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Reisman, Eric oral history interview

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Interview with Eric Reisman by Steve Hochstadt
Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project
Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

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Interviewer

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Transcribers

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Date

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Extent

2 audiocassettes

Place

Bonita Springs, Florida

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Biographical Note

Eric Reisman was born in Vienna, Austria, on April 26, 1926. His family originated in Czechoslovakia. At the time of the Anschluss, Reisman's mother was forced to scrub the sidewalk outside of their apartment. Reisman, his brother Paul, and their parents, managed to get a Chinese visa from the Consul Feng Shan Ho, which helped them get a passage to Shanghai on the "Conte Biancamano" in November 1938.

In Shanghai Reisman attended the Public and Thomas Hambry School, then the Kadoorie School. He celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in Hongkou in April 1939. In 1943 they had to move into the Designated Area. Reisman worked in a pharmacy and learned to box from Alfred Kohn, nicknamed "Lako". After the war ended, he worked for Northwest Airlines at Kiangwan airport. His parents came to the United States in 1947. His brother Paul married in Shanghai and went to Bolivia. Reisman came to the US in 1949. He got married and worked many years for Sikosky Aircraft. Eric Reisman died on June 30, 1999.

Eric Reisman: I think we, we can certainly start when I was born.

Steve Hochstadt: That's what I would like to start with, as much as you can from your experiences before China.

Reisman: Yeah, well, we, I was born, I'm Eric Reisman, we used to spell my name with a double "N" as it's shown on my father's business sign there, and it used to be E-R-I-C-H and it's now E-R-I-C only. We dropped the "H" and we dropped the "N" in my citizenship papers. And we didn't, don't pronounce it "R_sman" as it used to be pronounced in German, but it was "R_sman" and that has an origin. When I came to this country, I was drafted into the Army during the Korean War and everybody in the service called me "R_sman", so that stuck with me. And maybe it's Americanized. I like it better, it's something that I don't mind, so any time you want to call me "R_sman" or "R_sman", I'll say, "Here I am."

Well, as I said, I was born in Vienna, Austria, on April 26, 1926. My family originated in Czechoslovakia, in Theben-Neudorf, where my father and mother were born, and they, after the World War I, my father and mother immigrated, or changed their residence to Vienna, Austria, where my father went into business, and that was one of his businesses here that I showed you . . .

Hochstadt: Is that him in the door?

Reisman: That's him in the door, yes. That was, and, but that business, that broke up and he went into a rather strange but different type of business of citrus import, citrus fruit import in wholesale, with another person together, and they did very well. And so I went to school, being an Austrian-born I had no problem getting into school in Austria, and our life was a regulated life. My mother was a homemaker and afterwards she, being a very business-minded person, had a delicatessen store and opened up a delicatessen store not far from where we lived in the eighth district in Vienna, Josefstadt, and pursued her own business career.

My brother and I, we went to school, I went to school in my district, we had friends, we had playgrounds in the area. We played the normal soccer and we had a very comfortable life with few worries of anything. We joined the Boy Scouts, which kept us active, and until the annexation of Austria to Germany, antisemitism was already felt way before that, and as a youngster you had to bear with it. You bent with the, with the wind and you couldn't do very much about it.

Other than in the Boy Scouts, we were of course geared and directed toward preserving the regime, which was under Schuschnigg at that time, and we were very pro-Schuschnigg and against the elements of the Nazi regime.¹ The election which was supposed to have taken place never did take place, and Hitler, the borders were opened up and Hitler's forces marched in. Antisemitism, as I mentioned before, was predominant in Austria, and the Austrian population had little time to catch up to the, what Hitler had pursued during his period of ruling over a number of years, the

¹ Kurt Schuschnigg (1897 - 1977) succeeded the assassinated Engelbert Dollfuss in 1934 as Chancellor of Austria. In 1938, he was imprisoned by Nazi Germany following the *Anschluss*, and survived Dachau and Sachsenhausen.

Austrian population tried to make up within a very short period of time. This wasn't difficult.

First thing that happened, well, I would say, it was on a Friday night, we had a Friday night meeting in the Boy Scouts, which was not far, well, it was a distance away from where we lived, but walking distance away from where we lived, and we had a meeting that Friday night in the Boy Scouts and suddenly there was a knock on the door. Already then the troop leader closed the doors to, from the outside to the assembly gathering room that we had rented as a Boy Scout troop, and, in order to prevent, because there were outbreaks of violence where Nazi underground troops, not troops but youths, would storm into a Boy Scout meeting and beat the youngsters up, and destroy whatever was there, because they knew that the Boy Scouts were against their theories. So consequently when we were in there, the door was locked. There is a knock on the door and shouts from a person outside, we didn't know who it was, that Hitler had crossed the borders and for us all to go home. It was one of the, after we opened the door, it was one of the members of the troop's mother that was at the door, and she directed us, she told us to go home through side streets, because the, we were in uniform and we had the, these swatches on, on the sleeve, the Austrian flag with the *Kreuzkreuz*, which is the insignia, not the swastika but the *Kreuzkreuz*, which was the insignia of the Austrian patriotic flag, and we had that on our shirts. So my brother and I, we took, who is older, my brother being older, he had the foresight, "Let's go down through side streets back to our residence," and we tore off these swatches and made our shirts just look brown, rather than have any kind of identity on there. And we ran home through side streets, and we weren't gathered, we weren't gathered up to made, to be made a spectacle of by the howling masses. And I got home and my father was at the window, wait, he closed the windows and he says, "Don't illuminate the light, make, show that there's anybody in the residence."

I asked my mother, my father, "Where is mother?" and mother, he says, my mother is downstairs on the street, she was taken to clean the street. So unbeknown to my father, I ran outside with a, after I looked out the window, saw my mother in a, in a cir-, being surrounded, there were about twenty Jewish people there cleaning the sidewalk. What they were doing actually with scrub brushes and water and soap, whatever they had, trying to get the propaganda slogans that were oil paint, with oil paint, put on the sidewalks to, voting propaganda, vote for this party or for that party, they were trying to erase any traces that was, showed that there was propaganda for the Schuschnigg regime, so they were trying to clean up the sidewalks. And so I got down there and I was trying to, as a young, youngster, I got myself in front of the storm troopers, by the storm troopers there, and one of the guys said to me, "What are you doing here?" I says, "I'm going to help my mother, she's down there." So he grabbed me by the seat of my pants and he, up in the air, right in the middle of everybody, [laughs] and I kneeled and scooted over toward my mother and my mother was surprised to see me there, and I was helping. We were there a while. Every minute lasted, appeared like an hour, but the howling masses and the dirty water being spilled, spilled on us and we were on our knees scrubbing the sidewalk, when I heard our superintendent of the house that we lived in say to one of the storm troopers, "That woman over there with the child," I heard it, "You don't need to show them what work is, she's a hard worker." And that somehow weakened that storm trooper and said, "You with the child, go home." And so we were fortunate enough to, after a few hours we were, we were able to go home. Those same people that were down there scrubbing, the next morning when I looked out the window, they were still there

scrubbing. So it was, we were fortunate to be able to get there, get away sooner.

But it was signs like I showed you, the “*Ewige Jude*” and all that, these antisemitic slogans, made me as a youngster of eleven or twelve years, eleven years at that time, grow up practically overnight. You realize that your youth was gone, it is, you had to think very rational and do everything with a great deal of thought and caution.

I, we were, I went to my, the second grade *Realgymnasium* at that time, and that was out of the question, we couldn’t go there any more. My brother went to a *Maschinenbauschule* in, a little bit further away, he had an experience of his own. But I, when I was no longer able to go to the school that I went in, was trying to get into, or was trying to stay in, but we all had to go to a place called the *Stumpergasse*, which was a school in the seventh district, we lived in the eighth district, and that again was a very long way. We couldn’t, I could not, I don’t know, some people continued doing it, although you weren’t permitted to do it, I couldn’t use public transportation, so it meant walking. So you got up an hour and a half earlier to, in able to get to the school. However, you got to school, and there were Jewish children from all around the area, several districts combined into one school that they all had to attend. The classes were filled, over-filled, more than they could possibly hold, benches and so forth, and teachers were scarce. There were just a few Jewish teachers there that were able to teach, and as a result learning was rather difficult. Learning in itself was difficult, because your mind was also set now, you had to go home. And not so much when you entered the school but when you exited the school, there was crowds outside waiting with bottles, stones, and chains, swinging chains, and anybody walking by got hit, got bolted by rocks and bottles thrown at him. Then, whether they were girls or boys, it was, it was, you took your hands in your own, your life in your hands trying to get out of this school.

So then we walked back. I walked back a distance of about a good hour’s walk, and not knowing, I had my *Lederhosen* on. I didn’t know that the *Lederhosen* was considered a part of the Hitler Youth uniform, which was either a black velvet pants or *Lederhosen*. Well, yeah, fortunately enough I had gym pants underneath my *Lederhosen*, so as I was walking, that was one of the experiences that I had with my school satchel in my, on my back, I got held up by several youngsters from the Hitler Youth demanding my *Lederhosen*. So I gave it to them, how was I, no, I could not resist, and so I, fortunately I had the gym pants underneath and I walked home in my gym pants. But it left me with an impression. So we got, I got home and I told that to my mother and father, and so I wouldn’t wear *Lederhosen* any more, because that was, was only, would antagonize them and that was the one thing I didn’t want to do.

That, and the fact that all the kids that I used to play with, which, I was not, we didn’t live in the second district where you had a large Jewish population. The eighth district, the area we lived in, had Jewish people, but in a very great minority. And we, the friends that I had, we used to play football with, tag, hide-and-seek, whatever young people played, they didn’t want to know you any more. Suddenly you were an outcast, which left you with a certain impression. People that you used to eat ice cream with, you used to drink a glass of milk with, you had a snack with and you used to chat, suddenly they, either they walked away or clammed up when you approached them, so it was a very peculiar feeling.

Considering these circumstances, I, on my own, my parents did not force me, I said to my

parents, and I discussed it with them as young as I was, that learning is an impossibility. Not only couldn't you concentrate on trying to study or learn something, because of fear of what, what you could expect when you left. Not only this, but there were no teachers there that were prepared to teach you, because they were in the minority. There was one teacher for two or three classes in various grades, there were an inadequacy of teachers, the number of teachers. So going to school was strictly, you went there because it was, schooling was compulsory, you felt you were still living under the laws of the land, that you, everybody had to go to school. So I told my mother that I wasn't prepared to go to school, I wasn't going to learn anything.

It so happened that I had in the house, I always liked woodwork and so forth and the smell of wood, and tradesmen were in the building, downstairs in the basement they had a *Tischlerei*, I don't know whether that means anything to you, and I got to know the guy who owned or worked there, and he was a nice fellow. And I said, I always helped him carry lumber or do things, so whenever I came, he put me to work. And I worked there with him, and surprising enough he had contracts with various SS organizations here, and they built a new office building for the local gendarmerie and this and that. And he would take me along, and I would be going indoors where Jews, and I, at that time I didn't, as a youngster I didn't look too Jewish, he would, and he said, "Call me Father," and so when I called him Father, I worked, went with him wherever we went. We, we laid parquet floorings and so forth, and I helped him carry the heavy sacks of hardwood flooring pieces, parquet slabs, up the stairs, and I did, I handed him tools and I helped him here and there. So that's what kept me busy. And I was, I stayed out of trouble that way.

Then of course my father, basically the day that the Hitler, Hitler's troops entered Austria, the business that he had, the citrus fruit business, he had a truck and he had a place on the *Naschmarkt*, wholesale, where he, he sold to the wholesalers, he imported it and he sold to the wholesalers. He went into his place of business and the driver who drove the truck said, "Reismann, go home. This business is mine, it's no longer your business." My father couldn't do anything, so he went home, and all we had was what we had in the house or what we had on finances, the banks were closed to us, everything was not accessible to us, so what we had was all we had. So my father, knowing, sensing the situation, I guess, or, he said, "I can't wait for the regime to change. I have to feed my family, I have to support my family." He immediately, but immediately the second day, pursued the emigration out of Austria.

We went from one consulate to the other. We wrote letters to family members that we, nephews that my father had that I never knew lived in Argentina, we didn't have anyone in the United States at that time. And we tried to dig through registries to find someone that we possibly may have known, and tried to write letters to try to get an affidavit of some sort, or try to get a lead on how to get an exit visa or an entry visa into another country. This lasted for about a year. We went to countless consulates, embassies, Vienna being the capital, it had the embassies there. We went to consulates and embassies trying to get an entry visa into any country. We stood in line, sometimes we got to, we took turns, my father, my brother and I, we took turns to stand in line in front of a consulate. We'd stand in line from the evening before until the morning, nine o'clock when the consulate opened.

And there were, on every consulate, every consulate, there was a policeman out front, sometimes there was a storm trooper out front, sometimes it was an, a government official was out

there quote-unquote “guarding” the consulate, which is also in the United States, you have, that’s customary, that hasn’t changed. And, but he had acquired or assumed the responsibility of telling how many people could go in. Sometimes the first ten would only go in, sometimes only the first fifteen would go in. If you were lucky, be among the first fifteen, you could go in. That luck enabled you to get an application or meet somebody from that country, an ambassador or a consul from that country, to talk to him and plead with him, “May we have an exit visa, I would like to immigrate to your country. I have a family, I have, whatever knowhow I have that I could impart to that country, and thus be of value to your country.” Well, those experiences were countless, and they would give you the application, the application would require you to have your copy of a translated birth certificate to the, that country’s language, your marriage certificate, your, countless documents translated to the, which was costly and time consuming. And that would have to accompany the application. That gave you a dimmer of a, of a chance or at least encouragement that maybe it would develop into something. Well, we, that basically happened from one consulate to the next consulate to the next consulate, regardless of what country it was.

Until one day we stumbled on the Chinese consulate. The Chinese consulate said, “Yes, I give you a visa if you can give me a document where to give the visa into, a passport.” Well, okay, we got an assurance that we could get to China. But now came the question, was a catch as catch can, it was sort of a six of one, half a dozen of the other, where are you going to go and get a passport? They wouldn’t give you a passport unless you had a visa. They couldn’t give you the visa, unless you had a passport. So where are you going to go? So, I don’t know whose idea it was, but the people that were trying to immigrate to China were able to convince the Chinese ambassador that he would provide us with a promissory note saying that if we had a passport, he would stamp the visa into that passport. That promissory note he was able to give to those interested to go to China. We were able to get that.

With that promissory note we had to now convince the German/Austrian authorities to issue us a passport. My father was able to, and again it was the process of standing in line, waiting countless hours, countless days, to try and get in to see the authorities to convince them to give us a passport. That we obtained the passport, he said, first you have to get what they called a *Steuerunbedenklichkeitserklärung*, which means that you didn’t owe any taxes to the government, the previous government or this government. Secondly you would have to go to the police authorities and give them proof that you had not been convicted of any minor or major crime, that you had never served in prison for any wrongdoings. You had to get from the local authorities, your local authorities, that there were no outstanding, whether they were traffic violations or pedestrian violations, whatever violations, that these, you were in the clear there. Countless, basically countless documents to include in the application for a passport. Overcoming that hurdle, we finally got our passport. The passport was issued, as you probably know, with the red letter “J” in there, which automatically made that passport a one-time passport. You could exit the country to your destination. After that the passport was null and void, which made you stateless.

Okay. Now that you had the passport, we also wanted to, we had to get a, a booking to go to China. Well, we were fortunate enough that we had, my father had bought my mother Persian rugs, oriental rugs. And as you can see in this house, you have a number of oriental rugs, I have a special liking for them, because those oriental rugs basically saved our lives. We didn’t have any

money, so my father was able to sell these oriental rugs for a fraction of their value, but it gave us sufficient funds to buy a ship's passage to China. So that meant, that's the attachment that I have toward oriental rugs. We got that, the passage, we got the funds available and we were able to get out.

I did skip a few points there before I actually got to departing Austria, is that my brother went to, he's three years older than I, he went to the *Maschinenbauschule* in Vienna and about the same time that I was transferred to the *Stumpergasse* School, and I couldn't go to the school there any more, there were some Jewish people in that school he went to. And one day when he came into school, there's a hullabaloo, a whole ruckus, and one of his classmates, a Jewish youngster, was carried, basically carried up to the top flight, and there was a winding staircase going up, in the middle was nothing, and they threw him over and he landed and was killed that way. And that, my brother up and ran home and he had a nervous breakdown from that experience. That was very difficult for us, because we had, we didn't know which doctor to go to, other than the doctor that we knew, and treated us, who happened to be a Jewish doctor, very good doctor, and he started treating my brother and lucky enough the treatment that he prescribed cured him basically. His nerves were never, he's always been, ever since, from that experience that he had, he's been a very, you had to treat him with kid gloves. He's all right, but he can't be exposed to dramatic upheavals to the point where he gets very tense due to that, his nerves are not as strong probably as mine.

This doctor, Dr. Schäfer, his two children were friends, they were schoolmates of, well, schoolmates and playmates of ours. Dr. Schäfer, one day we found out that he had committed suicide and took his family with him. Many, many friends that we had, we found that they, the Christian population, Christian, I would say the antisemitic population, wanted to better themselves, so they knocked on people's doors and threw the occupants, people, meaning the Jewish people's homes, threw the occupants out, and moved in. And if the people said, "Where should I go?" "There's the Danube, go into the Danube." Meaning, "Kill yourself, go drown yourself, do whatever you want, but you're not human. We, we are now the master race, and we want that apartment, or that house, or that residence, whatever it is." That happened time and again.

We were, again we were, I don't know how we escaped, but we were very fortunate. We lived in a very nice apartment in a very reputable area, and the *Gauleiter*, I don't know if you know what that is, *Gauleiter* of that district wanted our apartment. So he, for some reason he, he had pity on us, and he, if you recall that *Kristallnacht*, people probably told you about it, they knew about the *Kristallnacht* before it, when it was, the date it was set for, we had a knock on the door and there was an SS man standing there. I said, "Now it's our turn to move out, he wants the apartment." He, the *Gauleiter* sent a letter telling us to paste that letter on our door. And on that letter it said, "This apartment should not be touched, it belongs to me when the people move." That's how *Kristallnacht*, we knew about it, the following day we knew about it, but we were left alone, because he wanted the apartment and he didn't want the, damage to the interior of the apartment, because it was his. So we were saved. So that saved us there. The next day, of course, when, when we heard about all the damage, my brother went to the Neudegger Temple, where he was Bar Mitzvahed and he saw it was burnt out. All the Jewish stores were smashed, the windows

were smashed, everything was robbed. These are the things that we endured during that time, and, but we were fortunate, very fortunate. And so then in September we got our tickets and got the visas and so forth, and were able to leave in November. We left Vienna, we were on a train . . .

Hochstadt: November of which year?

Reisman: 1938.

Hochstadt: So that, so you left just after *Kristallnacht*, because that was also in November.

Reisman: Yeah, well that's why I mentioned the fact of the letter that saved us, we left after *Kristallnacht*, we left the end of November of 1938, so we had a considerable amount of time under the thumbs of the Nazis and under duress there, we were exposed. I, I was a youngster, I don't know whether I had nerve or I had guts or I had gumption or whatever I had, but I, I went out, when there were parades I went to see the parade, and when I saw, when Hitler drove along the *Ringstraße* around Vienna, on the, on his first visit to Vienna, I was there with all the crowds. I wasn't yelling "*Heil Hitler*," but I was there looking, just like anybody else was looking. And I, I saw a lot and I wasn't molested too much, other than that incident of the *Lederhosen*, but I guess all my life I was always, I didn't, I didn't say, I wouldn't say I assimilated, because I have always, I never denied my Juda-, me being Jewish, but I have never advertised the fact of being Jewish either.

That's another theory in my life, because as you basically know, the aviation field, very few Jews in the aviation industry. When I was, started working for Sikorsky Aircraft here in the United States, we're jumping from one to the other, in Sikorsky itself, maybe, I would assume there was maybe a handful of Jews. And I was given a very, not right from the beginning, I was service analyst, but then I worked myself into the service engineering part of it, which I always wanted to, it was, you worked with the customer outside. It was the one position that I was looking for is, I was working for the company and yet I was by myself. I didn't have to work with the vice president looking down at me, every move I made, I was free to, what I felt I should do to the customer or with the customer, it was left to me. I've never had any dispute that I did the wrong thing, they always let me, "Eric did it, he was a diplomat, he knew what to do and he did the right thing." And I was never, the company got copies of my letters and everything that I sent to all the customers in my area, and I never had a problem, never ever.

But I, I was never, and, again this is drifting away from, basically it's sort of funny how life is. In 19-, I, now I have to think, it was 19-, from 1960 to 1964, four years, I was advisor to the German military, the German *Luftwaffe*, for four years I was in Germany. I was in Koblenz discussing theories of operation with the ministers of defense, with the highest government officials, German government officials, who were nothing other than Nazis before, because where would they get the knowhow at that time, and be able, be in that kind of position without being prior German military in the German, under the other regime, but I was accepted by all of them, and I was respected by all of them. I have letters to show you. Well, I . . .

Hochstadt: How did you feel about doing that work?

Reisman: I tell you, to me it was a job. I had to support my family the best I could, and I liked my work, and I did it to the best ability that I could, and they accepted me. I had never had one word, antisemitic remark, never once, in four years working with the German ministries and the German Army and Air Force, never once. And they knew I was Jewish, I never hid it, I never advertised it. If somebody asked me I was, "Yes, it's a Jewish holiday, I'm not working today." So, I mean, there was no, no problem, I have never had any problem. But as I said, I don't, I, to this day I don't walk around with a Jewish star around me. This my mother gave me, it's Taurus the bull, [laughs] so, that's the month I'm born. But I just don't feel that I want to advertise it, yet I go, every Friday night I go to services. That's, I believe in being Jewish, but I don't have to advertise it. I have *menorahs* hanging on all the doors, but I don't, I mean *mezuzahs*, but I don't have to advertise it. And here, in this community here, we're .2 percent Jews here in this, in the club, everybody came to my house and I go to their house, I'm invited here, there, everybody knows Eric, "Hi Eric, hi this, hi Bernice," but that's it.

Well, anyhow, I, so then we, we left by train. We, it was a funny sensation leaving by train, because you were on a German/Austrian train, you were basically on Austrian ground going to Italy, Italy was part of the Axis power. So you never really could breathe freely that, it's behind me, it's a thing of the past. It isn't, because you were still under that fear. Approaching the border, of course, you heard from other sources that Jews were taken off the train because they had more than one ring on their fingers, or women, ladies would wear more than one chain around. You knew you were permitted one set of earrings, one ring, one chain around your neck, one of each things, but not more than one. Some of the heirlooms that my mother and father were able to save from the family were priceless to them, they were treasures, so my father was able to hide it and hoping they would not detect it.

Hochstadt: Do you know how they were hidden?

Reisman: I really don't know. I heard, my uncle for instance, he hollowed out, he took a rubber heel off a shoe and hollowed that portion out and put it in and put the heel. People cut out books and made them into hiding places. People put false bottoms in valises. Those were all, in cameras, they would put, hide things in cameras, tell people that there's film in there and don't open it, consequently. So many ways people . . .

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B

Reisman: . . . difficult times, so you, so you made, invented methods of trying to do things. So anyhow, we, we then went across the border and we came to Naples, Italy, and there again we

came on an Italian ship. Now Italy was again part of the Axis power, and we were basically on Italian ground, so we again had to refrain from any celebration of any sort that we were finally free. We had to simmer everything down, calm everything down to, not to show whoever the crew members may be, that it may be detrimental to you, that you could get yourself endangered.

We made our way to, that was a 28-day trip from Geneva to Shanghai, from Naples to Shanghai, and we arrived in Shanghai and it was a very, very dreary day. On the way to Shanghai, in the various ports, we, the first port that we were able to get off ship was Aden on the Red Sea. There we walked and we, I know like today one of the stores, large stores, along the waterfront dockside was evidently owned by an Arab Jew, and we walked in, we had no money to spend, so we just looked around at all the beautiful things, they were mostly tropical things, we had winter suits on. So the fellow came up to me and he says, "Have you got a hat?" And I says, "No, I don't have a hat." "You need a tropical helmet." He gave me a tropical helmet, and I said, "I can't pay you." He says, "I don't want any money." And it was the first time in my life that I experienced the emotions in me of accepting a gift from a stranger, and it made me realize that it is much easier to give than to take or accept a gift, and it takes a lot more from a person, of a person to be able to gracefully accept a gift. Taught me a lesson. And so I wore that hat, that tropical helmet in China during, during the tropical heat and exposure in China, until I couldn't force it on my head any more, [laughs] but I was very proud of that hat. Anyhow, it saved me probably a lot of heat strokes and so forth.

Well, we arrived in Shanghai, as I said, well, then other ports of entry, of call, we weren't allowed to get off the ship for fear that some people would stay unauthorized in these port of calls, and we, what they came up with an idea is that one part of the family had to stay aboard, only one part could go off ship. So that's what we did, and we, my father and mother took turns of going on land and looking at the various cities that we stopped in and took either my brother or I with us, with them and one had to stay behind.

We came to Shanghai, as I said, on a very, very dreary day. It was cold, raining, and we didn't have any baggage, and we were loaded on, on trucks, which the local Komor Committee of, made up of local Jews, that tried to settle the new arrivals. It was a marvelous thing they did for us, for us and anyone else that came. They settled us in Hongkou, which was basically the worst part of Shanghai at the time because it was destroyed, the war remnants were very, very visible to the point where you saw people that the Japanese cruelly executed in doorways and so forth still hanging on the ropes, and it was a rude awakening to see that.

Hochstadt: You saw that.

Reisman: Oh yes, oh yes, many of them. And so we saw the Chinese living in cardboard boxes, in ruins, and dead people laying on the streets when we arrived there. It, it was terrible. There was an organization from the municipality, like you have here, people collecting garbage, that were, their responsibility was to collect dead bodies. And they would take them to a crematorium and burn them. There were no place, nor was there any funds that these people had to, for a decent burial, so they were just dumped into a crematorium, which was also in Hongkou not very far from where we all lived. Well, we . . .

Hochstadt: Could I interrupt to ask some more questions before you get to Shanghai?

Reisman: Sure, yes.

Hochstadt: One of the things I'm interested in is the preparations that your parents or you and your brother made to leave Vienna. Thinking about packing, thinking about transferring money or valuables. You talked a little bit about hiding valuables.

Reisman: Yeah, well, we, valuables we were able to hide. Funds we did not have. First of all, you could not exit with any funds, that was the first thing. But we didn't have any, because we didn't have a, my father didn't have any source of income, and we lived there more than a year, close to two years, without any force, source of income. The source of income we had was to sell whatever we had for practically nothing, because there was so much of it on the market that you, you gave things away, but it gave you enough income to be able to buy the milk, to buy the bread, to buy the potatoes, to afford whatever you could with as little as you had. So funds we did not have, there were no funds to speak of. We had, my father was able, we had a safe in the house which we, my father had some money in there from the business that was not deposited in the bank account for normal payment of bills, because when you're in business you have to have capital to run a business, so whatever you had on savings was there, but that was used up very rapidly. And so we didn't have the problem of worrying about how to transfer funds.

Unfortunately my uncle, who had a hat factory in Vienna, he was one of my father's brothers that came to Vienna later from Czechoslovakia, and he had a hat factory, and he was doing fairly well, and he transferred money through someone and he had connections and so he got a visa to Australia and he transferred money with someone that offered, he was going to, he had a way of trans-, getting the money out to Australia. When his ship, and that's the last I heard from them, when the ship docked, before it docked in Sydney, Australia, the fellow sent word up that he couldn't get the money out and it affected my uncle so that he had a stroke and died on the spot, he never laid foot in Australia, set foot into Australia. His family lives there and I, unfortunately, I don't know why, we've written to them through other means, but never heard from them, my father did still when he was alive, my mother, we never heard from them, so I have family in Australia, but that's all I know about them.

But that was one incident that I know of, personally know the family because they're, they're related to me, that took money out and through various means people were able to get money out, and a lot of our own people cheated the rest of them, one way or another. Some were honest, I don't want to dump them all into one big bag and say they're all, they were all that way, but we didn't have any money to speak of. When we came to Shanghai we basically came with, penniless basically, and my mother was able to, able, she had the foresight to go through ORT, O-R-T, the organization, she learned how to make leather gloves.

Hochstadt: Still in Vienna.

Reisman: In Vienna, before we left. And she also went through, by, with ORT, through a baking

school, confectionery baking school and she wanted to learn something that she had, she wasn't, you know, unfortunately the majority of our Jewish population in Vienna were not tradesmen. They were businessmen, doctors, lawyers, but trade? There were very, very few. The greatest minority, a handful of tradesmen. A shoemaker, a Jewish shoemaker was unheard of. So my mother knew that she could, if she learned a trade, she would be able to do something with it. And the first thing she did when we came to China was make gloves, and my father, being a businessman and being able to talk to people the right way, was able to sell them. And they accumulated a nice bit of change, just, my mother made gloves, hand made, hand sewed gloves, she had blisters on her fingers in doing it.

Well, anyhow, you want to know more about before we left. Incidents that occurred before we left were that we, although we were a group of youngsters that flocked together, there was still from the Boy Scouts that were somewhat friendly, some of them were Jewish, some of them were not, and that Boy Scout spirit still persisted. We were able to mix with them and play with them and we played in the parks, that was the only place you could play. There were no play streets like, you know, in New York City, they would block off a street and make it into a play street, that was nonexistent, you played in the parks. And of course when you played in the parks, you were exposed to other children and the hatred that was either instilled by them or unfortunately they were born into. And that hatred made itself very noticeable when you were out exposed to that, by rocks and beatings that they, they usually attacked in, not one-on-one, they would attack in, in groups. And you had no choice, they'd surround you and come in and gather you up and gave you a good shellacking. So that was even difficult to do, to have as a youngster, to be, to live as a young, youngster, it was not easy. You grew up very, very rapidly, very rapidly. You had no, your youth was stolen from you. That's one thing that I, I could never, I can never regain, the, the free thinking, the carelessness of a youngster. We always had to think for ourselves and then of course as you got older, you had to help your parents in the struggle for survival. But when we came to, I don't know what else I can tell you about Vienna, unless you have something specific.

Hochstadt: Well, just thinking about what things to take with you . . .

Reisman: Well . . .

Hochstadt: . . . and what you thought about, once you knew your family was going to Shanghai, what you thought about that trip and how you anticipated it.

Reisman: Well, I, my mother did a lot of that. We were, during the summer vacation we always, my father would rent at any farm outside of Vienna in Österreich itself, in Austria, in the cultural part of Austria, she would, he would rent a room in a farmhouse, where my brother and I and my mother would spend the summer months out of the city. So we had luggage that we could use to pack our things.

Along that line, we were trying to get ship steamers. Those were very much in demand, these big steamer trunks, and we were able to find through an ad in the paper a person that was selling steamer trunks, and it was a far distance away from where we lived. And I mentioned to

you that I was working for a cabinetmaker, and he had one of these hand carts, so I asked him if we could borrow the hand cart, my brother and I. And we went through, from one end of Vienna to the other pushing that hand cart through the streets, it was a large hand cart, to pick up these suitcases, these steamer trunks which my father bought from that person. And we got to the, and funny thing is that the school that, the gymnasium I went to had its sport grounds in that very same area and I knew there was a school there and there were antisemitic gangs always wait-, lurking out in front of the school for any Jewish kid, or anyone that looked Jewish. If they passed by, they would notice them and then of course the consequences would be they would get a shellacking and a beating. So I said to my brother, I says, "We should avoid that section because I know, I've been there before and when I still, before Hitler came, that's a very bad area, we don't want to go through that." He said, "I'll go with you." My brother was blond, didn't have a trace of Jewish looks, appearance. So he says, "I'll be, I'll push the rear of the wagon and you steer the front, we're going to go through there," that was the only way to get there, or otherwise we would have had to go all the way around to get there. So he says, "We'll get there." So we, we went there and lo and behold, just as I predicted, these kids spotted me as being, looking more Jewish than him, and he got up to them and he said, he defended me. Anyhow, we got into a big beating there, we couldn't fight the masses, but we got the trunks and we went back, so that was one beating that I couldn't escape. So that was an experience.

But having these trunks, my mother was packing things like linens and bedding and clothing, as much as we, separated those bigger valises that we would put in the hold of the ship and those things that we didn't need immediately from those things that we would use right away. Of course, during those years, whether the hygienic conditions were different than today, but people used to, people, and I say people because it was the common way, now I change my shirt every day, at that time you changed your shirt once a week, and you changed your underwear once a week, and your socks once a week, so it was easier for my mother basically to segregate, this is what the kids need, this is what my husband will need and I will need for a duration of time.

And then she would, on board the ship she would wash out little things like that and hang them up in the cabin that we occupied. The cabin was just big enough for one person to stand, the others would have to jump in bed [laughs] so, or leave the cabin. So anyhow, this is, that's how you packed your things, and you segregated the things and you would, my mother would take along whatever she could. I remember she even, my mother used to make jams and jellies and she didn't want to leave those and she took those along. So you packed whatever you could, whatever you thought was, you could pack.

When my mother first started to keep house, I don't know whether you ever have seen those things even, the miners used to, here in this country used to take them to work with them, they were, one pot would fit into the other pot and you would carry that. You probably, the miners, going into the mine, the people would have those, in those things she would prepare a whole meal for four of us, cook it right in there, and prepare it. And it was a good healthy meal, when we got to China, she did that in one of those things, under one flame.

So it was a very different type of life, but my, I guess I was very, very fortunate. My father, A, what I am very grateful to my father and mother for is one thing, that my father recognized the situation immediately, and he also knew one thing that the nuclear of the family should stay

together. We could bear all kind of hardships as long as we were a family, as a nuclear, as one family. It was portrayed basically much, drastically portrayed in the film “*Schön*.” I don’t know if you have seen it.

Hochstadt: With Gary Cooper, is that the film?

Reisman: No, “*Schön*” is the film that is now being played, it just came out.²

Hochstadt: Oh, I see. Oh, yes, I think . . .

Reisman: You may have heard it, and I recommend you see the film. It’s, as an emigré, as going through, and I call myself Holocaust survivor, although I was fortunate never having been in concentration camp, or my mother and father, but having lived under the circumstances for as long as I have and being able to escape those circumstances in Germany, in Austria, I can, I think I qualify. But there it’s more drastically portrayed, and in keeping a nuclear together, only he, the man, the story is unfortunately, when you see it, which I hope you will, it’s very drastic and it’s, I guess everything can be drawn toward the extreme, and that is the extreme of keeping a family together.

But make a long story short, we, we stayed together, and although my mother and father had the opportunity at the time, and so did everybody else that was in Europe, the mothers could go to England as housekeepers and take one child along, that was permitted, and the English would give visas to housekeepers. And my father said, “No, we’re going to stay together. Together we can bear the hardships much easier than if we were separated from each other.” So we, we stayed together and we were able to get out as a family, and that was my father’s doing. My mother, in turn, was able to care for us and nurture us and give us the strength to, to pursue and to bear some of the hardships that we had, including my father, because he sometimes came home very disillusioned and my mother was able to give him the strength in order to bear through that, those kind of turmoils in our life.

So when we got to China then, we all started to work, I, although I was, she, my mother worked and was able to sew these gloves which my father sold, and we as children helped as much as we can. My father, my brother was learning to be a mechanic, an automobile mechanic, and he worked in the bus company. I was too young to, I was twelve years old at that time, I was going on thirteen, and I was the first child, we arrived there in December of 1938 and in April I was Bar Mitzvahed, and I was the first one to be Bar Mitzvahed in the temple in Hongkou. And, which was, I knew very little about the Jewish religion, somehow I knew the *brucha* of the Torah, and knew a little bit of reading, and so I, then they bestowed the Bar Mitzvah on me, and I went to school, Kadoorie School.

² Reisman is probably referring to the 1997 Italian film by Roberto Benigni, “Life is Beautiful,” which in German is entitled “*Das Leben ist schön*”.

Kadoorie was a, you know of him, you heard of him, and especially you heard of him by reading the magazine that we're all subscribing to, I'm subscribing to, and he, his charter that he put upon himself was to give an education to the young of, the young people of the immigrant population. So he built the Kadoorie School, but before that, after we arrived there, there was a committee called the Komor Committee and they pursued to place young kids into families that lived there, whether they be Jewish or not, and it so happened that I was placed in a, in a family, a childless family, husband and wife. He was the assistant principal of the Public School, an English school in Shanghai, Thomas Henry Public School, and he got me enrolled in that school.³

So I learned English with a British accent, of course. Never knowing the English language, I had to learn it overnight, and I seem to have gotten along fairly well with the kids there. I know the one word that threw me tremendously, I learned the word "life", and then suddenly they said, "Where do you live?" I said, live is life, and I couldn't figure out what that meant, until I realized that they wanted to know where I lived, where I resided, and I said, "Well, I reside with Mr. and Mrs. Pyle," and Pyle was their name. And so I lived with the Pyles for about six months, maybe a little longer, and they be, they were very good to me and they gave me a place to live and they fed me, and I went to school, and he had a car and I drove with him to school every day and came home with him. And I tried very hard to learn the language, and I learned it, and it was either swim or sink.

And my brother was taken in by a Methodist missionary family that had two sons, both of the sons I still correspond and I visit occasionally, and one, one of their sons, Edward, lives in Georgia, not very far from here, about eight-hour drive, and when I visit, when we visit our children in Jersey, we, our daughter in Jersey, we, on the way back we usually stop off and say hello to him. He's became, unfortunately to his father, he left the Methodist religion and he became a Protestant, which his father took very serious. His father's not, not living any more, but anyhow, we became very close friends to the Berckmans. They never tried to convert us to their, to their thinking or their belief, they respected our religion, but they were very, very good to us. And I considered Mr. and Mrs. Berckman as my second parents. My brother didn't, didn't stay in contact with them, yet I did, and I found them loving, caring people.

And the family came to my wedding and the family came to my brother's wedding, and until the day that he died. He came back to China as a missionary after the war, and he was interned in an internment camp and he was exchanged, the family left before then and were able to get out before the war, because the British, the American Consulate evacuated non-essential personnel from China before the war and, but he stayed on and he was interned.

And we were, I was very helpful to him, he trusted me a great deal and he trusted my judgment, and he gave me the key to his office when he was under house arrest, before he was put in internment camp, and he said, "Eric, I need you to go to the office and get certain things." And I bicycled to the office and opened the safe, got those things, put them in my valise, in my, my school bag, which was a leather school bag in which I carried them out, and as I came out I heard the Japanese coming up the front steps and I ran down the back steps and I took my bicycle and

³ Reisman means the Public and Thomas Hambry School.

pedaled away. And the Japanese troops came up the front, [laughs] the gendarmerie came up the front steps. They had these, on their shoes they had steel caps and I could hear these caps shuffling up the steps when I ran down the front steps, and so I got that stuff out for him. He was forever grateful for me, I, to this day I don't know what was in there, whether it was money or documents or shares or whatever it was, valuables, I don't know. He told me, "Get this and this and this and this place in my vault," and I took it.

Hochstadt: Was that right after Pearl Harbor that that . . . ?

Reisman: That was after Pearl Harbor. We were still able to move around. Right after Pearl Harbor all the, the British, the Americans, Greeks, were put in internment camp, immediately. First in house arrest, they couldn't leave the houses, and then they picked them up and put them in camps. So that was also, and Pyle went, the family that I went with was in camp and I was able to get food to them to show my appreciation for what they did for us. And my brother lived with the, with the Berckmans for, about as long as I did, and then he went to work for the bus company, and I went to the Kadoorie School.

Having entered the Kadoorie School afterwards, by, in six months I was basically fluent in English. And, you know, I can never comprehend the, the way of thinking over in this, in our, in my country now, the United States, that we make these allowances for the Puerto Rican kids and the Spanish-speaking children, that we have para-teachers in the school system so that they could learn. I had no para-teacher in the school system that I attended, I had to learn the language. You live in the United States, you should speak English. You lived in China and you mingled with the population in China, you had to speak English. And I can't comprehend why we are doing what we're doing to our, you want to live in the United States? English is the spoken language here. Why do you make allowances? [laughs] I can, this is my own way of thinking, please don't, it has nothing to do with what we're talking about, but it's just, that's the way I was reared, that's the way my thinking goes. I had to learn English and I learned it, and I made good grades then, grades enough to keep me in school. So anyhow, I, we came to China, that was our initial experience.

Of course, a very big shock to us, as I mentioned to you before, when we, the meager belongings that we had we put into our, that room that they gave us. It was Ward Road, number 24, I'll never forget, and I mentioned to you that it was winter time and that was the rainy period in Shanghai, rain like you see over in Florida at times. It came down in buckets, and we took our shoes off and went to bed that night. In the morning I'm getting out of bed to go, get out of bed, and I can't find my shoes, they're floating. The room was flooded. So the little we had with us was soaking wet [laughs] the following day, and we were, my father was able to get us a room on the first floor subsequently. Those are some of the things that you'll find in my transcript, the experience there. The transcript was made in a more orderly fashion, because when they told us what they wanted from us, they gave us a questionnaire more or less, and I followed that questionnaire rhythmically, and consequently brought it out in a more orderly fashion. Our interview is jumble here and jumble there, and I hope that it isn't going to cause a hardship, any hardship to the person who's going to type it up for you or if you're going to type it yourself.

Hochstadt: It's no problem at all.

Reisman: So anyhow, this, these are some of the experiences. And as I mentioned before, when we got into Hongkou, in the early, we were one of the early settlers, immigrants that came to Shanghai, we saw carcasses of people that were strung up on, on rafters, door posts and so, that the Japanese in their cruel way of conquering certain parts of the earth, of the world, displayed. And, but unfortunately the population was very poor, undernourished, and there was a lot of infant mortalities, and the population itself, the people living there had no means of burying the people, the young children that were born. And you would walk and suddenly you'd see a package laying there and as you looked closer onto that package wrapped in either a straw mat or a piece of newspaper, you saw a small leg sticking out. It was children, dead children that the parents, or the mother or whoever, laid out on the sidewalk and that organization that I told you that gathered dead bodies would go around continuously every morning and picking up dead bodies, because there were no ways of, they had insufficient funds of feeding and burying them who starved to death. And so those were some of the impressions that we got when we lived there that were shocking to a lot of people, but made you after a while very callous, to the point where you didn't even walk around that package. If it was laying right on the sidewalk and you used to be walking, to walk on the sidewalk, we were used to walk on the sidewalk, the Chinese would walk on the street, they would make a circle, you would step over it. You got so callous and it was such a common appearance.

Then the, in Hongkou itself, our Jewish people knew that they had to do something so there were, soup kitchens were built in the camps and you were able to get at least one hot meal a day, meager as it be, but it was fresh bread and they baked bread and people worked in the soup kitchens, and the volunteers, some of them would get paid. Where the funds came for the payment was primarily probably from the United States, donations, or the local Russian Jews that were in business over there, and some of them were very wealthy. The, some of the Moroccan Jews, Kadoorie was Moroccan, the name . . .

Hochstadt: Sassoon.

Reisman: . . . Sassoon, Elly Sassoon, those were all Moroccan Jews that made a bundle over there.⁴ Initially, how they made their bundle nobody asked, but you and I know how they made their bundle. They brought money in, I mean, dope in from Bombay and India, and that's how they, once they had made their money, then they went into legitimate business and they were the aristocracy of Shanghai, the Jewish aristocrats. But they were very, very, very helpful to us, as they did magnificent things. Without their help and aid giving, given to us, I don't think that the European immigrants would have fared as well as they did.

⁴ The Kadoorie and Sassoon families belonged to a community of Jews from the region around Baghdad, numbering somewhat less than 1000. Reisman may be confusing Reuben Ezekiel (Elly) Kadoorie and Elias David Sassoon.

As I said, my mother, my, my mother was industrious and she was able to make the things that my father sold, and we accumulated enough money to buy a small home. We bought a home in Kinchow Road, the same road that the Kadoorie School was on, but that was coincidental, and it was a very nice house. It even had a w.c., which is, was very rare, because the honey buckets were the common denominator. And so it had all the facilities and was a nice house and we were able to buy that house and have tenants in it, so that we had a small side income from the renting out the rooms. Everybody, all families lived in one room, that was the luxury living. Compared to the unfortun-, less fortunate ones that had to live in the camps, Ward Road camp, Chaoufoung Road camp, Tongshan Road camp, there were camps which were old warehouses where people, families, lived in bunkbeds, and curtains or sheets would separate their, give them a little bit of privacy. So that, so we were fortunate enough for living there. Pearl Harbor came and lo and behold, the house that had the w.c. was a place that the Japanese liked very much and they confiscated it, and here we were, we started out from scratch all over again.

Hochstadt: Was this, was the house outside of the, or the, of that District?

Reisman: Exactly, it was outside of the Designated Area, and we had to move into the Designated Area. As a matter of fact, Kinchow Road, the left side of Kinchow Road was the camp, we had, our house was the right side of Kinchow Road, and we were, we had to evacuate the house and we, our person that takes care of the chemistry in the pools. So we . . .

TELEPHONE RINGS

BREAK IN RECORDING

Hochstadt: The question I had was about the room that your parents had on arrival. Was that in one of the homes, or was that separate?

Reisman: No, that was, at that time when we arrived, the homes were not in existence yet.

Hochstadt: Because you were among the earliest arrivals.

Reisman: Yeah, yeah, the home, very shortly thereafter, the home on Ward Road, where the hospital also was, became to be. It was very shortly thereafter, but that was not in existence yet. Everybody they, they had, evidently the local Jewish population, I think it was Komor who took the responsibility, and he was a Czechoslovakian Jewish person,⁵ that came to China in the early, I

⁵ Paul Komor was a Hungarian who had lived in Shanghai for decades. He led the International Committee for Granting Relief to European Refugees, commonly called the Komor Committee, founded in August 1938.

would say in early '30s, and he took the responsibility of trying to obtain housing for the arrivals, and the ship that we came on where we had, we were . . .

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

Reisman: . . . where we lived. Now that, those rooms . . .

Hochstadt: Excuse me.

Reisman: . . . were, had a fireplace, an open hearth where you burned briquets, and being cold and damp, that was the only means of warming up. So I arrived, I had, when I was still in Vienna I had scarlet fever, and the side effects of that scarlet fever was a punctured ear drum. Due to infection my ear started to bother me and they opened up my ear and it healed, but due to the cold, and I must have gotten a cold in Vienna, in China on arrival, my ear started to bother me.

And so the first thing on the agenda was to try and get me to a doctor who could relieve that terrible earache that I had. And not speaking the language it was rather difficult to pursue that endeavor, and, but my father was able to find a doctor for me and I was being treated. But again, one of the things that relieved the earache was to get me close, get me, get some heat. And I had no thermos and no heating pad, nothing, so I was, they bedded me, my parents bedded me close to the fire and kept the fire going and that would help me. Anyhow, those are some of the, that was the room that we lived in. Then from there we went into a more, after my mother was able to make a little, a few dollars, don't forget, when we came there, although the Chinese dollar was greater in value, it was 98 cents of Chinese money that made up one U.S. dollar, you could buy one U.S. dollar for 98 cents, the Chinese dollar had greater value than the U.S. dollar, and a family of four could easily live on fifteen dollars, that was paying for the rent, paying for everything.

Hochstadt: Fifteen dollars a week?

Reisman: Fifteen dollars a month . . .

Hochstadt: A month.

Reisman: . . . easily, you could eat very well. It was, things were dirt cheap. At that time, 1938, now we're going into 1939, fifteen dollars would more than adequately survive, a family could live on. I guess in the United States it wasn't very much more, everything was, the dollar was, the

buying power of the dollar was much, much greater. So that we, we were, and then when, as we were able to make a little bit of money and we could afford little better and we moved out of that one room into a larger room that had a balcony, and we lived on Chusan Road, I remember. And then again we, my mother was working, and all by herself she was working, my father was selling these gloves and it was all word of mouth. "Could you recommend another family that they may want to buy a pair of gloves from me?" And so he had one or two sample gloves, "and that's the kind of gloves I could sell." So it, vendoring, actually, from door to door and only by, through recommendations my father worked, and he would sell these gloves. And, I don't know what he got for a pair of gloves, I can't tell you the amount he got, but it was adequate enough for us to live on and save some, and with that money we bought then the house. And it was no, you didn't go to the bank to get a loan, you bought the house, and that house belonged to us.

And then we rented the rooms as long as we lived there, until the house was confiscated by the Japanese. And I remember going, my father, I spoke English, of course, my father's English was very poor, and he took me along to try and talk to the Japanese authorities to try and find out why, if we could possibly stay in the house or get some compensation for it. And we met up with the Japanese authorities, I remember, and all I would get is a nodding of the head and a big smile and nothing. And that was it. And we couldn't get anything, no compensation for the house, that was it.

And we moved then into a, into another room that was in the vicinity of the, the detention area. I, I, although you could call it a ghetto, it was a forced detention area, but being that the Japanese were, I don't think they were, they felt antisemitic, because I don't think they knew antisemitism, and the Chinese. But what they did under duress of the German influence, they simply, the ruling was that anybody that came after or during 1938 would have to move into that area, and that's how they, they got all the Jewish people into that area. Anyone that arrived in Shanghai after or during 1938 would have to move in, so we all moved in. Your father, your grandfather evidently was able to, through his practice and treating and the need for having a good doctor in the area, he was able to stay out, that's very fortunate, I give him credit for that. But we all lived in that area. And doctors and everybody, and I'm sure you heard the name Dr. Herbst, H-E-R-B-S, Herbst, and I think if I didn't loan it to somebody, I should have the book that was written about him.

Hochstadt: Do you know the name of the book?

Reisman: [unclear] by James R. Ross.⁶

Hochstadt: This book I have.

Reisman: You have that?

⁶ James R. Ross, Escape to Shanghai: A Jewish Community in China (New York: Free Press, 1994).

Hochstadt: Yes.

Reisman: And there's pictures even of Dr. Herbst.

Hochstadt: I see. So, was he a doctor that you met? Or he was the doctor who helped you with your ear?

Reisman: He, no, he was not the doctor. He was, whether he was there at that time or not, I don't know, but, no, the person that helped me with the ear was a German of all people, a German doctor in the city of Shanghai. "Jewish Community in Shanghai," have you read this?

Hochstadt: I haven't seen this.

Reisman: If you leave it out, I will make you a Xerox copy of that, that may be of interest to you.

Hochstadt: Thank you.

Reisman: "*Shanghai Revisited*", there's an article here. But in here is an . . .

Hochstadt: The move that you had to make to give up your house to the Japanese, was that at the same time that the Designated Area was created and everybody had to move?

Reisman: That's right, because they, they, what, what the Japanese said, by a certain date the people have to be in the . . .

Hochstadt: That was in 1943.

Reisman: Yes, that was right, well, soon after Pearl Harbor. But there's pictures of Dr. Herbst, they're in here, I'm sure. Yeah [unclear] .

Hochstadt: Your mother was making gloves that whole time until then?

Reisman: Yeah, then after when we moved into the Designated Area, this is the Ward Road camp. You have, here it is, that's him, Dr. Herbst. The, we, we moved into that Designated Area, we, my father was able to get a room there, and my father then went, when he couldn't leave the Area any more, he opened a, he knew a little bit about, well, he knew fruit, there was nothing, no, no tropi-, oranges or citrus fruit as such, that was his speciality. He, they opened a vegetable stand in the market and bought vegetables from the farmers and sold them to the public, to the, those people that lived in there and could afford it, and that's how he made his living there. And I, after I finished the Kadoorie School, I went to work in a pharmacy and I worked for the majority of the war years in a pharmacy. I helped fill prescriptions, the pharmacist taught me how to do certain

things you do in a pharmacy and how to package things and distribute the things, and I worked, made a few dollars and, dollars, made some money, and we all were able to put it all in a pot and it was, with my brother working and I working, we were able to subsidize the living that we needed.

There was never, “You made this and I made that,” it all went into one community pot, and we all took out whatever we needed, the meager requirements that we had to have.

While we were in the camp, of course, it was, the Japanese military, the Japanese themselves, the military, each military person, soldier, was a representative of the Empire, Emperor and whenever you saw him you bowed, you had to humble yourself. That was very degrading, of course, to all of us. I’m sure the adults were more conscious of that procedure, that requirement, than the young ones. Us, we, we hadn’t developed yet as well, so we were like a young tree able to bend much easier than an, an old established tree, which broke if bent too deep. And they were the authority and we had to adhere to that. Subsequently, of course, their requirement was, whether their expansion of their acquired territory prevented them from being in control of the camp, we had to start to govern ourselves, which was an experience that I will never forget too much, too easily, insofar that our own Jewish population would turn in people for doing things that, to try and bend the law or the rules of the country at that time. And there was a lot of nasty occurrences where our own Jewish people would turn in our, another Jewish family, because they did certain things that they were not supposed to have done.

Hochstadt: Did you have some firsthand experience with an incident like that?

Reisman: No, no, I did not, I’m very honest, I did not. But I know from friends that they would shun certain individuals, because they were what they called *Spitzels*, which was, you know, they would squeal on you, and I would have nothing to do with those people. But there was others that were, had some very bad experiences and were put in prisons within the Designated Area and had to endure punishment by the Japanese, because they were being turned in. And one of the things that was an occurrence was that a friend of mine that was active in the money-changing business, where he was able to get from the black market dollars and so forth, and he would trade in that, in those dollars. He was older, he was my brother’s age, and he was turned in by one of them and was, consequently lost his life. When he was in the prison and got cholera and typhoid and what all the other diseases that were predominant under those circumstances, and he died from that.

Hochstadt: What was his name, do you remember his name?

Reisman: With ‘K’, Kaufman or something like that.

Hochstadt: Is it like Katowitz?

Reisman: No, no, it was with a ‘K’, he was an Austrian. I can’t remember his name, but I know that his mother and father had a restaurant and he was doing this on the side and he [unclear] so I, that’s all I really remember from that. Names sort of, I was never very good in names and unfortunately names escape me, even though I knew him at the time. So, make a long story short,

those were some of the badder exper-, worse experiences. And then, of course, but as a youngster, and I left those pictures out, as a youngster you took, this was an early picture that I went to a, in, in August of '39 I was in a camp, that's me here, that were, we were in a youth camp, where Dr. Herbst, as a matter of fact, was, was the doctor in the camp and he would treat us. These are some of the youth activities that we, I left them out, so, as a young man, as a young boy, we did a lot of things that other kids did, too. Costume parties and socials that we had in, this was in . . .

Hochstadt: Is this a costume party?

Reisman: Yes, this was a costume party, and it was in his house, Zunterstein, I don't know . . .

Hochstadt: Is that Walter Zunterstein?

Reisman: Yeah, Fredl Zunterstein, yeah, that's him. That's him here, too.

Hochstadt: Fred, right, Alfred.

Reisman: Alfred Zunterstein.⁷ That was in his house, too. This was a party. This is Harry Loew.

Hochstadt: I don't know that name.

Reisman: Fredl Zunterstein, yeah. Harry Loew, he was one of, ace soccer player, he was a real good soccer player. I can mention some of the names that I still remember. This was Rita Schlosser, that's me, this was Schwartz, Ernstl Stern, Moser, he was a barber. This guy here was, Zimmerman, I think, was his name, I'm not sure, but this is Harry Loew, he and I were very close, and Schwartz, and Rita Schlosser, I remember, he, Stern, he died, unfortunately.

Hochstadt: When would this have been?

Reisman: This was during the war, so this was during the war years.

Hochstadt: So you were still a teenager at this time?

Reisman: Yeah, I was maybe eighteen years old when that was taken. Here, this is the same girl who is here, and this is Harry Loew, the same fellow that was here. And this is the same girl that was here. And Schlochauer, Horst Schlochauer is this guy's name. This guy and this guy's the same, these two. And this fellow here and this fellow here is the same, I can't think of their name. This girl and this girl is the same girl. This was a group that used to hang around together and, of course when you're young, you take a lot of things in stride, much easier than when you get older.

⁷ See interview with Alfred and Eva Zunterstein, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Salzburg, May 20, 1995.

We had fun days, I mean, everything was not, not every day was a dreary day. We found ways to entertain our-, each other and it was all clean fun. At that time you didn't fool around with girls. You married the girl, then you could fool around, and you would, there were friendships that were, to this day we're friends. And this guy here, wait a second, where is he, is he on that? No, yeah, well, in back here, he turned out to be a boxing champion.

I took up boxing afterwards, while I was in China, and the guy that used to train us, I can't think of his name, but at one of our gatherings he came up to me and my wife, he says, "Eric, is that you?" I says, "Yeah." And I didn't recognize him. A short fellow, and he says, "You don't remember me, but I was your trainer in boxing." And I took up boxing for the simple reason that I, I was tired of being pushed around, I wanted to know how to box and defend myself. There was no way of using any weapon as such, because I didn't, weapons, I don't have a weapon in the house. I, that I did not want to have, but I wanted to be able to defend myself. I did not, I felt that our Jewish people under, under the Nazis and under the Hitler Youth were so meek, they didn't, they went to the gas chambers not defending themselves. They were like sheep being driven, unable to, I know that it was, it would have meant death, but going into the gas chamber it was death, why not take one of them with me? And that I could never understand. Did they know that they were going to be gassed? Maybe they didn't, but I'm sure they did, because I have, part of my family went through that and they knew and they survived, and they knew that they were going to be gassed. And some survived, and they knew that every morning a thousand of them, they had to give, turn in a thousand of them, and those thousand never came back, so they knew darn well that they were being terminated. And so why, if I know that I'm going to have to die, I'll take somebody with me, and that's why I learned how to box and defend myself. I never needed it, but one instance, but that's beside the point.

Hochstadt: What was that one instance?

Reisman: In China, it was one instance where somebody, one of the Chinese was trying to steal something from me and I knocked his block off. [laughs] But, and another time was in Germany, I was already there, that was an incident that really, I was, when I started working for the company, I held a position of importance at the time, being assigned to the U.S. Army Depot in Mannheim, Germany. It was an overhaul depot and they needed to have a consultant there from Sikorsky, so I was sent there. And my sister-in-law, my sister came to visit us and we went to Frankfurt Rhein-Main airport to meet her, she flew over, and I, being that she was a young girl, I wanted to help her carry her valises, and so I said to one of the customs officials standing there, I showed him my I.D. card, I was, at that time I was a GS-15, they gave me an equivalent rating, which was very, very high GS rating. And I talked to the custom official in German, I said, "My sister-in-law is coming, I would like to help her carry the bag." "Oh," he says, "You can't go past the door." So I stand, I stood right there and I waited, and in comes a German lady and they speak together, "Oh yeah, yeah, go in." Now the German lady comes, and she goes in. So I said, this is ridiculous, if they can go in, I can go in. They were welcoming some visitors, so I can go in. So I walked right in and he put his hand on me and he told me I can't go in, that was the early part of Germany. I swung around and I flattened that guy, he was laying right there on the floor. So that was the only

two times that I can remember that I used what I learned in fighting other than, they wanted to make me semi-pro and I fought a Japanese in the ring, and I knew I won the fight and they wouldn't give me the win, the, the winning side, and so I said, the heck with that, I'm not going to fight any more, [laughs] I can't win with them, fighting the Japanese. So I gave it up as a, I didn't go in any, but I was in the ring for about three years. But all as an amateur.

Hochstadt: Who was that fellow you were pointing out as a champ?

Reisman: He was, what was his name? My brother even told me his name, right here, Lako. Lako, the name, when you talk to some other Germans my age, you can, "Lako" we called him, Lak-, *lange Kohn, der lange Kohn*, Lako. Kohn was his name, but Lako. And he became a professional fighter in China. He didn't do it in here, he's a furrier from profession and he made his money either in furriers, as a furrier, or he went into business and he sold appliances, electrical appliances. I don't know exactly what he did, because he came back to, he came to this country and he subsequently emigrated to Israel, but his name is, he was named, under the name of Lako he fought. *Der lange Kohn*, and he was, he was a good fighter, he was a good boxer.⁸ But anyhow, so that was that part of Shanghai. And I worked in the, in the pharmacy, and when the war ended and we were, we were liberated by the American troops, actually when the war was ended, suddenly the, that was a puzzle to me, because we had one guy who was the administrator of the camp, and what was his name, he was . . .

Hochstadt: Mr. Ghoya?

Reisman: Ghoya, and he vanished, I never knew where he went. I understand some Polish Jewish people that got him cornered and gave him a beating, but he just disappeared. And the Japanese vanished, there were no Japanese around, you couldn't see them any more. Where they went, I don't know. But they sort of cleared the area and the gates were opened, the barbed wire disappeared and everybody went, pursued his voc-, his or their vocation and tried to make, A, make a living, B, since Shanghai was only for most of them a temporary haven, they went to, emigrated from there, either went back to Europe to try to reclaim their belongings that was taken from them.

My parents did not want to go back to Europe. By that time we had family in the United States, and my mother and father pursued it to immigrate to the United States. And I was still under 21 and went, tried to come to the United States on, under their quota. Lo and behold, my luck would have, as luck would have it, I turned 21 before the visa was issued, and the Consul said, "Eric, you got to go under your own quota." So they went to the United States and I was in the Austrian quota. The Austrian quota was not a very good quota, as you may have heard from

⁸ See interview with Alfred Kohn, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Kiamesha Lake, New York, 1997.

your family or others that have told you about it. So I had to reapply, and it was just a day's difference, because my parents left in, at the end of April, they got their visa between that time, and my birthday was the twenty-sixth of April, which was also the end of April, but they got the visa issued on the thirtieth or there, so I missed it by a couple of days.

So I had to apply under my own visa, and I started working for Northwest Airlines after I, I already worked for them while I was working in Kiangwan for the U.S. Army in aviation, and I pursued the, I was schooled by the U.S. Army, got a 747 rating, which was, 747 was an aircraft mechanic's rating, and Northwest Airlines acknowledged that rating, they accepted that rating, and they hired me as a mechanic for them, and I worked for Northwest Airlines in China. And I made a decent living, especially since Shanghai, in China, life was a lot cheaper than in the United States, so with the salary I made, I was able to move into the French Concession and live in the French Concession on Avenue Joffre in a very, very nice area. I, working as a, during the time that I was helping in the pharmacy or working in the pharmacy, I got to know quite a few of the Russian Jewish people, and I got to know the people and associated with them, and I lived there in the French Concession, and the commercial airport was in the other direction, it was Lung Wha Airport, Kiangwan was on this side, Lung Wha was on the other. Kiangwan was the military, Lung Wha was the commercial, and the initial flights into Shanghai, the, the experimental FAA flights, were made before Lung Wha was in existence, so they landed in Kiangwan and I got to know the people from the Northwest Airlines to the point where when they got their regular flights going they hired me, and I worked for them.

At that time, my parents, and my brother was gone already, he married in Shanghai and he went to Bolivia, and my parents came to this country, and I stayed on in China waiting for the, the quota to get my affidavit. And as it turned out, I did not get the affidavit when the Communists came to China, but working for Northwest Airline, I left with the last group of people. I left China and I came to the United States, and I came to the United States with the intents of going back to Vienna and waiting for my visa to come through. Once I was in the United States, in transit to Austria, I met some, a lawyer in New York. His name I can't remember, if you killed me I couldn't remember his name, but anyhow he said, "Eric, you don't want to go back to Vienna. We will try and get, get you a visa while you are waiting here." And so he pursued that and was able to get me, although I had already my deportation papers, I was going to be deported, they weren't going to allow me to stay any longer. I went to the authorities, immigration authorities in New York and they extended my, my transit visa, allowing me to stay here, and that almost ran out when he was able to get me my, through some, it cost me money, it was at that time, in 1949 when I came to the States, it cost me about ni-, eight hundred dollars he charged me, charged the family.

And I had to, and then I got married and my wife and I, we went to our first, to get me into the country, went to Rouses Point, I reentered the United States through Rouses Point, but it wasn't due to the fact that I was, was married, which would have allowed me to stay anyhow. But I got married and the visa, the application for my visa was granted and I had to go to Montreal and come back through Rouses Point into the United States, and that was more or less our honeymoon.

[laughs] So we came, I came into the United States. Then I was no sooner in the United States, I, before I even went to Rouses Point, while I was still basically quote-unquote "illegal" in the United States, but legal to the point that the authorities knew I was here, I went to the Academy,

started going to school to the Academy of Aeronautics, and I graduated from the Academy of Aeronautics. And when I, after I went, we got married and we went, everything worked sort of, time was good to me at that time, and I graduated and I was legal in the United States, I went to work for Sikorsky Aircraft.

And then I got drafted and so during the time that I was drafted, that helped me, my longevity with Sikorsky Aircraft. And I went into the military and I had my degrees and everything, so I was an instructor then, flight instructor at Sikorsky, for the Army, I was at Fort Sill, and ground instructor and subsequently flight instructor. And as soon as I came out of the service, I served my time, and I went back to work for Sikorsky and I worked for Sikorsky all this time. Until I retired.

So that's basically my life story. And I've been happily married, we're married now for thirty-, forty-six years and we have two children. Our son lives here, graduated from Babson College, and my daughter, our daughter, graduated from Clark University and made her masters degree, her masters, in physical therapy and, at U Penn, and lives in New Jersey, married, has two children. My son has one child and is happily married. We're all, our son-in-law is very, very nice fellow, Jewish fellow. My daughter-in-law is not, she's Christian, but she's a lovely, lovely lady, and they're very happily married. Can I tell you more?

Hochstadt: I just have a few questions . . .

Reisman: Sure.

Hochstadt: . . . all about things that you had talked about. When you came across the United States, about to be deported, were you on one of these sealed trains that . . . ?

Reisman: No, no, never. No, I came to the, we landed in San Francisco and I, as a matter of fact I took a train, the first Vista-Dome train that ever went from San Francisco straight to New York. Usually the trains changed, you had to change in Chicago, but this one was a special train, and we were very fortunate. We, I went to the, to the portier at the hotel I stayed in San Francisco, I said, "What do I do, I want to get to New York?" And he said, "Well, do you want to fly?" I says, "Well, I work for Northwest Airlines, I could have flown, but I have no, I never took vacation time, so I wanted to, I have enough vacation time that I can take a train and I'd like to take a leisurely train to the, to New York." He says, "I think I can get you on the Vista-Dome train, it's the first maiden run." People were waiting for months and months to get on that train, and he got me on the train, and I was with all kinds of dignitaries on that train. [laughs] Stopped at every whistle stop there was, with bands meeting us, [laughs] and we came, I came across. And that train went straight through to New York, and my mother and father, I saw him, them after two and a half years for the first time again, and they met the train and met me, there was a band there. [laughs]

Hochstadt: But you were on your way to being deported from the United States.

Reisman: No, no, I was on the way to see my parents in transit, and went to the immigration authorities in, in Manhattan, and I could take you there, I don't know the street, on Third, it was Columbus Circle, around that area where the immigration, and I told them that my parents are here and I would like to, I am on my way to Vienna but I, to Austria, but I would like to stay with my parents longer, and they gave me a visa to stay, but it was a visitor's visa, and they gave me I think six months or so. And that visitor's visa I had extended every time, until they wouldn't extend it any more and they were ready to deport me . . .

Hochstadt: I see.

Reisman: . . . when the lawyer came through with my visa. So I was always legal here, I never was illegal or never broke the law in any way or form.

Hochstadt: I just meant that it seems ironic that you were on this train with all these dignitaries, but you weren't going to be able to stay in the United States, you had to . . .

Reisman: Well they, nobody asked questions. Don't forget, since I got my, my papers here, that I'm legal here, I never had to show them to anybody. Once you were legal here, and I got my citizenship subsequently, my citizenship papers are in my vault, I had never to show them to anybody, nobody ever asks you. It reminds me, I, one of my first assignments that I had to go to was to Redhill Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. I waited for my top secret clearance, you need it, I was already out of the Army, that was afterwards. I waited for my top secret clearance to get into Red-, into the Redstone Arsenal, the base, and, because there was a helicopter there that had problems and nobody could fix it and nobody knew what the problem was. The helicopter was down inside the Arsenal, and I, from the fence I could see the helicopter, but couldn't get to it. And I called my boss up and I said, "Look, I'm here, I have my discharge papers with me, everything." "Yeah, but we're working on your top secret clearance," Class Q clearance they call it, "We're working and you can't get in until you get that clearance." He says, "You got your wife and family with you? Go back to the hotel. How's the weather?" I says, "The weather's . . .

END TAPE TWO, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE B

Reisman: . . . the Provost Marshal on the base to find out if my top secret clearance hadn't come. Finally it arrived, after I'd been there for about a week it finally arrived and from that day on I drove through the gate, nobody even asked for my I.D. card, so this is the way it works here. If I would have wanted to come in illegally into the base to help them out with the helicopter, I probably could have driven straight in, but because I asked and showed my I.D. card, and I wanted to go, to get in legally because I had no reason to want to get in illegally, they subsequent-, I could

have probably got, done it, just driven through, waved to the guard and drove through, but once I asked the question, I was barred from going in until my, I had my top secret clearance. So that's basically the whole, in everything that is here, nobody asks for your, you could, if you spoke the language and blended into your surrounding area, I guess people could be illegal in this country forever.

Hochstadt: I had another question. You said that there were about 800 Jewish people, refugees, on the "Conte Biancamano".

Reisman: Yeah.

Hochstadt: Were they mostly Austrians, did you have any way of knowing that?

Reisman: No, no, they were, there was, yes, you do, you, first of all speaking German, the Germans have a different dialect than the Austrians, so you could recognize who was from Germany, who was from Austria, that you could immediately distinguish. And then of course you could distinguish the Polish Jews who spoke either Polish or Yiddish, and they came from another part of Europe. But it was a mixed bag, it was not only Austrians, no.

Hochstadt: Do you remember whether your family had conversations, this is still in Vienna now, with other family members or friends about going to Shanghai? Was it a good idea? People who didn't want to go, who thought it would be better to stay?

Reisman: Nobody, it was just trying to save your hide. I don't think, I never spoke to anybody about immigrating to Shanghai. My father may have, but then there was no experience to draw from, so you didn't know what you got yourself into. It was basically trying to get out of, that was the question. You knew what you had was no good, so anything was an improvement, and I'm sure your grandparents felt the same way. You knew where you lived you couldn't stay, that was going to be the end of you, to stay, so you tried to save yourself. Those were basically the circumstances that we all lived in, under, that anything is better than what you have. So considering that was enough reason for you to not question. They accepted you, you went. Because anybody wanted to get out, everybody wanted to get out, quote-unquote "the Jewish people." Now, for the Christian people, life was an improvement. I have to tell you this, because it was definitely going to be better for them than what they had before, so Hitler did make it more enticing for them.

Don't you think I ought to put on my shoes and let's go to the club and have lunch?

Hochstadt: Certainly, thank you very much.

Reisman: You're going to be my guest.

BREAK IN RECORDING

Hochstadt: These are just to clear up some things that I wasn't sure about. when you were talking about your father going without income just before you went to Shanghai, you said that he had gone nearly two years without income. Now that's a longer time span than the time between the *Anschluss* and when you left.

Reisman: Well, when we left, I lose track of the time. I don't know how, exactly how, what the time span is between the *Anschluss* and the departure. I know we departed, when was the *Anschluss* exactly?

Hochstadt: It was March.

Reisman: March of what?

Hochstadt: '38.

Reisman: March of '38. You sure it was March of '38?

Hochstadt: I could be a month off, but it . . .

Reisman: Well that's, that's about the, then it was only, only that period, between the *Anschluss* and the departure.

Hochstadt: Well, maybe it's interesting that you said two years, because maybe it seemed like a very long time to you.

Reisman: Yeah, it appeared to me that it was more than that. Hmmm, I thought the *Anschluss* was in 1936.

Hochstadt: No, it was in '38.

Reisman: It was in '38, well then that's . . .

Hochstadt: And that was the moment when your father lost his income.

Reisman: That's right, that's right. It was the next day.

Hochstadt: Yes, as you said. That was really the only question I wanted to ask. That was just

something that had confused me, so I'm going to turn this off again.

END OF INTERVIEW

