

***Captain Wonder,
Lou Gehrig,
and Me***

A memoir by

ALEX S. KOLE

Captain Wonder, Lou Gehrig, and Me

A sentimental journey to a place
where malteds cost a nickel and
friends were worth a million.

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In memory of
my *Los Caballeros* brothers:

Abe Yanover

Victor Kunet

Angelo Serritella

—A.S.K.

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Thanks, Mindy.

Thanks, everyone.

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Prologue

Let me tell you a story, before I tell you *my* story. Last summer my wife, Marilyn, and I were food shopping in a new super market in the small town of Vails Gate, New York. There were two or three shopping carts in front of us on the checkout line. In the cart facing us sat a sweet little blonde, blue-eyed girl—about three years old. When she finally caught Marilyn’s eye she asked, “What are you doing?” Marilyn answered, “I’m shopping.”

Her blue eyes opened even wider as she spun around to see her mother placing groceries on the conveyor belt. She turned her head back and slowly navigated the store with those baby blues. Then in a low voice, as if she were speaking to herself she said, “So this is shopping!”

I have never attempted to write a book before. Oh, I’ve written two short unpublished stories—*Stickball* and *Los Caballeros*—but a book!

When you are nearing your eighty-second birthday it’s impossible to remember all the events of your long life, so I asked for help from Marilyn, some old friends, and some even older relatives. I contacted and had lunch with several former coworkers. I gathered all the visuals of my past—old photos, old letters, documents, the diary I kept while I was in the Army, film (now on VCR tape)—and put them all in a very large box and thought, “So this is writing a book!”

I hope you like *Captain Wonder, Lou Gehrig, and Me.*

Those Early Daze 1924-1928

I don't remember being born.

I'm sure I was there that split-second after my conception and I must have been there when the doctor told my mother she was pregnant. Living in my mother's womb was no walk-in-the park, I'll bet! And that ride down the birth canal must have been painfully exhilarating, I think! The doctor who delivered me, slapped me on my behind, and told my parents I was a boy must have recorded and remembered the event—I don't!

The reassuring fact is that all of the above really did happen whether I remember it or not.

My birth certificate yields five important facts:

My Name:	Alex Stovrey Kole
Where I was born:	4024 Third Avenue, Bronx, New York
When I was born:	September 18, 1924
Father's name:	Jack
Mother's name:	Bella

However, the birth certificate did not note how much I weighed (six pounds, six ounces), how long I was (18 inches), or who was elected president that November (Calvin Coolidge). Some other facts that were omitted: brown eyes, a patch of light brown hair, small dimple on left cheek, and I cried very loud when Dr. Lossow's palm met my butt.

Here's the last omission, and I promise not to write another word about my birth certificate. My sister Elsie was six years old when I was born. I'm told Elsie wanted a dog but learned to tolerate a brother.

My mother, Bella Kaplan, was born in Poland in 1902. She was the illegitimate child of a woman who didn't want children. Her grandparents, orthodox Jews, raised Bella. They were very good to her, and she

loved them with all her heart. Bella often spoke of her elderly grandparents and confessed that their love almost made up for the love she never received from the mother she seldom saw. Till her dying day my mother blamed herself for her mother not wanting her.

Bella Kaplan came to America, to New York City, when she was 13 years old to live with her Aunt Minnie and Uncle Phil Kaplan. Her mother was also living in New York City at this time, but she seldom saw her daughter. Photos of my mother as a young girl and teenager reveal a very pretty blonde. Neither the black and white nor the sepia prints could show how very blue her eyes were. Even though her aunt and uncle took good care of my mother, she never went to school and never learned to read or write. Life was hard for this teenage girl from Poland.

My father, Jack Kole, was a Greek orthodox born in Turkey in 1899. He was one of seventeen children—15 boys, 2 girls. His father's name was Stavros Koleoglu. Stovrey was my grandfather's nickname which is how I got my middle name. My father would tell me awesome stories of growing up in Turkey. When he was a young boy his parents gave him a donkey to ride and take care of. His father was the third wealthiest man in their small town and there were three servants that worked for the family. Stavros was a fashion designer of men's clothes and traveled to Paris and Athens. My grandmother was a very religious woman who died when she was only fifty-five years old. Her name was Thesbo.

It wasn't all fun and games in Turkey for my father. He told me many grim tales of the bloody battles between the Greeks and the Turks (before World War I) and how the Greeks struggled to move their families and belongings to Greece and then back to Turkey, several times. The Koleoglu clan was among the many migrants.

My father's birth name was Esau Koleoglu, which he changed to Jack Kole after he came to America. He arrived in New York City when he was 13 years old. The year was 1912 and William Howard Taft was president. One of his brothers, my Uncle Mike, came with him and they both lived with their married sister and her husband, my Aunt Athena and Uncle Gus.

My father always said he was sent to America to continue his education with the hopes of going to dental school. Jack was a charmer, a likeable rogue and a handsome young man now in his late teens. The money his parents sent for school was spent mostly on girls, cigarettes, and games of chance. The funds for school stopped as soon as his mother and father learned of his gambling. When he gave up his plans of being a dentist to live the good life instead of going to school, his sister insisted he get a job. At eighteen he became an untrained auto mechanic; my father was good with his hands. With money once again in his pockets he returned to gambling and carousing. Then he met that blonde, blue-eyed Polish girl. She was fifteen years old.

Bella saw very little of her mother, yet she did everything she could to please her. She always called her “Moma” and felt sure that one day they would live together. Now, how was she going to tell this woman that she was dating a Greek called Jack (not to mention Esau)? Bella must have been very shrewd because when she introduced Jack to her mother she quickly said, “Moma, meet Jake, my friend.”

Having written at length about my birth certificate and promising not to write any more about that certificate, I feel obliged to tell you about just one other document. The paper in front of me titled “Certificate of Wedding Registration” records that on February 15, 1918, in New York City, Jack Kole from Turkey, age 21, and Bella Kaplan from Poland, age 18 were married. Twenty-one and 18 my foot! My father was 19 and my mother was only 16 when they took their vows. I’m sure she wanted the security that marriage promised. Not to live with grandparents or aunts and uncles must have been at the top of her wish list. So at 16 the new Bella Kole was ready to have her own apartment, a husband, and children. My father must have thought, “What the hell, maybe being married will be better than running around.”

The history of my parents coming to America as teens in the early 1900s has been repeated by millions of refugees looking for a better life. The fact that they met, fell in love, married and had children is a tale as old as the hills of the Bronx. What’s strange is that I now have the need to tell how life was in the 20s, what we did to survive the Great Depression in the 30s, and relive some of the other escapades that led me to my computer.

My mother was happy cooking and cleaning in her small apartment in the Tremont section of the Bronx. She enjoyed being the lady of the house. And the gamble of married life had its rewards for my father, too. After work he'd come home to a great dinner, a clean apartment, and a loving wife. But the greatest reward for the new Kole family was the birth of their first child. My sister Elsie was born June 2, 1919.



Sure, when you are born, life begins. But I believe it actually starts when you can remember your very first event—then, life has meaning. My first recollection of anything was exactly four years after I entered this world. September 18, 1928, began like any other day. It was my fourth birthday, we were living on the top floor of the building (a tenement building under the Third Avenue elevated trains), and I was bored. I wanted to see if my friends were playing downstairs so I looked out of the closed bedroom window. I could see the few cars that were parked in the street. Then I saw my father get out of his Jordan (I loved that big car). He opened the back door and took out something blue. I yelled so loud that my mother came running into the room and nervously asked, “What’s wrong Sonny, what’s the matter?” Nothing was wrong. I couldn’t answer her because I was so very excited. I didn’t have to explain because my father opened the door and wheeled in the sleekest, shiniest, bluest tricycle in all the Bronx.

I rode my bike around the apartment that day for at least two hours, barely missing tables, lamps, and our dog, Nellie. My mother suggested that my father take me and my bike outside so I could ride it on the sidewalk. My friend Alfred was there with his green tricycle and my father supervised the two of us. Riding on the sidewalk was much better than cycling in the apartment. No table or lamps to miss, only carriages, other kids, overflowing garbage cans, and the occasional fire hydrant (we called them johnny-pumps).

My fourth birthday, my blue tricycle, my first memory! Life had-begun for me.



1924

- Congress declares native-born Indians citizens of the USA.
- J. Edgar Hoover is appointed head of the FBI.
- Walt Disney begins creating cartoons with “Alice’s Wonderland.”
- Babe Ruth bats .378, hits 46 home runs.

1928

- Herbert Hoover is elected president, promising “a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage.”
- Mickey Mouse makes his screen debut in “Steamboat Willie.”
- Amelia Earhart is the first woman to fly across the Atlantic.
- The annual salary for a teacher is \$1,400.
- The first Academy Award is given to “Wings” for best picture.

Moving Around the Bronx **1928-1930**

The TV commercials and print ads for tourism in New York always end with the catch phrase, “I Love New York.” A bright red heart is substituted for the word love. Well, “I *Red Heart* the Bronx.” And for those of you who don’t know what or where the Bronx is—it’s the northern most of the five boroughs that make up New York City. The other four boroughs are Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island.

Lloyd Ultan, the author of several photo-filled books about the Bronx, dedicated one of them “To my parents who had the wisdom to raise me in the Bronx.” I couldn’t have said it better! I spent the first fifty-five years of my life there, and as a boy and an adult, I am proud to have lived in the borough that calls the New York Yankees their home team. And even though the Bronx is part of New York City, a city famous for its many steel structures like the Empire State Building, one fifth of its land area is devoted to public parks. This includes Bronx Park, where in 1891 the New York Botanical Gardens were built. At the other end of the park is the world famous Bronx Zoo. Just a few miles south, and also in the Bronx of course, is Yankee Stadium.



From 1928 to 1932 we must have moved at least eight times, still we always stayed within the radius of several city blocks and were always in walking distance of the Bronx Zoo. The building we lived in when I got my blue bike was on Clinton Avenue and 181st Street, a nice neighborhood with tenement buildings on both sides of the street. No matter how many times we moved we always rented an apartment on the top floor, and never in a building that had an elevator. The rent for top floor rooms was less than for the apartments on the lower floors. In March 1929 my father lost his untrained mechanics job and had to

sell the Jordan to pay the rent. I remember him stuffing his shoes with folded sheets of newspaper because of the holes in the soles of his shoes. After four or five weeks of hunting for work he was hired as a night man in another garage. My father took a huge cut in wages. He had big responsibilities now, a wife, two kids, rent, and countless bills to pay. Any job, any income was welcome.

The job requirements of a night man were a combination of being a guard and a handy man. In addition to making sure the cars were not stolen, the night man would fix flats and make minor repairs. The cars of the 1930s were much simpler, no electronics or computers like the vehicles of today with all the bells and whistles that I crave. The two-story garage my father worked in was on Bronx Street, about a mile from where we lived. His boss let him have the use of a car so he could travel to work and back home. My father got to enjoy his new job and made many new friends, both men and women. Jack was still a charmer.

As the job implies, my father worked at night; however, it was my responsibility to wake him at 6:00 PM. This was not an easy task, and it took several trips to the bedroom shouting (softly), "It's six o'clock, get up Pa!" After five or six tries I'd poke him in his back (gently) and he'd get up (grudgingly), have "breakfast," and go to work. Seven PM and my job was over. Seven PM and my father's night was just beginning.

When the stock market crashed on October 24, 1929, and the Great Depression began, I was only five years old and didn't understand the terrible news on the radio. I was too young to read the newspaper headlines about the millions of Americans who were losing their jobs and couldn't find work anywhere. But I knew that something was wrong because my father didn't need me to wake him up at night anymore.

None of the garage owners that my father knew were hiring night men. None of his friends knew of any business that was looking for help. Just when things were about to get even worse, my father found employment driving a cab at night. The cab company needed a new man because one of their drivers, out of despair, had killed himself. The Depression was to claim many innocent victims.

Each morning after his shift was over, my father climbed the five

flights to our apartment and Nellie, our Maltese-terrier mix, would be the first to greet him. My mother, Elsie, and I looked forward to the fresh baked rolls or coffee cake Dad brought from the bakery down the block. We'd sit around the kitchen table and have those warm, delicious treats for breakfast and my father would tell about the exciting things that took place in his cab the night before. Even Nellie listened, that's how impressive those stories were. Looking back, I'm sure my father embellished each episode, because most cabby's fares were run-of-the mill and not worth repeating. But we always looked forward to those fresh baked treats and those wonderful tales.

During the Depression many landlords would offer new tenants a month's concession. When a new tenant moved into their building the tenant would pay the first month's rent, and get the second month free. Money was tight and being able to afford the moving van, moving men, the first month's rent and cash to turn on the gas and electricity was a problem for most families with little or no income in 1930. More than 1,300 banks closed by the end of the year and jobless men on every corner were selling apples for a nickel. You could buy a loaf of white bread for nine cents, if you had nine cents.

Most of the fights between my parents were about money—the lack of it. During some of those fights my mother would cry and accuse my father of seeing other women and gambling away most of his salary. Elsie, myself, and Nellie would take comfort in another room, turn on the radio, and wish the yelling and cursing would end. The one good thing to come out of those horrible fights was that it brought Elsie and me closer with every battle. Elsie would forever be my older, wiser sister, and I'd always be the brother she got, instead of that dog she wanted.

A dispossession was a legal document that a landlord gave to a tenant when the tenant did not (or could not) pay the rent. After receiving the notice, the tenant had to pay the back rent in a specified time (one or two weeks) or the landlord would have the right to evict the family and put their possessions in the street. Driving a cab at night during the Depression was not a big moneymaking occupation, and we received several of those eviction notices. Just before all our worldly goods were to be tossed on the empty sidewalk, we'd move. I'm not sure where my

father got the money for each move, but if I had to guess, I'd say he borrowed it from his sister, my Aunt Athena.

Uncle Gus and Aunt Athena owned a small apartment building on Fairmont Place. They lived in the building and rented the other four apartments. I don't know why my mother didn't like my aunt, but she didn't object when my father took me with him each time he went to see his sister. My Uncle Gus was a stern, serious-looking Greek gentleman with an impressive flowing handlebar mustache. Irene, Alice, Luxie, and Debra, my four cousins, spoke both English and Greek. They were a few years older than I was, and in addition to letting me play with them, my cousins always plied me with warm cookies that my aunt baked. Aunt Athena told me that my grandmother, Thesbo, made the same cookies in Turkey and Greece. The "S" shaped treats were the only reason I agreed to go with my father to visit my aunt. Sometimes we took Nellie with us and she'd enjoy a cookie and have a great time playing with Alice's cat.

Whenever my father was negotiating a loan from his sister, I would be in another room with one of my cousins. But even if I were in the same room with my aunt and my father, I was too young to understand any of the financial goings-on. In addition, they sometimes spoke in Greek, Turkish, or Armenian. It was all Greek to me.



I never wanted to move, but it wasn't terrible. We'd only move a few blocks and I could still see Alfred and some of my other friends. Days before the move my parents and Elsie would pack all our belongings in boxes and barrels that the movers provided. I'd get a box for my toys, crayons, and coloring books. I would repeatedly remind my mother to make sure the moving men put my bike on the truck. It was nerve racking for my mother as she watched the movers carry our furniture down the five flights of stairs. I liked to watch and wished that some day I could be as big and strong as the moving men. When everything we owned was finally in the van, the movers would drive the few blocks to our new apartment. They had to climb up five flights of stairs carrying our furniture, boxes, barrels, and my bike. Now came the hard part for us, putting everything away in closets, cabinets, and drawers.

Furniture had to be moved from one side of the room to the other until my mother would decide, “Okay Jack, that’s where I want it!”

We couldn’t put everything away, arrange every piece of furniture, and hang up the mirrors and pictures all in one day. So Ma would say, “Enough, enough working today. Elsie and I are going to the delicatessen.” That was the part I liked the best about moving. Going to the deli meant buying a kosher salami, rye bread, pickles, and soda. I couldn’t wait till they returned with the makings of my favorite supper in the whole world (until I was ten). As soon as Elsie and Mom returned, I could savor the spicy smell of salami. But it wasn’t the salami and it wasn’t the seeded rye bread that made my heart race. What made me feel warm all over was that the four of us, and Nellie, were at our kitchen table, in our new apartment together. We were tired and hungry and happy. We were a family again and no one was fighting.



1928

- FDR wins New York gubernatorial race.
- Russia announces Five Year Plan.
- The first animated electric sign on the New York Times building begins operation.
- Ty Cobb retires with a lifetime record of 4,191 hits.

1929

- Tuesday, October 24, the Stock Market crashes, setting the stage for the Great Depression.
- Following the Crash, New York Mayor Jimmie Walker urges movie houses to show cheerful films.
- The Rose Ball at Pasadena draws 100,000.

1930

- Unemployment rises past four million.
- Hooverilles (slums) and Hoover blankets (newspapers covering parkbench homeless) appear.
- W2XBS, the CBS pioneer station, begins its first telecast with “Felix the Cat”
- More than 1,300 banks close by year’s end.

Meet the Koles and Alfred 1931

My parents didn't fight all the time, we weren't hungry all the time, and we didn't move every month. If I gave the impression of being the harbinger of doom and gloom on the previous pages, I'm sorry. Sure, times were bad, but as a kid still in short pants, what life experiences did I have to compare? Remember, my two major concerns were, "Can I go outside and play?" and, "When is Elsie going to help me with my homework?"

There were many good times among the chaos of each day. The best way to tell about those happy memories is for you to understand who those individuals were that I loved so dearly and how my seven-year-old eyes perceived each of them.



My mother, Bella Kole, loved taking care of her new apartment, her home. When my father was working he would give her money each week to buy food and anything else she needed. She was a very smart shopper and managed to squirrel away a few cents out of each weekly allowance. With those meager savings my mother could buy something special for Elsie, a toy or a coloring book for me, and with the rest of the pennies she splurged on her hobby. She loved to decorate the apartment with all kinds of knick-knacks. She called them *tchotschkes* (pronounced chot-skees)—one of the many Yiddish words she remembered from Poland. Ma only spoke Yiddish when she first came to America to live with her aunt and uncle. Many of her new friends and neighbors also spoke Yiddish, but as a second language. My mother was always proud that she learned to speak English—with a Polish accent.

When I started first grade it did not seem unusual that Elsie helped me learn the alphabet. By second grade I realized my mother could not read or write. This embarrassment stayed with her all her life. We never

spoke about it. I never thought it was unusual that Elsie read the mail, newspapers, and some magazines to her. My mother loved the stories in those five-cent confession magazines. Those romantic tales with pictures in *True Confessions* magazine were about discovering love, losing love, and finding it again. Elsie enjoyed their time together and they would laugh and cry as the stories unfolded on each enchanting page. Some of the tears my mother shed surely must have been from wondering why her mother couldn't love the way she loved Elsie.

My mother wanted desperately to be able to write her name so her friends wouldn't think she "just got off the boat." It was hard work as Elsie sat with Mom and showed her how to form each letter, B-e-l-l-a K-o-l-e, over and over until she got it right. Finally, after a month she was able to write Bella Kole without any help from her proud daughter. Now she could sign our report cards and any papers we brought from school that needed a parent's signature. Now, when Elsie wrote to Ma's aunt and uncle, who had just moved to Cleveland, Ohio, she could sign her name at the bottom of the letter. Every time she carefully wrote Bella Kole, she was pleased that she wasn't "just off the boat" anymore.

When my mother spoke of her childhood in Poland, she would repeat how much she loved her grandparents and how much their love meant to her. Her bearded grandfather was a very pious Jew and took her to shul on the Sabbath and each holiday. When she left Poland to live with her Aunt Minnie and Uncle Phil in New York, she went to temple with them. But after she married, my mother remained a Jew in her heart, but not in the temple. I don't remember my mother ever going to shul, maybe she was too busy taking care of her family and her apartment. My father agreed with my mother that if Elsie and I were to follow any religion it would be of the Hebrew faith.

Housework was hard work. I never heard her complain as she got down on her knees to scrub the floors or when she sat on the inside ledges to wash the windows. She would wash all our clothes and bedding in the deep sink that was prominent in every kitchen, using a washboard, soap flakes, water, and a lot of energy to get everything clean and wet. She didn't have a washing machine. After squeezing much of the water out of the wet clothes and linen, my mother hung