

## Nazir Walji

### Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Memories of Uganda

Nazir Walji: "I was born in Uganda in October 1958, and I had a twin brother who unfortunately, at the age of two, died in Uganda. I also have another brother here, and my mom and dad. My family in Uganda consisted of lots of people. I had my grandfather, my grandmother on my father's side, my grandfather and my grandmother on my mother's side, I had seven siblings on my father's side, and my mother had approximately seven siblings on her side, so we were a big large family. My father's family came from the province of Buganda and we lived in a town called Mitala Maria, which was forty miles east of the main city, which was Kampala. My mother's family came from the province of Lango and lived in a town called Lira, which was in the north part of Uganda. My earlier recollections of Uganda were very good. My father was what we call a *dukawallah*, or a storeowner, in Uganda and when he was a young man, he had moved to the capital city to finish his education. He tried to finish up to what we call GC4, which is really about grade ten here in Canada. Unfortunately, things did not work out for him so he had to go back to the village to set up a store. He was very ambitious and he did in fact get a lot of education when he came to Canada, and we'll talk about that later.

My mother's family lived, as I said, in the town of Lira, and they were quite prominent there. My grandfather on my mother's side, that in my case we call him *nanabapa* in Gujarati, had moved by boat from India, landed in Mombasa, and then from Mombasa made it as close as possible to Uganda. Then in Uganda, because of the lack of infrastructure, he had to walk across a number of areas before he got to his location in Lira, and basically he started out in that area, in that area of Lira. On my father's side, my grandfather, my *dadabapa*, was a little more fortunate in the sense that he did move from India but the infrastructure was a little bit better because we were in what was called the Buganda province, which happened to be a very prosperous province.

My first five years, I lived with my brothers, my twin brother and my younger brother, and my mom and dad in the town of Mitala Maria, and it was a good time because we were carefree. It was fun, there were no issues. We were living in a community of approximately forty or forty-five different buildings. It was a small town, predominately of Ismaili origin. However, we also had a few Hindu people that lived there who owned small dukas. We also had what was called a cotton ginnery, which was a manufacturing business that spun cotton, and that was owned by another fellow who had been established there for a while. Just to the west of that town was another small town called Station. That particular town was not really a town but a junction point where there was a big store, and it happened to belong to one of my relatives. The town of Mitala Maria, or what we call the village of Mitala Maria, was well known because we had a major cathedral, a major Catholic cathedral that was located about two or three kilometres north of the town. The interesting part was that because of this cathedral, the town is well known, and if you make the words Mitala Maria, *Maria* being a very Catholic word, it was in honour of that particular cathedral. The access points into our town were very good because we were on the major highway between the capital city of Kampala and a provincial city called Masaka, so therefore it was well connected. Our first four years were spent there, my mom did

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well and my dad, you know, they made ends meet as best as they could. The one unfortunate part was that I did lose my twin brother to a particular bad fever and he is buried in Mitala Maria. At that time, we had what we call a jamatkhana, which is really a place of gathering. He was one of the two people from our community that were buried in that town, and that was in early 1960. That was traumatic more for my mother and father than for me because obviously I was too young. In hindsight, having looked at his pictures and seen him now in the pictures, yes, it would have been traumatic and it is still traumatic after all these years.

The interesting part of living in this small town was that we would walk barefoot. It's a dirt town, there's no paved roads there, so we would walk barefoot and enjoy it. We were just like the local African kids, the Buganda kids, in some ways, that we were able to intermingle and do quite well. Being traders, or small storeowners, obviously the community was looked at in a different light by the local population. It was good in most cases because you would work with the community to give them employment, to give them food and stores they needed on a trade basis, and that had good items to it. There might have been resentment but we did not really see it at that time because we were still too young. Around the age of five, my brother and I moved with our grandfather, our *dadabapa*, our father's father, to the capital city, Kampala. The reason was that we were now starting school. As we were starting school—we did have a local school in the village that we lived in, however, my father and my mother felt that it would be better if we were to move into the city. Now, just remember, this was not my mom and my dad moving, it was just my brother and I moving to live with our grandfather and my aunts, that means my father's sisters, my *fui* as we call them. So you can imagine the trauma that would have created for my mother to suddenly lose her two boys to the city, even though there was access to it through transportation—as you know, transportation was very good at that time. We did move to Kampala and we started in what was called the Aga Khan Nursery School.

The good thing is that the Ismaili Muslim community in Kampala and everywhere were already setting up these educational systems programs, along with our health programs, and so on and so forth—our social programs and sports programs and all that. So for us to be right away put into what was called the Aga Khan Education System made good sense to us because it enabled us to get into a formal education process much earlier than might have been possible if we had lived in the village. It also gave us opportunity to begin looking at early childhood development, and we're talking 1964, which at that time was unheard of. Now, in hindsight, you can see the kind of research that's out there for early childhood development. The biggest input or impact of this type of educational direction obviously has to come from our spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, or as we call him Hazar Imam. Looking back at forty years, or fifty years ago, you can see now why this type of early childhood development has enabled us to adjust and adapt into whatever environments we are in. So I did my nursery school there, so did my brother, and then two years later we moved into the Aga Khan Primary School. The Aga Khan Primary School was a school that was designed to teach us what we call elementary education—similar to

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grades one to six in Canada—and this primary school was just across the street from our nursery school, and I began my education there.

It was brilliant education, very well developed, very well involved. Some of the highlights from my education there were what we call assembly, which is still an ongoing scenario. We had assemblies every day where the headmaster or his assistant would be on this ledge overlooking the main courtyard, and you would know that it was time for assembly because the bell would go and all of us would be lined up. We had buildings on both sides of the courtyard. It was more like a horseshoe-shaped courtyard, buildings with the courtyard in the middle. I still remember, we had a beautiful gym on one side, just behind the main buildings, and then we had these beautiful playgrounds everywhere. Again, thinking of this area was conducive to having great education. So we'd have this courtyard, we'd have the schools, we'd have our education. We had classes in art. We had classes in the traditional education—mathematics, science, English. You have to remember that for all of us, English was the language of instruction and it was the language that we had to speak with. It was ingrained into us right from nursery school that we had to become fully versed in English. We could still learn, and we did all learn as much as possible, the local languages in order to communicate with the local African population. English remained the mode of communication for education and for higher learning. I played lots of sports while I was in the primary school. We had rounders, we had soccer, and the interesting part was that some of us learned how to play other sports like tennis and do some swimming and so on and so forth.

The curriculum of the primary school was based on the English school system, so when you finished Primary Six you would then move on to what we call Secondary School Form One, which here in Canada would be similar to grade seven. The interesting part there was you just did not move from Primary Six to Form One, you had to take a test, which was an admittance test. So again, right away, even in that environment, we were being asked to really understand and comprehend our education so that we could write this test, and this test determined whether you would go to the secondary school of your choice. Again, it was what was considered the Aga Khan Secondary School, operated by the Aga Khan Education Services, and we now continued our studies from Form One to Form Six. The good thing was, the camp was for both the Aga Khan Primary School and the Aga Khan Secondary School, and it was all in one location so we shared tennis courts together, we shared soccer fields or football fields together, we shared running tracks. It was very convenient for most students to move between the primary school and the secondary school as long as they met the requirements. Subsequently, another school was also developed by the Aga Khan Education Services, which we call the Aga Khan High School, which was built in a location called Kololo, Kampala. The reason why we had to put that school in there was that obviously some of our students were not making it in passing the exams. So in order to ensure that these students would not be discouraged from continuing education, His Highness the Aga Khan, through the Aga Khan Education Services, created this new school for those kids that had not made it through the normal process of

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passing the government exams. Interestingly, my brother, my younger brother, did go to that school and he thrived very well. This was a concept of school which was unique, and again, we're talking about the 1960s, 1970s. These were schools that were quite unique in the sense that they had the latest technology and educational information available from the world that they were able to incorporate. From just a physical location point of view, we had things like swimming pools, facilities like squash courts. Those things were put into this new Aga Khan High School which were unheard of at that time in Uganda.”