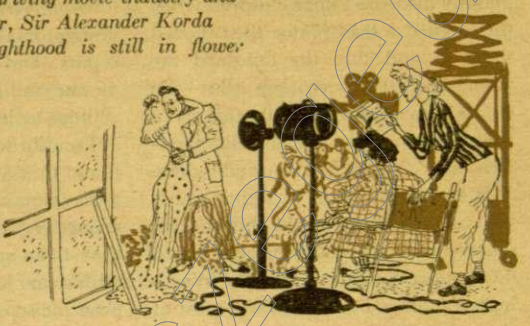
Patron saint to England's thriving movie industry and to Hungarians the world over, Sir Alexander Korda is one-man proof that knighthood is still in flower.



Alexander Korda: Knight Errant

by ILES BRODY

CHAUCER WOULD CALL Sir Alexander Korda, London production chief for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and a partner in United Artists, "a very parfit, gentle knight."

However, some 30 years ago Alexander Korda, commoner, was eking out a scant living in his native Budapest by writing newspaper and magazine articles. None of them brought him more than the equivalent of a dollar in American money. Although at the time he hadn't set foot out of Hungary, he wrote extensively about England and English subjects.

Aside from the indignity of a meager wage, he was chided for being an Anglophile. Only recently at a sweltering Hollywood conference, fellow movie magnates voiced the same accusation against him. "Korda," said one of them, taking off his sport coat and beflowered Charvet tie and opening the collar of his polo shirt, "you favor the British too much. Particularly since you've become an aristocrat."

Korda, one of few Hollywood bigwigs not given to wearing two-tone suits, fancy shirts and rainbow ties, drew himself up in his impeccable Savile Row garment, including waistcoat, and coolly answered:

"Gentlemen, have you read Julian Green? In the preface to one of his books, one man asks another:

'Do you like the English?'

'No,' is the answer.

'The French?' 'No.' 'The Americans?' 'No.' 'The Germans?' 'No.'

'Then whom *do* you like?'

'My friends . . .' "

The English have proved to be Korda's best friends, but then he's done right well by them. Only a dozen years ago, people entertained the notion that no decent moving picture could ever be made in England. Among other insurmountable

blandly disowned their children when they signed a lease; later they moved them in and told the landlord the youngsters were visiting. But the courts have judged that this is a breach of contract and that the landlord may dispossess. He usually does.

Is there a solution in sight? Those who ought to know shake their heads. Government housing projects will put 4,000 more living units on the Washington market by September, most of them in dormitories. But these are offered only to those who have moved to Washington within four months. Four thousand units are not many, in view of the 5,636 applications made to WHC in a single recent month.

Are the landlords happy over the sight of desirable tenants clawing each other to pay them money? Not as happy as you might expect. For one thing, Rent Control—a local District arrangement, distinct from OPA—actually works: to what extent can be judged by the fact that Detroit landlords allegedly sent a group of investigators to Washington, heard their report, and promptly raised a fund of one million dollars to fight rent ceilings at home.

Landlords find it pleasant to demand that a tenant be single, solvent, sober, non-smoking, childless, and an executive, in the sweet knowledge that their specifications will be met within an hour. They might find it even pleasanter if prospective tenants were allowed to bid up the rents.

If Washington is not altogether a landlords' paradise, it is, without any doubt, a home hunters' hell. Any job-seeker or dollar-a-year man headed for the nation's capital will be wise to take the clear and unanimous warning issued by those close to the problem:

Don't come to Washington. If you must come, don't bring your family. If you must bring your family, bring a certified check for down-payment on a trashy, suburban home—and a wife who can do her own wash!

The Hymn That Went Wrong

MARCHING ALONG in one of the Crusades, a band of French pilgrims sang a stirring hymn in honor of their knight-hero, Mambron. The tune was so catchy that the Saracens stole it from their enemies, and it is still recognized in the Near East. Decades passed before the French revived the strain—but when they did, it was to twist it into a song of ridicule, scoffing for verse after verse their great enemy the Duke of Marlborough, whom they called "Malbrooke." Before long the tune wafted across the channel, again from enemy to enemy, and English barber-shop quartettes fondly warbled to departing pals that now old favorite, "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow." When the same tune turned up again, this time in the United States, it had fallen from respectability completely. Here it has become a brazen chant for midnight carousers, the quavering serenade of the soaks—"We Won't Go Home Until Morning."

—JAMES ALDREDGE

obstacles they cited the climate. Korda reminded himself that even Hollywood's sunshine has to be heightened by artificial light, and that most films are made indoors anyway.

So he formed the London Film Company, and in foggy England produced on a tiny budget the epochal *Henry the Eighth*. The picture was remarkable for two reasons—it was the first good film to come out of England, and it was the first movie in which royalty realistically burped to its heart's content, ate with its hands and played cards with one of its brides on a mussed-up honeymoon bed. A curiously beautiful and talented young actress impersonated Ann Boleyn. She was Merle Oberon, Korda's discovery. A curiously unbeautiful but formidably clever actor played the king. He was Charles Laughton, another Korda discovery. The London Film Company overnight was big business.

KORDA's 50-year life and career is a saga of friendship. He has innumerable friends chosen without regard to nationality, creed, color, wealth or position. It's true, however, that Hungarians are in the majority, and many thousands of them regard him as their patron saint. Korda, although a naturalized British subject since 1937 and a knight of the United Kingdom since 1942, has never forgotten that he was once a minor reporter in Budapest.

He has never been known to refuse a friend in need—or, for that matter, turn down an enemy. Shortly before the war an Hungarian writer, who for years had written poisonous articles against him, cabled him for a loan of 200 dollars, the price of a steamship ticket from New York to Europe. The next day the man received 500. It's a Korda trick to lend money to people by whom he doesn't want to be bothered again. He gives them more than they can repay and then forgets about it.

Korda is a tall man, panther-like in movement, filled with a nervous energy which he takes out, in part, in a passion for travel. For a half hour's conference in New York, he gleefully hops a plane from Hollywood. Dividing his time between America and England, he goes overseas via bomber.

At the outset of hostilities, he asked Prime Minister Churchill to let him fight at the front with other Tommies. "Korda," said the Prime Minister, "you carry on as before with your very valuable services."

From behind thick glasses his blue eyes laugh at you with maddening tolerance and good humor. He is always in dire need of a haircut and gets one only if Merle Oberon, now his wife, begs him to go to the barber.

His eyes were ruined in his youth when he read day and night by the scant light of candle butts filched from his mother, the widow of an estate overseer. At 12 he devoured Tolstoi's *War and Peace* at a single sitting. He used to play a game with the late Sandor Hunyady, the Hungarian short story writer and playwright. When they met, one would greet the other with:

"Elena Ivanovna Popova!"

"A landowning little widow with

dimples in her cheeks," would come the unhesitating reply, "from Chekhov's *The Bear*." The two penniless newspapermen read widely, and knew the classics by heart. Korda had the edge, however: he read most books in the original, for he possessed an extraordinary talent for languages.

DESPITE HIS MOTHER'S supreme Hungarian dishes, he was unbelievably thin and his collar perpetually remained three sizes too big for him. From a too early youth he adored cigars. Today he has them specially made in Cuba, ordering 11 thousand at a time; and keeps them in the humidors of a New York tobacco specialist's store. He smokes all day, chain style.

The young Korda spent much time in the Budapest cafe, *New York*, in its balconied section called "Siberia"—so-named because it was frequented by pretty Hungarian girls who went to Russia before World War I to dance, sing and marry grand-dukes but usually returned broke and somewhat the worse for wear. Korda sat among the outcast girls, writing and sharing his pennies with them.

The oath of a knight is: "I shall maintain and defend the honest adoes and quarrels of all ladies of honor, widows, orphans and maids of good fame." Years before he attained knighthood, Korda silently amended this oath and added to the list all ladies of dishonor, maids of ill fame and men friends down on their luck.

In 1909 he turned to writing about the new art "running photography." In a very short time he was editing a publication entitled *Movie Magazine*.

This was a four-page affair, pamphlet-size, filled with naive information about the new art, which Korda wrote, edited, corrected, sold and did everything but print. His friends decided that he had taken leave of his senses. Such a talented young writer turning to a fly-by-night business!

Next thing they knew he turned up in Sweden, then the only country that made tolerable films. He had gone to meet the great movie stars, Asta Nielsen and Waldemar Psylander, and to learn technique at the Nordisk Film Company. He learned few secrets but fluent Swedish.

In 1916 he formed a movie company and built modern studios. The men who supplied the money went broke long ago and Korda, who in the interim had made a fortune abroad, supported some of them for years. Only war halted the gratuities.

Korda made few films in Hungary, none of them memorable. His activities cut short by the Bela Kun revolution, we find him next in Vienna, producing and directing for the Sacha Film Company *Samson and Delilah* and Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. The latter was a success exhibited all over the world. On its merits he got a Hollywood contract as a director for First National at 750 dollars a week. Though *Helen of Troy* was the only notable picture he made there, it led to a job with Fox Films and a still fatter salary.

Korda being Korda, it was only natural that a lawyer friend from his old Budapest days promptly began to bombard him with letters asking for a job in the movies. Korda sold a "bill of goods" to the company president and the lawyer forthwith became a writer for Fox at a handsome salary. Korda in usual fashion advanced the money for the trip from Hungary, and invited the gentleman to stay with him when he arrived in Hollywood.

After a few rounds of work, the lawyer ran into one of the studio's top executives and struck up a conversation about Korda. "He's a great guy, isn't he?" enthused the executive. "Great, what's so great about him?" asked Korda's friend, proceeding to run his benefactor into the ground. A few hours later he received a "services no longer required" note.

Korda pleaded with the executive to reinstate him. When he over-insisted, the executive disclosed the reason for the man's dismissal. Unperturbed, Korda argued on to point out that intrigue is typically an Hungarian art and that his friend was otherwise a splendid man. The executive remained adamant but Korda found his "friend" a job elsewhere.

When he later lost his own job on the Fox lot, he moved on to Paris, where he produced and directed two pictures for French consumption, *Chez Maxim* and *Marius*. From there he proceeded to London to prove that movies could be made in England.

Setting out to raise capital for his newly formed London Film Company, he barraged prospective backers with charm, persuasiveness and a near-religious belief in his mission. With the capital gained by these weapons, he built marvelous studios in Denham and undertook large-scale film producing. *The Shape of Things to Come* and *Rembrandt* were products of this period.

He also worked hand-in-glove with a then rather politically unimportant man by the name of Winston Churchill, on a cavalcade drama depicting the reign of George V. The King's death cut this project short, but not Korda's friendship with Churchill.

It is comparatively easy for a foreigner to achieve success in the United States, a country accustomed to foreigners. It is much more difficult in inbred England—and it is doubly remarkable that an Hungarian, with a temperament so alien to the Englishman's, should father that country's movie industry. Nothing less than the genius of Korda could do it.

An Embarrassing Time-piece

FOR THE FIRST TIME in its history, the Elgin Watch Company decided to advertise its product on the air. At the conclusion of the premier broadcast, a pretentious affair starring Shirley Temple, the announcer orated at great length on the quality of the Elgin time-piece. No sooner had he finished when the station announcer chimed in and with stentorian voice said:

"This is KNX, 7:30 p.m., B-U-L-O-V-A, Bulova watch time!"

—SHEPARD HENKIN