

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF COMMANDER M.M.BRIGHT D.S.C. R.N.

1890 to 1965

Early history of Jews in the Royal Navy,

In the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich there is a painting by Hogarth of Captain Sir Alexander Schomberg dated 1760. He in fact was the son of a German Jewish doctor, living in England. He was a Jew by birth and due to the Test Act of 1673, was obliged to publicly receive sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England. So we find him giving up his Jewish faith just to become an officer in the Royal Navy. This was when he was twenty three, rather late at the time, and because of the Test Act all his family abandoned Judaism.

Jewish immigrant traders came to the various Naval towns- Portsmouth, Chatham, Plymouth and Sheerness and started to trade with the Navy selling everything from old clothes to trinkets and cheap jewellery to the seamen. It is quite probable that some of these traders were taken by the Press Gangs and forced unwillingly into the Royal Navy. Needless to say, the number of Jewish traders and their families in the naval towns were the beginning of the Jewish communities and the building of Synagogues. Plymouth Synagogue has the privilege of being the oldest Ashkanazic Synagogue in the English speaking world, built in 1763. Miraculously it was saved from destruction when the centre of Plymouth was destroyed during an air raid in 1941.

There is an interesting story about a warden of the Penzance Hebrew Congregation called Lemon Hart. He was a spirit merchant in partnership with his brother Jacob. The firm became purveyors of rum to the Royal Navy when they moved to London in 1811. In 1849 Hart supplied 100,000 gallons of rum for the matelots' daily "tot". Lemon Hart Rum is still on sale today although the original firm no longer exists.

There is a record of a Moses Benjamin on board the Victory at Trafalgar, but he was discharged on the orders of Lord Nelson as "he was a Jew". It seems that the navy did not mind who served on the lower deck, but to be an officer they had to relinquish their Jewish faith. Not so in the case of my father as you will hear later. Moses Benjamin was a "Landsman" and was probably also pressed into the navy. The "Jewish Chronicle" believe it or not has a link with the Royal Navy, as the paper's founder Isaac Vallentine was pressed into the service in about 1812, eventually obtaining his release with the aid of the Canterbury Jewish community. The Jewish Chronicle incidentally, was founded in 1841.

I am indebted to Geoffrey Green who is a naval historian, and also happens to be Jewish, for some of this information.

Early life in the East End.

My father, Morris Moss Bright was born in the East End of London on August 9th. 1890 to poor Jewish parents, both of whom were born in

England. He was the eldest of 5 children, and lost his father when he was thirteen.

As they lived in Poplar, he often walked to the docks where he loved to see the many ships that were berthed there. He really longed to go to sea and see the world. One day he asked an "old salt" how he could get on the ships and was told "when your'e old enough join the Royal Navy"!

Two years later in 1905 his dream became a reality. His mother, although born in England, could not read or write but was able to sign her name. My father told her that he wanted to become a telegraph boy with the GPO and needed her signature on the form. Little did she know that this was the enrolment form for joining the Royal Navy as a boy entrant.

One of the questions on the enlisting form asked if he was Church of England or Church of Scotland? As there was not the usual question of religion on the form he thought that as he lived in England, he must be C of E. It was later, when they wrote to my grandmother to ask if he could be confirmed, by a visiting Bishop, that the truth was revealed. She took the letter to her Rabbi and told him that she was alarmed that they wanted to "confirm her Morry". The Rabbi wrote to the Admiralty, and his original entrance certificate was duly altered from C. of E to Jew. This matter of religion, however, did not hinder his career at all, and his determination to get on in the service was uppermost in his thoughts.

His early days as a boy entrant were really tough. He was sent to the old training ship, H.M.S. Ganges where the overseeing Petty Officers beat the boys with rope ends, and holystoning the deck was a daily chore. He told me that when rubbing the decks with the stone he looked at the feet of the P.O. standing above him, and on each stroke of the stone said to himself "I'll be like you one day".

Needless to say the food was atrocious. Ships biscuits and pickled pork from barrels that were well past their sell by date was the normal fare of the day.

Eventually after going through the ranks of Ordinary Seaman, Leading Seaman, Petty Officer, Chief P.O. he then became Warrant Officer. We have in our possession copies of all his "flimsies", which are the various Captains' reports during his service.

In 1911 Winston Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty, and as a new broom effected drastic changes in the administration of the Navy. One was, that certain outstanding men from the Lower Deck should have the opportunity for commissioned rank, and in 1913 my father was selected for a commission at the age of 23. This fact made him the very first Jew to go from the Lower to the Upper deck, an honour of which he was justly proud. His college courses were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World war.

The Fleet was mobilised in July 1914, and he was posted to HMS Minerva (a Light Cruiser) and saw action in many parts of the world including the Far East and the Med. While in Singapore, he told me, that he had had a "Singapore Sling" in Raffles. Not so many years ago I had the pleasure of visiting Raffles myself, which was still in its original Colonial state, and as I walked through the door I

had an uncanny feeling as I remembered him passing through the same place so many years before. You know that tingle factor.

As I wanted more information about the exploits of HMS Minerva I recently went to the Public Records Office in Kew. There I was able to inspect the actual Ships logs. These show the day to day activities on board H.M.S. Minerva and some of the entries put a different light on the Akaba incident, for instance:

1st August 1914 Mobilising Ship, All hands preparing ship for war and the continual entry "Coaling duties"

Later Off Akaba

1st November 1914 5.00 pm Stopped off Akaba, shelled fort and barracks with 6" Shells(6)

2nd November 1914. Landed flag of truce to demand surrender of Akaba. 9.30 Shelled fort and barracks and demolished them.

Landed armed party of seamen and marines Searched town and destroyed all stores.

On reading through the logs it appears that they went up and down the Red Sea from Suez to Akaba at least eight times over a period of two months.

The logs continue and on 16th December 1914 They sent off their Hydro-Aeroplane. This was a seaplane that could be lowered over the side by derricks and it went off on reconnaissance. On its return it was hoisted up on to the deck again

At 11.45 Rifle fire at ship from shore was reported

24th December 1914 Off Akaba enemy opened fire with 12 pounder, Sent off seaplane but returned due to engine trouble.

31st December 1914 9.45 am Capt. Suepp Royal Marines and escort landed in N.W. corner of Gulf to examine the beach, Turks concealed in sand hills opened fire. Landed Marine detachment to rescue and opened fire with shrapnel. Enemy driven off. 1 Private Royal Marine killed and Capt Suepp seriously wounded.

5.pm. Stopped ship for burial service for the RM private.

8.pm. Seaplane wrecked 15 miles away Observer slightly injured and unable to walk.

Next day sent landing party of 150 men to search for pilot and went about 6 miles inland. No sign of pilot.

2nd January 1915 Returned to head of Gulf and found pilot on beach and embarked him uninjured but exhausted.

On the 8th January 1915 Auction of Pte Wards' effects.

In a letter to the Jewish Chronicle dated November 27th 1914 my father describes the bombardment of Akaba and I quote.

LETTERS FROM JEWISH SAILORS

" You see, Sir, I have been on active service since the war broke out and we have covered a good many miles, performing a duty that has many records and will live in history when it is published. At present I am not permitted to mention the latter, but I have asked my Captain's permission to describe to you the bombardment of Akaba, where we proved a success. Akaba is a small town north-east in the Gulf of Akaba in Asia, and during our duty, we heard that Germany was going to use the said place for a good purpose, such as mine stores, and also direct all her plans here for the destruction of our transports which as you know have to go through the Suez Canal to get near the fighting line. Now we could not possibly touch Akaba because it belonged to the Turks, and at that time we were still friendly with Turkey. Of course we guarded the place until we were ordered to bombard it. Away we went at full speed

expecting to see a nice big town with lofty houses and palaces, but alas!, it was just the reverse, mud huts and a fort and, in front of them covering the whole show, an exceptional number of fir trees.

Our fire was directed at the fort, and after three rounds we reduced it to ruins. The next object to take our eye was the Post Office, that came down with the first shot. Night came on and we had to wait for daylight before we could proceed. Well the following day a landing party was told off. I was put in charge of a company of about fifty men, but two hundred landed in all. We got into boats, and whilst we were pulling for shore our guns gave them a bit of fire which was very murderous. Now, when we landed we were in a very awkward position, as we were situated in a sort of valley, so to speak. But that did not make any difference to us boys; our first thought was to inspect the town. We found three with arms and they were promptly shot where they stood. No one else could be found and after seeing what damage we really had done, we were surprised to find that the only thing we had left standing and entrenched was the Mosque-- of course that is, the Mohammedan church. Very strange that, I must say, but it is the truth, and it's position was about twenty yards from the fort; absolutely marvellous don't you think so?

Well, to go on we made for the railway station which was about ten miles away. When within two miles from it we were fired upon from the hills.. Now, just imagine our position in the open: not a soul could be seen and ourselves left at the mercy of those who were trying to stop our intentions. Of course we returned the fire. What at? Nothing as far as I could see. But that silenced them all right. We did not venture any further, and so made our way back to the ship under fire all the time; fortunately no one was hit as their shooting was very poor.

Now, Sir, a word about this town, it will surprise you to know that the meaning of the word Akaba is "Obstacle" and on inspection of the place there were at least one hundred wells. You see this town is situated in the Wilderness, and all the pilgrims come here for water and dates. Of course they use camels as the place is very sandy, and to walk-- well it's very uncomfortable. Pilgrims going to Mecca stop here just for supplies, but I don't think the place would agree with us, as I found it to be very filthy, and you can just picture what hardships they must have had two thousand years ago. Our men left everything untouched although many ancient relics could have been taken away. We avoided looting and so keeping up the the good name of the British Blue.

.An additional story about the landing parties that were sent, was that the other party put a camel down a well for devilment. On returning to the ship, the Captain hearing of this escapade, ordered them to go back at once to get it out. The leader of the other party was Lieutenant Bruce Fraser who eventually became Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser of North Cape. Admiral Fraser was better known for masterminding the sinking of the Scharnhorst in 1943. In the biography of Frasers life he states " Thanks largely to the compelling story told in "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom" Akaba and T.E. Lawrence became synonomous. The capture of Akaba by Laurens with Arab irregulars in July 1917 after an agonising approach march through the desert is the first point of greatest excitement of that great book. But readers of "The Seven Pillars" will, search in vain for any mention of the fact that British sailors were playing

football in Akaba two years before Lawrence even set foot in Arabia.

I often wondered what would have happened to my father if he had gone to Dartmouth instead of the Jewish Free School.

He also took part in the landing and at the eventual evacuation of Gallipoli. Later they fought against the German force under Von Latto in East Africa. It was about this time, whilst on leave, that he had met my mother, and they were married at Dukes Place Synagogue in February 1917. He wore his Lieutenant's uniform and carried his ceremonial sword. There was a guard of honour of his fellow naval officers forming an arch of swords.

In 1918 he was appointed to the Grand Fleet and saw further action with both HMS Ramilles and Marlborough against the German High Seas Fleet. It seems at this time one of the Fleets preoccupations was to destroy the German battleship Emden which was chased all over the high seas.

The Emden was a light cruiser and was known as the "Gentlemanly Raider". First she would fire a single warning shot- then send a boat over. The object of this was to ensure whether or not the vessel was carrying contraband and did not belong to a neutral power. The captain, Karl von Muller, was very sensitive on this point. When the Emden's officers were satisfied that the merchant ship was fair game they scrupulously took off all the crew to safety before sinking her.

Among the Emden's many talents was an aptitude for disguise. She could actually alter her outline. The secret was an extra dummy funnel made of canvas and stretched over a wood frame. When erected the ship could look like an English "County" class cruiser. At the end of her career there were 78 British ships looking for her. The Emden was subsequently sunk by an Australian ship H.M.S. Sydney.

After the war, as a full Lieutenant, he continued his naval studies at the Royal Naval College at Greenwich and then to HMS Dryad Navigation School.

My father used to love to relate an incident at the College. On a special occasion there was a banquet in the Great Hall. All the gold plate was laid on the tables, and among the distinguished guests was Lord Derby. At this point I would like to say a few words about my mother. Her father was a tobacco blender and worked for Markavitch Cigarettes. My mother learned to make hand made Turkish cigarettes and very special ones with rose petal tips. For this special banquet she had given some to my father to smoke after the Queen had been toasted. My father offered one to Lord Derby who refused bringing out a packet of Weights and said "I prefer these".

In 1920 the navy was being axed (the usual round of defence cuts) and he was given the choice of staying on for a few more years with a full pension, or leaving the service with a lump sum of £1950. This was a colossal amount at the time.

My mother had by now become disenchanted with his long absences from home, and as by now, they had a son (my brother Burlington named after one of the Captains he had served under) she asked him to take the money and leave the service. So in 1920 he retired from the Navy as a Lieutenant (Retired). He was later promoted to Lieutenant Commander (Retired), but still remained on the active list.

Between the war years.

The years between the wars were nearly as eventful as those during wartime. He could turn his hand to almost anything except make money, and within a year most of his severance pay had been spent on various schemes. They had a shop in Hampstead Road and as he knew and liked fish they tried a wet and Fried fish shop. One evening when they were at the theatre, he heard someone remark "What an awful smell of fried fish". That was enough of that for him, and the next day the Fish shop became a Fruit and Vegetable shop. Not long after he decided to buy a lorry and start a transport business and managed to pick up the contract to cart Paderewski's grand piano around the U.K. when he was here to play on tour.

He was also busy in the Jewish Friendly Society movement and became President of the Tree of Zion Lodge of the Order of Achei Brith and Shield Of Abraham. He was a forceful speaker on the platform of the Anti-Deformation Committee. He was often to be heard at Speakers Corner in their fight against the Fascist element that had started to raise its ugly head. I think that my father's looks helped his oratory. He was fair haired, with blue grey eyes, and his powerful voice was an asset to his public speaking. Some of his friends at this time were Major Lionel Rose, Frank Austin and Frank Renton. All were outstanding fighters against Mosley and spoke all over London at street corners, opposing the Fascists wherever they were. There is still the Lionel Rose prize for public speaking today.

Later on, my father thought that an up-and-coming market would be Refrigeration. He then started to sell refrigerators and small cold rooms, and my brother was apprenticed with Kelvinators. He later joined my father in his small business as he knew how to repair them as they often went wrong. The business flourished and in 1937 we moved to Willesden. Things were becoming very good until the outbreak of the second world war.

During the wars, as my father was still on the reserve list, he had to go on various courses to keep up with the latest developments in naval warfare.

In June 1939 he was asked to inspect fishing trawlers to see if in the event of war they could be used to sweep mines. As a child I went with him to Lowestoft to see the ships.

Service during the second World War. War was declared on September 3rd 1939 and a day later he was posted to Harwich. My mother and brother took him to Liverpool Street Station and tearfully saw him off. During the following weekend my brother suggested that they would motor up to Harwich to see him. They asked for him at the docks and were told that he was at sea, and would not return until early evening. When the small flotilla did eventually arrive, they were amazed to see my father had gone to sea wearing a lounge suit, bowler hat and spats. Why spats I shall never know! Of course there had been no time to get his uniform.

He was given a flotilla of minesweepers in the North Sea. This was particularly dangerous work, and in July 1941 he was awarded the D.S.C. in the Kings Birthday honours list. The award was made for "outstanding zeal and whole hearted devotion to duty without which the high tradition of the Royal Navy could not have been upheld".

I eventually managed to find out exactly how he won his D.S.C. He told me, that whilst at Great Yarmouth, a ship was hit by a bomb during an air raid, and was about to sink in the mouth of the

harbour. This of course would put the port out of action for some time had it sunk. My father and a rating went on board and literally bunged up the holes with wooden spars and stopped the inevitable happening.

My mother and my sister (who was in the A.T.S. at the time) accompanied him to Buckingham Palace for the investiture by the King. The tingle factor was as work again last year when Valerie and I visited the Palace and went into the Throne room, where King George VI had given the medal to my father.

In the meantime, my brother was in the Merchant Navy as a Refrigeration Officer Engineer and was on ships engaged in bringing meat from Australia and New Zealand. Later on in the war, his ship the P & O liner Strathallen was torpedoed and sunk off Oran.

Soon after his award my father was posted to the Admiralty, Minesweeping Division and was often in the map room when Churchill came in to see the war maps. During his time at the Admiralty, an officer came into my father's office, and after he had finished and was about to leave, he was surprised to hear my father ask "What are you doing for Pesach"? The other officer was Ashe Lincoln who had no idea that my father was Jewish. They later became firm friends. After a time at the Admiralty, he went to HMS Cabot, a shore establishment in Yorkshire. You must remember that he was at this time in his mid fifties, and they obviously wanted younger men for sea duties. The story has been told that whilst at HMS Cabot, he found a rating with a particularly Jewish sounding name and asked for him to be sent for. The seaman was asked if he was a member of the Jewish faith and on confirming this, my father said that he had better go to the synagogue in Leeds for the high Holydays. The Sailor said that he was not due for a pass and my father gave him one to attend the synagogue. The rating was even more surprised to see my father sitting in the synagogue a few days later. This same seaman had a rather sad story to tell. It seems that whilst in port in Egypt, a few of the men went ashore and he was either drugged or knocked out, but on waking found that he had been tattooed on his arm. The boy was from a very orthodox family and he knew that there was law concerning the defacement of one's body which says "Ye shall not imprint any marks upon you" the word "imprint marks" means one that cannot be erased, and that his very orthodox father would react badly. On returning home he kept the tattooed arm covered, until one day his father became suspicious and tore off his shirt. He was so incensed by the tattoo he apparently would not speak to his son for two years.

Soon after joining the Navy my father was tattooed (he had an anchor and a peacock on his arm) and he said that from the moment it was done he regretted it. I am certain he did not know of the din. (Law)

Occasionally as a young boy during the war I was taken to some of the "Stone Frigates", and realised that the rank he held entitled him to a wonderful way of life. Officers were waited on hand and foot and had a batman. The wardroom was like a select London club, pink gins were the order of the day, every day. Later when he was promoted to Commander I was very impressed when they used to present arms as he passed the guards on the gates. At HMS Wildfire at Sheerness, I had a tot of Nelsons Blood. Even in its diluted form it was a very potent drink. I'm not surprised that the Navy

stopped this a few years ago, especially with the clear head that is required to operate modern computers on ships.

My father was a strict disciplinarian. This is probably why my brother joined the Merchant Navy rather than the Royal Navy and my sister joined the A.T.S., instead of the WRENS. They thought they might be posted under his command! Once when I was coming home from my school in Suffolk by train, I entered a carriage full of sailors going to London from Lowestoft. They were beefing about how strict my father was, and what a "****". Needless to say I stayed very quiet in the corner of the carriage.

His sense of humour was rather old fashioned. I can remember his favourite Navy story about Chatham. It seems that a number of ratings were late in returning to the dockyard. On being asked why he was late the first one said that he hired a horse and carriage to take him up Chatham Hill and half way up the hill the horse had dropped dead "and that sir is why I'm late". "Very well" said the Captain "case dismissed". The next one in front of the Captain told the same story. This happened 5 times, all being dismissed. The next one came in and the Captain said rather sarcastically "I suppose you also hired a horse and carriage to take you up Chatham Hill and the horse dropped dead half way up the hill?". "No Sir" replied the rating "the horse was fit and well sir, We couldn't get up the hill because of all the dead horses".

Towards the end of the war he was posted to Trincomalee in Ceylon. He was ready to go, having bought all his new tropical kit at Gieves, but his health had failed and he could not go. He had chronic bronchitis which prevented him doing so, and soon after this the war ended and my father left the Navy.

After the war on his return to civvy street, he restarted his refrigeration business in a very small way with my brother. Later the business flourished when my brother started to manufacture medical Cryostats (these are used for taking very thin biopsy specimens). The company moved to Huntingdon and is now the world leader in its field. I am certain my father would have been as thrilled as I was to see the name "Bright Instruments" in 8 foot letters on the side of the 43,000 sq ft purpose built factory. This is a success story in itself.

During the years after the war my father continued with AJEX and became National Vice President and President of the East London branch. One of his delights was the annual Jewish Remembrance parade. In 1948 he was Aide-de-Camp to Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham. Later in 1965 the inspecting officer was Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser, the same one from the Minerva fifty years before. At this time my father was in hospital too ill to attend the parade at Whitehall, and he was so disappointed that he could not be the Admiral's "Flag Lieutenant" on that occasion as they had been through so much together in the First World War. My father died a month later.

It is rather ironic that at the Western Synagogue cemetery in Edmonton where my father was buried, there is a large black tombstone near to his grave with the name "Emden" engraved in gold letters. It seems that they caught up with each other at last!

A memorial service was held during which Rev. Berberman described him as a "member of AJEX who through war, became one of the great architects of the Jewish peace in many ways".

G.K. Chesterton said "Adventure is the Champagne of life" and I really think Morris Moss Bright had plenty of Champagne.