

Oral History of: Sylvie Salei
Interviewed by: Fran Hildebrandt
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Location of Interview: Max M. Fisher Federation Building, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Subject Matter: Diaspora in Detroit: the Jewish Immigrant Experience

Fran Hildebrandt: 00:01 My name is Fran Hildebrandt and today is Thursday, April 12th, 2018. I'm interviewing Sylvie Jami Salei at the Max Fisher Federation Building in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

Sylvie, did I pronounce your name correctly?

Sylvie Salei: 00:24 My first name is Sylvie.

Fran Hildebrandt: 00:26 Sylvie.

Sylvie Salei: 00:27 My last name is Jami and my married name is Salei.

Fran Hildebrandt: 00:32 Thank you. So, for the record, if I mispronounced it, I'm apologizing but I wanna make sure we get it down correctly.

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Sylvie Salei: 01:05 Yes, I do.

Fran Hildebrandt: 01:06 Thank you so much. Okay, so let's get started. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

Sylvie Salei: 01:15 I was born in April 6, '47. I was born in a city by the name of La Goulette, it's in country Tunisia. La Goulette is a suburb of Tunis. Tunis is the capital. The country is Tunisia.

Fran Hildebrandt: 01:34 Can you tell me about your parents?

Sylvie Salei: 01:38 Tunisia was colonized by the French in 1800, I believe, and they left in 1954. This is the reason why we speak French. So, the first language for Jewish people was French.

Fran Hildebrandt: 01:58 That was one of the questions I was actually going to ask you.
So, you left in 1965, am I correct?

Sylvie Salei: 02:09 Yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 02:10 Can we talk a little bit about that time before you left?

Sylvie Salei: 02:14 So, I was born in 1947. The Jewish life in Tunisia was absolutely beautiful. We were 100,000 Jews. And starting ... As long as I can remember, I was a child, I remember that Israel was going to get the independence so as soon as Israel got their independence, everything fell down in Tunisia. The Arabs were killing the Jews, they took everything away from us. But we left in '65.

Fran Hildebrandt: 02:52 So, what did your parents or your father do for a living?

Sylvie Salei: 02:56 Okay, my grandparents were tailors, my father was a bookkeeper, my mother was a stay at home mother like all the women in North Africa.

Fran Hildebrandt: 03:08 Okay. And do you have sisters and brothers?

Sylvie Salei: 03:12 I have a sister, she lives in Paris, and I have a brother who lives in Paris too.

Fran Hildebrandt: 03:24 So, while you were there, at least initially, before the French left ... You were born, the French were still in [crosstalk 00:03:34] Tunisia so that part the Jews were relatively taken care of?

Sylvie Salei: 03:40 Yes, in a way yes, because the French were there.

Fran Hildebrandt: 03:44 Okay, we are still recording so we are good.

Sylvie Salei: 03:48 The French people left in '54, so from '54 to '65 it was very difficult for the Jews.

Fran Hildebrandt: 04:00 Your father lost his job?

Sylvie Salei: 04:02 My father lost his job because he was working for a French company. He lost his pension, his social security and we lost everything. And we lost our house. We left Tunisia in '65. We

were allowed to take only \$10. We had to leave everything behind, even pictures.

- Fran Hildebrandt: 04:25 Even pictures?
- Sylvie Salei: 04:26 Even pictures.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 04:28 So, at that point in time, everything had been taken away from the Jews, it sounded like.
- Sylvie Salei: 04:34 Yes, it is.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 04:35 Were they the only ones being targeted?
- Sylvie Salei: 04:39 I have to say that I did not ... There were Italian people, there were Christian. I think they got the same. It was maybe the same thing for them but I really don't know because we weren't involved in the Christian community. We had not think of ourselves, it was very difficult [crosstalk 00:05:02] so I really don't know so much about the Christian people.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 05:06 And was the suburb that you lived in then primarily Jewish?
- Sylvie Salei: 05:12 When I was born, I was born in a suburb that was really mostly Arab and Jews. And we went to an Arabic school too. The first language in Arabic school was French, second was Arabic and third was Hebrew. I say Hebrew just to show that the Jewish people were very prominent and there were Hebrew teachers teaching Hebrew. Not allowing even Arabic students in their class.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 05:47 Interesting.
- Sylvie Salei: 05:48 Yeah, so the Jewish people were very fortunate. I mean, we were for 2000 years, I believe, the Jewish people were in North Africa.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 06:01 And then, when the French left and between what was going on in Tunisia itself and I'm assuming maybe Israel-
- Sylvie Salei: 06:10 Everything fell apart, yes. They took all the land from the Jews, they took the houses. My sister who goes back often to Tunisia, she was telling us that the apartment that we owned, they almost don't exist anymore because the Arabs didn't take care of them.

Fran Hildebrandt: 06:30 So, was it just your parents, your sister, brother and yourself who came over or were there other family members who came with you?

Sylvie Salei: 06:38 So, little by little my cousins, they all left little by little. My family, brothers, sister, father and mother left in '65. We left and went to France.

Fran Hildebrandt: 06:54 I think we're fine, I'm just double checking. So, the more we talk, okay, we're doing just fine. And these are the kind of things when I check just to make sure that they will edit out of the tape just so you know.

Sylvie Salei: 07:10 So, when we left in '65, as I said we weren't allowed to take nothing at all, so when we arrived in Paris, the French people, they didn't give us citizenship. They knew who we were but they didn't treat us better because we were not French, we were Tunisian. I had an Arabic passport. So, when I arrived in France I had to find a visa and they had to give me all the papers.

Fran Hildebrandt: 07:53 So, your passport, if I can back up for a minute, did not say Tunisia?

Sylvie Salei: 07:58 Oh, yeah. My passport was written in Arabic.

Fran Hildebrandt: 08:00 Okay.

Sylvie Salei: 08:01 It was an Arabic passport from Tunisia. Tunisia, which is an Arabic country.

Fran Hildebrandt: 08:07 So, your parents and your brother and sister left with you. What about your grandparents, your cousins-

Sylvie Salei: 08:14 My grandparents died.

Fran Hildebrandt: 08:16 -aunts and uncles?

Sylvie Salei: 08:17 Yeah. My grandparents died, cousins and uncles left before '65. The emigration was very silent and very slow because we knew that we could not take any money with us so we had to do it very slowly.

Fran Hildebrandt: 08:35 Could you move things over? I mean, how did you choose France, lets say [crosstalk 00:08:39] versus Israel or-

Sylvie Salei: 08:40 Because we spoke French, that was easier. We wanted to move to Israel, but you know, when you listen to other people, they

were telling us that Israel wasn't kind to the Sephardic people. They did not treat Sephardic people well and my father who was listening to people, because it's very interesting, when you're in a country like an Arabic country you listen to everybody and you pick up information from everybody. So, my father picked up information from Israel that the Jews from Arabic countries were not treated very well. So, it was maybe a mistake but he decided that we should go to France because we spoke French, so that was easier to find a job, to go to school. So, that's the reason why.

- Fran Hildebrandt: 09:34 So, you said it was a long process to be able to leave the country. Did you find that once the decision was made and your parents gave you permission to publicize it, did you find that people treated you differently or were there so many people gone by then?
- Sylvie Salei: 09:51 Where, in Tunisia?
- Fran Hildebrandt: 09:53 In Tunisia.
- Sylvie Salei: 09:54 Yes, it was because every time I was looking for a friend, they weren't there anymore. Nobody would say where they were going and when. Everybody was afraid to talk. So, little by little I didn't see my friends and so after I left, some other friend came. So, it was very silent and very fast in a way.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 10:16 Why were people afraid to say anything?
- Sylvie Salei: 10:19 So, that's the thing. When we left, we had to buy a ticket back and forth because we weren't supposed to tell the Arabs that we were leaving otherwise they'd put us in jail. So, we were saying that we were going to visit family. So, when they see that you have ticket, a round trip ticket, they let you go but if you had one ticket just one way they would put you in jail. So, that's the reason why.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 10:50 And this was happening to people you knew that they were being put in jail?
- Sylvie Salei: 10:59 Yeah, they did that to my cousin, yeah. And we knew then because you know, when you are in these countries who listen to everybody, there were group in the street of people talking politics and telling what was going on so that's something that you don't see in the US but it is very prominent in Europe and in the Arabic countries. People talk to each other and they give you ideas where to go, what to do.

Fran Hildebrandt: 11:28 Would you feel comfortable telling us on the tape about what happened to your cousin?

Sylvie Salei: 11:34 My cousin was taken and he was put in a psychiatric hospital.

Fran Hildebrandt: 11:49 You don't have to talk about it.

Sylvie Salei: 11:52 And they told him he could get out and they pushed him on the train and he died.

Fran Hildebrandt: 11:59 How awful. I can't even imagine.

Sylvie Salei: 12:02 And my sister found ...

Fran Hildebrandt: 12:09 I'm sorry.

Sylvie Salei: 12:13 Like maybe six years ago, my sister went back to Tunis and she met a lady who recognized her and she told her, "I know where is your cousin buried." And a Jewish lady who was still in Tunisia couldn't go anywhere else, she took my cousin's body, she took it out from I don't know where he was, and she buried him under a pile of trash. And she was waiting for someone from our family to come and to bury him in a cemetery.

Fran Hildebrandt: 12:52 And is that what your sister ended up doing?

Sylvie Salei: 12:55 Yes. But what happened also when we left in '65, they destroyed all the Jewish cemetery to make parks. So that's why maybe that lady took my cousin's ... You see, in the Arabic countries there are people always checking on other people and other Jews. It's a mentality that you really cannot understand. It is so interesting to see what people are doing.

Fran Hildebrandt: 13:24 I've not lived in an Arab country, but I've lived in Indonesia for two years in the '80s and I appreciate what you're saying. It's a different mindset, I different cultural expectation.

Sylvie Salei: 13:37 Exactly.

Fran Hildebrandt: 13:40 So, was there anything that you or your family did to prepare for leaving, even though you couldn't make it publicly?

Sylvie Salei: 13:48 We could not. Nobody would buy anything from us, what we did we gave money to some French people who promised to give us back the money in France but they disappeared. My father wasn't prepared at all. He was not.

Fran Hildebrandt: 14:08 Is there anything that you left there, and I'm talking about you realizing that you were, how old?

Sylvie Salei: 14:16 I was 17.

Fran Hildebrandt: 14:18 17. Was there anything that you left there that now as a much older person you wish you could have taken with you that ...

Sylvie Salei: 14:28 Yeah, I guess the pictures.

Fran Hildebrandt: 14:30 Yeah.

Sylvie Salei: 14:31 The pictures and that's it, really. Because we left with a suitcase that was really nothing in it.

Fran Hildebrandt: 14:39 So even though they thought you were going on vacation, you weren't able to pack anything to remind you of your home.

Sylvie Salei: 14:50 No, not at all. Because if they saw that, they would detain us and they did searches. They did physical searches on our body that was the worst.

Fran Hildebrandt: 15:04 Okay, so that explains then why-

Sylvie Salei: 15:07 They want to make sure that you get scared and don't hide anything. Some people did it but we were scared. We didn't have anything. We couldn't sell, we didn't have anything really.

Fran Hildebrandt: 15:22 So, you came to France and what did you do there?

Sylvie Salei: 15:25 So, I came to France. My sister who was a little bit older, she rented an apartment so we were five people in two bedroom apartment.

Fran Hildebrandt: 15:37 Did you fly there?

Sylvie Salei: 15:39 We flew. That's why, like I said, we had one way ticket. We flew to Paris and with the \$10 that we had we took a taxi to the apartment that my sister rented. So, that was Friday night. Monday night I was already looking for a job. So, that's the reason why. We knew French, we could speak French and it was kind of an open door to look for jobs, so on Monday morning, I went to look for a job.

Fran Hildebrandt: 16:12 And did you find a job?

Sylvie Salei: 16:14 I found a job. I was 17 years old.

Fran Hildebrandt: 16:17 Oh, my goodness. What did you do?

Sylvie Salei: 16:19 I was a typist. I was typing on the typewriter and I was taking shorthand that my father told me that I should have a training. I didn't even have a high school diploma, but he said, "We have to leave, you have to learn something."

Fran Hildebrandt: 16:38 And what did the rest of your family do?

Sylvie Salei: 16:40 My sister went to [inaudible 00:16:42], she was lucky, so she learned out to sew. My brother who was 13 years old went to school in Paris. But I have to remind you also that when we arrived in Paris in '65, there was no Jewish organization who was there for us. Nobody knew who we were. There was no help from nowhere.

Fran Hildebrandt: 17:09 So, your family was really on their own. Did you meet people? Were there people from Tunisia that you knew [crosstalk 00:17:18]?

Sylvie Salei: 17:17 There were friends but everybody has their life and everybody took care of themselves.

Fran Hildebrandt: 17:25 Was your father able to get a job?

Sylvie Salei: 17:26 My father couldn't get a job, he was too old. He died three years later. My mother, she found a job as a maid and that's how she could support herself but after I got the job I was paying the rent.

Fran Hildebrandt: 17:50 On this two bedroom [crosstalk 00:17:51]-

Sylvie Salei: 17:51 Two bedroom. No shower, no bathroom, nothing.

Fran Hildebrandt: 17:55 I'm just checking to make sure we're good. We are.

Sylvie Salei: 18:00 Yeah, I paid the rent, the food, and I was making maybe \$200 a month. Yeah, but remember that the French people have a lot of socialized medicine so it is socialized country so because of that, we could have some ... When you get a job they give you tickets to go to the restaurant. So, because of the socialized country, even with \$200 we could survive. Not very well, but we did.

Fran Hildebrandt: 18:38 And how long did you stay in France?

Sylvie Salei: 18:41 I stayed in France until 1973.

Fran Hildebrandt: 18:46 Okay.

Sylvie Salei: 18:48 Did you want me to talk more about Tunisia or France?

Fran Hildebrandt: 18:54 Is there anything about [crosstalk 00:18:56] your experience in Tunisia-

Sylvie Salei: 18:56 In Tunisia, I have to say we had a nice life because in the summertime we used to go to the beach, rent a house on the beach. In the winter time we used to go to the city in order to go to school. We had a very prominent Jewish community, everybody know each other but you could see there was some secret about everybody because nobody wanted to say what they were going to because they were afraid if the Arabs would know that they would put them in jail.

Fran Hildebrandt: 19:29 Was your family very religious?

Sylvie Salei: 19:31 Not at all.

Fran Hildebrandt: 19:32 So, they weren't part of a Synagogue or a religious community.

Sylvie Salei: 19:38 But you see, everything was closed on a Friday and Saturday so we went to the Synagogue, just socialize. But we weren't religious. But remember, everything was Kosher over there. The Arabs made sure, I don't know why, but they made sure that all the food was Kosher, everything was Kosher. Yeah, we had a Kosher house.

Fran Hildebrandt: 20:00 So, really, until Tunisia declared their independence.

Sylvie Salei: 20:06 Life was very nice.

Fran Hildebrandt: 20:07 Yeah, so and comparing it now with what you then had to experience when you went to France, I mean it was night and day.

Sylvie Salei: 20:14 Night and day, totally, totally. My father ... When we arrived in France, my father, they told him that the Tunisian government took away his pension and everything and we had nothing, really. When I think about that, I don't know how ... But again, I was young. I was 17.

Fran Hildebrandt: 20:37 Did your family ever consider staying and sort of waiting out the difficulties of the '60s and '70s?

Sylvie Salei: 20:46 Where?

Fran Hildebrandt: 20:46 In Tunisia? Or think about going back?

Sylvie Salei: 20:50 No, never.

Fran Hildebrandt: 20:52 So, once you left-

Sylvie Salei: 20:55 That was it.

Fran Hildebrandt: 20:57 That was over.

Sylvie Salei: 20:58 That was it. That was it, my father couldn't find a job, he was going to a café every day just to meet friends, take good meat. No, it was awful.

Fran Hildebrandt: 21:10 But your parents, it seems to me, if I may interject this, had to be very brave to take their whole family [crosstalk 00:21:20] away from what they knew to something brand new that they had no way of knowing what the outcome would be.

Sylvie Salei: 21:28 They were attacked in the apartment. What happened, there were some Arabic guys who came and asked my father that we have to be married to them, so my father got very scared and that's how we ... So, all these stories made it faster for my father to send us away from there.

Fran Hildebrandt: 21:52 So-

Sylvie Salei: 21:53 Because if you get married to a Muslim in Tunisia you are there for life, you would never be able to get out.

Fran Hildebrandt: 22:00 So, are you saying that the Arabic Tunisians were more receptive to Jews?

Sylvie Salei: 22:09 At the beginning, [crosstalk 00:22:10] before the independence of Israel, yes. When Israel became a country, that was it.

Fran Hildebrandt: 22:15 That changed it all.

Sylvie Salei: 22:16 Even our friend, even my mother's neighbors, that she knew since she was born, they told there, "If we had to kill you, we'll kill you, we don't care." So, that's what happened. The Arabic people, they changed their mind in a second. First, I don't know if they were happy but they had jobs, they had money, they had everything when we were there. As soon as we left, they had nothing.

Fran Hildebrandt: 22:46 So, if we can sort of move back to France a little bit. You stayed in France-

Sylvie Salei: 22:52 I stayed in France for ten years.

Fran Hildebrandt: 22:54 For ten years.

Sylvie Salei: 22:55 Didn't go back to school because I had to take care of the family.

Fran Hildebrandt: 23:03 And at that point in time your sister and brother ... Your brother was much younger so-

Sylvie Salei: 23:06 My brother went to ... How do you call that school where you sleep there? How do you call that school where you sleep there?

Fran Hildebrandt: 23:17 Boarding school.

Sylvie Salei: 23:18 Boarding school. My sister got married. And here I was. So, I was looking for ... I got the job, I was going from job to job but remember. 17 years old, no education, I couldn't make that much money and I couldn't go to school because we needed a lot of information but nobody was there to tell us what to do. I could have gone to school but I don't know, something went wrong in the whole system.

Fran Hildebrandt: 23:54 So, what made you decide ... So you worked as a-

Sylvie Salei: 23:58 I was a secretary.

Fran Hildebrandt: 23:58 As a secretary for ten years and at some point you decided to leave France and come to the United States.

Sylvie Salei: 24:06 No.

Fran Hildebrandt: 24:06 No, okay, so-

Sylvie Salei: 24:08 When I was living in Paris, I used to go every year to Israel. You see, when you work in France, you don't really have to worry so much because you have paid vacation so with all the money from paid vacation I could go to Israel. And I met my ex-husband there. So, that's the story. And coming back to Paris, I could see that I had nothing. I mean, I was so poor. But I had a life. I had some friends, I met my family. So, I met my ex-husband, lived a year or so in Israel, but unfortunately my ex-husband decided to come to this country for business.

Fran Hildebrandt: 24:51 And what did he do?

Sylvie Salei: 24:52 He was an engineer, electronic engineer, and we opened electronic company.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:00 So, let's me see if I'm understanding this.

Sylvie Salei: 25:02 Yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:02 You're in France, you're going to Israel once a year, vacationing there?

Sylvie Salei: 25:09 Yes, going to kibbutz.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:11 Going to kibbutz.

Sylvie Salei: 25:12 Yeah, because I couldn't really afford to go into this nice hotel so I went to a kibbutz every year. Yeah.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:18 And then would come back to France.

Sylvie Salei: 25:19 I would come back to France.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:21 Met your ex-husband there.

Sylvie Salei: 25:23 In Israel.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:24 In Israel. And lived there for a few years. And while you were there, did you work?

Sylvie Salei: 25:31 When I was in Israel?

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:32 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sylvie Salei: 25:32 No.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:34 So, you were home and then because of business reasons, you came to the United States.

Sylvie Salei: 25:40 Yes, for my ex-husband, not for me really but yes. He was an engineer and he knew he could make it in the US. It was at a time when Israel wasn't like it is today. Many people used to leave Israel. I don't know if they do today but at that time yes, yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 25:57 And so, once you came here, did you ever think of moving back to France or to Israel?

Sylvie Salei: 26:05 Yes, we wanted to move to Israel but my ex-husband wanted to make it here so he did, and after it didn't work out because we got divorced. And all the years, I wanted to move back to Israel but it didn't happen. I know, I know.

Fran Hildebrandt: 26:22 So, you would have returned to Israel.

Sylvie Salei: 26:25 Absolutely. Absolutely. It was never my intention to stay in the US because the culture is different, the mentality is different, the people are different, everybody's nice in their own way but it was not my way.

Fran Hildebrandt: 26:43 So, let's sort of segue into the United States if that's okay. Is there first anything else that you would like to talk about either about Tunisia or your trip to France or your years in France?

Sylvie Salei: 26:59 Yeah, it looks to be better memories are really from Tunisia. The beach, the friends, the party, the freedom that we had. Being with each other.

Fran Hildebrandt: 27:14 We're okay.

Sylvie Salei: 27:15 So, that was my best ... So, coming to France, didn't have the same life.

Fran Hildebrandt: 27:23 I'm listening.

Sylvie Salei: 27:26 And yeah, my best years were really in Tunisia.

Fran Hildebrandt: 27:30 So-

Sylvie Salei: 27:30 Jewish people had a beautiful life there.

Fran Hildebrandt: 27:34 In Tunisia.

Sylvie Salei: 27:35 Absolutely.

Fran Hildebrandt: 27:36 Until that point.

Sylvie Salei: 27:37 Until Israel independence.

Fran Hildebrandt: 27:39 So now, you come to the United States. It doesn't sound like you were that interested in coming here. How did you choose Metro Detroit?

Sylvie Salei: 27:52 It wasn't my choice, really, it was my ex-husband's choice. I don't know if you know that, maybe you don't, but when you

move to a country, you feel a little bit scared. You are a little bit scared. You don't know where to go. So he came with four friends of his who were also engineers and by being together they supported each other and they came to Michigan because Michigan one of the cheapest university to go to. I mean, Michigan it was Lawrence Institute of Technology.

Because you know, when you're together, you talk about what you're going to do and that's happened in Tunisia, we had to speak. In France, not so much in France because we were already free in France. But in Tunisia, that's what we used to do. You talk to each other. You finalize where you want to go, you create ideas what you want to do, where you have to go.

Fran Hildebrandt:	28:52	So, what was your first impression of the United States.
Sylvie Salei:	28:55	As soon as I arrived there was no subway and no buses.
Fran Hildebrandt:	29:02	Yes, you're right.
Sylvie Salei:	29:04	Oh my god, oh my god. But because I didn't have a home, so I said to myself, with my ex-husband we're going to have that now and I don't have to ... I can have a shower so all this was important to me because I didn't have all this when I was living in Paris.
Fran Hildebrandt:	29:29	So, it's 1974, correct? That's when you came to Michigan.
Sylvie Salei:	29:34	Michigan, yeah.
Fran Hildebrandt:	29:34	What part of Michigan?
Sylvie Salei:	29:39	[inaudible 00:29:39].
Fran Hildebrandt:	29:40	[inaudible 00:29:40]. Do you remember what street you lived on?
Sylvie Salei:	29:42	Yeah, on Kipling.
Fran Hildebrandt:	29:43	On Kipling?
Sylvie Salei:	29:44	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Fran Hildebrandt:	29:44	And what was it like? Can you describe your house a little bit?
Sylvie Salei:	29:49	I had a house and for me, I was tired of packing up and not having a shower and being in a ... When I was living in Paris I

had a small ... Like one-third of this room. No shower, no nothing. So, I wanted something better. So, I stayed, didn't think about anything else really.

- Fran Hildebrandt: 30:15 Did you have children.
- Sylvie Salei: 30:17 No, I had children later, in '76. I had my son and in '85 I had my daughter.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 30:27 And what are their names, if I may ask?
- Sylvie Salei: 30:29 My son's name is Arik and my daughter's name is Thalia.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 30:34 Arik and Thalia.
- Sylvie Salei: 30:36 Both Hebrew names, I believe, yeah. Thalia is a Hebrew name and Arik with an A is also a Hebrew name, yeah.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 30:44 And they went to school in [inaudible 00:30:46] then.
- Sylvie Salei: 30:47 No. My husband started to make money so they went to Hillel Day School. So we moved. After that, we moved. We went to Southfield.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 31:00 So, when you first arrived here, did you speak English?
- Sylvie Salei: 31:04 Yes. [crosstalk 00:31:06] My father made sure. He knew exactly what was going to happen. He say, "You have to learn English, Sylvie. You don't know where you're going to end up one day. Learn English, it will help you to make more money," and believe it or not, in the one day of summer, 100 or 120 degrees, I used to take the bus and go to a tutor in English who used to teach me English.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 31:32 So, you were learning ... I mean, you were very multilingual then because you spoke ... Now, my understanding from the reading that I've done is that some of the Jews in Tunisian spoke different Arabic-
- Sylvie Salei: 31:46 It's an Arabic. It's North African Arabic. It's what they call [inaudible 00:31:49] Judaea-Arab.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 31:51 Yes. And you spoke that?
- Sylvie Salei: 31:54 I spoke that when I was but not so much because the Arab people hated the Jews so much so I refused to speak Arabic.

Fran Hildebrandt: 32:05 And at home you spoke French.

Sylvie Salei: 32:08 French, yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 32:08 So, French was really your mother tongue.

Sylvie Salei: 32:11 Totally.

Fran Hildebrandt: 32:11 And then this form of Arabic, you could use in the community.

Sylvie Salei: 32:16 Yeah, when we went to school we had to read and write Arabic.

Fran Hildebrandt: 32:21 Sure. And then you were learning Hebrew-

Sylvie Salei: 32:24 Hebrew also because the Jewish people were there, they were very prominent, and they used to bring Hebrew teacher from anywhere from Morocco, wherever they could find that we could learn Hebrew.

Fran Hildebrandt: 32:37 So, you were learning Arabic, a form of Arabic, French, Hebrew and English.

Sylvie Salei: 32:43 English, yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 32:44 So, by the time you moved to France you already spoke enough English.

Sylvie Salei: 32:52 What happened is that when you learn languages it opens your mind. I wasn't a close minded, even though I did speak all these languages, but my mind was very open and nobody I believe who is 17 years old moved to a country and get a job two days later.

Fran Hildebrandt: 33:10 It's hard.

Sylvie Salei: 33:12 I really have to say to myself, "How did you do it, Sylvie?" You're right.

Fran Hildebrandt: 33:18 But it sounds like your father must have realized at some point that you were going to need ... And I'm assuming your sister and brother-

Sylvie Salei: 33:27 No, no. My sister and brother, no. My sister, she knew how to sew, so he knew that she could survive. My brother was still very young. I was the only one that he knew I would find a job as a secretary and maybe English will help me to make a little bit more money.

Fran Hildebrandt: 33:45 Sure. We're probably around the same age so I can say to you that I remember the '60s and '70s and the attitudes about going to school, but even then, did you ever go back to get a diploma?

Sylvie Salei: 34:02 Not in Paris, but here in the US. First, I went to OCC to take different classes to become a citizen. So, I took quite a few classes. And after, I went to beauty school. I became a cosmetologist.

Fran Hildebrandt: 34:22 Okay.

Sylvie Salei: 34:23 So, whatever English I learned when I was in Tunisia and when I was in France helped me to go to school here because otherwise I would never be able to go to school here.

Fran Hildebrandt: 34:34 And in the late '60s, there was still this feeling here in the States that as long as you had some kind of training, whether it was college or it was technical training, you could get a job and you could establish a reasonable lifestyle for yourself.

Sylvie Salei: 35:00 Absolutely because when I went to beauty school, the time was when you say that you are coming from an Arabic country they were not asking you for your high school diploma.

Fran Hildebrandt: 35:15 Oh ...

Sylvie Salei: 35:16 Because they thought that the Arabs would not give us the papers. In a way, it was not true but that had to go with that lie in order to go to school and they believed me.

Fran Hildebrandt: 35:30 So, in this case it worked to your advantage.

Sylvie Salei: 35:33 Exactly. I learned how to do that because of where I come from, because we had to lie to survive. But that was a good lie because I could get my degree of cosmetology that today wouldn't be able to go, because today they ask you for your high school diploma.

Fran Hildebrandt: 35:49 Yes, yes. I'm aware of that.

Sylvie Salei: 35:53 So, again, when you come from these countries you have to do what's good for you.

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:01 So, you became a cosmetologist, and did you work as a cosmetologist?

Sylvie Salei: 36:07 Yes, I did.

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:08 And is that how you spent your career here?

Sylvie Salei: 36:12 Yes, that's how I took my children to college and bought a house. Yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:17 And may I ask where you worked?

Sylvie Salei: 36:19 I worked in different spas that I don't think they exist even today. Do you remember [inaudible 00:36:27]?

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:27 Yes.

Sylvie Salei: 36:28 Okay, I used to work for her.

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:30 Oh, how wonderful.

Sylvie Salei: 36:33 She died but I met her daughters who lives in California now.

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:36 Nice, nice. So, besides being happy to have showers, what other lifestyle changes do you feel you had to make coming from, first from Africa-

Sylvie Salei: 36:55 North Africa.

Fran Hildebrandt: 36:56 -and then to Europe ... North Africa and then ... And you're right, I apologize. North Africa, Europe and then the United States and Israel is thrown in there as well.

Sylvie Salei: 37:08 What I wanted to do mostly is to keep my tradition and that's what I did.

Fran Hildebrandt: 37:14 So, what are the traditions?

Sylvie Salei: 37:15 The traditions as a Sephardic is you have tradition in the way you ... The tradition for the holidays, the food, so I wanted to make sure I keep all this.

Fran Hildebrandt: 37:26 Do you find that you have become more religious? More observant?

Sylvie Salei: 37:30 I'm not a religious at all. It looks to me it's even worse.

Fran Hildebrandt: 37:37 Was it hard during those years your children were at Hillel, because they were coming home having learned-

Sylvie Salei: 37:43 Yeah but Hillel was more open. I mean, going to that it was a lot easier for my children because most of the people are not religious at all over there.

Fran Hildebrandt: 37:58 So, that didn't make a difference. I actually had an opportunity in the '80s to spend my holidays in Singapore and so I actually for one of the holidays, for one Rosh Hashanah we actually were invited to someone who was Sephardic and we had an opportunity to experience a Sephardic Rosh Hashanah and we thoroughly enjoyed it, I might add. But there were some different customs and traditions than what I had grown up with.

Sylvie Salei: 38:31 Totally. The Sephardic, because they come from different countries like you have Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon. So, they all will have different traditions. So, you were in Singapore, so the people who were there, which country they came from, do you know?

Fran Hildebrandt: 38:53 Unfortunately I don't know.

Sylvie Salei: 38:56 That's why so ... Let's say, when I meet people from Egypt, they do different food than I do. The spices are different, the food that we do is different, the tradition are different and everything is really different.

Fran Hildebrandt: 39:13 So, are there any traditions that you ... Can you make some comparisons about traditions that you observe here that you did back in Tunisia?

Sylvie Salei: 39:24 Yeah, let's say Pesach. Pesach was very significant. When we were in Tunisia, the Rabbi used to come to our house and kill a lamb. A whole lamb. And that's what we used for seven days. So, we had stew and stuff like that, and a lot of vegetables, so we used to go according to what was available in the country. Rice was available, and vegetables and lamb, and that's what we ate for seven days. And I continue on doing the same thing over here. I don't kill the lamb but I buy lamb. So, I feel that's really important because I feel that in the US, people are going away from their tradition and the excuse is I don't have time. I don't think so, I don't think that's what it is. If you kill all these traditions, you really have nothing.

Fran Hildebrandt: 40:20 So, let me ask you a question. This is an older person's question. Not on our list. But do you find that as you get older, some of the traditions you learned as a child have become more important? Maybe you stopped doing them somewhere in between those busy years of working and being a mother and a

wife at that point and that now, you are coming back to certain traditions that you had there that maybe are not practiced here but ... Besides Pesach, which is a very good example.

- Sylvie Salei: 41:02 Yes, because first you don't find the food that we used to use in North Africa. It's very difficult for me. I have to go spend a lot of time going from one supermarket to the other, one store to the other. Even the meat. But the Arabs in Michigan carry a lot of the food that we used to eat, like vegetables. We're not talking about meat, but vegetables and food. So I can find that at the [inaudible 00:41:33] or whatever. I don't like to go to [inaudible 00:41:36] but you have to do a lot of research.
- My daughter, let's say, I can see that in one generation she will become just like any American. Eating out most of the time, not taking time to cook. And the excuse is always I don't have time.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 41:58 So, did you feel after you came here that the Jewish ... Did you reach out to the Jewish community, did they reciprocate?
- Sylvie Salei: 42:07 Yes, I went to a few Ashkenazi Synagogues and I was [crosstalk 00:42:16]-
- Fran Hildebrandt: 42:16 You were living near [inaudible 00:42:16].
- Sylvie Salei: 42:16 And I was so disappointed. People were not nice at all. You see, because I'm a foreigner. I think they didn't know I was Sephardic. Just because as a foreigner people are very cold. They have a tendency to stick with each other.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 42:31 I know in the '80s there was a lot of Russian immigration. I worked for JVS. Did that interfere with let's say-
- Sylvie Salei: 42:42 No.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 42:43 -you were able to assimilate or find a place.
- Sylvie Salei: 42:47 They accepted the Russian, they gave them apartment, food, doctors, everything. And second, I didn't come as a refugee in the US.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 42:57 So, you didn't get any ... Did you get any help from any resettlement services here?
- Sylvie Salei: 43:01 Here? I didn't need it.

Fran Hildebrandt: 43:04 So, you didn't need anything like that. I wasn't thinking so much of money or a place to live but [crosstalk 00:43:11] resources-

Sylvie Salei: 43:12 I didn't need any.

Fran Hildebrandt: 43:13 Okay.

Sylvie Salei: 43:14 No, but right away, when I found that there was a Sephardic Synagogue, that's where I went to right away. And that's until today.

Fran Hildebrandt: 43:24 So, that became a home away from home, so to speak.

Sylvie Salei: 43:28 Totally, even though the people are from Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Iraq, we're very different.

Fran Hildebrandt: 43:35 But in your differences maybe [crosstalk 00:43:37] you find-

Sylvie Salei: 43:38 Yes, because some of the people spoke French, Arabic. So, yeah, I could find this one. When you go, let's say to the Shalom temple [inaudible 00:43:47] you have the real Ashkenazi people who really ... I don't want to [inaudible 00:43:53], sorry, but ...

Fran Hildebrandt: 43:54 I'm okay with that.

Sylvie Salei: 43:55 It's just, they're very cold. Very ... So, that was my feeling.

Fran Hildebrandt: 44:01 I will say to you, I'm sorry to hear that. And that not all Ashkenazi's are like that. But-

Sylvie Salei: 44:10 But unfortunately all the ones I met.

Fran Hildebrandt: 44:12 Well, maybe that was a ... I would like to think that if I had met you in the '70s or '80s, I would not have been like that. But, point being is, it made it more isolating for you-

Sylvie Salei: 44:12 Totally.

Fran Hildebrandt: 44:26 -is what I'm hearing you say.

Sylvie Salei: 44:28 Very, very much. Very much, yes.

Fran Hildebrandt: 44:31 And so you had to ... And especially since your experience doesn't sound like what we talked about the Russians. You came over, your husband had a job, you had some people, at least his friends. So, you had some common people to be with.

So, your getting assimilated and accepted into the community was a different kind of experience.

Sylvie Salei: 45:03

It was so tough.

Fran Hildebrandt: 45:08

So, you're a citizen now.

Sylvie Salei: 45:10

Yes, for a long time.

Fran Hildebrandt: 45:12

Sure. Do you feel when you compare your experience of the '70s and '80s coming over here and I'm including the '80s even though I know you came over in '74 because one doesn't get used to living in a place over night, do you feel you have ... This is your home now?

Sylvie Salei: 45:33

No. Not at all. I do not feel comfortable here at all. Why? Because I have an accent and people don't like accent. If I lived in New York, yes. I made a mistake. I should have gone to New York. But not in Michigan. People see me right away as an outsider, right away. I am different in a way I eat, the way I speak, the way I carry myself, everything. And people I feel that they are kind of afraid from you for whatever reason. I don't know. They have more education than me but they really don't even like to talk about it.

Fran Hildebrandt: 46:15

So, since it doesn't sound like it's been a great experience for you, what would you say your biggest challenge living here has been?

Sylvie Salei: 46:30

My children were born here, so at least they went to school here, so they belong. If you don't go to college in the US, you don't belong. So, they went to school here, they belong. That's good, that's what I wanted.

My biggest challenge was really always to be accepted, so I'm still trying to be accepted but I have to say that I don't care. Most of my friends, believe it or not, are all foreigners from different countries because I still feel as a foreigner, we are humble and we just like each other. We don't pay attention, you have an accent, you don't have an accent. We just speak.

I even have friends, that's unusual, who are Muslim. I never in my life would have said to myself that I have friends who are Muslim because they were so mean to us.

Fran Hildebrandt: 47:33

And so, now you are more ... You have made all of these accommodations.

Sylvie Salei: 47:33 Yes, accommodations.

Fran Hildebrandt: 47:41 And do you think your children understand? The accommodations you have made, are you still making them?

Sylvie Salei: 47:50 Yeah, I'm still making them but mostly my daughter, she doesn't. Because she wants to belong and she saw how much I suffered and she doesn't want to be in the same situation, so she's totally accepted in the US with her friends. But she does say that I was born in Tunisia, that sometimes when I go there she ask me to make some food and everybody likes it, but I still see that I will never be accepted.

Fran Hildebrandt: 48:28 And do you think it's because you are an immigrant versus just being her mother?

Sylvie Salei: 48:33 Because I'm Sylvie. That's who I am. Because when I came to France, I spoke French, no accent. I was accepted.

Fran Hildebrandt: 48:47 So, are you working now?

Sylvie Salei: 48:50 I am retired.

Fran Hildebrandt: 48:52 The reason I'm asking is, have you thought at all about maybe going back to France and live as an expat there?

Sylvie Salei: 49:07 I have so many ideas but I don't think I will do any of them. Yes, I was thinking about that but not as an expat but because I would have to find an apartment, I would have to ... Okay, I'm not thinking about France at all-

Fran Hildebrandt: 49:26 What are some of your other ideas?

Sylvie Salei: 49:28 I was thinking about going to Israel but again, Israel is also difficult. I wasn't lucky enough to save a lot of money, so it looks to me for right now, I'm here. I have to accept. And sometimes it feels a lot better when I accept something where I have to be.

Fran Hildebrandt: 49:48 So, I have a couple more questions if you don't mind. Have you thought about returning to Tunisia?

Sylvie Salei: 49:57 No, because I hear that ... Okay, for right now, there are maybe 2000 Jews and if you're in Tunisia, you cannot have the mezuzah on the door because the Arabs will know who you are and as you can see, they sometimes go to the beach and they kill people on the beach. They don't care if you're Jewish or not.

But I think it's a dangerous place to be. I would love to go but I don't think ... It's kind of dangerous to go. I've never been back.

- Fran Hildebrandt: 50:33 Is there anything that you would like to share that I haven't-
- Sylvie Salei: 50:36 I would like to go back to Tunisia to see where I was born but my children, I know, don't want to go with me and yeah, so that will be really my ... I want to see where ... My sister tells me, "You won't recognize anything." I know I won't recognize it, I won't recognize [inaudible 00:51:03] either but just I would like to see where I was, it was very good memories.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 51:07 It sounds like it.
- Sylvie Salei: 51:08 Yeah, it was a beautiful life.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 51:10 It sounds like it was. Is there anything you would like to add before we close this up?
- Sylvie Salei: 51:17 No, I wished that the people in Michigan would be kinder to the Sephardic people instead of thinking that we are Arabs. Even if we are Arabs, Arabs can be educated too. And we have a lot of tradition and culture. We have a lot of culture. You take someone from North Africa, he knows history, geography, just everything. So, sometimes I want to be considered as not different but someone who has a lot to offer in a way of tradition. Just culture, everything.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 52:05 Well, I'd like to thank you for this interview. I found it insightful. I have never had an opportunity to talk to someone who's had your set of experiences and has not found Michigan a welcoming place. So, I appreciate your honesty in telling me about this. And what I really appreciate is all of what we've talked about today, and I would like to thank you very much. I know some of the memories were good memories and some not so good and I appreciate your willingness and honesty in sharing with me. So thank you very, very much.
- Sylvie Salei: 52:53 Thank you. And I wanted to add something interesting. My brother just sent me today some pictures that he found in an archive in Israel and he sent them to me. So, it was during the occupation of the German in Tunisia. So, I was born in '47 but they were there from '43 to '44. They stayed there not too long. So, that's the picture that he sent me. Would you like to see that?
- Fran Hildebrandt: 53:20 Yes, I would, I would love to.

Sylvie Salei: 53:22 Do we have WiFi here, internet?

Fran Hildebrandt: 53:24 That's a good question, we should. Yeah, it looks like we do.

Sylvie Salei: 53:55 Okay, so let me show you what my brother just sent me. He's also looking for-

Fran Hildebrandt: 54:05 Do you get to see your sister and brother very often? [crosstalk 00:54:09] Since they're in France?

Sylvie Salei: 54:22 Maybe once a year. Okay, here it is. So, it looks to me this is the name of the dead that worked for the German. This is under the Nazi Occupation. All the Jews, because what they did, they told them, "You have to come, we'll give you jobs and will take care of your families." They gave them a coat, shoes and some food to eat. So, this is how they were dressed. They told them, we'll give you a job. But this is all in Hebrew. This is how the looked like. [French 00:55:02] That's what they tell them that you can come and we're giving you food and we'll take care of your family. That wasn't true. This is France ... Again this is-

Fran Hildebrandt: 55:18 I'm gonna turn this off, because at this point-

-able to figure this out. Okay, go ahead.

Sylvie Salei: 55:26 We left Friday night, Tunis. We took the key from the apartment and we put them under the mat because we knew that the Arab will come the next day and just take everything. Not only take everything. They would say that that was their apartment. So, that's what happened.

Fran Hildebrandt: 55:45 I cannot imagine. It takes real courage.

Sylvie Salei: 55:50 But you know, when you live in this country you become strong. You really do.

Fran Hildebrandt: 55:56 I don't think you have much choice, do you.

Sylvie Salei: 55:59 No. It's that or jail like my cousin.

Fran Hildebrandt: 56:03 Well, and I think the other thing, and I don't know if they'll include any of this, is part of our addendum to what we're talking about, like when you talk about your children having different attitudes. They've grown up in a different culture and they've grown up with a different set of attitudes. I mean, I remember 1974 and I remember all of those periods of time

since, and it's a very different period of time for our children and grandchildren if you have any today.

- Sylvie Salei: 56:37 And American culture is very ... I don't know, I think it's very cold. People, they do not accept. Even though there are a lot of foreigners but if you look around, all the foreigners, they have their own group of people. They don't mix. They really don't mix and there is a reason why. American people do not include us. Do not include foreigners. Sure, I mean, I have a good friend, she's American, whatever. It's because you will find that but in general it is not.
- Fran Hildebrandt: 57:14 So, I don't know whether ... And of course, I'm not speaking now as the interviewer. I'm speaking as the two of us having a conversation. I'm not disagreeing with some of what you're saying. I don't think it was always like that here. I grew up here and I will say to you that in the '50s and '60s, when I was growing up, I was born in 1949, so I'm only two years younger than you. So, I'm going to say to you, we lived in Northwest Detroit and it was a very different kind of experience. And the coldness you were talking about did not exist. So, and I'm gonna turn this off only because we're having this really lovely conversation.
- Sylvie Salei: 58:06 Do you think it's money that made people like that?