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INTERVIEW WITH ALICE ALBERT MARCUS

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
March 19, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: Alice Albert Marcus(AM)
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (CE) and Anne Kent (AK)
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CE: Today is Wednesday, March 19, 1975. We are at the residence of Mrs. Charles Marcus, 501 Via Casitas in Greenbrae, California. We are in her charming living room on the eighth floor, overlooking the Corte Madera Creek. What a beautiful view you have. Today we are here to review the life and career of Jacob Albert, who lived between 1871 and 1946, and he was an outstanding merchant and civic leader of San Rafael. Mr. Albert came to San Rafael in 1892 from Pennsylvania and was the founder of Albert's Department Store, and he was the donor in 1937 of land for a sports field for young people known as Albert's Field, and also gave the land and a building, in 1943 at Second and A Streets, to the Marin Boy Scouts. To tell us about this unselfish and most successful pioneer, we will be talking today with Alice Albert Marcus, Jacob Albert's daughter. Good morning Alice.

AM: Good morning.

CE: Let's start from the beginning. Will you tell us a little bit about your father, where he was born, and what brought him and your mother, Annie, and your brother, Harry, to Marin County? I see you have a little biographical sketch there. Would you care to read that for us?

AM: I would love to.

CE: Alright.

AM: As a child Dad was always busy, but meal times on Sundays were family days. Even our relatives from San Francisco made the long trip by a ferryboat and train

to our house, and Mother spent the entire Sunday cooking, never quite sure how many people would be there for dinner. As I grew older, I began to understand how busily engaged he and Mother were, working together six days a week, thirteen hours a day, to provide for all of us. Jacob and Annie Albert arrived in Marin County in 1890. They had come from Lithuania a few years before, to New York City, then Pennsylvania, and now having barely learned English, Jake also learned Portuguese and Italian. His customers were the ranchers in outlying Marin, and he knew he could serve them better if he spoke these additional languages. Within five years, Jake and Annie had opened their first store in Marin County. Hard working, thrifty, he had the foresight to see the potential of this beautiful area, and he wished to grow with it. He did. From the first store in San Rafael, to four larger ones, and as his business prospered, he turned his attention towards developing another kind of future: the future of San Rafael. After years of serving as a city councilman, he was asked to run for mayor. He declined. He wished to remain in an advisory capacity. He didn't need the glory of the spotlight. It was the same with the gifts he gave, for he wanted to give back to the community some lasting pleasure, for the fact that his roots, as well as his children's, were here. What better way than donating buildings and land for future generations? The Boy Scout Hall in San Rafael and Albert Park, are two of the lasting changing moments; testimonies to his vision to what he and Annie Albert, who worked loyally and lovingly beside him, labored so long to achieve. His children, Harry, Bertha and Alice never wandered far from Marin County. They were infected with the same love for the land as Jake and Annie Albert must have felt instinctively, seeing the long rolling hills of Marin open before them that first time. Knowing they had arrived, at last, at the place they had traveled so long and so hard to find.

CE: Very nicely – Did you write that, Alice?

AM: Yes.

CE: That's very nice. Well tell us Alice, now where and when were you born? We'd like to know the date.

AM: 1898.

CE: 1898. And were you born in San Rafael?

AM: In San Rafael.

CE: At home?

AM: Yes.

CE: Where was the family home at that time?

AM: At that time it was over a store.

CE: Where about on Fourth?

AM: On Fourth Street between A and B Streets.

CE: Well now, this first store that your father built was on Fourth and B and was called The Wonder.

AM: The Wonder, right.

CE: Did he name it The Wonder?

AM: Evidently. I suppose so, yes. It's before my birth.

CE: Now was this the store that you later worked in, and you and your sister helped him as you grew up?

AM: No, then they moved across the way, Fourth and B, across the opposite corner.
CE: What kind of goods did your father sell in this first Wonder store?
AM: Department store business.
CE: Dry goods?
AM: Yes.
CE: Yardage and things for the home?
AM: Right.
CE: Now the Albert Building on Fourth and B, that was built across the road?
AM: On B Street between Fourth and Julia Street, I believe.
CE: That had the first elevator in San Rafael, I understand.
AM: Yes, right.
CE: 1939, wasn't it in the thirties? Tell me what were your early school days like? Where did you go to school? You would be about 1910. Are we talking about 1905, '06? Is it the school on B Street?
AM: It was on Fifth and B.
CE: How many classmates would be in your school at that time?
AM: At that time, probably 30, I would say.
CE: Did you walk to school?
AM: It was just opposite our home. We were living at that time on Fifth.
CE: Who were some of your classmates? Some of those families still around?
AM: Ray McPhail is still here.
CE: Was he one of your schoolmates?
AM: Yes. I think that's about – William Crane. I don't – No, I think they're just about –
CE: What was Fourth Street and downtown San Rafael like during those early years in your memory?
AM: Muddy, muddy.
CE: Was it dirt roads and wooden sidewalks?
AM: Yes. Muddy gravel streets that washed out every winter and had to be replaced.
CE: Well, what was the merchandizing like in those days, as compared to now? Did you stay in this business after your marriage?
AM: No.
CE: In your judgment, was it different that it is today? In other words, what do you attribute the success of your father's –
AM: We worked all over the store, not just in one department.
CE: All over. Alright, what would you do? Go there after school and help?
AM: When I was young we'd sell notions on weekends, my sister and I, Saturdays.
CE: Well legend has it that you were working behind the counter, where you could just peek over the counter.
AM: I know. I was about fourteen years old or twelve years old, I remember. Notions department.
AK: All our children have a chance –
AM: With unions you can't do that today.
CE: All the children –
AM: I think that's why I know so many of these people today. I remember them as children.

CE: Well then, your father branched out and opened stores where? Where else?
AM: San Anselmo and Mill Valley, Richmond, California.
CE: And Napa. Was there one in Napa?
AM: Napa, but that – Oh, about two years or so. And we did have a store for a short time in Petaluma. One year – But my Dad never – He didn't like Petaluma, so –
CE: Well he evidently always aspired to have something better, something bigger, and then –
AM: Yes, preferred Marin County.
CE: Was there a great family discussion when he made his big move in 1942, and built the store on Fourth and County Street?
AM: Right. Well he made his own decisions. He and my mother together. Both of them.
CE: Does the family still own that property?
AM: Yes. It was left to my brother Harry.
CE: Harry. And then he had the store there until 1952?
AM: Until he passed. At that time they sold to Macy's in '54, 1954.
CE: I understand. Is it true that your father wasn't actually seeking political office, but was more or less drafted to run for the town council in '37?
AM: Right, yes.
CE: What was his reaction when he won?
AM: He was delighted, and I think that was one reason why he wanted to pay his tribute, or his thank you to the city of San Rafael.
CE: And that would be –
AM: By Albert Field, they call it now.
CE: Albert Field. Where is that?
AM: On B Street.
CE: B Street. Would you describe your father to us, Alice? I see a photograph of him, but what kind of gentleman was he? He appears to be very understanding and sweet. Was he a large man?
AM: Yes, he was a tall man about five ten in height; a fine-looking man and a very kind person, nice personality, understanding of people, very devoted to his community.
CE: What are his most memorable traits, in your judgment?
AM: In my judgment, it would be devotion to his family.
CE: Devotion to his family and his community?
AM: And his community.
CE: Well evidently your mother and Bertha and you, you all seemed to work closely together to achieve this extraordinary success story.
AM: Oh we did, we did.
CE: Was there a special philosophy of his life that prevailed in your family? I mean, he was hard-working, but did he have a little philosophy that seemed to prevail and sustain you all?
AM: I think so; devotion I would say, more than anything else.
CE: Devotion.
AM: To his community.
CE: Was he a religious man?

AM: No. No, I wouldn't say he was very religious. He was raised as a religious man. Father was a Rabbi and he was trained to be a Rabbi, but he wanted to get away from it when he left Lithuania.

CE: And when he came to this part of California, it gave him what he wanted.

AM: A merchant.

CE: Would you describe your mother to us? Did he marry her in Lithuania?

AM: Yes, as a matter of fact.

CE: What was her maiden name?

AM: Kasago. Annie Kasago. They came out on their honeymoon. He was twenty and she was twenty, also.

CE: They came out to here?

AM: To New York City.

CE: To New York City. And then he came further west.

AM: Pennsylvania, and then later up to the Mendocino County area, then down to Marin County. And this is where he wanted to remain for the rest of his days.

CE: Well, I understand that after your father's death in 1946, that your brother Harry filled out your father's vacant council seat.

AM: Yes, true.

CE: And then carried on your father's work in developing downtown San Rafael.

AM: Yes, that's true.

CE: And helped refurbish it and carry on the dream of your father. Knowing your father better than anyone, what do you think his reaction of today's economic and social troubles would be? He certainly showed great courage in building that building during the Depression. He was a fearless man in a way. He had a lot of confidence.

AM: Yes he did. He had foresight, I would say, in the future of Marin County. I think his reaction – I think he'd be a little discouraged, I'd say.

CE: Do you think he would continue with his optimism, though, and be in the forefront?

AM: Well, he was that type, and I'm sure he would be. I would say he would. He'd know in his own mind that we'd overcome this situation. We did it the days of 1929, Depression days, and I'm sure he would be optimistic.

CE: I was going to ask you, what was the –

AM: Well, he built the Albert Building during that time, and his own home, so he had confidence in Marin County.

CE: Where did he build the family home after you moved away from over the store?

AM: Then we moved into the – It was on Fifth Avenue between A and B; Dr. Crosby's home. He was the minister, I think, wasn't he?

CE: There were some beautiful homes on there at that time.

AM: An old, lovely, big home. And we were raised there.

CE: Well, you can perhaps remember many landmarks. Mrs. Kent is with us today, and she wants to ask Alice some questions.

AK: Alice, I don't remember. I can't place it, but it seems to me that all the people in San Rafael really had a lesson in belief in a town, maybe from your father. And one of the ones I half remember was that either when he sold to Macy's, or one of the corners, maybe for Montgomery Ward. I forget what it was. Anyone else

would have thought, “That’s the opposition, and I will keep him out.” And your father instead sold the property, knowing that they were the opposition, and he accepted it very graciously.

AM: And true, he felt he didn’t want to own much in San Rafael. He didn’t think it was a good idea.

AK: But he was so right, you see.

AM: Yes. He wanted to sell some of the property that was to be – Opposed to his owning San Rafael, no doubt.

CE: We have a photograph here, Mrs. Kent, of the store, Albert’s. Beautiful, grade-A store. Look at the – That would be a knockout today. They have the best of everything in the way of merchandise, didn’t he?

AM: Well, it was “the” store.

CE: It was “the” store.

AK: Well, I telephoned someone, Alice. I telephoned one of the nieces to tell her to come up on Sunday from Palo Alto.

AM: Yes. Yes. Oh, yes.

AK: And well, we couldn’t tell exactly where – I wanted her to come up to the opening, the dedication, of a window in the Presbyterian Church. She said. “Well, I don’t know where it is. Can you tell me from where Mr. Albert’s store was that we all went to? Can you tell me where in San Rafael it would be?” That was the only thing she remembered about old San Rafael.

CE: That’s the landmark. That’s – Now that the Courthouse is burned down, that’s one of the landmarks.

AK: And another thing I remember. When vacation came along, all of the children would race up to see if they could get a job with Mr. Albert. Then the poor mothers, you know, the one thing they did was – Everything they saw that was just so nice, they wanted to sell to themselves. I remember each vacation, when Albert’s bill came in, there were the things the twins had bought. All the things they wanted to buy that they had seen because that was the most fun they ever had, working in Mr. Albert’s store.

AM: Do you remember in just what department they were?

AK: No. I don’t remember.

CE: Probably ready-to-wear.

AK: I guess they were – to get in wherever they were put.

AM: Well you know, we didn’t have competition then. That was the only store where you could really, actually work before Penney’s existed here.

AK: Yes, that’s right.

CE: That’s true.

AM: Either here, or we shopped in San Francisco.

AK: And another nice thing about it was that all the people worked in the store for so long that everybody knew everybody else. All the people who were selling things to you knew just what –

CE: What you liked, too.

AK: Yes. Oh, it was great.

CE: That was a wonderful way to do business.

AM: And I still like that attitude in the store.

CE: Well, everyone does. We have a store in San Anselmo, which I think might have been the store Kaufman's?

AM: Yes. He was married to Lois Albert Kaufman.

CE: And similarly there, the people are there. My sister has taught the children French, and you go in there and you know them. They say, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you for two months. Come in next week. We're getting something I think you'll like." This way of doing business is just –

AM: Wonderful.

CE: And that too is a lovely store, so your father undoubtedly set a standard that has been followed by his successors.

AK: Quality.

CE: Quality. Tell me, did you leave the county much after you got married, Alice? Or did you –

AM: We lived in Richmond, California. We had a store there, and my husband was in the store there, just for one year. Outside of that I've lived in Marin, San Rafael.

CE: Has that store been sold too?

AM: Yes. Macy's also.

CE: So there's no more stores by the name of Albert's, per se?

AM: No.

CE: Did you ever have time – I know you sound like a very hard-working family. Did you ever have time to go on a little holiday, like on the weekends.

AM: Oh, yes.

CE: Did you ever go over to Stinson Beach, Bolinas area?

AM: Oh, yes, yes. After we had a car.

CE: After you had a car. You never went by stage earlier?

AM: No.

CE: But you got a car and that was the event.

AM: Means of transportation.

CE: Did you enjoy picnicking?

AM: Yes, almost every Sunday. My mother adored it.

CE: People still do. I think Marin County is filled with people who love to go to picnics and little outings.

AM: They'd prepare all Saturday for it, after she retired from the store, she and the help.

CE: Did she work, your mother, in the store?

AM: Oh, yes. My dad always –

CE: In the bookkeeping end, or did she do the selling?

AM: Selling.

CE: Do you have a photograph of your mother?

AM: Oh, yes, an old one. I have one here.

CE: Well, maybe we could see it. Well, Alice has brought us a lovely photograph of her mother. Gee, she is a beautiful woman.

AM: Dad always gave her all the praise she deserved, as his success was responsible to his wife.

CE: You know, this is not an unusual story, is it? It is not an unusual story. A man who has really been successful in life usually pays tribute to his wife.

AM: Yes.

CE: Is your sister Bertha still alive?

AM: Yes. She lives in Napa.

CE: In Napa. And there were just the three of you?

AM: Yes.

CE: And Harry died in his 70s? 1963, the news article says.

AM: Yes.

CE: And they quote here, if I may say, that, "Much of the face-lifting of the downtown district in the past few years has been because of Harry Albert, who was in the forefront in remodeling properties to improve San Rafael's business climate, even buying old buildings to have them completely restored." Is that true?

AM: Yes, that's true.

CE: Did your father have any time for any diversion? Did he ever go down to San Rafael Baths or go horseback riding?

AM: No, he didn't. The children –

CE: He was always busy. Did you enjoy that?

AM: San Rafael Baths? Oh, we loved it.

CE: Did you?

AM: That was our pastime.

CE: The canal went right up a little further in San Rafael at that time, didn't it? It came up past where the freeway is now. Did you ever go boating in the canal?

AM: Oh, yes.

CE: Or boating on this Corte Madera –

AM: No, not through there. No.

CE: But on the canal you did?

AM: Yes.

CE: And you went to the school on B Street.

AM: B, and then later to the –

CE: Where else did you go?

AM: From five, through the elementary school, on Fourth and E, and then high school on E Street, San Rafael High School.

CE: Did you know Eleanor Murray, who taught Latin?

AM: Oh, yes, right.

CE: She taught Judge Martinelli also, who we had the pleasure of interviewing.

AM: Judge Martinelli and Genevieve, his wife.

CE: What was your impression of Eleanor Murray? Wasn't she –

AM: She was our English teacher.

CE: As well.

AM: Through high school.

CE: She has an excellent reputation.

AM: And Miss Dufficy, Dr. Dufficy's daughter, taught Latin in San Rafael High School.

CE: Were you married shortly after you got out of high school?

AM: No. I was about 24.

CE: 24. Did you go on to the university?

AM: No, I didn't. I went to business school. Munson's, graduated from Munson's.

CE: Did you?
AM: Yes.
CE: That's in San Francisco, isn't it?
AM: Yes. Commuted.
CE: Now, when you commuted, the ferries had transferred from San Quentin to Sausalito. I presume you took the train?
AM: Yes, electric train to the ferry.
CE: And you're not old enough to have gone up on the Crookedest Railroad?
AM: Oh, yes.
CE: Well that ran until the early '30s, didn't it?
AM: Yes.
CE: Mrs. Kent has photographs of her husband at the tiller of the gravity train. Was that a pleasant excursion?
AM: Oh, wonderful.
CE: Another picnic outing?
AM: Yes. Yes.
CE: Do you have a family?
AM: I have one son, Warren Marcus. Three grandchildren.
CE: And is Warren involved in this similar business?
AM: Yes. He has a men's furnishing store on Fourth Street in San Rafael.
CE: Well you see, the tradition has continued.
AM: Yes. That's all he knows.
CE: Well, you know, this community, all of Marin County, owes your father so very much. The tangible things that he left because of his largesse, with the Albert Park, and the Boy Scout property and building, and the store, which we now know as Macy's. But more than that, we owe him an unselfish contribution of his efforts as a pioneer, early in San Rafael, to come here, and through the dedication and love of his wife, prove to be such an exemplary member of the community. We are indeed fortunate to have men of his stature, and we want to thank you so much today, Alice, for reminiscing a little bit about your remarkable father. Would you like to add anything, Mrs. Kent?
AK: No, I'm not sure I would. I think no one can hear San Rafael without thinking of Mr. Albert. Because, it seems to me that you speak to any people and it isn't that they just heard about him, almost all of them had some personal contact with him in one way or another. He was really, truly, I say, a piece of San Rafael. That's the way I feel about him.
CE: Thank you, ladies. This concludes our interview today with Alice Marcus, and we are recording for the Moya Library Guild. This is a project of Oral History for the California History Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center. This is Carla Ehat, and this concludes our interview.