

Nigel Ostrer
BECTU History Project
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Interviewer, Darrol Blake
Interviewee, Nigel Ostrer
Cameraman, Dan Thurley

DB: Camera's rolling. Will you identify yourself, you know to the camera.
NO: How do I know if he is rolling?
DT: I'll tell you - I am rolling you.
DB: It is rolling now.
DB: My name is.....
NO: My name is Nigel Ostrer and
DB: I was born.....
NO: Oh, I was born in, yes I was born in 1935. In fact, I was born in Grosvenor Park House in Ealing Park Lane, not in a hospital, like a lot of people.
DB: Right okay. Now tell us about the Ostrer family, your father and his brothers and I think there was a sister aswell.
NO: Yes there was.
DB: So your father was?
NO: Maurice, Maurice Ostrer and he was the youngest of the whole clan in fact. And David was the oldest of the brothers but his sister Sadie was older than him. And then there was Isidore who was quite high up there. They all descended until you got to Maurice at the end.
DB: And Maurice married? Well.....
NO: Yes, my mother in fact. She started her career in well, she was the first person on the London stage that was naked in a stage play which was a Sculptress and there was a sculptress and she was the model and naked up in the top part on the London stage which was quite daring in 1926. And then you got the next year - she was under contract to Gelmot Bridges. So obviously that was a good start to her career.
DB: Thank you. Tell me about your relationship with your parents. How do you think they influenced you your mother and father?
NO: Well of course my mother built her dreamhouse in Denham which was quite magnificent. And it was sort of like a film star kind of house. And James Mason.....
DB: At what stage was that?
NO: That would have been in Well I lived there in the earliest 1970's. So it was finished then. So she probably finished building it in the late 1960's, I should think. And I think James Mason was making his last film in Denham Village in fact, shooting parts of it and any Auntie looked a bit like Betty Davis. She was living in the house aswell at the time. And she went up to James Mason and said Mrs Ostrer lives in this village and would you like to come to tea. And he said, "No thank you. I never want to meet another Ostrer again."
DB: That needs some explanation because James Mason was married to.....
NO: To Pamela Ostrer, Isidore's daughter in fact.
DB: Yes.
NO: She is the one that in my book I refer to as a stuck up bitch.
DB: But she had been married to Roy Keeniyo.
NO: Roy Keeniyo first, yes that's right.
DB: Who was a Director.
NO: Well he was an Assistant Camera Man when she met him but he became a Director.
DB: Was that () Rose?
NO: I think so. If you marry the boss's daughter I suppose you rise up the ladder a bit. And then yes she.....
DB: Pamela and James Mason met and married or later married. But they went into production on their own didn't they? I mean they did an all location film, I seem to remember.
NO: Yes. Would that be, "Pandora and the something box"? They made a film called that, I think.
DB: That was later.
NO: Could have been.

DB: I can't remember the name of the one that they did but it was a sort of an all location enterprise which in those days was and I am talking about the 40's now and it was quite an enterprise the things those studios made.

NO: Oh yes, that's right. All studios controlled everything and distribution and all the other little bits to do with films. So it was not easy.

DB: Now you had a cousin Bertie.

NO: Yes. That would have been Uncle David's son from his first marriage.

DB: Yes. And I knew of him as a Film Producer. Do you have any memories of him or his productions?

NO: Yes because he used to hang around in the offices because my mother had an office even when he started at Premier Productions and he kept the office going. I am not sure what they were doing. I don't know if they did anything but Well they were watching horse racing on television actually. Bertie used to hang around there aswell and they would be reading scripts all the time thinking maybe they should make a film or something. So Bertie produced quite a few films I think, didn't he.

DB: In cooperation with Albert Fennel.

NO: Albert Fennel. Because Albert Fennel used to work for my father aswell originally.

DB: Ahh.

NO: And of course Fennel went on to do The Avengers, didn't he which in fact was magnificent on television.

DB: But before that he coproduced.....

NO: With Bertie Dryes.

DB: With Bertie. A couple of films at Nettlefold, Walton on Thames and at various other places.

NO: Yes, they did, they did. And when you look up Bertie on the internet, they always mention Captain Nemo and the something or the other. Yes, it seems to be some sort of cult film or the other.

DB: But is he still with us Bertie?

NO: No he, he died some years ago, yes.

DB: Any of your other cousins or relations in the business at all?

NO: No, none at all really, no. Because the business doesn't exist any more really.

DB: True.

NO: And then of course they went back into textiles because that was the other thing Isidore was into. He started a textile thing in the early 1920's before he started films in fact. And it was just on the backburner for all those Gaumont years. And then when he finished with Gaumont he revived it and expanded it and all that kind of thing.

DB: What was the name of that company? Do you remember?

NO: It was Ealing Worth Morris but it sort of died a death. It does not exist anymore because I don't think they do textiles in England too much now. No. Of course it wasn't a glamorous business really.

DB: Right, well thank you. Dan do you have any thoughts? Are there any holes in that story?

DT: No. That would be interesting.

DB: Good. Well thank you very much. Can we cut it there.

DB: So tell me what your mother's professional name was?

NO: Her professional name was Renee Clarma and of course Clarma was her maiden name in fact.

DB: And going back to the family, how long had they been in England? They obviously came from.....

NO: My father was born in England and the rest - I think Isidore might have been born in England but they certainly came in the late 1890's. They came to England. Originally from and it is debatable where they came from but it could have been Poland or the Ukraine which was next to each other.

DB: And why do you think Isidore and his brothers got into the movie business?

NO: Well, Isidore worked in the stockbrokers room office originally and then he made it big like made billions or something. I don't know what he was doing but he made billions. And then he started a bank - The Ostrer Brothers Bank and the bank was issuing shares and stuff and all that kind of carry on. I think it was a commercial bank. And then Broomhead. He probably approached them. He had approached other people before other stockbrokers before because he wanted to buy out Leon Gaumont. Because Leon Gaumont owned and controlled it.

DB: Who was Broomhead at that stage?

NO: Broomhead at that stage..... Originally Leon Gaumont started his company in France and then he had an English branch of the company.

DB: It's not British?

NO: No, it was just Gaumont then. And then he started with two employees in fact probably just one of them, Broomhead was one of them in Soho in two rooms or something in 1898 that was. And then from there it expanded more and more as they made films and things. And then eventually it got bigger and bigger and bigger. And then Leon wasn't that interested in England because he was still running one in France and in fact I think he was supplying most of the world for processing films because he started a big processing factory in Shepherd's Bush and that was why he was everything in Shepherd's Bush because he had this big film processing plant there. And then he built that studio with the glass things there but he was more interested in the processing and that side of things rather than actually making films. And then, well, Broomhead was more interested in making films so he wanted to buy out Leon because Leon wanted to get on back to France really. And so he had to get someone but I mean film companies were a bit dodgy at that time and probably still are. That's a risk venture you could say because they are obviously going bankrupt every five minutes as well as being successful. So most stockbrokers wouldn't touch them with a barge pole but the Ostrer Brothers thought that that was a reasonable thing to go into so they financed the whole thing and bought out Leon who went back to France. And then they of course had the control of the thing but they didn't know anything about films but they just let Bromhead run it. But the point of the thing was.

DB: At what stage did they come in?

NO: 1922.

DB: 1922.

NO: And they just let him run the whole thing like he'd been doing before. Meanwhile Hollywood's hand was getting stronger and stronger all the time and they were dominating the whole film thing until they got about 80% of the English market of Hollywood films. So Gaumont which was at that stage just making films, they didn't own cinemas or anything. They were being squeezed out of the thing. Well it's a poor thought - his investment is going to go down the drain unless he does something about it. So, he decided the only thing to do about it was to have a mass expansion, a huge expansion of the whole thing. So he refinanced the whole thing and then bought out Gainsborough Picture which was bought in

DB: In 1926, I think.

NO: Yes, he bought that one. Then he bought two film distribution companies and he bought 200 and something cinemas. I like chains, little chains. Because he said he could make the films, distribute them and have the outlet to show them the whole thing, the whole way through. And from there it went on from strength to strength but then he started negotiating with William Fox of 20th Century Fox and William Fox of course in America had 130 cinemas in his chain at that time. Mind you he borrowed some vast amounts of money. In 1929 they were negotiating with him to merge so that both companies could merge together and it would be like the biggest thing ever. William Fox at the time I think was somebody like Louis Mayer or somebody. I am not sure which one of these sports of people that died and the widow inherited all of this stuff and she didn't really want a film company - she just wanted the money.

So she was going to sell it all off. Well he couldn't risk it being bought by a competitor like the Warner Brothers or somebody else. So they had to borrow all of this money to buy into British Gaumont as well. And he did all of this in 1929. And then of course in October 1929 the Wall Street crash ends and he lost about the equivalent today of £922 million personally. And he borrowed on short term as well. He had to pay it all back the next year or so. It was a bit crazy really and so of course he lost the majority of his own company, in fact they slung him out in the end. But then the people that took over his company, they were still interested in the Gaumont British end of things and they carried on and they were on the Board of Directors and the controlling company and all the rest of it. But Bromhead didn't agree with all of this. He didn't like the idea of merging with Fox and all that sort of thing. He thought it was letting Hollywood in through the back door, that sort of thing probably.

DB: What happened to Bromhead?

NO: He had to go. He had to resign and things and his brother because his brother was there as well. There were two Bromheads. And then before he went he changed the article to the company so that no foreigner could be on the Board of Directors to make certain that false people were not able to run the thing. So that was all that was put through and it went from there. He did make millions out of it Bromhead so he wasn't a down and out.

DB: Can we go back to the Brothers?

NO: Yes.

DB: David you said was the eldest.

NO: Yes.

DB: But he wasn't immediately in the business, I don't think. He didn't take part in the filmmaking until later on perhaps.

NO: Well, I presume they gave him a job, to keep him off the streets.

DB: Am I right in thinking that Isidore was the prime mover?

NO: Oh absolutely.

DB: Yes.

NO: Totally, he actually had the control and the majority of the shares and everything were in his name I would think.

DB: Do you have any personal memories of him?

NO: Oh yes. He was a recluse when I knew him. He obviously wasn't a recluse in the 1930's when he was rushing around doing all of these things. I mean doing the shareholders meetings and speaking and all the rest of it but when I knew him he was a recluse. I mean you go down to his house and you wouldn't see him at all he would be hiding in his room and all that kind of thing. But you knew he was there because in the drawing room we would sit around and my father would say you can't sit in that chair. That's Isidore's chair. Well he wasn't in the room and he never was in the room while we were there.

DB: Tell me about your father and how he figured in the Gaumont British scene.

NO: Well.

DB: He was the baby.

NO: Yes. He became an Executive Producer, whatever that is eventually and he made quite a lot of films including, "The Wicked Lady" and all that sort of thing. He liked the costume dramas which is what that was and he liked cowboy films in fact but they never made one of these. So he was long before Spaghetti and Westerns came around.

DB: Going back to the 20's when say Bromhead was now out and they were in charge of Gaumont British, what happened of course was the coming of sound.

NO: Yes.

DB: Now presumably they still had that glass proof studio in Limegrove at that stage.

NO: Yes.

DB: Do you know how they coped with the coming of sound?

NO: I think in the very first sound film there were birds and things living up in the top of the studios. They couldn't make films during the daytime because all these birds were squeaking away and they had to wait until it was after dark until they had all gone to sleep to make a sound film, the very first ones. But then of course when they built that huge complex all the studios were sound proofed, were full of sound so it was more suitable. So it was only that.

DB: So this was at the end of the 20's and into the 30's. In 31 or 32 I seem to remember they reopened.

NO: And of course there was a problem also when Fox disappeared because sound was coming in America as well. There was a big American company that was supplying all of the sound equipment in all of their 1000 and so many cinemas. Sound equipment was a vast profit on that and of course they wanted to get their finger into all of the British cinemas as well but Isidore didn't really want them to have the monopoly like that so he got a German company to design sound equipment that they could use instead.

DB: Do you remember their name? Presumably the American company was RCA was it?

NO: It could have been RCA although is it something AT and T or something. It could have been some sort of name like that - there's the thing - eventually it was called, was it called British Acoustic or Gaumont Acoustic or something like that? And of course the other people pinched was some of his patent and they had to be sued in America and all that kind of thing.

DB: Of course and I'm leaping ahead now but Fox came back into the story at the end of the 30's didn't they?

NO: Oh yes because they financed a number of films into the 40's as well. That was the Fox company without William Fox of course.

DB: Oh yes.

NO: But the actual company carried on and I think the Fox company merged with 20th Century in America so it became 20th Century Fox.

DB: Indeed, indeed. So once they got into sound and they built a five stage studio in Limegrove it came like a factory I am sure, like the factory before.

NO: Yes.

DB: Do you have any memories or information about how things were organised?

NO: I think they were making about 40 films a year at one stage weren't they?

DB: 40! Goodness.

NO: I think so. And they were spending a million pounds a year on production or something at one stage. But later on in 1937 or so he decided that because American films were pushing their way in again he decided that there was no point in making films in Britain really so he closed down the studio for two and a half years I think. He shot the whole thing. But that.....

DB: There was a slump in '38 definitely and I believe that they owned because there was no door lot in Limegrove.

NO: No.

DB: They used the roof at Hendon and had a big field at Hendon which they built sets on and sold in '38 because they needed the cash presumably.

NO: They theoretically used the roof as well at Limegrove because there was two acres that the roof was made from.

DB: And uninterrupted views.

NO: Yes because I would go sometimes in the train from Hammersmith to Portabello Road or something and I kept looking out of the window to see where is this studio because it was obviously all of these big clumps of houses and there was nothing there. So eventually I get out of the station and walked it along Limegrove and that was when I discovered this big clump of houses. It was all gone by then.

DB: But that was in 93. In 93 they pulled it down because it was 40 years almost to the day after my going there to work and I got one of my daughter's to take a photograph of me in front of the building as it was coming down.

NO: I'm rather sentimental about that building anyway because they had a thing on the internet about finding a time capsule in it and all of that sort of thing.

DB: Did they? Oh. What are your memories of that building and of the filmmaking presumably in the 40's if you can remember?

NO: Yes, I did see The Water Tank which we were doing that film with ships and stuff in it.

DB: In the big studio?

NO: In the big studio yes. So there was a sort of battle scene going on and these ships lurking about the place and I remember that and of course we never met any of the film stars because I don't think Maurice didn't like film stars really. I don't think he didn't like films much. He didn't like film stars. He thought they were immoral and all that kind of thing – loose and all that sort of stuff.

DB: But he was married to one!

NO: I know. He obviously had double standards. But so then we never actually got introduced to any of them, none though we did have passes that we went to the cinema with which was nice.

DB: The other brothers – how did they function in the company? Can you remember?

NO: Well Mark, I think he was in charge of cinemas basically. But he died 18 years before Isidore - a long time earlier and so one did not know him too well because of that really. And yes basically that was what he did really.

DB: And Harry I believe was employed by the company as a Scenario Editor.

NO: Yes, that sort of thing. But he did live in London. He lived in Hove or somewhere. So he presumably came up and did whatever he did there.

DB: So presumably there must have been some conversation between your parents possibly in front of you or around you about what was going on in the studios. Do you remember any of that?

NO: No, no. No they never seemed to talk about it too much no.

DB: And was your mother appearing in films in the '30's? I believe

NO: No. Well in the early '30's before she was married. When she was married, she stopped films. She made about 11 films. I think in that period and of course most of them are lost aren't they.

DB: Yes.

NO: Yes.

DB: Do you know anything – well just before the coming of sound they had the quota quickie law that just came in which said there had to be a percentage of British films in the cinemas and that meant that

a whole lot of studios got built and soundproofed and all the rest of it in order to turn out these quickies and I don't think British Gaumont ever did really. Their product was much more elaborate and ambitious wasn't it?

NO: I think so yes. I think then when you went to the cinema you had a main feature and a second feature and these quickies would have been the second features wouldn't they?

DB: Yes.

NO: More or less.

DB: So you don't have any memories of the Brothers reacting to that law or anything or of them saying anything?

NO: No. I think I mention it in my book though, 'The Ostrers and Gaumont British' that my father did mention the quickies in the book. I mean I mention it in the book what my father said about the quickies.

DB: As we have said 20th Century Fox put some money into the company at the end of the 30's into the 40's.

NO: They put some in right at the beginning. Around 1927, they put some in. Well it would have been 1929 in fact just before Fox before he went down himself in actual fact.

DB: Yes but the ones that were actually accredited to the 20th Century Fox were at the beginning of the 40's.

NO: Oh the films.

DB: Yes.

NO: The films, yes.

DB: That was a Gaumont-British 20th Century co-production.

NO: Yes. I think they had some sort of arrangement with distribution as well didn't they. 20th Century Fox would distribute in America and all that kind of stuff.

DB: (References are made to distribution companies, I presume though I cannot make out which ones they are) and other things into the late 30's.

NO: Yes.

DB: Then Rank came on the scene in 1941 I believe.

NO: Yes, yes that's right.

DB: So you know anything about the business leading up to that?

NO: No, no but Isidore sold it to Rank in fact. But in 1941? I think, I think he sold it in 1941 but it wasn't paid for until a year or two later because it took him a long time to sort it all out. But he had already cleared off and gone to America by then.

DB: Was your Father still there?

NO: Yes, he was still around. Yes, definitely during the war.

DB: Do you have any memories of Limegrove during the war?

NO: Well I was too young really.

DB: Oh quite.

NO: But he did, he did say that because of the difficulties of travelling at that time that a lot of people slept in the studio and all that kind of thing. They didn't go home and things but then he always made sure that they didn't work weekends so that they could always go back to their families at weekends and that sort of thing.

DB: Yes. Phyllis Calbot told me about the hilarities of filming during the bombing and things.

NO: Yes.

DB: They'd be in huge crinoline dresses and then suddenly they'd be an alert and they'd all rush out in the corridor and lie down on the floor in those huge dresses. And she said we would all be quiet to listen for the planes and what you would hear from the other end of the corridor was a big laugh coming from Margaret Rutherford and a great load of giggling that would go on as they lay on the floor in the corridor.

NO: Was this corridor safe? Wouldn't the whole of the building have collapsed on them?

DB: This is what she told me. I don't know what the actuality was. Your Father executive produced a whole string of very successful films during the war period.

NO: Yes, absolutely and of course 'The Wicked Lady' in those films were later weren't they in 45, yes at the end of the war that would be yes.