



SAMS Roots Interview Transcript

Beverly Cohen interviewed by Caroline Pearce, transcribed by Caroline Pearce

11th August 2015 at Beverly's home in Hemel Hempstead

Recording length: 38m 27s (1 of 2)

CP: Would you start by telling me a little about how you came to be at SAMS?

BC: I moved from Canada to Brighton in 1974 and I lived in Brighton until 2013 when my granddaughter was born and at that time I moved to Hemel Hempstead to be near my daughter, son-in-law and my new granddaughter. When I moved up here I was looking for a synagogue and I was looking for friends, as much as for a religious base. or even more than for a religious base. I had belonged to a very big Reform [shul](#) in Brighton but was looking for something maybe a bit smaller and more intimate and I found [SAMS] on the internet. I went to a couple of services there and people were really friendly and welcoming. I was afraid the first time I went – I was dreading it – not so much for the service, the service was nice – but for the [Kiddush](#) when everybody takes the chance to catch up with their friends and I didn't know anybody, and I was really dreading it. But people came up to me and were very warm and friendly and so it was kind of love at first sight with the shul so I joined very shortly after that and have been very happy for the two-and-a-bit years I've belonged and have been quite busy with lots of activities there.

CP: What kind of activities have you been involved in?

BC: I volunteer for Sunflowers, which is the [multi-faith] playgroup, and I help organise the rotas, and I've just started actually helping out there on Mondays now when I'm free on Mondays. I go to the weekly [parsha](#) study which I'm very much enjoying. I have a great depth of ignorance but the rabbi doesn't intimidate so I feel good and I feel like I'm learning something. I belong to the book group - I like that too, very much. And I go to the social events that are organised, and I go quite often to services on [Shabbat](#).

CP: Sounds like you've become quite involved with the shul.

BC: Yes. I also do the Meet and Greet rota – I'll be writing to you soon about that! – so by volunteering, especially when you need to be in touch with a lot of people because you need their help, you get to meet people. So I know quite a lot of the people in the shul now. So it's really great.

CP: Volunteering has helped you to get involved with the community, so you're giving something and also getting something back as well. Can you tell me something about your background, where you grew up and what that was like?

BC: I was born and brought up in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Yarmouth is a town with a population of about 8,900 I think and it is the largest town in two hundred miles. So I actually thought I grew up in quite a big place. Lots of people used to come into town because it was the 'big shopping centre' so I had quite a distorted view of the world because it was such a small place but I thought it was big.

Just to give you a bit of context, all four of my grandparents are from Russia, although my grandfather on my mother's side - that part of Russia was often part of Poland. My maternal grandparents came to New York and were very active in Yiddish culture and my New York grandfather belonged to the [Workmen's Circle](#) which I only recently found out was quite left-wing/Communist so I now have a new [way] of looking at him. On my father's side, my grandfather found his way to a place called Clark's Harbour, Nova Scotia initially. He and his brother came there because they had learned that there weren't people that were selling things so one of their other brothers gave them a great big tray that they could carry door-to-door and sell things and eventually they bought a building and set up a dry goods store in Clark's Harbour. Clark's Harbour had a population of 98 and they were the only Jews in the village! Their first cousins went to New York and the two brothers married two sisters who were also their first cousins. And they became my [family]. My mother tells the story of her wedding night. My father had sleep apnoea – he could snore! The house would shake – so she was sure that maybe it was because of the close relationship between [my father's] grandparents. But fortunately we were born healthy so I guess it was alright!

The Clark's Harbour family then moved to Yarmouth which is where I was born and brought up. My father had four brothers and one sister that survived. There were other children, but they didn't survive to adulthood because of illness. I think there was a three-year-old between my dad and his sister, and another child who died in childhood. My father doesn't remember them and didn't talk about them so I don't know. My dad was in business with three of his brothers. They had a cross between a general store and a department store and in fact on my wall...this photograph is of the Yarmouth Hotel which they bought and changed into a department store. So over here was the men's department, and over here was the shoe department which was my father's bit. Then there was ladies' wear in the building next door which one of my uncles took responsibility for. And in the back there was linoleum and furniture and bicycles and anything that anybody else in the family had need of - they'd buy a couple of extra and sell them in the store. This [photo] was taken at the turn of the century in Yarmouth but I think my father's older brother – my father was the youngest boy – they started the business in the late 1920s and then my father sold it when he retired in 1985. Eventually the other brothers retired, so for the last ten years my father was on his own in the store.

CP: No other family members after that took it over?

BC: No, everybody had moved. It was such a small town, the next generation went to university and became professionals in bigger cities, Halifax and Toronto mostly.

CP: How was it, do you think, for your mother – moving from New York to Yarmouth?

BC: She was dreadfully, dreadfully homesick. All of the men came from Yarmouth – had been born and brought up in Yarmouth - but they went to Montreal or New York to find women. My dad was on a blind date with a friend of my mother's, that's how they met, in New York. So all the women came from big cities to this tiny place and she was homesick for her family and she was also very homesick for the life. But once we were born and she got to know [people] and made friends there...There was a [Jewish] community which at its peak was maybe forty families and most of them were the same age. In the larger [Yarmouth] community there were maybe eight thousand and about a hundred and fifty or a hundred and seventy five Jewish people and we all lived very close to each other. I was just over the fence from one of my cousins and down the lane from another. So it was a very very close knit community. And the women set up something called The Sisterhood, which I guess is the equivalent to the Ladies' Guild here so they provided services to the shul, made kiddushes and that kind of thing. They also had a [Hadassah](#) chapter there so the same women belonged to all these Jewish clubs. Every year they did some kind of entertainment or play or

whatever, and when we were older we belonged to a Zionist group which we called Young Judea, but it was called Hanoa Hatzionie. It's a more left wing seriously Zionist group and we were very active in that and we went to a camp that was organised by Hanoa Hatzionie.

In Canada school [summer] holidays were much longer, so we were off [school] for ten weeks in the summer so we all went off to summer camp for six weeks or sometimes eight weeks. All of us Jewish children in the Atlantic provinces went to this camp called Camp Kadimah. It was in the country near Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, kind of inland from the coast in south western Nova Scotia. It was about eighty miles from where I lived but it was another world. First of all it was a world mostly of children. I have a book which celebrates fifty years of Camp Kadimah, in fact I sent my daughter there for one year, but unfortunately her school holidays didn't coincide – but it was really where I got my broader Jewish education. I did go to [cheder](#) – we went Tuesdays and Thursdays for Hebrew and Sunday mornings for religious education but the rabbi who was eastern European...I think we weren't very nice. We were very tired as children after school and I think we weren't very attentive. I do remember him throwing blackboard erasers at us and being cross all the time. But at camp they had a very regimented programme. We started the morning with a [shiur](#) so we had a little lecture, mostly about the history of Zionism as I recall. They used a lot of Hebrew words for things so we started to develop a Hebrew vocabulary. We did arts and crafts and usually the themes were Jewish themes. We did dance and it was all Israeli folk dancing, and we had singing and again it was almost all Hebrew songs. And then there was sport and swimming and everything and it was a lot of fun.

There were about 180 to 200 children all together. At that time they were all from the area. Now children of parents who've moved away send their children there, so it's much more spread out and the Jewish population in Nova Scotia is much smaller now – everybody's either assimilated or moved to bigger cities which is sad. I do think we had a good life growing up – it was very safe, because it was small and we had more freedom.

CP: Was there countryside around where you grew up?

BC: There was, and the town was quite small...at a young age we were just put out and then all the mothers would come to the front doors and shout for their children to come in for their lunch...they had no idea where we were! There was a railway track behind my house. We used to go there quite often and walk along the tracks. I had a bicycle and I was given boundaries so I wasn't allowed to go beyond about a mile from my house when I was young. I was about eight and I had befriended an older girl who was allowed to go much further so of course I went much further. So it was very free.

CP: What about your sister? She's a little younger than you.

BC: Yes she is. I think I wasn't a very nice older sister. I can remember one time her following me to school. I was five. And I used to come home and play school with her, which meant that I had to be the teacher and she had to do what I said and I made school out to be something which only old sophisticated knowledgeable people could go to so one day she decided to follow me and I had no idea she was following me. So I get to school and the teacher, my teacher, sees her and says 'Beverly I think you're going to have to take her home' and I was mortified! I thought I was going to be expelled from school. And all I remember is taking her and I was holding her with one hand and hitting her with the other all the way home. We're very close now! Three years was quite a big difference when I was little. She couldn't turn the skipping rope over my head – she wasn't useful for much. But now she's my best friend, for sure and she lives in Toronto.

CP: Does she have family?

BC: I have a niece and nephew and they're both married, and I have one great-niece called Isla, with red red red hair which comes from my mother's side of the family – there were a few redheads on that side of the family.

My grandparents had small businesses and they moved around a lot. I don't think they ever owned a building but they ran a kind of candy store-newsagents. They had a store in Brighton Beach [New York] at one time and between the two of them, my grandmother and grandfather they opened it at seven in the morning and they closed it at ten [at night]. So life was pretty chaotic. My mother always used to say she was embarrassed, she didn't like to bring her friends home because everything was so untidy in the house and she was obsessively tidy. I wasn't ashamed to bring friends home but she didn't much like it because we'd make a mess.

But it was a very close family. I remember my grandfather being very funny. I think he was a bit of a gambler. My grandmother tells this one story of sending him out for a loaf of bread and he didn't come back for three days because he found a crap [dice] game somewhere.

CP: Was it legal then or not so much?

BC: I think it was probably legal, but it wasn't good for the marriage, although the marriage lasted I think 55 years before my granddad died so she did put up with it.

CP: How many children did they have?

BC: There was one boy - and I know his name was Paul – who died in childhood, and then there were three brothers and two sisters who survived to adulthood; my mother was the youngest. And she had one sister who was nine years older, and then three brothers. One of my mother's brothers, Uncle Izzie, had scarlet fever when he was about three or four and lost his hearing and he married my Aunt Rose who also was deaf. They had three children who were hearing.

And there was a lot of...they were very funny, my mother liked to laugh. So it was fun...my memories as a young child when I'd go to my grandparents' house and everybody was sitting around the table was everybody laughing all the time. My mother would visit them more often, but she'd take us about once a year, sometimes once every two years. So I didn't see them [much] but we were very excited because [where they lived] was different, whereas on my father's side of the family they were just around the corner, we saw them every day – my father worked with them every day.

CP: How far a journey was it [to your mother's parents]?

BC: It was a flight. In fact it was about – these days, if you could fly direct, it would be about an hour, and hour and ten minutes, but we had to fly from Yarmouth to Boston, then we changed planes in Boston and then we flew to New York. And when we were little and we went on the plane – so this was in the early fifties – they always bought us new clothes, so we were wearing party dresses on the plane because it was an event. So we got very dressed up and people made a fuss of us because when we got to New York everybody thought that Nova Scotia was in the Arctic because people didn't travel very much. They'd heard of Nova Scotia but they thought it was very very far away and exotic.

CP: And a bit of a snowy wasteland...

BC: Yes, that's what they thought.

CP: But that's not the case?

BC: No! It's not dissimilar – it's probably a little bit warmer in the summer and a little bit cooler in the winter – than the UK because it's coastal so it's moderated by the coast, There were two main industries in Yarmouth. One was fishing and the other was the cotton mill. They made canvas for sails for sailing vessels and that kind of thing.

CP: So the industry was based on the sea.

BC: Yes it was. I was very conscious of the sea. There were beaches that we could easily ride to on our bicycles. The harbour was close. Our house was at the top of the hill and you just went straight down to the bottom of the hill to get to the harbour.

CP: Sounds pretty idyllic!

BC: Yes, it was a very pretty town. I can show you some pictures of Yarmouth. There it is in that paperback book. For the purposes of the tape, I am showing a picture of Cliff Street, not very far from my house, but in the distance that is my dad's and my uncles' store at the very bottom which is the photograph on the wall.

CP: These buildings look Victorian...

BC: Yes they are. A lot of the buildings were built at the end of the 19th Century. This is Forest Street, and I lived on Forest Street. My parents built a house in 1960 so it was a newer house. These three houses are a little bit down [the hill] from mine. Mine was a little bit higher up the hill, but these three houses were on the same street.

CP: They are quite sizeable houses.

BC: Yes they were. It was a very elegant ...I mean, I didn't think about it as such when I lived there, but just looking at it remembering, looking at the houses now, they were very elegant, very genteel place.

CP: You don't think about it when you're growing up do you? Sometimes you need to move away in order to actually appreciate it. But you went to school there until you went to McGill [University in Montreal].

BC: That's right.

CP: So that was a bit of a change, moving to Montreal.

BC: Oh, it was a huge change. I think it was probably too big a change. I wasn't [ready] – I was overwhelmed. I loved Montreal but I don't think I got as much out of it [as I could have]. I think I would have been better off at a smaller university because I just didn't know how to negotiate such large numbers [of people]. At that time English Literature was compulsory for all students – in first year you had to take English so the classes were three or four hundred students, so I wasn't very good at asserting myself there. I loved the experience of living in Montreal. It's a beautiful city.

CP: You would have had classes at your high school of how many [students]?

BC: I went to a place called Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High, and it was consolidated because they amalgamated with...children came in from as far as thirty-five miles away so [children from] all the villages came there so it was a fairly big school. I think there were five year groups in each year and there were about thirty kids in each class, something like that. So it was big enough...we had critical mass for sports teams and that kind of thing.

CP: But I suppose being in Montreal was overwhelming...

BC: Oh yes. And I'll give you an example. I was editor of the high school yearbook – I pulled out one that I edited and some marketing company wrote to 'The Editor, High School Yearbook, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia' and the letter was delivered to my home because everybody knew who the editor was, or who was captain of whatever sports team, or whatever, so I was easy to find. So I was used to being well-known without trying.

CP: And that's a bit different from [being in Montreal]...

BC: I was very anonymous.

CP: You were obviously very involved in high school...

BC: Yes, I was involved in high school and I was very involved in the Jewish community. There were seven people my age – there were four girls and five boys all in the same year. I think when things got boring, at the beginning of the winter, children were conceived in the Jewish community. My sister also had about five or six Jewish children who were born at the same time as my sister so we all had contemporaries that we could play with and between us there weren't too many. And as I say we had Young Judea, we had cheder, so we saw a lot of each other and we quite liked it, it was a bit like belonging to a secret club.

CP: The shul that you belonged to, was that Orthodox?

BC: It was a kind of mainstream Orthodox, there was no [mechitza](#) – men and women sat separately, on different sides of the shul, but you could see [each other], nobody tried to put a curtain up or anything. I think the women were happy with it – they gossiped and the men prayed. I think the men gossiped too, but they also prayed. Women were never called up [to participate in the service]. And there were no [batmitzvahs](#) or anything to mark the girls, but the boys all had [barmitzvahs](#).

CP: Were they fairly big events?

BC: For the time, yes. My recollection is that they were all held in the shul halls, so they weren't [in] grand hotels...they weren't really flamboyant affairs which some of them have become. There was just a band in the shul and lots of food and lots of people. And people invited the bank manager, and the GP – you invited the dignitaries, the important people in society so the bank manager came to a lot of barmitzvahs.

CP: Was the bank manager Jewish?

BC: No, the bank manager wasn't Jewish. He was a dignitary in the town, he was important.

CP: Did you feel quite comfortable growing up, I mean in terms of being Jewish – in terms of your community, yes, but outside of the Jewish community?

BC: I did. Growing up I did. People were interested, it made you feel a little bit special and also there was only one shul. My auntie was a bit more [frum](#) than the rest of us, but most people had the same level of [Jewish] practice. I thought it was the centre of the Jewish universe. I thought that everybody practiced Judaism in the way that we did and I became less comfortable with my Jewish self when I realised that it was a continuum and that you could be a whole lot more religious than my family were, or a whole lot less. And then I thought I don't know where I stand; I don't know where I fit and I spent a lot of my young adulthood not feeling very confident in my Jewish identity. I think I also then learned how much I didn't know. Before I went to McGill I knew what other people knew, I practiced in the way other people in my town practiced and I didn't know anything else. But then when I discovered that there were some seriously erudite people, people who were much more fluent readers of Hebrew and even speakers of Hebrew, then I started to think well am I really Jewish? If you don't know anything can you really be Jewish?

CP: After McGill, was that when you came to England?

BC: I came to England in 1974. I went from McGill to the University of Toronto and did a social work degree and then I actually went back and started a Master's in English Literature, but then I discovered that just because you like to read it doesn't mean that you want to be an academic. Then I came to England with my ex-husband, who wasn't Jewish, and I went back to doing social work which I started to like to do. I liked it here better, I liked the approach here. It was much more psycho-therapeutic [in Canada], whereas here it's more practical, and I thought it was less pretentious, trying to address people's environment and their physical needs, rather than trying to change their minds and their attitudes.

CP: And how did you find the Jewish community here? I mean what was your opinion, what was your feeling about being Jewish here [in the UK]?

BC: I found it a bit uncomfortable but I don't know how much that was me not feeling comfortable in my own skin – because if you don't feel comfortable in your own skin, then other people sense it I think – and also because my then-husband wasn't Jewish, and I was feeling very guilty [thinking] maybe I wasn't really Jewish, maybe I shouldn't say [I was Jewish], what would people think so I just wasn't very confident in myself I think. I did join a shul after my daughter was born, and in fact I taught cheder there for many many years in Brighton, at the Reform shul. I think that a lot of people think that what's really Jewish is the way that they were brought up, and [the Reform shul] didn't seem really Jewish, not least because they had an organ there, and I didn't feel confident enough to join - there was no [Masorti](#) there – I didn't feel confident enough to join the Orthodox shul because my ex-husband was not Jewish and I thought they might not welcome me. It isn't fair to say, I didn't test it out. So I joined Reform, but I didn't really feel comfortable with Reform because it wasn't what I was brought up with. I'm a hard person to please. So when I came to Masorti, it was much more familiar. Except the first time I went [to a service], before I even joined, Ruth Rabin the [gabbai](#) came up to me and invited me to have an [aliyah](#) and I was terrified, I just shook my head [as if to say] 'no' which was really rude I guess, but I'd never been asked to have an aliyah, I'd never had an aliyah, not even at the Reform shul – women didn't go up [to the [bimah](#)] very often – I mean there were some women who asked to be called up, and they would be called up, but it wasn't done as a matter of course. I don't think they ever invited people, like strangers, as a way of welcoming you. On reflection I think it was a very nice way of welcoming you as a guest. It was terrifying, so I said no, but then at kiddush I met Jackie Gess and she said 'why don't you come over for coffee and we can go over the [brachot](#) and then you'll feel ok'. So I did, and now I accept aliyahs and I feel very good about it.

CP: Going back to [the photographs you are showing me]...

BC: That was my five-year-old class and in fact at that time my parents lived about a mile from where we eventually moved which was like the other end of the earth. We went to a different school – all the Jewish children went to Central School, and I went to Milton School so this is my class before I moved nearer to where the Jewish community was. [Phone rings, interview interrupted].

[Interview resumes]

Recording length: 7m 41s (2 of 2)

BC: So maybe I'll finish off by talking a bit about my father's family found their way to Canada. And I've often thought, even as a little girl, or especially as a little girl, I thought how grateful I am to them for making that trip. And I can't imagine – because they came over and none of them spoke English when they came, and it's a different alphabet, it's a different everything, and I don't know if I would have had the courage to do that.

CP: What year are we talking about?

BC: It was about the turn of the century and I think my grandfather was in his late teens and he came over because his older brother had found his way to St John, New Brunswick, and then called for his brother – my grandfather – to come, then the two of them moved to Nova Scotia and went selling things door-to-door and eventually saved enough money to set up a shop in a very small hamlet called Clark's Harbor and then they had cousins, first cousins, who were living in New York and my grandfather married one of the New York cousins and my [great] uncle married another one of the New York cousins and then they came to Clark's Harbor and eventually moved to Yarmouth where there were a lot of Jewish people from White Russia.

CP: What do you think made them go to Canada? A lot of [Jewish immigrants] did go to New York [around that time], and stayed in New York...

BC: I think economically they just thought there might be a chance to set up a business and make a success of it, and I think the Jewish Agency was encouraging people to spread out. And life was very tough in New York financially. I mean it was very tough when they began, but I think for everybody who was prepared to work there was lots of opportunities. And my great-uncle Isaac wrote a memoir and he said how very warm and friendly people were in Nova Scotia. He never experienced any...coming from a place where there were pogroms, he never experienced any anti-semitism. People were very curious – nobody had ever met a Jew before, or a Russian – but they were warm and welcoming and hospitable and he was very touched by that. And their older brother, Abe Cohen, became involved in teaching systems of government. There were loads and loads of people in Russia who were fleeing the pogroms, so he did his research and helped prepare people to emigrate and he had to flee because it was an illegal thing to do, so eventually [when] he had to flee, he came to New York. He was the first of the brothers to come and he brought over Isaac, and my grandfather and Isaac wrote a memoir of their life in Russia and then my great-uncle Isaac stayed in Canada, but then he eventually moved to Israel and my great-uncle Abe stayed in America.

CP: So they would have come over on a boat, and then how would they have made the journey from New York.

BC: I think they came into Boston and I think they knew somebody in Portland, Maine – there were Jewish people who were exploring all over, and their networks and Jewish geography was very good – and the people in Portland, Maine knew people in St John, so they made their way to St John and it was from St John that they really struck out because in Clark’s Harbor they knew nobody, they just had stuff to sell door-to-door.

CP: So they were real pioneers. They were very brave. It’s not like today when we have the internet for one thing, and you can read about any place you want to go, or you just get on a train or a bus or whatever, or a plane. It would have been a much longer and more arduous journey...

BC: There was one anecdote about when they were still living in Clark’s Harbor which would have been about ninety miles from Yarmouth, but at that time, at the turn of the century, there were very few roads so they had to take a boat along the coast. So they were going to Yarmouth for [Yom Kippur](#), because there’s a shul in Yarmouth, and he says it was unbelievably stormy, so the captain of the boat put in at a port halfway there. It was supposed to be a two-hour boat ride, but it was just so stormy, and they pleaded with him, they explained what Yom Kippur was, and how important, and they couldn’t travel [after sunset], if they didn’t get there before nightfall they would have missed [Kol Nidre](#) and it was a very important prayer for the family so the captain of the boat said ‘I’m doing this against my better judgement, but if it’s important to you, I will take you’, so they went out and it was a nightmare journey, but he got them there.

CP: That’s a great story and it also illustrates how important not just their cultural Judaism, but their religious Judaism. It wasn’t only about tradition, it was about something that ran deeper for them.

BC: For that generation I think so. On the other hand I think they were probably wanting to be there, obviously partly because of the religion, but they were so isolated in Clark’s Harbor and it would be a big jamboree, wouldn’t it, because they’d be in shul with loads of people.

CP: Yes, there would have been a connection...because it was probably quite lonely in Clark’s Harbor...

BC: And their English wasn’t very good.

[Interview ends]