



SAMS Roots Interview Transcript
Rabbi Rafael Kaiserblueth interviewed by Caroline Pearce, transcribed by Caroline Pearce
5th January 2016 at Rafael's office in St Albans

Recording length: 1hr 13 mins

CP: I'd like to start by asking you how you came to be at SAMS.

RK: How I came to be at SAMS starts almost exactly eight years ago, I want to say December 17th or something like that in 2007. I had been invited to do High Holydays services at Borehamwood that year and while there Jeremy Gordon was still the rabbi here [at SAMS] and I knew him from seminary and I didn't really know anybody else here so he suggested that we get a coffee, let's chat during [the] Rosh Hashanah – New Year – [period] and we can finish working on our sermons together so we met at the British Library and we were chatting for a little bit and he told me 'no-one really knows yet, but I'm planning on leaving the synagogue soon to move to New London synagogue and I was wondering if maybe you'd be interested in meeting some of the leadership [of SAMS]. So he put me in touch with Laurence Harris and Lauren McQuillan who were the co-chairs at the time. They took me out to lunch at Bloom's, I believe, and we discussed that perhaps I would come out for a visit to the community. They told me a lot about it and I came in December for Shabbas and then I started to come a little more often and I came for Seder that year, I came for High Holidays, I came for Bar mitzvahs...I was coming pretty regularly. Then I came for a three-month stint during a break from studies and during that time we agreed that [SAMS] would help me financially with my last year of studies and I would commit to coming here during that year but also for two years after that. That was five-and-a-half years ago, and I'm still here. So in a nutshell that's how I arrived here at SAMS.

CP: So it was quite a good transition going from studying at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] and then going straight into your first job?

RK: It was. The idea was never to move here, and then once it was, the idea was to stay only for a couple of years. But the transition was brilliant because I saw my classmates finishing their studies and then going through the interview process, whereas I didn't have to have that stress. But it was also not just because it was easier, but because this was a really good fit for me. They tell us a lot during the interview process and the job selection that it's a lot like dating – you're not looking for the best, the biggest, the richest [synagogue] or whatever, you're looking for the best fit and I really feel this is the best fit. I've been really happy here [at SAMS' full time rabbi] for the last five-and-a-half years.

CP: I can't believe it's that long actually! And of course then you met Rachel...

RK: I met Rachel, then we had Toby, and we have number two [child] on the way, so yes, for not thinking I'd be here permanently...

CP: Life takes you in unexpected directions.

RK: Yes – as much as you think you're going to plan for it, it doesn't happen that way.

CP: You were born in Puerto Rico, you grew up in the US, would you have pictured yourself staying there then, or had you not really thought about it?

RK: There's two ways to [answer] that. Yes and no! Yes because that's where I thought I was going to stay. I had trained [in the US] and my family's there but I've also lived a lot of my life out of the US before I moved here. I'd spent two different years in Israel, I spent a year in Argentina, and quite extensive travelling outside the US too so for me it wasn't such a difficult choice in that yes, it's a different country, but I've done that already two or three times so that was not as [difficult a choice for me]. I know there are some of my colleagues, or my fellow citizens in the United States who blanch at the idea of leaving the US permanently, whereas [England] is a different place, an exciting opportunity and adventure...

CP: And [travelling] is in your blood, isn't it.

RK: Yes, my father used to tell me all the time: I give you roots and wings. I know where I come from but you've got to go explore a little bit.

CP: You and your siblings were all born in different places, your parents are from different places...

RK: We are the epitome of the wandering Jew! My dad was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and shortly thereafter he moved to Lima so even though he was born in Argentina he [grew up] in Lima. My mom was born in Lima, Peru. They didn't really know each other because they're six years apart so it was only later when he started to be the student rabbi there that really started to meet at the synagogue in Lima while he was studying in Buenos Aires where he went back to do his rabbinical studies in Argentina. And his student pulpit, much like I had an international student pulpit, he had an international student pulpit in Lima. His family was still in Lima so he would come back and forth for High Holydays or whatever the case may be. I'm not sure how often he came back and forth but his first date with my mom was in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

CP: Isn't that like you and Rachel?

RK: That's exactly like me and Rachel. Our first date was two days after Rosh Hashanah. So there are a lot of eerie similarities there.

CP: Not to mention that you look the double of your father.

RK: I've been told that before!

CP: Why did your dad's family move from Argentina to Peru?

RK: They never actually lived in Argentina. They were actually living in Bolivia at the time so my grandfather, my father's father, Fritz, he was a lawyer in Germany. He got his degree in, I think, 1931 or 1932, something like that. He opened up a law firm, a law practice, and then the Nuremburg laws passed and it wasn't a good place to be a Jew. Him and his partner went looking around Europe, came back and decided the writing was on the wall, this isn't for us any more, we need to get out of here. Fritz's brother Paul had already moved to Bolivia working for a mining company and told them 'I can get you a job here' so he left everything and went to Bolivia and lived in Potosi, a tiny little town forty five hundred metres high.

CP: So Paul went ahead and he went to Bolivia and got a job...

RK: Yes, and he started working for this company and I'm pretty sure [he and Fritz] were working for the same company. So Fritz got there arriving in 1935 or 1936 and he was there working. Most of the rest of the family didn't make it. A couple of years ago I went with my family to Germany and we found graves of our family, my dad's side. Some got out [of Germany] but most did not. In 1941 he wrote to a friend in Buenos Aires saying 'listen I'm in my late 30s, I'd really like to meet [a woman]' so the friend set him up with [the woman] who would become my dad's mom. They got married, went back to Bolivia, to Potosi. In 1943 my dad's sister was born, Valvi - we call her Barbara - she was born up in Potosi which is very very high. They didn't have an incubator so they put her in a shoe box. So two years later, when it was my dad's turn to be born, the doctor said 'go down to Argentina, to Buenos Aires' that was really the capital of South America culturally and advanced in medicine, so that's how he ended up being born there. Not too long after that they moved to Lima because the head of the company was in Lima, Peru, not in Bolivia. It was just the mine that was in Bolivia. The head office was in Lima so he got promoted I guess so he was in the head office there. He wasn't working in the mines, he was an administrator in the company. Once [Fritz, my dad's dad] left Germany I don't think he ever practised law again. He was very very intellectual and not very practical with his hands. I remember stories where he had to call my mom to ask her how to change a typewriter ribbon. He was just not practical at all. I never met him, but there were stories about him. He was an intellectual academic. He knew all the royal families and how they were related but he couldn't change a typewriter ribbon!

CP: Was his brother Paul still in South America?

RK: Paul eventually went back, after the war, to Strasbourg, France and he was married to Denise. She just passed away not too long ago. They had two kids, Annette and Leslie. Leslie just passed away a couple of months ago. Annette and her husband Jean are still alive in Strasbourg. They have two kids, Leslie and Grasina - she's Brazilian. They have three kids. So that's that side of the family. My dad started studying in Argentina and moved to Israel in 1965 for a year to learn Hebrew, then back to Argentina to finish his rabbinical studies. His last two or so years were in Israel - he was studying with Tuviah Friedman [a Nazi hunter and director of the Institute for the Documentation of Nazi War Crimes] and he got his

[smicha](#) from him in 1973. He went back to Peru, took over the synagogue there, married my mom. He was there in Lima for two-and-a-half years then in 1976 he moved to Sao Paolo where my brother was born in 1977. In November 1979 they moved to Puerto Rico where I was born in January 1980. In 1982 we moved to Los Angeles, California and my sister was born there in 1983.

CP: So there's a lot of moving around in the family...

RK: And I'm not done yet. We moved into my grandfather's house in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, for the first year.

CP: Was that Fritz's house?

RK: No, Fritz had died in 1977 in Peru. This was my mom's father, Hans, who died in 1997. We moved into his house for the first year in Los Angeles and my dad took over a shul in Inglewood and lived there for two or three years and then we moved further south to a city called Cerritos and the synagogue was a mile away [from our home] and he stayed there for fifteen years. I'd left at that point to the university. And then he moved further south to Irvine where he was the head of Judaic Studies at a [Jewish] day school, then he moved to Vancouver where he was a rabbi for ten years. He retired there last year and now he lives in Atlanta, Georgia with my mom. My sister is there with her two kids and her husband and my brother is in Washington DC with his wife and their three kids.

CP: And your brother is a rabbi as well?

RK: Yes.

CP: In your father's family was he the first rabbi?

RK: He was, as far as we can tell...there wasn't really a rabbinic tradition. On my mom's side there is a famous rabbi, I don't really know much about him. That is not to say my father's family was not heavily involved in the Jewish community but I don't think there was a rabbinic tradition. We have documentation on my father's family going back to 1708 or something like that in the family tree. In the city where they lived, Naumburg, one of the ancestors [named] Kaiserblueth was responsible for bringing the chazan for High Holydays, the shochets, the cheder teachers, so they were really helping to organise the community but they weren't necessarily the spiritual leaders of the community.

CP: And in South America how different is it growing up as a Jew compared to, for example, here or in the US? How would it have been for your father?

RK: The difference I think...well it would have been different then from how it is now. Then there would have been quite a few refugees coming from Europe because a lot of countries had closed their border [to Jewish refugees]. It was very very difficult to get anywhere. The reason they went to South America was that that's where they could get a visa – it was as simple as that. My mom's father was trying to get a visa to the States but he was applying in writing to people with his same surname but in New York I think or maybe St Louis – my

mom told me this story – he somehow got the phone book from New York City I think it was, and started writing to every Wachtel he could find. He was Austrian. And he wrote to all these people and never heard anything. So his buddies were going to Lima and they said ‘come with us’ so he said ‘ok’, he got a visa and said ‘let’s go’. He was boarding the ship, or about to board the ship, and he got a telegram from his family in Vienna telling him that his visa for the States came, and he said ‘you know what? It wasn’t meant to be’. And he went to Lima. I’m not sure if that’s exactly what happened, but that’s the story I was told. He left Vienna in 1938, so he just barely got out [before the war]. His girlfriend at the time, who eventually became his wife, she got as far as London. He got to Lima. She couldn’t leave London – I don’t remember why, but she couldn’t get out of London – so he’s in Lima, they married by proxy over the phone, the civil marriage, so then she could get a visa to join him in Lima, then the chuppah came later.

CP: That’s determination for you.

RK: Yes. They weren’t sure if it was going to work out. It [was more a case of] ‘let’s do this so you can get out of Europe’. They ended up having two children. He started tinkering with electronics, lamps, also riding a bike between cinemas carrying film reels [to earn money]. Thirty odd years later when he left Lima he owned five electronic appliance stores so he was a hard tough tough worker, determined. When he was diagnosed with a precursor to lung cancer they said ‘you have six months to a year to live’. He says ‘I’ll show you’ and seventeen years later he died.

CP: Sounds like he was a strong personality. Do you remember him?

RK: That’s putting it mildly. He died when I was seventeen. My dad’s parents passed away well before I was even born and my mom’s mom passed away when my mom was sixteen. But my mom’s stepmom just passed away four years ago.

CP: Tell me more about your mom’s parents.

RK: My mom’s dad was Hans. Her mom was Erni and her stepmom, my grandfather’s second wife, was Edith. For all intents and purposes she was my grandmother. And it never occurred to me until much much later in my life that Edith [does] not mean Grandmother, it’s her name. It just was never... but that was the difficulty, my mom’s mom died when she was sixteen and then my grandfather remarried when she was eighteen. It was a very very tough transition, very difficult. [Edith] all of a sudden had two grown children so...I was very close with her. She was a very interesting lady. She had a lot of challenges in her life growing up. When she left Vienna and came to London the father – we’re not sure exactly – seems he had some sort of mental or nervous breakdown. The mom couldn’t work really, so [Edith] at fourteen or fifteen had to be the breadwinner for the entire family and she got to the States after the war, in the 1950s or something like that, and [with the challenges of being] a woman, got a Master’s degree from the University of Chicago. She was quite impressive. Then she moved out to Los Angeles to work for a guy doing some sort of research, I can’t remember exactly what it was, and then her cousin died in Peru so she went to help [the family] and she gave up her career to stay with my grandfather [Hans].

CP: So she met your grandfather through...

RK: I'm not sure if they met before or not – I don't remember that part of the story – but she gave it all up [to be with my grandfather]. I can only imagine how hard it was in the 1950s for a woman to get a Master's degree. That was just not very common. There's getting in, and dealing with what I am sure wasn't a lot of pleasant comments from some colleagues...

CP: About being a woman, about being Jewish...

RK: Yes, and not married, I mean you name it!

CP: She would have had quite a lot to deal with.

RK: And she was quite a personality. Unfortunately I don't know if it was just regret that she didn't pursue [her career]. So she passed away in 2012.

CP: Did your mom have a good relationship with her after the initial transition?

RK: It was a very difficult relationship and [my mom] will freely admit that. My uncle, mom's brother Tony, also will say they weren't easy on her. Later in life they regretted that, that they didn't make things easy on her, but on the other hand, as an eighteen-year-old kid whose mom just died and how you have somebody else taking over, that's not an easy transition to make. So it was difficult. But I was very close with [Edith]. I always called her once a week, even after I moved here. So her passing away was difficult for me because my brother and sister had grandparents at their weddings, and I didn't. [She was the last of] that generation gone.

CP: You didn't have any grandparents at your wedding?

RK: We had Rachel's grandfather there. Depending on who you ask, in May he'll either be 102 or 104, depending on which document you look at. It seems that they forged some documents to make him appear a little bit younger so they could get him out of Russia before being drafted into the military. That's what it seems like. So he has some documents that say he's 103 and some documents say he's 101 and they weren't so scrupulous with the paperwork in Eastern Europe, whereas on my Dad's side, in Germany, we have lots of great records. On my mom's side we have some pretty good records, but some sides of the family come from Romania or Poland and all we have is names.

CP: What happened to your mom's grandparents?

[Pause while RK writes a text, but no pause in the recording.]

CP: I'd like to go back to Jewish life in South America.

RK: So, Jewish life in South America...it must have been in the late 1950s there was a rabbi by the name of Marshall Meyer who came from the States down to Buenos Aires and he really brought [Masorti](#) Judaism there so much so that today that's the dominant form of

Judaism in South America. It's not necessarily the Masorti Judaism that we [in the UK] know, it's much more left wing so a lot of the [synagogue services] will have music in them, they're very geared towards social action, charity work but also a deep deep sense of community. There are somewhere in the region of half a million Jews in Latin America and some of the communities are not very large, but they are very well organised. When I finished university I had another gap year because I didn't know what I wanted to do so I went down to Argentina, to the synagogue [Marshall Meyer] had founded, and worked there for the year which was amazing to see. In many ways it had a lot of similarities to what we do here with the deep sense of community and outreach and those sorts of things. They've had to deal with quite a bit of political instability in a variety of different countries and consequently they have very high rates of aliyah. They're very very Zionist also. For example, when the rabbinical students from the different seminaries get together in Israel for their year of study, you have the ones from South America [whose spoken] Hebrew is very very good because they've been learning from a young age. But they don't have the facilities or faculty – because [Jewry] is a much smaller institution – but they have Jewish communities in many of the different [South American] countries, in Lima, in Colombia, they have some massive synagogues in Brazil. My dad led one in Sao Paulo which [had a membership of] sixteen hundred families or thereabouts, huge. In Argentina they have a bunch. So in the tremendous area of South America, or should I say Latin America, you don't necessarily have Jews so widespread but concentrated in areas. But unfortunately in certain countries like Venezuela – with all the [inaudible] they've had over the last I don't know how many years, and the economy being destroyed, the Jewish community has dwindled down to I think three thousand Jews left, not very many left now. Peru has four to six thousand. The big centres really are Argentina and Brazil, and Argentina has decreased considerably because of the economy and the situation there which is really difficult. But it's still one of the largest [Jewish communities] in the world, I think it's fourth or fifth. There's a kosher McDonald's there!

CP: I've heard it's a great place to go if you want kosher meat.

RK: Oh, the meat there is just spectacular.

CP: You said the Jewish communities in South America are predominantly Masorti. Before the Masorti rabbis came along, would you say they were mostly Orthodox?

RK: I would say that distinction didn't really apply so much there. It was, I'd say, traditional. Beforehand you had a large amount of Sephardic Jews and then with the immigration before the war starting in the 1920s and 30s, there were a tremendous number of Ashkenazi Jews came for the same reason that immigrants from Germany, Italy and England and all those [European] countries came there. There was great opportunity, there was work, the same as in the States. Originally though – I forgot when – Jews were not allowed to own [property or businesses] or live in Buenos Aires, in the city, until I think it was the Rothschild family bankrolled and bought plots of land to the north, way to the north of Buenos Aires, in an area called Moises Villa – Mosesville! – and they became Jewish cowboys. And there was a Jewish centre there, where they were allowed to live – that's one of the places where I worked – they established a teaching institute, so for years, if you wanted to become a Jewish educator, even if you worked in Buenos Aires in the centre of

the Jewish community there, you would go up to Mosesville. Unfortunately the population there has dwindled. It's really in the middle of [nowhere]. It was an eight hour bus journey. It's a little tiny village now, with one working traffic light. By the time I went there, that's all that was left. But it's the same phenomena you're seeing here in England – Jews are leaving the provincial towns, and moving to London or Manchester, Birmingham to a lesser extent. [The Jewish community in] Glasgow for example has dwindled. [There were] once twenty or thirty thousand Jews, now [the community consists of only] four or five thousand. All of these towns...you're seeing that phenomena happened already in Argentina. I'm not necessarily so familiar with the other [South American] countries because I haven't lived there. Peru was never a massive Jewish community. It was a decent size, but not humongous.

CP: Do you think that the Ashkenazi traditions overtook the Sephardi traditions or there a sort of blend of traditions?

RK: Yes and no. As with many places, you have a melding of traditions, even here we meld some of the Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions. In our day and age I don't think the distinction any more is Ashkenazi and Sephardi. It's American, Israel and the peripheries. You're having this melding of things. And is still early in this mixing, but that's the new distinction that you're beginning to see so – you have vestiges of Ashkenazi traditions and Sephardi traditions, but you don't really have so many distinctions. Keep in mind that some people who are still alive are first generation immigrants, they are the first generation who were born [in South America] and they still have their parents but their kids, the ones my age are really doing a lot of the mixing and the blending, and there are 'intermarriages' between Ashkenazi and Sephardi families so you're starting to see a lot of that mixing. It's been eleven years since I've lived there, so it's been a while.

CP: It's interesting for people who don't know too much about Judaism or about the differences between religious practices and traditions. There are family traditions as well as community traditions, and there [are] different elements that blend together. In your household [when you were growing up], how would you describe a typical Shabbat?

RK: A typical Shabbat I remember growing up [consisted of] every Friday my grandfather and grandmother Edith – I call her my grandmother because she [played the role of] my grandmother, even though technically she's my step-grandmother, but she's my grandmother – they would come over in Los Angeles, usually about 3.30 or 4.00pm – and [my grandfather] would go straight to the recliner and have a siesta, and then within twenty minutes we'd hear the snoring! That's one of the things he picked up from South American culture, you take a siesta. It doesn't have to be long – twenty minutes, an hour or whatever – and then we would get ready for dinner. At six o'clock we'd sit down for dinner. At that time my dad's shul services were at 8 o'clock on Friday night and we were young so we needed to eat beforehand. It never occurred to me that that wasn't the normal way to do things.

CP: Because normally [now] you'd expect to do it the other way around: shul first, then dinner?

RK: Exactly. So we would eat dinner and we would do services, and a lot of times we would be rushed because we had to leave [for services]. Sometimes, in the summer, it wouldn't even be [Shabbas](#) yet so we would eat, go to shul, then come back and do Kiddush and [light Shabbat] candles. It was a little...I had no frame of reference so I didn't know that wasn't the way you [would usually] do it. Every week, unless my grandparents were on vacation, every Shabbas they would be with us.

CP: And they lived where?

RK: They lived in Santa Monica and we were in Inglewood, and then Cerritos. [Inglewood] was about 10-15 minutes away, and then later [Cerritos] was about 20-25 minutes. Later on as traffic got worse and worse it took a little bit longer. That's why they came so early in the afternoon [to avoid traffic].

CP: Were your grandparents [religiously observant]?

RK: Not really. They were with us, but when they were on their own I'm pretty sure they weren't. They made the effort [for us]. With my dad's parents, his mom was [observant], his dad was not, but once my dad went into rabbinical studies his dad studied on his own and learned and eventually became the president of the synagogue. Hans also later became president of the synagogue so they really became involved – I don't know if that was ritually speaking, but they certainly became involved in the community. A typical Shabbas was always about family. Because my dad worked crazy hours, we didn't really see him much during the week. The one thing we got to do was breakfast in the morning, and dinner. When my dad came home we ate dinner with him because that was sometimes the only forty-five minutes of the day that we saw him. My mom made sure that when he comes home dinner's ready and we eat with him.

CP: I suppose he might have had to go out again...

RK: He did have to go out, almost every night he would have to go out – he was a rabbi [caring for the community], he was also teaching...and later on I realised that it was very tough, economically speaking. Moving from South American to Los Angeles, he didn't have a job. [We moved] to be close to family. His parents had already passed away, my mom's father was still alive, we lived in their house. My brother and I lived on the floor of my grandfather's office. But again, I didn't realise until many many years later that this was not normal. But we loved it! And so for us Shabbas became a time we'd spend with my dad. We really enjoyed going to shul with him, hearing stories... [We were] observant but it was never about what you're not allowed to do on Shabbas. It always became fun. We played board games, we had ice cream, we went to the pool, we went to the park, walked the dog...it was [these] things we got to do on Shabbas. It was never prohibitive, it wasn't a burden, it was a joy, it was something to look forward to. So for me, [those] were the rituals of Shabbas – grandparents always there, and the family. We had guests over from time to time also. Home is ...this is where I learned it from, and Rachel also, our home is open. We want to enjoy...it's not really Shabbas or a yom tov, a Jewish festival, unless your table is full [with friends and family] and you have a beautiful meal and you bring out the nice china.

That's just what you do. [That's how it was in my family] for as far back as I can remember. My dad would sing [zemiroth](#) at the table, benching [grace after meals]...

CP: That was a big part of your life and the best part of your week by the sound of it.

RK: Absolutely. It was absolutely something we looked forward to because we got to see my dad. He worked such ridiculous hours. I realise now, when he tells me now, that it was to make ends meet. We didn't realise how difficult it was until much much later on in my life.

CP: As a kid, you don't [have much perception of that struggle].

RK: They insulated us from that, they really did.

CP: Did your mum work outside of the home?

RK: Not really, until later. At the time she was Mom, which is a full time job but you just don't get paid for it. I know that now because Rachel is doing it. She does work a little part-time but [there's] the expense of day-care and all these other things so...

CP: Is it worth it, to go work, and what is it you want from work?

RK: And having a stranger raise your child. For some people that's the right thing. [My parents] didn't [feel it was the right thing for them]. That was the deal they made. My mom studied. She worked for, I think, IBM in Peru in administration, though I can't remember exactly what she did, but she runs the house and she did a very good job of that.

CP: How inevitable do you think it was that you and your brother should both become rabbis?

RK: I don't think it was inevitable at all. In some ways yes and in some ways no. I really didn't know what I wanted to do, so I studied at university – I studied military history and got a degree in military history. I got a degree in Talmud and it's not really a minor but in the States, to go into medicine, in your BA you have to do what's called pre-medical studies so I did all those – I covered my bases. I did science, I did liberal arts and I did religious studies because I had literally no idea what I wanted to do and I finished university at twenty-three and I still didn't know what I wanted to do. I had started the application process to go to rabbinical school but I wasn't inspired to do it. I had studied Talmud, but being a rabbi is much more than that. I had an interest in it. I knew at that point that I didn't want to do medicine any more. I loved the human aspect of it, the interactions. I worked for six years on an ambulance, I volunteered in New York City.

CP: That must have been interesting...

RK: It was awesome.

CP: Was that while you were at Columbia [University]?

RK: Yes. In 1999 I studied for my certification and from 2000 to 2006 I was working on the ambulance. It was an amazing experience, but I knew from looking at my friends who were in medicine, or going to go into medicine, it's not something that I was really passionate about any more. It wasn't that I couldn't do it, but...it was as simple as that – I wasn't passionate about it anymore. History, which I love, military history, is still a hobby of mine, reading about it on my time off. But what do you do with that? I talked to one of my professors and the way that he sold a career to me left me feeling really underwhelmed. It didn't do anything for me. To this day I still love reading history and studying about it on my own time, but I didn't really know what to do with that. I thought about going into teaching, I thought about becoming a nurse because I still love medicine and the human interaction and then finally Rabbi Joe Brody sat me down. He was Director of Jewish Student Life at JTS. This is while I was away in Argentina – I had come back because I knew I had to get ready for graduate school but I still didn't know what I was doing. This was in January 2004. I came back from Argentina for a couple of weeks, because that's their summer break, and I needed to get letters of recommendation and applications done and he had been someone who I knew and trusted at JTS, as Director of Jewish Student Life, and I sat down and said 'I'm lost and I don't know what to do'. And he said 'tell me about what you like to do' and I said 'Judaism is such a part of my life, I love people, I love this [and that], that's why I thought about medicine'. And he said 'I'm just curious. You just rattled off that you love your tradition, you love teaching, you love people. I'm just curious – why are you not considering becoming a rabbi?' And it was only then, at that point, that the penny dropped, like "ping!" So I said 'when you put it that way...' then I said my dad does that, I don't [want to do the same thing]. And he said 'that's ridiculous. If that's the reason you're not doing it, that's ridiculous.' And it finally occurred to me that I can do this...if doesn't have to be my dad's way, it can be my way. I'm definitely inspired tremendously by my dad: he's my rabbi, he's my teacher, my mentor...and scarcely a week goes by when I haven't called him one or two times saying 'hey, how would you handle this? I'm trying to find a source to connect this with this...He has forty something years of experience. Why wouldn't I call on that, plus he's my dad!

CP: Plus he's retired now...

RK: Yes, he has the time!

CP: And he's only too happy to talk to you about it, I'm sure...

RK: Yes, it's a pleasure for me to sit and just absorb as much as I can from him. There was no pressure from him to do this work. I'm absolutely certain that he was thrilled that I'm doing it but there was no pressure [such as] "this is the family business and you're going into it". So in a very circuitous, roundabout way...I had a lot of options of what I could do. I came to this, and I love it. I've been able to do some incredible things with it, the Navy work that I get to do, the pulpit work, teaching...it's just really a fantastic experience so I'm thankful and grateful for the experience he gave me, and maybe a gentle nudge. But the support and the encouragement to pick what I want to do. So I got to this [rabbinical work] because it's what I want to do not because I felt pressured into doing it or had no other options.

CP: It's the best way to make any decision...

RK: Absolutely. On the other hand I should have known better. Sometimes being a rabbi is not the easiest profession and I should have known better because my dad did it. Working for Jews can be tough! But it's been a fantastic journey. And [I'm] only five-and-a-half years into it – I was ordained five-and-a-half years ago.

CP: And you have a lot of variety in the job...

RK: Does it ever!

CP: And your brother, what about him?

RK: He's also a rabbi, but he's not a pulpit rabbi. He's executive director of Hillel [in Washington DC]. He does some rabbinic work but [mainly] he runs the George Washington University Hillel in Washington DC. Hillel is roughly like the JSoc. He runs a lot of different programmes there, and [Hillel] has [its own] building. There's lots of fundraising that goes on all the time, study programmes [and so on].

CP: And that's within the campus?

RK: Yes. For all the university students there. I think they have about twenty to thirty thousand students there, not all Jews. But the first university [my brother, Yoni] worked at, the University of Florida at Gainesville, there were fifty thousand students, eight thousand of [whom] were Jews.

CP: Would you say that's a high percentage?

RK: That's a very high percentage. But there are some universities that have, easily, two thousand Jews. How many Jews does, say, Cambridge have? Definitely nothing like that! But there's also seven million Jews in the US, and three hundred thousand in the UK so it's a different universe, a very different universe.

CP: There are probably more Jews in Birmingham I'd guess than any other university.

RK: Right, you have the Jewniversities, is that the term?!

CP: I haven't hear that before! Leeds, Manchester...

RK: Yes, Leeds, Manchester...I just went to visit a bunch of them a couple of years ago including Bristol, Bath, Durham. I never made it to Glasgow. There are some [Jewish students], but nothing like the scale, or the resources that you have in the States. So this is what [my brother] does.

CP: Maybe you could tell him to come over here. Maybe he'd be able to get more Jewish students in universities [involved]!

RK: I'd love to – I tell him 'you're spending how much money on sending your kids to Jewish day school? Come over here, it's free'!

CP: It's all private [in the US], and you don't have to pay here.

RK: And it's really expensive over there.

CP: Tell me about your work with the Navy.

RK: I also had an itch for...I live a life of service, that's what I do. I volunteered on an ambulance, I'm serving my people as a rabbi, and there's something about the United States that I deeply love. Aside from its flaws, and its political process which is driving me insane, watching it from afar...

CP: You still get to vote...

RK: I still get to vote and I will. I haven't missed one yet. But they took my family in. They were in South America then they moved to Puerto Rico first, then to LA. I was the first one in my family born in the States and I feel that if we hadn't moved there, we would not have what we have today in terms of the opportunities, the stability...and I feel that I owe something and the opportunity came that I could serve in the military. The [military recruiters] came in my first year of medical school to recruit, just telling us about the programme, and I thought 'cool'! I had a brief flirtation with enlisting in the Navy out of high school. It didn't come to anything but I talked to the [recruiter].

CP: So it was just an idea...

RK: It was [the realisation] that I wanted to go to university and get a degree. I didn't want to enlist in the Navy. If I was going to do it I wanted to become an officer because I also had a look at the pay scale, the [career] advancement rates...I know what the enlisted guys make, and it's not much at all. So I thought, great, I'll do a summer with [the Navy]. It's called the Chaplain Candidate Programme. You go through abbreviated basic training, a crash course in how to be an officer and four weeks you're serving out wherever you are.

CP: So you would count as being an officer...

RK: I was commissioned, I was an officer, and I thought you know what – part of me [thought] 'this is great, I can make a lot more money than if I went to summer camp'. What do you do as a rabbinical student? You work at the synagogue, you work at a summer camp, you study...I'm always one – I'm sure you know by now – I like sometimes to take the road less travelled, looking for a bit of adventure, something new and something different. So I said 'you know what? I'll do this for the summer. I'll play soldier for the summer, or sailor or whatever for the summer!' It never occurred to me that I would stick with it. I thought it would be fun and different and after that seven weeks...basic training was at Newport, Rhode Island, then they shipped me out to the base in San Diego. I was at the base there serving on different ships and hospitals [and so on].

CP: That sounds great!

RK: It was phenomenal, I absolutely loved what I did.

CP: You were working as a chaplain – were you advising just the Jewish [sailors]?

RK: No, that's the beauty of it for me – that it's not just the Jews. I mean, you're there for the Jews, but the good analogy I give is how many hours a week am I in services here [at SAMS]? Friday night it's an hour, Shabbat morning it's about three hours, so about four hours a week. What do I do the rest of the time? It's not playing video games here I promise! But you're meeting with people, counselling people, marriage counselling, barmitzvah training, visiting people who are sick, counselling people who are having some difficulties, grief and bereavement and all sorts of stuff like that...and [when I'm on naval duty] I do that but it's not just for Jews, it's for everybody. I teach classes and you're also dealing with an average age of, I think, twenty-one in the military and there are a lot of kids that do stupid things because they're eighteen, nineteen years old and so working them through their processes and getting them back on their feet is very rewarding. Plus I'm giving something back to my country which I feel everybody should do. I don't necessarily mean in the military, but I think everyone should somehow serve their country in some capacity. It really reinforces the sense of you being part of something bigger than yourself, which I think in this day and age we seem to have lost. It's all about 'me me me' or 'my my my'. Judaism is not about that at all so my Jewish identity and my service to the military go very much hand-in-hand. I'm part of a Jewish community but that means I'm also part of something larger than myself in this country where I live and where I serve, I want to serve. So I give the opportunity for the Jews to have some kind of Jewish experience if they're out in the middle of the ocean or I've had the singular experience of having to advise two Muslim students about Islamic law on if they're allowed to fast or not during Ramadan while they're doing basic training. Why doesn't that make the news?! 'Rabbi teaching about Islamic law'! And it was brilliant – where else can I have that kind of opportunity?

CP: That's amazing. You had to learn about Islamic law first...

RK: Yes, I had to get in touch with – there are only three or so Muslim chaplains – so I had to talk to them and say 'how does this work?' and they gave me the sources, and I'm quoting the Koran and an Imam, and they were like 'thank you very much Rabbi'!

CP: That's a great story!

RK: Yes – and that doesn't get advertised...

CP: Can you tell me a bit more about that? How did you advise them in the end?

RK: It was remarkably similar to Jewish law in that you're not allowed to. It's not that you shouldn't, it's that you're not allowed to [fast] during basic training. In that sense it's called – I don't remember the term in Islamic law – but in Jewish law it's called sh'a dacha, which means, loosely translated, in an emergency situation in the military. And your primary concern is being able to do your job, which means you don't die – in essence, saving your

life. When you're burning something like three thousand calories a day during basic training, and it's hot, you're moving around, you need to be hydrated and you need to eat. It's as simple as that. They treat it like combat, and in combat you would never think about fasting. You just don't do that. It's the same in basic training. So it means going through that process to them, explaining to [the new recruits] that this is what it is, this is why you have to eat – not you should eat, you have to eat. [And they said] 'ok, no problem. Solved.'

CP: Their families wouldn't [necessarily] have known...

RK: They're not allowed to talk with their families. In basic training they're only allowed to talk to them once a week or something like that. It's interesting that in certain cases where they might not be observant or religious at all, across all faiths, you come to basic training, you need something to...what's that saying? There's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole.

CP: [The new recruits] are in a completely new situation, so you hang on...

RK: You hang on to anything, any vestige, of comfort. I've been able to...someone who hadn't lit Shabbas candles in...I don't know how old, she was a dentist or a doctor on board one of the ships I was on in the middle of the ocean and that Friday they had flown me – we were a group of three ships – and the night before they had flown me [to one ship where] I did Shabbat services on Friday morning, the second ship in the afternoon, then back to my ship just in time to light candles and I just happened to ask her – I knew she was Jewish – and I said 'I'm exhausted, I missed dinner' – they kept a plate warm for me – 'do you mind sitting with me while I light candles, say [kiddush](#) and eat dinner' and she said 'yes, I'd be happy to'. I lit them and she said 'do you mind if I say the blessing with you?' and she remembered it [even though] she hadn't done it...since maybe before her bat mitzvah. She was in her late twenties or early thirties at that point. So [it was] the first time she gets to light candles. The next week there was a couple of pilots who were flying around. [It had been announced] on the ship that Shabbat services if you're interested will be in such-and-such a place and one of the pilots came down [and said] 'I haven't been to Shabbas services in ten years. Thank you very much'. So you give these opportunities to people who don't necessarily have [them]. You're also an ambassador of [Yiddishkeit](#) in that sense because you have some of these recruits who come off the farm and know nothing [about Judaism]. So I've had them say – not because they're anti-semitic, just ignorant – 'so you're Jewish. Where are your horns?' And they just don't know any better, they just don't know any better. So to be able to dispel some of those notions and show 'I'm normal just like you' is invaluable...

CP: to debunk Jews as 'other'...

RK: Yes. I mean you get to do some fun stuff too, like how many rabbis do you know of taking the helicopter to shul? How many rabbis do you know who have steered an aircraft carrier?

CP: [Tell me about] the helicopter to shul...

RK: I was taking the ship...

CP: Going from one [ship] to the other?

RK: Yes - they call it, when the chaplain's on board, the Holy Helo. When it's the Jewish chaplain, they call it the Kosher Copter. It's been an incredible [experience], plus there are the practical things I get to learn from there. I mean I have to stay in shape. Plus I have to take regular classes on counselling and stress management and how to counsel people for depression, marriage counselling. So I was able to lead, last year, a marriage counselling retreat for thirty couples. I was gone for one Shabbas because the Air Force needed me to do it.

CP: How do you learn to do that?

RK: They give me the materials and it's a constant [learning experience]. Some people think that when you finish seminary you're done learning and then you go practise, but these books [indicates his office bookshelf] aren't here just for show.

CP: Also I'd guess that most of what you learn at seminary is religious...

RK: Not really. That's part of it – you learn a lot of bible and Talmud – but you also learn how to give sermons, you learn how to counsel...I concentrated on pastoral care. My core classes – [you] learn enough Talmud, but you never learn enough of that! – I focused on pastoral care. I wanted to make sure that I [knew how to counsel people] I love people. When people ask me what I do, [I say] I am in the business of people. That's what I do. So what better way than to learn how to listen is really what my job is – learning how to listen. There are counselling sessions where I don't really say much of anything except 'how are you?' and 'thank you very much for coming. We'll schedule another [appointment]'. The hour in between I don't say anything. I just let [whatever they want to talk about] come out.

CP: That's sometimes the best way isn't it...

RK: Yes. That was a hard lesson for me to learn.

CP: I suppose one's natural inclination is to try and fix the problem, when sometimes people just want to talk about it...

RK: Yes, there are some things you can't fix. One of my instructors told me, in my first pastoral class, 'I'm a fixer and this is what I want to do. I want to fix things'. And [he] said 'Really?' And [I said] 'yes'. And [he] said 'ok. Good. I want you to go and talk to that woman over there, in that hospital room, who is dying of terminal cancer, and you're going to fix that'. And that's the only way I learned, but I learned that some things you can't [fix]. Or change your definition of what it means to fix things. Because you're not going to cure her. So what is it that you can do for her? So he told me to go in [to the hospital room], listen and shut up. That was how he put it. And he was right. So that's the kind of stuff I get to do with the Navy. In many ways it mirrors what I do [at SAMS].

CP: It's very interesting to hear about it because I'm sure a lot of people [in the community] don't really understand what you do...

RK: A lot of people don't realise what it is that I do. They think when I go [to do a stint with the Navy], I go on vacation or something like that. I don't mean that literally!

CP: You get to wear a nice uniform and you get to shave your beard off!

RK: Rachel hates that! But in many ways it's a more difficult day than here because it starts at five or six in the morning. That means I'm there at six in the morning. And many times I can go until eight, nine, or ten o'clock at night.

CP: And if you're on board ship, there's no escape is there...

RK: There's no escape. You live, work, eat, and sleep. So your day on ship is...they are really really long days. They're fabulous days, amazing days, very varied – no day is the same. It starts to turn into Groundhog Day because you don't know what day of the week it is. There's no weekend! Because I'm a chaplain I don't stand to watch. Everybody on the ship has a job to do and they do it [at various times]. I don't stand to watch. My job is to look after people. [Inaudible few words]. You can be talking to the engineering guys at night time, bring them cookies and just start talking to them, or go up on deck and talk to the guys who have time off or go onto the bridge and talk to the guys there or whatever. I am always talking [to them] and schmoozing, and just letting them know that [I'm] there, and building relationship with them so when they need to talk to you, they know who you are.

CP: When you're on board ship as a chaplain are you the only one or is there a chaplain of another faith?

RK: It depends on the size of the ship. So when I was on a carrier, there were three chaplains from the ship. The carrier has basically two crews. It has the crew that runs the ship and the crew that runs the aeroplanes. The air wing has its chaplain, the ship has three chaplains and sometimes the escorting ships have one chaplain and they share who lives on the carrier. There could be as many as five or six chaplains on board the carrier at any given time. The amphibious ship that I was on has one chaplain for the ship and one chaplain for the Marines who are on board. Destroyers have one chaplain, if they [even] have one because they're a lot smaller so they might not have one.

CP: How long does your time [as a Naval reserve officer] typically last?

RK: I did this chaplain candidate [programme] for my time in seminary, so that was six years, then I left that and went directly into the active reserves which is what I do now, so I have been doing that for...tomorrow will be exactly five years in active reserves. And I know that because my commissioning date was on my birthday. It just happened to work out that way [which was] great. Easy to remember!

CP: So that does that mean you don't know when you're going to be required? Do they just call you or ...?

RK: Theoretically if they need to mobilise me for something, theoretically, they have to – by law - give me six months' notice, that's if I'd be gone for months at a time or whatever. My normal things are planned all throughout the year so I have to go...but the thing is that the Navy is a bureaucracy – I'd like to say like any other bureaucracy, but I have a feeling it's a lot worse than any other bureaucracy. Sometimes I'm scheduled to go and then the government shuts down, like happened last year, so I didn't go. I went late. I'm at the whim of the government bureaucracy.

CP: Being [in the] Reserves is different from being on active duty?

RK: Yes. [Being on] active duty would be my full time job, that's all I would do. The Reserves I go two weeks a year and if I was living in the States or near a Reserve centre it would be one weekend a month. But I'm not flying to the States once a month because they don't pay for that.

CP: Fair enough! I don't know if you have time...can we take another few minutes to talk about your trip to Germany?

RK: Yes, absolutely. So in August 2012 my father and I...well my father started – and I've been working a lot with him - doing a family tree. And we flew to Frankfurt, spent a little time there, then we went to Cologne, then [my parents] continued – I only went for a couple of days – but we saw the places, the homes where his ancestors were, just his parents. I think his mom grew up in Frankfurt and his father grew up in Cologne. What was eerie was that although they lived in different cities, their street addresses were the same. The same street name, the same street number! This is Fritz and Sophia. And then we saw the plaque on the ground, the stolpersteine, in Frankfurt, but then we also went back a couple of generations – I think it was in Frankfurt – [to] the cemetery there, on my dad's mom's side. There was Karl and his wife [whose name] I can't remember, and Julius, which was his brother I think – we found their graves – [they were] Fritz's uncle and father. So Karl, my dad's named after him; his name is Claudio Carlos.

CP: Karl was Fritz's father?

RK: Yes. I'm pretty sure Julius was [Karl's] brother. Julius I think had a son [called] Ernst. So hold on to that name for a second. In Peru my dad and mom had a really good friend...I can't remember his name now. His sister, who lives in Germany, is married to this guy who is on the board of directors or board of governors of his local day school. [The day school received a bequest in Ernst's] Will after Ernst passed away bequeathing his Estate to the school because he had no children. [The school] didn't know [Ernst], but they knew of him, he lived like a pauper. [The school was given] two million Deutschmarks or something. [And the school board is asking] so who is this guy? Ernst Kaiser-Blueth. So [the school board director] talks to his sister and brother-in-law in Lima [Peru] and asked 'Do you know [of anyone named] Kaiser-Blueth?' [And they replied] 'Yes, [there are some] really good friends of ours [with that name]. Let me put you in touch'. So they talked to my dad, and we were going [to Germany] anyway, so we met up with [my parents' friends brother-in-law] and it turns out he's I think my dad's great-uncle or something like that. He's on the family tree.

And the story we found out was – because Ernst kept everything, all these documents – the school board guy went into his house and found all these things. [For example] he has emigrated to Israel. They found his travel documents, all the stamps and everything [confirming where he'd been], and then in 1938 he found [Ernst's?] parents had been taken to Theresienstadt so he left by way of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa – the port – to Alexandria, then to Athens and Sicily...all the stamps were there so we knew exactly where and when he travelled – I think it was Sicily – trying to get his parents out, couldn't get them out - they eventually died there – he went to New York, enlisted in the US Army...I thought I was the first Kaiser-Blueth in the military but I wasn't. Until that point we didn't know [this about Ernst]. He was there on D-Day, he was there at the Battle of the Bulge. 1946 he was demobilised from the army, he stayed in Germany, joined the War Department, hunted Nazis for twenty or thirty years. [He] kept all of his evidence – [there was some evidence he had to turn over] but he kept all of his stuff and this is one of the things we found. Before that Ernst was just a name on the family tree. We knew nothing about him, nothing!

CP: Can you tell me again how you made the connection? You lost me a little bit there...

RK: Yes, so in Peru...I wish I could remember the guy's name! There was a friend of my parents, a member of the community when my dad was a rabbi there, his sister lives in Frankfurt. I'm sorry I just don't have the names off the top of my head. So, his sister was married to this guy who was on the Board of Governors of the school who received [a bequest in the] Will after Ernst passed away, giving everything to the school. But they didn't realise there was going to be anything because he saved all his money. So you get there, on this crazy convoluted path, and we were given copies of most of the paperwork. He let us look at anything that we wanted to look at and it just blew my mind. It blew my mind that this was a guy that we knew nothing about, nothing and now we know a lot! So that was part of what we did on this trip [to Germany]. Later on my parents went [without me] to Naumberg and that's when found out that the Kaiser-Blueths there had been instrumental in setting up the Jewish community there. And the gravestones that they found had all been pillaged, but the ones that were left were Kaiser-Blueths. I think it was Jacob, or was it Max...I don't remember which one it was. They talked to one of the [civic] employees or historian or council members or whatever, and he said 'Oh, you're Kaiser-Blueths – your family is famous here in this town. Let me tell you all about them!' [And my parents said] 'How do you know about them?' and he said something like 'we all know about the Kaiser-Blueths!' I wasn't [with my parents] for that part of the trip. But still, it's just incredible.

CP: It sounds a bit like Nick Grant's experience when he went to Germany. I don't know if he told you about that.

RK: Yes – incredible stories that you find out, when you find out that they were just normal people.

CP: And you didn't know because...

RK: There was no-one to pass the stories on to.

CP: Because [Ernst] didn't have children.

RK: Yes. And then my mom's father's father, Hans's father – I think – he was on a train in Austria in the 1930s which got blown up because he sat in the wrong seat. They were trying to kill a Nazi official but [Hans's father] sat in the wrong seat. So for some reason when he was buried they cremated him and he was never buried properly. The urn was left in a...so for the last couple of years my mom was trying to coordinate with the rabbi there. I wasn't able to [be there] for the actual burial because it was around the time [my son] Toby was being born so I kind of had to be here! We were finally, after almost eighty years, able to give him a proper burial in the grave of his parents. We never able to ascertain why...yes, he was blown up, and I'm sure there was tremendous damage done to the body, but why did they ended up cremating? That we've never figured out – why that happened.

CP: Because that's unusual [in Judaism]...

RK: Yes, we've never been able to figure that out. And why he wasn't given a proper burial either. We never knew. So we were able to make that happen. That was about a year-and-a-half ago.

CP: That must have been emotional for your mom. This was her grandfather...

RK: Yes. I think it was her grandfather – or her great-grandfather.

CP: It's funny when the past comes back, and comes into our lives...

RK: And it's just like the stories of things that they went through...you realise in some ways they're not so different from what we go through. How different really were things back then in certain respects. I wonder how would I cope living in that time and how would they [cope living in our time]? When people ask me that question 'who would you like to go back in time and meet'? I'd say some of my ancestors and just talk to them. [I'd say] just tell me stories about you. Because at the moment a lot of the entries in the family tree are just names, and dates of birth and death. We don't really know much of anything about them unfortunately.

CP: A time machine would be ...

RK: It would be incredible. This [family tree my dad created] is part of keeping this history alive because this is my dad's thing: roots and wings. We want to know where we come from and where we go.

CP: That sounds like a great title for this piece!

[Interview ends]