Sephardi Voices UK

IMPORTANT

Oral History
The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB
020 7412 7404
oralhistory@bl.uk

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it. Should you find any errors please inform the Oral History curators (oralhistory@bl.uk) and Sephardi Voices UK (info@sephardivoices.org.uk).

Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	Sephardi Voices UK
Ref. no:	SV120
British Library C. Number:	

Interviewee Title:	Ms
Interviewee Surname:	Hakham
Forename:	Carmen
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	15/04/1957
Interviewee POB:	Baghdad, Iraq
Interviewee Occupation:	Accountant
Father's Occupation:	Accountant
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

Date of Interview:	29/09/2022
Location of Interview:	London, UK
Name of Interviewer:	Dr Bea Lewkowicz
Recording Format:	Video
Total Duration (HH:MM):	02:46
Copyright/Clearance:	Yes

Additional Material:	Photographs
Interviewer Comments:	

[00:00:00]

Today's the 29th of September 2022. We're conducting an interview with Carmen Hakham, and my name is Bea Lewkowicz. What is your name please and where were you born and when?

Carmen Hakham. Born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1957, April 15th.

Thank you Carmen so much for having agreed to be interviewed –

Pleasure.

For Sephardi Voices UK.

Thank you.

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

[stumbles over words] Well, how far do you want me to go back?

Back as long as you want. But wait – do we...?

Cameraman: Running.

Okay running.

Right. My father comes from the Hakham family. It's a very well-known family back in Iraq. His great-uncle was the Ben Ish Chai, Hakham Yosef Hayyim. My mother's family is Zubaida. Again, quite well-known in the country, and we lived there as far as I understand from the destruction of the first temple, we went into Babylon into exile and never left until we did in 1971. So quite an old family back home.

Tell us about your father's side a bit more for people who don't know who –

Right, well the Ben Ish Chai was very well-known in the Middle East, indeed in the whole of Europe. When questions relating to religion were needed to be answered, the questions were addressed to him. The Ben Ish Chai was one of five brothers and two sisters. **[00:02:00]** One of the other brothers was Hakham Moshe who was my father's grandfather. The son of Hakham Moshe, my grandfather, Hakham Binyamin at some stage was the *Af Beit Din* in Iraq, in the late thirties early forties, and indeed when the archives, the Iraqi archives were sent to America and discovered and digitised we actually did find some letters that he had written. So that was quite a nice thing. And talking about the archives, we did find even letters written by other members of the Hakham family to do with trading from the early century, the early 20th century. So anyway – so Hakham Binyamin not only was he the *Af Beit Din,* he used to do quite a lot of circumcisions. And one day my brother was in Israel on a trip and met with the finance minister and he said to him, 'Your surname is a bit different.' He said, 'It's Hakham.' 'Oh,' he said, 'and who is the family?' So Ben, my brother, told him who they were. He said, 'Your grandfather circumcised me.' So there you go, you know [both laugh] somebody knows somebody somewhere. Then my father is one of three, three of them, boys. And, so that's my father's side of the family. My mother's side of the family is Zubaida. Again many, many cousins literally all over the world in her particular case on her mother and her father's side. So yes, it's – I suppose really it's where the Iraqi Jews have ended up. All related and all over the place.

Yeah. There's a Hakham in the Iraqi tradition. What is the role of a Hakham, again for somebody who might not know, in the community?

Well, he would be either heading a synagogue or be adviser on religious matters. **[00:04:07]** In the case of my family they were – headed synagogues and had their own congregations. It really is – it's a religious role. And in the case of my grandfather, he would actually have corresponded with the government. He would have been a person, a Jewish person, between the Jewish community and the government, and hence finding the letters that he had written.

Leadership, in a leadership position.

Yes, absolutely, yes.

And what sort of letters? You said there were letters to –

It's to do with various matters relating to the community, relating to the welfare mostly of the community, to do with *shechita*, the ritual killing of animals for food, to do with religious holidays when certain things can happen and cannot happen. Very difficult for people to understand as other than *shabbat*, Saturday, everything moves, all our festival moves around. So it was important for the government to understand when exams – to take place, that sort of thing. He was involved with that.

And did you ever meet your grandfather?

No. No, he passed away in 1943. So no, I have never seen him.

And tell us, how did your parents meet? Do you know? Was it arranged or –?

No. Very interesting. It was not an arranged marriage. My mother was very friendly with other members of the Hakham family. There were a lot of girls. Again, they are the products of the five brothers and the two sisters. And she met my father at one of the gatherings, and I think they had their eye on each other. And one day I think it was suggested to my father that he would better go and propose – well, my mother did not have a father at that stage, so my father went and spoke to her older uncle, her mother's eldest brother, who had known him because the Hakham family had large land, agriculture land, in the south-west of Baghdad. **[00:06:21]** The province is called Hilla, and the land is called Gus. So Mum's uncle used to supply feed to the animals of the Hakham family so that's how he had known my father, and he consented immediately. They were engaged in 1955, married in '56 and I was produced in '57. All very swift [laughs].

And where did they settle or where did they live? Did they live with parents?

No, they lived on their own. They bought – through the dowry as was the custom that the girl would give a dowry, they bought a house and that's where I was born and brought up, and left out of that house, left the country. So an interesting little area where we lived. Not too far from the river. We could walk to the River Tigris. Our next door neighbours, one neighbour was an elderly, lovely lady, a Catholic lady. On the other side again we had Christian neighbours. We lived opposite a Catholic school, a convent school, and then we had two churches at the end of our – one side of the road, a synagogue on the other side, and there was a mosque, we could actually hear the *muezzin* in the morning when we used to sleep on the flat roofs, and then you hear him with his prayers. It was beautiful, absolutely wonderful. So it was an area called Karada, whoever may know that area.

So you grew up in a time where most Jews, many Jews had left Iraq already. **[00:08:08]**

Yes, after '50, '51 that was the mass immigration. Then people were able to leave in the early sixties either through Basra, they escaped from Basra, or by that stage Abd al-Karim Qasim, the President of Iraq, had allowed some Jews to leave with passports. And quite a few of our relations who live in London actually left by passport at the time. I suppose we left it to the end. By the seventies it was becoming very difficult, particularly when the Ba'ath Party came in 1968. It became almost impossible for the Jews to live there.

Yeah, so tell us a little bit about growing up, your memories of growing up in the fifties and the sixties in Baghdad.

Really, it's the sixties.

Yeah.

Well, I would have to say it was – despite what we went through towards the end of 1969, 1970 which I'll come to, it was a privileged life. My parents were well-to-do. We had a country house where all of us, the Hakham children met, and my relations are still scattered all over the world but mostly in Israel, the children I grew up with. It was a wonderful life really. I do have little bits of memory of when I was about three, four years old travelling with my parents

on the train to the north of Iraq where they spent all their – every summer. Which is now termed Kurdistan. So you would go to the province of Erbil and from there on you travel all the way to the north to Hajj Amran where my parents actually had their honeymoon and returned every single year up to 1967. **[00:10:04]** From then on it became very difficult for us as Jews to cross to the north. We did return in 1968 for one brief visit. We were only allowed – which is interesting – as Jews. Our driver was a Muslim, he was not allowed to come in with us, and we actually went to see the hotel where we used to stay. By that stage Mullah Mustafa Barzani was in a war with the Iraqi government and they actually brought down an Iraqi plane. And this plane, or at least a wing of it, was housed in the room where we used to stay in this hotel [laughs]. So, it was quite a surreal thing to see that there is a wing of a plane where our beds were. So that really, I do have very beautiful memories up in the north. I recall one *shabbat*, Saturday, my mother and I went for a little walk. It was very safe. And we got to the border with Iran and there was a guard there, and I said, 'Can I go to Iran?' And he said, 'Yes, as long as your mother stays in Iraq.' So I went to Iran by taking just two steps. So I can say I have been to Iran. Little things like that. I mean, nature was wonderful there. First time I ever saw snow on top of a mountain – because it never melted at that stage – was on the top of a mountain called Hasarost. Then we did other trips again to the north, Sulaymaniyah, where there was a dam built by the British there. So it was a wonderful childhood, travelling round Iraq. I recall very well my father coming to school on a Friday saying, 'Well, you've had enough education, we can now take time off, but before *shabbat* comes to go somewhere out, to enjoy ourselves.' **[00:12:05]** And there were certain rituals in the summer we did, you know, on a Friday go and buy the lovely bread and come back and, you know – just a very nice life.

What bread, because somebody said in Baghdad there wasn't actually – people didn't have challah, it was a pita.

No, well, we used to have what we called *khubz mai*. Khobez Ma is round bread that has got bubbles on it. I think you can get – you can get it from Iraqi shops now in London, you can get it in Israel. It tends to be about that big and that's how we would do our –

For shabbat.

For *shabbat, bracha*. Then there was something else which was very hard bread called *khubz yibbiz* which was dry bread. It was a bit sour and you really needed good teeth for that. I didn't particularly like it, but again that is – the same baker will sell both. Then the normal bread to make a sandwich was – we called it *samoon* and it was that way. It sort of had two little ends. I don't know if it – I think you may still be able to get it now in London from the Iraqi bakers, but I'm not so sure. And we would eat this bread with *geymar* which is the very, very thick cream and *silan* which is the date juice, and my goodness me, that really was wonderful. And the lady would come and sell the *geymar* in her huge trays. They came from the south of Iraq from where Ahwar were, and I think Saddam dammed the whole thing. And because they had the special type of cream, or milk rather, that came from there, very thick, very creamy, so they will make it. **[00:14:05]** So when the lady will come you would buy whatever you wanted, and they would cut it with a blade. I mean, God only knows what dirt we were eating but we seem to have been unaffected, I suppose we got used to it.

So cheese, she was selling cheese? Was it cream –?

Cream and cheese. The cheese is a different thing. I can't – I think they used to sell them in round dishes. And in fact today I saw a picture on Facebook of a friend of a mine – a Muslim friend of mine from Baghdad sent an old photo of a lady selling the cheese in round dishes. They look like pots, like a normal cooking pot, but it's sort of up to there and she carries it on her head. Now the problem was, they were either made of copper or lead, mostly lead, and they would bleed into the cheese. And we used to buy it and unfortunately my mother once had some of this cheese, ended up being poisoned and had to have her stomach pumped in hospital. At least she lived. And her mother again had some of this cheese, and fortunately she didn't need to go to hospital but she had to drink milk to be sick, so it was not very hygienic.

What other things do you remember from the home? You said – so shabbat, tell us a little bit, how would you celebrate shabbat?

We were a very religious family. My father was extremely religious, so we celebrated *shabbat* by having obviously – sort of the light was on, the light was not turned off because there were no clocks as we have nowadays to open – you know, put lights on, turn them off. It was a little

bit – in the winter I would say Friday night was cosy [sighs]. I say it that way. A little bit sort of grim because it was dark. **[00:16:01]** Although it was lovely in the sense that we would be – we would go to bed very early with our parents, and I recall my father reading us stories in English. So we actually spoke English as little girls. Particularly my sister and I, we were close in age, three years between us, and that's how we learnt English, from the Hans and Gretel type stories. And we learned something called *shbathoth* which are the songs of – they're Hebrew songs for Saturday, greeting the *shabbat*, that sort of thing. So we learned these *shbathoth* that my father used to sing after dinner as we were all laying in bed sort of having – it was very lovely, it was very family-like. Saturday was a day where we really – nothing very much happened. As the case with every single day my father prayed at home, and then we would have breakfast, and then my mother would take us, the children, to her mother's house. So we would spend the day with our cousins. My father stayed on his own. In the afternoon he would go to the synagogue near our house, and then that was the end of *shabbat*. But obviously, all the festivals were observed as they should have been. The *sukkah* was an interesting one as we would be coming to the *Sukkot* here in about a week's time. That was interesting because we actually had our own *sukkah* in the house. So it was built completely. For the floor it was concrete with the metal poles. Now, just after *Yom Kippur*, the tree man I suppose he was called, he would climb up the date tree and he will take the leaves down and he will bring down the dates as well. **[00:18:04]** These tree leaves, huge leaves, would be the roof for the *sukkah*, so the *sukkah* was built on the same day and then exactly the same, they will hang the little fruits and things from the roof. And the sides of the *sukkah* were natural plants, mostly sweet peas, the plant of the sweet peas that went up. So it had no – and the entrance would have been sort of a plastic sheeting or something, in case it rained. Normally the rain in Baghdad came on the last day of *Sukkot* and finished on the first day of *Pesach.* I mean, I'm really generalising. And we had breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the s*ukkah*. My father would spend one night – he would sleep in the *sukkah* as was the custom. When they were younger they would actually have a *sukkah* on the roof as well, on the flat roof. In my days we didn't have that. So they actually were able to sleep under the *sukkah*. That's why he still spent one night in the *sukkah*, and of course one night reading the *Tehilim* at the end, praying all night. And once *Sukkot* finished, our next door neighbour, the elderly lady, the Catholic lady, her daughters would come and wanted to sit in the *sukkah* because they felt they needed to say their prayers, so that's what they did. And one of the ladies was not married, so she decided if she came to

the *sukkah* and prayed, perhaps she would find a husband. Now she did, three weeks later. Got engaged and she was married within three months. So the *sukkah* did work for some people [laughs].

Carmen, what was your favourite festival?

Probably *Sukkot* because it was different. **[00:20:01]** We were not eating in the house, we were outside. We would have to carry all the food and it was all very exciting. It's a completely different thing to do so that was lovely, and of course the *sukkah* was full of people, I should have said, particularly the first two nights and the last two nights where we would do the prayers, the whole family would turn up. We would be about 30 people and we could easily sit round the table. It was a huge place. So that was quite good fun. You were outside. *Rosh Hashana* was interesting because we would literally dress in white from top to bottom with our little white shoes and off we would go to the synagogue.

Which synagogue was that?

It's called *Heda* which is the one near us. We went to that one on *Yom Kippur* because there was no driving. For the rest of the festivals we in Iraq would drive and we went to the synagogue called *Meir Taweig* and you needed a car for that one. And so I recall for instance *Purim* going to *Meir Taweig* with my grandmother, with my mother's mother, running around like – one should not say the word Red Indians, but that's how we knew them, Red Indians, and cowboys. And we would wear the feathers in our hair and the little guns and running after each other, so that was quite good fun as well. But we did – the thing with Iraq, women did not need to go to synagogues, not that often, but we sort of would want to go just to visit the *Sifrei Torah* so we may go not for the whole service, for half the service or something like that. As you know, it's very difficult to get children to quieten down. But my father used to go to this particular synagogue before he went to the baker every Friday morning because he would have some dealings with the person who ran the synagogue on religious matters. **[00:22:03]** My father although was not a Hakham as a Rabbi, he was still consulted on religious matters, there in Iraq and continued up to the end here in London. So we used to go there. And the other thing that happened with this synagogue, the lady there used to bake the *matzah*, which

was sort of a big, round thing about that – like that. Very wide, and they used to sort of give it to us in a great big sort of holder. So the *matzah* would be baked there. So my father would have to go for the rest of the community to check that the – I guess it's called the oven. They're not as an oven like we would know them here – that has actually no bread around. Everything has been cleaned. That was part of the things that he did for *Meir Taweig*.

So he was involved.

Yes.

But what was his profession please?

He was – my father was an accountant, so he was – it was sort of an easy-ish life in the sense that he could work when he wanted to work, and quite often he may work through the night, so that he would have the day off so we can go out somewhere. It was very important I think for my parents and we learned the love of travel from them. When I grew up – sorry, I should have said, we were not allowed to leave the country as Jews, we were not allowed passports. So the only thing we could do is travel round the country which we did. So I have had the privilege of seeing most of the country, other than the province of Basra, so I've never been to the south, the very, very south of the country.

And were you aware that you couldn't leave? That you didn't have passports?

Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely, the whole time. I recall that my father was telling a story that he had a friend who was a Jew, had to convert to Islam in order for him to travel to London for medical purposes. **[00:24:11]** Apparently this chap had some cholesterol in his system where I think they had to change his blood every year or something like that. Anyway, forced conversion, but the children grew up as Jews and one of the daughters was in my class and indeed one of the sons was my maths teacher. After most of our teachers left, we had students, university students, who were at our school who started to teach us. So he was one of them.

So was there other discrimination? You said more or less you didn't experience so much discrimination. Were there other instances where you felt as a second-class citizen, or –?

Well, certainly in my lifetime after 1967 once – that was very interesting. So I was in a Jewish school. We did have non-Jews with us, Muslims, and Christians. Literally the day after the war of 1967 we were playing in the playground as we had normally done with the rest of our classmates. The Muslims said, 'This is our half. You play on the other half.' Considering they were in a Jewish school. So it was – really for me it was – the catalyst was 1967. It was at that stage where I recall very well all our telephones thankfully were – I say thankfully – taken away from us because we would have been accused of all sorts of things otherwise, communicating God only knows what probably with Israel. So all the phones were removed. It became very difficult for the youngsters to go to university, almost impossible for them to go to university, although I was nowhere near that age. People in trade who were importers, again that was a difficulty, in case they were trading with the enemy, of course being Israel. **[00:26:03]** But of course France, England, and America were as well the enemy, so it was terribly difficult at that stage. So the difficulty started for me from 1967. 1968 when we had the revolution and the Ba'ath Party came, they came in July and the first person – as far as I recall, that's my memory – that was murdered, a Jew that was murdered was one of my father's cousins. He was what we would say the word 'taken' on the eve of *Rosh Hashana* of that year, and I think from what we understand he was murdered that same day, and it was a little bit gruesome. We were told how he was murdered, what happened to him, and his body was handed back to the community after the hangings of January '69.

So this was before the hangings.

That's before the hangings.

Tell us what happened because I think it's important for the record.

Well, 1969 we started to hear – so that happened in January '69, the hangings of the nine Jews. Really that was the catalyst. That was when we just knew we could no longer stay. I recall very well something was going on and in fact – so I was thirteen, twelve. I recall very well

that my parents were very agitated. In fact, my cousins, my uncles, there was a lot of agitation going on. The night before, I went to bed, I had my own little radio, transistor radio, and I actually heard the Judge pronouncing the death on all Muslims, Christian – there were about four Muslims, two or three Christians, and the nine Jews. **[00:28:00]** So anyway, we heard that, had to get up early in the morning to go to school, and we could see that the convent school opposite our house where the girls were being dropped off, the school was closed. The parents had to take the children back. We turned to go back inside the house, my mother put the television on, and we actually saw the bodies hanging on TV, in the square, *Sahit Tahrir*. My mother called my father and it was the first time I ever saw my father cry. It was absolutely dreadful, absolutely dreadful. We never thought they would do it. So I think it changed our lives completely. I mean, from then on life became extremely difficult. With hindsight, at least they returned the bodies and the bodies could be buried, and as I said my father's cousin's body was returned and he could be buried and at least prayers were said for them.

So what happened exactly to that cousin? You said he was tortured or what happened?

Yes. I think they stuck a metal bit in his neck. All dreadful. I can still see his face.

And was an accusation – nothing?

Nothing. There was no need to accuse anyone. I mean, in his particular case as far as we know there was no accusation because he really had hardly any issues with anybody. Of course the – I should have said, the Jews that were hanged were accused of being spies for Israel and I can assure you, none of us had contact with Israel. I mean, really we would hardly ever mention the word Israel. So really from then on, for someone like my father with a name like Moshe which was a Jewish name, my mother would call him Musa, or she calls him the Father of Ben because it's quite normal to call Abu somebody, that's the normal thing. **[00:30:02]** So she would call him Abu Ben. A lot of people called him Abu Ben, so that the name is never called in public. And really, that we knew our days were numbered in Iraq. And I will continue that little story of ours in *Pesach* of 1969 in the *Chol HaMoed*, which is the bit in the middle in between the festivals, my father went to visit friends of his in their office. They were his clients as well, but they were friends. He did not work during the period. Anyway, on that day we

were at my grandmother's house and the secretary came to my grandmother's house and wanted to see my mother, and she said to her, 'I'm sorry to tell you, 'they' came.' 'They.' We did not need to know who 'they' were, 'they'. 'They came for the boys, and they took them.' And that was [sigh], a nightmare of four months where we did not know where they were. Where they were taken. Somehow my mother found that the only contact she could have was through the Ministry of Defence. The problem was my father being very religious and it was *Pesach*, there was no way he was going to eat any food, for the meat, as in *kashrut*, and for bread, so he couldn't even chew a piece of bread. As we found out later he literally starved for the rest of *Pesach*. Other than water, there was nothing he can eat. They did bring them food once a day, which he couldn't participate in. And he slept on a cardboard box but at least he had a suit, so [laughs] – I laugh. **[00:32:03]** They were in what is termed *Kasr el Nihaya* the Palace of the End, which used to be the palace of the royal family which was called *Kasr el Zuhur* which was the Palace of the Flowers, so it became the Palace of the End because when people went in they hardly ever came out. The idea was they probably will never survive it. So it was an absolutely awful time. My grandmother came to stay with us so that she would look after us while my poor mother was running around trying to find out where my father was. Now, the ladies as in the wives of these other men were wonderful. We used to congregate in the evening in the house of one of the ladies. She's still alive and lives in south London, bless her. It was, 'What can we do? What can we do next? What can we do next?' The problem was there was not very much one can do other than plead and plead and go on the knees and – there were no news from the men. That was the problem.

And the men was your father and brother.

No, my father – the men were my father – my brother was very young at the time – my father and the men that he went to visit. So all in all there were five men taken out of that particular office. And – I'm trying to think – as far as I know there is only one surviving gentleman left. They died of natural causes afterwards, glad to say, not through torture. The interesting thing about my father's imprisonment was he never talked about it. Now, I recall reading something in a magazine or a website for Jews from Arab land I think called Jimena, which is the American one. **[00:34:03]**

Yep.

There was a testimony of one of the prisoners who was with my father. His name was Saeed Hardoon and he talked about his time in prison. I found it so horrifying. I printed it out not long ago, over a year ago, something like that. I gave it to my brother. I gave it to my sister. When my mother read it she said, 'Oh, that's only a quarter of what your father had to go through.' Now, about three weeks ago someone sent me an article in Arabic. I think it was found again in the archives, that said that my father – and it does actually give his name. At one stage it calls him Musa, and the other stage it calls him Moshe, on one piece of paper. That they were accused these five men with other – there were other Jews there we knew – of manipulating prices of goods that were being imported into Iraq. So it was only three weeks ago that we discovered why they were imprisoned. It was absolutely fascinating. So the question was, were they tortured or were they not? As far as I know, my father was not. He said to us that every morning when they were taken to go to the bathroom he would meet Saddam Hussein. Saddam at the time was not President, his uncle was, and he was always dressed in military clothes and was always very nice, and apparently always saluted my father. But the guard was horrible to my father because dad's name was Moshe, so he used to say to him, 'I'm going to...' – he slapped him every morning and spat in his face, and said, 'Because your name is like Moshe Dayan,' who was the Defence Minister of Israel in the 1967 war. **[00:36:06]** So my poor father got a slap. Now, the other thing my father mentioned that he shared an extremely small cell – tiny, tiny, I mean, you couldn't apparently even stand straight – with a young man who was a Christian man. That Christian man was tortured on a daily basis and apparently my father used to attend to his wounds. The sad thing was this man's wife was pregnant at the time. Anyway, one day they took him and he never came back so one assumes he died. He was murdered. But through that – so anyway, my father four months later came out alive. Now, how it happened is they move them it seems from *Kasr el Nihaya* to the *Ermin* which is the security services. At least the *Ermin* had a proper prison, as in with rails. One can see them through. And they needed to – literally, a ransom was demanded for them which was paid, and they were let out, but by that stage actually my mother was able to speak on the phone to my father who called her, as we had no phones he used to call the neighbour Alice, and mum would go there and she would speak to him. And I remember – and we knew the day he was coming out and our house was full of people. And he walked in

wearing the same suit as he did the day he went in to prison, and he was a skeleton. His suit was falling off him. It was a brown suit. There was nothing of his face. He actually looked so awful that – my father died of cancer and at the end he looked as bad as he did when he came out of prison. Due to the lack of nourishment, food, vitamins it seems that it affected – the lack of vitamin A affected the nerve for his eye. **[00:38:05]** He went the day after immediately to the ophthalmologist who was a Jewish man called Rubichek and they saved the nerve, just about saved the nerve. And it took a long time for him to eat and to put on some weight [sighs], and to I suppose have a normal life. But now my father when he left Iraq never, ever, ever complained about the weather in England, about anything or anybody in England. He was very grateful. The problem, one of the problems that I suppose he carried with him was they were told that if they ever spoke about what happened to them, they will find them and they will kill them. Now, I recall in 1974 I was walking with my father on the Edgware Road towards Marble Arch, someone stopped and said to him in Arabic, *sabah allah'cher Abu Ben* [Greetings Son of Ben] and chatted with my father. My father said, 'I need to get a brandy. We've got to go to a pub now.' And I actually could see that this hands were literally shaking. I said, 'Who is he?' He said, 'He was my guard in *Kasr el Nihayah*'. So obviously the guard was not looked upon very nicely by the government so he had to leave the country as well. So I think when people talk about the fact that they did not want to speak about what had happened to them in these circumstances, one understands it. Either they don't want to recall it, or they were afraid in case their voice was heard. It's quite possible that he was afraid that his voice would be heard and we never really found out – at least the children – whether my mother knew more than she ever told us, I do not know, but she certainly is not willing to speak about it even today. **[00:40:05]**

They were scared.

Absolutely. Absolutely because these people would turn up to London which was very easy. A friend of mine who I will talk about, when we were in prison, he met him again. This all happens on the Edgware Road, and he met him on the Edgware Road as well. So these guards were around. They were in London. Whether they were here on holiday or they were expelled or afraid to stay in the country as sort of regimes changed, or opinions through the same regime was changing.

So Carmen tell us maybe just, again for the record, the names of the – including – I mean, your father, and the other four men.

I'm going to try and remember them. Yusef Zilcha, Haki Zilcha his brother, Sahid Herdoon, and Kamal Ibrahim, and my father.

And how many months did they spend –?

Four months.

Four months.

So my father actually missed the landing on the moon, which I kept all the magazines for him and said, 'A mam landed on the moon Dad, when you were in prison,' [laughs].

And the ransom, you said there was a ransom paid by the families or by the Jewish community? Who paid that ransom?

By the families and the Jewish community. It depended who could afford what and, what they will give, and what they had to be given. So yes, I think my father's ransom was paid by a friend of his. So that was my poor little father. We then – 1970 – I move on swiftly because I'd like to talk about my life in prison.

Yes, please.

Why not? [laughs]

This is the occasion.

This is the occasion. We had gone to the north of Iraq. As I saying we used to spend our summers there. We could no longer – let's say by 1970, we could no longer go all the way to

Haji Amran which was on the border of Iran. **[00:42:03]** We could only go to a place called Salahadin, Anyway, we rented a house there and we were going to spend most of the summer there. And we took our kosher food with us, and this was a beautiful little house where we were staying. And in my particular case I took my books with me, schoolbooks for revision, and I remember it was mostly French because of the *conjugaison de verbe*. I had to learn that by heart. Anyhow, we started to get messages from my uncles, my father's brothers in Baghdad. 'You need to come back. School is starting early this year.' And it was very odd messages which of course was completely – went above our head. And one day we got a knock on the door and it was the security service. 'We have come to take your husband,' they said to my mother. 'Take him where?' 'Oh well, you know, it's just we need to question him.' We think we will try to escape because at that stage the Jews started to escape through the north of Iraq to Iran. No passports, mostly no passports were given at the time. And my mother said the equivalent, 'Over my dead body. You took him last year and I know what you nearly did to him. If you take him you will have to kill me first.' Now, in 1970 the Iraqis were still nice people. I think probably afterwards in the mid-seventies they would have killed her, but at that stage it was still quite polite. Anyway, then they suggested we ought to pack up all our things and go with them, which we did. So we were taken in a van, as they put it, down to Erbil to the police station. So when we arrive there who should we see, oh, so many Iraqi people – Jews I should say, so many Jews, friends of the family. They were all taken. **[00:44:04]** They were trying to escape. Really and truly we were the only family that were not trying to escape, but that doesn't matter. The problem is, people – the other people were carrying jewellery, money, and the sad thing were they were trying to flush it down the toilet, throw it out of windows. I think farmers and certainly plumbers made a lot of money. Very sad. We were not interrogated. We stayed all night awake with all our goods, and I should say, which is very interesting, that's an interesting Muslim custom. My mother was trying to persuade the chief of these people that took us to Erbil, to have some bread, and he would not. Because once you break bread and salt with your guest, with your host, you become a friend and he did not want to do that. So it was a bit ominous. Anyway, the next day we were all driven in vans, whoever was in Erbil in the police station, to Baghdad and we were put in the Hall of the Bahai's. Now, we had a chicken with us that was uncooked and this chicken started to smell. So they said I can take the chicken in the box and throw the chicken out in the street. That was quite good because one of my mother's friends saw me and they said, 'Oh, she's Esperance's daughter.

They must have been imprisoned.' So they actually were able to tell my uncles and the rest of the family that we were taken with the rest of – so we were 136 people in this particular hall where we spent seventeen days. And we were finally released on the eve of *Rosh Hashana* of 1970. **[00:46:00]** And it was very difficult because every so often you would hear a rumour, 'They're going to separate the men from the women,' which meant they will kill the men. I mean, we had absolutely – by that stage we had – there was so many people taken. Whether they were Muslim, Jews, or Christians, they were – including Jews that were taken, tortured, and the bodies never returned. They were all melted in acid. That's it, they disappeared. And so we were very concerned throughout. We were not tortured. Not – certainly not our family. We were questioned, interrogated. My interrogation was early hours of the morning about one o'clock in the morning. I was taken to a very long – big room, and my goodness, I mean, it probably was the length of my house that room. So I stood on one side and the interrogator was on the other side and he was sitting with a young man. So the questions they asked me, 'Who...' – the names of my family. I mentioned the name of my cousin. My cousin was not in a Jewish school and this young man was with my cousin, so he told him that he'd seen me the night before. Anyway, they said to me, they asked me was the house in our name, and these things are not for children to understand. Who bought the house? I had no idea. I was – it's my parent's house, my house. Why did I have all these books in foreign language with me? They went through everything that we had. And then they brought my poor brother to be interrogated, now it was by that stage after two a.m., my brother was asleep, he was five years old. I had to actually position him towards my body so he won't fall, and I was holding him under his arms to keep him awake. They asked him how old he was and he said he was sixty-five. **[00:48:02]** Because at that stage if you were over sixty-five and a Jew you were allowed a passport [both laugh]. So they said to me, 'If your brother lies we will hit you on the soles of your feet with the hose.' Because they did it to one of the ladies. Her name was Carmella, she passed away in Israel last year. Her feet were about that big each. They did hit her with the hose. So that was our interrogation, and they called – oh, there was one – they accused Moshe, whatever his name was, and he was six weeks old. There was a baby with us as well, so – it was just an absolutely dreadful situation.

And was it you, your father, your sister, your brother –?

My brother and my mother. Now, sleeping arrangements were interesting. Of course there were no beds. There were benches and the benches had seats that – like cinema seats that went up. So we had to put our head on one seat, our bodies in the air, and the feet, or the knees and the feet, sort of the rest of the leg, on the other seat. And that's how we slept the night. And we adopted a young man to stay – so we all had our little sort of bench that was our bed and where we sat during the day, where our clothes were, and we took this young man who was on his own. His name was Samir. Sad story is, he and his family were butchered at home. They actually came and – this is after we left, probably 1973 or '74. They cut them to pieces, put them in suitcases that they had prepared because they had passports to leave, and when their sister Joyce – she was in our class – came, she saw her family literally in pieces in suitcases. It was appalling. So that's the story of the young man, Samir. **[00:50:05]**

What's his surname, Samir?

Kushkush. Anyway, so we spent our – 136 people spent their time for seventeen days there, and –

Sorry to interrupt you but were you – you said you were in fear of your father being taken. What did you feel at the time in general? I mean, you were old enough to understand.

Oh yes, absolutely. I mean, you literally understood what the word fear, what the word self-preservation, how you don't look up, your eyes are always down, you never lifted your head. I should say, twice a day we were taken to relieve ourselves, and we were allowed to have a shower. But of course the shower was out in the garden so we were fully dressed and we would wash ourselves. That meant that all the plants died from the soap, so they said those sort of bad word Jews had killed the garden. The thing was, there were some young Jews in that place that they were tortured. A friend of mine tried to call their names and I think they just pulled him and brought him back to our big room. One of them, one of these young men, lives now in Israel. I asked his son a few years ago whether his father ever talked about that episode in his life and he said, no, did I know something? I said, 'Yes, I heard him scream.' And that's all I – because that's the only thing I knew. So he'd never want to talk about it. Although his cousin said she remembers the day he came home, and she said there was not one single bit on

his skin that was not bruised. **[00:52:01]** But we were in general untouched. The problem with us having spent seventeen days there, we could only eat yoghurt, certainly my family, because again of the *kashrut*. I did not eat yoghurt for about twenty-five years after that. The problem was, we had health issues. I got something on my face. I needed surgery on it. My mother had problems under her arm. My father on his back. It's all to do with lack of vitamin. It's malnutrition basically. But they did give us food – well, at least for the others – as in cooked food, once a day. And I recall it was the brother-in-law of the lady that lived opposite my house here, he used to be the person who dished the food out for the rest of the community. But, you know, we were together.

But your father decided – or you decided you can't have the normal food there.

No, no, no. I mean, we absolutely kept to the laws of *kashrut*, so it was a tub of yoghurt that big, three times a day. That was the only thing we ate. And had some water. So – but as I speak to you, I actually see the hall. I see the veranda. I see the garden. I see my schoolfriends. I was with schoolfriends. I see faces. So the day when we were let out as I said, it was the eve of *Rosh Hashana*. It was the day that Gamal Abdel Nasser who was the President of Egypt died. Now, we were very scared in case they do some harm to us. Not that we had anything to do with him. But they just came and said, 'Go home now.' That was it. We went home. And they returned by the way – I think we had something like sixty or eighty dinars with us, and my father had his prayer books. **[00:54:05]** They gave it to him, and they gave the money, and they said, 'Go home,' and everybody went home. That was the end of that episode. Obviously, there was a lot of pressure from overseas Jewry to let us out. Because I think on that day it could have gone either way. We would have either been killed or let out, and really it was hanging in the balance. So it was an interesting – it was a very interesting day. At least it went our way. And we left in '71. That was the earliest time we could leave. The problem was because dad was in *Kasr el Nihaya* it was very difficult for him to get passport. We thought apparently – that was not discussed with us children – of escaping but it wasn't that easy. So we had to hang on as they say until we got our passport.

I wanted to ask you, when were your parents thinking of escaping or leaving first? Do you know?

After my father came out of prison in ’69.

Right.

For sure. And although we were not escaping in 1970, at least then you are near Kurdistan to be able to hear of what people are doing and how they’re doing it. But in fact it was during that period, certainly in ’70, ’71, when you actually would go to class, to the school, and you’ll see one student missing and you think, ‘oh well, they’ve gone’. It could be that they were not well on that day, but you really thought – I mean, you actually could see how the school was – the numbers were dwindling as they were escaping.

For teachers and pupils?

Yes, yes, yes, very much so.

Coming out of that imprisonment, how did you feel?

Nothing. Actually it was nothing. **[00:56:00]** I think its effect on me happened years later. It was – 1993 I went to Beirut, and at that stage – well, they’re still there – Hezbollah said they will kill any Jew who comes into Beirut. I had to go there for work. I don’t know what got into my head to agree to go anyway. I mean, first of all I had to apply for a visa here, and the problem was my sister had gone three weeks before me. So on the visa apparently they asked, ‘What’s the name of your father?’ I said to her at the time, ‘Just put his name was Musa.’ ‘No, no, no, I’m putting Moshe.’ Anyway, three weeks later when I went to get my visa I had to put obviously Moshe, and I remember the one girl saying to the other, ‘Another one of them has come,’ i.e. what a joke these girls are with a name like Moshe Hakham to go to Beirut. The problem was, as I landed they actually couldn’t read the surname properly which is as it should be, Hakham. Every time I heard my surname being mentioned I started to literally feel sick with fear. And I then realised that you learn fear and you actually file it, and I needed it. So I went back into the fear mode of Baghdad, eyes down – I mean, I was literally shaking. I lasted seventeen hours in Beirut, put it this way. I just couldn’t take it. I really couldn’t do it.

I was with a colleague who was at the time pointing at this, that, and the other, and I'm, 'Don't point, please don't point at anything. You should not do that.' There is no way he could appreciate how we felt. It's very difficult. So you do learn fear and you do file it somewhere. Somewhere down there. But I think the experience was, that for twenty years I would say, that every so often I would have a nightmare that I would be chased in the streets of London by somebody or something, about something or who knows what, and then perhaps end up in our house in Baghdad. **[00:58:12]** So the association wasn't that somebody English was chasing me, although I was chased in London. It was to do with Iraq because I always ended up at home. Mostly in the dining-room which had – we used to – it had a huge ledge and we always used to sit on the ledge and were able to look over the fence to the street. So I always ended up there for some reason. It's very interesting, so – it was a nightmare, and it stayed. Does it bother me on a daily basis in my life? No, it does not. It was a long, long time ago but it's a story that needs to be told. It's a story that needs to be got out there, particularly for the younger generation who no longer speak Arabic, who don't know what for instance my nephew and nieces, I have no children. They wouldn't know what happened to us. They can't speak a word of Arabic. Their mother is Ashkenazi. They just have no appreciation. Very interested obviously, but very difficult to understand our feelings. They never went through it. Their father of course remembers it very well, although he was – by the time we left was seven years old. It's an important story to tell.

But do you feel because – that there was an ambivalence to tell it, for obviously all kinds of reasons, that there is – you know, there could be more testimonies or things out there but because people wanted to continue their life, maybe not –?

I mean, particularly with people like me who came here at the age of sixteen, wanted to get on with life, I'm now living in the West, I have left the East, I really don't want to hear about it. I did it because I studied here, I went to work here, my friends were English people. **[01:00:05]** Yes, I still have an accent and people will say, 'Where do you come from?' I was, 'Iraq,' like that with my teeth completely closed. I really didn't want to know, but to the extent that it harmed my Arabic. Yes, I read and I write, but my writing is like a child. That's provided I can spell correctly, my spelling is completely non-existent. I do read. I have forgotten a lot of words. There is no way I can write a proper letter in Arabic anymore, so I did pay the price by

not wanting to associate myself with the country. It's in the last ten years or so that I've sort of – you know, a lot of water has gone under a very high bridge by that stage. I've gone back to yes, enjoying Arabic music from our days as one would say, from the sixties, meeting with Iraqi people of different – or Muslim people from different countries, but mostly Iraqi people. Different religions. It's a joy now to do that, because quite honestly if one looks at the Muslim people, the Iraqi Muslim people, their stories are just as horrific as ours. The reason why they are living in the West is because they could no longer live in Iraq for some reason or another. Torture, killing, expulsion, who knows, you know, everybody has a story to tell, so –

And you said you were in touch with some of your schoolmates, also non-Jewish –?

Jewish and non-Jewish, yes, yes. Obviously, the non-Jews are in Iraq, well-educated. A particular boy comes to mind. I was with him in primary school. Very nice man. He worked for Saddam's government, but that was the normal, the norm. **[01:02:01]** He had to eat, he had to feed his family. As far as the Jewish friends and non-Jews that live abroad, well, that's quite easy now to get in touch. I mean, through Facebook, emails, whatever, WhatsApp. At the beginning of COVID we put together a group of ladies called Reunion. We had a reunion in Israel about six years ago.

Of Frank Iny.

Of – yes, Frank Iny – well, of the schools 19 – people born in '55, '56, '57. And it was a beautiful, wonderful reunion. So some of the ladies got into a group of WhatsApp called Reunion group, and we actually started to talk to each other. We were doing it once a week, and through the dark times of COVID, and now we speak to each other once a month. And it's lovely. Yeah, we've got the United States, Canada, Israel, and London, and it's really very nice. But generally speaking, when we meet face-to-face with all these friends, you know, it's like we never, ever left each other. It's a conversation that continues. And not about the past. We're talking about things that have – are happening now, in the future, or now, our lives, but it's all very normal. There's no pretence. It's all very relaxed. It's very interesting.

But it's a shared history –

Yes. I mean, the background is a shared history. Of course the language because as we are from different countries we tend to speak Arabic which is the common language we have. I mean, I happen to speak Hebrew as well. Not very well, but I do speak it and so I don't have a problem, but the common language is Arabic. And certainly, when we are speaking on WhatsApp once a month, we speak in Arabic. Which is the easiest language for all of us. Judeo-Arabic is something I do use on a daily basis. Certainly I speak to my mother in – but of course that, Judeo-Arabic, is not very well understood by the Muslim community. **[01:04:03]** We sound a little bit like the Christians of the north of Mosul. That's how Arabic is. It's got a lot of Persian, Hebrew, Turkish of course, who knows. French, English. God only knows what sort of mixture that language that we speak in. But, yeah, I mean, I do use it on a daily basis.

Yeah, with your mum.

Yes, yes. And I still sometimes do have to think in Arabic. You know, if there is a complicated matter I do go back to Arabic. It's easier. It makes life much less complicated.

Interesting.

Yes.

With the maths, or accounting or –?

No, no.

No, just –

Issues in life.

Interesting.

Issues in life. No, interestingly enough accounting it's got to be in English because I have never studied accounting. I mean, I would not know how to say balance sheet, debit, credit, in Arabic because I didn't come – well, I say I didn't come across it, my father was an accountant, but, the only thing I learnt from my father and I think maybe they did the same thing in England, is that when you audited accounts you used green ink. I thought I'd just throw that in. Because my father was a certified accountant by the way, who did his certified accountancy in London – well, he didn't do in London, in Baghdad through the British Institute. And that's how we sat our exams, a lot of our exams in Frank Iny. So I did C*ertificat d'état Français*, and *Brève*. This is for the French side. We would go to the French Institute and sit our exams and we were invigilated by people from there. And the papers went back to the country, to say France, they were all marked and then we had the results back. Same thing when we did our GCSEs or whatever they call them. O-levels, A-levels, in my lifetime, **[01:06:03]** everybody sat it at the British Institute, and they were marked in England and returned to us.

Interesting. Carmen, you said at some point you came back to your heritage. What changed or what – for you?

I think sort of I was very grown up by then. Now we're talking about, I was in my fifties, you know, you are always grown up. You know, I've done what I needed to do in my life, I was rather relaxed and it was I had time. I actually had time to go back and to enjoy things. And I found that I do enjoy the Iraqi bits. My sister does not do so much, but if now you say to me, 'There is a *charlghi* – which is our music, sort of an evening of music, oh my goodness me, if it hadn't been for COVID I'd be gone there immediately. I'm still a little bit cautious. But a friend of mine had two afternoons of Arabic music in the summer. Oh, we went there for tea at four o'clock in the afternoon and left at eleven o'clock at night. It was so enjoyable. Just to be back with Iraqi people, speak the language, sing with everybody. I still remember the songs.

Like, what songs, tell us?

Oh, you know, the usual Nadeem al Razani and that sort of thing, you know, it's really Iraqi. Iraqi more than Egyptian, although we do remember the Egyptian songs. So it was quite lovely.

Let's come back to your leaving because you haven't told us exactly – do you want to have a little break?

No. Are we all right –?

Ten to one.

Would you like anything to drink and something? Wait till –

[Break in recording]

Yes, so just to come back to your actual leaving. If you can tell us please.

Yes. We got our passports. **[01:08:00]** I recall that we had to go to a place, again to do with the secret service. We had to present ourselves, even us children, and my – somebody asked my mother her father's name and she was so frightened, and she had to ask my father what her father's name was, she was so frightened she couldn't recall his name. The person who interviewed us was called Muthena. Now, if any Iraqis ever listened to this particular interview, they will all know who Muthena was. He made our life a misery. Shouted, screamed at everybody. Oh gosh, he and the Jews did not get on very well. Anyway, when he went – when we went there – so my mother's name is Esperance, I'm Carmen ,Jane, Benyamin – Benjamin my brother. 'What is the matter with all of you? Can't you ever call any of your children with Arabic names?' They could not pronounce our names and Jewish people generally speaking have got Western names, most of them. Anyhow, we were given a passport and we were told as I think is the case that happened with all the Jews that left at that time with a passport, 'If you do not come back within three months we will confiscate all your assets.' And that for sure seems to have happened. I think I referred to earlier that my father's family had lots of land, particularly agriculture land. They had land in what they call New Baghdad as well, which is part of – now part of Baghdad. Not too far from where the Jewish cemetery is which still exists. Anyway, so there were the passports, wonderful things, in our hand and we left the house the night before. Couldn't sell the house. Anyway, we left our house the night before. **[01:10:01]** Stayed with my mother's cousin, I remember that, and we went to the airport and

somehow my father managed to take with him five *Sifrei Torah* that he gave somewhere in Israel. We don't know what happened to them actually. That was a question we did ask and I don't think we ever got the answer of what happened to these five *Sifrei Torah*, but they were taken from the *Meir Taweig* synagogue. And on that day we left with a Jewish lady and her nephew, and her nephew actually passed away four weeks ago. So my best friend who was the niece of this lady, had come to say bye-bye to her auntie. So there was my best friend, and she still is my best friend, and she and I have been friends for sixty-one years now. She lives in Canada. We were – the glass was between us and we literally were scratching at the glass crying our eyes out. That was the hardest, hardest bit, actually saying bye-bye to my friend. And anyway, we got on the plane and I recall my mother saying to dad, 'Moshe, has this plane taken off yet? Have they folded the wheels?' We flew to Beirut. Just could not wait. But my mother did cry as the plane went round and there was like a little mound, and the airport disappeared from sight. And she said, 'That is it. We have said goodbye to our country of our birth forever.' So it was sad. On the other hand, just couldn't wait for this aeroplane to take off, and be in international space, and just get out of the country. All terribly sad. And so how did I feel about it at the time? I think we needed to go. **[01:12:00]** I would not have wanted to stay there for a day longer. Simply because it was – all my friends were leaving. My class which was full of students at some stage, within a year-and-a-half, we really were quarter. And if there is a place where you have got no friends, there is no live there anymore. I remember a friend of mine who left Egypt, Alexandria, in 1956. He was able to return, as a grown man and he said, 'I went to the synagogue and I looked at where my father sat and where my uncle sat and where this one sat,' and he said, 'they've all gone. And it was the first time I realised I left Egypt forever.' I have never, ever forgotten that and I have sworn I will never go back to Iraq. I don't want to go – that feeling I very well understand, and I just don't want to see it. I want to remember it as it was.

With the people.

With the people. With how it was. In my eyes, it was wonderful. With its badness, but it was lovely. This is how I – I'd like to remember it how it was.

And you felt Iraqi at the time, and you had – did you?

I think I probably still feel Iraqi. I mean, what am I? I'm sort of a naturalised British Iraqi Jew [laughs]. It's a very difficult thing to say, but that's what I am. Definitely naturalised. And I'm very proud by the way now with the passing of the Queen, one has to remember that, that we took the oath of allegiance to the Queen and her heirs, and that was – my goodness me, that was a day where I actually did cry. For being so proud. Absolutely proud, and I suppose relieved to have a British passport. For sure, for sure.

Just before we get there, tell us what were the options? So you found yourselves in Beirut. Where did you go? What were the plans?

We went to Beirut because we really did want a holiday. **[01:14:00]** We just wanted to see what the place looked like, and Beirut was the Paris of the East. It at the time was absolutely wonderful, and everybody spoke French, and we saw the Mediterranean. First time I was looking at a sea because don't forget Iraq has rivers, it has no sea. From there we had to go to Turkey. We knew that this is where we would have to take the decision of where we will go. In the meantime, my father's mother's cousin from Montreal, the Mashaal family got us a visa to go to Canada, to Montreal. So when we arrived to Turkey, to Istanbul, where the Jewish Agency – it's the Israeli Agency – the Jewish Agency was waiting for all – that was the route and the hotel was a known hotel where we would have to stay. We were met by the Jewish Agency. The question is, where do we go? We go to Israel or do we go to Canada? We had no visa for England. I think at the time my father was persuaded that he had young daughters – I was by that stage fourteen-and-a-half and Jane following me – that it is better for us to go to Israel so that we would marry Jews. That was the only reason. So we ended up going to Israel. I think at the time the Jewish Agency paid for our flight from Turkey to Tel Aviv, and so we went to Israel in January '72. We were met by my mother's cousins who had left in 1970. So we grew up with them. It was very familiar faces. And some of her cousins that were born – sorry, born in Iraq but left in '50/'51 that my mother had sort of just about recognised as children. **[01:16:01]** The Israelis suggested we ought to change our names to some Hebrew names, and my mother said, 'I'm getting back on the plane and going back to Iraq,' [laughs], 'I'm not changing my name.' And there was our affair with Israel. In my particular case it lasted a year and eleven months, and the case of my mother and the other two,

my siblings, two years, two-and-a-half years until my father got a job in London. I came here with him. It was important that I should leave before sixteen because I would have got the order to join the army.

What - Why didn't it work or what happened?

We were too delicate. I'm going to put it that way. We were too delicate, cotton wrapped, to live in a tough place like Israel. It was very difficult.

Did you get accommodation? Where did they put you?

Yes. We stayed – as we arrived we stayed for one or two nights at an apartment flat that my grandmother – now, that's a little story – had, that she shared with her nephew – sorry, her grandson, my cousin. And then the Jewish Agency, the *Sochnut* paid for us, I suppose they must have paid, to go to an *Ulpan* for six months in Netanya in a place called *Hof HaYarok* which is called – it's Green Beach. We went there and spent six months. My parents were studying Hebrew on a daily basis in the *Ulpan* and Jane and I went to school in Netanya. I can't remember the name of the school. But in this particular *Ulpan* it was very interesting. The people that were there were all from the USSR – it was still the USSR at the time – and Romania. **[01:18:02]** We were the only Iraqis, plus the old lady and her nephew that we were together – when we were together in the airport in Baghdad. And the problem was with most of the Russians and the Romanians, they could not – we had no language. They did not speak English. The Romanians, at least if you spoke French and they spoke Romanian, because of the Latin you just about can say my name is so-and-so, what is your name? With the Russians, they mostly spoke Yiddish and there was no communication. But we were really taught Hebrew very, very quickly. It was the way we were all educated in the language. So within a week at least we could sort of just about make friends. And my sister has now a Russian friend that she met in this *Ulpan* who is still her friend up to today who actually married an Iraqi boy who was with Jane in Jane's class in Baghdad. So it was an interesting time. They were, the Russians were beautifully – all very well-educated, and yeah, so we were there for six months. From then on, I don't know how the mortgage was arranged but there were arrangements for new immigrants, that you could get a mortgage and they were newly built homes, which we

had a home in an apartment in Tel Aviv. In fact, the block of flats where we lived in, the entrance where we lived in, one of the Hakham family lived there. Again, they were from my classroom and relations of ours. I think there were about three/four Iraqi families in the block. And you can import furniture tax-free. Again, that was something to do with all new immigrants, nothing specific to us. So we had a nice flat but it was difficult. **[01:20:01]** They used to say in Hebrew *chaim kashim*, 'life is difficult', and it was difficult. Israel changed a lot in the last forty/fifty years. It's not the same as it was in the early seventies. It's much nicer now. People speak English, they're much more polite. They still shove you when you get on the bus, but it's part of the beauty of visiting Israel now, but it was very difficult in our time. And it was very important that I – I did not want to go to the army and it was important that I do not wear trousers and that sort of thing. Anyway, when I left Israel, I had issues with the headmaster. So I had to tell him I was getting married in London. He just – unfortunately the headmaster was a nightmare.

In the school in Tel Aviv?

In the school in Tel Aviv. For me probably it was just as bad as being in Iraq being with him. He was a nightmare of a man. Anyway, so I had to get a piece of paper from one of the Rabbis who was a friend of my grandfather, to say that I come from a family of religious people. This letter I carried when I left the country, but when I eventually received the order to join the army, that my mother received on my behalf, because I had already come here with my father, I had to go to the Israeli consulate, hand them the letter, and say, 'I'm not going to go to the army on religious grounds.' I had to take my nail varnish off and – I mean, we are religious in Iraq, but we are very modern. You know, we used to have chignon and open dresses and paint our nails. You know, it's a different type – we presented ourselves differently than I suppose the religious people in the West. So I sort of had to not shake hands and – then my Israeli passport expired and they refused to renew it. **[01:22:08]** They said I have to go back to Israel. Absolutely I had no intention of going. By that stage they sent me the piece of paper to say I did not need to go to the army. And we had to write to the Home Office and say I have become Stateless. I had no Iraqi passport because that had expired. The Israeli passport would not be renewed and the Home Office granted me *laissez-passer* as a, as a, I guess, a refugee of some sort here, and that's what happened to all of us. Eventually all the family although, you know,

they had Israeli passports, as they expired they didn't go back to Israel and we all became – we all had to have *laissez-passer* until we became British subjects. So even to go for a day to France we used to have to get a visa. It was a bit of a nightmare, but it was a positive nightmare if there is such a word, a positive nightmare. It was a good thing.

And just understand. So you didn't – was it – you didn't want to go to the army on religious grounds or other grounds?

Religious grounds for sure. I had – you know, we had just come from Iraq. We're a very traditional family. The idea of spending a night outside my parent's house was just not – really not on. And to go and spend some time with boys as well, outside my parent's house, really it was just not the way I wanted to conduct my life or my parents wanted me to conduct my life.

So it was a culture clash really.

It was, it was, from day one. I mean, literally from the minute we arrived at the airport, as I said to you, 'You change your name from Carmen to Carmit or Carmel or God only knows what. My mother's name is Esperance which is – 'Oh well, you know, you have to change your name. This is a foreign name,' you know, just –

And did your parents feel the same? **[01:24:00]**

Yes, yes, yes.

So it wasn't how they wanted to live.

No, no. I mean, we were pleased to have left. And I didn't go for about thirty years, thirty-two years. So it was pleasant when I returned to see the family. I now – putting COVID aside – try to go at least once a year. I quite enjoy going there now. Again, I'm older, I am not part of society, it's a different thing all together. I'm meeting my family which is always a pleasure. I'm meeting my schoolfriend which is a pleasure. It's a different life now.

But did they also feel that at that point Iraqi Jews were not well treated in Israel?

Well, yes. I mean, I didn't want to talk about that, but yes, I mean, that really was as they say in Hebrew – the basic point was it was the Ashkenazi and the Sephardim. I did find it very, very difficult to live with. There was us living in Iraq, being persecuted as Jews, which to a certain extent I could understand, because you were brought up in such a way that one day you'll have to leave the country, because we're different. Okay, that's fine. Then I go with the Jews and I actually used to think, well, there can't be a prison in Israel because there'll be no Jewish thieves and no murderers. And then there you are living with Jews, and the discrimination was just absolutely unbelievable.

Tell us an example, Carmen.

For instance, now my father was a blonde man with green eyes. He would apply for a job. As a new immigrant obviously his Hebrew was not the best, but he spoke Hebrew as a religious man all the way from Iraq. So they ask him the country of birth. So he was a qualified accountant, qualified from the United Kingdom, and somebody suggested perhaps he should wash dishes in a hotel. It was really that bad. **[01:26:02]** It was absolutely dreadful. And certainly the problems I had with my headmaster were all to do with the fact that I was born in Iraq. He absolutely hated our colour, as he put it. Although [sighs], I think it was in his time, in his days of that particular headmaster, that the assistant headmaster was of Iraqi extraction. He certainly spoke our Arabic. Because in my class in Ironi Tet, in the school, our chemistry teacher, the gentleman I'm referring to, the Iraqi one – there were three Iraqis all from the same class from Baghdad and the problem is, none of us could understand the elements in Hebrew. So he would have to translate into English to us, because we were educated in an English system, so he took it upon himself to tell us everything in English. This is how chemistry was an easy subject. History I found it almost impossible, because I actually never learnt anything about medieval Europe or anything about Europe. Because it was in Hebrew. There were no *nekudot* so I could not read it, and so I absolutely failed history miserably. I mean, I just did not – I suppose I didn't want to learn Hebrew, God only knows. So I had to make up for the lack of my history knowledge by doing history classes as an older student. So I sort of joined

all sorts of history society to make up for what I have lost, because the history I did in Iraq was mostly Islamic history.

But you feel there was no understanding really for the situation.

No.

For the Iraqi Jews. Where they had come from or –

I don't know about Iraqi Jews, but certainly *Mizrachim*, Eastern Jews. **[01:28:00]** I mean, that I think was the story of most of the *Mizrachim* as I was led to understand and believe. That that was the story. So I really just found it very difficult to cope in Israel mentally, because I left Iraq as I said before, as a Jew. I did not want to go through something similar with Jewish people, so I did say at the time to my parents, 'I'm dying a thousand deaths a day in this country. Do something. Get me out of here.' I said, 'I don't care what we do, how I do it, I don't care if I never went to school, I don't care if I clean houses, just get me out of here.'

So were you the driving force?

Very much so. It was on a daily basis. And then my grandmother, my mother's mother – I need to tell her little story of how she left Iraq in a minute – she had cancer and she was so badly treated by the doctors, by the hospital, to the extent that when she needed morphine injection the doctor or the nurse couldn't be bothered to come. They said to my mother, 'Oh, just open – crack the ampule and let her drink it.' She said, 'I'll kill her.' They said, 'So what, she's dying.' That was how – I know she was eighty-two but there was no need to treat an older person in that manner. That was – she passed away second day of *Pesach* 1973 and as far as I'm concerned that was the end of my life in Israel. I was not going to stay there. If it meant I had to swim through the Mediterranean, I did not care. I had to get out. Really, that was the turning point. In fact, in all our lives. Again, I remember the difficult of getting her a burial certificate because she died in a hospice – whatever they called it at the time, the equivalent of a hospice, and they did not have her history, so they said they will not grant a death certificate. **[01:30:03]** So her nephew who was brought up in Israel had to go and scream

and shout. They knew what to do. And so he screamed and shouted, got the piece of paper, and got my poor Nana buried. Now my grandmother's story is quite an interesting one, leaving Iraq. My cousin was eighteen/nineteen when he left Iraq, and he said he would take Nana. She was his grandmother as well, with him. So they escaped through Iraq. My poor grandmother, poor woman, had to – because she was elderly they actually gave her a donkey. Normally you would have to walk all the way to Iran. So they gave her a donkey. Poor woman fell off the donkey, so she said to Albert my cousin, 'Please, please, you just go on your own and just leave me be.' 'No.' He was a good boy. He put her back on the donkey and this is how my poor grandmother ended up in Iran in Tehran, and then she flew to Tel Aviv with my cousin. But she had her brothers there, so she – although she and my cousin were given an apartment, she stayed with her brothers until my mother came and then she moved with us, when we got our own apartment. So it was nice to have some time with Nana anyway, when she was well.

And then she passed away before you left.

Yes, yes, yes. Yes, my grandmother. And when I go to Israel I visit her grave. Every time I go there. Now, talking about graves, there's an interesting thing about finding graves in Iraq of my grandparents. Now, much earlier on, about ten years ago or so, someone found my paternal grandmother's grave in Baghdad and sent me a photo of the stone which I have somewhere filed on my computer. **[01:32:00]** And about three years ago or four years ago, certainly by 2019, I was reading about somebody in Montreal who decided to refurbish his grandfather's grave in Baghdad and said that he would pay for another 100 graves to be refurbished. Now, as I was just reading this I was saying to my mother, 'Oh, what a shame, I wonder...' – in 1960, '61 the old graveyard was moved. I think they wanted to build something. So the President, Abd al-Karim Qasim, called the Chief Rabbi, Hakham Sasson, and said that's what he wanted to do. Hakham Sasson did warn him, he said to him, 'Don't touch the dead.' Anyway, the President got murdered but whether that was as a result or not, who knows? Anyhow, so all the men had to be involved in moving the bodies, the remains, of the family. So on that particular night goodness only knows what made me ask, 'Do you think your brother moved your father's body from the old graveyard to the new one?' She said, 'Well, he must have done. Everybody else did it.' Now, I remember my father saying that about his father and about his grandfather. So anyway, then I got the email and I was looking through it and I

started to read the names. Now, it's very difficult. First of all, not all of them are very, very well-written. My Hebrew is poor enough for me not to be able to read every name. Then I discovered somebody has put all the names at the bottom, and the next time I look and there was my mother's father's grave. They did actually put it all beautifully together. I burst into tears and I said, 'No one has thought about him since the 1940s'. **[01:34:01]** My mother – she was very, very young – hardly remembers her father. And there was my grandfather's grave. So we have now – the only person that we do not have the grave for is Hakham Binyamin, my father's father.

And where is that grave of your grandfather?

Baghdad.

In Baghdad.

In Baghdad, yeah, yeah.

And it's well-kept.

Certainly my grandmother's was, about – as I said, the photo goes to about ten years ago at least. My grandfather about 2019, 2018. Yes, that was definitely refurbished and it was in a good state. As to what happened to the rest of the family, the Hakhamim as in Hakham Yosef Chaim, Hakham Moshe, I don't know. I do not know what happened to them. I mean, they have quite a few Hakhamim in the family. I've no idea what happened to all of those, but as far as I know interestingly enough, Muslim women – this is after we left – who have issues in their life like they want to get pregnant and cannot, they go and visit the graves of the Hakhamim and they pray, and they believe that will make – ease them into whatever they wanted to – they had an issue with.

That's interesting.

Yes.

I've heard that as well.

Yes. Even though we left and they probably hardly know what the word Jew means, they would still believe.

Can they access the cemetery?

Yes, yes.

They can--? Is it open, so –

It is, I think, by appointment of some sort or another. There are – from what we can understand, there are two fences around it and in the days of Saddam he made sure that no harm will come to it. All of a sudden he seemed to have liked us as much as they guarded *Meir Taweig* synagogue which was the last one left that I had mentioned before, and he made sure that – actually whoever was left in Iraq, he was pretty careful with them, Saddam, that no harm came to them. But after the invasion I think again the cemetery was re-protected, because it became – it's in an area where I think a lot of Shi'a lived and they had to protect it again. **[01:36:07]**

And the synagogue?

It's still around, it's still around. I mean, obviously there's no *minyan* or anything of the sort but it's still around. Every so often you would get a picture of the outside at least. On Facebook I see quite a lot of films sent by Iraqi people, Muslim people that live there and there will walk through somewhere and they'll say, 'Oh, this is where the Jews were, and this is their *salaat'* i.e. this is their synagogue. So that would have been *Meir Taweig*.

Thank you Carmen. I think we should have a break.

Sure.

And then start from your –

[Break in recording]

Yes, so I think let's go back to the time when you then actually arrived in England. So maybe tell us a little bit from your arrival.

Sure. Well, I arrived here in January '74 with my father because – not knowing if he can or can't work and how we are going to settle. Of course before we arrived he had to have a work permit. You can't just get a job, well at least at that time you could not get a job unless you had a special talent, something different. In his particular case were his languages, and that allowed him to be able to get a work permit from an employer, and so he was able to work. I was – of course at that stage I was still studying. Although I could speak English, English was not a problem for me, I still needed just to – one of the problems was of course the accents. The accents were pretty difficult to understand, particularly if they were Cockney. Mind you, I never got used to the Newcastle accent, even now. **[01:38:01]** Sorry, people from Newcastle. Or from Glasgow. But that was difficult because we were taught the Queen's English.

But had you finished school at that point?

No, no, no. I was sixteen.

Yes.

So I had to carry on. And as part of my studies I actually studied accountancy, so that's what got me into accountancy, and I've always said, 'I shall never become like my father and become an accountant. I will become an engineer.' So I became an accountant. Never say no to anything, which was the easiest thing, so that was to start with so I was studying. And then when – and actually, when I mentioned that my father was in prison and I was recounting their names, one of the gentlemen used to rent rooms and we lived in I think number forty-three Harrington Gardens, and we lived in – we had a whole floor, and our own bathroom. So we stayed there until dad was settled workwise, and then we rented a little flat in Golders Green,

and then my mother and my brother and sister came. The problem that – my brother could not speak English, could not read and write. I think by watching cartoons or whatever he was watching on television at the time, and I think he had classes as well, they gave him a one hour class a day, within a month he was absolutely fine. And he has actually forgotten Arabic. He understands what we say to him. Sometimes he gets words wrong, but he can't really speak very well, like feminine and masculine are completely mixed up in his mind, and that sort of thing.

But he was the youngest.

The youngest, absolutely. So by the time he arrived here he would have been about nine because he studied in Israel, he went to school. He reads Hebrew, he understands Hebrew. He can't speak it. He's just not very fluent in it. **[01:40:01]** So that really is the start. So when mother came it was August '74 and I actually had a Sunday job. I had saved enough money and I went on holiday on my own to Switzerland with Woman's Magazine, holiday, Page & Moy. Well, there you go. Gosh. Brain works going backwards, not where it is now. And then we bought a house in Hendon about a year later, something like that and, you know, doing one thing or another. Father working, we at school, then universities, for sister and then brother, and I did accountancy. At that time when you did certified accountancy you can work and study which was a very, very difficult thing to do but that's how I did it. And before that, I had to do the Institute – Association of Accounting Technicians as it's known nowadays, so actually it took me about seven years to do the accountancy. And, er, excellent profession. It made me – I ended up with a fantastic career, gladly to say not in accountancy.

What career? What did you do?

We ended up in asset management. So I work with my sister and we've got a partner and our work is in emerging markets. We have now – he is in his seventies, we are getting on in our sixties, so we have – and because of COVID we worked from home and then the lease was coming for renewal during COVID which we never – we did not renew, and then we decided we would shrink the business. It's something we had been talking about in the past. So we are now working from home, which works quite well for us, and we will need to shrink it a little

bit more, and I suppose at some stage retirement in its form, shape, or manner will loom in say three, four years' time. **[01:42:08]** So, you know, that's sort of a very quick run through the career.

Can I ask you did you have family in England or did you have any friends when you came?

Yes. We had family, we had friends here. My cousins, two of them were here. My other cousin married to my father's brother, were living in Holland. They came after we came here, but I actually visited them on several occasions in Holland when they were living there. And schoolfriends, friends of my parents. In fact, when my father got his work permit and he was working here, it was through a friend of the family. They had a textile business in Regent Street and Oxford Street and he worked for them. So it helped – he stayed within the Iraqi community working, but certainly his languages helped because they were open to the tourists. Albeit at the time there were a lot of Japanese tourists. They used to come and buy material for men's coats and suits, and that's what they used to sell.

And did they join a synagogue?

Yes. My parents – and my mother still is – members of Ohel David in Golders Green. It's a synagogue I think – please members, older members, forgive me if I'm getting it wrong – I think it was established in 1960, 61 by the Iraqi Indian community. So the community, their families would have left Iraq in the early twenties – sorry, in the early 20th century, or late 19th century, went to India, mostly in Calcutta, and they left in the fifties and the sixties, came here, established the synagogue. **[01:44:04]** So I would be about right. It used to be called the Lincoln Institute. The land was given to them by the Foundation. So they joined the synagogue and eventually quite a lot of the Iraqi community of our days who lived around the area joined as well. And it sort of seem to have moved from Indian Iraqi to an Iraqi synagogue and at the moment the President is an Iraqi person from our community.

It's in Golders Green.

In Golders Green.

Are you a member there as well?

No, I'm a member of Lauderdale Road, so I actually belong to the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue which is – their customs and the prayers are quite different from ours, but I've got so used to it now that I would not know what to do in an Iraqi synagogue. Other from *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* I have stayed into the *Mizrahi* service and now I go to either the *Mizrahi* service for *Rosh Hashana* at Lauderdale Road, and for *Yom Kippur,* because I do not drive, there is a *Mizrahi* synagogue in Edgware, in Edgwarebury Lane. I stay with my mother normally on that day, the eve on the day, and I go to that synagogue. That's about the only prayers I understand, but otherwise Lauderdale Road and I've got quite used to the *minhag* there.

But your parents stayed with Ohel David.

Ohel David, and my mother is still a member of Ohel David, yeah.

And do you think it helped them that synagogue membership to kind of feel at home or –?

I don't think so, no. I think the most important thing was there was a community here so they came into a community that they knew from Iraq. Same friends, same faces, I suppose same conversations. My father's relationship with the synagogue was purely for religious grounds. He obviously needed to belong to a synagogue. He needed to do his prayers. So I really don't think it made any difference. **[01:46:01]** And again, the people who sat around him were actually all Iraqis from Baghdad, who he was meeting socially anyhow. So, I think the important thing about coming to London was there was a society, there was a community already in place, so one never really felt a stranger at all.

Is it the same for you as well would you say?

No. We went straight into British society, absolutely. I mean, I really – I knew I had friends and we would be invited to weddings, and I would meet them there, but apart from, 'Hello,

how are you?', it was a very stunted conversation because we had really completely left that society. Our ideas were completely different. The way we wanted to conduct our lives, and particularly in the business we went in, the time we came at, and I think if you look at the generation of who would have been my children, and what we did is one and the same. So people of my age would have – most of the ladies would have got married and looked after children, at least to start with, while we went straight into careers. And the careers were pretty dynamic. We were hardly in England at the time. So quite honestly, I don't think we would have been looked at quite positively I would say by the Iraqi community. It wasn't the sort of done thing by girls at the time to travel then, both of us –

You and your sister.

Yeah.

Hmm-mm.

As we worked together. Although we worked together she did one thing, I did another thing and they were completely different parts of work. She looked after quoted as in stock markets. I looked after unquoted. **[01:48:01]** And it's different countries, different skills, but it's all part of what we term emerging markets.

And you feel that Britain gave you that opportunity.

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think if we had not come here, if we had not been educated here – and if I just look at the education system, certainly in our time – I do not know how schools are nowadays here, but certainly in our time it was very, very – the education system here was excellent. And not to forget that I, but not my sister, had been studying towards O-levels in Iraq. So my English, the command of my English was very good. The books I studied there were the same books as being studied here, so really there was not that bit of difference, although I had two years in between when I was in Israel and of course my education had changed and it had progressed. And although it was done in Hebrew, it was not such a difficult thing coming here and just continuing with what we had already started. But certainly the fact

that I spoke English made a lot of difference because from day one you sort of just merge into –

[Inaud].

Absolutely, go into society. And we were – actually I suppose I was really – I felt I was quite well accepted. It was not a problem. People asked where I came from. As I said, with sort of closed teeth, 'Iraq,' but some people didn't even know where Iraq was. Everybody said, 'Iran,' and you correct it and say, 'No, it's the country next door,' and that was that. And it was sort of – it was never – foreigners – there were so few foreigners at the time that being a foreigner was never an issue. **[01:50:00]** Even with the real English people it was not an issue because –

You never felt any problems.

No, no, not as a foreigner. Absolutely not. There was just no prejudice, no bad word being said. People were fascinated. What did we wear? What did we eat? How did we live? What were our houses like? But it was all asked in a very friendly fashion, because people were just interested. You know, 'Oh, it's an exotic place,' and that is how we were – I suppose we were termed as exotic people. So, yeah, and of course there was always a reminder of home which is the British Museum. Now, it depends how people feel. I feel it was an excellent thing that the British got all the – well, whatever artifacts from Iraq that they have in the British Museum. At least they're well-kept and looked after. They would have been destroyed with one thing or another, so one can always go and visit and see what is left. Now, a few years ago I took my nephew on an organised tour of the British Museum, organised by the LSJS, it's a Jewish organisation, and the guide was taking us around and showing us this, that, and the other. Well, I've actually been to these places physically to where these artifacts have come from, and I recall as we had a break – it was about a three-hour tour, and I recall saying to the lady, 'You know, I was born and brought up in Iraq and left,' and I said, 'my nephew was born here.' And she actually, at the end of the talk she said, 'Well, look at the full circle. They went back,' she pointed at me, 'and then they left and that's the product,' and then she pointed at my nephew. And in a way it was sad, because then when she was pointing at my nephew who was born

here, it's saying that's the end of their history. The Jewish history in Iraq. But in a way it was nice that we still – we survived, and well, and can't complain and we've made a life. **[01:52:11]** So it was – but it's nice to go and visit every so often and sort of –

What do you look for then in the Museum in particular?

I think what is interesting is two things. One is the Biblical sense of things, so you actually can read the story in the Bible, particularly in Genesis. And then I had done ancient Iraqi history as part of my curriculum at school which I have not forgotten, so you're actually marrying both of them together. And that is quite interesting because then you realise – I'm talking here with my religious hat on, that the Bible is a true story. Even if you think it's a story, but it is a true story because there are the bits that are showing you what happened and there is the book telling you what the story is. So there is the story and there is the bit. And this particular statue, or whatever it is, is actually not been done because somebody held the Bible in their hand because there was no Bible at the time, so it must have been a true story. And from that particular point it's quite lovely. I mean, of course the other thing – that's on the Jewish side, but of course it's very lovely to see Iraqi artifacts. Well, Mesopotamian as it was at the time.

Yeah, yeah, interesting.

Yes.

Yeah, a circle. Yeah. And your parents, they adapted here.

Yes.

And did they miss Iraq or did they – how did they feel?

No, no. I think – I mean, certainly my father never, ever, ever, missed Iraq. You know, you would get a very short day here, well, in the winter sort of it's grim, it's dark most of the day. **[01:54:01]** And even when you sort of suggested that it's a grim day today because it's raining

or snowing and it's sort of very dark at three-thirty in the evening, and he would say, 'No, no, you should be very, very grateful. It's a very lovely country. At least you can then appreciate the summer and you appreciate daylight.' He always actually saw – not that he was an optimistic person, in fact he probably wasn't, but he saw the good things of not being in Iraq. That was the most important thing for him, and I think – and actually, so are we – being grateful living here. I think that is something that is very important for us as foreigners. I still feel foreign. Not because anybody makes me feel foreign, because I am a foreigner. But it is – I am grateful, I really am, to be living here. And yes, I mean, I'm part of society now, yes, government gets – what the party is, it makes no difference, we're not going to go into politics – it gets on my nerves. Economy gets on my nerves, and all that sort of thing, and we've all got problems and that. But, with all that which is better, living here or living in Iraq? Oh my goodness me, no need to – I mean, one can be grateful from morning to night for being here. Actually, I was saying that Michael Palin has done a series of being in Iraq. It was last week and it was two nights ago. Two nights ago I did not see it. Apparently he went to Baghdad. I did feel I could – I can't do it. I really didn't want to see Baghdad. I just want to remember it as it was. And a friend of mine, an English girl, made a comment, 'There are no women in the streets, it's all men.' I mean, my comment was, 'Well, we were very Western.' Dressed in Western clothes, short clothes, long hair for men, painted our nails, danced – I mean, I recall my cousin, older than me, dancing the Charleston – having parties. **[01:56:03]** It was a very Westernised society. I just don't want to see what's happened to it now. If they're happy, I'm very happy for them, but the break has happened. It's been many, many years. It's the country of my birth. It was lovely. It was lovely to walk by the Tigris, it was lovely to eat the fish, the *masgouf*, and – finished. Must move on.

For you.

Yes, yes. And you were asking whether my mother adapted. Yes, she has. I think the issue is that even in my mother's days, my mother was educated at *Alliance Française*. As everybody, even her mother – I was actually only asking her yesterday if her mother could read and write Arabic and she said, 'No, but she could read and write French,' because of the Ottomans and because of the *Alliance*. So my grandfather, Hakham Benyamin was exactly the same. He actually did not know any English. He did learn Arabic. He could read and write, but French

was his language. And my father told me at the time when the Second World War started and the news was coming into Baghdad in English, my grandfather did not understand English because that was not the system of their education. They were educated in French, again through the *Alliance* which had an absolute enormous effect on all of us. It Westernised everybody. And then I don't know when the English system was introduced into Frank Iny. I really have – it's an interesting point that someone will know much better than I do. I think the system was there even in father's days, I would say. So it probably was introduced in the 1930s, the English system, or perhaps when the British came into Iraq after the First World War.

Yeah.

[01:58:02] But it helped us be very international and as the Iraqi Jews worked mostly in trade and the trade was with other countries mostly English speaking countries, and knowing English was extremely important, it wasn't – the gap interestingly enough between Iraq and England was much narrower than Iraq and Israel.

Yeah, that's really interesting.

Absolutely. And having been one country away with Jordan in between, you'd think it would be the same, and it was not.

Yeah, we've heard that. I mean, historically it makes sense in some way because obviously of the education system and, you know –

Yes, yes. No, it was much easier living here. It really – I mean, I can't recall a day when I sort of found it, oh gosh, what a slog having come to England. And I actually came in the worst time in '74 when the strikes – they had the three-day working. I remember my cousin's wife wearing a coat to work and the first time I saw fingerless gloves because she was a secretary and she had to type, so she had to wear gloves in the office because her poor hands were frozen. So she could only sort of produce her little fingers. The underground trains were freezing cold. The rubbish was not collected. But even then, do you know what –

Well, let's hope [both laugh] –

Well, let's hope we don't go through the same thing. But even then it was beautiful. I don't think I'll appreciate it now [laughs].

But you said you were talking earlier about how happy you were to get the British passport.

Absolutely.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Yes. Now, in our days, seventies, eighties, in general Conservative governments did not look favourably upon foreigners, while Labour governments did. **[02:00:00]** Now, my father decided that we ought to wait until there is a Labour government in play before we actually apply for citizenship. Now, Mrs Thatcher had won the elections – of course it depends how you felt about it. Wonderful times. Anyway. But the problem was we had one Conservative government after another and it was getting ridiculous. And as I was saying we became Stateless so we had *laissez-passer*. We couldn't live with *laissez-passer,* so in the end the decision was taken that we will apply through a Conservative government and see what happens. It took about two-and-a-half years for the Home Office to reply and said they are sending us somebody to interview us. Now, that would have been MI6, somebody dressed in a suit. At that time I had already moved out of home, but I was interviewed at my parent's house. I was told exactly what to have. Any savings books – as you remember if you saved in a building society you had a little booklet – rates books, my driving licence if I had one, anything about me sort of thing. So obviously I was old enough to be interviewed separately from my parents. My parents were present when my sister – certainly when my brother was interviewed. He was a minor. I had to show my savings accounts so that they know I had money. My rates that I was paying them. That I had no endorsements on my driving licence when it came out of its pocket, which was a piece of paper which was quite long, and he was looking at that. Now, in his file I had actually my Israeli passport. I mean, you can see it because it became theirs when we sent it, when we got the *laissez-passer*. I remember saying,

'Can I please keep it? It has got a stamp from San Marino,' and he said, 'No.' **[02:02:01]** Anyway, that was fine, no problem. Anyway, after interviewing us which I think took about three hours for all of us to be interviewed – of course the biggest interview was my father – the chap said, 'I can't see why you should not become British citizens as long as you don't make any claims...' as used to be known at the time, DHSS. Now interestingly enough at the time, I think you had two days off sick where the company would pay your first two days and then the DHSS would pay the rest of the sickness. I remember going to personnel and saying to them, 'If I'm not well make sure I don't get paid by the DHSS'. So that was quite important. And the other thing they wanted after the interview, we had to give them the names of two British subjects, one of them was a homeowner, and they will have to contact them to get reference. So one of them, in my particular case, was a lady I worked for and the other one was a gentleman who was my boss. They were phoned, I had to give their phone numbers. They phoned them up and I recall they asked Wendy, 'Does she have any allegiances to parties that are not the usual parties,' i.e. not Labour or Conservative? And she said, 'No, no, not at all.' 'How is her English?' 'Absolutely fine, that's what she speaks at work all day long.' And they asked my boss, 'What sort of employee...?' I don't know what that meant, what sort of employee I was. And that was that. I think they probably did the same with my father. My mother was not working, and my brother and sister were students. And a few weeks later we received a letter and it said we need to go to a notary and take the oath of allegiance, and then we will get a passport at some stage. **[02:04:00]** We did go to the notary. I have to say, we did not put our hands on the Bible because again for religious reasons, but we affirmed our allegiance to the Queen and her heirs. And he signed the papers, the papers were submitted back to the Home Office, and we were then sent our naturalisation certificates that were really the equivalent of our birth certificates. We then applied for passports and we became British, thank the Lord, I would say. But I should have said actually when we first came to England, I don't know if it happens now, we had to register with the Metropolitan Police in Holborn. I think that used to be there – it's not Scotland Yard. The equivalent of their head office. It was a big thing, and we paid 50p for that green book which was our registration with the police. I don't know why, who, or what, or where. I do know I've got this booklet somewhere lying about. So, it wasn't easy at that time to become British. You had to prove that you were working. Obviously, we had the work permits first. So the work permit, my father's work permit – I was here on his work permit because he was looking after me. I was still a minor.

So he had to have it renewed for four consecutive years and from the fifth year there was no need to renew. We became then permanent residents in this country. So before that it was a one year residency only.

So when did you become British?

I can't recall. It was somewhere in the middle of the 1980s. So it took quite a while. Quite a while.

Yeah.

Waiting for the Labour government which didn't come, but anyway.

Yeah, interesting. So just to come back to the topic of women.

Yes. [Coughs] Excuse me. **[02:06:00]**

Do you think – because I also know in the older generation some women started to work. Again, they wouldn't necessarily have worked in Baghdad or –

No. I think I probably do know one lady, who passed away unfortunately, that you refer to. In fact, that's how I came across Daisy. I was watching the programme, Jacqueline Khazoum. I actually then sent a message to her sister. Now, she was well-educated in Iraq. She worked in Iraq and she worked here, she worked with her sister, with Suad. But they were really very far and few between. I think my – I mean, my mother was educated, but what was her education like? She finished secondary school but I'm not so sure secondary school was as good as say, my secondary school was. And they did at the time a lot of work in the *atilier* so that they will know how to make a dress, and how to knit, but not for a living obviously. They just learned it as the equivalent of what is finishing school.

And was there pressure on you to get married, to have a family?

Oh, yes, absolutely. I mean, absolutely. There's a saying in Arabic *Bufraha, Bufraha, Bufraha* and of course the nagging – not of my father, but the nagging of my mother, you know, made one's head fall off. You know, 'When are you getting married? When are you getting married? When are you getting married?' You know, yes, it was there but I think my father was very understanding interestingly enough. For a man you would think he would be much more old-fashioned than a mother would be, but he could see that our careers meant that we would have to be travelling all the time. Now, I have to say I don't believe – having been looked after by a mother who was at home, which was a wonderful upbringing, I really did not believe that I could be a working mother and – well, working and being a mother. **[02:08:00]** I really couldn't do it. Particularly in my particular case, when I was travelling I physically was not present in the country. It would have been terribly, terribly difficult. It's a choice. You marry work, you marry a man. So one or the other. I decided to marry work and stay with a man I'm married to for thirty-two years. So that was the choice [laughs]. Yes, and now I find – for the first time ever on Sunday I actually said to my brother *bufrah awladic* i.e. may your children get married. I've got a twenty-eight-year-old nephew and a twenty-six-year-old niece. I would like them to get married. And it's now – although I've always said, 'I will never say it to anyone,' oh my goodness, 'Wouldn't it be nice if you were to go there, to meet someone? Would it be nice?' And I actually – if I ever hear of youngsters meeting somewhere in London where my niece lives – my nephew does not live in London – I would always say, 'Why don't you go to this place? Why don't you go to the other place?' So there is me saying I shall never nag a child. It's started [laughs]. We've even started with the twenty-year-old niece who I think is a little bit too young for that, but – yes. I think it's the tradition.

Yeah.

Parents want to see their children settled, and they feel they settle when they are married, rightly or wrongly. Well, at least – life was that when the children married whether a boy or a girl, they did settle because they had their family and it was, marriage was for life. Whether they were happy or unhappy, at the time, that's how it was. It was a very, very rare occurrence for people of my parent's age to be divorced. I suppose really nowadays things have moved on and, you know, that's how life is, and there are a lot of single people of all different ages, but it's just nice to just have a structure. **[02:10:13]** However one wishes the structure to work.

Yeah, exactly. And you feel there is still in London today an Iraqi Jewish community?

Oh, yes.

Yeah?

It's alive and well, I'm very, very glad to say. And may we always meet with happiness, and weddings, and engagements, and good fun. But yes, absolutely. Weddings and parties, it's purely Jewish Iraqi get-togethers. And they are supportive, really they are. It's a good community. It's supportive of – if you want something, they really would come running. And it doesn't matter how friendly or unfriendly you are with them as such. Because yes, of course we all make special friends whoever they are but as a wider community, you know, you walk into it and there it is. It's very supportive of all of us. There are people who are my mother's friends who know who I am as much as there are people who are younger than me who will know who I am. And this is how we sort of – because we all know sort of three generations –

Families, yeah.

Exactly. We know three generations in all these families.

And do you think it will continue in some way?

Unfortunately, I think not because – I'll tell you why I say that. First of all, by the virtue of the fact that we have all as families moved out of one country, and you would get one family where the brothers and sisters live in different countries, you don't have – the cousins yes, they will know who their cousins are, but if you don't live with the people, you don't have the closeness that we have. For instance, I have a cousin I was brought up with in Baghdad and she has a daughter who's again my cousin – don't ask how because of the inter-marriage, two cousin. Now, I'm much closer with the mother than with the sister – with the daughter, and she always says to me, 'Why?' **[02:12:05]** I said, 'Because I was brought up with her in Baghdad.' I don't know why. It's something – it's perhaps because I used to see her nearly every day. Well,

here as you know, it's by appointment, you know. Obviously, we are all doing – our days are much longer here. That's the issue. In Iraq you had – you started early in the morning, you came home for lunch, then it depends what people did. We'd go back to work, but quite often you always met in the evenings. And when we were off school, as our mother wasn't working, we would all spend it either with her cousins or with my cousins. So we were meeting on a daily basis. No one sat at home. This was the other thing. I mean, there's just no sitting at home watching television. You just – and you had – in Iraq you had servants, so the housework was being done by somebody. Interestingly enough, most men did the shopping there.

Yeah.

So the shopping was being done by the man, and so we the girls, and the children actually even boys, little boys, would go and meet with family. Had the time to do so. Here it's a little bit difficult, as I put it by appointment. But if there is an Iraqi society – and that probably is an unfriendly thing to say, and I mean it in the nicest possible way, if there is an unfriendly Iraqi society it probably will be London. If you look at for instance the Iraqi society in Canada, they're much friendly than we are. And that's nothing to do with us being Iraqis, it's to do with the country we live in.

[Laughs].

I recall going to a wedding in Montreal and somebody made a joke. And I turned to him and said, 'I beg your pardon.' And he said, 'Oh, you must come from London.' And a smile broke and I said, 'I'm sorry,' [laughs]. I actually apologised and then of course it sort of – it completely melts away, being one and the same. **[02:14:01]** So you do pick up customs and certain traits of the country where you live in. And that's why I mean it in the nicest possible way, for the Iraqis being unfriendly, but they really are very friendly.

Do you feel there's an interest from the younger generation in the history of –?

Yes, yes, there is.

Their parents and grandparents?

They do want to know, they really do. They are quite interested in – now, it hasn't happened in London but in Montreal there is – the children want to learn as they call it, Jewish Iraqi. Same thing happening in Israel as well. They're being taught Jewish Iraqi. Now, Jewish Iraqi is of really no use because it's a particular accent, it's a mixture of languages. I'm not so sure if it's going to help, but that's the language of their parents and they want to learn that. Yes, there is a lot of interest. There is interest in – I don't suppose they would carry it, but in the customs. And to that end for instance, my mother is recording in Judaeo-Arabic the customs of the festivals. But it's not only for our – now the problem is some of the children will not understand our Judaeo-Arabic, such as my nephew and nieces. But it's actually done for the Muslim community of Iraq as well, because then they must remember how we lived for so many years in our country of birth. And I think it's been very well received from the comments I read on Facebook and on YouTube that my friend is actually doing with my mother.

So Niran –

Niran Bassoon is doing it, interviewing my mother.

She's coming to record it and then she puts it on her Facebook.

On her Facebook and her YouTube channel, yeah. And, you know, she sends the comments or I can read the comments. And I think my mother is very – first of all, they're very nice comments. **[02:16:02]** It encourages mother to do it. But I think again mum feels it's an important thing because she's actually talking about the customs in Iraq. Now, certain things that we her children have forgotten because we no longer do them. Either we don't eat certain foods or we don't do it, or we can't get certain things here in London. So that's actually even for us certain things are quite important.

So what is she going to talk about, do you know?

Yes. Her next recording is *Sukkot.*

So she's done already some recordings?

Oh, yes. She started – they've been doing it, consecutive festivals. She's done *Purim* up to *Yom Kippur*. *Yom Kippur* I think will probably be released on Monday or Tuesday, and then she'll do *Sukkot*, and then *Hannukah* and that is for the festivals, and they'll go through the cycle of life. They want to do the cycle of life as well. That will be quite interesting because there are a lot of things I will not remember.

Fantastic. And it's video recorded?

Yes.

Brilliant. And has Niran done only your mother or some other people?

No, no, she does many things. She does different things. She records people from different provinces in Iraq because don't forget, we are – like, you are London-centric, we are Baghdadi-centric.

Yeah.

So we tend to forget that other places in the country existed. And so she's tried to find people from different provinces in Iraq to record them, so she's done a lot of that in Israel. She records people because of their experiences, whatever they may be, whether it's art or whether it's businesses they were in, that sort of thing. And it's all quite interesting.

It's really interesting, but the wonderful thing is because it's in Arabic it can go back to Iraq. I mean, people – to the Arab world.

That's the whole point.

Not only Iraq, to anyone who speaks Arabic.

Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. And it's very important. It's very important. I mean, I harp on about Iraq because I want them to remember how we've lived. **[02:18:04]** Obviously, my contact is with them and for them, and that is absolutely important that they should understand how we lived and not only that, what we contributed to the country.

Yeah.

It's thousands of years of contribution and it's done from the bottom of our heart. Don't forget, we were never Zionists. I mean, there was no – we never had this urge of going back to Zion at all. You know, off we went to Babylon, we bemoaned the destruction of the temple every day, and in prayers, but we did nothing about it. We just stayed, and stayed, and stayed. So yeah, it's good for them to get to know what we've given them.

Yeah.

And talking about what the Iraqi Jews gave, of course the minister of finance, the first minister of finance when Iraq became independent was an Iraqi Jew. Now again, he was of the Hakham family. As I was saying, Hakham Yosef Hayyim, Hakham Moshe, my ancestor, his ancestor was Hakham Heskel, who was one of the brothers. So again, it's sort of interesting.

And his name was?

Yes, Sassoon Hakham Heskel.

Yeah.

Hakham Heskel, was the brother of Hakham Moshe, Hakham Yosef Hayyim. He and his brother – and I can't recall why – they were buried in Paris. I once went and spent the day in *Pére Lachaise*, it's a cemetery in Paris. The person who – I went there because Bizet who wrote *Carmen* was buried there, so I just wanted to see where Bizet was – I was actually – I was called after –

Are you name after –?

I was called after the opera, I was named after the opera. So off I went. Anyway, it was very interesting walking through the cemetery. They give you a little map and you look at it, and you look at things. I ended up in the Jewish cemetery. **[02:20:01]** Unbeknown to me I was looking at the tombstone – and I looked at the word – and it's spelt Hakham exactly like we spell our surname here, and I kept thinking I know this word. And then it occurred to me, oh my God, it's my surname. I looked twice, read the name, and immediately phoned mum and said to her, 'Why is he buried here?' Sassoon Hakham Heskel. She phoned her sister-in-law who was his niece, and she did tell her the story but I can't recall why. And his brother was buried next to him.

And Carmen, so how do you feel about Iraq today?

I feel very sad for the country. Desperately sad for it. It's been left in a very difficult situation. It was – one must remember that the first civilisation in the world was in Mesopotamia. The first written law was Hammurabi's law from Mesopotamia. And to think where it was and where it is, it's seriously a very sad place. The Iraqis that we knew – things change, I know – were excellent people, were lovely people. Generous, loving, open handed as we call them. And not to forget that not everybody – I do not want this recording to think that everybody was antisemitic. I am told for instance by my mother in the *Farhud*, as much as by my father, that the people who stood in front of their houses to protect them with guns were all Muslims. And the Muslims of my days that I grew up, whether they were neighbours or whether they were in my class, were all lovely people. The people I meet here in this country, in England, are very nice people. However I don't know how it will ever go back to some form of normal living. **[02:22:11]** I don't know, I don't know, it's very difficult. It goes into politics and this is the politics of the Middle East which is not the subject matter of this particular interview, but I feel very sad for the country as a country. I feel sad for the people. I have no wish to go back. I don't want to see it. It was wonderful in my days. I want to remember it as it was. I want to remember walking by the Tigris first thing in the morning and being chased by dogs, my mother and I. We used to have to stone them. In the evenings going to the same place but sitting in

the cafés and having *masgouf* the fish, cooked on charcoal. I want to remember the lovely nights we used to go and spend in a place called Habbaniyah which was an artificial lake built by the British. There used to be an army camp there, but that's where we would spend many, many beautiful nights, looking at the sky which was – I remember once my sister saying, 'It's like black velvet with diamonds on it,' because there was no light pollution. That's how I want to remember it. And I just wish them all the very best. They gave me life, the life I have in my body is from there. I just wish them lots of luck, and I thank the United Kingdom for making me into a British subject.

Carmen, you mentioned the Farhud.

Yes.

I was going to ask you, what actually happened to your parents and if they talked about it?

They did. I don't think very much. I mean, it's of no consequence as such. They were in their houses. Obviously my parents hadn't met. No harm came to them. **[02:24:04]** People came to the top of the road. The Muslims stood there with guns. Apparently, proper guns. As much as the – and actually, my mother says they were protected by two men standing outside their door. I actually met these two men. I know exactly who they were. They were friends of her brother, my mother's brother, and they were country people, Iraqi country people. They were what you'd call a squire here, who used to be dressed in complete Arab clothes. And they were the people who stood with their guns and said – you know, they will kill them. They won't let anybody go into the houses. But my mother lived in a place called *Aktun Nasara* which would be translated into the Street of the Christians. I don't know why but it was a Jewish area and it was protected on both ends so no one came in. But from what my mother tells me, and unfortunately it cannot be – there were no eyewitnesses, other than the numbers of – I think 190 to 210 people claim were actually murdered, my mother has always said many more Jews were murdered. What happened was they were injured. They were taken to hospital and the doctor killed them. He was antisemite. Over 800 people is said were actually killed during the *Farhud*. But I did ask at the Iraqi museum, Babylonian museum in Israel, why this is not recorded and apparently it is said because there were no eyewitnesses to it. And that's

something that must never be forgotten. I mean, okay, we can't prove it but a word of mouth is very, very important. People like my mother would have heard it. It's not something that they dreamt about. **[02:26:00]**

What, that the doctor – that the injured came –

And they injected them with God only knows what.

One particular doctor.

There was a particular one and even the name is known. I can't recall the name, but my mother remembered the name. I mentioned it to my friend Lily Shaw at the Babylonian museum and she said, 'Yes, we do have the name.' But they cannot prove it. So that is why they talk about 800 in total. So 600 unnamed.

Yes.

And of course some of them were actually literally taken off buses and killed, and it was terribly unfortunate. There is a little bit of a sad thing for me about the *Farhud.* Of course I was far from being alive at the time, and that again can be verified with papers because the papers have – in England the papers have been – are available to look at. The British Army was in the place not far from where I was mentioning. That lovely Lake Habbaniyah. It's a place called Thabana. They were in the camp there and they knew what was going on and they did nothing. So that is terribly sad. So every time when people used to mention – again, one doesn't want to get into politics but I'll just say it – they used to mention Sabra and Shatila, what happened in Lebanon, and they said, 'Well, the Israeli Army stood outside the camps.' I'd say, 'Well, so did the British.' So, you know, everybody is the same. Human is human. Makes no difference what colour, creed they are.

Thank you Carmen. Just a few more questions.

Sure.

I mean, generally what impact do you think – did it have on your life? Both your experiences in Iraq, being a – did you see yourself as a refugee? **[02:28:00]**

No.

No.

No. I think – [laughs] I'm going to – this is really not a sexist remark. It made me into a man. And I don't mean a man with a beard, you know, a man. In the sense, I find nowadays where people talk – I don't deny there are mental stress. I suffer from mental stress every so often, we all do. But we have to get on with life. You know, you go through a nasty experience. You have to leave it behind and you've got to get on. England is the third country I lived in. Third language. Okay, I spoke it in Iraq, but for me it was the third language. You just get yourself – you could have sat down and said, 'I wait for God to look after me.' You can't do that. You must educate yourself. You must go to work. You must push yourself. You can't afford to say, 'Well, I don't feel like it today. Well, I feel depressed today.' Yes, we all don't feel like it, and we all get depressed, but you have to push the whole time. Yes, the experiences we've gone through have – obviously must have had an impact on giving us the drive. For sure, for sure. It's just driven us positively. It ended up being a positive experience from that particular point. But on the negative side I think it made me less tolerant. I am not very tolerant of people or of things. I like things to move on. You start a project. Let's get on with it. You know, let's do it. I don't like all this waiting around. You know, it will be done tomorrow, or it's half done. I just can't tolerate that. You know, it's got to be done and you do it, you do it today because that is what is required of you. And if it means you don't go to bed, well, so be it. **[02:30:00]** It's got to be delivered. Delivery is very important for me, and positive good quality delivery. So yes, that certainly is the drive from going through the adversities in life.

So to achieve something or to –

It's not achieving per se. I suppose everything is achievement. I mean, waking up in the morning I suppose is an achievement [laughs], but you know what I mean with achievement,

anything. You know, you bake a cake, make a mistake, next time you do a better one. Or ask the question, why did that fail? I mean, I remember once I baked a cake and I had people coming here and it was such a terrible thing that I said to the lady, 'If it falls on your foot it will break it.' It was a brick. So I then had to ask my sister-in-law, 'What did I do wrong?' 'This is what you did wrong.' I learnt. So I now bake a cake, and it doesn't break people's teeth or people's feet. You know, that's a very silly example but you've got to – you just can't sit down and say, 'You know what, I can't bake. I'm giving up.' Try. That's a very silly example, but it's the same in life. Whatever it is, you've got to push yourself. You know, no one is going to do the work for you. You just can't sit down and say, 'Well, you know, God will provide.' No, he doesn't. He helps, but you have to do the work. We have a brain. We have arms and legs, we have eyes. We are very, very fortunate. Some people have much less than we do and they do achieve a lot. So, so can we.

You think that's the sort of – if I ask you what lesson or what message would you give, is that the message based on your experiences?

Very much. Get off your backside and do twenty-five hours a day. And when the day has twenty-five hours, you do twenty-six. It will not kill you. It will not break you. It will make you – you will feel happier. **[02:32:00]** It just won't do you any harm. Yes, you'll get physically tired so you'll sleep it off at some stage. You can sleep at the end of the week. So, yeah.

Okay, and just to come back, you've mentioned before about your identity, how you define yourself and how that has changed. How you feel today?

No, I still feel Iraqi, I have to say. Again, not wanting to go into politics – I mean, I don't care if they're Conservative or Labour but one of the politicians certainly in the Johnson government was Nadhim Zahawi who became the Chancellor, I think for a few days. And Nadhim Zahawi was running to become the premier, the PM for the country, against Liz Truss who is now the PM. And I actually asked myself how would I feel if I live in London and the PM is Iraqi? And I thought I will be very, very proud, extremely proud, but I'm not so sure I would like it. There lies the – on one hand it's very wonderful, on the other hand I'm living now in England,

I'm not living in Iraq. In Iraq an Iraqi Prime Minister of course is what I want. Here, it's a little bit difficult ,but I would have been terribly proud. But I was very proud that we actually ended up with an Iraqi Chancellor. Who would have thought it? I think though his mother is English, so I think he's half-Iraqi but that's not an excuse. He goes by the word Iraqi. So how do I define myself? I'm still an Iraqi person, I always would be. I am very happy to be naturalised British, and I think having the Middle East background, it's actually a very good balance to the Western society as well. I feel we probably are pretty well-balanced because we have the traits of both places, but I would say I'm seventy-five percent Western, twenty-five percent Middle Eastern. **[02:34:09]** I still like all the Iraqi food. My mother's cooking is the best in the world [laughs].

So that brings me to the next one. What for you is the most important aspect of this heritage? For you.

Tradition, our traditions. Our food. And really, our history. Because our history is the Bible history. Amongst one of the very important things we produced the *Talmud,* although it wasn't me obviously, 11th century Iraq. But I think we gave – the Iraqi Jews, with the Iraqis as I said, Mesopotamia and civilisation and law, but we gave the world quite a lot. I think we are a very understated people. That's one of our problems is that we don't talk about things. And even when we are asked we're quite reluctant to talk about things, which I think is very sad. So interviews like this are quite helpful to sort of just talk about – at least somebody would remember what Iraq looked like.

Well, let's hope many people will go to the British Library and watch the interview. Is there anything else Carmen I haven't asked you, you would like to add?

No. There was one thing I think we talked outside this interview. We were talking about photos and I mentioned to you that we have no photos of our childhood because we had to burn them. And we burned them after my father came out of prison. And the reason being as the Jews started to leave Iraq and some of them actually did go to Israel, we were very concerned that if we were to ever be 'visited' as we used to say, i.e. the secret service coming to the house, that we would have no photos of anybody we could be accused of having – collaborate

– we would be collaborators of Israelis. **[02:36:17]** So all the photos were burned. They were burned in the middle – we sort of had a little opening inside the house where all the way up to the flat roof, so all the smoke went up. And my mother had to go to the street to make sure that you could not see the smoke coming out of the house. And of course, it was an acrid smell as well of all the photos. Thousands of them were burned. And it was actually mostly of our holidays, wherever it was in Iraq. So it was terribly sad but they had to go. I mean, I understand that they had to go. And the other thing which was interesting which I hadn't mentioned. When I said that my father was taken into prison in '69, a man stood outside our house and he was from the secret service. And my mother one day got absolutely fed up with him, and she went and said to him, 'You see, there is an old woman,' – that's my grandmother – 'and me, and my children. What are you watching us for?' He said to her, 'I'm so sorry Madam, I have to.' And he would actually get on a bicycle and follow her. I mean, where was she going? We were going to, as I said, the lady, the wife of one of the other prisoners, and she would go to the Ministry of Defence. And he'd get on his bicycle and follow her and apologise. Anyway, she got fed with him. She used to give him food and drink. [Laughs] And this was the equivalent of the cameras, but it happened to all of us, to all the – to most of the Iraqi Jews, all of us seem to have had somebody outside our house who was watching us twenty-four seven. It was very unpleasant. **[02:38:02]** As far as I know, when dad came out of prison we stopped having a man outside the house. That was done with. And at that stage my uncles, his brothers, were not allowed to come to the house. Mum was very concerned that no man should come to the house, so her niece used to come. Her niece is nine years older than me. She would come to the house and get the news of what was happening on the day. Not that there were any news. And she would go and tell my uncles. Now, my uncles lived next door to them.

Yes, your niece. So not your uncle came but your niece.

Yes, my mother's niece. My cousin. So my cousin used to come to the house to actually ask what was going on, what news were of my father. Not that there were anything, but anyway. And then she would go back home and she will tell my uncles who lived next door to them, wall-to-wall, of what was going on. And she was too short for the wall so she would get pots, plant pots, one on top of the other and stand on them. What I call my little uncle, i.e. my youngest uncle, would come and talk to her. Now, the end of my father's imprisonment was

the engagement of my uncle to my mother's niece. Because they met through the – on the wall. And got married and lived in Holland for a while, had a daughter there, and now they live in London. And that's their little story, so something good came out of it.

Because the uncles were not supposed to come, so she came.

Exactly, exactly. So she was the go-between between my mother and what was going on, to his brothers. So –

And I wanted to ask you, so since they burned the photographs did they manage to – some photographs survived from people who had emigrated and taken photographs with them? **[02:40:06]**

I think they tried to keep one or two photos of people that were alive, such as the photos of my ancestors here. As in they were individuals that you could name and they were not with anybody else. Yes, I have a photo with my parents that I saw – but it's just the five of us, taken in a place called Nirsa that was – it really is – I think if I tell you if we've got more than fifty photos I'd be exaggerating. So no, not many of them at all.

And do you remember the burning? Were you there?

Oh yes, yes, yes. Yes, absolutely. And really we were crying, because it sort of – that's the only thing that would remind you of the nice places you visited. That was the whole point with that. It was the nice places we visited, and that all went. So again, you did not want to have photos in Kurdistan in case for instance – or anywhere else, in case it was a particular military place or something. You just did not know. You really didn't want to have any excuse for them to have a reason to imprison someone.

It's really eradicating any sort of tangible memories, isn't it?

Very much so. Very much so, yes. Very much so, unfortunately.

Okay, well, if there isn't anything else I would say we are going to look at the photos you do have.

Thank you.

And we are going to look at them and you can tell us what they are.

Sure.

Carmen, thank you so much for this interview.

My pleasure, my pleasure. Thank you for your time.

Anything else before we...?

No, no, not at all. I'm wishing everybody peace and happiness, and let's hope for many, many happy years in the United Kingdom for all of us.

Okay, thank you so much again Carmen.

Thank you.

Thanks. **[02:42:00]** *[Pause]*

Yes, please. Who is in this photograph?

This is Rabbi Yosef Chayim the *Ben Ish Hai.* He was an authority on religion in the Middle East, late nineteen/early 20th century. Questions would be asked of him from all corners, including Italy, Poland, and he would have travelled to Palestine at least twice. He visited *Yerushalayim* in his lifetime. He died and was buried in Baghdad.

And how is he related to you?

He is the brother of my great-grandfather. So he comes from a family of five brothers and two sisters.

Thank you. Yes, please.

The gentleman on the left with the beard is my great-grandfather Hakham Moshe. He was one of five brothers and two sisters. The gentleman on the right is Hakham Binyamin. He was my grandfather, so he was the head of the – what we would call now the *Beth Din* of Baghdad in the late thirties, early forties. **[02:44:03]** And he used to conduct circumcisions as well, but they all were for free because the family of Hakham never got paid for any of their services.

So it's a father and son.

Father and son.

Thank you.

This is a photo taken in 1925 of my father, the little boy, with his parents. With Hakham Binyamin, and my grandmother Gurjee Mashaal. Most of her family now live in Montreal. Well, live in Canada anyway, mostly in Montreal. And she is related to the Sassoon family.

How do you spell her name?

Mashaal. M-a-s-h-a-a-l and the name was changed to Marshal in English. So if you ever come across a Marshal, they're not always English Marshals. They could be a Mashaal as well. So one of her other relations – she's related to the Sassoons who were partners of the Hakhams, and they are the people that went to India.

[Pause]

This is a photo of my parents taken on their engagement in 1955.

Where?

In Baghdad. This is a professional photo so it would have been at somebody like Nerso, in Baghdad.

Studio.

Studio.

Thank you.

This is a photo taken thirty years ago of the whole of the family outside Lauderdale Synagogue. It was the day of my brother's wedding.

[Pause]

This is Jamie, my nephew, my brother's son, his eldest. He is now – this is a photo of course of him being a child. **[02:46:00]** He's now a twenty-eight-year-old biochemist, living in Cambridge.

Montage of photos of the family. On the left is my mother with my niece, her granddaughter, Georgia. She is the eldest of the two girls. Underneath is me with my two nieces, Georgia and Jodi, and on the right-hand side top, my sister Jane. Bottom, Jane with our mother.