

Transcription code: RJ201312A

Interviewer: Suzanne Paginton

Interviewee: Tess Joseph

Transcriber: Simon Mayers

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### **Tess Joseph - Interview**

Recording Id.: RJ201312A

Date of recording: 9 September 2013

Length of recording: 1 hour, 15 minutes and 54 seconds

Interviewer: Suzanne Paginton

Interviewee: Tess Joseph

[00:00:00] Interviewer asks Tess how she would describe her Jewish background and early life.

[00:00:07] Tess describes her early life in some detail. According to Tess, her early life and Jewish background were somewhat “eclectic” and “different from the norm.” She explains that this difference was firstly in terms of her family. On her mother’s side it was “absolutely wonderful and exciting.” Her mother’s mother, Rosetta, converted into Judaism. Rosetta’s father was Jewish. Tess thinks that Rosetta’s mother’s family had a dry dock somewhere in Rotherhithe, and that Rosetta was descended from Portuguese dancing girls who had come to England before Menasseh Ben Israel petitioned for the readmission of Jews into England in the 1650s during the reign of Cromwell.

[00:00:47] According to Tess, her family on her mother’s side has had to make choices about being Jewish, and some have chosen to be Jewish and some haven’t. Despite this, they all get along, without the great chasm that exists in some Jewish families. Tess remembered her mother’s older cousin Reni, who is about 20 years older than Tess’s mum (who is 77). Reni was Jewish but her husband was not. Reni was her mother’s favourite cousin, and they saw Reni and her husband often. Tess’s grandma and her grandma’s sister (Alice) “converted into Judaism”, but the other parts of the family did not. Tess remembers Lily, who wasn’t Jewish, and her son, David (who is brilliant but suffers from schizophrenia). Lily always used to talk about the price of tomatoes and how to darn socks, which Tess described as “bizarre but it was very very rich.” Tess then talked about “Beady Edy” who had a “lover boy” who was a lodger and was 20 years younger than her. Continuing to talk about her mother’s side of the family, Tess explained that her great-great-great grandfather who came to Ireland with his family (when he was about 17-18 years old) and settled in Cork where the family set up a dry goods store in Cork, fell for an Irish Catholic girl (this was circa the 1850s). The Irish Catholic girl converted into Judaism. Tess still has the *Ketubah* from the marriage. [00:02:45]

[00:02:45] On her father’s side, the family had been in England for at least five generations. Her father’s family were more orthodox than her mothers’, though Tess’s parents were secular. Tess described her father as a “three times a year Jew” and her mother was not at all religious in any way – though she was “dragged to shul” three times a year. According to Tess, as a family they did not keep kosher though she did go to Chaider (unlike her sister) and as a teenager went to *Habonim* (a Jewish youth movement). Tess describes *Habonim* as the defining experience of her life as a

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teenager which left a huge imprint on her. She very much still sees herself as an “ex-Habo kid”. Tess’s ex-partner equated the *Habonim* with the Moonies, but Tess disagrees, describing it as “far more positive than that.” [00:04:00]

[00:04:00] According to Tess, on her father’s side her late great-uncle was president of the United Synagogue at one point, and there are photos of him meeting the queen at a garden party. Tess’s father worked for a cigarette company. Tess was born in Hackney, delivered by her second cousin Tony Wolfe (her dad’s first cousin), who she described as being very “vulpine” and “terrifying.” [00:05:05]

[00:05:05] Tess’s family lived in Basildon until she was about two and a half or three years old. She doesn’t remember anything from those first years of her life. By the time that Tess was three, her father had been posted to Jamaica. Tess doesn’t have any memories of Jamaica the first time (when they lived there for about 6 months). After Jamaica they moved as a family to Cyprus (1964-1965). Her earliest memories are of Cyprus. Tess went to an international school in Nicosia, Cyprus. After Cyprus they moved back to the UK. Tess and her mother initially stayed at Tess’s grandparents house in Hove for six months whilst her father was sorting things out in Basildon where he worked. They then moved to Thorpe Bay. Tess’s second school was Brighton Hove High School for Girls (for 6 months) followed by a school which she things was called Greenways, followed by Thorpe Dean. The family then moved back to Jamaica for 2 years and she went to an international school again (aged 8-10). When she got back she did her final year of junior school at Thorpe Dean. They later moved as a family to a village in Suffolk as her father got a new job (when Tess was 13). Tess’s sister at the time was four and a half and loved the countryside, but Tess loathed it. She described the countryside as “very pretty, but there for other people.” After living in Jamaica and Cyprus, in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic cities (a “polyglot world”), she found it difficult to adjust to what she described as a “crappy little village.” She found the village boring and observed that it had only limited public transport. According to Tess, she was “asked quite seriously” whether she had “horns and a tail” whilst at this village because she was Jewish (the antisemitic myth and school yard taunt that Jews had horns and a tail was not uncommon in English rural schools during and after the Second World War<sup>1</sup>). Tess was the only Jew in the school and found that very debilitating. [00:09:40]

[00:09:50] According to Tess, it was hard enough being Jewish and feeling different, and even harder “not having a name for why I didn’t connect on a sexual level with other kids.” She observed that it “wasn’t even a possibility to say the name lesbian.” Tess referred to a little red school book that she has, which “had a little bit about being gay,” but it was more about “boys and girls.” She stated that to say “the name lesbian” was just not possible. “I was Jewish and I had been born in 1960, fifteen years after the Holocaust, after Shoah, after the Second World War had ended, so it just really wasn’t within my vocabulary.” Tess talks about having her “out.” She

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<sup>1</sup> See Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xviii and Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British society during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 69

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explains that when they came to live in Suffolk they went to Cambridge for their first Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year). Tess talks about a “gorgeous family” that they met there, and their son, Paul, who is straight and nearly the same age as Tess, and who she has remained friends with (they are not in contact much but they are on each other’s Facebook). Tess also discusses some of the other people she met there including a somewhat rebellious group of kids. The experience was “incredibly special” to Tess. Tess talks about the parents of some of these kids who were academics, and how their houses were full of books, and she discusses the excitement she felt at reading and discussing their books and talking about politics (most of them had political views that were to “the left”). According to Tess, by the time she was 17/18, she was “set”; she knew she was “of the left,” she was “already writing poetry” which was published in the “Suffolk Free Press,” she was active in CND and “Rock Against Racism.” At this point she was not yet “out.” [00:16:25]

[00:16:25] Interviewer asks Tess about how her orientation evolved around this time.  
[00:16:35]

[00:16:35] According to Tess, she “didn’t have a clue” about her “sexual orientation” at this time. All she knew was that when she went to *Habonim* and “all the girls were flirting” she felt that she was on the outside. According to Tess, this could have been partly because she was “chunky”, but it was also because she felt she “didn’t know what I was” and “didn’t feel confident in who I was.” She attributes this partly to some bad experiences, such as being “hit on in some rather nasty ways.” According to Tess, when she went to Bristol Polytechnic, she found she fitted in a lot better. There was a small Jewish community (which reminded her of Cambridge) with a Liberal synagogue and an Orthodox synagogue. During the first year she did the “usual freshers thing,” trying to have “heterosexual sex,” and not enjoying it very much, and getting very drunk on a very regular basis and dancing a lot. She had a best friend, Jo, and they were inseparable. Tess found herself falling in love with Jo but not having the words for it. Jo was “very straight” and they went off “trawling for men” together because that was a way of “bonding and being close.” According to Tess, in her second year she started to attend a drama group, “E-15,” which was amazing and liberating, and to mix with a much more eclectic group of people. Tess got more involved with Feminism, and joined a “consciousness raising group” (which consisted of “wonderful women”). One of the women in the consciousness raising group, Kathy (who was training to be a lawyer), was a lesbian - Tess still wasn’t “out” yet at this time. At the end of her second year at Polytechnic, Tess’s parents split up, and her mother was trying to commit suicide. This was a hard time for Tess and she decided to take a year out from her degree as she was afraid she might fail if she continued with all this going on. [00:21:30]

[00:21:30] According to Tess, she was going to use some of the year out to go to Israel during the summer and do some research for a dissertation on Israeli and American literature in the twentieth century. For various reasons she did not end up going to Israel until the following January/February. According to Tess, she ended up on Kibbutz Matzuva, about 5km from the Lebanese border, and was there as the Lebanese Civil War started, and was almost killed the night before it started. This was

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a traumatizing experience for Tess. To compound the horrible experience, Tess also had a traumatic abortion experience around the same time. The Feminist group that Tess was a part of in England supported her during this traumatic time, were “amazing,” and were her “life line to sanity” from a distance (whilst she was still in Israel). Tess then returned to England and very briefly went out with Shaun, an amazing if occasionally infuriating guy (more like a brother/cousin according to Tess; even more so than her biological cousins).

[00:32:20] Tess talks about being involved in the setting up of the Jewish Bristol Feminist Group” which is part of the network of Jewish Feminist Groups. This was at the time of the “Spare Rib dispute.” Tess mentions going up to London and talking about Jewish lesbian responses to the “Spare Rib dispute”, and how to support Linda Bellos (see footnote<sup>2</sup>). Tess got involved in a Jewish feminist magazine that came out as a response to the dispute. Tess was involved in every single issue of the magazine, and whilst not an official part of the collective, was part of all the collective’s meetings. According to Tess, this was an exciting time. Tess was also involved in other movements, drama groups, and the first international feminist book week in Bristol. [00:33:37]

[00:33:37] Asked by the interviewer about partnerships at this time, Tess said there was no one as she was “just coming out.” Tess fell in love with one women but she was straight. Tess then met someone in drama group called Elaine, who was not Jewish, and they had a one night stand. At a later date Elaine committed suicide, and after that Tess could not bare to be in Bristol any more.

[00:38:53] Tess mentions getting involved with a Jewish lesbian network, with people like Claire Lazarus. Claire used to do fund raisers at “Rackets”, an old lesbian club that Tess sometimes attended.

[00:42:45] Tess was one of the people who set up the Camden Lesbian and Gay unit. Tess was involved in the “pre-setting up” of some of the forums for the unit. Tess was also involved in trips to Europe to discuss “sexual orientation regulations,” which were later incorporated into the “Employment Act 2002” (in connection to unifying European policies on Lesbian and Gay Rights ). Tess is “massively proud” of being

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<sup>2</sup> According to sources on the internet, Linda Bellos was a revolutionary lesbian feminist and the first so-called “mixed-race” lesbian to join the “Spare Rib” feminist collective (a collective that arose around the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*). Bellos rejected the term “mixed-race”, preferring instead “mixed heritage.” Her mother was Jewish and her father Nigerian. According to an article in the *Independent*, Bellos felt that the notion of sisterhood started to “turn sour at Spare Rib magazine, the bible of the feminist movement.” Bellos stated that “it was about point scoring” and that that was “just how the white, middle-class women who owned the women’s movement played us. We fell into the trap of thinking that the more oppressed we were, the more points we could have. Bloody women from Oxford had universalised their experience, defined it as feminism and wondered why it didn’t mean anything to the rest of us. When we started asserting our equal right to define what feminism was, they didn’t like it.” Katy Guest, “Whatever happened to feminism’s extreme sects?”, *The Independent* (online), 12 February 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/whatever-happened-to-feminisms-extreme-sects-465970.html> (downloaded 12/12/2013)

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involved in that project at the ground level and sees it as being part of her “legacy”. [00:44:29]. Tess later moved to a “shared lesbian house” in a co-operative in 1988. There was a Jewish woman in the house, Melissa Freeberg, who Tess still knows a little bit, and they occasionally grimace at each other and say “hi”, but they didn’t get on so well in the house. [00:46:00]

[00:46:00] Tess mentions doing Lesbian stand-up comedy workshops with Karin Parker and Maria Esperito and other people for about a year and a half. She says she didn’t have the courage to go “main-stream” (largely “straight” and “macho”) stand-up comedy. Tess talks about her grandma who was an important influence on her life; she was cultured and knew about art and antiques and was an antiques dealer. Tess started to work for Camden council in 1990 in various capacities, including a period at the HIV unit as a high-level administrator. [00:52:11]

[00:52:11] Interviewer asks if and how Tess’s Jewish identity figures in the “political and feminist work” that she has done. Tess replied that she “was out there as a Jewish lesbian in the middle of it all.” Her Jewish identity and hanging out with her Jewish friends was an important aspect of her life.

[00:55:50] Tess mentions that she was a convener of the “Camden Lesbian Workers Forum” from 1990 to 1992. However, the social workers strike ended that as she couldn’t go out on strike because of regulations that were brought in which would have resulted in her being sacked.

[00:56:00]: In 1994, Tess met Sarah (her future Civil Partner). Tess went to an HIV conference with a colleague called Mario. Tess “ditched” Mario because she saw Helen Reece, who at that time identified as “Lesbian Jewish” (from Bristol). Helen no longer identifies as lesbian and is now married. Helen was sitting with a young woman (Sarah) who had long blond hair, amazing blue eyes and was “quite chunky”. Tess thought that she was the “most beautiful person in the world.” Tess observed that she was “entranced by her.” So Tess ditched Mario for the evening, and sat with her friends, Helen, and this girl who she knew nothing about. Tess was besotted with Sarah and her beautiful blue eyes. Tess and Sarah sat at the bar together and Tess observed that when her friend Diane came by and said hello, she (Tess) blanked her and focused on Sarah. Tess later took Sarah out for a meal. Tess’s friend Gwyneth, who Tess “fancied something chronic” sometime before that, came in to where they were. Tess blanked Gwyneth. Sarah then went back with Tess to Tess’s home. This was the start of virtually sixteen years of partnership with Sarah. When Tess met up with her sister, Lucy, the next day, Lucy did not think it would last, suggesting it was just a one night stand. However, Sarah came back over to stay the next night and from then onwards they rarely spent any time apart for the next sixteen years except for when she was away doing her scholarship or for work related purposes. However, after sixteen years they did split up. Tess thought that it was the “real deal” but they split up on 6 November 2010. When they split up, Sarah told Tess that she was bisexual, that until then she couldn’t tell her, and that she was already going out with a “straight man.” Tess and Sarah had had the first Civil Partnership in Camden (and

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the fifth in the country), and they featured as such in the *Jewish Chronicle*,<sup>3</sup> the *Observer*, *Camden New Journal*, various law journals, and other periodicals. This was in 2005. [01:02:40]

[01:02:57]: Tess finished working for Camden council in 1995. She then did two years at Royal Holloway college, obtaining an MSc and a DipSW in Social Work. Tess is currently not registered and does not practice. She was involved in student politics and equalities work during this time at Royal Holloway like she had been at Bristol Polytechnic. She got very interested in social psychology and social morality. She also looked at psychological ways of understanding the Shoah (the Holocaust). After finishing at Holloway, Tess worked for 3 months in a social work team in Hackney. Claire Lazarus was also working in Hackney at the time so they reconnected and had great fun. Tess also met her friend Katherine Radcliff there. Katherine was a lesbian and also a social worker, having been on the same course as Tess a year before Tess. Tess and Katherine became very close and used to go to “the Glass Bar”<sup>4</sup> together. According to Tess, Sarah hated the Glass Bar and “it turns out she wasn’t keen on anything lesbian, and now I know why but I didn’t at the time.” Tess then spent eight months working for an adults asylum seeking team. According to Tess, that was very political, and she did a lot of work with interpreters. Tess observed that this fed into her Jewish politics and her concerns about displacement and multiple identities. Tess observes that there was a lot of anti-asylum feeling going on at the time [01:06:00].

[01:06:00] After that Tess did 18 months in a drug and alcohol team in Watford. She then worked in the probation service for seven years. During her time as a probation officer she was also part of the formation of the Diversity Directorate. Significantly, Tess was the only lesbian on that team and the only Jew on that team. Tess points out that she personally had multiple identities (e.g. Jewish and lesbian), and yet the team itself was not that diverse, and there were lots of problems about her being Jewish, and even more difficulties about her being lesbian among some of the team who were for the most part very devoutly Christian or Muslim. Conversely, Tess’s director, a Muslim, was “a complete sweetie” and Tess’s “hero until this very day.” According to Tess, her director, founded (the UK branch of) “Alif-Aleph”<sup>5</sup> with Richard Stone (President of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality), and got Tess involved with it. Tess is still “incredibly proud” to be involved with Alif Aleph which helps to facilitate dialogue between Jews and Muslims in the UK. Its about how to

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<sup>3</sup> See entry in the *Jewish Chronicle*, 23 December 2005, 26: ‘Friends of Tess Joseph and Sarah Bourke, warmly congratulate them on having the first Civil Partnership ceremony at Camden Town Hall, on December 21. May you have a fabulous life together, filled with health and happiness. Mazeltov and simantov.’

<sup>4</sup> An Arts and Social Club for the London women's LBTQH community (lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer and heterosexual women).

<sup>5</sup> According to *The Muju Crew*, “Alif-Aleph UK is a group of British Muslims and British Jews brought together by Richard Stone, President of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality, in 2003. He was able to build on the many positive contacts in British Muslim communities he had made in five of the previous nine years when he was member of the Runnymede Islamophobia Commission, and Chair of it from 1999 to 2004.” <http://www.muju.org.uk/partners-supporters/alif-aleph-uk/> (downloaded 12/12/2013)

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communicate together as human beings rather than politics. Tess suggests that there is a closer connection with more points of cultural contact and similarity between Jews and Muslims than between Jews and Christians, and she observes that a lot of her best friends are Muslims (some secular and some religious). According to Tess, her “nephew of choice is Zak,” a Pakistani Muslim gay guy, and she is his “aunty” because he needs an aunty because his own parents are “rubbish about him being gay.” Tess observed that she supports Zak, and that he has grown into a fine young man, and that she “loves him to pieces.” [01:08:08]

[01:08:08] Tess explains that she was involved in some work with the CPS which she is very proud of, such as setting up the first LGBT criminal justice conference with Yvette Williams, which had prominent speakers such as Linda Bellos and Neil Young. Tess later ended up working for the Hackney Council Domestic Violence and Hate Crimes Team, and (re-)wrote in 2007 their pamphlets and leaflets on hate crime and domestic violence which included some material on anti-LGBT and racist prejudice, and violence towards asylum seekers and women. Tess then worked for the police in various capacities, including working for the diversity directorate (now about to be disbanded) and in connection with firearms and Tasers, and public order policy. She left the police in June 2013, taking voluntary exit after nearly seven years. In the future Tess hopes to continue her career in connection to the criminal justice system, hate crime (including anti-LGBT hate crime), and violence against women, but working in a more independent capacity. [01:15:17]

[01:15:17] Tess concluded the interview observing that being a woman and being Jewish is who she is. She observed that being Jewish and a woman features strongly in her writing, her friendships and networks. She stated that: “It’s just a question of Being. I feel very comfortable with being Jewish, being a lesbian, being a feminist, being a radical activist, being a campaigner, being a stroppy stroppy stroppy dyke, and just hanging out with my mates and having a good time.” [01:15:54]