

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Saleem Khamis

Archives and Research Collections

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Narrator: Saleem Khamis
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Abstract:

Saleem Khamis was born in Jinja, Uganda. When Idi Amin's expulsion decree was announced in 1972, Mr. Khamis was seventeen years old and still in high school. He and his family left Uganda in October and went to the United Kingdom, where they initially stayed in a Royal Air Force camp for several weeks before resettling in Chester, England.

In 1973, the Khamis family moved from the U.K. to Canada, but Mr. Khamis stayed in the U.K. to go to university where he studied pharmaceuticals. He eventually joined his family in Canada in 1976, initially arriving in Toronto.

Mr. Khamis discusses his transition from the U.K. and then to Canada, and settling down with his family in Markham, Ontario.

This interview was conducted at the Markham Public Library in Markham, Ontario.

Heather LeRoux: “Okay so today is June 20, 2016. This is Heather LeRoux interviewing Saleem Khamis for the Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project. So yeah I’ll get you to tell me a little bit about yourself, and where you’re from.”

Saleem Khamis: “I was born in Uganda, and we left in 1972. I lived for a few years in the U.K. and then in 1976 I came over to Canada. So...”

Heather: “Whatever you want, where did you live in Uganda?”

Saleem: “Well I’ve always lived in the cities, I was born in Jinja which is the second largest city, and before we left we were living in Kampala which was the capital. When we left I was seventeen, I was just finishing high school, so when we went to the U.K. I finished off my high school in the U.K. and then I went on to university there.”

Heather: “Okay, so did you leave Uganda before the expulsion?”

Saleem: “No, so we left just before the deadline, we left at the end of October. We weren’t quite sure what we were going to do at the time. So the week that we left I went to school until Wednesday, and we left on Friday. It was just a couple days later.”

Heather: “Right. So leaving close to the deadline, was that intentional or?”

Saleem: “Well I think my parents weren’t sure what was going to happen because... as a matter of fact I was a third generation born in Uganda. My dad was born there, my grandfather was born there. My great grandfather was one of the first people to move to East Africa from India in about 1892. As far as we were concerned, we were Ugandan and when the announcement was first made it was supposed to only affect people who were non Ugandan, so initially we did not think we were affected by this but at the end because of the security situation was getting serious, my dad decided to send my mom – we were five brothers – all of us to the U.K., because she had a U.K. passport and he stayed back for a bit.”

Heather: “Okay. So how was that adjustment going to the U.K.? Or do you remember...”

Saleem: “It wasn’t very difficult actually, obviously it was a change. But I was only seventeen and I don’t think I realized how big the change was. I had gone to an English school and we were still using the British system of education, so when I went to the U.K. to finish off my high school it was a very easy transition. When we got there we stayed in a camp – it was called a camp – it was an old R.A.F. [Royal

Air Force] camp that they had converted into a refugee centre for about three weeks. Then we moved to a little town up in the north of England called Chester, and so I finished off my high school there.”

Heather: “As a teenager did you remember the events leading up to the expulsion very well? The atmosphere before it all happened in August.”

Saleem: “I mean, yes some of it. Not a lot because it was forty years ago. No, I remember the announcement and I remember the feeling of uncertainty that was in the air and I remember going to the airport and having military checkpoints on the way to the airport. So there is some memories there.”

Heather: “So going to the U.K., when did you decide to come to Canada? Was that much later?”

Saleem: “So what happened is when we went to the U.K. my dad’s other brothers and his mother, my grandmother, they all came to Canada. So we went to the U.K. in October ’72, and then my dad decided that he wanted to be with the rest of the family so he decided to come to Canada. But in the meantime I had already been accepted into university in the U.K. so I didn’t want to come with him. So they came in early ’73, and I stayed over until I finished my school.”

Heather: “So most of your [extended] family went straight to Canada then, and you went to the U.K.?”

Saleem: “Initially we went to the U.K. with my mom and my dad had a Uganda passport so he wasn’t allowed to come to the U.K., then they found out that they could go to Ireland because Uganda was a commonwealth country and you didn’t need a visa to go to Ireland. So my dad and his brother went to Ireland, and then he joined us in the U.K. from Ireland, and then a few months later they came to Canada. But by that time I was finishing off high school, I got accepted into university so I decided to stay over.”

Heather: “Interesting, I hadn’t heard of anyone going to Ireland first off.”

Saleem: “Yeah they ended up in Dublin because they had a commonwealth passport, they could go to Ireland because they had a visa. Because other countries were putting restrictions on their movement and between Ireland and the U.K. was I guess a free zone, so they could come over to the U.K.”

Heather: “Interesting. So what did you end up doing in university?”

Saleem: “What did I study? Oh, I did pharmacy. I had actually wanted to go to the U.K., even when I was back in Uganda but I don’t think my parents could have afforded it so for me it worked out very well. Things worked out just right. When we got to the U.K. it was like three weeks before the university

application deadline, so I just made it. And I said to them, “I’ve got my high school diploma,” I got accepted and it really worked out like a charm.”

Heather: “Good, and what did your parents do?”

Saleem: “Oh my dad had a veterinary supply store, agricultural veterinary supply store, and my mom just worked in a retail outlet.”

Heather: “Okay, and that was in the U.K., or?”

Saleem: “In Uganda. In the U.K. my dad worked as a bookkeeper or something, he was just there for a few months. So for them, it was tough because he was about forty when we came over and he had to start from scratch. He had to sort of take any sort of job that he could take, so I think he used to work in retail here. Then after a few years he became a real estate agent, so he was fine then. And my mom worked at Eaton’s in the packing department until it closed, so she was okay too.”

Heather: “Good, interesting. So I don’t know if we covered it, but when did you come here?”

Saleem: “1976.”

Heather: “So 1976 you came here.”

Saleem: “So I finished my degree... I could have stayed over in the U.K. but I came here to see what Canada was like and I liked it, and so then I came here in ’76. I got my designations and I’ve been here since then.”

Heather: “And did you come straight to the GTA [Greater Toronto Area]?”

Saleem: “Yes, because they were already living here. And I’ll tell you a funny story actually... I wanted to go to B.C. [British Columbia], I wanted to go to Vancouver but they said I had to do TOEFL, which is Test of English as a Second [Foreign] Language. My point was that my high school diploma was from the U.K., I had studied in the U.K. and I didn’t see a need to do TOEFL. But the rule was that anybody outside of Canada or the United States had to do TOEFL, so I decided to go to Ontario instead. [Laughter] So that was the reason, one of the reasons for coming to Ontario – silly reason.”

Heather: “Fair enough though, yeah. So started working in the Markham area, or?”

Saleem: “Actually, no I worked in downtown Toronto. Then I went to London, Ontario for a year or so, and then I moved back to Toronto. I’ve been in Markham for the last thirty years, but for ten years I worked in Toronto.”

Heather: “Okay, interesting. And do you have a family here?”

Saleem: “Yes, well my parents are still here, I’ve got four other brothers, three of whom live in Toronto and one is left in East Africa. As I said my parents are here, and we’re all here.”

Heather: “Okay, great. And have you gone back to Uganda at all, or had any interest?”

Saleem: “Not really, actually we went back last year. I had no intention of going, I had no desire to but my kids wanted to see where we were born... my wife’s from Kenya, so they wanted to see what it was like. They wanted to see where we grew up, the school we went to, stuff like that, so we took them for a visit. I was happy that I wasn’t living there anymore, it’s a bit of a shambles. Very confusing... I didn’t feel like I belonged there, I was very young when I left, so that’s part of it. It was sad to see, the schools weren’t maintained, maybe because they didn’t have the funds to maintain it or whatever it is. The houses that we lived in were all sort of broken down... so it was very sad. I wouldn’t go back.”

Heather: “No? What did your kids think?”

Saleem: “Well... they’ve travelled a bit, they’ve been to the Caribbean and we’ve to the Middle East, we’ve been different places, so it wasn’t a complete shock to them but I think it gave them a sense of grounding as to where they’d come from, more so than anything else. But I don’t think that any of them would want to live there, even for a short period of time... but it was good to see.”

Heather: “Nice. So, do you remember your journey to the U.K. at all? In terms of... because I know from the Canadian side they all went to Entebbe in busses and it was quite hectic at that time. So I don’t know what the U.K. experience was like in terms of actually moving, do you remember that at all?”

Saleem: “You mean when we first went there?”

Heather: “Yeah when you left Uganda.”

Saleem: “You know – and I was just thinking about this – and I’ll tell you what struck me the most was how kind everybody else was. We moved into this little town called Chester in the north of England, it’s a small little town and everybody made us feel welcome. Our neighbours, our teachers in school... because obviously because we were in a different school there were some gaps in our knowledge. So for

example the chemistry teacher took time out every once a week to bring us up to speed for a few weeks. Even all the organizations, everyone was very good to us. I mean I know there was a lot of political discussion, Enoch Powell was making speeches and stuff like that, but on a one to one basis people were very good to us. And that's what strikes more than anything else, but as I said we spoke English and we hung onto the British school system, so it was fairly easy, it wasn't very difficult. It was harder for my parents, but for us kids it was a breeze."

Heather: "Yeah."

Saleem: "I mean, I look at the situation with the Syrian refugees here, and we didn't have any money or anything we only had around fifty pounds, which is around a hundred dollars. So we didn't have money but we had language skills, the culture was not a shock. We were used to... we knew what life was like in England, we knew people who had gone there and who had come back, we had some relatives there. So it wasn't that bad. I mean it wasn't as bad as some of the people would find the refugee situation."

I'll tell you something funny, so the first thing we did in England... when we were kids we always used to read books by Enid Blyton and P.G. Wodehouse and all these English authors, the kids would always be eating a toffee apple which is... I think you call it a candy apple here, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. So the first thing we wanted to do when we went to England when we got there was to eat a toffee apple [laughter]. But for us it was a big adventure, more than anything else. It wasn't traumatic... I don't think we were traumatized at all. I mean as I said, my parents it was a different story. They missed their homes and their lives. They sort of... for a few years they used to pine for back home, but then they got over it."

Heather: "You mentioned food, did you find the food adjustment ... other than the treats, obviously..."

Saleem: "Not really. Again we were used to English food and the town that we lived in, you couldn't buy spices and stuff but we used to go to Liverpool once and awhile. And my mom learned to make roast beef and burgers and stuff, and that in fact was a plus, we enjoyed it."

Heather: "Sure, yeah. Well that's good. We covered pretty much everything that I wanted to ask you I think. Did you have any... In terms of the Ugandan Asian community here, did you find still socialized, or spent time with people who had a similar experience?"

Saleem: "Well, at work and that it would be different people. I remember when I first came and started working I met someone from the Philippines, and I had never met anybody from the Philippines. I met

another chap who was from Jamaica that, and he wasn't... he was a white Jamaican. And I met another fellow who was ethnically Chinese but was from India, and the only reason I knew that was he spoke with an Indian accent... it was very weird. I think since we've moved here we're more broad minded, more liberal thinking, more tolerant. That's the best thing that ever happened."

Heather: "And so you consider yourself a Canadian then?"

Saleem: "Oh definitely. Even... in fact I applied for citizenship the first day I was eligible. We didn't have a place to go back to so we... basically it was either adapt or die kind of idea so we decided this was home, definitely. Even when we go somewhere on holidays for a week or so, when we come back here we've come back home."

Heather: "Do you have anything else to add, any stories or anything?"

Saleem: "Not really. I think, again as I said for us coming to Canada, the transition was good. I think because we were educated, we spoke the language and we spoke it well. I don't think we had any issues that a lot of immigrants coming to Canada would. And the other thing is because we came en masse – our whole community – we managed to have community institutions here, not exactly the same as what we had there. But we had places for praying and for socializing and for gathering together. We also, as I said we became broad minded and came across people that we wouldn't have met, and came across ideas that we wouldn't have come across. Our thinking changed. For example in Uganda – I don't know if you know this – but there's a lot of homophobia there and things like that that are totally alien to us now. I mean when you think about it here, and... I think things change for the better.

The only thing I would say is for my children now, they don't speak the language. They are unilingual English and that's fine, that's something that we tried but it didn't work out. So that's okay. Other than that, it been forty years, it's been a long time. We're happy, we're Canadian, our kids are definitely Canadian. When I hear them speak I think it's a bit odd because they speak with a Canadian accent [laughter]. They say that I don't have a very strong accent but I know that I do... so that's okay. One other thing I would say is that because of my accent, when we first came to Canada it was a more acceptable accent than many others. And I think that opened a lot of doors for me. Now it's not politically correct to say things like that, but that's the way I see it."

Heather: "Right. And your kids are in Canada now and doing well?"

Saleem: “Yes, one finished medical school, one is in engineering, and one is just finishing up her Masters in biology so yeah, they have all done well.”

Heather: “Great, yeah those are very tough disciplines, so that’s good.”

Saleem: “I think we always stressed education and that was a big thing for us. They would not have had these opportunities if they hadn’t been here. I would not have had these opportunities if I had not left when I did. So it was a blessing in disguise, but yes definitely a blessing.”

Heather: “For sure, and probably also that you had your schooling in the U.K., did you find that helpful when you came over to look for work? Versus... you would have done that anyways I guess?”

Saleem: “Yes. Again the systems in the U.K. and Canada are very similar so I did not have any problem. I know a lot of people who had problems getting their degrees or whatever, but for me within a short period of time everything was done. I did my board exams and... yeah I got licensed and everything was fine. I guess it is a success story.”

Heather: “Of course, yeah. And you’re still working now?”

Saleem: “Yes, I love my job. I’m one of these people who loves to work I like what I do, and I can’t see myself retiring and sitting at home and doing nothing, I can’t do that.”

Heather: “[Laughter] Well that’s good. That’s pretty much all I have, so thank you so much for your time.”

Saleem: “Thank you.”

[End of transcript]