

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Tom and Joan Francis

Archives and Research Collections

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An Oral History with Terrence Francis
The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project
Archives and Research Collections, Carleton University Library

Narrator: Tom and Joan Francis
Researcher: Shezan Muhammedi
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Abstract:

Tom Francis was born in Entebbe but spent many years of his childhood living in various cities including Mbarara, Masaka, and Kampala. Joan was also born in Entebbe, Uganda and spent most her childhood in Kampala. She received training as a teacher and had just returned to Uganda when the expulsion decree was announced. Tom was halfway through completing a Master's degree in agriculture when they were rendered stateless by Idi Amin's decree.

Both Tom and Joan held Ugandan passports and applied for admission to Canada based on the advice of Tom's mother. After visiting Canada in the 1960s, she advised her children to resettle in Canada if ever they were to leave Uganda. Upon arrival in Montreal, Tom enrolled at McGill University within their agriculture department as they had strong ties with Makerere University. Joan secured a position within the university's administration staff.

After completing his PhD in agriculture at Guelph and working for Agriculture Canada for several years, Tom took up a position at the Western University until his retirement in 2008. Joan joined the department of Fine Arts at Western University and continued her career in university administration until she retired in 2008 as well. Tom and Joan reflected on their experiences during the expulsion and outlined the various elements of adjusting to Canadian society.

The interview was conducted at a Tom and Joan's home in Mississauga, Ontario.

Shezan Muhammedi: “So this is an oral interview being conducted on May 8th and yeah, thank you guys for being here. Yeah, go ahead and just start telling me about your childhood, Uganda, and what it was like.”

Tom Francis: “Okay. You want me to go?”

Joan Francis: “You go first.”

Tom: “Well you’ve talked to my brother so you kind of know our childhood, so we lived... I remember in different areas, including Mbarara, Masaka and Kampala, I was born in Entebbe, lived a lot of my life in Kampala. I guess what I remember most about it, we were three brothers and my dad usually lived somewhere else because we needed to be in the capital for education purposes, so my mom brought us up in Kampala and we would on holidays go and see my dad, he would of course come occasionally to visit and so on. So my mom pretty well brought us up, and then my dad died pretty young, I think I was seventeen and so again you know, my mom was kind of the head of the family and really made all of the decisions and so on. So anyway life was very good in Uganda and we never really thought that we would leave, so we became citizens and we were all decided that we would actually live there the rest of our lives.

I got interested in agriculture because that was the main occupation of people at that time, eighty percent of the people in Uganda were into some form of farming and so when I decided what to study I thought that agriculture would be something where I could contribute. So anyways, I was studying in agriculture, I had done a BS [Bachelor of Science] degree and was partway through a master’s degree in 1972 when all the trouble happened. And so... that’s when we left and Joan and I had been dating but we hadn’t decided if we were going to get married, but when this came, this whole thing came about we decided that rather than take the chance... because being Ugandan citizens that had lost their citizenship, we were kind of rendered stateless. So the question was, if we independently applied to different countries to take us, we might end up in different places, so we made the decision to get married. We went and got civilly married, applied for Canadian citizenship as a couple and we got married on the seventeenth of October and we left Uganda on the eighteenth for Montreal.

[Laughter]

So when we arrived in Montreal the guy looked and he said, “You were married yesterday? You are on your honeymoon.” We said, “Yeah, by courtesy of the Canadian government.” That’s what happened,

yeah. We arrived in Montreal one day after we were married and went on from there so I don't know. Joan can tell you."

Joan: "You must have heard too because you spoke to my sister... I'm the last of four girls, we were born in Uganda, and I was born in Entebbe. My dad... when I was young I spent my time in Entebbe and then Kampala, my dad worked for the government so I did my schooling there and we just loved the place, and we were citizens too of the place. And when the incident happened we had to move, and Tom told you how it happened, so that was it. It was... we were young, we were really young, twenty-one, so you know I think it was easier for us than our parents. So... that's what happened."

Shezan: "And so Delphine at that time was abroad, if I'm correct... she was studying abroad or was she back?"

Tom: "No, she was in Uganda. She had gone earlier to study."

Shezan: "She had gone earlier right? She was teaching..."

Tom: "She was actually pregnant and they were the first in our family of brothers and sisters, they were the first to leave because of the issues they had, so they kind of left in a hurry. And then Joan's one sister Irene went to the U.S., her husband had been on a course then, he stayed there and she went there. Delphine and Errol went to Montreal. My brother Terry and his wife left next and so Joan and I were left with our parents and we all left together then. So Joan... oh and Joan's other sister Margaret had left too so Joan and her father and mother and myself and my mother all came the same flight, and we were the last of the family. So we came together, and we went to Montreal as well. We went to Longue Pointe and went through the interview process there."

Joan: "From Longue Pointe... Delphine and Errol were in the YMCA, we contacted them and she said, "Oh, mom and dad and Tom's mom's there, so that's nice." So I said, "I'm married." She said, "Oh, when?" You know, "Yesterday." So my sisters were all surprised."

Shezan: "And then, do you guys remember what happened when you first heard the announcement? Idi Amin, and the expulsion decree, what were your sense of things?"

Tom: "I think we were together... right? I think we were at a nightclub that young people frequented called Silver Springs and someone there said, "Have you heard that Amin has decided to expel all the Asians?" We thought, ah, it's a joke. And Amin was known to be a bit over the top and making rash statements and so on, so we kind of dismissed it. The next day he repeated it and then we realized that

he was serious and then he gave us three months to leave the country. You know we heard the international countries protesting about it and we initially thought he would reverse the decision, plus we were citizens so we didn't really feel like we would be affected. I mean of course, it could be an issue and then he clarified and said, "Everyone of Asian origin needs to leave." The details are blurry but I think what happened then is people said, "You can't get rid of your citizens." So then they went through this citizen verification process where they had you come with your passport and then they determined whether you were really a citizen, got citizenship, you know... unlawfully. So it was an exercise to appease the international..."

Shezan: "We can pause this, yeah."

[End of first audio].

Date: May 8, 2015

Session #: 2/2

Length: 60 minutes

Tom: "Yeah 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, so 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 somebody there was also from the same university, one of the officers recognized my name or... I don't know. So 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. We heard rumors that Amin was building camps to house people that 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 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. 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: "Yeah, but then... what about when you applied they asked if you were stateless..."

Tom: "Sorry?"

Joan: "If you were stateless you could go anyways, 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."

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

Tom: "Then there was some kind of 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. But... we said, "Yeah, worst case scenario even if I don't get into Canada, she could go to Britain and being stateless we probably would 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 someplace, some camp, then from there they were distributed around the world. So we felt... we didn't go to Canada and get accepted, some country through the United Nations, we can then find a way to get together. But we were lucky all of us had 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: "And so Joan, how was your experience with the expulsion and sorting out the passport process?"

Joan: “Well I liked Uganda and I always thought I was going to be there because we enjoyed our lives but today I say I’m so glad it happened because we really like Canada. And I guess I was young at that time so I was not accept... the army killed people and 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, yeah. 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. So that’s 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 on the wall, it was time to go. This was a good opportunity, we had a chance to be able to go somewhere else and 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 houses, they lost a lot of... they had to start life again. For them it was extremely difficult. I would say for us, in hindsight... 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.”

Shezan: “So what happened when you got here? Because you guys landed in Montreal, did your interviews, and then...”

Tom: “Yeah, sort of. So we... we did our interviews and we had a friend who is now in Hamilton who was... her husband was a Canadian. She had studied in Canada and she was assisting in the immigration office there. She’s actually the one who helped Errol to get out, Nancy is the name. She said to me, “Tom, when you go to Canada, go to Montreal, go to McGill University, they have an agricultural

campus. I know it because I've been there, that's where you should go and study." Now I didn't know anything about McGill or any university or anything. So when they said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to stay in Montreal." Plus Errol and Delphine had decided to stay there. I heard about this McGill campus of agriculture and thought I'd give it a try. So anyways... we went to the YMCA for a few days and we went to an immigration guy and I still remember he said, "What do you want to do now?" Joan and I had discussed that even though I had a degree and so on, it really didn't matter... we would do whatever we had to do, work in a factory... whatever we had to do to survive, we would do. But I had this idea that I should check out this university and see if they would... any chance I could continue my graduate studies.

So when I met this immigration officer at Manpower [Department of Manpower and Immigration]. I still remember his name was Beaudouin, and I told him, I said, "You know, I would like to go and visit this agricultural campus at McGill University and see if they would accept me to a master's program to continue my graduate studies. He said, "You know what? They haven't even probably heard of Makerere University, and so I'm just telling you your chances of getting in are slim to none." And I said, "Well that's fine, but let me try. I've got nothing to lose, let me try." So Joan and I took the bus from downtown Montreal, drove out to Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue which is about twenty miles away on the west island, it's the agricultural campus of McGill. And I went to the agronomy department and I met the chairman of the department then, a man by the name of Harold Clink. I said, "You probably haven't heard of Makerere University in Uganda or anything like that, but I'm here just to tell you I've just landed..." He said, "Oh! Are you one of the Uganda refugees?" and I said, "Yes." He said, "Oh, I've been reading in the paper about you. So how can I help you?" I said, "Well I was doing a master's degree in agriculture and I was wondering if there was any opportunity for me to continue. But you probably haven't even heard of Makerere University." He said, "Not only have I heard of it, we have people here from the university, we have people who have gone there, faculty that have gone and taught there. In fact," he said, "In Uganda right now in the department."

So he called this guy and he came in, and he said, "Here is a guy from Uganda that went to Makerere." So they knew all about the university, they knew about the reputation of the university and they looked at my transcripts and they were very, very open, you know. He called one of the professors there, Gislaine Goudreau who was a French Quebecer and he said, "What you are studying kind of fits into our area of study." And he said, "I think we can find something for you." It shocked me, I said, "What about money?" He said, "We'll find you a grant, student stipend and arrange for married student housing

where both you and your wife can go.” We were just completely floored, never expected this. You know I was just completely shocked and then he says to me as we were walking out, “Oh, by the way, what does Joan do?” I said, “She’s a secretary.” So he calls the office of the department and he says, “Wendy,” he says, “Don’t we always need some extra secretarial help around here?” She says, “Oh yeah, we do.” He says, “I think we’ll find something for her.” So that’s how... just amazing. So they not only gave us that, but Joan got a part-time job, we got married student housing. So I went back to the Manpower guy in Montreal and he said, “How did it go?” I said, “Great, I’m accepted! They’re going to give us money, they’re going to give us an apartment.” He couldn’t believe it. He said, “They’ve heard of Makerere?” “Yeah, not only have they heard of it,” I said, “They have hired a guy from it.” It was a great story, you know and two days later we left the YMCA and went over there.”

Joan: “We were one of the first to leave, I think. A lot of people stayed at the YMCA for quite some time before they got jobs and everything, we were lucky. We stayed literally a couple of days.”

Tom: “Off we went there, they were welcoming and the people were just...”

Joan: “The people were very good, their attitudes were good, they gave us a lot of stuff. They heard about my sister Delphine having a baby and people gave us a baby carriage, they were so good. Very, very, very good. Our first experience with the Canadians was really good.”

Shezan: “And then you guys were in Montreal for how long?”

Tom: “We were in Montreal from 1972 to about the middle of ’74. And I left... I finished my master’s degree and then I decided I wanted to do genetics and specialize in that and the best place to do that at the time was the University of Guelph, so I applied to come and do my PhD at Guelph and got accepted. So we came down and... somewhere in the middle of ’74 I think it was. We moved to Guelph and started the PhD program and... yeah, so we were there from ’74 to 1977. Both our kids, we have a boy and a girl both were born in Guelph while I was a grad student. So I got my PhD in agriculture in 1977 and just to add a story that’s kind of interesting... so yeah, again Canadians were extremely good to us. I mean we just felt really welcome, we never really experienced any hardship because people were giving us stuff, we had a lot of friends.”

Joan: “Like having two children... I did work at the university at the animal science, before I had the baby. But after I had my first baby there was just eighteen months between the two of them. I found life very easy because people were very friendly and generous and everything so we never felt any hardships you know, it was really nice, really, really nice experience.”

Tom: “Yeah, and I was going to tell you a story, when I finished in 1977 my PhD, I applied... there was a job in Agriculture Canada which is a federal government job and the requirement for that job was that you had to be a Canadian citizen, but to be a Canadian citizen you had to be in the country five years and I hadn’t quite completed five years but the government had just introduced a law that allowed you to be a citizen after three years which I think is the current law... it had just been introduced. So the chairman of the department said, “You know, I think you should... you’re an ideal candidate for this job, and they clearly want you. The issue is, you’re not a citizen, but if we could somehow get you to be a citizen under the three year law then you would qualify and get the job.” And so I don’t know who he talked to or what he did but the first person in Canada to become a citizen under the three year law was myself.”

Shezan: “Oh, wow!”

Tom: “I have a newspaper cutting of it, a picture and everything else and that was expedited I think through the local Member of Parliament, I think he went to them and said, “Look, the government wants this guy for this job but his issue is his citizenship.” So anyway, whatever strings they pulled or whatever, I became the first person in Canada under that law who became a citizen and then got the job. And from there we moved to an Agriculture Canada station in Harrow Ontario, which is just south of Windsor, it’s a small town, three thousand people. It was a government reset station, there were about a hundred or so scientists working there, a small community. So you know, Montreal, we moved to Guelph, and then we went to Harrow, we lived there. Again, people were very kind. You know, we didn’t see a lot of Ugandans where we were living, really among not only Canadians, but rural Canadians and we enjoyed that, it was a great experience, a lot of close friends still do. The local voluntary organizations we took an active part in that. So we really lived a different life than we do now in Toronto and our kids of course grew up there and then in 1980... so we used to drive from Harrow to Toronto to see the family, which is about a four hour drive.”

Shezan: “Four hours, okay, wow.”

Tom: “And about halfway we’d go by London, and every time we’d go by London I’d say to Joan, “You know what? This would be a reasonable drive. If I could get a job in London then going to Toronto wouldn’t be that burdensome. We used to always say that and I went to a conference in the US and I was standing at a bus stop, a shuttle bus to go to the hotel, this just demonstrated all the coincidences in our lives. I’m standing at the shuttle bus, a guy is standing next to me and I looked at him and I kind of

recognized him and I said, “Are you Jim Mock from Iowa State?” “Oh, yeah, yeah.” And I introduced myself, “Oh,” he said, “You’re working with the government in Canada...” and so on. He said, “By the way, we’re looking for a research director for the company in London if you know of someone who might be interested, let me know.” I said, “Sure, I’ll do that.” And I went to my hotel room and I thought about it and I thought, you know what? Maybe that’s me. So anyway, long story short we had breakfast and I ended up taking that job in London. So we moved to London in 1980 and we lived there for twenty-eight years... 2008, we lived there until 2008. Kids grew up there, they went to Western [University of Western Ontario], got educated and when they grew up the first thing they did was move to Toronto like young people do. And so we stayed... we continued to stay in London but our kids started to get married, and they had kids so our grandkids were here and so in 2008 we decided we would move here and at the same time Joan took retirement from Western.”

Joan: “It was hard because I loved Western so it was like move to Toronto and take early retirement but I got to do that... because I really enjoyed working at Western and it was really nice there in the arts department. Really nice.”

Shezan: “You were in the fine arts department, or?”

Joan: “Yeah, visual arts.”

Shezan: “Visual arts, oh wow. That’s amazing.”

Joan: “Yeah, so it was really nice, the profs, the students, I had a great experience.”

Tom: “So really between her and myself we spent a lot of our life in Canada in the university environment. First as a student and she...”

Joan: “Because in Montreal I worked at the university, in Guelph I worked at the university, Western I worked at the university so I loved that atmosphere, it was nice.”

Tom: “Yeah... so when I joined the company it was a private company so we were out of the academic environment, but I was still in research and yeah, so I did that. Worked through the company through various... I started in research and ended up managing research at more of a global position because I did a lot of travel, but in 2008 we decided... Joan took retirement, I moved to Oakville. The company allowed me to move to Oakville to move here. Even though I was attached to the London office I remember my work was really outside of... my work was international and in the US so they didn’t care

as long as I was close to an airport. So I came here and I worked until 2010 from home, still travelling a lot and then retired in 2010 so we've been retired since then, you know."

Shezan: "So how did you guys find living in each one of those Canadian cities, I guess you spent some time in Montreal, some time in Guelph, some time in a rural area right outside Windsor and then some time in London and now here, did you find any differences between I guess, the people or the atmosphere, or..."

Joan: "It's funny we never had any bad experiences, actually all of them were a little different maybe, but all were very good. In Montreal they were very helpful to us knowing that we were immigrants and everything and that was a short time. It was nice because students too... you know, international students, mixing with them. And then it was Guelph, and we were looking forward to that because it's closer to our family in Toronto, but in Guelph it was nice too because I had my office friends and he was at the university... it was nice. It was different but it was a lovely experience, too... kind of the rural, like I said to you, we were members of the Kinsmen and Kinettes, we got very close to the Canadian..."

Tom: "Yeah I think, I have to say that was the most unique side of our experience because other than that we were in cities or urban environments, but that one we were really in a very Canadian rural environment and we really enjoyed the experience. It was very different, I think a lot of people from Uganda have not experienced that, and I think they are poorer for it, in my opinion because the farm community... we have a lot of respect for them, for farmers in Canada. They're really brilliant people, I tell people the smartest people I've met are farmers, not university professors because they work in an environment where they have to do everything from fixing a tractor to looking after animals, dealing with weather, you know... dealing with financial issues, managing crops, commodities, they do everything. And they're very modest people, you know. Usually when you meet farmers they'll give you the impression that they're not very smart... it's all an act, they're very smart. They're very smart. And you have to... you learn to respect that. We learned a lot. I personally learned a lot in those three years in that rural community because my friends... one of my friends had a farm so I'd help him out on his farm, he had an apple farm, peaches, apples, fruit growing environment. And everyone, all of our neighbours were farmers or associated with farming and a lot of activities they did were not things that you'd do in a city."

Joan: "Just like I learned to make jams and preserve fruit and stuff like that, you know. I really enjoyed it."

Tom: "So yeah, it was a very unique experience and... no, but we didn't... people were very interested in our experience. They wanted to know about it so we had to tell our story many, many times."

Joan: "In the rural area we were the only coloured family I guess in the two thousand people, yeah. So even in the church we kind of took part and we had little things like okay, they're going to put out a recipe book and would you like to do some curries and stuff like that and put the recipes... so I joined that, and I did it for the Kinettes. So we kind of exposed our culture to them and it was very well taken... I liked that."

Tom: "The one change we have seen, you mentioned cooking, but the one change we have seen that decided for me was because I worked with people for many years, even in London, white Canadians who you know they wouldn't even think about eating any spices. It was something very foreign, when we invited them over we made sure we didn't have spices and when I look at it today, it's completely changed. Those same people – because we still keep in touch – and we had them over for a meal here last year, and they eat all the Indian foods and samosas, and they know all this stuff and yet the same people I remember distinctly saying, "No, I can't eat that stuff, I don't like it, I don't like the smell of it." So Canadian culture has changed, and I think in that sense, we didn't realize at the time but we were always out of place. Even though people were friendly with us and so on, we were always aware that we had a different culture, different food, we were always trying to blend in, fit in, and do things the way Canadians did it. I think now we can be more of ourselves and live our culture very freely and so that for me is a change."

Joan: "I should say that when I went to Western I was really shocked because professors there knew more about Indian spices than I did. You know the different ones that they had in the states and everything, they were explaining to me. And they were giving me places to come to Toronto and eat, because they had been to Goa, where we come from, and travelled a lot in India. And I found the professors and some of the students in the arts department were pretty much educated on all that."

Tom: "Yeah I think that was the difference, so really you see the extremes of Canadian society, the academic world who is more global, outgoing, and able to... interested in other cultures. The rural community, more conservative, more representing what Canada used to be forty, fifty years ago. And so we really had those contrasting experiences and they were good we enjoyed them. But like I said, one of my regrets is that new immigrants now to Canada who... they kind of go into almost an urban ghetto of people of their same type, they never really get to see what Canadians have to offer. They don't have a

lot of interaction with Canadians. To me that's... they're missing something. So we experienced that, and our kids also experienced that because London was very much white when we got there. There were not a lot of people from... not a lot of visible minorities in London like it is now. You know, it's changed a lot. In school I think our kids were... the only other Asians were another Ugandan family, and they're all Ugandan families, two or three families, other than that our church was all white. So we stood out. When we came to Toronto we were actually shocked because when we went to the church here, you couldn't see any white people. [Laughter] It was just the total opposite. So that's how Canada has changed over time, so I think it's easier for immigrants now, but they lose some experience I think."

Joan: "But like you were saying also, what were your experiences in the different places? And we often talk about it, Tom and I, honestly, we never really had a bad experience. Honestly."

Tom: "No, we have not."

Joan: "With our neighbours, or with our friends, in fact it's been... not exactly, but it's a fact. We talk about it, you know. A lot of our friends say they had problems at work or... we never experienced that."

Tom: "And I think part of it... a lot of university environment. But also part of it I think is I think people don't understand Canadians. I think for me I found particularly among rural Canadians sometimes they can seem to be standoffish, but actually they're shy. Once you start talking to them they open up. But Canadians are shy, they're not like Americans. Americans are different, they're very much outgoing, they'll start a conversation. Canadians very often... you have to start the conversation, but you can sometimes perceive that to be discrimination you know, or antagonism or something – it isn't, mostly they're just shy. So once we realized that we would start the conversation and you know, we made a lot of friends. I never, like Joan says, never really experienced discrimination. I'm sure there was, maybe people avoided us but we never had any overt discrimination, we never had to feel like we didn't belong or anything like that."

Shezan: "That's awesome, that's good to hear. Now that we've been talking about food a little bit, what was it like adjusting to the Canadian diet, and finding traditional spices to make...?"

Joan: "That was pretty easy because in Montreal you could get the spices because people who helped us... you could get it and all over the place when we were in the rural areas, when we used to come and visit our family in Toronto we did our spices shopping... so really, we didn't lack that."

Tom: “And we also changed our diet, let’s face it. I mean kids were not... now they are, but at the time they were not accustomed to the spices so a lot of times we ate – for lack of a better word – bland food. We adapted to the Canadian thing and then occasionally on weekends and so on Joan would make something spicy, but we didn’t have to have spicy food every single day. I mean it was not a requirement in our house and you know with kids a lot of other things, pasta, things like that went over better so yeah, it was a mix. It still is, we still have both types of food and so... yeah. So it wasn’t a hardship at all, and like Joan says, you could find spices and people found out.”

Joan: “More and more now.”

Tom: “Yeah.”

Shezan: “Now it’s easy, you can just go to a regular Loblaws and get exactly what you need.”

Tom: “Yeah, yeah that’s right. You couldn’t buy samosas at Loblaws in those days.” [Laughter]

Shezan: “Now you can probably even find samosa wraps and everything, yeah I remember before always growing up my mom being like, “Okay we need to go to this Indian convenience store to get these things.”

Joan: “Yes, it was just one or two. In fact it’s funny, we moved seven years ago to Oakville and I thought oh, jeez I need to go to Mississauga. Now in Oakville we have restaurants, a couple of them, we have the spice stores, we have everything very close, and it’s amazing the big change, you know?”

Shezan: “How quickly it changed, yeah. So more of the difficult question is, after being in Canada for so long and going through many different experiences growing up in Uganda, how would you identify yourself? Would you identify yourself as a Canadian of Ugandan origin, a Ugandan Canadian, a Canadian of Goan ancestry? How would you sort of answer that question if I asked you, who are you?”

Tom: “Well you know we’ve lived longer in Canada than we did in Uganda. You know we’ve been here forty-three years, I left Uganda I was twenty-three, Joan was twenty-two... you were twenty-three as well. So you’ve lived twenty-three years in Uganda, forty-three years here, totally different experience. I mean we lived our childhood there, and here most of our adult life here so it’s hard to compare. I think over time it’s very hard to just use one word to describe, but I would say that our Indian roots are probably very strong, at least that’s how Joan and I see it. For me I feel like identifying more by the fact that I’m Goan, Indian than I am Ugandan, even in Uganda we were always aware that we were not local

Ugandans, even though we became Ugandan citizens. We never... and this is not to blame the local peoples as much to blame the Asians. We went to a school that was a Goan school, right? We belonged to a club which was a Goan club. Most... social life was among Goans, Indians, so on. So in Uganda all of these communities tended to live, Ismailis had their own kind of thing, Muslim, other Muslims, Sikhs, the Goans, even though we all interacted with each other. The Europeans had their own little pocket, we had not been there long enough to completely blend in. So even though we were Ugandans on the one hand, there was always a way we were slightly different Ugandans. When politics got in the way people were very quick to call us Indies right, Indians, sometimes in a derogatory way. There was – I'm taking a long time to answer your question..."

Shezan: "It's a complicated question, of course."

Tom: "You know there were feelings of resentment, I think there still are, against the Indians. Part of that was economic, we were wealthier than the average population so there was this feeling of resentment, justified I think in some ways. We kept to ourselves as communities, why we did that... I think part of that was even the British from the time that we grew up we were trained there was a European, an Asian, an African section. A lot of the washrooms... it wasn't apartheid like it was in South Africa, it wasn't legally imposed, but you knew your place. So you grew up knowing that you were... belonged to a certain group and so even though we can't... I mean I would have a hard time saying that I identify myself as primarily as Ugandan I can't say that because my culture is really Indian, Goan, is my primary culture, still defines us. Most of our friends are, most of our friends today are people from Uganda, people of Goan heritage, so we still tend to do that. But I would say... I mean I'm more Canadian than I am Ugandan. For sure I identify myself more with Canada. Uganda is part of my experience, but I feel Canadian, an Indian Goan Canadian. Trying to separate those... that's how I identify.

Joan: "The same. I think we are proud Canadians, sure, our roots are there. I guess my kids will say Canadian, you know."

Tom: "No, we totally identify with being Canadian, but if you want to be hyphenated Canadian I would say it would be Canadian-Indian is how we see ourselves."

Shezan: "Do you guys still have family in Goa?"

Joan: "Right now he just has a cousin there, I lost my... most of them passed away, yeah."

Tom: "So we have some distant relatives, a lot of them actually have moved here. So yeah like Joan says I have a couple of cousins and their kids and so on."

Shezan: "Because the Goan community here is pretty big."

Joan: "Oh, it is."

Shezan: "How big is it?"

Tom: "You should have asked John Nazareth because he's really into this stuff. I've heard different estimates, I mean I personally I think it's around twenty thousand but I've heard as much as fifty thousand, but I think that's the number somewhere in there. It's pretty big."

Shezan: "It's pretty concentrated here in Toronto, John was telling me that when you go outside the populations get much, much smaller when you leave Toronto."

Tom: "I think this could be the highest concentration of Goans almost in any city, anywhere, it's huge. Because Goa is a very small place and so it's a lot of people who are here, yeah."

Shezan: "So my last question would be, what role do you see the Goan community playing in this whole process? Like did it help knowing when you came to Canada that there were other Goans, that there were other people here in Canada already, or? Did the community welcome you as well or was it a mix of... your everyday interactions led you to interactions with Canadians, did it also lead you to interacting with..."

Tom: "Yeah, well you know coming here I would say it was a very small part of the decision even though we knew one family that was kind of distantly related to us. Actually wrote a letter saying they would support us financially if they needed to, which probably helped being able to come here. But, no I don't think it was a major decision."

Joan: "We very pretty open."

Tom: "To going anyway, and you may know this better than most people but I think the Ismaili community probably had bigger influence on Trudeau and accepting people from Uganda, we kind of followed on their coattails, so the Goan community hadn't done a lot you know in terms of being upfront, trying to persuade the government of Canada to take more Goans and so on. Just... yeah we kind of followed along. And then when we came to Canada, we did interact with Goans in Montreal, but it wasn't our primary interaction. I think we've kind of gone full circle, a lot of my friends now are people

I went to school with in Uganda, and yet there was twenty-five, thirty years where I hardly saw them. I mean I kept in touch with them but they were not close friends. So we've kind of come full circle. When I go to play golf, once a year we have a Goan school reunion. So this is a Goan school in Uganda, Kampala, we have a reunion of golfers and there's about eighteen, twenty of us, we meet every year and they are in Toronto!"

Shezan: "Oh, that's awesome."

Tom: "What are the chances of that happening, you know? From that little school in Kampala, Uganda to now get together here in Toronto once a year. And a lot of them, my classmates... or maybe they're one year higher than me, lower than me."

Joan: "It's funny that you say that because just last week we were talking to our friends the same age and we are thinking we have some friends who live in different parts of Canada. But now being in Toronto, I think as you get older you want to be closer to your old friends and everything so that you can have your own social life. It's funny that when we were younger, it didn't matter. As we are getting older, that's part of the concern. I was talking to my sister and she's thinking yeah, I want to be close to my old friends and everything, you know now that you're thinking about it."

Tom: "Yeah I think that's true, as you grow older you know it's your very closest friends or family who is going to look out for you, right? So as a parent you want to be close to your kids but if you don't happen to have kids, you want to be close to friends who will look in on you and make sure that you don't have issues. So yeah even though people kind of dispersed all over Canada we've seen that trend where as people get older, get to our age they're trying to come back to the big centres because they know that they have people that they can kind of count on, rely on. And I'm sure this is true for any of the Ugandan communities but it struck me that if you went to the funeral of a Goan I mean there's hundreds of people that show up. It shocks a lot of people, like who are these people that show up? Well these are people who came from during the exodus, they know them from back in a relatively small town back in Uganda, and they've not lost those ties. We've played sports together, we went to schools together, we went to community centres together, our parents knew each other, sometimes our grandparents knew each other so. And to some extent our kids also interact with kids of those people, not exclusively but there is some interaction there, even today.

So when I tell Canadians, I'm travelling around the world and I tell Canadians I can go to almost any country in the world and find someone I know to stay with, I know them well enough to stay with them.

And that is the result of this exodus that just dispersed people all over the world. But these people we knew really well, it wasn't like we were casual acquaintances. We grew up with these people. I can go to Brazil, I can go to Norway, I can go to India, England, Australia, New Zealand, you name it. I know people, I know them well enough that I could go and stay with them and they'd do the same. So that's one of the benefits of this exodus is that we really know people all over the world. And we were not really... sixty, eighty thousand, something like that..."

Shezan: "Yeah so the estimate that Idi Amin said was eighty thousand, in reality I think only fifty thousand."

Joan: "Fifty thousand came to Canada, right?"

Tom: "Well no, not to Canada."

Shezan: "Worldwide."

Tom: "Canada was five or six thousand."

Shezan: "Canada by the end, by '72 had about eight thousand. So the initial chunk was almost six and then over two years people came from those refugee camps that were all over Europe and then they were trickling in, about twenty-five to thirty a month."

Tom: "You know I had a good friend, an Ismaili friend who is now in Florida and I remember when I was going through the interview process he had already landed in Toronto and he sent me a note saying, "Tom, don't bother with the interview process, just fly to Toronto and they would take you anyways." Which is true, I found out later, you could just fly into Toronto if you could get into Toronto and once you came you'd say, "I'm a refugee from Uganda." And they'd just take you in and so... I don't know why I thought about that but I mean... there were people who didn't go through the process. You really didn't need to."

Joan: "Now where is he?"

Tom: "He's in Florida. He owns a hotel in I think... you probably know more about this, but I think at one time the Aga Khan and maybe part of the Ismaili community were recommending to people, to Ismailis to buy hotels along the east coast because it was a good investment. So he did agriculture just like me but he followed that advice and he went into the hotel business. So he owns and runs a hotel just outside of Disneyworld. So not in agriculture at all, but he's doing extremely well."

Shezan: “I guess you guys had mentioned earlier that your kids would sort of call themselves Canadian, for sure. Them growing up here and raising your kids in Canada, were there any... I don’t want to say tensions but were there moments where they sort of confronted different, not necessarily identities... but values compared to what you guys were used to.”

Joan: “Yes. We were really surprised in London, you know how it was. But I’ll tell you a little story about my son when he went to junior kindergarten and Tom was travelling at that time and he came home and was not really happy to go to school, they were both delighted to go to school but one week he didn’t want to go to school and I didn’t understand why. So I said to him, I said, “Rahim...” I tried to get it out of him and he said, “Well in school when we have to do our PE [physical education] gym they take off their pants and have shorts underneath and the boys say I have black legs, black knees.” So I said, “That’s not bad, you are a little different.” “But it’s just me.” Anyways I went to school and spoke to the teacher and she was so accommodating, she was a lovely person and made a trip with all the kids in the class to take them to the hospital and see the different types of children and say you’re all the same and everything. That is the only incident I can literally remember and today my son who is married now... he’s thirty seven, he’s got very, very close Canadian friends who he still keeps in touch with, goes and stays in London, he grew up with them from junior kindergarten and he’s so strong with at least four of them, real Canadian boys who he’s very, very close with. And so is Karen, my daughter, but he is very, very close with his Canadian friends. He’s had good bonding with them so other than that we didn’t have really...”

Tom: “Yeah in terms of tension in the house... I don’t think it was normal, it wasn’t a cultural thing, it want that they were trying to be Canadian and we were trying to have them be something different. Part of it I think was we didn’t... we didn’t have a lot of, what should I say? Cultural requirements of our kids that conflicted with their Canadian identities. I can’t think of anything, it was the usual parental thing, how late can I stay out? And things like that. We didn’t put any restrictions on them in terms of who they dated, for example. We didn’t really care who they dated, who they married, it didn’t matter to us as long as they were compatible. So that was never a conflict.”

Joan: “I think in our community, they’re really different. In Toronto they socialize with a lot of our culture people and that’s how they kind of got together, but I guess with us being away we socialize with everybody, we never really said to our kids, “Oh you should marry so-and-so.” We didn’t put any restrictions.”

Shezan: "I found that really interesting so far between all of the Goans, I guess I've only interviewed John, your brother, and you guys, but everyone seems to... most of their children seem to have mixed marriages, almost. Like outside of the Goan community."

Joan: "Not to each other, but I think John..."

Shezan: "John, oh sorry yeah okay so both of John's kids married outside."

Tom: "In our case it's one of the kids."

Shezan: "And everyone's been happy about it. Awesome, really nice to hear about."

Joan: "Oh yes, yeah. It's nice. I think genuinely they notice us and are very curious about other communities too, and interested in knowing their culture and everything so I think they have that too."

Shezan: "Because the Ismaili community has struggled, struggled very hard with the idea of non-Ismaili relationships. Especially... even going back to when they first came to Canada, and even now trying to figure out okay, what do we do?"

Tom: "And I think part of it with the Goan community... I mean if you look at the history of Goa you know it was under Portuguese rule for four hundred years, we were converted to Catholicism. Okay so we had this western influence, even our names are anglicized so we had this influence and you could see it even in Uganda as a community we were different from the other communities because we listened to English music and tried to dance like the British, you know. Rightfully or wrongfully our culture was more westernized. We grew up a lot of us, a lot of us grew up speaking English at home which was again different from a lot of Indians. I mean, we regret it now, we wish our parents had talked to us in Konkani, we understand it but we don't speak it. But they thought they were doing us a favour by teaching us English, we spoke English at home."

So we were pretty westernized already so coming to Canada wasn't as big a transition so I think a lot of the other communities where they followed traditional lines... it was a big juxtaposition to take you from Uganda where you could live in your own community, drop you here and now you're exposed to all these different cultures and TVs and all the influences. So yeah I think for the Goans it's been a lot easier to make that transition, that's for sure."

Shezan: "Yeah I remember my grandma used to skip ESL [English as a Second Language] classes, so she'd get on the bus, get off the next stop and just walk home. She'd be like I don't want to be here, I don't want to learn English, I miss home, I miss Uganda."

Joan: "Naturally."

Tom: "Oh I'm sure that's true, no like I said it was a bit more difficult for the older people. For our age you know being twenty-three, like I said since we didn't... we did have some stress because we didn't know what we were getting into but once we settled it really was kind of an adventure and it was very enjoyable. We had the normal stresses of bringing up a family but culturally there were not a lot of tensions. And we didn't have... in the home we didn't, like we were just saying, we didn't suffer from that potential issue with culture, with relationships, and I think for Joan and myself we had the additional aspect of being in an academic environment. So to give you an example, we've always been very tolerant of homosexuals... maybe Joan had a little more difficulty with it..."

Joan: "Initially."

Tom: "Initially, but when she went to Western she worked in an environment among artists so you know it was... I don't know maybe every third person was gay and she found out hey, you know what? These are normal people, in fact they're very nice people, and she changed the whole thing. I've always been open, I think in our community it has been more of a challenge for people to deal with that issue than it is for us because we've always been very open."

Joan: "And my children don't..."

Shezan: "They don't even think twice."

Tom: "They don't think twice about it and now we've got issues in our communities, Indian communities where a lot of the kids who are gay are coming out openly and now its creating some issues for the parents and in Uganda... there were probably just as many gays, but they hid that, they didn't come out of the open or they acted in clandestine fashion. So issues like that, I think we had the advantage of being in a very progressive kind of environment I guess."

Joan: "It's also interesting to know that you think sometimes and you surmise that most of your age group think alike, especially the same type of people you think alike. But now as they're getting older and we meet together sometimes and I come home and I say to Tom, "You know what? I cannot believe

how some of our friends think.” Still very racist if you ask me, and those are our friends, you know what I mean?”

Shezan: “Yeah, it’s shocking.”

Joan: “It shocks me, you know what I mean? How they think about blacks or any other cultures, they think that we are it. And I’m sorry but we are so different, Tom and I are very different I find, and that’s what I am experiencing now and I say wow, I never expected... I always thought that we all thought the same way.”

Shezan: “Yeah, it’s one of those things that’s always blown my mind is how older immigrants – not older in the sense of age, but immigrants that have been in Canada for longer – are very prejudice towards newer immigrants.”

Joan: “Yes!”

Shezan: “And I was always like, you are also an immigrant, why are you hating the other immigrants?”

Joan: “And they’re so upset over them having it easier than us.”

Shezan: “Yeah, is it easier? I don’t think so. It’s still the same.”

Joan: “It’s tougher. It’s tougher. We had, honestly, we had a choice of jobs. If you apply for a job maybe you’re competing with a couple of others. Now it’s that much... so really.”

Shezan: “Yeah, it’s been really difficult. I went to a lecture yesterday and they were talking about how forty percent of the poorest immigrants in Canada today hold university degrees. That’s shocking.”

Joan: “Yes.”

Shezan: “Eglinton and Don Mills, that radius has the most PhD’s per capita in the country.”

Joan: “Is that right? That’s very interesting, in fact it was sad, Tom was working in London and they had to hire people to work in the fields and everything and he used to tell me you know, these kids have degrees and they’re coming out here, you know what I mean? So that’s how it was.”

Tom: “But you know one of the things I tell immigrants when they ask me my advice on this it’s that if you come to Canada, let’s say you have a PhD and they say to you, “Well we don’t recognize this PhD because it came from a different university or something,” I tell them to go and study and get a PhD in Canada and the reason I say that is, I found that when I studied in Canada I learned a lot, I learned in a

different way than I did in Uganda, it was a good experience. In agriculture it was something I had to do, I mean it's a different agriculture so I had to learn different principles but in almost any profession here I always tell people if you're young don't just drive a taxi and say, "Well I have a PhD, but I have to drive a taxi." Go back to school, study. Because we did it and you're not just repeating what you've learned, you will learn something different, probably a different approach and you'll be better for it.

So I always advise immigrants, go ahead and do it. It might cost you three years of your life, it's nothing, in the whole scheme of things it's absolutely nothing. It's a great experience and it'll never be a barrier then for you. So I sympathize with the immigrants who have that issue but I had friends when we arrived here... who we saw last week who... yeah he had to, to use his words, what did he say? "I had to eat humble pie." He had to go back to school, to graduate school, he did. He ended up being a professor at the University of Guelph. So he could have easily said, "Well, I'm not going to study again, I've already done that, they're forcing me to do the same." But he went and did it and did it in a slightly different area so he learned something. And I have friends who didn't, I have friends who said, "I have a degree, if they don't recognize it, it's their problem." And you know, they never succeeded. So to me that's part of the immigrant experience and we're fortunate I think from Uganda, particularly the doctors were fortunate that they set a similar equivalent exam that gave them exemption to practice here. So they..."

Joan: "I'll say something I got from my dad, you know he'll always say study hard and then, it just depends what you do. I think we kind of applied that to our children, we didn't force them but we were hoping and supporting them if they studied whatever and specialized. Because then we felt once they do that, they are on their own. We've done what we had to do, they're on their own, they'll survive. And both my children, my daughter's a teacher, my son was a little immature, after he did his university he was kind of gentle and then he didn't know what he wanted to do..."

Tom: "You're on tape okay, so be careful what you say about your son." [Laughter]

Joan: "But he knows that, but then finally he himself went to Queens [University] and became a physiotherapist so I think was part of it, we liked them to do that."

Tom: "I think that's part of the Asian culture, education is important."

Shezan: "Yes, it's stressed. Education is huge."

Tom: "Which is good, and I think it's helped us a lot."

Shezan: "Yeah my brother always jokes with my dad that I'll be the first doctor in the family, dad says he's not an M.D. so it doesn't count."

[Laughter]

Joan: "How many kids, two boys?"

Shezan: "There's three, so I'm the youngest and there's one more in the middle, Faizan, he lives in Ottawa. So he just moved into his own place, so it's nice that he's still there where my parents aren't all alone, so it's good. Thank you guys so much, this was fantastic."

Joan: "Oh, you're welcome."

[End of transcript].