

Interview #15 7/19/2000 Alfred Skondovitch
Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK

(Early History)

My teacher was the sister of Elizabeth Kline. She came from the little village of Zenore, this being the home of Patrick Heron who took me to the cottage in which they were born. It **was the sister who recommended that I go to America with these gifts I had as a painter.** Of course I had another idea that **I could go there and become a boxer.**

I didn't have any money, but I did have talents and gifts. And I was approached by a group in London who said we need your assistance. They had learned about the concentration camps in Europe which was a revelation of horror to people, and they asked me to go there to see what could be salvaged. To look for athletes who could serve in what was then Palestine, but became the state of Israel.

Until the age of 10 or 12 I was brought up in a home where English was not the language. **The language I spoke was a patois of German, Yiddish, Hebrew and Cockney English.** I remember once being asked by a teacher in a school before a class, "what do you call this thing?" I realized I didn't know what the English was for a basin, so I said in Yiddish, "shisl". I can still hear the laughter and an undercurrent of "don't mess with him, he's a boxer, or his brothers are boxers." **But that really troubled me, that I couldn't name a basin. So I began being very concerned about speaking English correctly.** I know that people might think that one fights to get out of the ghetto, but that isn't really true. **The ghetto is a nice place in which to live. I still dream of the sights and sounds, and the food which has never been eclipsed by anything.**

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The food that your mother made and you enjoyed when you were a child. You could never equal this; there is not gourmet dish that could really satisfy you, unless you're some sort of cosmopolitan degenerate. You remember the food.

And contrary to the prevailing opinion, boxers were not necessarily people whose wish it was to fight their way out of the ghetto and earn fame that way. There was a different motivation to parents of young men who had these physical gifts, namely to make it clear to the country to which we had emigrated as the victims of pogroms and persecution in Russia and Lithuania and other countries, family that were stained by mob violence in these countries, arrive in England where life was certainly a lot more pleasurable. **It was a civilized country, but then we became aware of the press and the media and our being demonized, and this was where the younger people excelled in sports to indicate that we don't have horns, that we suffer pain and are gallant in victory. This was the motivation of my brothers who were boxers.** But again you had a wonderful fighter like Jackie Kid Berg who became a world champion. He fought an American style, and yes, maybe it was his wish to get out of the ghetto. Well, I don't think so. He just had this raw, wonderful talent. Ted Kid Lewis was another world champion from the area in which I lived as a boy, the ghetto.

I remember on our honeymoon, we went down to San Francisco and Patti wasn't feeling too well. And I went out promising to come back with aspirin or something. I went into a drugstore and I saw a man who I last saw when I was nine years of age. This was over two decades ago. We were all at a camp in Camby Island in the Thames Estuary, and these were all East End boys who lived within the ghetto. But his brother was a talented composer who wrote music for Carmen Miranda, and he lived in the United States and worked for Doris Day for many

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years. His name is Joe Lugan, and his brother was sort of his sidekick. This brother was the man I ran into.

I said, "I'm Kid Harris's brother."

He said, "Oh yes, I remember you," patting me on the head. And then he opined if only he were back in the East End. I had this vision of a fruit stand and the unanimity of things and the comradeship and the wonderful food. But above all, if you did something heroic and returned to this small world, everyone admired you and looked up to you. And here was this man who had spent 20 or so years under this penumbra of Hollywood success in the shadow of his brother, dreaming if only he could go back. I thought I should tell him that all the Jews have moved out and gone on to better things, that what he dreams of no longer exists. Now there is a splendid cultural axis of the Whitechapel art galleries become something of world class. We have been replaced by what appear to be blacks from the West Indies and so on and so forth. It is not the same; you could not take the hero's walk.

So if you had physical abilities, there were things required of you. Namely, in boxing and even in cricket, and things like that, these were important. And also the protection of brothers who could not defend themselves. The fellow who wrote the South American music was a skinny, weak little boy who was picked on by other people and came under the protective wing of my brother.

I started boxing when I was eight years of age, and then I discovered this talent for art, and I thought what the hell is this, why does this have to happen to me. And then there is a period in history where of the dreadful things that have happened. We saw the first survivors of concentration camps arrive in England, arriving like animals. People would fight over food—this is a restaurant situation.

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So I was with a group of people who were not necessarily Zionists, but no one had any place to go in Europe. There was no place for Jews to go. They were slaughtered by the millions and from Poland their homes were stolen from them. They could not return from whence they came and Palestine seemed to be the logical place. So I found myself involved in Zionist activities, where we would do things in establishing the flow of people. At the same time I was working with a theatrical group, doing theatre sets and all these things are running along on parallel lines. So I began to learn to speak English like an officer, and I was given a few weeks to come up with this accent. We did this by feedback. We had these old tape wire recorders, so that I could go there and in the chaos of Europe I would be uniformed and would find out what I could do to rescue brothers. Anyway, there was a delegation going through the British Zone of Germany. We had a young woman, a legislator name Jenny Lee, who was the wife of Aniron Bevon who had responsibilities under the Labor government. The people spurned Churchill at the end of the war and selected Clement Atlee and a Labor government. Jenny Lee was on the back bench of this party, but she was placed in charge of a delegation to visit the concentration camps that we had liberated in the British Zone. So I glommed onto them and was terrified of what I was asked to do, but it seemed to go beautifully. I didn't have to fool British people, but rather Germans and we were now their conquerors. This led to the most horrible experience of my life. We saw Bergen Belsen which had been cleaned up quite a bit. I thought there is nothing that can be salvaged from these living skeletons. I couldn't see in them soldiers who could fight or till the soil. The delegation just wanted to get the hell out of there. Jenny Lee, M.P., returned to England and her constituency in Wales and died within a week. She was about 32, our glamour lady of the Labor government. We had the mayor of a nearby city in Germany. He said he didn't know this was going on. He returned home and died within two days—he

didn't commit suicide. I mention this just for the horror of it. I couldn't stand the smell, the sight of things. I thought, my God what am I doing here?

Then I'm back in England—I want to say a bit about my brother. He was kind of a promoter. He loved dancing and dances, and this is a big deal in England where they would have dancehalls where three to five thousand people could dance. These dancehalls, like the one out at Cricklewood has three floors and there are three orchestras, and there would be thousands of people doing the waltz or what have you. My brother Sid got into that business which was going along swimmingly. He also managed the Blackbirds, a Negro group of singers from America. Their sound preceded the Motown sound, and they sang in England managed by my brother. So he was involved in theatre and indicated he was going to make movies. He organized one dance in the county in which we lived, at the Odeum a theatre with a mere two floors and he had two bands playing. On top of all this he decided to challenge the British welterweight wrestling champion to a fight. The fight was sanctioned. Now he was a boxer, and why he turned to wrestling just beats the hell out of me. But it was obvious as the evening drew on, and people retired upstairs to watch the fighting, that he was drinking champagne, and was drunker than a skunk. My mother was summoned to try to stop this, but it seemed hopeless, and he climbed in the ring with the British champion who handily defeated him. His pride was such that if ever you mentioned that match, he would bristle and you'd be on bad terms with him. Anyway, the whole spectacle was enjoyable anyway. His opponent assisting him out of the ring on a stretcher was one of the choice moments of all this. Anyway, he began to make films and got permission from the Air Force to work at their combat airstrip. It was to be about the Battle of Britain or something like that, and there were glamorous looking ladies that he recruited from the world of the theatre and dancehalls. And he had cameras shooting at planes which were kindly loaned to

his production company. This was their plan. There were two great pilots in WWII. One was Sgt. Cohen who flew a little biplane called a fulmar. It had two wings with a hull and he would fly around picking up downed British or German pilots. His biggest patron was a Canadian flier, Burling, known as Screwball to his colleagues. Screwball Burling was responsible for more German pilots being shot into the sea, with Sgt. Cohen picking them up. So they formed a team.

I don't know if Burling was Jewish or not, but this ace fighter offered to fight for what was then Palestine. He needed a suitable craft, and we were looking for aircraft that had been surplused in German and France. But the plane that was the dominant plane was the Mosquito, a twin-engine aircraft that was very fast. It had been developed to shoot down flying bombs, which were a precursor of jet aircraft. We glommed on to such a plane, sequestered it, we adorned it with glamour girls, and then Screwball turned up anonymously and he climbed into the cockpit, his co-pilot was Sgt. Cohen. We preceded them on a boat, we arrived in Genoa, went up into the hills, he had cars illuminating the strip and these two great flyers crashed on landing. Why? Because we're not aircraft mechanics; here were a bunch of actors. They didn't make an altitude adjustment on the plan. A simple thing like that doomed these boys when they thought they were flying at 400 feet they weren't. They were 6 feet above the earth. I remember we used to do primitive kind of surveying with altimeters. They were really not very precise instruments. The atmosphere would affect them.

We split and ran in different directions. This Zionist group found me a job in the Danish Merchant Marine. So I went aboard a Danish ship in Italy, which didn't know that some of the crewmen were doing things like this and delivering guns and other weapons. The ship was picking up citrus fruits in the middle east and would perform this circuit. It would go to Genoa

and then go through the straits there, and you could see lava coming down from Vesuvius there. I often wonder if that still happens.

I had never really met the captain of the ship, but one day a man walked by me on the deck, and he was dressed in a homburg hat with a Persian lamb collar on his coat, a single breasted pinstripe suit. I thought my God, this must be a passenger, but I wasn't aware of any passengers. I was working as a mess boy or cabin boy. I said to the Chief steward, who is that? He said that's the Captain, Christian C. Christianson. I often wondered what the middle initial stood for. This is where he says hello to his girlfriend. Well, we met him on the port side, so we both went over to the starboard side, and we could see the Captain on the very edge of the bridge of his ship and he was waving. On the little abutment that extended from a cliff was a lady and two little children, and they were waving to the ship Captain. That's the happiest thing, I just couldn't believe it. We had altered course so that she could see him and he could see her and the children could wave and he could see them.

On the Danish vessels the ships travel with a nurse, so if you're under 16 you go ashore with a nurse. But the nurse was on leave and also the Captain and the Chief Engineer travel with their wives. The wives had just left the vessel, because they had been sailing for over a year.

We had a bunch of guns and we were told to get them ashore in Lebanon. There was to be a fellow there to meet us. And ultimately we did this; we took some crates ashore. However, to begin with, I and my young friend Scottie had been something of an object of interest by the Captain when we boarded the ship, and I was worried that we would be questioned about whether we were the people who had the chests of machine guns. Scottie, who was 16 years of age and really a genius, said, "We're just young fellas you know, and all we got to do is say 'ah dun't know whut yer talkin about captain. I swear tuh God on me father's kilt.'" "

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But someone is saying, “But what about these crates? If you went into your bunk you climbed over three crates of Czech machine guns. Where the hell do these come from?”

“Ach Captain, yer barkin’ up the wrong tree. I’m just a wee lad of 16! And Alfred, he just sleeps all the time, he doesn’t know anything.”

They were very frustrated at this. They had this sort of mock ceremony before the mast in the Captain’s smoking saloon. They just decided to leave us be and hope that we jumped ship in Tel Aviv.

Before we got to Beirut, we stopped in Turkey and there was a suspicion that this ship was engaged in gun smuggling. The Turks have kind of a rambunctious Marx-brothers air—the shades and declensions of Sherlock Holmes are not apparent in the Turkish character. It was their view that everyone on the ship should be arrested and thrown into jail. The jail being one cell for 28 men, with a toilet in the form of a hole in the corner. We were detained there one day and night. Of course keeping us all in one place was a mark of Turkish efficiency. When I think about Turkish people, they are either miniscule people who look like raisins with crinkled skins, or they’re gigantic people, some of them red-haired. We had a redhead, a gigantic man who single-handedly shoved everyone of us into that cell. He arrived the following morning, and I thought well, this is where the trouble begins, where they start knocking heads. But no, he had something that was written for him and he had obviously been bribed. All I remember of the thing written for him was that it was an apology to us. And it began with this giant man saying, “My darlings!” This in all seriousness. We were careful not to laugh, filed out past him, each saying, “Thank you darling.” So we all got back on the ship and we delivered our stuff to the Arabs who were paid to take it to our colleagues.

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The ship did not actually land at Tel Aviv, there's no harbor there, though there might be one now. It landed across at Jaffa, a suburb of Tel Aviv. You might say that Tel Aviv, and Jaffa the ancient Arab city. Scottie and I were going to swim ashore, because we thought the jig was up with the gun-running. Anyway we were kind of innocent of it, because other people had made all the arrangements. We were now kind of scared about this. I remember asking someone what city that was because bombs and guns were going off all over the place. We were boarded by Arabs who would come aboard and boast about what they were going to do, so we kept our mouths shut. We weighed the idea of swimming ashore, but we were about a mile offshore, though out of artillery range. Also we saw these fishtails that looked like sharks and didn't want to venture into the water. So we remained with the ship and elected to jump ship in New York.

(So your job regarding the guns was simply to accompany the guns?)

Yes, and to show people where they were, people who came on board when we arrived.

The stuff was placed in our room and there were other people who had stuff in their cabins.

They were paid for this sort of thing.

(So the crew would just turn a blind eye...)

Yes, but in those days when you visited these areas—for instance, currency in Italy was cigarettes. If you had cigarettes, a carton, you could obtain a suit, custom-tailored to you. Two cigarettes had a value for a mixed drink in a bar. And there were other things that were more obscene that you could get for a cigarette. The salary of the seamen on that boat was \$60 a month, but they would come into New York and people representing Camels and Pall Malls would come aboard, and they'd spend their entire salary on the purchase of cigarettes. So they were earning far more than that on the black market. Everyone was involved in this. Anyone,

who because he was drunk ashore or jailed or some other thing, would become involved in what we were involved in but would expect to be paid to install the guns aboard.

We don't know who got us out of the jail in Turkey. We don't know who loaded the stuff in Italy. They were Czech machine guns, excellent guns, but we don't know where the hell they came from. We had agents who were spotting when I went there to Bergen Belsen, who glommed on to that delegation. There were other agents whose job it was to look for surplus that could be used for the fighting.

(And part of your idea anyway was to get to the United States?)

Yeah, I thought I want to get out of this. When I was five years of age, there was a little magazine that would come to the house and on the back cover there was this advertisement. It was of a boy enjoying Ovaltine, by an organization that begged you to become an Ovalteenie. There were radio programs for Ovalteenies—we are the happy girls and boys—and I would look at this advertisement of this perfectly dressed child and I thought, I could be like him. I thought if I dressed and behaved and sat at the kitchen table with a glass of Ovaltine, surely I'll appear on a page of that magazine. I'd look through each issue, and I wasn't there. I think strains of this sort of thing go through your life, this strain of naivete. **But to have it shattered by the events that occurred and to feel responsible for Screwball Burling and Sgt. Cohen dying the way they did—and then those death camps. I think with my painting *Hanging Clowns*, I was for the first time able to find some beauty in it. This is the soul and it's unconquerable. But I thought, like it or not, I'm going to the United States.**

However, because of the good food on the vessel, I came down with a bout of protein poisoning. In a country where you ate one fresh egg a month, you don't get a lot of protein. We had lots of good food, but on the ship for my first breakfast out at sea, they brought what you

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would recognize as a pizza plate and it was full of eggs sunnyside up. There would be 15 or 20 eggs there, and I would eat one, eat two. This meant nothing to the other guys; they just indicated they wanted more eggs, keep them coming. And so on with other food. They had a Christmas dinner at sea and the Danish had duck l'orange. Imagine this on a 2400 ton steamer, a little ship. So when I came into New York, my limbs had swollen up. I looked like an elephant. I thought I was doomed. There was a Swedish sailors hospital on Staten Island and I went over there. I walked in and the guy says, "Oh, you're another one of these that have protein poisoning." I didn't know what he was talking about. I thought would I be subject to something terrible? Would they cut me open to let the fat out, like some sort of ghastly liposuction? No, he filled a glass with water and Fuller's Earth. I drank it and all the swelling went away over the next six hours or so.

Later, walking toward the seaman's home to meet Scottie, I felt much better. He comes running out there – he was always in a panic—and he says, "You'd better jump ship, laddie."

I said, "But I don't have cards."

He says, "You don't need cards in America, all you need is a Social Security card.."

(Now we've been through this part elsewhere.)