

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project
An Oral History with Nazir Walji

Archives and Research Collections
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Narrator: Nazir Walji
Researcher: Shezan Muhammedi
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Abstract:

Mr. Nazir Walji came to Canada along with his younger and both his parents when he was fourteen years old. After flying into the military base in Longue Pointe, Montreal, his family was flown to Calgary where they met his father's sister who had immigrated to Canada before the expulsion decree.

He reflects fondly on his childhood in Uganda recalling the wonderful time spent with his family and his enrolment within the various Aga Khan schools in the country. Although his family had possessed Ugandan citizenship, they were effectively rendered stateless under the later decrees of Idi Amin which required the removal of all Asians regardless of their documentation.

Upon arriving in Canada, he was fond of the Canadian atmosphere and enjoyed his experiences as he completed his secondary and post-secondary education. Currently, Mr. Walji is a certified accountant and works for the Canadian Border Services as an auditor. He has been working for the Government of Canada for over 20 years.

This oral history was conducted in Mr. Walji's home in Calgary, Alberta.

Shezan Muhammedi: "So this is an oral history being done on July 29th, so Nizar uncle I let you take it away."

Nazir Walji: "Hi my name is Nazir Walji, I live in Calgary, Alberta. I came to Calgary from Kampala Uganda on 4th November 1972 and I landed in Montreal, Quebec. And then on 5th November 1972, we moved to Calgary, Alberta and I've been here ever since then. To begin with, in terms of my history prior to Canada, I uh was born in Uganda, uh in October 1958 and I had a twin brother who unfortunately at the age of 2 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 grandmother on my mother's side and I had uh 7 siblings to my father on his side and my mother had approximately 7 siblings on her side so we were a big large family. My father's family came from the province of Buganda, um, and we lived in a town called Mitra Maria which was 40 miles west sorry correction 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 store owner in Uganda and when he was a young man he had moved to the capital city to finish his education. And he had 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 and you know set up a store. He was very ambitious and he did in fact get a lot of education, you know, when he came to Canada and we'll talk about that later. My mother's family, uh, lived as I said in the town of Lira and they were quite prominent there. Um, my grandfather on my mother's side uh, do we need names?"

Shezan: "It doesn't really matter too much, it's up to you."

Nazir: "We can just leave it at that then. My grandfather on my mother's side, that in my case we call him nanabapa, we call him in Gujarati, had moved by boat from India, landed in Mombasa and then from Mombasa made it as close as possible to Uganda. And then in Uganda, because of the lack of infrastructure, had to walk across some 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, by dadabapa, was a little more fortunate in 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. So my first five years, uh, I lived with my brothers, my twin brother and my younger brother and my mom and

dad in Mitra Maria and it was a good choice, time, because we were care free. You know, it was fun, there were no issues. We were living in a community of approximately 40 or 45 different buildings. It was a small town, predominately of Ismaili origin, as being the predominant community there, however we also had a few Hindu people who lived there who owned small dukas also. And we also had what was called a cotton ginnery, a business of manufacturing cotton. 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. And that particular town, was not really a town but it was a junction point where there was just a big store and it happened to belong to one of my relatives. The town of Mitra Maria or what we call the town, or the village, correction, of Mitra 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. And the interesting part was that because of this cathedral, the town is well known. And if you make the words Mitra, Maria being a very catholic word and it was in honour of that particular cathedral. The area that we were also, the access points into our town were very good because we were on the major highway between the capital city Kampala and a provincial city called Masaka, so therefore it was well connected. So our first four years were spent there, my mom did well and my dad, you know, made ends meet the best they could. The one unfortunate part was that I did lose my twin brother to a particular bad fever and he buried in Mitra Maria. And at that time we had what we call a jamat khane, which is really a place of gathering, and uh, he was one of the two people in that, from our community that were buried in that town. And that was in early 1959, correction, 1960. So that was traumatic more for my mother and father than for me because obviously I was too young. Looking back in hindsight having looked at his pictures and seeing him now with 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, you know, it was a dirt town, there was no paved roads there so we would walk barefoot and enjoy it. So we were just like the local African kids, in some ways, in the ways that we were able to intermingle and do quite well. And being traders, you know, and small store owners, so obviously the community was looked at in a different light by the local population. It was good in most cases because you know you would work with the community to give them employment, to give them foods and stores they need obviously with, on a trade basis. And that had good items to it, you know. There might have been resentment but we did not see it at that time because we were still too young. Around the age of 5 my brother and I moved with our grandfather, our dadabapa, our father's father to the capital city Kampala. And the reason was that we were now starting school and as we were starting school, we did have a local school in the town

in the village that we lived in. However, my mother and my father felt that it would be better if we moved into the city. Now just remember that this was not my mom and my dad moving, it was just my brother and I moving to live with our grandfather and my aunt's, that means my father's sisters, my fui as we call them. So you can imagine the trauma that would have created to suddenly lose her two boys to the city, even though, you know, there was access to it through transportation, you know, transportation was very good at that time. We did move there to Kampala and we started what was called the Aga Khan nursery school.

Now the good thing is that the Ismaili Muslim community in Kampala and everywhere were already setting up these educational systems program, 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. And not looking in hindsight you can see the research that's out there for early childhood development. The biggest input or impact of this educational perspective obviously has to come from our spiritual leader, the Aga Khan or as we call him Hazar Imam. And looking back at 40 or 50 years ago you can see why this type of early childhood development has enabled us to adjust and adapt into whatever kind of environments we are in. So I did my nursery school there and so did my brother and then two years later we moved into the Aga Khan primary school. And the Aga Khan primary school was a school that was designed to teach us what we called elementary education, similar to what we have in Canada grades 1 to 6. This primary school was just across the street from our nursery school and I began my education there.

Again, it was brilliant education, very well developed, very well involved. Some of the highlights from my education is what we call assembly, which is still an ongoing scenario. And we had assemblies every day where the headmaster or his assistant would be on this ledge overlooking the main courtyard and yeah you would know that it was time for assembly because the bell would go and all of us would be lined up and we had buildings on both side of the courtyard. It was more like a horseshoe shaped court yard, buildings with the courtyard in the middle. I still remember that we had a beautiful gym just behind the buildings and we had these beautiful playgrounds everywhere. Again, thinking of this area was conducive to having great education. So we'd have this court yard and we'd have these classes in art, 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 learn as much as possible the local languages in order to communicate with the local African population. English remained the modes of communication and for high learning. I played lots of sports there while I was in the primary school. We had rounders, we had soccer, and the interesting part was that we also, 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 6, you would then move on to what we call secondary school form 1, which here in Canada would be similar to grade 7. The interesting part there was that you did not just move from primary 6 to form 1 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 considered the Aga Khan secondary school, operated by the Aga Khan education services and we now continued our studies from form 1 to form 6. The good thing was the campus 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 football or soccer fields together, we shared running tracks and it was very convenient for most students to move between the primary school to the secondary school so long as they met the requirements. Subsequently, there was another school that was being developed by the Aga Khan education services which was called the Aga Khan high school which was built in a location called Kololo, Kampala. And 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 schools for those kids that had not made it through the normal process of passing the government exams. Interestingly, my brother, my younger brother did go to that school as he did not make it. And he thrived very well and this was a concept of school that was unique. And again, we're talking about the 1960s and 1970s, these schools were quite unique in that they had the latest technology and the latest educational information available from the world that they were able to incorporate it. And just from a physical location point of view we had things like swimming pools, facilities like squash courts. So those things were put into the Aga Khan high school which were unheard of at that time in Uganda.

During my school years we did lots of school trips and I remember one vivid school trip to what was called the Uganda museum. The Uganda museum was this place where the history of Uganda had

been incorporated and this was very unique when we look at historical artifacts, that we were given the chance to at least start understanding what it was like to try and collect and then look after historical contents of an area or a province or whatever because that had never been done before. So we're talking 1960s we had this beautiful museum, we went to it and had a chance to look at it. We were also fortunate to be able to see some of our history of the country itself and this was through visits of the ancestral homes of some of our African leaders that had lived. As you know Uganda at one time consisted of various kingdoms. And we had kingdoms like the one I lived in the province of Buganda which is really the kingdom of Buganda because it had a leader who we called the Kabaka. Same with we had the kingdoms of Teso, which was another region and you know another one also in Tororo which was another region also. So we did have a history of Kingdoms in Uganda and we had an opportunity to visit their ancestral homes for these kings that was there. One of the ancestral homes and still remains to be one of the homes of the king of Buganda is in a place called Mengo. Which was really part of Kampala but in a different area or north of what we call the city center area.

In Kampala, we had again a substantial community of what we call Asians or in this day and age East Indian but we used to call ourselves Asians and that consisted of various multi-religious groups. We had the Ismaili Muslims, we had the Hindus, we had the Sikhs, we had other tariqahs of Islam and it was not uncommon for us to enjoy each other's religious festivals because there was no distinction that came in on whether you were a Muslim, or a Sikh, or a Hindu. You basically had fun with all their festivals. Kampala itself was a very western city in most ways. It was a very cosmopolitan city and it had a vibrancy that enabled Uganda to be really what we called one of the jewels of Africa and it has remained one of the jewel and Winston Churchill has always called it a jewel of Africa. So my school years continued on from primary one to primary 6 and then to form 1 was about to do my form 2. Actually I was in my form two then when we had the issue of the expulsion order to leave Uganda, that was given by Idi Amin. Little background on Idi Amin, I had the opportunity to meet Idi Amin and that was done about July 1972, I think it was, around June of 1972.

Our family used to go to swim at this hotel called the International Hotel. They had a swimming pool there, and we would go to that swimming pool just to enjoy it. And at one time Idi Amin had come there to just enjoy him and then at that time he was already the leader of Uganda and we had a chance to meet him and say hello how are you and so on and so forth. So you know we didn't really think anything about him, yeah he was a leader and as long as he kept, you know, we went along with his business we were ok with it. You also have to remember that there were also situations where as a leader he may have made rumblings but we were Ugandan citizens so therefore we were part of the

fabric of the nation. So we did not feel any justification of anything going wrong. So we continued with that and made our lives in Uganda, became Ugandan citizens. My personal family were travelers so therefore; we were very fortunate that we were able to see all of Uganda. I'm just going to grab some water."

Shezan: "Oh yeah no problem"

Nazir: "Because we had a chance to see all of Uganda, my family and I got to appreciate the differences of languages, cultures, that were African cultures, African languages that we're talking about, that were in display as you moved around the province of Uganda. And I distinctly remember we had a province north of where my grandfather, my mother's father used to live which was called the district or the province of Karamoja, which was the most northern point of Uganda. And what was unique about that area was that it was a very pastoral area and very dry. So to see those people make a living there and to see the people of Karamoja who are mainly cattle herders make a living was very unique you know it was very eye opening to see that part of the country. Obviously we had what was called Lake Victoria, which was part of Uganda, and we had many joyous times not swimming in Lake Victoria but at least enjoying what Lake Victoria had to offer in terms of its abundance of sea life and as an area of enjoyment as you went along. For us when we lived in the village of Mitra Maria parts of Lake Victoria were not that far from us so it was quite interesting to see that.

So we now come to 1972, we've had beautiful relationships you know, good relationships with the government of Uganda at that time. We are Ugandans, you know we all had a reasonable lives, you know, we are all doing fine and uh 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 Asians have to leave Uganda, as a 13, 14-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 populations did begin to assert more strongly their identity of Africans and that we, the Asians, and in Swahili were called Muhindis were now ready to be kicked out. The question that arose, oh what about those who were really citizens of Uganda, what would you do with them? And yet we continued with our lives. We still went to school every day. We continued with our education, with living as reasonable of a life as possible. Things did hectic in a sense that you did see a more stronger military presence in the streets in Uganda and a more

aggressive attitude by the soldiers because they basically had free reign. The Asians were caught in some ways to, um, you know, the whims of both the military and the police services and also the local population because in some way they knew that the police and the military will not do anything about it. So we were cautious, we were aware, we had to be, um, understanding that yeah we couldn't do things that we could previously do. So it was an idea for us to just be reasonably cautious just as we were moving around the city.

In um, in that time I remember that as things got serious and we were requested to go get special identity cards to remain as Ugandan Asians. It was a red card, I still have a copy of it, I still have my own. I still kept it after all these years and uh we called it a *kipande*. And this particular identity card, and for my family it was particularly 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 so 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. And so 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, uh, the bureaucrat in front of you on a whim would tear up all your practical documents, your documents of identity. So therefore, you were now considered stateless, which you can imagine the trauma it would have caused in these people because they now had nothing to go. Things did start becoming more serious, at nighttime you would see the army trucks. You had to be more cautious you know how you moved around in the city. You could not walk around anywhere. And there were issues, you know you had to be careful. Was there looting, yes there was looting in some parts. At least where I lived, which was very close to our main jamat khane in Kampala, that was not the case, and you had to be careful. So given all this, you know, we started seeing the situation getting worse. As Ugandan citizens and having already gotten out identity cards, it was ok fine we'll just make the best of it and my father was ready to do that and as we were doing it, we starting hearing things saying that 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 IMO."

Shezan: "Yeah it's called the International Organization of Migration – IOM"

Nazir: "And this organization had been delegated or tasked by the UNHCR, at that time, I think, headed by Prince Sadrudin Aga Khan, again you know that all has to be verified. And they were tasked to set up

an office in Kampala through the IOM to now process those people who had become stateless. Interestingly, as you know, as the Ugandan crisis heated up, and there's lots of documents on the British government on who they're gonna take and there's lots of documents on who the Canadians were gonna take, and who the Australians were gonna take, and who the government of the United States was gonna 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 therefore, 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 development, 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 and just built 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. And 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 but there were other people who helped out there. And 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 gonna get worse here. Once that office was outfitted the IOM came there and started processing those people that needed to now get documents to now move on to other documents who were offering refuge until they were, because technically they were not refugees. They were stateless.

A unique thing that happened to me as a 14-year-old, and my brother as a 13-year-old, was that here we were processing documents that were basically the only paper that these people would have to move out of the country. So you can imagine we were very naive, we were very innocent, we did the processing but we did not understand the impact of what was going on. So for us to do that work was wow, fun, it was fun thing to do. We couldn't really go to school anymore this time because not the schools were starting to have less and less people come out. And a side note to that, and yeah 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 you know the population which had its own issues, you know the African population would obviously create stuff, problems for the non-African kids. So therefore, the family members would say to the kids, now you stay close to us, we never know what's

going to happen to you. So therefore, we started doing things and 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. So we were staying with our families, with our parents and so we were helping my mom and dad run as best as we could.

Now my father helping at this particular centre, right across the street, in the same building which was a building that was still 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. And for us, my family, and 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 things are gonna 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 7th, we're talking I think middle of October, or late October, my father finally completed the application to now see if we could move to Canada. And the reason why we looked at Canada was that we already had an aunt here. My father's sister, my *fui*, living in Calgary and had been living in Canada since 1966. Now she's still here. My aunt, that's

[Shows Shezan a few photos]

So yes, that's my aunt and so was my uncle, my *fua*. And what had happened was that we had filled out the forms and we got the medicals done and so on and so forth. And then we went for an interview, at the interview we were very fortunate that our aunt had given us a letter of support that said, you know, she would look after us once we came to Canada. And so we went into this interview and I remember going into this interview the four of us and within 20 minutes the gentlemen said yeah that 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 all of us because the Canadians came out there, they set up this office, and they ran it very efficiently, very effectively and I distinctly remember this one gruff tall gentlemen that used to be there. He was gruff because I think the job he was trying to do was very difficult given the circumstances we were in. In hindsight though, I can see why he had to be a task or tough disciplinarian in order to get the task 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 ok, things are gonna get better. So for us we were processed by about October 31st and in four days we were told that we would have to leave.

So now we have to empty our little house. Basically, we didn't empty it. We tried take stuff that we could but you know there were stuff coming in, back from people who had already moved to Canada about you how things were in Canada. However, we didn't always have the best picture of what we really had to do or what we had to bring with us to Canada. And I think that happened to a lot of us in the sense that if we had received a little more directive information on what life was like in Canada, for a lot of us we would've made more wise choices in the kind of stuff we were bringing. You know, we were bringing clothes, utensils, sewing machines, we were bringing sports equipment, really you get all that here. So in hindsight that would have been something better to know. It would have been better for us to bring our priceless items, our collectables, maybe our books, which we would never get here. You know some of those historical books of 100 years, 200 years, you know religious books, hymn books, that we call ginans and stuff like that. Those were the things that we miss a lot. And 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 and unfortunately, we forgot it on the wall. We never did get it. So you know that would've 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 so take whatever you need. So we moved on November the second, yes, November the second we moved into the International Hotel, and as I recalled, as I told you before that's where we used to go swimming. 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 and said whoever is gonna get it, we left the key in there, is gonna get it. So that's uh fine.

We got on the buses, we were fortunate in the sense that I don't think that we didn't have an issues. There were issues that some other families may have had but we did not. Went on the buses, went across, went to the checkpoints and got to uh Entebbe airport. Entebbe airport was a chaotic mass of confusion. You had people that were trying to get on commercial flights that were just trying to get on. You have people like us, who were under the auspices of the Canadian government boarding. And 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 on going. Uhm, the degradation that could happen by the security services of the people. The scenarios of you know older women, younger women, being harassed for no reasons was evident there. There was also animosity from the Asians, so in some ways they were lashing against the African population. The

African population knew that things are gonna get worse and they are gonna miss us. You have to remember that 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. You know the flights 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 was really incredible. Got you comfortable, got you organized and we got on the flight. Straight forward flight, but for some of us who had never been on a flight it was another adventure, for young kids that had never done this, it was an adventure. And uh DC-8 was the largest plane at that time in existence in the 1970s. So 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 that 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 who would hop out of the airport and make their way to England which was much more what you call forth coming centre for the Asians because nobody had heard of Canada. So they put us on these buses on the tarmac in the rain. Ok fine, so once the planes were refueled we got on the planes and then we all made it to Dorval Airport or now called Pierre Elliot Trudeau Airport in Montreal.

This was on the 4th of November 1972. It was late night, not that late, I think about eight or nine in the evening. Dark, we are ushered into these buses, they are green in colour and they have on it the words Canadian Armed Forces. And then the first person we see as we get processed and come into the country is a, in my particular case, our bus was met by a sergeant from the Canadian Armed Forces. And he says yes, I know you have come from a country where the military is not good, let me assure you that is not the case in Canada. So you can imagine for us, having suddenly coming from a very military dictatorship to see a soldier was a very unique experience at least for me and my family. And subsequently we were housed in a military barracks at Longue Pointe Garrison. So again you can imagine what that was like. But you could say that you know that was our first experience of what was considered Canadian hospitality. The barracks were incredible, they had food that was good, um, food that at least we could eat. You could move around the barracks not a problem you know. The food was not maybe to our liking because we weren't used to it but they had the regular stuff. I think they had done their own research on what would work for us and what we could eat so they had tried to accommodate as much as possible.

On the 5th of November before we were moved out we were outfitted with Canadian clothing. It was funny, for us the snow had fallen that day in November and we were going to go to Calgary. So my family was in a dilemma, do we take winter clothes that look nice or do we take winter clothes that are gonna be functional? So made the decision to go with functional. So we ended up with these woolen overcoats that were huge and we were drowning in it but we felt that we are going to a very cold place so it was worth it. And now I still have them, I still have those overcoats after 42 years. So again you know, choices, right that we made and uh, we moved in these big overcoats and we moved and we got into the planes and that was the first time that I took a flight of Air Canada. And uh, we were supposed to leave at night, unfortunately, they had an ice storm, nothing new for Montreal so they cancelled the flight and they ended up putting us in a hotel. So again, the first night in a hotel in Canada. A unique experience, at that time Air Canada was accommodating to put us in the hotel. We said we have no money and we are refugees so you have to look after us. Subsequently, the second day we got on the plane and went from Montreal to Calgary. On the flight, what was unique about this was that it was the first time that we had a breakfast meal. And the breakfast meal consisted of a piece of ham on it. So my father says, listen we can't eat this because it's got ham in it, and I distinctly remember the Air Canada hostess saying why don't you just take out the ham and just eat the thing. So you can imagine after all these years my relationship with Air Canada is a little bit strained. [Laughter]

So when we got to Calgary which was our final destination, we were met by officials from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. And uh, also by my aunt who had been living here you know and so we went to her house and we were accommodated there to be acclimatized before we moved on. The stay in Calgary, the initial stay in Calgary was unique in the sense that we were also able to meet some other Ugandans that had come here a number of years before us. So we were able to meet them and they came and saw us. And some of them had left about three years, they left in the late 1969, 1970 and their families are still here in Calgary. So they moved here and also when my aunt looked at the kind of winter jackets we had bought from Montreal, she said these are not going to work for you guys, they are going to be way too hot for you guys. So we went shopping to Zellers, this was located in Northwest Calgary in the community of Huntington Hills and that's where we bought new winter clothing. Again, we were given an allowance by the Canadian government to buy some of this other stuff that we had not got when we came over and that was our first experience shopping in this huge department store called Zellers. So we went there and got the stuff and we moved on.

Subsequently, uh, we got our first town house just in North West Calgary, not too far from my aunt, and the interesting part was that, there was two schools right across the street from there. One was a junior high school called Sir John A. MacDonald, and a senior high school called John Diefenbaker, interestingly they're both former Prime Ministers of Canada. One is a father of confederation and the other is a very well-known Canadian Prime Minister. We both started in grades eight and nine respectively. And so we were asked that we could probably move up another grade given the credentials that you brought but we said no it is better for us to get acclimatized, so therefore it is better for us to start just about where we would be back in East Africa, in Uganda. So we started our school years in Canada. My brother was in grade eight, I was in grade nine. As I was going to school, this was the time in the fall that they would do a lot of winter activities. So initially when I went in there I said what do you want to play and I said basketball. And then I asked them, you have winter sports here, because we wanted to get to know what winter sports were all about. And they said yeah, yeah you can play it. So they had curling, so I had my first chance starting to curl right, in fact, a week after I got here. I went curling, to a club called Inglewood curling club which is still in existence in Calgary. And that's where I learned how to curl so that was a very unique experience for me.

And then subsequently, I also learned how to ski through the school. These were the types of programs that we called lifetime activities. This was a school that was also predominantly, still did not have visible minorities in the school and was still in a neighbourhood that you know was mostly of the area that was there. I remember when I went to my first class and I went to first was my home class and next was English, and here I am this nice little guy from Kampala, Uganda, obedient on how to respect the teachers. And I go to this class and I see a little bit of a chaos and I could not figure out why. Because the kids were of a different mindset that I was, which was, you know, a very unique experience also. However, you know if you are willing to accommodate and understand other kids in the school, you know, then you start to make friends and you start to get along. And we did that, we participated in a number of events while we were in junior high, and my brother was very specific and he, one night they had a talent night. And so my brother participated and did an Indian dance, you know one of the Bollywood song dances which at that time I don't think anybody would've known what it was at that time in the 1970s and he did it and that was a very unique thing and people appreciated it. I wasn't as brave as my brother at that time yet we continued and we made friends there and there were kids there either from my neighbourhood or around. And the next year I went to high school which was John Diefenbaker, my brother continued to grade nine.

My father always believed in using that, you know, in order to establish yourself well you have to own your own property as soon as possible. So within two years, uh 1974, middle of 1974 we bought our first house in Canada. The community that we had belonged to had gone from 50 people when I first came to close to 200 so it was starting to grow and that was very unique. A very interesting aspect also was that in terms of our prayer halls, the first prayer hall after we moved out of somebody's home was a hall, was a social hall, which was adjacent to a converted church that had been made into a mosque run by the Muslim community in the community of Forest Lawn. So here we are as a community of Muslims using a social hall that was again run by other Muslims. A very interesting concept when you come in terms of an appreciation, you know of different paths of the same faith you know so it was very unique. That really made a big impact on us.

We moved into the community of Pembroke Meadows which still exists and I started my high school in grade eleven, in a school called Forest Lawn high school. I went from a very predominantly very non-immigrant community to a community that was very immigrant and the school reflected that, the high school. So it was very interesting to see the dynamics that were happening, and it was in an area from an economically from a very upper middle class neighbourhood to a neighbourhood that was lower middle class. So economically the school reflected that, you know, and that made a very interesting dynamic to be there. Yet I loved it. We loved it, my brother loved it because the school respected who we are. They looked at us as students that would make an impact and we did lots of good stuff there. And I remember I had friends there who really ensured that they took care of us if some things happened, both my brother and I. Because you know, being the type of school it was, things can happen that maybe somebody would not like it. But we had good friends that looked after each other and it was a good grounding on how we could all live together, how we could all enjoy the community.

So I continued my grade school there up until grade twelve and I got my high school diploma from there and then subsequently, I had to go back and do another year at another school in Calgary called Western Canada high school where I learned how to debate because I was a member of the model parliament and it gave me a chance to be a model parliament person. The uniqueness of that was that, you know, if you, the idea that you don't need to be a leader to influence policy in this country. Because remember my leader of the party was a gentlemen called Marty and I happened to be his campaign manager and I learned how to campaign so that he could be the leader. I knew I could never be one because of the dynamics of the school, that's fine. But I learned, ok, I can still have an impact on policy so it was interesting. And our speaker at that time, was a speaker from the Alberta legislature, his

name was Art Dickson, former speaker for the Alberta Legislature, so again a unique experience in seeing how that all worked out.

So we continued with that, one story I like to tell is that while I was in uh junior high and high school, I became a Royal Canadian Army Cadet. So um, you can imagine my father's reaction, that here was this boy who had come from a military dictatorship and said oh I want to join the cadet core. My brother also joined a cadet corps called the Royal Navy Cadet Corps in Calgary and both of us were in cadets. I was in for three years and he was in for two years. The cadets taught us a lot of good stuff in terms of discipline, in term of deportment, in terms of just being human beings. And we enjoyed it, he enjoyed it, so did I. In fact, I won some award for it. One of which was for best cadet and I won a rifle and I still have it here and uh I got the opportunity to go to England on a military scholarship, just a little two-week scholarship which was fine. Subsequently, I did continue in the primary reserve and I did another three years and then that was the end of my idea of the military but we got a chance to see what the Canadian military was all about.

After that we finished our high schools and then I began my university. And I began my university at Mount Royal College. I did my first two years there and I loved my subjects which were economics, and social, and business, you know, and I'd finally started making changes saying ok, I wanted to go. It was also a time of dilemma because we're talking about around the early 1980s and there was money being made in this city and you had to ask yourself do you want to continue with school or do you want to go work. And I remember our father distinctly telling us, "no Nazir you go to school. Try and get your education before you do anything else," you know, so we had to continue with school. We relied on student loans to do that, and we did. I did four years there at the University of Calgary after that. I got my bachelor of commerce in finance and I began, you know, doing activities at the school. I was also one of the principle persons help establish what was called the Aga Khan Ismaili Student Association or ISAs as we call it, in 1978. And this again was now a chance for us to get the community students because we were starting, the students were starting to come through. And so they needed a community that could organize it which we did not only social gatherings but a religious gathering everyday which was a place of gathering which we call a jamat khane. So again, a place of gathering and it really made sense to it and the good aspect of it was that because it was located at the University of Calgary, the local community members also came and participated in the evening prayers which was good.

I finished my university degree and then I began working for the Royal Bank of Canada for eight years I worked there. I was mostly in administration and the career was advancing at a reasonable rate. I

would not say it was phenomenal but reasonable and the biggest thing was that I would've jumped much higher or gone much quicker if I was willing to be mobile but we have to remember that we have family obligations and that required me to stay in the city of Calgary. So that's what happened in my case, is you know, I continued. I worked for the Royal Bank of Canada from '81 to '89 and then from '89 I moved to the Government of Canada and I began working for Canada Customs. It was also the time, I did have my education and I moved into the government because the Canadian government was now starting to recognize the strength of the employment equity programs and the idea that you know what there may be some needs for employment equity as we are trying to get the Canadian public service to be more reflective of the community of Canada. And so, being a business major, I obviously went into the one area that I liked. Um, began that whole area of uh working at Canada Customs has been evolved and now I'm with Canada Border Services Agency and I've been in the government almost twenty-five years, again working as an auditor. I also had the opportunity to complete my education as a certified management accountant or a professional accountant and I'm still a member of the association and I've continued with that.

The community that I live in, in Calgary has been a phenomenal community. I've seen the growth of this community through population wise of 200,000 to over 1.3 million, 1.4 million now. The community of Calgary has never in my mind ever made me detested. It has always been a very involving community, a very accommodating community, and we respect, there's a matter of respect in this community. My family in 1988, at the Olympic winter game, the fifteenth Olympic Games, were volunteers. My whole family were volunteers. My father worked as a ticketing volunteer, my mother worked as access control volunteer at the Olympic oval, my brother who is an artist and who has majored in interior design was a docent or a worker with the spirit sings exhibit which was the main exhibition held at the Glenbow Museum which articulated the First Nations of Canada and I happened to be a VIP driver. So again the inclusiveness was there, we were able to contribute ourselves into the community."

Shezan: "Nazir uncle do you mind if I just go to the bathroom quickly?"

Nazir: "Yeah go ahead. So continuing with the career in Canada it has been good. I cannot complain. The environment has been good for my career and I've enjoyed working for Canada Customs and Revenue Agency and now when I work for Canada Border Services Agency which is another department of the government, I have never had any issues when it comes to working for the government of Canada. I

have never had any issues in the working environment of this country. It is merit based, at least from my perspective. Yes there might be some personal stuff there, but I cannot judge for it. I just look at what I have, and I cannot complain. I've also had a chance to look at Canada in the light of being a country of opportunity and adventure. It is a country that does let you as an individual gain as much as you wish to gain within what we call the decorum of being very British or English. In the sense that as long as your manners are there, as long as you're willing to understand the psyche of the Canadian population you can successfully do very well here.

I have been fortunate that I have traveled this country from sea to sea to sea. The only place I've not been to is Nunavut but I've been to every provincial and territorial capital except for Iqaluit in Nunavut. So that is something that not a lot of people can say that they've done. So that is a very good thing, you have to understand Canada by traveling it. You have to understand what Canada is all about, when you start understanding the people of Canada. It is very difficult for persons who have not done that to then suddenly make judgement calls on what it means to be a Canadian. I've always taken the understanding that we are very, we are a very merit based society, a meritocratic based society and we have to work hard to achieve what our goals are. And you have to embrace what Canadian values and identities are as a whole. Unfortunately, when immigrants that are more later than when we came in the '70s have had a difficult task to understand that and that has created issues of identity for them. At least in my case, I have no issues with my identity.

I am not a hyphenated Indian-Canadian I more of a Canadian that happens to have Indian and African origins. That is something that we all have to be very, very articulate about. That we have to understand that. Overall, my life in Canada to date has been good. My accomplishments here are by the grace of the almighty. I've had the chance to educate myself here, which if I was still in East Africa might have been more difficult and that I would say about anything. Even for my brother it would have been difficult. Our values and systems in this country are par excellence. We have to embrace them and we have to articulate them, not only to us within in Canada but also outside Canada. I cannot say anything that is not conducive for being a good Canadian, we are good Canadian so long as we ensure that we follow the principles of this country. Governments in this country go up and down, that's normal, that's why it's called a democracy. At least the bottom line is, at least for me personally, at least in this country democracy does not entail a lack of security, a lack of freedom, a lack of being able to move around. In this country, you are still able to do all that and your safety is assured, it is not out of question. Anything else?"

Shezan: "Excellent, I guess do you want to expand a bit more on, you were saying that your personal identity, you are a Canadian of Indian origins, what would that sort of mean to be a Canadian to you?"

Nazir: "To me there are three areas that I look at when I say I'm a Canada. First of all, I look at myself as a Canadian, as a member, as a people of Canada. I do not consider myself a Canadian who happens to be of Indian or, sorry, I don't consider myself as a Canadian with a hyphenated Indian beside it, you know. To me Canadian means the subject and I will not say, oh I am a Canadian of Indian origin. Yes, I am, you can see that, visually, I am Indian origin but I'm not going to say that I'm from India because the question we always ask in this country is where do you come from? No, it doesn't matter where I come from, I am Canadian, I embrace what I bring to this country, my religious ethics, my culture, my foods, I am still Canadian. The defense of Canada is paramount to me. The defense of another country is not paramount to me because I have nothing to do with that country. So to me I am not a hyphenated Canadian. I embrace all cultures, and all music in Canada. I can embrace French culture, I can embrace East Asian culture, I can embrace Native, Aboriginal, and First Nations culture as long as we know they all join to become what is Canada, so that's important. It's only in this country that the opportunity of education, especially education, from a state level is incredible. Yes, there are other countries that have state education, I still believe not to the extent that we see in this country. You know the access to education is important, the access to healthcare. Yes, we have issues with healthcare but it's still there which we would not be able to do in other countries. So those ideas of economic well-being, of educational well-being, of social well-being are important in what makes me a Canadian."

Shezan: "Very interesting, and then when you guys first came, what did your parents end up doing in terms of work?"

Nazir: My father and my mother, my father his background was that his first job was that he was working in a store.

Shezan: "This was when they were in about their early thirties?"

Nazir: "No, my mother was about 32 and my father was 40 around there. So uh my father started working in a store, the 711 store. You know doing the 711 stuff and it was funny because we were all there to go and help him. Another exciting thing, my mother's first job was sewing because she knew

how to sow. And she continued with that for a long time. We did operate a business in this city for about five years making drapes and actually ten years we made drapes, you know. In between my father did a stint at the Canadian Pacific Railway Ogden yards. There was at that time CP rail had hired a number of immigrants to work there. CP rail always hired immigrants and it happened to be that at that time a lot of the Indian Canadians or Asians Canadians who had come from Uganda were hired or from East Africa and then from there he did some real estate and then he always wanted to be in his own business so he established a small business here. So we continued with that business environment and that was something he did. And then when he retired, then we did close the business, we did some home based business but we were old enough by then that we could support them and all that and then he continued from there. He passed away. And my mother did stop doing the drapery business when her health failed but that was it, you know, so I think it was more the opportunities that we got, to do our studying to make a life in this country, which is very important for us. The safety and security was guaranteed for us which was very important."

Shezan: "And then, I guess your father's siblings and mother's siblings, where did they end up going?"

Nazir: "Ok, so my father has seven siblings, three of them ended up in England, ok. Again, they continued with their lives as best they could, they got married and lived in parts of Wales England, London, you know. The other one, one of my father's siblings was here already my aunt. Another aunt came over also, so that was two and they stayed here, on my mother's side, her siblings ended up in England also and subsequently moved from England to Canada after things got better. The other siblings also got to Canada because they had already been in England much earlier than the Uganda crisis, but as we started migrating to Canada they were able to come under their own steam to come to Canada and made a life for themselves here. So yeah."

Shezan: "So I guess the majority are here and then some in England"

Nazir: "Just one in England now"

Shezan: "Oh, ok, wow. Is there anything you wanted to add at all?"

Nazir: "No"

Shezan: "Because that was perfect, I didn't even need to ask any of my questions since you went through everything. Awesome, thank you very much!"

Nazir: "If you do run into issues please let me know."

[End of transcript]