



UNIVERSITY OF
WEST LONDON
The **Career** University

Summary of an interview conducted as part of the South Asian Heritage Project

Funded by the Heathrow Community Engagement Board (HCEB)

Interview conducted by interviewers from the University of West London.

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HCEB South Asian Oral History Project Interview 2

Interview Date: Wednesday 23 February 2022

Time: 12:05

Place: Online

Interviewers: Anne-Marie Purcell and Jane Rae Ross, UWL (University of West London)
Archives

Interviewee: Rajinder Singh

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Rajinder is originally from India. He lived in a village, Devi Das Pura, approximately 18 kilometres outside of Amritsar. His family were farmers, his father was in the army, he was studying and helping his parents on the farm, staying in the background, and helping people in his village. Helping other people makes him happy. He also mentions his nickname 'Skipping Sikh' and mentions that he is also called 'Reg'.

Rajinder's father wanted him to come to the UK (United Kingdom) for a better future as his uncle lived here. He could not disrespect his father, so he came here. His uncle got him a little job working with him. Rajinder was homesick and he wanted to go home but he stayed because it was his father's wish. He went to classes with his cousins and took part in sports. His teacher chose him to take part in running. His uncle stopped him because he was worried that Rajinder may get injured, however, Rajinder continued with his sporting activities. He took a night class once a week to improve his English at college while working although he still was not happy, he stayed because it was his elders wish.

Rajinder did not come to the UK first. He was in Germany where he was a student and was originally supposed to go to Canada. However, the agent who had brought him and his fellow students to Germany left them, so he called his father who arranged a student visa for the UK and sent him another air ticket for him to go to the UK. He came in 1971/1972, he remembers that it was December and very cold. Rajinder mentions that he was born in 1947 so he would have been 24/25 at the time. He mentions that in Germany, the teachers were interested in teaching Sikh people, and he found out that some German families belonged to Aryans which is the same as his ancestors. He was taken to many places with old buildings, Heidelberg, Faising?, where he was told about history; Germany, English, India world. Rajinder mentions his English teacher and Health & Safety teacher. His uncle was able to get him a student visa because of this. He believes in honesty; no-one is perfect, and he does not believe in deceiving people. This is a principle which he learnt from his father and by which he tries to live by and has passed on to his own family.

Rajinder recalls his first time at Heathrow. He had to wait at immigration for 3-4 hours. He was treated very well, offered tea/coffee. His passport was taken from him, and his uncle had to provide documentation so that he could get the documents from immigration to permit him to work. Rajinder's dad had advised him to be truthful, which he did, he felt that immigration looked after him very well. He mentions that he could not criticise them as they had to do their job and that he was happy to be sitting at Heathrow waiting. He remembers that Heathrow was quite different compared with India, principles, hygiene, cleanliness, the only problem was 99% of people were English speaking so he hesitated to speak due to his English. He feels that after so many years he still feels embarrassed because he cannot pronounce some words properly.

Rajinder started to work at Heathrow. He recalls that he had a variety of jobs, approximately fifteen. He worked first with his uncle, then making nuts and bolts for

Ford cars, then for British European Airlines night shift cleaning once a week, then he worked in a bakery for a few months, but he always had a job because he could not stay without working. However, he did not like people who criticised him and who ordered him, he found this difficult. After the bakery, he worked for Intercontinental Air Catering. He mentions the owner, Mr. Hillier. He left this job because someone threw a knife at him even though the manager said that they would like to keep him and would that this person would be suspended. By this time, Rajinder had improved his English, so he went to the job centre in Hounslow, he mentions two men and a girl who helped him. The girl helped him fill in forms. There were two jobs that he was interested in, one for British Airways (BA) and one for the British Airport Authority (BAA). He did not know the difference, so this was explained to him that BA was a private job and BAA was a government job. He remembered that his dad had told him that a government job was better so he said he would like to apply for the job with BAA. There was a £5/6 difference between the jobs which was a lot of money in 1973/1974 but he wanted to do the government job. He went for an interview. The interviewer was Mr. Kirby, airport personnel, who had been a soldier in WW2. He asked Rajinder why he wanted to join BAA and spent a good five/ten minutes with him. There was also a lady and another girl asking him questions, but he does not remember. He recalls becoming confused during the interview and how kind they were to him and told him to take his time. He got the job. He then recalls Mr. Kirby telling him that he hoped Rajinder had not had any trouble before joining them, but he did not disclose the incident at the bakery. When his new employer received his reference three months later, Mr. Kirby called him to the office and asked him why he had not told them that he had left the bakery because of an argument which had been reported to the police. Rajinder explained that his uncle told him that if he told them this then he would not get a job. He thought he had lost the job, however, Mr. Kirby told him he could keep his job but not to listen to third parties who tell you to hide things and tell lies again he kept his job but had an extended probation of six months. After six months his duty officer, a Scotsman called Morris Stephenson, confirmed he had a permanent contract. He took him to the airport superintendent, Mr. Roberts. They trusted Rajinder a lot, he was the first Asian to receive an award from his manager, twenty-five years staff and confidence. The photo reminds him of all the top people who gave him respect and inspired him, he will be faithful to this country to his dying breath. He says that this was the best job he ever had. He left Heathrow in 2003. He remembers he would always volunteer for jobs in the airport when they needed someone, going from terminal 1 (T1) to terminal 2 (T2), T2 to terminal 3 (T3). He still volunteers today. He currently volunteers at a hostel where he recently met his old duty manager. They were great people he worked with at Heathrow. These are the memories he would like to keep rather than money.

When Rajinder started working at the airport the job was called sundry services, so he had a variety of duties, all kinds of jobs including cleaning and was provided with a uniform. Just before he joined the section used to include police, immigration, customs, traffic wardens combined but when he joined the services were split. Rajinder recalls that the old uniforms were nice nylon shirts and trousers which were still being used 2-3

years after the services were split into separate sections. He also remembers that employees had to do any jobs, they could not refuse to do jobs. They were given khaki overalls so that employees could do any job. Rajinder believes that since the airport has been privatised the reputation is not the same. He mentions that it was extremely strict compared to now, no smoking on duty, no chewing gum compared to now. He still wishes that the airport would be renationalised as he is not happy with how it is run now and how staff behave. He remembers that BAA used to train other airports around the world on airport operations, how to treat/deal with passengers, and how to do things properly.

Rajinder did not return home for a long time as he wanted to show his parents that he had worked hard so it was six/seven years before he went home. He went through Heathrow. He remembers that because people who worked at Heathrow knew each other they did not check id cards the same way that they do now. He recalls bottles of alcohol and other goods being left out airside and that no-one touched them or took anything because people were so honest. When travelling through Heathrow he was given priority and treated like a special person. Every time he travelled, he travelled from Heathrow, he feels proud to travel from Heathrow and to come back to Heathrow. He has not travelled since Covid but even before this he did not enjoy flying. Rajinder mentions that due to his job – nearly 28 years at Heathrow, he was rarely sitting down and even now he prefers this to sitting in a plane for lengthy periods. However, as he is now 74/75 years old, his age makes sitting for extended periods even more challenging. He likes to walk, run, and cycle, and to meet as many people as he can. Meeting people is more challenging now due to restrictions so unless he was going to the Golden Temple he is not inclined to travel, especially as his father, mother, and brother are dead. Rajinder also mentions that he is concerned with the current political situation in India. He would rather continue to volunteer, help others, walking, cycling, and charity work for the rest of his life, helping other people. He recalls his father's words that first is God, second is women, and third is sport and charity, and he tries to keep it.

Rajinder was the first Asian to join the Heathrow to Brighton cycle ride for charity. He did not like to be photographed or be in the front, he prefers to stay in the background, not to show off, and to carry on. Heathrow is where he started his charity work. His first half marathon was Harlington, then Felton, then Kingston and so on. He then took his children to Richmond Parks and others. He has also participated in charity cycle runs.

During Covid his daughter made videos of him exercising to show older people how they could exercise at home and stay healthy because the restrictions prevented people from going to places. He prefers to keep away from bad things and doing things that are good for health. More people watched them, including younger people, than he thought would so his daughter made more under his nickname of the 'Skipping Sikh'. He does

not believe in giving up, help others, and believes in eating well and exercising. This is how he tries to help people.

Rajinder lives near Heathrow, and he finds there is a lot less noise now. He believes that the new company which runs the airport is doing it differently and not in the correct manner. He wishes people could see this. He mentions that if any job needed to be done when BAA ran the airport, for example painting, and if it had to be completed in one week then it would have been finished in time. He mentions that the company that runs the airport now is not doing this. He believes that this company is more interested in making money (he mentions the car drop-off charges) and that it is not running the airport in the correct way. For example, when there are runway closures resulting in flight path changes, or when work is to be done which impacts the local community, no information is given whereas BAA would always ensure the local community would be informed. He feels this has been detrimental to the local area. He wishes that the government would bring back BAA and that it was state controlled again several times. Rajinder believes that if BAA ran the Heathrow again then it would get its third runway 'in no time'.

Rajinder's most significant memory of Heathrow is that it is a hub not just for the United Kingdom but for the world, Heathrow first, Singapore second. Other airports would copy it. BAA would train and show other airports in the world how to run airports. It was an example to the world, others would say it is better meaning its principles, law, transport, law abiding, faithful staff compared to the new company. He believes it is a significant difference, but people are not saying anything including himself. He would go quite often to see staff he used to know but he has not been for a long time because he does not know many people now. He believes that since the new company has taken over, standards, for example cleanliness, are not as high. He does state that these are his own views and that he cannot speak for others. He would like to see the airport return to the standards that were there when he worked there. He calls Heathrow a 'star in the world' but now 'no principles, money, money, money, money, nil stars'. It would be his dream to see BAA return. He ends with some general life advice.

The interview ended at 12.58.