

**The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project**

An Oral History with Shahira Patni-Tejpar

Archives and Research Collections

Carleton University Library

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*The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project*  
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Narrator: Shahira Patni-Tejpar

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***Abstract:***

Shahira Patni-Tejpar was born in Mbale, Uganda and immigrated to Canada at the age of ten with her parents and three siblings in 1969.

Mrs. Patni-Tejpar recalls her early memories as a child in Vancouver, and her experience adjusting to life in Canada before the influx of Ugandan Asian refugees in 1972. She discusses her family's role in assisting the incoming Ugandan Asians, and her father's role in helping to set up some of Vancouver's early jamatkhanas, and the establishment of the Ismaili community in Canada.

Mrs. Patni-Tejpar is a retired Immigration specialist, and currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

**Shahira Patni-Tejpar:** My name is Shahira Patni-Tejpar - it's a double barrel name because my maiden name was Patni, and my married name is Tejpar.

I was born in Mbale, Uganda in 1959 and I moved to Vancouver, Canada before the Ugandan exodus took place. I'll give you a little bit of history about why we moved from Uganda so early, because, as you know, the bulk of the Ugandan Asians – or Ismailis – moved out of Uganda at the critical stage of Idi Amin coming into power and basically “throwing out all Asians” from Uganda, which was their home. Our family was not the first Ismaili or Ugandan or East African Asian family to move to Canada....There were a few other families (the pioneers) who had moved here before us, a few years prior.

Historically speaking, I don't know if you are aware, Canada cut off non-white immigration in the 1920s or so, until sometime in the mid or early 1960s. When that happened, a person by the name of Zinat Virani, hailing from my home town of Mbale, Uganda, moved to Vancouver in 1964 or 1965. He was one of the first Indians or Asians from East Africa who immigrated to Vancouver. When he moved here, he realized what a beautiful city this was, and that it was a growing country full of opportunities, and open to immigration. It was different from the UK, which had an imperialist history with East Africa and therefore had a different relationship with the people coming in to the country, as they were from the colonies.

Canada was a new country that was growing and changing and had a different outlook towards immigrants. Soon after Virani moved here, he invited his brothers and sisters and their families to join him....many of them did.

My father was a longstanding member of the local Mbale chapter of The Lions Club (an international, non-political service organization). In 1967, The Lions Club had their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Chicago, USA so my mother and father decided that they would attend this big convention and visit America, since they had never been to North America before. So while they were on the North American continent, they decided to also visit Montreal that was hosting , Expo 67. After that, they decided to visit Zinat Virani in Vancouver, who was originally from their home town, Mbale.

It was at that time that Zinat Virani (we called him Zinat uncle), convinced my father to apply for immigration to Canada upon returning to Uganda. He said, “Sadru, (my father's name was Sadru Patni), you know this country is opening up to immigrants and there are many opportunities in this country, for business, for education, for growth, etc. We should also diversify as a community. We have our community in East Africa, the UK and other parts of the world, but we have no base here in Canada. Our traditional path for post-secondary education has been the UK or the USA. Look, you are going to be sending your children for an education abroad somewhere, are you not? Well then, why not Canada? Why not immigrate to Canada

and be with your children, raise them here, send them to Universities locally and that way, we are also building up our Jamat base here in this new and wonderful, welcoming country.

My father, being a man ahead of his time and a visionary in many ways, returned to Uganda, excited and with purpose. He immediately started the application process for immigration to Canada. At that time, there was no Canadian Embassy or High Commission in East Africa.... The closest Canadian office processing immigration applications for East Africa was based in Beirut, Lebanon. One or two years later, we got our visas. At the end of 1969, our mother (Gulshan) and father packed up our bags and with four children in tow, (ages 16, 16, 12 and 10) moved to Canada.

It was a very difficult decision because we were leaving behind our entire extended family, our community, our school friends, our way of life and most importantly, a thriving, well established business in Mbale (which my father and grandfather started from scratch in the late 50's). It was a commercial bakery, called Jubilee Bakery, which supplied bread, pastries, cookies, soy buns and other baked goods to a large part of Eastern Uganda. It was a very successful business, but my father said, "I'll leave that business to my younger brother and he can run it and send us some of the earnings, so we can establish our family base in Vancouver."

So at the end of 1969, we moved to Vancouver. We were picked up from the airport by Zahur Talib and his son, little Malik (who is and has been the President of the Canadian Council for many years now). Their family had just moved to Vancouver. There were seven other Ismaili families living in Vancouver in 1969, when we arrived: Zinath Virani's, his brother Amir Virani's, Zahur Talib's, Barkat Virani's and a few others.

I still remember our arrival, because the first place they took us to from the airport, was a new restaurant in town, called McDonald's (!) on Southwest Marine drive. Zahur uncle said: "This is one of the newest restaurants in Vancouver". Over 29,000 people served, said the sign outside on the golden arches. It reminded us of the hamburger restaurant in Mbale called Wimpy's, part of a British fast food chain. It was all very exciting for this new family that had just arrived.

Our first home for two weeks, was in a little motel on 12<sup>th</sup> Street (the extension of Kingsway in New Westminster) called the Royal City Motel. Soon after, we moved to a three bedroom apartment on Kingsway and Gilley, in Burnaby and my father registered my brother Hanif and I at Windsor elementary school and my sisters Shamim and Pervis at Burnaby South High school. My classroom teachers name was Miss Arthur... I will never forget her face and her kindness.

It was not easy for my dear parents. They had four children from the ages of ten to sixteen to care for, to create a home for, to enroll in schools, to navigate the roads, to learn the lay of the land and figure everything out, with no close relatives or established support systems around. And then, to figure out what to do for a living!! ....In Uganda, he was a businessman....the same rules did not apply here. My father was a very bright man... Back in Uganda, In addition to the Bakery, in his younger days, he had started a Coca cola plant, called Kitty Kola. In his youth, he had clerked for a local British Law firm, called Wilkinsons. His superiors thought very highly of

his aptitude and potential. He really wanted to pursue his studies in law, but being the eldest child of a family of 7 siblings and with the demise of his father, he felt responsible to work hard to provide for the entire extended family and his own. So he never pursued a Law career.

Now that he was in Canada and University education was within his reach, he considered attending UBC 's school of law (a 7 year program) , but being the ever responsible head of his family, he decided instead to do something that would generate income, such as a business. So he decided to purchase a small business – he looked at various businesses: The Maverick steak house in the North Shore, various grocery stores like Macs, etc. Eventually, he purchased a small drycleaners in New Westminister. Now, one asks, why a dry cleaners? He had no experience in that area.... The idea was actually suggested by none other than Zahur Talib whose family had just recently purchased a small Busy Bee drycleaners in New Westminister.

Zahur said to my father, “Sadru, it’s a good business to be in- It’s a daytime business and you don’t need to worry about working long hours in the evening. Besides, we can concentrate on building up a jamatkhana for our community and you can focus on the family and the children etc”. So with that, the search began for a suitable drycleaning business.

My father purchased a small drycleaners in Sapperton, New Westminister, as it was the area closest to the Ismaili families he knew by then. The whole family got involved and helped in the business ...all four children worked part time in this family business. My sisters and I worked after school and on weekends, doing counter work, bagging and tagging clothes. My mother operated the pressor equipment for the pressing of shirts and other clothes. My brother and father cleaned the drycleaning machines of its used perc (today, we know it is a highly toxic material) and together we ran this small business in Sapperton, which we named White Rose Cleaners, after a similar business in Nairobi, Kenya.

We ended up living in New Westminister because Zinat Virani lived there, as did the Talibs. We bought a house within six or seven houses from the Viranis and Count Magan Mawji’s family. The area was called Massey Heights, located behind CKNW (a radio station), which was at located at McBride and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. So, we had three or four ismaili homes in the same area, more or less, of a beautiful area of New Westminister. We grew up there, spending ten years of our lives in that neighborhood.

In the 1970s, things were tough, but my father still made a go of it because he said, “We’ve made our commitment to this country and we’re going to do it.” We children assimilated into the school system. I was in grade five at F.W .Howay Elementary and school was easy for me, in comparison to the standards that we had in East Africa. My brother went into grade seven at the same school. Zinat uncle’s nephew Iqbal Virani , was also at that school. You know, at that time, there weren’t too many visible minorities in those schools. I remember in grade five, some cheeky classmates saying to me, “Do you have monkeys flying on trees where you come from?” and they were shocked that I could speak English and that I was quite knowledgeable about world geography and history and that I was ahead of so many of them in school. Their

image of Africa was based on the character of Tarzan! In my class, there was one Chinese girl, one Japanese girl, and one Sikh girl. Most of the visible minorities in Canada at that time, were brought in as workers 10, 20, 30, 50, 100 years before, to build railroads or to work on farms, etc. ... they came as laborer's to this country and then were permitted to continue living here. They did not come out as economic immigrants, based on criteria or the point system. So we were really some of the first non white "immigrants" to the country.

Over the next few years, we began to put our roots down and became comfortable with all that Canada had to offer: parks, libraries, skiing, skating, Xmas festivities, Halloween, using the bus system, working part time after school and weekends either at the dry cleaners or KFC or A and W or at my fathers next businesses, which was a Biscuit manufacturing plant, called Baders Dutch Biscuits and later on, a doughnut manufacturing plant called Honey Cream Doughnuts, both of which were located on Commercial Drive in Vancouver.

But going back a bit to 1971, in East Africa, trouble was brewing... Nationalization was being instituted in Tanzania, that is, the government started claiming and taking over all businesses that were privately held, by force and with no compensation. As such, we started seeing an influx of Tanzanian Ismaili families coming to Vancouver. So, at that time, my father, Zinat Virani and a few other key figures realized that we needed to set up a proper jamatkhana because until then, for several years, we held JK only monthly, in our homes. Once a month, we would have a jamatkhana in our house, the next month at Zinat uncles house, the next at the Talib's, the next at another Virani uncles, etc Everyone would get together and we would say our prayers, and then would have a pot luck and eat a meal together. We would share experiences and stories about life in this country. Everyone helped each other a lot, in every way, be it talking about schools, business, places to discover, government, news from back home, and our trials and tribulations.

Then in 1972, when the Ugandans refugees started coming to Vancouver, I remember my father replacing our small sedan car with a Volkswagen combi van, a 'box body', as my dad would call it. It was a big, yellow van (which could seat 9 people). We would ask, "Why do we need such a big van?" And my father would say, "We need it because our community is coming here with nothing, and we need to help them. We will need to pick them up from the airport, take them around for housing, and we will need to show them how to get jobs and how to establish themselves. We need a big van for that purpose."

I remember my father was instrumental in looking around for possible Jamat Khana sites and negotiating leases... And for the first jamatkhana we had, he was one of the key persons involved in finding that site and signing the lease for the community – it was known as Edmonds jamatkhana, located on Edmonds street/6<sup>th</sup> street, in Burnaby. This building still exists to this day – it is now a Dance teaching academy. And right next door was a hamburger drive in restaurant, called "Giant Burger". It too has withstood the test of time and is now called "50's burgers" It is known for its old fashioned burgers and is frequented by people in their classic collector's cars.

We have fond memories of that place because it was our first jamatkhana, and every day, there were new newcomers present. The first Mukhi ofcourse was Zinat Virani and the Kamadia was Zahur Talib.

After the daily congregational prayers would end, we would all head down to the Giant Burger and hours would be spent chatting outside in the parking lot, over burgers, fries and cokes...people would exchange stories about their journeys, their backgrounds, their job hunts, their settling in and they would also seek advice, suggestions about where to go, live, study, work, buy cars, etc. The burger joint just loved the business and for us, it was like the courtyards that jamatkhana's back home always had, where people socialized after prayers, played games, ate snacks and enjoyed the balmy night air. Now in Canada, we were socializing with Ismailies from all over the world: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, the Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, the UK, etc..

There is a picture of this first Jamatkhana in one of the editions of the Ismaili Canada Magazine which did a feature on Routes and Roots. A few years ago, while in the area, I popped in to the Hamburger place and asked them: "Did you know that there was an Ismaili congregational hall upstairs, next door to you , for many years and we used to frequent your restaurant all the time? ." And they said, "Come on in!" and they showed me a historical picture of the old Giant Burger on their walls and the owner, said, "We are very proud of the fact that this place is still here, because it has quite a history." I said, "Do you know the success and longevity of Giant Burger was probably because you had a regular clientele of all the Ismailis who frequented your restaurant, seven days a week, and it kept you going?" He was thrilled to hear about that link. I told him "Our community has fond memories of your business and we are so happy that it has survived the test of time." He was delighted to meet me and chat about the history of the restaurant.

Yasmin: "That's a very interesting story indeed! It was just last week when I was driving on Edmonds St. and I saw this burger place and I said, "Oh my gosh, it is still here!"

Shahira: "It was a drive in Burger joint, with a huge parking lot, which became a meeting ground for all of us.

Anyways since then, the Jamatkhana became too small for the numbers arriving. So once again, my father was very instrumental in finding larger locations in Burnaby (the Ledger Jamatkhana) and the Oak Street Jamatkhana in Vancouver, and the downtown one on Burrard and Sixth. We would do the rounds, going to different Jamatkhana's every weekend. Each one had a different character, with people from certain countries frequenting some locations over others.

We remember them vividly in our youth, growing up with those different Jamatkhana's. When the Ugandans arrived, we all wanted to go to the downtown Jamatkhana because that's where all the cool, young, hip people hung around. These teenagers who had just arrived, all attended King George Secondary School located on Denman Street. I remember asking my dad if I could

switch from New Westminster Secondary School to King George in Vancouver and of course he flatly said NO! You are not going to commute by bus for one hour when your own school is 10 minutes from home! But once in a while, on a Friday when we had a free afternoon or a Professional day, my girlfriend and I would take a bus to downtown and go hang around with all the cool teenagers in their school cafeteria while they played their guitars, played ping pong and sang, like they owned the place. They were bright, they were sporty, they were musical and they were so with-it!

So, it was such an amazing time for us. Weekend dancing parties started happening every weekend, which we never had before. They were held at private homes all over the city: In New Westminster, in North or West Vancouver, in the West end apartments or the Tropicana or Riviera Hotels in Downtown or in Burnaby homes. Invitations were not necessary....We would somehow find out where the parties were and everyone just turned up, or 'gate-crashed'. Our social lives changed completely. For these young, pioneer Ismaili families to suddenly have such an influx of young hip Ismailis now in our midst, it was amazing!

During the 70s, we witnessed massive changes in our community. All persons who had a head start by a few months or years, were volunteering their time to set up councils such as the Regional B.C. Council and the National Council. Setting up the the Jamatkhanas , the leasing that had to go into it, the various bodies of management for the community, financial aid for those in need, womens committees, religious education committees, social, economic and educational committees were all set up to deal with and cater to the needs of this burgeoning community made up of professionals, business people, youth, seniors and new business people.

Everything was starting from zero – institutions and organizations that we had grown up with and taken for granted for years and generations in East Africa, were now being established here in Canada, from the beginning and for different needs. My father was intricately involved in all of this, and as such, we too, his children were also involved with guiding the way, so to speak, for so many new comers.

In business, as I may have said before, my father went from the dry-cleaning business to wholesale manufacturing businesses such as Bader's Dutch Biscuits and then Honey Cream Donuts, and then to establishing a new business from scratch, called Fibertex Insulation. It was a very exciting time, the 1970 – 1980 period.

Of course, we all grew up, we moved on from elementary school to high school, to university. Most of us, who had immigrated recently, could not afford to send our children away to universities . So, most of us lived at home and attended local universities, such as SFU [Simon Fraser University], or UBC [University of British Columbia], or local colleges, such as VCC or Douglas College. It is only now, after all these years, that so many of our children are going away to Universities in other provinces, or to the USA or the UK. But at that time, young Ismaili Canadian families could not afford to send their kids away to universities.



In 1978, Hazar Imam visited Canada for the first time. It was such a time of joy, festivity, planning and excitement. His guidance to us at that time was to 'make Canada our Permanent Home' and to take full advantage of this wonderful country's opportunities, education, etc without forgetting our faith's ethics and values.

In 1979, during my second year at Simon Fraser University, my mother got Cancer - she passed away one year later. It was a huge blow to our family...we felt we had just moved to Canada 10 years earlier and now we would be living our lives as in this country, but without our dearest mother. Everything started changing after her demise. My father sold our family home to Zinat Virani's sister, Zarin, and he moved to Texas, where his cousin had a Motel. My father purchased a motel in partnership with the Lalji Family, of Vancouver, formerly of Uganda. He built that business up and eventually purchased another motel, apartment buildings, etc. He unfortunately lost everything with the downturn of the Texan Oil boom economy in 1985. He then moved to Florida, where he got into the Drycleaning business once again.

After my mother's death, my sister moved to the UK to join the Institute of Ismaili Studies. My brother and I moved in together. I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in French. A year later, I decided to go to France, to live, study and work there, in order to practice and perfect the French that I had learnt. It was a wonderful experience, living in the heart of Paris, in the 8<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, near the Champs Elysees.

When I came back, I had a Canada students loan to pay off, and needed a job to do that... but felt I needed more education to be more marketable...so I decided to go back to University to do a Post graduate Diploma in Education/French Immersion teaching. One year later, upon completion of same, I had three job offers for teaching in the French immersion system of the public school system. I started working in North Vancouver at Ross Road Elementary school and I worked there for one year.

During Hazar Imam's Padhramni (visit) to Vancouver in 1983, I met my husband, who was visiting Vancouver for the first time. We had many things in common such as Squash, French, love of foreign movies, katchi speaking, both mothers born in Zanzibar, etc. He had recently moved back to Kenya after completing his studies at MIT in Engineering. After working for a few years in Boston and Texas, he moved back to Kenya to help his father run his business, something he always wanted to try his hand at.

After a courtship across the world for one and a half years, we were married and I moved back to Africa, but this time, to Nairobi, Kenya. When I left East Africa as a child, I was ten years old. This time I came back as an adult. I soon realized that one cannot live in a country and not speak their language...As such, I attended Swahili courses at night at the University of Nairobi and I learned Swahili.

In terms of work in Nairobi, I first tutored students in French, then started a vegetable/fruit wholesaling business between Nairobi and Mombasa, which meant getting to know the markets, the buying habits, the delivery systems, the producers and the purchasers...it was quite the learning curve. Next, I started a handicraft export company, called LEOKEN (Leo means today in Swahili). I made various contacts locally with local suppliers, women weavers, soapstone carvers, wood workers, etc. as well as visited importers of such handicrafts in Atlanta Georgia, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. It was not an easy business to run as I was new in this business and did not have agents in the USA or Canada to market and distribute the handicrafts. In addition, all importers needed consistency in the quality of the products which the Kenyan handicraft market was not able to provide at that time. A year later, I started working as the Executive Assistant to the Head of the Immigration Section of the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi. Donald Cameron was his name, he said to me, "You know, with your degree from a Canadian University and your bilingual abilities, your qualifications are far greater than what you are currently doing. You should be applying for the upcoming position of Officer here at the Canadian High Commission. So why don't you try?" With his encouragement, I applied and despite the stiff competition, I got the highly coveted job of Immigration Program Officer, with the Canadian High Commission. Everybody else in that department was a career diplomat, posted to Kenya by Canada's department of External Affairs. Every two or four years, these diplomats moved on and new ones were sent in.

I did that work for six years, interviewing and processing applications for Canada, for immigrants, students, refugees, visitors, etc. Often I had Ismaili files come across my desk...needless to say, I had to be extremely, extremely, impartial during my interviews. Some of them would look at me at Jamatkhana and say, "She's really tough." But I had to be tough, I had to do my job. I had to apply the criteria and accept or refuse people, based on merit. If I felt that people did not meet the criteria or the qualifications, I had to refuse them even if they were Ismailis. It hurt me, but I had to do my job.

I did that for six years. During those years, I worked under three different Program Managers: Donald Cameron, Mike Molloy and Ernest Allen. I got to know so many wonderful people who, to this day (more than 25 years later), I keep in touch with. I see Mike Molloy and Susan Burrows when I visit Ottawa and vice versa, when they visit Vancouver, we get together for a dish of Kuku paka (coconut chicken curry).

Anyway, when I left Nairobi, it wasn't because I wanted to leave. I was very happy with my work there. It was my husband, who was running his family business, but who was getting frustrated with the way businesses were expected to engage in corruption. It was not something he felt comfortable with and it was compromising his morals and values....so despite the good lifestyle and my wonderful job, we decided to move (back) to Canada.

So in 1990, we moved to Vancouver, my former home. It was a tough move, with husband and 1 young child. I started applying as a French teacher. Just then, I realized I was pregnant with my second child. The thought of going into a classroom with 20-30 children, was daunting.

So, instead, I got a job as an Immigration Consultant, with an established downtown Vancouver law firm to establish and set up their immigration department, because by then, I had so much expertise in immigration. It worked out well as they wanted to establish and expand their Immigration practice area.

I worked for Clark Wilson, for six years as their Immigration Consultant, advising lawyers, clients and businesses on how to bring into Canada, Executives, workers, Immigrants and Investors from other countries.

In 1996, my children were growing up and my husband travelled for his work, so needing the flexibility to be there for them, I started my own Immigration practice as an Independent Consultant. I had flexibility as it was my own business and I had success right from the get-go. A lot of my previous clients at Clark Wilson were Japanese...when they found out that I had moved on, they found and followed me. They didn't want the firm, they wanted me. I developed a strong following in the Japanese community and a good reputation with them.

During my twenty years of consulting, I assisted thousands of people realize their dreams of moving to Canada. The different nationalities of people that I had as clients, enriched my life incredibly....their cultures, languages, histories and lives were all such a reflection of what Canada is...a multinational, global, pluralistic country and its richness comes from precisely that.

Since it was my own practice, I was able to have a work life balance. It was a satisfying occupation in that I was able to help so many people immigrate to this country, based on their professions, their education and their sheer will be able to make a contribution to this country. Although I had clients from all over the world, eighty percent of my clientele was Japanese. In approx. 2013, I decided to retire from my Immigration practice and focus on other interests that I had. I spend my time now on keeping fit, cycling, playing squash and tennis and doing pottery. I also like to travel once or twice a year.

Going back to my siblings, we all ended up everywhere after 1980, just 10 years after our arrival in Canada. My sister (a twin) moved to the U.K., married there and had 3 children. She passed away thirteen years later. My other sister (the other twin) continued living here in Vancouver, and my brother moved to Toronto, the UK, Melbourne and now he lives in Ottawa. As mentioned earlier, my mother unfortunately passed away only ten years after we immigrated to Canada (1980), and my father passed away twenty years after immigration to Canada. I lost my mother and father at the ages of fifty and sixty.

I have fond memories of those early years. I remember my father - he had never skated in his life, what did he know about skating? But he would take us to skating rinks and he would tie our laces at the skating rink because he wanted us to experience the sports and pleasures of this new

country of ours Canada. Every weekend, we would go off to discover new parks – Allouette lake, Alta Lake, central park, Stanley park, Cates park, Whycliffe park, etc. He loved having picnics. He signed us up for skiing lessons in 1972, and it was tough, money was tough, but he signed us up because he wanted us to experience these Canadian sports. To this day, we all still ski – and we can thank him for that.

Re: languages, I'm one of the few in this generation who speaks four or five languages. English, French, Swahili, Katchi, Gujerati. The next generation, my own children speak only English and French and the younger one speaks a bit of Chinese. Unfortunately, we did not speak to our children in Katchi or Gujerati .

Yasmin: "So talking about Swahili, did you complete the entire 4 years degree at Nairobi University?"

Shahira: "No, I took a few courses and I learned enough to be able to converse with any person who speaks Swahili . To this day, I can speak it because I've maintained it. Every time we go back to Kenya, I get an opportunity to practice. It was interesting... about ten or fifteen years ago, we went to Uganda with our children. We went to Mbale, to see our old house and our old business - Jubilee Bakery, which was given back to us by the Government of Uganda in the 90's. Subsequently, my uncle sold it to the current Mukhi of Mbale jamatkhana. He was a recent immigrant to Uganda from India,. Not only did he buy Jubilee Bakery, but he also bought so many other businesses that belonged to Ismailis in Mbale.

Apparently, he moved to Uganda during the time that Uganda was going through its toughest period. That is, after Idi Amin kicked out the Asians (of Indian origin) who were running the country, Uganda went through a terrible slump and serious, economic hardship - it is during that time that he moved from India to Uganda. In a sense, It was like history was repeating itself. We (our great grand parents) had moved to East Africa many generations ago, and like him, we had nothing, we started from nothing. We started with little dukas (shops) , and from that we progressed to more. With the advice of the Agakhan, institutions were set up in Education, hospitals, nursery schools, etc. . Now we see this man, who came to Uganda during its struggling times, he worked hard and soon brought out his brothers who also set up small businesses in the outskirts of the country... Little by little, they saved and re-invested their capital, enough to buy these businesses from ex-Ugandan Asians.

This new immigrant to Uganda, Mukhi Feroze, started those businesses, but he realized during those years that he was a lonely man. He married an African woman and she converted, she became an Ismaili. Subsequently he apparently married another woman from India, and he brought her out too. So now in this home that is above Jubilee Bakery, he has his African wife who is an Ismaili, and he has children by her and he has his Indian wife who came from India, and they are all living together, in an extended family with his brother and wife. So there they are, living above Jubilee Bakery, living together as a joint family, and he is the mukhi of the Mbale jamatkhana - amazing.

Yasmin: "It's a beautiful Jamatkhana, I went to see it in 2008, and I was told that many people (Ismailis) had migrated to Mbale from India."

Shahira: "Yes, when we went – this is an interesting story – we went to see our old house. It was full of memories despite the dilapidation and state of disrepair. Someone was occupying it, so we knocked, we knocked, we knocked. Nobody would open the door for us. We were so disappointed as we had come a long way to see it. Finally, just as we were driving away, somebody peeked out. We said to them, "We used to live in this house. Is it possible for us to see it?" Reluctantly, she allowed us to see it. In our memories that house was huge, it was beautiful, it was magnificent. And yet now, it seemed like a modest, small house and you think, "Oh my God, did I really live in here?"

When we were driving away from the house, suddenly the girl who let us in, ran out of the house, running after our car, waving. So we stopped the car. She came to the car window, crying.... "Please,....Are you going to come back and take our house away from us?" And we said, "No. No, we are not going to take away your house. Please, that house is yours. You have been living in it. We only wanted to see it, we did not come here to take it away from you. " Needless to say, she was so relieved!

So then, from there, we went to the Aga Khan School to see what it was like. We spoke to some of the students who were hanging about and we told them about our history, that we were students at that school, and that we were Ismailies, followers of the Aga Khan, who the school was named after. They were very pleased to hear that.

Our next stop was the Mbale sports club, which was where we were members in the 60's. We saw the swimming pool, which was so small compared to how it was in our imaginations. We checked out the squash courts, since all four of us in our family play a lot of squash in Canada.

We then went on to the Mount Elgin Hotel, which is where we stayed the night.

So yes, it was nice to see our home town some 20-25 years later. Obviously, our children could not really connect with any of this, but we could. So that is our history."

Yasmin: "That is fantastic, I am glad you went back with your family. However, when you were working in Nairobi for the six years, did you ever go back to Mbale during that time?"

Shahira: "No. During that time, 1984 to 1990, Museveni was in power, and it was still relatively difficult to go back to Mbale - we didn't feel safe. Re: ancestral visits, we did visit Bungoma [Kenya] where my grandparents lived, and Zanzibar, Tanzania, where my mother and my mother in law were both born.

Yasmin: "That is interesting! However, visiting your home in Mbale was definitely an eye opener and good learning experience for your children! Now, they know their roots."

Shahira: "Yes, exactly. And to this today when people ask me here in Canada, "Where are you from?" The first thing I say is, "Have you got five minutes?" Because it is a complicated history.

When somebody asks, “Where are you from?” Do they mean, what is your race? Do they mean, where were you born? Do they mean, what is your country of residence, your citizenship? We are a confluence of so many cultures and histories, we are Indians by race, we are African by birth, we are Canadians by residence and citizenship, loyalty, and the birth of our children, and we are Ismaili Muslims by religion. We are such a mixture of so many influences! Sometimes I automatically say I’m from Kenya, because that is where I spent my adult years. And yet my birth and childhood years, were in Uganda.”

Yasmin: “Yes that is a loaded question & answer and so true! I get asked the same question and it is so difficult for me to answer in a couple of minutes! I like how you have broken it up! You have got such a rich history, and you remember so much.”

Shahira: “Well I am glad I remember enough to share this with you.... I applaud you for recording this for the next generations to come. Because so much of our history has not been recorded especially between the 60s-90s. And of course some very important people who could remember and recount so much, have gone. But some documents still exist. For example, When I was doing some research for the Roots to Routes Article in the Ismaili Canada magazine, I had gone to interview Tasneem Virani, who is the daughter of Zinat Virani (one of the first Ismailis to immigrate to Vancouver in the mid 60s). I asked her if she had any documents or letters from her fathers early years here. And she did - she had boxes and boxes stacked high in a room, full of documents that her father painstakingly kept during those years, the 1960s. There was Correspondence with Sir [Eboo Pirbhai],(the then supreme council’s president), correspondence with Hazar Imam (Aga Khan IV), correspondence with different people all over the world who were looking at Canada at that time and saying, “Should we move there? What are the job prospects like? What is the education like in that country? Should we be sending people there?”

This is all before Idi Amin came into power in the early 70’s and forced so many people to leave Uganda. I put Tasneem Virani in touch with Carleton University’s archive project in progress which is phenomenal, and encouraging her to send all her documents there.... But that’s all I could do, it’s not my decision to make... I don’t own those documents so I can’t do anything about it. It is ultimately her decision”

Yasmin: “I think I got that idea when you were talking about the documents there, when we were at VPL [Vancouver Public Library]. Maybe [inaudible] but there would be a lot of scanning and digitization, that could be a lot of work.”

Shahira: “I think it would be a worthwhile project because she is sitting on a treasure trove of historical documents .”

Yasmin: “That would be very interesting for our Ismaili community.”

Shahira: “Absolutely.”

Yasmin: "Some of the other things I wanted to... you said you were ten years old when you first went to school here. I interviewed another person from Uganda, she was a little bit younger and she found it very, very difficult. So did you experience – I know that you mentioned you were one of two Indians in your classroom – but how were you treated? Did they look at you differently, did you have any problems? Any kind of issues?"

Shahira: "Absolutely! Racism was alive and well. And so was Ignorance. In my school, I always felt like an outsider. Often, the other children made fun of me, I was often excluded from groups and circles at school. I was different. Words like diversity, ethnicity and multiculturalism were not yet in use in the everyday Canadian Lexicon. Children are brutally honest and very unforgiving....they can be cruel. So yes, it was very difficult. Thank god for the fact that I had a strong family with older siblings who I could turn to if needed. But, I was also befriended by a group of 3-4 young girls in my grade, with whom I would play at lunch time, sing in the locker bays, have weekend sleepovers with, go camping with and sing and play the piano with.

One of my closest friends in the 70's was of Italian descent (Shari Tartini), and two were "regular" Canadians. So we called our group, the Patini gang. We stuck together through many of our high school trials and tribulations and we remained friends throughout primary school and high school, and to this day, I am still in touch with one of them.

Those were very, very important years because yes, there was racism, absolutely. The words that would be thrown at us, would be "East Indian" or "Punjab" or "Paki". And to my 10 year old skin, none of these made any sense. "Why are you calling me an East Indian? I am from Africa, what's that got to do with being an East Indian? Why are you calling me a Punjab, I am not from India?" But in their eyes, if you were brown, you were a Punjabi Sikh and therefore you were an East Indian because that was the only kind of brown person they had ever known or seen. A lot of those the early Indians (mainly from the Punjab region) had not spoken English when they first came to Canada or when they entered the school system. Whereas we came in from East Africa, speaking English fluently and often ahead of our classmates academically. But to them, we were a minority race that they looked down upon.

Yasmin: "Most of the interviews I have been conducting, have been with adults who were a lot older when they immigrated, so most of them did not quite feel this racism as much as the children. So it is good to know that it wasn't all 'a bed of roses' coming here to Canada."

Shahira: "Exactly."

Yasmin: "But I must say your dad did a fantastic job and left a good mark on you and your sisters and your family. Because I think what he has done is phenomenal."

Shahira: "Yes, he was an amazing man. Being the eldest of 7 siblings and having responsibility thrust on him from a young age, he became very mature. In Mbale, he was involved with the

establishment of the Agakhan nursery school, the Agakhan Hostel and was a key member of the local Ismaili council for Education . He cared a lot about our community and selflessly gave so much of his time to it. I remember him on various council positions in Canada such as the Aid Fund Committee. He was the also the first Mukhi of Hastings jamatkhana. It was a magnificent big building hall, with a social hall and kitchen downstairs and a grand, high ceilinged ballroom-like hall upstairs for the prayers. All the other rented JK halls were either schools or low ceilinged spaces, but this one was amazing. My father believed in developing a very close relationship with the volunteers who worked so hard at that jamat khana. It was a very special place, it was a very special time.”

Yasmin: “I like Hastings Khane (prayer house). So let’s see, some of these questions that I have here... would not really be typical for you because you came before 1972. So you said your dad started a dry-cleaning business, so he came before the...”

Shahira: “yes, we immigrated a couple of years before the Ugandan refugees arrived. I believe it was 1969.”

Yasmin: “Yes, 1969, so when did he buy that [dry-cleaning business]?”

Shahira: “He bought that business I believe in 1970. He brought a little bit of capital with him to be able to start this business, and he was hoping that he would get more sent to him to run this business and to establish himself here. Unfortunately, his brother was not as able to successfully run the Bakery business left with him and further funds were never received once we left. So basically, my father had to manage with the few funds he had brought out.

You know when you call it a family business, that’s exactly what it was.....I may be repeating myself, but all of us worked in that business in the dry cleaners. We would go to school and at three thirty, we would go to the dry cleaners. And I remember bagging, tagging, and cleaning and my brother and father would be cleaning the perc from the machines at the back, and we have now found out that Perc is Highly toxic.! My mother, my brother, my sisters, we were all doing different things in that business. My mother would do the pressing of the shirts. My sisters and I would be working at the counters, receiving customers, bagging, tagging. You know, you could say, that those were our first jobs in Canada! My father would say, “Listen, I’ll pay you, this way you can earn some pocket money. You work in the business after school or on Saturdays, and I’ll pay you.” So he would pay us a little bit and that became our pocket money.

With that, I one day said to my dad, “I want to work at a different dry cleaners near my high school.” I started working for a the Aloha dry cleaners on Sixth Avenue, owned by a second generation Chinese family – Arlene and Harold Gee - and that family became very good friends. I still remember them, and from that time I became independent as a worker from a very young age, thanks to my dad’s training. Subsequent jobs as a teenager were a cashier at Kentucky Fried Chicken when I was fourteen or fifteen, then back to a dry cleaners, then while at University, I tutored kids in Math and French and I worked at Budget Rent A Car on weekends. I was always working throughout my childhood, sometimes I feel I didn’t have a childhood



because I was the child of new immigrants wanting to settle in this country, where parents were not able to afford pocket money for the kids, so we had to earn it ourselves.

Earning that pocket money meant not participating in school sports at three thirty after school, or hanging around with friends. I couldn't do a lot of those things. So my childhood in a way was spent working, but definitely, you build up a work ethic. Throughout high school, throughout university, I was working. I would be tutoring, I would work at Budget Rent A Car, I worked at various places to put myself through university and school so that I would not be a burden to my parents. I would take out student loans – and of course, my parents helped wherever they could, but they had four kids to support. They had businesses that sometimes were not doing that well.”

Yasmin: “Was it only you? Or did your siblings do the same things?”

Shahira: “I think because I was younger... I did different types of things that they did not do, maybe I was a little bit more adventurous and fearless in some respects, being the youngest of four. They all had jobs as well, different kinds of jobs, working at A&W, teaching yoga, etc.. I remember at the age of 11 or 12, my next door neighbor, Mrs Auld, asked my mom if I could come over and vacuum her house and tidy it up and that she would pay me, so I did a few hours of that and earned some pocket money...a quarter, .... fifty cents. Anything was good for me, and it was just next door....one less TV program of Gilligans Island to watch!

Yasmin: “Wow, you were really hardworking, that's really good. Now let's see... you know, now that you look back, would you have wanted anything different? Do you have any regrets coming to Canada at the age of ten? Do you think your dad made the wrong decision, or would you have been better off there? What are your views now that you think about it?”

Shahira: “You know it was a very tough period for my parents. When they first moved it was not easy, and there were times I remember them saying, “We should move back.” This was in 1970, 1971, “Maybe we made the wrong decision, we should move back.” And I remember that I was the person who resisted the most in the family, because by that time I had developed friends at my school, I had assimilated better than the others because I was more flexible and younger....it was tougher for them. I had assimilated better so I said to him, “You can go, I am staying. I'm not going to leave. I will stay with Zinat Uncle, you can go back to East Africa.” My father said, “Of course we can't do that, maybe we should just hang around here a little bit longer.” Just as well he decided to stay on!

That was the best decision he made - to leave Uganda when he left... because if he had left with Idi Amin's expulsion, we would have been in the same boat as everybody else. ....Struggling financially, struggling to find ourselves, struggling to establish ourselves etc. But because we left early, we were actually able to help our extended family and the jamaat settle in this country. They needed to have the guidance from people who had already been here. They needed to have ideas and advice on basic things such as getting a drivers license, taking buses, finding apartments, where to go to find Indian spices or where to apply for unemployment

insurance, where to go for jobs [Department of Manpower and Immigration], where to get medical coverage from, which schools to go to, which areas to settle in. Those questions... who else are you going to ask?

So all of us in our family as well as the early Ismaili settlers were pioneers you know. It was a very important role we had. There were often newly arrived, young 16-17 year olds, seeking advice from me, a young 12 year old, because I have been here longer. So it felt good! But it was a critical role that the early pioneers played in settling this jamat here, properly. Today, you see how well established the Ismailies of Vancouver are, and how Vancouver is perceived as one of the most successful Ismaili settlements of the world. It feels good that we had a part in it."

Yasmin: "Very nice story. Very, very different from the others. So at the present time you said you are not working?"

Shahira: "I'm retired. I had my own Immigration practice in which I helped thousands of people from all over the world realize their dreams. Now I want to travel light, without too many responsibilities....I'm an artist, I'm a potter. I am a competitive squash and tennis player and I want to travel and see the world.

Yasmin: "Do you have any pictures or photographs that you would like to share of these memories?"

Shahira: "I do have some of my family life in Vancouver/New Westminster in the 70's if you want."

Yasmin: "When you went back, did you take any pictures?"

Shahira: "yes, I have a few photos of our trip to Uganda...in an album somewhere.... I can send them to you if you wish.

Yasmin: "You don't have any relatives in Uganda at the present time correct?"

Shahira: "No."

Yasmin: "We already talked about languages, your visit to Uganda... I think you have covered most of the points that I have. Anything else you want to share?"

Shahira: "No, I think I've said enough." [Laughter]

[End of transcript.]