

ALHAJ USTER ALI

When did you come to Britain?

Ali: 1963

Why did you choose Britain?

Ali: I came to Britain because I have a big family. I was the second oldest of 5 brothers and 3 sisters. I came to this country because I believed by coming here I can help my family by putting my siblings through school and also supporting my country.

What's your age?

Ali: I am 72

And what was your age when you came to Britain?

Ali: 22

And was grandmother around then.

Ali: Yes I was married and with one son.

Did you bring your family with you.

Ali: I came by myself which wasn't a problem because my family were very close and I knew they would look after each other.

Did you know anybody in this country?

Ali: There was nobody from my province in Bangladesh but there were some people who I had a distance relation with.

Who told you to come to this Britain?

Ali: Nobody told me, I wasn't young when I came. I understood that my life would be better if I came to London or America. I filled the applications myself to come to this country.

Was this your first journey, the first time you travelled by plane? If so what do you remember?

Ali: This was my first time. Like I said I wanted to come to this country to better my family. My Brothers, Sister and parents.

When you first landed was it in Heathrow Airport and what was your initial reaction?

Ali: Yes it was Heathrow. When I first landed in Heathrow I thought to myself this is a white person's country, it was very strange because this was an unfamiliar sight. When I left the

Airport I was given an address which took me to North West London, Daventry Street. I stayed there for a week and then left to Birmingham because I had some relatives there. Coming to this country I never knew about racism. There were so many problems, white people used to attack blacks and my community also faced this problem, we really had to struggle and fight to stay in this country.

And how did you fight?

Ali: My struggle was my fight. I didn't understand the language, I had problems getting work, and Bangladesh faced major problems. We had rooms with no doors, in one room there would be 5 to 7 people sleeping. 10 to 15 people would eat rice with one curry out of one pan. Not like today. Later on once we slowly learned to language we could stand on our own feet.

When you came from Bangladesh did you bring anything with you?

Ali: No I didn't really come with any possession. I just bought a little money with me; it's too embarrassing to tell you how much.

So you have said the people where different, and this was your first journey on a plane. What else was different?

Ali: The way of life was different in this country. Travelling from one city to another was a real struggle. We were illiterate and did not understand this culture. A lot of us did not know how to read numbers so what we used to do was put bricks in front of our homes to signal our location. My friend did not know what 8 was so I told him put to eggs on top of each other and the number which looks like that is an eight.

You have mentioned that you where the second of 5 brothers, why did you come to Britain and not your elder brother?

Ali: My elder brother had no interest in coming whilst I always wanted to travel. And I was also very well connected and popular. In Bangladesh I would mingle with all the locals whilst my brother was less social. Even when I came over he still was not interested in coming.

When you were in Bangladesh what did you think London would be like?

Ali: I though London would be good. Though I didn't ever think I would see white people spit on black people and because of this I really suffered. This country was very problematic but I was a really strong man, I was 6ft at 16 stones. I became established I had my own coffee bar in Birmingham. God willing I was able to help my fellow Bengalis especially those who were scared of being attacked by the locals. In our area there were lots of skin heads who would target Bengalis.

We didn't have a bathroom or a television but we didn't care because our focus was to give money back home. I would work the whole week for £5 and out of that I would send £3 to my

family in Bangladesh and live of £2, I had to do it because my mum , sisters and brothers where waiting on me to give them money. And that is how I lived.

How did you come to Westminster and why?

Ali: I was originally in Westminster, I came here in 1975. When I first came to Westminster I worked in a canteen but it was a fitting job so I asked the station manager who I knew well how can I get a job and he told me to fill out an application and sit an interview which I did and that's how I first started working for the British railway . I had many jobs in the British railway service from working as a Forklift driver to working in the red star office. In the Red star office I was my own supervisor, I would hand over parcels to those who had bought there identification.

When did you bring your wife and why?

Ali: I brought my wife in 1978. I decided to bring her over because I had one son and two daughters in Bangladesh and knew I wasn't going back as I was becoming established over here so that's why I brought her over. Also British Rail offered to accommodate my family if they had come over.

What hopes did you have bringing your family over?

Ali: I brought my family over so we could all stay together, it would have been really expensive traveling back and forth also bringing them over I could put my children through education.

Did you have any fears raising your children in Britain?

Ali: No at that time I wasn't scared because I was real tough. The rail station I used to work in had little to no Bengalis. The few Bengalis who used to work in the rail station used to work in the canteen and those who didn't used to get picked on by the Irish and Jamaicans. When I first came they used to try to pick on me, but I showed them and from then they all called me Ali Baba. I can remember throwing two Irish men on the floor and it wasn't that I liked fighting it was self-defence, you needed to be able to defend yourself in this country.

Did you fear whether your wife could cope in this country?

Ali: No I didn't, this country was okay. When she first came we had social workers who taught her how to cope in this country.

Who told you about social workers?

Ali: I knew all about this country, I had already lived here for 15 years, I had already helped many families so I was quite experienced.

How did the community start?

Ali: Well the first community was in Birmingham, there were lots of Bengalis from local districts. It was a society we had our own community leaders who taught us many things. The community where really involved especially during the Bangladesh independence war, we travelled to France to protest against the funding to West Pakistan. We let them know every time that they sent money over the way cows are slaughtered that would be the same way our families would be slaughtered and I believe that helped stop the funding.

I also helped start a community; I am a founder of the Lisson Green Bangladeshi Society. We had about 500 members. Every building had about 4, 5 families. However, in the 70s there were only 3 to 4 Bengali families in Lisson Green.

When you brought your wife over how many Bengali families lived within the community?

Ali: There was quite a bit, at that time there was about 30 to 40 families. I had connections with all the Bengali families because I used to help them out a lot.

You said earlier that you were already established in the country that you had been here for about 10 years before lots of families from Bangladesh moved into the area. Did many Bengalis look to you for help?

Ali: Yes, I used to work in Paddington during the night so I was free during the day. Once I came back from work and there was a local Bengali man crying on my door steps and asked him why he was crying, he replied to me "My flight is at 3, I don't know the directions to get there and that would mean my paid ticket would be wasted" I replied to him that I just came back from a night shift and your crying at my door, could you not find any other Bengali? So I told him to come I grabbed his bags and took him to get an emergency medical and then I dropped him off for his flight. Since then he has passed but his children told me that he used to tell them how much I helped him.

Did any one eat English food?

We used to buy a chicken for 20p and it used to last us the whole week. We used to buy a bag of rice and that used to last us.

What about prayer?

In the beginning we did not pray as much as we should do. There were not many mosques. We used to pray tahajud. People used to look after each other and support each other. When one child was bad then whole community knew that.

So there was a community

The community was strong. Now there is less respect amongst people. When people used to come over we used to help each other out with money. Everyone used to give for example a pound

What about prayer

In that time there was not a consistent mosque. I even led the prayer

When you came over you were well respected. When your wife came was life hard?

When she came life was easy. She had everything.

Did you ever see your wife sad because life was hard?

Life is hard, for normal people life is hard. But for her she dealt with it well. It was a little hard we lived in a small room because we did not take the house provided by the railway. My kids wanted to stay in Edgware road.

You said that the social workers supported you anyone else?

When I first came I did not need support. I was a single man earning money. When my family came I had money and I could have maintained them. I did not need social workers because I knew the system.

In your spare time what did you do?

D: we had no spare time we worked most of the time. When we were free we would visit other family's who came new

That time there was no telephone how did you contact?

D: We used to write letters every Saturday and Sunday. Some people could not write therefore I would go round and write for them. I used to help some people who needed it because we also wanted to know what was happening back home. We used to write on the weekends because we had full time jobs. I used to work on holidays for double pay. I used to work for 7 weeks then go back home.

Was your son born here (Eklas)

He was supposed to be born here however my wife was denied visa so he was born in Bangladesh

Where were you when the kids were being born?

I used to live less than 500 yards from the hospital. I used to live in Pread Street so I always used to go down. The nurses were great; they took care of us when the twins were bored.

When the kids went school were you worried

No my daughter went to a school next to my work. I was not worried because I could drop them off and pick them up. The teachers were great because they would feed them milk and food.