

**The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project**

An Oral History with Yasmin Merani

Archives and Research Collections

Carleton University Library

2016

An Oral History with Yasmin Merani  
*The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project*  
Archives and Research Collections, Carleton University Library

Narrator: Yasmin Merani  
Researcher: Yasmin Jamal  
Date: November 1, 2016  
Session #: 1/1  
Length: 31 minutes  
Location: Vancouver, British Columbia.

***Abstract:***

In 1972, Yasmin Merani was working at the Diamond Jubilee Trust in Kampala, Uganda when Idi Amin issued his expulsion decree stating that all people of Asian descent must leave the country. Under the looming expulsion deadline, Yasmin married her partner Anil at a ceremony shortly before they departed the country separately.

Yasmin recalls her memories from the expulsion period, and her experience arriving first in Montreal and then in Vancouver, looking to reunite with her husband. Yasmin shares her first experiences working in Vancouver, and stories about her early life in Canada raising her two daughters.

This interview was conducted in Vancouver, British Columbia by researcher Yasmin B. Jamal.

Yasmin B. Jamal: "Yasmin, how are you today?"

Yasmin Merani: "Fine, thanks."

Y. B. Jamal: "I know you recently went through a knee surgery, I hope you are feeling a lot better. Thank you for allowing me to come by to your house to interview you today on your Uganda stories. Like I was telling you earlier, please share your stories from when you were in Uganda, when you left Uganda, and I know you have a lot of interesting things to share, as we had discussed at Vancouver Public Library when we met a few months ago. So let's roll on, the mic is yours."

Y. Merani: "Okay, in 1972, August, [Idi] Amin Dada told us to leave Uganda, and we didn't know where to go. At that time, we were with our parents having lunch, and it was a really shocking thing for us and we didn't know what to do. So then, after some time it was decided that the Canadian team was coming to Uganda to take the interview, and whoever goes through, you get though [to Canada].

I was working at Diamond Trust at that time and I went to work the next day and the following day because I didn't have a choice, and the keys were with me because most of the staff were gone. So I had to go and open the office and close and all that, which is really scary going on your own because there is nobody around there. Eventually we got our turns to line up, I think I went twice, I lined up in the morning from seven to eight or whatever, and I got my interview on the third day.

I go to the interview because my medical and everything went through and I didn't have an issue. Then my flight was booked and everything, but I was getting married because we were working in the same office. So what happened – this was funny – his interview was earlier than mine and we couldn't get the flights together, so we insisted to the doctors and they said, "No, we can't help you, but we can help you later on to connect you there, wherever he is going." So anyway, Anil left, just after we had got married the next day, and I was here. Stay for one night here, then we landed in Montreal. During my wedding, the Canadian team came to the wedding."

Y. B. Jamal: "Wow!"

Y. Merani: "Yeah, there were three or four doctors who came to the wedding. It was in the main jamatkhana, our prayer house. From there it was moved to another one because they thought there were problems coming up there with the army, so they moved to another one and the team was all there for my wedding. They came to the reception and all that, and then they told me, "This henna, you have it in your hand, it is going to give you a lot of problems." Because they [never sent it] in Canada, so [they said], "I don't know how you are going to get through."

But then the doctor advised my brother that you go and get these photos done, they were done at Makerere University, where my brother was doing his medicine. So he got the pictures done in black and white and he gave it to me. As I landed in Montreal, around midnight, eleven, twelve o'clock, I went to sleep. Next day, we didn't get breakfast first of all, because we were late, and secondly because of the henna they could not give me anything because they were wondering, what is all this?"

Y. B. Jamal: "This is in Montreal?"

Y. Merani: "This was in Montreal, at the Longue-Pointe or whatever, I don't remember. So I couldn't get anything until I dug into my suitcase – which was broken, and an elderly guy who helped me to tie my suitcase with the ropes so I can reach Montreal. Eventually we opened it and we took those black and

white photos from three o'clock in the afternoon, I showed them what it was, and then they wanted to hear the whole story, about the wedding and everything.

Eventually around eight o'clock I was sent to Vancouver. As I arrived in Vancouver, Anil was not home. He went for a nice dinner, sikh people, they invited him for a dinner and they hired a school bus, the Sikh community. Yeah they rented big school busses and took some of the Ismailis for dinner. So when I reached there, I am sitting in a suit and I am wondering, where did he go? And he said, "I went for a dinner." I said, "Where?" He said, "I had chapatis and rice and all this, it's why I took so long." I said, "Who took you?" and he said, "The Sikh people, they rented the school busses and everything."

Then eventually the next day we went to Manpower [Department of Manpower and Immigration] to look for jobs and really we were treated so nicely at the Manpower, they gave us the whole room with the coffee and everything there, we can go and sit, relax, and go and look for the jobs. At that time Mrs. Armstrong was there, in charge of the Manpower. We would go and look for jobs and the newcomers who came, we would ask, "What is the situation in Uganda now?"

Eventually, I found a job in November. It wasn't the type of job I wanted, it was at an insurance company, but I took it because I didn't have Canadian experience. Same thing, Anil took whatever he got because he didn't have Canadian experience. So we took the job. Then I found a job with Save the Children, a charity organization and I stayed there for many, many years. After Shazeen was born in 1979, I left that job. Then I went back again after a couple of years, I went back and in 1979 Nashina was born, when Nashina was born I left that job and I was just home for a few years. Then I worked for the Salvation Army. That was a nice paying job too, I enjoyed it because they were all volunteers. I liked the one with the Save the Children Fund too!

The life was not as easy as it was back home, but we were used to it. At the beginning we were scared to take the busses even, I used to walk a lot because you didn't know where you were going, and maybe getting off at the wrong stop, so we would walk so many blocks, you know. Sometimes we would carry our groceries even because at the beginning it was scary, we didn't know. From where we came from in the war, right? So it was harder for us, but eventually we settled down in good jobs, and we had a car. So we could go everywhere whenever we wanted in the car.

There was one year, every time we went to the prayer hall – they rented a school hall for prayers. Every time we went on the bus, the bus drivers would ask us, "Are you going for a party?" Because we were dressed up, we would say, "No, we are not going for a party, we are going for prayers." And we always had some food offering with us, so they would ask us, "Are you going to eat and enjoy this?" We had to explain to them what the food offering was, when we came back again they'd say, "Oh, your party is over?" [Laughter] It was funny, we explained it to them what it was once a week, a gathering."

Y. B. Jamal: "So this is a local, public transit?"

Y. Merani: "Public transit. So after a year we got a car and there was a big function at church, Mrs. Armstrong celebrated the whole one year for the Ugandans at a church on Burrard Street. On Burrard Street, not very far from St. Paul's. So she invited all of the Ugandans up there, and we had a big party there. And the couple of children who were born on that very month in 1972, their birthdays were celebrated. Their birthday was celebrated, she had a big cake, all the cookies and crackers and all kinds of food and everything. She said, "I could not find parking, I went round in circles and within an hour all

of the parking was taken by these Ugandans, and I could not find it. I am so glad to see how these people are all settled down here.””

Y. B. Jamal: “So all the Ugandans had a car by that time?”

Y. Merani: “Everybody had a car by one year.”

Y. B. Jamal: “So this Mrs. Armstrong, she really made an impression, and she really helped all the Ugandans out.”

Y. Merani: “When we went for the jobs, she was so helpful to us, very helpful.”

Y. B. Jamal: “So she helped you with the applications and the resume writing?”

Y. Merani: “Resume writing, everything, she helped us. It was difficult, because you have to take whatever you get, right? Because of the experience.”

Y. B. Jamal: “So you arrived here in August...”

Y. Merani: “No, I arrived here in October, October 23<sup>rd</sup>.”

Y. B. Jamal: “October 23<sup>rd</sup>, and you got a job in November?”

Y. Merani: “November.”

Y. B. Jamal: “So that was pretty good in about a month’s time or whatever.”

Y. Merani: “Yeah, we were staying at the Nelson Place Hotel on Granville Street, and as soon as I found a job, we moved out January there.”

Y. B. Jamal: “So how long do you think you stayed at the hotel?”

Y. Merani: “Not very long, half of October, November, and December too. Two and a half months, and January 1<sup>st</sup> we moved into an apartment. But the apartment was very little, we thought. Only three hundred dollars for two bedrooms.”

Y. B. Jamal: “Now you cannot find that.”

Y. Merani: “Now you can’t find anything, it’s four times the price.”

Y. B. Jamal: “Where was your first apartment located?”

Y. Merani: “Downtown, on Robson Street.”

Y. B. Jamal: “Oh wow, the main street. The hip street.”

Y. Merani: “It was not a hip street during that time, it was a very quiet street. There were not that many restaurants there, by five o’clock that area was completely dead. You would not see people walking around, it was a very, very quiet area.”

Y. B. Jamal: “And now it is the opposite. So that is nice to hear... can you just track back, tell me a few things about Kampala. Now I understand that you were working at Diamond Trust, right? What was your job at Diamond Trust?”

Y. Merani: “I was.... I did [treatments], sizing, and I was a secretary there.”

Y. B. Jamal: "So you were born in Kampala?"

Y. Merani: "I was born in Kampala, my parents were born in Kampala, but my grandfather was from India. He came from India and he settled down here, he had a big farm, he had his own business, he had a hardware shop near the market and he had lots of properties. My dad was the eldest son, but he passed away very young at the age of thirty-two, and we were very little at that time, we were eight sisters and brothers, and my younger sister was not born, she was born after my dad passed away.

So we lived with my grandparents for some years until I finished my school and all that. Eventually we moved out in an apartment, but my brothers and them were all studying. My two sisters were married at that time, my brother had a bursary so he went to England. My other sister went to England too, so it was only myself, my other sister Ravina, and my brother, my youngest was Ramiru. So we lived with my mom, my mom had a very rough time because she had to raise everybody, plus she had to... you need financing, right? So she used to... teaching she used to do from home. So that's the way we lived, but she made sure that all the children got a proper education."

Y. B. Jamal: "So that was a good thing."

Y. Merani: "That is what we did. Everybody was educated back home. My brother even got his medicine degree... everybody was educated back home."

Y. B. Jamal: "That was a good thing."

Y. Merani: "She made sure that you now everybody got the proper [education]... it was a tough life for mum."

Y. B. Jamal: "So when you came to Canada, where was mum then?"

Y. Merani: "Mum was in Uganda, because she was with my brother, my brother could not leave Uganda because he was working in the Mengo hospital, Nsambya Hospital. So they would not allow doctors to move. Eventually he moved with my mom around the end of November. Then they went to Montreal in November. But you know that doctor who helped me at the... [Canadian office] in Uganda? They came to the airport with me, they helped me all the ways. They took my flight, and I showed them to Montreal, and when I went to Montreal I did visit one of the doctors who was there for the interview in Kampala. I took a very nice gift for him and my brother. I met him twice in Montreal."

Y. B. Jamal: "So the doctor, they gave you very good treatment in Kampala? And you had a good experience in Montreal, so I'm just wondering, how did you make this connection with the doctor? Is it because of your brother who was a doctor, you knew this doctor? I'm just curious to know, right?"

Y. Merani: "I met him at my interview, and I said, "Can you help me with my flight because I am getting married." He said, "When are you getting married?" So I told him, and he said, "Can I come to your wedding?" And I said, "Yeah you are welcome." He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Yeah, you guys can come." So he brought his whole team to the wedding."

Y. B. Jamal: "He was from Canada?"

Y. Merani: "He was from Montreal, they were all from Montreal, and I wanted them to get my flight with Anil, [instead of] me coming alone. They said, "Don't worry, army people in Montreal, they won't

even trouble you, but we can't change it. We want to come to your wedding." So they came to my wedding."

Y. B. Jamal: "Did you take some pictures with them?"

Y. Merani: "I don't have any pictures... maybe, I don't know. I don't have any pictures because at that time it was hard to find photographers, right?"

Y. B. Jamal: "So tell me... all this turmoil, you still got married, which is really something. You were not scared or anything."

Y. Merani: "Scared... we went to main jamatkhana, main prayer hall, and it was closed because they said the army people are coming here, so we went to the other one near Hoima place, the prayer house there... I don't know how these doctors found out. And they were there when we went. I cannot believe... it is surprising, yeah."

Y. B. Jamal: "How many people attended your wedding, apart from your family?"

Y. Merani: "Just the family, my siblings, not very many were left because my brothers... only my sister Rashida was here and my brother, the rest of them were all gone. And my mum was there, nobody was here."

Y. B. Jamal: "So was this wedding date [determined] or did you just decide now that you are moving and you are already going together with Anil, like you wanted to get married before you left."

Y. Merani: "Yeah we wanted to get married before we left because we thought that at least... he was there, we don't know. We were going out because we met at Diamond Trust, we knew each other, because we were working in the same department." [Laughter]

Y. B. Jamal: "So the love blossomed. That is quite interesting. So you were glad that you could tie the knot back in Kampala, but you managed to meet here and all that. That was really good."

Y. Merani: "Shazeen was born after four years being here, Nashina in 1979."

Y. B. Jamal: "Anything else you want to share about your trip? From Kampala, your home to the airport in Entebbe, anything like, were you stopped? What happened? Anything?"

Y. Merani: "When we were headed to the airport, we were not stopped. Army people just looked at you and went away. When I went to the airport I was warned a few times, be careful with whatever you have, because they will take away... they took away my jewellery, what I had on my hands and those things. I let them take it because I was told, don't argue with them, you don't know where you are ending with that."

Y. B. Jamal: "Who came to drop you off?"

Y. Merani: "My brother and one of the doctors came."

Y. B. Jamal: "So you were safe?"

Y. Merani: "I was safe because of the doctor. He was there and my brother was there, too. Because they would not allow my brother to go there because they thought being a doctor, maybe he is running

away. He was not allowed to leave, right? So being a doctor... he came because of that. The two came back again to Kampala after dropping me.

Y. B. Jamal: "Especially as you had the henna, as they know back in Uganda henna means you had a wedding, and a wedding means a lot of gold jewellery. So you were at a lot of risk there."

Y. Merani: "I had a lot of issues with that. And we were in tropical clothes when we landed in Montreal, which was October, here with these tropical clothes. We did get clothes in Montreal for the Canadians. It was really nice, I really appreciated it. I still thank them from the bottom of my heart for what they have done. But you know, we were all in tropical clothes and no boots or nothing, and they gave us coats, boots, everything. Same thing happened when I came to Vancouver, but because I had it, I didn't want to take it again."

Y. B. Jamal: "So the Canadian government paid for your fare from Montreal to Vancouver?"

Y. Merani: "Yes."

Y. B. Jamal: "Did you have to pay them back?"

Y. Merani: "No. I didn't have to pay anything, nothing. And nothing for the clothes, we didn't pay for anything, nothing, plus we were getting ten dollars allowance. Because I came on my own, when I landed in Vancouver I went to the Manpower to stand in line to get my allowance. Once a week you would get ten dollars, because we applied on our own, right? So what happened is you'd get ten dollars, but for groceries ten dollars was so much that it could last you for a month because the cost of living was so cheap at the time. Oh Henry's were ten cents, I remember. And the first day it was only twenty five cents, I still remember. But the cost of living was so low that twenty dollars was a lot for us. We were lucky because we came on our own and we got an additional ten dollars."

Y. B. Jamal: "Otherwise if you came as a couple... only ten dollars. So that was a really good bonus, so everything turned out."

Y. Merani: "We were treated really nicely, I can't say anything bad about it. Very well treated."

Y. B. Jamal: "But the job that you landed... the job was at an insurance company? It was similar to the one back home, or it was a lower level?"

Y. Merani: "Lower level, it was a clerical job, filing and all that. Filing and running around to the bank and all that, that's all I did. And I took it because I didn't have a choice. But the one I did at the Save the Children Fund – fantastic. That was a really, really nice job, I loved it. The staff was good, there was only two of us, myself and my boss, and then we had volunteers, about seventy plus, four or five every day. Really friendly staff, we really had a good time. I really loved my job at Save the Children Fund."

Y. B. Jamal: "And how long did you work there?"

Y. Merani: "I worked there for many years."

Y. B. Jamal: "And that was your second job?"

Y. Merani: "That was the second one, and then after Nashina was born, I finished that one and then after a few years I went to... somehow I found a job in the Salvation Army."



Y. B. Jamal: "How long did you work there?"

Y. Merani: "I was there for ten years I guess."

Y. B. Jamal: "Are you working at the present time?"

Y. Merani: "No I am not working, I am retired now."

Y.B. Jamal: "That's good. So anything else you want to share? Or has your husband told you a few stories about what happened to him when he was leaving? Did you guys ever discuss this in the house? No?"

Y. Merani: "No, nothing. When we got married we stayed with his mother for a couple... I stayed there for a couple of days with his mum, and he had left already, right?"

Y. Jamal: "You mean in Kampala? Oh, I see."

Y. Merani: "Kampala. And he had left already, and Anil had some cash, his money was taken away from him at the airport. His money was taken away, whatever cash he had... otherwise, you know."

Y. B. Jamal: "But that is good that you reunited here. Did you ever doubt that... what if I never see my newlywed husband? Because he was just newlywed."

Y. Merani: "Yeah I was thinking, because I asked this... because they didn't give us a flight together, I told them, "What would happen? I don't know where he is and what Vancouver is," or whatever. And they said, "Don't worry, we are taking you to a safe place and he is going to be safe there, there are no army people like what you are seeing back home, so you will be very safe and we will make sure that he is there and that you will connect with him before you land at Vancouver airport." And when we landed at the airport, I was not left alone. There were some people who had come to pick us up and they dropped us at the place where Anil was. They dropped us where your families were, right? They didn't leave you like that alone. They were really, really, nice."

Y. B. Jamal: "That was very well planned and organized, mainly because at that time we didn't have cellphones and things like that. So that was fantastic, really good. Have you ever been back to Uganda?"

Y. Merani: "No, never been back and I am not planning to go back."

Y. Jamal: "You don't want to show your grandchildren?"

Y. Merani: "Maybe Shazeen and Nashina will go one day, but I don't think I am interested in going now."

Y. B. Jamal: "No? It's as beautiful as ever. So let's see... you have told me a number of important things. Now you said you went to the Canadian government to come here, right? But what passport did you hold?"

Y. Merani: "I had a Ugandan passport. My passport was not taken away, I still have it."

Y. B. Jamal: "Oh really? Wow, so you have a stamp there?"

Y. Merani: "I think so, it's in the bank. For some reason I kept it in the safety deposit box, I am not going back but I don't know why I am holding on to that."

Y. B. Jamal: "Maybe we can take a picture of it."

Y. Merani: "It is not here, I can give it to you when I go to the bank."

Y. B. Jamal: "I would love to see it. So now when you look back it has been over forty years, right? Since you came here. How do you feel? Do you think that was the right move you did to come to Canada? How do you feel about your stay here now?"

Y. Merani: "You know what? Frankly speaking, I am so happy that I am here. The reason my children Shazeen and Nashina got the best education I think, because you would not get it there. I think I am very, very happy for them. I'm very happy because I don't know if we had been in a country with wars coming up, and you never know what will happen next, right? Very uncertain. So you never know what will happen next, but my girls' situation is nicer here, education is... and everything they had is a lot better here."

Y. B. Jamal: "I think this is what everyone says, education, medical system..."

Y. Merani: "Medical system, because we don't have that medical system there, right?"

Y. B. Jamal: "So you never ventured out?"

Y. Merani: "No I never... I don't think I want to go."

Y. B. Jamal: "You don't have any property there or anything like that?"

Y. Merani: "Oh, we had it... we tried to do it through somebody who could sell it and do the commission and give us... get some money back, but we never got it. They sold the property, but we never got anything."

Y. B. Jamal: "Oh, really?"

Y. Merani: "There were a lot of issues going on, so it was difficult. We didn't get anything, not a penny. That was hard earned money that my mom worked so hard to get the apartment, right? Three bedrooms, but we never got it."

Y. B. Jamal: "Now, you said your mom came with one of your brothers to Vancouver..."

Y. Merani: "To Montreal."

Y. B. Jamal: "And then she moved to Vancouver?"

Y. Merani: "Actually she lived in Montreal for many years with my brother. And my brother was doing his dermatology course there, working as well as his course there. My mum was there with him in Montreal. They lived in Brossard. My mum went to learn French in French school and I'll tell you, her French was so nice, honestly. I didn't know much about it because I had learned in school, but hers it was more fluent than mine."

Y. B. Jamal: "Wow, that is fantastic. At her age too, she learned a new language, which is really a blessing. So your mum is still alive, or?"

Y. Merani: "No, my mum passed away about ten years ago."

Y. B. Jamal: "So this is the same brother who has moved here to Vancouver?"

Y. Merani: "He is living in West Vancouver now."

Y. B. Jamal: "Okay, I didn't know he was from Montreal."

Y. Merani: "Oh, he lived in Montreal for many years. He did his dermatology degree there."

Y. B. Jamal: "I'm just wondering, how did he leave? They were not pressuring him to leave because they wanted all of the professionals to stay there, right?"

Y. Merani: "Yeah, professionals."

Y. B. Jamal: "How did he escape?"

Y. Merani: "I don't know how he did it. You know what, it must have been... somebody must have helped him from the Canadian team who came there I guess."

Y. B. Jamal: "Well everything ended up good. So you still have the Ugandan passport, do you have any pictures, newspapers or anything from Uganda? Do you have anything?"

Y. Merani: "I have some of my wedding, I don't have anything else."

Y. B. Jamal: "Do you have the henna picture?"

Y. Merani: "I think so..."

Y. B. Jamal: "Okay, just be careful. I know you just had a knee surgery, so I don't want you to fall down."

[Interruption]

Y. B. Jamal: "Yasmin is just going through one of her older albums and she is trying to find some pictures for us. So I am just looking at some of her wedding albums, the henna ceremony which is before the actual wedding, the ceremony the night before. I can't believe in all that turmoil and all that... the wedding still went on and all these people are happily engaged in the henna ceremony. Still can't believe that. Was the henna ceremony held a little bit earlier? Because at night I believe there was a curfew or something there."

Y. Merani: "It was held in the afternoon, around noon time..."

Y. B. Jamal: "Okay, and what time was your wedding?"

Y. Merani: "It was early too, in the afternoon."

Y. B. Jamal: "I guess everybody was scared at nighttime."

Y. Merani: "Yes, because you never knew would end up, right? Everything was very early, before noon."

Y. B. Jamal: "Wow, look at that. Nice pictures!"

Y. Merani: "You couldn't find any wedding clothes or wedding saris, nothing at that time because everything was closed, the shops were closed. Somebody had to stitch a dress for me for my wedding."

Y. B. Jamal: "You must be kidding."

Y. Merani: "I couldn't find anything. I couldn't find any jewellery, nothing. The jewellery they took away from me belonged to my mum, she gave it to me."

Y. B. Jamal: "Wow, look at that. I'm so glad you brought this album."

Y. Merani: "In fact... the Canadian team who said that you can't take it, they took some of my stuff, gave it to my brother in Montreal. I can't remember the name of the doctor, it's so bad... forty-two years have passed, and I have forgotten his name. But they really were very, very helpful for me, the Canadian doctors."

Y. B. Jamal: "Are they in here? Because they came for the wedding, right?"

Y. Merani: "The pictures... they were gone by then, I think."

Y. B. Jamal: "That is very good. Thanks for sharing the wedding pictures."

Y. Merani: "Oh, you're welcome."

Y. B. Jamal: "Anything else you want to add, Yasmin?"

Y. Merani: "No, that's all I can say now."

Y. B. Jamal: "So you are happily settled here in Vancouver, your daughters are here, one is here I guess, and one is in Toronto. Thank you very much for the interview and letting me come by, even though you are not feeling well. Thank you very much."

[End of transcript].