

REMINISCENCE THEATRE ARCHIVE OF PAM SCHWEITZER

INTERVIEW WITH HARRY ISENBERG

Marjorie This is an interview between Marjorie Monnickendam and Dr Harry Isenberg on the 5th of March 1987. Harry, first of all tell me about your parents, about your father, where did he come from?

Harry Isenberg My father came from Warsaw, the outskirts of Warsaw, roundabout the age of 18, before the First World War and he went to work in a gown shop as a tailor in Brick Lane where he met the daughter of the shopkeeper and married her eventually. Now her mother - Mrs Baranovski - was smuggled over the border, she used to tell me this, at turn of the century, I couldn't quite get the date, and she arrived in England and I think she was married in England. My Zeder [Grandfather] I don't think ever did a days work. He died fairly young I think - he used to have (015) great pain. He used to go to shul, I used to go to shul, and we had a very nice time. And

M So where did they come from, where did your grandmother and grandfather...

H Well my Grandmother was smuggled over the border from Russia. My father came from Poland, from Warsaw and his father came over later. His father came over- and I think he was a milkman in Warsaw. My father sang in the shule, in the choir Chazan Sirotta. He had a very nice voice my father, a tenor type of voice, I've got a base voice. As I say he was a tailor and worked in my grandmother's shop. And when he married my mother we lived in 82 Hanbury st.

M What was 82 Hanbury St. was it a house or...

H 82 Hanbury St we lived on the first floor over an estate agent, two or three doors from the corner Spital St. In Spital St, on the outside of the corner there was ... they kept horses there, I think that's where they kept the horses who used to take around the milk floats. I remember buying milk from the float in one of these lovely little brass containers with a handle with a little cap and pouring it out, fresh from the cow. We used to keep cows, it was a cow shed basically I think.

M And how big was your place ?

H Flats ... In the front room was a dining room come lounge come bedroom for my sister and myself. My sisters leapt on the bed and I slept on the couch. Next to that was my parents bedroom. Then at the back was a small kitchen, very small, and an even smaller scullery. And there was a lavatory downstairs in the backyard. I remember I used to have baths, when I was very young, standing up in a tin bath. And eventually used to go to Public baths once a week, on a Friday I think it was, we used to say - if you wanted more water - "more water ... hot water, No.4, and that kind of thing.

M What language did you speak at home ?

H English. My parents, of course, used to speak in yiddish when they wanted us kids not to understand anything. I was ... my sister was two years older than I am. I was born on the thirteenth of January, 1916. So they must have been married about 1914, something like that, I should think.

M So your father didn't serve in the army here during the war ?

H No.

M Did they take british nationality ? Did your father have british nationality ?

H I don't think he did. I've got a travel document ... when you had to get permission to go out of London during the war, and the name isn't as it is spelt now I S E N E, he used Adzenberg A D Z E N. Its an interesting document- giving you permission for outside of London for one night.

BREAK IN TAPE

M ... So how did you celebrate for that ?

H Well my father used to belong to Dukes place shul. That was the premiere shul in England, and we went to shul ... on Friday night of course the usual candles and the shabbas meal. And Saturday morning I used to go to shul with my father, and coming back from shul I used to pick up the cholent from the bakers shop across the road, wrapped in a piece of brown paper with a number written on it. And a (060).

M Did your mother and your sister go to shul as well ?

H I don't think they did, just my father and myself. And it was lovely because (063) they gave boxes of chocolates to the kids, whereas all the other shules gave bags of sweets, so we used to get our boxes of chocolates and used to run round to as many other shules as possible getting bags of sweets, I remember that. Little boxes of chocolates () very posh silver. Had a nice cousin there as well. What the hell was his name, I can't remember his name.
My Grandfather, he belonged to Philpot St shul. My maternal zaheh. He used to get drunk ...

M And what about the other festivals ... did you have special things to eat ? What did you have on a Friday night ?

H Chicken soup, chicken or beef or whatever. I remember getting drunk once, one pesach. I got up from the table to show my sister how she should be playing nuts and I thought to myself ...

Yom Kippur my father used to (080) for us. He used to go round with a feather and a wooden spoon, your not supposed to have any (082) in the house. So father gave it a thorough cleaning and then she put a little bit of (083) which was known t everybody. My father used to go down with a feather, putting it (). And tie the feather to the spoon and little boys used to go down and see (085). Used to have a little brazier and you'd pay them a penny or twopence and they used to put the spoon in to the brazier.

M And what about Heda ?

H Heda as I said, I used to go to heda in spittle st just round the corner from me, just a minutes walk. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday after school and again on sunday morning.

M And what did you learn there ?

H I learnt there to read hebrew, to write in hebrew and to write letters in yiddish.

M So, you learnt to speak yiddish ?

H Yes, a little bit of yiddish, but I used to write in yiddish.

(094). But as far as hebrew was concerned there was many learnt to speak it like a parrot (096) that kind of thing.

M And what about school ?

H Well I went to the Robert Montefury school which was three quarters of a mile away, something like that, on the corner of undwerwood st and valance rd. It was a marvelous school, I think there was only one non jewish person and that was the son of the caretaker. And as I said before I used to paint in oils before I left them ... I left about the age of nine. And we put on operas, I remember two operas we put on. One was the magic flute, I can't remember what the other was, oh yes, gilbert and sullivan- the policemans song.

M |Did you play a part in this opera.

H I played a part in the policemans song, my sister played a part in the magic flute. I remember when it was put on- smith, I think, was the headmaster, wonderful school.

M And did the parents come to

H Oh yes of course. I remember Empire Day ... lined up in the playground. But I enjoyed my schooldays. I enjoyed my time in the east end because we used to have street gangs where we played, not fighting ... we played cricket and football against each other. Our game was based in spittle st though. We usually played cricket in spittle st. Of course it was a narrow st, we used to play cricket and break a few windows. We used to get murdered ! And I remember the day - I was the treasurer - we went to buy our first football. All of us went to the shop to get the football. And we used to play against (121) St. I remember incidentally being stoned in the spring time as I went to school by presumably christian boys... they must have been just learning how jews had killed jesus. I didn't know anything about that at the time. We were never told anything about christianity. And I could never understand why it was in the spring time I was always being stoned. I used to go from one dustbin to another to protect myself with a dustbin lid !

M Tell me about your friends and your neighbors, what do you remember about them ?

H All Jewish, entirely jewish. We were just all kids together. My father by that time had left my grandmothers shop and set up a wholesaler of hosiery, with my mothers brother, in Whitechurch St in Aldgate. And also he dabbled in diamonds. He used to buy diamonds,

pawn them at a higher price than he'd bought them for ... he had little scales to weigh them in. He was a business man. And then they moved from ...

M So you were quite well off were you compared with ...

H Oh no, we were very poor. Although he had wholesale house ... possibly we were better of than most ... but we still had this tiny little flat until we moved to clapton. We moved in to a house.

M When did you move to clapton ?

H When I was about nine, something like that.

M And do you remember anything about moving ?

H I remember going, for the first time in my life, in a tram to clapton, from aldgate.

M That was the first time you'd been on a tram ?

H Fifty three I think it was ... took a long time, miles in to the country, remember that very well.

M And what was the house in clacton like ?

H That was quite a nice house, 25 mount pleasant lane.

M And how could your parents afford it then ?

H I suppose they must have made some money in the wholesale hosiery business.

M Did you have the house to yourself ?

H Oh yes. And we also had a maid. There was three floors and there were two rooms at the top. One the maid was in and the other one I was in- she had to come through my room to get to her room at the back.

M Did you still have relations in the east end ?

H I think my bubbeh was still in the East End and her son, willy, began to take over the business ... when she retired he took over the business. Then he moved to Mare St, where he opened a similar type of shop, (165). My mother had three sisters and also three or four brothers. One sister married a man who lived in bethnal green road selling old clothes. Another sister married a very very small businessman and she lived in Calvadale Rd. And the third one married (174) Fox, who had a small retail shop in Hackney, in Mare St I think it was. So most of my family moved out of the East End all round about the same time I think.

M When would that be then ?

H Well, mid nineteen twenties.

M And how did you like clapton compared to the east end ?

H Clapton was quite different. There were no street gangs, different type of life altogether. We were no longer the close jewish community that we had in the east end. So I went to a shule in (186) where I was barmitzvahed. And the rabbi who had taught me in the east end he also moved that way and he taught me my barmitzvah, I remember that now. Then my mother had several brothers. There was (191) my father's partner. There was Issey. Issey was the youngest, a poor sod. He married a yiddisher girl once. And then he married a non jewish girl, that was most unusual. He died very early of cancer of the oesopheogus. My uncle Issey- he's still alive uncle issey, he's in the nineties. Uncle Highmy, he's still alive, he married Jenny, they separated. Uncle Ruby- he worked for my father and my uncle in the shop, then he seemed to have dissapeared from view, moved to South London somewhere. He's dead now.

M And what about schooling, when you went to clapton ?

H I went to (203 Rd School) and ... very few jewish children there. It was OK, I can't recall any anti-semiticism. Although my wife, sheila, she went to (206 Rd school) and there was a lot of anti-semiticism she tells me. But I left that school at the age of 12 and I went to clarks college for a year to learn shorthand, typing and various languages ... and then after a year or two I went to Pitmans college in Finsbury Park. Then I didn't know what to do with myself so I went to work for a nice chap called (214). He had a wholesale cloth business in cheswell st., where I used to earn three pounds a week. I used to buy a

bar of chocolate every shabbass before going home, when I got my wages. And then my mother often wondered why I didn't have much of an appetite when I got home.

M Did you find that job for yourself or did someone find it for you ?

H I haven't the faintest idea, I remember I used to play chess. There was a (223) in the corner of thistle st - the main finsbury sq - and () a table ... the shelf you played chess and the underneath shelf your coffee and roll and that kind of thing.

SUNDAY:

M What kind of a job did you have /

H I was in the office as it were. People used to phone up and say. "Have you got this kind of cloth?". And I used to say, "yes, threepence, three farthing". And I should have said threepence farthing or something like that. So after a few years there I managed to save enough money and I left there, without telling my parents and every day I left home and went to Hackney library where I studied for the london matriculation by post , which I passed. I hadn't told my parents I'd left because I didn't think they would approve and one day MR (237) met my father going to shule on the shabbas and my father asked him how I was getting on and learnt the awful truth ! However, my sister got engaged to a doctor, so I thought well I'll become a doctor. So I went to Queen Mary College in the East End of London nd then I went to Barts.

M How could you afford to do all this ?

H Well my father could barely afford to do that. I remember ... for instance when I went to Clarks College I was always ashamed because my father couldn't afford to buy me pairs of trousers and my trousers were always patched but he managed with extreme difficulty. I remember that the fees for barts were about \$90 a quarter or something like that ... or a term. But he managed it. He first started off in Christchurch road in aldgate and then he moved to no 9 Whitechapel road and then- they were doing some business in Germany, and there man there stole everything. And my company had to go bankrupt.

M When was this ?

H During the war I think, or before the war, before the war. I remember standing in the shop in Whitechapel Road watching the Jarrow Marchers go by, the hunger marchers. And then during the war my father opened up again in Cutler St in the same type of business. And when he died - about twenty years ago now - we carried on the business for about ten more years, my two sisters and I, in (265) St. I went down there about two or three times

a week. My wife and my two sisters ran it with the aid of a manager and eventually the lease came to an end and they wanted to treble the rent or something so we sold the goods to another chap, scotty,. He bought all the goods and took over the shop ... only for a couple of years, because the whole place was knocked down then and rebuilt.

M Were your parents very frumm ?

H Not (276). We kept shabbas and (277). And milk and meat separate. And paesach ... paesach in the east end in (278) was a wonderful time. First of all on several of the chairs white cloths were placed and all the (281). We used to have a crate of eggs ... a bakers dozen of eggs. In the East End in those days at paesach time we were all in the street. We used to have those little round nuts, what were they called ? We used to stand on the roadway, by the pavement and throw the nuts up to the ... they used to have shoe boxes with little holes and bigger holes- you had to get the nuts in, it was small hole, you got say ten nuts back, a large hole you only got five nuts back. And if you were winning you wet up yourself ... used to buy thirty nuts for a halfpenny., that kind of thing. And the very rich people used to put a sixpence used to put a sixpence in a niche in the wall of the building and you had to try and knock it off with a nut. Paesach was a wonderful time, it was magic.

M And did you have the sadach at home /

H Yes, all four of us. My parents, my sister , myself ... absolutely magic paesach. And I remember the games we used to play. There was picturecards, from cigarettes. Then we had pitch and toss ... a little piece of wood with an angled corner. You had to hit it and then give it a bang when it was up in the air. Then we had the large circles of wood which used to roll along.

I enjoyed my time in the East End ... and then we moved to clapton and it was a different thing entirely ... all the warmth ... in the East End out of doors you were at home. It was absolutley wonderful .. I enjoyed it, it was really an outdoor life we led. Whereas in Clapton you went in to your house and that was that.

M You shut your door at night ?

H Yes. And not in the east end. Our sisters and I used to let down on pieces of string pieces of cake or biscuits for our friends down below, where we weren't allowed out of the house. And one of our greatest pleasures was going to get a taxi for my parents when they had to go to a wedding. I used to go up and get a taxi and ride in the front of the taxi.

M Do you remember whether you went to any family weddings when you were young ?

H No, I think everybody had been married by then and they were all bringing up children. All of my cousins, who are still alive I still meet. In point of fact Jewish families have a very close family life. Here for instance every Shabbas, when my parents were alive, the whole family used to come every Shabbas there for tea and now .. my parents had three children ... and when they died, my mother died eventually, once a month every one of us, everyone comes to the other's house every Shabbas for a month.

M Who's the third one then ?

H I had two sisters, one sister unfortunately died - Hilda, she died in the fifties, and now her two children, they take over from her. So once a week on the Shabbas we sometimes have twenty or thirty children here. And the noise that the grandchildren make, crickey. It's a pleasure to have them but it's wonderful to see them go ! But it was like that at the east end too. I used to go to my bubba. She used to ... upstairs, she had a large house over the shop and I remember having klisk-lech which is a kind of a bread (342Loxcshen), about half an inch wide and klisk-lech you can have either with milk or with gravy, she made a wonderful klisk-lech. We used to go quite a lot to my Grandmother's house for a meal..

M What other things did she cook that you enjoyed ?

H Er, (356). And she made a lovely chollant. But the chollants my parents made were absolutely .. the only time I've had anything similar was in the Hilton hotel in Jerusalem. I was there one year for a Shabbas ... I had three helpings.

M How did you meet your wife, were you introduced ?

H Well no ... when we lived in Mount Pleasant road my two sisters - across the road was a family - and my younger sister was a friend of Ruth. And Ruth had a cousin called

Sheila who lived in Gilda crescent and so I got to know sheila through her and when I was in the army- I was in India most of the time in the army, we got engaged by post !

But I'll tell you something my time in the East End I really enjoyed.

M I'm sure it was fun for you, but what did your parents feel about it ?

H They worked hard. My father, he worked very very hard and my mother was always busy cooking. She was a very very good housewife, a very very good cook and she used to go round to my bubbah. We used to meet there very frequently. .. in the east end I had a very happy time ... a long time ago. My flat, where I used to live is no l longer there, everything has been knocked down, its just a block of flats. And the shop where I used to buy broken biscuits thats gone now.

M Did you used to get pocket money ?

H I don't remember getting pocket money in the East End, I used to get a shillings worth of pocket money before the war when I was going to clarks college and with that pocket money I had to buy everything ... paper, pens, ink, and I had enough money to go to the pictures once a week. I used to go to the pictures in the regent I think it was called. And I remember in the east end going to the (414) and I remember seeing Frankenstein, oh no the one with the teeth ... dracula . And I remember that for weeks afterwards I was afraid to go to bed.

M Did you go with your friends ?

H Oh yes, infact every Saturday we used to go to Lyons and have a coffee dash- thats coffee with a dash of milk and a pastry . And also on the corner of valance road and Whitechapel Rd there was a fish and chips shop, I used to buy a pennyworth of chips there. If I was in money I used to have a penny worth of chips and a piece of fish, or even got two pennyworhs of chips. There was a place in Mile End road where you got money on tick ... I remember the market. We used to the Yiddish theatre- in the grand was it, in Whitecahapel Rd.

M You understood what was going on ?

H Oh yes. I remember one woman, there was something going on on the stage and some woman was telling somebody else lots of stories and one woman she said, "its all lies" she said "its all lies".

END