

10-17-1999

Langer, Robert oral history interview

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ROBERT LANGER

PHILADELPHIA

OCTOBER 17, 1999

Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt

**Transcription: Nicci Leamon
Steve Hochstadt**

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Steve Hochstadt: Tell me, tell me the story the way you'd like it to be told, so the things that you think are missing from other things that you've read, that would be great for you to fill in. I'd love to hear about "Arsenic and Old Lace". I'd appreciate it if you'd start with your family in Europe ...

Robert Langer: Okay.

Hochstadt: ... and I'm very interested in those details of daily life, so as much detail as you can give me, that's what I'd like.

Langer: Well, my parents, I was born in Vienna. My father was born in Lvov, Lemberg, and then eventually he grew up in Czernowitz before he came to Vienna. And I don't know whether he, I think he met my mother in Vienna, came there maybe in the early '20s, after World War I, and they were married in '25. My father was a waiter and, which in some way, I think, helped him to decide very early that we were going to leave Vienna, right after the *Anschluss*. The reason is, he didn't have a lot of money. He was always, he was a wonderful provider, you know, waiters make good money, but he didn't have any wealth, etcetera, so he had nothing to keep him. And I think part of the problem, as I'm sure you're aware of, that a lot of the Jews, particularly in Germany, had difficulty making the decision because they had to leave behind their businesses, etcetera, which he didn't have.

So we left in, I think he decided almost shortly right after the *Anschluss*, which was in May, in March of 1938, to leave, and initially I'm not quite sure why it didn't work. We were really going to go through Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The story I heard is we couldn't get the transit visa through Poland, so that was discarded, and he then finally decided to look for transportation by sea. And I recall vividly, I think I recall vividly, that he would get up every morning at six o'clock and go to the offices of the Lloyd Triestino Steamship Line trying to buy transportation, passage. And he came home one day all excited, that he was able to book us on a ship called the "Conte Biancamano", which was leaving Genoa in late January. And I remember exactly the day that we left Vienna, because the day after my tenth birthday, I was born on January 22nd, we left on the 23rd, the reason I will always know exactly the date we left.

Hochstadt: What year were you born?

Langer: I was born in '29, I was born on January 22nd, '29, and we left on January 23rd, 1939, and we went from there, went to Genoa, where we stayed for a few days. We got there a few days early, why I don't know, which was a problem, of course, because, as you know, you couldn't take more than ten *Deutsche Mark* with you, so there were three of us, we had thirty. And regardless of how well you planned to be sure that you at least bought things, etcetera, when we left the day I think my father had something like two hundred *Mark* left, and he had it on him and it was, and when we were on the train [unclear], he was smart enough to decide not, it isn't a good idea to put it in your pocket, etcetera, to cheat. Not that he was that ethical, but if they caught him, it ain't worth it. So he said, well, the heck, let's go and have a great meal. So we ate in the diner, the dining car, which was a thrill. I remember exactly what I ate, *Reisfleisch*, and I was not a good traveler. As soon as we got back to the compartment, [laughs] I threw it all up. And then the conductor came over and kind of whispered to my father, he says, "Any money you want to take across?" So he still had some, but I think he would have preferred to have given him the money that expensive luncheon cost. Because when we lived those four days in Genoa, I remember I think, we had to scrounge really. I know the one thing that my father had every morning was a cup of espresso and I thought that was, in my memories, it

looked like whipped cream, coffee and whipped cream. And then we traveled. Enough about Vienna?

Hochstadt: No, I'm going to have to ask more questions, can I ask some questions?

Langer: Okay, go ahead, interrupt, sure, I'm sorry.

Hochstadt: No, no, no, don't be sorry, and I try not to interrupt, because I like the stories as they come. But I wanted to ask you first about the conductor, the conductor was willing?

Langer: He, my father was, wanted to ask him whether he would take it, but he thought that's too dangerous. Again, the money was going to be useful, but being arrested and kept in Vienna wasn't worth it. So I think the conductor just came over and he realized that we were kind of leaving, departing, and he just, that's, I do remember him, that he asked my father.

Hochstadt: Was this an Austrian?

Langer: Yes, an Aus-, yeah, it was an Austrian train we took from Vienna to Genoa. And it was really a short, it was not a very long trip, I think we left in the morning and we must have been in, in Genoa by late afternoon, as I remember. I don't think it was an overnight. No, hold it, it was an overnight one, because I do remember we stopped in Milan, and I do remember also, I might imagine it, that there was an, we may have changed trains and there was about an hour or so, and I remember getting out of the station with my parents and we saw the, what was it in Milan, the famous plaza, etcetera. So it must have been an over-, it may have been an overnight trip.

Hochstadt: So your father did give the conductor some money?

Langer: Oh, he gave him, he gave it to him and, with no assurance, but he got it back as soon we got across the border. And that was enough to help us buy some food and I presume even pay for the hotel that we spent the two or three nights.

Hochstadt: So now I'd like to ask you about preparations for the departure. Things like packing and deciding what to pack and what to bring and selling things.

Langer: That I don't remember, about what to pack. Keep in mind I was ten. I don't remember what to pack, but we had these, you know, we had those steamship, what do you call them?

Hochstadt: Trunks?

Langer: Trunks, you know, the huge things made of wood or, that you opened up and we took it to, it went all the way to Shanghai. And I think it was, my parents still had it when we left Shanghai ten years later. I think they had personal belongings, they were able to take things, they weren't allowed to take money, they were able to take things that you might consider valuables, like silver, you know, dishes, etcetera, clothing.

I know what paid for the trip, that I do know, the sale of our furniture in our apartment. That was money that was

used to buy the steamship passenger line, you know, the tickets. And I think first clothing, etcetera, so it was that kind of thing.

How they, well, I guess you decide what you can pack and put in there, you take with you. Keep in mind, we didn't have paintings, etcetera, none of that.

Hochstadt: Was there any official, was there any official checking of your parents' trunks, do you remember?

Langer: I don't, I don't remember. I presume, no, the trunk obviously was in the trunk compartment, not in the, what was with us in the compartment where we were traveling was most probably a briefcase, etcetera, and that's where most probably my father, if he had that money, would have wanted to hide it, would have been in there or in his shoes, etcetera. But I never thought much of, I know, as I said, I do know, remember about sale of the furniture, which was done quite some months before we left, because we had to, we had, were kicked out of our apartment by a young Nazi couple. There's a story behind that, if you're interested.

Hochstadt: Yes.

Langer: When I came, I didn't go back to Vienna until 1980. People went back early, but I didn't. My parents did, they were there earlier than I. And while I was in Vienna, don't forget I was ten, so I have a fairly good memory of where we lived and the whole area, neighborhood. I went past the building where I grew up and, in fact it was, Betty was with me and my cousin Mary, who lives in Vienna, who, they went back, and I said, "Well, let me out of the car. I'd like to just walk around and be by myself." And I did, and walked into the building, came back, I saw the staircase, remembered, walked up to the apartment, where I lived on the first floor. Number was 12A, because the Viennese are very superstitious, you couldn't call it thirteen. And I rang the doorbell and, rang a couple of times, and finally a woman answered. And I explained to her, my German is terrible, by the way, non-existent. And it miraculously came back at that moment and I explained to her that I grew up in this apartment as a small child and would she mind if I came in for maybe five minutes, I'd just like to see it, where I spent the first ten years of my life. And she was rather gruff and said, "I'm an old woman. The only reason I answered the doorbell is because I expected my doctor to come," etcetera. So I felt very guilty and I explained to her again why I'm here, politely, at which point she said, "I know you, I remember you."

Cut a long story short, she was the widow of that young couple that took over the apartment from us in 1938 just before, in fact we left the apartment before the, somewhere in late '38, and then lived for the last month or so with relatives in their apartment. And she finally said, "Well, how long are you going to be here?" And I said, "Well, I'll be here another couple of days." She says, "Well, call me, my name is in the phone book." So I called her the day we left and she says, "When do you want to come?" And I said, "Well, it's one o'clock now, how about three?" "She says, "Fine."

And I got there by three o'clock and as I was walking up that staircase, I noticed a young couple was walking up the same time. It turned out to be either her son and daughter-in-law or daughter and son-in-law, whom she, I think, called for protection. What I discovered afterwards, I mean there's a, I can drag this out, is she was afraid that I was going to claim the apartment. And I, a) I had no interest in doing it, I was visiting there. Secondly, I didn't know that I had any right to that apartment. We didn't own it as far as I was concerned, we were renting it. Well, somebody's told me since then, in Europe, you know, once you rent something you have life-long right of possession, and that's what scared her. And it seems that my parents came back to Vienna shortly after the war and also paid a visit, and they didn't meet her, but she was told that the Langers

are back. So for all these years she must have lived in fear of being evicted from the apartment. So that's the story about the apartment.

And then, as I said, [unclear] my father, as I said, was a waiter, I saw him, you know, waiters work evenings, so the only time I saw my father was on his day off, which was either Monday or Tuesday, when we went to visit his mother who was in an old age home, and on the way home bought some chocolate cakes for dinner. Those are the memories. And going to school, of course.

Hochstadt: Was there anything that happened to your family in connection with *Kristallnacht*?

Langer: Yes, not, well, yes, not to either my father or my mother or myself, but I have two uncles, three uncles, all of them single. Two of them were arrested and sent to Dachau. Fortunately, as, and I keep referring it to the period when the concentration camps were still the country clubs, quote, unquote, that as soon as they had evidence of leaving Vienna, had booked transportation to leave Austria, they were discharged. And both my uncles came to Shanghai. My third uncle had another kind of a crazy experience. Two of them, by the way, are no longer alive. One of the three, the one I was, one of them who was in Dachau lives now in San Diego and is going to be ninety-eight, and I talk to him very frequently. He's had a few strokes and somehow I'm able to communicate with him better than his daughter or anybody, because I know about his background, so I can refresh his memory more easily than others. The other one went illegally across the border from Austria, and I have sometimes trouble visualizing it just looking at the map. He wound up in Belgium in, what's the capital?

Hochstadt: Brussels?

Langer: Brussels, yeah, and was living there illegally, until the grapevine got around that they were going to round up those illegally living there, and return him, turn him over to the Germans. So you know what he did? And this is the unbelievable part. He illegally went back across the border to Austria. Smart, because once he was back, he was able then to legally again leave. If he had been arrested, you don't know, he could have wound up in the concentration camp. And then he went to Shanghai too, fortunately. But I've always, that story about illegally crossing the border back into Austria, where you want to get out of. So that's a part of, I think, of everyday life.

I think the life of, mine was I went to school, I'm an only child, and shortly before we left, after the *Anschluss*, we were all put into a Jewish school. Not into a Jewish school, a school that had only Jewish children, it was not a Jewish school, rather than the school that we had, I had attended. And I was in fourth grade by then. And I still have a document when I was applying for my Austrian restitution, that I'm sure your father got, too, to prove that I was there or had left. And my only evidence that I had left, that I was leaving Austria for Shanghai was a certificate, a school certificate, and it says at that one point on the bottom of it, leaving to transfer to Shanghai. [laughs] [unclear] he's transferring to another school, it happens to be in a, a few dist-, a few miles away. But I still have that one, fortunately I found that among my belongings, either my parents' belongings or etcetera that, by the way, there's more coffee there.

Hochstadt: This was fine, thank you.

Langer: So, you want to talk again about early experiences of Vienna. Across the street, we lived on Lichtensteinstraße,

which is in the 9th District at the corner of the, where the border between the 9th District and the 19th District. Across the street, we had a balcony, and people living on the other side of the street, it was a, not a very wide, but it was a wide street, was a young lady, young lady, it was a girl, young girl, who was a budding film actress, whose name was Traudi Stark. And my memories, and I think that's correct, she was in many ways the Shirley Temple of Austria. And there was one movie I know she made, I'm not sure I ever saw it, called "*Peter im Schnee*", "Peter in the Snow", and so I always consider that my first love affair. We had an affair across, balcony to balcony. [laughs] And I read years later after the war in the, you're familiar with the paper called the *Aufbau*?

Hochstadt: Hm-hmm.

Langer: Okay, I saw there that she had married an American G.I. after the war and immigrated into the United States, and for some reason, I don't know why, I never contacted her. I'm sure by this time she was married, she wouldn't have, her husband wouldn't have been too upset. So, this was in the late '40s, early '50s, and it was shortly after the war. So I've always claimed my first, my first great affair was with a young film actress. So that's, I've been back to Vienna a couple of times, not too often, but a few times, and visited there, walking around.

Hochstadt: So, Robert, could you talk about the trip?

Langer: Yes. Well, the trip was about four weeks. My first memory, a memory, we went to see the ship, not the day we left, but the day before, and it was already in the harbor. And you'd take the elevator down and you emerge from the elevator right next to the ship. In other words, almost the distance would be from where the bookcase is over there and the ship is here. Imagine a ten-year-old. I'd never seen a ship before in my life. I saw them there, and as I come out there and look up this, this was an ocean liner, you know, thirty-eight, forty thousand ton, it was a, and I always remember the awe that I was, particularly if you see, stand right next to it. If you were there, maybe a few miles, from here to there, it doesn't look that imposing, but if you see it.

And we left. I mentioned to you that I was not a very good traveler, so I think my first few experiences, first few days on ship were, consisted of being slightly sick. But as you sat up on the deck in the cool weather, and. We got on the ship, and I told you my father had been very proud that he was able to secure passage. What he thought he had secured was a stateroom. We traveled second class, he thought he had secured a stateroom for three people, my mother, he and I. What he didn't realize is that he had secured three berths. My mother was in with a group of women, my father was in with a group of men, these were four-passenger cabins. I mean, nothing, nothing terrible, but they were, they were second class, they were fairly nice. And I, what I can't understand is, I mean, I understand that they couldn't put my father and my mother in the same one, you know, but why they didn't put me in with my father, I don't understand.

I was in another cabin with some other men, and the memory I have that one of the men in the cabin I was traveling was a businessman, who was, by the way, they weren't all refugees who were on these boats. I mean, there were people, this was '39 still, people were still traveling on business to Manila, etcetera. He was traveling on business, he was an experienced traveler, and he ordered for himself every night a sandwich and a glass of whiskey, and he taught me how to travel. He ordered milk and cookies. He did not try [laughs] to destroy my, but he, I remember that I learned. Then he left the boat in, I think in Manila, he got off in Manila. But that's one of my early memories.

And we had a fairly, fairly uneventful trip. We stopped at various places like, oh, I do remember going through the

Suez Canal. And I have a memory, which I know is incorrect, because we're going through, I think some people pointed out that if you look out you can see Palestine. Well, you can't look across the Sinai Desert that far, but it, we were traveling, as we were traveling through from Naples [unclear] the next stop was Port Said. So vaguely I always say to people I was able to see what was then called Palestine. But I saw most probably the Sinai Desert. What's the width of the desert from the canal to ..

Hochstadt: I can't say, hundreds, hundreds . . .

Langer: But I don't think it's, there's no, there is no possibility. So that is, that is a faulty, but it's a good story. And then I think we stopped in places like Ceylon and Bombay, and when we arrived in, and we got, were able to get off at most of the places so, I don't have too many memories of what I saw exactly. Except when we got off at Singapore, I remember, we, they'd take us over from the boat on a tender to the wharf. I remember, that I remember quite clearly, saying to my mother, "Why are these people wearing pajamas?" First time in my life I had seen Chinese wearing, you know, the Chinese clothing.

So that, and then we arrived in, we arrived in Shanghai. One of my favorite stories, that, it may be apocryphal, but it's a good story, and I'm sure in some ways it may have happened. As I said, there were four classes, first, second, third and steerage or etcetera, and we traveled second class, which was very comfortable. We ate well. And when we were met at the wharf in Shanghai, and if you've seen the movie they were showing? You saw that they were met, people were met by trucks, really open trucks, these army trucks, etcetera, and we, you know, put our luggage on there. And somehow, I don't know whether I really heard it or whether somebody told me about it, but it makes a great story. This woman, who had traveled first class, said rather loudly when she saw this, "Where is the transportation for first-class passengers?" As I said, it may be apocryphal, but I think, I'm sure it happened in some form or another.

And then we were taken to camp, to one of the refugee camps and spent the first night, first, you know, few nights we were living in there, in a camp. And I got sick, you know, as ten year olds have a habit of doing. I caught a cold and was taken to a hospital. When I got through a few days later, nothing very serious, my father had gotten a job by then. See, that's the advantage of being, having a trade, and that had an impact on him and me for a long time. But he was able to, I think it was maybe less than a week that he was there, he had found a job as a waiter. And there were already, this was the community we moved into, there were already restaurants there and they were hiring people, and developed an economy, and so I never went back, and as a result having a job, he was able to rent, not an apartment, a room, where we lived for many years.

And, of course, the fascinating thing is once the segregated areas for stateless refugees [unclear] was created, we lived on the wrong side of the street. And I mean truly on the wrong side. We had to move out of there, because the dividing line was in the middle of that, which was Wayside Road, so that's. Oh, and I forgot the other part of the trip that is interesting, really, I think had a greater importance for my parents most probably than for me. Is, everything was prepaid, then we'd buy, it was like going on a cruise, your meals, etcetera, and a certain amount they deposited in what they called the bursar's account, so my father was able to have his glassful of schnapps, etcetera, and buy a bottle of wine to have at dinner. So they lived, they were four, in a way I think it was the last vacation they had for God knows how long. We ate well, etcetera, and then suddenly when we got to Shanghai, again as I said, I'm not one who concentrates on the negative, but there was this sudden transition from having the three very excellently prepared meals at a table with white table cloth, you suddenly were in a refugee camp, where the food was, it was food, but it wasn't particularly good. I don't know whether it was as bad as everybody remembers, but it was probably, I didn't like it, until we were able to move into this room and we were able to kind of prepare meals there. So

that was in February of '39. And my father worked there until the rest of his family came, maybe half a year later, and the three of them opened up a restaurant.

Hochstadt: Do you remember the name of the restaurant he worked for?

Langer: The one that he worked at, you mean the, yes, it was Klinger, K-L-I-N-G-E-R. And of course I remember the name of the restaurant that they opened, that they, that my father then and his, the other two members of the family owned, which was called Delikat. Which is, by the way, you can see it for a split second in that, in one of the shots of, the one that was just, you know, Joan Grossman did.¹

Hochstadt: Well, I've heard reference to Delikat before, yes.

Langer: Have you? Yeah, well it wasn't, I know, I like to think it was the best restaurant. I think it was an excellent one, but it was very, it was very well known, it was very well known and people came there, and in fact it became quite well known even after the war, when the G.I.s came to, came to Shang-, you know, after the war, and became very popular. [unclear] my father, none of them were good business people, they didn't sell liquor. And I've learned since then, and he should have known, you don't make money on selling food, [laughs] you sell money on selling liquor, that's where the profit is. No, it was a very well known . . .

Hochstadt: What street was it on?

Langer: On Chusan Road, 23 Chusan Road. And on one side was the Barcelona, which was another restaurant, it was a restaurant and a nightclub more, and the Barcelona was owned by people who had one in the French Concession. And when the segregated area came into existence, they had to close theirs over there and reopen, and they may, I'm sure they lost money on that. But at least ours was always there, except for a short time, they were thinking of op-, of moving into the French Concession, because that was a more opulent, affluent area and was probably, you made more money. Thank God, they never did. So we were fortunate in that respect, that we, that the place of business was always in the ghetto, if I can use the word ghetto area, it's easier than the segregated area for stateless refugees. And in fact, when we had to move from this room, quote apartment, we didn't find a place to live very soon for about, I think three or four weeks, we slept in the restaurant. Every night after the place closed up, we pulled out some mattresses, pulled tables together, and slept overnight there, got up rather early. Fortunately, I think there wasn't a very good health department. I think they might have looked askance at people sleeping in a restaurant.

So that was kind of, again, these are memories that are, and those are not, those are memories that I haven't been, we didn't have a bathroom in the place where we finally found to sleep. We had a place where you can wash up. But there was a bathroom in the restaurant. The restaurant was in an old building of the pre-'37 era that had not been destroyed. Kind of a Russian and, it was apparently in the building where people lived, had apartments, and on the ground floor, where the restaurant

¹ Langer refers to the film "The Port of Last Resort" (1999) by Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman.

was, there was a bathroom with a tub, etcetera. So the, once or a couple of times during the week, we went from the apartment, room, where we lived to the bathroom and I took a tub bath and cleaned up. So that, in many ways that was my first experience with a bathtub. We didn't have a bathtub in Vienna. Remember, that was a nice comfortable three-room apartment, but there weren't any bathtubs. Bathtubs were considered a sign of affluence. You know, we had a place with a toilet and a sink, etcetera, but I think, I never thought of it that way, that my first experience with a bathtub was in Shanghai. [laughs] So maybe that's why I always have fond memories of Shanghai. [laughs]

Hochstadt: I don't want to interrupt your lighting your pipe.

Langer: No, no, come on.

Hochstadt: Can you, can you say more about Delikat, about the kinds of customers, about working, maybe you did a little work in it as a kid?

Langer: No, I didn't. Well, kind of customers, they were most-, originally they were mostly, well, I would say primarily at the beginning, they were people who lived in Hongkou who had enough, however, who had money to eat in a restaurant. See, people lived in the camp and there were, as you by now I'm sure are aware of, there were a number of the *Heime*, Ward Road *Heim*, Wayside *Heim*, Seward Road, etcetera, there were a number of them. I mean, those people didn't have money to go to a restaurant. But there were people who were employed, and many were employed outside of the, don't forget, when my parents opened that restaurant, there were no, you could leave the area and they had jobs in the International Settlement or in the French Concession, so people did have money. Not, some of them did very well at that time, so those are the people that came to the restaurant.

I tell you one of the customers who came there is a great historical figure, about whom I have a copy of his biography written by Bernard Wasserstein, wasn't it, at Brandeis, Trebitsch Lincoln.² I remember Trebitsch Lincoln very well. You know who Trebitsch Lincoln is, I remember him very well. He used to come to the ghetto and saw him in his Buddhist outfit, and he used to eat in my father's restaurant. What we didn't realize, and I only learned that from reading Wasserstein's biography of him, he was up to his old tricks. He was again, I think, an agent for the Germans trying to pick up if there was any information to be picked up by, nobody, see, they saw him as this kindly old gentleman. I remember that, I remember him vividly.

The other person who came to eat in my father's restaurant, and let me be sure I know the facts, as I recall the facts. There, I think this was in the pre-World War, was before the era, before Pearl Harbor, it must have been before Pearl Harbor. There was a guy by the name of O'Reilly, Joe O'Reilly, who was the slot machine king in the Shanghai area. And there was a famous nightclub in Shanghai called Farrens, F-A-R-R-E-N-S, owned by a Viennese, whose name was Joe Pollack, and who had gone there early in the '30s, he was the black sheep in the family and they're going to kick him out there, and he opened this famous nightclub. And he and O'Reilly, O'Reilly said, "You know, I want to put my machines in your nightclub," and he says "No." And they couldn't agree maybe on, he didn't object to the machines, but they couldn't agree. So the story went that O'Reilly said, "You won't?" He bought up the property around the nightclub and people couldn't cross. [laughs] So that

² Bernard Wasserstein, *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

finally resolved the issue. At the same time, O'Reilly was an Irish American, etcetera, who had escaped from, I think, from Sing-Sing, it was some, the judge advocate of the American embassy, no, it wouldn't be the embassy, it would be the Consul, the Consulate in Shanghai, was a guy I think by the name of Teitelbaum. I'm not sure of his name, but it was a nice Jewish name, Teitelbaum. And one day, he got a notice or instruction to the, they heard about O'Reilly, to arrest O'Reilly, because he was in the, he was still wanted. And he faced the problem, the problem he faced, if he carried out the instructions of his government, O'Reilly would spill the beans that they had known each other as prisoners.

Hochstadt: He and the judge?

Langer: No, no, he, well, he was not the judge, he was in whatever the legal department of a consulate is called. That he too had been a former prisoner, who apparently escaped and somehow was able to hide his, at least that's the story. So he was a, he finally did what he was supposed to do, served his government, and the guy spilled the beans and he was arrested and he was staying at that famous jail in Hongkou, which you may have, called the Ward Road Jail. But, again, this is Shanghai, he had money, and I don't know whether he did it every day, but frequently he would kind of bribe the guard and they would drive him over to my father's restaurant. The guards would stay outside, and the restaurant was [unclear], they had to drive him, but it was only a half a block really from, and the guard would stay outside and he would come in and have a good dinner, and then go back to jail.

Hochstadt: This is O'Reilly, or this is . . . ?

Langer: No, Teitelbaum . . .

Hochstadt: Teitelbaum.

Langer: I think his name was Teitelbaum. I can't swear on that one. O'Reilly, I'm quite certain, but I think it was Teitelbaum. This tells you something about the culture of this colonial, in a way money, money talked, money talked. So I can remember him coming there, and I even may have talked to him once or twice, thrilled at this little boy meeting such a famous crook. Now, but mostly I think, don't misunderstand, I'm not, these are the most exciting people that I knew who came.

They were mostly, they were refugees who lived in Hongkou and who had the money to come there. The restaurant was open seven days a week, three meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner. So you worked your, my parents worked there, fortunately there were three families running it, so some people were able to get up, come in late one morning and stay until it's closing, and the others came in early and left early. Early was ten o'clock at night. And that's, and that's a problem that I had as a child, that my friends, very close friends, thought I was rich, because, you know, my father had a restaurant. So once in a while, you know, when I, I was able to invite them over, my parents invited them over for dinner, I was a, but I was considered a rich kid, and that created problems, of course. Any more about the, does that tell you something about . . . ?

Hochstadt: Oh, yes, certainly.

Langer: The people who worked there, by the way, were refugees. Of course, you know, down the street, when we are

speaking again of people who became famous, half way down the street on Chusan Road, I think the number was 57 or something, there was a young man who eventually became Secretary of the Treasury, Mike Blumenthal, lived down the street.³ I did not know him. He was a loner. Many people, I had friends who knew him well, but he was a loner. I didn't meet him until he, until he was running UNISYS in Bluebell, and he spoke one day at the World Affairs Council, and I walked up to him and I says, looked at him during the cocktail lounge, I says, "You and I were neighbors at one point." He looked at me, he says, who is this kook, and he says, "Where?" And I said, "On Chusan Road." Oh. [laughs] And it's interesting, you know what his first remark was? "Oh, those terrible days." His memory of Shanghai. And I don't think he suffered a great deal, I mean, because he did rather well when he came here and went to Princeton and got his doctorate, and became a good politician. Because I remember, as I said, that's the first time I ever met him, and in his opening remarks, usual kind of thing, you know, "I'm so glad to be here today," and then he went on, and to s- . . .

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B

Hochstadt: So now you've gotten to Shanghai, and you've gotten established, and you've talked about the restaurant. Maybe you can talk about your own school life and social life and those kinds of things that you said you thought were missing from a lot of accounts.

Langer: Well, I think what is, well, I got there and we were among the early group, early '39. There were some who came in '38, etcetera, but we were still among the, not with the first. But, so we were enrolled in what was known as the Shanghai Jewish School on Seymour Road, and I spent my first semester, I got there in February, so I was there, I think I was there for February until the end of the school year, which would have been May or June. I didn't speak English very well, hardly at all. I shouldn't say very well, I spoke hardly English at all. I was ten years old, so I was put into first grade, you know, six-year-olds. I don't have to tell you how embarrassing it is for a ten-year-old. And I think the incentive to learn English, to get back to kids my age, worked miracles. One of the reasons I sometimes have questions about bilingual education in our country, and I believe in cultural heritage, etcetera, is I think, I wonder what, if it hadn't been for that incentive, whether I would have learned the language as fast as I did. By the end of the semester, I spoke well enough so that I could be promoted to fourth gr-, well, they had forms, you know, lower and whatever the form would have been for ten-year-olds. So I was there for, I think, I'm not positive, but I think my first, the first, whatever the end of the semester would have been. And then I think from there, as this was this large increase of refugees, they opened up a school in Hongkou on Kinchow Road, so we started, I think, the next semester, and I started going to school there. And we, well it was, we made friends, of course, and started getting an education.

³ See interview with Michael Blumenthal, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Berlin, February 3, 1995.

We, if you, from previous exposure speaking to people, they were using this concept of the British system of having a club after school, the, so you went to school in the morning and then you belonged to clubs, where you learned, you know, engaged in a variety of personal interests, etcetera. The story that I heard on one of the tapes that I've been [unclear] or write about is, this was the school that Horace Kadoorie was, helped to support, is that he was going to educate these young Europeans, these heathens, [laughs] to become well educated young men and women. That's where the club came in. And ...

Hochstadt: I've never heard it described ...

Langer: I don't mean the ...

Hochstadt: No, no, no, but ...

Langer: I don't mean he, I mean, by what heathen, I ...

Hochstadt: ... no, I understand that, but I've never heard the club aspect described as part of a, of the British system, or I've never realized that that was also a take over. So you think that that was ...?

Langer: It may have been, I may be wrong. I don't know where they got, but it was a club, you belonged ...

Hochstadt: And you think that that was part of this takeover, because there were certainly many other elements of the British school system there.

Langer: Yeah, first of all they were called forms, not ...

Hochstadt: So you think the clubs, the post-, after school clubs were also part of this British educational system?

Langer: Yes, I think we did, you know, learned, exposed to music, and I have a hunch there were even kitchens there for, for the girls to learn. I'm not positive of it, but that's the part I'm somewhat vague about. But the club I'm clear, I mean, that was something, that was fun. And there were, there was a, I'm still talking about that first period when it was on Kinchow Road, there was a soccer field there, where, and athletic meets, and there were tennis courts. While I was never much of a tennis player, and I was too small anyway, but I remember serving as a ball boy, picking up the ball for the older boys who played tennis. And, I mean, it's interesting. I don't know, maybe that part about the club isn't being British, but the club was a reality.

Hochstadt: It makes sense.

Langer: Yeah. And then of course, when we moved into the new school, the one that had that U-shaped one, the club was a very important part. We did, this was our life. Even after I dropped, I dropped out of school when I was thirteen, even after that, you know, when you came home at the end of the day from your job, that's where you went. You spend your time there, and there was a beautiful auditorium there and you, that's where we had our performance, that's where we had our performances of "Arsenic and Old Lace". Of course, that was after the war already. But still, it was, it continued. Our social life centered

around the school building, but not only the educational part, but the social part. They had dances at night, and when we were in the new building on, what was the name of it, I can't remember the name of the street, whatever it is, they had a coffee, a kind of a coffee shop, where you could buy Coke and, etcetera. Except the guy who had the concession, if you knew him well enough and if you knew how to pronounce Coke properly, what you got was a Coke and rum. [laughs] And we started running charge accounts with the guy, and I think we learned afterwards that that was not such a hot idea, because I don't think he kept very accurate accounts as far as, he kept it very accurate for himself. I think we paid for more than we consumed. But the idea was if you, you had to pronounce Coke in a certain way and what you got was, and we had quite a few Coke and rums there. I remember getting terribly drunk there one night.

Hochstadt: Is this after the war now, when you're a little older?

Langer: This was after, this is when I was old enough to earn money, this was after the war. But, my God, was I. Talking about, you know, there was this gal, I think, who was out to get made, and she said, "Let's go and have a Coke." So we had one, and we had two, I think by the time I would have been, she was ready to, I was sufficiently drunk, all I did is went outside and I stretched out on the lawn. [laughs] I woke up at three o'clock in the morning and finally managed to get a, well, by that time we had pedicabs already, you know, they changed, and I went home and my father saw me and he was ready to throw me out, this drunken son of his. [laughs] But in a way the school became a, the central part of our life. Now, I don't know to what extent that was true for those who continued to attend Shanghai Jewish School, whether they had a similar, of course, it may not have been, because they did not live as close to the school. We were all within easy walking distance. You know, the whole ghetto area was not very large, so maybe from where I lived to there may have been a fifteen-minute walk or so, whereas the kids who attended Shanghai Jewish School came from all over the International Settlement and the French Concession, and that may have been sometimes, I don't know, maybe their parents even drove them to work, to school, I mean. So that was . . .

Hochstadt: Do you remember the Demans as being part of this club?

Langer: You know it's interesting, when I was looking at the pictures against the wall, you know the, Charles Klotzer is a good friend of mine, we've known each other from Shanghai still, but we have remained good friends in this country, because I lived in St. Louis, so I'm familiar with his St. Louis Journalism Review, and in fact he brought and gave me a few copies of the Review that I used to subscribe to and I kind of stopped doing it.⁴ He, from, what was I about to say?

Hochstadt: About the Demans.

Langer: Oh yeah, one of the three blown-up pictures he had there, one was the Tikvah Group, which was my group, in fact I was its first president, and we have one picture when we, it was shortly after the group was founded. This is post World War II, it was up with a number of the, well, the director of JDC who came to Shanghai, Charles Jordan, who became a very dear friend of

⁴ See interview with Charles Klotzer, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Chicago, September 4, 1993.

mine and who was murdered . . .

Hochstadt: He's in that picture, isn't he?

Langer: He's in that picture, yeah. There are, if you take that one picture, I have a copy but, oh, he left it, he left those pictures for you, did he?

Hochstadt: No, he left me the newspapers, but he took the pictures.

Langer: Oh, he didn't take the, oh, I knew he was looking and I said you were coming here, in case he didn't see . . .

Hochstadt: Yeah, he gave me the newspaper . . .

Langer: Oh, he gave you the, oh, not those three?

Hochstadt: No, he kept the pictures.

Langer: Okay, well I have, I don't know where to find them but I have, there were two adults in that, in one, that was taken in Shanghai. One of them was Lucy Hartwich, who was the principal of the school, and the other one was Charles Jordan, who was the JDC director. And they were, we called them our counselors, or, and then there were two other adults who had an impact on this group, they helped us form it, in fact, prior to the two of them. One was the U.S. Army Chaplain in Shanghai, Alvin Fine, who I understand somebody told me just died quite recently. He, he was a Reform rabbi, Union Hebrew College, and a graduate of Union Hebrew College in Cincinnati, and then he was their director of placement, when he came back to the United States. And sometimes directors of placement do kind of know which placement to assign to themselves. He became senior rabbi, Temple Emmanuel in San Francisco, which was the Reform congregation in San Francisco, and he lived, until he retired in, I understand he died, he must, well, couldn't have been too old, because I think he was, probably wasn't any older than maybe ten, fifteen years than we were. He was a major in the U.S. Army. And the other one was the USO representative, by the name of Harry Herbert, was known to everybody as Capt. Herbert. You know, USO people were given military rank, in case they were taken prisoners of war, they had the protection of being an officer. So those were the four individuals who had a deal of influence on that particular club.

Hochstadt: I've heard about three of them . . .

Langer: Who?

Hochstadt: . . . but I haven't heard about Herbert very much.

Langer: Well, I tell you, if you wanted to know more about him, he, when he was working for the National Jewish Welfare Board, and there would be a history at JWB about him. In this case, he was a football player, he was a real, you know, he died very early in, I remember, I remember, we, remember, met with him when we all came to the United States and he lived in New

York. And I have a hunch he must have died in, I went to his, to a memorial service for him, he must have died, let me see, I was in New York the second time in my life, went to school there and then came back years later, from '74 until '81, and I wonder whether he died during, yes, he died during that period, so he must have died closer to '74, '75. And I've got pictures of a lot of people. But he was very influential, particularly because of his athletic, he was the only real he-man among that group.

Hochstadt: Could you just . . . ?

Langer: Al Fine, Al Fine was a, you know, a very charismatic rabbi. He could, had all the, some of the good qualities of rabbis and some of the phony ones. I remember when we, the first time we got together, he introduced us to, our club, Tikvah, was supposed to be really an affiliate of AZA, you familiar?⁵ Okay. And he took us out to the Shanghai Jewish School to introduce us to the members of the AZA chapter that they had, they were all Russians, etcetera. They of course ignored us, we were second-class citizens. But I remember we went out there in his jeep, and we were driving out, and when he started talking, he says, "As I was driving out here, I would begin to think, what am I going to say?" Anytime anybody does this to me, I know it's phony. [laughs] They're well prepared. No, he was a handsome guy, and as I said, an excellent speaker. You asked, you . . . ?

Hochstadt: Just to say more about the Tikvah Club and organizing it and being its leader.

Langer: It's a good club. Well, we met I think for the first time, the idea of organizing the club was at a building called the Embankment Building, I think, that Harry Herbert, etcetera, got, you know, was able to, and I don't know, the idea was, you know, why don't you guys, you know, do something useful, you know? This was after the war already, just, I mean, there are other things to do besides chasing girls, which all of us thought was more important than anything you could think of. And he says, "Why don't you form a club?" So everybody says, rah-rah-rah. And for some reason, you know, form a club, we have a club now. We've got to have officers. So they decided to elect officers and why the heck I got elected the first president, I'll never know, but maybe I was the least threatening or they remembered my name better. So I became its first president and I still have a plaque that they gave me when I left Shanghai, as a farewell gift. And we met and we organized cultural events, and one of them was that we organized a concert, and we had the concert at the Shanghai Jewish School, interestingly enough. Or was it, I think so. And part of this community, they were not all, the members of the club were all boys. We said, while we appreciated the other sex, but I think they had their proper place. And we had club meetings, and we'd take minutes and decide what to do, and we became very, very close friends. Many of, in that group still stay in touch with each other. Some have died. I mean, don't forget the time has, and some went on to do some, you know, become fairly successful in their fields. Ilie is one of them, who retired just a couple of years ago . . .

Hochstadt: Could you just say the names of some of the important people in the club?

⁵ AZA stands for Aleph Zadik Aleph, an international organization for Jewish youth.

Langer: Well, there was Ilie Wacs, Ilie became a very successful and well known designer, had a, his name became fairly well known, if you look at Vogue, etcetera, and he closed his business about a year or so ago, he finally decided he had it. Walter Saphir is a, became a pediatrician, and Walter lives in the San Francisco area. He lives, interestingly enough, while he's still practicing medicine as, you know, he's doing it because, however he lives in a retirement community. He said, "You know, it's a nice place, they take care of my things." But he keeps a *pied-a-terre* in San Francisco. It's not quite of the kind of person you think of in a retirement community. Another one was Walter Eichwald, who died. Walter worked, eventually worked for NASA, and I am told, I did not see it, but one of the early NASA shots showed him in the control room. And I'm sure that there must be tapes of, audio, you know, radio tapes available of that. Then there were a couple of them here, Alfred Kohn, he was known as Lako, Lako became a very successful amateur fighter who, in fact I remember seeing him, I think he got to the semi-finals of the light heavy division of the Golden Gloves in the '40s, late '40s.⁶ Let me see, one of them, I'm not sure he was a member of the club or not, it was a guy by the name of Tommy Levinson, who became city manager in Kansas City. Tell you who knows more about him almost, about his career afterwards, is, oh, what are these two guys with the Shanghai Experience, Council of . . . ?

Hochstadt: Hirsch.

⁶ Alfred Kohn won the New York Golden Gloves Championship at 175 pounds in 1948. See interview with him, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Kiamesha Lake, NY, April 13, 1997. Kohn is featured in Exodus to Shanghai by Steve Hochstadt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Langer: Yeah, one of the Hirsches, who is a city, who is by the way a physical planner, that's the reason he knows him.⁷ I don't know whether Tommy is still, I remember meeting Tommy when I lived in Missouri, I lived in St. Louis for many years. Then, well, I mentioned Saphir, who also was an excellent pianist. Let me see, who, who, I mean, most of them did rather well. I mean, some didn't, I became a social worker and had a half way decent career as a community planner and fund raiser. One of the other people, he was older and I think he belonged to the club or not, but I'm not sure, his name was Bernard Goldschmidt. Bernie studied, was a violinist. He graduated from, not Julliard, not the Curtis Institute, but in Philadelphia. And the reason he couldn't get into Julliard, into Curtis, he was too old. Curtis has a cut-off, I think if you're over twenty-five or so they don't take, they don't, you can't be too young, but you can't be too old. But he left and then went into the U.S. Air Force and played in their symphony. Not the Air Force band, the Air Force symphony. And then eventually joined Cleveland Orchestra and became its principal second violinist until he died, he died a few years ago. So he had a interesting, fairly successful career. Richard Weiss, that's somebody we all lost track of. Richard graduated, Alvin Fine had an impact on students, on the group, in many ways. One of them, he was a graduate of Reed College in Oregon, so he said, "Gee, this is a school you guys ought to go to." So a bunch of them went to, at least two that I know, went to Reed College. Richard was one of them, and the other one, his name was then Alfred Büchler, B-Ü-C-H-L-E-R, who eventually became Al Buckley, when he changed it. But he then transferred from, when he graduated he went to the University of Colorado in Boulder, and I think got his Ph.D. there, and then went, started teaching, and I think he taught at Harvard. He was brilliant, he was a brilliant guy, and I've lost, we've lost contact with him. Again, he was the kind of a guy, he was a nerd, every description of Al was that he was a nerd, but a fun guy. When we had our first reunion of this Tikvah group in St. Louis in 1949, I think, I have pictures of that, everybody had a ball and he was playing the piano. [laughs]

Hochstadt: Did you all know each other well before the group was formed? Were you a group of friends before?

Langer: That's a good question. My hunch is we must have, otherwise why would we all have suddenly, you know, I think we must have known each other, because we attended the same school. There was an age difference, you know, a gap of about maybe twenty, two or three years. I guess I was among the younger ones, and some of us were ten when we got to Shanghai, others were twelve or thirteen, so you had that kind of. But I think we met through school, and became, it's a good question, I hadn't thought about how well we, we knew each other obviously. I mean, how the heck do the same people, they don't suddenly show up in one place and say, "Let's form a club." Even though that was already, by that time we were, you know, late teenagers.

Hochstadt: So one of the things you did was put on "Arsenic and Old Lace"?

Langer: One of the things, well, "Arsenic and Old Lace" we put on not only as a club, but I think, oh, and what happened after the war, we were already a club called Tikvah, but then they formed a Jewish Community Center at the school there. And so there are other people who didn't belong to the club, there were girls, you know, became part of the Jewish Community Center,

⁷ See interview with Ralph Hirsch, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Shanghai, April 22, 1994. Hirsch is also featured in [Exodus to Shanghai](#) by Steve Hochstadt.

and in typical American fashion, the Jewish Community Center had to have a youth council. You know, every good American organization has to have a governing board. And so they elected, people ran on platforms, etcetera, and some were appointed by constituent groups, and Tikvah was one of them and I was their representative.

Hochstadt: So this is then like a higher level . . . ?

Langer: Yeah, yeah, this was a club, yeah, Tikvah was a club, I don't know, about thirty, maybe there were thirty or forty boys. But the Shanghai Jewish Community Center became a community center as you find in any, whether it's a Jewish community, etcetera, and they put on, we put on, we had, I remember we had a memorial of the Warsaw ghetto and we used a script that we got from NBC, written by Morton Wishengrad, if that name rings a bell.

Hochstadt: No.

Langer: Morton Wishengrad was a script writer who did, and it was called "The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto", and some of the material that was sent over from the States for us to have access to were, there was this script, and we put that one on. And we put on "Arsenic and Old Lace".

Hochstadt: Betty, should we interrupt, do you want to . . . ?

Betty Langer: No, I'm just wondering how you were, boys were doing.

Hochstadt: Oh, we're doing wonderfully.

Langer: We . . .

Hochstadt: Did you act in "Arsenic" . . . ?

Langer: Yes, I did, I think I, one of the things I just found, I played two minor parts in it. I played the dir-, have you seen "Arsenic and Old Lace"? I played the director . . .

Hochstadt: I've seen the movie, I guess, I don't think I've seen the play.

Langer: Oh yeah, well, yeah, I think all we had seen was the movie, so we were imitating, a very dear friend of mine who died, Werner Rosenberg, he played the Peter Lorre part and was wonderful. I had, my part was as the director of the insane asylum, who comes at the end to pick up the two old ladies, the Brewster sisters, and I think I played, oh, I know, I played I think in the first act another minor part of one of the old men who comes to their house and is poisoned. So I guess I was poisoned in the first act, and played the director of the insane asylum in the third act. [laughs]

And then, as I said, we had a memorial service for the battle of the Warsaw Ghetto, and we had lecture series at the club, and, at the Community Center, and one of our speakers was Claire Chennault, and I introduced him, I, it was my privilege to

introduce him and it was one of the, one of my many *faux pas* in my life. I remember saying, as I introduced him, I said, you know, "How privileged I am to," you know, "to introduce the Chief of the Flying Tigers," and I said, "Just a few weeks ago I saw the movie 'God is My Copilot,'" which was about the Flying Tigers, and I think Raymond Massey played Claire Chennault, and I said, "I never thought I'd meet the General in person." And when he gets up, he says, "God, what a horrible movie that was, what a phony Hollywood production." [laughs] And I still have a picture of, that his press photographer took, of me meeting him before I had my introduction. So these are the kind of things. We had New Year's Eve big parties . . .

Hochstadt: I've seen some costume parties.

Langer: Yes, yes, there are pictures of that and I think I have some of, there was a costume . . .

Hochstadt: And the Zuntersteins were in some of those costumes.⁸

Langer: Yes, yeah, Fred was a member of the group, Fred.

Hochstadt: Of Tikvah?

Langer: Yeah, he's part of that one picture, Fred was in it and. And they spread, some went to Australia, most came to the United States, and some went to Israel, and a few went back to Europe. You know, among, you're saying among what they accomplished, Lako's younger brother, I don't whether you . . .

Hochstadt: I've interviewed . . .

Langer: Have you met Ingolf?

Hochstadt: No, but I've interviewed Alfred, so he's told me about his brother.

Langer: Yeah, well, Ingolf, Ingolf got a degree in engineering at City College, and one of his first jobs after he was, he worked on the project that built the second level of George Washington Bridge. There was only one and they built, I don't know whether it was the upper level or the, whichever was the newer level. So people became all fairly, fairly active.

Hochstadt: You said . . .

Langer: Not too many became Secretary of the Treasury.

⁸ See interview with Alfred and Eva Zunterstein, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Salzburg, May 28, 1995.

Hochstadt: Yes.

Langer: No, no.

Hochstadt: You said that Tikvah was one of these constituent clubs for the Jewish Community Center?

Langer: Yeah, yeah.

Hochstadt: What are the other constituents?

Langer: If my memory is correct, the Scouts and etcetera, but mostly we were the first, we, and I'm putting it in a way that is really, we were a bunch of elitists, which was not always appreciated. And I think as we look back upon it, we realize, some of us realize we acted like a bunch of bastards, as elitists do usually. But the Shanghai Jewish Community Center had, elected its youth council by, some represented the clubs and some were just elected at large, that's my memory of that.

Hochstadt: Now, I want . . .

Langer: Charles may have some memories of that.

Hochstadt: I interviewed Gerald Bigus.

Langer: That name doesn't . . .

Hochstadt: And he told me about contests, like trivia, like quiz shows.

Langer: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, I'm sorry, you mention, I forgot about that, yes.

Hochstadt: What were those like? He just described it a little bit, but I'd really like to know more about those.

Langer: Well, it was like, it was, it was like the famous "Twenty Questions" program in this country, you know, they read about it. There was a great emphasis on intellectual capacity, etcetera, so they had these contests and you, there was a panel selected and they were asked, you know, questions. Like, it was very much like "Twenty Questions".

Hochstadt: So your, the Shanghai Jewish Community Center had a group and then you competed against . . . ?

Langer: No, no, no, this was, no that was . . .

Hochstadt: This was internal?

Langer: Yeah, that was internal, I don't think it was a group against, it was internal. There may have been a group from that

constituency, another, but they were all members of the, and there was the emphasis on the, how can you, how much brighter can you be than the next guy. There was this, although there was also, there were two things, one was intellectual, the other one was athletic. Well, that was true in Shanghai, I mean in among the group all together, there were soccer teams and they were clubs, they were clubs, they had different names. And I'm talking now not among young people, among the adults. One of them was called the *Alten Herren*, the Old Men, they were all maybe in, they were in their early thirties or so, and they had championships, seasons. And then of course there was the overall athletic group called the Jewish Recreation Center, JRC, Jewish . . .

Hochstadt: JRC.

Langer: JRC, Jewish Recreation, I'm not sure what the C was, was it club, yeah, I think so.

Hochstadt: I don't remember, but I've seen JRC.

Langer: Yeah, and they put, they played in the Shanghai city-wide league and did very well, I mean, they were contenders at times for the city championship. And the other, they competed really against, like the Chinese teams and one of the teams was PTH, these were all alumnus of the Public Thomas and Hanbury School, and SFX, St. Frances Xavier's, and LEAP [unclear] there was a Portugese team, and there was an Italian team.

Hochstadt: Which people were for you young fellows, say, were the, I don't know, the stars or someone that you would look up to?

Langer: The athletes.

Hochstadt: People like Lako?

Langer: Yes.

Hochstadt: And who, what other names are there that were people who were kind of, who stood out from the crowd?

Langer: Well, there were the athletes, those who were great soccer players. Ping pong was a very important sport, so people who were very active in, they had ping pong leagues, etcetera, so the emphasis was on that. The others, there were a few, there was one religious leader who stood out, and I remember him vividly. A young, very young, dynamic, and I'm talking about the war years still, whose name was Rabbi Teichner, and he appear-, he is in Hep-, I think he may be in Heppner's book or one of them.⁹ He was a dynamic young, died in Shanghai of typhoid or cholera, etcetera. But I think athletes, as in any young group.

⁹ Ernest G. Heppner, Shanghai Refuge: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

Hochstadt: So who were the, what were some . . . ?

Langer: Well, Al was one of them, Kurt Wolf who was a bo-, were boxers. What's his name who was at the [unclear] , I always think of him, his name of being Schlochauer, but his name is Shelton, Norman Shelton. I have trouble always remembering his Amer-, his Anglicized name. There were also a group, and we haven't talked about that, a group of musicians. There were two competing light opera companies. They did things like, mostly European things, like "*Fledermaus*" and "*The Merry Widow*" and "*Count of Luxembourg*" and that kind of Lehár, Lehár or Kálmán stuff, you know, that kind of jazz. Some, I think some people looked up to them.

One of them, I can't think of his name, really very successful, wonderful young voice, and years later I was in Chicago at a conference and walked into a bar and, to buy a pack of cigarettes really, because I thought they were cheaper there than, I couldn't find a drug store, and I said, gee, this guy looks familiar, he was playing the piano, and I asked the guy at the bar, "Now who is he?" He says, "I don't know, he just started playing here the other day." So I sat down at the bar and ordered a drink, waited for him to finish his set, and he came over. It turned out to be the most expensive pack of cigarettes I ever bought in my life, because we sat until God knows how early in the morning drinking and I was picking up the tab. And he had a, Kratoschinsky, Heinz Kratoschinsky, I remember his name was, and he did well, but he sang and played the piano. Well, there's a guy in, doesn't come to these things any more, he did some damage to his arm. In fact I talked to his sister just before I left, Henry Satler, and he played the violin, and as I said, Saphir played the piano, and they put on concerts.

And in fact I think at, towards the end, we once had a performance that we put on at one of the theaters in Shanghai. You may have heard about those movie theaters? This one was the one on Wayside Road, I can't remember the name, and we put on a concert. I am not talented, so my job was either to be the manager or I was all right at announcing since I could talk, and so I did the announcing. But we got the, you know, doing quite a. Once we did it after the war at the foreign YMCA, and I was announcing the acts as they were coming in. We didn't have any, you couldn't come from behind the stage, the dressing room was there, so I would get up and then I'd see them come down and, didn't have a script or anything, all I was supposed to say, "The next act is so and so." But I was up there and nobody showed up, you know, the door didn't open. So I was totally unprepared except that I had heard a joke the other day, which was slightly off color, and I, the first thing came to my mind, about these two mothers who are talking to each other. They said, "Gee, you know about my son, a terrible thing happened to him the other day. His right leg got run over by a jeep. You know, he was working in the, for the American, and you should see him, it's swollen like this," I still remember. And the other mother says, "You should see what happened to my daughter. She was run over by a G.I. and you should see her swell." [laughs] There was deathly silence, it went over like a lead balloon. [laughs] Taught me, you have to have timing, which you ought to know who your audience is. There were two sisters, nuns sitting in the front row and they did not appreciate that kind of humor. So from then on, I think, I was being more careful. But these are the kind of things we did. And this one, this one was really closer, because it was, that performance was in the, done in the International Settlement, so those things we did after the war. One of the girls who had a beautiful voice, her name was Rosita Zysman, Z-Y-S-M-A-N. Her brother, and I can't think of his —, last name is Zysman, became a major, I don't know whether he was an assistant dean or something, at Jewish Theological Seminary. But that was back in the '70s, so I, again, I don't, some people I haven't been in touch, and I haven't heard her name, was an assistant chancellor or something.¹⁰

¹⁰ David H. Zysman served as Vice President for Development at Yeshiva University.

Hochstadt: So tell me about, well, tell me about leaving, leaving Shanghai, thinking about leaving, trying to get out, making preparations for leaving.

Langer: Well, okay. Most people, you know, they were beginning to think about leaving. Families left, major emphasis, get to the United States. Australia was the second choice, and gradually I think starting, starting about maybe '46, '47 or so, it, the community began to diminish and people were waiting for their quotas to come up, and they started to come up more readily.

I left as a student, I got a student visa to the United States, and then went to school here and etcetera, because my parents' quota had not come up. So my parents went back to Europe. That was the end. Of course there was the question of what was happening to Shanghai in terms of the possibility of the Communist takeover. I don't think it was as much of a fear that people had as is now portrayed, it was more really the Nationalists who were trying to scare the hell out of everybody, you know, if the Communists take over, terrible things are going to happen. I don't think the Communists gave a damn, [unclear] so unhappy. So my parents went back to Europe, and then people then gradually began to move away and the community closed down. I think it's a, it seems to me a good word to describe it. Shops began to close up, because people left, and the community collapsed. It didn't collapse, it closed down.

Hochstadt: What school did you come to?

Langer: Well, when I got to New York, since I didn't have a high school degree, since I dropped out at thirteen, I went to a place called, on Broadway and 80th Street, called the Robert Louis Stevenson School, which was a private school. Kind of a prep, I call it a prep school, but that has hoity toity connotation. What it was, it was a school that attracted World War II veterans who, in order to take advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights, had to get a high school degree or pass the New York State Regents . . .

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

Langer: Where were we?

Hochstadt: You had moved to Michigan and met Betty.

Langer: Oh yes, that's right, I moved, I left the Army in '56, got a job as the assistant director of the, of Pontiac Area United Fund and moved to Pontiac. And you know what happens, and I'm sure it happens in any career or profession. I had been from, I mean, I had gone to school in New York, but then I moved to Michigan, and you begin to form your acquaintances, you make your contacts in a certain part of the country. So for the next twenty years we lived in the Midwest. All my promotions came, I went from Pontiac, we met there, I met her through a girlfriend of hers, who was a member of the board of the agency I

worked for. So she, I was kidding, I said, you know, I wanted to break up her marriage and she wanted to get me off her back, she said, "I know this nice Jewish doctor. Why don't you call her?" [laughs] And we have remained good friends over the years.

And so we were in Pontiac from, I got there '56, until '60, when I was offered, I was offered, I was looking around for, the problem in my field of United Way community planning is you're dealing with small staffs, so promotions are not available. You have to move to a larger community or to another community. So I was, I got a job in Battle Creek, Michigan, which was not any larger, but it was, seemed like a promotion. And we lived there from '60 to '65, and they're very happy years.

Small communities have something to offer. You know everybody, you are involved, and we still have friends there that we have some contact with and live there. That's when I made an attempt to fulfill one of my ambitions, but it didn't last, I never went through with it, and it was to go into politics. It was in '64, and I could have done it then maybe, there was the Johnson landslide or the Goldwater debacle, depending what you call it, and I tried to run for the state legislature in Michigan. I always remember, I was quite active in the community and had made some good contacts, and I went to the publisher of the paper, who became a very good friend of mine, who respected me, and I said "Bob," he just died quite recently, I said, "Bob, I'm thinking of running, would you support me?" And he says, "No. I see no reason for," this is a Republican paper, "for me not to support the incumbent Republican for reelection." So, and I, I was enough, I was mature enough to accept that answer [unclear] surprise. Then as I walked out of his office, he looked at me and he says, "Bob, I hope you run and I hope you win."

But there, a [unclear] he respected me, I think he would have, thought I might do a good job as a state legislator, but it's a Republican paper.

So we left there and I was offered a job and I moved to St. Louis where we stayed for, let me see, we lived there from '65 to '74. Again, it was an interesting period where among the people I got to know rather well was Tom Eagleton, when he had his, when he almost ran for Vice President. And it was, again, it was, I got involved in a good number of things, rather successfully some of it.

And then I was offered a job in New York as the associate director of a large national organization called the National Social Welfare Center, and we moved to New York, but didn't live in New York, we lived in White Plains. And Betty always complained that we went, she went, she had to move whenever, it always interrupted her career. She got her, she's a graduate of Ann Arbor, got a medical degree in Ann Arbor, and, but did the residency in psychiatry in St. Louis, so, and then we lived in New York until about '81, then came here. And, again, because I was offered something. And then I retired about seven, eight years ago. I have been involved as a volunteer doing pro bono, only lawyers can use it, it's doing things, but you don't get paid for it. And I think in that respect I am an exception to my friends. Most of them have lived in the same community, we were talking about that today. They came to New York and they stayed in New York, or they came to San Francisco. Now some of them have moved to Florida now, but I think they basically settled in one community. But because of the kind of work I was doing, I moved around and I went where the opportunities were. It was fun, it had disadvantages, you know, you set your, it becomes more difficult to make friends and establish roots as you get older, you know. I presume in education it's, there's a similarity.

Hochstadt: Yeah, there are many people . . .

Langer: I mean, you're not going to be in Lewiston for the rest of your life. Or you may.

Hochstadt: I don't know, it's a question mark. Now one question that occurs to me, it occurred to me a while ago, when you said you dropped out of school at thirteen. It doesn't fit entirely with, certainly with your career afterwards, so maybe you could say something about what that was, why you did that, what you were thinking.

Langer: I don't know whether it's as accurate as I recall it. As I said, my father had a restaurant, so while we were not, we were among the more well-to-do, but not the, so my income would not have been important. Many dropped out of school, and I was not the only one, because they had to go and help support their families, thirteen, fourteen, and so. I didn't. But you want to be a sissy? You know, your good friends are out doing adult work, and you're going to go to school? So I convinced my father that he should let me drop out of school. But he says, "You got to do something, you're not going to sit on your fat ass." Not his words, but basically that's what he meant.

The first thing I did is I took a course, secretarial course, and that's where, you mentioned Deman, he ran a secretarial school. That's when, I think he was teaching at one point at, he was the principal at the Kinchow Road School, and I'm not sure of that. Charles was saying, because there's one picture we saw and he was in it, and, but then he ran that secretarial school, which was a money-, I mean that was a commercial institution. So I took a course in secretarial business, writing shorthand, bookkeeping, all at the age of thirteen, and I graduated, quote, unquote. Except that nobody thought of who is going to hire a thirteen-year-old male secretary? Nobody gave any thought to that. I mean, why the heck did they even, so I tried and then [unclear]. So then I, and I tried a few other things. I, ORT had a agricultural program in Shanghai in horticulture, etcetera, landscaping, it was really landscaping, so I tried that, except I'm color blind and I had some problems with picking the right flowers. So the instructor suggested one day when I came in with all the wrong flowers, he says, "Maybe Bob, there's something else you ought to be doing," so I dropped out of that. Then I had a, then I got a job learning to be a weaver, the old fashioned loom system, and whenever I made a mistake, this Chinese foreman kind of whipped me across the back, and I decided this was not for my mother's young son, so I quit that. And then my father got me an apprenticeship as a goldsmith, and some of the people I worked, adults that I worked with, were here at the, at the reunion. I finished that, I finished a three-year apprenticeship and then continued to work as a journeyman, you know, it's the old guild system, for another year.

But, and I think this is where the fact that I have a brain and I can be fairly honest with myself, I realized that if I had to do this for the rest of my life, I wouldn't do very well, I'd starve. And I got involved in Tikvah, and the owner of the jewelry store, of the, the goldsmith, said to me, he says, "Bob, you're never going to be a good goldsmith, but I think you'd be a very good Tikvah organizer," you know, that was his. So I got to, actually one, people, Charles Jordan, who was very active, kind of offered me a job as a clerk in the Far Eastern office of JDC, known as the Joint among, and I worked there for maybe a year or so, and then I think fairly well, and he says, "Bob, you have the capacity to be a good social worker." And he helped me, he helped to pay for my coming to the United States as a student, and from then on, that's where my career. So in a way I think you're right, I mean, I think I dropped out, because I didn't want to be different than all my friends, who all had, you know, who were learning trades. Ingolf, for instance, learned a trade in Shanghai, but then when he came to the United States, he, he went to City College and I went to Brooklyn, and he became an engineer and I became a social worker. When we were, we were both at the Robert Louis Stevenson School, and he won an award in the social sciences and I won an award in mathematics, and we always kidded about the fact [laughs] [unclear]. There's a guy to whom I owe a great deal of gratitude, who is on the mailing list of the Shanghai group, who was my, who's older, his name was Otto Schnepf. You've heard of him?

Hochstadt: I interviewed him.¹¹

Langer: Did you? Otto has, I owe him a great deal. I have to write to him sometime. When I decided to come to the United States to go to this prep school, I already knew I was coming, I suddenly realized, you know, I was, I had heard what I had to do was take courses there and pass exams. I didn't know a damn thing about algebra and geometry, they hadn't gotten to that yet when, so Otto coached me. He tutored me and I think if it hadn't been for Otto, I might have never been able to pass any of the New York State whatchamacallums.

Hochstadt: Regents exams.

Langer: Regents exams, and they were tough, they were tough. And I really owe that to Otto. And for some reason I've never, I've seen his name. What I didn't know about Otto is that his, I didn't, I thought of him as somebody who was in, you know, mathematics, etcetera. He went into the Foreign Service, I mean, he's political.

Hochstadt: Well, he's, he became a chemist.

Langer: See, I didn't, well that fits, that fits.

Hochstadt: Became a chemist, was, when I interviewed him, he was chair of the Chemistry Department at the University of Southern California, but he also was connected with . . .

Langer: He had gone back to China at some . . .

Hochstadt: . . . with the government, with our government's efforts to open relationships with China.

Langer: I see.

Hochstadt: So, not through the Foreign, not in the Foreign Service, but connected with the diplomatic initiative there. And now he's retired from chemistry and he, he may be retired from this now, but he began a kind of a Far Eastern institute at USC.

Langer: Okay, that, I think I saw that. I have his E-mail address, because one of the things that Walter Silverstein does, you know, he keeps that E-mail list.

Hochstadt: What a nice man Otto Schnepf is. We had a wonderful interview.

¹¹ See interview with Otto Schnepf, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Los Angeles, June 7, 1990. Otto Schnepf is featured in [Exodus to Shanghai](#).

Langer: Did he? I have to, I have to either write to him or send a lengthy E-mail. You see, I meant to do it, until I completely lost touch, and then when that E-mail list came up, I saw his name on there. And somewhere I saw a story about, he had gotten some kind of a, that he, that he cre-, Otto must be, he's not much older, Otto must be in his late seventies, middle seventies, late seventies.

Hochstadt: Probably, I can't estimate.

Langer: I'm going to be 71, and Otto was older, but not that much older. He had already, he had taught at St. John's University, if I'm not mistaken, in Shanghai.

Hochstadt: I've interviewed a hundred people.

Langer: You have?

Hochstadt: The only one who's ever met or talked about my family is Otto, because he dated or wanted to date my aunt, who was a little bit younger, or actually probably about your age, and so he visited my grandparents' house in this . . .

Langer: Your aunt.

Hochstadt: My aunt, yeah.

Langer: Her name?

Hochstadt: Mia, Mia Hochstädt. So he's the only one who really, because she was a student at St. John's.

Langer: Okay, all right, then, all right, yeah.

Hochstadt: And that's how he met her. But he's the only one who actually met any members of my family, that I've met, who have met members of my family in Shanghai. But it was a very nice, he's a very nice man.

Langer: Yeah, he's, I have some very fond and respectful memories of him, because I remember we used to meet when he was tutoring me at the foreign YMCA, usually in the late afternoon, he had the time and I was, my, I was working there for JDC and we weren't that far, it was maybe five, ten minutes to the YMCA. And we met there, [unclear] had a cup of coffee and he was drilling me in algebra problems. Came in very handy. I always wondered what would have happened if I didn't have that background, but it, in, I guess I would eventually picked it up, but it might have taken me longer. I started there in the summer, came to New York in July.

Hochstadt: What year was that?

Langer: '48. And was admitted to Brooklyn and started Brooklyn in January of '49, and graduated . . .

Hochstadt: How did you know to go to New York, how did you know to go to that school, in fact?

Langer: Well, I'll tell you, well, Charlie Jordan was of some help. He had a very good friend, who was the treasurer of the New School, famous New School, and he wrote to him, his name is Joe Hosiosky. Joe just died, his wife is still alive and she's a practicing dentist in New York, in fact she was the dean or the assistant dean of the school of dentistry at Columbia. And so he wrote to him and says, "I have this guy, you know, bright kid, you know, et cetera, who is coming to the United States and he needs to, he needs to learn something before," so he's the one who suggested Robert Louis, otherwise he suggested Robert Louis Stevenson School, and I lived on Broadway.

Hochstadt: So when you came to the United States you were going to that school, you knew you were going to that school.

Langer: Oh yes, I was, I needed, I needed an acceptance for something, otherwise I couldn't have gotten a student visa, you know. You can't just pretend you're going to be a, because I came as a student, not as an immigrant. And I came, you know, got a student visa and went there from July of, until end of whatever the semester is. And in the meantime I had gotten and passed an entrance exam at Brooklyn. Also the, Joe Hosiosky also had a hand in that one. I applied to LIU, was accepted at LIU, the grades were sufficiently good, except LIU, I would have had to pay tuition, and Brooklyn was free. Except that none of the city, New York City colleges in those days, they were all free, but they didn't accept foreign students. I was a foreign student, except Brooklyn, Brooklyn accepted seven foreign students each semester, or each, I think each semester. And the President of the New School, what was his name, well known person, his name was Johnson, I think, at that time, in the forties, had a friend who was the dean, see, you know, the New School was really originally called the University in Exile. They were all European, mostly German refugees who came here in the thirties and formed that school and they had a fabulous reputation. Well, one of his friends was William Gaede, who was the dean of the, dean of students, dean of faculty, I'm not sure, dean of students at Brooklyn, who happened to have been the Minister of Education in the Weimar Republic, they knew each other. So he called him and says, "You know, I have this, can you do something?" He says, "Well it so happens that we have a student who was supposed to come here from Egypt, who can't make it in time for the beginning of the semester," so I got . . . [laughs]

Hochstadt: Got his place.

Langer: Got his place. You know, very fair, everything was, and for the, I graduated in three years, for the three years I was there he kept my file on his desk. He said, "If you ever have any problems, etcetera, come and see me." And I did, I wanted to take, I wanted to take, to graduate faster, so I wanted to take more than the usual credits and you're not supposed to do that, and he gave me permission. So I graduated in January of '52, no, yes, January of '52 and then went on to [unclear] school and graduated in '54 [unclear] .

So that's, and I'm eternally grateful to Brooklyn. I just got a letter from, a fund raising letter from them in which they made a point, and I'm glad they made it so bluntly, I've been contributing to the school, not any great amount. It says, you know, we all, those of us who graduated in the fifties, it was a letter to the graduates of the fabulous fifties. It said, we all got a free education, all of us, all it cost us was 35 dollars a year to belong to the student association. Today the tuition is, what, three

thousand, whatever it is. Still not, and it said, you know, if each of us, since we're graduates of the fabulous fifties, had contributed one or two multiples of fifties, if each of us did it, we could provide help for the education of someone who's, they put it that bluntly, we owe it. And I think we do, we do. I've been contributing that amount for a number of years, but maybe it's, we don't realize it in some ways how lucky some of us have been. Particularly the kids who lived in New York with the free education that New York has provided.

Anyway, you may not remember, or you may have heard about it, Gerald Ford made a famous statement, which made the headline I think in the *New York Post* or one of the tabloids in New York, when New York had its financial problems in the fifties and sixties, and he said, and they were applying for federal aid, and his argument was, he says, why should the federal government provide any financial assistance to a city that is as frivolous to provide free education to its, the headline was "Drop Dead, New York", "Ford: Drop Dead, New York", and I got so mad. By that time I think I had lived in, I was living in St. Louis or where, and I wrote a letter to the editor of every paper where I had lived and basically said, look, I am one of those so-and-so's that got a free education. I've lived in your community, I've paid taxes in your community, and you know, the papers published it. And some of my friends sent me clippings. But I remember that, "Drop Dead, New York". And it's unfortunate that the city colleges have deteriorated, because, not so much because of the free education, but because of the open enrollment. But we had to meet some standards.

Hochstadt: Right. Now Robert, just to finish up.

Langer: Okay, I'm sorry, [unclear] . . .

Hochstadt: No, I'd want to ask you two questions, could I just ask you two more questions, quick ones?

Langer: Sure. By the way, you have my number, my address and . . .

Hochstadt: Yes, absolutely. One is, what difference, as you look back on your life, you spent these formative years in Shanghai and also you were uprooted in your formative, what difference do you see that that makes in your outlook or your life?

Langer: I tell you what difference I think it made, whether it's really true or not I don't know, I think it might, in my case, it may not be tr-, it obviously is not true in that of others, is my choice of profession. I continue, I, you know, I've voted Democratic all my life, but there's once in a while I'll find a Republican I can vote for, but basically I've never, you know, I don't believe in "this a new Democrat," etcetera. Having a s-, the, we have a responsibility to people. You know, many of us in Shanghai, with all, and there were some problems, by the way, in terms of what the Jewish organizations did or did not do. Some of it I'm not sure is it correct, etcetera, but if it were not for the support of philanthropic organizations, things would have been much worse. So it had that impact. So I guess I learned to enjoy my interest in politics, which I never followed through. Maybe if I had succeeded I might have, could have added another chapter of a dropout to it. [laughs] It came from that, you know, I was, I got involved in Tikvah and in our political battles. I got defeated and ousted as President. And if you had the time, we gave each other, as we left Shanghai, we had this little autograph book, where people wrote notes and I just read it last night. Some of my friends were here, we were looking at it, and I was amazed about how honest we were with each other, and yet saying, one of them said to me, "You know, Bob, you and I never agreed on anything. We were always on opposite ends, but I consider you

a dear friend.” Maybe that had that kind of impact, a commitment to, at least it did in my case, it is a commitment to public life, even though I never worked for government, but still I worked in the voluntary sector and have been involved. Since I’ve retired, I’ve worked on boards of not-for-profit organizations, I think I’m doing right now, which is taking more damn time than my wife thinks I ought to devote, and I’m chairing a state-wide committee on inquiry for, in our profession having to do with ethics complaints, holding hearings. And keeps me, the thing I never have done, I’m not going to bother you with, I did four, I started writing my memoirs and I got to four pages. [laughs] And they’re still lying in my desk. And I think I want to do it, just for my sake, not, I don’t care. No, I wanted to give you those three pages of . . .

Hochstadt: Well, thank, let’s, we’ll shut this off.

Langer: Oh, I’m sorry.

Hochstadt: No, this is fine, thanks.

Langer: Oh, oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you had it still on.

END OF INTERVIEW

Robert Langer was born in Vienna on January 22, 1929. He lived with his father Ignatz, a waiter, and his mother Stephanie (née Waldapfel) in the 9th District. Two uncles, Eugen and Desiderius Waldapfel, were arrested on *Kristallnacht* and sent to Dachau. The family left for Genoa in January, 1939, and sailed to Shanghai on the "Conte Biancamano". The uncles were also able to get to Shanghai.

Upon arrival the Langers rented a room on Wayside Ave., and Ignatz got a job in the Klinger restaurant. Later in 1939 he and his brothers opened the Delikat Restaurant on Chusan Road. Robert first attended the Shanghai Jewish School, then later in 1939, he switched to the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School, commonly called the Kadoorie School in Hongkou. When the Designated Area was declared in 1943, the Langers lived on the wrong side of Wayside Rd. and had to move.

Robert quit school in 1942 and worked in a weaving factory, as a goldsmith's apprentice, and took secretarial courses at the Demans' New Gregg School of Business. After the war ended, he became the first President of the Tikvah Club and sat on the board of the Jewish Community Center. He worked for Charles Jordan in the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee office, which led to a career in social work.

In 1948, Robert came to New York on a student visa, and attended the Robert Louis Stevenson School, then Brooklyn College, where he graduated in 1952. After serving in the US Army, he began a career as an administrator of philanthropic organizations in Michigan, St. Louis, and New York. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife Betty.

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 Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. The interviews are housed at the Ladd Library at Bates College in Lewiston, ME. The transcript was prepared with support from the Littauer Fund, the Memorial Fund for Jewish Culture, Bates College and Illinois College.