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Salter, Les oral history interview

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LES SALTER

PHILADELPHIA

OCTOBER 17, 1999

Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt

**Transcription: Nicci Leamon
Steve Hochstadt**

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Steve Hochstadt: . . . yes, words like that, which we all understand. So any, either language is fine, whichever you're comfortable in to say what you want to say.

Les Salter: *Ich, mein Name ist Ludwig Salzer und ich bin am 1., am 31. Dezember 1920 geboren. Meine Eltern, mein Vater hat, mein Großvater kam von Ungarn nach Wien in den letzten, in den späten 19. Jahrhundert. Hat sich dort eine Speditionsfirma gegründet, und hat acht Söhne und eine Tochter gehabt. Die Söhne sind alle groß geworden [unclear] Alter erwachsen, erwachsen geworden, die Tochter starb als kleines Kind. Mein Vater war der zweitälteste von den, von den acht Söhnen und hat das, hat das übernehmen, die Spedition übernehmen sollen.*

Meine Jugend, meine Jugend, meine ersten Jahre sind, der war der finanzielle disintegration of the business caused by the Depression, and that had a very, very bad repercussion on my growing up years, because money was very, very tight.

There was, there was from the beginning of my school years, which would be 1925, I can, I remember nothing but turmoil and antisemitism. And in 1934, when I was fourteen year old, there was the, the, a short civil war in Vienna and the provinces. The Socialists were decimated and several were executed for, for treason. And a year later in, well, a year later *waren, waren zwei Aufstände*, there was the *erste* [unclear] *Sozialisten und dann im, später im Juni waren das dann die Nazis. Und von den an* there were [unclear] *immer größer geworden. Und ich kann mich noch erinnern, wie meine Mutter hysterisch reagiert hat, heute kann ich das besser verstehen, weil sie hysterisch war, wenn die Demonstranten die Mariahilfe Strasse, wo wir gewohnt haben, herunter marschiert sind, thousands, at least Hunderte mit Sprechchören, "Jude verrecke! Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!"* and they sounded like a waterfall.

I, in spite of all those difficulties, I had a very nice Aryan girlfriend who talked me into getting a Shanghai ticket, when I told her the trouble we had getting a visa. The minute I was discharged from my job, I started to make a list of all consulates which existed in Vienna from Abyssinia to Zanzibar and walked, took my bicycle and an acquaintance, we made the rounds and when we then, about a week later, done with the list, there was absolutely no success. We, we, most of the places wouldn't even let us in to talk to, the Consul was always indisposed or out of town, and there was obviously no, no way to get out on a legal way, and on a illegal way it seemed even worse, because some of my friends tried to go out via Switzerland and all of them got caught and sent back to, to Vienna, or to the city in the provinces. But through a fluke, *wie soll, Spaziergang*, it would be, they gave, *Neumann so ich angestellt war, haben mir ungefähr zwei oder drei Wochen, diese Steuer, nicht Steuerzeit*, can you shut it off? I got to look at the . . .

[INTERRUPTION]

Salter: *Neumann gave me ungefähr zwei Wochen Kündigungszeit, und durch diese zwei Wochen, war sehr wenig Arbeit ausgeführt worden. Und wir einmal mit einer freien Spaziergang wo, wo ich von diesen Erlaubnissen, bei den Konsulatbesuchen gesprochen hab, hat sie mir [unclear] mir ein Shanghai-Ticket zu nehmen, sagt, sie kannst Du immer noch zurückgeben.*

Hochstadt: *Ihr Freundin hat . . .*

Salter: *Die Freundin.* You can always give it back. So I went in and I had, I'm, I'm not sure about the amount, but I had twenty dollars from the, from the firm in my pocket, which I subsequently replaced, but with this money there was enough for the minimum down payment for a ticket, and . . .

Hochstadt: When was that?

Salter: That was, that was in summer of 19- . . .

Hochstadt: '38.

Salter: '38. '38, the Hitler, Hitler came in March '38 . . .

Hochstadt: And you were . . . ?

Salter: It was about, it was about three months later.

Hochstadt: You were fired soon after that?

Salter: Within, within a few weeks. But it was no heartbreak, because I didn't like the job. I was basically trained as a technician, and this was letter filing and very, very menial bookkeeping. So I was, that didn't hurt me much, my feelings were not very hurt by this, by this dismissal, because I knew some Jewish farmers in Marchfeld, that is south of Vienna, they had, they hired anybody who would come and they helped them with the harvest preparation. That was also, you got some sort of a registration for *Umschulung für landwirtschaftliche Arbeit*. But when the tenth of November came and things looked more

grim than ever, I, what actually happened, my father was arrested at seven o'clock in the morning on the tenth by the Gestapo. *Der kam*, two men came around and they were, they were really decent kind of fellows, because they never, they never did anything to me nor to my father physically. They took the linen press of my mother and laid it flat on its face, and they found some, a, a *Feuerzeug*, a lighter which was, looked like a pistol, they objected to this, and, but never did anything else but march, march him off. And he was, he was put on a train a day or two later and went to Dachau.

And my mother went completely hysteric, she took my Shanghai ticket and went to the, one of the few employees of the, which were left over from the *Spedition*, and they, one of the *Angestellten*, he volunteered to try to, what he could do to get Mr. Salzer out of, out of the concentration camp. And he must have been very successful, because my father was, two weeks exactly to the day was home. I was, I was, that was, for me it was like a miracle, because I hated to give up the, that ticket to Shanghai on one hand, and on the other hand, there was no way I could have denied it to my mother, because I wanted him out of the concentration camp, too, in spite of the fact that I did not know what that meant at this time. Had only a very, very vague feeling.

Well, after my father came out of jail, out of concentration camp, he instructed that man, that employee, shall I put his name in here?

Hochstadt: Sure, if you'd like.

Salter: Oberndorfer, and Mrs. Oberndorfer after the war told me that that was her husband's undoing. He got accused of *Judenbevorzügung*, *Judenbevorzügung*, and got into trouble.

What happened then is a kind of paradox, because my father made it, started to make big sums of money because of the emigration. He built *Lifts*, it was called a *Lift*, but in reality it was a large container that the people put everything what they had in and they had to be served with liqueur and cigars for the custom men, they inspected it and put the seal on it and then it was shipped. And this, that business blossomed and we had a teddy bear full with money at home. The first time in my life that the funds were very, practically unlimited. My father's income was very, very good at this time. He was a *Frontkämpfer* from the First World War, and the grandfather was a Austrian patriot who had his picture in the "*Wiener Illustrierte*" with several of his eight sons in uniform, and he signed *Kriegsanleihe* enough to paper a office out with, and, where am I? I hope this, we will be cleaned up a little bit.

Hochstadt: Oh, this is wonderful.

Mazy Salter: You were at the place where you have the money now and the tickets.

Salter: Money, yeah. So I, with my father's dismissal from concentration camp, I got my Shanghai ticket back and started to grab money wherever I could for, to pay for the rest of it. And that took not very long and I was, I was in possession of the ticket, and I could have sold that, the reservation for any amount of money. There were people who asked me if they could look at it and just touch it for good luck, that ticket, when I went to pick it up. There were about three, three blocks, several hundred people were lined up to get into that office from Lloyd Triestino, and there was a policeman at the head of the, at the head of the queue, and I could, I could march in without lining up, which was also for me a very novel experience, because wherever I went before, I was the last one in the line. So . . .

Hochstadt: In what street was that office?

Salter: It was, I was, I think it was off *Herrengasse*, which is in a, there were the *Wiener Hochhaus* was there, *Wollzeile* in this old first, first *Bezirk*, but the address I can't, can't remember, but I got at home the tickets, see, and that might, might have a reference. Well, in any case, up come my birthday, eighteenth birthday, we had a party, and then on the fifth of February, 1939, I was, took, took a train out of Südbahnhof Vienna for Trieste, and what, the devil really, no, that is, that's too strong. A funny thing happened to the, not to the [unclear] but to Trieste, there were two school friends from me, they were in the German uniform and that caused a lot of stir when they, when they left after St. Polten, after Wielach, in Wielach they left the train and I had to make myself comfortable in the coupè and everybody took a look at me like I was smelling bad, because they thought I was a German, because I talked to the, my school friends. [laughs]

Mazy Salter: Instead of Italian, you should have talked Italian, you should have spoken in Italian or something?

Salter: No, no, no, no, we spoke German, we spoke German, they could have overhear, I don't think they overheard it, they were just, one expressed envy that I could leave Austria, whereas he had to go in the army. But the other one, he took it in stride. But it was kind of funny that I was mixed up there, I mixed, I mixed those, the people up. They also went to, to join that ship which, well, was a very wonderful experience.

I have to say that I was not very happy in Vienna during the preceding years. I, I had difficulty with the school, with my, with my grades, and so there was, the idea to

escape to the Far East was not all repellent to me.

Little did I know what exact-, what to expect, but first of all there was a one month, one month, one wonderful, very, it was like a vacation, was the cruise. I only went third class, but the food was nothing to crow about, with heavy emphasis on pasta and noodles. But, but it was a modern ship, and it stopped in places like, like Aden and Bombay and, and in Ceylon, and obviously that was something which greatly enjoy, what I greatly enjoyed.

Well, but one day we come to Hong Kong and I started to get the reaction, I start to get scared what was lying ahead, so I looked the ship carefully over and decided that I was going to stow away [laughs] and go back to Hong Kong. I was able to get a job in Bombay, in a textile mill, but I, the police, somebody pointed me out to the police, and they came in and never arrested me, but they put me in a car with another policeman and took me down to the dock.

Hochstadt: Back to the ship?

Salter: Where the ship was. [laughs]

Mazy Salter: Did that happen in Bombay or in Bangkok?

Salter: In Bombay, Bombay.

Mazy Salter: It happened in Bombay, oh.

Salter: And, well in any case . . .

Hochstadt: Did you, did you get off the ship in Bombay in order to look for a job?

Salter: I got off to, to, for sightseeing, and that was, that was also funny, because you know the, we Europeans are very squeamish as far as the handling of dead bodies is concerned. There the taxi drivers cunningly took us to the tower, where they put the bodies of the beggars and the ravens who are so fat they can't even fly, they make, they make, well, they, they eat, they recycle, they recycle the bodies. And the, the emigrants, "*Ach, fürchterlich!* Take me home." "Oh yes," but they take them back, the road back to the ship is twice as much as it was to take out.

But this doesn't disturb me, what disturbed me was then to get into, into Shanghai.

That was, it was a kind of a scary experience. I woke up with a grey dawn, because the machine, I'm very sensitive to noises, the machine stopped, the, the propellor stopped working. And I got dressed, which was not so easy, because the cabins was not much bigger than this bed, there were four people in there. And I got up on deck and was chilly and drizzly, and when I start to make the rounds, I found out there was a sailor in every life boat, that cage where they kept the anchor chain was locked. Somebody, somebody who had a very good organization feeling had done a thorough job. There was, there was no way anybody could have stowed away.

So, you couldn't see anything, it was foggy and it was drizzly and was cold. It was fifth of March. And after a while there was some voices in the water and there was a boat came down, it had flares on it, and they were working with, with a fanaticism to get by our ship, because that current brought them very close together. Our ship was in the water dead, that was the "Conte Rosso". And when it got a little lighter and there were a few more passengers come out, very, very subdued, and you could see there was a endless flat area which was filled with water, like a void. Eerie. And then when it got lighter, we were traveling along a kind of a stone embankment, they had reinforced the bank of the, that must still be Huangpu River and not the Yangtze Kiang. It was flat, and there was no life on it whatsoever. You could see some shanties, one-room shanties like a, like a, from a shanty town. And then as the sun came up, the fog lifted and we approached in a gray sky the skyline of the Bund. And this is very, very impressive, a row of monumental buildings facing the waterfront, and nothing on the opposite, there was, I understand Pootung is connected with a tunnel now, and there was, there was, it was standing by itself alone.

And we landed on a, not on the shore, but in a, on a anchorage out in the middle of the river, and they took us with a motor launch to the, to the shore. And we were supposed to get breakfast on ship, and all they had was a basket with some few old rolls [laughs] and no coffee, the coffee, the coffee pot was empty. And that was very, very bitter, because we, we had, nobody had any money. I had ten dollars sewn into my, not sewn, but stuck into my shoe, and that was all I had. And breakfast would have been a lot to raise our spirits. But the Committee also had people of questionable character, characters of a, a sense of humor. They said, "Don't worry, you get a room with running water, but running down the wall." [laughs] So, after they, they put our baggage on, on the shore, we were told to walk up a flat back truck, a lorry, I don't know what else to call it, they had no, it had a rope, I think, instead of a railing where the, the people got loaded in one and the baggage got loaded in the other one. And they took us out what later is known the Garden Bridge and Broadway . . .

Mazy Salter: How many were there of you, how many?

Salter: There were, there were about two thousand people on ship.

Mazy Salter: Oh, that came off and got onto lorries?

Salter: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hochstadt: All emigrants, all Jewish emigrants?

Salter: I would think that 99 percent were emigrants, yeah. And the, when we got over the Bridge, the street was only cleared of rubble, there was nothing to be seen but destruction. The typical artillery destruction of, of light residential buildings, where everything flies in every direction. I mean, this is, it was not the shock so much, but the extent, the extent was, it was immense. Wherever you could look, you had the same vista, and that was, maybe that was, was so intimidating.

But they took us out to a school on Ward Road, which is where the municipal jail is, and it's in a district area which is called Hongkou, and dumped us there. Well, that's, that's nasty, but they let us off there, and I think it was room 32 where I ended up with a number of other bachelors. I tried to reconstruct the number of beds, but couldn't, it must, it was at least two dozen, in steel cots, two high, two, two people high, and two cots pushed against each other so there was a small gangway of approximately, oh, thirty, forty centimeters between the wall or the other side of the cot. And there was hardly any pla-, there was not enough place to put all the luggage in, so a lot of the suitcases were left outside, including mine, because mine was a ship's something or other. It had a, not a flat top, but a shaped top and nothing could be set on top of it. So I had to misbehave and play obnoxious . . .

Mazy Salter: To get very assertive . . .

Salter: . . . to get, to get, to assert myself to get that suitcase in. Shoved the other stuff together to make a little extra space. Now this room was a paradise compared what they did to the families with children. They were large rooms and they put, they put strings up and hanging, hung blankets up to, not just to mark their territory, but to have some, a little bit of privacy. And that was, that was a contradiction, you couldn't, you couldn't have privacy under condition like this.

But there was a kitchen where they boiled hard, eggs hard, and you could get hot tea

in a tin mug, which doesn't, didn't taste too good, because the water there is very, very heavy chlorinated. There was no, there was no indoctrination or anything which could have, could have made it easier for us, if we would have known what goes on. But I, I got to bed, they had mattresses also on the bed, and pillows. No, no sheets, of course, but that was like camping out, it was not objectionable. And, but the next morning when I woke up and heard the kids crying and the people yelling at each other, and also, you know, there were, there's some older person in our group, they had, they had most probably, no, not most probably, was assuredly greater adverse reaction to this perpendicular drop from, from bourgeoisie middle-class lifestyle to pffft, nothing.

Mazy Salter: What was the bathroom facilities?

Salter: The bathroom facilities were very satisfactory for somebody who had no modesty. It was a, it was a concrete, a concrete slab with two trenches, and you squatted over the trench, and every half hour or so automatic water discha-, a tank got full and tipped a valve which then sent the water down, and if you, you squatted at the right position you could watch whatever went by there. There was a woman attendant, and I was still in a modesty stage, I was holding back using the toilet for the first one or two days, until I bowed to necessity, or whatever you want to call it, got used to the idea to take care of the, there was also a laundry with two water faucets, and this is where I washed, when nobody else was in there, in the evening, the late evening. That's it.

Hochstadt: Could I go back for a minute . . .

Salter: Yeah.

Hochstadt: . . . and ask you about packing to go to Shanghai? What kinds of things you decided to take and what you decided . . .

Salter: What I had.

Hochstadt: . . . not to take? And also you said you had ten dollars hidden, or it was kind of, was that smuggling, were you worried about that?

Salter: No, no, we were, we were allowed ten dollars. But I didn't want to spend it. As a matter of fact, when the war was over, I still had it. [laughs]

Hochstadt: Did you think about trying to smuggle any money out of Germany?

Salter: I didn't have any.

Hochstadt: Or valuables?

Salter: I didn't have any.

Hochstadt: You didn't have anything.

Salter: No.

Hochstadt: So what kinds of things did you take? Did you buy anything to prepare for the trip?

Salter: Yes, shirts, I didn't have any shirts. And when the money, when there was a little money available, I saw some, on, on, there was a shop back in, if I have a map of Vienna I could show you where it was, they had just some bolts of shirting and [unclear] made to order some, there was, they had shut down a big factory and they were selling off the shirts there, all, all, what they called it, when you order something, made to order shirts, and I bought about a half a dozen shirts. And they are much, well, let bygones bygones, but I was told then that I was rather extravagant. [laughs]

Hochstadt: And what about things of your own, did you bring books of your own or . . . ?

Salter: No, no. My father sent books after me, he sent, he was also very, very interested for me to get some money and I'm, from the correspondence, I think I told you that I found some letters from him. I know he gave money to, how much I don't know, most probably not too much, not speaking of some would be five dollars, to people who he helped to get out and they promised him they would send me the money. Because all the, every one of the twenty-one letters contains at least one reference of, of, that I should call this-and-this man or write to this-and-this guy in Ohio and to send, to send some money.

Hochstadt: Did you ever get any of that money?

Salter: No, no. There was, it was no disappointment or anything, because I never figured I would. I, I had some lucky circumstances which allowed me to get a job, well, not get a job, but to make some money, earn some money in setting up textile machinery, namely hand looms mostly, and . . .

Mazy Salter: You might mention what your education was, that you got in Vienna.

Salter: Well, I went to the *Textilschule* in Vienna, I don't know if it still exists, Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt für Textilindustrie.

So, there was the ordinary run of the mill resentment, but I can't, I should not even call this a resentment. There were, there were many different forces at work. You had, you had the, the refugee community, which was, I was told once thirty thousand and then I was told it was much too high, it was twenty thousand, I don't know how much there were.¹ But they were this, there was a spectrum of from very, very poor to well off. Heppner, his mother sold a fur coat and I understand it was sable, and they lived for ten years on this.²

I, I'm, I was not interested too much what anybody else does. I found, I had a ship board acquaintance with two brothers, they were Bruno and Richard Schnellenberg from Paderborn, and Richard Schnellenberg was arrested on the tenth of November and put into Buchenwald, where he got frozen limbs by, for waiting, you know, they had roll calls when somebody was missing. He was, he was such a object of pity it would have broken your heart to see him. [weeps] And you made, but in any case they were very nice and, people with a work ethic and we had, we had, we rented an apartment, not an apartment, a room after we, well, we, you can't establish yourself in a situation which is very, very fluid.

But another friend, also from the Boy Scouts, who spoke fluent French and English, much better than we did, he had a, he made a Armenian acquaintance and this one, he had a friend who had, he built a German hunting lodge and they had to have for the furniture, they had hunting seats, *Auerhahn*, you know, with, *Auerhahn*, and we made those pedals and they made, that brought, that brought him and another man in to finance tapestry and embroidery.

¹ The best estimate is that about 15,000 German-speaking refugees arrived in Shanghai, along with about 2000 from Poland.

² Salter refers to Ernest G. Heppner, author of Shanghai Refuge: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

Hochstadt: So you helped in making these?

Salter: Oh yes, oh yes, I made most, most, my work was mostly with the [unclear] only on paydays did I get into action and have my talent shine, pay, they were paid by the thousand stitches and the quick count, the accurate count so they tocked it up a little bit, because the girl thought she put, you know, more, she had done more than we were paying. But . . .

Mazy Salter: You don't make that clear really. You had Chinese girls working for you, in the business that you established with the two brothers, right?

Salter: Huber established it.

Mazy Salter: Oh, Huber, that was another person.

Salter: Yes.

Hochstadt: Huber is this fellow who spoke French?

Salter: Yes, yes. Yeah, he's dead. Well, that worked until the outbreak of December '41. But we, we had then a smattering of Chinese and I got a job in a Chinese textile mill in, in Pudong. They gave us rice and they bought us, and made us [unclear] one suit. And the Chinese, the Chinese in my acquaintance, they were all very talented people. I had a boy turning a lathe for me when I made some pots which were [unclear] and after about three months he was better than I, and I could leave him the job. There was another fellow by the name of Phil Sigmund, he died on cancer, terrible cancer, he spoke fluently Chinese, and . . .

Mazy Salter: Phil Sigmund.

Salter: Yeah.

Mazy Salter: But he died in the States . . .

Salter: He died in the States, yeah.

Mazy Salter: . . . after he emigrated to the United States. He worked as an electrician for PGE, was it?

Salter: He worked as an electrician for the Power, Pacific Power.

Mazy Salter: Yeah, and he contracted the cancer from dealing with those . . .

Salter: PVC.

Mazy Salter: PVC.

Hochstadt: I see.

Salter: He was practically wallowing in that stuff. At the time nobody know what . . .

Mazy Salter: Yeah, that was before they had any control.

Hochstadt: So you were working for this Chinese firm after the war started? And did that go through the, after the Proclamation also of the Ghetto?

Salter: Well, we, we got a pass without too many, too much trouble, but I don't want to get into the war times efforts of, which was childish. We, we did, we tried to do sabotage.

Hochstadt: Could you tell me about that? I'd be interested in that.

Salter: No. Well, that's an adventure story and nobody really know whether the thing worked or not.

Hochstadt: But I'd be interested in what you tried to do, even if it didn't work.

Salter: We tried to put cotton into wool before it got woven.

Hochstadt: Were these things you were making for the Japanese?

Salter: No, Chinese market. But at this time everything was olive green, so whether they used it for a suit or for us or, or for the, for the Chinese army was, they, weeks away,

there were only Japanese. There was, the Chinese had the [unclear] police, they were in a no-man's land, out of Zicawei and, it was a dangerous area, nobody wanted to go there. But it was, when the, when the District, when the District opened, some people by the name of Mick, who had a hand weaving factory in, were adjacent to Jessfield Park. They moved into the District and I helped them up, to set the machinery up. That's one adventure story I'm free to dispense. [laughs] I had their names and addresses, they gave me this at my request when I was done with the job. And there was a temple in Hongkou where there was a public scribe and I went in there and told him to tell this man to come. And within minutes there were twenty or thirty Chinese around and the one in the back wants to see what did the *nakoning* tell him, and they said, they said, "To come to work a job." "Oh, cuss, cuss, cuss. We don't want the work." But the scribe did me a favor of course, by putting that request, and I, Mick was very, very astonished how I can go and hire labor outside the District. [laughs] And there was another firm, Ritterman, they went to Australia, they had, they had a similar operation. So, that's it.

Hochstadt: So you were making enough money to live on?

Salter: After the war I made enough money to live on. During the war, until the war was over, we got the, this is, I'm bitter about the exploitation. But then I'm from the hotbed of the Social Democratic think tanks, Viktor Adler and Carl Jung, and it's possible that I'm not just, but prejudiced.

Hochstadt: So if you weren't making enough money before the war ended, were you eating food at the *Heime* or . . . ?

Salter: I was working at the *Heim* for the pot of food, which were shared by the two Schnellenberg brothers and a lady and her husband, and I ate while I was working. And I went from there to work, I had, yesterday when they were talking about the dead children in the street, Bruno Schnellenberg and I, we went with the bicycle day after day from Hongkou to Zicawei,³ where the embroidery was made and we used to play, just imagine the callousness, either even and odds or the higher number counting dead bodies on the street. And there was hardly ever any day when it was less than thirty.

Mazy Salter: How many?

³ Zicawei is a suburb of Shanghai.

Salter: Thirty.

Mazy Salter: Oh, my God.

Salter: That means, that would include the babies, too.

Mazy Salter: So when did the Army, the United States Army get into the picture? You worked for them.

Salter: Well, they bombed, they bombed, they [laughs] friendly fire, the American Air Force is a humdinger in friendly fire. They're very good in shooting their own, well, they were shooting up the friends they had in the Ghetto. I had, another young man, his name was, he's also dead, he stayed with us, he got bombed out. They walked away with a toothbrush. And we had him sleeping with us, and also with my dog, I had a dog, yeah, Irish setter. And Fritz Schneider, he died, he died a couple of years ago.

Mazy Salter: Two or three years ago, of cancer. You worked for the Army, and then you had food. Now that's an important element of the story, isn't it?

Salter: Well, I got a job with the U.S. Army as a coolie pusher.

Hochstadt: A coolie pusher? What does that mean?

Salter: Well, you push the coolies.

Mazy Salter: So they work.

Salter: So they don't sit down. [laughs] No, it's, it's like a straw boss. I put the hands on, I could read the description how to stick a Quonset hut together, or I did some, a lot of driving and transportation. We picked up the Japanese prisoners of war and brought them to the docks in Kiangwan. But there were, there were people in my age, they were, it was the common thing to do. I can claim no originality.

Hochstadt: So tell me about leaving Shanghai, please.

Salter: Well, it was a pleasant experience. We, I went to Kiangwan and lined up on, I

think it was [unclear] or, it was not Quantas, Quantas didn't even exist then, maybe, of course. We flew to Hong Kong, and Hong Kong at this time was a, was a, maybe a eighth, Hong Kong today is eight times bigger than the Hong Kong I remember. The Peninsula Hotel stood in a beautiful garden, what's the name of the road, Jason's Road? The main, new, Nathan's Road. You know Hong Kong?

Hochstadt: No.

Salter: Well, from the ferry building up I think there's a Nathan, like "*Nathan der Weise*". That is the shopping center. And the gardens of the Tiger Balm King, you know what tiger balm is? It's a universal medicine, you can buy it in . . .

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Hochstadt: . . . way. So how had you arranged your departure from Shanghai, did you have to get visas or permits or . . . ?

Salter: I didn't have the money for the ticket. And there was, there was from a school, this school teacher, somebody who worked in Kadoorie School, the husband died and they had to shift around the departures, they had a ticket. I, I left with, on an empty airplane, I think there were three people on there.

Hochstadt: So you got that ticket?

Salter: Mrs. Ritterman, the old Mrs. from the former employer, they had a mother who was very dependent on my help, *komische Alte*, she had, we had very, very bad weather and when it cleared up she woke me up and said, "What happened? We stopped." [laughs]

Mazy Salter: You were in the airplane and she said, "We stopped." You don't stop in the air in an airplane.

Salter: So I had to convince her we were making good progress. We flew to Port

David, Port David to Sydney. My . . .

Mazy Salter: Did they pay for your ticket?

Salter: They gave me, they gave me advance. They did not give me advance, they told me that, over the books, you know, I never saw any money anyway, I was interested, was interested in getting the ticket.

Mazy Salter: Well, tell him how you got, you did get money out of Shanghai to have when you were in Australia.

Salter: Yeah.

Mazy Salter: Tell him how you did that. You said you gave a note to a stranger and when you got to Australia, that's interesting.

Salter: Oh, I, I forgot, that's true. You, if you had more, if you had more than I think a hundred dollars, you had to get through all sorts of legal and custom regulations. And there were, there were people here made themselves a business doing this transfer by their own, it was a matter of trust. But the man was recommended to me and I handed him I think nine hundred, eight or nine hundred pounds, or dollars, dollars, dollars.

Mazy Salter: And when you got to Australia?

Salter: He gave, he paid it out without a whimper.

Hochstadt: This was an emigrant, too?

Salter: Yes. But I could not remember, I can remember when I tried to the people with the [unclear], they gave me knitting needles to take along, and then they, they made a big fuss when I tried to charge him the over-, the, you could only have sixty kilograms, I think, of, in baggage, and that tipped the scales, you know. Knitting needles are very, machine knitting needles are very, very . . .

Mazy Salter: Heavy?

Salter: Heavy, yeah, it's metal. I had trouble with [unclear] , but I think they paid off in the end.

Hochstadt: So you had saved this nine hundred dollars from your working with the American Army?

Salter: With the Army and with the, with the China Piece Good . . .

Mazy Salter: Your business, from your business.

Salter: It was the Kiukiang Road and the name, the name of the proprietor was Flusser, Kiukiang Road was the office.

Hochstadt: Les, could you say something about your social life in Shanghai, what you did outside of work? You were a young man, friends?

Salter: There was no fraternization with Chinese. They are very, very prudent people, they, they value virginity in, in girls to a extent that they throw, they would reject and throw out the daughter who would get pregnant. I, I don't think that there were more than ten mixed marriages in all of the District time between Chinese and Austrians or Jews. I tried several times in parties to come closer to some of the Russian girls from the White Russian, White Russian is not, nothing to do with Caucasian. You, but then I don't have to go into that.

Hochstadt: But it means not Jewish in this case.

Salter: Well, you can be a White Russian Jew. Solzhenitsyn writes about, he writes about the group of Soviet people who re-, reclaimed the Soviet citizenship. And there was a jeweler there who took along a white lacquered piano, and Solzhenitsyn described how this thing rolled down the embankment, and most of the people who went, they, they got eliminated. There was one of the popes, the Russian priests who lived in Shanghai, he was cursing the ship. He climbed up on a pile of boxes and cursed the ship.

Hochstadt: That was going back to the Soviet Union?

Salter: Soviet Union. It went, I think, to Harbin. No, there was, there was very, very, I

think that's one of the reasons that the Boy Scouts had that, stuck together and . . .

Mazy Salter: They were so successful.

Salter: No, because there was not, they were not, under the normal circumstances you got a fifty-fifty ratio of men and women. I would think that in the years I was in Shanghai, there must have been, for each girl at least five, six, seven.

Hochstadt: That's in your age.

Salter: In my, my age group.

Mazy Salter: But you did have social activities and friends that you partied with.

Salter: Well, yes, I mean, I was, I was . . .

Mazy Salter: Helga, Ursula, and probably a couple others that you haven't told me about. [laughs]

Salter: It's true.

Mazy Salter: But they were in the group, they were Jewish.

Salter: Ursula wasn't Jewish.

Mazy Salter: Oh, she wasn't? Was she in the Ghetto?

Salter: Her father was.

Mazy Salter: Where did she live?

Salter: [laughs] That's . . .

Mazy Salter: That's a personal question. [laughs]

Salter: That was a good question.

Hochstadt: So you were . . .

Salter: You don't do marriage counseling?

Hochstadt: [laughs] So you were in the Boy Scouts also?

Salter: Yeah. I was, I was in other things, too. They had the Society of Investigation of Extrasensory Perception.

Hochstadt: Could you tell me about that? I've never heard about that in Shanghai.

Salter: Oh, we matched, we matched socks, green socks and yellow socks in the darkness, [laughs] and matched sequential cards, you know, you don't see, and, and Madame Blatsky was the inspiration for this.

Hochstadt: What was his name?

Salter: Madame Blatsky.

Hochstadt: Oh, Blavatsky.

Salter: Blavatsky, yeah.

Hochstadt: Yes. So this, who else was in that group, how big was that group?

Salter: If you go to San Francisco, there's a cemetery in Colma and there's an area which is about twice as big as that room here, and there must be thirty members of the Boy Scout group in this place. There's one that, Rose's father, he's older than I am by about three or four years, then it's me, then comes Heppner, I think, they are six, seven years younger than I am. Now we have all the crypt.

And it was a good place to forget. And I, this, I don't want to say, "to forget", let me retract it. It was, it was a good waiting room, relatively good waiting room.

But Flusser tried to stay in China. He's a good example what happens, he did excellent financially, and then he had to close down. And it was, he had to pay everywhere a kind of *Abfertigung*, and there *Abfertigung* was so that he was penniless, and he had to give them all the stuff.

Hochstadt: When did he come out?

Salter: I don't know when.

Hochstadt: But after 1949?

Salter: Yeah.

Mazy Salter: After the Communist?

Salter: No, he came out, he came out after Mao Zedong's troop went into Shanghai. That was also something I would have liked to see. The story goes they shot into the neon lighting, because they were very scared of the sparks flying. They washed rice in the toilet and shut the toilet up when they flushed, the rice went down the toilet. Now, I never saw this, I don't know whether it's true or not, but I hear this from enough sides. Strehlen got away from it after, Strehlen was a book, a book dealer in, in Melbourne, but he spent a few weeks in Shanghai, in Sydney, and I took him around to show him the sights, and he told me about the Communists being on one end of the runway in Kiangwan and the American on the other end. That, that answers your question, I hope.

Hochstadt: Can I ask, do you have a few more minutes? I don't want to take too much of your time.

Mazy Salter: I'll run down and see if they're looking for us, okay?

Salter: Yeah.

Hochstadt: Could you say something about the rest of your family?

Salter: From the eight brothers, the oldest one was, the oldest one, Richard, I got that written down but I can repeat it. The oldest one had two children, they survived. The son in the English Air Force, their daughter got to England and, and survived, too. My father and my mother got wiped out. And the next one is Carl, he lived as a *Unterseeboot* in Prague, and got caught three or four weeks before the war was over. His wife survived and came back to Vienna, they never had any children. Then there was Otto, he had a wife and two daughters, they got killed. There was Max who had a, he survived by

somehow or other in Italy. The oldest, the oldest sons, their Uncle Richard, take this pen, what I'm trying to say is Otto, Otto managed to get a job in Italy and survived somehow. He had no wife and children as far as I know. Then there was, there was Max. Well, I have a sister, did I mention that I have a, I have a, who, why don't you give me a, your card and I send you, I send you the, the history.

Hochstadt: Okay. Did you talk, when you were leaving, or when you were preparing to leave, did you talk with your parents about them leaving, too, to go to Shanghai?

Salter: My father was, well, I didn't get on well with my father. So it was this, you have to make your own judgment. He said, he always said that, "*Es wird nicht so heiß gegessen wie gekocht,*" let it go, it will go by. He beat me up mercilessly when he found out that I was in a brawl. He said there was no, he, he didn't, he did not believe that, that you could settle anything with force.

Hochstadt: I don't think I have any more questions.

Salter: Good, then turn this thing off.

Hochstadt: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Les Salter was born as Ludwig Salzer on December 31, 1920, in Vienna. His family had a transportation company which was hurt by the Depression. Salter studied at the government school for textiles. After the *Anschluß* in March 1938, Salter was fired from his job. His father was sent to Dachau in the wake of *Kristallnacht*. After he was released he constructed containers, called *Lifts*, for people to ship their belongings overseas. Salter sought in vain to get a visa to leave the country, but was able to get a ticket to Shanghai. He left Vienna for Trieste in February 1939, and sailed on the "Conte Rosso" of the Lloyd Triestino line.

In Shanghai, Salter earned money through his knowledge of textile manufacture, and also worked at one of the Heime. He joined the Boy Scouts. After 1945, he worked for the US Army as a "coolie pusher", and did some driving. He flew to Australia, and eventually settled in Bremerton, Washington. He died in 2004.

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. It was prepared with support from Bates College and Illinois College.