Interviewer: Sharon Rapaport
Interviewee: Rabbi Lionel Blue
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Transcriber: Anna Barker

SR: Ok, I'm interviewing Rabbi Lionel Blue on the 12th April 2013 in his home in London. My name is Sharon Rapaport. Rabbi Blue, I want to start by thanking you for taking part in Rainbow Jews. I would like to start the interview by you telling me when you were born, and where were you born.

RLB: Yeah, well I was born in London, from British-born parents but Russian grandparents and they wanted to get to America but never made it. They got stuck in London instead. Um…I was born in the Salvation Army Hospital in Hackney in East London. My father was a tailor. My mother was a secretary. My father was out of work for many years when I was a kid, so my mother had to support the family, which caused a lot of trouble. There you are.

SR: Your parents' background, you started saying, could you tell me a bit more about your parents' background, from where did your mother come?

RLB: My mother was born in London, so was my father. My father was a terrific chap, he was…he was very physical, he wanted, his great dream was of leaving the seamy factories of London, East London, where he was a tailor, and become a gardener instead, but he never made it. My mother was very conscious that he was unemployed for many years, my mother had to keep the family, which broke his pride. My mother was a secretary, and she was very good at it. My grandmother had forbidden her to ever enter the kitchen, because she wanted one of her daughters to get out of Stepney, out of the poverty of the East End and get to the heights of Highgate or Hampstead, and she chose my mother, because my mother was very bright. And er…they, I thought that they went through a difficult period in their marriage, having a child came late, they didn't expect me when I arrived on the scene, and I thought I kept them together, but in fact I think I was the source of all their problems, because the thing they disagreed about was me. My father wanted me to be a boxer, my mother wanted me to be a Jewish property developer. [Laughter] So I did the dirty on both of them and became a rabbi instead!

SR: So where did you grow up?

RLB: In Stepney in London. [inaudible]

SR: Can you tell me how was it to grow in that area at that time?

RLB: Well, we were very conscious of what was going on in the world around you. For example I used to have to plot my way from my school to home, to walk, because there were Jewish streets, and Jewish sides of streets, and you had to be careful that you walked on Jewish streets or Jewish sides of streets and not through hostile streets where stones were thrown at you, that sort of thing. Because the problem of Mosley and the Fascists and the Communists was all coming up, shirts, different coloured shirts all over the East End of London. Mosley was trying to march through the East End, and my father went, my father and grandfather went out to stop him. My zayde landed in jail, and my father ended up in hospital. I was sent to take packets of sandwiches to an old woman who threw buckets of water over the heads of the Fascists below. [Laughter] So it was rather frightening in some

ways and also the things that frightened me myself, because I remember thinking once when a Fascist procession came down the street that…my mother rushed into a shop to keep out of it and keep me away from it. And I remember thinking, I'm fed up of running away from all this sort of stuff, I think I wanted to become a Fascist too, I wanted to have a drum, and a black shirt, and I felt guilty about that for ever afterwards. But on the other hand there were people like Stencil the Yiddish poet who slept on, with other Jewish intellectuals, who absolutely broke, and slept on park benches near us. There were a lot of very interesting beggars I remember. There was the… And people were very kind, and I think I learnt kindness from all of them. I think that period really set me on my course of life which later ended in my becoming a rabbi. For example I remember my grandmother, my bubbe, looking out the window and said to me, 'Lionel, who are those chaps walking in the rain across the road? They look so sad walking across.' I said, 'Ma, I think they're some miners come from Wales to demonstrate.' She said: 'Tell them to take any food out of their pockets and come in the kitchen and I'll make them soup.' And she never allowed me or my mother in the kitchen, because we might contaminate it, because we didn't keep the [inaudible] laws. But the miners she… And as a result of her, I could never get from my office to the BBC properly, because she taught me whenever I saw a beggar, that is the nearest I would ever come to meeting god in life. So I always had to take out something for a beggar, and said a nice word to him or her. And going from Oxford Street to the Marble Arch, where my office was later on in life, when I ran the Reform Beth Din, I always used to end up in my office with no money at all, and no lunch for me, so I used to have to find my way through back streets to avoid the beggars. She was a very good woman, and my mother was in hospital for the first few years of my life, so she very much brought me up. I was a…

SR: Why was your mother in hospital?

RLB: She had some signs of blood illness, as a result of giving birth to me, so I felt guilty about that straight away. And my father had to give her blood all the time, and I was allowed to go and visit her. I remember going into a hospital as a kid and looking through a window at her and waving at her. She enjoyed herself in hospital. She had the capacity to enjoy herself in any situation. She… I remember the nurse, she used to translate from Yiddish into English for the nurses and doctors, for all the old Yiddish women who were there. And I remember once she told me that the sister had come, sister of the ward had come, and had tried to tell an old Jewish lady [inaudible] that she could get out of bed now. The old lady gave her just a look on her face like that, and the sister just, and ma said: 'Why did you do that to her?' she said: [YIDDISH: inaudible]. 'She wants me to go to hell, I'll have her go to hell!' Antisemite! It has a kind of humour in it, but it was a funny time because I wasn't allowed to play with the ordinary children on the street because I might get a bad accent. My parents wanted me above all somehow to get out of London life, and get on to the heights of Hampstead or Golders Green, and not to have the poverty or prejudice that they had to suffer. Well it rather disturbed my childhood, I wasn't allowed to play with this person or that person. I used to come home at night, and my mother was out, still working, and my father was still trying to find a job. And I was, my grandmother had now died, and I used to go into the pictures, the films, I used to climb through the um…. air, glass top, one of the glass windows, and get in to the cinema. And no one would take me into the cinema, you see.

SR: What was the name of the cinema?

RLB: It was called the Classic, in Mile End Road. And I used to get in, and the kids used to wave at me and hide me under their knees and when the lights went low, I'd get a seat. And it was a kind of game that was played with the Ashes. So I just spent my time at the cinema.

SR: What is your, one of your most favourite films of the time?

RLB: Um…I think it was Fred Astaire, and…what was her name, Ginger Rogers, doing…Top Hat. That seemed to me really elegance, that seemed to me high society. Which was romance, where there was no Fascists walking along the street, no poverty, there was nothing like that. And so I saw it again and again and again.

SR: You were talking about your mother. Would you like to tell us a bit about your relationship with your father and what kind of man he was?

RLB: My father was a good man, who wanted, a very good man, who wanted to, wanted to be a provider for his family. But he was rather, he always seemed to fall for dominant women, like my grandmother, his mother, and my mother. And he could never work out which one, he tried to satisfy them both and never succeeded! And also he had this secret longing to be a gardener, and lead a completely different type of life. He had the mind of a…peasant, not of a, someone who was a tailor, or a manager of a tailoring factory. And he was very, very good, I think I learned a lot of goodness from him. I remember, but he always, he always was willing to have a fight, he liked fighters. And I remember we were, we decided one Saturday night we were going to go out on a spree, we were going to go to a dance corner house in the West End of London. And as we got towards the station, we were walking down Whitechapel Road, dad saw a coloured chap being thrown out of a pub. And my father, and my mother said: 'Harry, Harry, don't, don't get mobbed in a row,' and my father said: 'No, no, no Hettie,' and rushed in. And an awful row broke out in which, in which the…poor coloured chap got knocked out. So did the owner, the manager of the pub. Finally he opened his eye and looked out and saw my father bending over him. 'Harry', he said, 'Do you know why I showed that man out?' 'No.' 'It was because he was making anti-Semitic remarks.' And my mother said: 'Harry, I told you so, I told you so'. I also remember that my father was, he had tremendous love for animals too. He found a dog which was all mangy and had sores on it, and my father was in a little workers caf having food. And he, my father, insisted on taking the dog into the caf while the owner and everyone else said 'You can't do that, we're eating in here.' And my father said 'This dog needs it more.' And my father insisted on having some water and a scrubbing brush and anointing all the dogs…sores and um I was almost ashamed of my father because he was making such a lot of trouble. And I remember a man went up to me and said: 'Don't be ashamed of your father, he's the thing, he's doing the thing that we should do but can't do it. You be proud of him.' So I thought that was very good. Many years later, I remember reading about Dr Johnson, the great English writer of the 18th century, and Dr Johnson said, he had a very poor father who ran a bookstore in Lichfield. And…Johnson used to stand, he never sold many books [inaudible]. Many years later, when they asked him about his father, he said where he was going, he said he was going to Lichfield. 'Why?' he said, 'Why are you going back to Lichfield if you're from London? It's a long journey.' He said: 'I know, I've got to.' Why? 'I'm going to that place where my father's bookstand was, where he never sold any books, and I'm going to stand in the rain for a few hours, just to remember him.' And I found myself standing in, I thought I'd do likewise, I went to stand in Petticoat Lane for a few, for about half an hour, just thinking about my father, because he was the same sort, he was exactly the same. So, there was a lot of worry, there was a lot of kindness, because of course people didn't keep things from

children, the problems of unemployment, poverty, not being able to pay the rent, that sort of thing were facts which I knew very well from early childhood. Later on of course things got a bit better, but then came 1939 and the war. My father had already fought in the First World War, in the Royal Flying Corps. In the Second World War, he became a fireman in the London docks. Which during the Blitz was heavy stuff!

SR: Excuse me for a second I'll stop because there's a bit of noise.

[end of first recording]

RLB: My mother's family was a big one [incomprehensible]

[Pause.]

SR: Were your family religious, what was their relationship with Judaism?

RLB: We were, it's hard to say because, they were…they didn't know where they were really, religiously, politically or anything else. Because they were still partly living, in their minds they were living in Eastern Europe. They spoke about five languages, they spoke to God to Hebrew, they spoke to, they made love in Yiddish, they spoke to their neighbours in Cockney. And my grandmother, I don't think even knew she was in England, she thought she was in America. So they had no comprehension of the world outside, really, except in politics. It was very political. And…some of my cousins were communists, my grandfather was an anarchist, he was a follower of Prince Kropotkin. And I always had a soft spot for them. And one of my uncles ran, when he was a kid, ran away to the Spanish Civil War, but got taken off the train at Dover, because they found he was too young. Another distant cousin, more distant cousin, another cousin of mine lost his life in the Spanish Civil War. When I tried to find, later on in life I tried to find the jail in which he might have met his end in in Spain. It was very moving. But something very odd happened there. A Spanish lady came in and while I was sitting in one of the pews she gave some prayers and she turned around to me, so I said 'Amen' at the prayers, because after all she must have had a relation who died there in that prison. So she went on like this, and I decided to say 'Amen', and I listened to the Spanish and suddenly I realised she was praying for the wrong side! [Laughter] So I thought to myself, it doesn't matter now. But at that time it mattered intensely. So my father was a conservative, my uncle was a communist, [inaudible], there were one or two Trotskyites, Anarchists, and one of them was liberal. And they all, I remember, all meals were. ..shabbes any time, were taken up with politics, except for my grandmother and my mother believed in Hollywood. That was her life. And so I knew the whole lot, the whole political alphabet from a very early age. Although when it comes to religion it was a funny business. Um…I didn't know what to make of it, my family sort of, my grandparents, my grandmother kept some things, kept a lot actually. She kept strict, um, religion was keeping difference between milchig and fleishig and all this sort of thing. My mother was forced to, was never allowed to go out to Lion's when she went to work, because in case she might eat traifer. And something my grandmother waddled (?) right up to the city in order to try and make sure she kept the rules. But my mother was really out of it. She, as soon as shabbes ended, and three stars appeared in the sky, my mother took it hotfoot to the La Boheme dancing club, where she was the Charleston queen of Stepney. And she lived in two worlds. I used to watch it, because none of them were consistent about the things that they, it struck me that I was inconsistent too, to the Christians, people, children at school, Jews were, a, a hangover from the past. They were, at best they were nice people but silly

enough to make the wrong choice when the real goods were offered them. And one should be nice to them, but they had it! [Laughter] To the Jews the Christians were nice people but they couldn't, but they couldn't really, that they had an addiction to pig and to, pig, and wrong, false piety. And so therefore they weren't, and I was told never to go to a church, which of course I then did! I got frightened out of my wits by a church because there were so many pictures of suffering there. You're not used to it after a synagogue, which is neutral as far as suffering is concerned. You come to a Christian church and in it you get everybody being tortured. The central point being the crucifixion of Jesus himself. So I shuddered, and walked out! And I didn't know what would happen in life, I thought that Hitler would invade, I knew quite a lot even at the age of 8 and 9 I knew a lot about politics, I didn't believe that anything we could do could ever stop him. It seemed to be…so, and I was relieved when we were evacuated in 1939, we all had to report to the school, with our little satchel full of stuff to go away…I thought that, I thought I wasn't going to wait for Hitler to send me to a prison or a camp, because rumours were already going around the Jewish ghetto in East London about what was happening in Germany and what was going to happen in Poland. And one chap, I met in the market, on the days when I came up from London for a few days afterwards, we met in the market, said to me, he was a nice guy, and he wasn't allowed to join up because he had a little farm, and they needed him to do the farming. And he was going to, a non-Jewish chap, and we got very friendly together, I think he was the first love I ever had in my life! He said, he was going to, he's got a gun, and he was going to stay in his little house with his gun, and kill, and stay until they killed him. And I thought, that's the best way of getting out of the whole business. I didn't want to get captured or anything like that. So I asked him if I might join him, and he said yes. And so that relieved me of a lot of worry, because I wondered what would happen, and I didn't want to end up in a, you know in a concentration camp or anything like that. Though I didn't quite know the word at that time for it, but I knew something dreadful was going to happen and I much preferred to fight to the last bullet and that was that and this chap, Nicky was his name. I looked him up later on, after I came back to London, but I never found him again.

SR: How was it to move from this Jewish environment when you were evacuated, from this Jewish East End environment to the countryside?

RLB: Well, I never stayed in the countryside longer than about six months, then I was immediately sent to another school. Because it was a time when children were doing their preparation for the 11+ examination. And the whole system was in chaos. And I had to educate myself a lot of the time. So I discovered libraries. So after school was over, and often there was…in London we only had one hour and a half school a day, because the bombers were coming over. And there was a gap in the middle of the day, when the first wave of bombers had gone back, and the next wave of bombers were waiting, you see, when we had school. And so I, the people that we were billeted on, some of them were lovely, some of them were incredibly nice, some of them just had you because they were poor people who needed to make a few shillings out of you. But I liked them all, and I found it wasn't true because my grandparents had told me that only Jewish people knew how to love their children. Which was not true! Because there were one or two of the ladies who looked after me during the evacuation who were the nicest people I ever had, and I still remember them very much. Mrs Holton in Guildford, and…there was another lady, Mrs Granger in Devon. And all of them… I think I learnt from my mother to listen to people. My mother liked listening to people, their stories, and I did too. And I began to get much more conscious of the common humanity of all of us. Which was more like the communist thought, or the anarchist. So…I started reading, I thought I'd better, I started reading a lot more about Jewish

life, they all had books, old books on Jewish history. So I read my way through those. I read everything. Sometimes not knowing what the hell it was! I read a book which I thought would be a murder story which I was going to enjoy, called *Jocasta's Crime*, it was a book about Freudian psychology. [Laughter] I never quite found out who the murderer was! So it was, in a way it was a kind of a, I didn't come back from, I came back from London during the Blitz, because everybody thought the invasion was coming on. And that…you had to sleep, for example, at night, with a little bag beside your bed or in the shelter, because in case the invasion came and everybody had to move in a hurry. But it didn't come. But we thought it would. And we lived from day to day.

SR: Could you share with us what is this feeling to be a child in the time of the Blitz? Could you share with us maybe one night where you had to be…?

RLB: Oh yeah, I'll tell you what happened. I'd go along to…daddy, dad didn't appear because dad was, had a meal and then went back to the London docks which were being bombed, which, everything was going up in flames. My mother came out, left her office at about 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock. I and my grandfather, we stayed in the line to the shelter to keep places for them. We found a place under the brewery, in the brewery walks, where you could lie down. And some people tried to find a place in the Underground. But…there were a lot of problems, because my mother, my uncle was dying of TB in the hospital nearby, my mother and my uncle, one or the other always tried to get to the hospital to him before the next raids began. So it was a bit fraught the whole business. And once I remember the tour of the, they closed the gates of the shelter because it was full. I saw my mother trying to get in from the hospital, they wouldn't let her in. So the chap said, you can kiss, you can say goodbye to her, she'll find another shelter. So he picked me up and I bit his ear! I wouldn't let go until he opened the door for her. And that really terrified me. But in the shelter there was a very nice atmosphere. First of all, there was a nice Irish non-Jewish family nearby, they used to stay with us, we got to know. And they used to give us food, and we used to exchange food and I was allowed to eat it, which was interesting, and I liked it. And people used to sing, they used to sing songs in the shelter. Like…shall I sing you one?

SR: Yes, please do.

RLB: [Singing] After the war is over,
After the raid is over,
After the bombs have dropped,
Then comes that wailing warning,
That Hitler's pranks have stopped.
But the roar of the akak is overhead
And the sirens sound once more
How many a heart will be breaking
Long after, long after the war.

SR: Thank you.

RLB: We all sang those songs and I was very moved by them. And we made a lot of friends there, and there was a great feeling of togetherness in the shelter, and that's when the war, it really felt great to be alive at that time in some kind of way, because it was heroic time, it was a time when Britain, when I became first conscious really how English, how British I was. It was a very inspiring time. There was Churchill… I remember the king's speech, that time

which went on… 'I said the man at the gate of the door,' he quotes some unknown poetess who said, wrote: 'Give me a light to guide me into the unknown' and God said: 'I shall give you a light which no one can put out. Which will [inaudible] you in any known way. And I got a flavour of what religion was like at that time. Because I'd given up on ordinary religion. All the business of the food laws and all this sort of thing didn't fit into my life any more. I'd been [inaudible] evacuated and all that sort of thing, and I waited for a bomb to come, [inaudible] to give a thunderbolt to drop on me which never did. And I thought my uncles, one of my uncles, Marxism seemed to me the most intelligent thing I'd ever heard. And he explained it to me and I read a book on it, and it seemed to me that was the way that it was.

SR: So at what age do you fall out from religion?

RLB: When I was five. I remember my grandmother told me, that if I prayed for something with all my heart and all my soul, and I prayed it wasn't a selfish prayer, then god would do it. So I prayed for the speedy death of Hitler and Oswald Mosley, the British Fascist leader. And about a week later I had to get my grandfather a Daily Herald, his paper, from the shop, and it showed a picture of both of them, I think, and they looked very successful and very bright. And I thought to myself, well that's religion for you, and I gave it up. It didn't work! So I gave up religion and marched with the Reds instead, and they liked a little child marching with them. And when, they used to sing songs like, communist songs, and I used to shout out: 'Red Front! Red Front!' you know the middle of songs. And they used to always give me biscuits and orangeade. So that was, I was a serious Marxist from then on. And it helped me a very great deal because, later on, because…with puberty of course came the business of sex. And I didn't know how to handle it, I didn't know what it was because I first of all, I'd never stayed long in any place enough to know how to have a friend. So, I had no brothers or sisters, and no cousins on my mother's side. So I didn't know who to ask what or anything. All I knew was I made friends with people like Nick, the one that, the bloke I…and fantasised on him.

SR: So at what age is that, you said that he was the first love of your life.

RLB: Yes.

SR: What age are we talking?

RLB: I was about ten, nine/ten.

SR: So was that the first time you were aware of…

RLB: Yes I also was aware of it, I started reading, when the other boys started reading boys' stories, boys' school, Tom Brown's Schooldays, all that sort of thing. I found myself reading girls' stories, and having to make up little stories that my mother and aunt wanted them, or a fictitious cousin wanted them. But it's true and…

RLB: So when you say that your mother wanted, was it something very explicit, did she…?

SR: No she didn't want them of course, but I just had to say that somebody wanted them and I would act them as romances, um…

RLB: What were your family's ideas of the time of lesbians and gays?

RLB: Theoretically that they didn't exist, because only goyim did that sort of thing. It was a typical Jewish defence, I suppose it was later on I realised it was done in the Middle Ages, and the Christians, Jews were already guilty of blasphemy, but the same time they were always trying to pin on them the idea they were also guilty of sexual sin. And the rabbis always had to say, no, no it's never us, it's only gentiles that do that sort of thin, we don't do it, we have purity of family life. I suppose there was a purity of family life, but I know for example that there were gay people, I didn't know the word gay of course, that didn't exist, but they were called feygeles. And um I had two cousins, two distant connections in the family who must have been feygeles.

SR: Feygele, is it a Yiddish word?

RLB: Yes, little bird, birdies.

[Phone rings – second recording ends.]

RLB: I don't know how the word came up, but one doesn't know the origin of words as a child. But feygele was 'little bird', and every Jewish family really had one. We had big families, and there was always a feygele among them. So everybody knew it in fact, but denied it in…in theory. But there was a great big, you didn't see what you didn't want to see around you.

SR: So those two cousins which you referred to…

RLB: One left the family and went a lot to another continent, so as not to.... The other one, I don't know what happened to him. But I was always rather curious about them, but at the same time, I didn't know I was one of them. The other thing was, my father sometimes read aloud from the Sunday newspaper, the News of the World, a little bit about, someone had appeared in court guilty of something, finding someone on Hampstead Heath or something like that, and going at it. And he made a sort of coarse remark, and I used to shiver, because I used to begin to think, was that me? And I didn't know where to find anything about feygeles, or how to ask, you didn't say such things. But then the only thing that, the only way I knew that other people must have existed was from…things that people had written on lavatory doors in public loos, that was the only education I had about them.

SR: What were the things that were written on the public loos?

RLB: Well attempts to make assignations with somebody else, little letters or just a sort of, dirty words, or remarks or that sort of thing. I didn't want to get mixed up with that, and also everything I heard about them was always in connection with the police, because at that time there was, by the end of the war there was beginning to be a, I don't know why, a kind of persecution of gay people, homo people. You always read them in the form of police notices, or things in court, and therefore…I wanted to read some, but you couldn't, and you could meet one person in the pub once, but he was so frightened, he was more frightened of me than I was of him. And it wasn't very encouraging, but I didn't know what I was looking for, quite. In my mind I got it mixed up, I was reading Dennis Wheatley's *Black Magic* books. And somehow I got it mixed up, the whole idea of sexuality, became mixed up with *Black Magic* books. Mind you, the odd thing about it was, I remember before I left London for the first time I was evacuated, I used to play games with the other boys and girls, called Doctors

and Nurses, in which, your first attempts to discover what the difference was between a boy and a girl. And I was very interested in girls' bodies, so I don't know quite what happened, but it seemed to be some sort of, somehow the evacuation brought out a completely different side of myself. Why I don't know.

SR: So when did you feel able to start exploring your sexuality?

RLB: Well I suppose when I first started reading things in the loos. I never knew a gay person except, when something really happened to me was when meeting Nick, whom I fell in love with, I realise from later on, because I didn't know what it meant then, but really I felt for him.

SR: So actually you understood that you fell in love with Nick only later on, not at the time?

RLB: Yes, no at the age of about ten, nine or ten when I came back to London after the first evacuation.

SR: And at the time what were your emotions around Nick.

RLB: I just wanted to die with him in…He was a very strong, very handsome guy and he seemed to know what he wanted to do, my life had always been pulled in bits, what my mother wanted, what my dad wanted, you can't speak like the children in the street, you can't do this, you can't do that, and you've got to look good, etc. etc. And my mother didn't know the difference I don't think between a child…she loved me dearly, both my parents loved me to the nth degree, but at the same time they both had different ideas of what they wanted. Only my grandmother loved me as I was. But my mother…Nicky was something completely different, first of all…he knew what he wanted to do with, whereas my mother and father wanted to make, try to believe in myths, that Britain would never go under, when I thought it would. I was a very, I was quite an intelligent kid, and sort of *wang i*t up (?), I thought it didn't have a hope after 41, 40/41. And he knew what he wanted to do and he was going to do it, and I thought, thank god, someone knows their own mind. And he was, he was blonde, he was blue-eyed, and he was a very strong man, a farmer.

SR: How old was he at the time?

RLB: I should think about 28, 30.

SR: So in what, he was actually already an adult.

RLB: Yes he never made any, he was very fond of me, but at the same time he never made anything, nothing happened between us. But at the same time he was my hero figure. Then I got, started reading the Dennis Wheatley books which were about black magic in London, and I thought this was all black magic stuff. I didn't know what the thing was about, I couldn't ask my mother and father about it, I didn't have any brothers to ask about it. And I didn't know any children, because I was only too short a while in any place, and then I got moved on [inaudible]. So it was if, I think, what happened was, later on I decided what happened to me was that, after my grandmother died when I was about 6 years, 7 years old, my soul died, with her. I didn't believe in a soul any more. Especially after that business with the prayer, when I tried to work out if the prayer worked. And my body didn't want to, tried to distance myself from my body. Because I knew that it could only lead to dreadful things. It

was constantly leading me in things I shouldn't do. So I gave up my body and my soul, and, but the only thing that was left to me was my mind, so I went and read books. And went into the library and became very clever.

SR: So when was your first homosexual experience?

RLB: Well I told you there was one incident in the park, but it was so pathetic that…

SR: What year is it around?

RLB: When I was about 12. It was so pathetic, and the chap was so worried and nervous about the whole business, that I ended up by having to stiffen him as it were, to give him courage, him! I didn't even know what to do. Then…then I quickly realised I was in a very bad situation because for example all the members of my class in school were talking about girls. And someone said to me, 'Who do you like, Lionel?' And I said without thinking, I said that chap who was footballer in the class. And everybody said 'Look, Louis, look what Lionel said!' And I got ribbed about it a great deal. And so I was [inaudible] in my own body, I didn't know what to do about it, and I didn't know where you found people. Because you see you couldn't find people at that time because first of all it was illegal…Police were on at you. There was blackmail constantly involved, if anyone found out you were you were blackmailed. So therefore relationships didn't exist because you had to be terribly certain of someone you had a relationship with and you had to be very careful you covered it up. And this carried on till 1968, when of course the legality of things...even by that time when I'd come out, so to speak, I had to be very sure that curtains were closed, that the radio was on strongly so you couldn't hear what we were saying, if there was [inaudible] on the other side. But we had to do fake girlfriends. Right to the time when I was finished off with them was…came before a board to get a scholarship to be a rabbi, I had to invent a girlfriend. I thought they would ask about it, and they didn't actually, but I thought they would. So I had to invent one.

SR: So in these years of being a teenager…

RLB: Oh they were hell! They made life impossible. The only thing was that…left (?) of me was my mind, I thought I'd have to exist on my mind. I got called up for the last years of national service, when the war had ended. But I had a breakdown that time. And the doctor released me from the army. Because I was having terrible headaches. And the chap I was really, I told the doctor there that the chap I was really very fond of, very friendly with had written to me telling me he'd fallen for a girl and was getting married. And I never said anything to him about how I felt, but I felt as if if life was going to go on like this, it didn't seem any point in carrying on. And then…

SR: So in these years in the army, when you're with big groups of men, you still don't…

RLB: I was dreadful. I was falling for this one, and that one and the other one and nothing I could say and nothing I could do. God help you if you said anything about it, because you might be sent to military prison. It was real persecution. I mean I didn't know the persecution, I knew a bit about anti-Semitism, but as a kid being…There was a big rise in homophobia at the end of the war, until the..The first people changing the whole thing were the Quakers [inaudible] view of sex, which was… And of course you see, it's no use, Communism was worse than the… I remember I met a Polish soldier in London who told me

that it, who was telling me about life in Moscow, he'd been to Moscow before, free of Moscow and come to England and signed up here. And he told me that um…he told me that people, people who were homosexual, if they got an illness could not go to any doctor in Moscow, because you had to report everything to the police, so they never go to a gay person, a homo person in Moscow, because. And so I realised that Communism was no use for me, that… I began to realise that Stalin persecuted Jews, Jewish doctors and all that sort of thing. And he was even worse on the gay, homosexual side than anything with the Jews. So therefore that knocked out that idea. And that was the thing I'd been sublimating on. Because you easily transfer sexuality into power. A problem for all religious organisations. And I was left with nothing in the end. As long as I had something to believe in, something to work for, like Zionism or [inaudible] Zionism or the great new dawn of socialism or this sort of thing, ok was ok, I could give my life for this or give my life for that. But it wouldn't do because they were worse in their way than even London.

SR: You were saying that in the years where you were younger, you didn't have anyone to confide about your feelings. [RLB: no, no] In these years where you're already a teenager, and when you go the army, was there anyone [RLB: no, no, no] you could tell about…

RLB: No, no it was a forbidden subject, you didn't dare, you have to remember it was a criminal offence in England. Um…[pause] Unless you lived in a certain type of society, like café society, where things like Noel Coward existed or that sort of thing. But if you lived in, middle class it was impossible. And I was a kid with a strong sexuality, and, but then something happened to me which was rather, which was very important for me. I remember when I got to Oxford in 19…1949, 1950…I was, there was a communist procession marching down, and I thought 'Auld Lang Syne, I'll join them'. And I joined them, and as they were marching down the street, shouting 'Free Indonesia, Socialist Indonesia and all this sort of thing…And they were all talking about Stalin's henchman and that sort of thing, I suddenly knew I couldn't take this any more, it wasn't reason, it was nearly criminal, Stalin's mafia. I had also gone to Yugoslavia and tried to join a shoot and shock (?) brigade, I wanted to go to Eastern Europe, find out what it was like. It was dreadful. And um…I was having a terrible, ill feeling because I'd met two very nice Albanian youngsters, students, in Yugoslavia, and they wrote me, they were, they had been in Yugoslavia but had been sent away after Tito or to by the [inaudible] government to Czechoslovakia to do their studies there. And they sent me a letter, obviously prompted by their own police, saying that hadn't I now recognised that this was the, that this was the people's true choice, and etc. etc. etc. And I wrote them back a letter, which I should never have written them. I wrote them back a letter saying I know I didn't accept one word of it really, the maximum I was, was a sort of tepid social democrat, and that was that. But I thought this worship of the individualism, of the individual seemed to me idolatry, not rationality. And I sent that letter back, and I realised afterwards I should never have sent it, because all their correspondence must have been checked and goodness knows what troubled I'd led them into, I was very guilty about that. But I was trying to be virtuous. So I got to Oxford and working on my mind alone I got through exams with a distinction, expecting to get a First and then had a mild breakdown, I'd had it. But what worried me was that I was becoming very bitter and very angry and very hard. Um…and I could see myself ending up not just in failure but loathing myself as well. And at Oxford I got to know a very nice girl who…we functioned (?) on every level except sexuality. And I came back from her, I used to go for coffee in the morning sometimes, and I remember coming away from her after lunch, came away from her college, feeling awful because the one person I did fall for was absolutely, I felt nothing sexually at all. And I thought to myself, my god, what have you put me into, impossible situations. And as I went back from her room, back to

Balliol which was my college, there was a big thunderstorm, and I took shelter beneath the, one of the houses in St Giles, in the doorway. The door opened and an old lady came out and took me in and she turned out to be a Mrs Joachim, Miss Joachim, one of the, great-granddaughter of the Joachim the violinist who had helped Brahms. She took me into the room when I found that actually there was a Quaker meeting happening there, from Thursday mornings for…farmers who couldn't find anyone to look after their cattle on Sundays. So I sat and listened and then I began to see a way. I suddenly started to think about…something I'd been thinking about already, the origin of my grandmother. And I realised that I was going to be a very hard and nasty chap, very bitter. And then, then somebody said in the thing that, I got the impression that they were saying that, when people got up and testified, they were saying that…Jesus, you could give away your bitterness, you could, everything that came to you you could use for good.. You could turn it so you could use any bad period or unhappiness for good. And I suddenly realised that this was a way forward, that at least I could see some purpose in having a bad time. I could use it to understand, and I suddenly thought perhaps it was a blessing not a curse, perhaps this was the only way I could, I suddenly realised that in the Communist days, I hadn't done it because I liked people, but because I wanted to make them different from what they were, because I didn't like them at all, really. And they said the way you could, it was true you could turn this thing into love. So I…so I prayed with them and started, and in the conversation going, and that conversation lasted till the present day (?), on on. So…it helped me, so I began to realise that this was not dead stuff, that this was stuff I could, it wasn't leading me to a blank door. It was leading me back to the religion of my grandparents. And Oxford's a funny place you know, there's an awful lot of religion there which seems dead. Because there's all these chapels, every college has a chapel, it's rather like the East End, where there's a little steeple (?) in every little…in every block. If you stripped away the difference in class, it was the same thing, and both of them were in the same thing, both of them were a bit played out. [inaudible] And I don't know what to do, and a friend of mine, I met a chap who was becoming a, studying theology and becoming a priest. And he said to me: 'Lionel, go away to a monastery, I'll write to the prior, get you in, and see what you feel about it.' So I did. And I took to it like a duck to water. I took to it absolutely. It was um… I tried Judaism beforehand, but all they seemed to want me to do was, whenever I asked anything about, they never told me how to transform suffering, but how to be on a committee to raise funds for Israel. So I said 'I've done that years ago' in the HaBonim, HaShomer, HaZair when I was a kid. And where do you go from here? And they said, didn't seem to know and so on. But this monastery was really good stuff.

SR: Where was the monastery?

RLB: In Yorkshire. It was [deleted] an Anglican monastery, [inaudible] and it was outside Leeds. And I began to see that, I felt very at home in it. And now, then there came a problem. The prior…I thought I'd gone there, I'd made it quite clear I'd come there because I couldn't exactly say I was gay but I could say that I had a…unfulfilled loves, love, they probably took it for girl or a woman who was married (?) or that sort of thing. And they thought I'd come because…because I wanted Christianity, and I came because I wanted to find something to love somewhere. And they thought I'd come to get converted, which I hadn't in the slightest. But I thought, well, perhaps it's god's sign that he wants me to become a Christian, and then a very important thing happened. I said to the prior, that I really found that the, I hadn't expected this, but something had happened inside me, because I started having this inner conversation and I thought that…possibly one could have love without the body. I was feeling love for this Jesus figure. Did I believe in it, no not really, because I wasn't sure

because I don't believe in miracles or that sort of thing, but it was a focus in which love could come up. And this Jesus figure became a friend of mine. And still hangs around, actually. And I asked the prior if I could become a monk. He said, he said, he gave me the frankest answer possible and I was very grateful for it, he was the first person who had ever spoken straightly about sexuality (?): he said, 'If you've got a low, if you've got a low sexuality, you might make it, Lionel.' I didn't have a low sexuality, I had a roaring one! I didn't know what to do with it!

SR: In these years before, I just want, in these years in Oxford and going afterwards to the monastery, you said that you had this brewing sexuality that you didn't know yet what to do with [RLB: Yeah], was there any means of self-exploration of your sexuality…

RLB: Masturbation, the only one. I didn't know, I got to know one or two other gay people, but I'd let go my body, I looked ugly, I felt ugly, I didn't know how you made love, or what you did to it. I had no idea of the technique of it. My exploration (?) of it were quite impossible. So…it was a situation I couldn't handle.

SR: Would you like to stop to have a glass of water?

[third recording ends]

RLB: And um…I thought I would leave Oxford at this time, I wouldn't take my degree, I guessed…I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where you found gay people, who were [coughing] and no one like me as I was. The only thing which lay ahead of me was that, this Jesus figure which came into my mind, and stayed in my mind a lot and I used to speak to him, and he seemed to answer, and the answer actually was quite good. It was often not what I expected.

SR: When you say you used to speak to him, what were the things that came up and what were the answers that you are talking about?

RLB: Well I asked him for example…[long pause] Did he mind if I didn't keep this ritual or that ritual, and he said no, no not at all, no business of his and um… I got more matey with a guardian angel who came along too, and I used to ask him to show me how life looked from his point of view. So I saw things…I saw things in a different way from I'd ever seen them before… [pause] He told me to make use of the things I had gone through, so I found myself going out of my way to speak to beggars and people who, outside on the edges of society, so that came very strong with me. Um…And he told me, he told me also not to use him for avoidance, to stay in Oxford was ok, so I had to go do an exam and fail it, it's better than not to take it. Which was quite encouraging as I'd never gone into an exam without being first before. And I couldn't do the work. So it was something to get on by, and I went to quite a lot of monasteries after that, and found that the, the religious life made sense to me, but at the same time it couldn't be for me because once again there was no answer for this for me, first of all my mother said she would commit suicide if I did it, my father too she said, and then one day I got… I got a Jewish newspaper at breakfast at Balliol, and there was an advert saying that any, any Jewish young man of good education, you couldn't get a better one than Balliol, should apply for an awarding rabbinate, Jewish rabbinate. So I thought 'Ah! This is a sign of God.' So I said to Jesus, 'Is this the sign of God, is this what you want me to be?' He giggled, he said 'Do what you like, Lionel' and then I went out to London, the advert was from the Liberals, but the service was so far from the kind of Judaism I'd known as a kid, in a

stiegel (?) that it didn't seem to connect at all. So I said no to that. And then my, then I found out, my mother said that, my mother who'd been against this, we had a series of phonecalls, first of all she said she'd commit suicide if I became a rabbi, I went to this course, then I said well 'I'm going to become a monk'. She said 'Oh no' she said, I'm going to commit suicide.' Then she said, then I said 'Ok' and I was serious about it because I was beginning to take this whole business of the inner conversation very seriously. It wasn't just a therapy or a joke, it was becoming real. And then I said I was going to India with a group of friends, we were going to find out some…swami, in the Himalayas or somewhere or other. And she said no to that. So I said, then she rang me up and said: 'Become, Lionel become a Rabbi, it's the least worst of them all.' So I said: Ok. Well I was lucky, I came along to see what it was like. I liked it, I met Baeck whom I liked. And Baeck said one sentence to me which was very important. He said: 'Lionel, Judaism is your religious home, it's not your religious prison.' Which was good.' And they were very pleased to get someone from Balliol. I just got through my degree, not a good degree, but I got through it, how I got through it I don't know because I never did a bit of work. I was reading theology (?) most of the time. And all this, I thought all this religious business would end when I found a partner, and all this sublimation stuff would just disappear. So I started the college, I was the first rabbinical student after the war, of the reform. I remember the first…I thought they'd never accept me because they'd find out I represented the Anarchists in college. And then when I went to see the rabbi, Rabbi Vanderzil (?), saying I wanted to become a Reform rabbi. And he said 'Mr Blue,' he said, 'there's another student from Oxford who's also applied to become a rabbi.' 'Who is he?' So he said: 'Mr Michael Lee,' and I said 'Well I don't know him.' He said: 'Well he's certainly heard about you! [laughter] And I thought, that's finished it. But he said he burst into laughter and told me to go out of the room for a moment, he made a phone call while I was out of the room, he called me and said he'd give me the scholarship. So at least I'd recovered my soul again, and it was working. And I stayed in religion because it worked.

SR: You felt whole.

RLB: Yes, it made me feel whole, and it made me feel a purpose in life. And the purpose wasn't, I didn't care really very much which religion, I'd done all that with *HaBonim, HaShomer, HaZair* and all this sort of stuff. But there was something about the holy, which I'd learnt in the Anglican monasteries which got me.

SR: Was it applicable to the Jewish religion?

RLB: Oh yes I could translate it quite easily.

SR: You were able to translate it?

RLB: Yes, yes. It was so much like, religion at that level was so much like the stiebels (?) of East London. I asked Jesus what he thought about it, he said he couldn't care less, it was up to me. And Baeck was very good, because he said to me one thing, he said: 'Lionel, where are you going on holiday?' So I told him I was either going to a monastery again, back to a monastery again or somewhere with people I knew there from Oxford days. And also I might go to an ultra Orthodox yeshiva, because that was most like the religion of my childhood, or bits of it I knew. So I said to him, 'Dr Baeck,' I said, 'Do you mind?' because he was a liberal rabbi you see. He said, 'No, Judaism's your religious home it's not your religious prison.' And that's one of the most liberating remarks I'd ever heard. So I decided that…that…I'll give it a go, and see what happens. And I liked it. And there came a point

when there was an awful lot of acting. I had to pretend I had girlfriends which I didn't have. I met a chap in a sauna in London who was the first serious lover I'd ever had. We stayed together for three awful years of quarrels, but it was genuine stuff.

SR: Could you tell us about him, at what year are we talking about?

RLB: 1953/54.

SR: And would you say that he's your first…

RLB: First one I tried to make a home with.

SR: The first real love.

RLB: Yes, I wanted to make a home with him and live happily ever after.

SR: And where did you meet him?

RLB: In a sauna. He was a student, a Canadian student who was doing a doctorate in Edinburgh, and like me he'd had a breakdown, and he was leaving Edinburgh to go back to Canada. And he thought he'd stop in London for a day or two. And he was feeling at the end of his tether, at the end of the world as far as he was concerned. He'd never told anybody he was gay. We met each other in the sauna and our stories were so similar in some ways, we understood each other. So I took over, and somebody said let's make a home together. So we got a house, and we set up home together. He got a job as a teacher and I was a student for the rabbinate, and it was nice in many ways, but it didn't work. I'm not quite sure why it didn't work, but it didn't. It ended physical fights, not possible any more.

SR: Did anyone know?

RLB: I'd started telling people, close friends, I was not good at keeping things to myself.

SR: So actually in Leo Baeck, when you're studying to be a rabbi, you are actually able to go and tell people about?

RLB: A few people yes.

SR: How did they react?

RLB: Many of the young ones to my surprise and shock, they didn't react at all. It was mildly interesting, but it was nocuriosity, but it was a different generation that had come up.

SR: We're talking about 60s?

RLB: Late 50s, already the world had changed.

SR: So your friends that you told about, were they from the Institute, were they also students?

RLB: They were ones who either worked with the Institute or somehow in it, and I didn't put it this way, I didn't tell all of them, I just lived my life and let them make what they wanted

of it. If they asked me directly, I'd tell them what happened. Anyway I met [deleted] at the sauna and we were both in the same situation, we were both [inaudible] of course of the [inaudible] business, so we set up house together, and I thought that was the end of the trouble, we would be happy ever after etc. But it wasn't.

SR: What was your parents' response to your living, and knowing that you're homosexual?

RLB: My mother said she was having her change of life at this time and I was killing her. My father actually said nothing about it. My mother, I went to see a psychiatrist to please them. The psychiatrist, I remember he asked me one question, he asked me, he asked me what I thought were certain symbols, and he showed me one symbol and I said it was the hammer and sickle. Which was…one movement I had been involved in was the Communist. He said it wasn't, he said it was the sexual one, so I told him not to be a dirty old man. And it never occurred to me that it had a sexual symbolism too, it took me a long time before I realised what it was saying. I was very naïve. But… Then my mother really couldn't give a damn, really, except possibly she would have liked grandchildren, but my father was very nice about it indeed, he said: 'Lionel, he said, you can bring anyone home you like, but don't bring back rubbish. Make sure they're decent chaps.' Which was extraordinary of him, I never expected that, he never said a word to me about it any more. And he was very nice to all my partners, and so was my mother actually.

SR: What was the environment towards gays in the late 50s, were there any groups…?

RLB: It was utterly, utterly out. If they had any suspicions, I noticed, I went out with my friend, we were invited out to a couple in the synagogue, he was always put away from me, we weren't put near each other, I was always put next to a girl who was going to be, who was marriageable, and no one ever spoke to him, my partner. So I realised that something was out.

SR: There were also no underground groups?

RLB: I didn't know any. Except one or two people I met in a café sometimes, I used to go to gay cafes, the place to go to was Amsterdam. Amsterdam, everything was free, it was the country where there was no law against being gay, where you were legal, after 21, over 21. And that, where it was a much more freer world than London. It was the sort of Greenwich Village of London.

SR: Were you still with your boyfriend when you went to Amsterdam?

RLB: This was after Amsterdam that I had a boyfriend, that's why I came to my boyfriend. So I went to Amsterdam, and it was true. I joined a gay…a gay club there… Very nice, nice people. And um… I was still pretty grubby and not looking very nice, because I didn't believe in my body yet.

SR: How did you feel coming from closed London to this open Amsterdam?

RLB: Oh, I'll tell you the story of that. What happened was, I decided that I couldn't carry on living a lie. It was just getting on my nerves. And um…and eating me up, so I, so I thought I'd give up all this religious stuff, this Jesus, and the business of religion and that sort of thing, and go and sort of, go to Amsterdam and say yes to everything. I went to Amsterdam, I did say yes to everything. And um…But I didn't like the, I wanted a normal life, I didn't

want a sort of…I didn't want life to be a vaudeville turn. But in Amsterdam, when people went to Amsterdam to find new partners for themselves, when you found a partner the best thing to do was go and live somewhere else, outside it. Because Amsterdam was a place where you found people and then you moved. So I slept with a lot of people, and I sent a letter of resignation to the Leo Baeck College…

SR: Why did you feel you had to stop with the rabbinic training?

RLB: Because the two seemed so opposed to me, because that's the way people regarded them. But then, the funny part was, when I was being gay in Amsterdam, I found out I was a minister again. For example, I'll never forget one night, for example, I met a former German soldier, went to bed together, nice chap, and we talked and he asked me what I did so I told him. He was very surprised, and then he wanted to confess to me all, what he'd done during the war. So I said ok. And I found I was acting as a minister for so many things, and that it got known around Amsterdam. And then the woman who ran the sauna in Amsterdam which I liked very much, which was an old men's sauna, because I tended to like older men than me. I was looking for Nick, I think. She said she'd told another Jewish chap who came there, a youngster, who wanted to speak to me. She told him to come and speak to me. He wanted to know whether I would go and speak to his parents about him being gay, and I said I don't think so. I felt awful afterwards, but I didn't want to get involved. I gave him advice, that's the best I can give you, I said. But I found that, it worried me. And then my old rabbi turned up [SR: To Amsterdam?] to Amsterdam, to some Conference there, he turned up, and he said to me that he'd never given in my resignation to the college. And I should come back to take the Yom Kippur and Rosh HaShanah services [laughter] in Manchester. So I said I'd better show you what life I've been leading. So I took him through Amsterdam at night, at about 4 o'clock in the morning we sat down in the morning at a café and he started crying. I thought to myself, oh my God, I've really hurt him so much. And I thought 'What have you done, Lionel?' He's a nice guy. And to my annoyance I found that he couldn't stop himself laughing! He said he'd never seen anything like this since the Weimar republic, and the sooner I got back home the better, 'Now get some sleep!' So I said yes. He said, look, he said Lionel, the thing you've got to do in life is learn to have your cake and eat it, you'll never get life perfect, and you have to learn to combine things, and to choose things, and to… That made sense, like the business like you can use your defeats and unhappiness in life to do good.

SR: So after that meeting with the Rabbi you go back?

RLB: I went back.

SR: And just to place a time, when you met your first love, it was…?

RLB: Just after, when I came back, because I was then ready to experiment with London's gay life, it was dangerous but I was going to do it, I'd been to Amsterdam and I'd found freedom.

SR: Can you tell me a bit about London's gay life at the time?

RLB: London gay life consisted of a few pubs…

SR: What were their names?

RLB: Mainly in the West End. A few saunas, which were constantly being closed by the police, and people appearing in the newspapers. You went to a café, you were in danger of being beaten up by a group of anti-gay people, mobs. It was, if you did settle down with a person in London, you had to be very, very careful, especially if you were in the professions. Because it was the time when the Lord Montague case came up and all that sort of thing, and it was very, very risky, because the police were very anti-gay at that time. And so it was quite hair-raising trying to, going to a pub and wanting to meet somebody and finding someone you wanted to go and talk to, and knowing that a policeman might be there, then God help you. And sometimes to my surprise I found people from my old congregations were there, one or two of them sort of turned the other way and went out, or I went out and then... I wanted to settle down and lead a quiet life, and this chap, this Canadian I met was, intellectually he was my equal certainly, we gave each other a lot, actually. But we didn't fit physically. And I knew very little about things. And I was still pretty raw. He knew a bit more than me, but he wanted to hit the town, and I wanted quietness and peace.

SR: Could I stop for a second and just develop a bit of the night scene and gay scene in London at the time. Was there any place that you liked to go regularly, one of these pubs which you were talking about, and if you could…

RLB: Yes, I did.

SR: What was the name of the place?

RLB: There was a sauna in [deleted], there was a sauna in [deleted], which if you said, when you, you got in by pressing the bell, say you were, you'd been told, recommended by the club in Amsterdam, and they let you in. There was a club near Leicester Square, I've forgotten the name. Some people were much braver than I was, tried to find partners on Hampstead Heath at night, but often got beaten up. It was on the dice, if you, I could have landed in jail easily. And also…I wanted the normal married life of some sort, I didn't want anything bizarre…so I came back to the Ministry, and the rabbi, by the way the rabbi, I told you he burst into laughter at the end of it. Lionel, he said, I can only afford one of you, but one of you I'd better have. When anything came up in this line, he always used to refer it to me. And then I, my first chap, I went to the second one, who was Canadian, who was this chap who I met, the next one I met was a yacht designer, a famous British yacht designer.

SR: And where did you meet him?

RLB: In the sauna. And he'd been having a breakdown, and gone to his doctor, and she'd said, he told her he was gay, and she said, you'd better find yourself a partner. And the second person he found was me. And we stayed together for about eighteen years. [deleted] And we lived in a little village, and he was a famous, he always blamed me and thought I was responsible for it but I wasn't actually, I was a person who was trying to help him. My mother was very good about it, she liked him too. And I tried to take jobs which were…which were, I didn't have local congregations to deal with. I was offered the job as the, the head of the, religious director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism in Europe, so I had to look after the needs of all the congregations on the continent. And I got on very well, during that, I did some good work there. But all the time I had it, this time living with [deleted] in the village, where everybody thought I was the villain of the piece, I could cope with it because all the time I had this Jesus figure still in my mind whom I could discuss

things with. If you asked me, did I believe in the thing, no, a lot of the stuff was mythology, and also a lot of the stuff was um…I didn't approve of the words he gave either, but it didn't matter somehow. I mean it was, it was a way that something seemed to express itself in me, and I asked if he minded my being Jewish and he said no, not at all, no problem for him. And also I felt at home back in the Jewish world somehow. I did quite a lot, and that's why I wrote the prayer book, I was responsible for the first forms of prayer, the Yom Kippur prayer book, which were the best of the prayer books I did. And of course they were true because prayer was important for me, still is. I don't do it because out of folk feeling or that sort of thing, it comes naturally to me. And then at the end of the sixteen or eighteen years with him [deleted] had this breakdown, and they wanted to do a lobotomy on him, but I wouldn't allow it. There was a hell of a row. I got stopped and they'd suggested something, much more minor thing which was reversible, when a lobotomy's not reversible. I needed a job that was free during the weekend for [deleted], because he got back to selling again, I used to sail with him. He was sailing all over northern Europe, and to the West Indies, and that sort of thing, and I needed some work to do and so I did a prayer book, and I did the Beit Din, which where all my knowledge of life was helpful, because you're dealing with people in situations, because you go to Beit Din and when something's happening which doesn't fit in. And I liked people who didn't fit in, I could sympathise with them.

SR: In the years after 1960 were you already a rabbi, do people around you know about your homosexuality?

RLB: I decided, after I came back from Amsterdam, I never hid it any more. I didn't go out to tell them about it, but at the same time I was living with a chap called [deleted], living in the same house as him, with my [deleted] number one, I was living in the same house with him…I made my point, I gave the lectures that a rabbi lectures on, they asked me if I'd give a talk about homosexuality, so I did.

SR: What persuaded you suddenly to come out?

RLB: I came out because newspapers were getting on to it.

SR: About you?

RLB: Yes. I'd helped found the Lesbian and Gay Christian movement and I hadn't been careful any more. And also the whole feeling was changing, because you were getting towards the Quaker view of sex, the Wolfson Report, and the feeling was changing, there was a complete change in the air now. What had started in 1950 was now coming out in England. And the newspaper was on my trail, and somebody told me this was happening, they were going to get me, so I thought the first thing to do was get my story in first. So I made a disclosure of it to a big newspaper in Britain, and I argued my case and why I was what I was and why I did what I did.

SR: What was the impact of this?

RLB: To my surprise, very little. What everyone had already known for ages. And since I was in a job that was not in the public eye, my job was doing a prayer book, also I was doing work for, running the Beit Din for divorce, conversion that sort of thing. And also spiritually I was bringing something to the reform movement which it didn't have. And also it was

important because it was also bringing some honesty into the whole business of modern life into the movement.

SR: But how did the religious authorities accept you, did they accept you?

RLB: I never asked them, it was not their business, I mean whether they accepted me or not, the point was did I accept myself, and did my angel figure accept me too. Then the BBC got hold of me, I did the Thought for the Day in the morning for about 30, 40 years.

SR: Before we go on to the next phase of you being on the BBC and Thought for the Day, how did you actually in the day to day life manage the challenges you had to face in regards of the combining the religion…

RLB: I personally didn't have a problem with it. I'd ceased to have a problem with it, myself personally, I thought the problem is their problem, not mine. And also the other thing was I found there were all sorts of gay people in the congregations, what worried me most was that some of the children were gay, obviously one knew they were becoming gay, and what would I do? Unfortunately I didn't dare do anything. [SR: In the 60s, you still…?] No, no. If the parents were reasonable people I tried to warn them a little bit about what I thought was happening, but I couldn't do very much. [deleted]

SR: But regarding the Judaism, is there any position that the Judaism regards for being gay in your studies, is there any kind of…

RLB: Yes there is a point of, you have to remember that many of the rabbis had been gay, openly so, Moshe Ben-Ezra, the great writer of most of the great songs for Yom Kippur – he was gay. He wrote love songs to his, in the Arab quarter in Cordoba and Grenada where his poems were read, they used to have dinner parties where they had dancing girls and singing boys coming along, it was a normal part of upper class, aristocratic Arab life. And the Jews were exactly the same, the Jews tend to take on the characteristics of the society in which they live. When they live among upper class Arabic society in Grenada then the Arab aristocracy would have literary soirees where there were girl singers and boy singers and a lot of sex going on, and all these poems by Moshe Ben-Ezra who was a thoroughly believing rabbi. Just as they take on the eating habits and the rituals of the people among whom they are. Why for example, in an open society, they tend to eat all sorts of things they shouldn't, they're not supposed to, and these are, for example, Moshe Ben-Ezra is a funny business, because I did a little bit of work on him, because I was curious about him. When the East-European rabbis got hold of Moshe Ben-Ezra they couldn't work it out because they say that in Hebrew the ending of 'seree', heart, dear, which is feminine, sometimes in Hebrew it's put in the feminine form to denote the masculine. What Moshe Ben-Ezra is saying is 'my darling boy.' And they went to a whole new Hebrew to try to explain, so in Spanish Hebrew you often find in old Jewish dictionaries that this is the masculine ending, but in the Spanish-Jewish poetry it can also be feminine, because it was an Arab custom. The Arab aristocracy liked little boys, young men. And you find for example that the Eastern Europeans could never, knew nothing of the sociology of this life, therefore they give Hebrew a different grammar. And today I should think that rabbis gradually take on part of the life of the attitudes of the society they live in.

SR: And what do you feel that you bring to Judaism as a rabbi who is gay?

RLB: As a person who had to go through the mill, and the difficult things, it's the knowledge that, I go into Judaism because I'm interested in its spirituality, which mostly people are not. Therefore I give that side to it, and also that it can help you in difficult times in life, and also you can use it for good. I tell people not to regard the troubles of their life as punishments, but as opportunities to show that they too can be used for good. And also that one's got to be honest about religion. A lot of the, that for example, scripture is a mixture of what actually happened, and what people would have liked to have happened, and what the meaning of what happened was. Fine, but you don't have to believe in impossible things. Religion isn't trying to be thinking an impossible thing before breakfast each day. But also trying to relate religion to life, to sexuality, to everything else, the difficult bits, and the difficulty of doing it. That's why I was very good for the divorce court. Because I understood what was going on in couples.

SR: That's interesting, the relating the religion to sexuality like when you're working with the Beit Din, can you elaborate more about this collaboration?

RLB: Yes, because I've learnt a lot myself, because I passed through two divorces myself, as it were, with little affairs in between, and it took me a long time to find out what I wanted and get it. But the business of trying to get over your feeling of hate and everybody feels very rough after a breakdown, and Jewish law requires you to remain friends afterwards, if you can. [SR: It does require?] It does require yes, if you hate a person it regards you still love the person in reverse. The divorce should be able to free you from feelings for the person, you can be bonded by ties of hate as well as by love, and the thing is that you don't, that one can do that, and one doesn't have to always find villains. And the other thing is that doesn't change people very much when you get married, people think that a miracle's going to take place, magic, you have to take people as they are, and the chances of changing a person any time after thirty is not on.

SR: So these are things that you learnt from your studies?

RLB: Yes, yes. And also the knowledge that…kindness and goodness, I've seen it happen in the most improbable places. It's not that we, the virtuous, are against them. For example, a friend of mine in Amsterdam, was a chap called Bertie. Very handsome guy. He was a hairdresser, who somehow knew everyone there, all the criminals of Amsterdam life. But he could do things like, for example, Bertie was coming home one night, he was living in a squat in the Rembrandt house, and he sees a chap in the gutter surrounded by injection things. And Bertie takes him up, picks him up and tries to give him, get him awake and give him some coffee because he could have been run over there. The chap doesn't wake up, so Bertie takes him home, which is very nice to do, because most people would ring the police or the hospital, but he takes the chap home and he looks after him for about a few weeks, and I was always very impressed by that. The chap was a nice chap, he was a drug addict, but he'd been in care, gone from one institution to another throughout his life, known nothing else, and he felt most at home in prison. I don't forget, Bertie had brought him to health again. And he went out to Bertie and Bertie came back and found that the chap had, you know that people in Amsterdam used to show refrigerators and expensive equipment on chains outside their shops so they couldn't be stolen. This chap had bought a bolt, and brought all the stolen goods back to Bertie, and Bertie said 'My darling, you can't stay here any more, you've got to back. Where do you want to go to?' The man said 'I don't know where to go to.' He said 'Do you want to go back to prison? I think you'd better go back to prison for a while, get yourself arrested and go back to prison for a while, I'll be waiting for you when you go out and we'll

see.' And he did. But I can see myself leaving a chap some cigarettes and sandwiches but I never think of taking him to my home and taking responsibility, but Bertie managed to do it. And I learnt a terrific amount from the people as they behaved, that the goodness of people who lived outside of all the normal rules. And also I learnt a lot about myself, I learnt that I wasn't a very good person. I wasn't capable of such acts of generosity, I had a lot of learning to do. [Pause.]

SR: Would you like to have a break?

RLB: No I'm ok, I'm just thinking, I learnt a lot from what you might call, somewhere where rabbis don't often venture into, the underside of life, through the…you learn things about people which you'd never learn if you just kept to the legal side. And um…

SR: Did you feel fully accepted by the different Jewish authorities?

RLB: Yes, they did, because I realised one thing. Provided you don't, I kept out of the political struggle in Judaism. I never wanted any of the titles or the um… If you don't want anything that anybody else wants and do the job that people don't want, then you're ok. It's when you enter the political power game of religious organisations that you're in trouble. And I kept myself well out of that.

SR: But what would you say about your sexuality to an orthodox person, which will feel that you're offending him?

RLB: I never had any problem with that, I just said who I was and if they wanted to discuss it they were welcome. Some of them were very nice, some of them… You see the orthodox attitude now is not like it used to be it's not [inaudible] abomination. A chap I got to know, who was a minister, a Jewish minister, who went to the, who was gay and went to the Chief Rabbi to tell him…he said to the Chief Rabbi, 'What do I do?'. The Chief Rabbi said to him: 'Go to a place where no one knows you and do it there.' Which was basically a very sensible, [inaudible] Amsterdam. And then he said to him: 'In regard to mitzvahs, there's mitzvahs you can't do, like having children and that sort of thing, but do the other mitzvahs with more zeal, do the other mitzvahs better.' Which is also sensible advice. Some of the rabbis made a great fuss about it, some of them, the wiser ones never did.

SR: When was there the change in the rabbinical feeling towards homosexuality do you think?

RLB: I think during the hippy movement. The hippy movement was the first youth movement, the movement which got young people and which made a different, before then, when I was at Oxford, we wanted to look like our parents, dress like our parents, go in for the same kind of jobs as our parents with the same securities. When you had the hippy movement, that made a revolution. And it was the first thing that the younger generation, which had come up just after the war, who had regarded the adults as having caused the war, and who wanted something new. Not based on Christianity, but something from the Far East, often.

SR: But this revolution that you're talking about, the rabbinical institutions also tapped into?

RLB: Yes because it affected a lot of people who, because Judaism had got very secular here. It had got a thing of…the experience of god had more or less gone, so what you were left with was a series of formalities, very much geared to the honours list, or nationalism replaced the search for the inner god inside you. And hippies brought that back, they thought that they could control drugs, but in fact they became part of the drug world, and in fact they weren't clever enough to deal with it. But I think it was the hippy movement which was the first movement which came from young people after the end of the war which was really different. Before then we still, I remember at Balliol we still tried to wear the same clothes, same customs, same dances, same silences about certain things. It was when the hippy movement came that everything [inaudible].

SR: So in the hippy movement in the late 60s, how was the LGBT scene…

RLB: Didn't exist. There was a little group of people, a little group of Jewish people who knew each other, who met in people's houses, in people's houses. They'd met because they'd wanted to meet Jewish people, other Jewish people and they came to my house for example, once or twice, two or three times. I…

SR: How did it evolve, was it…

RLB: It came about, it evolved…because a number of things helped in the reform movement. First of all there was me, and I'm not saying I was first in importance, but the first because that's the one I know myself. But the point is I was clear about it, and not making a song and dance about it, but honest about it, and also I wasn't in anybody's way. I kept out of the political struggles. I never tried to get on to the board of deputies or this or that or the other. Also when I was on the BBC, I told them the truth as I knew it, as I experienced it. I was tactful about it, but it was there. And it didn't affect anybody. As a matter of fact, people rather liked the idea of a, it made sense the business of the connection of…what the difficult parts of one's life can give you.

SR: So becoming a well known figure actually made people feel more comfortable…

RLB: Yes, for themselves, because everybody's got a few ghosts going around. Since all my boyfriends always came from the non-Jewish world, it didn't impinge upon them. Also Jews, I don't think, in Judaism…sex wasn't the most important thing in life, it was getting on, and during the war period, getting by, staying alive was the most important thing in life. I don't think Judaism rated private sexual things as very important. I noticed that for example I used to have to write the cookery column for the Catholic paper The Tablet, The Catholic Universe. I did it because I started writing about ecumenical eating and how you've got people of different religions on your road, how you can invite them all to your home and give them all a meal, Muslims, Orthodox Jews, Swami, and how you can manage it. And also how you, how you can make the secular world religious, religious in its deeper sense, in the sense of discovering the spiritual inside oneself. And therefore, since no one was interested in this sort of thing…the danger now is that…that the purpose of life isn't sex, and the purpose of life, that there's another dimension altogether. It wasn't for example who you managed to get, whether you got the most handsome, the most beautiful looking person and showed them off, that sort of thing, or him off. It was a question of how kind you were to each other, and what love did to you. And also you get some shocks sometimes with the love business, because it's very curious. I thought my parents stuck together because of me, you see, because they weren't getting on well together at all. But I found it was when I left that they

started really liking each other! What they quarrelled about was me. That put me down a peg or two!

SR: Could you tell me a bit more about the group that…?

RLB: The first thing is that, we told each other our stories, and we got some idea of what…I think the group, I felt, would work provided it had something to give to the general community, and provided it had something to take [SR: From the general community?] Yes, from the Jewish world. For example, what are the Jewish things it can take, it can [inaudible] in the Jewish community? Love is basically a very self-centred business, the gratification of one's own desires. Therefore…anything that wants to be part of a religious community has to accept the business of the duties of being of one's position. That means you've got to look, get gay people out of, life isn't just pubs and clubs and saunas, it's also trying to work out what you do when people, who's going to visit people who are old, whose partners have gone off on them, when they're ill, who's going to take care of them then. There's a tradition in Jewish life of looking after your own, of charity and looking after the elderly and that sort of thing. And therefore gay people have to learn that. And I think they only learnt it through the AIDS business. In the AIDS business they were faced with a problem which was more or less theirs. And one of the great things of it was that for example, what the lesbians did. The lesbians, who were least affected by AIDS of any group, heterosexual or homo, were very good about being buddies to people, to men. And they did it for shmu'el, for the sake of god or for loving kindness. And that made something very important happen.

SR: So that happened in that group?

RLB: Yes people looked after each other.

SR: So there was an identification also of lesbians in that group? [RLB: Yes, Yes.] And the group you were talking about, was it gays and lesbians, or…?

RLB: First of all it was mainly men. Then gradually the two groups, the men and women, the two groups got to know each other and started integrating each other in some things, but in some things they couldn't integrate each other, but in they didn't have to, in some ways they integrated each other very carefully. And the AIDS one was a very strong part when the community took care of itself and started to look after itself, and the two parts of it, the lesbians and the gays helped each other, the lesbians were more helpful than the gays but that's because they didn't have the problems. But that's when the Jewish world took on a different attitude. Because you see first of all there was repression. And one period of repression in gay life, until the 60s in England, and then when things got easier in the 50s, and also all the [inaudible] and that sort of thing had been conquered. Before AIDS, life was a wild debauched party. And people had, people almost lost the art of settled relationships, after centuries of just being bottled up. It was weird to see how quickly it went to the other extreme. And then AIDS brought back a sense of, that you don't get away so easily in life, and that it mattered very much, the AIDS community had to start dealing with people who were sick.

SR: But this community that you're referring to, was it across London, in specific synagogues?

RLB: Word went round the whole gay community that you had to start helping. And somehow they formed themselves, you find that, people say that [inaudible] Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group. They found out who had AIDS among their group, and they started visiting the person, and they tried to see if the person had friends, they took on responsibility of people. They'd taken on responsibility for people now in trying to find places where people could live, Jewish old gay people could live.

SR: That's today?

RLB: Yes, yes, because…one of the problems is for example…which Wendy Greengross was trying to do battle with, although she was not gay she wrote the best thing about gay life I know. She wrote advice for parents of a gay child, for reform. But one of the problems is that say you get someone who is disabled, maimed, or that sort of thing, they can't get out of their room, ok they're put up by one of the big charitable organisations, the question is are they allowed to have a key for their room? Can they have a private life or not? The Catholics are very much against it. The rabbis on the whole, because gay people have talked to the rabbis about it, they're for it, a person in a home is entitled to have his or her own life too. It's very important, it sounds simple, but a great battle is being done for it now. So therefore, the gay world has got to take on the traditional Jewish responsibilities for your society, or for a section of society, one of the things they've got to deal with is sick gay people, AIDS gay people, people with mixed marriages. And they can't just, any group that tries to live just for itself gets deadly dull, it lacks also the spiritual satisfaction. I started in London, some many years ago, with the help of the Sisters of Zion (have you met them, the Sisters? Oh you ought to meet them!). The Sisters are a Roman Catholic order, but they've become very modern, and they had a former Jewish nun, although she's died now, Charlotte. [deleted.] [Pause.] And it's having problems actually that makes you go in to spirituality, that religion isn't just singing Hebrew folk songs, but it's also about the finding, awakening the spiritual resources within you.

SR: It sounds as if you had a conversation all the time between all the religions, between your sexuality, the emerging of thoughts and ideas.

RLB: Yes, because every religion regards itself as complete, but it isn't, it's lacking things, which you can find in abundance in the other ones. They're all there in…germination as it were, the seeds of them everywhere. [Pause.] What other things are there? I think the Jewish world can learn things about sexuality which are not used to, because gay people on the whole are more honest about it.

SR: In your experience, is there a room for this learning and this expanding?

RLB: I think so, well when I [inaudible], the rabbis of the reform movement asked me if I could tell them about being gay and Jewish, which surprised me because things are not free yet. But I did. Because I think it's important to…there's been two revolutions in life in the 20th century. One has been the change of women's status, and what women can do and what women are. And the other is the emancipation of the sexual minorities. And these two, the sexual revolution that is taking place, and both of them have changed the dialogue very much indeed. I think now, I don't think people mind if the rabbi is gay, lesbian or what, but provided that the person has got, is kind, decent, learned…[inaudible] kindness in there, whatever they call it. What else do I think? Also gays can give the Jewish world humour, which it needs very badly. When I used to visit gay wards in hospitals, even the time before

there was a thing for AIDS, not a cure but, for AIDS, the gay wards were always the one whose parties everybody wanted to go to. [Pause.]

SR: We'll stop here for now, we'll have a short break, and we'll see if you would like to go on.

RLB: Yes ok.

END of INTERVIEW