



## Michaela Denis: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Michaela Denis

**Name of interviewer:**

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**Name of cameraman:**

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United Kingdom

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c. 28 minutes

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### **1. The early years**

*Int: Where did you live when you were child?*

MD: When I was a child I lived in London mostly I think.

*Int: Did you have a garden? Did you have animals?*

MD: I had a garden but I got all the neighbouring pets of all the other people coming into my garden. I just stood and enticed them in and they used to come and talk to me. Also I had a very close connection with my cat and one day I was in bed and he brought me a present and dropped it onto my face and it was a dead mouse.

*Int: Were you horrified or pleased?*

MD: Horrified at first being a vegetarian, then I realised it was a present, I got over it as I do. But he didn't do



it again luckily.

*Int: I believe you got interested in fashion as you grew up, could you tell me about that?*

MD: Yes, I was a fashion designer and I learnt to cut and do most of it for a short time and people wanted me to model for them which I can't remember, I didn't do much of it because then of course I got into wildlife when I married.

*Int: How old were you? Did you go to college?*

MD: No.

*Int: You didn't. So you worked with a fashion house?*

MD: I got a scholarship as it was, for going to a fashion house. That was that and I learnt how to cut patterns and things like that. I mean I couldn't afford to pay, they just took me for nothing as long as I mentioned where I was trained you know.

*Int: So where was that?*

MD: That was I think in Bond Street or something like that, I've forgotten it was so many years ago, but it was somewhere in London.

*Int: And I gather then as a result of that you went to New York?*

MD: I think someone asked me to marry them when I went. I didn't like him at all. We went to a party and actually [laughs] he came in and tried something nasty, so I took my shoe off and banged him on the head [gesture hitting him]. He was impressed by this, that I immediately got an offer of marriage, but it didn't work out. We had nothing in common. Except that I had wounded him when he deserved it.

*Int: So, I believe that at sometime during this point is when you first met Armand.*

MD: Yes it was, I met Armand

*Int: So what did you think of Armand when you first saw him?*

MD: I fell instantly in love, completely in love and luckily he fell in love with me. I thought he was a wonderful man. He was very well educated and knowledgeable about animals of course. And it was wonderful, it was a wonderful marriage. But you know he got Parkinson's disease in the end which was very sad of course for him, so he died and I met this other husband and married him.



*Int: And who was that?*

MD: Sir William O'Brien Lindsay

## **2. Marrying Armand and first experiences in Africa**

*Int: Anyway shall we go back to when you first met Armand. Did you know anything about him?*

MD: I knew he was a great animal lover and so forth and I just fell in love with him. Luckily he fell in love with me. His mother was a bit hostile at first before she met me because I wasn't a Roman Catholic and in fact I'm an agnostic actually but I'm a spiritualist, I believe in spirits because I see them which is very useful of course and also I'm a natural healer, I've helped a lot of people. So, is there anything else you'd like to ask?

*Int: Oh yes, I gather you were proposed to by Armand in quite interesting circumstances in Bolivia. Can you tell me about that?*

MD: I have to think back, it was so long ago. He just asked me to marry him and of course I was very happy and said yes straight away. And my mother in law who was a strict Catholic wrote me an angry letter which I never received luckily. But when she met me, she apologised and said don't take any notice of it, burn it please. Now that I've met you I'm very happy, because Armand's first wife was ever so revengeful. She was the niece of the president I think it was, but anyhow she wasn't especially nice in her morals.

*Int: So they got divorced.*

MD: Yes, they got divorced very easily.

*Int: And as I say, I gather you got married in Bolivia?*

MD: Bolivia, yes.

*Int: Can you tell me what happened after that immediately after you got married, what you did on your honeymoon?*

MD: We just continued working.

*Int: What were you working on?*

MD: Films



*Int: Do you remember what that was about? That particular one?*

MD: We had dangerous shots to take, I remember once being up a tree when an elephant decided to scratch its back on. I was hanging on the top of the tree like this [gestures] thinking oh God am I going to fall underneath because I'm sure he wouldn't have been very friendly.

*Int: So you got yourself into a lot of sticky situations.*

MD: Oh, all the time, knocking my face — a couple of accidents like that. Getting cut across my forehead once [indicates where] which luckily people can repair so easily now with surgery and that kind of thing. And I did get my nose broken once in the war when I was running for a taxi and called it down it stopped a little way down and I raced and got it and a man said "this is my taxi, I called for it" and went boom [imitates his fist] and knocked me on the nose and broke it.

*Int: Really*

MD: Yes, but as he had a history of violence I didn't prosecute but he had to give an apology for putting my nose out.

*Int: Can I turn back to South America which is where you were filming with Armand first. Is that correct?*

MD: I think it was in South America. Yes, it was.

*Int: It must have been. I mean you had never been in anything like that before had you?*

MD: No I hadn't.

*Int: What did you think about that?*

MD: Oh, I thought it was alright. I liked it in fact, I liked a bit of danger. I think it's stimulating.

*Int: And so, how did you put up with the discomforts of all this travelling.*

MD: It was part of the job.

*Int: And you accepted that?*

MD: Oh yes, of course.



*Int: Why?*

MD: Well, because I wanted to look my best. So I did my best I put on my make up and so forth. And I was very careful not to get burnt in the sun. I always used sun lotion on my arms or any part that was bare. One had to because, you know you can get such terrible damage from the sun. It's our good friend and our terrible friend. Almost like human friends you know.

*Int: So, can you tell me about the filmmaking progress. Because you, I gather, you got involved in Hollywood films, you got involved as a film double at one time.*

MD: Did I, I can't remember that.

*Int: King Solomon's Mines (1)*

MD: Oh yes, I was Deborah Kerr's double for some scenes

*Int: So what did you do?*

MD: Oh just appear in one or two things, minor things. We weren't so terribly alike. She was far more good looking than I was.

*Int: Were you excited when you got that job?*

MD: Yes, I think I was. Yes, it got me into another country which I wanted to do. Yes, I was excited about it.

*Int: And how did you find Africa for that first —?*

MD: I loved it, from the minute I saw it. I just loved it. I was in Africa before you see. It was before I married Armand I think, and I got friendly with the Masai. I used to act as their post woman really because they had miles to come across to Nairobi. But when they had a message I used to hang out a red dressing gown and they came across and got their mail. When they were allowed to carry spears and things they went into Nairobi with me, which was a great sensation for the tourists because they saw all these tall men [indicates their height] with their spears in their hands and myself in the middle of it all. I don't know what they thought of it. But everybody looked, some of the tourists took pictures.

*Int: And, I want to start talking about filming and what you did when you did that. What was the situation when you were filming, who was doing the filming?*

MD: Mostly my husband, and we had other cameramen as well when we were both together. We had men called — Tom Stobart, Des Bartlett, yes he did some of the filming, quite a lot of the filming, it was all very





exciting. But of course it was exciting when we were in great peril.[laughs]

*Int: So, were you frightened in those times?*

MD: Well, yes. When the elephant started rubbing its back up against the tree I was on. I was thinking please God, don't let him come out and look upwards. So I just clung on to the tree as hard as I could.

*Int: How close did you get to really dangerous animals like lions?*

MD: Very close that was our job. So we got very close to animals, to lions and so forth. We just stalked about to see where they were where the wind was and things like that, and tried to snatch as many as possible —. If you did see them very close the best thing is to just ignore them. But if you start running away they are going to chase you and they are far quicker than we are

*Int: And that's what they're used to — chasing things*

MD: Yes. They are used to chasing things more than we are!

*Int: Who did you learn about that stuff from?*

MD: Well just instinct to be honest, when you're in danger you act accordingly.

*Int: So did you ever do any filming yourself or did you always just appear in the pictures?*

MD: I mostly appeared. I took some stills sometimes which I put in the books which I wrote. One was a runaway bestseller, it was amazing it was Leopard in my Lap (2).

*Int: Yes I've heard of that.*

MD: That was wonderful I can't believe it.

### **3. Meeting new people and spiritual healing**

*Int: So you made your films in Africa, some of them, you've also been to New Guinea and Australia. Tell me about those places what about New Guinea – what do you remember about that?*

MD: It was an exciting, I loved it — because I love these primitive people I get on with them at once. I not afraid of them and they see that. I'm used to shaking hands with people like that. They look at my skin – they look down my neck sometimes to see if I'm just white on the top! [laughs] I loved them all and they of course



responded because Europeans are sometimes afraid of them or just wouldn't mix with them. But I had every kind of mixture of people coming to my house. Some of them said "you can't have those people, it's not done" So I said "Well it is done in my house and I think you all ought to be more open-minded about it" So I was rather sort of dictatorial on that. [laughs]

*Int: Very modern in that way*

MD: Now yes. But in that day they were horrified to find I had Indians, Africans, everyone you could imagine in my house. But I loved all these people they were nice and gentle and were always very nice to me and I was nice to them.

*Int: I completely concur with you. Can you tell me more about Armand – what he was like?*

MD: He was absolutely wonderful. He was very knowledgeable. He was a perfect person. Very tall, which was very nice taller than I was because I didn't like to have to look down too much. He was a wonderful man very knowledgeable about everything in fact. And I adored my mother-in-law, I could never with my mother. At first she was horrified Armand married a girl especially as I'm not a Catholic. I'm an agnostic but I'm a spiritualist as well, because I see spirits which is very good.

*Int: How do you see spirits?*

MD: I see them as people very often, I see them with someone.

*Int: You said you would do the spiritual healing – can you tell me about that?*

MD: Well I put my hands on people and I think of their illness and it goes away. But I used to do it from a distance. If someone had some sick person they would bring me a photograph or a piece of their hair or something and I would heal from a distance, but it really worked. I didn't charge for it because it was a gift I had.

*Int: Do you remember when did you start doing spiritual healing?*

MD: Yes I remember the child I saw who had died and I said to his mother, who didn't know anything. She had lost her child. I said who is the little boy with the bad arm, "she said what do you mean" and I said well he's here. I said he's wearing a bandage and she was so delighted to think that he was alright. But it was a big comfort to her.

*Int: Where was that?*

MD: It was in —was it in Belguim or Bern? It could have been England. He was wearing a little yellow pullover and I saw him very clearly. She was so happy of course because it's not nice to think when you die you die.

*Int: Yes*

#### **4. Fame, approaching rhinos and pet animals**

*Int: Could you tell me that again about being famous?*

MD: Well I didn't realise I was famous. Until I got caught — I went down to the loo once and people were tearing bits of toilet paper for me to give an autograph on! [laughs]

*Int: Really. Is that because of the way they did the films? You were in Africa making the films and then they put them on television.*

MD: Well they didn't know who I was until they saw me on television. But it stopped a bus even! The bus said they usually got told when the Queen or someone was coming along, which I was amazed at, you know. Funny. But people rushing in getting me to sign on toilet paper even [laughs] But I had no idea I was famous.

*Int: There was a story we've read about Gertie the Rhino (3) can you tell us about that?*

MD: Jumping on the rhino, yes I can. I got on the rhino. How could I do it. I can't imagine now how I got on the rhino. It was sort of stood still and suddenly it bolted and I slipped off the back. [laughs]

*Int: Why did you do that?*

MD: Why did I do it, because she would have killed me otherwise

*Int: No get on — No I understand why you fell off. Why did you get onto the rhino in the first place?*

MD: I don't know. Probably daredevil in me. It was a challenge probably. I did silly things sometimes. [laughs]

*Int: Tell me about the African animals then, which ones you like?*

MD: Which I prefer? Well I loved my leopard. But of course it was dangerous to keep him with other people around. He was wonderful with me I couldn't guarantee him with anybody else. And his favourite trick with me was to bite the bottom of my handbag and all the things would fall out.

*Int: What was the leopard's name?*



MD: Chewy

*Int: How did you get Chewy?*

MD: Well that was the name in—

*Int: No I mean how did he come in your possession?*

MD: I just adopted him, he was around and I adopted him.

*Int: Where were you?*

MD: That was in Kenya. And he used to sit in my lap and that was my first book, *Leopard in my Lap* (2). But he was wonderful with me but I couldn't vouch for him with other people. He used to jump on their back and things like that.

*Int: How about Armand? Was he good with Armand?*

MD: He was alright with Armand, yes. Anyone he knew, anyone he didn't he would play tricks on them. I told this one man who came round to see us — don't go over there my leopard is there. He said "You've got a leopard?" and I said yes. He went over to him. I said oh do be careful. And of course as soon as he saw him he leapt straight on his back. It was a struggle to get the man out alive [laughs]

**END**

### **References**

1. KING SOLOMON'S MINES (1950, d. Compton Bennett, Andrew Marton)
2. Denis, M (1955) *Leopard in my lap* W. H. Allen, London.
3. SEARCH FOR GERTIE (Travellers' Tales: Armand and Michaela On Safari)