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## **Erdman, Fred oral history interview**

Steve Hochstadt

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**FRED ERDMAN**

**DEERFIELD BEACH, FLORIDA**

**FEBRUARY 21, 1990**

**Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt**

**Transcription: Sharat Kumar  
Sabune Turner  
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Steve Hochstadt**

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**Steve Hochstadt:** . . . eighty.

**Fred Erdman:** In July, I will be ninety-one, a little bit different. So go ahead whatever you want to do.

**SH:** Well, what I would . . .

**FE:** I'm following you.

**SH:** What I would like to do, let me just put this here, what I would like to do is hear your story as you wrote it here, but in much more detail.

**FE:** It depends whatever you want to know.

**SH:** I'm especially interested in Shanghai.

**FE:** In Shanghai.

**SH:** And you were only in Shanghai for a short period of time.

**FE:** About three weeks only.

**SH:** But I would like to know about why you went to Shanghai, which you described in here but, I guess, a little bit about your life in Vienna, and why you went to Shanghai, and how you got there.

**FE:** Why I went there. The Gestapo came once and told me, if I am not out by July 31st, it was '39, they would pick me up August 1st. So I had to try to get out. It was hard to get any visa.

**SH:** Why, could you tell me, let's start at the beginning with your rubber factory and just go through the story.

**FE:** I had the rubber factory and when Hitler came in August, March 13, I had a neighbor, not a Jewish neighbor, he called me up. I wrote this down, I told you. "You damn Jew." You speak German, too?

**SH:** Yes.

**FE:** Yeah, I have a hard time. "You damn Jew. Now it's come our time, you will see what's going to happen to you." And I was very worried. You had, I had a machinist, a machine shop owner, who always worked for me something. He came over in the morning as *Kommissar Chefverwalter*. And I lost everything, that's no banks and no *Sparkasse*.

**SH:** This was right after the *Anschluss*.

**FE:** Right after the *Anschluss*, the next day.

**SH:** So they took all your bank accounts?

**FE:** They took everything, they took everything.

**SH:** And your factory too?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah. And on the tenth of December, I think, when was Crystal Night?

**SH:** November.

**FE:** Tenth of November, tenth of November. They removed all Jews from their apartments, and put them in warehouses. My eighty-four-year-old mother was also among them, had to climb outside on the steps [unintelligible] and there were all Jews right there. And for me, I, for some reason I don't know, I went to another district, to friends, to stay over there. And the Gestapo also came into this house, but for a miracle, like my father told me, they skipped this apartment where I was living overnight. So then I came back and many Jewish people were taken out of their apartments, couldn't get back their apartments and were taken by, by Christians.

**SH:** And this, what happened to your family on *Kristallnacht*?

**FE:** My family, my family, they were in jail. They put away my eighty-four-year-old mother, my wife, and my little daughter, who was about seven and a half years old. And the next day, or the second day, I think, they were freed, they had to go home. But many people couldn't get back home, because was taken away from, from other citizens.

**SH:** So did you think, what did you think then after, after that night? Did you think you could still stay in Vienna?

**FE:** No, I couldn't. I was trying to get out somehow. But it's very hard to get a visa. I wrote to Sweden, to a rubber company, the biggest in Sweden. They wrote back to me that they would like to accept me, to help me, I could stay there until I get my American visa, but there was no chance to go over there.

**SH:** I don't, why was there no chance? There was . . .

**FE:** Because the Gestapo gave me an order to get out by July 31st, and it was not possible to get through.

**SH:** I see. When, when did they give you that order?

**FE:** They gave me that order maybe a few, a few weeks, two, two weeks to go, two weeks ahead, yeah.

**SH:** And that was in 1939.

**FE:** 1939. The only way was Shanghai, because you didn't need a visa.

**SH:** How did you know that? How did you know about Shanghai?

**FE:** How I did know about Shanghai? It was known that you don't need a visa, but when I came to the office of the ship's company, it was a big company, he said, "Everything is sold out." And if somebody returns a ticket on account of sickness or so, then I could have it. So I was standing three days in line in front of the office . . .

**SH:** Waiting for one of these returns.

**FE:** . . . to get one ticket, for myself.

**SH:** And there were other people, other Jews, the line was all Jews waiting to get out or . . .

**FE:** No, it was sold out and I stayed another two days and I got a ticket for my wife for second class, I had a first class ticket. So it was the only way. My daughter, she was seven and a half years old, I didn't know if I would get out alive, so I sent her with the children transport to England to strange people. She was there three and a half years, then we got her back. Also it was still war and no private people could come from England by boat or airplane, military people and diplomats.

**SH:** What month did you send her to England?

**FE:** What month? Before I left.

**SH:** Before you left.

**FE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** Had you tried to, you said you had tried to go to, tried to arrange a trip to Sweden.

**FE:** Yeah.

**SH:** Had you tried other things? Tried to get an American, gone to the American

Embassy to get a visa?

**FE:** Yeah, my quota was not due. So I couldn't get a visa and this was the only way I could get to Shanghai and you had thousand refugees on the boat. Before I left I wrote to Jewish committee in Singapore and in Bombay, I will pass by on this and this date, he should try to supply me a job. In Singapore it happened that the boss came on the boat and took me down to his place to his partner and I was hired. Only five people could come down from the thousand people. It was a British colony at that time and they couldn't come down.

**SH:** Tell me a little about your preparations to leave Vienna, selling things or arranging for your apartment.

**FE:** No, I had, I had a friend whose parents lived in America and he went to . . .

**SH:** A Jewish friend.

**FE:** A Jewish friend, a customer of mine, he was, he was ready to move to America, and I, I couldn't take anything out with me. So I packed one big container and put stuff down and he took it from me as his to America? So when I came to America I got it from him. It was the only thing . . .

### **BREAK IN RECORDING**

**SH:** What kinds of things were in this container that you sent to America?

**FE:** Clothes and other things, which are valuable things, for example, I had a Hanukkah, a silver Hanukkah lamp, which I packed in there, too. So many things one box, one big box, a wooden box, you know.

**SH:** And you know that he was going to America?

**FE:** Yeah, because his parents . . .

**SH:** He had a visa?

**FE:** Yeah, his parents were living in America.

**SH:** I see, so he could go.

**FE:** So he could get a visa. He took this. I met him then here.

**SH:** Otherwise you had to leave everything behind?

**FE:** I had to leave everything. And I did, I did the packing and the moving of this on a Sunday, where the *Kommissar Cheferwalter* did not come in, you know. So without, they didn't know anything about it that I moved some stuff.

**SH:** And all you could take out of Vienna was that coin?

**FE:** All there was, yeah, that's all I had.

**SH:** And some clothes or some luggage.

**FE:** Yeah, some suitcases, some . . .

**SH:** Did you worry? If you owned a factory, then you must have been fairly comfortable before that. Did you worry that you were moving from a comfortable life to one that was . . .

**FE:** No, I didn't know what will happen to me, because you cannot see ahead of it, what it will be. I know I would have gone to Shanghai and to live there, where the others are living. I met many people from our neighborhood which were also there, and I was afterwards, when I came to Shanghai, I saw where they lived. It was, I saw only one big building and with beds, two rows of beds one on top of the other, plain wood. It was a huge building.

**SH:** So please tell me about your trip on the boat to Shanghai.

**FE:** Yeah. I had a first class ticket, and my wife had a second class ticket, so we separated. And there were, one thousand people were there. I think a Gestapo man was also on this boat for checking what happened and otherwise it was . . .

**SH:** Were all the thousand Jews?

**FE:** All the thousand were Jews, yeah.

**SH:** From Vienna, from Germany?

**FE:** From Vienna, I think, they're mostly from Vienna.

**SH:** And when, when was that, when did your boat leave?

**FE:** The boat left on the, the, I think, I left on the 31st of July and when I came there, left the next day.

**SH:** Did you, you left from Trieste?

**FE:** From Trieste, from Trieste, yeah.

**SH:** From Trieste. If you came to Trieste with no money, how did you manage even to stay over night or get food?

**FE:** No, we went on the boat right away.

**SH:** You arrived in Trieste and went right on the boat.

**FE:** Yes. And there was, the *Kommissar Chefverwalter* gave me three hundred Mark, or deposited in the ship's company. I had three hundred Mark for when I need something on the boat, but I didn't need anything, so I left it for a friend, for a friend who went to Shanghai, I turned it over to him.

**SH:** So that was in addition to the five Marks that you were able to take out?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah, but I didn't get the money. I could only take food or something else for this money.

**SH:** And if you didn't spend it all it was gone?

**FE:** Yeah, it was gone.

**SH:** As you went, tell me again about writing to these people in Singapore, looking, trying to get a job. You wrote to, to whom did you write?

**FE:** To the Jewish committee. There were in the big cities we passed, there were Jewish committees. In Egypt I came down just for a visit and also in, in Colombo. In Bombay, we, the ship stopped there for a certain time and . . .

**SH:** How did you know about the Jewish committees in all these places? How did you know that they existed? What their addresses were?

**FE:** I was sure, I was sure that everywhere Jewish committees. So I wrote a letter to the Jewish committee in Bombay and in Singapore. And both, in Bombay I had a promise to a job, you know, but I had to leave Bombay, I couldn't get it from the boat. I had to leave and come back to Bombay. But this was a little bit harder. But in Shang-, in Singapore the boss came on the boat to introduce himself, and see me and he took me out to the, to his place. My wife didn't know it, we got the first mail there in Singapore.

**SH:** I see, so you arrived in Singapore. You didn't know that he was going to come.



You wrote . . .

**FE:** No, I didn't know anything.

**SH:** You wrote this letter, and had no reply?

**FE:** I wrote this letter, had no reply, but when I, when the ship stopped there, suddenly I heard my name called, "Mr. Erdman, Mr. Erdman," and they introduced me, it was an American Jewish fellow who was, they played golf, a golf partner, you know, and he had a big factory where natural rubber, its liquid, is formed into solid rubber and chemically protected so it can be shipped.

**SH:** So you went to visit this factory.

**FE:** I went, yeah, he took me, the boss took me there. He was a Christian and an American citizen.

**SH:** And then tell what happened after that.

**FE:** Then he, then he hired me. Then I started on the next day or the second day to go to work. I had to go by bus. It was eight miles out of the city, but the bus was always loaded with Indians and Japanese and Chinese and all foreign, and so I had to stand the whole time there on, on the bus. [laughs]

**SH:** You, after you spoke to him at the factory, you went back to the boat to get your wife and take her off.

**FE:** Sure, she was reading in the meantime our mail and we found out that the Gestapo was on August 1st there to, looking for me.

**SH:** I see, in your apartment, as they said they would be.

**FE:** Yeah. I had a cousin which still was there when we left.

**SH:** Why do you think the Gestapo said that to you, and not to everybody else? Why did they say that to you?

**FE:** This I don't know. But the fact is that they warned me that I had to get out.

**SH:** Did you see this as a friendly warning or that they were saying, we'll give you a chance to get away.

**FE:** Yeah, something, yeah.

**SH:** Or was it very threatening . . . ?

**FE:** Listen, I was, I was, for some reason, I was a Polish citizen. When, I lived in Vienna since, I came 1904, but when, after the war it was separated, I think, so there was a certain date where you have to apply for citizen, other citizens, you know. So, but I missed this date because I was away on business trip to, to, to Switzerland, you know, so I couldn't get any more this citizenship, the Austrian.

**SH:** For Austria?

**FE:** So I had a Polish passport.

**SH:** Did your family come from Poland or what became Poland?

**FE:** I'm born originally in, in Galicia, it was part of Austria. But in 1904 I came to Vienna.

**SH:** When were you born? Could you tell me when you were born?

**FE:** July 15, 1899.

**SH:** And that part of Galicia became Poland after the first World War.

**FE:** Became Poland, yeah, yeah. Now it's become, it's now Russia again. But maybe the Poles got it back from the Russians.

**SH:** When you were in Singapore, how did you find an apartment to live in?

**FE:** No, the Jewish community had no money and I had only the five Marks. So they brought me into a boarding house and, and they paid for it, because I had no money. I was sitting at the dinner, I was sitting near a lady from Vienna, and she gave me, after dinner she gave me \$50 and said, "I know you have no money. You'll give it back to me." And she gave me \$50, so I had for the time until I get my salary.

**SH:** Then please tell me about Shanghai, about Singapore, working in Singapore and how long you stayed there.

**FE:** Yeah. I stayed there one year. But my cousin in America, in Detroit, wrote to me. I had four cousins there, wrote to me, leave the best job and come to America, because there will be war. And really it was war, the Japanese came, not from the front, from the sea, he came from the back. The sea was fortified by the British, but the Japanese came by the [unintelligible], conquered it so . . .

**SH:** This was after you left though.

**FE:** This was, no, before I left, I think, before I left I think it was. Yeah.

**SH:** So your cousin said, come to America.

**FE:** On account of this, I quit my job and tried to get to America. I was, I had to go to the American consulate and ask and give my quota number and they told me, yes, I can get the visa.

**SH:** Your quota had arrived.

**FE:** Yeah. So I thought, let me think it over, because I had intentions to stay in Singapore for the rest of my life. So as my cousin wrote, we should leave everything, so I followed their advice and I quit the job and went to the, yeah, an American boat didn't come at this time, it was war, no American boat came. So I had to go to Shanghai to have, to get an American boat.

**SH:** That was the only reason you went to Shanghai.

**FE:** Was the only reason that I went to Shanghai.

**SH:** And how did you get to Shanghai?

**FE:** With a Japanese boat.

**SH:** A Japanese boat.

**FE:** Yeah, and I had relatives from my wife, which were in Shanghai, on the same boat they were, when I came to Singapore, they were on the same boat.

**SH:** And they had gone on, they continued on to Shanghai.

**FE:** They continued to Shanghai, yeah, but I had to go down to Shanghai to get an American boat. And so I had to wait three weeks until I can get this boat. It was "President", I forgot the name.<sup>1</sup>

**SH:** Harrison?

**FE:** Not Harrison.

**SH:** Not Harrison. I want to ask you about your time in Shanghai. But first I want to finish up with Singapore.

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<sup>1</sup> In a typed autobiography, Erdman remembers this boat as the "President Cleveland".

**FE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** You said that you intended to, you intended to live there the rest of your life.

**FE:** The rest of my life.

**SH:** You felt comfortable there.

**FE:** Yeah. It was very nice. Yeah. It was very hot, tropical there and . . .

**SH:** And did you meet a lot of other Jewish people in Singapore?

**FE:** Yeah. I went to the synagogue there, and always, there were, I think, two synagogues.

**SH:** What kind of a job did you have in the rubber factory there?

**FE:** I had, I had, in the office, from the office, I had a desk for myself from the office. And they had to oversee many things, you know, it's not a direct job for one thing, to be helpful in every way. For example, they imported from Australia in big containers, I forgot the name. It smells very badly. Its protection for the latex, for the liquid. They got two-hundred pound containers, very big, from there to, no, bigger. And they shipped this out to their plantations, because they bought their liquid rubber and they had to prepare it with this material, what was it? This is funny.

**SH:** It's a name I would know?

**FE:** Yeah, its a common chemical.

**SH:** Formaldehyde.

**FE:** Not formaldehyde. It was used in rubber. It's . . .

**SH:** You'll think of it.

**FE:** It's, getting this age, your memory is a little bit weak. And I had many things, I had many workers there to, to direct and so on.

**SH:** And did you do this job in English?

**FE:** In English? Yeah.

**SH:** Everything was in English. And you knew English already from Vienna?

**FE:** A little bit I knew English and I had, I developed books, you know, for the process, and so on.

**SH:** So it was a good job.

**FE:** It was very good job, yeah. I would have stayed there, but some of my cousins wrote me, they could get the visas, so I decided to go to America.

**SH:** Let me ask you about that decision. Was that a hard decision? You liked it in Singapore, but you were afraid of the war coming.

**FE:** Yeah. The war was already there, so this is the reason why I went to America.

**SH:** Did you make the decision to go to America after the Japanese invaded Singapore?

**FE:** It was, I think, before, before, close before, probably. Yeah. Because I, when I came to American consulate, they told me I can have the visa. So, I told them, "Let me think this over."

## **BREAK IN RECORDING**

**FE:** Where did we stop?

**SH:** I, I wanted to ask you about the Jewish community. [whistling noise] What's that noise?

**FE:** In Singapore?

**SH:** In Singapore. What is that? Is that this?

**FE:** Yeah.

**SH:** This makes it. I see. The, how many Jews were in Singapore?

**FE:** I couldn't tell you exactly, but there were many Jews, and mostly Sephardic Jews.

**SH:** Did you, when you were in Singapore for the year, was most of your social life with those Jews, or was it with other people?

**FE:** No, there were only Chinese. Mostly the population is Chinese, then there are

Japanese, and India, from India. No, we contacted, we made friends with people from Vienna. And for example . . .

**SH:** This is, this is the microphone, even though it doesn't look like it.

**FE:** Yeah, for example, it came Passover. So I invited all the Vienna friends I knew there and we had a nice Passover. And I went to the synagogue, it was all Sephardic. For example, they read the Torah every day, you know the Jewish, European Jews only on Saturday, they read the Torah. So it was nice.

**SH:** So you were able to recreate a little of Vienna in Singapore.

**FE:** No, I didn't recreate it, [laughs] but we were all friends with the Viennese people. We were not many, we were not too many.

**SH:** How many?

**FE:** I couldn't tell you exactly. I had about ten friends.

**SH:** Making a lot of noise, isn't it?

**FE:** Yeah.

**SH:** Then please tell me about Shanghai, coming to Shanghai, what you saw and what you did for your few weeks there.

**FE:** It was, I think, it was at that time, the Japanese entered Shanghai. And they were very nasty, the Japanese. But I have nothing to do with them, you know. I had my board ticket, and we made visits so.

**SH:** You stayed with your wife's relatives.

**FE:** Stayed with wife's relatives, yeah.

**SH:** And what kind of place did they have? Did they have their own apartment?

**FE:** They had their own apartment, yeah.

**SH:** Do you remember where in Shanghai that was?

**FE:** I didn't know where.

**SH:** Did, what, when did you arrive in Shanghai?

**FE:** In, in, wait a minute, I think, I arrived in, in America, Nov-, October, I think. Yeah, October, 25th of October.

**SH:** Of 1940 this is?

**FE:** October of 1940, yeah.

**SH:** So, you were in Shanghai in the summer then.

**FE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** What did you see of Jews in Shanghai, of the Jewish community there?

**FE:** I thought they were poor, poor. The conditions were not good.

**SH:** You saw this barracks where they . . .

**FE:** Yeah I saw the barracks, where we met some people which were my neighbors, which were mechanics, Jewish mechanics, you know, and I met them there too. They let me come in and see everything. It was, it's very poor.

**SH:** Your wife's relatives were not in the barracks, though, they had . . .

**FE:** No, they had their own apartment.

**SH:** How did they manage to do that?

**FE:** I don't know, they were going on the same boat with us, but they probably had money.

**SH:** You think they had some money?

**FE:** Yeah. They had a small business in Vienna, so not indirect, they were selling leather, leather for the shoemakers.

**SH:** And then you waited for your . . .

**FE:** Then waited for three weeks, then the boat came, so we went to America. We stopped in Honolulu, and then on the boat came the wife of the chaplain, the Jewish chaplain in the Army. She gave us a sightseeing trip with a few others.

**SH:** Were there other Jewish people on the boat?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** And you were on your way to Detroit, is that what you said?

**FE:** I was on the way, yeah, my cousin in Detroit wrote me, that I have a cousin which I never knew, in San Francisco. They had a hotel and they had apartment houses, they rented apartments. So he asked me, [unintelligible] first time, he asked me if I want to live in the hotel or an apartment. I preferred an apartment, so I got an apartment where I was staying two weeks in, in San Francisco. And then along came a salesman, a salesman came, a German-speaking salesman also from Europe and he told I should stay in San Francisco, and rich relatives they will help him, but I decided to come to Detroit, because I thought my daughter will come, will be there too. But she was not there.

**SH:** You thought she would be there already?

**FE:** I thought she would be there already.

**SH:** When you left Singapore, were you able to take some money with you, that you had saved, from Singapore?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I sent also money to England for my daughter and she is still in contact with these people, there is only one, there were two daughters, teachers, only one now is alive and she is still in contact with her, and she comes to visit us when she comes to America, and my daughter when she went to England, she was with them, very close relationship.

**SH:** Could you tell me, when you sent your daughter to England, did you have an address that you could then send mail to. How did you know where she would be?

**FE:** This I did not know, but I had relatives know, relatives from my wife, from Vienna, they went to England, to Newcastle, they had relatives there and from there I got the information where she was, and they recommended some people, who take care, take care of her.

**SH:** And then you had an address and you could send mail to her from Singapore. Did you get mail from her also in Singapore?

**FE:** Then I had an address, yeah, I sent also money for her. A very interesting story is this. Before we left home in Vienna, there came a man who wanted to buy a, a rubber heels for export, but I didn't work anymore, couldn't do it, and he told me if you have a chance, come to Singapore and you will make good over there, and I didn't know his name and he left. And when I came down from the boat I heard my name called, Mr. Erdman, Mr. Erdman, it was this man here who told me I should come to Singapore, and he and his sister had a store there in Singapore and gave me six white suits, yeah [laughs] without money. They paid, of course.



**SH:** He was Jewish also?

**FE:** He was Jewish, yeah, yeah, Jewish.

**SH:** So you found many generous people?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** I want to go back to Vienna for a minute.

**FE:** Yeah.

**SH:** You had an Ameri-, you had planned to go to America in any case, you had a number, a quota number, how did you get that quota number? How did that work?

**FE:** I applied, I applied for America.

**SH:** Was that after Kristallnacht or before?

**FE:** I think before, yeah, but my visa was not, my quota number was due.

**SH:** Because so many other people had applied?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah, and also when I came the first time to Singapore, the American consulate, they said I have to get the papers, where I make the application so they sent, they sent to Vienna to get, they want the papers and when they got them, they let me know that I can get the visa now.

**SH:** So when do you think you made this decision to try to go to America?

**FE:** When my cousin wrote me, "Leave everything, leave the best job, come because there will be war."

**SH:** I mean in Vienna when you first decided to . . .

**FE:** To go? It was the only way I could go without a visa.

**SH:** No, I mean, you, you said you went to the, you got this quota number before Kristallnacht. Why did you want to go to America, what made you decide then that you would . . . ?

**FE:** Because I had relatives there.

**SH:** And was this after Hitler had already, was this after the *Anschluß*?

**FE:** Yeah, after the *Anschluss*.

**SH:** So that was enough, you decided it's time to leave.

**FE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** But many other Jewish people in Vienna were not . . .

**FE:** They had no chances, maybe? Are you from Vienna too?

**SH:** My grandparents.

**FE:** Your grandparents. Where were you born?

**SH:** In New York.

**FE:** In New York already? So you're lucky.

**SH:** My grandparents and my father were, my father was born in Vienna.

**FE:** In Vienna, too.

**SH:** And he went, he came to America in 1938.

**FE:** '38, that's when Hitler came, yeah.

**SH:** He was 18.

**FE:** Yeah.

**SH:** And my grandparents went to Shanghai.

**FE:** Yeah.

**SH:** They couldn't go, they couldn't come to America. They could send him, but they couldn't come themselves and then they went to Shanghai in 1939.

**FE:** And they stayed there?

**SH:** They stayed there until 1949.

**FE:** '49.

**SH:** And then they came to the United States. That was how I got interested in

Shanghai, because of their experience.

**FE:** Yeah. You were there?

**SH:** I was there in April, over Passover. It was very, do you have any interest in going back to Shanghai? Well, you weren't in Shanghai very long, but Singapore? Would you want to go back to Singapore?

**FE:** Yes, I would like to go back to Singapore. It's already fifty years.

**SH:** Yes.

**FE:** That's interesting, I had a very good job, I had freedom, for example, it came Rosh ha-Shana, Yom Kippur, so I asked my boss that I will have to stay out. He told me, "You don't have to ask me anything. When you want to stay out, you can stay out. You don't have to ask, to report to me."

**SH:** So was there any anti-semitism in Singapore that you felt?

**FE:** No, no, none. I had contact with the business people, too, because I bought equipment for the company. And there were no anti-semitism.

**SH:** What else can I ask? Tell me about establishing yourself in Detroit, when you got to Detroit.

**FE:** I went to, I lived with one cousin, he had a house, and I lived with him. And one other cousin, the brother, they had a distillery, he was a partner in a distillery, Arrow Distillery. I think the still was taken over by JB, a big company, and they gave me a job right away. I took, covered bottles with caps, liquor bottles with caps, I got forty cents an hour. And when I accumulated a little bit money, because I didn't spend it, I didn't have to pay rent and so and food, when I accumulated a little bit money, I stopped working there and went on an excursion to see what I can get. I went to Philadelphia and there was a rubber factory, but it was not producing anything. I had to wait a while and I worked in another factory where they made raincoats. I had a little experience of this, because we made raincoats, my brother made rain coats [unintelligible] . So and then, but it was nothing, so I went to, to New York.

[Door-bell rings]

## **BREAK IN RECORDING**

**FE:** What did I . . . ?

**SH:** I was just finishing up with Mr. Erdman's story.

**Michael Vass:** That's fine, I have plenty of time, I am only 84.

**SH:** Oh I see. [laughs]

**FE:** Where did I stop?

**SH:** You were saying about, you got a job in a place that made raincoats.

**FE:** Yeah, yeah, then I went, it was nothing then in Pennsylvania. So I went to New York. In New York I got a job from a company . . .

**SH:** Was your wife coming with you on . . . ?

**FE:** No, she was staying in Detroit. Then I got a job in a rubber company and when I came I bought some overalls for work and I came in the morning for the first day, so the people, the other workers got on strike, because I'm not a union member. So I had to give up this. Then I met these people from, a customer from Vienna, who took my [unintelligible] and he was learning something about rubber and was starting up a little factory, and after a year or so, he quit with his partner and I went with him into a business, and this was 1945. We hired a place, rented the place and equipped it, machinery, and then worked five years there with him.

**SH:** This is in New York?

**FE:** It was in New York, yeah. And then we separated, I paid him out, and I bought a factory in Union City, and I moved there by myself, from 1950 I was by myself in Union City. I gave the business to my daughter, she still . . .

**SH:** And meanwhile your daughter arrived from England?

**FE:** Yeah, she arrived from England by plane, but we couldn't, didn't want, didn't were allowed to inform me when the plane arrives, so I waited two days here for her, but she didn't come. Then I went to Baltimore, I had a job there in Baltimore in a rubber factory, so I went there, and left a message there they should tell, let me know, should phone me when she arrives. And one day I got a phone call that she has arrived and I went as fast as I could to take a train to Baltimore, to New York. I came to the airport and was standing a little girl with a rucksack, you know what a rucksack is, on the back, yeah, and was crying. All people which came, all people left already, so nobody there, so I couldn't recognize her. [laughs] But this was my daughter and the next day somebody told me, "I read in the paper, in the *Times* about the arrival of your daughter." And I still got the papers around here. So we had a very hard time, because she was like a strange, like a strange child, she

wanted to go back to England. But little by little, it took a long time, until she got acquainted. Now she is contact with this one daughter, still alive, still in England. It's not much what I went through.

**SH:** No, it's very interesting.

**FE:** I went through a lot.

**SH:** You mention in here a story . . .

**FE:** Some autographical mistakes . . .

**SH:** That's alright, you mention this story about this coffeehouse, the coffeehouse [unintelligible] . Could you tell me that?

**FE:** Yeah, Café Metropole, no, Café Johann Strauss.<sup>2</sup> It's opposite the Hotel Metropole, where the Nazis had their headquarters, and one day . . .

**SH:** It says in here, that it was the only, it was the only place where Jews . . .

**FE:** The only place where Jews could come together in coffeehouse.

**SH:** Other coffeehouses said we're not going to serve Jews.

**FE:** No, no. And suddenly we saw people coming in, police and, police and detectives and they formed two rows and all had to leave. They were all touched up with stuff, what ever they had. And I had a, a . . .

**SH:** Attaché case.

**FE:** Attaché case, where I wrote letters to the outside companies where I wanted to get, try to help me to get a visa to them, and describe what we went through. And they would have seen this, they would have put me in jail. I was two times in jail for eight days for no reason. And, according to the dream of my father, he said, "Don't worry, nothing will happen to you and you will come out safe." And everything was, we had to go, we were visiting people who left for Israel, friends, you know. And everyone had to go out and we were touched up and I went through the line of detectives with my attaché case and they didn't touch anything. This was also like my father told me.

**SH:** Could you tell me about being in jail? Why were you in jail?

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<sup>2</sup> In a typed autobiography, Erdman names the café "Richard Strauss".

**FE:** This I don't know.

**SH:** Tell me about what happened.

**FE:** They put, they put me just in jail.

**SH:** They arrived at your house or your work . . .

**FE:** Yeah, well yeah.

**SH:** At night or in the daytime?

**FE:** This I couldn't tell you, but twice I was eight days in jail.

**SH:** And what, did they talk to you in jail, what did they do?

**FE:** No. [laughs] I don't think so. They were friendly.

**END SIDE A**

**END OF INTERVIEW**

Fred Erdman was born in 1899 in Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1904 his family moved to Vienna. In March 1938 he lost his savings and his rubber factory, and in November his family was arrested. He sent his daughter to England with a children's transport. In July 1939 Erdman left Vienna with his wife on their way to Shanghai, but was able to get off in Singapore and was hired to work in a rubber factory. In 1940 his American quota number came up, and they sailed to the United States, stopping for three weeks in Shanghai. Erdman was reunited with his daughter in the United States.

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

**SH:** My interview with Fred Erdman got cut off, because I didn't hear the tape go off, we missed a few minutes at the end. What we missed, the end of the story of him being in jail, where he wasn't able to tell me about why he was arrested or much that happened in there, he was just in and then out. And then I asked him about whether others of his relatives had tried to get out of the country or had wanted to get out, whether he had conversions with family members about coming out, but he was unable to recall any of that. He didn't talk to them about it.

I do want to say the very first thing that he showed me when I arrived in his apartment was a coin, a five Marks, five Reichsmarks piece, 1934, which was the coin, the only money that he was allowed to take on the boat and he still had it, it was a memento for him, he still had the coin which represented the only money that he was able to take out of Vienna.

Mr. Erdman was a very nice man, very willing to talk, very hopeful that what he said would be useful to me, although he wasn't sure that it would be. He is a small man, about five feet tall, I would say. Born in 1899 as he said, 91 years old and extremely helpful. He met, he happens to live in the same apartment, the same retirement building, two doors down from Judith Isaacson's mother, and that was how he, that was how Judith found out about him and I found out about him.