

Interview Summary
Collection's name: Rainbow jews
Interview code: RJ201323A
Interviewer: Lisa Rodan
Interviewee: Zizi
Interview length: 51:48

Track A: 0:00:27.7- 00:00:54.7 Motivations for giving interview

Zizi talks about why she is giving the interview, to see how people combine lives as both Jewish and gay

Track A: 0:01:02.0- 00:01:56.2 Upbringing and background

Zizi says she was brought up in Stanmore, northwest London in a middle- class suburban house and a fairly observant family. *"In a Kosher home and I would go to the synagogue with my friends on a Sabbath morning, on the high holy days and festivals"*. She went to school locally before moving into her present profession as a solicitor. She mentions how she had expectations from her family to grow up, go to university, settle down with *"a nice Jewish boy and have nice Jewish children and so the traditions would be continued...it didn't quite work out like that"*.

Track A: 0:02:01.0- 00:03:07.0 Family and Childhood

Zizi describes herself as fortunate for having a really happy childhood. Her dad worked long hours so she was closer to her mother. She had one younger sister, six years younger. She feels she is lucky to have had four grandparents and three great grandparents. She recalls being very happy, if quite anxious. She describes herself as not spoilt but made to feel fairly safe and secure which she feels lucky about. She went to an all-girls senior school which she describes as a well-regarded school- she had to sit an entrance exam. She feels fortunate for being given a lot of love, support, and opportunities as she grew up.

Track A: 0:03:10.0- 00:03:38.0 Importance of Family Now

Zizi describes how her mother died over twenty years ago at the age of 56, which she says was very difficult but significant in her coming out process. Her father is still alive as is one grandparent. She describes herself as being very close to her sister and nieces. She emphasizes her family are very important to her, although they have all been on a journey to get to this point.

Track A: 0:03:45.0- 00:05:38.0 Parents Background

Both Zizi's parents were born in this country. Her mother was the eldest of two and born just before the start of the Second World War. Her grandfather was a tailor and her grandmother worked with him, and her father before her had been a tailor, starting out in the East End. On her father's side, her grandmother was born here but she tells how her grandfather had come over from Russia/Poland at the turn of the century- she isn't exactly sure as he was very young when he arrived. They lived in the Ladbrooke Grove area. Her parents met on holiday in Venice and her father fell in love with her mother instantly, proposing within a couple of days. Her father was an accountant. She says in a different era her mother may have liked to combine being a mother with having a profession but felt at the time that she had to choose one or the other, therefore choosing a mother. Zizi recalls when she and her sister had grown up, her mother qualified in her career in which she did very well, making them all proud. *"She got to fulfil some of her potential but I really think if she had lived at a different time she would probably have been a doctor or something like that and would have been really satisfied by her job...she was very bright and charismatic and I miss her a lot"*.

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Track A: 0:05:45.0- 00:06:40.0 Professional Life

Zizi says the fact she believes her mother wasn't fulfilled propelled her to seek a profession and have choices. She says it made her quite focused not to rely on another person, to "*make my own way*". She felt her mother didn't fulfil her potential because of her relationships, so she felt it was important for a woman to fulfil her potential, whether she was married or not, to "*have equal status as a man...that was very important*"

Track A: 0:06:49.0- 00:08:48.0 Sexual Identity

Zizi says she didn't become aware of her sexual identity until her early teens, when she started getting crushes on friends at school, and realising it was more than a crush. However she says she had no idea of what to do about the feelings except that she shouldn't tell anybody about them, which she didn't. She recalls seeing a film in her early teens called the "Killing of Sister George", a film about a fairly butch lesbian who was abusive towards her younger partner. The film freaked her out as she both identified with and was put off the character. She says she tried to shut it down for a long time and partly attributes this to the lack of role models and presence of gay people in her acquaintance. She remembers how someone had a gay brother and how that was "*always whispered about in hush hush tones as if it was something nobody talked about, so I knew it was a 'bad' thing*". She remembers how even when she went to university she was aware of being attracted to women as well as men, She says she got to a state of equilibrium where some of her friends were aware of how she felt and she decided to identify herself as "*a non-practicing bisexual, which was major cop-out really*".

Track A: 0:08:48.0- 00:09:42.0 Marriage

Zizi recalls meeting her husband during this time, She describes him as a lovely, gentle man with whom she is still very friendly. She says he completely understood her attraction to women and that she didn't intend to do anything about it. They got together and were together for twelve years- five of which they were married and seven living together. During that time she recalls having a dalliance with another woman but it didn't go anywhere and she ended up confused and running "*back for shelter again afterwards*". She states that she wasn't in a position to come out at this point.

Track A: 0:09:42.0- 00:11:00.0 Mother's attitude to homosexuality

During her early marriage Zizi also recalls how she was aware that her mother, with whom she had a very close relationship, did not want to discuss gay feelings at all. She says it was understood as a no-go area which she describes as "*weird...because everything else in our relationship was totally open*". She recalls having a conversation about it soon after getting married, when her mother had first gotten ill. Her mother had said how lucky they were at how open they could be and that there was nothing they hadn't had a chance to say to each other, to which Zizi responded "*Well actually, mummy there was something, we never really discussed how I might be gay*". She says her mother replied "*well we don't need to discuss that now do we*" and completely closed down. Zizi states that when her mother passed away a few years later it was very difficult for her to deal with how she might have coped with her coming out, which happened a few years after she died.

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Track A: 0:11:06.0- 00:13:43.0 Family's reaction to coming out

Zizi says her family reacted in *"various ways"* to her eventual coming out. She recalls telling her father, who she describes as a *"very nice man but quite Victorian in his way of thinking"*, about how she had met another woman and that she was going to end her marriage to be with her. She remembers sensing him thinking *"I've just lost my wife, if I get this one wrong I'm going to lose my daughter as well"*. She says he then *"played a blinder"*- despite their relationship not being that close beforehand, he had said OK. His first question was *"is she Jewish?"* Which Zizi says amused her greatly and she told him they weren't going to have kids so it didn't really matter. She says her dad took it on board and never made her feel bad. Her mother's mother, on the other hand, gave a very different response. She had been brought up in the 1920s and Zizi says she had always portrayed herself as a liberated woman, However she told Zizi *"you're an intelligent woman, you should know better. You'll not be welcome in my home with another woman because I don't want to know if she's a friend or more"*. Zizi's sister, who she was very close to, *"adored my husband"*. Zizi recalls how her sister parked her car outside the house waiting for her to come home and berated her in the street. It was late at night and so loud that it became a public spectacle and was only stopped by her husband coming down and sticking up for her, telling her sister *"she's doing a very brave thing and I'm supporting her in this so it's OK"*. Zizi's husband was really supportive the whole time and actually offered to accompany Zizi to tell her father.

Track A: 0:13:44.0- 00:15:06.0 Relationship with family now

Zizi says her relationship with her family now is *"absolutely fantastic"*. Her grandmother, who is now 98, *"absolutely loves my present partner"*. Zizi describes how one of her grandma's friends rang her grandma up in a panic because her grandson had just come out. Her grandmother *"absolutely revelled in it because she was now the font of wisdom and could say 'no it's wonderful having a gay grandchild, it's not an issue at all'"*. Zizi's sister is now also *"totally brilliant with my partner...the first time they met each other they got on famously"*. There are now no issues in the family. Her partner is as welcome as anyone else's would be.

Track A: 0:15:28.0- 00:19:43.0 Romantic relationships and religion

Zizi feels really lucky having a Jewish partner, her first partner was not Jewish and she says this made things more difficult. She points out she doesn't know if this was because she had just come out of a marriage and her family *"hadn't quite got their brain in gear and couldn't accept the gay thing"* or if it was because the woman was American and a non-practicing Catholic. Zizi recalls that this partner was also a very difficult person so that may have contributed to the tension. She says she loves having a Jewish partner now, she feels they have a common back history and understanding and *"there's so much that doesn't need to be explained"*. She feels there is a lot she can share about their culture and *"it's brought me feeling Jewish back to me which I had kind of lost"*. She says that Friday night is *"our night...it's the end of the week, we'll have our Friday night meal together because it's the Sabbath and we'll light the candles and drink the wine and have the **hallah** bread and we'll sit at the table rather than where we'd sit otherwise"*. She describes it as a real marking and a tradition they keep alive in their household. She says they also go to the synagogue together which is really special. Zizi states that the little things are really important too, recalling how one year she went around to her partner's house at New

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Year with some flowers and that her partner was arranging flowers to give to her too. *"It was something we both know we wanted to do...there was no explanation required, it was just a shared tradition"*. Zizi says that if it weren't for being Jewish they never would have met in the first place as they met at the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group at their Passover meal. Zizi recalls how was her first time at the JGLG and that one of her secretaries at work how given her the details of the group and pushed her into going. She laughs out how the president of the JGLG group- who is now one of their closest friends- *"googled me to make sure I didn't look too scary"* and that she was allowed to go along. The first person she was introduced to was her future partner. She says they started talking and *"haven't stopped since and that was six and a half years ago...it was as near as it gets to love at first sight"*. Zizi says that date has become very important to their relationship, they go back to the dinner each year and *"it's a real anniversary point for us"*.

Track A: 0:19:57.0- 00:23:13.0 Experiences with wider Jewish community

Zizi was brought up in the United synagogue which she describes as a step down from the Orthodox community but a step up from the Reform community. She says at the time she came out they would not have been particularly supportive. She recalls how the last time she went to the synagogue was before she came out, with her parents, and a sermon was being given by a rabbi who said *"if your children were gay then it was the parents fault for not bringing them up properly"*. She thought that was a terribly cruel thing to say and never went back to that level of synagogue again. Zizi then joined the Reform movement, where she was married. She recalls how when she ended her marriage and came out she went through a difficult time, *"I was rebelling against a whole history and I still cared a lot for the man I was married to but I just couldn't be that person anymore"*. She recalls how she talked to her then rabbi who *"was wonderful, absolutely wonderful, she just let me cry for ages and ages and ages and then told me I had to do what I needed to do"*.

She now belongs to a Progressive community which has a gay rabbi and lots of gay people and was set up by mainly gay women. She describes them as her *"family of choice"*. It means she can take an equal part in the services and be surrounded by non-judgemental people. She knows she couldn't do that in a more orthodox environment.

She thinks things are changing though, she is "out" at work and has a lot of Jewish clients and she doesn't feel the need to hide anything or that she has experienced any direct discrimination.

Track A: 0:23:37.0- 00:24:50.6 Equal Marriage Rights and Religion

Zizi says the Progressive synagogue has been really supportive regarding civil unions. Although they couldn't call it "marriage", they've long had a commitment ceremony for same sex couples under the traditional "Chuppah" which she says is the same as a marriage without the legal wherewithal. Personally, Zizi feels civil partnership is a brilliant thing and feels gay people are living in a very lucky time, compared with when she was growing up. Zizi herself likes the idea of equal marriage, she fought quite hard for the right, signing petitions, getting in touch with her MP etc., but she also feels straight people should have the right to be civilly partnered if they prefer *"otherwise it's not equal"*.

Track A: 0:24:52.0- 00:26:39.0 Living as a gay person in British society

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Zizi still feels there is a way to go but is very appreciative of *"how far we've gone"*, especially in London *"where nobody really bats an eyelid"*, she doesn't feel she experiences any difficulty. She does point out however that her partner doesn't feel the same, she isn't 'out' at work although she says everyone has probably guessed. Zizi says her partner doesn't hold her hand in public as *"she feels we would become a potential target and she's more cautious"*. Zizi says each person feels differently how they'll be received and they've compromised by looping their arms around each other, respecting what the other is comfortable with. Zizi says they love going to Pride together and to places where they can be 'out', such as the Lesbian and Gay film festival and other festivals.

Track A: 0:26:54.0- 00:32:20.0 First female partner

They were together for eight years but Zizi describes the relationship as very difficult, saying her ex was not a happy person. Zizi says with the benefit of hindsight, her former partner probably suffered from Aspergers as well as depression. Zizi tells how several years after splitting up, when they'd both moved on with their lives, her ex took her own life.

Although the relationship wasn't easy, Zizi recalls that it was fantastic in the beginning because she felt *"I was finally being me"* and *"for [her ex-partner], it was if she'd found someone she could finally be herself with"*. However Zizi says this only lasted for a couple of years. Zizi feels immensely grateful to her ex for inspiring her to push the boundaries of her comfort zone in terms of her creativity, but she says their incompatibility meant it became *"an ugly relationship that was well past its sell-by date"*. However she recalls that it was difficult to end because she was afraid people would think she had failed, as she had given up a very nice marriage. She says she had to find the courage to end it, which she finally managed to do with the support of some friends.

The lack of Jewishness didn't specifically have a negative affect but Zizi says it meant they were more different and accentuated the lack of compatibility. Zizi says during that time she had to put her Jewishness on the backburner. Zizi says her ex didn't feel like she belonged anywhere so Zizi's Jewish belonging was difficult for her to cope with. Zizi didn't go to the synagogue on Fridays, and she felt she had to do Yom Kippur fasting furtively as her ex demeaned it. She felt less Jewish during those years, which is why she felt it so refreshing to come back into the Jewish way of life. Zizi says she's amazed at how wonderful it is to share that with her present partner.

Track A: 0:32:37.0- 00:35:00.0 Ex-husband

Zizi recalls how they met when she had just qualified as a solicitor and she moved in as his tenant. They developed a friendship and eventually she *"moved down the corridor"*. They had a traditional Jewish wedding, although she was the more religiously observant of the two so he let her do her own thing. She recalls going away on holiday and finding the Jewish areas- he was into Jewish history and culture. They had no children- he didn't really want them and she couldn't which she says *"worked out well"*. He has since remarried and lives around the corner with his wife, who Zizi describes as 'delightful', and has since had two young children. They still see a lot of each other and Zizi has a lot of respect for him, he's been really supportive of her journey. His family were very supportive too, and both Zizi and her

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partner were invited to his mother's 80th birthday party. She feels fortunate to have been involved with really decent people.

Track A: 0:35:08.0- 00:39:00.0 Family's changing attitude to coming out

Zizi says her dad was always pretty good. Her sister came round once she realised it was for real, but had a difficult relationship with Zizi's first partner. Zizi recalls that they didn't get on very well and so it was hard to have a close relationship with her sister. Zizi says this was hard as their mother had died and there were six years between them, so she felt she should have been there. Zizi recalls how her former partner actually engineered a reconciliation with Zizi's grandmother one Christmas Eve. Zizi calls this the beginning of a truce, albeit an "uneasy truce" which lasted for the first five years of the relationship. When that relationship ended, Zizi recalls how her grandmother said "we've got that out the way now" and offered to introduce her to a nice man. Zizi says it was difficult to make her see that she didn't need to be with someone to be a lesbian. However they communicated through letters which Zizi says helped them get through it and things are now great. Zizi recalls her grandfather, who died just after she met her present partner. She remembers they were alone in the hospital and Zizi asked if he liked her present partner and despite his weak state he managed to say "*she's better than the other one*", which Zizi took as a thumbs up. She says it's the passage of time but also that society has produced other gay and lesbian people who "*aren't freaks*" and people talk about gay relatives more. It's not such a strange thing anymore, which she says is easier for her family to feel that it's not a stigma the neighbours will talk about.

She recalls how two of her grandma's nine children siblings visited Zizi to say they supported her. Zizi's other grandma, who was blind at the time, also found it difficult initially but through confusion, not hostility. Zizi remembers how she said to her "I don't understand it, but if it makes you happy, that's fine".

Track A: 0:39:24.0- 00:00:00.0 Role Models

Zizi says she didn't meet any gay people in her community before she came out so there was no-one influential during her own coming out. She says the general zeitgeist has made things easier- starting with the Brookside kiss. She says seeing attractive, normal people identifying as gay standing up to be counted made her feel like she wasn't alone. When she was younger she says she didn't even know what a lesbian was, other than that they were laughed at.

Track A: 0:40:55.0- 00:41:39.0 Progressive Jewish Community

Zizi has only been involved for a few years through her present partner but she says they have been around for quite a few years before that. Zizi says the majority have supportive family but that there are some whose families have ostracized them and won't have anything to do with them. Zizi says she has met some brilliant people through them and made some fantastic friends.

Track A: 0:42:12.0- 00:44:17.0 Non-Jewish gay community

Zizi doesn't just associate with the gay Jewish community, she has lots of non-Jewish gay friends. "*The pleasure is as much being in a gay environment as being in a Jewish environment. It's nice when then two come together because that's extra special, but there's something really lovely about being in London where there's a*

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gay acceptance largely, especially in the artistic areas". She especially refers to the theatre world, which is where she met her first partner. Zizi says there are lots of areas to share commonalities. She says that one of her straight colleagues at work told her she envies gay people for having a defined support network and that she feels there isn't such a focal point for heterosexuals.

Track A: 0:44:31.0- 00:47:23.0 Coming out at work

Zizi was initially worried about coming out at work but says in the end it was fine. She remembers that some people were surprised, perhaps a little uncomfortable but they got over it. She recalls that when her firm then merged with another she didn't want to have to do it again so decided to put up pictures of herself and her partner in her office to let people know she was gay all in one go. She remembers that on the first day of the merger everyone in the firm came up to visit her to see what a lesbian looked like- she thinks they'd never knowingly met one before. She says after day one she was then only of mild interest. Zizi says when her partner comes along to work events she is always treated as anyone else's partner would be.

Zizi came out at work at the same time as to her family, it had to be that way she says, as it was such a traumatic event and as she was ending a marriage. It's a small family firm and it *"wasn't something that could be brushed under the carpet"*. She says she was a bit of a basket-case at the time and wasn't sure how she managed to hold down her job during that time, but she did.

Track A: 0:47:25.0- 00:48:33.0 The future

Zizi hopes she will be with her partner forever. She says she prefers the concept of civil partnership to equal marriage as the language *"smacks of equality"* so she hopes they will be civilly partnered one day. Zizi says she hopes that everything will be normal and there won't be any horrible backlash from society. She says she feels she's living in the best possible time as an independent woman and a gay woman, however she worries about anti-Semitism and hopes it doesn't get bad.

Track A: 0:48:44.0- 00:50:53.54 Auschwitz-Birkenau

Zizi recalls how she went on a trip to Krakow with her partner and some other gay Jews, about eight close friends. She says it was important for her both as a Jew but also as a gay Jew. Zizi says one of the most significant things for her to do at the camp was light a memorial candle at the concentration camp in memory of the Jews all over Europe who had passed away. She describes the iconic image of arriving on the rail line and passing through the gates into the camp. *"For me it was symbolically and massively important to walk with my same sex partner, holding her hand, along those railings and out of the gates as a Jew, as a gay woman, and it was saying, I am here, we survived despite everything that you did to both gay people...and Jews in particular. You wanted to destroy us, and here I am. You are destroyed and I am walking out with the person in this world who makes me happiest. With my friends who are walking out with their partners as well. That was so symbolically important to me."*

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