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Benger, Kurt oral history interview

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Interview with Kurt Benger by Steve Hochstadt
Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project
Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Benger, Kurt

Interviewer

Hochstadt, Steve

Transcriptionists

Das, Kankana
Vazirani, Jyotika
Hochstadt, Steve

Date

6/8/1990

Extent

2 audiocassettes

Place

Long Beach, California

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Biographical Note

Kurt Benger was born in Grimmen, Germany, in November 1908. He worked in the clothing business, but was fired from Karstadt in Hamburg in April 1933 because he was Jewish. He later moved to Berlin, where he got married on November 15, 1938, just before they left for Shanghai on November 23. In Shanghai he held many jobs, and had to take care of his wife, Friedel, who was very sick. They had a son, Daniel Benger, in September 1939. In 1947 the family sailed to the United States on the "General Meiggs" and settled temporarily in St. Paul, moving to Long Beach in 1948. After Friedel died, Benger married again. Kurt Benger died in 1992.

Transcript

Kurt Bengler: Did you talk to Siegbert, to the . . . ?

Steve Hochstadt: To both of them. Yes.

KB: Siegbert and Werner.¹

SH: Yes, I had this appointment with Siegbert, and he'd never told me, he didn't tell me he had a brother. I just had found out about him and I asked if I could interview him, and then when I showed up, his brother was there, too.

KB: Werner, the short one, like I am. And they had another brother, Kurt, and he died.

SH: Yeah, they told me about him.

KB: Yeah, he died.

SH: And so . . .

KB: They were all in Shanghai. Even the parents were in Shanghai. Yeah, yeah.

SH: It was very nice to talk to them.

KB: Yeah, they are very nice people. They came from Berlin.

SH: Yes.

KB: I married in Berlin, November 15. And I was there during the Crystal Night in Berlin, too, and a week later, my late wife, she died over twenty years ago, we, we went to Genoa and then to Shanghai, which take us, took us four weeks on Lloyd Triestino, Italian ship line, and we arrived end of December in Shanghai.

SH: 1938.

KB: Yeah, yeah.

SH: Could you go back a bit and tell me about your, just when you were born and where you were born, a little about your family situation and how you decided to go to Shanghai?

KB: I, well, I was born 1908, November 1908, in a very small town in East Germany. There were only two Jewish families and everybody thought with Hitler, it would last for maybe four, six weeks, and everybody said, they maybe gets out to Holland, a neutral country, so that we can come back, that he won't last. And I tried to, to join, to learn about agriculture. There were

¹ See interview with Siegbert and Werner Wollstein, Minneapolis, July 28, 1989.

possibilities that you could learn and could go out to Israel, but it was also full, it was impossible to get in. Then I went . . .

SH: This is after 1933 you are talking about now?

KB: Yeah, after 1933. I thought you were more interested in the Hitler era.

SH: Well, I just would like to know a little about how you got to Berlin and . . .

KB: Oh, how we got to Berlin? Well, I, I worked in Hamburg for a big concern in silk, silk, wool, and rayon department. It was called Karstadt, it was a very big concern in Germany. And in April 1933, we were told, we have, they have to let us go, because they cannot employ Jews anymore, and they were very wonderful to us. We were only two Jewish fellows in the big outfit there. He went back to Hamburg and he never could come to Shanghai, he was a communist. He, no, he couldn't get, couldn't get to U.S.A., he was a communist. And things got worse and worse. My parents had a store, let's say, like a kind, a kind of small department store and business got worse . . .

SH: Was that in Berlin?

KB: No, that was in Grimmen, it was in that little town. I was the only Jewish boy in, at school, and they started already with anti-semitism there, so and my brother-in-law, my sister were in that store, too. It didn't work out to make a living for four adults and the children, so my father decided to go to Berlin, that we move to Berlin, and let them have that. It was not that serious yet, but was '33, it was the beginning. But then in Berlin, it was hard for me to find work already. I had to do different things, sell cigarettes or this and that, until I finally found someone who was distantly related to our family, and I worked in that store in Berlin from '33 till '38. Then '38, the Nazis came already, started to paint the windows and the sidewalk and everything, so we had to get out. And then we got, '34, we stayed another year in, in Grimmen, and then we finally went in May '34. We went to Berlin, that was, that was when we went to Berlin, I am sorry.

SH: That's all right.

KB: And then I learned, tried to learn to be bricklayer or something. It was told in the paper, in our Jewish papers, you could migrate to South America as a bricklayer, they would like to, so I learned it. I was not happy with it, to tell you the truth, but I was at that time 28 years old. And it got worse, and my father urged me, he said go. There was, it was also in the papers that Jews could migrate to Shanghai.

SH: It was in the papers, that you could read about that.

KB: Yeah, yeah, our Jewish papers said you could migrate to Shanghai without having a visa, without having money, because when we, when it was so far, we got, only ten, ten, we could only take with us ten dollars, ten, ten dollars. That was nothing. Oh, ten, no, excuse me, ten German Marks, that was about, a little bit over two and a half dollars. That was all. On

possessions, you could have only your old clothes and old things. You could buy nothing new to bring over. They checked everything when you, when you left. And my father urged me, go to Shanghai. I was not so much in favor for it, but he persuaded me and luckily that was the way that I could escape.

SH: Did you talk about going to Shanghai . . .

KB: Yeah, yeah.

SH: . . . before Kristallnacht?

KB: No, no, that was after Kristallnacht, was November 10, and we left Berlin for Shanghai, November 23.

SH: So you decided to go to Shanghai after Kristallnacht?

KB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I am sorry I didn't. Mix it a little bit up.

SH: That's all right.

KB: So we arrived there after four weeks. We had a typhoon and it was terrible.

SH: While you were on the boat?

KB: On the boat, we all were seasick. And we were, we were, of course, happy to come to Shanghai. I had friends there already who . . .

SH: Did your whole family come?

KB: No, unfortunately not. I tried to get my brother out, tried to get my father, to persuade my father, my mother, nobody wanted to go.

SH: What did they think? Why didn't they want to go?

KB: They thought, my father fought in World War I and, from the third day on when the war broke out, 1914. And he was very much liked. My parents were very much liked, they were there so long. Nobody thought they would harm elderly people, because they started already to take younger people to put them in jails and let them out and brought them to Buchenwald. If they could provide that they had tried to get out of Germany, then they let them go, if they had the proof, that they want to go Shanghai. I think Shanghai was the only one, because all the other countries didn't want us, because we were poor.

SH: Did you try to, to go to . . . ?

KB: Yeah, we tried. We had relatives in New York, a physician, cousin of my first wife. And he said, he couldn't help us, because he would send a affidavit and everything, but it would not,

they wouldn't take us. Then it was told, Australia would take Jews because they needed people, that huge, enormous land without people, but, of course, they wanted people who could work there and who, they didn't want a merchant or somebody, people who had, shoemakers or tailors, or they were well off or whatever, who had something, had something to learn what they could use in, abroad. But not us. So finally we left then and arrived in Shanghai. And I had friends already there, who provided us with one room, a little studio . . .

SH: So you, they expected you to come? They knew you were coming?

KB: Yeah, yeah, we got in touch with them, we corresponded with them. And we couldn't afford it very long. My wife got pregnant and . . .

SH: You, I am sorry to interrupt you so often. But you were married already?

KB: I married in Berlin, November 15, a week before we left Berlin.

SH: I see. Did you marry in order, in order to leave?

KB: My, also my parents urged me. "Don't go alone. Get married before you go, then you are not alone," and that was right. And then we couldn't afford that, we had, but there was, they had camps. Probably the Wollsteins told you, they had lots of camps, not lots, four, five camps. And most people were living there, 16, 20 people in one room, men and women all together. Thank goodness, we didn't have to. We got another apartment, what was little bit cheaper. And my friend took out, when he, when we were still Berlin, he had an uncle in Paris. He took about five hundred dollars or what it was, my father gave him, and he brought that money over to Shanghai.

SH: So how did that work? Your father gave him, how did that . . .

KB: Gave him, gave him five hundred mark.

SH: Your father sent it to Paris?

KB: No, no, no. Gave it to him and he visited his uncle in Paris . . .

SH: I see.

KB: . . . he visited his uncle in Paris, and . . .

SH: And then it got sent to Shanghai from there?

KB: No, he brought it, he brought it.

SH: Oh, he brought it.

KB: I got it from him, when I was there in Shanghai, he gave it to me. So that helped us for the first time.

SH: So as soon as you arrived you got this money?

KB: Yeah. My wife had a very good profession, she was a baby nurse and everybody wanted her. There were very rich German people, she had it wonderful, but then she got ill and had to give it up, unfortunately. And I worked different jobs. I had a friend who bought eggs on wholesale and I got on a bike, on a little cart and delivered it to bakeries and, and little stores and so on, so I made a little bit of living there. And then I worked in a, we had a bus afterwards, there were Jewish people who had opened up this bus line. And I . . .

SH: In Shanghai?

KB: In Shanghai.

SH: Was it in the, in the international concessions, the bus?

KB: No, no, that was, that was called Hongkew.

SH: In Hongkew they had the bus line.

KB: In Hongkew, in there we couldn't know. And then I did several different jobs, until I finally, through also friends of ours, I got in in a big company, in a American wholes-, American im- and export company, who employed thousands of people, and I got in there and worked there and had a good job, got good pay, so that we . . .

SH: What was your job?

KB: My job was, I had to control all the Chinese. What was, I was for, in the factory, they had egg yolks, they had candies, they had condensed milk, they had butter, they had margarine, they had meat and sausages, they made sausages and everything, and they had to go to the, they called it, what did they call it? Sometimes I forget. Anyhow, it had to be taken to the, oh, they called it a godown, they called it a godown. In other words, it was kind of a silo, where you put all those things before they are shipped out, and I had control, because the Chinese steal a lot, steal a lot. So I had control, everything what went out from the factory there into the, to the godown.

SH: I see, when did you get that job?

KB: I got it approximately, shortly before 1940. The only thing was, you had to work there, you had to be there twelve hours a day. You had no Sunday, you had no vacation, nothing. But you get a very good check at year's end, year's end. There were employed were some Jews, then they had Russian, they had British people, and it was international. And then, when, after the, when the war broke out, the Japanese took all the foreigners in a camp and they took over. And afterwards when, when, when Japan gave up and lost, they put, the American and British put the Japanese, the Japanese in a camp. And the Japanese treated, they treat us very well, were educated fine people. We had it good.

SH: Did you keep working after the war broke out, keep working at this place?

KB: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was for a time and before all the camps, there were several camps, at least four, five camps, if not more, for bachelors, for married people and so on, and we had to have kind of a watchman job. It had to be protected day and night.

SH: From what?

KB: Yeah, yeah, from, that the Chinese would break in and steal and so on, and because, and the pay was very small, but at least we had something to do. Now the climate was terrible, sub-tropical climate. We were not able to sleep indoors, we had to sleep outdoors. It was impossible to sleep. And water had to be boiled, you could nothing eat right away. And the HIAS helped with kitchens, that we got to eat, it was . . .²

SH: Did you eat in the, in those kitchens?

KB: No, no, I picked it up and took it at home.

SH: But you got a meal from the kitchen.

KB: Yeah, yeah.

SH: Did you do that every day?

KB: Every day, every day.

SH: And that was a way of saving money, that was cheaper than . . . ?

KB: Saving money, but we, we, the food was not rich enough to keep us, keep us really healthy. We all looked afterwards like, like a skeleton. I lost so much weight there. Then I had my boy there. When he was born, it was tough then.

SH: When was he born?

KB: He was born September '39, in Shanghai.

SH: What was his name?

KB: Daniel. He is an attorney here now, has four kids on his own, and was eight years old when we came over here. And, well, the sanitary living there, it was terrible. You had no, like here, electricity or water or facilities or washrooms and so on, and it was always very, very, very primitive. And day and night people were on the street in China, the biggest city there anyhow. And we, and then some people made out better, who had relatives in Poland or from, or in East Germany, who sent them money. They opened together sometimes a store or bought a house

² HIAS, the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society, resulted from the merger of two organizations in New York in 1909. It offered aid and services to international migrants.

together, and rented it out, or had a little grocery store, and so on, they did well. But in the Frenchtown, international district, some made good money there. But our life was very hard, the Wollsteins and ours. We bought a house there. They probably told you we did live together . . .

SH: Where was the house? Was it in Hongkew?

KB: In Hongkew. And then we had to, afterwards we had to leave, that district was restricted only for Chinese, we had to go in another district. And then was the time when we were not allowed without permission or permit to work, they probably told you that, too.

SH: So you bought this house before you had to move to the Designated Area?

KB: No, no, that was already in a Designated Area, it was already there, it was already there.

SH: But you still had to move out of it?

KB: Afterwards we had to move out of it. Yeah. They put it, afterwards the Japanese put it similar to a ghetto. And they were afraid, what they told us, Americans would bomb the city and we would be more secure there. They were good to us, until they found, because Germany was allied during the war, but then they found out from Germany that we were Jews and that we were persecuted and nobody wanted us. So they restricted everything, certain hours you could leave the city, you could go to certain districts, and so on. I had it good because, at that time, the Japanese were our employers at that time. And otherwise . . .

SH: So was that firm, was your place of business outside of the district, outside of Hongkew?

KB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SH: So you went out every day?

KB: Yeah, yeah. And the guy who was very brutal . . .

SH: Mr. Ghoya.

KB: . . . Ghoya, yeah, he was terrible with the people, he mishandled them . . .

SH: How often did you have to go to see him to get a pass to go out?

KB: Maybe twice, because I had a letter, I had a letter from the company.

SH: I see.

KB: In that, in that respect, I was lucky, but I have seen how people had standing there in line and how they beat them up.

SH: You saw that?

KB: Oh, I saw that myself. He was little fellow like I am, but he was very brutal. Yeah, what else can I? My wife got very, very sick in Shanghai. It started with kidney trouble, which she later lost here in the States, one kidney. And she was always ill at that time, so she couldn't work.

SH: What was her name?

KB: Friedel, Friedel. Israel was her maiden name, Israel. And then later on we wrote, we could correspond with our people in Germany. But later on we got it all so very seldom, that the mail got through, and we didn't know, of course, what happened, what happened to them. We didn't know about concentration or anything, nothing.

SH: Did you, did you try, or was there some way of, or did you think about trying to . . .

KB: Yes.

SH: . . . bring your family over?

KB: Yes, yes, I paid, I paid four hundred dollars that time. Someone who had connections, he told us. It was a lie, bloody lie. Nobody got out. Now my present wife said, they had the same happen to them. And then I, my wife smuggled in good porcelain and . . .

SH: How did she do that?

KB: We had somebody was there watching. When we, when they packed the, the, what did we call it, I forgot. Anyhow, he was a good man. He did . . .

SH: Where was this happening?

KB: That was in Berlin, that was in Berlin, was in Berlin. He said, "I go out. Come later, I go for lunch." And in other words, he meant, "Do what you want."

SH: So was this a Nazi, this man, or who, what was he doing, he was watching you pack?

KB: He was watching there what was packed, and he had to approve what going out and my wife was more courageous than I was. She put in porcelain and crystals and some gold rings and so on.

SH: Into your suitcase?

KB: No, not suitcases, they were wooden cases.

SH: Crates?

KB: Yeah, crates, kinds of crates. And he came later on and he approved everything, and

everything went through.

SH: And then at the border they didn't open it up?

KB: No, no, they didn't open it up.

SH: Because it had this approval?

KB: Yeah, approval. And then, of course, with that, when it was very sad situation with my wife. She was months and months in hospital. She was partly paralyzed and she has, had diphtheria and they didn't have any serum to kill it. And then when I came, he said, "Mr. Bengler, we need money. She has to get the B vitamin. We have, we cannot do it without money." So I had to sell everything. And I had . . .

SH: When was this?

KB: That was about '4-, between '45 and '46.

SH: After the war?

KB: Yeah, yeah. And so I was compelled to make everything to money. And also the money what I had from my, what my father gave our friend who shipped, who brought it over . . .

SH: So that five hundred dollars and this porcelain lasted you all the way through until . . .

KB: Yeah, well, that helped us, that helped us. We had also got in that factory, they made, we got everything cheap.

SH: Food? You could buy food there?

KB: We could buy food. I couldn't afford it, I couldn't afford to buy it, because for me it was too much. Then, but we had friends who were in very good position, who had money and they bought it from me, so I sold it to them. Because we couldn't afford it. You didn't know even, could you eat an apple or could you eat a little piece of chocolate? Because it was all too expensive, it was black market. My wife had to go to these Chinese markets and buy everything. Once I came home, Wollsteins knew that, too, she had in a pot with newspaper packed to keep it warm, six pound potatoes. And I was so hungry I ate it all. And my wife said, "Don't you know how many potatoes you ate, that was six pounds, that should last for so many days." I had a little, when I went to work for nights, there was so much rice and some, some, some slices of bread. I was so hungry that it should last during for the whole night, I ate it right away when I came there. So that's the reason that we were always hungry, hungry, hungry, because the food was not nourishing at all. It was meager portions. And, but at least it saved our lives. It saved our lives. That's all I have to say. Then our passport was only for a short time, was issued, was a big "J" *drin*, in ours, and for the women, Sara, and so on. The German Consulate was very nice to us.

SH: In Shanghai?

KB: In Shanghai, they were very nice to us, yeah.

SH: Why did you go to the German Consulate?

KB: We had to go when my son was born. He had to, his name had to be entered in his mother's passport. That's the reason that we had, otherwise, we wouldn't have gone, of course. And there were only certain names allowed, so Daniel and this one, we choose Danny. And he changed it here afterwards for Daniel. And he had to go to school there.

SH: Which school did he go to?

KB: It was a Jewish school. There was one, it was Kadoorie, and the other was Comor's, Paul Comor.³ He went there as a two-year-old when my wife was very, very, severe ill. He went in a kindergarten. He was only a little bit over two years old.

SH: Was this all in Hongkew, the kindergarten?

KB: Yeah.

SH: And Comor, is that what you said, Paul Comor?

KB: And I think, if we didn't have HIAS, HIAS, and what was the other, Euro-, or Euro-, I don't know exactly what it was named, we couldn't have survived. Then we got, later on they shipped the portions from the GIs from North Africa, where they fought that time, to us. That was butter and candies and cigarettes and something. It was all in not too good condition, but we were happy to have it.

SH: And they gave it out to people?

KB: Gave it out to us. We could go and pick it up. And what else could I tell you?

SH: Could you tell me about your wife giving birth to your son? Where did that happen?

KB: That was in a British, British hospital. She had labor, she was in labor and our physician, he was also, she knew him from Germany already. He said, "Try to get in in a hospital as soon as possible, that they take you." We had to have the special permission. I was hidden in a bus when we were taken there.

SH: Why didn't, I don't understand that.

KB: That was because we were not allowed overnight to get out.

³ The Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School was often called the Kadoorie School, because of the generous support of Horace Kadoorie. Paul Comor was instrumental in the welfare programs organized by the existing Shanghai Jewish community to aid the refugees.

SH: Oh, out of . . .

KB: Overnight, yeah, overnight, and that's the reason, that's the reason why. And then she was, when she had, they had to give her artificial, that she had artificial labor. And he was the smallest baby when he was born. Everything went all right. She didn't understand too much English, when they said, "Push, push." She wouldn't know what it meant. I had English before. I took extra English lessons before I left Germany and she was better in French. So I could help myself a little better and I had to learn to speak Chinese, too, to deal with the Chinese people.

SH: But how did you learn that?

KB: I learned it by myself.

SH: With books?

KB: Books and also, there were also Jewish people there, who were there longer than we were there already. They learned, they learned to read and to write Chinese, what I didn't do. I got along with, I could converse with them. Just the most necessary things you had to know every day to get along with them and to find out, to make yourself understanding, that is what, what I know at that time. And she was only about two days, I urged her to stay longer . . .

SH: In the hospital?

KB: . . . in the hospital, but she wanted to get out. A friend of ours built a little, I had to pay for it, a little crib for him and also later on a little bed. And he was all right, but we had so many infections, dysenteries, dysenteries, so much because of the climate and of everything what was involved, it was not sanitary. Hygiene was not there anyhow either, so he was quite often sick. We had to get a doctor. And she was very often sick. You had to pay, there were also in those camps Jewish physicians and there was also, were also some who did surgery and so on. But I didn't, was not in favor of it, because I was afraid you are not treated correctly, and I didn't want to be sorry later on, so I had a private physician. The visit was a dollar at that time. And she wanted this one doctor. He was very young. He just, he just, very young, he came, I don't know if he was working in a hospital before as a, yes, what do they call it, a . . .

SH: Intern?

KB: Intern, yeah. He, she got later on, she had here trouble with her throat, she couldn't swallow. She went from doctor to doctor, nobody found out until it was too late, it was diphtheria. Then she was almost paralyzed. Her heart gave up and with her legs, she couldn't, couldn't walk correctly and also the frost she got here, open, open wounds here in the legs, so she had for months and months in the hospital. And as I already said, from my boy I had to, oh, that was later in Shanghai.

SH: So how did you manage to pay for the, for the hospital?

KB: For the hospital, I could not pay, I could only give whatever I had, and I did, I did pay at least for the, for the B vitamin shots she had to get.

SH: But otherwise, because you couldn't pay . . .

KB: They would have, they wouldn't have helped her, also, they wouldn't have let her down and die, no.

SH: So they, you knew that even if you didn't pay they would . . .

KB: They knew, yeah, that was a hospital, that was a hospital, it was all in Jewish hands . . .

SH: I see.

KB: . . . that was all in Jewish hands. And physicians from Austria, from Germany, from Poland. You know there were twenty thousand refugees in Shanghai. Then I had to have somebody to help my wife afterwards, she couldn't hardly walk. And, for the boy, I had always to have some help, because I tried to work as much as I could and bring the dough in . . .

SH: More than one job sometimes . . . ?

KB: No, that was later on with more than one job. Here, here, when I came here, I had two, three jobs, that's the first time, to make a living. I think only, the only thing what saved us was our age. I was just thirty when we arrived and we left '47, so I was about thirty-nine years old when we left. Our youth which was, of course, lost, our best years were lost, but at least we could stay alive. I have seen people who were older, in their fifties, sixties. They couldn't make it.

SH: In Shanghai?

KB: No, so many people died. My brother-in-law died there. He was 52. His brother died there, he was maybe 54, 55. Then when the American bombed Shanghai, there were also big loss on Jewish people.⁴ You probably heard that before.

SH: Yes.

KB: Yeah. And I remember across from one, one camp, there was a jail and they operated direct on, in that jail just to be, to aid them for the, for the first shock and everything. And it's hard to think what, what else you, would be interesting . . .

SH: Let me ask some questions.

⁴ Nearly every refugee remembers vividly the terrifying day, July 17, 1945, when American planes dropped bombs in the heavily settled area of Hongkew. Most can say exactly where they were and what they were doing when the bombers struck. About thirty refugees were killed, and hundreds, perhaps thousands of Chinese and Japanese.

KB: Yeah.

SH: To go back, when you were in Berlin and you had just gotten married, what did your wife think about going to Shanghai and her family?

KB: Well, she was young, she was 23, not even, yeah, she was 23, not even 23. Well, she was an only child and her mother was a widow at that time. We thought, we talked it over, we thought we had no choice, we couldn't be choosy, and as that was the only place to go, and we also did believe in a few months we would come back . . .

SH: You thought that, you thought that it would just be a short amount of time?

KB: I didn't think it so much. I myself didn't think it so much.

SH: Had some people said that?

KB: Most people, most people thought Hitler wouldn't last. They wouldn't let, he would not, he would not make it. We thought, and nobody did dream that they would harm the Jews. I always used to say, what they promised the people they couldn't do, couldn't do, but what they promised the Jews, they almost fulfilled that, with six million Jews. And, yeah, and I, when we left Berlin, I had, my brother, he was eleven years older, I don't know how it came to me, I said to him, "Paul, I have the feeling we never see each other again." How it, I don't know how it came to me. All of a sudden I said it, and, really, we didn't see each other any more.

SH: Did your wife's mother, did she . . .

KB: She did, she died also in concentration camp.

SH: Did she think about going to Shanghai or she didn't want to go?

KB: No, no. Nobody wanted to go from the family, from my family, but they pushed me out. They said, "You better go."

SH: Because you were young?

KB: I was young, yeah. And my brother married a widow, with grown children, and he was, he was learning to be an architect and he had relatives in Australia, in Brisbane, and they promised him they would take them, but nothing, nothing came through. So that's the reason that my brother said, "I go with them." Otherwise, maybe he would have followed. My sister and my brother-in-law came later, came later, and that was about two years later.

SH: How did they come so late, how did . . . ?

KB: Well, there were people who came, that was '40, they could make it, they could do it. Because he was also put in camp and then he was released, after he . . .

SH: Your brother-in-law?

KB: My brother-in-law and then they came and . . .

SH: When was he put in the camp?

KB: In Buchenwald.

SH: Was that after Kristallnacht, or sometime later than that?

KB: Yeah, after Kristallnacht. As I already mentioned, if you could prove you get out, you want to migrate, you could go. And they had an only child, a wonderful girl. And [unintelligible] said, "Let her go to Stettin." Stettin is now Polish, and she can go with the children transport, either to Israel or to England and the parents can follow. After long discussions on, they did it and Hitler took all the Jews and put them in the, it didn't work out either. She came in a, in a camp, she was in Piaski by Lublin, it's in Poland.

SH: This, their daughter, you're talking about?

KB: Their only child, twelve years old. She also didn't survive, she was also killed. So, I don't know what else I . . .

SH: Tell me your sister's name and her husband's name.

KB: Her sis-, she died here, my sister. He was Louis Wolff and her name was Margaret, Margaret Wolff.

SH: And when did they arrive in Shanghai?

KB: Well, they came probably, I think it was already '39, not '40. I think it was already '39, it was about a year later.

SH: And did he spend then a long time in Buchenwald before he . . . ?

KB: No, not too long, not too long. And I, I helped him to get in in that job where I was, that he work there. But he smoked, he was a chain smoker, constantly smoking, and that killed him, his heart gave up. And his brother, I mentioned before, died shortly afterwards, also was a heavy smoker. And I had, I forgot, I had a cousin of mine, died there also. He came, he did live in Manila before and he had tuberculosis and he couldn't survive in the climate. He was very young, he died there. I think he was about, he was still in his 30's. He died there, too. And maybe when you, when you left, then maybe [laughs] I know more, but right now I . . .

SH: Well, let me ask another question. You talked about having a job in which you were delivering eggs.

KB: Yeah, oh yeah, I was delivering eggs.

SH: Why did you stop doing that? Why did that job end?

KB: Well, because I had the opportunity to get in this.

SH: I see, this was a better job.

KB: Yeah, yeah. And you know what you had to do. Our Jewish people are also not the best to make it, they always, they also make it hard when I delivered. "They are small, I ordered this and that." And some you had to, had to bribe and I gave him some eggs from the other company where I knew, where other people who I knew, they put it in the kitchen didn't care, give it to them. To make them shut up their complaints. And they paid me and, it was all right, I had to, there were some Jewish bakeries, who opened up bakeries. Oh yeah, I learned, I went to a course to learn to be a baker.

SH: In Shanghai?

KB: A confectioner, yeah.

SH: Who taught the, the . . .

KB: He was from Germany. He was from Cologne.

SH: A Jew?

KB: A Jew. And my brother and I and a friend of mine, we went there, we learned to bake bread, cake, and, and simple things and better things. We learned that. We had to pay, I don't know how much it was, maybe it was ten dollars or whatever.

SH: Were you working while you were taking this course?

KB: Yeah, yeah. I was working and I did that in the evening there . . .

SH: I see.

KB: I did that in the evening.

SH: And what were you hoping to do then?

KB: Well, I thought maybe I can go later on to America to be, to work in a bakery.

SH: I see. So when was that when you were doing that?

KB: That was about, it was about two years before we left Shanghai, '45.

SH: So it was after the war?

KB: Yeah, yeah. See I told you that when you are getting older then the, I am sorry I mix it all up.

SH: That doesn't matter. That can be straightened out later.

KB: Yeah, I learned that. And my wife learned from the, to be a seamstress, to work on a machine and everything. That was from the, what was this organization? Euro, Euro? Maybe, I learned to drive a car, took a course. She had took that course to become a seamstress. I cannot think of it. But the organization was, it was very well known all over, all over Poland and, Euro or what it was, I forgot the name.⁵ That was free, so that we could be prepared when we left Shanghai . . .

SH: I see.

KB: . . . that we could make a living. Because, as I already said, only a ordinary worker or a plumber or whatever could find a job. Like you have now European tailors, European shoemakers, and so on, that would help to make a good living. So that's what we learned. We thought, we were so stupid, we thought that if we learned to drive a car, we can go as a chauffeur here in America. That was foolish. But we thought, then we took extra English lessons again, and . . .

SH: You knew you wanted to come to America?

KB: Yeah. Her cousin always stayed in contact with him. He said, "Whenever possible, I give you an affidavit, that you can enter the States." Yeah, what else?

SH: You didn't think about going other places?

KB: Yeah, we thought when we were on our trip by ship to Shanghai, we came to Hongkew and . . .

SH: Hong Kong, you mean?

KB: Hong Kong, Hong Kong, not Hongkew, Hong Kong. And there were some people who said, "Oh, if you have a good job and so on, we can go maybe to the consulate, maybe that they take us." We tried, of course . . .

SH: Tried to get off the boat?

KB: Yeah, yeah, of course, it was in vain, doesn't work out either. So at least, as I already mentioned before, we tried to prepare ourselves not for illusions, but that we have to do, that we can do something when we get out, that we don't, that we don't work with what we did in Germany, so that we can do something what is needed and would provide us a good job. And

⁵ Benger is probably referring here to ORT, a worldwide organization which offered instruction in artisanal skills to Jews.

that's what we did also in Shanghai, that I thought, as a baker. And my wife learned too, was very, very wonderful in making from very, very old things, clothing for my boy. It was unbelievable what she could do. She was very, very clever in that. From really old things, he got, we had something to dress him up and we helped each other. The Wollsteins helped us.

SH: How did they help you?

KB: Well, Siegbert made a fairly good living and he said, "Danny has to have butter." He was like a father to him. And when I got things cheap, what I gave them from the company I worked for. So that's the way we helped each other. And my wife and I, when we, when the birthday was a big, big event for the child, we baked a cake and so on. It was primitive, but we had a wooden case as a table. [laughs] We had only one room. You were glad to have one room by yourself, at least you were not in a camp. My sister, they didn't make out so well.

SH: Your sister.

KB: My sister, from time to time, they had a little, little privacy in the rooms, otherwise, where they could stay for a month or two, that they, what they could afford . . .

END SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

SH: . . . if they had had more, if they could have made more money . . .

KB: Yeah . . .

SH: . . . would they have moved out of the camp, do you think?

KB: Yeah, yeah. See, it helped me that I had that money from my, what my father gave me.

SH: What I find surprising is that you were able to keep that money all, or use that money all through, it never ran out. You must have been very careful with it.

KB: Yeah, we had to be very, very careful and stretch everything. And then when we were really in limbo and really down, then I had to, my father had a wonderful golden watch, they call it *Repetier* watch. It sounded off quarter after, half after, three quarter after. I had to sell that, I think I got \$400. And also . . .

SH: And what would, what did \$400 do?

KB: Well, it helped. Ten dollars was a lot of money for us. It meant we could buy something. We could survive with it.

SH: Who did you sell your watch to?

KB: Well, people who bought it from you, our Jews, and who sold it again to Chinese people. Of course, they made money on it and we didn't get, I don't think we got what we should have gotten for it. But we had to, knife was up to here, we had to because of her illness. And that was the same here, the years in America were very, very hard and tough for me. I had to have at least two jobs to make it. And so, what else?

SH: Did you, I want to get straight where you lived. You, when you first arrived . . .

KB: In the private, private.

SH: . . . where was that, when you first arrived, where were you living?

KB: That was called, the street was called Wayside Lane.

SH: Was that in Hongkew?

KB: No, no. That was in Shanghai.

SH: In Shanghai.

KB: Shanghai. It did belong to Russian Jews, and they rented it out. For a short time I could keep it, take it, but then I said, "We cannot do it, we have to find . . ." We moved and moved and moved until we found something cheaper and not as good as that was, but at least we had our own roof over our head . . .

SH: And where was that?

KB: That was in, the one was Ward Road, one was in . . .

SH: So that was in Hongkew?

KB: It all in Shanghai.

SH: Oh, all in Shanghai, not in Hongkew?

KB: Not in Hongkew. It was all in Shanghai.

SH: And then when the, when the Japanese order came to move to the ghetto . . .

KB: Ghetto, we had that house already, that one house. And we changed it with another one in that location where we were allowed to stay. And as I already said, the Wollsteins had one

room, we had one room, my sister had one little room and the bigger room we rented out on people who were well off. So we could survive with it, we could survive with it. Then we had lots of dysenteries, of course, we were sick. We were afraid we couldn't leave Shanghai for United States, that they wouldn't take us. We had to come to the consulate for examination and everything . . .

SH: This was after the war now?

KB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But they were also very nice to us. They were very nice to us, I have to say. My wife was so sick, that she got first class on the ship back to Germany, back to, to United States. My son and I had to stay with all those people. But she was so ill that she, that they gave her that, special for her . . .

SH: You were able, you had enough money that you could afford to . . .

KB: No, no, they paid us.

SH: Who paid for the ship?

KB: The HIAS . . .

SH: I see.

KB: . . . the HIAS paid for it. And I, when I worked afterwards in America, I paid as much as I could, I paid back. I didn't want to pay . . .

SH: Did you have to do that or was that just something you wanted to do?

KB: In a way, they expected it from you. And if you are a decent person, you do it to help others, too. Same as here with the Russians now, you want to help, because, if you come in this situation, before we were, we said, "Oh, my goodness," those pogroms in Russia, those pogroms in Poland and the German Jews didn't want them there, when they came with their, when they talk already [unintelligible] you know, they were *d'rish'us*, you know, anti.⁶ And they gave them money to move on, move on. Nobody wanted them. But we never did dream that it would happen to us, and even much worse, that they burned our people, killed them with gas, and, my, my parents, I heard from someone who was with them, who he said, they starved, they let them starve. Didn't give hardly anything to eat. So I think people who were gassed right away or shot, shot right away were better off as those who worked hard as a laborer there and got hardly anything to eat and didn't know from day to day what will happen to them. I think, I think, I don't know, so.

SH: You didn't think at all about going back to Germany after the war was over?

KB: No, no, I didn't want to go back. After what they had done to us, who wants them? And

⁶ The Yiddish word *rish'us*, used several times by Bengier in this interview, may be translated as trouble or meanness.

every, and every other, all the other people, you see somebody in your age who was probably pro-Nazi and did harm the Jews as much as possible. In the other way, I can understand, people had also hardly a choice, not to join them or not to agree with them. They would be killed, too. I know that. There were decent people, as you already know, especially in Denmark, who helped Jews to escape and hide them and put their own life on the line. Like Anne Frank, afterwards they didn't last forever. I saw, I saw where she lived in Holland, I was there in Amsterdam. So, no after that. Well, at first we thought, at first, the first years we were there, we said, maybe we can come back, that wouldn't, that it wouldn't last and we didn't know, of course, that it would happen, that they would destroy our people. And then when we found out, we said, "No." I know people who went back to Germany. I couldn't do that.

SH: Why did they go back, I mean, what did they think?

KB: See, there were people who didn't make it here in America or people who had still relatives in Germany and so on, and maybe they did dream of a better life, a paradise now. They didn't want to work hard, because you had to work hard here, had to work, start as a dishwasher. I had to work as a dishwasher and I had to go to the market to shop for them, and when I came back and everything was piled up to here in the kitchen. That was by, washing by hand. And I had to hurry to get it all washed.

SH: Who did you work for?

KB: That was, they don't live here anymore. That was here in Long Beach. It was a widow with her daughter and a son-in-law who had that restaurant.

SH: So you worked in the restaurant?

KB: Yeah, and I got free breakfast, and I got free lunch

SH: Was that your first job here in America?

KB: No, no, I think, let me think. No, the first job was here in a wholesale bakery, and I didn't, they, I heard that they need somebody and I worked there. But then it came out as soon as I was through, as soon as a fellow who was sick, broken thumb or anything, they would take him back and then I had to go . . .

SH: I see.

KB: . . . but I didn't know that. So I worked with them, you had to work very hard there, but you were treated alright, otherwise, you had to work. And then when I worked here as a dishwasher. I worked in San Pedro, here, overnight in a wholesale bakery. I had to pay somebody who worked my shift here in the kitchen. I had to give up my lunch, and I think, you know, I had no car. I had nothing. I went with, Red Car we had, before it was called, a little, like they have it now again, like a little train. I worked twelve hours. The company's name was DeCarlos. And I think you get \$12 for that. So I worked the night from Saturday to Sunday there. I think my only day I was off was Sunday. And here I worked again in another bakery.

Then it was big strike, they had to lay off the people, and I was laid off with them. Then I worked there for metal and, what was it called, where the ships were scrapped of everything. There were blacks, and mostly blacks [unintelligible]. We had to work [unintelligible]. We had special shoes and helmet and everything. We had to work there very, very hard. When you came back you had to, you looked like a chimney sweeper, you had to take three baths to get clean again, but you had to take what you got. And then I worked as an extra, there was a company here, Harrison Frank, men's clothing and so on. Whatever came along I did. And then I went here also, took a course in better confectioneries, then I learned that. So I tried everything to help, because my wife was always ill, always ill. And I had that boy. And also when we were in Shanghai, when we were here, when we left Shanghai '47, we arrived in San Francisco.

SH: Which boat did you take, do you remember the name of the boat?

KB: "General Meiggs", was a troop transporter. It took us sixteen days to come there.

SH: And what happened when you arrived in, what did you expect was going to happen when you arrived in San Francisco?

KB: We knew nobody would accept us with open arms. We knew that. I had friends there, too, who were in Shanghai, but left already earlier. They came and tried to help us. He had already a job. And in San Francisco, we could, nobody wanted us. They said, "No profession what you have and you only that course what you took and so on as a baker, we wouldn't trust you to work on a machine," and this and that. Nobody wanted us. And then the committee, the Jewish committee and Family Service said, "Where do you want to go? We can't keep you forever here. You have to go, leave."

SH: Were they giving you a place to stay?

KB: Yeah. They paid for the place to stay, they gave us money that we, just to live, just to make barely a living. The Wollsteins left Shanghai later than we did and they had to sell the house and they helped my sister and brother-in-law to get out from Shanghai also. We were very good with each other, very good. And then we, the Wollsteins choose Duluth that time, a small place in Minnesota, they probably told you.

SH: Yes.

KB: And we went to St. Paul, Minnesota, St. Paul-Minneapolis, the twin cities, and I had also friends there. And they . . .

SH: So you went from San Francisco to St. Paul?

KB: To St. Paul and . . .

SH: And who paid for the ticket, again was it . . . ?

KB: That was from the Family Service paid for that. And then in Shanghai, in, in St. Paul the

terrible winter, my wife was partly paralyzed. She could hardly walk. We said, "We cannot stay here."

SH: Too cold.

KB: Too cold. She had another kidney, some kidney trouble, that the remaining kidney, oh yeah, no, no, let me think, let me think. She got so very sick, we had to put her in a hospital in Shanghai, in, in St. Paul, and they had to remove one kidney. They didn't tell us that and she didn't know and I didn't know, until later on they told us, that you cannot stay here, you have to get in a better climate. And before she had that trouble, she went to New York to see her cousin. He paid for the trip, who wanted to give us the affidavit, what he later did, what he did, to leave Shanghai afterwards. And he said, "You have another cousin here in Beverly Hills, get in touch with him, he is a gynecologist, that you have a better climate." And also a sister of his was living here in the area. So we talked it over and when she was so very, very ill at that time, they were also, had no feelings whatsoever at the Family Services. Her name was Mrs. Diamond and the man, the fellow who cared for us was Hoffman, his name was Hoffman. She said one day to me, "I don't think your wife will survive. I don't think she'll get out alive from hospital." So that was terrible for me, because I worked hard in that bakery. We had, they had no housing. We had to stay in a little hotel with a, just a little, do everything . . .

SH: In St. Paul, this is?

KB: . . . in St. Paul. Later on, later on also we got, was also miserable, but we got a little apartment with a kitchen. And I had then, they said, "You we have to take your boy to Minneapolis to a private family to stay there who can, you are not there, your wife is not there." So I *pendled* back from Minneapolis to see my boy, I *pendled* back to see my wife in St. Luke's Hospital. So it was, I think it was the worst time I had to go through. I had two times, two where I was really miserable, that was when she was so completely ill for months in the hospital in Shanghai. I felt awful. I felt suicidal. And then afterwards when it happened, when it happened here, I had, barely could sleep, was impossible hardly to sleep, and I still had trouble for years and years of insomnia, that I couldn't sleep. But then again I had to pull myself together and said to myself, "You cannot give up. You have your wife still alive, you have to do whatever you can, and you have your boy. You cannot give up. You have to." So I forced myself not to get, let myself down and feel pity for myself. And then when, when her cousin in New York said, "You have to leave there, you cannot stay in that climate." You know Minneapolis and St. Paul has very hot summers and very hard winters. Siegbert came every, all those years, stayed with us during March and April here, and I took him over to, to Palm Springs. So we did everything for, to each other, for each other. And then the committee, the Family Service said, "We pay, you have your choice. You can go to Long Beach. We pay for everything." They wanted to get rid of us. The first loss was for them the best, because they thought we could not survive there and . . .

SH: Why did they pick Long Beach?

KB: Long Beach was, they got in touch with other Family Services.

SH: I see.

KB: And they had only . . .

SH: Was this a Jewish Family Service?

KB: Yeah, Jewish Family Service, yeah. They had only Long Beach and they had, I think, Houston, Texas. I knew Texas was terrible hot, and because of her other cousin staying here, we choose Long Beach. So they packed everything up. We came here in June 8, 1948, to Long Beach. We thought this was a paradise. We had a wonderful apartment.

SH: You got an apartment right away?

KB: We, Jewish Family Service did it for us. We had a wonderful apartment, a refrigerator, bedroom, and little, little living room, kitchen. We were, we felt like king. My son had never seen before a banana or anything, never knew what this or what that is. So he came here to school, and as I already said, I worked all those different jobs. Until I finally, until we finally got some money from, from the German, from Germany to make up for whatever they could . . .

SH: When did that start?

KB: That did start, I believe, '50, I think it . . .

SH: So soon.

KB: . . . started in '50. So when we got some money, yeah, we said to ourselves, we have to see that we get, that we get a house, that we can start all over again. I was lucky enough, across the street, almost across the street, where we did live in our apartment, they were wonderful people. We still correspond with each other, once we were even visited by them. They said I was an inspiration for them, how I had started all over and was not afraid to do anything to work. I started as an apprentice in a grocery store. I went to school to learn everything about cashing, to be a cashier, about the groceries, about everything. I went here to a, to a school what was free also. And I stayed with them a year. Then we had to have, my wife worked as a baby-sitter. That was all she could get at first and broke her ankle, had a compound fracture. And from that, from that insurance company they got two hundred and seventy dollars. That we used as a down payment for a house. And then I met that man from the bank. Do I talk too much about . . . ?

SH: No, this is fine.

KB: The man who was wonderful to us, I met also here, later, much later. He was impressed, he was impressed that my wife, that we cannot pay more monthly what we pay now where we live, otherwise, we can not afford to have a house. And I went from here then to a company where I stayed 28 years with, Lucky Stores here. And that was in, you must excuse, I forget names, I'm getting older. I worked there, the store was open, the stores were open till one o'clock at night, and I had some trouble with my back, I had to wear a corset, and I had to stay with that corset, there was no air conditioning, nothing. And I had to work, that was a big store

where I started. I learned that man also to know, he was a liquor buyer for this company, for Lucky, but he wanted to get in in groceries. And he helped me to get a job, Bell, it was called Bell. And it was, I had to go by bus and sometimes I had to take two buses to come back to Long Beach again. If I had to work late, I had no choice, I came home at two o'clock in the morning sometimes. But they were also very good to me I worked hard and I still remember, when one fellow said, "I know, I think I have the feeling you will stay for years and years with our company." Nobody knew I was Jewish. I didn't tell them. Why should I? Then afterwards, this fellow I learned to know, Alfred Durfy was his name, he got promoted to get, be a manager in one of the stores here and he called me. He said, "Kurt, would you like to work here, then you don't have so far to go with bus and everything." I said, "Wonderful." So I worked there. Then I got in a bigger store here, across from us, here.

SH: This Lucky Store here?

KB: Lucky Store, was before, yeah, at that time it was called Dollar Market and then Jim Dandy [laughs] and then Lucky. I worked there and I befriended the, with the manager. He was wonderful, too. He was a younger man and I told him, "I'm Jewish," and he was very, very good.

SH: Why did you tell him and not others?

KB: I don't know, because we became mostly friends. And I had confidence in him and I trusted him. I said, "I am Jewish." He said, "Wonderful, I take care of you." And that's the reason wherever was a big store opened, they needed somebody, he wanted me all over, until he, we stayed in a very big store here in Hermosa Beach. And I stayed there till the end there. When I was over seventy I worked part-time. Then I got sick, I had, had to get a pacemaker. And my back gave up, so I said to myself, as much as I love to be here, I was loved by the customers all, they were, they came all to me. The girls said, "Here my section is open." "No, we want Kurt." Because at that time with the specials, you had to know everything. Not like now, where you don't have to have a head anymore, you had to know everything. And I prepared myself, too. They knew, they were not cheated. The others knew it when it was over with the sale and everything. I was conscientious and I still remember when I worked, when I worked before once, when the bakery strike was. I am sorry that I bring in.

SH: It's alright.

KB: I worked in a pie shop, I learned in a pie shop here. And I heard when one fellow said, "Where's Kurt?" And the foreman said, "You don't have to worry about Kurt, he's always doing something. He's not loafing." So I stayed there. Then I worked for a big company here. They still exist, Babba's Bakery, I worked also, where we made rolls and all those things. Then was big strike, they were laid off, then I had to go to that, I had no other, then everything went down, and I had to go to that *Schiß- [unintelligible]* National Metal and Steel it was called. I worked there. So until I finally got out and started then over in the grocery, I am sorry I bring up . . .

SH: No, it doesn't matter. It's hard to tell a story perfectly straight.

KB: Yeah, it's impossible.

SH: Tell me, I'm interested that you didn't tell people that you were Jewish. Did you see anti-semitism here in the United States?

KB: Yeah, oh sure, oh sure. My wife listened at night, she could also not have too much of sleep. They had earphones and she listened and she heard especially from Orange County about the anti-semitism. And I thought . . .

SH: On the radio, you mean?

KB: On the radio, on the radio. And I heard also. People who did not know that I was Jewish, how they talked about the Jews. And in the 1967 war in Israel.

SH: So you knew.

KB: I knew, there was one German fellow, one German fellow, I said to him, "Would you like that Israel wins, or that Egypt wins and Iraq and so on?" "Oh the Jews can . . ." Oh, they had one thing that I have to tell, when we had that house. We wanted some cement laid out where grass was and we got some fellow and he had to wait to get the cement. And of course, he said, "From where are you?" I said, "From Germany." "Oh. Hitler did the right, too bad he didn't burn all the Jews there. They should have, not one Jew should have survived." And my wife spoke up. And he got red as a, as a, what do you call that fish, it's a lobster. And I said, "Why are you against the Jews?" He said, "Well, I had to build once a cage, ape cage or what it was, for a Jew and he didn't pay me." I said, "Because of that one Jew, you hate the whole population of Jews? All the Jews? You think, don't you think you have people like that among your people, among every other religion?" Well, we spoke but it was too late. We couldn't throw him out. And also, well, this guy, [unintelligible] they all anti-semitism. And one fellow came, wanted to exchange something. His wife was Italian. So I said, "Why don't you take this one?" "Oh no, I would never take that, that are Jews." You know? So I was better off to keep my mouth shut.

SH: Were you disappointed about that in the United States? Did you think, did you think . . . ?

KB: No, I was not disappointed, because let's face it, we are hated, we have no friends, they hate us all over the world. Why I don't know. I think as long as we live, I don't want to, probably won't see anything changing in Israel, because in my age, but maybe you have a chance to see some change. It's awful.

SH: Did you think when you were in Shanghai after the war, did you think of going to Israel?

KB: Yeah, yeah, we thought of Israel, we thought of Israel. But, of course, when we get that affidavit here to come to United States, we preferred that, of course.

SH: Why did you prefer that to going to Israel?

KB: Well, first of all she had those two cousins here, we had nobody in Israel. Yeah, she had a

friend in Israel, she didn't see any more. She died six weeks before we wanted to see them. And there was, as I already said, there was another family, a sister of her cousin here in Beverly Hills. She knew very well, and she was very close to them.

SH: So it was the relatives and friends that were here.

KB: Relatives for her, for me I had nobody here. I had nobody. And so what else could I tell you, what else? We have still time. I don't know what else you would be interested in. Ask me what you, what comes to your mind, Steve?

SH: Tell me about having fun in Shanghai. You were young. What did you do for entertainment or fun, or was there any money or time to do that?

KB: No, we couldn't afford to have fun. [laughs] We were glad if we could pay the twenty cents for a bottle of, of soda or what. That was all, we couldn't afford anything, was impossible. It was too hard. We were lucky when we could buy less than a quarter pound of cold cuts or anything. That was already like heaven. [laughs] No, no fun. We were young, you said, as I already said before, our best years were lost in Shanghai. I mean . . .

SH: You think of them as lost because you had to work so hard?

KB: No, I didn't mean to work so hard, I didn't mean. But you couldn't live as a *Mensch* as you would have lived when you stayed still in Germany, where we had everything, where we were spoiled. No, it was too tough. And then when the American came in, some people got jobs during the time when the American came in to, that was close to Shanghai where they worked. I cannot get to the name right now. Wollsteins and we, we didn't get a job. Only people who were electrician, plumber, or barber, they could work, or who drives them. We couldn't get a job at all, nothing. They made good money at that time. Also a very good friend of mine, who died recently, he did live in San Mateo, by San Francisco. He got a job as a, he had little bit knowledge of electricity and so on, he could work as electrician. He tried to get me in as something, of course didn't work. And, no. It was no laughing, nothing to laugh about, anything, I think, it was too serious, too severe, and you saw so much misery among our Jews, older Jews. We sent even care packets, package to an aunt who came out of a camp to Holland. We did that. We tried to help, as little as we had, and if my wife would have been healthy, she could have earned a lot of money in Shanghai as a baby, they were crazy about having somebody there, Germans, but very good people, too. We could have had heaven on earth there. But, unfortunately, didn't work out. Yeah, then if that wouldn't have, if we wouldn't be troubled with all this illness, that killed us, really did.

SH: But still you managed to stay out of the camps.

KB: I had not one night in a camp, not one day in a camp. Wollsteins neither.

SH: How did you, was there a difference between you and the Wollsteins and the people in the camps, that you managed to stay out and . . .

KB: Wollsteins, Wollsteins, as they probably told you, had their own little business. They managed. Their parents had a café and restaurant, they told you probably. Their parents had money. They probably . . .

SH: So money is the difference?

KB: Money, money is still, we always say, "You don't have to, but it makes you feel good, you have to have it." Without money, you're lost, really. As they say, you probably heard that, "When you laugh, the whole world laughs with you. If you cry, you cry alone." There's nobody there to help you. So we had to count on ourselves to stay. And when you're young, you still have hope, you still have hope, that you can start a new life. We liked it here, we liked it here otherwise. I couldn't say I am disappointed. I'm glad I am here, very glad to be here. Your grandmother was in Shanghai?

SH: My grandparents both.

KB: Your grandparents were in Shanghai?

SH: My father was a, my grandfather was a doctor.

KB: What was the name?

SH: Hochstädt. Josef Hochstädt.

KB: Oh, they went to Shanghai from Vienna?

SH: From Vienna in 1939.

KB: '39.

SH: But they stayed out of Hongkew.

KB: They were in, in the . . .

SH: They were in the French Concession.

KB: . . . French Concession, there they had it wonderful.

SH: They had a very good life.

KB: They had, sure.

SH: They didn't have any financial problems or anything.

KB: No, of course not. They had a coolie, they had a maid, they had everything, and they could pay and they could get everything they wanted. Sure.

SH: Yes, that was a different life.

KB: And where did they go from there?

SH: To New York.

KB: Oh, to New York.

SH: To New Jersey actually. And he was a doctor in New Jersey for twenty years. Then they came here to Santa Monica.

KB: Was he a GP or . . . ?

SH: No, he was a gynecologist/obstetrician.

KB: Oh, also gynecologist, yeah, obstetrician, same as the cousin here in Beverly Hills. And now your parents live here in . . .

SH: Laguna Hills.

KB: Your parents.

SH: And my brother lives in Venice.

KB: Oh, in Venice. Your parents are retired?

SH: Yes.

KB: What did your father do, if I may ask?

SH: He was a freight forwarder. He was a middleman between people who are importing and exporting. And the people, and the boat or the airplane, he would prepare all the papers and go through customs and he did that in New York for, for 35 years or so.

KB: And he did that in, in Vienna? Was he, he was young when he . . .

SH: He was young, he came here when he was 18.

KB: Oh, he came here . . .

SH: See, my grandparents sent him here and then they went to Shanghai, because they got an affidavit for him to come here.

KB: Yeah, yeah, wonderful. It's an interesting life. And you would like to write a book about . . .

SH: About you all.

KB: Yeah. Did you interview other, other people who did live in Shanghai, besides the Wollsteins?

SH: About twenty-five so far.

KB: Did you hear about the same stories or different?

SH: Some things are the same, some things are the same. But every one, each person had their own way of getting by and it's very interesting to hear, to hear that.

KB: If you interview twenty-five people, that fills the book alone, I think.

SH: Well, I want to interview many more. You know why, because it is very interesting to hear what you say. It's very interesting for me to talk to you all, so, so I want to keep doing it, keep talking to more people.

KB: Oh, could I offer you something, a Coke or something to drink?

SH: Oh, that would be very nice.

KB: Yeah, sure.

BREAK IN RECORDING

KB: So you probably have to go and ask me . . .

SH: I have, I have another question.

KB: Yeah.

SH: You, you said that in some ways these years in Shanghai were lost.

KB: Yeah, I think.

SH: Do you, is there something you gained from being in Shanghai that helped you?

KB: Well, I would say, I gained that much that I can say, where a will, there is a way. That we are able to do things we would have never thought of we could be able to do. So, if you are really in that situation and you want to survive, that you do it, and don't hesitate to learn another trade or something to keep you alive. And I think also, that we should appreciate everything more, not just take it for, "It has to be that way." You wake up in the morning and that's it. I

think that was not Shanghai, but I think also we have to be happy and thankful that we are able to get up every morning and nothing hurts us, and that we don't take everything that it has to be that way, it has to come. We are entitled to it. And people were closer to each, with each other also .

SH: In Shanghai?

KB: Yeah, I would say you had a certain circle of friendship later on, where people were together and we still stay in touch with each other, and of course there are several, more than several who have passed away in the meantime. And the feeling of being together and go through thick and thin, and take life in your own hands. It helped. Then when we came to San Francisco, there were already Jews who left earlier. They didn't want to know, didn't want to have anything to do with us. They thought we are, we are rivals, we are competition. That's life, that's life. And we were happy to see there was a market in San Francisco, I don't know what it was called, Crystal Market or something. You saw all the, everything in abundance what we missed. We missed all the fruits, we missed all the good, good meals. I mean what we had was meager, meager, very meager. We were, as I already mentioned before, we were almost skeletons, not direct but we lost so much weight. And also when we came to Long Beach, my wife says, "Oh, this is like paradise," to have your own housing, your own living, you can do what you want. The Family Service helped for the first month or two, and I already in St. Paul paid, paid whatever I could back, I didn't want anything to take just for granted. And I had a better feeling. And here when I came to Long Beach, I had friends I knew from Germany already, we lived close and so we were again like another, another little town, you know. All the people together, we stayed together and stuck together, stick together. And was a happy life then, unless sickness did struck. That was, what was against us, but otherwise we should have been very, very happy. We would have liked to have another child, but her cousin here, also the gynecologist, he said, "No, there is one kidney." He said to my wife, "Your life is in danger, you cannot have another child."

SH: Did you think about having another child in Shanghai?

KB: No. We didn't even want, want a child in Shanghai, when it happened, it was an accident. And also there was a doctor, Eugen Marx, she knew him from Cologne. My wife was born in Westphalia and she knew through her profession lots of doctors, lots of physicians, and he said, "You went through . . ." I still hear him, "You will never regret, let come what comes. And don't have an abortion. You would be happy." Of course we were happy afterwards. Even because there we thought, how shall we make a living? Many people were afraid. Many, you probably heard that also, that many women went as prostitute in Shanghai, sold herself. I know even one fellow who sent his wife out with a little basket. She went with a Japanese to bed and everything. You probably heard that, it was lots of this going on. And women were very, very, there were more men than women from our refugees there. I think every woman would forget her husband there, what would she not, would have not been able to normal times. Because everybody wanted somebody to stay together, live together, makes it better for them, as to be alone.

SH: So do you think there was competition among men for the women?

KB: No, no, no, no competition, no, no, but many married there, many. Even some . . .

SH: Or was easier for women to find husbands there?

KB: Oh, sure, sure, sure. And specially if women had a job there as a nurse or, or had some skill, skillful job and so on. Sure, because there were so many young men. Werner was, came over with his wife and with his boy, Peter.

SH: And Siegbert, but Siegbert didn't get married, did he?

KB: Siegbert never got married. He was always a latecomer. I think, when he told us, "Oh, I think, I would like to marry, Friedel." My wife said, "Siegbert, don't wait until others propose." He was always too late, always too late. We always used to say, he would be a, make a, make a wonderful husband to a widow with kids, because he has a golden heart, a very good heart, very good person, very warm person. And he is also an educated man, he has good knowledge, he is interested in many things. He's older, he's two years older than I am. As a matter of fact, my wife will meet them next week in Chicago.

SH: You are going to Chicago?

KB: No, I don't. My wife goes there, I don't. I had bad luck with Chicago. The first time I got there I forgot my straw hat. It was stolen in a hotel. The second time I lost my umbrella there. I said, I don't go to Chicago any more. [laughs] Whatever it is, I always forgot something or lose something, go alone. [laughs] I didn't care to.

END SIDE B, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2

KB: . . . would you like another Coke?

SH: No, that's fine, that's fine.

KB: I was so depressed.

SH: When was this?

KB: That was, now we have '90, '88 to '89. My doctor asked me, he said, "How do you, what is wrong with you?" I said, "If you want to know, what I feel like not waking up tomorrow."

Awful feeling, if you get depressed, and I don't know why, I had no reason. I don't know why. Still don't know what happened to me. So he came over, Siegbert, and stayed with us a week and I was in terrible depression at that time. I felt sorry that he came. But he wanted to help, he wanted to send Werner over. He said, "That's not you, because you were always, had always so much humor, you were always so happy, and you could entertain the whole family, everything."

SH: How did you do that, what did you do to entertain?

KB: I, we would sing together, we would, we would, I had lots of jokes to tell, because the cantor here, I always, I always went to, twice a week to *minyán* here. You know what *minyán* means?

SH: Yeah, are you talking about here or in Shanghai?

KB: Yeah, yeah. There we, our cantor, he was like an artist, and like an entertainer, he had so many jokes in hand. And I heard them also when we were together with families, I told the jokes, which were not too bad [laughs] or we did sing together or we, whatever you, shared other interesting points. We talked about Germany, we talked about here and there, we talked about politic, about everything. So it was lively.

SH: Were you that way in Shanghai, too?

KB: Not that much. No.

SH: Life was too hard?

KB: Was too hard, was too much, I was too much, too much was on my mind with my wife at that time. It was a sad situation. As I already said, maybe everything would have changed, if my wife would have been all right. Because my nature is, I love people, I love to be with people, I love nature, I love everything. And I was very, very easy going, very easy going. That's the reason that Siegbert could not understand where I got the depression from, he said. I say, I don't know either, but I could not help it. It was awful, I hope not, I hope for nobody to get that, because you have the feeling you don't want to live. You probably heard it from nobody, or did you hear something similar?

SH: My grandmother actually sort of feels that way. She is quite old, she is ninety. She is going to be ninety-three this month.

KB: Well, in that age . . .

SH: And she's sick, she says that too.

KB: Yeah, at that age they don't want to live. They want to, is she healthy?

SH: Not very healthy.

KB: Also not. Because you hear so many people live over hundred years old, but nobody tells them what condition they are. How they really mentally and physically are really. We have here a man, he, a Jewish fellow who comes to the, I get you another Coke?

SH: No, that's fine.

KB: Who was in Russian, when he was in concentration camp, he still don't know, doesn't know. The Russians took him to a Russian camp there, he was in Russia years. He lost two wives and found his children back, they were brought to England and he found them here again. And that man, I say, he puts us all to shame. I never hear that he is sick, or has maybe a cold. And we, all the other people have arthritis and this and this and this, he is always the same. I talked to him yesterday and I said, "Max," Max Hess is his name, I say, "Max, how I really, really . . ." Now I cannot even say what I told him. I don't know what I told him, but I really do feel he's blessed. He's blessed. He can eat you under the table still. He goes, he can go, still go out on walks or goes to eating places and so on, stays out late. We go to bed at ten, sometimes even earlier. So some people are wonderful. They're blessed.

SH: Kurt, you mentioned going to *minyan* here. What was your religious life like in Shanghai?

KB: My religious life was not much, not much at all. I was brought up in that little town, only with two Jewish families. The cantor from the neighbor town had to come to prepare me for the Bar Mitzvah. I didn't know anything. My father came from a very, very religious family from Upper Silesia, but [unintelligible] changed, too. They were strict kosher and everything. And in Shanghai now my son had the *bris*. I went to *Shul* whenever it was necessary, otherwise I didn't go at all. My wife, she is religious. We belonged, we belonged here to the temple before we were three-holiday Jews, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, because I had to work. I could not say, "I don't work on Saturdays." Now we, I go twice to *minyan* alone also. We call it the Happy Hour, we have the bagels and lox, not always lox, and cream cheese. We have coffee, whenever is an occasion, like last Saturday, we had lox and cake and everything, and it's like a camaraderie with us together, older people all about my age, 82, 83, 80, 79, and so on. And then we go every *shabbas*, used to walk over there to our temple. It was about twenty minutes. I walked almost every morning three miles, then I got arthritis and after that I cannot walk, have to take the car. We enjoy it. We have a new rabbi there, young, thirty-eight years old, I think. And we enjoy it. But the Polish and, the Jews, their forefathers came from Poland or Russia, don't want us. They hate the German Jews.

SH: Here you mean?

KB: They don't like the German Jews.

SH: Why is that?

KB: Why is that? In a way, they are right. When they had these pogroms and everything, the Jews had to get out and the Jews in Germany didn't want them. Thought they make nothing but *rish'us* when they start to talk. What they do? Everybody gives them money to get out, only out. They don't want them.

SH: Did that . . .

KB: That is true.

SH: . . . did that come out in Shanghai between the Russian Jews and the German Jews?

KB: No, no, there was, no, no, there was peace, there was peace. But the Austrian and the German Jews didn't get along.

SH: Why was that?

KB: I don't know. I don't know.

SH: But you noticed that?

KB: Everybody noticed that, yeah. I met wonderful people from Austria, when I was, I was once in Abbazia. They were, it was Austrian, belonged to Austria, wonderful families, wonderful. I learned here also to know, but in general in Shanghai they didn't get along at all. I don't know why.

SH: Did you ever see, see this happen? What does it mean, that they didn't get along? They didn't associate with each other?

KB: They didn't associate. They'd fight with each other, I mean not, not like, not fist fight. I know, I had a, somebody I knew from that time, when I was in Abbazia, he came also to Shanghai, a Dr. Braun, and he said, "Ach, Ihr seid, Ihr Deutschen. You German, you say, 'Guten Morgen,' we say, 'Griß Gott.'" Do you understand it?

SH: Yes.

KB: "Und you say, 'Brot,' we say, 'Kipfel.' You say, 'Schnür-, Schnür-,,' we, you say, 'Schochbindel,' here and we say, 'Schnürsenkel.'" He said, " [unintelligible] ." Yeah, I mean, they were nicer to me, because we, we learned to know each other, but in general, I don't know. You know, in Austria was more anti-semitism than really in Germany. They were all cried "Hurrah" for Hitler. It's a beautiful country. Have you ever seen it?

SH: Yes.

KB: You saw Vienna?

SH: Yes, a short while, a week in Vienna, and traveled a little bit through the mountains.

KB: Oh, it's beautiful. It's very beautiful. Were you in Germany, too?

SH: In Dusseldorf and in Mainz.

KB: Oh yeah, Dusseldorf is, they call it the city of the gardens and the windows, stores, because it's so beautiful. Yeah, it's too bad that, that we had to go out, that we had to leave it.

SH: What do you think about the possible reunification of Germany?

KB: Maybe it's for the better. Maybe it takes a long time. How shall they find jobs for all those people?

SH: I don't know that.

KB: Housing and everything?

SH: That's a big problem.

KB: That's a very big problem. I think the older people stay where they are, and skilled people might stay where they are, but all the others from out, and they have, of course, they have a much better living, much better earning. But there probably will also be a friction.

SH: This doesn't worry you that Germany will be strong again or anything?

KB: No, I don't care about them any more. I hope they will. Here the skinheads and everything, they also like Hitler here, or Ku Klux Klan. I mean, it happened, many, many things happened here too . . .

SH: Yes.

KB: . . . that they hate, that they openly hate, I don't know, they hate the Jews. And the blacks hate us, too, in certain ways, because they say, "All the Jews are well off and we are still in a dump. We still on, on welfare and so." Because I think, I think also sometimes that Jews themselves brought the anti-semitism on. There were Jews you can do without, too. Don't you think?

SH: Yes.

KB: Who make *rish'us* alone when they open their mouth and the way they act. Same with, in Israel now, too, I think. Now all the Russian Jews will come over there. There will be also frictions. And most of the Russians are interested and skilled people. I know here some who are engineers or physicians or physicians and everything, physicists, yeah. And I think all the Russians, the Russian Jews are intelligent and high, maybe eggheads even, high intelligent people. They may not think about Israel, it started with Jews, it was a miracle. It's a miracle that they survived.

SH: Yes.

KB: It's a miracle. Yeah, Greta. I thought, quarter after eleven, Greta.

SH: Perhaps we can finish.

Gretal Benger: Finish, finish. [laughs] Where do you live?

SH: In Maine.

GB: Maine.

KB: We were there when we took the tour. When we were in Boston, when we were in New York . . .

GB: Is there a nice Jewish community?

SH: There are a few Jews. In the town I live, there is a small Jewish community. Not that many Jews, though. Maybe it's too cold for Jews.

KB: [laughs] We get cold feet.

GB: Here are many Jews, you know. Come on, Kurt, that dirty thing . . .

KB: No, I had something happening, some, I spilled some Coke. You know me, I always spill something. What would you like?

GB: Here there are a lot of Jews, but they are distant. You don't know where they are. They don't come to the synagogue, only Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

KB: Yeah, most of them, that's true. It's true.

GB: But Bar Mitzvah, you know . . .

KB: That's a big event.

GB: . . . it's more than a wedding, ach, my God . . .

KB: Only when there are big events are there, then they come. But otherwise it's just a handful. On *shabbas* we have maybe, if we have thirty people, we are lucky.

GB: Are you married?

SH: Yes.

GB: Children?

SH: Yes.

GB: Children! How old are you?

KB: How old do you think Steve is, Gretal? He looks so young.

GB: If he would shave, oh my gosh.

SH: But it's there.

GB: I would say maybe thirty-two.

SH: Forty-two.

KB: Forty-two. I asked him.

GB: Ahh, forty-two! You look young. Even when you have . . .

KB: Yeah, even with the beard.

GB: Why don't you take that beard off?

SH: That's what my mother says.

GB: Because it is getting very . . .

KB: Because she has no place to kiss you.

GB: My son, my son has, he had a beard, you know. When he took it off, I couldn't stand to look at him, you know, because I'm not used to that, but . . .

SH: If I took my beard off, I would frighten my children.

GB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KB: They wouldn't recognize you.

SH: They've never seen me without . . .

GB: How old are the children?

SH: Eight and five.

GB: Girl and boy?

KB: Yes, that's wonderful. You don't want more children probably.

SH: No, that's enough, I think.

GB: That's enough. They are too expensive. They go their own way, anyway. No family life in America, that I tell you.

KB: Because when they are grown-up, when they are teenagers, when they work . . .

GB: No, no. No family life, I mean.

SH: What do you mean?

GB: No family life.

KB: She means, she means . . .

GB: I know what I mean.

KB: . . . when the family sits together for dinner or lunch or supper or so on, that they are close together, everybody goes his own way.

END SIDE A, TAPE 2

END OF INTERVIEW