

100 YEARS OF SUGAR CORPORATION OF

AMIN'S REIGN OF TERROR



PART III

BY MS RADHA MEHTA
(Granddaughter of N.K.Mehta)

On the 9th of October 1962, thousands of people thronged joyfully in the streets to celebrate Uganda's independence from British Rule. Milton Obote became the Prime Minister of Uganda, and leader of a coalition between the UPC and the Kabaka.

Under Uganda's constitution, members of parliament were entitled to elect 9 special members for their exceptional contributions in various fields. Mahendra was elected as one of the 9 members, for his outstanding contribution to the economic development of the country.

Relations between Milton Obote and the Kabaka however, were deteriorating rapidly. In 1966 Obote sent government troops led by Idi Amin, a young officer who he thought showed a lot of promise, to attack the palace of the Kabaka. In the brutal Battle of Mengo Hill the Kabaka was deposed.

A new constitution was drawn up in 1967 abolishing all four kingdoms and declaring Uganda to be a Republic. Obote's government also took over 60% share of all foreign owned businesses in the country, including the Uganda Sugar Factory, UGMA and Cable Corporation.

Amin, meanwhile, continued to gain prominence. He knew Lugazi well as his mother had worked on the sugar plantation when he was a child.

Amin often visited ECTA Motors, started by Mahendra as the sole agency in Uganda for TATA and M A N Trucks, Allis Chalmers construction and agricultural equipment, BMW and Mazda automobiles.

In Mahendra's words: "Amin could be very friendly and charming. He once told me that he would like to take over the country, a statement that I took to be in jest."

IN 1972 AMIN ANNOUNCED THE EXPULSION OF ALL ASIANS FROM UGANDA. ASIANS WERE GIVEN 90 DAYS TO LEAVE. MAHENDRA, WHO WAS IN THE UK AT THE TIME TO SEE HIS NEW BORN BABY DAUGHTER RADHA, RUSHED BACK TO UGANDA AS SOON AS HE HEARD THE NEWS, AND APPROACHED AMIN. AMIN SAID TO HIM: "WEWE USIENDE- YOU DON'T GO, STAY HERE AND CONTINUE TO RUN THE INDUSTRIES."

In 1971, while H.E President Milton Obote was at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Singapore,

Amin launched a military coup and seized power.

In 1972 Amin announced the expulsion of all Asians from Uganda. Asians were given 90 days to leave. Mahendra, who was in the UK at the time to see his new born baby daughter Radha, rushed back to Uganda as soon as he heard the news, and approached Amin. Amin said to him: "Weve usiende - you don't go, stay here and continue to run the industries."

Amin issued permits for 50 engineers and technicians who agreed to stay on to work. Mahendra arranged for financial assistance for all the others who wanted to leave. In his words:

"Decades ago, my father was instrumental in inviting and helping thousands of people to settle in Uganda in various fields of work. Many of our present workers were the sons of those settlers. They had served us loyally and I felt a strong sense of responsibility to do whatever I could to ease their departure."

1972 saw the unleashing of Amin's reign of terror. Soldiers from opposing tribes, civil servants, supporters of Obote, any and all dissenters were arrested, brutally beaten, tortured and murdered. Mahendra tried to keep a low

profile. Suspicious that his telephone lines were tapped, he would call his young son Jay in Nairobi every day and exchange a few words in code with him, to convey he was okay.

The 89th day of the quit orders coincided with both Eid and Hindu New Year. That evening the officer in charge of the Lugazi Police Station came and told Mahendra that he had heard rumours that Mahendra would need to leave within 24 hours. Mahendra immediately tried to contact the Minister of Internal Affairs but there was no answer.

His suspicion was confirmed when it was officially announced on the evening news "Mehta given quit orders."

He shared the news with his heart broken staff and started preparing to leave the next day.

The following is a passage from his autobiography "The Call of the Peacock": "(That night) I tossed and turned, unable to sleep, filled with a strange foreboding. Then suddenly the peacocks began to scream. I glanced at the clock-it was just 5.45 and still dark....Just then there was a loud knock on my door. The security guard stood outside and I could see that he was terrified.



Asians expelled from Uganda in 1972

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"Someone wants to speak to you" he whispered hoarsely, adding briefly, "Soldiers." My heart sank. This was usually the time they picked up people for interrogation, or worse...

For the first time in my life I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I remembered I had a gun for protection. Should I try to shoot my way out? But even as these crazy thoughts passed rapidly through my mind, my instincts were telling me that it was too late for any action. The crisis was at my doorstep. Commending my fate to God, I stepped out of the door.

About a dozen soldiers pointing their AK-47s at the door, stood on my porch. When they saw me, they lowered their guns.

"What can I do for you?" I asked as calmly as I could manage.

One of them said: "We have been patrolling all night in the rain, and the cold is killing us. Could we have something to drink?"

...Their Captain, who was a Muslim, did not drink. He stepped away from his soldiers and asked if I had received the

THE 89TH DAY OF THE QUIT ORDERS COINCIDED WITH BOTH EID AND HINDU NEW YEAR. THAT EVENING THE OFFICER IN CHARGE OF THE LUGAZI POLICE STATION CAME AND TOLD MAHENDRA THAT HE HAD HEARD RUMOURS THAT MAHENDRA WOULD NEED TO LEAVE WITHIN 24 HOURS. MAHENDRA IMMEDIATELY TRIED TO CONTACT THE MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS BUT THERE WAS NO ANSWER. HIS SUSPICION WAS CONFIRMED WHEN IT WAS OFFICIALLY ANNOUNCED ON THE EVENING NEWS "MEHTA GIVEN QUIT ORDERS."

President's message.

I said I had. "When will you be leaving?" he asked. I told him that...I did not even have a passport as my Ugandan passport had been revoked...but I hoped to leave by the afternoon. Then he began asking after my family in a very personal way. "How is Mama?" (Mrs. Mehta) "And Mama Kubwa?" (My mother) "And Jay?" "What is the name of your new baby?"

I was surprised. "How do you know my family? I asked. "Are you in the Intelligence unit?"

He smiled. "I know you very well," he said, "My father worked on your plantation for 40 years. I was born on this estate, studied in your school here and won a scholarship to go abroad. When I returned I joined the army...I am sorry that it has fallen to my lot to see you out of Uganda, but I am sure you

will return...May God's blessings go with you."

Then he had the soldiers line up; they saluted me, and left.

I was speechless with gratitude that this was the man who had been chosen to see me on my way out of Uganda. Had it been any other, my fate would have been very different."

Mahendra packed two suitcases containing only essential items and, left all other possessions, and his home behind.

During the next few years, while Uganda descended into chaos, he learned that many of the men, distinguished parliamentarians and friends that he had served with during his stint in parliament had been killed during the Idi Amin era.

In his words: "It saddened me, but made me realise how extremely lucky I had been to have been expelled in 1972...I had escaped prison and even death, unlike some of my friends."

TO BE CONTINUED
NEXT WEEK



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