

Paul Alexander (born 1917 in Berlin, died 2003 in London)



Paul Alexander was interviewed by Dr Bea Lewkowicz on the 22nd of May 2000.

Today is the 22nd of May 2000 and we are conducting an interview with Mr Paul Alexander. Perhaps we can start this interview by you telling me a bit about your family background?

My father was a doctor in Germany and my sister Bella married somebody from England, I believe 1930 or something like that, and through that, we had a connection to England, and we were lucky that the whole family got out and came to England. My father was in London visiting his daughter Bella when he wanted to come back to Berlin, he was only here on holiday, he was by friends asked to register at the University to be confirmed as a doctor. That study took two years, so he never went back to Berlin.

Which year was that?

It must have been 35 or 36, something like that. I went to Basel, officially to look after my grandparents, who unfortunately had died by the time the permit from the Swiss came, but I went there and then went into an apprenticeship in Basel for carpentry, but I had to promise to leave Switzerland before my 21st birthday because at that time the children could go where the father was, before their 21st birthday. So I was the last one who arrived in London at the time, and

I then was a volunteer, or something or other, at a very posh interior decoration firm in Mayfair, Laszlo-Honig. I gave that up when the war started and we joined the army, my brother, my twin brother and myself. Everything happened at the same time sort of thing, so we joined the army together, and went to France the first time with the BEF, the British Expeditionary Force, and came back one week after, we came back from St Malo, one week after Dunkirk. And then were in England for about three years before we went again with the ... what were they called... with the army first in France, Belgium Holland, Germany until we were demobbed, and came back to England. And my last job in the Army was, we had a German prisoner of war camp, in Schleswig-Hollstein, single-handed with five hundred Germans. My brother at that time was in Belsen, with the war crimes commission. And he caught quite a few of the big noses. One of them was... one of them was Hesse, no Hoess, not Hess. He was the inventor of the gas-chambers. And we got demobbed together, back in England and I wore my uniform the last time at my brother's wedding, at which I met my first wife, Leila. When she met Hans there, she said: 'Pity he hasn't got a brother!' And Marion said 'He has a brother!' Anyway, at the wedding, everything was still rationed, petrol and food and so on so there were lots of parties, not one big one but lots of small ones. And when my sister Bella asked, 'who do you want as your partner', for the party, so I said, the nurse von Wembley, that was Leila, she was at that time... as a war-job she was in a war-time nursery, afterwards she was a dental nurse.

I was with Eric my brother-in-law in the leather business until one day when he sent me the samples, very beautiful samples of plastic, imitation of leather, very beautiful, very nice, but German, which I did not like very much. But one of my first customers I visited was an English-Jewish firm in the East End, and when I showed him these samples, he asked 'where do they come from?', so I said from Germany, so he put them aside and said: 'How can you, as a German Jew, sell this German product?' Which was exactly the person I was looking for, because I didn't like it either. So that's when I left fine leathers and then eventually an army pal of mine, Mr K, from 20 Abbey Road Restaurant, wanted a manager for his other restaurant, which he had just bought via his English brother in law, who was a Welsh miner, and he needed somebody to run that restaurant, which was Oslo Court, which was at that time, in a building, it's still in the same place in St John's Wood, and I did that for about three months or so, until Christmas 1951, when my wife was in hospital with... producing Johnny. So I joined her, gave up the job, and because I am not made as a restaurant manager. Then I went back again in building, in a small way, at that time conversions were going, but you needed everything under license, coupons, for curtains you needed dress coupons and so on, so it was pretty difficult, but I was alone in a small way. And when it came to the question of either to give up, or get bigger or something, we decided to move to Canada.

We moved to Toronto, where a very good friend of my sister Elsie, of the family was Peter Caspari, and we first lived for a couple of weeks in his basement in Toronto, and then he got us a flat which he had to guarantee, because we had no money, we came with ten shillings, or whatever it was at the time, and so I started in the building racket in Toronto. Caspari got me a job on one of his buildings as a carpenter, and one day when he came home he saw me there. ‘So what are you doing home, in the middle of the day?’ I said they sent me home because they didn’t have any material. So Caspari fired the foreman of that job because he didn’t order the materials in time, and I took over and I was then a construction superintendent and finished that job and then went to other companies and so on. So I was construction superintendent and built high-rise buildings, or hundred houses at a time and so on. And we bought a very nice brand-new house in Don Mills, in a new area, and my mother came over every year when the weather was lousy here in England she came to us for about three months, where the weather in a way was worse, but we were prepared for it. The houses were properly insulated, and car was properly heated and so on, so we had a very good time. I was somehow instrumental in forming a new congregation. Because when, the first year we left between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and which was rather an emotional time, and when I said goodbye to our chairman of Belsize Square, which was Lady Montague, she said ‘You must go to our brother congregation in Toronto’, which was a holy temple, which was a huge building, we didn’t like it at all, so we formed our own congregation there along the lines of Belsize Square. And I was involved there as *Schammes*. Anyway, Johnny had his Bar Mitzvah in Toronto. And the whole family came over. Bella, Elsie, Hans, so we had a very good reunion. When my mother couldn’t come anymore, when she was too old, ... she died in 82. She must have been 80 or so.... So we decided as we don’t make a million either over there, I just earned a good living, I could probably do that in England as well, so we came back because we didn’t want to deprive our children of the close family we were, so I came back into the fold to London, and er, And then I did again er building and decorating in a small way, and there I met... one of my jobs were the decorating of a house which Tamara had round the corner from where I lived, in Nether Street, her house was five houses down the road in Eversley? street, and I always said ‘She got stuck to the paint’, so we got married. Now you wanted to know about Belsize Square...

Before we get to Belsize Square, could tell me about life in Berlin? Did you go to Synagogue; what sort of congregation did you belong to?

Yes, in Berlin we had the Bar Mitzvah in the Oranienburgerstrasse by Dr Warschauer, who also came later on to England. But that was for the high holidays we went there. But we used to go on Friday nights to these various

congregations to what I called the ‘political rabbis’, like the Friedenstempel, and ... I can’t remember the names of the others.... And we were, I mean we were not orthodox, we were liberal, and we went Friday nights to synagogue, but that’s about all. When my father came over to England, they formed the New Liberal congregation because our forefather translated the German ‘*Liberal*’ with the English ‘Liberal’, which was far out. Lily Montague was our chairman, thinking that she’ll take over that outfit with our congregation, but as it turned out, ours became bigger and theirs became smaller, so eventually we left the Union of Progressive Judaism and went on our own. I remember every night the telephone went when some member of the board rang my father and said ‘What about this?’ Mr Losch, who was in charge of the canteen, and everything else. He rang nearly every night, and Hans Levi, who was then the chairman, I think was a far relation of ours, was also, I mean... Belsize Square was on the phone nearly every day.

What are your first memories of the ‘New Liberal Congregation’?

We at that time I think we were in rented accommodation in Buckland Crescent. And my brother and I were active in the bazaar. I think the rooms then were two intercommunicating rooms, in one was Dr Freyhan giving a lecture on Goethe or something, and Hans and I were in the room next door building something for the bazaar and knocking something, and I remember Dr Freyhan saying about this knocking: ‘*Was klopfen die da?*’ And he said: “*Die klopfen nicht. Es pocht.*” Or some high-faluting word for it, in German. And I remember we were involved with the bazaar with the bottle tombola. And some kind person had given three boxes of shaving soap which got damp in their basement. And with that we managed that every ticket was a winner. And it was only this lousy shaving soap. And we asked the members of the congregation to donate wine and so on, and I think it was Mr Eden, was very generous and donated a dozen bottles of whisky and some wine, and I went shopping for additional bottles.

Which year was this?

This was after we came out of the army, it must have been 45 or 46. And I only bought wine by a price, the cheapest possible plonk, but different labels, because I didn’t want all the same Algerian wine or something, and so when we offered our tickets when they came in, everybody said “I never win anyway”. But I said ‘Everyone a winner’, come on, have a look.’ Of course we also fiddled with the bottles, they got the wine and the whisky stayed a little bit longer, and so we were regular on bottle tombola, every year.

Why was the bazaar so important in the social life of the synagogue.

It was not only to make money for the synagogue, but it was like a social event. The Rabbi now when he announces that that and that date for the bazaar that it's the biggest Jewish function, which was true, there was a very nice atmosphere amongst mainly old people who were at the stalls and at that time lots of our members were still manufacturing, so you could get toys, which now doesn't exist anymore, today the bazaar is completely changed, it is mainly professionals, er, my wife for instance, when she had to take over the business of her father, who had agencies for lead crystal and ceramic from Germany, when she gave up her business, all the samples and so on she donated to the bazaar, so that was the background of a very nice stall with beautiful stuff. And but once that was sold that was the end of that. The bazaar was very much a family affair.

What was the general atmosphere like at Belsize Square?

At that time, we had the synagogue at Belsize Square, which was er, a Church building, a building from the Church next door, it had a social hall, for functions, so it had a very nice atmosphere.

Why did you go? What did it mean to you at that time to participate?

For the family business. Everybody was in. Everybody except my oldest sister Bella, who, as she came early, she was in the synagogue of her, at that time husband's family, which was Petersburg Place, and when the Jacob's affair started and they started on their own and they moved to Abbey Road, and er she went there, so she was the only one, we always said 'She married out, because she was with Rabbi Jacobs. But eventually she also joined Belsize Square Julián Jacoby, Bella's other son, he came, and I think he was the last one of that gang who joined Belsize Square.

What was the most important aspect to you of Belsize Square, of the synagogue?

Not being terribly religious, but we went very Friday night and every Saturday morning, so we felt at home in Belsize Square, and we always supported

whatever was going on. Even some lecture which we weren't really interested in, we thought we better go because otherwise nobody else goes. And er,

Can you tell me a little bit about the Rabbi, at the beginning?

At the beginning in 39, Lily Montague helped some of the German Rabbis to come out from Germany. Among them Dr Salzberger from Frankfurt, and *Oberkantor* Davidson from Berlin, and Rabbi Italiener, anyway. And when Belsize Square then was formed, Salzberger became our first Rabbi, and *Oberkantor* Davidson our Kantor.

Did you know Oberkantor Davidson from Berlin?

From the Fasanenstrasse.

Did you know him?

I always said he was the beginning of my antisemitism. Because we went from *Simchah Torah* to Fasanenstrasse complete with our flag, God knows why that was, and that was 'Schwarz Wei Gold', or 'Schwarz Rot Gold', I don't remember, it was a very national sort of thing. At that time one didn't have the blue and white. And anyway there was a big procession, it was a very large synagogue, and towards the end of it they chucked all the kids out into the yard because the *Oberkantor* wanted to finish his singing without any disturbance. So we were standing in front of the locked door, crying our eyes out, and that's where we got introduced to *Oberkantor Davidson*.

Yes, the Rabbis. Salzberger and Davidson were appointed.

Yes, and Salzberger's sermons were in German. We spoke German alright, but this wasn't good enough for the future of the congregation. And he spoke very, very beautiful German, except he couldn't speak that well in English. So he resigned and he went Christians and Jews. And my wife Tamara, who was working at the time in Berlin, had her high holiday service with Rabbi Salzberger in Berlin.

When you left to Canada, Salzberger was still the Rabbi

Yes. And then Rabbi Kokotek took over.

So when you came back in 67 Rabbi Kokotek was the rabbi?

Yes.

So how different was it? What difference did it make?

Quite different. Kokotek was a very nice man, and at the time when my wife died he was very supportive. So I should be supportive to him, we are very friendly with his daughters, and their families and so on.

So what was the community like when you came back in 67?

Yes, it was mainly the old people. But today it has changed completely, now Norbert Cohn complains that on a Saturday morning, people are called up whom he has never seen before, he doesn't know them, who are they? Already the next generation. I mean the same as, my father was a board member, then I was a board member, and Hans, and then Johnny took over, and then the kids took over, and it's already the fourth generation. And it has changed a lot, so I always say it's the old fogeys. But I'm an old fogey myself, but I maintain it doesn't matter anymore. The congregation was built for the next generation, and it's certainly has made its mark, and it's there to stay. By that time the children had grown up, had their Bar Mitzvah, or got married, so it built up, I mean I remember when *Oberkantor* Davidson reported about the Sunday school. We had 21 kids at the Sunday school, or we had 25 kids at the Sunday school. Today there's about 175. If you get there on a Sunday morning, at five to one, or one o'clock when all the cars come to collect their little angels, they make that road a one way street, because we have to go there and pick up these kids who are waiting in the yard and it's quite a procedure there on a Sunday morning for ten minutes. And now of course you have arguments over whether women should be more active.

What do you think about the women's issue?

People say: 'look there is a new member, they want this that and the other' and when it comes to the question women or no, then they say if they would have liked it then they wouldn't have come to us they would have gone to the reform or something. In a way I'm very broad minded. I wouldn't like a woman rabbi, but now the kids when it comes to the anniversary Bat Mitzvah, they read...it doesn't bother me at all. Why should it? I maintain we shouldn't count. It is now the next generation which should say what there is to say.

How do you see the future of Belsize Square? How would you like it to develop?

Our rabbi is more orthodox than we are, so he had to compromise, so did we in a way. We are now probably more conventional. I'm a regular on Friday night, a regular on Saturday morning, if for some reason I'm not there somebody rings up and says: 'where were you?' Did you read the story about the Alexander Torah?

You told me a bit about it, but please tell me again.

When my parents emigrated from Germany, they left overnight sort of thing without anything, and they had a very loyal staff. They sent everything from Germany, including kitchen towels and you name it. And amongst all other stuff, books and so on, there came out the Torah, which was written I think by a grandfather or great-grandfather in Germany, in Bavaria, at the time, and there was a stipulation that that Torah should be where the oldest son worships. And so it couldn't be donated to a synagogue, it could only be on loan. So when my father moved to Berlin, the congregations like Oranienburgerstrasse or Fasanenstrasse, they were so wealthy as far as Torahs were concerned, they wouldn't accept it. They said you either donate it, or we don't want it. Through that the Torah was kept at home, at my father's library in the bookcase. Through that it wasn't destroyed when all the synagogues went up in flames at Kristallnacht, this Torah wasn't in the synagogue.

And it was the first Torah we used at the New Liberal at the time. When we were in this rented accommodation in Buckland Crescent, Ernst Levi rang one day and said to my father: "The Torah has been pinched. Has disappeared." So my father looked round, and went to that flat there of that lady, I don't remember her name now, and found it in her wardrobe in the back, was the Torah. So it has re-joined again Belsize Square. And the Torah is now used I think only three times a year, when we use three Torahs, that's on Yom Kippur in the afternoon service, then that Torah is read, then two others and any family occasion, say if one of the young children got Bar Mitzvah or something then the Torah appears, but it's in the Ark and so on. And it's a very beautiful Torah. It's very large. And it's been repaired a few times so that it's kosher, because the normal life of a Torah is about 200 years. And this is much older.

So how did your parents bring it?

It came out with the possessions from Germany at the time.

Was it used for the first service?

Yes, it was the only one we had for a while. Today we got eight or nine.

Is it on loan at Belsize Square?

It's on loan because it's got to with the whoever has the oldest son, which at the moment is my brother, as there are no sons with our children, we all have ladies, so it will go to the eldest granddaughter or ... But it is actually on loan. I think Johnny has written in that book the story of it.

So all the family was very involved in Belsize Square?

At the beginning it was sort of an unwritten law that only one member of our family should be on the board and so on. But later nobody wanted the job so more appeared, I mean my brother-in-law Eric Harding was on the board, and Hans and I we sort of resigned from the board because we decided the younger one should take over. The old fogies should get off. But the other old fogies didn't take the hint, so we are off, but the old fogies are still there.

What's the biggest change in Belsize Square since its beginning? What do you think?

Once we've got our old building, 51 Belsize Square, with classrooms for Sunday School and very active Sunday School, and now already the children come up from the people who had their own Bar Mitzvah there. It is a very lively congregation.

Do you think it has changed from a more cultural community to a more religious community? Did religion become more important?

No, I think it's still very much a social set-up. I think. But I probably get into trouble for saying it. But the Rabbi is very active with lectures and so on, while the kids go to Sunday School, he gives lectures there for the parents and so on I don't know how many

Was the social aspect more important for you than the religious?

Yes. I mean Mrs Salzberger, the wife of Rabbi Salzberger said: ‘What would we do without the Alexander boys?’ Because whatever needed doing, we did.

Were there different factions in the community at the beginning? Different groups?

I don’t really know; I don’t think so. I mean now they’ve got these questions about should women be more active, and new members who came completely from outside for some reason or other. And they started this Totteridge branch service thinking with that they could get new members from that area. I should go to the branch service because it’s very much nearer. But I Belsize Square so I go to Belsize Square, except for once a year for when we have the picnic in Totteridge Square, and then we go there. But I don’t think we got many, maybe a handful of new members from there. The others are all Belsize Square members who go there because it’s more convenient.

What role has Belsize Square in the refugee experience? Your refugee experience I mean. Or your family’s experience. Did it help you to become more English?

I don’t think so. But then we were away for five or six years during the war in the British Army.

Can you tell me a little bit about your Canadian experience, the formation of Habonim?

I think the first president was George Pitz, who was also a member of Belsize Square before he emigrated to Canada. And the secretary was Gangolf Hermann who came from the youth club from Belsize Square and so the background was refugees there as well. And then the Hungarians came as well, so it was more or less a middle European congregation.

So how similar or how different was it from Belsize Square?

I think very similar. I at the time wrote to Rabbi Kokotek for prayer books from here, so we had the same prayer books there and here, and our *Chazzan* was originally Czechoslovakian a very nice guy. So it was very similar.

And the Rabbi?

We didn't have a rabbi, there was a very nice rabbi. Toronto had two large congregations, one down on Avenue Road, near the lake, near Kensington, and they sold it to the Bell telephone company, they needed a new place, and another one was halfway up somewhere, and they combined the two, each one had their own rabbi. So they were trying out which one and so on. Rabbi Slonim at the time didn't like the idea, so he went off and became correspondent of a big newspaper, the Globe, for the Middle East and Israel, as long as he got two trips out of it a year, so he could see his kids, and he did sort of freelance work. And he became our rabbi except for the High Holidays when he went to America when he was paid for the couple of days much more than he would have been paid by us. thought he was a very good rabbi because he made us think and talk for the rest of the week about it. My son had his Bar Mitzvah with him. And but I think he is now retired now.

So do they have a rabbi now the Habonim congregation?

I'm not sure.

What I'm interested in finding out is how different the Canadian congregation was to Belsize?

I think it is very similar. Also now, this was a long time ago. In the meantime, they become also more Canadian, and less refugee

That's what I'm interested in. Was the Jewish community different in Canada?

We were a little bit out in a way. We refugees are a little bit peculiar to put it mildly...

In which ways?

We don't fit in with the others. I mean the Canadian Jews, I mean it's the same thing with the English Jews here, it's somehow different. I mean here in this

building are 8 flats. All of them but one is Jewish. But the English Jews and the German Jews are somehow separate, for no reason at all.

And do you think it was similar in Canada? I mean how did it feel for you the experience?

When we moved to Canada, I think we met all our friends right at the very beginning, and then through the congregation. I mean we dropped a lot of the friends along the way, but the rest was still the friends from there.

So is that true also here? Socially, most of your friends from Belsize Square, were they involved in one way or the other?

Yes, I think so. I mean my son who is very British in his ways, would probably kill me if I say it, but if you look at his friends, they are also Belsize Square. So it has enormous social significance. Yea, we are a funny lot.

Do you think by now Belsize Square is an English Synagogue, or a British Synagogue? Or ...

I think so. Through Rabbi Marriner, who is quite a big shot as far as the community is concerned being a... I think they formed a Beth Din and so on, and he is the head of it. He's very much on the map.

So that's quite a success story?

I think so. Yes. And our parents who formed the congregation... after all they were already old then, and now we are old, second generation, now the kids are already in there...

So for the people who were involved in Belsize Square, it did play a major part in their life?

I think so.

Ok. Is there anything else which is relevant or important which I haven't asked you, about the history of Belsize Square, about the importance of Belsize Square for your life.

I think that our congregation is very much also welfare orientated. They look after the old and the sick. Norbert Cohn was the chairman of the Welfare Committee, which he somehow or other he wasn't very efficient in that or was too busy in his business. It somehow died down I was also a member. So eventually it became Friends of Belsize Square, under Rabbi Mariner as chairman, and we had meetings and everybody discussed the people we were looking after, something needed doing, somebody needed to come out of hospital or something, Irene White was one of the big-shots there, I mean she ... at the meeting she got out her diary and read everyone she looked after... which other people also looked after, I mean we had it all down there, I mean the funny thing is that she's very, very active... She's also 80 now, or 82, I don't know. She is fantastic in what she does.

Who set up the luncheon club where I met you?

Yes. There used to be a group which I think ... Nathan did. But it died down. She picked up what was left. Which was much bigger than it is now.

Do you go regularly?

I go and I bring Mr Vernon, or George and so on. I mean I've got nothing better to do, so I go. I mean I was working for eight and a half years as a volunteer at our Day Center. And I always say I ought to go and see a friend and so on. I never make it for some reason or other. I visit people in the homes.

So, you are saying there is a very strong feeling of welfare and community within Belsize Square.

Yes, I think so.

Do people feel responsible to take care of older people?

Yes. The rabbi is trying very hard to get younger people in there, or through Mrs Walters.

Was that ever an issue, the question of mixed marriage. Was that a big issue for the community?

Yes, I am sure. We lost quite a few of the people who married out. Or got new ones who were converted with Belsize Square, which the orthodox wouldn't do.

Was there a feeling among the second generation among that generation, to marry among the refugee community? Was there a strong... Was there pressure by the parents or did that just happen?

There is always pressure from the parents when the kids start marrying out.

It seems quite a few people have married other refugees?

Yes. They meet through youth clubs and the congregation and so on, and I mean with the English Jews who are very much closer in themselves, as soon as their kids get loose in university that's when they marry out. When they meet other people.

What was the relationship like between the other synagogues of the Union of Progressive and Liberal Synagogues and Belsize Square? Was there a feeling that Belsize Square is sort of different?

Yes, in a way because with us the men and women sit together, in the others they sit separate. One of the synagogues in North London is Rabbi Wittenberg, who is the grandson of Salzberger, so in a way that is... we've got I mean Marion Leonard's daughter for instance, she belongs there because her husband belonged there You go where you feel happiest, or what you are used to.

And for you ...

And quite a few of our refugees belong to other congregations because they had their burial arrangements there, and they don't go to that synagogue at all. They are just members for those reasons and

What about the memorial services? What did Belsize Square do for the memory of the Holocaust, the German Jews. Is that important?

Yes, for instance, on the second day of the various *Yom Tovim* they've got a memorial service. Lots of what I call the 'Old fogies', who normally wouldn't.

Because I saw the monument at the cemetery.

Yes, they have a service there at the cemetery during the high holidays.

Do you think the synagogue should do more, or less, because there is a... so there is a new plaque in the synagogue, and there was a debate about the form of the monument or whether there should be something else.

For instance, our social worker, Mrs Walters, her father was on that plaque, and she didn't even know. There is AJAX, our people didn't join AJAX, we had our own set up, which also died in the meantime. Like AJAX, ex-army set-up, it was called 1943 or something or other, but of course the people who were in there are also too old, so it died a natural death. We wanted to amalgamate with AJAX because we couldn't find anyone who was willing to become chairman or secretary or something.

So who was this?

Ex-servicemen or pioneer corps. Dr Falk was one of them.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

No.

Thank you for the interview.