

Sephardi Voices UK

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Kojaman
Forename:	Yeheskel
Interviewee Sex:	Male
Interviewee DOB:	14/02/1920
Interviewee POB:	Baghdad, Iraq
Interviewee Occupation:	Translator, Music Scholar
Father's Occupation:	Cloth Dyer
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

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[00:00:00]

Today is the 28th of April, 2015. We're conducting interview with Mr. Yeheskel Kojaman. My name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we're in London. Can you please tell me your name?

My name is Yeheskel Kojaman.

Where were you born?

I was born in Baghdad.

When were you born?

On the Valentine day of 1920.

Thank you, Mr. Kojaman. We would like to say thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for the Sephardi Voices Project. Can you please tell me a little bit about your family background?

Well, my father was of a middle class. He was a colourer, colouring clothes. He has 11 children. Most of them had good jobs in Baghdad. He died in 1945 at about 70 years.

Your mother?

My mother, of course, she was in Baghdad. She was a good house-woman. She lived until 1967. She died in Israel.

[00:02:00]

When did they get married? When did your parents get married, do you know?

No, before the First World War.

What do you remember? What are your earliest memories?

Well, the earliest thing that I remember was that I was a lover of Umm Kulthum at the age of four.

Tell us a little bit about it.

There was in our house someone who lived in a room, and he used to buy all the records of Umm Kulthum. Every night he comes and drinks and takes me from my bed to listen to Umm Kulthum, and I used to sing Umm Kulthum without understanding a word of it.

Who was the person?

He was a person who lived in a room in our house and not a relative or something.

Yeah, so that was your first introduction to--?

To music.

Any particular song? Do you remember what it was? Can you sing it? Can you sing us something?

I remember mostly--

Habiba Kojaman: He was four, that is all

[00:04:00]

I remember *wehakkak ental mona waltalab*. I remember *al ain Aziza*. Well, the records of those days. I didn't understand a word of it.

You liked it?

I liked and sang.

There might be people who don't know who Umm Kulthum is, maybe can you tell us a little bit?

Umm Kulthum is the most famous singer in Egypt.

Habiba Kojaman: Singer.

She was very popular.

The most popular in all Arab countries. She started to sing when she was a child. Her father took her to sing with him clothed as a child, as a boy. Until she was 16, she was clothed as a boy.

She was dressed as a boy?

Yes, and became a famous singer even when she was five years old. Then, she still was the most famous and the best singer in the history of Arabic music. She used to sing once a month on every Thursday at the beginning of the month so that people have money to buy the tickets and that night, you will never hear a radio in all Arabic countries without Umm Kulthum.

[00:06:00]

Did she come? Did she perform in Baghdad?

She came twice only. She came on 1933 for a month, and she came for one night on the wedding of the regent of the king of Arabia.

Did you go to any of the concerts? Did you go to a concert?

Well, I was a child.

Well, you were 13 in 1933.

Yes, I was a child in 1933. When she came for one night, of course, it is a royal wedding and we listened to her. She sang two songs. One is very light and short one and the regent to sleep. She sang another song from 12:00 to 4:00. For four hours, one song.

It was public or was it-?

They took it in the radio.

It was on the radio?

Yes.

Tell me did music play a role in the house? Tell me a little bit about the house, who lived in the house, where you grew up?

No, there was no weather for music in the house, even if when I used to sing, they didn't want me to sing. Otherwise, I would have been a good musician.

It was your own interest, nobody else. Your brothers and sisters or your parents were not particularly interested?

No, they all liked music, but no.

Can you describe the house you grew up in, where was it, the house where you grew up?

Well, in my childhood the Jews used to live in an area, a special area for Jews. Almost all the Jews were in this area and we lived there also. And this area had all the Jewish schools, primary schools, and well, all the markets were Jewish in this area.

What was it called, the area?

It is called-- Every piece is called-- Some is Abu Saad, Yengija, some is Hanoun, Everywhere you have another name.

[00:10:00]

Your house was in that area?

Yes.

Can you describe it a little bit? You had so many siblings, so did you grow up-- Were the siblings still in your house? Which number were you in terms of-- You were 11 children in total?

Yes. Every one of my brothers and sisters when they married they left the house. The only remaining were the ones which are not married.

What was the age difference in your brothers and sisters. How much older was your oldest brother?

I don't know exactly but maybe the difference is at least 30-35 years between the big one and the small one. She cannot have 11 children in 10 years.

No, so your mother was young when she married?

Yes, of course, very young. They used to marry in the age of 13 or 14.

Were your parents' cousins? Were they related at all because it was--?

No. My father's parents were in the same house, our house.

You lived with your grandparents?

Yes.

Tell us a little bit--

No, I didn't.

[00:12:00]

You didn't?

No, I didn't know them because they died before I was born, but the house is the same house. It's a family house. My mother had another place. My mother's father was a writer, a religious writer. He writes Torah.

A Sofer?

Yes.

What was his name?

Jacob.

Jacob what?

Jacob Naqar, and my smallest brother is Jacob.

After him?

Yes.

Was he well known? He wrote the Sifrei Torah for the synagogues?

Yes. They wrote the Torah in a big Sefer they call it, and he was one of the writers of this.

Wonderful. Just to come back to the house, by the time you came, the grandparents were not alive anymore?

No. I didn't meet any of them.

On either side?

On either side.

You lived in there, were there any helpers? You said you have somebody live there who introduced you to the music, were there any people who worked-- Other people who were in the house or no?

They were against me.

They were against you?

Yes. They didn't allow me to sing.

Why?

Because it is noisy.

[00:14:00]

Tell us maybe about your schooling. What are your early memories from school?

The school, all the Jewish children learned in Jewish primary schools. There was maybe 15 or more schools for boys, and there was only one school for girls.

You went to that school, do you have any particular memories from the school?

It is a memory of every child, you get a teacher and you pass from class to another class and then you arrive to the sixth year. In the sixth year, there is the first government examinations

called *Baccalaureate*, primary, and then you go to the higher school, to the secondary school. In two parts.

Then people could choose to go to Jewish schools or not Jewish schools for the secondary school?

The secondary school in my age there was only one secondary school in Baghdad, in all Iraq. There was no other secondary school.

[00:16:00]

People who lived in Basra had to come to Baghdad in order to be in secondary school. There was only one another secondary school, Jewish secondary school called Shamash,

Yes

and a French secondary school called *Alliance*. And rich people could learn in both these schools. I did not have enough money to enter these schools and I learned in the government school.

It wasn't a choice. The people who could afford it could go to the other schools.

Yes.

How religious was your family in the house? Jewish festivals.

My father and mother were a little religious, and especially my mother because she was from a very religious family from her father but all my brothers were not religious.

Did you go to synagogue as a child? Did you go to synagogue?

On *Yom Kippur* sometimes we go to-- I used to, when I was a young man, I used to go --

[00:18:00]

[phone ringing]

Yes, we were talking about-- I ask you synagogues.

When I was a young man, 16 years or 15 years, I used to go to the synagogue on *Yom Kippur*, but only the synagogue where my school manager used to sing because he had the best voice which can-- You know Paul Robeson?

What's his name?

Paul Robeson, the singer?

Yes.

I think the voice of this man was similar to Paul Robeson.

What was his name? Do you remember?

Shimon Maalem Nissim

Which synagogue? Where did he sing?

He sang on *Yom Kippur* in the *Alliance*.

In the school or in the synagogue?

Every Jewish school had a synagogue.

You went to Alliance synagogue in the school?

Yes.

What did he sing? Was there a choir?

The prayers of *Yom Kippur*.

He was the Hazzan?

Hazzan.

That's why you wanted to go and listen to him?

Yes. Only to listen to him.

In your house with your family, did you do Shabbat or no?

My father and mother yes, but not others.

[00:20:00]

Maybe can you tell us what sort of friends, also your parents' social circle or your own. What friends do you remember from your childhood?

The neighbors used to visit each other. This is the only relation.

Your parents, they worked pretty hard. Probably, there was not much time to--

They work really hard. My mother used to work with my father in the same profession.

Tell us a little bit. People would come to the house with what?

They brought clothes to be coloured black or blue.

It was to be coloured into black or blue?

Yes.

How come there were only the two colours?

Because Shia people in the days of Ashura, they have 10 days. In Ashura, they used to use blue or black clothes as a sign of--

[crosstalk]

Habiba Kojaman: They were sad for Husayn. They killed Husayn the Shia --

- 14.

Habiba Kojaman: Every year they have to celebrate this as a sign --

Remembrance of the one who -

Habiba Kojaman: 10 days, that is sad days.

- was killed.

It's a sign of mourning?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

[00:22:00]

Mourning, okay. They would wear black and blue to commemorate the killing?

Habiba Kojaman: For 10 days.

At the end of it, there's a festival?

What?

There's a festival, yes? What is the name of the festival?

Ashura. They still do that.

Yes. They particularly did it for those people?

Yes.

They didn't have Jewish customers?

No.

All right. It was a niche market. They would come but only once a year or throughout the year?

Only days before this date. They come in order to have the clothes on the date.

On the rest of the year what would your parents-- the rest of the year?

I don't know. This is--

That's what you remember?

Yes.

Very interesting.

This was their profession. My father was not rich.

No. It must have been a hard job because it involved physical.

Very hard.

Yes, because--

During First World War, my father had to run away to where the British Army came, so that they don't go to the Turkish Army. My mother completed the work all

[crosstalk]

Habiba Kojaman: Took care of all the children.

I understand.

She did the job for the years of the war.

[00:24:00]

The First World War. Where did he go, he left Baghdad?

I don't--

No, your father, you said he had to leave.

My father went to a city called Aymara.

Because he didn't want to be recruited for the--?

All the people who were taken to the Turkish Army did not come back. Not even one.

Some Jewish men they--?

A lot of Jews, young men, went to Aymara.

They didn't want to fight?

Mm.

Then they came back after the end of the First --?

After the end, yeah.

A topic related. You said they worked for the Muslims. What was the relationship at the time between the Muslims and the Jews of-- For your parents, did they have-?

Actually, we didn't feel the difference. All the work is work together as friends and work together, only from the religious side, they were different. They worked together. All the merchants were Jewish. Most of the markets were Jewish. They worked with all the people of Iraq.

When you grew up you felt there was no difference or that it didn't feel that people were different?

Yes.

At the time.

[00:26:00]

Yes. In my class for instance, in the secondary school which is a government school there were 45 students. 39 of them were Jews. The same in another class because at that time in 1938 and '09, there was only sort of-- They liked Nazism. There are four classes of secondary school. They were different only from the second foreign language. Most of the Jews wanted mostly the French language and most of the Muslims liked German.

I understand. It was separated because at that point it was the beginning.

Yes. The French classes were mostly Jews. There was almost no Jew in the German classes.

That's very interesting. On the social level, you would say there was integration?

[00:28:00]

Even the Muslim boys who went to the German club and got 250 fils a month and used to write against Jews. He may be with me hand in hand and he writes 'qafeh Jews'.

Anti-Jewish, something.

Anti-Jewish.

Tell us a little bit about the German club. They were encouraged to go to the club or?

Well this is a, there was Grobba is the--

Habiba Kojaman: Teacher?

Lah [No], Ambassador.

It was the--

German in Baghdad and he had a club. They usually paid 250 fils a month to every child who goes to the club and the teachers had payments according to the salaries. 250 fils at that time, 1938 was enough to cigarettes, cinema and many times to eat in a restaurant. Because a meal in a the restaurant, was 12 fils. You eat kebab and *leban [cheese]* and tea - 12 fils. Cinema was 25. 250 was enough for them for all of that.

[00:30:00]

They try to encourage the local population to come. It worked? Do you think it worked in terms of the propaganda?

Yes. It worked very well until 1939.

Because you weren't then old enough, did you feel they had started an anti Jewish sentiment? Could you feel that personally?

In writing.

Yes.

Our relation is like brothers.

It didn't change, that's what I meant? Did you feel a change at all in your-?

We didn't have any anti-Jewish between the students. For instance, I can tell you something. In 1935, there was a massacre in the prison and on the same day they sent the manager of health in Baghdad with a group of doctors to see what is the damage. I was sitting there with blood. One of my friends in secondary school was the manager. When he came, he saw me and he talked to me about a quarter of an hour, in spite of the fact that he's the manager and I'm a prisoner.

[00:32:00]

This was not '35, this must have been later. In which year was that, later when you were in prison? Which year?

Yes. It is later in '53.

'53? It was a school friend?

Yes.

There was a close contact?

He remembered our friendship when we were at the secondary school.

Also the Jews were quite in the civil servant. I mean, in the gov they worked. For example, can you tell us a bit about your brothers and sisters what they were doing?

When the British occupied Iraq at the end of First World War, almost all the students, the Jewish students knew English because English was in secondary school, even in primary schools. The Jews went to work and they occupied most of the jobs in the government. For instance, in [00:34:00] the railways you didn't find any non-Jew there. In the Ministry of Finance, in the Post Office, all of the class were Jews.

Because of the language you think? Because of the language?

Because they wanted people who know English.

Tell us because your brothers and sisters you told me before, one worked for the Post Office, for the railway?

One was an officer in the railways, the first one. The second one was assistant manager of the post office. The other was a station master in the railways. The other one was an assistant master in the railways. Only one completed education in Egypt as a *vétérinaire*.

It's quite amazing that in your family so many worked at government's positions?

Yes. Well, this was not very good because everyone who married [00:36:00] left the family and didn't help the rest of the family. He became independent. This is why one of them was actually very poor.

I understand. Also their salaries, they were not businessmen so they were not wealthy.

My father could not work after the war when he came back because he had half paralyze--

A stroke? Yes. The family had to take care of him, your mother had to take care of him?

Yes.

Let's just go back. You went to the secondary school, tell me a little bit what subjects, do you remember what you learned in the school?

In the secondary school?

Yes.

Well, actually, it was very different from now. In the secondary school, we had to examine in 12 subjects. Mathematics, algebra and cubic engineering. We had chemistry and physics and cubic geometry and of course, Arabic and history and geography and English.

[00:38:00]

What topics were you interested in, do you remember, what did you like?

I was a mathematician in all my life.

Arabic as well?

Of course. In Arabic, I'm very good till now. I write very high style Arabic till today.

You read a lot in Arabic today?

Not a lot. My program now in the morning, I told you, I drink a cup of milk with coffee and listen to music and write articles, mainly political articles. And at night, I read about two hours in the computer articles for today and this is all my reading.

About the current situation in Middle East?

Yes. I read some books in English.

When you were here you said you were exposed a little bit to the music in the house and what about music in the school? Was that-?

Neither in the school nor in the house. Only when I became 16 I started to learn music.

What did you learn?

I learned to play Oud. [00:40:00]

I did not have any teacher. I taught myself. This is why I did not become a professional musician.

You started playing that with-- Can you tell us a little bit because as you said before, the Jews were very important for the music in Iraq. Maybe this is a good time to talk about it.

In all the world there were famous musicians. If you know Germany, you know how many German musicians who were actually world musicians very famous but in Iraq, there was a different thing. There was nothing similar in all the world. In Iraq, the Jews was the only musicians of the Iraqi people and almost until 1950 there was not one player of music which is not Jew. Most famous musicians and composers and some singers were all Jews so the role of Jews in Iraqi music is different [00:42:00] from all the world.

Why is it? Why was that?

I don't know actually, but the Muslim people did not allow their children to play music. They thought that this is against Islam so only the Jews loved music. There is a special kind of music

in Iraq called *Maqamat* and this *Maqamat* was family. The father teaches his son and doesn't teach any others, so this is in both styles of music the Jews were the main musicians.

Also, I heard that there was an orchestra.

There was not an orchestra until the '50 in Baghdad. There were groups, bands. As far as the radio had a band of seven people, there's no orchestra. Orchestra in Iraq became in the '70s after the Jews.

Yes, but these bands were mostly Jews. Do you remember going to concerts? Did you go to concerts when you grew up as a young man?

No, I was not a professional.

No, but to listen.

Yes, of course. [00:44:00] All the cases where there was performances for audience, I used to go but the radio had many hours a day for music and all the band of the radio were Jews except one only--

Habiba Kojaman: Percussion.

Percussion player and the others are Jews.

What are their names? Maybe tell us some names for people.

One of them is Saleh al-Kuwaity and Daoud al-Kuwaity.

Kuwaity Brothers.

Kuwaity Brothers. One is violin and one is oud. There was Yacoub Imari who played flute. There was a cello player and santoor, qanun player, called Yusef Zarour. I can show you a picture of them.

In what venues would they perform? Apart from the radio, where would they?

They used to work full-time in the radio because all the singers had to be accompanied by music so they almost stayed all the day [00:46:00] because there was no recording at that time, only live music, so they had to be in the radio all the day until the end.

Amazing.

Just to end at 11 o'clock.

You would listen where, in your room? Where would you listen to the radio, with your friends?

In coffee shops and in friends, because I had no radio at home.

When you were in secondary school, did you join any other clubs or political? Were you interested in politics?

No.

Did you join any other organizations?

No, not in the school after that.

So what happened when you finished school?

I went to be teacher in a Jewish primary school.

Straight afterwards? Because you needed to probably make an income?

Yeah.

In which school? Where did you go to?

The school called Masuda Salman.

What did you teach?

Masuda Salman is a woman who had money and had no one to enhance her so she built a school and lived in the school. I remember she used to come and see the children and she had her home in the [00:48:00] school.

You started to work there?

Yes.

Teaching different subjects?

Regularly, I'll go. If they ask you to teach mathematic, you teach mathematics. If they ask you to teach English, you teach English, any subject.

But you didn't live there, you stayed at home?

Right, like every teacher goes to school and back home.

Yes, and this must have been around the late '30s, early '40s? Late '30s, early '40s?

From 1940 to 1945 when I went to the university.

In the time, obviously, the Farhud was in 1941?

Farhud, 1941.

Can you tell me--

I was a teacher at that time.

Can you tell me your experience? What happened to you?

Well, what happened is at 1941 some officers rose against the government and formed a government which is pro-Nazis. The British army with the Iraqi leaders made a war against and this continued about [00:50:00] one month.

And when the British Army had a victory, all the government run away to Germany. The British Army was supposed to pass the bridge to the main part of Baghdad, which is called Rusafa. This was on the first of June I think, which was a Jewish feast, *Shavuot*. The Jews at that time were celebrating and went to see the British Army when it passes the bridge, and no one of them return, of those who went to the bridge. The British Army did not pass the bridge, Baghdad remained 48 hours without a government.

At that time, some people who came from outside Baghdad attacked the poor area of the Jews and not all [00:52:00] the areas, and killed and raped and stole for 48 hours until an army came from the North of Iraq and occupied Baghdad, not the British, occupied Bagdad and stopped the killing.

You said only the poorer areas, not in the other areas?

Yes. The rich area was not attacked by anyone because the police protect the rich area. The *Farhud* was in the old area of the Jewish.

They were more vulnerable, the houses, the people?

Yes.

What happened to you personally and your family?

Our family was in area in which these people did not arrive. They arrived about 20-- very near area but they did not arrive to all. I was in my brother's house during the celebration [00:54:00]. And I had to go back home. And my brother advised me not to go in the New Street, but I go on the old street called Rashid. All those who went back from the new street called Razi Street were killed. They used to stop all the busses and see who is Jew and they kill him. And I and one of my relatives went by foot on the old street, and we arrived safely.

Who were the perpetrators? Who did these killings?

I told you, it was mostly people who came-- at the end of Baghdad, people came from all parts of Baghdad who had no work and they call it *al-Asmima* and mostly these people. It was not Nazi people who were in Grobba club. Actually most of them [00:56:00] they protected.

Yes, that's what I would say, that's interesting. It wasn't a local?

No. It was not the Nazi education which did the massacre.

Which is responsible. What do you think, what was responsible?

British Army. They wanted it. This is why they kept Baghdad without government for 48 hours. For instance, in Basra, they wanted to do *Farhud*, the same. The people of Basra did not want to do it. The Indian army came to the market and broke the shop services but not the people.

But why was it in the interest of the British Army?

They are occupiers and they want to be as savers.

In your family, nobody was affected?

My biggest brother was in an area where they came. He kept his wife and his children in one room, and when they came he told them, "The money is there, [00:58:00] the clothes are there, don't touch them." They said this is a national one. They stole all everything. They did not leave a trousers, but they did not kill the children.

They ransacked the house. But for you, did it change? Did the Farhud change anything for you personally because for some people they say-?

No. Well, actually after the *Farhud*, all the young Jews, almost all of them became political. There were two political movements, one is the Communists and one is Zionists. Many people went to the Zionist movement and many went to the Communist. You have sometimes in the family one brother is Zionist, the other is Communist.

Do you think it was triggered in '41 just because there was a problem in the way?

It was in effect of the *Farhud*.

People ask the questions about the future, lets say of the Jews in Iraq.

This was not in 1941. This was in [01:00:00] '48 when Israel was formed. People sometimes want to do the connection because they want this connection as if Jewish people wanted to leave Iraq because of the *Farhud* but that's not true.

Right. For you, that's not the case.

It is not true, not for me.

Because it's a different political situation?

Yes. After the *Farhud*, every family, most of the families were robbed and lived in Muslim houses on their account. That is they accepted families to live in their house because of the *Farhud*.

At the time you were still in the school until 45? You said from 41 to 45.

Yes.

When did you become interested in politics? At that time or later?

In '41, '42. Also as an effect of the *Farhud*. All the younger Jews were affected by the *Farhud*.
[01:02:00]

What were you? On which side were you? You said there was Zionist or communism.

Communism.

What were the ideas discussed at the time-- It was also the Second World War ongoing, of course.

Yes.

So, what were the ideas discussed? Or maybe you can convey what-

Well, the communists is known. They wanted to free Iraq from imperialism and become a socialist country. This was to free the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians and Sabis. All.

And do you think in terms of, let's say, your own family, was it divided equally, the Zionism and the communists or some people?

All the young children, three young children, I and Moshe and Jacob were communists. Some of them were Zionist and some was not political.

Not interested. Do you think it was also a generational question?

Yes.

Also, maybe the younger ones felt more integrated into Iraqi society in some way than the older ones.

We were still in school and in connection with the—

Yeah.

They were an officer and [01:04:00] they --

They were part of the imperial structure more, the older ones.

Yes.

That's interesting. Another thing I wanted to ask that we didn't discuss, what about the language because the Jews, the Arabic is slightly different, or there is an accent-

Well, it is dialect, but it is Arabic. Like German and-

Yiddish.

Yiddish.

Yes. It's similar in that.

Yes, it is that-

Habiba Kojaman: In the north they speak as Jews.

In the north of Iraq?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

In Mosul, the Arabic is very similar to the Arabic-

Habiba Kojaman: Dialect of Jews.

-dialect of the Baghdadi Jews.

So, you could hear how somebody speaks whether they were Jewish or not?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Yes. You have a clear dialect. So we used to know both dialects. You can speak both dialects. That's when the old women, specially, they want to talk the Muslim dialect, they make it very, very --

It's funny, they make mistakes?

-fancy.

They make it what?

Fancy.

Fancy.

They say words, when the Muslim hears it, he laughs.

So, when you were, let's say, in school, you could switch?

Yes.

Among the siblings you would speak what?

We don't have a problem [01:06:00] talking with Muslim because we talk the same. At home, we talk our dialect, but outside we talk the common.

What about the music, for example, in the singing, the Jewish-- Do you see what I mean?

It's not Jewish.

It was in the?

There is no Jewish music.

That's what I want to know. Was there music with the Jewish Iraqi?-

Iraqi music, which the Jews played. When I wanted to write my master thesis, they wanted me to call it Jewish music, and I refused even to write the master if they want Jewish music. I told the professor, I told him, 'which is better, to say music of 100,000 people or a musician of seven million people?' Even from the Zionist view, it is much better to say Iraqi music.

Yes. It's very interesting that it was Iraqi music, it wasn't-

I wrote it as Iraqi music, and this is why they are reprinting my book now in Baghdad.

Did you feel the same in the way not only the music but in terms of your own identity at the time you felt Iraqi, yourself, you felt [01:08:00] Iraqi.

Yes, until today. On my writing articles, I write as an Iraqi.

But not everyone felt that way.

No.

Some people felt different. But as you said, it was also generational, it was easier for the younger?

Not a generation in Israel, everything changed. The Jews who went to Israel, most of them even were ashamed to say they are Iraqis. So, you have only a small number of Jews who write till now as Iraqis.

Today. But do you think it was also at the time a class issue so that in a way the working classes were more Iraqi? Do you see what I mean?

Well, it is all the classes. There is a difference in equality, but it is all the classes. Even the people who were connected with the ruling people, they were Iraqis, but in Israel, they change their attitude.

Once people arrived in Israel?

There are many people who were ashamed from their names, they changed their names into European names or [01:10:00] Israeli names.

Hebrew names, yes. Yes. Well, that has to do with the whole situation in Israel, but that's the whole question, what happened to the Iraqi Jews who emigrated to different countries and how did it affect their identity?

Well, the most important people who came to Israel from Arab countries was the Iraqis.

Yes. In 195-

And the most educated one, because the Jews did not want to send their children to the army in Iraq. So, if one passes the secondary school, he is not taken to the army. So, all the Jewish young men try to get to the secondary school certificate so that they don't have to go to the army.

In the 1940s, when was there a feeling of change- or was there a feeling that things-

Well, the feeling of change for us, the young people, started in 1933, '34. At that time, they started not to accept Jews in universities, that is every college takes only four Jews and not the [01:12:00] 50 people who tried to get, and they didn't give chance to the young Jews to become workers in the government offices. This was-

The beginning. In the '30s already.

Yes. In 1939, we had some problems because of the Nazi education in Nazi club, Grobba.

Then, later in the '40s, obviously that is the beginning of-

It became very bad in 1948, after the formation of Israel.

Shall we, I want to ask, you do you want to have a break first? We're going to discuss it now. Shall we take a little break or you're okay?

I have to go to the-

I think we should take a break now. We were talking about 1948. So, maybe you could tell us where you were at the time and what happened?

Well, I was at that time the College of Pharmacy. It was a very difficult situation at that time because of the formation of Israel. [01:14:00] The government started to look at the Jews as Israeli or wanted to go to Israel. It was arranged between three governments: Israel, Britain and Iraq. They all participated in the problem of sending the Jews out of Iraq.

Habiba Kojaman: To Israel.

Under that time, we felt really in a very difficult situation because our party did not believe in our difference from Iraqis. They treated us as Iraqis and we felt as Iraqis. And these three governments wanted to treat us as not Iraqis. So, they made a decision to give the Jews the chance to go to Israel. They [01:16:00] gave me a limit of time, and the limit of time almost ended without many Jews registering to-

Habiba Kojaman: They don't wanted to leave.

But there were an organization in Baghdad of Zionists, and was people who are organizing it from Israel in a Irani passport and from London. When you talk about the prisons, I'll talk about them-- They started to throw-

Habiba Kojaman: Bombs.

-bombs in Jewish clubs and the-

Habiba Kojaman: The synagogue.

The synagogue. The last 15 days actually was almost all the Jews asked to go to Israel.

That is the scene which is I don't know whether you've seen The Dove Flyer. Have you seen the film? They made the film now called The Dove Flyer.

No.

Habiba Kojaman: He didn't.

It's about the time, and the synagogue incident is displayed there.

[01:18:00] Well, I had a good relation with the Zionist who came for him from Israel, because he came to the prison and I was responsible from the communist organisation to deal with the problems of the Zionists and to help them. So I became friends with this person. He's called Yehuda Taja. In the prison, he was called Salchun in the name of his passport. He told me, 'We had orders to kill 20% of the Jews in order to let the others go'.

He told you that in prison? Orders from whom?

Yes.

Orders from whom?

Habiba Kojaman: From Israel.

From Israel?

From Israel.

He basically said that the bombing of the synagogue was-

Yes.

Because I think still it's disputed in some way.

Yeah. The people became afraid.

So, the aim was to create fear?

Yes.

Habiba Kojaman: Yes. Fear.

And it succeeded. The only little number of Jews remained in Iraq.

Tell me little bit about you said you were in the Communist Party.

No.

You were not?

Only the rich people who wanted to keep their [01:20:00] richness stayed in Iraq. It's not the Communist.

No, you were in the Communist Party?

No, I was-

Habiba Kojaman: He was in prison.

-from '49 in prison.

When were you in prison, 1949?

In February '49.

Just before that, before we speak about it, I want to just to go back a bit. When you finished being a teacher, you went to college to study pharmacy.

Yes.

What made you do that?

Well, I always wanted to get more education, and it was a chance, they accepted me in the College of Pharmacy.

Because at that time was it difficult to be able to get a place to study?

Yeah, because in the College of Pharmacy, they accepted only three Jews every year.

So, you were one of them? Okay, and then you were in that college. But did you finish it?

No, I studied three years, and then they took me to prison. We had to finish it in four years, so I did not become a pharmacist.

Do you remember where you were exactly when the State of Israel was declared?

Mm?

Do you have any memories of the day when they declared the State of Israel, in 1948?

I don't know-

You don't remember.

-the date of-- I don't remember.

No. [01:22:00] Please tell us what led to your arrest? If you could tell us the story, what happened?

No, it's not connected with the Jewish or Muslims. It's one communist member of the party who brought to the government, to all the members whom he knew, and we were taken.

Habiba Kojaman: They beat him.

Yes, he was tortured and he gave all the names of all the party members.

Yes.

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Because at the time it was secret, it was undercover. It was not official.

It was always a secret party.

Before your arrest, can you describe what were your activities in the party?

I was a simple member in the party. I never was a cadre really in the party. Even in the prison, I did not become a cadre or guiding-- Although I was the theoretical teacher of all the prisoners, including all the leaders who came in the prison, but I was not treated as a higher member of the party.

Right, just an ordinary [01:24:00] member.

Yes.

You said a theoretical teacher. What does that mean?

Well, in the prison we had the chance sometimes to make groups who learn the theory of Communism, political. I was the best educated in this area, so all the leaders who were at the time in the prison with me, were my students.

When you were arrested, was it a surprise? Did you expected it - to be arrested?

No.

What happened exactly?

We were trying to go to the cinema regularly, and suddenly the police came and arrested us.

Habiba Kojaman: The whole family, they take us to prison.

They arrested your whole family?

Habiba Kojaman: Even his mother. She was- [crosstalk]

Even my mother who was older than the mother of the judge, he gave her two years of prison.

Okay, so we have to backtrack a little bit because I want to understand it. First of all, were you married at the time?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Yes.

So we didn't - Tell me a little bit-

We were married exactly 50 days.

Where did you meet your wife?

This is another story.

Sorry.

[01:26:00] Well, she was a student in the secondary school. As usual, there is no secondary school for girls in Amara, her city so, she came to Baghdad in a boarding school. She has a relative in Baghdad. She used to come every Friday to her relative, and it happened that this relative is my friend. She was weak in mathematics, and he asked me to teach her mathematics, and this is the problem. [laughs]

When was that? When did you meet?

'43?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

No, '43 or '44, yes.

When did you get married?

December '48, 50 days before. But we lived together many years before that.

Where your families in favour of your--?

Mm?

You families, did they support this?

Yes, she lived in my house, regular in the house. Only we changed the room when we were married.

Right, so you got married in 1948?

[01:28:00] Yes.

You were a bit younger, so you were still in school. You finished secondary school?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Now we can back to the arrest. They came to the house, and who was arrested?

Well, at that time, in the same day, in the same visit, I was arrested, she was arrested, my sister was arrested.

Habiba Kojaman: Your mother.

There was a girl who was a friend of my sister, she was arrested, and my mother. The next day, her sister and her brother and her aunt were arrested.

What were the charges?

Communism.

For all of you?

Yes.

Who was actually a party member? You were, but was your wife a party member? Your mother was probably not.

My wife was a party member. My mother didn't know anything.

Exactly, yes.

Habiba Kojaman: Doesn't know anything.

No. At the time, had other people already been arrested? Had other families been arrested?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes, one.

Next morning, her sister and her brother and her aunt were arrested.

What happened then, after you were arrested?

There was a trial, and [01:30:00] I was charged for 20 years, her sister for 20 years, my sister and her aunt and she was 5 years, and my mother for 2 years.

Unbelievable. It's unbelievable. That's why I'm trying to find out, because also some people were executed. There were also some executions.

From our group, one was executed.

Who was that?

He's called Sasson Dellal. A very young person.

Why was he executed?

Because he was the head of the group. They wanted to kill one person, and he was the most important one. Executed.

Before the trial, first of all, you were arrested, did you stay together or you went to different prisons? Where did you go?

Habiba Kojaman: Different.

Prisons, where did you go?

I was in men's prisons, very different prisons according to the situation. She was in the women's prison.

Habiba Kojaman: Women's.

How long was it between your arrest and the trial?

We were arrested in February and the trial [01:32:00] was at the end of April.

In that time, did you have any contact with the outside, with the Jewish community? Did anyone try to-

They all thought I was dead.

So, they didn't know where you were?

Even my mother and my brother, they thought I was dead. It was a surprise for them when I came to the court.

Were you tortured? Did you have experience? What was your experience before the trial?

Well, it is usual. You have a period of torture and then you go to a place where people are arrested in a single room until their trial.

What did they try to get out of you, more names? What did they want?

Anything. Anything you will say. I didn't have anything to tell them. I didn't tell them anything, but they tortured me. In the prison, after the torture, I used my hand as a pillow because it was like that.

How did you cope psychologically? How did you feel at the time?

I feel the pains of the - . I had a ring here, a marriage ring. Because [01:34:00] my hand become like this, they called somebody to cut the ring in order to cut the finger.

Were you angry?

No.

No?

In this case, you cannot be angry. It is a trial and there is not a real trial. It is an army officer who is trying you. He doesn't know anything about it. The results of the trial are written for him, he only reads it.

It's a show trial.

Yes.

There were quite a few of those show trials in Baghdad?

A lot of them. In our case, there were 21 people, 6 of them is my family. When the officer came to our house, I said the husband will be 20 years and the woman is 5 years. It was exactly.

In the house when they came?

[01:36:00] In the house, we were still on the house.

At the time, so you could be either accused of being a Zionist traitor or a Communist?

Yes.

Was it as bad to be a Communist as a Zionist? Was it worse?

We were caught as Communist.

21 people was the group. Did you know the other people who were in that group?

No, we didn't know. I knew only the one who was executed. The others, I didn't know.

When the sentence was passed, there was one execution and the other, including you, were imprisonment?

Yes.

At that time, did you have contact with the other family members who were not your brothers and sisters? Was there any contact with them?

No.

You didn't have contact between each other because you were in a different prison?

No. I didn't see her until I went to Israel.

Between the arrests, was there any possible conversation when people were torturing you and trying to get-- Do you see what I mean? Was there any sense that you can defend yourself or no?

How can you? They come and *yaani* [filler word while thinking], start [01:38:00] to beat you and that's- they call us bad names and that's it.

Was there something which helped you to go through it, to keep your spirit up? I don't know. It must be a terrible situation.

Even the doctor who came to-- He told me, what is that? Did [Arabic....]

Habiba Kojaman: Snake.

‘Did a snake bite you?’ And he knows it is only torture. The doctor is-

In it.

-one of them.

Maybe can you talk to us about the trials?

And I told him, I answered him, "Iraq is full of snakes".

Because as you said you felt Iraqi, did you feel a sense of betrayal? At the time, how did you feel?

Actually, I don't feel anything at that time. In the time of the prison, I never felt bad because I kept educating myself as much as I can, and I [01:40:00] did not have time to be sorry.

You kept your morale?

Yes.

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Maybe I am the best of all the prisoners in this case. Maybe I'm the only one who left the prison more educated than when he entered the prison, and the government did try to make us less.

Can you tell us the day of the trial? I will ask Habiba when we do your interview - but your memories.

At the end of December. I think it was 28 and end of April. I think it was 28, because after the trial, they took us to the prison. In the prison, we celebrated the first of May. This was the first meeting of the prisoners in our case in the prison.

In fact, if it's the 28th of April, this is the day today?

I think 28th of April.

Which is amazing. So, that is how many years ago? Now, it's 2015.

49.

Yes. Can you tell us that you were brought from where you were [01:42:00] kept to the trial?

Yes.

What happened then?

We went to prison.

But you said you saw your wife and your mother. You didn't see them before so-

In the courtroom-

In the court.

-because we were there, and after the court I didn't see them.

Did you have somebody to defend you? Was there somebody who could take-

No.

There was no pretend?

No defending, no lawyers, nothing. It's only a ridiculous ceremony. Nothing.

The judge stood up and what happened? What was the accusation? What was read out at court?

It is communist. 'You are a communist'.

You're danger to the-

Yes, danger to whole world

And the sentence were passed, each name was read out with the sentence?

Yes.

Did you expect your sentence?

I did not expect it but I heard it from the official who came to our house. He said he 20 and his wife-

The person who got the death penalty, was that expected?

Yes?

You said the leader-

We did not actually expect that he will be executed. We thought he will be prisoned like us.

How long did the whole thing last? I'm just trying to picture it.

Yes?

How long was the trial? How long [01:44:00] did it last? An hour or two hours?

It is only one day.

One day?

Yes. One day they took us in the morning and only 21 were executed. Other was punished as prisoners.

From there you were then-

Some, 20 years, some 15 years, some 10 years, 7 years, according to-- The Jews were higher.

That's what I was going to ask. Of the group of 21, how many were Jewish and how many were-

We are six or seven. The family.

Your family?

Yes

Apart from your family, were there any other Jews?

The other people, also the Jews had more sentences than the non-Jews.

It was worse to be Jewish and communist than just a communist?

Was it?

It was worse, it was-

Is it worth?

Not worth. From the perspective, it was worse. That's why you had higher punishment?

Worse. Yes.

Then, after that day, then you were taken where?

First to prison in Baghdad for two nights, and then to Nugra Salman. Do you know Nugra Salman?

No.

Nugra Salman was a castle for [01:46:00] police. Police castle directed and built by the British army for the Bedouins police. You know the Bedouins?

Yes.

For the Bedouins police. It is very near to Saudi Arabia in the-

In the desert.

-in the desert, and it was very lonely prison and people or the relatives of the prisoners had to actually travel to this prison without the accompaniment of a police car. They could [not] go there. A regular driver doesn't know the way. So, they had to travel for two days in order to arrive to the prison. They came only in the feasts to meet their boys. Then, after two years, we went to another prison in Kut, and then again to Nugra Salman, and from Nugra Salman to [01:48:00] be released.

How many years in total while were you in prison?

For me, it was 12 years.

It's a very long time. How were you treated?

Yes?

How were you treated? Was it different from prison to prison? How were you treated? How did you feel?

It depends on the manager of the prison. There were bad managers who treated the prisoner very badly, and there were managers who were less bad and did not treat the prisoners very badly.

In your case, let's say, the first two years, you said in the first two years-

We were with the most cruel manager. This first two years. After the revolution of 1958, they executed because his attitude to the prisoners.

For example, can you give us an example? What happened? How was he cruel? What happened to the prisoners?

Beating and stopping giving food, little water, because there is no water there. There's no [01:50:00] pipes for water. They used to bring water by tank and we did not have enough water to drink.

Did you feel, being a Jewish prisoner, I don't know how many other Jewish prisoners were there among?

Well, at that time, more than half of the prison was all Jews. I told you after the *Farhud*, many Jewish boys became communist and 60% of the prisoners in my prison were Jews.

Do you feel- were they differently treated than the non-Jews?

No. We were in organization, a communist organization.

In prison?

Yes. In the organization, there was no difference. If the director of the prison is bad, he treats all the prisoners as bad, badly.

Everyone was treated badly equally?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Yes.

If one can say that?

Yes.

You say also there was some Zionist in the prison. There was some Zionist?

Not at the beginning. After 1953, they gathered all the prisoners. The Jewish prisoners were in prison. [01:52:00] The prison became the prison of Jews, Zionists, communists, criminals, everyone. Every Jew was there from 1953 in Nugra Salman, from 1953 to the end. After two years, in 1955, they sent some Muslims from other prisons to Nugra Salman communists. We

have a communist organization together. Because the organization is big and we have a lot of members, we could manage to help other prisoners.

In which way?

If they need something, they need help, they need-- Sometimes they need food, sometimes they quarrel between them and I was appointed the person to deal with them.

This was in the first two years?

Which first?

In the first two years when it was still-

No. This was at the end.

At the end, sorry.

From 1953. [01:54:00]

You had some contact to the party outside or--?

Some of them. The leaders of the organization have contact with the party, but not all of the organization. Not all of the organization is communist. It is a communist organization that every political prisoner has the right to live with the communist.

Were they kept in different parts?

Yes?

Were the prisoners kept in different parts?

No. It is organization. We live together. We organize our life together; the cooking and cleaning and washing and everything, but members are not all communists. If there's somebody because of a strike was sentenced, also can live with us without necessary to be a communist.

In a way, you missed the mass exodus of the Iraqi Jews to Israel. You were in prison?

Yes.

You didn't see it?

No.

Did that have any effect on you in prison?

Yes, it did. They took our nationality.

While you were in prison?

While in prison. They took every prisoner who [01:56:00] finished his sentence was sent to-

Habiba Kojaman: Israel.

- Israel against his wish.

It was not your decision.

No.

They took the nationality of all the prisoners?

The Jews.

Of the Jewish prisoners?

Yes.

At the same time, when this law came about in 1951, yes?

'58.

In '58, so later, not with the first mass exodus?

Yes.

After that revolution in 1958?

The remaining Jews were three men and three women. They took their nationality again.

Meaning when?

We again became Iraqis.

When?

After the revolution, 1958.

I see. Sorry. Now, I understand. It was taken away in '51 and then given back in '58?

I still have it, yes.

You got it back in 1958?

Yes.

That's very interesting. For you, what was the worst experience you had during that time in prison for you personally?

Well, the worst was the massacre, which was done in the prison in 1953. They entered hundreds of police [01:58:00] into the prison with guns and machine guns in the prison. When we wanted to leave the prison, many of us were dead because of that and many others were wounded. I was one of the wounded.

That's when you told the story when you're-

Yes.

Habiba Kojaman: How many killed? Two killed?

What two? Ten.

Habiba Kojaman: Ten killed?

Ten was killed and most of us were wounded.

What happened? What was the context? They came in- was the uprising, a revolt?

No context. First, they stopped to give us food for a month and stopped to give us water. We had to dig a well-

Habiba Kojaman: In prison.

- in the prison to drink water.

Then?

Then there was massacre.

You said you were injured. What happened to you? What injuries?

I was injured here. There is still a sign.

Then the army came in? The army then--

What army? No.

You said your friend, he came into the prison as what? As a doctor, is it?

He was the head of-

Habiba Kojaman: Police?

No. [02:00:00] The leader of the medical organization in Baghdad. Head of the doctors.

Yes. Could he help you personally?

No.

No, but he talked to you.

It was very brave that he comes and he knows me and he stopped to talk to me while the prison manager and the others were looking at you. They were very surprised. But he talked to me about quarter of an hour. And he was only a student in my class.

I understand. That was the worst point of the imprisonment. That massacre?

The massacre was-- I was supposed to be the first killed because they told to the police, 'This is Kojaman. This is Kojaman.' And I was supposed to be the first to be killed. They didn't do it.

What saved you?

Huh?.

What saved you?

I don't know because when they started to open-

Habiba Kojaman: Fire.

Yes. We runned [02:02:00] into the room of the prison. And I was in a room which was forced to go out of the prison, and we passed in a row of police with – *yaani* –

Guns?

- trying to kill us but I was not killed. I only was wounded.

You were lucky.

Yes. It is not exactly that. We had one of the prisoners who was very keen in electricity. They put about 500 lamps in the prison in order to- but we arranged that this person, when they start, he makes a fuse and it became dark. They couldn't see what they wanted.

Was it at night time?

Habiba Kojaman: Night time, yes.

It was at five in the morning.

After that was finished, did the--?

We were taken to a hospital.

And returned to the same prison or not?

No, they separated us. The Jews were taken to Nugra Salman and there's a special prison for Jews, and others were taken to another prison, in Baquba.

Why were the Jews all put in one prison? [02:04:00]

Yes.

Why were the Jews all put in one prison?

Because the government thought that the Jews are the people who are managing the other prisoners, so they separated the Jews and thought that, in this case, they will finish the communist movement.

I understand. They thought that Jews are influencers?

Yes.

How different was that prison than just with the Jewish prisoners?

Yes.

How different was it than the prison which was just for the Jewish prisoners? Was that different?

It is only because we were in the desert and alone and we had no connections. Our families were not there because all of them emigrated to Israel. This was very difficult for all of us.

Yes, because a lot of people didn't have families around.

Only one or two prisoners had still families in Iraq.

You were even more vulnerable in a sense, or you could get less food or parcels or letters. Was there contact to the outside?

No.

Did you have any contact with anyone?

No.

Did you have contact to your wife?

Habiba Kojaman: No.

No.

Throughout the period of your imprisonment?

Yes.

You had no contact at all?

Habiba Kojaman: No contact at all.

Unbelievable. [02:06:00] Tell me a little bit about- you said you educated yourself in prison, how did you manage to do that?

Well, actually, secretly, we could get some books, political books, and some other books also. I did not leave a book without reading it and studying it. Other people, if we get a book in the winter, they say it's better in summer, and if it comes in the summer, they say it's better in the winter. I always took the book on the day which comes and study it.

What did you read, do you remember? What sort of books did you read?

I read all the political books which came to the prison. Usually, it comes from two or three months and it's again lost. All the books especially in all the 12 years we had the Capital of Karl Marx for three months, only. In these three months, the Capital was under my cushion.

In Arabic?

No, no, in English.

In English. Your English was good enough, you could read it.

Well, it's not as good, [02:08:00] but I had a dictionary and I repeated, I repeated and repeated, until I learned it. I was, therefore, the person who taught economics in prison.

Basically the party smuggled in the books into the prison?

Yes.

How could you hide The Capital. It's such a big book. How could you hide it?

Well, I did not read it all, but the first part, which is very theoretically, I repeated it at least 50 times in order to understand it.

Amazing. That kept the--

Yes. I read books of Lenin, of Stalin, any other political book from the communist party of Britain. We received some newspapers and the pamphlets. This is all.

Was that also the case when you were in the Jewish prison as well? Was that the same?

No. In the Jewish prison, we had no book at all. Not any kind of book. At that time, I [02:10:00] made a newspaper.

In prison?

Weekly newspaper to write articles so that the readers will be educated in it.

What did you write about? What were you allowed to write about?

Well, it is not allowed.

It was underground?

Yes. I write it every week and we call it a newspaper, but not a print or something. We have nothing.

You had a pen and a pencil and you wrote it?

Yes. I was lucky I have a pen and one paper in that prison. After that, they took us to a prison where we cannot have a paper. Even the Quran was--

Habiba Kojaman: Not allowed.

Not allowed?

Yes.

You said in '58, you got the citizenship back, the Jewish prisoners. Did anything else change in 1958 for the prisoners or--?

No. All the prisoners were released in 1958.

In '58?

Before the time their [02:12:00] releasing.

But you were not released in '58?

I was released for a year and I was taken again to prison.

You were released in 1958. At that time, where was your wife?

She's in Israel. She was taken to Israel from prison.

Habiba Kojaman: [crosstalk] They sent me to Israel.

In 1954, you were sent to Israel?

1953.

Habiba Kojaman: '53.

'53. You came out in 1958. Who did you find when you came out? Who was there? Was anyone left from your family?

No. I remained one year and I lived from translation. After a year, they took me again to prison.

With what charge?

No charge.

Habiba Kojaman: No trial, nothing.

Nothing. No trial, no charge. I was taken to another two years, more than three years.

Was it not possible in 1958 to go to Israel immediately or did you think--?

Well, I didn't want to go to Israel.

You wanted to stay?

I wanted to stay in Iraq, or if out of Iraq, to go to Europe, but I didn't have the chance.

You said was that the idea, they thought that by releasing you, you would leave?

Habiba Kojaman: I thought that I can meet him in Vienna. I went to Vienna but he didn't. He went to prison. [02:14:00]

Your intention at the time was to find another route, not to go to Israel, but to find a different--?

I wanted but I didn't have the chance, because the communist party treated me as a Jew and they did not accept me in the party.

That was a change. That was a big change.

This was a big change. It is not more any communist party, it is not a communist party. A communist party cannot differentiate between religion.

Here, you must've felt a sense of exclusion after all your time in prison. That must've felt then to comment--

When I arrived to Israel, they came to meet me in the airport. When I met Habiba she told me, 'Where will we live?' I told her, 'Where is the university?' She said, 'In Jerusalem,' 'ok live in Jerusalem'. This is the same year I became a student.

In '58, did you have contact with the Jews? There was still Jews in Baghdad, a small community?

No. There was nothing in [02:16:00] Iraq.

In Iraq.

No, In Iran, in Tehran, there was an organisation, Zionist organization. When a Jew came to Tehran, they sent him on their account to Israel.

I meant when you came out in '58, in Baghdad, there was still a Jewish community?

Communist?

No, Jewish. Jewish. There were still Jews in Baghdad?

There were still a small number of Jews.

A few. For example, could you get back to the house? Where did you live when you were released?

I lived with her mother. Her mother was still in Iraq.

In 1958. Was that when Abdul Kasam was-- The revolution in '58, that was when the--

It was in July, 14th of July.

There was an amnesty for the Jewish prisoners or for--?

For all the prisoners.

Everyone could come?

Yes.

When you were rearrested, why were you rearrested? You said no charge?

No charge. They came to the house and suddenly told me, "You have to come with us." And they sent me in a prison for more than two years without any trial. Without any --

Unbelievable. That was not part of a group, just an individual? [02:18:00]

Individual.

At that point also then, you were not in touch with the party anymore because, as you said--

1958. I was not accepted in the party because I am Jew. They wanted me to be a Muslim.

Did you consider that? Was that an option? Did you ever consider?

No. I told them because I'm a communist, I cannot get to Islam or Jewish. I have no religion. I told them this is not communism.

You were an atheist?

I'm atheist.

It was against your principle to convert or to--?

Yes.

How was your treatment in those two years at the end in prison? Was it as bad?

About 18 months, I was in a lonely room, alone in room. They call it *ri'abah*.

Solitary confinement?

Solitary. For three months, they sent me to a special place where there was 32 Kurds and I'm the only one who's Arab. They thought that it was a punishment, but I had the best time with them. [02:20:00]

Habiba Kojaman: He learned Kurds.

Kurdish? You speak Kurdish?

I forgot it but I learned it.

Was that the first time you were in extended solitary confinement before you were not alone in the first imprisonment?

No. Only when there is a punishment there is solitary. In general, we were together.

This must have been very hard. 18 months of solitary confinement?

Yes.

How did you manage? Did you have any books? Did you have a pen? Did you--

No. There is--

Nothing.

Not a paper. Not a book. I used to sing and walk in the room.

Could you sing the songs of Umm Khalthum and, I don't know, whatever came to your mind?

No.

This is very difficult to--

In prison, we made oud.

You made an oud?

We made oud. I'm not good in working but I told them what to do in order to make oud. They did from a wooden box of tea and sieve and--

Habiba Kojaman: A seive to make it the- for a wire.

A part of [02:22:00] the oven the--

Habiba Kojaman: Seive.

The seive, yes.

Yes. From this part, we did three ouds.

You played them?

I played and sang and composed three songs.

In prison?

Yes.

At which period? When? In which part of the imprisonment?

In all the prisons. When we lose an oud, we make another.

When in the evening people managed to sing and to play some music?

Yes?

In the evenings or--?

No. In the organization, we have celebrations of feast and things. When a prisoner leaves the prison, we made celebrations. And in these celebrations, I played, sang and let them-

Habiba Kojaman: And dance.

-let them dance.

Amazing. Do you have these compositions? You have these songs here?

Huh?

You have these songs which you composed?

I forgot them.

You forgot them?

One of them was supposed to be sang on the same day as a celebration in Berlin, but because of the treatment [02:24:00] of the massacre in the same-- we couldn't sing. Several people left the prison before that and went to Berlin and there they sang the song.

In 1953?

Yes.

On the day of-- What happened in Berlin in 1953?

In Berlin, a celebration of young men.

Yeah, there was -

Habiba Kojaman: One of May?

Yes?

First of May?

Habiba Kojaman: First of May.

Not 1st of May.

There was a special thing in 1953. I can't remember. There was a special in June '53.

In June '53.

Yes. What was it? There was something.

There was a, what they call— a yearly celebration of young people every year. In 1953, it was in Berlin.

In East Berlin. Must have been East Berlin.

Yes.

They took that song which you composed?

I let all the prisoners to learn the song.

What was it? In English? Which language?

In Arabic.

In Arabic. Do you remember the song- some words?

No. They learnt it, and they went to Berlin and sang it there.

Fantastic. In the Jewish- when you were together with the Jewish prisoners, in the Jewish prison, did you celebrate some Jewish festivals? Did some people celebrate the Jewish [02:26:00] festivals?

I don't know. The Zionists did celebrate but not us.

No. You said the celebrations were if somebody left. What other celebrations were there in prison?

If there were Muslims, they celebrated the Muslim-

The holidays.

-holidays. We celebrated the political celebrations.

First of May.

The first of May, October revolution and things like that.

Amazing. Obviously, at the end when you were by yourself, this was not the case. At the end before you were with the Kurds in solitary confinement. You couldn't?

Hm?

When you were by yourself.

Where?

At the last bit of your imprisonment when you were re-arrested.

In the two years?

Yes.

I had nothing.

You had nothing.

Only walking.

Did you have to work? I was going to say in all the imprisonment during the day-

No.

-did you have to do some forced labour, or some work or--?

No. We worked our things. We used to take our ration, dry and we'd cook our food, with washing, and things like that, the cleaning. Everyone has--

Had a job.

I was a cook. This is why-- [02:28:00]

This is why you're a good cook today?

Hm?

You're still a good cook.

Yes. This-

Sami Zubaida.

Sami Zubaida used to call me the best cook.

That's where you learned to cook?

I learned in prison.

It was a self-organization? There was an element of self-organization?

Always all the years. There is a self-organization, communist organization. We did all our things alone, ourselves. We wash our clothes. We cook our food. We clean our rooms. Everything.

Let's just go to the last bit now. You said that you came together with a group of Kurds?

Yes.

Where was that? Where?

In the same prison.

The same prison.

And there, I also worked as a cook.

After this long time of being by yourself, it must have been a relief suddenly to- because I imagine it's the worst thing in the prison if you're not in a group of people.

Yeah. When I was with the Kurds, I had the best time.

Why? What did they do or what did you do?

I have a company. They loved me and they taught me Kurdish and I cooked for them. And even I had some lectures to them and things like that.

What did you lecture about?

Political. There is nothing else [02:30:00] except political.

At that time in your heart, where you still-- I mean, the party rejected you in Iraq, the Communist Party, so were you still a communist or--?

I'm the only one who's still a communist because they are not communist because they made a difference between a Jew and Muslim-

I understand.

- so I'm the only one who remained a communist.

They betrayed communism in a way because they differentiated?

Yes and I'm still.

You still agree. How long were you together with the Kurdish prisoners?

Yes?

How long were you together with the Kurdish prisoners, until when?

I think it was three months or about three months.

Then were you released suddenly or what? How did-

We all were released.

Everyone together?

Yes. After three days I run out to Iran.

When you were released, was your mother-in-law still there? Was anyone still? Which year?

Yes, my mother-in-law was still there and she took me to some friends who arranged my running away to Iran.

What is the date? When were you released?

It was at the end of December of '61. After three days, I run away to Iran. After 20 days, I was [02:32:00] sent to Israel.

Was it clear when you were released that time in your mind, did you know you have to leave, for yourself?

Because the same day when I was released, they started to look for me.

Habiba Kojaman: The police.

There was no option for you?

No.

How did you know about Iran, that it was, I guess, people started going?

No, there are people who are specialists in taking, illegally, people to Iran and they did it for money.

What were you able to take? Did you have anything? When you came from prison, what did you have? Did you have any-

I had a bag of clothes only, the inner clothes. That's all I had.

When you left Baghdad, you didn't have any personal or any items, anything? No. What was it like, you left at night time or you went to--?

It took three days from Basra. I was taken to Basra, and I was taken by a little boat to a place, a very lonely place and it was at two o'clock in the morning. In the morning I was taken in a boat [02:34:00] which was drawn by a rope. There in the house of the driver, I slept the night and the morning, I was taken to the town.

It was organized for you? This whole thing was organized?

No, everything was organized until I am in the city. Then I had no one. I slept in a synagogue.

Habiba Kojaman: Where?

Synagogue. I slept in a synagogue then I went to Tehran and her uncle arranged for me to sleep in a hotel until they sent me to--

Did you come with a passport? You had a passport when you left? You took your papers at that time?

No, you cannot get a passport.

No. You didn't have any papers?

Habiba Kojaman: No.

So you arrived in Tehran and you knew you were going to meet somebody who would help?

They arranged it for me. Her uncle was there in Tehran.

You knew you had to go to Israel although you didn't want to?

Well, they told me. Even they wanted a picture and I made a good picture. They told me that it's not good. They wanted a very bad picture. [02:36:00]

What do you mean, a photograph?

Huh?

A photograph.

In order to arrange my travel from Tehran to Israel, they need a form with a picture.

You met was it somebody from the Zionist Organization you said?

I didn't tell you about it. They only arranged the problem and a person who has a car took me to the airport to Israel.

You flew from Tehran to where?

To Israel.

To Israel, with a fake passport?

No, no passport.

No passport?

You don't need a passport in Israel. When you are a Jew, you enter to Israel and you are Israeli. The same day in the airport I had what they call? *Te'udat Ze'ut?*

Identity card.

Habiba Kojaman: Identity.

Identity card.

In the airport.

Yeah. And What did you feel like if you can remember leaving Iraq after so many years and after--?

You had no feeling in these case. You are meeting the situation and you have to arrange it whatever you can. You're not feeling-- When I arrived to Israel, there were [02:38:00] about 250 people waiting for me.

At the airport?

Yes.

Today is the 30th of April 2015 and we're conducting and continuing our interview with Mr. Yeheskel Kojaman. Last time, you told us about your escape from Iraq and how you got to Israel. I'd like to take you a little bit back and maybe let's start again. What happened from the time you were released from prison?

Well, we were released in the middle of December 1961 and at the same time. The next day, they started to look for me again. Her mother knew people who can arrange- who can take me

to Iran illegally. We went to Basra and there they took me in a small boat to a small island and I remained there two days. The second day at two o'clock in the morning, I was taken by a very small boat to Iran and there I slept in the house [02:40:00] of the driver, who's house is there and he took me to Amara in the morning, and there I stayed three days in a synagogue. Then I travelled to Tehran and her uncle used to work there and they arranged an air flight to Israel and I arrived to Israel at the beginning of January '62.

Can I just ask you, why did they release you and then look for you immediately?

Well, I was with Kurds, you remember, and they released all the Kurds. By mistake, they released me with them. It was a mistake.

Okay, and did you know that? Did you know that it was that--

I was surprised that they released me because I knew they would not like to release me. I went to Baghdad. They cannot find me and they have to look for me.

Were the police really on your trail? They were looking for you? Were they also following? Did they have a suspicion you were going to Iran?

Yes.

Did they follow you to Basra?

No, I don't know what they wanted but maybe they would have taken me again to prison. [02:42:00] I don't know what. They forced me to go to Israel.

So somebody paid for the people to take you to--

Well, the friends of her uncle, of her mother, were rich enough and they paid for that.

At the time, when you got to Tehran, there were quite a few Jews from Baghdad in Tehran?

There are Jews who travelled to Tehran and moved there, but there was an organisation, a Zionist organisation, who did the same thing the Jews who came illegally to Israel.

Who did you meet from the Jewish agency? Did you meet them?

I did not meet any.

But you knew that they arranged it.

Yes, I knew because I filled the form and then I put my picture. They told me about the day of the travel, everything.

On the plane, what was it, a normal plane? You boarded a passenger plane?

Yes.

You were the only person? You were by yourself?

No.

I don't mean in the plane, but in the position from coming like that.

A friend of her uncle took me to the airport.

Then what happened when you arrived? [02:44:00]

As everybody, every traveller, they took my name and there is a document with me. They took the document and they sent me to the airplane.

Then in Israel, when you came out of the airplane?

When I came, it happened that when I was in Tehran, I met a friend of mine who came from Israel for two days or three. When he saw me, he told my brother, when he returned to Israel, he told my brother that I'm coming. All the family knew that I'm coming. About 250 people came to the airplane to meet me and, of course, there were two secret police also.

Meeting you?

They did not meet me, but they were there.

And what did it feel like suddenly after so many years to see-- I guess Habiba, your wife, came also to the airport?

Yes, of course. She was the first person whom I talked to. At the beginning, I had very difficult days in Israel.

One second.

Cameraman: Sorry, just hold for- [02:46:00]

Yes, at the beginning.

At the beginning, I couldn't get any job. They gave me the least payment jobs. After six months, they let me out in order not to be a permanent worker.

In which field? What did you do for the six months? What was the job?

I worked for six months in the post office to separate telegrams. Very stupid work. At the end, before *Pesach*, they let me out because they didn't want to give me the permanency. I was in the printing house of the journal and also, they let me. In the university, I studied and because of my knowledge of Hebrew, I took Arabic subject in addition to economics.

The Arabic language is simple like I told even the professor. I told him when I finished there the first degree, I told him I took Arabic in order not to [02:48:00] learn. I continued for the master. It happened then that the professor who taught Hebrew-Arabic translation in the university, and he was the manager of a group who translated the official newspaper of Israel from Hebrew into Arabic.

He called me, he needed a translator. He knew from the class that I'm a good translator. I went to meet him. I told him, "Look, it is three years I'm here and they let me off after six months. If you will send me out in six months, I don't start." He told me, "Give me two weeks, I have to discuss this with the official officer," a secret officer in the Ministry of Justice. He discussed it with him and he told him, "I know the person and we have no secrets because the newspaper we publish is for the Arabs. So we have no secrets," and they agreed [02:50:00] to give me permanency and I worked there for nine years.

Was it at the university?

No, in the Ministry of Justice.

In the Ministry of Justice? It was in the Ministry?

In the Ministry, there is a group who translated the official newspaper, all of the official newspapers into Arabic because Arabic is an official language like Hebrew in Israel.

For the Arab population, for the Israeli-Arab population this was meant.

Yes.

When you came, where did you live in Israel? Where was your wife? Where did you settle?

I told you, when I met Habiba, I asked her, "Where is the university?" She told me, "It is in Jerusalem." I told her, "We will live in Jerusalem."

Why were you so drawn to the university? Why were you so drawn? You knew you wanted to pursue your studies.

I cannot stay without advancing myself.

Also, after so many years in prison, after the prison, you probably wanted to--

Even in prison.

You did in prison, yes. So you settled in Jerusalem.

Yes.

Do you feel that in Israel, they must have known that you were a communist.

This is why they didn't want me to be a permanent worker.

Exactly. Tell us a little bit about it. [02:52:00]

What?

Because they also didn't like-- The government was worried?

There is nothing. I work, and the manager is satisfied with my work. After six months, they sent me a letter. Even when my son was born, they gave me a present, a letter of send me out.

When you came to Israel, were you in touch with a communist party?

No.

You were not politically out there?

No. Actually, first of all, in Iraq, I felt that the communist party is not a real communist party, and I told them. When I went to Israel, I felt that they are the same and they are not real communist party. I didn't join.

Why? Why did you feel in Israel they were not real?

I don't know if you know anything about the Russian, about Soviet Union. The Soviet Union in 1953 was changed from a socialist country into a capitalist country. Khrushchev family. The communist party of Israel and of Iraq did [02:54:00] did follow Khrushchev. When they followed Khrushchev, they are not communist.

You didn't agree with the support of Khrushchev.

No.

Were you interested in politics when you were in Israel?

I always was. I cannot live without politics. Both in Israel and in London, I kept writing about communism until today. Yesterday, I sent a new article. I hope my visitors will be 4 million today. I hope.

You can check it.

Yes.

Can you see how many people? Can you see how many people visit the website?

It's good that my site, which was done in Denmark, gives the number. So now, I need 2,000 to arrive to 4 million.

That's wonderful.

I hope tonight will be.

Today, 4 million, which is quite amazing.

I have another site. I have many sites. There are organizations who print my articles [02:56:00] without my knowledge because they are different.

Just another topic, you said your Hebrew, how did you get to learn Hebrew so quickly? Did you have Hebrew when you came?

This is another story. I told you in the prison, I was responsible for connections with Zionists. With the prisoners, there was an Israeli called Yehuda Tajer. He's now a professor in Tel Aviv. When I was in connection with the Zionists, we became friends. He used to talk to me about Zionism and I used to listen to him. I talked about communism and he listened to me. I taught him Arabic and he taught me Hebrew there in the prison.

When I came to Israel, I talked Hebrew with them from the first day. This is why I was accepted as a student in the Hebrew university the same year. Of course, when I was in the university, I developed my language.

You learned it in prison.

What?

In prison, the Hebrew.

Yes.

He must have been a good teacher if you-- Or you were good?

I was a good teacher to him because when he [02:58:00] came back to Israel, he learnt Arabic and he took master in the Arabic language. He came here, he became secretary of the Israeli ambassador in London and he made his PhD. in Arabic. He's now a professor of Arabic in Tel Aviv University.

You were also a very good teacher. How much time did you spend with him? How much time did you spend in the same prison?

It was only months. Only months, we could contact each other and talk in Hebrew and Arabic.

Amazing. Did you like Hebrew, the language and such?

When I became a translator from Hebrew to Arabic. The problem is that there is no dictionary. In order to translate, you need to learn the words. We used to go from Hebrew to English and from English to Arabic. I thought there is a need of a dictionary. I wrote a dictionary while I was working in the [03:00:00] Ministry of Justice. It was one volume and it came out at 1970 immediately after the occupation of Palestine. All the army were using the Arabic.

From your dictionary?

My dictionary became in every house in Israel. An Arabic person who had a library reprinted it in Lebanon and they distribute it in all Arab countries. When I was in London I used to meet the students from Yemen, from Kuwait, from Saudi Arabia who had my dictionary.

That's amazing. You influenced a lot of people, if you think how many people could use this.

Nobody helped me even for £1. I sent a copy to the head of the parliament, I sent him a copy, he sent me the exact price. [03:02:00] 40 Lira. At that time it was the Euro and nobody helped me at all.

When you came to Israel, obviously, you knew so many musicians. Did you meet the people who came to Israel from Iraq? Did you find your friends?

Only little, not much. I actually met the musicians because I felt that the life of Jewish musicians in Iraq should be registered and be written. I met a lot of musicians in order to write my master thesis in the Hebrew University.

You felt that it was something which had to be documented?

I told you why.

Go on. Tell us again.

My sister, the first week, took me to a market. It's called *Shchunat Hatikva*. The Hope Area. This market is almost a complete copy of *Souk Hannoun* which was the main Jewish market in Baghdad. Everything is similar. I went to see this market. [03:04:00] I saw Daoud Al-Kuwaity selling a—

Habiba Kojaman: A saucer.

What was he selling?

Hm. Something kitchen—

Kitchenware.

Kitchenware to a woman.

Saucers.

He's selling and I felt that if Daoud Al-Kuwaiti has to be in a shop like that, a shop that - if I sit here nobody can enter. You know? I said this history will be dead if it is not written. I didn't know at that time that I am the one who will write it. I only felt that it should be written. When I arrived to do master and I had to write my master thesis, I tried to make it about music and everything was irregular. I'm in a college of Arabic. Yeah? And in Hebrew university, it was not allowed to write a master theses in Arabic only Hebrew. I agreed with the head of the music college to make a master thesis with him instead of the college of Arabic. I told him to persuade the [03:06:00] Dean of the Arabic college in order to accept that. Because he is Lebanese, he agreed to read the master in Arabic. So everything is irregular.

You wrote it in Arabic?

Yes. I wrote the master in Arabic and printed here in London printed it in Arabic in typewriter. And now it is reprinted in Baghdad. I am waiting for it because they have to send me and I agree about the form of it.

Amazing. At the time, was it your perception or how did Daoud Al-Kuwaiti, how did he feel himself? How did the people about their position there--

This Dean of the musical college used to come to my house and we discuss music, Arabic music. This is how we became friends, and he then became my supervisor.

Were there any performances, let's say, by the Kuwaiti brothers, did they perform? Was there any performances of any Iraqi Jewish music?

Not at that time. After that, there was many. My book is the first thing there. For instance, Sara was in Israel and she went to Shiloah, my supervisor. Amnon Shiloah.

Amnon Shiloah.

[03:08:00] Amnon Shiloah. He told her, "Why are you coming to me? You have Yeheskel Kojaman in London" and she came.

You became the expert for music

Yes. I helped Sarah a lot. After that, when she decided to write her PhD. I did a lot of her work in the PhD.

You said you felt there was a loss of the tradition, let's say the Jewish Iraqi tradition, but not only music, also in terms of other things.

Yes, in all. In medicine, in engineering, in teaching, in writing poetry, all the Iraqis were very good in all subjects.

They couldn't do it quite in Arabic in Israel so they had to switch language.

Yes, and then they became Israelis, and they did their profession in Israel like others.

You had children born in Israel?

Two.

Two children. When were they born?

Well, I arrived in '62 and my daughter was born in '63. My son was born in '64. They are both musicians. When they were born, I decided to leave Israel [03:10:00] because I don't want to send them to the Israeli army to kill Arabs. This is our only reason, otherwise, I would have done my PhD while working in the Ministry of Justice without any difficulty. I left Israel only because I didn't want my children to go to the army.

So you felt very strongly about it? About this--

I had a very difficult times here in London. I had a time that if I want to go back to Israel, I do not have the money for the ticket.

You made a decision which was difficult for you, but you felt an ethical decision.

We had a lot of difficulties in our lives and I could live actually because of her. We are about 70 years together and no one of us told a bad word to the other.

That's wonderful. 70 years? 70?

66, marriage and we lived about four or five years before, [03:12:00] and not one bad word. She helped me, she was the financier of the family for a long time and she was after all my efforts.

Amazing. You had the support, to go--

Support and to encourage.

When you decided to leave Israel, what did the family think?

From the day my daughter was born, I decided to leave Israel in the first chance. When I finished my master thesis, it was the first chance.

It means you were not happy with the political situation in Israel while you were there?

No, of course not. Of course not. How can a person, a real person accept the policy of Israel? It's a Nazi.

For you it was not acceptable?

No.

While you were there, did you have contact with the Arab population? Did you have friends, you yourself in Jerusalem?

One Eli Amir.

Yes, so that's Iraqi, Jewish.

Eli Amir was my best friend in [03:14:00] Jerusalem.

He's a writer?

At that time, he was General Manager of *iskan, esh?* [what is housing?] for a Ministry of--

Habiba Kojaman: He has a good job in the Government.

In the Government?

Yes.

Were there other people who felt like you? Were there other people from Iraq, Jewish, who felt like you? Because most people, I guess didn't feel like it.

There are still until today, there are people who felt like me, but not as good as me.

No, because often you have people who came from Arab countries who are very anti-Arab.

Yes, even Iraqis, but there are a lot of Jews in the Communist Party of Israel.

The other question I've got, in Israel, did you play music, because you were playing the Oud? Did you play?

A little, very little. Here, I play more than in Israel.

Did you teach your children to play the Oud?

No they don't play Oud. What I taught them is [03:16:00] the rhythm [clapping hands] as to play on their backs. My daughter learnt piano. She has her A-level in London in piano. My son was a percussionist, he did not become professional. My grandsons also are musicians, they had their A-level in composition, and my big grandson now has a studio, he learnt to be a sound engineer. He has a studio for composition and producing. My second son who finished BA in-

-

Habiba Kojaman: Mathematics.

In Mathematics in London University, he was first there. He is a singer, and a saxophone player, and composer.

So the music carried on?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

Yes.

Tell us, you said, the first opportunity you wanted to leave, what was the opportunity to come to London?

The opportunity is to leave [03:18:00] Israel on the pretext of completing my learning, to write a PhD.

*Did you have any contact here in London when you came? How did you arrange it? [coughs]
Excuse me.*

Actually I was accepted in the Sorbonne to write a PhD about the Jewish dialect of Arabic. When I came to London to visit, I was in a visit with a family. They knew about my master thesis, so one of them said, "I know a teacher in the SOAS who is both a teacher of Arabic and music." They arranged for me meeting with him. This was on Thursday, the meeting was on a Friday.

I met him there. I showed him my Arabic thesis in master and he asked me to borrow the book. When I went to France for a month, he arranged everything. I became a student without even signing an application. He told me, "You came from heaven." [03:20:00] I started learning with him even before the start of the year. We started and remained with him three years.

Was your wife also wanted to come to England or-?

What?

You both wanted to come to England?

Yes, of course, and our decision was similar.

Did you know anyone in England? Did you have some friends here? Did you know people in England when you came? Did you have any family or friends?

There was one who is my nephew and he helped me also.

Because all the other, your siblings all remained in Israel, your big family. You have a very big family?

We had our 50th-anniversary celebration in Israel, and we only invited family: my family, and her family. The people who came were only 120. There are many of them who didn't come.

Amazing, and did they all settle in similar places or where did they mostly live? All over Israel?

Mainly in Ramat Gan, Tel Aviv and some of them in Jerusalem, some of them in Beer Sheva. They [03:22:00] came especially for the celebration. All of the people did not agree to let me celebrate the night, because they thought I'm feasting the New Year, until my nephew persuaded a restaurant people in--

Where, Jaffa?

What?

In where?

Where the Jewish Museum is.

In Tel Aviv?

Not Tel Aviv, a city near Tel Aviv.

In Jaffa? No, not Jaffa,. Which Jewish Museum?

No, there is a city where there is a museum of Iraqis.

In Or Yehuda

Or Yehuda.

Or Yehuda.

In Or Yehuda and he persuaded him that it is not a New Year celebration, it is a wedding anniversary.

Because it was on December 31?

30.

That's why you celebrated in Or Yehuda?

Yes.

Amazing, but just before we move on I wanted to ask you, did you have any [03:24:00] contact with Israel not with the Communist, but I know for some there was a party called Matzpen.

What?

Matzpen. There were other parties. Matzpen.

No.

You had no contact?

I did not have any contact with any party in Israel.

Because there were other parties. So back to London, you started the PhD, you came, where did you settle here in London,? Did you settle?

Yes, in London.

You came here, where did you move?

I was a student in the SOAS.

Where did you live?

We rented a flat in the centre of London, and then after seven years I bought this house. I sold the flat and bought this house.

It must have been difficult, you came with children, you came here?

Yes, it was very difficult. Sometimes we did not have enough food.

Your wife worked as a-- You worked as a nurse?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

No, after six months she had a job, a nursing job. She's a nurse in profession.

You did the PhD?

When she worked, the situation was a little better. [03:26:00] And I - The distributor of my dictionary was in a company for language teaching, and he gave me a book to translate from English into Arabic. And this was the beginning.

Then you became a translator here in England?

Habiba Kojaman: Yes.

What did you translate, fiction, nonfiction?

Anything, but the best thing, I started with six lines to translate from English to Arabic with a company who has about 20 lawyers, specialist in International Law, and had a, a Translation Department in the company. They are the ones who gave me six lines to translate. I became for 15 years, their only English-Arabic translator. Then I became rich. *Yaani*, rich. I could buy the house, and pay the mortgage, and live a good living.

You kept your language, you kept the Arabic?

[03:28:00] Before that, I worked many works. I was a manager of a building, I was the seller in a shop, anything.

Were you happy to be out of Israel, was it for you?

No. In Israel I was in very good situation. I had my office in the Ministry of Justice. I had half in teaching in the university. She was a qualified nurse. I used to get good profit from the dictionary. My situation was very good. I left everything only because of the children.

That's quite something, but that's what I mean. When you were here, were you tempted to go back to Israel?

What?

Once you were here, were you tempted to go back, or you were happy to be in England?

I never thought of going back.

No, you were happy to be here?

Only because of the children. I said, "Let them be 18 years old, and they decide," but before that, I decide, and I don't send them to the army.

Do you think if you had stayed in Israel, it would have been [03:30:00] impossible. Do you think it was the right decision? Was it the right decision you took?

In my idea, it is the right. It was difficult, and very costly, but I think it was the right.

What were your impressions when you came to England? You'd never been in England before?

No.

It's far away from the Middle East. What were your impressions when you first came?

I was interested in getting food and getting a job. That's it, and of course the writing of my thesis.

What happened to the thesis after the three years you--?

The supervisor, all right. Told me, bring me a completed three chapters and I pass you from master to PhD. I brought him three chapters full and he agreed that they are complete, but he told me, "I'll give you only master." I said "I have a master I don't want," and I stopped working with him. After 20 years I told you when I invited him, he told me to write, to publish my work and he thought [03:32:00] of the three chapters. When after a month I put into them in the computer, I gave him eight chapters. "Why did you bring them? He has only three." I told him, look at them. They are all with your notes and you read them.

This is why he was sorry, he thought the only thing I have is the three chapters.

It was a situation where you felt that you should have passed to the doctor and he--

Yes

Then you are already translating them?

Yes, and all my books were loss of money on my account except the dictionary. The dictionary gave me some profit. Other books, all of them including this with the loss of money.

Yes. It's difficult. It's difficult with those books. You said--

Because I did not have a publisher who helps me. I did not have. I purchased them on my account, the printing is on my account and this is the situation. Even the dictionary was on my account. [03:34:00] I agreed with her that if the dictionary will not be, we lose all the money and she said we lose it and you print the book.

But you did it.

I'm glad I could do so many things.

You said you started, you played oud in London.

No, I was a player of oud before I was in prison.

You said you picked it up--

No, I played at home but here I met Iraqi musicians and one of the best oud players was my friend here, Salman Shukur. We used to meet every week and we played. We had a lot celebrations in Sami Zubaida's house; I played and he played.

Here in London it was in a way easier. Was it easier in London to carry on let's say the Iraqi Jewish of the Iraqi tradition?

Because of the musicians who came from Iraq, all the musicians who came from Iraq used to come to me, became fans of mine.

Who? Give us some names. Who used to come and visit you?

[03:36:00] Almost every Iraqi musician who came, came to me, and Salman Shukur was here for many years. He wanted to write his PhD. He's one of the best oud players and we became friends. I have a very good orchestra player of viola and he became my friend. There is another Sabi player who is still my friend, he's in London. Ahmed Mukhtar who is teaching oud in SOAS, he's my friend. The *Makham*, the special - who came from Iraq, all of them are my

friend. Even after they returned to Iraq, they came for a celebration in the UNESCO for four days. We travelled to Paris in order to meet them.

How do they all know about you? How do they know you are here and how to--

They know my book.

They all know you.

The Arabic book before the English. I was told they celebrated [03:38:00] our 56 anniversary in the room.

That's wonderful.

When your husband comes, I'll show him the celebration.

Here you managed to maintain this close contact-

Yes.

-with the music. Did you find, because what I read is that, let's say the Kuwaiti brothers that many modern Iraqis they didn't know that this was played- [crosstalk] by Jewish.

No. Both Iraqis did not come to London. They never came to London.

The Kuwaiti?

The Kuwaitis. After their death they had a son, Shlomo, came here and they arranged some celebrations and I talk in the celebrations and I gave them things about his father and his uncle and we are in contact; when he comes to London he comes to me.

Did you find it's true because what he says also that in Iraq itself, that people didn't know that the Jews were so important for this music? That it was played- [crosstalk]

Who said that?

I think in one of his articles said in Iraq after the Jews left that--

No. I'll tell you. First of all, all the Iraqis knew that the Jews are the most important in music, but what you are [03:40:00] talking about is that after the Jews left Iraq, the governments wanted to - that their people does not know about the real role of the Jews. So about this, they say that the Jews did not know about the Kuwaiti, but that is not true. When the Jews were in Iraq, nobody could do any celebration without the Jews. The prime minister used to call them to his house in order to celebrate.

Today, do you feel that no people know about the role of the Jews?

Some people write about it. And now they are printing my book, which is one of the best in this subject.

Do you get responses saying, "I didn't know anything about this"? What responses do you get?

I did not get any response and I did not contact anybody.

Your motive, your reason for writing this book that you felt it had to be captured or it has to be recorded?

Yes.

You felt you achieved your aim, did you manage?

Hm?

Did you feel you achieved to do that?

I did it [03:42:00] in the best way and now I'm the reference in Israel about Iraqi music and I am the reference in all the world with this book. Most of the people who bought this book are the music teachers in universities or university libraries.

Do you go to Israel or to the Middle East and lecture sometimes?

No, I never lectured in Israel.

No?

No. But here I lectured a lot of lectures.

You stayed in touch with Amnon Shiloah and with people.

I told you Amnon Shiloah sent Sara to me here, and when they have Jewish Iraqi celebrations, they mention things from my book.

And how do you feel? You've lived in Baghdad, in Israel, in England. How would you describe yourself in terms of your identity?

When I was a teacher, my identity was a teacher, when I was a student, my identity was a student, and when I was in prison, my identity was a prisoner. [03:44:00] You have nothing else.

And now?

Now I'm a writer. I write about one article every week, and I have a lot of readers.

What are your topics? What are you writing about?

Because I am separated from real life in Iraq and do not have the real happenings there, most of my writings are theoretical. I write theory.

For example?

Hm?

For example?

Marxist theory about dialectical. Now we are discussing dialectical materialism. There are people who don't believe in dialectical materialism. Some people who doesn't know what is dialectical materialism and there are people who discuss this and I am the best one who is discussing with them. I answer about all their fault, bad ideas about that. Of course, political, economy, and about Lenin and about Marx.

[03:46:00] Within communist Marx's theory?

Yes.

Do you follow the events in the Middle East? Do you follow the news of Iraq?

I wrote about five articles about the revolution in Egypt and the results of these revolutions.

What is your view on the situation in the Middle East in general?

Well, American government wants to separate all the states into small states, in her favour and in Israeli's favour, which is the same. The revolution, especially in Egypt, was against that. They destroyed Iraq, they destroyed Syria, they destroyed Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, everywhere in the world they destroyed. I'm reading a book now called The Rogue State, written by an American. He said something, [03:48:00] It is impossible to believe, he says - I forget the words in English.

I could do Hebrew, Arabic I can't.

The army budget of one year of America is enough to give \$18,000 for every hour from the birth of Jesus to now. Did you understand?

Yes.

This is what he says. I'm reading it now.

Have you been back to Iraq at all?

No. I was not allowed, now I am--

Habiba Kojaman: This book was written by America.

Okay. The Rogue State, William Blum.

Habiba Kojaman: They wrote everything about what the government in America they do to the whole world.

I'm now allowed to go to Iraq.

Are you allowed to go?

Yes.

You didn't get your Iraqi passport back?

I do not have a passport but I have my nationality, identity card.

An Iraqi?

Yes.

[03:50:00] When did you get that?

I got it in 1958 when I left prison; because they gave me back my nationality.

Since then you kept it.

I kept it here and it is still all right. Edwin Shuker also returned his nationality; because he did not leave Iraq in the '50s. He left it afterward. So he has Iraq nationality now. He told me that he's going to Iraq. This is why I asked if he returned home.

Would you like to go to Iraq? Would you like to go to Baghdad?

I like very much, but at my age, I'm unable to travel. I could not go to see my grandchild. Because of my age, we are unable to go to Israel.

If you were allowed to go to Baghdad, what would you like to see?

I see the prisons, and I see my house where I was born.

The [03:52:00] question connected to it, is there something you miss most from Iraq?

I miss Baghdad and its people. I miss the fish. They have a special way to cook the fish, *masgouf* it's called. We used to go to Babi Shelkhi and sit in a coffee and choose a fish, a living fish and they do it and bring it to the coffee and we eat. This is Iraq.

You're very involved, you write in Arabic. What for you is the most important part of your background? Is it the music, the language?

Should I have had the chance to be a professional musician, I would have been very happy. I did not have the chance. All my life I wanted to be a good mathematician. I was a mathematician since my childhood. I could not do that. I was accepted in Iraq. [03:54:00]

Musical and my mathematics is the most important thing in my life. Here in London, I taught the mathematics to children as I learned it in 1939. I still remember.

Fantastic. How do you feel about your experiences especially? You had-- [ringing] I was asking you had quite bad experiences in Iraq. You were in prison for a long time. As a communist as a Jew, how would you feel about it today? Looking back about, how do you feel about your experiences?

I feel like any prisoner. That I was sentenced to prison without any reason. As I told you, I succeeded to leave prison in a better situation than I was before that. I improved my knowledge and my education in prison, which was not done by other people.

Do you feel bitter about your experience? Do you feel bitter or angry?

No, I don't feel bitter. If I lived another time, I'll [03:56:00] do the same.

I think something we didn't discuss is religion. Is religion important to you?

Yes?

The topic of religion.

I'm a communist, I don't believe in any religion. This is why I did not agree to go to Islam when the party asked me to.

You are an atheist?

Completely.

How did you raise your children? Did you raise your children atheist?

The same.

You didn't do any--?

No.

Do you feel it was easier to be atheist here than in Israel? Probably also in Iraq, there were not that many atheists.

No. In Israel, it is worse to be an atheist. They treat you very badly.

Why did you? Because I think in Israel they put the Jewish in your identity card.

Of course, they put the Jewish, but they don't write atheists in the passport.

Despite that, would you still consider yourself Jewish? Do you consider yourself Jewish?

I did not do that. I was born in a Jewish family and I'm Jew. I did not want to be Jewish. Everyone who is born in a Christian family is a Christian from his childhood. [03:58:00] If you want to change, you have to change your religion. If you change your religion, you are religious. If you are an atheist, you cannot change.

Can you be a Jewish atheist?

Yes. I'm Jewish because I was born in a Jewish family. That's all I have a relation with the Jews.

Here you didn't join any synagogues or any--?

No.

But you kept in touch with some Iraqi Jewish friends and--

If I'm atheist, it does not mean that I am separated from people. My relation with other people is friendship, love, and relation, and everything.

Habiba Kojaman: Respect people.

Yes, and respect.

Well I have to respect. Communism has to respect people because communism was from the beginning until now a minority in a very enemy situation. [04:00:00] All the people are against communism. If you treat others without respect, you cannot win them. Communism has to win people from people who are against communism. You have to treat them respectfully in order to persuade them.

That leads me to the next question. In Britain, did you have any contacts with the communist party here?

No. No, I did not have.

You were not interested at this point in party politics.

I did not have the chance even. I did not. I have no activity other than writing. I am a writer.

It's amazing that you can still do it, that you do it. Is there anything I haven't asked you which is important which you think we should talk about?

I don't remember. It is difficult to say that. I have many things in my life. If you ask me, I can reply, but I cannot ask myself.

I asked you something. What about your siblings? What about your brothers and sisters, are they still around? Who is still alive today?

Only two. I and my brother, the smaller brother.

Where is he?

Here in London, but very ill.

When did he come to London?

After me, [04:02:00] he came about 20 years ago.

Did he follow you? Why did he come to England?

He finished his work. He was a printer. He finished his work in Israel and he found it better to live in England.

You said, we talked about it the last time that the Iraqi Jews had quite a difficult time in Israel. That's why many stayed but some then went to other countries.

Only the two of us live in England after Israel. All the family remained in Israel. Some of the children are in Sweden and America.

In the family, did anyone of your siblings share your views? In your family. Or was it only your personal views?

Only the four of us, my sister who is bigger than me and my two brothers which are smaller than me and I. We are the only communists in the family.

You remained involved and active. Did they stay active in the party?

Yes, until their death.

I think we have covered many, [04:04:00] many things.

If you remember things in the future, you can come.

One question I do have to ask, what would you call your home? Home. Where is home for you?

Iraq. I write as an Iraqi, not as an Israeli or a British.

What does it mean for you to be Iraqi?

I think like Iraqis. I think like a son of the Iraqi people.

Habiba Kojaman: Our children are not communists.

I wanted to ask you, how do your children feel?

No, they are not communists. I did not force them to be communists. They are independent in their thought. My son is very keen and he understands what's going on, but he's not a communist.

Did you teach Arabic to your children? Do they speak some Arabic?

They listen to us and they understand us, but they don't speak Arabic. They can speak a little Arabic because their mother tongue is Hebrew. They speak Hebrew.

How do they see themselves, their identity? How do they identify?

They think of themselves as English.

[ringing]

You were saying about your [04:06:00] children's identity, how do they feel, I asked you.

They feel British now. Because they came here at the age of nine and seven.

Just to go back to your time in prison, which is extraordinary that you had so many years in prison, and you said you felt improved when you came out, what gave you the strength to have this energy or to have the strength in prison to do that?

This is natural. I always wanted to advance in my thoughts. I studied all the books which came to prison, whether they are political or not. I did not leave a book which I didn't read. This gave me -- improved me in thought over time.

Do you think it's your nature, it's your personality?

Yes. This is why I told her we live in Jerusalem because the university is in Jerusalem.

A thirst for knowledge.

Yes.

Because undoubtedly, some people can't do that in prison. Not everyone can do that.

Habiba Kojaman: No, not everyone.

Only one.

Based on your experiences--

I used to discuss this with [04:08:00] the leaders of the party as a teacher, as their teacher. I told them you have to study, you have to learn your theory in order to be able to struggle a real struggle for communism, but they did not. They did not. No one of them read a political book in the prison.

It helped you. Your knowledge helped you, your belief.

Habiba Kojaman: Yes, of course.

Yes.

Based on your experiences, have you got any message for anyone who might watch this interview?

What do you mean?

Based on your experiences, is there any message for the future generation?

I cannot think of that.

But you just gave a message. You said for you it was very important to know the theory, to know--

Well, this is what I'm doing. I'm improving ideas of my readers. This is what I'm doing now.

I don't know, anything for the young? If you look at the young people today, your grandchildren, is there something you want to tell them? For their lives.

I give them advises if they have problems in their life and I encourage them to advance both in their profession and in music. I encourage them to advance [04:10:00] in music as much as they can. And they are doing this.

You think music is important for life for everyone?

Yes.

Why? What does it do?

It is a world language. A language for all people of the world and the best language they have. It is one language for all the people. You have English, French, and all the languages, but in music, you have only one language.

No barriers.

Yes.

Okay, Mr. Kojaman. Thank you very, very much for the interview. We're taking a little break and then we'll continue our discussion. Thank you very much.

You want the coffee now?

I think yes, but one moment.

You have to take this.

[Habiba and Yeheskel discuss making coffee].

We're continuing the interview with a few questions now. I wanted to ask you because you mentioned Or Yehuda Museum in Israel, how do you feel about the heritage of Iraqi Jews? What do you think should be done? Should there be museums? Are these interviews important?

It is a museum. [04:12:00] They had a lot of old things from the ladies and families of Iraqi Jews and they built a small market which included the professions of the Iraqi Jews. One beside the other, but it is similar to what was in the markets of the Jews. They have costumes, Jewish costumes, especially the ladies had very special costume to wear in celebrations. They have some of these. It's good they have a lot of things which are confirmed and a big library about Iraqi Jews.

How do you think should the history be remembered? Personally, what do you think? How should this be carried forward?

It is not history, it is something similar to what was there. You have a market. You can enter the market in the museum and see a tailor and see the grocer and everything. [04:14:00] In our time, they used brass things for cooking and there is special persons who made the brass white. And these are things -

Is it important that a museum like this is there? Is it a good thing?

It is a good thing, yes. Although the managers are using it for their personal interest. I gave a book, one of my books to the manager at that time. Today the manager is Shmuel Moreh [04:15:19] but at that time there was somebody else. Whose impression about the book, he asked me if he can do copies of the disks and sell them.

A question related to this, let's say heritage, and I think we discussed it briefly; [04:16:00] whether you think how different the Iraqi Jews managed in America in the UK in Israel. Did it matter where you emigrated?

All the traditions of Iraqi Jews are Iraqi traditions. They were similar to all the people of Iraq. Their food, the only difference is that they went to the synagogue and they went to the *Jameh* and to the mosque, but everything else is similar. I don't know if the American Jews are the same.

I'm thinking of identity, as we said, in Israel, you wanted to become more Israeli so you would probably try to not emphasize the Iraqi identity, while maybe in England, you could with a scribe and maybe people were more proud to be Iraqi. I don't know.

I didn't understand your question.

Let's say, was it easier to be a proud Iraqi Jew in England than in Israel?

It depends on the person, every person. I was Iraqi in Israel and I am Iraqi in London at the same. [04:18:00] I did not feel even for a minute as Israeli.

A question I didn't ask you if you could tell us something about your name because it's an unusual name, Kojaman.

The grandfather of my father was responsible for the finance of Baghdad in the old money, so they called him Kojaman. It means the big man. It is a Turkish word.

It's Ottoman, comes from Ottoman times.

In the Ottoman Turkish, *koja man*. *Koja* is big, *man* is a person.

You kept it. Your brothers and sisters, anyone changed their name in Israel? Did they change the name or they kept the name?

No, the brothers and sisters remained but their children changed.

They changed it. What did they change it to, something similar?

Something Israeli, which is the same meaning of the word in Arabic.

Your children, your sons kept the name or did they change it?

My children took their name in Israel because they were born in Israel. I gave them the names of my father and my mother and the other names are Iris. Iris is a flower. [04:20:00] My son is Erez which is the Lebanese tree, *arz*.

I wanted to ask now just specific music questions and a little bit go back to your first music is so important in your life to go back to the beginning and tell us a little bit again in more detail about your exposure to music.

The person who was living in my house he's an officer in the railways. He used to drink alcohol and comes back about ten o'clock or nine o'clock home and he used to take me from my bed to his room and we listen to Umm Kulthum records. I'd sing with him without understanding but I did not have somebody who took care of my ability for music until I was 15. Nobody helped me in this direction.

You said also something about your older brother. He had some connections.

No. Not with me. My older brother was a friend of *maqam* singers. All the [04:22:00] *maqam* singers. Most of them knew him and were his friends. And this was when I was a child.

How come they were his friends? How come he was friendly.

Because he used to go to their celebrations and became their friends.

Can you tell us for the camera because we haven't explained it, what is maqam? What is it?

In Iraq, there are two kind of classical music. The one which is equal to the music of Egypt and other countries, and one which is a classical music which is older than this music. It is a group of-

Musicians?

No, a group of songs, classical songs which were sang about 400 years ago or 200 years ago and the singer repeats the song.

[doorbell]

One second.

Cameraman: Is that the classical songs?

The songs, yes.

Yes, please.

The maqam is a number [04:24:00] of composed songs which are sung as they were composed before. The singer has to repeat them. Like if you have a song and I tell you you repeated it and it is composed by musicians. This *maqam* now we have about 56 remaining. We have 56 songs which the *maqam* singer has to sing them. Everyone who sings a *maqam* he sings it as it was composed before. This is the *maqam*. This was not known by any other country, Arab country. Only in Iraq. This is why you would call it Iraq *maqam*. And in the first Arabic Music Congress in 1932 in Cairo, the *maqam* singers were there and they were the most important group from all other Arab countries because they did not know about it.

Were they mostly men or also women?

Only men. Only men.

[04:26:00] In what settings was it used the maqam music, in celebrations?

Before the radio, it was sung sometimes in coffee shops especially in Ramadan at night. There are several shops where the *maqam* singers sang but the most important thing was the wedding celebrations in Jewish families. They have a night celebration the day before the wedding. They call it *henna*. In the *henna*, they put henna in the fingers of the wife and bride. The *maqam* group used to start at seven o'clock in the evening and until morning.

Usually, they sang about 25 to 27 *maqams* at that night and they had a special arrangement of the *maqams* so people who are interested in *maqam* know what *maqams* are sung at seven o'clock and what *maqams* are sung at ten o'clock and until morning. In the morning they used to take yogurt because they believed [04:28:00] that yogurt is good for the people who drank at night so that they can go to work in the morning from the celebration. They called this night *henna* or *Sabah hiya*. *Sabah hiya* means a celebration till morning. *Sabah* is morning. *Sabah hiya*, the celebration which starts from evening till morning.

I don't know whether it's possible whether you can give us an example of a maqam? Is it possible for us to sing something?

No.

No. It has to be somebody who-- We have to listen to it?

Yes.

How different is it let's say from Umm Kulthum or from other structurally?

In Umm Kulthum, you can sing, can learn 20 songs of the same *maqam*, same , but the *maqam* is known. You have only one *maqam* which is *maqam rast*. You have only one *maqam* which is *maqam saba*. You have only one which is *sikah* and things like that. I think you have 56 songs which you can and you have nothing else and therefore the music is mainly voice music. You can [04:30:00] do a *maqam* celebration without accompaniment and the instrument that accompaniment is only for help. Not the instrument is important, but the song.

Which instruments would accompany, which instruments were used?

There are two instruments which are different from all the other. One is called santoor. It is put with wires and he has two sticks and plays on the wires and the kamana-joza which is like a violin, *rabab*, with four wires. The sound-box is made of a part of a coconut shell.

Was it taught from father to son or how was it taught to the next [inaudible 04:31:29].

Especially the *maqam* music was treated as a private profession. They did not want to teach others other than their sons and brothers. It is a family. You have the father, his son, and his [04:32:00] grandson and so on.

Today you said-

Today there is no *maqam*.

Nobody knows.

Among Jews but after the Jews left, when the most famous instrument players, the joza and santoor wanted to leave Iraq, the Prime Minister did not allow them to leave Iraq before they

teach two persons. These two persons started to teach what they learned in the university and in this musical school and now you have hundreds of maqam singers and players.

Who were those two people, who had to teach, who were not allowed to leave?

The Santoor player is called Yusuf Pataw and the joza player is Saleh Jummaie.

Only once they taught the melodies.

They taught them how to play to accompany a *maqam* singer. There was a singer, Muslims all the time and very famous singers but there were no players. He forced them to teach two *maqam* singers to play and one [04:34:00] of them learned the joza and the other learned the santoor.

Did the maqam tradition then continue in Israel a little bit for some time?

No. There were four or five singers who went to Israel and when they died, there is no *maqam* singer now, real *maqam* singer. There are people who try to sing *maqam* but not real *maqam* singer. The players also just disappeared, died. There is Pataw who was the famous Santoor player. He lost his hearing and he couldn't play the last years of his life. Saleh Jumaie died when he was in the cottage at the beginning of their life.

That tradition came to an end?

Yes, in Israel but it is very developed in Iraq.

You've met many of the Iraqi Jewish, the musicians. Is there anyone you want to talk about or will you touch briefly on the Kuwaiti brothers?

The Kuwaiti brothers did not come to London. [04:36:00] They are not *maqam* singers, modern singers but all the *maqam* singers and players who came from Iraq to England are my friend. The best *maqam* singer in Iraq today was here for four years. He was at my house at least two or three times a week. He trusted me more than his brother who lives in London. The one who learned the santoor when the Jews left, his sons, one is in Berlin now and one is in London and they are both my friend and they play the *maqam*. The one in London plays the santoor like his father and the other who is in London plays the joza and in every celebration, they call him to play joza.

They came here also for your celebration. When you have a celebration then you have some maqam music.

The two groups were here. It is never known that two groups play together [04:38:00] in one celebration. Only in my -

You would listen to the maqam only on occasion. It's not something- or do you later you just listen to it like that?

In Iraq when the radio was started in 1936, there was always *maqam* singing between 10:00 and 11:00 at night, every day. One hour of *maqam* singing with *maqam* players.

Where would you listen to it? You remember where.

On the radio.

In the house, in the coffee shop?

If I'm with a friend which has a radio at his house with him or in the coffee shops. Every coffee shops has the radio.

To think we didn't discuss, what's this thing about the school of the blind.

This one is something else.

Okay. Is there anything else about maqam then we move on?

No, this is all you need to know about *maqam*. Blind children of all the groups they have the most famous profession to demand.

Begging.

Yes, begging. The Jewish community thought to teach it to children professions [04:40:00] in order to save them, they can earn some money and do not have to beg. The professions they taught is to make strings and to make chairs and things like that and it was very good. They had a good profession. But there was a blind child whose family are musicians. He became a good oud player, a good violin player, and a singer. But this one is older than the children of the school.

The school was two rooms. There was a big school which they rented to a carpentry company and they left two rooms at the back of the school and they gave it to the children to learn the professions. This musician used to visit these boys and play out for them and sings [04:42:00]. They started to like to be musicians. He started to teach them to play and in this way, they started to teach music. What I remember was in 1928, my aunt lived near so I used to go to my aunt to listen to them.

They are learning music. In 1933, a Jewish rich man built a special building for this school and they called it the houses of blind children. The King opened the school in 1933 and it had a lot of children. They had a special music teacher. They had a big number of the best musicians, not *maqam*, only modern. Yes.

It was a very progressive idea to teach blind children to have a skill, basic skills. That's where you heard-

The only one I know he's still alive is-[04:44:00] I know there is one who's still alive.

From?

In Israel.

You went to that school?

Yes. Qanun player. The band of the Israeli radio and television had a special Arabic music band which had 20 persons, all of them Iraqis except one. One is Egyptian and maybe 16 of them were from the school of blind.

Amazing. What was the school called in Arabic? What was it called?

It is *Dar al satr al mi'an*. The school of helping the blinds.

It was a Jewish school.

Only Jewish. No Muslim children were accepted, as I know there was no non-Jewish boy. People brought them food every day. They ate their food in the school. So they were able to get rid of begging.

That was another exposure to music for you, this school. What about something we didn't discuss about films? What films did you go? Was that important in terms of your music exposure?

Well. Films? [04:46:00] I used to go every day to cinema and, of course, look I go to the Egyptian films. Egyptian films started in 1934, 35. The first film which came to Iraq and it was a musical.

What was it called? The first film.

I forgot.

Don't worry.

Habiba Kojaman: [suggests film]

Lah, mi Nadra. [No. With Nadra] Anyway. I didn't go only to Arabic films, there were hundreds of Indian films at that time and most of them are musical. I went to all the American and British films whether musical or not but there're very beautiful musical films of Paul Robeson and Maurice Chevalier and Janet McDonald and things like that. I used to go to them- not once. For instance, I saw The Great Walls [04:48:00] in two weeks, I saw 12 times.

Habiba Kojaman: Twelve times?

Twelve times.

Habiba Kojaman: How? [laughs]

Was it cheap to go to the cinema?

Yes. I saw the Life of Mozart, Chopin, by Paul Muni. Yeah? I saw it eight times in one week and when it came back, I was out of Baghdad. I went to Baghdad in order to see it again. I saw many films many times, only musical. If it's not musical I see it only once but if it's musical I see it several times.

That was another part of your music exposure.

Yes.

Is there anything else about the music now we have discussed the--

When we were friends, we had a friend who had a lot of records, classical records. We used to go once a week for at least two or three hours to listen to classic records. Beethoven and others.

That's amazing. It wasn't taught at the time. You taught it to yourself.

[04:50:00] Yes. What is funny, when I went to Israel and I did not have still work, I have work for six months and I have a chauffeur.

You have what?

Chauffeur. A chauffeur is Eli Amir who is Director General of housing and he was my chauffeur. He takes me to Tel Aviv and waits for me for three hours and we are back home. Why? Because I go to visit the musician who used to teach the blinds. I told you he's one of the best musicians. He used to visit the blinds and teach them oud. This one lived in Shchunat Hatikva and Eli Amir used to take me to Shchunat Hatikva we visit him for three hours and we take him to a restaurant and then back to my home.

What was his name?

Salim Dawood. Salim Daqwood

Did he continue to play the oud in Israel?

Yes.

He continued to play.

Yes. Here in London. [04:52:00] I played. We have pictures of me playing at the house of Sami Zubaida. I have pictures playing The oud.

You taught yourself the oud. You taught it to yourself.

Yes. If I had a chance or a teacher, I would have been a good musician.

Is this one of your regrets? Regret?

Yes. I'm sorry I did not have the chance to learn music correctly.

Nevertheless, you did it and you became a amateur oud player.

Amateur. I wrote some songs and things like that. I think if somebody had helped me in my childhood, I would have been a great musician.

You think in oud play or something else?

Music.

In music.

In music. It is not connected with the instrument. In oud, you are a good musician, in the violin, you are a good musician.

What do you think just to finish? What do you think is your most important contribution in all the different things, the blog, the writing, what is the most important thing for you? [04:54:00]

Well, what I'm writing.

Your blog. Is it the blog? Website.

There is a group who have an organization which they publish articles of anyone who sent to them. They asked me to publish one of my articles. Then they took all my articles, even the old ones and it is there in a special website and this special website is going to be four million today.

I think this is a very good point. I hope you will reach the four million today and we can congratulate you.

It is very near.

If not today, it will be tomorrow.

Yes. It is 98. It is 2000 to around four million.

It's a wonderful thing that you can be here in London and be connected to so many people.

Very connected.

It's through the web.

Yes. If I send the article in the morning, after an hour, it is published.

That's, for you, the most important thing today to be able to.

Yes. Maybe this [04:56:00] is what keeps me alive.

You look forward to writing. You enjoy it.

Yes. In the morning, every morning, I make coffee with milk, only milk and go to the computer, I listen to music and write at the same time. From 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning till 10:00. At 10 o'clock, I go to eat my breakfast.

That's a lesson for everyone I think. It's so wonderful and you enjoy it. Okay. Is there anything else I think we have-?

I'm glad I've known you and met you and I hope that this film will be useful to anybody.

Mr. Kojaman, thank you again for this wonderful interview and for sharing your life with us with Sephardi Voices. [04:58:00]

Can you please tell me about this photograph? When was this picture taken?

Maybe when I was 22 years old. 23 years old.

Where was it taken?

In Baghdad.

Is this the only picture you've got from Baghdad?

Yes.

Why is that?

Because the police took all the pictures of the family from my house.

You have no other pictures?

No.

Your siblings? Nobody has?

The most important picture, I'm sorry I have lost is a picture of my father. A picture of my father with my youngest brother.

One sec. Yes, I asked you why this was the only picture from Iraq?

Well, because the police took all the family pictures when they came to arrest us.

There's nothing left.

No.

You were saying--

I am sorry, especially for a picture of my father because we have no other picture of my father.

Thank you. Yes, please. When was this picture taken, please?

It was taken in Israel in our house. In our flat in Israel.

Who is on the picture, please? Who is on the picture?

On the picture is the whole family. My wife [05:00:00] my two children and I.

Thank you. Yes, please. Who is on that picture, please.

Well, these pictures, my mother-in-law with my wife and the children.

Where?

Also in Israel, in Jerusalem.

What was the name of your mother in law?

Anisha.

Surname?

Mishal, Anisha Mishal.

Thank you. Yes, please. Who is on the photo?

Well, this is my wife when she was in nursing school in Belenson in Tel Aviv.

Roughly which year? Which year roughly? When was this taken?

This is before I came to Israel.

Thank you. Yes, please.

This is my both children very shortly before we came to England.

Roughly when?

It was in Jerusalem near our flat where we lived.

Thank you. Yes, please.

This is our picture, my wife and I after we came to this house and it should be 1985 or 86.

Thank you. [05:02:00] Yes, please.

This is a picture of my wife and I playing out in the house of Sami Zubaida in maybe '94 or '5.

Thank you very much. Yes please, what can we see?

This is the picture of my dictionary, Hebrew-Arabic dictionary which was published in 1970 in Israel.

Thank you. Yes, please.

This is the picture of my book on the music of Iraq which was published here in London in 2001.

Mr. Kojaman, I'd like to thank you again for this interview. Thank you very, very much.

Thank you.

[05:03:17] [END OF AUDIO]