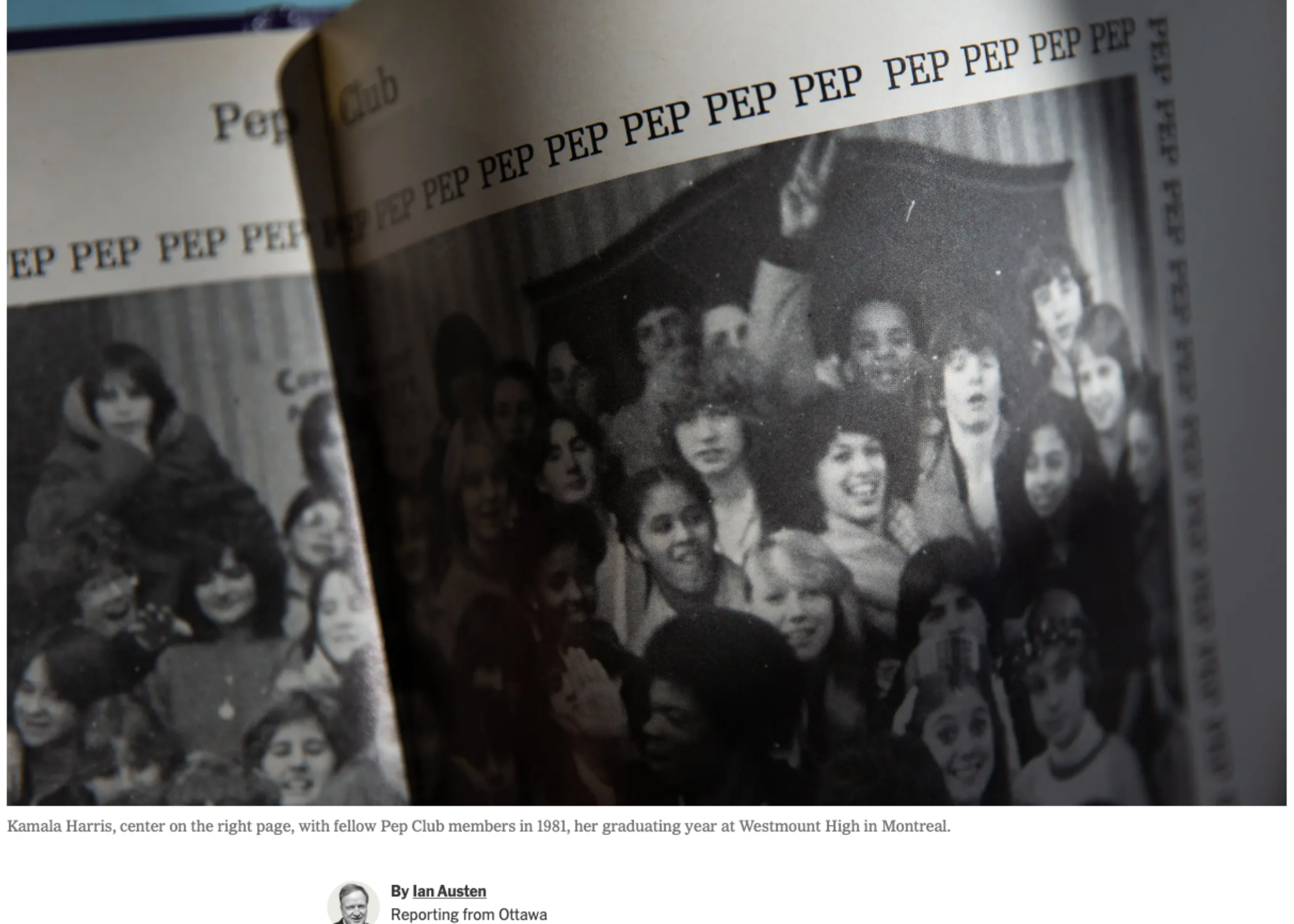


# Kamala Harris's Life in Canada Was Marked by a Yearning for Home

Ms. Harris went north as a 12-year-old when her mother was recruited to conduct breast-cancer research, but California was always on her mind. The experience of a Canadian friend inspired her to become a prosecutor.

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Kamala Harris, center on the right page, with fellow Pep Club members in 1981, her graduating year at Westmount High in Montreal.

By **Ian Austen**  
Reporting from Ottawa  
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While campaigning this past week, Senator JD Vance of Ohio called Vice President Kamala Harris a “phony” who “grew up in Canada,” as former President Donald J. Trump, the Republican presidential nominee, continued raising false and incendiary questions about the [presumed Democratic nominee’s](#) racial identity.

“Kamala Harris grew up in Canada,” Mr. Vance said during a [campaign stop in Arizona](#) on Wednesday. “They don’t like that in Vancouver or Quebec or wherever she came from.”

Ms. Harris did, indeed, move to Montreal as a 12-year-old with her sister in 1976, when their mother, [Shyamala Gopalan](#), was recruited to conduct breast-cancer research at Jewish General Hospital and to teach at McGill University’s medical school.

Over the next five years, Kamala Harris continued to shuttle between Quebec’s largest city and California to stay with her father, [Donald J. Harris](#), an economist at Stanford, and a family friend during holidays and vacations.

In her memoir, Ms. Harris characterizes that period of her life as a time of longing for California. (Her campaign declined to comment on Ms. Harris’s time in Canada.)

“I’d gotten used to most of it,” she wrote of her move to a predominantly French-speaking city with harsh winters that was far away from most of her family. “What I hadn’t got used to was the feeling of being homesick for my country. I felt this constant sense of yearning to be back home.”

She left Canada after completing Westmount High School in Montreal and enrolling at Howard University in Washington.

Wanda Kagan, whom Ms. Harris has described as her closest friend at Westmount, said the vice president and the other American students at the school maintained their bonds to the United States.

“They were American and they kept their American identity,” said Ms. Kagan, who lives in Montreal and works in health care. “It’s not like you come here and then you become French Canadian or Canadian.”

“They were still proud Americans,” she added.



Wanda Kagan, Kamala Harris’s close friend from high school in Canada. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

It was a time of enormous social, political and economic change in Quebec. The year Ms. Harris arrived with her mother and sister, the first Parti Québécois government came to power with a mandate to separate from Canada and expand provincial laws intended to make French the predominant language.

In response, several corporations moved many or all of their operations to neighboring Ontario. Between 1971 and 1986, nearly 200,000 English-speaking Quebecers left the province.

But Ms. Kagan said little of that filtered into the hallways and cafeteria of Westmount High. Like much of the western part of the island of Montreal, she said, life there was disconnected from the largely French-speaking areas to the east.

Within the high school, the only visible effects of the sweeping political changes were new laws requiring high school students to reach a minimum proficiency in French in order to graduate, Ms. Kagan recalled.

Ms. Kagan said she and Ms. Harris stood out because both of them had attended classes at a French-language school for a year before transferring to Westmount, which was part of the English-language public school system.

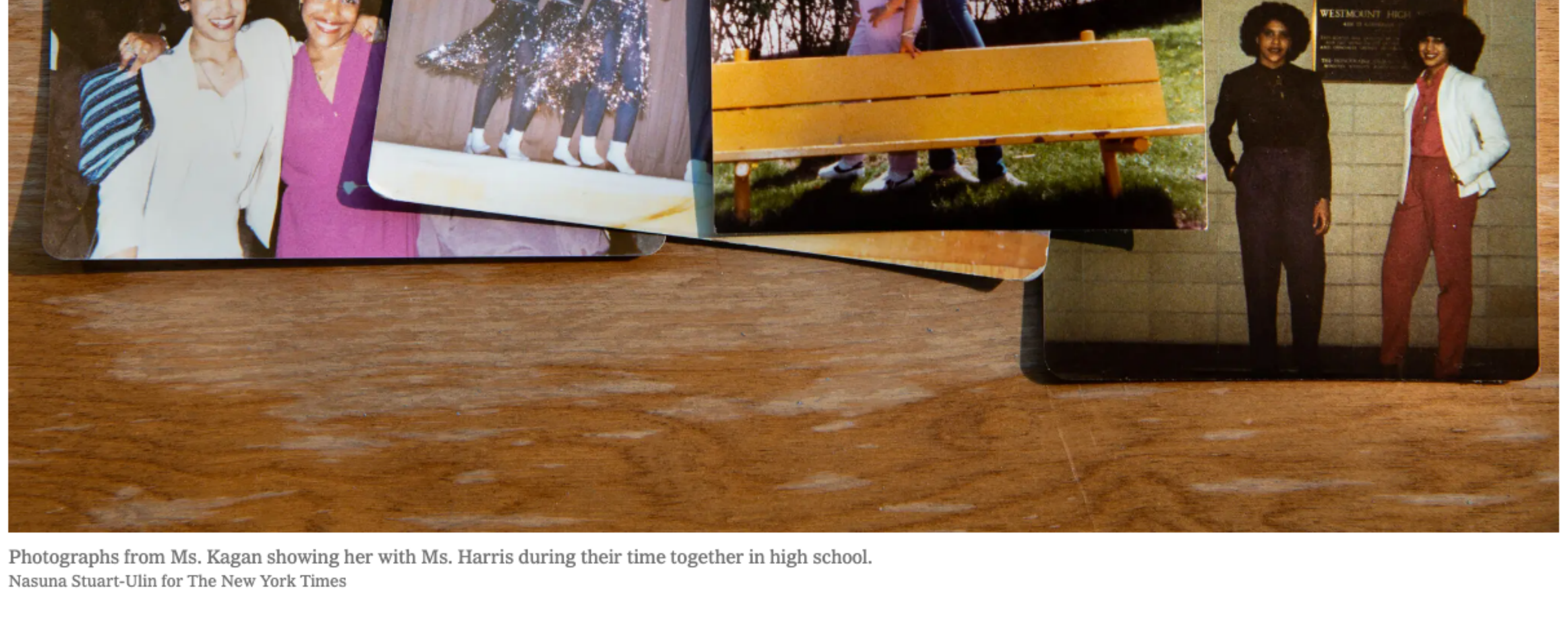
Ms. Harris wrote in her memoir that her mother had sent her to a French school to acquire a second language. But it did not go well.

“I used to joke that I felt like a duck because all day long at our new school I’d be saying, ‘Quoi? Quoi? Quoi?’ (‘What? What? What?’),” Ms. Harris wrote.

But Ms. Kagan said that their one year in the French system meant that both she and Ms. Harris avoided the struggle many classmates had passing the recently introduced French test.

Ms. Kagan said that life at school for her and Ms. Harris was more about school activities, like [“doing the variety show.”](#)

“We did the fashion show,” she said, “and we did the pep rally.”



Photographs from Ms. Kagan showing her with Ms. Harris during their time together in high school. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

They developed an unusually close friendship. When Ms. Kagan told Ms. Harris that she was being sexually abused by her stepfather, Ms. Harris had her move into her family’s apartment in a middle-class neighborhood.

“It’s not just that she took me in,” Ms. Kagan said. “It’s that human side of her, that empathetic side of her that could be so compassionate to realize that there was something going on.”

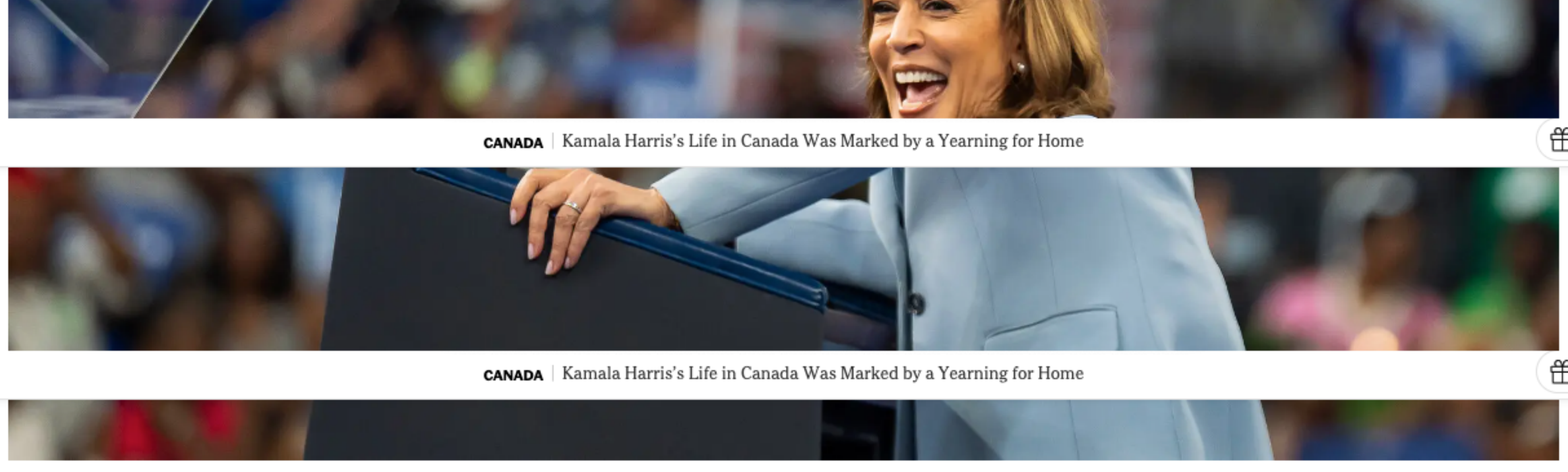
Ms. Harris said in 2020 that her friend’s plight helped influence her [desire to become a prosecutor.](#)

Like Ms. Harris, whose father is Black and from Jamaica and whose mother is South Asian, Ms. Kagan is biracial, with a white mother and a Black father.

The pair found themselves in a high school that was about 60 percent white and 40 percent Black and drew from a variety of neighborhoods that cut across economic lines.

Ms. Kagan said that she and Ms. Harris straddled the school’s racial divide.

Until Ms. Harris was picked as Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s running mate in 2020, her political career had passed largely unnoticed in Canada. Her years in the country had also received relatively little attention since she announced she was running for president.



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Ms. Harris in Atlanta this past week. Nicole Craine for The New York Times

Ms. Harris has not gotten too deeply involved in U.S.-Canada affairs, though as a senator, she voted against the renegotiated version of the North American Free Trade Agreement because, she said, she believed it lacked sufficient environmental protections.

The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau all the three pact to Canada’s economy and made its approval by all three countries its top political priority.

Before moving to Canada as a young girl, Ms. Harris had expressed some misgivings, though in the end, she seemed to have found her niche.

“My mother tried to make it sound like an adventure,” she wrote, recalling the time she was told about the move. “It was hard for me to be explorers of the great northern winter. But it was hard for me to see it that way.”

Vjosa Isai contributed reporting from Toronto.

**A correction was made on Aug. 3, 2024:** An earlier version of this article misstated who sexually abused Wanda Kagan. It was her stepfather, not her father.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at [nytimes.com](mailto:nytimes.com). [Learn more](#)

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A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 4, 2024, Section A, Page 15 of the New York edition with the headline: In Memoir, Harris Said Life in Canada in Youth Was Marked by Yearning for Home. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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