

Nazir Walji

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Announcement

Nazir Walji: “We now come to 1972. We've had beautiful relationships, good relationships, with the government of Uganda at that time. We are Ugandans, we all have reasonable lives, you know, we are all doing fine, and we thought we'd continue with our careers and living in Uganda because it was a developing country. In 1972, in September 1972, when Idi Amin made the pronouncement that, “Oh, now Asians have to leave Uganda,” as a thirteen, fourteen-year-old boy, I would not, I could not fathom what that meant, and for a lot of Asians who were of Ugandan citizenship, we could not fathom what it meant. So therefore, we took a very wait-and-see attitude to see what was happening. We continued with our work. There was turmoil in the sense that the African population did begin to assert more strongly their identity of Africans, and that we, the Asians—and in Swahili we were called *muhindis*—were now ready to be kicked out. The question that arose is, “What about those who were really citizens of Uganda, what would you do with them?” Yet, we continued with our lives, we still went to school every day, we continued with our education, we continued with living as reasonable a life as possible. Things did get hectic in the sense that you did see a stronger military presence in the streets of Uganda and a more aggressive attitude by the soldiers, because they basically had free reign. The Asians were caught in some ways to, you know, the whims of both the military and the police services, and also of the local population, because in some ways they had free reign because they knew that the police and the military would not do anything about it. So we were cautious, we were aware. We had to be understanding that we couldn't do things that we could previously do, so it was an idea for us to just be reasonably cautious as we were moving around the city.

At that time, I remember that as things got serious, we were requested to go get a special identity card to remain as Ugandan Asians. It was a red card. I still have a copy of it, I still have my own. I still have kept it after all these years. We called it a *kipande*, and this particular identity card, for my family particularly, was not difficult to get. We were very fortunate, and the biggest reason was that my father was fluent in the local language and in the other languages. Therefore, it made it easier for us to communicate, so we were able to get our cards very quickly. However, to say other people were not as fortunate as us. It is now the time when you started seeing what was called becoming stateless, because the Ugandan authorities, when you went to get your papers, the bureaucrat in front of you, on a whim, would tear up all your practical documents, your documents of identity, so you were now considered stateless. You can imagine the trauma it would have caused in these people because now they had nothing to go.

Things did start becoming more serious. At nighttime, you could see the rumblings of the army trucks. You had to be more cautious, you know, how you moved around the city. You could not walk around anywhere, and there were issues, you had to be careful. Was there looting? Yes, in some parts there was a lot of looting. At least where I lived, which was very close to our main jamatkhana in Kampala, that was not the case. You had to be careful. So given all this, we started seeing the situation getting worse. As Ugandan citizens and having already got our

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identity cards, for my personal family, it was okay fine, we'll just make the best of it, and my father was ready to do that. As we were doing it, we starting hearing rumblings of, "You know what, things are going to get much worse than they are right now." So my father, having known the local population very well, was suddenly asked to help with the outfitting of an office of the International Migratory Organization, I think it's called the IMO."

Shezan Muhammedi: "Yeah, International Organization of Migration, IOM"

Nazir: "And this organization had been delegated or tasked by the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], at that time, I think, headed by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, again, that all has to be verified. They were tasked to set up an office in Kampala through the IOM to now process those people that had become stateless. Interestingly, as you know, as the Ugandan crisis heated up—and there's lots of documents from the British government on who they were going to take, there's lots of documents on who the Canadians were going to take, on who the Australians were going to take, or who the government of the United States was going to take, and so on and so forth. However, there was a big chunk of these Asians who were now stateless, had nowhere to go, so from my recollection, there had to be some processing done in order to get these people out of Uganda. So my father was asked to outfit this particular office. The uniqueness of this office is very interesting. Initially, this particular office of the IOM was housed in an office of the Uganda Development Bank. Now suddenly, that particular building had a flood so the office was completely uninhabitable. Fortunate for us, His Highness the Aga Khan had just opened a building called the Diamond Jubilee Building, or the Industrial Promotional Services Building, which was located just across the street from the Parliament of Uganda. This new building happened to have space on the main floor, which was still empty, so a very prominent Ugandan Ismaili—her name was Sugra Visram, who happened to be related to the Allidina Visram family—asked my dad to see if he could help outfit this office, so he did. He was able to secure the equipment and get that office running. Again, not by himself. There were other people that helped out there, so he was one of those teams that helped out. You have to remember, my father was not a professional, he was a *dukawallah*, or a small store operator, but we could read the tea leaves that yeah, things were going to get worse here. Once that office was outfitted, the International Organization of Migration came there and started processing those people that needed to now get documents to move on to other countries which were offering refuge because technically they were now refugees, they were stateless.

A unique thing that happened to me as a fourteen-year-old, and my brother, who was thirteen at that time, was that here we were processing documents that were basically the only paper that these people would have in order to move out of the country. You can imagine that we were very naive, we were very innocent, we did the processing but we did not understand the impact of what was going on. For us, to do that kind of work was... wow, it was fun, it was a fun thing to do. We couldn't really go to school anymore at this time because now the schools were

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starting to have less and less people come out. A side note to that is, yes, we were starting to go to school but the classes were empty because the kids were moving out, they were going out with their families. So between September to November, you were starting to lose a lot of kids and it was becoming unsafe to go to school because the population, which had its own issues, you know the African population, would obviously create stuff, problems for the non-African kids. So the family members would say to the kids, “No, now you stay with us, close to us, because we never know what’s going to happen to you.” We started doing things, so for a while our education was stunted because we did not continue with our education—we’re not talking major periods of time thankfully, maybe a month or two.

We were staying with our families, with our parents, and so we were helping my dad and my mom run as best as we could. Now, my father, helping at this particular centre, right across the street, in the same building, which was still a building that was part of the Industrial Promotional Services offices, was the headquarters of the Canadian mission that was out there to now take those Asians that were going to come to Canada. For us, my family and I, we were not going to leave Uganda. However, when things became very difficult—and because my father's understanding of the population, he had been told by some of his local friends that, “Look, things are going to get worse than better, and it may be time for you to leave.” So at the last moment—and we're talking, the deadline to move out was November the seventh, we're talking I think middle of October, or late October—my father finally completed the applications for us to now see if we could move to Canada. The reason why we looked at Canada was that I already had an aunt here, my father's sister, my *fui*, living in Calgary, and had been living in Canada since 1966.”