

'Rainbow Jews' interview with Searle Kochberg
Manuscript

Camera Two shot.

Surat.

Hello, Searle. Welcome to Rainbow Jews. Thank you for coming. My name is Surat Knan and I'm the project manager of Rainbow Jews and today is Friday the 7th June 2013 and we are at the Montagu Centre in London. So Searle, would you like to briefly introduce yourself?

Searle.

Thanks for inviting me, Surat. My name is Searle Kochberg and I was born in Canada, in Winnipeg and I have an English Parent and a Canadian Parent and I lived there until I was eleven and then I moved to the UK and I've been back and forth. Truly, by national person, I would say and, uh, Judaism has always been a factor in my life. Um... So, I welcome this opportunity to talk today.

Surat.

Thank you.

Camera on Searle.

Surat.

Searle, could you tell us a bit about your family background?

Searle.

Yes. Um... Surat, thank you for inviting me by the way, I enjoy the experience. I come from, uh, a mixed heritage background. Um, my Mother is half Jewish and half not, half Catholic. My Father came from a very Orthodox home and my Mother's Father was very Orthodox as well. I had my early childhood in Canada and then, because my Father is Canadian, and my parents got married in Canada and my Mother brought us back here in the early 70s and we were here for about ten years and then we went back to Canada en Femme and my parents eventually split up and my Mother now lives in England and my Father in Canada and my Jewish life was set up at a very young age. I went to Hebrew School. I went to Zionist school, in Canada. All through my elementary education and then when I arrived here my parents who are not probably the world's experts on Judaic Theology sent me to a Hasmonean prep school which is extremely Orthodox, but I found myself studying with rabbinical scholars which was a little out of my comfort zone and my brothers and I all went to Hasmonean and then I went to a non-denominational grammar School for the rest of my education.

Surat.

So you come from a sort of religious background?

Searle.

Yes. My Grandfather was a Kantor in an Orthodox Synagogue. He also had a Tailoring business, but Jewish life was extremely important to him and he went to shool every day and my Father, although my Father is a lapse Jew, I would say, although he's recovered some of that in his old age. My Grandfather was adamant that his grandchildren have a very traditional, Jewish education. So, in fact, when I was young we –my Mother who grew up in a very bohemian kind of –she grew up in Soho in London, Russian/German parents. She embraced all of it. She, you know, kept a kosher home and all of that sort of thing. But these things tended to dilute. When I was in my early teens things seemed to – we were more relaxed.

Surat.

And how much did religion and faith play a part in your life as in your childhood, as little Searle?

Searle.

Um. It was very important, I think. You know, the biblical stories. I mean I went to a school where half of the day was spent in the Hebrew language and half in the English language. So, I spoke fluent Hebrew, you know, at the age of seven or eight. Um, so we –although it wasn't really too much of a religious school it was more of a Zionist school we spent a lot of time studying the festivals and the bible etcetera. So, um, yeah. And then of course when I went to Hasmonean it was very religious and the festivals were important. My Grandfather, in Canada, had very traditional seder nights as we would have them here too, you know, the whole service, the four hour thing, you know, he was leaning on a chaise longue, my Grandmother fed him that night. He didn't feel himself. It was a wonderful spectacle and I've actually made film –a film about my early childhood and the past savoury table, called "Leaving the Table" which all is about how one leaves one's identity and takes on new identities as one gets older and I brought in my niece and nephews into the film because obviously they're relationship to Judaism is quite different to the proceeding generation and my brothers and I all, at a time, were living with non-Jewish partners. So that made a huge difference to the dynamic of our family Jewish lives.

Surat.

Are you happy to elaborate on exactly how religion played a part in shaping your identity, who you are today?

Searle.

Gosh. That has been a life long journey. Um... I would say that in my late teens through early thirties it played no part, Judaism. Like a lot of gay men, a lot of LGBT people, and particularly of my generation it was, um –you were more or less excluded from –or you excluded yourself. You felt there were a lot of values that were not compatible with the way you thought about yourself and you – there was a bit of self-hatred, I suppose. It was in – it was all in the discourse of the people around you and my family was extremely supportive actually, but it – you didn't see yourself in that traditional Jewish world, really. But apart from that period of my life, um... Judaism has played an important role. I think less religiously than in terms of *ritual*. I love the ritual. And in terms of cultural studies I am a film theorist, historian by profession and filmmaker as well. And I

am very interested in the routes of my ideas and whatever. And I am very -I identify as what is called a Diaspora Jew, where my identity is not through Israel, I don't have a very strong affiliation with Israel, but through my experience really as a North American Jew. So for me New York is the big mecca, and my world view is very much shaped by the writers, directors, performers, Jewish performers in America and that's still a big part of my -my life's work, really. And those people continually renew me and inspire me.

Surat.

Is there anyone in particular that has inspired you, both in terms of your Jewish LGBT identity or your work as a filmmaker?

Searle.

Well, Lorenz Heart, actually. Um, I have always loved Lorenz and Heart music. I sing and years ago I did a CD project with some Jazz musicians I worked with where I did a treatment of a story about Jewish, Gay New York life over a twenty-four hour period. And all using the lyrics of Lorenz Heart, in the music of Richard Rogers who was also Jewish, but straight and later on I wrote a play, a musical play, which was tried out in workshop in London's West End, called "Ile of joy" which used period music but essentially I took my Father's life story which was very -he was a real transgressive, naughty boy coming from this very religious background he played truant, he didn't go to Synagogue, he got into gambling, you name it. And I used his story but turned him into gay man. So, in a sense I morphed our two characters together and, in a play called "Ile of Joy" which was set in Manhattan and Chicago in the years from 1939 to 1942, exploring Jewish identity. So yeah, Jewish gay identity is big for me.

Surat.

Do you remember a particular, you know, period of time or situation where you started to have that notion of identity as a gay Jewish man?

Searle.

Um... I think it was always there. I think that when I first came out I went to a group -I came out in London, because I moved to London in my mid-twenties - back to London in my mid-twenties and I joined called Icebreakers in Islington which was a non-Jewish group. It was for people coming out in the 1980s -This was the late 80s and I just didn't know where to start and I didn't actually have any -knowingly, any gay friends so it was most -and I'd gone out with women and I had a sort of confused adolescence, which most people do anyway, and um... I went to Icebreakers and then when I finished with Icebreakers, which was wonderful, they were a group of about fifty of us used to meet up every week in some building in Islington, I cant even remember, and then we'd go to a pub and we would go with councillors and we were all terrified because *My god! What's going to happen to us?* And, um... These people just made us realize that being gay was like being straight, you know. It's just get on with it, relax, live your life. So I went through that and I thought *okay, so I'm normal. I haven't got three heads.* And the next phase was *I don't know anybody. I don't, you know... What am I going to do?* So, in those days I don't even think it was called, um... The Jewish Gay and Lesbian group, in those days. I think -I don't know if they've always

operated under that name, but at that [inaudible] . There was a Lesbian and Gay helpline for Jews that was set up in King's Cross, in the days where it wasn't as posh as it is right now, and I joined that. It's laughable, really, because I signed up to be one of those people who are on the phone and I didn't even know my own relationship to gayness at this point. It was a way of meeting Jewish gay and lesbian people and it was very, very therapeutic for me. I did all of the counselling thing and I hung around, I think, for about a year and a few of the people I know from my Jewish shul community, which was called BKY (Beit Klal Israel), I met there.

Surat.

What year was that around?

Searle.

This was -would have been 1987, and, um... and apparently, because I only stayed for about a year, but a lot of the members who really were proper helpline people, not me, I was a bit of a con really, um... They say that the helpline lasted about ten years. It was at that time it was the height of the AIDs epidemic and hysteria. It was a very strange time to be coming out and a lot of us, we clung to one another. We were all around the same age and there was one guy who kind of helped us with counselling skills and whatever, but, basically, we were all, you know, mid to late-twenties... Excuse me... and um... It was very helpful to me, but actually when I went through that I realized *Okay, tick that box. I'm cool about being gay Jewish. Now I have to get on with the rest of my life.* And I'd already had a few relationships with men by that point. I met one -well I met two guys through the helpline and not on the phone, I might add, indirectly through the helpline... And, uh...

Surat.

Was that around the same time you -was that the 80s

Searle.

That was, uh... That was - we're talking 87. Probably 86 to 87, I would guess, that period.

Surat.

Do you remember your first relationship? Or the first guy you started dating or...

Searle.

I remember the first one I had a half serious relationship with who was a gay Jewish guy from Chicago, who I met through JGLG, definitely. And he was over here for world congress, or something like that, I must have been in London in those days. Um... It wasn't a wholly successful experience but what was very important about it is that I realized I'm definitely gay, because, actually, I still wasn't a hundred percent convinced and when I had the relationship with him I felt so completely whole as a human being, for the first time in my life that all the dots kind of added up, emotionally for me, and sexually that I just felt normal because I think up till that point I thought *really* - strange person. I felt like I was living in some masquerade, which I was, actually, but it wasn't - it wasn't one

that – I wasn't in the closet so much as – there was a part of that, but I just was confused. Okay? And I think that experience is - the best thing about that experience is that I came out of it clearly gay and Jewish, because he was Jewish too; and we had similar backgrounds, very secular, liberal stroke socialist, you know, similar background to me, so, um... Yeah. And then I met someone right after him who I really was crazy about, I would say. And then for various reasons he got a job abroad, we didn't actually split up, he got a job abroad. We recently met up with each other again, which was quite fun. But, um, I hadn't seen him for like twenty-five years. So, yeah, and then I didn't actually have a Jewish boyfriend again. I then – I sort of...

Surat.

Do you think that made a difference for you or... What is the difference for you, yourself between having a Jewish boyfriend and a non-Jewish boyfriend?

Searle.

Well, I think it's about... In those days I wouldn't have thought about it in those terms. In those days I would have done it purely because I didn't know myself as a gay man enough. So, going out with a Jewish person felt at least that I understood. I understood that bit. So, I could try and grapple with my gay side and what I liked about it, what I disliked about my identity, whatever. These days it's quite different because in the intervening years I haven't actually been out with a Jewish person and in the intervening years it's come to mean... ultimate understanding, okay maybe that's – I'm hoping it means that. What I found is that – and I've always had...

[Drilling sound interrupts interview]

Yes, um, in past years it was all about feeling that this was a genuine connection and that the gay thing, for me, was a little amorphous, at that stage, I didn't quite understand it but that bit I did understand. But, in recent years I have sort of got to a point where I thought it might be a very satisfying experience for me, because I – as I've got older, and I know you're also one doesn't like labels particularly, you know those little boxes, um... LGBT for me is – I don't consider it a community I consider it to be a group of individuals who have – who share particular experiences; maybe that is community, but there's something I – when I look at community I look for ritual where one can enact certain things with people and for me it wasn't enough, okay. I thought *yeah, so I'm gay. Big deal.* I - it's my sexuality and it – less and less did it define my being and I think that I came from a generation where gay politics was huge in the light of gay liberation; in the light of the women's – the women's movement and, you know, um... in the light of the AIDs epidemic there seemed to be a need for label –label –label, okay, and we used that as a tool – a political tool. But as I got older I thought *well actually, okay I'm not –I'm not a piece of politics. I'm a human being.* And the Jewish thing seemed to me a possibility for emotionally connecting with someone on a level that I hadn't entirely experienced, in a satisfactory way before. I mean, I lived with a man for eighteen years who was Catholic and we had at times a wonderful relationship and I had another fabulous relationship with a Protestant German guy, you know. One does not have to be Jewish, of course, to have a meaningful persona and, you know, be compatible with me, but I just thought as I was getting older... For me personally, the one thing that was a

constant in how I saw myself as a human being with my Jewishness, even when I lived a totally secular life if anyone had asked me what I was I – you know I even remember going for a job interview at the university at where I work and telling the interview panel that I was gay and Jewish, I belonged to two minority groups and they looked at me like *So, why are you telling us this?* But I always felt it was very important to announce my Jewishness. It was like really important to me. Um... And equally as my gayness and of course, you know, in a University environment that is really cool. Um, it's interesting how my Jewishness is not always been received so well; in such a welcome manner, because it's not that people are anti-Semitic but actually I think people in the secular world mistrust anyone where that person imposes a religious label on themselves, you know, they question *why do you, you know, are you a rabbi?* You know. A lot of my gay male friends who are totally secular, when they –when I started going back to Shul they thought they were going to see me with ringlets and a fur hat, you know, they didn't really understand that I needed –I needed a kind of spiritual journey, a bit. I needed ritual and I needed things that were- I mean my gayness is pretty essential to me of course but the ritual is essential and it's about continuity and, um, so in many ways as I've gotten older I feel my Jewishness is more essential to me than my gayness. Of course, you can't say anything's more essential than your sexual being but, actually I've sort of put that to bed, a long time ago. You know, I'm –I don't think about it much, you know, as with my Jewishness I do think about.

Surat.

Are you active in the LGBT and or Jewish community in any way, like a social or politically or any other way engaged?

Searle.

In many ways, um, I always find myself referring to aspects of my work at University. I mean, I'm not trying to sell a package to my students, but I am clear about who I am and in my private life I belong to BKY, which is the community which isn't exclusively LGBT but it has that kind of a focus and a kind of socialist, um, agenda; Social justice agenda. I work for Keshet UK as BKY's rep and basically Keshet is an umbrella organization that deals with advocacy, like: gay marriage, and whatever and also educational programs in schools and synagogues about LGBT matters... Uh, what else do I do? I uh have some involvement in this project, you know, and my students are filming us as we speak, which is fantastic and, um, I'm a member of JGLG. So, but I keep it in perspective because I, again, am one of these people. I get kind of nervous where every living breathing moment is about sexuality –you know. I like –like I'm gay. I don't want to be exclusively in a gay world, I like my straight friends too, um, it's the same thing about being Jewish. I –it's a very personal thing. I have very close friends who are Jewish, LGBT or straight, indeed. Um, but I also have a need to be with a wider community of people. I mean I –all these kind of trendy words, you know, in humanities, like: transcultural, and transnational and all this stuff is very much who I am and I think most Jews find that if they search into themselves they come from a variety of backgrounds, well actually that stuff is all really important to me. So, I balance it, I don't want it to take over, you know, but

it's very important to me. LGBT gay world is very important to me -socially and professionally.

Surat.

Is there any particular moment you can recall that you find quite significant? It could be any situation be it serious or funny situation that kind of signifies your LGBT Jewish life.

Searle.

Right, um, one significant moment... Well, it was quite a funny moment; I used to come to this place which is Central London and Janet Burden who was the rabbi here, um, said to me *You know, Searle, it's great having you here. Love you coming here. You come whenever you want.* But she said, *you know, there's a congregation for you, that's got your name written on it.* And they meet in Notting hill and the minute I went to BKY I thought *Hey. You know, this is interesting.* So that was a bit of a revelatory moment, I would say. Um... I think it's about recognition and it's about, you know; I recognise, they recognise, you know, it's sort of mutual connection. So, yeah, that was a big moment for me. Walking in the door.

Surat.

Do you have any sort of outlook in terms –that you want to share your outlook, you know, in the future, you know, in terms of relationship or marriage, children or any other things that you can, you know, actually see for yourself?

Searle.

Um, kids I think I'm past that phase in my life. I did –I was involved with a friend for years who happens to be Jewish around, you know, supporting her. She's a single mum, and I was –is, you know, quite involved in that and I have a niece and three nephews so that –and they all live in and around London so –and godchildren so there are kids –a lot of kids around. Um, marriage I'm delighted that it looks like gay marriage is about to hit the legislation books in the UK. But, for me personally I –I don't know how big an issue it is. I also, because I –when I lived with the, um, my long term partner for eighteen years that was a marriage situation and I've done it and I –I –I don't know if I personally need the piece of paper to feel that that relationship is valued, but in terms of legal status and human rights I think it's very important that people should have every citizen in every country should have the same rights as every other citizen. I don't see why certain people can get married and have certain protection under the law and it shouldn't be available to other people, but it's going to happen here. I had –to me it has nothing to do at all with religion. I see marriage, necessarily that is, I see marriage as a secular institution it's a legally recognised institution with certain tax implications and all that jazz and every citizen should be treated equally under the law. Bu, maybe I will, we'll see. I mean it's not like a big issue for me, personally.

Surat.

Would you have it under Huppah?

Searle.

If I got married I would like to say on camera that if I got married the only reason I would ever get married, actually, this stage of the game, is to have a Jewish marriage, that's the only thing. Because I can't actually see any other point in it. It would be to have the Huppah and the whole thing, yeah. Because, again, it's my interest in ritual, but, you know, otherwise no, not for me. Not for me, personally. But that, yeah, that would be cool.

Surat.

And as a last question: What motivated you to give this interview today? For Rainbow Jews.

Searle.

I... I felt that my story is quite a typical one, but it's over a lifetime of experience and, you know, that I think because I'm of a generation that went through the AIDs epidemic that the value of these stories is something that I really understand. That -that was a moment of awakening. That's when I came out and that's my birth as, a sort of, gay man and I think that it's very necessary to record that position, but to also record the connection between spirituality and gayness. Often in the wider community, LGBT people are only discussed in terms of sex. I mean, you know, it's crazy. You know, we have souls, we have lives and to see us in the round and to see that we too go through exactly the same as everybody else and why I picked this out, my one artefact, by the way, that I am talking on camera about. Encyclopaedia Judaica. Why I pulled this out is because my first Minnie step in my mature adult life towards my Jewish, gay persona was when I started working at the London Jewish Cultural Centre and I started about 2000. The first Humanities Arts course on Jewish studies in the country was an access course and I taught Film and Television Studies. There were people teaching Photography Studies, Art History, Social History, Political History, Economic. It was an amazing program and it sort of a defining moment in my modern Jewish life and actually I talked a lot about being gay on that course and this book lay in my office and was the first tome that I had as a reference manuscript so it was very important to me, so I picked that up.

Surat.

Well, thank you for sharing this with us and thank you for the interview, Searle.

Searle.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do it.

Camera Two shot.

Surat.

Searle, thank you for sharing your story with us and thanks for coming today.

Searle.

And, Surat, thank you so much for giving me this opportunity it's nice to bring it all together I really enjoyed it. Thank you.