

Mohamed and Almas Lalji

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Political Environment

Mohamed Lalji: "You have to understand that back in Uganda before they left, the army was in full control. The police had no say in anything. If the army people wanted your car, they would just stop you and take it. They can walk into your house and take whatever they want, and you report to the police and they write it down, and that's it, forget it.

People were terrified that anything could happen to them. So when we landed in Montreal and everybody was tense, and the first thing we saw was armies, you know we're surrounded by the soldiers, and they had people who knew psychology, and the first evening before our meal, they came and talked to us. He says, "We know you are terrified with the situation you saw there. First of all, don't make any comments contrary to what the government is doing because you still have your families and everybody still needing to get out. The newspapers and everybody will want to interview you, but don't say that they were cruel or this or that. Say, 'Okay, we were asked to leave, so we left.'" Plus they said, "Don't worry about the soldiers you see around, they are your friends and they'll help you." So it was just the opposite situation and our immediate reaction was, "Can we trust these people?"

Almas Lalji: "But all this came after the problem started. Before that, Uganda was heaven. If I ever get a chance to go back, I would love to go back and see the place. The weather, the people, everything was just so amazing. You can't get a life like that anywhere. The beauty of the nature, the country itself, it was amazing. We really had a good time growing up there, travelling. We travelled a lot. Every vacation we had in Mombasa or travelling somewhere in Uganda. So East Africa is such—it's heaven."

Mohamed: "The proper answer of what triggered this situation is still unknown. There were speculations, but it's unknown what triggered him to say, "Okay, all Asians, leave." There was one speculation, they said the reason is that he wanted to marry an Asian widow of one of the richest families in Uganda and she had turned him down and that's what triggered it. That's one of the rumours. How true it was, we were never able to pin it down. What had happened prior to that is that two years before, all the Jews were asked to leave. They were told to leave just like the Asians were, but the Jewish community was a small community. Now one of the Jewish persons had warned my sister's husband that—not warned, I shouldn't say warned, but they knew each other. So he said, "Okay, we have been told to leave and we are leaving very soon," and he says, "You know what? You people are going to be next. So watch out." That was a warning—nobody took it seriously—and it did happen. So it's still something which is not answered, the question why."

Almas: "The other thing people do say is that because Asians had the economy of the country, they were so well to do and the gap between the local people and the Asians was a huge gap. They were rich, these people were poor, didn't have an education, these people lived in

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beautiful houses, they had good schools and all that, so that was all sort of resentment, and this is the only way that he thought, "I'll get rid of them, my people will have everything." Of course, they didn't. Instead, a lot of his people were killed. I believe they said about twenty thousand or something like that."

Mohamed: "Much more."

Shezan Muhammedi: "The estimates run between three hundred and five hundred thousand."

Almas: "Oh my god. And they were all thrown in Lake Victoria and things like that."

Shezan: "Horror stories, yeah."

Almas: "The last twenty years that he ruled—I think he ruled for twenty years or something like that—that was the worst time for his own people. Our people, most of them of course left, some stayed over and they're still there, they took the risk."