

Interviewee: Peggy Sherwood

Interviewer: Anna Barker

Transcribed by: Anna Barker

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[00:00:00-00:06:30] Peggy was born in Hove, Sussex on 23rd August 1953. She describes growing up in the Jewish community in Hove. She talks about her parents' background. When Peggy was growing up they went to the Orthodox United Synagogue, but after her brother had his Bar Mitzvah, Peggy, her brother and her mum used to go to the Reform Synagogue for services. Peggy had her Bat Mitzvah in Middle Street Synagogue. She describes herself as being '*a nice good, Jewish girl, I think*' [00:05.31] and had a lot of Jewish friends. At 18 she started working as a secretary at Sussex University. At 21 she moved to London to do nursing training and drifted away from Judaism, and didn't come back to it until her early 40s. It was the Jewish gay and lesbian world which got her back into Judaism.

[00:06.37-00:09:54] Peggy went to a grammar school in Hove, took O and A levels, and had a place at Oxford Poly to do a Business Studies diploma and then decided she didn't want to go and did a secretarial course instead. In her adolescence she had boyfriends, no girlfriends. Deep down she knew she was gay but thought it was a phase and it would pass. In her 20s she dated men but didn't meet the right one. When she was 11/12 she had crushes with older girls she was at school with, and she kept thinking they would stop but they continued into her working career as well. In her mid-30s she had her first relationship with a woman.

[00:10:05-14:40] Peggy describes her first relationship with a woman. She says she was working with a woman, also a ward sister in a London hospital and they began a relationship. Peggy was 34/35 and that lasted for 3 years. Peggy was completely closeted, and didn't tell anybody about the relationship. For both of them it was their first relationship with a woman: '*But it just suddenly felt completely right, this is what had been missing with men*' [00:11:29]. They felt that to be seen as lovers at work would be difficult. She wanted to remain closeted because of the '*terror of being outed...and feeling it was wrong, I suppose*' [00:12:54]. The Jewish upbringing had a huge impact on this feeling. As a child, her brother was seen as the career person and it was thought that Peggy would be a secretary for a couple of years, get married and '*that would be my life*' [00:14:20].

[00:14.40-00:23:57] Peggy talks about her experiences of coming out. She describes meeting someone through the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group (JGLG) who was her catalyst for coming out: she '*went almost berserk telling people. It was suddenly like a light had come on*' [00:15:16]. She describes the fantastic feeling of coming out. She talks about how she came out to her mum in 1996, when Peggy was 43 and her mum was 74/75. Her mum's reaction was: '*If you're happy, then I'm happy*' [00:18:18]. Her mum was fantastic about Peggy being gay: she loved her previous partner and loved her current partner Alison. However, she knew Peggy was president of the JGLG and didn't want her to go in the Jewish Chronicle. Peggy says that she has never had a negative reaction when coming out. '*I always felt if I had a negative reaction that was their problem, not my problem*' [00:20:16]. Peggy attributes the feeling of liberation at coming out partly to having a Jewish partner: it was just the right time.

[00:23:59-00:29:43] Peggy describes how she got involved with JGLG. She describes a conversation she had with Rabbi Elli Sarah. Peggy rang her up and said she was Jewish and

lesbian and she'd never put those two bits of her life together. She remembers her saying: '*you've got to take the plunge at some point*' [0:25:18]. Elli told her to join the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group. She describes the first JGLG event she went to, at which she was the only woman. She talks about how she organised a women's JGLG event at the Angel Pub in Islington.

[00:29:45-00:34:06] Peggy talks about the relationship with her first Jewish partner. She talks about meeting other partners and her life partner Alison and how she met them.

[00:34:08-00:44:12] Peggy describes how she met her life partner Alison. They met through JGLG and got together at the JGLG Valentine's Party. Peggy talks about what she found attractive about Alison when they met. She talks about their relationship in the years after they first got together.

[00:44.14-00:50:17] Peggy talks about the decision to have a civil partnership. It irritated both of them that they couldn't have a Jewish wedding. They had their civil partnership at St Alban's registry office on Thursday 16th August 2007, and on the Sunday they had a big Jewish chuppah '*which in law meant nothing and in reality meant it all*' [0:45:45]. The Covenant of Love, led by Rabbi Elli Sarah, took place on Sunday 19th August 2007. The ceremony was at Pinewood Film Studios. Now that there is a Marriage Act, they will definitely get married. She describes why marriage is important to her: '*When I finally accepted that I was a lesbian, I never thought I'd stand under a chuppah.*' [00:50:00]

[00:50:56-00:01:53] Peggy talks about her role in JGLG and how she became president. She talks about her greatest achievements in JGLG, particularly getting more female members. She explains the pride she feels about organising events such as the JGLG second night seder. She talks about the 40th Anniversary celebrations for JGLG. She discusses the way things have changed in JGLG over time and the kind of events they currently run.

[01:01:54-01:07:30] Peggy discusses the wider Jewish community's reaction to JGLG and LGBT Jews in general, particularly in the Orthodox community. The heads of Reform and Liberal Judaism came to the JGLG 40th anniversary: '*And I thought 'God! How far has the Jewish LGBT world come?'*' [01:04:50] But when the Chief Rabbi comes to a JGLG event '*we'll know we've really arrived – but it won't be in my lifetime I don't think, sadly.*' [01:05:04]. She discusses her views on the Chief Rabbi, and on other rabbis in the Orthodox community and their views on homosexuality.

[1:07:45-01:16:58] She talks about her sadness at not having had children, and not having come out earlier. She recalls an occasion when one of her parents' friends was discussing the term 'gay' and its usage. She remembers some of the first gay people she met or knew about, including Dusty Springfield. She remembers the controversy about the outing of female tennis players in the 1980s. Peggy discusses female role models or influences, including Rabbi Elli Sarah, and Martina Navratilova.

[01:16:58-01:17:42] Peggy talks about the merging of two sides of her identity, as an out proud lesbian and an out, proud Jew: '*The merging of my Jewish self, and my lesbian self was something that I never believed would happen, and it has happened, and now these two parts of me are merged together. And it's wonderful actually.*' [1:16:55].