

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Shiraz and Arzina Lalani

Archives and Research Collections

Carleton University Library

2016

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Narrator: Shiraz and Arzina Lalani

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Date: April 25, 2015

Session #: 1/1

Length: 58 minutes

Location: Toronto, Ontario

Abstract:

Shiraz was born in Mbarara, Uganda where he spent his childhood. He recalled a comfortable middle class family life with his mother and father looking after their general store. Shiraz moved to Kampala to enroll in a college accounting program. After completing his certification, Shiraz worked as a bookkeeper in Uganda for three years until the expulsion decree was announced.

Shiraz was admitted to Canada in early October and arrived in Montreal on October 13th, 1972. He was resettled in Kitchener where he recalls receiving support from the FOUR [Friend of Uganda Refugees] university group. After working several odd jobs including factory work at the Dare cookie plant in Kitchener, Shiraz procured a job doing customs clearance bookkeeping at Kuehne and Nagel. He has been working there since May of 1974.

Shiraz recalled the struggles of adjusting to Canadian life with the harsh climate, bland food, and anxieties of being in a new country. However, after a few months Shiraz felt more comfortable in Kitchener and remembered a relatively smooth experience of raising his family in Toronto.

The interview was conducted at Shiraz's home in Toronto, Ontario.

Shiraz Lalani: “Okay so basically I was born in Uganda in 1949 and the first few years were in Mbarara, grew up there with my dad and family, it was comfortable living in a middle class family. So we had people looking after us, my father and mother were looking after the businesses, and you know *dukawallah* [shopkeeper] store on the front and house in the back and *yaya’s* taking care of all the boys and girls and my sisters and brothers and all that. Life was comfortable, basically. It was easy going, went to school, Aga Khan School from grade one to grade eight and then my dad went to Kampala, actually. But we stayed in Mbarara, stayed with my uncle for a couple of years, my grandparents were there also and we grew up with the family basically you see, that’s how things were back home kind of thing, we would go to school and come back, basically we had a comfortable life growing up in Mbarara. And then we... after Mbarara we went to Kampala, too after we were done schooling. My dad was in Kabale and we went to Kampala because that’s where the high schools were and my dad also moved there so we kind of ended up in Kampala. And in Kampala we were there from 1962 when Uganda got independent we were in Kampala and in Kampala we did secondary school, I did not make it in university, I did not have enough percentage of marks that would put me there. So I went to a college there, did my accounting and then started working when I was nineteen years old, basically that’s how I started my working career so to speak. So I was a bookkeeper basically and three years later we were done in Uganda, basically.”

Shezan: “And then do you remember what happened during that period?”

Shiraz: “During the?”

Shezan: “During that ninety day expulsion.”

Shiraz: “Oh, okay. This came as a total surprise. People were very happy when Amin took over, there was a widespread support for him to start with because people were not very happy, especially the people in Buganda. They were not very happy with Obote because Obote was from the northern part of Uganda, he was Acholi, Lango and he was not doing well with the Buganda people. Buganda people, they were more educated, they were more... not educated, but economically they were sound. Compared to other people. Obote was trying to bring the other parts up, at the expense of Buganda. Buganda was kind of a kingdom by itself, it had its own kingdom and he was trying to dismantle the parliamentary system there and that did not go well with the people in Buganda. So when Idi Amin came to power, he had very widespread support, even Indians! Indians always danced to the music, whatever works for them. So when Idi Amin came to power he had the support initially, and he was very

charming, he was flamboyant, he was a big guy and he had a big physical presence and he was fearless. He would drive around in Kampala in his jeep and people were looking up to this guy and saying, "This is the kind of leader we need here."

But down the road not too far along he came up with this idea – he had a dream, actually, it was in the paper – he had a dream that God directed him that people of Asian extraction should be done away with, because what are they doing here? This is a black African country, and he says, "What are you guys doing here?" Also when he made the statement, I'm recalling all of these things, he says, "You guys, Indians, you are milking the economy of Uganda." And to some extent I would agree with that statement because that's what we were doing actually, in reality.

We... even though we were born in Uganda, my father was born in Uganda, enjoy your life in Uganda. But the business people were actually milking in the sense that they were making money but they were also taking the money out of their country. Because they were looking at their future and... how many more years would we stay here, what kind of safety do we have here, and all kinds of... also basically some of the African countries were nationalizing the properties and other things so Asians were looking at things differently and saying, we have to have a safety net somewhere else. So in some statements that we were milking the economy of Uganda I have to say I agree with that. The other thing was we were really neat community and we were not integrating with the black Africans, and that was another thing. Again, I have to agree that the statement that he made was right, that we were not integrating and only keeping to ourselves and our whole intention was to make money and use those Africans."

Azina Lalani: "And they were servants."

Shiraz: "They were hired servants but compared to those here, and reflecting back I don't think they were treated properly. They were not even paid properly for the amount of work that they were doing. There was no such thing as overtime, they were required to come seven days a week, anytime that we want them. So we had no idea until we came here that, look, you know what? We didn't do it right. There's human rights and so on, they were mistreated.

So there were a lot of twists to that thing. Again, Amin was right in his statements, we were milking the economy, we were mistreating the Africans, we were... we did not integrate, okay... and we were close knit, we kept to ourselves basically. So this is what happened, he says, "Well, you guys are no good." But the problem was with the Uganda passports holders, you see most of them were British subjects, so

when Uganda became independent we were given a choice to opt out or opt in, kind of thing and majority said they would take the British passport.

But again, there was a problem there because certain businesses required Ugandan citizenship and we Ismailis were advised that this is your home, as in his highness said this is your home and you should opt for it, so we followed him. He says, well you took up the citizenship. But when Idi Amin came, he said, "Why would I expel this ten thousand if I don't expel seventy thousand? They are no good either!" because they are brothers too, it's not going to work here. So he expelled everybody. That's when the problem came in, and I was twenty-two years old so when this news came... first of all we didn't believe it actually to start, we thought this was a buffoon, like the way he was acting and doing all of these things and making international statements. We thought this was going to pass over. But boy was he deadly serious, as time went by this was no joke, that he would finish us off if we didn't go.

So things started happening very quickly. Personally, I was twenty-two, this was my chance to go fly on an airplane, because I had never flown before. [Laughter] First time in my life I flew was when I was kicked out by Idi Amin. Now, I took it as an opportunity in many ways. I said, boy I can go to another country. And we applied for Canada and Canada accepted us because we are in the age group and we speak English and I worked. So we only applied for Canada, basically and we were accepted. So I was happy, personally. I was working there, but we also had our own business. I was schooling, college kind of thing and personally, I was happy. But that was not the experience of my parents or my grandparents because they had been there for years, they had established themselves, they were set in their ways. For them, it was devastating. Especially for my grandfather who had spent seventy years in Uganda and to happen to us...

But my personal story, I was happy actually. I was happy because I was looking for an opportunity and saying, when will I get the chance to come to this country, another country. Especially I had a friend who had immigrated from Uganda, he was a pharmacist and his wife was actually going to England and they qualified to leave Uganda and officially that was 1967, they were officially granted status to come here. My friend was here, so we were communicating and he says, "If you ever get a chance, this is the place to come." So I knew exactly where I wanted to go. I went to Waterloo, he was in Waterloo. So when we..."

Azina: Abdul right?

Shiraz: "Yeah Abdul was... we were told, so we landed in Montreal. They said, "Where do you want to go?" And I said, "I want to go to Kitchener," actually, not Waterloo, Kitchener. They said, "How do you know about Kitchener?" I said, "I have a friend there who lives in..." He was working in Kitchener and living in Waterloo... they're the twin cities, right? I didn't know about that. So I knew exactly where I was going to come so I knew somebody was here kind of thing. So to me, I was looking forward to it."

Shezan: "That's so interesting. Then, so how big was your family?"

Shiraz: "Four brothers, one sister, father, mother, grandparents, uncle, aunt..."

Shezan: "And everyone came to Canada?"

Shiraz: "Everyone ended up in Canada, and the way it happened was interesting, too. My dad didn't get the visa to come to Canada because my mother was not well. She was diagnosed that she had tuberculosis. So they said, "No, she cannot go to Canada." So they went to India. One of my brothers actually is here, he is going to be coming soon here and talk with you. That's why we had to change the timing, so he was in India so they ended up with him. And then I sponsored from here and they came two years later. Then when my mom came she went straight into the sanitarium because she had to be treated for it, but then she was okay and everything went well and she was out of it, she was cured. But she was put in quarantine this was '74. So they spent two years there."

Shezan: So they came two years later. And then your brother..."

Shiraz: "The other brother... my sister went to Vancouver. When she came to Montreal – this was the point where everybody came first there – she was asked where you want to go. She said, "I want to go to Vancouver," because she had a friend in Vancouver. I ended up here because I knew my friend who was here and said well, this is where I want to go. And my other brother, he went with my dad to India. One of my brothers was schooling in India..."

Shezan: "So one was already in India."

Shiraz: "One was already in India and my other brother went with my parents. But he came back, he came back after about six months and he joined me in Kitchener. So this is how it all happened. But before they went to India they spent a couple of months in Kenya."

Shezan: "Oh, a few people went to Kenya."

Shiraz: "Yeah, and I think they were set up by Eboo at that time."

Shezan: “Yeah, so there was a joint initiative between UNHCR [United Nations High Commission for Human Rights], Sir Eboo and the Ismaili Committee and the Kenyan government, so if anyone couldn’t get out or couldn’t get to a refugee camp, they’d come to Kenya first.”

Shiraz: “They tried, yeah so they went to Kenya and made their arrangements to go to India.”

Shezan: “So then you came straight to Kitchener.”

Shiraz: “I came, went to Montreal first and... it’s interesting I remember my first day because I came to Montreal thirteenth of October, 1972. Something about that... I was born on the thirteenth. My first job in Kampala was on the thirteenth, I came to Canada on the thirteenth, my first job in Canada was also on the thirteenth. So there was a guy from Toronto, he was a newspaper guy for the Toronto Star, he wanted to write about Uganda Asians and I told him about this thirteenth... there’s a write up. I know I have it somewhere. Thirteenth is a lucky number in the life of a Ugandan, because thirteen is not a lucky number for most people. You know so this is what happened.”

Shezan: “So then...”

Shiraz: “So when I landed in Montreal and then they asked me where you want to go... it was a refugee camp, an army camp. Most people were sent there and they treated us well. We came and they gave us winter clothing and it was just an overnight kind of thing, they processed our application and they gave us some money and then they put me on the plane.”

Azina: “How much did they give you?”

Shiraz: “Twenty-five dollars, but remember that winter coat they gave me? I wore it for thirty years actually. It was so warm! I kept it, it looked like... actually at the end of the thirty years it looked like a refugee coat... from, you know. But it was so warm and it kept me warm over the years. So it was okay, it was not too cold and the next day we were in Kitchener. When I landed in Kitchener there was a... what is it? A university group called FOUR, F, O, U, R. Friends of Uganda Refugees. This was a local initiative from the University of Waterloo and a professor, an Indian there was one professor which was Patharia He had initiated this arrangement that anybody who came from Uganda, they would look after them. So they would take care of you, like you could go into their homes and they decided, look, there’s about five or six professors of Indian origin, actually and they said, we’re going to help these guys. So when I came and landed in Kitchener, as soon as I landed there was a Manpower [Department of Manpower and Immigration] guy who came to receive me and his told us about this FOUR and he says,

“Your arrangement has already been made. You are going to stay with one of the professors, he has invited you to his house and he is going to take care of you and get you on your feet, basically.” That was amazing! That they would do this.

So we were two families and we ended up with this professor who had a big home and personal cars. You know, I was amazed the car he had was huge. He had a nice home, and they said, well, this is where you are going to stay. He says, “I’m going to work at the university, if you need anything make yourself comfortable, don’t worry about anything.” But his concept of seeing us, I came with a suitcase in my hand, I had a nice suit on me and he’s thinking, what kind of refugee is this? You know what I mean? He had this idea of a rough kind of thing that doesn’t know what to do and might not even speak English, and maybe not even educated. He didn’t know about the kind of refugee that he was going to get. So it was like I’m in a nice suit, they money I had in Uganda, of course I had some nice suits and the two briefcases, I still have those briefcases. I came with a briefcase, I had a gold chain on. [Laughter] You see, he was in a state of shock, he says, “Oh, its nice meeting you.”

And I had an accounting background, like I told you, right? So he said don’t worry about the job right now, I want you to settle down and make yourself comfortable. The first time I went on the street, which was the next day or so. This white thing, because soon after, what was it? Oktoberfest, Oktoberfest had just ended in Kitchener and I was out in the street and I didn’t know about this and the snow came. The snowflakes were coming, so I asked a guy who was waiting for the bus there, “What’s this white stuff?” He says... he was shocked, “You don’t know? This is snow!” They were flurries, but this was my first time experiencing snow, and I had no idea how snow fell... I had seen it on the ground in pictures when I was back home, right? Canada was like, people were living in igloos, geography I didn’t know right, they would eat raw meat, and that was in my head. So that was my first experience with snow and I still remember the guy looking at me, “Where are you from? Which planet are you from? It’s snow” he says. Boy, forty years of snow, I’ve had enough. [Laughter]

Then I was with the professor for about three, four days and the guy from Manpower called me, he says, “We have a job lined up for you.” I said, “Fantastic!” So I went for my first day which was Victoria’s beauty salon. You see, I told them that I worked with an accountant, but the job that they told me is there for you, it’s in shipping. I had no idea what it was, I went in a suit for my first interview. The guy calls me in the office and he was kind of taken back, shipping, he says, you don’t need to dress for that kind of thing. “Do you know the kind of job you are going to be doing?” Shipping, to me, I thought maybe a company kind of thing, you know? Maybe there would be something to deliver. So he says,

“We are offering you two dollars and twenty-five cents starting, and the job is right there,” he says, “But you can start, you may have to come back and change your clothing.” I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “Well, It’s a different kind of job, not in the office.” I said, “No, don’t worry about me.” I put my jacket up and he put me in the back and there’s a truck there, offloading. I’m a company office guy here, that was my first job.

So I worked there for three days, I go home to the professor’s house and he goes, “How is the job?” I was pretty tired, I was young, right? Twenty-two years old. So I told the professor, I said, “I’m going to quit.” He says, “Don’t worry, we’ll let Manpower know that you are not into this kind of thing. So they found another job for me, another... there were a lot of factories there. So they sent me to another factory and they were making shoes and when the shoe comes on, I put the sole in, somebody else does something, it goes in a line, you know? So every day I would go there, slowly, slowly, slowly... this was my job for eight hours. And then I had to do, I was missing out some, you have to...”

Shezan: “Very fast.”

Shiraz: “Very fast. A few days later they called me and said, “You know what? It’s not going to work out. We need somebody who is going to speed up things. So forth, back and forth for my first year I went through twelve jobs. And my last job, fast forward, was at a cookie factory. And I enjoyed working there because all I was doing, the cookies were coming in the line and I would pick up the cookie and put it in the box, this way my job. This was the kind of jobs there were, factory jobs, okay. But there were lots of it, you could change, you know like this. So there were some broken cookies there so I’d eat some of them because they were nice cookies, you know. I’d never seen cookies like that and I would break some and I would eat some. So I was warned by the supervisor, “Those cookies, they go in the garbage, it’s not for you.” And he said, “If you want to eat those cookies,” we have some you can buy separately. “There’s a place you can go and choose anything.” But cookies... they were tempting so I got caught eating another cookie and he warned me again, and he caught me again, I was told they fired me. [Laughter] Cookies! Dare cookies, still there... they fired me for eating cookies. Because I was not supposed to do that, you know it was I guess hazardous or whatever the case may be.

The first year it was very cold, it was... jamatkhana wasn’t established in the Kitchener area, as more Ugandans came in I was finding it exciting. For me it was exciting because it was different and my parents were in India so I had to get paperwork ready for them, I sponsored them. They did not get the visa, but we were told after everything is done they would be able to come from India. So that part I was

doing. With my uncle what we did was... well the professor, after two weeks I told the professor that I am ready to move out because this place where I was working was far. So I said, "I want to be near transportation and buses and everything" because it's wintertime, remember. I said no, I want to be somewhere near so there was another Ugandan guy, I teamed up with him and we rented a room, 58 Francis. Remember I took you there?

Azina: "50 Francis. Who were you sharing the room with?"

Shiraz: "This was this Hindu guy. Only for a couple of weeks, then he moved out and I stayed at 58 Francis. Still that house is there, a little building there. So basically that was in Kitchener, for almost a year, year and a half. Then one of my Ugandan friends came and he wanted to go to visit Toronto, he says, "Why don't you come with me?" So I said, "Okay, let's go and see Toronto." This was in the summertime, we were there in the winter and then it was summertime. And then... you know Toronto Star building?"

Shezan: "Yeah."

Shiraz: "At the bottom is Lake Ontario, and you could go on a cruise there, boat cruise and everything. So we had a weekend off, so we came and we stayed in YMCA, my friend's sister Sully, she was staying there in an apartment there somewhere. So he says, "Let's go Shiraz, let's go." So we came to Toronto in YMCA we stayed there and the next day was Sully's son's first birthday, so we ended up there. So they said, "What are you doing in Kitchener?" I said, "Well I am doing all these factory jobs, whatever, I take it and I have to do it." And he says, "Why don't you try, come to start building. There is a company called Kuehne + Nagel, why don't you try? I'm there in the export department and he says, "You have an accounting background, and they have a customers department."

So I said fine and after we finished our trip – remember, I was in my shorts, we had just finished our cruise, the boat cruise there. So I go on the thirty-third floor and I said to the receptionist there, she says, "What can I do for you?" And I said, "Look, I'm looking for a job." She said, "What kind of a job?" I said, "Any job." So she looked for the human resources desk and talked to the human resources guy, this is 1974. He comes out and he says, "What can I do for you?" I said, "Well, I am looking for a job." "Where are you from?" he says. "I am from Uganda." No resumes, nothing, I'm in my shorts here talking to this guy. He says, "Come in my office. Tell me in five minutes what you were doing in Uganda." I said, "Well I came here, I was kicked out by Idi Amin, my job in Uganda I was a bookkeeper, accounting background and I was working for this company and doing customs clearance..." "Oh! You were involved

in customs clearance?" I said, "Yeah, that was part of my function." "Oh," he says, "That's what we do here." This company, part of the department is customs clearance, people bringing goods from all over the world, and this is what we do here. He says, "When would you like to start?" 1974, May fifth. Guess what? I'm still there."

Shezan: "No way!"

Shiraz: "Forty-one years. That was a temporary job. They said, "Well, we'll hire you temporarily, we'll see how things work out. Between then and today, the rest is history. I'm still with that company."

Shezan: "That's amazing. I had no idea."

Shiraz: "I'm sixty-five now. So just recently we worked out the arrangement and everything to pay me off, but I said I want to continue so they've given me two years contract and I've worked for this company for forty years Kuehne + Nagel..."

Shezan: "And to think, yeah you were just there for the weekend to have fun."

Shiraz: "Yeah, see what happened. That goes to show how uncertain sometimes, reflect back on what happened. Because I know on that certain day that Idi Amin would make an announcement and I would be coming to a strange country, did I know that? No. I come here, there is somebody that is going to take care of me here. I did not know that I would be coming with my friend Amin to Toronto. We didn't know about that, what was happening. Then, surely Amin's sister says why don't you try the job here. We go on the boat cruise and I'm here in Toronto, nothing to lose. Did I know at that time that it was going to spark forward and I would be there for forty years? Unbelievable. Whatever happens with Rahim, my son, it happens for a reason. Everything that happens in your life happens for a reason. He's a believer in that, I'm believing now, because this is what happened to me."

Shezan: "So then I guess you moved to Toronto after..."

Shiraz: "I moved to Toronto after, like I was commuting back and forth to Barrie, my parents were still there, my parents had come and I was staying as a paying guest with the family for about... until I met you."

Azina: "You were in staying with Gulshanbhai"

Shiraz: "Then I met you, what year was that?"

Azina: "1979."

Shiraz: “’79 so after almost five years of commuting back and forth to Toronto. I would come on Monday morning, we would go back Friday evening and I would stay in Toronto with the family. And then Gulshanbhai comes by one day, because I was staying with the family, no I was staying with a different family and when I came to Gulshanbhai, they said, “Don’t you want to get married?” I said, “I have no idea, I don’t have a girlfriend or anything.” He said, “I know of somebody, but you’re not going to fool around with her.” [Laughter] So see he introduced me to Azina in ’79, right? Two years we courted, ’81 we got married, we’ve been married thirty-five years. Job forty years, thirty-five years married, I’m sixty-five, then of course we had Aleem and Rahim, Azina took some time off work and raised the boys and this is what happened to us. For me personally, I worked through the ranks, the company I worked my way up. They treated me well, they paid me well, you know they looked after me and we had families, it was not a struggle. Financially... I think that was one good thing, financially, we have always been reasonably well off. We didn’t need to struggle or anything in Canada, and we didn’t have to struggle back home also. So for me personally, it’s been a comfortable life. And I’m enjoying my life now, I travel a lot. I went back to Africa, to Australia, I went to Europe. I enjoy playing golf, I play golf. So in retrospect, I’m glad I came to Canada. But my heart is still in Uganda. [Laughter] Not for them, not for anybody else in my family, they say, “Why would you? Why are you so interested?” Nobody is going back. I have happy memories there, in Uganda. And nice weather, comfortable lifestyle, friends. Here it was a different lifestyle. So I wouldn’t go and live there again that’s for sure, but I don’t mind going there and enjoying myself for holiday and stuff like that.”

Shezan: “And then how did you find I guess... hanging out with Canadians?”

Shiraz: “Okay, when I first came my first interaction with the locals here was at the job, kind of thing. Kitchener was mostly... there weren’t any ethnic minorities, too many minorities at that time. The factory jobs they were rough and those jobs are not... we were kind of very gentle and very business-like, so to speak. It was a little bit difficult in the beginning to understand where they were coming from, what our values were and what their values were, swearing and stuff like that, which we were not doing. We got caught up with them eventually. But by and large it was not very difficult dealing with them kind of thing, they were mostly Germans in Kitchener. So personally, I didn’t have any issues with that. In the beginning, maybe I was a little bit sensitive, but after you get to know them kind of thing, you start thinking what we have in common, that was not an issue. And then I came from Toronto, it was even better for me because I was in an office job there. But in a factory, it was different, almost blue collar workers, right?”

Shezan: "Yeah, and then, how did you get used to things like the food, and..."

Shiraz: "Okay, the food is interesting! When I was first in Kitchener my uncle came and he says there is no... what is it?"

Azina: "Peppers."

Shiraz: "Chilies! We came here and we wanted to eat Indian food because we were eating all Canadian food, we found it very bland in the beginning. And we said we have to look out for... there is no Indian stores or anything and we would go in the grocery stores, Dutchboy was the big one at that time, and we would ask them for chilies or some spices, there were some spices... there were some, but not the spices that we use for our cooking kind of thing. And then someone said, "In Toronto you'll get some of this stuff." So you'd come to Toronto and you'd pick up some of the stuff and you'd make, but even then slowly and gradually began to wane off. But you know I enjoy both the food actually, it was different... we experienced that part of food and then we got our food also, so basically it was okay. And I eat everything you know, basically. Not like Rahim anyways, he was very picky.

Female: "Rahim, he's come a long way."

Shezan: "And then getting used to the winter..."

Shiraz: "Winter, in the beginning, the first couple... it was fascinating. But then it lasted... from October we came, November, December, January, February, March, I said, "What the hell is happening here? It was more cold than it was now, here." You couldn't do anything, just come home and go back to work, come home and go back to work. What kind of life is this here? We established a jamatkhana so we started to go there, no friends, anything. So we said, "It is what it is, it is what it is." Well, everybody started accepting it because we are in a better country, we don't have issues, like threatening our neck, we didn't have religious problems or political problems or those kind of issues. So we are living in a different world altogether. Meanwhile, I was twenty-two, so we said, "Hey!"

Shezan: "And then, yeah, I guess... how do you identify yourself today? Do you feel that you're Canadian, or Ugandan, South Asian, a mix?"

Shiraz: "It's... you it's very interesting nobody has asked me that question before. So how do I see myself, is that what you're saying?"

Shezan: "Yeah, exactly. And there's no wrong answer."

Shiraz: “Okay, I have to say... I’m a Canadian. But just because I am a Canadian doesn’t mean I have to accept whatever is out there. I am drawing on good values, but I am also a Muslim. I want to... I see myself as a Canadian Muslim also, the best of both. Okay, I stand tall and I tell people I am a Muslim, but again I have some good advice from his highness that you don’t bury your head in the sand, you stand tall and tell them about who you are. You are part of the group that is 1.2 billion in the world, what you are reading in the paper is just a small group of people making a mess of the whole thing here. And what you stand for, your principles, your ethics. You see that part of people accepted as such. At work I don’t have any issues, I have never been discriminated, I have never been called names. My neighbours here, they are Jewish neighbours, they are family oriented and they accept it, and they’re educated and they know. That’s a big difference, when you meet an educated person, they know what’s out there. And in Canada, especially Toronto, it’s a multicultural society, there are more visible minorities than the Anglo-Saxon majority, fifty-seven percent, did you know that? In Toronto... it’s so multicultural, so much at home in Toronto, basically. I was in Brisbane... have you been to Australia?”

Shezan: “No.”

Shiraz: “In Brisbane, it’s white Australia and they control immigration very strictly. It’s so hard to get in there, and when you are in... except for those students who are on exchange, kind of thing, in Brisbane you are... you stand out. Just imagine... can you imagine standing out in Toronto? It doesn’t happen in Toronto. Right? So what a big difference here, in Canada here, but especially in Toronto, multicultural.”

Azina: “Even Auckland was, you know... unless you go to jamatkhana you don’t see too many Ismailis around or other...”

Shiraz: “Indian, communities kind of thing. But in Toronto I have no issue. I have never encountered any racist comments or discrimination, even at work kind of thing, or in my personal life, or my neighbours. I just don’t feel in any way at all in all of these years, forty-two years, not once have I experienced anything to the contrary. Not once. And I think it’s safe to say, too... And I hear from others horror stories to tell you. But maybe I have not been in surroundings or that kind of situations... I’m always with the business crowd most of the time, my friends are people who are golfing and stuff like that. jamatkhana when you go, Ismailis... I’m happy actually to be here. But again, like I keep coming back to you and saying, Uganda is my home.” [Laughter]

Shezan: “My mom feels the same way. At the end of the day that’s...”

Shiraz: "Yeah, I enjoy... my dad is the same, too. Like because he had happy memories there, he enjoyed... part of the reason is because you're not about to venture out to ski or skate. Winter, for Rahim, he loves winter because the boys are into skiing and skating, winter sports. He says he's looking forward to winter coming in, especially snowy days. And I'm dreading those snowy days because I have to drive. And I said boy that is not good for me anymore."

Shezan: "In one of the interviews I did, someone said something about, about Uganda they said the quality of life was better, even though the standard of living was less. So you had a lot less but you were a lot happier."

Shiraz: "Happier. Because we had not known about the materialistic world, we had not known about the things, the toys that you can... so if you don't have it, you don't miss it. And you have the best of the best. Even now in developing countries, in the mountain areas and those kids, they are running around naked there. And I said, "Look, they are so happy they are cheering us," and they were coming down the mountain those naked kids. Nothing on them! And their parents were right beside them and they were happy and they were cheering us as we made it to see the gorillas in Burundi, we were coming back and they were so happy. Can you imagine? Because they don't know anything."

Azina: "They haven't been here to see what it's like."

Shiraz: "So that was the difference. So what else... can you think of anything else?"

Azina: "Mine was different from you."

Shiraz: "Your life in Uganda."

Azina: "But it was the same growing up. I went to school but we only went til grade seven and then I had to go to Nairobi to finish my education and did four years, then I went to Canada college where I graduated in those times from Canada college to become a secretary. But I didn't work in Entebbe, I worked in Kampala so I used to commute every day, and the days I didn't have a ride, I would sleep over at my grandmother's house and then on the weekends we would all go there as a family to visit. And I worked with a company called Liverpool Uganda, they used to expose corn and cotton, coffee, and then one day... we had Hindu guys working there and they treated me like their daughter so one of them comes up to me and says, "After Idi Amin took over, I don't trust this man. You should ask your parents to send you to England. If your parents won't send you, I will send you, you know? So I came home and I told my dad, and my dad said, "You know what, it's not a bad idea." Because my brother was already in

England, he was studying at the Isle of Wight doing his high school and so my dad says, "It's not a bad idea."

So the next day I went to my boss and said... I knew we had an office in London, and I said to him, "I want to go to London, are you able to give me a transfer?" So he says, "Sure!" He gave me a letter to take to the boss there, Mr. Brown and I was in London for two, three days then I decided to call the company up and let them know that I'm here and I have a letter for Mr. Brown and so I went there and he looked at the letter and said, "Sure, I can hire you, but what can you do?" I said, "I can type, I can take shorthand, I worked in an office, I worked with Liverpool." And he says, "We don't have the funds to pay you for the first few months, we have to find a way to fund the position, we can give you some petty cash."

So I said okay, because I had a job. I worked there for about two, three months then I said to myself, I can't keep getting paid petty cash because I had other friends who were working that I met in jamatkhana who were working for agencies and had much more money. So... and they said they would take me, the agency. Because I stayed in a hostel where I made other friends too and I had a cousin there, then we moved out. Because the hostel was near the agency, I went to the agency and I registered there and I got a job. I was working for central office of information, you know in those days I don't know if they had movies, movies they would make all these ads, you know. And so that's what we did. I had a ball, I really enjoyed it, working there.

Until October came and we heard this terrible news about the expulsion. My parents were affected, so that's when my life changed a little bit because I was saving for my parents to come here and so my parents came to London in October, towards the end of October. We had a very comfortable life there, we lived in Entebbe, a lot of the people who we didn't even know, families who had to come to Canada and my dad had told... we had very good relationship with the ministers and my dad had an excellent relationship. He told the people at the airport that anybody's whose flight was delayed that don't have a place to stay, just send them to our house. So we had so many people staying at our house every day. My dad had helped them and so when they came, they didn't have a problem as to taking luggage out, everything came with them. But it didn't get to London, so it just got lost along the way.

So the parents came, when they were coming to London I told my boss, I said, "Look, my parents are going to come and I need a day to come get them from London, are you able to help me?" They said, "Look, we can help you, you can take the day off. We don't have any accommodation or anything like

that." I said, "No, no, no, it's not the accommodation that I need. I just need some time off to take so I can go off and bring them here." He said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, take as many days as you want." So then I was paid by the agency, I didn't know the rules, I was kind of worried they wouldn't let me go, because the agency paid me on an hourly basis so it didn't affect them at all, I was free the day they arrived. So my uncle in Glasgow was a civil engineer and my aunt was a doctor, so my uncle says, "You know what? Bring mom and dad here. It's going to be easier and they can stay here until they get on their two feet."

And so I brought my parents to Glasgow, we stayed the weekend in London, then I brought them to Glasgow and they stayed my parents with my uncle and aunt and they looked after them. A week later I went back to London and I was working and then I said to myself, my parents are in Glasgow and there's no point in being here, I might as well go to Glasgow. So I moved to Glasgow and got myself a job. We lived... I can't say, I mean it was hard in the beginning. The government used to give them money for groceries and all of that and then we bought a little two bedroom flat, not bought it, but rented it.

So we stayed there for about a year and a half and then my dad's side of the family and my mom's side of the family were in Vancouver and they were always bugging my dad and my mom saying, look, why don't you come stay with the rest of the family, move over to Vancouver. How would they move? Because they had a British passport and they said, why don't you send Azina here and when she comes, she can sponsor you. So my dad says to me, "What do you think of this?" And I said, my god, I've been from London to Glasgow and I have to make a move, even when I was younger at the age of thirteen I had to go and study in Nairobi. So I'd been out, and I was happy to be with my parents and said, "Okay, well I can do that."

So I had my Canadian interview and they said, "Yeah, you can go to Canada, we don't have a problem. Where would you like to stay? We don't want you going to Toronto because we don't need you in Toronto, but you can go to Edmonton, Calgary, you can go to Vancouver. So they had highlighted the places where I could go." I said, "Well, I'll go to Edmonton, because I had my uncle there, my dad's older brother." I went to Edmonton and they said they would make arrangements for me to stay at King Edward Hotel, but I had to pay for everything. So I said, "Okay." And somebody came to receive me, I went to Edmonton, I stayed with my uncle, and my uncle and aunt were very happy to have me because their daughters were in Vancouver. They didn't like Edmonton so they moved to Vancouver. I stayed there for two, three days and I went to the Manpower [Department of Manpower and Immigration] office and I think I was so nervous of being in a new place and I wasn't doing well at the interviews for an office job, and I didn't really want to work in a factory or anything else.

So... but when I came to Toronto I loved it because I had friends here, I had my aunt here, and so I said, I don't have to stay in Edmonton, I can move to Toronto. My cousins were saying to me, "Stay here a few more days, you haven't given yourself a chance. Wait a couple of weeks and then something will turn up." And I said, "No, I don't waste my time. I need to move to Toronto." So I booked my flight, called my friend up and she came to pick me up at the airport. I was in Toronto and going for interviews for an office job, secretarial job, in those days there were so many of them. And I went for a few interviews, I got a job with an insurance company but then I also went for a test at the government, community and social services and I did well and I had a cousin here, and she said, "Don't accept anything less than a hundred and twenty dollars a week." So this job was one hundred and twelve or a hundred and thirteen. So I took it, I mean by that time I only had twenty dollars on me so I didn't have a choice, I had to take the job. And so the girl who interviewed me, she was the senior secretary and she says, "When do you want to start?" I said, "I can start anytime." She says, "Great, let me just talk to my boss." Her boss was away so she went to speak with another manager and said, "Yeah, if you want to, you can hire her, I'm sure David won't mind." So she comes back and she says, "You can start on Tuesday" because Monday's a holiday, and that was the thanksgiving weekend.

So I got hired and I started working, and I just loved it. And then a few months later I started sponsoring my parents from Glasgow. By then it was not easy to sponsor, I needed a lot of money and I didn't have that kind of money. But I had friends who would loan me money for a day or two, put it in my account and show it to them and that went back and forth for some time before my cousins would still loan me money, my family would loan me money. And then finally my parents got accepted and a few years later, 1979 they came. So when they came, I stayed at home of course. You usually stay with the family by then. All the time I was living with friends and families, so when my parents came I was happy, it was like a family reunion. My brother was in Saudi Arabia at that time, so he applied on his own an Canada accepted him, my parents came, my two sisters came, so we were living in Donmills and Dundas, that was our first home. A few months later I met Shiraz down the road. It's so funny."

Shiraz: "And the interesting part was, her dad and my dad went to boarding school in 1937, and we have a picture of them. 1937."

Shezan: "In Uganda."

Shiraz: "In Uganda, yes. And then we find out afterwards not only did they know each other, but my... her grandmother was teaching my mother how to make chapatis. So cooking with my mom, so that

relationship goes back even before 1937, so this was seventy-five year's history. Look where destiny brought us. Whatever has happened during my time here, it has been happening, you know."

Shezan: "In the works."

Shiraz: "In the works kind of thing."

Azina: "It was so funny because Shiraz came home one day, we were going out and my mom started asking, and when my dad came here, they didn't know too many people and I had a cousin... and my dad went to Willowdale khane so he comes back and he says to me, "Azina, I met a friend of mine who was with me in boarding school." So I said, "Oh, very nice." And the following week they went to Willowdale again because my cousin is there and now he has a friend there, so he says he introduced me to his wife, so I said, "Why don't you invite your friends over?" And he says, "Yeah, I will." He was telling me to come to his house, and I was telling him to come to our house, and that's nice you're making friends now. Because my dad used to work, but they needed some friends too. So one day Shiraz came home and my mom and dad were asking him, "Who are your parents?" and Shiraz said, "Fateali Lallani" and he said, "Oh, he's my friend!" [Laughter] What a small world. So our parents knew each other as well, and that was the funniest thing, you know."

Shiraz: "Shezan, this is my brother, Al."

Shezan: "Nice to meet you."

Shiraz: "He is from Vancouver, he is originally from Uganda too. In India, and then my parents then they left Uganda and ended up in India. So he was already in India."

Shezan: "Do you guys have to be getting to the airport?"

Shiraz: "No this is fine here. So yeah, this is how the story came here."

Shezan: "That's pretty much it."

[End of transcript].