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RENA KRASNO

SHANGHAI

APRIL 20, 1994

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Steve Hochstadt: I think we're all interested in the same thing . . .

Rena Krasno: I don't know, speak, ask . . .

SH: . . . which is your own story from the beginning. And for you the beginning may be even before you're born, it may be about your family, how they got here, and just for you to tell the way you want to.

RK: Well, okay, so, my mother came here as a very young girl. She came from Vladivostok with her parents. Her father came here to work as an engineer and very shortly after his arrival, he came with his wife, they had eight children in the family. Four, he got married at the age of fifteen and a half. My grandmother was fifteen, they had four children, he was taken by force into the Russian army, returned after six years, and after six years they have had another set of four children. And they came to Shanghai with all this band of kids with very little money. I mean, Jews in Siberia were very poor, and he had this job.

SH: When, when did they come?

RK: About 1911.

SH: Before the Revolution.

RK: Oh, before. He was sent by the Russian government. Shortly after his arrival in Shanghai, there was a cholera epidemic which happened every single summer. Every year we had to take cholera shots, and the Chinese fell on the street, an old man, and my grandfather, who was forty-two at that time, picked him up to take him to the hospital and contacted cholera. This old man survived, but my grandfather died. And he died and my grandmother was left with eight kids in Shanghai with no money, and survival was extremely difficult. And the way she survived was to give meals, cook meals for families, sort of like a boarding house. That's my mother's story. The three girls, the four girls started to work very young and the four boys were all sent to the United States to college. The girls worked to send the boys to college. And my mother basically had a hard life. She worked since the age of thirteen, she got married at eighteen to a penniless man. And my father's story was, my father was in Vladivostok, he was a socialist, not a communist, and he was a Zionist. And they came from Vladivostok to China hoping to go to Palestine, a group of them. Most of the people who went with him and reached Palestine became very prominent eventually, but they came here absolutely penniless, really penniless. And my father had an attack of appendicitis, had to be operated, and could not continue. So that's how my

parents remained here.

SH: When did your father come?

RK: '21. He married my mother in '22 and I was born in '23. So, when I was growing up as a small child, my parents were very badly off. I never felt that, because, you know, I mean, it wasn't the point that we were hungry, but I know that they were very poor. They were having a very hard time. We were never really well off. We had, we always had books in the house, no matter what happened, that's what people bought. The emphasis was education. We always had good food, and we went to school. The schools were very cheap, you know, because we'd be, I went to the French Municipal College, so it was like a public school, sort of, they had to pay something. I don't say they were poor, poor, poor, but they would be what in America would be almost lower middle class. You know, I'm speaking about my family. In Shanghai there were different types of Russian Jews, some lived better, some were, lived worse, the majority were middle class, you know. There were some Russian Jews who did very well in business, but there was nobody who was as rich as the Sephardi Jews.

So, life was, I mean, my personal life was my home, my friends, my school, and later my boyfriends. The school was the first priority always. I loved to study, I was an ambitious student. It was the French educational system, there was endless homework, homework, there were endless tests and examinations. And the boyfriends were something I squeezed in in the weekend. I was always in love, permanently, with somebody and then it disappeared and quickly replaced. So this was my life.

We had no contact with the Chinese whatsoever, except for our servants. I can't even see shopkeepers, because I never really shopped. The cook shopped, the *amah* shopped, I never went to buy food, you know. We went to, rarely to restaurants. You know, I don't even think I went for Chinese meals. When we really wanted to have a good time, my parents would go to a Russian restaurant and I loved Russian food. So I have not developed a great love for Chinese food like I have now for Japanese food, since I lived in Japan. So it's very hard to describe this type of life, where you're living as a foreigner in a kind of island, where the Japanese are background, I mean, the Chinese are background masses. All, and at the top, there were the British, the American and the French with their passports, which were the absolute lords. Then came the Germans, whose status went down since they lost the First World War, during World War II their status went up. And then they had the countries like Italians and Greeks and lower. And then the stateless, like we, and then under the stateless, the mixed blood, and somewhere at the bottom the Chinese, you know, which is a really

strange structure of society.

All this changed with Pearl Harbor. Upside down. The Americans, the British and the Dutch all were taken to camps. First they had to wear red arm bands for identification, with the letter of their country, then the letters were replaced by Chinese characters, and then they all disappeared into various camps, and we did not see them until the end of the war. And the Germans became the big shots, the *swastika* was on the Kaiser Wilhelm Schule, which became the center of the *Gestapo*, and they had the Nazi fascists and everything changed. And what happened was, into all this mess started flowing from about 1938 the German refugees. They came here when already the situation was deteriorating. The Japanese had taken a part of Shanghai. They were trying to take over the concessions, they were terrorizing American journalists. Everybody, nobody knew what the world situation was, and twenty thousand refugees poured into this thing, into a city where, you know, the Americans, everyone was later taken to camp, the Russians, their means of livelihood many of them lost because many worked for British, American, or whatever firms which were closed. And there were this new very large group of people that had to somehow survive, who came from Europe without any money. So it was a terrible problem. And this problem occupied, I mean, people like my father from morning to night. My father had worked for a British company and he lost his job, and we survived because my mother opened a toy shop.

SH: When did he lose his job? Pearl Harbor?

RK: After Pearl Harbor when his, all, the Japanese confiscated the companies and all the bosses, all these great lords, went to camp, and they just were gone. And the American Joint Distribution Committee started helping, they sent the money. And they continued throughout the war somehow sending money for the refugees through Switzerland. The Sephardi Jews, all those who had British passports, were sent into camps together with the British. So it was a very strange situation. We, the stateless Russian Jews, were left hanging. I mean, the refugees in 1943, they were segregated, because of German pressure, into a special area. The Germans actually wanted the Japanese to segregate all the Jews, but the Japanese did not do that. And there was a whole problem, because the original idea was to send the Jews outside of Shanghai. And they, one of the Japanese told the Jewish Committee, amongst whom my father, that that was the plan. And the Jewish Committee through Teddy Kaufman's father, who was the leader of the Jews in Old China, he actually went to Tokyo and somehow managed

to convince the Japanese to keep the Jews within the Shanghai district.¹ Because we, not we, but the Jews felt that as long as the Jews were segregated within, physical in the neighborhood, we would, could somehow help them. But if they were sent somewhere to an island or somewhere, there was nothing that anyone could do. So in this way it was, this did happen.

So they had their story of segregation in this Hongkew district that we visited yesterday, and they were really separated. The Garden Bridge that we crossed was the bridge where they had Japanese guards, who would bayonet people if they felt like when you passed. It was a real separation. And we continued here, we were not enemies, not in camp, we were not refugees, we were floating around not knowing from day to day what the Japanese would do. They could just do anything.

Now, my personal feeling was, I always feel, I always felt, I want to enjoy life to the maximum. Enjoyment for me, part of enjoyment is learning, is developing myself, is experiencing things. So I wanted to study, no matter what. And that's why I took medicine. I was never interested in medicine. And I studied throughout the war and the bombings and the whatever, I kept studying. I used to sit under the staircase and the whole house moved and my mother used to tell me, "You're crazy." I studied. I didn't give a darn. Because I can, I have a capacity when I'm concentrating on something, I just forget everything else. If I read a good book, or, you know, my husband's always afraid I'll get run over because, you know. So, this was my war-time experience. The war-time situation that I describe in the book, it cannot be compared to what happened in Nazi Germany at all.² The worst thing was the uncertainty for us. I mean, we were not starving, at least my family was not starving. We had enough food, a very poor selection of food, because my parents did not buy on the black market. Everything was restricted and so . . .

SH: Why didn't they buy on the black market?

¹ Japanese policy toward the Jews in China changed dramatically due to their alliance with the Nazis. Many plans were discussed inside the Japanese government, including resettlement of the Jews. Dr. Abraham Kaufman, one of the pre-war leaders of the entire Jewish community in China, protested the ghettoization plan, but to no avail. For a fuller treatment of these discussions, see the standard work on Jews in Shanghai by David Kranzler, Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945 (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1976).

² Krasno refers here to her book about her experiences during World War II in Shanghai, written in the form of a diary: Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai (Berkeley: Pacific View Press, 1992)

RK: Because my father, that's not what my parents did. My parents were, I think, very decent people with very high values. And very demanding of certain things. And they really passed it down to me. I was speaking to the gentleman next to me in the bus, and I said, "You know, I believe life is a compromise, but one thing I can't compromise. If I, I trust you all, but if you lie to me once, that's the end," because I lose the trust and the person as a human being has no value. I mean, it may sound radical, but I just, I accept people at face value, but I don't like someone to lie to me, nor will I lie, nor do I like to do, deal with the black market or anything like that. So we didn't deal with the black market. Some, there were many people who made money on the black market, during the war. So, I mean, I can't say we had physically great suffering. There were bombings, it wa-, our, what was very unpleasant was that Japanese occupied our apartment and we had to move out and we had a horrible landlady and we had to rent rooms, we had all kinds of difficulties. But these difficulties were my parents' problems. Somehow they solved, I was not thinking where to get food or, I just didn't think about it. Whatever happened happened.

So, I think it was a very, very important period in history. That's why I wanted to write about it. It's the end of capitalism and a complete change in the life of the Chinese people. They hated the Japanese more than they did all the other imperialists or whatever. The Japanese were imperialists worse than the others and so on. But somehow it really brought the end to foreign occupation to China. And after the war, with everything that happened, and with the revolution, that I know the Americans condemned and everything, I believe that no way could China have reached what they did today, because the situation was so bad that without some great, it were, there was no room for gradual reform, there was no room for democracy. Without some great physical upheaval, I don't think it would have been possible.

And today I spoke to this, he came here, this Chinese-Belgian journalist who wrote a book about his experiences in the Gulag and everything, and I told him, "Look, no matter what happened, this period of the Cultural Revolution and everything, in the long history of China, it's like a drop in the ocean." What really counts, in spite of all the suffering, is that it, I think, that China is now really on the road to, let's say a more or less normal life. They don't have complete freedom, I know that. And there are many things that are wrong. But if you go back forty-five years, and you go back to the suffering and the dying and the misery and the exploitation, now they're exploited, but they exploit each other. That's their problem. It's no longer an outside force that is important. This they have to solve themselves, I mean, you know. But before they had no chance. Now I feel that China has a chance and it's making progress. I'm not speaking of TV tower, just speak of the people in the street who are not hungry, who are smiling. If you ask

me the difference between before and now, I didn't see smiling faces on the street. They smile a lot. Their attitude to their children. A child used to be an extra mouth to feed. They were not nice to their children. I always thought Chinese don't love children. Always they hit them or they push them or they, they adore their children now. So these are the changes that I notice in China and I think they're extremely important. So if you want to ask anything, I'm drinking wine. Does that answer something?

SH: So, now we want to go back again . . .

RK: To, to the womb?

SH: Well, maybe not quite that far. But for you to tell us some more about growing up, about who your friends were. Were they Russian Jews or different kinds of people? And about what you, what your parents did, what your parent, who your parents' friends were, what kind of social life you had and saw.

RK: Okay, well, the friends, I went to the French school, and you're usually friends with the kids with whom you go to school. In our class I was the only Jewish girl. We had French kids and we had Russian kids. The French kids seldom if ever invited the lower-class Russians or Jews. So, in other words, I had a French friend whose status wasn't very high. Her father was in the police force. Most, I don't say they never invited, but it was not my experience, nor my friends' experience. So my friends were Russian Jews and Russians, you know, at school mostly. And I had very good friends with whom we keep contact. I don't even think that the French were aware of it, because I meet them now and, oh, they're so excited to see me, and so on and so forth. They were not aware of it, but I was aware of it. We had no Chinese friends. There were no Chinese kids in our school. We had, once I had a Chinese girl in my class, because her father used to be the French ambassador to, the Chinese ambassador to Paris. There was another Chinese boy in our class, and I never knew why, and I never even thought of asking, but I found out that he belonged to a very, very, one of the richest Chinese families here, which I didn't even know. But the vast majority, we had about seven hundred pupils, they were White Russians or French, or White Russian Jews, sort of. That was the class.

I had Jewish friends who went to the same school and we had a, and I had my cousins, and we had a very, we had a lot of fun. But our fun was going to each other's houses, because there was only the streets. And, you know, we just had fun together. There was no special entertainment. For a long time my parents did not let me go to the movies unless it had been something for children, which

restricted it to seeing "Tarzan" once a year, or something like that. My friends went to the movies, but I didn't go. So our, we just entertained each other. Our parents and their parents always were ready to have us. We had parties and they provided everything and they gave us a lot of freedom. My parents never checked what we did and, you know, we could do whatever we want and stay up late. So we really had a very nice social life. I really enjoyed it. That's when I was growing up.

My, my father was always very busy with social work. He was the founder of a, an editor of a Jewish cultural newspaper, which kept him very busy, and during the Japanese occupation it was a real headache because they had censorship, they always, always worried about what they write . . .

SH: Is that Nasha Zhizn?³

RK: Yes, that's Nasha Zhizn. Then together with some other Jews, they founded the Jewish Book Publication Society, because all this became of extreme importance, because they thought in Europe all Jewish culture was going to be destroyed. And they tried to save something, whatever they could. And in the Jewish Club, where we were today, it was a real cultural center. They used to have cultural meetings every Fri-, Thursday. So my father basically, as long as he kept his job, he used to go prac-, come home, have dinner, go to the Jewish Club, and they had endless meetings. When he lost his job, he, all his time was spent on social work, and there was a lot, a lot to be done. And these people, like my friends, I bought, I brought to Pan Guang a photograph of my friend's father. He was the president of the Jewish Community, Mr. Topas, and he was arrested by the Japanese and put into this Bridge, Bridge House where they tortured people. And they tortured him for eleven months, and he came out a human wreck and lived for thirty years as a non-person. Bridge House is the place also where, when they downed a plane of Doolittle fliers over China, they were brought to the Bridge House, tortured and then shot in the, in the back of the head. So, a lot, during the war, there were people in the Jewish community who really sacrificed their lives for the survival of the community. So my . . .

SH: Could, could I ask you more about the, the Jewish Book Club? Because you said . . .

RK: Jewish Book Club?

³ Krasno's father, David Rabinovich, edited the weekly cultural newspaper, Our Life, produced in three languages, English, Yiddish, and Russian.

SH: . . . it was . . .

RK: It's not the Jewish Club. The Jewish Book Publication.

SH: Yes, exactly. Because you said that your father was starting it, because he felt that Jewish culture was being wiped out in Europe.

RK: Yeah.

SH: That was, he talked about that in . . . ?

RK: Well, he talked about it. He said that he wanted to create a cultural center on the, on the banks of the Yangtze River, in one of his talks, you know, people, you speak right out. See what happened was, it's not that I always had serious discussions with my parents. I had with my father from time to time, because my sister was five years younger. So I was fifteen. At fifteen you have a good education at the French school. My sister was ten, she was a kid. So I had many discussions with my father. I cannot describe to you exactly what he did, because he was really never at home. And from time to time I knew what he was doing, but I can't give you the details. I just know that throughout the war there was always the fear that something would happen to him. If he came late, maybe the Japanese arrested him, because it was a balancing act. Having a, being a newspaper man is always suspicious, especially in a dictatorship or under an occupying power.

So the Ru-, the Jewish Book Club, basically they translated into Russian famous Jewish books written, of which they had copies in English or Hebrew or Yiddish. And my father translated, there was a book by Ludwig Lewison called *The Isle Within*, and my father translated it into Russian. And this, I don't say he was the only one. We had a lot of meetings, there were a lot of people who thought the same way, but the fact is that, that he was the editor and he was the publisher. Of course, never making money, that, that's not the way social work is done. And it was a struggle to maintain culture.

You know, he loved Russian culture, too. In 1937 they put up a monument for Pushkin here, which was the 100th anniversary of Pushkin's death, and my father adored Russian literature and all the Russians, for them Pushkin is like Shakespeare in England, or used to be, and they knew by heart Pushkin and they could recite it, and I went with him to the opening, unveiling of the monument. And since then the monument was torn down twice by the Communists, put up by the Cultural Revolution, now it's there, very near the Jewish Club where we were today and I'm sort of sorry they didn't show it to us. This whole area is an interesting

area.

And my parents' social life, they did not have a social, there were many people, many women who played *mahjong*, who played cards, many. I would say many of the friends, my friends' mothers, my mother never did, and I even until today, I have a sort of feeling that that's not the right thing to, it's a waste of time. So there was no card playing in our house, contrary, there was no *mahjong* playing. Our house was open, we had endless refugees, anybody was welcome. In fact, it went so far, when I met my husband, who comes from a very conservative family and he came to my mother's house, the first day I brought him to lunch on the *kibbutz* and my father came in with a man and he sat down, we all had lunch, and when he left, my husband, my future husband, said to my husband, "Who is this man? You didn't introduce me." And my father said, "I don't know. I met him on the street, we started talking, I brought him for lunch." Nobody knew who he was. But that was not abnormal in our house. In a European house this is still today abnormal. So we had a constant, as the French say, *va et viens* of people. I resented it, because I felt we never had our parents to ourselves. But I think it was, I really think it was wonderful. And when the refugees came, we always had a lot of people eating in the house. My parents had no money, but food was cheap and they used to come and they felt in a family. They were in a family, because the refugees, you know, it was just terrible. They had, let's say a boy of eighteen comes alone without his family. They had, I couldn't imagine what Vienna was like or, you know, when I think of it now, they left all the culture, they left, they came alone to Shanghai without money. It was just terrible. They wanted some sort of family atmosphere or something when they later, and they came and many of them lived in very bad conditions. So to come to family atmosphere was already something different. There was a problem. It was better with the Polish refugees, because they could understand Russian. My parents didn't speak Yiddish, they didn't speak German. Some of the German refugees spoke English, so obviously the ones who came to our house spoke some sort of language where we could communicate. To them it must have been a very s-, when I think of this atmosphere of people going in and out and everybody eating, it must have been very weird. But I think it, and it's not just my house, we were speaking today at the table, everybody did that. I would say almost all the Russian Jews. That was the only thing we could do for the refugees was to open our homes. I mean, because we did not have money to give them.

SH: So, would you, we've heard about organized efforts by the Sephardic community to help them.

RK: There were organized efforts by the Jewish, Russian Jewish community.

SH: But, it sounds like the, a lot of the efforts that you're talking about are not organized but individual.

RK: No, but there were, no, there were also organized efforts. And that's where my father s-, this is sort of by the way. But they organized SACRA, I forgot what it stands for, Shanghai Aids, I don't know what.⁴ They had committees with Russians in it and they had, my father was in all the committees, and they had organized efforts. In fact, we spoke today about it. One of the things they did is they imposed a tax on the Russian Jews to support the refugees, and they imposed, they knew who had money and who didn't, and they imposed, they couldn't impose it, but there was social pressure and people paid it. So there was an organized effort. There was an organized effort, they organized a kitchen for the people who, you know, had no place to eat. They organized many things. But not on the scale that, that the American Joint, not Joint, what's its . . . ?

Christine Lixl: Joint.

RK: Was it . . . ?

CL: It was too . . .

RK: Distri-, no, anyway, one of the American, whatever it, I think it was called . . .

CL: Something Relief? Jewish . . .

SH: The Joint Distribution Committee.

RK: Yeah, yeah, I think it's the J-, I think that's what it was. It was not in this, they didn't have sums like that to give. So, the Joint really helped the Jews survive in a way, because they gave big sums of money. If the Joint hadn't existed, I think that, I don't know what the Russian Jews would have done. I believe they, I don't believe they would have permitted any Jew to die of hunger, you know. But they really did the maximum that they could. Then there was the effort, of course, of

⁴ SACRA stood for the Shanghai Ashkenazi Collaborating Relief Association, a Russian-Jewish committee created under pressure from the Japanese occupation authorities in February 1943 to organize the relocation of German-speaking refugees into the Hongkew ghetto. SACRA raised considerable funds through forced loans from Russian Jews.

the Ashkenazi community, where Sir Victor Sassoon gave money.⁵ Everybody helped. And everybody played a certain role.

And, I think what happened is that many of the Jewish refugees who came and who were put in the ghetto and everything, only realized the help that the Joint gave, because they came in many thousands, and some of them don't even know about the efforts that the Russian Jews were making. So I was only aware of the efforts of the Russian Jews. I knew Mrs. Margolis of this Joint and she came to our house to have meetings with my father, because the Joint had meetings together with the Russian Jewish committee. But, you know, I didn't know all the details because, it wasn't that my father sat at home and discussed with us, he just disappeared and he was going from one meeting to another and I was studying. I was in medical school, we had tremendous amount of work, but I always felt, and Jenny, my friend, felt, I mean, that our fathers gave all their lives to the Jewish community. And they're not the only ones and that there were many others. So that was the life of my father.

My mother, somebody had to earn money, so my mother was very busy in her store. And it was very difficult, because you couldn't import anything. There was no merchandise. So my mother, I write in my book about she bought a small bicycle, she never rode a bicycle, she sat on it and drove off. And she went to look for all kinds of remnants in warehouses and what she did, I think, was really remarkable. She got the Chinese, Chinese carpenters who are marvelous, and they made furniture, toy furniture, and she found Russian, White Russian women who were very good with their hands and they made wonderful toys. And she had tremendous imagination, and that's how she built up a business. And really everybody knew the shop, because it was, first of all she was very gregarious, I get it from her, she was very optimistic, she loved life. I always told her, "Mama, thank you, that's something good I got from you, because I enjoy life." And people went to the shop and she, I met some guys now in San Francisco who had bought my book and who are eight, nine years younger than I. And one of them told me that he used to go to the shop hoping to see me. I said, "Really, who are you?" I was fifteen, the guy was eight. I said, "Eight?" And he shows me his photograph, "Do you remember a guy in short pants?" I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't look at eight-year-old boys." But they went to my mother every day after school, to my mother's shop to look at toys, you know. And that was very touching to me, because they had a school near, which was torn down now, very near my mother's shop, around the corner.

SH: Where was your mother's shop?

⁵ Krasno means here the Sephardi community.

RK: My mother's shop was on Huaihai Lu, and on the corner of Huaihai Lu and I don't know what road, there's a small sort of triangular park. You don't know. Across the street from the park was a high rise building and we lived on the top floor. And it's all within this thing. And the school, the St. Jean d'Arc School, a Catholic school for boys, was very near my mother's shop. So apparently all these boys used to go after, and one of the boys told me, he invited me for lunch in San Francisco to the Hyatt, there was a toy he liked very much and he couldn't afford. I said, "Why didn't you tell my mother? She'd give it to you, I know my mother." So, all these years he was looking at that toy and he never got it.

SH: What was the name of the shop?

RK: Peter Pan.

SH: Oh, you said, that's right, you said that in your book.

RK: I say that in the book. And I met a girl in Korea once, a young woman in Korea, Korean woman in Seoul, and you know, we were talking and I said, had you, she told me she'd been in Shanghai. I said, "How old are you?" And I said, "Oh, you were a child. Did you know Peter Pan Shop?" She said, "Peter Pan Shop, it was so wonderful." So they all remembered it.

SH: When did your mother start that shop?

RK: To tell the truth, I don't remember the year, but I think it was probably shortly before Pearl Harbor, when things started getting bad. And she always was very active and wanted to do something. And then of course during, after Pearl Harbor, it was our sole means of, you know, income.

SH: But she started it before your father lost his job.

RK: I think, she started it as, she started it as something else. She started a small children's book shop somewhere. And she dev-, when my father lost his job, she developed it into a money-making store. The first idea was, she liked to do something. And she liked books, we all liked books. And she likes children. So the first was sort of a hobby, but it became a business when my father lost his job.

SH: And it was enough, your mother made enough so that you could continue in your apartment and continue to feed yourself.

RK: Well, we were thrown out of the apartment. Look, the rent was very low. The thing was that when the Japanese took it over, it was a problem, because you had to pay key money to get in, we didn't have key money. You had to pay, I don't know, whatever the amount was. The rents were low, the school was cheap, the food was cheap, the *amah* was cheap, so, you know, you lived. You know. I know that s-, I mean, we couldn't go on great vacations. If we went on summer vacation, we usually went, you know, not first class and rented a room, in China. We'd rent a room somewhere in Japan . . .

CL: Where have you been? Where have you gone?

RK: We went to Laoshan, we went to Moganshan, we went to Tsingdao, and then we went to Japan. Japan was fabulous.

SH: Could you say something about when, when you went on these vacations?

RK: I don't say about the va-, I say something about Japan, because I don't want, I don't hate the Japanese.

SH: Christine.

RK: And I want a balanced book. I have also good memories of Japan. And I am saying about the Japanese occupation which is, thanks, very unpleasant, and I don't want to say that the Japanese are all horrible people. The occupying army is horrible. But I love Japan. So that's why I mention Japan. I, you know, you can't say everything, this is a book about the war. During the war we didn't go on vacation anyway, you know. All the vacations were pre-war. And I mention Japan, and this is what I develop now in the other book, the new book is 1939, about Japan, about the preparations for war, and this I develop. And because I also want to speak about Shanghai 1939, I write the book as a narrative about the trip and, which gives me more scope than a diary, and then I say my father sent us letters and that way I can tell about the situation in Shanghai. Until, what, this ends with the end of the war, and this next book ends with war be-, when, and it's absolutely true, we're coming back on the ship in the beginning of September, and war broke out in Europe. Everybody was very upset, but all the young people were very excited. It sounded so exciting, a war.

SH: Could you say more about that? Excited in, in what kind of a way?

RK: Well, I was, went to the French school, where we always spoke of the glory of

the French army. The war was always something glorious. The Hundred Year War ended with a French victory. The Great War, 1914, ended with a French victory. It was all very romantic, all these, you know, nobody told us about tren-, I mean, we told, history is very disto-, was very distorted in history books. When we learned about the Crusaders, I thought they were these terrific guys going in their uniforms to Jerusalem for the safe, for the grave of Christ. Later I read how they massacred on the way and they murdered and they killed, but my idea of the Crusades, war was something, something epic. Heroism. So, wow, I'm going to live through a war. I missed World War I. You know, that was the, the reaction. I was only fifteen.

SH: And there were some French patriotism mixed in with that, too.

RK: I was completely a French patriot. Until, until my eyes were opened when the war started and very quickly the French lost the war, so all the story of the valor was gone. And very quickly they became *Pétainiste*, and very quickly they followed the Nazi line. I couldn't believe it. It was my great, great disappointment, because I believed in this liberty, fraternity, equality and Napoleon who had given, given freedom to the Jews in France, and had the Sanhedrin, the judges, he, oh, you know, unite, and France to me was the ideal country. And suddenly they give up so quickly in such a, what seemed to me a cowardly way. They have Pétain, they follow the Nazi line. The students in our class, I'm the only Jew, suddenly they're *Pétainiste*. There were some people who were for DeGaulle, but a very small minority. The government, the consul whose son I was very friendly with, who became the Jesuit priest, represented the Vichy government. The Vichy government published anti-Jewish laws. I mean, that was the end of my love for France.

SH: Did that affect your relationship with your classmates?

RK: You know, it, it, in me, inside, it was over, it was the end. We had an incident that I describe in the book, where we had a, we had philosophy, we were studying, and our philosophy teacher was a real *Pétainiste*, a brilliant man, a *Pétainiste*, yes, a *Pétainiste*, which means he was a fascist. And he started suddenly, he spoke about sensual Jews, about coarse Jews, I'd never met coarse and sensual Jews in my life. And, you know, it was like a warning signal. And then our psychology teacher, he was for DeGaulle, and he even participated, there was an underground French radio station called "*La France Quand Même*", that means "France in spite of everything." And our philosophy teacher who was pro-Vichy spoke to us in class and said we had to boycott the classes of this teacher. And, to my horror, all the

French chil-, kids, approved it. You know, I thought, what bloody cowards. The next day our headmaster came and, although he had to follow the Vichy line, he said that there were no politics to be discussed in class, as a reaction to what had happened. And, and then all these kids are, "*Oui, monsieur, oui monsieur,*" and I thought, these are the French? They are cowards. They turn this way and that way, it was horrible for me.

So as far as I'm concerned, that was the end of my romance with France. And, and, I never, I never felt for France again. I mean, I went to France, I think Paris is beautiful and everything, but my feeling for the French people is gone forever. It's not that I hate them or anything, but I don't adore them the way I used to, because, between the actions and the speech there, there was a big difference. This psychology professor escaped to Indochina, joined the French forces, and a number of French people joined. I don't say they didn't, and at a risk. They left China, they, and some were killed in Indochina. But what remained was either the Vichy, pro-Vichy or people who had to, you know, *mitmachen*, who had to pretend to follow the line. And that was very disappointing. Really disappointing to me. So, that was it.

So, at that time anyway, I graduated college, and I describe how I was, you know, we had every year, there was a gold medal awarded to the best student in the French system. And that was the biggest academic honor you could have. And the year, and you didn't have to graduate, it could be any class. And it was really special because if, you could, any teacher could blackball you and you couldn't get it. You had to, it had to be everything. You were accepted as a person, whatnot. That year they didn't announce a winner. And it was always, I'll sh-, you know, the French school, we had a very, it's a very beautiful, was a very beautiful building. Beautiful assembly hall with a stage, and usually on prize-giving, we came and we had all the important French who presented this, and people from the Navy in their uniforms and Army in their uniforms and a band playing, and you'd go up and they'd shake your hands and they'd give you all the various prizes which we got every year. And the biggest thing was the medal of honor. This year nothing. I thought it was because France had lost the war. I mean, it was a terrible shock for everybody.

And sometime after I graduated, I got a phone call. I came home and the *amah* told me that there was a phone call from the school and I have to go and see my headmaster. My immediate reaction was, there was a mistake and I didn't pass my baccalaureate. You know, I couldn't imagine why he wants me because, you know, they treated students as non-human beings. We never had parent-teacher meetings, we never quest-, were allowed to argue with a teacher. I mean, we could discuss in our philosophy papers what we want, but we were sort of sub-human. Our teacher, philosophy teacher, started by classifying things. "You are

not zeroes, you're minuses." That was the attitude. We were minuses. So why do the, this great man, the school principal want to invite? And he asked me, and actually the thing was, he wanted to give me the medal. But the way he did it was really terrible. I came to him, I didn't know what the heck he wants, and he comes and I sit down and he gives me this box, and he said, "Do you know what this is?" And I looked, and, I mean, it's a medal, but I'm scared to say, what if I say it's a medal, he will say, "You don't, what do you think you are?" I didn't know what to say. So, I, you know, I said, "I don't know." He said, "What? You pass your *bachot*, you don't . . ." And I felt, I felt harassed and humiliated. And then he said, "And that's the gold medal you won." And I took it and I told my parents. Everybody was very excited, but I was very humiliated and very hurt. At the way he spoke. If he had said to me, "Look, you know, you must understand the situation. I can't give it to you in public," because I was Jewish, I will understand that. "But I feel you deserve it." I mean, there's a way to do it. But he did it in such a not nice way, and that made me, you know, I had it, and I never told my parents. My parents never found out about it. They'd only find out if they read my book, because I didn't want to hurt them. I knew it would hurt them very much. And they were so happy and everything. So, you know, there are many things, I am very unforgiving about such things. It's not unforgiving, it's just that if somebody does something like that, he's just finished for me. It's not, I don't want to harm him or anything, but as a human being, he's, I just have no more feeling for a person like that.

So there are these things that I took along with me from Shanghai. I never felt that people hated me because I was a Jew, not anti-Semitic. I didn't encounter much because I feel good about myself and I will say, "I'm Jewish," and I haven't had unpleasant encounters. But there are certain things that are engraved in my mind and I have negative feelings about the French people. And the more and more you find out now about the collaboration, we find out and read about it more and more. They speak about the great Maquis. I believe that a great number of French collaborated with the Nazis. I'm convinced of it. Because of, in spite of all the glory of France and everything, I think there's a basic, they're not like the Dutch. I can call it cowardice, I don't know what to call it. But, you know, you read the news, how much collaboration there is, and they find out more and more. Now there is a case, it's not one case. I don't know how to explain, but it's really a big disappointment for me.

SH: So can I ask you what you were doing at that French school in the first place? Why, this is a school where there's very few Jews. Why, why are you going there? Why are your parents . . . ?

RK: Well, I'm very happy I went there, because I went to the French school, they had an excellent system of education, I lived in the French Concession, I got a terrific education. What was the other alternative? My cousins, who lived in the British part, went to the British school. They got, or you could go to the American school, which was expensive. Or you could go to the Jewish School, which started off as a school for poor Sephardi children. So my parents chose the French school. We lived here, it was cheap, the education was excellent, the Jewish children, there were few Jewish children, because they were spread amongst the other schools. Most of the people here went to the British school. Rasha, Mrs. Kaufman, who is much younger than I am, went to the Jewish School, but it was a different period, because during the war, when they started closing all the other schools, the Russian Jewish children started going to the Jewish School, and the whole standard of the Jewish School was changed. And they tried to give them an education. It was a British system of education, and the school became good, much better than it used to be. It was no longer a school for poor children. So, you know, you went to what was available. And I'm very grateful I went to the French school, because I think I had a marvelous, marvelous foundation, you know.

CL: It sounded as if it would have been a co-educative school, is that right?

RK: Yes, that is. But the interesting thing was that during recess, we were separated. We were in class together. During recess the boys played soccer and the girls walked around together looking at the boys. That was our recess entertainment. It was, but we were in class together. It was one of these weird things. And another weird thing that I wrote about, and, you know, for instance, our lab was upstairs and when we had to go up the stairs, the boys had to go first, because if the girls went first, maybe they'd look under their skirt. I mean, and as I write, nobody thought about it, but they planted the idea in their mind. It was just crazy in a way.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

RK: . . . at least I felt it, I don't know.

SH: Could you say a little more about sex? It's a hard topic . . .

RK: About sex?

SH: Yes, hardly anybody talks about it, so it's hard to find any information about it.

RK: No, well, I'll tell you, it's very simple. I was talking to Abie today, because I had really dozens of boyfriends. It was not like today. Now you like a guy, you go to bed with him. That was completely out of, out of the possi-, nobody even thought about it. And no boy would even think of asking, of, of suggesting. It was just, it just wasn't done. What happened was, you went out together, you kissed, you this, you touched a bit here and there, that was it. That was as far as it went. But there was this suppressed excitement. Probably everybody was terribly frustrated, I don't know. There was this excitement in the air. You know, there was always some sort of electricity between a few people going on. It may have been that we were all adolescents, all developed physically, all sexually conscious, but nobody had sex. You know. I don't know what it was.

SH: I think the real question that I want to ask is, what difference did it make that you were in Shanghai? Do you think that relationships between boys and girls were the same as they would have been in Europe, or was . . .

RK: You know, I . . .

SH: . . . was there some effect that you were in this, in this city?

RK: I don't know what it was. You know, I asked my husband that question, how it was in Europe. You know, I think in Europe, even at that time, if you went to the university, let's say, I'm not speaking of high school, high school was out. If you went to the university and you had a girlfriend whom you liked very much, a steady girlfriend, you had sex with her. And it was a relationship. But I never heard of that. I don't say it didn't exist. Maybe nobody admitted it. But I never heard of anybody having a sexual relationship together, even at the university. Now, maybe, maybe they had it, you know. So I don't think it had to do with Shanghai. I think it was the moral values of the time, you know? It wasn't that people were afraid of getting, at that time, syphilis or something like that. It was just something that wasn't done. You would have sex when, I mean, my idea was I would have sex when I meet the great love of my life, wherever he would be. I don't know when. You know? It was something, you know. And it's just something I, it's something I, I just couldn't do. I couldn't do it to my parents, let's say. I don't know

how to explain it. It was a totally different attitude, but the plus side was that everything was exciting. That, if a boy passed and he put his hand under your hair, you know, you had a thrill of excitement. Now I don't know what they have to do to you to feel excited. Swing from the, from the lamp or something. [laughs] Everything was exciting, you know.

And, and, I don't know, it was a different period. And in a way I feel youth have lost something, because there was this tremendous mystery that, you know, if I read Hemingway and he said, "The earth stood still," you remember in, I thought, I thought, God, this must be the earth stan-, it must be something fabulous, indescribable, fantastic. So that's. And my parents never discussed it. My grandmother, who got married at fifteen, told me that having sex is worse, the first time, is worse than giving birth, that was very encour-, that's what she told me. You know. And my cousin, who was married and had a child, said giving birth is like being thrown into boiling hot water. And sex is not, not much, not much better. So, you know, it wasn't very encouraging. [laughs] And we really, you know, I think people were, I was never discouraged, I must say. I didn't believe them. I believe what I want to believe. But, you know, I think that many people, it was considered something very, very special, and you, very bad if you did it before you got married.

CL: How comes that you talk with your grandmother about that?

RK: My grandmother told me on some occasion, probably she wanted, maybe to scare me? I don't know what she suddenly sa-, and you know, I think her sex must have been awful. Because she was fifteen, her husband was fifteen and a half. Neither had ever had sex. It may have been a horrible experience. I don't know. You know, they were both kids, you know. So I never discussed sex. . . .⁶

But I, I mean, I cared very, very much for my parents and, and it was very hard for me when my parents died and it's still hard for me to remember. Very hard to come to Shanghai because of that. Really hard. And before I, I'm not a person who cries or anything, but I cried the whole week before I came here and my husband said, you know, and my daughter says, "Mama, maybe you shouldn't go." The idea to come here, that none of this is here, that my parents are dead, was really unbearable. And I was thinking, but I felt that since I didn't come all these years, first of all because China didn't have relations with Israel, I don't want to go to any country that doesn't recognize Israel. There are enough countries that recognize Israel, I don't want to go anywhere where I'm not really welcome. Now they recognize Israel. And the Chinese government invited me, and paid for me,

⁶ Portion of interview left out here.

and I felt it was like fate, I have to come. And it turned out, you know, much better than I expected. But it was really hard. Really hard. *Fini?* The end?

SH: If you'd like.

RK: Yeah, I mean, how long have I talked? [unclear] And if you want to ask me, you know, I'll answer.

SH: Maybe we should stop and then we can do more some other time?

RK: No, but, I don't know if it was interesting for you.

CL: It was very interesting.

END SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW