

Maurice Fernandez

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Announcement

Maurice Fernandez: “After I graduated I went back to Jinja where I was based, where my parents were based, and I started working for the United Nations. That’s what I was doing when I heard Idi Amin make his announcement, and when he made his announcement, at that time, because my father was a staunch nationalist, not only he but all the sons and my mother, we all had Ugandan passports. I was considered a professional. Anyway, when I graduated and I was working there, he made the announcement about the ninety days, and at the same time, he made an announcement that it applied to certain groups of people but not those with Ugandan passports or Ugandan citizenship, and especially not to professionals, because knowing that if professionals left, it would hurt the economy. So I could see that it wouldn’t apply to me, so I thought I would stay behind.

What else can I tell you? There were lots of—do you want me to talk about the incident now? Okay, anyway, when I started working, my boss was an African, the head of the UN out there. He did tell me that this didn’t apply to me, but I had made up my mind that sometime down the road I would think of leaving. As you know, I had a motor scooter, a Lambretta or Vespa or something, and I had my first little car and I was staying in my parents’ house and my father said, “No, we’re going to stay,” etcetera. He had a business, he had a grocery business in Jinja and one in Mbale, and he also had a trucking outfit on the side, so he thought we would stay. We had our own houses, two houses, and so we thought we’d stay. Incidentally, our house was near the banks of the River Nile, so sometimes in the evening we could see hippos coming up into the garden. They used to come up, and I don’t know if you know, but they say that hippos are the most dangerous animals in the world, but leaving that aside. So that’s what happened.

Other than that, there were a few incidents, not necessarily in order, but I will tell you. For example, because I was single, people would come up to me and ask me to take their daughters from Jinja through Mabira Forest to Kampala to Entebbe, and put them on the plane so they would go to India, and we did that for a couple of girls. I’ll give you one incident, that girl became a woman and she is now married and she is in Bombay. Her parents asked me to take her to Entebbe and put her on the plane. So we put her in the back seat, her father was on my right side, I believe the steering wheel was on the right, and I had another friend on the left.

We were driving out from Jinja and we had to go through the dam to hit the main road to go to Mabira Forest and Lugazi and Kampala and then Entebbe. When we were driving, just before we started, we knew there would be roadblocks, army roadblocks, at the dam. I remember that the best way to get through was to give some money to the sergeant in charge of the army, so I gave the father who was sitting behind, I gave him a fifty shilling note. I said, “When we get to the roadblock, I’m going to put your window down, and shake hands with the sergeant and leave fifty shillings in his hand and they’ll let us through.” We knew that was the way to get through. He said, “Okay.” We started, we reached the dam and there was a long lineup and

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when it was our turn I said to this guy, the sergeant came up and I said, "Oh, my friend behind wants to shake your hand and he wants to be your friend." The sergeant knew that that was a way of saying that. He came behind and I said to the father at the back, the girl's father, I said, "Okay, why don't you shake the hand of this nice sergeant?" No sound. I said, "Why don't you shake the hand of this nice sergeant?" No sound. I turned around, and he was in shock because all the army guys had rifles and this and that, and he was so nervous, he was in shock. I put my hand in the back, took out the fifty shillings, shook hands with the sergeant, gave him the fifty shillings, and he told the roadblock for the army, he said, "Let them through," so we went through. That was one incident that happened."