

Abdul Aleem

From Kenya to Canada

Abdul Aleem's sheer fortitude and determination have carried him through numerous challenges and setbacks. From historical roots in Jalandhar, India, to childhood in the bustling hub of Mombasa, British East Africa, then the horrors and aftermath of the Partition of India, Abdul navigated medical school and surgical training in England before arriving in Canada, the final destination on an incredible journey.

Abdul Aleem's family journey to Africa began with his father, Karim Bakhsh. Shortly after World War I, with few job prospects in India, Karim set off from his small village of Nawa Pind, in Jalandhar, to the main port of British East Africa: Mombasa, Kenya. Fighting on behalf of British India during the war, he had spent much of his time in Burma (present-day Myanmar) as a surveyor, his primary role being to map out and plan the routes that the army units would travel. After his time in the British army, and as Britain continued to colonize East Africa, he began working alongside a British surveyor in Mombasa by the last name of Stevens. Mombasa had become a bustling port city for the British Uganda Railway, and Karim worked for the municipality, surveying and planning the city's expansion. In time, he left his work for the municipality and opened his own consulting firm, where he continued his survey and city planning work throughout Kenya. Later, he travelled back to Nawa Pind to seek a bride. Zohra Aziz came from the village of Khurla Kingra. During this same period, he also convinced two of his brothers to come to work in Kenya.

Around 1941, during World War II, Karim began building a house in Nawa Pind and sent his pregnant wife Zohra to India to oversee the construction. By the time she arrived, however, the house had already been completed and furnished, and there she gave birth to Abdul. He was the youngest of six children, four girls and two boys, born across a span of eighteen years, the others being Sharifa Begum, Mukhtarah Firdaus, Abdul Qayyum, Fahmida Akhtar, and Saeeda Akhtar.

The Partition of India

In 1947, Zohra and the children returned to Nawa Pind to visit family, a voyage that many South Asian Indians would make every four to five years. Abdul's father remained in Mombasa for work. During their stay, they experienced Partition, one of the most violent moments in India's history, triggering riots, mass casualties and deaths, and a colossal wave of migration between the dominions of India and Pakistan. When Partition began, the army came to Nawa Pind and warned the villagers that they would have to gather their belongings and leave immediately; within twenty-four hours, there was a violent raid on the village. As Abdul recounts the family's experiences, he observes that although he was only four or five years old at the time, this traumatic time left an everlasting imprint — PTSD.

Zohra's cousin, Dr. Abdul Hamid, was a physician in the army, and upon hearing of the raid, he used his influence to send an army truck to rescue the family. However, when the truck arrived

in Nawa Pind and enquired into their whereabouts, another family impersonated them and were rescued instead. Abdul's family would only find out much later that Abdul Hamid had attempted to extricate them. Instead, they endured many months of hardship. The escaping family included Abdul and four of his siblings — Saeeda, Fahmida, Abdul Qayyum, and Sharifah — along with Sharifah's two daughters (a new baby and a toddler), his mother, one grandmother, and both grandfathers. They packed what supplies they could onto a bullock cart and began the dangerous journey to a refugee camp that lay just outside of Jalandhar. On their way, his mother would ask her children to close their eyes to avoid seeing corpses strewn along the roadside.

The Refugee Camp

Abdul's memory of arriving at the refugee camp was of standing in waist-deep water inside the family's allotted tent. He remembers crying from continuous hunger, and the aromas of food wafting over from the army barracks' kitchen. After they had been in the camp for ten days, Dr. Hamid was able to arrange transport for Abdul, his three sisters, and Sharifah's two daughters out of the refugee camp. They were to cross the new border into Pakistan and be met by his eldest sister, Mukhtarah Firdaus, and her husband, who were already living on the other side and anxiously awaiting them. After the truck was loaded, the children were placed on top of the cargo and then covered to keep them hidden. Abdul remembers lying under the truck's canopy in a torrential downpour. The children were told not to make a sound, lest they alert the enemy, who would then ambush the truck and massacre them. Upon arrival at the border, Mukhtarah's husband, working as a customs officer, let them through and brought them to safety.

Abdul's older brother, Qayyum, as well as his mother, grandmother, and both grandfathers were forced to remain in the camp. His father, upon hearing of the civil unrest in India, left Mombasa immediately to try to locate them. Each day, Abdul would walk to the border, watch the hordes of refugees cross, and wait for their arrival, not knowing whether they were alive or dead. Lack of sanitation caused cholera outbreaks in many of the refugee camps, claiming the life of Abdul's maternal grandfather. Qayyum, only fifteen years old at the time, was forced to dig mass graves and bury the bodies of those murdered outside of the camp's walls. He later shared with Abdul that this left him with lifelong, debilitating nightmares. Finally, after two long months in the refugee camp, Zohra, Qayyum, and Abdul's surviving grandparents finally crossed the border into Pakistan, and Karim made swift arrangements for their return to Kenya.

Returning to East Africa

Upon returning to Mombasa, Abdul entered grade school. His keen intellect allowed him to skip two grades during these early years. Students who then completed standard seven were given the option to enter a trade or high school. Abdul chose the academic route but was too young to enter grade 8 and lacked any official documentation, such as a birth certificate. Many of the family's records had been lost during Partition; on the night of the raid, they had escaped with only the barest of necessities. Consequently, Abdul does not know his exact age, nor the month or day he was born. His family estimated his year of birth to be 1941 or 1942. Eventually,

Abdul's father was able to obtain a passport with his estimated age, and he subsequently entered Allidina Visram High School in Mombasa.

Abdul holds many fond memories of his childhood in Kenya. With so many immigrants there, he recalls tolerance and respect amongst all of the various cultures and religions. His best friends were Ismaili (a Muslim sect), but he also remembers celebrating Christmas with some friends and Diwali with others. There was no judgement, shame, or animosity amongst the different cultural and religious groups. Mama Mkubwa (meaning Big Mama in Swahili) lived next door. She used to make and sell mandazis, a form of fried bread originating on the Swahili coast. As a youngster, Abdul recalls being terrified of her long, stretched ear lobes, a common Kenyan cultural practice, but he eventually endeared himself to her and enjoyed her loving attention and good food. During his time in high school, he not only excelled academically but was also active and skillful in sports (cricket, soccer, and running). His first trophy was won in a 400-yard race. He treasured the cup for many years but eventually lost it during one of his many moves.

Mombasa was the main port for travelers voyaging to and from India and Pakistan as well as for Muslims on their holy pilgrimage to Haj. It was also the main hub for those arriving from all parts of Kenya, Uganda, and even Tanzania. Abdul recalls watching not only the people but also the great African animals caged and ready to be shipped off to all parts of Europe. His father built a mosque for the Muslim Association in Mombasa, along with accommodations for travellers, and he put the rents back into the Muslim association. He also busied himself with various sports associations, raising funds for them as well. Thus, Abdul saw little of his father; he recalls watching him shave before work in the morning or having a short visit once Karim returned home late at night. His most treasured time with his father was the occasional haircut, when Karim would take him to the barber. This was ritually followed with a cup of tea in the cafeteria for Karim and ice cream for Abdul.

Returning to Pakistan

In 1952, the stirrings of the Mau Mau uprising began, a violent insurrection against colonialism that took hold as settler expansion continued to marginalize Kenyan tribes. During this period, the British began recruiting students from Abdul's high school to help suppress the rebellion. Abdul was deeply affected when he learned that two of the recruits, fellow schoolmates, had been killed. In part due to instability in the country and also due to declining health, Karim requested that should something happen to him, Zohra and the children would leave the country and return to Pakistan to be with family. It was becoming less safe to remain in Africa, and hard times hit Abdul again during his grade 8 year: on a Boy Scouts camping trip, he developed malaria, and then, during his recovery, his father passed away.

With development in full swing in the busy Port of Mombasa, along with the rest of the country, Karim had been too busy with his consulting work to focus on his deteriorating health, which included diabetes. When he became direly ill, a friend in the medical field forced him to check himself into a hospital to stabilize his blood sugars. There he remained for four days but never returned. Abdul, a retired doctor now, suspects he had a heart attack. Abdul had been told that Karim was to be discharged on the fourth day of his stay but woke in the night with

shortness of breath and began pacing while clutching his chest. The next morning, instead of welcoming him home, the family received the tragic news from his physician.

After Karim's death, Zohra waited for Abdul, Saeeda, and Fahmida to complete their high school year and then packed up their home and returned to Pakistan permanently. Karim had had high hopes of Abdul becoming an accountant; as a child working in his father's firm, Abdul had displayed mathematical acuity, and Mr. Stevens had suggested that they send Abdul to England to pursue an accounting degree after high school. So when the family arrived in Pakistan, Abdul wanted to leave immediately and move to England to fulfill his father's dream. But after only two or three months in Pakistan, he developed amoebic dysentery and became very ill.

Apart from this misfortune, his adjustment to life in Pakistan was challenging on many other levels too: cultural, religious, environmental, and linguistic, to name a few. His childhood had been filled with a spoken language admixture of Swahili and English, interspersed with Urdu and Punjabi. In Pakistan, he needed to become fluent in Punjabi. In addition, the rigid separation of men and women during his time in high school and, later, at the King Edward Medical College was foreign to him, a result of Pakistan's new Islamic regime, freshly minted from the politics of Partition.

Abdul also learned that his university options would be limited in Pakistan: engineering, medicine, or law. Upon overhearing his mother tell a friend that one of her sons was already an engineer and that she hoped to have a doctor in the family, Abdul set his sights on medicine. Having received an English education in Kenya limited the high schools that Abdul could attend in Pakistan. After reviewing the university requirements he would need in England, he had to choose between a Protestant or a Catholic high school. He chose the latter, St. Anthony's, the same high school that two of Pakistan's prime ministers attended. With high grades, he was then accepted into the pre-med program. However, after completing his second year, he developed typhoid and collapsed during his medical school entrance exams. Forced to delay these by three months, he found the medical school seats had already been filled by the time his exams were successfully completed. Thus, he went on to finish an additional year of his undergraduate science degree (BSc), taking courses in anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology.

The following year, Abdul began his training at the King Edward Medical College in Lahore, and in 1960, he was part of the 100th graduating class from a college regarded as the second oldest school on the continent. He remembers fondly the centenary celebrations, with many notable graduates in attendance, including dignitaries from around the world.

England

After completing medical school, Abdul was, in his own words, "desperate" to return home to Kenya and had secured a house job in Nairobi at the Aga Khan Hospital. A house job is the most important year of clinical experience, under supervision, before the start of one's own practice as a physician. Despite his family still owning real estate in Kenya, with the rents from this housing supporting his medical school tuition, it was proving impossible for him to return. This

was in large part due to Kenya's new independence from Britain, and the ensuing Africanization project, which left very little opportunity for Abdul. Although raised in Kenya since infancy, he had been born in British India and thus held a British passport. Returning to Kenya would require him to surrender his British passport and apply for immigration to work in the country of his upbringing.

Anxious to leave Pakistan behind, Abdul borrowed money from his mother and purchased a plane ticket to England, where he would go on to complete his initial clinical training and then to specialize in different areas. His first house job was at the Mile End Hospital, near East London. He followed this with a surgical house job in Wolverhampton, where he met nurse Noelle Malloy, who would later become his incredible wife. He then completed another one-year senior house job at New Cross Hospital (also in Wolverhampton) and then a final internship at Stourbridge Hospital. Noelle and Abdul married in January 1974.

By 1974, Abdul had realized that at this point in his career, there would be no further upward movement unless he knew "someone really powerful" in England. Upper-level consultantship jobs were typically allotted to British citizens, not immigrants. Hence, it was time to move again, and he set his sights on career opportunities in North America. A fellow medical school friend, Mukhtar Haidar, recommended Canada, since the United States did not recognize British medical training and qualifications and would require him to begin specialty training all over again. In Canada, one could work as a General Practitioner and would only be required to complete two years of specialty training in order to qualify to take the fellowship examination.

Canada

Abdul contacted the Canadian College of Physicians and was notified that they would not recognize his training from the medical school in Pakistan, despite it being a British-certified medical program. He would need to rewrite the same medical exams — this time, in England — before the College would accept his credentials. He challenged the exams successfully, and in June of 1974, he and Noelle left for the small town of Herbert, in southern Saskatchewan; Canada commonly recruited immigrant doctors to work in remote communities. While working in general practice, Abdul also undertook a six-month training program in anesthesia that was being offered to general practitioners. He knew that this would be an asset in his future career as a surgeon. Their first child, Nadia, was born in December 1974, followed by Rebecca in 1977. By 1978, the cancer clinic in Saskatoon was seeking an individual with surgical experience, and Abdul took this job, working there for a year. In 1979, he was accepted into a now five-year residency program. He completed two years of his residency in Regina and in 1980 became their chief resident. Their third child, Kamran, was also born this year. He completed his final years of residency in Saskatoon and after writing his fellowship exams, took a cardiac surgical position and became a member of the teaching faculty.

With three kids in tow, Abdul began looking for a permanent position. They loved Saskatoon and were hoping to stay in the city. Jobs came up in smaller locales — Moosejaw and Prince

Albert — but never in Saskatoon or even Regina. Abdul recalls a local doctor telling him that “people like you should work in the small towns.” This was his first memory of experiencing prejudice in Canada. Until this point, he felt he had earned his positions based on his credentials and strong work ethic.

Soon after, a work acquaintance notified him of a job opening in Cranbrook, in southeastern BC. In 1986, Abdul sat the interview and had no sooner returned to Saskatoon when he received the news that he was being offered the position. After years of grueling education and training, then re-education and re-training, he had made it! While in Cranbrook, their family grew yet again, and Sarah was born in 1989. During this period, they also purchased a lakefront property on Kootenay Lake. This would become an important gathering place for both family and friends, and even today, Abdul continues to visit the lake for rest and solace.

Abdul officially retired in 2013 but continued to work as a locum for a number of years. In 2017, he and Noelle purchased a home in Vancouver and now live there happily. Inclement weather in Cranbrook created many challenges for those coming to visit — importantly, for their four children and now five grandchildren, who live across Canada and internationally. Flights would often be cancelled due to fog or winter storms, forcing visitors to complete the final leg of the journey by bus from Calgary, four hours away. Many of their friends had also gravitated towards Vancouver’s warmer climate, including Mukhtar Haidar, his classmate from medical school days. Vancouver made sense — it was a central hub and would ensure that family visits could happen more often.

Today, Abdul and Noelle’s children are equally successful; each went on to complete various degrees, Nadia and Sarah at McGill University, Rebecca at Queen’s University and the London School of Economics, and Kamran at the University of Victoria. Nadia is currently a psychiatrist living in Toronto, Rebecca a human rights lawyer working with the United Nations in Germany, Kamran a bank manager in Vancouver, and Sarah a gifted musician working at the University of Toronto. Their many talents and successes are unsurprising, given their parentage.

Abdul has never been able to return to Africa. However, he continues to dream of setting foot once again on the red earth of his childhood, in the country where his early lived experiences inevitably shaped some of his most unforgettable memories, carved his soul, and molded him into the man he would become.



Aleem's Family (photograph taken by Aleem on a visit to Pakistan)