



# Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots

## Interview with Michal Brandstatter

Interviewer: Nicole Redfern

**Interviewer 00:00:02**

Great. So today's date is Tuesday the 22nd of September 2020. And we are here in the Ockment Centre in Okehampton, and the interviewer is Nicole Redfern. Could I ask you to start by telling us your full name and your date of birth.

**Michal 00:00:15**

Michal Brandstatter. 12th of June 1965.

**Interviewer 00:00:21**

Thank you and you live here in Okehampton, I believe?

**Michal 00:00:23**

Yes, I am living in a village just outside at the moment. Lived here for about 15 years before and in fact just found a place to live, which is actually on the edge of Okehampton. So, yes. [laughter]

**Interviewer 00:00:38**

Great. Thank you. And to start us off, I think you have a photograph that you've brought with us to tell us about. Because it's an oral account, would you mind by starting describing the photograph?

**Michal 00:00:48**

Oh, gosh I feel emotional straightaway. So, the photograph is in Israel: I was born in Israel, which I'm sure we'll come to. It is taken in our house in Herzliya which used to be a village on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv's nearly there now, but it's still considered slightly separate. But we lived there when it was just lovely and open. I'm about three in the photograph, and I'm there with my cousin. We're inside the house, and my Mum is on the telephone looking incredibly glamorous, and very intent on the phone call. Behind her are two pictures which are actually sets from plays which she and my Dad directed. Me and my cousin Yankalay - a friendly form of Yakov, which is Jacob - we are on this little step. All of us are facing forward, which is extraordinary because what it looks like is that my Mum doesn't know the photo's been taken, but we do. And, we just look like the ultimate ragamuffins. Scallywags! We're we're

dirty, our hair's scruffy. I've got something on my hands, I don't know what. Mud, jam? - because it's black and white, I don't know. My legs are dirty. My clothes look very boyish, and quite clumpy shoes. And my Mum tells me that this is when we just been either picked up or dropped off from Gan, which is nursery school in Israel. But Gan in Israel is just basically playing outside. That's all I remember about it. I've just been doing my Mum's life story, similarly to this, and so we were looking through a lot of old photos. And when I looked at this photo, what I saw was that actually, we were like free-rein children. Which just - makes me feel quite emotional, again, because one of the things about Israel is it's really warm 10 months of the year. I mean, I would say 12 - but obviously, Israelis don't! I was born in '65, so this was probably '68 - also very safe. And I remember that we were very free: we were just allowed to run around! - and I remember there was a creek behind our house, and we used to just go and play down by the creek. Very little: I left before I was 4. I love this photo because I just love how I look. I love that side of me which is free rein and also kind of don't care what I look like: an adventurer. Also, unfortunately, my cousin had a lot of troubles in his life since, so it's also an age of innocence. I'm way older than my mum in the photo, so it's all that too. I also think it's an extraordinary composition of a picture ... I mean my Dad was really into taking photographs, so he could have just called to us - but we're also not putting on a fake smile for the camera. And Mum doesn't seem to even know ... But also the contrast between how scruffy we are and how beautiful and glamorous my Mum looks. And also because it was an interesting time, you know: issues between my Mum and my Dad ... That's enough for the moment, I think, unless you've got any questions.

**Interviewer 00:05:19**

No, just to say it's a wonderful photograph. And it might be nice to take a copy of it for the website, [if that's ok?]

**Michal 00:05:25**

[Absolutely.] Well, I can give you this one, but I could also obviously send it to you digitally, so it's better quality. Yeah.

**Interviewer 00:05:30**

Thank you. So can you tell me a little bit about your family? Your Israeli family and your mum is British, I believe?

**Michal 00:05:37**

Yes. Welsh, actually. So it's quite an interesting combination, because I think they're both quite - well, quite outgoing, and maybe more outspoken than English.

So basically, my Dad: my Dad's parents, were born outside Israel. And I'm not sure again, if this is completely accurate, but basically, they both came to Israel. My grandfather was from what is Galicia, which used to be Poland. And he came as a very young man and was part of what was called the First Aliyah: the first big movement of Jews back to Israel, in the last century. And he was part of the Kibbutz



movement, the early Kibbutz movement: very secular, very much about the land and about the - kind of Zionism. But not like Zionism, as in extremist politics, but Zionism, as in let's have a homeland for the Jews. Very lovely idealist, kind of quite romantic.

My grandmother was German. And I'm pretty sure that she came later. I actually think that he met her in Germany in Berlin. So they came over. And that was what was obviously happening a lot. A lot of Jews were coming from other places. So this is, you know, the turn of the 20th century, early 20th century, so before the Holocaust and stuff like that, but there were a lot of Jews returning to Israel anyway.

Margot was my grandmother, and Yeshua was my grandfather. They were very amazing people. They set up the first Israeli Hebrew theatre. So the first Theatre Company, which used Hebrew. I'm not sure that there are other companies that use other things, but mostly it was probably travelling theatre companies. So it was, I think, the first time Israelis were able to watch theatre in Hebrew. And they also set up the first Film and Television Studios in Israel. So huge: it's a tiny country, so it's like you were a big fish, there was a lot you could put your fingers into. But also very interesting because there's been so much film and theatre in our family: talk about a legacy! And I was in a film. My Dad made a film at the Film Studios, and I had a little extra part in it, but it still exists. It actually won awards. So one split second, but I'm in that.

Is everything okay with the recording?

**Interviewer 00:08:55**

Totally fine. I'm just watching the levels [for a moment].

**Michal 00:08:57**

Dad's parents were very busy with their own lives, and, as a result, they put him and his sister in a Kibbutz to grow up at there. And they used to come on holiday. Like a boarding school would now but it was not really normal there. I mean, even though of course, in the idealist early days of the Kibbutz, the children would sleep in children houses and see their parents at mealtimes and stuff, they still all had their parent there. So it was it was very unusual. And it's obviously a, a scar on my Dad's life. So that was my Dad. My Mum - do you want all about my Mum, a little bit about my Mum too?

**Interviewer 00:09:41**

[If you -]

**Michal 00:09:41**

I could tell a lot about my Mum because I've just done her life story.!



**Interviewer 00:09:42**

If it feels relevant for you and for your story, then please do share.

**Michal 00:09:45**

Well, I suppose as far as being mixed culturally, I think it doesn't so much. But basically she was bought up in an upper middle class family, like boarding school from the age of 11. I know this because I've just done her life story. You know: a coming out ball, courting and all of that kind of stuff, very right wing. Mum became left wing when she grew up. She went to Central School of Speech and Drama to be a Drama teacher. So she went there to be a drama teacher and then kind of rebelled against all of that. So ended up very left wing, very anti-private schooling.

In the meantime, my Dad has come over. So my Dad grew up in the Kibbutz, but as a slightly older man, he's a few years older than my mum, he came over to England, to train to be an actor at Central School of Speech and Drama. Now, I don't know if that's because there wasn't any theatre training in Israel. It's an interesting question. I will ask him. So they met. And, you know, there's this kind of famous joke that my Dad was everything that my Mum's Dad, didn't want. He was communist, Jewish, Israeli, actor, unemployed and divorced! So yeah, quite classic.

Anyway, so they got together: that's the very short story, because I've just done her life story, so I know all about it. But anyway they got together and she was very keen actually to go to Israel and live there. She loved it. She, you know, she's more Israeli than a lot of Israelis. She's more Israeli than me. Much more Israeli than me. She loved it. Again secular Israeli, but very warm, loving, appreciative, outspoken. My mum is the most outspoken person I've ever known. She says whatever she thinks, and that is so Israeli.

That's what Israelis do. They just - I'm allowed to say it cause I'm Israeli: they just say whatever they think. Anyway, she loved it. And she went over there and learnt Hebrew in six months. And they married in England before she went to live there, and that was it. So we were born out there: two of us. My Dad and my Mum had two children. My sister is older than me. She's called Talia or Chuby And then there was me. And so that was it. Now, how far did you want me to go at this point in time?

**Interviewer 00:12:50**

I'd say that's brilliant, because my next question was going to be about your early life in Israel and your memories of that time.

**Michal 00:12:56**

Okay. I was less than four. So I'm not sure I've got so many memories, and you don't know how much is memories and how much is, you know, what other people have told you or photos. But I do seem to

remember this free rein thing. I know that... What I do feel was that I loved just being free rein. And I loved being outside. And now, it's like, I cannot bear it. It's like it felt like summer finished today. Like literally today: it was sunny this morning and cold this afternoon. And that breaks my heart. And especially with COVID it's like, will I be able to get away? Because normally I'd go, normally late autumn, I'd go to my place in France. And early winter, I'd go to Israel. So I'd get through the winter that way. And now, it looks like I might not be able to go to either.

So I think that that's very key. I was very little, I think that my life was very much going to Gan, going to nursery, my cousin and my other cousins lived next door, or next door but one, and we spend a lot of time together. We kind of grew up together. Family I think is also really important over there, in a different way. A different way to the middle class upbringing that I had here. I think this may be very classist, but I have a feeling that quite often in working class families, it's a bit more of a thing, family. I can remember when I used to teach, the kids: Nana would be everything to them. And Nana would live two doors away and all of that, which was never the case as I was growing up here. I was in Tel Aviv. We had everybody in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv - It was and is the main city, but it's not like London. And it certainly wasn't then.

So yeah, I think that's it really. Yeah. I also think - that would have been an interesting photo to bring - I found a photo of me about a year after we moved to England. And that was shocking how different I looked. So I don't know if you want to get onto that. But yes.

**Interviewer 00:15:34**

Please do tell me what the differences were that you observed.

**Michal 00:15:46**

Well, first of all, my hair had gone from white blond to more chestnut, but it had changed completely. My face had changed, I'd become like English! And I was going to school. and that's the other thing, I don't think - I'm 99% sure that there's no school uniform ever, in Israel. And I was in school uniform at the age of five. And, and suddenly, I was outside only a few weeks of the year. And I probably wasn't free rein. And suddenly, we were living in a nice English village. It was all very nice. But it wasn't Israel. They're much more - even now, everything's much more informal. You don't dress up much. Everything's so much more casual - and Tel Aviv also has a beach. I mean, there's not a lot of cities in the world that have a beach: that's an amazing thing and odd, when you're swimming in the sea, and there's high rise flats on the beach, you know, or high rise hotels or whatever. But it still makes a big difference if you can go to the beach when you get back from school or work or whatever. And in Herzliya there was a beach too and of course, a much less busy beach.

I remember the sea and there's also photo, another photo I thought of bringing, which was me this massive blow up dolphin which is bigger than me. And I'm hugging it, and the smile on my face. It's just



like, sheer joy. And I think that sums me up: I'm just mad about the sea and I'm also vegan. So it's like, you know, animal lover, even if it is blow up animal. And at the sea. I'm really noticing especially after lockdown, because everyone went mad for the beaches then. But just how much entertainment there is on a beach, even if there's only sand, but if there's sand and rock pools and pebbles and shells, and the sea and the sand and the, and then you might get ice creams or donkeys or whatever else. But just naturally what's there. And the amount of entertainment kids make for themselves - so I think that it was amazing to have that for those four years. But I think it's like there's a calling in me always back to it.

**Interviewer 00:18:34**

And do you remember very much about the process of arriving back in Britain and settling in?

**Michal 00:18:40**

I don't, but and again, who knows if this is a real memory? I mean, who knows if mum would say the same? If she would recall - remember it the same? But I remember: I was at nursery school, in Topsham. And there was a boy and I can exactly what he looked like and he wouldn't speak Hebrew. And so he smacked me: I thought it was around the face but that seems quite extreme. He smacked me because I wouldn't speak English: he was upset because he couldn't communicate with me. And he slapped me on the face. When we were in Israel Mum tried to get us bilingual and we wouldn't speak English. But in England, one day both of us stopped speaking Hebrew. And the way she tells it is that we went to Christmas with my cousins at their house in Wales, and we will have an amazing time. And when we came back up, we wouldn't speak Hebrew. But I remember it was connected to the boy hitting me. But again, who knows? Memory's a strange thing.

So, yeah, I don't have a lot of memories. Now this is interesting, I remember the trip over, so I remember the actual transition. And I remember it as one of the happiest times of my life. Because I was also free rein, free range. I've been saying free rein the whole time!

**Interviewer 00:20:28**

[Well -] Both both free range like like a free range chicken.

**Michal 00:20:32**

Yes,

**Interviewer 00:20:32**

But free rein, as in you have free rein [to roam] So I think [both are ok.]

**Michal 00:20:35**

[Oh great!] [Oh good.] Anyway, so yes I was free range on the boat, because I guess it was considered a safe place: no-one was gonna kidnap us, you know, couldn't take us off the boat. Also my sister was ill. And my sister was a very strong character. And I felt very overshadowed by her, obviously, because I remember this and I - sorry Chuby, if you're listening! Yeah, so I had this amazing trip. And it took like a week, I think we came by boat from Israel to England. Or maybe it was Marseilles? I don't know. No, no, it must have been all the way, I think. And I remember it. And there's a photograph of me with this woman cause she was kind of taking care of me. Oh I just had the greatest time with this doll. So yeah, so I remember the transition. But I don't remember a lot when we immediately moved in. I don't remember - apart from this boy - I don't remember anything else about struggling with it. I think you kind of adapt. And I think children are quite resilient and adaptable in lots of ways, quite often. So yeah. I can't remember much.

**Interviewer 00:21:47**

And did you move to Topsham? Was that where you moved to when you first arrived?

**Michal 00:21:50**

Yes. So we moved to Topsham, we moved to The Strand. And, funnily enough, that's another thing I do remember actually and again being free range, but alone rather than with my little buddy, Yankalay, I would go down on the estuary, so I'm still given some freedom. I remember just playing there, make believe. Oh and I loved it so much. And even now, when I go back, oh I just love that that thing where the sand, where sometimes the boats are on the water, and sometimes they're on the sand. There's something unbelievably magical about that, which is interesting, cause it's sort of the transition where the river becomes the sea. And funnily enough, I've just been living in Kingswear, which is on an estuary. But having said that, it's not the same: it's not, there's never any time that the boats are out of the water - except in the little Boat Float in Dartmouth, but it's not the same. But it's just interesting to be living in an estuary again, for the first time, after all that time. So we lived right on the estuary, and then we moved a bit further into the small town to 36 White Street, and then we left Topsham and moved to another village. So there was quite a lot of moving around actually, in my childhood. Yes!

**Interviewer 00:23:13**

Thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about your dad's Jewishness? So you said that he was a secular Jew, and that your mum was more maybe more Israeli than than you are? So how did your Jewishness feature in your early life?

**Michal 00:23:26**

Okay, I think it's really very interesting but one of the things that unless you are either Jewish, or Israeli or living in Israel, for some period of time, you wouldn't maybe get this is that Jewishness to Jews is very, very important. Even if they're completely 100% secular - meaning no religion or faith or belief



system. Yes, of God. I mean, they might have another belief system, but - what I mean by that is they will celebrate Shabbat, which is Sabbath, and that's every single Friday and you're with your family. Unless it's - imagine COVID. Oh, that would have been an impact - I hadn't thought how much that would have impacted it.

Then Passover, Pesach, is around about Easter, which is of course where they celebrate, this is the irony, they celebrate the Jews' liberation from the Egyptians and slavery - where God takes them out of Egypt. And eventually after 40 years of wandering around the desert into the Promised Land. It's God, you know. Shabbat is on the seventh day God rested. So it's sunset on the Friday to sunset on the Saturday. And in the Jewish tradition you don't drive the car or make fire: you know you're not meant to turn on the lights or turn on the oven or anything. But but for the secular ones, you just are together with your family on the Friday and then you'll celebrate or rest on the Saturday: you know, you try really try not to work and stuff. But Pesach is like: 'Let my people go, No! Let my people go.' You know, that's what I always used to remember, it was all about 'Let my people go, No, Let my people go, No, Let people go, No. Okay. [laughter] You know, that's all I knew about the the plagues and all that ...

And then there's this huge ritual, the meal of Pesach, which is there's something called I think 'Haggadah' or something which the thing you have to read through, and you have to read through it all. And you have to do all the little things that go along with it. And all the little things represent different things about the journey out of Egypt. So for example, there's a boiled egg that you dip in salt, to remember the saltiness of the sea, maybe, I don't know. And then there's bitter herbs to remember the bitterness of being a slave. And then there's the Matza, which is like the unleavened bread, because, you know, we couldn't wait for the bread to rise, we had to leave Egypt. All of this, including the afikoman, which is I think, only once the matza is broken. And then a small piece is taken out and maybe that small piece is called the afikuman. And that is hidden by the smallest children at the event. And because nobody can find it, the children are allowed to ask for a bribe, for a gift of some sort, in order to get there. To find the afikuman maybe so then this matza becomes complete. I don't know the whole thing.

And there was also a song called [she sings] 'Ma Nishtana Ha laylah Ha zeh', which is 'why is this night different from all others' ... And so I do remember that. Now again, I don't know if I remember it from when I was in Israel, or when I used to go back on a regular basis. But the point is that it was really important. So So Passover and Shabbat are the most important things. But then there are also the other festivals.

And you know, there's this famous thing, which is between mid September and mid October, it's like the kids don't go to school because there's Jewish New Year, which we just had - Rosh Ha Shana, it's called, which means 'head of the year'. And then there's - sorry, if I've got this the wrong way around! There's also Sukkot, which is the Feast of the Tabernacles, where now I've got a memory of this too. Again, I don't know if it's when I lived there, but I think it is actually. It's good that you suddenly



remember, isn't it? So we used to build, in my cousin's garden, a tabernacle out of bits of tree. So that it was, and I remember that and I've got a lovely feeling that goes with that memory. So I don't know whether you're meant to sleep out during the whole Sukkot, or how many days Sukkot is, but that's what you're meant to do. Sukkot means - I thought it meant sugar, as well, sucra means sugar, but anyway, it's the Feast of Tabernacles. And then the biggie is Yom Kippur, which is Day of Atonement. And I've only understood that more later in life, really, because I think it's not a big one for the children. [laughter]

But Sukkot's big because of the building of the tabernacle, and Pesach! So that's interesting. But the point is that it doesn't matter if you don't believe anything. It's a very interesting thing. And even the people who don't believe anything, still have this sense that they're God's chosen people. Very interesting. And in fact, my Dad wrote a book about it called 'The New Jewish Paradigm'. But I still think he's not completely outside it either. Because I think it's very deep that the Jews are chosen people. So it's really interesting. So even if you're not religious it is much bigger deal. Jewishness to Jews is a bigger deal living in Israel. It's a bigger deal: so in England, if you're not a Christian, you will, in the same way celebrate Christmas and Easter. But not the whole thing. You might go to church, in which case you will have the whole thing in a sense, but but it's very different. And you won't go to church on every Sunday, whereas Jews do have Sabbath together. And that's nothing to do with the synagogue. That's to do with the other thing.

I became a Christian, 14 years ago. So I was a fully fledged adult. And I've got a very different relationship to my Jewish background now, because obviously, I'm really interested. Because obviously, Jesus was a Jew, and, you know, the Old Testament is part of our Bible. And, yeah, so that's also very interesting.

What is also interesting is that Mum did not uphold any of it when we came to England. Now, I don't know if she tried, and I don't blame her. She wasn't Jewish. And she says that if she had been asked, she probably would have converted, but I'm not sure she would have because the point is, if you convert to Judaism, you then have to go to go through the whole religious thing and say you believe it, but I don't think Mum would have, because Mum's definitely an atheist. But she said she feels more Jewish than she does British in some ways. But again, that's an interesting thing, because British as a nationality, and Jewishness is: blood, which is me; is culture, which is what we grew up with, and what my Mum got involved with and loved; and religion.

And, and also, another little interesting detail is that in the eyes of the Jews in Israel, the Orthodox Jews, I am not Jewish, because my Mum's not. And actually, when I married, I married my son's father in Israel. So that's coming up 30 years ago, We intended to marry but we couldn't marry. Because at that time, they didn't have civil marriage. Now, I don't know if they still do, but it would be an interesting little detail to check, but they didn't have civil marriage. And so you could only marry if you were Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. So of course, I wasn't at the time. And so in fact, my dad got a radical rabbi to do a service for us. I was living in Israel at the time. I met my ex-husband in Israel, even though he was

Russian, he was in the second wave of immigrants to Israel. We we didn't want all these Israelis to have to come to England for a wedding. So in fact, we had a little fake wedding, with this Rabbi blessing us and everything, which was lovely. We didn't need to be blessed by a Rabbi, do you know I mean? We would have had a civil wedding at that time. But yes, so that's interesting.

So I'm not considered Jewish over there. But my husband, my ex husband, was considered Jewish, even though he'd only been in Israel a few months, right? And he'd not been religious, at all, all his life. And I don't think even following traditions or anything. And it's interesting because in my identity card, it says 'Lo Rashom' which means 'not written'. Identity: you're Jewish, or you're not written. Now again, I don't know if that's changed, but extraordinary, very interesting little detail! I'm really sorry if I've got any of this wrong, especially Dad if you're listening to this, but as far as I understand, the Orthodox Jews have the balance of power in the government always. So I think it doesn't really matter who gets in. Maybe I'm I haven't got that exactly right because obviously, it did matter to left wing people when Rabin was in and stuff but ...

So, it is quite big in Israel, and even now, on Yom Kippur, you're not allowed to drive your car. So there are no cars driving in the whole of Israel. Well, maybe now in the West Bank, which is, you know, Palestinian? That's incredible. Now, that's not because I think most of the people believe, but it's because the people who get to say - a bit like now if the government tells us we're locked down, we're locked down, whether we agree with what they're saying or not.

But it, I think it's fantastic, whether you believe or not, you can play in the streets of Tel Aviv, you can cycle through the streets. And it's so quiet. The only noise - the only vehicles are, you know, emergency vehicles. Unbelievable. And of course now for me, I'm quite interested in the festivals because we don't have them in Christianity. And I think that's a real shame.

Now there are some 'Jews for Jesus' and there's some like Messianic Jews and stuff, which try to do the crossover and that's great. But in mainstream Christianity, there's none of the festivals - and some of them are good. I mean, Day of Atonement. You fast 24 hours, and you try and atone for everything you did wrong that year. I mean, hopefully, the reason why it's maybe possible is that you're supposed to have done it every year because, of course, most people have got like their entire life to atone for, so if we decided Oh, I'll do Day of Atonement this year - wow! But I think it's really interesting. I think it's a brilliant, wonderful festival. So I can't remember I've answered your question.

**Interviewer 00:36:15**

No, that was fantastic. So you just, just prior to that question, you spoke about your mum not keeping up quite a lot of traditions when you came to the UK. And then I know that you went back to Israel to live in your 20s

**Michal 00:36:28**

Yes.

**Interviewer 00:36:29**

So what happened in that period in between where in some ways you your family moved away from its Jewishness? But then it sounds like you were drawn back and you went back to Israel?

**Michal 00:36:40**

So my Mum and Dad split up shortly after I came to England. But my Dad wouldn't have kept it either. I think he resisted it a lot. So, and I think she didn't keep it up because she was British. And also because we were very determined now we were English, you know, well British again because we've been with our Welsh family and all the rest of it. I don't think it was about my Jewishness. And again, this is a difficult distinction. And it's a different distinction than anything in England. But I do think it was my Israeliness.

And again, this makes me feel quite emotional - a bit of sadness, really. I definitely didn't - and don't - feel that I belong in England. Having said that, it's no longer a problem because I also know that I couldn't live in Israel and that's mainly the conclusion I came to - but that was, I think, more recent.

So when I was 20, I think I was 21 I so this is just a little bit before I went to New Zealand because I wanted to get away and have a new start and there's lots of stuff going on in my family. And so I went to New Zealand and I stayed there 4 years. I really did love being in New Zealand actually: I think New Zealand suited me more because people say that it is the country most like England, but it's still really different and one of the main reasons is it's a lot better weather. You know, it's a lot better weather, there's a lot of outside. It's also much more hippy and a small country again like in Israel. I mean, you know when I was growing up I think there were about 4 million or something in a tiny country. New Zealand about the time I lived there had 4 million in a huge much bigger country - much bigger than Britain. So this is the trouble with it all going down cuz it's like I'm saying this stuff and I'm thinking I don't know whether it's bigger than Britain, but I'm pretty sure it is. Anyway it's big.

So there was space and there were communities, and I lived in a community for a while and the North has got tropics and the South Island's got glaciers, though I never got to the South Island and still haven't - so it's still something on my Bucket List. But you know it was just amazing, and I, even now, I do think New Zealand is an extraordinary country, I mean the way they handled Lockdown: I think they've only had one case or something unbelievable. One death maybe. But yeah, amazing. So, I went to New Zealand for 4 years. And then I was 25. And I was like, I don't really want to settle so far from England. Because I was beginning to think about getting, you know, if I was gonna get married and have children. I was just like, what are you doing, if you're in New Zealand, you have children, they just don't ever see their grandparents? You know?

And I suppose I've had 4 years, so I've got out of my system a little bit more, what had maybe made me go, whatever. So I then had the idea of going to Israel, because I thought, well, I don't want to go back to England, because I must have felt quite strongly that I didn't want to live in England. So I went to Israel. I was 25 when I arrived, and I was just about 26 when I left so I stayed a year. And in that time I met my Russian 'olay', which means immigrant, you know, arriving in Israel. Perhaps immigrant's the wrong word because it's got such an association in this country, it's - something to do with going I think, yeah, to go. Yes, so, it's the going. So the Goer, you know, it's more like that. So anyway, so he was there, and we got together very quickly. I was like I'm not sure I want to be here. And especially when I was pregnant - I got pregnant, obviously, quite quickly, and I just felt very strongly my son was a boy.

So two main things happened. One was that I felt very amazing when I was pregnant. I felt like Woman, you know, and I felt the mismatch with Israel more than ever, which, yeah, sorry, I really don't mean to offend Israelis. But that's what I felt. We were only living in Tel Aviv, I mean we should have tried, maybe living in a Kibbutz - you know, like the there's Kibbutzim. But there's also Moshavim: a Moshav is like a village more, but has a bit more of a community feel to it. There's all sorts of things but we didn't anyway. That's interesting that we didn't. But so I felt it very strongly. Israelis say everything they think - sorry to generalise, but generally speaking, and secondly, they often say it in a tone, which I find quite offensive, like, [rising volume and tone] 'lama' is 'why'. Right? Whereas a Brit - an English person would probably [quieter] 'why', you know? But 'ma pitom?', 'what suddenly' - it's like in that tone of voice. And I would often feel quite intimidated by it, especially when I was pregnant. And like if you go to the market, like they're yelling at you. It's very East meets West, you know, like if I went to a market in India it would probably be similar, but it was like, you know, my sensitive sensibilities while I was pregnant ...

The second thing was I was sure it was a boy, and I did not want him to be circumcised. I was not going to have him circumcised. My Dad had four daughters: he married twice more after me and my sister. Then he had a daughter with the first one and a daughter with a second one. And then finally he had a son. And there'd been this thing apparently that he wouldn't have his son circumcised. They do it in 'Brit Milah parties': they all whoop loudly when the baby's cut and but the mother's not allowed anywhere near the baby It's all men with their beards and their robes, and it's it's not nice. I mean, I expect if you just went quietly to someone, and just had a little snip, it might be a different matter, the mum's allowed to hold the baby: I'm sure is what a lot of secular people do. And did, but my brother - because he's only a bit older than my son - was born, everybody said it would be very cruel to not circumcise him. You know, when he's in the showers at school, and whatever. Anyway Dad did do it in the end.

But I was not going to have Misha snipped. I mean, I wouldn't even let them give Misha any injections, you know. I was like, he's a perfect newborn child, and you're gonna prick pins in him? You're gonna cut him up? Like, no way. So So yeah, so it was very short lived my Zionist phase.

But the countryside is pretty amazing. Like my youngest sister, she lives in a kind of community, which is anthroposophic, which is like Rudolf Steiner. So it's very alternative and is absolutely amazing. Or just in a small town or a village, you know, I've got another cousin who lives in a lovely village and this village has got gates and, you know, you can only go in with your password and stuff so it's very protective and stuff, but it's overlooking the Galilee and it's got grapefruit trees in the garden and lemon trees,! It's like, could could we have lived there?

But, actually, I have that choice now. You know, because now, especially now, after Brexit, we can't live anywhere else. So, you know, I've got the choice of England or Israel now, automatically. Obviously, there might be other ways, but ... I think the heat is one of the things that I wouldn't want now. But also, I think that it's still too intense. And obviously, I would have to learn the language, though I did re-learn when I was back that year. So I don't think it would be that hard. But yeah, I think, I've become too English, I expect, you know?

**Interviewer 00:46:28**

And you spoke earlier about not feeling like you fitted in when you came to England.

**Michal 00:46:32**

Yes.

**Interviewer 00:46:33**

When you went back to Israel? Did you feel like you fitted in there?

**Michal 00:46:36**

I think this is the trauma of my life. Really, I would say that. And again, you know, I don't blame anybody for it. But I think my Israeli side is very passionate. And even I don't necessarily say everything that's on my mind. And that can be quite an issue for me, because I'm actually quite scared of saying what's on my mind, even though most people will probably say I do it a lot. Because I think it's a good thing to do. But then I'm so nervous of it, and I usually make a terrible mess when I do it. But, but my passion, my feelings!

I mean, I cry a lot in church. I especially did when I first became a Christian, and I've only once seen anybody else crying there - like they didn't even cry at funerals very much! Probably they do in the more charismatic churches, maybe. I'm quite bolshy as well, and I I mean, again, it might be nothing to do with my Israeliness, it might just be me, but I, I don't ever really get the whole social thing. Social interaction. I don't get you know, small talk too much. I'm okay at it but, you know, I but I haven't now worked in a job for quite a long time, I was doing my own stuff ...



In the staff room when I was a teacher, I just didn't seem to know how to do it, it's like people from another planet. I just would not understand how they were interacting, you know, bitching behind each others' backs, or complaining about their jobs or or bitching about the children. That to me was just like no, there might be difficult child, but you don't bitch about the children. I have to say my last school was not like that: it was lovely, mostly, 90%. But so you know again, I don't know if it's my Israeliness or if I am an alien - an alien changeling!

I took my present partner to Israel. We are engaged to be married but and I've been married before but this time he's very English. Well, funnily enough, Igor's Russian. But then my son was quite English too. So yeah, but James is actually quite Devonshire. Anyway, I took him to a Shabbat: he had to go to a Shabbat. So it's my cousin she's got five children, and so there's girlfriends and boyfriends: there's quite a lot of people around the table and an amazing spread.

And the other thing which is interesting is that it is a mostly vegetable and fruit diet. So it's fairly easy for vegans. The other reason it's easy for vegans over there, I've realised and discovered, is because of the whole kosher thing: you're not allowed to meat mix meat and dairy. So that means that if you go to a restaurant and you eat meat, which obviously most people would, or fish you know, I don't know if fish is included, but anyway, meat, you then can't have dairy in your pudding and of course most puddings have dairy, so they do a lot of vegan puddings. But then if you go the other way around and you want milk in your thing, then you can't, Well, you wouldn't have meat in your pudding anyway - apart from gelatine maybe.

So it's interesting. But anyway, there's this fantastic spread. We have this lovely meal, but it was so great, because they just did what I think Israelis do and are like! As far as I'm concerned, my family are about the best Israelis, you know. They're like, great, wonderful, amazing, like, human beings! But they were all giving their opinions loudly. And it was so funny: like from a ten-year-old boy, giving their opinions loudly! I think it was in English the whole time but then after a while I was like: just do it in Hebrew because me and James aren't joining in!

So I left Israel when I was pregnant with Misha. The final straw was when the bank teller yelled at me. And again, I don't think she was yelling at me, but it was her tone of voice. And even now that I'm a little bit more mature and aware of these things, I still can't stand it. So no, I don't feel I belong in Israel, and I don't feel I belong in England.

We tried to live in France, last year, actually, but it didn't work out. I think maybe now I've come to terms with the fact and that's okay. You know, maybe lots of people don't: you know, there's lots of songs and plays and paintings about not fitting in. [laughter] Obviously, lots of people feel it. But I don't know how much is actually cultural. But I certainly feel Israeli, yeah. Though when I was doing my Mum's Life Story, she said the same. She said she always felt 'too much'. And that's what I feel, I feel like I'm too

much. And if someone's responding, lovely and warmly and, like you are, smiling at me then I'm okay. But you know, sometimes like I see someone's reaction and I'm you know try to rein back in again.

**Interviewer 00:52:49**

Thank you. So just moving forward in time a little bit. So how did you come to be in Okehampton?

**Michal 00:52:58**

Interesting question, obviously very relevant, considering your project. Okay, well, we -- interestingly enough, when I was four, we moved to Topsham. My mum worked in Exeter. So Exeter was really our town. Then we lived in various places around Exeter and then I moved away to Torquay originally to do college and then, then it would have been the whole New Zealand thing. New Zealand, Israel. So when I came back to England with Igor and pregnant, we decided we'd go to London because he's Russian we thought that he could get work as a Russian translator or something like that.

And then, after, you know, I'm so precious! After a while, I was like 'No I'm not staying in London: I've got dirty fingernails! I don't want the the pollution going into my baby! It was the dirty fingernails that really completely did my head in, because it was just like every day I had black fingernails so I was like, if I'm getting black fingernails what am I breathing in? And that's going to my baby and obviously there were millions of people having babies in London, but I was like 'nope'. So we decided to go to Totnes because I had spent a summer in Totnes one year and I was quite alternative. Mum was in Devon still and in the Exeter area. Like 'let's just go to Totnes and have the baby there'. Very good idea because I remember going to the doctor the first time when we were in Totnes and he said to me, 'Would you like a home birth or a hospital birth?' - can you believe it? - so I had a home birth.

**[THE FOLLOWING SECTION CONTAINS SOME REDACTIONS FROM THE PARTICIPANT]**

So that was lovely. Anyway so that was that. But then we wanted to buy a house and as property is quite expensive in Totnes, so we moved to Exeter - which, of course, is a full circle almost - and bought a house there.

This is missing out a little bit of my life but it doesn't matter because it's it's not relevant to the story.

And then there was Okehampton. Misha's best friend had moved to Okehampton And of course I began to like Okehampton. And property was also 50,000 pounds cheaper. And we were looking to move at the time. So I started looking at estate agents' windows and I knew how much we had to spend. And there's a great choice which there wasn't in Exeter. In fact, in our price range, we could only we could only move to the roughest part of Exeter. So, we just bought a house: I was freelancing at the time and my partner was working away. So it didn't really matter where he came back to. So that was how we ended up in Okehampton. But since then, we tried to live in France last year, and then I was 10 months in Kingswear, up until about a month ago. I'm very glad I'm back in Okehampton



to be able to do this project! So I consider myself now back here. My fiancé now works in Okehampton. So we will be based here for the foreseeable future.

**[REDACTED SECTION ENDS]**

**Interviewer 00:58:26**

And what was that process of settling into Okehampton as a town like?

**Michal 00:58:31**

Oh, that's an interesting question. And I'll be interested to hear what other people have to say about it. Right. Well, Okehampton is an interesting town. It's got lots of wonderful things. And again, now I'm coming back to it, I'm okay with the things maybe that weren't or aren't quite so wonderful. I mean, I'm very appreciative of the wonderful things now I'm back. But it is small community. So my, my sister's quite eccentric and mostly she's not given a hard time, and there are other eccentrics in Okehampton, and they're not given a hard time. And I've got gay friends, and they're not given a hard time. And I do know a black family, but I don't know what their experience of racism is or was. But I think it's a tolerant community.

But it's quite hard to start something new here. When I first came, I was bright eyed and bushy tailed, and quite keen to. And funnily enough, I know there's somebody else who's done this, and she's been through a similar process of trying to start new things here. So that's quite hard and quite painful. I mean, I'm a photographer and I had exhibitions here. And if I didn't call everybody to come, nobody would have come. And I had one here actually, yeah, an amazing one here in the big room at the back. So Ockment centre. Yeah. So that was quite painful ...

But what's also interesting is that I became a Christian, I think a year after I came here. Now, that changes everything as far as what I think of Okehampton - because only one of my 14, 15 years here was non-Christian. And it's a whole other matter when you're a Christian, because I don't know, percentage wise, I'd be interested to know, but there seem to be a lot of Christians here. We have, I think seven different churches. And I think six denominations. Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist. There is a Kingdom Hall for Jehovah's Witnesses, Quakers, that's six, actually, and then there's also Inspiration and New Life, who are the kind of independent churches: charismatic, independent churches, evangelist. So that's eight. That's mad. And then there are two Anglican churches with the chapel. And then there's the one on the hill. So that's a lot.

So anyway, the thing about it is, when you tap into that, you therefore have community, you have activities, you have all sorts of things, you know. I was involved in Christian musical and Christians Together in Okehampton. CTIO is quite active. So there was a lot going on in there. So that was





amazing. But then on the other hand, I also saw the other side of that, which was the small mindedness. I mean, again, I don't want to say too much. But I had some very painful experiences, on those grounds. Some of the meanness between the churches. But I have to say that I do think, actually, Christian's Together is quite good in Okehampton.

So that was the big thing, I suppose. And also, I mean, being me, I got involved. So for example, I've been a photographer with exhibitions in the town, I've been a freelance Drama teacher, doing half term workshops, putting on productions in the town, I've worked at Okehampton Police Station, doing a big theatre production in the town and interviewing people who remember the Police during the Second World War - an oral history project as well. I've taught through Bigfoot Theatre Company at the primary school. And I've also led the alpha course, which is a kind of Christian exploration course. And exhibitions, and I've been in the newspaper a lot. Always because I wanted to be. I was always like contacting the paper, for the publicity. So I have put my head above the parapet a lot, and, I expect a lot of people are sick to death of me. It's like, What, Michal Brandstatter again????!!!!

I'm quite excited that I'm going to change my surname soon. Some people were like, 'Why, aren't you a feminist?' I'm like, I'm changing my surname. And I've also changed the spelling of my name recently to 'Michal', which we might talk about - so I'm gonna be Michal with a different spelling and Burrow, instead of Brandstatter, so I hope they won't think it's me anymore! Which is funny.

But yeah, a bit hard, being noisy in a small town. And I remember I went for a job actually, you might have heard about cinema in the villages? There's a special name for it, but it's a there: I forgot the name anyway. But it was this organisation which took film into village halls and stuff, once a week or so, maybe it was once a month actually. So you could get round all the villages, you know, there's a group of people. And I went for a job there, I went for job to you know, manage, oversee whatever. And I remember one of the people who interviewed saying, 'What do you think might be the problem?' I said, not having any idea at that time, because I had only just arrived, I said, 'Oh, just maybe because I've only just arrived it might be a problem that I'm not from the area. and secondly, I'm the one being paid and the others are volunteers, you know. And he said, 'Oh, don't worry, I've been here 10 years and they still call me and ' a blow-in'. A blow-in!

I think people are people are activated by me. I mean, yeah, I'm saying my church family, I would say that's happened - church congregation, I wouldn't call it family actually. But I think that I do press people's buttons. And I am not surprised. I think I would, if I met me, you know! I mean, I am full on, but also, I blow hot and cold. I'm quite erratic, can be really warm and then really angry or really warm and then really cold. So I do understand it. And again, I don't know if that's Israeli or not. But yeah, so I think it's been hard.

But now having been away -- I do feel that, we're living gonna live on the edge of the town now, hopefully, and I'm glad about that. So it's not quite in the middle. But also, it's not where I was before: it was really quite important to me that I don't live where I was before. Because I don't want to feel I'm

going backwards. But also I feel like I've been through quite a journey, you know, the two years away partly in, in France, partly down in South Devon. I think I've learned to grow. And I think that I'll have a different relationship to it. And also, you know, I'm going to be married. That's really exciting. You know, that's a whole different, that's a very different thing. And of course, now James is, you know, we're partners, we're by each other's side, we've been together a lot. We've been together nine years. So you know, with all sorts of dramas, but now we're going to be properly together. So. Might be different. Yeah.

**Interviewer 01:06:30**

And in the time that you've been here, have you seen Okehampton change as a place?

**Michal 01:06:38**

I think it's really interesting how much it doesn't change and how much it does. I can't remember the example. But I there was one recently when I thought, Oh, it hasn't changed at all. Bother that I can't remember what it was! So there's, you know, we've got vegan cafe now in Okehampton, which is amazing because there isn't a vegan one in Exeter: the only one has closed in Exeter! So it's extraordinary. And there's all sorts of enterprises have started and died, come to life and then died.

Anna and Phil, who are my tenants, created this amazing art festival, and I went and it was actually quite life changing for me. Not happening anymore. I don't know why, I don't know about funding. You know, I think I don't know the reason why things don't keep going. I really don't. And I'm not that bothered. Because I don't think I'm gonna try again. Or I'll do it very differently. But it's just like, I happen to know two people. Other than me, because I gave up years ago, I gave up long before I left. But I was dying to leave by the time I left - I needed to leave but I'm quite happy to come back now.

But I know two other people, you know, the one who opened the vegan cafe and Anna, who, you know, have also like really tried here. Then there's also Xristiana who, you know, I don't think she is doing this, but she started doing multicultural evenings. I couldn't believe it when -- I don't do Facebook now, but at the time, it came up on my Facebook page, and it was like, there's going to be a multicultural evening in Okehampton! And I just laughed out loud because I mean, it is fairly white, fundamentally, white. But this evening was incredible. And, in fact, and Xristiana's interesting because she's quite - I'm sorry to be naming names, I hope she doesn't mind but - she's also from a Greek background and stuff but she loves it here and she's quite alternative - because I'm quite alternative. We also have Harvest: an organic co-operative which is unbelievable, even though they do have dead animals in there - but that's an upset for me, but it's still fine for lots of people. But that means you can eat more or less local, organic, seasonal. Amazing. And then we've got a Waitrose, we've got a cinema with three or four screens. We've got a swimming pool, we've got the moor right there. I met somebody recently, we were swimming up on the moor and she was just like, 'Oh, I'd so love to live in Okehampton, how amazing to have the moor so near and I was like yes! The moor is amazing. Of course we've got the army camp



but the moor is fantastic. So yeah, it's got lots of great things, but do I think it's changed? I'm not sure. I'd say yes, no, it has. It has, because we weren't having multicultural evenings or a vegan cafe when I first came!

But, I hate to say it, I'm not sure that in two years time whether we'll still have them. I just don't know. I don't know what it is, there seems to be like, well, I think it's probably common in small towns. I'd be very interested to know how Tiverton is! So Tiverton, of course, my family were near Tiverton and I grew up there. So that was my other small town. Tiverton has slight alternative things, like they've got a really amazing health food shop and, where you can get things with, you know, zero packaging. And I mean, you know, there's only going to be one or two Totneses, you know, in any county, really. But why? I don't know.

And I'm now 55, I don't want to be the trailblazer with it, to be honest. But it's almost like it's very deeply rooted. You know, people who've been here for so long, so many generations. Apparently, somebody - I won't name his name - said that it has one of the lowest Higher Education rates of small towns in Devon. So maybe that's something to do with it. But it feels very safe. It has quite a lot going on, considering the size of it. And it's very convenient to the A30. Would be wonderful if the train station, became a proper train station. That would be amazing. All the property prices would go up, especially Station Road. So yeah.

**Interviewer 01:12:04**

Thank you. So I want to just take you to talking about the process of converting - well, converting or finding finding your Christian faith. Can you tell me a bit about that?

**Michal 01:12:14**

Yes. One of my favourite subjects! Oh, yes. Because it's funny, because we think of Britain as 'Christian'. I wouldn't have thought it was particularly interesting culturally, but actually, I think it is because I think one of the things I've noticed is that most people aren't. And most people think I'm very weird, and especially my kind of circle, because my circle is kind of slightly alternative, you know, quite often higher educated. And then quite often with mixed cultural backgrounds, and yeah, Christianity is considered very odd. I feel like I live in the margins. And being a Christian is in the margins in this country. I'm also a Catholic, and Catholicism is in the margins of mainstream Christianity in this country. If I was in France, or if I was in Italy, or if I was in South America or Spain, of course, it wouldn't be. So interesting.

I've chosen the margins of being a vegan. So it's something else you choose. Having a funny name with [throaty ha vocalisation] in it definitely in the margins here, but again, in London less so. So, yes. So I think what's important, again, to point out here is that I wasn't a religious Jew who became a



Christian. Because some people call those Messianic Jews, ie Jews who found the - who recognised Jesus as the Messiah. But I didn't because I was definitely brought up secular.

My parents - this is the kind of joke I make - is my Dad is a Jew who hates Judaism and my Mum's a Christian who hates Christianity. A Christian in the sense that she was christened only. But they weren't just people who didn't believe: they really didn't like religion - because Mum was brought up in a High Church, went to a High Church boarding school, and Dad with this whole thing of the how the Jews are having this power over the population in Israel - and also even if you go into a religious area in Israel, on Shabbat, you get rocks thrown at your car even now! And that's what Dad grew up with and hated it.

Then I was a searcher: search search, search - poems, philosophy, whatever. And then I heard about Taizé, which was a Christian community in France. And I went there, when I finished college - I think I would have been 18. Now this is interesting: not a Christian, but I go to Taizé, which is a Christian community. It is ecumenical. And, at the time, it was very open and quite hippy - still pretty hippy, actually. And anyway, I went and I did Silence there for a week. And the reason I did Silence was because I wanted to do a Silent Retreat, and somebody told me, go to Taizé. Well I go all the way to middle of France! I'm sure there would have been somewhere in Britain I could have done a week of silence. And it could have been a Buddhist place. But it's very interesting that I was not drawn really to that. And so I went to Taizé, I had an amazing, amazing time. It felt quite powerfully spiritual and I actually felt I had an encounter with Jesus and all sorts, but I never really thought about it much again when I left.

Years go by, during university, I was into Buddhism a little bit, New Age, kind of like reading tarot cards, and, you know, aroma therapy and stuff. But I was searching, searching, searching, searching. And then late on, when I started my degree, so I started a degree when I was 19. And then again, when I was 28 as I left my degree the first time. As part of my degree, I went to America, to Santa Barbara, for a year as I was doing American and Commonwealth Arts at Exeter University. So we had to sandwich a year out. So amazing. And I got involved with the Native Americans over there. I think -- sorry I called them Native Americans, I think then they came to be called American Indians. And then I think they became called Indigenous But anyway, they were called Native Americans at the time and I was really into all of that. And I did a big paper on the people who were local, who were native to Santa Barbara, the Chumash: very interesting.

But obviously searching, searching, searching, and I was really upset because I was like, 'Why? Why have we got no ritual left?' Why is there no becoming a woman ritual? Or tribal? Funny because I ended up as a Christian, which actually lacks quite a lot of ritual, but then I'm Catholic, which has the most ritual out of anything apart from Orthodox. So I came back from that, and I became a feminist while I was in Santa Barbara. And so that was my identity for a while and I even got a tattoo on my arm as a, you know. So that was my identity for a little while. Searching, searching, searching, searching, searching ... I couldn't be a Native American. I couldn't. It seemed so unfair and that's why I was so



excited about feminism, because I've been fighting for the Native American cause, been fighting for the black cause, been fighting for animals, I've been fighting against apartheid. You know, I've been fighting all these causes, and they weren't mine. They weren't ones I suffered from and then a feminist. Oh, there's a cause for women and a very important cause! So that was amazing.

Da da da da da, fast forward.

So 2006 and I was just struggling a little bit with my teaching, wasn't sure I really wanted to stay, did supply, didn't like it. And then I went to - on holiday with my son and his friend to the island of La Maddalena, which is Magdalene Island off Sardinia, which of course is very Catholic. Very passionately. And I went to a Mass there. And I felt my life change. Let's put it like that. That's the only way to put it. Something happened. I mean, the way I put it now is God met me there. And I was never really the same again. We'd just moved to Okehampton, in fact, and when I came back, I was like, what do you do with something like that? Like, it was amazing. It was one of the most important things/feelings I've ever had, but it was completely unfamiliar - and nobody had been talking to me: it was just in the service at the time.

When I was in Okehampton, I was trying out different churches to see which one gave me the same feeling as the church I went to in in La Maddalena, and it was the Catholic Church! And who knows if it was because it was Catholic, or because the priest at the time was an ex-monk, so he was quite contemplative, which was definitely the way I would go and do go. And the other thing was I did the Alpha Course. So, which is, you know, exploring. I mean, a lot of Christians do it to explore their faith, but I did it to explore the faith from the outside, and, and at the end of it, I became a Christian, and gave my life to Christ, as we put it. So amazing. Yeah, so that was December 2006. So really, literally coming up 14 years, and I so I've been here 15 years. I came here the year before. So it's funny, because it's like a new start.

And also the fact that Okehampton has got so many churches. It's like, someone was gonna get me, you know. But to be honest, now I look back, I can see the signs that I could have become a Christian, but really they weren't obvious. So it was a surprise. It was a very mystical journey. It was a lot of prayer, a lot of like, Revelation, a lot of amazing depth: just singing, going on retreats, reading books. It was the most amazing thing, because it's such a fascinating topic anyway, from all sorts of points of view. But it was also like, healing: the crying, all this crying, crying, crying. It was a healing crying. It was incredible. And so all that was all going on.

But yeah, up until then, I thought, which a lot of non-Christians think, that Christians are only the Evangelists, charismatic: Evangelist fundamentalists. I don't know if they'd even like to be called that, but those who believe that if you don't believe in Jesus, you go to hell. And that the Bible is 'the truth'. Those are the two main things and I absolutely don't and can't and won't believe that. And it's been a real struggle with everybody who's non-Christian in my life for them to understand that that's not what I

think. So my Dad was really upset. Because he thought that religion means the Orthodox Jews who stone you when you drive into the area on Shabbat. My Mum who is quite educated, intellectual just thought thinks of the Crusades and the burnings at the stake, the Inquisition - obviously, lots of good reasons. And then the nuns in the 60s with the fallen girls and then the priests with the poor young boys. I mean, lots of reasons not to like religion and Catholicism, not to like Christianity, or Catholicism.

But for me, it was just a completely different journey. And, and I would just definitely say, it's one of the best things that's ever happened to me. And really amazing, a completely different relationship to the fact that I'm Israeli and Jewish, and born in Israel. I mean, some Christians want to touch me, because it's like, 'oh, my gosh, you were born in the same country as Jesus'. You know, and just amazing to go back there, to go to the lake of Galilee and know that Jesus was there! Because it's not that built up, so you still get a feeling for it. That was where he walked, literally on the water, but also around, whereas Jerusalem you go to and so much has changed that I can't really feel it. The church of Calvary is looked after by the three religions. So it's got all that going on, and the conflict and everything. But just amazing. And also my different relationship to my Judaism.

And, and of course, you know, one of the things for Christians is that we were set free twice: we were set free from human bondage and slavery. And then Jesus came to set us free for death, but, you know, from everything horrible really. So [laughter] so yeah, amazing, really. I have quite a problem with the Old Testament though. I still struggle with it, of course, that is the main testament, if you like, for the Jews. I struggle obviously with the annihilation of people all over the place. And the Chosen People, like, I mean, I really don't like that. And a funny because I'm not considered legally Jewish. So maybe if I was legally Jewish, I'd feel differently - who knows?! We'll never know.

But I have got a cousin who is a religious Jew. And so we've had a few conversations, but I'd really like to have a lot more. She's very spiritual: she meets with other Jewish women and talk about, you know, like sisterhood. Again, in Jewish tradition, there's much more ritual than there is in in Christianity. Christianity got back the sacraments, we call them in Catholicism: baptism, confirmation. Holy Communion, which is, you know, taking the Eucharist every Sunday or whatever. Marriage and I think if you become a priest, and or when you die, like you're anointed when you die, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation as well, which is Confession. I don't know. I mean, I'm not that knowledgeable about all this stuff. But basically, yes, but ritual wise, what have you got? You've got your Confirmation, which is something. Which is where you make your profession of faith, rather than Baptism, your parents decide for - Godparents, nice. That works. That's somebody outside your family, who like takes care of your spirituality and stuff.

Whereas, Judaism, you know, obviously, you've got the Shabbat, every week, you've got all the festivals, you've got the bar mitzvah - and they now have a bat mitzvah for the girls. Circumcision. And I do love that. I love the ritual of Mass. You know, lots of people ask me why Catholic and that's a whole other story. But it was where it felt I belong. I've got a lot of issues with it, but it feels like where I belong.



But I love the ritual of Mass, you know, that we know exactly how it goes. You know, wherever you are in the world, it's the same. In different languages. [laugh] Yeah.

**Interviewer 01:27:15**

Lovely. Thank you. So what's striking me is that we've talked about loads of different aspects to your identity, your Israeliness, your Jewishness, your Englishness, your identity as a mother, which we haven't spoken a lot about, but it's there in that, and then your Christian faith. When you think about your identity now, how would you describe yourself? Or how would you describe your identity?

**Michal 01:27:43**

Wow... It's an interesting one, because I would still say, Christian more than anything. I say it's interesting, because it doesn't come up a lot. Even privately, especially if I'm going through a stressful time, because I'm a contemplative primarily. I have quiet to meditate and pray and would do it up to five hours a day. I say that, but that's usually only on Good Friday, when I try and be in prayer meditation all day. But I would say that it powers my life more than anything. And interestingly enough, my partner really understands that because one of my concerns was - because we had a period of being apart during Lockdown and stuff - I had a concern that, because I got really into my faith cause it was so much quieter, [laughter]. I mean, you can imagine locking down alone in Kingswear! But he really understands that and I would say that is my main thing.

And it's my absolute 'go to' if things aren't working. So particularly singing hymns or Christian songs, praying, meditating. Fellowship is important, but it's not as important to me as some for some people. I'm very passionate about my veganism, too and I feel very strongly about it. But it's still ultimately something I do, rather than something I am. Whereas my Christianity, my faith ... And, you know, I'm going to be a wife again, which feels very strange. I haven't - as James pointed out to me - the last time I got married was 20 years ago. But obviously I separated after that, but... I'm not terribly into it. I've done it before. And my family did it a lot: divorcing and marrying! And also I'm 55, so I'm not quite, you know, like Blushing Bride! But James hasn't been married before. And he's younger than me. So it's a big thing for him. And I don't know how I'll be when he's - OH! [laughter] - you know, we're husband and wife, that's a really interesting thing. But anyway, so. I don't really think that that's a big thing as my identity goes. And obviously Mother. You know, Misha's turning 30 next year. So he's got his own life, and, I mean he's quite independent. So it's not like we're really in each other's pockets and stuff. So yeah, that would be my answer. Not an Israeli and not an English. [laughter] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

**Interviewer 01:31:12**

Thank you. So I think that's pretty much everything I have to ask about today. Is there anything else that you'd like to share before we finish?

**Michal 01:31:20**



Well, we were going to talk about and the Mikhal and Michal, weren't we? The two spellings ...

**Interviewer 01:31:23**

[Yes, oh yes,] your name I did write that down.

**Michal 01:31:24**

I saw [you write it down, yes].

**Interviewer 01:31:26**

[I know I wrote] it down earlier. Please tell me about about the change in name. And the [choice to change it]

**Michal 01:31:30**

Yes it is quite interesting. Because from a cultural point of view, it's real, it is a journey. So for me: Michal is a Hebrew name obviously spelt with Hebrew letters. Okay, so I know I can write it in Hebrew. It's one of the few things I can still write in Hebrew, but they write it backwards, or backwards to us. But when we came to England, I don't know how they decided, but they said decided M-I-C-H-A-L. And as a Christian, I now understand that Michal in the Bible was M-I-C-H-A-L, and she was actually a princess and a queen! She was Saul's daughter and David's wife. So that's fine, but people couldn't pronounce it. So I was Mikael, or Mikheil or Mikhail, or you know, all the variations. That was fine, I accepted that. But, I can't remember when, but I'd say 10, 15 years ago, maybe more, I had enough of it. The biggest thing I had enough was people thinking it was Michael, because Michael is spelt M-I-C-H-A-E-L. So people would think I'd forgotten to put the E in. Even as a child, I would end up like in the boys dorm. Or then when I was beginning to apply for jobs, I get it back instead of Ms. Michal Brandstatter, whatever it was at the time, they'd send it back to Mr. Michael. I did not like it. So I changed it to M-I-K-H-A-L. Because I thought, well, at least they'll be aware it's foreign, because there's no name like that in English. But then Mikhail Gorbachev was in power! So it was longer ago than that. Wow. So a lot longer ago. Gosh, yes, a lot longer. [whispers] Probably like 30 years I think, oh dear.

So then people thought I was Mikhail - but that passed. And then now it's just like, Oh, interesting, Oh, interesting. But just recently, like, few months ago, I began to think that I wanted to go back to the other spelling, to M-I-C-H-A-L. And that is because I think a K is very hard and a C is very soft, which it is. A 'K' has straight lines and a C is is one whole curve. And it means a lot to me now. I never changed my birth certificate, well obviously not my birth certificate, but my passport has been Michal all this time. I'm pretty sure I changed everything else. So my driver's licence, my bank accounts and whenever I apply for a job, but the stupid thing is that whenever I'm doing anything really legal, and they need to see my passport, there's a different spelling.





So anyway, I decided to go back to 'Michal with a C': it was during this time that I've been on my own where it has been quite an identity thing actually. And I was just like, too bad if it's confusing because of course now my email address is Mikhal with a K. And also, I mean, it'll be fine because I'm not changing anything at the moment. But of course, soon, I'll be changing everything to Burrow. So I can change it to a C then! So that's really exciting. That feels really lovely. In fact, both are softer, Michal with the C is softer than Mikhal with a K, and Burrow is softer than Brandstatter, I think. And it's interesting because also I don't know if you know Anne of Green Gables but she always says that her name is 'Anne with an E', even though, obviously you can't see it when you say it, but so it's like 'Michal with a C'. You know, that's what I am now.

It does feel like I have to say another thing about my identity. I think I do feel a little bit as I have found myself, I would say. I don't think I've got such a problem with Okehampton or whether it likes me a lot. I still have my moments, you know. I think the Christianity, the veganism; I think also that we decided to marry: I was very clear about how, what I, you know, how I needed it to be - no automatic whatevers. It was really great. And he was really great. And we mostly agreed anyway.

So yes: profession-wise, I'm a bit all over the place, because I have been a photographer and I've done quite well in that: lots of people have bought my stuff, lots and lots, I never imagined they would, but it wasn't making enough money. And I don't like the marketing. So I don't know. And also now I thought, well, maybe I'll do a bit of teaching or tutoring or teaching assistant now I'm back in Okehampton. And now we've got no idea what's going to happen because there might be another Lockdown, the schools might be closed. And so I really don't know identity-wise. And I also did quite a lot of writing during Lockdown, very amazing, powerful stuff for me. So I still feel that what I have been doing mostly in recent life, which is photography and writing, I still think that's probably where I'll go, but teaching never quite leaves me.

But that's not my identity now. Definitely, now, I think, it's 'Michal with a C'!

I think that's a good place to end it. [laughter]

**Interviewer 01:37:15**

[laughter] Thank you sounds like a wonderful place to end it. So we're going to end the recording here.