



SAMS Roots Interview transcript

Andrew Hougie interviewed by Caroline Pearce, transcribed by Helen Singer

6 April 2016 at Andrew's home in Radlett

Recording length 37m49s

CP: Well thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. I'd like to ask you first Andrew about SAMS and what brought you to SAMS and I notice you've been a member for about 3 years now.

AH: Yes, Debbie's been a member for a lot longer so it's down to Debbie that I'm a member of SAMS.

CP: Oh, ok, so you were a member elsewhere before?

AH: Well we're still members of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Lauderdale Road which is my heritage, the [Sephardi](#) heritage. And we were members in Radlett United as well. So for a while we were members of 3 synagogues but now we're only members of 2!

CP: So what do you like about SAMS?

AH: The warm and friendly community, the being involved, Rabbi Rafi who unfortunately is leaving

CP: Mmm, I know, yes somebody said you were on the committee to help choose a new Rabbi

AH: Yes, that will be some task. We haven't had our first meeting yet so that's a treat in store.

CP: So the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, you know, would you say you split your time evenly, or...

AH: I don't like travelling on Shabbat (Sabbath) so by concession we come to St Albans but one of the reasons we were members of Radlett was that we could walk there. And so, you know, the Spanish and Portuguese is the one we don't go to.

CP: OK, I'm just kind of curious really, I know this is going off the track a bit, how the service is different in a Sephardi shul if that is not too big a question?

AH: Mmm, starting at the beginning on a Shabbat morning service, in an [Ashkenazi](#) community typically, the person leading the prayers will only say the first line and the last line of each paragraph and say the rest to himself. In a Spanish and Portuguese synagogue they say the whole lot. They have...anyway some of the prayers are slightly different, most of them are very similar. People don't stand up for [Kaddish](#) in the Spanish and Portuguese unless you are the mourner. The [Ark](#), [Hagbah and Glilah](#) are sort of done first not at the end so all the display is done at the beginning of the [leyning](#) rather than at the end. SAMS has a different way of doing the [Musaf Amidah](#). A typical Ashkenazi service will have a private Amidah then repetition, we do something slightly different but in the Spanish and Portuguese the leader does the first bit aloud, then there's a private bit and then he finishes off aloud. So I mean, and there are obviously different tunes

CP: Oh yes I was going to say there must be a difference. But you know, along the same lines but with some differences, so it wouldn't be completely unrecognisable to someone from an Ashkenazi community apart from maybe the tunes?

AH: No, not completely unrecognisable, there'll be differences and they'll feel a bit lost occasionally but

CP: So SAMS, as you said, Debbie was already a member and you've had your daughter's batmitzvah and that was with Rabbi Rafi?

AH: Yes, she [leyned](#) from the [Megillah](#) for [Purim](#) because Purim happened to be a Sunday that year so that worked well for us

CP: Nice, and your son is coming up for barmitzvah

AH: Yes, his barmitzvah will be in August this year

CP: By which time we won't have a new Rabbi

AH: Rafi will be there

CP: Oh he will, oh great, very nice, I'm sure you're all pleased about that, I can imagine,

AH: Delighted, yes

CP: Yes, of course cos you were in Australia for his wedding. OK well let's turn to the carpet then!

AH: The carpet....when I was growing up my grandparents lived in a flat in South Kensington, Chelsea / South Kensington and that carpet was on the wall of their dining hall so I've seen that carpet since I was very small. And the story is that my grandfather was a senior civil servant in the Treasury of the Kingdom of Iraq and after the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire had been defeated, there were negotiations on how to deal with the Ottoman debt and my grandfather represented the Kingdom of Iraq at that conference in Turkey. I don't know exactly which town it was in, whether it was Istanbul or Constantinople, but he went there to help negotiate who was going to pay which bits of the Ottoman debt and he saw that carpet in the market and bought it and brought it back to Baghdad and it was one of the relatively few things that my grandfather was able to bring out of Iraq when they had to leave. And when my late grandmother passed away and we were sorting out her affairs, my aunt, my uncle and my mother agreed that I could have the carpet and so it's been on our wall

CP: And it obviously means a lot to you, it's been there your whole life. And so we have here also a framed, well there's two items in a frame, there's a handwritten piece and then there's a typed piece so can you tell me about that?

AH: Yes, my grandmother wrote the handwritten piece in the form of a note to my mother and my uncle. She wrote it on a relatively scrappy piece of paper, and her handwriting is not the greatest so I retyped it to make it legible and it gives the explanation of where the carpet came from. Obviously it must have been of significance emotionally to her as well.

CP: So given that this was one of the few things...did they leave Iraq together, your grandparents?

AH: My uncle, who's about ten years older than my mother, came to England, it must have been just after the War, to study, and then took up a Research Fellowship in Oxford. And then my mother came here, it must have been about 1950, 52, 52 ish, to go to school to do Latin A level or I don't

know whether it was A level, which she needed for University. My uncle was her guardian while she was here and my grandparents came to visit and while they were in the air there was the first Army coup and so my grandmother never went back. Now apparently the Army coup, one of the things that my grandfather did in his, he had a number of roles in the Civil Service and one of the things that he did, was he lectured to the Army cadets, the Officer cadets, and by the time of the coup these Officer cadets were now running the Army, and it was their coup! So he actually felt he could go back relatively safely to sell what he could, bring back what he could, and he came back to London and then never went back again. My grandfather was retired, and I use the passive voice deliberately, when Jews were removed from all public positions in Iraq and so he spent his retirement in Baghdad tending his very nice garden by the banks of the Tigris, and when he came to London they had a flat on the third floor of a block of flats in Chelsea with about ten window boxes, that was his gardening.

CP: Oh really! That's so lovely, he could at least have some flowers, it was probably not what he was used to, but he had some optimism then? Now, so you said your mum was sent over in about 1952, so when did your grandparents come over because there were a number of different things, what was the time frame then? Was it about 1948?

AH: I think it was about 1954, it was later

CP: Oh ok, so before that time he hadn't been, oh because he was born in 1885, right, so he spent the rest of his life here. So was it difficult for them, or for him, in terms of actually, was it physically difficult for him to get away given what with what was going on and the unrest and the treatment of Jews, I mean I was reading that at some points Jews were prevented from leaving

AH: Yes, in 1948, '47, things became very difficult for Jews in Baghdad with the creation of the State of Israel and partly a lot of the Arab countries didn't want the Jews to leave because they would go to Israel and become soldiers and fight against them so they kept them deliberately. By about '50, '51 they'd got a different principle which was that they wanted to send as many as possible so that Israel wouldn't be able to cope with them. And in 1950 or '51 they promulgated a law which said that Iraqi Jews could leave but they had to forfeit their nationality, forfeit their assets and they had a finite amount of time in which to go. There was a consensus which said that out of 130,000 population maybe a few thousand would take it up. And 110,000 Jews took up that offer and were flown to Israel called Operation Ezra and Nehemiah, my grandfather was involved in organising it, but they chose to stay, they didn't want to leave at that stage. I think my grandfather was I think very emotionally connected to the Kingdom of Iraq, he helped set up the Kingdom of Iraq, I think he was the first Director General of the Treasury. He and his brother helped draft the Constitution and I think they felt very emotionally involved in its success even at a time when it was not being nice to Jews

CP: And invested, I mean and I've seen he was awarded an OBE

AH: Yes, I'm not entirely, I've tried to find the citation for that and I haven't been able to and I did write to the Home Office to try and get some information but I didn't get it so I'm not sure whether it was related to the Ottoman debt negotiation or whether it was Bretton Woods which was when Iraq came into the Sterling area. In one or both of those a Jew could not be the Leader of the Delegation, he was the Deputy Leader of the Delegation but the deal was that the Leader of the Delegation wasn't empowered to agree anything unless my grandfather said it was all right!

CP: It's astonishing really, the things that people will do to, you know, control a situation or try to control a situation!

AH: Well they were very involved, I mean my grandmother played bridge with the Ambassador's wives, she was part of that circuit

CP: in Baghdad?

AH: In Baghdad. And when they came over to London they were nobodies.

CP: Well I was going to ask you about that, about the transition, how it was for them when they came here because they would have been in their sixties roughly?

AH: There was quite a big age difference between my grandparents, so my grandfather would have been close to sixty something, yes. I think it would have been very difficult, they were very important respected people in Baghdad, he was one of the lay leaders of the Community, things didn't happen unless, and my uncle Joseph, my great uncle Joseph as well, unless the two of them and a few other people wanted things to happen they didn't happen in the Jewish community. And then their life revolved around quite a big Iraqi community in London. So their life revolved around the Iraqi Jewish community in London but outside the Iraqi Jewish community in London they were nobodies, they were a tired old couple living in a flat in London. (15 mins)

CP: But they, so both their children were here

AH: Yes

CP: And of course then grandchildren, on both sides?

AH: Yes

CP: So roughly, I think you said about 110,000 went to Israel, or something like that so how many came here roughly?

AH: I don't know, I mean Iraqi Jews had been leaving for various reasons for many years, my grandfather on my father's side arrived here in the 1920s so there was already an Iraqi Jewish community in the UK before then. And in the '50s they came not just to Britain, they also went to America, some went to France, I'm not sure that Iraqi Jews went specifically to France, there is a big Sephardi Oriental community in France but I'm not sure whether they were specifically Iraqi.

CP: OK. I was going to ask you as well how your parents met. So your dad's parents they were Iraqi as well so did they meet through the Iraqi community or how did that come about?

AH: Yes. My father's aunt rang him up one day and said you're coming to a bridge dinner this evening. I don't know whether it was this evening and I don't know if this is entirely an exaggeration but I think the story goes that my mother was the only single female at that evening and that's how things worked in Baghdad, the Baghdadi community!

CP: And then you grew up in Cheshire?

AH: Yes, my father was a dental surgeon, he was brought up in Manchester and so my mother had been living in London, my father was living in Manchester and when they got married they moved to Manchester. But they were living in a flat which didn't allow children so when I came along they couldn't stay in that flat and my father had a dental surgery in Whaley Bridge which was on the Cheshire/Derbyshire border so they found a house nearer where he was working in Cheshire, partly because my dad played golf with the headmaster of one of the primary schools in the area and he said if you move there your son can come to my school and that'll be fine. So they moved there and then they built a new school. And it wasn't zoned(?) for us. And so for the first few years of primary

school I didn't go to that school at all. And the other school was terrible for me and so eventually they did move me and I did get into his school. But that's why they picked there.

CP: So it worked out ok in the end.

AH: Yes, it did.

CP: And you and Debbie, how did you two meet?

AH: We met on the internet!

CP: Did you?! JDate?

AH: No, it was something called Matchmaker.com which doesn't exist any more. And it had a number of sub sites, it had Jewish.matchmaker.com and it had London.Matchmaker.com and we were actually both on both of them but we met on the London one rather than the Jewish one. And that's how we met. Debbie made me go through some hoops before she would meet me!

CP: Well, you know, what's a girl to do?!

AH: And then she decided I'd got the voice, when she spoke to me on the phone she decided I'd got a voice like Swiss chocolate which was good enough!

CP: Ok, interesting! So that was probably about 18 years ago?

AH: That was 1998/9. December '98. Yes so that is about 17/18 years ago, yes.

CP: Can we just go back to your grandfather because I was reading about how Jews were persecuted as you were saying, they were stopped from going, then they were encouraged to go. But I was also reading that you know Jews were treated pretty badly not just stopped from working or having the things they were selling reduced in price drastically, they were actually sort of physically arrested, imprisoned, tortured

AH: Yes, I mean there's a phrase which says that the Arabs never treated the Jews as badly or as well as the Christians. So we didn't have Nazism, we had the Farhout? in 1941 where an Arab mob killed a few hundred Jews. But Jews were never equal and the only time that Jews really prospered was when the British were in charge of Iraq. Now the British at the time were being horrible in Palestine, to Jews, but in Iraq they were keeping them safe.

CP: Do you know why that was?

AH: Oh probably politics, you can never really understand politics. I think when the British first arrived in Iraq the Arabs were broadly illiterate and didn't speak English

CP: Are we talking about roughly

AH: We are talking about 1917, 20 that sort of era. And the Jews were much more educated and spoke English and were able to run the administrations for them when the Arabs weren't. I think the other reason why they would have safeguarded the Jews was because the Jews were pro-British, now we're talking 1940s, during the war, and the Arab nationalists were pro-Germany.

CP: Oh so that's a pretty good reason.

AH: So the Jews were on the British side in the war as well.

CP: But when it came to Palestine that was a different....

AH: I don't really know enough about what they were doing and why in Palestine but some of them were clearly anti-semitic

CP: Is there any other sort of story you would like to share, any particular memories you have of your grandparents? Did you spend much time with them? You would have been quite young...

AH: My grandfather died when I was about 11. But I do have a memory of him, he was ill for quite some time before he died, he had some sort of cancer and so he was, in the latter stage of his life, when we went to visit he was in bed all the time. But when we were younger I do recall he lived very near Exhibition Road where all the museums, they lived very near where all the museums are. And we would walk, my brother and me, to meet them at the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum so I do have that memory of him taking us there.

CP: It's nice to have that sort of memory. Now your grandmother, she lived to be 90?

AH: Yes, did I tell you that?

CP: No, I worked it out! Or I saw it somewhere, maybe on the family tree

AH: Possibly yes, she died about 1996, so you have got that?

CP: Yes, so did you have, were you close to her?

AH: Yes, for a couple of, for a year or so when I first moved to London I lived in the flat with her as well. So yes, my grandmother was, she had favourites. She had four grandchildren. I was her favourite because I was the eldest. My cousin Jeremy was also the favourite because he was my uncle's son and my uncle was a boy and therefore he was the favourite!

CP: Right!

AH: And my cousin Desiree was the favourite because she was the only girl. And my poor brother wasn't the favourite because he wasn't a girl and he wasn't my uncle's son and he wasn't the eldest!

CP: Oh dear! He really did have a raw deal, didn't he? But you were able to live with her for a while when you moved to London so that must have been quite nice for her as well as she wouldn't have had any other company. So your parents were still up North then?

AH: Yes,

CP: So your mum was, wait, where was your mum born?

AH: She was born in Baghdad.

CP: That's what I thought. Oh yes right, cos she moved here in 1952. I think you also said you don't know that much your father's parents because his mother died pretty young?

AH: His mother died, yes, in a car accident with her mother

CP: Oh gosh

AH: She was driving. And I did once ask my father whether she was a good driver and the answer was no.

CP: So his mother was driving her own mother and they both died?

AH: Yes

CP: That's pretty shocking.

AH: Yes, I think he was about 18 or 20, something like that, at the time. So I never knew her. I did know my paternal grandfather, he died a few years before my maternal grandfather so I was maybe 7 or 8 at the time.

CP: And he died here?

AH: He also lived in London. Now his death was rather better than my paternal grandmother's,(?) he went out one evening, played bridge, walked home, went to sleep and didn't wake up.

CP: Oh really. And he was in his 80s so that is quite nice way to go. So was he part of the same community with your other grandfather, did they know each other?

AH: We've seen a photograph of them both in the same class at school.

CP: Really?

AH: I don't know how well they knew each other. They must have known of each other.

CP: Cos it's quite a tight-knit community here.

AH: And according to the family tree, my parents were third cousins. But they didn't know that.

CP: They didn't?

AH: They didn't know that, it was me that pointed it out to them.

CP: Are they, they're both still living? Oh, so how did they react when you told them that?

AH: I don't think they were terribly bothered really!

CP: Well I have noticed on the family tree, quite a few jumped out at you, second cousins getting married...

AH: Yes, and there was nothing wrong with uncles marrying nieces and so on in Baghdad so, it's illegal here but it was legal there so that happened as well. And I think people could get married as young as 12. And that happened as well!

CP: Gosh! You can't imagine that, I mean it's hard for us, I mean your daughter, she'd be a mother by now!

AH: Yeah

CP: So you probably wouldn't be too happy about that!

AH: No! But I think in Baghdad you had to pay a dowry, actually you wanted to get rid of your daughters as quickly as possible. Sons were important but daughters you wanted to get rid of!

CP: So you had to pay, you had to pay to get rid of them basically. So you wanted to get them out of the way as soon as you could

AH Because otherwise you'd have to support them.

CP: Yes, and presumably after they were about 20 they were considered unmarriageable! So do you have any, I mean do you have any history associated with your silverware here because

AH: No, it's all new

CP: It's all relatively new? It doesn't all look new. Looking at a very big Kiddush cup.

AH: That we bought, that's our Elijah cup.

CP: Oh ok.

AH: I don't think any of this is, there might be something, I'm not sure how much of this I can identify. These came from my grandmother.

CP: From Renee?

AH: Yes.

CP: Can I take a photograph of it?

AH: It's hall marked so it's not Iraqi.

CP: Oh really. Do you think these are Iraqi?

AH: Well they're hallmarked so they can't be.

CP: Oh I see.

AH: I don't know where my grandmother got it from.

CP: There's a silver teapot and I suppose that's a sugar bowl and a milk jug

AH: This is a miniature Sephardi [Sefer Torah](#)

CP: That would be ...?

AH: To be honest I don't know,

CP: Well I won't say that if we can't be sure...I'll take a picture, thank you

OK, I've never seen of these before, a little one. So was that given to you or

AH: I can't actually remember, sorry I'll say that a bit louder I can't actually remember!

CP: Well never mind, you don't have to remember, it's actually lovely I haven't ever seen one of these

AH: Well that's how Iraqi Sefer Torah are and they're read by opening it up like that

CP: Oh I see. Well that actually makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? I suppose it really does protect it. I'll take a picture of the outside of it as well if I may. So have you ever been to Iraq?

AH: No. When Saddam Hussein fell, and for a short period it looked like it might be safe for Westerners to go to Iraq, I asked my mother whether she would take me and show me where she grew up. And she'd always told us these stories of the good parts of growing up in Baghdad and the life they led. They had servants, they had a chauffeur driven car and they went to school in a chauffeur driven car and the policeman on point duty would salute. And whenever they wanted to go somewhere by train, because my grandfather was a Director of the Railway Company, they would tag on a coach on the back of the train for them. And they went on holiday on the Royal Yacht! So having heard all these stories I wanted her to take me and she said no, she was never going back, and she spent the whole of her childhood desperate to leave and she never wanted to go back. And

she also went on, the reason why they went to school in a chauffeur driven car was because it was too dangerous to walk.

CP: Because there was danger of kidnapping or

AH: Violence

CP: Violence generally

AH: Violence and death

CP: What about your, sorry I was getting mixed up. What about your uncle, does he, so he was that much older, did he ever go back?

AH: No, no-one's been back. And it's not safe to go back. I don't think, since my grandfather left, well then there was another coup, having had one coup there was another coup and at that point it was not safe for anybody. The Jewish community in Baghdad I believe is five.

CP: Five people.

AH: Five people.

CP: That's not very big. It's not even a [minyan](#)

AH: They're all old. And the previous number I heard which is only a year or two ago, was eight.

CP: So they're too old to move and start a new life anywhere else.

AH: And they keep themselves very hidden, nobody knows they're Jewish. It's not safe.

CP: They can't even practice if they want to. So what other memories does your mum have of this privileged growing up? How was it going on the Royal Yacht? The special train carriage and..

AH: I think it was the way, I think it was just at the time she just accepted it, she was quite small when these things were happening. I think she just accepted it. The train carriage was there, I think they only went on the Royal Yacht once and I'm not sure the King was on board!

CP: Actually that's probably even better because she didn't have to be on her best behaviour! So how did she feel when she came to live here, so she was a student

AH: Well as I say she was desperate to leave so I think she was very happy to be here. I don't think she any intention of ever going back.

CP: It must have been a bit of a culture shock though in some way, so different.

AH: She never said anything about that and I haven't asked her. The, I think the society that they moved in in Baghdad was a cultured, educated...I'll come onto the nationality bit in a minute, but it was a sophisticated culture so I'm not sure that coming to London in that respect was much of a shock. In terms of language, the School was French so her first language was Arabic, it was Judaeo-Arabic, it was the Jewish dialect of Arabic. Her second language was French because that was the language of school and English was her third language. But if you listen to her, she speaks English flawlessly. She also speaks French flawlessly. And the interesting thing about that is that in France everyone has an accent, there isn't the equivalent of the Queen's English in France, everywhere has an accent but my mother doesn't have an accent! So she's asked, whereabouts in France do you come from?

CP: Oh really? Interesting.

AH: But she's now forgotten her Arabic. She can't speak that much Arabic any more. Although when we go to Israel she looks at the signposts cos all the signs as you know are in English, Arabic and Hebrew. She just about reads what they say and she feels very proud of herself.

CP: Well it's been a long time.

AH: Well she used to speak Arabic with my grandmother. And that was really the only time she spoke Arabic. And then when my grandmother died she never spoke Arabic again.

CP: Well that was her last sort of tie really, her last connection with it.

AH: Whenever my grandmother saw anything nice, there's a difference between her and my mother, she, the expression she used was 'Kenni Bourhdad' which means just like in Baghdad! So when we were in the South of France and there were lemons growing on the trees 'Kenni Bourhdad', when she ate something nice, 'Kenni Bourhdad'. So she obviously missed it. My mother didn't feel that way at all.

CP: Well I suppose for your mother, she came here when she was younger than your grandmother so

AH: And hadn't lived at the time when actually the Jews prospered the most in Baghdad.

CP: Yes, so she would have seen it in a completely different light. You said you were going to come on to something

AH: Nationality, that was the bit about language. I think the way it worked was when the Ottoman Empire was dismembered, the French had the idea that Mesopotamia was going to be French and set up the schools and all the rest of it. And I think the Sykes-Picot line was drawn in the sand and Mesopotamia became British and I think that's why there was this conflict between the French schools and the British influence.

CP: Ok, well I think I have enough information there so unless there's anything else you particularly want to tell me about I think we can call it a night, is that alright.

AH: ok thank you

CP: Thank you very much, it's been really interesting.

Interview ends.

