

REMINISCENCE THEATRE ARCHIVE OF PAM SCHWIETZER

INTERVIEW WITH ALAN KANE

Marjorie This is a conversation between Alan Kane and Marjorie Monickendam on the 14th January 1987. Alan Kane was a professional singer and during his career he sang with bands including Ambrose, Lou Stone and Mantovani. He became a band leader in 1949 and he retired in 1984. Alan tell us about your memories of the Jewish East End.

Alan A Certainly I'd be very glad to- hello everyone. Firstly, to reassure myself I would like to preface what observations I make by saying that I feel that so many books have been written by writers of varying talents about pre war life in the east End of London, including particularly the Jewish community, in the 20's and 30's, that what I have to say may not be so very revealing. I think it may be rather too specific and not general, nevertheless I'll do my best. Secondly I feel that as I grew up in Victoria Park/E.9. district of London, my experiences can not be about the heart of the East End. I was not obviously an East Ender myself, perhaps more's the pity.

I worked in the famous Petticoat Lane for some years, an experience which I value greatly and my late father he was a cantor in the Jubilee St Great Zionist synagogue which incidentally he eventually served for over 43 years so from about 1905 on it meant he spent practically eighty percent of his life or six days a week and sometimes even seven in the heart of the east end. I therefore may be able to recall some worthwhile events pulled from both our working lives during those memorable times.

To tell you about my parents. My mother came from Vilna. I think she arrived when she was about eleven or twelve with my grandma and grandfather. And she had only two years schooling at, what may be remembered by people still alive and old enough to remember, Old Castle St School in Petticoat lane. In spite of only two years schooling she had a beautiful handwriting and spoke very well, I don't know how she did it, there your are.

Now my dear Dad, who officiated until he was seventy-eight years old, he started as a Chazzan at the age of twenty-five and he lived in what was Bessarabia, it seemed to change according to the little wars that went on. Once it was Romania and then it was Russia or something like that. And he joined a military band and there was a War going on at the time, I don't know which one, and eventually he came to London and through his official duties as a minister he got to know thousands of East Enders, having officiated at numerous marriage ceremonies in his synagogue. Blessing the newly born children, visiting

hundreds in hospital when they were sick, officiating at the family funerals and so on, a very mixed life. So I think after arriving in London, about 1900, or so that he had a very full life and his command of the language wasn't too bad either. He used to philosophise with me and tell me his ideas on Politics, very interesting, he used to guide me and inspire me and in spite of him being in the ministry and my veering towards the profession of entertaining he didn't show any resentment. He felt that was what I really wanted to do and he gave me encouragement, in fact he gave me my first loan to get my first drum set and I paid him back over a year and he was very supportive and I have fond memories of the relationship between my father and myself.

M What language did you speak with your parents, did you speak Yiddish or English or a mixture.

A Well I, regretfully, only spoke in English but my mother spoke yiddish to my father, especially when she lost her temper. But my father mostly speak to me in either broken English or in yiddish. When he wanted to express himself fervently it would be Yiddish and he was able to converse in English, but as I say a little broken English. But the grammatical sense was quite good.

I would like to make the point that dad joining the shule in Jubilee St in the first instance was very conscious how important a choir was to the service. How much it beautified the service, how it enhanced the spirituality of the service and he was ardent about having a choir because it would make his performance better and the general service would be enhanced and so he pleaded with what they call the gowers - the governors of the synagogue, who were big businessmen - and they said "we can't afford a choir." So dad said "right I'll go ahead and I'll get one on a semi voluntary basis and he organised a choir. It was one tenor - Billy Bunter proportions he was - pink angelic rotund face, he could have been the double of Lord Kitchener, and a very deep voice. And six mischievous choir boys, schoolboy choristers. These boys got twopence a week from Dad plus an extra penny for each rehearsal and if they did a very good rehearsal they got a bag of chips. He was very warm towards them and very strict when they didn't pay attention and he used to lose his temper when they were naughty.

Soon the choir became very popular with the congregation and I think dad made most of the vocal arrangements and often adapted operatic arias for the hymns, much to the delight of the regular sabbath congregants. So if you can picture the scene at the holy services. There was the hassan, my father (075) at the desk with the choir in a semi-circle behind. And he conducted the choir, which he wanted to keep rather unobtrusive ... he conducted the choir with his index finger unobtrusively behind his back whilst giving forth with his cantoral arrangements and his own solos.

Now there is a special reason for setting the scene for you really- these ten and eleven year old choristers, realising their choir was popular with the congregation, they got together day at a rehearsal and confronted my father with a demand and said "Chazzan, we want a penny a week increase". It sounds like nothing today but a penny bought a lot in those days. My father said "well, I can't pay any more out of my wages and that's it."

So nothing more was said and on the following Friday night on shabbas the service went ahead and in the middle of the service at the point where the choir had to come in with a great flourish behind dad's solo - his finger went behind him and he brought them in, gave them their cue and there was a deadly silence. So I say that surely this must be the only occasion when there was a strike in a synagogue during a holy service ! And incidentally they got their raise a couple of weeks later. What can you do? Organise. Organise. Eh?

I only recently learned from an ex choir boy of Dad's whilst giving a talk about my life in music that when there was a mid week choral wedding dad would go round to the school and see the headmaster. And he got the boys some special permission to have the time off for the choral wedding ceremony. And he was a very determined person. little did we know at home what was going on. He was a busy Minister of Jubilee St. Synagogue and a very popular figure of that era. Now add to this the fact that as we lived in Victoria Park, some three miles from his synagogue dad had to walk there and back, especially at the time of the sabbath service.

And in 1934 or 39 if anybody can recall - those that lived that era won't possibly need any nudging on this - the Old Ford area in the East End they were the busy headquarters of the notorious Mosley black shirted fascists. And that was a district that dad had to pass through on his way to the shule, for his duties. And he survived many taunts and anti-semitic tirades from those young mosleyite thugs, because he had a little goatee beard and he was obviously Jewish and they took advantage of that fact. And furthermore he hardly missed a service throughout the five year war period- walking through many an air raid, which he kept through unmarked, thank the lord. Yes, he was a determined man.

Now, an amusing little point in the war. It was a family joke and we don't forget it even now, that Dad took exception to the Anderson air raid in the garden, he thought it was a horrible thing. And he insisted on sleeping in his own bed. And he did that for a long time. But one day when the bombing got very fierce in London and they had a wicked invention of a parachute landmine – it didn't make a screaming sound - you had no indication anything was happened until the explosion. And one night a landmine dropped just behind the houses opposite our house in Penthurst Rd, Victoria Park. And that was terrible because ... Dad really must have got panicky. And there was Mum, Grandma and sister Gloria - they were in the shelter, I was on tour at the time - and he arrived at the Anderson air raid shelter

and there he was looking shaken and they were in hysterics because dad was standing with his legs in the sleeves of his pyjamas. He was in such a hurry, he didn't know what he was putting on and it was such an unbelievable site that in spite of the bombing and the terrible danger of the situation ... and that's how it was.

And there was another funny incident. Getting out of the Anderson shelter was not always easy, especially for an elderly woman who was rather big, my grandmother. To get up the steep steps mother had to get her head behind grandma's bum and she just pushed her to get her out, when the all clear sounded. So in the midst of near possible death, paradoxically there was some hilarious moments. Incidentally that type of parachute bomb made its descent silently and the resulting explosion seemed to come from nowhere. And that blasted off the front street door of our house. I suppose it's lucky that we escaped so lightly.

Incidentally perhaps I should mention dad tutored our eldest brother Aaron - who became a very successful cantor, so at home there were choir rehearsals in the early days in Dalston and my brother with the cantoral studies and he eventually actually became the cantor in the United Synagogue Australia, he served there for about thirty eight years.

Now perhaps I should revert to the twenties, Dot my wife tells me in the late twenties she had a cousin who was a race officer in Stepney and he and her father used to take her to the Bernard Baram settlement where he met the head of the club there- the very well respected Basil Henriques, one of the pioneers of the now worldwide liberal Judaism movement and she clearly remembers the lovely choir performing in the settlement - strange how a long ago memory stays very fresh in the mind.

This must have been about 1925 so we are speaking of over sixty years ago- the days when our London street had gas light, lampposts- I can remember those street lamplighters with a choker and a cloth cap. They were very welcome on a dark night on their rounds at sunset each evening and they used a long metal pole with a flint sparker on the other end - which was activated by the lamplighter and he lit the street gas lamps that way. And those old lamplighters incidentally, those chaps they were very important public servants when you think that you 'd be in darkness in the streets if it wasn't for them. Now to another subject- the palais de dance.

M Where was the palais de dance ?

A The Palais de Dance ? In relating to the East End? Good point Marjorie, I don't remember one in the East End but it relates very strongly to the east enders because I used to meet many of them at tea dances I played at various places. And it always struck me that it seemed to be a refuge for the middle aged and older unmarried men and women and

many married men ... and women ! And widows and widowers to a lesser extent and the colourful Palais seemed to provide a little romance and sometimes even led to the marriage service. And they patronised the Atoria, Charing Cross Rd- a strong contingent of Jewish people from the East End.

Now another thing I remember about meeting my fellow Jews who mostly lived in the East End was waiting Sunday night at half past six or so I think it was at Gardeners Corner for the long coaches that took you from gardeners corner to the Streatham Locarno, the famous dance hall. And you got the return journey and the entrance fee and the whole lot in was three shillings, three bob. And sometimes you might have found a girlfriend on the trip as well. What struck me about these ballroom dancers were that they took it so seriously. They used to try to be stylish in their long strided ballroom dancing and many an east end Walter Mitty were enjoying their ballroom world of fantasy in the thirties.

Now, how people lived. I remember I worked in Norsen St in a silk shop in very early days...

M When was that?

A That was in 1931. I'd left school in 1927, and this was around 1930, and I remember the buildings as the people called them- we never said we lived in flats. Apart from the buildings there were the neglected narrow cobbled streets with their rows and rows of two up and two down where the majority of working folk lived. And it was nothing unusual on a summer evening to see men and women sitting outside their front door chatting with friends and that was their pastime. That was their pastime, the piano in the house - which isn't so prevalent today, was a part of the home entertainment. And everywhere you could see front doors, street doors, left open. Apparently without any fear of being robbed. And in fact the school kids knew that they would always get in to their home by simply pushing open the letter box and grabbing the piece of string with the door key on the end. That's something unimaginable today.

One rather sad sight I remember - it didn't only to the East End, it applied to Dalston where I lived at that time, in the twenties and thirties - was to see the kids ... four, five or six, waiting outside the pubs in bare feet. It doesn't seem possible does it. They had to walk the streets just like that and it was a common sight. Though I must say that I never saw one Jewish child in that situation. Then there were the ice cream vendors - the pioneers of selling things in the streets. One famous firm was Assanines. Two of the streets ... I remember an Italian in dalston calling out "Okey pokey penny a lump". It was the first time I'd ever seen strawberry striped ice cream, sold in the streets in grease proof paper before the wafers came in to fashion and so on.

A 1930 I worked in a silks shop- silks and wollens in Petticoat Lane, at the corner of old castle st ... the street that my mother went to school at. When I first started, I was the sweeper up and the tea boy and for tea I used to have to go across to Ostwins opposite Shares. Oh the smell in there. And see them having their tea and cheese buns- that used to make my mouth water, they were very hot favourites. Ostwins tea and cheese buns. They were in the streets opposite sheers. There were stalls and shops- there were the pickled herring and cucumber stalls with fat ladies sitting by those large pickling barrels. And being initiated to the tricks of the elder salesman I can clearly remember the terrible experiences I had with those elder salesman that pulled my leg unmercifully. I fell for the gag when I was sent out to buy half a pound of rubber nails and a left handed hammer. I went from shop to shop ! But I must say that there is no better school of how to be a salesman than the three years I had in the lane, as they called it.

Now a salesman never gave the rockbottom selling price to a prospective customer, in the lane especially. One had to allow for the baiting down ritual. A favourite ploy was to cut certain popular pieces of cloth or silk equally in to half rolls. And many a time a customer who thought she or he were expert in the best bargains they would handle the cloth then with a turned up nose expression and say "I like the design but haven't you got something better, better quality." And out came the tactical reply to the customer "Well I have but it's expensive and you won't pay the price anyway." So immediately the customer says "don't worry, let me see it." So with studied reluctance the salesman goes in to a backroom, or might call out to a fellow salesman "Alf, let me have that top quality W.H. special line would you." So the other half of the same material came along, the customer feels the cloth. Very often there was a response, "now why didn't you show me this before." And many a time a sale was clinched through this routine.

I hope you realise that the other half that they had been feeling and saying was much better was the other half of the one they rejected.

The cafes bars and so on of yesteryear now ... Today's wimpy bars, Macdonalds etc .. in the thirties it was the milk bars where milkshakes were first introduced to the general public. Strawberry, chocolate flavoured concoctions and they became very popular, as they still are today. Having been sent out on errands by the salesman I remember some of the requests to go to another shop, apart from the hospice. There was Monnickendams and they used to say we want a special strudel that they sold and they liked, and I'd just like to include that.

Now the marvellous topic of east end family life and their ambitions in the twenties and thirties ... oh that stories got to be told. I can just pinpoint one of the aspects that struck me - one of the basic aims as far as the parents were concerned in Jewish family life in the

east end was to ensure a good education for their children. And so many used to dote on their sons. They were expected to eventually qualify as either a doctor, a lawyer, or even an Einstein, nothing less it seems.

The other fervent hope was that their children should marry "well", moneywise. But at the very least they should never ever, heaven forbid, marry out of the religion. The parents I must emphasise were mostly refugees from Poland or some other part of Russia and at first many people, I won't say all, but many many people at the first opportunity wanted to become what they called "naturalised". And that is be British, with a British passport- no offence intended please. Having come from such oppression and being treated to such indignities, it was very understandable for children, in their mind, must get to the top. They must achieve the security and they must win respect from their peers. And anti-semitism notwithstanding- they could not forget the taunting song that one heard in the east end as Jewish people walked by after the first world war in the 1919/20 up to the early 30's, it was a distortion of a very popular song. It used to go Abie Abie Abie My Boy Vot are you vaiting for now .. and that horrible vicious meaning behind it. And in the twenties just after the war with its horrific massacres, the Somme for instance, I suppose it's very understandable that the wounded and forgotten were called war heroes. They felt very bitter being unemployed. Exploited where pay was concerned and they let out their bitterness and their jealousies if they saw any Jew well clothed and shod. And remember the children running around without shoes ... so Jewish folk became a scapegoat once again.

So for the life's ambitions of the families. Well naturally, we all know that- to see their daughter married well to a nice Jewish boy.

M Things haven't changed very much have they?

A I suppose not. And the attitude was that there was nothing too good for our daughter. And according to their means, parents went all out to make a memorable do. And the wealthiest hired west end venues such as Portmans rooms, west end venues such as – Monickendam's famous Westminster Palace Rooms. Banqueting suits in the posh hotels wherever. And the middle classes went for () Mile End Gate. Sterns Hotel, Mansell St, Aldgate. There were Silverstiens in Whitechapel, very popular, and the poorer families they either didn't have weddings or made a small house do. Or they booked Schwartzers restaurant in Aldgate. As a matter of fact it was not unusual for a family to take outside an insurance family in the first week a baby girl was born, really. And they continued paying up to the wedding date. So they felt come what may - good times and bad times, we will have a lovely wedding ! Maybe there were some fathers who secretly breathed a sigh of relief when a son was born "let the bride's family worry about the cost of the wedding." Oh I'm being very facetious aren't I, if not cynical.

A Were talking about well-known venues for Jewish weddings and not forgetting Bar mitzvahs and anniversaries, I have to tell you about the La Boheme in Mile End, I really mustn't let this go by- a gig that musicians did. And a gig at the La Boheme in those days meant you played until 4.30p.m. and then you moved upstairs to dinner program at 6pm. - what a marathon that was, for the guests, not for us - about six courses, hoers d'oerves, chicken soup with kreplach, a fish course, and then chicken and vegetables and then deserts and pettifours, and in case you were hungry still a basket of fruit on the table. And then after speeches and grace - grace after meals - the opening of the ball, a waltz, "I'll be loving you always". What else? " And then about 10.30 pm. another gorging - tea: gateaux, teas, buns and a piece of a bridal cake. The band continued playing until two a.m - all for seventeen and sixpence.

But what I must not forget to tell you before I get carried away is that the ballroom piano upstairs - a full size imposing black looking instrument - until you came to open it to play ... it had at least six notes missing on the piano keyboard - actual gaps, no notes at all. All pianists taking a gig at the La Boheme used to shudder when they think of the agony awaiting them on the night. Well my first gig at that hall, I was amazed to see that at the end of the evening, sat in a line by the front door, as the guests were going home, they were sat in a line, the kitchen staff and cooks with their white overalls and hands up for tips in gratitude for the lovely dinner ! I can just imagine that scene at the King David Suite W.1.

Well whilst I was working at the N.W Rose in 1932...

M That's the silk shop?

A Yes in Commercial Rd I got to know about Britain's famous boxers because I used to go to Premier land - the leading boxing match venue opposite N.W Rose - and at that time I saw the then famous, and he's still remembered well, Kid Burg. He won almost all his fights. He went to the United States and became the conquering hero there too and the news vendors placards I used to see, I used to get a kick out of this, used to headline "Kid Burg wins again." And Harry Meisler bless him in later years followed his example.

Oh I mustn't forget to tell you about the Paragon cinema in Stepney Green. In 1932 they used to have Cine variety shows and one Friday night I had the pleasure, I can't remember whether it was successful or not, I appeared there in the new talents features on Friday nights only. I used to get a small expenses fee.

M On a Friday night! You went on a Friday night, what did your father think of that ?

A Oh it was a (352) situation, "God , you ought to be ashamed of yourself " But as I said I was ardently treading the path and you had to do it. There you are. I was one of the

four extra new talents as they put it and Max Miller was the top of the bill, the star attraction. There were agents sitting in the audience who we hoped would book us for their theatres and so help us on our way to a successful career.

And what else, well Schefzig in the East End. If you mention this to people over seventy years of age its such a nostalgic experience, to mention the word . It's a vapour bath where mostly the men used to go, I think. Especially Fridays my father used to go there to tone up for the shabbas service. Stepney Green baths also had popular vapour baths until comparatively recently.

M What is a vapour bath?

A Vapour bath is a Turkish bath. The baths up at Stepney Green had popular vapour baths and jewish customers were the majority of sweaters there.

Ah the Jewish theatre, my goodness. The Jewish Pavilion in Whitechapel, with Maurice Schwartz and his talented company. And the grand palais in commercial Rd., they were the two most patronised Jewish theatres in the East End. And with their marvellous dramas and their regular customers they used to enjoy themselves crying their eyes out with the heartbreaking stories. And they also enjoyed themselves crying with laughter at the inevitable Jewish humour as well, all in Yiddish.

And well, to finish, in Christian St I remember, its still there, a famous bakery, because it makes the indispensable wonderfully popular bagel. Three or four o'clock in the morning taxi drivers would arrive. Musicians would go there from there from their late night West End restaurant jobs to buy hot bagels. And with smoked salmon a delight - not for the vegetarians I hasten to add - what a name for a variety act eh ! "Begals and Smoked Salmon."

M Now how did you meet your wife Dot? Was it an arranged marriage?

A By no means, our family was not orientated like that. No, my sister married the boy of her choice. My first glimpse of my adorable Dot was when we were at the Hackney swimming baths. I think we were members of a different clubs who went on a certain night to swim. And I saw a certain girl talking with a crowd around her- she seemed to command the attention and her personality impressed me a lot. So I went up to somebody, I said "who's that girl talking there.?" He said, "That girl ? That girl's my sister !" I said, "Well I never, fancy asking you of all people. He said, "I'll give you an introduction". I said Please do." He introduced me and I asked her to go out to a dance and so on and I think it took quite a time because I was a member of the Stoke Newington social and literary society adjoining the (424) Synagogue in which Sunday evenings Jewish boys and girls had their

nights there. And I used to give concerts. I remember singing a song in particular - through a megaphone I hasten to add, in those days there were no microphones - through a large megaphone to help my small voice get over and I sang a song called "day by day I'm more in love with you. Day by day my dreams are coming true." And evidently Dot Caplin got the message because she eventually became Dot Kane. And that's how we got married. Incidentally we didn't get married straight away it was a very great struggle, I was a poor boy, she was from a poor family. But I got my job with Lou Stone- when Al Bowley went to America with Ray Noble I got a very good contract and we got engaged on the strength of that contract and through the ups and downs and years afterwards we got married 1938. But through the ups and downs that followed I was always successful and I got the opportunity to take Sam Brown's place. My idol at that time was Ambrose and he would go on stage with Judy Shirley to cash in on his popularity and make money in music halls. And the musicians of the Ambrose orchestra used to be in the sessions when I used to freelance singing for Luxembourg ... Horlicks music in the morning, Black Magic Chocolates and so on. And they mentioned to me that I might be a suitable replacement and I was invited to go to bush house where they were doing a Luxembourg session and I gave an audition to Ambrose and I got the job with Sam Browne. And because I got that contract I was able to book the Westminster Palace rooms, I'm very pleased to tell Marjorie this part! We booked the Westminster rooms with none other than the Monickendam caterers.

A We wanted the best and we got it. And on the strength of that I was able to book a year later this wedding ceremony and celebration at the Westminster Palace Rooms. That was in 1938, we were married 47 years and we lived in the same flat in Clapham. And we have a lovely daughter and two lovely grandchildren and I would say that through my career the greatest support that I could ever possibly wish for came from Dot, not only because she encouraged me through my pessimistic times when I had such a feeling of inferiority I couldn't overcome my nerves and so on. She encouraged me to go to Lou Stone who announced that he was going to America and for four weeks there was no announcement who was going to take his place. And I said to Dot "good gracious, four weeks and the Melody Maker doesn't say a word, I should have gone after that job." She said, "why don't you now, I think you've got as good a chance as anyone. I'd got a hand round his masters voice gramophone. took some of the discs I had recorded with Harry Leader and so on and went to the stage door and asked to see the right hand man of Lou Stone, Jo Crossman. I said, "I don't want to waste Lou Stone's time would you listen to these discs, I'll leave you this gramophone. I realise my vibrato is rather fast, my diction a little at fault and so on. But I'm taking singing lessons and I could assure that I will overcome those faults." He said, "O.K., leave the gramophone and come back tomorrow evening." I had a sleepless

night and got back to the stage door and Jo Crossman welcomed me and said "come in". I thought "my goodness me, does this mean to say that the impossible dreams coming true." He said, " come on I'll take you to Lou Stones dressing room." And so he took me to Lou Stones dressing room and he had a chat with and said afterwards "I'll take you to my studio flat in Regents Park." On the way he started speeding along very fast. And furtively he looked at me to see my reaction and he said, "are you nervous of me going so fast." So I thought, " a good opportunity here.". I said, " oh no, not when I'm with a good driver."

M Oh, you sucker upper.

A It may have helped. Anyway we had our little interview at his house and we came to an agreement and I changed my name from Abbi Kieselmann which was not very suitable for a romantic singer after all. Can you imagine a B.B.C. announcer saying now Abbi Kieselmann) will sing "love in bloom." It doesn't fit does it. So I used Arthur Kane and Lou Stone said "I don't think that's very suitable, it s not romantic, lets think about it. He rang me a couple of days after that and said, "well I've got a name, what do you think of this... Alan Kane." So I thought to myself "well, the agreement you've offered me and the salary your going to pay me, you can call me anything." So I said, " that's fine". And I became Alan Kane, changed my name by deed pole just before we got married and I've been Alan Kane ever since and we were able to become engaged on the strength of a good contact, and its been a happy story really.

After all Dot and I are blessed with a lovely daughter Janice and a very son-in-law, Elice-who incidentally is in the world of popular music and joint managing director of the well known Red Bus International with their two studios. And of course our gorgeous eight and ten year old gorgeous granddaughters, Michelle and Gabrielle, what more could we ask.

M So, its been a happy story since then, roses all the way ?

A No, not by any means but taking it as a life story I think I have a lot to be thankful for and I wouldn't have had it really any other way. So much to be thankful for, so many positive aspects, one can't have everything and I'd sooner have it as it was. It's been my pleasure to speak to you.

M I've very much enjoyed it and I hope whoever listens to this and whoever types it enjoys it as much as I've done.

END