

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Sasan Abtahi

Interviewer: Keith Stewart

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Key

SA: = Interviewee, Sasan Abtahi

KS: = Interviewer, Keith Stewart

[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time

[5:22 IA] = inaudible section at this time

Word 5:22 = best guess at word

KS: So will you tell us where and when you were born?

SA: Ooh, I was born in Iran in January 1963, so that makes me a good 46-and-a-half years old.

KS: So my first question, can you tell me a bit about your background, and your childhood and where you grew up etc.?

SA: Yeah, I grew up in Iran in the south of the country in the Gulf region, the Persian Gulf region, where I was born in the City of Abadan. And we moved to Tehran the capital around when I was nine, and in 1976 I was dispatched on my own at the ripe old age of 13 to live in London and that's where I've been put 33 years now.

KS: Where did you come to in London?

SA: Blackheath I went and lived in; I was a border in a school for nine months in Blackheath. Lewisham town centre was the place we went to on Saturdays for fun, tenpin bowling and fast food, and Lewisham town centre in those days was, because of the shopping centre, it was one of the most spiking brand new shopping centres in the country. So everybody used to flock to Lewisham Shopping Centre. It had a glockenspiel in the centre of the shopping centre – it was quite a cool place in those days, it still is, I haven't been for many years but I've recently gone and the shopping centre is very, very dated but there's still a nice buzz about the place, yeah. Do you know Lewisham at all?

KS: A little bit, yeah. And how did it compare to Tehran then, what the difference is for you?

SA: Oooo, OK yeah. This will dominate the interview rather than Galop. Tehran was a huge metropolis, smaller than London then but it's much bigger than London now in terms of population. It was a city of 4.5 million people and I was from a relatively middle-of-the-road middleclass background, so we had a sort of nice lifestyle; middleclass people lived in nice spacious houses or flats. And everything was very, very dry in Tehran, Tehran gets hardly any rain – it snows a lot in winter but for most of the year there's hardly any rainfall so it's very dry and very yellow. And coming to London the first thing you notice is

green, everything is green and it all looks very pretty, but after a while you think everything smells damp and it never dries, your clothes never dry and all sorts of things feel different. But yeah, I grew to love London, initially I was homesick quite a lot but ... I would say one thing about being an immigrant is whatever background you come from, and I came from a sort of relatively comfortable middleclass background, when you come here you end up being completely, either outside the social structures or considered to be amongst the very poor, because you don't have an income to start with and so on. So that was the biggest shock, I transformed from being a middleclass kid in Iran within a couple of years to feeling like part of the urban poor in London, but I liked that, I thought there was a lot of kudos associated with being part of the urban poor in London, yeah.

<End of Part 1>

<Part 2>

KS: So tell me a bit about your involvement with Galop.

SA: Yeah. Now, in 1994 I got my job with London's biggest funding body, which was called, at the time, London Boroughs Grants. And as part of my job I was responsible for monitoring funding given by my organisation to a number of voluntary groups. One of these voluntary groups was Galop – in fact, I had two lesbian and gay groups within my caseload. One was Galop and the other one was Switchboard, London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, which used to be called in those days, I think, just The Gay Switchboard. And although I've come across the work of Switchboard, because Switchboard was very high profile as I was growing in London with a lot of publicities in say telephone booths with their helpline. I'd never heard of Galop before I started this job in 1994, so it was quite interesting to sort of, first of all, work out what Galop stood for, and there was ... this probably is going to be of interest to the oral history project. Galop I think, when I took over responsibility for funding it from London Boroughs Grants, had just gone through a rebranding process. Because Galop used to stand for Gay London Policing, and there had been quite a lot of debates, I think, within Galop about its image. And at the time there was a lot of strength of feeling expressed about lesbian organisations and lesbians in general in London, that the gay organisations were male dominated.

So The Gay Switchboard was essentially seen as a gay man's helpline, not nothing to do with the kind of support that lesbians would have needed. And Galop was seen as a gay man's policing project because there was a lot of issues around the policing of communities and how gay men were particularly singled out for, not particularly nice treatment by the police at the time. And what had happened is London Gay Switchboard had gone through a process of trying to open up to lesbians and it become London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. And Galop decided that it would want to retain the name Galop because it was a brand, but it no longer wanted to be known as Gay London Policing because Gay London Policing did not include the word lesbian in it. I think at the time Galop used to say, 'We are the Lesbian and Gay Policing Project for London.' But just used the name Galop, yeah.

So that was 1994 when I first started to work with Galop as their funding officer from London Boroughs Grants.

KS: And what were some of the issues that were around at the time?

SA: Ooh ... Galop's were a lot of it were around under-resourcing, where Galop really didn't have any money apart from ... I can't remember exactly, but I think it was something of the order of £25,000 a year that we gave them – something of the order of £20,000-£30,000 a year that London Boroughs Grants used to give Galop. And they were based in Leroy House ... are they still in Leroy? Actually no, they were in another building, I can't remember where it was, but they moved to Leroy House soon after I became their grants officer. And they never had enough money to have enough workers in place, although they had a number of volunteers who help them, and I think policing was quite a sensitive issue. So at the time there was a lot of debate about the police's engagement of lesbian and gay communities and what the lesbian and gay communities used to ... felt were the priority intents of how they interfaced and dealt and worked with the police.

Initially I think there was a strength of feeling that the police were treating lesbians, and gay men in particular, very badly in terms of sort of criminal justice issues that used to be very prevalent at the time, things like arrests, cottaging issues and so on. But when I became their grants officer in 1994 they were going through a process of getting closer with the police, and I think the police increasingly recognised that they had to have a more positive profile with the lesbian and gay communities. So I think they were going through a transformation from being seen as a pressure group which they had been before, and a campaigning organisation on lesbian and gay issues, which in a lot of cases probably brought them into some kind of confrontation, if that's the correct word, with the police to a policy development body which tried to promote good practice. And I think the Metropolitan police became increasingly more open to Galop's policy input, and through their structures I think the MET also recognised that they needed to be seen to be not homophobic and positive about sexuality.

So all these exciting things were going on at that time, but Galop was always quite limited in terms of the scope of its work because of its lack of adequate funding.

<End of Part 2>

<Part 3>

KS: You said about the police beginning to seem more open. Are there any examples of things that you've heard that were showing that?

SA: Yes, I think the police established a liaison group, I don't know when it was exactly but when I became the grants officer for Galop in '94 I think the liaison group was already up and running. And the police had begun to have regular meetings with lesbian and gay organisations, especially around high profile issues like when a gay man, in particular – I don't think there were any instances of lesbians, but when gay men had been murdered ... I think there was a mass-murderer who used to kill gay men in London, and the police worked very closely with the lesbian and gay community, and Galop, in order to raise awareness of safety issues, as well as try to investigate the murders. So I think that represented quite a positive sea change in the attitude of the police towards lesbians and gay men.

<End of Part 3>

<Part 4>

KS: And were there any things in the wider political context going on?

SA: Oh yes. Well, yes because Clause 28 became a hot issue within the lesbian and gay community because of the various position of central government at the time around the work that lesbian and gay groups had been undertaking around rights awareness, around recognition of lesbian and gay men's human rights, in terms of representation in, for example, children's books and stuff like that. And the government's Clause 28, I think, created a lot of ructions and there were huge campaigns around Clause 28 with which a lot of lesbian and gay groups were involved.

There was also an issue around the politics of lesbian and gay rights in that in the '90s when I joined my employer as a grants officer, people on the right of the political spectrum, in particular the conservative party, were not seen as gay friendly. And it wasn't just about Clause 28, it was generally an issue in terms of, for example, funding for lesbian and gay organisations through organisations like London Boroughs Grants, where I think the conservative group, which was in a minority at the time, when I joined the London Boroughs Grants it was essentially Labour controlled. By essentially I mean there may not have been an overall Labour majority at the time, but I think there was a kind of an alliance between the Liberal Democrats and Labour which controlled the committee. And I remember, and this is just obviously because it's oral history, it's not a precise science. But I remember a lot of the times when you took reports on continuation of funding for organisations like Galop and Switchboard, there would be not particularly supportive comments from some of the members of the committee who were councillors representing London boroughs.

So I think the politics of the lesbian and gay movement at the time was that it was seen as a particular area where the Liberal Democrats and Labour Party were particularly positive and supportive and the Conservatives were not seen as particularly supportive. I must add that I think things have changed over the years and I think the Conservative Party, in particular in London, that the Conservative councillors recognise that there is a lot of value in supporting initiatives for lesbians and gay men, and initiatives that actually promote the human rights of lesbians and gay men.

<End of Part 4>

<Part 5>

KS: Could you tell us ... Clause 28 was broadened by the Conservatives; how would you describe Clause 28?

SA: Oh god, you're catching me out there. Clause 28 was about ... if I remember correctly, it was about restricting public bodies, in particular education authorities, from ... basically taking a positive stand towards gay rights in terms of depiction of gay lifestyles. And I think Clause 28 tried to, if purge is a word in this respect, to purge a lot of education materials, textbooks and so on and curricular from an open discussion of sexuality issues. At the time I think there was a very strong lobby which said family values are being

eroded, and part of this is giving the same value, in terms of representational issues, to same-sex relationships as traditional male/female, father/mother married couple kind of relationships. Obviously it created a lot of problems because a lot of schools had gone way down the line of trying to promote the rights of individuals to ... live in open same-sex relationships. And there were issues around children of families where the parents were same sex, and how do you deal with that in terms of helping the child not to feel that they've come from a kind of different background which never gets represented in terms of the text and the pictures and the stories that they talk about at school.

So yes it was, I think, hugely problematic, not just from the perspective of the gay campaigning organisations, but from the perspective of a lot of public bodies who has, for a number of years, been working towards a positive about sexuality kind of agenda.

<End of Part 5>

<Part 6>

KS: Did it have any direct impact for you on your work?

SA: No, because what we do, even though we are funded by local authorities, the provision that we fund is non-statutory. Now if we had been funding statutory provision, for example, mainstream education 5-to-16, and some of our funding was being used, for example, to produce books which were positive about sexuality, that could've been problematic in terms of Clause 28, but because our services were deemed to be non-statutory the general assumption was that this was not going to be caught up by the Clause 28. So nobody really strongly advocated, even people who were particularly negative about sexuality equality, that we should stop funding, well, at least they didn't seriously advocate that we should stop funding lesbian and gay organisations. Because lesbian and gay organisations by virtue of what they stand for, in terms of promotion of a lesbian and gay man's rights, would come into arenas like education campaigns, promoting the rights of lesbians and gay men in relation to depiction in the curriculum and so on. But we never had an issue in terms of our area, as I said, because we were essentially deemed to be a funder of non-statutory provision.

<End of Part 6>

<Part 7>

KS: Coming forward a bit, thinking about your work with Galop, did it have any impact on you?

SA: Yes, I mean for me both Galop and London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard were eye openers, because I come from a cultural background where sexuality is quite a taboo subject. So ... if you ask people, as I said at the beginning, I'm from Iran and it's not just a religious thing because Iran is predominantly Muslim, although I am a kind of a non-religious person myself. It's essentially a cultural thing where when I was growing up in Iran the word homosexuality was never used, nobody ... I mean people told you that there are perverts and paedophiles who do disgusting sexual things to children, including men doing disgusting sexual things to young boys, but the issue of homosexuality was never there, and I come from a relatively enlightened

Iranian background. I remember my auntie when I ... she was only about ten years older than me, had a book about adult themes, it was about ... I think she was about 20 at the time and I was about ten. And I sneaked a look at her book and I came across this word, in Farsi, which is the transliteration of homosexual, which is a *homesexooal*. And I sort of didn't want to ask her because I didn't want to tell her I had take a peak at her book. And then I went to her and I said, 'What is this word?' And she said, 'Oh it's, you are too much of a child to understand.' I said, 'OK, but what is it?' She said, 'Oh it's something really awful.' <Chuckles>

So that's about the size of my exposure back home until I was 13. Obviously having lived in London I'd come across sexuality issues because I lived in West London, and for example, Earls Court used to have quite a lively gay scene. But for me as a teenage Iranian boy, sort of I saw that as something completely outside of my world, I would not ... I mean to be honest with you, there was a sort of an element of fear because the young men essentially who used to go to these establishments I could see, were all wearing clothes that looked strange, like leather gear and.... And so that was about the size of my experience <laughs>. But having sort of become politicised in London I embraced gay rights before I came to London Boroughs Grants all through my teens and early 20s, but I'd never actually had any contact with the lesbian and gay movement until I became the grants officer. So it was quite an eye opener for me.

I remember my fist visit to Galop first of all. I had assumed, because I had vaguely had a notion that Galop was Gay London Policing and it was about gay men's issues in relation to policing. I'd assumed that I'd see sort of gay men in the organisation fitting my stereotype, like wearing leather caps and stuff like that, but it was actually women who were <chuckles> the organisers. The chair was Lorraine Roberts who used to be the policy director of London Voluntary Service Council at the time, but she was doing the Chair of Galop ... she was the Chair of Galop in a voluntary capacity. And I think there was a ... I can't remember her name, I think there was a woman worker, although there was also a male worker. So I was quite surprised that it was essentially ... seemed a feminine organisation rather than what I had expected it to be, which was a male ... a gay men's organisation. Having said that, exactly at the same time when I went to visit London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, they were all men in Switchboard in their building in Penton Street in King's Cross, which is a fantastic building, I don't know if you've ever been to? And there were all men in London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. There nobody was wearing leather caps <chuckles> or anything like that, but it was quite an experience for me because as I entered the building there were posters, I think promoting HIV awareness and there were posters depicting same-sex close relationships like two sort of naked men hugging each other. And I sort of, I remember I sort of had to avert my eye a little bit and I thought my god, this is like my test of political correctness that I do not stare at these things, saying oh my god this is not something I'm used to. But having overcome the initial level of embarrassment yeah it was, I thought I personally benefitted greatly from contact with both The Switchboard and Galop. And to actually have a discourse with people who were activists of the organisations about their issues, whether they were funding, or their profile, or Clause 28 or whatever, I felt I got an inside. And I used to wear that as a badge of pride in my own community, because sexuality is such a taboo subject and most of my friends from the Iranian community in London would sort of say, 'I don't socialise with gay people, gay men or lesbians.' And I'd say, 'I'm the grants

officer for Galop, which is a gay policing project and for The Switchboard.' And they didn't know how to construe it because they didn't know what a grants officer was or what it entailed. And I let them sort of not know exactly so they thought I had become an activist of Galop <chuckles> or The Switchboard. And they used to give me sort of strange looks and say, 'Why are you doing this?' And I wouldn't explain I'd just sort of thought it's quite a lot of fun with my Iranian friends to sort of say, 'I'm so completely ahead of you in terms of the political correctness associated with knowing about the lesbian and gay community.' But apart from that flippant point, no, I think I learnt quickly from actually having proper face-to-face long term contact with lesbian and gay organisations, and recognising a lot of the rights based issues that these organisations were advocating for, which I'd always been sympathetic towards because of my left-leaning politics before, but I think coming in to contact with the organisation I realised that they were really clued up people who had been working for a long time on these various agendas. So yes I think it helped my personal development being the grants officer for the two organisations for a number of years, about five years or so.

<End of Part 7>

<Part 8>

KS: And what about the impact of Galop's work on the community, did you see any?

SA: Yeah. Galop obviously had always had a high profile amongst gay men in particular in relation to the criminal justice issues as community safety issues. In the five years that I was their grants officer they'd really gone in the direction of establishing good solid links with local authorities and the Metropolitan police, the MPA in particular, Metropolitan Police Authority. And through that Galop did a lot of ground breaking work around good practice around sexuality and public services. I don't know, and I have never judged to what extent that has had an impact in terms of Galop's profile in the wider community, I think the impact may have been indirect in that Galop would have been commissioned by say Lewisham Council, and I'm just sort of citing that from the top of my head, I don't remember that they did any work particularly for Lewisham, I'm sure they did. And through that the local authority would then publicise their new policies which basically were equality proofed in relation to sexuality. Whether the community realised that Galop had a hand in it or not is another matter, I think a lot of the impact of that kind of work is not viewed by the public as being directly associated with a particular organisation. But within the lesbian and gay community I know that Galop has still got a lot of recognition as an organisation that does a lot of good policy development work and its work gets covered in particular in the lesbian and gay press very well. But that would be ... because I've never gauged what the community's awareness of the work of Galop is, I've just had to make assumptions as their funding officer that the broader community benefits from the work without necessarily knowing that it's Galop that's behind some of those initiatives.

<End of Part 8>

<Part 9>

KS: And did you see any benefits or any feedback from the wider community outside of the gay community for what Galop did?

SA: Erm ... I'm trying to think. Not personally, because as I said my role is quite limited, was quite limited as their grants officer, and it was never about gaging, me gaging what's going on in the wider community or the wider voluntary sector. But from the [0:29 post] that I got from Galop, they did a lot of collaborative work with other lesbian and gay organisations, and other voluntary organisations in general, through networks like London Voluntary Service Council, which as I said, had its policy director act in the role of Galop's chair for a while, so that kind of interface was quite effective. So Lorraine, I remember, would always make sure that sexuality equality issues and gay policing issues would always feature in terms of some of the public work that LVSC did, which was a good advocate for lesbian and gay rights within the voluntary sector.

<End of Part 9>

<Part 10>

KS: And will you tell us again the period of time that you worked with Galop?

SA: Yeah, I think it was around 1994 when it started, and I think it lasted for four years or five years, before 2000 because my role changed and I became a manager so I no longer had direct link and interface with the funded organisations, yeah.

KS: OK.

<End of Part 10>

<Part 11>

KS: Over the period of time have you noticed any changes in the LGBT community?

SA: Hmm. Well yes, I mean... a few changes, I think the impact of European legislation even before it was formally introduced in the guises of the sexuality equality directives, was massive in that people used to be able, both to have free course to the European Court of Human Rights around sexuality discrimination, and then more significantly around employment issues using some of the European Union's Directives in relation the enforcement of rights and discriminatory rights. I think that's been hugely significant because once employers began to sit up and take notice that they could not discriminate, either directly or indirectly against lesbians and gay men, a kind of change happened both within the broader community AND I think a sense of greater assertiveness about rights occurred within the lesbian and gay community.

Also I think it was hugely significant that all political parties realised that whether it's 5% or 10% or even 2% of the population who are lesbian and gay, this is a huge voting bank and you cannot disregard it. So all the mainstream organisations, and even the Lib Dems had always been, I think, relatively good, but all the other political parties, in particular the Conservative Party, began to embrace gay rights. I remember in London for example, I may be wrong, but in the '90s I think the only out-gay MP was Chris Smith. And

now, I mean especially with the intake of Labour MPs in the 1990s there is, I don't know how many and I haven't taken stock, but there is a lot more MPs who are openly gay. One of the most significant Conservative politicians in local government in London in Westminster has recently married his gay partner and nobody's battered an eyelid within the Conservative Party. Which is a huge step forward, in terms of recognising both the fact that there are gay politicians and acknowledging their rights to seek fulfilment in an open and equal relationship, equal with non gay individuals in terms of having same partnership rights and same pension rights and so on.

So I think that has had a significant impact on the gay community itself, because the mainstreaming of the image of gay individuals, i.e. the existence of a lot of gay politicians, journalist, has meant that I think it's not longer a case of having to assert that you are just as entitled to seek happiness and all the other things that everybody is entitled to. And I think that's been quite a positive development. In terms of gay voluntary sector, my experience was restricted to groups that I funded and sort of laterally seeing organisations like Stonewall. But I think probably because of the changes in overall attitudes and the greater sense of assertiveness within the lesbian and gay community, there isn't as great a perceived need for gay specific organisations. I mean this may be a controversial point.

So I haven't seen a huge sort of groundswell of community activity to create and develop new gay specific organisations. Having said that I think what's happened is all that I've said so far, in terms of my analysis of the lesbian and gay community and community activity, is essentially restricted to the indigenous gay community. By that I do not mean white only, by indigenous I mean second generation migrant communities. Whereas with newer communities, including my own, the Iranian community, it's a huge issue in terms of acknowledgement of even the existence of lesbians and gay men within the community, acknowledgement by lesbians and gay men within the communities, the newly arrived communities that they need to be active, to create their own organisations, to advocate for their rights, to advocate for recognition of, not only their existence but their right to lead a happy and fulfilled life. And I think there is a long, long, long journey to be undertaken in terms of the newer communities, because I think sexuality is still a hugely taboo subject. And I think the existing structures, and community organisations tend not to have made a lot of headway, because of the fact that it's an enclosed world and the fact that lesbians and gay men within these newer communities are not themselves happy to come out and establish contact with the established lesbian and gay voluntary sector.

So I think there is two different worlds at the moment, you've got ... which is probably the same, for example, in rural areas. I would have thought that lesbians and gay men in rural areas or in particular parts of regions of the United Kingdom would have a different experience than Londoners. Because London is quite a comfortable place I guess in a lot of respects compared with the rest of the country for lesbians and gay men to live a normal fulfilled life without feeling that they are subjected to at least the gays of the non-gay community in terms of different individuals who are not necessarily viewed as part and parcel of the integrated community.

<End of Part 11>

<Part 12>

KS: And finally, any sort of changes you've noticed with the LGBT community and how the police are relating to them or vice versa.

SA: Well as I think I may have commented at the beginning, I think the huge drives forward were taken when the police opened up. I mean when I first became Galop's grant officer in '94, I think the police still had an issue about people acknowledging their sexuality within the ranks of the police. I don't remember exactly when the change happened, but there were so many tribunal cases where, gay men in particular, had complained – gay policemen had complained that they were treated really badly in terms of the canteen culture as well as the management structures and so on. And ... I'm really bad with names – the guy who was in Brixton, the senior policemen who was in Brixton and was the mayoral candidate, the Lib Dem mayoral candidate.

KS: Paddock.

SA: Paddock, thank you, Brian Paddock. I think Brian Paddock, in one instance, was so instrumental in terms of image of projecting a changed attitude within the police towards gay men. And the liaison work that the Metropolitan police did in saying it's not just we want to have sort of good links with the lesbian and gay voluntary sector in order to help sort out issues like the murder cases and so on, but the police sort of sending out these messages that we are positive about sexuality. I think there's obviously still a long way to go as there is with race within the Metropolitan police, but I think it's a completely different world from 20 years ago, where I don't think it's a case of, in particular, gay men feeling that they're constantly harassed by the police. I think the police have become a lot more open to the notion that what they traditionally saw as public order offences are not really public order issues. I don't think many people are arrested for so-called cottaging offences anymore, hopefully, and I think back that it's symbolic of some of the change. So I think the police has done structurally a lot of work to open itself to proper good liaison work with the lesbian and gay communities, and I think that has had an impact on the lesbian and gay communities. I think they no longer view the police as particularly hugely an enemy anymore, which I think is a positive step forward.

KS: Brilliant, thank you.

<End of Part 12>

<Part 13>

KS: Let's finish off then, anything you want to say, any other thoughts?

SA: No, I hope you're going to find that useful. As I said, my experience was really restricted to the four years or so that I was the grants officer of Galop, although we still fund Galop so I still get verbal brief updates from my colleague who's the funding officer, in terms of the work and how it's been developing within the organisation. And that's it.

KS: No worries Sasan, thank you very much.

SA: OK, thank you.

<End of interview>