



## A Special Issue of the CIHS Bulletin The Ugandan Asian Refugee Movement, 4 August to 8 November 1972

### Background

Michael J. Molloy

When Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced the reopening of Canada's immigration program in 1947, he asserted that Canadians did not want the character of their population to change and therefore there would be no significant immigration from Asia. He also acknowledged a moral obligation to assist refugees from the camps in war-devastated Europe. Between 1947 and 1951, Canada resettled 183,000 displaced people from Europe. In 1956, Canada responded to the Soviet invasion of Hungary by accepting 38,000 Hungarian refugees: this movement established in the minds of the political elite, the media, and the public the idea that resettling refugees in the face of crisis was something Canada could do well. In time, the implications of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the responsibilities of membership in the United Nations, among other things, led to a gradual shift in Canadian values in the direction of a more open, multicultural society. (See "[Canada's Slow Road to Tolerance](#)" in *Canada's History*.)

Following the passage of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's Bill of Rights in 1960, Canada's first female cabinet minister, Immigration Minister Ellen Fairclough, introduced the 1962 Immigration Regulations. They removed most of the racial barriers and inequities and gave visa officers authority to admit people with skills, resources, and attributes that would enable them to establish themselves in Canada, regardless of origin. The 1967 introduction of the "point system" for economic immigrants and new rules for nuclear and extended family relatives under the "universality" policy introduced a selection system for immigrants that was more consistent, fair, and transparent. During this time, the immigration department established "area offices" in Beirut, Port of Spain, and Geneva and a Central Processing Office in Ottawa to provide immigration services to people in countries with no resident Canadian immigration office. The Beirut area office, in the Canadian embassy in Lebanon, was staffed by a manager and four officers. It processed applications from intending immigrants from 38 countries in the Middle East and the eastern half of Africa, including Uganda. By this time, Canadian officials were interviewing potential immigrants in more than 100 countries and territories, but access to refugee resettlement remained centred on Europe. That was about to change.

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In 1969, Canada ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The following year, Cabinet's response was to approve a new three-part refugee resettlement policy:

1. Canada adopted the UN Refugee definition as modified by the protocol, which meant that people who were outside their country and unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of persecution would be recognized as refugees regardless of where they came from.
2. The point system would be used to assess whether refugees could establish themselves successfully in Canada on the understanding that refugees would receive more settlement assistance than ordinary immigrants, and officers were advised that Cabinet expected them to use their positive discretion to override the points system in favour of refugees.
3. Cabinet approved the "Oppressed Minority" policy which made it possible to apply refugee rules to people who were facing persecution or oppression but who had not been able to flee from the country of oppression.

This policy framed Canada's refugee resettlement program from 1970 to 1978, when the 1976 *Immigration Act* came into force. It also led to the admission of 228 Tibetan refugees in 1970 and 100 Chinese refugee families from Hong Kong in 1971. However, the real test of this new policy would come in 1972, when Uganda's president Idi Amin announced the expulsion of his country's Asian population.

## **Fiftieth Anniversary of the 1972 Ugandan Asian Refugee Movement**

Michael J. Molloy

On 4 August 1972, Ugandan president Idi Amin Dada announced that Uganda's Asian (Indian and Pakistani) minority had 90 days to leave Uganda. The announcement targeted Asians who had British passports, but even those with Ugandan citizenship were at risk.

People from western India had been trading with eastern Africa for centuries. By the 1800s there was a small but steady movement of Indians to Africa: some came looking for business opportunities or to work in the colonial administration, while others who had built the Uganda Railway stayed on when the work was done.

In the late 1800s, Britain added Kenya and Uganda to its empire (along with Tanganyika after World War I). The Asians were useful in service delivery, exploiting the colonies' resources, as junior civil servants, and as intermediaries with the African population.

Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania became independent in the 1960s, and the comfortable circumstances the Asians had enjoyed under British rule deteriorated. In Uganda, the African population numbered approximately 10 million, compared with 60,000 to 80,000 Asians. This small minority had created 80 percent of the economy, were 50 percent of the professionals, and owned 50 percent of the businesses. They were an easy target for a dictator seeking to consolidate power.

General Amin seized power in January 1971 while the country's elected president, Milton Obote, attended a Commonwealth conference in Singapore. Amin quickly gained international notoriety as a dangerous buffoon for his outlandish behaviour and pronouncements. The Asian community, which had been under pressure from Obote, thought they could come to an understanding with Amin. Attempts to negotiate with him failed, but the expulsion was a shock.

On 6 August, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced that he would manage the issue and ordered the immigration, external affairs, and defence departments to coordinate Canada's response. The timing was bad: the economy was down, unemployment was rampant, and an election was looming. Within days, the British government, dealing with racial unrest, acknowledged its obligations to Asian British passport holders but appealed to Commonwealth countries for assistance.

Trudeau met the British high commissioner on 18 August. Following a cabinet meeting on 24 August, he announced that an immigration team would be dispatched immediately to Kampala. The announcement concluded:

Editor's Note: This special issue commemorates the exile of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin Dada in 1972, and more particularly, Canada's humanitarian resettlement of over 6,000 individuals affected by this decree in 90 days. Contributors to this issue are mostly Canadian immigration officials who went to Uganda. On this 50th anniversary year of the expulsion, our authors delved into their memories and photographic archives to tell readers about their involvement in the Canadian program during those tense, disorienting, and dangerous times. Inevitably there is some repetition in these articles: Canadian authors shared many responsibilities, activities, and office space; other authors had similar experiences in leaving Uganda.

For our part we are prepared to offer an honourable place in Canadian life to those Ugandan Asians who come to Canada under this program. Asian immigrants have already added to the cultural richness and variety of our country and, I am sure, that those from Uganda will, by their ability and industry, make an equally important contribution to Canadian society.<sup>1</sup>

The same day, Roger St-Vincent, manager of the Beirut area office responsible for immigration from Uganda (and 37 other Middle Eastern and African countries) received the following "Mission Impossible" instructions:

You are not unaware of General Amin's decree to expel 80,000 Asians from Uganda... accusing them of being puppets of the British government and sabotaging the economy of his country. Your mission is to proceed to Kampala and by whatever means undertake to process without numerical limitations those Asians who meet the immigration selection criteria bearing in mind their particular plight and facilitate their departure for Canada. Your mission must be accomplished by November 8.<sup>2</sup>

How did St-Vincent acquire, furnish, and staff a fully functioning visa office in Kampala in less than a week? How did he pull together a team of visa officers, doctors, army medical technicians, visa typists, clerks, and volunteers? How were over 6,000 Asians selected, processed, medically screened, and visaed? This story is told elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Between 6 September and 8 November 1972, the Canadian Kampala team issued 6,175 visas. It sent 4,357 adults and 69 infants on 31 flights to Montreal and the Longue-Pointe reception centre at Canadian Forces Base Montreal. Another 1,725 travelled on their own. An additional 2,500 Ugandan Asians transferred by the UN to refugee camps in Europe arrived in Canada in 1973 and 1974, bringing the total to 8,000. Canada had opened its resettlement program to non-European refugees in 1970, and the 1972 Ugandan Asian movement was the first real test of the new policy.

#### Numbers: African-Asian Immigration to Canada 1966-1978

As we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the Ugandan Asian expulsion, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's Data Bureau provided the following chart showing landings in Canada of people between 1966 and 1978 from various African countries by their "country of last permanent residence" (CLPR). CLPR captures both citizens and residents. The vast majority of those from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zaire (Congo) were Asians, as white settlers departing from those countries (Zaire excluded) preferred Australia to Canada. Pressure on the Asian communities began shortly after African countries attained their independence in the 1960s. Canadian immigration officers were sent to Kenya in 1968, and as the chart shows, slightly over 700 people came to Canada. By 1972, one immigration officer at the area office in Beirut was working full time on Tanzanian Asians whose businesses had been nationalized. The spike in immigration from Zaire in 1974 is explained in CIHS [Bulletin #70](#) of May 2014.

Between 1966 and 1971, 3,531 Asians from Africa arrived in Canada. The insecurity generated by the Ugandan expulsion is reflected in the arrival of another 28,000 Asians from Africa in Canada between 1972 and 1978.

#### Immigration from East Africa, Zambia and Zaire (Democratic Congo) to Canada 1966-1978

CLPR	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	TOTAL
Kenya	114	239	359	363	245	289	320	1,193	2,394	2,477	1,202	379	227	<b>9,801</b>
Tanzania	75	115	135	54	49	180	1,105	1,688	2,024	2,188	1,299	605	361	<b>9,878</b>
Uganda	54	68	62	69	90	149	5,021	2,056	423	112	29	34	43	<b>8,210</b>
Zambia	141	162	106	96	113	112	78	92	231	354	193	130	106	<b>1,914</b>
Zaire	3	4	25	13	32	15	11	49	1,273	188	82	32	28	<b>1,755</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>387</b>	<b>588</b>	<b>687</b>	<b>595</b>	<b>529</b>	<b>745</b>	<b>6,535</b>	<b>5,078</b>	<b>6,345</b>	<b>5,319</b>	<b>2,805</b>	<b>1,180</b>	<b>765</b>	<b>31,558</b>

#### Immigration Statistics 1966-1978

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Roger St-Vincent's *A Very Fortunate Life*, (self-published, undated) p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> See for example St-Vincent's memoir of the Ugandan Asian movement [Seven Crested Cranes](#). I recorded my Uganda recollections in chapter six of [Finding Refugee in Canada](#). The first full scholarly account of the movement can be found in Shezan Muhammedi's [Gifts from Amin: Ugandan Asian Refugees in Canada](#). Finally, see Jalal Jaffer's recent memoir, [Memories of a Ugandan Refugee: Encounters of Hope](#).

## Uganda Refugee Movement: The View from London

James Bissett

Shortly after my arrival in London in the summer of 1972 to take charge of the Canadian high commission's immigration section, I was summoned to the high commissioner's office, where Jake Warren, the high commissioner, asked me to attend an urgent meeting called by the British Foreign Office. The subject of the meeting was the announcement on 4 August by President Idi Amin of Uganda that the Asian minority living there had 90 days to leave the country. The expulsion was to apply to all Asians who did not hold Ugandan citizenship, estimated to be approximately 80,000 people.



Kampala, Uganda, 2 October 1972 (Photo courtesy of Gerry Campbell)

Included among the 80,000 were approximately 23,000 Asians living in Uganda who possessed British citizenship and were therefore entitled to enter Britain. However, the British government had recently introduced a new immigration quota and was reluctant to exceed this number by accepting thousands of Asians from Uganda. The government, therefore, endeavored to persuade members of the Commonwealth and territories to accept some of these refugees who held British passports. This was the purpose of the meeting.

I was aware that Canada had already agreed to accept refugees from Uganda and had opened a selection office in Kampala. Upon return to my office, I reported to headquarters about the British request for help and recommended that our selection team there should give priority in selection to those who did not possess British citizenship.

As far as I know, few if any, of the 6,000 refugees selected by our team were British passport holders. The vast majority were Ismaili Muslims chosen in part because of recommendations made to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau by the Aga Khan. The remarkable success of these refugees in rapidly becoming integrated into Canadian society speaks for itself, but it also reflects favourably on the immigration selection team led by experienced visa officer Roger St-Vincent.

Shortly after my message to Ottawa, I was asked to send someone to Kampala to help in the selection of refugees. I chose a promising young officer on his first posting named Gerry Campbell. Years later, through the "grapevine" I heard that St-Vincent was not happy that I sent him a young, inexperienced officer when I had a large staff of veteran visa officers, but within a week St-Vincent had put Campbell in charge of one of his critical sections of the operation. Gerry Campbell had a long and successful career and became Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations at Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

## Running the Roadblocks: Getting Refugees Safely to the Airport

Gerry Campbell

I had been posted to London for just over one month when I was summoned to Joe Bissett's office and asked whether I would go to Kampala on temporary duty as part of the team being assembled to process Ugandan refugees.

Both flattered at the trust extended to me as a newly arrived junior foreign service officer and attracted by the chance to travel to a part of the world that I had never seen, I leapt at the opportunity. It was only later that I found that the offer had first been extended to Gordon Whitehead, the number three in London, and to Doug Dunnington.

So within a few days, after getting the requisite vaccinations and visas, I checked in at Heathrow airport with a hundred pounds of excess luggage—a supply of application forms for use by the team in Kampala. I flew from London to Kampala on a BOAC flight on 3 September 1972 but had to continue to Nairobi on the same plane as clearance had not yet been obtained from the Ugandan foreign ministry. I can only remember vaguely being met early on arrival in Nairobi and escorted to a hotel where, after a few hours of sleep, I was taken back out to the airport later the same day. I arrived at Entebbe airport late that afternoon, where I was met by Roger St-Vincent, the team leader, along with Phil Boyes, a CIDA officer from the embassy in Nairobi.

After the forms and I cleared immigration and customs, and Roger had welcomed me aboard with the less-than-encouraging comment that he "had expected someone with broader shoulders", Phil drove us into Kampala along dusty red roads (or is that now just my imagination) in the golden, late-afternoon African light at breakneck speed (and that is literal, not imaginative) past lines of colourfully dressed African women walking along the sides of the road, presumably

doing their evening shopping. As an aside, when I returned to Uganda in 1998 and drove along this same road in the late afternoon, there was no one walking along the road; it was not safe to be out that late in the day. I was captivated by this first look at Africa, at the tropics, and at landing on the equator at Entebbe, though slightly concerned that Phil was going to hit someone and at what would happen if he did. I was still pondering Roger's cryptic comment and thinking that I would show this stodgy old bugger (or something along these lines). I did not realize at the time that Bissett's decision to select an inexperienced junior officer had been challenged by Morris Mitchell, Director of Operations in the Immigration Foreign Service. Bissett, who outranked Mitchell, responded by asking him if he was questioning his judgement. I am grateful that I was not told of this at the time.

I checked into the Kampala International Hotel in time to see my first African sunset over the green hills and large tropical trees of Kampala. The next morning, I found that the team, at that point, consisted of exactly two people: Roger and me. I accompanied Roger to check out the IPS Building in downtown Kampala as a place for our operation. During the inspection, an African who had applied for a student visa showed up, and Roger delegated me to issue him a visa. To my chagrin, I had no idea how to do this, as in London all the visas were done by locally engaged staff. Roger's look when I had to admit this basically confirmed what I suspected his view was, but somehow over the next week or two, I must have earned a measure of his confidence, as he asked me to take on the responsibility for organizing and managing all the air transport arrangements. This turned out to be an exceptional assignment, as neither I nor anyone else had any prior experience in doing something like this, on this scale.

The rest of the team began arriving over the next week or two, while with Roger's help and guidance, I organized arrangements with Bruce McNally of Pan American Airways for the ground handling of Canadian Pacific, Air Canada, and PWA charter flights at Entebbe airport, chartered buses to transport Ugandan refugees to the airport, and confirmed arrangements with the Kampala International Hotel to use its parking lot as a staging area. Roger in the meantime had set up office operations in the IPS Building, and the team had already selected hundreds of refugees. After some unforeseen delays in medical processing, the first group was ready to go two or three weeks later.

The first flight, however, was only about two thirds full, causing consternation in Ottawa, where press and politicians had been waiting to welcome the first arrivals. This shortfall was in part due to medical processing delays, but another factor that quickly became evident was that many if not most Ugandan refugees issued visas were, understandably, hedging their bets in case the erratic President Amin changed his mind about his expulsion order. Some were booking commercial flights out; others wanted to defer their departure until as close to the early November deadline as possible.

Obviously, we could not run an airlift with empty planes or compress all flights into the late October period. Ottawa had provided Roger, over the telephone, with a long list of flights that had already been chartered and scheduled. The solution was to put up notices advising all refugees that if they wanted to travel on Canadian chartered flights, they were required to confirm bookings on the next available flight. This resolved the situation, and after the first few flights, all future flights were full, and went off with only a few people missing flights, sometimes for valid reasons such as not having been able to get a tax clearance certificate or having been detained by the military.



Chartered buses, drivers, and visa officers: Gerry Campbell (front left) and Norm Olsen (front right) checking their passenger lists (Photo courtesy of Gerry Campbell)

The first flight was a major event, covered even by *Time* magazine. All refugees scheduled on the flight were checked off the manifest at the hotel parking lot, and their bags were loaded onto three buses for the drive to Entebbe airport, about 45 minutes from Kampala. The Canadian high commissioner from Nairobi, William Olivier, who was also accredited to Uganda, flew to Kampala to escort the convoy in his official vehicle, along with a senior officer from the External Affairs Africa desk in Ottawa. After the buses had been loaded, he called me to

his car to confirm arrangements at the airport. Olivier was accompanied by his political officer, Reg Smith. When I explained that the plane was parked by a hangar away from the main airport terminal, Olivier asked Smith if he knew where to go. As Reg did not know, Olivier ordered me to accompany him in the official vehicle, which was to lead the bus convoy to the airport.

It was a new experience to ride in an official vehicle with the flag flying on the front left-hand fender, but any prestige in riding in the front was quickly dispelled when we reached the first military roadblock. The driver started to slow down, but Olivier summarily ordered him not to slow down and to drive right through without stopping. I shrunk down as far as possible in the front seat in case the notoriously undisciplined and often inebriated soldiers at the checkpoint decided to open fire, then looked back to see what had happened to the buses. To my surprise, they had all just followed suit, driving right past the checkpoint without stopping. This set a precedent that was followed for all other departures.

Arrangements at the airport went off without a hitch for this and all other flights, thanks in large part to the help of the PanAm station manager. McNally was more than happy to assist, as arrangements were made to pay PanAm at the Canadian end, enabling him to offload Ugandan currency from PanAm's accounts in Uganda to pay for fuel and be reimbursed in Canadian or American dollars.



Ugandan chartered bus drivers with Gerry Campbell, John McNeish, and Jim Versteeg (Photo courtesy of Gerry Campbell)

There were, though, occasional difficulties in the airport screening procedures. After the captain of one of the early flights took off, he radioed back to say that the plane had only barely cleared the runway at the last moment, evidently due to the fact that it was overweight. It turned out that Ugandan airport personnel or soldiers, subject to compensation, were turning a blind eye to strict baggage weight limits. We then had to station Canadian officers at the baggage scales to ensure compliance. On one occasion a soldier pointed a gun at Larry Carroll when he stopped an overweight bag from being cleared for loading, but Larry refused to back down and this did not happen again.

Aside from a few isolated incidents involving delays or the arrival of different capacity aircraft configurations than expected, the charter flight operation continued smoothly with flights on a regular basis, and sometimes two flights on the ground at the same time. Many other officers pitched in to help with the marshalling of passengers at the hotel in the early morning and screening and boarding at the airport. Team morale was very high right from the outset, under the able and professional leadership of Roger St-Vincent. It was only years later, when I had been given similar responsibilities, that I realized how much Roger had to deal with, especially in view of the fact that we did not have access to the normal communications system of an overseas mission and in an era without cellphones. There were four or five sub-groups within the team: a large contingent of visa officers, the doctors (who of course have a different set of professional considerations), a group of Department of National Defence medical technicians, administrative and secretarial support staff, and Nairobi embassy staff. There was also a steady stream of escort officers who arrived (and left) on each flight, along with visiting senior officers from Ottawa, one of whom was Director of Operations Morris Mitchell. Still oblivious to his initial concerns, I was pleased when he singled me out for having, by all accounts, done a good job, but mortified when he told me that he had received a call from my mother in Vancouver who was concerned about my safety after seeing alarming news reports on the security situation in Uganda.

How Roger managed all this with no communications link, other than by long distance, late-night calls with Ottawa, is beyond me. Roger had big shoulders—the biggest—and handled the immense pressure that he must have been under without showing any strain. He took the responsibility for the first partially full flight without criticizing me or anyone else. Similarly, when a regular DC8 arrived, instead of a larger capacity, stretch DC8, Roger was not taken aback or critical. All the information on flight dates and equipment was given to him over the phone, and somewhere along the line, a small mistake had been made.

I liked Roger immensely and got on with him really well. I learned a great deal from him in a condensed period of time, and undoubtedly the path of my subsequent career owes a lot to him and the wide range of contacts I made during this

intense two-month period. Roger's hotel suite was like the waiting room of an overworked doctor, full of people every night after work and after dinner.

I and many of Roger's team worked from 5:30 in the morning until sunset: it was hard work, and hard play afterwards—going out for dinner with team staff in the evenings (eating whatever was left on the rapidly diminishing menus of the few hotels still open, until not much was left other than tilapia, a fish I still do not like eating), drinking with visiting colleagues in the Leopard's Lair on the top of the Kampala International Hotel, and even sneaking across the road to the old British sports club where I learned to play squash for the first time, a game I took up seriously and later played in the Caribbean, Hong Kong, and Canada.

In retrospect, it strikes me as a golden time early in my career—a fresh, new experience, challenging, meeting many colleagues, some of whom became lifelong friends (Mike Molloy in particular). It is easy to overlook the tension and real danger and tragedy that was taking place. Ugandan Asians were having their cars hijacked and their homes ransacked. Ugandan African enemies of Amin (who I once saw driving around Kampala in an open army jeep) were being picked up on the street and thrown into the trunks of unmarked cars (I saw this happen once, too).

On one Sunday, after a long night of overindulgence, I was lying around the lovely circular hotel pool when a group of un-uniformed Ugandan security arrived and began assembling automated weapons. For a short time, I thought they might start shooting the people around the pool and was looking for the best escape route, until they seized the British journalist they were looking for and dragged him away by his hair. After they left, on the way back to my room, I passed Reg Smith sitting on the floor of the lobby with his back to a pillar under the guard of a soldier with a rifle. I went up to my room and, to avoid any risk, exposed several photos I had taken earlier that morning from my hotel balcony when Ugandan tanks and armored vehicles had surrounded the British office in the Speke Hotel across the road.

In early November, as the operation was winding down, several young visa officers (Larry Carroll, Jacques Drapeau, and Jim Versteegh) and I persuaded Bud Clark, the Director General of the Immigration Foreign Service, to agree to four of us going on temporary duty to Dar es Salaam to help clear a backlog of visa applications that had built up during the Ugandan operation. We left Kampala on 5 November, and the next day flew from Nairobi to Arusha in Tanzania and took a four-wheel-drive vehicle up to the rim of the Ngorongoro Crater. There we spent the night in the old rustic, damp, and foggy crater lodge before going down to visit the crater the next morning. It was the home of the most concentrated herds of game in Africa and an enchanting place to visit then, and even 26 years later, when, as high commissioner to Kenya and Uganda, I drove my wife and three daughters up to the new Serena Crater Lodge on New Year's Eve in 1998.

## **Back in the Saddle Again**

Larry Carroll

I returned to Ottawa in the summer of 1972 after a posting of four and a half years in Beirut, Lebanon. Beirut's large area of responsibility for immigration included the Middle East, Turkey, and the eastern half of Africa with the exception of Egypt and the Sudan. During my years in Beirut, I made a number of area trips to East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, as well as Zambia and Mauritius).

I was not originally selected to go to Uganda to be part of the processing team that began operations in August 1972, but given my most recent overseas experience in East Africa, I was not surprised when Roger St-Vincent asked Headquarters that I travel to Uganda for this purpose. I left Ottawa on the evening of 16 September and flew with BOAC to London, where I connected on the 17th with East African Airlines for a direct flight to Entebbe. I arrived there on the morning of the 18th and made my way to Kampala.

When I arrived at my hotel, I went immediately to Roger St-Vincent's office in the IPS Building. I could sense from the onset that there was a high level of adrenaline in the office and that everyone was working flat out. I was immediately assigned a small cubicle and began interviewing clients. I only checked in at the hotel after my workday was done.

Each subsequent workday was the same: little time to rest for both interviewing officers and support staff including interpreters. What struck me upon arrival at the office on day one was the long line of people that encircled the office and continued down the street. All selection interviews were based on scheduled appointments. People submitted their application forms to the office and were given file numbers. They were then told to check the local newspaper each morning to look for their file number and which date they were scheduled for interview at our IPS Building processing office. We worked long hours, starting interviews at 8:00 a.m. and often working past 7:00 p.m. The work was hard but extremely rewarding, knowing that we were resettling people in danger and who had skills in high demand in Canada.

Canada operated several charter flights each week. Once visas were issued, the recipients were assigned specific departure dates on a scheduled Canadian Pacific Airlines or Air Canada chartered flight. As we geared up for these flights, I was assigned to the brigade ensuring that departing people gathered in the hotel parking lot at 6:30 a.m. for the 26-mile escorted bus trip to the airport.

Officers verified that the right people were ready to depart on their assigned day and on the designated buses. Passengers were limited to two pieces of luggage including handbags. We weighed each piece of luggage before placing it on the bus, as it could not exceed the allotted 50 lb. limit. This limit was a requirement imposed by the chartered aircrafts as the total weight of the passengers, luggage, and combined fuel weights could not exceed the airplane's liftoff capacity. A number of these aircraft were DC stretch planes. On one occasion, I boarded the bus at the hotel in Kampala and acted as escort to the airport. There were three military checkpoints on that bus trip. We had heard stories of Ugandan soldiers robbing people at gun point of their jewelry and other personal items, including money. Having a Canadian immigration officer escort these convoys made for a smooth clearance at each check point.

### The Kampala Office's "Numerator" and Interview Schedule



**Left image:** Numerator. When Asians applied to Canada, the Kampala office stamped a unique reference number on their application and on a gray information form letter using a numerator like the one shown here. They were given the form letter and told to watch for their number in the *Uganda Argus* newspaper. (Courtesy of Michael J. Molloy and Jessie Chima)

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	10.30 to 12.00	2.00 to 3.00	3.00 to 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.

**Right image:** Invitation in the *Uganda Argus* newspaper to appear for interview on 13 September 1972. Contacting applicants using the reference numbers rather than names protected their privacy and security. (Courtesy of the Wayne Bennett Collection, Carleton University Archives, Ottawa)

It was customary for the officer escort on the bus to remain at the airport until the charter flight was in the air. On the day that I had that responsibility, an incident occurred that required a heartbreaking decision on the spot.

The charter plane in question was a stretch DC, and it was understood by the captain that a sizeable amount of medical equipment was being transported back to Canada on that flight. The total weight capacity of the plane for that day had been miscalculated, and the pilot advised that a number of passengers would be denied boarding. I was charged with removing six passengers and their luggage. I informed all passengers that I would not separate families. I asked for volunteers, promising them that they would return by bus to Kampala with me and that we would house them overnight at the hotel, feed them a supper and guarantee their departure the following day on the next scheduled charter flight. One couple as well as one individual volunteered. I randomly chose three others. Roger St-Vincent was surprised to see me return to Kampala accompanied by the six individuals in question. After I explained, Roger fully approved and endorsed the decision I had taken.

I once saw Idi Amin drive by the building in a convertible white Mercedes. He was

standing up front holding on to the window frame and mockingly waving to the crowd in line outside the Canadian processing office. He was wearing a holster containing two pistols and a string of bullets crisscrossed over his chest à la Pancho Villa. On another occasion, I saw a street vendor selling T-shirts with photo prints of Idi Amin highlighting the latter's life accomplishments. No Canadian officer dared buy one of the T-shirts for fear of the negative repercussions of wearing it back in Canada.

The Canadian setup in Kampala officially closed on 5 November 1972. Roger St-Vincent asked me to complete an area trip on behalf of the Beirut office, and so I travelled back to Kenya on the 5th and subsequently did selection interviews in Tanzania, Mauritius, and Zambia before returning to Kenya on 10 December.

Roger St-Vincent, who was back in Beirut by this time, subsequently telexed the high commission in Nairobi to ask that I return to Kampala in case there were stragglers who had not managed to leave Uganda by Idi Amin's imposed deadline. I therefore travelled back to Kampala to the hotel. I believe the high commission in Nairobi had made arrangements to place a notice in the Kampala newspaper that a Canadian immigration official would be in town available to assist anyone who might have been unable to attend an earlier scheduled appointment with Canadian officials.

No one contacted me during my stay. I guess all those who needed to get out of the country did so on their own. I finally left the country for good on 15 December 1972, having assured myself that no one else required Canadian immigration assistance.

## **Personal Recollections**

Jim Versteegh

Having just settled into my first foreign assignment as an immigration officer in Cologne, Germany, I was pleased to be given the opportunity to participate in the Ugandan humanitarian program. In retrospect, that experience generated my career-long interest in and support for Canada's refugee and refugee-like programs.

At the request of headquarters in Ottawa, I went initially to Beirut to pick up some files needed in Kampala. On the outbound trip from Beirut, I was delayed in Nicosia, Cyprus, for a day because of an unscheduled postponement of my flight. When I arrived in Kampala following an overnight flight, I was taken directly to the office, where the program was well underway. At first, I was assigned to desk duties including reviewing files, completing forms, and vetting and signing admission documents. By the second day, however, after being given some operational guidance and specific information on what we were looking for (admissibility and eligibility criteria) I started interviewing. Accustomed to doing three to five interviews per day in Cologne, I soon settled into a routine of seeing 20-25 applicants per day.

It was easy to be impressed by the applicants' personal characteristics. Though they were being forced to leave their homeland, few volunteered any critical comments about the Ugandan regime. They were stoic and fully focused on their intended futures in Canada, though not many had any substantive knowledge of Canada. At the time, Canadian immigration officers abroad were called selection and counselling officers. After positive selection decisions were made, it was expected that we would counsel applicants on conditions in Canada. With the timeline imposed by the Amin regime and the number of people being interviewed, counselling at interview was not possible.

The absence of counselling was addressed in a modest way on the charter flights to Canada. I had the opportunity to escort one of the flights to Montreal—16 hours including a stopover in Madrid to refuel. I was assigned to the front of the plane with an empty seat beside me. One by one all heads of family were invited (by one of the flight attendants) to sit beside me to ask questions and to be given some basic information about Canada and what to expect upon arrival in Montreal. It was certainly not ideal, but at a minimum, all travellers were given the chance to ask what was on their minds.

I returned to Kampala on the next empty charter flight and helped load the next group on buses and escort them to the airport for departure. Each adult was allowed only one piece of luggage, and that bag was thoroughly inspected by Ugandan officials before being allowed on the plane. We noted that officials were removing valuable items from bags and putting them aside, in clear view of observers.

One of the last to leave Kampala, I was part of a small group of officers assigned to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, for ten days to interview applicants from a backlog that had developed. We arrived in Dar es Salaam around mid-day, and after checking in to the hotel, which was located near a beach, we decided to go for a stroll on the sand. This walk resulted in severe sunburn on the tops of my feet. When interviews began early the next morning, I was unable to put on my shoes. I had little choice but to conduct my interviews in a suit and stocking

### **Upcoming Events Related to the 50th Anniversary of the Ugandan Asian Community in Exile**

#### **Conference**

#### **Beyond Resettlement: Exploring the History of the Ugandan Asian Community in Exile, Ottawa, 14-16**

**November 2022.** The Canadian Immigration Historical Society is pleased to be a sponsor of this conference. Thousands of Ugandan Asians resettled in Canada and elsewhere. The conference's focus will be that resettlement experience. For more information and registration, visit the [conference website](#).

#### **Documentary**

This fall, CTV will air an exclusive documentary on the Uganda movement, with Omar Sachedina relating the story and linking it to his family's experience. When more specific information becomes available, the CIHS will share it on its website.

feet. If there have ever been observations from applicants about being interviewed by a shoeless immigration officer, I am him.

After ten days, I returned to Cologne and to a less hectic workload. That was not the end, however, of my association with the Uganda movement. In 1987 after managing a refugee-like movement out of Central America and returning to headquarters, I bought a house in a new development in Ottawa. A few weeks after moving in, my son (then six years old) befriended a boy of similar age half a block down the street. The boy was of Asian origin, and when I subsequently met his father (a medical doctor) he recognized me as the officer who interviewed and selected him in Kampala. Though I can't confirm that was the case, it was true that he had arrived as part of the Uganda movement in 1972 and that he was successfully settled in Canada. In my mind, that example validated the entire program.

## **Whatever it Takes**

Terence (Terry) Colfer

*Terry Colfer is the former ambassador of Canada to Kuwait, Qatar, and Iran.*

In early October of 1972, I was enjoying my first posting as a foreign service officer at the Canadian embassy in Rome. I had been following media reports from Uganda claiming that General Idi Amin, President of Uganda, had ordered the expulsion of 80,000 Asians. A number of them were members of the Ismaili community who had taken out Ugandan citizenship, and as a result had lost any previous citizenship they might have held. So, they were stateless.

In the fall of 1972, Canada decided to assist with this refugee crisis. Roger St-Vincent, immigration officer in charge at the Canadian embassy in Beirut, was selected to head an immigration team that would set up in Kampala, Uganda. But a full team of officers was required to process the initial quota of 3,000 refugees. This number rose to 6,000 shortly afterwards. Consequently, visa officers were assigned to Uganda on a temporary basis from headquarters in Ottawa and Canadian embassies in Athens, Beirut, Nairobi, Rome and elsewhere. I was one of them.

On my arrival in Kampala on 7 October, I saw that the Canadian team was working extraordinarily hard to ensure that the goal of issuing 6,000 visas to Ugandan Asians would be met on time. Roger had arrived several weeks prior and had been responsible for finding office space and furniture, for communications, for selecting his team, and so on. Initially he had little support, but under his expert leadership, morale was always high and challenging objectives were met.

Part of my job in Rome was interviewing prospective European refugees wishing to be resettled to Canada. The Muslim Ismaili community in Uganda was different but in a positive way, as it demonstrated a strong interest in integrating into Canadian society as soon as possible. My observation was reinforced by the results of a survey taken a year after their arrival in Canada: roughly 3,000 Ugandan Asians initially accepted financial assistance to facilitate their resettlement, and fewer than 100 were still receiving government help at the end of their first year in Canada.



Terry Colfer, Kampala Office, IPS Building, 1972  
(Courtesy: Molloy collection)

Other things set this group apart from refugees I had encountered elsewhere. More than half had postsecondary education and most spoke fluent English; they probably would have qualified for residency through the regular immigrant points-based system. Once in Canada, these refugees made a relatively smooth transition to being productive citizens, with their education and job-ready skills. About 6,000 Ugandan Asians (including Ismailis, Goan Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and others) arrived in Canada in the fall of 1972; Canada is now home to approximately 80,000 Ismailis.

I returned to Rome on 7 November, but my involvement with the 1972 Ugandan refugee movement was not over. A few weeks later, Ottawa and the UNHCR advised that there were Ugandan refugees in camps in Italy and Malta who wished to join family in Canada. I made follow-up visits, and several hundred more Ugandan refugee visas were subsequently issued.

Working with the Kampala team was an honour. Despite tight deadlines and a heavy workload, the group spirit was consistently upbeat. Roger St-Vincent did an outstanding job as our overall boss. I watched, listened, and learned a lot

from his judgement and leadership skills. I am only sorry that he is no longer with us so that we could share a beverage and properly toast this significant anniversary. Cheers to everyone who was involved!

## **The Uganda Refugee Movement: A View from Ottawa**

Nadia Stachowsky Gray

After a posting to Rome, I finished a secondment to the Toronto Immigration Settlement Office and then moved to Ottawa, learning the ropes as executive assistant to Bud Clark, Director General of the Immigration Foreign Service. Suddenly, we had to deal with the Ugandan-Asian refugee crisis. The top priority was to set up administrative and processing systems in Kampala and Ottawa to deal with the applications of refugees applying to Canada. Senior headquarters immigration managers at the time included experienced people like Maurice Mitchell and George Reynolds, who managed the growing and complex workload.

The threat uttered by Idi Amin to the lives of the Asian Ugandans came without warning and was immediate. Thousands of people were in peril. Canada and other countries organized to resettle these refugees. The response was our government at its best—confronting an emergency. Immigration (domestic and foreign service), External Affairs, National Defence, Health and Welfare, and many nongovernmental organizations and airlines stepped up to help.

In Ottawa, two interdepartmental committees were created to coordinate, one centred in External Affairs and the other in the Immigration Foreign Service, which was situated at that time in the Department of Manpower and Immigration. I was secretary to the second. My role was to ensure that information was current and available for the committee, and that it flowed to and from the External Affairs Committee and between the processing immigration office being set up in Kampala and the Immigration Committee. I was also responsible for following up on actions and deadlines. Getting and keeping information current was particularly important for the people who were charged with scheduling and chartering aircraft for refugee flights.

It was a challenge to keep the headquarters requirements and the field foreign service requests in balance at times. Planes had to be chartered for specific days, but then processing in the field office in Uganda had to generate enough refugee acceptances and finalize all processing steps for visa issuances to have enough people to fill the plane on the scheduled charter day.

It is long ago now, and my memory does not contain details on a day-by-day or action-by-action basis, but reading Roger St-Vincent's diary I was struck by the contrast between the work world before computers and present-day technology. I write this text on my iPad and smile as I realize that with just a few of these small devices a great many processes in the Uganda workload would have been streamlined.

At first, many communications from the Kampala office conveyed concern that applicants' medical clearance processing was not keeping up with the numbers of refugees being interviewed and thus slowing down the visa issuances needed for people to board a plane for Canada on a particular date. Another continuing issue was the unreliability of X-ray and other equipment, including typewriters, which were either breaking or in short supply. These challenges necessitated adjustments to chartered aircraft schedules and to staff being sent to Uganda as escort officers. The effect in Ottawa was that we were unable to charter the required-size planes with enough lead time. We also needed to ensure that all the players had current information about those arriving in Montreal, such as numbers and ages of family members, religion, if any had family or friends in Canada, as well as any ongoing transportation needs, housing, and other supports.

The Canadian Armed Forces organized the first reception for the incoming refugees at the airport. It provided food according to religious or other dietary needs, warm clothing—even shoes—and then it set up the ongoing transportation arrangements and coordinated the necessary next steps with settlement services.

The press also wanted information on an ongoing basis. That was within the External Affairs Committee's purview, but the Immigration Committee had much of the most sought-after information, and so a timely turnaround of reports from the field, to Immigration headquarters, to the External Affairs Committee and others was required. People worked long hours and weekends with professional dedication regardless of seniority. It was a good team.

Preparations for receiving the refugees was a crucial step and as the end came closer there were concerns about what would happen in Kampala and Entebbe for the last flight of refugees. Was a specially equipped plane with medical supplies and personnel something to be arranged in case conditions deteriorated?

Immigration foreign service (FS) officers in various headquarters assignments were sent to Kampala, where they helped with processing for a brief time (days to a week) until the flight they were to escort to Canada was scheduled to leave. Mitchell, Reynolds, Clark, and other senior managers also went to ascertain how things were progressing and how staff were coping. The staff there at all levels worked extremely hard responding to unexpected events, putting in early mornings and late nights, dealing with piles of work, and scheduling, loading, and escorting busloads of refugees finally bound for Canada.

Each trip out to Entebbe airport required running a gauntlet of armed soldiers, often with their gun safeties off, staring at those disembarking from the buses. Only one suitcase was allowed at Entebbe airport, since the aircraft's ability to get aloft was dependent upon the plane's weight. The runway was short in comparison to other airports. At the end of the runway was a lake. I knew this because of the information I managed.

As time passed, the processing of refugee files smoothed out and the loading of buses bound for the airport also became smoother, but tension rose as the operation prepared for the last flights. At headquarters, pressures from the press and the ministerial level required us to send questions to the Kampala office, even while it coped with a grinding workload in a tense and dangerous place.

Not only did each headquarters group have to get big things right, but each had to deliver the detailed underpinnings so that the shutdown happened without mishap. The underlying message was: Just get the answer now and as soon as possible. Each group worked very hard, always aware that the operation had to be ended safely and smoothly. But each side was frustrated by the other's information requests. Each side felt the other perhaps did not appreciate the problems they had to solve.

I was in my office in Ottawa after one of the headquarters meetings, organizing actions, updates, questions, and briefing points. It had been decided that the senior members on the committee would assess if and when they would travel to Kampala. Clark, Mitchell, and Reynolds came into my office, and surprised me with a pointed arm and the statement: "Nadia is a woman and a foreign service immigration officer". I think Mr. Reynolds was the speaker. Why this surprise announcement? There had been all sorts of male FS in Kampala, but no female FS had been sent from Ottawa. They thought one should be sent, and here she was. Since I was the secretary of the Immigration Ugandan Asian Refugee Committee, I was up to date on the policy, processing, and logistical issues and could go immediately. I was to assess whether the last plane or the last couple of planes should be equipped as medical planes, including a nurse and doctor. Speaking to representatives from various countries in Kampala seemed a good way to get information, so these managers turned back into Mr. Clark's office and asked me to come in too.

The timeline was tight. Staff and even senior officials were normally scheduled ahead of time for Kampala assignments, with enough time for the necessary medical inoculations if required. I had no such inoculations, but I ended up on a fast track to leave in two days. Voilà—all the shots at once. Voilà—passport. I do not remember what shots I received but began to have a reaction. I told myself that it would pass because I was very excited about going on this assignment and there was a very long plane journey for the effects to wear off.

On the plane I slept almost nonstop until we entered the airspace over Africa. Looking out the window, I saw a landscape of undulating sand dunes. It was my first view of a vast desert. My travel continued with some more dozing, landing in Nairobi, spending a night in a hotel, proceeding to Entebbe, and finally arriving in Kampala.

When the plane doors opened, in came a colleague, the escort officer of the refugees now about to board this plane. There was no time for chat. The foreign service escorting officers were efficient and got everything done smoothly. I pitched in where needed to keep everyone moving and on board. The plane door closed. This batch of refugees was on its way.

My purpose in Kampala was to learn the Canadian, British, and other missions' assessments for how to prepare for the flights that would be scheduled closer to Idi Amin's 8 November deadline. The consensus was that a medically equipped flight, especially at the end, could trigger an adverse reaction by the armed and unpredictable troops all around the airport and plane-loading area. It seemed a sensible concern. The best path seemed to be to continue getting planes loaded and off the ground as quickly as possible. That was our message back to Ottawa.

At the time, I was asked why I was sent all this way when they were doing the job and had first-hand knowledge of the danger. My answer was that they did not have the first-hand knowledge of the various levels of discussion in Ottawa. Trying to discuss the issues from both perspectives was too slow in the messages back and forth. My job was to work with the people stationed in Kampala to recommend the safest approach.

My job completed, the next day I was the escort officer. The thing that stood out for me about the trip to the airport and boarding the plane was the quiet, contained anxiety of the refugees. A couple of other Canadian foreign service officers were on board the bus, for security and to shepherd the bus through various stages before getting to the plane. Then the plane doors closed. The engines revved, and takeoff commenced. On to Canada.

During the flight there were questions to be answered and reassurances to give. Leaving Kampala, the temperature was tropical. Arriving in mid-October in Canada would be chilly. My friend, later my husband, Paul Gray, had already been an escort officer. When I was leaving for my assignment, he suggested a thoughtful measure: before landing in Canada, ask the refugees to get whatever socks the men or women had out of their luggage and put them on the feet of women, girls, and boys in sandals, and to get any warmer clothes out for deplaning. That was done, with at times some humour regarding the fashion effects.

My refugees stepped off the plane into the caring and efficient arms of the Canadian Armed Forces. Right this way. Follow the colour-coded paths according to your dietary traditions. Welcome to Canada. And they were off to a new beginning!

It was a poignant moment for me on another count. My parents and I had arrived in Canada as refugees after World II. I knew that even if there were difficult adjustments to be faced, Canada could and would be a safe haven for them to explore their future.

In writing this narrative I realized the theme of refugees has been a thread picked up at various times in my life and career. As the refugee officer in Rome, I processed applications from Jewish applicants displaced from Poland, Russia, and other Eastern European countries under Russia at the time. Then my experiences with the Uganda movement. During my husband's posting in Pakistan, I witnessed the influx of Afghan refugees during the Russian invasion of that country. In Hong Kong, I was on secondment with the Immigration Foreign Service as the refugee officer for processing applications from the Vietnamese boat people. Tiananmen Square occurred during this time. Ukraine is now being pummelled by Russia.

I used to hope that armed aggression would abate. But like a recurring virus it reappears in various parts of the world. Canada has provided shelter and help in these crises. May it always be a place of refuge and offer new possibilities.

## **Escorting a Flight to Canada**

Paul Gray

I was back in Ottawa just about two months after my London posting, when I was asked to go to Uganda to escort a flight of Ugandan Asians to Canada. I started this assignment on 28 September 1972, the date of the seventh game of the Canada-Russia hockey summit series.

I watched the entire game in front of a coin-operated television at Dorval Airport. Fans standing behind me were inserting coins in a blind panic not to lose the program. The atmosphere was electric. Pacific Northwestern announced delays in its flight at least three times—and as at least one Pacific Northwestern flight attendant was in the crowd, my suspicion has always been that the pilots found reasons to delay departure to see the game. When Paul Henderson scored, the place went berserk. I heard someone yell, “The drinks are on me”.

My flight routing was: Ottawa, Paris (maybe), Nairobi, Entebbe, Paris, Longue-Pointe, Ottawa. I remember a long flight over the desert and majestic dunes. I stayed overnight in Nairobi, having dinner with Al Lukie and the immigration staff there. My stay in Entebbe may have been four days. I was teamed up with Moe Benoit, and my sole role was to allow only refugees with visas to enter our temporary office.

My escort role came on 2 or 3 October (it has been nearly 50 years) and began with a somewhat harrowing but rewarding trip with busloads of refugees escorted by a vehicle with Canadian flags, possibly with visa officer Gerry Campbell.

Once we were on the aircraft with our passengers settled, I felt that two important messages were due. So, borrowing the microphone from the flight attendants, I made the following announcements. First, as the people on board had had numerous negative experiences with the Ugandan military, I wanted them to know that they should have no fear when meeting Canadian military personnel. Second, I told them that it would be much cooler on arrival in Canada and that they should get anything warm to wear out of their carry-on bags.

After dinner was cleared away, I kept myself busy with trips down the aisle, asking people questions about where they hoped to go in Canada, whom they might know, and what they hoped to do. I also replied to any questions they might have. On our stopover in Paris, passengers were not allowed off the aircraft. I would have been allowed but declined. The crew of our flight could not have been more sympathetic and helpful.

My lasting memory of arrival at Longue-Pointe was watching the military wrapping blankets around “my guys” as they left the plane. I can get a touch nostalgic with the thought that I was the first working immigration officer to escort a flight of Ugandan Asians to Canada.

## **Uganda Memories: A Midnight Drink with Idi Amin**

Jolène Beaupré

### **From Montreal to London and Rome**

Going to Uganda was my first flight out of the country. On our Air Canada flight from Montreal, a transit London-Rome flight attendant asked us ladies (myself, Ginette Leroux, and Mary Helen Hempel) if we were the team going to Uganda. We replied yes. She told us that the pilot wanted to meet us and brought us to the flight deck. After being introduced and a bit of chit chat with the pilot, we were given first class seats and served good drinks and good food. I felt like a VIP, and greatly appreciated Air Canada. Our stopover in Rome was pleasant, and staff from our Canadian embassy took good care of us. We visited the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel, the Colosseum, and Saint Peter’s Basilica. What a wonderful experience!

### **Arrival in Uganda**

I was very happy, finally arriving in Uganda at the Entebbe airport. What a beautiful country. I could not believe all the flowered trees and beautiful, lush scenery and orange earth. I worked long and hard hours for a good purpose with a really good team. I did not miss home since I felt comfortable helping thousands of exiles. I saw so many sad faces in line waiting to apply to come to Canada. Before handing out application forms at the counter, we asked basic questions. I remember asking a young newly married couple how many members were in their family, and they replied 43. I thought it was kind of funny. Their definition of family was quite different from our Canadian definition.

We had really good leadership with Roger St-Vincent and Mike Molloy, especially as we worked under strict deadlines and dangerous conditions in an unstable country.

### **Military Tank Parade**

For a while, every day an army parade slowly moved in front of our immigration office in the IPS Building. One day I was standing at a desk reading documents in front of the big window. All of a sudden, I noticed the turret barrel of the army tank start aiming towards us. I heard Roger St-Vincent scream to us “Everyone at the back and bend down”. I did not follow instructions but stayed put. I just stood there with my left leg shaking but remained calm and looked at the tank barrel gun move back to its front position. The parade kept on moving down the main drag. With not much post-drama stress, we all went back to work quickly. What a good efficient team we made, with no time to waste.

### **Squash Game**

One evening after dinner, a bunch of us agreed to go play squash at the golf club behind our hotel. It was late, and the club was closed. We could not access the squash courts, but we noticed that there was a small opening at the bottom of the barbed wire fence. Yeh!!! We could sneak in. Ginette Leroux, being really thin, went under the fence and opened the door to the club. I remember playing squash with someone who could speak Quebecois really fast. We pretended that Idi Amin’s face was on the front wall and we hit the ball as hard as possible. I really enjoyed playing squash that night even though I played barefoot—I did not have running shoes. On the way back, we noticed a security guard leaning on the wall of the hotel close to the back entry. He watched us go by with a smile and was not aggressive, thank God.



Presenting the first visa to Sami Marodali: Left to right: Roger St-Vincent, Officer in Charge, Kampala operation; Sami Marodali; Jolène Beaupré, visa typist; and Mike Molloy, head of the Selection Unit. (Courtesy: Canada Department of Manpower and Immigration)

## **Pool**

On a Sunday around 2:00 p.m., John McNeish, Veronica Clarke, and I decided to go to the hotel pool to relax. There were not many people around, but I noticed three young boys having fun in the pool; one was white with a British accent, one was an Asian, and one was black. What a beautiful picture to enjoy during a scary world around us because of crazy Idi Amin. Sadly, not too long after, soldiers with their weapons walked in to check out the scene. The beautiful young boys were scared and came out of the swimming pool. Thank God the soldiers turned around and left. Too bad the beautiful picture did not last a long time.

## **Cairo**

At the end of our work in Kampala we (Peggy Watson, Veronica Clark, H el ene Labelle, and I) stopped in Cairo. We were booked into two decent hotel rooms. Not too long after our arrival, we heard a knock on the door. A hotel staff politely requested that we move to other rooms. I replied that we were fine there. He insisted we take our luggage and follow him to the end of the hall. He opened the double doors that gave access to two double doors on each side, which he also opened and told us to enjoy the first-class rooms. I figure hotel management was thankful to us Canadians for helping out the Asian refugees escaping Uganda.

## **Idi Amin**

Some time ago, I watched a TV Ontario documentary on Idi Amin. It confirmed to me that I actually did meet and speak with Idi Amin Dada. One evening during our time in Kampala, we went up to the Leopard's Lair on the top floor of our hotel. A while after, I stepped out of the club and noticed there were stairs by the elevators going up to another floor. So being a curious person, I went to see what was up there. I slowly entered a dark room and could not see much. Down a short hallway on the right was a bit of light. I noticed a bartender and three tall African men at the bar. I thought perhaps they were hotel managers. The man in the middle greeted me, and we chatted a bit. A few minutes after, he shrugged his head ordering the two guys by his side to go to the back of the dark room. This is when I noticed two other men at the back standing with a very straight posture, as if they were security guards. They were not wearing military outfits but were dressed and looked exactly as Amin's security guards in the TV Ontario documentary. The man standing at the bar (Idi Amin) eventually asked if I wanted a drink, I hesitated but trying to be diplomatic said yes. The bartender served me the drink. Being careful I only took a very small sip. The man at the bar (Idi Amin) asked me if I was American and I replied "No, I'm not American", and he went on to say he did not like Americans. Being careful and playing it safe, I replied, "You are not the only one". All of a sudden, thank God, John McPhee showed up at the door to say that they were waiting for me downstairs. I said thank you and goodbye to that man at the bar and left the room.

## **Uganda Experience**

Ginette Leroux

I recently received an email from Mike Molloy about the upcoming 50th anniversary of Idi Amin's decree expelling the Ugandan Asian population. No wonder I'm getting old. Even though 50 years have gone by, I still remember it as being a pivotal moment in my life. Obviously some memories have faded, some I see differently than how they actually happened, while others I seem to remember vividly.

My experience in Uganda will obviously be very different from those being expelled. I can't imagine how that must have felt, but 50 years later we are seeing a similar scene in Ukraine, where people are again having to leave their homes due to a tyrant.

Mary-Ellen Hempel, Jol ene Beaupr e, James McMaster, and I worked in the Central Processing Office (CPO) in Ottawa and were responsible for providing immigration papers for applicants from the United States wanting to come to Canada. We were asked if we were interested in going to Uganda to work for a couple of months. None of us knew where Uganda was, so we looked at a world map. How exciting to be asked to travel to Africa to work! Our decision to go basically depleted the support staff from CPO, and a hiring process soon began to replace us.

The first thing we needed to do was get all the inoculations necessary to travel to Africa. Not a fun time. These shots were usually administered over a much longer time period. I remember getting two shots (one in each arm) on the same day, and that night I was not able to lift my arms.

Our flight to Africa was very long. It was my first time flying. Our first leg of the journey took us to Rome, where we met some of the personnel who worked in the Canadian immigration office. They took us sightseeing. We visited the Sistine Chapel, the Colosseum, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Trevi Fountain. What a wonderful experience! After a very full day, with no sleep because we could not sleep on the plane coming over, we were taken out to supper by these same kind

people. Our flight to Nairobi was to leave at midnight but it did not depart before 3:00 a.m. We could not even buy a cup of coffee at the terminal. I think we were the only people there. We all fell asleep on the plane and did not wake up until we got to Nairobi.

We wanted to get something to eat in Nairobi, but because none of us had much experience in travelling, we had not thought to get the local currency, so there was no supper that night. The next morning, we flew to Kampala. At last, we had arrived in Uganda. I remember all the beautiful greenery and the palm trees. Our summer was winding down in Ottawa, so I felt we got an extended summer that year.

We were scheduled to work at our Kampala office the next day. Mary-Ellen and Jolène were able to go, but I had severe jet lag. I was in my hotel room for three days. My kind co-workers were very concerned and eventually with the help of some much-needed food, I recovered and was ready to contribute.

Because I was out of commission those first three days, I did not participate in distributing the applications to those wanting to come to Canada, but I got first-hand accounts from Mary-Ellen and Jolène. It was fascinating how things were handled in the beginning.

We worked from early morning to around 7:00 p.m., six days a week with Sundays off, but we didn't mind. Those days were long but very rewarding. We worked well together. We all took advantage of a beautiful pool at the hotel. The sun was warm, and we were surrounded by such wonderful people.

There was also a place in the hotel where we could grab a quick bite after work and then head back to our respective rooms for a quiet night. On one such occasion, four of us were sitting at a booth each with a drink in our hands waiting to place our order. At the table across from us, a British journalist was sitting alone with papers spread out in front of him. Two police officers and one plain clothes officer came in, hauled him out of his chair, hit him in the stomach with the butt of a rifle, and dragged him away. I was stunned and then realized what a dangerous place we were in. We all lost our appetites, left our drinks, and went to our rooms. We never really talked more about this incident, because one thing we learned from Roger St-Vincent was never to talk about Idi Amin and the things we saw in public, even between ourselves. It was a taboo subject.



Mary Ellen Hempel (left) and Ginette Leroux (right), visa typists from the Central Processing Office in Ottawa, produced more than 6,000 visas in the Kampala office during the 60-day operation. (Courtesy: Canada, Department of Manpower and Immigration)

We were assigned an African driver called Denis, who would pick us up in the morning and drive us back to the hotel at night. Denis always seemed available when we needed him. I remember him driving us out in the countryside to visit certain landmarks. Apart from these little jaunts, a few of us went to Mombasa Beach during the Ugandan National Holiday. Roger St-Vincent was afraid that there might be trouble on that day, so he whisked some of us away for a weekend. It's not a place I will ever forget: apart from the white sand and the very long beach that seemed to go on for miles, a beautiful buffet awaited us. You have to remember that I was only 20 years old, and a hotel like this was way beyond my means. One thing, however, made us uncomfortable—on the night we arrived in Mombasa, our taxi driver criticized Idi Amin. He obviously did not agree with what Idi Amin was doing and felt comfortable talking about what was happening in Uganda, but we were in a different country and didn't engage.

Local residents, the Chima sisters, came to work at our office to provide secretarial support. Their father invited us to his house one Sunday and served us Indian food. He told us that he made it very mild for our palates, but it was still spicy. I still remember that Mr. Chima showed us how to wear a turban. He unwound his own and then showed us how he wrapped it on his head. It was fun to watch him adroitly put it back in place. Someone also showed us how to put on a sari. This family emigrated to Canada.

Our time in Uganda soon came to an end, but not our memories. The graciousness of Roger St-Vincent and Mike Molloy will never fade from my mind. Roger had a suite and would often invite us to congregate in his room. We never seemed to tire of each other's company. Some of us have kept in touch and fondly remember this momentous time in our lives.

Years later, when my five-year-old daughter was taking swimming lessons at the Nepean Sportsplex, I was sitting beside a woman. We started to talk, and for whatever reason the subject of Uganda came up. She had lived in Uganda and had applied to Canada during this time. It made me feel proud to have been part of this and to know that she had made a good life for herself here in Ottawa.

I want to thank Mike for giving me the opportunity to write down a few memories. As I said, I'm sure over time my memories have changed a bit, but I guess that is to be expected. I remember certain things one way, and my co-workers and friends may remember them differently. But in the end I have fond memories of my time in Uganda and with the special people I worked with. Roger is no longer with us, but we all carry his memory and feel proud to have known him.

## **Mother's Memories from 1972**

Rahim Meghji

*Ed. Note: The following article combines extracts from Rahim Meghji's emails to Mike Molloy, 29 August–6 September 2022.*

My mother and her family immigrated from Uganda in 1972. This weekend, I was wanting to find out some history on this migration and I came across your [lecture at Western University in 2012](#). I thoroughly enjoyed the account of what happened.

I wanted to drop you an email to thank you for all you and the team did in 1972 and thank you for telling the history.

I also wanted to give you some family stories from that time. My mother and her family arrived in Vancouver in late October 1972. They found an apartment. On 31 October, kids in costumes started knocking on the door. My mom and her family were terrified. They later found out what Hallowe'en was.

My mother clearly remembers that she and her aunt and uncle went to a Ugandan government passport office, where they were greeted by an intoxicated officer. The officer looked at my relatives' passports and said they were not Ugandan, stamped their passports with "cancelled", cut the corners off, gave their passports back, and said "Go, Britain will help you now". There was no review of records; it appeared very much to be an arbitrary decision by the officer. My mom said the whole experience was terrifying. When this happened, my mom was really upset and regretful that she had given up her British passport in favor of a Ugandan passport.

My mom's brother worked for an American multinational in Uganda which had suggested he move to Vancouver since they could use his skills in Canada. She with her siblings then proceeded to the IPS Building. In contrast with their experience at the Ugandan passport office, their visit to the Canadian office was greeted by professionalism. The Canadian immigration officer asked about their education and experience. The kindness and compassion demonstrated by the officers, combined with the warm reception on their arrival at the Longue-Pointe Canadian Forces Base, paved the way for her to be a proud Canadian.

## **From Kampala to Vancouver: A Unique Medical School Transfer**

Dr. Alnoor Abdulla, with foreword by Michael J. Molloy

### **Foreword**

The success of Canada's Kampala operation depended in part on the efforts of local Canadian and Ugandan Asian volunteers like nurse Heather Leighton, Nancy di Gregorio, and the Chima sisters. Some were paid, some not. Unknown even to Roger St-Vincent until the last minute was a Tanzanian Asian medical student, Alnoor Abdulla, who worked alongside the army medical technicians analyzing medical samples. (See [his article about St-Vincent](#) in CIHS Bulletin 95, which describes this experience.) Alnoor, who arrived in Canada with the Ugandan refugees but was classified as an independent immigrant and as such was ineligible for refugee settlement services, retired as a distinguished cardiologist.

Before World War I, Alnoor's grandparents travelled by dhow from Kutch in India's Gujarat province to east Africa and settled in the village of Mpwapwa in central German East Africa (later Tanzania), where they established a series of small shops. Mpwapwa, located in an arid region with few resources, was an important stop on the infamous slave and ivory route. Alnoor's father, Hassan, born in 1927, benefited from a formal education at the Aga Khan School in Dar es Salaam and worked for a law firm for several years. In 1950 Hassan married Roshan, the head mistress of the Bohra Shia Muslim school. Hassan and Roshan moved to Mpwapwa at his father's request to take advantage of growing economic

opportunities created by a lavishly resourced but ill-fated British agricultural scheme. Alnoor was born on 18 September 1951.

The family eventually set up its own business, living for eight years in a small three-room mud home, with a shop in the front, a kitchen-store room, and a single bedroom. With hard work, frugality, and a sharp eye for opportunity, by the end of the 1950s they had built a complex with two residences, a large store, and three small shops. Despite being active supporters of Tanzanian independence and President Julius Nyerere, they lost everything when socialist Tanzania began nationalizing Asian businesses and properties in the late 1960s.

Alnoor was sent to school in Dar es Salam, where he did very well. In 1969, the only medical school in East Africa was at Makerere University in Kampala, which took a total of 100 students a year from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Alnoor was one of 10 Tanzanian students accepted by the medical faculty.

### **Alnoor Abdulla's Story**

#### **Starting in Africa...**

On 25 January 1971, Uganda had a military coup, and General Idi Amin seized power. Deposed President Milton Obote took refuge in Tanzania with his good friend President Nyerere of Tanzania. Essentially Tanzania and Uganda entered into a "state of war". During the March school vacation from Makerere University in Kampala, I did not risk going home to my village in Tanzania, for fear of not being able to get back into Uganda. That vacation, our professor of anatomy gave me a job at the anatomy lab, creating cadaver models for teaching purposes. This hard work literally paid off here and again in the future. Later things simmered down at the border, and I was able to go home to visit my family in July and December 1971.

Given the situation, I tried to transfer to another medical school. Many universities responded to my request, but usually just rejected it or suggested applying to their medical school from the beginning through the usual admission process and clearly stating that there would be no financial assistance.

I left Makerere and took off to Tanzania in May 1972 to renew my passport. It was a major struggle, but I got the renewal until 1979. Tanzanian passports were normally only valid at that time for travel to specific countries (in my case, Uganda, for my studies), but I succeeded in having it made valid for travel to more countries, including Canada.

In July 1972, I went home for the vacation, and I recall the conversations with my family, mainly my mother. I got the feeling that she was not going to be able to hold on too long in that household. I worried about my four-and-a-half-year-old brother Rahim growing up in that environment. On 4 August 1972, Idi Amin came up with his infamous decree expelling all Asians from Uganda within 90 days. Now all Ugandan Asians were going to be scrambling to get out, and what would happen to me, a Tanzanian?

In October 1972, I started receiving some positive responses to my applications from reputable medical schools in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K., but I did not receive any definite acceptances. What seemed to have helped were the excellent results of my University of Cambridge and University of London A level exams and strong recommendations from the professors at Makerere Medical School. That stated, two large challenges had to be addressed: immigration and funding.

I had to get permission to immigrate to one of the three countries that gave me a favourable response. Everyone was scrambling to leave Uganda—all embassies and high commissions were flooded with refugee applications. Being a Tanzanian, I felt I did not stand a chance. I decided to concentrate on trying to get Canadian immigrant status.

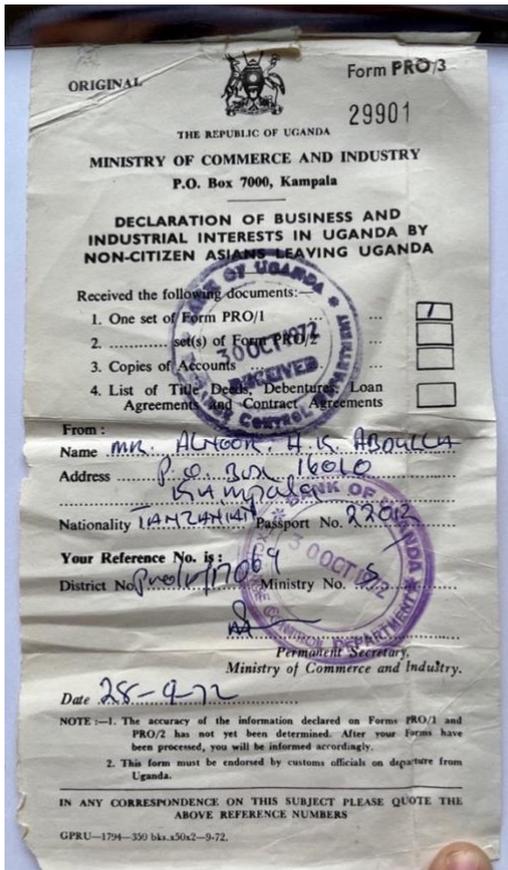
The Canadian high commission was processing hundreds of Ugandan applicants daily and simultaneously getting their medical examinations done. I volunteered to help at the medical laboratory, supported by letters from my professors at Makerere. I was competent at doing stool and urine checks for ova and parasites, having completed my microbiology/pathology requirement. In mid-September, I stopped attending classes and started working full time at the high commission's medical laboratory, where the Canadian staff were very pleased with my work.

In October, I got positive letters from the Universities of Alberta and Western Ontario. Then came the definitive acceptance letter from the University of British Columbia (UBC). I could not believe it! The acceptance letter, however, unequivocally stated that there would be no financial assistance or funding. I quickly made sure that all the Canadian medical team members knew that I had been accepted by UBC's medical school, though I was still not able to get an application form or interview for immigration. I was Tanzanian—they had their hands full trying to deal with Ugandan refugees.

Towards the later part of October, the grace of Allah fell upon me. On this “never will I ever forget” evening at around 5:00 p.m., while still working in the medical laboratory, I was summoned to go upstairs. The “big man” (Roger St-Vincent) wanted to see me in his office. He told me that he had heard good things about me from the medical staff and knew that I already had medical school acceptance at UBC. He asked me about my family, my ability to fund my education, where I would go, etc. I told him that I was alone in Uganda; I had no funds; my family had no resources abroad; and I did not have any relatives abroad who could assist me financially. I said that if I was allowed to immigrate to Canada, it would turn out to be good for Canada as well. As for how I would support myself, although I had no resources—I emphasized that I did not expect to get anything handed to me—I would work very hard and repay in full whatever assistance I got.



This image shows a passport page with examples of the forms and stamps needed to leave Uganda in 1972: (clockwise from upper right) the author’s National Bank of Commerce (Tanzania) stamps for educational travel allowance for study in Uganda, the Uganda Commercial Bank stamp, the important Tax Clearance Certificate, dated 13 October 1972, and the Bank of Uganda Exchange Control Department Stamp of 27 October 1972. (Courtesy: Alnoor Abdulla)



This is Alnoor Abdulla’s copy of his “Declaration of Business and Industrial Interests in Uganda by Non-citizen Asians Leaving Uganda” form, which was stamped on 30 October 1972.

As he sat there expressionless listening to me, I could not tell what he thought. He looked at me and then flatly stated that he would give me “landed immigrant status”. I was shocked! I think my heart and breath stopped momentarily. I already had a direct transfer into a Canadian medical school with more than full credit in the subjects I had completed at Makerere, and now I had official permanent residence immigrant status in Canada!!

He asked me if I was ready to fly out. In a daze I said yes. He said I would have to leave on 31 October. That “big man”, Roger St-Vincent, the “guardian angel”, gave me a new life in my new country Canada, that I could call home.

I had been getting prepared. I had already applied for my “Uganda Tax clearance certificate” on 13 October 1972, and the Bank of Uganda approved it on 27 October. I had filed my “Declaration of assets for Non-citizen Asians leaving Uganda” on 28 September with the Bank of Uganda, even though I had no assets. I got it on 30 October. I had saved some Ugandan money and got it converted to US \$140 at the Uganda Commercial Bank on 28 October. I did not want to carry

the money with me for fear that we would be searched at the Ugandan army check points on the way to the airport. I had become friends with a Canadian medic at the medical laboratory. I gave him my American money and he gave me his address, so that when I got to Canada I could write, and he would send me my money. I am sad to say that he never answered my letters.

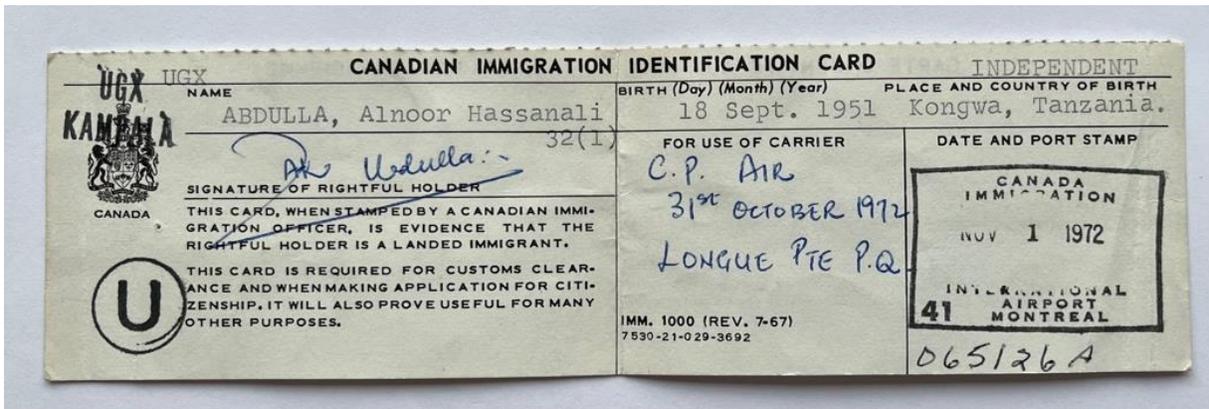
At 7:00 a.m. on 31 October 1972, I was at the rendezvous spot behind the Apollo Hotel, where the Canadian high commission bus picked us up and took us to the airport. We passed multiple army check points on the way. I was terrified as a Tanzanian, but I had no possessions or money with me that that would interest any officers at the check points. We made it to the airport, and we took off in the Canadian government-chartered Canadian Pacific flight to Canada.

### ...Arriving in Canada

That flight from Entebbe on 31 October 1972 was full of Asian refugees. I was the only one who was not Ugandan. The plane stopped at Madrid for re-fueling and we were allowed to get off and walk around. I sent an unsigned post card to my parents to let them know I was alive and "on my way".

That same Hallowe'en night, after landing in Montreal, we were taken to the Longue-Pointe military base, where we were received by military personnel. I remember the trepidation of many of our older people coming off the flight and being led away by soldiers. We had just escaped soldiers in Uganda who were looting, raping, and killing everyone, and now we were in the hospitality of these Canadian soldiers.

The next morning, we were processed at big aircraft hangar triage centre. I was alone, designated as "Independent" on my Canadian ID card, not Ugandan but Tanzanian, and I wanted to go to university. I had no funds and no family resources. I was shuffled from one immigration officer to another. After a difficult day, the frustrated senior official decided that Manpower and Immigration Canada would fly me to Vancouver in a commercial flight, give me temporary accommodation like the other refugees, and then it was up to the immigration officers in Vancouver to sort out the matter. The Immigration department would issue me a loan for the cost of the flight and give me an overcoat/raincoat, umbrella, and ten dollars. I repaid that loan within my first year in Canada.



The author's Canadian Immigration Identification Card, showing that he became a permanent resident of Canada on 1 November 1972, at Montreal International Airport. The "UGX" typed and stamped in the upper left corner was the code assigned by Immigration Canada to its temporary visa processing office in Kampala. (Courtesy: Alnoor Abdulla)

That same day, 1 November 1972, I flew to Vancouver with about 20 Ugandan Asian refugees on a commercial flight. At Vancouver airport, the Canada immigration people were there to receive the refugees, and I was allocated my promised "transit" accommodation at the Gifford Hotel, which was behind the famous Sylvia Hotel at English Bay.

The next morning, the hotel clerk explained to me how to get to the Immigration office. I walked with my papers, flimsy rain/winter coat, umbrella, and ten dollars in my pocket. It was wet, and the cold bit into me. I negotiated my way to the Manpower Centre on Howe Street, which was very busy with so many Ugandans there, working out their accommodations and getting their allowances. I immediately got the now-familiar refrain of, "Not a Ugandan, no family, no resources, no sponsor, not agreeing to look for work, and wanting to go to university".

Then I heard “Alnoor, Alnoor” being called from the other side of the counter. I look over and it was Mrs. Elizabeth Strong, a Canada Manpower official who had come to Kampala towards the end of the exodus and met me working in the Canadian medical department. She took me aside, and I explained my situation. She authorized temporary accommodation at that same Gifford Hotel and a weekly single-person allowance until I got my finances arranged. My second Canadian “guardian angel”. Alhamdulillah—another step forward!

The following day, on 2 November 1972, I arrived at the UBC campus, found my way to the medicine department, and looked for Dr. Graham, the associate dean who had sent me the letter of acceptance. When I found him, the conversation went somewhat like this, “Oh you are here. We have been expecting you, and we have decided to give you credit for all your training”. He suggested that I would start off in the third-year class. I was not sure if I would make it, starting in a new country, new medical system, part way through the year. He acknowledged my concern and said they would reconsider that. Ultimately, I began in second year. The conversation then switched to my finances. I told him that I did not have any funds to pay the fees, and I had only temporary accommodation at the hotel downtown. He looked pretty grim. Somewhat unhappy, he asked me to go and meet with UBC’s president. He would let him know that I was coming.

When I met with the president, Dr. Walter Gage (a large, fatherly, softspoken man), he asked me a little bit about myself, and I related my situation to him. I asked for financial support until November the following year, when I could get a student loan. He looked at me silently and smiled. Dr. Gage—my third Canadian “guardian angel”—made a couple of phone calls and explained to me the plan. He would reach into funds accessible personally to him as UBC president, which would go towards my tuition fees as a loan. The university would get me a place in residence on campus. To pay for my residence fees, I would have to work part time during the school year. He told me go to the pathology department and meet Dr. Hardwick. I did not even realize at that time that I had not eaten or had anything to drink since the flight from Montreal.

Dr. Hardwick was a tall, distinguished man. He explained to me about the only job he had for me and the arrangements. I would work after classes at night at the Vancouver General Hospital (VGH) morgue. He would take me there and show me what to do.

I took the number 10 bus back downtown and walked to my hotel. I was hungry. The gentleman at the desk told me the cheapest place to eat was McDonald’s. I had to make my ten dollars last till the end of the week, so my routine became one meal a day at McDonald’s: a regular hamburger for twenty-five cents and a hot chocolate for ten cents.

Dr. Hardwick took me to the pathology department at VGH, introduced me to the morgue staff, and had them explain to me how and what was to be done. I worked weeknights and weekends all through that academic year. I had to dissect one or two bodies to get them ready for the autopsy assessment by the pathologist the next day. Weeknights, I would have to finish my work by 11:30 at the latest, then take the Broadway bus to Broadway and Granville (and wait in that cold that I had never experienced before) and transfer to the last number 10 UBC bus just before midnight. The bus drivers got to know me. I slept in the last long seat, and they would wake me up when we got to UBC. I would then walk across the campus to my residence in that cold at around 12:30–1:00 a.m.

I worked extremely hard that year. I do not know how I studied or got my assignments done. I believe the solid foundational education at Makerere Medical School and the knowledge from my work in the morgue allowed me to not only manage but do well at my studies. I actually won two awards at UBC that year!

### **...And my First Canadian Summer Job**

Canex Placer, a mining company, was exploring for lead and zinc in the Northwest Territories (NWT), and I had a summer job as a first aid attendant. We flew to Watson Lake in the Yukon in early June, then took a ski plane to the middle of nowhere in the NWT, where there was still snow.

The camp consisted of several large tents, a kitchen trailer, and an eating area. Here I was, the only colored person. I did not eat pork, did not drink alcohol, and did not gamble. I did not look, talk, or swear like the others and was completely a fish out of water. I had not been in Canada for even a year. We slept on single cots in tents of six people, with one oil heater in the middle of the tent.

The mining operation was organized into two 12-hour shifts a day. The geologist and miners would be dropped off by helicopter on different ridges in the surrounding area. They would drill a 10-20-foot-long core from the rock and mark the spot to identify its location. The core of rock would be pulverized and then sent as powder by helicopter to Watson Lake, and from there flown to Vancouver, where it was analyzed for concentrations of lead and zinc. Seven to ten days later,

they would learn which specific spots had high concentrations of the minerals and could determine if it would be cost effective to “stake it” as their property.

My job as a first aid attendant was pretty mundane— treating cuts, sprains, a dislocated shoulder, and one bad ankle fracture. I had time on my hands. The helicopter pilot was an overweight, beer-drinking, bigoted, horrible man. Very soon it became clear to everyone that I had very good gun-handling skills, was a great shot, and had no fear. When I beat the helicopter pilot during the long-range rifle-shooting contests, I earned many protectors/friends.

After two or three weeks, I told the camp boss I could speed up their whole operation and save them a lot of money. I explained that I could tell him the lead/zinc ore concentration at the camp the same day. I asked him for the supplies I needed: a light meter, small circular metal rings, cellophane paper, graph paper, pencils, and multiple small samples of pulverized ore with accurately known concentrations of lead and zinc.

The principle was that the higher the heavy metal concentration, the less light would get through and be detected by the light meter.

I tested all the known samples of lead and zinc and charted the results on the graph paper. I started analyzing our ore and predicting the concentrations on the same day. I was very close to the results from Vancouver. After two such runs, they essentially started accepting my analysis. I was able to tell them the “hot locations to stake” the same day versus

seven to ten days after the results went to Vancouver, thus speeding up the camp’s operation. The amount of land staked was almost twice what they had expected. I got a double salary for the three months. I deposited all the money in my bank account in Vancouver, as I did not need a cent there—no alcohol, no gambling, guns and free bullets, excellent food, and the helicopter pilot off my back. Also, I was now learning to swear like the French-Canadian miners, and they loved it.



L-R: An English geologist who had come to Canada to work for the summer, and Alnoor Abdulla, outside their shared tent at the mining camp. As they had both studied in the English system Abdulla’s vocabulary and expressions were familiar to the geologist. (Courtesy: Alnoor Abdulla)

## **From Nightmares to Dreams: A Family’s Journey Through the Ugandan Exodus**

Jessie Chima

It was the evening of 5 August 1972; we were on our way back to Uganda, to our home. My sister and I had just spent two years studying in London, England, and we were going back for a brief holiday. It was while we were awaiting check-in at Heathrow Airport that we had heard of some problems brewing in Uganda. President Idi Amin had just announced the expulsion of all Asians within ninety days. Our friends at the airport suggested we contact our parents before leaving England but the excitement of going home was too much and we felt it was best we carry on.

We arrived at Entebbe Airport in the early hours of the morning of 6 August 1972. I admit, we were a little concerned, but returning home after two years seemed to take all the tension away. After waiting for almost an hour, there was no sight of our baggage. We were told it had not arrived and we would have to look for our bags when the next flight from London arrived. Little did we know that our baggage would never be found.

Finally, we were home and thrilled to be with our family. As the days passed by, the reality of having to leave Uganda one last time, the reality of leaving our home, started to sink in. Although everyone kept hoping that this was not going to be permanent or real, each day brought a new, horrific experience. People started to panic and families started to prepare for departure.

The Canadian immigration team arrived and those interested, such as ourselves, applied for residence in Canada.

It was around 10 September that we received a call from Roger St-Vincent, team leader for the Canadian immigration authorities. He informed us that he had gone through our application for immigration to Canada, and had noticed that we had just returned from England. He asked us if we would be interested in working with the team for a short duration before leaving Uganda. We discussed this proposition with our father, who was more than eager for us to work for them.

So started our short but very interesting career with the Canadian immigration team in Kampala. My sister, Sudarshan, was to help in the medical section and I would work in the visa section. That same afternoon, we were interviewed by Mr. Mike Molloy and were told that we had met the criteria for immigration selection. We were, however, asked if we could possibly stay on and work until the end of the three-month deadline. We both agreed, as we enjoyed our days with the Canadian immigration team and made many new friends.

Meanwhile, people encountered all sorts of problems with the police and being harassed by them became a way of life in the last few days in the country. It was during my drive home at lunchtime one day that my car stalled at the traffic lights. Before I could start my car and go on, a couple of military police chaps appeared at my window. They asked for my license (which, of course, I produced) and I was then asked to follow them to the police station. I was extremely afraid by then and did not know what was to happen to me next. The short drive to the station seemed never-ending. Fortunately, upon arrival at the station, I saw a good friend of my father. I was in tears by then. He came and consoled me and said I needn't worry and he'd sort it out with them. This experience left me really shaken and unable to drive myself home. I was thus driven by my father's friend. From that day we never drove alone in Kampala.

Work at the immigration office was very well organized. Lines of clients were getting longer each day, and people's frustration started to show. On one particular day, two individuals got into a very heated argument at the door, and eventually an immigration officer had to intervene. Although one was blacklisted for having caused a disturbance, he finally got his visa for entry to Canada. It was only after arrival here that we realized that this same man was a very good friend of my father and became a well-established lawyer in Mississauga. My short but very keen interest in the immigration system left a mark in my mind and led me to pursue a career in this field upon arrival in Canada.

Everything seemed to run very smoothly in the office's everyday operations, though, mind you, I was only a small spoke in the wheel. At home, however, things were not that smooth. An unexpected visitor arrived one morning at our gate and asked for our father. He showed us papers which seemingly authorized him to take over our property and all our belongings. Not easily flustered, my father calmly detained him and contacted the security forces. Upon arrival, they checked out this imposter and took him to the police station. He was questioned thoroughly and later shot in the presence of my father. This experience, once again, had us all shaken and ready to leave. My father feared that we might be in danger due to this incident, and although we agreed to stay for another two weeks, things were pretty rough in the city.

As we prepared to leave the country, a poolside dinner party was held at the Apollo Hotel to celebrate the hard work of all the staff and volunteers from the Canadian immigration team. It was at this time that our father invited Roger St-Vincent and the rest of the immigration team to dinner at our house, as he wished to thank those who had come to our aid. The dinner was lovely, and it was one of the final few celebrations we were able to have in our home.

We left Uganda just two weeks before the deadline given by Idi Amin. Our journey took us first into Kenya, followed by a three-month trip to India. We had never seen that part of the world and thus it was a very interesting and enjoyable trip, although the circumstances that brought us there were not the best. From India we flew to England and then on to Canada; a new life, a new beginning and a new home awaited us there. Canada has been a haven for all of us. It provided us with many opportunities, and today as I desired, I work for the Canada Border Services Agency and thoroughly enjoy my career with them. Our family came to this country as refugees, but with hard work and determination, we have been successful in our family-run business and in our daily lives. What began as a nightmare turned out to be a wonderful dream here in our home in Canada.

## **Britain Celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the Arrival of the Ugandan Asians**

Michael J. Molloy

Fifty years ago, on 18 September 1972, the first evacuation flight of Asians fleeing Uganda landed at London's Stansted Airport. A few weeks earlier, on 4 August 1972, Ugandan dictator General Idi Amin had served 90 days' notice to about 70,000 Asians to leave the country. Each family was permitted to take only £55 and one suitcase per individual. Some 28,200 who held British passports were admitted to the U.K.

The British government set up the Uganda Resettlement Board to find accommodation for those unable to make private arrangements and to assist the expellees to find permanent homes, jobs, and school places. Sixteen temporary resettlement camps around the country were set up and staffed in just six weeks. This imperfect yet extraordinary feat of cooperation between central and local governments, the uniformed services, 63 voluntary sector organisations, and private volunteers has strong contemporary relevance.

Fifty years on, British Asians from Uganda have excelled in many fields, from business and finance to politics, science, and the arts, integrating successfully and contributing to British society in many ways. “British Ugandan Asians at 50” (BUA50) is a program of the India Overseas Trust designed to mark this significant milestone. The Trust previously led on national commemorations of the 25th and 40th anniversaries. [BUA50](#) is pleased to be supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The program has a number of strands:

- *Recording, on film, the oral histories of people who volunteered to help with the reception of Asians from Uganda during the crucial early months after their arrival in the U.K.* Although the history of the expulsion is well known, the stories of volunteers who came forward in their thousands to help them in their hour of need have never been recorded before. BUA50 has focused on three of the board’s resettlement camps: Tonfanau in Wales, Stradishall in Suffolk, and Heathfield in Devon. Surviving evacuees and leaders of the Ugandan Asian community have also been interviewed.
- *Bringing together a wealth of period photographs, artifacts, and documents into a touring exhibition.* This can be viewed by the public for free between July 2023 and September 2023 at locations that include Leicester, Peterborough, Suffolk, West London, Coventry, North Wales, Devon, and North London.
- *Arranging events, including four panel discussions featuring distinguished speakers on Ugandan Asian themes, and a national service of commemoration at St Paul’s Cathedral in 2023.*
- *Collecting images of over 300 period documents from the National Archives and other sources, and presenting these on the BUA50 website as a long-term resource for students of the expulsion.*
- *Archiving the documents, video footage, and other materials at the Living Refugee Archive as a resource for future generations.* Video footage relating to Tonfanau camp in Wales will also be archived with People’s Collection Wales, a program of the National Library of Wales.

The BUA50 team has reached out to the organizers of Carleton University’s “Beyond Resettlement: Exploring the History of the Uganda Asians in Exile” Conference (15 November 2022) and plans to participate. Former CIHS president Mike Molloy gave a talk about Canada’s Ugandan Asian program to the British organization in London on 20 June 2022.

## **More Readings and Materials on the Ugandan Asian Expulsion**

### **Primary Sources**

*The Uganda Collection (2015)*, Carleton University Archives and Research Collections.  
<https://arc.library.Carleton.ca/exhibits/uganda> Note: this is Canada’s largest online collection of documents and oral histories on the Ugandan Asian movement.

### **Memoirs**

Jaffer, Jalal (2022). *Memories of a Ugandan Refugee*, Friesen Press. Altona, Manitoba.

St-Vincent, Roger (1973). *Seven Crested Cranes: Asian Exodus from Uganda: The Role of Canada’s Mission to Kampala*. 40th anniversary Issue. Ottawa: The Canadian Immigration Historical Society.

St-Vincent kept a daily log while managing the Kampala operation and wrote *Seven Crested Cranes* based on it shortly thereafter. A later, richly illustrated version can be accessed at <https://carleton.ca/uganda-collection/seven-crested-cranes-roger-st-vincent/>

Molloy, Michael (2021). "The Ugandan Asian Expulsion. A Personal Memoir" in *Finding Refuge in Canada*, ed. George Melnyk and Christina Parker, Edmonton: Athabasca University Press. <https://read.aupress.ca/read/finding-refuge-in-canada/section/75b6e899-fe1c-4cfb-a8df-0bcf50a4d6c3>. Accessed 2022-09-22.

Molloy, Michael (2012-10-31). *40th Anniversary Lecture: Uganda Asian Refugee Movement*. University of Western Ontario's Migration and Ethnic Relations and Pathways to Prosperity YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtQPKNhxyM>. Accessed 2022-09-03.

**Histories**

Herbert, Joanne (2012). *The British Ugandan Asian Diaspora: Multiple and Contested Belongings*. Global Networks12, no.3 (2012), pp 296-317.

Muhammedi, Shezan (2022). *Gifts From Amin: Ugandan Asian Refugees in Canada*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, September 2022.

**Novels**

Shah, Neema (2021). *Kololo Hill*. London: Picador, 2021.

Jamal, Tasneem (2018). *Where the Air Is Sweet*. Toronto: Harper Collins.

Zayyan, Hafsa (2021). *We Are All Birds of Uganda*. London: Merky Books.

Althaie, Tina (2019). *Orange for the Sunsets*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books.



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