

## Aga Khan was an honorary pallbearer

by Haroon Siddiqui, editorial page, editor emeritus, *The Toronto Star*, Oct 3, 2000

A close friend of the family for 30 years, he also represents a slice of Trudeau's Canada. "Pierre and I were friends and there was an informal understanding that if there was a racial crisis, Canada would intervene. So when Uganda's Idi Amin decided in 1972 to expel Asians, I picked up the phone, and Trudeau affirmed then and there that Canada would wish to help."

Canada opened a special diplomatic mission in Kampala. They worked nonstop from 6 am to midnight. The office processed 6,000 Asians, including 5,000 Ismailis. Another 5,000 Ismailis came from Kenya and Tanzania. Later waves would swell their total in Canada to 45,000. They would prove a model minority - self-reliant, educated, organized and entrepreneurial. Among them: author MG Vassanji; lawyer Nurjehan Mawani, former chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board; and Firoz Rasul, CEO of Ballard Power Systems, the current president of the Ismaili Council of Canada, who accompanied the Aga Khan to the funeral.

Jean Chrétien, too, is a fan of the community. At the height of the last recession, he bemoaned that what his hometown of Shawinigan lacked was "a dozen Ismaili entrepreneurs".



## Were Ismailis favoured?

Of those admitted to Canada 80 percent were Ismailis, the next largest group being Goans. Even if the "pass percent" was higher for Ismailis than others, it wouldn't prove that they were favoured, simply that based on their qualifications they scored higher points. Certainly in terms of their education level, age distribution, and fluency in English (all criteria on the immigration grid) they scored bonus points. Was the "pass mark" lowered for them - and not for others? Half way through when many people were being rejected on strict interpretation of the points system the pass mark was relaxed, because this was basically a "refugee" operation, the first of its kind and hence criteria were being evolved on the run. The pass mark was lowered for *all*. This important point is covered later.

St Vincent was asked recently by the author Mansoor Ladha (*A Portrait in Pluralism: The Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims*, Detseling Enterprises Ltd, Calgary, Alberta, 2008) whether Ismailis were favoured: "The biggest advantage they had over the others was they had members of the community already settled in Canada who could "sponsor" them." Roger St Vincent mentions in his diary that Asians who received offers of assistance from people in Canada were immediately interviewed. All the 57 heads of families interviewed on the first day had relatives in Canada.

Peter Mansbridge did an interview with the Aga Khan on his *One On One* programme on CBC. The story behind the interview from his eponymous book.

There are about eighty thousand Ismaili Canadians in our country, and when I decided to interview their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, his Canadian



PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTO BY JUSTIN RABIN.COM

representatives told me that every single one of them would be watching. I had to smile when I saw the overnight ratings the first time the Aga Khan's interview ran: eighty thousand.

He was a great friend of Pierre Trudeau, based on the former prime minister's decision in the early seventies to admit to Canada thousands of Asians expelled from Uganda by the brutal dictator Idi Amin. Many of the new arrivals were Ismaili, and they, and the Aga Khan, have never forgotten Canada's open doors in their time of need.

I took with me a good friend and colleague, Sherli Najak, executive producer of *Hockey Night in Canada*. He'd begged me and my regular director Fred Parker to let him direct the Aga Khan shoot. Freddie, normally very protective of his turf, said, "Absolutely," and so did I. Sherli, you see, is Ismaili. His family story traces back to those Uganda days, and for him this opportunity to be in the same room as the Aga Khan was going to be a life-defining moment.

As inspiring as the Aga Khan's message was, the lasting memory I take from that day was the beaming face of Sherli Najak standing next to the Aga Khan for that special photograph he had so wanted to get. The man who regularly bosses Don Cherry around looked pretty tame all of a sudden.