

Shafick Panjwani

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Arrival and Early Experiences

Shafick Panjwani: “We left Austria and we landed in Montreal—I think that was the receiving for everybody. So we stayed in a hotel in Montreal for one night, they did all the paperwork or whatnot, then they put us on a train, Montreal to Vancouver and I think it’s a three-day journey. There were a lot of other Asians that were on the same train that got off in different parts of Canada along the way. I remember that there was no sleeping thing on the train, it was called a day and nighter, so you just sat in the seat that reclined a little bit but that’s where you stayed for three days. Okay, and the food—you had a little bit of money and the food was very expensive on the train, so you basically bought some store stuff when you got on the train and when it stopped you got out, stretched your legs and picked something up and got back on the train.

So I remember coming to Vancouver—I think it was a weekend that we came, Saturday or a Sunday, something like that. We’re at the train station, it was downtown, where the Waterfront Station is right now, that was the original train station. We’re standing there and we’re looking around, and there is nobody there to meet us, nobody to pick us up. Now the people that paid for our airfare was a Christian society in Vancouver that had paid for our airfare to come here, and they had sent the rep out and they were asking us where we were going, who we were going with, all that stuff. We said, “My brother is supposed to be here. We don’t know his address. We have a phone number. We can try calling him.” He said, “Sure, try the phone.” So he gave us quarters to try and we’re calling that number, but there’s no answer, there’s no answer, there’s no answer. Great. So he took us and he put us at English Bay near Stanley Park.

They took us and they put us in a hotel there, but this hotel I remember was not a very good hotel. There were a lot of prostitutes and stuff like that but my brother and I didn’t know any different. We were right on the beach in this hotel room and we’re trying to get a hold of my brother, there’s no answer there. I think it was a Sunday if I’m not mistaken. Finally, at about nine o’clock, eight thirty or nine o’clock in the evening—we hadn’t eaten all day because we didn’t have money to buy anything, we didn’t know where anything was except for some chocolate bars or something like that that we picked up from the lobby—we get hold of my brother. At eight or nine o’clock at night. He goes, “Where are you?” I said, “We’re in Vancouver.” “Where in Vancouver?”

Now you’ve got to remember, he doesn’t know we’re coming, he has no concept. He’s living in a one-bedroom apartment with his family, or a two-bedroom apartment with his family. Now he has two brothers in town, where is he going to put us, right? So, we’re downtown, eight o’clock at night, and what had basically happened was, the hotel we were staying in, the beach that was across the street, he was there the whole day. We called him up and he said, “We just came from there.” He asked us where we were and we sort of described the area. He said, “We were across the street at the beach. We just came from there.” So he said, “Stay, I’m coming,

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I'm coming to see you. Do you need anything?" I said, "Yeah, we haven't eaten all day." So he said, "Okay, don't worry. I'll bring you something to eat."

So he comes there with his wife. Their kids—my niece and nephew—were quite young at the time. I think they left them with my cousin and my brother and his wife came downtown to the hotel. We hadn't seen each other in two years, right? We're a little bit bigger and all that, hugs and kisses and all that. He said, "Why didn't you let us know?" We said, "Yeah we did, we sent you a postcard and everything else." He said, "I had no notice of you guys coming. I can't take you home with me right now because there's no place to put you." I remember he said, "Well, come on, let's go get something to eat." First meal in Canada? McDonald's [laughter], downtown.

Anyways, so we're in this hotel and we talked for a long time. The poor guy had to make some kind of arrangements to get an extra bed or whatnot, a hide-a-bed, so we could sleep in the living room or stay with my cousin who used to live in a house, so we stayed with him for a couple of days. He picked us up the next day. We were only in the hotel for one day, which was nice. But, you know, it was an experience because for him it was a very big shock, for us, even though it was an adventure, it was still a shock because now we're in a totally different country, different society, a different culture."