



SAMS Roots Interview Transcript
Rick Taylor interviewed by Caroline Pearce, transcribed by Caroline Pearce
28th July 2015 at Rick's home in St Albans

Recording length: 44m17s

CP: I can see you've brought lots of things to talk about today. Can we first talk a little bit about SAMS, and what it was that appealed to you about SAMS as a community?

RT: Jenny and I were members of the St Albans Synagogue, which is the United synagogue, and there were various other reasons but I was finding it difficult reconciling membership of that synagogue with the attitude of the synagogue to women, excluding them from parts of the service and, particularly at that time, which was the early 1990s, there was a movement to try and separate women from men even more during the service than they used to. Now at St Albans Synagogue they always had to have the division [between genders] with the gentlemen at the front, then a gap of one or two rows, and then [behind that] the ladies. That worked perfectly [during the tenure of] many rabbis and many years but there was a movement at that sort of time generally for a [mechitza](#), a proper screen. And in fact a rabbi came to do a service and wanted one but we said no, we've never had one and we've never had it, so he did the service [without it]. There was this sort of division, physical division, that was wanted [by the US] which nobody in the synagogue wanted, and I felt unhappy with that sort of argument and also there were arguments going about at the time with the United Synagogue rabbis justifying the attitude towards women. The whole thing was against the zeitgeist at the time. When women were becoming more [included] generally, there seemed to be reasons manufactured [by the US] which were false, artificial, to exclude them, and we were unhappy [about that]. [Jenny and I] happened to go to a service at [St Albans] [Masorti](#) synagogue, in its very early days, for Remy Strauss's barmitzvah, and there were others there whom we knew, and we enjoyed it. Then a couple of weeks later we went to a [SAMS] service purely voluntarily, and [people] were surprised to see us, and after that we joined.

I was in at the very very beginning [of SAMS] when I was a warden of the United Synagogue and one Sunday afternoon I got a phone call – I think it was from Stephen Gess, but wouldn't like to say [for sure] as it was a long, long time ago – they wanted to see me, but they wouldn't say what it was about. Two or three gentlemen from [St Albans] United Synagogue - this was before [SAMS] was formed - told me that they had this idea of forming a Masorti synagogue. I suppose I was meant to be shocked, but I don't do shock really – it was up to them. So they formed it.

CP: That was twenty-five years ago...

RT: Yes. So we joined really because we felt more comfortable. Although at the time I wasn't even comfortable with the Masorti synagogue because at that time they wouldn't have women taking part in the service. They could be called up to read the [brachot](#) but they couldn't take part in [leading] the service. I couldn't see why there had to be this difference, but it's long gone and I'm much happier with it now.

CP: Yes, it's completely egalitarian now, which pleases a lot of people I think. Having been there a long time, you obviously enjoy being part of the community. What do you like about it apart from [not feeling like an outsider]?

RT: It's relaxed. It may be the same with other synagogues now, I don't know, but [at SAMS] there's nobody to lay down the law in a sort of smug religious way, which I hate. I'm not including the rabbi in that, it's his job. I'm talking about the laymen.

CP: You grew up in St Albans, and were born in London...

RT: My parents lived in Highbury when I was born in 1938 so I came to St Albans as a baby.

CP: Did they move because of the war?

RT: Yes, I think my father's work brought him here.

CP: He was an accountant...

RT: His full title was cinematograph accountant and he worked for the Rank Organisation.

CP: Did they have offices or premises in St Albans?

RT: During the war my father was actually working in Cookham in Berkshire and he came home occasionally.

CP: Did your parents know Jenny's' parents?

RT: Yes.

CP: Because the Jewish community wasn't all that big at the time?

RT: It was quite big actually because there were loads of people who came out [from London] because of the war. But we didn't have a synagogue building.

CP: Where did the services take place?

RT: At the Town Hall, and then [the existing [shul](#)] had various premises. They did have a permanent building used as offices at 54 Clarence Road. They used it for Shabbat services and for what I call the minor festivals. For Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah there were too many [congregants] so they couldn't use it so they used the Town Hall, and later on the dance hall called the Victoria Rooms in Victoria Street just near the corner with Upper

Lattimore Road. It's just next to the Cotswold. I must be the only person at [SAMS] who can remember St Albans during the war. There were occasional bombs. I can remember the air raids, they were very regular.

CP: What do you remember?

RT: I can remember...first of all, they always happened at night – or usually happened at night – [I remember] hearing the air raid warning, which was frightening [as we didn't know] what would [happen] next. After a while – usually nothing happened – there would be a nice continuous siren for the all clear.

CP: Did you have any kind of shelter?

RT: No, we didn't have a shelter. There were shelters available, and neighbours had a shelter, but we never had to use any shelters. The odd bomb came near the area but St Albans itself was never bombed I don't think.

CP: Were the aircraft flying away from London and looking to dump their bombs?

RT: It might [have been because of] dumping. There were loads of aircraft [hangars] near here [that could have been targets], but they must have been disguised. One of my earliest memories is of being in a bus in Sandridge. The reason I remember it, and [know it was during the war] is that there was netting on the windows [to stop the glass shattering]. Another early memory is of being in a pushchair in Catherine Street. The local pronunciation is *Catheruyn* Street.

CP: Did you go to school locally?

RT: Yes, I went to Garden Fields School, again, in Catherine Street – it's now in Townsend Drive – [the building where the school was previously] is now the Jubilee Centre and then I went to St Albans School and this is the book...

CP [Referring to the book] And this was given to you...

RT: It was given to all new boys and they were very proud of the fact that at the time as they stated it was the oldest school in the country, formed in 948 but the actual foundation of the school is 1553.

CP: Were there any other Jewish boys there?

RT: There were a few. When I started there were about 120 boys, I reckon five or six of whom were Jewish, three of us were from St Albans. It was a boarding school then but most were day boys. There were a few boarders.

CP: Did you ever feel that being Jewish made you stand out?

RT: No, because it was an inclusive school and if anything had gone wrong [the staff] would have stamped on it. [We] were treated exactly the same. The only time we knew there was any difference was, obviously, when it came to services. Every morning there was a service and the non-Christian [boys] would be outside – the Jews, the Catholics, the Plymouth Brethren.

CP: So you didn't feel excluded, that was simply [the way it was with services]?

RT: You got the odd remark, but it was stamped on if it ever happened, so there was nothing [that happened of significance].

CP: This book was signed by all your teachers when you joined?

RT: This is interesting – this guy [points at a teacher's name] was our next door neighbour many years later.

CP: Was that strange? Because you expect to see teachers in school – when you see them outside school, it's unexpected...they're almost like a different person if you see them outside school.

RT: Yes, though it was [something we had in] common, the same school...I am still involved with the school, through the Masonic Lodge which is open to all boys and all masters. One of the masters – I don't know if you can see it, Charles – he was active in the Lodge when I joined.

CP: When was the Lodge set up?

RT: The Lodge started in 1928.

CP: What kind of work does the Lodge do?

RT: General masonic work, charitable work, masonic meetings.

CP: I'm looking at that letter – what can you tell me about it?

RT: This is a copy of a letter – my cousin has the original which was written by her father, my mother's youngest brother, to his mother during the war.

CP: What does the letter say?

RT: It just says what was going on in the war. Moaning a bit, but they were a moaning family anyway sometimes! He was somewhere in France, so obviously they were under strict orders not to disclose their whereabouts. He also went all over the place. He went to India, Madagascar...I think he was a prisoner very briefly of the Japanese but then he was freed. So the story goes.

CP: Do you know more about the story?

RT: He was apparently rescued by Gurkhas.

CP: So this [letter] says that he hasn't really got any news at all, and that he hopes they aren't annoyed 'if my letters are very short'. I would think [his family] were simply very happy to hear any news at all.

RT: Naturally my grandmother would have been very, very happy to have a letter. He was the darling of the family. His name was Len. He was the darling of them all because he was the youngest brother of thirteen.

CP: Were there any girls?

RT: Mainly boys. Of the thirteen there were only three girls. I knew a lot about them because I was very close to my grandmother in the short time I knew her because she lived with us and she used to tell me about the family. [Indicates photo]. There were three girls – my mother, and her sister Dora who I was very close to, and then there was another sister who was called Sissy who sadly died when she was sixteen. But unfortunately what happened often in those days – my grandmother was born in 1875 – a lot of them died young, either as babies or as small children.

CP: How old was she when she died?

RT: Seventy-three.

CP: That's young...so this is a photograph of your grandmother, who lived with you, and your grandfather, who died before you were born? So this would have been taken roughly when?

RT: I'm not sure, you probably have a better idea – ladies usually know more about costume.

CP: She lived with your family...you had no siblings? It was you and your parents?

RT: For a long time, when I was very small, it was myself and my grandmother and my mother, and people were coming in and out all the time. People would come up from London, family.

CP: Because of the war?

RT: Yes.

CP: Did they stay with you?

RT: They stayed overnight sometimes, but they didn't live with us. They came to visit. Things were much more fluid in those days.

CP: I suppose St Albans wasn't around the corner [for people who came from London]...now it's a lot easier [to get to St Albans by road].

RT: The trains were running. They ran all through the war. They had a horrific experience during the war going to Glasgow. I hated that. My mother grew up in Glasgow, although she was born in London she was brought up in Glasgow so her home was Glasgow – she thought of it as her home - and she went there to visit one of her old friends, Miss Stapleton. I hated Glasgow.

CP: Why did you hate it?

RT: It was miserable and seemed dirty and I always came out in large spots when I went there, and the dreadful thing is that then I went there again!

CP: It's a lot nicer now.

RT: I'm sure it is. I haven't been back since then.

CP: It sounds like you were quite put off by it...

RT: Oh yes! [Indicates book] That was my grandmother's rent book.

RT: Glasgow, Union Street, 1932, seven years before I was born. This is my grandmother's alien registration. The fact that she'd been living here since the early twentieth century didn't stop her being classified as an enemy alien. When war broke out she had to register. She was born in Cracow and one didn't dare say 'Poland' because you were quickly corrected on that [since in those days Cracow was considered to be part of] Austria. We didn't know at the time about the partition because Poland was part of Austria. In fact [to say that Cracow was part of the larger province of] Galicia is probably more exact.

She was not averse to telling me some Polish stories. This is a Polish story she told me when I was a very small child. There's a tramp in the countryside and he's very very hungry, he's starving. He's reduced to eating berries. He hears the sound of music being played and he looks round and there's a church, a village wedding [is in progress]. And he thinks 'oh good, there'll be food at the wedding, I'll be able to eat there'. So he urinates on the berries and he goes to the wedding. The father of the bride sees him and says 'go away, we don't want tramps here!' so he goes away and ends up eating the berries. I think this is a sort of Polish folk story [teaching us to] never presume. It's a nice story isn't it?!

CP: So she was considered an alien?

RT: Yes, and I can remember very very vaguely as a small child a policeman knocking at the door, rather shame-faced [at having to confront] a very old lady, harmless.

CP: He needed to check on her?

RT: Yes.

CP: Her name was Fanny?

RT: Yes it was Fanny but she didn't like being called Fanny. She called herself Frances or Francesca. Her middle name was Lieberman, and her last name was Eichenbaum so the family name became Oaks as a translation. All her sons called themselves Oaks. [The rent book] gives her nationality as Austrian and part of the Hapsburg empire. This was in 1875 when Poland [as an independent entity] didn't exist – it was part of Austria.

My grandfather died before I was born. They moved around a lot. I don't know whether he had trouble of some kind, though they did have a bit of luck in their history. He decided to move back to live in Poland. My grandparents left their children in the care of an uncle who was unkind to the children, and in fact two of the children, the two older ones – one being the son whose wedding photo you saw – he and his sister went on a long walk to the British Consulate somewhere and managed to get them out, which was very lucky.

CP: [Looking at the rent book] I can see your grandmother was in Glasgow in 1932 and moved to Brick Lane in 1937.

RT: I remember her talking about Brick Lane.

CP: I wonder at what point they stopped being known as aliens, if they were ever not known as aliens.

RT: They've dropped the word aliens. I remember there used to be an aliens committee on the Board of Deputies [of British Jews].

CP: I wonder if she ever became a British citizen.

RT: I don't suppose she ever did. And of course by the time the war ended, it was only four years before she died so I don't suppose they ever bothered. I haven't really thought about that. But you don't think of your grandparents as belonging necessarily to certain group; they're just your grandparents.

CP: This is when she moved to St Albans – Dickens Close, Union Lane, St Albans.

RT: That's right. Union Lane was actually Normandy Road. They renamed it after the war. And that's where I saw my German soldier. I was a little boy and it was [while I was] going to school. It would have been a very bad winter just after the war and having been brought up as a British boy, regardless of being Jewish, to hate Germans – because we had a war on with Germany – and walking up to school on a very snowy road there were German prisoners of war who were clearing the snow and this very young man wanted to smile at me, because I was a small boy, and I wanted to smile back but I knew that I shouldn't because he was German. I didn't feel alarmed, just felt sorry that I couldn't respond as I normally would. I knew he was harmless – he was just a young man doing a job shovelling snow. Circumstances put him there and put me in a different place. I never knew about the Holocaust until after the war. I knew it had happened but it wasn't until the Eichmann trial

in Israel in 1961 – and I followed that, in the [Daily] Telegraph very closely - that I read of the full horror what had happened.

CP: People didn't really talk about it, did they, before that?

RT: I don't think people realised. I mean, all my family – and there was a large family in Europe – all disappeared. I think one time one of them appealed for help, but nobody took anything seriously. It was terrible. I mean even now you get - on Holocaust Memorial Day meetings - you get, certainly among non-Jews, they can't take in what happened. It was so awful.

CP: [Looking at photos, going back to your grandmother it looks like she had to register regularly as an alien]. 1939, 1940, 1943.

RT: [When I was growing up] people didn't talk much about the outside world. They talked about family, and not about formalities – at least my parents didn't anyway. [Reading from the registration certificate] 'You must produce this certificate if required to do so by any Police Office, Immigration Office, or member of His Majesty's forces acting in the course of his duty.' Notice 'his' duty!

CP: What would you like to talk about next? I see you have a tiny book. What a lovely thing to have.

RT: This is a tiny Yom Kippur [machzor](#) that belonged to my brother. I inherited it. Books are very important to me. This is a siddur from my barmitzvah in 1951.

CP: Inside it says 'St Albans Synagogue, Oswald Road, St Albans, October 1951.'

RT: It mentions D. Geller. His son, Seymour, was one of the Jewish boys I was with at school. P. Ratner [is also in the book]. He started up the jewellery business in St Albans, in London Road. His sons or his grandsons...Philip had a small shop.

CP: I don't think that ended up too well...

RT: One of his grandsons unfortunately said that the diamonds were paste or something and of course [that ruined the business].

This is a traditional siddur. I've got two of those because the other one was my very first Hebrew classes present. This one isn't inscribed. This copy of The Last of the Mohicans was a present from Garden Fields School when I left. I opened it and I didn't like it and I haven't read it since.

This is a wonderful book. It has nothing to do with the synagogue. It was an early present bought for me by my parents during the war. I was always keen on the natural world. [This is a mini encyclopaedia]. I was a very studious little boy.

CP: What did you do as a career?

RT: I qualified as a solicitor, and actually I'm still doing legal work now. In fact I saw a client this morning. We were doing will-writing.

CP: Is that something you've always done?

RT: Yes, that's part of it. The book is beautifully presented [with lovely illustrations, really colourful].

CP: Is [the natural world] something you're still interested in?

RT: Yes - I'm interested in so many things. I was quite distressed [recently] when I went to a family [barmitzvah](#) party where there was a quiz during the dinner. There was a question relating to the German language. I knew the answer but there was a chap sitting opposite me who said 'why would I want to know German for? I've left school now.' And I thought that was a curious approach - to think that you forget what you've learned once you leave school.

When I first had [the nature book] I just looked at the pictures; it was only later that I could do the words because it's quite a serious book. I was quite happily able to read before pre-school age.

CP: What kind of things do you like to read now? Or is your reading material varied?

RT: At the moment I am dutifully reading Chekhov plays. I am trying to read The Seagull and I never liked it [when I was younger].

RT: [Looking at a certificate] This is a certificate which I received from the United Synagogue to show that I, Roderick Taylor, am qualified [by the] London Board of Jewish Religious Education to [inaudible] read [Haftorah](#). I had to sit down with the teacher for various tests about the history and the ritual and obviously I impressed him enough for him to sign the certificate. This is the [chumash](#) that Mr Glassman, the teacher, gave me as a present for my barmitzvah. It [started to] fall apart a bit and very kindly Sarah Grant's mother offered to stitch it together and I'm very grateful for that. Mr Glassman lived in St Albans and he used to take some of the services. [He was a] very devout man. His daily employment was as a [shochet](#). We never knew his first name and one of the rabbis at the time, Rabbi Chetowitz, told me [he was only known] as Mr Glassman. [He was] a private man. I went to [cheder](#), I was a pupil and was a teacher there too, a long time ago, in the 1940s or 50s. Cheder was in Alma Road school. The cheder itself had nothing to do with [learning for my] barmitzvah, [the children] had private lessons which was much better, one-to-one. My [parsha](#) was [Bereshit](#). I still remember how to sing it and do it every year [at shul]. I also read other haftorah at times. A few years after my barmitzvah, when I was about seventeen or eighteen, the rabbi asked me to do a haftorah and I hadn't done it [for so long that] he taught me the notation, because once you know the notation, you're ok. [For my barmitzvah] I did the last portion [and the haftorah].

This is Lewis Carroll book from my aunt, one of the daughters of my grandmother. She gave me this book when I was quite a small boy. I have a lot of books! It was a casual sort of gift really.

CP: I imagine when you pick it up it takes you back to your childhood.

RT: Yes, it was quite emotive looking at that evolution book with the lovely pictures you mentioned a few moments ago. [It's interesting to see in] what good condition it was. I read a lot of history and biographies.

[Looking at a photo] This is a photo from my wedding to Jennifer. [Also shows CP a menu/order of service from their wedding.]

CP: Who are all the people making toasts [listed on the order of service]?

RT: That was an elderly cousin of Jennifer's, Joseph Cowan. John Horton was a well-respected and loved doctor in St Albans for many years – he died a few years ago - Arthur Stiles, one of Jennifer's uncles, her mother's brother, Ian Alexander was my best man - I grew up with him in St Albans - I'm no longer in touch with him. He moved to New Zealand. Last time I saw him was many years ago when he came over because his father died. That's my father. Dr Harry Levy was a very close friend of Jennifer's family, a minister at the synagogue in West Hampstead. Sidney Cash was my father-in-law. Reverend Korn was the chazzan at our wedding, a young man who very sadly died not long afterwards. He had a small family. It was very sad. The dinner as you can see is very vast!

CP: Meat omelettes, braised tongue, vol-au-vent...it's very impressive, quite a feast. Where was the reception?

RT: The reception was at the Brent Bridge Hotel. The wedding was at the Raleigh Close synagogue in Hendon. The World Cup was that year [1966]. We were just married. We had already moved into our home when the World Cup was on.

CP: There's an inscription: 'To Mum & Dad with all our love, Jennifer and Ricky'. And this photograph was also taken at your wedding? That's your mother and that's your father. Your parents look happy.

[Interview ends]