

**The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project**

An Oral History with Almas and Mohamed Lalji

Archives and Research Collections

Carleton University Library

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Narrator: Almas and Mohamed Lalji

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**Abstract:**

Both Mohamed and Almas attended Aga Khan schools in Kampala before Mohamed decided to apply for a scholarship to study in Sweden. Almas joined Mohamed in Sweden after they were married but they both returned to Uganda in 1968. Upon their return, Mohamed completed his final degree requirements in Kaliro before being placed just outside of Kampala as a teacher and Almas worked in the Ismaili education department. They both fondly recalled their lives in Uganda. The weather, lifestyle, and way of life was particularly memorable for both Almas and Mohamed.

When the expulsion decree was announced both Almas and Mohamed were Ugandan citizens and were rendered stateless by President Amin's declaration. Due to Mohamed employment with the government, they were forced to flee within days of the announcement to avoid being held back in Uganda. Fortunately, Almas' sister had moved to Toronto before the expulsion and they stayed with her after initially flying into Montreal.

Almas found almost immediate employment with the Bank of Montreal and worked there for twenty-five years before retiring. Mohamed's credentials from the University of Uppsala were eventually recognized in Canada and he was able to work as a lab chemist in Toronto. After a few years at a pharmaceutical company he started his own business supplying products for dental offices. They are both happily retired and incredibly grateful to have raised their two children in Canada.

This oral history was conducted at the Lalji's home in Toronto, Ontario.

**Shezan Muhammedi: "This is an oral history being done on May 12<sup>th</sup>, thank you guys for inviting me to your home and welcoming me to share your stories with me."**

Mohamed Lalji: "It's our pleasure."

**Shezan: "I'll let you guys take it away from here and tell me about growing up in Uganda."**

Mohamed: "Okay, how do you want to go about it? Do you want some of our background?"

**Shezan: "Yeah, I guess your parents coming to East Africa and what they did..."**

Mohamed: "Well basically they both went to Aga Khan school in Kampala, when I finished my high school certificate I didn't get sufficient marks to get admittance at the local university, I could get admittance but I couldn't get any funds, because I got one principal and two subsidiaries, I needed two principal. So I was in a situation where, my parents could not afford to send me to any other university to bear the cost. So I had to struggle to get a scholarship and it was tough, very tough. It was... you couldn't get a scholarship unless you knew people at the ministry and it was getting to be very difficult. Fortunately during that exercise a scholarship was offered by the Swedish government to study social science in Sweden and I applied for it. Two people from the university came to test the applicants and I went through the test and after the test they said whoever is successful will be notified.

So there was a waiting period and almost every other day I used to go to the ministry and ask them if they had heard about anything. And he says, "If I were you I would not bother because you're not going to get it, they already selected somebody." So I said you know, but at least I wanted to know the answer. So I kept going and then out of the blue I got a telegram from the Swedish embassy that they had awarded me the scholarship to go and study there. If I accepted, let the embassy know in Nairobi and they will start processing everything. So I did that and then I went to the ministry and he said they had already selected, I don't know why. So the Swedish government had decided that they want to select themselves because past experience showed they were offering scholarships and they were sending people who had not even finished high school. You know, something like nephews of a minister or something like that.

Anyway so I had to sign a contract with them, the Uganda government to... so when I come back I had work for the government for at least five years. And I don't know, I said, "I don't care, I'm going to sign because I want to go and study, I want to do something." Mind you science was not my initial choice, but there was an outlet for me to go and study. So that's what I happened to do, I went to Sweden and the first year they repeated what we had done in HSC, high school education. I don't know if you're familiar with HSC, which is after grade twelve a two year university preparatory course. So they had arranged for one year there so I went through that and in the middle of that they said you don't need to because you're doing excellent. So I volunteered to help, there were a couple of students who basically didn't have any idea what they were doing, so I said I'd help them. They said, "No, you don't have to help because..." I said, "No I want to be of use rather than just biding my time." That was... that sort of started... a couple of them started talking in Swedish, the professor and the scholarship people and they didn't realize that I had learned quite a bit of Swedish by that time.

So when they are finished discussing and I said, "Hold it, I don't want any more money," because they were saying since he was doing the extra teaching, we should pay him. And I said, "I don't want any more money, I appreciate for you to be..." He says, "We should." But anyways I said, "No, I don't want any more money." So that was the start of that. Basically what happened is that my professor took me out for lunch and said, "Why are you refusing?" And I said, "Well, you are paying me enough scholarship." They were paying us a good scholarship and all you had to look for that fund to pay the rent and your food and clothing. Fees, medical, everything was covered. In Sweden there are no tuition fees for university, even in university there are no tuition fees. And then we started talking and he says, "You know I've been watching you and you don't seem to be very happy, you are doing a good job." But I said, "No, I'm homesick, I miss my mother and I miss my girlfriend." You know so that's basically the first conversation that I had and then he came back after a couple of weeks and he says, "You know what? I wish you were married, then we could get your wife over." I said, "Well, it's not easy," you know.

So what happened is that he started... he kept going on with me about it. So he said, "Why don't you go and get married and bring her over?" And I thought about it and I said, "You know, it will be a tough job trying to convince her parents that fast." Finally they said, "Okay, we'll get her over here on the condition that you get married when she comes over." I said, "It will take time." He says, "Yeah, as long as..." and then we got into the situation there and I asked her, "This is the situation," and she was what? Eighteen or seventeen and you know there's no way our parents would... because you know you're in the mid '60s and it's still early on, very tight situation. But you know we kept going about it and what they said was she would get fifty percent of the scholarship I was getting to maintain ourselves. And even if they had not paid, we could have afforded to live on my scholarship. So finally they agreed, so the following year she joined me in 1966.

And then the question was before she came over, I said, "One thing worrying me is when she comes over, what is she going to do?" I don't want her to sit around for three... because I had three more years after that. And then he went through... wanted to know what her credentials were. I said she's finished grade twelve and she was offered to do two more years in high school, but the family situation didn't let her continue. So she had done grade twelve, and grade twelve was worth... university in Sweden would look at it with one year preparatory course. So he says, "Okay, let her come and we'll go through her papers and see what we can do. So she was given a tutor, a private tutor to do economics. So she started and they provided all the literature and everything and... because she didn't know the Swedish language so she can't go to regular classes. So she was given a special tutor and then started working, just like going to the lectures. Then after six weeks or so she had to write a test and until then she was not a university student, and she did very well on that.

So then you know they said, "Okay, she is capable of doing university work so we will skip that one year and she can... so they enlisted her as a university student. That's when it started, there was a family situation back home and so she needed to go back to help with the family. The thing was that she was upset or worrying about it that after one year spending there to go back without anything... she was feeling very unhappy about it. So then we worked out that she would go to London for a crash course as a shorthand typist, which was in big demand in Uganda. So in December of '66 we both went to get her

settled, she entered the college and I think you spent, what? No I think it was less than that, three, four months and she got her papers and she came back and spent a couple of months with me and then she went back to Uganda.

That was the situation and I still kept asking her to see if she would come back, but it sort of dragged on. But in early '68 her parents agreed she could go back on the condition that we get married.

### **Break**

Mohamed: "Basically that was in '68, July and '68 end we went back to East Africa, I had to go to Nairobi to do my final thesis degree. So they had accommodated us there at the Science Teacher's College. But with us because we were married we were able to arrange our own accommodations at a guest house in Nairobi. I did my final paper... partly did fieldwork in Kaliro, on a farm, the study of soil. Then went back to Nairobi and they tested us and everything, wrote my paper, got my credentials in the middle of '69.

Then I reported to the Ministry of Education, and the job had already been decided for me. They had written me that I was going to take over lesson planning services, about fifteen kilometers outside of Kampala. I was supposed to cover the whole country because they didn't have anybody there with the same qualifications. So I started working at the government and Almas started working at the Ismaili education department. So basically that's the start of..."

Almas Lalji: "But you should also know that this course that you took was designed for Ugandan students and he wasn't the only one, he was..."

Mohamed: "We were about twenty students from all over Africa. So it was designed for... so the lectures were actually in English."

Almas: "For him it was easy, not easy but the content of the lectures was English. And for me it was very hard to do the economics in Swedish, it was tough. I did one year and I got through but I couldn't continue so then I just had to give up because they wouldn't have... this wasn't a specialized course. For them it was specially designed. So yeah that's our life history in Sweden and coming back to Uganda working for... three years? Then the trouble started."

Mohamed: "And initially when I started in the ministry they gave me a house in that area all sort of gated area, but it was far and out and she was working in Kampala. Then we moved back to Kampala and I used to travel for work. At least one week a month I used to be out of town travelling to different provinces, one province one week and the next month another province. A lot of travelling involved. Mind you it was just to check things... I wasn't able to put my knowledge too much into it, more administrative, assistants in the provinces do the work, you just analyze it. But it was enjoyable, and a lot of flexibility.

So basically this is... I had also the opportunity by the Swedish scholarship that if I wanted to do further studies, they would sponsor me. So my... based on part of my course was meteorology and I wanted to proceed more with meteorology. So I was consulting with a university in West Virginia and they accepted me and the scholarship committee had already approved. But then we decided that we wanted to start a family and it's not going to help with meteorology for Uganda. So we sort of gave up

on that so we started a life there. My brothers said, "Why did you come back? You should have settled down there or gone to another country." I said, "You know what? I've lived there, I've experienced it. The life we have in East Africa, you can't get it anywhere else. You are spoiled there and so I said, "Not now, later on." Then the situation changed. It was something out of the blue, Idi Amin had to start..."

Almas: "'72, it was just three years we were working and beginning to settle down and all that. And because he was with the ministry it was very tough, so we had to leave right away, on the second flight."

Mohamed: "Okay what happened is that my boss, he was a black African, very nice guy because he was educated. So what he said is that... I told him, I said, "This is the situation and I'll be in and out, I need to get my papers verified and you know..." because that's what was happening. So he said, "Yeah just take care of that," and he said, "Don't worry about this, when you have the papers because you have Uganda passports so I'm sure you won't have any problems, don't worry they'll give you back the house here and you'll be in the enclosed area and you'll be protected. So you don't have to worry about that." I said, "Yeah, that's very nice of you, that's what I'll do." In the back of my mind I said it'll be like living in a prison... you know? You have very limited access to the outside. But I would not say that to him and I said, "Okay, I'm taking my vacation." I had about six days left of my vacation, "And I'll sort out all my paperwork and we'll sit down and decide if I should move here, or maybe not." First day after that I was taking her parents to get them in line to sort out paperwork because..."

Almas: "We had three months to leave Uganda and all the Uganda citizens had to go. So we were all Uganda citizens so now where do we go? And this thing with the Canadian government and Trudeau came in because Hazar Imam was helping out. So we all stood in line and I don't know it took us days we were standing... sometimes overnight."

**Shezan: "Were your siblings all in Uganda too?"**

Almas: "Yes."

**Shezan: "So how many brothers and sisters did you guys have?"**

Almas: "I had two brothers and two sisters."

Mohamed: "I had my parents, her parents and I had five brothers and a sister. My sister was married early so... and I was married."

Almas: "For us... fortunately my sister got married in 1970, and I don't know if this is destiny or something because her husband... she decided she doesn't want to stay in Uganda and the place they chose was Canada. So in '71 they came to Canada. So they were here, they were just settling down and in '72 the job also... I wanted to send them that you go and make space or whatever and the family will be joining you guys. '72 September I think it started, they were here for only a year and they were living at twenty five St. Dennis in an apartment and as soon as people got accepted, the visas got through with the government and all that, then the family started coming in. His side of the family, her side of the family and we wanted to leave right away because..."

Mohamed: "Yeah, what triggered my exit was that like I was saying, I was taking our parents that day and just after I picked them up from their house going uphill and then I had to make a right turn. Over there they drive on the left not the right, so I had to make a right down there to head towards the downtown in Kampala and there was a car parked there so I couldn't see the road. So I just went further and try to turn, there was someone on a motorbike and he was coming that way and almost hit my car and swerved, stopped his motorcycle and came back with a gun pointed at me. And he was an army guy and he said, "You tried to kill me." And I said, "No, I couldn't see where I was going." "No, you tried to kill me" and he had the gun pointed at me, they were shivering in the car because they couldn't get out of the car and I was out of the car. And you know... god's blessing, another army jeep came around and two of the soldiers came out and one was probably holding a high position and he says, "What's going on?" and what happened is that one of them took the guy to one side, and one of them stood with me. And I said, "Look," and I pointed and said, "I was coming up, I turned right and I couldn't see because of that car and he happened to come by. It didn't hit the car and he says I tried to kill him." They said, "It's okay, get in your car and leave." I said, "But..." He said, "Just leave." That guy took him aside and I said, "This is it." It's very dangerous for me because once they find out that I'm working with the government they'll put out information that I should not be allowed to leave."

Almas: "Yeah but the army people were patrolling by the house too because they knew where we were living and they didn't want him to leave. So they were patrolling and as soon as soon as we got the visa, second flight. First flight I don't think there was any room, so second flight we left."

Mohamed: "And at the same time I said, "Don't take anything that would make them suspicious at the airport." They were checking everything. Now, only because the concern was on my passport occupation said civil servant. So I kept praying... if they notice that they might start questioning and then I'm in trouble. So fortunately they didn't look at the occupation on the passport."

Almas: "The way we left we couldn't take anything with us of course, just one bag of clothes and that's all we were allowed to. Nothing, no jewelry, no money, no nothing. Twenty dollars... shillings, Uganda shillings in his pocket and at the airport too they check us out, right? So they let the suitcase go through but they searched us and they took that twenty dollars from him at the airport. So the flight from Entebbe to Montreal without any money or anything. And then when we came to Montreal the reception was very good, the Canadian government took us to the army barracks, we stayed there for the weekend and they provided us food and things like that. Then they were processing papers and asking where we want to go because they were sending people wherever, right? Most people wanted to go to Vancouver because East African people knew the weather was better, some of them had families and relatives gone before that. And I said, "We would like to go to Toronto" because my sister was here. They would rather send people to Winnipeg and I had asked for Toronto. They asked me if I had any relatives and I said, "Yes, I have a sister and she will take care of us."

From there they left us, they gave us the transport and we went to Toronto, my sister came to meet us at the train station and we put up with her. Soon everyone was coming and they would stay with her for a little while and they would find their own accommodation and then the next family would come. So they didn't take any more help from the government because that was alright. The first time in Montreal they gave us twenty dollars to start life in Canada, for the week they gave us that money. So then we

were staying with my sister and the following week we were all looking for jobs and things like that and I got a job right away. Right away because my sister was working already in downtown Toronto with Wood Gundy at that time and actually I got two jobs, one was at Forester's and one was in Toronto with a broker, of course I said I wanted to go downtown because of the novelty and travel and all that, she was there too so I took that job. And he had a hard time getting a job in his field, he didn't have a job for five or six months."

Mohamed: "Yeah March I got... September to March."

Almas: "Yeah then second week when we were here he went to get his allowance because they were giving you allowance, the Canadian government offices where you can get your used clothes and coats and boots and they would give you your money for the week if you hadn't found a job. So when he went and asked for the allowance they said, "Your wife is already working so you don't get anything now.""

Mohamed: "Yeah I didn't ask for it, what he said is that... because I phoned in that my wife has found a job. They said, "Oh that's good, I'm happy for you. So are you going to be okay?" I said, "Yeah, we are." So he said, "Based on our policy, once one person in the family finds a job, then we don't give allowance. But if you're running short let us know and we'll work something out." Before that..."

Almas: "That's how we started our life in Canada with twenty dollars from the government. That is all the money I have borrowed from the government and I must have paid them a hundred times more... but that's about it. We stayed with my sister for two weeks, then her side of the family started coming so we rented an apartment in the same building, a one bedroom apartment. My uncle was here and he gave us a mattress to use and so we slept on that mattress for I don't know how many months, but that's how we started our life. Because he didn't have a job, right? For six months the money I was getting was sixty dollars a week or something."

Mohamed: "At that time it was..."

Almas: "Sixty dollars so the rent, the food, transport and things like that was all... on top of it there was still the worry that the family was back home, they were not with us."

Shezan: "So they had applied when you guys applied? But you guys left..."

Almas: "They had applied but not everybody had gotten their visas yet."

Mohamed: "What had happened is the Canadian government has sent delegation, now prior to that... I'll go into a little bit more detail of the situation for people. Prior to that what happened and what made it very, very worrisome was the fact that a lot of people didn't have passports or anything and they seemed lost completely. They became known as 'stateless,' okay? So what happened is that like I said I talked to my boss and I had a lot of flexibility. There was no help available to these people, there was no centre where they could go. Apparently I started going to... there was offices near the jamatkhana, the main jamatkhana in Kampala and there was another gentleman who took time off from what he was doing and we both met there and he says, "You know, what do we do?" I said, "Let's talk to people, then we find out what can be done for them."



So that's what we started doing is taking information from them, making a note of it, saying, "Okay these are stateless." And then trying to mix them with the Canadian delegation, and how to apply for passports, where to go, all these things. There was nobody available to them to... because everybody was in a panic situation, you know. So from the day the announcement was made to the day I left I was trying to help the people, they were terrified. They were... it was a very, very sad situation. I mean you could see that there were people with grown up children had help. There were families where nobody could help them."

Almas: "But too people... like were qualified... when the government interviewed us, they would take qualified people first, and only people with Ugandan passports. So six thousand of us came that way, but the parents of everybody couldn't come, or if you didn't have any Uganda passport you were either a refugee or a stateless, or if you were a British subject then you had to go to Britain, and so many people went to Sweden, so many people went to England without the passport as refugees and only the people who had Uganda passports came here, and those too who were qualified and had more education, they came first, the other families were still there. Same thing with my family."

Mohamed: "But see I had the possibility of going to Sweden, okay? Because the advantage I had was the language, but then we talked about her side of the family and my side of the family and everyone was aiming for Canada. And I said, "We'll be alone there unless part of the families move there." So I said, "Let's get out of here" and because we needed to get out immediately, to deal with Swedish authorities may take a little time, so we can't afford to waste time so the moment that they expedited our visa and got us approved right away. So that's what happened. The other thing was that when we did land in Montreal, you have to understand that back in Uganda before they had left, the army was in full control, the police had no say in anything. I mean if the army people wanted your car they would just stalk you and take it. They can walk into your house and take whatever they want. And you report to the police, they say, "Oh, right now that's it, forget it."

So it was... 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 people... they had psychological people and the first evening before the meal they came to talk to us. And 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 everything there who needs to get out. So avoid any... the newspapers and everybody will want to interview you, but don't say anything that they were cruel or this or that. Say okay they said we had to leave, so we left." So they had sort of... plus they said, "Don't worry about the soldiers here, they are your friends and they will help you." So it was just the opposite situation and our immediate reaction was, "Can we trust these people?"

Almas: "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. And 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... its heaven."

Mohamed: “Still the question is not given, the proper answer of what triggered this situation. It’s still unknown, there were speculations... but unknown what triggered him to say, “Asians, leave Uganda.” 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. That was... and she didn’t want to, so that’s what triggered it. That’s one of the rumours, how true it was... we’re never able to pin it down. What had happened prior to that is that what had been done about Asians living in the country, two years before that 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 says, “Okay, we have been told to leave and we are leaving very soon.” 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 something... something which has not answered the question why.”

Almas: “The other thing people said was because Asians have 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 and didn’t have an education. These people lived in beautiful houses, they had good schools and all that so that was all sort of resentment and this is the only way he thought he would get rid of them. Our people had everything and of course, instead a lot of their people were killed, twenty thousand or something like that.”

Mohamed: “Much more.”

Shezan: “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 rules – I think he ruled twenty years or something like that – and that was the worst time for his own people. Our people most of them of course left, some of them stayed over and they’re still there, took the risk. Some of them are still very well now, but a lot of people from India are coming now, and Pakistan are coming now. Originally our forefather’s also came from India and that’s how they started their life. I guess Mowla had told them one day I will take you to the moon. This is probably happening, in Canada probably to the moon. And life getting settled in Canada wasn’t easy either, it was tough. Six months no job living in one room apartment, starting our family here with no help. Eventually my parents did come here, his parents came here and we had to settle them down. His brothers were well educated so they were on their own, the other two brothers went into business in Vancouver. My brothers were very young and started schooling here, and my sister was sort of stateless, she had a British passport and she had gone there. Eventually I had to sponsor her and she came over to Canada. So those were very difficult days, very stressful but we got through with Allah’s help and his guidance and the education that he had asked everybody to take education, especially the girls and it’s really, really helped out. And look at us now, we have an Ismaili community. I mean initially...”

Shezan: “And literally coming with nothing.”

Almas: “Absolutely nothing. I remember coming to Canada and having one small jamatkhana on Foxwell Street, the jamat was about, what? Thirty people, maybe less. Going for khushali and wearing your sari going in the subway and storm like crazy, one winter storm... one khushali it was terrible. But it’s all history now and everybody I think is doing very well with Allah’s blessing, and hopefully all children will do better.”

**Shezan: “How did you guys find your first interactions with actual Canadians?”**

Almas: “Because we lived in Sweden we had mingled with people not in our community, so it wasn’t that tough for us, we were okay. And we had other jobs and people were very friendly. Interaction was... we had made a lot of friends.”

Mohamed: “The weather conditions, we had gone through even worse weather conditions in Sweden. So the snow and everything didn’t come as a surprise. So we were already accustomed to that kind of weather. That’s one of the reasons why I didn’t want to leave Uganda was you know different weather conditions there. But you get used to it, you know. You have to get used to it and it’s a question... like I said, the cold winter has never bothered me because I don’t let it get to me. With that attitude I’ve never said it’s too cold or anything, why am I here? Or something like that. But now it’s... when we came here it was not that bad and the summers were not that hot. But now the extremes are rich, the winters are too cold, the summers are too warm. You never had air conditioning or anything. Now that’s a must in the cars and homes.”

Almas: “So my... if you have any questions or we have forgotten anything you can just... because we have basically given you our life history.”

Mohamed: “Yeah so I had to reconsider my profession, I ended up working... because agriculture is all private farms and everything. The government had very little area where you could fit in. So because I had my degree I was able to get into a pharmaceutical company because I had a chemistry knowledge and everything. So I started at a very junior position, I started as a lab technician then moved on to lead chemist after my papers were... by U of T [University of Toronto] they... I don’t know the word.”

**Shezan: “They recognized your credentials...”**

Mohamed: “Recognized, yeah. So I got a letter from them saying Uppsala University is a very well-known university with a high reputation and the Swedish system, they don’t have master’s degree, so it’s like BSc [Bachelor of Science], then you do PhD [Doctor of Philosophy]. So BSc is a little higher than normal BSc, PhD is lower. And then there is a doctorate. So they said if not more it is at least equivalent to a U of T degree. Subjects are different because they don’t have experience with those subjects here. So I got into the pharmaceutical company and I enjoyed it.

After I’d done three years as a lab chemist they asked me to take over packaging operations, to manage packaging operations. So I became the packaging manager and then in 1989 I saw no further moment and so for the past two or three years I’d been thinking of making a move. And so a friend of ours he used to work for a dental supply company and the supply company had shut down so he was wondering what to do and then one day we were talking and he said, “Why don’t we start a dental supply

company?" because of his experience and he said, "You're thinking about leaving your job." So we went into business and ran it for ten years and after that the situation became such that we had to part company. The business was doing very well so I said, "Okay, you buy me out." And then I sort of decided I'll retire and then I found a couple of people who asked to help, I went and joined them. And then the last eight years I was working at a company where my daughter is working.

Yeah I started working as a part time, and I liked it I said I didn't want responsibility or anything, I just want to do the work. And then part time became... two days became three days and four days, five days, six days. Then I said, "No, that's too much." Then I had my mother with me and she was in long term care, so two or three years ago I retired completely. She was working up until last month part time."

Almas: "I worked after the broker, I was with the Bank of Montreal for twenty five years. And then they were restructuring and they were offering packages, if you wanted to take an early retirement or go to the bank that the department was getting sold, it was CIBC. And I said, "Okay I'm very tired right now because I was working on third day when I came from Kampala and the kids were born here. At the time the maternity leave was six weeks."

**Shezan: "Six weeks?"**

Mohamed: "Not even."

Almas: "Six weeks before and six after. And of course I didn't take it before, so six weeks after Rahim was born. Six weeks old when I had to leave him with a babysitter. Tears every day, tears to go back to work. But we had no choice, right? We had come with nothing. At least my daughter is older, but with Rahim. My mother in law lived with us for a year, so she looked after her for a year but then she had to go to a sitter with Rahim because nobody was here, my parents were here but they had their own business and they were tied up. So six weeks I had to leave him, that is the toughest part of my life.

And... yeah, so after that I said, "Okay, I am getting the chance to retire early, I'm going to take it." I'm not really retiring, I'm taking the opportunity to... so I did take a year off. Took a year off, I wanted to see India. Three friends together, we went for six weeks doing a tour of all over. I came back and I was feeling a little bored, what am I going to do sitting here all alone? I can't do that. And then I said, "Okay, I'll do something that is very close to me and I don't have to travel and do the downtown thing anymore. So I said, "I'm going to apply for Shoppers." Shoppers Drug Mart, so I said, "Okay, I'll start there and we'll see." I did start there, it was very close to my house, I used to walk to work and back, half days, three days a week or something like that. Then it went six months to a year, here I worked for Shoppers... not the same Shoppers, but another Shoppers too for fourteen years. I cannot believe I lasted fourteen years at Shoppers. Part time – full time would be tough to work in the retail business because it was totally different from what I was used to.

But yes fourteen years until last week, or two months ago because we were moving. And that's when I really needed time because our house was full of junk we had to get rid of, right? So much stress and everything was to be done in three months because to find a new place, to get organized, so I left in the end of February. And he's asking me again to go back in September so I don't know if I'm ready to go back, I'd rather do some volunteering work. That's my main sort of thing now, I want to work in a

museum or jamatkhana, or some community centre here, library or something. So I'll enjoy the summer because I will look after my grandson, right? For two days we do that, Thursday, Friday we look after him. The other two days he goes to his other grandma. So September he starts Montessori so then I will be off four or five days so I just can't sit like this, I need to do some volunteering."

Mohamed: "Our daughter has two sons, so we spend some time with them."

Almas: "Every Wednesday is their day so Thursday and Fridays we help my daughter and Wednesday Tuesday I used to work, and then we are quite involved in jamatkhana too. We go to Pickering still, from here it's very far, but I would like to continue until at least July and then we will decide what to do next."

**Shezan: "It's hard to give up your home khane, even when you move you still want to go back, yeah."**

Almas: "Yeah so that's our life history, Canada and Uganda."

**Shezan: "I have one last question for both of you guys, and that is: now that you've been in Canada for quite some time and you've raised your families here, if I was to ask you how do you identify yourself? How would you answer? Would you say you're like a Ugandan Canadian, a Canadian of South Asian origin or a Ugandan still? How would you identify that?"**

Almas: "I would just say I am a Canadian Ismaili, yeah."

Mohamed: "Yeah I mean..."

Almas: "And more Canadian than Uganda because I lived in Uganda for twenty five years, and I've been here forty three years. So I think I've become more Canadian, and then I'm an Ismaili. That's how I would like to be identified, Canadian Ismaili... Ugandan can become sort of part of it but first is Canadian. And Hazar Imam has told us make Canada your home, and that has always stuck with us. That's how I think I would identify myself, maybe you have..."

Mohamed: "It's... I mean our background, great, great grandparents was in India so we went to a country which was foreign to us, didn't have any roots there. So we made that our home, so it served for two or three generations or maybe more... and to come here it's more like home because this is sort of an assimilation, all kinds of immigrants here. Over there it was limited, either just very few communities. So here you feel more that you are... I mean this is your home than I was feeling in Uganda. Uganda although I loved it, but it's just like Sweden... I loved Sweden. We had a great time in Sweden but we couldn't make that our home because you need extended family to be also with you.

And Uganda was very good to us except politically it was very risky because... I mean it still is risky because you never know tomorrow what happens, who will mix up with a certain idea that we need to do this. So here at least politically you are secure, you have to also be faithful to your country, you know. I mean sometimes I take... sometimes it bothers me to hear comments that certain communities or certain people say, "This is my... I'm going back to visit my country." And I say, "Yeah it was your country but you decided to move to Canada, why don't you say that Canada is your country and that you are visiting your former country?" Or something like that... becoming more local than being more

dedicated to your older country, former country than here. Because here you come to this country to provide you with all the necessities and all the good life you have here.

So to us like we said almost fifty years here, it's more than half of our life, because I am over seventy one, and she's sixty seven... or fifty eight, fifty five. [Laughter] But you know it's something where my children are doing well, we've built a good foundation, we've built a good foundation here and that foundation is carrying us through so I don't know if I can... I mean what if I could call it my home because in India I never lived in India, I didn't grow up in India. My great grandfather or great, great grandfather worked there. So the only life we know is back in Uganda and here. That one has its advantages, but there's more advantages, very few disadvantages we can see, you know.

Mind you, and it's rampant everywhere... life has become rough, there's a lot of gunplay and you know people don't think, they just shoot first and ask questions later. And you know it's scary sometimes, scary. You worry about your children's whereabouts but I think that's happening everywhere now, you know it's not exceptional time. I mean I've never held a gun in my life, I used to play with a BB gun, you know used to go in the forest and hit mangos with the BB gun. But apart from that it's something where I... I never thought of owning one or anything, because people thought that you had to defend yourself.

But it's a good feeling that we've been okay so far, and hopefully it stays that way. But I think apart from that, to answer your question, yeah we feel this is more of our home than the previous one. Because one thing I have is memories of my previous residence... the reason I am not going back is because I have fond memories and I've been told that if you go there now you will be very disappointed because it's not what you have in your mind. So one thing... yeah, I could have gone back but I didn't feel like it. My sister was there for quite some time..."

**Shezan: "How did she find that?"**

Mohamed: "She used to say, "Why don't you come and visit?" And I never felt like visiting."

**Shezan: "So she was living there? She went back and lived in Uganda"**

Mohamed: "Yeah they had gone back after Idi Amin was out... they had a big business there but by that time everything was ruined, they went to try and rekindle the business. It worked for a while but then it was becoming very expensive to live there. The cost of living in Uganda is much higher than here so then they decided to retire and come back here. But that's our feeling now, we've done what we can so our children... today sometimes we talk about the type of life we had there, it doesn't sink into them because you had servants working there and every day you would go home and have lunch..."

**Shezan: "Take a little nap..."**

Mohamed: "Yeah but you know, "When did you guys work?" There was no measurement of work there. But anyways, is there anything we've missed or any questions you may have?"

**Shezan: "Yeah I'll get in touch if I think of anything else."**

Almas: "We covered everything okay?"

**Shezan:** "Yeah, you guys were great, it was fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing your stories."

Mohamed: "Our pleasure."

Almas: "I hope it's useful to you."

**Shezan:** "Oh, absolutely."

[End of transcript].