

Tom and Joan Francis

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Immigration

Tom Francis: “So you’ve probably heard of the verification process. It was kind of a farce. We had to line up overnight and go through the whole thing. In our case it really was a farce because we were three brothers, all had applied for citizenship at the same time, filled out the same paperwork and gone through exactly the same process, and my two brothers were rejected. They said, “You’re not really a citizen, you did something improper.” And I was accepted. Why I was accepted was probably because I had studied at the university, I had a degree in agriculture, I seemed to be someone who would be useful to the country, I don’t know. We just don’t know. Could be that someone there was also from the same university, one of the officers recognized my name or, I don’t know. I was accepted, so in theory, I could stay, but we had a family meeting and we decided, you know, the writing is on the wall, if two of them have to leave, there was no sense in us staying, and we didn’t know what was going to happen. We heard rumors that Amin was building camps to house people who hadn’t left by the deadline.

We started to get concerned that if we stayed there could be trouble. And as I recall, I think what happened then was the decision, “Okay, which country do we apply to? Where do we go?” My mother influenced that decision a lot because she had visited Canada on holiday many years ago. None of us had been to Canada, and she kept saying to us, “If you boys ever decide to leave Uganda, go to Canada. It’s a wonderful country.” So, you know, there it was right in front of us, and we said, “Okay, that makes sense,” and we happened to have some distant relatives in Canada, and Canada was taking the most number of people. So yeah, not knowing much about Canada but based on that and the fact that they were interviewing and so on, we decided as a family that we were all going to apply to Canada.”

Joan Francis: “Yeah, but then what about how you applied, they asked if you were stateless.”

Tom: “Sorry?”

Joan: “If you were stateless you could go anyway, right?”

Tom: “Explain that, because I’ve forgotten.”

Joan: “Yeah, you thought when we got married, if you were stateless, I could come, and you would follow me.”

Tom: “Oh, I see. Yeah, no that’s true. She had, she was able to get a British passport.”

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Joan: "Because originally I was British and then I—"

Tom: "So she was, there was one kind of a loophole in the system where you could get your British passport back. She was able to get it so she had the option to go to Britain, so we said, "Yeah, worst case scenario even if I don't get into Canada..." Even if I don't get into Canada, she could go to Britain, and being stateless, we would probably have ended up being rescued by the United Nations, that's how it turned out in the end. The Red Cross came in and people were sent to Europe or someplace, some camp, and then from there they were distributed around the world, so we felt, if we didn't go to Canada and get accepted to some country through the United Nations, then we can then find a way to get together. But we were lucky, all of us got accepted to Canada, her family and ours all got accepted, so we were extremely lucky and grateful that happened so we were all able to come over."

Shezan Muhammedi: "And so Joan, how was your experience with the expulsion and sorting out the passport process?"

Joan: "Well, I liked Uganda, I always thought I was going to live there forever because we enjoyed our lives, but today I say I'm so glad it happened because we really like Canada. I guess I was young at that time, so I was not—except seeing the army kill people, that was frightening—but didn't think about the impact until we reached here, and I'm glad we came to Canada."

Shezan: "And so your family, did everyone have British passports or was it just some of the kids?"

Joan: "Yeah, my parents had British passports and we were becoming citizens so that's why we could go with our original passports before our Uganda passports were taken."

Tom: "Was your passport taken?"

Joan: "No I was accepted."

Tom: "She was also accepted. I can't remember all the details. The whole point is that whether you were accepted or not, you felt the same way because you knew that you were not desired there and you were kind of worried about what Amin might do to people, so really we were all in the same boat. I think in her family there was one cousin who decided to stay back and he did stay, and he stayed successfully and his wife is still there, but most of us felt the writing was

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on the wall, it was time to go. This was a good opportunity, we had a chance to be able to go somewhere else, start a new life, and we were young enough—I wouldn't say it was an adventure, but there was an element of an adventure in it because we were young.

We didn't have a lot of savings, we didn't have a lot to lose. It was really difficult on our parents because they lost money, they lost their houses, they lost a lot of, you know, they had to start life again. For them, it was extremely difficult. I would say for us, in hindsight, I mean at the time, it was very stressful, but in hindsight, when I look at what the Syrian refugees are going through, and the Vietnamese boat people, people like that, we didn't have that level of stress. It was hard to be kicked out of the country you were born in, but Canada was also very good to us."