

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project
An Oral History with Nizar Fakirani

Archives and Research Collections
Carleton University Library
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Narrator: Nizar Fakirani
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Abstract:

Mr. Nizar Fakirani came to Canada as a Ugandan Asian refugee in his late teens. His family was one of the last to leave before the expulsion deadline of November 8th and most of them were sent to a refugee camp in Malta. They were eventually reunited with their family in Montreal.

He reflects fondly on his childhood in Uganda recalling a happy lifestyle with his family and his parents' strong connection to Uganda. Upon hearing of the expulsion decree the Fakirani family along with many Ugandan Asians were shocked and hoped that over time the President would change his mind. After a year in a refugee camp in Malta, they were sponsored by family members in Canada. Mr. Fakirani recalls adjusting to Canada and his early years of schooling at McGill University and the University of Ottawa.

Currently, Mr. Fakirani is a practicing lawyer in Toronto and his family has been instrumental in the creation of the Uganda Collection at Carleton University. Their team work and support spearheaded the establishment of the collection and was created in honour of their parents Hassanali and Sakinabai Fakirani.

This oral history was conducted in Mr. Fakirani's office in Toronto, Ontario

Shezan Muhammedi: “So this is an oral history being done on June 21st and Nizar uncle I'll let you take it away.”

Nizar Fakirani: “Oh, ok, I really don't know where to start but uh, of course my family comes from Uganda. We were all born in Uganda, my dad was born in Uganda. And we had a good life in Uganda. We were not extremely wealthy but we were well to do. We were able to afford more than the necessities of life. We all went to good schools. We had free public schools until high school and then after high school you had to pay for your educations. So most of the kids, in my family also, we all got education. And so the life was good generally, we went to school, we had friends. All our families, extended families were nearby in the same town where we grew up or not too far away. The education system was very good. It was a system was linked to the Cambridge University o-levels. So you had to sit for those exams coming from London.

So we always thought of ourselves as Ugandans. Not any different from the natives, native Ugandans. But of course we were treated differently because of course as being a visible minority there was certain restrictions, especially on businesses. Asians were not allowed to engage in certain business activities that were reserved for blacks. On the whole we got along, we had no problems with the local people. And there was hardly any incident of racial strife. It was only at the rare occasion where politicians would use the race card for of course you know personal advantage but other than that, as far as the local people were concerned, we used to get along very well. We treated them nicely, they treated us, also, with the same respect. So there was no indication at all that there was ever going to be a problem of the nature that did occur under Idi Amin.

And when the problem did arise and when Idi Amin declared that the Asians had 90 days to leave the country, that came as a shock, as a complete shock. There were Asians there for more than three-four generations and we followed the guidance of our spiritual leader the Aga Khan and opted for Ugandan citizenship when Uganda became an independent country. So we always thought of ourselves as Ugandans. We never had in our minds any thought of leaving the country. We had never had any thought of emigrating out of the country. Our roots were there and we were doing generally well so we had no reasons to think of moving away and out of the country. So when Idi Amin made the order that the Asians had to leave it was a shock and we were all trying to find the reason why he would have done this. Different people have different interpretation of the reasoning, some said it was personal, that he

had some issues with the British government, the Ugandan economy under Idi Amin was not doing well. Foreign aid had come to a trickle and he had asked for some aid from the UK which was denied. So it was in a way, it was like getting back at the UK. We thought that he would probably go after Asians who had decided not to become Ugandan citizens at the time of independence. So his target would have been the Asian who retained British passports, British citizenship or Indian citizenship but not Ugandan Asians who had opted to stay as Ugandans after independence. So it was a shock of course there was the hope and there was the expectation that Amin would change his mind at some point. That really he didn't mean to do this, and he would at least exempt Ugandan Asians from this expulsion order. But as time went by as the deadline grew nearer we all came to a realization that we would have to all pack up and leave. So, of course that was a very difficult decision but we all saw slowly our neighbours all packing up and leaving. And uhm"

Shezan: "You guys were living where at the time?"

Nizar: "In Soroti"

Shezan: "In Soroti, ok,"

Nizar: "So that's a small town and about 5-6 hours drive from Kampala but slowly and slowly we see our neighbours and our friends all leaving but we were especially my dad was very steadfast in his resolve to stay. Because we didn't have any options, he felt that we had no options, what would we do if we left the country? We would have to reestablish our lives. He didn't have any particular skills; we didn't have any money outside the country because we never prepared for something like this. So everything that we had we owned, everything was in the country. So we but of course towards the end we came to this realization that we had to go. Initially, the family had decided that only the girls in the family, so my sisters, would leave. So they applied for and got accepted by Canada to immigrate to Canada. But then we decided also as the deadline grew nearer, it became with the statement that were being made by Idi Amin, they were not very reassuring that we it would not be safe for any Asian irrespective of their citizenship to remain in the country. So uh, and there was a campaign going on of fear and of intimidation. And the whole purpose of all this was to get rid, to cleanse the Asians from Uganda. And it was working and the neighbours, word was spreading, so finally my dad gave in, what we were suggesting to him from the beginning that we would probably also have to leave the country. And our

Ugandan citizenship was rescinded by Idi Amin and the passports were all confiscated. So we were stateless and that was not a very good position to be in. Uh there was no country that would accept responsibility for you.

Of course Canada did a tremendous job by coming to the aid of quite a large number of stateless Ugandan Asians and they came in and took close to 6,000 Asians straight from Kampala to Canada. But we were left behind because it was too late to apply to Canada. My family had always intended to stay. So we stayed until the last day, we left the country on the last day of the deadline which was as I remember as November 8 1972. So we left, we had no choice. We went to the United Nations and they took responsibility for us. They processed us and we left on, if it was not the last day, it must have been the second last plane on the last day to leave the country. No idea where we were going. We had few belongings that we could carry and as you travel to the capital, Kampala, and then from Kampala to the airport, there were army checkpoints and roadblocks everywhere. And as you went through these road blocks you were stripped of all the few things that you could carry. So it was not a very good experience to go through. But we made it to the airport with the help of United Nations. They had buses from Kampala and carrying the UN flag so we were able to go through the road blocks to the airport ok. But at the airport again you were checked. Again, there, the few personal belongings that you could carry were taken. But we managed to get on the plane, left the country, we had no idea where we were going. The UN at that point, the expectation was that we were going somewhere for a short time and that we would come back. This was of course not to be.

We ended up landing in Malta which was in a way a good thing because Malta is a part of the commonwealth, it is an English speaking country. So we were very well received there. We were taken care of, very nicely taken care of there. But of course it was still a camp and uh there we stayed there for almost a year while we were being processed to immigrate to Canada. The good thing about being in Malta was that it was an English speaking country so we were able to adjust quite quickly, and all the kids, including myself, we were able to go to school there. So we joined the school system there and continued on with high school in Malta for a year. And then when we were accepted to come to Canada, my sisters who were already in Canada, fortunately, they were here so they were able to sponsor us. And because of them we were successful in getting visa, immigration status to come to Canada. But it still took one year. So after one year we landed in Montreal and my sisters were already in Montreal, they had settled in Montreal, they found work there, so they were well settled. They had a place, a small

place, but we managed so we settled in with them. Me and my brother, my other brother started working. Later me and my brother who was also in school still at the time we resumed our schooling.”

Shezan: “And you guys are four brothers, two sisters?”

Nizar: “Yeah, we have five brothers, and four sisters?”

Shezan: “So all four came before?”

Nizar: “There was one sister, younger than me, she was with us in the camp and I had two other brothers with me in the camp. And then one brother at the time was studying in India. He was, that was Alim's dad he was doing his aeronautical engineering there. He had finished but he was stuck there so he had nowhere to go because he couldn't come back to Uganda. And then after we arrived in Canada, a year later, then we sponsored him and then he was able to come. So then the family was able to be reunited. And my eldest brother who's married, he also left Uganda almost the same time just a day or two earlier than us, but he ended up, that's Salim's dad, he ended up in a camp in Malta, not in Malta in Italy. And we ended up in Malta. But then they also were, eventually, they were able to get the visa to come to Canada from Italy so the family was then finally reunited in Montreal. The whole family was together in Montreal so that was a blessing.

What more can I say, it was initially a struggle getting used to a new environment, a new culture, a new way of doing things but schooling was good because the standard of education was quite high in Uganda. So me and brother who were still in school didn't experience too much of a disruption, we were able to continue. My brother who was in form five, in Uganda which is like post-high school but pre-university and he managed to get into university at McGill. I commenced high school, last year of high school, which is CEGEP in Montreal. So I did my CEGEP in Montreal and I also managed to get into McGill. So my sisters and my brothers were all working. My parents also were in Montreal with us and uhm we finished, I finished my BA, my brother finished his BSc at McGill. He managed to get into dentistry, and I managed to get into Law at Ottawa. So I finished law in Ottawa and then I did my articleship in Brantford, a city near Hamilton. And then moved to Toronto. So since then, after I was called to the bar, my brother moved from Montreal to Calgary and he set up his practice there. I set up my law practice in Toronto just about the same time.”

Shezan: "And that's Sabdar, is in Calgary"

Nizar: "Sabdar, yes. So he set up his practice in Calgary. I set up mine in Toronto. My brother stayed back, Bahadur, Alim's dad stayed back in Montreal and he's been there. He got a job because of his training as an aeronautical engineer there with Rolls Royce and with Pratt and Whitney which are aviation companies. And he's been there, ever since, I think he's going to be retiring this year so he's done well. My other brothers, my eldest brother from Italy, moved to Kitchener and started a business there. My other brother who came with us from Malta, got married, and moved to Vancouver. So now we have a family that is spread all over Canada right? Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. So we are spread all over. But generally we have done all well. And we can only be thankful to Canada for coming to our aid and also allowing us to come and restart our lives here. We came with absolutely nothing. But even the airfare that we came here was paid for by some agencies and we paid them every dollar that they extended to us for the expense for the travel expenses. So we've done generally very well, no complaints. Canada has been good to us."

Shezan: "And then so, sort of back in Uganda, your family's business, did the have a business or were they working?"

Nizar: "Yes, yes, my father had a, what I would, something equivalent here would be a pharmacy. He had a medicine shop right? And uhm, so he was the only pharmacy in that town so that was his business. Most of the other businesses were in retail clothing, that kind of business, the Asians were in those kinds of businesses but my dad had taken a course in pharmaceuticals from some South African college and then he set up his shop. It's a pharmacy like shop and he was doing well. At one point we were importing medication from Asia, from Singapore specifically, we got some medications from Singapore and then he used to go around the country and sell the medication. But the base was in Soroti where, he had a shop here, a medicine shop"

Shezan: "Interesting, and then Idi Amin's government had granted some exemptions for people that could stay. Did pharmacists fall in that category?"

Nizar: "No"

Shezan: "Because he had extended it to teachers, and I think some certain professionals and I was wondering if yeah, pharmacists were exempted"

Nizar: "Even if he had, I think that for my dad there was no option for him to stay. There was no one, we were the last family, almost the last family to leave Soroti. There was hardly any Asians, it was just not safe to remain behind in that kind of environment"

Shezan: "And then as family started to leave, you guys were sort of realizing that now it's maybe time for us to leave, or were you still, was your dad still holding on that things might change?"

Nizar: "We were very much holding on to the hope that we would be allowed to remain and right to the end and that's why we made the decision at the very end, like I said, we were on the last plane, the last family, one of the last families to leave Uganda and on the last day of the deadline because we never intended and we never planned to leave. And the expectation was that my sisters would just leave and when things stabilized and it became more secure and more welcoming that maybe even they would return to Uganda and then we would continue on as a family. But of course then it became very obvious that we had to leave."

Shezan: "And then when you guys came to Canada, three sisters were working?"

Nizar: "Two sisters were already working"

Shezan: "The younger sister was with you?"

Nizar: "Yes she was with us"

Shezan: "And then am I missing one, there were four sisters?"

Nizar: "Four, and the eldest sister, her husband held a British passport so they left for London, for England. So they were never with our family. They were on their own and they left for England"

Shezan: "And the two sisters were working, and then your eldest brother started working or he was coming from India?"

Nizar: "Yes my eldest brother was working. The three brothers, my eldest three brothers starting working right away. So Salim's dad and my other brother younger than him, Aziz, and then Alim's dad Bahadur along with my two sisters"

Shezan: "So you and your brother and the youngest sister were in school"

Nizar: "Right"

Shezan: "Ok, good, I've got the family tree. And then your mom and dad did not work when they were in Canada?"

Nizar: "My mom did not work because my dad did take some courses while he was here but he did not have the skills. Like he was not, his skills would not be recognized here so he couldn't go and work here in a pharmacy and also the language problem because in Quebec, you need to also be conversant in French so that was the other issue. And so they were home, yeah. Except for the initial period where he took some courses to get some new skills and some language courses as well."

Shezan: "And then how did you find CEGEP, how did you find interacting with Canadians?"

Nizar: "CEGEP was a very good experience for me because I was initially intimidated when I started because I didn't know if I would fit it. I didn't know how well I would do. And I wasn't too sure also about the language. But I did extremely well in CEGEP and I found it easy actually. So I breezed through CEGEP, I did well, McGill accepted me. I did very well in McGill also, I got into law school after two years of my bachelors. At that time, law schools were accepting applicants after two years within your bachelors. I went to McGill, I got a first class honours from there. I got a university scholarship every year when I was there. And so I just applied, I hadn't finished my BA at McGill. I applied to two or three universities just to try and see if they would accept me into law school and I got accepted. I got accepted by Ottawa which was closest, and also the good thing about Ottawa was that the Quebec government student loans they extended it to students that were going to Ottawa U. There was a common law school and civil law section so we had students from Quebec as well in the university and in the law school so it worked out quite good for me. So the experience, the schooling experience was great here you know? We were quite, we adjusted quite well. It was a seamless almost. It was amazing because I didn't think I

was quite sure about my future when we landed here as to what, I thought maybe I would just end up finding some job, some menial job. But when I started school, we started to do well, and university was ok and I managed to get into law school. So it's been a different life all together”

Shezan: “And then sort of getting used to the weather and the food, how was that side of things?”

Nizar: “That was a challenge, yes, Montreal has so much snow and we arrived there in November just as the winter was starting right? So we had never experienced snow before right? So that was quite an experience. And Montreal used to have so many snow storms, I can remember. So that was a big adjustment, the cold, the cold weather and we of course coming from Uganda, coming from a tropical country and that was a big adjustment. The weather was a big big adjustment but after all these years now we are used to it and Toronto is has much milder winters than the rest of the country, fortunately”

Shezan: “And then sort of your family getting used the food and sort of thing?”

Nizar: “Yeah that took some time. The food was mostly if you are eating out but my mom used to cook, my sister, my eldest sister used to cook also so we used to have a lot of the food, and the food at home was quite similar to what we used to eat back in Uganda. But when you go out of course it's different, it's not fresh like in Uganda we used to have all the fresh fruit. Poultry was all fresh, there was not any frozen, like we have here. So it was a change as well but we got used to it. It wasn't too bad”

Shezan: “How was raising your children in Canada?”

Nizar: “Raising children here, because we, when I got married and I had my children I was already here close to forty years. So really my formative years I have been here right? So it wasn't too much of a problem, raising children here. Both my children are born here. They're quite well adjusted and we tried to make sure that they have some kind of a balance in terms of, and also to be, to reinforce their identity first of all. But also to reinforce that they are Canadians and we have to identify with the society. This is our country, this is our home and we have to make some compromises but at the same time there are those core values that we must maintain. So we have tried to reinforce that, we have tried to bring them up with those kinds of values and to maintain a balance and I think so far we have done well and I think so far they have done well too, shukar [thanks to God's grace]”

Shezan: "And then sort of you, you just touched on this a little, the identity bit, so then how would you identify yourself? Would you say you're Uganda-Canadian, no wrong answer?"

Nizar: "Like a lot of new Canadians, we have multiple identities but the core of it is that we share these values of pluralism, of accepting differences. So at the core of it, it is of course that we are Canadians and our loyalty to this country and our identification with its people is paramount. By the same token, we have other identities as Ismailis that we are followers of the Aga Khan and we have certain core values as Ismailis. That we want to maintain too. And these values are not inconsistent, they are not in conflict with our other identities. So in a way they are complimentary and I think that's the best part about it, that there's no conflict really between these identities and that makes it easier. And so the adjustment process has been very smooth I would say. Because we have had a more modern approach to religion and how we perceive ourselves. So that has made it easier, and of course the guidance we have received from the Aga Khan of course has reinforced this. It has made it much much easier and for the kids as well, our kids as well, I think, we have high hopes and we are optimistic for them and for their future in Canada"

Shezan: "Awesome, well thank you very much, is there anything that you wanted to add?"

Nizar: "Well I guess I've said quite a bit, but we consider ourselves, first and foremost proud Canadians and we will always be indebted to this country. We will make sure that the generation that follows remembers this and we will try at every opportunity we can to give back to this country, it's a great country."

Shezan: "Well thank you so much Nizar uncle, that was fantastic."