

Rainbow Jews Exhibition Summary for Sacha Kester

Interviewer Code: RJ201310A

Interviewer: Greg Reisman

Interviewee: Sacha Kester

Transcriber: Greg Reisman

Summariser: Greg Reisman

Sacha is a retired chemical engineer and business owner. Sacha's parents died in the Holocaust and he discusses moving from Paris to London to live with extended family. Although Sacha had some experiences with boys at school, he was married for 19 or 20 years and discusses his sexuality during his marriage and how his life has changed since he came out after his marriage ended. He doesn't feel that Judaism has influenced his sexuality and doesn't have any religious feeling, although he does feel connected to other Jews socially. Sacha discusses his involvement with the London Gay Men's Chorus and his political engagement.

Active years (bold as appropriate): **Pre-1968, 1968-1981, 1981-2000, 2000-**

Pre-1968 Activity

Knowing

- Sacha felt different and had some experiences with boys at school, but didn't feel he was "gay".
- He talks about feeling inhibited.
- He talks about wanting to conform.
- Sacha discusses his first feelings of same sex attraction at school:

"I don't know that I ever formulated it in that way, but certainly I remember at school being attracted to boys. Some girls, but mostly boys. But I never thought "I'm gay". Umm, and then of course there was a lot of family pressure, and you know, I had to follow the path, you know, of getting married and all that and er, but I always felt different. I mean I was different in some ways – my French background – but certainly I felt very different and all these boys were talking about girls and that didn't interest me particularly. And I had a few fumbles with some school boys at that time. But I didn't feel I was gay, I just didn't, because I didn't know that they were gay – the ones I fumbled with. I don't know they were gay, I just wanted a bit of sort of sexual relief. Um, but nothing much happened - I was too inhibited to do very much. I think at that time if somebody, you know, if a boy had hit on me and we'd had an actual relationship, things would possibly have been very different for me, but it just didn't seem to be a possibility to have a relationship with a boy or a man, it just... I guess things nowadays would be very different, because being gay is much more talked

about and if people have those feelings, they're more likely to put them into practice..."[00:56:34]

- *"I mean, looking back, certainly, I've, I remember some people who must have been attracted to me, because of when I look back, I can see how they behaved and you know I never sort of realised it at the time. It just was not on the horizon that I could be gay." [00:59:00]*
- *"You know, I just wanted to conform. I mean I didn't feel I was doing anything major in order to conform, but er, it just didn't seem to be an option to rebel and to be - although I had been rebellious when I was in France as I said - I don't know why I felt I couldn't rebel, but I didn't particularly want to, I didn't have the urge to rebel. I just had these feelings of attraction, which you know, I felt I couldn't really fulfil those [laughs] ambitions. It didn't seem to be a possibility at all, so it wasn't even worth thinking about" [01:01:37]*

Religion (or their Jewishness)

- In Paris: Sacha recalls the general warmth of a close Jewish family in relation to his natural parents, but religion didn't play a prominent role in his early life and Sacha doesn't recall learning anything Jewish in France after his parents died.
- In London, his adoptive family was Orthodox and Sacha was barmitzvah'd. They attended a yeshurun shul.
- He describes his approach to Judaism: *"... I was always rather resistant to it. Err, and I didn't enjoy going to synagogue because it was all mumbo jumbo to me. I didn't like the atmosphere. I wasn't bought up to it and so it didn't feel errr ... I couldn't understand why everybody around me was chattering and making a noise and there was things going on on the bimah and you know, nobody took any notice and I thought, you know, "What's this about?" [laughs]. So I wasn't being a very good Jew at that time and I've become a worse Jew ever since." [00:43:47].*

Family and Relationships

- Sacha was born in Paris to Polish parents.
- His parents died in Auschwitz
- He was sent to hide in the French countryside with his brother.
- After the war he was in a series of orphanages.
- He moved to London aged 12 to live with some of his extended family.

- Sacha got married (not entirely sure of the year).

"And that was OK, um, well it was OK in many ways inasmuch as you know, I could have sex with her fine. I get the feeling now that she wasn't that keen on sex with me, uh, so I didn't get as much sex as I wanted to have, but erm, but anyway...[00:59:57]

Politics, Law and Activism

Pride and Pleasure

1968-1981 Activity

Knowing

Sacha came out after he and his wife split up.

Religion (or their Jewishness)

Family and Relationships

- Sacha has two children from his close to 20 year marriage. He came out to them after his marriage ended and his daughter was more supportive than his son, who probably found it a bit more difficult.
- During his marriage he never acted on any same sex feelings and lived just with fantasies:

"I didn't have any affairs. Um, again, it's through some sort of naivety, because looking back I was attracted to several people... I remember one in particular. How I was so blind to the fact that he was [laughs] wanting to have a relationship with me I don't know. Because looking back he made it so obvious. But somehow it just passed me by and although I was attracted to him, again it just seemed that it was an impossibility that we could be together anyway, or have sex together. It was just fantasy. So I just lived with fantasies. I didn't, I didn't have anything in reality." [01:08:39]

Politics, Law and Activism

Pride and Pleasure

- Sacha went to a local gay group called Harrow Gay Unity and had his first 'proper' gay experience with someone from there when he was aged 45.
- Sacha didn't necessarily enjoy going to such groups:

"I didn't feel I went there for enjoyment. I went to try and change my life, but it was not, it certainly wasn't a great revelation, apotheosis of wonderfulness. You know, it was just something I felt I had to persevere with in order to achieve my goal of getting some gay sexual experience."
[01:15:45]

1981-2000 Activity

Knowing

Religion (or their Jewishness)

Family and Relationships

- Sacha didn't come out to his mother, but she ended up finding out and couldn't really deal with it, although this did get a little better over time.
- Sacha has his first 'proper relationship' with H, which went on to last 7 years with a man he met through an advertisement.
- *"Having a partner meant that there wasn't as much need to access, sort of, gay social life."* [01:37:13]

Politics, Law and Activism

Pride and Pleasure

- Sacha did join JGLG when he was in a relationship with H and made nice friends: *"I feel sort of strongly Jewish and strongly gay and being with a group that represents that sort of consolidates it."* [01:39:00]

2000-Present Activity

Knowing

Religion (or their Jewishness)

- Sacha doesn't have any religious feeling/has become more anti-religious over the years.
- Doesn't feel the Jewish community has influenced his sexuality.
- Feels there has been a change in Jewish community:

“...people are more aware of the existence of gays and think about it a bit more and so are more prepared to accept that there is such a thing as being gay.” [01:51:30]

Family and Relationships

Politics, Law and Activism

- Sacha has protested at Downing Street concerning the Winter Olympics being held in Russia and produced a video through LGMC in support of Russian gays.
- Sacha has demonstrated outside the House of Lords in favour of gay marriage.
- Sacha is glad that the law permitting same sex marriage has passed, but is ambivalent about the prospect for himself:

“I don’t sort of visualise having, at my advanced age, a partner that I will feel that close to that I want to be married... but I don’t feel the necessity to marry. I think you can have a good relationship without being married. I don’t know that having a piece of paper to say that we’re in a relationship will change much, although some people who marry find that it does somehow, but I don’t know how... I wouldn’t rule it out. I mean I would love to fall in love with somebody who, you know, could be a partner in all ways to me, as opposed to having to have several people to fill all my needs. I’d much sooner it was just one, but whether I would need to be married to them, I don’t feel it would matter really.” [01:47:26]

- *“I just cannot understand what homophobia is about. I mean why are people bothered what other people do in bed.” [01:50:10] “I just hope that gradually people will see sense and... you know, people should love who they want to love and that’s it.” [01:51:03]*

Pride and Pleasure

Sacha has been involved in LGMC for 8/9 years and discusses the choir’s role:

- Sacha talks about the role of gay choirs in the gay and broader communities. He describes that from an internal perspective they provide a safe space for gay people and a social space for people to meet others. *“But also politically, I think it makes a statement. I mean we don’t go around making speeches saying, you know, there should be no homophobia, but we hope that we have an influence on homophobia, reducing homophobia by the mere fact that we call ourselves a gay choir and we sing well and we have audiences and it changes the perception of people.” [00:10:46]*

- He describes his reasons for joining as follows: *"I met a friend who was a member and he said, "Oh, you should join this choir." I thought, "What a good idea. I might meet some nice gay people, might find a relationship, I should join."* [00:02:40]

Sacha talks about being active in his 70s:

- *"It was slow progress. But I have to say that [laughs] my seventies - I've been making up for lost time, which surprises me so much, because uh, well I thought that by the time I'm seventy I'd be over anything sexual and uh it's been totally the other way for me."* [01:13:44]
- Sacha is more relaxed about being gay now:

"Well, for me, I'm much more relaxed about it than I ever was. There was a time when I wasn't relaxed at all and I just denied it somehow. I mean I had fantasies, but it never occurred to me that I could actually fulfil these fantasies in any shape or form. Now I'm much more relaxed about it and as a result, I seem to be much more successful in finding people who want to be with me, which is, you know, I find quite amazing, but lovely." [01:49:16]
- *"I have other relationships, in the plural, people who visit me fairly regularly or at least fairly often. And I find that quite surprising. I don't know what I do that's right, but they keep coming back, so that's nice. They're not partners really, any of them, just people I can do things with and I can have sex with."*[01:44:06]