

**The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project**

An Oral History with John Halani

Archives and Research Collections

Carleton University Library

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*The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project*  
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Narrator: John Halani

Researcher: Shezan Muhammedi

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***Abstract:***

John Halani was born in Masaka Uganda as one of seven children in his family. In Uganda, he participated in a significant amount of non-profit work with various local community organizations. He was a Ugandan citizen since he was born and raised in the country. After the announcement of the expulsion decree John was rendered stateless in his mid-thirties.

After being admitted to Canada as a refugee, John worked a glass factory in Vancouver before moving into the hotel business in 1975. Since then, John has owned and managed several hotels while sponsoring his parents to come to Canada from England in 1973. He has continued to manage several investments and currently serves as the Honorary Consul to Uganda.

This oral history was conducted at the Tropicana Hotel in Vancouver, British Columbia.

**Shezan Muhammedi: "So this is an oral history being done with John Halani on... I guess today is June 21<sup>st</sup>. So go ahead John..."**

John Halani: "Okay, so do you want to ask me a question, so how...?"

**Shezan: "Whatever is easier for you, so I can ask questions or you can tell me..."**

John: "Sure, ask me a couple and we'll start."

**Shezan: "So you grew up in Masaka right? And you were the eldest?"**

John: "In Masaka, yeah my father was from India, probably in 1934 or '35. Got married there, he was a business man and we all grew up in Masaka, my family too, my brothers and sisters until we came here in '72. So 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 and in 1972, February and I had the privilege to host him at my house. So actually jamatkhana we had people from Masaka and Mbarara.

So 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 Commission 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. So 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 so 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 they were meeting the people who came, we decided to come to Vancouver and ever since I've been here."

**Shezan: "What did your parents do back in Uganda?"**

John: "My father was a textile merchant, so he was quite successful in his own way and I think initially he must have worked in the school or something. Then probably in the 1940's, 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... the majority of the Ismailis and Asians were Ugandan citizens so this order did not apply to us, that's what our 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, how did you guys try to navigate how to get all the Ismailis out? What happened on the ground?"**

John: "When we came here? Or..."

**Shezan: "In Uganda, first."**

John: "In Uganda the majority of the people who were born there or lived there their whole lives. And so they were Ugandan citizens and they would have no trouble and they can settle down. Or some of the

people thought 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. Until 1991 when the new government came in and there was the revolution there and the new government was sworn in I think in '86. Then in '91 they started sending the minister's out to various countries, Western countries to ask Asians to come back and claim their properties. And the ministers came here and I was elected chair of the committee for Ugandan Asians to start claiming their properties.

So we did this exercise for the majority of Ismailis, plus some non Ismailis and within four years we were able to retrieve or repossess ninety five percent of the properties. So I did this free of charge except what we paid to the Asians to get the documents for the land and immigration. We paid minimum two seventy five, which we collected from the properties and then once that was done people got their properties and our aim was to get them their certificates and once they got it then they were free to do whatever they wanted, either sell the property or rent it, or appoint an agent to look after their properties."

**Shezan: "And then when you came to Canada, how old were you?"**

John: "How old was I? About thirty... in the mid-thirties."

**Shezan: "Thirty, okay. And then I think you started in a different hotel first..."**

John: "I started the other one first."

**Shezan: "Where is the other one, is it close by?"**

John: "Robson Street across, and then I came here. '75 there and '81 here, no... '75 and '77. So since then I've been here, both the properties."

**Shezan: "So I guess you came in '72 and then before you bought the hotel, what were you up to?"**

John: "I was working. I worked as a salesman for a glass company, so I worked for three years and in the meantime I started making investments, bought some buildings there and then fortunately came to acquire these two properties. So I got them in '75, but between '72 and '75 I did a lot of investments in between."

**Shezan: "And was that all money you earned here in Canada, or were you able to get some out?"**

John: "No, I didn't come with too much money but these two properties came and I leased the properties in the first five to six years and then I made some money for the down payment and then at that time the prices were not that high, so I was able to buy it in '81 and '83."

**Shezan: "Wow, that's fast. And then your parents, when they came, they came with you to Vancouver?"**

John: "I came straight to Vancouver. Yeah I worked and lived on the North shore, I did some work as a salesman and then I moved downtown in '75."

**Shezan: "Were your parents working when they first came, or were you guys supporting them?"**

John: "My parents? No they were retired when they came here, they came afterwards. I came in '72 and they came in '73, I had to sponsor them. They could not come with me because they didn't qualify at that time so I sent them to London, England then after six months I sponsored them and they came."

**Shezan: "That process of sponsoring of them wasn't too difficult, then? What was..."**

John: "Not that difficult, but difficult because you had to qualify again, you can support your family of four plus your parents family of four, so you had to have enough income. By that time I had established myself receiving income so they allowed me to bring my parents."

**Shezan: "Your brothers and sisters, are they all in Canada too?"**

John: "Yeah, they are all here. I have five sisters and one brother."

**Shezan: "They were... I guess you were the eldest, so did any of them have to go to school before they were working or..."**

John: "Yeah my younger sisters and brother, they were quite young so they went through the school year but my other two sisters were already graduates from India, so they found jobs here. And my eldest sister also found a job here. So they were all happy and settled."

**Shezan: "And did they find jobs in their professions?"**

John: "Yeah, one became involved in the stock market, she's still with them. The other one joined the government and my eldest sister joined the department stores as a salesgirl, and they all were happy. And things are okay with us."

**Shezan: "You've done a lot of humanitarian work, a lot of things from things I was reading online. Was that..."**

John: "Did you check the website?"

**Shezan: "Yeah so you had sent me a two or three page word document about... a little bit of history and background and then you were the Honorary Consul to Uganda for British Columbia. So I guess is that a continuation of the not for profit work that you were doing..."**

John: "Yes, it was. We sent eighteen students to Uganda, to Masaka where I was born. And this is the tenth year students from Douglas College go there for three or four months for their practicum courses in the community. So they work in the hospitals and like that for other projects. Another project I'm working on now is called Shanti Uganda and they have received a grant from the rotary club, so we'll be expanding this project very soon. I can give you some material on it and you can make copies later on."

**Shezan: "When you first came to Vancouver, what sort of programming was in place by the government, or even within the community to help with resettlement."**

John: "I think we were lucky the Immigrant Services Society were just established when we came and they were offering interviews and lining up jobs for us, so they were quite organized at that time although they had just started when we came. Today after forty years they have expanded their programs and they are building a new immigration centre in Vancouver. So there were a few programs and then '74 the federal government started their multiculturalism policy. Then the provincial government came in the picture a few years after and the non-profit groups, the multicultural groups

came together and started lobbying the government for programs and funding for those programs. So ever since those programs have grown, and I think we make sure the multicultural groups lobby the government to give them feedback, what immigrant refugees would come, what kind of help they need. Language programs, programs to look after them are all in place now.

So I think the time we came and the time now after forty years, things have improved in terms of delivery of those programs. And the government has become sensitive also to make sure that the immigrants who come here receive the help they need. So I run another program called New Canadian Entrepreneurial Awards and the idea behind that is people who come to this country, not all of them come looking for jobs but they also come looking for business opportunities and this group's role is to encourage entrepreneurship. And for the last twenty years we've been identifying successful immigrant businesses that have done well to recognize them and give them awards. So this is our twentieth year, and probably more than twenty years now. We started in '96 so we'd get sponsors who sponsor the programs. I'll give you a copy of the program for you to see."

**Shezan: "How was the Ismaili community at that time? When you first came I guess it was quite small..."**

John: "There were a few numbers, but now of course... initially I think two to three thousand in Vancouver, it's grown now to ten to twelve thousand. But there are other non-Ismaili immigrants also, but since then immigrants have come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and they are all doing well. My family focused... the last ten years has been on housing. So we... people who come to this country, their biggest expense is really the rent. And I've managed two housing projects, I've built one for the community, a housing project in Surrey. We built thirty four townhouses, we got the money from the government but finally we have the money to build that project. It's been about ten years now and what it does is help people who don't have enough income and large families to take advantage of the affordable housing."

**Shezan: "That's great. What's been your motive to do all of the humanitarian work?"**

John: "Motive to do all this? Probably... people who come here need help. And there are not many people who offer help when needed so quite a few friends of mine also involved with me and we try to identify the need for help for the immigrants to settle down as quickly as possible. Because immigrants really need help the first few months and if they get the right help at the right time, they probably settle quickly and then they can help others, too. So that's the main reason, but I was doing this work before so it's been easy for me."

**Shezan: "That's great. So this is more of a tough question, how would you identify yourself now that you've spent a chunk of time Canada but also... would you say you're a Canadian of Ugandan origin, a Ugandan Canadian, just a Canadian?"**

John: "Well first I am Canadian, but my origin is Ugandan. Although my parents, they came from India so we have that cultural heritage of India also. And that's why I do work for Uganda because there is opportunity there to do that and Uganda after fifty years of independence is still struggling. They need help in education, health, this is why we do work for hospitals, UBC [University of British Columbia], Douglas College. And we send the people from here, I just sent the students to Masaka. There is another

group going to a children's hospital, doctors, and then there's another hospital we are trying to help in Soroti we will probably be raising some money to improve the facility at the hospital."

**Shezan: "I guess my last question is, what does it mean to be a Canadian to you?"**

John: "Simple, we are citizens of this country so our loyalty now is to Canada and we play our role in the day to day affairs of this country and see where our input is required. I do from a humanitarian point of view and not a political point of view, so my goal is different than some other people who run for public offices."

**Shezan: "When I was looking at your profile I noticed that you had done some work with multiculturalism for the Vancouver police, yeah what was that?"**

John: "It's called Diversity Action Committee, DAC, and what they do is they select people from different cultural groups and then appoint them as advisory to the police. So anything that we think police should be doing or should not be doing, we sit down and discuss the issues every month, every two months. An advisor, I served on that committee for about ten years."

**Shezan: "How did you find it? I was just so curious as to how it worked out."**

John: "I also was the chair for the Multicultural Advisory Council advising the provincial government, appointed as the chair to advise on the multicultural programs as to what they should be doing, how they should be helping the new immigrants. And we also started the NESIKA awards, if you go on the website you'll see that we identify people who contribute in this province, we give them awards. So I did that about six or seven years."

**Shezan: "There was one more that I had a question about, with I think Dr. Shafique..."**

John: "Pirani?"

**Shezan: "Yeah."**

John: "He's a Ugandan orthopedic surgeon and some years ago he found the need to address this illness called cleft foot and Ugandans... a lot of cases in Uganda. So he started this pilot project and the rotary club also helped him fund the first year and they've been doing it for the last ten years, children who have deformed feet, he has a method by which he can do it... he can correct that deformity without surgery. So it's been very successful and since then he's been recognized by the federal government, he's got a million dollar grant to do it in six other countries. Uganda, South Africa, Malawi, Tanzania, and a couple of other countries. So he's got a million dollars and I think he's got now Bangladesh, too. So he's Ismaili and he was born and raised in Uganda."

**Shezan: "Did he also leave in the expulsion?"**

John: "Yeah, yeah. I knew his parents, I knew his father and their family."

**Shezan: "Was he younger at the time? I don't know how old he is now."**

John: "Probably he was twenty five at that time, because we've been here forty years so he's now about fifty or sixty years old. So he started this about twenty years ago and he's coming up very well."

**Shezan: "Yeah, that's awesome. I think that's it for the questions that I had for you, but is there anything you wanted to add?"**

John: "No I think besides my involvement in the multiculturalism housing and some of the projects in Uganda, I'm quite occupied doing a lot of work, all this New Canadian Entrepreneurial Awards. If you get a chance, visit the website for Pier 21 in Halifax."

**Shezan: "Yeah, okay I will for sure."**

John: "I think I'm featured in that."

**Shezan: "Yeah, I saw that email."**

John: "So Pier 21 is the example of how we want to start something here of that line, so in the next few years I'll be working on that."

**Shezan: "So you want to do an immigration history museum?"**

John: "Centre, multiculturalism centre."

**Shezan: "In Vancouver?"**

John: "In Vancouver."

**Shezan: "Oh wow, that's awesome. Yeah let me know, I'd be happy to work for you, that'd be very fun."**

John: "So you go back to England? Is that where you're staying?"

**Shezan: "It's London, Ontario. So I'll be going back to Ottawa I think in August, so I'm here for another two or three weeks and then I'm meeting people in Calgary and Edmonton as well."**

John: "Sure, okay."

**Shezan: "I'm trying to get as many interviews as I can."**

John: "Good, thank you for coming."

**Shezan: "No, thank you. Thank you for taking the time, I really appreciate it."**

[End of transcript].