

Nazir Walji

Uganda Collection Oral History Project – Departure

Nazir Walji: “We filled out the forms, we got all the medicals done, and so on and so forth, and then we went for an interview. At the interview, we were very fortunate that my aunt had given us a letter of support that indicated that she would look after us when we came to Canada. We went into this interview, and I remember going into this interview, the four of us, and within twenty minutes, the gentleman said, “Yeah, that’s fine, you're approved, just go get your medicals done, go get everything else done, your stool samples, whatever, and then you'll be ready to be processed as soon as possible.” The whole Canadian mission that was there was a very unique experience for a lot of us because the Canadians came out there, they set up this office, they ran it very efficiently and very effectively, and I distinctly remember this one gruff, tall gentleman that used to be there. He was gruff because I think the job he was trying to do was very, very tough given the circumstances we were in. In hindsight though, I can see why he had to be such a tough disciplinarian in order to get the things done and in order to keep us in the right row. The staff was incredible at the Canadian mission. They did do lots of stuff for people that really, really made it easy. They gave the people a sense of comfort or a sense of okay, things are going to get better. So for us, we were processed by about October thirty-first and then in four days we were told we'd have to leave.

Now we have to empty our little house—basically, we didn't empty it, we tried to take stuff with us, which we could. Again, there were stuff coming in back from people who had already moved to Canada about how things were in Canada. However, we did not always have the best picture about what we really had to do or what we had to bring with us to Canada. I think that happened to a lot of us in the sense that, if we had received a little bit more directive information on what life was in Canada, for a lot of us, we would have made wiser choices in the kind of stuff we were bringing. You know, we were bringing clothes, we were bringing utensils, we were bringing sewing machines, we were bringing sports equipment, really, you get all that here, so in hindsight, that would have been something that would have been better to know. It would have been better for us to bring what we consider priceless items, like our collectables, maybe our books, which we would never get here, you know, some of the books that were historical books over a hundred years, two-hundred years, religious books, hymn books, that we call *ginans*, and stuff like that. Those were the things that we miss a lot. I remember for me particularly, there was a letter that my father had received from His Highness the Aga Khan, Hazar Imam, that he had kept on the wall when he had become a religious missionary, and unfortunately, we forgot it on the wall and we never did get it. That would have been something that we would have been more proud to get. Other than that, we told our servants, “Take whatever you want,” because none of us were able to take it and we're not going to sell it, so, “Take whatever you need.”

We moved on November the second, yes, November the second we moved into the International Hotel, and as I told you before, that's where we used to go swimming. We moved into the International Hotel because that was the point of departure for the Ugandan Asians who were leaving on Canadian flights, and we had a vehicle that we had all come into that. When we went on the buses to the airport, we left the vehicle there, said "Whoever is going to get it—" We left the keys in it and said, "Whoever is going to get it is going to get it, we don't care." So that was fine.

We got on the buses. We were fortunate in the sense that I don't think we really had any issues about getting there. There were issues that other families may have had, but we did not. Went on the buses, went across, went to the checkpoints, and got to Entebbe airport. Entebbe airport was a chaotic mass of confusion. You had people that were trying to get on commercial flights who had nowhere to go but were just trying to get on. You had people like us who were under the auspices of the Canadian government boarding. There was a mass confusion because the security services and the police were there to ensure that you did not take anything away from here that did not belong to you, so the searches were ongoing. The degradation that could happen by the security services of the people, the scenarios of older women and younger women being harassed for no reason whatsoever was evident there. There was also animosity from the Asians because now they were bitter, they had to leave, so in some ways, they were lashing against the African population. The African population knew that things are going to get worse and they are going to miss us. You have to remember, maybe the intelligentsia of the African governments were not up there, the local people knew that once the Asians left, our economy will completely collapse and we will not have jobs.

Personally though, we were able to get on the flight. This was a Canadian Pacific DC-8, first time that we had ever sat on an airplane, and the flight was full of people who were bound for Canada. Very unique experience again—you get on the flight, you know, you get on it, you get through, and the Canadian staff that was on there, very good, very incredible, really made you comfortable, got you all organized. We got on the flight. Straightforward flight, but for some of us because being brand new, never having flown before, it was another adventure. For young kids that have never done this, it's an adventure, and DC-8, at that time, was the largest plane in existence in the seventies. We made it from Entebbe airport, which was the international airport in Uganda, to Madrid because Madrid had to be refueling. An interesting aspect in Madrid was, the Spanish government let the plane refuel but they would not let the people go into the terminal. There was a big risk by the Spanish government that some of these Asians will then hop out of the airport and try and make their way to England, which was a much more forthcoming centre for the Asians than Canada because nobody had heard of Canada. So they put us into these buses on the tarmac, raining, while they refuel the airplane. Okay, fine. Once the planes were refueled, we got on the planes and then we all made it to Dorval Airport, or now called Pierre Elliott Trudeau Airport, in Montreal. This was on the 4th of November, 1972.