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Living well is the best revenge

Thousands of Ismaili Muslims were among the Asians expelled from Uganda in 1972 by Idi Amin. As the tyrant lies on his deathbed three decades later, ERIN ANDERSSEN reports, Canada's hugely prosperous Ismaili community doesn't bat an eye

By ERIN ANDERSSEN

UPDATED AT 8:22 PM EDT

Saturday, Jul. 26, 2003

Nasim Rajani's family was at prayer when they lost their every possession in the world.

If the neighbours hadn't warned them on their way home from the mosque, it might have been much worse. A servant had slipped out to send a panicked message: You can't come back. There are soldiers here. They are waiting for you.

For the longest time, they had not believed it. No one had. How could a dictator awake one morning, report he'd had a vision from God, and throw them out of their own country, with nothing but the clothes on their backs?

Yet they watched from the upstairs windows of their house in Kampala on Aug. 7, 1972, the day president Idi Amin Dada told the country's 80,000 Asian residents that they had 90 days to go into exile -- Ugandan citizens included. Africans had celebrated in the street, tying tin cans to their dusty cars, because they expected to take over the businesses and homes that would be left behind.

The Rasjanis, like thousands of their fellow Ismaili Mulims, would end up in Canada, and in three short decades turn their fortunes around, in what is often heralded as one of Canada's most remarkable immigrant stories.

Few Ismaili-Canadians, now numbering roughly 70,000, seemed troubled by the news this week that Idi Amin -- the man who brutally changed so many of their lives, and whose dictatorship resulted in the murder or disappearance of 300,000 Ugandan citizens -- was lying in a coma in Saudi Arabia, his wife pleading for Uganda to allow him back to die.

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"Over the years," said Ms. Rajani, "we blocked him out."

At the time, though, the Rajanis assumed that Mr. Amin would have another dream before the 90 days expired, or listen to reason from the rest of the world. After all, Nasim's father had been born in Uganda. This was the birthplace of his children. His business was here. Where were they to go?

So they kept serving meals of samosas and beef curry to the regulars at their restaurant, who were mostly workers at the nearby Parliament building. And then one evening, at closing time, a group of soldiers stomped through the door and ordered Nasim's father to turn over the ownership. He refused and told them to come back the next day. That night, they closed the restaurant, and hid in their home -- until the soldiers claimed that as well.

While her family stayed with relatives, Ms. Rajani's father tried to get them out of the country. But their passports, and all their identification, were still in the house, tucked safely away in an old leather briefcase. As their anxiety grew, Ms. Rajani's 16-year-old brother, Nazir, slipped away from the family one afternoon and went home.

A soldier with a machine gun slung over his shoulder answered his knock. He didn't live here, he lied to the guards, but he had studied here once with the boy who did, and had forgotten his book bag. Could he get it? The soldiers let him inside, and he snatched up the leather briefcase. He walked among their possessions, wistfully noting his mother's gold bangles on the dresser. He dared not touch them. He had what was most important: the papers to secure his family's flight to Canada.

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While other countries balked and protested, Canada was making room for about 6,000 of the suddenly penniless refugees, among them a large contingent of Ismailis. On the day they left, without a single suitcase between them, Ms. Rajani's father said, "I don't want anyone to look behind. We are going to a new place. If we keep looking back, we cannot move on."

They arrived in Montreal in October, to their first sight of snow, and to people with warm food and clothing in welcome. Telling this part of the story, even three decades later, Ms. Rajani -- who spoke so matter-of-factly of losing everything and having, at 20 years old, to give up her dream to go to university and teach -- began to weep so hard she could not speak.

"What we left behind was hostility," she said finally, "and what we came to were people willing to accept us."

And that is the reason Idi Amin haunts her no more. Ismaili-Canadians exhausted their anger long ago, and concentrated instead on filling the "honorable place" famously promised them by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1972. The fate of

the man responsible for their past ruin is little more than a curiosity today.

"It really doesn't matter anymore whether he is alive or dead," said Tazdin Esmail, the founder of Forbes Meditech, in Vancouver. "The damage is done. We licked our wounds and moved on. We are quite happy here."

The penniless refugees who showed up in business suits to sweep warehouse floors now own the warehouses, and wear their suits to the boardroom. They count among them the nation's doctors, architects and lawyers. Guided by a faith that stresses charity and success by merit, they are noted for their philanthropy and business skill.

They have their own magazine -- a glossy high production quarterly called Ismaili Canada, and have built two major Ismaili centres, called *jamatkhanas*, on the West Coast, with a third in the planning stages in Toronto, along with a new museum of Islamic art. Prime Minister Jean Chretien once joked that what his hometown of Shawinigan needed was a dozen Ismaili entrepreneurs.

Mr. Esmail is just one example: In 1972, at age 21, he arrived alone in Montreal from Uganda with $7 in his pocket. He is now chairman of the board for his own publicly traded biotech company, and delivers meals to housebound seniors.

Mobina Jaffer, who in 2001 became the first Canadian senator to be sworn in on the Koran, had to flee Uganda after her husband narrowly survived a gunpoint encounter with Idi Amin's soldiers.

Nazib and Mansoorali Charania, who scraped by in their first years in Canada as mechanics, started an Ottawa transmission shop in 1977 that now employs 15 people, and are also co-owners of a Swiss Chalet, a Harvey's and a Dairy Queen.

Rahim Jaffer, 31, is a two-term Canadian Alliance MP for Edmonton-Strathcona. He was nine months old when his father, who ran a floor-tile factory, loaded his wife and young son on a plane heading out of Amin's reach, with nothing to sustain them but a diaper bag and a suitcase of clothes. (The father would later follow.)

On the phone from the Edmonton bakery she owns, Mr. Jaffer's mother, Razia, remembers her last walk through their home overlooking Lake Victoria, where they had planned to raise their family. The property, she said, bordered on the army barracks, and she could often watched soldiers training through the windows.

At night, from their secluded perch, they could hear gunfire on the street. There were stories of people disappearing, women being raped and soldiers storming neighbours' homes in the dark. One afternoon, they'd had enough. Within a few hours, Razia Jaffer packed up what she could and the family moved in with cousins, before eventually getting flights to Canada.

Of Idi Amin, Ms. Jaffer said, "I feel very sick for those people he murdered. He's probably paying for it now."

And, she points out, if it wasn't for Mr. Amin, her family wouldn't be in Canada, with a son sitting in the House of Commons. Uganda, she said, "has fallen behind, but we have only advanced."

Ismaili-Canadians credit their successes to a tightknit community that is fostered,

in large part, by the guidance of their spiritual leader the Aga Khan, a wealthy humanitarian who funds hospitals and education projects around the world. The world's 15 million Ismailis, a sect of the Shia Muslims, believe that the Aga Khan is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammed.

His advice, says Nazib Charania, is followed strictly: Buy a house as quickly as you can, work hard, live within your means, be loyal to your country. This, Mr. Charania says, is why so many Ismailis were hit hard by Idi Amin's edict. Unlike other Asian business people, most of them were fully invested in the Ugandan economy, and had not banked their money elsewhere.

But it is also the root, he explains, of their success in Canada: Being active in the community has fostered goodwill, and a proven willingness to work from the ground up has opened doors. Perhaps, he suggests, Ismailis have learned also from their experience in Uganda to take an active role in politics, so they will never lose their voice again against a dictator.

"An able-bodied person who complains he can't make his ends meet here should be sent to a [developing nation] for six months," said Nazib, who gave up on his dream of becoming a doctor to support his mother when he arrived in Canada. "They will come to worship this country."

His brother echoes the sentiment: "This country is like a goldmine, if you are willing to work." In Uganda, their middle-class family owned a watch-and-stereo store in a small town outside Kampala. In the heated months of 1972, Mansoorali, who worked for a tour company, was once held at gunpoint in a wilderness park for three days, before his boss could rescue him.

Upon arriving in Montreal, a young couple offered Mr. Charania and his wife a place to stay -- "without even questioning what kind of people we were," he said incredulously -- and within three days he had a job. The values of the Ismaili faith, he said, are "the ideals of Canada."

The Charania brothers have responded in kind, as some 4,000 stranded drivers in Ottawa have learned personally. Since 1994, Mansoorali Charania, known as Brian, has traveled the Queensway each morning and afternoon through the winter months, rescuing broken-down drivers by offering a boost, a cell phone or a warm coffee -- completely free of charge. In the capital, they call him the Angel of the Highway.

Which is not to say that every Ismaili refugee has flourished. It was hardest, recalled Mr. Esmail, for the older generations, who had been forced to leave their life savings and start over. Used to having servants to clean and cook, they suddenly had to prepare meals and buy groceries in a strange country. His own parents, he said, "never recovered." They barely spoke of Uganda "because it was too hard to talk about."

Nasim Rajani also remembers distant family members who could not get over the past, when they had been landlords, and accept the fact that they now needed to be employees. "They perished," she said.

Her father was not among them. Days after arriving in Vancouver, he found work as a mailroom clerk in the Bank of Montreal -- a job he held for more than 20 years without complaint. Ms. Rajani, who needed to help support the family, went to work at a department store, her mother cleaned fish at a plant, and the two youngest went to high school. Within a year, the family had saved enough to buy a condo and a car.

Before long, he had enough money for a larger mortgage; they would move into a property for a few years, fix it up and sell it for a better one. "It runs in our blood," Ms. Rajani said. "Somehow we all got started."

The leather briefcase that saved them is still stored away; the only memento they have from the life they once lived. "This is our home now," Ms. Rajani's son Aly-Khan remembers his mother telling him as he grew up. Now 24, he is a communications director for the international aid organization Care Canada. "These are the people that took us when no one else would. This is where our allegiance lies."

Erin Anderssen covers social issues for The Globe and Mail.

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