

John Nazareth

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Memories of Uganda

John Nazareth: “I was born in Uganda in a town called Entebbe, which at one time was the capital of Uganda. In fact, Entebbe means seat. It was the seat of the Ugandan government, at least certainly for the civil service. I was born there in 1947 and lived the first twenty-five years of my life there before leaving. Although I didn't leave in the expulsion, I left because of the expulsion. Had the expulsion not occurred, I would not have left. I spent most of my life there, studied there—had the good fortune to actually study with some Africans in my primary school days. A lot of schools were very racially based in colonial times but there were a few pockets and, in fact, I went to school, elementary school, we had a few Africans and then a whole plethora of people. In high school, I went to a boarding school, St. Mary's College Kisumu, which was just seven miles out of Entebbe. It was one of the best schools in the country and certainly the best Catholic school. It was founded just for Catholics but over time, they would admit anybody who wanted to come and was able to qualify. It's in that school that I learned a lot about politics, and later on, a lot of my old classmates and schoolmates went on to become politicians, very significant politicians, one of whom is currently the vice president of Uganda and whom I know very well. To go back a bit, I'm born to a family of four siblings, I have three brothers and a sister. My parents—we are all of Goan origin. My father was born in Goa when it was still a Portuguese colony. My mother was born in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Essentially, a lot of Goans left Goa looking for jobs because the Portuguese gave us a taste for the good life but couldn't give us enough jobs to satisfy, so we ended up moving around. My grandfather was a big musician. He had an orchestra at the time of the silent movies and he got a contract in Kuala Lumpur with the British. He went up and settled an orchestra there and my mother was born there. Just to digress a little bit, he was such a great musician that he ended up teaching music to Chiang Kai-shek's children, and Chiang Kai-shek was the leader of China at the time and was fighting Mao. While he was fighting Mao, he kept his children in Kuala Lumpur and my grandfather ended up teaching music to them. Just a slight digression.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “Fascinating.”

John: “So my father and mother got married. In those days, a lot of people got married through arranged marriages and that's why the huge distance between Malaysia and Uganda. They got married in Goa and came to Uganda. Most of the time we spent in Entebbe although we did spend time, a few years, in a town called Fort Portal, which was in Toro province, a few years in Kampala, and I did go to university in Kampala. I did my degree in mathematics there and then worked in the Ministry of Finance for a few years in Entebbe. It's funny how I ended up studying there. They happened to blotch my application for a scholarship to go and do postgraduate studies so I said, “Okay, let me work in the Ministry while I'm waiting for the next chance,” and I kind of liked it. It was so soon after decolonization so I got promoted to a very senior job very young in my life. I was the head of one of the departments just because the British who was running it left and I was there. I got a chance to write backgrounds to the budgets and so on. It was a phenomenal job. You know, there was very little discrimination against Asians at that

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time, so if you were a Ugandan, whatever colour you were, you got treatment. I went to university, the country paid for my whole education. They even gave us some money for books and so on. We never had to pay a thing. They even gave us pocket money, we were equal. They didn't say, "Oh, you're an Asian you can afford more." No, it was equal. It wasn't like Kenya. In Kenya, for example, if you're an Indian, there was a meanness and they gave you much less than they gave Africans. Not so in Uganda. They gave us an equal amount. When it comes to jobs, they never discriminated against us, so in the government there was loads of people of Indian origin and Goans were very big in the civil service."

Shezan: "Huge in the civil service"

John: "They really liked Goans. In fact, Obote once actually commented and praised Goans. The reason he did—and people asked him—he said, "We Africans were good at making the big plans but these guys will look at the smallest things and do them well, and maybe that's something." We became good at that sort of thing and looking at the smallest things and it grew into the civil service. It wasn't always so in Asia. I'm told that we did loads of different work. There were Goans who may have originally left Goa to work at such diverse things as cooks, and sometimes as tailors, and music, and somehow over time, we gravitated towards civil service. When we first went to Zanzibar, they were opening up bars and apparently, these bars became social clubs for the British. That's how they started their social clubs, in a Goan bar, and then other things transpired. Life was very good in Uganda in the sense that everybody felt safe. You know, there may be some times for adults where things were more dangerous than here, but for children, nobody touched you, you were absolutely safe. We would wander miles from home on our own and it was quite acceptable maybe because all around town everybody looked out for you. It was not just your parents, every house, if they saw you were misbehaving, they would tell on you and they would come and correct you. I guess it was a typical, what Hilary Clinton would call, it takes a village. That's what it was with us, everybody corrected you. So life was good and I lived in Entebbe, which was like a little paradise. I never realized how much until I left and went back."