

Sephardi Voices UK

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Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	Sephardi Voices UK
Ref. no:	SV88

Interviewee Title:	Ms
Interviewee Surname:	Bassoon-Timan
Forename:	Niran
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	29/07/1957
Interviewee POB:	Baghdad, Iraq
Interviewee Occupation:	Book Keeper and Activist
Father's Occupation:	Journalist
Mother's Occupation:	Secretary

Date of Interview:	19.10.2018
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Bea Lewkowicz
Recording Format:	Video
Total Duration (HH:MM):	02:59
Copyright/Clearance:	Yes

Additional Material:	Photographs
Interviewer Comments:	

[00:00:00]

[silence]

Today is the 19th of October 2018. I will conduct the interview with Niran Bassoon. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in London. Can you please tell me your name?

My name is Niran Bassoon.

Where were you born, please?

I was born in Baghdad.

When?

1957.

Thank you, Niran. Thank you very much to agree to be interviewed for Sephardi Voices UK. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background, please?

My father is Selim Bassoon. He was a journalist and a writer in Iraq. He was writing in main newspapers. He had many contacts with politicians and writers and poets and journalists. One of the main one was Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, who was the most famous poet in the Arab world. He worked with him in the newspapers and they became friends.

My mother is Miriam Al Mulla. Who, in Iraq, usually, women don't have their own career and things like that. They just stand by the husband. With my father's history, she had to follow him in unpleasant places. Actually something very, very interesting. 40 days after they got married, my father was deported to the borders of Iraq-Iran, and he stayed there for a year. She had to follow him.

[00:02:00] *Why was he deported?*

Because he wrote an article about the Prime Minister. They just deported him for a year. And then, even when he came back to Baghdad, they didn't give him any help. She had just to support him and just go with the waves. When he did well, she was well, when he didn't do

well, she had to raise her children on the minimal, even selling her jewelry. She managed after arriving to Israel. At a later stage in her life, she taught herself through her children and grandchildren to use the computer.

She started writing stories, short stories in Arabic. She had some stories that she wrote in Iraq, but it was an aside thing, it wasn't really nourished. She started writing stories and publishing online in Arabic and writing poems. She managed actually to be the driving force to publish my father's book. I will tell you later about my father's book. That's the background with family. I'm one of three. I've got a brother and another sister. I'm the youngest in the family.

What were the stories? We'll talk about later, but just for now, what were the stories she wrote, your mother wrote about?

Stories about life and about things that she went through. She put it in stories. Suffering through following the husband to the borders where there was no water, no electricity [00:04:00] and she had to wash the clothes in the river and learn how to bake Arabic bread in the special oven which is made out of mud. She created these stories of -- and she always used to say, "You know what? It's all from real life. I'm not making it up."

Which year was he exiled? In that year?

My father?

Yes.

In 1949, 1948. They were married in 1948. First of April 1948, they were married, and within 40 days he was exiled.

He was sent away?

Yes. He had to stay in this village. It's a village, it's called Badra, literally on the border of Iran-Iraq.

Was he sent away for his political convictions or because he was Jewish?

No, no, his political. I think his political. There were other people with him who were Jews, but it's not because of them being Jews. It's because of their political activities. They were communists and other people. As far as I know, they lived in a house with other people.

Did he have strong political convictions?

Yes.

What?

He never said that he was part of the Communist Party but he was leftist. Very patriotic, thinking about the people, thinking about Iraq and think about that. I don't remember him saying that he actually was a member in parties, although, some of his friends say "Yes, he was a member in this, he was a member of that." I personally never heard my father saying [00:06:00] that he was a member. He was very patriotic. Many people know him, Iraqi people know him. He was a very straight person. He wasn't somebody who will change his opinion. He had a very strong opinion.

Could he continue to work as a journalist?

After that, yes, until '63 when the Ba'ath Party came, and then he had three children. It became dangerous. Even when we were born, after we were born, he had once -- As well when actually they toppled Abd Al-Karīm Qāsim, they came to take him, they took him to prison. They sent him to Samawah or somewhere. My mom had to raise us until he was freed. She went -- because we were young, we will not really feel exactly. She went through a lot. Although being a woman, being the second person in the family, but she was the pillar of the family, really.

Then she worked as well?

She worked, yes. She worked in '62 in the Jewish school, she was Secretary in the Jewish school. She actually always used to say, she started with me when I went to school, she went to school to work, and that really didn't help me, having my mom in the school. [laughs] I've been watched the whole time. I have to be on my best behavior.

After '63, did your father stopped working?

My father stopped working in journalism, and he started working in a garage with a Jewish family, Khalastchi, who had a partnership [00:08:00] with other Muslim family, Suhail. They had a garage to service tractors and agricultural, machinery and other cars, Zodiac and other cars. He worked there as a manager. From journalism to something like that. It's something that paid. People respected him, especially the Khalastchi family and the late David knew him very well.

That was their business?

Yes.

Tell us a little bit, you know how your parents met ?

My parents met through my mom's cousin, who was a communist. They met through him because he used to come and visit my mother's family, and he will bring along his friend, although meeting different places. This is how they got married. It's not a big love story and all that, then, we're talking in '48. You meet somebody and you know that they're from a good family and that's it.

What were their backgrounds from their families, your grandparents?

My parental grandfather had a business with lorries in trading between different countries, between Syria and Palestine and things like that. Unfortunately, he was killed. Well, we don't know if he was killed or just had an accident. He died when he was quite young. My grandmother, my parental grandmother, raised her three children [00:10:00] when the youngest was, I think, eight.

My father being the eldest in the family, he was the spoiled one. All his uncles would consider him like god. Whatever he wanted -- because he is the son of the eldest brother who was killed young, so they had a special treatment. Then 1950, my grandmother and her two children, my uncles, left to Israel. We stayed. My father, as I said, he was a journalist. He was patriot. For him, it's not considered. I think he promised his mother that he one day will come, but it wasn't his intention.

He wanted to stay.

He wanted to stay. My mother's side. My maternal grandfather, again he worked in trade. A small merchant. Again, my mother's family, all of them left in the '50s to Israel apart from one uncle. I had three uncles. Two of them died when they were young and they had children. The wives and the children left to Israel in the '50s. I was left with one uncle, my maternal uncle with his wife and four children.

By the time you were born, there wasn't that much family around?

Not at all. I had an uncle and his wife. I had three cousins and after me, another cousin was born. That's it, that's the family. Not even distant family we had.

What are your [00:12:00] first memories of growing up in Baghdad?

I don't know if this is going to sound really very strange to a lot of people, I had a beautiful childhood. Maybe because of our parents, they shielded us from all what's happening. Normal childhood, we went out. We went to trips, we were members in a community club. We used to go swimming in this club in the summer from ten o'clock in the morning till ten o'clock in the evening. It was like a family club and we had Christian friends, we had Muslim friends.

We used to go out on trips together and everything was normal. The first time I felt different was in 1967, I was 10. When you could feel that my parents are under a lot of stress. Listening to the news in a very low volume, and then at a later stage, I knew they were listening to Israel to hear what's happening when the war broke out. We started being treated differently. For example, that summer when we wanted to go to the same club for swimming, they said, "No, you're not allowed to come because you're Jews."

Suddenly, you feel that you are different. Personally, I did not feel anything. Thank God, no one of my family was hanged or killed or disappeared or tortured or anything but you can feel it in the air. I remember I think I was probably 14 [00:14:00]. We had a party at my cousin's, really fun party. I remember how really lovely it was. Then towards the end, parents came to pick up their children and you could see their faces are really sad. They heard that a few people were taken away from their houses, men. Usually, if they are taken, they will not come back.

It was grim. As a child, you have something happy and it ends with something very sad. You feel it in the air. As I said, I personally did not feel it. Through my family, we did not. There were cases of people that, not that I know but parents of people that I know disappeared.

There were hangings?

Yes, I remember seeing it on TV. I didn't go to the street. I was young really to go. I was 12. I won't go by myself. My parents won't not take me to the main square in Baghdad to see people hanged. I just want to go back to the childhood. Sometimes you remember things which are told to you and you think that you remember it. In this incident, I remember it very well because there was no adult to tell me that I said that.

I remember the first day in nursery. Now, in our household, we used to use the normal dialect, Arabic, not the Jewish dialect because my father had a lot of friends who are not Jewish through [00:16:00] journalism and all this. We were taught to speak what we call the Muslim dialect. I remember going to school and using this dialect. It's a Jewish school so everyone spoke the Jewish dialect and everyone looks at me. I remember people says to me, "Are you Jewish or Muslim?"

For me, it does not exist in my dictionary. We were not raised, "Oh, we're Muslims" or -. I'm not saying that the other Jews were raised this way, but this being a Jew or Muslim or this was not an issue in our household. We were Iraqis. Full stop. I remember very well saying, "I'm Iraqi." I could not understand the difference between Jews and Muslims. This is how we were raised. This is how my father and my mother were full Iraqis.

The religion was a secondary thing. It wasn't a main thing. Although we celebrated festivals and we were in the school and everything, but it wasn't an issue. It was a secondary issue.

What did you do? Could you switch to the Jewish?

To be honest with you, now I can say it. I try to learn the Jewish and I spoke with my friends in Jewish, but when I came home, I switched to the Muslim because my parents did allow us - not want us – did not allow us - to get used too much to the Jewish and not being able to switch to the Muslim. It was all Muslim in the house.

How different is the Arabic? Give us an example.

Slightly different. For example, say, "I said to her that I'm going home." You'll say in the Jewish *qoltola ar-harja al-il beit*. In Muslim, you will say *gilt la enoura harja al-il beit*. [00:18:00] There's a different pronunciation of the letters. There is the ga in the Muslim dialect and Jewish

will say qa. Other vocabulary is slightly different. I don't know even how to -- "Did you have breakfast this morning?" You say, *riart il yom?* This is the Jewish. *Tryegit il yom?* It's slightly different and you can see the difference.

Now, the Jewish Iraqi dialect is very similar to the Muslawi dialect. The Muslims use because they pronounce the letters as they are. There is no letter called *ga* in Arabic. This is Persian and Bedouin. It's not written. There's no letter. There's *qa*. The Jewish and the Muslims, they pronounce the pure letter while the Muslims, they have this *pah*, which is from Iran. It's not *pa*. There's *ba* in Arabic. For example, let's say, as you say, passport, somebody Iraqi will say a *bassbort*. It's different.

You've managed to switch back and forth?

Yes. This is what I do now. This is what I know. Some people ask me, "How can you speak the Muslim or the local dialect?" Because I grew up on this. It just takes time just to learn the new vocabulary. Now, I think in all languages. I think and dream in all languages, seriously.

Your parents made a conscious decision?

Yes. Don't forget that at a later stage because of the situation, it was better to speak in the local dialect, not to be standing out. [00:20:00] I remember once my father we used to go to trips just outside Baghdad to Babylon and to Hillah where the *Kifl* is. Just short trips, us and my uncle's family. They used to speak between them the Jewish dialect and my father would stand and sing, there's a song it's called *Dear Shepherd, Change*. Change like the path, and he used to sing it, he say [sings the song]. It means change. He's giving us a sign that we need to switch to a different dialect, so we switch from the Jewish to the Muslims so we won't stand out.

At that time, one didn't want to stand out in public?

Yes, not to be standing out and because they -- We sound different. When there's tension you don't want to be standing out, you don't want to be known that you're a Jew.

That also relates to the names, right?

Yes.

Tell us a little bit about your name and your siblings' name.

Yes, my name. Again, we'll go back to my father. My father was a very strong personality. He wanted Arabic names that has meanings. My brother is called Khodur and that's the short version of Kadouri, of Khdhuri. In Iraq they would say it Khdhuri, not Kadouri, so Khodur is a short version. This is the second name for Eliyahu in Arabic, it's called Khdhur Elias. So Khdhur is a known name in Iraq or in other countries, in Arab countries. Khdhur has meaning as well as green, Khdhur is green. He was called Khadhar after his grandfather but in an Arabised version.

Correct, yes.

[00:22:00] Then my sister Kahraman. Kahraman is the favourite mistress of the Caliphate Harun Rashid who is the most prominent and loved and made Baghdad prosper in his era and that is the name, the main street called Rashid Street after him. Kahraman, actually Kahramana was the favourite mistress of Harun Rashid and now, not now, in the '80s or '90s maybe in '70s I think, they put, there's a statue of Kahramana in the centre of Baghdad, so that was her name.

As far as I remember, I was told that the name Niran was on the list of calling my sister but they decided to call her, maybe they were waiting for me to come because the name, now I'm so so happy with my name, I love my name because it is me. I can't think of another name that really suits my personality. Niran means flames and that's my personality. I just can't sit still, I'm always active, I'm always this. Maybe they knew this is what I'm going to be, so yes.

You're the only one who didn't change, you stuck with your name.

I stuck with my name. My brother did not change his name but he added David because it's difficult, he lived in the UK, so writing his name was Kheder, Khedel... I think the main thing was when he was working in one of the chemical-- He's got a Ph.D., sorry, I forgot to say that. He's got a Ph.D. in chemical engineering [00:24:00] and he worked here in one of the big companies. One of them is ICI and he used to meet many people from all over the world and I think there was an issue with the Chinese delegation who arrived to the UK, could not pronounce, they can't say Kha, they can't say Dha and they can't say Ra. So it end up his name is Ua. He decided after he got divorced he said, "I'm going to add --" A friend of ours said to him, he said, "What do you think I should -- Which name should I use?" And she said, "Do you have a personality that you admire?" He said, "Yes, King David." He said, "Okay, call yourself David." So he added David. My sister changed her name to Carmit, a Hebrew name,

and I just stuck with my name. I had a - wasn't sure to which name to change, I didn't want to change to completely different name.

I couldn't find a translation to my name because a lot of people use the translation. For example, Amal, they change to Tikva and things like that, they find the translation of it. I couldn't find. You can't call yourself fires, or you can't call yourself flames. It sounds very Red-Indian name. I stayed with it, and people got used to it, and especially when I explained what's the meaning. There is a connection to it and people adjust to it.

Tell us a little bit about where you lived in Baghdad, the neighbourhood and--

Okay. I lived in a neighbourhood called Elwia. It's one of the prominent neighbourhoods in Baghdad. It was very close to our school, to Frank Iny and Shamash School. It was literally about, I would say, seven, eight minutes walk. We had neighbours, mainly, there no Jews in our street. [00:26:00] I think just at the top of the road there were some Jewish families. Majority of Jews in the period that I lived in in Baghdad, there were more in Arasat la Hindiya and Masbaha.

There were a few of them in Elwia. Very nice. I wouldn't say cosmopolitan, but there were other families than Iraqis. There were French. Behind our house, there were the Sri Lankan consulate. Our next door neighbour was the consulate of Sri Lanka. We used to go visit them, and they used to come and visit us. We had two Palestinian families living in our streets. One of them were our neighbours. This is a story I remember it very well.

There were two families, one next to us and one opposite. The family next doors, they were a young family with one child, and the wife was pregnant. The lady opposite knocked on the door one day, and my mum opened the door, and she said to her, "Your next-door neighbour is pregnant, and she is craving for the grapes in your tree." We had grapes tree. My mum said, "Of course." She said, "Can she take a bunch of grapes because she's craving it?" My mum opened the door, opened the gate, and she said, "She can take whenever, whatever she wants. She doesn't need even to think that she's craving. She just come along and take."

It was just open. You know? I don't know if they knew that we were Jews. [00:28:00] This is what I remember. That's the reason I say I don't remember bad things. No one really attacked us in the street. No one put any graffiti on our house. We were respected. We had a supermarket

on top of our street, and a lot of the students from Frank Iny and Shamash used to go. They knew that we were Jews. We had no problem whatsoever with them.

Who lived in the house, you, your parents?

Yes, all of us. The five members of the family.

You said you celebrated some of the Jewish festivals.

We celebrated all the Jewish festivals.

What stands out for you, anything?

Pesach, because *Pesach* is a very long service. Now, we did not know Hebrew. We were taught Hebrew in the school, but by the time I arrived -- My brother would know more Hebrew or *Rashi*. He can read *Rashi*, I couldn't read because year two or year three, we were forbidden to learn Hebrew anymore. All the Hebrew books were taken out of the school and I think they were burnt.

By the government.

By the government. Well, it was not by the government, it was an order that came to the school that you cannot teach Hebrew anymore. The school had to get rid of it, so we didn't learn Hebrew. Sitting for the evening for *Pesach*, doing it two nights, reading the whole *Haggadah*. [00:30:00] Not skipping like what I do now, not skipping here, or not skipping there. Reading the full version with Arabic parts in it because you sing or you read parts which are written in Arabic, phonetically in Hebrew.

To go through all this and not even whispering, it was torture, but we respected it. We were four of my cousins and we are three children and our parents. Seven kids sitting like statues following the instructions of my uncle's wife who read fluent Hebrew and my father who read fluent Hebrew. My uncle and my mom didn't. They were reading the *Haggadah* and we would sit like statues and not even wink, and follow, cover this, take this, uncover, and take that.

We followed it. Now try to do it. Here, we do it now. When are we eating the egg? When are we doing this? We just followed it, I'll never forget. The other thing is -- What I remember is the blessing that we used to bless each other for every festival. There was no *Chag Sameach*.

What was it?

We say *Tizku Mishanim Rabot* [Hebrew] may God grant you many years. Then the answer will be *Tizke W'Tihiye* [Arabic], may you be granted and you'll be living as long as -- That was, you seeing people, you say, *Tizke Mishanim Rabot* until now we use it sometimes.

What other customs were there which you remember or which you think were special for you as a child?

Nothing special.

[00:32:00] The end of *Pesach*. We have a tradition, try to keep it here, is we take green leaves and we hit each other with that and wishing the green year, *Suntak Khadra*. We do that at the end of *Pesach*, because it's a beginning of a year. That's a nice tradition. Then you just take your revenge on your cousins and you hit them very hard.

[crosstalk]

Yes, you take anything from a hedge or something. It's usually the one which has smell that you use for *Havdalah* and you hit people and you say *Suntak Khadra* and all that. The harder you hit, the better.

Yes.

All small things. I remember, for example, my uncle's wife -- Now in Iraq, your uncle's wife you call her auntie, okay? My auntie used to smoke and she used to keep *Shabbat*. We didn't have a Jewish calendar, you don't know any *Shabbat* goes out and comes in. For her after 24 hours or 25 hours not smoking, she scream for a cigarette. I remember she used to ask us the children to run into the garden and say, "Whoever is going to tell me that there are three stars showing in the sky, I would give them a present." We never got a present, but it was nice running around and say, "Auntie, auntie, we saw the three-star." Beautiful. It's religion through practice and not through, you know - yes.

Did you live near the river? Was it near the river?

No, not at all. No, no, no, but it was something that we used to go in the evening to go for restaurant and eat *masgouf*, the specially cooked fish in Iraqi way [00:34:00].

What other food was there? What food did you eat?

The general food, *kubba*. We used to have -- I don't know, this has made me sound horrible. It's stuffed intestine of the chicken, and that was a feast because it was a lot of work in it. You need to clean it and you need to turn it inside out and soak it with whatever lemon to get this and then stuff it with rice and meat and yeah - *kubba*, *t'beet*, kebabs.

Your mother would cook?

Yes, my mother. Although my father would attempt when he had -- because he didn't work on Friday and my mom being in the school, she worked on Friday. He would probably do things for us. Salads and things like that. He wasn't a shy person. He would go in the kitchen and do things and invent things but obviously not when there are guests but for us as a family.

Were you part of any youth movements, you said you went to club for swimming but were you sort of any politically active or?

Not in Iraq, not in Iraq. Don't forget I was young and secondly as a Jew you don't. You don't. By the time I was born probably, there was nearly nothing. There was the club, the Jewish club, Menachem Daniel Club but I think that was closed, maybe '67. I remember vaguely going there. I remember the slides, I remember the swings but I don't remember anything else. My brother had, [00:36:00] obviously -- He's eight years older than me, he used to participate in volleyball, in basketball in that club but I was too young to really do any activities and girls usually didn't do sport activities.

I remember going to this club but I don't remember being an active member. I remember the cafeteria vaguely and as I said, the swing and the slide, but it was closed and then there's nothing, you don't do anything. The school did not have any activities, they didn't have any PE or any activities. It was study, study, study. I think '67 or '66 they did, what do you call it? An event in the school, sort of a concert singing and all these but again, I was too young to be active in this.

But you said that from '67 things changed, how did it manifest itself in your life?

In my life, I learned that I need to shy. I need to hide but don't forget our circle was house, school, school, house, my uncle's house, our house. We were not mixing with others because first of all as Jews, we were not allowed to go to different places and because I was young. My brother though [00:38:00] in '66, he started university, in Baghdad University and he went through all this period of going downhill for the Jews. At--

[phone rings]

Yes, you were saying in that period.

Yes, my brother went to university 1966, and he went through his university mixing with other people. We used to have his Muslim friends coming to our house, no problem. I'm sure he was not abused verbally or physically in the university, then, there was still respect. Although there were incidents in other higher education institutes, for example, Al-Hikma University, Jews were attacked but not in Baghdad University.

Even at that time, there was still respect. There was still a government that controlled and they were not thug government. There were a few Jews in the university and none of them were attacked, maybe somebody will say a word here and there but it wasn't really a harsh treatment. Look, at this age 10 or 12, you're just realizing who you are and I knew that we are different.

What sort of friends did you have?

Only [00:40:00] Jewish friends. I had one Christian friend who went to our school, I lost touch with her. Now, I cannot even remember her name. I remember her first name but I can't remember her surname. I had a friend in the school who was with me, I think from nursery if not then reception or year one, a Christian guy.

I think about three, four years ago I tracked him and he's still in Baghdad but we communicate very rarely but at least I know where he is and he send me pictures of his family and all this but we didn't manage to see him, it's been over 45 years. The rest are Jewish friends from school

and yes, I kept in contact with few of them. You grow up completely in different countries and different interests completely, but yes.

From the Frank Iny school, what do you remember? What were your subjects or what did you like or?

To be honest, I hated it. It was all studies and it was all-- I admit, I'm at an age that I can admit, I'm not an academic person, I'm more action person. I don't like to sit and study, I like to do things. In our school, with time, slowly, slowly these activities shrunk. We did not have an art lesson, we did not have PE, any sport, we did not have any theatrical or [00:42:00] anything which is artistic. I really, really suffered. I just managed to move to the next year with really hating every day of it. That's me, not everyone is like me and what made it worse is having my mom in the school.

Now in comparison, I'm a mother now and I have my children in the school and I know that a mother in the school can be a very big bonus for the children. They get treated differently. Not in Iraq, not with my mom. I wasn't treated badly but I was monitored because, for her, I remember if I -- I'm a rebellion in my personality but I couldn't do this at school because my mom will say, "*Khad bihid leini*. You know, you're embarrassing me if you do something like that."

So it was 24 hours monitoring. can you imagine? Parents are strict and my mom was strict and I'm so glad she was strict and I'm the same, I became the same, I'm very strict with my children. They're grown up now but you feel that you have your strict mother with you 24 hours, it's horrible, horrible. Towards at a later stage when I started my secondary school, the school wanted to help the graduates, some of them could not go to university because after '67 they did not allow Jews to go to university [00:44:00].

Graduates who finished university and cannot work, they let them teach in the school, with my luck, I had my brother teaching me and few of his friends teaching me as well. It was just like a 24 hours full surveillance. You cannot breathe and you have to be the role model for everyone, for the sake of my mom, for the sake of my brother, and not be myself. I hated it, I hated it.

Did that change when you changed to secondary school or was it similar to the Shamash school?

No, no, it's the same because it was in the same building. My mom was in Frank Iny but she was a secretary, so she worked with everyone. She worked in both schools and we're in the same building. I cannot go, for example, walk in the -- Especially in secondary school when I was -- You cannot walk in the school if you don't see your mother or you see your brother or you see the friend of your brother, whose parents are friend of your parents and you go to visit their house in the evening and you go out with them home.

But in a way, doesn't reflect the Jewish experience at the time which was very restricted in a way?

Restricted and actually, it was a support for each other and you feel protected in this way because you know that the school is looking after the graduates. The graduates feeling that they're giving back to the school where they studied so you become a close congregation. I remember when things was tough for many families because they could not [00:46:00] withdraw money from their bank accounts and all that. People were really on a very bad poverty line. At the school, maybe other people told you, the school and few families organised packed lunches and support and people used to go and give anonymously to people to help them with food, with clothes.

So were there quite a lot of people who needed it because their accounts were frozen or what?

They couldn't work. If they have money they couldn't withdraw money from their account. They can withdraw I think 100 dinar for a month which won't last, so they were organising few families. I will leave it to them to announce who they are. Prominent families would come, the women mainly would organise sandwiches and give it to children.

What about phones because I often heard now that the phones were cut?

Yes, we didn't have a phone in our house but my uncle had a phone and it was cut. I always describe it as being a prisoner in your own home or in Arabic I say that you're a prisoner in your own country. Suddenly from being a citizen, you become a prisoner. They wanted to cut the ties between even the families between each other. I don't know why. You're not going to do conspiracy, you're only few families. We were [00:48:00] only few families, what conspiracy we can do? When you want to hurt people, you go straight away to the vulnerable people because they're weak.

At that time it was impossible to leave, is that correct?

Of course, because we didn't have passports. We could not leave by passports. The only way is you escape. Many people escaped. They found the route through the Kurdish border to the Iranian border and they escaped, but there was a risk. There were a lot of risks although it sounded and it looked being organised and thank God, there were no rapes. There were no killings. There were no -- It was tough. It was hard but there was no injuries and there was no fatalities.

I think the idea -- I remember my brother came one day after few of his friends escaped through the borders and he said, "Nothing else to do here. All my friends are leaving, what is the future for me here?" My parents did not like the idea. They could understand but they didn't like the idea. I think now being a mature person and thinking about it, trying to analyse it, I think the idea that you're escaping from your own country, it was something against their principle.

Leaving with a passport is something else, escaping from your country because they considered it's their country, it was very difficult for them because it's contradicting your feeling. So they will say to my brother, "Yes, let's check," and all this and I remember [00:50:00] vividly that my mom used to prepare a bag that he can take with him.

I remember she used to put every day one thing. She wanted to prolong that period for him not to go so she would put a vest and she would leave it. She would come the next day and take the vest and put pants. Then the next day she would take this and put socks and she takes this. She wasn't happy to do it but she could understand my brother. Luckily, they opened the way to apply for a passport.

When?

I think end of '70, 1970. Then my parents applied for my brother. It took many, many months. Many of these officials knowing that the Jews applying and knowing or believing that the Jews are rich started asking for *bakshish* [bribe], for money. Unfortunately, the Jews complied which made it a norm. If you don't pay, I'm going to put your application at the bottom. It's a vicious circle. Now, we were not rich and my parents refuse to give any bribery. For them, again, they're people with a lot of principles and thank God, my brother, my sister we have principles and my children will tell that we--

They always say, "Mom has principles." [00:52:00] They refused to give the bribery. They said, "It's official, why should I give bribery?" They managed to get my brother a passport. Although he was stopped once. He was supposed to leave Iraq on the 2nd of January 1972, he arrived to the airport and they stopped him in the airport. They said, "You're missing a signature." He had to come back and flew the next week on the 9th of January 1972.

Where did he fly to?

To the UK. He had the scholarship already waiting for him in Manchester University to do his Master's Degree and then he stayed there and did his Ph.D. Just a small little thing, there's a tradition in Iraq is if somebody goes away, you throw water on the threshold of the house. It's a belief that the person who's leaving is going to come back. I remember vividly my brother saying to my mum, next time when he returned on the 2nd of January, he said, "Don't throw water. I do not want to come back." Yes. He stayed here. Finished his degree. In 1995, he moved to Israel. I joined him here in the UK.

Later?

Yes.

After he left, what were your plans? What did your parents want to do?

Well, you know you adjust to new situation. They adjusted to my brother being in the UK, and they didn't think anything. The situation got worse and worse and worse. Really, to be honest with you, there was no future for us. [00:54:00] As an adult, maybe, as my parents' generation and all that, maybe they thought they had no future but for us, I was nearly 16 or 15, 15 and a half, by the time my parents adjust to the idea that we will leave.

My sister was nearly 16. She was 16, I was 15. Adjusting, get on with things and all that. I remember my brother decided, being in the UK and seeing life and hearing what's happening in Iraq, people are disappearing. He just decided to pressurise my parents. He said to them, "Let my sisters go." Everything through letters, don't forget, we did not have telephones. We did not have mobile, we don't have emails, we don't have anything, it's just a letter.

Now the letters would arrive to Iraq and would be checked, so you have to use a certain language. I remember him using about when the -- One of his letters he said about the people

who were hanged and he said, "The vinyls that you sent me, the nine vinyls that you sent me were all scratched," or something like this. Meaning although he was at the time of the hanging but he wanted or maybe people who were taken from homes, he used vinyls being scratched.

I know the vinyls being scratched of something like that to tell my parents that I know that these people were taken. You have to be very, very careful how to use. So I [00:56:00] don't know which language he used. I don't know if he still keeps these letters. My mom, I don't think she kept these letters but he said to them, "If you're not going to let my sisters, you want to stay, stay but you need to give an opportunity for my sisters to have their life. They're not going to have anything in Iraq soon, no future, no nothing."

He said to them, "I'm going to stop writing. I'm just going to stop writing." Can you imagine you're sitting in Iraq, your child is abroad, you cannot contact them and pick up the phone and say, how are you? Did you travel from this and this? I say to my children, "When you arrive to this destination, tell me that you arrived safely." They didn't have all this.

The only sort of line they had is a letter that arrived once a month. He said, "I'm going to stop writing to you until you tell me that my sisters are leaving."

So they had no choice. They decided all to apply as a family, now we were underage, we were not allowed to apply for -- It's not like the UK or any other places, you can apply for your child. We had to apply with an adult. The idea is to all the family apply for a passport and then me and my sister will leave and they will come at a later stage when they want. A lot of families stayed this way, they sent the children and they got stuck. I don't know what was the intention.

Maybe to defer the decision as long as possible. A friend of my father as far as I remember. He was either [00:58:00] a politician or journalist or something. He said to him, in Iraq they call by the father of the son. He said, Abu Khodur don't apply as you the head of the family because of your relationship with some politicians in the past and journalists in the past and all that. They might just decide not to give you the permission to hold a passport. I suggest that your wife apply and apply for the daughters, add them on her passport, make a proper passport for them, send them and then you apply by yourself because if they refuse you, they're going to refuse the whole family.

This way at least you secured your daughters leaving Iraq and then if you can't, then you'll find your own way." The idea is me and my sister leave, my mom would leave my passport and my father would escape if they don't give him a passport. Although the route of escaping through Iran it stopped once they gave the permission to hold a passport and this is exactly what happened. My mom applied for a passport, she did two passports for us and sent us and my brother came to see us in Turkey.

He met you?

He met us, yes because again, 15 and 16 or nearly 16 and 17 girls who never been by themselves anywhere, we used to be escorted. The house and the school were five, seven, eight minutes from the house. We were never allowed to walk from the house to the school by ourselves, can you imagine flying for the first time in your life [01:00:00] to a country that you don't have anyone. So the condition is that my brother will come from Manchester to meet us in Turkey. He actually was a student. He didn't have anything. He took a loan and bought a ticket and came to Turkey to see us and then he had to work in I think filling sandbags in floods or something to pay his loan or something like this while he was a student. At a later stage, my father applied for a passport and he was granted. Now, you will have your name shown on our list in the passport office who was granted and then you go and do the passport itself and the person himself had to go. My mom, as I said, she was a pillar. She was the one who would do things.

My father would be the one who talks, my mother will be the one who does. She went to the office and saw his name on and she said, "Yallah, let's go and do the passport." My father could not stand on his feet. It was again facing reality. "I'm leaving Iraq. Now, I can leave Iraq." It's a contradiction in his inner person. "I'm really leaving Iraq, I'm going to have a passport, if I have a passport it means I'm leaving Iraq." He could not stand. He would just like a temporary paralysis. My mom had to assist him to go because she can't do the passport for him and then four months after that, in August 1973, they left Iraq and they went to Israel.

So can you describe how you left with the memories of that last few days of leaving and your thoughts.

It's very exciting. At this age [01:02:00] you're going on a plane, you're preparing your bags, you're this. To be honest with you, I just cannot understand how I did not think that I might not

see my parents anymore. I think the euphoria of having a passport and going away overcame the anxiety of there might be a chance that I will never ever see my parents again. I don't know.

You were happy to leave?

I was happy to leave. I was happy to think of a new life. The thing is when I left, and that was a tradition, whoever leaves obviously by passport, not by escaping because when you escape, you don't tell anyone that you're escaping. By passport, people who used to go, especially classmates and all that used to go out and say goodbye and I remember all my classmates and other friends came to say goodbye. One person who did not come to my sort of going away party was somebody who shared my desk.

We used to sit two of us in a desk. Now, I might be vague in the dates but she didn't arrive to the -- Sorry. She didn't arrive to the going away party. When we were in Turkey, we heard that the Qashkush family were killed. She was Joyce Qashkush in my class. [01:04:00] They were all killed. Five people. They were intending to leave Iraq a few days after. They were preparing their suitcases. One of the daughters went to check her results in the university and while she was out people came to the house and killed all the five people, a father and a mother and three children. They cut them into pieces and put them in their suitcases and the suitcases were taken. I was upset that she didn't come and say goodbye.

It must have happened that same time.

Exactly that. Exactly that. Lora came back from university and saw blood everywhere, and I just heard recently from her elder sister who was abroad already. She said that when she came back, she saw Saddam standing, now I don't know if it was the shock, or really Saddam was there. As I understood now, she is not in contact with everyone, she doesn't want to be in contact with everyone. She don't want to get married, she don't want to do anything, she's living a lonely life. She's working, she's living but she doesn't want to talk about it, she doesn't want to do anything. You can't blame her, but I think it's very important to document these things.

Yes. Why do you think was this particular family [01:06:00] targeted?

I think as far as I understood, there was a demonstration for Palestine and all this and a group decided to go knowing that it's a Jewish family. They just went and killed. Whether that was by orders from Saddam and his thugs, or was a Palestinian group. Palestinian group at that

time, they would not be able to do anything, if they don't have the permission, whether it's by proxy, or it's -- they were killed. For me it's a fact, they were killed. And the government is responsible.

Which year was that exactly?

'73.

Bea: *It was '73. Just give us the name of the family again?*

Qashkush family.

Can you spell it?

It's Q-A-S-H-K-U-S-H. Qashkush.

Thank you.

Sorry. I should need to write it down.

The surviving sister went to Israel or?

No, I think she's in America and she's got another friend I think in -- sorry, another sister I think in Canada or America. There's a picture actually, of one of the Qashkush, Samir Qashkush, God bless his soul. In this play that they did in '67, he's dream was being a filmmaker, so he was one very active to do this play in '66, when they did the play in the school. There's a picture I can find it for you and he's standing there really glamorous person.

You said you found [01:08:00] out about this when you were already out of Iraq.

Yes, yes. When I was in Turkey.

What about you going on the plane and the journey, can you elaborate?

It's scary because me and my sister, by ourselves in a plane, we've never went to the airport, let alone being on an aeroplane and knowing that we are seeing my brother, on the other end, which was quite emotional. Then I remember the first night in the hotel, we sat in, I think my

sister in my bedroom and we called our uncles in Israel to speak to them and my grandmother. I had one grandmother left, she was in Israel and my uncles. We spoke to them on the phone and it was nice.

In the meantime, did you have any contact with them?

No.

You couldn't have spoken.

We couldn't have spoken. The only thing is, my brother, after he arrived to the UK, I think few months after that, my uncle paid for a ticket for him to come to visit the family. Don't forget, they left before I was born, my brother was about a year or two when they left, so we don't know them. When he went to Israel, he brought some photos and he send us the photos, but he made sure that the photos would not give any indication that he's in Israel. In a garden or something, make sure that there's no Hebrew lettering and you can't see the street name in Hebrew or something like this.

The flag they're supposed to be in the UK, so the first time we saw my grandmother and my uncles and their family and all that, was in '72 and it was strange. [01:10:00] When we met them it was strange, they're your uncles but you don't have a connection to them.

What was it like then?

Very strange. Fantastic because suddenly you have a big family, which we didn't have. But on the other hand, you didn't grow up with them. They don't know your moods, they don't know your weaknesses, they don't know your strength, not like my cousins who we lived with. But it was lovely having a family now. All of them are in Israel, from both sides, from my father's side, and from my mother's side. Thank God we've got big family.

My mother being the youngest in the family, she has nephews who are nearly her age. So, their children, my cousin's children are my age, and we are very, very close. So, whenever I go to Israel, for example, all the cousins meet up and all this and you can't even count them. Bless them. It's lovely.

What happened to your cousins in Iraq, the ones you grew up with?

Yes, they left. They left as well.

At the same time?

Actually, two of my cousins the eldest left just before they applied for a passport as well. My oldest cousin finished schooling in '67. So, he was in that way which was not accepted in university. So, he left in '71, I think November or December '71 just before my brother, and they went to Holland. The eldest I think, finished master's degree in computer science or computer engineering. The one after finished as well, university. The third one who was six months older than me, we were classmates.

So, [01:12:00] you can see I was just monitored everywhere. I had people to watch me the whole time at school. He was in Holland. He finished medicine college. He's a doctor. He lives now in Israel. The youngest who is four years younger than me or five years younger than me, he's in Holland. I mean, we were very, very close. I speak to them regularly.

So then, what happened to you after you left?

I came to join my brother and got married, the normal stuff, boring or normal stuff. I think I needed to mature, and it took quite a while. '84, I discovered myself. It's not '84, sorry. 2004 I discovered myself, my children were slightly older. I was asked to help to do a conference for a friend of mine who is from Libya, Jews of Libya. So, I helped him to do an event. From that on, I became very active in doing events. I wouldn't call it a human right activist, although in Arabic they use this term, I'm activist. I just want to show the truth. While I have the Arabic language, I'm very fluent in writing and reading and the dialects. I know Hebrew, and I know English.

So, with these three languages, I can reach the Iraqis. That's my [01:14:00] main point. I don't work in the subject of Jews of Arab land. I'm part of it. But I concentrate on Iraq.

This is what I know. This is where I'm from, and I would like to focus on this. I don't know enough about the Jews of Libya. I know some. I don't know about the Jews of Egypt, I know

roughly things. So, I cannot really contribute fully if I don't know the subject very well. With Iraqi Jews and Iraq, I know the culture, I know the music, I know the history as much as I can, and I can reach people, so I concentrate on this. Being so active in these things, and 2010 I was helping different organization to do events and things like that.

In 2010 I've decided with a friend of mine Dia Kashi who's Iraqi-Muslim, a very good friend, we decided to form a cultural forum. We called it after Meir Basri who was a prominent Jewish writer, poet, historian, politician. He did it all. We decided to call the forum after his name and do events and this is what we've done. We've done events, book launches, talks about different various subjects. If it's proverbs in Arabics or it's Jewish jokes. It's all in Arabic, the events are all in Arabic.

2016 we were asked by [01:16:00] Meir Basri daughters not to use his name. They had their reasons. I don't know their reasons. For me I felt it's very hard. I work. These activities are really on my spare time. I love it. For me I thought maybe this is a sign that we need to stop. Maybe it's a sign from God or from somewhere that enough, you've done enough you don't need to do anything. I approached Dia and I said, "Look maybe this is a sign we need to stop." He said, "What are you talking about? Wherever I go people are asking, "Where are your events? We're waiting for you. We're waiting for you." He said, "Definitely not." We're just going to switch the name.

We had actually series of meetings with different people. We called it meetings of *Awlad Al Taraf*. *Awlad Al Taraf* is the neighbourhood kids. He said to me, "We'll just switch the name off. We won't use Meir Basri forum. We'll call it *Awlad Al Taraf* forum." Luckily I had my children who were 23 and 15. Just like the idea and supported me. I think the first event they came to help me and they said to me, "Yes, mum." My youngest said, "Mum you need to do a website." and the other said, "Mum you need to do a Facebook page." This is what I've done. I don't have a website. I have a Facebook page and I look after it. We do events. Literally everything. It's a two-man band. We work together. We work together. Dia and I. We have no problem. We share things. And yes. It's been fantastic. People love the name because it's pure Iraqi [01:18:00] name. You straight away feel that you are Iraqi. I don't need to describe it even. We managed to do events with one of the organizations here, institute forum again. It's a forum called Humanitarian Dialogue Forum which is founded by a cleric from Iraq who believes in the dialogue between religions. We've been extremely thankful to David Dangoor

and the Elixarch's Foundation to support us all along. When it was Meir Basri Forum and even now and the support is there always.

We're hopefully going to have an event in cooperation with the Wolf Institute in Cambridge University in February. We have been reported on our events in Iraqi TV, in Rashid TV and Al Sharqiya. Yes. It's lovely. It's very exciting. We have been watched through somebody who comes and records everything through our events in Iraq, with people commenting about our activities and all that. Now the other thing because of these activities in November 2016, I was called by a young lady who was, maybe still is, the Chair of the Iraqi students society in Imperial College. She said [01:20:00] to me, we heard about you and we would like you to set a stand about the Jews of Iraq in our exhibition, Iraq Culture Exhibition. For me it just a proof. You did it. Niran, you did it. Because if we are called by young Iraq students to come and join them and be a proud stand in this exhibition for me-

This is what you wanted.

This is I wanted. For me, it's a proof, it's an award. Now, I was speaking to David just before that, David Dangoor, about doing maybe some collaboration with David because I think he finished university, Imperial College, and for him he has a nice memories and they wanted to do something. I remember when she called me this lady. I just contacted David. I said, "You remember when you said this? We've got it now."

There and then he said to me, "Do whatever, I'll support you. I will sponsor your stand." We did a beautiful stand. They gave us two stands actually, because we had so much. I called it Jews of Iraq.

What did you display?

Now, part of my activities in the forum is I sell books, books that I bring from Israel which are published by the Iraq Association of the Academics, which was chaired by Shmuel Moreh. So they are books which are written by Iraq writers, poets, memoirs and things like this in Arabic, and I bring books from Baghdad [01:22:00] mainly about the Jews of Iraq. There were many books written since the toppling of Saddam about the Jews of Iraq. I bring them through friends. Now, can you imagine every friend who come from Baghdad, I will ask my friend in Baghdad to send me a few books. It's literally to do with shipping with five, six books. Five, six books

with this – and I have - thank God I have about hundred titles on the list, which is published on Facebook.

These books were displayed. I made a presentation of photos of the Jews of Iraq in different subjects, will be religion, will be tradition, will be a section about the Babylonian Heritage Museum. There will be about musicians, there will be about religious people in all section, about 350 photos in a spiral going round as a presentation. I took my television from here with a stand and we put a big display.

The books were there, I had disks for Saleh al Kuwaiti. I made big posters about the history of Jews in Iraq with a graph about the numbers of the Jews from 1900 up to now. It was the most successful. This is what I was told by this young lady and her father who organized the exhibition. It was a more successful stand in the exhibition. We were the centre of attention of the whole exhibition, from even before we displayed our books.

The beauty of it is many of these books were written, published by the Association of the Jews in Israel, printed in [01:24:00] Jerusalem. People had no problem. They bought the books, we sold about £600 books. The most interesting thing is people were interested. People came to take photos with the stand showing Jews of Iraq. For me, it's a big achievement.

It reflects as a renewed interest now.

Of course.

Just let me take you back a little bit and find out, so what created that interest or what made you not change but become more interested in your heritage?

I think the main thing is having children and I don't want this to be lost. I don't want to be the one who closes that chapter. I know I want this chapter to continue that chapter, the book to continue. This is what I take it as a duty, to be honest with you. I mean, I spend a lot of hours. I go to work, I come back from work, finish dinner and straight away on the computer try to energise this idea.

What identity did you want to give to your children growing up in England?

That they are, or they can't be - they come from Iraqi-Jewish background, with the tradition, with the history with the bad memories with everything, it's part of our life and I think, to be honest with you, I was just thinking about it this morning. Why do we read the *Haggadah* in *Pesach*? This is exactly the same thing for me if we don't read, and this is the idea, we read the *Haggadah* for *Pesach* not to forget the story of the Exodus of Egypt, so why we [01:26:00] do not need to read the story of the Exodus of the Jews from Iraq?

This is the same thing, if we don't talk about it, if we don't pass it on, it will disappear. We are not dinosaurs, that we don't exist anymore, we do exist. Okay, after my generation, there will be my children who were not born in Iraq but if I don't put this seed in them, I cannot expect for this tree to grow and I think it's a duty on every person, especially the ones who were born in Iraq to pass it on to the generation and I tell you what?

It's very emotional, I see people in Israel, second-generation born in Israel, don't forget in Israel they live in an environment that every Arab is bad, okay? You see the young generation. I'm talking young generation, 20s and 30s, and maybe 40s, who are born in Iraq, sorry, born in Israel, the parents are born in Iraq, they identify themselves as Iraqis, they listen to Arabic music, they want to learn the Arabic dialect.

I have contact with a few, I have a lot of friends, young friends, and this is what gives me this energy, Muslims and Jews in Israel and outside Israel and in Iraq, who give me that energy because if a young man in Israel who is born in Israel, who learned to speak the Jewish dialect, contacted me the other day and said, "Can you teach me the Iraqi local dialect? I want to speak like you." I just want to hug this [01:28:00] person because he doesn't want to lose these roots and it's important not to lose this.

Don't forget, we have 2,600 years in this area, why to lose it, on a period of 70 years? Does it make sense? It does not make sense sorry, I just don't accept it, people ask me, why do you love Iraq so much and I love Iraq, and people probably won't agree with me. I'm not ashamed to say it, my roots are 2,600 years in that country, no matter what you call it. Call it Mesopotamia, call it Nehardea call it whatever, it's that area, my roots are there 2,600 years, how can I just cut it?

It's my duty not to forget my ancestors, who were buried there, they had their history there. I'm very passionate about this and this is what I'm trying to do maybe my children won't understand

it now or won't believe it or they will just accept it and just say, "Okay, my mum is like this." I'm pretty sure at a later stage they will -- it will come back, so I'm taking this chance. I'm just putting that seed in them.

What is it in particular when you think of Iraq, what makes it feel so strong of what?

Look, I was born there, it's written in my passport. I can't change it, just like I can't change anything in me. I can't change my personality, that's me. I can't change my history. I cannot be a different person then being Niran the daughter of Salim and Miriam, I cannot. So this is part of me. [01:30:00] I am aiming that one day, the seeds that I'm putting in my children, and in this young generation. That one day will flourish, and it will bring fruits. Maybe not now, maybe not in my lifetime. Actually, I'm pretty sure not in my lifetime. But if I don't put the seed, definitely I cannot expect that one day this tree will grow and bring fruits. This is what I feel it's a duty.

What fruits do you want to see, let's say from your children?

First of all, not to lose the identity that they are from Iraqi origin. Call it Babylonian, I sometimes don't call myself Iraqi. I call myself Babylonian, because it's a name, okay? We went - the Jews went to Iraq at the time of Babylonia, so I'm Babylonian. Okay? If Iraq is called Iraq now at a later stage, but I'm originally Babylonian. I don't want them to lose this, I want them to always be interested in the history of where their ancestors come from. I am in a way lucky because my ex-husband is Iraqi as well, so they have double roots, okay? My husband, if he was probably from a different country, it will be difficult for them to identify themselves as from Iraqi roots, but in this case, it's both.

Do you think it was important for you to marry somebody with a similar background?

I think it was important in a way. Although at that time, I wasn't very, very Iraqi, but I think I needed somebody to understand my background. Now definitely, [01:32:00] I find it very difficult if I ever have another husband or whatever. I find it's very difficult, what can I talk about? I've got a friend of mine, Iraqi Muslim who keeps insisting for me to do the DNA and I refuse. I refuse to do DNA. Why do I need a DNA, to prove that what? He says, "Yes, but you can tell what is your root? I said, "If it happens I'm actually a Russian descendant? What do I do? I get lost, so it's better not to know."

You're proud of your roots.

I'm very proud, very proud. I live it 24 hours a day, literally. Literally 24 hours a day and what is more important really, to be honest with you is the energy that I get from the young generation. It gives me such a boost. I talk to a lot of people. I stay sometimes, maybe that's the reason I look tired all the time. I stay till three o'clock or four o'clock in the morning, wake up at seven o'clock in the morning, go to work. I speak to people all over the world. Young, under 30, interested about the history of the Jews of Iraq. Interested as well about Judaism. I think it's very important. People have a problem is thinking about the Jews of Iraq, as Iraqis. You cannot think about them as Iraqis if you don't take the component of being Jews, because it's important.

If you look at the history, you need to understand where they come from and to understand what Jeremiah told the Jews when they arrived to Babylonia. You prosper - that when the country that you live in prosper, you [01:34:00] prosper. You need to work, and to be part of the country and this is all over the world. This is what we do, actually on Shabbat. On our service. We always bless the leader, we bless the King, or the Queen, or the Prime Minister, not Prime Minister sorry, the President. Because wherever you go, if the country prosper, you prosper. Or you prosper so the other country -- you become part, and we were part of this land for 2,600 years, so very proud.

Do you see your audience more? Do you want to educate let's say, the British people here about the Jews of Iraq or more the Iraqis about-

Both. The thing is, because I don't have enough time, and I don't have really the financial ability to do events in English. Although there is I think couple of events we're trying to work on English as well to try to open up to the open audience. Look, if there is a subject about Iraq, majority will be Iraqis who will be interested about Iraq. Unless you are somehow interested in the Middle East or something like this and you want to learn about it. It's a topic that only people who are interested in Iraq and all that. There is something which I'm very, very happy that happens. What the statue on the Fourth Plinth and I think that put Iraq on a completely different level and I really, I'll *Chapeau* to Michael Racowitz for being able to put this. I think through these people know more about Iraq.

Tell us about it. [01:36:00]

Michael Racowitz is an American artist. His mother is an Iraqi Jew. His father is an American Jew from a German origin. Michael feels very much the Iraqi side in it. He loves the Iraqi food. He loves this. I haven't spoken to him personally. I've been in contact with him on WhatsApp and on emails. I've told him about me and about my events and about my this. He was very excited and I said, "I would like to host you." And he accepted.

Now he lives in America and he's got a lot of things. We agreed that when he comes, I spoke to the British Institute of Study of Iraq and we're going to do a collaboration to host him in English. Again, I love speaking to the young generation. Not that I hate the old generation like me but the young generation, I find the future in them and I want just to give them that present or that duty, pass it on to them.

When I speak about something like this, they'll get very excited, including my son. My son knows a bit of Arabic but he wouldn't be able to sit in a lecture all in Arabic in a local spoken dialect. If I can adjust some of these events in English and bring the people like my son or others who were born here, they can speak Arabic, they understand Arabic but you know what, they are not interested in coming to Arabic lecture. I'm providing this for them and there will be other people who are just interested in Iraq. I always present myself as an Iraqi Jew, always.

That's my next question. How would you identify yourself today?

Iraqi Jew. Iraqi [01:38:00] Jew, British citizen. I can say live in Edgware but it's always Iraqi Jew. They're both as important as each other. I can't be a Jew without being Iraqi and I can't be Iraqi without being a Jew. It goes together.

What impact did it have on your experiences in Iraq and your leaving? How did it impact your life?

I think in a positive way, in a way. I don't like to look at things negatively. You always look at the full cup. I think because I'm holding the two worlds in my hand. I can easily, as much as I can just shift from one world to the other. I have no problem. I can be here completely British, just do whatever. I work here. I go to elect and involved with the politics of Britain. I'm always on LBC talking. Always have an opinion. That's my problem.

You're always on LBC?

Always.

On what topics?

Mainly about Jews, Israel, Iraq. That's the majority. Sometimes if there's something funny about these cold calls, what do I do with the cold calls? How do I deal with that? I call sometimes it just for fun. I call different times. [01:40:00] LBC it's always on. I have countless of times I called. It reached to a point that when I call now they know my name, because they have the data.

Once you call on the same number they will say, "Okay, Niran from Edgware." Yes, so what I'm saying go back to how I feel. I'm very involved in the politics in Britain, and I go in the evening. When I come back from work I switch, I'm in part of Iraq. I'm one of the admins of the biggest group on Facebook called Jews of Iraq. I did not create this group. This group was created by some Muslims in Iraq, and with time the admins changes.

I joined them, started putting some posts and all that, and they asked from day one because I'm being very active for a long time and people know my name now, so the minute I joined they asked me, "Can you be an admin?" I said, "No, no, no. I don't have time. I don't have time." With time and monitoring what's happening and a friend of mine that I introduced to the -- two actually friend of mine I introduced them to this group became admin. There were posts that there were some wrong information in that and all this and I said, "You know what? I'm accepting now to be an admin." I've been for about two years now an admin and I put posts all in Arabic.

The group is all in Arabic. I put posts about all the Jewish festivals explaining exactly what is the festival, how do we celebrate it, and how the Jews of Iraq celebrate it if there is a bit difference, and other things about -- Yes.

What you've created or are creating is basically against [01:42:00] the forgetting of the Jews in Iraq? I mean that people remember the past in Iraq as well.

Yes, of course. Of course, because I tell you what? I'll tell you a small example. For example, for *Sukkot* the tradition to build a *Sukkah*, all this, in Iraq it's Middle East area, and I think it's known. I can't remember what's the name, it's in Hebrew, when the first rain falls around *Sukkot*. *Sukkot* is autumn so it makes sense now. In Iraq, it used to be a tradition, known

tradition. Not only by the Jews but the Muslims. The first rain would be always in *Sukkot*. I remember people, neighbours, or friends, all that, they used to come and ask my father, "When is *Sukkot*? When is *Sukkot* because we need to know when the rain is going to start?"

I wrote this and I said, "This is what used to happen and all that," and somebody answers exactly that. My mom always remembers it. She used to ask her Jewish friends to ask when is *Sukkot*. By doing that post I triggered that memory in his mind. By saying it, other people read it. Now there is a connection between the first rain and *Sukkot* for them. Through this, they know about the Jews. Talking about the Jews and talking about the history of Jews doesn't have to be always direct. It has to be in a different way, not because I want to manipulate things. I don't want it to be harsh information. I want to be interesting information.

Recently I put a post about *Birkat ha Kohanim*. What is the meaning of *Birkat ha Kohanim*? I [01:44:00] found a clip of somebody singing *Birkat ha Kohanim*, so they listening to it and suddenly they feel something, "Oh, it's so nice that the father is blessing the children." This way I'm not trying to change people to Judaism. I'm trying to see the beauty of Judaism which was practiced by the Jews in Iraq.

Yes, how it's done.

It's indirect. Indirect. Recently there was a post of somebody reading *Shema Yisrael* but in a Muslim way, like the *Maazin*. Exactly like Allahu Akbar, but he's saying Shema Israel. Somebody said, "Oh, do you have *Maazin*?" I said, "No, we don't have *Maazin*. This is somebody singing." *Shema Israel* you don't sing it with music. It's a prayer that we say twice a day and all this, and just to say something very important. I'm not religious. I wasn't raised in a religious house. I'm learning through this about my religion because I go and search, and I ask our Rabbi if there is any question. I ask him, "Explain to me." He explains it in English, I translate it to Arabic.

So you're basically educating the Arab world.

Absolutely, and I'm educating myself, I'm educating myself. I just put a recent post about *Shema Yisrael* what is *Shema Yisrael* and I found the translation in Arabic and I said exactly what it is and I said, "This is -- You say it twice a day and it's written in the *mezuzah*," and what is a *mezuzah* and it's in the *Tfilin* and I explained what is *Tfilin* so please God in a week,

two weeks time I will put a post about the *mezuzah* because people see these things and send me pictures and say, "What is [01:46:00] this?" You know what, it brings people together.

The internet in a way facilitates the global audience.

Absolutely. Through the Facebook and through this I think you're breaking a lot of barriers. People have no fear because it can be public, it can be personal. I have somebody in Baghdad. Once we had a conversation on this group and I don't know once we start talking and all that and he said, "You are my mum's age," and I said, "Okay" so he said, "It would be nice if you call me 'my son'." So now I called him my son, Mohammed. If sometimes I forget and he says to me, "You are cross with me because you don't call me 'my son.'"

This is someone you've never met?

I've never met it's only on Facebook and we go through this group, we try not to be political but you cannot be not political when there is something, "I have no problem with the Jews but I have a problem with Zionists," and then I go in too deep, "Tell me what is Zionism, go on explain what is Zionism and where it comes from," and this guy says to me, and now I see him quoting that, "I thought that Zionism is this and this but Niran told me that this and that." Look I achieved, not switching this person off but I explained to him instead of relying on the wrong sources he's relying on me and they know that I don't lie.

If something harsh, I will say it. There was a question, for example, about Judaism. Are women Jews allowed to marry their uncles, their maternal uncles? And they are allowed [01:48:00] and I know that, I've got a member of the family who married her uncle. I asked a Rabbi and he explained it to me. I went back, I said, "Yes, I'm not hiding," so they know I'm not lying, they know that I am a source that they can rely on. This guy two days ago sent me a video and he says, "Madame Niran is that true? There is a Shi'ite site in Ashkelon and it's looked after and Shiites come and visit?" He said to me, "Is it true?" I said, "Yes, it's true," so I become sort of a source and it's lovely because I'm educating and I'm getting educated because I'm going in search, to search things. It's just like discovering myself and this is how I discover myself.

It's very interesting because you could say before it was important to be in school books and things and now the internet has become a source of information so in a way you've come--

Absolutely, you have the tool and the other thing is what I've done is now I started my YouTube channel and I record and it started just by coincidence. I went to Israel last year and because I'm an admin in this group wherever I go there are things I do live streaming so I decided to do live streaming. I went to the museum, to the Babylonian museum, I said, "That's it, I'm going to a video now," then I thought, "No if I'm going to do it I'll do it properly." I recorded the floor where it's the story how they left Iraq. I did a whole film about it, about 15 minutes explaining exactly and my friend works in the museum, she was my classmate in Iraq.

[01:50:00] She spoke in Arabic. I did this video then I did another video about there is a neighbourhood how you walk to the neighbourhood, in the neighbourhood and go to the synagogue. I did a video like this and now people started following. I've got I think about 12 videos. I've got over 350 subscribers because people are seeing and people now are telling me this please can you do an interview with this? Please can you do an interview with that? Can you interview people from Mosul? Can you interview people with --? It became another duty that I feel that I need to document in this way, interview people

Please, God, in December, I'm going to Israel. I've got a full program, really to record people. Because this is a documentation. People have no time or patience, including me, to sit and read books or to read articles. They want to see and hear.

Who do you want to interview then in Israel?

I've got a friend of mine, Sammy Dalal, hopefully to tell me the story of how he escaped because they escaped to the borders. It's a long story and I recorded him but the recording wasn't very good. We need to record it now with a better technology. How he left when he decided, how they cross the border, what happened in the border, all different things. How they changed their name on their license or something like this to avoid showing any Jewish names. Hopefully, interviewing few musicians. Music is the language for everyone. You put music, people forget which which religion they are. They forget what it's their politician affiliation. It brings people. Hopefully, I'm interviewing at least [01:52:00] two singers. I'm interviewing another lady, Iraqi lady from the south of Iraq who had a program on Arabic radio *Kol Yisrael* in Arabic. It's called *A Doctor Behind The Microphone*. She used to get letters from people from Arab countries about their medical problems and arranged for them to come and be treated

in Israel. This is I'm talking before the toppling of Saddam, talking in the 60s and 70s and 80s. She will have a lot of stories.

I've been requested to speak to somebody from Mosul, and they're very rare. Because after the 50s, the Jews from Mosul, moved to Baghdad, but I've got a friend who lives in Herzliya and I'll go and interview him.

You have a full program.

Absolutely, I wish one day I don't need to work.

And do this full time.

Do this full time. I think it's very important. Very important to document these things because unfortunately, with time, these people disappear. Then we rely on what people told about them. As you know, anyone I can hear what you say and go and write it completely different. Using one word, I can completely change what you said. You hear me? This is me, if you document it exactly what you do now with this project, you document the person. Then the person who is receiving it will get his conclusion from what I'm saying.

Now, I was thinking about it. What we do is, of course, similar but you did in Arabic.

Exactly.

While this is in English.

Yes, because it's very important. I tell you why. Because what I discovered now, that a lot of Iraqis do [01:54:00] not speak English. Unless they are in America or in the UK and some in UK don't understand English either. I would rather give it to them digested. While I have these people still, that I'm recording still can speak Arabic. Why not to bring it in Arabic?

But also the Arabic it sounds is very important for you.

Absolutely. Very important. It's a rich language. It's my mother tongue. It's very important and you know what, now sometimes I find it very difficult to speak fluently in English or speak fluently in Hebrew. I have a big vocabulary in Arabic. Because I'm constantly like my second

job, which is in the evening here on Facebook and on YouTube, I get on YouTube on my channel, I get every day, about five six comments and I respond to each one of them.

In Arabic?

In Arabic.

You also write in Arabic?

Yes. On Facebook as well. A lot of people can't understand, including my brother always says to me, "You answer everyone." Yes, I do answer everyone. It's very important to answer everyone, even the nasty ones.

Do you get a lot of nasty comments?

We get. I get even on my YouTube channel.

For example?

For example, only two days ago. I did a video that I'm walking in the museum, in that little alley in Baghdad leading to the synagogue and he says to me, "You're taking video in this museum, it reminds me when the Palestinians were [01:56:00] kicked from their country and this and this." I said, "You're absolutely right. They were kicked, they had to emigrate because the Arab leaders cheated them and told them to move so we can throw the Jews in the sea."

Look at it, in 70 years. What happened to them? They did not give them citizenship. They actually abused them. I can continue for three hours discussing this thing. As long as they don't get abusive, as long as they don't use foul language, I will continue. You know what, I don't want to show off, but I manage usually to really twist them completely. Because if he's arguing with me about, for example all the Palestinian. I had a conversation with somebody for about, I would say at least 30 comments back and forth. "The Palestinians and this and the Arabs and the Jews and all this and all that."

I'm not trying to manipulate things, I just say the truth. Ok, Let's say, "What happened to Iraq since 1951 and what happened to Israel since 1951? You tell me," and he says to me, "You're right." After 30 comments, "You're absolutely right. I said, "Yes. You know why? Because the

leaders of Israel are thinking about their people. The leaders of Arab land, they don't think of their people, they use them." He said, "You're absolutely right."

Sometimes conversations do help, because you bring them down to earth. They come with these slogans, and they actually don't know what they mean. I challenge them. If [01:58:00] he becomes abusive or you can see that he's saying, Zionism this and Zionism that and Zionism this and Zionism that," I say, "You know what, I'm an admin. I can just like this take them out. Just last night, I took somebody out. I just say to him, "You know what, this group is too respectful for you. Go and find another group who can tolerate your rubbish." I just delete them.

Do you get anonymous posts as well?

No, this group is members. We accept members, and we go through their profile and we check who they are, because there are a lot of people who are not Iraqis. From any religion we'll accept, as long as they're Iraqi. We go through their profile and we check their posts. You can tell from the post, you can draw a profile of the person, who they are, and the comments and who is commenting. Is a lot of work. We're four of us. One is responsible on the membership, unless I know the person.

How many members are there?

There's 24,000. Not all of them are active but I know people who joined the group because I am the admin. I've got other things, I was interviewed on Al-Arabia, I was interviewed on Rashid. There are few videos about me, so people know me. Recently last year I was invited to the BBC Arabic to participate in a program about women, and the subject was how the Arab societies are involved in the British society, [02:00:00] and I was introduced as an Iraqi Jew. It was wonderful. BBC Arabic, to have any Iraqi Jew, that's a big achievement.

Do you feel more could be done by Iraqi Jews in England to educate their children?

Absolutely. I tell you, it's not just that, what is - I can really say, it saddens me that they are not getting involved. They're sitting in a cocoon. Whether it's from fear, whether it's from lack of interest, I don't know, or maybe I'm too much Iraqi for them. I put events, the events that we've done til now somehow direct or indirect somehow related to the Jews. Because if I do an event about music in Iraq, it's Jews.

If I do, Proverbs in Arabic, Iraqi Proverbs, we use them every day, we did an event about Iraqi Jewish jokes about how the jokes in Iraq about the Jews, how clever they are. They can do this, and they can do that. Why not come? We did an event about the Middle Eastern food and how the Jews had the involvement of moving this food all around the Middle East, from India, too, with them, with some Sammy Zubaida. Why not to come.

[unintelligible 02:01:45] people.

Numbers. Really. I mean, it's a shame. I think somehow they have, I would say fear or [02:02:00] may be less than fear, but it just trying to - because I had, for example, somebody who came to an event, musical event and said to me, "Well, I'm going to sit" I said, "Sit anywhere." She said, "I'm not going to sit next to Muslims." I said, "They're not going to eat you."

That's the reason I'm trying now to do more musical events, because Iraqi Jews when there is music, they forget about it. They can sit anywhere. They have no problem. For example, I had Yair Dalal now why not to come to Yair Dalal? He's an Iraqi. He's Israeli. He's a Jew. Okay. He's speaking in Arabic. Why not to come?

It's a shame to keep, and you know what? You see them in their houses, you see them in their parties and all that. All Arabic music. They speak between them in Arabic. They joke in Arabic. They live in Arabic, but inside the house and not, and I find it very difficult. I'm a very open person.

Not publicly.

Not public, why? It's the fear of being in contact with other people. I am on the opposite. I'm trying to open up now other projects that I'm doing is maybe people won't like it, but I'm doing it. I'm bringing friends of mine who are not Jews to come and see this Shabbat service because I don't want this fear of passing by a synagogue and seeing a closed door and a security man standing outside and imagining what's happening inside. I don't want them to imagine. I want them to see.

I had the most wonderful [02:04:00] experience taking two people on. I'm doing it with the- obviously, I'm organizing it with Rabbi Joseph Dweck. He knows about it, and he's welcoming the people and all this. It was such a spiritual event that I took two of my friends, who I knew

them through my forum, they follow me in my forum and all that. One Muslim and one Christian,

Take them to Lauderdale.

Take them to Lauderdale. I arranged with a friend of mine who comes to the Wembley synagogue to escort them because I'm going to sit upstairs. They're going to be by themselves downstairs. He is wonderful, Jeffery Ben Nathan. Thank you, Jeffery. He's been wonderful. He prepares an email and he sent me and send them to tell them what is the *Parashah* is about.

Okay. I choose when it's the *Mizrahi* service, so they can relate to the tune and all this. The last time was about the Ten Commandments. Ten Commandments, everyone knows, especially the Christian, he said, "It's what we learn."

You take them to synagogue they've never been?

They've never been into a synagogue, not on Shabbat in a synagogue at all. They see the service and they read in English and then they join in the *Kiddush*. One of them has become addicted to events that are run by Rabbi Dweck. He goes to Spiro Ark. He contacts me. There was a lecture in Lauderdale synagogue with Rabbi Dweck and another person from America.

I don't know him, he apparently started researching and all that. He sent me a message one day and said, "Niran, are you going to this event?" I said, "No, [02:06:00] not really." He said, "Please, please, please." I went with him. Rabbi Dweck know him by now because he goes to the event. Two days ago I received a message from this Christian guy, he says, "When are you taking me again?"

I understand.

I don't want people to fear the Jews. I don't want them to think that we are conspiring. Let them see the beauty. I'm not trying to convert anyone. I want them just to see what I experience is the beauty.

Niran, what do you miss from Iran?

From Iraq?

Iraq or from Baghdad?

Well, I miss being there, but having a lot of Iraqis here actually compensates. I meet a lot of Iraqis here and because I'm active and all that, a lot of people know me, so I get invited to places, musical events, lectures, exhibitions, and I speak the language. This is what I would have wanted if I'm missing Iraq, is to go and speak the language, I speak it.

Go and experience the food, I experience it here, whether at home, whether going to Iraqi restaurants, enjoy the culture, I do that through even in my house. New Year's eve, I will have *darbuka* here and we'll sing Arabic-Iraqi songs. Culture, I'm getting it here. In a nutshell, I don't miss Iraq as such, but being there, now, in 2013 I was invited to participate in a conference in the north of Iraq.

I was hesitant really to be honest with you to go to Iraq and Erbil doesn't mean anything to me. I haven't been to Erbil, so why do I need to go? My children [02:08:00] were still young, my youngest and older I think. I thank God, my ex-husband's family helped and all this and my eldest was here, so I went for four days. I flew with a friend of mine Emin Cohen. Without him I wouldn't have flown by myself, still have this fear.

Look, Iraqis, I don't know if all Arabs, but Iraqis till now, whether you are five years, whether you're 40 years, they have fear of a policeman, let alone going to a different country, because your fear of authority. Anyway, I decided to go. I thought this is my chance. Either I take this chance or never do it. You know what? I probably would have never done it after that.

You did?

I did.

How was it?

I have a stamp on my passport that I was in Iraq because I've got a stamp from the Republic of Iraq. I was there. Now, maybe other people went to Iraq and they feel they closed the cycle. For me, that was a closed the cycle. Although, being in Erbil doesn't mean anything to me because I've never been to Erbil before. It was full three days and we only went to tour in the area the last day.

What was it under the auspices of?

Under the auspice of the Christians and the Christian guy donated the money. It was the friends of Bartala. Bartala is one of the villages in the north of Iraq in Nineveh in the area of Nineveh, which was taken after that by Daesh. The subject was the demographic change of the [02:10:00] of Nineveh area and it was just by chance just before Daesh went in.

What was it like? How did you feel getting--

To be honest with you, I was scared. Emin was in a different hotel than me and he starts straightaway suspecting, "Why did they put us separately? Are they trying to control this? Are they trying to do this and all that?" We were invited by a friend who is an Iraqi writer, Qadem Habib. He did a big book about the Jews of Iraq.

I thought, "No, it can't be. Then why do they need me around and Emile to come to Erbil to do something to them?" You have the fear. You're going back to Iraq. You're going to a place that you escaped from and things are not better, but the north of Iraq is better. I remember panicking and saying to Emin, "You're going to be--"

The hotel was literally on the other side of the road. I said to him, "Before you leave the hotel, please text me so I will make sure to come down. I don't want to be down without you being next to me and all this." You know what? It took 24 hours, and I just walked the street by myself. It was scary in the beginning, because, first of all, we didn't want to be known to be Jews.

The first day of the conference we were about 900 people. We were just sitting the two of us with my friend Mazin Natif sitting next to us and another journalist and it took 24 hours. Because Emin and I, we participated in a program in Al Arabiya about the Jews of Iraq in Britain and it went viral, it's about, seven, eight years ago now. [02:12:00] It went viral, so our faces were familiar.

The first day, people did not know us. They looked at us but they did not know us. With time, the next day, we went to the second part of the conference, people came to us like we are-- I don't know, king and queen. "Can we take pictures with you?" Oh the Jews of Iraq, we miss you so much. You're this, you're that." It was just overwhelming.

People literally took, I sometimes say, like we were monkeys. They're trying to take photos with us, and it was really very, very overwhelming, but yeah, it was done. You know what? It was done. I have a stamp on my passport that I've been there and I don't think I will reach to a point, I will not be alive to be able to go to Baghdad. I don't think so.

Would you like to?

I would love to. I know it doesn't look at all like the Baghdad that I left and it will be heart breaking, but I would love to. I would love to just to close another cycle. I don't like the idea of escaping. If I decide tomorrow to leave Britain, it's on my terms and it's my decision although I am seriously thinking about it because I don't feel safe.

If the political situation in the UK changes, maybe I need to leave, but it will be on my terms hopefully. It won't be when it will be forbidden for the Jews to do this or to do that, but it's on my terms. I don't like to escape.

[02:14:00] Like your parents. They didn't like it -

Yes.

Would you see yourself today as a refugee or what do you see yourself?

At the moment, I'm not a refugee, but I was a refugee. If a Palestinian who lives in America is still a refugee, then I'm still a refugee. We need to change the terms. Now, the refugee situation in this sense, I think it was created intentionally because Arab countries including Iraq -- I saw the nationality law. There is a point in that law saying whoever can get the nationality and whoever cannot get the nationality.

There is a point specifically that the Palestinians cannot get a nationality, to reserve their rights of return. Now, a Palestinian-American still have the right of return. It's either you don't give them, in the Arab country, the nationality to reserve the right of return, or the ones who have other nationality should not be considered refugees. You cannot have it all.

You cannot have it both sides. If you have it both sides, then my children, and the children of my children will still be a refugee, because I'm a refugee. You cannot implement on one and

don't implement on the other. In a way, I'm a refugee, because I was forced to leave a country that me and my ancestors lived in.

Do you sometimes think what it would be if you hadn't been forced to leave, if you'd stayed in Baghdad?

Yes. It would just [02:16:00] have been horrible. Well, seeing what's happening now, it wouldn't have been horrible, although, there are some people like Khalid Kishtainy is a big Iraqi writer and journalist. He believes that if the Jews would not have left Iraq, it wouldn't have reached to this mess. I don't think so, because at the end of the day, they're minority.

Minority cannot really influence much. Hopefully, it won't happen in the UK. A minority can always be -- they are vulnerable, so they always can be used as a scapegoat. Birth ratio, you cannot compete. We would have always been a minority.

Have you got a message for anyone who might watch this video later on based on your experiences?

Two messages. One is to the Jews of Iraq. Please get involved. Being Iraqi Jew is not within your walls, is outside as well. We have a message to give, I think is very important we give a message to other people. By staying at home and talking to your family and to your friend, you're not passing the message. With time, it will dilute.

If you pass the message out, and pass it to your children, it will dilute with time, but it will take much longer. That's a message. Not to fear other people. Look, we have so much tradition, [02:18:00] we have so much history. Why to be shy? Why to hide? On the contrary, show your beauty, show your heritage, show your beliefs.

Just an additional thing, in the last year, I've been inviting non-Jewish people to stay the night to *Rosh Hashanah*, they participate fully. I don't want to convert anyone. I'm not a religious authority to convert anyone. I want to show them the beauty of it. Through this beauty, they can appreciate again, the Jews of Iraq and themselves, because they'll find things that relates to what we're doing.

If we're blessing on the bread, Muslim, for them it's a blessing to bless on the bread. This is one thing, and that's the reason I do these projects. To have people over and to take people to

the synagogue. To talk about it in all social media about Judaism and what we do and what the Jews of Iraq do. Because *Rosh Hashanah* table in Iraqi household is different than, for example, the Ashkenazi household. There are a few vegetables to be put on the table.

For example?

For example, the beans, string beans, and it all relates to what's the blessing is. String beans or beans, it's called *lubia* in Arabic. The blessing is *liyit'lavevu* - we will be in the right side of the heart. It's connected. We put courgette in Arabic is *qara, yi'karu* - [02:20:00] May they be torn, all our enemies. It has a meaning. I have the service put in sheets, laminated, prepared for people. This year I did small pots of honey and I put a string with the name of the person to have a seat.

They're taking this honey with them. It's something. It's like you're going to a country and you bring a souvenir, that's a souvenir for them. They will remember the honey. They will remember the apple. They will remember why we're eating the pomegranate. So that's a message to the Jews. Open up. We have a beauty thing, it's a beautiful thing we can share, so open up, don't close.

To the non-Jewish, which I know a lot of people will watch this, not specifically mine, but I am sending this website to people who are interested about the Jews of Iraq, who can understand English. We're normal people. We have a lot of things to share with you. Let's put our hands together and try to build bridges. Religion is a personal thing. For me, I respect anyone who is praying to a stone. I really don't care.

They can pray to a chair, they can pray to a light, I don't care. I want them to be a human being. I want them to appreciate me as a human being. We have a lot in common. Jews of Iraq, Jews of Egypt, all people. We have a lot in common. I think looking at the Middle East and seeing all the suffering, enough is enough. We need to build bridges. People talk about the Jews of Iraq, [02:22:00] okay, they suffered, but they're actually the Israelis and the Zionist movement, convinced them to leave Iraq.

What about the Yazidis? Who convinced them to be suffering like this? What about the Christians in the Middle East? Was it Israel convince them to leave? There is a lot of theories. People talk about things without understanding. They repeat things without understanding. For

example, "Oh, you know, they could convince the Jews from Arab land to come because they needed manpower." Yes, that's true. Now, we know it's true.

What about the Christians? Who is convincing them actually to leave the Middle East? Want to go and be manpower in Israel, or to be a manpower in America? What about the Mandaeas, what about the Yazidis, what the Tukmans, what about the Kakais, I'm talking about Iraq. Iraq is a beautiful country. It has so many races and so many religions and so many diversities. What convinced them to leave? Look at yourself. Unless you admit the mistakes, you're not going to correct.

There's no point of -- there's a saying in Arabic you say, "You're hanging your coat, you're hanging your problems on somebody's else." They hang their problems on Israel. Everything is Israel. Everything is conspiracy. When you go and talk to them and really-- and this is what-- okay the Yazidis, they talk to people and say, "Oh, the Jews left because of Israel. The Christians left because of Daesh. Yazidis suffered because of Daesh." "What about the Mandaeas? Oh, the Mandaeas because of Saddam.

You blame something else and this is a story that I will finish it off [02:24:00] with that. When you blame other things, as I said, you cannot correct. When I learned to drive, my instructor told me about the lady who tried to pass her driving test. She tried 30 times and she didn't manage and why? Because she always blame something else. She would drive and if she would touch the pavement she would say, "The pavement was high, it wasn't my fault."

If she passes the traffic light when it's yellow, she says, "Oh, because of the tree was actually covering the traffic light, I didn't see the traffic light." Thirty times. This is exactly what's happening. You blame it on somebody else. Look at yourself. If it's your problem -- I'm not saying the Iraqis or the Egyptians, so this is their problem, obviously, there is the leadership who are fuelling the situation.

But be honest with yourself. Now forget. Now the world is run by social media. We have the power in our hand now to change things. With time, I think the leadership has to obey to what the street is saying. What the people in the street are saying. If there is a big movement of people accepting that there was a mistake, I'm not waiting for an Iraqi person to say, "Sorry, it was my mistake. Please, forgive me."

They did not make the mistake, but admit there was a mistake. Don't blame it on Israel, because in 1941 the *Farhud*, Israel wasn't there. Admit there was a problem. Only then we can change, and hopefully we can change. I'm only one person, but I'm pretty [02:26:00] sure there will be a lot of people. It's really it's from both sides.

I cannot expect somebody from the other side to give his hand without me giving my hand as well to try to build something. Bridges are built from two sides. You cannot build a bridge if you don't have another side to end it with, and usually, when you build a bridge you try from both sides.

I think that summarises you quite well because you would like – are doing what you're doing as a bridge maker.

Absolutely. What I'm doing in every aspect that I'm doing it's a bridge-building, even selling the books. Selling the books. I'm shipping books to America. I've shipped till now books to America, New Zealand, Dubai, Iraq, Israel that I sometimes can take with me and to Egypt. Somebody who wanted a book from Shmuel Moreh that I didn't have, I managed to request it from Israel.

It was brought to me here. From here, I gave it to a friend of this guy who lives in Egypt. She lives here. I went to meet her. Gave her the book and she posted to him read. This is building bridges.

Because he couldn't have ordered that book from Egypt.

No. From Egypt. Because from Israel, people know I have people here who approached me and say to me when they knew that I sell books and they whisper, "Can you get me this book?" I said, "Just talk loudly, tell me what you want." "I want this book and this book." Something that was printed in Israel. "No problem. How many do you want?" I bring it. It all literally brick by brick. It's literally brick by brick. [02:28:00]

Amazing. I think we get the picture of your amazing work.

Thank you.

Is there anything I haven't asked you you'd like to add or anything?

I just want a short story about what happened with my father's book. It's very important to document because it has a beautiful message. My father, as I mentioned, he was a journalist. He worked with prominent journalists and writers and knew a lot of poets and politicians. al-Jawahiri, who I mentioned, one of the best poet in Arab world was his friend.

Jawahiri was exiled by Saddam, and a certain period they let him to come back. In '73 he came back or '72. 1973 my father decided to write a book about him. It's called a *Al Jawahiri bi 'lisani w'bi khalami*. It means al-Jawahiri in his -- the exact meaning is in his tongue and my pen which means he's speaking I'm writing. He wrote. He had many hours. He was interviewed by my father interviewed him ask him questions and all that and compiled a book.

We still have the handwritten. There was no computers. It was all handwritten. Part of it was al-Jawahiri's will where he want to be buried. My father finished the book. By the time he finished the book, my brother, my sister and I have left Iraq. The dilemma is he was offered to be printed by the [02:30:00] Ministry of Culture in Iraq. The dilemma was to print it in Iran or not to print it to Iraq.

If he prints it in Iraq, it means he's going to stay to see how it's going to be sold and how it's going to be this. It means that he's going to stay there longer. He decided not to print it there because that's it, his three children are abroad. Situation getting worse and worse. He took the book and he went to Israel. Now, Israel, nobody's interested in al-Jawahiri.

It's a very difficult, Arabic. His poetry very, very difficult. It's a matter of taste. He took that book and no one was interested. Even the Association of the Academics of Iraqi Academics were not interested, because they can't sell it anywhere, and don't forget there was no contact with the Arab world. He left it. He passed away in 1995 and we still have the manuscript.

My mom had all the time said, "We need to bring your dad's book". Yes, yes, yes. "We need to print your dad's book." Always had this idea that she needs to print it. We asked here and ask there and who is going to publish it and who's going to print it and who's going to be -- don't forget, it was handwritten. In her 80s, she decided to start working on computers and learn how -- she typed the whole book on computer.

Now, Iraqi poetry is not like English poetry. It goes line-by-line. Iraqi poetry it goes in two parts. One part and one part and then one part and then one part, it goes like two columns.

Literally you see two columns and it's very difficult to do it. She typed everything, and with the help of my [02:32:00] brother and the help of my sister, they managed to put it in order, text wise, to manage to read it again and again and to try to find faults or mistakes or something, which is not accurate, but it's not needed in the thing.

In 2013, Baghdad was declared as the Capital of Culture in Arab world. Every year there's a different city. My friend Mazin Latif, who was a journalist, contacted me. He knew about the book and he says, "Let's print it." When this happened, he contacted me. He said, "Look, I've got a budget. Let's print your dad's book through the budget of the Ministry of Culture in Iraq."

So they finished it very quickly, we sent it through PDF and all this, and it was printed. Now, if you look at the story in a timeline, he left in 1973, the book was printed. Sorry. He wrote it in 1973 in Baghdad. It was printed by the Iraqi Cultural Ministry in 2013, 40 years. 40 years. Now, if you try to make it even more spiritual, the Jews left Egypt and they were lost in the desert for 40 years, so this book was lost, not in the desert but lost somewhere 40 years. Went back to Baghdad and was printed in Baghdad [02:34:00] exactly how my father wanted it to be.

To make it even more spiritual, it was published in January. We did a book launch here in June - sorry, we did a book launch in Israel in May. I did a book launch here in June. My mother passed away in September. Actually, her dream was to take a copy of this book to take it to my father's grave. We have a picture of my mother holding the book and showing it sort of to my dad, telling him, "I made it."

She passed away a few months after that. It just like she had a duty to do, and with time I listened to stories, she had the heart attack. She was 86. She had a doctor's appointment in December. The doctor said to her that her arteries are blocking again because it was difficult for her to do as much as - she was having difficulty in breathing. The doctor said to her, he said to her, "Look, I can take you through ballooning and different things, but I can't guarantee you'll wake up." Because of the age and because of she had a bypass operation in 1990, and all this.

He said, "Or you just live your life. If ever you ever need it, then we'll do the ballooning." She said, "No, I don't want to do anything. I've got something to do." She held onto her life to be able to accomplish this mission. She did exactly the same thing, exactly what she wanted.

[02:36:00] It was a message even to my children. She wanted to do something, she literally clung with her teeth to life to be able to achieve this.

I think it's a beautiful story. Every time I see this book, for me it's my father and mother in this book. Obviously, my brother and my sister being involved in it and me being involved because Mazin is my friend and how we shipped it from Baghdad to here, it was a mission impossible to try to receive the books before the book launch in Israel. I managed to get only 25 copies to book launch.

It seems to me it almost symbolises the fact that although you can't go back and the way the book made it back.

Absolutely, and my father definitely. I still have or maybe one in a million chance that I can go, but my father wasn't, but his book went.

I think that's a -

I think it's a nice story to end it up. I think it gives hope. This is what I want people to not to lose the hope and not to close that chapter in their life. Iraqi Jews, please don't close that chapter. We have a lot of history. Thank you.

Okay. Niran, thank you so much for sharing this story with us.

Thank you.

We're going to look now at some of your photos and documents.

Yes. Thank you.

[pause 02:37:32]

[background conversation]

This is a picture of my grandmother, my maternal grandmother. Her name was Lulu. Lulu from Masri family, Lulu Masri. She was born in Baghdad, and she passed away **[02:38:00]** in Baghdad around probably '52. She managed to see my eldest brother.

This is a picture in summer 1959, in one of the, I assume, big parks. It's the summer party of the Iraqi Journalists Union. My father was a journalist and he was a member in the Union. Sitting in the picture from right to left, it's my cousin, Abraham, my cousin, Naji, my brother, Khodor, and my father, Salim Al-Bassoon holding my sister Kahraman and then my mother, Miriam Al Mulla holding me, I'm sitting on her lap, and then my uncle's wife Naima.

This is a picture of my father holding my sister on the right and me on the left-hand side. My father unusual because he loved the girls in comparison to men from Arab land, they always prefer them a boy, having a son. He was happy to have two other children as daughters, always very proud of having daughters.

This is a school trip. I cannot recall the date, but I assume that would be probably '63, '64 or probably later. I can name few people. The ladies [02:40:00] standing, starting from the right to left that is Simha Cohen She is the wife of Saleh Cohen who's standing next to her who was the headmaster of our primary school. Then Rachel Khalastchi then I believe it's *Sit* Leoni on top of her *Sit* Simha our headmistress of the secondary school. Bless her, she's still alive. She lives in Israel. She's nearly 99. Next to *Sit* Simha it's *Sit* Salma Amin She's a Christian teacher. A Christian Iraqi. She was a teacher in our school. She used to teach French. Next to her is Madam Viniole. She's a French teacher for the secondary school. Next to her turning her head to the right is So'ad I think So'ad Akarab she used to work as a secretary in the school. Next to her is Miriam Mulla, is my mother. Next to her is Yasa Dwek our teacher for Arabic. Then the lady standing next to her, I don't know who she is. The young girl with the blonde hair standing first on the left is me, and next to me is *Sit* Salma's daughter. The man standing is William Ejundi who was an Egyptian teacher for English, and the two kids are his children. A school trip to Habbaniyah.

This is a picture of me on the right and my sister on the left holding our dolls. This is presents from our parents. We grew up playing with different type of [02:42:00] toys. Not only dolls

and saucepans and things like that. We used to have Meccano. We used to have rifles like boys. We played with all types. We have variety. We were not raised as girly girls.

That's in 1960s, probably towards the end of 1960s. A trip we used to go with my uncle's family out of Baghdad every now and then. Maybe either Hilah or Babel or Habbaniyah. Somewhere not far from Baghdad, so it's a day trip. In the picture is my cousin Abraham driving, and his mother, my uncle's wife, and I can see my cousin, my little cousin Ra'ed just trying to see the camera. I'm standing next to the car, and my sister Kahraman standing next to me. We would stop between to have a break and this is a picture together.

This picture is from a swimming competition. We used to go to Mesbahel Shahad which is a swimming pool, sort of community centre. Not much activities apart from swimming. My sister who is the second one in this picture from the right, and me the fourth one in the picture. We competed in swimming competitions. Me and my sister were the best swimmers in the swimming pool. Now, when it was time for competition they always brought somebody who is a professional swimmer. I remember her name very well because it was exactly the same person [02:44:00] who would just turn up for the competition on the competition day, so she can win number one. The gold medal sort of. Her name was Afra Ishagra. I still remember now because we knew that we will never get the gold medal.

As Jews?

Yes. It was so obvious. She never, we don't know who she is. Suddenly she will turn up only for the -- because how can a Jew be a leader in a competition? Okay. This is a picture of a trip. We used to do trips.

This is 1971 I believe, or '72. No, '71 because my cousins left. It was the end of '72. '71, sorry. In the picture is my brother Khodur. He has graduated at that time. Graduated from Baghdad University finishing chemical engineering. My cousin Naji who just finished I think his secondary school, my cousin Abraham who was not able to do university because they didn't

allow Jews to join the universities after '67 war. My uncle is Hakim Mullah and then my father Salim Al Bassoon and sitting down is my cousin Fareed Mullah and Rael Mullah.

This is a picture, I would guess it's '72 or '73 maybe just a year before I left. Just a simple young woman living in Iraq. You know a garden in Elwia.

This is a picture about four years ago, [02:46:00] this is when Ben my youngest who was standing on the left had his bar mitzvah. We had all the family over, Joseph on the right-hand side, my eldest. I've got two boys and apart from they named Joseph and Benjamin they've got other names that I called them, one is Treasure and one is Miracle. Joseph is my treasure and Ben is my miracle.

This is an Iraqi ID, it's called Iraqi ID according to 1957, it was issued in 1963 and is showing my pictures, showing my name, my father's name and my grandfather and my mother's name and grandfather. Now, with this ID, I was able to participate in the last election Iraqi election because this is one of the documents they wanted, is the ID according to 1957, plus an ID from the country that you live, I use my British passport were saying that I was born in Baghdad.

This is the cover of the ID card. It's saying in Arabic *aldawlat al Iraqi* - Iraqi Republic, [Arabic] the Ministry of, like Home Office. [Arabic] The Department of Citizenship and it's according [Arabic] according to the ID to the law from 1959 and is giving the law number and at the bottom is saying [Arabic] to females and the number [Arabic] the number of the document and is saying which city [02:48:00] unfortunately this one is written, not unfortunately, but I mean this is written on it [Arabic] and stamped on it Baghdad because it was from Baghdad.

This is what they used to call recommendation. Every student in Shamash school or Frank Iny used to get something like this to have all the achievement and the results of their exams to

take abroad with them. Everyone who intend to leave Iraq will ask the school to have something like this to be used for further education, for work for anything because otherwise, we don't have any documentation.

In Baghdad, we didn't have birth certificates really. As you can see on the date it's after I left Iraq, that's the 7th of May, 1973. I left 10th of April, 1973. This was requested by my parents from the congregation to have sort of a birth certificate. You can see at the bottom is saying the certificate is supplied upon request. The person who signed is Meir Basri, the known, late Meir Basri acting as President for the Jewish community in Baghdad.

Thank you.

This is my Iraqi passport. Until the age of 15, I did not see, I did not know how Iraqi passport looks because the Jews were not allowed to carry passports. This is the first passport and the last Iraqi passport. With this, I was able to leave Iraq in 1973. This is the first page of my passport showing my [02:50:00] picture, my signature, my name and it's giving a list of countries that this passport can be used including Turkey and all the Eastern Europe countries, UK, Luxembourg and other places. Obviously, Israel is not mentioned there.

At a later stage as far as I know, they put countries that you're not allowed to go and Israel is on this list. As far as I understood from a friend of mine, the name Israel now it's been deleted from that list. Anyway, this passport was issued in 27th of March 1973, and it's valid up to 26th of March, 1975 but my nationality was cancelled when I did not return to Iraq within three months, so even if it's valid till '75, I wasn't Iraqi by then.

This is the inside of the passport. Now, on the top there is writing code it says [Arabic], it means it's valid for one trip. This is a variation of what the Jews in Iraq had their passport or their *laissez passer* stamped on, no-return, exactly the same thing. I can use it only for one trip, just leaving Iraq and is saying here that the Director of this office is allowing the holder to use it for one trip, and the date was the 18th of March, 1973, so just before I left. And at the bottom is a stamp from the Baghdad International Airport [02:52:00] on the 10th of April, 1973 that I left Iraq and it's saying at the bottom *mughadara*, it means exit.

Niran, thank you so much for this interview and sharing your story and your photographs. I say thank you, but we're going to look at another collection of photos.

Yes.

Yes, okay, thank you so much.

Thank you.

1948 I guess, my father was exiled to the borders of Iraq-Iran because he wrote a poem, oh, sorry wrote an article against the government. Yes, this is how the locals used to dress up, so he was part of the scene.

This is my mom Miriam Al Mulla, this is in Iraq. I guess this is around 1948 after she was married. She was a beautiful woman.

This is my father Salim Al Bassoon at his desk in one of the newspapers. I cannot recall where is this. Maybe *Ra il am*, maybe *Bilad* they were the most prominent newspapers then in Iraq. He worked in many, many newspapers sometimes simultaneously in two newspapers and magazines. That was his life.

The pictures now they came to me through a friend of my son. They were found somewhere about five years ago and by a person who is not Iraqi, who is not a Jew, who had no interest in something like that.[02:54:00] It looks like an ancient picture, but for us for the project of Sephardi Voices and for me in particular, it shows Baghdad in I would say the '40s or '50s. This is an era when Baghdad was glorious. This picture and it's written behind it actually, which is very nice, the person who took the picture or had these pictures documented everything. It says, "This is the picture of cinema in Baghdad, Roxy Cinema, the film was *Thousand Cheer*." Probably, I don't know if we can focus on it to see, but this is what he's saying. Now, very important to say that Roxy Cinema was owned by a Jewish family, the Sudai family, and they had the first studios in Baghdad where they filmed the first cinema film, in Iraqi cinema film in Baghdad, it was called, *Aliya w' Isam*. The music was done by Saleh al-Kuwaiti an Iraqi

Jew, the scenario was written by Enwar Shaoul an Iraqi Jew, and the cinema and the studio was owned by Iraqi family.

There's another picture from the collection that I received from a friend. Now, looking at this picture, I think no one would believe that this is a Baghdad, but in fact, this is Baghdad. The person who took this picture wrote on the back of it, "This is a picture of Rashid Street in Baghdad. This picture was taken [02:56:00] with my own camera, also while it was raining." It's so beautiful, it looks like Paris or London.

That's another picture from this collection and it's written behind it, "This is the picture of one of the most famous hotels in Baghdad, Central Hotel, which is near our house."

That's another picture of the collection and it's written, "This is the picture of White House in Baghdad." Look at the building, it's modern and you wouldn't think that it's in Baghdad in the '50s or '40s.

That's another picture of the collection and it's saying-- In this picture, you can see the Square near the American Embassy in Baghdad, I can't recognize the Square, maybe in my times it just was a different name or different features in it.

That's another picture, somehow I can relate to this one, but I'm not sure exactly what it's called, maybe it's [Arabic] but anyway, what's written behind this picture is saying, "This is the picture of a Square in front of our house."

That's another picture of the collection. Now, I cannot recall which bridge is this, this is the bridge between Rusafa and Karkh the two sides of Baghdad. It might be Al-Jamhuria but it

wouldn't have been called Jamhuria because Jamhuria it means Republic, it couldn't be the time when the King was ruling Iraq, really, I don't know. Anyway, what's written on the back of this picture [02:58:00] is saying, "This is the picture of the bridge that I crossed many times a day to go to the dancing places."

This is the last picture of the collection that I received from a friend through my son and it's written behind it, "This is the picture of the Sadun Park, one of the best parks in Baghdad. This picture was taken while I was sitting, as it is shown." He's sitting literally in the middle, sitting on a bench or something, it was very difficult to identify the person, unfortunately.

Okay. This is my father's book, he wrote it in Baghdad in 1973. He took the handwritten version with him to Israel, and 40 years after we managed to print it and publish it in Iraq, while Baghdad was the capital of the Arabic culture in 2013. After 40 years of being lost like the Jews in Sinai, it went back to Baghdad exactly where my father wanted it to be printed. It's called *Al-Jawahiri bi'lisani w'bi khalami*, Al-Jawahiri who is the famous poet who was my father's friend. *Al-Jawahiri, In His Words and My Pen*.

Cameraman: *Thank you very much.*

[02:59:46] [END OF AUDIO]