

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project
An Oral History with Rossbina Nathoo

Archives and Research Collections
Carleton University Library
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Narrator: Rossebina Nathoo
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Abstract:

Rossebina Nathoo recalls a playful and pleasant upbringing in Kampala, Uganda. Her parents and grandparents were originally from Mbale and Masaka but moved to the major city when she was young. She attended both the Aga Khan primary and secondary school in Kampala and remembered an excellent but strict school system. As Ugandan citizens, her family was rendered stateless by the government and were given asylum in Canada.

Rossebina was in her late teens when she arrived in Canada and opted to attend one semester of high school before moving on to university. She recalls an incredible reception in both Montreal and in Vancouver. Her favourite subject was English and an essay she wrote on her initial days in Canada appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* in early 1973.

Over time Rossebina started her own travel consultancy group and settled down in Calgary after getting married. Once in Calgary she dedicated her time to raising her two children and volunteered vigorously within the local community which continues to this day.

This oral history was conducted at a local coffee shop in Calgary.

Shezan Muhammedi: “So this is an oral history being done on July 20th and Rossebina aunty, I'll let you take it away with growing up in Uganda.”

Rossebina Nathoo: “Ok, thank you. So uhm I was born in a small town called Masaka. Masaka is not very far from, but closed to Mbarara.”

Shezan: “Yeah it's not too far, my aunt is from Masaka.”

Rossebina: “Masaka was a lovely place my paternal grandparents came from that place so uhm and my maternal grandparents came from uh Mbale. Right so, but I grew up in Kampala because when my mom and dad got married, they were very very young. I had a brother Altaff then, he won a lottery ticket. A football-soccer ticket, it was Liverpool. My dad loved playing those lottery tickets, anyway he won a major lottery and that's what made him move into the city. So since then we lived in the city. So my childhood memories of being in Uganda are living in this little home called Madras Gardens. It was in old Kampala and very close to the old Kampala school and the um, what's it called, the Kabaka Hill. Yeah that's all I remember and you know it's funny our communities there, residential neighbourhood communities were named after the Indian cities. So there was Bombay Gardens, Madras Gardens, Delhi Gardens, what was the other one, I can't remember. Anyway I remember that and what else can I say, yeah the old Kampala school was next to us, it was just up the road. And the Aga Khan school that we went to was about um, a 20 minute walk. But for little feet, it felt like half an hour right?”

Laughter

That was quite an experience so, Uganda was a beautiful place. It has always been known as the pearl of Africa. But unfortunately, when all this happened it regressed back years and years and years which is too bad right? So now my childhood experiences well, what can I say, it was so naive right? Like we played doll with each other with the neighbourhoods. Um the only African people we were exposed to at that time were our servants you know, the black people.

So we spoke a little bit of kitchen Swahili, like bring me this, bring me that, which I have forgotten now. My husband can speak fluent Swahili, if he was thrown into Tanzania he would just ramble off. I'd have to struggle; I would have to struggle. But wow it was a um, school was wonderful, we went to an Aga Khan based school. We had multicultural people there, meaning we had the Hindus, black Africans, we had Ismailis. To us, that was our world, the Ismaili community was our world. We played with our Ismaili kids, we played with our neighbourhood. We played all these beautiful sports, we played hide and seek, and we played, I dunno if you know this it's a game called 7 stones. It was called nagia, we would hit these 7 stones and then everybody would disperse and run and then we'd play tag. Wow that was a neighbourhood get together. It was amazing how all the neighbours would get together. And usually around this neighbourhood there would be a compound, they called it a compound. Or a little park area. You know? So that was our play area, we did not have toys and things like that. Bicycles, yes, but we played with sticks and stones. So that little game was called nagil.

And if we played wheel, we would use a bicycle, you know the frame of a bicycle, we would use a stick and roll it along the roadside. Playing with that right and I loved going bare feet. Everything was tarmac or mud roads but bare feet yeah, I don't know what it was about me. And always running in scraggly clothes, petticoat you know they call it because it was so hot all the time. So anyway so that kind of a community living being completely safe, oblivious to any danger, yes going to schools, studying seeing other people, praying, going to jamat khana [Ismaili prayer hall] everyday because we had such a strong base of the Ismaili community. So we went to, we used to called it religious education classes right? So we had education classes every evening. We started our school assemblies with prayer. Just like you would see in a convent school but at the Aga Khan school so everything was Ismaili oriented. And wow, totally safe and very strict! It was very autocratic, it was a very British way of bringing up the kids. So you did get punished by getting canes from the headmaster. We used to get those what you call, hand uh, hand slashes with the canes and ouch. You get one or two of those and you'd remember to smarten up and get your homework done. A whack on your bottom with one of

those canes, yeah it was abuse at that time but we didn't know but that's how we grew up right?

So and everything was community oriented, our world was our family, our friends and yes, uh at that time we were told to keep away from Africans. Why? Because we feared them, they were of the poor. They would come home, they were usually labelled as thieves right? They would come to the house in the middle of the night and come and rob homes. That was the most terrifying, traumatic, you know you'd have dreams saying oh I'm not sleeping in my bed alone or in my room by myself because I'm dreaming of a thief coming in or I hear noises or you know things like that. And it wasn't as scary as knowing there was a thief in the house it was after that the thief was caught. The robber was caught, oh my God, they would just punish him so badly like you know so much harm was done to that poor person. But then we don't know where they come from, what does poverty do to them? What is it that they are looking for? Were they really bad people? We don't know, we don't know any of this. It just left a very traumatic you know uhm, how do you called impressions as a little child, you know, with things like that. But as a grew older and I became more aware of my surroundings, you know, I've been one of those persons, I always had an open mind.

So once I went to secondary school and we we're integrated with the other African kids around us. So to me they're people, you know, and so you should see the shock of my parents, eyes, and when I first brought an African student home, my classmate. They freaked out, you know, saying you're not allowed to do this and you're not allowed to see this person, and you're not allowed to go out with this person. I said we're just doing homework. So things like that, so yeah it did come off as being a little prejudice but then I don't know what was all that about. So I don't know but we were brought up that way."

Shezan: "Yeah"

Rosbina: "But as we engaged, as adults and educated youths in school, it became very obvious you know that colour did not matter. You know that we were two intelligent people here. We were amongst a group of friends, we were part of what you call the rotary club, we participated in sports. You know we did things together, and they were appreciated Asians for our culture and what we did and we were appreciating them you know the African youths. Yeah, and uh what else can I say, yeah as a little girl I was not allowed to go anywhere on my own. You know like we were always being protected. Either we had an *aya* [nanny] with us or an *ascari* [security guard] with us, you know a guard, to make sure that we were either walked to school together or we were you know, if we were going to jamaat khane that day. A lot of it was done on foot, we never really thought of cars or things like that. But our play, we would play hideouts, we'd be on the roof of the house, we would climb on to the rooftops and that would be like oh being on top of the world. You know being on the roof tops, hide and seek. You know things like that. Simple, simple little things. And uhm, yeah in my home I was allowed to have a pet. We were allowed a dog, we called it happy. And every time a stranger or a passerby would come by, he was an Alsatian dog, she was an Alsatian dog and she would bark. You know, so she was our protective dog, you know she'd alert of us anything came around. But that was sad because eventually she was poisoned and she died a very cruel death you know but we don't know what happened. But you see things like that happened.

So what other memories, playing with the kids around, playing hid and seek with the community, nagil, those were the fun things. Oh and one things, whenever the rainy days would come by, oh this was amazing. Ok, the grasshoppers would come by and the grasshoppers would start swarming the lights. Now the grasshoppers were a very high source of protein for the African staple food. Yeah and I loved running around because I was a little bit of a tom boy when I was a little girl. So I would run around go get the grasshoppers just like the Africans would. So I would catch those grasshoppers we would clean those insects, you know in water, de-wing them, de-feet them you know. There was a special technique, you'd see your African servant do this and I wanted to do this. So we would cook and sauté those *sanenes* [grasshoppers] as we would call them. And we would eat them, and they were such an amazing

delicacy and we would wait for those seasons. As soon as those grasshoppers came, those *sanenes* came, we would be out there. And that was a festival, it became like a festival you know yeah? Although we did not have things like Halloween, we did not have things like, what else do you have?"

Shezan: "Easter and Thanksgiving"

Rosbina: "Exactly, although we did not have festivals like that. But when the events and these seasons came around we celebrated those seasons. Yeah and uh that was a fun part. But surprisingly when we travelled to Thailand as adults and with our children and they had those grasshoppers one the thing and we went eww, I wouldn't eat that again you know. But see how that changed. But I think if I were to do that again, like catch those *sanenes* again or if I had an opportunity to live that part of my childhood, I would want to do that. Yeah, yeah that's something I would like to do. Because you know, there we were with the locals, with the black people, everybody was doing things together. And we were running around sharing their experience right. So food was another thing, we had a total food fusion right? We experienced cooking with African style. We had matoke, we had the plantain, the green bananas, and the *mogo* [cassava], you know those kinds of things. And those were our favourites you know. And at the same time the Africans learned how to make samosas and they became so creative. So instead of having meat or chicken samosas, they would start making chick pea samosas, or potato samosas, my goodness, yeah that was amazing.

So another experience, if I were to go back in my life and I would want to relive it, is really being with my dad. You know my dad was such an educationalist and maybe that's where I get my thing from and he was such a great volunteer right. So as we were little we had this small small mini miner, it felt like a Cadillac to us because we were so tiny. This Maurice Mini Minor sat four persons. Tiny little car but my dad he was so innovative, he had the whole car painted in safari uh safari landscape. So because he was an artist and he loved to tinker away right? So he had the whole car painted with giraffes, elephants, and you know all this. And we had this mini

Maurice Minor and we travelled through the country because he loved driving. So every school holiday he would take us some place. Travelling through East Africa right? So we'd be traveling miles and miles and miles. And with him we got to know the country, you know. We travelled to the Murchison Falls, we got to know mount Kenya, you know all this safari. The games, you know, when we went, or we would spot an elephant or a giraffe, we would be shrieking away with excitement. That wow we have that elephant out there but my dad has painted the elephant on the car, you know, that kind of a thing. He was such an amazing person that way and he was not afraid of people. And he would take us into the villages and uh I have actually explored being at the cotton fields, you know because cotton was a major export in Uganda. So I've been into the cotton fields, where my dad has shown me how cotton grows and we had to use it in our hands. Well our teachers never took us for field trips. Today we call them as field trips but you know those were the real live learning experiences. So if today, maybe this generation would not know how a cotton ball rolls but I certainly do. You know, I know that, I touched it, felt it, and thought wow.

And um this experience of what is an equator for example. Ok, the equator line runs through Uganda. So the last time we went to Uganda with the boys, I was so excited to share this, the equator line because we have that symbolic, you know the circular thing that says Uganda and it says the equator and the line goes through it right? But my boys were not that interested in that. So what you know? That kind of thing, they had a different perspective has Canadian kids, North American born children. But to me as a little child, it was like wow I'm actually in a certain part of the Earth you know? That's the kind of feeling I got from my dad. So as we had pictures taken there you know? I did not want to shop anywhere in Africa, but I definitely wanted to shop at the equator, I wanted a souvenir of the equator right? Even after 35 years after we traveled there right. So that was amazing and the experience by the way. We had, we went back to Uganda or East Africa after 35 years. So I really did not know what I was expecting."

Shezan: "That would have been in 2000-ish?"

Rosbina: "8, 8ish years ago? Navid and Nadeem were still very young, they were maybe 9-10 that kind of an age. They were afraid of poverty, they weren't sure, they were afraid of bugs and insects. Things like that would freak them, so if we saw a fly so what no big deal it's a fly but for them it freaked them out. So when we see caterpillars or snails you know in the water puddles we played with those things. We never had car seats in those times.

Laughter

We would sit on a scooter, 3 people on top of each other, or in a truck, like 10 of us on top of each other but you know what that was our life and we enjoyed that right. So anyway but when we took our children because Nadir uncle, my husband he's from Dar-es-salaam, and they had a history of fleeing from their country because Tanzania was being nationalized. So they left over night for the safety of their family. So they, they, whatever money they had, they took to the UK and that's where they, uh, well I wouldn't say claimed refugee status but with the little money they had they said they are here as visitors but then they ever went back. So they lost their coffee farms, they had so much wealth but they never turned back. They struggled and they struggled in the UK and they built their wealth from that, ok, through buying and selling their real estate, so when you interview Nadir uncle from his point of view as a Tanzanian refugee as an entrepreneur what they went through he, it is a fantastic eye opener. From that perspective, yeah, so now Nadir and myself we traveled to East Africa to show our boys the roots. Like ok, where did we come from, we never had the passion to go back. It was never there but we thought ok just for the sake of education let's go.

But you know when we did go there, that's when I felt the trauma, you know. I think it finally brought closure. I did not feel it, I did not miss Uganda, nothing but the moment we landed and I visited that Aga Khan school, it was like a fast track rewind of uh my childhood memory. You know, when we got there, tears just started gushing out, thinking what the hell is happening here, you know? Yeah it was all memory thinking my goodness, we loved this place we enjoyed this place, what happened, you know? I think that was a real closure for me. After going back

there to see my goodness everything had deteriorated, it was so lovely but it was all in bricks and stones. It had, you know it was in rubble, trees grown all over. We went to our home in Madras gardens, we went there. There was an African family living there and we told them that um, we just want to say hello we're not here to interfere or anything but we're just visiting and I'm just showing my kids where I was born. So when we went there my goodness, that house had a huge, big, I mean there was no roof. There was such a big hole, they had never learned how to upkeep or maintain the home. The beautiful garden we had outside our home, where we used to play, dance and sing, you know with the papayas growing you know. My goodness, it was like a *shandah*, it was like a forest. Like everything was growing and nobody was taking care of it. All this family could think of was that there was a little bit of shelter in their home. But how it had deteriorated to that point nobody knows. Maybe it was through vandalism, through maybe poor care, whatever it was. You know poverty because people just wanted a shelter. There were no more ovens, and stoves, and cookers there anymore. They were back to their village style, *siglies* as we call it, the fire pits and things like that. And in fact, we offered them some money, it was about 200 dollars worth of shillings. We offered it and we said hopefully you'll get a better life from all this right. But we never looked back, we never saw, we didn't want our home. Because when we came to Canada we received material wealth in tenfolds, right? And when we saw those African people living in that home we thought ok so you know what it's ok.

Yeah, so that was a time, there was deep gratitude, that you know where we were was the best life that we had ever. And that's the best thing that Idi Amin could have done for us, right. And so that brings me back to reflecting about my story I first told. So when we first came to Canada, I was a teenager, so in class I was in, this was grade 12, there was only 6 months left to go. So I had a choice of going to either university or high school. And I decided I was gonna go to high school and do the six months and I think that was the best decision of my life because we didn't have the money and high school was free for us at that time. So uhm, English was of course my favourite subject because we spoke English. But the teachers and the students, the Canadian students and the teachers had a different uhm, conception about these refugee kids.

They thought that maybe we were from the boonies, we came from the jungle, we did not speak English, maybe we were primitive in our ways. They had absolutely no idea. So as a few weeks went by and my teacher, he was an editor of the *Vancouver Sun* and he took such great interest in my and my brother, who was also attending the same school but he was two years younger to me, Altaff, that you know he was in awe thinking my goodness here's this girl. And I would just jabber away, talking in English about this that and the other and he was quite fascinated. And so he challenged me, he said you know what, you have four weeks to graduate as a grade 12 student, and obviously, I had missed all these literature books and studies and all that. He said I want you to write an essay, what would you like to write about. I said I'm not quite sure. He says would you like to write about your experience coming to Canada. And I said sure, I would do that. And you know, it was amazing, what a wonderful teacher he was because not only, I think he emotionally counselled me by actually writing my own story.

Journalizing my feelings and how I cried through writing my story, at that time, you know how I left my pet behind. How I had to separate with my friends because I didn't know where my girlfriends were. Or how I had to separate from this new boy, who I had started to date, he was my first love you know, and oh my goodness I was so devastated to think that, oh my goodness this is the end of the world. When am I going to meet Amin again? Or where would I ever find my friends again? It was the end of the world, a clean-cut life, you know. But you know as I was writing the story, the comfort of being around a safe place, being able to express my thought clearly, to talk about exactly what I felt and what I wanted to talk about, that was really liberating. You know because in Uganda we were not allowed to. We were not allowed to talk about this, that, and the other person but that was a great liberating feeling. So yes, I wrote my essay, and he was so fascinated by it, he said you know what do you mind if we get it published in the *Vancouver Sun*. And I said, you know what, I don't know because we're not allowed to do things like that in Uganda because then those army people will come after us. And he said, no this is totally different, people need to know that you are an educated group. People need to know that you've come from a beautiful country like Uganda. And that you people are beautiful and I said ok, if it means educating them, let's do it. So here's my teacher and myself, we're

walking with my essay into this huge bug Vancouver Sun building. Had never been to a publishing place before and I'm finding out all of this within my four weeks of arrival of going to visit the *Vancouver Sun*. And uh, you know what, look at this I even forget the teacher's name, I can't believe I'm doing this. He actually took my essay and it got published. It was a full size page, and um, although my original title of my essay was *Exodus from Uganda*, they picked up one of my phrases, which was thanks a million Idi Amin. And so it was titled, "Thanks a Million Idi Amin." Yeah that was uh, it was quite yeah, alleviating, very healing to do that and I felt proud of being a Ugandan at that time. I felt proud of coming to Canada.

I felt like I was a chosen one, you know, it felt really really good. And my teachers, my students, they all respected me so much and they wanted to help me a lot you know. They didn't want to trip you, or come in your way, and that was such a different feeling, I'll never forget that. Especially upon arrival, when we first arrived at the airport it was October, winter, 1972. It was a freaking blizzard there and I think we landed in Montreal. Yeah and uhm we were taken into this army barracks. All I know is that we were just moving form one crowd into another crowd because you know I was quite tiny then. So it was a herd, herds were moving. But we were taken into this humongous warehouse which was filled with winter clothing. With coats and boots and whatever and we were asked to selected our winter clothing because we landed at the airport in our summer tropical clothes right? Wearing this summer dress with these *champals* [sandals] on my feet. So that's all I remember, and I told myself, my goodness, and we're getting all this for free. You know we never had the concept of receiving or being at the other side of feeling the poverty, or feeling the need. And all of a sudden, we were the needy you know. And so from riches to rags kind of story, kind of a thing. So I remember that time and I told myself, one day, one day, I will have a way of thanking Canada. Of being so hospitable, you know, and receiving us with such, open arms yeah. And that's what I do today, and ym compass has always led me that way, and I've always been focused.

So today, after what 40-45 years, what did I do with my life. Although I did not have an opportunity to go to school. We fell through the cracks, we did not have the money for tuition, I

had to end up working, you know, at these different jobs. From McDonald's, McDonald's was my first job, so you won't believe it, it was 90 cents an hour at that time in 1972. But I was determined to you know, to empower myself, I would call it. Because you know, working at that time was a thrill. It wasn't about earning money, it was about working. We never, never had to work. We never got paid for working but to get a job and to actually receive a salary that could buy things and fulfill your own, you know, desires, your own wants and needs, it was absolutely amazing. Yeah it was quite an eye opener, so it wasn't, for me it was not that oh now I'm able to earn because now I can invest in this, or I can do this. No it was just earning it and paying back into the family pot and just supporting the family to say, ok, maybe next month we'll buy a car. Or the following 6 months later we will invest in buying a home, a family home or something like that. But it was the little little things that intrigued me. You know to be able to buy a chocolate bar with that. Like at that time the chocolate bar was 10 cents, oh my goodness, and I'm a chocolate fanatic. I mean over here we have a variety of chocolates. Over there, we were treated one a month with a chocolate, or treated with an ice cream cone. But over here, all of these luxuries were at our disposal. So earning 90 cents an our why? The fact that McDonald's really gave me such fantastic interpersonal skills training that I became such a people person that I think that gift has stayed with me, you know. On how to be able to communicate with people right?

And um, it's interesting how people would notice from that newspaper, you are the girl, you are the young lady that wrote that. Yeah they would come up and compliment me and you know. And I thought, oh ok, people are reading out there, you know what I mean. Yeah so at 16-17, yeah that's what I went through, so it was really beautiful and uhm, at the end reflecting back to Uganda, you know, our beautiful jamaat khane there in Kampala. Wow, it was so beautiful, it looked like a white house. Have you seen a picture of it?"

Shezan: "I have seen old pictures of it but I haven't seen any new ones"

Rosbina: “Ok, yes so my dad because he was an artist and we used to love decorating for our khushalis [name for religious celebration held by the Ismaili Muslim community] because it was so, you know, we had such a stable, how do you call it, presence in Uganda, Ismailis, that even Africans celebrated khushali with us. We played *dandiya* [cultural dance] outdoors, there would be this big huge courtyard and you know 5-6-7 thousand people would play *dandiya* together. Africans would be waiting to play *dandiya* with us but they would be sitting quietly under the tree or by the garage there or by the cars just watching us. You know, wishing that they could join us, you know. But yeah we would be celebrating out there. My dad would decorate the whole of the jamat khana with light bulbs. Just how we would have a whole Christmas tree light up like at a Christmas festival, that's how our khane would light up at khushali time, the whole jamat khana. And my dad he would actually craft out, you know the *Taj* [emblem representing the Aga Khan], the whole emblem, individual *Tajs*. He would craft those out, individually decorate those *Tajs* and paint those *Tajs*, you know that's the kind of work he wanted to do. So that's the kind of work he would do and he would take these *Tajs* and decorate them everywhere. Just like they had billboards and flags, these *Tajs* were you know symbolic of our what you call, our actual peak of our, when we are flourishing as a community.”

Shezan: “So it symbolized how well established the Ismaili community was?”

Rosbina: “Yeah, so yeah and he would do those things and we would be watching and saying oh my god he can make that, we want to get involved we want to get our hands dirty and jamat khanes were decorated you know which are simplified now. But our life revolved around community but my dad showed us the other side of Uganda. You know that traveling to the villages, the safaris, you know, so those were our experiences, yeah.”

Shezan: “And then so when you guys came, you guys had applied only to Canada I guess, or?”

Rosbina: “Yeah we had, see we were classified as British protectorates. So as you were aware, there were three of four different categories. So those who came directly from India were

considered British subjects. Britain took them, those who were Ugandans by birth but had been in Uganda as of a certain year, which I can't remember, then they were classified as British protectorates. And those who were born in Uganda, Uganda didn't even want to hear about that, they didn't care whether you were born in Uganda or not. They just wanted to trace back your heritage, you know, you're a refugee, or your immigrant status, how did you immigrate to Uganda? Was it through India, was it through Pakistan, were you born here? So of course my parents were born and raised in Uganda and so were we. And I believe it was my grandparents, they had immigrated from India."

Shezan: "So you were second generation Ugandan at that point?"

Rosbina: "Yeah yeah that's right, so you probably know this that Ugandans had the history of building the railway and business communities around. So that's that."

Shezan: "So then you guys went to the Canadian embassy that they had set up in Kampala?"

Rosbina: "So my dad had taken mine. So he went through the proper procedures. So we were interviewed by the Canadian government and because we were a young family, at that time, I had my mom and myself. They were probably in their late thirties I would imagine. They must've been in their early or mid-thirties because it was myself, my brother, and my younger sister. She was a baby still, she was a toddler. 6-7 well, that's all I can remember. Yeah but yeah they went through the proper procedure and uhm we had our health examinations the whole works. We stood in the lineups for hours, I can remember that. But I don't remember the actual proceedings or whatever."

Shezan: "And then you guys came and you went to the military base in Montreal and then from there did you guys come straight to Calgary?"

Rosbina: "Ok so my family, my family was given a choice. So most people who spoke French, were given the opportunity to reside in Montreal and in French speaking areas of Canada and because we spoke English we were given the opportunity to say ok where would you like to go? Canada was open at that time to having people go to any places. I think if it had not been for our uncle who had already been established and resided in Vancouver, we would have not heard about Vancouver right? We would have gone to any place that they would have sent us. In which case, it would have been a totally different lifestyle but because we had previous support, they said go to where your relatives are. And we did, we came to Vancouver. They lived in New Westminster and they housed us for a couple of months. And then the government had paid for our air flight and they offered us accommodation to stay at a hotel. This was at the Tropicana Hotel on Robson Street."

Shezan: "Oh so John Halani's Hotel?"

Rosbina: "So we were all refugees then, so all of us refugees are staying in this hotel on Robson Street and it's a one bedroom time of a unit but hey, you know what that's fine. And we were told that ok, this is where you're gonna be staying, this is your airfare, you try and look for a job within six months and see if you are able to pay it back. Of course, my mother was the first person to get a job, although she had never worked, she had helped my dad run a gift shop in Uganda. So she was one of those emancipated women, you know she could drive, she spoke English, she helped my dad run the shop so, you know, so yeah she was quite a leader in herself. And my dad at the same time, because he was an artist and his passions lied in mechanics and tinkering away with cars, body work you know, like repairs, body shop type of thing. But for some reason he was just not successful in securing a job because they kept asking him for Canadian experience. As the months went by his self-esteem got lower and lower and lower until he was succumbed to taking a job at, he just did not like, but he had to do it for the sake of providing for the family. So he ended up working in a shampoo, carpet shampoo place. Which I think the chemicals in their eventually got in there. He got his mouth cancer from there. But otherwise he was a perfectly healthy person, positive person, he loved to find outlets

and how he could get involved with art. So he would go look for jobs looking to paint you know traffic lines on the street. So he would do all the jamat khane parking lot lines, you know here. He would um paint all the different plays that we would put together as a community.

It was funny because there was no entertainment, people couldn't afford things without jobs. So as a community we came together we did performing arts, we laughed at our sorrows you know. We celebrated successes, we would share job referrals with each other. So people who became comfortable with the job they secured, they became very very comfortable. And my mother, although she was a shopkeeper and all that, she was a housekeeper. She used to cook for the family so what better fit. So she had the first job as a cook at a restaurant right on Robson street. I forget the name, but it was an Ismaili-owned restaurant. Delicatessen of some kind, Robson delicatessen as a cook. So she ended up working for this restaurant and after that she got hired by Eaton's the department store. So for the longest time my mother became the bread earner of the family. And then there was myself who was taking these odd jobs like you know after school, McDonald's, pizza places, and then through various jobs I kept challenging myself and then I ended up working in the Hyatt agency. And then I started getting that love for the hospitality industry right? And through that, you know, I started taking pride in our Vancouver and I would think my goodness we have such a beautiful city. So guess what? I became a tour guide with a bus company there."

Shezan: "That's amazing!"

Roszbina: "Yeah and because I was a tour guide wow, I actually started boasting about Vancouver and Victoria. And I met all these people from all over the world, and I would be all yakity, yakity, yak. And after a while I told myself this is me, you know, this is me, so I became a travel agent. And I told myself this is what I do. It was a 3 or 4o month travel course I did as a travel consultant. So that's how I started, I became a travel agent, I started to help people start businesses right from scratch because I was so good at what was doing right? I never realized this but I was a very very good consultant. And I created a real niche in our community there

right? So different travel agencies would start seeking me, you know to start up their offices for them. Like there was a Uniglobe franchise that had started and the manager would say please start our office. And I would start with them, and I would manage them and this that and the other. Of course, it was all done in so much innocence because I didn't really care how much I was being paid. It didn't matter to me because I just loved what I was doing. And yeah it just took course. And after that, through my work as a travel consultant, I started to explore international destinations because I started to escort group tours to Thailand, to China, too you know, so my world expanded even more and I thought this is me now. I'm gonna be traveling the world because as soon as we came to Canada, this was when I was 17 years old and I realized that being sheltered in Uganda by my parents, they never let us out of their sight, whereas other people were already traveling to Europe, to here there and everywhere. And here I was thinking we live a city lifestyle, maybe we deserved a better education or a higher education. Maybe my parents should've sent me to UK because we had the money but why did I lead a sheltered life?

From that point onwards, I told myself that travel was going to be my number one priority. I did not buy clothes, I did not buy things I wanted, but I saved my money. I saved and saved and saved and within 6 months of my arrival to Canada, I actually traveled to Europe. I made my dream come true, within 6 months. Because, I told myself no, I'm not going to be like other people. I'm gonna be me but what made that, what gave me that courage because Canada gave me that courage. I was able to get my own passport and at that time you know \$1000 dollars was like \$100,000 to me. But I saved \$500 at that time through my external wages here, there, and then also contributing to the family. And I would also set aside this much for myself right? And I told my uncle, that I wanted to go to Europe and I needed some money and he said ok. He was a very smart man, he said, he didn't just give the money to me. He said ok, I'll take you to the bank and I will cosign for you and you are going to be responsible to pay for your own debts. And I said ok I will, so I had 500 of my own and I borrowed 500 which was cosigned by my uncle and I traveled to Europe and I did my first Eurorail trip.

I traveled through Europe and that was an experience in itself because first of all I was a rebellious teenager. Because at this time I wanted to say, nobody come in my way, I want to do what I want to do and live my own life. So guess what? Through my communication and my feelers and whatever, I managed to contact my boyfriend. He was in the UK, right? So yeah they were going through their settlement issues in Europe as well but somehow we managed to connect and uhm, I said, I'm coming to see you and he said sure. And that was something that was definitely a no-no. Like it was unspoken, no parent would let their daughter, who's single run, go across the oceans to go meet a so-called boyfriend who was of a similar conservative family, right because he would get home. So we were what? 19-20 and within two years and I'm thinking you know, I'm 18-19, I'm traveling and I said ok, I'm coming down. So here I am, with a big suitcase, the airfare was what only \$249 return on board air. This was a charter flight, it was for 6 weeks and I took off to Europe and I met Amin and we spoke to the parents. And uh we were just, in that time when a girl meets a boy it's the old fashion way. Yeah the dating like a kiss is like a big thing for us yeah. So no sexual contact but we traveled, we traveled Europe together. Yes and we had an amazing experience. We got to know each other, what love really felt, you know. Like you know the crying and the pain and the sorrow and the quarrels we had with each other you know. But yes, that trip really made, brought me almost to mature by 2-5 years instantaneously, you know because that's what I wanted to do with my money.

And I traveled and I saw a whole new world out there, and you know what, this is not going to stop for me. So that's how it was, so we came back. We were very very good with each other. We were great travel companions and the following year because the parents had sort of suspected that are we going to disown these two or are we going to accept them because we were good. We weren't into drugs or drinking, we both came from such religious backgrounds and nice families that kept us together. So the following year he came to visit me in Canada. So that was another amazing things, so guess what we did then? “

Shezan: “You guys traveled?”

Rosbina: "Yes, we traveled through the States. We took the bus, the greyhound bus and we traveled the whole of the US. And at one point to think that at 19 or 20, I was so immature, today my sons at 21-22-23 are traveling and seeing the world out there. But for us, I was a village-town girl, you know. And for me to explore a whole world out there was an amazing experience for me. So with Amin and myself when we traveled the US on greyhound we went to places like Las Vegas and we were actually in the show when Elvis Presley was performing and I didn't even know who Elvis Presley was. Those were the days, those were the Donny Osmond and Marie Osman days, we were in Las Vegas, ok so that was an experience. Which now in retrospect, we think yeah he was a celebrity you know. But anyway we went through Minneapolis and we worked at restaurants when we ran out of money. And we got paid 25-30 dollars at the end of the shift and we carried on. We were like vagabonds, gypsies you know. Oh my goodness we always stayed. We never feared the world, that somebody was going to come and rape us or rob us. We had no cellphones, so imagine, I can just imagine what my parents went through because when I don't hear from my sons for three-four days, I'm on that cellphone just answer me! But this is what it was like, yeah it's been a good life.

Shezan: "And then how did you end up in Calgary?"

Rosbina: "Ok so, so I was a travel consultant and this was did you want more coffee? Are you sure?"

Shezan: "I'm ok, I'm only one a day"

Rosbina: "But I hope I'm not uh, boring you or"

Shezan: "No no, I love hearing this stuff."

Rosbina: "I don't know if this is any different from others but this is my personal individual life right? So uhm when we came to Canada, I was a travel consultant and I became a professional

at what I was doing. So I did start ups for other organizations until I met a friend of mine, she was working at a bank and she was 10 years senior to me. And she says you know why are you working for other people? Why don't you start your own business. So I thought ok, whatever, why not, here goes. So she was my mentor, and we started our own business, I called it Orbit travel and it was mine. So wherever I worked, she mentored me, she taught me how to uhm how to manage an office right? So she did all the administrative and I just continued my consultation, you know, and delivered my services to people. So and this is my story and truly I was one of the most un-marrying kind because I loved my life. I never had a single moment to myself, I was so involved with volunteering, youth camps, jamat khane, I was the key event planner for every weekend we had to plan something you know. We would explore, weekend places like the Harrison hot springs, we would go to Semiahmoo which was right across the border in Seattle. So everyone would come up to me and say ok what are we doing this weekend. And so yeah I had such a big follow up of so-called friends, mixed girls and boys but I was the event planner. And we would go away places, camping, this that and the other. We had a great youth life.

So I know but, although, I never attended university, so that was my only fall back. That none of my friends who were university educated, or those who were, I did not fit with them because I had university language and that was something in common and I was not. But somehow we still managed to do things together, we had a great time. Through my travel consultancy comes my knight in shining armour, because my mother would always say that if you don't learn how to cook how will you find the right man? And I would say, I don't need, I don't need that kind of a man then because I could not learn how to cook. I'm too busy out there, I'm trying to run a business, I'm trying to volunteer here, there and everywhere and uh finding a man just for me to cook for is not going to work for me. So guess what? I was the most un-marrying kind and Nadir he was the most un-marrying kind because he too was the Romeo of his time. He was the Casanova, good-looking, hardworking, he came from UK, he had all these English girls he was romancing with you know. But his lifestyle was different, he came from a background where his passions drew him into horse racing, so you know he was out there, frivolously spending his

money in the wrong places. You know he was gambling away his money, but at the same time he was a pillar of his family.

The most hardworking family, he will tell you his own story but along comes this good looking guy and he comes to purchase his airline ticket and he tries to woo me. And I'm saying ok, because I'm quite challenging at this time. So what's in a man, a man is a man, ok you know what, I'm way beyond that. So uhm, because after so many years Amin and I had drifted apart. We were so far away from each other, although we really respected each other and really cared for each other we just grew apart. We matured in different ways but we can still be friends. It was my whole outlook, we can be friends you know. But when Nadir came and you know he started to woo me and I started to say you know what let me figure out what's in this guy? And I'm not young here, I'm now, uh 30. So I'm one year older than my husband, so he comes up and within 3 months of us dating each other he swept me off my feet, like a typical Indian romance movie. You know at that time e-mail was just out, and he would be sending me these e-mails of songs in Indian language, in Hindi, that I didn't understand because he was a Romeo because he wooed me you know. And his sense of humour, oh my goodness, because I had become so serious in life, everything had to be so factual. And here comes Nadir, he's such a comedian and he sweeps me off my feet, you know saying that you know he doesn't have time to wine and dine women and am I willing to be his prospectus wife. And I'm saying, "ok, well what does that mean?" Yeah I want you to have my children, I want you to stay home, and if that is ok with you then let's go for it. You know it was just so specific and I said, "ok are you making a business deal?" And here I'm in a Cinderella mentality, thinking one day my handsome prince will come and sweep me off my feet. And this guy is my knight in shining armour but his approach was totally different, you know, because he says I'm not available with time and this is how I am. I want to have children right away, and this, that, and the other, are you game for that? And I'm saying ok, sure let's go for it, you know.

Yeah that's how it was, you know. And I met him and fortunately he turned out to be a wealthy man because I told him I'm not one of those typical Ismaili girls that will cook and clean and do

things for him. And he says no it doesn't matter but he wants my children. So I said ok, let's go for it. So everything was done in a matter of fact kind of attitude. Next thing you knew, oh my goodness, we got married within 6 months, within 6 months he told me pack up your office. And I said no my office is my life, people depend on me here. And he says no, don't worry about it. You're packing this place up and your coming with me because my bed is in Calgary as he would say. You haven't met Nadir but he's got this great sense of humour and he said that's where we are. And he was a new immigrant to Canada from the UK in Calgary and he had just purchased his first business. And I'm saying ok so long as he doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, it was just his humour that just swept me off my feet. I didn't care whether he had the wealth or not but he seemed like he was very very close to his mother and I told myself that if there's any man that can love and respect his mother the way this guy does, I'm sure that one day he's going to be by my side.

So based on that I was giving him points. So the point would go 2 points, 4 points, 5 points. And he was always striving for that 10th point and I would always say there's always room for improvement

Laughter

Yeah that's how we ended up, when we got married, I left my so-called long tail as they call it in Vancouver. I left my family, my friends and went to Calgary. Before our first anniversary I had Navid and before the second anniversary I had Nadeem. So we were really on this fast lane, boom boom. All of a sudden I came from the extremely busy life in Vancouver where I had no time to myself and all of a sudden coming to Calgary and I'm thinking wow this was such a welcoming experience. Because I had the leader, my husband who was stronger than I am, he took care of everything. He took the lead and he says you just do what you have to do. So I became a stay at home mom and I loved spending time, every second of the day with my kids because I think that came from my father and I thought to myself this is what I need to do with my children. So I enjoyed being at home, I loved it with them, and I continued to do my

volunteer work with the children at school. As soon they went to school and they were of an independent age, I started to volunteer with women. Like-minded women because all of a sudden technology was in such a fast lane and I'm thinking ok, I'm in the whole wide world and me I don't know how to write an e-mail.

So I gathered a few people and I knocked at the boys and girls club, I was taking my children to the boys and girls clubs for camps, and I volunteered with them. So once day I just walked up to this director and said you know, "if I brought some women together could we use this lab? Could you teach us how to use e-mail?" And he says, "wow, of course we can do that. Why don't we?" And so that idea just sprung you know. And we trained I think 4 or 5 batches of women of approximately 8, and these were all stay at home women, that were all moms that had no idea how to use technology and we all learned how to create our own e-mails. That was at that later aging stage, and I'm thinking ok now I finally know how to write an e-mail so another world of communication opened up with e-mails. So now the children are in um high school. And so, mom is a chauffeur, that was my job all day. I just drove them to school, dropped them from school, took them to dental appointments this and that. It was very mechanical, very robotic but I was very very very involved with my boys. And I took them everywhere, I wanted them to experience anything and everything. From public speaking, to swimming, to skiing, you name it, whatever I felt I was compromised with I exposed them to. So I was living my world through the now. So we were experiencing this beautiful snowshoeing and through schools you know and camping and all these things through volunteering with them. So I was leading a different kind of a lifestyle. So all that was great until they went into"

Shezan: "University"

Rosbina: "University right? And then all of a sudden now what am I gonna do right? Because they chose to move away from home. So when they lived away from home that's when I started to work. One day we had a small quarrel, Nadir and I and he said are you capable of earning a dollar? And I thought yeah, am I? Because here he took care of all the finances and I

became totally dependent on him. I was raising the children, I was volunteering in the community, everything. And when he joked about that I took a real offence to that and I took that seriously. And I really started to examine myself then and I said you know what there is truth into this, ok, what now? So that was a time, that was a rude awakening and I thought to myself am I really capable of earning any more. And so I thought ok let me see where can I start. And the very first resume I put in because I knew that travel was my passion and I had volunteered at the airport as a white hatter over here in Calgary. And I decided ok that's what I'm gonna do. I want to get back in the hospitality industry again, I was a tour guide, I need to get back to my passion, I need to find the Rossbina in me. You know because I've been a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law, I've done all these 100 of thousands of things but I forgot myself from the place.

And um, the first job I applied at low ground and this was as a customer service at Air Transat vacation travel and I got my job. And I thought wow, ok that means I'm still in the market, I'm employable. You know nothing gave me as much pleasure then to know that wow I was able to answer my husband back. You know, I didn't care if it was \$8 an hour but the fact was I able and capable of earning my dollar. Although we came from a wealthy family you know, I was a kept woman in other words and this dawned on me that never am I doing to feel that again. So yeah, I started working and I would work these odd shifts at 3 in the morning, 2 in the morning. So whenever the air flights would come in that's when we would have to be there. We had to bridge the airplanes, checking the people in for their trips out, we are receiving them, baggage handling so we would work around the airline schedules right? And I find myself working until 2 and 3 and 4 and overnights and slowly this went on for almost 6 years because I totally immersed myself in that job because I need to know that I'm employable. And again forgetting about my purpose because I became so passionate about working. Now the kids are still at university and I'm thinking ok you know I had slowly dropped out from all my volunteering activities right because now I had become so focused on working that all of a sudden I started feeling that void that I stopped volunteering in khane. I had stopped teaching at BUI, religious education classes, which was my number one passion you know. Because I raised my boys in

my class, right from birth until grade 7. They were with me and I loved being around children and I'm thinking to myself, now I've even done this and I'm feeling this plateau that I'm not growing anymore. And there was another call growing inside me saying what is it that I want to do? I'm already 48-49 years, just reflecting on my age, not that age mattered at that point. And I'm thinking you know what I'm going to quit this job.

So I talked to my father-in-law because I was not at home, my husband was working away, he was so busy with our businesses and everything. I was doing what I was doing and somehow I felt like we were disconnecting. So I talked to my father-in-law and said I don't know what to do. I'm not going to stay home because I'm not the cook and clean type of person and I've done enough of that. And he says look, you can go back into your volunteering but I don't want you to work. I said "ok, as long as I'm not earning, as long as you don't want me to work for the money that does not mean I can't keep myself busy." So that's how I got into volunteering for seniors because right then it was 2000, December of 2006, and I quit lowground, I gave my resignation. So I said ok, 2007 is coming, it is going to Mowla Bapa's golden jubilee [that Aga Khan's fifty year anniversary of being the religious leader of the Ismaili Muslim community], I think that if I ever wanted to say thank you spiritually, materially, this is what I'm gonna do, is I'm gonna volunteer my whole life now. So I dedicated not knowing what was happening here.

So I dedicated my time, so I started to volunteer with seniors. Finally, I started to see things through my mother's eyes. My mother was so active and so helpful like me as I am today and as I was 10 years ago and all of a sudden she had this depression spell. My father passed away, she became totally incapacitated, she couldn't even tie a button. So she was really really um you know total disability. Depression just overtook her then. And she wasn't the type but somehow whatever it was, mental illness just came and took over. And I started to see things through her eyes, ok that does a senior look forward to. All they look forward to is a medical doctor's appointment or a shopping trip to buy oil, or to buy milk at the grocery store and they would spend hours at the grocery stores or the 3 hours at the doctor's appointment and they would get this feeling that ok, they went out. And I thought to myself my goodness within that three

months that I was with my mother and I started to see other seniors around there. And I thought to myself no, this is not going to be my life, Rossebina is going to be different. So guess what skills came to my aid, all my BUI teaching, my BUI skills that I was teaching and I told myself ok if you can't bring Mohammad to the mountain..."

Shezan: "Bring the mountain to Mohamad"

Rossebina: "So this is what I am going to do, so in January of 2007, I made up my mind that our seniors are not going to be the way that they are. We have a lot to offer, our current seniors fell through the gaps because they worked extremely hard during their settling years, they did not get opportunities to enjoy Canada, they did not get opportunities to get involved with external communities, uhm, because they were so busy trying to establish themselves, our community right? And I told myself that we are here for them. This is the emerging seniors. And I told myself, ok if I were to belong to a senior group in years to come. What kind of a group would it be? And I told myself, ok time to work because I could not see anything out there that served my needs as an emerging senior. So at uh in 2007, January 2007, I decided that was going to be my compass. So I started empowering the seniors around my mom."

Break to discuss volunteer work

Rossebina: "You know when we first went back to Uganda and it says Uganda born and the African at the immigration he says, oh welcome back you are from Uganda, so hopefully you are going to stay here. Well guess what my answer was, never! Canada has been too kind and too good to us you lost us. In the future, we are the ones who will come back and be helping all these countries and look that's exactly what's happening. You've heard of Noor Jaffer, the kind of work he's doing, he's building schools out there. There's another lady in Edmonton, Altaff knows her name, I made contact for him. She's building schools in Gulu and all that. And look at, there's another, she's not from Uganda, this is all over. They're building schools in Tajakistan, they're going there, some of our Tanzanian residents are going to India. They're

building hostels for girls, they're building water wells in Tajikistan you know. Hey you know what, they've got the money and they see real value in humanity now. Yeah but you know poverty is right under our nose. If we have the time we can help but if we don't we can reach out. Yeah, So that's our story.

Shezan: "Thank you so much!"