

10-18-1997

## Culman, Ernest oral history interview

Steve Hochstadt  
*Bates College*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scarab.bates.edu/shanghai\\_oh](http://scarab.bates.edu/shanghai_oh)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hochstadt, Steve, "Culman, Ernest oral history interview" (1997). *Shanghai Jewish Oral History Collection*. 21.  
[http://scarab.bates.edu/shanghai\\_oh/21](http://scarab.bates.edu/shanghai_oh/21)

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library at SCARAB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Shanghai Jewish Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of SCARAB. For more information, please contact [batesscarab@bates.edu](mailto:batesscarab@bates.edu).

**ERNEST E. CULMAN  
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND  
OCTOBER 18, 1997**

**Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt**

**Transcription: Nicci Leamon  
Steve Hochstadt**

**© 2005 Ernest Culman and Steve Hochstadt**



**Ernie Culman:** Now we're getting started. My father's family actually has lived in Germany for centuries and he felt very much a German, a German patriot. He served in the military as a doctor in World War I and settled in a little town in Silesia called Liegnitz, now it's called Legnica, because it became a part of Poland. He was not an observant Jew by any means. My mother came from a more, more observant family, but in our house we didn't keep kosher or anything like that. We went to temple, my father had a seat in the synagogue and things like that, but basically he considered himself a German. And after Hitler came in, the [unclear], of course he lost his practice. Then he was appointed as the doctor for the Jewish population, called him something else other than doctor, but he was then in charge of taking care of the Jewish population in Liegnitz. Crystal Night came and he was arrested with everybody else, but the chief of police of Liegnitz took it upon himself not to send anybody to the concentration camp who had been an officer in the German army, and as a physician he had been a lieutenant, so after five days he came home.

After he came home, we heard on the radio that Jewish children can't go to public schools any more, so I didn't go the following day. This was obviously, this was in November, my birthday's in December and my teacher comes to our house to bring all my books and all that, his, he was very nice. He said he was so glad that I didn't show up that day, because the principal sent somebody over to him, "You have the only Jewish kid in the whole school, make sure he gets out of here." And he was able to tell him, "Well, he didn't show up today in the first place." And then I had a tutor come to the house to teach me a little bit, including the beginning of English, which I began to learn at that time.

We had made contact with some relatives back in Cincinnati and they sent us an affidavit, but we had to wait like everybody else. So, one day we had dinner, a dinner party at the house, one person said, "I'm not staying here any longer, I'm going to Shanghai." The next person said, "I'll follow you, I'll go with you," rather, and my father said, "I'll join you, too." So there were about three families. My brother and I were the only children. One couple had sent their children to England, Holland and Argentina respectively. The other one had two children that went to Palestine, at that time. And the third one was a single man. He had been married to a non-Jewish woman who wouldn't go with him, so they had, they divorced. His wife and his son stayed behind. I don't know if this is true or not, but I think that his son actually went into the German army. After the war he went back to her, lived in East Germany.

But these nine or ten people that we were, got together, we booked passage on a ship, on a Dutch liner out of Genoa, and we had to transfer in what is now Jakarta, at that time it was called Batavia, where we had a very interesting experience. First of all, on the ship, being a Dutch ship, we had all the freedom that we wanted. It wasn't like the other refugees, who often went on Italian ships. We could take our board money that we had and take it out in cash, rather than having to spend it on board ship. On top of that, my parents thought that on the way to Shanghai they might be able to get off in some other place, like Singapore, Manila, Hong Kong. And our furniture and all was in storage with a freight company in Hamburg. They were told to hold on to it until we tell them where to send it. But obviously we couldn't get off. In Batavia the Dutch Jewish community welcomed us, we had a one week layover, and they put all of us up in nice hotels. But my father and his family, we were taken in by a major in the Dutch army, a Jewish major, doctor, and we lived like kings, you know, like the typical

colonial British and Dutch people lived. We had a car for our disposal with a chauffeur, I mean, it was wonderful. And five days later we went on, a week later we went on board on this other ship that eventually got us into Shanghai.

In Shanghai there was a welcoming committee, and they told us that most of the refugees lived in Hongkew, Hongkew being a part that was occupied by Japan at that time. Had been completely destroyed in the fighting between the Japanese and the Chinese, and many refugees had settled there and started to build it up. But the conditions were horrible. My mother objected. And so we first went to a hotel, the Burlington Hotel on Bubbling Well Road. We stayed there until this group of people found a house that they rented, being the equivalent of a townhouse here. Each family had one room or two rooms. We, because we had, my parents and my brother and I had, got two rooms, everybody else had one room, a common kitchen which beca-, and then they started a business, they started a luncheon business. The women cooked, the men did the marketing.

My father could not get a practice started. He was introduced through this major in Batavia, he got letters of introduction, to two German-Jewish doctors who had come to Shanghai in 1933 or '34. They were younger than my father, they had graduated medical school in Germany, but then were not allowed to practice. They were very helpful to him in that they explained a lot of these crazy diseases that we had there, but still the Chinese didn't come to him. The refugees went to the free clinics. And my father was a little bit of an idealist, he didn't believe in socialized medicine and didn't join up with this clinic. Eventually he did, but that was towards the end of the war. So we struggled with what to live off of. We cabled the freight company in Hamburg, go ahead and send our stuff, and it got on the ship, got as far as the Dutch East Indies when the war broke out and all German ships were told to enter a neutral port. Well, Holland was still neutral in the beginning, so they entered a port called Sabang, S-A-B-A-N-G, a little island off of Sumatra. And it cost us a lot of money to get it transported from there to Shanghai. It was worth it, though, because we had all our possessions in there, and by selling many possessions we could live on a day-to-day basis.

The little lunch room was not really profitable, because inflation was rampant. Whatever we charged for a meal, it cost us more to buy the food the next day. Basically what we got out of it was free food for ourselves, which was well worth it. Eventually they stopped having that lunch room. The other couples moved to Hongkew, but my mother still didn't want to go to Hongkew. So she, my parents, rented an apartment with another family even further away from the city than where we lived up until now. We, this house that they had rented, by the way, was in the French Concession on rue Ratard, it was called at that time. So we moved out to, I think it was called Kinear Road, way out.

In the meantime, of course, I had been signed up to go to school. I got enrolled in the Shanghai Jewish School which was on Seymour Road, and at first they didn't want, they didn't have room to accept all of us, so they postponed it and postponed it. But eventually both my brother and I entered that school, where we were put in lower classes than our age would have us be, because our English was minimal. But at nine years of age you pick it up very quickly. In a year I was almost fluent, they put me in a higher grade, and I did very well in school.

My brother, four years older, was thirteen, he actually was Bar Mitzvah in Germany a



month after *Kristallnacht*, and, well, going back to that for a moment, our synagogue was burned down. There was no Torah in Liegnitz left for him to be Bar Mitzvahed with. In Breslau, forty miles away where he had actually attended the Jewish school, there were little *shuls* that were part of buildings that didn't get burned down and there were some Torahs there. And he had to carry a Torah on the train from Breslau to Liegnitz to be Bar Mitzvahed. And the Bar Mitzvah was in a Jewish old age home, the people who had come back out of the concentration camp like our rabbi, and it was quite, quite emotional to have a Bar Mitzvah at that time.

But getting back to my other story of Shanghai, my parents had no real income. My mother baked cakes that she would sell to people, did sewing, different sewing, my father had a patient here and there. He became deeply depressed, so much so that we often were worried that he would commit suicide. He would sit in his chair and fall asleep and be sleeping most of the day away. It was just horrible, and it really affected us. So to get some money in, my brother went to work at the age of fourteen. One of the doctors that my father had been introduced to knew a man who had a machine shop, a Swiss man, but it was at the other end of town. And he had a bike ride of over forty-five minutes each morning and night, going through the whole city of Shanghai. It was at the other end of Hongkew, you've been there, you know where Hongkew is, and we were on the other side of the French Concession. Tremendous trip. The situation there, he was like an apprentice and they were horrible, the situation. I mean, how my father could send a fourteen-year-old boy into such a work situation, I don't understand and my brother doesn't understand. Some very hard feelings especially on his part that he was put through this.

Then on December 8th I went to school, I hadn't heard anything during the night, and I get to school and all the kids are all excited. "Didn't you hear the shooting?" What had happened was the British and American gun boats were being shot at by the Japanese, and it was December 8th over there, December 7th in the United States, and the Japanese were beginning to occupy the city. The whole school got called into the auditorium and the principal got up and told us all that. There were Marine barracks, American Marine barracks across the street, and when the lecture was over, we went back to our class for a little while before we started to go home, but the Japanese were marching past the school, were occupying the Marine barracks, and I personally saw the American flag being lowered and the Japanese flag being raised in its place. And then we were sent home. I get home and my parents had absolutely no idea what was going on. We had no radio. The kid of the people next door to us had gotten home maybe ten, fifteen minutes before I did, but he was younger than I and completely incoherent. My parents heard from me about Pearl Harbor and the Japanese taking over the city. In the meantime, my brother had gone to work that morning, all the way to this Swiss machine shop. And he came home in the midst of the occupation. He was driving back by bike, I don't know, was he fourteen, fifteen years old at the time, he was born in 1925 so he was sixteen, through this mob of people where nobody knew really where he was going until he finally came home. Eventually he, through other friends he found a job in a different machine factory where he was treated more humanely.

After this, after the Japanese occupation, my parents finally decided that they need to live within the Jewish community and decided to find an apartment in Hongkew. So we moved

to Hongkew sometime in 1942, I guess, on East Seward Road. Again we shared this place with another family and I transferred from the Shanghai Jewish School to the SJYA, normally referred to as the Kadoorie School. Took me a little while to get acclimated but it wasn't bad, it was not a far walk there, and we did very well, and I did very well in school.

At this time I was twelve years old, so it came time for Bar Mitzvah and I had a Bar Mitzvah in Shanghai. The cantor had been, or still is, was at that time, an opera singer. He looked something like Pavarotti, big and all, and I still remember him, little thirteen-year-old kid looking up at that man singing at full voice to me. It was, the Bar Mitzvah was held in the school and it was very festive, even though we were at probably, at the poorest point that we could be.

The school was not a free school, we had to pay, and the principal came up to my parents afterwards. She said, "We usually don't make this a habit, but we like Ernie, he's a good student, and as a Bar Mitzvah present he has free schooling from now on." This was Mrs. Hartwich. I remember quite a few teachers. Another teacher that I had who was our home room teacher, taught math and physics and chemistry and everything else under the sun it seems, was Günter Gassenheimer, an excellent teacher. What I learned through him without text books, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, is what people here learn in high school or the early years of college. Algebra, trigonometry, not calculus, I didn't get into that, but math is what I really loved. And I stayed in school another year. More and more of the children left school when they became thirteen, fourteen years old to go to work, because the parents did not make enough money.

Then came 1943 and in February of 1943 the Japanese brought out this Proclamation that everybody has to live in a Designated Area. The word ghetto was not to be used and there were no barbed wire around it, but it was a certain area designated, and East Seward Road was the dividing line. Trouble was, we lived on the wrong side of the street, and we had to move again. It was very hard to find a place to live. We had ninety days, three month, and the Jewish community, primarily the Russian Jewish community, which because Russia was not at war with Japan at the time, purchased an old school building. SACRA took half of it, half of it remained a Japanese, I don't know what it was, a school, or, oh no, it was a Japanese radio station. Half of it was a Japanese radio station, the other half they purchased and divided up the rooms, the classrooms into smaller rooms, large rooms where single men could live in dormitory style, and we had a room, oh, I don't think it was as big as this living room for the four of us. So we moved again into the SACRA.<sup>1</sup> But even that was not completely free, you had to pay a certain amount of money to get in there. The only way we could do it is for my father to sell his microscope, which again had an emotional effect on him. It basically told him that he couldn't do anything. He was very proud of his microscope and microscope work that he did. We moved in there and then my parents decided when I was fourteen that I should go to work, too.

---

<sup>1</sup> SACRA stood for the Shanghai Ashkenazi Collaborating Relief Association, formed after the Japanese Proclamation in February 1943 to help with the relocation of Jews into the Designated Area. The SACRA building in which Culman lived was located at Tongshan and Kungpin Roads.

In the meantime my brother had gone to this other factory which made lathe and drilling presses [unclear] . It was owned by a Korean and what he did, he took an American lathe, took it apart and reproduced the pieces piece by piece. There was a small area where all the small parts were made, the screws and nuts and bolts, springs, headed by a man by the name of Lorenz, Kurt Lorenz, also a refugee. And that whole department had about half a dozen refugees working there, including my brother and another boy really, you can hardly call them men, who I'd been friends with and they got me a job in there. And I was an apprentice learning how to make parts. I loved it. When the boss came in he always wanted me to just clean up every place, but I enjoyed working there very much, I learned a lot, most of it taught to me by my brother. We had some Chinese working with us and we used to kid around with them. There was one guy, he and I kidded around and I used to say to him, "*Du bist so nett*," which is the German of "You're so very nice." But I made it sound like a cuss word. The end result was that when he got angry at me, he used to tell me how nice I am. Henry and I still get a big kick out of that these days. And I worked there until the war was over.

In the meantime, my father eventually got a job with the clinics. And between him and my brother and I working, and the fact that we were getting charity, we were able to make things work. The charity that we received was in the form of one big pot of stew was divvied out to everybody. My parents used to dig out the meat pieces to give to Henry and I, and they lost a lot of weight. My father lost over fifty pounds in the years in Shanghai.

And in July of 1945, I was home with a cold, virus, or what, you know, nothing serious, didn't go to work. The air raids went off, but we never paid attention to the air raids, because usually the American bombers bombed the city outside, the naval facilities, the airport. And we didn't have any cellars either, because Shanghai is basically at sea level and you can't dig a cellar in there. All of a sudden a terrible noise, I look up and I see the ceiling falling down on me. Our house got hit. This is the school house where there were several hundred refugees living in. And I went like, I put my head down and my hands over my head, tucked in my feet, and the bookshelf that was on top of the bed fell on top of me, with one leg above my head and one leg below my leg, and all the ceiling stuff fell on top of me. But I was really not hurt. My parents were just outside the door to that room. That part held because it had an archway, and at first my mother couldn't open the door because of the air pressure. Finally she was able to open the door and yell for me. They tell me I didn't answer right away and they thought I was dead. But I was obviously alive and we were safe. There was about thirteen, fourteen people killed in that building that day, and many more all around us.

My father was called immediately to help people. My mother and I went out to the back, sort of a back yard I guess you would call it, and I still had a temperature from whatever illness I had, but my brother was at work. And at work we frequently went up on the roof top when the planes, American planes were bombing, and watching them. And he saw that, in the direction of where we lived, fires were going. So he decided to come home and as, the closer he came to home, the more devastated things were. He asked, this building was known as the SACRA building, S-A-C-R-A, don't know what it stood for, he asked people, "What about the SACRA?" People told him, "Oh, everybody's dead in the SACRA, it got hit." Not until he was a block and a half away did he meet someone who knew that we were alive. So he suffered

more coming home than we who stayed there and knew we were alive when it happened.

The building actually didn't collapse in its totality. There were certain areas where the bombs fell in, but they were not such big bombs that they would destroy everything. And the decision was made to bring all of those who were homeless into the actual school, where people took their mattresses and one mattress right next to the other. My mother again didn't want to go. So the first night we stayed in this bombed out building. You could see the skies through the ceiling. During the night somebody yelled, there's a fire breaking out over here, over there, so the next morning my father says, "I'm not, we're going to the school." Took our mattresses on our backs and went to the school. Well, we were about twenty, thirty people in a room, man, woman, child all next to each other. We dressed and undressed under the covers. We had no showers there really, we went once a week to a home, these, they called them *Heime*, they were actually like barracks where people lived and they had showers that we could use. And survived to some degree. Neither my brother nor I wanted to go back to work, scared as everything. I mean, the war in Europe was over, and now it was hitting us in the Far East. Finally they got me a job with some small machine company. It was owned by a refugee, but the place was filthy, absolutely filthy. One morning I woke up and I saw some bites on me. I thought they were mosquito bites. Well, they were more than mosquito bites, because I had typhoid fever. Went into the hospital and stayed in the hospital for about three weeks. This was, this was, wait a minute, I, I did not go in chronological order. Let me back track a little bit. We got bombed July 17th. We didn't go back to work, but August 10th, effectively, the war was over, and an American plane dropped leaflets which said that surrender will be on the 14th of August and the Allies are, people will be coming in a couple weeks after that. Until then, the Japanese still had control. But on the night of the 10th of August, which happened to be my mother's birthday, the principal came in, turned the lights on which was unheard of because of blackout, and told everybody she had just heard through some sources, through Kadoorie, that the war is over. And everybody just became jubilant. Somebody started playing the piano, my father started leading a conga line through the school building. The next morning the Japanese still showed their authority, they arrested some of the people who had torn down the signs of the ghetto, you know, do not go past there. But then the leaflets were dropped and the war was finally over. It was after the war was over that I actually got sick, went to the hospital. I was sick for about three weeks and finally got well again.

But while I was in the hospital, my parents ran into this fellow Kurt Lorenz who used to be my supervisor in the other factory. Kurt Lorenz used to work for Zeiss in Germany, and decided to do camera repair. Of course with the American troops coming, everybody had cameras, wanted to take pictures. New ones were not available. So he had a big thing going right in his home, and he said, "I need some help. Do you think Ernie would like to continue his apprenticeship with me doing camera repair?" Well, when I heard that, I think that helped to cure me more than anything else. And I worked for Kurt Lorenz from then until we left for the United States. He treated me very nicely and I learned a tremendous amount of stuff. Parts were not available and we couldn't send away either for parts, so we actually made the little parts by filing handmade parts to make it work. And that's how I got into my profession, because when I came to the United States I continued repair work, eventually went into sales

and became manager of a camera store. Still do this, selling cameras part time at this stage. I've got to take a break.

**Steve Hochstadt:** I'll stop this for a minute.

[PAUSE IN RECORDING]

**Culman:** At my brother's Bar Mitzvah, my mother had planned a dinner party and in the last minute she realized that we were thirteen people around the dinner table. She was very superstitious, so she quickly called up a bachelor friend of the family to join us as the fourteenth with the rest of us, mainly family.

**Hochstadt:** I even had written down here that I wanted to ask you more about, about that.

**Culman:** Yeah. I guess I skipped over Crystal Night fairly rapidly before. Basically what had happened, we had lived in a very large apartment, which had been two apartments and my parents broke through the walls. Half of it roughly was my father's offices and the other our living quarters. Some time in 1938 my father lost the right to practice. His practice had been primarily in the working area. He had very few Jewish patients. And they took away his right to practice for Gentiles, for Aryans if you will, and he was appointed the, they didn't, I'm trying to think of the word they used, it wasn't doctor, he was the health official for the Jewish community, something to that effect. And he decided we don't need that big apartment any more. We knew a family by name of Braun, B-R-A-U-N, 'Brawn' is the way you pronounce it here, who had sent their three children off to different parts of the world, so they had empty rooms. Their place was on the first floor. On the second floor was a Jewish old age home. So we moved in there.

My brother was attending school in Breslau, because there was a Jewish high school there which we didn't have in Liegnitz, and on November 9th and November 10th respectively, I went to school. I was the only Jewish kid in the whole school, not just in my class, the whole school. The kids were all excited about what happened during the night and I couldn't understand what was going on, and when I came home my mother said, "Did you hear anything?" I said, "Yeah, the synagogue was burned or something." And she was in tears, my mother was there in tears, and she told me that one of the guys in the old age home had gone, was very observant, he went to synagogue every morning, and he stuttered. He came back and tried to tell her that the synagogue was burning. Her initial thought was somebody had left a lamp on or a candle on and got thrown over, whatever. Nobody thought that it was done deliberately. And then my father got called to a patient who had been taken by the Gestapo during the night, beaten up. While he was there, the Gestapo came to our house looking for my father and my brother. My brother all of almost thirteen. And she said, you know, "Dr. Culman isn't here." "Well, where is he?" "Well, he got called to a patient." "Where?" So they went over to that person's house and picked my father up there and took him to jail from

there. My brother eventually came home from Breslau, and my uncles in Breslau got warned somehow, I don't know the details, and they left by train to Dresden, where we also had relatives, and somehow escaped being taken prisoner. My father was in jail, you know, with everybody else was in a big large dormitory type room, he was in a room by himself. So my mother said to the jail keeper, I mean, everybody knew my father, he'd been there for thirty years, small town, roughly seventy thousand inhabitants. She said, "How come he is solitary confinement, so to speak?" "It's not solitary confinement, Mrs. Culman, we can't put Dr. Culman in the same group as the others." They thought they had special privileges as, and so he was, solitary confinement is horrible, have nobody to talk to, nothing to do. And when he finally was released was one of the few times in my life that I saw my father crying. [sighs] Anya, my wife, always tells me that when I tell these stories I don't show enough emotion. It was horrible to see my father cry, to try to understand what was going on.

Couldn't go back to school, and I loved school, always had. Then I had this private tutor, it was a teenager, maybe early twenties, she wasn't really a trained teacher. And, but going back a bit again, after November 10th I went back to school. And my teacher, his name was Thiel, T-H-I-E-L, came and sat down on the bench next to me every day, "Is your father home yet? Is your father home yet?" And of course the day he came home, as I mentioned earlier, they announced that I couldn't go back to school. But I met Mr. Thiel on the street, he was riding on his bike, a number of times, he always stopped to talk to me to see how I'm doing. He asked me, he came and brought the report cards to me. Many, many years later during the Korean war I was, I had been drafted and was back in Austria actually, I was stationed in Salzburg, and I made contact with him through the mail. He was in some little town. I never did get to see him, but we corresponded for a while. [unclear] he remembered me. His first letter back was, "I couldn't figure out where I would be getting a letter with an American postage stamp from, but yes, I remember you." We corresponded for a few months. But he was very, very nice.

Another interesting thing was, when we finally left for Shanghai, some of my father's Gentile friends came in the middle of the night to say goodbye to him. You know, the outside of the building had a big sign, *Israelitisches Altersheim*, Jewish Old Age Home. People were afraid to come in there, be seen. And I remember the one man saying to him, "In some respects you have it easier than we do. You can say what you want in front of your children. We have to watch our tongue in front of our kids, because they could turn us in, and they would turn us in." That stuck with me. And there was another family by the name of Braunert, and when I was in Europe I contacted the Braunerts, went to visit them, and continue to correspond with them to this day. Mr. Braunert has since passed away, his wife is still alive. I correspond with their sons even to this day. I have to write in German, which takes me hours, but Klaus wrote back one time, "I could make life easy for you and write to you in English, because I'm fluent in English, but I think you need the practice." So that's just a little background there, what happened at Crystal Night.

When we finally left Germany, we traveled by train to say goodbye to the other relatives that were still there. And we came to the Brenner Pass middle of the night, I was asleep, but everybody had to get out for customs inspection, and my mother said to the guy, "Can't I leave my kid here, he's fast asleep?" He said, "Sure you can, but I don't guarantee that

you'll be back on the train before the train leaves." So obviously I had to be woken up. And then we went to, came to Italy, to Genoa. My mother's sister had gone to Italy from Germany before that and she came to see us off in Genoa, at the boat. Her train cars got connected with our train cars. I was walking through the train and all of a sudden there's my aunt in front of me. But it was very emotional to have her wave goodbye to us when we boarded the ship.

The Dutch on the ship had a regulation that kids under ten could not be in the same dining room with the adults. I was nine, so I had to eat with the little kids. I got very upset about that. And I got seasick the first time when you could still see land . . .

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B

**Hochstadt:** You, you can do whatever you want. If you'd like to listen and stay that's fine with me.

[NUMBER OF PEOPLE SPEAKING AT ONCE.]

**Hochstadt:** You don't have to be quiet, you can do whatever you want.

**Culman:** You can be [unclear] . Now I feel a certain way, I feel like I was cheated. Many of the, and I saw that specifically when I went to the reunion in Philadelphia, that many of the men who were my classmates and playmates in Shanghai made something more of their life than I felt that I had the opportunity to do. Werner Blumenthal is an example. When his parents came here from Shanghai and he was able to go to college and have a profession that ended him up in the highest area of government and the highest area of industry. We came to Baltimore, on a, arrived on a Wednesday. The following Wednesday I started working. My brother did, too. They, we went to night school after a little while and, because we figured we still need to learn English, and we wanted to get the high school equivalent test, high school equivalent certificate, so we sent all our school books, school report cards and what have you to the Department of Education in Washington, figuring that we would get credit for some of the things that we had learned. But they ignored everything but our ages. I was seven, fourteen when I left school, so I had to take a test to be able to go to high school. I passed that and I went to high school at night, Baltimore City College, both Henry and I, so what should we take? Well, we knew we had to take some English and we took American history, which was very interesting, chemistry. For German we, as a language we took German and we took tests which we passed. Not necessarily with a hundred, but in the nineties. And then we heard of the Maryland high school equivalent tests, so we took those. Both Henry and I did get our high school equivalent certificates.



But other than that, our education lacks. Whatever education I have had over and beyond that is from my own reading and so on. I've never had any formal college education. I attended some college courses, more for the fun of it than for anything else. So I feel that I lost a lot. I mean, obviously if the Nazis wouldn't have taken over in Germany, being the son of a physician, upper middle class physician, I would have gone to college and I would have been a professional. If we would have come to the States directly in the early '30s, instead of when we did, actually the same thing would have been true. And even coming here from Shanghai, my parents were so concerned about making a living that they saw to it that we immediately went to work. We supported our parents.

My father died less than two years after we got here. He had, with the help of the Jewish community, been able to get a job in a sanitarium for colored people. Maryland being a southern state was still segregated at the time. So he had a position and was making money. And we were, so to speak, out of the poor house by this time. But I continued to go to work, and so did my brother. After my father died, my mother said to us, not once but many a time, "The day before he died he said to me, 'You don't have anything to worry about, your children, your two sons will take care of you if something happens to me.'" My mother worked very hard in Shanghai to keep the family together with the lunch room, the sewing, the baking of cakes. She helped out. And then she must have felt like, okay, now it's my turn, you guys go to work and I take it easy. She was only fifty-two years old when we came to the United States, but she never got a job. She lived off of my brother and I. And I resent that, in retrospect. I don't think I was fully aware of it at the time.

In 1951 I got drafted, the Korean War was going on, and after first being, after basic training being stationed at Fort Monmouth in the camera repair school where I became an instructor for a while, I was then sent over to Austria, Salzburg, which considering the war was going on in Korea was very nice. But I was expected to send money home each month. As a private I think I made eighty or ninety dollars a month, and half of that was sent home. Again in retrospect, I resent that. I mean, most kids who are in the Army get money from their, from home. Here I had to send it the other way. It eliminated me to have some of the fun that you have in the service. This constant responsibility for my mother continued on and on and, like I said, it hurts to this day. By the way, Anya and I, this is our second marriage for both of us. My first marriage also suffered from this. There were many things that were wrong in the marriage, but one of the things was that when we became engaged, I told her that each pay day I send x number of dollars to my mother. And over the years she resented it, because she was sitting at home not doing anything. After a while, some of the claims to Germany, she got some pension and things got a little easier. But when my father died, and I was only eighteen years old, I felt a tremendous loss. As I mentioned to Anya this morning, I mean, it felt like part of me died at that time.

When my mother died about twenty-five years later, I felt relief, because finally I don't have to take care of her any more. I could concentrate on my own life. I mean, it wasn't only the financial part. Anya always gets a kick out of this one, but when we went to movies, she never learned English. She learned enough to go to the grocery store. Go to the movies, she expected me to translate word-for-word what was going on. And you could always tell where we are sitting, because all the way around us people had moved, it was empty. We went to



see, I took her to see “Gone With the Wind” and during the movie interpreting or at least translating the gist of it. I didn’t get much out of the movie, she did. [laughs] She became very, very self-centered and made us feel like we owe her.

I eventually moved out of Baltimore, I got a job in Washington. After I came home from the service in 1953, my brother had gotten married the previous year and I moved back in with my mother. A few years after that, I got a job in Washington and instead of getting myself an apartment in Washington, I continued to live with my mother and commuted, one hour train ride or eventually one hour car ride. She used to say to me, “Why do you want to have a second apartment, then you have to keep up two apartments,” making it known to me that even if I move to Washington, have my own place, I still have to support her and pay the rent on her apartment. About a year after that I got married and at that point of course I moved to the Washington area. [unclear] resentment towards her, for years I felt guilty about these feelings. That’s my whole life, that, we didn’t have to live like we did in Shanghai, if my father would have been more willing to go to work for the clinic right away. What he did to my brother, making him work in that machine shop, is inexcusable. And even when we came to Baltimore, I was lucky, I was there, got to Baltimore on a Wednesday and the following Monday I walked into Ritz Camera Center and told them I did repair work and they hired me. Stayed with them for ten years. My brother was sent out to Bethlehem Steel, in the machine shop there. Again, at the other end of town from where we were living in Baltimore. Didn’t have a car as yet, so took street cars, took about an hour and half to get there, an hour and a half to come back, shift work, sometimes night, all night, and he hated it. And finally my parents agreed that as soon as my father has a job, he could quit there and find something else. Well, it turned out that my father did get a job about three months later, and Henry found a position with a paper company selling paper products, and stayed with that company for over forty years before he retired. Did very well, was very happy there. But initially, again, they just demanded of us to take care of them. I don’t know, what did I leave out? Now I give you a chance to ask questions.

**Hochstadt:** I have a few questions, and I’ll just go in order here, but tell me other things that you think about along the way. You mentioned that before you left Germany you started to learn English.

**Culman:** Yes.

**Hochstadt:** Was that a decision about emigration, about preparing to emigrate?

**Culman:** Oh definitely, definitely. Because, I must say almost as long as I can remember, there was always the thought in everybody’s mind about emigrating. Even before Crystal Night, my parents were planning to go to Palestine. They had pretty much everything in order to get to Palestine, but at Crystal Night the Palestine office in Berlin or wherever it happened to be got burned down, so those papers got lost. And then right after Crystal Night, my father was still in jail is when my mother found these relatives in Cincinnati and we were thinking of coming to the United States. So we knew we need to learn English. And when we, when I came to



Shanghai and I went to this English Jewish school, where everything was taught in English. The teacher, of course, was aware of my background. The first class, I believe, was a dictation and she corrected every word I misspelled, which was practically every word. I can still see in my mind this piece of paper with the red ink on practically every word. But the teachers were very patient. And the other kids were very patient with me. So I was able to learn English fairly rapidly in a situation where I had to speak it. I had the basic background from that half year of English, I knew enough to make myself understood. But it was very easy for me once I was in the school and was accepted.

Maybe six months, maybe a year later, one of the kids was talking to me about the Boy Scouts, the Cub Scouts actually, and I joined the Cub Scouts, it was a British scouting organization. And I became very much involved in that. These were not just refugee children, these were children from the other Jewish community, the Russian Jewish community, which had been in Shanghai since the end of World War I, the, we called them the Arabian Jews, but they were basically Jews from Iraq and the other places in the Mideast who had settle in Shanghai as early as Shanghai was made an open port. Some of them became very wealthy, many of them were not. But these were on the other, the larger group of kids in that school. They were Sephardic, and the synagogue that was there was actually a Sephardic synagogue. But I caught up within a year, I got promoted to another class and a few years later I got promoted into another higher class. Learning came easy to me, but the teachers were good, excellent teachers. And then when I switched over to the Kadoorie School, there all the children were refugee children and it didn't take me long to get acclimated to those kids. And again, as I mentioned earlier, we had excellent children.

Just about, oh, three, four years ago I was playing with the idea of going back to college and getting a college degree, and as I love math, I decided I'll take a math course first. And the college math course that I took was like a, going over the things that I learned when I was thirteen years old, by this guy Gassenheimer. I was just amazed that it all came back to me fairly rapidly. Sure there were new things in there, things I didn't know about, but the bulk of it was as if he was teaching us first year college math.

You being a history professor, this will interest you, having been a Jewish School, we went of course through the Jewish Bible stories and then continued into Jewish history, and Jewish history in a way is like world history. So I had tremendous background of that and to this day I'm fascinated by history, love history. I was one of the best students in the school. One teacher claimed that I was the best math student, regardless of grade. And, going back what I said earlier, I feel cheated in a way that I did not utilize this in my life. Part of it I cheated myself, I can't blame it all on my parents.

When I got out of the service, there was a G.I. Bill available for me, I did not take advantage of it. By this time I was just looking forward to making money again, going back, you know, I'd been working for Ritz Camera Center, they kept the job open for me. Before I went in the service, I did all the repairs for them. Granted I don't want to do a commercial for Ritz here, but they only had about four or five stores at the time, now they have several hundred. But they found other places to do the repair work for them, and they took me back as a salesman. Eventually I became a manager of one of their stores in Washington, that's how I got transferred to Washington. And then we had some disagreements, I thought that I should



make more money than they thought, and I found another job with a company in Silver Spring, Industrial Photo, where I switched to and I was with them for twenty-eight years, Industrial Photo, as a general manager, vice president. And like these things happen, the boss and I had our disagreements, strictly on business level because to this day we're still friends, and I left there and went with a company called Pen Camera. Pen was just starting their government industrial business at the time, and I took over as manager of the government industrial sales department. Worked very well for a number of years, but the situation was so that it became extremely difficult to do that job satisfactorily, so when I reached sixty-five years of age I decided to retire. I enjoyed retirement, but six months later Pen Camera called me, would I be willing to work part time in one of their retail stores. After a little bit of thought, I decided to take it, so that's what I do now, two days a week I work in the retail store behind the counter and love it because there's no pressure on it. I'm doing something I've done all my life and it's easy on me. This has nothing to do with Shanghai, I guess, but I got off the subject.

**Hochstadt:** No, that's fine, that's fine, I'm happy to hear about that part, too.

**Culman:** In Shanghai when I was working at the factory, the factory was outside the District and we had to have a passport every time to get out of there. The passport got, the issuance of the passport was administered by one man, Ghoya. The passport was valid for one month. Frequently he let you wait in line for a month before he would bring you your passport. Ghoya, I guess you've heard this from others, was quite a character. He was short and hated anybody that was tall. A tall man came in looking for a passport, he'd jump up on the table and say, "Me big potato, you short potato, out, no passport," without any reason. He considers himself the King of the Jews. Our sporting activities was basically soccer, you know, we had soccer matches. He would be out there watching the game and before the game we had to parade in front of him, just like others would parade in front of the king. And he had assistants also.

When the ghetto was formed, there were a number of people who decided not to move into the ghetto. They were given a one-week jail sentence, which sounds fairly mild considering it was a war situation. But what nobody knew was that these jail cells were infected. People came out of the cells, within a week or two they died of cholera, typhoid, whatever diseases they had. And, it was horrible, twenty, I don't know how many people, I think like twelve to twenty people died from just being in jail for a week.

In Shanghai there were so many diseases. We got inoculated every six months, smallpox, cholera, typhoid, typhus. Those were the primary things. And even though, through my father who insisted that we have that done, I was inoculated every six months, I still caught either typhus or typhoid, whatever you get from bites of an insect.

**Anya Hoffman:** Typhus.

**Culman:** Typhus. The other one you get from bad water. Water had to be boiled, we couldn't eat any raw vegetables, or anything raw as far as that's concerned. One couple decided to put a filter on their water fountain and said, then we don't have to boil it. Unfortunately they

caught cholera and died. I'm just relating incidents that are not necessarily connected but . . .

**Hochstadt:** That's fine, that's fine. Did you know that couple? It's something that you . . . ?

**Culman:** People we knew, not, they were not friends, but we knew of them. There's another couple that, what is it when you get bitten by a mad dog?

**Hochstadt:** Rabies.

**Culman:** Rabies, another couple, the man caught rabies, God knows from what, and as they were taking them to a hospital, he kissed his wife goodbye, he died and a few days later she had rabies and she died. I didn't know these people, I just know of them. The Chinese themselves, they had absolutely no hygiene. The fields got fertilized with human waste. You could walk through a near field and you would see people defecating right on the field. When the babies died, the poor Chinese, they would wrap them up in newspaper or blanket and put the body out on the sidewalk. When I walked to school I often saw those, flies and other insects all around them. I used to go on the other side of the street to be [unclear] . Theft was rampant. People would, a man would ride on the streetcar with a hat on, somebody outside would grab the hat and run away and everybody would just laugh. The beggars crippled their children sometimes, to make them, to get more money from passersby. When my father was looking for a job, one day he applied and almost got the job at the leprosy colony. My mother put her foot down, that just goes too far. But you had leprosy and you had typhoid, you had smallpox, blackpox, diseases that I've never heard of before. You had to be so careful. You couldn't go barefoot, because you would catch what they called Hong Kong foot. At one time there was some fish that they were selling. It wasn't herring, but it tasted like herring to most people, and you know, Jewish people generally speaking like herring. My father didn't like herring, and I didn't like herring at that time. We were the only ones who didn't get sick, everybody else got what they called liver worm. Don't ask me what that really is today, but it wasn't critical, I mean, it wasn't a fatal disease, but it was very uncomfortable. Dysentery, amoebic dysentery.

**Anya Hoffman:** Talk a little about your feelings.

**Culman:** I put my feelings aside, I think, because I had a hard time with feelings, basically. To some degree to this day, expressing my feelings is difficult for me, because I pushed my feelings aside to survive. You know, you form friendships in Germany, in Shanghai, in Baltimore, wherever, and then people move away, so you don't hold on to friends that long. I still have a hard time making close friends with people. Lots of acquaintances, but a really close friendship is very difficult for me. And I think that it goes back to that time, when my feelings were suppressed by me, because that is the way I felt I could survive.

The Japanese were not really that cruel to us. Compared to Germany, I mean, it was nothing. And when people like Anya say to me I have to consider myself a survivor, I have difficulty with that. Because a survivor, I see a survivor as somebody who survived a German



concentration camp. Things weren't that bad. But they were bad enough.

The Jewish people had their own little police force, the Japanese made them be the guards at the entrance and exits of the ghetto, called *Pao Chia*. There's one guy, he was somebody in the *Pao Chia*, lieutenant, captain or whatever equivalent, he was riding with his bike one day when a Japanese army truck hit him, accidentally. He didn't get hurt, but his bike got ruined. He wanted these two soldiers to replace the bike for him. Of course they wouldn't. He threatened to go to their superior, "Take me to your superior," and people standing around yelled at him, "Stop it, be glad you didn't get hurt. Forget it." He says, "No, I am so and so of the *Pao Chia*," I don't even remember the man's name. Anyhow, eventually they told him, get on the truck with them. He was never seen again. A week or so later his body was fished out of the Yangtze River. These are foolish things that people did. Because a war situation, a soldier isn't going to take you to his superior that he had done something wrong. There was no authority to go to.

The Jewish community had its own, what was it, it wasn't a court per se, but it, a mediation board, I guess would be the closest thing in English. For when people within the community had disagreements, they went to this mediation board and they tried to resolve things without taking it to the Japanese authorities.

When, as kids we, you know, many areas were destroyed by bombs from before we got there, from the Japanese-American war. In this building, the SACRA building where we lived, in the back there was a bombed out building where the second floor cement hung down like this at an angle. We used to jump up and down on that thing. Thinking back on it now, we could have been hurt quite badly. At other times we dug around ruins. One time we found pieces of a *mahjong* set, where obviously the house got bombed and the *mahjong* set all over the place, and put things together. As kids we played a lot there, there were a lot of things to do. In sports we had soccer and track meets and things like that.

Ping pong was a big game for us. I actually became pretty good at ping pong. Tried it the other day and was lousy, but that's understandable. One time in school I was playing ping pong and in my enthusiasm broke a window, so I was very concerned about what this will do to me. My parents would have to pay for it, and this was a time when they had very little money. So I walked in to the principal, and told the principal what had happened. And she said, "Okay, don't worry about it." Went back to class and then the custodian comes running into our classroom, yelling and screaming at the top of his lung, "I know somebody in this classroom has done it. Whoever it is, I'm going to see to it that you get punished, I will take you all to the principal." And I held up my hand, "I'm the one that broke it and I already told the principal." The custodian was just flabbergasted, he didn't know what to do.

We had in Shanghai a board game called Shanghai Millionaire which was a copy of Monopoly, identical to Monopoly but with Shanghai streets. And we used to play that on a rainy day for hours at a time. We'd start at ten o'clock in the morning until six, seven o'clock at night. On a more adult basis, there were theaters. They had operas and operettas and simpler operas, and in our building was a man by the name of Gyula Singer who painted the backgrounds. He was a, became a friend of the family and he used to take me into the, into the theater, snuck me into the theater so I could watch it. And I saw the "Fledermaus," I saw "Carmen" there and several of the other Viennese operettas, and got my first taste of music,



which I still love to listen to.

**Hochstadt:** Where did the game Shanghai Millionaire come from? Did a kid make it up or . . . ?

**Culman:** No, I think somebody in Shanghai built it, you know, just using the same type of board and just changing the names of the streets. They're doing it here now by having Monopoly with different city streets other than Atlantic City. And it was the same thing with the railroads and the power company, electric company, and it was just, we took this so seriously as I said, we took hours, one kid would leave, somebody else would take over his place like an ongoing crap game, you might say. But of course not for money, it was all just for the fun of it.

**Hochstadt:** Do you remember some of the streets that were in that game?

**Culman:** Yes, yes, the Bund was the most expensive part, then there was Nanking Road which was the next part over, I think Bubbling Well Road was on there. I don't remember too many of the others, but Bund and Nanking Road were the two blue ones at the very end. And, you know, my parents couldn't afford to buy one of those things and there's a, another kid and I, we actually made, copied it. We took a piece of cardboard and painted everything in there and we made a game for ourselves.

And of course cooking was something else again. In the SACRA building, there was one kitchen and I don't know how many people lived in there. And if you were lucky you got, were able to use this gas kitchen for twenty minutes, thirty minutes, whatever it is. So everybody was cooking on what we called Chinese stoves. They were little charcoal things that we now enjoy for outdoor barbecuing, but it was no joy for us there because it was a necessity. We bought the charcoal, did the cooking on that, and sometimes the charcoal was too expensive, so we bought just powdered coal dust, mixed it with water and made our own charcoal. Hands became pitch black by doing that. There was one woman who worked in a restaurant, she used to come back to this SACRA building and brought the coffee grounds back. "Who has an oven going with some hot water, they can share a cup of coffee with me." My mother missed good coffee tremendously, so she often kept the oven going for this woman to come back and she could have a cup of coffee.

My father was so worried about everything. I mean, he wasn't really cheap in the pure sense of the word, but he didn't want us to spend money on anything that wasn't necessary. My mother had a very sweet tooth, and I inherited that sweet tooth and my brother did, too. So sometimes when my father was out at a, he used to go to all these medical meetings, doctor meetings, she would send my brother or I out to buy three pieces of candy for whatever it cost at that time. And inflation was so rampant that I guess the smallest bill was a hundred dollar Chinese bill, and come back and we'd enjoy each one piece of candy. As the water always had to be boiled, at every street corner practically there was a place that boiled water, where you could buy boiling water. And we had to make sure that we saw the water bubbling before we would take it, and then it got poured into a thermos bottle which we brought along, and we

took it home, either made tea or sometimes just drank hot water. At the factory where Henry and I were working, we just drank hot water usually with some loaves of bread with salami or something on there, frequently no spread on it, that was our lunch.

I still remember the first time, after the war in Europe was over, the United States concentrated more on Japan and the Far East. After Okinawa fell, that's when the planes started to fly over Shanghai. We had never heard of Okinawa or Iwo Jima before, but these Koreans we worked with showed us on a map where it was, and we realized how close to Shanghai American troops are coming. It's after that that the planes started flying over Shanghai. I remember the first time seeing these gigantic planes, they were probably B-29s or something like that, flying in formation over the city, so high up that the Japanese anti-aircraft couldn't touch them. Probably they were taking photographs, whatever. And then we often heard bombs falling in the outskirts, never paid any attention to it until it hit us. And after that it seemed like they came over every day. And I was so scared.

The war was already over one time, after the war was over, I was playing with some friends in this, in the school, we were living in the school after having been bombed out. And a thunder storm came up suddenly. I had looked out and seen the black clouds. A thunder bolt struck and I heard it and I dived under the bed. Of course everybody started laughing, including me, but the fear was so great. When the dive bombers bombed, it sounded like they were always overhead no matter where in the city they were actually bombing, you heard that sound and when you heard the bomb dropping you looked up to see if it hit your house or not. As a matter of fact, other than that July 17th, the ghetto area was not hit again. But the fear stuck with us. It was only a month before the war was over.

And when we heard about the atomic bomb, of course, nobody knew what it really is, it didn't affect us. I mean, the effect was carried many thousand miles. But that the war was finally over, was so, we were so elated, I told you earlier about my father leading a conga line. We all just were so grateful that it was finally over. We were still afraid what would happen when the Japanese move out before the Allies move in, I mean, anarchy would exist. But as it turned out, it was done very well, the American troops came in, sent a liaison in, then the Chinese troops came with them, and on September 3rd or 4th the whole Seventh Fleet steamed into Shanghai harbor, about seven hundred ships, British, American, other Allies. And then the sailors went wild in the city. I was walking along the street and some sailor comes up to me, "Hey buddy, you got a sister?" you know?

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

**Culman:** Henry got a job with the military and he really loved that. Number one, he got paid in American dollars and we were finally able to make ends meet, actually put a few dollars aside each week, or each month when we got paid. And General Marshall was sent over by the American government to try to make peace with the Shanghai Communists, and he was right



there at the airport when he arrived, he was standing in line with other G.I.s and saluting him when he came in. The, he actually brought home a lieutenant for lunch or dinner one night, which had a funny situation because the man, whoever he was, of course, ate the, in the American way changing his knife and fork around, and my mother thought that this guy just didn't have any manners, he didn't know how to eat properly.

When we came to the United States eventually, we all made it a point trying to assimilate as much as possible, including eating with the fork in the right hand. On, on the train from San Francisco to Baltimore, my father said to us, "You know, you all got to go to work when we get to Baltimore, so consider these three, four days like a vacation. Order whatever you like from the dining car." So they had fried chicken, we all ordered fried chicken, and trying to eat fried chicken with knife and fork in a dining car is almost an impossibility. So the head waiter comes up to us and says, "Here in this country you can take chicken into your hands." We all did it and enjoyed it that much more.

That was, yeah, that was a real high, when we finally got our permission to come to the United States. The war was over and the papers were full of articles of what had happened in Germany. Of course we had had no idea. And all we wanted to do was get out of Shanghai. So we contacted relatives wherever we could find them. Many of my father's relatives specifically, unfortunately had remained in Germany and they were dead. But my mother's two sisters, one had ended up in Panama, one had ended up in Palestine, and her brother had ended up in Baltimore. My father had a sister who ended up in Montreal. We contacted them all and the idea was whoever comes through first, that's where we're going. Well, the United States came through first and on Christmas Eve, 1946, we got our visa to come to the United States. We were scheduled to go on a ship leaving in February, the army transports, and we figured, well, we've got roughly two months to get everything taken care of. Then my father gets a phone call to come to this office where they handled the transports, and was told the ship in February still has American G.I.s on there, "We can't allow any women on board. You and your sons can go, but your wife would have to stay behind." And he said, "Well, no way, I mean we stuck together through all this, we're not going to separate now. What was our choices?" "Well, there's a ship in March where you could be scheduled to go." He says, "Is there nothing else?" This was January the 5th. And they said, "Well there's a ship leaving on the 9th of January, four days from now, where we still have some room." And he says, "I'll take it." "Yeah, but you have to have your big luggage on in two days." "Never mind, we'll take it." I got a call at work, my boss was out, I left him a little note, "I'm going to America, good-bye." [laughs] And four days later we were aboard the ship.

My father, as a doctor, always had a telephone, which was rather rare in Shanghai. In fact, in the SACRA building it was part of our business. We let people for x number of dollars make a phone call, for half that amount they can receive phone calls with it. Call comes in, I would run through the building trying to find whoever it was. But the telephone was a very valuable asset, and downstairs from where we lived at that time there was a Chinese merchant who wanted to buy the telephone from us, and he bought it. I don't know for how much any more, it doesn't matter. But there was also a refugee who wanted the phone, but he didn't come up with as much money as the Chinese. So my brother went with this guy to the telephone company, bribe the proper officials to move the phone from our apartment

downstairs. We were already on board the ship, all of a sudden over the loudspeaker, “Dr. Culman, you’re wanted on the pier.” He goes down on the pier, there’s this other refugee, he is going to give my father more money. He says, “No way, I’m already on American territory, I’m not going to renege on the deal I made with this other guy at this point.” I mean, this guy was, I have absolutely no idea any more how much, how many dollars [unclear] , it was a substantial sum in American dollars.

But we got on board the ship and, it’s a regular troop ship, you know, with bunks one on top of the other. Henry was on the bottom, my father in the middle, I on the top, and my mother was in the women’s section on the other side. During the day of course we were all together. It took us thirteen days to get to San Francisco. When we arrived there it was still night, four or five o’clock in the morning, but none of us could sleep. We ran up on deck and eventually we could see the sun rising behind the Golden Gate, and really it looked golden to us, and steamed into San Francisco. Some friends from Germany were there to greet us, from our little town in Liegnitz. The Jewish community, the Joint I think handled all of that, saw to it that we had a hotel room. It looked to us like a very fancy hotel. As I don’t remember the name, I have no idea what it really was. And one of the first things Henry and I did, we went into the bathroom, opened the faucet and drank the water right out of the faucet. It tasted delicious, because seven, eight years we always had to have everything boiled. And then these friends in San Francisco tried to talk us into staying there. Why go east? Everybody from the east is coming west. My mother wouldn’t hear from anything they said. “I’m going to my brother, he’s in Baltimore, we’re separated long enough, too much has happened.”

Lo and behold, we get to Baltimore, we settle down, a month later or a few weeks later actually, my uncle and aunt tell my parents that they have a chance to move to the west coast. My mother was furious. By this time, Henry and I both had a job and my father was just about ready to have a job, already made friends, we really settled into Baltimore very fast. So they went to San Francisco, he couldn’t find work there, a month or two later they came back. But that was very thrilling, coming into San Francisco. I guess I’ve covered just about everything I can think of right now.

**Hochstadt:** Can I ask you a couple questions?

**Culman:** Certainly.

**Hochstadt:** Maybe I’ll go in order. When you were packing, when you were, had decided to go to Shanghai, your family had decided to go to Shanghai, maybe you could say something about other preparations. Learning English was a preparation. What other kind of preparations did you make about taking money, or thinking about getting money over there, or valuables or any of that?

**Culman:** Well, the Germans only allowed a certain amount of dollars and cents, or marks actually, to take out as cash. What my father had over and beyond that when we got to the Brenner Pass, the border into Italy, he wired the balance to his brother. We did pay a lot into the board money, which is money to be used on board the ship. As we went on a Dutch liner,



they had to keep a record of what we spend it for, but they just wrote anything down. Like my father would go to the purser, the purser would say, "Well, didn't you lose a hundred dollars in gambling last night, and didn't you buy some good cigars?" and they wrote all that down, and so we got all the board money in cash for us. How much that was I don't know, I have no way of recalling that. We had, as I mentioned before, planned to move to Palestine. And some of the furniture my parents had redone for tropical climates. [unclear] big heavy book shelves were put on legs, some pieces were cut shorter, and a lot of clothing was bought. Shoes, double soles were put on the shoes so that when the shoes, the soles wore out, you tear them off and you had another set of soles in there.

When it actually came time for packing, all our belongings were packed into a gigantic box, they called it a *Lift*, which was basically the size of a room. A Gestapo agent was there to supervise what you put in there. The silver and gold we had had already been turned in for pennies, they paid you by weight. But we were allowed to take out two sets of silverware per person, which in our case was eight pairs. I have a few years ago given that to my daughter, she still had that. I had, as toy money, some aluminum coins from when Germany had this tremendous inflation. They were absolutely worthless. My mother was getting ready to pack them and they stopped her and she said, "Look," she finally talked them into that it's toy money, "let it go." I said to her later on, "Why didn't you just let them have it?" I don't care, I didn't care about my own things as much. But they watched everything that was in there until they had, my parents had some fun glasses, you know, it looked like the glass was filled with wine, but when you drank it nothing came out. They saw that and they were fascinated by it and my mother gave it to them and then they relaxed a little bit and the packing proceeded faster. However, my father would not think of doing anything illegal, he didn't want to take any chances. We had special clothing made. My uncle had a haberdashery place and clothing made to order. I think the whole family wore the same material, suits for my father, suit for my mother, Henry and I had a lot of clothing that we took along, some suitcases were specially designed to hold a lot of dresses, for example. We took a lot of clothing with us. My mother did take along a fur coat, my father as I mentioned a microscope and all that, and much of this we eventually sold in Shanghai. The microscope gave us that room in the SACRA building. That's all that I can think of of special preparations as far as packing is concerned. And I as a boy, I was very excited about all this, you know, just like a big adventure for me. Everybody get out of Germany to go to Shanghai, I mean, I had no idea where Shanghai is and neither did I have any idea what fears my parents had. I mean, they, what they must have gone through I have no idea, because I never got a chance to talk to my father about that after everything was over. He died too soon. Go on, what next?

**Hochstadt:** You said that when you, when your family, your parents decided to move to Hongkew the first time, that it had to do with a need to live in the Jewish community. What did you mean by that, or what were they thinking about?

**Culman:** When we moved from the French Concession out to, it was almost the suburbs, it was still in the city limits, but very far removed from everything. The fact that as the war broke out in December, they had no way of knowing what was going on. They felt very isolated there. In Hongkew you had the whole Jewish community, your neighbors were Jews,



or refugees like yourself, and I think that was what they felt, that they should live within the Jewish community so not to be so isolated. The move was weird, because it wasn't trucks, it were hand carts. We moved through town with these hand carts. And every time we moved from one place to the next, it was smaller. So my mother and I used to make a chart, a diagram by centimeter by centimeter to figure out what furniture can go where, and what furniture do we have to sell or give away before we could move in there. Sometimes it was within a quarter of an inch or it wouldn't have fit. But we moved all, I mean this was, I don't know how long it actually took us, but it was a long ride to walk with these push carts all through the city.

**Hochstadt:** Was it Chinese who were pushing the carts?

**Culman:** Chinese were pushing the carts.

**Hochstadt:** And you were riding in them?

**Culman:** No, we were walking along them to make sure they don't steal anything.

**Hochstadt:** That was one of the things I wanted to ask you about, this moving in Shanghai. So you've already answered part of it. You were often moving into smaller places and so you had to give away or sell some things.

**Culman:** We always tried to sell it, you know, every penny helped. But initially we were in this house with our friends where we had two rooms, then we moved into that smaller place out on Kinear Road, and when we moved into Hongkew, East Seward Road, that was even smaller, and then from there to the SACRA building, which was one room. So it was always smaller.

Now my mother was a good decorator. She took that single room and with some wardrobes divided it up, so she had like a kitchen area, could do the cooking, a table where we ate, my parents had a pull out couch that they slept on, my brother had a bed, and that came from Germany. Initially we had two of them, one for him and one for me, which folded up against the wall with a bookshelf on top and then like a curtain in front of that. And I slept on an Army cot. In the morning when Henry and I went to work, my father had to stay in bed, because there wasn't room for all of us. The bike was also in the room, that we used to get to work on. And I was actually in my brother's bed with that bookshelf on top when the bombing occurred. But it was always, like when we moved in the SACRA, my bed had to be given up and I had to get a cot which could be folded up and stuck in the corner when not in use. Things always got less and less, and there in the SACRA we didn't have a private bathroom any more, I mean, it was like a school, there was a bathroom there for everybody. There were some showers there and you could take showers, and men from six to nine, women from nine to twelve or whatever it was, it wasn't that long. You could take showers there. Once we got bombed out, we had to walk someplace else to get our showers [unclear] that school building did not have shower facilities. But it's, taking a shower once a week was okay. Nowadays, if you don't take one a day that's a different story. But often we did our washing



just out of a basin, a little basin, like a sponge bath is what you would call it here. But the hygienic situations were terrible. To clean your teeth, you had to have boiled water to clean your teeth, you couldn't take any unboiled water and put in your mouth.

Food had to be boiled or hot water, boiling water poured over it before you could eat it. Salads were almost unheard of. Rice was the thing we had most of and cereal. There was, because there were a lot of Japane-, not Japanese, Russian people there, a lot of Russian food got introduced into the Shanghai market. There was a cereal called *kasha* which tasted horrible, and it's still available in grocery stores here. I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole. And that brings up another point. In the initial school that I went to, the Shanghai Jewish School on Seymour Road, they served a hot lunch to everybody, but as it were mainly the people from the Middle East that were running that, it was extremely spicy, curry, and I hate spicy food to this day. Anya and I were dating when she invited me the first time for dinner and she served me curry.

**Hochstadt:** Big mistake, huh?

**Anya Hoffman:** Big mistake.

**Culman:** It almost ended things before they really got started.

**Anya Hoffman:** [laughs] He's very polite, he ate.

**Culman:** But it just burned me inside, I wasn't used to it. Now my mother when she cooked, she tried to cook German style as much as possible with the available things there. I was a very bad eater as a child, my parents must have had a horrible time with me. One thing I remember, they bought rye bread, it was the only thing available there as bread, and I had my mother take out every kernel of rye before I could eat it. I'm trying to think of some of the other things that went on.

**Hochstadt:** Would you say more about your mother's cooking? Not for the family, but for the luncheon and for the cakes that she made?

**Culman:** Well, the cakes was interesting, because butter was very expensive so we, all we ate was margarine. But even nowadays when you put margarine on the table, you refer to it as butter. So my mother one day told me to go out to the grocery store and pick up a pound of butter, and that's exactly what I did, butter instead of margarine. Yeah, she laughed about it because it's a one time mistake, but all the cakes were usually done with margarine. There was one person who ordered a cake done with butter one day, they had the money and they wanted it with butter. So my mother baked it with butter, it was a sheet cake, so she cut it apart to make the delivery, cut a small slice for all of us to taste what the difference would be between a cake made with butter over a cake with margarine. Of course what we also enjoyed is when a cake didn't rise fully or didn't come out right, because then she couldn't deliver it, and we had it.



The lunch room was interesting, because there were a lot of single men there, living there who were not used to cooking on their own, and this was like home style cooking for them. And my father acted like the maitre d', you know, talked to the people, sat them down on the table, and they used, the men used to go out early in the morning to the market, which also by the way was on Seymour Road, if you've been there, and pick up whatever they had available, and then the women would cook it. And the big meal, European style, was at noon time. What she actually served I don't know, I can't remember, but it was basically European style food. And these bachelors loved it. They complained every time they raised the price, but the price had to be raised because of the inflation, and finally everybody got so sick and tired of it they closed the, they stopped the lunch room. Then everybody was complaining that they stopped it. So, you guys didn't want to pay more money and we were not, we're not even breaking even half the time. Because if you bought something today for a hundred dollars, the next day it might have been a hundred dollars.

Whatever money we had we kept in foreign currency. Initially my father didn't know whether it would be British pounds or American dollars or half and half, but basically it was American dollars that people went by, and you took the money to the bank to exchange it for every day living. So every time you made the exchange, you got more Chinese dollars for one American dollar. One day in 1941 my father went to the bank, came home, and [unclear] this x number of Chinese dollars made out to the Central Reserve Bank of China, CRB. And his, our friends looked at it, "Doctor, you got cheated, that's the money that the Japanese, the Chinese puppet government for the Japanese issues." My father was all upset about it. Well, shortly after that was December, the Japanese took over the city, all the other money was worthless, only CRB was, had any value. So, where he thought he was being cheated, he actually got ahead of the game. But that's all I can, I can't remember details about the lunch room as far as the food itself is concerned.

**Hochstadt:** And the cake business worked by orders, people would make a specific order and your mother would make the cake?

**Culman:** Yes. And then she had a sewing machine, a Singer sewing machine with the pedal, and made alterations for people. She also did knitting, like she would knit a sweater for Henry and I, and/or I, and as we outgrew it she would undo the sweater and redo it sleeveless, you know, and after two, after Henry outgrew it, then it became mine. And everything was used over and over again. Socks got darned when the holes came in there. Now if I would give socks to be darned to Anya, she'd throw them out the window.

**Anya Hoffman:** [laughs] That is not, it's not what I do.

**Culman:** That's right.

**Anya Hoffman:** Not in my job description. [laughs]

**Hochstadt:** Did your mother keep working in Hongkew also, was she able to keep cooking

and sewing?

**Culman:** Well, the cook-, I'm trying, she did the sewing in Hongkew, she did more the alterations and things like that. But the lunch room ended once we moved out of the French Concession. And actually in Hongkew is where things really got bad for us, you know, that's when Henry and I brought in the money that we had. And we applied for charity, they came in to inspect your place, to see if you have anything else to sell before they would give you charity. And I remember at the school after the bombardment, they would bring in these wagons with big kettles of stew, and we kids would use, to set up our, stand, instead of standing in line we put our pots down, I mean, this is my pot, this is where I stand and so on and so forth. When the wagon finally came in we went over there, got our little bit of stew. It was not too tasty, but it kept us going.

**Hochstadt:** You mentioned being in the Scouts. Did you know a Scout leader named Eric Bergtraun?

**Culman:** I don't know for sure. If I may show you a picture of one in that book, it might be him. He was my Scout leader at one point. The name rings a bell, but I wouldn't want to swear to it, because Heppner was a big Scouting enthusiast. This was my Scout leader.

**Hochstadt:** No, I don't think that's him.

**Culman:** So I do not remember his name. But initially I was in the Scouts before the war as a Cub Scout. There was some British Scouting and took part in some jamborees and [unclear] things like that. I also remember Adam Clayton Powell who, no, not Adam Clayton Powell, God, I get all confused now, erase that part, Baden Powell, the founder of the Scout movement died while I was in the Scout troops and we had a big memorial service for him. And during the war we didn't do much Scouting. Then towards the end of the war we formed a new Scout troop in Hongkew. We met at night and we didn't do it officially. When the war was over, we became official Scout troop again, went out to some camping sites and things like that. And that's when that picture that I just showed you was taken. I don't remember that particular name.

**Hochstadt:** I just met him at the last Rickshaw Reunion, and he had an album of, more than one album of pictures of Scouting. He must have taken twenty pictures at every Scout meeting. He had all these pictures, really wonderful.

**Culman:** I remember we went to Scout meetings at night, during, during the war still. There was a curfew, you had to be home by a certain time, and frequently we just did it by minutes, I mean, I was scared when you ran home, trying to be home before the curfew started.

**Anya Hoffman:** Do you have a Scout picture?



**Culman:** I don't know if I do or not, I'll have to look it up. My parents took a lot of pictures in Germany of us growing up, and then not in Shanghai, I don't know what happened to my father's camera, but other people took pictures and all those albums my brother has and one day I copied a bunch of them so I could give it to my children, and I have some, but I don't think there's any Scouting pictures in there now.

**Hochstadt:** You went to those two different schools. Could you say something in comparison of the two schools, in what ways they were different or . . . ?

**Culman:** The, for comparison I'll call one the Seward School and one the Kadoorie School. The Seward Road school was more rigid, very, very strictly British schooling. At the end of the year there were exams which came, the questions came in sealed envelopes from Cambridge, England. Not even the teachers knew what the questions were going to be. The exams were taken in this big auditorium and the chairs, you know, I would be sitting here, but the guy next to me on the right and left would be from a different class, so there was no chance of copying. And then the envelopes were opened on the day of the exam and handed out to the students.

In the Kadoorie School, things were more relaxed. Especially the last year that I was there, as kids had dropped out of school, this highest grade, whatever it was, we had twelve students in the class, six boys and six girls. And instead of a regular classroom we sat at a long table, like a long dining room table, the boys one side, the girls on the other, the teacher at the head. And a lot of kidding and playing around went on in there. With some of the teachers, with some you couldn't, Gassenheimer you couldn't get anything past him.

But we had one teacher who was teaching us Chinese, he was a Chinese, who again was obviously not a teacher, and the way he would teach it to us is we didn't have to write down in Chinese, and the exams consisted that he would say a sentence in Chinese and we had to write it down in English. There was always one person in the class who knew the answer and he would yell it out in German. [laughs] Of course all of us spoke perfect German, so we all had the same answers, and this one exam, we all got ninety. One person gave us a wrong answer. We also had a refugee teacher teaching us Japanese. And one day he decided that we don't have any cultural knowledge of Germany, German culture, and he decided to, instead of going into Japanese, to read us German poetry, Schiller and Goethe, and that was fascinating to me. First we learned English history, English literature, Shakespeare. We put on Shakespeare plays in school, or parts of it. "Midsummer Night's Dream," I got the part of Puck in "Midsummer Night's Dream." We had a lot of fun in school, under all those conditions. A lot of camaraderie, the teachers and students both.

I remember in summer of 1942, in 1942 I was Bar Mitzvahed, and everybody went to this Hebrew teacher to take their Bar Mitzvah lessons, and he was, he went into too much detail in all these things, so I talked to my teacher Gassenheimer whether he would give me my Bar Mitzvah lessons, and he said "Certainly." He had aspirations to become a rabbi anyhow. And he said "When is your birthday?" "It's in December." He said, "Oh, we have plenty of time." And then a few weeks later he comes up to me, "Ernie, I just looked it up, even though your birthday's in December, your Bar Mitzvah day is going to be November 14th, we

don't have that much time." So we took, I took Bar Mitzvah lessons from him in two months, I think, is all it took, just enough to get me by. We then had to go to the rabbi for like a little exam, whether I have learned everything, and even though Gassenheimer showed me how to lay the *tefillin*, somehow or other I didn't get it right, either he didn't show it to me right or I didn't do it right. The rabbi was a little upset about that. But I was Bar Mitzvahed, it was very, I told you already, it was very very interesting.

Didn't get many major gifts, the biggest gift was from the people who lived next door to us, they had a clothing store and he had asked my mother some weeks earlier to loan him one of my shirts, because he's going to have a shirt made for his son or whatever. She just pulled out a shirt, gave it to him. Well, they made a very nice shirt, custom made for me. The only trouble was, my mother, when she gave him a shirt, gave him one that I had already outgrown. The sleeves came up to here when I got it, he took it back and put an extra patch in there. And that was probably my biggest gift. I had coffee and cake and about a dozen or so people came over for that. But the Bar Mitzvah was nice, I remember that cantor singing to me. I don't remember a word the rabbi said, but I do remember the cantor singing. Go on, getting a little .

..

**Hochstadt:** Do you remember the name of the teacher of Japanese who taught you some, some of the German culture?

**Culman:** No, I don't.

**Hochstadt:** Or there was an-, then you were talking about another teacher, oh, the teacher who, the man who taught, typically taught the Bar Mitzvah lessons.

**Culman:** Wesel.

**Hochstadt:** Wesel, like the river or like the town?

**Culman:** Right. He was from Breslau, and, you know, my cousin, my mother was born in Breslau and her parents lived there and her sister and brother, and my cousin had taken classes from him in Breslau when he was still in Germany. I might have a picture of him someplace. I have, I have some things that I have upstairs that I can show you. But there was him, there was, Epstein was our music teacher, and when I got to the Kadoorie School, the kids all told me in music classes, singing classes it was called, they said, "Those of us who can't sing, he lets go outside and we can play soccer or anything." So I don't have a good voice to begin with, but when he tested me, I purposely sang bad, so out we went to play. Eventually some of the other teachers complained, we were making too much noise, so we had to stay in class. We didn't like that at all, so we collected, before the singing class we collected waste paper baskets from several classes and stuffed the piano with it. He comes in there, we're standing quietly in the back, those of us who can't sing, and he starts hitting the keys, nothing came out, he opens up the piano, realizes what went on, gets furious and kicks us all out of the room, which is exactly what we wanted. So discipline left a little bit to be desired with many of these

teachers. The ones that were strict was the principal, Mrs. Hartwich, who also taught French, Gassenheimer who wouldn't stand for any joking around unless he went along with it, which he often did. But he was a terrific, I mean, if I think about it, he taught geography, geometry, physics, chemistry, and made it so interesting. I remember in chemistry class, he told the anecdote when he went to school he and his buddies made a stink bomb, and how they made it and all that. It just kept the class interesting enough so nobody, he didn't have any discipline problems. The other, oh, Leo Meyer was the gym teacher and I met him in Philadelphia, he had his eightieth birthday there while we were there.

Then after the war was over, we formed a little club called the Tikvah Club and we met in school, that's where we had our club meetings. Many of the people from the Tikvah Club I met back in Philadelphia. That was really, became a fairly close knit group. One of them actually came and lived in Washington and I was friendly with him. He died about a year ago, Henry Comfit, you by chance . . . ?

**Hochstadt:** I've heard his name.

**Culman:** You did not interview him?

**Hochstadt:** No.

**Culman:** He was very much involved and kept in touch with many of the Shanghai people. He also went back to Shanghai and visited Kadoorie in Hong Kong and thanked him for all the Kadoorie family had done for the refugees. And Kadoorie himself just recently died.

I was amazed in Philadelphia how well some of the people that I went to school with or went, belonged to that club with did with their lives. Eli Wachs, who was a quick artist at school, he'd stand up there at the blackboard, one, two, three, he'd draw Mickey Mouse for you or something like that. He became a fashion designer. Hans Eberstark, who was in my class, who was a genius, he entertained himself by going to the library and learning the dictionary by heart. He ended up in Switzerland working for the United Nations as an interpreter, he spoke several languages. He also, this is all hearsay, I don't know these things for a fact, but he also helped write some of the constitutions for the newly formed republics in Africa. Blumenthal, of course, and others became lawyers and so, in other words, they had their full schooling once they came to the States.

**Hochstadt:** Were all of these people that you've just mentioned in the Tikvah Club?

**Culman:** No, Eberstark was not, Blumenthal was not, no, they were not. Henry Comfit was, and one was called Lako . . .

**Hochstadt:** I've talked to him.

**Culman:** To Lako?



**Hochstadt:** Yeah, Alfred Kohn.<sup>2</sup>

**Culman:** Alfred Kohn, everybody knew him only as Lako. And his brother, put it on hold a minute, let me check something.

END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE B

**Hochstadt:** It looks like the Tikvah Club is boys in a certain age.

**Culman:** Yes, late teens basically at that time.

**Hochstadt:** Was there some adult who helped you form the group or was this something that you guys did on your own?

**Culman:** We did it on our own. The school helped us and they let us have the room. We weren't supposed to have any alcohol in there, but what they didn't know didn't hurt us. We used to bring in vodka and Coke and mix it, put a big sign on the vodka bottle, "water," and, you know, we didn't get rowdy. They had some of these little theater shows going on in this school and they often came in to us to borrow a chair, this or that for their show, for that we were able to get in free to the little cabarets that they made up.

But I did want to tell you, still goes back to nursery school, the nursery school picture reminded me of that. It's like kindergarten here, only it was not part of the public school system, it was separate. School didn't start until you were six. So I got enrolled in this nursery school. The lady in charge was a Mrs. Schröder. My brother had been there before and she knew my family very well. And one day, on a weekend, I guess it was a weekend or one afternoon, the doorbell rang. I opened the door, there is Miss Schröder, not Mrs., Miss Schröder, in tears with a big bouquet of flowers in her arm, wants to talk to my mother. Well, what happened was that one of the kids' parents, also a doctor, objected to having a Jew in the kindergarten class with his boy, so she came over to tell us that I had to leave. That was my first touch of antisemitism, my first experience of antisemitism on a personal level. Then the following year when I got enrolled in the public school, my mother took me to school, of course, and go into the class and she sees that kid in the same class room as I. So she took, went back to the principal whom she also knew, I mean, the family, my father had lived there for thirty years, everybody knew us. Explained the situation and he put me into a parallel class, in a different class where this Mr. Thiel was my teacher. Yeah, this, that reminded me of

---

<sup>2</sup> See interview with Alfred Kohn, Kiamesha Lake, NY, April 13, 1997, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project.

my, basically my first experience on a personal level of antisemitism.

**Hochstadt:** Which year would that have been?

**Culman:** 1935, '35, maybe '36, because in 1936 I started school, and you start school in Germany, or at that time at least, at Easter, the school year began at Easter, so it was before that. You know, a little child, I didn't really know what was going on. But I always felt, was aware that I was different from everybody else. Military parades used to go down the street in front of our house, it's one of the main streets in a little town, and you know, kids love a parade. And I used to run out there with the other kids watching the parade go by. But I knew I'm not supposed to hold up my hand like the others did.

And when we went, we went on many trips. We were not too far from the Czech border and frequently went to Czechoslovakia for the weekend. One time going someplace, the car broke, the axle, whatever. Big bang, there was a big part of the car sitting in the back, otherwise it was raining and the car got stopped. Next thing we know there's a big military convoy coming up and the guy in charge comes over, "Can we help you?" Then the German *Wehrmacht* helped us move the car and get us to a train station and everything. At other times, we'd go through a little town with big signs, "This town is *judenfrei*." And sometimes when we saw a parade or something coming by, my father said, "Just hold your hand up to the ceiling, hold up the ceiling, like that, so they think that we are saluting," not to bother us.

19--, I think it was 1935 or maybe 1936, I don't remember the exact year, my father, parents wanted to go for a summer vacation to a resort along a lake, and we heard of a Jewish like a bed-and-breakfast I guess, and we wrote to them and got the reservation. My father asked can we swim in the lake, because so many places had signs, "no Jews allowed." "Oh sure, it's no problem here." This was not too far from Berlin. So we went up there and sure enough all around the lake, "no Jews permitted". We said to the landlord, "What goes on, you told us we could." "Nobody pays any attention to that, just go ahead." So we went swimming, next thing we know there's a guy with a big German shepherd dog yelling at us, we don't come out at once he's going to chase the dog in after us. So we came out, my parents were very annoyed at the person that was running the inn, and then we left, went to another place, also a Jewish resort, but they had their own lake, and spent the rest of the vacation there. Things started bad in 1935 after the Nuremberg laws came into effect. All right, you have more questions?

**Hochstadt:** No, I don't have more questions. No, I have one more question, and I'm especially interested in this, I realize, because of my grandfather being a doctor. You said your father went to medical meetings. What was that?

**Culman:** They had like a doctor's association.

**Anya Hoffman:** Like the MAA, the AMA?

**Culman:** Ja, it was just a local thing. It's basically just for the guys to get together.



**Hochstadt:** Do you know what they did there, what they talked about?

**Culman:** No, I have no idea. All I know, he went to the medical meetings. And gave him a way to get away from the family for a while and be with other people of his own. Doctors had it very tough in Shanghai in the Jewish community. Number one you had the free clinics, number two, there were more doctors per capita than average, so that each guy was cheaper than the next. One guy would charge three dollars for a visit, then the next guy would charge a dollar for a visit, and somebody charged as little as fifty cents for a visit, and you know, it doesn't, didn't make any sense. My father couldn't make a living and was, as I mentioned earlier, deeply depressed. Especially, I mean, in that period where we were living on Kinear Road so far away from everybody else. But even later on, my memory of my father in Shanghai is seeing him seated in a chair, mouth half open, most of the day. So terribly depressed that he could not support his family. And his dream had been to send my brother and I to the finest colleges in Germany. All his dreams just collapsed one right after the other, and he couldn't cope with it. Other people were able to cope with it, but he couldn't or he didn't, I don't know.

And then he died so soon after we came to the United States. He had a goiter which developed when he was still a young man, and he said, "I could have had it operated on," but he knew of somebody, this is during WWI, he knew of somebody who had a goiter operation and became a vegetable, and he felt it was just a beauty spot, so he had that goiter. In some of the pictures I think you could see the very thick neck. But what happened was the goiter was not only external, it was also internal and it put a tremendous pressure on his heart. He had had a heart attack in Germany. He was visiting patients and, at that time doctors still made house calls, and I often accompanied him, sometimes by car, sometimes by bike. I had just learned how to ride a bike and we were going someplace, I was riding in front of him. All of a sudden I'm talking, I don't get any answer. I look around and I see him off the bike, standing there panting. He said he's not feeling well. A friend of ours that lived not far away, we went there, then we got a cab to go home. He had had a very severe heart attack, he was sick for a long time. But recovered, this was in 1938, I think. And then in Shanghai he had another small heart attack, it wasn't as severe.

When we came to the United States and he was working at the hospital, some of the doctor friends that he had met here suggested he have it operated on, now with modern medicine, and get rid of that goiter. It puts too much pressure on your heart. But they also were concerned about his heart, whether it could withstand an operation. So the idea was that he would go into Johns Hopkins Hospital for a week or two, you know, good bed rest, and they would check and make sure that his heart is in good shape, and then operate. And we went to visit him one Sunday and while we were there the doctor comes in, your heart seems to be fine, we've scheduled the operation for tomorrow. Next thing I remember is that he said he had to go to the bathroom, and it took him a long time and all of a sudden we hear the loudspeakers, you know, "Dr. So-and-so, Dr. So-and-so, Dr. So-and-so." And my mother says, "Something happened to your father." And sure enough, he had had another heart attack. They wheeled him back in a wheelchair into the room, kicked us out of the room, and he died right there. What caused that final heart attack is anybody's guess. The fear of the operation



finally came to him, one thought. But he was only sixty-four years old. And to me completely unexpected. After that all the responsibility fell on my brother and I. My mother just demanded that we take care of her.

But prior to that, prior to him getting into the hospital, he was in that sanatorium, he started to learn more and more English, he read English books. Now granted, he didn't think in English, basically translated everything from one to the other, you know. I remember the two of us reading the trilogy about Lincoln, and he was very interested in it, we talked a bit about that. And he even considered taking some of these exams to be a full fledged doctor again. He was, you know, there were a lot of colored doctors up there also, and some of the English words he knew from reading them, but he didn't have the proper pronunciation in his mind. So this one doctor talked to him about something to be cleaned up with Lysol, so he didn't know what the man was talking about. Lysol, what is Lysol? Finally he wrote it down, "Oh, you mean "*Lysol*," you know, that's the way he read it, with the German, and that's the way he remembered it.

I have some pictures in here actually of him at the hospital, and a lot of little children were in there and they loved him. The little kids just loved him. Even in Germany, thirty years in the same place, he assisted people in their birth and they grew up, they continued to go to him and, you know in Germany you have the *Du* and *Sie*, he used to say, "Well, when you graduate high school, I'll start saying *Sie* to you, after high school." Well, "When you get married I start saying *Sie* to you." He never did, and then helped them with the birth of their children. One time we got a letter to Shanghai from Germany, "Doctor, you might be gone but not forgotten. The other day I was walking behind two people who were talking about somebody having gotten ill and one said to the other, 'Well, if Dr. Culman were still in town, he would have come over even in the middle of the night.'" It's one of the things, I remember that he got called out frequently in the middle of the night. Very dedicated to his profession and just couldn't handle it once everything fell apart. I guess that's about it, huh?

**Hochstadt:** I think so. Thanks very much.

**Culman:** You're quite welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW



Ernest Culman (formerly Ernst Culmann) was born in Liegnitz on 2 December 1929. His father, a doctor, was arrested on *Kristallnacht*. Culman, his brother Hans, and their parents sailed on a Dutch ship to Shanghai in June 1939. His father had difficulty establishing himself as a doctor, so his family and some friends started a luncheon business. Later his mother baked cakes and took in sewing. Culman attended the Shanghai Jewish School, then after 1942 the Kadoorie School. He made his Bar Mitzvah in Shanghai. The Culman family lived in the SACRA building, which was bombed by the Americans on 17 July 1945, but none of them were hurt.

After the war, Culman apprenticed in camera repair. The family left Shanghai in January 1947 for San Francisco, and settled in Baltimore. Culman continued in camera repair, was drafted during the Korean War, and later became a manager with Industrial Photo and Pen Camera. He and his wife Anya Hoffman live near Washington, D.C.

This transcript is part of the Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, an effort to collect and transcribe interviews with Jews who lived in Shanghai, directed by Steve Hochstadt at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. It was prepared with support from Bates College, the Littauer Fund, and the Memorial Fund for Jewish Culture.