

OUR JOLSON STORY

How the past can have an impact on today or even tomorrow

By Andrea Oberheiden

We are Andrea (29) and Jens (23), Jolson Society members from the northern German city called Kiel. We study German Literature, Media Studies, Anglistics, History of the Arts and Philosophy. In December of 2005, we attended a lecture about film history at the University of Hamburg. The professor mentioned *The Jazz Singer*, as being the first commercially successful talking picture in which "a Broadway singer from the 1920s sang some songs which had nothing really to do with jazz." The University did not possess a copy of the film, so no excerpts from the film could be shown. Jens and I simply had to see this film, so we decided to make a film evening of it by watching this movie at home.

It was December 23rd when we set up a borrowed video projector and screen in our tiny apartment. We did not know it yet that due to this evening, our lives would undergo a radical change, and that the effect of that film would dominate our future activities for a long time.

After the film had run for some time, we started to get disappointed by the fact that it was not a 100% talkie, something we had expected. But soon thereafter we were captured by the story.

As Germans of course we had only dealt with everything Jewish in the context with the Holocaust until then. We were amazed by the super-temporal and eternal topic: the conflict between tradition and modern spirit.

When Al Jolson appeared eating and moving restlessly at the table of *Coffee Dan's*, he left quite a mark. And during his renditions of "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face" and "Toot Toot Tootsie" I do remember how we laughed, because we thought that the scene with Jolson whistling was such a fake. We did not know it then but at a later date we would find out that it was not a fake at all.



William Demarest (Buster) sits at the table as Jolson takes the stage at Coffee Dan's.

Then the film came to the point where Jolson sits at the piano, singing to his mother. Shortly after Jolson had started singing "Blue Skies", we got the impression that this guy must have been quite unique, not only at his time, but in general terms. When he stopped singing and turned around in order to talk to his mother, something weird happened. Although or just because he turned away from a watching audience and away from the fixed camera, he was able to captivate us during the whole dialogue with its intimacy. Technically, the film itself is not perfectly done at all. But something this protagonist had was able to transport the intimacy of that scene without facing the audience. That was remarkable! Jolson was able to act intimately for one person within the plot, as well as to an unknown number of people in front of the screen, and at the same time. This man captured us, and we were hopelessly doomed to being entertained. We both

agreed that we had never seen anyone before who was able to do what this guy did there, whatever it was. The climax of course is when the cantor enters and says, "Stop"; and everything comes to an abrupt end. It is a powerful moment when you see and hear something great which is interrupted like that and followed by silence. It was a crime to make Jolson stop.

We immediately watched that scene over and over again, and we were not able to go on with the film. We wanted to find out what had generated our feelings. We knew it had something to do with the way that man was talking and behaving. There was something electrifying in it that we could not conceptualize. Today we know that there is only one word for explaining what was going on there: *charisma*. And you do not learn anything about that at a university.



Al Jolson with William Demarest at the piano, in a scene that was cut out from The Jazz Singer.

We were amazed by the fact that someone, who was obviously not even alive anymore, was able to capture an audience belonging to a completely different time and culture in terms of film and music. Jolson did that, despite the fact that the quality of the film print we had was very poor. We wondered why we had not heard of Al Jolson before. We immediately wanted to know who he was and when exactly he had lived. And yes, it is unbelievable, but we were even wondering if this guy had something like a career.

We were sure that this film must have been the only captured work of that man, otherwise, we thought, we surely would have heard of him long before this. To find out more about this man, we did what everybody does these days: we googled his name. We found out that he was obviously better known than we had expected. We went through wonderful hours by finding out how big he once was and how many films he indeed had made, but we also read stories about him, which were not nice at all. However, at the end some kind of a rational overview was the result. Shortly after watching *The Jazz Singer*, we had already instinctively decided to make some kind of a documentary about Jolson in order to tell maybe some fellow students who Al Jolson was.

The most important thing we found out about Al Jolson was that, although he was dead for so many years, a Jolson Society existed, which meant there were still people alive who may have dealt with this man in some way or another. This was good for a documentary. We read every sector of the website and became members. Without the internet we would have never gone as far as we eventually did. We read about a convention to be held in Philadelphia in May 2006. Jens and I met a lot of interesting people at the Philadelphia convention that year.

We now make a time lapse by saying that our experiences in the USA were marvelous and made us going on with our unreasonable project under which our regular studies still have to suffer. We finished some "spin-offs," a short documen-

tary about Rudy Wissler, developed because of a very sad incident, which of course was Mr. Wissler's untimely death in January of 2007. We also made a short film about Al Jolson called, *A Look at Al Jolson*, which is intended to introduce Al Jolson to an unknowing audience, and which we presented on a TV talk show in New York City. We just finished a 77-minute documentary about *Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer*.

On one of our trips we interviewed two members of the Jolson family, Marjorie Elitzer, a second cousin of Al Jolson, and Julian Ertz, also a second cousin of Jolson. Barney Hesselson was a brother of Al Jolson's father. Barney's two daughters, Ida and Bess, are relevant here. Marjorie Elitzer, born in 1917, is the daughter of Ida Hesselson and George Wladis. Julian Ertz, born in 1919, is the son of Bess Hesselson and Isadore Ertz.

Interview with Marjorie Elitzer

Question: As a second cousin, when did you first learn of Al Jolson?

Marjorie: I was not really aware of his existence until I was about 8 years old. But when *The Jazz Singer* came along, my cousin was an important person. You would walk up to people and say, "I am related to Al Jolson." Wow, that always made everybody perk up.

Question: When did your family come to the USA?

Marjorie: My mother, Ida Hesselson, came over in 1892. She and her sister Lena were the only children born in Russia. Their brother, my uncle, was born in the USA ahead of the family. The family of my grandmother Sarah Yager was very wealthy, and when she married my grandfather, it was said that she kind of married down. But he was a great man, a traveling scholar in Europe. He spoke many languages and prepared my brother for his Bar Mitzvah.

Question: Was Al Jolson a topic within the family?

Marjorie: No, I am sorry to say. But, we were all aware that cousin Al was known worldwide as the greatest entertainer. But our lives in no way centered on him. Everyone felt that family was not really important to him. And the fact that he married so many times out of the faith. He was okay, but he was not anything special. And everyone felt that once he had established himself, his family was not important to him anymore. I never once heard my grandfather, Barney Hesselson, mention Al.

Question: You mentioned something about a telegram you discovered some years ago?

Marjorie: Yes. You always think of family at a wedding. It was February 28th, 1909 when my mother got married, and Al as her cousin was invited. But he had a gig in New Orleans and he could not make the wedding, but he did send a telegram saying: "Sorry, I am on my way to New Orleans, but: Best Wishes!" I happened to come across the telegram in a whole sheave of telegrams that my folks had received. That was the way you honored the bride and the groom in those days. I was cleaning out my mother's house and it just fell into my hands, and I just pulled that one out and then threw everything else away. And then again I felt very proud of being related to Al Jolson. I had it framed. That was six or seven years ago, but I thought I should do it for posterity.

Interview with Julian Ertz

Question: What comes into your mind when you hear the name Al Jolson?

Julian: The greatest entertainer in the world! I had seen him, and to me it was the best ever. When I saw him I was thrilled.

Question: When did you first hear of him?

Julian: When I was very young, and I am talking

about the 1920s. We had a Victrola, and I can remember listening to a recording of "April Showers," of which I thought it was one of the most beautiful songs I had ever heard. And then my mother told me that he was a family member.

Question: Did you ever see Al Jolson on the stage?

Julian: Yes, I think it was in 1941. I was supposed to go into the army, but I was still a civilian. I must have been about twenty-one at the time. My father and I went to a baseball game in New York, and afterwards my dad said: "Let's go and see Al's show *Hold On to Your Hats*." But when we got there the tickets were sold out. But whom do you think my father saw in the box-office? It was my cousin Al, and although it was twenty minutes before curtain time, he still had not put his make-up on. I think Al liked to see the money come in. Al said he was sorry that the house was sold out. Then he reached for the phone to call his business manager, Lou Epstein, and Al said: "I need a couple of seats for my cousins here!" He was told there was not a single seat available. Al said: "Then put some seats in the aisle for them." Epstein told him that the fire department would not let them do that. Al apologized to my dad and said: "I am sorry about this, but please be my guests in the standing room."

Question: How was the show?

Julian: Al started by telling a joke. I do not remember it, but I remember people laughing, it was very funny. Then some people walked in a little late. Al said to them: "Sorry, you are late, but you have not missed too much. And here is all we have done so far!" And then he told the same story, but with a different ending. The people loved it. We were all surprised by this, and for the people who had come in late, it was a new story anyway. And then the same thing happened again with some more people coming in late. Once again he told the same story, and again it had a different ending. Then he sang some songs, and soon it was intermission. It was a great show and he was the greatest!

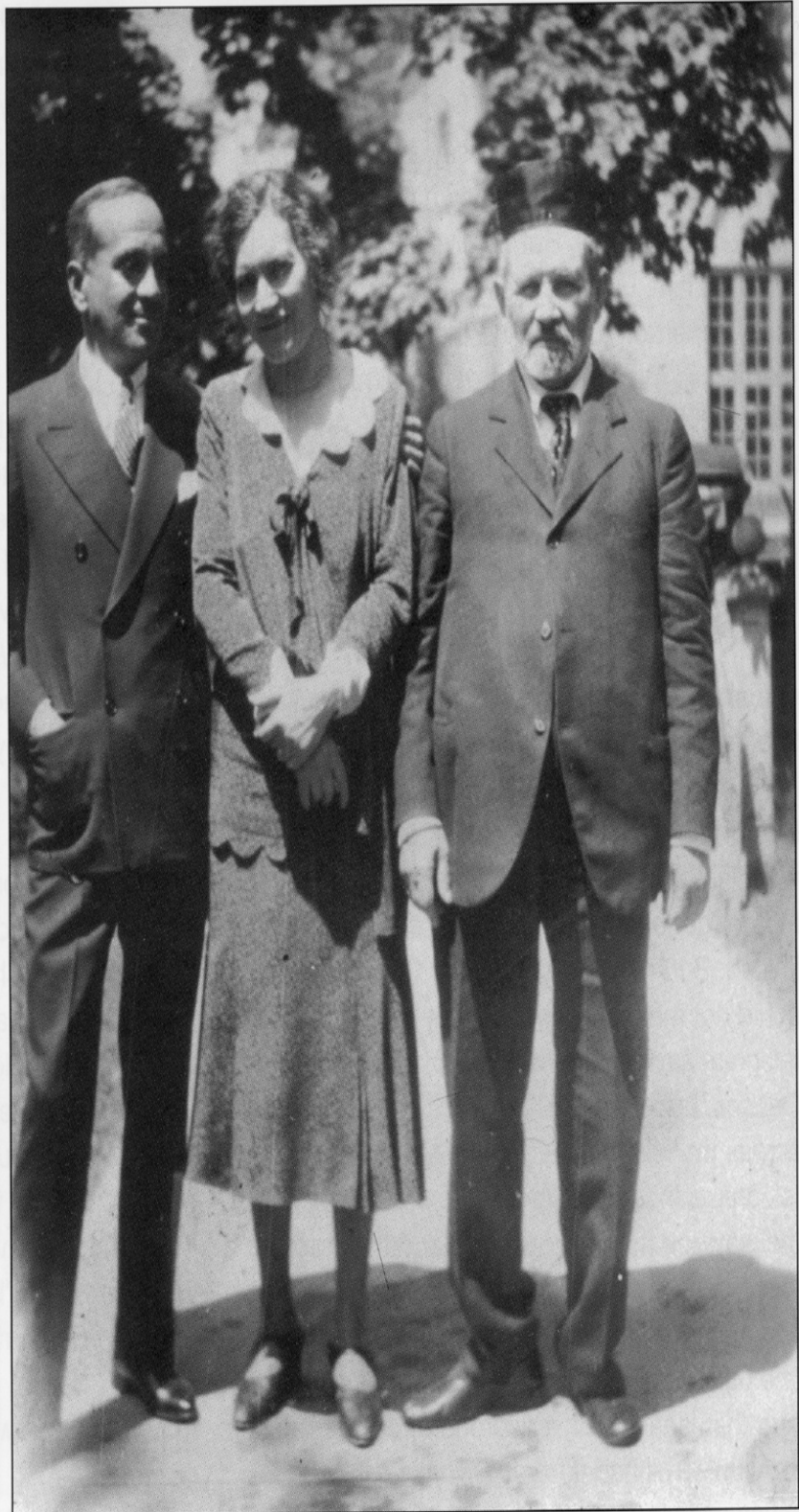
Question: Did you ever meet Al's father?

Julian: Yes, when I was in the army. I was stationed for a time at Fort Belvoir, which is near Washington D.C., and that is where Al's father lived. I used to go there on Sundays for dinner, and then I always had a walk with his father. I remember he used to like telling jokes that were not funny, but I would laugh anyway. He talked about Hebrew sayings and such; I could not understand any of them.

Question: Did Al's father ever talk about his son?

Julian: No, not that I can recall.

We would like to thank everybody who has helped and supported us so far in creating a feature-length documentary about Al Jolson. It definitely makes a difference. On November 10th, 2007, we made the first place at a film festival in Kiel, Germany with, A Look at Al Jolson. If you would like to learn more about how you too can help, feel free to visit our website: www.aj-images.com.



The prodigal son did return home, seen here in 1931 with his sister, Etta and their father, Rabbi Moses Rubin Yoelson.