‘Can you feel it? This is Uganda.’ 50 years after fleeing Idi Amin, my family sees home on our own terms

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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My parents were among the thousands of Ugandan Asians driven from home, then welcomed by Canada, in the 1970s. This year, my family went back to explore the places they left behind – and appreciate the future they made for us

Fifty years ago, my mother and father were forced from the only home they’d ever known by a ruthless dictator who robbed their families of virtually everything they ever had. Yet I never could have anticipated the torrent of emotion I experienced as my mother, my sister and I prepared for the journey to my mother’s hometown in Nabusanke, Uganda, this past July – a return I’ve wanted to document for the past decade. My father had also long wanted to make the trip, but he passed away in 2015.

In some ways, I felt that by going to Uganda I was about to confront the thief responsible for my family’s trauma. But Idi Amin died in 2003. This trip was never about “closure.” Not for my mother. And not for me. It’s a term that has always struck me as somewhat trite, anyway. One doesn’t “get over” an experience like that. It becomes part of you and transforms you. For me, the trip was about reconnecting with my roots.

My parents were among as many as 80,000 Ugandan Asians who were expelled by Mr. Amin in August in 1972. His brutal regime killed thousands. Asians had first arrived and settled in Uganda at the beginning of the 20th century, and he vowed to reclaim the country’s economy for Black Ugandans. He gave my parents and every other Ugandan Asian a mere 90 days to leave the country. In many ways, my parents’ story is representative of the Canadian story – one of flight, and of finding a new home. And yet

the expulsion of Ugandan Asians, as well as its impact on Canada and its immigration system, remains a story largely untold.

Soon after arriving at Entebbe International airport, just outside Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, I was slapped with a harsh and uncomfortable truth: that the idyllic memories of this land with its warm breezes, lush green hills and simple way of life – all the memories my parents shared with my sister and me as a child – would be challenged every second of this trip.

“Omar, nothing looks familiar,” my mother told me with a heavy sigh as she stepped foot in the country of her birth for the first time in half a century. “Everything has changed. I just don’t recognize anything.”

It was 3 a.m., after 30 hours of travel with my mother, Salma, and my sister, Nafilia. The combination of jetlag and my mother’s bewilderment left us all slightly disoriented.

But although nothing looked the same, the way a place once made you feel never really leaves you. As we made our way across the parking lot to meet our driver, my mother said to us, “Do you smell the air? Can you feel it? This is Uganda.”

In October, 1972, my mother, a second-generation Ugandan, and her family were forced to flee from this very same airport, even though they were all born in Uganda.

Her return was motivated by a sense of curiosity, and a reoccurring dream in which she keeps running up and down the central dirt road of her birth village. But mostly, she was inspired by a desire to guide my sister and me on a journey to bear witness to our history and what thousands of other Ugandan Asians surmounted, thanks to their faith, resilience and Canada’s generosity. For my mother, agreeing to the trip may have been an act of quiet defiance, too. Before we made the journey to Uganda she told me: “At least this time when I leave, I can do it on my own terms.”

Omar Sachedina visits Jinja, a town that many Ugandan Asian families have returned to since the upheaval of the Amin era. Mr. Sachedina's great-grandparents were among the generations of Indians who came to live in Uganda when both places were colonies of the British Empire.
STILL FROM EXPELLED: MY ROOTS IN UGANDA, COURTESY CTV

In a span of three generations, my family has settled on four continents: Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. In the late 1800s, around the same time Europeans were coming to North America in search of a brighter future, there was another migration happening between India and Africa – a wave that brought my great-grandparents across the Indian Ocean from Kutch, a district in the state of Gujarat, in northwestern India, in search of a better life. Thousands of Indian families undertook a similar journey.

The colonial influence – they were British subjects – made the transition smoother. They were encouraged to make the voyage to Africa to settle, set up shops and embrace new opportunities. Some went to South Africa, others to Kenya and Uganda and Tanzania, among other countries. This move proved to be enormously successful for many of them.

Even more Indians came to Africa with the promise of work when the British, in 1890, began construction on a 1,000-kilometre railway across East Africa, which would eventually stretch into Uganda. The work was dangerous and cost many people their lives.

But along with a critical piece of infrastructure that would help transport goods from the coast of the continent inland, the British built something else: a hierarchical system that best benefited them. They were at the top, and used Indians to achieve their economic objectives. Indians, in turn, used native Ugandan Africans as cheap labour to achieve theirs. And although there are examples of Indian generosity, the predominant sentiment was that the relationship was exploitative. Mr. Amin accused Asians of "milking the cow, but not feeding it." The community was largely siloed, and had limited integration with Black Ugandans.

This was a major factor that contributed to the expulsion declared by Mr. Amin, a largely uneducated soldier who had risen through military ranks before eventually staging a coup against President Milton Obote in 1971.

Mr. Amin, known to be both charismatic and cunning, ruled by fear and intimidation – and thousands of those who opposed him died at the hands of his soldiers or Mr. Amin himself. During Mr. Amin's leadership, between 1971 and 1978, he was responsible for the murders of roughly 500,000 people.

Idi Amin at a summit in Khartoum in 1978, a few months before his fall from power.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A populist, Mr. Amin pledged to give back economic and political control to native Ugandan Africans. By the early 1970s, Ugandan Asians – who represented just 1 per cent of the population – ran the vast majority of businesses, and Mr. Amin "accused the Asian community of economic sabotage, of a failure to integrate socially," says Shezan Muhammedi, a policy analyst with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and author of a book about the expulsion, Gifts from Amin.

Mr. Amin is said to have had a dream that inspired him to expel all Asians in the country. He made it into a reality on Aug. 4, 1972, giving them 90 days to pack their bags and leave. Those who refused to leave the country would "be sitting like they are sitting on the fire," he said. "I think they will not sit comfortable here in Uganda, I will tell you this."

"The first time I heard the news was on the television," my mother told me. "We didn't pay much attention to this because we thought it was probably just a joke." Mr. Amin, she thought, would surely change his mind and not take such a drastic step, one with such sweeping consequences. "But after a few weeks, the reality sank in, and we only had a few weeks where we had to pack everything and leave Uganda."

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau gives a news conference in 1972 to announce an upcoming federal election.
CHARLES MITCHELL/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Canada in 1972 was a very different place than it is today. Opening our doors to immigrants and refugees was relatively new. While a point system was introduced in 1967 to prioritize attracting a diversity of applicants from around the world, immigration was still seen as a mainly European phenomenon. Before 1972 there were only 50,000 Indians in all of Canada – less than a quarter of 1 per cent. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, coming to the end of his first term as Prime Minister, was in the middle of an election campaign against Robert Stanfield's Progressive Conservatives. The race was one of the closest in Canadian political history, and the Prime Minister saw an opportunity. On Aug. 24, after diplomatic attempts at convincing Mr. Amin to reverse his decision had failed, Mr. Trudeau announced that he had decided to give a home in Canada to those who were losing theirs in Uganda, pledging "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." While Mr. Trudeau lost his majority in the 1972 election, Canada gained something else: the beginning of a reputation as an open, tolerant country, and a place that was welcoming of immigrants.

"I think that the general principle of Canada helping people in need and distress is accepted by all Canadians," Mr. Trudeau said at the time.

It's one thing to want to offer help, it's another thing to actually do it. The logistics of processing so many visas, and getting people out of Uganda quickly and safely with a ticket to Canada, was largely due to a tireless team of civil servants, one of whom was a 28-year-old visa officer, Michael Molloy, who arrived in Kampala in September, 1972. "We didn't have any doubts in our mind that, if we didn't get as many as we could out of the country, the people who [we] left behind were going to be in serious danger," Mr. Molloy told me when I met with him in his Ottawa home. "We certainly felt that these people had a damn good reason to get out of there. For us, the question was, of these large number of people, who should we be taking?"

By September of 1972, makeshift visa offices were set up and, on the first day they opened, lines wrapped around the Kampala streets for five blocks. Looking at the numbers alone, it's hard to dispute that what Mr. Molloy and Canadian officials did in Kampala in the fall of 1972 was impressive.

6,175 visas processed in 60 days.

31 chartered flights.

4,420 people safely landed in Canada by Nov. 18, 1972.

Nearly 2,000 more would continue to arrive in the weeks and months to follow.

"There was discomfort in some parts of Canada about: why would we open the doors like this?" Mr. Molloy told me. "I think Trudeau saw it as a kind of a teaching moment."

In total, more than 6,000 people came to Canada that fall, including my father, Nizar, and his uncles and cousins. They arrived at CFB Longue Pointe in Quebec and they were

given warm coats and warm food, and a place to stay, while officials helped them determine where they might settle and if they needed another flight. It was a massive operation and the first major wave of non-European immigrants to this country.

Not only was it one of the fastest turnarounds of visas in Canadian history, but it contributed to an emerging immigration model in this country. After the Ugandan Asian expulsion, Canada welcomed another 21,456 Asians between 1973 and 1978 from other African nations such as Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zaire. These Asians hadn't been kicked out of their countries but were so rocked by Mr. Amin's act in Uganda that they looked for a safe haven elsewhere. Around that time, Canada also welcomed over 18,000 more immigrants and refugees from other countries such as Chile, Argentina, Cyprus – and more than half of these newcomers were Indochinese from Vietnam that came between 1975 and 1978. Another 2,100 came from Angola and Mozambique. The 1970s represented a watershed era in Canadian immigration history.

"The trauma of losing your country, the place that you regarded as your home, the place that you were working to help develop, is like losing a member of your family," said Mr. Molloy, who later served as ambassador to Jordan, among other postings. The work he and his colleagues undertook in Uganda will be felt for generations. They literally changed – and probably saved – thousands of lives.

The Canadian
INDIA TIMES

Ugandan Asian families receive food, child care and a special-edition newspaper (with a welcoming message from Pierre Trudeau) in October, 1972, at a military base in Longue-Pointe, Que.

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

My mother and father left on separate planes but were bound by the same experience.

My mother still vividly remembers the military checkpoints and the sound of gunfire as she made her way with her family to Entebbe airport in October, 1972. Her family, who had British citizenship, first settled in a small English town near Birmingham called Tamworth before moving to London. She later came to Canada – first Toronto and then across the country, to British Columbia. Once there, she lived in the YMCA in Vancouver, and worked in the mailroom at the Vancouver General Hospital, eventually becoming a secretary. She still recalls the culture shock of arriving in a strange city: "People looked at you with just a different face and it took me some time to get adjusted to it," she said. "It was challenging. But pretty soon I got used to it."

My father's family had Ugandan citizenship, but like many other Ugandans of Indian descent, Mr. Amin revoked that citizenship, which rendered my father's family stateless. He arrived in Montreal in November, 1972. I remember him jokingly telling me that the pre-winter experience in that city was enough to immediately push them as far west as possible, which is how he ended up in British Columbia.

Omar Sachedina's father in Uganda, with two of his sisters.
COURTESY OF OMAR SACHEDINA

When my mother's grandfather died, in 1977, she went to Victoria for his funeral. My father was at the funeral, too, and, on the ferry ride back to Vancouver, caught her eye – they recognized each other from back in Uganda, and now here they were meeting in a new country on the other side of the world. They were married in 1981, and I came along in 1982.

When I was growing up in the Vancouver suburb of Port Moody, the summers there brought back a flood of memories for my parents. I remember them talking about how the West Coast climate took them back to a previous life.

"Mukhe Uganda yaad acheto," they would say in Kutchi. "I'm remembering Uganda."

Dinners were often a delicious mix of Indian staples along with Western dishes, but also Ugandan ones like matoke. And on Sunday mornings, African beats would echo throughout our house, along with Indian classics from the "Old is Gold" collection, and English songs. Retaining those cultural influences was important to them, but not something they did by design: It was probably something that brought them a sense of peace and comfort.
What was concerted was an emphasis on service, compassion and education. My parents always told my sister and me – no doubt because of their own experiences with the expulsion – that even when circumstances can rob you of everything material, nothing can take away your education and humanity.

But when it came to the specific details of the expulsion – Mr. Amin's decree, leaving everything behind, the journey to the airport – those stories were always more difficult to tease out. As I got older, my curiosity compelled me to ask more questions. I am still not convinced my parents have told me everything they saw and endured. I suppose a parent always wants to protect their children from the horrors of history – especially if they experienced them first-hand.

But their reticence and restraint – intentional or not – provoked a deep desire in me to fill the gaps of my own history, and served as the catalyst to me eventually becoming a journalist. Researching the missing links in books, archives and testimonies of the living ultimately allowed me to connect with myself. But in order to do that, I had to embark on a self-directed journey to acquaint myself with a dictator who epitomized evil – a journey that ultimately took me on a historical path that showed me humanity's light. I've always been struck by the complexity of human nature, and the depth of fortitude that people show in their darkest moments. Whether it's natural disasters, political upheavals or personal crises, I'm always inspired by how people get back up and push forward with the help of those around them.

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Mr. Sachedina reflects on his journey at Makarere University in Kampala. He says coming to Uganda helped him to understand what his parents left behind, and feel grateful that they built new lives for themselves and their children.
COURTESY OF SHELLEY AYRES

I don't think I could have ever anticipated the psychological dislocation of returning to a place once considered "home," even if I had never lived there myself.

On the day we planned to search for my mom's home in Nabusanke and my father's home in Masaka, I felt the weight of what this journey meant. This trip was not only to rediscover good memories, but to make peace with what happened 50 years ago, an abrupt upheaval at a formative time in my parents' lives.

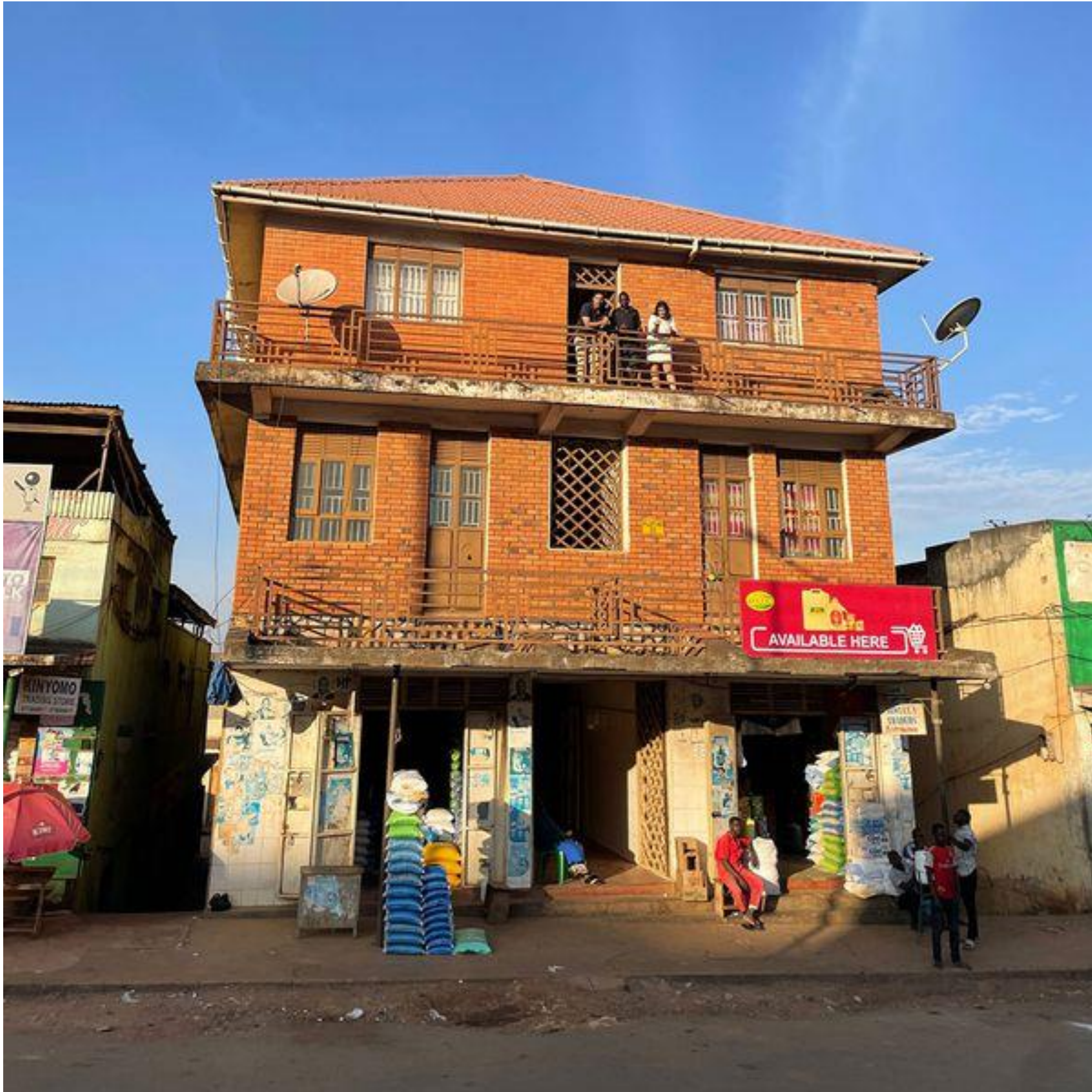
For my sister and I to see where our mom grew up, where our dad grew up, would give us both a greater understanding of their values and their humble beginnings.

Seconds before we set off, it was clear that what was to come was too much to bear for my mom. Witnessing her fragility reaffirmed and crystallized her strength. I saw her not just as a mom, but as a fighter, who despite everything, has pushed forward with generosity and compassion – never losing her capacity to love and feel.

The blows we experience in life can leave us feeling embittered. But when one can stand up, surmount and help others through their own pain, the experiences can empower us. My

parents fundamentally believed in the transformational power of the latter. And that's what they instilled in my sister and me.

On the afternoon we visited my dad's hometown of Masaka, I texted my cousin in Vancouver, Fatima, whose dad – my uncle – has kept records of where the family lived. We needed an address to begin our hunt. Within minutes, she sent me a document with the street and apartment number. As we walked up Hobart Street, I couldn't help but think what it would have been like for my dad 50 years ago – forced to leave this place and not knowing what to expect in Canada.



The Sachedinas look out from Nizar's old apartment building in Masaka.
COURTESY OF SHELLEY AYRES

As we approached the apartment building, we noticed two people running a small shop on the ground floor. They looked at my sister and me somewhat curiously.

In the years that followed the expulsion, many expelled Asians fought for – and received partial – compensation for their confiscated properties. But when my sister and I explained why we were there, the tension immediately dissipated. One of the owners invited us inside. I think – especially in that moment – my sister and I felt the presence of our dad and in some ways it felt like we completed a journey for him. On a balcony, as the sun set, I saw my sister wipe away a few tears.

Until the very end, my dad resisted leaving. It wasn't until soldiers arrived at his family's home and ordered him to get behind the wheel of the family car and start driving that he knew how dire the situation really was. There had been rumours of soldiers killing Asians before they could flee and so, in a split-second decision, he offered to take them to a local bar for a few rounds (even though my dad himself never drank), and got them into a blissful state of stupor. The bartender told him she'd keep pouring and told him to make his escape. He left Uganda on the final flight out to Canada on Nov. 6, 1972.

In Vancouver, he worked all his Canadian life – first as a carpet layer, then as the manager of a carpet store in East Vancouver. The last time I was in the city I drove by and saw that it's been converted to a brewery. Maybe it's his way of paying tribute from above to the bartender who helped save his life. He died on Feb. 13, 2015. Born in one land, buried in another. Until the end, he was always adamant that the expulsion was a blessing in disguise.

In Nabusanke, Mr. Sachedina and his mother chat with relatives about their return home.
COURTESY OF SHELLEY AYRES

I have asked my mom how she felt about our journey to Uganda this summer, and the word that keeps coming up is "grateful." She's grateful to have been able to make the trip back with her children, grateful to have been able to start a new life in a new country thanks to the generosity of Canadians, grateful to have been able to preserve this history for future generations. But I also think she's grateful to have had the ability to finish this chapter of her story. Even after we left for Uganda, she told us she was looking forward to leaving on her own terms this time. She will never go back. And I know she is okay with that because her personal reconciliation with the past is now complete.

As children, we sometimes forget, perhaps somewhat selfishly, that our parents had entire lives that pre-existed our own. For me, it gave me a greater appreciation not only of what

my parents endured, but also what they surmounted to start a new life in Canada – and a deep sense of gratitude for that. Making the trip with my mom has also been incredibly affirming. I realize what it means to stand on the shoulders of ancestors, who voluntarily and involuntarily sacrificed stability and comfort, motivated by a deep desire to improve lives for future generations. It's empowering. And yet, at the same time, it carries with it a burden of responsibility to help build on that path of progress.

When you have everything ripped from you – your home, your money, your safety – you learn not to put your sense of security in "stuff." My parents worked extremely hard because they had to support their family, but what guided their parenting were values and non-tangibles: education, faith, resilience, determination, compassion and service.

My mom and dad aren't unique. Millions of Canadians have made the same sacrifice for their children – forced by necessity or choice. Despite our vast geography, and even though we are a work in progress as a country, fundamentally we are bound by the same values. These are values that anchored my parents and that anchor me, in a country I am proud to call home.