

*Statement given before a Joint Briefing for Members of the House of Commons
and the House of Lords of the Parliament of Great Britain*



on June 24, 2008

by Sarah Fedida

(Sarah Fedida is a living witness, a refugee from Egypt, one of 25,000 Jews expelled from Egypt after the 1956 Suez crisis. She was invited by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries to tell her story to the British Parliamentarians)

Lords, Ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Sarah Fedida. I was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1928. Both my parents were born in Jerusalem.

I attended a French primary school. I won a scholarship to the Lycee in Alexandria, but war broke out in 1939 and no bursaries were forthcoming from France. I went happily instead to the Scottish School for Girls. The school is still standing: my eldest daughter visited it two years ago.

In 1954 I married Joe Fedida. We both worked at the *Societe Egyptienne des Petroles* where Joe was a senior manager.

The mainstay of the company was Egyptian, but the French and the Americans had an interest in it.

That year a military coup overthrew the king of Egypt. The Pashas – the westernised aristocracy - fell with him.

Two years later 25,000 Jews were kicked out, along with many foreigners.

Alexandria was like little Paris. We lived well. We had a lovely flat on the Corniche. But my world was about to crumble.

The Suez crisis broke out in October 1956. Colonel Nasser sequestered all companies with foreign interests. Joe arrived at the office one morning to find red seals on the door.

He was never allowed into the office again. He was not allowed to pick up his personal belongings and papers from the safe. Everything had been confiscated by the state. This was just a taste of things to come.

The Jewish community was well-off, but Nasser expelled us and we were made to leave penniless, with only the knickers we were wearing on us!

I was heavily pregnant with my first child. As soon as the baby was born, my husband Joe left Egypt for France to look for a job. He left me and the baby behind. I was so upset that fateful November that I went back to hospital after the birth of my baby. I was ill for weeks with postnatal depression.

In spite of excellent references and letters of recommendation, Joe was unable to find a job in France.

As he had a British passport, he decided to try his luck in England. He shared a room with his brother and scoured the newspaper every day for job vacancies.

My sister-in-law and mother-in-law were sent to a refugee camp in Staffordshire, but the men had to be in London where the jobs were.

The day finally arrived for me to leave Egypt with my mother and my five month-old baby girl. I was due to board a boat bound for Italy. But my departure turned into a nightmare.

As I passed through customs, I was suspected of carrying valuables. The customs men called me back.

My mother pleaded to come with me as I was in a fragile state of health, but they would not let her. I had nothing, but they searched me as if I had been carrying bombs. They turned everything I had upside down. They turned the baby's carrycot upside down. They stole anything they could from my suitcase.

I joined my husband in England. He had found work at £10 a week. He had no desk, just an old crate. But like most men from Egypt he was hardworking and intelligent, and led a full and busy life until 1985 when he developed a heart condition. He was operated on. He had a brainstem stroke during the operation and never recovered until his death in 1994.

Our children received a good education and found good jobs.

I should like to express my appreciation to the UK for serving as a safe haven and allowing my family to resettle and build new lives for themselves.

We were not refugees for long. My motto has always been 'never look back, 'always look forwards'. Now that I am old, I can afford to look back!"