

Sephardi Voices UK

IMPORTANT

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| Interviewee Surname: | Harari |
| Forename: | Irene |
| Interviewee Sex: | Female |
| Interviewee DOB: | 07/05/1934 |
| Interviewee POB: | Cairo, Egypt |
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[00:00:00]

Today is the 22nd of January 2016. We're conducting an interview with Mrs. Irene Harari and my name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we're in London. Can you please tell me your name?

Irene Harari.

And where were you born?

Cairo, Egypt.

And when were you born?

The seventh of May 1934.

Mrs. Harari, thank you very much for having agreed to be interviewed for the Sephardi Voices project. Can you tell me please about your family background?

Okay. My grandparents and parents came from Aleppo. Both families, you know, on my father's side, on my mother's side, they were all born in Aleppo. My mother was born in Cairo, my grandmother, her mother, was born in Cairo. Everybody else, I think, was born in Aleppo in Syria. My grandfather was going to go to America when he left Aleppo. Arrived in Alexandria to take the ship to the States. But there was a problem with the suitcases. They said there's a disease, they have to fumigate them. They took the suitcases and they were too late, and the boat left and he was horrified. But there was another ship going two weeks later. So he had an aunt in Cairo and went to stay with her. But he wanted to stay with his uncle and the uncle said, 'Sorry, we have girls who are marriage age, so you can't.' So he stayed with the aunt and with my grandmother, who was fourteen at the time. [00:02:01] And I think they got married and he was eighteen, not much older. And they got married there and then. As for work, he was sort of desperate and was walking to go to his uncle, and there was an Arab man sitting outside. He said, 'What's the matter with you? You look very sad.' And my grandfather said, 'I'm sad because I was going to go to America.' And the man said, 'What America? Do

you speak English?' He said, 'No.' He said, 'This is America here.' And he left him a little garage space, and this is how he started. And he was a millionaire. My grandfather was a millionaire, even in Egypt, even at the time. So you can imagine, yeah.

He was a millionaire? What did he do? What did he ...?

He was selling not so – not underwear, all sorts of things. But clothes, yes. Yes.

And did he marry one of his cousins? Or who did he marry? He was very young.

He married his niece. This is it, that's what I'm telling you that ... And when they went to the rabbi, the rabbi said, you know, 'God forgive you, this is not allowed.' But it was done. He was a very religious man. I don't – you know, they fell in love. What can I say? He was very religious. We lived in **Koubbeh Gardens** in a villa. My grandparents lived downstairs and I lived upstairs with my family. But we had a synagogue in the garden, small, because there was no synagogue in **Koubbeh Gardens**. [00:04:00] And then, you know, a few families got together and everybody put something, and they built a synagogue about ten minutes' walk from the house. But he was a very religious man. Yeah.

And the other – on the other side? The grandparents on the other side?

I didn't really know them, because the grandmother – I think in my, you know, background that maybe I saw her when I was a baby. You know, sometimes you have – she died young. And her husband, my grandfather on my father's side, also I remember vaguely, and he died. So I really have – but I had – I was very close to my father's brother, sister and their children. So he had a three sisters who lived in Israel and – three sisters, yes. And he had, I think, three brothers. One was in America, one was in Egypt and him. That's it, yeah. But I was very close to his brothers' sons and daughters, you know. We were very – closer than with my mother's family, because they had younger children. And on my mother's side they didn't. Yeah.

And how did your parents meet? How ...?

They were cousins [laughs]. I don't know how they met, they were cousins. It's – the funny thing is my father's brother, when I was five years old, said to my father, 'Irene is for my son, Bebo.' And my father said, 'No' and my uncle got very upset. [00:06:00] 'What, do you think my son is not good enough?'. He said, 'That's not the point. It's enough family, to family, to family.' [Laughs] So that was said to him.

But I guess cousin marriage was quite usual. But not – uncle to niece was probably not?

Uncle to niece is not allowed.

Was not allowed.

It's not allowed, but there you are. So, but it's not the only thing. It's my father's parents were cousins, my mother's parents were cousins. Before that, they all do it, everybody. So after that it changed. Nobody married in the family anymore. Yeah.

So was it a big family?

Big family. My grandmother was pregnant eighteen times, but the first three died. She was too young, she was fourteen, so you can imagine. Yes. And then, I don't know if you know that, but there's an old wives' tale. You sell the next child to a non **Dowek**, because if it's Cohen, you know that. So you sell it to another person, as if it's not yours. And then it lifted, that why it is a superstition, but it worked. So that was Benzion, the first son. Then there was my mother, Sophie, then there was Leon. Then there was Edward, then there was Albert. Then there was Sally, the only other girl. Then there was **Henry, no Henry** was before. Anyway, and then there was Eli. And then there was Mario, but he died after his bar mitzvah. [00:08:04] He had typhoid at the time. That was it, that's the family.

Amazing.

Yeah. So my uncle, all my uncles, when all that happened in Egypt, ended up in Canada. Almost all of them. On my father's side, they went to Brazil. And I don't think anyone went to Israel. My aunts on my father's side were already in Israel earlier, but nobody else went to Israel.

Before we start talking about leaving, can you describe the house you grew up? What was it like? Who lived there?

It was very nice. It was a villa with a big garden. And as I said, my grandparents and all their children lived on the first floor. And we lived up above. And then, there were another two bedrooms on the terrace, which two of my uncles had to live in. [Laughs] There wasn't room for everybody other than that. And every Saturday, my grandparents received the family. So Alice's parents and Alice, they came every Saturday. They sat in the garden and had coffee and, you know, cakes and talked. And oh, and the children played. Under the first floor, there were the kitchens and you know, extra rooms to put luggage and God knows what, yes? And all the people who worked for them lived there. [00:10:00] They had a car with a chauffeur. That's how I remember it and cleaners you know, and servants. Servants, yes. You know, servants were extremely cheap. Mind you, maybe it was money then but still very cheap. So you could have the – what was – that if you had someone working for you, you had to feed them and that was probably more than what they earned. The cook was Jewish and the others, no. Yes, and the chauffeur was Jewish, now that I remember. His name was Ibrahim. We all live together, it was very nice. Then my aunt married, aged eighteen. She didn't even finish **school**, she got married to a **Schouella [ph]**. I don't know if you know the name **Schouella [ph]**. Anyway, they were a big family and **Ezekiel Schouella [ph]** was quite a bit older than her. But you know, she wanted to marry him, so that was fine.

So the expectation was for the girls to get married fairly young?

Just as quickly as possible [laughs]. You know, I never went out with my husband alone. We were in a group, his sister, other friends. And then there was – his parents asked for my hand in marriage. At the same time, somebody else also asked for my hand in marriage. And my father came and said, 'Listen, they're both fine. You want this one? Fine. You want that one?

Fine. You want neither? Fine, but you're not going out anymore.' [00:12:07] [Laughs] So it was something. So I said Tony, but I had never been – you know, we never talked separately. We were in groups always, there you are. And the funny thing is Sonia Cohen had another son from a first marriage, who lived in Australia. Who afterwards lived in Australia, he lived in Cairo. And he was a great friend of my husband. Isn't it funny? So when everybody came here, he went to Australia, because he was brought up by his father, not by his mother. And he came to visit her. Yeah, and he was a great friend of my husband's, really very nice.

Tell me a little bit – the neighbourhood you lived in, what sort of neighbourhood was it? Was it a mixed neighbourhood? Was it a Jewish neighbourhood?

Mixed neighbourhood. As I said, my best friend was a Muslim girl who lived like one street back of me. She prayed five times a day. They were very religious, but we were the best friends. I talk – I called her mother 'Aunt' and she called my mother 'Aunt.' And really, it was a pleasure, when you come to think of it. There wasn't this, what's happening today.

Tell us a little bit more about this friendship and about your friend.

Okay, she went to the American College to learn English. I went to the Lycée. But after school, we met nearly every day. And together we spoke either Arabic or French, because I didn't have English at all [laughs]. [00:14:00] And the funny thing is the photos that she sent, she writes at the back but she writes in French with mistakes, but it doesn't matter. She had a brother, younger. And I was a lot with Muslim people, which – and we used to go to the club, the Shell club. You know, Shell petrol people had a club there, so we used to go there. And I was then, I think, fifteen or six – fifteen, I was fifteen. And my parents came and saw me sitting, me, with – everybody was Muslim around and there were boys, of course. My parents said, 'Right, we're moving' and we moved to Zamalek. They got worried, you see, you're with young – you know, you're all young people, you might fall for ... So everything's fine, but there's only a bit –

So how old were you when you moved?

Fifteen, I was fifteen. We moved to Zamalek, which is quite a bit away from **Koubbeh Garden**. **Koubbeh Garden** was near Heliopolis, near King's Palace. The other one was somewhere else. And there was a club the **Tawfikeya Tennis Club**, which was mostly Jewish. Of course, there were other people but mostly Jewish. And you went there all time. You know, apart from school, we had nothing else. We went there all the time and this is how I met my husband, at the club, but in a group, not alone.

Yeah.

So we used to go to the cinema, come back, that sort of thing. And yeah.

Yeah, so Zamalek was quite a different neighbourhood?

Completely.

Yeah. Can you describe it? What ...?

Yeah, much higher, richer people, more educated people. [00:16:04] The other one was not, no. But as I said, we had this villa and they built a synagogue very close. And I used to spend my days at – you know, Passover and **Rosh Hashanah and** Kippur. I was the whole day at synagogue with the men. I was a kid, yeah, with the men downstairs. So I remember all that very vividly.

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

I have no idea.

But it was in that area?

Yeah, it was first in our garden. There was like, let's say, a house, which is the side of this room. And it was the synagogue there, **they had Sefer Torah** and the whole thing.

And your grandfather founded – your grandfather was behind it?

Yes, yes. That, yes. And when they built the other one, they all – there was a country member, his first name, Cohen. His daughter was a friend of mine. And together with other people as well, there were quite a few Cohens there, they built this other synagogue, which was much bigger. And they had an upstairs and the downstairs and the whole thing. Yeah.

So that leads me to the next one. How religious was your family or your parents? And the grandparents?

My parents, perhaps a bit less religious, but my grandparents were very religious. My uncles were not so religious. And so, you know, my grandfather was losing his temper all the time. But I remember when I was little and he came back from synagogue, he sat me there and told me stories of the Bible, which I remember up 'till today. You know, the way the world is supposed to end and, you know, all sorts of things which I remember. Every Saturday, we sat and he talked to me. I was his first grandchild.

So you were close to him?

Yeah. [00:18:00] And to my grandmother. My grandmother was diabetic and he used to inject her twice a day, or three times a day, all the time. And she had a special diet. She had boiled courgettes and I went down and ate it. My mother said, 'You're not supposed to. This is health food, she can't eat anything else.'

But she was diabetic, but she had eighteen births, yeah?

Yes.

So –

No, births but who didn't – yes. Diabetic. The funny thing, none of her children was diabetic but now one of her grandchildren is diabetic. At the age of seven, they realised, and he lives

in Los Angeles, and his family. My – his father is my cousin, Maurice. Like my brother, Maurice, because my grandfather was **Moïse**, which is Moses. And so, only one of them is called **Moïse** as such. Then you have Maurice, then you have Morris, then you have you know, all sorts of names that remind you of Moses.

And how religious was the house? Was – did you keep the keep Kashrut and Shabbat?

Yes, of course. No, but even I – it was very – even when I got married and moved, I kept Shabbat and I kept kosher. It was easy to get kosher. I mean, there was a man who came, a Muslim actually, who came and delivered it every week. You had – you know, you left an order. And, but the funny thing with all the fact that it – was my grandfather was so religious, for him, you could eat milk first and then meat, but not meat first and then milk. [00:20:01] Did you ever hear of that one before?

Yeah, yeah.

Well, I haven't heard of it before, apart from that.

Well, it's interesting.

Yeah, it is interesting.

But so, you said there were arguments between him and his sons. So what would the sons do he disapproved of or ...? Go out on Shabbat or ...?

I don't think so.

No?

I don't think so. No, at any rate, it was the war after that. And they were all – they were British. My grandfather was British, because he had done something for the British government, I really don't know what. And they gave him British citizenship and his children. After – from India,

from India. So they were all in the army, my uncles, all of them. Some were in the Navy in Alexandria and the others were in the British Army in Cairo. And they used to – they were not allowed to go out. So at night, they used to jump the window and go out and, you know, young people. Yeah. And they got, yeah, they all got married in Egypt and then they left, yeah. Now I wanted to say something, which I can't remember right now.

It will come back.

Yeah.

It will come back. So what are your first memories actually? Do you remember what were your first memories of growing up in Cairo?

Yeah, my grandparents. I was there all the time, I was there all the time. And the family and we have – what is wonderful is my children also are very family minded, and my grandchildren now. It's really a pleasure to see, not everybody is like that. And Natalie's mother is my first cousin and she married Philip. [00:22:03] You met Philip? No. Anyway, he's my husband's cousin's son. But nothing to do with the same family this time. But I put them together without meaning it. She lived – Natalie lived with me for quite a while, because she was – I think she was studying law here. After, she did law in Canada. And she lived with me for quite a while. And one day, we went to the cousin, Philip's parents. And I said, 'Look, you're going to make meet a very nice young man. Nothing will happen because you're leaving tomorrow. But come with me.' And he came and twelve o'clock she left with him. They went God knows where, twelve o'clock, one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock. Midnight, Madame comes back. I was livid [laughs]. And they carried – she left and – but they carried on writing. And she went and he came and God knows what. And then they came one day both crying, saying 'We are separating.' And I said, 'I must be stupid, but if you're both crying, why are you leaving each other?' I mean, anyway, they left each other for, I think, maybe three years. But they carried on talking to each other, writing to each other. And Natalie even said, 'If we are ...' or he said, I don't know, 'If we are both in our forties and none of – neither of us is married, we'll get married.' Anyway, then she was in Canada. Then she came back to work for a lawyer here, solicitor, and they met again and that was it [laughs]. So we're very close and Natalie's

mother died. [00:24:05] She was forty-nine, cancer. But, you know, we were very close family on both sides. On my mother's side, on my father's side, very close all of us.

You're surrounded by family?

Yes, yes.

And you are suddenly in... Let's talk a little bit about your schooling. You said you went to the Lycée.

Lycée.

Tell us a little bit about it. What was it like? What ...?

Okay, I went to the Lycée when I was, I think, five to kindergarten there. They had the kindergarten and then you went – the two schools were together. Only there was like a wall between the little ones and the bigger ones. I was very happy at school. I'm in touch even with some of the children who were with me in kindergarten, so you can imagine. Then my Aunt **Cely [ph]**, who is ten years older than me, was – at school she was there at the Lycée, but on – with the bigger ones. And every day, I used to go at break time and stand next to her like she – you know, like I'm a big girl. You know, if I was five and she was fifteen. Also very close and I was a very good pupil. My father, if I came second, if – in the exam, I came second, he said, 'What was wrong with first?' He was never satisfied. I was always top, top, top at school [laugh]. Except in geography and up 'till today, you tell me north or south, I have no idea what you're talking about. And also now, I have friends, girls and boys, which are obviously old people now, and I'm in touch with them. [00:26:02] They're mostly in Paris. They didn't come to England, they went to Paris and I see them. About it really.

Was it mixed? Or what was it?

No.

No? So the Lycée ...?

No, the Lycée, there was a wall with steps going one – and a door. But the door was always, always closed. We had a – what do you call it? Headmistress who was horrible and she hated – she would not allow you to look at the boy, never mind ... So we were completely, completely separate. And then, there was a trip organised and she was going to be there, to watch boys and girls. Going to Aswan and Luxor, I had never been. My father said, 'Not you. There are boys, no, you're not going.' And I didn't go. And he said, 'I'll take you' and he never took me. And I left Egypt and I had never been. But then, after my husband died, '91, we were again allowed to travel back to Egypt. So I went with my son and his wife and my brother. And we did the Nile cruise to Aswan and I saw all the things that I had never seen [laughs].

Which you could have seen on that trip.

Which I could have seen on that trip. You know, thinking about it, it must have been very difficult. But I had to shut up, I had no choice. But it's very hard to always be the only one. It's true and I was the only one. Only one, it was me. 'You're not going, that's it.' At the age of sixteen, a friend of mine had a party boys and girls. The parents were going to be at home. After ha, ha, ha, my father said, 'Okay, you can go, but eight o'clock you're done. I'll come and get you.' [00:28:08] Maybe it was even seven o'clock. Anyway, I went with a cousin of mine who lived in town but was staying with me. So we went and at seven o'clock, my father found – or at eight o'clock, I can't remember which of the two. Anyway, 'Okay, I'm coming.' So the mother of this girl had to talk to him. She said, 'Look, we haven't even opened the buffet.' He said, 'Okay, one more hour.' We went in, my cousin and I like thieves. We had, you know, a piece of cake and what have you. And we went down. Everybody else stayed. I mean, if you few think about it, it's not right [laughs]. But it was like that. And I had a cousin who was a year-and-a-half younger than me, who was my father's brother's son, you know. If he was there, my father let me go because he was watching on me like a hawk. I couldn't do anything. Yes, there you are. So he was there, so that was fine. A young man came and asked me to dance. So I danced. Let's say two minutes later, he came and asked me again. My cousin went and said, 'Okay, this is my cousin. What are your intentions?' The boy said,

‘None.’ [Laughs] So after three who were – I sat down. I didn’t – that’s – you know, it was awful really. But it’s true.

Yes, yeah. You accepted it?

I had – well, I had no choice. Yes. Other than that, my father was a wonderful father. No, he was really. But he even apologised after he – when we came to England. I had the children and all that, he said, ‘I’m really sorry.’ [00:30:00] He realised, what was I going to do, in heaven’s name? Yeah, no. [Laughs] Voilà.

Tell us a little bit about Second World War. Do you remember? Do you have any ...?

I remember.

You were young but ...

I wasn’t that young, ‘34, ‘44, I was ten.

Yeah.

That was the end of the war though, ‘44. No, during the war, really, we didn’t feel anything. Apart from my uncles going to the army and to the Navy and what have you. Only when the Germans got to El Alamein, I remember my parents sending me and my brother to the countryside, to a little *eizba*, you know. And the next day, they had been stopped. So we came back, but that’s what I remember. And I remember the – you know, the porter and people in the street, they were already not so hot about Jews, saying, ‘Ha, ha, tomorrow, we will cut your throat.’ You know, that sort of thing. It was not very nice. But after that, that was it, was the end.

So they were worried enough to send you away? So –

Yes, because Cairo is the capital. And they were – they had gotten to Alexandria at that time, which by car was two hours. But by car going slowly. So it was very close, yeah. They were very close, but they were **stopped** just then and so, we came back to Cairo. Yeah. Other than that, really and truly, we didn't feel the wa – I'm talking about me. Maybe by parents did. But I mean, as children we didn't feel anything.

So when – what then happened in the forties? [00:32:00] What do you remember? Was there a change? Could you feel anything in terms of your own relationships? You said you had a good Muslim friend?

Yes, no, the same.

The same?

No, we were friends always. When we were told to leave Cairo, we were given two weeks to leave. And we couldn't take anything. And the photographs, and the photographs I got with me, if they were in albums you had to take them out. You could take twenty pounds, Egyptian pounds, per adult and ten per child. So we had fifty pounds, Egyptian pounds, which was nothing. But we had someone living in the same house who was a Christian man, who had been who had been living in Israel, him and his wife and two girls. And they had been thrown out by the Jews, by the Israelis and came to Egypt. But we were friends, they were living in the same building as I and we were very close friends. And he took us to the airport and he put another fifty pounds in my husband's glove, so that they didn't see it. But when we arrived and they were looking into the suitcases, they opened and they never thought of looking in the glove. We had fifty pounds more [laughs]. We arrived in Switzerland and my son, Joe, I was pregnant with the second one, a thirty-nine temperature or forty even. So, very hot. We had to call a doctor in Switzerland, one night we spent there. So we arrived in England, literally with nothing. And – but as I said, the Anglo-Egyptian Resettlement Board, they had hotels where they put people. [00:34:00] But my in-laws said, 'No, you will come ...' They were living at a lady in Manchester called Mrs. Levy, who let out rooms and cooked for the people, meals and all that. So we were there. She was a very nice lady but, you know, with a baby and no money. And well, it's things I want to forget. Anyway, after a year or so, now what

happened is my husband worked. He earned, I think, fifteen pounds a month. And this Board supplemented what we needed, you know, just literally to live. Then after – I think it was after a year or so, they gave us – they would lend us 2000 pounds to buy a house. And we would have to repay it when we could, without interest. So it was really very nice. So we bought a house and this is when I lived alone, with the two kids, yeah? And we did repay it and – but my husband was working at the time in London and came home only weekends. And really, I wanted to – and my parents were in London, and I really wanted to move to London. We found the house in Temple Fortune. It was a shambles. It was horrible, but it was a house. But suddenly from nowhere, a man from Hungary said he could redo everything for 400 pounds. So my husband said, ‘Okay.’ We had sold the one in Ma – we had money now. So we bought the house, came to London and if you saw this man, we didn’t. [00:36:08] He disappeared [laughs]. You know, it’s things that happen. We would never have come to London otherwise. Yeah. So we were there and slowly, slowly we did the house and ...

He disappeared?

Disappeared.

With the money or without the money?

No money.

Oh, okay.

No, he just disappeared. We bought the house. Once we signed and everything we came, ‘Where is he?’ **‘Il n’y a plus.’** He’s gone [laughs]. It was so funny, really. And the kids went to a school. To school. It was called – it’s where the cinema is in Temple Fortune, the Odeon. Now, it’s Marks and Spencer, I think, it’s not a cinema anymore. Anyway, there was a school there. So I used to take them by bus every morning. I’d go pick them up. And then, I sometimes went and worked at the factory with my husband. So I went in the morning and then came back, picked up the children, went home. It was not very easy, but yeah.

It was quite difficult. I just want to go – because we jumped a little bit, just to go back.

Yeah.

Back to Egypt a little bit. So when you – you were in the Lycée. And then, what happened after you went to the Lycée? You went to another school?

No. Ah, yes. Yes, yes. I went after – I didn't do the second part of the Baccalaureate, only the first. And I wanted to learn English and I went to the Alvernia School, which was in Zamalek, where we lived with my parents. Also, for a year and that was it. Yeah, I –

To learn English?

But when I was fifteen, I used to have a teacher who came at home and taught me Italian. So I liked the language, so I have four languages fluently. [00:38:06] Arabic, French, English and Italian. And Arabic, if I speak Arabic and you didn't see my face, you would think I was an Arab.

You're fluent in Arab?

Yeah, very, very well. And now, I read but it takes me time. It's – I haven't read in Arabic forever.

But you can?

But I can, yeah.

Speaking of languages, was there any Ladino at all spoken or ...?

No.

No, because they were Syrian? So there was no –

Syrians, yeah.

Yeah.

No Ladino, no. When my brother, my brother, my – the one who died, was doing his bar mitzvah, I was sitting there and reading with him, learning with him. But truthfully, I forgot completely. I can't read Hebrew at all. Well, maybe the odd word or something, but ...

So the tunes and the minhag was the – the Syrian minhag in the synagogue, would you know what it was?

I'm trying to think exactly.

The tunes?

Oh, the tunes were totally different. And this is why you said, you know, you like the synagogue and I was – I felt always like an outsider. There was only us, my father, my mother, and then she died very young. She was fifty-one. And my husband –

And you joined that synagogue in Golders Green?

The one in Golders, yeah, because it's near. It's the only one which wasn't too far and was Sephardi.

Right.

Yeah.

It was local.

Yes, yes. You could walk there from where we lived.

Yeah, yeah. So just to come back, so you finished the – you went to the college? You had some English and then you – when did you meet your husband? When you were how old?

Hmm?

How old were you when you met your husband?

[00:40:06] I was – I'll tell you, something happened. I met him in – we got married in '53. I met him 1950. And then my – but in groups, as I say. And then, my father decided to emigrate and try to go to France. He could see what was happening, it was not exactly very good. So we went to France. But I wrote to Tony and he wrote back to me. And we spent, I think, a year there and he couldn't – my father couldn't get anywhere. We lived in an apartment, all of us. My brother went to school there, French school, and **I didn't** do anything really. And he tried and tried. And then, that was – now it was '52 years. Now, it was '52 when we went to Paris. And my uncle, one of my mother's brothers, wrote to us and talked to us on the phone. And he said, 'Come on', because we said it's very bad there. He said, 'You – this is what the papers say, everything is fine. We're fine, you should come back.' Then off we went [laughs].

After a year?

After a year, we went back. And then, I saw my husband again. And then '53 exactly, but from 1950 or '51 that I met him, until we got married, I was away for a year. And then, we met again and got married, '53.

[00:42:02] *So your father realised that – wanted to go? He thought it was time to go?*

Yes, he could see what was happening. And he showed him – but he was really struggling in Paris. And I tell you, my uncle said, 'You shouldn't do that. Here it's fine. Why are you...? You know, we are wonderful and there's nothing happening.' And we came back.

And did he go with your brothers? Yourself, your two brothers and your parents? Who emigrated to France in the first instance?

Yes, all of us, yes. And my younger brother, Maurice, now who is – went to – I forgot the name of the school. It'll probably come back to me. But anyway, he went there and he stayed there when we went back. He stayed there for a while and then he came back home. Yeah, so ...

Because in the early fifties, so you said it was – your father, what was the atmosphere like?

Because Israel had been attacking. It was not – it was – I think it must have been 1952 or '51 when the – yeah. And it's not the same anymore. There were a lot of Jews who wore crosses. You know, because they were scared to be attacked. And they even had a joke, suddenly a Jewish man couldn't find his – he went, 'I lost my cross.' So you can see ... [laughs]. Yeah.

People were scared, were getting worried?

Of course.

Did anything – you personally, did you have any bad experience?

No. No, me no. My brother, yes. My brother, the one who died. He was going to cross the street and the car was almost on top of him and the man started apologising, but he realised that he wasn't an Arab. [00:44:00] And he started shouting at him and, you know, the atmosphere, no, even I actually, I am saying no ... I was – you know, I had Joe, he was one when I left, my son. So I was pushing it, in the front it was straight, and you could see the looks and the – not – nothing. They didn't touch us or anything, but you could feel that it was not what it should be.

Uncomfortable.

And then one day, when they told us we have two weeks to go, we could take as many clothes as we wanted, but no money, except what I told you. And nothing of your belongings. So, what was I going to say?

We talked about bad experiences.

Yes. I had a cousin of mine who lived in the same building. But they were not British, and they ended up in Israel, actually. They were not British and they were selling their – whatever they had. And the porter said it was us, and we were British and we were not allowed. And so, I was in town with my husband. I had left – I had a nanny, black woman, and Joe, left them at home and went shopping. When I came back, they're not there. You have seals on the door. The neighbours, those people from – who were living in Israel, they were Christian, these, had taken the maid and Joe in the house. They would have been in the street otherwise. My grandfather knew a lot of people in government. So they came and opened the seals and apologised, what have you. And, but you know, you, you get things like that. I just wanted to go.

You wanted to go?

I wanted to go, my – because my grandfather said, you know, 'If you want to extend it, if two weeks is not enough, I can ...' [00:46:10] I said, 'Not one second finished.' You're not comfortable anymore. And this friend of mine, her name was Neriman [ph], we called her Nana, cried her eyes out when I left. But I didn't. It's true, I didn't. Afterwards, she came to visit me. Many times, my husband was alive. She came with her sister, she came with her children. So we remained friends and then once, she came and she had breast cancer. And they told her that in Germany, they could do something. But they couldn't do anything and she died. But I kept contact with her brother, her mother. And when we went to Egypt that time, I went to see – first I found the brother who was an ear, nose and throat specialist. And he went crazy. He joined us at the Hilton, we were going to see belly dancing. He went totally crazy. And I saw her mother and her aunt. And you know, it was family to me.

You were close.

And then, at about three o'clock in the morning after the Hilton, the brother took us in his car to show us where our house in Zamalek was. But he was going in a road which was one way, the wrong way. And the policeman is standing there and he stops him. And he – you know, the Arabs had very different attitude. He told him, 'Look at the time. Okay', the man said, 'Okay, just go.' [Laughs] It was three o'clock in the morning.

[00:48:00] *And you saw your house?*

I saw my house from outside. I didn't – it was three o'clock in the morning, you know. Yeah.

And did you feel nostalgic at all? Or how did you feel when you saw your house and ...?

Nothing, nothing. We had left things that I really loved, you know, wedding presents. And it was a very nice apartment.

So where did you live after you got married?

We lived with my parents for one year and then, we moved to that house, which was not very far from my parents in Zamalek.

Apartment?

And – apartment, yes, yeah.

And from there you left?

And from there we left. Can we stop a minute? I need to blow my nose.

Yes, I just asked you whether you had your own apartment.

Whether I had what?

You had your own apartment after you got married?

Yes.

Yeah.

Yeah, rented obviously, not bought.

Yeah. But you said you were quite happy to go to France at that point. You felt it was good to leave?

When I went to France?

Yeah.

I didn't have a choice at any rate, I didn't have a choice. My father had to – decided to go and we had to go. But I had already met Tony and, you know, but we wrote to each other. And then when I came back, I saw him and that was that.

And did your father make – when he went back, did he manage to keep some money aside? Did he really think ...?

No, no.

No, he really thought, we're going back?

No, yeah. Back, back. No, my father didn't have a lot of money. He had enough to live, you know, comfortably. But it's my grandfather who made – he made a lot of money. But he came with literally nothing. Ah, what I forgot to tell you is a man came to him and said, 'I have ...' We had something like premium bonds. [00:50:00] It's not premium – the same kind of thing,

where they had a draw. And this man said, 'Mr. Dowek, I really – I need ...', I can't remember how much money it was that he needed. 'Please, I'll give you this ticket, you never know.' And he won the lottery, and this was the beginning. Yeah.

Your grandfather?

My grandfather, this – and starting from there, he really made a lot of – to have one million in Egypt at the time, it's like having, I don't know, a hundred million [laughs]. A lot of money.

So what happened? Was he still alive in the fifties? Was he ...?

Yes, he was alive when we left.

So what happened to him, to the grandfather?

Okay. My grandmother died, she was sixty-five. She had, as I said, she had diabetes. She had the problem and she fell out of bed in the hospital. And I think she had gangrene. I wasn't there anymore, you see. And they wanted to cut her leg and what – and thank God she died. She didn't have to go through all this rubbish. And so, my grandfather came to England and then went to Canada, because all his sons were in Canada. My – I told you, my uncles went to Canada at that time. And so, he came here for a few days to see my mother and us and all that. And then, he went to Canada.

And did he manage to get anything out? Or he lost everything he had?

I think he had money out already, yes.

So he planned it?

Yes, yes. He was a clever man. He really – he knew what he was doing.

And why were the sons in Canada? Why – was there a connection? Did somebody emigrate first and ...?

No, no, because we were supposed to go to Canada. It was – you know how it was the country where you had a chance of making it if you started a business.

[00:52:04] *And to Montreal? To the French speaking, they went or ...?*

They went to Montreal, yes. They went to Montreal, all of them.

Yeah.

They're still there, all of them. Yeah.

Yeah. And tell us, okay, so your grandfather, but it was later after you left, you said?

It was probably three years. I left in '56, or the first of January '57. Probably three years later, two-and-a-half or something like that, he went to Canada. But his family, his children were there already when he went. He stayed with my grandmother there in Egypt for a while and then decided, when she died, especially, he was really alone. Then he went and he lived with his eldest son, who had never done anything in his life. I don't think he was a very clever man at the time. So my grandfather was usually helping him and lived with him. So that's where he was.

And maybe just talk us through now exactly what happened in the – when you were given notice to leave in those two weeks? What happened exactly?

Well, you got a letter saying – let's say it's the first of January, well, I'm saying anything. 'You have to be out of here by such and such a date.' And as I said, you know, it's a shock, because you don't know exactly what to do. But my grandfather said, 'You don't have to worry, you can stay a few months if you want. I can arrange it.' I said, 'No, that's it.' I had one child who was one, I was pregnant with the second one, no. And so, as we were allowed to get

clothes, I got clothes for the baby of the second age. You know you're going and you know you haven't – no, but seriously, all we had – I think this has moved or not. [00:54:10] I felt it move. We really, honestly didn't have any money really, apart from these 100 pounds in the end, that's all. So it didn't matter.

But just to clarify, so you had to leave because you were not Egyptian citizens? Or were you at that point?

I wanted –

What was your husband?

My husband was British.

Yes.

Also, British passport, it was British, yes?

Right, so –

All the family was – my father, no. My father had an Italian passport and I was Italian. And the Italian, they didn't bother, but the British... So my husband, being British, I swore to the Queen, I became British. So we're British, so we had to leave. Those – after a certain date, I think after '48, if you were Jewish and born in Egypt, you could not be Egyptian. And if you didn't have another passport, you had nothing, which was the case with a lot of people. Like my cousin, who ended up in Israel. Israel, obviously, took anyone who wanted to go. So they had to go to Israel, it wasn't even a choice. They had no choice. But –

So you could come to Britain, because you were a British subject?

Yeah, yes, we could come to Egypt, to London.

Yeah. So when you were expelled –

Yes.

Basically, the order was given to all British ...?

British, French. You know, who attacked at the time? The British, the French, I think the United States and Israel, obviously. [00:56:04] So all these nationalities had to go. Yeah.

Yeah. And they did it come to you as a complete shock when you ...? Where were you when you receive the letter? Do you remember the moment actually when ...? What ...?

No, I really don't remember at all. All I know is we got this thing saying we had to go. But you could expect it. They were people who got it probably before, so you knew more or less what was going to happen. But then I wasn't comfortable there anymore. As I said, I had – I was pregnant and I was pushing Joe in the pushchair. And you could see the looks and I thought, really it's enough, let's go.

And how did people know? Just to make clear that – for example, in the street, how did they know you are not Egyptian? Just ...

Look at me. Oh, I'm telling you, it's falling.

Yes.

Even my brother when he was crossing, he didn't – he looked more Egyptian. He was dark, very handsome but darker. I was blonde, blonde, blonde, blue eyed. What can I be? I spoke perfect Arabic. Even I have friends, I have – actually they're Greek Orthodox. She's Greek but he's from Syria and his sister is still in Syria. So he's quite worried for them. But they're very good friends of mine that I met here, not in Egypt. But you can't tell if they are or they aren't. And his name is Salim. Salim is a very Arabic name. So when he says Salim, they think he's Muslim but he's not.

But in your case, it was your appearance? From your appearance –

From my appearance, of course, from my appearance.

And from the name as well? From the name?

[00:58:00] Before – the people in the street don't know my name. They're just seeing this woman who is pushing the child who was red head with blue eyes. [Laughs] So yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So it wasn't safe? You didn't feel safe anymore?

No, you didn't feel safe anymore.

And did you have a visa to Canada? How did you ...?

We had the visa to go to Canada.

Did you have that before or did you manage in those two weeks ...?

No, we had decided already to leave Egypt before. You know, you could see that it was not getting anywhere. Everybody was getting ready to go. And we had asked for a visa and got it to Canada. So as I said, when we came, my in-laws talked to their son and said – and we didn't have a penny, so it wasn't a lie. They said, 'How are you going to pay for that? And there you have to pay, here it's free.' It's free and so, we stayed.

But your parents-in-law, when had they come to ...?

They came at the beginning of summer and went to Manchester, because he used to work with – I think he bought material or so on, materials, that sort of thing. So he came, work and holiday at the same time. And then, the thing happened in Egypt that the Israelis attacked or what have you. And people were told to leave, so they couldn't come back. So they stayed, yeah. Which was very hard for them, I'm sure. But anyway.

So then you came and you ...?

And we stayed at that this – Mrs. Levy.

Tell us about – because you mentioned this Anglo-Egyptian – the Anglo-Egyptian ...

Anglo-Egyptian Resettlement Board, it was called.

Yeah, so who was behind it? Who organised it? Do you know any of that?

I haven't got an idea. Not Jewish people. I mean, not necessarily, maybe they were Jewish people. [01:00:01] It was the – really the British government. And at the same time, the Hungarians had problems and came at the same time. Yes, exactly at the same time and it was so –

That's interesting. Did you meet some Hungarians at the time?

Huh?

Did you meet some Hun – no?

Apart from the one who was going to redo the house and disappeared [laughs], no.

No, because you said was the same, yes.

No, but Mrs. Levy, we had a room, the two of us and Joe, the baby.

And where was it, the ...?

Didsbury.

Didsbury?

West Didsbury. Yeah, very nice. Two sisters who kept this house, until – my husband was working, but they were giving him extra money so that he could live. Anyway, we found a big house, also in West Didsbury, where my in-laws came and their daughter and her husband. And her husband was Italian, with Italian passport. And we all lived in the same house and I had the baby when I was there. And I was very unhappy. And Joe had problems, my son, with his tummy. So I went to the hospital and the host – the doctor looked at me said, ‘Okay, the child is fine. Let’s talk about you.’ I was really, really – I didn’t realise, I knew that I was very unhappy, but realise how bad I was. Anyway, so yeah, everything sorted – when they offered us money to move, that was like opening gates to paradise really.

You were not happy in that ...?

No, no. My mother-in-law was really a nasty person. She used to – what my husband money got – you know, she managed the house. [01:02:00] And my sister-in-law worked and she – he couldn’t work. He was Italian, her husband. I mean, my sister-in-law’s husband. And so, she bought, let’s say, apples. She counted the apples and came and said, ‘An apple is missing. Did you have an apple, Irene?’ ‘No.’ ‘Did you give maybe an apple to Joe?’ ‘No.’ ‘Oh, then is Vicky’, Victor – the poor fellow. I’m saying the poor fellow, she hated him [laughs]. This is how it was, very bad really. Anyway.

And what were your – when you came to England, you arrived on the plane. What were your first impressions? Do you remember? What did you think?

You know, what was wonderful is that I met Natalie’s father-in-law. He’s three years younger than me, but they were – the two cousins, were studying in England and doing the washing up

in a restaurant to be able to pay for all that. And we met them. So you know, you felt, wow, you're not alone. You know, really was – we met them on the night we arrived in London. They may have come to fetch, I don't know, to meet us.

What else do you remember? Any other – was it cold? Was it January you arrived? So it must have been cold.

It was cold, of course, cold. It was cold and grey. But still, you breathe differently. You feel, okay, I'm free really. And then Tony, my husband, after probably a year did – sold life insurance. He did – he went to this company, he did a course and started selling life insurance. And he was doing very well. At the beginning obviously, he was – they used to give him the difference between one thing and the other, so that we could carry on. [01:04:05] But he was doing very, very well. The first month he was top. Yeah, very well.

So you were – when you arrived, it was a relief to be outside?

Yes, yes.

Egypt?

Yes. You were scared at first, you don't know what's going to happen, you know. But yeah, it was a relief.

And did you have any contact with, you said the Anglo Egyptian ...?

No, nobody.

Jewish organisations or anyone who ...?

No, there were a lot of Jewish people in Manchester. They were very nice, they welcomed us and everything. They were – my mother had a cousin there, Susan or something, I can't

remember her first name. And her husband and she had her daughters. And so, we had people we knew.

Did they join the Sephardi synagogue in Manchester? Or – yeah.

Yes, yes.

So they were part of that?

Yes, we did. And my brother came, Maurice, the younger one, a few months after he was twelve, when he got – and he did his bar mitzvah in Manchester, which was very nice. I have also photographs of that. And he went to school and hated it. And he hated it. And he started not going to school and pretending he was at school. Yes. And one day, someone from the council came and said, ‘Where is your brother?’ I said, ‘My brother is at school, where is he going to be?’ ‘No, he’s not at school.’ Oh, my God. He was very – he didn’t speak a word of English when he got here. And you know, twelve is a very difficult age as it is.

Yeah.

Yes.

And your other brother?

My other brother? No, he was – past school age. He used to work at my husband’s factory. [01:06:00] He was not very well and he ended up dying. He was only thirty-two.

What did he ...? Did he have health problems? What ...?

Hmm?

What was his problem? What did he have?

He had a lot of problems really, a lot of problems. And he's buried here in Hoop Lane.

Yeah.

So are my parents, yeah. So is my husband.

So, because the Sephardi is the ...?

The – both sides.

Yes, I know.

Yes, yes.

On the Sephardi, they are ...?

Yes, on the Sephardi side, yes.

So how long did you live in Manchester, in Didsbury? How long did you stay? For a year , before you came to London?

So we stayed one year in that house with my in-laws. Then probably two years in the house we bought and then we came to London.

And in the meantime, your parents?

My parents were in – when they came, they were in London. They lived in London.

And how did they manage to settle down?

My father had a bit of money out of Egypt. And – but he worked. He worked with a friend of his who lived in Leicester. And they opened, I told you, this factory that did Rosi knitting that – but he lived in London and went to Leicester occasionally, that sort of thing. Yeah.

So he managed to ...?

Yeah. And they were doing very well. It was the height of jersey knitting. And then, it went down, down. Now it's back.

And your mother, how did she manage in this new environment?

They were, as I said, Sonia Cohen, they were very friendly, very friendly. And my mother had cancer. Unfortunately, at fifty-three they discovered she had cancer and she died. Sorry, forty-three and fifty-one, she was fifty-one when she died. [01:08:04] So she – really it was horrendous. And at the time, my father would not accept it, you see. So someone said in Switzerland, there's a doctor who did the – he went to Switzerland and came back, nothing. And someone said in Israel, they can do miracles. He went, nothing. And then in the States, they said – she went. They operated on her and it was in her jaw. So they took her jaw out. I mean, it was really very, very sad. And she didn't last, in the end – well, she **lasted** a few years, from forty-three to fifty-one is unheard. She had radiothe – I don't think there was chemotherapy at the time. She had radiotherapy, she had to go every day to have the rays and what have you. And there you are. And she was in America when she died, actually, looking at photographs. I found a letter from her from the hospital, writing to us, saying how hard it was. But that was the last letter and she died there. She died there and my father had to bring her back. Really, it was not easy.

No. And then your father stayed in London?

And my father stayed. Yes, he stayed in the Ridgeway. Yeah.

And you settled not far?

And then, he moved. He moved to – where is ...? Fairfax Road, yeah, in an apartment. He sold his house and lived there.

But you started – you had a young family. You must have been busy.

I had – yes, I had a family. I had a family before we got here, since I had Joe and I was pregnant already. [01:10:04]

Yeah.

Yeah.

And what did you – how – what was your – how did you want to raise your children in terms of your identity? What did you – did you have any ideas how ...?

I didn't, but they both had bar mitzvahs. They did them at, you know, the synagogue in – I can never remember the name, which, you know, Rabbi Levy was at that synagogue?

Oh, Lauderdale Road?

Lauderdale, that's where they had their bar mitzvah, both of them. And yes, they met – you see, we were very broadminded and it didn't make a difference what you were. So when my kids were little, there was – they had groups for Jewish children. And I had a very close friend from Egypt, was living here. And he had married second wife, a German girl, who was my best friend. We opened the boutique together. But he had two children, a girl and a boy. The mother took the girl and he kept the boy. And this German woman hated him. So he was very unhappy, so he was always with my children. And then, they had the synagogue thing where – a dance for little ones, they were little. And he wanted to go and they said, 'No, he's not Jewish. He doesn't go.' I said, 'If he doesn't go, my children are not going either. I cannot take ...'. Still no, they went to synagogue but they didn't go to the meeting. I think, to say to a little boy who is with us all the time, because his stepmother couldn't stand him, he was with me like my son. [01:12:00] I actually have a letter from him, he died, motorcycle accident,

saying how much he appreciate what I did for him. He realised; he was a little boy but he realised. I cannot accept this. To me, a person is a person, their religion is their problem, not mine. This is how I feel and this how – although my grandfather was very religious and I was brought up very religious, people are people. They're not – so that's how it was.

So because of that you didn't – they didn't – you didn't continue at Lauderdale? Or did you ...?

No, they did, they went to –

Oh, they did?

No, no, they did their bar mitzvah at Lauderdale. But this group thing where you say, 'Okay, he's not Jewish, he doesn't come' is not for me. That's it. When someone says, 'Sorry, we don't accept Jews', how do you feel? Yeah, I can't take it, sorry [laughs].

Yeah, you're against it? You think people shouldn't be discriminated?

Yes, no, shouldn't. Not religiously, you can have other things but not for your religion. Is yours personally, nobody else's really. And this kid was brought up, seriously, by me. Because as I said, which was a stupid thing to do, that the father keeps the boy and the mother keeps the girl, it's horrible. And I kept in touch with him always. He was like one – a son to me. He came to visit me, they lived out of London. He got married, has four boys and that he had this stupid motorcycle accident. He was – a woman changed lanes without looking and took him as well. Wah, yeah. But the sister now lives in Greece, because the father was Greek. [01:14:00] She moved to Greece now and she keeps writing to me, to my children, you know.

And what sort of friends did you have in your circles when you were here in London?

Here, you mean? I have everything. I don't think I have a Muslim friend here, but I have this Greek Orthodox. I have Christian people and Jews, of course. Yeah, lots of Jews, Jewish

people. I give bridge lessons on Wednesday. They were all at the JCC centre and they preferred me, so and they're all obviously Jewish, so.

That's one of your hobbies, bridge?

Yes.

You play bridge?

Hobbies, yes. I play a lot of bridge and after my husband died, there was a man who was a solicitor but he was – he knew my husband. He was with him. He phoned me and he said if I wanted – he wanted to start a bridge game, would I be interested? So every Monday, one year – from one year after my husband died, every single Monday up 'till today, my husband has been dead twenty-three years, I think, so a long time, they come to me. All men, we play bridge, the old bridge. So, you know.

That's fine.

Yeah.

And for how long – when did you come to this apartment?

That has a story as well.

Go on.

Tony has a new started looking into property, which is what his son does now, Joe. And found this house which was going to be sold by auction. And he had – he knew a man and they became partners. And borrowed the money, they didn't have the money, either of them, to buy this house before the auction. [01:16:03] And after he bought it, he took me to see it. And I thought, I think he has lost it. It was in such a state. It belonged to a Lady Butterworth, who had died. And her heirs, she had many, must have been very old. And each one of them had

an idea. So they decided to rent – to let the house to students until they saw what they were going to do with it. And you can imagine students, what they do with the house. Outside in the hall there was a hole in the parquet, down to the thing – and I thought, what happened to them? Are they crazy or something? I didn't see it. So they converted it into five flats to start with. Downstairs was the kitchen, before I mean, it was the kitchen and one room for the coal, and one room for I don't know, pickles. And this became an apartment, this one became an apartment. The one on top, one on top and a smallest one, two bedrooms up there. That's how they converted it to five apartments. And I came to see it and I said, 'I want to move.' We had a house now, the house in Temple Fortune. And we had just finished redoing it, refurbishing it and making something of it. And I said, 'I want it.' He said, 'Look, we spent a lot of money there. If we get – if I put it on the market and we get what we spent, then we'll move.' And we did, a couple from Spain bought the house with the furniture, with the carpets, with the curtains, with everything. So here I am.

[01:18:03] *And when did you come here? When?*

Wait a minute. Ah, '65, 1965.

So with the children? The children came?

Oh, yes, the children had already been going to school in Temple Fortune before, you know near the house and what have you. Yeah, with the children. So Joe went straight to St. Anthony's, but Alain was a bit back. So there's a school, I don't remember the name. They take them and give them, you know, harder ... Went there for a year then went to UCS after. After St. Anthony's, they both went to UCS. Again, Alain didn't make it and went to Ely as a boarder. And had such good results, that I talked to the headmaster at UCS and said, 'Look at your results' because I never – I was never pushed to study. So I never pushed my children, either they did it or they didn't do it. And Alain needed the push. Anyway, so they took him back. In the end, he decided to do hotel management. He went to Switzerland to the Swiss, you know, the Swiss School of – yeah? And then, opened his – no, then he got employed by somebody. And when 9/11 happened, the man who own it said, 'I'm really sorry, but I can't afford to pay you right now.' It lasted a month or two or something. And then he said, 'Okay,

now I can pay you but you'll have to take half pay until ...'. And Alain said, 'Not me.' He was their top seller, he spoke French, which nobody else did. He spoke French like me, very well. And so, he opened on his own and it was thank you to the man, because he's better than him now [laughs].

[01:20:13] *And did you speak French to your children?*

Always. I did, my husband didn't. I said, at school they are going to learn English, whatever happens. But French, I spoke French to them all – and both of them, Joe has **licence en français**, you know, from a school here. They went to English school, not French, but he talked in French. And Alain, when he went to Switzerland, he had to go one month before the school opened to have like a refresher course. And to learn – like computer, you don't say computer in French. So he had to learn all the – one month before, so.

So the language was important for you to – that they are bilingual or ...?

I'm so happy that I insist – and I did that with my first grandchild. She forgot now, because her father was too lazy to do it. It's true, it's –

Hard work.

It's hard work.

You speak in French; they answer in English. You speak in French, and they answer in English, but it was there, you see. So my grandchildren, they understand quite a bit but they don't speak.

In terms of your Egyptian heritage, what else did you want to give to your children? So one is the French and the way in which – from your background.

Yes, that's for sure. And to keep the family together really, and they are. You know, one of them says, 'Nonna, can I ...?' They call me Nonna, because – I don't know why. I called my grandmother Nonna, although it's an Italian way. 'Nonna, can I come on Tuesday?' for

instance. 'Of course, darling.' [01:22:01] Two seconds later, he phones the others and suddenly, all of them are here [laughs]. It is lovely. Really, it's – for me, it's – I've done something. Yeah, I have. My two sons are very close. The wife, no, no, not that they don't like each other, but they're not the same kind at all. So, but if one of them, the boy says, 'Ah', the other one is there in three seconds. It's how they were brought up and really, I know that I did it [laughs].

That was important for you?

Very important, very important. You know, when I left Egypt, the rest of the family, my uncles and all that, were still in Egypt. And I used to write to them, they didn't answer and I wrote again. You know, I needed this, the family spirit. But in later years, after they went to Canada and settled down and all, we became close again.

You needed the connection? You maintained this connection?

Yes, always, always. Even if it was one way, I did. Yeah.

No, because one effect of the – let's say, of the migration is that it's multinational.

Yes, yes, yes. And – but also, my father and his brother were very, very close. So I was very close to my cousins. They're in Brazil, but we're in touch always. And the one who died was a year-and-a-half younger than I, went to live in Italy. And so, we saw each other much more and then he died. He died in Italy. He – I think he had heart problems. They found him sitting, watching television, dead. [01:24:03] And his wife now lives in Brazil, where the rest of the family is, yeah.

So it's really everywhere?

[Laughs] Yes.

And you go – you say you're going to visit your brother. So is that also something you do regularly?

Every year. I used to go through three months, up 'till last year. I said it's a bit much for me really. You know, two months, I think is already too much. But three, the last month becomes very hard- You know, out of your house, out of every –

So where do you go? Where is it?

He lives – he lived in Hawaii first, which is such a long trip and I went for three months. And this is where I started painting. So I have very good friends from the painting class. And then he moved, I told you he moves all the time. After Hawaii he moved to Florida. Then from Florida, he came back to Hawaii. Then from Hawaii, he now is –

But is he by himself? By himself?

By himself. He had a very serious girlfriend who was not Jewish. And he asked her to marry him and she said, 'Your sister will never accept me, because I'm not Jewish', which was very stupid because I'm not like that. Anyway, they still – she comes. She lives in Australia, but she comes. But they don't live together, they have nothing more than that. Yeah.

So you feel you want to spend the time with him?

Yes, yes. I do.

So that's keeping the family together.

Yeah, and she probably will come. When I'm there – she came as my au pair, to look after the children when they – when we moved to London. She used to get paid three pounds a week. But you see, my husband did – I told you the – and she used to pull the threads and get paid, I can't remember how much per... [01:26:08] So she made a lot of money from that, because

three pounds were like a joke [laughs]. And she started going out with my brother, this is when it happened. Yeah.

Yeah. How would you describe yourself today in terms of your own identity? How would you ...?

I am a lot surer of myself than I've ever been. I was always very shy and you know, now I feel ... And I miss my husband, obviously. He really was fifty-one, which is very young. No, sixty-one, sorry. And – but I am pleased with myself. I'm happy with what I have become. And I'm very close to my sons, both, and my daughters-in-law. So, and my grandchildren and for me, this very important. I play a lot of bridge but if I stopped tomorrow, it wouldn't bother me. But I made good friends through bridge, which is nice.

And do you see yourself as British? Or how would you describe yourself?

I'm now British, really British. From day one, we – first I met – when my husband went to sell insurance, life insurance, he met another man who was originally Norwegian, not Jewish. [01:28:00] But we became great friends, him and his wife and me and Tony, and the children. And up 'till now, the children, although their son lives in South Africa and we live here, they – if Joe goes anywhere, he calls ... When he did his sixtieth birthday, the boy, it was in South Africa. And my son and his wife went. And Joe was sixty this December and he came from South Africa. And I remained friendly with the wife. It really doesn't happen often, things like that, carry on. They were my first friends, never mind British or non-Jewish or whatever, the first friends I made in England. And when they told a joke, everybody laughed. And it took me some time and then, 'Ah', and it was very hard, to tell you the truth. Yeah.

*Yeah. But **the language**, you managed it? Did ...?*

Finally, yes. I never went to here to school. No, it was just practice and talking to people.

And do you see yourself as a refugee at all?

You know something? I didn't feel it at any time. Yeah. But yes, we were refugees. It may be because we got taken care of and made to feel that we were people, not – yeah. It's very hard to come to a country where you don't speak the language. My husband did French school and then he did fully English school. So he went to the Cairo English school. Funnily enough, there is a lady who plays bridge at the club in – what's it called? Highgate and she was in the same class as my son, as my husband. [01:30:05] And I see her every week on Thursday. It's funny suddenly, yeah.

Is this something you miss from Egypt?

The first thing I miss is all the family being together. That's number one. And number two, I loved Egypt, I really loved Cairo. It was very nice before all the rubbish started. It was very nice and –

You loved the city?

Well, to us, then it was. But if you look at it, you say, what are they talking about? Yes, yeah.

Well, the place you grew up?

Yes, yes. I – also all the friends that went everywhere. And, you know, here you meet people, they have friends they went to school with and I don't. It's very – that is very hard, actually. But as I said, I have – in Paris, I have a couple, in Israel I have a couple. But it's not the same, it's not the same. It's – when you go, when you have to leave and everybody has to leave and go somewhere else, it's very hard. I never – in England, apart from Alice and Claudia, I haven't – I don't think I have anyone that I knew in Egypt before.

So it's new, although you've managed to stay in touch with people? But not –

Yes, yes. But it's like through the telephone or through writing or visiting every now and again. But it's not the same, no.

*No, it's a big – **discontinuity**.*

Yes, yeah. It's very hard, actually. [01:32:00] Now, it's not hard anymore. You – in any case, people have died. So whether they were here or not, it doesn't make any difference. But –

But you said you went back to Egypt once?

Only once.

Once?

Only once and I'll tell you something. I told my son, his wife and my brother, I said, 'Have a good look, because we're never going to come back.' Because you could see the animosity, not – the minute I spoke and I spoke Arabic, it was – you can, you know, **ahlan wa sahlan**, But the rest of the time, they look at you like that. Woah, yes. Unfortunately, yes. Went to – you know, to buy things, I went into a jeweller's actually and he was **copt**. He doesn't say, he had a teeny, little cross tattooed under his watch. And he showed it to me, realising that I wasn't a Muslim. But you go into a shop, they look at you and nobody talks to you. And suddenly, I say something in Arabic. '**Ahlan wa sahlan**, please sit down. Can we get you a coffee?' And I don't want to drink a coffee. I'm terrified of the drugs. 'Impossible', they have to make me a coffee and I went *tak*, and the coffee fell on the floor. 'Well, make you another one.' I said 'No, no, please. No, thank you.'

You don't want to drink – you didn't want to drink the coffee?

Are you joking? The water is – no, the water is polluted. We were warned – we did the boat to Aswan, not to eat salad. Not to eat anything that was washed in water, not to drink the water. So every night I had to make ice, because I had a Scotch the next day. So they made the ice with – from the bottle for me. Don't touch the water. Yeah, unfortunately, it's a very sad really.

How do you feel about the Middle East today?

[01:34:00] Ay, ay, ay. Very bad, I feel. Very bad, very bad. There's too much hatred, this is it and they don't even know why really. Very sad. What can you do? And this is why I think that I am so open minded, because I cannot accept all this. You know, you are Muslim or you are a Christian, or you are whatever. To me, you are a person. I can hate you and you can be Jewish and again, it doesn't matter.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, and I've always been like that.

Is there anything I haven't ask you or something we haven't talked about, do you think?

I don't know, I really don't know. It's – no, I don't think so. No.

Then I'd like to ask you whether you have a message for anyone who might watch this interview, based on your experiences? One already you said, that everyone – that you shouldn't regard people –

What?

That their religion doesn't matter. That's one, is it?

Yes. No, it matters. It not doesn't matter. But if you're not of the same religion as I, if you're a nice person, it doesn't matter. Not to me. This Greek Orthodox woman, they're very religious, but they are my best friend, and I am their only friend. No, seriously, very close. If I – you know, I sold my car because suddenly I wasn't feeling comfortable driving. She lives in Golders Green. If we're going to go to Bent Cross, she comes to pick me up, take me to – in other – 'Please', I said, 'Please, I'll take a cab to you.' 'Impossible, are you joking? If it had been the other way around ...' I said, 'I don't know what I would have done if it had been the other way.' [01:36:06] But they are real friends. And these are the people I call my friends would do anything for me and I will do for them. You know, Natalie's father-in-law, he

married a German girl who was not Jewish, she converted. She's more Jewish than anybody else now. She even tries to say a few words in Arabic. They are my great friends. I don't have many, but the ones **that I have are comme ça**, all of them.

You're very lucky to have them.

I agree, I agree. They see if you can count five on your heads, you're really a lucky person. Yes.

But is there any message based on your experiences, on your experiences of, I guess, migration?

I will tell you. To take people for what they are, not for what you want them to be. Yeah, accept them as they are, provided they are your friends, if you see what I mean. It doesn't matter if you believe in something else, or if your life is different. Just take people at face value, without wanting them to be like this or like that, or whatever. Yeah, that for me is very important. And I'll tell you, my children are like that. Yeah, and hopefully my grandchildren [laughs]. When my first grandchild was born, both Joe and his wife worked. So I took care of her, she's like my child. I'm – wow. All of them actually, they're so, so nice.

Can you – just the last question, can you imagine how different would your life had been if you'd stayed in Egypt? If you hadn't been forced to leave?

[01:38:01] It would have been – not family wise, it wouldn't. Family wise, it would not have been different. It would have been the same and perhaps more. But you don't know what's going on on the outside when you are there. You don't know about museums, about theatre. No, I'm actually wrong because they had an opera house. And every year they brought opera, for which we took a membership, my parents did. So I saw all the operas, all the **comédies françaises**, all the ballets. But I don't know about now, if they carry on with that or not. No, it's very limited, it's very limited. There's really not a lot. Not a – well, you know, having seen the pyramids and having seen the Cairo Museum, you're not going to go every day. It's

exactly the same always. So you don't have this openness that you have elsewhere. Other than that, really, I know the family would have been toget – very much together, yes.

One thing we didn't talk about, you wanted to tell me about your birth date. How come there is a discrepancy?

Okay. There was a limit to register a birth. There was a two-week limit, after that you get fined. So I was born the 7th of May. So they were already probably three weeks late. Three weeks instead of two. So they put the 24th, like I was born on the 17th or something like that. And I wasn't, I was born on the 7th. [01:40:02] And it stayed on my passport. It says 24th, but I know that I'm born on the 7th.

Your parents told you?

Yes, yes, they told me. But I keep saying that, really, we should change it. But apparently, it's very complicated. It's not that easy. But I think we should change it. I always say, you're going to think I'm crazy, I always think if I die elsewhere, if I die, yeah? What are they going to do? The person insured is born on the 7th, but my passport says 24th, what is going to happen? [Laughs] I don't know and I used to travel all the time. My brother was three months, I went on a cruise every year for at least two, three weeks. And my first cruise, I went all by myself, not knowing one person on a cruise for one month. You paid two weeks and you go two months free. And at the end of the month, I wanted to stay. I had to leave but it was wonderful. And from then on, every year, every year, first my brother came, then my best friend from Paris came. The, you know, we always had people. This last year and this year, I just didn't feel like. Yeah.

So the traveling is very much part of your life, travel?

Yeah, yeah. See, my husband loved traveling and he never did. He worked, he worked, he worked. And he always said, like I said, 'Let's do that.' 'Okay, I promise you in six months I will.' He worked but he enjoyed, he enjoyed what he was doing. Only made him see nothing and do nothing. He didn't – we did only one trip almost around the world once. [01:42:03]

And other than that, it was little trips to France or to whatever. And so, I always have that in my mind, that he loved traveling. And he kept saying, 'I promise you. Okay, not this year but when this happens ...' It never happened. He had cancer and when – really, they gave him a year maximum and he lasted four months. Finished. To – and so I, everything, the bridge lesson and I give, whatever, goes for Cancer Research. I have – I showed them, because they were here on Wednesday, I didn't take it away, a letter from Cancer Research. Regularly, regularly, they get 200 pounds from me. I go and I give it to them. If I have newish clothes or shoes, or what have you, I give to Ca – only Cancer. I also have had cancer, you can see from my face. But I'm not even thinking of me. I'm thinking – because I'm not that young. So thank God, I lived a good life. But those who died early, I always think about it.

You're collecting –

And they are getting – the point is they're getting somewhere. It's not just spending the money. You can see every day there is a new thing. I have a cousin, my aunt's daughter, who has cancer. I don't know where, it is very bad and they gave her three months. And someone recommended someone in Kansas who takes the cells, which is what they're doing now. I don't know what they do to them and they put them back in the body. And she is better, okay? And the three months have passed. So they are doing something, it's not just spending money for nothing.

[01:44:02] *Yeah. So that's helping.*

Hmm?

It's helping.

Yeah.

Okay, I think if you have nothing else to add, if anything comes to mind ...

No, no. The only thing is also at festivals, if there are people who are around, they're always with me, always. Rosh Hashanah, **Kippur**, no, but Passover. I have. photographs of friends of my parents, who came from Egypt and knew nobody and had no children or whatever. They were here, always. Yeah.

You made sure, you wanted to ...?

Always, if somebody says, 'Can so-and-so come?', of course. If someone is alone ... There's a friend of my son's who was with him at university, he has three children and this year at Rosh Hashanah, the three children were somewhere else. And so I said, 'Okay', I found I said, 'Would you like to come to ...?' 'Are you sure?' I said, 'I'm sure.' So they came at Rosh Hashanah and I have to put the second table. I have to work harder, but I cannot accept that people are alone at festivals. So it's how I feel.

So you think that people should ...? You open your doors?

I think, I think the first thing at Pesach is to put the extra seat, no? In case someone comes. And this is in my head. If people have no family, they have to come to me. They ... Voilà.

Voilà. Thank you very, very much for this interview.

Thank you.

We are going to take a break and then look at your photos.

Okay. Maybe you can have a piece of cake and a proper coffee. Or would you like, I don't know, a cup of tea?

Just one second.

[01:46:00] [MS1] Okay, if you tell us who's in the picture?

[IH] Hmm?

[MS1] If you can tell us who is in the picture?

[IH] This is my great-grandfather, Hakham Abraham Douek Hacoen [ph], and all these medals were given to him by the Sultan of Turkey. I don't know why, but apparently, he did something for them. And he's the one who started the whole thing. I haven't got any pictures of his wife, so I don't know about it. He was very nice man, apparently and had many children. And his –

Yes, please. Can you describe this photo?

This photo was taken in the garden of the villa in **Koubbeh Garden**. It's my grandparents with all their children. The names are in the back. I don't know if you want the names. This is his older son, Benzion. Then this is my grandmother here, this is her mother and then all the little – the younger children, that's it.

[MS1] And when and where was it taken?

[IH] 1977 in **Koubbeh Garden**, where we lived.

What's on the picture, please?

The picture is my grandfather and my grandmother, the parents of my mother, on their wedding day. My grandmother was fourteen and my grandfather was eighteen. And they lived together always and had many children and many, many grandchildren. [01:48:01] And I only remember them with a lot of happiness. Yeah.

Their names, please?

Moses Douek, but he was called Moussa and she was called Latifa.

[MS1] Okay, yes, please.

[IH] These are my grandparents on my father's side. The – my grandfather was named Albert Douek and my grandmother was Rena Douek. I hardly knew them, because she died long – when I was probably a year or something and he, maybe after I was five. So I have very little memory of them. That's it.

[MS1] Okay.

[IH] This is my mother and me, when I was probably a year old in Ras El Bar, which is a place you went every summer, which was not built. They used to undo it, it was built of straw. And at the end of summer, everything came down, so there was no life there. And then at the beginning again, they started rebuilding those houses. And we went there for the whole summer, which was three to three-and-a-half months every year.

When was this taken?

If I was one, it's 1935.

Thank you.

Okay, this is my father, my mother and my uncle, Albert, and me at the front. It was taken also in Ras El Bar in **1937**. And we went there every year for the holidays, the full holidays.
[01:50:03] And we were all always very close, had a lot of family there at the same time.

[MS1] Okay.

[IH] Okay. This is a photograph that was taken in Port Said, which is a place we went rarely but we went. It's on the Red Sea. And this is Alice, who is my mother's cousin and me. That's about it really.

[MS1] Do you know when it was taken?

[IH] Hm?

[MS1] Do you know when?

[IH] When? 1931.

[MS1] Okay.

[IH] Yeah, this photo was taken in Ras El Bar, which is this place that got demolished in the winter and built up again for the summer. There is my uncle, Benzion, my grandmother, my grandfather, my mother, I can't see somebody, and me on the house itself, very near the sea. And there were no cars allowed. So you were safe walking all over the place. It was really very nice.

[MS1] And when was it taken?

[IH] Can I turn it over?

[MS1] There's no date. Okay, so just say it again for me. Where was it taken?

[IH] 1949 it was taken.

[MS1] Okay.

[IH] This photograph was taken at the funfair in Alexandria. **[01:52:00]** It was a boat that used to go around and around. This – from left to right, my father, my mother, my brother, Maurice, my brother, Albert, my cousin, Juki [ph] and me. That's about it, really, and it was taken in 1949 in Alexandria. This picture was taken at Rod El Farag, which is like a little island by the sea, where we used to go on Sundays or something for the weekend. And in this picture, you have my father and my mother, my uncle, Cesar, and his wife, Nellie. And my uncle, Jack, who is my grandfather's brother, and his wife, Regine. It was about twenty minutes from Cairo

and we went quite often when the weather was nice, which is almost always there. This picture was taken at **Koubbeh Garden** in 1944. We used to cycle quite a bit there, it was quite safe and very nice. And this is me again with my bike.

[MS1] Okay.

Yes, please.

This picture was taken at the **Lycée Français**, it's the gym group in 1951. In the middle you have the gym teacher, Monsieur Kagali [ph] and the fourth from the left is me. And as you can see, or maybe not, there are Jewish girls, Muslim girls, Christian girl, all together, friends and really very good friends. Which is how it should be really.

Thank you. So up to you if you want to. I think it would be interesting.

No, I can, I don't mind. Why should I mind? As I said, my father offered –

Yes, please.

This picture was taken in Ras El Bar in 1949. [01:54:01] I am standing on a felucca, which waited for us every day. The guy who used to manoeuvre it was called Faruk. And when we left Egypt in '56, it was our last summer, but we didn't know at the time, he cried his eyes out. He probably had the feeling that was it. And he was a very nice guy, he waited for us every – nobody else could rent him. He waited for us unless we told him, 'Okay, we're not coming today.' Yes?

[MS1] Yes, please.

[IH] This is the end, after the wedding as we are leaving the synagogue, there's me and Tony Harari. And in the background, you have some guests and family. And it was at the synagogue, Adly Pasha synagogue, which was one of the biggest synagogues in Cairo. And it was May 1953, the 10th of May. Yeah.

[MS1] Okay.

Yes, please.

This was taken at the house of **Huguette Hetena [ph]**, who was engaged to my uncle. It was the engagement party. In the picture, left from right, you have Doris Harari, who was my sister-in-law, Claudia Roden, Mimi Hamawi, was my cousin, me and a friend, whose name I don't remember. And it was **at the fiancé's house**. That's about it.

Thank you.

This picture was taken at my father's – my parents' house on – it's not house actually, it's apartment, on the balcony. **[01:56:01]** It's Tony and I in 1953, just out after our wedding. It was in Zamalek and overlooking the Russian embassy [laughs].

Yes, please.

This picture was taken in Zamalek on my parents' terrace in 1953, just after my wedding. That's it.

Thank you.

This picture was taken in Gezira El Wosta, Zamalek. It's a photograph of my son, Joe, who was almost just born and his nanny. The nanny was called Aisha and she really looked after him very well. There you are, Joe. This picture was taken at the Meschack's, who used to live in the same apartment building as us. It was the 31st of December 1955, one day – no, 1956 and the next day we left for England. There's me, Mimi, my cousin and Madame Meshach, who was the lady who was receiving us that night. I can't see what it is. I'm sorry, but I have to move it, I can't see. This picture was taken on New Year's Eve 1956. The day before we left for England and it's at a neighbour of ours, Mrs. Meshach, downstairs. So we celebrated New Year together and left the next day. **[01:58:00]** This picture was sent from – was sent to

me by my friend, Nariman Salim [ph] in 1957, one year after we left Egypt. We had been friends since we were born almost. So she's the one on the right. Her name is Nariman. Next to her is her brother, Mohammed. Then it's her father and her sister down there. We were almost inseparable. Although we went to different schools, we were friendly forever, really. This picture was taken in 1957 in Manchester, it was Maurice, my brother's bar mitzvah. In the photograph, left to right is my father, then Maurice, then my mother, Sophie. And then a cousin, Miss. Sassoon, from Manchester. That was the synagogue actually. In London, we belonged to Ohel David and we had two **sefer torahs** given there in the memory of – one for my father and one for my mother.

Yes, please.

This picture was taken at the airport in England, which was called Lydd, where you could go with the car on the plane to go to Paris. So there's me here with my son, Joe, and my son, Alain. And obviously, my husband's taking the picture. It was – I can't remember the name. I don't know, 1960 probably, or something like that.

Thank you.

This picture was taken at Rosh Hashanah in 2012. It's the whole family together. [02:00:00] On left to right, top row is Gary, Sophie's fiancé at the time. Then Daniel, Joe's son, then **Joëlle**, Joe's daughter, then Joe. Then the girlfriend of – who's not a girlfriend anymore. Then we have Ben, who is Alain's son and Maurice, my brother. Next row, left to right, there's my son Alain, his daughter, Sophie. Me, his wife, Chris, and Joe's wife, Sue.

Irene, thank you very, very much for this interview and for sharing your story with us.

Thank you, my love. I really enjoyed it.

Great.

It's nice for me to be reminded of things too, very nice.

[END OF RECORDING 02:00:52]