

Sephardi Voices UK

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Title:	Ms
Interviewee Surname:	Dangoor
Forename:	Linda
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	04/06/1949
Interviewee POB:	Baghdad, Iraq
Interviewee Occupation:	Artist
Father's Occupation:	Businessman
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

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Today is the 8th of December 2016. We are conducting interview with Linda Dangoor. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we're in London.

What is your name please?

Linda Dangoor.

And where were you born?

Baghdad.

And when were you born?

1949.

Linda, thank you for having agreed to be interviewed for the Sephardi Voices project.

Welcome.

Can you please tell me a little bit about your family background?

Yes, I will tell it. We are Iraqis. In fact both families, my mother's family and my father's family. And we go back to about 1700. And before that, I think, any proof of being there has been lost or has not been recorded, but in my, in my heart I think we were there 2,600 years, so we are indigenous to that area, to Mesopotamia, to Babylon. And so I really regard the family background as Babylonian. My great-grandfather was the chief rabbi of Iraq and we were brought up in a Jewish family, traditional Jewish family.

What was your great-grandfather's name, please? For the record.

Ezra, Ezra Dangoor.

Mhm.

Hacham Ezra Dangoor.

And when was he the chief rabbi?

I think about, I'm not, I'm not sure the exact date, but I think around 1910? Something like that? Maybe?

Mhm.

1920? Not certain [00:02:03].

Tell me a little bit about your family, your upbringing. What, what are your memories? What do you remember of growing up in, in, in your family?

Well, we lived in a big house. In fact, both my father and my uncle, his brother, lived with his parents, so my grandparents on my father's side. And... So, we, it was a big house with many, many people, perhaps about twenty or twenty-five people. And my memories of, of my childhood are lovely ones, that we always played, that we went out onto the river. They are sensual memories of the earth. We, our house was on, on the riverbank of the Tigris river, and I remember on, in afternoons my father and my mother would take us out in a rowing boat, and my parents didn't row, row us around [laughs], there was a nice guy rowing us up and down, it's like a promenade, you know. As, as the sun was going down. What else do I remember? I remember the garden, we played a lot with my cousins, there - we had four cousins, and we were three, three of us played a lot in that garden. In the garden we had a lot of fruits. We had what you call Seville oranges now, but these sour oranges. We had trees growing there, we had some grapes, we had, I think pomelo rather than grapefruit. What do I remember? The smells, the perfume, the jasmine flowers. It was fun, because we were with other kids of our, of our age. It was fun. [00:04:02]

Where was the house? What was the address of it?

It was on a road called, our street, a Abu Nuw'as, and, which was parallel to the riverbank of the Tigris river, and we were almost, we were opposite what was at that time the royal palace, with just the river separating us.

Mhm, mhm. And you said, so who, who were the people living there? So, your grandparents?

So, two grandparents, two aunts, my father's sisters, who were not married yet, his brother, my uncle, with his wife. My uncle Naim with his wife Renee. And then their, their offsprings, David, Michael, Robert and Eli. Then we had my, I think yeah, my grandmother's brother who also was living there. We also had my father's brother, my unc-, another uncle who was not married living there. I can't remember who else [laughing] there was quite a lot of people. It was very dynamic house.

How did it work, did people have different parts of the house...

Yes.

...where you...? Your family was in a ...?

Yes, different parts of the house and the funny thing is that in the summer, we all went and slept on the roof. So, the roof was the whole area of the house. So there'll be one corner, my uncle Naim with his family, then in the middle two, two beds for my grandparents. Then on the side the unmarried sisters and then we were right on the edge facing the river was my brothers and my parents. And it was, it was amazing, really to think about that now [00:06:06].

Yeah, and how, how many months would you spend on the roof in the summer? I mean, was it...?

Yeah, well I think from... probably six months, yeah six months. My parents had in their bedroom air conditioning so that their siestas were very nice but nowhere else. I'm not sure if my uncle, maybe my uncle had one too. But it was very hot, in the summer really hot.

So...

Mm.

...they would have siestas in there?

Yeah...

In the air conditioning...?

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah of course.

But at night time on the roof?

On the roof, cause it was cooler. Mm.

Mhm.

Mm.

And who were you particularly, apart from your parents, who were you particularly close to in that, in that household?

Two people, my grandmother Nana, with who we called Nana, and my aunt Eileen. There was another aunt [clears throat] but she left early on, she left in 1951, so... or '52, cause she got married. So, I was very close to my aunt Eileen. My parents went out a lot, so we were left with my grandma, Nana, and aunty Eileen, who used to tell us wonderful stories.

What, what sort of stories? What, what she talk about?

She was very inventive because we were very, we were very naughty, you know, can you imagine six, seven kids getting up to mischief? So, she would devise, create a story, a moral story like 'this brother and sister they did this or they did that and this is what happened because it wasn't right'. I can't remember, but I remember her patience, her patience in telling us stories.

Mhm.

It was nice, it was really nice. I mean whilst talking to you, I can see the house, I can see the trees, I can... it, it was, it's a, it's a beautiful memory, up to perhaps the revolution, in '58.

[00:08:09]

So, you had, yeah, quite a few years there...

Mm.

...living peacefully.

Yes, we lived in France for a while in, in 1952. And I sort of remember bits of it, being taken to the Bois de Boulogne but I, I can't remember much. So... And then we came back.

How come? What, happened ...?

Cause my aunt, my other aunt Doreen got married in France. And the whole family went there and I, I think in those days, I don't know, that they used to, when they used to leave their country to go for a holiday or something, it was not a week, it was could be a year, so it was almost a year.

But you didn't plan to stay there? It was just a... or was there...?

Um... no, I think my father wanted to, but for many reasons they decided not to. I think he found the atmosphere after the war, not maybe very conducive to a Jewish family. Maybe, I'm not sure. But...

Mhm.

...And anyway, my father's background and education, unlike that of my mother's, was English. So, it was natural that afterwards we would come here later on. My mother's education was French, so...

Because he'd studied in...

He...

...in England?

...Yes, yes, he studied in England, he came to university here, in the thirties, so. I think his ideal was the English gentleman, so.

He had a vision?

Yes.

Of something

Yeah.

And did your mother go to France before or she was just in a French school? [00:09:59]

No, no, she, she was brought up in Pa-, in France and in Belgium.

OK.

I think they lived in Nice for a while, then Paris, then a place called Knokke Le Zoute or something [laughs]

I know it.

...in Belgium. [laughing] Do you know it?

Yes, it's on the coast.

Yeah.

Knokke Le Zoute

Knokke Le Zoute

Yeah, it's where they lived?

They lived for a while, I th-, yah, yah.

Uhuh, how come, what was her father, what did her...?

He was a tea merchant, but I don't know. They, they just lived abroad, and he loved France, I mean before my mother was born, they lived in Paris for a long time.

And did she come back before, for the marriage? Or did they all come back... did she come back...

No, no she was quite young when she came back.

Right.

Yeah, when I say brought up maybe not many years, but her, but her, her roots really are in the French language.

Mhm.

And in fact, she would speak to us in French and my father in Arabic. So, we were brought up with two languages.

That's interesting. For her, it was important to speak French?

I think it was natural...

Right.

...not so much important, it was natural...

Mhm.

...because her mother spoke to her always in French. I think you'll find this in many Egyptian families, where the Arabic was not very developed but the French was...

Yes.

Whereas, especially with me, but I think with, with all of us, Arabic was very developed, especially with, for me. I...

Yeah.

...I loved Arabic. I absolutely loved Arabic and you know from the age of six maybe I would start to write poems and... so it's a very, it can be very flowery language, very beautiful. And... yah, I think I would have been a writer [laughs]. I just loved that language so much, which unfortunately the literary Arabic I have lost. I can still read, but I lost the... [00:12:05]

So you got bi-lingually?

Mm, absolutely.

Which is unusual, because most people in Iraq spoke mainly Arabic...

Yes, my mother, yes...

Yeah.

...yes, yes. My mother had this French strain, you know, French...

Mhm.

...background.

And how did your parents meet? Was it arranged, or?

Ah... [pause], I think when you say arranged it sounds like they never - I, I think the families knew each other and so perhaps somebody said 'why not have a look at this one', or- I don't know, that's, I don't know, I don't have a real story about that.

Mhm. Mhm.

Hm.

What about Jewish festivals or festivals or...

Mm.

...what, what did you celebrate or what stands out in your memory?

The fact that we wore white for every festival, that was very nice. And the fact that in, in the synagogues, the kids were allowed to play outside, I mean, it wasn't really outside, it was part of the synagogue, that's what I remember. I remember Sukkot very well because that was beautiful the way they did the Sukkot with the palm branches to make the Sukkah. I don't remember much, really.

Was the Sukkah in your house, or?

It was on the terrace, yeah.

On the roof or...?

No, we had a, a terrace near the garden, before you go down to the garden.

OK.

Mm.

And that was built every year?

Yes.

Mhm.

With, with all sorts of things hanging, you know, fruits and things, and, and very white linen.

White, so like the clothes?

Mm.

Everyone was dressed in white?

I think the kids, were I, I, I haven't got a memory of the parents but perhaps, I, I can't remember.

[00:14:03]

Uhuh. And what about Shabbat how was that celebrated?

You know our house was a strange house in that because it's so big, the, the, the adults ate on their own and us children ate in our, in our rooms, in our bedrooms. I, I can't remember, it's funny I can't remember, but I do remember the Shabbat lunch because it was very delicious [laughs]. So, we were all together then.

I see...

Yeah.

...so the evenings, people would eat separate?

I can't remember, I think Friday night we were all together probably, but to be honest, erm, I don't have a very strong memory it's very hazy.

And, in terms of food because that's something which occupies you today. What's the food stands out for you? Is it the Shabbat food or is it other food or?

I'll tell you what stands out, it's... when I think about it I think 'my goodness'. It's the grilled pieces of fat, of the lamb fat, that was the most coveted thing ever. Now, lamb, I think in Europe and especially in England, the fat of the lamb is all over the lamb. In Iraq and probably in parts of the Middle East, it's in the tail only. So it's called the fat of the tail. And so whenever you had any kind of grill meat, these, these pieces of fat would be put on skewers and they would be barbequed or grilled. And the taste was absolutely delicious, really. That's one, I mean that's the first thing that came to my head now.

Where was that served, at home or...?

At home, yeah, yeah, yeah, at home.

Mhm.

And to come to think of it now, the memory comes back [00:16:00]. We were all children in, in, in, with the adults, so we did eat together. It could have been Shabbat, could have been Shabbat as well. You know evening...

And where was the...

...Friday night.

...it was kosher meat?

Of course.

Where was it slaughtered, was it slaughtered in the house or...? Do...?

That I don't know.

Yeah. Hm.

I don't know. But I do remember that my grandfather, my father's father, would wake up early in the morning, five o'clock, and would go, would be taken by car to do all the shopping for the day, every day, so...

Which is so interesting because the women on the whole didn't go out?

No, and I, no, no, didn't go out and especially not in markets. I don't think it was a sort of conducive place for...

Yeah.

... women.

So it was a man's job, which is really interesting...

Men's job.

A man's job to do the shopping, with help or helpers probably or...?

Oh yeah, we had help. I mean... yeah, we had help, some perhaps did not, but it's mostly the men that did it.

Yeah, and who, speaking of helpers, who, so who was the staff, or who were the other people in the house?

So, we had a nanny for us, for me and my brothers. My cousin David had their own, nanny. Then we had a wonderful cook called Gershon, who was part of the family and I mean he stayed with us and even after we left he was still there. And he was there, somebody else called Yousef who used to do the cleaning, another woman who did also the cleaning, and then another guy, I think he was the cousin of Gershon, not sure what he did, but he did something. Then we had a gardener. It was busy house.

You had a busy house, yes...

Hm.

...and were there...

I tell you what we loved though. We loved going to the kitchen, but we were not allowed, not allowed to go to those quarters if you like, but that's what we loved most, most. [00:18:05]

Why, what to watch it, to taste it, to...?

Watch them cook, watch, it was real life going on in there, for us it was very interesting, very different to the way we were, were brought up.

And, were, were they Jew-, were who were, what religion were they the...

Christian.

...the cook?

There were all Christian... the...?

I think they were all Christian, I know that the, the gardener Lefta, was Muslim. I think they were all Christian, yeah.

Mhm, hm.

Mhm.

What about, something we didn't talk about is school, what, what school did you go to?

I went to Frank Iny a Jewish school, but which accepted Muslims as well, so we had, I remember, we had one or two Muslims in our class. And that was a great-, we had a great time there. Erm... all of us went there, so... it was like...

All the cousins?

All the cousins, we were a family school [laughs].

So were you... in different classes?

I was with David, I was with David and then my brother Eddy was with Michael and then my brother Alfred was with Robert and Eli was too young at that time. I mean he was, he was born, much later.

So you were the only girl...

Mmm.

...in that crowd?

Mmm. Was difficult [laughs].

So, so what then two brothers, even more...? Mm...

Yeah.

But you managed them?

Yes, yes, it was really nice.

And Frank Iny the school, can you just maybe describe it for us, it was a Jewish school?

Mhm.

It was run by the community or how?

Not sure.

No, OK.

I'm not sure.

What was taught in, in Frank Iny?

French, Arabic, maths, very high levels of maths, science [00:19:54]. I only, you know, I only stayed until the age of nine or just the end of my ninth year, so... but I know that the maths was amazing, because when I came to this country...

[Recording Cuts]

Yeah, you were saying you stayed only on till the age of nine, at Frank Iny?

Yah, yah, so... what I wanted to say was when I came to this country and I went to the lycée, they wanted... my French wasn't that great, I mean it was good, but perhaps academically, I don't know, it wasn't maybe that great. I didn't have English, I had very little except I, I did go for one year to an English school. So it was, it was OK. But it, I wasn't rooted in the English language.

Mm.

And... so, my parents wanted me to go to the lycée so they had to find out which class to put me in. So they... one of the people at the lycée who was examining me said 'OK, let's do maths' and of course Frank Iny was so good in their education of I think the sciences and maths, they put me in the right level, everybody was my age. But it was quite hard, because the, the Latin, which I've never done, was incredibly hard. I had to really work hard at my English. The French was OK, the French was OK. But it's just to show you that the level was so, so good.

It was a good education.

Mm.

Mm. What about, something we didn't talk about is clubs, what about clubs? Did you go to anything?

Yeah, with my parents, to the Mansur Club, it was a lovely, lovely place, where we used to go swimming. It was really nice and they had even a horse racing track, so that was rather nice [00:22:03]. I the – Now, wait a minute, I think they had a horse racing track, or I'm confusing the two, did I go to the races? [laughing] But, anyway, yeah we used to go.

The Mansur club?

Yes.

And was that for Jews and non-Jews?

I think so.

Mixed?

Yeah.

Mhm.

I think so.

And in terms of your friends, I mean you were probably very busy with your cousins if you... can you remember any other friends?

Yeah. Yeah, I do remember, but you're absolutely right, we were very busy with our cousins. I do remember, I wish I... I mean, I remember them and, and I met them again when they came out in the seventies, when they came to London. But you know, a lot of time had passed, so, yeah you remember the faces and it's... One or two I remember cause, we, we, they used to come to our house. Yah. And those ones, I'm still friendly with.

So, was it also, the life of the children was also quite bound to the house?

Yes.

In a way?

Yes, we weren't really allowed to go out. So, the house was our world, really, and the river. The house and the river. And I'll tell you a story. We were left for one day on our own, I don't know if it was a holiday or... But all of us not knowing what to do. Our parents were out, obviously my father and all the men went to work. I don't know where my mother was, but nobody was in the house except my grandmother. And the staff of course. And we said we wanted some bubble gum [laughs] and there used to be a small kiosk on the riverbank, and he used to sell coca cola and bubble gum, bazooka bubble gum I remember, you know the pink, horrible pink stuff [00:23:59]. And so we said, 'OK we'll go to Nana', so you can imagine if you have this visual imagination of all seven people, little people, going up to my grandmother saying 'can you give us some money please, we want to buy some bazooka bubble gum?' She said, 'I haven't got any money'. We said, 'how can you not have money, you're an adult?' Erm, no she didn't have any money. So, we had to think of something and we went to the garden, I had a look at the tree, it was the orange tree, but it, the oranges weren't ripe, they were green. I said, 'I know what we're gonna do, let's get a box and we put the oranges in the box and we sit outside the house and we sell them'. Which is what we did. I mean they were green, but people would stop and would give us quite a lot of money, I think they were, they were chuffed to see you know seven kids with, with a box of oranges. Anyway, so we got enough money to, to buy the bazooka bubble gum. [laughs]

And the bazooka gum, was that pink, the red stuff

But my grandmother, apparently this we weren't ...

Yeah.

... aware of, was upstairs looking down, and, and apparently she told the cook to, to look, to look out for us, because you never know. She let us do this but she said, 'never tell your parents that, that, that you did this'. Cause we weren't allowed to be outside, really.

Mhm. Which language did you speak to her?

Arabic.

Arabic.

Oh Arabic, everywhere, yeah.

Mhm, mhm. Why were you not considered outside the house, was it considered dangerous? Just, or?

Yah. I mean you, you don't let kids out, yeah, yeah, I think so.

I'm just thinking also, the way you describe the house, maybe it was even more important because you spent so much time...

It is! It's...

Yeah.

...it's my whole world! [00:25:59]

Yeah.

The house and the river, I don't remember much else. The house and the river, is my whole world. And, yah. A lot of things happened there [laughs a bit].

What of views, can you describe the view, the river, what...?

Yeah. So, our bedroom and my parent's bedroom and my grandparent's bedroom looked onto the Tigris river, and so you would watch boats going... We actually, actually, yeah, these, these were the views and then trees, trees, a few trees. The river was actually brown, it was very murky, and in that river we learnt to swim. In that river. But, at night from the roof in the, in the summer when we used to inhabit the roof, at night, the river was absolutely magical because they had the boats that would come up and down the river would have lights, little lights. So, you have these little boatmen, who were rowing, rowing their boats. And so it was, it was almost like Christmas decorations, there were so many lights, it was really lovely. And then the aroma of the fish being cooked on the riverbank, the *masgouf* fish. So it was, it was quite atmospheric, quite nice.

It's the grill, the grilled fish...

Yeah.

...yeah?

Yes. They would put it on a stake, and they would put the stake in, in the ground, so instead of if you like barbequing it this way, horizontally, it was vertical. It was quite nice. And, and the fish would be butterflied, so opened, cut open.

Yeah, yeah. And you would buy it from the people?

Yes, people would come and buy, yeah. [00:28:00]

Mhm, mhm. What about the, the politics? So you were born '49?

Mhm.

A year after Israel was founded...

Mm.

...and, ah, shortly many, most Jews left Baghdad, so you...

Mm.

...you were already in a smaller community. How, what did you notice, or what, how did it impact the, the political situation... on you?

You see, I have to think in hindsight, I mean in, in, from my point of view now, because if in hindsight, you know, I was not even born. So I was one, two, and then we went to, and three, and then we went to Paris and then came back. Erm, [pause] I think... at that time I wasn't aware of anything but there were... I, I was, I was quite a sensitive child so I was aware of certain tensions. Sometimes the adults would be near the radio, trying to listen, there was a slight... but I, I never felt anything really, I mean I was too young. But where we all felt something was with the revolution, I mean I was then eight, err seven, eight, just, just eight. That was, the whole world was upside down. But I remember we used to, all, all of us kids, used to have stamp collections, we used to collect stamps, and I used to collect a lot of Iraqi stamps because I was actually quite in love with our king. You know, as a little girl, he was very young and very handsome. So, that's all I remember of that period the stamps and... politically, if you like if that is politics. [00:29:58]

Well, what about the revolution, what, what did you see or what did you...?

We were on the roof, and as I said to you before, we were opposite the royal palace with only the Tigris river separating us. So, we were awakened at five o'clock in the morning with machine guns and fire. And very quickly the adults said, gathered all the kids and we were taken to a basement. And there was a lot of noise, a lot of gun fires, I heard. We did know what was going on, and then, in the basement funnily enough, there was a radio, there were radios everywhere, cause they wanted to hear the news all the time. And erm [pause] this is as a young child I was absolutely shocked because they used to say this is the Kingdom of Iraq, you know, and now they said *jumhuriya*, this is the Republic of Iraq. I didn't understand, as a child I didn't

understand. Then it, it dawned, dawned on us, but that year was a year where I understood the house felt fear, the whole house felt fear. Because it was unpredictable. I don't mean that the Jews were targeted particularly, but there were different factions and so, it was very unstable. Even I think at one point... at one point an oil refinery was set on fire and so we had, and it was during the summer, so we had fire coming all over us like a cloud. So, it was quite frightening. So that, that was frightening, and I remember that the... We were going to go in August, we were going to go to Switzerland. My mother heard... We were going to go to a boarding school, and my mother was, during the summer was putting little *étiquettes* with our names or initials on the back of our clothes to prepare us to go [00:32:10]. So, we were going to go on the 1st of August. And the revolution happened the 14th of July. So, that was it, and the, the airports were closed, and nobody could move. Ah... I don't, I think we got a TV right at the end of 1958 and I remember people were watching trials, they were very famous trials, and as a child I found them very frightening. But you know, this is a child's perspective.

Did they tell you what happened to the royal family? Did you know?

Yes, we knew. And that was... as a child, that was very shocking and in fact to this day, I, I can't, anything to do with the Middle East kind of hurts me. It sort of reminds me of, of that time. It's exactly the same.

What happened, just for the record, what happened to the royal family?

To our family?

No, to the fam- to the royal family? To the, what happened?

Well they were killed in, I think one of them was dragged in, in the streets. I think the Prime Minister was killed in, in a horrible way and dragged in the streets, and I remember tanks in the street, and I do remember people being dragged. I do remember. One must be careful because a child has, a child whose...

Yeah.

...memories and what one hears... And then maybe, maybe certain things one didn't see, but I, I, I do remember a lot of machine guns and people in army uniforms [00:34:04]. And, you know, a lot of other people of my age witnessed this, some people it affected in one way and some people it affects another, I think for me it affected me quite deeply. And as I said, especially with my stamps and my little king on the stamps, you know, I was quite sad that he was dead. And he was about to get married, he was engaged to a, a Turkish princess.

So, you felt it quite personal? It was close to you?

Yes, very much so.

Mm.

Very much so. Ahm... Yah it, it was a tragedy for a little girl.

It was a violent - ?

But it was a trage-...

Yeah.

But apparently afterwards... But we didn't stay to witness or experience the good times. Apparently those good times, there were good times under Qasem, that he was a fair man and, and he eventually got killed as well. But it seems that part of the world is, is incredibly violent, whenever there's a regime change, there's always... Even biblical times, they never stop killing each other.

And what about the trials? You said you remember them, so trial against the Jews? Where the Jew...

No, no it wasn't against the Jews.

No, you mean general trials...?

Yes they were, they were trying people who were, if you like, if you like, royalists or, or what they call the, the *l'ancienne regime*, you know the old reg-, so. No, it's not the Jewish. This, this was later.

Yeah.

And I wasn't there.

No, so...

Mhm.

...that those...so just an atmosphere of fear and...?

And instability...

Mhm.

...and fear. Yes, because a knock on the door, you don't know what-...

Yeah.

When my grandparents came out in the seventies they came to live with my parents and us [00:35:58]. I remember my grandmother, we used to jump every time the doorbell rang. And I said 'It's alright, you're in London'. So, it affects...

Mm.

...it affects people.

And you said you were supposed to go to boarding school? So that's interesting, did your parents want to send you away? Or what...?

I think it was a boarding school, I'm not sure, I must, I must ask my mother. Whether it was boarding school for a year? Two years? Or was it for the summer, I'm not sure!

Aha, OK.

But a, a lot of sewing of [laughs] of labels with our initials, you know, so I don't know, I really don't know.

Mm.

Yeah. [pause] But not just us, I mean...

Yeah.

...a whole... Even friends, friends of my parents their, their kids as well were going, so maybe...

Mm.

...it was just going to be for a few months, I don't know.

And then at what point did you leave, or at what point, do you remember was there discussion among your parents, or...?

I don't remember anything. I remember being in the car, going to the airport. I don't remember anything before that. And, I remember my grandparents, it's quite emotional this, standing at the door and we were in the car looking back and the cook, erm... [pause], [gets emotional] with a bucket of water, and erm, it's funny it's been so long ago, I don't understand. And as

the car moved away he would, sorry, he would chuck the water. I think that meant good luck or something, I can't remember. [00:37:57]

He put the water on the car?

On the road, on, yeah. [pause]

Mhm. And who was in the car? Your...

My pare-, er because, I, I, I think we were, we left the same time as my uncle, but obviously the car can only take five people, so, we were with my parents.

Mhm.

And my brothers.

And did you know where you were going?

Beirut. [pauses]

And when was it exactly, when did you leave?

Er, think it was either July or August 1959.

So a year later?

Yes, exactly.

[pause]

Mhm. So your parents in that year must have thought, decided...?

My parents said that they were going to take us on holiday. Now, we never went abroad on holiday, so it's kind of strange, but I think they were, I think in some ways they were right, maybe they had such a bad time or they just wanted to go on holiday, because we only took holiday clothes, we had nothing else. And my father... And then suddenly we decided to stay. I, I think they must have been back of their mind that we were going to stay. Somehow. Because then my father would, would go maybe three, four months on end back to Baghdad. So my mother was left alone with us in Lebanon. Mm.

And what was it like for you to change suddenly and to... I mean Lebanon you still had the Arabic?

Sorry?

You still had Arabic?

Yah, yah it's different, they, they spoke differently...

Yeah.

...so we had to very quickly [laughs]...

Sure.

...get the lingo. You know, just the dialect was different but...

Yeah.

I tell you the first thing that I remember of Beirut was the sea, I never saw a sea before. I had this muddy, beautiful, lovely Tigris river that I love to this day [00:40:00]. But the sea was blue. So I remember when, in the car coming from the airport going to, I, I don't know where we were going, probably a hotel, to arrive in Beirut, I said to my parents 'look the sea, the sea', and my father said 'don't talk like you've never seen a sea before' and I said 'I haven't!'. No,

I re-, it was wonderful in Lebanon, absolutely wonderful. The food was different, the mezzes, the sea, the sea, the wonderful sea, the mountains. And we were freer. We, we went to school on our own, walking. This was ne-, never, never in Baghdad.

Beirut at that point was diff- was it...

Different.

...more modern city.

Yah, yah, and I remember Sunday afternoons we used to go and have a, a drink or Pepsi or whatever it was and my parents would be dancing and they were, they had tea dances and things like that, it was completely different, it was, it was... They called it the, the Switzerland of the, of the East. Different.

Mhm.

And my mother of course spoke French so for her it was, she was very happy there. Mm.

And you went, you were sent to school?

Yeah.

What school, where did you go?

I think, I think it was called the Ehli, Ehli means family, ehel means family, it's called Ehli. And my, my, cousins went there too. There was the beginning of life, you, you must understand...a, a beginning of life in the world. We were in this bubble. [00:42:00]

Yep.

The, we were in this wonderful, magical house but it was a bubble. And we didn't know it was a bubble, we thought it was the world. And I remember the first day, or the second day, my brother, myself, I think my little brother was in another school, I'm not sure, because he was tiny. Michael and David, my cousins, so four of us, were going to school and in the playground, I think, was an army of little kids. And they started to, I don't know if they threw stones at us, I'm not sure, but they started to want to fight, because we had killed their god. And I said, 'how can you kill a god, god is, you can't kill a god'. 'You killed our god' and I said, 'who is your god?!' I didn't know, I, I didn't know anything. And so we had a lot of aggravation at the beginning, but we fought them, we actually fought them physically, and after that we got respect. But then I understood that the, there were - there were things in the world that I didn't know about.

So, it was anti-Semitism?

Yes.

From... yeah...

Well, yes, I guess, I mean call it what you like, we killed their god.

So, they knew you were Jewish?

Yes, they...

Yes.

...knew, I don't know how, but, but they knew, I mean I, I think, the word, the word, the word travels fast in those, in, in those areas. Probably the teachers said something, I don't know.

Yeah. Probably by name also?

Well, no.

No?

First of all we were in Lebanon, they wouldn't know.

Yeah.

And we had, we had names that the Christians could have as well, I mean... maybe, I don't know. [00:44:05]

Mm.

To be honest, I don't know. Mm.

Anyway, you were identified but...

We were, yah. Yah.

But apart from that was there any other negative experience like that? Or only in school?

I think the other negative one, and that one I didn't understand at all, was some girls who were quite awful to me, physically, it was always physical - get beaten up, because I took their home, and they were Palestinian girls. I understood afterwards, but I, I had no idea, I was quite ignorant.

Mm. At that point had you heard about Israel or was there, was it talked about, in your...?

Israel, even when we did prayers, now I remember, even when we did prayers all together, especially during the feasts, in the, let's say *Pesach* or any other, of course when you read the prayers, there's always Israel there, we had to say a different word in Iraq, in case, any- the cook or anybody else would hear the word and it might cause problems. Because it is in our prayers but it's not political in the same way as they would perceive it. So, I knew that Israel

was out-of-bounds and we couldn't have Israeli stamps. And one day, I don't know how I got an Israeli stamp, I don't know how, and I remember going to the garden, and I dug like a little grave for it and I put it in, I closed it. Amazing.

So, you, as a small girl, you had a sense of danger?...

I had a sense...

...of danger?

...but I can't put it into words...

Yeah.

...because it would be too definite and too defined and it's, it's, it's a haze, you, you understand?

Yeah.

There, there is, yeah.

What in the prayers, when you had to replace it, what did you call it?

I don't know, something *chodra'il* or something, I don't know [laughing]. Something.

And was it the same in Lebanon as well?

I don't remember the feasts in Lebanon, funnily enough, I don't know why. Don't remember.

Where did you stay in Lebanon? Did you rent a house or...?

We rented a h-, a flat, that was amazing cause we were lived in a house before. And in the summer, when all the European tourists would come and, and bathe in the sun, we went up to the mountains because it was too hot. Again, we rented a, a mountain flat.

But at that point your father was going back and forth?

Yes, yes.

So, he could bring money or... there was no

I guess...

...issue?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I know my mother was very anxious, sometimes, because in, in, point of fact, when he went back, whenever he'd go back, he never knew if they'll be another political upheaval and he'd be stuck. Which is what happened much later on.

What ha- what was your father's profession? What did he do?

I think they were in import, export, mostly of paper. That's what he used to do, mostly of paper.

Paper...?

Paper.

Real paper?

Real paper.

Yeah.

Mm.

Did it have a name, the company, or...?

I, I don't know.

And did he continue that in Lebanon? Or...?

Maybe, I don't know if he worked in Lebanon, I think that's why he went back to Iraq. I'm not sure.

And do you think, was it their plan to stay there, was it... what was their plan at that point?

[00:48:01]

I don't think they, they thought they would ever stay there. I think, probably my father had designs of coming to, to London. I remember, my mother one day said we're going to London. And I remember jumping for joy, because I had some wellington boots. Don't ask me why I had wellington boots. Who bought them for me? I don't know. But I could never wear them. We didn't, it didn't rain enough. So, I, I jumped for joy cause I thought it would be lovely to have some rain and I could wear my wellington boots [laughing]. Mm.

And then, that's what you did?

What?

To come...

Mm.

...to go to London?

Mm.

And, how, how did they put that in, in motion?

The first day that we woke up there was a tiny balcony in our apartment that we rented. We went out and looked down, we were on the fourth floor, looked down and I saw these people running, running, hundreds of people, running. So, I remember asking my father, I said 'come, come quick, there must be a fire or something, because these people are running'. So, he had a look and then he laughed and said 'no, they're going to work'. I'd never seen so many people in the street [laughing], you know, walking all to go, to go to the, to the underground, or coming out of the underground, I can't remember. But I think very quickly, I, I didn't, I didn't particularly like the weather, very quickly I sort of started missing the sun. Mm.

But how, what was your journey like, to come from Beirut to London? [pause] Did you fly, did you...? [00:50:00]

Yeah, we, we flew. We flew. I can't remember, I don't know if there was a, a stop in Frankfurt. I can't remember. But funnily enough, when I was 52, oh when I was, sorry, when I-, in 1952, when we were going to Paris, I remember stopping in Damascus, and I remember stopping in Frankfurt and going... But here I don't remember.

Mhm.

Funnily enough, there was a, my mother told us a story, she, when we went to, when we went to Paris for my aunt's wedding, my father sent my mother and her two young children, so me, I just maybe nearly three, not yet, and my brother was one and something. So, this young woman with very young kids going on a long journey. I don't know how he could leave her, but anyway, he sent her ahead of him. He stayed, he stayed for whatever reason. I can't remember. And I remember landing in Damascus and it was pouring with rain. I don't remember anymore. My mother told me that she spoke to us in French and she said 'don't speak Arabic. Not a word.' And the officials at the airport heard her speaking in French, didn't realis-, thought she was French, and actually brought a special car just for her and, and us, to take us from the plane to the airport, whereas everybody else had to go under the, under the

rain. And she was very frightened, because she was alone with two kids and she was Jewish.
So that, that's...

Mm.

...French saved us there. [00:51:59]

That stuck with you, yeah...

Yeah.

...that story?

Hm.

And how did, do you know how, did you have relatives in England? Well how did your father or how did they organise...

Yeah! My, my father's sister, Doreen, was here already and there were a few Iraqis here, so...
My uncle as well, his brother Sasson was here. So. And, and Uncle Naim, and David and Michael, my cousins, were already here, they came a year before us.

Did they come straight from Iraq?

No, Lebanon. They-...

Also Lebanon?

Yeah, because...

I see!

...they were with us at school in Lebanon.

But they just left earlier?

Yeah, we stayed two years in Lebanon, and they stayed one year.

Right, right. So, you came on a visitor's visa or, you don't know exactly?

Probably the same, I don't know.

And, whe-, what were your first impression, you said that you, what, what other impressions, do you remember, coming to England?

I think it was very cold. We didn't have these wonderful ski jackets that you have now, that keep you warm even if you're wearing a t-shirt, and I was frozen, absolutely frozen. I remember the rain... I do remember going out with my cousins again, right at the beginning, we used to go to Hyde park and they were trying to teach me cricket, cause that was the English game, and LBW and I never got the hang of it [laughs].

Mm.

Yeah.

Where did you settle in, in London?

The first year or so I think we were in Knightsbridge.

And then?

And then we got a flat in Kensington.

And was that where the other relatives were? Or... why?

Erm, no. Erm, very near us, was my uncle Naim you know, just about two blocks away [00:54:07]. But, hm... but we were near Hyde park, opposite the park, so it was nice. And I used to then walk to school to the lycée, because it wasn't far, which was, the lycée was just opposite the Natural Hist-, is still, opposite the Natural History Museum.

But first you went to a different school?

To Glendower, which was also very near, it was in Queensgate.

Mhm. And how difficult was it for your parents particularly to settle here?

I think it must have been, because my father was always on edge. I think it must have been. Such a different life. Erm... But we got on with our schooling and it was fine. I mean, they had enough people that they could relate to.

Yeah.

And they, both my parents spoke English, so, there wasn't, there wasn't that kind of problem.

Mm.

Mm.

And did they join the synagogue when they came?

Yes, yes.

Was it important, what, which Synagogue did they join?

It's well, the Lauderdale one, the Spanish and Portuguese, which is now called the Sephardi Synagogue.

And was that important for them, you think it ever?

For them? Oh yes, yes, yes. Of course.

Mhm. And, again, what... it's a funny question, so what traditions do you feel that they continue or what did they bring?

Well, the... All the feasts that I ca-, couldn't remember in, [laughs] in Baghdad, we, we did here...

Yeah.

... and so I remember those and those were lovely ones, you know so, Friday night, Shabbat lunch, *Pesach*, all the, yeah, all, all the festivals [00:56:03]. My father would, and my mother, I mean it was, it was very nice. We became a family, a small unit, this is the difference. And we started a little bit in Lebanon but as my father wasn't with us most of the time, I can't say to you we were a unit. When we came here, we were in living in a flat, with nobody else but our, our immediate family, you know my parents, and my, my siblings, so we were... It was the beginning of a unit.

Mhm.

A different unit, you know?

Yep, yep.

Before we were a tribe. This, this time we became a European unit. Small...

Yeah, small family unit...

Mm.

Yes. Yep.

Mm.

Mm. And what, so you said Shabbat that there were festivals that you...

Mm.

And the food?

The food's very odd, very odd with the food, and the... at the beginning... Cause we did have help but the food was not, was nondescript because you couldn't buy, let's say if you wanted to do a Middle Eastern dishes, you couldn't find the spices or the actual ingredients. I think you could go to an Indian shop maybe buy one thing or there used to be a Cypriot shop that my mother used to go to, but these she found out, you know, as time went along. But very, very quickly, I started to help mum in the kitchen on weekends and, and not just me there's my brothers as well, so, we used to chop, we used to be her sous chef. And that I remember very fondly because it was really a good education. Although we loved eating the food, we now were involved in making it and that's very important. [00:58:02]

Because she had, also was cooking it? Before...

Yes.

...she probably wasn't cooking...?

She wasn't cooking, before she would, she would do jams and, and a bit of baking, which is what genteel women did probably, you know, that kind of thing. But here although we had help, she was the one doing the cooking or she would direct, but especially weekends she would be doing it. And that was great.

So...

Because we were involved, we were involved.

And what food, what do you remember?

Well, I tell you what we loved, we loved everything that we didn't have. So we loved peaches in tins, we loved, any-, cheese that was sort of processed cheese, we loved all processed foods, we loved the cakes, you buy a small packet and you just tip the, the powder in, in the bowl and then just mix it with water and then put it in the oven, that was great. Everything tasted so much nicer because it probably had sugar in it, you know. So for a long time we had this type of food, I mean, we asked for this type of food and from time to time we got it. No but then we had our usual, the d'bit the, the *Shabbat* meal...

Tell us about D'bit, because we haven't spoken about it, d'bit chicken, what is it...?

It's an overnight, it's, it's a dish that's cooked overnight, it's cooked on Friday, so that you can eat it on Saturday. And it's, it's a hen chicken, it's a boiler what they call a boiler. And it's, it's stuffed with rice and spices, and also giblets, some people put giblets inside, and sewn up, and then it's cooked wi-, buried in rice, and, with cinnamon, cardamom, different, different herbs and spices. Delicious. [01:00:07]

Mhm.

So that's the sort of iconic dish that we have for *Shabbat*. And, we had a lot of other things, okra, and sweet and sour sauce. My mother used to do this lovely aubergine, stuffed aubergine. Instead of stuffing the aubergine the normal way, she would cut, the aubergine would be this way, so she would cut it this way, but not to the end, so then she would open it like a concertina and then stuff this way, which is really nice. And in fact, of course I continue to do that, and I took her recipe and put it in my book. But, we had that kind of food and... But we also had the Lebanese breakfast, which was different, so that *za'atar* with, with olive oil, *za'atar b'zayit*, also you had *labneh*, which is a thick kind of Greek yoghurt-y yoghurt, and you make a little

hole in the middle and then you, you pour olive oil and then you eat that with a bit of bread. That kind of... We had that for breakfast as well.

So that wasn't an Iraqi thing?

Not really, but they do now the whole...

Yes.

... of the Middle East has it.

Yes, but at that time...

But that was specifically what I discovered in Lebanon, when I arrived there, we didn't have, we had eggs in the morning in Baghdad, we had fried aubergines, things like that, I, I can't remember but...

Mm.

...yeah.

And at that point what, what is the main difference between, let's say Iraqi Jewish food and Iraqi food, or...?

Yes... it's, the dishes are similar, but different, and, and some dishes are completely, let's say Jewish [01:02:01]. The, the Jewish cuisine is, is very similar or has strong influence or has kept the strong influence of the Persian cooking. So, the sweet and sour, which we get from Iran or Persia, really I would say, we have continued. So, if you had a stew, let's say okra stew, we would put lemon or pomegranate molasses in it, to make a sweet and sour. And then a bit of sugar. Whereas, perhaps, others would just do it in tomatoes, just ordinary tomato sauce. We don't use butter. We don't use butter for cooking. You know w-, we, we respect the *kashrut*, so in that respect these fine details...

Yep.

...make the difference. But also there are dishes that we do that they don't do. One is like a fish patty. It's a, a stuffing of fish with dried lime, which is delicious, and then it's enveloped in rice and, and fish. A, a kind of paste of rice and fish and then that is first boiled and then it's fried, which I don't fry, I just put it in the oven. But that as far as I know that's a, a typical Jewish thing, that we do. And we do it also with, with meat. A lot of things overlap and, and their the same, but the differences are subtle. I would say their taste is a slightly more refined. But I don't mean that in a pejorative way, it's, I prefer that taste because it's, it's a, they have many more layers of taste, if you like. [01:04:10]

Mm.

Erm, yeah.

[pause]

So in your own life, you said as children you liked the processed, the food when you came?

Mm.

So when did you get back to those Middle Eastern foods or in your own...?

Erm [pause] not, not, I mean...

Was it always there?

It was always there.

Yeah.

I think very slowly we, we got rid of the tinned stuff [laughs], after we got our fill, you know, of eating them.

Mm.

No, it was always there. But my mother also loved baking and I remember she had, she still has, very thick cookbook, American cookbooks, so she liked doing a lot of things, French things as well...

Yeah.

...French dishes. So, so, we, we were experiencing...

[Recording interrupted]

OK, we continue, sorry we had a small light problem. You were talking about your mother's...

Cooking.

...European cooking...

Yes.

American cooking.

She introduced us to European foods in a way, I mean, we did have them before like say in Lebanon, we had different types of food. Mostly Lebanese, but maybe French once or twice, I mean. The other thing about Lebanon is that we actually went out to restaurants. We didn't do that in, in Iraq. We only ate at home. So that was quite...

That's actually...

...different.

...that's interesting, were there no restaurants or were the restaurants mostly for men in Baghdad or what? Because that's...

Yah...

...interesting ...

...it, it, it, it's very funny, it's... Lebanon was, of course they had restaurants in, in Iraq, but, yeah, I think men went to cafes, that was their domain. [01:06:09]

Yes.

But I think we did not eat outside the home, I mean, the home was where we ate or, other people's, friends' homes. I don't remember eating out, at all. At all, and I don't think we did. But in, in Lebanon, in Beirut or in the mountains, it was wonderful, mostly vegetarian, but just wonderful food, you know, these, these mezze plates were just amazing. So that was another adventure, you know, in Lebanon.

Mm.

But to come back to my mother's cooking, I remember she told me how to make mayonnaise, that [laughs], everything by hand, you know. Her... She loved French cooking so she made a lot of dishes, with, but without cream. But she liked the, the principle of French food...

Mm.

...and the cakes. She did do quite a few Iraqi dishes. Her, her, her signature dish, of Iraqi dishes, was this, this fish patty, I don't know what to call it...

What was it called?

In Arabic it's called *a'oq bil samak* is fish, a'oq is this sort of round, like a hamburger...

Mhm.

...but made of fish and rice and stuffed with rice, with fish, stuffed with fish and dried lime.

Sounds good. [laughs]

So and I still do her exact recipe. I use her recipe.

Mhm. [01:07:57]

No food was, it w-, it was begin- and also, in the seventies, my father started to work in, in Spain, he had business in Spain, and island of Ibiza, which was almost uninhabited by tourists at that time, which was wonderful. So, another different sort of culture, food culture... yah. I think food played a very important part and I think also food is very important. Because if you lose the use of your language, you go to a new country, if you lose your home, if you for many reasons you are cut off from your roots, from your family, from, from what you, from your roots, I th-, I think the thing that is lasting, that stays with you is the food, the food becomes a kind of vehicle to remind you of your culture. A vehicle that you could also share with a next generation that might not have lived in the country that you were born in. But, a kind of, sort of nudge to tell you where you, where you come from, somehow, you know. It's an identity, I think food has to do with identity, identity, a physical identity...

Mm.

...with taste, and a...

Yeah.

...something.

It's a memory of taste in a way...

Mhm, mhm.

Mm. And can last... the question is how long can it actually last? Which is interesting. How many generations, you know, after...?

Well you know, it's very complicated now because of globalisation. Now whenever you open any kind of magazine there's always *za'atar* here and pomegranate there, and its used by everybody, so the overlapping of cultures, which is what's happened last ten years, has become a sort of a uniform thing. So... **[01:09:59]**

Yeah, so it's prob-, for future generations, you see, they don't have a memory...

No.

... of a specific food...

No, unless you make it at home.

Yeah.

They have, they have what you make at home...

Yeah.

...which they might like and might not like. But yah, it's wh-, in fact really your roots are in your home. Of course, it's in the wider world, but in the wild, the country, and you know in the world, wider rather, not wilder, wide. But it's what you do at home...

Yeah.

...that roots, that gives memory. So, if you cook in a certain way, you know if you have, I don't know roast beef and Yorkshire pudding every Sunday, it doesn't matter what you eat outside, doesn't matter what the fashion is, this is what stays...

Yep....

...with you.

... *yep, yep.*

So, in a way it, it roots you. So, so it's really important for kids to sit down at table with parents, not just to eat take-away and on-the-go because... somehow it, it, it, it, they don't have roots somehow...

Yeah...

...maybe in other things, I don't know. Now technology has taken over so...

Mm.

I'm not sure, you know where, where the focus will be...

Yeah.

... because everybody is looking at their phone the whole time.

Well I guess it's the idea of Friday night, people...

Yah...

...*sat together...*

...yah, so there is this thing of eating together, and, eating together makes not only memories and, and, and roots but friendships and, you know, breaking bread, the, the actual phrase of 'breaking bread' of the somebody...

Mm.

...is to become a friend.

Yeah. Just to come back to your arrival, so what was it like for you, and how did you identify yourself? Suddenly were you a, how did you present yourself? Did you say, 'I'm Iraqi', 'I'm Jewish', you know, when you started school and went to the...

When I start...

... lycée?

I say, 'I'm Iraqi' [01:11:59]. I never thought of saying 'I'm Jewish', because unless you're asked, because you didn't say that, it's where, where you come from, you say 'Iraq', and of course at the time they didn't know where that was. They sort of knew Iraq, but very few. So you had to tell them where it was, it really, and you felt like you came from such a non-entity, you know so, nobody knew where you came from, you know like, it was such a primitive place that nobody knew where you came from. Sometimes we used to say Lebanon, because they knew where Lebanon was, so for a long time I'd say 'Lebanese', 'Lebanon', 'Oh, ok'. But, you know, so that we didn't have to go through this 'where is Iraq?', 'where the...' [laughs]. So yeah, as Iraqi. I'm not sure how people perceived us, not sure, but I know very quickly I thought yes, I'm going to, I, I took, I become English, you know, you sort of do what the English do, in my naïve way.

Which is? [laughs] Which was?

I don't know, but you know, you sort of take on a new identity, I don't know...

Mm.

... so, there was a split identity as well. What you did outside school, outside the home at school and how you were at home, you know, they didn-... And then when you brought a friend home you realised that you were different. You, you know there, there was a, an identity sort of, I wouldn't say crisis, but like there were two things that you had to juggle with. and in my case even worse because I went to a French school, so it wasn't ...

Yes.

... even rooted in England as such, it wasn't English. Erm...

So, you had a different...

Yah.

...cultural elements?

Yah, and like with my brothers we would talk, let's say about history lessons, and I remember talking about Napoleon [01:13:59]. The way I was taught at school at the *lycée* as this hero. And my brother was like 'awful man, tyrant!' and I said 'what?!' So, you see he went to an English school, went to a French school, so even history is looked [laughs], looked on differently...

Did all your brothers go to an English school...

Yah.

...to an English school? So how come you were sent to a French school?

I don't know. I, I, I was unhappy at my English school. I thought it was too dry, I was unhappy. And French school was the way, w- you know Frank Iny, our Jewish school in Iraq, had the same way of teaching or, not even just the way of teaching, but the way they, they organised their classes as the French, so it was very easy.

Mhm.

Also, it was easy because they had so many foreign students.

Yep.

You know from everywhere, so it just felt like you were part of the same, because they were all different.

And you said at the beginning your father wasn't allowed to work?

Was not allowed.

No...

Mhm. That's why he went to Spain.

The, so he couldn't work in, in England?

Well I don't know, he might have done something, but I, I don't know what they meant that he couldn't work here. I'm not sure what they meant...

Mm.

...but I know, he, he was, he had to live on his, if had means, he had to live on his means.

Mhm. And what happened to the papers or what happened to your passport, to your Iraqi...?

Well, we, we were Iraqi until one day the Iraqi government decided to call all the Jews and say if you don't come back within three months, the Jews that were outside Iraq, you will lose your nationality, you will lose your passport, you'd become stateless [01:16:00]. And your, in effect, in effect, all your property, I don't know if they would keep it, they would, it would be taken or sold or something, I don't know, honestly. And of course, we didn't go back, so we, we became stateless. And then obviously my father had to go and get different identity papers and we got the United Nations, I suppose the *laissez-passer* for refugees.

Mm, so you became refugee?

Mm. Yah. There many types of refugees.

Yeah.

Many different types. Yes, stateless...

And...

...can't go back...

Yep.

...without fearing for your life, yeah.

And what was left behind at that point? Was there anyone still left in Iraq?

Yes.

From your family?

My, yes, my aunt Eileen, my grandparents, a few other people, but I mean these are the closest. And of course, a lot of friends and a lot of people that we knew.

And were you in touch? How easy was it at that point to be in touch with them?

I think they were writing letters and letters would be 'the weather is very nice today', you know, it was coded. But yah, but we, I, I know that my father and my mother were kind of concerned.

Because at that point they couldn't leave? Right?

No they couldn't leave, my, my grandparents couldn't leave, my aunt couldn't leave, therefore my cousins, she had two kids, two, two boys, they, they couldn't leave. They in fact got a visa to leave in the seventies. So, we saw them, I would say after about twelve years, after our departure from Iraq. And aunty, my aunt Eileen had a very bad time because during that time she had to look after her elderly parents but during that time all Jews were not allowed to have a telephone, they were not allowed to take out more than, I don't know, twenty dinars or fifty dinars, a month of money from the bank [01:18:17]. They, they had different periods of hardship.

And when did they, did they, when did the grandparents, did they come and join?

Yes, yes they joined us, I think it was '73. [pause] They came and stayed with us and then after that my aunt came. She would not leave until they were safely, in London.

And do you remember that, it must have been quite emotional to see them after such a long time?

It was amazing, it was really amazing. Because by that time we spoke less Arabic. I remember my father wanted us to integrate quite quickly. And after about a year, he said 'no more Arabic should be spoken at home, only English', he wanted us to really, you know, become part of this society, this country. And so, so very rustic, and never, never used it properly. So with my

grandmother, I found it kind of difficult, although we said a few words she would laugh, she would really laugh because it was all wrong, it was... But I do remember, I do remember, I think the first thing when she came, it came back to me, I don't know about, my, my brothers, but it was to take her hand and to kiss it and to kiss my grandfather's hand, cause that's what we used to do. And it came out of nowhere, you know, it was an automatic thing. And I remember her saying 'you don't do this anymore, you don't need to do this anymore, you know, you can kiss me, but don't kiss my hand' [01:20:00]. I'm not sure why but it erm. Anyway because of her my Arabic got better.

Because you spoke Arabic with her?

Yeah! Yeah, I started to speak Arabic and...

And did they stay with you or were they?

Yeah, they stayed with us for a long time and then my grandfather passed away and yah, they stayed with us. And it was nice, it was really nice.

Were they happy to have left after all this time, or how did they...?

[sighs] I don't, I don't think you can say, are you, they were happy not to be...

Yeah.

... in an unstable... but I don't think, their country was Iraq.

Yes, yes.

They were... and in fact I don't think they were really happy to be here, but they were happy to be safe and...

Yes.

...the family, you know. Their life was there.

Yeah.

Mhm.

They probably didn't, did they learn English?

No. They didn't go out, my, my grandfather couldn't go out much, so, my grandmother never went out until, unless we took her out, you know, by car. Erm... but she was a laugh, I mean I used, I loved talking to her, we used to laugh a lot... really nice.

How old was she when she came?

Hm. Maybe about eighty. Maybe. But, you know, when they came here they weren't in the best of health, they both had strokes in Iraq. So, they were fragile.

Yep.

I mean now an eighty-year-old can be quite, you know, quite young.

Mm.

Hm.

And coming back to your own life, when you finished school, what, what were your plans? What did you want to do, or, where did you want to be? [01:21:58]

Well, I was, I think I went to art school but on, I think I wanted to go, I'm not sure, but I remember my parents always pushing me towards art, so. I think in the beginning I wanted to learn business. I used to see my father doing business on the phone, stocks and shares, I used

to find them, these conversations very intriguing, you know I thought maybe I could do that. Seems like a good job [laughs]. But in the end, you know, I went to art school and I did painting, fine art. And then as I'm, I'm quite an independent spirit, I thought 'mm, I must get a job, I must understand what it's like to be on my own, and I'm not going to do it through painting', so I went and did graphic design, which was my profession for many, many years, about 25 years. So... And after that I worked quite, quite a few years here as a graphic designer and then I went to France and set up my own design company there. Worked there for about 13 to 14 years.

What was it called?

Edition Blah Blah. Because I used a lot of words, so I called it 'blah blah'.

And what did you make, or what was your...?

Primarily, postcards and greeting cards and then it, developed into table mats, bathrobes and towels. It was for the gift market, design for the gift market. So, I had to do about four different collections a year and I had, by the end, about 15 people working for me.

So quite a big business?

Became. At the beginning, I would say it was ten per cent management, or five per cent management, because I was the only one, and the rest was creativity [01:24:08]. But by the end it was reversed, it was five, ten per cent creativity and mostly management, cause when you have so many people and... distribution and thing... I mean it needed much more time. So that's when it started to be, a bit less, I wouldn't say enjoyable, but it wasn't my, it wasn't really my, my profession to be in, in distribution. I want, I want, I was dying to be more creative.

Mm.

But all, during all that time I still painted. And had one or two small exhibitions in France, which was nice, and that, that was always my lifeline. If I didn't like a day at the office, I would paint.

So you changed country again?

Yes, changed country again.

What drew you to France or what...?

Different things, met somebody nice, different things [laughs].

Yeah.

But I always wanted to go to France. I love the literature, I always wanted to go there.

And you had the lycée so in a way...

Yah....

...that was a...

Yah...

natural...

...but I had friends there, so I just loved the city, I thought it was the most beautiful city in the world and when you're there you become so enamoured with it. I was really enamoured with it.

And while you were in France, were you, are they, where there?

Now I must tell you something...

OK, go on.

... really, really interesting. So, when I went to France, the French are much more direct than the English. They would say 'where do you come from?', looking at you like this, and, no 'what are you?' and I'd say 'I'm English' you know *je suis anglaise*. 'Oh no, no, no, no' they said [laughing] [01:25:58]. But they would say something terrible like 'have you seen your face how can you be English?'. You know, really direct. So, then I started, because I'd forgotten that I was Iraqi, I sort of became English, you know went to art school, had English friends. You don't think, you sud-, your, your integrated, your, you don't think too much of the past. So, I had to start to say, 'originally I'm from Iraq'. And so, my Iraqi identity started to become much more important while I was in France. It's really an interesting thing to do with identity, you know.

It's how others see you, in a situation...

Yes.

And did you have any contact with other Iraqi Jews or was that...?

There aren't, there weren't any, I think just one person, one family. The daughter, her parents were very good friends with my parents, and I knew her, she was much, she was older than me, so I knew her, when I was in Iraq, by seeing her a bit, but I wasn't friends with her. So I would see her, from time to time and she was already married to a Frenchman. So, nobody else, no.

Mm.

So I was with French people mostly, yah.

Mm.

It was an interesting, it's an interesting experience because I wasn't brought up... [pause] to really do these things. I was quite protected, if you like...

Yeah.

...and I just thought it would be... I think I had an ambition to be independent, I didn't know how to do it here because you have family, you have friends, you have a community, you know, so you put yourself in the deep end and you have to swim or sink. And I swam. You know and its sort of, it was very important for me to, to, to feel that.

Also, there was a, I'm sure there was a gender expectations, here in...

There was, I mean, to be married and I actually didn't do that [01:27:59]. So, I got married much later.

Yeah.

For whatever reason, I mean, I just needed to, I think I just needed to find out who I was, what I was capable of, and what I wanted to do, and yah.

Mm.

Takes time. I think perhaps, I might do it in a different way, I don't know, you know if I had a, my time again, but you know that was my path.

Yeah.

Hm.

Mm.

That was my path.

Because it's a interesting question in general, you know whether the women post settlement in England were more independent than in Iraq, for example.

Mm.

Erm...

Yes, but I think if you live in a community, a quite close community, it's almost like, you, you, you're not as independent as...

Exactly.

Mm.

Yeah.

Mm, mm.

So in a way you have to leave it or otherwise you...

You have to leave, yah...

Yeah.

...yah, I see what you mean, yes. But I think, maybe other people do it a different way...

Yeah.

...you know, mine was quite a severe way, you cut yourself off from everything. And you go on your own...

But you came back?

Yes, came back.

Mm.

Came back.

So when, when did you come back to London?

'94. Mm. And coming back, I was astonished at how Americanized London became, from the time that I left it.

Mhm.

And the first thing I noticed was the ambulances and the police, the sirens, didn't have those sirens before, they become like American sirens... Yah, it was a big, it was a different culture, completely different culture, I could say it was a culture shock. And it, and it's only...

From France, to come back to...

Yah, yah, it's amazing. But you know, it's fine. [01:30:00]

Yeah. . Well your parents were here, your family was here...

Yah. Yah, my brothers were here, both of them. My, my other brother hadn't gone to Brazil yet, so yeah, and then I understood a lot of other things, you know, I mean family is very important. When you're out on your own you really do appreciate what that means, you know. And also, it, in a funny way, being alone brought me back to my roots.

Yeah.

Because, you know when you have an identity problem and like you want to become English because you living in England. You kind of deny where you come from. You know a little bit like in Israel when they kind of denied that they came from the East, cause they wanted to be Western...

Yes.

...and now it's all coming back, it's the same kind of thing, because you cannot escape it. And once you, it fits you nicely, once like Cinderella's shoe, fits you nicely, then you are fine, then you, you are part of everything, you know.

Yeah. So you think for you it became more, your Iraqi identity became...

Oh yes.

...more important...

Yes.

...in life...?

Yes.

Let's say.

Yes. And, and happily to have it, happily to assume it.

Mm.

And I think, through the food, and eventually you know, much later writing the book, that is like I close the chapter of that problem, you know, it's like I, I assume where I come from, what I am, completely. Whereas there was a, a kind of, a dilemma or...

Yeah.

...a friction, you know.

Because by writing the book you've become sort of public figure in some way. More public in as [01:32:01]

Well it's because I, I wanted it, I loved it, I actually did it for the love of it. And for, it's like when you cook a meal and you know it's good and you want to give it to somebody, say 'please taste', you know, it, there was this kind of feeling. It, 'look this is so lovely, this is what we used to do'. And, yah it...

Sharing? Or some...

It's sharing...

...yah.

Yah, yah, it's sharing. It's sharing. And this bubble that we were lived in Baghdad always stays with me cause it was beautiful, it was really beautiful, and, it really grounds you, it really grounds you. I remember at one point, one point in, in France, I had a lot of business problems I had to solve, but at one point there was one that was very, very tricky and, and I, I always wanted to work things out myself. And I remember I had on the wall a small carpet, I don't think I have it here. Do I have it here? Of my great-grandfather. There were about ten carpets made by my uncle from who was living in Sweden at the time, of my great-grandfather sitting, writing. And in fact he looks a little bit like the Ayatollah Khomeini, the way that they, they did the carpet, you know fr-, because they had to transfer the picture onto the...

Yeah.

...Anyway, so I had this carpet on the wall, in France, in my apartment in Paris, and you know I looked at it one day, and I promise you this is true, and it's almost like it's saying 'know who you are, it'll be fine', and it was fine. I mean, it, it gave me strength. It's funny isn't it?
[01:33:59]

Mm.

It's funny that I would even hang it on the wall...

Yes.

Because before that I wouldn't.

[pause]

But do you feel that this bubble you had in a way lived on here in London? Or, in the community?

Not in the same way, but...

...in some way?

Ehh, sort of, but I mean that bubble there I look at it incredibly fondly. No, I don't feel so much, because you see, you have to live it for a long time. I came when I was an adult and I came after many people got married, got children, have had their community, so I, I, I was erm, a newcomer, even though it is my...

To this community?

Yeah.

Yes.

Even though I was...

Yes.

...part o-, I am...

Yes.

...part of the community, I am a newcomer. And I was seen as a newcomer, you know, but yeah. I sometimes when we have marriages or *bar mitzvahs* I think who can, who can invite so many people and you can say hello to so many people that you know. So yeah it is a community, but I don't look at it in the same way as my bubble, because my bubble is...

Yes.

...is magical. Magical.

Sounds magical, yeah, yeah.

It was really magical.

Because here you came and had to, yeah, rejoin the

Mm.

Yep. [pause] And how does your pottery fit into this?

Well, as I told you I, I did fine art and then I became a graphic designer. One day I just, I just married Frank, we just got married, we went to see one of his oldest friends, who used to be with him when he was studying dentistry, because my husband, Frank, was a dental surgeon [01:36:06]. So, we went to see one of his friend from student times. And we were just the four

of us, this friend with his wife, and we were eating, and they served food in the most lovely plates, you know they were very interesting. They looked like eighteenth century plates, they were just very different. And I said 'where do you get these plates from? I want to buy some' and he said, 'I made them'. 'Hm! How did you make them, where, where do you go?' So, he said 'you go to evening classes', because he was still a dentist at the time, 'go to evening classes and, that's where I make them'. So, I signed up. Now you must remember when I was doing painting at, at art school, all the teachers there, somehow looked down on craft. Either very directly or insinuation, they always insinuated that applied arts, crafts, were lower arts, you know. Fine art was painting and sculpture. So, I never touched clay before, and so I went to this evening class, the first time I touched clay, and it was love at first touch, you know, it was love at first whatever you call it. I couldn't believe that I hadn't touched this material before and I started, I stopped my design work, and I started doing that. I, I went to different school, well not school, I went to night school, evening classes, and then I did a certificate in, in, a diploma of some sort in, in ceramics. And funnily enough... Then I started exhibiting [01:38:03]. The people's reaction to my pots was very strange, they go 'I've never seen anything quite like it. Where do you come from?' Yeah. And it has to do, whenever I used to make certain pots, not all of them, it really reminded me of where I come from. The, the, the land, the land, the, the desert or the something. Always...

What was it the texture...

...the pots...

...the texture, the...?

The texture, but also when we were sleeping on the roof, what there was in one corner, was a, a table in wood with two holes, inside of which were, sort of amphora-type pots that contained water, for us to drink at night if we needed to. And they were not glazed terracotta.

Clay?

Clay. And it, because, because it's not glazed it can breathe, and so the air, the, the water could have evaporation if it needed. So it kept cool the whole time, it kept cool. So... And we used to have glasses made of clay as well and we used to drink, and, from that, and that resonated when I started making ceramics. Amazing. You know, it's really, it's really funny the echoes you get.

But the colours, you use quite a lot of white not clay...

White...

...you don't, you don't...

I...

...you do brownish...

Oh, I do, I do.

You do?

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah...

OK.

...a lot of brown and sand coloured...

I see, so it is in that...

And now I, I use porcelain with colour. I mean, it's different, it's a, it's a different...

So, tell us for example the pottery we see in the camera now? What, the one...

Well that's not typical, that I think I did... [01:39:59]

What is that?

...about, that's the one I first started [laughs]. [pause] It has to do with layers, you know, sometimes I, I wouldn't say that that's how I decided to make it, but when I look at it, it reminds me of, you know how sometimes when the wind goes over sand and you get a kind of ridges, or, the way it's made its made in layers. And if you're really interested, a lot of my work is done in layers because I do believe that we are layered beings, and our civilisation is also layered. That one civilisation goes on top of the other. And that we are made of so many different layers from childhood onwards. So, this is how I think but I, I don't sit down and say 'I'm going to make layers', but you know, it, it's sort of, there's a resonance to do with the layers and so I use, I used that for a very long time, I still do. Layers. And, a lot of things to do with mountains or rocky mountains or, very dry, very dry deserts. These, these are landscapes that I love very much. And I think it, somehow goes into my work. I haven't got anything else here...

Mm.

... to show you, but there were oth-, there are other examples, other pots, other things, that are closer to what I'm describing.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So in terms of layers, the layers of identity...

Mhm.

How would you describe yourself today, in terms of your own identity, or layers of identity?

[pause]

I would say that, I would like to say that I'm sort of have become err [pause] a person, erm, what would I say? [01:42:11] I would say I'm Iraqi, I would say I'm Iraqi, but with a Mediterranean flair. I would say I'm Iraqi with a, yah, but very much part of the East. An Eastern person. An Eastern person. And I would regard even southern Spain as Eastern, even though it's in the West. So it, yah, with a Mediterranean flair. Something like that [laughing].

Mhm, mhm. So it is interesting how do you, how do you make actually those layers, so when you sit on a...

On? No you do it by hand...

Yes.

...you, you don't throw, you, you do each one.

Mm.

You do each one.

So you add?

You keep adding.

Another and another?

Mm, Mm.

Which is, if you look at a cross-section of a mountain, or of the earth, it's layer upon layer upon layer of generations, if you look at a tree you have different layers to do with the, the years of,

of a tree. And that is something that's, philosophically it fascinates me. But you can see it visually, you know.

Mhm, mhm.

You know of a word, you know, I'm sure you know what it means, palimpsest?

Mm, go on, yes.

So palimpsest is a document that has been rubbed out and another document written on top. Now, in the, in the ancient times they used to do it on parchment paper, I mean on parchment.

Yep.

And parchment was scarce, so if they needed to do a new document they would rub out what was written before, but they wouldn't rub it completely [01:44:00]. So you would write another layer on top, and you could sort of see that there was something underneath, that is palimpsest, but metaphorically it really is something that goes on top of something else. And its these layers. It's layers and layers of experiences, I would say, of language, how language also develops, it doesn't come out of nowhere. Nothing is new, it's, it's, it's all from somewhere else.

Mm.

It's quite, quite an interesting...

Well, I guess you can apply it in one way to every person...

Yes!

...every person but also you could apply it to any person who has experienced displacement, migration...

Even more.

Even more?

Even more so, because he would have more layers to...

Yes.

...yeah, different...

Yes.

Of different, of different atmospheres, different sections of diff-, yeah, different things to deal with, yah.

So, my next question is how do you think that your, however you want to call it, displacement, migration, how has it affected your life?

Oo, I would say it affected it greatly because if I, and I have reflected on the past, had I stayed, had we stayed in Iraq, I think I would have been a writer and a journalist, but certainly a writer, my love of words and of the written word and of books, is great, really great. And I loved Arabic immensely. So, I would have been a writer. It has, it has chopped, it has a sort of, my history is chopped up by, by moving in different countries. So, somehow, somehow I've sort of come back to writing through writing the book, but it's not the same. It's not the, yeah, I would, I would have had a different path, obviously. **[01:45:58]**

Yep.

It's, it's, yah.

But you kept the Arabic but what you mean now is really...

I, I can't...

...in a different way?

I cannot write it. I mean I cannot write a book or...

Yes.

...or I cannot write an...

Yes.

...article in Arabic.

So you lost that, that...

The literary Arabic.

Yeah.

Yes....

Mm.

...But I can still write, I can still write, and I can still read, which is quite an amazing thing.

And, do you?

Yes, yeah. You go down the Edgware Road I can read everything in Arabic [laughing]. And, yah, and to think about the English, I mean to, to send you to a French school when you're

living in England is quite something, because I didn't, I didn't, I only had like one hour or two hours a week of English.

Yeah.

Everything else was in French, except for the last year or so...mm, I struggle with...

Yes.

...language but I like to write.

Yes.

Mm.

Yes. And how, would you call yourself a refugee, or migrant, or how, would you call yourself...?

It's very difficult because I think these words mean, have a different meaning now. You visualise something completely different, so, I... technically yes. But I can't say that, I, I feel not right saying that because it is used for a certain situation, certain people, and certain suffering. So, I, I can't use that now. But, but we did have difficulties. We did, my, certainly my parents even though they didn't want to talk about it, did have some kind of difficulty and suffering. But, you know, its, it has a different colour and a different erm visual meaning. You know the... **[01:48:04]**

Yeah.

...minute you say migrant you get...

Yeah.

...you get a different idea.

Is there any other word you would like to use? For yours-, I mean is there...?

I'm not sure, displaced maybe? It has less, err... displaced I think. But displaced also means a negative so maybe not even...? I'm in...

Uhuh.

...my place now [laughs]. I am in the pl-, in the right place now.

You feel you're in the right place?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Where's your home today?

Where my family is. [pause] Hm. I must tell you something that just popped into my head. I was in America once and I was talking to an American girl. And we were talking, of course she has an American accent, and I have whatever accent I have, I thought I had a British accent but obviously not, not quite. And the phone rang and my aunt called, so I started speaking to her in Arabic. Now, the American girl that I was with, once I had finished, she said 'you totally changed, you looked completely different!' I said, 'what you talking about?' She said 'I saw you in a certain way when you speaking English, but here you were wild, you were like...' So, I understood that, you know, a language inhabits you physically and your expression is different.

Mm.

And maybe a new language would constrain you, in some way, you know because you can't express exactly what you want to say. It's an interesting thing, with language, with identity, and how even it affects your movements of the body.

Yep.

How your expression on the face... very interesting.

Mhm. And is there anything you miss most from Baghdad? [01:50:03]

The house. The garden. The roof, I don't know, it's just, but it's a, it's a bubble, you know, I would never want to go back. I would never want to see it. In fact, my cousin David has sent me pictures of the house as it is now, I mean, no, thank you. The, the windows have been made small and they all boarded up. Err, it's, err... I mean, it's, it looks like, looks like, some, some unkempt warehouse of some sort. And it had a big sign saying 'For Rent' [laughs].

Who owned the building? Who...

I don't, I don't know.

But I mean originally it was your...?

Oh my grandfather.

...did the grandfather...?

Mhm. Funnily enough, we lived in that house. If you're facing the house, on the right of it was my uncle Naim's house, that he rented out, on the left was my father's house. But we lived in the middle [laughs]. It's a funny thing.

So what I mean the house was not com-, was just lost?

Yeah.

It wasn't sold or anything?

I can't remember.

Mm.

Perhaps, I heard this but I'm not sure of... if I heard correctly, but my grandfather, I think the Jews, when, I mean when he was allowed to leave, he could sell the house but maybe for a tenth of what, what it's worth, I don't know. So maybe he got a little money for it, I'm not sure.

Mm.

Not sure.

[pause]

Is there anything else you think we haven't sort of touched upon, you think you want to add?
[pause] *We haven't talked that much about your, the cookery writing?* [01:52:05]

No.

No, so I'd actually I'd like to ask you, so when did you, when did you start it and what...?

Well the book was published in 2011, so that's five years ago. But I thought of doing it, I started to think about it, about ten years ago. So I have been back from France twenty years, so it was after ten years of being here. And initially I wanted to do the book, a small book, for my nephews. It wasn't going to be a, a public book, as such, because they love cooking, they were young then but they loved the food. Their mother is, respectively, one is Scottish and one is Brazilian. And so, the brothers don't do the Iraqi cooking so they used to come either to me or

to my parents and they used to just adore the food and it was like 'what is this?'. So I started writing a few recipes for them and I thought I would copy, photocopy them, maybe take a picture or two, and somehow staple the whole lot together and give it to them. And you see as I started, I don't know, the love of designing it, because I was, I am a designer, and the love for my heritage was so strong that I thought 'you know what mmm maybe stapling is just not honourable enough'. So I started doing little books on the computer, you know you can, you can do with Apple or you can do, ones called Blurb you can do, and so I've got a few of them, and I thought this is really nice, and I thought you know I'm going to do a fully, full-blown book for everybody [01:54:00]. So I'm, I was a publisher but not in books, so it's a completely different thing. And so I had to learn what to do to get the ISBN numbers, and, I had to learn a lot about it. But, that is the technical part, but the journey of writing the book it took me two years, whilst I was having exhibitions with my...

Mm.

...ceramics, so it wasn't every day. At the end it was every day. The book, the research, the cooking, the talking to different people, made me quite humble. Because I would go to people's homes, they would open their homes to me because they knew what I wanted, I wanted to see them cook, I want to see how they do certain dishes, their generosity, people that I might not have known before or not actually connect with, but I connected with them through food.

Mhm.

It became a very, very important vehicle, socially, apart from identity. You talk about food with a few people and, and there is an interaction.

Mm.

So in itself it was just an idea, a project to give certain recipes for my nephews but it became something much bigger, and much more meaningful. Much more meaningful. In fact, I'm thinking of doing another one now [laughs] but that we'll see. But, it yah, it, it's sort of put the stamp on my identity.

And also did it bring, I mean you used some of your mother's recipes...

Oh yes.

...some of your aunt's recipes

Yes, it was family, at first it was called 'Flavours of Babylon: a family cookbook' [01:55:59]. And the next one is the same but it had things added to it, so it's just called 'Flavours of Babylon'. But it really is a family cookbook. Yah.

So what responses did you get from your family, from your mother and your aunt? Were they happy that you...?

Very happy, very happy. Yah.

That it's sort of out there, those...

That it's out there and, but the wonderful thing is I started to get emails from people that I didn't know in Canada, in America, and even Muslim Iraqis, saying it's, 'I, I my parents used to know a Jewish family', I mean it erm, it, it, it created more than just recipes, it created some kind of link to the past. And in fact, very recently, Imperial College, I think it was last Sunday, had an Iraqi event and there were, so everybody had a table and different factions of Iraq were exhibiting something and there were two tables of the Jews of Iraq. And with all the books that were written in Arabic by Jews of Iraq, and of course my book was there as well. This is rather nice, recipe book, the only recipe book there.

But has it been published in Arabic?

No, no, it was in English.

In English?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Maybe you should do an Arabic version?

No, there no. No.

Mhm, mhm.

Nah...

But you feel that in England, let's say Claudia Roden has sort of paved the way, I mean that there is more reception because maybe of her books also that...

Oh yes, of her books?

Yeah.

But I think much more to do with immigration...

Yeah.

...and the plethora of restaurants...

Yeah.

...Middle Eastern restaurants and Ottolenghi, very recently, and he really, I mean, pomegranate juice and pomegranates are everywhere, do you know? [01:58:06]

Yeah.

And *za'atar* is everywhere and I think he was the one that pushed it right to the front.

So that you have a receptive audience as well?

Yes.

For you?

Yes, yes.

Probably thirty years ago it would have been different...

I don't know...

...I don't know.

...I don't know, because I'm not sure who bought my books.

Hm.

I mean I know a lot of them, a lot of the people who are connected with Iraq in some way or other or Jewish. But I think quite a lot of other people, the rest, were not. So it, it's interesting to know who they were. But yeah, they were more receptive.

But you also didn't only stick to the traditional recipes, you edit your own...

Yeah because I'm creative, so I think you know, 'there's the tzatziki, you know the, the yoghurt with cucumber that you just put in a bowl, well I, I've done that differently, I've done that my way, using the same sort of herbs but doing something else with them.

But did you change any of the traditional Jewish, things as well? Like the...

A little bit, like no frying, put in the oven or, you know, less heavy, healthier, tried to make it...

Uhuh.

...much healthier but not compromise on the taste, you know. Something like that. And of course, everybody thinks that's how I cook every day, no it's not, but I do cook some, some things, I do cook some things, but you know, when, when you have Friday night I would do something special, so yes... yes.

So in a way the food is a vehicle of talking about the past, in a specific way?

It's a vehicle of, yah, it's not, not just talking about the past, it actually it makes the past, it makes - ah how can I put it? **[02:00:10]** It's a vehicle for memories but it also keeps alive how, how life was. And, and it keeps that connection somehow, it's a connection.

Yeah. Because I'm wondering whether you think in the community, in your family whether the past, the past in Baghdad, was it something people talked about?

Yes.

In a, in your family, for example, did your parents...?

My father never wanted to talk about the past. My father absolutely didn't want. Whereas I always did, he didn't want, so perhaps it was either too painful, he just want to cut it off, I don't know. My, of course when my aunt came, yah, she al-, I mean, yah. So, and I think if you, it depends who you speak to, but a lot of Iraqis have very good memories, except for the bad times. I mean it, now you would say 'OK the Iraqi Jews were second class citizens'. Technically they were, absolutely they were, and today, you know, human rights would say 'this is terrible'. But I think Jews have a way of adapting, so that they can get on with life, they can get on with living. There is, a proverb in Chinese, which I'm not going to be able to quote correctly, but he said 'be like the bamboo, do not be too stiff, the stiff, the stiff people',

something like, 'the stiff people will not survive [02:02:00]. The weak will survive', by weak he means the flexible will survive. So I think us Jews had to be flexible to survive and so you, you understand when things are not good, but you know, I think they'd like to move on. They've always liked to move on, otherwise they cannot develop. I think that's, they don't stay stuck too much. Of course, it depends on their experiences so I can't talk...

Yep.

...but in general, and if you look historically, they've had so many upheavals and I think their philosophy is just to get on with it.

No, because I'd like to ask in terms of your own Babylonian let's say heritage...

Mm.

...what is it you want to bring forward?

I don't want to be airbrushed out and I think we have been. A lot of people don't even know there were Jews in Iraq and in a way when the book came out, I said 'now they know there was somebody', I mean, not, not, there were other books written, so it's not just for me, but I say, 'this is another proof that we, we came from there and we were indigenous to that place before Christianity and before Islam'. And that, that to me is so important because it's, it's almost like, you know, we have been, dis-...well we have been disowned, but we have taken... Our presence has been denied. Our presence has been airbrushed out...

Yeah.

...and I find that very painful. Very, very painful. Politics is one thing, but the love of the land is another, you know, and where you come from.

Mm.

I don't know why, I have this love of the land there. I have it and I left when I was very young, I, I'm really attached to it. But politics is another. [02:03:58]

And still you don't, you have no desire to go back, you say?

I don't want to.

No.

I don't want to, erm, no.

Yeah, you know, the Jews have been silenced? Airbrushed, silenced, not...

Well airbrushed out, I mean...

Yeah.

...if you, in, in history classes they don't say there were Jews there. I don't think they say, you know. And now even, well, some Christian churches have been demolished. You know, I mean, hm. But, I'm sort of very proud but I don't know why but that that I come from there. [pause]
Yeah.

And do you, that should be carried forward, but, I mean, that's partly the reason why we do these interviews and hopefully they can be seen...

Mm.

...in the Iraq or other places...

Mm.

Erm...

And they should see the love of the country, forget the politics, the love of mixing with, with everybody. And the fact of being one of them, I mean one, one of the, one with the land, with, with the place. And ah, it's not new what I'm saying because Jews everywhere else felt they were part of something. But I feel in our case it's been thousands of years, I really do.

And in your own family it's like compared to your own brothers...

Mm.

...you have a stronger sentiment than them or...?

I have a stronger sense. I have a much stronger sense. My younger brother he was far too young, but he does like some of the exotic, and perhaps that's why he's in Brazil. And no, I think my, the other brother doesn't have, he's just sort of cut, shut it out.

Mm.

Hm.

No because I, you see, I'm curious also, I think sometimes in family it's the, the daughters who take on the sort of heritage in some way...? [02:06:02]

Oh, this I didn't know. I suppose they're, women are homemakers and so, I don't know. Was it to do with the food [laughs]?

Or is it one person in a family...

One person.

...who is more interested in the history than others, I've...

Oh yeah, I didn't know they were just women, could be the...

Could be, could be, mhm...

Mm.

...in that way...

I mean, my, in m-, in my cousin's case it's a, it's a, it's not a woman, it's a man who's interested in that.

Yes that's what I mean, maybe it's one person.

So, it's one person, yes.

Who then...

Yes.

...carries the torch...

Yes.

..somehow...

Yes.

OK Linda is there any, I would like to ask you have you got a message for anyone who might watch this interview, based on your own experiences?

[pause]

I'm not sure what I could say. But something like, if you're [pause]. I'm not really sure I, I can say very much but, I'd, I'd like to say that, for children to be rooted, I think, it's very important to, it's very mundane what I'm going to say...to sit around the table and to have specific times to eat or let's say, let's say like Friday night, that is something that is so precious because at least once a week there is a tradition of getting together and... I think, I think it's [pause]. Let's say, I'll, I'll go to the philosophical first. Freedom, freedom, complete freedom is chaotic because you don't know where to go. But if you have a structure and within that you can create your own freedom, then, then you, you are rooted and you have direction and you can build [02:08:09]. And, so I would say do not throw away, like perhaps I wanted to do, traditions that seemed perhaps in antiquated, outdated because I've come to the West and wanted to be part of the West. Don't throw it away because really these are your roots and you will come back to it in one way or the other so it's kind of a precious thing, it's kind of a precious heritage, that you can refer to. I'm not sure if that's a message but I mean that these are the things that I think about. Yeah.

Because you can work within it or change it or...?

Yes, but it gives you a platform.

Mm.

I think complete freedom, I see it visually as a boxer who hasn't got anything to box against. If you have a wall to box against, so even if you don't like the wall, you're boxing against something and then, and then, you might like the wall after a while but you might not, but at least you have a direction. But I mean otherwise too much freedom, to lack of any kind of discipline or tradition or I think it's, it's, you're lost. You get lost. I don't know if it's old age that's making me think like that but I [laughing], do you know, it's erm, I don't know. It, it's very difficult for me to explain what I want to say. But it's a bit like what I said before, when I looked at my great-grandfather on the wall, it's almost I knew where I came from, so if you don't know where you come from it's very difficult, I think, to advance [02:10:04]. You might reject it but you must know where you come from, you must understand where you come from, and you mustn't reject it outright.

[pause]

OK Linda I think that's a very good point, to say thank you very much for having agreed to be...

You're most welcome.

...interviewed for Sephardi voices

Most welcome.

And we're going to have a short break and then look at some of your photographs.

Lovely.

Thank you.

Most welcome.

[Pause]

Yes, we're going to look now before we look at the photographs at some of the objects you brought with you which mean something to you. Can you show us something please?

Yah, I can show you a very humble thing that one uses, it's a rolling pin, it's quite a lovely rolling pin. This is, this actually belonged to my paternal grandmother and, I... She didn't give it to me, it was my aunt Eileen when she came back in '74, when she came to London rather in '74, she had two. One that was used by my grandmother and one that was new. She gave me the new one, so it's not used by her but it was part of her culinary objects [laughs] and I love it. I've used it once or twice. I think that's really nice.

What was the name of your grandmother?

Khatoun, but we called her Nana.

And what would it be used for, what would they make with...

To roll dough, you know, it's very easy to roll dough.

It's a beautiful. [02:12:00]

It's rather a beautiful piece of wood, it's nice, so I treasure that. So I don't use it very often. And apparently this was, my mother gave me this, she handed this to me, when I went to Paris actually, to give me something of my heritage. This apparently was given to me when I was born. It's funny to be given a tray, but it's absolutely exquisite. [pause] Don't know if you can see that there's a little sort of filigree work and its pure silver and I use it to put almonds or some kind of sweets, so this one. So this is as old as me.

Yep.

[laughs] The other one is this beautiful cup that we use for Shabbat for Friday night and for other prayers. And it's, it's also silver and it's typical of the work. Both in Iraq and in, in Per-, and Iran as well. It's absolutely lovely, so these two I really treasure. And I have a box which I actually just keep, I don't use, also silver, given also by my grandmother. So I don't think I can even open it. Yes I can. I'm not sure what they used to put in it but it also has nice work. So these, these really are the only pieces, four pieces I, I do have but I haven't got it here. I do have something from my maternal grandmother that was given to me by her daughter, my aunt, only when we got married, so about twenty years ago [02:14:04]. And it's a pair of opera glasses because my grandmother when she married, the, her and her husband, my grandfather, they went to live in Paris and she was a regular atten-, you know, she attended operas regularly and I thought that really epitomizes her, she was a very elegant lady.

What was her name?

Simcha. And what, what is very strange is I have the, a paternal grandmother with whom I was very close because I lived with her, who could not read or write. And my other grandmother, my maternal grandmother, who could read, who could speak French, Arabic, English. So, we had the contrast from the two families, which was quite unusual really. Erm, anyway. So, I have from her I have opera glasses and from my paternal grandmother, the, the objects I just showed you.

And from your maternal side, the mother, were they also Iraqi Iraqi? Or were they, the ones who went to France?

Oh, no, the, the, the ones that went to France.

Yeah.

Yes.

They were also Baghdad- born?

Yes, all of them...

Yes.

... all of them, but you know some went West, or had a western culture more developed, let's say. Whereas in my paternal grandmother's side it's the children that had a more Western outlook or education. Specially the boys, let's say. My father and his brothers.

Yeah.

Mm.

That's interesting, so in a way the two objects here from your grandmother, one is a, a rolling pin for cooking and the other one is to go [laughing] to go to the opera – quite a contrast!

[02:16:03]

Quite a contrast!

Yeah.

But that said, my maternal grandmother was such a fantastic cook, such a fantastic cook, that as children we preferred her food rather than the food that Gershon, our cook, used to make for hundreds of people in every day, the poor man, you know, he had about thirty people to feed every day. Didn't particularly like his food. I write in the book something very, very funny, in that the reason we didn't like his food was because the rice at the time was not clean the way you buy it today, you know, it used to just come in bags and you used to have pebbles or whatever, it was dirty, so you had to really pick it, all the time and clean it. Well, he wasn't as meticulous as my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, so whenever you ate his rice with, with the stews on top, you, you weren't sure when you going to hit something, so it was a bit like walking on a field, mine field [laughs], you know, you never knew. And so, we preferred her cooking, it was, it, it had, it had some kind of refinement that he didn't have.

Mhm.

And this continued with my mother. She, she's, that's why we learnt a lot from her as well, because her cooking was so delicious.

Can we see your cookbook now?

Oh sure. So, this is a second edition. The first edition came out in 20-. 2011 and this came out two years ago, 2014, and it's, it's really a labour of love. I, I took 99.9 per cent of the pictures and I, I designed, I chose the typeface and I just think it erm, it, it so, it became a success because it's an old kind of cuisine, but the way I set it out and the way I, I designed the pages it became a modern, like approachable for somebody who's quite young **[02:18:19]**. It, it, it

can compete with any modern cookbook. Even though the cuisine is quite old fashioned. And, yes I'm quite, I'm quite pleased with it really. It has most of our family dishes and some invented ones at the end. We never have avocados in Iraq [laughs] but, you know, these...

It's modernized.

...the-, yes, what we eat nowadays and with a bit of quinoa as well.

Mm.

Yah.

Yeah Linda, well it looks fantastic, the book...

Mm.

...needless to say, but I wonder whether, for you, sort of having lost a home, whether the book is a way of recreating a home, or?

It, ah...

...a homeland...?

It's, it's definitely saying something about not forgetting a homeland and, many times I say, and I used to say this when I was a teenager, that, when you lose your parents you become bereft, you know, you become an orphan. And on a much more sociological level, a country is, is also, they call it the motherland, so it's also like a parent. And if the politics of that country rejects you then you are also an orphan. So many times I used to find this parallel, I used to feel this parallel, I used to feel that I was an orphan, I was being orphaned because I don't have a country [02:19:56]. And it's quite hard when a country rejects you. Of course as you get older, you, you get used to it, but erm. So what happens as in somebody who is a really, who's really an orphan, they probably go looking for parents in, in other people. It happened to me

that I would look for a place where I could live in other countries, I used to search for, it's the same sort of thing, because I lost one, maybe I can find it somewhere else. Yeah. But this parallel with, with an orphan I think relates to what I feel about not being able to go back and being rejected, being rejected.

And do you remember, do you, did you feel being rejected, did you feel that?

I think after we lost the passport, yes, definitely. I mean, can you imagine being, your passport has been taken away from you, you become stateless. I can't remember what age I was, maybe thirteen? Thirteen or fourteen, I can't remember, but definitely, definitely you feel it. It's, it's your identity, I mean, your legal identity has been taken away, so you could be nowhere. Legally. Yah, I felt it.

Mhm.

It was quite hard. Hm.

And this is my last question to you now, you, your husband is also Iraqi, from... Jewish?

Yes.

Was that, is that important for you, that...

Well...

...you married somebody from a similar cultural background?

It's a funny thing because I never ever wanted to marry an Iraqi, I mean that was one of the things, never. Never! Really, I rejected everything to do with Iraqis, as I said I wanted to be English. And after living on my own and working abroad, and then coming back here and, and feeling the warmth and the connection really with my roots [02:22:05]. It's ironic that I married one. But I'm very happy. And I'll tell you one, one thing I said to him, and this is true, after,

just before we got married but after we got to know each other a bit better. I said 'Frank, I lost my country, you lost yours, I lost my country, but you are my country now'. You see, you see [emotional] it's very emotional because he comes from the same place and it meant something that he was my coun-, do you understand?

Yeah.

It's like erm, yes it, it means, it means a lot. It meant a lot at the beginning because I had a hard time trying to work out where to be and of, of course now it's, it's fine, I mean I don't feel as emotional as, as I did, but it was, it was quite an emotional thing and he, and I remember saying it to him, we were going over to, I think Spain, it was in the plane, I said 'you are my country now'. So, it's funny.

[pause]

OK.

You go back to where you start, you go ba-, you go back to your roots, but without intending to, without particularly projecting, um, um that you want to do this...

Yeah.

...it just, it happened. It happened. And you have to be open to it and I became open to it.

Well it was your journey.

It was my journey. And the final part, it, although it's not the end of the road, is the book, it, that was the crowning thing, you know, so. [02:23:59]

So what's your next project then?

I'm not sure [laughs]. Not sure. But ha-, something to do with my background. Mm.

OK. Thank you, Linda, thank you again.

You're welcome.

For this addendum.

You're welcome.

[pause]

Yes please, who is on this photo?

So on this photo are my maternal great-grandparents and my grandparents. Now, the couple in the middle are my maternal great-grandparents and they are the parents of the lady on the right. And she is being my grandmother. And, on the left-hand side is her fiancé, this is a picture that was taken at their engagement.

When?

Erm, around 1919.

Where?

In Iraq, by I suppose a famous photographer called Donatocian. And you can see the background is kind of neo-classical, which is quite funny really, but what I love about this picture is that it's quite historical in that there, both men are wearing the fez, which is part of the Ottoman empire, because actually, around the time that Iraq became independent they started wearing a different type of hat, I've forgotten now what it's called, but it's kind of more pointed, more pointed, more triangular. And also women of a certain age, married women, wore exactly what my great-grandmother is wearing on her head, a special, a special type of hat, and I think the tradition was that if you weren't married, you didn't wear a hat, but if you're

newly married you wore a simpler hat, and then if you became a, sort of, a wise old lady you'd wear this type of hat. [02:26:18]

And the names? Do you remember the names?

No, I remember my, you see my grandmother we used to call *Maman* which in French means 'mother', because my mother used to call her *Maman*. I know her name was Simcha. My grandfather we used to call *Papa*, because my mother called him *Papa*, but I don't recall knowing my great-grandparents.

OK.

And I don't know their names.

OK, thank you. [pause] Yes.

So, this picture, probably taken around, between probably 1915 to 1920, I'm not sure exactly. And it's of my great-grandfather in the synagogue, Ezra Dangoor, *Hacham* Ezra Dangoor, and he was the, the Rabbi of Iraq.

What was the name of the synagogue? Linda? Do you remember?

I don't remember, I don't know, I really don't know. [pause] And you can see, I mean really, the, the clothes were of...

Yeah.

...of, of the, of the country, of the land. Probably slightly different because he was Jewish, and he was a rabbi...

Yeah.

Erm, yeah, but... [pause] Yes, it's quite a good picture. [02:27:56]

Great picture. That's used a lot...

[pause]

Yes please.

So this is a picture of my maternal, my paternal, sorry, my paternal grandmother's mother. So it's my great-grandmother. On, on my paternal grandmother, paternal grandmother's side if I can say it that way.

Do you know her name?

I don't, I'm afraid, I don't, but you will see, as, as an older lady she is wearing the same sort of hat as my other great-grandmother was wearing. Erm, these were like signals or, or sort of tradition to actually tell somebody's age or if they were married or if not and their position in, in society probably.

Thank you.

[pause]

Yes.

OK, this is a picture taken in December 1921. And, my, of my grandparents, my mother's parents, and again what's so interesting is the backdrop and the decoration. Very much *art nouveau* style, the table and, you wouldn't think that this was taken in Baghdad, really at that time. They look incredibly western and in fact probably they'd just come back from Paris, could be? Or they are going to Paris? I'm not sure. But I mean, they were quite western in their outlook and in their culture.

Yes.

So this is a picture of my father, he's the one sitting down on the right-hand side, with his, parents on the left-hand side and his three brothers and two sisters and erm [02:29:57]. You can see it's quite a, I'm not sure what year that was in, but, it's in contrast with the background of the other pictures because it's quite, it has a quite simple background. It's a different, photographer. The photographer that took this one was called Alchac and he became quite a famous sort of, photographer for, for society, for social events.

Thank you.

OK, so this picture is of, it's a wedding picture of my, my parent's wedding. And it has, you can see it's in a garden, it's was taken in a, in the garden of our house. They got married in February 1948 and they had to have the whole ceremony at home for the simple reason that already, they, there were lots of different incidents because of, the Israeli independence and the forthcoming independence of Israel in 1948. And, so it wasn't really safe to do any kind of party or celebration by Jews, they were, they were much more sort of, I wouldn't say in hiding but they would do things in a very low-key way. So, this is why, this was taken in the garden at our house. And on the right-hand side of my father, are my mother's parents, and on the left-hand side, on, nearest to my mother, are my father's parents. And then, on the, the couple on either end are both brothers and sisters of my father [02:32:03]. And the little girl in front is my aunt, my mother's sister. I'm not sure who is the little lad, in front of my mum. And...

Any names, Linda?

I... OK, so from left to right, my aunt Doreen, my uncle Saleem, my grandmother Nana, my grandfather, we called him Baba but he was called Eliahu. My mother Claire, my father Abdullah, my grandfather Salah, ah now I remember his name, my grandfather Salah, and my grandmother Simcha. Then my uncle Sasson and aunty Eileen and in the front, my aunt Lily, and as I say, the boy, I'm not sure who he is. And all this was done on a beautiful Persian carpet, laid on some grass, in the garden.

So, this was taken in June 1950, on my first birthday, and here I am, surrounded on either side by my grandmother on the right, and my aunt Eileen on the left. And it was taken on the terrace of our house, that overlooks our garden. And, I think it's a lovely picture. I, the dress I think was prickling me slightly [laughs], but it's a lovely picture.

So, this is a picture of my aunt Eileen on the left-hand side and she's holding me in her arms. And the boy underneath, sitting on a chair, is my cousin David [02:33:58]. And I'm not sure who's the person on the right, but this was on our terrace, overlooking the garden and under a *Sukkah*.

When?

I must have been one year old, so 1950.

Thank you.

Yes please.

So this is a, a picture of my aunt Eileen holding my hand. I was two years old then, and I'm wearing a dress that she made for my first birthday, which seemed to sort of fit me. Anyway, it was taken in our garden, it's quite a lovely picture.

Yes please.

So this is a picture taken in 1952, when I was in Paris with my brother and my parents and we were there for the wedding of my aunt Doreen. And it's a very nice picture taken by the famous Arcour, who used to do quite a lot of photographs, family photographs, it's quite a...

[recording cut]

Yeah.

OK, so this is a picture of me at the age of four and I'm on our balcony and in the, in the photo you can see a road, it's the Abu Nuw'as street, where we used to live, and you can see part of the Tigris, a little bit of the Tigris river. A tree, and behind the tree a little, shack where we used to, where they, actually the men used to go and have coffee there, and where we used to buy bubble gum, and it was owned by Abu Ali. [02:36:00]

This is a, a picture taken in Fallujah a place we used to picnic, where we used to picnic quite a lot and, the man standing there is one of the cooks, barbequing some lamb chops, and in the distance you can see me running towards him.

Yes please.

This is a, a picture of myself with my brother Eddy and my brother Alfred, taken in Baghdad.

When?

1954.

Thank you.

So...

Yes.

...this picture is, was taken I think in 1959, and it's a lovely scene of my mother with myself and my two brothers on the Tigris river. And it was taken probably in the middle of the river, in the summer, where you get little islands, it's in the middle of the river, so I guess this is, this is when it, where it was taken. These islands we used to call Jazra.

This was taken in 1968 in Ibiza, it was our second trip there. One of many, many, many trips that we will be taken, will be taken by us in, in the future. And the picture is of myself and my father, and I had just finished my, passing my A-Level exams.

Which year?

1968.

Thank you.

This is a, a photo of Frank, my husband and myself, taken in 2003 in Spain. **[02:37:57]**

Thank you.

Yes please.

This is a picture taken in 1997 and it's of myself and my mother in my parent's home in London.

So, this picture was taken in 2004 and you see me holding two ceramic pots that I made, and in the background a detail of a painting, a painting of mine, of rocks and some kind of landscape.

Linda, thank you very much again for sharing your life story and photos with us.

Your...

Thank you.

Your most welcome.

[Ends 02:38:54]