

Sephardi Voices UK

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Someck
Forename:	Chaim
Interviewee Sex:	Male
Interviewee DOB:	1940
Interviewee POB:	Basra, Iraq
Interviewee Occupation:	Engineer
Father's Occupation:	Chartered Accountant
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

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[00:00:08]

Today is the 21st of March 2019. I'm here with Sephardi Voices UK interviewing Chaim Someck. My name is Daisy Abboudi. Chaim Someck, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed by Sephardi Voices. If we could just start by you telling me a little bit about your family background.

Well, I come from Iraq, I came from Iraq. We lived in Basra. I was born in Basra in 19 – the fifties, early fifties we emigrated to Israel and the rest is history.

[Laughs] Could you tell me a bit about your grandparents? Do you remember your grandparents?

I had a grandmother only. I didn't know my grand – my parental grandparent, no, only grandmother. Just the one grandmother which is my mother's mother.

And what was she like?

Very nice [all laugh].

Was she born in Baghdad?

I think so, yes.

Yeah?

Yeah.

And did you live with her?

[Pause] What do you mean live with her?

Did she live near you? Live in Basra, did she –?

No, she had her own place.

She had her own place.

Own flat, yeah, yeah.

Yeah. When you think about Iraq what's the first memory that comes to your mind?

E: Is it good memories?

Sorry?

E: Good memories?

I was too young.

E: [Laughs].

You were eleven when you left.

Exactly on my eleventh birthday.

Yeah.

No, my eleventh birthday was on a Thursday and on Saturday we left Iraq.

E: Yes [laughs].

Wow.

Hmm.

Do you remember leaving?

Yes.

Can you tell me about that? [00:02:00]

Yeah, it was a flight so I remember that very well. Yeah, it was very nice.

E: Exciting.

We arrived in Israel, went straight into a transit camp [laughs], and stayed there for a few months, and then we moved to a flat.

Okay.

E: *Ma'abara*

Yeah. I'll ask you a little bit more about Iraq.

Yes.

Can you tell me about your father? What was he like?

In what sense?

As a person what was he –?

Well, I loved him very much [laughs].

Yeah. Was he strict? Was he –?

No, he was a very good father.

Yeah?

A very loving father. I have two sisters and – yeah.

Are they older or younger than you?

Younger than me. I'm the eldest.

Yeah.

E: And what did he do there? What did he work?

What was his job? What was your father's job?

Originally he was a chartered accountant.

Hmm-mm.

Then there was – the war came and everything turned upside down and –

E: He had to leave.

Yeah, and then he went into –

E: The Freemasons ?

He always was a Freemason, yeah, but –

E: That's important.

Hotelier he was for a while. [Laughs] But he was originally a chartered accountant, yeah.

Yeah. And what about your mother?

My mother was a housewife all the time.

Yeah?

And –

E: She taught – she taught French.

Oh yeah, she spoke a few languages, yes.

What languages did you speak at home?

Hebrew and English.

Even in Iraq?

[00:04:02] Yeah, because she wanted us to learn a foreign language so as kids she used to talk to us in English.

E: They always talked in English, yeah.

Yeah.

And did you speak Hebrew in Iraq as well?

No. You'd get arrested [laughs].

Yeah [both laugh].

I wouldn't have done Hebrew anyway.

Okay. So in Iraq at home it was only English?

Arabic.

And Arabic.

Arabic, mainly Arabic, and English.

And did your father speak English with you as well?

Yes.

Yes.

E: But you were with the British you said.

Yeah.

E: I'm reminding you

Sit in my place [laughs].

No, you're doing great.

No, the area where we lived in Basra in Iraq was a British area because from the war.

Hmm-mm.

They controlled southern Iraq, which was Basra, and so it was a British neighbourhood.

Was it all British people living there?

Mainly British people, yes. My parents had English friends and they used to play Bridge with the British officers and all that. They used to come over for Bridge, yeah.

Did they go to any sort of clubs or anything like that?

There was a club, yes. They all belonged to a club but I don't know what it was called or what have you, yeah.

And what about you? Who were your friends?

Boys [laughs].

Were they British, were they Jewish?

No, they were Iraqi Jewish, yeah.

Iraqi Jewish. So there were other Jews living in the area as well?

It was a Jewish area. Yeah. I think, yeah [laughs].

Can you describe your house?

A bungalow with a large garden.

Was it big? Was it small?

Yeah, yeah, it was big, yes.

Yeah?

Yeah.

And the area, do you remember the area? [00:06:00]

Basra, yeah, it's –

Was it –?

It was more a British area, the English area, because the British were there all the time after the war, after the Second World War.

But for example your road, was it a big road, was it small, was it –?

No, a small road [laughs]. At the backyard was a river.

Yeah.

Not er–

E: Smelly.

A dirty river, yeah [laughs], which I fell into it.

Okay.

Yeah, because there was – as a bridge there was a plank. We used to go across, and I fell over [laughs].

E: [Laughs].

How old were you?

E: Don't know.

Little?

Yeah, five or six, yeah, yeah.

Could you swim?

No.

E: [Overtalking].

My aunt grabbed me out of the – it was a dirty – very dirty river. Yeah, very dirty, yeah. I think now they'll be classed as having bilharzia, this sort – [laughs].

[Laughs] So your aunt was living nearby as well.

Yeah, she was on the other side of the road. A river which had been as wide as this – yeah.

Yeah.

E: A small river.

Yeah, a small river. Not, okay, like the Tigris or the Euphrates, you know.

Did you have lots of family living nearby?

I only remember my aunt. Yeah, and uncle from my father's side. Yes, uncles, yeah.

Can you tell me a bit about them? What did your uncle work? Was he –?

I don't know.

E: And what about Uncle Ghali? He wasn't there?

No, he was in Baghdad.

E: Oh, [inaud].

Yeah.

Did you have a lot of contact with Baghdad?

When?

When you were living in Basra. Did you go to Baghdad?

Well, because my mother's family was in Baghdad so I remember we used to do train journeys, which used to be overnight [pause]. **[00:08:01]**

Often?

Yes. Yeah, I think it was often, yeah.

What about a Jewish life? Did you practice Judaism in Iraq?

We had a Jewish home, yeah, a Jewish home of course.

In what sense?

The *kosher* and all that, yes. But we weren't practising – how shall I say – we weren't religious Jews as such but we kept all the traditions.

For example, what traditions do you mean?

[Sighs] With all the festivals and – yeah.

So let's take Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana for example.

Yeah. *Yom Kippur* was sacred. Of course. And *Rosh Hashana* of course, yeah.

What did you do on Yom Kippur? How would it look?

Everybody fasted yes, and at the age of thirteen I started to fast also but before then I didn't fast. As children we used to fast half a day. We used to have lunch the next day [laughs], which was the thing at the time, yeah.

And did you have a bar mitzvah?

Yes.

Can you tell me about that?

I had a *bar mitzvah* together with my cousin from my mother's side. We were the same age and we had it together. But it was a long time ago – and we did it in the house.

E: No money [laughs].

No, no.

E: Not like today.

Not big festivities as it is now. This was unheard of at the time [all laugh].

So you did that together with your cousin.

Yes.

Were you with your cousins a lot?

Yes, we were like brothers. But unfortunately he passed away and that's it [laughs].

What about Pesach?

Yeah, we always kept *Pesach*, of course.

Did you have anything special that you would do for Pesach? [00:10:00]

No. We didn't eat bread.

Yeah.

Of course, yeah, and –

Do you remember making matzo, your mother making matzo, or did you buy it?

I think originally in the beginning they used to bake the *matzos* at home, but then in Israel they bought the *matzo* like it is now.

E: They used to bake the *challel* [ph] the dates they used to make.

Yeah.

Do you want to tell me about it?

[Laughs] No, it's part of the festival. It's sweet things. Date syrups with grounded nuts.

That's the charoшет.

The *charošet* yeah.

Yeah.

E: But they used to make it by hand, you know, they'd squeeze it. Not like to buy it from the shop [laughs].

[Laughs].

Do you remember seeing that happen?

Yes.

Yeah? Can you describe it?

No [all laugh].

Okay [laughs].

E: Didn't you say that somebody wanted to smoke, you went to the toilet, from your grandmother?

Tafsiki Etty. No, we had a very strict grandmother.

Yeah.

And everybody smoked on Saturday but they had to go and smoke in the toilet and be away from her, you see? As respect to her.

Was it because it was shabbat or because –?

Shabbat.

Or because she was older?

E: *Shabbat.*

No, it's *shabbat*. Well, she's our grandmother, you know, so – we were kids but with all that smoke – didn't use to smoke in front of her.

Okay.

Yeah.

So was shabbat kept quite strictly?

Not really, no [sighs].

Did you go to synagogue on shabbat?

I can't remember.

No.

No.

Okay. Okay. Were you allowed to – did you speak about being Jewish? Did you speak about –?

Yeah, of course. At home all the time, yeah. [00:12:00]

And outside of home?

Well, we were different to our Muslim neighbours because of their traditions and our tradition, but there was no clash. No clash whatsoever, but after the war of independence of Israel things changed completely then. Then there was enmity from their side. They wouldn't talk to us and we – I remember my parents used to say they lost all their Muslim friends. Not because of us. They wouldn't – didn't want any – it was dangerous to them. It was dangerous for them also, yeah.

What do you mean dangerous for them?

They could have been arrested. They regarded all Jews as spies for Israel. You know what I mean? So they might have connected them to something – they were afraid so all Christian and Muslim friends broke contact with us, yeah. I remember my parents saying that. They couldn't believe it. How we had Christian friends, the next day didn't want to know us.

Did you feel it as a child as well?

No. Only what I hear from grownups, yeah.

What about school? Do you remember school at all?

School, yes. Yes, I went to the Alliance – Alliance [*French pronunciation*] school and then I went to a private school which they called after the headmistress. It was called Madame Adur [ph], which wasn't a Jewish school but it was a private school so the education was much better there.

And did you feel a change after '48, 1948, after the Israel war of independence, in school?

[00:14:03]

I don't think they sent us to school. I think we stopped school for a while until we were transit to Israel, yeah.

So what were you doing if you weren't at school? What was a day like?

Never thought of it. What was a day like? Can't remember.

E: 'Cos it was about three years, from '48 to '51.

I can't remember.

That's okay.

Don't forget I had an accident recently [all laugh].

I know [laughs].

I can't remember a year ago so – [laughs].

E: You're doing well.

No, you are doing well, don't worry [laughs]. We spoke a bit about leaving Iraq. Do you know anything about how that came about?

Yes. They had to register and – remember waiting in a queue until our time came and we had to leave, we had to leave everything behind. Everything, yeah.

What –?

We were searched, everything, at the airport, yeah. And I had a small bar of chocolate and the rotten – he took it away and he ate it in front of me.

E: [Laughs].

Oh, wow.

E: [Laughs].

[Laughs] I kept it for the flight and he found it in my pocket, the one who was doing the searches, yeah, and he took it and he ate it [laughs].

Wow.

As a child I remember – [laughs].

E: A part he remembers.

Yeah. Amazing.

Yeah.

And what did you leave? What did you have that you left?

Everything.

What is –?

Everything. Except the clothes on us. Yeah, everything.

And did you – were you aware as a child that you were leaving for good?

I was looking forward to it. I tell you the truth it was an adventure to me as a child.

[00:16:02] Going to fly and all that, even though I had an experience of flying before then. I was looking forward to it.

Where had you flown before then?

I had – the coughing – what do you call this coughing thing?

E: Whooping cough?

Whooping cough, yeah, and it was advised that I breathe the air at 9000 feet or something like that. So I remember my uncle took me and we went with – in a Piper, a small plane, to that height, open the window, and [blows out].

E: Breathed the air.

Breathed the air [laughs].

In a small plane?

Yes. Yes, a three-seater.

Wow.

E: It's amazing.

And did it work? Did it help?

It must have because I can't – [all laugh]. It was advised by the doctors, yeah.

Wow. So you enter Israel.

Yes.

What was it like arriving in Israel? What was your first impression of Israel?

Wonderful. As a child it was wonderful. Playing in the fields and no school [laughs]. The first few month, two or three months, yeah, in the transit camp, yeah. There was school but it was, you know, not never well organised [laughs].

And where were you in Israel? In which town, near where?

Near Herzliya.

Near Herzliya, okay. And then you joined school?

And then we moved to Tel Aviv.

Okay.

Lived in a flat. And there we went to school.

In that period in the ma'abara, in the camp, can you tell me a little bit more about that time?

E: [Inaud].

What was —?

I was a child.

Hmm-mm.

And we used to play around all the time. You know, in the fields, what have you. It's the parents who suffered. [00:18:00] We, the kids, were having fun [laughs].

Did you notice your parents?

Yes.

Were you – yeah?

Yes, it was –

Can you tell –?

It was very hard on them because they took everything from them. You see, we children, we didn't understand, but they took everything from them. Their money in the bank, their savings, the –

E: Jewellery.

Everything. The Iraqi government took. They confis –

E: Only saucepan –

The houses, everything gone. I remember asking my mother, 'What luxury?' She said, 'The only luxury we were allowed was to take a saucepan.' Can you imagine how strict they were [laughs]?

So you took – did you take –?

E: Unbelievable

Yeah. Did she talk to you later about – more about that time? Did she tell you anything else?

I think they wanted to forget. It was a very, very, very bad time for the grownups, yeah? A lot of them were arrested for nothing. I remember we were – the Jews were supposed to listen to the broadcast on the radio because there was a list to go and report to the police station. They were arrested on the spot. They used to tell them, 'You are spies,' or

something like that. Some of them stayed in prison for five years. Had a bad time. A friend of our family was – he was arrested for five years.

What was his name?

Someck too but it was a different family.

E: What about Ades, Ades ? *Zeh lo ba mihamishpacha shelachem ?*

Yeah, from my – my cousin married the nephew or something of Ades who was a prominent Jew in Iraq who was [00:20:04] – they say that he was a spy and he was selling –

E: Arms.

Arms to Israel. So they took all his – everything from him and they hanged him in front of his house. Public hanging in front of his house. All the Arabs came and they had a day out [laughs]. And they kept the body for – I don't know, a few days hanging there. Animals.

E: It's a famous –

Were you in Iraq at that point?

I was in Baghdad and this was in Basra.

E: It's a famous story about Ades.

Yeah.

So you were aware as a child that things –

I was aware, very much aware, because the parents were talking about it all the time. They were terrified. It could happen to anybody. You see, it's a small Jewish community. They

didn't have any power. They can do anything they like to them. I could walk in the road and be beaten up by a policeman, and that's it [laughs]. There wasn't law and order like you have it in England [laughs]. Completely – even now it's different over there. I think it would be safe to go to Iraq now, yeah.

So when did you move to Baghdad?

[Sighs] [pause] I think when I was about seven or eight, move there.

So that's where you went to the private school, in Baghdad?

Yes.

Okay.

Even though my father – they'd confiscated everything. I don't know how he managed to go to put us in a private school. I don't know how he did it, but yeah [laughs].

E: He worked.

And was he – yeah, was he working? [00:22:01]

No, he wasn't.

One second. Okay.

I remember they used to say that all Jews were sacked from the place of work and what have you, and properties confiscated. They do everything you like when, you know, you're a small community.

So he wasn't working in Baghdad.

Not in there, no.

No.

No.

That's for a few years?

I don't know.

E: So how did he pay for private school?

Well, his savings.

Do you remember being told that you were going to leave?

Yes. Yeah, because there was an arrangement between the Iraqi government and the Americans who did it for us – allowed the Jews to leave. But they paid Iraqi government for each head to leave deathbed [laughs]. So yes, so who paid? American government or Jewish people in America? I don't know. But they actually paid for every person to leave Iraq.

And you remember being told that you were – did your parents tell you?

Yeah, we were waiting for – well, there was a queue [laughs].

Where was this queue?

No, when we're at home. They used to call us.

Okay.

Yeah. There's a list and my father always used to go and read the list to see if our name is on the list, and that's how it was, yeah.

And what about your sisters?

They were too little.

How old were they?

One was a baby, the youngest one was a baby, and the other one was about four or five years old.

Okay. [00:24:00] What about food? Do you remember – what food did you eat in Iraq?

Iraqi food.

What is Iraqi food?

E: Different [laughs].

No – yeah, the usual food they used to eat every day.

E: Egg of Shabbath.

Such as? What is the usual food of every day?

Home cooking.

Of what though?

Rice and meat and chicken and all that. Yeah.

Is there any specific dishes that you remember?

Yeah, *Tebit* on the weekend. They call it *Tebit* because they used to cook it overnight because the Jews were not allowed to light any fire on the sabbath. So they used to put it from Fridays on a low fire, cook all night so it used to be delicious the next day, very well cooked [laughs].

Yeah.

E: And they used to put the eggs as well.

What about for fun? What did you do?

As a child?

As a child, yeah.

Yeah, well, I had a cousin who was my age.

Hmm-mm.

Who unfortunately passed away, and we used to play around all the time.

What kind of games did you play?

What boys play at that age, yeah.

Tell me.

Indians and cowboys [both laugh].

Yeah.

Cowboys and Indians [laughs].

Did you go to the cinema?

Yes.

To see the – yeah?

Yeah, it used to be an outdoor cinema they used to take us to watch, yeah.

English films or –?

Yes, American. American films, yeah.

Okay. Which was your favourite one that you saw?

Cowboys [laughs].

Any cowboys [laughs]?

E: He loves cowboys [both laugh]. Then, yeah.

What about music?

Oh, I love music.

Yeah?

Music I love since I was a child. My mother used to sing to me when I was a baby. I suppose I grew up on that. I love music. [00:26:02]

What language did she sing to you in?

English, French, Arabic.

E: She used to teach French.

She used to love to sing. Yeah, she loved the music and I think I got it from her.

What kind of music did you listen to?

Everything. Classical, jazz, modern, at the time. Yeah.

Arabic as well?

I didn't go for that.

No.

I didn't go for the Arabic, no.

E: Now he likes it, in the old age [laughs].

Hmm.

And where did you – did you hear it on the radio? Did you buy records? How did you access this music?

No, on the radio mainly, yeah. Of course we had record players, you know, the one you wind up and all that, yeah.

When you went to Israel did you keep any of these kind of things? Did you listen to the same music? Did you eat the same food?

No, well we weren't allowed to take anything with us.

No, but you can listen to the music.

Whatever was on the radio.

Okay.

Radio only, yeah. So there's certain programmes we used to look forward to it at certain times of the day. Popular music used to be at seven o'clock in the evenings. Yeah.

And the food?

Whatever our mother cooked for us. Whatever she had available.

Did she cook the same type of food once you moved?

Well you see, there was quite a time when it used to be all rationed. So we had coupons and what have you, so whatever –

E: It wasn't easy.

Very difficult for – for grownups it was extremely difficult but for us children we enjoyed – [laughs]. No, we didn't have chocolate. And we couldn't have jam [00:28:02] – we don't have all these things. It's all rationed, yes. So people knew that here during the War when they had rationing, shortages of everything, yeah.

E: Didn't you say they put the sardine in the jam –

This is something by mistake, yeah [laughs].

Do you want to tell us?

No, I was standing in the queue, you know, and they put sardine in this tin [ph], and then I went for the jam which – I had another one for the jam, and the horrible person put it in the sardine.

E: [Laughs].

I could have killed him [laughs]. And I couldn't get another one because, you know, it's rationed.

Wow [laughs].

E: What different to today [laughs].

And that's in the camp, in the ma'abarah?

No, this used to be out of that. Our father got us out – our father was a Freemason so he was helped a lot and he was a chartered accountant, and he arranged a flat and all that for us in Tel Aviv. So we were okay.

Can you tell me a bit more about being a Freemason from your father?

My father always wanted me to be a Freemason and I wasn't interested. But he was a Freemason as far as I know – all the time he was a Freemason. And he was quite advanced in the lodge and what have you, because I remember that when he died everybody came out. They bought a wreath for him. You remember when –?

E: [Inaud], yeah.

Yeah, a long procession.

E: [Overtalking 00:29:48].

And I [inaud] be in the front. I was in the back because there was such a long procession. It was about a hundred yards long, yeah. Yes.

So you got a flat in Tel Aviv. [00:30:00]

Yeah.

What was that flat like? Was it –?

Very small. Very small flat, yeah.

And was your father working?

Yes. Yeah, of course. Being a Freemason, as we came into the transit camp his friends arranged it all [laughs]. You know, they help each other the Freemasons. Yeah, so they got him a job as a chartered accountant of a hotel. Yeah.

If you want to take a break at any point, just say so.

No, I'm okay.

Okay. So he was working for a hotel. Which hotel was he working for?

Gazit. It was in the centre of Tel Aviv.

Okay.

E: It doesn't exist now.

No, it doesn't exist.

And you went to school?

Yes.

Could you speak Hebrew by that point?

No.

How – when –?

Children pick up a language very quickly. Yeah, very quickly, yeah.

Was it difficult to go to school without –?

No, because of my age it would have been very difficult to go to a Hebrew school so there was an English school in Jaffa so we went to the English school in Jaffa so it was easy for me.

So you were studying in English.

Studying in English.

Okay. And did you enjoy that school?

I loved it.

Can you tell me more?

Yeah, it was not a– it's called– it still is there in Jaffa, Tabeetha School, yeah. Yeah, I loved that school.

Were there other Jewish children there?

Oh, yes, many Jewish children there. Many Jewish children. There were local Christian children because Jaffa was more of a Christian area and they were there, Christians and some Arab. But mainly Jewish children, yeah.

What happened when you finished school?

Went to the army. [00:32:00]

Can you tell me about the army?

It's a different kettle of fish, you know, [laughs].

In what way?

[Laughs] Well, the first night was – [laughs] you never forget the first night in the army. They never let us sleep. We had to fix our bed and then they come and turn it over, 'Fix it again,' turn it over, 'Fix it again,' turn it over [laughs]. So yes, it was very, very tough in the army.

E: Especially in Eilat.

No, Eilat was different, yeah.

Why was it different?

Because then I was already a year-and-a-half in the army and I was transferred to Eilat. I wasn't – what you say – I was already a corporal then so that's a different thing, yeah, no.

Did you feel any difference in the army coming from Iraq than the Ashkenazi people in the army?

No. No.

Did you ever experience any sort of –?

No.

No. Okay.

No. I don't know how the grown up felt but I didn't come across it at all.

E: His mother felt it. She told me in – [coughs] because when they heard she –

Just one second. Can we mike –?

No, don't interfere.

[Inaud].

My mother felt – we had a neighbour, she was Ashkenazi, and she looked down on her. She felt, my mother felt it. She didn't say anything but she felt that she wasn't very friendly.

When you finished the army – what were you doing in the army?

I was in the tank regiment and – for two years, two-and-a-half years, yeah, [00:34:00] and then after that, the army, I arranged jobs in civilian lives. And to resettle down.

What was your job?

Mechanic [laughs].

Okay.

Whatever they gave you, you know what I mean? Because we go out with no money whatsoever, nothing, so just to have some income they used to arrange jobs for us. So they put me in a mechanical job, yeah.

Okay.

Which was very good by the way. It was very good experience for me in future life, in my career which was completely nothing to do with technical things, but it served me well I must say. I must say.

How?

My knowledge. I mean, I wasn't restricted. It opened my mind. There's other things than theory. There's also technical and this or that. Yes, it was very good, yeah. I was ahead of others because of that.

Did you – how long did you work for at that time?

Only about a year-and-a-half. And it was a night job. It was a night – what you call it?

Shift?

Shift, nightshift, for –

Where?

In Tel Aviv.

Okay.

Yeah.

Okay. So you finished your job as a mechanic. Why did you finish that job?

No, because when we came out from the army – the army arranged it for us. Immediately go into jobs. So whatever it was, where you were allocated to when – they just do so you can have pocket money and things like that. So you don't live on your parents. [00:36:00] You have some independence. And then we branched out.

Where did you go to? What did you do after that?

[Pause] What did I do?

E: I don't know.

I'm sorry, my mind – I'm forgetting [laughs] –

That's okay, that's fine.

E: Dan?

No.

E: You worked *be Dan lo*?

Yeah, yeah, I worked nightshift, yeah. I worked nightshift to make some money so I can go abroad. Then it was everybody wanted to go abroad because being in the army, and this [mumbles] – no money, no nothing, so me and my cousin worked nightshift to earn 50% more so we could – we wanted to come to England because we spoke English. We didn't want to go anywhere else.

Why England and why not America for example?

Nearer.

Okay.

Yeah.

E: No, your uncle also was in –

I had an – we had an uncle here. My mother's – who took me under his wings.

What year did you come to England? How old were you?

Sixty-three, straight – '63, How old would I be –

E: So you were twenty-one.

Twenty-three.

Twenty-three.

E: Twenty-three.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. And what did you do when you came to England?

I came – I went to study in England, yeah. And I lived with my uncle.

Where?

In north London.

Had you been to Europe before?

No.

What was your first impression of England when you –?

I liked it from day one.

Why?

I don't know.

E: You always –

I remember I arrived with my cousin who was my age. As I said he passed away. We arrived in – what's the name of the port? [00:38:00]

E: Dover?

No, not Dover.

E: *Lo chashuv.*

Newhaven or something like that, yeah, and our uncle picked us up from there, straight to their house. I had it easy. So yeah, I loved it from day one, I liked it in England.

What time of year was it?

October.

Okay. So you arrived, you went to your uncle's house.

Yeah.

Did you already have a place to study?

No.

So you had to apply.

Yeah.

Okay, and when did you start studying?

[Pause] Very soon after, yeah.

What did you study?

I studied engineering and then textile technology I studied in Manchester University.

Did you keep any – was your uncle keeping any traditions from Iraq at that point?

Oh, yes. Only tradition, not religious, but only tradition, yes, very much so.

Such as what?

Hmm –

E: Shabbat, the egg of shabbat.

And the food, the festivals, and all that. He was very broadminded, very liberal [pause].

He was – was he a member of a synagogue?

No.

No.

He probably was but he never went.

He never went.

Yeah.

He never took you or anything.

Yeah, no, no.

And at university were you involved in any Jewish life in any way?

Not really. I was enjoying myself more [laughs] – the best time of my life was at university [laughs]. Yeah, I loved it.

Tell me about it.

Oh, I enjoyed it, yeah. Funny thing, I found university much easier than secondary school.

Why?

I don't know. I don't know. Because I developed or something. [00:40:00] Secondary school was difficult for me. You know, I struggled, but university was – I enjoyed it. I think my mind developed. I was a late developer or something.

And who were your friends at university?

A mixture. Mixture.

A mixture in what way?

English girls of course, and friends –

E: Jewish, you had Jewish friends?

A mix.

So you were friends with Jewish people as well.

And Jewish, yeah, of course.

And was there any problem that you were Israeli, that you were Iraqi born?

No. None.

No.

I never came across it.

You never came across any –?

No.

Okay. What did you do after university?

Madam [laughs].

E: [Laughs].

Okay.

No, no, not – I worked, I worked, I worked, [laughs] – no [laughs].

E: Married late [laughs].

Yeah [laughs], fairly late, yeah [all laugh].

Where were you working?

Yeah, I worked with friends of ours, a cousin of mine whose uncles – industry in England and in Manchester. And they took me under their wings and eventually became a director there, and then they died and everything collapsed, and then I was on my own [pause].

So where did you go? What did you do?

Well, I saved some money so I was all right as far as that was concerned. No, I got myself a nice flat in Marble Arch, Edgware Road [laughs], [00:42:02] the Water Gardens if you – [laughs].

Lovely.

Yeah, yes, and then I met Madam, introduced to Madam.

How did you meet?

Through her cousin. Her cousin met me –

Yeah.

And she liked me, and she – [laughs] she introduced us.

Was Etty living in Israel?

In Israel, yeah.

So you went back to Israel to get married?

Yeah, we got married in Israel but I had to go there and back and what have you.

So how long were you going there and back before – ?

I think it took us about two years until we got married.

E: Yeah. Something.

We knew each other, we corresponded a bit, yeah, and then the whole trail went cold.

E: Yeah [both laugh], because I didn't want to come to England. I was – [laughs].

Yeah. She didn't want to leave her parents and come here. She found – when she came to live here –

E: Very –

She had a miserable time.

E: Yeah. It was cold. I came in February.

Yeah. And then eventually she loved it [both laugh].

What year?

E: After ten years –

She came – what, in '67?

E: Seventy-seven.

Seventy-seven. Seventy-seven, yeah.

E: Yeah. It took me ten years to adapt [laughs].

She's a hot place girl. She –

E: Not the cold [laughs].

She couldn't stand the cold, yeah.

Did you ever think about moving to Israel?

No, because I was working here. My future was here. And – the main thing was leaving for her, I mean, leaving her parents, but when her parents passed away then it became easier for her to be here. Then she didn't want to go back, she wanted to stay here [laughs].

So you were living in Marble Arch.

Yeah, a flat in Marble Arch, near Marble Arch, the Water Gardens, yeah. [00:44:02]

When did you move north?

When I bought this house.

Okay.

E: I think it was '73.

No, '75.

E: Seventy-five.

Did you have children?

E: No, no.

No, no, I was single.

E: We were married '77.

I was single.

Okay.

E: Yeah.

When did you have children? What –?

E: Eighty and '82.

1980 and 1982. Was the – [laughs].

Were you in the same career, were you in the same job at that point?

What was I doing then?

E: Yes. Then it collapsed I think later.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

E: Yeah.

Yes.

E: And then you going independent, your uncle died and –

Yeah, and then I went on my own.

What was your company on your own?

Supplier. I had a small supply company and I was supplying mainly restaurants.

Okay.

Hmm.

Do you think where you came from, Iraq and Israel and everything, do you think that's had an impact on the way that you've lived your life?

Yeah, of course. The people. We always kept in contact with the same people more or less. Of course we met new people and what have you, but we kept our identity.

How?

At home with our parents, the language.

Did you speak Arabic after you left Iraq?

My parents spoke Arabic. I wanted to forget all that era. I wasn't happy. I was happy as a child but I wasn't happy in that environment in Iraq. It's not a friendly place. [00:46:01] Not even now as you very well know, maybe it's worse now.

E: Or worse now, yeah.

You don't go to Iraq to live or you don't go to Iraq as a tourist, yeah.

Would you visit – would you go back to visit?

No [pause].

Do you think moving – do you think moving from – no, that's not a good question [laughs].

Well –

Just talking about when you were in the army.

Yeah.

And when you were in Eilat –

Yeah.

You said something wasn't very nice, something wasn't very –

Well no, because I couldn't get home often enough [laughs].

Okay.

I used to go once a week home but then in Eilat only once every three months because of the distance, and as soldiers they were only allowed to fly, not allowed to go by car or buses because they kidnapped us on the way. Jordanians used to kidnap –

E: [Inaud].

So we were allowed to fly, and because we had to fly and it's expensive, so it was very irregular time, we used to go and all the stuff. I used to be always homesick. Always homesick.

Was there a big difference – kind of what I was trying to say – about the community life between living in Iraq and Israel and then England? Did you feel that difference in the way that communities –?

In England?

Yeah.

England is a very tolerant society so there's no complaints whatsoever. I mean, I integrated very easily as I say from day one. No problem yeah.

[00:48:00] *A lot of people that we've interviewed in the past have said that they missed the community life in the countries that they were born in. Did you feel any ?*

No, I loved it here [laughs]. I didn't miss anything [laughs].

Okay.

E: But also because you'd got a lot of Iraqi friends.

I'd got friends here, yeah.

E: So [overtalking 00:48:23].

We've got friends, Israeli friends, and all that, so yeah.

E: So that's very important.

All our friends were Israelis –

E: And Iraqi.

And Iraqis, yeah so...

E: Yeah, so...

Because of the language barrier –

E: [overtalking].

So it's inevitable. Didn't mix that much with the locals because of the traditions and the culture. It's different, so we kept to ourselves.

Is it important for you to pass it down to your children and your grandchildren?

What?

The culture.

E: Very.

Yeah, very much so, why not? They're interested. They're very much keen.

E: They are very interested, yeah.

They're very – they want to know where they came from and – they're very happy here.

Yeah.

And they don't want this culture to disappear. They think with our age group, when we're gone they'll have nothing to remind them of everything, so they want something for their children. That's what my son told me. That's why he want me to have this interview. He said he want to pass it on to his children, yeah.

E: And even in *Pesach* he like the Sephardi way, you know.

Well, the traditions, they're used to the tradition, yeah.

For example, you mentioned Pesach, doing Pesach the Sephardi way. What is Pesach – what is the Sephardi way of Pesach? What does that mean?

Well, the tunes are different. It's exactly the same only the tunes are different.

E: [Overtalking 00:49:55].

Yeah, the tunes are different, yeah.

E: Back in Iraq.

Yeah. We're the originals. [00:50:01] The Iraqi Jews are the original Jews because they were there for how much, 3000, 3000 ? –

E: More, 5000.

No, 3500 years, so when you think of it, we're the original Jews [laughs].

E: They say the Garden of Eden was in Iraq.

Yeah [pause].

Are there any other ways that you pass on your Iraqi heritage?

[Sighs] I must say, I never thought about it, yeah. My son is thinking about it.

E: [Laughs].

What is –?

Alan. That's why he arranged all this.

E: [Laughs].

He wants me to pass it on to his offsprings.

And what would you pass on? What's the most important thing for you to pass on?

It's what he thinks. He just want me –

But for you, what would be the most important thing for them to know?

Well, the family. To go back to the family and traditions and what have you. The traditions are disappearing.

Which traditions? Give me some examples.

Our parents' traditions. Whatever it was. Festivals and what have you.

E: It's not disappearing, [inaud].

Hmm, it's different. It's mixed Ashkenazi and Sephardi.

E: Yeah. I don't think it's disappearing.

What are these traditions? Can you give me some examples?

Like in the Passover we don't do it exactly like our parents used to do it. It's now mixed. Because of Israel it's more modern and what have you.

E: But we still read the Sephardi tune.

Yeah.

But what's something that's changed? Can you give me an example of something that you used to do in Iraq that you don't do now on Pesach, on the Seder ?

We couldn't do many things in Iraq [all laugh].

You said the traditions are –

E: Changing.

Are changing.

Yeah, of course.

So can you give me an example of a change?

E: I really don't think–

Well, we're more free and – free, we're free. In Iraq we weren't free. [00:52:03]

E: But the tradition, I don't think it's changing, this tune and everything. And the food. I don't think so.

Hmm.

You said you weren't free in Iraq.

Hmm.

To pra – can you expand on that a bit more?

I was a child, what do I know? Always to be –

You know more than me so tell me.

Yeah, we used to be very careful what we say and this sort of things. We weren't liked by the locals of course, so we kept away.

Hmm-mm. Is there a message to the future that – you said you have to be careful about the way that you speak in Iraq. Did your parents tell you or did you just understand?

No, they told us to be aware. They didn't like us to be on our own. We always had to be with grownups.

E: And they told you to be careful.

Yeah, we got– it wasn't safe to be on our own.

So did they, for example, sit you down and say, 'Don't speak about this, don't speak about that,' or did you –?

I can't remember but there were restrictions. I can't remember what they were. Don't forget, Iraq was – how would you say – a police state.

Hmm-mm.

So you were very careful what you say. But as a child they could trace you back to your family, you know what I mean, and arrest the whole family. The arrest wasn't that they come but that your parents and the brothers and cousins and the whole family [laughs], the whole wide family, all arrested [laughs].

Your parents didn't tell you about any of these arrests. Did you see any arrests?

I knew of arrests, yeah. **[00:54:01]**

Yeah.

E: Well, this Ades, you knew about it.

Yeah, of course, he was hanged. Yeah, yeah, of course. He was related by marriage, yeah.

Yeah. Shall we take a short break?

Whatever you say.

Let's take a short break and we'll –

[Break in recording]

During the break we were talking about a couple of things. Can you tell me about your –

I2: Sorry, just –

Can you tell me a little bit about your Rabbi ancestor?

I didn't know him.

Tell me about him. Who was he, what was his name?

I think he's about – this is 200 years ago or more.

E: Yeah, there is a date here.

Yeah, but it's a Hebrew date. I don't know it.

E: Yeah, it's about to, yeah– This is a great-great-great –

Two hundred plus, yeah, yeah.

E: Great-great-great.

So I'm directly descended from him.

What was his name?

E: Abdallah –

Ovadia Somekh.

E: Ovadia Abdallah Somekh.

Yeah. But they used to call him Master. His title was Master, they always called him Master. It says so there. *istaiy*, in Arabic is Master.

E: And there was a famous Rabbi Ish Chai, he is his pupil. This Ish Chai is very famous, yeah.

Growing up, did you – were you told about him?

Yes.

What did they tell you?

They said – [laughs].

E: That he was very famous.

I wasn't that interested then [laughs].

E: [Laughs] Now he's more interested.

I2: What was he ?

What was he, who was he?

He was the Chief Rabbi of most of Iraq of course but his influence spread outside of Iraq.

E: Yeah.

He's known.

To where?

I'll give you an example. I was surprised. I was once, don't know when, it was an Ashkenazi Rabbi, and when I told [00:56:00] – gave him my whole – I gave him my name, Chaim Someck, he told me, 'Are you related to the Rabbi?' I said, 'Yes.' He knew about him. An Ashkenazi Rabbi.

E: But also in Singapore when we went.

Oh, in Singapore, of course. In Singapore we went to visit a synagogue there. When I told them my name, 'Oh, you must come on Saturday.' So they took me on Saturday especially to

the rostrum where the Rabbi was giving a sermon. He said, 'I want to intro – we've got the honour to have a descendant of the Someck Rabbi – Someck,' [laughs].

E: Someck.

Yeah, 'In our midst today,' [laughs]. I felt that small [laughs].

E: Also the wedding of the children there.

Yeah. He's known all over – in Judaism he is known, yeah.

E: And he was Somekh. Somekh. So you be proud [laughs].

Hmm.

E: [Laughs].

Are you proud when you think about it?

Of course.

Yeah?

Well, he achieved – [laughs]. I just realised this is all pencil, this is – you see, charcoal or what have you – yeah.

E: But they used to dress like the Muslim, like –

Yeah. Turbans, yeah.

E: Turban.

Let me put the picture.

[Background talking]

E: I remember the picture.

I2: Hold the picture up for us.

Can you hold the picture?

I2: Just so we can –

[Break in recording]

Is that okay?

I2: Yeah.

Lovely.

E: The name is somewhere here. Yes, Abdallah Ovadia Avraham Somekh.

Okay, if you could – [pause].

You know, I framed it. When my father passed away in Tel Aviv and I was there and I was looking through his cupboard, and I found this scroll.

E: It was a scroll.

In a scroll. And I opened it and I saw that. So I brought it here and I framed it. [00:58:00]

Do you know how long he had it?

Many years.

E: But he never told you about it. Did he –

What?

E: Your father, did he say about –?

Yeah, the Somekh, everybody knew the – yeah. But I didn't know he had – between this thing I found this scroll. Yeah, this was – yeah.

E: Yeah.

Did anyone in your family in Iraq at the time dress traditionally Arabic style?

E: Like *dishdasha*.

Yeah, they all did.

They all did.

Yeah.

And your parents?

No, I remember my grandmother, yeah. No, my parents were modern. My mother was always modern. She used to like western dancing and music and all that. And I grew up on western music, yeah.

E: But a lot of the one with *dishdasha*.

But your grandmother –

Grandmother, oh, she was Iraqi [both laugh].

How did she dress? What did she –?

With the *abaya*, you know, the black things. The way you see them now – you see the Arab women?

Yeah.

They used to have to go that way.

Hmm-mm.

E: Yeah.

But they didn't – 'cos your mother didn't, so she didn't –

My mother didn't because times start changing.

E: Start changing, yeah.

My mother was always liberal.

Where did she get that from? Was your grand–?

No, no, because she spoke a few languages.

Okay.

So – and we grew up in Basra in a British community, you know, the soldiers were there since the War. And I remember growing up with the English officers coming to play Bridge with my father, yeah.

Yeah. Can you tell me a bit – speaking about the War – did your parents tell you about the War, the Second World War?

[Sighs] I remember going into those – they didn't build houses like this [01:00:03], they were always bungalows with gardens, and they dug a trench in the garden and – which sort of – you know, so if a bomb fall, you know, a bomb goes like that so if – and this comes on top of you, you are safe.

And did they tell you about the Farhud?

They used to talk about a lot and what I heard –

Yeah?

But just to tell me to know about it, no.

What did they talk about it? Can you tell me what they used to say?

They were terrified. They were terrified. Not because of the properties, only terrified personally. Because it wasn't a matter of taking your belonging but cutting your throat before then [laughs]. Literally, they liked cutting throats the Arabs, yeah, [laughs].

E: But there was [overtalking].

So did they tell –

Yeah, but there – the same time there were Muslims who saved Jews.

Can you tell me?

Yeah, and that's what I read. Apparently there was – there's a famous street, a Jewish street, which had two entrances on either side, either end, and when the Farhud Pogrom – they were intending go and kill and pillage and what have you, rich Arab families who had their own – sort of like the Mafia, they had their own army. They put their men on each side to stop the mob coming through so they saved the Jews in that street, that main street, yeah.

So you read about that once you left Iraq.

Oh, I read about it here.

Here. Did they experience anything similar to the Farhud in Basra?

Yeah. All over the country. [01:02:00] They had – they locked themselves in.

Hmm-mm.

And hoping they won't break in, the mob will not break in.

Did you experience any mobs, any – did you see any mobs or anything like that?

Oh, you always see mobs in Arab countries.

Did you personally is or is the–?

With the swords, drawn swords and the screaming.

Did you see it as a child?

I don't know whether I saw it live or I saw it on film, I don't remember, yeah [both laugh], but it was there.

Yeah.

They liked to go and – you know, you see them, you know, they shout and scream slogans and swords in the air.

Do you know if your parents experienced this kind of help from neighbours?

The only thing I remember that we had very good Christian neighbours because they were also a minority so we had something in common. But I remember my mother said when – after the war of independence when they turned over – the Jews had to – they were okay until the war of independence, then they started seeing refugees coming from Palestine so they turned on the Jews. They took all their properties, gave it to Palestinians, you know what I mean? And our Christian friends left us, didn't want to know us. Didn't want to be involved. I can remember my mother said, 'Oh, you know, our neighbours, all of a sudden they don't know us.' That happened in Europe of course.

E: The same [pause].

Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think is important? [01:04:01]

E: To add.

About your time in Iraq first? About living in Iraq.

You know, I was a child so a lot of things I don't know. I know – I remember when – ah, yes, maybe that's interesting [both laugh]. Before they made the arrangements with the Americans to fly us over to Israel –

Hmm-mm.

They used to – Jews used to smuggle – be smuggled over to the Iranian border by smugglers. And those smugglers actually sometimes used to turn over the – kill them and take their belongings, you know, yeah, [laughs]. But anyway, I remember one night we already took all suitcases and what have you there, we were going to be smuggled that night. And I was looking forward to it.

E: [Laughs].

An adventure. I was looking forward. And then they cancelled it [both laugh].

E: [overtalking].

I was so – and I was so disappointed, yeah, [both laugh].

E: but he wouldn't have been alive.

Yeah, going to the smugglers.

E: [Overtalking].

But the smugglers sometimes, you have dishonest smugglers, you know what I mean? They used to turn on those people they're smuggling and they kill them and take their belonging and – yeah.

E: Of course, they took their money. You were lucky.

Was that the only time you tried to leave before?

Yeah. We were going to go, then they said they're going to allow us to leave because the Americans, the American government, made arrangements with the Iraqi government, they pay money per head and they let us leave. And they arranged –

But you only tried once with the smugglers.

We were all ready to go that night and I was looking forward to it [laughs], and it was cancelled.

I2: [Inaud]?

Yeah, do you know how much you paid? Do you know anything? How it was arranged?

No. A lot of money, a lot of money. And that even wasn't – sometimes those smugglers used to turn on the people they're smuggling. **[01:06:02]**

Yeah.

I2: [Inaud].

They even raped and we knew – we heard cases where they took their belongings and raped the women. Hmm.

Do you know who these smugglers were?

How do I know?

You don't know.

No, this has been passed from one – yeah.

E: And your uncle, he worked in KLM. Didn't – what did he – he took people to Israel?
What did he do, your uncle?

No, he was managing director of KLM.

E: His uncle.

In Baghdad. And he was able to arrange for people who had money to transfer it through diplomatic bags. Like the Saatchis.

Yeah.

The Saatchis are second cousins of mine. Yeah. We have – our grandmothers from our mother's sides were sisters. But of course they don't want to know me [both laugh].

E: Don't say.

No, I mean it. I mean it, I mean it. Charles actually saw me and– he didn't want to know you.

Were you friends in Iraq?

The families, of course, yeah.

You knew them in Iraq.

Our parents, yeah. And I knew Charles Saatchi in London. We used to go out a lot together.

E: Your mother used to dance with Nathan Saatchi, the father of all the Saatchi.

Yeah, yeah, they were dancing partners with their father.

Hmm-mm.

My mother. He was liberal and she was liberal and – yeah. Modern dancing. They were dancing partners.

Dancing where?

E: In house ?

No, in the clubs, modern dancing, Jewish clubs, you know. Western music, they used to dance.

Was it allowed? So it was allowed for them to go to Jewish clubs.

There were Jewish clubs, yeah.

Yeah?

Yeah.

Did you go? [01:08:00]

I remember, yes, they used to play – but then they – after the independence war of Israel they closed everything. There was nothing.

E: Even the Jewish.

But before that, do you remember the club?

Yes.

Can you tell me about the club? You said you played – when you were –

E: What did –?

No, I – you'll find it yourself. Now if you go back to your school it will look much smaller than you remember it. Isn't that right?

E: [Coughs].

Yeah.

So everything was much, much bigger than you imagined. So that's why once I wanted to go and –

E: [Coughs].

Visit my school in Jaffa, and my friend he told me, 'Don't Chaim, don't. You'll be disappointed. Remember it as you remember it,' and I never went. He said he went there then everything – the yard was smaller, the classes were smaller, the building was smaller [all laugh].

Do you remember the club as you remember it?

Yes.

How was it? What did it look like? What was it –?

I was a child.

E: [Overtalking].

What was it like –?

A Jewish club, it was a Jewish club, yeah, but they closed it, yeah.

Was it a big room?

No, no, they had a garden and the ping-pong room and tennis.

And did you go a lot?

My parents did.

E: *Al teshafshef.*

But you didn't.

No, I was a child. What, I go and play tennis [laughs]?

No, but did you go to play with the other children, other Jewish children in the club or –?

No, I remember going with my parents and standing at the side and watching whatever they are doing, yeah.

It wasn't –

There wasn't playgroup like that, no. They didn't know what playgroups were [laughs].

No, but for example a lot of the – in other interviews people have said that their parents would go and all the children would go and the children would play and the parents would do their thing.

Yeah, yeah, we used to go with the parents only, never on our own.

Okay.

Hmm.

E: To watch, yeah.

And when it closed did you notice a big difference in the way that people –? [01:10:04]

Oh, all of a sudden there's no club. What happened, our club was taken over and given to Palestinian refugees after the war, so they took all Jewish properties – and they've got to settle them somewhere so they took Jewish properties, clubs –

E: They brought the Palestinian to Iraq?

Yeah.

E: Really?

Some. They didn't want to help them but they had to.

E: Oh, okay.

You know, because, you know, 'Our Arab brothers don't do anything for us.' So they took a few. They take Jewish property and they give them the club. I remember.

E: Really?

Yeah, I remember, yeah.

E: I don't, no.

So they gave them the club and –

They closed it. They took it. Just confiscate it. Look, law and order, not like as you know – [laughs].

What was your – the reaction? How did that change the social life of –?

I don't know. I was a child darling.

Don't remember.

I don't know.

You didn't feel a difference after that?

No, because we were getting ready to leave. We're looking forward to our flight.

Okay. And what about the synagogues? Did they close the synagogues?

There weren't synagogues as such as I remember. I remember they used to convert a classroom into a synagogue. A synagogue I remember we used to go to was our classroom, was converted for that day.

Okay.

E: So there wasn't a synagogue as such?

Of course there was. My uncle was the big – a big Jewish synagogue in Baghdad very known.

E: Yeah, but you went to a converted one, yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

'Cos it was a Jewish school.

In Basra, yeah.

In Basra.

In Basra.

E: Yeah.

And in Baghdad, was there synagogues?

Large synagogue, still exists.

Were you allowed to go?

Yeah, my uncle got married there. I was there, yeah.

They didn't close it.

They closed it. **[01:12:01]**

E: But now it's closed? I think it's still –

Of course it's closed. This was his name, went to visit it.

E: Ah, Shuker.

Shuker, yes.

E: Shuker.

We've got an Iraqi friend who's obsessed with his past.

E: He went to buy a house – he bought a house now.

In Iraq. Not in Baghdad, yeah.

E: But more in the Kurdish – yeah.

He'll get killed eventually.

E: Yeah. So he went to the synagogue.

I2: Yeah, we've interviewed him.

Shuker yeah.

E: Shuker? Ah.

Yeah, he's a good friend of ours, yeah.

E: Yeah, he's lovely.

He's living dangerously.

E: I don't know how he does – he went to where he lived –

Yeah.

E: And they nearly killed him [laughs].

Yeah, he told us. He told us he went to [laughs] – to his house where they used to live and, you know, he took a camera. He was standing across the road and taking picture and the owner saw him from the window and came out to the balcony and told him, 'What are you doing?' He told him, 'This used to be our house and I'm taking pictures.'

E: [Laughs].

He says he came down with a broom and chased him with the – [laughs].

E: I tell you one day I think they will kill him.

He's asking for it.

E: His Facebook, he's eating the food and –

He's asking for it. He's going to all those dangerous places, yeah.

E: I like him actually.

No, but he see it like that, he's not on his own. He's got bodyguards with him.

E: [Laughs].

So the synagogue was closed.

Yes, of course.

Yes, okay. Was there any other way of being Jewish in public at that time?

I don't know. I was a young boy.

You were a child but you can –

E: [Overtalking].

You tell me from what your parents told you.

I remember they used to convert classes in school to synagogue on festivals, yeah.

Okay, yeah.

So a simple class became –

E: A synagogue.

A synagogue.

Is there anything else that you remember?

Because, you know, in Jewish tradition if you get ten people –

E: *Minyan*, yeah.

Yeah, then you can have a synagogue and do prayers, yeah. [01:14:00]

E: [Inaud].

Yeah.

Is there anything else that you want to tell me that I haven't asked you about? Anything you remember from that time?

You got me at the wrong time because my memory's not good at all [laughs].

E: You're ok, fine, 100%.

Ask me, ask me

E: [Laughs]. We talked about the Rabbi, we talked about you fell in the river. That's the story [overtalking]

Yeah.

Did you learn to swim after that?

E: Yeah [laughs].

In Israel.

In Israel, okay.

In Israel, yeah, yeah. Everything changed when we came to Israel. The world opened to us when we came to Israel. A different world. We were alive when we came to Israel.

E: But there were discrimination between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi.

[Inaud].

E: [Inaud].

Was it a feeling that you were – was it a feeling of freedom or was it a –?

Everything. I could go on my own in the street without having a grownup with me. I could go to the cinema on my own if I wanted to as an eleven-year-old child. No, completely as free as in – more free than in Europe, yeah, [laughs].

Let's just stop for a second.

[Break in recording]

E: Yeah.

What did he say?

E: Alan.

All of a sudden, yeah, this going back to our roots is very important because when we go, there's nothing.

Hmm-mm.

Nothing to remind them of – for his children, nothing to – he knows nothing. Nothing to pass on.

E: Yeah.

If you have a message for the future, what would that message be?

E: Be proud of your –

Be proud of –

E: Be proud of what you are. [01:16:00]

Yeah. Yeah, be proud of what you are.

E: Be proud of what you are. Of your religion, of your ethnic group, everything, you have to be proud. And to pass it on.

Yeah?

Yes.

And what about you?

The same.

The same. She said it for me actually, yes.

E: [Laughs]. We are very proud.

Can you say it? Can you – what –?

Yeah.

E: To be –

Be proud of what you are – and you live in a very tolerant society in England – and say what you have to say. Teach it to your children so they know where they came from. It's good.

E: And not to be afraid.

Yeah, not to be afraid. In another country yes, but not in England [laughs].

How would you identity yourself? What would your identity be?

As an Israeli residing in England as my second home, which I've been in England more than I've been in Israel, and I like it very much. And I like the English culture.

E: And Iraqi. So you're third.

Hmm?

E: He's third an Iraqi, third Israeli –

And third English, yeah.

E: I – we – the children identify him as third, third, third.

Yeah.

So your children see you as a third, third, third –

Yeah.

And you see yourself as half and half.

E: What do you see yourself? Third?

How do you see yourself?

E: Iraqi third, Israeli third, English? Or different?

No, more English than Iraqi. I want to forget my Iraqi side.

E: [Laughs].

Yeah.

E: Why?

No, it wasn't pleasant.

E: I don't [inaud].

Because you didn't grow there darling. You were born in Israel, so – [laughs].

E: No, but I'm –

Yeah, I'm proud of it, of course, because of the culture.

E: Yeah, but don't say you want to forget about it.

The culture's different than the country Etty.

E: Yeah, but – yeah.

So for you there's a big difference between the culture and the -

Of course, of course. It wasn't very healthy for –

E: To forget about the country –

Just one second. [01:18:00]

It wasn't very healthy to be a Jew in an Arab country.

Hmm-mm.

It was all right during the middle – not the middle ages, when the Jews were having a bad time in Europe in recent history, it was much better for the Jews in the Muslim countries.

You say you would like to forget. Was it living in Iraq?

I didn't like it. I always remember it as a dirty – everything was dirty, not very – I don't know why – as a child, I don't – you know, the roads weren't clean and – it's not like here or in Israel where everything is organised.

Do you see yourself as a refugee in any way?

I was a refugee but not any more, no. I feel very accepted in England and in Israel, but I won't be in Iraq [laughs].

Do you think there'll be a time where your children or maybe your grandchildren could go back to Iraq?

It's up to them but I will not encourage them.

E: I think Alan mentioned it, one day he would – it's his dream.

Yeah, because he's going back – [laughs] – yeah him, but not Nigel.

E: Yeah.

[Laughs] It's two brothers. Nigel, no way [all laugh].

E: One day if there will be peace.

Do you know why? Did you –?

Because they're different characters.

Hmm-mm.

They're very different characters. I don't know why Alan went into it. I think because of his friends maybe.

E: No. He likes it.

And is it important for you that they continue that?

I don't mind. I wouldn't tell – I mean, I didn't mind having this interview. [01:20:00]

E: Pleasure.

He wants it, I'll do it.

E: [Laughs].

He wants to pass it on to his children, by all means. He'll impose it on his brother, I know that [laughs].

E: No, I think it's also important for him.

Yeah, it is important for him but he doesn't show it like he does.

E: [Laughs].

Yeah. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

No, ask me, I don't know [all laugh].

Chaim Someck, thank you very much for –

Thank you.

Agreeing to be interviewed by Sephardi Voices UK.

Thank you, you have been very patient, thank you very much.

E: [Laughs].

Just stay there please.

Etty Someck, thank you very much for joining us in this interview with Chaim Someck. You are Chaim's wife and your family also came from Iraq. Can you tell me a bit about your parents and your family in Iraq?

E: Yeah, my parents, when they came my mother was pregnant with me, 1952, and she nearly gave birth on the plane. So I was lucky. A week after they landed in Israel I was born in Jaffa. And my father was a doctor so we were lucky that they took him to Be'er Ya'akov to hospital and they didn't take them to *ma'abarot* –

Transit camps.

E: The trans – yeah. Because he was a doctor. And straightaway they gave us a house. As a little girl I remember the house, it was amazing. And also, we didn't suffer from the rationing because every day there used to come a van with plenty of food. We couldn't believe it. With bread and butter and meat and – **[01:22:00]**

[Laughs].

E: And we didn't know that other people are suffering from rationing. So that was the advantage of my father was a doctor. And I think we stayed in Be'er Ya'akov about four years and it was fantastic time for us again because my mother, she was very social person and – in Iraq they had social life. And all of a sudden she was by herself and she spoke only Arabic and most of the doctors they were from Europe so I don't think she mingled very well with them so she was a bit lonely. Yeah.

[Coughs].

E: And one thing I remember, I was a little girl, the Sinai War. Maybe I was four years old, the same age as our granddaughter, I remember my parents they stuck all kind of – on the wall for –

On the glass, Sellotape.

E: On the glass, Sellotape, for camouflage.

Not camouflage.

E: For – how do you call it?

No, so it doesn't shatter.

E: Yes.

The glass doesn't shatter.

E: Doesn't shatter, that's right, yes. I remember it so well. I was four years old. So this is the Sinai War , yeah.

Did your parents pass their Iraqi heritage to you?

E: Very much. Very, very much. It's a very – our house was a very Iraqi home. Because my parents, they spoke Arabic and they spoke Arabic with us. And at the time I was shy to speak Arabic in front of my friend because mostly were Ashkenazis, so what do they say about us? Like, we're Arabs or something like that, and – so I told my parents, 'When my friend comes, please speak Hebrew. At least when they come,' [laughs]. And they accepted. And I remember my father, he used to open Umm Kulthum, you know, the Arabic singer. I said, 'When my friends come, please don't open it,' [laughs]. We were really – [01:24:03].
Al tarim et harosh, hu metsalem otcha. It's okay?

Do you think there is a difference in the way that your families related to their Iraqi heritage?

Yes, they were very Iraqi.

E: My family.

We were more liberal.

E: Yeah we are –

Liberal

E: More the tradition – as I told you like in *Yom Kippur* my mother used to make the almond juice. You know, like she used to make it by her hand, not to buy. And in *Pesach* from dates they used to squeeze it and make – *metsalmim otcha*. [all laugh].

I'm sorry [all laugh].

E: Yeah, this –

Why are you laughing? What are you remembering?

She's going into such details [laughs].

E: Of course. Not like you [both laugh]. Yes, they used to squeeze the dates and the dates juice used to – yeah, I remember it so well. It was a very, very Iraqi traditional home, our home. Also, a lot of music, Iraqi music I grew up with. You know, what is *Tschaalwee* ?

Tell us.

E: It's like the Arab music. They used to come with their – all the instrument, and with belly-dancing, and you had to dance and – yeah, it's very, very – they want to keep the tradition.

Chaim, did you ever experience anything like that?

Yes.

E: [Laughs]

Yes, but I wasn't very keen on it.

E: He was silly, now he say he was silly [all laugh]. Now, he likes it [laughs].

Why weren't you so keen on it? Why? What –?

I was more interested in Western music.

E: But don't you like it now? **[01:26:00]**

Yes.

E: Yeah.

Because now it's – because of age, yeah.

E: [Laughs] Yeah, because of age.

Going back to our childhood.

E: [Laughs] Yeah, so that was my roots, yeah.

Yeah. Do you think your influence is because your family grew up, or you grew up with a more maybe positive view of Iraq than Chaim?

E: Yeah.

Do you think that's affected the way that you pass that on to your children?

E: Yes, I really wanted them to have it, to have it, yeah. Yeah, and I think they saw it a lot in my family as well. Yeah, the children. I used to take them. Six weeks we stayed with my parents. Yeah, so they received it well, yeah.

Chaim, how did you feel about it, seeing such an outwardly Iraqiness?

Very good.

Yeah?

Of course.

E: Yeah. He likes it, yeah [laughs].

Yeah.

Okay, thank you very much.

E: Yes, thank you, *lehith'aten i'm Iraqi nachon* ?

Yeah.

Oh, yeah? Okay.

E: He wanted to – yeah.

How important was it for you to marry someone from an Iraqi background?

I preferred it.

Why?

They cook better [all laugh].

E: Don't put it, please [laughs].

The one if it's all [all laugh].

E: Only because of that, yeah?

No. They're nice girls.

E: Nice girls [laughs].

Was it because –

They listen to their parents and all that, so.

E: The old generation [laughs].

Was it more important that it was an Iraqi or just someone from the Middle East?

No, Iraqi.

Iraqi.

Yeah, you always want to go to your kind, you know.

E: Yeah.

What about you?

E: Yeah, I really wanted Iraqi. [01:28:01] I think there is more in common, more in common, yeah, [laughs]. I think so, yeah [laughs].

Thanks.

E: Good question [laughs].

Thank you.

Thank you.

[Break in recording]

My father-in-law, Dr Nagid Akhan [ph] that's after his graduation.

In what country?

Iraq.

E: As a doctor.

As a doctor, yeah. That's my mother, Flora, before she got married.

Where?

As a single girl.

Where?

In Baghdad.

Do you know roughly the year? The decade?

E: Twenties?

No, no, the thirties.

E: The thirties.

Thank you.

That's my wife Etty with her parents and brother when they first arrived in Israel.

What year?

E: 1952.

1952.

Thank you.

This is with our son, Alan when he was one-year-old in 1981.

Where?

In London.

Thank you.

What do you want me to say?

E: The picture of *Pesach*.

Who's in this photograph?

E: Passover.

Yeah.

Who's in this photograph?

You want me to name them?

E: Yeah.

Or just tell me who they are, yeah.

Yeah, okay.

E: [Laughs].

Yeah.

That's Passover feast in London, that's with my parents, my father and mother, and my sister and her family, and our neighbour, this lady here is our neighbour.

What year roughly?

I don't know. I don't know. Quite a while now.

E: I think 1998, I would say. 1998, yeah. [01:30:03]

1998.

E: Yeah.

Thank you.

This is Nigel and Danielle's wedding at The Grove in 19 – no, no.

E: 2017.

2017.

E: Yeah. Who is in the picture?

That's my – that's – [laughs] Nigel, Danielle, Etty, Alan and myself.

I2: Please.

That's myself and Etty and with our grandchildren Leah and Lev. This being their fourth birthday [pause].

I2: Yes, please.

It's Rabbi –

E: Abdallah –

Abdallah Ovadia –

E: Ovadia –

Abraham Somekh, was –

E: [Inaud].

Chief Rabbi?

E: The Chief Rabbi.

Chief Rabbi –

E: Of –

His title was *istai* which means master.

E: Chief Rabbi of Baghdad, yeah?

And the surrounding areas, yeah.

When?

E: It's 200 years ago.

Yeah, about 200 years ago.

Thank you.

[End of recording]