**2013\_esch\_UgAs\_11**

*INTERVIEWER: Ok can I ask for your full name please?*

AJIET: My name is Ajiet Singh Sondh

*And can I ask you to spell that, for me please?*

Sorry?

*Can I ask you to spell that for me please?*

Spell it?

*Yep*

A-J-I-E-T S-I-N-G-H S-O-N-D-H

*That’s perfect and we are good to go, that’s great. Ok then. Um, wha-we usually start off is a XXXX of personal details so can I ask your date of birth as well please Mr XXXX?*

020246 (February 2, 1946)

*46? Perfect. Ok, um, so you mentioned earlier you were um, born in Uganda. Is that correct?*

Yep

*And um, can you tell me the actual place of your birth, the town that you were born in?*

Jinja

*It was in Jinja. And can you perhaps tell me a little bit about Jimja, describe it as a community, as a town and perhaps some of your fond memories when you were growing up there?*

Jinja was a very closely-knit community, as a whole. Irrespective of colour, creed or religion. Being a small and a business place...all-most of the tycoons of Uganda were doing business from that little town. Um... And also being the first place to provide hydro-electric dam to cater for the needs of electricity for Uganda and also some other parts of East Africa. Um…Agriculturally, Uganda was the top most in East Africa... Coffee, cotton, sugar, sugar cane industry was the top of the list. And then later on Mr Gill... added a plywood factory which was the first I think in most of the African countries-

*Wow.*

And obviously these tycoons started building their business round what they already had . So it was large, it was second to none as was the business of money was concerned.

*So I mean, a quite prosperous community-*

Very, very prosperous.

*And perhaps can you describe um, sort of the layout of the town and perhaps where you lived? What was your house like? Geographically, where were you living? Were you in the centre or[...]*

We lived in a joined house about eight, nine bedrooms. Or-could be more. Um, three brothers, my father’s young-younger brother and his elder brother. [...] Being in the company called XXX Singh and Brothers, they lived together. And the youngest-most brother Mr XXX Singh who had his own separate business after splitting from the brothers, was living in Nile Garden. He had his own house and the other two elder brothers , one of them used to serve for the family companies and the eldest-most was in the army and he never bothered to work for anyone of when he wished like he used to work for his brothers.

*So he was the black sheep of the family-*

Very, very shrewd-

*Yep*

Very shrewd, honestly. [...] They lined up a job for him, my father used to tell us, that he said um, ‘Big brother, we have lined up a job’ when they were not into their own business, when they were just working in the mines of somewhere, um,They said ‘we lined up a job for you, could you go and see the foreman, chippy foreman or carpenter foreman there?’ And he used to come up with swearwords to say ‘whom so ever needs me can bloody well come to my place and take me. He was that military type-

*Yeah. A man of his upbringing wasn’t he?*

Oh yes, that’s right.

*And in terms of um, your school days, um,what school did you go to?*

Our school, I went to Jinja Primary School. Then from there to Jinja Secondary School. There was only two schools in the town. The government schools. And then later on, of our own community, Sikh Community, built a XXX school , which was taking XXX care of the religious studies and also at the same time, the normal studies what the government allowed for. And it was subsidised later on, was subsidised by the government also.

*XXXX for the curriculum-*

That’s right.

*And um, obviously um, the state school, was that for both Black Africans as well as the Ugandan Asians?*

Um... At first, the government schools were only Asians... Africans were admitted very late after Independence and al-also they used to shout to come into the cities or towns from remotes. So there was a breakthrough after the Independence, slowly and slowly. Um…Obviously now its all, all blacks now-

*Yep, not many Ugandan Asians left-*

Yes.

*Um, and, so you had with Independence became a certain perhaps unification-*

Yep

*Absorption.*

When I was there in school, we had... hardly half a dozen students. Hardly half a dozen students. And the black locals-

*So not many. So how perhaps did the two communities interact in Jinja, apart from school, where yeah what kind of places would you meet Black Africans?*

Well the most, mostly Black Africans used to work as house servants, garden boys, gardeners um…on the build-building industry, roads weepers, and to do the labour work-majority. And very few of them, then were in high posts, very, very few were working in offices... Um… Later on, the trends started changing though everywhere, Africans were... coming forward to take the major role.

*And I mean did you ever sense any um, perhaps tension when you were younger between the two communities and when I say the two, obviously the African and the Asians groups.*

I personally felt the tension when the army was manoeuvring the streets in Kampula. I was going one-one evening after work in a company bus... we happened to come through some sanitary post and... we were stopped and the gun was pointed at me for not listening. So that put fear into me. This is what’s happening now. So it will be obviously unsafe to stay here.

*Uh-hmm. But I mean so this was obviously after ’71-’72-*

This was-this is ‘72

*’72. So perhaps going back even long-before that did you-*

Not-not...

*When you were growing up did you ever sense any tension?*

Not before the Black Africans were adjust... They were in majority there but the rule was in minority and there-there status was minority-in minority. So they were considered as a very lowly class.

*Uh-hmm. And they kind of accepted it perhaps?*

Well that-that was a part and parcel of it because majority of them were uneducated and socially they could not mingle with people... that is at common level, like most other nations would have done it but talking about the high society, that was a different ball game-game.

*XXXX They kind of yeah they’d brought been brought up in that environment-*

Yep

*And they got used to it.*

That’s it. Their environment was there, the hawkers selling fruits, veg, early mornings where ever they made money about two shillings or three shillings. Never more than enough for them. Because-mind you, don’t get me wrong two or three shillings be-the value of currency then was equivalent to the British pound... So it was alot of money-

*XXXX Perhaps. They could have accessed in other ways.*

Yep

*Um, do you um…Let’s talk-so we’ve talked about sort of the intimate inter community relations, we’ve talked about the role of the Black African. Can we describe perhaps the Asian community’s role in society. What were –I mean it seems the merchant class was very much predominant.*

There-there was not much difference between Asian communities. I mean, everyone mingled together, everyone mixed together, talked to each other. I mean, there was hardly any differences that ‘he’s a Muslim’ or ‘he’s a Sikh’ or ‘he’s a Gujarati’ or this and that. It only differentiated people where they belong to this religion or that religion through their worships. And also, their businesses and so on and nothing in particular like where as a human being one would say ‘oh he’s a Muslim, I don’t want to help him.’ Or ‘ He’s-he’s so and so I don’t wanna do this for him now’. Everyone was in harmony, peace and love.

*So you’d say everyone some themselves as being Asian first-Ugandan Asian first and then religious differences XXXX*

Yep that’s it Yeah that was it, there you go.

*And you said, um, there’d be certain community events where the whole of the Asian community come out and celebrate. Do you wanna perhaps explain it. You mentioned Diwali earlier?*

Diwali, yes. Diwali was the main... main, main festival which almost every Asian community used to take part in...

*And what sort of events did you celebrate. I mean was it-well perhaps could you describe-describe the night of Diwali and the streets of Jinja in the sixties and-*

Well Diwali, the streets I mean we, um-all the Asian communities I mean especially the Hindus used to distribute sweets to the neighbours, to friends, to their relations and that was the tradition. In our town, Jinja there was no differences between whether he’s a black man there or next door or whether its a Muslim next door. No, festival was celebrated in this XXXX manner, what it used to be. So celebration means celebration-be happy and the happiness was shared amongst everyone.

*Uh-hmm and lets go back to the Asian community. You’ve described in detail before we started the interview, um, some of, um, the, um,**events that you took part in at school. It seemed to me quite an important part of an, um,**Ugandan Secondary School, amongst the Asian community was sports. So can you perhaps describe that?*

As far as games and sports are concerned, that was sort of a natural... gift to me. The more my Father didn’t want me to play, the more I sneaked out and took part in different games and sports. I-I was very good, very agile, very fast in running. Out-witting people , side stepping, whatever. Or even my brain tried to out win-out wit people. So this sort of-this nature of mine took me through to games and sports and I became one of the leading hockey players, football player, athlete and cyclist, boxing and rugby player.

*So a very, very much an all around sportsman weren’t you?*

Yeah. Well we should say-we could term it as all part of the best all rounder’s.

*Uh-hmm. And let’s focus on the rugby because you told me before we started recording, um,**a bit of an anecdote in regards to a certain Mr Idi Amin. Um, do you wanna tell me about it?*

Idi-Idi Amin was the first black man who played rugby in Jinja or Uganda or East Africa. He was a member of Nile Rugby Club, Jinja... He was the first man to represent the Jinja fifteen, a black man representing Jinja fifteen of Nile Rugby Club in Kenya, playing against one of the Nukuoro clubs where the farmers assertation was very, very strong, being the white farmers only. And there were alot of restrictions in those days that no blacks should enter their clubs. So Idi Amin was the first one ever to play there.

*And what were your-you obviously met Idi, um, a number of times.*

Well I knew Idi Amin from games and sports. I used to represent my secondary school for athletics and he used to turn out for Kings Africans Rifles, as a sprinter and sometimes as a XXXX race member.

*And did you compete against Idi?*

He-Later on people said ‘oh he talks too much, he-he wants to advise anyone. I personally think that was a part and parcel of his nature. He used to advise me also because I was a very keen cyclist. We used to have two mile grass tracks cycling XXXX end of the meeting. And I used to take part in that and he always used to ask me not ever to let any black African to touch my bike because they can do Voodoo-the black magic.

*Incredible.*

Yeah.

*Um, and it’s not the only time you met uh,**Mr Amin as well-*

No-no I-I met him many, many times, many times I met… Idi-

*And can you perhaps describe him as a character, um, not the Idi Amin that I know obviously through the expulsion.*

Idi Amin… to sum him up like people say ‘oh he was in love with Madhvani’s wife or this and that XXXX Madhvani’s wife. Oh I don’t know much about that but as I know Idi Amin-yes he was a womaniser… because… once I ran out of diesel and I was walking in the blazing sun towards Jinja town… uh,coming from Bugembe where our national athletic stadium used to be. I was in the middle of Bugembe and Jinga railway station when he was coming from the barracks which was not far from the service station. Er,in his Zephyr Zodiac and he sighted me with the XXXX and he stopped and he said XXXX [Swahili] and I’d replied in Swahili XXXX [Swahili] that means ‘I’ve run out of diesel in my truck’ Um, so he said ‘oh hang on, jump in the car, I’ll take you XXXX [Swahili] ‘I’ll take you to get some diesel later’. And he said to me ‘I’m just (in Swahili) I’m going to see a friend of mine just here’. When these people used to say ‘just here’ it may be miles in the bush. So we went and stopped by a mud hut. He said ‘you wait in the car XXXX, uh, I’m going to see a friend of mine. And this is… in the afternoon, blazing sun. He’s gone in fully, fully in his army uniform and he’s seen a woman-woman friend and he spent more than an hour there and I was choking in the heat, in his car and I went and knocked on the door he-he replied ‘Can’t you wait XXXX, you’re disturbing me, I’ll be out soon’. This is-this is Idi Amin-it’s no bullshitting, I’m telling you the truth because I was waiting there like a XXXX for him.

*And he eventually came out-*

Yep he came out later.

*Possibly with a smile on his face.*

A big smile on his face.

*And um, will-we’re on the topic anyway so I’d perhaps like you before we go back to um, your upbringing in Uganda. Can you tell me about the last meeting you had with um,**Mr Amin, um,**because that was very under different circumstances. It was back to the rugby club wasn’t it?*

Yeah. The last time I saw Idi Amin, now he was the President of Uganda… He was the chief guest… for a rugby game. Invited being the ex-rugby player… and now the President of Uganda. He-he was asked to preside over this tournament this-this game. A team from Ireland-a Cork constitution was touring Uganda then… I happened to be standing in the clubhouse next to him he-he didn’t even say hello to me, nothing. So much difference in him. And all the time he was outside witnessing the game and I was not far from his side, he didn’t even smile at me. That much difference or that much his status changed him…

*I see you’ve described two very different Idi Amins there. I mean-*

Yes… After-after becoming President I think he was entirely a different man, a different man. Not the same old Idi Amin.

*Uh-hmm. Power corrupts-*

Do you want me to say about Gaddafi?

*Yes, I mean XXXX*

I think all the changes brought in to Idi Amin, as far as I know was Libya’s President Gaddafi. He’s intervening the Ugandan, him being a Muslim and Idi Amin being a Muslim and Israelis were training the Air force-Ugandan Air force and the Ugandan Army. That… that sort of carry-on Gaddafi could not bear so he has to intervene and he started poisoning his ears. Um, **a**fter that, Israelis were given thirty days notice to leave the country and then obviously the Asians followed after a few months, were given ninety days notice to leave the country.

*So you think Gaddafi made-*

So I think-I personally feel Gaddafi was a main influence for all this exodus of… Jews and Asians from Uganda.

*That’s interesting ‘cause as I said off the recording device, that is a very new perspective to me from what I’ve interviewed. Many-I don’t think anybody will ever really get to know exactly why Idi Amin made that declaration but there’s-there’s many I think reasons*  *behind it and that’s certainly one of them. Um, let’s go back to yourself then really, uh**you mentioned-you gave me an anecdote earlier about your Dad. You said your Dad was a very well respected man in Jinja, er,* *because of some of the things he did with the local communities etcetera-*

Yeah

*Do you want to describe your Dad and per-your Mum as well, your parents. Er,**when did they arrive in Uganda?*

Wow, um,that’s… very hard to say when they arrived. We never even bothered-nobody ever bothered-they were sort of the pioneers. They were in Kenya before coming to Uganda… um-

*And did they come over under the British colonial power?*

Yeah, yeah that’s it, yeah.

*Yeah*

It was obviously it was then, they started immigrating from India to Africa, um,as far as I know, my Father used to talk about him travelling from Kenya to play volleyball in Uganda so that’s-that’s how I could say they were in Kenya first and then they immigrated to Uganda and settled in Uganda.

*Yeah, it was very different back then as well, isn’t it. There was no real borders as such-*

No

*Kenya was part of Uganda and Uganda was part of Kenya-*

No-no nothing then, I mean it was a British colony, Kenya was a colony, Uganda was protected-a protected rite so it was under British- I doubt that there was any borders or something of that sort in those days.

*Uh-hmm and you said, let’s go back to your Dad, you said your Dad was quite a prominent member of the community. Can you tell me how that came about?*

Yeah my Father was a-a one of the leading figures… from the community because for the locals and for the whites-he knew them although he could not even speak a word of English. He- ‘Yes XXXX no XXXXX’. These are two common words possibly most of them used to grasp. That mean, you know what it means. ‘Yes XXXX’ and ‘No XXXX’ XXXX used to be the boss man so every white man in a higher position was a XXXX to them. Right, so this is how their transactions used to start. ‘Yes XXXX, no XXXX XXXX, XXXX, XXXX. This means ‘Yes, yes no XXXX’ This is it. As far as his personal approach was concerned, he was a well known figure, within the white community and the black chiefs because they used to build local governments, um,housing estates and the XXXX what used to be the local XXXX. And most of other families had those contracts. Because of just how deep they knew the locals and-and the British side of the government. So-so my Father was a very, very dominant person in these sort of things. And he played his major role and locals used to call him ‘XXXX Simba’ Simba means Lion. And his whole labour force used to be scared of him as soon as they would hear his car approaching the site, wherever he used to go and visit, they would run to their place of work and believe you me, its not only them-even we used to hide. If we had to go out somewhere without him noticing, we used to sneak out. We wouldn’t dare tell him where we are going.

*So he sounds like a very fair man however also a very tough man-*

He was very fair. A good hearted, good natured person but very shrewd and abrupt. Very shrewd.

*I suppose you have to be sometimes.*

Oh he was a big man, he was a big man, yeah.

*Uh-hmm and, um,**yourself, um,* *you obviously-you were brought up in Jinja. Can you tell me perhaps about did you go-you went to secondary school a great-did you go to university? Did you-what’s your sort of career path?*

Um, no, no. I didn’t go to universities there, nothing. I mean… I got married… um,then I-I started working… I started working… at Mr Gil’s plywood factory or his whole set-up before plywood factory, um,it was a timber impregnating plant, building construction site section and also his mechanical section looking after auto-auto mobiles because he had a fleet of trucks and cars to cater for his needs for transportation of timber, XXXX and a lot of other bits and pieces and he was the-one tycoon of our community who owned the Mercedes Benz and Renault agencies. He had a theatre, a cinema he-he had loads of buildings and he had buildings for his staff-housing estates for his staff so far so, um,people used to call them as ‘Gil Colony’, um,he was a tycoon in a real sense-

*And did he employ, um,**both Asians and Africans or?-*

Yep, majority Asians were the higher posts and the local Africans, if they were not qualified enough or- I mean early days obviously most-majority were labourers nothing else. Some of them were good carpenters, I mean he didn’t need no carpenters in the factory so the carpenters, the local black carpenters used to work on the building-building sites. Other than that, they were very, very few trades men as carpenters. But other than that, most majority of them were the labourers.

*Yep. So it goes back to what you said previously the Africans were very much at the lowest level of society.*

Yeah, very much-that’s right.

*And where would you fit if we can put a diagram of society. You have Africans at the bottom obviously where would you fit sort of you and your family. ‘Cause obviously you’d have the white colonial power, er,**in pre-independence* *at the top, where would the Asian community fit?*

Well comp-comparing ourselves to the white community then-there was no question the rising of that because the whites set their own trend wherever they went, whites only area, whites only clubs… so for so in-on a lot of Uganda XXXX mines, a copper mine was another part turned one of-by one of the ministers as little South Africa on the land of Uganda. There was so much segregation-these Welsh miners were showing to us the locals and Asian workers there. I happen to remember, I travelled to play Rugby against Clumbi mines club from Kampala, instead of me being catered by a white family, I was singled out as a player to go and stay with an Asian family. Although I knew this was gonna happen, I knew there was a lot of segregation in that part of the country but I didn’t mind. But I’m just viewing my points, that’s what was happening there. And most of the whites were taken in by the white families… All of the players are the guests-they all catered for that. And- But as was my own club in Kampala they were good. Well you can judge people by how they react, how they present themselves, but seeing all that they were very nice people-all the British were nice but who knows deep down, beneath their hearts what sort of nature they had. But outwardly they were all very nice and friendly. I mean, travelling wise, we used to travel together there’s no distinction that ‘oh you’re not gonna travel with us’ we used to travel together. There was another black African who was a very good rugby player, come up from university and he used to travel with us also. That’s it.

*So I mean well I suppose, I’d possibly say a black African who went to university was probably quite unique compared to the rest of the black Africans. So I mean it seems to me sort of three major, um,**groups in society in terms of ethnically speaking; whites, um,**Asians and blacks-*

Yep

*And it seems it would be in that order of their positions in society. Do you think in the same way that some, um,**the whites would look down on some Asians and blacks, do you think some members of the Asian community looked down on the black community as well, do you think it worked that way?*

Yeah, yeah that was true, that was true. Even some Asians were looking down upon Africans. Many a time, this used to happen if-if a black man early days used to nick anything, everyone used to stone them… Even the black Africans, they were the first one to get hold of him and beat the hell out of him, that was the trend. So-

*Community justice.*

That’s it, yeah… I mean, being poor obviously, if one cannot afford to do anything that’s the easiest way-to nick something from somewhere, um,to cater for his needs.

*Yep*

That’s humanity.

*Survival*

Human nature.

*Yep. Survival instinct-*

That’s it. Survival- hook or crook.

*Um,**I love that phrase. Um, that-so if we, um,**go back to this period of when, um,**Idi Amin came into power, um,**did-obviously you’d met him a number of times on the crick-on the, um,**rugby field or at the track. He’d given some advice about your bike and he’d given you a lift a couple of times. Um, he came to power, what was your first reaction when he came to power. What was your thinking, this man that I know, this rugby player.*

When, when he came to power, um, the way he came to power Milton Obote was the Prime Minister of the country then and they were out in Singapore for the Commonwealth heads meeting and XXXX was the President then XXXX. Um, being a Muganda, these Muganda tribes comes from Kampala side, mostly and so on. They never got on with Obote so Obote was always against XXXX like so XXXX and Idi Amin conspired while Obote was out of the country to overthrow him and that’s when the coup started in Uganda. And they took over the government and that’s how Idi Amin became head of the army. One of the brigadiers then, he was one of the brigadiers then. And then obviously later on XXXX, I don’t know what happened, whether he died or what. Idi Amin became the president.

*And where were you during all this? Were you still in Jinja?*

I was in Kampala then.

*You were in Kampala?*

I was not living far from the parliament square and Radio Uganda. All the bullets being fired, any stray bullets could have gone through my windows and hit us. And we used to lie on the floors.

*And did you sense any tension towards the Asian community when he first came into power? Did you feel-were you worried about your future?*

People thought it was nice.

*Really?*

People thought it was nice. A man whose made his way up to that position, from ordinary soldier would do justice. Obviously, the justice they’re being shown to people then tribalism comes into these people. It’s-it’s human nature and then he started being very brutal to some tribes. Started killing, this and that, giving orders being the head of the state and army. So all different names, Idi Amin dada, Marshall this and Marshall that-we only knew him by Idi Amin. That’s all, Idi was the only name he knew. Idi, Idi, Idi and all dada this and then Field Marshall. Well God knows that’s all-

*He had many titles, tyrant I believe it is.*

This is all his own creation possibly.

*Yes, I think tyrant is a title that is attached to him most nowadays. Um, you mentioned earlier, before we started recording, um,* *quite an interesting story, I often ask people where they were when they found out about the, um,**the ninety day declaration when it was first declared. However you-you actually may have found out about it, stumbled upon it earlier-*

Oh yeah yep-yep. Yep after one… big match-rugby match… we normally used to have a lot of, erm,embassies members as members there or come for socialising also. Being invited guests, on this occasion the clubhouse was packed with the whites. Very hard to differentiate with different white nationalities; the famous ones were the British and the Americans because you could tell them, the British from their accents and the Americans miles apart. Unfortunately I was one of them, I used to be like Americans before. Even my teacher in school used to write in my composition books ‘we don’t want no American slangs in our compositions’. Well that’s apart from that, we were just proud of that. In ’71, I was touring Europe playing rugby and when we went back, I had a notice served by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that my post will be nationalised in the Ugandan, um, Uganda Fishnet Company. As a chief electrical and, um,mechanical, um, supervisor. So, I happened to break this news in the club on that day, when that clubhouse was packed with whites and when I’d said I’d been served a notice to leave the country, erm, one of the groups standing next to us happened to comment ‘Oh Ajit, you’re not the only one, you will take the whole community with you.’ And I was surprised all of the sudden, then I questioned the gentleman. I said ‘What do you mean?’ Oh he possibly realised the mistake he done, revealing the top secret of the country. Er, he was one of the, er,government officers, erm,so he said ‘No, no, no I don’t mean nothing of that. No I don’t mean that um, what you’re thinking, I was talking to someone else. I mean something else.’ So, it never crossed my mind then, because the man covered up the whole issue to such a manner that it arose no suspicion in my mind. So it didn’t bother me at all. But later on, after a month or two, there was, there was a warning that all Asians are given ninety days notice to leave the country-

*So that was the declaration of-*

Of all the non-non Ugandan Asians and all the British passport holders only.

*And where-can you describe your feeling because I suppose your reaction was quite different to other people ‘cause you may have suddenly realised as well, that guy was right so what-can you describe your initial reaction to that speech?*

Yeah this was it, yeah. So well I was XXXX like, I was completely puzzled. I didn’t know what he meant by that but when the Jews were given thirty days notice it clicked quickly. Did he mean Jews as Asians also, what? So I said, nah.. Then after the Jews left, it was us, then it was printed in the paper news bulletins saying, Asians have been kicked out. They have been-all the British passport holders are given ninety days to leave the country. So then and then, I-I came to my senses and say oh the guy, whatever he mentioned in the clubhouse was for real.

*Well-*

It was a bit too late.

*You got a scoop I think.*

Oh yeah it was too late but, um, as my post was being nationalised, but the company wanted me to stay there. And my terms were that well I’ve already sent my family to United Kingdom. I can only stay here under one condition, if my three-quarter of the salary would go to United Kingdom and quarter given to me here to live. And those terms were not met then I said I’m sorry, I have to go.

*So, um, what was the time difference between the declaration, the ninety day declaration and you getting your family out? Erm, how long did it take?*

My family I took them out about in September I think, I sent them in September. We-we didn’t have time factor of ninety days, time limit-

*Did you-when you first heard about the declaration, erm,**did you think-‘cause a lot of people have inferred to me that they almost thought Mr Amin was joking ‘cause he’d-he’d mentioned things before and yet people tended to take what he said with a pinch of salt, lets say. Erm,* ***d****id you feel-did you think this was real or was there a sense that, perhaps questioning it?*

Because I-I personally took it for real because that incident all of sudden crept back to me when the gentleman said ‘you’ll be taking the whole community with you’. So I said it could be for real. So, I had no pangs of toothache, I would say doing fine here, you know?

*True. And I mean it’s quite a decision isn’t it to send your family to the UK. Did you send the UK yourself or was it-cause you-your-*

No, I mean when we were in school, we used to yearn to come to this country for education, this and that to learn some games and sports or this and that. They-I mean-United Kingdom was always for the further of-to further your education or any ability you want to gain this country was looked for. Um, thinking of, we will seek whatever we are looking for, in the United Kingdom. I mean, we didn’t know it was entirely different life here then what we used to have back home. It’s nothing like servants at your… for your service all the time, this and that. Its self catering here, like, self catering.

*Bed and breakfast only.*

Yeah. Even you become a millionaire, still you got to be a self catering. You’ve got to do that self catering.

*It’s true. I know millionaires who can’t even afford a servant.*

Yeah.

*Erm, so obviously you had a British passport, did you?*

Yeah, I had a British passport-

*So that played in you-*

The whole of our entire family, entire family had British passports. I’m sorry I-One of my cousins, he had a Ugandan passport and he-they were the first ones and they ended up in Norway-

*Oh wow*

Scandinavian countries and then they came back to the United Kingdom-

*Ah ok. So, erm, obviously, your, erm,**you didn’t actually come on a resettlement plane-the charter plane did you? You actually chose a plane yourself.*

No I came by regular flight.

*Can you tell me the story about that and also perhaps the story of the people who met you outside the bank. Erm, when you went to book the tickets.*

Ah. I … as this human crisis started, people were trying to take old money out of the banks, this and that. Before these peoples monies were frozen in banks so before that came into fact. So I also happened to take all my money out of the bank. And as I was walking out of the bank, three-three guys local Africans, saw me come out of the bank, they started following me on the quiet road. And I had a suspicion, all the time that they-they will rob me definitely. Um, so, as I was walking, towards my home, towards the parliament square, on the high road, the British […] Airways then BOAC office came on the way and I slipped in. And I told the whole story to them, the guys were standing outside with a briefcase-a gun in it, possibly. And they waited-waiting and looking inside, what I was doing and I told the guys could I book three tickets for my family, the regular flight. Um,date doesn’t-I don’t remember the dates now, so that’s what I done. Whatever was the course of the tickets I paid and whatever was remaining I requested them if they could save that money for me in their office, in their custody. Other than me walking out with that and that gentlemen follow me and rob me. And they consented to keep the money and I was happy to leave the money and walk out bare hands nothing in my hands. And these-these guys just stopped tailing me then.

*Uh-hmm. You had nothing to take.*

I’d been- I’d XXXX. If that’s going to happen now then what would be coming later God knows. So-

*Yeah. Um, can you-I mean that-I mean to me that sounds almost a sign of the way it was turning-*

Yeah

*The situation was turning very diff-quickly.*

Yeah. The locals used-started taking law in their own hands and they started doing whatever, harass people and even so far so house break ins was increasing, car thieving was increasing. Loads, loads of things were happening, loads-

*And often-*

Yeah

*More likely against the Asian community.*

Very often, very often, yes.

*And so I mean, you did feel a sense of danger for you and your family, you would say?-*

That’s right, that’s right. So I-I thought it was high time to get my family out and as soon as I would settle my differences with the firm and I would walk out too. And I-so when I couldn’t finalise my terms with the- with Uganda Fishnets so I decided to leave the country too, that was in October ’72.

*And can I ask what you did with your, erm,**possessions? ‘Cause you’re only allowed to arrive with £50?-*

The possessions, we were allowed only twenty-twenty eight kilos? Or twenty-three kilos, some-between twenty-three to twenty-eight kilos, er,per head. And my belongings was nothing and I came penny-less. Fortunately, when I was on the coach to airport, one of my white friends sighted me sitting and they came to-approached me and asked me to help him. And when I asked him what sort of help he said he’s got a mate who come from England visiting him. He’s also going back on the same plane, could you help him if he has any problem as far as the language of country’s concerned. I said fair enough, that’s no problem and when we were on-at Entebbe Airport, this-mind you this is regular flights not the chartered flights, um, I-my belongings were bit overweight. One of my tape recorders which I had on me, XXXXit was showing overweight**,** so I asked the girl there, um, I don’t want to leave it here on the counter-anyone who wants it, take it. So that girl put my-rest of the belongings through the customs-up to for the-after checking everything to go on the plane and the plain clothes detectives come around on the scene and arrest me for saying I was trying to bribe that girl. I said ‘In what sense? She said it was overweight so I took the tape recorder.’ I said, I told them ‘I put it on the counter.’ I said ‘If that is giving me the overweight, I have nothing to pay in excess so you can keep this. Anyone whose interested can take it.’ If that is bribing, I don’t know, I’m not bribing the person to anyone I just said this is free for anyone to take it. So they harassed me so much there. I had loads of Ugandan currency on me and this white friend whom I’d met on another friends advice and that, he wanted to buy some perfume and we were sitting up in the duty free shop drinking and I-I offered him a drink he said no he’ll buy, I said ‘No, no no, you’re not going to pay ‘cause I’ve got this money. Its-its gonna be useless as soon as we leave this place, it won’t be even worth tissue papers.’ So, I bought him, he said ‘If you don’t mind I have got no change, I want to buy some perfume for my girlfriend. I said, ‘Be my guest, take it.’ He said ‘No, no, no I’ll pay you as soon as we get on the plane.’ So I said ‘Fair enough, as it pleases you.’ So through all this harassments I happened to go through the plane was stopped for me because they were running late. I was the last passenger to board the plane and everyone eyed me as if I was the culprit. It-they went through my suitcases two-three times all of my belongings and few of my trophies I had on me, they took them out. They said ‘This is not yours, this belongs to the country.’ I said ‘This is my personal achievement.’ And they took out my trophies, this and that. ‘You can’t take this, you can’t take that.’ I said ‘Well this is my personal belongings.’ Alright, so they harassed me to the extreme and then when they asked me how much Ugandan currency I’ve got on me while I was walking towards the plane, chief plain-there’s a plain clothed police man who I said ‘I’ve got some, you want some?’ He said ‘You trying to bribe us?’ Well I said ‘This is gonna be no use to me. So if I throw here you might do me for assault saying you’re defaming of a currency.’ So it was a nightmare for me to leave the Entebbe Airport.

*Were you ever in fear of your life at all?*

Yep-yep I was, I was because I thought they might even detain me there. I was-when I got on the plane, that friend wrote me a check for five pounds that was the only money I came to this country with. With the kind generosity of that gentleman whom I gave Ugandan money, which was useless for me anyway. So that five pounds I cashed in Gant’s Hill Barclay’s bank.

*Which is still there, not far away at all.*

No its-its, um, Wellington Park-

*So, um, yeah, lets talk about your arrival then. Erm,**you arrived in the country with five pounds*

Yeah

*Um, you didn’t I’m guessing go to a settlement camp, or did you?*

No, no I didn’t go to the settlement camp because my brother in law, my wife’s brother was here. He had a call from back from Kenya one of the brothers saying ‘oh he’s coming, I don’t want them to go to the camp, you take them home.’ So this is how I ended up in Gants Hill, straight… with my brother in law we stayed with him for few months and then I brought sixty-nine Hamilton Avenue.

*Which is the place we’re sitting in now.*

Yeah, this is it.

*And can you tell me, er,**obviously your, erm,**your wife and your daughter had already arrived a few weeks before did you say or-*

XXXX almost a month before-

*Almost a month-*

Something like that, yeah.

*And they’d been living with your brother in law in Gants Hill-*

My brother in law, yeah.

*Um, what was your first reaction when you saw them, obviously, you-you’ve XXXX*

Well it was a great relief because they were more worried about my safety other then I was worried about them-

*Yeah*

They were worried about me. They were much relieved to see me, in one piece.

*Of course, of course. And-*

Under those hostile conditions-

*Yeah*

We were put in.

*And I suppose the communication was quite difficult back then, it’s not like today. You have the internet, Facebook or you could phone someone, you know-*

Oh no, no, no, no, this was only telephones then, nothing else, yeah.

*And I suppose they were watching the news every day and-*

Oh yeah

*Hearing some of the stories, the horrific stories of what was going on.*

That’s right, yeah. Yeah we used to watch a lot of news, so many-so many people killed this way, that way not Asians, but Asians being robbed. Some-such and such house being broken into, all their belongings being taken, this and that. That was very common then, very common. Because-

*I heard*

The locals took… as a Christmas party that one.

*Yes a free for all, I’ve heard.*

Yeah, free for all, yeah.

*Yeah, yeah, the um-*

There was no law and justice then-

*Of course*

Because majority of them are army people, were disguised in robbers and all this-

*Yeah*

They used to call them XXXX

*What does that, XXXX-*

XXXX-robbers.

*Robbers, what the army?*

They used disguises also because-

*No way*

Cases used to happen that you’d go to report the case and police and you’d go and see ah, it’s the same pair, person who robbed me… Yes many cases we heard like that, many cases.

*Wow. So-*

It’s the same people who robbed us. I think it could have been the constable, three of them or the officer also.

*Incredible*

Yeah. Um, it was free for all.

*Yeah, of course.*

Yeah-

*And you were the victims.*

That’s right.

*Um, and your life in England, let’s move on to this. And this is something I really want to sort of really explore-*

Right, it is more fascinating?

*I think it-I mean for me personally, I think it’s you know, sitting in this house now and finding out you bought this pretty much as soon as you arrived or you sort of found it-*

Yeah, with five pounds in my pockets

*It’s - now, this is the true story of the expulsion to me.*

That’s the truth you know, the five pounds in my pocket.

*So, so let’s start from the…*

Sorry to say, there was a few more pounds in Greenford when I was, when I was here in ’71 playing rugby touring Europe, I- whatever was left of my travelling cheques, whether it was another £5 or £10 which I deposited in Greenford Barclay’s Bank.

*Oh, so you actually already had a bank account that was open.*

Yeah. And I just left it there, I thought “what’s the point, taking this and putting it there”.

*That’s really interesting, I used to live in America, and I left an account open that has about $12, so I always think, if I ever get sent to America, at least I have $12…*

As you mentioned America, all Americans… were so nice to me, my good friends. They were very good friends. One of them sent most of my belongings on the – American government’s expense to this country later on. He borrowed some money from me in Uganda, he then sent me dollars from America. He personally came to England with his new wife, and then I was working in Victoria, building uh, British Petroleum’s headquarters. And when I said to him “well, I’m working”, he said “it’s a Wimpy site”, I mean the building contractors, the main builders were Wimpy, and the Yankee jumped on “what are you working with a wimp for, mate!” I said “no, it’s a building construction firm, not the ‘wimpy’ as in ‘wimpy’”

*Very different. And um, you um, you’ve obviously, so you’ve moved to uh, first you stopped in Gant’s Hill, then you eventually found this wonderful house here.*

My sentiment here was come to Gant’s Hill, as my brother in law had a two bedroom place on top of his laundrette, he had his family, then his two younger brothers were already staying with him, one of them was working and the other one was studying, then we came in, and his elder brother was here, he also stayed with him, his wife came, and his- the eldest of his brother’s wife also came, so everyone was being accommodated there in two bedrooms we were sharing, then slowly and slowly, after a couple weeks, one of the brothers moved to Ilford. Eaton Road, because that belonged to his in-laws, who had bought the house, they were still in Kenya, so some of them, some of us used to go and sleep there, not me in person, but some of the family members used to go a and sleep there, but… Eating, lodging was done here. Completely, eating was done here. So it was a burden on- of a young man who was catering for us.

*Well, I’m sure he never viewed it as a burden.*

Sorry?

*I’m sure he didn’t view it as a burden.*

It was a burden, I mean, feeding about fourteen, fifteen, men at a time, three times a day, we used to eat like pigs then because, carry on about that country… it took her some time to adjust to this country, eating –I’m going to say- habits, so we carried on three times, heavy meals.

*And did you um- what was your first impression of England? You’d been to Europe before, hadn’t you?*

Yeah, it was okay, we came to play a game and it was nice, people were nice. Well, but the food, you only come to know what the taste of the country is when you start working.

*It’s true.*

That’s it, I mean, otherwise you wouldn’t know what the country’s like, if you’re a free man, if you’ve got enough money, any country is gold for you, because you’ve got to do nothing. When you have to earn your livelihood, especially in the cold weather, yeah, then you can start learning what life is.

*And did you- uh, where did you start working when you arrived?*

I started working, um, after, after a month, a month’s arrival, I think. After a month’s arrival in this country I started working.

*So straight in there. And was that with Pete on the construction site?*

No no no no no no no, that was with Barclay’s electrical.

*So you worked there as well?*

That was Barclay’s electrical. That was my first, um, employment with. Um, their head office was in Victoria, Vincent Street, if I’m not mistaken. Um, that’s going back nearly, nearly forty years ago. Um, the XXX those days was “first come, last to go, last come, first to go”. And that was very common, uh, on top of that, come Christmas, building industry used to shed labour. Always. Um, ah, I bought this house, 69 Hamilton Avenue, um, I was hardly in employment three months when I’d lost the job. And I was paying £169 a month then because the mortgages were frozen, and I was knew, I didn’t know nothing, my brother in law approached a friend who arranged the mortgage for us, it happened to be a money lender’s, and I was paying 24%, then it was brought to my notice that one of the… uh… what do they call… Citizen’s Advice Bureau. When I had gone to them to seek some advice about changing the mortgage, they put me right saying “you already paid 24%, you’d be losing too much if you change this to another society or whatever, you’re going to lose a hell of a lot more money, it’s best to keep it there, but didn’t you know you were paying so much?” I said “I had no idea”. 24% then, people used to pay £20 and they used to scream their heads off. Whenever I used to tell people I was paying £169, they said “bullshit, coming here”, right? Bullshit.

*You could have bought a few houses in Uganda, I think, with that.*

Loads, loads of them. Because I happened to borrow £10 000 from Midland Banks in Southall, because my brother in law who I was living with when I came to England in ’72, he was in Greenford, he had his little account in Southall, Midland Banks. The manager knew him, so he took me there, so I got a £10 000 from him, in order to mortgage. The house was for 15 000. We bought three houses from the same gentleman, Irish gentlemen, he had some sort of business. He had three houses; one in Leytonston, one in Ardville Avenue here, not far from me, and on Hamilton Avenue where he himself lived. So he said if we bought all three, he would give us this house for 15 000, so we bought all three from him, so we… so I was lucky to get this for 15 000.

*I think it’s probably worth a few more than 15 000 now.*

This? This was done by me.

*Really?*

Really. This was done by me.

*It’s a really a beautiful house.*

It was done by me. Oh, everything done by me. He… being Irish, a husband, a wife, and son. Upstairs in the bathroom, was a kitchen, of course it would be subletted, and he… I don’t know- that was a sitting room there, in front, and this was a bedroom, I think.

*What, downstairs?*

I think he was subletting it also.

*Perhaps if he owned properties, perhaps he employed and let people live here.*

Yes, I mean, my brother in law lived with him in Ireland because they because two good friends with him, and he is, he bought a beautiful place in Ireland, I don’t know where, by the seaside. Beautiful.

*And you um, obviously, you came to England ’71, ’72, and it was quite a – I mean, England was in quite a lot of turmoil back then. Um, really politically and socially. Um, and I’d say particularly this region as well.*

Well, I mean, XXX, from the government’s side, yes, and Banupal was a great force there. I mean, he raised the issue of West Indians coming here, then obviously the British Asians, now, was facing the same music from Mr Banupal.

*Do you, I mean, did it ever filter down to you or your family, did you ever fear-feel a sense of tension, did you anybody ever say anything in the street? Because obviously Barkingside at the period was going through cultural change, everything changed-*

Yeah, there was a lot of problems early days from the skinheads. And the Teddy Boys. They were not many around, but the skinheads taking over now. That lot of problems we used to have. We were termed, we were termed ‘bloody Pakis’ all the time, anyone with a turban, a ‘bloody Paki’, that was the terminology used.

*“Go home Paki”, that was the-*

I remember when I first came to sign- sign on after being absent, made redundant. Seven Kings was the jobcentre. I was… I went there to sign in, I was queuing up, I didn’t know the XXX, I mean, the gentleman standing there, looked at me, says “you bloody Paki, what you come here for?” That really put me off completely, I just wanted to run away from there, and I- I just signed, I didn’t want to go sign again. I didn’t want their money for nothing, because I was unemployed, and I was asked to sign it because I was unemployed, so I went to sign. I think, during my forty years of staying in this country, I might have claimed once through unemployment, that’s it. Once or twice. Nothing more than that. That was also for a week or two. I was so fortunate, I used to get a job.

*Well, you say fortunate, I say that also you had…*

And also, on top of that, I was so fortunate to be working in such environments which most people won’t even dream. I- I happened to work in the Bank of England, ink factory, Whitehall, Ministry of Defence of Leicester, and most of the banks in the bank area, so some police station, um, I forgot the name in Liverpool Street, yeah. Police station there. And most of these XXX places then, they used to be big buildings and be- XXX used to own, worked all those buildings in London.

*So, I mean, would you say you’ve been very lucky in terms of…*

Very lucky, very lucky yeah. Very lucky.

*And, let’s go- can you tell me what kind of help the British government gave you? I mean, we’ve talked about whether you’ve had any – or even the British community, I mean we’ve talked about the odd skinhead, um, but was there ever members of the white community…?*

As far as the British government is concerned, because I didn’t go to the camps, so I didn’t come into it, those brackets. So I was sort of um, catered by my brother in law.

*Yeah, you were never a refugee. You were a…*

Yeah, so I didn’t claim nothing of that sort. There are no refugee benefits or anything of that sort. But… lucky to get a job, and that was the only help I needed. And I plod along from there slowly and slowly, and look back for nothing. No favours, nothing of that sort, I mean, even back home, I never looked for any favours from our parents, I believed in my own rights, working, and survive.

*And I think that’s gotten you quite far in life.*

Well this is it, I wanted to, but um, I had a lot of ambitions. A lot of ambitions. I wouldn’t like this to be recorded, but the family at large, because I was well-to-do back at home, back home, a most of them had a lot of money in this country already sent, all of them were living on rent when I had £5 in my pocket, was having my own roof over my head, which they could not bear. Could not take it. They tried their level best to see me out on the roadside. They poisoned my brother’s ears, who was a joint partner in this house, and my sister, and my parents were living with me. They took every mean step to see us completely parted from each other.

*Wow, so the bigger battle, it seemed really, was with your own family.*

Yeah, that was the biggest battle, yeah. That was a bigger battle, so… Because four names were put on this house. Myself, my wife, my sisters, and my brothers, because we had to produce the pay slips. Them days, that was the… carry on, must produce the evidence where their income coming from, so… put together, all four pay slips couldn’t meet the criteria of achieving a mortgage, so… the brothers hardly la- my sisters, they hardly lasted a month or two with me, after taking the mortgage. They were poisoned, their ears were poisoned, they- they left me, they had to go, so I was struggling now with my wife, with my three kids here…

*And you were paying for two- for four people’s mortgages in one.*

And the mortgage I was paying on my own.

*That’s amazing.*

Yeah.

*So, I mean, life doesn’t exactly sound easy here.*

No, not easy, I mean I faced the music but, uh, I didn’t- I didn’t mind, but that was the biggest problem, was setback… setback. But money had value. Let’s put it this way: I will – I was… XXX was about £30, I was so lucky the first big job was St Thomas’ Hospital. That was the biggest job.

*And what was your firm? What was the…*

Uh, this was the Phoenix- the first electrical job um… I come back- when I got laid off by Barclay’s, and I was completely heartbroken, as I had taken- bought the house, no income, nothing, so I was looking through the local paper, um, there was an ad for electricians. I said “I better take it”. So I rang the people. It was Bosey’s Brothers. I had – a local electrical firm on XXX in East Ham. Whether or their shop came into Forest Gate, it was on that XXX Road.

*Yeah, main road.*

Right, so … I rang the guys, the guy said to me uh, “could you come over please?” I said “well, today?” He said “if you want to come today, you come today, we’ll interview you”, so I went for an interview. So uh… I was interviewed, the guy made me laugh when- when he asked me my name, I said “Ajit”, he said “what?” I said “Ajit”. Four letters, I spelled it. He said “No, no no no, it’s too difficult to remember”, I said “what? Too difficult, four letter word?” I said… all of a sudden, my brain clicked, I said “Aji, Aji, Aji, as if you’re edging someone, Aji. Agitator. Agitator. Agitator. You can call me Aji. Agitator.” The guy started laughing and almost rolling on the floor laughing, he said “hang on, hang on hang on, mate, hang on, you’ll give me a tummy ache, hang on.” I said “what, that’s the easiest way to remember, Aji Aji Aji Aji Agitator, right?” So that word, ‘agitator’, became so famous with my name later, even the last contracts we had with Goldman Sachs, one of my colleagues, he used to call me “oy, Aji! Agitator!” all the time, he used to sing. All the time.

*Like the Terminator, but the Agitator.*

Yeah, yeah it became sort of a term. Oh, Aji, Agitator. Every time I would give some grief to chief engineers or this and for discussing other projects, this and that-

*Yeah, yeah.*

They would say “stop agitating us…” So then that was a part and parcel of my name then. I mean the guys said “ok, um,could you start on Saturday?” I said, “I don’t mind mate, I can start anyway.” He said, “but one personal question I would like to ask you,” I said “XXXX go ahead.” He said “no offence”, I said “go ahead”. He said “the first job is in brewery mate, would you mind working in a brewery?” I said, “why you ask me that?” I said “I’d love to”, I said “I would rather swim in it-“

*XXXX*

He said “no, no I’m asking because some religious people don’t like to work in such-”

*Yep*

“Environments.” I said “nah, I would love to”. He said “ok”, so we started with that firm XXXX-that was my second job now within two, three months. So they-we were sent to Ind Coope Breweries in Romford, by the market… Funny enough when we went there, it was on the picket line… but the guys drove us through and they went and as we were talking to the site agent, an electrical firm who were doing their job was called a parker electrical firm Birmingham side from Midlands somewhere. Um, they said to us well look, this is what’s happening, there’s a strike here and we would like to engage you people to do our job over the Easter holidays, whatever it was, or the bank holidays. So we have to hand over certain area after these holidays we’re promised, so that’s the reason we are… in a grave need of workers. So as our people are on strike, so we can’t really meet our commitments, so if you could help us. As soon as we were discussing this, the picket line stewards and all those come over and XXXX giving us razzmatazz which I didn’t know and didn’t understand even much about it. “Brothers, this and that this is our job you shouldn’t be jeopardising our livelihoods this, you’d better leave the site.”

*Solidarity*

Sure, Because we-we didn’t know about the unions so, so the guys explained to us all look what we will do the site agent said, “you go and have a cup of tea, come back by the main gate, there’s no pickets there and we’ll let you in.” So we done the same after having a cup of tea in some cafe, Murphy’s cafe somewhere. I think I still remember the Murphy’s cafe in Romford, um, we’ve gone back and sneaked through the main gate and worked throughout … had plenty of beer to drink at our… so the-the guy said “here have a few crates, help yourself whenever you want a drink but please, finish this job for us.”

*It’s a perk of the job, XXXX.*

This was-yeah, that was for a week’s job for ten men. So we were there, were six or seven of us so he said, we asked him, I said “what if we finish it before the holidays?” He said, “well we’ll pay you whatever we have agreed.” I said “fair enough.” We happened to finish the same night… same night we finished the job and the management XXXX electrical governors and they were very happy. So they took us, they were supplying labour to another major firms called Phoenix, they had a picket line also and they were doing St.Thomas’s hospital on the banks of River Thames opposite side to former GLC. Now you can either place us in Waterloo or you can go in Westminister its joining the Westminister bridge, so when we went there we faced the same music again. “Scabs, scabs” banging on XXXX with the main contractors there. They happened to lay the transport from Burrow station where Phoenix head office was, so we were asked to come there so XXXX the transport will be given from there. So we-we were sneaked in through in that manner to St. Thomas’s, the second employment, second taste of picket line. So… we were there after XXXX there were two companies supplying the labour, one from the West London king’s and this from the East London XXXX brother’s. So it so happened, slowly and slowly, Phoenix wanted to get rid of these labour supplying companies and they took over the entire labour who was willing to work for them on their payroll. So I was lucky to be one of them, so I ended up working seven years for them, Phoenix doing some major work for them also. I was a supervisor and a foreman, um, unfortunately, one of my friends-I don’t know whether he’s still alive, Mr Burt Hunter he was well famous in union. He knew Ian Chappelle or was it Frank Chappel, Ian Chappel, I forgot-

*No it was a Chappel, yep I remember I think it was Frank.*

Yeah, yeah. He was the head of the union then, he-they were good mates and Bill seaman used to be the London area officer, um, we-I worked for them. They XXXX the idea of coming to coming to me because we done some projects together and I done the job, he-he got the fame. My-my mate Burt Hunter, um, he and other labour manager Dave-Dave Evans, Phoenix labour manager they-they cooked something they come to me I was-we were doing Bank of India and Bank area and I was sorting out some plant when they shouted to me. Um,I went over to them and asked what it was and they handed me a letter. I said, “I asked them what it was they said ‘oh don’t worry, it’s nothing, it’s just a hoodwink’.” I said “what do you mean by hoodwink?” “It means, it’s saying we are terminating my services.” He said “nah, nah it’s just a bluff don’t worry.” I said “bluff, in black and white?”

*Yeah, it seems more than a bluff.*

He said-he said “no, no” he said “we are getting rid of people with two to four years service.” I said “but mine is seven years and you’re telling me it’s a bluff?” And that was for real… and I went-I went to sign on and the guys I showed them the letter also. They said “you got so many more weeks to go mate, you can’t sign on because you have to finish the-your term of resignation, um, redundancy. A number of weeks, every week every year a week for you so you got to serve that notice.” I said “the guy”-I was in office I said, the guy, my own mate told me I’m not supposed to be within those four walls, I should not be, I’m not in their books anymore. I’m finished with them, I said “that’s the reason I’ve come over here, I’ve already been there and they said no, I’m not working so they said leave it to us and we’ll sort out this” and they rang Phoenix headquarters and spoke to my mate, the union head and explained that some of your guys came over to sign. This is his name and according to his letter and him, saying there’s so many weeks left for his redundancy, um,redundancy notice and you people are saying, “no he’s finished, he can’t work, he’s finished.” So he wanted to sign-we won’t let him sign until he’s finished his redundancy notice. Um,so the telephone rang the same evening, my mate blowing his top, “why the hell did I go to the Jobcentre, you bastard, you shouldn’t have done this.” I said “well, what else was left for me to do, there was no option I told you, I tried to convince you.” Being my mate also, I said “I tried to twist your arm saying I’ve got still so many more weeks to go, but you wouldn’t listen to me and so that was the only place I had to go to sign on by right. To declare that I’m unemployed from today according to you people.” “You come-come back tomorrow enough you bastard XXXX.” So he rang our mate Bill Seaman who now by-before he was a London area officer who now is, um,labour manager for James Scott another big electrical firm, electrical mechanical. So as soon as he heard my name, he said what has he done? He said, nothing, um,can I send him over to you, Bill? He said, oh by all means, by all means if he’s our friend we can’t see him suffering. So he sent me over there, so he signed me on… he signed me on and I was eight years with them, served eight years with them, done major contracts with them including the Bank-Bank of England, Whitehall and we went to ink factory, Ministry of Defence in Leicester to rectify a lot of work undertaken by one of the directors who was the engineer right. I had to go and rectify all his… jobs, yes-

*Cleaning up after the boss.*

Yes, so I’m-I got hurt in Bank of England and that’s how I lost my eight years service saying I did not send sick notices. I sent them one sick notice, told them “I’m not fit, I will be sending you another sick note before coming, when I feel like I’m fit.” They terminated my eight years service saying I have terminated it on my own for not sending sick notes, so I lost that job. Then I started my own and I-

*You decided you wanted to be the boss?*

Because I was hurt, I almost got paralysed and I could hardly manoeuvre myself and local builder, I don’t know where he got my name from, he was stuck, he was doing some work for an architect and there was a fourteen bedroom… old people’s home in Pinner. Um, that architect project so he was-this local builder was doing this architect’s office in Kingston so he took me out, told him “look I cannot even walk, I cannot manoeuvre, I cannot-I can only sit or-so if you want me to do your job I cannot do it. It’s only one condition, I can do it, I’ll take my brother in law with me, the youngest one. I’ll show him what to do, he’ll do it if you’ve got no objection.” He said “no I’m interested XXXX.” I finished the job for him and all-all the office for the architect, the drawing room and all that and his office. He was so much pleased with it so he-we were invited for the party for the opening ceremony and that was on the Saturday, we finished half noon. I’m struggling to do his XXXX lighting, all this fascinating stuff, which arrived the last minute, in the afternoon and the evening he was holding a party in the same place.

*And he need light.*

Yeah, so we finished it, it was so- so much overwhelmed XXXX. He really liked everything and his other project electrical contracts were giving them hard time. So the builders who were doing the construction for that old people’s home also were present there and my name was being nominated without my knowledge. And then I was taken to the builders who we were introduced that I will be doing a project, at the same time I had a big house on top of my road which I’d already consented to do, because I was out of work. So I said I will do that, so I had to turn that down and took this fourteen bedroom old people’s home which included fire alarms, XXXX system, laundry system all-music system everywhere, so that was a good big contract I thought that’s a good breakthrough for-but the builders turned me over. Because it was taken on mutual understanding and I had to pay from my pocket. The forty thousand contract then, I had to pay a lot of money out of my pocket. All these big panels which were part of the builders XXXX-

*So you’re paying for theirs?*

I have to buy for them.

*You’re paying for their supplies.*

Yeah, I’m paying for them. So that was a bitter taste of my own contracts but at the same time I had loads of contracts for the same time. Six, seven but the labour force, I could not get it XXXX. And then I came back to building industry and I joined, um,XXXX… Did I, hang on. No, no I didn’t-didn’t join XXXX, sorry I-I was looking for a job and I’d gone through agencies, called XXXX . I joined them and-and I was fortunate now again to be sent to British broadcasting service… right, in Holborn. I was there… and I worked there then from there, I was sent to… Whitecity-the studio five, um, they used to do- that’s the TV centre we’re talking about now.

*Yeah*

Whitecity, um, they used to do the sports programmes and we-

*Yeah, I used to work there, at the television centre.*

Yeah. We refurbished the whole area linked with that studio five. Um, one of my engineers so XXXX commended me and all the certificates which was supposed to be given to me. Well, one day I went to XXXX office, they were hanging in their office, with my name on it. And I say, well I […] asked the gentleman I said what-what are those things doing up there mate? There-there supposed to be in my custody. They said no, no these are XXXX these are ours. I said but it says Arjit Sondh not you. So this is it, well it’s still lying with them so um-

*So that you’ve lost your trophies in Uganda, your certificates in London, people keep taking all your awards off you.*

Yeah, yeah. Well I got a few things, you know, a few things I mean this-this, um, I started working there then finished with… that… the girl who used to be our wages clerk, Shirley Eaton with Phoenix, my first big firm, of big-where I’ve worked for a long time. The first big firm was Barclays, this, let’s say this is the second big firm. Phoenix, which was international, they had a lot of work in Middle East also. The girl who worked for Phoenix as wages clerk now I was finished-I was looking for a job again and I happened to be ringing when I started with, um, XXXX she was working for XXXX. She gave me on, then when I finished with this she was labour manager with XXXX. When I rang, she recognised me straight-oh who is that Arjit? I said yes. I said who is that, Shirley. I said what’s up, love. I said I’m looking for job. She said, you don’t have to ask for a job, come on then, I’ll sign you on. Go to Barking shopping centre, that’s at Vicarage Farm, is that Vicarage Farm?

*Yes, it is Vicarage Farm.*

Yeah. That-that was where I started working for XXXX. Ah-

*So she was your guardian angel, it seems-*

Yeah. I worked there and then I worked in NatWest bank in Aldgate. Where they do all the administration and the paperwork stationary-

*Yeah*

We worked there for XXXX. I made a lot of money there. A lot of-a lot of overtime-

*Do you-it seems like you have a real um,**ethic for work*, *like a work ethic*.

Yeah

*I mean, that’s not unique to you though that. I mean that-I’ve found every member-*

I mean this is it, I took a challenge because that was my nature like lets-let’s get back to square one in Africa now, East Africa. If people said with my physique, I’m about five, five or something, um, not very stoutly built but very XXXX, let’s put it this way. Um -

*A Tough-tough cookie*.

I can take-take, take the challenge-

*Yeah, yeah.*

That’s-that’s my nature. I used to, if somebody said you can’t do this in games and sports, I said I will do it. And I proved it and I done it. Rugby is not my taste why-it’s a joke now I was doing a job for a XXXX in Chislehurst. Irish-Irish foreman for the builders sight, we were having a lunch break, sitting on the lawn of that XXXX pad, on his house discussing and I happened to say I-I used to play rugby. This big, hefty Irish guy looked at me and said what, were you the player or the ball?

*I thought he was gonna accuse you of being a winger, not the ball, that’s incredible. I think that’s the Irish sense of humour.*

Yeah, that’s it, yeah that’s it. I think yeah-

*But do you-but, I mean-*

Yeah when we-when I toured Europe, Fergus Slattery was playing with us-

*Really? That’s right, yeah, yeah.*

He was one of the players as a guest member, included on our team. Two of them were playing with us-

*Do you think I mean in terms of the work ethic, do you think it’s because-you’ve just said you like a challenge if someone’s-if somebody says you can’t do something you’ll do it-*

Yeah, yep yeah.

*Do you think it was the same with the when you were-when you left Uganda with nothing, you had everything taken, did you see that as a challenge to get your life?-*

Yeah, yeah. That-that was initiative also to look forward. Look-not to look back what the parents had. I think because I never looked back there, even then so that was part and parcel of my nature like, let’s put it this way so, I had to struggle to make ends meet. So that paid off slowly and slowly. I went one place to another, one place to build my own reputation, one so-

*As you said earlier it’s a survival instinct, you lose a job, you have to get another job-*

Yeah, that’s right, that’s right. It’s-it’s survival-it’s survival-

*To survive. You have a mortgage to pay-*

Let’s put it this way. Any-majority of the nation, even today, if you look at them, if they don’t have regular work, they can’t survive… majority.

*Yeah yeah, the system cannot help you support you all your life-*

Yeah, yeah. That’s where we also came in and we have to do the same thing.

*Uh-hmm. Do you think, um,**do-I mean do you generally think in terms of, that there is-because-why do you think the Ugandan Asian community has been so successful, because it’s-it’s almost-when I first came and sat down in your wonderful living room I-I said part of the reason we’re doing this project is because really, the Ugandan Asian community’s seen probably the most successful-*

I-I. They have-the best.

*They’re held up as the most-*

Yep. They-Indians were here… now, Indians were here… we’ve heard a lot of stories, early days between ‘70’s-’75, ’76. There was a jealousy amongst East Africans Asians and the Indian Indians, South Asians. Because they used to say, oh these-these people have just come this country, we have been here for yonks. Look at them, their flash motors, they come in the pub, jump in their motor, gone-whizz, disappeared and we are waiting here for a bus to come. The difference and in Leicester, we heard stories that East Africans who opened their shops, they were ruined by jealousy. But-jeopardised their business out of sheer jealousy people used to come and wreck the place, this and that. Because as I said there were XXXX opening ceremony for a shop opposite, they said their prayers and got the sweets there. All-any customers coming yes I said to give sweets is a good omen and so they would go in for that and these hooligans would go, Asians again and they jeopardise the whole area.

*XXXX*

Yeah, this is what-these stories were going on before, I mean they were so jealous, so jealous but in a way, we catered everything for them, nobody wanted to take them on before-

*Yeah, yeah-*

Because they said, illiterate, lack of social behaviour and no manners, no etiquette so when-I’m not saying we’re well cultured, this-no. We know where what goes.

*Do you think it helped the fact that you were brought up, erm,**in**essentially in a colonial system as well, an English colonial system? I know Uganda had independence-*

Yeah

*But, before that-*

Yeah, majority, majority of the places where the colonial rule was, they XXXX.

*The culture was still there-*

Yeah-

*Almost, wasn’t it and the sports that you played in Uganda when you were young-I mean, their all British sports you know-*

Yeah

*This is a-*

Rugby yes-

*You know, the aftermath of the colonial power-*

That’s right, yeah-

*Despite the fact they’d left-*

XXXX

*So do you think that helped when you arrived here, a lot of you had almost-you’d been adapted already, almost to the British system.*

Oh yeah, we were-because as I said my parents was too much into these white friends. Many, many parties were organised and Christmas time we-we never knew what Christmas was? It was only the-when Christmas comes in December, big baskets being made. Nothing small gifts, baskets that big, local-made baskets were beautiful, of cane. Packed with different sweets, drinks, this and that for that-that XXXX [SWAHILI] for this XXXX [SWAHILI] for that XXXX [SWAHILI] and we always used to be ready to pounce on anything XXXX on any damn thing what was left there, we see no-one looking assorted biscuit XXXX, tins. We’d never seen them-but that was sort of a luxury, right so every time nobody’s looking-open it, get the tape off, eat the bottom layer, top layer then back in office. That’s in office, not in the house, little offices and when, when they used to have these-their friend officers come in, these big XXXX [SWAHILI] oh XXXX tea, alright. Oh yes, yes we’ll have and he would ask-ask the servant, er,get those biscuits out, this and that and they take one layer out and there’s nothing on the bottom, still XXXX seen.

*Too late by then, you’ve already enjoyed the biscuits.*

Well, this is it, I mean we used to have a lot of fun like that well this is-that was our XXXX because I would say we were well-well to do, we didn’t suffer much, we didn’t- we were not that there-

*Yeah, yeah-*

That’s it, we were somewhere-

*But you weren’t-you weren’t down there-*

No, we were somewhere, three quarters or something like that-

*Yeah, yeah, and do you think, er, I mean so, I suppose, ‘cause I think the biggest issue-whenever I ask people what was their first impressions of England, people oh it’s the weather, oh its cold the weather, erm,**or the food is often an issue is well. Um, but it seems to me, er,**one thing that helped the Ugandan Asian community, obviously they weren’t used to the weather, they weren’t used to the food but certain aspects of British society they were already aware of. You know, cricket for example, they played cricket you know-*

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah yeah-

*So they XXXX on it and you know a lot of Ugandan Asians already spoke a certain level of English as well which obviously helped-*

That-that’s true, that’s right yeah, yep-

*Because the biggest test for any migrant is being able to talk-*

English was taught from primary, um, primary three, four-four or something like that-we started early-

*So I mean all these things helped you perhaps achieve the status-this successful status-*

Yeah-

*The fact that you had this work ethic installed in you, erm,**but also-*

Yeah that’s right and as was-as I’m saying most of the families used to intermingle with the British also obviously there’s no there’s no other way of transaction-

*Yep-*

Right, or communication if the guys been old enough in the country, he would speak Swahili-my father was multi-lingual in that way but no English, this is it. All three or four African languages he could speak.

*Oh*

Hmmm. Um, this is XXXX we felt that-that’s how most of the Asian community who were in business had no problem. Because they met most of the people, from all fields of life, lows, highs, high society this and that so they knew hot to behave, where to behave, what not to do, how to accommodate certain groups. Right, how to treat them, how if a low-low class, if he’s welder give-dish out the same treatment to him, similar way. I mean, that low class will be always the same to everyone.

*Do you think all these-its quite interesting isn’t it because all these skills, your ability to sort of, um,**you know interact with different communities in business et cetera, um,**the reality is once Idi Amin, um,* *removed you from his country, he took your possessions, he took your money and he threatened you. But he couldn’t take away these skills that you’d learnt-*

No-

*Your ability to make business-*

Yeah this is-

*Your ability to turn around profit quickly-*

This is what Bob Astell, he was one of the British guys there, he was henchmen, I think he was killed later. I saw him here in ’72, no ’73 or ’74 in Bank area eye-eye to eye XXXX. I said Bob, he looked at me and he turned his face, he was in Kampala- he used to come to rugby club. And then later I learned he is, he was murdered also-

*The secret-*

By Idi Amin

*Really part of the-*

Yeah, yeah that’s right-

*The foreign diplomat service.*

He, nah-he I think-I think he wrote in the paper that, um,Sikhs… he said other nations, XXXX and all this are shopkeepers, a nation of XXXX [SWAHILI] shopkeepers. But Sikh community… the country will let them because they are fundi [SWAHILI] F-U-N-D-I, that’s technicians right, craftsmen that’s fundi-

*Engineers-*

Yeah, so that’s where the country’s gonna lack. All the skilled people will be going, amongst these what-lot leaving the country. So XXXX [SWAHILI] people will manage to run the shops, but to get the skilled labour, that’s going to be a deficiency in the country. So that’s why he said it will be the biggest blow to see Sikh community going away, especially because carpenters, bricklayers, contractors, electrical, mechanical, you name it they were there.

*And always in demand-*

Yeah-

*Those things-*

That’s it-

*Every country needs these skills that-*

Yeah, yeah that’s it.

*And, um,**you-let’s talk about-we’re gonna start wrapping it up soon, um, ah…**certainly the next ten minutes or so. Let’s talk about, um,**your family here, I mean when you sort of-I’ve met your daughter, Veena who obviously I met on the internet to, um,**approach you into this interview. And you know when you see Veena and her children who I’ve-she’s told me about, um,* *gone to university et cetera, I mean if you look back to 1971, 1972 when you first arrived here, you know you-that time where you almost looked like you were going to lose your house after three months of getting it you were made redundant for the second time-*

Yeah

*And you look back at all the possessions that you lost in Uganda and the life that was taken away from you, are you proud when you look round and you see what you’ve achieved?*

Well it was, it was a challenge again, let’s put it this way it was a challenge every time trying to settle, something happened. So-

*Uh-hmm, it’s just the next challenge.*

Yeah

*That’s very modest of you though, I mean it’s-*

Yeah it was, I mean you’ve taken it… you gotta be patient… I mean… although I’m human, I used to get heartbroken, I mean XXXX failed me a lot. She was working, she used to take my youngest XXXX say the place she worked was in Green Street, um,Forest Gate… stitching right, XXXX… The owner was a female, she said and my sister in law also was working there to, the two of them used to go there together, oh three of them, two sisters in law, her. And she used to take the baby with her three month old, four month old baby, with her all the time. And she said don’t worry about the baby, you bring the baby here, you do the work, I’ll look after her. She was so nice, so nice I mean she helped her a lot, I mean she used to feed the baby everything. She-she’s a real XXXX, she would let her work, I mean people have been very helpful also, the same time. My next door neighbour was an old lady, um, there were two-two couples living together, related-English, um… she-she was living downstairs I think. Their grandson stayed upstairs XXXX, and she stayed down, when we moved in, in the first couple of months her husband died. And she was nice, nice lady no, all of them were nice and… we didn’t know much… so because people, this kind of people want to keep them separate themselves. It’s nothing like back home if XXXX are visiting me, I’m not in then next door will say oh come on, come on-

*Wait-*

Come on, don’t worry come in be our guest till they don’t come. So you can’t see here happening this-this XXXX until you know the people.

*Yep*

You know, so… she, my kids were raised by her. If we have to go somewhere, we will give the keys to her and she would make sure the-she would even pick them from school, bring them, stay with them. If we happened to come by midnight or two o’clock in the morning she would be still there, with the kids, she’d be sitting there. She was such a nice lady.

*And was she, um,**was she Asian or is she a white lady?*

White lady-

*White lady*

White lady, I’m telling XXXX, they’re-they’re gone a long time ago. They gave me the offer first when they were selling, but Veena was getting married then. So that XXXX tied up or I would have bought that house, so even this one. But that was my idea to buy a few-which my, but my-

*So you’re, you’re really happy here aren’t you?*

Yeah, which my brother there, then buy another one, give it to rent but I-I-

*Uh-hmm. When you first-*

My family at large, as I said earlier didn’t allow this to happen, they wanted to break us before because they saw the roof over my head before them, with five pounds in my pocket and they had the money in the banks here and they’re living rent, that jealousy-

*I: Jealousy, amongst the family-*

That’s it so-

*Do you think-I mean when you first arrived here did you see yourself staying, um,* *in England, obviously you knew you wouldn’t go back to Uganda, or did you think one day you would?*

No the first-yeah people-everyone felt like that, um, I tried in fact, before coming I tried in Kenya… because when they gave me that notice so, I had to leave, their nationalising my post I-I told my brother in law, her elder brother, um,he said not to worry, that’s no problem. So he spoke to one of his friends who-who had a textile, owner of a textile, he said yes I’ll take him on. It was all done but when it come to the government level, I’m leaving one country going there there's-it was east like European… community. It was East African community, that was organisation, three-three XXXX countries. No Zambia also I think had part of it, they were together so they said if one community country has asked them to leave the country we cannot take him. So we will be violating the rules and regulations-

*Yep-*

Of the community. So-

*It will affect the agreements.*

Yeah, yeah, that’s it so-so I had to leave otherwise I was offered a job in Kenya-

*Yeah*

God knows I might have been there still now-

*Your life may have been a little bit different.*

Yeah, yeah different, entirely different.

*Um, and I mean, so-but once you were here after a few years you realised this was your home, I mean-*

Oh yeah, I mean this it, we have to take it. I didn’t want to go to any other country, so-

*Uh-hmm. And let’s talk about Uganda, when we first started chatting you said you went back in 2010, was it?*

2011

*’11, was that the first time you went back since the ‘70’s-*

That’s it that- I wanted to go while I was in Kenya in 2005, I wanted to go to Uganda. I was trying to get tickets then there was some big outcry going on, a bit unstable. Something like some commotion between the government or I don’t know exactly, then my family members in Kenya, wouldn’t let me. They said no, we don’t want to let you go, it’s not safe, so you’re not going. That’s it yeah.

*Uh-hmm, so even then still a concern. And so you went back, erm,**interesting-*

In 2011-

*And what-can you tell me what were your first reactions-*

Yeah it-the first reaction when I landed out in Entebbe, it was different and till it-bigger, bigger airport, much bigger airport now. Um,I’ll show you, got some photographs there-

*Oh amazing-*

With the Olympic team flying out and, um, going through the system, a taxi driver XXXX completely system like people are asked, you want a taxi? It’s organised within the area there, that the taxi drivers come and they escort you to the taxis. Um, another big thing shook me, the development, so much development from Entebbe to Kampala is about twenty miles-twenty to twenty one miles difference-distance like… Before, it was isolated huts here and there, mud huts, this time I saw development, houses like this you see like my shed here-solid, tiled roofs, far inside, not on the roadside. Few of them on the roadside, along the roadside but now it’s about maybe two hundred yards, hundred yards down the road. Nice, like a little location, nice and through our most very isolated areas, where you won’t find life, development XXXX and when you come near Kampala, seven, eight miles non break throughout, and you can see you’re getting into hustle bustle there now.

*Hmmm, the city’s getting bigger.*

Oh that was the chaos. That was the chaos when I seen there. Gone to our Sikh temple were three of us, Sikh temple. So we said we’ll go to Sikh temple then we find out from someone, good hotels, we’re bound to get someone there. So-because I knew a few of them-electrical contractors who was still there, right I said there used to be very XXXX linked with the church, the temple. Family members may be there so that it was different story, entirely different, most of India, Indian Sikhs have come there, all different. So we went up there asked for the […] there was a temple coming from Entebbe straight, there was one temple there and there’s-there’s a national stadium, football stadium and you go up slightly. That’s the mosque, XXXX mosque, you go this way on the same road, there’s our temple, Sikh temple. I used to live here-

*Ok-*

And you come down this way it’s a XXXX cinema, XXXX cinema, XXXX cinema, that’s the high road-

*Uh-hmm-*

That’s-that’s where the city bar used to be somewhere here, this was my road coming down XXXX so going there we said, we need a taxi… one-one to go to the other temple, so we took a taxi. The distance between those two temples we could walk there with-within five to ten minutes… We took a taxi because we had belongings, took us more than an hour. So much traffic. So much traffic in Kampala.

*Compared to 1971? You can hardly have any…?*

Nothing, nothing. Nothing.

*Amazing.*

So much traffic.

*And did you go back to your former house?*

Yeah, I come back to that later. Um, yes, Entebbe, Kampala, no. So, we see - I wanted to see Kampala, I wanted to see my university, my career university. I said “I want to go and see my university please, let’s go there”, um… The driver took us- it was so much traffic, he went around and we asked him “you come take us siteseeing, like, we want to see Kampala town, I want to see my factory…” Do you want anything else to drink?

*Um, no, I’m good thank you.*

You sure?

*Thank you very much. No, I’m good.*

**Do you want anything?**

*You know, I will have a tea, is that okay?*

A cup of tea?

*Yes, yes, that’s okay. I appreciate that. Yes, sugar’s good, thank you, just the one.*

I’ll have a glass of wat- hot water please. I don’t drink tea.

*You don’t drink tea? Not even masala tea? Chai, masala chai, or…?*

Rare, really rare. If someone really twist me arm…

*So you’re- you’re Ugandan Asian, uh, moved to England, and you don’t drink tea? [laughs]*

No, I used to drink, I’ve given up almost three - almost three years now. Only hot water. Only one cup of day.

*That’s very good for you. Yeah, coffee? I can’t drink coffee. I have one a day.*

You sure you don’t want something to eat?

*No, I’m good thank you. I going to, sort of, push off probably in the next twenty minutes.*

Okay, okay.

*Um, the um, my job is very good. If I spend a day out interviewing, they give me money to buy food on the way home, so I - my girlfriend works-*

Should I give you a list? My shopping list? [laughs]

*No, I’ll save you some, I promise! Yeah, but my girlfriend works at Tottenham Court Road, so I’m going to go and eat at Tottenham Court Road.*

I see. Alright.

*Yeah. Quite alright. She’s Australian, so I don’t get her to cook.*

Australian?

*Australians can’t cook. They barbecue, but they don’t cook well. [laughs]*

Okay, okay, okay. So you are from…?

*I’m from Wolverhampton, originally. In Midlands.*

You’re English.

*Yeah, yeah. I’ve lived most of my life, though, adult life, I’ve lived abroad, I lived in Mexico for two and a half years, Peru, in South America, I lived for a year, um, America, I lived for about three and a half years…*

What part of America?

*Everywhere. Tuscon, originally, in Arizona. Then I moved to California for six months, and then in the north, I moved to New York for a year, Washington DC for a year, and then eventually, Pennsylvania, in a small coal mining town, I lived- about twenty thousand people. I was the only Englishman in there.*

[phone rings, interviewee answers] 200:16

*Did he want to sell something or buy something?*

Canvassing call…

*So let’s go back. You wanted to go back to your old university.*

Yeah, I wanted to see that. XXX, he took us around, so we did this travel, this and that, and gone back. I’ve seen the place, I’ve seen the house in Kampala living, he could not even go there. There were so many rules XXX this and that, the place- development, so much development, unbelievable, in Kampala itself. But the old building, they haven’t maintained it, there were broken windows, paint, seen all the paint like that, roads, big holes… ditches, and the like. Commuters, unbelievable! Pedestrians, unbelievable. Rat race.

*Just people everywhere.*

Like you see on Bond Street here. It’s- that is nothing also, it’s like… it’s less- not a XXX rate, like people coming out of Wembley Stadium, that’s… certain big areas are like that, congested. So cars can’t go, they’re hooting “dee dee dee dee dee dee!”, people are walking on the road, in certain areas, that’s what the stadium XXX that I’m talking about. Too much. I mean, earlier, I mentioned Gaddafi’s influence there, he built a big, big mosque there, Gaddafi. Yeah, by other con- right behind XXX’s mosque. Massive! I was surprised to see that. That’s a big mosque there, um, that was Kampala.

**Sugar?**

*Yes, please.*

One or two?

*One, please.*

**One.**

Coming out of Kampala, going to Jinja, we used to have a town - a small location. First you come to… uh… there was a college… uh… XXXbo. As soon as you leave the town and industrial state, you come to the national stadium. Cricket, massive cricket pitch, hockey stadium, boxing XXX, and across the road, private clubs: Sikh club, next to it was the rugby club, uh… ground for- hockey grounds, football grounds, and about two miles or three miles of that, going to XXXbo College. It was a location on its own, like. Bit further - It’s all- no football pitches, those football pitches are gone… development. Buildings.

*Buildings.*

Development. Both sides, buildings, buildings. Round up to XXXbo was fifteen, fifteen miles or something… it was a small shanty area, like. We used to stop for doughnuts, mandazis.

*Okay.*

Doughnuts called ‘mandazis’.

*It’s a place that’s sort of your last stop to get some food and then keep going.*

At night time, when we’re going back to Jinja after a game, the boys are saying “oh, I’d like a bottle of soda” and like mandazi, that’s what the young… and so… I was surprised, when we stopped there, I asked the taxi driver “what is this place?”

*Thank you so much, it looks perfect, thank you very much.*

Don’t be shy.

*No, no, it looks wonderful, thank you.*

No prejudice, it’s white, or black?

*No, no, it’s exactly as I wanted, quite, it’s perfect.*

You sure?

*Quite sure. Honestly, it’s quite perfect, thank you. It’s very English, isn’t it? You always find that English people are scared to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, they’re always sort of…*

No, no… when you ask for something, you better have it at your own pace.

*Exactly, exactly. I think it’s the English Disease, pretending you like something when you don’t.*

I don’t think the English… Maybe some, but the majority of them, yeah, no, don’t worry. The English are shy. It’s… other people will be more shy.

*Yes, I mean, I think what I say is- I- I got brought up as an Irish person, not as an English person…*

No, you’ve moved around, you’ve gathered a bit of everything.

*Exactly, exactly. I think the biggest lesson I ever had when I was travelling was when I moved to Peru. I was only nineteen when I went to Peru, uh, so for a nineteen year old to be uh… living in a place like- Wolverhampton and Latin America are very different, you know? I went, I actually went- my first girlfriend was Peruvian, and that’s why I went there and lived with her there…*

I’ve got family in Wolverhampton.

*Oh really?*

And friends also, that come from Africa.

*They’re not related to Enoch Powell, are they? [laughs]*

XXXside.

*Really? So this-*

Our cousins.

*There’s a big Asian community in Wolverhampton, most of my friends when I grew up were Shirads, Deepaks, Patels, they were all my friends.*

Right, so…

*So you were going – you were on your way back to Jinja.*

Yeah.

*For the first time.*

We were going to see – see that town, and he said “there’s no corner”. And I said “what?” It’s a town! A fully developed, modern town. There was no break from Kampala, all the buildings along side this, back, down the road, this, and right up to Lugazi, Lugazi is the half way to Jinja, Kampala is fifty miles’ journey, it’s about twenty five miles, that’s where XXX met us, XXX status. Sheikh Amata, have you heard of him?

*I think Praful Patel mentioned it, is that the guy XXX the cars?*

Israeli cars, yes. He’s the one I made a member of the rugby club.

*XXX?*

I took him too, and there was another guy called Sidra, they had motorcycle agencies, XXX or something, him. Ta- tarum Sidra. Right up to Lugazi, development. I was shocked! Shocked. Before, it was all isolated and jungle.

*Like, rural area?*

Yeah, becoming the other way now, rather fast towards Jinja. So… slowly and slowly, and sugar cane XXX the estate, so you can’t have development there. But we did – if you look beyond some locations, I’ve seen big locations are going, twenty, thirty houses, a church, or a school, or something like that, and I’ve seen the white girls on… cycling, you know? We crossed them after about a mile or so, we say “oh that must be the teachers or something, yeah”, so as you’re approaching Jinja, obviously halfway, after twenty five miles, after ten miles, nothing. No development, because of forest, and come near Jinja, you have started the development, uh, come, on the right you have the XXX, the XXX, and further on was a XXX textile, that was the uh, during the colonial time, I think, XXX textile. And on the other side, Madvani had his own textile, Madvani had a tractor’s factory somewhere, and then you… come to a dam. A hydroelectric dam.

*Yup.*

Ah… Couldn’t believe the sight, honestly. Filthy! Ditches, puddles, on the dam itself, the road. I looked on my left, the water flowed into ravines, full of green. All the branches, full of plants in there, I said “no wonder electricity is being cut off, maybe the turbines suck in all this rubbish”, who knows? So… going across, all the houses, when the dam was being erected were beautiful houses, beautiful bungalos and all that.

*For the workers.*

For the labour. Yeah, for the workmen, but the majority was white, they were Italian and all that, so… so, um, that township was built then, with this one… club, swimming pools and everything. And that swimming pool and club later on, Asians became members and all that… before it was a white dominance, no blacks were allowed, no Asians were allowed, nothing. So, the whole area alongside the road, and slightly, say, about that house there, not my shed, I mean the other house, but that far from the road, all a – haunted area. Nobody, no soul, nothing. Right off the stress of the road, right off the roundabout.

*A ghost town.*

Yeah. There’s nothing. I was shocked. And we hit onto the main area passing by my school, coming to – that’s the main road coming straight from Mr Gil’s, and uh, graves- a cemetery, straight- that one straight road that goes straight across, bypasses the main street, my- my road, where our other house was, and XXX market, taxis- taxi rank, bus stop, bus stations, straight right up to there and you follow that road, you don’t take no turning, straight into Kampala. Just one straight road. It’s only when you come to the towns that they’re XXX. So… I couldn’t believe it. The nash- sorry, Nile Park, which was the railway bridge, before that, there was a river bridge, that’s the dam here, this side is the railway bridge. For the East African Railways, that was built a long time ago.

*By the British?*

Yeah, so… because it was easier for relation, they cut off the traffic, motorway completely cut off later, only pedestrians and cyclists would go. So that was a park alongside – big massive green. And the other side was a golf course, my rugby club, Mr Gil’s massive house like Buckingham Palace. Yeah, so… ah, I couldn’t believe it, development. No park, very little left on the – on the side of the road development. A hotel! A big hotel, we went there, had a couple of beers, came out, gone to see my town, wherever we could go, and XXX a day trip. So, we’d seen my temple, beautiful, old… the building that my parents helped them to build. By the… alongside the temple, Mr Gil, being the tycoon, seven thousand shillings was donated by our family. That was in fifties, early fifties, that’s a lot of money. Two opening ceremonies. Mr Gil, who was a multi-millionaire, whose case had to pay a hundred thousand shillings cash for tax evading, for one of the buildings in Nairobi. One building. So he was nominated to perform the opening ceremony, but he wanted to change the name of the temple. They said “no, we can’t change the name of the temple, the temple is going to be Rangaria Temple, Rangaria Siekh Temple, from day one of its existence”. So this building also is a part of it, all this new building, built now, that will be also called the same thing. He said “if you change, I will do the donation, otherwise I won’t perform the ceremony”, last minute. So my parents said “okay, not to worry, we’ll come forward”, and they done it. So… they gave seven thousand.

*And what was your emotion when you saw this temple, this temple your parents helped…*

We were kids, we were kids.

*No, I mean when you went back.*

And having seen that, nice. Yes, it looked like when I went to see the house, I went to see the house, it was right behind. I went to see that where we could park, not many cars, let’s say one, two, three, four, five…. About eight to ten cars in front of the house, right? With ample of room left, so … Big grass- big grass there, the road, same- same all over, all over. The European town which was by the L- Lake Victoria River Nile, same. There was a pier, people used to go enjoy, you just could go right by the river bank, right up the Nile from Lake Victoria. Nothing. Nothing, you couldn’t even go down.

*It was like the place had just been left to decay for forty years, just fell apart.*

The roads were so bad, I went to see my own private house in the European area, nobody knew, I was, I was shocked.

*I’m saying nothing.*

Uh, I’ve- couldn’t even ask, coming to be in the family house, I said “I’d better”- looked at it “bloody hell”, same old doors, same old paint, forty years ago! Window panes are broken, mesh, wire mesh to keep the mosquitoes out, torn.

*Was it upsetting to see that?*

No, the pain was awful, I was a bit upset. I said “okay, let me go to my section”. It was three sections, three entrances. Eldest brother, the one who ran the company, the youngest, and older. Oldest, next one, next one. That’s- so I went there, knocked on the door, knocked on the door, a few minutes, no reply. I said- looked in, nothing. Come out, middle door. Knock- knocked. And I was waiting. A handicapped person come with a big stick walking, with a “[SWAHILI]!” Very rude. And I said “Jambo”, greeted him, he said “[SWAHILI]!”, he said “you, what do you want?” I said “I used to live here, this was our place. He said “I don’t know you!”, I said “no, I just wanted to see the place”. He said “get lost! Go away! Quenda, quenda! [SWAHILI], I don’t know you, go!” I said “let’s go, Aji, before he creates some more problems, let’s go.”

*We’ve already been thrown out once, we can only be thrown…*

My – my two mates were sitting in the taxi, he said “what happened, XXX?” I said “the guy was a bit rude” I said “leave him, let’s go”. We went around the place, my old town, then drove back to Kampala.

*So it’s a different world, it seems to…*

Right, it was awful, awful.

*Did you get to see you old secondary school as well?*

Um, when we passed, there was not much time because the taxi driver was pushing us, “I want to go back”, so… not much, but seen most of the places I wanted to see. I went to see the fac- Mr Gil’s factory, shambles. It’s still being run by Sikhs, they were the transporters who bought it from him. And they bought the entire business from him, and Mr Gil has been left only with one, uh, plywood factory in XXX, in Kenya. That’s it, that’s…

*Do you… there is quite a large, um, um Asian population actually going back to Uganda, um, from India, actually, it’s not sort of…*

Oh yeah, there were loads of them!

*How were they treated though? Did you witness…*

Well, I don’t know, I mean…

*What’s the relationship between the Africans and the…*

The white- the guy I spoke to, one of them, I asked, I happened to ask him, I said “now how long have you been in this country”, “I’ve been long enough”. I forget what he said, maybe ten years, or twelve years or something. I said “God, that is long enough, we must have lived here only for a short while” [laughs] They got everything ready-made, that is the difference.

*It’s a different experience.*

It’s become a different place, a different… atmosphere.

*A different world. And politically, a very different country as well.*

Entirely different, yeah. Run by the blacks, and then it was, although it was run by the blacks, dominance was Asian.

*Yeah. Do you regret going back, or are you happy you went back?*

Sorry?

*Were you happy you went back at least once?*

I was happy to go and see the place, it was a little bit of consolation. Let’s put it this way, I wanted to see what the place was like, and it’s not that bad. I mean, out of the three east African countries, it’s still doing well.

*Yeah, it’s the most prosperous out of that region.*

Yeah, Tanzania was good also, Tanzania. I liked Zanzibar, that was a great – the hotel we stayed in was a great, great place by the seaside, that was nice, nice.

*Did you feel like you were actually going home? Did you see it as home?*

Yeah, it was feeling – a similar feeling, but uh… when you see surroundings entirely different, you seem to think “ah, where the hell am I?”

*Yeah. The home isn’t familiar.*

You know when I was there, the whole- childhood memories come back, that we used to do this here, we used to do that, and in some places you’re just looking around going “where is that corner?”, “where were we?”, like for example, the District Commissioner’s area, was almost central to this town. The town finishes here, this was there, the post office, here, Mr Gil’s… used to be called Jinja Garage, an auto company, the Patels or something, they had it. Gill and Roberts, they were the biggest… uh, English firm there. I don’t know whether they were Scottish or English, a British form, that was it: Gill and Roberts. And they used to have a majority of the stuff. What – let’s… Scottish whiskey, or, let’s say, this is XXX only. So Dimple was a very famous whiskey then. Uh, that was famous in east Africa. You only could get from Gill and Roberts. And XXXs had their own stage bit further down the main street down there, they had their own little area, the car- car wise, we’re going back to when Austin’s Vanguards? We had all these cars.

*There seem to be a big, uh… as you said before, a lot of Ugandan Asians that I speak to now, um, a lot of the things they reminisce about is the XXX cars. There seems to be quite a culture of racing.*

American cars. Yeah, we used to have American cars, that was a craze first. We, in the family had Chevrolet Pickups, two, two Chevrolet Pickups.

*Classic.*

And um, Pontiac? Fair- Ford Fairline? And these were the American cars. And coming back to Amer- English cars, two Austins, small pickups. They used to make the small, the small pickup in the back. So, two Austins, Vanguard, uh, Bedford trucks, Bedford trucks. Dodge, that’s American again. So…

*That’s as American as it gets, the Dodge!*

Dodge, American. Then comes the Japanese Isuzu trucks. Isuzu cars, we had. And then the Germans, Mercedes trucks, Mercedes cars, we had. All together in the family, between four brothers, we had about fifty automobiles. Trucks and all this.

*And was that the same for everyone at the time? A lot of people collected- had lots of cars?*

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. People had…

*Because you know I go on Facebook groups where like-*

The majority people didn’t need a car there. People XXX, if you are going to Kampala, for example, and someone knows you are going, they would say “I want to come, can you take us?”, and they would take them, no problem.

*You would pick people up on the road?*

Yeah.

*Do you, um, let’s go back to England. Let’s talk about your daughter and grandchildren, and obviously, your XXX children as well. Do you um, uh, did you- I mean, Vina is very interested in the story, and she experienced the expulsion herself. What about her children, your grandchildren? Are they aware of this story that you guys went through? Are they aware of where they come from?*

I think some of them have heard of all this because we’ve mentioned a few times, but the younger generation doesn’t know yet. Just the boy knows. Vina’s daughter, my granddaughter, she is now grown up, so she knows, when we talk, you know, we can visualize things, but, generally the generation still… My sons, youngest sons, two boys, one is turning fourteen now, and the other is eight, they don’t know much.

*Do you think it’s important for them, uh… and for you as well for them to know, or do you think it’s time to move on from that?*

I stum-… They don’t want to know nothing, you talk to them about anything, no.

*Computer games, football… [laughs]*

It was the same thing with these kids, my kids. You ask them “are you going to see India?”, “no”. I didn’t go. I didn’t want to go. I used to make programs with my friends and at the last minute I would opt out, I would say “no, can’t, I got tied up with banks, this bank needs this job to be finished over the holidays, this and that, so I can’t get time off”, we’re talking about a month away, in that country, so why ask if you can’t even say nothing?

*Yeah, it’s not like a weekend away. I mean, do you think it’s a good opportunity with the fortieth anniversary for… you know, for people to be- perhaps let their children, their grandchildren be aware of the story?*

Yeah, I mean… I think it’s…

*Because I think too many people, I speak to people…*

It’s okay, the kids who were born there to go back, to see if they want to. What their parents had, or those who can recoup a bit of it where they were, what they were doing, something like that, a little school in XXX. Those who can remember. But those who –like my youngest one- he wasn’t born. No sense to remember anything. He was as a free man, like… It being carried around all the time, this is it.

*Yeah.*

People found – I found the experience, yes, because many people are yearning to go back, but then again, I don’t know, they’re ashamed to go. Seem XXX about what may be… what may be lurking around the corner there, you see this is it.

*Skeletons in the closet.*

Oh yeah.

*And also, you know, the reality is, it’s quite a traumatic experience. Some people went through worse things than others, but it’s still…*

Yeah, but most of them… See, people who were hit hard were the businessmen who didn’t want to stay, who lost. In general, everyone, because it was an easy life, that was the utmost point, easy life, no fear, lovely weather, only the rain. I’m telling you, I was out for lunch one- one day, I used to XXX from my factory to come, because of course along the main road, right next to Radio Uganda next to my house here, so… I come home, XXX a light. Had lunch, come out, sat on the motorbike, gone hardly a hundred yards- hailstorm! That big! Within a couple of minutes, it was what… three, four inches deep by the roadside. I mean, that was only the setback for the rains, the torrential rains.

*You came to England, it rains a lot here.*

But this is not rain, this is a mockery of rain, ice! Ping, ping, ping, ping… People say…

*A hailstone probably isn’t that big.*

The rain here is so annoying, all of a sudden, the XXX trickle down a little bit, stop or you’re finished. Okay, ready again? Drip, drip, drip, throughout the day! But there, if it wants to rain, it rains, like, once. “I mean business now”. That’s it, finished, the rainclouds are gone.

*“See you in a month.”*

Here they sort of, they’re sort of lingering, they stop so much traffic you can’t go through.

*It’s, it’s true. I mean, the thing about this place is, you can never plan a day –can you- around the rain? You know eventually it will catch you up, the rain. So let’s – this is the last question I always do it. This is quite different for you though, because not many people who have talked to me so far have actually met Idi Amin, let alone met him a few times. I often ask if you had a message to Idi, um, today, if he was sitting where I am today, what would be your message to him?*

Idi Amin?

*Knowing what went on in the last forty years.*

Yeah, I would tell him that… whatever he had done, he might have thought it was right on- on the influence of Gaddafi, but if he would have taken his own opinion, with the right, in the right state of mind, even considering what people are saying about his light- likeness for someone’s woman, how he really loved her, and this, and wanted to marry her, and he threw Asians out of ht country on account of that, that- that was a bit naïve. To make the whole country suffer, alright? Being a little bit of a Casanova or not, he was a Casanova, so… I think that was the gravest mistake he made, to chuck Israelis and Asians out of the country within four or five months, which left him in a deep, deep, trouble. Not him, the whole country. I have been back to the country for- after forty years, I don’t think so, it’s the same old country, no matter how much progress they have done, but maintaining what they had is still deteriorating, the roads are the worst! Economy may be picking up, but… as a country, whole, I don’t think so… they’re showing any signs of international achievement.

*So you think…*

Like what, like what they used to have during the Asian time. I’m not trying to be prejudice, or taunting, or being a national, trying to praise, no. That is the gospel truth. The economy was flourishing, everything was okay. Although the economy may be flourishing now, people think twice before really taking any steps to invest their money in that country.

*Do you think Uganda is now playing catch-up because of the forty years?*

Sorry?

*Do you think Uganda is now playing catch-up because it lost that…?*

They are still, they are still catching up, because- with my visit, I could see, if they can’t maintain what they’ve already got on a plate, so how can they look after the way they’re going to spend money? If they free things cannot be maintained with their pockets, what they can fish out from their pockets, with the government’s money, what are they going to do? It will be limited.

*And do you think he’d regret it? If he was alive today?*

I think he would. He would have regretted it. He would have left the Asians there, and, and the Jews, and should not have fallen for Gaddafi’s trap, that’s my concept of this issue. People may say anything, or people- hardly many people don’t even know about this concept, about Gaddafi’s influence down this. They only think it was Madvani’s wife, which lured him, and then he became mad and threw the Asians out. Could be both together.

*I think XXX, the problem with things like this is people are always looking for one answer. There’s not necessarily one answer for anything. Sometimes there’s many answers for a consequence.*

So there you are.

*So Aji, thank you very much, absolute pleasure.*

Thank you. Anything more, or…?

*I think, I think that’s enough, unless there’s anything you’d like to add. Is there anything, anything you can think of?*

There’s plenty of things, we can be sitting here for days.

*Of course, of course, and I think I’d probably quite enjoy that, strangely! Well, thank you. I’m going to turn this off. What I’ll do is, um…*

**Interview details**

**Name of interviewee: Ajiet Singh Sondh**

**Project: Ugandan Asians**

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**Language: English**

**Venue:**

**Name of interviewer:**

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