

You Called My Number – an incident during the Ugandan Asian
Operation in Kampala, October 1972

Michael Molloy

(Former head of the interview unit, Kampala)

By mid-October 1972, the November 6 deadline for the expulsion of Uganda's Asian minority was looming. The Canadian immigration team, based in the IPS Building in Kampala, was in full swing with charter flights of accepted migrants departing Entebbe Airport for Montreal every two or three days.

The challenge for the members of the selection unit was for each of us to interview at least 25 families a day. We were starting to get tired and a little testy. I was on my third or fourth interview one morning when I heard the voice of the man who was in charge of the reception counter, Moe Benoit.

"Mike there is someone you need to interview right away!!"

Moe and I had had a disagreement the day before and I was about to say something I would have later regretted when I glanced up and saw that his normally ruddy face was chalk white. Moe, a genuine tough guy who had survived being torpedoed twice the same day during World War II, was not easily rattled so I just said,

"OK but let me finished this interview."

The fellow I was interviewing met our selection criteria so I told him that my colleague, Mr. Colfer, at the next table would explain the medical and departure process.

Moe was back in an instant, accompanied by a tall Ugandan police Sergeant... shiny boots, blue knee socks, immaculate khaki shorts and tunic, blue peaked cap, handsome face, pleasant expression... So far so

good. But he held an ugly little submachine gun in one hand and in the other, a metal chain. The other end of the chain connected to a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of a smallish, young Asian man ---- wrinkled clothes that looked like they had been slept in, glazed tired eyes, unshaven face, and matted hair. The man croaked “You called my number” and handed me a battered, grotty lump of grey British High Commission stationery. I carefully peeled it open and sure enough in the upper right corner was a number which, I confirmed in a second, matched the number on the application form that Moe had dropped on my desk.

I told the Sergeant I needed to speak privately to the man and asked that the handcuffs be removed.

“No sir” was the reply.

So, I rearranged the chairs, one behind the other, seated the Sergeant in the back chair and the man in front. I leaned across the table and asked him what was going on. His story unfolded quickly. He had applied with his Kenyan Asian wife to come to Canada. When Idi Amin announced that Asians with Kenyan, Tanzanian and Zambian passports had three weeks to leave the country he arranged for her to join her family in Nairobi while he awaited his interview with us. Unfortunately, when they got to the border the Ugandan authorities seized her jewellery, kicked her across the border, charged him with smuggling and had him imprisoned in Kampala. His family tried without success to obtain his release. He had been in jail about a week when the family spotted his application number in an advertisement we regularly placed in the *Uganda Argus* newspaper inviting applicants to their interviews.

CANADA
CANADIAN HIGH COMMISSION
IMMIGRATION SERVICE
INTERVIEWS
I.P.S. BUILDING, KAMPALA

Holders of the following reference numbers
are invited to appear for Interview Wednesday,
Sept. 13, 8:30 to 12:00 and 2:00 to 4:00.

| 8.30 to | 10.30 to | 2.00 to | 3.00 to |
|------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| 10.30 | 12.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 |
| 174 | | | |
| 248 | 398 | 530 | 622 |
| 290 | 409 | 531 | 623 |
| 295 | 410 | 539 | 624 |
| 304 | 411 | 544 | 625 |
| | | 550 | 627 |
| 305 | 412 | 551 | 631 |
| 306 | 413 | 567 | 635 |
| 307 | 426 | 568 | 641 |
| 324 | 428 | 577 | 642 |
| 329 | 430 | 579 | 646 |
| 337 | 450 | 580 | 649 |
| 339 | 458 | 586 | 669 |
| 341 | 462 | 587 | 670 |
| 343 | 468 | 601 | 676 |
| 350 | 505 | 610 | 689 |
| 364 | 506 | 615 | 693 |
| 367 | 507 | | 694 |
| 368 | 510 | | |
| 378 | 511 | | |
| 382 | 517 | | |
| 397 | 523 | | |

Only those heads of family or single persons whose REFERENCE NUMBERS appear above will be interviewed. All other holders of reference numbers will be invited through subsequent newspaper notices or contacted by mail. If you hold a reference number please refrain from contacting this office unless invited to do so.

Example of the advertisements the Canadian team placed in the *Uganda Argus*. Courtesy: Wayne Bennett Collection, Carleton University Archives

The family returned to the jail and showed the Warden the number in the newspaper. The man was brought from the cramped cell he was sharing with dozens of other prisoners. He produced a lump of grey paper bearing the number that matched one in the ad. The Warden was impressed, the Sergeant was summoned and the man was released under escort so he could attend his interview.

There were fifty or more Canadians and Ugandan Asians in the room while all this was happening but I was aware of an unnatural silence. The Sergeant, in the meantime, was having difficulty with his awkward weapon - a Sten gun. From time to time he would place it on the floor and then, remembering himself, would pick it up again. Every time that gun came up, the silence was broken by a collective gasp.

There was no way we were going to refuse this man but the formalities, including the point system, had to be observed. As a mechanic, with an aunt in BC, he qualified easily. I started to worry about getting him through the medical. I told the Sergeant we had to see the doctor next. Across the strangely quiet room we went to the medical section where Dr. Piché was standing by his cubicle. Yes, of course he was available to examine the man.

Could the handcuffs be taken off?

“No sir.”

The doctor and the man at end of the chain disappeared behind a curtain leaving me to entertain the Sergeant. I remarked that my Dad had some of the same war service ribbons that his tunic displayed. Making the case that Dad in the North Atlantic and the Sergeant in the jungles of Burma were comrades in arms was a bit of a stretch but it gave us a safe topic of conversation. The doctor, the prisoner and the chain re-appeared.

“He has passed his medical.”

I could not believe my ears -- what about the X-ray, the blood and urine tests, the dreaded stool examination?

Piché looked me right in the eye:

“HE HAS PASSED HIS MEDICAL.”

At that moment, my boss, Roger St. Vincent, who had been quietly watching all that had transpired, marched up, planted himself in front of the Sergeant and said in his best RCAF fighter pilot voice:

“Sergeant, this man is to be on the tarmac at Entebbe Airport at exactly 7 tomorrow morning. Understood?”

“Yes sir.”

St. Vincent turned on his heel and marched off parade. The Sergeant saluted.

Piché scored the second home run of the morning when he then told the Sergeant that, if all went well, he and his family could come to our office the following day for free medical examinations.

At 7 the next morning, a pair of police cars pulled up to the stairs leading to the Air Canada charter now ready for departure. Up the stairs went the Sergeant, the chain, and the man with his visa to Canada. St. Vincent, blocking the doorway, asked for the cuffs to be removed and quickly propelled our applicant through the door. The Sergeant asked if he could see inside the aircraft.

“No, that’s not possible but we are looking forward to seeing you and your family tomorrow.”

The following morning Moe Benoit escorted the Sergeant, his wife and six children to the medical section. The medical team pulled out all the stops and an hour later the family left our office with cookies, a box of medical supplies and a certificate of good health signed by Dr. Marcel Piché, Head, Medical Section, Canadian Team, Kampala.