

Sephardi Voices UK

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Title:	Mrs
Interviewee Surname:	Sara
Forename:	Fedida, née Cohen
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	07/07/1928
Interviewee POB:	Alexandria, Egypt
Interviewee Occupation:	Secretary
Father's Occupation:	Importer of Food
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

Date of Interview:	06/05/2010
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Name of Interviewer:	Alec Nacamuli
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[00:00:00]

Today is 6th of May 2010. My name is Alec Nacamuli and I am interviewing Sara Fedida. Sara, please perhaps tell me a few details about yourself, what is your full name, what was your name at birth, where were you born, how old were you, please?

My name is Sara Fedida. By birth I am called Sara Cohen. We are three times Cohens in my family, so [laughs] we have which. And I was born on the 7th of July 1928, so I'm eighty-one, almost eighty-two. I was born in Alexandria, of parents both born in Jerusalem. My father's family moved from Jerusalem to Egypt very – when he was very, very young. My mother was Sabra, they were Sabras. They were – she was born in Palestine then and she lived until she married in Palestine. When she got married to my father, who was related to her, without knowing her or she didn't know him, and they got married and came to live in Egypt. And that's where my sister and I were born.

Do you remember anything or do you know anything about your grandparents?

Yes, I had a grandmother, a paternal grandmother. I never knew my grandfather. He died very young, well before I was born. And from my grandpar – my Israeli or Palestinian grandparents – my mother's parents – I knew my grandfather very well and I was very fond of him. [00:02:14] And he lost his wife. My grandmother died before I was born, only a few months – er, put it here – only a few months before I was born and so I never met my maternal grandfather – my grandmother, nor did I meet my paternal grandfather. Oh, I only had one of each. My maternal grandfather was a very off – well-off gentleman. He had a big department store, big for Palestine then. [Laughs] But I suppose it wasn't as big as Selfridges but it was big for there. And he did very well for himself. He came very young in Palestine and settled there and opened a business for – of tailoring. And two of his brothers who were still in Greece – they came from Greece, from Larissa originally – and two of his brothers were tailors, so he sent for them and the three of them worked together and he managed very well. He really had a good situation for what was then Palestine. And it was called the shop of Ytzchak Cohen. It was his name. And it was well-known in the area, in Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem. My mother married in 1927 and came to live in Egypt with my father, where his family was settled.

My father had five brothers and he was superstitious, he never said he – there were six when he was asked – he never said there were six of them, six sons and one daughter, he always said there are five and me [both laugh] to make sure that [laughs] nobody gave him the evil eye. [00:04:12] That's what they believed in. And so I grew up in Egypt. I went first as I told you yesterday to a little school, a French little school, because everybody spoke French at that – in those days. And when I was eleven I had won a scholarship for the Lycée Français. I wasn't too dumb in those days [laughs]. I won that scholarship but unfortunately it was 1939 and war just was declared in – on the 2nd of September 1939. France came into war with Germany and all the scholarships naturally were all cancelled. And Monsieur Faure [ph] who was the administrator and the manager of all of the Lycée Français had no money to give for scholarships, so my father said – in those days in Egypt education was private, you had to pay for it. So the Lycée Français was the dearest one, the most expensive school in Egypt and my father said no, it's too much, I'll send you to the Scottish School for Girls and you'll learn English and it will be very good, very useful. He didn't know how useful it was going to become. But I was miserable as sin for a long time. I couldn't even say my name in English. And it was difficult to change language completely. And then I got used to that and I went through the school, up to the top of the school, and then I went to work, where first as I told you yesterday I worked for my [laughs] father. He wasn't very happy but he couldn't get rid of me. When I [laughs] found another job at Société Égyptienne des Pétroles, I told him bluntly, you know, I found a job and they are paying me more than you do, so I'm leaving you. [00:06:06] And he – I couldn't tell you how happy he was that I was leaving him. And I worked for Société Égyptienne des Pétroles for ten years, eight years before I got married with Joe Fedida, Joseph Fedida, who was manager. There were two managers. Number one was Ari Tawil [ph] who was married, as I told you – I won't speak that. So Ari Tawil [ph] married to Annelise Maloum [ph]. He was Lebanese and his wife was Jewish. And there was my husband, the other manager, of Alexandria. In Cairo which was the main office, was a very – it was a very big office and there were many more people and many more managers. Actually one of them from Cairo lives in London and I'm friendly with him and his wife. And [sighs] I haven't seen any of the others. I've heard of them. A lot of them died of course with age. And that's all I know of Société Égyptienne des Pétroles after we left, and we left in difficult conditions because one day in November my husband went to work and found red seals on the door. He couldn't open the front door, the gates of the office, and he found out that he couldn't get in,

that the sequester had taken over and they wouldn't allow him in. He said, but I have my personal stuff in the safe. They said no, sorry, you – well, you can't get in now or ever. You cannot get in at all. And that was the fact that he never got in at all. And that was I think it was October when things became very bad already in Egypt, um, October '56. [00:08:07] And in November I was pregnant of my first child and November I gave birth to a little girl and my husband left very soon after for France in the hope that he would find easily – more easily, especially that his language, his main language, was French, he would find a job more easily than elsewhere. He went to France and Société Égyptienne des Pétroles had big interests, French interests, called Omnium Français de Pétrole. They had a big office in Paris and he went there to get some help with all his certificates and recommendations and whatnot and it was useless. They wouldn't have him. And at the same time, I must add in fairness, there were a lot of Hungarian people – there was a revolution in those days in Hungary and a lot of people were leaving to save their lives and so there were many people wanting jobs. And my husband did not find a job in France. He went – he had a British passport, he was British by birth, he had gone – he, during the war he was in the navy. [Laughs] He couldn't swim. And he went to – he came to England and he found a job at £10 a week and he sent for me. And I had been quite ill, in the shock of all these things happening, unpleasant things happening, while I was expecting a baby. It must have [laughs] – it must have had a bad influence on me. [00:10:01] I was ill. Finally I got better and I came to England in – and the baby was five months old. That was my first child. And I did not have a British passport. I had to request one when I came into England. And that's how our life in England started. I landed here in May 1957. My husband came here in November '56 and he had, as I said, he had found a job, a very, very small job. They wouldn't even give him a desk to sit at or to write on. He had an old crate of some sort. But they very quickly found that he was a valuable person, that he had – was very knowledgeable in his work and he was a very good accountant. And he came – he was increased very quickly. And then one day he decided to leave and went to work for a Belgian firm. And in those days Belgium was French influence, *le Congo Belge c'était Français*.

Well, it was. There was part of Belgium which was French and the other which was Dutch but this was obviously when the French community was –

That's right but the office traded mainly with *Congo Belge* and it was in French and my husband's knowledge of French was useful. And [sighs] he worked there for some time and then he went to work for somebody like us who was also from Egypt, called Marc Dwek who was – opened a business of fruit and vegetable wholesale, not, er – and, er, in Covent Garden and he took over my husband, and there he met somebody – he was Lebanese or Syrian, um, mixture of both – called Selim Moshe and they decided after quite some time with, er, *comment il s'appelait le patron?* Marc Dwek, er, he decided to leave Marc and to settle with his friend, newly acquired friend, from that office to settle the two of them on their own. [00:12:38] And he – they never looked back. He was very – they were successful, they did very well, they – and then quite a few years later because of the bad situation between Jews and Arabs, his partner who was Syrian, [sighs] didn't want to work with him because it made things – his life difficult. He thought – he said it was made but I don't think it was just a question of interest. But the brain of the partnership was Joe Fedida. It wasn't the other one. The other one was good for negotiating but my husband had [laughs] –

The sechel.

The *sechel*, that one needs to work really. And in the meantime, years had gone by already, we were doing – we were quite happy, we were – in the beginning – the beginnings were very difficult but when you are young you can take anything in your stride. Whether you have money or you don't have money, it doesn't matter very much. And [laughs] I – something funny perhaps [laughs]. We used to have pedicure, manicure in Egypt. When we came to England they didn't know the words even. But anyway, we found somebody who could do a pedicure. We went there, said, oh, we'll come out with red toes, oh, how lovely, and we didn't. We came out with, er, [laughs] with medication, yellow medication on every toe. [00:14:01] We looked horrible, with bandages on each toe. We didn't need them [laughs] and I don't think we ever went again for a pedicure until many, many, many years later. And things improved a bit over time of course. The children – I had another child, another little girl, four years later and [sighs] no, not true – three years later, three years later. And at the age of eleven, Josiane, the eldest, was very bright, was – went to North London and a few years later, two years later, Carole followed her there. My two nieces also, because I had – my husband has a – had a brother who also was – had to leave Egypt. He was expelled. We left because of lack of work.

And he left, the brother also left Egypt. He left before us and he settled in England and he worked all his life for a bank, the Israeli bank, what was the name of it?

Leumi?

Leumi – *non, pas Leumi, l'autre,*

Discount?

[Sara]Non, celle des trois frères.

Ah, Mizrahi?

[Sara]Non.

Safra ?

Sa–non [laughs]. *Vous avez dit tout sauf...*

Recanati?

[Sara]Oui.

Ah ça c'est Discount.

[Sara]Ca c'est Discount, voila.

The Recanati Brothers was a Discount bank.

[Sara]Il a travaillé tout sa vie pour la Discount. Le frère c'est Simon, et lui aussi s'est débrouillé, tout le monde s'est débrouillé, a acheté des maisons. Everybody bought – sorry, I spoke to French.

That's okay, don't worry.

Everybody got a house and we were happy and the children were in very good schools, we couldn't complain, we were very happy, happier than ever in Egypt. [00:16:02] And all our family were scattered all over the world, Italy, France, we were in England, a lot of them were in America, in New York, others in Brazil and São Paulo. We were all over the place, so when we wanted to see family we travelled from one place, from one country to the other to see this one and that uncle and this cousin and that one and that one. It was a good life [laughs] and I was very happy that we were expelled [laughs]. I had no regrets, none at all. It was hard, it was very difficult but we survived the bad times and made good and we were very happy – I was very happy. I don't know about the rest.

Let's go back a minute to your life in Egypt. Okay, so what would be your earliest memories? Did your parents have a very active social life? Did they have Jewish, non-Jewish friends? I mean who were your friends?

No, they did not have a very – my uncles – my father's brothers – because I told you, he had five brothers – yes, they were, er, they played cards, they played Colon, they played all sorts of things, they went to clubs and so on. They travelled. One of them did very, very well. He became very wealthy. It was Ike. I don't know if you remember. Perhaps you are too young to remember. And they all did well. And not only, my father brought them all up because he was the eldest. When the father died he was only thirteen. He had to go out and work, to go – to feed all these people, all these children. So he worked very – and they always were very, very grateful and they respected him very much, very much. My father – when my father said a word, it was – after God, it was his word. [00:18:00] And they respected and they loved him very much and they were very grateful for all he did for them. And actually, two of the last brothers, the two youngest ones, went to university. One became an electrical engineer in France and the other one, I can't remember well, and one did [laughs] – became very wealthy, which was also a very good and successful life. That was my – on my father's side. What else? What else do you want to know? I told –

And which area of Alexandria did you live in?

Married, I lived in Mazarita, very close to the cemetery where you saw my father's grave. And a very beautiful view on the sea and beautiful view on the club, *le Tir aux Pigeons*.

Yeah, I remember.

And there was a Luna Park, which is what we have here, what do you call it, a Luna Park here?

Fun fair?

A fun fair opposite my – our big – it was a huge block, and it belonged to a very wealthy Egyptian man called Darwish and he – his daughter married – daughter to a Libyan diplomatic representant – repres – *représentant*, with –

Diplomat, yeah.

Oui. The daughter of Darwish lived on the top floor. We lived on – sorry, I can't remember. It was a beautiful, very, very lovely flat. And opposite our block was a fun fair and every night we could hear until twelve o'clock *emta teoli emtaa, ana h'ebak emta* all night for – until twelve o'clock [laughs]. We had – Egyptian songs because it was a place for pleasure really.

Right. And your friends had Jewish and non-Jewish friends?

My parents?

Your parents, yes.

I can't remember. We had neighbours who were Greek and so on, yes. [00:20:01] They – but they didn't play cards, so they – they didn't have a big – it was mainly –

They belonged to Sporting Club or Smouha Club, or did you belong to Sporting or Smouha?

The uncles. My father and my mother, no, didn't play cards. We just lived a very, very, very happy family life, all the – the cousins, you know, with five brothers and a sister, you have a lot of cousins, so we had a very, very, varied family life. And when we had *Pesach* or we had *Rosh Hashanah*, my mother invited – she was the eldest of the sisters in law, so she had all the family at home and [laughs] there was very often between twenty-five and thirty people and there were no caterers in those days [laughs]. It was hard work.

And which synagogue did you belong to?

We belonged to a little synagogue in Sporting and my parents lived in Petit Sporting, one station before Ibrahimeya. Do you remember?

Yes. In fact, Yves showed me your flat.

Sara: *Voila.*

Voila.

That's where my parents lived, and I lived where you – I told you, in Mazarita, when I got married. And it didn't last very long [laughs]. I had a beautiful flat, very, very lovely. [Laughs] I suppose this is what made me ill, because I became very ill before leaving and the flat had to go, everything had to go. So I came from maternity and I found that – well, this one was paying a penny for that, or that one was buying my beautiful dining room and so on. And it was – it really upset me but you survive. Everybody survived and did well afterwards. And what else? [Overtalking].

Were your parents –

My parents – my friends –

Yes?

My friends were school friends, and my teachers and – and I had a very varied life. I enjoy life very much. I had a good – very good friend called Ruditi [ph] who lives in Swiss Cott – in, er, Switzerland, in Geneva. [00:22:05] I had many friends but that's a younger generation. My parents had a very, very full family life. That mainly –

Right. You had a more active social life, then, with your school friends?

Yes, yes.

And did – would you speak English, French or –

Equally. I could speak both but French came more naturally because all the girls or whatever friends I had spoke French. And boys, they used to call me, er, my uncle made fun of me [laughs]. They were – some of the boys were a bit fat, so they [laughs] said, how are the *godros* which means how are the fat. And I got [laughs] mad every time [laughs]. They have a name. No, no, I know them, how are they, they're [laughs] okay. But I didn't marry one of those, no [laughs]. They all – but I know where they are. They – I mean –

Yeah, you've kept in touch.

I kept in touch more or less, yes. Not over fifty years but some years.

Yeah. Did you have any, you know, every family had their own little expressions, their slang, or –

Yes, they spoke – my parents spoke Spanish at home.

Yeah, godros is, er, gordo is –

Sara: *Gordo, gordo. Godro.*

Gordo.

In Spanish you say *gordo* and in Sephardi you say *godro*. *Que godro. Como solos godros?*
Comment vont les gros ?

And did you speak Spanish with your parents or did you speak French?

No, I spoke French to my parents but between them, they spoke Spanish. My grandmother spoke Spanish with my parents.

So were they Sépharade? I mean they came from Spain.

Sephardi.

Yeah. Right. Any particular what I would call family customs or even what I call superstitions? I mean you said your father was very sort of, you know, he only talked about five brothers, le mauvais oeil.

Yeah, he was afraid. That was his only superstition, his brother, his brother, because six brothers is quite [laughs] –

It's a lot.

Quite [laughs]. And the mother was widowed very early, very young, so it's a lot – it was a lot of responsibility at the same time. [00:24:00] No, there was no superstition. It was a very, very full family life, with so many – such a big family, so many branches because six brothers and one sister gives a lot of children, so we grew up all together, very close family links. Very close.

And you remember that it was your mother who would host Seder or the Rosh Hashanah –

Yes, because she was the eldest of the sisters.

'Cos she was the eldest. Any particular dishes, any particularly – was it more sort of –

She was a wonderful cook.

Middle East, Egyptian or was it more Sépharade Spanish?

It was a – it was more Sephardi but there was the goodies of the Egyptians. They were there also. But it was more Sephardi food. And she was a wonderful cook, wonderful pastry maker, very good with needlework and knitting and crocheting. I still have things that she's crocheted for me over the years and, um, she was a busy lady. She was – she didn't have outside interests apart from her family and her children. The others, the other brothers, their wives were younger and they all played cards, they belonged to clubs, to Sporting. I used to go very often. I loved racing [laughs]. And my uncle –

The horseracing?

[Laughs] And my uncle used to take me. I was his favourite niece. He was the rich uncle, so he was a member of the Sporting, the Smouha, whatever it was. It was Smouha, where we used to go. And from time to time he used to take me with him to the races. And I remember like today, there was a pasha called Farhali Pasha and he – I was very young, I was – I mean I just had finished school and I started working and he took a fancy to me, his – with his big *tarboosh* and so on, and he was friendly with my uncle and I was with my uncle, so he called one of his horses Sara [both laugh]. [00:26:07] And when [laughs] my husband married me, he said, *c'est pas un cheval ça c'est une âne*, he said, *il a jamais gagné, ce que j'ai dépensé sur lui il a jamais gagné, alors voilà* [both laugh]. That was my [laughs] – my husband's opinion on Sara the horse.

And tell me, were your – you, your husband – probably not your parents – were they part of –

My husband was a big gambler. He belonged to all the clubs in the world. When we came –

Your husband?

My husband, he used to spend his life – he only went to bed at home and when he went to bed it was to sleep only. Otherwise, it was work and *comment cela s'appelait?* How was – What was the name of – what was the name of the Jewish club in Alexandria? It was very well-known, it was a big club, a big –

I can't remember. I was too young.

Too young. I can't remember.

And he would go and play Colon and bridge or poker?

Yeah, yeah, poker, poker, and whatever it was – bridge, he was – he was a champion. He was a bridge champion. I have a lot of cups and plates and so on. And he was a very, very good – he had a very, very quick brain, a very mathematical brain, and he never had higher education. Simon, his brother, his younger brother, went to *bachot* and to *bachot* and so on but my husband didn't. He stopped before finishing – yeah, and –

Yeah, because he was – as you said, he had to support the family.

No, that was my father.

Your father, sorry.

But my husband didn't have to support anybody but his brain was mathematical more than for studying. He wasn't very keen on studying. Simon was. And he started working very – very quickly and he did very well. He managed very well. He was a manager of Société Égyptienne des Pétroles and to be a manager in those days was quite something.

And tell me, were you – did you or he belong to any Zionist organisations? [00:28:05] Were you aware of the state of Israel? What were your views of Zionism?

I was aware because we used to go to Israel every – er, to Palestine then, every year. My mother had all her family there, all her brothers and sisters and her father. Her mother had died but the father was alive.

Even after 1948?

Er, 1948 –

Was when the state of Israel was founded and there was the first [overtalking].

She had a lot of family.

And she would go to Israel?

When we were little, I remember we used to go by train. And then it was little planes of seven people and I was always sick as a child, I was always sick in the plane. And one day somebody sat next to me and he was a crafty devil, he started speaking, occupying my brain with talking. I was a young girl and this man spoke and spoke and spoke and I didn't have the time to be sick. We got to Israel and I [laughs] – so my mother said, ah, now we know what you play up.

But then after 1948, you know, there was the war.

Sara: *Oui.*

La guerre d'indépendance.

All these people must have already been old by 1948.

Yeah. Oh, I see, yeah.

All my family. The children, I'm still friendly with them, I still travelled when I was – *Pesach*, we went to Israel and one of my cousins who is on my mother's side, the family of my mother – because all her family were Sabra, well, they lived in Palestine. My father lived in Egypt. And so we went every year as long as [laughs] my grandfather was alive. And he was a crafty devil, he married twice after he lost his first wife. The second one was very lovely. The third one, she got him [both laugh]. She killed him [laughs]. He was a very handsome man. And I remember like today, we used to go to his house and he had – he lived – it was like a farm. [00:30:09] He had chickens. He had a little house for the chickens and I remember he used to cook for me in the morning for breakfast – I was a little girl – two fresh eggs from the –

From the chicken.

[Laughs] From the chicken.

So let's go back to when you left. So you talked about your husband went and he found the scellés, the seal from the séquestres. I mean before that, had you experienced anti-Semitism?

Yes, I was already. A lot of people had been put in prison. The head – I remember like today, before we got married in 1954 – yeah, '54 we married, and 2nd of May, it was only two days ago I would have had fifty-six years of marriage – and he, the high – the biggest manager of Société Égyptienne, he was called Maître Bensilum, he was a lawyer, Jewish, from Gibraltar originally, so he was British really also, he called me in his office. He said, Mademoiselle Cohen, I have a very beautiful present for you, for your wedding. I said, yes – I was tickled pink. I said, yes, what is it? He said, I'm going to send your future husband to Abyssinia, to Addis Ababa, number one, not number two – number one, three months' paid holiday every year, you come, you have – you can put your money – you can receive your money in any country in the world that you want, you don't need to be in Egypt to take it. And I said, look – I don't know how I had the courage to tell him – I said, look, if you do that, forget the wedding, I'm not getting married. [00:32:02] I don't want to go to Abyssinia. I was dumb, I was shortsighted, and I was young, I didn't know how soon things would have changed. It was very, very quickly afterwards. Because we left in '56. That was happening in 1954, only two years earlier. Somebody more clever would have foreseen that it was going to happen. No,

we lived very happily. We went on. People were imprisoned, people, er, how do you say, expelled, had to leave the country. A lot went to Israel. And no, things were difficult but it didn't seem to sink in that it was dangerous, that something would happen any time. It didn't – it didn't – I was [laughs] not clever enough. Some people were cleverer perhaps.

So when your husband had – when Joe had to leave, when he found the scellés, and he had to leave, was that a total shock to you, then?

Yes, I was in hospital. I just had given birth. As I told you, I became very ill because I had, er, how do you call this, depression, a childbirth depression.

Yeah, postnatal depression.

Postnatal depression, yes. Yes. And they didn't know about postnatal depression in Egypt in those days. And there was a big surgeon called Professor Katz.

Oh, I remember him. Fritz.

And they called him. I was in Hospital, they – he was in the Jewish hospital and they called him to say, look at this young woman, she doesn't – she – she's hopeless, she's bad, she's very bad, and it's only childbirth, it's not a sickness, it's not an illness. And he examined me and they told him what was happening in my life. He said, she's not ill, she doesn't want to get better, she doesn't want to know anything. She – I – it was depression [laughs]. And they didn't know about it in those days. But he said exactly what it was. Five months later I left and depression went and everything went. [00:34:01]

So was your daughter – had your husband already left when your daughter was born?

No. She was born and he left a few days later and – very shortly afterwards he left. I had no more house. I went to live – my house went with pennies, with backyard stairs and so on. Everything – everything was brand new. And I went to live with my mother for five months and then we left together on the famous Esperia. We took first class because we couldn't spend

the money, so [laughs] let's spend it [laughs]. And it was difficult because at Customs I went through and then they called me back and my mother said, this woman has been ill and I want to go with her, take – to keep all my stuff as security, just let me go with her. No, she said, you – they said no, you can't, she's got to come on her own with the baby. So they made me open all my cases again and they stole what they could from – I was in no condition to discuss or to see or to look or to know or anything. They took what they wanted and they opened this one. It was done – this painting was done by my brother in law. He was a painter. And Baruch, he was called. And he never came [laughs] to fame unfortunately but he was a good painter. And it was rolled without a frame and they opened it and the one, the man who opened it said – turned it this way, that way, he said *yachabara biat, yahla yahla, il l'a jeté*– He threw it back in the suitcase. And they let me because they found I had nothing. And the whole journey back to – we landed in Italy first, before – you can't come straight to England – we came to Italy, we have an uncle there, one of the five uncles [laughs] was living in Milan and we stayed a few days with him. [00:36:15] And my mother stayed in Italy because I have a younger sister who lived in Italy and she stayed with her in Italy and I came to England with my baby.

To join your husband.

To join my husband.

And when you arrived, did your husband already have a flat or something?

No.

Or did you have to go to a –

No flats. They both brothers lived in a rented room because the family, my sister in law, her two children and the mother in law, the mother of Joe and Simon, had been sent to northern England somewhere, a camp.

Kidderminster?

No, another name. I can't remember. Yvette, my sister in law, will remember. I'll tell you if you're interested. And they stayed in that camp. I was lucky. By the time I came, they had left the camp already. And when I came, no, there was no house. The two brothers lived in a rented room, that's all, because the family, his wife and children, were in a camp, so to be in London, that's where you can find work. It was – they had to be in London, not in some godforsaken place where the camp was. So they stayed in London. When they both find work – found work, then the family came. But work was elementary. I mean very, very small job but they progressed [overtalking].

As you said, he didn't even have a desk.

Oui, very quickly. Not even [laughs] a desk, no.

And were you helped by Jewish organisations?

Yes, yes. We had a discount [laughs] for Marks and Spencer's. I can't remember who gave it. We could buy things what we wanted to buy.

Vouchers?

We had – *oui*, vouchers. And there was – a lady was so kind to us. [00:38:01] She's long, long dead now. She used to go from one Jewish family to the next, ex-Egyptians, to help, to talk, to advise, to – very nice woman. I can't remember her name now. And that was the help we got. We couldn't get compensation from Egypt. [Laughs] Nobody could. No, they had no compensation to give or they didn't want to give anything, compen – we left our keys at the Swiss embassy. There was no more English embassy. We left our house keys at the embassy, or car keys, who had cars and so on, and whatever was – you give – you gave it. You couldn't take it.

Did you get any compensation from England?

I can't – no, I can't remember. I've been asked this question. And I remember one thing, that [laughs] we had a joke about that, that some people said, *moi j'ai laisse tant d'argenteries, avec les armoiries* [laughs]. *Les armoiries de mon grand-père.* [laughs].

The coat of arms, yeah.

[Sara]: [Laughs] *Il n'a pas sù dire the coat of arms, il a dit les armoiries de mon grand-père.* [laughs].

'Cos you were British when you arrived here.

I wasn't. I was Greek, I had – I came with a British passport. I must show you this because it's important for some – I can't get up. I have a passport where it says, *cette enfant ne peut voyager avec sa mère que pour un seul voyage.*

I'll tell you what we'll do. Afterwards I'll take a photo. I'll be very interested in doing that.
Yes.

Don't get me into trouble though.

No.

Oh [both laugh].

So you were Greek but your husband was English.

[Sara]: *Oui.*

Yeah. And, you know, he spoke English, so he didn't have – did he have any problem with lang
—

He spoke French mainly.

He spoke French mainly.

English, he knew English but he – I mean he picked it up more fluently here in England because he didn't – his first language was French, that's why he went to France first, because it would have been easier for him to work in French. [00:40:11]

Did you work when you came here or no, you just looked after –

[Laughs] I was asked this question many times and they laugh when I tell them. I say no, I couldn't work, I had two – by that time I had two babies aft – no, and I couldn't work. But at night when my husband came home I used to go from house to house selling Avon beauty products. And I cannot tell you [laughs] how – the number of doors I had slammed in my face. How you come at this time of night? [Laughs] You can't come another time [laughs]. You don't want anything? No, I don't want anything. Just go away. Okay. And that's – I did this for a few months and then I gave up. I said no, that's enough. And [laughs] I said okay, I'm good, I'm very good – I was – now I'm a good for nothing. I was a very good pastry maker and cook. I cooked very well and [laughs] made a lot of beautiful pastry, so I'm going to make cakes and sell them. And Joe was angry because he didn't want me to do that. And he knew it was too much, I couldn't cope with this and this and – so he said no, you won't. Yes – I said yes, I will. I will, I will. In the end I didn't do it [laughs]. And somebody who was maybe related said why don't you – said the two sisters in law, why don't you open a pastry shop or something like that. My husband was going to kill him. He said, tell your wife to do it. Don't tell my wife. Don't tell my wife. He was very [laughs] – very protective, very – with a very Egyptian mind, you know, women don't work.

Yeah, it would have been a shame on him. And when you came here, did you tend to –

You didn't help yourself.

No. I tell you what, do you want to – in a few minutes. [00:42:00]

Here is your plate there.

Attends. In a minute. I'll tell you what, let's have a pause and let's have a – and when you came here, did you tend to mix with other Egyptian or ex-Egyptians or did you also have friends, you know, English friends? Did you make English friends?

I couldn't go out very much because I had two babies. But as soon as they grew up and they went to school, I was ready with my two play – I'll show them to you in – a wooden play – one red and one green, [laughs] to go and play cards. I was ready, I was [laughs] – I was open to all suggestions about doing things. I like the theatre, I like – I always painted. All my life I had painted, before getting married. I went back to school to painting classes.

Art school?

At night, at night, because I couldn't go during the day. I [laughs] didn't have a nanny or something like that but I had the biggest – the biggest, most beautiful pram that you could get, the Silver Line I think they were called. They were –

Silver Line.

Oui, the –

I remember them.

The ones that nannies, very well – nannies of very wealthy families used to promenade in Hyde Park.

With the suspension.

With that pram, I needed somebody to push me [laughs] with the pram. It was heavy.

And your children then they went to school, and you told me one became a very successful lawyer.

[Both talking at once] They went to school and they were very bright.

The other one set up a business.

They're both very, very bright. They took after their father, both of them. And Yves, he's – they all three have mathematical brains. Very, very –

Yeah, Yves is very –

Very strong, very strong. They – and Carole and Josiane, the same thing.

And did you join a synagogue here?

As soon as we came and as soon as we – not as soon as we came. As soon as we had money. We went to synagogue, to the big synagogue here in Hendon, er, the –

Raleigh Close?

Raleigh Close. And the rabbi was a lovely, lovely man in those days, a very, very nice man. [00:44:00] But it had nothing to do with the rabbi. I went, it was one of the feasts, I think it was *Rosh Hashanah* or – I can't remem – *Rosh Hashanah* – an important feast. I said, okay, I want to go to – I said to my husband, you stay with the children, I want to go to synagogue. I had no friends, I had no family, I had – we just arrived, I didn't know anybody. And then I went to synagogue but [laughs] I didn't put a hat – that is a very *frum* synagogue. Instead of telling me, here, take a veil or take a something, or take a hat or take anything from the box, instead of telling me, the woman who – ah, it was upstairs and downstairs. The synagogue is all – everybody sits, because I belong to Danescroft which is a Reform synagogue. Instead of telling me, take something from here and put it on your head, she told me, you can't go there, you can't go in with – to the synagogue without a hat. [Laughs] I left, went home, crying, all

the way I was [laughs] crying, not because she told me that but because I was so upset that she didn't then let me go into the synagogue and I never went back, never went back to that synagogue, even though the rabbi was a fantastic man. I went, when we had money – during the year you don't need to be a member to – of a synagogue, you can when you want. But for High Holidays you have to be a member, otherwise they won't let you in. When we had money, as soon as we had money, we became members of the Danescroft Reform, which is very close to my – because of the children. By right I'm Sephardi, I want to go to Maida Vale, but I can't travel – I couldn't travel with two kids all the way to Maida Vale, so we became members in Danescroft. I always used to say to my husband, when the children will be married, perhaps we'll go back also to – to belong to two synagogues, to Maida – but it never happened because [laughs] he died and I'm very happy in the synagogue where we belong and I won't change. [00:46:03] Everybody knows me, *on me connaît, moi je connais tout le monde*. I'm very happy.

When – what year did Joseph die, then?

In 19 – 16th of June 19 – let me see. I'll –

I think you told – er, yeah.

If you go in the kitchen, on the wall, on the wall, there are many calendars. Lift them, all of them one by one, and the very end one, there is a long one, bring it to me, I'll give you all the dates.

So your husband died in June –

On June 1994. He had been ill for ten years. He was very, very strong. He never – had never met our doctor, only when he became – he, only when he died, she had to give a re – how do you say, a certificate. But in 1985 he developed angina and because he was such a fit man all his life, never went to the doctor, never took medication, he couldn't swallow an aspirin – he was going to get choking on the aspirin, on an ordinary aspirin. So he became – he developed angina and couldn't cope with it, so he went to see the cardiologist, a very well-known man in those days, and he say, look, you're seventy-two, I don't like to operate after seventy but you're

so fit and so strong, I'm going to operate you. He did operate him but he had a stroke. I never found out exactly if it was during the operation or after the operation. The result was the same. He was as good as dead. It took him a long, long time to recover. For two years he was more or less – more or less couldn't work, more or less okay, and then he lasted ten years, of which the last five or four and a half, he was in a home. [00:48:07] We couldn't cope with him any more. And it was very sad – a very sad ending. He was such a strong and powerful and nervous – very, very, very nervous – he was all – all –

And active, very spec–

Very active, very active.

Yeah. Do you still preserve Sephardic traditions?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yes. I used to do with my sister in law when we first we started having bigger families, all the holidays we did in turn. She did all the *Pesach*, I did all the *Rosh Hashanah* and helped each other.

That is Joyce's mother? Joyce's mother?

Joyce's mother, and parent – and father. And for years – we have lots of pictures with all – all the [laughs] fish, big like that, we used to fry [laughs] – fry for two days [laughs] on two – on [laughs] – on two frying pans at the same time to make fish for all these families. And the picture, the photograph – my mother used to come from Israel on the occasion and she gave a very good hand, she was very capable, and her beautiful photograph, very lovely memories of these days, all the family and the friends of the friends. Everybody wanted to come to the Fedidas because there was good food. And when [laughs] – when my mother did this at home many years before, and she used to work like a slave [laughs] to prepare all these big parties.

And when we had dinner and I sat on a chair or whatever it was, and I fell asleep, and you people, all the guests used to say, [gasps] poor Sara, she must have worked very hard. I had done nothing [laughs]. I just went to sleep.

And now I mean in terms of identity, what do you consider yourself?

I consider myself British.

You consider yourself British.

Yes.

Right. Absolutely. Do you still consider yourself what I would call a refugee? [00:50:01]

Definitely not. Not after a few months I couldn't re – [laughs] I didn't want to know about refugees.

And what do you consider home?

Here.

Here in London.

Here. Now that the situation is a bit unpleasant, sometimes I wish I were in Israel. But to be honest, when my father died, my mother who was Israeli-born, wanted – very modern, whose whole family lived in Israel, and she very much wanted us to move to Israel then and I refused. I spoiled the game. I spoiled – she wouldn't go without me and so we stayed in Egypt. And afterwards we were kicked out [laughs] anyway. But had I gone when [laughs] she wanted to go, when my father died, it would have – life would have been different. Then I didn't want to go to Israel. Life was very difficult in Israel and I couldn't understand all this pushing and jerking and nobody respected anybody else and it was – it was different then in Palestine. But now it's very pleasant. It's not – it's changed a hell of a lot. And I would have liked to be able

to go backwards and forwards. But not now. Now, I mean I can't do it. But up to two years ago I was very – still very fit, I could go and come back. But I didn't do it because my whole life is here. What do I have apart from my children? I've got nothing else. My husband is gone, so my life is in England, where they are.

Do you speak English or French with your children?

English. They wouldn't speak French to me. I said, you're French, you're French, with a disgusted air.

Have you ever gone back to Egypt?

Yes, I went twice. I didn't go for thirty-two years. To swallow that pill, it took me a long time but I went back, it was very nice. [00:52:04] I still – I have – I'm on Skype with a school friend, a school friend, that sixty years ago – from Egypt. She's Coptic and Copts are Egyptian but they are very – they are not well-seen and not well-treated. I saw a film on television very late at night after eleven once, quite a few months ago, perhaps even quite a year ago, a district they call the district of the *Zabbaleen*.

Yeah, I saw.

And *ça m'a tourné* –it turned my inside out to see this. Copts are the brains of the Egyptians. They are the ones who had the best jobs but it's not like that now. They live very quietly and as remote as possible. They are not well-seen there.

But there are some of the – like, the – there are some of the Coptic families like the Sawiris and others who are very, very powerful.

They're okay. *Oui*.

I mean even most –

They are clever, they make money. They know how to gain –

So what was your impression when you went back? So you went back twice, you said.

Yes. It was good. I went to Upper Egypt, I had a – my aunt came from America, we went in a family group also. It was a big group but I had family with me. It was lovely. I went, it was very enjoyable. But it took me long to accept by – on the other hand, my husband, as soon as he started work in the fruit and vegetable, the first country he went back for work was Egypt because that's the one he knew the best [laughs]. He knew how to – *il savait comment*—he knew how to deal with them. Egypt, Cyprus, all the places that have fruit and vegetable. And I kept saying, but bring me some potatoes. He said, what do you want me to bring you, a ship of potatoes? What do you want? Go the greengrocer and buy two kilos and forget, finish [laughs]. You want me to bring you a sheep? I said no, no, don't bring me a sheep [laughs].
[00:54:00]

And did you – so you went to Upper Egypt. Did you also go back to Alexandria?

Yes, I went to the cemetery, I went – my friend, I didn't see her, the one I speak to on – by Skype, and she said, show me – she sees my photo – oh, you're not so bad still [both laugh]. We are the same age, we were in the same class [laughs]. But she left school a whole year and a half before because the Copts, they marry quick, married girls very quickly. *Ils l'ont prise par les cheveux, elle ne voulait pas se marier.* She was very headstrong, very beautiful and very intelligent and she did not want to get married, I want to finish school. They took her by her hair and got her to the church to get her married. She had a happy married life [laughs] but that's not what she wanted really. Anyway, what did you ask me before?

When you – what were your impressions when you went back to Alexandria? Did you go back to see your flat?

I didn't see my – this friend, I phoned her, I said I can't come because I'm with a big group, I'm not on my own, if I leave the group I won't find them again, they will leave Alexandria, and where shall I meet them. '*Ah c'est pas juste*' it's not good and that and that but I couldn't

see her, I just spoke to her. And my impressions, I was very – I was glad I went to see my house. It was pocked, you know, like somebody was – a terrible condition, where it was a beautiful block that was brand new when we moved in. It was in very bad condition. We had a porter, a huge man, black as soot, with – *oui*, with three lines on his fingers, a white, white, white, white turban, and a – and I don't know how they – the sun gets them so white. Everything, all their clothes get so white from the sun. Here, you [laughs] – you hang a white, it stays a little bit yellowish. But yes, it was – it was not a very good impression I got from the block where we lived. The Luna Park had gone, cemetery I went to. [00:56:01] I followed the group and they were very kind, they allowed the bus to stop for me at the door of the cemetery, and my father must have noticed very close to the door, with the grandmother is behind him, so it – I didn't take long to go in and come out very quickly. And they gave me – they made me the favour to do that. And I don't know, I – it didn't disturb me at all to be back. They – we were very well-received wherever we went. I went up, he said, don't pay me. He was so happy to see [laughs] we were *baladiyat*, he says, yes [laughs].

So you can still – you still speak Arabic?

Not much.

Shuaya.

I – my grandson learnt *NaHawi*. He went to university to learn Arabic. But I speak Arabic of the street because in my time Arabic in European schools was not compulsory. We didn't need to – only the last year of my schooling, Arabic became compulsory and because I was very naughty, I was thrown out of the class [laughs]. I was naughty but very good in – at school. And the first week I enjoyed it, being out [laughs] of the Arabic class [laughs]. The second week I started worrying and the teach – the headmistress, Mrs William, Miss Williams, [laughs] she comes past the class and she says, Sara, what are you doing outside? I've been thrown out by Miss Chayat. She doesn't want me in the class. She said, I think you had better go in and apologise. So I went in and I apologised and she threw me out again [both laugh]. She said that they way I apologised sounded like an insult rather than an apology [laughs]. In the end, I had to beg her. I said, I'll kiss your feet, only let me go in, otherwise I'll miss my exams,

because of the Arabic I won't have good results. And that was the end of the Arabic, so I never learnt really well, proper Arabic. [00:58:00] I can remember a poem, *qad kan eindi bulbulun faa qafas min aldhanbi* That's the first line. The last line was *walqahal li huriyati latushtaraa bialdhahabi*.

Very good.

[Laughs] That's all I can remember, the first and the last line.

Yeah. You're better than me. I can't remember any Arabic poems.

But you learnt Arabic at school? I didn't as young [ph]

I gave – no, I did it during the primary school and then in secondary school –

You gave up?

Well, my father made me gave up. He wanted me to study German because he knew that we were going to have to leave and –

Ah, he knew.

*Yeah, he had a – he always said we would – he used to say *ce pays n'est plus pour nous*.*

*Ce pays n'est plus pour nous. Il m'a donné l'occasion, le patron, de quitter, je lui ai dit 'non non, moi je ne marie plus.' You know, he told me he was British, from Gibraltar, he know – and everything he said came true. He finished his life here in England. He left with cuffs, handcuffs in his – on his hands, they sent him out on the plane like that. *Résidence forcée* for a few months until they threw him out with the handcuffs. And he told me, I am British, you are Jewish, and your husband is British, and one day we'll come, when I will not be able to help you. He couldn't say something more true than that. Didn't – it wasn't long before [laughs] the day came.*

Very interesting, yeah. No, my father would have left but my mother didn't want to leave, so we had – yeah.

You couldn't.

Anyway, so this has been a fascinating story, it's very interesting. When somebody listens to this, let's say, a stranger who doesn't know Egypt or us or you, what message do you want to give to a person who just listens like this?

That life goes on, no matter how difficult things get, you, provided you are young enough of course – for elderly people it's more difficult but [laughs] provided you are young enough, you always come up trumps in the end. **[01:00:11]** If you want, if you want, if you fight for – to get yourself organised again and live a normal life again and you can make good and succeed and then I don't know one Egyptian family who hasn't done well since they came to England. They've all done well because they are hard-working and they just pulled themselves together and just started living again.

Yeah. That is very true.

Do you know of a family that hasn't done well? They've all done well. Mostly.

Yeah, and all the second-generation people, like Yves, myself, we've all been educated.

[Both talking at once] Are educated. Oh, the sky's the limit after that for the younger ones.

Yeah.

And they had opport – if you've had opportunities that you wouldn't have had in Egypt, no matter how well-off you were, you couldn't have had those chances that you had here in England when you were brought up here in England. How old were you when you came to England?

I left Egypt when I was thirteen but then I didn't come to England until much later 'cos my parents settled in Switzerland.

Uh-huh. But you were abroad, you were not in Egypt at thirteen.

No, no, no.

You see, Egypt stopped for you at thirteen.

Thirteen, yes.

You were still –

December '56.

You were still very young, very young. So a lot – a lot, er, it was easier, the younger you were, the easier it was. [Laughs] For the people who were middle-aged or things like that, it became –

Yeah, who had to restart their lives.

Sara: *Oui, c'est difficile.*

C'est difficile, oui. No, you were – my father was, for instance, forty-eight when he left, yeah.

It's difficult.

Okay, well, thank you very much. This has been absolutely fascinating.

A pleasure.

[01:01:48]

[End of transcript]