

Sephardi Voices UK

IMPORTANT

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

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Ebrahimoff
Forename:	Paari
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	28/01/1936
Interviewee POB:	Tehran, Iran
Interviewee Occupation:	Housewife
Father's Occupation:	Merchant
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

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[00:00:07]

I am interviewing Mrs Paari Ebrahimoff on 10th November 2011 in her house in London. My name is Sharon Rapaport. Mrs Paari Ebrahimoff, I would like to thank you for taking part in Sephardi Voices. Could we start by you telling us your name, the date of your birth and where you were born?

I was born in Iran, in the capital, in Teheran, and my date of birth is 28th January 1936. And what else you want –

And your name?

My name is Paari Ebrahimoff.

Could you tell me about your name? Is it – Paari, is that the name you were born with?

No. My real name was Bibi Joan. The reason that they called me Bibi Joan was my mother and my grandmother had the same name. They wanted to call me after my grandmother, Rachel and my mother's name was also Rachel, so they couldn't, so they called me like Booba, Bibi. And I went to the Muslim school and that name wasn't suitable, so I changed it to Paari. It's a nickname, Paari. **[00:02:08]**

Did you change it officially or was it just changed?

No, no, not officially, no.

I wanted to take you back to your grandparents. Did you know your grandparents?

No, I didn't see any of my grandparents. They died before I was born, I think – no. One of them was alive and she went to Jerusalem, and the other – the other one I didn't see. They died before I was born.

What was your grandparents from your mother's side names?

From my mother's side, my grandmother was called Malka and my grandfather was called Efraim.

And their surname?

Armini.

Armini. And do you know anything about their backgrounds?

Well, my grandfather remarried and there were two wives, and it wasn't – it wasn't right for two wives to be in the same house, so my real grandmother went to Israel with her little daughter.

So that's a sister – I'm trying to understand. You had a grandfather. Your grandfather had two wives. Where did they live?

They lived in Mashhad.

They lived in Mashhad. And then your mother left?

[00:04:01] Not my mother, no. My grandmother left.

Your grandmother, your mother's mother, yeah?

Yeah, with her little daughter, not with my mother. My mother at the time was pregnant. She was 15 and she had a very difficult birth, and she nearly died. And they thought she's going to die that night and they made everything ready, and in the morning when they went to her room, she was – she was fine. There was nothing wrong with her. And they said to her, "Did you see Eliyahu Hanavi?" She said, "Yes, he came and he sat next to me and read the *tehilim*, and then when he wanted to leave, he said, "Have plenty of water, Madam.'" Yeah.

And then your mother was pregnant with your eldest brother?

With my eldest brother, yes.

So we'll go back to it a bit later. Your grandparents from your father's side, tell me a bit about – first of all their names.

Their names, they were Cohen and my grandmother was a very, very special woman. She was too old to have any relationship with her husband, so she went and found another wife for her husband. [00:06:01] And she – she had a little boy. The name of the little boy was David. And when she died, she said to all the other children, she had many children, that, “You should look after David.” And she was a very special woman.

Did you get to know your grandmother from your father's side? Was she the grandmother –

I never saw any of that side.

Were there any other stories about her? You say that she was very special.

Not that I know of, but this I heard. Most men, they married the second wife and it wasn't anything bad, you know. The first wife couldn't be bothered with relationships and they still – the men still need it, so that's why they remarried.

So then – and the grandparents from the father's side, where did they live?

In Mashhad, in like a place, like a ghetto. They had – underneath – their houses were underneath, that nobody saw them and they did all the synagogue and the praying and everything down there. And they ate kosher. They kept everything. [00:08:00] They read the Torah. They taught it to their children. And if they had to go and buy from the Muslims, they bought non *kosher* meat and they brought it and they fed their dogs with it. And that was – that was very sad because they were forced to become Muslim, and a lot of them became Muslim – became Muslim on the – on the surface, but underneath they were still Jewish. There were one or two girls that – they married the non-Jews.

You were telling me before when you talked about your grandparents from your mother's side that actually your mother got married when she was 15. Tell me a bit about your mother. First of all what's her name?

Her name was Sabjan Aminoff, and they all – they all got married very young, and the reason was – the reason was that if you didn't get married, a Muslim boy come and want your daughter, and if you said no, it would have been trouble. But once you said that this girl is engaged, she is married, they didn't bother to – to ask for the girl any more.

And your mother and father, did their families – how did they meet? How did they get married?

They were all – most of their marriages was arranged. [00:10:04] When a child was born, a boy, a girl, they said, "These two are going to get married."

From when they were born?

Yeah, because they had to do that, that the Muslims didn't ask for the girl. And they got married afterwards, you know. Whatever the parents said, they did. It was customary.

So your mother was 15 and your father, how old was he?

18, I think, maybe more. I don't know, maybe 21. Very young.

Were there any stories that she told you about what was it to get married at that age already?

Hmm, no, but she had a very, very difficult life, bringing up eight children and ... And I mean, she had maids and everything, but still it wasn't easy. I remember that she used to sit until two o'clock in the morning and sew pyjamas for all the children and do this type of thing.

Can you describe what kind of person was she?

Very kind, very lovely, very witty, and until today everybody says how lovely she was and how friendly she was, and how much she loved everybody. She was a very special person.

Were you close to her?

Yes, yes, but I left at a young age. [00:12:03] She came once or twice to London and I went once or twice to Iran.

When you say you left at a young age, what age was that?

[Recording paused]

So you were telling me before that you left your parents to England at a young age. How old were you?

16. I was nearly 17 when I got married.

But I'm interested to know a bit, how was it to grow up as children? How did your daily life go?

I wasn't a child.

No, before, I'm trying - before, before you lived. When you lived in Teheran.

When I lived in Teheran, I used to sew dresses and I was very good in school, and there was a lot of jealousy between me and my sisters and – because I was the first girl and I used to dress up and [laughs] they wanted to be the same. And we got on nicely but we also fight [laughs].

How many brothers and sisters? Tell me how many brothers and their names.

Three brothers, Yoseph Cohanin, Mordechai Cohanin, and Iraj Cohanin, and he called himself Hussainof. [00:14:02] And Iraj lives in America. Mordechai unfortunately died. Joseph lives in Bat Yam.

And your sisters? And then came you – you were number four?

No, I was before Iraj.

You were before Iraj. And how many sisters did you have?

Another four sisters. Sarayah and Malka, and Diana and Violet. Unfortunately Diana died from cancer.

And what was the difference between the older brother to the youngest sister? What was the age gap?

Hmm, my brother now is 83, something like that, and I'm 75, so ... eight years.

Between you and your eldest brother?

Yeah.

You were saying before that you used to sew.

Yeah.

Tell me about it. Did your mother teach you?

No – yes, she put all of us in – like they were dressmakers in Iran, and she put – she put us there to learn how to sew, every one of us. And I also – in school they used to teach us sewing and cutting and all that. And I remember I made a dress and I got 20 out of 20, yeah.

And what kind of dresses did you make? Was it for yourself or ...?

Yeah, for myself. I didn't make for anybody else. [00:16:04]

And what was the style?

Very modern, very chic, yeah.

How did you get to know about the style icons? Did you look at magazines? Was there any – let's say, any style icons? Who was your style icon that you liked?

I don't know, but I remember that I made a skirt and a top, and the top was, oh, from different – two different colour squares, and I sewed them together and it was a very nice outfit.

At what age did your mother send you to this sewing class and why was it?

From the age of eight, and there are no reason, that we should learn.

Did your mother sew all your family's clothes or did you buy it from –

No. She made like underwear or pyjamas, things like that, but not the proper dresses.

Let's go on now to your father. Could you tell me his name?

His name was Jacob Cohanin, and he was born in 1900, and ... Hmm, he – at the end of his life, he went to Israel and he lived with my – he came to London and he was here for six months, and unfortunately every time he went out, it was raining. [00:18:15] And he [laughs] left for Israel and there – I said to my father, "When will you come back?" He said, "Never" [laughs]. It was too cold and too miserable, the weather. And he went for quite a while. He lived with my sister, and then he went to an old age home. And he used to go on Shabbat to different sisters, and one Shabbat that he was with one of my sisters in Netanya, he went out in the evening and he died. And that was it.

How old was he when he died?

I think he was about 73. My mother died very young.

And where is he buried? Are they buried in Israel?

My father is buried in Israel. My mother is buried here in London, in Hoop Lane.

What kind of father was your father?

Very strict, he had to be. He had to be. It was a lot of us, and we were really frightened. When he came we had to be quiet and we had to be good. And my mother was a different person. She was very loving and she used to talk to us very quietly. [00:20:02] She used to tell us what we should do, what we shouldn't do.

When you say strict, what do you mean?

He didn't hit us or anything. He just gave us a look and it was enough., yes.

I reckon that if you had so many brothers and sisters, you had ones that were more naughty and less naughty. Who were –

Oh, we did all sorts of things. I remember we put pistachio skins in my brother's nose and – I don't remember everything but I know we did a lot of wrong things.

And what was your father's occupation?

He was a merchant. He was in fur, in carpets, and they were doing very well in Iran because they were honest and people from England sent them goods, and they sold it, sent them the money. Oh, they sent to London and they got the money back.

So they were exporters?

Yes, export, import.

And when you say they, did he have a company with more –

Yeah, he was with his brother, another brother, yeah.

What was the name? Did they have a name of their company?

No, I don't know. I don't remember.

How would you describe your childhood?

It was a happy one. It was very good. [00:22:02] And I remember every Saturday night, my father used to take us to cinema, and then when we came out of the cinema we went to the bakery and we brought home a lot of lovely biscuits and we ate it [laughs]. It was lovely. It was very nice. And we always had a *Shabbat* meal, and I remember I always made a cake, and I had a good childhood.

Were your family observant? The household, was it observant?

Yes, yes. I remember my mother used to put a little fire and she used to put something over it, like higher, and – for *Shabbat*, if they wanted to warm anything, they used to put it on there.

And where did you live? What part of Teheran did you live?

It was called Amir Abad. First we were in Shahr-dari and my school was there, and then we moved to Amir Abad. We had a little swimming pool and it was a big house. And the upstairs, there was quite a few rooms and we used to let it, usually to young couples.

So was it a Jewish area?

I don't – Shahr-dari was, but not Amir Abad, no. [00:24:06]

Amir Abad was the second one?

Yeah, yeah.

So your neighbours were Muslims?

Yes, yes, they were Muslim, but we had nothing to do with them. We didn't mix with the non Jews. It was frightening if you mixed with the non Jews.

In what way?

Well, they wanted ... If they like a girl, they wanted to take the girl and do whatever they want. We didn't want that. So we kept away. And if we went out, we always had a chaperone. We didn't go on our own anywhere.

Girls didn't go on their own?

Mm.

Who was your chaperone? Your brothers?

No. I don't remember but we always had maids. Somebody used to come with us.

And from where did the maid come from? What was her origin?

They were – we called them Sisteni from – Sis- I don't know from where. They were not from Teheran. They used to come from different towns around Teheran, and there was a lot of them. And my mother used to have one for washing the clothes, one for washing the dishes and one for cleaning. And then I remember that, if they wanted to give birth to a baby, they went in the ditch outside the house, and my mother used to take a scissor and used to help them have the baby. [00:26:09] She had so many babies herself, she knew what to do.

So that was the maid that worked with you. But you were saying before that you didn't have any relationships with neighbours. Did they know that you were Jewish, you were a Jewish family?

Of course they knew, yes, yes.

What are your fondest memories as a child? Something that you remember and it makes you smile?

We used to – on *Pesach* night, my father had a very good voice and he used to sing all the songs, and we used to enjoy the whole evening. But it went on and on and we were – by the time it was *afikoman*, you know, we were all asleep under the table [laughs]. I don't remember many – anything more. And there was a magazine that used to come every week to our house and we were all fighting over it. This one wanted it, that one wanted it, and then the next day the magazine was there and nobody touched it and my father said, "Yesterday you were fighting all over this magazine and now you don't touch it."

What was the magazine? Was it Jewish related?

No, Iranian, Iranian. [00:28:01] I don't – I went to Hebrew classes but it was three or four of us and we all giggled and have a good time. We never learnt anything.

So what languages did you speak at home?

Farsi, yeah.

And Hebrew you learnt in the Hebrew –

Yeah, it was like a *cheder*, you know, but I didn't learn much in Iran.

Tell me a bit about your education, your schooling. Where did you go to school?

Until the age of 16, I was in a Muslim school and studying, and when I came to London I went to English classes.

I'm interested to know of the school, your Muslim school. So was it girls and boys' school? Was it a mixed school, or was it only for boys or only for girls?

I think it was only girls. I don't remember any boys. We had to go to the room when they did the Qur'an, and we also read with them. I think it was hidden, our Jewish religion. But I used – for – when is it that we have seven fruits?

Shavuot.

Shavuot. I remember we used to take all the dried – there was not many fruit, fresh fruit. [00:30:02] We used to take dried fruit into the school and everybody had it. My mother used to roll the newspaper in like a bag and used to fill up all the newspaper, and we used to take it to the school.

So at school they knew – did they know that you were Jewish or not?

I don't – I'm sure the teachers, they knew, but we didn't make it open. That's why I changed my name. We didn't make it, you know, like they should know that we are Jewish. There was no anti-Semitism or anything in the school.

You were saying you changed your name. Tell me a bit about it. You changed it from ...?

From Bibi Joan to Paari, and my Hebrew name is Rifka. And Bibi Joan, I told you, the reason that they called me Bibi was my mother and my mother in law – my mother and my grandmother, they were both Rachel and they wanted to name me after my mother in law, but they couldn't because my mother was Raquel [ph], so they called me like the Booba, Bibi. In Persian it's Bibi, Bibi Joan. And when I went to a Muslim school, I saw that that name is not suitable, so I changed it myself to Paari and now everybody calls me Paari. [00:32:02]

Why did you decide on specifically Paari?

It was an easy nickname, you know. It's a nice name. It's called fairy.

So was it very – were there lots of Paaris then?

In Iran, yes, yes.

So could you describe for us a typical Friday night? Did you have friends coming over or did you have any special kind of traditional food?

My mother was a very, very good cook, and we always had one or two guests, you know, round the table. And it was nice. It was lovely. Very ... good evening, you know.

Describe it a bit to me. Did you have to wear something special?

No, we all dressed up for *Shabbat* and my father used to sing. He had a very good voice. And that was it. We ate lovely food.

Was there anything typical for Friday night? That was special for Friday night?

You know the Persian meals, mostly in Iran they didn't use a lot of meat. They made out of one pound of meat, say, six people could eat it. And there was chicken and there was rice. We have special rice dishes. [00:34:01] We have green rice, yellow rice and *polo khoresh* rice with goulash. And also *ghormeh sabzi* I'm sure you've heard of it. *Ghormeh sabzi* is a very popular Persian meal. And *gondi nochotchee*, a special meatball, white meatball. And that was it. And it wasn't like today, that you have first soup and then chopped liver and then fish and then the main meal. In those days they made a meal, just one meal, and we all ate it and it was lovely. I mean, it wasn't too much and it wasn't too little, and that was it.

So what other special traditions were there in your congregation in comparison to today? Or something that you would like to document.

I keep everything, everything that we made in Iran. For *Purim* we make *halva*, we make gushweel [ph], we make – and I used to – I used to do it in the kilos synagogue with all my friends, two, three saucepans, big, big saucepans, of *halva*. [00:36:01] And after the fast we used to bring it. It's not the *halva* that you know, they sell in the shop. It's from rice, almonds, cinnamon and saffron, and rosewater. It's that type of *halva*. And believe it or not, all these three big saucepans, every teaspoon of it went [laughs]. They don't leave anything. They loved it. And we made – my husband used to say, "You should keep all these – all traditions, you know, alive. You shouldn't stop doing it."

So halva was something sweet that you used to do in Purim?

Yeah.

And what did you do – what were the specialities in Pesach?

For *Pesach*, we used to ground ourselves. We used to ground, not to go to the shops and buy it, rice. We used to make rice, rice biscuits. I've got some rice biscuits on the table. And we used to do ground almonds ourselves. And we used to make macaroons for *Pesach*. And we used to make a cake out of matzah meal. And in Iran we didn't have anything milky for *Pesach*, so for breakfast, for instance, we had a spinach cutlet, potato cutlet, and there wasn't any cheese or milk or butter or anything like that for quite a while. [00:38:12] Afterwards, later on, they brought it, but we didn't have. And ... It was quite difficult, no milky stuff. We only had meaty, everything meaty. But for breakfast we couldn't have just meaty. We had like potato, or from spinach we made a lot of things.

And what about the synagogue? What synagogue did the family belong to?

The synagogue, mostly the men went, and the women went like at the end and they said amen. They never sort of like – like now, to sit and read the *Torah* or the *chumash*, the *siddur*. And that was it.

What was the name of the synagogue that your father used to go to?

I don't remember. I don't remember.

Do you remember how it looked like?

Like a little *shtiebel*, nothing big or grand. But later on the Iraqi people, they built a very, very big synagogue, Iraqi synagogue, and it was all mirrors and it was lovely. And I got married there, yes.

You said that you went to a girls' school in Teheran. What were the things that you studied? Was there different education to boys and girls at the time?

[00:40:09] No, we studied like any other school, maths and geography and history and like any other school, no different. But we had to go into the Muslim assembly to read the Qur'an. We had to do that. They used to teach us sewing and ... Everything, there was everything in the school.

Why didn't you go to a Jewish school?

There was only one or two Jewish schools and we used to go to the nearest school that there was near to us. To travel, nobody really had a car or anything like that to go and come. And that was the reason. There was one or two old *cheder* schools, and there was another one as well. I don't remember.

So did your friends from school – did they used to come also home to your house? Did you go to their house?

No, no. I don't remember ever bringing a friend home.

Tell me a bit about Teheran in the late '50s, '60s.

Oh, it was lovely. The Shah made Iran a copy of Paris, and we had everything, everything modern and chic. [00:42:09] He wanted the ladies to dress in a modern

fashion. He didn't force us to – in Mashhad everybody had to be covered up, but in Teheran there wasn't anything like that. And we – before that, everybody cooked on a fire, but then we started having ovens. [Banging] What is doing? [laughs]

[Recording paused]

We stopped before when you were telling me about how was Teheran. So tell me a bit about Teheran for you as a child.

Teheran was lovely. Everything was new, and the Shah was very pro the Jewish people and we had a very good life while he was there. And we had a beautiful park, beautiful sights. We used to go on – one day in a week there and ... And while the Shah was there, we had a very good life, very, very good.

And how were the different quarters in Teheran? The different Jewish quarters?

We had many, many synagogues and we were free, free to do – to keep our religion. Nobody bothered us in Teheran. [00:44:06] And everybody from Mashhad slowly, slowly came to Teheran because the life was better and the businesses were better. There was a bazaar in Teheran and the businesses were all there. They all had their offices and everything.

Your father's business in the bazaar, could you a bit describe – we weren't there – most of us weren't in Iran. How did it look like? How was the feeling in the bazaar?

I don't think I ever went there but it was ... They had an office among the Muslims and they did business with them and everything. It was fun. It was nothing wrong. I don't remember anything went wrong.

But with it, you said that you did not want that people will know that you're Jewish.

Not in Teheran so much.

I'm asking about you, your family.

Yeah. Well, in school we tried to keep it a secret, you know, but it was impossible. I mean, the teachers and everybody knew because we used to stop going to school for *Rosh Hashanah* and for *Yom Kippur* and for *Pesach*. For *Pesach* – I think during *Pesach* we went, but I think they knew that we are Jewish, but didn't bother us. I don't remember any time anybody did anything to me because I'm Jewish.[00:46:09]

So you didn't encounter any anti-Semitism ever?

No, no. Only Hitler time, we used to queue up for bread and there were some non-Jewish, they used to say – they used to say, “Hitler is coming, Hitler is coming,” and they used to do – paint the German sign on our windows and things.

Did they do it in your house?

I think so. I think they did. I think so. But there wasn't a lot of anti-Semitism. I remember once my auntie and us, we had a house. On one side we were leaving and the one side they were living, and my mother – there was a few people at my auntie's, so my mother went to my auntie, and my sister Soraya fell in the – fell in the swimming pool. And my mother all of a sudden said, “Where is she? Where is she?” she went, and she was at the bottom of the swimming pool and she was black when she came out. And we wanted to take her to the hospital and some Jewish boys, they came and they picked her up and they start going to the hospital. [00:48:03] And all the Muslim boys were behind us and they were screaming. They were saying, “A Jew has died, a Jew has died,” something like this. And then when we went to the hospital, there was so much noise – the hospital was a maternity hospital, and they shut all the gates and they didn't let us go in and take my sister in. So these boys were very clever. There was grass on the floor, so they picked her up from the top of the gate and they threw her on the grass, and then the people from the hospital, they had to see to her. *Baruch Hashem* she stayed alive. But she – I think she swallowed a lot of water and she was as black as an aubergine, you know.

But it shows that actually the environment – they all knew that you were a Jewish family.

Yes, of course, of course. Some of them were good to Jews and some of them were not.

You were saying that in World War II, in the time of World War II, you had to – that youngsters used to come to your house and draw a star on your window.

Yeah, mm-hmm.

Tell me a bit about it.

That's all I remember. I don't remember anything else.

Do you remember if you were frightened of it or ...?

We were frightened, yes, yes. It was wartime. And there wasn't really a war in Iran but, you know, we had this fear of Hitler coming to Iran.

[00:50:01] *So what did you know of what was going on with the Jews of Europe?*

Nothing, nothing. I mean, I was too young, too young to know.

How old are you at the time? You're a young child?

Yeah, like five, six years old, something like that. I don't remember much.

And the relationship with everything to do with Israel, the Zionist aspect, did you – were you part of any Zionist organisation?

No, no, but my brother, the one who died, they – in 1950, or '49, they came and they took a lot of Jewish people out of Iran and my brother was one of them, and he went to the army in Israel.

But before 1948, before Israel became a country, what was the relation of your family? Did they talk about Zion? Did they send you to any – you or your brothers or sisters to any organisations? What did you know of what was going on?

No, not as much as today, no, no. There wasn't much. There must have been some organisation but we didn't go to any of it.

What organisations were there?

I don't know. I don't know.

You don't. And in 1948, was there any difference – what did you know of what was happening, 1948, when the State of Israel is – [00:52:10]

Yeah, we were very – all very excited and, you know, planes full of people were all the time going to Israel. Free of charge they were taking them. And I was only 12 years old, but this is – that's all I remember.

Did you have any friends, let's say, that were taken? What was the atmosphere like?

Erm, I don't remember any other friends except my brother, but a lot of people went on those planes.

And why did your brother decide to leave?

He was a bit backward and he opened a shop, a grocery shop, in Iran, and not so many people were buying from him because he was a Jew, yeah. So that was one of the reasons that he went.

Did he want to do it or did your father send him?

I think he wanted to do it, yes.

And how old were you when he left?

How old was I?

Yeah, how old were you?

12. Yes, 1936 to 1948, it's 12 years old.

It's a long time ago, I know, but I reckon that if he was the only one from the family that left, it must have been quite a special moment. [00:54:11]

Yeah, mm.

Could you describe a bit the moment, what he thought he was going – what did you know about Israel at the time?

Nothing, I knew nothing, but I suppose the older people knew, knew something, what happened in Israel and *Baruch Hashem* we had - Israel was freed and was ours.

So your father left and was there any change in the way that the society treated you once Israel was – in 1948?

No. My father didn't leave. My brother left.

And when do you – so you said in the beginning of the interview that at 15 you married your husband.

No, I was almost 17 when I got married.

From what age did you know that you were going to marry him?

Oh, he came from England to Iran. He was also Persian. And he didn't say anything about me but everybody knew that he came for me. And my father didn't even invite him. They were in business together. [00:56:01] They were doing business. And at the end he said, "Aren't you going to invite me?" my husband told my father. Then my

father invited him on Friday night and he said at that night he looked at me properly and – there was no such thing as going out with a boy. We were not allowed to do that. And he saw me once or twice, you know, in other places, and then he went to Mashhad, because he had a lot of relations there and they all had daughters, and he didn't say anything about me. And afterwards he came back and we got engaged, and they – they send a whole load of people to ask for my hand from my father, like from the community.

Different men?

Yeah.

From the community.

They came and they asked my father if Isaac can marry Rifka, Paari, and ... My father told me he was – my father was for eight years in London on business and he knew my husband. He said, "He's a very good boy. He's a very nice boy. You should marry him." And he did that. And ...

Could you describe the situation? Did your mother come to you one day and tell you that you're engaged? Could you tell us a bit how it went in your family? [00:58:10]

My mother didn't say anything. My father said, "You should get married to him," and that was it. And I was too young to say no or "You're wrong" or anything like that. It was my kismet [laughs], so I got married to him.

What did you do in the engagement?

Engagement? I don't remember the engagement. I don't remember. But we had a lovely wedding in the Iraqi club and then afterwards my husband brought a cook – he was staying with some friends of his, some relations of his, and he brought a cook and for seven nights we had *Sheva Bracha* [Seven Blessings].

The marriage, what did you wear? Did you have any special traditional clothes?

For the *chuppah* [wedding canopy] I was wearing a simple dress, with no makeup, no nothing, but for the wedding I went to the hairdresser and makeup lady.

What's the difference from the chuppah to the wedding? Is it the chuppah –

Chuppah was at home.

At home?

Mm-hmm. My mother made special food, and then – then afterwards in the evening was the wedding. [01:00:01]

And was it the first – in the wedding, that was all the synagogue – where was the wedding itself? You said in the Iraqi synagogue.

Yeah, in a hall. They had a hall as well. They had a synagogue and they had a hall for weddings, a beautiful hall. It was lovely. I think there is a picture there.

Is there anything you want to mention about your wedding?

No. Oh [laughs], they brought – they brought four or five ladies. They sat outside our room, that my husband should bring out the - you know it's in the *Torah*.

What? I don't understand, what?

That I'm a girl, that I've never been with another boy.

Yes.

They bring a sample of the blood, the first blood that a girl –

That's when you're in the room, after you're in the –

No, no, I'm with my husband, okay? And he's having ... He's the first time that he's sleeping with me.

Yes.

And there is a token that – he has to show it to these ladies.

Okay, yeah, okay.

You understand?

Yes.

You never know about this?

Maybe I know but maybe the people that will see it –

It's in the Torah.

Yeah, so explain exactly because, you know, there'll be people that will not – the young generation maybe will not know about it, so tell us.

No, they don't do it today. **[01:02:02]**

So tell us what was this tradition and what did it mean?

It meant that everybody should know that I'm a girl, I'm not – I haven't been with another man. That's all.

So after you went to bed with him, you had to show that it was blooded?

Mm-hmm.

To show that you're a virgin?

Yes.

Okay. And that happened straight after the wedding?

Yes, the same night, mm-hmm, yeah.

But did you –

They call it *yenge*. The women that come for that is *yenge*.

And these women that come for that, what is their job in all this thing?

Nothing. They are some of the relations from that side and relations from our side, to see that everything went well [laughs].

So what do they – do they stand outside the room?

They sit. They sit outside.

Outside the room, okay. And then you give them –

[Laughs] I didn't do anything. My husband did.

So your husband gave them the ...

[Laughs] Yeah.

But for all this happening, did your mother talk to you before about it?

No. The less you talk about sex, the better it is.

So how did you know what was going to go on?

I didn't know anything yet [laughs]. It all happened. It's alright. He knew.

But before you got married, didn't your mother tell you about something that is going to happen, how your life is going to change?

No. She didn't tell me anything.

So after the wedding, you're with your husband, and then how do things go on?

[01:04:06] Er ... It was fine. I mean, we didn't stay very long in Iran. I went to – we went to Paris, I think, and Zurich and all that.

Did you know that you're going to leave – was it understood beforehand that you're going to leave Iran?

Yes, yes. They told me, yeah, and I didn't say no.

[1:04:25]

And why was the reason that you wanted to leave Iran? That it was understood that you and your husband would leave Iran?

But my husband was working in England and he had to leave. He had to go.

What was his work here in England?

He was working with his father in fur and in carpets, and led this thing.

So after the marriage, you leave –

After two months we left.

You left. When you leave, did you leave with any qualifications from school?

No, I only was there until class nine. I didn't take any certificate or anything.

Do you regret it?

No. I came here, I didn't speak English and I went to English school, and I was quite busy.

But what did you know about England, the country that you're going to emigrate to?

[01:06:00] Nothing, but I didn't like it at first. Everything was old and the buildings were old, and they were all antique but they didn't recognise it because I only liked everything fresh and new. And then –

Let's go back for a second. I'm stopping you. I want to try to understand, when you're leaving, the day that you're leaving, describe it to me. The day that you know that you are leaving Iran and leaving your family and your sisters and brothers and going with your new husband to a new country, describe what feelings – what are your thoughts?

There was some crying, you know, my mother and me, but it was alright. But afterwards, here, to get used to England, it was difficult. It was really difficult. I came from a very busy, busy home with lots of children and here I came, there was nothing. There was no excitement. And my husband all of a sudden, he said he have to go on business for quite a while, for six months, I think, to South Africa with his father.
[Phone ringing]

[Recording paused]

We were talking about leaving Iran and trying to construct a bit the moment. When you left, from where did you leave? Where did your journey out of Iran start, and who came with you? Did your parents come? [01:08:04]

Everybody, like 20 people came to the airport, yes.

So it must have been quite a sad moment.

Yeah, yeah. I remember, we all cried, yes, to leave each other.

Did your parents give you any tips or something, sentences or something that they told you?

My mother, all her life she gave – she taught me what I should do and what I shouldn't do, so she didn't need to tell me anything.

So what were the things that you shouldn't do, that you say that your mother taught you?

She didn't say anything. She was – she herself was a pattern that we followed and I think the way they brought us up was the best because we never looked at another man after we were married and everything was fine. Not like today.

So you leave Teheran. And when you get here, where – how do you get to London?

First we went on our honeymoon to Paris, and then we came to London. They all came to the airport from my husband's family, and I lived with my mother in law for 20 years.

Where did you live in London?

In Stamford Hill.

So what struck you most about England when you came here? What was your first impressions? [01:10:04]

I didn't like it [laughs]. There was everything old and ancient. But little by little I got used to it and I saw what beauty there is in all the buildings and everything.

How would you say – how were the people towards you? How did you get into the society or community?

Erm, there was ... There was a very, very friendly community and we got on nicely together, and they were about three, four girls that – because my husband was away, I used to go out with them, go to cinema or to eat or something. And it was lovely. It was fine.

But these girls that you're talking about, from where did they come from? How did you meet them? Where did you meet them?

They are Mashhadi, they are Persian. I knew them from years ago.

Oh, so you knew them from Iran and you re-met them here in London. Where did you meet them?

Here, in London.

Where? In what situation? How did you suddenly meet each other?

We all knew each other [laughs]. What do you mean? They were in touch with me and I was in touch with them.

So when you left Iran you knew that these two girls are here already.

No, I didn't know, but little by little I made – they were friendly and we were good together. We went out together. It was five of us, mm.

And did you get involved in any synagogue when you lived in Stamford Hill? [01:12:05]

Yes, we had a synagogue in East Bank, a smallish synagogue. It was good.

And how did you get along with the language?

I knew some English because I learnt it in school, but not enough. I went to the English school.

So how did your life go on? Tell me a bit about – how did your life evolve?

I was mostly with my mother in law [laughs]. Whatever she did, I did. She – I think Sunday or Monday was washing day, and then Tuesday we went out to West End or something. And Thursday it was – we went shopping to Dalston, and we – we bought everything for Shabbat and for all the week, and we came home. And it wasn't like today that all the chickens are ready and – we had to do the chicken, you know, feather them and take everything out of the stomach, and it was such a dirty thing [laughs]. I didn't like it, but I had to – I was living with her, so I had to do my share.

So did you get along on the whole?

Yes, it wasn't pleasant but yes, fine. She was a very good person. She had a good heart. She wanted everything good for us.

And why did you decide to live with your mother in law? [01:14:03]

I didn't decide. It was my husband. He wanted to look after his father and his mother and wanted to be in the same house.

And the surroundings around you, in what way was it different to the surroundings in Iran?

I think in Iran there was more life, you know. There was a lot going on, more than England. But once you get used to England, there is more to do here than there is in Iran. At that time I was new and it was what my mother in law – my mother in law was a long time – you know the – when there was the war, they suffered a lot. They were part of it. Everything was on coupons, they didn't have any food, and it was very difficult for her. But otherwise it was fine. She was a very good lady, good person.

How did your husband's family get from Mashhad to England? Why? How did they roll into England and when?

Oh, my husband's family?

Yes.

First they went to ... to Russia. They went to Israel, and they couldn't stay in Israel. The grandfather was there but they couldn't make *parnasa* so they came to – they came to England. [01:16:09] I think in between they went to Herat, to Afghanistan, and then they went to Russia and then they went to Israel. And in Russia they were very bad anti-Semitic and ...

So your husband lived in all these countries for how long?

My husband was born in Russia, and then they went to Israel.

In what year are we talking about?

I really don't know exactly. If you like I can ask my son.

No, no, I'm just interested. But everything was still open, that they can go from Russia to Israel?

Yeah.

So you are living in London and you – when was your first son born?

My first son was born in 1954.

And your second son?

'57.

And how was it to grow them while all your family is away?

My husband was here.

Yes, but you – how did you grow them up? What did you want –

I had some help from my mother in law, otherwise I did it myself. **[01:18:04]** At the beginning it – it's always difficult when the baby's born, but then afterwards it was fine [coughing].

What was the language that you talked to them?

To my children? I always talked Persian to them and they speak Persian, most of them. They both went to university and they are very clever boys. Very religious.

When you say very religious, what do you mean by that?

They keep everything, the milk-meat, *Shabbos*, the *Torah*. Everything there is, they keep. All the fasts, all the seven fasts.

Are they married also to Iranian women?

No, no, Ashkenazi. They both married an Ashkenazi, lovely girls.

*So as a young mother or as a mother, how did you preserve your Sephardic heritage?
What was important for you to pass on to your kids?*

We ate all Persian food and we kept everything that the Sephardim keep. It was fine.

But Paari, you know, I'm sure your children are not married to Sephardi.

You know the reason? **[01:20:04]**

And your grandchildren are already not totally Sephardim. When you say you keep the Sephardi traditions –

They love it. They love the –

Tell me what is the – what do you mean by saying Sephardic traditions? What was it important for you to pass on to your kids?

Well, I did – at the time I wanted them to marry a Sephardic girl, and the reason that they didn't – first of all they needed a girl that should be religious and also gone to university and clever, and you could find a religious girl among the Sephardim and you could find a girl that studied in university, but you couldn't find the two. So that's why they married the Ashkenazi. They went to B'nei Akiva. They went to Sinai, and they met these girls there.

And what is important now that you're a bit older? When you look back on your life, what is important for you today in your Sephardic heritage?

I keep everything Sephardic. Everything that the Sephardim do, I do and I'm part of them.

What are the things that Sephardim do? I don't know. What is it? Give me – for example.

Well, we are very, very religious and we don't do anything to – you know, to break *Shabbos* or anything inside the house that we – mix milk and meat or anything like that. [01:22:12] But we got Sephardim that – they keep everything but they drive a car on *Shabbos*.

But not keeping milk and meat and all that is more to do with the Jewish tradition, not especially Sephardic. I'm interested a bit to understand in what ways –

It's only the food is different. The food, we've got different food, different things. For *Purim* different and for *Shavuot* different.

What do you have for Purim different to the Ashkenazi?

I told you, we make *halva*. We make elephant ear. We make ... We used to colour eggs on *Purim* and – that's all.

From where did this tradition come, colouring eggs?

I don't know but they used to do it in Iran.

They used to do it in Iran?

Yeah.

And how would you describe – if I would ask you, what's your identity? Are you Jewish? Are you British? Are you Sephardic? Are you a combination of the two?

I'm Jewish and Sephardic.

You told me that you're part of Kinloss Synagogue.

Because there wasn't any Sephardic synagogue around us, and we went to Kinloss. And I did as much as I could for the synagogue. **[01:24:03]**

But in Kinloss, do you have two congregations?

Yeah. [Rattling noise] What was that? Erm, two congregations, well, now the Sephardim have got their own synagogue. You should go and see it. It's beautiful. It's really, really lovely. And there are a lot of Sephardim that – they don't go to the Persian synagogue and they stay in the main *shul*.

And you? What do you like?

Well, we are a member of the Ashkenazi *shul* because we've been here from 1968 and we became a part of it, you know. Like we – but I'm very much for the Sephardim, anything the Sephardim want. I told you, I was a chairman with Carolina Corby for the Persian Sephardim.

So what is home for you? When I say home, what is home for you? England or Iran?

Israel. I'm very Zionist, very.

When did you start going to Israel?

Nine years ago.

What was the situation that you decided to go to Israel?

My husband died and I had one son there and one son here, so I say I buy a place in Israel and I stay in Israel some of the time. [01:26:10] I go from – I go usually in December and I stay to the end of summer, end of August, there, and then I come – in September I come here and I stay couple of months. This time I stayed more because I ... because my grandson getting married.

And are you part – in what communities are you part in Israel?

In Israel?

What communities do you belong in Israel?

The Persian, the Persian. We've got a Persian shul near us. I go there. And when I'm with my son I go to their synagogue and that is – that's not so far away. I don't believe in Ashkenazi, Sephardim. We are all Jewish people. There is no difference to me. A Jewish person is a Jewish person, so what's the difference?

And in what ways is the community that you belong to in Israel different to the community you belong here? Are there differences?

In Israel and here?

Yes.

No, there is no difference. They're also – the Persians are very good together, and here also. I love my Persian people, my Persian friends. There are quite a few of them living in this road and we are together all the time. **[01:28:03]**

From – did you ever go back to Iran to visit?

Yes, I went twice while my parents were there. I went with my two children. One was one and a half and one was three years old – no, four and a half. And I stayed three or four months there.

What was it like going back then?

It was fine. It was alright, but I was pleased to come back.

And the second time? What year was it?

The second time I went on my own.

When was that?

That was just before the Shah was taken away, yeah. I don't remember in what year.

And from when – from then on you never went to Iran anymore?

No, no, because my mother came – she was ill, she came here and she died, and my father came a little later and went to Israel, and I never went. There was nobody there anymore. All my sisters were in Israel and one of my sisters was in London, here.

*So when you see in television what is going on in Iran today and what is happening in Teheran – **[01:30:12]***

We hate – we don't like Ahmadinejad, and what you hear about him is unbelievable.

We're getting quite towards the end. Do you ever regret leaving Iran?

No, no, what should I regret? I came to a better country, and Israel is the best. I love Israel.

In what ways? You say that Israel is the best. In what ways is Israel –

In every way. In the buildings, the people, the food, the surroundings. Everything is lovely. At night they – round about Bursa it's lit up. It's so beautiful, so lovely. Everywhere you go in Israel is like that.

Your brother went to Israel in the '50s, didn't he, in the '50s?

Yeah, '49, '50.

What was his experience as a Sephardi going to Israel at that time?

Well, there was no food at that time, and he went to the army and he had a very hard life. He came back. He came back to Iran.

Ah, he didn't stay in Israel?

No.

Was he in the Ma'abarot?

What's ...?

The Ma'abarot.

What's Ma'abarot? [01:32:01]

The places that they were sent when arriving first to Israel.

I don't know. I don't know.

That the government provided.

Yeah, I don't know. I'm sure he went empty handed. They took him, you know. The plane came and took a lot of young people.

And what were the – what would you say, looking back, were the most difficult times of your life and what were the most happiest times of your life?

Well, bringing up children, it's not such an easy thing, and my children [laughs] until the age of five, they used to vomit and they used to – they didn't sleep, and it was a very difficult time, a very difficult time. But, *Baruch Hashem*, they are lovely children now.

So you would say that that was the most difficult time of your life. And what would you say is the best time of your life?

Now.

Now?

Now that I see my children and my grandchildren and I enjoy my great grandchildren. It's lovely.

Are they interested in your Iranian heritage?

Yeah, very much so. They love the food [laughs]. Everything that I make, the Persian food, they like it. And they keep their own and it's fine. They come, they eat, they're happy to be here. **[01:34:04]** Let me bring you something to eat.

[Recording paused]

Before – is there anything that you would like to pass on to someone that will watch this DVD, about your life? About your experience as a Sephardic Iranian Jew? Is there anything you would like to pass on?

I'd like to tell them that every day they should make a *mitzvah* and they shouldn't miss that. And every day they should do their praying to our god, whether they are reading it or they're saying it. It's very important. And I do all that myself.

You said before that you don't see the big difference between if it's Sephardic or Ashkenazi.

No, I don't. No, I don't. I have a lot of Ashkenazi friends and I play bridge with them and I go to their houses. I'm invited to all their *simchas*. In fact when I have a party, I have a very difficult time because I have so many friends and I don't know which ones I should invite and which ones I should leave out.

You were telling me before about the henna. Was it henna?

Henna, mm-hmm. We had a *henna* party on Sunday night and it was lovely.

For who?

For my grandson's wife – fiancée. They're going to get married soon.

What do you do on henna night? Can you describe it?

Well, we had – we make a tray of sweets and all sorts of necklaces and things that they take away with them, and you put the *henna* on their hands, on everybody's hands. [01:36:17] They say it's nice. And *henna* stands for *hallah*, *niddah*, and *le'hadlik ner shel shabbat* [lighting shabbat candles]. The three *mitzvah* that a woman should do, should make *challah*, should keep *niddah* and - you know what's *niddah*?

No. What is *niddah*?

Purity. And should light candles.

So that's –

Henna stands for that, those three things. And we had – somebody came and drew *henna* on people's hands, and we had music, dancing. It was like a wedding. It was lovely.

So this is, let's say, a tradition that – it is special to the Sephardic community and tradition.

Yes, yes.

So what other traditions do you keep on today that are especially for the Sephardic community, heritage?

This is one of them.

This is one. Is there any other one?

Anything that we do is Sephardic. We keep all the Sephardic customs.

In the songs in synagogue, are they the songs like you used to hear in your father's house?

Upstairs, yes, at the Persian shul, and downstairs is Ashkenazi tunes. [01:38:02]

Is there anything that you would like to mention more before we go onto the photographs about your life?

No, no, nothing else [laughs]. I told you everything.

Paari, I really, really thank you for your contribution to Sephardi Voices.

You're welcome.

[Pause]

Could you tell me what document this is?

This is my mother's passport when she was very ill and she was coming to London for cure.

Where was the passport issued?

In Iran.

[Pause]

Could you tell me, what is this document?

It's my mother's passport. She was coming to London and it was issued in Teheran. She was very ill. She was coming for a cure to London.

Could you tell me her name?

Her name was Sabjan or Rachel Cohanin. **[01:40:01]**

Thank you.

This was – this passport was made – it's my father and it was made – after my mother died he came to England to live with us.

Could you tell us his name, please?

Jacob Cohanin.

And where is he buried?

He's buried in Israel.

Thank you.

Could you please tell us who are –

That is my mother and my three brothers and myself and my sister.

Where are you in the picture?

The one standing up in a little tracksuit.

And the names of your brothers?

It's Joseph and Mordechai and Iraj and Paari and Soraya, and my mother is Sabjan.

In what year was it taken?

It is eight years – I was eight years old, in 1940 – no, 1945.

And where was it taken?

In Teheran.

Was it in a studio? Was it by a photographer taken?

By a photographer, yes, yeah.

Thank you.

Who do we have in this picture?

It's my mother, my father and my four sisters and myself and my two sons, and my brother Mordechai and my sister's husband, David Armini. [01:42:20]

When was this picture taken?

When was this taken? In 1955.

And where was it taken?

In Teheran, in Teheran.

Is it when you went back with your two kids?

Yes.

Was it taken in your home?

No, a photographer.

Thank you.

That is my father in law, my mother in law and my mother in law's brother.

Could you tell us their names?

My father in law, Hajirah and my mother in law, Yoheved, and the brother in law – the brother of my mother in law, Alemamat. It's a [laughs] Muslim name.

When was this picture taken?

This must have been taken in 1930.

And where was it taken?

In Mashhad.

Do you know in what – if there was a special situation that it was taken in?

No, I don't know.

Thank you.

What could you tell us about this picture, please?

It is my in laws, my mother in law, my father in law and my husband and his brother and his sister. **[01:44:09]**

When was – around year was the photo –

The same, in 1930.

And where was it taken?

In Mashhad.

Thank you.

Could you tell us about this picture, please? What can you tell us?

They are both my wedding pictures. It was taken in an Iraqi synagogue in 1952. My husband and myself.

How old were you at the time?

Nearly 17.

And was it taken in the Iraqi synagogue in Teheran?

In Teheran, yes.

Thank you.

What could you tell us about this document?

This is the invitation for my wedding in 1952, and it's written in Persian, in Iran. And it tells you where the wedding is.

Why was it written in English also?

The same, exactly the same in English.

But was it for your husband's family?

They wanted to send it to England, the invitation, to the English people.

Thank you.

This is the invitation in English. It's the same thing as the Persian, for the guests in London.

So did a lot of your guests arrive from your husband's family from England?

No, not many. [01:46:04] Nobody. In those days people didn't travel.

Thank you.

Who do we see in this picture?

There is my husband and his sister and his brother, and I think it's taken about 1930.

How old is your husband at the time?

He must have been, hmm, 15.

Do you know where it was taken?

I think in Mashhad.

Thank you.

Thank you.

This is my husband and me and my two boys. It's taken at the seaside in 1955.

What place? Seaside in London?

In Bournemouth usually. We used to go to Bournemouth, yes.

Thank you.

When was this picture taken?

We went to Israel for my niece's engagement party and it's about ten years ago, in, hmm, 2000.

And is it your husband and yourself?

My husband and myself, yes.

Thank you.

This is my grandson's wedding. Coby Ebrahimoff with his wife, Tuti, and there is me and my son and my daughter in law, and my grandchildren, all my grandchildren in it.

[01:48:15]

How many grandchildren do you have?

Six.

Thank you.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT - 01:48:24]