

Interview Code: RJ201309A
Interviewer: Anna Barker
Interviewee: Sandy K
Transcriber: Anna Barker

Date recorded: 22.08.13
Location: The Montagu Centre, London

Summary Transcript

[00:00:00] Sandy was born at University College Hospital in London in July 1946. Until she was fourteen, she lived in a tight-knit, poor Jewish community in Great Titchfield Street. She went to All Soul's Church of England Primary School, which was a multicultural school, but mainly white working-class British, working-class Jewish, Greeks and Maltese. At school there were Jewish prayers for the Jewish children. She remembers seeing Greeks and Cypriots in their homes hand-sewing garments, and dustbins full of leftover material outside factories. She remembers seeing the first black person in the area. There was also an affluent Jewish community in the area but they occupied the district around Portland Place, Harley St, Wigmore St, and Wimpole Street, and Sandy didn't have anything to do with them, apart from the fact that she went to Hebrew classes at Great Portland St Synagogue, and services every Shabbat. The family lived at 49 Great Titchfield Street, which is now The Riding House Café. Before moving out of the area at age fourteen, she used to go to West Central Club in Holborn, which came under the auspices of Liberal Judaism. Lily Montagu and Miriam Montagu would come there to take prayers. Sandy would go on Wednesday evenings after school for activities like ballet and ballroom dancing.

[00:05:25] After passing the 11+ exam in 1957, Sandy went to Paddington and Maida Vale High School, which was part of her parents desire *'to move up in the world – because I was going to school with quite posh girls at that point.'* [00:05:47]. The same man who took the Jewish prayers at her primary school took the prayers at her secondary school. There were some Indian and Chinese children at the school, but it wasn't a very multicultural school: it was mostly middle-class and working-class English and a fairly substantial number of Jewish girls from the St John's Wood, Swiss Cottage and Maida Vale areas of London. When Sandy was fourteen, the family moved to Wembley and Sandy changed schools to the local grammar school. She started going to Jewish clubs, and became very interested in boys.

[00:06:56] Sandy describes an influential moment in her life prior to this. Her mother used to go to a hairdresser in Berwick Street Market, and there was a woman who used to come to the hairdresser who had short hair and was totally cross-dressed. Sandy knew she was a woman but thought she was a man, and was absolutely fascinated by her: *'I probably sat there with my mouth wide open. My mum used to say to me, 'Stop staring! Stop staring!' And I never forgot this person and I remember her till this day, actually.'* [00:07:33] She says her fascination with this person probably ignited her taste for women who were androgynous.

[00:08:12] When she was fifteen, she got a boyfriend and had a relationship that was on and off until she was eighteen. She got engaged to him. He was in the sixth form at school, and she was in the fourth form. But when she was with him she got interested in going to clubs in Soho with her best friend, and she became interested in foreign boys. She started going to discos at London University where she met a man who was studying at LSE. She was bowled over by him, broke off her engagement, and went on to marry him. He wasn't Jewish, and her parents were utterly against him. Her parents went to a lawyer to try to stop the marriage because she was under twenty-one and needed their consent. But eventually they got married, and went to live in Cambridge.

[00:10:20] Sandy's husband was offered a job in a university in Canada. Sandy did her first degree in Canada. They were married for five years. Sandy describes the '*very free-wheeling, promiscuous period*' [00:10:55] of the 1960s, among privileged, politicised people at least. When the marriage broke up, she got involved with the Anti-Abortion Coalition, Marxism and feminism. But she wasn't at that point attracted to the radical feminists, the lesbians. Looking back, Sandy thinks that she probably had opportunities to have relationships with women at that time, but she didn't see them until later. During this time her father died, and she felt that as an only child she had to come back to the UK because her mother was there.

[00:12:28] On returning to the UK, she did a Master's degree in Social Work at Brunel University, and continued with a string of boyfriends and eventually got married for the second time. She knew she wanted to have children, and had two children in quick succession with her second husband. Once she had had children, she felt free to pursue another area of her life. By that time she was in her early 30s and she had a notion that she didn't want to get to middle-age without having experienced a relationship with a woman. It wasn't political, it was '*purely to do with exploring my sexuality.*' [00:13:34] Because there was an au pair and she had help in the house, Sandy was freer than most women with children. She went to bars such as the Barley Mow in Smithfield with somebody who was probably a member of Kenric. Then she started having relationships with women.

[00:14:31] Sandy's first sexual encounter with a woman she describes as '*not in the best of taste.*' [00:14:38] Despite the fact that she didn't find her first female sexual partner very attractive, she knew that what was happening to her physically and emotionally was to her taste. That relationship fizzled out, and she had a couple of other short-term relationships.

[00:16:19] Sandy describes the difficult process of extricating herself from her marriage. In some ways it was a good marriage: she had lovely children and a privileged life. But in other ways it was a difficult marriage because her husband was quite possessive and had an inkling that she had an interest in women. He used to say of some of her colleagues that they were lesbians, even though they weren't. Once when she was on holiday with her children he had gone through her things, and found cards in her possession and thought that she was seeing someone. She left him, found somewhere to live, changed the children's schools and tried to '*keep her life under wraps.*' [00:19:01]

[00:19:20] The fact that Sandy was secretive about her relationships with women had an impact on her children. Her daughter has always found it extremely difficult. Her second husband went to America and got very ill. He was very angry with her, and that had an impact on her children, particularly on her daughter. But by the time he died, they were on reasonable speaking terms. But they never spoke about her female partner: '*That was something that was never ever spoken about.*' [00:20:30]

[00:21:10] Sandy talks about going out to meet lesbians when married to her second husband: '*It was amazingly exciting.*' [00:21:13]. When she went to the Barley Mow in Smithfield in the mid-1980s, there were butch and femme women, but also a lot in between. There were women who looked like men, and their partners looked ultra-femme. She remembers wondering how the butch women could go to work looking like this, but probably they just dressed this way to go out. Sandy would wear jeans and a top and wore make up and had longer hair. She talks about bringing female partners home with her when her husband was away for work.

[00:24:00] At this time she had a passionate affair with a woman, even though she knew she wouldn't end up with her. They didn't have a lot in common, but she '*really fancied her like mad.*' [00:24:18] This person was the stepping-stone to Sandy leaving her husband. Even though she didn't leave her husband for this person, it was being with this person which

helped her become decisive about what she wanted. It was this person's androgyny that made her so attractive.

[00:25:58] Sandy met her current partner [Pam] at a party. Sandy was with someone at the time, but she had already decided she would end it with that person. The first thing she noticed about her was her lovely hands. Their relationship worked very well at the beginning because her partner really liked her children, and they got on well. Her current partner is a landscape gardener and former art teacher and freelance carpenter.

[00:28:27] Sandy talks about her family and friends' reactions to her relationships with women. One of her cousins twigged that she was with a woman, when she was with the person who she was very passionate about. All her cousins were fine about her relationships with women. Some of her friends found it a bit more difficult. The husband of her closest friend had a bit of a problem with Pam [her current partner], but now they get on well.

[00:30:56] Sandy says that the prospect of telling people she was in a relationship with a woman didn't bother her. She came out to her work colleagues because she couldn't bear people making comments assuming she was single and couldn't get a man. But she has never had a problem about telling people: *'Because I think: I am who I am, I lead a dignified life, I don't ask anybody for anything, and if they don't like it then they've got a problem. I've always felt that way.'*

[00:32:05] Sandy talks about her relationship with her current partner Pam. They met when Sandy was 46 and Pam was 49, and they've been together for twenty years. They delayed having a civil partnership because Sandy had already been married twice and couldn't bear the thought of being married a third time. She was also apprehensive because of her daughter's feelings. But they had the civil partnership for legal reasons. She describes her daughter's realisation that the civil partnership meant Sandy would never go back to men. It was a small, simple event, but they had a big Christmakah party after it. They won't get married because Sandy doesn't want another wedding and Sandy would rather spend her money on other things.

[00:36:30] Sandy talks about the role of Judaism in her life. In her childhood Judaism had a strong role: most of her close friends were Jewish, and when she spoke about anyone at home, her mother would ask: 'Are they Jewish?' She was expected to marry a Jewish man. When she was a teenager she underplayed her Jewishness, and didn't want to be with anyone Jewish. But her second husband was Jewish, and they got married in a synagogue. They had a culturally Jewish home, but went to synagogue on the holidays. She promised her mother that her son would get a Bar Mitzvah, which he did. Her daughter has a lot of Jewish friends, but her son doesn't have any.

[00:39:59] Sandy talks about finding out about JGLG [Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group] after meeting people at a Gay Salsa event. What she likes about JGLG is that a lot of people don't have Jewish partners, so her own partner has always been very much included. Through JGLG she met people at BKY [Beit Klal Yisrael], and will probably join BKY. She likes the philosophy and inclusive nature of BKY. She and Pam host the Women's BBQ for JGLG, and have done for four years. She describes her non-Jewish partner Pam's inclusion in JGLG: *'She's picked up loads of Yiddish, she knows how to insult people in Yiddish.'*
[00:45:26].

[00:45:56] Sandy says that she didn't know any gay or lesbian people growing up. In Canada in the feminist movement there were a lot of lesbians. But it was always *'something that was lodged at the back of my mind. So I guess...I was sort of born with it.'* [00:46:48] In her teenage years she didn't know any gay men or gay women. She thinks she first heard the term 'lesbian' at school, as a derogatory term used as an insult to women who *'did not look*

the part, were very, very studious, who were more maths and science at school...the bluestocking types, they had to be lesbians.' [00:46:57] At the girls' school there were a lot of unmarried teachers who were called lesbians.

[00:49:53] Sandy describes what it is like being Jewish and LGBT. Sometimes she goes to get her nails done at a nail bar in North London which is frequented by affluent middle-class Jewish women. *'I do feel very different, although I'm not, I'm not. I'm Jewish like they are, I'm white like they are, I have a nice home like they do, I have children who went to university like they do, but I do feel very different. And I sometimes think, if they did strike up a conversation, would I be inclined to say that my partner is female. It's never arisen, but...I think I might think twice before I did. I might. But then I also think it's none of their bloody business.'* [00:50:09] She says there have been times when she's concealed her sexuality, but she wouldn't deny it.

[00:52:42] Sandy says that what she finds attractive is androgyny: she's attracted to a type rather than a gender. She doesn't describe herself as bisexual, because she's made a choice. After she had children, she had *'fulfilled what I wanted to do. And then I suppose I let rip! And I wanted to explore the other gender of that type.'* [00:53:33]

[END OF RECORDING]