

MR. ALEXANDER KIPNIS

Oral History Memoir

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The American Jewish Committee

Alexander Kipnis

Words sound like:

Page 9 - Die Dichterliebe - words by Heine

23 - Juddy Creen

24 - Janssen
Kleinschen
the wife of Kleinschen

27 - Judge Rosenman

Alexander Kipnis
interviewed by Alan Green

Tape 1 - 1.
May 14, 1971

Q. -- Alan Green. I'm sitting in the living room of the home of Alexander Kipnis in Westport, Connecticut, not far from the Weston line. It's a late morning, the fourteenth of May, 1971. Mr. Kipnis, I'd like to begin by asking you about a few of the events in your life. Oh, for instance, you were born, I believe, in the Ukraine.

A. Yes, Mr. Green, I was born in the Ukraine eighty years ago.

Q. Well, that's difficult to believe right at the outset. /laugh/ You don't look it.

A. I have just recently been celebrating my eightieth birthday. It is very pleasant to look back on such a long time. Most of my memories are very pleasant and some of them not so. My career was, throughout my life, very successful, I was marching from one success to another, from one country to another one. I studied music in Poland, which was at that time part of Russia. From there I went to Germany and I studied singing there with some Italian and some German teachers. The German language became part of my own. I was still speaking Russian with my friends, and I still am, and I was singing a great deal in the Russian literature. And in 1923 a manager asked me if I would be willing to come to the United States, a German opera company was traveling, or going to, to have some performances in the United States. Of course

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I accepted, and it didn't take me very long to realize that the United States is going to be my future home. I was never happy living in Germany. I was offered a German citizenship, which I declined even in the early years of 1915. I came to Germany in 1912. Shortly after my arrival in the United States the Chicago Opera engaged me and I was a member with the Opera for nine years. I stayed in Chicago until 1932. In 1930 I became an American citizen. It was a lucky day for me, and I was for a long time a...a citizen without a country and finally I became a citizen with a country, and what country. After the Depression the Chicago Opera closed its doors. The general manager in Berlin with whom I have communit^{ca}_Aed offered me a contract for five years, fifty performances each year. I accepted it and I went to Berlin.

Q. That was in what year that you went to Berlin?

A. In 1932. The season in Berlin was a whole-year season, starting the beginning of January and we had only about five, six weeks' vacation. The shadow of Nazism was already visible at that time. We didn't realize what is coming. I sang my performances, I traveled a great deal in other countries -- I sang in England and in France, in Scandinavian countries, Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy -- and I always came back to Berlin to sing my performances there.

Q. What operas were you perform...what...what were your roles, the main ones?

A. I sang a great deal of Wagnerian operas, I also sang the opera La Juive by Halévy. I sang Aïda, Don Carlos, Faust, Rigoletto and so forth, many, many operas, Lakmé, Carmen, all sorts (?) Boris Godunov I didn't sing in Berlin, I sang Boris Godunov outside of Berlin. I sang Boris many performances in Czechoslovakia and in France I sang Boris Godunov and in Italy but not in Berlin. During my activities at that time I had some guest performances coming up in Brussels, in Belgium, and one day my general manager told me, "You cannot go at this time because we have a Wagnerian festival and we need you." And I said, "I have a contract to sing in Brussels, what shall I do?" and he said, "Break your contract," and I said, "They are going to sue me." And I said, "They are going to sue me, who's going to pay the damage?" and he said, "We, the State Opera in Berlin, are going to pay in case you lose." Well, the case came up and I lost, and the Berlin Opera paid this big sum of money for my losses, this was the end of 1932. In the meantime the Nazi regime took over Germany the beginning of 1933, February, 1933. I decided to leave Germany and I told so my intendant, Tietjens.

Q. You use the word "intendant." What does that mean?

A. Intendant is general manager.

Q. Ah, um-hmm.

A. General manager assigned not by a board of directors

but assigned and given by the state. Tietjens told me, "I don't think that Goering" -- who was at that time the Prussian prime minister -- "will let you go, he likes you," and I said, "In spite of it I will go," and he said, "They are going to sue you."

Q. What did Goering have to do with the opera?

A. Goering, being the prime minister and being interested in theatrical art, took over the Prussian theaters --

Q. I see.

A. -- the dramatic theater as well as the opera and the philharmonic orchestra. Goebbels at that time, who was the minister of propaganda, claimed that this part of the German culture belongs to him. There was a silent rivalry between Goering and Goebbels, and Goering was the stronger man and he said, "You can do everything concerning culture all over the country, but the Prussian theater is mine." They threatened to sue me to pay them for three years remaining in my contract. I didn't have the money and even if I would have had the money I wouldn't have liked to pay them. So Tietjens said, "You have to sing," so I stayed on for a short while. Goering invited my wife and me very often to his parties, to which we never went. I met him once on the stage in the Opera and he asked me why I am avoiding him. I said, "I'm not avoiding you, it simply happened that I am in different countries singing while you have your parties.

I cannot stay in Berlin constantly, I'm only a guest." I sang very often during that time The Magic Flute, and after the famous aria, "In diesen heil'gen Hallen," meaning "In these sacred portals we don't know any vengeance," I always got at that time a standing ovation from the so-called Nazi audience. This went on and on and on. There was another colleague with me who belonged to the same religion and to the same race, Leo Blech, general musical director of the State Opera.

Q. That was B-l-e-c-h.

A. B-l-e-c-h. Translated, the meaning of "blech" means "tin."

Q. Tin?

A. Tin. He was already the general musical director during the time of Kaiser Wilhelm. He was very intelligent, a great musician and a great personality. He became also the favorite not only of the people but also of Goering, and this was the case when Goering said, "I decide who is Jewish here."

Q. /laugh/

A. Goering used to sit all the time in the evening in his box and listen to the operas. I don't know if he really loved music or if he really understood music, but he was there with all his glory, with his uniform with all the medals.

Q. Did he come to every opera?

A. I don't know if he came to every opera, but he came almost to every opera I sang.

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Q. Were those largely the Wagnerian roles in those days?

A. No, there was a number of other operas. There was Rossini operas, like William Tell, I remember he used to come there. He came to Aida, to The Magic Flute, to Don Giovanni, to Marriage of Figaro, was always there. Leo Blech, the opera in Berlin and the music was his life, and with him happened the same thing as with me in The Magic Flute. When he conducted an opera, like The Bartered Bride -- they performed The Bartered Bride by Smetana -- and he played the introduction and after the introduction again the audience stood up and it was an ovation for him. The principal part in that opera was sang by a German-Czechoslovakian girl, her name was Maria Müller, and Hitler liked her singing and liked her as a person, and one day she invited Hitler, saying, "You should hear me in that part in The Bartered Bride," so Hitler came to his box and witnessed this performance. And after the overture to The Bartered Bride, Blech got such an ovation and Hitler was so surprised to see that that Hitler ordered Goering, "Dismiss this man. This is against all my theory about racial abilities and talents and likings and so," and this was the time when Blech was dismissed. Blech was an old man. I remember meeting him on the street and the only word he used to say, "Nicht mehr dirigieren, this is hell for me not to be able to conduct any more." Shortly after that came out the so-called Nuremberg Law.

Q. Well then, this must have been near the end of your

date "see Blech on

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contract.

A. No, no, no.

Q. No?

1934? 1/15

A. It was not. No, no, this was still in 193...the end of 1933.

Q. Oh, I thought the Nuremberg... Well --

A. Anyway, I was always thinking how to find an opportunity to get out of that contract. I was smoking at that time very heavily and I went to my doctor and the doctor said, "Stop smoking, your voice is going to suffer very badly, and...and when you sing those Wagnerian parts and you continue to smoke, this is going to do a great deal of damage to your voice." So one day I decided I'm going to do something very drastic. I started to sing the most difficult parts and...and exercises in the highest range, in the loudest possible way during a period of about five or six hours and I smoked for twenty-four hours without stopping. My vocal chords became inflamed and red, I could not even whisper anymore. So I went to my doctor and he looked into my throat and he said, "What happened to you?" and I said, "I don't know." Then he said, "And you're going to sing...you will never be able to sing again. It will take you a year until you...you are cured," and I said, "Could you give it to me black and white?" So he gave me a letter and he said, "Mr. Kipnis has to be silent for at least six, seven months and not to sing and not to smoke. Otherwise he's...he's losing his voice."

Q. One question, was your doctor a Jew?

A. Yes.

Q. Thank you.

A. I took this letter and I went to my intendant, to Tietjens, and I showed him and he went with that letter to Goering, and then I finally got my permission to leave Berlin and my contract was finished. It didn't take six months, took only about two months. I went to Vienna and I was ~~accepted~~^{engaged} in Vienna for the next five years. But I was already a burned child, my contract...in Vienna I had a paragraph put in, in case the political regime should change, I should have the right to get out of my contract. The management in Vienna cannot hold me responsible anymore. And that's exactly what happened in the beginning of 1938.

Q. Sure, (?)

A. During my activities in Berlin...this was a very bitter time for all of us and especially for the Jewish people who couldn't leave the country. I don't know, Mr. Green, if you know about that. Jewish people couldn't go even to a moving-picture house.

Q. Yes.

A. They couldn't attend a performance in a theater, they could not go to the opera. The only thing they had at that time, the permission to organize a so-called Kulturbund, a culture society, and they had their own orchestra and they organized their own opera house and they organized all their

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own concerts. In almost every town in Germany -- in Berlin, Cologne, Magdeburg, Leipzig, Konigsberg -- in all the cities there was a section of the Kulturbund. I was asked to help, so I was traveling a great deal from one city to another city and singing concerts for the poor people. Very often I saw the audience sitting down there in the audience -- they couldn't even rent a hall, most of the concerts took place in the synagogue -- and I saw the people sitting there and tears running down their cheeks when I sang for them Die Dichterliebe, The Love of a Poet, words by Heine. I have helped many people to come to this country financially, I have helped many people to go to South America, and I did what I could. I have many, many letters from the Jewish community in Berlin and in other cities in which they thanked me for helping them. They also had a so-called old home in Berlin and also in Hamburg and there I could place many people there, they didn't have money to pay. Some of them have been able to get out later on, but most of them... you know what happened to most of them.

Q. Indeed I do. The ones you helped were fortunate that you were one of the stars of the Berlin Opera or you wouldn't have been able to give them this help. You wouldn't have been there, you wouldn't have been able to be in a position to aid them. They were fortunate in your talent.

A. One little fact. One day I received a letter and then a telephone call from the assistant of Mr. Goebbels to

come to his office. When I came in there he said to me, "Mr. Kipnis, you're a member of the State Opera. Everyone knows your name and everybody likes you. But you are also singing a great deal in the Kulturbunds throughout Germany. Don't you realize that this doesn't go together? I ask you to give up your singing in the Kulturbund as long as you are singing with the State Opera." And I said, "I am sorry, I will not give up the singing," I knew very well that Goering would not let them force me to do that.

Q. Yes.

A. And he said, "Think it over," and I said, "There's nothing to think. You know I'm at the Opera because I am under contract. The Kulturbund I am not under contract but I'm trying to help." So this was the end. Being an American citizen, they couldn't do anything to me.

Q. Yes. When the audiences in the Berlin Opera acclaimed Blech at the end of the introduction to The Bartered Bride, where they gave you the special ovation at the end of your "In these portals there is no vengeance" aria, obviously a large part of that acclaim was for the quality of your singing, of his conducting. Do you think there was anything else in it, do you think that they recognized or at least some of them recognized the fact that you were a Jew and that they were in a sense almost apologizing? Am I making up something, am I guessing at something?

A. I considered this as a sort of a demonstration against

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the regime. It was not only my artistic achievements.

Q. Yes.

A. It was a demonstration without words, because we had some other very good conductors and none of them got such an ovation as Blech.

Q. Now, Hitler must have recognized it as a sort of demonstration the night that he said, "Get rid of Blech."

A. That is exactly the fact.

Q. And had you been singing that night and gotten a particular ovation, he laugh might have taken the same --

A. Possibly the same thing.

Q. Yes.

A. I remember a little episode. We had a singer, he was for many years also here in the Metropolitan, his name was Schorff, Friedrich Schorff.

Q. Yes.

A. He was a very well-known baritone and he sang with me in Bayreuth. This was in 1930 or '31. Excuse me.

background conversation and recorder off

Q. You were speaking of Bayreuth in '30 or '31.

A. At that time Hitler attended regularly the Bayreuth Festival. Siegfried Wagner was already dead --

Q. Yes.

A. -- and Siegfried's wife, Winifred, became a very, shall we say, devoted friend of Hitler. One of my colleagues asked Hitler during one evening in Wahnfried... Wahnfried

was the house which...in which Wagner lived and died. Oh no, he died in Italy. Anyway, his wife and Siegfried and all the grandchildren, they grew up there, and there near Wahnfried there is the big grave of Richard Wagner. Anyway, this colleague of mine asked Hitler, "You saw today this performance of Walküre and you heard Mr. Schor~~x~~ singing Wotan, his voice was very fine, a magnificent voice, a good performer and very convincing. How do you combine your theory about the Jews and art after seeing Schor~~x~~ singing Wotan?" And Hitler replied, "I did not see Wotan walking on the stage, I didn't hear Wotan's voice during this performance. I only saw and heard the Jew, Friedrich Schor~~x~~, walking and singing on the stage." Now you can see what kind of fanaticism there was in that beast of a man.

Q. Yes. This would have been a year or two before he became Reichskanzler.

A. Yes.

Q. Yes. Aside from feeling all the pressures of what Hitler was doing to the Jews of Germany and aside, as I say, from feeling personally this, were you at any point subject to direct anti-Semitism, either from the government or from the people?

A. No.

Q. At what age did you leave Russia?

A. I beg your pardon?

Q. At what age... I want to continue this, at what

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age did you leave Russia?

A. I left Russia when I was... As...as I mentioned before, I studied in Warsaw, and Warsaw was part of Russia.

Q. Yeah. In your youth, in Russia or in Poland, did you experience any anti-Semitism?

A. A great deal of it.

Q. In America or in any other country can you remember experiencing it at any time?

A. No.

Q. The reason I ask this, Mr. Kipnis, is that when I was recording the oral history of Leo Godowsky, who as a young man traveled and studied music in the company of his father, Leo said the same thing, that he felt that because he traveled in musical spheres, that the...the great artist, which he didn't pretend to be but which his father certainly was, was to a great extent immune to the more typical forms of anti-Semitism. In fact, he claims that he never really experienced it anywhere, except possibly -- and he'll tell you the story some day -- possibly, although he's not sure of it, up at Kodak on one occasion. Now, what you've just said would seem to bear that out because you did experience it as a young man in Russia, Poland, but that was before you were established as a...as an artist.

A. I...actually I...I very seldom have experienced anti-Semitism after I was established, except when I sang in Bayreuth and, without being conceited, I was at least on the

same level or possibly better than some of my colleagues. But on the following day after the performance of Meister-singer I was attacked by a music critic. Writing in his paper, he said, "How can one expect that an Aryan type like Pogner in Meistersinger shall be convincingly performed and sang by...by a non-Aryan?"

Q. Clearly. Clearly.

A. This is...was the only fact. I don't recall anything. I had many arguments with...with some of my colleagues and, with tears in their eyes, they told me how unjustly Germany was treated by the world, by the Allies after World War One, what they have taken away from Germany and how they have been treated and so, and they tried to justify that the Hitler regime and Hitler theory is...is right and justified, but not in the sense of anti-Semitism but in the sense that they tried to excuse Hitler's appearance.

Q. The old Versailles Treaty --

A. Yes.

Q. Yes. Tell me... If you don't mind a personal question or two. Do you actively practice Judaism? Do you...are you a member of a temple?

A. No.

Q. Were you ever?

A. No.

Q. Your son, who's a fine musician himself, did he marry a Jewish girl?

A. No.

Q. Did that matter to you?

A. Yes, it did. It did matter to me. One can be a warm and convinced Jew without practicing Judaism and belonging to a temple or (?) My father and my grandfather were very convinced Jews, Orthodox Jews. My father died when I was twelve years old, that was (?) '03. I left my home, as a matter of fact, when I was about fourteen years old. I didn't have to be driven to Judaism, I could --

Woman's voice: Did you call me?

A. -- read Hebrew. I still can.

Woman's voice: Did you call me? I'm hearing things already.

A. No. /laugh/

Woman's voice: I mean -- /recorder off/

/End of Side One of tape -- beginning Side Two/

Q. You were saying that it did matter to you that Igor did not marry a Jewish girl. Was that because of the particular girl? Forgive this personal question, but...you...you...you may strike all of this out later if you...if you wish it out, or is this a general sense that a boy raised by Jews, belonging to a Jewish family is better off to marry within his faith?

A. It happened that Igor's wife is a very religious person, she respect^s every religion and she has a great deal of knowledge of most of the religions. She is very well versed in the psalms. If I am talking to her and ask her about a cer-

tain quotation of a psalm, she will immediately tell me which number the psalm is. But she is not Jewish, she is still wandering from one religion to another, from one Christian relig...religion to another, in order to find what she doesn't have. It... There is definitely not a racial question, it's only a religious question. She...she possibly would respect Buddhism exactly like Judaism. But I would have liked Igor to marry a Jewish girl. I...it is not so easy to explain the reason. It is possibly something to have close to us somebody who belongs to the same race.

Q. Then you think of Judaism as a race in addition to a religion.

A. Not entirely. You cannot... It's not a race. Jew... Jewish people in the world at present time are very much mixed up, mixed...I mean not mixed up mentally but mixed up racially.

Q. True.

A. So they are not...you couldn't say this is a typical Jewish man, Jewish blood, Jewish face, Jewish physi...physos... physiognomy. It is...you see blue-eyed, blond Jewish people, you see dark-haired people (?) I have, for instance, a student in...in Julliard where I'm teaching --

Q. Yes.

A. -- a Jewish girl with blue eyes, blond hair, blond hair, she comes from Israel.

Q. Have you been to Israel?

A. No.

Q. How do you feel about Israel?

A. Oh, I feel wonderful about our Israel.

Q. If... I even hate to mention this, but...I mean /laugh/ God forbid, if Israel should be overcome by its enemies, how do you think that would affect the security of Jews in America?

A. I don't think it would affect very much the Jewish people in America, but it would be a very black day for...I think for all the Jewish people --

Q. Right.

A. -- even for...even Jewish people who don't want to be associated with Israel. I am very happy that Israel is there, I'm very happy that Israel has a home --

Q. Yes.

A. -- that the Jewish people have something to...to see, it is like a very close, loving...lovingly a relative, all the Jewish people who live in Israel, although I...I'm not... haven't been there, but I still hope to go there one day.

Q. Yes. Getting back to music, nowadays, as you have just mentioned, you teach in Julliard and you do some individual teaching out here also, I believe. You were active as a singer until quite recently, weren't you?

A. Oh no, I...I was active until about '55.

Q. '55.

A. Of course.

Q. That's fairly recently, fifteen, sixteen years ago.

A. Um-hmm.

Q. Did you know, did you ever sing with Flagstad?

A. I discovered Flagstad.

Q. Oh. /laugh/ I'm glad I asked. Tell me about it.

A. This is a very strange episode. This little country of Norway has an orchestra and has several conductors and several good singers, and one day they decided to have a Norwegian performance of Tristan und Isolde, all the singers were all Norwegian, the conductor Norwegian and the orchestra. And there is a bass part called King Marke --

Q. Yes. /laugh/

A. -- and --

Q. As...as a member of many audiences, it sometimes has seemed to me that King Marke sings for about an hour and a half at the end of Act Two. /laugh/

A. No, you have...you've been very unlucky to hear bad singers.

Q. Ah.

A. Bad singers.

Q. I wish I had heard you. /laugh/

A. Yes. Well, I was a good King Marke.

Q. I'm sure.

A. And King Marke is not only a part to be sung but also a part to be acted. Anyway, they had a Norwegian basso, a big, fat man, and he was a ra...rather thirsty man.

Q. /laugh/