

PROFILE

Alan Ereira

BY DOREEN WACHMANN

AFTER a distinguished career as an historian and documentary filmmaker, at the age of 81, Alan Ereira has struck gold with his latest book, *Gold: How it Shaped History* (Pen & Sword, £25).

Alan hails from a mixed marriage — between a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi.

“My father’s family were Sephardi. They lived in Amsterdam till the end of the 19th century and then came to London. My mother’s family were from eastern Europe,” he told me.

He explained that in Amsterdam and later among British Sephardim, the community would pay a *dota*, a marriage award to Sephardim who married fellow Sephardim.

Because his father did not marry a Sephardi woman, he could not receive the *dota*.

Alan said: “My grandmother much resented this withholding of money. The *dota* had a curious and somewhat alarming history because it’s basically slightly racist.”

His parents were practising Sephardim.

He said: “Orthodoxy is not a word that sits in the Sephardi community particularly well. I left the Sephardi community as fast as I possibly could.”

The reason was that, after walking nearly three miles from

‘I had to walk six miles to get a hat to be barmitzvah’

his home in Cricklewood to Lauderdale Road Synagogue in Westminster on the day of his barmitzvah, he was told that he couldn’t be barmitzvah because he was wearing a kippa and not a proper hat.

Alan said: “That was incredibly offensive, I had to walk six miles there and back to get a proper hat before I could be barmitzvah.”

“I thought that I didn’t want anything to do with these people. It was a closed world. I didn’t feel part of it.”

After graduating in history from Cambridge, Alan became a producer for BBC programmes for schools, winning international recognition and awards.

He then went across to TV schools for some years and then onto documentary series.

He explained how his latest book was conceived: “When I was working on a history series about the Spanish Armada, I went to look at the gold in Columbia which was connected with Drake’s seizure of gold in the Spanish Armada.

“While I was there the BBC asked me to investigate an archaeological site in Columbia, which is known as the Lost City.

“I went to the extraordinary area in the north of Columbia. It was cut off with a high mountain city in a difficult area. I found there were other cities there, which were still occupied and had been functioning since before the Spanish conquest.

“These Kogi people wanted to end their isolation. They felt that we were destroying the world and

Babylonians attacked the Temple for its 40 tons of gold



they needed to send a message to the world.

“It was the most extraordinary experience, going into a civilisation that had survived from before the Spanish conquest and was still functional. It was unconnected to the outside world, except in frail ways.

“I showed them what a camera was. I said that I had this machine that has an eye that sees and an ear that remembers.

“If you want to speak to people in the rest of the world, you can use this and it will be as though they have come to the door of your house. But they won’t be there. You don’t have to meet them. They don’t need to know where you are.

“They decided that was a good system for communication.”

The 1990 BBC documentary *From the Heart of the World — The Elder Brother’s Warning* ran on BBC One and Two.

Alan said: “Most of the things they said we were doing to destroy the world, we did already know and therefore it wasn’t that difficult to get that message across.

“They said they were taking up too much oil, too much stuff from out of the earth, that we were demolishing everything. We knew that.

“But they also said that we were taking all the gold out of the earth, that it was killing the earth. I was baffled. It didn’t

make sense. What difference would it make if gold didn’t exist? So I didn’t make much of that in the film.”

He continued: “Subsequently I remained in touch with them because now I was responsible for their connection to the world, so I kept going back.

“They kept saying that gold is really important. So I decided that I must study it. To my astonishment over a long period of time I realised the extent to which the engagement with gold has completely transformed the world we live in.

“This is not talked about in the history that we learn or teach ourselves.”

One of the things that Alan learned was that, just as the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was a key element in the history of the Jewish people, so it was in the history of gold.

Alan asked why the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple.

He said: “It was a very strange attack. Jerusalem is not on a trading route.

“It is not on a military route and yet Nebuchadnezzar devoted 30 months to the siege of Jerusalem. It was a colossally expensive operation. Why?

What was it that made Jerusalem so important to the Babylonians?

“The answer is that the Babylonians knew, because according to the Book of Kings, that Hezekiah had shown the Babylonians the gold that was in the Temple.

“After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, people had flooded down to Jerusalem, bringing the gold from the shrines in the north, as well as their own personal trading gold. All of it went

into the Temple.

“It has been estimated that there was more than 40 tons of gold in the Temple. Hezekiah had shown the Babylonians the gold because he had hoped for an alliance with them.

“The prophet Isaiah said that that was a very stupid thing to do. It was for the gold that the Babylonians were besieging the Temple.”

Alan has shown that new archaeological evidence from the *Astronomical Diaries* has revealed accurate accounts of the price of gold at the time of the destruction of the Temple.

He said: “The *Astronomical Diaries* accounts show the prices of gold and silver month by month, when they captured the Temple. The value of silver soared which means that the value of gold had collapsed. Gold had been taken out of the Temple. This had a colossally serious effect.”

Before the destruction of the Temple, the world’s first coinage was made of electrum, a combination of gold and silver, 40 per cent gold and 60 per cent silver.

Alan said: “After the fall of Jerusalem, the relative values of gold and silver changed dramatically, so dramatically that the value of the gold and silver was more than value of coin itself. People started dismantling the coins.

“The result was an economic catastrophe. The market collapsed as the price of gold basically halved. Something had to be done.

“A new king came to power. Croesus solved the problem by producing a new kind of coinage. After the destruction of the Tem-

ple, he produced two new coins, one solid silver and one solid gold coin which was worth 10 of the solid silver coins.

“They were no longer using a combination of metals. They had gone to a gold standard and the currency stabilised.

“The whole journey into coinage was triggered by the economic catastrophe that followed the destruction of the Temple.”

This linkage with Jewish history is just one of many fascinating facts this book reveals from ancient history to present day.

I asked Alan why he thought that the Kogi were so worried that we were destroying the world by plundering too much gold?

He replied: “We think that gold is totally inert, that nothing happens to it. Its magical nature is that it’s unchanged through time. It doesn’t react with anything.

“Put a piece of gold in the ground, dig it out 1,000 years later and it’s still bright and shiny and un-corroded. Nothing has happened to it.

“But recent experiments with nanoparticles of gold, tiny, tiny clusters of atoms, only visible to electro-microscope, show that if you add gold nanoparticles to corn, wheat, rice, tobacco and parsley, it accelerates the growth of the seedlings.

“This substance of gold which is not supposed to react, somehow energises things that are growing in the ground. Perhaps it does feed the world. We don’t know. We still have a lot of work to do. The Kogi are well worth listening to.”

■ Alan will speak about his book at Limmud in Birmingham on December 23.

Idan’s song is a call for release of all the hostages

ON October 7, Sagi Dekel Chen was abducted to Gaza from Nir Oz when he went out to protect his family.

The 36-year-old, held captive by Hamas for more than 400 days, has never met his third daughter who was born this year.

Sagi’s favourite song is *Yored Ha’Erev* (Evening Falls) by Idan Raichel.

The graduates of the youth music village Bikurim — founded by Sagi and the late Tamar Kedem

Siman Tov — collaborate with Raichel on an emotional version of the song, under the name Tamari Project, in a call for the return of Sagi and all the other hostages in Gaza.

Raichel said: “Since the tragedy, nothing will ever be the way we imagined growing up, but it will be different. When they all return, we will try to revive all the dreams.”

Itai Dekel Chen, Sagi’s brother and Tamari Project manager,

added: “To be honest, I also get lost every evening . . . trying to think, ‘What else can we do?’

“Thank God that we have an amazing family and good friends who give us a bit of relief and healing. Thank God that one of these friends is also Idan Raichel.

“Idan was the first to reach my mother in the hospital, the first to reach the broken Nir Oz community after the evacuation to Eilat, and the first person I called when we wanted to dedicate a song to

Sagi and his wife Avital.

“In the meantime, he managed to give us a little smile back, and we managed to bring him back to the accordion a little.”

The Tamari Project was founded in memory of Tamar Kedem Siman Tov, who was murdered on October 7 together with her husband and their three children in their home in Nir Oz.

■ Watch the video at tinyurl.com/YoredHaErev