

Gay Jews in the U.K. to document life over the rainbow

A new grant from the UK Heritage Lottery Fund will allow the gay Jewish community to research, record and archive its colorful roots.

By Daniella Peled | Dec. 28, 2012 | 9:53 AM | 1

Coming out to your rabbi can be a nerve-wracking experience, particularly when he's the head of the United Synagogue, which represents much of England's Jewish community – and your boss. But Mark Solomon, an Orthodox minister at the time, recalls that the reaction of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks at their pivotal meeting in January 1992 was "quite kind."

"Under his breath, he said 'Oh my God.' Then he gave me a little spiel about why he thought homosexuality was wrong – but he wished me well and said that the door was always open."

Most significantly, says Solomon, who had already decided to leave his job as a rabbi at an orthodox London synagogue, Sacks allowed him to work out the remainder of his job.

The experience of Solomon, now 49 and a prominent rabbi in UK's Liberal Synagogue, is likely to be part of a landmark project launching next month to record the history of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Jews in the United Kingdom.

The two-year "Rainbow Jews" initiative, the first of its kind in the UK, has been awarded a grant of nearly 60,000 pounds by the UK Heritage Lottery Fund to research, record and archive the experiences of British LGBT Jews from the 1950s until the present day. The theme of the project, conducted under the auspices of the Liberal Judaism movement, is "Pioneers and Milestones."

British Jews have long been something of pioneers in LGBT rights. The Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group, celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, was the first body of its kind established in the world. The first ordination of an openly LGBT rabbi came in 1989, when Elizabeth Tikva Sarah graduated from the progressive Leo Baeck College.

In 2005 Liberal Judaism became the first religious movement to introduce an official liturgy for blessing same-sex commitment ceremonies, the Brit Ahava, just ahead of British legislation recognizing civil partnerships.

But the history of Jewish-British LGBT activism remains uncharted, says Su Rath Knan, the project's initiator and director.

"This is something we have to uncover and share with the Jewish and the wider British community," Knan says. "We need to take it out of its hidden space and celebrate it; it is a history that has never really been looked at."

Openly gay Jews in the public eye include actor Stephen Fry and comedians Matt Lucas and Simon Amstell, whose recent sitcom "Grandma's House" made much of both his sexual orientation and religious background. Though these entertainers won't be involved in the "Rainbow Jews," other high-profile LGBT figures in the Jewish community, such as writer and broadcaster Rabbi Lionel Blue, who was ordained in 1960, will be playing a significant role in the project.

"I'm not aware of any Orthodox rabbis – hopefully one will come out," adds Knan.

The UK's Orthodox establishment, as in the rest of the world, has long been dogged by allegations of homophobia. Lord Jakobovits, the UK's former chief rabbi, notoriously described homosexuality as "a disability" in 1993, adding that he saw "no moral objection" for the use of genetic engineering to limit it. "It would be like correcting many other conditions such as infertility or multiple sclerosis."

Just over 20 years ago, the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Helpline was banned from a cross-community charity walk organized by Sacks and just this year, controversy erupted when high school seniors at the Jewish Free School in London were shown materials suggesting that homosexuality could be cured.

But views within the community have become much more accepting over the years, according to Solomon. "Social attitudes have changed and eased," he says, "and certainly Jonathan Sacks's position has altered a bit." Sacks still opposes gay marriage but has said that gay Jews should be shown compassion and understanding.

According to Searle Kochberg, a 55-year-old film-maker who is on the steering committee of Rainbow Jews, the introduction of civil partnerships had a deep impact on the Jewish community's acceptance of LGBT relationships.

"Jewish life is very much related to couples and families," he notes. During last year's World Gay Pride event, he recalls, West London Synagogue "one of the poshest shuls in London," hosted a special Friday night ceremony with 19 gay and lesbian rabbis.

"Non-Jewish friends of mine who were invited were gobsmacked," he says. "In this way Judaism is way more advanced than Christianity and certainly Islam."

The struggle against homophobia by Jewish organizations in Britain has allowed them to form alliances across the political spectrum. Recently, Jewish leaders made common cause with LGBT institutions in their campaigns against hate crimes. The two communities joined to criticize former London Mayor Ken Livingstone in 2004 when he welcomed Islamist preacher Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, known both for virulent anti-homosexual rhetoric and his ruling that suicide bombings against Israeli citizens were admissible.

Knan says "Rainbow Jews" is particularly important as both faith and sexual orientation are oft-marginalized identities and thus anti-Semitism and homophobia can be addressed together, though the project will not focus explicitly on anti-Semitism.

Starting next month, a group of specially-trained volunteers will take a minimum of 40 oral histories, both audio and audiovisual because "some people, possibly from more traditional strands of Judaism, won't want to appear on camera and we are expecting that," says Knan.

The initiative is also collecting memorabilia in conjunction with two major British archives, as well as a touring exhibition and a resource pack for high schools. The project's grand finale will be an exhibition in the London School of Economics in February 2014 as part of UK LGBT history month.

"The response has been overwhelming," Knan says. "One person told us that their 84-year-old uncle, who never talked about being gay and Jewish and lives a quiet life in a rural area, is interested in participating."