# ­Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir

A case study report

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January 2022

*the choir was a sort of a family, you know, not a family but yeah, an important set of connections… for me personally. I think that’s something that’s been sustaining.* (Sarah Balkin)

*a lot of us are single women on our own, and [the choir] became a support network, actually, more than friendship, well, it’s friendship as well.* (Eliana Cohen)

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# 1 Introduction

The [Hopeful Solidarities research project](https://hopefulsolidarities.wordpress.com/) in Brighton and Hove aims to work with community groups in the city to facilitate and support spaces of hope and solidarity in times of crisis. The project has received funding from the University of Brighton and is also funded by [SHED](https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search?p_p_id=uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_mvcRenderCommandName=%2Fcharity-overview&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_LIFERAY_SHARED_backToSearch=https%3A%2F%2Fregister-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk%2Fcharity-search%3Fp_p_id%3Duk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet%26amp%3Bp_p_lifecycle%3D1%26amp%3Bp_p_state%3Dnormal%26amp%3Bp_p_mode%3Dview%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_cur%3D1%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_delta%3D20%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_keywords%3DSustainability%2BHealth%2B%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_orderByCol%3D%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_orderByType%3Dasc%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_priv_r_p_prevCol%3D%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_priv_r_p_useSession%3Dtrue%26amp%3B_uk_gov_ccew_portlet_CharitySearchPortlet_priv_r_p_mvcRenderCommandName%3D%252Fsearch-results&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_organisationNumber=5142773) as part of the [Necessity network](https://necessity.info/about).

One of the groups we are working with is the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir. This report summarises thirteen in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the choir and its director in November and December 2020.

As much as possible the text consists of quotes from the interviews. The report is thus a case study of the choir through the voices of its members. It brings together choir members’ perspectives on the history of the choir; Jewishness and Yiddish; Brighton and other places; the role of music and singing; rehearsal and performance spaces; and the effects of the pandemic. The final sections of the report consist of choir members’ reflections on community, solidarity and hope.

Names of research participants have been changed except where people have requested in writing that their real name be used. More details on the research methods and the ethical approval received from the University of Brighton can be found [here](https://hopefulsolidarities.wordpress.com/).

# 2 History of the choir

## 2.1 Choir as a whole

The Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir (BHYC) had its origins in an advertisement. When she arrived in Brighton from Kazan, Tatarstan in 2004 Polina Shepherd was already established internationally as a performer of Yiddish and Russian songs, and as a composer of music. Not yet fluent in English, with the help of her husband Merlin Shepherd, Polina sought to make connections in London and Brighton.

*My first connection was with the Progressive Synagogue, and the first two people I met there actually advertised [for choir members]. I got in touch with them, I don’t know who answered me, maybe the Rabbi, Rabbi Elli. So yeah, they said come and let’s see, we will put a little advert. If anyone wants to come and sing with you they will come and there were three people there.*

One of those people was Anna Ross. Seeing Polina’s advertisement in *Sussex Jewish News*, she remembered going along, singing some *nigunim* [wordless chants] and chatting. But there were not enough people to form a choir.

Another, Maya Vardy, recalled ‘*a small meeting at the Progressive Synagogue with Polina and one or two other people. It kind of wasn’t going to take off and then it did take off with a lot of, mostly, women, who I didn’t know*.’

Anna Ross bumped into Polina and Merlin again a year after the first meeting. Polina was still working on her English and really wanted to start a choir. Anna contacted someone at Ralli Hall[[1]](#footnote-1) for advice and Ralli Hall agreed to underwrite the project because it was an aspect of Jewish culture. ‘*So they got it going*,’recalled Anna.

Known for most of its history as ‘Brighton and Hove Chutzpah Choir’, it took time for the choir to move from being a Jewish choir (with songs in multiple Jewish languages) to being a specifically Yiddish choir, and its name was only changed to Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir in 2019. According to Jackie Fuller in a piece on the history of the choir published in ‘Our Jewish Story’ in 2016, it

…didn’t take too long to decide that Chutzpah Choir was the best name to choose, as the choir felt it certainly had ‘chutzpah’[[2]](#footnote-2) to sing in Yiddish, which none of the members actually spoke, and ‘chutzpah’ is a word that many non-Jewish people are familiar with too. The choir was still seen as part of the Yiddish music revival, which has now become part of the world music scene.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jackie Fuller writes vividly of the choir’s performances from 2006 to 2011, sometimes as part of events within Brighton and Hove’s Jewish communities and at other times shared with performers drawing on a broad range of heritages.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Ralli Hall phase of the choir began ‘*thinning out a bit*’ (Maya Vardy) and by 2012 it had ceased rehearsals. Eliana Cohen remembered,

*people came and left and came and left. It really wasn’t as stable as it is now. There were younger people who couldn’t commit… Lots of men came and left [laughs] so we didn’t have many bass or tenor voices really. Yeah, and it was always sad, and of course, with no commitment Polina couldn’t really continue*.

Sarah Balkin recalled going to

*a few of the meetings, a few of the sessions at Ralli Hall quite near the beginning. I was working at the time, still working at the time and I don’t know why, I just didn’t sort of take to it, I just decided not to carry on at that particular point, I didn’t feel that connected to it*.

In her 2016 article, Jackie Fuller remembered how in

November 2015 a small group of former Chutzpah Choir members decided to re-form, meeting in a member’s house in Hove on a weekday morning (instead of an evening). Polina agreed to give it a go. The reincarnated Chutzpah Choir met for five weeks at the end of 2015 and already has 18 people on the list, some being former choir members and some coming along for the first time. This time there are already several men, and the choir performed at a four-choirs concert at Brighton’s Unitarian Church in February 2016 (‘A Bublichki Evening’) and performed in the mixed ages choirs section of the local Springboard Festival. The Chutzpah Choir was awarded 90 marks with an Honours First. So who would have predicted that in 2012?[[5]](#footnote-5)

Maya Vardy remembers rehearsing in the choir member’s home. She ‘was just a bundle of energy and getting things moving. And we were meeting in her house, in her front room… It was advertised through Jewish Women Friends in Sussex (JWFS). People joined… and eventually it was getting too big and a lot of the people coming at that stage were not people who’d been in the original choir.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

Eventually the choir rehearsals moved to Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue (BHPS). The choir is secular although members have a range of affiliations from observant to atheist and it includes people who identify as Jewish and others who have no Jewish heritage. Anna Ross explained that members who were not observant Jews were comfortable because

*BHPS is anyway a synagogue that is progressive and forward thinking… I don’t think anyone feels they’re being ‘proselytised’. It’s a very friendly place, a very open place. People there are very supportive.*

Weekly rehearsals continued in BHPS until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and resumed there in September 2021.

Polina Shepherd is enthusiastic for the choir to perform alongside professional and community musicians from a wide range of traditions and heritages. ‘It’s my subject. I love other cultures, I love other musicians and seeing what other people are doing.’ A number of performances and the recording of the choir for a CD have been supported by Brighton-based music producer Phill Minns.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*I love it that our choir has become part of this international musical community here in Brighton and Lewes and, you know, East Sussex… Phill and his events and his network allows us to educate people around us and to be educated ourselves about other cultures, how to listen, what to look for… So that’s one little element, that can, you know, through education bring people together, enable us to hear each other.*

## 2.2 Choir members

While the membership of BHYC is never static, over twenty people attended rehearsals and were preparing to perform in February 2020 at the time the Covid-19 pandemic struck in the UK. Approximately the same number of BHYC members remained involved through joint monthly online (Zoom) rehearsals with the London Yiddish Choir in 2020–21, as well as outdoor rehearsals specifically for BHYC in June and September 2021.

The ratio of women to men in the choir is approximately 4:1. Most members are white British people, in their sixties or older, and retired. Several live as single-person households and are either widowed, separated or divorced; at least one identifies as LGBTQI+. The majority identify as Jewish.   
  
Of the participants in the Hopeful Solidarities research, eleven are women and two are men. Eleven of the thirteen participants have Jewish backgrounds, mostly Ashkenazi though including at least two people with a Sephardic mother or father (we discuss different ways in which people spoke about Jewishness and what it means to them in Section 3). All but one moved to Brighton and Hove (or the nearby towns of Lewes and Shoreham) as an adult. Three participants were born and grew up outside the UK. People’s moves of residence and their connections to particular parts of the city, nearby towns, London and other places within and beyond the UK are explored in detail in Section 4.

As this report shows, one of the most remarkable aspects of the choir is the diversity of reasons members have for being part of it. In Jonathan Martin’s words,

*it is such a diverse group, you know. We’ve got this thing that brings people together, [it] is this love of singing the songs from this culture and the various different strands of the culture, but the people that are attracted to it come for completely different reasons and it really is very interesting.*

Choir members have worked in a wide variety of paid and unpaid roles over their lifetime and most have moved residence at least once before coming to live in Brighton and Hove. In the remainder of this section we briefly illustrate the range of research participants’ life journeys through examples drawn from the interviews.

Places participants grew up in include London (East and North), Essex, Hertfordshire, New York City, Oxford, Chelsea, Hove and Israel. Polina Shepherd grew up in Kazan, Tatarstan. Other places people lived in during their adult lives before moving to Brighton and Hove include Lower Clapton, Holland, St Albans, Brixton, San Diego (California), Glasgow and Switzerland.

The range of paid and unpaid work that participants spoke about doing during their lives include

* IT consultant
* volunteer reader and IT support for disabled and disenfranchised people
* assisting in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (including to refugees and asylum seekers)
* clinical psychology
* parenting
* caring for partners and/ or parents
* office administration
* bereavement support
* teaching
* working in social housing
* owning and running a small hospitality business
* leadership of a community and events hub
* working in a bicycle shop
* studying for further and higher education qualifications
* trade unionism
* anti-racist activism
* psychotherapy
* social work
* music teaching
* academic research
* composing and performing music.

Some participants spent years as commuters between London and Brighton. Some have had long periods of illness when they were unable to work at all.

# 3 Jewishness and Yiddish

As its name suggests, the repertoire of the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir consists almost entirely of songs in Yiddish, one of several Jewish languages. The choir currently rehearses in the Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue. We asked choir members about what both Jewishness and Yiddish mean to them (whether or not they themselves identified as Jewish). This section demonstrates the diversity of perspectives on both through four separate sub-sections respectively on identity, religion, Yiddish language and politics.

Hostility towards Jews has a very long history in England going back many centuries and including the expulsion of Jews by royal edict in 1290.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is still widespread anti-Semitism across society today. Debates among Jews in the UK about Jewishness are fraught, especially because of disagreement about how anti-Semitism should be defined, and in particular the relationship of anti-Semitism to views about Zionism, the definition of which is also contested.

Academic Lily Kahn has written about Yiddish as ‘the traditional language of the Ashkenazi, or Eastern European, Jews.’ She describes Yiddish as a:

fusion language… approximately 70 per cent is Germanic, 25 per cent derives from the Hebrew-Aramaic component, and the remaining 5 per cent is Slavic, with a few Romance elements traceable to Judaeo-French and Judaeo-Italian. On the eve of the Second World War Yiddish was spoken by 11-13 million people, roughly 75 to 80 per cent of the entire Jewish population globally. A variety of interconnected factors, chiefly the Holocaust, widespread immigration to Israel, Western Europe and North America, and Stalinist repression in the Soviet Union led to a dramatic reduction in the number of Yiddish speakers during the twentieth century, and it is now an endangered language with an (approximately) estimated 1-2 million speakers. Yiddish has always been a stateless language.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Yiddish is spoken by many Haredi (strictly Orthodox), mostly Hasidic Jewish communities. It has also experienced a revival since the 1980s among the descendants of non-Haredi Yiddish-speaking ancestors, ‘heir to the legacy of the flowering of secular Yiddish culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’.[[10]](#footnote-10) This has included the revival of Klezmer music and Yiddish song, of which the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir is part. Learning Yiddish has become increasingly popular to the extent that in 2021 the online language learning platform Duolingo launched a Yiddish app.

## 3.1 Choir members’ diverse perspectives on Jewish identity

This section illustrates some of the different, contrasting and dynamic meanings that Jewish identity and Jewishness have to members of the choir. A minority of members have no Jewish heritage; however, most grew up with at least one Jewish parent.

*Many people do not understand that you can be Jewish by birth but not religiously Jewish. Statements are made to the press on behalf of the “Jewish community”, but really the people issuing them are only representing those who belong to member synagogues or are members of their particular group. It is actually not possible to “represent” all Jews in one go as there are so many shades of opinion. Jewishness is an ethnicity that also has its own religion, but the ethnicity stays even without the religion. (Anna Ross)*

*I’ve always had enough Jewish friends who have been on the same side of the debate as me to feel totally comfortable being a Jewish non-Zionist… As far as I’m concerned I’m as Jewish as anybody else, which others might deny. (Esther Wolf)*

*I’m very hesitant still [to come out as Jewish, eg at work] because my parents were survivors. Basically, they lost their whole family in the Holocaust… Whatever people think about their Jewishness, they are still Jewish. They can deny it, they can pretend they aren’t, but they all know they are. When you’re number’s up, you’re Jewish, aren’t you? (Eliana Cohen)*

*I remember when we went to the Jewish Museum in Poland where you go through different ages, and so it takes you through Jewish culture right from the beginning when the Jews first came to Poland, right the way through to the Holocaust and then post that. And I found that really important because the way in which you go round it, you’re not seeing everything as through the lens of the Holocaust, you’re actually seeing the culture as it existed before. And I think too often now [sighs], I get a lot of Facebook posts about things to do with the Holocaust which to me is encouraging this view that everything before was leading up to the Holocaust. And so it reduces, it’s almost playing into the Nazi hands and saying “this is how you define Jews, through the Holocaust” and that I really don’t like. (Jonathan Martin)*

*My husband was not Jewish, but he was very supportive. We found a group of people who we’d meet on the major holidays, mainly for food… When you live in New York, you can be Jewish without thinking about it very much. (Maya Vardy)*

*I kind of rejected my Jewish upbringing because it wasn’t a very good Jewish upbringing. Rejected everything about being Jewish and I still, I don’t identify as Jewish… Jewish people can be extremely racist, I‘m sure you’re aware of that. My father didn’t like, none of my family really liked non-Jewish people, except my mother was completely open to everything. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*One of the things that turned me against being in a Jewish community in earlier years was this feeling of exclusivity, having to keep it within the tribe. I don’t like that. (Anna Ross)*

*I’ve always worked with non-Jewish people, lots of non-Jewish people and I’ve never, that’s never made me feel Jewish but I think there was something about the very county waspy sort of churchy nature of the people there [at West Sussex County Council] (Sarah Balkin)*

*the Yiddish is what connects us as a group, and the Jewishness… until I was part of the choir and have made friends in the choir, I've never had a Jewish group of friends. It’s interesting, but there is something very deep that I feel in common with them, even though we are very different people… In Israel I never thought about being Jewish. (Leah Setton)*

*Well I was born at the start of the war and we were quite strict in a sense that we didn’t eat food which wasn’t kosher. My mother said, “I’m going to give you sandwiches, don’t tell them you’re kosher, tell them you’re vegetarian”. She was terrified that people would find out we were Jewish, so there was a paranoia around in those early years. I mean, a great, deep respect for our identity in the home but, from her particularly, terror that somebody might find out. And metaphorically shoot us. So I had that sort of overlay to my early years. She came over, ma, I think she was about 9 or 10, I think. She came from near Warsaw, a village, she came from a little shtetl, and she was the youngest of about 10 children. And it must’ve been quite an extraordinary experience to come over on a boat to the East End of London, Whitechapel actually [laughs]… (Eva Williams)*

*In terms of my identity, it really helped and helps because before that I felt that split within me. Do I belong to Russian culture? Am I Jewish, am I Russian? Who am I? and I really wanted to connect with the Jewish side. I felt something was missing and that's why I felt so drawn to it when I first heard the, you know, klezmer music and I wanted to belong and I feel now that I belong, purely through music. (Polina Shepherd)*

3.2 Religion

Those choir members who identified as Jewish range from people who regard themselves as atheists to others who are in some way religiously observant Jews. This latter group varied by denomination and included people whose religious expression included attendance at synagogue as well as people who regarded themselves as engaging with Judaism only on ‘high days and holy days.’

*we’re not synagogue-goers, we’re atheists (Esther Wolf)*

*I’m a member of the Reform Synagogue. Didn’t go that often but I am part of it, and the welfare part of it, I’ve done a lot. (Eliana Cohen)*

*From quite young I really disliked religious things, we’d been through various different types of religious communities, we’d been in an Orthodox and we’d been in a Liberal synagogue, been in a Reform synagogue, and I found nothing there that had any relevance to me and yet I felt strongly Jewish. (Jonathan Martin)*

*Actually, the Judaism I get more and more interested in and because I love our choir so much I realised actually I've always been a ‘heathen’. I realised that I love to be in the room and sing with people and to connect on a level that I can't necessarily rationalise, you know, somehow we're all connected. We might not have anything else in common but that we love the music and I find that's so special and I often think maybe I want to go there [to Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue] and be in a service, I don't know, just to be in the room with people feeling good together. (Rosy Armitage)*

*I have been connected with the [Brighton and Hove] Progressive Synagogue for a long time, a long time. [Sighs] And that is because Rabbi Elli’s wife, I knew and she knew me and she wrote an application, God knows how many years ago, fifteen maybe more years ago, to get an outreach programme for the synagogue to support older people in the community and she knew that I was working with older people, she asked me to be on the committee, so I ended up on the committee and it was called L’chaim… So I was involved and I did once or twice go to Seders there and they did try to persuade me to join the synagogue. I said I’m a non-believer and [the rabbi’s wife] said it didn’t matter! (Sarah Balkin)*

*[in response to a question about her feelings on attending her first Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir rehearsal] I didn’t like it. There weren’t that many people there and there was an elderly lady there who goes to our synagogue, who doesn’t seem to like me, I don’t know why, so she was kind of a bit offish. And I felt very out of place. (Naomi Truman)*

*Personally, it was nice to connect with Jewish people through a non-religious way, because I've never felt comfortable being part of a synagogue. I’ve never become part of a particular religious community because I basically am not religious at all, I’m really an atheist myself. But I’m still very much Jewish, and so relating to the people in the group without having to deal with religion. (Leah Setton).*

*I think [Hove] is more formally Jewish [than other parts of the city]. There are more Jews who go to the synagogue who live there, but [my area has] all the people like me and [laughs] you know, we don't live in Hove, we don't go to synagogues unless I have to teach choir, so, you know. People who just mix with everyone else and you don't have like a big sign on their forehead, I'm Jewish, yeah. [Laughs] (Polina Shepherd)*

## 3.3 Feelings about Yiddish

The differences among choir members in the meaning and significance of Yiddish is striking. For some members, Yiddish is the main draw of the choir and reminds them of their parents or grandparents and/or is a language which has particular importance as a resource in times of crisis, given the history of Yiddish-speaking people. Others like having an introduction to the meaning of song lyrics but then being free to sing without focusing on literal meaning. A minority belong to the choir *in spite of* Yiddish, and would prefer to sing in another Jewish language, such as Ladino (one of the languages traditionally spoken by Sephardic Jews) or Hebrew. Some members grew up with familiarity with Yiddish (to different degrees) and some have studied it and/or other Jewish languages.

*[Yiddish music] comes from a time of real suffering. It puts things in perspective. [It is important for] memorialising these people – they shouldn’t be forgotten… At the same time, Yiddish music should be seen as a living thing, not just looking backwards but also moving forward and expressing an evolving Jewish identity. Polina understands this very well and it is the essence of what she tries to do. Some Yiddish singers in other countries are also on same wavelength. (Anna Ross)*

*I grew up hearing Yiddish words rather than sentences. Like I remember my aunt always used to say ‘how’s the kleyne?’ and I knew that referred to me but I didn’t know that it meant ‘how’s the little one? (Esther Wolf)*

*My parents didn’t [speak Yiddish]. They had a smattering of it, so I didn’t hear it at home. But you know it goes to the soul really. (Eliana Cohen)*

*when I began to realise this strong link between the Yiddish culture in the Ashkenazi countries before the war and the strong socialist element of that, I suddenly went “wow this is something that, you know, finally has got some sort of link which means something to me”. And that’s really how I sort of got so caught up in the whole Yiddish kind of thing. (Jonathan Martin)*

*you have to understand that as a Zionist I had completely rejected anything to do with Yiddish. It was something you would mock, you would mock the way in which it was pronounced… all the things that I really dislike at the moment about the way that people relate to Yiddish, this seeing it as a jokey thing and, or something that is very, very pious. (Jonathan Martin)*

*the truth is that I have a much greater interest in Sephardic music and singing in Ladino than I do in Yiddish or in that music… I have to say, the music has grown on me because it is much more varied than, you know, My Yiddishe Mama. And, you know, even linguistically, I’m slightly more interested in the language than I was. (Maya Vardy)*

*[Regarding the Yiddish choir] it was nice in a way to connect with my ancestors, my heritage… I love the music. Yeah. I’m not sure that the music did it. I think the Yiddish did it because it did bring something back to my memory. And also because there was something latent there. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*My grandmother spoke [Yiddish] to my mother. My mother didn’t really speak but she could understand and [my grandmother] used to speak it to my mother when she didn’t want me to understand what she was saying. (Sarah Balkin)*

*[in response to question about whether she had a connection to Yiddish music before she joined the choir] Not like some people. You know, like [names choir member], when we did a song she said it made her cry because her grandparents used to sing it to her. No, nothing like that at all. I don’t know, my parents spoke Yiddish, but I don’t think they, I don’t remember them talking about music at all. (Naomi Truman)*

*The culture was you spoke only Hebrew. The sort of languages of the diaspora [i.e. such as Yiddish] were rather dismissed, where a young Israeli society and Israeli culture was being sort of developed, yes. I spoke German at home. I grew up bilingual. (Leah Setton)*

*My mother’s mother spoke only Yiddish, she never learnt English. And although I didn’t speak Yiddish as a child, it was absolutely in my bones I suppose and my mother used to speak to her all the time… [My mother] was rather ashamed of [Yiddish] when her mother died and didn’t want to use it at all, which was very common. And then it became more fashionable and she really wanted to learn… She went to Yiddish classes and I’ve still got her Yiddish books… Her older sisters and brothers actually wrote beautiful Yiddish. (Eva Williams)*

*Yiddish music touches the soul of people, it just touches us beyond any religious or social structure. It’s encapsulating the whole spectrum of human experience. (Eva Williams)*

*Because I didn't grow up in Yiddish culture and because I don't speak Yiddish, I'm actually learning right now, I'm taking lessons, but I understand pretty much everything in the songs, but I don't feel quite as relaxed with teaching [as I do with Russian]. (Polina Shepherd)*

## 3.4 Political beliefs

A rare aspect of the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir is that members have a range of views on matters which often keep people entirely apart, such as views on the State of Israel, Zionism and Palestine. This is made possible by the focus of the choir on singing together rather than on political discussion, although occasionally, differences of opinion surface.

*My earlier upbringing… was Zionist. [As a teenager] I went to Habonim [which was] a socialist Zionist youth organisation… I grew up with a much less complicated idea of what Zionism meant than I now feel. [Later] I got involved in the Jewish Socialist Group [which] is about promoting the continued existence of Jewish culture very much as opposed to Zionist culture, wanting to influence both the Jewish community in terms of objecting to, you know, the Israeli state, finding a solution and things like that, but also I think there was a role in maybe educating aspects of the left who just assumed all Jews were Zionist and all Jews were this and all Jews were that… There’s also Jewish Voice for Labour who were the ones who supported Corbyn and still do. So yeah, and I just think it’s really important that these groups exist even though you wouldn’t know it from most of the coverage that we read and hear. (Esther Wolf)*

*this whole Jeremy Corbyn episode has been very painful so that’s really what I mean when [I say] the choir is like a microcosm of Jewish people and some, you know, some of us, we feel the same, and others don’t. And it’s difficult, this whole Israel thing, it’s a problem. (Eliana Cohen)*

*I think the question whether there should be a Jewish state or not a Jewish state and so on I think is no longer relevant. It’s there. How it exists and how it deals with things I think is the subject, is the issue… I do get very angry with the conflation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, I think that infuriates me because I think there’s, particularly when you have a country which is doing so many bad things you should be free to criticise it very, very strongly and I think it’s very unfortunate that people feel that they can’t. (Jonathan Martin)*

*And I think it’s… being involved with antiracism, feeling strongly about antiracism and yet and thinking, hold on a minute, well perhaps I ought to be advocating for my own background somehow as well, you know, I think that’s what changed. (Sarah Balkin)*

*In the large Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, there was a strong left-wing element. The choir songs remind me of this Jewish political activity on the left, lost now – well, not lost entirely but active politics now conducted more within mainstream political organisations rather than from within the Jewish community itself. My parents were left-wing but not active. My father was there at the Battle of Cable Street in 1936. (Anna Ross)*

*There’s a whole area of loss in what people are singing about… because Yiddish music for centuries, way before the Holocaust, it carried a culture and an ethic, which is linked to Jewish values. So Yiddish songs sort of, they state the values and not only that, it actually tells us that we must actually live by these values and that’s sort of things like social justice... We’re always drawn to making a contribution and we’ve got very high numbers around who are fighting for the rights of refugees and [against] racial discrimination... And do the people that are singing all these songs including songs when the fight for political activity is being expressed, like some of the marching songs we’re singing, do they really know about this, all these singers in the choir? (Eva Williams)*

Taken together this section on Jewishness and Yiddish has shown the multitude of ways in which Jewish identity is experienced and understood in the choir, as well as a wide range of political views among choir members. Approaches to religion range widely too. Some members are atheist while others are observant in a range of ways. The Yiddish language of the choir’s repertoire is of prime importance to some members and less central to others, while a small number of members expressed enjoyment of songs in other Jewish languages such as Ladino or Hebrew.

# 4 Choir members’ migrations and their connections to places in the UK and beyond

Of the 13 choir members interviewed, all but one had moved to Brighton and Hove as an adult. Three had grown up outside the UK, but the majority had moved down to Brighton from London. In this section, we present choir members’ stories about their connections to different places, including London, Brighton and Hove and its surrounding areas, Israel, the USA and beyond.

4.1 London

As indicated in the choir members’ profiles in section 2, at least seven research participants had been born in London. Reflecting the geography of Jewish London,[[11]](#footnote-11) several of the choir members had been born and/or grown up specifically in North or East London. However, their family connections were not limited to these areas.

Of those who had grown up in London, several had moved around within London before moving to Brighton. Rachel Beck – who had grown up in Oxford and moved to London after university – described a series of moves around North London:

*I spent the first six months or something in East Ham, I was teaching there, and then moved completely the other side to Westbourne Park, so sort of near, next door to, well North Kensington, Notting Hill. And then I was there for two or three years, and then I moved to Tufnell Park […] I wasn’t in Tufnell Park very long, but I moved to Highbury from there, and Tufnell Park was always a place I went through on the way to Hampstead Heath, and Kentish Town and other places I visited. And then I lived in Highbury for eleven years and then I moved to Stoke Newington. And then before I moved to Brighton I decided to move in with a friend and I rented out my flat and so I lived in Kentish Town for about 18 months.*

In some cases, people had moved for work; however, people’s personal circumstances and politics also took them to new areas. Having grown up in Chelsea, Rosy Armitage described her decision to live in Brixton during the 1980s as an attempt to move ‘*as far as possible from her own culture’.*

*When I heard about my friends’ childhoods, just ordinary childhoods of going out in the day and running around in the street, you know, in posh areas you don’t have that because everyone gets taken by their nannies to different private schools and whisked away on the weekends. To me, I didn’t really ever fit in with it, I didn’t really ever, I didn’t want to grow up and continue in that life. I didn’t really know what I wanted but I knew that I didn’t want to be in that life, I didn’t want my parents’ life at all.*

Although ‘*it was terrible then, it was rough, and the whole place looked like, it looked like just after the Blitz or something’*, Rosy enjoyed ‘*discovering a completely different set of beliefs’* in Brixton.

*I loved it. As soon as I started meeting West Indian people I just totally fell in thrall to it. I loved it, I loved the music… There were so many interesting people. It was so lively, you know... and for me, I wanted to move as far away as I could from my own culture, you know, I was running away, so it sort of hit the spot. [prompt: what did you connect with in Brixton?] Well, fine with a bunch of anarchists for one thing who were, a lot of them were amazing people, and also I started working in a bike shop and I just used to ride my bike everywhere and go on holiday on my bike. I was welded to my bike, I was never off my bike.*

Sarah Balkin had also lived in Brixton around that time. As a community worker and then a social worker, her decision to live there was more practical:

*I needed to be in the inner city at that time in my life, you know... I was working as a Community Worker and then a Social Worker, I couldn’t work as a Community Worker anymore because of all the nights and then having a small baby, it doesn’t work, you know, all those evening meetings so I’d gone back to a little bit more regular 9 to 5 and... Yeah, salaries weren’t, you know, it’s pretty shit now but it was not very good even then so Brixton was the only place that a lot of us public sector workers could afford to live, basically, teachers and social workers and, you know, people on the Left more, as well and so yeah, that’s where I ended up.*

Sarah remembered the 1981 Brixton ‘riots’:

*We lived there during the riots, my daughter was very young then and we lived just up the hill and in fact, the day after the riots we went down to the frontline, to Electric Avenue and it was a very... It was a very interesting feeling, I mean it was not at all threatening or anything... It was not a racial riot in any way, you know, we were white and there were other white people down there, it was about the Police, absolutely and totally about the police and the sus laws*[[12]](#footnote-12) *and things and it was just an interesting time to be there.*

Reflecting back, Rachel Beck commented that London was

*a lot about work… Obviously there was more to London than work, but I also felt a lot that there was so much going on in London that a lot of the experience there was about how many things you were missing rather than how many things you were going to.*

### 4.2 Moving to Brighton (from London)

Often described as ‘London by the sea’, Brighton has long attracted people from London who, as Sarah Balkin put it ‘*slip right down the A23 to Brighton*’. Although a common migration, members of the choir had different reasons for moving down. However, most had previous experiences or connections with the city that had led them to make the move:

*It was always a place that had a very strong identity for me, probably because I think, I think when I was very young we used to come down here quite a lot. I didn’t know then but my paternal grandmother had actually lived here during the war. I knew we had relatives down here and we used to come down for big Jewish weddings… There was one particular family that had three very, very big Jewish weddings at the Metropole and so for us sort of, you know, sort of living in bland Hemel Hempstead, this was sort of really something exotic coming down to Brighton. So that sort of set up this idea of an exotic place but in a different way to the exotic that we found when we actually moved down here. And I think more or less immediately we were, we felt it was a place, you know, we’d like to live. (Jonathan Martin)*

*I came to Brighton and Hove in 2007, I’d lived in London for 36 years and I decided that I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life in London, and there were various reasons for choosing Brighton, one of them was that I, that it wasn’t terribly far from London, another was that my parents lived in Sussex. They’re both dead now, actually my mother was already dead, but … and I also have a sister and her family. But I also had, because my parents used to live in Hove, been here a lot, and my grandparents lived in Sussex [Ditchling] so we visited when I was a very small child…**My grandfather was the vicar for 14 years there. […] And yeah, so I moved to Brighton because of lots of the reasons that people move to Brighton, it’s got a lot going on, it’s very gay friendly, it’s by the sea. (Rachel Beck)*

*You can get to London, I mean my work was in London, I thought if we go to Brighton I can commute either to this job or any future job I get, also it was important for me for there to be some Jews but for them to be the right sort of Jews and Brighton totally fit the bill, it really, really does. And, you know, as soon as, shortly after the moving here we did meet the right sort of Jews, you know, just enough of them so that you, you know, we’ve got Jewish friends, obviously we’ve got lots of friends who aren’t Jewish but, you know, the Jewish friends are our, we speak the same language, you know, basically. (Esther Wolf)*

*I have a long history of Brighton & Hove because my great aunt, on my mother’s side, moved down here just after the war, I think, well it must have been and so as a child I used to come and visit them a lot from North London and they had a little arch under the, just next to the West Pier, so I had many, I had really happy memories of coming as a child and whether it was that or whether it was just the glorious opportunities offered by the university but I ended up as an undergraduate at Sussex University in the late 60s, so I was here for 3 years then. […] I think I didn’t want to go too far away from home, but I really liked the set-up that they had in those days […]. In those days, in the late 60s there wasn’t enough accommodation on campus, so 1st Years used to have to live in guesthouses and I lived at the Hotel Cecil, which is still there, opposite the West Pier. So yeah, I lived there and then round and about in different places for the next 2 years, yeah. (Sarah Balkin)*

*By the time I moved [to Brighton in 2012, the gallery where I used to show my work] had closed down. So, that connection wasn’t quite there anymore, but yeah… but that was really the first thing that drew me, through art and I used to come often from London to the artists’ open houses in May. And in fact, this is a really important thing for me to be part of that here, and I think part of my involvement with the community. (Leah Setton)*

Others had moved to places around Brighton, including Shoreham, Seaford, Lewes and Saltdean. Anna Ross, for example, had moved to Saltdean after the breakup of her marriage. Her ex-husband had come from Hove, so they used to travel to Hove for family visits from London, but she moved to Saltdean initially, partly because it was easy to get to her work at the University of Sussex without going into centre of town.

Because of the easy connection between Brighton and London, some people had done the move gradually. Rachel Beck described holding onto her London flat until she was pushed to commit:

*I started in Hove, then I went to Brighton, and then I had these hip operations, and so I was kind of between places, and also kind of working out what made sense to where I would live eventually in Brighton. And so it took a while and it wasn’t actually until my landlady sort of gave me the elbow that I thought I needed to kind of get on with it. So, I sold my flat and moved to Hove, which is where I am now.*

Anna Ross, whose move to Brighton was triggered by her job at Sussex University, had also made a gradual transition, staying over one night a week with a colleague in the nearby village of Kingston. It meant she ‘*didn’t really see much of Brighton though*’.

## 4.3 Brighton and Hove

Naomi Truman was the only choir member we interviewed to have grown up in Brighton and Hove.

*We were in a house till I was 2, in Davigdor Road. And I don’t remember that, but I do remember moving to the flat. I have lots of, I have about six memories, we moved to a flat in Wick Hall which was supposed to be temporary, while they were looking for another house, and that took seven years to find. And then we moved to Old Shoreham Road, Hove which, right opposite where the junior school is now, Brighton and Hove High, but wasn’t then. And I was there for the rest of my unmarried life. My parents left there erm…, I think just about the time our son was born. […] We were married reasonably young. So we got married and had a small flat on the seafront, that actually belonged to \*’s father, we paid him rent. And then we moved to Elm Drive in Hove, and then we moved here.*

‘*Hove was separate from Brighton*,’ Naomi explained, ‘*there’s things about it I don’t like and neither of us like what Brighton has become*’. Talking about Hove, Eliana Cohen had also seen it change ‘*an awful lot*’ over the years.

*It’s become much more like Brighton. Well, it’s busier, it’s crowded, you can’t park, there’s so many people everywhere [laughs]. It hasn’t got a heart, it’s got, you know, Hove’s got George Street and that’s it and then it’s all houses.*

Others similarly felt that Brighton and its component communities had changed over the years. Anna Ross, who had lived in North Laine and been ‘*very much part of the community’* there, noted that that area used to offer the ‘*best of both worlds*’, having ‘*everything on your doorstep, umpteen buses*’ – but also a ‘*villagey feel*’ where one knew people by name in every street. Now manyhouses have been turned into rented accommodation or AirBnbs and the population is much more fluid. ‘*It’s lost that villagey atmosphere*.’ In Anna’s eyes, the area, which also used to have more practical shops, now caters more to visitors than to locals, with lots of cafes and trendy shops, and also suffers from lots of anti-social behaviour, drug dealing and graffiti. ‘*It’s not the North Laine I knew and loved*’, Anna explained.

Despite changes such as these, most participants liked the city, speaking positively about the city and its natural landscape, particularly the sea. For those who had moved to Brighton from other places, they were able to appreciate the benefits that Brighton offered, including its relative size:

*I just loved Brighton straight away. I came here for three months on a, what's it called, a short visa, and then I came here, I bought my one-way ticket to Britain in January 2004 and then I married Merlin on the 27th of January 2004, so I stayed. (Polina Shepherd)*

*I think I appreciated the ways that it was different, it was, you know, there were fewer people, and you could go to places, and even after a reasonably short while, well I mean there’s sort of one centre in Brighton so you kind of meet people more frequently than you do in London, and yeah, and it took a while before I kind of took the sea for granted, although I try not to [laughs]. (Sarah Balkin)*

*I’ve had open houses in London for about 30 years before… But in Brighton it’s firstly you exhibit, you invite several other people to exhibit, so you’re already a little community. But then, I am connected with the artists in my own area, and we have open evenings to see each other’s work, because we can’t go during the day when we have ourselves visitors, so we visit each other’s houses and it’s very much a social and cultural event. But [in London] it was much more my own private event and the people who I invited, rather than lots of people walking in, it was completely different. Here [in Brighton] people walk in, the door is open, anybody can come and go, while in London I wouldn’t have left my door open. People rang the bell and you welcomed them. It was different. (Leah Setton)*

*You never really feel hemmed in here, you can see the whole sky. You know if you’re in town and you can’t get out you can see the Downs, you can walk everywhere, you know. I feel, one thing I really love about Brighton is the lack of billboards. I know it sounds silly now, but in London you’re just hammered with advertising all the time. When I moved here that was one thing I really noticed, how lovely it was not to have that sort of constant pollution and, you know. Also here you’re never on the underground. (Rosy Armitage)*

Others appreciated the people, the culture, and what they perceived as the liberal and welcoming values of Brighton and Hove.[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Well, it [the Black Lives Matter 2020 demo] made me feel so proud, I loved it. I used to love Pride as well and I just feel proud of Brighton, you know. And one of the loveliest things actually, my daughter’s school had a float and there was the headmaster on the float and it was wonderful, because I thought he was gay but very quietly, you know, but to see him on the bus I just thought was fantastic. (Rosy Armitage)*

*It’s such an open-minded, such a diverse place, with so many different cultures, so many things going on, and also it’s a very artistic place so you can experiment and you can, you know, think, throw things into the audience and people will be open to experimentation. (Polina Shepherd)*

*I think just the proportion of conscious people in Brighton people is higher, I don’t know. Maybe, I don’t know why it happened historically, Brighton is in a specific place and who are attracted to living here. Of course we have these issues and I experience issues as a Jew and as a Russian in Brighton kind of all the time but it’s not that bad, and I also know that in Brighton if something, if somebody makes a negative comment about me being Russian or Jewish, there’ll be another like ten people who would support me, and I don’t know that everywhere in Britain the same thing would happen and in Brighton I do, so I think that we’re on the right track at least. (Polina Shepherd)*

Others had struggled to find ‘like-minded people’:

*I found a very few individuals with whom I have a strong level of understanding, a similar mentality I suppose. And with an understanding of the differences in the backgrounds and how we can talk the same language. But it is only very few, which is a very interesting observation about Brighton. Or about the fact that I don’t know where to go to find these people. I don’t know where all the Jewish people live, or even the non-Jews, I mean I’ve got a lot of friends who are of all backgrounds here. But if they’re all, I feel very different. I mean in a way it’s in a positive way but also there is a sense of aloneness as well. (Eva Williams)*

### 4.4 Connections between Brighton and Hove and surrounding areas

Anna Ross, who had lived in Saltdean before moving to Brighton, explained that she had always oriented herself toward Brighton, going out to the concerts, theatres, and the cinema in the city. Although it was nice to live near Downs and the sea, Saltdean was very suburban and full of elderly people and young families. It was ‘*not my sort of place at all*’, ‘*I’m really a townie*’ and ‘*nothing happened there anyway*.’

Other choir members who lived outside Brighton and Hove in Lewes similarly enjoyed the draw of the city, although unlike Anna they had remained outside, happy to enjoy the city from a small distance:

*We came down here in 1990 [for my husband’s work]… Our eyes were very much Brighton-oriented and Lewes was where the children went to school and where we lived and it was very nice. But having gotten very involved here in the last six years, since he died, um, I realised how little we were involved in Lewes itself at the time. I mean, we loved it and we had friends here and he was involved with things like the Tom Paine Society, but I wasn’t. Most of my connections were in Brighton and with the Jewish community. (Maya Vardy)*

*About 5 years ago-ish, one of my closest friends moved from Lewes to Brighton so I go quite often to see her, and you know, to do things there. I love it. I wouldn’t want to live there, it’s too big and noisy and yeah, too busy. But I love going there. It’s so nice to be able to visit a city and get home quickly, because I don’t like spending too long in the city. But it’s nice to go and to come back. London is, you know, it’s like a day trip, whereas Brighton is much easier. You know, there’s so much to do in Brighton, you know, there’s concerts, there’s gigs and all sorts of things and lots of nice places to eat. (Geoffrey Segal)*

### 4.5 Street, neighbourhood and community

Asked about their immediate community, their street, a few participants commented positively about the social nature of their street:

*I have connection to my street, because it’s a very sociable street, and once every two years we have a street party, which is very enjoyable and sadly was missed also last summer. And I know a number of people, and we used to have a book circle that I was instrumental in organising for some of us. So, yeah. Yes, I like the street a lot, and if I go down the street I often meet people and chat, because in fact the person who just called me lives in the street. (Leah Setton)*

*I was the one who was the catalyst for our street parties which have become quite famous over the years. There was plenty of other people who have carried it on and made it happen and one of them is now our local councillor. (Sarah Balkin)*

Just one of the participants mentioned the significance of a local Jewish population in the decision to move to Brighton and Hove. Other participants also recognised the presence of other Jewish people in the city as important to them, and something they had enjoyed since joining the choir.

*I’ve been here for 20 years when I joined the choir and I knew that there was a sizeable Jewish population… it’s been interesting to meet Jewish people who’ve grown up here and been in the community all their life. In fact, the first flat I bought I lived below an elderly Jewish couple and the couple on the top floor, when they were trying to sell their flat, they only advertised it in the* Jewish Chronicle *for a year. They wouldn’t advertise it anywhere else. (Rosy Armitage)*

For Sarah Balkin, who was planning to move into a more ‘user-friendly’ and ‘future-proofed’ house, proximity to Hove’s synagogues was also an attraction:

*I just walked past somewhere last month, and it was just in the right place, it’s just down the road from the synagogue as it happens, it’s on Lansdowne Road where there are two synagogues and the Buddhist Centre so my spiritual needs will be totally taken care of.*

### 4.6 Continued connections with London

Despite many years spent living in Brighton and Hove, several members of the Brighton and Hove Yiddish choir still had strong connections with London, both practical and emotional:

*When I moved down here [pause] I did spend a lot of time, I did spend quite a lot of time going up to London to see people and to carry on doing things that I was doing there. And but I also really enjoyed, because it was around the time that I retired, and so I was able to just enjoy having a lot of time. (Rachel Beck)*

*I go up often to see my Mum and, you know, do things. (Rosy Armitage)*

*[I don’t go to London] very much but that’s partly because physically it’s quite difficult for me to travel, I’ve got various physical difficulties which makes it very tiring to go down there to London. So [\*], our daughter, she comes up here more often than I come, I go down there. (Eva Williams)*

*[After retirement Jonathan Martin connected more with people he knew outside work than with his former colleagues. A keen student of Yiddish he frequently travelled to London for lessons. The switch to Zoom during lockdown didn’t change this general orientation]. It’s been interesting that the sort of lockdown has actually, the reason I suppose I’m busy, is because I’m doing much more because I would tend very much to see my links being outside Brighton.’*

*I still have a strong connection to the north-west London world from which I came. Yes, I’ve got a strong link to it and there are certain aspects of life in Brighton that hasn’t, I miss certain cultural aspects of London. I lived in Pinner and Northwood. (Eva Williams)*

*Well most of my family is still there, my cousins and things. Friends, obviously not seeing so much of them over the years, over this year. I’ve got a number of old school friends, as it happens, who never left London who I see, under normal circumstances. So yeah, I do feel very connected with London. I could never have moved far from London really… This is the longest I’ve ever lived in a place, you know, other than the house that I grew up in. So, you know, I do feel a very strong connection to Brighton and Hove. My London friend says, well, would you ever move back to London and I absolutely would never, would not, although I’d give my eye teeth to have enough money for a pied-a-terre up there. Very very jealous of people who’ve got things in both places. Just a tiny studio! But anyway, I’ve got enough friends up there to be able to go and stay with them... (Sarah Balkin)*

### 4.7 Connections with places beyond the UK

Members of the choir were connected to places beyond the UK through family and ancestral links, as well as their own migration histories.

At least three of the choir members we spoke to had links to the USA. Sarah Balkin, who also had a cousin in Melbourne, Australia, had spent five years living in San Diego – a ‘*very right-wing city*’ – doing her Master’s degree and still had friends there. ‘*Sadly a couple of them have died but over the years I’ve gone back, yes. I think it was about five years ago was the last time I was there and I still... In fact, I had a Facebook message from friends just the last couple of days.*’

For Maya Vardy, ‘New York did play a role in my life because my parents were in New York. They eventually retired to Florida so, you know, the United States was a part of my life’:

*I still have extended family there, cousins who I’m close to. We would go back every year because of the children, every summer my dear husband would allow that to be his holiday, visiting the in-laws. [Laughs] And then they moved to Florida and we did the same thing, and they would come here. So there’s always been a very close connection and there always will be, even though I’ve renounced my citizenship, I did that two years ago for very practical reasons. I am still very close to the family, yeah.*

Naomi Truman was also connected to the USA by family. Her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren had lived in Kansas City, a ‘utopia in terms of people’, but had since moved to Philadelphia:

*Kansas City is like utopia in terms of people and, I don’t know, it’s a lovely feel. Everyone, whether in the Jewish community or in erm… in the outside world, if you’re in a shop, if you’re in a supermarket car park, everyone will stop and let you cross. Everyone in the shops, lovely, and they love the fact that you speak English, English, English, and they love your accent. And everybody was just utterly delightful. I don’t think we ever came across anybody, maybe one person, I don’t know, who wasn’t utterly delightful. But then they wanted a bigger challenge, so taking over something bigger, so then they moved to a part of Philadelphia, a suburb. And then they got asked to take over another [synagogue]… So I don’t really know what it’s like. People-wise, I think they were nicer where they were living, the other side, Elkin’s Park, there was, it was a very small, nice community there. We liked it when they lived there. To be honest we haven’t seen so much and we’ve been mostly with them.*

In addition, to living relatives, participants were connected to places internationally by past family members and familial ancestors.

*all of my ancestors came from Lithuania so there is always that additional element to your understanding of the world, you know. Maybe you’re more aware of the validity of other cultures and, you know, just the realness of other cultures and that there are other ways of being. (Esther Wolf)*

*I did have a great uncle who lived in Hungary and Budapest, I did actually go and see him before he passed away, actually, a few years ago. Yes, I have that connection and when I first arrived in Hungary, I remember, all those years ago, the people looked like my parents, they had that look about them. They were small, they had just a middle European look about them.**I felt I was at home [laughs]. (Eliana Cohen)*

*[After finding a diary handwritten in Yiddish by his grandmother and letters that had been stored within it from other family members, Jonathan Martin was able to identify the village in Poland where his grandmother’s father had come from. He visited it] ‘three or four years ago’… ‘Jews were long gone from the village because of the Holocaust.’*

*‘It was very strange. The day we arrived, the village was just one long street, it wasn’t a shtetl that I was imagining, but there was nobody about except for lots of workers who were digging up the roads to put the internet down, so cables were being laid for the internet and there was nobody about. And we just sort of saw somebody, a bus came through and somebody got off and went into a house, so we chased after them and we went in and we had a long chat with these people, I was learning Polish at the time and really couldn’t understand a word that they were saying but I had little crib sheets that I’d prepared explaining that my grandfather had been from there and they nodded and they were interested but they didn’t know anything. And I actually came to the conclusion that probably not only were there no Jews there anymore but in fact there were probably none of the original people living there anymore because it was a long, long time ago. I mean we’re talking about stuff from, my grandfather had come in the 1890s so it’s a long, long time ago.’ (Jonathan Martin)*

A couple of participants had lived in Israel and spoke about their connections there. Leah Setton grew up in Israel:

*I still see Israel as my main home, and I have some very close friends and family, and this is the first year I will not have gone to Israel. I've gone every single year, I've never missed out a year. So, yes, I do miss it, although I feel very very at home in Brighton and Hove, and I don’t miss London at all. I can never see myself going back.*

Jonathan Martin, who said he ‘*fell in love with the country but not the people’,* described his experiences of living on a kibbutz:

*I really wanted to be a pioneer and go and live on a kibbutz but almost immediately I realised that it was a very, um, it was very much set up for families and I wasn’t married, it was very staid, and I was quite sort of wanting to be radical, and it was very Israeli and I tended not to like Israelis. And I found it politically more and more difficult. (Jonathan Martin)*

Polina Shepherd, choir director, also pointed beyond connections between specific places to the global connections of the choir itself, through the international nature of Yiddish music and song. As discussed in more detail in Section 7 of this report, this became more obvious during the pandemic:

*You see with the pandemic everyone is torn away from everything and here it is, the global community of Yiddish song… The internet just provided us with that way of coming together, and it’s still there.*

In the next section we focus in on the role of music and singing in choir members lives.

# 5 Role of music and singing

5.1 Music

Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir is a community choir which anyone can join. There are no auditions. This means that members have a wide variety of levels of musical experience, including in some cases no previous experience of singing at all. This subsection brings together a selection of quotes from choir members and the choir director about what music, and especially the music sung by the choir, means to them.

*Mozart started much younger so I wouldn’t say 20 is a young start [laughs] but I just started composing because what I witness also is that our klezmer revival, Yiddish music revival in Russia and the former Soviet Union, because we had no information, no access to that culture back then, people started singing the same songs… It’s kind of like in the world now people are stuck in the old favourite thirty songs… I decided to say something new, so I started experimenting with it. So like the Jewish modes I usually mention at my sessions. Certain variations, certain musical components, I’d use them. I knew that they were originally from the Yiddish culture I would use them in my compositions… I compose Russian songs too. (Polina Shepherd)*

*And I loved it when we had our four-part harmonies, that was beautiful, you can’t really replace that on Zoom. So it’s just hearing the whole thing together, was beautiful, actually. (Eliana Cohen)*

*I mean just this idea of having four parts in songs and things like that… was quite strange for me and I did feel quite a bit of a fraud. (Jonathan Martin)*

*I find my singing developing through these other choirs [names three] and sometimes I get a little bit frustrated with the Yiddish choir that we’re not getting better quick enough. (Maya Vardy)*

*I really enjoyed, and still do, I don’t know what the musical term is, but the Jewish-ness of the music. (Rachel Beck)*

*If everybody played music, loved music it could make a much more harmonious world… Unfortunately, certainly in this country these days, those who are given that opportunity are mainly like middle class. If you’ve got nothing you don’t get music because music in schools is not good. (Naomi Truman)*

*To begin with, because I don’t read music, I was anxious, you know, am I good enough for singing? (Leah Setton)*

*Music has always been very much part of my family background from very early. My parents had a piano shop actually. I don’t play anything very well. But both myself and my husband – his mother was a professional pianist and music is absolutely core to our psyche. We couldn’t really live without it. (Eva Williams)*

*My father and his fellow musicians, many of whom were Jewish, never played klezmer style music because of their desire to fit in and do what the English did. (Anna Ross)*

### 5.2 Repertoire

The choir sings a wide range of Yiddish songs, some of them with music composed or arranged by Polina Shepherd. Most of the lyrics were originally written either in the late nineteenth, or, more commonly, the first half of the twentieth century. They range in mood from melancholy to joy; some are love songs; others were written in and reflect the experience of living in Nazi ghettoes or are part of one or more Yiddish socialist or anarchist traditions of resistance and struggle. Some choir members enjoyed all the different kinds of songs in the repertoire. Others were firmer in their like or dislike for particular parts of the repertoire.

*I’m not too keen on those sort of strident, marching rebellious ones, particularly. I never heard any of those. I quite like the sad and soulful ones. (Eliana Cohen)*

*After I’d sort of embraced the Yiddish language, I was still sort of rejecting the sort of Klezmer type music and Yiddish type music and that came much later. (Jonathan Martin)*

*I get very excited by the socialist songs, obviously the Bundist songs, but I also get very moved by… a lot of the songs that came out of the Holocaust. (Jonathan Martin)*

*I love ‘Stav ya pity’ because you can really let rip. Interestingly enough there isn’t a great deal of Yiddish in that song. But I do love it. And it’s got a kind of aspect of Hebrew, devotional Hebrew, towards the end. It’s fun anyway. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*I love all the workers songs. I love ‘Un du akerst’. I love ‘Ale brider’. I always want to cry when we sing that. I love the really, really poignant ones as well, ‘Cranes’, ‘A malekh veynt’, and I love the dancey ones, the waltzes. (Rosy Armitage)*

*I love ‘Stav ya pity’. Oh my God, I love it, I love it, I love it. I liked it from the beginning. I think because it reminded me of synagogue things, maybe. (Naomi Truman)*

*One of the songs I really like is ‘Fort mayn shif’ and I like the melody but I also love the sort you know, dispossessed coming home. (Leah Setton)*

*I felt pain of loss and joy of sharing in equal measure. Pain of loss from the history of where these songs had come from and the joy of sharing with survivors… There is a huge sense of loss because I’m not the little child dancing around on my own in the lounge anymore singing and clapping. But it’s a wonderful thing that these have become alive again. (Eva Williams)*

### 5.3 Mental health and well-being

Choir members spoke candidly about the effects of singing in the choir on their well-being, particularly their mental health. Some people’s reflections on this could be related to the health benefits of singing in a choir per se, others to the specific experience of singing in Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir, or just being able to lose themselves in the music.

*So I went along for the first session, bear in mind I was really not… I was low, I was feeling low and I went there and for two hours I really enjoyed myself. And for the first, so for the first month or so, or six weeks it worked every time. However I was feeling beforehand for those two hours I felt happy and I felt like myself. (Esther Wolf)*

*Well I think the thing is part of it when you’re anxious and depressed it’s how should I be spending my time? What shall I do next? What shall I do next? When you are somewhere where there is a structure, you’re sitting in your seat, this is your music, this is what you have to sing, then you don’t have to wonder about what to do next, plus you have to concentrate so your mind is focused on something rather than having to think about yourself. (Esther Wolf)*

*I like the way that we sort of know what the words are but I still kind of forget what I’m singing about, especially when there’s no translation immediately to hand. (Rachel Beck)*

*Music is very much about being in the present, and sort of being uplifted and inspired, and one of the things I like about choral singing is being together. One of the frustrating things about singing on Zoom is that you can’t hear everyone’s voices and the vibrations in the room. (Rachel Beck)*

*I just think great, it’s Tuesday, it’s choir, I love choir… you always come out feeling uplifted and inspired. (Naomi Truman)*

5.4 Socializing

Experiences varied widely in terms of how much the choir was a location for people to meet others and make friends, or even, through the repertoire, to feel connected to people elsewhere.

*I’ve never found being in a choir a very good way to get to know people… I guess there are people that I have met in choirs, but I don’t know that I’ve kind of built much of a strong relationship with them. It’s always been more about the music. (Rachel Beck)*

*I feel bonded with everyone at choir rehearsals and I’d never have met them if it hadn’t been for the choir. (Rosy Armitage)*

*I think it’s been a lovely sort of anchor since I’ve retired… It’s certainly extended my friendships, you know, considerably. (Sarah Balkin)*

*It comes back to what I said before about being part of something more global, more enduring, you know, bigger in time and space even than our meetings, our Tuesday morning meetings. (Sarah Balkin)*

5.5 Other choirs

Several BHYC members also belonged to other choirs or had moved between choirs and were able to compare.

*Music and being in a choir have always been really important to me… I sang in the school choir when I was in Oxford, I had one term in the Oxford Bach choir… And I also sang in a church choir on Sunday evenings… So when I came to Brighton I was interested in finding out what choirs there were. (Rachel Beck)*

*I’d been told I couldn’t sing. [BHYC] was really only my second experience of a choir, because I’d only sung with the first choir that I’d joined. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*I remember at school I used to like singing and being in the choir and that feeling of making something bigger than yourself, you know, with other people somehow. (Sarah Balkin)*

*I love the Russian choir. I don’t relate that well to western folk music. I find it very square and simple and repetitive. That’s why I like the Yiddish and the Russian. But I also sing in other kinds of choir. A lot of it is religious music. That doesn’t bother me – to me it’s just music. (Anna Ross)*

*I never sang before, until I joined this choir, actually. I wasn’t in the school choir, I wasn’t in the church choir. (Eliana Cohen)*

As Director of Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir, Polina Shepherd spoke about the importance to her of relations between her Yiddish and Russian choirs and other choirs across Brighton and Hove and beyond.

*The Brunswick performance comes to mind because I think it was just fun and the audience was great and the response was fantastic and people knew us a bit better. There were quite a few people in the audience who were part of our kind of further community, friends of friends, not necessarily from this background. Also, oh, these events were called international, what were they called? We shared it with a few other bands. We were singing some other music from other cultures. And that was good, that's the sharing aspect, and we had lots of young people there. That was it, that’s what I remember. We had quite a few young people there who sang with us and joined in and clapped and all that and they reacted to us… and this young audience full of life and energy and wanting to dance, they were all into it. I think we all felt wonderful after that and being received like this and we sang okay, we sang quite well then. (Polina Shepherd)*

# 6 Rehearsal and performance spaces

The particular spaces used for rehearsing and performing can make a major difference to members of community choirs. Members of Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir reflected on the space they rehearsed in at the Ralli Hall community centre, the series of rehearsals in a choir member’s home, and the current rehearsal space at Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue. Performance spaces have varied greatly from churches to Brighton’s Open Market, and occasionally involved travel beyond the city, including to London and Paris. This section brings together choir members’ perspectives on the range of rehearsal and performance spaces.

6.1 Ralli Hall

*And with horrible lights that really weren’t atmospheric at all. We were in the big hall as well upstairs sometimes, and then we had the, yeah, we had the, we had the downstairs room. And it really wasn’t very nice at all. But there was a little kitchen there, we had a break and, you know, we’d socialise. (Eliana Cohen)*

*I only did maybe two rehearsals in Ralli Hall... But, you know, it was down underneath, the downstairs room and it was all a bit dreary. OK. I mean, it doesn’t matter a great deal once you start singing but that’s what it was. (Maya Vardy)*

*I think we were in a bit of a dark basement or something at Ralli Hall, I think it was a bit of a miserable environment. (Sarah Balkin)*

*Well, they’ve made it, they’ve done it up now, but they hadn’t then, it was kind of rather tatty and dark and, and like no atmosphere. (Naomi Truman)*

6.2 Choir member’s home

*It was wonderful. She’s got a fairly big front room. She loved doing it, we all brought things to eat, it was a very social thing. And as it grew bigger we couldn’t, you know, we couldn’t fit in the room any more. But there was a piano there and, yes, there was a keyboard, but she had got a piano in the room, but we pushed that back and opened the doors. And, yes, it was great, hmm. Yeah, very intimate in the front room… Those were the days you could be squashed together, yes, on the sofa, on chairs, all over the place. Yeah, that was good. (Eliana Cohen)*

*we were starting out, it was very warm, very personal, it was a pain in the neck in terms of space. You know, it wasn’t ideal. But it was a bit like everybody making an effort, OK? (Maya Vardy)*

*it was cosy,* gemutlich *[comfortable] really and yeah, so that made it just so much more relaxed and fun, I think, yeah, even... Although it ended up being very squashed, which is why we ended up at the synagogue, you know. But yeah, I think that was one of the more attractive things about it, yeah. We brought stuff, you know, everybody brought stuff but she was always, she was always the hostess with the mostest… (Sarah Balkin)*

*in a way it was more informal, which had a plus and a minus, really. I mean, the seating was all higgledy-piggledy. There were some couches and some other chairs and people squashed in corners, it wasn’t ideal. But it was nice in her home. But it really needed to be on a more organised footing. Yeah, we always had a tea break, yeah, and that was obviously much more informal because it was in her kitchen and everybody just helped themselves and she put out biscuits and things and, yeah, it was nice. (Naomi Truman)*

*I think it felt a bit more amateur and you know, yes people were sort of, some people had to sit on the floor, and it was very tight and, but it was fun actually. It was more fun, let’s say a bit more informal. (Leah Setton)*

6.3 Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

*Obviously it had been under renovation for years. And then when it opened again, we had that lovely room and that was wonderful. And the kitchen and all of it. (Eliana Cohen)*

*I don’t find it very inspiring as a place. I mean I’d love to sing in Middle Street, in the Middle Street synagogue, that I would find inspiring. (Jonathan Martin)*

*Meeting in the synagogue, for me, I suppose, means let’s get serious, OK? We have the space, we have the kitchen, you know, for when we’re not singing, we can chat. But let’s get serious. (Maya Vardy)*

*I noticed that somehow it feels kind of vulnerable being there… I guess it’s just the thing about, you know, Jews being targeted, and you know, being aware of how much security there is on the door, so that’s the main thing. (Rachel Beck)*

*when we’re singing at the synagogue, I get off the bus at The Old Steine and I walk along the seafront, which I love. It’s a lovely start to the day. And I used to do that all year round, you know, winter as well. And interestingly enough, there were very few days when it was too wet to do it… and in the summer, I’d go down to the beach and have a swim afterwards. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*I was a bit disappointed at first, but then when I saw it, I could see it was so perfect. The arrangement, you know, the teaching, it was a more professional level, wasn’t it, really. And it’s such a beautiful building there and it’s all spotless. And, no, it just felt, you know, after the first time it was great. (Naomi Truman)*

*I think that the synagogue is a lovely venue. I like it a lot. It's not got the religious meaning about it, it’s just a nice modern venue. It’s convenient, it’s got a kitchen, it’s accessible for me. Does it make any difference for me that it’s a synagogue? I’ve been there for one or two events, which were not religious, for lectures, but I’ve actually never been to that synagogue for a service, for holidays or for anything like that. So, I’ve not used it as a religious venue. (Leah Setton)*

*I’m perfectly happy with it. I don’t think it really matters what room you’re in. I don’t think I would mind it if it was in a mosque. I’d get used to it, I think. But I suppose, if I’m honest I’m probably more comfortable in a Jewish place singing these songs but that’s probably because that’s been my history. (Eva Williams)*

*I think the venue, the synagogue, the people at the synagogue as well, are so encouraging, so easy-going, so trusting… It’s good, it’s okay, it’s okay for acoustics, it’s not the best. It would be nicer to have wooden wall or something, but I think it’s the people and the community who make it work as well as the venue being okay and the location is okay, so it’s alright. (Polina Shepherd)*

6.4 Performance spaces

*I think it just doesn’t matter where we go and perform, it feels, and I was thinking about where else we’d been, we’d been to London, we’d been to, all over the place together, several concerts in London, actually, yeah, and in the country. And I think each time we performed it was that feeling of coming together. It may not be specifically for our choir, I think most choirs probably feel this. (Eliana Cohen)*

*I suppose oddly I rather like singing Yiddish songs in churches, but then I like churches, I mean I’m very moved by churches, I like the, I love the architecture of churches. I love the acoustics in churches. (Jonathan Martin)*

*Some churches I like better than others for singing in. I like the Unitarian Church which is small and doesn’t have Christian symbols. Some churches are very formal though (e.g. with pews) which doesn’t make for a relaxed join-in atmosphere. Puts too much of a barrier between performers and audience. (Anna Ross)*

*We really enjoyed going as a choir, well both Yiddish choirs of course, to Paris where we performed at* Le Festival des Cultures Juives*, organised by ‘Yiddish Without Borders’ and coordinated by the FSJU (***Fonds Social Juif Unifié***). We were one of nine choirs performing in the final concert and the only one not from France. Even though I say it myself we were definitely the best – the other choirs just sang all the standard well-known hackneyed repertoire, nothing original or different. (Anna Ross)*

*I remember schlepping my keyboard all the way to [The Open Market concert for International Language Day]. Singing outdoors is very difficult and singing something that people don’t know, an unknown culture, unknown repertoire from an unknown culture is triple hard, but we had a good crowd around us and as a choir leader I have to draw some other means of attracting people when performing like this. So choir performing and singing the parts out is one thing but I don’t know, I dance around, I turn to the audience, I come up to them and I just wave to them, I make all sorts of gestures, engage people a lot of dancing as the choir is singing and I had to do all these things. I remember it being a hard concert for that, hard performance, but we had a good crowd around us. People stayed and listened and danced with me I remember, I have a photo or something from that, but for the group it was amazing. Actually London people also turned up for this. It was a joint group and we sang really well, and maybe the difficulty of the venue makes us kind of, you know, we pull ourselves together and sing with responsibility, and I remember singing well, the group really sang well that day, that was fun. (Polina Shepherd)*

# 7 The pandemic and online singing

The declaration of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the UK lockdown meant a sudden and unexpected change for the choir: weekly in-person rehearsals had to cease and all in-real-life performances were cancelled. The choir director Polina Shepherd innovated a series of online singing sessions via Zoom – Sing With Me – which was opened up to anyone in the world who wished to join. Each Sing With Me session involved learning two pieces of unison singing – usually one *nign* (wordless melody) and one Yiddish song chosen by Polina. These began with almost no notice on 20th March.

At the same time Polina also began monthly online rehearsals specifically for members of the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir as well as her London Yiddish choir. In these rehearsals the choirs sung songs already known as part of the repertoire and this meant that it was possible to sing in parts as well as in unison.

In this section we record how these changes and the lockdown more generally were experienced by members of the choir as they reflected on them in November and December the same year. The dates are significant because people’s responses show that their experiences changed over time.

7.1 A sudden end to singing together in person

There was a striking variation among choir members in how they narrated the experience of the end of in-person rehearsals.

*Well it was horrible. Amongst all the other things that I felt I’ve lost in the pandemic, that was just one of them, yeah, a big part, yes, of my life, yeah… Going back to the community, social cohesion, social contact, all those things are inherently important to your mental health. I have met with many of them still, socially distanced, walking, all the things we can do. But it’s not the same as singing together. (Eliana Cohen)*

*Well I think it was that thing, you began to hunker down and sort of, you sort of withdrew into yourself. And I think it was particularly unfortunate that, I think particularly unfortunate for the choir because although you can interact with people socially and I think certainly the first few months we had a lot of social contact with people using Zoom and Skype and things, and that doesn’t work very well with a choir… I think just that interaction and the joy of singing and everything, sort of the buzz of it, that’s gone. (Jonathan Martin)*

*I think one of the things, this is nothing to do with the music, one of the things I’ve become aware of during the pandemic is that I see most of those people at rehearsals and I like a lot of them but I don’t socialise with them. Whereas they do meet, the people who live in Brighton, I mean, being in Lewes, I think, is one of the issues and the fact that I haven’t been in Brighton for months and months and months. You know, they do meet up socially and it’s not something I can do casually with anybody. So, and I think that’s really positive. I think that’s one of the reasons the choir has kept going is because people have established friendships and it is very much a social thing, as one recognises hanging about the kitchen during rehearsals. (Maya Vardy)*

*I noticed that I didn’t feel like I shared other people’s experience of missing [rehearsing together in person]. I kind of, I got so busy with other things during lockdown that I almost didn’t notice… it was just kind of I’d got into a different rhythm of life, and I think I, yeah, I didn’t sort of have a sense of it being a community or whatever that I was missing. (Rachel Beck)*

*I mean initially, I didn’t miss very much because it was a time, it’s a wonderful time of year the springtime, which I love, the weather was great, I did lots of walking, I did lots of cycling. And I really loved the empty roads, you know, the lack of traffic and even the empty streets, it was kind of, it was different, and it was nice actually, peaceful. And cycling on the empty roads was just, was wonderful. And so I didn’t really miss much, and I kept in, well I had one good friend who, you know, we kept in touch, you know, we went cycling nearly every day together. And when the weather got better, I started to swim as well and so it was great. The second lockdown has been very different, because it coincided with the worsening of my foot, so I can’t really go out to walk much. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*Well, you know, I’m sure like everybody else says, it’s horrible, you know, I mean, it’s really horrible that we’re not meeting. (Sarah Balkin)*

*Oh, I really missed it, and I still do very much… I think the choir is the thing I miss most during the lockdown, yeah. And I suppose I have at the back of my mind a fear that if we don’t continue doing it, the choir will disappear and never start again. (Leah Setton)*

*It made me think, ah, I’ve got two and a half hours to study Yiddish instead. So that’s exactly what I did. I got out my, I’ve got loads of Yiddish books, but I haven’t learnt them all have I, so I got out my Yiddish grammar and I learnt all sorts of strange words and yes, and I can’t say I do it every single Tuesday morning but certainly that now has replaced it. And I love it, I just love language anyway so, but it’s such an extraordinarily rich language. (Eva Williams)*

*Of course the in-person rehearsals is something I really, really miss, but on the other hand there are positive things about not teaching choirs and taking a break and positive things about staying at home and just, you know, it’s a different mindset, different way to function, and I am rethinking my life, really, the balance between my performances, between my teaching and personal life and this and that and my energy and I’m not getting younger, I do feel tired when I work intensively, so it’s all good. (Polina Shepherd)*

### 7.2 Choir rehearsals on Zoom

Choir members clearly distinguished between their experiences of rehearsing together on Zoom (with the London Yiddish choir) and singing on Zoom as part of wider, global Sing With Me sessions (see next section). For some, Zoom singing was generally unbearable but they could make an exception for the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir. For others, in spite of their limitations, online choir rehearsals were a lifeline.

*I have been going to our own [rehearsals on Zoom], like the one that we’re having tomorrow night. I’ve been going to the choir ones, yeah… Why do I keep going? I suppose partly because, um, to support Polina, partly I suppose FOMO. (Esther Wolf)*

*I think a couple of the ones when we came as a choir, I wasn’t around, so I couldn’t do that. That was the most satisfying of them all, to see everybody, rather than everybody from all over the world [laughs] that’s a bit more remote. But, yes, it was lovely to see the whole group together, I think I’ve only done one of them, actually. In fact it was \* and I who suggested it and put it to \* and Polina, and thought, wouldn’t it be nice to just have us together and do our repertoire again, that we’re all forgetting. So that’s what she’s doing now, monthly, which has taken off. (Eliana Cohen)*

*I mean I enjoy these sessions that we have but they’re not, it’s not sort of being in a choir. And I think particularly again, particularly because of the standards that Polina has and her sort of, the way in which she really enjoys having these different parts makes it particularly difficult. One of the songs was just completely impossible to do because if you’re doing it by yourself it doesn’t, it isn’t part of the, you know, the original, there’s no overall sort of sense. And then you’ve got this long holding note whereas other things are going on and you’re just going ‘huh’. (Jonathan Martin)*

*Because Polina’s only had a few rehearsals for the choirs, for the two Yiddish choirs and I treat that a bit like just singing, you know. I think it’s the same problem, you know. You never get the sense of putting everything together in a satisfying way. And I realised that the music, for me, it’s not just a social thing. It’s also, sort of, intellectually or creatively very important to me to do it well and so it can be very frustrating when you’re not happy with yourself as well as, you know, knowing it’s not working. (Maya Vardy)*

*I tried Polina’s Zoom session once and you know how unruly the actual Yiddish singing practices are, well the Zoom was so much worse, because you know, you have to be very disciplined to participate in a Zoom meeting and the Chutzpah [previous name for Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir], the choir is a very, very undisciplined group. I don’t, I honestly don’t know how Polina puts up with it. I think she’s a saint. And so it was very much worse on Zoom and I just thought, I can’t cope with this. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*I just find it very frustrating not being able to hear other people, it’s not satisfying. [But] I can put up with not hearing each other for Chutzpah because we’re connected in other ways somehow, it feels, it feels like, you know, it’s not right but it’s okay. I’m glad she started trying to do some part work, even though it’s a bit, a bit crazy but yeah, it’s... I would like more challenge with it, I think that was the point that, you know, she obviously she can’t do that and so there’s a limit to how much we can stretch our skill and our listening and you know, all the nice things that goes with being in the choir. (Sarah Balkin)*

*Yeah, also lovely, just to be able to sing freely and not to be heard. Yes, I can sing up loudly, and it does me good, yes. Yes, singing itself is very good, and the continuing connection with the Yiddish and with the songs, yes. (Leah Setton)*

*I missed all the choirs and still do! It isn’t the same singing on Zoom. You’re not really singing in a choir. You’re just learning songs, just being exposed to more repertoire. I’m not even sure that one learns it that much. You don’t get that feeling of creating the sound together... the totality of the four parts that sounds so much better than singing in unison. Meeting up with people is very nice but that isn’t my prime motivation. The music is my main motivation. [Moving from BHYC online rehearsals specifically to singing on Zoom more generally] I have felt more isolated during the pandemic. Zoom has been my lifeline. I live alone don’t have a family. Not locally. I would have had a nervous breakdown if it hadn’t been for Zoom. (Anna Ross)*

*And now we’re doing the choir rehearsals, I feel it’s a bit more inclusive, a bit more like the real thing. In fact, actually, the last actual rehearsal we had, as opposed to Sing with Me, I felt, I did write to her afterwards, and said, “That was brilliant”, it felt as near to the real thing as possible. Because also, she, like she was taking people through their parts, so we could sing our part over it. And we had that, a bit of a feeling of the harmony. (Naomi Truman)*

Rachel Beck made a point of being at the monthly Yiddish choir rehearsals on Zoom:

*I think it was kind of wanting to make sure I was doing some kind of singing, and it was nice, well not having been to one, you know, remembering the music. And it sort of worries me that, you know, I really like music but I’m not actually practising it, I’m listening, I listen to it a bit but I don’t, you know, I don’t sing, you know, my other choir they say, you know, do some singing every day and I rarely do it every week, so…*

Yet this was an exception for Rachel who gave Zoom singing up with the other choir she was part of:

*And the other choir I’m in I did a couple of, maybe one or two, I can’t remember now, Zoom rehearsals, and I just found it unbearable really, because it was just, there was so much complication between having the music and having the screen share, not being able to hear anything except yourself and possibly the recording of another choir, that I gave that one up.*

7.3 Sing With Me

Two separate Sing With Me series of weekly Zoom singing groups were started by Polina Shepherd in March 2020, one involving Russian song, the other Yiddish song. Polina used already existing international social media networks to publicise the Sing With Me series. Some members of her four choirs (two Yiddish and two Russian choirs in Brighton and London respectively) attended Sing With Me sessions. However, a majority were not choir members. No payment was required although donations were encouraged and these could be made online on a pay as you go basis.

*Well, we didn’t go online immediately, did we? It was just Polina setting up her Sing with Me. And I really enjoyed it, I mean, especially in those early days when you weren’t sick of Zoom and it was novel and you had all Polina’s energy and I thought it was fantastic. I think rehearsing on your own is, it’s not great. (Maya Vardy)*

*it’s remained fun because that’s what it is, it’s not pretending to be anything else. But I do find, you know, when a Yiddish question comes up and all of a sudden, in the chat, everybody is sharing their grammatical knowledge and everything. I’ll be absolutely honest with you, Ben, my reaction is I don’t care, you know? [Laughs] (Maya Vardy)*

*What I find frustrating is that you see all these faces and you can’t really talk to any one person. The most you can do is send a personal, a one-way chat to someone. And I have found that frustrating because there are, you know, a few people in the choir who, you know, I miss or I’d like to get to know better and it’s just, you know, very, very difficult. And I don’t mind the fact that there are people there from other countries and other choirs and things. I mean, that’s fine. (Maya Vardy)*

*I did Sing With Me in the beginning and then I just got bored of sitting in a chair for an hour and a half every evening, you know. I can only really hear my voice. I will always do our own dedicated choir rehearsals but to me, Zooming is a very poor substitute for real social interaction. I don't really feel like I've spent time with people, you know. [prompt re with Sing with Me how people joined from all over the world] I mean, I think that's lovely, well, it’s wonderful for Polina, but I’m, I don’t, you know, it doesn’t make me want to do it anymore. Do you know what I mean? It’s just about being in a room with people, you know. (Rosy Armitage)*

*Polina’s done everything she can to keep it and those first 6 weeks, that first lockdown and the way that she did it, I mean every single day, you know, was fantastic, was just fantastic and I think that was very important, for me that was a very important element of getting through that. That and the, you know, the walk, going out, well for a run actually, it was every day during lockdown that really kept me going, I think, and going to see and connect in the evening. And not just connect with each other but connect with people all over the world, that was fantastic, you know, and it was bloody well Iceland or somewhere, you know, I mean, what’s that... Didn’t even know these people existed, you know, out there. (Sarah Balkin)*

*[after the first lockdown] I’d certainly had enough of Zooming of anything at all and I was ready to get back to life, so I think I’ve lost the momentum for it since then so, I mean, recently I haven’t joined much, I haven’t connected on the Wednesdays or whatever or even sing-a-long stuff, the Monday stuff, less so, I feel more distant from it. Yeah. I just find it very frustrating not being able to hear other people. (Sarah Balkin)*

*I suppose that’s why I liked that connection from all over the world on Zoom because that gives a sense of something that’s bigger than one’s self in this little world that, you know, we know that there is because we’re in a pandemic and the pandemic by definition, you know, I mean, but you know, on a day-to-day level, when we were all incarcerated sort of thing, you know, it was easy to draw inwards too much and so... (Sarah Balkin)*

*Well, I enjoy Sing with Me, but sometimes I get bored with it and sometimes I don’t like the songs she’s doing. And it’s a really bad time, six thirty, for me, on a Monday because I’ve just finished teaching and I’m, especially now I’m back teaching online, I’m usually kind of dead by then, so sometimes I don’t do it. But I did, like last week [sings] Yiddish, Yiddish, Yiddish, Yiddish, Yiddish, I love that. And I really like the songs we did last week. (Naomi Truman)*

*I do singing online virtually every day.  One of the few good things about this pandemic, certainly from the point of view of singing is that it’s opened the whole thing out. Instead of just people in Brighton. When we go to Sing with Me people are coming from all over the world. North America, South America, Eastern Europe, even Australia. It’s breaking down barriers really. We need to find a way of ensuring that continues after the pandemic. We could sink back into our niches again and lose that. (Anna Ross)*

In her interview, Polina explained how she caught COVID right at the start of pandemic and how this led to her coming up with the idea of Sing With Me:

*as soon as I got out of Covid and could think what to do, I think it was my way of coping with a shock. I like to act, and I acted so like as soon as I could sit upright at my desk I practised how to use Zoom with my son in Germany and my father in Russia, and I modified my website. I made a webpage, I figured out how people can pay me if they want. I also looked at other people who was doing what and there was a lot of charity which is why I thought well, it should be charity but also I’ve lost my income. I lost so many gigs you won’t believe it, so many exciting concerts and projects.*

*So I thought well, it could be a way of keeping things together, so I started Sing With Me on the 20th of March which was quite early. Other choir conductors came to me and listened to what I was doing and learnt from me and then many more people started doing it so, I’m quite proud of myself actually. It felt good, and it kept me motivated, it kept me, you know, healthy and energised and more focused through that time of shock. It was quite a shock for I think everyone.*

*[Prompt: did you imagine it would be so long?] No, no, I actually had also there was a second stage of realisation what this whole thing was. I remember teaching one of the Sing With Mes and I remember what I wore that time because I put my special jacket that night because it just felt so bad, and I remember going out for a run before Sing With Me and crying because then it dawned on me what actually was happening, that it wasn't just a two or three weeks’ closure. We were looking at a year or something like this. Suddenly, you know what sometimes this happens. Yes, it may be that, but then you kind of internalise it and that’s when I internalised it and yeah, and then I taught my group that evening and I felt better…*

*I didn’t expect it to become so big. When I first started Sing With Me, the first session, Zoom, and suddenly 50 and then 60 and I think I had 65, maybe 80 people, quite a big number, 70 people or something like this. I expected twenty-something. I expected a few people from choirs to turn up and it was a shock, plus there was a bit shock of starting something. I was panicking, I was learning something new, many different skills at once so that was quite an experience.*

*You see with the pandemic everyone is torn away from everything and here it is, the global community of Yiddish song, which it is. Just, the internet just provided us with that way of coming together, and it’s still there.*

7.4 On the pandemic, lockdown and Zoom more generally:

*The reason is I try really hard to enjoy Zoom and it’s not just Yiddish choir, anything, I have difficulty in this sort of medium of communication. I really do love face-to-face, whether it’s to do with having, working in a psychoanalytic set-up, when I’m working with one-to-one with people at quite a deep level, there’s no screen between us. I really need, I suppose I feel, see them and let them see me engage with somebody and that’s, for me, it’s very important to understand somebody in order that they can develop a real sense of trust and respect for that person and their world. And this Zoom thing comes on and press a button and all these faces are smiling at you and I just find it very difficult, even to sing. I’m working on it as I say, but I just think I’m not technically comfortable. (Eva Williams)*

*Initially I really felt it was essential to have a very strong routine so I sort of threw myself into far too many things and began to feel that I was sort of failing at everything because I wasn’t keeping up with all these things that I’d set myself to do. But I think I sort of settled down to managing and sort of coping with it… But at the same time it’s reduced to being not a one-dimensional thing but it certainly doesn’t have the variety… (Jonathan Martin)*

*I’ve been invited to join the community WhatsApp group and I don’t want to because your phone just pings all day and it’s never anything to do with you, you know. (Rosy Armitage)*

*It was devastating to start with, wasn’t it? But then I think I’ve managed through the year to get my life into perspective and realised that nothing that’s happened to me is really devastating. And we just have to bide our time, you know, and we were in a privileged position, anyway, to be able to be part of all these things, which in our, on Zoom or not at all, and just wait for them to be back in the real. It’s worse for people who live on their own, I mean, a lot of the choir are single, an awful lot of the choir are single. So, from the social point of view, and also from the just going out and connecting musically and everything point of view, it’s worse for them. (Naomi Truman)*

*In May [2020] we didn’t have an open house because of the pandemic, and I think we all felt a huge loss, because it’s an event that brings in hundreds and hundreds of people. I mean, I often have over four weekends over 1500 visitors. And it’s vibrant and it’s connecting, and you get to know your neighbours, it’s very much a community event. (Leah Setton)*

*I think one of the things I’m missing so much is hugs. I've got a daughter in Hove, so she’s got two children and we see each other, we are in a bubble. And I’ve got another daughter in London, who I see less often, but she’s also got two girls, and I’m planning to see her for Christmas. And last year my husband died, and I went through lots of stress and grief and pain. And so, because I’m on my own now, physical contact is quite rare. I don’t get to hug people a lot, and especially not at this time. So, my grandchildren and my daughter are the only people I actually have a good physical contact with and can hug and kiss. It does give me hope. (Leah Setton)*

*I don’t know that many people here locally in Brighton.**[Prompt: and that didn’t change?] That didn't change at all, no, just the whole life became about this, the internet, and what... you know, the two things I missed here in Brighton during the pandemic and still miss but we managed to go to one of them, the two restaurants, my favourite restaurants. One is New Era near clock tower and the other one is Tuntuns. We speak with the, you know, with the people in the cafes and in the both places. It’s a home connection, you know, that’s something, not the street, although \* does talk to our, you know, people from the shops, he knows everyone. I like to keep more incognito here. [Laughs] (Polina Shepherd)*

# 8 Community, solidarity and hope

In this final section, we broaden the discussion beyond the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir itself to explore choir members’ views and practices in relation to three key themes of the research: community, solidarity and hope. Whatever preconceptions of these themes we may have as individual authors, the intention of our collective work in the Hopeful Solidarities project is to engage with research participants’ ideas and practices in relation to these three themes. In what follows we consider each theme in turn, and as with previous sections we rely mainly on participants’ own words.

### 8.1 Community

Esther Wolf reflected on expressions of community that she is or has attempted to be involved with, including the work of the group of neighbours who came together to buy shares in a local building that would otherwise have been sold off for development, Exeter Street Hall.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Esther also spoke about community in relation to playing badminton with others for over twenty years as well as her failed attempt to start a dance group with neighbours during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown:

*I play badminton. Okay, so that’s where the community thing is important. So Thursday evenings, well until this year I’ve played with a group of women friends and we’ve been doing that since 1997 and that’s lovely. And then Sunday mornings mostly with men, which is a shame because they’re too good for me, but that’s a good social thing as well.*

*I have this love of line dancing… So I learnt this dance and I suddenly thought “hey, this is something you could in lockdown, you could get a whole street of people socially distanced standing in a line doing the same dance together, how marvellous would that be?” So I typed up these invitations saying “yeah, what a great way to get together as a street”, that’s right, I asked a couple of people that are from this end of the street and they said they’d be up for it, so I leafleted the whole street and sat by the phone waiting, nothing! Nothing! [Laughter]*

During the lockdown Esther and her partner moved house within the same part of Brighton but to an street with a different feel to the one they had lived in for many years in the Exeter Street Hall area. This made her reflect on the potential loss of community:

*But, you know, the way that the street [where our new place is] is organised around a green it could be fantastic community-wise. You’d expect to recognise everybody within a couple of months or so, so there is that possibility of community but I don’t think it would be the same sort of community. So yes, there are pangs but on the other hand we’re still shareholders of the Exeter Street Hall, we’ll still be coming here on a Tuesday to play table tennis, and when my exercise class starts up again on a Wednesday I might still be coming here on a Wednesday. So although I will come and feel rueful possibly for not being part of it, I’ve decided to think of it as we’re not leaving the area, we’re extending our area of operations so that we’ll still have access to this and another place too. That’s how I’m trying to look at it.*

Eliana Cohen, who lives in in a close in Shoreham a short way along the coast just to the west of Brighton and Hove found that the choir itself was an important source of community, a community of friends:

*the whole process of a Tuesday morning being taken over. You could use the bus, and went in by bus and we’d, you know, go off and have lunch sometimes… It became a real community of friends, which hasn’t happened in any other choirs I’ve been with, this is really exceptional.*

Eliana spoke about the lack of friendliness towards her from her neighbours and told the story of an occasion when shared Jewish identity broke through this:

*I live in a close, really, and they’re really not at all friendly. But, ironically, I’ve got a new next-door-but-one neighbour. She knocked on my door to introduce themselves, and said, ‘I’m so glad you’ve got a mezuzah on your door, [laughs]. So I said, ‘Oh, there’ll be two of us in the village, then’ [laughs]. And, yeah, she’s come to be near her daughter and family who live in Shoreham. She’s moved from London. And we had, in the two minutes we were on the doorstep, we had so much in common. You were saying about being Jewish, we have this whole thing, unsaid. We now have a bond. It is. And I’m sure once we can meet more, you know, we’ll get to know each other better. But it was very unexpected. Yeah. Well, I said, ‘Oh, my goodness, are you Jewish?’, she said, ‘Yes’, there you go [laughs]. Yeah, I do have one. Yes, yeah. And, funnily enough, I had met her daughter at a synagogue meeting a long time, just before the pandemic, and she was saying, ‘Well, my mother hopes to come down from London’, erm… and I put two and two together and realised, this is the mother that was coming from London. And, yeah, that was a really nice feeling. In fact she knocked on my door last night, or the night before, said, ‘Just to wish you happy Hanukkah’.*

For Rachel Beck the lockdown meant a loss of community because the bowls club she was part of could not meet and then reflected too on practices of community within the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir, expressing an ambivalence about that which contrasts with Eliana’s notion of the choir being ‘*a community of friends*’:

*I mean one of the things that I have missed during the summer and lockdown, but also partly to do with being busy and having an injury was a couple of years after I moved down here I joined a bowls club, because I thought that would be a way of meeting people who are completely different from me, but yeah, I haven’t seen anything of them since just before or just after the lockdown. You could have a shared activity like playing bowls without having shared values.**[prompted to think about community in relation to the context of a choir]**I guess in that you’re, you know, you’re doing something together that means that you have to be really mindful of everybody else, and then there is a… I mean that you know, there is a sort of, notice is given out about people’s illnesses, or health, or having babies, and I always, I tend to think well that if… I don’t know if there was something going on for me if I would be part of that.*

Rachel spoke about the friendship and community she found elsewhere, in her sea swimming group:

*there’s a group of friends who swim in the sea, and we’ve got a WhatsApp group, so there’ll be sort of little, and one person goes for an early morning walk and posts pictures of what the state of the sea is, and then people talk about whether they’re going to go swimming that day, or what the sea’s like. And one of the people in that group I’ve known for 53 years, so it’s definitely… and I’ve only sort of just, I’ve only relatively recently joined the group because I don’t always swim with them because they’re about ten minutes’ walk along the seafront, but yeah, so that’s definitely a kind of local nice bit of kind of community.*

While Rachel’s swimming group is clearly an informal community, Geoffrey Segal spoke about the years when he was leader of a community organisation in Lewes (and in charge of lettings at that organisation’s venue) and how, though it was now several years since his retirement, this meant a very distinct relation to that town, a sense of being known, even by strangers:

*I got to know hundreds of people, I mean literally hundreds and hundreds of people. And I still bump into people who I don’t know who they are, but they know me, it’s quite embarrassing actually. So, through that I’ve met a lot of people, but there’s a lot of community in Lewes…*

Anna Ross had been active in a residents’ association in a neighbourhood of Brighton and Hove for over forty years. She found that when she joined in with any community initiative or organisation she tended to become fully involved: ‘*there are too many people who take and don’t give. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t enjoy it. I obviously do enjoy it. I get pleasure out of putting something in*.’

At least two participants mentioned the importance to them of the Jewish Women Friends in Sussex network. Sarah Balkin remarked ‘*To be honest I think I joined the network just purely to meet people, you know, to extend my social contacts really*’. For Leah Setton a crucial moment came when she met a fellow Israeli Jew who introduced her to the network:

*in fact when I first came to Brighton, I knew very few people. I didn’t know any Jewish or any Israeli people at all, and I found out that there is an Israeli group who meets in a pub once a month and on a Sunday evening, and I decided to go there. And the first person who talked with me is a lady called \*, who since then became a very close friend. She’s Israeli, she’s from a kibbutz so we shared a very different, we didn’t share similar childhood, but she’s become a very good friend. And she was part of the women’s Jewish network in Brighton and Hove, and so she talked about the women’s Seder, which \* was hosting every year, and people were bringing food and it was a very lovely and connecting event, which I really enjoyed. And the first time I went there, there were other people there who I now realise were part of the [Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir].*

Leah’s community networks came not only through her Jewish connections but also through her work as an artist:

*I used to paint in a studio with some other artists and we met regularly to paint, and that became sort of a group as well. And at the moment, we aren’t meeting because of the rules, but it meant a great deal to me, not just because it gave me an opportunity to be creative, but because of the connection between people and the conversations that we’ve had. It wasn’t publicly organised, we hired the studio and paid for it, so yeah. [I knew the others through] being a member of the Sussex Watercolour Society. Everybody does their own thing, there isn’t a leader or teacher.*

Naomi Truman also developed a web of connections, partly through her lifelong work as a piano teacher. She spoke of her pupils staying in touch. ‘*A lot of them are still friends. One of the first mothers whose children I taught brings her granddaughters to me now.*’ She elaborated on this was just one of several ways in which she is connected to others, referring to how her connections have been important during the lockdown:

*I kind of get overwhelmed with all the people I’ve picked up in my life from so many different sources. And I feel really, really blessed that I have. I mean, there’s one school friend who lives nearby, and we were the only two that did A-level music together, so we were very close, and we’ve always remained close. I taught her children piano and we swim at the same place and we see each other quite often. And know all of the real inside stuff about each other’s lives, that other people don’t know. But there are four other school friends and we used to try and meet in London at the theatre once a year, and it’s never worked out. And now, we’re meeting every fortnight on Zoom, which is amazing, that’s just one area. And then I, a lot of those ex-mothers from about, hmm, twenty to thirty years ago, they all keep in touch.*

For Eva Williams, the experience of moving to Brighton and Hove after her retirement led her to the conclusion that there was no single Jewish community in the city, that it was ‘*fragmented*’:

*The Jewish community itself is very fragmented and is not really a very, a nurturing or educated community. It’s a very, it’s quite thin if you know what I mean, it hasn’t got a lot of substance to it and there are five, I think there are four different synagogues. But there is not a real strong sense of community here, which is, I sort of knew that before we moved but it’s also an interesting revelation.*

Eva reflected further on how in London too she had not felt completely part of any specific community and how she thought this was ‘*partly about one’s personality*’:

*I also have to say that even when I was living in London, I didn’t feel that I absolutely belonged right in the middle of any community. There’s a sense of being on the edge of a lot of worlds and understanding them, but not actually being totally in them… I could never go into a place, any community and say this is exactly where I belong because I don’t. I belong with a bit of that and bit of that over there and a bit of something, because I don’t easily fit in to any particular group mentality.*

Interestingly Eva also spoke about community as not fixed, and connected this to the choir and its relationship to Yiddish culture:

*the choir is a sort of micro-community of this ever-evolving culture and the more we’re involved in it, the more people can get involved in where it’s leading them, what it makes them feel. It’s not a static, fossilised thing at all. It’s a constant evolution.*[[15]](#footnote-15)

Moving the lens beyond Brighton and Hove and its surrounding towns to a sense of community in regions across the UK, nationally and even globally, Polina Shepherd spoke about the communities that grew and sustained themselves through Yiddish song and Klezmer music. Referring first to a specific event, Klezfest, she reflected that

*It did and it still does [feel like a community], but it has grown since and it’s amazing. KlezNorth that you mentioned and there’s also a small branch in Edinburgh, there’s a Scottish branch and there is something, or there are little bits and pieces here and there, little Klezfest-y kinds of events and one-off things. There’s in Manchester there's quite a good one, there’s a Sheffield community that’s quite good, rich, and not just Jewish communities, it’s klezmer music lovers. So it has a certain activist [group] that used to come to Klezfest London to connect with their community. They started building their communities in their little places, like our Klezmer South, it was one of these because, you know, we live here. We know a few people interested in Yiddish culture here, but let’s do something bigger, let’s invite people to hear it at the concert, let’s invite them to join us at a workshop. So these things have been happening, and it’s not just Britain and there is a layer and a layer and a layer. There’s Europe and there is Weimar and Paris and all that and there is Vilnius and there is Riga and now there is a global Yiddish klezmer, Yiddish song community and pretty much everyone knows either someone directly or you know someone who knows someone in this community.*

During the COVID-19 lockdown Polina’s commitment to the global community of people singing in Yiddish led her to set up (with another artist, Efim Chorny, based in Moldova) a series of online concerts. The concerts known as *Step Forverts* ran through June and July 2020.

*it was a good sense of connecting and knowing that it’s there, that these people are there, they are willing to put their time and thought into this. The response was huge so. Well, I guess that was the, I guess people missed that too, people wanted that connection. The internet just provided us with that way of coming together, and it’s still there.*

## 8.2 Solidarity

Solidarity is the second major theme of the research project. Our bottom-up approach led us to ask choir members an open question, ‘What does solidarity mean to you?’ This led to a diverse set of responses and conversations. In this section we provide a selection of their perspectives.

For some, the first thing that came to mind was solidarity within a group, for example in the choir, or among Jewish people.

*I also used to go to Limmud[[16]](#footnote-16) every year and that, again, it’s hugely, you know, you’re meeting people from all over, but you’ve got the same thing in common, it’s learning and it’s developing and it’s things Jewish and lectures. So, yeah, that was great. And, you know, lots of people of the choir used to go as well. (Eliana Cohen)*

*And I guess, you know, being with groups of people that are sort of likeminded, and like, you know, sharing different, you know, experiences and backgrounds and things… I guess I associate [solidarity] with kind of campaigning for things, and I’m trying to think about my first, when I’d sort of say my first experience, well I guess when I came to London and I kind of became part of gay liberation, and so I was involved with doing a lot of things with that, and that was definitely a sense of solidarity having been quite isolated before. And then getting involved with the women’s movement as well, and in… then combining both really in 1977, a group of us set up a women’s telephone service and we were also a social… it was a kind of mixture of social and doing something, and also we’d take part in demonstrations and things, so that was a lot about solidarity then. (Rachel Beck)*

*I’m just trying to think, what’s the difference between loyalty and solidarity. I think loyalty is contained within solidarity. [Pause] Well it’s obviously standing side-by-side, it’s Ale Brider, you know, or Der Yokh.[[17]](#footnote-17) Yeah, I mean, it is, it’s standing side-by-side in the case of, usually of adversity. I think it’s... Yes, it always seems to be... It does, it’s a slightly oppositional concept, I think. It’s in the face of somehow because solidarity in the face of, is something joyous, would you use the concept of solidarity if it was something really lovely and positive and joyous? I’m not sure that it is so much but it’s having, yeah, the same values or similar values and approach to other people or standing by other people even, this is where it sort of overlaps with loyalty, even... Yeah, but it’s slightly different viewpoints but I think, by and large, you need to have a pretty similar perspective on something and standing by somebody or people with those perspectives. (Sarah Balkin)*

*I think when you’re there for each other, in a group or in society, or yeah, if there is empathy and understanding and mutual help. And I think it’s about having certain values that you have in common. [Prompt: and solidarity in relation to the choir?] I believe the solidarity was much much more there when we met in person, and we saw each other in person and were there for each other, and there were people who maybe are slightly more vulnerable, and the others helped them. I know that I myself have difficulty walking and somebody always used to bring me a cup of tea and biscuit at the interval, and another person next to me too. So, there was this sort of unspoken thing that somebody will bring me a cup of tea and biscuit. I think that when we are all online, we’re just little pictures. Although I also felt at some points at Polina’s online choir when you had an opportunity to talk and talk about our lives in some way, I felt some of the reactions that I got from people were very caring, and even people who I have not met before. (Leah Setton)*

*I suppose I feel a certain solidarity with Jewish people in general, but not necessarily with all. I mean, when I see the ultra-Orthodox Jews, the solidarity doesn’t go as far as that. So, people who are sort of more in my kind of moderateness I feel solidarity with. (Leah Setton)*

In contrast, others emphasised solidarity across group boundaries. In some cases this entailed joining organised demonstrations or rallies and became explicitly political.

*There is certainly enough comparable experiences of people suffering and losing everything and having to re-establish themselves and just going through the process of being ashamed of who they are and having to pretend they’re something else and to assimilate because they don’t want anybody to know that they come from some other place. I think the experiences of refugees have got more in common than they have not in common. (Eva Williams)*

*I think any group that identifies themselves maybe as a minority will come together, we’re all the other [laughs] actually… if we all sang together, that would be the ultimate, wouldn’t it, of solidarity together as a, you know, for the human race. So I don’t know how far being separate is useful. (Eliana Cohen)*

*Well, I love the idea of solidarity. I love the one we have where we’re running in the street. [interviewer and participant sing briefly ‘Volt ikh gehat koyekh’][[18]](#footnote-18) You know, I love the idea of workers’ solidarity and I feel like, I mean, I’m not a worker, I don’t know anything about the labour union movement, but I would still hold it in high esteem, you know, that kind of old-fashioned thing, everyone, we’re all sticking up for each other, we’re all going to look after each other… And do you know, I think that I was, there was a news story a couple of years ago that moved me as well. This Italian, you know there’s a lot of fascists in Italian football?**This Italian football manager went to the north of England and for the first time in a hundred years the kind of coal workers’ banner was removed from the football stadium in protest against this Italian right-wing football manager and I just, it just touched me that even though the collieries had gone, there’s still a feeling of unity and of sticking up for what’s right, those people, you know. (Rosy Armitage)*

*Well, did you go on the Black Lives Matter peaceful stand and march? [No]. Oh, Ben, it was really amazing. People were supposed to stand between the Palace Pier and the Marina but there were so many people it went all the way down the seafront. We just all stood there for half an hour in complete silence with masks on, and it was really incredible, and then there was a very slow march. I had a bit of backache so I didn’t march all the way, but I marched up to the clock tower and then I went, I just sort of wandered up and down West Street watching the rest of the march go by and it was the biggest march I’ve ever seen, and it was quiet and respectful. It was amazing, it really was amazing. [Prompt: why did you go?] Because, you know, I want to stand up for BLM, for Black Lives Matter, you know, I think it’s really important. (Rosy Armitage)*

*I mean as a trade unionist, you know, or ex-trade unionist, absolutely, yes, and... Yes, and against fascism and against whatever, whatever the oppression appears to be really, that sense that we can’t do anything much, trying to overcome a sense of helplessness through connection with other people. (Sarah Balkin)*

*Hm, solidarity means being open to the other, being open to new people, new communities, new cultures, new approaches. It’s about listening, very much about listening and embracing and that’s how solidarity works. Without these things there is no solidarity. Solidarity is embracing the other, being part of a bigger community, bigger than yourself and the then the next circle, your closest community and then it goes outwards and outwards, all these little circles. So solidarity is being open-minded and listening. To me that’s how I, yeah, that’s how I would say solidarity rings to me. Also, you know, of course if something happens people unite for or against something and that’s solidarity, but I haven’t really come across that, thank God, some really negative events and that’s when solidarity is really important, but without the original listening and being able to embrace there wouldn’t be that kind of support. So okay, listening, embracing the other, support. That would be it I guess. (Polina Shepherd)*

Some choir members spoke very personally about solidarity, whether in terms of its meaning to them, or how they had experienced it in everyday life, including during the pandemic.

*There are some words that mean a lot to me and will get me quite sort of fired up, but solidarity isn’t one of them. I mean it’s there, it’s always sort of, you know, something that gets tagged onto other things that I think are important but I’m not quite sure that it’s something that is that meaningful to me. (Jonathan Martin)*

*I think at the moment there’s a, you know, clearly we have to have solidarity and it’s a strange of solidarity in terms of respecting social distance, it’s like we’re all in this together and there is a certain set of rules and things that we are buying into and although we may be a bit sceptical about certain aspects of them and of course our Government but... So that’s a sort of here and now solidarity, I think, that is important, obviously. (Sarah Balkin)*

*You know, I think it's really important to have solidarity with people, you know. I've been a victim of this, that, and the other, yeah, definitely. If I saw someone being set upon, if I thought I could do something I would. I don't step into a fight between two blokes outside a pub**but you know, I've seen women being picked on, I've seen people being picked on by strangers, you know, young women or. Yeah, I’d always step in and stand up, of course. (Rosy Armitage)*

*Well, the word solidarity, to me, has a slightly politicised feel to it. I mean, I’ve described to you my different feelings about different choirs. So in terms of, you know, what you’re talking about, that virtual space, there are obviously issues with each one. Um. [Pauses] And I suppose the only organisation that I would say I feel solidarity with is LOSRAS, which it the Lewes Organisation in Support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers. You know, that’s solidarity because there is an opposition. (Maya Vardy)*

*I think people in Lewes have certainly got together to support people who need support. There has been a, I can’t remember what they’re called now, Coronavirus Volunteers Support Group, which I did enrol with, you know, to help people that had to self-isolate and couldn’t go out to shop. For whatever reason, I don’t know, I’ve never been called upon to do anything for them. So there certainly has been a good community reaction to the crisis. And also there’s been… actually, I think it’s organised by someone from the Lewes constituency Labour Party, organising collections once a month outside all the supermarkets to support the food banks people in this time of additional crisis, and as a group the ukulele group has supported this because what they’ve asked people to do is to stand outside the store either sing or play music or do anything to attract attention to the fact that there’s a food bank collection and to encourage people to donate items. So we’ve done that several times. (Geoffrey Segal)*

*I think when people have been locked down, they sort of go into themselves and maybe more reluctant to reach out, they sort of burrow themselves in their little rabbit hole. I don’t know is the answer. I mean, I don’t know what the answer is, if people over the last few months whether they’ve come out and fought for things or whether they’ve just withdrawn because we’re not encouraged to mix, so I don’t know. (Eva Williams)*

Esther Wolf distinguished solidarity from charity. She gave the example of the Brighton and Hove organisation Thousand for a Thousand.[[19]](#footnote-19) ‘*I think that it’s any group where you’re actually involving the people who you are supposed to be helping as opposed to just talking about them and raising money for them and sending that money somewhere else*.’

Some were prompted by our open question about solidarity to return to consider the choir as well as music more generally:

*I see the choir as a source of solidarity. I think people have genuine care for each other and genuinely would help each other, you know, should help be required. (Esther Wolf)*

*I’ve been to some of my cousin’s choir performances, and they’re brilliant, you know, it’s just inspirational listening to, it’s the harmonies, isn’t there, the harmonies do something which there’s not much else in life can do. You know the advert for Heineken? Reaches the parts that other somethings can’t reach. Well, that’s what choirs can do. (Naomi Truman)*

*One of the things I’ve been really pleased about is that Polina is really keen on bringing her music to wider audiences not just to perform for Jewish groups. Opening up the culture to the world. Improving understanding of different cultures. For example, many gospel choirs have sprung up with mostly members who don’t come from that tradition. At one time I was a member of a singing group that sang traditional African songs, etc etc. So singing Yiddish music could be the same. Doesn’t have to be just for Jewish people within a Jewish environment. Recently Polina has been teaching the Great British Home Chorus members one of our songs ‘Ver firt di ale shifn’ and they are recording it for Holocaust Memorial Day. Nearly 200 people are participating, virtually all non-Jewish. Most knew nothing before about Jewish music or culture. This is a great way to disseminate Jewish music and open it up to a wider audience. When we were able to put on concerts and perform we often performed in venues that attracted audience members who weren’t Jewish. We performed in the Brunswick for example… There’s a lot of potential for links with other groups. I’ve been really pleased we’ve done a few concerts with other groups. (Anna Ross)*

## 8.3 Hope

Hope is another central theme of this project, and again, as with solidarity, we wanted to ask choir members an open question about hope rather than starting from our own way of thinking about it. The responses reproduced here illustrate some different ways in which choir members responded to the question. They range from the hopeful to far less so and in scale from the practical activities, including singing together, to consideration of ways of contributing to a future for the planet and for humanity in the face of existential crises.

Most of the responses were nuanced and suggested much thought and reflection about hope, and often ambivalent and shifting positions.

Esther Wolf described herself as cynical about using the pandemic as a route to a better future:

*I think it could lead to a better way but I think unfortunately the way that society works are that the same people who had control before will be the people who have control in the future and that it’s probably not in their interests as they see it to change things in the kind of way that you or I might want things to change.*

For Geoffrey Segal, one crisis was likely to be followed by another. He had become less hopeful during what was by the time of the interview about nine months of the pandemic.

*Well, at the beginning of the lockdown, I had hoped that this would be an opportunity for society to change for people, particularly leaders to realise that this is not an act of God, what’s happened to us, it’s not an accident, it’s to do with the way we live on this planet and that we need to do things differently. And I’m afraid it seems to me that there’s a huge determination not to change and so I’m not very hopeful that we will change or that this pandemic will end. Well, the pandemic will end, the crisis won’t end because something else will happen. You know, you can’t, my feeling is that you can’t abuse the environment you live in and expect no consequences. So even if the vaccine does deal with this particular pandemic, there’ll be another, there’ll be another crisis, it won’t go away. And everyone seems so determined to carry on the same, in the same way and I’m not very hopeful.*

Geoffrey was encouraged by Extinction Rebellion when they first started but

*felt that they had to really seize the moment and act very quickly to have a lasting effect and I think it didn’t work. I’m not, I haven’t given up, I don’t go to the meetings anymore. And Extinction Rebellion wasn’t exclusively young people. But I think young people will have a huge part to play in significant change.*

Similarly to Geoffrey and Esther, Rosy Armitage was of the view that

*the world is going to hell in a handcart. You know ecologically it’s not looking good… It’s no good you and I recycling our loo rolls if governments are still paying companies to make plastic or… Bolsonaro’s allowing them to burn the Amazon.*

Jonathan Martin’s response reflected the value he placed on hope and on the distinction between hope and ‘now-ness’.

*Hope is incredibly important for me. I see that as perhaps one of the sort of driving emotions, driving feelings in life… But I think this is more, you have hope, which is where you’re going, and you have your now-ness, your being in the present and that’s part of that.*

Jonathan resisted being swept up in the emotion of crowds even though he had taken part in some anti-Brexit protests:

*Now-ness is part of being with people, it’s support that you get in the present. And I’m speaking as somebody who’s quite antisocial. I mean I’m not naturally attracted to a lot of social interaction. I don’t get swept up in things, for example I get very keen on political action, take for example the anti-Brexit stuff, I was very keen on, you know, just being present at anti-Brexit demonstrations and I went up to all the anti-Brexit things, but I didn’t, I don’t like being part of a large crowd that is going in one direction because I see that as very similar to what happened with Trump’s America, you know, that you get swept along with an emotion which you don’t evaluate.*

As with Jonathan’s view about now-ness as support in the present, from being with people (albeit not in large emotional crowds), Rachel Beck identified human connection as important. In her case hope was about not just being with others but doing things with others.

*Hope involves action as opposed to just feeling, otherwise it’s just optimism. So I’m not trying to think about how that relates… [pause] I think it is about sort of deciding to do things that are about connection, and meaning. Well I’m very involved in things around the climate crisis, and you know, that has to be, I don't know, it’s kind of, it could go either way in a way, but yeah, it’s hopeful to be doing something. And again I feel like one of the most hopeful things to do, and I’m not sure how much I am doing it, is to make connections with people, with different people.*

When Leah Setton reflected on hope she too highlighted human connection and how it could be achieved through singing together. This was a theme also taken up by Sarah Balkin:

*Well I think part of it is what I said before, that when you sing with other people it’s something beyond yourself and beyond all those people, there’s a sort of gestalt really and that in itself, I think, gives hope. [Pause] Yeah, and I think the fact that we are able to meet on Zoom, although obviously unsatisfactory, gives the feeling that we will meet again.*

Maya Vardy and Eva Williams both drew attention to individual resources that brought hope. For Maya it was to have a goal, and she gave the example of music:

*I think some of the work in singing with the\* [names another choir], I suppose, has made me hopeful that I would find it satisfying, fulfilling, that I would learn new music, that my voice will improve, that my sight reading might improve. I mean, yes, there are certain goals there, maybe being hopeful’s having a goal, I don't know, I’ve never thought in those terms before.*

Eva in contrast relied for her hopefulness on her belief in positivity which she said had come through personal experience and which she also connected to Ashkenazi Jewish history, in particular the Holocaust:

*I have a very strong passion for, I believe in positivity and whatever, we will overcome and other resources will come into play and I think it’s also related to my own personal experience, I’ve got a disabled daughter and since she was born I thought I’m going to pray, I’m going to be so proud of every bonus, everything she does rather than be sorry for everything she can’t do. And I think it’s an attitude of mind that I’ve got anyway. And if I’m fussed with a certain situation of any sort, I do tend to fall right into the active mode of moving forwards to ensure that something good is going to come of it. And not because I’m a martyr but just because I believe in there being a positive outcome somewhere, even in some of the most tumultuous and horrifying experiences that people experience. And I suppose it’s also this personal experience to me that having known that we as a Jewish people have come from the most extraordinary event of history and we’re here to tell the tale.*

History was also seen by Naomi Truman as a resource for hope, in her case specifically for an end to the pandemic:

*I think we have to, we have to believe that things are going to improve. If you think, whatever we’re going through, it’s not the same as what people went through in the war. And I think they got through it with hope, didn’t they, you know, this will end, etc, you know. I think we have to think this will end and we will get back eventually. And hopefully sooner rather than later, if we all get vaccinations and if the vaccines work, etc…*

Also looking towards the future, Polina Shepherd spoke about what made her hopeful linking her own individual contribution as a musician and cultural activist with wider moves towards encouraging others:

*[Prompt: what comes to mind when you think of hope?] Love, love that we share through music in my world that opens our minds and hearts. That that’s just it’s a kind of energy that goes, becomes a mindset, becomes an emotion, becomes a feeling, and when I see people going for love not for fear I am hopeful, but I am not a very positive person so that’s what I would try to do and encourage in people and encourage in myself to go with that, to go with love rather than fear, but we need to do a lot of work. I don’t think it’s an easy world to live in, but, you know, especially with all the events, political events, the social stuff happening in Britain right now and from 2021, God knows what’s going to happen to us, but I just think pragmatically there’s nothing else I can do. If things get worse I’ll still be doing the same but maybe even more.*

Choir members’ reflections on community, solidarity and hope seem just as relevant at the time of writing this report in December 2021 as they did one year earlier when the interviews were carried out. That the pandemic would continue was predicted by more than one research participant. Yet, in spite of this, and continuing evidence of catastrophic climate change, the Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir met weekly to sing in person from September to December 2021. The future is always uncertain and, at present, there is considerable apprehension about the rapid transmission of the latest variant of coronavirus. For now, in a variety of ways, the choir continues to be a source of community, solidarity and hope.

1. <http://rallihall.com/history/> last accessed 2 September 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Yiddish word ‘chutzpah’ does not have an English equivalent. It is sometimes translated as ‘audacity’, ‘gall’, ‘nerve’, ‘impudence’ or ‘temerity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/brighton-hove-chutzpah-choir/#](https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/brighton-hove-chutzpah-choir/) last accessed 2 September 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/brighton-hove-chutzpah-choir/#](https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/brighton-hove-chutzpah-choir/) last accessed 2 September 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ([https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/brighton-hove-chutzpah-choir/#](https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/brighton-hove-chutzpah-choir/) last accessed 2 September 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jewish Women Friends in Sussex was cofounded in 2003 by Maxine Toff. See [https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/jewish-women-friends-in-sussex/#](https://www.ourjewishstory.co.uk/anthology/jewish-women-friends-in-sussex/) last accessed 2 September 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The choir was recorded for the CD ‘150 Voices’ at St Michael and All Angels Church in Brighton in 2019 along with other Yiddish and Russian choirs and soloists Polina Shepherd and Lorin Sklamberg. The CD was released in 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/::ognode-637356::/files/download-resource-printable-pdf-5>, last accessed 22 October 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lily Kahn, *Colloquial Yiddish: The Complete Course for Beginners*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp xviii-ix. More information about Yiddish and its history is available in Jemima Jarman’s excellent online zine <https://www.jemimajarman.com/zines> last accessed 3 January 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kahn (op cit), 2012, ix-x [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Philip Sapiro, 2016, The Geography of the Anglo-Jewish Population in the Twenty-First Century: Characteristics, Spatial Distribution, Comparisons and Trends, unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of Liverpool, p. 34. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3007313/1/201014557_Dec2016.pdf>, last accessed 22 October 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The ‘sus laws’ and the struggle against them are described in detail here: <https://irr.org.uk/article/fighting-sus-then-and-now/> , last accessed 20 December 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On the perception of Brighton and Hove as an ‘open-minded’ city by some of its residents and its promotion as such by local institutions such as the University of Sussex, see Caterina Mazzilli (2021) ‘The happiest city in England’: Brighton’s narratives of diversity between ‘success stories’ and sidelined issues, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44 (11): 2074-2092. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This relates directly to Case Study Two (see accompanying report by Cath Senker, Amy Clarke and Ben Rogaly) because the subject of that case study Migrant English Project recently came to locate its main face-to-face activities in Exeter Street Hall. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In another context one of the authors of this report Ben Rogaly has written about the idea of community as something that isn’t fixed but is always becoming or dissipating, a verb rather than a noun. This chimes well with Eva’s point here. Ben’s article is available online at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-954X.12371 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://limmud.org>, last accessed 20th December 2021/ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ale Brider and Der Yokh are the names of particular songs. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A joint performance of ‘Volt ikh gehat koyekh’ by London and Brighton and Hove Yiddish choirs led and conducted by Polina Shepherd can be found here <https://youtu.be/iXYpnDLq5ok> (last accessed 17 December 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://www.thousand4thousand.org.uk/>, last accessed 29 October 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)