

## **Saanich Archives Oral History Project 2007 Interview with Nindi Sehmi**

**Interview date:** 24 July 2007  
**Interviewer:** Louise Ditmars

### **SUMMARY**

#### **EARLY LIFE:**

Narindra Singh Sehmi, or "Nindi," was born January 1st, 1929 in Nairobi, Kenya, to father Bishan Singh Sehmi and mother Sant Kaur Sehmi. Their family consisted of eight children. Kenya was a British colony at the time, and was governed under the British system. Students of different ethnic backgrounds studied at different schools, and Nindi attended the school for those of Indian descent, the Duke of Gloucester highschool.

#### **ADULTHOOD:**

Nindi joined the civil service as a draughtsman after highschool, worked for about a year, then moved to his brother's civil engineering firm for a period of five years. His brother was an alderman and held many official positions, so Nindi managed the office and the staff and was an engineering student there. His brother then needed an architect, so sent Nindi in 1951 to the Northern Polytechnic in London to study architecture. In the summers during this time, he toured Europe as a sitar player and singer with an elite group of Indian dancers. He graduated in architecture with honours from Polytechnic in 1956, then returned to Nairobi.

He had met his wife, Surindra Walia in London, where she was studying fashion design, but they waited until 1960 to be married in Nairobi. Their first son, Havind was born in July of 1964 in Nairobi.

Nindi had a small architectural practice in Nairobi, but it was becoming politically unstable. He later worked for the Tanzania civil service and was posted Chief Architect. Later, he was with the City of Nairobi for a year, and also taught architectural subjects part time at the University of Nairobi.

In 1965, the family moved to London, where he worked for the civil service. Their daughter Rasna was born December 9th, 1969 in Byfleet, Surrey.

In 1974, Nindi and his family moved to Victoria. He had an introduction to partners in the firm of Siddal, Denis and Warner, Architects, and worked as an architect designing schools, commercial buildings, and a few houses. The family rented a townhouse for a year, then bought their present home at 1619 Dougall Avenue. That house was chosen for the opportunity for ground-level living, close to nature.

Nindi worked for the Ministry of Health from 1980 to 1991, involved in the planning and construction of hospitals and longterm care facilities.

#### **VOLUNTEER WORK:**

Nindi has been involved in his Indo-Canadian community in several ways. He served on the Board of the Inter-Cultural Association for ten years, has been active in the India Canada Cultural Association and may offer advice to cultural and civil organizations.

## **INTERVIEW**

### **What is your full name?**

My full name is Narinder Singh Sehmi and the Singh, as you know, is part of my cultural name. All Sikhs are called Singh. Sehmi is my last name but most anybody for 50, 60 years calls me Nindi and here it's almost become my official name so I'm Nindi Sehmi to most people except my.....out of respect.

### **Who were your parents?**

My parents, I think I've probably mentioned that I was born in Kenya in Nairobi and my parents moved there from Indian from Punjab, they were Sikhs, my father was Bishan Singh Sehmi, my mother was Sant Kaur Sehmi.

### **What was the date of your birth?**

There's a story behind it. The official date of birth was first of January, 1929. I was not a New Year's baby, but that's my recorded date of birth. The Indians had no birth registrations in Kenya and when you went to school, the teacher said 'what's your date of birth?' and my father said 'January 1<sup>st</sup>' because that's when the term started. There were half a dozen other boys in my class whose date of birth was also registered first of January.

### **Tell me a little bit about what the conditions were like when you were a child in Kenya.**

Kenya was a developing colony, a very strongly British style of living. There was a fairly large Indian community emigrated from Indian and culturally we lived there as an Indian conglomerate, living Indian life, but we were always being schooled in the way of the British, the English and the British way of life. Generally there was a sense of wanting to become westerners in a way.....and yet we hung on to our Indian heritage, I still do.

### **I think you mentioned there were a number of ethnic groups in Kenya at the time and that the schools were separated.**

It's true the school system was primarily into three-tier groupings the Europeans, the Asians and the blacks. There was hardly any schooling for the blacks because the natives, it was their country, so there was hardly any schooling for them. We as Asians got a fair amount of education and the Europeans schools were well provided, well equipped. It was relatively controlled in that manner throughout. We achieved education which was set up in England for us, the London.....the senior .....that was our highschool ....., but there were no universities in Nairobi at that time so for any further education you had to go out, the Indians mostly went to India, the rest went to wherever they came from, if you were German you went to Germany, if you were Polish you went to Poland, of course most were Indians.

### **What was your high school called?**

It was originally called Asian Senior Secondary School but to give it a more of a British image, it was then called the Duke of Gloucester, why Duke of Gloucester, I don't know.

**There was perhaps a little bit of ferment at that time, politically?**

We were going through a little bit of a troubled time because it was my school ending 42-43, India had become a nationalistic country opposing the British ruling the country and we, as Indians, of course, sympathized with it, empathized with it and that did not sit well with our colonial government offices. There were a couple of incidents in school when we were reprimanded for being Indians and sympathizing with Indians.

**What did you do after high school?**

Well, I finished high school, dabbled around a little bit, worked for a newspaper for a while, I thought I would probably become one of the top editors in the country, but I didn't last very long. I joined the Civil Service as a draughtsman in the Engineering Section learning a bit of engineering at the same time, for about a year or so, and then my brother who was a civil engineer and had his own practice, decided he would take me into his office to help him with his office essentially and also to train me. I worked with him for about five years, primarily managing and running the staff and office as well as doing the engineering part of the construction buildings.

**That must have been interesting.**

It was, it was very heavy work, I was never home, I was mostly in the office but I enjoyed it and I was learning and I did become virtually ready to take my final examinations ..... and ..... I had to go to England anyway, I couldn't take them in Nairobi. I ended up in England eventually but I went to study architecture. My brother needed an architect in the office because a very large part of the office was doing architectural work. So they offered to send me to England to go and become an architect. It took six years and .....

**So that would be about 1951 that you went to England.**

Yes, 1951, this was post-war England, England not quite rich and ..... as they are now. I had a bit of a struggle, England, sort of paying your fees, living a very meagre life.

**What was the housing like in London at that time?**

Most of the students lived in what was called 'digs' and probably still called 'digs.' You took a room in a house, there were maybe 8 or 10 rooms, and you paid rent for a room and that was your life. I lived in the same room for 6 years. I shared the room with a fellow student [Yanis Moussaki?] he's Greek, he now lives in Paris, he married a French girl and lives in Paris. For eating facilities, we either just toasted sandwiches and beans or went out and paid for a meal if you could afford it. The life was very lonely because as I mentioned I came from a very large family, 8 siblings, and here there were just the two of us trying to keep each other company and trying to make the best of the conditions around us. Not bad conditions, it was a good life, but it was a hard life, studying and trying to make ends meet at the same time.

**What were attitudes like in London at that time?**

Very racial. Generally there was an opposition in the sense of 'this is England and you are foreigners, you're not welcome but we'll treat you nicely because you're here though' and we were treated nicely but the sense of not being wanted, I left England long ago now and things may be different now and they are.

**It's quite an international population there now?**

It is, there's a tremendous amount of, after the war, there was a tremendous inroads into England from the West Indies and India and other countries. Most are now very established in fact part of the economy is now run or managed by these people who at one time were foreigners and aliens and were not welcome. But it's home to them, see. One of my daughters was born in England, she carries a English passport, I don't I still carry a British Diplomatic passport.

**How did you do at your School of Architecture in England?**

It was a long struggle, as I said earlier, I was aiming to be an engineer and that was my forte and being an architect was a different lifestyle of concept. I was artistic in many ways, I played music, interested in music, I played sitar, so I have an arts facility but I had not the facility to what architecture required. The learning process, but I'm a soldier, once I was in, and of course I was sent there to be an architect and I did, I carried on. I eventually ended up with an Honours Diploma, that was sheer accident because the design of the building, nobody had designed a Sikh Temple ever, not that I knew of and I put together the project because it looked very admirable, that was the Honours part, so I consented to .....

**Please tell me more about what you did in the summer times?**

Most summers, was, like two months of 'what do you do?' So you either took up jobs in various

Industries, most of the students would all go down to farm camps. It paid the food, paid the bills, and you met a lot of young ladies as well while you were there. But I was very fortunate, because of my ability to play sitar, I joined a troupe of Indian dancers and I toured with them in the group as part of their musical ensemble and this happened almost every summer and that was very fortunate for me because I was able to do what I enjoyed doing and I was able to see all the capital countries in Europe and performed in some of the top theatres in Europe and I got recognized as what was said, untruly, as India's leading sitar player, which I wasn't.

**What a way to travel?**

Yes, it was very convenient because it was difficult otherwise.

**So when you finished your training in England, what did you do?**

I went back, of course, to Kenya, a period of struggle there. I started a small private practice which didn't last too long because the economy of the country was in the doldrums at that time because the country was heading towards independence. So I decided to actually move out of the country altogether but I was waiting to get married to my now wife and we moved, I got a job offer in Tanzania, and it was the first time that the Tanzania government has offered a professional job to anybody who was not a white person. So I was the first professional non-white person and I was hired as an architect. I was later offered or considered for the position of Chief Architect. There was a political turmoil which followed up with that because I was neither an ex-patriot white, I was not an African born in Kenya, and it had never happened before. I was actually forced to just say thank you very much and I did not stay. I then moved to Nairobi for a while. We were expecting our first child. I worked as an architect with the City

Council of Nairobi. ....job I designed to move originally to Canada to Australia or Canada but in the interim to England, then I designed a job offer, I was offered the position of City Architect and again when I looked at it it looked like a temporary stopgap, suit them, not suit me so I decided not to accept that either. And then on to London, home.

**You were very familiar with it.**

I was very familiar with that and England.

**Please tell me the name of your wife.**

Her name is Surindra, a name very similar to mine I am Nahindra she is Surindra.

**So you already had one child born in Nairobi and who was that?**

Havind, he's my son, yes.

**And then you had another child.**

My daughter, ..... was born in England.

**So tell me about that period when you were in England again.**

Well, it was a question of settling down, making up your mind whether to, making it home and then you found out because of the nature of the social environment, it would never be home or it would be home with some restrictions. I was unhappy. I changed jobs only twice. I worked for the local authority for two years and then for the civil service for 8 or 9 years. It became apparent there would be no further promotion offered to me and I decided to move on somewhere I might find a better future. Canada was the option. I was very fortunate in getting a job in Victoria, ..... job in Victoria. Got off the plane at 2 o'clock, was in the office at 3 o'clock and was working the next morning.

**Tell me about that transition, I think you told me you had an introduction to someone here to make it happen.**

Yes, you know I was making enquiries in Canada, writing to the various associations about the opportunities and a friend of mine, .....Jackson..... I might mention his name, was actually working in Victoria and I had listened to him. He knew David Warner in the firm of .....Warner. David had also schooled at Polytechnic in London with us in London and he knew me because I was the only Sikh in the school at that time. And he said 'oh, the job is his.' It was just one of those fortunate things. It connected up very easily. I came up to be eventually a partner in the firm but in the 1980s things went a little ..... and I left that office to join the government and that's where I kept working until I retired.

**Let's jump back to when you first arrived. How was your first week or so in Victoria?**

Very difficult. I was alone. I had left my wife and two kids in Winnipeg with a friend. I thought I would come and settle down and call them in. I knew nobody here. My friend .....and ..... had already gone on vacation when I arrived, the same day, I think. I was pretty much alone in town. I did meet some people who are now like family to me and they sort of took me in charge. I stayed with them for a while until I found somewhere to go and live and carry on with my life. Life was a little difficult again, different

social environment, different from England, much happier place to live in, socially and culturally. But I was unable to find the kind of lifestyle I was used to previously. But then when you move to a new place, you see what's going for you and try to work your way into it.

**Where did you live at first?**

Shortly rented a place, a condominium up in Gordon Head and the reason for moving to Gordon Head was it was building new schools out here and ..... about, and after a year we moved into this little what I call a shack, compared to the houses in Victoria, and we never moved. It was very convenient, schools are nearby, the University is not too far, I've got a bus stop outside, didn't need to drive a car if I didn't want to and we found the environment very acceptable. The neighbours of course on the side have been there just as long as I have been so it's like it big ..... large family.

**It's a lovely house. Very pleasant, bright, airy.**

Yes, most people think an architect should have some sort of an excellent house which is architectural, but that's a very relative term. What you see as beauty, I'd like to say 'the beauty is in the beholder's eye'. The things in the house which I've done, people walk in and appreciate, yes, but then I fixed the house, I did not start from Day One with it. You mentioned that you liked the neighbourhood. You've been here 30 years? Thirty-three years almost. The neighbours, we've seen their families grow up, the neighbours next door, little girls grew up, and now are into the adult life, and now of course the neighbours are childless like us. But we still sort of associate, visit each other quite a bit, go out for walks together. On Canada Day, Bob across the house has a Canada Day Picnic, the entire neighbourhood is there, about 40 or 50 are out there. It's not like living in the city on a street where you don't know who your next door neighbour is. It is homely and friendly. And I'm glad we didn't move.

**Tell me some of the things that you're involved in or have been involved in during your time here. You've been involved in the ICA and various cultural organizations.**

I had a background back from Nairobi getting involved in activities. In Nairobi they were essentially of a political nature. But in England I was involved in societies of music because that was my interest and cultural organizations. When I came here I got involved again with cultural organizations. The first one was the India-Canada Cultural Association which was a Group of Indians trying to promote Indian culture and I have been with that Association almost every since, off and on. If I'm not on the Association, I am there, in the ..... I got to know the Inter Cultural Association because of my interest in that kind of field and I was again with ICA for about 10 years, again on the Board, off the Board, sort of thing. But .....with the Inter Cultural Association, and also with my own Association. But because of my interest in social and cultural lifestyles, I got into other things, I was with the United Way Board for a while, I did a number of other official organizations as a consultant, advisor, counsellor, coffee house, Transition House. There were a number of these places where I have always had something to do with it, but not as an organizer or operator but as a volunteer or consultant mostly. Kept my life busy.

**You did tell me something about the Victoria Police Board, that you have some connection with them.**

This started way back when, the police of course here are always sensitive to issues involving ethnic people, not aware of how to deal with them, and I, this is way back I attended a couple of seminars on that but recently I've been involved with another, the Inter-Cultural Association set up a group of people from different ethnic origins. We talk to each other about what we see as problems, and how we ..... solve the problems and we meet on the opposite side with the Police board people who join us, and have a dialogue, a very useful dialogue because we learn why the Police does what it does and why it doesn't do what it should do. Hopefully they listen to us also. We meet fairly, not on a scheduled basis now, on call, like to just keep the ball going.

**So this is to help the Police to become more culturally aware.**

That's the intent because culture is a very awkward thing because your culture, my culture, can be intending to do the same thing but still looking like opposed to each other. You try to find a common ground where you can sense there are no answers of your feeling what is right and wrong and often some cultural attitudes make it difficult. I've talked to police officers about a number of these issues at one time and hopefully it helps in some way to ease some of the tensions. There is sometimes tension between Police and ethnic groups ..... what appears to be tension, it shouldn't be so.

**You stood for Alderman at one time. Tell me about your political career.**

Not so much a political career, I was always connected to political people and I was involved with the Sikh community at a time who respectfully followed my input into the running of the Sikh Temple for a year. And it was the community members who thought we never had an Indian on the Saanich Council. And I was promoted for it but unfortunately I did not succeed. I almost succeeded the first time but the second time around, for some very unfortunate incidents I was just off the board altogether. I didn't make it. It wasn't an ambition with me as much to become a political person it was just that it seemed that because I was doing the kind of cultural things for the community, maybe I could have a better input if I was a Councillor or Alderman on Saanich *Council*. I'm still friends with the Saanich people.

**I'd like to give you the opportunity to make any more comments you'd like about the time you've seen in Saanich?**

I think when I first talked to your office, the thing was where is Saanich going or what's happening to Saanich. When we moved here this area was like a little suburban and in isolation. It's not now, it's almost an urban kind of development all around us, all the fields are gone, houses spring up everywhere, there isn't a piece of land available in Gordon Head now. But that's, of course, that's the way things go, as populations build up, and become denser, need for housing increases, so the single-story houses like these disappear and you end up with condominiums and highrises. People are opposed to that but then again, it's a question of sensitivity and if you're reluctant to accept change, you oppose it. But change will come and it's coming and happening slowly all over. As an architect I think it's probably a welcome thing. The design of that which you're building which of course is something that we question. These mega-large houses that are characterless and too dense. If you look at my yard over the

yard ..... the new houses have hardly a yard in front and hardly a yard in back and hardly any space on the sides. And I think that probably is an issue that needs to be addressed.

**I'd really like to thank you for giving this interview today. The community will very much benefit from it. Thank you again.**