

Vinay Dattani

Uganda Collection Oral History Project: Departure

Vinay Dattani: “I was a project engineer for Shell. I worked two-and-a-half-years till Idi Amin asked us to leave. He didn’t ask me to leave, I was a Ugandan citizen because my mother is born there, I am born there, so birthright. Initially I was going to stay. You had to—within ten days go and get your passports checked. I went on the second day and got it checked, and I was legal to stay, but then with everybody leaving, I thought I’d leave too. So in the morning, when I was going to work, I passed by the British Embassy, and the Canadian Embassy had just opened up. I hate lineups, if there’s a big line, I would not like to stand in the line. The Canadian Embassy had a very small line, ten people were standing in line. This was at quarter to eight in the morning. I got down to see and I asked what the line was all about and they said, “To go to Canada.” I said, “So few people only.” I stood in line, little knowing that my work started at eight, the office opens at eight-thirty—I thought it opened at eight. So by eight o’clock, more people started to come, and by eight thirty, the line was long and I was not going to get out of the line and stayed. I stayed and they took my interview. They said, “Your qualifications for engineering are not recognized in Canada, will you do anything else?” I said, “I’ll take any job, it doesn’t really matter. I’ll do anything you want me to do, I’ll do.” So he took my interview and I got the right points, and he said, “Is your wife outside?” I said, “Yeah.” “You’ve got your photographs with you?” I said, “Yeah.” So I went and got my wife from home, she wasn’t outside. I came back to the line and started standing in line and I told the person standing there that I’ve already got my visa, and he wants to see my wife, so I went to get her from the car.

Then the Government of Canada sent planes, ten planes actually, to get all the people from Uganda as refugees. I left my house, my car, all the furniture, everything. We were allowed to bring sixty kilos of luggage. I had a daughter, three months old, so twenty kilos for me, twenty for my wife, and twenty for my daughter. We brought sixty kilos of clothing, left everything else the way it is. My car, I gave the keys to my operations manager at Shell, and our secretary wanted to buy the car for five-thousand shillings, and she didn’t have the money, so I said, “It doesn’t matter, you give the money to the operations manager, I’m leaving.” I said, “We’ll figure out how to get the money from there.” My uncle was still in Uganda, he became stateless. When he went to get his passport okayed, they took it away and said, “This is fraudulent—” Not fraudulent, but, “This is not a legal document because you applied it not according to the rules.” Do you want me do get into that too?”

Shezan Muhammedi: “Yeah, sure, yeah, yeah, of course.”

Vinay: “So what happened is, he was a British subject, and the government said, “Within two years, you should apply for Ugandan citizenship and if you get your citizenship, you cannot be citizens of two countries, you must revoke your other citizenship.” So he applied for Ugandan citizenship. The day he got it, he applied to the British to revoke his British citizenship, which was within the two-year time period. There was so much work in the British Embassy that they could not attend to his letter of revocation until after the two years were up. So after the two

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years were up, they wrote him a letter because they don't know that there's a two-year time period or anything like that. The British government, they get all these letters and they go one by one by one. By the time they attended to his case and revoked his citizenship, he had two citizenships within that two-year period because he didn't apply right away, it was at the tail end. So they said, "On this day, is the two years up? We see here that you are citizen of Britain too, you're a Ugandan citizen too, so not valid. We will take away the Ugandan one and accept the British one." Meanwhile, the British had already taken away [his citizenship]. He went back to the British and the British said, "This is not a game, you've revoked it once, we can't give it back to you, now it's our choice," so they didn't give it to him. Whereas Uganda cancelled it on a technicality basically, so he became stateless. He was going to be there, so I said to my operations manager, "When you get the money, you give it to my uncle," which he did actually. You couldn't take the money out of the country anyway, so we didn't bring any money with us, we had no cash.

The Canadian government sent planes over and they said, "When do you want to go?" We said—I got a visa on Tuesday, Wednesday was the first flight, Saturday was the next flight—I said, "Wednesday is too soon but Saturday we can leave," and we left on Saturday. Those that left on Wednesday, when the bus was taking them to Entebbe, everybody got robbed on the way to Entebbe at police checkpoints, army checkpoints actually, but on Saturday, we had escorts because of the incident that happened on the Wednesday. We were lucky that we could get to the airport and leave without any hassle. The plane was not full, I think the passengers—there was a two-hundred-seater plane or something like that, or two-fifty. We were only seventy on the second plane."