

Shafick Panjwani

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Memories of Uganda

Shafick Panjwani: “I was born in Uganda, Mengo Hospital. Growing up was fun. I went to the Aga Khan School. It’s funny, now that I’m here, when you think about things that happened over there. When you’re growing up, you had servants bringing you lunch for school and things like that. My dad was a merchant. He owned a shop, just a grocery shop with smokes and stuff like that. He was also a businessman so he owned a couple of houses, stuff like that. We lived not too far from the main jamatkhana that was there in Kampala on Martini Road. The shops around us were a restaurant across the street, a bar across the street, a Hindu temple across the street. So a different variety of people around. You grew up in all that and you grew up in really warm weather, not too far from the equator so it’s nice. The rainy seasons—well you call it the rainy seasons, I don’t know how much rain there was.

Growing up life was nice. I went to the Aga Khan School until I was in grade seven and then we had to go to a higher high school. In order to get to high school you had to write an exam and unless you got a certain amount of marks, you couldn’t get into a higher school, and I was one of those that didn’t get the higher school marks so I had to go to a different school. Again, an Aga Khan school, but a distance away so you had to walk there, or in the morning, you were driven there, and then at lunch, you walked back and whatnot. That was a twenty or twenty-five minute walk. I was probably thirteen at the time, twelve, thirteen. Then I scored enough marks that I applied to a public school to get into that, which was not too far from home. My classes started in the evenings, and from what I see in the pictures, from what I remember, I was the only Asian in the whole African school, African class. I made some friends studying and all that.

Well, there was rumbling going on with everything going around, and as a kid you don’t really pay attention to what’s going on. I’m sure my father did and my parents did. But as Idi Amin took over, the first few months everything was celebration and everybody was happy, then slowly things started getting worse. It was his army that was breaking into houses, stealing stuff. When you’re young you don’t look at what’s happening to the women there, but there were things happening to women as well.

I remember that our house went from just windows being left open to having bars on windows. At night, we were living in a prison cell that was created by my parents to keep us in, and every night you heard screams on the street. You heard army vehicles, you heard gunfire, and you were peering outside the windows trying to look and see what was going on. You dare not turn any lights on. You see people breaking into your neighbour’s house and there’s nothing you can do, and you’re hoping and praying that nothing like that happens to your house. You see in the daytime where people are taken away and they never come back, and one of those incidents happened to my dad where he was taken away right in front of us. You’re looking and everybody is worried because you’ve heard so many different stories about it. One of the nice things is that the store that my dad had, he had a lot of police officers that were his customers

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who he used to give credit to, and he treated them well and they treated him with a lot of respect.

Because I used to work with my dad on and off at the store, I got to know a few of these people, so when he was taken away, I took off and went to one of the police stations. I found one of the sergeants that used to deal with my father. I told him the story of what was going on. What was nice is that he started investigating, but by the same token, my dad was being smart. My dad knew seven languages, seven African languages, so he could talk to them in any of those languages. What he did was, he told them, look, he didn't have much money on him right now but if he went back to the store he could get more money and he could even ask his brother-in-law, my mom's brother, who had a store not too far away, to see if he can give us some more money. So they fell for that and they brought him back. This was, I'd say, four to five hours later. When he came to the store and I saw him come back, he sort of told us in Gujarati to go get help while he delayed. So while he was doing that I ran up to the police station and found the sergeant and told him what happened, and because my dad knew all these people, they came and got all of these people. Now, I don't know if they were army or they were just robbers, but that's how my dad got away.

There were also stories that you heard as a child—how much of it is true or not you don't know. You heard about how people were taken away and they're taken to prisons where they were beheaded, or one prisoner is asked to kill the other prisoner so if you don't kill him, he'll kill you. You either survive, or you kill the person. As a child you hear all these things and it stays with you for a long time."