

Early Lenasia – Memories of Mrs Hajra Bibi Patel



Mrs Hajra Bibi Patel

Aged 94 years, Mrs Hajra Bibi Patel is one of the veterans of Lenasia. She was born to Adam Motala and Rasool Salejee in 1931 on London Farm, near Schweizer Reneke.

After passing Standard 2 in Bloemhof, her family moved to 17th Street in Vrededorp and Hajra Bibi attended the Vrededorp Indian Girls' School. Her family did not allow her to attend high school.

In 1948, at the age of 16, she married Goolam Hussein Patel, who was the son of well-known educator known as "Master" Patel. She has four daughters, namely, Soraya, Yasmin, Rehana and Shenaaz. She believes that her daughter, Rehana, was the first Muslim female to be born in Lenasia, and the nurse who attended to her was Sister Fredericks, who travelled to Lenasia on a scooter.



Goolam Hussein and Hajra Bibi Patel

Initially, they lived in Marabastad in Pretoria and the family then moved to Fide House in Becker Street in Ferreirastown, Johannesburg. Here they stayed for five years until Master Patel and his children, Goolam Hussein, Cassim, Yusuf, Yacoob, Ismail, Fatima and Jubaida, moved in July 1955 to 3rd Avenue (Smew Avenue) in Extension 1, Lenasia. Master Patel at the time was one of few residents of Lenasia that owned an Opel car.



The extended family of “Master” Patel

“We were forced to come to Lenasia. I did not like it at all. There were no facilities or amenities at all. Life was hard and difficult, and things only improved in the 1960s,” she remembers.

For the first six years there was no electricity, sewer, paved roads. There were no shops to buy household necessities and no religious and recreational facilities. A man called Lunat “Chacha” from Kliptown came from time to time and sold bread and groceries to the residents. Her children attended the First Primary School (Alpha Primary), which was established in 1958. The principal was Mr Billy Moonsamy.

The early families in Lenasia were the Lahoris, Hassens, Mr S. Pillay (teacher), the Moonsammy’s (teachers) Vincent Naidoo, Ajoodhas and the Bagus and Francis families.

Her daughters attended madrassah classes privately at the home of *Aapa* Hamida and *Aapa* Zohra at 6 Smew Avenue. During the month of Ramadan, the men would go for evening prayers at the Varachia home, and later prayers were performed at Khan’s Butchery.



Patel residence in Smew Avenue

Once out of primary school, the daughters either attended Lenz High School, where Mr AJ Francis was the first principal to be followed by Mr Moosa Lorgat, or Nirvana High School, whose principal was Mr Lingham. After matriculating Hajra Bibi insisted that all her daughters should pursue their studies as she was never afforded that opportunity. Soraya became a social worker, Shenaaz graduated as a teacher, and both Yasmin and Rehana became nurses.

Hajra Bibi supplemented the family income by baking and dressmaking. “I would sew children’s dresses, sari blouses and bake biscuits, and sell to friends in the neighbourhood,” she says.

In 1981, Goolam Hussein decided to move to Toronto in Canada. “Our lives were disrupted again – we had moved from London Farm to Pretoria, then to Ferreirastown, then to Lenz, and then to a foreign country. It unsettles a person and disrupts family life,” she recollects. In Toronto she continued with her baking and sewing work but also registered as a home care aid for elderly citizens. Goolam Hussein worked at a men’s clothing store. In this capacity she looked after old Jewish women by attending to their personal needs such as bathing, cleaning their homes, cooking and feeding and doing the laundry. She would earn 12 Canada dollars per hour.

Hajra Bibi Patel has returned to Lenasia after the death of her husband in 2015. She lives with her daughters and now says, “I miss my friends in Toronto.”

(Interviewed by Ismail Vadi on 30 January 2025, Lenasia South)