

## **Munira Dhanani**

### **Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences**

**Munira Dhanani:** “We got on the plane—I think it was out of Heathrow, stop in Paris and then straight into Toronto from there, or something like that. Got here—now I don’t know if it was February sixth or February sixteenth, but anyway, it was in 1973, in February, that we actually landed in Toronto. A fricking cold day. Here you are, brand new. At least some parts of London your parents are familiar with that, but you’re in Canada, in Toronto. Cold. You could actually see your breath, which is something you had not seen because even the month we were in London and we were travelling around and doing the sightseeing and so on and so forth, you never saw your breath because it was cold, but not that cold. You come here, you hear something like, “Oh yeah, it’s minus thirty-six degrees,” or something to that low level of cold. You have no idea what that feeling is going to be like, right?”

You’re standing at the departure terminal there trying to hail a taxi, and you can see your breath, and you’re thinking, “Well I don’t smoke, what am I seeing here?” Because normally you see that when you see a smoker, right? My sister and I are looking at each other and we’re thinking, “Oh, this is fun.” We can see our—we’re not smoking but we look like we’re smoking, you know. Silly little kids. Here I am, maybe almost twelve, and here she is almost seven or eight or something like that, and I’m looking at my parents and my parents are looking at each other, like “What in the hell did we do? Did we really want to come to Canada?” It’s so cold and my mom’s still holding my baby sister, who is now about nine or ten months old, and they’re thinking, “Did we really want to do this?” So you get in a taxi and they drop you at a hotel, which is arranged through your landed status. You get to the hotel and it’s this cold and you’ve had this whole few hours of travelling and so on and so forth, but you need to get some formula for the baby and you want to eat something yourself because you get fed on the plane but it’s not what you’re used to.

Dad goes down into the lobby to try and find out where we can go get some food and so on and so forth, and you know with the lightweight clothing that we had—the winters in England were not as cold as what we now have in Canada, right? So coming back to the clothing part, when we were leaving Uganda it was just in our routine regular clothes. What an experience Paris was, right? What an experience detention camp was, getting to know the cold weather. But holy crap, what an experience it was coming to Toronto, or rather coming to Canada, landing in Toronto, to now realize what it is to have minus temperatures, and this is like minus thirty-six degrees—or at least that’s what we were told. It could have been a lot colder, I don’t know for sure. They didn’t say anything about wind chill or stuff like that.”

Shezan Muhammedi: “At that point it wouldn’t have mattered.”

Munira: “The fact is it was fricking cold. So dad is in the lobby trying to figure out how to get food and so I guess they gave him whatever directions to the closest grocery store, and well, you know what, you’re on foot because you’re not going to hail a cab, right? You have some money on your own, you received a small allowance to get you started, but you have no idea what it’s going to cost you. You’re still are trying to grasp what the currency value is and how it

## Munira Dhanani

### Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

works and the cost value and so on, so anyway those thoughts probably went through my dad's mind, but I'm just thinking he may have calculated some of that.

So here he is walking out, late at night now, it's probably eight or nine o'clock at night, to go find food for us to eat and try and get some formula or milk or something for the baby. He got back to the hotel about ten or something like that. He looked like an ice cube because, again, the clothing was not adequate. You have a winter coat, which is English-standard wool, you have a toque, which is, you know, just your regular toque. You're wearing gloves that are barely going to keep you warm. As far as leggings, you have your regular socks and shoes, you know. Now when I think back, I don't know how he even walked because when he came back to the hotel with food, he was like an ice cube, just frozen solid, but he was still moving and you know, he didn't blink an eye. You could see all the tears that had iced up on his face because of the cold. So it was a suite, there was a little fridge and a stove and a sink there, and the little cabinets there had some dishes and stuff like that. We put the food in the oven, warmed it up, sat there, and I could see my dad now starting to..."

Shezan: "To fall."

Munira: "Well, to fall because of exhaustion of being out in the cold, never mind the jetlag and all that nonsense, and the time change too because now you've got the time zone that you've changed as well. He's defrosting from being an ice cube and the colour is gradually coming from being that stone hard cold that you are. We ate a little bit, or we probably didn't eat and we just slept. We slept because now you're not sharing the hospitality of your uncle's home, of having mattresses and beds and whatever—the humbleness of what went on there, of being there to where you are now. Here you are, the five of you, all alone in a new country, in a new city, in this hotel room that had beds you could individually sleep on. Fell asleep, next morning dad made some phone calls because we already knew of some people who had settled here because by September to February, well September to February of '73, people had already come by and settled down and so on.

We had some contacts that we made through long-distance phone calls, local mail from England to Canada and so on, and you exchange phone numbers and things. So dad called my aunt, which is my father's sister. She couldn't wait to get on the subway to come meet with us because when you left Uganda you had no idea when you were ever going to see anybody, right? Having left the way we had to leave, none of my father's family knew that we were leaving. My mother's family, because of my uncle's home being in downtown Kampala, and that was all hush-hush, he was the only one at that time who knew that we were leaving. Whatever code words that you used back in those months to say, "Alright, you know this one and this one have already departed and left Kampala and they're safe and they're in transit somewhere," was all anybody knew.

So here she is coming to visit us at the hotel room, and of course, first things first always, it's tears and tears and tears because you don't know. You don't know whether you've got to see anybody or whether anybody's healthy and around and got away okay, so there's the tears and

## **Munira Dhanani**

### **Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences**

then of course what's happening with ma, which is my grandmother, because my aunt wanted to know where her mother is, right? So she's safe, she's in Liverpool with my uncle, my father's younger brother. There's that catching up to do, and then trying to get caught up with "Okay, you're here but what's happening with the rest of the families?" You know, the other relatives, your other uncles and your aunts and everybody else.

My father had an older sister who was then sent to New York from Kampala, because again, with age and the lack of documents for immigration purposes, they couldn't exactly get in to apply for Canadian residence so they were sent through United Nations where Prince Sadruddin at that time was leading the United Nations, they were in New York. So that is how we found out from my aunt that morning, on this cold February night after we had a good night sleep, and then here she is the next morning that, you know what, now we're starting to place where everybody is. Because even while you were in London and you're starting to place people, you don't genuinely know and properly know where everybody is. This is how we're getting caught up and spent a few hours together that morning. My cousin, my aunt's son, gave dad a little bit of knowledge of what was happening in the neighbourhood because we didn't know how long we were going to be in a hotel because from here on, the first thing you wanted to do is get your own home now. You had to deal with the Canadian offices here to try and guide you with what job opportunities are available to you, where homes are available to you within your budget because you still don't have a job. You have your little savings, but you don't want to deplete all of that before you know where you're going to end—or rather, where you're going to start—before you end all this support from the various levels of government.

My cousin was chatting with my dad about all of these little locations and areas and just familiarizing dad with the neighbourhood and so on. Here's now—I think when we arrived on February sixth or sixteenth, I think it was a Friday night, and they came to see us the Saturday morning. Now here's Sunday, here's a whole day you're just sitting there. It's too damn cold. You don't want to go out because you don't have clothing for it. You stand there outside and you think you're smoking because you can still see your breath, but that wasn't funny anymore because it was just too cold to be outside. How long do you sit in a hotel room and not be able to go out—I mean you're kids, you want to run around, you want to do things, right?

So here's the difference of a TV here in Canada versus a TV in London—it's no longer just the BBC One channel and at restricted times and so on and so forth. You have this TV in the hotel room, it has cable, it gives you like five or six channels, my god, you know it's fabulous. You have this tiny talent show, and being the age that we were, my sister and I, we got a kick out of it because here we're watching all these kids doing their little performances from whatever classes they were taking and they were performing on the show. So you're watching TV Sunday afternoon, come Sunday evening, you've got some news that you're getting caught up on. I haven't got a clue what this news is all about but it's something your parents are very interested in because now this is going to be our home, right? We're going to live here in Toronto so you need to make yourself familiar and get used to the way of life and get caught up with the local issues around here. You're thinking, "Why do they want to watch the news?" You

## **Munira Dhanani**

### **Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences**

could flip on another channel but you had to walk up to the TV to turn the dial to get to the next channel. So anyway, all that.

Come Monday morning, dad's out, you're waiting in a hotel and you don't know what's happening. In the meantime, your mom's saying, "Well, you know what? We need to find a school. It's time you went to school." Now here's almost half a year gone by, we haven't been to school, right? In England, there was no point because they wouldn't even look at you because you weren't going to live there, plus, you were in between school semesters—what is known as a school year there. They're not going to enroll you as a student because you're going to up and go in a few weeks or whenever your papers are ready to move to Canada. So we hadn't had schooling in almost half a year, so that's six months of no school and you're thinking, "Ah, not so bad." But now, you know what? The real world begins—not that we didn't have the real world, but that wasn't what a normal world is all about, right?

That transit and getting out of Uganda and now finally making it to Canada and to Toronto and this is where your parents want you to settle and they want to settle and make a life and a future for you. Says mom, "We need to find a school, we need to walk around, we need to do this, we need to do that." So as dad's heading off to do whatever he has to do with the immigration offices here to find a job, see where housing is available, we were walking around the neighbourhood to see if we can find a school, go and talk to the principal there, get enrolled. The neighbouring school for this downtown hotel that we were in, they weren't discouraging, but they explained to us how the school year works in Canada versus how the school year works through the British system, and also in Uganda, we had the British system as well. So while you're already there through the month of February, and in March you have March break, it didn't make sense to enroll you in a downtown school when you didn't know how long you're going to live in the downtown area or where you're going to live when housing was appropriate or when it was going to be available. They decided they weren't going to enroll us. This is now three, four weeks later, we're still in a hotel in downtown Toronto. Dad's found a job and we're now looking for an apartment because of course you're not going to buy your first house, you're still a new immigrant, right? But everywhere you went into an apartment building to apply for a unit, they wouldn't lease you a unit because you wanted to have a two bedroom for the cheapest amount of rent for a family of five. So here's a couple and three kids, what are the guidelines here? If you have three kids, you have to have a three-bedroom apartment because the parents need a place and of course the baby and kids, right? We couldn't find a place within a reasonable budget, or it was a no-pet building. This is how it was back in those years, right?

Finally, there was an apartment that did become available to us. It was a three bedroom, it was within dad's budget. Commute was quite the distance because this apartment was in the Don Mills and Sheppard area, the old Fairview Mall, which is where eventually the little khane and everything started. We finally got an apartment and moved out of the hotel, went there. March break was over. School was just up the road from where our building was, so we were finally enrolled in school after March break, only to find out that by mid-June you were going to be out

## Munira Dhanani

### Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

for summer for two and a half months, so we're thinking, "Hey, you know what? This isn't a bad deal." We didn't go to school for half a year, maybe five weeks of school now between April and mid-June and then we're off for two and a half months, how good is it going to get, right? Boy oh boy. In the meantime, here's dad commuting from Don Mills in Sheppard to a job downtown in the sales field but not quite what he was comfortable with because that wasn't the product type that he always catered to."

Shezan: "Was he in car sales?"

Munira: "No, my dad was always in the life insurance sales. When we were in Uganda all those good years, he sold life insurance with Prudential of England and he had a lot of entrepreneurial connections with selling beauty products, L'Oréal hair products. He did a lot of school supplies. His biggest contact was with Bic ball pens, and in those days, you didn't just see a blue ball pen, it was a miracle when you had a black ball pen that you were holding in your hand in those Ugandan days, right? Then when they had the red and green, it was like, "Whoa! Multicolours!" My dad had all of those channels that he was a distributor for back in Uganda, so being in that background, and life insurance being his primary background, with the sales position that he got here, it was to sell silverware. It was a sales job nonetheless, but it wasn't a product that he was comfortable with and it didn't satisfy what he wanted to do. Through the silverware channel, he met a gentleman from Korea and they got talking and dad said to him, "You know what? I need to do something better." This Korean gentleman was already a salesperson at Sun Life of Canada back in those days—it's now known as Sun Life Financial but back in those years it was Sun Life of Canada. He says, "You know what? I want to take you somewhere." Dad was introduced to Sun Life through this gentleman. This gentleman then became a very good colleague, friend, because dad ended up being at the same branch of Sun Life with this gentleman. Beautiful. Now, this is my dad's comfort zone, but where do you start because you're all new immigrants, who's got the money, right?"

You still have a family to feed, you've got rent to pay, you don't want to sell silverware anymore, you don't have a car. TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] in those days was very inexpensive, for adults you only paid a quarter. For us kids, you only paid a dime, which is the size of a subway token. The prices are phenomenal now compared to back in those days, but for an adult to pay a quarter and for dad to commute putting in quarters to go see prospective clients and to build a business and it's all commission income because sales in life insurance is always commission, right? It's never base pay. How many quarters do you put away before you have a budget enough to pay your rent, to bring in food, to clothe your family because now your baby is a year old. It's no longer just formula, now baby food starts and that's a little added extra in your routine food that you pick up. The struggling was there, but it was all in joy for him because he's providing for his family, right?"