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le et d'Angleterre
mai 1982

The Ferwellers' Story.

REAL STORIES

MC

METAL CONCENTRATORS

In Conversation with *Alice Weil*

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on behalf of
Metal Concentrators

A vivacious woman with countless anecdotes and a memory that is truly astounding. Alice views the world through wry eyes that exude a bemused twinkle. Although she is not a jeweller, and confesses that she has never attempted to create a piece of jewellery, she is undoubtedly one of the most knowledgeable personalities within the industry, having been associated with the jewellery trade for over 38 years. During this time, she has travelled to countless jewellery and watch exhibitions throughout the world. Her monthly column in SA Jewellery News became a favourite read, delving with precise eloquence into the exotic and glamorous world of jewellery and watches. Covering a glittering array of topics including fine jewellery, timepieces, diamonds, pearls, coloured stones, precious metals, auctions, luxury goods, shopping, antiques, fashion and celebrities, Alice's writing has become essential reading for those who want to keep up with what's happening in the trade.

Despite her diminutive stature, she radiates palpable energy and presence. She is smartly attired in an avocado green cardigan, cream slacks and cream shoes; her hair is immaculately coiffed. She wears an eye-catching heavy beadwork necklace – boldly displaying at least 30 strands of threaded beads in green and purple that perfectly match her ensemble.

Over the years, she has become revered, ferreting out facts and trivia about an industry with which, by accident, she fell in love.

Sitting opposite me in the lounge of her comfortable Sandton townhouse, she shares her experiences.

"You see, back then (38 years ago), I had actually retired. I had done 10 years with an American company, Engelhard Industries and I was looking forward to a break. Incidentally, Charles Engelhard was

a founder investor in Rustenburg Plats. They dealt in precious metals – gold and platinum. They also had a gold processing facility and they exported ornaments (we weren't allowed to export bullion or bars in those times). So, I got a bit of exposure to gold and design.

Anyway, around that time, the lady who was running the Diamond News and South African Jeweller magazine (now SA Jewellery News) emigrated and I was offered the job. So, I took it.”

“What was it like in those early days?”

“The magazine was based in Kimberley and there was no one to help me – I had to do everything myself. Everything! But as I got more and more involved in the industry, I found I really liked it.”

“What have you enjoyed the most?”

“Oh, my gosh ... I have had the opportunity to meet the most interesting people and I have been able to travel the world. It has been fantastic! You know, people ask me when I'm going to retire – and I tell them, never! I need to keep being involved and also to interact with younger people – it's very stimulating!”

“What are the characteristics that have got you to where you are?”

“Well firstly, let me tell you I am not a journalist. I actually went to the Michaelis School of Art in Cape Town. But I always knew I could write. I started with the school magazine and it came so naturally. Also, I was a great reader as a child ... my mother called me a book-worm ... and I was an admirer of the writing in New Yorker magazine. Those writers helped me develop my style.”

“So, what advice would you give aspiring business-women?”

“Work every day!”

“What is your take on the current jewellery environment in South Africa?”

“You know, the talent is here – South Africa has wonderful designers. It's the market that's not so good ... and that is a problem that goes back much further. The industry has had no assistance or acknowledgement from the government. I remember 30 years ago when there was a huge billboard that greeted visitors arriving at Jan Smuts Airport, proclaiming: 'You've just entered the land of gold and diamonds!’

I witnessed the growth of the diamond and jewellery trade through the golden years – and then through its gradual decline, as frustrated diamond cutters fled to countries that were more accommodating to their needs. Over the years all the major diamond cutters moved out.”

“So tell me, Alice, what’s your idea of perfect happiness?”

“Family! I have three children, seven grandchildren (they are so loving) and two great granddaughters.”

What is your greatest fear?

“Losing my independence.”

“Which living person do you most admire?”

“That’s difficult, because they are all dead! I have outlived everyone!”

“Okay then – someone you especially admire from the past.”

“My father. He was an immigrant from Russia ... he had limited education ... he left at 17 ... but he had a big personality. He was a scout for the British during the Boer War and he was presented with a medal by Queen Victoria. He was a very interesting person and I was particularly close to him. He had great confidence in me ... he was my mentor. When I was 18 he sent me overseas to further my education ... I wrote home nearly every day – and he kept every one of my letters. Those letters gave him so much pleasure because he knew they had been written by an educated person. He was a very wise man ... Still today, I talk to him ...”

“What do you say?”

“Dad, you were right!”

“Phew!” Silence. I am deeply touched!

“May I offer you a refreshment? Come through to my study.”

A silver tray displays an assortment of cold cans, dripping with condensation and two crystal glasses. As I select an iced tea, my eye is caught by the magnificent collection of books that fill every space of the stacked shelves around the study.

“These are magnificent!”

“I have collected the international watch and jewellery catalogues and art books from every famous jewellery house in the world. Just look at these beautiful designs ... and the quality of the photographs! I also have a passion for watches ... I think I have every book published in the Cartier coffee table range. I loved going to the International Watch Expo in Basle, Switzerland.”

We return to the lounge, quiet, comforting – memories leaking from the walls – stories encapsulated within the fine collectables.

“Alice, what is your greatest regret?”

“In the main, I don’t have too many regrets. I am content with my life and with what I have done. It’s just frustrating that I cannot do everything I want to these days. And it’s hard watching everyone who was important to me disappear – very hard!”

“How would your closest friends describe you?”

“I haven’t got any left! That’s why I like keeping in touch with younger people these days.”

“Which talent would you most like to have?”

“I am quite happy with what I am. It has been so fulfilling to have had an outlet for my creativity.”

“What do you consider your greatest achievement?”

“Being successful in this business. It has been a vocation.”

“What is it that you most dislike?”

“Smoking! I hate being around people who smoke!”

“If you had your time again, what would you do differently?”

“I should have studied journalism at university rather than art.”

“What is your motto?”

“A verse from Ecclesiastics: ‘Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might!’”

“What is next for you in life?”

“At the moment I am coasting.”

I leave Alice Weil and her world of memories feeling inspired by her life so filled with richness of experience. Having seen the industry in all its facets, and written with such passion over so many years, she displays utter contentment, knowing that the world she knew has changed forever. Regardless, she is ever keen to learn more.

The Jewellers' Story.

An initiative from Metal Concentrators.

Neville Crosse, his wife Charlotte and son Grant purchased Metal Concentrators (Pty) Ltd (Metcon) in late 2015 and rapidly became aware of the issues and difficulties faced by retail jewellers and manufacturing jewellers on a day to day basis. This led to a lot of thought and discussions as to whether Metcon could play a role in improving the sustainability of the industry.

To that end, Metcon created The Jewellers' Story. An initiative intended to provide a platform for dialogue and debate within the industry.

The first phase was a series of published caricatures presenting the compelling case to the public that purchasing South African manufactured goods has a number of benefits for the jewellery purchaser as well as developing the industry to be more inclusive of all the talented people in the country.

The second phase seeks not only to highlight the most apparent issues, but as a space to share knowledge and wisdom from the most senior and innovative participants, and to nurture emerging talented jewellery makers, as well as to help established businesses struggling to compete at the global industry level. To tell important stories. To share lessons learned. To establish a sense of community within the industry.

There are many challenges ahead for the industry, from both direct and indirect forces. Only by working together to confront them as a community can we triumph over them and provide a new hope for all South African jewellery retailers and manufacturers.

This hope we place in The Jewellers' Story.

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