

Surat: So hello Nick. My name is Surat, we are here at Rainbow Jews at the Montague Center and today is Friday the 7th of June, 2013. So welcome to the Rainbow Jews project and would you like to introduce yourself briefly?

Nick Jackson: My name's Nick Jackson, I'm 51 years old umm I've lived in London since 1985 and I currently live in South London umm

S: Thank you. So umm.. Nick could you tell us a bit about your background, family background?

N: Well it's not. like everything else in my life it's not very straight forward, I suppose. I was born in 1961...

Searle: CUT

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Surat: So Nick, could you tell us a little bit about your family background?

Nick: Yes, I was born in Luton, Bedfordshire about 40 miles, 30-40 miles north of London in 1961. Like everything else in my life my formative years were white complicated umm. I was born to a white biological mother who got pregnant by a Jamaican and in those days it was....controversial...mixed race unions as same sex marriages are in this day and age umm. Because single mothers weren't deemed fit to bring up children, especially as she came from a rural background in Gloucestershire and from what I gather went back home to her parents, tail between her legs so to speak.

I was adopted by my late parents who, because my mother spent most of the 1950's looking after her own mother, was too late in the pre-IVF years to have children of her own.

Umm, I had a very happy childhood. I went to the local, I shouldn't say local but it's the boy's, the all-boy's school in Bedford and after that I went off to Leicester University where I studied modern languages umm so I suppose learned, it's given me a bit of a kickstart to learn Hebrew even though Hebrew is a completely different ball game.

Umm...after that I came down to London in the mid 1980s umm and I've lived all over the place and now I currently live in South East London.

Umm I'll just backtrack to the mid 1980s, it was that time, it was like 2, 83, 84 when I was coming out. Now I don't know if anybody here can remember but it was quite a difficult period to come out as a gay man, because all the headway which had been made in the UK post decriminalization in 1967 took a retrograde step because at that time umm..AIDS was seen as the gay plague and there was a heck of a lot of discrimination against gay man and umm..in particular at that time so it wasn't very easy time to come out.

S: Do you remember your coming out experience, do you remember a specific

situation?

N: Umm Yes umm..I (LAUGHS) I suppose I first....well what happened was I went over to Italy as part of my university course and I thought, well I've always fancied blokes so I decided to do something about it and coming back to England, telling friends was very difficult. Umm..one of my friends from university's mothers who, I know it's bad etiquette to slag off someone for their religion but she was a born again Christian so she went straight for the "clobber verses" as I call them in Leviticus about "Man shall not lie with man as woman". Now I found it rather hypocritical because my friend's father committed suicide but certain Christian sects, particularly the Catholic church see that as a mortal sin and also, isn't there a Christian thing about taking the wood out of somebody's eye and not throwing something in or words to that effect, I can't remember the actual saying. Anyway umm so I suppose although I'd been brought up in a very, well I say a 'strict' background, I found that time of life I was in my early, mid-20s mum I suppose for want of a better word 'rebelled' a lot umm..because there was a lot of opprobrium about gay people in general and it was very easy you know. You come down to London, you're young, you're good looking ad it's a bit like a kid in a sweet shop really all the clubs and the bars and what was on offer.

S: Do you remember it as a specific situation like for example the first time you went into a gay club, what was it like?

N: Errr it was like going into some, well. The first time I went into a gay club I felt a bit guilty I suppose because the atmosphere in those days the entrance was behind, it wasn't visible like they are now. You felt you were doing something elicited and naughty but I suppose that all added to the fun in some ways. Umm...as I say, it wasn't an easy time coming out because my parents, my, my late father never knew because he died the year I graduated, 1985. I told my late mother three years later in 1988 and she came out with a classic sort of "oh well, I wouldn't have thought so because you're not effeminate" and I thought (LAUGHS) umm.. or "you haven't found the right woman" that was another of her, that was another thing she said. Umm.. she didn't really approve but it didn't cause a rift we just found a way of living, she died in 96 ten years after my late father so we just found a way of co-existing from a distance I suppose, for want of a better word and ironically, since my mother's death both sides of the family, like my cousins who, some of whom are, because my mother was from a huge family of 13, my dad was the middle of 5 so some of my cousins are much older than me some in their 80s with grandchildren, they are completely chilled out everything even though ironically they are older now than my late mother was when she died umm..so it just shows how things have moved on umm..

S: So at that time, when you said around the coming out time and you went to first gay clubs, do you remember specific instances? you met someone interesting or your first lover or gay man or what were you doing around that time in the community, where you active?

N: Well I wasn't sort of political active I was a party animal at that time bit of a hedonist umm..I don't really do a lot of that now, it's not that I'm too old because I don't think you should put people on labels but I suppose it's just that you know, come

the weekend I'm happy to just stay at home or see friends. I don't really do a lot of socializing on the gay scene, only if there's something specific to do because I've been there, done that, burnt the t-shirt anyway...backtracking to 1985 it was terribly exciting coming to London after spending four years at university in Leicester. A lot of my friends from university moved down at the same time so there was kind of a network which has obviously fragmented because a lot of my friends have got married and moved out to the sticks to raise their families but I still keep in touch with some of them umm.. I suppose it was like, you know...it was very exciting running around clubs all weekend but I wouldn't want to do it now.

Ummm..but I sort of settled down for a while in 1999 I.. wait for it..I..shacked up with my ex-partner, we bought a house together and about four years after that we had an amicable separation we're still very good friends so I've done the marriage bit (LAUGHS) so to speak umm..I wouldn't say it wasn't for me but I don't think I'd ever live with anybody again because I think the older you get the more crustier you get because even at 38 I think there was a bit, there was a part of me that said umm.. if he put the top off the bleach bottle on the wrong way I'd start freaking out. I think the older you get the more you get set in your ways. I wouldn't say never again but that's just how I feel about things, in myself.

S: If you had err, say three most memorable experiences in terms of your gay, your alternative life even if you had to backtrack or later ones do you have three experiences that just pop up in your head?

N: Ooh that's putting me on the spot errr. three experiences. I suppose about 1991 I got heavily into the rave scene and we just, this is a generic thing, I'm not sure how we did it actually, used to spend all weekend you know going all night umm..I think umm..I suppose you know it's very topical, I never thought I'd see the day in this country whereby legislation is going through that people of the same gender can get married. I know there's been a lot of opposition to it and I think, you know, this is something I've said to a lot of people of all backgrounds: surely we should as a civilized democracy, we should be more worried about people sleeping rough in a wealthy country on the street than in what two consenting adults get up to in the privacy of their own home. I think, you know, people object to it and often use religious pretext to object to it should really take a good look about at other inequalities in society.

S: So how if you're looking back from the time you came out until today has the change in legislation affected your life as a gay man?

N: What current change?

S: Umm legislation and for example you say, you talked about how secret everything was when you came out to today. That period of time you know, where now the bill came through for same sex marriage and if you reflect on your own personal life how has it affected you in any way then and now?

N: Errrr..I think, you know I'm not really answering your question I mean. But I see the two of my experiences as a young twenty-something and the bill...and Britain finally being dragged into the 21st century in 2013. I think we've dragged our heels

compared to our countries in Northern Europe, which have had the same...you know like Holland, the Scandinavian countries, they've passed it without all this huffing and puffing and I've just come back from Portugal which is a deeply conservative catholic country, probably one of the most observant catholic countries apart from Poland possibly more so than Ireland in a lot of ways and they've passed it without all this huffing and puffing. So I don't see why we have, why the Brits have this sort of screwy mentality when it comes to talking about sex.

S: Has it affected you in your relationships, in your intimate relationships has that had any effect or how has it affected at all your relationships? I mean you talked about the long-term relationship or maybe a current or past partner in that sense, what's going on in society. Do you feel for example that you wanted to get married and you couldn't or have children, adopt children and you couldn't or you can?

N: I think...well I've never really wanted to have children umm..of my own but I suppose it's like, you're always conscious that your relationship was seen as second best umm.. things have moved in even in the last decade you know, if anybody's partner died it was seen in some circles as a pretend relationship umm.. it hasn't really affected me but I know that in the 90s when a lot of people were dying of HIV a very, my ex-partner told me that there used to be these horrendous scenarios whereby the parents would blame the gay friends and the gay friends would blame the homophobic parents and at the funeral sort of each side was looking daggers at each other, I'm glad we have moved on from that polarization and I think most, the vast majority of people of my age and younger are completely relaxed about it.

S: Do you have any personal experience as you mentioned homophobia or prejudice can you remember a situation possibly where you personally faced a particular expression of homophobia or prejudice?

N: Umm..Well I've never - touch wood- had any physical attack for being gay, I've been called names on street..umm.. also I've faced it at work..umm.. but there again

S: What is your work? Specifically, the job you're talking about

N: Sorry?

S: Umm..What is your profession or the kind of work you were doing at that time when you experienced umm..homophobia? Is there a particular job or line of work or is it in general?

N: In general.

S: Right, could you tell us more about this experience?

N: Umm.. well this was largely at the time when there was no specific protection about gay men and lesbians in the work place..umm.. I think you know, low level homophobia has always been, in the 80s and 90s was always bubbling under the surface. You know, people were seen as..umm..there were stereotypical jobs for gay men and stereotypical jobs for lesbians and if anybody broke the mould it was seen as "Huh" you know but I think that still goes on. My hospital consultant is a gay woman

and she said to me that people still refer to her as a lesbian and because she dresses in a certain way, they think that she is a social worker rather than a hospital consultant so I think we know we're not going to get away from it are we.

S: You talked about like you know yourself the way you looked you know your background..umm. do you feel there is prejudice going on in regards to your identity, your LGBT or your Jewish identity have you got any stories there? any experiences there or anything? what are your feelings about it?

N: Umm..I found that, you know, I'm actually a covert to Judaism myself, I found that the, within the liberal community they seem terribly, not just about gay stuff, and accepting of gay people...they seem terribly on the ball about challenging prejudice about you know in terms of race, sexual as well as umm. sexual as well as sexual orientation. Because I've always thought that the sort of people who are racist tend to be homophobic and..you know a lot of these prejudices do tend to link on to the other.

S: How did you umm..going back to the conversion that's very interesting would you like to tell us the story about how it came about from the family background that you told us to the conversion.

N: Ok I was brought up Church of England now, I've always referred to it as Christianity meets the Tory party at prayer which it pretty much was, don't mention the G word, don't mention the JC word and definitely no sex. That was my own personal take on it growing up umm I suppose you know my parents, especially my other she was at the church every Sunday and, but I think what really turned me off it, it, not so much the gay stuff which I think the Church of England has made a complete dogs bollocks of and they seem to have a sort of vacillating position on it every day of the week but I'd always, when I was adopted one of my late mother's friends who married a German just after the war, she turned around and said to me, she didn't think I would fit in in the village being a mixed-race child and I thought it was a bit of a cheek, considering that my parents where completely fine about her marrying a German directly after World War 2 but then my biological father who was from Jamaica, people from the Caribbean actually fought on with the Brits against Nazis and I thought it was a bit of a brass neck to turn around and say that. So, I'd always associated that sort of middle England C of E stuff with what I call bourgeois racism, for want of a better word and one of my mother's friends who was actually from a quite orthodox background in London, she married an Anglican and converted to the Church of England, now the poor woman had the worst of both worlds from what I gather her family sort of said 'kadish' for her because she left the Jewish community and when she arrived in Bedfordshire it was like "ooh she's not really one of us, she's Jewish" you know so I'd always associated that sort of small town, stuff, with very petty small-minded prejudice and like one of my cousins married a Greek Cypriot who umm..in about 1971.. and at my aunt and uncle's church it was like, how can you let your lovely daughter marry a (LAUGHS) a greasy wop for want of a more elegant expression.

S: So how did that come about, was there a trigger or a particular situation where you decided, I want to convert to Judaism?

N: Not so much a trigger. I think, you know, having studied all of the world's faiths

and none it was the only sort of umm. religion or mind set that just made any sense to me umm. because I think, you know, the two daughter religions: Christianity and Islam. They're both umm.. they both try to convert people and it's like you have to believe it our way or not. So I mean I've always but I suppose you know, having come from what I call a "watered-down" Christian background at the end of the day, the Seri doesn't do hell fire and damnation at the end of the day does it. Umm.. I think you know, what I find really bad in London is that I get these people who try to convert you to sort of more , what I call "fire and brimstone" versions of Christianity by force and you know; we're right and you're wrong. And it's like a, I find, what I like about the Judaism is it doesn't try and say "we're right and you're wrong". I mean, even before I converted, what i call extremism like very orthodox Jews folioing the Torah by the letter, it's hermetically sealed within the Jewish community don't give a monkeys what other people are doing as long as they're left alone. I mean I, yes, you know I'd always respected that about the Jewish faith, it doesn't go knocking on doors and saying "well you've got to keep kosher because we do" or you know "you've got to keep shared because we do" and any angst is sealed within the Jewish community rather than spilling out into other people's lives which I know.....which is.. what happens with the two daughter religions.

S: Which year did you convert to Judaism?

N: Well formally, 2012.

S: Formally.

N: Yeah

S: And how did you come across liberal Judaism specifically?

N: Err..How did I come across liberal Judaism? well I suppose umm..I'd be disingenuous if I said it wasn't because it is gay friendly umm.. then again I wish there was more, if you do a lot of research on, by googling umm..I wish there'd be more material about people who, from non-Jewish backgrounds, who convert because they feel drawn to Judaism rather than sort of Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe [...] and Isla Fisher/Sacha Baron Cohen's work, there's a hell of a lot of information about what I call "Glitzy Hollywood" conversions but there's very little about people who convert because of a love of Judaism, because it makes sense to them.

S: So how was your personal conversion experience, how was that?

N: Oh very positive yes Umm..there again there's a lot of clap, a lot of nonsense on the internet about people who don't blend in aesthetically to the Jewish community made to feel outside just like myself umm.. but then I haven't experienced any of that, ironically there is more information in the States about Jews from different ethnic backgrounds compared to England. I mean it's like the flip-side of the coin, the American Reform Community it by and large the largest organization and there's a lot of awareness about, you don't have to look Jewish whereas I have heard anecdotally there are, the more you go into the Jewish community that the more you stick out like a sore thumb. Whereas the American Christian community makes middle England bigots look like pussy cats I mean it's like a complete reversal.

S: Could you tell us more in terms of your LGBT identity and your Jewish Identity where the cross-overs there and how do they influence each other.

N: Umm..How do they influence me? Well I've got something I'd like to share with you, a couple of things which I think have....I don't know if anybody knows about this, in medieval Europe there used to be in the Catholic churches a representation of the church and the synagogue umm.. as an allegory and the church is seen as good and the synagogue is seen as bad and umm..I suppose it resonated with me that the divine hand is crowning the church and killing the allegorical symbol of the synagogue. I suppose I can identify that with heterosexual good and gay people bad. Secondly, when I came into the world in 1961 it was anathema for a nice white girl from Gloucester to get up the duff, for want of a more elegant expression, by a Jamaican. And there again this is the old canard about the English Rose or in this case the German Rose being seduced by the dark other. There's like a stereotypical figure of a Jew seducing a blonde German Fräulein so I think that canard has always gone on that, in one shape or form so I think I could identify with that well, does that make, does that resonate?

S: Is there anything, is there any specific moment in your life where you say "look there's a parallel I can draw from that" and situation, any moment in your relationship-life, family-life that you can tell us about?

N: Umm..Well no, not really no. But as I say, I did find these two images quite powerful in terms of my own situation, identity umm.... something else I'd like to share with you, I don't know if you've ever come across this and this, I dovetail this into the current stuff about gay marriage and people saying it's wrong blah-de-blah-de-blah. Now I had a biological DNA test done and apparently I'm 56% European and 44% Sub-Saharan-African because obviously with me having a father from the Caribbean there's some mixture there as well and all the sort of spurious arguments about marriage always being between a man and a woman blah-de-blah-ad-nauseum since the year dot is rubbish because I found out that although my biological father was black from Jamaica, his Y-chromosome is actually Northern European because what used to happen was umm..the people who owned the plantation had a swayer with the slave women even though they were married themselves because they were seen as chattels or, you know, one up from animals so this stuff about marriages always being between a man and a woman. But then equally when my biological mother who was white made a conscious decision to have sex with a black person in about 1960, that was seen as anathema but I've always, I've seen this objection to gay marriage isn't so, it's not to do with sex, it's because people or the establishment are afraid of losing control umm..you know, because say 50 years ago if you were, if you were a young white woman who had sex with an Indian or a African, Afro-Caribbean you were ostracized, that doesn't really go on so much now if at all umm..as I say the whole debate about same sex marriage is to do with people losing control I think.

S: And would you personally consider umm..marriage?

N: Umm..would I personally consider marriage? Possibly not but I think I should have the right to say whether I do or not, not somebody tell me what, not somebody dictate whether I can or not umm.. I wouldn't say never say never but umm..I just see

it as something which as a civilized country I don't know where the hell it's been when considering our European neighbours. We have one of the worst records in Europe for STDs, teenage pregnancy, we probably got of the worst, we're one of the worst countries in Europe for the gap between rich and poor it's a real indictment to our society that when I'm going around London I see young people sleeping on their street and all people have got, you know, people who would consider themselves religious their more worried about what two consenting adults get up to in the privacy of their own home than things which really matter in society like kids going to university, can't get a job, can't get a mortgage, can't get a pension, people sleeping on the street, old people because we've had the coldest winter since 1963, old people having to choose between heating and eating why are we getting so stressed out about two people of the same gender being in love for heavens sake surely us as part of a civilised society should be concerned about other things or maybe it's too easy because we don't really want to deal with the real problems.

S: Coming back to your LGBT/Jewish identity is their one situation which you find memorable?

N: Umm..Umm.m.m.m

S: Could be from synagogue life or relationship-life or a connection with a group a LGBT group, anything in the last few years have been memorable?

N: Not so much I just think..I won't say there's a specific incident but as I say, what's quite, it doesn't really get reported in the mainstream media because I think religion is such a flash-point nowadays that it, I'm not really answering your question but I'm answering it obliquely. Religion is such a touchy subject these days that the media is full of crazy Christians and mad Muslims for want of a more elegant expression. The fact that even the chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks says we won't be doing gay marriage but we have to remember that a lot of gay people ended up in the camp same as Jews even the more frum end of the Jewish spectrum doesn't seem to freak out as much about the gay stuff as you know, the two daughter, the more extreme ends of the two daughter religions so I think well umm.. there again I think that's prob, that's umm..another reason that drew me to Judaism because I think a lot of minority groups within this country get very single issue about their own needs and don't tend to, because you've got gay people who can be quite racist and you've got some people of colour who can be very homophobic but I think, you know. My own sort of learning of Jewish history is that, like in America a lot of Jews were very instrumental in the civil rights movements of the 60s. So I think that's what attracted it to me because I think some minority groups can get terribly single issue about their own needs and it can be almost like a sense of victim-hood umm..so I thought that, that particular, that's what attracted me to Judaism. I think, you know, I'm not spouting theology here but I think one of the tenets is justice and I think from my own experience that tends to get applied to other groups in the community, so yeah.

S: Have you joined any LGBT Jewish groups?

N: Oh I go to Gay Jews In London's events sometimes yes, it's all very, it's a good laugh but I feel old there because the average age is about 30 (LAUGHS) all nice guys from North London you know we have a good laugh and a few drinks, you

know, it's good fun.

S: Do you remember a particular social situation, with one of those groups or?

N: Umm..Do I remember a particular social situation? Oh, only that sometimes I've arrived home in South London at about 3 in the morning completely plastered (LAUGHS)

S: Is that recently or?

N: Last year

S: How did that come about?

N: Probably too much to drink.

S: Was that in a home? or bar crawl, where did you go?

N: At a home yeah

S: Sounds like fun.

N: Yeah.....Cut....I'm sort of umm..

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S: Umm. photos here would you like to tell us a little bit about?

N: Ok well, this is a very embarrassing me who was a very chubby baby huh (LAUGHS) over 50 years old umm..what else have we got?.....me and junior school umm..I wasn't that angelic, I was a little monster actually, I'm sure my late mother and father would say umm..that's me at my graduation in 1985, the reason I look a bit gloomy is because my late father has actually died about a week previously and I said to Mum, I didn't want to go but she said "well you've got to go because he would have wanted you to go" so that's why I look a bit gloomy in that picture umm.. what else have we got? umm.. there's a very silly one of me at about aged 20 umm.. in my hall of residence umm..I look very babyish there, very baby faced but that's a long time ago.

S: Was that before or after your coming out?

N: No well it's sort of, before, well I always knew I was gay but I was trying to be straight in those days I guess umm.. something else I'd like to share with you umm..I actually visited Auschwitz in 2001 when we went, my ex-partner and I we did a city break to Budapest and Krakow umm..it was a very harrowing experience we, I deemed it appropriate to take that. There was people snapping away in the gas chambers and glass cases, cases of glasses and hair and I didn't think it was appropriate to take pictures of that, just my own personal thing I just. It was too horrendous for me to actually, it was before I even thought about converting but I thought it was just too horrendous I didn't want to take pictures umm..so that's just a

few, that's just a few sort of bits and bobs about my life and I got loads. Which reminds me, I've got a whole crate full of photos at home which I'm trying and when I get around to it I want to scan them all digitally because it all has my own stuff going back to the 70s and 80s and I've inherited a lot of old stuff from my late mother and I keep saying I've got to put them all on disc or digital vaults but I never get time to do it so...maybe this will prompt me to do it some day.

S: Nick is there anything else, we are coming towards the end of this interview, that you would like to add on that you find for this project Rainbow Jews or LGBT Jewish History UK that you find important for yourself?

N: Umm..Not really I mean. I suppose what's come out of this, my whole Jewish experience is that we hear so much in the media about you know, crazy Christian and mad Muslims that there's never anything positive reported about...you know, umm..religion for more, for a better word that you know like umm..I suppose the media, because it's a positive experience that you know none of the orthodox synagogues want to host same sex marriages it wouldn't sell papers because people like the negative don't they I'm afraid.

S: Thank you very much for this interview Nick. Thank you for coming.

N: Thank you.

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S: So Nick, is there anything you'd like add as in terms of Rainbow Jews/LGBT Jewish History, any personal experience or reflection?

N: Umm..Well yes, only that I'd say that, there's so much negativity in current society about various religious groups, mostly Christian and Muslim actually, that it's quite refreshing that, you know, people within the Jewish community that I've come across are so positive about same-sex marriages and acceptance of other faiths because Judaism doesn't see itself as the only way whereas the two daughter religions do or...umm but I suppose anything negative to do with religion sells papers whereas anything positive doesn't unfortunately, that's the world we live in isn't it.....thanks

S: Thank you Nick