Sephardi Voices UK

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Title:	Mrs.
Interviewee Surname:	Kleeman
Forename:	Manuela
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	19/02/1944
Interviewee POB:	Alexandria, Egypt
Interviewee Occupation:	Housewife
Father's Occupation:	Cotton Trader
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

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[00:00:11]

Today's the 29th of September 2020 and we're doing an interview with Mrs Manuela Kleeman, and my name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we are in London. Can you please tell me your name?

Manuela, Manu Kleeman.

And where and when were you born?

I was born in Alexandria in Egypt in – on the 19th of February 1944.

Thank you very very much for agreeing to be interviewed –

My pleasure

For the Sephardi Voices archive. Tell us a little bit about your family background.

My family background is quite complicated. Where do we start? We start with the grandparents or –?

Wherever you want to start.

Then let's start with the grandparents. On my father's side my grandparents lived in Izmir which I think may have been called Smyrna at the time 'cos the Greeks and the Turks used to fight over it all the time. My grandfather was a jeweller. I'm actually wearing my grandmother's brooch as a tribute [laughs] because – I will tell you later how he got them out of Egypt which is another story. When the Turks retook Smyrna – I think in 1917 it was – they burned the city and my grandfather's shop and everything, and so they all had to leave. My father said he left the same day as Onassis, but Onassis did a better choice of route and went to South America. But my father went to Egypt because one of his brothers had a job there, and when he arrived there he tried to get to school but – he was seventeen, I think. Maybe I've given you the wrong date. Anyway, he couldn't really go to school although he was a very

good pupil, and he had to start working, and he did. **[00:02:02]** And he built a big company there where he would – he had four brothers and each one of them had a nice office in his business, but I think he did most of it. And what he did was, he was a cotton trader. He used to buy crops and resell them. And he also had a factory that took the grains out of the cotton flower and, you know, that's made into oil and so that's what he did generally there. And he became Egyptian because when they left they had no papers. He had an Italian *laissez-passer* but after a few years he became Egyptian, which was better for business, etc. So he had an Egyptian passport. My grandparents on my mother's side came from Corfu which at the time belonged to Venice, so they – in fact, when we went to the Venice ghetto I said to my husband, 'Please take pictures of those ladies. They could be my aunties,' 'cos they looked exactly like my mother's family. And they then went to Egypt also. My grandfather was – had a big business there too and nine children who all loved each other [laughs]. And the first two were born the same year, one in January, one in December, so my grandmother was a busy woman. And in fact somebody apparently once came to dinner and said, 'Do they all have shoes?' [laughs]. My grandfather didn't like to tell them they had several pairs [laughs], but there we are. Are they were all a very very close family, very loving and – in fact, I think exceptional 'cos I always expect people are going to be the same, I'm always surprised that they're not, but anyway, that was my mother.

And when did they migrate? When did they go from Corfu to Egypt?

I'm not sure but quite a long time before. I mean, they were settled in Egypt really.

Okay.

[00:04:00] Egypt in those days was a very civilised place to be and they had a – it was a life very much like the Raj, you know, they had lots of people looking after them and they were generally very spoilt and – but they lived – you know, everybody says to me, 'Oh Alexandria, Lawrence Durrell,' and I always say, 'Nothing to do with us,' [laughs]. You know, we were not at all – we were very sheltered and chauffeured everywhere and really only saw little bits of the city. But had a good life there until the Suez crisis came. Then it was not so good.

So just to go back. So your grandparents, did they know each other your grandparents, from both sides? From [overtalking 00:04:52]?

I don't think so. No, I don't think so. And I only knew my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, 'cos when I was born they had all passed away. So no, I don't think they knew each other, no.

And from Izmir to – when did they – do you know when they – well, we know [overtalking 00:05:11] the twenties.

They came in – I think my father came with his brother who later died in Auschwitz, but the parents I think followed on. I'm not sure exactly. I know my brother – my father and his brother came first or came separately. They all went when they could. And in fact, when we left Egypt my father said it was practically forty years to the day that he left another country, so he was a wandering Jew.

So which languages did he speak?

My father – well, everybody spoke French in Egypt. It's quite bizarre because Napoleon was only there a few years, but the schools were all French mostly. There was of course the sort of Eton of Alexandria. **[00:06:02]** I'm trying to remember what it was called. The Victoria College where Prince Hussein went, and some of my relatives went as well. But the schools – and the papers were all in French and if you went into a shop you spoke French. It was mostly the lingua franca appropriately, you know. So my parents spoke French at home. My mother spoke – we all spoke several languages together.

Yeah.

When I was recently with my sister in a shop where you say two words in French, one in Italian and six in English, people are very amazed by that and they said, 'Sorry, but where do you come from?' [Laughs] So I tend to say, you know, 'I'm an international woman of mystery,'

[laughs] because it's too complicated to explain. But we generally, mostly spoke French. Went to the French *lycée* and that's what everybody – well, the people we saw, [laughs], spoke.

And did your father speak some Greek?

My father spoke Greek, Turkish, Spanish – well, Ladino really but Spanish – French, Italian, and Arabic. And Hebrew a bit. When my father was very little my grandmother sent him to Hebrew school saying he'd never learn it otherwise, so he first learnt Hebrew and then went to the Jesuits actually in Izmir.

But they didn't want to stay. When it became Turkish, they didn't want to stay.

No. Well, as I said, they burned the city and I think they just had to scarper basically as usual, so he did. They all did. It was difficult but, you know, you get used to it.

And what – did they tell you things about their life in Izmir? Did you –?

Well, my father came to live with us when he was quite elderly because he lived in Paris on his own and it wasn't working out. And then he became to reminisce. **[00:08:00]** You know, when you get older you start – then he used to talk to me about they had a villa by the sea. He said you could practically jump into the sea from your window [laughs], you know, and who they had looking after them, and I think my grandmother was a very stern mother. She was not – whereas on my mother's side they were all very happy and demonstrative, etc. My father was more of an austere man, although he was a very very respected man. In fact, we always used to say afterwards he was like the Godfather, you know, people would go to him in Egypt for – if they had a dispute and he would sort it out. He would call the – he was a mediator, you know, he was very highly respected. And he was a lovely man, but he was not demonstrative. He wasn't sort of very affectionate in any way, but he was a very powerful man. My husband who had him to live with us, adored him. He said he was the most wonderful man, and he was but he had I think a difficult time when he was little because for one thing my grandmother – there were five brothers. The first three were from a previous wife of my grandfather who had died, and when my father was born my grandmother sent him to live with her mother. He

didn't really live with her – because she had to look after the other three. And he thought it was perfectly normal. Nowadays of course you would make a thing about it. What? Given away to a grandmother when your mother is sort of five doors away? You know. But you got on with it, you know, whereas he used to say – because my mother used to make the most fantastic birthday parties every year for all of us, and he would say, 'Oh, you know, when I was little boy they'd sometimes say to me, 'Oh, you know, last Tuesday was your birthday,' that was it.' **[00:10:01]** So, I mean, he had a difficult, very tough upbringing I think.

And how did he present this move to Egypt? Was that traumatic or was it – how did he talk about it?

I think he was always upset that he couldn't continue his studies which, you know, happened to me afterwards too, because he was very good and he would have done terribly well, but he just sort of rolled up his sleeves and worked. You know, and did very well, so...

And you said he managed to get Egyptian nationality.

Yes, which was a great thing at the time.

Yeah.

But which we then had to renounce with great difficulty when we wanted to leave.

Okay, a bit later.

Let's not leave, okay [laughs].

And tell us please, how did your parents meet? How did they – do you know?

Well, it would be very easy to tell you if you had lived in Alexandria but there was the sporting club where everybody went [laughs], and they met – he says they met playing tennis there, so – it was a very restricted society really, so very few families. Sometimes people say to me, 'I

know this person from Egypt,' and I say, 'Well, I know the family, but I might not know this particular person.' But, you know, we knew the names of everybody, so it was – that's how they met. They would know each other basically.

And when did they get married?

When did they get married? I know it was the second of June, but I can't tell you when it was. Quite a while ago. I have the photograph.

Okay. Late thirties maybe? Something like that.

Something like that, yes. And they went on honeymoon to Scotland [both laugh], which was a very very peculiar thing to do [both laugh], so...

It was exotic.

Yeah.

Hmm. And they married in Alexandria?

Yes.

And where did they settle then? Where did they live in Alexandria?

[00:12:00] We lived in Alexandria in a place which was variously called the Rue Fouad and then the – you see, the streets were called the 'Rue' something – and was then called the Road of Liberty [laughs]. It was a big block of flats and we all – mostly all lived in flats, and in fact, my sister has returned there and said it's – there might be chickens in there [laughs]. Anyway, it's not like it once was. It was a very very large flat. My grandmother lived with us also after a while.

Hmm-mm. And what are your first memories of growing up in Alexandria?

I just – I don't have a first memory. I'm trying to find a first memory. My sister was two years older than me. She had asthma and she was often looked after at home, and I remember being under the table – 'cos I know when I was just four I could read. I mean, they used to call me in the drawing room to read the paper to people [laughs]. I was like a show pony [laughs]. And I kind of learned things. In Arthur Miller's book, book's end he says 'you learn things on the carpet' and that's exactly – you know, you just pick up things. I remember being under the table and kind of maybe listening vaguely to what was going on. So maybe that. We had a very happy childhood. In fact, sometimes we say too happy because my mother lost her first child at birth. She had a very difficult birth, and the forceps damaged the head of the baby. It was quite traumatic I think. So when they had my sister who was perfectly normal and me – because I said to my father when I had my second daughter, 'Were you disappointed when I was born?' He said, 'Of course I was,' [laughs], which was nice to know but, you know, in a fond way [laughs]. **[00:14:03]** And so I think that they really looked after us in particular. Also, it was a dangerous place to live because there were illnesses. There were little boys with Bilharzia which is a horrible disease. There were, you know, eye problems. You'd see little boys with flies all over their eyes. We were supposed to keep away from everything. We could only be – we were quite segregated from Egyptian people, so we were very very much looked after. Too much.

But that would have been true for the, let's say, European middle-classes.

Yeah.

[Overtalking 00:14:44].

I think that would apply anyway –

Yeah.

But as I said, my mother was much more careful with us because she'd lost a child, so...

So tell us a little bit about the house, what it looked like or what –

Well, we had a very large flat –

Oh, flat.

Which had one, two, three, four, four reception rooms – five reception rooms, and a long corridor we used to bike up and down. So [laughs] really. And then we had – there were one, two, three, four bedrooms and three bathrooms. It was a very huge house really, a huge flat. It was – and we had a chimney. This was very important because when people had to leave in a hurry after Suez they'd all come and burn their papers in our chimney, no matter what the weather was like. Because, you know, they didn't want to leave them behind. They hadn't invented shredders, and so we had everybody's photos and papers going up in flames in our chimney. We were very spoilt. We had lots and lots of people looking after us. We had men servants, you know, with a red sash and a hat, and maids, and cooks. **[00:16:04]** In fact, our cook was a lady at the time, said to my sister who was ten, 'Why aren't you married yet?' She said, 'Well, I'm ten.' She said, 'Yeah, well I was married at eight.' You know, so we had them. And on top of – and we had a chauffeur, and my father had a chauffeur. My father was very friendly with the brother-in-law of the Prime Minister and at that time when he got it, you couldn't import any cars. And so this man Abdel Hamid said to him, 'Two cars have arrived at customs. You can have your pick and I'll have the other one.' And one of them was a very sumptuous Jaguar, which we had forever after that, and the other one was an American car. And my father picked the Jaguar, so we had that. But my father had also – because he used to go to the villages a lot, he had his own driver who'd had all his teeth removed and all gold ones put in. And he said to my father he was going to get married again because, you know, he had already a couple of wives somewhere, but this time he thought he really ought to have an older one because he was getting on, and so he picked an eighteen-year-old. That was – you know, that was the thing to do. And on top of all this army of people we also had somebody who came and collected my father's shirts and ironed them and brought them back, and we had – my grandmother had a lady companion and we had a relative of my mother's who used to come and teach us to be ladies. I'm afraid she didn't do very well with me [laughs], but every time I thread a needle I think of her because I used to thread very long strands of thread and she'd

always say that wasn't the proper thing to do. And she used to come once in a while. We had – there was always people –

To teach you –

There was always people in my house and people would turn up for dinner and the cook – after that we had a proper chef with a *toque.* you know, **[00:18:03]** who spoke Italian as well as Arabic, which was very good because my mother spoke no Arabic to speak of, or very bad Arabic, we had to help her out. But when the cook with the *toque* arrived [laughs], at least she could speak Italian to him so that was good.

And nannies? Any nannies?

Oh yes, oh yes, we had a governess. In fact, my husband always loves this story. When I was about to get married my mother took me to a café in Paris and she said, 'Well, you're about to get married. I think I ought to have a talk with you.' And I said, 'Yes, what do you want to know?' You know, we joked. And I said – she said, 'Well, I know you've always behaved very well.' I said, 'How do you know I've always behaved very well?' She said, 'You had governesses,' [both laugh], you know, your governess was going to teach you that. We had a lovely governess who was Armenian, and she taught us to play chess, and my brother had a very ferocious nanny because my brother was five years younger than me so he had his separate staff as well. You know, we were – and there were always people my mother – my mother's brothers would come in and have lunch as well. You know, you'd just go to the kitchen and say, 'Four more for lunch,' and the poor man would have to do it [laughs]. I mean, I have a memory now that I remember and everybody – there was never a time when you were alone in that flat. Not ever. And we had – the Jewish holidays we had one evening my father's family, which were all very serious people, etc., and the next we had my mother's family, which were so much more fun. And we sang and enjoyed it. When I moved here I found that the Jewish holiday in my husband's home were rather like a duty, you know, nobody was enjoying themselves. I was looking forward to much laughter and huge tables of – I don't know how many we were. **[00:20:00]** We also put small tables. Yeah, there was another room I forgot about. Lots of drawing rooms. Lots of reception rooms.

So very very big family.

Yes. Yes, very big family.

And did your parents, did they mix? Who did they mix with? Was it mostly family? Were there friends? What –?

They had lots of friends and as I said, it was a very narrow society really. They lived – you saw the same twenty people over and over again in different configurations basically, but the family was always there.

And your mother had eight siblings.

Yeah.

So she was one of nine.

She was one of nine, yes.

And they all lived in Alexandria?

Yeah, except my – one of her brothers who was a maths teacher in Paris, and whom we saw when we all moved there [laughs]. But yes, they were all there.

So that's a very large family.

It is a very large family but none of the boys ever married, of the brothers. Well, one of them did but never had children, so it's only the girls.

And you said, you mentioned Jewish holidays. Which Jewish holidays stood out for you, or what was your favourite one?

Well, I would say that, you know, in those celebrated Jonathan Miller phrase we were Jew-ish [laughs]. In fact, we knew a girl at school who didn't eat ham. To us this was the most religious you could ever get. And we were very relaxed about such things. You certainly ate everything and didn't really – we used to – the synagogue was very lovely. I don't know if you saw the films of it. It's a marble thing, very nice. We sometimes – well, we used to go at the Passover, Atonement, and certainly we didn't do *shabbat* but my father used to go to synagogue on the Friday night, not – **[00:22:03]** sometimes when he remembered and when the stock exchange was not open – or the cotton exchange rather, not the stock exchange.

And this is the synagogue which just was restored?

Yes, that one.

What is it called?

Eliyahu Hanabi.

Hanabi synagogue.

Yeah. In fact, my cousin went back there, took a photo of my father's seat, you know, the plaque is still on it, and –

And what does it say on the plaque?

It says, 'Edouard J. Cori,' [laughs]. It's just his seat, you know. I don't know who sits there now. There's very few people left, so...

Because everyone – you bought a seat or how did it work at the time?

I'm really not sure. I think yes, you probably –

Donated.

Yes, and then that was your seat, you know, it had your name on it and nobody could park there [both laugh].

Yeah. So Jewish holidays, you did some shabbat or –?

No.

No.

We didn't do – no, no. No, but then we did sort of a religious ceremony, my sister and I. I'm not sure what it would be called, like a – I suppose a *bat mitzvah*. A sort of – where, you know, you had to learn some text, etc,. So we did do that. But we were very – yeah, we were very irreligious really. I mean, there were lots of things I didn't know. We had a nanny who came to work for us when Susanna was born, and she had worked for a very religious doctor. And she kept saying to me, 'No, you can't do that.' 'Cos the people were coming who were kosher and I said, 'Oh, I'll just get a kosher chicken.' She said, 'Yes, but then you can't have butter in the vegetables.' I'm going, 'Why not?' So she told me [laughs]. You see, I learnt more from her than from my parents. We were – and I think everybody – as I said, there was a girl at school who ate ham – who didn't eat ham, which for us was –

So they wouldn't have put you in the Jewish school. **[00:24:00]**

No, no. No. [Pause] What more can I think of, I don't know. You ask me.

Well, tell us a little bit about your schooling.

Schooling. I went to the *lycée* and because I could read they put me the year above where I should have gone, but everybody used to tease me horribly and say, 'Ah, so you're the little girl who can read,' [laughs]. And so I came home crying and said, 'I never want to go back to school again.' So the headmistress said to my mother, 'You need to put her in with her peers

because she needs to be with people her age and not –' so they put me back – the reception. And I kind of coasted along really more or less for a long time [laughs], but my memories of school is that – certainly I'm sure it has changed. We're talking many years ago. But it was very much the French system, very much, you know, regulated, very much – there were some – there were more than thirty of us, but we were sitting at benches, you know, you put your hand up to speak. There was none of this casual schooling that I found my children getting embroiled in [laughs]. And it was all very regimented, I always say. You know, we had this history book that said our ancestors, the Gauls, were blonde and blue-eyed, and the Ministry would send it to Senegal and all those places where the children wondered what had happened, you know, since then [laughs]. And we very much learned lots of things by rote, which I still remember. You know, it was very – and we did very little extra sports or anything else. We just did learning a lot of the time, all the time, in a very strictly regimented way. I remember I had dinner with a friend of mine the other day who said his sister went to the English Girl's College. We used to call the English Gorilla Company because we were very jealous 'cos they had very pretty uniforms in different colours, and we had very dull things to wear, and a hat which we hated. **[00:26:00]** But there we are.

But you had a uniform as well?

Oh, yeah. Oh yes, but we used to go to school at eight o'clock in the morning and finish at one or two because of the weather, you see. It's too hot otherwise. My father used to go to the office at seven or eight in the morning, come back at twelve-thirty/one o'clock, had a sleep and then went back to the office at say, four or five, and stay until late. Because in the middle of the day –

Too hot.

Too hot, yeah.

And was his office – or did he have a factory or office?

He had an office.

Where?

He also had a factory in the villages that did this taking the seeds out of the cotton.

Did you ever –?

And he had a house there too.

Uh-huh. What was it called, the village?

The village? Desouk.

Desouk.

Hmm-mm.

And did you ever go with him?

Yes, we did. We sometimes spent a week in that house, which was fun, it was all right.

Far from Alexandria?

Depending on the roads [laughs]. I don't suppose as the crow flies it was that far, but it took a good hour-and-a-half maybe to get there. Yeah.

So that must have been quite different than being in Alexandria, there.

Yes, it was. I mean, we used to go again with friends. I always have this memory of always being surrounded by lots of people, you know. Even when we went on holiday from Egypt to France or Italy or something, then we always went with one of my aunts and her two sons and,

you know, there was – we were never – and the nanny. We were never by ourselves, let's put it this way.

So also with your parents probably, not –

Yes. No, no absolutely with my parents, yes.

What other memories of Alexandria stand out for you? What about friends?

I think – one of my cousins said it really was a bubble that we were in, and when it burst – that's why I don't want to go back because you have a – **[00:28:01]** you know, I have good memories of it. I don't – you know, we had a charmed life and then we didn't, but –

So happy memories.

Yes, yes.

When you were still born it was still wartime, '44?

1944.

Yeah.

I think it was just the end of the War, yes.

Did that affect you in any way? No.

No, not at all, no. '48 was more difficult because, you know – but as I said, we were always very protected and nothing remotely bad ever – and I was only four then, so – but I know it was more difficult then.

What happened, tell us?

I know for instance that – it seems to me that some of the family had bought land in Israel. That was another thing that went up our chimney [laughs] because you couldn't be found with documents related to this. But I don't think anybody we knew was injured or – but '48 I think was a bit dodgy.

So they had bought land earlier in Israel.

Yes.

Yeah.

Yes, because I think that's how they raised money basically. They sold land. Then '56 I was twelve.

Yeah.

So, you know, and then everything changed because for one thing all the French teachers all left and the school closed, and then we had – one of our friends whose father was a doctor, they had a large house and we went to have private lessons there to – so that we didn't – and then it reopened with all Egyptian staff. There was a French lady who was married to an Egyptian and she stayed, and we carried on. But from that moment really, I felt that when are we going to leave here basically? **[00:30:00]** And my mother had red hair and people in the streets would throw stones at her because they thought she was English. So that was not good [laughs]. Apart from that we really – and up until then we had never suffered from any kind of antisemitism because we were very much the top-drawer people there. I mean, there were Greeks and – it was very cosmopolitan. I mean, at school we had people from Greek origin, Italians everywhere, because it was that kind of a country. And there was never any unpleasant moment or a moment where I felt looked down on in any sort of way because – there wasn't, except as I said, some people threw stones at my mother and caller her a dirty, English woman. Quite shaken after that and wouldn't go out. And also I remember we had to have blackout windows. You know, we had to put paper on the windows because we thought there might be

some bombing. And there was a curfew. And there were people who were put on home confinement – like now [laughs] – but weren't allowed to go out. One of my cousins was married to a Frenchman and he wasn't allowed out except an hour in the morning, and we all used to take turns to go and play cards with him or something or entertain him. And they left.

Why? He was suspected of something or –?

He was an alien enemy. He had a French passport. And then–

But you had an Egyptian passport, so you were not –

Yes, we had Egyptian passports, so we were really not able to go anywhere. Anyway, hum–

And as a child, do you remember the change or what – you know, the change in atmosphere?

I remember the change and I remember from then on wanting to go away and not be there anymore. It was very much – it was a different thing for my parents who had had a very good and charmed life up until then to decide where they were going to go. **[00:32:02]** And you really couldn't leave after a while because what happened was after they expelled all the French nationals and the English nationals, they had nobody left to run the businesses. So then they made it much harder if you had a business to leave unless if you were Jewish you could renounce your nationality. But it didn't really – [pause] it wasn't that simple. Nothing was that simple, you know, it all worked with bribes and people and, you know, it was difficult. But again, you know, our parents made it sound very good. I mean – and then there was when we eventually applied for an exit visa – and the rule was if nobody objected for a week, you could have it but if they objected then you would have to go through a very long process of going back and trying, and disputing. Which is why people wouldn't even tell you even if you were close, that they had applied for the visa. I mean, you could be having dinner with them and the next day they'd be in San Paolo [laughs]. You know, it was even – and then of course because there was lots of staff and people around you had to be very careful what you said and what you didn't say. You know, because if you denounced somebody, if you said you had applied for the exit visa, if I went and denounced you as, you know, somebody who was going

to take a great deal of jewellery, and gold, etc., if they found it to be so you were entitled to half of it. And if they found it not to be so, nothing – you know, there was no sanction. It was always in your best interest if you knew somebody who was going and if you wanted half of their earthly goods, to say, 'I'm denouncing him.' So there was a nasty atmosphere really at that time. **[00:34:03]**

So to clarify, so you could, if you denounced your citizenship, leave but not take anything basically.

Well –

In terms of property or belongings.

Yes. I think so but the thing was that people did take things, sort of sewn in the hem of their clothing or elsewhere, you know, because we were only allowed E£20 and to put it in perspective, when the five of us arrived in Marseilles and got on a train, the E£100 we had was not enough to buy everybody a sandwich. So Jeanine and I had to put some back saying we were not going to have that one 'cos the money was, you know, ridiculous. So if they found – this is where we get into the James Bond territory. My father then said, explained to us that the way he got some money abroad was that he had money in cash, say E£100,000 in a newspaper. He would then meet – there were airline pilots who did this traffic. Somebody, you know, by the sea or by the seaside. Give him the paper and he would then deposit E£50,000 into your Swiss bank account, or nothing. There was nothing you could do about it because you're not going to say, 'I asked him to...' – you know, there was no sanction there as well. So he managed to get some money into a Swiss bank account, which we then had –

In preparation for [overtalking 00:35:39].

Well, yes, [overtalking 00:35:41] exactly. And –

But you had from '56 to '62. You left –

Yes, we had time.

So that's six years.

But then there was the factory, there was – eventually we applied to leave and didn't tell anybody, and we left our flat as it was with the books in the bookshelf, everything, and went into a hotel and waited. **[00:36:01]** And two days later somebody said, 'Oh, the Cori's are going.' So we had to go and discuss, and we stayed in this hotel I think for six months until they gave us the permit to leave. And then my father paid this guy – don't ask me how. Again, it's all sort of – it's like a film, isn't it – who came to the hotel, had a look at our suitcase – and we were allowed two suitcases each – had a look at them and said, 'Right, if you put anything in there you're – more when I leave,' you know, if you're then going to put E£100 million in there. And he said – he took a small suitcase that had my mother's horrible fur coat in it [laughs] – like a poodle, Astrakhan, you know – and some jewellery. That's why I'm wearing this, my grandmother's jewellery, and my mother's jewellery, and a few – I think a few diamonds because diamonds as we know are a good way to smuggle some money out. And it was in a small suitcase, and he said, 'When you get on the boat,' 'cos we went by boat, 'you will find it in your cabin.' But again, we could have not found it in our cabin. But there it was. So, you know, it could have all been lost. The people next to us had their two suitcases – our suitcases, this guy was there, he sort of made a sign to the people and they just put a cross and it was taken onboard. The people next to us had their two suitcases opened and ripped, because people would put things in the lining. So all their belongings were on the floor and nowhere to put them. You know, it was hard really.

This was in the port of Alexandria?

Yeah.

Where was this?

In the port. We then went on those lovely luxury Italian steamers with bowls of caviar on the table, and lots of luxury things. **[00:38:05]** We were met in Marseilles. I had – as I said, my

uncle – I didn't say. My Uncle Victor went to live in Paris because when they all left Smyrna he was married to a very rich and spoilt woman who said she wasn't about to go and live in Egypt with Egyptians [laughs], and she said, 'Paris or nothing.' So they went to live in Paris and when the War broke out they went to Nice to shelter there, and the woman who lived next door came crying and said, 'My husband's been arrested by the Gestapo, and I don't know what's happening.' And my uncle said, 'Don't worry. I'll sort it out for you 'cos I speak German.' Went to the Gestapo and was never seen again. He went – he was taken to Drancy and then to Auschwitz. And a little girl he knew then who was fourteen, who was called Vivette, very smiley lady, she was in the camp with him, and she was the one who told them what had happened, although it's in the record books, etc. And in fact, she was – you know, how they used to pick up those piles of bodies, and she was in this pile of bodies and moved a little and somebody saw her move and got her out. She was fourteen or fifteen. And her name was Vivette and she was a great friend of my uncle's sons who were both in Paris. And she came to meet us at Marseilles, and she put us on the train, but no sandwiches [laughs] on the train. And she was a lovely vivacious, happy woman, with a number tattooed, you know.

She was a survivor.

Yeah.

So she was together with your uncle in the camp.

Yeah. And my cousins after the War, my father looked after them. **[00:40:02]** And they always remember that, you know, after he'd clothed them and fed them and found them a flat, etc., and paid for all the – 'cos they had nothing. And my father then gave them £100 which in those days was like, you know, you could really – and he said, 'This is for *les choses inutiles*.' For the useless things. I want you to just enjoy this. You know, don't buy food, don't buy shoes.' And they were always completely amazed at this, and they felt that they had to look after us now, that we were arriving in a similar set of circumstances. So my sister and I went to live with them in Paris, and we had other relatives who were there and my mother, and father, and my little brother, went to live with these other people at the beginning. And then my father knew lots of people in Paris, and he found – somebody found him a job in an office, and he

went for a week and came back and said, 'I am not working in an office,' [laughs], 'I am just not doing it.' You know, you'd hear all about those Russian emigres, grand dukes who used to drive taxis, that kind of thing [laughs]. And he started his own business, you know, very slowly, and he did well. He kept us all really – but then my cousin, the one who had been hiding in a henhouse in Nice for a long time, took me out for a coffee and he said, 'You know, you can't go to university. You have to go and work because circumstances are that no matter, you know, if you're a good pupil or you're not a good pupil, you have to contribute.' So I went to work and so did my sister. My sister had done a lot more jobs than I did. I stayed and worked for Bell & Howell for years at sort of doing translations and, etc. **[00:42:00]** But she had sometimes very interesting jobs. Like she had a job with Steinway and we used to go to the concert all the time, so it was very good [laughs]. And we were, you know, very happy to be there but it was –

What do you remember – leaving Alexandria, what did – you said you wanted to leave.

Yes.

What did it feel like?

Good. It felt good and as I said, we were again in the lap of luxury until we arrived with no money [laughs], which was less funny, until my father worked out how to get the money out of Switzerland, which also wasn't – you know, he had to go there and – it was –

But it's a terrible–

And then we were only allowed – I should have said – to stay one week in France and undertake not to stay a minute longer. The only place we could go to was Israel, we couldn't go anywhere else 'cos we were then stateless, we had no papers. So my cousin who was a lawyer, and also did very well for himself, took my father to wherever, the ministry, and they said, 'Okay, you can stay a month.' And then every month we had to renew it and then we were given three months and then we were given six months. But if we wanted to go anywhere, like as I said we had relatives in – everywhere, in Belgium, in Switzerland, you had to go and get a visa

because they were very nervous about giving you a visa if you were a stateless person 'cos they think you're going to want to stay there. Then they – there's different conventions that regulate the status of the refugees and we managed to change it to another convention. I still have – maybe I should show it to you afterwards, the papers.

Yes, absolutely.

I still have the papers. Which was then less restrictive. Some countries wouldn't have us at all, but we could –for instance we could come here. Couldn't go to Germany at all. Had no relatives in Germany so that helped [laughs]. And that's it really.

Did your parents think of going to other places?

I2: One second.

[Break in recording] **[00:44:00]**

Yes. We were talking about coming to Paris because when – listening to you, it must have been a terrible shock coming from this wonderful life in Alexandria.

We thought it was wonderful, except when we went – you know, the Place de l'Étoile has twelve avenues and it was very carefully explained to Jeanine and I, my sister and I, how to get to where my parents were staying, which was in the Avenue Victor-Hugo which is one of those. And we came out and instead of going left, which would have been the first on the left, we went right and walked across all the avenues before we found where we were. We were very klutzy, but we thought it was a wonderful experience. It just shows how amazing my parents must have been, not to let on. 'Cos, I mean, if I had to do this now with my children I don't know that I would be so, you know, amazingly relaxed about it. They were, you know. No, I know when the magic stopped was when we saw a rat in the tube, in the Metro [laughs], and then we thought oh, there's rats as well, you know. But then we had all this – for instance, we were allowed in the *boulangerie* to buy an ice-cream cone, which in Egypt you could never, ever do because it was dangerous. You couldn't eat in the streets. You couldn't do anything,

you know. And the two of us sitting there with our ice-creams, we thought this was the life. It was wonderful. And it was what it was. I mean, you know, you always think – and then of course the people in the office, etc., would always say, 'Well, when are you going back to your country?' 'Er, I don't have a country,' [laughs], 'I'm stateless, you know.' Then my sister got married and went to live in – first in – he used to work for Phillips, the electronics company, and they went to live in Zimbabwe I think, yes, in Africa. And then – now they live in – well, he was always Canadian and he lives in Canada, and that's where they are now. **[00:46:02]** I think they came back just as I was getting married. And I met my husband through my cousin Alec Nacamuli, who was greatly – they were three great friends who were always together, always skiing together, and we met in Switzerland. And I thought, ooh, a passport [laughs]. No, not really. I always tell him [laughs] – actually, the funny thing was we had a friend whose mother had an aged boyfriend who said he would marry her when all the daughters were married. She had three daughters and there was one left, and we were always on the lookout for a husband for her so that her mother could get married [laughs]. And I came back and said, 'I've found you a fantastic – but he talks about the Common Market all the time, be warned,' [laughs]. So anyway, after a while when I saw him again here I thought, well, maybe I'll keep him. You know, he'll do, he's all right, he's got a British passport [laughs]. And then we got married and in fact, my parents-in-law said, 'Shouldn't the wedding take place in Paris?' And my father said, 'Well, as all our relatives have to come from all over the place, at least one of you can get married at home.' So we got married here. And there we are.

Just to go back a little bit to Alexandria. Tell us a little bit more about the chimney and the papers. When did that happen?

The chimney and the papers, yeah.

Yeah.

We actually made fun of my father because we had endless photographs. Some of them we have kept and I must look for them, but he had photographs of all his cousins from Smyrna and didn't want to burn them. He said, 'Come on, burn Rachel?' [laughs]. You know, and everybody would come and burn anything compromising or anything if found in their home, if

there were – because people did get arrested and taking in to I suppose camps. We were quite lucky, that didn't happen to us but it did happen to people we knew. I mean, the husband of one of my mother's cousins was taken into – **[00:48:02] who** was – I think he had a Greek passport 'cos they went to Greece. It's actually quite interesting to see because this cousin who's in Greece, the daughter, is very Greek. She even looks Greek. [Laughs] I don't know how she did it. My cousin who's in Milan is very Italian, [laughs], you know, after so many years. So, you know–

You adapt.

Yeah, yeah, you adapt, exactly.

So people were worried about being accused of treason, that sort of thing, or was it their [overtalking 00:48:33]? What papers –?

Well, yes, if you had papers with Hebrew lettering on it or something.

Yeah.

You know, people were scared, genuinely.

So anything to do with Israel.

Yes, yes. You had to not have any links with Israel.

Yeah, correspondence or anything like that.

Yeah, exactly.

What other things?

I don't know. Again, I suppose in '48 they burned the land papers but if they had any correspondence or – I don't know. They just wanted to be safe I suppose. I don't know. And it was very haphazard 'cos the Egyptians – I will say one thing, Egyptian people are charming. They're very nice, they're very gentle. They still farm like they did with the Pharaohs, you know, with – and they haven't really moved on. That's why they're not very good warriors and they can't really fight very well. They can run away in the desert and leave their shoes behind [laughs], but they can't fight very well. I'm saying this because I think people who came from Iraq had a different approach. You know, they were really – you know, but with us they just – but they're very inefficient and sometimes they would arrest you for no reason and sometimes they would not arrest you when there was a good case for you to be arrested.

So in that time, from '56 to '62, you said the teachers changed in your school.

Yes, the teachers all changed. It was all right.

And the content, what about the content?

No, they still followed the syllabus and it was okay, it was okay. It wasn't bad. Not as bad as we complained about anyway. **[00:50:03]**

What about the friends? I mean, I guess friends were leaving? There must [overtalking 00:50:07] people.

Yes, there were friends who left as I said, from one day to the next. Somebody met somebody running in the street and said, 'Where are you going to?' And he said, 'Brazil,' and disappeared [laughs]. You know, my – I don't know if this is of any interest but it's quite a funny story. My cousin, the son of my mother's older sister, had a boat. A sort of yacht, a small yacht, which he had rebuilt. He knew every plank of it, etc., and he would have had to leave it behind. I mean, you couldn't [both laugh] – so he and a friend took it and went to Cyprus. They escaped basically from Egypt on it. Lots of people said it had lots of gold bars in it, but it didn't because it wouldn't have because if they got stopped they had to say that they'd lost their bearings basically. And it was a day of national – it was a national day and they were going to – all the

coastguards were going to go and have a sort of fiesta somewhere, they would be away. And they arrived in Cyprus with a change of clothing and their bathing costumes. When they arrived in Cyprus the British were there and said, 'What are you doing?' And they said, 'Well, you know, we've just escaped from Egypt.' And they said, 'Oh, come on,' and they put them in jail [laughs], which was quite funny. And then they sort of, you know, explained the situation and they believed them, and then they said, 'Well, do you have any papers?' Of course they didn't and my cousin said, 'It's okay. My father is sending me a passport from Geneva.' And the next day somebody arrived from Geneva with a passport in his name, an Italian passport because of the Livorno connection. And he kept his boat and in fact, when he got married, he went on honeymoon on his boat [laughs].

So he escaped on the boat ?

Yes, yeah, on the boat, on the boat. **[00:52:01]** So I think – no, I don't know if it's still there.

So lots of people let's say in your school, class, people were leaving.

Yeah. Yes, absolutely. There was –

Anyway, the people who didn't have Egyptian nationality had to leave in '56.

They had to leave. Again, as I said, not necessarily all of them because their records were so terrible. They didn't know what they were doing.

What about your grandmother? Was she still alive?

No.

No.

I think the reason why we stayed until ’62 was I think my father waited for his mother to die because we couldn’t have – you know, it was very difficult to have moved her, and her lady companion, and her brooch [laughs]. And so...

And this is the brooch you’re wearing.

This is the brooch I’m wearing for her today.

Which was smuggled out in that separate suitcase.

Yeah, it was, it was.

And who was that man, do you know, who took that suitcase aboard?

I don’t know. You know, it was a question of – you know, somebody had used him or somebody knew he was reliable. You didn’t know if they were reliable or not. On the other hand, if they were not reliable you would soon let people know not to use this man again. I don’t know, but – and the airline pilots, the same. I mean, they were doing very well out of it. They took half your –

So how old were you when you left Egypt?

I was born in ’44 and we left in ’62, I was eighteen. And I was really happy to go to the Sorbonne or to – [laughs].

You were looking forward.

I was looking forward, but it didn’t happen. But as I say to my daughters who always say, ‘What a pity,’ and I say, ‘Yes, you wouldn’t be here,’ because my life would have taken a different road.

Track.

Yeah. I mean, I went once to a lecture given by a Nobel prize-winning physicist and he was explaining predictability, what you can predict. **[00:54:01]** And he was saying like, you know, we can predict the trunk of a tree. But then there's branches, and on the branches there's smaller branches, and smaller branches, and that we can't predict. And he was saying to us, 'Ask yourself how you come to be sitting here listening to me. What brought you here?' If you unravel it all you find that, you know, these things happen. I don't know, I suppose if I'm – what's left of the Middle East in me says, you know, things are going to happen to you – I'm talking about Covid, you know, I always say it's like when they had those lottery adverts where a big finger came out of the sky and said, 'It could be you.' That – you know, if something's going to happen to me, I can't escape it. But of course I do what I'm told to do for the good of others anyway, and you never know. And you can take precautions but I always like to say – apparently, it's not strictly true but I like it to be true – that Aeschylus, you know, the Greek, was killed because an eagle dropped a tortoise on his head. So you could sort of protect yourself from everything but not from an eagle dropping a tortoise on your head. So things happen and things happen. You have to just carry on, you know, you can't – I was saying to you before, I'm not a nostalgic person. The questions you're asking me now are things I haven't thought about in years and years, you know. Which is nice. And in fact, let me tell you something very strange. When I was telling my daughters – when they were quite small – about all this, or about what happened, I was talking to them as I'm talking to you now and I had tears coming down my face. I wasn't crying, I just had tears coming down my face, which was unexpected to me because I wasn't in a mood for crying. I didn't feel emotional. I just cried. Today I'm not crying. That's good. **[00:56:00]**

And did you talk about your past with your children?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did. And now to the grandchildren who think it's all highly exciting, you know. Having lots and lots of money in the newspaper and giving it to someone else, yeah, you know, [laughs]. Yes, that's good [laughs]. But I think, you know, we were lucky because my sister says that many people have written books about how they left, etc., and many of them left in worse circumstances. Much worse circumstances, and they were taken out by the HIAS or the Jewish charities –

American.

American, yeah. There were many of them put in – also in camps for want of a better description. I mean, they were camps after all. And –

Well, there's that wonderful book in – Man in the Shark Suit.

In the Sharkskin Suit, yes.

'Cos that's a whole story on HIAS, isn't it?

Yeah, absolutely, yes.

Yeah. I wanted to ask you, you were eighteen so your sister was twenty, your brother thirteen.

Yeah.

How differently did this affect them?

Oh, my brother definitely became very French. Not only did he become very French, he was going to be a lecturer in mathematics at the university and they saw that – because my father says, 'I'm not – do not want to apply to be French. I'd rather be stateless.' He didn't like the French very much [laughs]. And my brother had these stateless papers and they said, 'What? You're not French. You can't teach then if you're not French. Come back next week.' Next week they gave him a French passport [laughs], so he came back and said, 'I'm French. Do you want to be French?' And my father, 'No.' And in fact, we should have all said, 'Yes,' at the time [laughs], you know, 'So my brother is French, can we...' – but after my father died we found a suitcase that he had left behind which had all the correspondence where he tried to get a nationality. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, came from a Dutch family, a noble Dutch family called De Traves [ph] I don't know. **[00:58:08]** And one of her sisters managed to get her Dutch passport through that link, in fact wrote to us in Egypt, 'Her Majesty

Queen Juliana has given me my passport,' [laughs]. So he wrote to them and they said, 'Get lost.' Then my father had Italian *laissez-passer* when he came from Smyrna, and he wrote – and one of the brothers I think had an Italian passport. And he wrote and said, 'Can I please be Italian?' And they said, 'Get lost.' And then wrote to the Greek government because my mother's family coming from Corfu had a Greek passport, and said, 'My wife is of Greek extraction. Can we please have a passport for her?' And they said, 'Get lost.' I don't know who else he wrote to, but it was quite touching to see all this, and the rejections [laughs].

Why didn't he want to be French?

He didn't like the French. Wasn't going to give them the pleasure of being French. It got a bit difficult when he died here and we had to have him buried next to my mother in Paris, because the paperwork was a bit difficult 'cos he was stateless.

He was still not French.

No, he was stateless.

After so many years.

Hmm. [Pause] In fact, we are stateless in a manner of speaking in that –

Do you see yourself as stateless?

Well, I mean, I quite like being British, which is good, or was good until recently [both laugh]. But I always see – try to see things from different perspectives. There was a time when I tried to watch El Jazeera news 'cos you want to hear what the other people think and, you know, not necessarily – you don't want to be – to have blinkers and only see the world in one way and disregard anything else. **[01:00:02]** So I quite like – there's lots of things that I think are much better in France, like the national health service. Whereas here it's supposed to be this great and wonderful thing, I think it's better in France, you know, because I know both sides. I also know for instance when Saddam Hussein was talking about the 'mother of all battles' it's

because he's talking in literary Arabic, which is quite different from talk – you know, what you would speak, but is understood by everybody. And it's a grandiose language like Shakespearean, you know. That's how he would talk. It's not because he's got a – 'cos he's an idiot [laughs]. So you have to understand other cultures as well and other people, and not have a fixed view about – you know, not be black and white. There is grey. I like grey.

And do you think your experience helped you to [overtalking 01:00:56]?

Yes, I think it must have done. You know, there's things that you know that you know firsthand. Like I said to you, Egyptian people were nice people, they're not nasty, cruel – in fact, they are in dire straits now with no tourism and no anything. I do feel sorry for them. They're kind people. I mean, I had – they were at school with me some of them. I mean, we also had the – people from the Libyan royal family. We all kinds of people there.

Did you speak some Arabic?

Yes. I can read and write it also because we had to. It was compulsory.

After '56.

[Laughs] Yes.

But that was a big change.

Yeah. That was a big change, yes. When I went with one of my daughters to Tunisia with Jenny I think it was, yes, and they gave us a pot of yoghurt which said *mawz* which is banana in Arabic, I said, 'You see, this is banana.' We were with a group of French people who said to me, 'You can read this?' **[01:02:02]** [Laughs] I said, 'Yes, I can read this.' But then if somebody speaks Egyptian Arabic, I understand them. I mean, my hairdresser is from the Lebanon. I understand maybe five words out of ten that he says. And they pronounce differently as well, but I can adjust to that. And also, I haven't really spoken it for such a long time. I'm sure it would go back to me – come back to me rather if I went back. But we had a

plan on our 25th anniversary to all go back to Egypt. There was a time when they used to shoot people in buses, you know, and all my relatives started ringing, 'Darling, don't go there. You never know,' blah, blah, [laughs]. So eventually we changed it and we went to Florence instead which was lovely. We could all wander around where we want and meet, you know, at certain times, and so that time I didn't go back.

So have you been back to Alexandria?

No. No, no. It's where it was and it's not there anymore and, you know, it's a state of mind. It doesn't exist. I remember when I was quite little, when the King was there, if the King came to the sporting club everybody – all the girls between fourteen and forty-four had to disappear from the swimming pool because if he found one that he liked, that was it, you know, [laughs]. So all of a sudden – and the King was the only one who was allowed to have a red car so if a red car arrived, all the girls disappeared from the swimming pool [laughs]. My father went to the King's wedding 'cos he was a supplier to the royal family and...

How did your parents cope with the situation, coming to Paris?

My parents –

And your father–

Got on with it. You know?

It was his second migration.

Yes.

Second displacement. **[01:04:01]**

Yes, it was. It was.

How –?

But he was a wonderful man. As I said, he just did what he had to do and was always his own boss after that one week where people told him what to do [laughs], which he said, 'I'm not doing this.' Well, you know, it was – not at his age any more. He'd always used to run the roost and –

But were they bitter? Was your father bitter at all?

No.

No.

No. He was never bitter, no. You know, he had regrets. As I said, when he got a lot older things came back from his youth that he would talk about but the truth is we had a very nice life and then we didn't have it any more. But many people from Egypt have done very well wherever they've been so, you know –

And what –?

And some have not but, you know, on the whole –

Yeah.

On the whole, they have. I mean, as I said, my sister went all over the world and always found people from Egypt there, including in Zimbabwe and places. There's lots of them in Brazil doing very well, and here.

And what's her identity? How –?

My sister?

Hmm-mm.

My sister finds it hard being in Canada at the moment. Well, because she had some very good friends who sadly died and her husband is ninety and is a little – he's all right, but she feels very far away from us. You know, she's very much a Skype type of person, you know, [laughs]. I told her not to try and Skype me today 'cos I would be doing this, so – in fact, she has – we had those suitcases made which were maybe, well, this big and quite deep, and in leather, and unbelievably heavy, which we had to carry [laughs]. And she has two of them with some stuff from – because she has a big house in Canada with a basement. You know, there's a huge basement like they have in Canada underneath with ping-pong tables, etc., and she still has some of the luggage there. **[01:06:06]**

The original luggage which you made [overtalking 01:06:09].

I don't know how she managed to, but yes. My sister when we left was engaged to somebody in Egypt, which happened to be maybe the only person of the correct age left in Egypt. And certainly my parents weren't very thrilled with the engagement and even less thrilled when the fiancé said could they get married and then they would follow us, 'cos they knew that he had aged parents and he wouldn't follow us. And they said, 'No, if you want to marry her you have to come out.' So he came out, left his elderly parents. And my sister when she saw him getting off the train and saying, 'Where is the porter?' in the way that we entitled people used to talk [laughs], she said, 'As soon as I saw him and he asked for a porter, I knew I didn't want to marry him,' [laughs]. So that caused great tragedy with his family who then they had to leave. His father died I think beforehand and his mother came out, and wrote – again, in my father's suitcase was a letter she wrote to my parents saying, 'You have ruined my life, you have ruined my son's life,' [laughs]. But anyway, so she didn't marry him, but she married another person. There we are.

It was not the right person for the new situation – for –

Well, he was all right [laughs].

Yeah.

He was all right.

Hmm-mm. So your mother, how did she cope? How –?

My mother couldn't cook anything. All she could do was go into the kitchen in Alexandria, take her rings off, break twelve eggs, make a cake with six layers, then go off and play Bridge while they repainted the kitchen after her [laughs]. But she didn't know how to do anything. When we arrived in Paris she would ring her sister in Lausanne in Switzerland and say, 'Okay, I've got the meat, what do I do with it?' [laughs] and my aunt would talk her through it. But then she wouldn't eat anything. She would only eat – you know, when you come out of the *boulangerie* with a fresh baguette, she would eat a bit of baguette, a bit of cheese, you know. **[01:08:03]** And then she got very ill because she had – the doctor said to her, 'You have an illness that only little children, under-nourished children in Africa have, and you must eat proper food.' So she had to – then she had Parkinson's, which was very sad and difficult, you know.

Hmm.

She was a lovely lady, full of beans. She always, as I said, made amazing birthday parties. She had a cousin, the two of them would make us puppet shows, would make all kinds of amazing things. She was very – full of joy she was.

And did she become French or – no.

No, no, no, she didn't, no.

So none of they didn't.

No.

So they both died stateless your parents.

Hmm-mm.

Hmm.

Yes, we could have I suppose, especially – the thing about France is, you have to live there for a certain number of years and then you have to spend another I think it's five years before they let you vote. It's quite strict there, you know.

And do you think it helped you in the way that you went to the lycée so that coming to France was a sort of more natural thing to you, for you?

Oh, absolutely. It's really brainwashing [both laugh]. David who went to an English school says the English always beat the French and I say, 'No, the French always – what about the 100 Year War then,' I said. 'Yeah, we won it.' 'No, you didn't,' [laughs], you know. Definitely they export this idea that French literature is all, and we learnt – I mean, I know lots of chunks of Racine and Corneille – and Macbeth, as I said, we also did quite a lot of English. My husband said he never would have married me unless I spoke English, which I can quite see because – unless I spoke it well, you know. But yes, you do get this idea of France. **[01:10:04]**

Yeah.

And then you see the – you know, the actual state of them and in some ways they are fine and in some other way, they are not, you know. I think the French actually dislike the North Africans more than they dislike the Jews, if you know what I mean [laughs]. So we were okay there also, even though they don't particularly love Jews. I was watching a documentary yesterday about Paul Touvier who was one of the people in charge in Leon who murdered seven – or had some Jews murdered or something. And still – especially the very Catholic, there's still some – not a lot of love for the Jews there as well, but I never experienced any –

You had no problems.

No, no. I think if I was North African or Algerian or something they would have been more sniffy about me [laughs].

And did your brother stay in France?

My brother stayed in France. He became very French. He can tell you all about wines and good [laughs] and everything, and he is very French, yes. Although now he's trying to become Spanish because the Spanish government has issued a list of people who after the Inquisition left, and our name is on it. And one of my cousins from that side has been finding out. And I say, 'Why do you want to know that?' He said, 'Well, I think it would be quite nice.' So he might become Spanish and so I could too and then I wouldn't have to queue at the airport after December 31st. We shall see.

Yeah. Through your mother?

No, through my father.

Through your father's side.

Cori, yeah.

Oh, Cori.

Well, there's a village called Cori not far from Rome, which is quite interesting because, you know, Jews weren't allowed to have a last name, they just had the name of the city that they came from. That's why they're all called after cities basically.

Yeah, yeah. **[01:12:03]**

Okay.

Yes, so just to come back you said this lovely quote. I think it's from Andrea Simon with this Alexandria being a state of mind. What do you mean by that?

It just means it's not a place you can go back to. It's a place that existed somewhere and, you know, it's a bubble. It's gone, it's gone, and everybody's gone. It's exactly like a bubble 'cos everybody went all over the world really. America, wherever they could find a place to live and a job, you know. And in some ways I suppose we deserved it, in some ways I don't know. I mean, I remember when I first came to France I was saying, you know, we had all those servants, people working for us, other people – including I should have said, a lady who came to wash our sheets in a huge tub with boiling water and would, you know, trample all over the sheets to wash them. Also, as I was saying to my husband the other day 'cos we need a new mattress, that there used to be people who came and took all the stuffing out of the mattress and beat them with a – I had a friend from Pakistan who said, 'We did the same,' [laughs], you know – and replace the stuffing, etc. We had lots of ancillary people who would come and do extra jobs for us in case we needed them, you know. I mean, although I will say that my mother was quite strict and we were never allowed to say to Ismail or whichever it was at the time, 'Bring me this.' You know, you'd have to go and get it, but people who were very spoilt would ask for a glass of water or would ask for – plus we were remarkably nice because the servants ate the same food as we did, which was not always the case. They used to have either their own food, or leftovers, or whatever. But, I mean, if we all had salmon, they all had salmon too so we were supposed to be very enlightened people. **[01:14:02]** But still as I say, now we've all left they don't have jobs. They always used to laugh at me, the French, saying, 'Ha, you think it's a job looking after you? Cleaning your floors,' [laughs]. Yeah, sorry, you know, it's –

It was a different structure of society.

Yes.

I mean, wasn't it?

No, no, it is, it is. And really, I mean, this particular Ismail that I'm thinking about, for a start if we came back from school with our school, you know, *cartable,* satchel, he would jump on us to take it and, you know, he'd practically genuflect in front of us. And he also would sometimes bring small children, saying they were his children. So one would give them a pastry, some money, or a toy or something. But after the eleventh or twelfth child [laughs], we realised it was a job he had bringing children over. He was a nice chap. We had lots of people helping us [sighs].

Did you stay or did your parents stay in touch with anyone once they left?

No, we couldn't. My uncles had a servant who had been with my grandmother as a child. I mean, they used – my children are very shocked when I say that the girls who worked in my father's factory were maybe fourteen or fifteen. Because there were sort of two rollers. You put the flower, the cotton, on one side and the grain would fall on the other side, and they would turn the handle. And they were little girls really, fourteen, fifteen. They say, 'Your father was a slave driver,' [laughs]. I said, 'No, you know, he gave them jobs.' I don't know. I mean, I suppose nowadays – it's always like comparing the morals of people –

Yeah.

Beforehand, you know, Domingo doesn't understand what he did wrong, you know. Yes, it's a different way of looking at things. And because hands were small– I don't know, anyway. The things were quite different, you know. **[01:16:01]** And they had parties, there was always gatherings. There was always, as I said, people. There was always lots of people around. I actually would have liked – I'm a solitary person by nature. I would have liked a little bit of time to myself, but I could always – I mean, I could go somewhere and read a book, that was fine.

But you said – so they were in touch with somebody who was a nanny for their whole life?

No, so they were in touch with this man who had – who cried like a baby when they left, etc. They were in touch but then, you know, it's difficult 'cos they're not necessarily all literate.

They can't read and write. But they certainly left him with – I'm not sure that they even left him with a flat or, you know, financial compensation anyway. Because it was easy to do because all – you could just leave it. I mean, my father parked the Jaguar on a street corner and left, you know.

What happened to the flat and all your belongings?

Oh, it's all there, it's all – I don't know. It all went. My father once before in the better days was in Paris and there's a block of flats in the rue La Boétie which is off the Champs-Élysées, which somebody said he should buy at some very ridiculous price. And he said, 'What do I want a block of flats in the Champs-Élysées for?' [Laughs] And every time we go I say, 'Do not go to that street 'cos I don't want to see this block of flats.' You know, you don't know – it's like with Covid etc., you don't know what's going to happen. You can't predict anything. There's another story of my father. His father was very religious and he would pray every day. And my father was six or seven and said to him, 'Do you have to pray every day?' And he said, 'No, only the day before you die.' Which I think is a very good story. I told a Rabbi who said, 'I'm using this next week,' [laughs]. I said, 'You are very welcome,' because it's exactly right. You don't know what's round the corner, so you –

You have to be prepared. **[01:18:01]**

Yes, yeah, exactly. I mean, you know, I was looking – I had actually – I have a Filofax, very old-fashioned but there it is I'm used to it, which I have kept since the 16th of March. Usually I would just tear the pages away and not keep them – just to see all the things that I have missed, you know, all the operas we were going to, all the places we were going to, all the trips we were going to – and looked at them. Yesterday, 'cos I received next year's calendar, I thought this is enough and I threw it out [laughs]. So, you know, you can't plan things. Well, you can try to but as somebody said, 'Life is what happens when you're making plans.'

So you became a refugee.

Yes.

In effect, in '62. Do you still see you – did you see yourself as a refugee or did you see yourself – how did you see yourself?

Yes, I do in some ways but not in a painful way, you know? You know, I see all those people in boats who are trying to come across and I think it could have been us, it might have been us. My daughter Jenny my youngest daughter, used to make documentaries. She made a film about this place in Greece where all the boats arrive, and she said, you know, 'Those people are desperate. They are going to carry on trying by all means to get away from it,' and I can understand that. But I don't think of it in a sort of oh, poor me, tragedy kind of thing at all [laughs]. It's not my way of looking at things. And I don't – when you say do I think – I don't wake up in the morning and say, 'I'm a refugee,' you know, it's not me [laughs]. But if I were – I mean, if somebody asks me the question I'd say, 'Yes,' because again you have to have a perspective other than a very narrow perspective, which – **[01:20:03]** I completely understand that people, you know, live in a semi-detached house in, I don't know, wherever, or a terraced house, and they don't see much further than the end of their nose basically. Which I suppose is why the referendum went the way it did also, because – you know, difficult.

And how difficult was it to adapt to Britain? Because again you've come from Egypt –

Well, the first thing I had to do was realise that when people were hooting at me – I was given a Mini for a wedding present – that it wasn't them who were wrong but it was me on the wrong side of the road [laughs]. And I used to get lost terribly because David would say, 'All right, we want to buy...' – he would sort of find – we were looking for a house and by looking for a house is where I got lost the most in England. London is not Cartesian. You know, Paris has been redesigned by the Baron Haussmann who has made it nice and regular, but here if you missed the turning and you take the next turning, you don't know where you're going to arrive [laughs]. So if I had to go and see a house, I would give myself an hour to get there because I had to build in being lost. So physically it was a bit difficult. And it is – I'll tell you what's difficult is picking up references that people make, because they're not – you know, you don't necessarily understand them. Or political talk, which I found difficult to follow.

Yeah.

But now I'm fine. What I don't follow is the French political 'cos I've got – I have on Twitter lots of French people who complain bitterly because I think France is in a bad state also. Every point of view. I mean, Covid and the rest. So it's –

So you got used to it.

I got used to it and they got used to me, which was good [laughs].

And where did you settle in London?

[01:22:00] Well, my husband had a flat in Oslo Court which is just opposite Regent's Park so we lived there for a while, while we were looking for a house and I was lost looking at them. Then we lived in Clifton Hill which is off – is it between Loundon Road and Abbey Road. Then we lived in Hamilton Terrace where we had a very big house with a huge garden. And I said to my husband the other day, 'Do you regret Hamilton Terrace?' And he said, 'I only regret that we didn't leave five years earlier.' So I think that's a no. 'Cos I thought my grandchildren, nine of them, would love the garden. It was a huge garden where you could hide. There were, you know, little alleyways, etc. We have a garden here but, you know, it's not the same thing. And then we had to do a lot of work to the house and the architect came and said, 'Yes, we'll do this, we'll do that,' but then he said, 'You'd have to move out for a year while we do the work.' And I said to my husband, 'We move out, we stay out. I'm not doing this.' And my father was living with us at the time, so I said, 'I'm not going to go into a rented place for a year.' And it's usually two years and twice the budget, you know how it is [laughs]. So we moved here, which was good. I mean, I wasn't convinced at the time but it's fine, you know.

And you raised four daughters.

I raised four daughters.

Yeah. So what sort of identity did you want to give them and what was important for you?

It was important for me that they behaved well and politely to people and that they didn't harm anybody. That was important. Lately – then – I sort of recently discovered that for them it must have been a handicap to have me as a mother because I'm a kind of foreign – you can't say, 'My mother is German,' or 'My mother is Libyan,' or whatever [laughs], you know, you have to say, 'My mother is this strange soup of people,' [laughs]. **[01:24:02]** And I suppose for instance, they always mock me because they say I can't pronounce – if I say, 'I went to Boots,' apparently I say it wrong. You have to say it in an English way which I can't manage [laughs]. So they pick me up on my accent. So it must be difficult but it's a lot easier if your parents come out of the same mould, you know. But I always used to say to them, you know, about marrying out. I said, you know, 'You see, I got married to Daddy. We come from completely different languages, experiences, etc., but what we do have in common is being Jewish and the values of Judaism.' So then each one of them married a non-Jew immediately [both laugh] – not immediately – saying, 'I had lots in common with him,' you know, 'We had the same...' – so, I tried. Even the one who married the Tibetan, managed to convince us that it was okay. And actually, he's a charming man, and also being I suppose a Buddhist, he's very gentle and not materialistic. You know, he's so gentle and nice. I always say to my husband, 'If we were all like this we would still be at the Iron Age because we wouldn't...' – you know, you have to be a little ruthless to get on in life. If you're too nice – like some of my uncles – I do this because they're up there –

In the picture.

Were lovely, lovely men, too nice really –

Yeah.

For the world, so...

So Jewishness was – is still important for you or was or –?

I think what's important – for instance, I see – you know, we had recently New Year on Zoom may I say because how else? And although in my husband's family his father was more religious than we ever were, they did nothing much at New Year. They just had apple and honey and a blessing. That was it. **[01:26:01]** But we used to do lots and lots of things, which now I can quite see was just a sort of family tradition. It wasn't anything to do with religion. 'Cos my grandmother on my father's side did different things, and on my mother's side they did different things. Like they'd do different *Charoset* for Passover.

Sephardi Charoset.

Yeah, and most of these things are really just – you know, most of the people were illiterate. These things represent something else always. And we used to have to eat the head of a fish. Apparently you have to eat the head of a lamb, but we had to – and also we had to have something like a frittata –

For Rosh Hashana?

Yeah. And a frittata of leeks, courgette, and something else which I can't remember.

That's a very Greek –

Yeah, well, there you are you see –

[Overtalking 01:26:49].

But it's nothing to do with religion, it's to do with tradition and all getting together.

Sure.

And –

So what were your traditions? Tell us a little bit. What your–

Well, my –

Eating the fish, the head of a fish. I've heard of that.

Eating the head of the fish. Well sort of, you know –

For Rosh Hashana. I know about this.

Yes. My grandmother on my father's side used to put – we had salt cellars, you know, those silver things with legs. She would put sugar in them and had to remember then to change it back to sugar so that the New Year would be sweet.

Sweet.

And then she'd put some grains and some sultanas on the table. Don't ask me why. My mother used to grow a bit of wheat, you know, a few weeks before I suppose, and if it grew well that was good. But it's not religion. It's tradition. It's not at all the same thing. And I think many of these things are symbols for other things to remind you. In Passover, you know, those bits that you have are just as a – you know, it's a memory thing, you know?

And your husband's family has what background?

My husband's family?

Hmm-mm.

My father-in-law was quite religious.

But you said from Germany, they came – **[01:28:02]**

They came from Germany, yes. I'm not sure why. My mother-in-law was quite relaxed, because when I first got engaged and I went out to Fortnum's with my mother-in-law to have lunch, and I had something unmentionable. I don't know what it was, ham maybe [laughs], or something. [Laughs] And so he said to me, 'You go out with my mother and you have ham?' I said, 'Well, I eat it. It's time she finds out,' you know, because – and also we went to celebrate to the Mirabelle which was then a very nice restaurant, and I ordered liver and it came with bacon I'm afraid. So my brother-in-law who sat next to me said, 'Maybe you should put it under the liver,' and I said, you know, 'I'm not hiding anything. This is me.' You know, I don't – I can't believe – you know, it was apparent– there's 619 or 613 rules that you have to follow. The first one being you can't go more than twice your height without washing or something. This was told to me by somebody who was very tall, and I said, 'That's very unfair. You can go further than I can,' [laughs]. You know, and there's all kinds of rules and many of the rules are to do with good hygiene and good – you know, not – maybe not mixing milk and meat – maybe it's indigestible, I don't know. Certainly, the thing about not eating shellfish, etc., I mean, shellfish could poison you really unless – especially if you're in the desert with Moses or whatever [both laugh]. But I like to think – I mean, I absolutely believe in God. I think – because I can't otherwise understand what we're doing here and how it happened, but I do – you know, Voltaire said, 'God created man in his image but man paid him back.' So we always have to think of him as a sort of rather large person sitting on a cloud. **[01:30:01]** Man, may I say [both laugh]. Or getting annoyed with us or getting nice with us, but obviously he's not that. But, you know, I do speak to him and say, 'Don't do this to me now,' when I need to park my car somewhere and I can't [laughs]. He doesn't always answer. Sometimes – it's like the story of the little boy who says, 'I want a bicycle for my birthday,' and the Rabbi says, 'Well, if you ask God for it every day, you will get one.' And on his birthday he gets nothing, well, not the bicycle. He goes back to complain and he said, 'Well, I prayed every day and God didn't answer me.' He said, 'Yeah, he answered you, No,' [laughs]. You know, kind of – so I absolutely believe in that. If I had to pick a religion, I would pick Judaism because I think other religions are even more extreme in the son of God bit, etc., and you always feel what about the ones from before who got deprived with this? You know, before he – before 2021 or whatever. So – and I feel that I'm Jewish. I never feel that people look down on me because I'm Jewish because they don't. And I would – if it was somebody I was very close to and respected a lot and he said something unpleasant about Jews, that would hurt me. But if

it's somebody else who is ignorant, I'll let them say it because it can't possibly affect me. I've only ever had – I had – my daughter Nicole had a friend whose mother came from some family allied to the Vatican or something. And she once rang me – and this girl was always left on her own – this is not very interesting, I'll tell it to you another time. Anyway, she was unpleasant to me on the phone and she said, 'You have to understand that people like us would never normally consort with people like you.' **[01:32:00]** And I said to her, 'And you're so right,' you know, 'what a good way of thinking.' She was absolutely furious because the more I said it very calmly and what a good idea, yes, of course you mustn't, etc., – 'cos she kept saying, 'You think your daughters are special. Ha! My daughter...' and I'd say, 'Yes, yes, your daughter is a lovely girl and...' You know, that was the only time when I had somebody confront me if you like, that I can remember. But people say things all the time and you think, you're a stupid, ignorant person, good luck, etc. But as I said, if it's a dear friend of mine who will come and say, 'Jews are this, that, or the other,' – and sometimes they're right. They are this, that, and the other, you know? They're not all saints.

But you said before that it's quite complicated to explain yourself –

Hmm-mm.

To others about your identity.

Yes. And also it's boring for me because I know this story [laughs]. You know, I don't want to tell it again. And it's a complicated story because you don't know how much you want to – how far you want to go, you know.

So do you ever say – when somebody says, 'Where are you from?' from Egypt? Or what do you say normally?

I say I was born in Egypt, yes. 'Oh, so are you going back there? So you're Egyptian.' No. 'You're Armenian,' they ask me sometimes. As I said, we had an Armenian governess, Mademoiselle Beatrice. Lovely lady she was. And there were all kinds of people in Egypt who had gone there because again, there was a lot of opportunity. They had lots of –

Yeah, because we did – in some of my interviews people said they would say I'm French or –

Hmm.

You know, just because it's easier –

Yeah, absolutely.

To – in England because then it explains the French accent rather than –

Well, this happened to me when one of my daughters went to see the university in Sussex I think, and she at the time was going to do French and Italian. **[01:34:02]** And I was talking about the languages, etc., and one of the fathers said to me, 'Where do you come from?' And I said, 'I was born...' and then he said, 'No, I just wondered if you came from London because there was a lot of traffic,' [laughs]. He couldn't have cared less where I came from, but I'm so used to people saying, 'Where are you from?' you know, [blowing noise], yeah.

Hmm-mm.

It's not important but as I said, it's easier to say, 'Yes, I'm Lebanese,' whatever. You know.

And where do you feel a sense of belonging or do you have a sense of belonging or home?

I think it's a sense of family. I mean, you know, I belong to this family, with this family, and also as I said, I'm still quite close to the surviving relatives. We were the youngest, my sister, my brother, and I, and sadly many of them are no longer here. But, you know, we're still – I mean, my cousin who's in Milan also feels very lonely and she calls a lot and she wants to still be in contact with us. And of course now – we used to all meet in Lausanne. We can't meet anywhere now, you know, so – and I don't – again, I don't wake up and say, 'Where do I belong?' But when you're asking me, I'll tell you I belong to the family. That's where I am.

Hmm. And you said you don't have any sense of nostalgia or –

No, I don't. I don't think that it brings me anything. Maybe when I get more doddery [laughs] and senile –

We'll come.

Although my plan is not to be senile too long [laughs]. But it might come back to me. You'll have to come back.

We'll come back. We'll ask you again.

Exactly.

But is there anything you miss from Alexandria? Anything you can think of?

There's nothing I miss, except the mangoes but now they're in Sainsbury's, so – [laughs]. My daughter – my second daughter in her year off went to Zimbabwe where she said there was a mango tree. **[01:36:04]** She taught in a school. She said you could just pick them off the tree and eat them [laughs]. So no, there's nothing I miss really. And if I did miss it, you know, what would it help me in any way?

So there were no mangoes when you came to Paris?

No mangoes [laughs], no. No, there were no mangoes but we could have ice-cream in the street. That was okay.

That was –

It was good [laughs].

Yeah.

And we could walk, you know. Because I remember my sister in Egypt making plans with a friend, sort of writing at school saying, 'Shall we go on the tram to the sporting club?' 'Yes, let's. What time?' 'Twelve o'clock.' The question was, 'Are you allowed to go on the tram by yourself?' 'No, are you?' 'No,' [laughs]. That was the end of the arrangement. You know, we were very much protected and not allowed anywhere. For hygiene reasons and for other reasons, and also safety I suppose.

And you're not a member of the Association of the Jews of Egypt or other –?

No, I'm not. My brother-in-law is, I think my sister is, so sometimes they send me – and they meet up, etc. But I don't look forward to that. I mean, it's not something I want to do. And also, there's lots and lots of people I have lost contact with and I say, 'I've lost contact with them because...' – for a reason, you know. If I really wanted to be – to see them and be with them, I wouldn't have lost contact with them. And there's a couple of them I haven't lost contact with. You know, I have a friend in Rome who's had quite a sad life. She had a bad marriage, etc. And I do see her. She comes sometimes.

From your school?

Yeah.

Hmm-mm. And other schoolfriends?

Not really, not really. There's lots of people – like, I don't do Facebook. I am on Facebook because I used to play Scrabble with my daughter in China. When she was in China we used to do Chinese Scrabble – well, Scrabble [both laugh], but since then I don't actually ever go there. **[01:38:05]** And lots of people want to – I was actually a very good pupil at school and lots of people look for me, as it were. But I don't necessarily want to see them – she said nastily – so there are people looking for me, but – sometimes, you know, they say it's their birthday and I say happy birthday, but I never go – my husband is the Facebooker. He comes and tells me things. He says–

Manu, how do you think that your experience affects your life or later life? Your experience of displacement.

I think everybody's experience affects their lives one way or another. You can't tell. I think probably it has had influence, but I would have to have a twin who didn't have – [laughs] you know. I don't have this –

The control group.

Exactly.

Yeah [both laugh].

You can never tell. I mean, I remember Julie my third daughter who felt very neglected in some way because, you know, she would compare herself either with the little one where everybody would fuss over, or the other two who were maybe not always very kind to her. And I said to her, 'It's not a laboratory here. I can't – you're the third one. I can't change things so that you're exactly the same as the others.' And then I used to make a big effort. Once I took her to see *Peter Pan* I think at the theatre, by herself. And she said, 'You're only doing this to make me feel better,' which is exactly what I was doing. But, you know, you can't – there's no – there aren't the human parameters that you can apply equally to everybody. And there's of necessity some that are more whingey, some that need more reassurance, some that are fine, so you – again, I mean, you should have to ask them how do they feel about having a strange and foreign mother? **[01:40:07]**

Maybe we can ask Susanna ?

We can ask –

If she wants to come on. But, I mean, in terms of your parenting or in terms of your – you know, your – 'cos the question I'll ask, what do you think – can you learn from your experience, for somebody who might watch this interview?

For somebody who might watch this interview good luck, you are very patient, but no, I don't think – I think people don't learn lessons from others, for one thing. I always say – when people ask my advice I say, 'I'm going to give you the best piece of advice you've ever had, never listen to anybody else's advice.' Because when you ask for advice you just want a confirmation one way or the other. You don't necessarily want – except of course with my children it's different because my advice is so much better than anything else. Children [laughs]. Well, because my advice is, you know, exactly what they want to hear or exactly what they don't want to hear sometimes but, you know. Anyway, so no, I think maybe you learn by your experience but it's too late when you've learnt it. You have already learnt it. You can't compare. And people – exactly, who have been – who came out at the same time as me, you know, everybody is different and they have to do what they have to do.

What it make– what helped you, do you think, for yourself to adapt and change and, you know, get on with it, what you described, you know?

Would it help me?

What helped you?

I think, my character. I see for instance my sister and many of my female cousins who were all brought up in the same way, which was very much sort of behave yourself and be nice, say please and thank you, and all the rest of it. **[01:42:05]** And some of them have internalised it so much that they kind of disappeared, you know, they're non-people. But I'm not that kind of person. You know, I'm more iconoclastic and I will more – as I say, rude to people which I never am because I really don't see the worth in it, you know, that it's any – but, you know, I am – I think that's how you are. You know, I have had four daughters. They are very different. They have been brought up more or less the same thing, except Julie but, you know, it's – you don't learn from other people I don't think. And if you do it's too late. You know,

if you get to be my age and you think, oh, my mother was right in 1952 [both laugh], you know, it – I don't think people learn from other people.

What about tastes and food? We didn't discuss about the food at all.

The food, yes. The food was very nice. It was more Greek than oriental and in fact, one of my cousins got married to an Iraqi person and his mother invited us all to dinner. And I said to my husband, 'Oh good, this is going to be lovely Egyptian food.' And it was practically inedible – not inedible but really uninteresting.

Different.

Different but not at all what I expected. So Iraqi food, not good. Well – Lebanese food, Lebanese food is much the same as ours. I mean, if I'm going to go down the Edgware Road [laughs], it's a Lebanese place I would go to or a Greek Cypriot or something.

So what would you eat? Let's just give us some dishes in Alexandria.

In Egypt?

Yeah.

I don't know. We ate very – my father was very abstemious. He had a friend who was a great gourmet and he said, 'You don't eat, you feed yourself.' **[01:44:01]** It's better in French [laughs]. And it's true because I know he used to like lettuce dipped in salt. I mean, that's not a proper – he just fed himself basically. He was not at all a great foodie. I don't know what we had. The proper Egyptian food is *foul* which are beans, and it's spelt f-o-u-l because it's foul, I hate it. And also, a cousin of mine died from a very particular disease called Favism. And in fact, the other cousin got ill in Paris and they had all the students come and study him, and he didn't die from it. And so in my family it was considered not a proper food to have. But that's what they eat. *Falafel* is nice if it's done properly, as my sister points out [laughs]. That's sort of Egyptian food if you like, but we had three courses. We had – it's kind of Italian

Mediterranean food really. Claudia Roden, that's what it was [laughs]. That's what it was. And in fact, when my father used to come over, my father-in-law would take him to Blooms or something, and my father hated it [laughs]. He'd say, 'Can't we go to an Italian restaurant,' [laughs]. [Overtalking 01:45:31] because, you know, it's not the kind of food – it's more eastern European than...

He didn't like it.

No [laughs]. It's too – it's a bit – not greasy, it's a bit – he would always say, 'Italian, take me to an Italian restaurant,' [laughs]. He'd say, 'Okay.' Didn't happen. Anyway, he ate it. That was another thing. You had to eat everything. Look at me [laughs]. And in fact, I used to stay with my governess, and everybody had left the table, and finish my plate, yeah. **[01:46:03]** I'm not pleased about that. There we are.

So a certain upbringing, it was strict.

Yeah.

That's quite strict, hmm.

On the other hand, you know, people would serve your food so if there was something you really hated it, you could manage to just take a little bit of it [laughs], 'cos you knew once it was on your plate you had to eat it, so.

And do you feel it's – do you feel it's important to tell your story or do you feel it's – because is it something –

No, I don't feel it's important to tell my story because as I said, it is my story. Not being completely solipsistic but, you know, it's me, it's my experience. Again, a laboratory couldn't reproduce it. If it amuses or interests people, fine. Or if not, you know – no, I don't think it's very important but I think what is important is people who have been in camps etc., to testify and to say what happened because there's always the risk that people are going to contradict

them and say it never happened. But in my case, you know, I can't say that what I went through is of great interest except perhaps for my family who know most of it anyway, so.

You don't think – I mean, for example, in Egypt or other places, you know, where the local population not necessarily knows that there were Jews at all there, you know, so – [overtalking 01:47:35] –

Possibly but I think they're told the story differently. There's a film and a book – what's it called – the dentist wrote it – about Egypt. Maybe you don't know about it.

Yeah ?

The something building, the –

The Jacobean Building?

No, no, no.

No.

I can't remember what it's called. Anyway, and they have people, older Egyptians, reminiscing. Saying, 'Ah well, in those days we had the *Khawega.*' The *Khawega* means the people of – sort of people better than us. **[01:48:05]** 'And they were here and now they're not here.' You know, there was always this tension, which is not good. I mean, if you're – just think if you have German people coming here and they're the top of the pile and you're slightly below them, you're not going to like them very much, even if they pay you a nice salary to work for them. So, you know, I don't think– as I said people don't know that it happened and I think – as I said, happened for a moment and now it's not happening anymore and the world goes on.

But some of – I mean, I was thinking of your father and, you know, coming from Izmir.

Yes.

In a way, you know, maybe that helped him to then move again. I don't know.

I'm sure it must have done. I'm sure it must have done, but as I said, he was a very non-emotional person. He got on with things, you know. You had to find somewhere to live, you had to do this, you had to do that, and you just did it. Also, in that little suitcase he had, he had all his – a book he had started when we arrived, where he said – because before we left we had to buy umbrellas. Let me tell you, you can't buy an umbrella in Egypt, in Alexandria, [laughs], because if it rains you just go in for two minutes and then you go out again and that's the end of the rain. You know, it's a shower basically. And eventually we found two very good – really parasols, one blue, one red, with checks, for my sister and I. And we felt so conspicuous with these things the first salary we had we went and bought black umbrellas [laughs], that nobody could notice – look normal, if you like. And he's written everything in this book like, 'Janine and Manu, five francs for an umbrella.' Or fifteen francs or whatever it was. It's all there. It's really quite peculiar. **[01:50:00]** But he kept track of everything because he had to I suppose. We were very unaware of anything. We just sort of – my father – you know, whatever my father said, we did. When my father was quite old and on his own in Paris, my sister came to see him from Canada. She said to me, 'I want to go to The Louvre,' where there was an exhibition, 'but *papa ne veut pas,*' – 'my father won't let me.' I said, 'I've got news for you. You're fifty-five. You can go to a museum even if *papa ne veut pas*, [laughs], you know. Because my father thought if you came to Paris you had to stay with him, you didn't go to a museum. But if you come from Toronto you might want to go and see an exhibition [laughs]. So, you know, we did what he said we should do basically. And usually it was sensible. If it was really – it's like now, if the rules are sensible, you know, originally stay at home, go to the chemist, go and get food, we follow them. If they start getting extraordinarily complex and some of them ridiculous, then you weigh them up and think am I going to do this or not? But my father was never – in fact, the nice thing about him coming to live with us is that he established a very good rapport with the children, and they were very often prepared to discuss things with him that they wouldn't with their parents, you know. And it was very useful. Because I remember telling our GP that my father was going to come and live with us and I didn't know how this would all work out because – but as I said, we had a very big house

and he was actually – he had like a granny flat I suppose with his own bedroom and bathroom, like a little apartment there. And he was never – and the girls loved him. They all wanted to be with him and talk to him and look after him. Because we got to the stage where somebody had to babysit him, you know, if we went out.

Did he speak English?

Yes. Yes, yes, he spoke seven languages as far as I know, quite well, which is good. **[01:52:04]**

Is there anything I haven't asked you or anything you'd like to add?

Not really. I think I have been through lots of things I hadn't thought of in many years but, you know…

Manu, you mentioned the umbrellas.

Yes [laughs].

Is there any other – you said you had a little suitcase you were allowed. What did you take personally, do you remember anything?

Ah, now my mother – we had – another thing we had in Egypt, apart from everybody else, is one day a week we had a lady who came to the house and made our clothes. We bought the fabrics. So we would buy *Vogue* and whatever, and say, 'Right, I want this,' and she would make it for us. But my mother was very, very strict about length and width and colours. We could never have anything black or anything dark or – you know, and it was – the fashion was to have three-tiered skirts with a *jupon* underneath [laughs], with an underskirt. And, you know, she would never let us have anything too extreme. It always had to be within very tight parameters. And when we decided to leave she decided to have this poor woman make us pyjamas. She made us pyjamas with twenty-one buttons. Three, three, three, three, three, three, three, everywhere. You had to get up early to get out of these pyjamas [laughs], because she had – they were Viyella pyjamas – that it was very cold. In fact, it was cold but not in the

flat. You know, these pyjamas was the other thing we threw away as fast as we could [laughs]. Things we thought we might need – no, we took very little with us really. But, you know, you can't – you have two suitcases. If you, where you got home, and say, 'You have two suitcases. What are you going to take?' you know. But I don't miss – I miss the encyclopaedias. We had all the encyclopaedias at the bottom of the bookshelf and I used to – you know, you read them and you go from one to the other. **[01:54:02]** And now of course I've got Google which is another system, which also sends you back to other things that you're interested in. So, no.

And just maybe one thing, and so is your grandmother buried in Alexandria?

They're all buried in Alexandria.

They're all there.

Yeah.

Hmm. So any idea what happened to the graves, what –?

Well, my cousin Alex regularly goes and looks after them and sends pictures, but I think once you are no longer here, you know, you're not the pile of bones that's there. You are – I don't know where you are, but [laughs] – it's like somebody I know was talking to me the other day. She said she'd had Covid and she lives on her own, and she said, 'I had it on the 14th of March and I remember waking up in the night thinking something terrible's about to happen to me,' and she said, 'Really, you feel like somebody's sitting on your chest basically.' And she said, 'Nobody's going to find out, and I thought, okay, I'm going to die.' And I said, 'Yes, and then you were going to find out the secret that nobody knows,' [laughs]. She said, 'Yes, but you know what,' she said, 'I think it's a cocktail party. We're all going to be at a cocktail party.' I said, 'That for me would be hell if I was at a cocktail party. That would be the last place I want to be.' And she said, 'No, no, I think we're going to be doing this, that, and the other.' And we don't know what happens afterwards. We like to think we know but, you know, it's a guess. We don't. I actually don't think there's very much going on afterwards. I mean, you know, if you're a flower and they go, that's it, they go. They don't go and flower somewhere else.

Maybe I'm wrong. We'll see. I actually remember going to a lecture about this at the university college because I'm not very clear what happens after death in the Jewish religion. **[01:56:00]** And I think this guy was basically saying that unless you had followed every commandment, you were going to suffer a lot [laughs]. So I don't know what happens, but I quite like the idea of purgatory and, you know, all those various places you can go to [laughs]. But I think once a person is dead, you know, it's – I always say to the children, you know, 'If you remember them and they're in your heart, they're with you.' It's when you forget them…

So you're not worried about the –

No. I'm not, no. And there's a little guy who looks after the graves, you know. So is there anything you would like to ask me [laughs]?

I think we have discussed most of the themes, many themes.

I think we have. Thank you.

And I think I want to thank you for the time being and see whether –

For the time being?

Susanna wants to come in.

Oh, Susanna, okay. All right. [Pause].

Manu, can you please introduce the person on your left?

This is my oldest daughter Susanna.

Hello Susanna, welcome.

S: Hi, hi, thank you, thank you.

I'd like to ask you would you like to reflect on your mother's experience, or have you got anything to –?

S: Well, the first thing I want to say is I'm really glad that my mother has had an interview with you, and for about two years I've been suggesting it's a good idea that she should. Mainly because I'm so curious to actually hear for once all the things – you know, to hear the full story of the past. We hear snippets of it from time to time, but it's not something that you discuss so easily, is it?

[01:58:01] No, that's what I was saying. I'm not a nostalgic type of person and that's why I don't belong to all these associations of Jews from Egypt or AHA or whatever they call themselves, and – from Alexandria, 'cos there's also the Alexandria versus Cairo thing, you know. It's not just Sephardi and Ashkenazi [laughs]. It's also whether you're from Alexandria or from Cairo. It's not the same thing, but similar.

S: Hmm.

So –

S: I always remember you, a long time ago, drawing us the layout of your flat in Alexandria.

Yeah.

S: In quite a lot of detail, the layout of it, and then throwing it away and having done a –

Well, that's how I am. I'm not the type of person that's going to keep it basically, although I keep lots of rubbish which your father gets very annoyed with [laughs].

S: Yes, it's true actually. Usually you keep everything, so –

Yes, I do. Because – I always say it's because I left my house. You know, I have no background. I'm giving myself a bit of background. Really, the truth is that I'm lazy, but never mind [both laugh].

S: Wow, all the truths are coming out in this interview. Yes, but also it's also true that – I know that it's not the same thing but it's also true that your drawing of your house in Alexandria is also our story. You might not think that.

Well, I can draw it again. It's not a problem.

S: Maybe you can. Then you –

I don't feel strongly one way or the other. I don't notice that I did that.

We certainly talked about the flat, didn't we?

Yeah, we did.

S: Hmm-mm.

We talked in the interview.

S: Hmm-mm, yes, I've heard of this. Which sounds like it was the largest flat in the world basically.

No, my Aunt Stella was the largest flat in the world. To the extent that she had flats within the flat for her daughter and for her son.

S: Sounds good.

Yeah, very good [laughs].

S: Yeah, sounds good.

Susanna, I'd like to ask you how do you think that your mother's experience affect you do you think?

S: I think it's interesting. For a long time I didn't understand at all that I had a foreign parent and came from a foreign background. **[02:00:01]** That's also to do with the milieu in which we lived. We live in a very Jewish part of North London. I went to South Hampstead High School. The majority of girls in my class were Jewish. I just thought that's how it was and therefore, everybody had a sort of – you know, I knew no better until I was quite old when I suddenly one day was realising, hold on, my Mum – my Mum was a refugee. I had not put that together in any way whatsoever. And I think it was important for you that we should feel as normal as possible. That's why, for example, you didn't teach us French which is your first language. You didn't want to confuse us, you've said, and you wanted us to have a clear British identity, and I think you were successful in that project. What was confusing was the amount of people who used to ask me where did I come from, and especially when I left the enclave of North London and went further out into the world and people said, 'Oh, you speak such good English.' And when this first happened to me, it was quite confusing. And then after a while I realised, oh, to lots of British people I'm obviously a foreigner, but I've never thought of myself as a foreigner, and it's a complicated story.

I would like to remind you that when you went to Sunday school –

S: Hmm.

When you were maybe six or seven –

S: Hmm.

And they said to you, Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, you said, 'Please sir, my mother was with them,' [laughs].

S: Yes, yes [all laugh].

And I said, 'Sometimes it feels like it,' [laughs].

S: Yes. I'll tell you what, I think it was very romantic the idea that my mum came from Egypt, Ancient Egypt, she was kind of a pharaoh, she had lots of amazing jewels and a few amazing objects. It was very exciting to have this exotic background and to be able to say, 'Oh, you know, I recently myself came from Alexandria,' which I may have said from time to time. But I don't think I really understood it at all until I moved away from where we grew up, and then I understood a lot more about it. But it's not the same thing as saying that you come from another country because obviously I don't come from Egypt, but I come from a world that existed within a part of Egypt that probably doesn't exist anymore. **[02:02:05]** As I got older I've come to understand that the best way of understanding is I'm Jewish, and that often means that you come from a different place.

You mentioned objects. So what objects were there? For example, you said –

S: There are one or two – for example, I have one at my house that Simone gave me when I got married, just beautiful – it's a kind of – it's a China box with silver inlay on it. There are very few things – maybe –

You didn't really bring anything.

S: Do you know what it is? I think it's the jewels. I think every so often my mum would bring out just some amazing objects that had belonged to her mother –

Oh no, the jewels because we left everything else behind.

S: Exactly. And I think those object – and because they were jewels also. You know, ooh, from the exotic East that I come from. Do I? That – yes, I read a lot of *Arabian Nights*, a lot of *Tintin* and my mum's story became sort of involved in that, so it was a sort of – you know, it was a kind of glamorous foreign.

Exotic.

S: Exotic.

But in a positive way.

S: In a positive – definitely in a positive way.

In a curious way.

S: Definitely in a positive way. And I always felt like I'm not quite from here. I have some mysterious other. But later I had to come to reckon with a whole set of other things that were a bit less glamorous than that, and that were more about identity, what do I look like, what does it mean to other people. You know, my mum speaks an impeccable English as you can see, and it would be – after a while I stood back to think, her grammar is perfect, you know, but yet how is she doing that [laughs], that – you know, and for example, your brother and sister do not speak such very perfect English –

No.

S: And Jeanine, my mum's sister, lives in Canada, you know –

She sounds all Canadian also.

S: Well, she sounds – I don't know. I often say, 'My mum has no accent,' and then my friends will say, 'Excuse me, your mum does have an accent,' so I can't hear it.

You can't hear it. I couldn't hear my mother's accent either.

No?

No, you can't hear your own [overtalking 2:03:56].

S: No, I can't. So I was going to say, I think that Jeanine, your sister, has a stronger un-English as a first language accent but then maybe I'm wrong. I don't really know. **[02:04:04]**

But it's a funny thing about the accent. I mean, does it bother you when people say, 'Where are you from?'

No, it doesn't bother me. Again, it depends who says it, you know, [laughs]. I think it's just because English people do try to place you according to your accent and when – they're defeated if you sound not like, you know, RP or, you know, the Jew, that you're from the north, or from the East End, or whatever, so it bothers them. They need to place you somewhere.

S: But I've actually found that the look that you and my father gave me is very useful. I was a teacher for example for a year in China when I left university and a lot of Chinese people thought I came from the west of China. And I've also travelled in quite eastern parts of Indonesia where there's been a lot of, for example, Arab traders and settlement, and I look like the people there. I feel I've got a very useful, blending, Spanish, something, international look. So anyway, there you go.

Exotic.

S: Exotic, yeah. I've had to move away from that.

[Laughs].

I liked it a lot when I was growing up but I've obviously had to interrogate what that actually means.

And now you have a blonde, blue-eyed daughter.

S: Now I've got a blonde, blue-eyed daughter, yes, that's right. That's right.

That's interesting.

S: You've seen maybe on Zoom from time to time, yeah. Yeah.

Well, it's not our choice is it, I mean, well – [all laugh] – how we look or our children.

S: Not yet, not yet [laughs].

Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

S: How have you felt – how has it been to be interviewed?

It was fine actually. There were lots of things that Bea asked that I hadn't even thought of for years and years, so that was quite interesting to sort of dig them up again. But as I said, I don't think my testimonies are of any much use to anybody as – whereas somebody who has been in a concentration camp and really gives testimony to it, because that's important. But my own experience has relatively been not so terrible, **[02:06:05]** because my parents were very wise and – yes, you should say something about your grandfather 'cos I don't think I said enough about my father being a very special person.

S: He was amazing.

Your mother said that when he moved here you could get to know him better and he was very close to the children.

S: Yes, yes. I used him to practice my French. Because French is my mum's first language and the language of her family [coughs], but we were not brought up speaking French. So the French I speak is a confusing one because I've got a good accent and I could – because of my useful, international look –

And she has [laughs] –

S: [Overtalking 2:06:41] also, but I speak– I speak a French of my own devising without much grammar involved in it, much to the disdain of my mother. So I would speak bad French to my grandfather and he would correct me. Yes, he was amazing, dapper, you know, gentleman of Alexandria really. You know, he would have been a good person to interview for the project.

Hmm.

S: I must say. Amazing. And –

Two exoduses [laughs].

S: Incredibly dignified, almost immaculately in his suit with a –

With a tie, yes.

S: A tie and a handkerchief, and so droll and dry and – I always remember what he said to – he did a lot of internal reflection as he was getting older. He once said to me that he was *inquiete [ph], pessimiste, nul.* Worried, pessimistic, and nothing [laughs].

Worthless.

Very strange.

S: Well – and he said it with a smile and a twinkle. And he also was very fond of saying, *finita la comedia.* He was just tremendously – as my mother is, I don't know how much of it she's shown in here – is using wit and style often to express profound things, and to offset emotion, I would say.

I said he was a very unemotional person, which he was. **[02:08:01]**

S: He was a very unemotional person but he was a very – he was a sort of king as it were.

Yes, he was.

S: Kind of, a judger of things and an arranger of things. He was a pretty amazing guy. Just – you could see him. I don't know if you've seen him, pictures of him, but just –

No, there's – the picture that's in the hall of him in his youth [laughs] –

S: Well, I'm sure that we'll give Bea –

[Overtalking].

Yes, we will talk about the pictures, yes.

S: Yeah, yeah.

Okay. Okay, thank you both. Thank you very much Susanna.

S: Thank you so much, thank you.

I should have brought all the other ones [laughs].

S: Yes, you should have brought all of them and all the grandchildren also.

Well, there'll be a photograph.

S: Yeah, yeah.

We'll take some photos. We'll look at the photos.

S: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly.

Okay, thank you.

S: Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thank you.

Who is on the picture please?

This is a picture of my father aged I think about seven or eight.

And what's his name?

Edouard Cori.

And where was it taken?

In Smyrna.

So roughly which year?

I don't know. Maybe 1913, something like that.

Thank you.

I2: Yes.

Yes, please.

This is a picture of my mother, second from right, and her eight brothers and sisters. This picture was by my grandmother's bed when she was ill on a trip in Florence, and the doctor came to see to her and looked after her, and then he said, 'What is this, a school?' And my

grandmother said, 'No, these are my children.' He said, 'These are your children?' And he said to my grandfather, '*smettila*' which in Italian means, 'Stop it,' [laughs].

And do you remember Manu, the names?

The names of the people? Yes, absolutely I do.

Go on then.

Well, there's Emmanuel, Edmond, Stella, Victor, Rene, Mary, Aldo, Lydia my mother, and Grazia.

And where did they all go to in terms of countries or –? **[02:10:03]**

Ah, well, Switzerland the first two – the first three in Switzerland, and then Paris, and then – which is the third – oh yes, he went to New York but then he came back to Switzerland. My Aunt Mary went to Milan, and my Uncle Aldo went to Paris, and my mother went where we went [laughs], and the little one went to Switzerland. So mostly Switzerland really.

Which one is your mother?

The one – the second one from the right.

And who is still alive of anyone?

Sadly, no one. No.

Thank you. Yes please.

This is a wonderful picture of my grandparents and their nine children casually arranged for a very formal photograph in their flat in Alexandria, in probably – well, the 1920s anyway. My mother who is the one sitting down with her face not showing, sadly, at the bottom right – they

were all very musical in my mother's family, they all played the violin or the piano, and so that's sort of showing them as I said, casually, not casually, arranged [laughs]. There's another one where they play chess but I'm afraid I don't have it any more.

Manu, what is the address? Do you remember the address?

It was in the Rue Nebi Daniel, wherever that – if that rings any bells with anybody in Alexandria. It was a very large flat where they lived.

And the names of your – the grandparents again please?

My grandparents were called Maurizio and Rachel Rachelina, yes. And they're sitting there, you know, he's reading the paper.

Nacamuli? **[02:12:00]**

Nacamulis, yes. All the Nacamulis.

Hmm-mm.

So it's quite a picture really.

In the twenties, yeah?

Yeah.

Yeah, thank you.

'Cos my mother –

[Break in recording]

Yes.

Okay, so this is a wedding picture of my parents Edouard and Lydia. Lydia Nacamuli and Edouard Cori. They went on honeymoon to Scotland, which is an interesting – if you're in Egypt it's a very exotic place to go on your honeymoon. One of my daughters lives in Scotland now.

And what year?

I'm not sure of the year actually [sighs]. I'm trying to see how old they are [laughs]. I'm not sure.

In the thirties.

Yes. Yes.

I2: Yes please.

Okay, this is my wedding photograph. From the left is my father-in-law Jack Kleeman, his wife Ruth, our best man Alec Nacamuli, and then there's – whoops, I can't see, sorry. And then there's me [laughs] and David my husband, my mother Lydia, and my father Edouar.

And the year?

1968.

In London.

In London, yes. At the New London Synagogue.

Not far from here.

Not far from here.

I2: Please.

Yeah. Okay, so this is my father. It's actually my father's favourite photograph of my father. Edouard Cori is in his thirties, and he is looking very dashing, so it was his best picture ever. There we are.

And he brought it from Egypt?

He brought it from Egypt. I think it's one of the things we grabbed possibly at the last minute because it came in the original frame, which is not here, and it's a little bit ancient now but, yes. **[02:14:01]**

I2: Yes, please.

Sorry, can you start again? He's just gone to find the date of it [laughs].

[Break in recording]

Okay. So this is a picture of me with my father later on, about twenty-five/thirty years ago, in Switzerland. And it's really one of the last pictures of my father looking well because after that he got quite elderly and not very well. So I like that one.

I2: Yes, please.

This is a picture taken at my seventieth birthday. It's my husband and I in the centre with our daughters. From left, Susanna, and Jenny, Nicole, and Julie.

Thank you. Yes, please.

Okay. This is a picture of us taken at our fiftieth wedding anniversary, and it's us with all our children and grandchildren. Nine of them [pause].

Yes, please Manu. Tell us the story of this brooch.

Well, this is my grandmother's brooch which she used to wear quite often actually, come to think of it. I always think of her wearing this. And my grandfather was a jeweller, and his shop was burnt down during the uprising in Izmir in Smyrna – it became Izmir. And some of her jewellery was left to me and some of it was smuggled aboard the ship that took us from Alexandria, in a suitcase. And I thought I'd wear it today or at least show it to you because it's interesting [laughs]. And also, it's very much of its time. It's kind of early 19th century – 20th century.

Are you happy you have this brooch?

Well, I don't wear it very often, in fact never [laughs], **[02:16:01]** but I have been wearing it recently and I – you know, it's an interesting link and, you know, I'm going to give everything to the girls anyway, so they'll have a future life.

Manu, thank you again for sharing your story with us.

Pleasure.

[02:16:20]

[End of recording]