

Fida and Razia Haque From East Africa to Canada

Fida and Razia Haque's family journey begins in Jalandhar, India, where a lack of employment opportunities and the hope for a better existence prompt their families to seek a new life in East Africa. However, the shadows of British colonialism continue to affect every aspect of their lives, from the Partition of India, to Idi Amin's economic war on Uganda's Asian population, to discrimination in England, and finally their arrival in Canada as refugees. This is a story of strength, endurance, and courage.

Fida Haque was born in 1935 in Kampala, Uganda. His grandfather was the first family member to venture forth from Jalandhar to East Africa. The British railway linking Uganda to the Kenyan coast was under colonial construction in the 1890s when Dr. Rahemtullah, a veterinarian, became employed by the British to help find a solution to the tsetse fly problem. The tsetse fly carried a parasite that caused sleeping sickness. During an epidemic from 1900 to 1920, over 200,000 Ugandans died, as did innumerable herd animals. Dr. Rahemtullah's contributions to this research helped to eradicate the tsetse fly from the area.

Fida's father, Shams-ul Haque, was one of three boys born to Dr. Rahemtullah in Kampala. Shams worked for the Ugandan government in the information department. As Fida recalls, the government had trucks with cinematic movies on board, and it was Shams' job to travel around the country, showing the films. Following this, he worked for the Public Works Department at the pump station on Lake Victoria. Shams would later marry Wazir Begum, a woman from Kisumu, Kenya, whose family also worked for the British state-owned railway company. They went on to have ten children. Fida, born in 1935, was the third child of five brothers and four sisters. Fida became a radio and television technician, a career that many years later was instrumental in supporting his family when they landed in Canada as refugees.

Razia Haque was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1939, by which time two generations of her family had already called East Africa home. Her family had come from Phillaur, a small *tehsil* (subdistrict) in the district of Jalandhar, and prior to this, from Persia. In the late 1800s, her grandfather Karim Chaudhry first set sail to Africa. With the race to colonize East Africa, Britain was actively seeking labourers, along with those in specialized fields. Karim Chaudhry later married and had two boys, Abdul Ghani — Razia's father — and Abdul Sattar.

For a reason Razia does not know but suspects was likely depression, her grandparents left their young children — her ten-year-old father Abdul Ghani and his younger brother Abdul Sattar — in Kenya and returned to Nawa Pind. Her young father was forced to work during the day to support his younger brother, then studied diligently in the evenings. Her uncle went on to finish his bachelor's degree and became a teacher at the British-run Duke of Gloucester Secondary School in Nairobi. Abdul Ghani landed a job with the British government as an engineer and was in charge of the maintenance and upkeep of East Africa's railway line. This job required him to be away from home for days on end, so he was provided with two railcars: one to use as an office and the second for his sleeping quarters. Work took him throughout Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. He eventually married and had a son, but his wife and second child died during childbirth, and Abdul

Ghani remarried Razia's mother, Gulam Fatima, who then had four girls. Razia was the third-born. Her sisters currently live in Manchester, England, while her half-brother recently passed away.

In 1939, with her children in tow and Razia only three months old, Gulam Fatima returned to Phillaur to attend the wedding of her sister. During their stay, the second world war broke out forcing the family to remain in India for six years. Safe passage back to Kenya with German U-Boats patrolling the Indian Ocean was not an option or risk the family was willing to take. However, by the end of the war the stirrings of the partition of India were well underway, and Razia's father anxious for their safe return, became insistent that they depart for Kenya at once.

As a young child in Kenya, Razia attended a Muslim school for girls, followed by the Duchess of Gloucester High School. The latter was part of the British education system, and the exams were administered through Cambridge University. During her childhood, she spoke numerous languages: Swahili, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Arabic, and English. Growing up, Razia was also a gifted artist, and she would later become an art teacher. Throughout life, her art carried her through the darkest hours and greatest challenges.

When Razia was twenty-three, her family moved to Pakistan. Her father had wanted to immigrate to Canada, but her mother insisted on returning to their remaining family, who after Partition were living in the newly created Pakistan. Land compensation after Partition had allotted her family new farmland near the Himalayan mountains. Razia's mother would recount stories of her childhood in a beautiful house on the banks of the Sutlej River in India. Her family had been well off and had they been given the choice, would never have left. The British Raj and colonial rule had forced their migration to Kenya and then Pakistan. For Razia and her sisters, Pakistan was a difficult adjustment after growing up in Kenya. According to Razia, corruption and extreme poverty were rampant. When they arrived in Pakistan, Razia's sister registered to attend St. Mary's Convent Higher Secondary School in Multan, and Razia was invited to teach English there. Razia remained in Multan for 1.5 years.

As a child, Razia had had a teacher at the Muslim girls' school who took a liking to her and insisted that one day, she would marry the teacher's nephew, Fida ul-Haque. She stayed in touch with Razia's family over the years, and when Razia was twenty-three, she began to play matchmaker. Fida's family had remained in Uganda, and as Razia's paternal uncle still resided in Nairobi, he was sent to meet the ul-Haque family. Razia's uncle approved of them, and Razia and Fida were soon married.

Razia was excited to move back to East Africa. She missed living near the equator, where the mountainous regions provided a cooler climate than the blistering heat and lack of air conditioning in Pakistan. Her childhood memories of Kenya included the bountiful flowers that bloomed year-round. She recalls the colourful butterflies, the birds' songs, and the wildlife — so much wildlife. These memories have inspired much of the incredible art that Razia continues to paint, crochet, and even mold into pottery.

Upon moving to Kampala, Razia began teaching art at the Aga Khan Elementary School. She was the head art teacher for grades 2–7 and loved working with all of the children. Razia and Fida would go on to have two children of their own: Chico and Farrah, born in 1969 and 1972. Razia

looks back fondly on her nine years in Uganda, where they could afford a nanny to help care for their children, a groundskeeper, a cook, and a house cleaner. But life as they knew it would change in 1972 when they were expelled from the country, never to return.

Idi Amin had declared an economic war on Uganda's Asian population. Seventy thousand Asians holding British passports, even individuals born in Uganda, were given three months to leave the country. The resulting abandoned business were handed over to Amin's supporters. During his eight years of terror, an estimated 80,000–300,000 Ugandans were murdered. Often, the bodies would be disposed of in the Nile, fed to the crocodiles. Razia recalls seeing pools of blood from murder victims on the river's edge. She recalls a constant feeling of terror and very little sleep in those three months. Told not to take any valuables, they were only permitted to leave with a small suitcase. Razia held a British passport. The Canadian and American embassies quickly set up immigration offices in Uganda and began various checks in order to ensure that the ideal demographic of refugees would be immigrating to North America. Razia recalls them checking her age, conducting medical tests, and verifying her level of education before her Canadian visa could be approved. Fida, who did not hold a British passport, initially stayed behind in the hopes of continuing to work.

Once Razia's visa was approved, she flew to England to stay with her parents and recover from the atrocities she had witnessed. Fida was not so lucky. Idi Amin threatened the remaining Asians who had stayed behind and told them that if they did not leave within twenty-four hours, "he would take them to the desert and make them dig their own graves." Those who had stayed behind were now frantically trying to get flights out of the country and jumped on any plane that had an opening. Fida ended up on a flight to Germany. Once there, he wrote to Razia in England and explained what had happened and where he was. As he was stuck in Germany without any funds, Razia's parents would send money so that he could support himself while waiting for his refugee status to be approved by the Canadian government.

As Razia disembarked in England, the November winter air hit hard. They had left Uganda with the clothes on their back, and coming from a warm climate, they were not prepared. She recalls the kindness of the pilot who gave her a blanket to wrap around herself and her children. But Razia also recalls the racism she faced while staying with her family in Manchester. After exiting from the plane, her toddler Chico had to go to the washroom, but in England, you paid to use the public restrooms. With no money and unsure what to do, she began to panic. In this moment, a cleaning lady, watching this take place, came over and told her, "You people are such a burden on us, coming to our country." She then walked away, refusing to open the washroom door for Razia.

When people from the local community realized Ugandan refugees were living in their part of town, they also retaliated. One night as Razia sat on the bed, reading a bedtime story to her children, a rock came through the window, shattering the glass and narrowly missing her head. This left her and her parents shaken. Holding a British passport would allow Razia to remain in Britain, but her father strongly advised against it. In his opinion, there was too much overcrowding, no central heating, and outhouses in the courtyard. He knew they could make a better life in Canada. After all, he had once dreamed of Canada for himself.

After receiving his refugee status, Fida left Germany and arrived in Canada before Razia and the children; without a British passport, he had been unable to divert to England to see them. While in Germany and Canada, though, he wrote to Razia daily, and when the children heard the postman drop a letter through the door slot, they waited eagerly for their mom to read it.

Within three weeks of reaching Canada, Fida reported that he had landed a job at A&B Sound, where he would remain until he retired just a few years ago. Shortly after this, Razia, Chico and Farrah arrived at Vancouver International Airport, and Fida along with a fellow Ugandan friend and refugee were there to pick them up. Razia recalls being in awe of the apartment that Fida had secured for them in Burnaby. It had three bedrooms, and there was a playground outside with three swimming pools: a toddler pool, a children's pool, and an adult pool. Razia was so happy to be in Canada. She immediately made a lifelong friend with Iris, her next-door neighbour, who had children the same age.

Razia wanted to go back to teaching and with her Cambridge education, she was not required to complete too many upgrades. She met with administrators at Simon Fraser University to begin the process, only to find out that being a new immigrant with two children under the age of five and no family support or extra funds for childcare meant teaching there would be impossible.

Chico had begun attending a Montessori preschool prior to leaving Uganda, and after settling into life in Canada, Razia began looking for a similar program close to their apartment in Burnaby. Razia found a preschool in the basement of a church, and when she learned that the woman leading the program was from South Africa, they immediately bonded. Chico and Farrah were happy to play with so many children, but Farrah was too young for the program. After seeing how much this upset Farrah, the preschool teacher proposed that Razia could become her assistant, since she had a teaching background. Razia could provide the snacks and help with activities, and in lieu of payment, Farrah could attend for free. Razia states, "It is because of people like that, their generosity — that's why we love Canada so much."

Razia worked hard to contribute to the family finances, and eventually, other immigrants learned that she had been a teacher prior to coming to Canada. They began asking her to provide English classes, so Razia would leave her children in preschool and travel to individuals' homes for lessons, where she would be paid twenty dollars for her time. Razia recalls that twenty dollars was a lot of money back then. Groceries cost their family twenty-five dollars per week, and you could fill an entire grocery cart for that amount. She would also take in and look after other children from her apartment building and was paid one dollar per hour. She notes that their apartment rent was \$150 per month. Razia feels fortunate and proud that they did not receive hand-outs from the government and also acknowledges that few Ugandan refugees ever did. They worked hard to stay here in Canada.

After a year, they decided that it was time to purchase their forever home. They were told that when refugees arrived in Canada, the housing markets increased, and they began feeling anxious that if they waited too long, they would not be able to afford a home. They purchased a townhome for \$28,000 in Port Moody, and with \$3000 borrowed from her brother in England, they purchased a Ford Pinto car. After some time, Razia realized that they were not living in the safest neighborhood. They began to experience racial slurs, the kids were being bullied, and she never

felt comfortable letting the children out of her sight. Razia knew it was time to move, but to do so, she would also need to garner more work. A teacher acquaintance shared with her that the banks had data processing centres and were often hiring for evening shifts. With this type of job, Razia could leave when Fida came home from work, and she could still be home by midnight, sleep, and make sure the kids were up for school the next day. Leaving the house at night was stressful for her, though. Up until this point in her life, Razia had never left home after dark on her own, and she needed to take a city bus to the downtown core. Her motivation to find their family a home in a safer neighborhood kept her going, and eventually she managed to save up \$10,000 to put toward a down payment.

Razia began her banking career at CIBC and then moved to RBC. At this time, the banks were beginning to scan and digitize documents. She worked at the VISA centre, where they were transferring piles of papers into online formats. With long nightshifts and looking after her children and the household during the day, she functioned on little sleep, but she still feels this was a necessary sacrifice that was more than worth it for her family. They eventually purchased their next home in Port Coquitlam. They used all of the cash they had diligently saved up for the down payment on their new home, only to find out when they moved in that the previous owner had removed the clothes washer, dryer, and refrigerator. They went without until they could afford to replace these items.

After three years of her dedicated work, the bank wanted to promote Razia and put her on the daytime shift, but she was not worried about career advancement. Her focus was making sure that she could bring her kids to school, take them to their activities — swimming, dancing, soccer — help them with their homework, and make sure they all had dinner before she left for work again.

Razia and Fida worked hard for many, many years. They did so with love, generosity, and kindness while continuing to stay positive. They also maintained strong ties with anyone who immigrated to the Fraser Valley from the East African community. Word would spread — Did you hear that so and so is here? And since everyone had come from the same parts of India and East Africa, these bonds ran deep. Razia and Fida would be some of the first to invite newcomers over for dinner and welcome them to Canada.

Razia and Fida have faced many challenges — war, racism, relocation, migration, and immigration — from India, to Africa, to Pakistan, to England, and finally Canada. Now, they are both retired and living in Mission, BC. I equate their house to walking into an art gallery filled with Razia's masterpieces, which comprise an homage to all of the places they have lived, loved, and experienced. Each piece tells a story, part of their journey. Yet, when you examine each artefact, you do not see the heartache or sadness caused by the journey's many challenges. Instead, her works represent beauty, optimism, and strength, attributes Razia and Fida continue to impart to everyone around them.



Razia's Art Painting



Razia's Art Painting



Razia's Art Painting



Razia's Art Sculptures



Razia's Art Sculptures



Razia and Fida's Wedding



From Left to Right: Fida, Farrah, Razia and Chico