ALEXANDER KIPNIS by IGOR KIPNIS

A two-room hut of clay, located in the Jewish ghetto of the Ukrainian city of Zhitomir, was where my father spent his earliest years.

Alexander Kipnis was born in that city on February 1, 1891 (d.

Westport, Connecticut, May 14, 1978). There were seven who shared the hovel: his mother, his father, who died of tuberculosis when my father was only 12, a younger brother, and three sisters. The most rudimentary schooling formed the beginnings of his education, but the young lad had a single advantage: he had a voice. As one of four boy sopranos, he sang in one of the synagogues in the middle of the ghetto, eking out a tiny salary as well as working as a carpenter's apprentice. After auditioning for a visiting cantor from the town of Novybug in Bessarabia, he was picked to sing in the cantor's synagogue where he stayed until, at the age of 15, his voice changed.

Returning to Zhitomir, he resumed carpentry, but on the side participated in a local Yiddish theatrical troupe, where he helped build scenery, distributed posters, took tickets, acted, and sang. Moving to Siedlce, Poland, my father was employed as a chorister in yet

another synagogue, where he also sang solo before deciding to enter the Warsaw Conservatory, the only recourse both to conscription in the Russian army, which he feared, and a curriculum that did not require a high school diploma. Here, he studied two instruments - string bass, and trombone - in his intended goal towards, being a bandmaster. Synagogue work continued to provide a small income, and upon the advice of his choirmaster, at the conclusion of his two years m Warsaw, he took a train in 1921 to Berlin to take up vocal studies.

He began to work with Ernst Grenzebach (who also taught Max Lorenz and Lauritz Melchior), at the same time singing as a member of the second basses choir in Monti's Operetta Theater. But with the commencement of hostilities that marked the start of World War I

two years later, my father, with his Russian passport, was classified as an enemy alien and was prevented from singing in synagogues or theaters. Vocalizing to himself at one point in an incarceration camp, he was overheard by an army captain who immediately

recommended him to his brother, the general manager of the Wiesbaden Opera. It was suggested, however, that he first gain experience at the opera house in Hamburg, which became the start of his operatic career. His first appearance as a fledgling bass-baritone was as one of the guests in the Fledermaus Act II party scene, where, on September 3, 1915, he regaled the assembled listeners with three Richard Strauss songs. Three days later occurred his real debut, the Hermit in Der Freischutz. He cut his musical teeth with an amazing succession of, at first, minor roles during the next three years, such

as Zuniga in Carmen, a Cappaducian in Salome, Lodovico in Otello, Schwarz in Die Meistersinger, Baron Dufal in La Traviata, Ferrando in Il Trovatore, and the Third Monk in Les Huguenots.

It was during his Hamburg stay that he began recording, first for Odeon, then for Deutsche Gramophone in 1921/22 (“0 tu Palermo”), and, a year later, four sides for Homocord, including the Barber of Bagdad aria, and the third version, in Italian, of his four commercial recordings of “Ella giammai m'amo” from Don Carlos (the first unpublished one for Odeon dates from around 1916, the second from 1922, and the final electrical one from 1930).

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His Wiesbaden years - 1917-1922 – beginning with such lesser

roles as The Bonze in Madame Butterfly, Colline in La Boheme, and Schlemil in Tales of Hoffman, gradually progressed to his first appearances as Mephisto in Faust, Gurnemanz in Parsifal, Abul Hassan in Barber of Bagdad, Tristan's King Mark, and Rocco in Fidelio,

the latter with Furtwangler conducting. In 1919, he became a member of the Deutsche Opern Haus in Berlin - the Charlottenburg Opera - which became the Staedtische Oper in 1925 under Bruno Walter's musical direction.

I have been able to tally a total of 108 different roles, some in more than one language (i.e., Faust both in French and German), a few in the same operas (for example, Don Fernando and Rocco in Fidelio, Titurel and Gurnemanz in Parsifal, Ramfis and the King in Aida, Wotan and Hunding in Die Walkure, and the Commendatore and Leporello in Don Giovanni). But opera was not the only area of his accomplishments. His first Verdi Requiem was in Berlin in 1922 with Selmar Meyrowitz, the same year he sang the Mussorgsky Songs and Dances of Death and a Mozart concert aria under Furtwangler (who also accompanied him on the piano in Leipzig, in Haydn and Schubert songs in 1923). There were now also lieder recitals.

The first Kipnis United States appearance also took place in 1923 with the Wagner Opera Festival tour, at which point he was immediately signed for the Chicago Civic Opera. He made his Chicago debut as the Wanderer in Siegfried in November that year. The extraordinary list of roles continued there for nine years until the depression knocked that opera house of commission. Among new

ones: Don Pedro in L'Africana, Dumas in Andrea Chenier, Marquis in La Forza del Destino, the Coal Picker in Louise, Woodcutter in Koenigskinder, Cardinal Brogny in La Juive, Peleman in Thais, Prior in JongJeur de Notre Dame, Second Soldier in Salome, Zacharias in Le Prophete, Alviso in La Gioconda, Albert in Werther, Varlaam in Boris, Sparafucile in Rigoletto, Arkel in Pelleas, the title role in Boito's Mefistofele, and even Escamillo in Carmen. I mention this partial assemblage to indicate the extent of roles in contrast to the more

circumscribed Metropolitan Opera ones by which Metropolitan Opera audiences knew him.

In Bayreuth in the summer of 1927, he appeared as King Mark with Karl Elmendorff and sang Gurnemanz under Karl Muck, recording

the Good Friday Spell with Siegfried Wagner. There, he also sang the

Landgraf and King Mark under Toscanini in 1930, as well as Gurnemanz and Titurel under Richard Strauss in 1933. Starting in 1926 with Les Huguenots, he appeared for five seasons at Covent Garden. He was much praised for his Sarastro at Glyndebourne in 1936.

Buenes Aires, too, was an important facet of his career. In 1926, with Reiner, he had major Wagnerian parts at the Teatro Colon; in 1928, under Egon Pollack, he sang Baron Ochs and the title role in Nozze di Figaro. With Klemperer in 1931, he performed in Nozze, Meistersinger, Tristan, and the complete Ring (Hunding in Die Walkure - he sang Wotan only in Chicago between 1926-1938), as well as in Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex, Beethoven's Ninth, and a lieder recital with Klemperer at the piano. Between 1934-36, now with Fritz Busch conducting, there was a Teatro Colon Saint Matthew Passion, B minor Mass, Bartered Bride, Arabella, and Flying Dutchman added to the usual Wagners. As a young lad in 1941, I heard my father under Toscanini in my first Beetnoven 9th and Verdi Requiem there (he had also appeared with Toscanini in Vienna, Salzburg, and was to sing with him in New York as well in the early forties. Under Erich Kleiber at the Teatro Colon, there were also a Nozze, Lohengrin and Meistersinger.

The beginnings of the Nazi era caused my father, who was very much the favored bass in Berlin, to escape his Berlin State Opera contract, which had been drawn up in 1934 under Furtwangler's directive. He had been singing regularly at that house since 1930, but by the end of 1935, he moved to the Vienna State Opera, appearing first in one of his signature roles, Gurnemanz. In the following three years, he sang those leading Wagner, Mozart, Gounod, Beethoven and Strauss bass roles with which he had previously. been identified, plus the more rarefied Prince Gremin in Eugen Onegin, Walter Fuerst in William Tell, Colline in La Boheme, particular standouts being Kezal in the Bartered Bride, and Philip in Don Carlos.

A trip to Australia had been scheduled at the beginning of 1938, at which point my father was to return to Vienna , but when the Anschluss came, he instead took us all to the United States. He still had to fulfill engagements in Europe, and, in spite of the potential danger of appearing in Germany, he managed to perform recitals under the auspices of the Judische Kulturbund (the Nazi minister m charge of Jewish cultural affairs having given permission) as late as October, 1938. With Kristalnacht, all that activity ceased.

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My parents managed to board the S.S. Washington, and on November5, 1938, they arrived in New York City, eventually settling in , Connecticut. Though he had sung extensively in the United States, he did not appear at the Metropolitan Opera until 1940, when he had an enormous success as Gurnemanz. He had been scheduled to sing Boris a season before that, but that role had to wait until 1943. Gurnemanz was also his last appearance at the Met in New York City on April 19, 1946; two Tannhauser Landgrafs under Busch in Cleveland and Chicago concluded his Met career. A planned film of Don Giovanni under Furtwangler with my father as Leporello was discussed in 1946, but, sadly, was never consummated.

He continued to perform in the United States, however, in the early l 950's, mainly in recital, sometimes singing with assisting artists, but also created opera workshops with young singers in which audiences had the opportunity to see him as director/coach in truncated, piano-accompanies versions of Faust, Nozze and Boris. Teaching, first in 1966 at the New York College of Music, and then in 1968-72 at The Juilliard School occupied him, and following the course of music and contemporary singers interested him keenly.

My father was proud of his accomplishments, his international career, his having started that of Kirsten Flagstad in 1932, his appearances at virtually every major opera house in the world, and, on a personal note, I believe he was proud of what his son had achieved on an instrument so very different from his own.

He had decided views on performances and performing. He felt it important to know the correct traditions, but he detested Schlamperei - sloppiness. He felt it important always to be musically prepared: I asked him once how much time before any performance he considered necessary to be in a "ready" state; his reply: at least three weeks. He was a splendid host at his parties in Westport, Connecticut, reveling in telling stories about singers as well as conductors with whom he had worked and whom he admired (Toscanini, Furtwangler, Klemperer, Erich Kleiber, Busch, Blech) and those for whom he didn't so much (Walter, Beecham, Koussevitsky) for either personal or musical reasons. For his guests, upon request, he would often play some of his own favorite recordings - Wolf, Schubert and Brahms lieder, for example.

Communication from the stage, whether in opera or song, was of vital importance to him. I can attest to that, having seen most of his major roles as a young boy at the Met: his Hunding and Hagen were

fearsome, his Gurnemanz spiritual, benevolent but also, as when he kicks Parsifal out of Monsalvat, impatient. He never sang his

Mephisto in Faust on the Met stage, for that role as well as a number of others, had been commandeered by singers previously ensconced in that house. Still, there are recordings - even off-the-air transcriptions that provide the full flavor of his broad but elegant characterization of the Devil.

An example of that kind of multi-faceted interpretation can be heard in the second of his commercial recordings of Der Erlkonig, more vividly dramatic than the equally marvelous earlier version with Gerald Moore. His singing is a chilling reminder of how he sounded when I heard him so terrifyingly perform that song in the concert hall. Communication was also effected on the recital stage by his relating to his audiences in his inimitable accented English what some of the texts were all about, especially when it came time for encores. He took credit for having been one of the earliest serious artists to espouse speaking to the public, and, I must add, that I owe him a considerable debt of gratitude for having advised me to do the same at my own recitals.

What were his lieder recitals like? They could be esoteric on occasion, such as the 1946 Metropolitan Museum of Art concert with two songs by Beethoven, four by Schubert, Revelge of Mahler and, after the intermission, the Four Serious Songs of Brahms and four Wolf lieder. Much more likely, however, was the mixed program that might begin, for example, with varied Handel arias, continue with four Schubert songs, six Schumann, five Russian folksongs (always a favorite) and conclude with the Mussorgsky Boris monologue and Song of the Flea (the latter was a 1942 recital at New York's YMHA). In the earlier Nazi years, before he left Germany for good in 1938, he would add Jewish folksongs to the above list, perhaps also adding Mendelssohn to his Schumann.

My Alexander Kipnis discography includes 156 78rpm commercial sides from actual recording sessions, issued, unissued, or rejected. There are also the many live performances that have subsequently been released. These include radio broadcasts, Met Saturday afternoons, Vienna Opera fragments, and even Teatro Colon

completes. All served admirably to illustrate his variegated vocal presence, but overall, I believe - and I think my father would agree with me - it is the commercial releases, most especially the many lieder recordings and the 1930-31 opera arias from his shining Berlin days that so well illustrate the heights of my father's artistry.