



### SAMS Roots Interview Transcript

Stanley Morris interviewed by Caroline Pearce, transcribed by Caroline Pearce

20<sup>th</sup> January 2016 at Stanley's home in St Albans

**Recording length: 1hr 03 mins**

CP: I'd like to start by asking you about SAMS and what brought you to SAMS. I don't know how long you've been a member.

SM: It's many years now. We came to St Albans about eighteen years ago for a variety of reasons and after a year or whatever I thought I ought to join a shul. I'd never joined a shul over the years. My parents ended up in Edgware down the road and on Yomtovim I'd go with Dad and find a seat somewhere.

CP: Was that orthodox?

SM: Yes, that's the Yeshurun shul, quite orthodox. Not that it necessarily contains a lot of orthodox people. I didn't want to join [Yeshurun] because I had certain problems with it. Anyway, we came here and I think I looked up the Yellow Pages or something like that looking for a shul. And I came across the United [Synagogue] shul which is in the centre of town here. And you wouldn't believe the difficulty I had in trying to join. When I went along [to a service] on a Shabbas there were only eight or nine [people], rarely a minyan, and I couldn't get into conversation with one. You'd have thought they'd have wanted to pin me to the wall – here's a middle-aged man wanting to join our shul [who could help make up a minyan]...they only had services once every three or four weeks. It was as though I wasn't there. Then I persevered with that, and I tried to join, and they never replied to me. And this went on for a year. I got in touch with the United [Synagogue] head office and nothing happened. Eventually a guy rang me up and said 'Mr Morris?' and I said 'yes', [and he said] 'I understand you want to join our shul'. And I held back for a moment, because I had something to tell him. And I said 'you were a long time in getting back to me', and he said 'well I'm very busy man'. And I said 'but you're the secretary of the shul, you just told me'. This sort of nonsense went on for a while, then I said to him 'well it's a bit too late now. I've joined SAMS'. And SAMS was an entirely new vision on life. It was remarkable. It was wonderful. Friendly, outgoing, welcoming, non-judgmental...I have a non-Jewish wife, as you probably know, and she might as well have been the chazan.

CP: So she was very welcome...

SM: She was very [welcomed]. It hasn't been in my experience to meet a lot of Jewish people who are welcoming and not difficult I suppose [in relation to an inter-faith couple]. I lived in Liverpool for some years and there was much the same difficulty if ...I'm trying to think of a short way of telling this story. Anyway I got out of the car one day, I'd been working and I was in my jeans or whatever it was and I thought – I lived next door to the shul, and this was a Friday night – and I thought I'll go in

[to the service dressed] like this. And on the steps going in someone said to me ‘is this how you go to shul?’ with that irritating Jewish intonation. I’d been in Israel for a year, a long time before that, and it was a revelation to see people coming in off the fields, literally, and going into the shul for a Friday night service. Anyway, so SAMS was very welcoming, far beyond anything I had ever expected and nobody made a fuss about being too busy! And that’s about the short[est] story really.

CP: Did you ever find out what it was about the United synagogue [that prevented you joining]? Was it because your wife wasn’t Jewish?

SM: They didn’t know. We never even got into a conversation.

CP: You didn’t get that far...

SM: I didn’t fill in a form or anything. [I made] a number of phone calls, I got nothing, until one day this guy rings and says ‘I’m a very busy man’. I said to him actually – because he rang me back after I told him I’d joined SAMS – and I said ‘what do you for a living?’ And he said ‘I’m an accountant’, and I said ‘well you don’t this work, you give it to the girls to do, It’s a standard form you send out and it’s all sealed and done within three weeks surely’. So I thought if that’s the attitude it’s not a place for me to be anyway’. Can you imagine, a newcomer to the shul that’s got seven or eight people, and I’m standing there like a lemon...

CP: You’d think they’d have pounced on you, like you said.

SM: Would you not?

CP: That’s very off-putting to start with. So it’s good that you found SAMS then...

SM: Yes, it’s wonderful.

CP: A bit of a revelation isn’t it?

SM: Totally. The only time I’ve met anything like it was a chap in Liverpool who was very very frum and his wife was very frum. They were very high [ranking] – he was a judge, she was a magistrate and a doctor and they had all the accoutrements of an affluent family. He was head of the King David School, or chairman...and I was working with youth in those years and his daughters came to the sessions I gave and they would invite me round for Friday night or Saturday lunchtime and I was terrified of doing the wrong thing, not being frum. Not being that immersed in the ways of yiddishkeit really and I tackled this head on one day and I said ‘how do you feel about this? You must know where I come from’, and he said something like, I can’t remember the exact words, [but words to the effect that] ‘everybody is inclusive [sic]’ and that was a concept that simply had not come down to me through the years. As far as I was concerned, Judaism was essentially non-inclusive. At the Yeshurun you couldn’t mention Israel. Israel had nothing to do with the yiddishkeit of the services. And what with the services and Pesach we never spoke about anything else except [for example] how many millimetres away must the bread be, must the dustbin be from the ...really, that’s not a joke. It must be seven metres, and three centimetres...what is going on here? What is this about? God won’t accept me if my dustbin is two centimetres [adrift]? And so on, and so forth.

CP: It doesn't sound like it wasn't in the spirit of Judaism as you wanted it to be, or as a lot of people want it to be really...it's very far removed from reality.

SM: It was disastrous. And when my dad died... my dad had been going to shul since he retired which must have been some twenty years, every Saturday morning, every yomtov. When he died, he died on a Saturday morning which meant I had to leave it til Sunday to [make arrangements], it was almost impossible to find someone on [Yeshurun's] reception, phones, who wanted to deal with this. They wouldn't bring over any chairs [for the mourners], so there am I on a cold winter's night schlepping chairs by myself...this was Saturday night of course, after Shabbat went out. The rabbi wasn't interested. He gave me a number to ring. It was heartbreaking. I was in tears. I didn't know what to do entirely. When it came to the service, nobody [from my father's synagogue] turned up. And luckily my cousin Richard - may his memory be blessed - was there and he took the phone from me and he dealt with it quietly. I was screaming 'why is there nobody here?' and so on. And the rabbi [had said to me] 'that's not what I do'. And so eventually somebody came to take the service. There are lots of little stories attached to that, which I won't bore you with.

CP: That sounds very painful.

SM: When it came to – I can't remember if it was my mother's or my father's – stonesetting, I phoned him up, the rabbi, and I said 'I presume you'll be there to take the service', and he went on in a way where I shouted at him and put the phone down. [He said] 'I have this problem...if someone picks me up then I'll go, if not, too bad!' I won't use the language I [used to the rabbi]. 'I said but this is a parishioner of yours! We've been coming here since 1958. It's your job to go, whether you're picked up or not. You find a way. What do you want? Is it the taxi money?' I said. 'Is that what you're angling for?' I didn't wait for an answer. I just put the phone down.

CP: That sounds awful.

SM: It was absolutely awful. Imagine the difference I felt when we were invited – I can't remember who it was now – to some sort of meeting for people who were prospective members, at someone's house. I can't remember who it was. What a difference in attitude. And I went to see the young rabbi at the time to talk about Irene and was rather apprehensive of what might be the result.

CP: Was that Paul Glanz?

SM: That was Paul, that's right. For all his difficulties, I said to him 'Irene's not Jewish', and he said 'yes'. It reminded me of being in New York some years back where a very similar thing happened. We were on the street with this guy's friends, they weren't Jewish, and for some reason I said 'actually I'm Jewish. And he said 'why are you telling me this?' In England you tell someone you're Jewish they say 'Really? Are your parents still in Israel?' No, no we don't come from Israel.

CP: Or they say 'how long have you been in this country?'

SM: That's right. [And they say] 'I bet you like the heat, don't you?'

CP: In New York Judaism means something completely different [from the UK]. It's normal, for want of a better word.

SM: Yes, it is. [The attitude is] 'Why are you bothering to tell me this?'

CP: [SAMS] is a wonderful community...

SM: I think it's incredible, absolutely incredible. The outreach that goes on. I don't do very much, I don't know too much about it anymore. I'm just staggered by it. I mean, this interview...

CP: You're pleased to be doing it then...

SM: Well I'm not displeased! It's fine!

CP: It's great for me to be interviewing you and the other people and collecting stories and thoughts and I'm talking to people from very diverse backgrounds. It's absolutely fascinating so to be recording all these stories for future generations, and for the wider community, is a privilege. Ok, well that's SAMS. So we were watching a CD which was about your trip to the Ukraine and trying to find out more about your ancestors and your grandmother particularly. What prompted you to go on the trip? Did [the wish to do so] build up over years, or was it something in particular [that prompted it]?

SM: It was pretty much like I said at the beginning of the disc. I don't know where to come in on this really...my cousin Richard was very conscious of the family, more so than I was, and he'd drawn up charts and tried to find names and who married who, and the whole family tree, and that's when it first came to me. Then gradually over the years I realised that my mother had a lot of stories to tell, and I said on the disc here, I really didn't listen to them as children don't. As soon as a parent says 'When I was a girl...' they turn off, 'yes, Mum, Dad, I've heard that a thousand times before'. And so my mother would tell stories that her mother had told her about the family. And the family was quite large. My mother came from [a family of] ten or eleven children, and her mother came from another dozen. Then there was my grandfather on my father's side...so an enormous amount [of family stories]. And I felt terrible about this so I rang up cousins and they were no better off.

CP: You must have had a lot of cousins with huge families on each side...

SM: Yes. We're all getting old now. I'll tell you something else, where it all really started. It was thirty-five or forty years ago. I don't know what you know...I worked in Liverpool for Harold House, Jewish Youth and Community Centre. I don't know if that means anything down here in London. There were a lot of Jewish people in Liverpool, not so many now – they're closing shuls one after the other – and I was a drama teacher and an actor, and I had married a Jewish girl who came from Liverpool and one day there was an advert, they wanted a drama teacher in Liverpool and one thing led to another and I got the job. While I was there, there was beginning to be a consciousness of 'are we a Jewish youth centre, or are we a centre for Jewish people?' And the nicety of that was lost on all of us. Are we a Jewish youth community centre? If so that means we can have no activities on Shabbas, there's kashrus, do we install various activities on the yomtovim, [we'd need ]to look for someone to come in and put a Jewish element into [youth programming], or if we're just a centre for Jewish people then that's what it is, and how do you get rid of non-Jewish people who want to come, which that implies? At that time, a young man and his wife who came to Liverpool as a shaliach. His brief was to instil some awareness of Israel, Jewish culture via Israeli culture, and again,

that's a very gentle differentiation here. And a very personable man, who looked about thirty years older than his twenty-one years, very bright, very knowledgeable in all forms of yiddishkeit and Israeli culture and, very unusually for an Israeli, smiled and laughed. I don't know if that has any bearing on what you know. And we got on like a house on fire, and during these discussions we organised a trip to Israel, the first of its kind, even though the centre had been going for some years, and Zevi – that's his name, and his wife Esti – did the legwork in getting thirty or fifty kids, I can't remember, on the plane and I went as another leader, and there was another leader and it was an eye opener for all of us especially for me because we went to visit Zevi's family in a little town called Ness Ziona. It was one of five 'starter' towns in the movement from the 1880s and thereby has some historic importance and Zevi's father was a big noise – he had olive groves and orange groves – and he was a major in the army which rescued the town at the bottom of the peninsula – [the name] will come to me – he was very instrumental in recapturing the town from the Egyptians. He was a bit of a national hero. He became Chairman of the Citrus Board and he came to work in England which accounts for his children speaking beautiful English.

CP: This was your first visit to Israel?

SM: This was my first visit to Israel and we went to look at a sleepy town in the sun, with no paving, and [inaudible] for houses, and they started to talk and I listened, about the whole business of the beginning of Israel, and how Zevi's grandfather walked from Odessa to Israel and these sort of stories. Incredible. And it touched me very much. And we came back, and I can't remember why it started, but we wanted – and when I say 'we' I don't remember if it was me, or Zevi or everybody – we were going to do some sort of dramatic thing about the beginning of modern day Israel from the 1880s.

CP: Do you mean a production of sorts?

SM: A production, a drama production, performed by the kids. We were going to write it all, and we did. And we put on a show, it was called 'The Ness Ziona Kid' and I had meant to dig out some stuff for you but I haven't done that – but I could do that as a 'tailpiece'. And we wrote the music and we wrote the storyline and we wrote the lyrics...I say 'we' [meaning] the older kids, the younger kids, whoever wanted to participate in some way and the whole of the centre at Harold House contributed in some way to it. So we built our own scenery.

CP: It sounds wonderful to have so much input, a real community, and fostering an even greater sense of community through creativity...

SM: Absolutely. I look back on it with some pride now. At the time of course it was a graft.

CP: I'm sure it wasn't easy.

SM: We had the luxury of a man called Maurice Shifrin who sold up his business about 1968 or 1969 or so, and he donated £35,000 a year for seven years for the creation of music and drama. £35,000 a year doesn't sound much now. Forty years ago it was an unimaginable luxury.

CP: This was all to go to the centre?

SM: Yes. It meant from £35,000 they could pay my salary easily – I think it was £20 per week or something like that, it was good pay in those years...

CP: And that was your full-time job?

SM: That was my full-time job. It was a miracle, because I wasn't having to leave another job and come in the evening and try and piece it together, I had all day and although looking back some people might say 'what did you do all day?' I can tell you I could have done with another day.

CP: Yes, especially when you're organising a production.

SM: That's right. And so we found other people to help, some teachers who came in and did this and that, we built up a part-time and full-time staff for music and all the rest of it and we wrote the show and we called it 'The Ness Ziona Kid' and we wrote a story, and the story was basically about a man of about Zevi's age, about twenty, who decides there's no future in Israel and he goes off to America, to Arizona where he makes his pile. And he decides to come home one day, back to Israel, and he's overcome by emotion etc. etc., and he stays when he comes back. And [in] the opening number we have a plane flying in and we have a song [sings]: 'I am the Ness Ziona Kid, let me tell you what I did'. I'll find a better recording for you...and we worked out hearts out on that. I think at the time we felt it was a shame that we couldn't get anybody in London to come up to see it. [They] spoke about it being a concert, and we said 'it's not a concert, it's a full-fledged musical. And we got a band [together with] the kids and we played music [inaudible]. Making it all happen was a young man called Maurice Chernick who played at the [SAMS 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party] three weeks ago. I wasn't able to go. A very talented man – a boy at the time – he wrote a lot of the music, and he got together a lot of the kids from the community and forged them into some sort of band. And we found a man who used to be the drummer in Ted Heath's orchestra in the 1950s and he came in to do the drums which was a great asset because he kept time, an important thing for a drummer.

CP: Did you have a chance to see Morris [when he was in St Albans]?

SM: No, I made contact with him from time to time anyway so that [wouldn't have been] a first. After I left the Shifrin Foundation in Harold House, I went back to acting in the theatre and actually he came to work with me for several years as a music director. Then he took up teaching. Now I am in touch with him and he's a wonderful guy, extremely talented and a very lovable man. And so to answer your question at long last, the seeds were more than sown for my interest in the 1880s and 1900s and I started to become aware of a lot of things I hadn't been aware of before which I mention on this DVD, like the stories of Shalom Aleichem and a lot of other writers of the time.

CP: Do you know how your grandmother made the journey from Ukraine?

SM: No, we know so little which – I'll use a Yiddish word my mother used to use: kranks me, or annoys me so much...they knew very little, because they as children also didn't want to know about foreignness because kids don't. They don't want their mother to speak Yiddish, they wanted their mother to speak English. And apparently my grandmother spoke very little English. My grandfather spoke virtually no English. He seemed to work all his life from half past five in the morning until going to bed at night. He was a tailor, he was a buttonhole maker and I have his machine outside.

CP: Really? That would make a great photograph to add to the story.

SM: Apparently he would come home at seven o'clock from the office where he worked, in the factory or whatever it was, a workroom. He'd have something to eat, and take out his machine and do some private work. He'd get up at half past five in the morning, go off to shul for shacharis every day.

CP: So he was very observant...

SM: Yes he was, but he didn't seem to pass it on. My feeling is that the children, my mother's age, just enjoyed themselves and the new-found liberty of the East End of London...

CP: And they wanted to become assimilated and integrated into [British] society?

SM: I think so. Because my grandfather had nothing much to do with children, I think he was of that sort of mentality at that age...my mother used to say things with sadness like that she'd come home on Friday night and went out and didn't stay for the Shabbas meal and went out again. She says it with sadness [as if she was letting] down her mother. But the grandparents didn't seem to exert much pressure on them, but perhaps they were just glad of the money coming in. As soon as the boys got old enough, I suppose at fourteen, they went out to work. I think the eldest two were boys so they could get work more easily and were better paid than the girls.

CP: I think it was different for them as immigrants. I mean my own grandfather was from Russia and he spoke with a cut glass English accent. He grew up in the East End and yet he had this beautiful accent and we think that he must have had elocution lessons to try and fit in. He was also a tailor. But for him, for example, going to shul – he wasn't religious as such but he was a regular shul-goer because of the community because that was important to him...

SM: And safety. I think that people like me have made great mistakes in thinking that the Jews who fled Russia were only too pleased to set up a Jewish community here in the diaspora. I begin to think it's quite the reverse – that having fled because they were Jewish they wanted to shed all this 'nonsense' and not be the specially chosen people, and just get on with life and live it because what Judaism had meant – penury, starvation – and the more I read, the more horrified I was at the life of so many Jewish people in the shtetls. Also what I learnt was that life wasn't contained just in the villages, that there was actually a very prominent mercantile life going on in Russia which I didn't realise. I mean there was the story of a man - I think Shalom Aleichem tells it – who dealt with Japan, import and export in the 1880s. It puts a different slant on the story that they were underprivileged, stuffed in the corner that they were already mixing fairly quickly. And of course the socialist movement absorbed a lot of intellectual Jewish men. So I think, like America, when the children arrived in safety I would imagine the grandparents, and their parents as well, said 'go, go. Just live a life, don't be like us, having to walk all the way from Warsaw...'

On my other side my dad's father walked all the way from somewhere in Poland, but Dad never knew where from [to England]. It was very interesting because he got off the boat somewhere thinking it was New York. It wasn't New York so he found another boat and went to New York, didn't like it and came back. My dad's family were even less interested [in maintaining Jewish practice]. They were just glad I think not to be subservient, not to have the Cossacks coming round their door,

to be free and to do what they wanted and I get the feeling that a lot of Jewishness was seen as the anchor to wear around your neck.

CP: And I think that culturally, for my grandfather for example, it was more of the cultural side of it that he was connected to, not the religious side at all. Because those things like the rituals, for some people they represent their history, their connection with their ancestors and so on.

SM: My father saw all that through a jaundiced eye because against a lot of opinion, apparently, drank, didn't work very much, and played Clobiosh whatever that is, rummy or something, during the season when they were out of work, which is about six months of the year, they didn't try to find anything. So they had not a lot of respect for the 'old man', as they called him. My dad's mother was built of stone and iron. She was ninety-three when she appeared one day at our door, having taken three buses across London. When I said 'Mum's out', she said 'well I'll go away and come back another time then'!

CP: Moving on to you, what interested you in acting and how did you come to make that your profession, as well as education?

SM: I will answer your question, I will give you a little pamphlet I wrote recently so you can read up about the detail of it. It was an act of some unbelievability really. I didn't do very well in my A levels and I didn't know what to do with myself. I was supposed to become – my mother was supposed to tell me to become a pharmacist, or to make me become a pharmacist – I didn't even know what the word meant, really. And I spent three years in a wilderness, an unhappy wilderness. The family got me various jobs in the schmutter business or something or other like that and none of [the jobs suited me]. To a large extent I was a stupid youth. I thought of living the life of a poet in the attic and that sort of nonsense. And I didn't have parents who were very good at guiding me, if at all. My dad was thrilled that I went to grammar school, but he didn't know what happened at grammar school...

CP: Because his education had stopped when he was very young...

SM: He was fourteen. And with his stories of walking to work for three hours and walking home.

CP: It was a different world by the time you were a teenager...

SM: It was a world he could never imagine being. Just to digress, he talks about saving a penny by not going on the bus from Notting Hill to the East End where he had work, and saving that penny [by walking] for an hour and a half there and [by walking for] an hour and a half back, so he'd save tuppence.

CP: It was substantial to him...

SM: It was something and they had nothing. Notting Hill was nothing like it is in the modern day on television or film. It was a run-down dangerous place that's only recently been gentrified. And [my dad] would tell stories about how they would steal from the barrows at Portobello Road market and various other criminalities which were a joke. One lovely [story], his elder brother Dave used to work in a shoe shop and at a given hour he would go into the office and throw a pair of shoes over the

wall which Dad and others would catch. They were very poor. So his world in 1960 was as different as it could be in 1920 or so.

CP: He must really have felt like a fish out of water, having seen so many big changes.

SM: By this time we were living in a nice flat in Edgware. He spoke about there just being two bedrooms [when he was growing up in Notting Hill], one for the boys and one for the girls – I don't know where the parents slept - and there was an oven on the first floor of three floors for all the families [in the building] to cook on, same with the water barrel. [There was] no bath, no toilet [except] an outside toilet. Not the Notting Hill that we know today.

CP: So Edgware was different...

SM: Dad loved Edgware. We came up here and I can remember him – it was spring – and he wandered about the streets...Edgware was a lot prettier in the 1960s than it is today, and the blossom in springtime is magical up and down those streets. And the little park across from where we lived, Stonegrove Park, he loved it. He wasn't a real businessman but he made enough money to get by, and I'm not a real businessman either. Dad glorified in being a master craftsman in the fur trade. He'd make coats for Harrods [inaudible]. So in a sense I wasn't very different, I became a craftsman in another area. So why theatre? It's a long long story and I'll try to make it shorter, and I've written it all up but basically I didn't know what to do with my life when I was twenty-one. Other people were doing various things and leaving me behind and I decided I had to apply to university, I had to get some education and when I got to the library to ask for details on how to do it I was told I was too late for that year, I had to apply for the following year [and I thought] I can't bear another year of doing this, that and the other. My school didn't help. It was nothing like today's schools. There was a careers meeting with the chemistry teacher in his laboratory, a tiny little place to which Mum came and he asked me what I wanted to do and Mum said 'he wants to become a pharmacist' and I didn't know what a pharmacist was, and that was that really. And they could see how terrible I was, I had a lack of interest in it all so no, there was no support, there was nothing.

CP: Difficult to get motivated without help or support to help you find your direction.

SM: Yes, it's another world. All my friends [went to university]. I met a group of guys whose parents were as different as chalk and cheese and one of the families called Vergoda, his brother was Mr British Lion Films – don't ask me how that happened, [they had] a butler who opened the door – and Martin, the son, who was in the same block of flats – we met by accident one day and I appreciated him and the family - and they [took] me to see opening nights of films in the West End and to the theatre, and Martin was interested in classical music [and from him] I learned to listen to classical music and I studied painting but I was a yob really, I was Elvis Presley or Lonnie Donegan, I didn't really quite fit. And I met a few other people, layabouts and ne'er-do-wells who got chucked out. One became head of regional social workers – a layabout lout! – another one became Professor of Industrial Psychology at Bristol University, so they were terrible layabout lads. The point I'm making is that they had no help either. They were derided by the staff as being wastes of space. Being Professor of Industrial Psychology isn't a bad attainment in life, is it?! [The lack of support] was dreadful, but we just got on with it and found our own way.

CP: You had a creative spark...

SM: Yes I did. I know at school I loved English where I could read aloud, the parts, when lots more people couldn't do the same. My voice isn't as strong as it was because of the P[arkinson's] D[isease]. We had voice training at drama school. I used to write a lot of poetry, like a lot of kids did. I was very interested in literature. Funnily enough I'm just rereading Dostoyevsky's book which I last read about forty or fifty years ago. I've tried like everybody else to read War and Peace but I can't remember the three names for fifty characters. I've read most of the other Russian novels but there you go – I'd never have thought of it but Russian novels are very much a part of my psyche.

CP: Connected to your history...so, you enjoyed reading aloud in class and you said you like literature. How did that translate into...how did you decide that drama school was the place for you?

SM: What happened was, at the library, you're going to have to read my twenty-nine pages to get the full version of it. But basically – a couple of strands really. I had a job in the West End, in Golden Square, as a sort of trainee-salesman in men's materials which was got for me by the family. And I suffered from terrible boredom – I think it was 1963, you're not old enough to remember it – but it froze from early December until Easter. The ice and snow just didn't go from the streets. Dad used to drop me off somewhere in the West End and I'd walk the fifteen minutes to Golden Square up into this warehouse which had very little heating. Do you know the play of the film *Billy Liar*? I was *Billy Liar*, although I didn't know it at the time because the film hadn't come out. And I would act the fool. I would jump up over the stage, and I would improvise characters and anecdotes to the two or three people sitting there by way of letting off steam and frustration. And they probably all thought I was a jolly fellow – the hurt inside ran very deep. So I'd done a fair amount of stand-up comedy to the two or three other workers there and then one day after the snow fell I jacked it all in and went to Hendon Central Library and, as God is my witness, the book of addresses fell open on the desk [on the page where it said] 'Drama Schools – Teaching Drama [and Comedies]', I can't remember exactly.

CP: It sounds like that had your name written all over it.

SM: It had my name written all over it. I am pausing because I'm thinking of the horror that I must have produced when I went for auditions. I'd never done anything in my life. One other thing I must tell you which is interesting – I belonged to a Jewish youth group called – was it *Bnei Akivah*? No, it wasn't Bnei Akivah...in Edgware and Hendon and Golders Green there was a group of young...

CP: Was it Maccabi? Habonim?

SM: It wasn't Maccabi...it was none of the regular ones. This was a group that met on a Sunday evening, intellectual young Jewish men and women [aged] seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, and they planned – eventually we planned – activities for Sunday nights which might mean going to a concert, a classical concert, which might mean a quiz, which might mean a social or anything that anyone could invent we'd have on Sunday evenings. If I look back at it now, we were a bunch of pretentious gits, and we were a load of pretentious gits.

CP: You were following your interests though.

SM: They put on a play once a year to raise money for charity, and I was probably sixteen, seventeen at the time, maybe eighteen and I wasn't in the play – they cast it without me – but what they did, they hired in stage scenery, they hired in everything...I had the job of being chief seller of advertising space so I went round Hendon, Edgware, asking to speak to the manager – 'would you donate a fiver and get your name in the programme?' which was very useful work for me to understand other things about people and this is what happened one day. The girl who was directing the play, whatever it was, wasn't available on a Sunday evening and a couple of actors got on with it by themselves and at the end of it they said 'how was that?' expecting everyone to say 'well done, brilliant' and lo and behold, Stanley Morris had the temerity to approach this older man who was all of twenty-one, three years older than me, and say something to the fact that it wasn't convincing and he let me go on without hitting me. And I remember saying to him 'have you ever been a failure at anything?' and he said 'no', and I said 'I think that's the problem. You don't understand the problem that this character you're acting has'. I don't remember what it was but obviously the guy was playing it full-frontal, American, chatting up the girl or whatever it was supposed to be.

CP: He didn't really understand the character or his motivations.

SM: That's right, absolutely. And I sensed that he needed to understand that not everybody was successful or rode that wave of success. I, who'd had three years of not being accepted by any of the girls, it sort of kills you at that age. If I'd been a girl of that age I wouldn't have had anything to do with me either!

CP: You also didn't have any direction in terms of a career so you probably felt rather lost.

SM: Totally, totally. The point of the story is that I did exactly what Dostoyevsky, the great drama guru had said, and I hadn't read ...is that who I mean?

CP: Do you mean...it begins with S...

SM: Stanislavsky – this is the fundamental teaching of Stanislavsky, resort to what you know about yourself and see where it corresponds anywhere along the line with the character you're playing. I think he cites, if you're supposed to be grieving for your mother or something, have you ever grieved? No. Well what about a pet? Yes, I've cried for a pet, ok so bring that feeling to [acting] the death of your mother. I wouldn't have known about Stanislavsky. In 1958 nobody knew about Stanislavsky.

CP: But you knew that inherently, what was missing.

SM: What was going on?

CP: You had a natural affinity with acting I suppose, with characters and personalities and understanding, and empathy.

SM: I was astounded that it came out like that. I just can't believe it.

CP: And you were very young...

SM: Very young. Nonetheless I was not promoted and I got my position at the back of the hall.

CP: They should have made you the lead character after that!

SM: So I went to the New College of Speech and Drama which was supposed to be partly teaching but never really got off the ground and my boast is that Helen Mirren went to it, amongst some other big names, and my soul was saved – is that the expression? – and I found a direction in life, and I'm eternally grateful to God for letting this book drop [open at that page] if it had dropped somewhere else...

CP: It's amazing, sometimes we can pinpoint a certain moment in life when things just changed in a way that you couldn't have predicted, so that was your big moment of revelation...

SM: And I say to all kids who are eighteen or so who don't know what to do, I tell the parents 'don't worry, let him go and do what he wants to do and not what he doesn't want to do. Something will happen'. So then we kick off into a whole new period [of my life].

CP: And so you were acting and later teaching?

SM: Yes. I never thought about acting being something to do with the West End. Socialistic principles and thought come very strongly to mind. With this gang of girls and boys I told you about earlier we would sit up the night through talking about socialism and where the world was going, as one does, and so I had, I was actually convinced that socialism was next on the agenda with the very obvious thinking that [inaudible] so yeah. I came into teaching because we were travelling around Norfolk and somebody said the local school is in need of a drama teacher blah blah blah...so I said I'll do two days a week or two half days a week because we had no money.

CP: Were you living in Norfolk or were you sort of bumbling around?

SM: I belonged to a theatre called The Mill Theatre which did plays and toured around. It was fringe theatre if you like. Socialism...to say you weren't a socialist in 1966 was like putting your head into a noose to be hanged. Everybody was a socialist. Nobody thought about conservatism or Toryism and it's all about – for people on the extreme left you're talking about Soviets – and it got very virulent with Vanessa Redgrave – but it was also all about Joan Littlewood, if you know what I mean, a socialist. She did Oliver! based at that point in the East End of London. It was all about the workers...

CP: And the conditions and the treatment...

SM: That's exactly right. The left was right over here from being centre left to being extreme left. People on the extreme left were very difficult to get on with. Almost everybody did shows about the working class. Even if some people thought it wasn't, it was. At that point I had been married and Sally made a substantial living by being an itinerant hairdresser so the chance of earning some extra dosh on a Wednesday morning ...so eventually I became head of the English and drama department.

CP: And this is at the school in Norfolk?

SM: [Nods] Not like today!

CP: But you were obviously able to develop your skills and use them to impart your knowledge to others, to kids.

SM: Yes, that's right that they loved me and I was grateful for the money!

CP: Did you enjoy the job as well though, did you like teaching, did you find it satisfying?

SM: No, not really.

CP: Would you rather have been acting?

SM: I'd rather have been directing.

CP: Did you ever get an opportunity to do that? In Liverpool?

SM: Yes I did, in Liverpool. It's difficult to explain because it was sometimes this and sometimes that but I was the only person on the staff who recognised the importance of the nativity play! Somewhere in my second or third year there at the school I put it to the headmaster that we ought to do something.

CP: Why did you see that as being important?

SM: I think it was the process that was important. It was getting everybody involved so the whole school, three hundred boys, no girls, took part in this show, and I worked out – oh the temerity of it all! – there I am, [aged] twenty-four or something – telling these fifty-five year old teachers how to teach and I produced for them a weekly sheet of paper telling them what to do in drama, what their object was [such as] 'you're going to do this'. And they had ten minutes of registration time per week, no, five minutes of registration time to fulfil my requirements and then at the end of the term I had them all together, they all sat in the round, class 1, class 2, class 3, class 4, class 5, and – gosh, I hadn't thought about it very much until we're talking about it now – but basically they each did a section of the nativity story. And the music teacher, reluctantly I think, played a few tunes and we sang to it. I suppose the staff hated and loathed me, but Mr Blythe, the head teacher, was a man who was used to having his way.

CP: So he was useful?

SM: Oh yes, he was all for the endeavour.

CP: Drama for kids fulfils so many important areas, doesn't it, teamwork, you've got to learn lines...

SM: Confidence...

CP: Reliability, confidence...

SM: If you can stand up and say a few lines to a gathering of two hundred mums and dads and other people, you've got it made. So there was me, a Jewish middle-class boy in the middle of Norfolk, puts on a nativity play involving the whole school!

CP: That must have been quite something, with that many kids as well, that's a lot of people to manage, with the teachers as well...

SM: I was young...where angels fear to tread, a lot to be said for it. Give it to a person who's experienced it would be a disaster.

CP: [You were] somebody new, with so much energy to put into it, you've got a vision, and you're not scared to follow it through. Sounds brilliant!

SM: Head of English and Drama – I can hardly believe it. They hated me, the other teachers. They were still doing work from a book: 'Mary had a little blank'.

CP: How tedious. No wonder the kids loved you. You were ahead of your time.

SM: [inaudible] my face, with a beard.

CP: Do you have any pictures?

SM: Yeah, I'll find you some.

[Interview ends]