brother was verified. My sister was rejected because she didn’t have a certificate, a particular certificate, and they didn’t know that she was not required to have it. My sister didn’t know that, but I later on went and did my research and found it, and tried to get her citizenship back but it was too late, it was gone. My elder brother was one of the earliest persons to become a citizen and he went off on a scholarship to Britain to study and do his postgraduate in English. This is Peter Nazareth who became a professor later on. His citizenship and his renunciation of citizenship—oh yeah, if you had another citizenship, when you became a Ugandan citizen, you had to renounce your previous citizenship. Well, the British kind of blotched that thing up because he was one of the earliest and nobody could find it so they just took his citizenship away. Mind you, his ministry, he was pretty senior in his ministry, and they ended up exempting him. It’s funny about him, he had such a role in the Ministry of Finance. He worked there too and he ran Uganda’s first lottery and ran it for a few years. Funny thing, he became an English professor and he always told me that thanks to the ministry, he learned

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about life, because originally, when he tried to get a job in Makerere [University] after doing his postgraduate, it turned out that he had been blacklisted. He had been blacklisted because he didn't kowtow to the British—he was an independent thinker. The British still had a strong neocolonial influence on Uganda and they controlled the University at that time till the late sixties. They blacklisted him, made sure not only that he never got a position in Uganda, they blacklisted him all over East Africa so he got a job in the ministry and that turned out to be a blessing in disguise because he learned something about life and that helped him write his first novel. He lost his citizenship, so in my family, two lost their citizenship, two could keep them, my mother had not become a citizen, my father had passed away. My mother never became a citizen, and my father and my mother, they thought at the time, they were too old to change citizenship. They never even thought what that meant, you know, would it mean that they could stay?

And just to go back a bit, even our decision to stay in the country and become citizens, it was not automatic. Originally, we thought, well my father thought, we should leave the country. We tried to go to Malaysia because that's where my mother grew up, and Malaysia rejected us the first time around, and this was now late '62, so my father asked us, he says, "Look, I've got to apply again, they'll probably say yes this time, do you want to go?" I don't know what made him ask us, and then we, all four of us, said, "No, we want to stay here. This country is everything we know." So then we became citizens. My mother had not become a citizen, she was British, and then she had to leave the country and so did my aunt—very close to us, my aunt, my father's sister. That was a kind of heartbreak. My sister had to leave her job, she was working for East African Airways. She had to leave her job, but her husband—they had just been married for a year, I think it was, or two years—he was a Ugandan citizen and his citizenship was verified, so she could stay in the country because of him. That was okay, but it was quite a blow to her independence that she couldn't work. Upsetting, you know? But my brother-in-law, he was a good friend of mine, he also studied at the same school in Kisubi. It's funny, I was the only one who studied in that school, my two brothers studied at Kololo Secondary School in Kampala. That was, you know, we could slowly see the danger ramping up, but life was full of surprises, and I remember once going on a picnic. The funny thing was even though it was so dangerous and so on, it was an intense period that was in some ways happy. Why? Because everybody was living like there was no tomorrow because there indeed was no tomorrow."