

Mohinder Singh From Kenya to Canada

From impoverished farmers in a small village in Jalandhar, India, Mohinder's Singh's family gains independence and financial freedom when his father decides to leave it all behind and journey to Kenya — a country full of opportunity for those willing to make enormous sacrifices. This narrative follows Mohinder's journey from a happy childhood in Nairobi to medical school in England, where he intends to return to work in the country of his birth before his aspirations are quelled by the Africanization program. His life undergoes a renewal in England while he plans a journey to his ancestral roots in India. However, the corruption, poverty, and lack of infrastructure once he is there stymie his attempts to make positive impacts as a medical doctor in the community; disillusioned, he leaves India with a heavy heart. Ultimately, Mohinder makes a life in Canada, where his medical practice comes full circle to unite with his agricultural and farming roots.

Mohinder Singh's journey to East Africa began with his father Niranjan Singh. Born in 1907, in Shahpur, a small village in the tehsil of Phillaur, Jalandhar district, Punjab, India, he came from a farming background. Due to lack of employment opportunities in an overpopulated country, he ventured into Delhi for work when he was 19, and while there, he heard about work in Kenya. A man lent him the money to purchase a ticket on a dhow, and in 1926, he set sail for the port city of Mombasa. For two years, he worked in a warehouse there, before landing a job with Nairobi's police force. He would continue to work on the force for eight or nine years before opening his own heating and plumbing business. Around 1936, he returned to India and married Basand Kaur, who came from Ludhiana, Punjab. She returned to Nairobi with Niranjan, and toward the end of the Second World War, he expanded his business and developed a successful machine shop and foundry. Together, Niranjan and Basand had six children: four boys — Hardev, Parminder, Mohinder, and Paolo — and two girls, Gudi and Ginni.

Mohinder was born on March 7, 1937 in Nairobi. He began Junior Indian School at age eight or nine and then entered the Duke of Gloucester High School, formerly known as the Indian High School. In 1956, his graduating year, he was the top student and held the title of head prefect. During his time in high school he also joined the Queen's Scouts, where he completed numerous projects (cross-country trips, butterfly collecting, games, and writing assignments) and was subsequently rewarded with Scout badges. Upon earning all 12 badges, he received the highest of honours, a signed certificate from Queen Elizabeth herself. Mohinder also took part in numerous sports, including field hockey, cricket, and volleyball.

He recalls there being three gurdwaras in Nairobi, as the Sikh population was large. His father was a religious man, and Mohinder's family had their own Granth Sahib in their home, where they would gather for morning and evening prayers. On Sundays, the family would attend one of the gurdwaras for prayers. Each gurdwara handed out goodies to the children in attendance, so Mohinder and his three young friends would often visit all three. He also recalls that there was no discrimination amongst the south Asian immigrants — it did not matter which religion they followed. But there was a definitive, enforced physical divide between the British residing on the upper side of the river and the south Asians and indigenous Africans located on the other.

After graduating, Mohinder completed a pre-university preparatory year. The Duke of Gloucester School was affiliated with the University of Cambridge, and the exams that students sat were official Cambridge University exams. In recognition of his excellent performance, he received an English scholarship. Niranjan wanted Mohinder to become an engineer and work for the family business, but Mohinder had his heart set on medicine. His mother encouraged him to follow his dreams and attempted to override his father. Niranjan eventually acquiesced, on the condition that Mohinder only apply to a single medical school. There were three medical colleges in London: Guy's Medical School and Saint Thomas's, both at King's College London, and Whitechapel Medical School. Each would accept only four overseas students out of the total 60–70 successful applicants. Thus, applying to just one significantly lowered his odds of being accepted. Knowing that Guy's was the top-rated medical school in England, Mohinder brazenly pushed forward, applied, and was accepted. He recalls that of the three other overseas students that year, one came from Tanzania, another from Ghana, and the third from Nigeria.

In 1958, Mohinder travelled from Nairobi to Mombasa and from there set sail for England. During his first year in medical school, he roomed at the school's hostel. The following two years, he stayed in lodgings run by a single mother with a child. In his final year, he shared a flat with a friend from Nairobi. After finishing medical school and qualifying, Mohinder was determined to return to Kenya to practice medicine. He knew that to do so, he would have to specialize in several fields, including obstetrics and gynecology, general medicine, and surgery. Specializing in each field required six months to a year of training and mentoring in different hospitals. He pushed forward and received his obstetrics and gynecology qualifications in 1965 and his surgical qualification in 1967. He then received his final qualification, Member of the Royal College of Physicians, in 1969.

In 1967, Mohinder returned to Kenya when his mother suddenly passed away from a brain tumour. During his three months stay he would practice surgery in a hospital near Mt. Kilimanjaro. In 1968, Kenya had passed the first of numerous laws preventing Indian citizens with British passports from holding gainful employment. Feeling dejected, Mohinder returned to England. At the same time, Britain began limiting the entry of Indian families holding British passports to only 1,500 annually. No longer able to remain in Kenya, the majority were forced to return to India or Pakistan. Mohinder's father returned to Delhi in 1965 and opened a heating and plumbing business there. However, Mohinder's eldest brother, Hardev, remained in Kenya until 1976 in an effort to continue running the family business.

In 1965, Mohinder had met nurse Susan Thorpe. Susan was a State Registered Orthopedic Nurse in the operating theater in Leicester, England, and one evening while cleaning surgical instruments, the doctor coming off shift, Dr. Boris Pasternak, came in to introduce the doctor who would be covering for him. It this romantic twist of fate, it was the grandson of the famous *Dr. Zhivago* author who brought them together, and they fell in love. Mohinder continued to write to Susan while he practiced medicine in Kenya. Susan went on to qualify as a midwife in 1967 and later became a theater sister at King's College London, in charge of the operating room. In 1970, they married.

In 1973, they decided to move permanently to India. They packed up their belongings, including their fridge and furniture, and had them shipped while they traveled by car. The road trip took a

month as they toured France, then elsewhere in Europe, and on into Turkey and the Middle East, up to the border of Kuwait. They slept in the back of the car when necessary. The initial plan had been to arrive in India by way of Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, they were unable to obtain visas to traverse through Pakistan and were forced to divert. They purchased tickets to travel by sea, with their car, on a three- to five-day voyage from Kuwait through the Persian Gulf and into Bombay. During this sailing, the ship stopped in Basrah, Iraq to pick up six members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization being deported from Iraq. When the ship landed in Bombay, they then drove to Delhi.

There, they lived with Mohinder's father until they could rent their own house. Mohinder worked as a general surgeon in numerous clinics in Delhi, while Susan assisted as his scrub nurse. Although they had intended to remain in India permanently, frustration at being unable to make a difference caused them to return to England. According to Mohinder, overpopulation and corruption were problems, along with long power outages and water shortages, which made operating not only challenging but dangerous; plus, medications were tainted. The final straw came during a surgery on a young boy. The power went out once again, and none of the surgical equipment worked, so Mohinder was forced to improvise. They had had enough.

By this time, Sue was five months pregnant with their first child, Gavin. They began driving back to England, and as visas through Pakistan were still impossible and their safe passage could not be guaranteed, they purchased ship tickets from Delhi to Kuwait. Prior to the sailing, they toured India and rented a houseboat, living for a time on a lake in Kashmir.

After returning from India, Mohinder worked as a senior registrar as well as a locum surgical consultant in several hospitals. To become a full-time consultant required practising as a senior registrar for seven to eight years, then potentially being waitlisted for an additional three to five years before a consultantship came available. The annual pay for a senior registrar was extremely low, at only 14,000 pounds per year, and becoming a consultant was not guaranteed. According to Mohinder, it was very much an "old boys' club," less about what you knew and more about who you knew. The likelihood of an immigrant receiving such a senior position was low.

In 1974, Mohinder began looking into positions available in Canada that were being advertised in *The Lancet*, a medical journal. There were positions in Vanderhoof, British Columbia, Calgary, Alberta, and Swan River, Manitoba. The hospital in Swan River was looking for a surgeon, and given Mohinder's qualifications, they settled upon this job. The doctor in Swan River offered to pay their transportation and moving costs, and he even guaranteed a wage until Mohinder could build up his own practice. Mohinder, forever the adventurer, decided that instead of a direct flight, they would come by boat. It was a two-week sail, with a toddler in tow, from Southampton to Montreal, followed by a three-day train journey to Swan River. Although happy to have a permanent paid position, Mohinder and Sue initially planned to remain in Swan River for just two to three years before moving to Winnipeg, or potentially to another province, depending on where an opening arose. However, Mohinder came to appreciate the company of the four doctors he worked alongside; two had trained in England, one in Winnipeg, and the fourth in South Africa.

In 1976, Sue gave birth to their second child, Rachel, in Swan River. John Honig, the doctor who had originally hired Mohinder, eventually retired and moved away. Mohinder became the senior

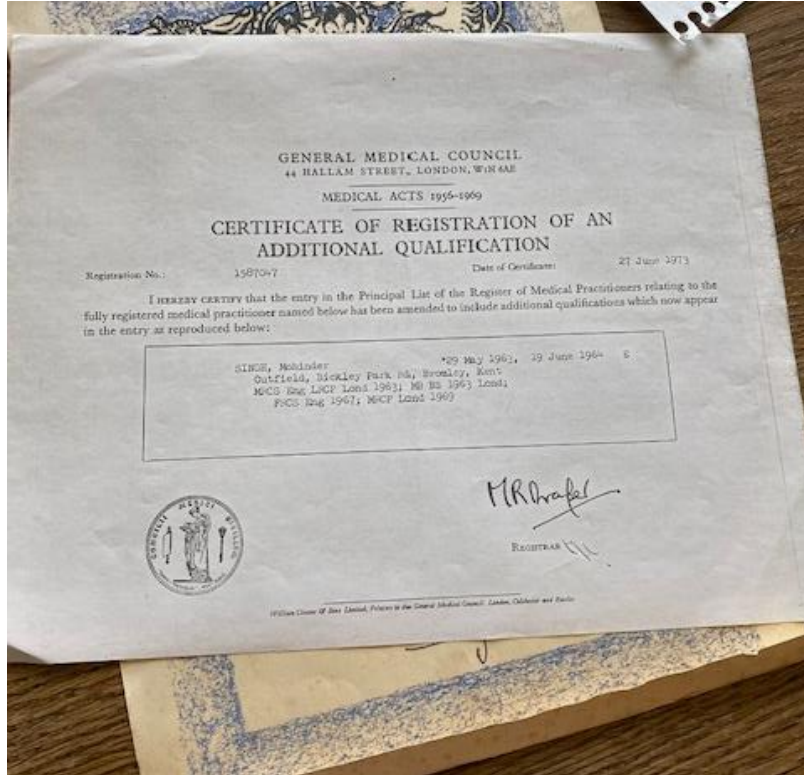
surgeon, and he and Sue purchased John's house and then a cottage on a lake. Mohinder had always wanted to farm. It was in his blood, after all, with ancestral farming roots in the Punjab. He then purchased John Honig's 160-acre farm in Bellsite, 45 minutes outside of Swan River, and went on to buy additional undeveloped parcels totalling 3,000 acres. Mohinder then developed the land, simultaneously farming and maintaining his medical practice.

In 2013, the small airport in Swan River closed, replaced by a Greyhound Bus service that ran twice daily to and from Winnipeg. Manitoba's medical services also underwent some restructuring that included an amalgamation of hospitals, reducing the amount of surgical and obstetric work that Mohinder could continue to do in Swan River. To keep himself in practice and maintain his licence, 76-year-old Mohinder would drive 200 miles north to Flin Flon and the Pas, Manitoba. For six months of each year, he undertook one- to two-month locums, but after a few years of working in northern communities, he decided to retire.

Back in 2006, Mohinder and Sue had purchased a blueberry farm in the Fraser Valley of BC as an investment property. So in 2016, with Mohinder's family and childhood friends already residing there, they made the move. Never one to sit still, though, Mohinder continues to dedicate his retirement to the farm.



Queen Elizabeth's signature on Mohinder's Queen's Scout Certificate



One of Mohinder's numerous medical certificates