

**The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project**

An Oral History with Ginette Leroux

Archives and Research Collections

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**Abstract:**

Ginette Leroux was a stenographer working in the Central Processing Office for the Department of Manpower and Immigration in the early 1970's. In 1972, Leroux along with her coworkers Jolène Beaupré and Mary-Ellen Hempel travelled to Kampala, Uganda to assist the Department of Immigration in typing the thousands of visas for the Ugandan Asians who were being expelled under Idi Amin's rule.

This oral history covers Leroux's early life as well as her experience travelling and working in Africa during the month that she was stationed in Uganda.

This oral history was conducted at Maxwell MacOdrum Library, the home of Archives and Research Collections at Carleton University.

**Heather LeRoux: Today is October 16, 2014, this is Heather LeRoux's interview with Ginette Leroux for the Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project. So Ginette, I'll just get you to start by telling me a little bit about yourself.**

Ginette Leroux: I'm from a small town called Deep River which is about two hours North West from Ottawa. I grew up with three siblings – two brothers and a sister – today I have three daughters and four grandchildren, and a fifth on the way. So we're all looking forward to this number five, number five but probably the last. [Laughter] As a youth, I guess I could be considered shy... a bit of an introvert, I had good friends growing up, and some lasting friendships. Today I still communicate with some of my girlfriends from my youth and as a child we always had... not organized, but playground softball, we had outdoor rinks that were made at the school so we always had skating and I still skate today on the Rideau Canal, at least once a year I try to get out there.

I went to school post-secondary at St. Lawrence College in Kingston and spent one year there, enjoyed Kingston very much although I found it very, very cold in Kingston with the cold air coming off of the lake and to me it was just a small town, a little bit smaller than Ottawa, but I went back there this summer and... it's totally, totally different. Not the same Kingston I remember as a child. My first job when I was about... I don't know, maybe seventeen, eighteen I guess... my father built a restaurant which was two doors down from where I lived and I got hired on. I think the proprietor maybe felt a little bit obligated to hire me but I turned out to be a good employee so I guess it wasn't such a bad move on his part and I worked there until I went to Kingston, and when I'd come home from holidays, long weekends I would work to make a little bit of extra money.

My first real job at the time was at the Department of Immigration and I worked in a small office called the Central Processing Office, which was... short form we used to call it CPO, and it was a stenographer's pool and I worked with two other girls, and our main job was typing up immigration forms, visas for the United States. The States didn't have any offices in Canada at the time, or rather in the states at the time so we dealt with all of that... so we had a pretty heavy workload. I worked there for about one year before the call went out to go to Uganda and I had no idea where Uganda was, I had to go on a map... all I knew it was in Africa somewhere, so we all looked at the map and found out where it was. And the next couple of weeks it was really hectic because we had to get inoculated and we had lots, lots of shots to go through and these would be normally spread out over weeks. We'd get a shot in each arm every two days for I don't know how long, maybe a week or something and you literally could not move your arms above your head, shoulders... that was it. I had a hard time bathing I was so sore. So that was kind

of... you'd laugh about it, but it was painful. I think our last shot was the day we left, in the butt.

[Laughter] So that made it a little bit uncomfortable for sitting.

So anyways, we did that. The office was depleted, there was only three of us, three stenographers at the time. So all three of us were leaving and they had to hire new people and so we had to train the new people before we left to make sure that everything was going to run smoothly in our absence. I was twenty one at the time and had never flown, the farthest I had ever gone was Kingston, Montreal... that was the extent of my travel. If my memory serves me correctly... because I think this is basically what happens today, we left for Uganda at... probably early evening between five and seven I guess from Ottawa and we flew to Rome. So we overnight, of course didn't get any sleep on the plane, and arrived in Rome early morning. We were met by someone from the Rome office who very graciously showed us around Rome, so we could see the Sistine Chapel, the ruins, we went to the Trevi Fountain, made my wish at the Trevi Fountain – which hasn't come true yet but there's still time. [Laughter]

That night we went out for supper with a few members from the Rome office. We were supposed to catch our flight at midnight, and it didn't come until three o'clock in the morning so we were really, really tired by this time... we'd been up for over twenty-four hours at this point and nothing was open. You couldn't get coffee, you couldn't get drinks, nothing, you know... you were just on your own. So finally we got on the plane, I think we slept a little bit on the plane, and then I think we flew to Nairobi... I think that's where we headed. And we had to spend overnight in Nairobi, there was a few of us... we planned to go out for supper until we realized we had no money. We had no Kenyan money, so we didn't go out for supper needless to say [Laughter] ...we just starved that night.

Then we got up in the wee hours of the morning to fly out to Entebbe Airport [Uganda]. When we arrived in Entebbe it was morning... it was day, I'm not sure what time of day it was... probably before noon. And we got picked up by a driver, which I presume was our African driver that we had the whole time we were there, Dennis... he was a real sweetheart, we all loved him, and he brought us to the office... so we got to see the office. The next morning was day one, except I didn't get up to go to work, I was exhausted... I was exhausted, severe, severe jet lag. And I spent the next three days in my hotel room with the maids all concerned because I wasn't getting out of bed, I wasn't leaving the room. I saw strange bugs in my room, which wasn't great. I didn't like the smells of the place, everything was totally, totally foreign to me... no appetite. And my coworkers were getting a little bit concerned and so they asked me, "What do you need?" and I said, "Just bring me some fresh fruit," you know. So I just... they brought me some nice fresh fruit, it brought me back to health and then I was good to go.

My role was basically the same as what I did in Ottawa, it was typing up visa forms for all those that had been accepted to go to Canada. If I remember correctly, we had brought electric typewriters from Canada but the voltage was different so they didn't work, and so we had to use manual typewriters... it was not very good... they didn't work very well. And Roger St. Vincent managed to get us some local electrical typewriters, so that was great, then we were set to go... we started to work. It was really, really busy, we arrived early in the morning, we would go until six or seven at night depending on the day, depending on the workload. After supper we usually would go for a drink, have supper. It was really hard for me because it was a lot of late suppers. I wasn't used to late suppers, I was used to eating at like five or six... so that took a little bit of getting used to. But I was introduced for the first time to wine, I never drank wine so they introduced me to a bottle of white, German wine... I forget what it was called... Liebfraumilch, my first taste of white wine in Africa. I was also introduced to escargot when I there, it was the first time I had ever had escargot. So I got to try that.

Because I was so young, I didn't really follow politics and so it was really hard for me to understand what Idi Amin was doing. I think the people that lived there had a hard time understanding what he did. People were being killed, I was naive I didn't realize that maybe perhaps I was also in danger. I just figured that the Canadian government would protect me, but today I think wow, what a thing to believe you know. People were disappearing every day. I witnessed a very horrific incident... we were having supper in the hotel and there was a British journalist that was sitting opposite us and these three men came in, one of them was a soldier with a huge gun – I presume it was some kind of machine gun or something – they literally hauled him out of his seat, the soldier took the butt of his gun, hit him in the stomach and dragged him off. That killed my appetite, let me tell you. That was really, really something.

I didn't witness it, but some of the other people witnessed some... a young man being shoved into the back of some policeman's car... in the trunk, closed the trunk and off they went. I think these were things that were happening every day, we didn't see a lot of the stuff. Obviously we were very sheltered, the girls were more sheltered, they really sort of tried. We didn't work... our office was on the main floor but we worked, I believe we worked on the seventh floor or something. So we didn't get to see a lot of stuff that was happening on the ground floor.

People who were seeking asylum and trying to get to Canada were devastated about having to leave their country. This was their country, this was their home, this was where they grew up. They had successful careers, their families were being torn apart and some family members were missing. People were hesitant about leaving, you now their children were missing, their fathers were missing. They

didn't want to leave, they didn't want to go to Canada – they didn't want to go anywhere, they just wanted to stay where they were. So sometimes people were sort of forced to get onto the buses, to leave, knowing full well that somebody was behind – probably dead or being tortured, who knows.

We met some nice people when we were working there. The people from the – we had two Ugandan sisters that were working with us – we went to supper... I think at her home and it was really funny because I remember her parents and all the others said, "We're going to make the food really mild for you." Well, it wasn't very mild [Laughter] if I remember correctly, but they made an effort.

There was the national holiday in Uganda, and our officer in charge Roger St. Denis... not St. Denis... what's Roger's last name?"

**Heather: "Vincent?"**

Ginette: "St. Vincent, yes... he didn't want us around, so he sent us off to Mombasa Beach [Kenya] for the weekend. Gorgeous, gorgeous place. We stopped in Nairobi, went to visit a national park... like a safari park, saw all kind of animals that I didn't even know existed. Gazelles, I never knew gazelles existed... I do now! So it was a bit of a learning curve for me, and then we went off to Mombasa.

Beautiful, beautiful place... it's not a place that I would have ever been able to travel to on my salary. I'm not sure I could travel there today, even. But it was... it was gorgeous. We had a hotel room right on the beach, the beaches went for miles and miles. I remember the spread they put out... lunch time just, oh my god, it was just awesome... food, food, you know. So that was one trip I remember – I'll never forget it.

We did get to visit when we were in Uganda, we had some free time although we were really busy, very long nights. We did have some free time, we visited parts of Africa with our guide, Dennis. There was a bar/nightclub in the hotel called the Leopard's Lounge. We'd go up there, listen to some music and it was kind of fun. If I remember correctly, it was at the very top of the building... it was open, I'm not sure it was closed in... Jolène's got an excellent memory, she'll be able to tell you. [Laughter] And Roger had a suite... and we would sometimes we would go there just to hang out with the people that we worked with.

When we were in Nairobi, on our way to Mombasa Beach, we had taken a taxi somewhere... I don't know where we were going. The taxi driver was talking about Idi Amin and he was saying things... and I thought oh my god, I'm not sure you're supposed to say anything about Idi Amin, you know... different country. To me, Africa was just one big country, not a continent like North America, South America, so

their political views were obviously different but we were just told to sort of zip it up, don't say anything. Keep your mouth shut, which we did... just let him talk and... you know.

I guess the thing that stands out in my mind about Uganda... when I arrived, I had never seen a palm tree, my first palm tree was in Uganda, I got to see that. I remember everything being so green and one of the men said, "Is it not green back home?" It was green back home, but this was September, things were starting to die, you know flowers were dying – everything was in full bloom in Uganda, it was warm. It was like a bonus you know, an extra month's sunshine. Where we were starting to get colder, it was still warm there. So it was a great time to visit the country, it was the trip of a lifetime for me. I've never been back to Africa, I'm not sure... with all the turmoil everywhere, I'm not sure if it's even a place that I would want to go anymore. So it was really awesome that I did get to go when I did.

Today, afterwards I came home I got married, raised my children, I was a stay at home mom for about ten years. When I re-entered the workforce I worked for the Department of Communication which then became the Department of Canadian Heritage, and I worked there until my retirement in 2012. I worked in the administrative field.

When my daughter was about five years old she was taking swimming lessons and another mom whose daughter was also taking swimming lessons sat down beside me and we started to talk. And I found out that she came from Uganda, she immigrated to Canada at the same time that we were there. So it was really kind of neat to hear that, you know just out of the blue, this mother and said, "Yes, I was there." You know, so you felt like, okay I did some good. I did something that was worthwhile.

I guess what I learned from the experience was that no matter where you're from, no matter who you are, no matter what kind of family you come from, we're basically all the same. We all strive for the same things, we all love our mothers and fathers, our children, our country, and we usually all strive to be happy, to be successful in what we do, no matter what we do. It's a common bond that most people have. I loved the experience, I loved the experience that I shared with Mary-Ellen and Jolene. It was an experience that can never be duplicated and it's an something that I share with two very special people in my life. Jolène and I and Mary-Ellen still – not as frequently as we should – but we still communicate and we still have a common bond. We worked together for about a year before we went to Uganda and Jolène and I continued to work together, Mary-Ellen went off to I think the Department of Health because our small office got disbanded because they opened up the offices in the United States. So Joèlle and I went to headquarters and Mary-Ellen found a job I think at the Department of Health. But

sharing this experience with these two people was huge, and it's something that's a special bond that I'll always keep. It's not something I'll ever forget.

And it was amazing going through the questionnaire that you gave me, and I thought, do I want to do this interview? I don't remember anything. And then certain things started to come back to me and I thought, wow, this is really amazing you know, I still remember some of this stuff. I'm sure the other girls when they give their interview I'll think, oh yeah! I forgot about that. Yeah so that was a very important phase in my life, and it's nice to be able to share it. It's nice to know that the project was a success, that the people came here and were successful. We've had a few get togethers since then with people from Uganda, and they're happy to be here and it's great to know that Canada opened their doors and the people are happy to be here and love it here."

**Heather: "So how long were you there, total?"**

Ginette: "I was there for about a month."

**Heather: "Okay."**

Ginette: "I left earlier than everybody else because I was supposed to – not supposed to, I did – I got married in November, the beginning of November. And so I had to leave a little bit earlier. And I got a beautiful batik from Uganda that the staff had all pulled together and got for me. So I still have that."

**Heather: "Oh, nice."**

Ginette: "Yeah, not everybody has a batik in their living room you know, so that's kind of neat."

**Heather: "Do you remember what a normal day would be like, if you were to start a day of work?"**

Ginette: "We started... I don't remember what time we started but 8... 8:30, and we would easily go to 6, 7 at night, depending on the workload. And it would be... you know you'd have your break for lunch but it was like... it was busy. It was go, go, go. All day. You never really had a chance to sit back and put your feet up. There was always things to do and we did... it was amazing because I don't remember... I don't know if it was the weather or not but I never felt tired when I was there. I did the long hours, and we wouldn't go to bed early. We'd be up the next morning no problem, go down for breakfast and there was always a beautiful breakfast waiting for us at the hotel and it was pretty good. To this day I can taste the toast that we had [Laughter] you know there's certain tastes that you never forget? I still remember that. And I still remember the smell of Africa, you know, which was kind of neat.



But yeah, we worked some really long days, Sunday was always off... we didn't work on Sundays. If I remember correctly we worked six days a week though, and Sunday we had off. There was a beautiful pool at our hotel, we'd spend the day at the pool. The very first day... I never, ever sat in the sun, I had never gotten a sunburn. Well none of us ever even visualized that... we spent the whole day and we all ended up with severe, severe sunburns. And I thought oh my god we're nuts. And we always had to have something long on, you weren't allowed to have short skirts or anything. So of course, back in the '70s everything was short. So you'd wear pants, and I remember being so sunburnt on my stomach that the button on my pants was left open... because there was no way. I remember... what was his name? Jim McMaster, top of his feet were totally burned... couldn't wear shoes for the longest time and so we were very careful after. I never had a sunburn, I didn't know what it was like, I kept saying, "Am I red? Am I red?" "No, no, you're fine, you're fine." "Okay, whatever." And then I got into the hotel that night and was like, oh my god, I'm a lobster! You know. [Laughter] So we never did that again. We were a little bit more careful."

**Heather: "Yeah. So did you deal with people coming to the office directly, or were you mainly doing...?"**

Ginette: "I didn't because I missed the first three days."

**Heather: "Oh, right."**

Ginette: "So my main role right away was typing up the visas. Jolène and Mary-Ellen did a lot of the frontline work at the very beginning. But that didn't last too long, I think once the applications were out and then they started to interview people right away and so then, once they were accepted we started the visas, so it went pretty quickly after that. It was pretty organized. I was amazed, you know. There was a lot of people with good organizational skills, everything ran smoothly. Nothing lagged, there was no down time, there was always something to do. Just setting up the office alone was something."

**Heather: "What do you remember about the office? And working with that group you were there with?"**

Ginette: "I remember... the office itself was on the main floor with these huge, huge windows everywhere and originally we had the ground floor... but there was a lot of chaos, organized chaos. A lot of people coming and going, so it proved a bit of a distraction actually. So we were moved upstairs to another floor and it was quieter, more work got done. There were a lot of people that were interviewing and then we had the armed forces that came in to do all of the medical tests, and they were off in an

area on their own. I think there were some RCMP there too, I'm not sure what their role was... I can't remember too much about that part of it, but we were kind of secluded from the main goings on, because we didn't need to be there. Once the applications were out, we didn't need to be there anymore so it was just more solitary work. We could work on our own after that.

**Heather: "I think that's all I have that I wanted to cover, but did you have anything you wanted to add?"**

Ginette: "No, just that it was a great... I met some really wonderful people when I was there. Mike Molloy who is still... we're in touch with. And I got to meet Roger, I think it was last summer and such a... just a big bear, just a big huggy bear. And he's just such a sweetheart, and he hadn't changed... the same old Roger that we knew that was such a calming force over there. Knew what he was doing, did what he had to do, and nothing got out of hand with him. So it was really great. A really good working... and after a while they had a bit of the changing of the guard when I left, there was new people coming in from Ottawa that did a lot of the visa stenography work. So it was just such a well-organized operation – we were in, and we were out. And I got to visit a bit of Africa which was kind of nice. Like I say, I probably won't go back there... but who knows. Who knows what life will bring." [Laughter]

**Heather: "Well thank you very much. I really appreciate it."**

Ginette: "Thank you for inviting me and this was a really great experience."

**Heather: "Good! Thank you."**