

## **Lutaf and Sul Virani**

### **Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Memories of Uganda**

**Lutaf Virani:** “You asked the question, memories you may have about Uganda. You want the good memories or the bad memories?”

Heather LeRoux: “Anything you want to share, anything you are comfortable sharing. Yeah, anything you want.”

Lutaf: “Good memories I had was that Uganda was so beautiful, the weather was fantastic. I used to play a lot of cricket and tennis and every time it rained or something, after a few hours, one and a half hours, bright sunshine, everything is dry and nice. That’s one memory I had. The other memory I had was when I was in school and I was a young teenager, we had a canteen at the school but the canteen didn’t provide any good food for us so we used to sneak out. There used to be a shop, a small restaurant, and they used to have cassava. Cassava is a staple food in Uganda, cassava and green banana. This guy used to make this cassava, fried cassava. So we used to sneak out and go and eat that. I remember the first time we saw a bottle of Coke, it was a big bottle, they called it Hostess. We used to chip in our five cents each and buy that and buy a bunch of cassava fries and go and eat that and enjoy it.

The other memory I had was—I don’t remember the exact year, but it was 1958 or 1959. I was a good tennis player at school so I was picked by the school to go and get a bit of coaching. The guy who coached me was a guy called Pancho Segura. He came on with Kramer’s Circus Club. Kramer took players and turned them into professional tennis players. At that time, there were no professional tennis players. Four of them came, one was Pancho Segura, the other one was Mal Anderson, Ashley Cooper, and Frank Sedgman. There’s a photo of them when they came to Uganda playing an exhibition. Each school sent one player each to be coached by them, so that was a good memory I had. I went and learned my tennis from them. Yeah, it was such a great occasion.”

Heather: “That seems like a good opportunity.”

Lutaf: “I was amazed with how they played tennis and how they hit the ball. It was like going to Wimbledon [laughter]. When I established my shop, the sports shop, we used to play at the Lugogo Stadium there, tennis and all that, and there used to be a ball boy there, a young African kid, very promising tennis player. I used to partner with him sometimes to play tennis. I was approached by BAT, which is British American Tobacco Company. They wanted to sponsor this kid to go to the States and learn tennis there but they did not know how to—because he was living in a small village and it was hard and all that—so they wanted someone to take care of him and groom him, prepare him to go to the U.S. They approached me and I said, “Okay, I’ll take him in.” I took him to my house and my wife and myself, we kept him there for a month, taught him how to speak English—he could speak English but not that well. Right now he’s in

## Lutaf Virani

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the States, he never came back. He got married. He's in the United States with a couple of kids, that's what I hear. I never got in touch with him but somebody else told me. I am still looking for his phone number so maybe I can—his name is Eustice. Very good tennis player. I gave him free tennis rackets at the time, shoes, clothing, everything. These are all the good memories.”

Heather: “Yeah, that's a good story.”

Lutaf: “And the bad memories. After Idi Amin declared that all Asians must leave Uganda, he put a curfew and everybody had to be inside their house by seven o'clock, no one could go out. One day my wife Sul went out to play badminton and she didn't realize the time, so she quickly she put my daughter in the car, and we were living a bit further away from where she was, about five, six miles—”

Sul Virani: “So let me tell the story. Yeah what happened was, as soon as I got out of playing badminton, I got out of the Shimoni area. When I arrived at the corner, I saw *kondos* [thieves] standing there so I quickly sped up. As I was speeding along, they were trying to zigzag to try to overtake me. I wouldn't let them so I kept on but then they knocked me from the back and I got jittery and I was shaky and all that. I tried to reverse—I'm not a person who can reverse easily—and then they overtook me and they came over and they showed me guns. I said, “Let my daughter go, let me and my daughter go.” I was just coming out when I realized that I didn't have my shoes, because I used to drive without shoes, and I said, “Can I take my shoes?” They told me, “Get out, get out.” They were not interested so I had to get out of the car.

And there were people watching but you could see that they had all locked their doors because they didn't want anyone to get into their homes either, so I had to wait until the *kondos* were gone and then they opened their doors for me. We didn't have a home phone, no cells either, but we didn't need it. Any time we needed it, we'd just run to the neighbour. I phoned the neighbour and asked them to speak to my husband and have him come and pick me up, but they found our car at the university campus.”

Lutaf: “It was taken by a student, a black student.”

Sul: “Totally shattered inside, very dirty, but at least we found it back.”

Lutaf: “The only good thing was that she was not harmed, neither was my daughter. Thank God for that because some stories that we heard of Idi Amin's rule were terrible. A friend of mine, he was locked up. In Uganda, before this thing happened, there used to be a king called Kabaka. The Kabaka was a Buganda king. In Uganda, you had about four kings, and this king was living in

## **Lutaf Virani**

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Kampala in his own palace and he had a wall around it. He was thrown out. Now, my friend was arrested for no reason and they took him there. They wanted to torture him. At night somehow, he jumped over the wall and escaped. He was telling me about it and he said it was so bad, everybody was scared, you know. Every night when you'd go to sleep you'd hear, "Bang, bang, bang," guns going off as if some shooting is going on, and you're scared all the time. It was a very, very nervous time and very insecure. You didn't know what was going to happen the next day."