

Bates College

SCARAB

Shanghai Jewish Oral History Collection

Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library

6-9-1990

Bigus, Gerald oral history interview

Steve Hochstadt

Follow this and additional works at: https://scarab.bates.edu/shanghai_oh

GERALD BIGUS

LAGUNA HILLS, CALIFORNIA

JUNE 9, 1990

Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt

**Transcription: Amy Brunner
Philip Pettis
Francisco Ugarte
Steve Hochstadt**

© 1996 Gerald Bigus and Steve Hochstadt

Gerald Bigus: Quite a bit were there, the Goldbergs and the, the Grundlands.¹

Steve Hochstadt: I don't know some, the Goldbergs I don't know about. Maybe later you could tell me some, some other names that I don't know, of people who were there.

GB: Okay.

SH: That would be helpful.

GB: All right.

SH: What I'm doing is now doing interviews with as many Shanghai Jews as I can find. Eventually I'd like to do some writing. I'd like to write a book about your experiences, which somehow captures the personal side and the human side of life, both getting to Shanghai and life in Shanghai, and then leaving Shanghai and what happened to you all. But that's a bit in the future. I want to collect a lot of interviews. I've done about twenty-five so far. I want to keep going. So it will take me a long time.

GB: Yeah, I can see that.

SH: So what I'd like you to do, if you could, is just to start at the beginning, a little bit about your background, where you were born, about what your family did, and then leading up to Shanghai. Why the decision to go to Shanghai and when, and preparations for leaving, and then going to Shanghai, and then what happened to you or what you did in Shanghai, and then finally coming to the United States.

GB: Are you recording already?

SH: Yes.

GB: Okay.

SH: So. Let me say one thing: I may interrupt and ask some questions.

GB: No, sure.

SH: If I ask any questions that you don't feel like answering, feel absolutely free to say . . .

GB: No, I won't.

SH: . . . "I don't, I don't want to answer that." And, but I'm mainly interested in, in just getting some details, probably, that you might skip over in your story. That's why I might ask questions.

¹ See the interview with Heinz and Edith Grundland, Laguna Hills, California, June 27, 1991.

GB: Okay, well, I was born in Berlin, where I grew up, went to school and where my life was, you could say, interrupted in, in every way. I wanted to be something different than it turned out, because of schooling, because of the interruption, because of the Nazis. And we, my parents had this store of gentlemen's outfitting, like suits, coats, and the likewise. And it was destroyed on the Crystal Night and then we seriously thought about emigration. Actually the only one, to be truthful, in the family that pressed on wandering out or emigrating from Germany was I. I was fourteen years old. I saw it coming. I had some friends, so-called friends that were Christian, that were in the Hitler Youth and I could see what's coming, what they told me, what they learned already then before the war. They were telling of, telling, "The Jews against the wall." [makes sounds of machine guns] That's what they told me before the war already. That's what they learned. So I saw it coming. I told my parents, if you don't go out, our teacher in school said that he had opportunity to bring some boys to England. I said, I'm going to register for England, if you don't go out. Now our trouble, our problem, is we had no one in the whole world. In other words, if you want to go to America, you need someone to send an affidavit. Wherever you want, you need affidavit or visa. We had no one. [unintelligible] was closed. So where do you go? And a lot of people like us who had no one in the world and wanted to get out, who thought of Shanghai? You know? Then all of a sudden it was, I think it, was it before the Crystal Night or what? I'm not sure. The word Shanghai came up. It's a free city, you don't need no visa, no, no entry visa, no nothing. All that you need is a ship's passage. And very soon the few ship's passage were gone like that. And then, as I said, our store was destroyed, and then my parents really tried to get out, but there was no other way than Shanghai, because we had no one in the whole world.

SH: Did they try to go to other places?

GB: Oh yes. We registered already months and months ago to South America, and, but everywhere, to Australia, for instance. Always negative replies, you know.

SH: And that was before Kristallnacht that you made . . .

GB: That was before Crystal Night, but negative replies, you know. And for South America, I think that only somewhere up in the mountains and you needed, I think my father had, he didn't pass, because he didn't have a bad heart, but you needed something. I don't know. So, negative replies everywhere. So, and my brother, he was older than I, he was already married, had a little kid, he didn't live with us anymore, you know, he said, "Well, why don't you wait? I'm sure Hitler will, there will be a war and you'll see the Nazis will get out." And I'm the only one who said, "I want to get out." So after the Crystal Night my parents came also to my decision. So . . .

SH: Had you had . . .

GB: . . . we went to travel bureau and there were no ship's passages, but then we still had some money and my parents paid twice the money under the table, and a few days later was a ship's passage there.

SH: Where did that come from? Who, who was getting bribed then?

GB: Okay. We went to . . .

SH: The people in the travel . . . ?

GB: Well no, the way we know it from our side, that the owner of the travel bureau told us, "Well, right now," to my father, "right now we don't have anything, but let me see." A few days later we got a call. There was that family that wanted to go to Shanghai, but they don't go now. Those, there are three tickets available, but of course they want extra money. So, as I said, at that time we still had some money, so my father paid it, and we got the passages to Shanghai. And we had to, whatever, I mean, the store was destroyed and whatever we had, our furniture, we had beautiful furniture, we had to sell it for next to nothing. And we were allowed anyhow to take ten marks out. That's all. Ten marks. And then we went to Shanghai. And we were the only ones from my family. All my other family, from my father's side, my mother's side, stayed there, and they are gone in the Holocaust. None of them got out. Not one. I'm the only survivor of my family.

SH: Do you remember any conversations with your brother . . .

GB: Yes.

SH: . . . or with your in-laws . . .

GB: Yes.

SH: . . . in which they explained why they didn't want to leave?

GB: For instance, my uncle, my, the brother of my mother, said, "You have to hurry out of Germany. You will see. I will send you a visa to come back to Germany one day." And I said to my brother, I said, "You," he was always politically a little bit, I want to say, I wouldn't say advanced, but on the level, I said, "You had always such a good outlook. I don't understand you. Why don't you," he couldn't, he was smiling and I, his wife, my sister-in-law said, in that time there was a war going on in, in China, because the Japanese had invaded China in 1937. He said, "Well, to die on the roadside in Shanghai, I can do that here, too." I still remember the words, but he said it in German. Do you speak German?

SH: Yes.

GB: "*Verrecken kann ich auch hier.*" Do you understand that, the word "*verrecken*", that means to die in a low way, "*verrecken*", you know. So I still remember it. And so we got out of Shang-, out, out of Germany and landed in Shanghai.

SH: Could I ask you another question?

GB: Sure, sure. Go ahead.

SH: You learned something from your, your schoolhood, your school friends, about what the Nazis . . .

GB: Not school friends. I went to a Jewish school. Berlin had so many Jews, we had our own school. Not necessarily a religious school, but schools where only Jews went, Jewish teachers. We didn't learn the New Testament, but only the Old Testament and we learned Hebrew to pray and so on, but otherwise a secular school. So the Christians, I wouldn't say friends, I mean, two friends and some acquaintances, we didn't go to school together, because as I said, I only went to Jewish school.

SH: But they told you about what was happening?

GB: Well, the way, for instance, I remember one day we were going on the street, I don't know whether if it was 1938 or '37, and I went with that one boy who lived in the same house and he had his friend, who didn't know that I was Jewish, and we all went, you know, and we spoke and that, and then we, and "*Wenn wir die Itzigs an die Wand stellen und . . .* [machine gun noises] ." So my, my friend, you know, he nudged me and just told me, told me to be quiet, you know. And at another time, they spoke also about something like that, and he looked at me and said, "*Ist das nicht auch ein Jude?*" So Gerd Grabowsky said, "*Ja, aber er ist ein anständiger Jude.*" So I said, "Hey. Do you know any *unanständige* Juden?" He didn't answer that, you know. He didn't answer. So, they believed, the way I see it, they had the education. The teachers were indoctrinated with the Nazi manifesto, and they taught the children. The children believed them. All the youth was infested with the Nazi doctrine against the Jews.

SH: I'm just trying to figure out how you came to this very firm decision that you had to leave.

GB: Oh, I could, I could see it coming. I believed that if a war comes and the war will come, we Jews will be put in concentration camp. We would not live that over. I mean, I saw it coming. I don't know, in 1939 when the war broke out, I told them, "In 1945 the war will end." So help me God, I did. I, I just knew it. I just knew it. I could see it, I mean, and, and the way that the whole, wherever you went was propaganda. Let's see, at the end, we didn't, weren't allowed to go to the movies anymore. But when we were allowed, before every movie we had the weekly news, "*Tönende Wochenschau.*" From A to Z was Nazi propaganda, Hitler talking and so on, and the whole thing, I mean, I could see it coming. I said, I said, "I'm not staying here."

SH: Could you tell me about preparations that your family made to leave: selling things, or packing things up, or what got left behind and what got taken?

GB: Well, I think we did put some want ads in, in the newspaper that we have had to sell things, furniture or, people, I mean not private persons, but rather from stores, came to our place and bought whatever we had to sell. We had excellent furniture. And we acquired a professional packer, everybody did that, you know. And they came and

packed everything for us, you know. We had everything ready. In fact some officials from the German government came to our place to inspect what we take along, you know. They were very nice. They were not in uniform. They were very nice. And they okayed everything, because we really had nothing. We had, gave all our gold, we had to give it away already.

SH: Your gold?

GB: Oh, yes. All Jews had to give their gold away, except their wedding ring. That was after, I think it was, it was after Crystal Night, I'm not quite sure there, oh yes. We all had to give gold and, and diamonds and all. We all had to give it away. We left with ten marks, that was it.

SH: So what, was there any money that was left over between what you sold and then buying these tickets? Was there anything left? Any money left that you . . . ?

GB: I don't remember. My parents did that. I didn't handle the money. I was, I said, a fourteen-year-old boy. I don't remember.

SH: What do you think about the fact that you were about to go to Shanghai?

GB: Well, let's say it that way, in a way, in a way I was glad, getting out of, to get out of Germany. And in a way it was like something new, expectant, you know. Everything has two sides, so that view also had, had two sides. I was sad to leave my youth behind. I loved the way we lived. Besides the Nazis there, I had a happy youth, you see. My relatives and everything, I had to, to leave this behind, I mean, I was sad about that. On the other hand, I was glad to get out, and I had no thoughts about Shanghai. I knew there was a war going on, but, and I knew we had no other choice. In a way, I was glad to get out, but that was all, you know. Anything else for the time before, from the beginning? No?

SH: No. Did you try to take anything that was, that you thought might sell in Shanghai?

GB: Well, we did sell, we had to sell some things later on. Oh, yes. I don't know whether we specially took those along for selling. I don't remember any more. But I had a nice little library, you know, for my books. I had to leave it all behind. I, I wanted to take a few things, but I couldn't, you know. So, so when we came to Shanghai, the first few months we had to stay in a, in a camp, you know. And there we formed already some new friends, that stayed all those years with us. In fact some of these friends sent us later an affidavit so that I could come here. And she died, but her husband is still living here, across the way, over there. You know, that formed in 1939 in a camp in Shanghai. And after a few months, we found a room and that's where we lived all the time in Shanghai. And we were glad to get that one room. It had no kitchen, no bathroom, no nothing, and yet we were glad. There was one bathroom for the whole house and we were glad that that bathroom had a water closet. Some houses next to us didn't have a water closet; there was also one bathroom. So, those were the conditions. We had some, a little cooker in front of the room. There was a corridor hall, where it was

to this room, to this room, you know. And there we had our electric cooker, which we used. And sometimes when electricity was scarce during the war, we had a little, we called it a Chinese oven. It was like a, a flower pot, with a hole in the bottom and you put some coal on top and you stand there with a fan. Oh, yeah, you had to improvise for a lot of things in Shanghai. Now, what I remember in Shanghai in the beginning. Let's say, all us emigrants that were there were more or less the same types that we had no one in the whole world. We had to go to Shanghai and some of them there in the concentration camps, they had preference in, in getting passages sometimes. There was an organization in Germany, in Berlin, Hilfsverein, that if there were passages available and they had to get persons out from the concentration camps, they took them first, which is understandable. And there are a lot of ex-KZler, how we called them there in Shanghai. But we had more or less all the same. Either the difference was from where you came from.

Now you would think, since we were all Jews, all refugees, we would love one another. Unfortunately in the beginning, it was not the case. Now when you think back, I mean, psychologically it might be explainable. If you put together on a relatively small scale a lot of people from different places, tensions grew up, you know. In the beginning you say, hey, you are from Berlin, you are from Vienna, you are, you know? They call each other names and so on. It's, it's hard to believe we were all in the same predicament. But that's what happened.

SH: So how were the splits? How did they . . . ?

GB: Well, you, you heard words flying around, you know. Nerves were on high, you would say, you see.

SH: I don't understand.

GB: We were all in a strange country. Some of them, most of them didn't know the language, they didn't know English, some of them. I knew a little bit of English, because I went to high school in Germany, where we learned English. And learning opportunities were, let's, let's say they were different. They were very little, but they were also different. That means people who were really, I knew some people who were, like my father was very, quite well off in Germany, you know. They could do nothing. I mean, he tried. My father used to be a tailor years ago, before he started doing bidding up businesses, you know. And that's what he started again in Shanghai again. And then later he bought a little bit of cloth and made some linen suits on our sewing machine, which we took along and that's what he sold. And he tried to make a living for my mother and for myself, you know. And, and, but on the other hand, there were people who were next to nothing in Germany, and I don't want to name any names, that became quite big in Shanghai. One opened a bar. She was known in certain circles, also in Japanese circles. It was said, it was rumored among us, we don't know how true it is, she took only milk bath for her, for her good body. It's the truth. And there were some people who got big in Shanghai, if they, if you knew how, and the people who knew how were not always the best elements. And so we had to, but later on the differences became more and more less pronounced, I would say. Later on, we had, you get along with the Berliners, you get along with the Viennese, after some years, you know.

But in the beginning there were, they, for instance, to give you, ever heard of the word *Luftgeschäft*, air business? That was in the first years in Shanghai businesses, businesses that don't exist, they're made. To give an example, a friend of ours who also tried to make, everybody tried to make a living somehow, bought wholesale soap, boxes of soap. Now it's time to sell it. So let's assume his name is Abraham. There came Mr., Mr. Solomon to him, who wants to also make a living, "I can sell your soap." You say, okay, Mr. Abraham bought his soap, let's say it was twenty dollars, so he invested his money, he is asking let's say twenty-five dollars. It's just [unintelligible]. So Mr. Solomon now is going round offering soap for twenty-five dollars the case, you know. He meets Mr. Rosenthal. He knows Mr. Rosenthal buys soap. "I have a deal for you. Boxes of soap. Do you have enough? It's ready there if you want it." "How much?" So he's, his was twenty-five dollars. He wants to make some money, too, let's say thirty, thirty dollars. That's a lot. Okay, twenty-seven dollars, if you take a whole box or two boxes. Twenty-seven dollars. So Rosenthal said, "I know somebody who buys soap." So he goes to Abraham. He says, "I have soap for you." Abraham says, "I have soap a lot, but if it's a good deal, let me know." "Twenty-seven dollars." "Twenty-seven dollars! Are you nuts?" No, no, he wants already thirty dollars, because he wants to make some money. "I'm selling my soap for twenty dollars! I just offered, in fact, Solomon . . ." He said, "But Solomon is the one who offered me." He wants to sell him back his own soap. That is *Luftgeschäfte*, you know. And there were a lot of *Luftgeschäfte* in Shanghai. I remember one day, they would say, "There you can get gasoline, or was it petroleum, a whole canister full for, let's say, eighteen dollars and you sell it right away next block for twenty dollars." So my father and I, we went there and I saw a lot of emigrants going there. And it was the truth. We got, we paid, each one got two, I carried two cans at home. You know, and my father paid eighteen dollars and we went one block and sold the same thing. We were glad to do, you know?

I didn't go to school in Shanghai any more, because I wanted to help my parents. I wanted to learn a profession. So after some months, you know, after I guess walking around Shanghai, that part of Shanghai as I told you was half destroyed by the way. And then it started to being built up and it looked, after a year, it looked quite nice. But when I came it was half destroyed, you know, so. In the beginning some friends of us were just roaming the streets, you know. Just, not roaming, walking around, like adventuring, you know, the whole matter. But then, we were settling down and I said, "Hey, I'm going to learn a profession." And a friend of mine, he was two years older, he started to learn, or he learned already the radio trade. So, he said, "I can get you a job in one of the firms." And that's what I started to be an apprentice in the radio trade, radio repairing, and radio in general, radio building, we built more radios in the beginning than repaired. And that's what I learned. And . . .

SH: Was this a Jewish firm?

GB: Yes, there were quite a bit of Jewish firms that went into the radio business. I know of, let's say, Three-Point, Transmare, Rekord, Hahn, and another Hahn, I know about of

five. That's quite a bit.² And we built radios and sold them, and under the circumstances they were not bad. And . . .

SH: So you started working then full-time at this?

GB: Well, let's say I was an apprentice there. But I learned more and more. And I later made my journeyman's examination, you know, and then started working on my own also.

SH: So who organized this journeyman's examination?

GB: All right, now there, don't forget there were twenty thousand middle European refugees there. Different professions, some of them engineers, masters, you know, after journeyman, you become a master and so on, and they got together and formed the Guild of Craftsmen.

SH: When was that? Do you know when that was formed?

GB: No, I don't. It must be, it must have been the beginning of, of, maybe 1940, 1939, 1940, I don't know, and they organized that apprentices had to make their examination, and they had to learn. It was a good institution. I still have my diploma there, somewhere, you know. And . . .

SH: Was it an attempt, you think, to recreate the German system there in Shanghai?

GB: The German system? Well, let's say it this way, no, it was no attempt, but we were all brought up in Europe. Let's say, we were indoctrinated with the, in the way, the German way is to work, the good work, you know. The German worker was a good worker, handicraftsman, and to know what you're doing and really work, give a good job for the money. And that's what we were all doing. Whether it was for that purpose, I don't think so, but it happened to be that way. And . . .

SH: So what was your exam like to become a journeyman?

GB: Well, first was theory and then practice, the test, practical test. Practical test was for a radio engineer and then for, for the theory test, I came before a *Gremium* of, I don't know, seven or ten teachers, which I don't know, which I didn't know except one. They all asked me questions on radio and mathematic and there were some, most of them were nice, but some were just maybe a show-off to show, put themselves in a good light, to show how much they know, and asked us questions which we never learned, which had nothing to do with operations, yet to show how much they know. That happened too, you know, but in general, of course, I passed and I received a diploma.

² In a telephone conversation of January 28, 1996, Bigus remembered another radio firm, Jacob's Radio Workshop.

SH: How old were you when that happened?

GB: Well, let me see, I got my diploma a little bit later, because in the meantime the war ended and my father had died and, well, a lot of things happened in the meantime, I got a it '46, I believe, I got my diploma. So, but by then, you know, Shanghai underwent so much of a, especially Hongkew, I wouldn't say Shanghai, Shanghai too, of a change. For instance, right from the beginning, which I like, there were a lot of artists in, in, among us. Stage artists. They found right away stage plays and there were singers and comics. And very good ones. And we had our own plays and theater, you know. And there were some painters there which were very good. One opened up a store in, in San Francisco. He died in the meantime. But there were some, quite some good people among them. Some others too, but Shanghai left a memory, let's say it that way, a love and hate. First of all it saved our lives and fulfilled its purpose for us. It cost some of our lives, too. My father died of a tropical disease, which we didn't know even existed, never heard of. But then he never, you know, he was a healthy, strong man. But within eight days he was dead, you know. So I mean, but we formed our first loves in Shanghai. Now I was in the growing up years. I had a Viennese girlfriend and a girlfriend from, one was from Leipzig and one was from Berlin. And you know, and then we formed so-called, usually we stuck together, let's say, all our friends that I had from the beginning stayed till the end, till everybody went his own way, you know, I mean, when they left Shanghai, you know. And we had parties, we made parties in the evening, you know. And dances. We had dances. We had records, you know. It was nice. We had musicians. There were a lot of musicians there. And so the memories of Shanghai were, as I said, was a love-hate. We had good times and bad times. And then later on, you know, when the proclamation came out of the District, we had one advantage, we already lived in the District.³ We didn't have to move, but a lot of people who lived in the International Settlement and in the French Concession, they had to move to Hongkew and the District. That was quite tough for some of them.

SH: So from your point of view inside the District . . .

GB: Yeah.

SH: . . . how did the District change when all these people moved in and some people must have moved out?

GB: No, who moved out?

SH: Nobody moved out?

GB: No, they couldn't.

³ Bigus refers to the Japanese proclamation on February 18, 1943, which forced all stateless refugees, meaning recently arrived Jews, to move residences and businesses within three months to a bombed-out square mile in Hongkew, called the Designated Area or District.

SH: Just people moved in?

GB: I mean, emigrants were not allowed to move out. As long as they . . .

SH: Didn't some Chinese or Japanese . . .

GB: Oh, Chinese . . .

SH: . . . move out, switch out?

GB: No, they lived in different, in a different, don't forget Hongkew was quite large and the Japanese had their own district, the Japanese district, it was beyond our district, you know. And nobody moved out, but it became denser, I would say. Lodgings became scarce. Some of them had to take little rooms, you know, just to get within the District, you know. And, no, but you could see more people going, in the evening what did we do? We all walked around, you know, especially in the hot evenings, you know, you could, you'd see more people walking around, you know. We all had to live within that District. I lived in the center. Our home where I lived, you know, was right in the center of the District, Chusan Road, corner Ward Road. That was the center of the District and that's where I lived.

SH: You lived there with your parents?

GB: Yes.

SH: So you were earning some money?

GB: I was earning very little. My father was, as I said, he was selling some, he made some suits out of linen. He sold them. He had a pass, he went out of the District, you know, and he, he sold them on the market. I don't know where. I don't know, I don't go with him. That's how we . . .

SH: Was your mother working at all? Was your mother working at all?

GB: No. She kept the household. She went shopping and cleaning and so on. No. And then shortly before the war ended with Japan, my father died. And then the war ended. And then the Americans came in and I got a job. Most of, not most, but a lot of us got a job as a civilian employee with the U.S. Army. And that's when we make nice money. We were paid in United States dollar. You know, we were bombed, you know that. We were bombed. On the seventeenth of July about 50 of our people died.⁴ And a few days later on the twenty-seventh of July, 1945, my father died, a few days before the

⁴ Virtually every Shanghai survivor remembers this day vividly. Fifty years later most can say exactly where they were and what they were doing when the bombers struck, the only time that American bombs caused casualties in the ghetto. About thirty Jewish refugees were killed, along with many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Japanese and Chinese.

war's end. And, as I said, then I was an employee of the United States Army. That was a good time. We all made money.

SH: What kind of job did you have?

GB: I took one of the first jobs. I, if I would hold out longer, I would have gotten a better job, I mean, a job with, in the radio trade, but I, in the PX as a warehouse man. But it paid good and we were allowed to buy things which I brought home, you know, to my mother, because now my first duty wasn't my fatherland, I had to support my mother, you know. And 1945 I was born, I was twenty-one years old then. And we had money, I set a big stone for my father on his grave, you know. Then we could go out of course of the District, could go downtown again to Nanking Road, you know, see the big department stores again. And that's something. Shanghai was a nice city, especially in some streets, you know. And when, when we came to Shanghai, when you look it from afar, the Bund, or Bund, you know, the big high rises and the banks look quite European, you know. And Nanking Road, Bubbling Well Road, were nice, with nice old houses, you know, and homes and department stores. And so that's where we went, you know. We went to some nice, good restaurants there, you know. So there were some big dance halls with big bands playing. After it all, after the war that's when we could go out. And, but when slowly come 1946, '47, '48, '49, the emigration started to break up. People were leaving Shanghai. Then they had opportunity to go to Australia. Some of them left back to Germany, you know, went back to Germany or Austria. We wanted to get out. We wanted to get to America. But as I said, later on, came that, something what you call the cooperative affidavit, that the American Jewish Joint guaranteed for us, because at that time you needed an affidavit, a guarantor, and we had no one here. But then they guaranteed for, for the whole community. And whoever could go to America went to America on the Joint cooperative, cooperative affidavit.⁵

SH: And is that how you came over?

GB: No. There was still the quota system. I was born in Berlin. I had the German quota, which was very good. My mother was born in a little provincial town. She never knew that, because she, the father left there, you know, and she was a little kid. But that was part of Germany till 1918. After 1918 Poland took it over. So she had the Polish quota, which was very bad. And I could have left and left my mother there, but I didn't want to. So I stayed with my mother and the meantime there was a civil war going on. And the Communists come closer and closer to Shanghai. And they stood close before the gates of Shanghai. Then the United Nations announced they rechartered two ships to Israel. Whoever wants to go to Israel, they allowed to go [snaps fingers] within ten days, something like that. That's where we went to.

SH: Would you have gone to Israel otherwise except for . . . ?

⁵ The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is a relief organization, which funneled considerable funds to Shanghai refugees and eventually opened an office directed by Laura Margolis in Shanghai to oversee relief operations.

GB: Well, I was a Zionist and there was a war going on. I would have gone anywhere to get out of Shanghai at that time, because of the war and we wanted to get out. I was registered to Australia, to United States, and to Israel. And, as I said, there was a war going on at that time, the war of liberation in Israel. And the Polish quota still didn't come up for my mother and we didn't want to fall into the hands of the Chinese Communists. I thought till they come in and the other left outside, there could be a pogrom against the whites and they could, you know, in those uncertain times, it could, it didn't happen. But we sold everything and fast. We packed, we packed everything what we had, what we could take along and then we sold it to two Chinese who lived, who knew us around the corner, you know, who bought our bedroom and our couch and, and beddings, you know, everything. And we left for Israel. We left for Israel and . . .

SH: So when was that?

GB: It was the very end of 1948, the very end, December, I don't know, twenty-eighth or twenty-seventh, or something.

SH: On a ship?

GB: On a ship, the United Nations ship to Israel.

SH: And there were two, you said? Two of these ships.

GB: Well, one, the second ship, we were the first one, and since the Suez Canal was closed for us because of the war, we had to go all around Africa. We were about, was it two months on the water and the ship was overloaded, [laughs] wasn't that pleasant, the most pleasant of voyage, but we left Shanghai. Before of course we went several times to the cemetery to visit my father's grave and everybody went to visit their loved ones. There were quite a bit of people who died there. And . . .

SH: This ship was filled with Shanghai Jews, that's . . .

GB: Yeah, well, Jews from Germany, but also Russian Jews that were there. Don't forget that when we came there, there was a large community of Russian Jews that fled from the Revolution there. And a lot of Jews there, too, you know. And they left quite a bit, half of our ship, maybe thousand, there were two thousand there on that little ship. [laughs] About half were Russians and half were ex-Germans, you know. So, well, thinking back, as I said, Shanghai did save our lives, and conditions in Shanghai, this I forgot to tell you, were abnormal. As I said, people who, I told you that, who were nothing became big and so on. But a lot of marriages broke into, into, I mean, they separated, that they would never have done if they would have stayed in Europe. In fact good friend of ours, they are separated. All of a sudden Shanghai was, I don't know what it was, but a lot of divorces were there. There were a lot of so-called house friends, means marriage to three, you know, for three, if you know what I mean. There were a lot of divorces. So in that case Shanghai had a negative effect on some of us, you know. And . . .

SH: So you saw this among people that you knew?

GB: Yes, yes.

SH: And you don't think that would have happened if they had stayed in . . .

GB: No. It wouldn't have happened.

SH: What was the difference, do you think?

GB: Well, don't forget nerves were, in emigration, the, the, if you analyze the emigration, actually we were not emigrants, we were refugees, there is a difference between an emigrant and refugees, we were refugees, but if you live in these close quarters and little rooms sparsely furnished and with the sanitary facilities below, I mean, even a very poor family lives better in sanitary fashion than we did in Shanghai, I mean, nerves are on edge. And moral values just went to pieces, just went to pieces. So, in this respect, Shanghai changed us in a way. Shanghai changed us health-wise. Don't forget Shanghai had a subtropical climate, I believe, very humid in the summer, cold in winter. A doctor told me our blood changed in Shanghai. What we had sometimes were, became filthy and covered with a green slimy thing that I had to clean, because water was running down the walls, you know, the roof was leaking. Our landlord, he was a white Russian, an ex-Cossack, he didn't do anything to repair that. When it's raining, we had some water basins standing there and it was raining and, I mean, you know, in such a climate, in such conditions, sometimes nerves are on edge, and you do things, you say things, which you under normal circumstances wouldn't do, you know. So Shanghai in that respect changed the life of a lot of people. You know, as I said, marriages fell apart or formed anew and . . .

SH: You said that moral values went to pieces.

GB: Yes, moral values, values, for instance, let's say, I don't want to name names . . .

SH: Don't name names . . .

GB: No, I wouldn't.

SH: . . . but help me understand.

GB: No, let's say it that way, a lot of women went into bars as hostesses. Now, I don't know what they did, or after work what they did, but there were always rumors that they weren't only holding hands or sharing drinks with their customers. But I don't know.

SH: And these were women that you wouldn't expect that of or that . . .

GB: No, definitely not. Definitely not, but it's the truth.

SH: And they were, why do you think they were doing this?

GB: First of all, there's the one basic function was to stay alive, you know. To stay, for staying alive you will do a lot of things.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

GB: Now, if a lot of people wouldn't just do it like, I mean, like, they would rather be poor or, you see, for a housewife, at that time, first of all not only they didn't work, they couldn't find work, even if they wanted to. What should they do? What should they do? It's, a few of them found work as nurses, some of them, or maybe teachers, but only a few. Most of them didn't work, couldn't work, weren't able to work, you know. As I said, Shanghai conditions were not normal. And yet under such conditions you would surprise yourself, that you do things, say things which under normal conditions you wouldn't do. That was part of the emigration.

SH: Can you give any examples from yourself, where, that you did things that . . .

GB: From myself.

SH: . . . surprised you, where you felt, "I would not have done that in Berlin, but . . ."

GB: Oh. Well, at one, at one point, this is hard to say, I had a girlfriend, and another girl, another girl made advances, and I was, at that time, too young or too vain to say no, so after I brought her home I started with her. That, now that's surprising to me, because I am a one-woman man. That's me, I'm a one-woman man, you know. I don't know, well, it's hard to say. I myself, I behaved, I think, to my love quite decent, even in Shanghai. And I don't know what, what I did wrong which I wouldn't have done . . .

SH: Not necessarily the things you did wrong or that you're ashamed of . . .

GB: Oh.

SH: . . . but just things that would be, that you wouldn't have done in conditions that you feel normal . . .

GB: Oh, wait a minute! I joined a political club, the Betar, that was a Zionist, a right-wing Zionist organization.⁶ Because friends of mine were there, so I went there too. I mean, I

⁶ Betar was a conservative Zionist youth organization, founded in Riga in 1923 by Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940).

was a Zionist, but I wasn't right-wing. [laughs] Maybe center of the road, I don't know. I had maybe more socialized than [laughs] they, no. But just for the sake of it. I really don't know what, Shanghai made some changes in myself, I really have to think about it. I don't know. It made me maybe more understanding . . .

SH: Of?

GB: . . . you know, of human nature. No, I mean, maybe I, no, I think I am an understanding person anyhow. But I don't know, it, maybe more cosmopolitan, people became, because I got in contact with foreigners. When I was apprentice at that radio firm, and as long, that was before, as we still could go out of the Dis-, there was no District then there, and he was selling radios to the, the British and to, and to Japanese and so on. And I was the first apprentice, *Oberlehrling*, you know the word, and I went usually, sometimes I took another young man with me, another boy, you know, and we went in the evening to demonstrate the radios and selling them. So I got in contact, you know. And you become more cosmopolitan. Oh, later on, as we went, we went to some, when we made the more money, we went to some good Chinese restaurants. We became appreciative of good Chinese food, you know. And you became, I mean, more, I would say, wise of living and of dying. Shanghai brought you everything closer, in perspective, you know, to your own view. Everything closer, living and dying, they are now closer, you know. I don't remember ever going to, oh yeah, once in, in Berlin one of our classmates died and we all went to a funeral. But that was the only time, I didn't go to a funeral, and in Shanghai it happened so often, besides my own father, you know. So everything became more, living and dying, closer to us. And you learn, people from other cities, other behaviors, other, they named, as I said I had a Viennese girlfriend, you know. The name for the same thing, different names. I didn't know if it would be, you know. You learned more that you would, otherwise might not done that at home, you know. Maybe you become more tolerant, I don't know. But okay, now ask me questions, what would you . . .

SH: Well, I want to follow, just ask one more question about this. Do you think that relationships between boys and girls going out together were different then.

GB: One thing was different, okay, let's speak of lovemaking. Shanghai had hundreds of thousands of whorehouses. So that it was quite easy for us young men. So we all went in groups, all friends went together, you know. So . . .

SH: And were the prostitutes Chinese?

GB: All right. We went to Chinese prostitutes, yes, but there were also white Russians and there were emigrants, too, but we didn't go there.

SH: Why not?

GB: I don't know why not. Maybe they were too expensive? And we didn't, we didn't go there, because they were, they were not for us, I don't know. They were, when Americans come in, you know, sailors and so, they knew of them already. They had,

even they, they, they, I remember! We were stopped on the street, some sailors came in, American sailors, you know, in a rickshaw, you know, in that time there were still rickshaws and pedicabs, "Hey, can you tell me where is . . ." and they named, and I don't want to name the name, that and that, they named that establishment. And we told them where to go.

SH: So they knew . . .

GB: And they asked horrendous prices, those boys were paid. No, when we went we went to Chinese, you know.

SH: And you went as a group?

GB: Yeah, well, we were afraid in the beginning. We were afraid. But then later on we were, I went with another ma-, a friend, and you know, sometimes. But in the beginning, we went four of us, you know. And later, as I said, but that was easy then for us, not like here. Because the thing, as I said, it's a natural, I mean, it's natural for young men. I mean for everybody, right? And so there was no problem. And then we had dances, as I said, and then we had steady girlfriends, you know. So, our, the first, you know, when I said I came there I was fourteen years, and I stayed there nearly ten years, nine and a half years. So that was the growing up years I spent in Shanghai, the first really loves, you know, and it was all in Shanghai.

SH: Can you tell me about the dances?

GB: Well, they were, let's break it this way down. In the beginning, we went downtown as long as we could go downtown. There were big ballrooms with Philippino orchestras and they were very good. They played American arrangements and around the circle, in the inside on the dance floor, they had ticket girls. And what we did, we'd order tea from the waiter and, and dance ticket. You get booklet of five or six, I don't know, and you dance always with same girl and at the end you gave her the booklet or the ticket, or, or the ticket or something, a ticket, one ticket was worth five or six dances. That was our beginning, you know. [laughs] That's how I started.

SH: So, so, so these girls were, were there to dance with whoever . . .

GB: Dance, they were mostly Chinese, there were also some white Russian girls there, yes. And then later on, we had our own restaurants with dances. I remember from the ping-pong sections, they did some dances, mostly Sunday afternoons, you know, or Sunday evenings. And at the "Hungaria" there were dances, usually a, either a piano player or accordion player with a drummer, you know, or a trio or something like that. And then there were, we had good musicians, but there were better dance establishments in the Settlement and then, they were more expensive than, as young as we were, we couldn't afford it. But that thing we could afford, you know, so we went, there were quite a bit of boys and girls came there for, just for dance, you know. And that's how, that's where we danced. Then we made parties, you know, sometimes in my room, sometimes in another friend's room. We came there and we had the record player

and records. I had, I had American records, and, and we danced. That's how I . . .

SH: Did you ever dance at the "Roof Garden Mascot?"

GB: Oh! Mascot Roof Garden, I still have a picture there! [laughs]

SH: Mr. Rossetty played the accordion and the saxophone. He lives over here, I spoke to him yesterday.⁷

GB: Yeah, he, I met him once. I don't remember him, so I met a lot of other musicians. I don't remember him. He told me that I met him once, yes. Yes, I went there to the Mascot Roof, it was quite nice in fact, up there. And we had some nice dances, I must say. Oh yes. Mascot Roof Garden, that's right on Wayside, down there was the cinema and up there was the Mascot Roof Garden. So what else would you like to know?

SH: Tell me, please, about the end of the war . . .

GB: End of the war . . .

SH: . . . right at the moment of the end of the war.

GB: Well, the first phase was with the end in Europe. When we heard it, we danced *hora* in the streets, you know, and we knew that Japan would lose. It was just a matter of time. As I predicted, it was in 1945 and then I said, "Autumn 1945, there will be war, peace all over the world." And we heard the news, the atom bomb was, at that time my father had just died, you know, the atom bomb was falling and that's the end. And then a few days before, truth came, Russia declared war on Japan. And out of the Settlement came a lot of Russians on, I remember that, I saw it, on, on, on bicycles with the Soviet flag and shouting and waving to us openly, and you know. And then a few days later, Japan said, hey, they cannot take Ger-, Russia too because there was a big battle in, in Mongolia and the Russians destroyed the whole Japanese army. And . . .

SH: So this is interesting. The Russians came out of the Settlement.

GB: Well, I remember because I was, I tell you what. There was a group, the Japanese, under Japanese pressure we formed a group that called Pao Chia.⁸ It means "watch duty." And I was one of the Pao Chia men. I had to just stand around and guard that nobody leaves the District without pass.

SH: Were you careful about that? No?

⁷ See interview with Henry Rossetty, Laguna Hills, California, June 8, 1990.

⁸ The Pao Chia was an auxiliary police organized by the Japanese in September 1942, and staffed by refugees. After the creation of the Hongkew ghetto, it guarded the entrances, insuring that refugees had the required passes to enter and exit.

GB: About my own men? About our own people? If somebody showed me a doctor's recipe, I said, "Fine." You know.

SH: You weren't afraid that you would get in trouble from that, for that?

GB: Once I got into trouble. I, during, I and a friend we did Pao Chia together, right at, at the end of Wayside that merged into Broadway, and there was a policeman there, a white Russian policeman. When he came to us, "You're not allowed to sit in there. You have to be outside." And it was freezing cold, I had frozen blisters around here. Later on I took on, my mother made, I had house shoes and she stuffed some things in it so that my feet wouldn't freeze. And it was cold. Oh, and he gave us a ticket and somebody said, you know, what, he just wanted, because they were all bribed, he just wanted a bribe, and we didn't give him anything. So they called us before the committee, and we said, that's it and they gave us a warning. One more, our excellent duty, that was all. But, and I was doing Pao Chia duty on Wayside, on Broadway something, I was, and I remember, in the morning some white Russians, and one of them I knew from the Betar, came on bicycles cause the Soviet flag, and waving and shouting, "Oh!", you know. And when the war ended, we know there was an airplane coming with the United Nations sign. And then I was on the street and that airplane came, and when it did the corner, it did it like that and you could see the big white with the blue, you know. And we all shouted, we knew, you know, that was like Messiahs had come. [laughs] And a few days later the first Americans, navy men, came in and they were treated royally, you know, like. And then of course the black market came, too.

SH: Tell me about the black market.

GB: Oh, I have, I took some pictures of the black market, like. Well, a lot of, a lot of the American servicemen, they sold their rations for money and you saw, it was open, they stood there against the houses, you know, I mean, and on the street, and had their cans and everything and chewing gum piled up. You know, the Chinese, Chinese, really Chinese are traders. And we didn't buy, I didn't have to buy, because I was employed at the PX, and I could bring things home, you know. I remember the first night, we had, I had, we had night duty the first few nights.

SH: This is your first night at work?

GB: Yeah. And during the war we were all hungered out, we had no chocolate with, no nothing. And cases came in full with chocolate bars, you know, and we had to, and one case broke down and our lieutenant saw that. He said, "Well, this case is damaged," so he took out a box, ripped it open and gave it to us, you know. I got three or four. I ate mine so hungrily. That was the first that I had for years. And I remember I brought some home to my mother, she was so happy. We didn't have any, see anything for years, you know. So . . .

SH: Did you keep working for the Americans right up until the time that you left?

GB: No. I, they later changed location and only a few kept their jobs there, instead of a

big warehouse of four stories, there were just one story somewhere else and I didn't work there anymore. I got a job, at that time I made radio repairs independently, you know. And so, one told the other, you know, and I bid some radios and sold them. But, as I said, emigration was breaking up. There was a corporate affidavit, and with every ship, people were leaving Shanghai left and right. And they were going, getting down by the hundreds, by the thousands, and getting less and less and less, you know. And what was I saying before? How did I start into this?

SH: About . . .

GB: Oh yeah, jobbing! And I, and I was looking for a job. And it was quite tough to get. But through somebody who knew somebody at a high place, I got a job at the hospital storeroom, as a stock-, you know, for medicine, to handing out medicine. That's what I did for the last eight or nine months. I was working at a hospital, as I said, I was handing out, they came in with their requests, with their orders, you know, and I took it over and then took out the medicines or for the cleaners the cleaning supplies, everything went through my hands. And that also came with food, in other words, I was allowed to eat there, you know, the employees, we had our own dining room. It was good food, and that was my last job till I left Shanghai.

SH: What was the, how did it change the atmosphere of Shanghai that people were leaving all the time?

GB: Oh yes. It was like, like, let's say as you live together, imagine you live together in a small room with a lot of people and suddenly somebody opens the doors and said, "Hey, you are allowed to leave." And from the little room, a lot of people [breathing sounds], you are going to breathe easier. That's what we did. We, you breathe easier, you know, you are allowed to go out. Just the thought that you are allowed to go out, you don't have to be in the District, that already means something, you know. And we all knew we would leave Shanghai one way or the other. We didn't know where, but we know we would leave. That, knowing that in the meantime we got, we heard from Europe the bad news that all our relatives were taken away, you know. Neighbors wrote us about my brother and my uncle and so on, we heard, you know. They were all taken away, from my father's side, mother's side, a lot of people. So I didn't want to go back there. I didn't want to. So, as I said, either Australia, Israel, the United States, I was registered to come here, I was ready to go on that corporate affidavit, but I had to wait for my mother, and that's what, yeah, as I said, that's what happened. Then, then the United Nations chartered a ship and they came to Israel. One thing I forgot to mention, in the last years, bef-, after the war, there was something formed, the Community Center, there I went then nearly every evening, not nearly every evening, doing, let's say, three times a week, I'm sorry, three times a week, in that Community Center. And we had quiz evenings, and we had musical evenings, we had dramatic evenings, we had readings, you could listen to records, we didn't have that before. That was very nice.

SH: This was mostly for young people.

GB: Yes, yes, about, for young people, some elderly people came there too to listen to

the music. I was in charge of the music room. I was also in the quiz group. You know I earned some medals, you know, it was Shanghai-wide quiz, sometimes, you know, that was nice, the Jewish Community Center. We had our own soccer team and it was nice.

SH: Tell me about the Shanghai-wide quiz, how that worked.

GB: Well, that was also after the war in the Community Center that we would, let's say the, no! Our Jewish Community Center in fact was the sponsor of that, of that quiz. And let me see [gets up to look for something], whether I can still find something. I even have the picture there, and I think I have. You see, I knew where that, that was one of them, and more. [sits down, hands something to SH] But here's one of them.

SH: This is a prize?

GB: No, that was the medal, the medal, I mean the . . .

SH: [reading] Quiz Olympiade, 1948. And it says . . .

GB: That was one of them. We had . . .

SH: J.F.C.?

GB: J.F.C. Jewish, wait a minute, Jewish Recreation Club. J.R.C.

SH: Oh, J.R.C., Jewish Recreation Club.

GB: And I have some pictures where we all were photographed before, when we won, each one won five hundred dollars, you know, for spending money and, and also I got, I don't know where that is . . .

SH: So this is, this is for entertainment? This is for the . . .

GB: Yeah, I mean, we had quiz groups that came from the Settlement, too. From the YMCA, from, I don't know, from schools and from . . .

SH: The quiz groups would come to this one center.

GB: Right. And there was, I don't know who did the questions. I don't know.

SH: Who made up the questions?

GB: Who made up the questions, I don't know.

SH: Well, what were the questions about? Were they . . .

GB: About, about every subject, world-wide, you know. And we always were mostly on

top and sometimes we were invited out. And then we had another one and then we made within our Jewish Community our own quiz evening. At first there was one, what was his name? And after he left, he said, came to me and said, "You should take over." And then I became, I did some quiz evenings there, you know. So that was nice. That was nice. So, the Jewish Community Center, that there should be named, too, because, really, we had somewhere to go, you know. That was nice. Let's see, what else would you like to know?

SH: Tell me about what you heard about the Communists coming and what you felt about that.

GB: All right, now, about the Communists coming. What we know about the Chinese was that the average Chinese wanted to make a good living, wanted to support his family and wanted to have a lot of children, mostly sons, and as long as he could afford to buy rice, and everything was available to him, the government was good, Chiang Kai-shek was good. But then it became scarce and they had to stay in lines, and rice became more expensive, and we saw them standing in lines, and we saw it coming. Then Chiang Kai-shek wasn't good anymore. And they were speaking, speaking openly about, "Just wait till the Communists came in," you know. And among the employees, you know, we had, when I was working at the United States army, we, in the warehouse, the workers, they were Chinese coolies. And they were talking in Pidgin English, you know, to us. They were talking about revolution and especially the younger ones, you know, young one we called "Young Shiner One." He was [makes sounds of guns], you know. Not against us so much. Usually they were speaking against the whites, but no, not against us. We were treating them fairly and they liked us. But against, you know, the Chiang Kai-shek people and so, and it was open secret that the Chiang Kai-shek army was all bribed. I mean, whole, generals with the army went over to the Communists because they paid better, or American money and American weapons came into the wrong hands, they were sold, you know. Those were the, I remember when we went out we didn't want, we packed everything nicely. We had nothing to contraband or what, you know. But we didn't want that the, that the Chinese at the harbor would take out our things and looking for things. So when I gave them our passports and so on, I mean, these were some American dollars. Just, everybody did that. They took it, looked at it, made their signs on the boxes and that was it, but never opened, you know. We had nothing to declare, anyhow, but we didn't want them to, to take things out and throw them around, you know. [unintelligible] their way in this respect. And we heard later from emigrants who were there under the Communists, they were, they went out of, they were not allowed to take anything anymore, you know. They were . . .

SH: Bribes. No bribes.

GB: . . . very strict, no bribes. They were very strict, the Communists, that's what we heard from emigrants who got out later, who lived under the Communists, you know.

SH: Did you or the Jewish community fear the Communists?

GB: In a way.

SH: Did that ever happen?

GB: Well, let's say, we feared the unknown. We knew that first of all there could be a war, that Shanghai might be defended, and there might be shooting, you know. Who wouldn't fear that? And then the fear of rioting and plundering and, and pogroming against the whites, you know. They did that in the years past, remember the Boxer Rebellion and so on, you know. That before they came in, they got out, they might go and, and take whatever they can, you know, and kill the whites or whatever, you know, some elements. That's what we feared of. So . . .

SH: Now, I had another question and I've, I've lost it, but let me just go back. I wrote a few things down that I wanted to ask you some more things about. This goes way back now, about your trip to Shanghai. Something about, was there anything especially notable about your voyage?

GB: Oh, yeah, well it was, first of all . . .

SH: Exactly when it was, when, when you left.

GB: We left Berlin the tenth of April, no, the ninth of April 1939, went with the ship, with, with the train to Italy in Trieste, stayed in Trieste for three days, which was very romantic and interesting and . . .

SH: Paid for by yourself or . . . ?

GB: By our-, everything paid for ourselves. And that's when we still had the money, you know. We were, once we left we had ten marks in our hands. And I didn't even know how we paid in Italy the hotel. I don't know. The ship's passage was already paid, but I don't know how we paid the hotel in Trieste. I don't know. The train ticket, everything was paid, but I don't know. Now, we went on the "Conte Rosso". We came to Shanghai the seventh of May, 1939. Of course, the passage was wonderful, we had a cabin, first-class cabin, you know. That was the first freedom for me, I mean, not first freedom. I had, I had my own book with board money. Maybe that's how we paid, I don't know. I had a booklet with money. Board, they called it board money. Was it, it was tickets inside, I can spend. That was paid already in Germany, you know. And as young as I was, I went to the bar and ordered a drink. And then they served it, oh yes. Even my parents knew about it. In the evening we went there after dinner and there was dancing going on in the cocktail lounge, you know, with a band. And I was sitting there, was ordering a cocktail. There was nothing wrong, I mean, I was, you know. Or among our family circle in, in Berlin where we celebrated birthdays and so, I always had my glass of wine and so. As young as I was, ten years old or whatever. There was nothing, you didn't see nothing wrong with it, you know. So, and then first when we went on board in Port Said, in Egypt, we saw, that was, of course, my first impression of the Orient, you know, with all the, with Arabs and everything. Singapore, I went on board, I went on board in Ceylon, Colombo, now it's Sri Lanka, you know.

SH: So you were able to get off the ship and . . .

GB: Oh yes. I have it in my passport. The, the harbor police stamped in and I was allowed to go offshore. Not in every port, but in Hong Kong I was, you know, in Kowloon. The ship, my passport was all the entrance.

SH: Was anyone able to get off the ship permanently?

GB: One left in Bombay, a lady with a son, and I was friendly with the son on the ship. That's why I know about it. I think she married somebody there, whom I don't know. But she went off the ship. Then there were some Indians on our ship, Indians, they lived in India. Then there were Americans and British on our ship. They went for pleasure. They went just for pleasure, you know. I don't know where they went and what, but they were a honeymooner, it was. And, but most of them were us emigrants.

SH: Were many people from, who had come out of concentration camps? *KZler*, as you would . . .

GB: On our ship?

SH: Yes.

GB: I don't know. There were more families on our ship. There were mostly families, was what I remember. I don't remember any single persons, but mostly families. Wait, there was one thing, a young man. But mostly families. That's what I remember. And, no, also they treated us, the Italian ship was, they were, they were treating us really nice. No anti-semitism on the ship or nothing, you know.

SH: How about the Japanese?

GB: Now, I got in contact professionally, as I said, with my radios, and the private families, which I came in contact with, they were very friendly, they let us sit down, we took off our shoes, you know. I spoke a few words Japanese, just to sell my radios, you know. And, and then later we came in contact with the Japanese when we stood in line to get, we wanted to get passport to get out of the District. And they behaved a little bit different. I saw, I was never beaten up by them, but I saw people beaten up, oh yes.

SH: From waiting in line, those people who were waiting in line, or, other on the street, or . . .

GB: No, I mean, yeah, waiting in line, either on the streets and upstairs, by Mr. Ghoya.⁹ Oh yes, I saw it. I saw it. Yes, that, it's hard for you to imagine, but remember, did you see some picture from the war where some American prisoners knelt like that and above them the Japanese officer with the sword about to chop their heads off? Oh yes. There

⁹ Kanoh Ghoya was a Japanese official in the Bureau of Stateless Refugee Affairs who was charged with issuing passes for refugees who wished to leave the ghetto for business purposes during the day. His capriciousness and occasional brutality are remembered by all who came into contact with him.

are such pictures. Ask for them. And ask how is it possible that even these American soldiers or officers, they're obediently, like that, you had no choice. Even under the Nazis, you know. People ask, "Why didn't you defend yourself?" You can't. You couldn't. If you would defend yourself against SA men or SS men, they would hack you to death, right away. [laughs] Or against a Japanese official. You would never see the daylight again. It's a little bit different in a dictatorship. That's why we appreciate so much the freedom here in America. That's why I appreciate it so much.

SH: Well, you say, "we", you think that . . .

GB: Others, too.

SH: . . . the Shanghai Jews . . .

GB: Well, I spoke with it about fellow Shanghailanders and fellow Europeans, you know. And we all feel that we, who underwent dictatorships and hardships, we appreciate that feeling of breathing free here, you know, in America. Even, not everything is, nowhere is everything hundred percent, but under the circumstances, you know, this is still a great country, even under the, you know. Though, you have to see everything in a relative, in a relative way, you know. It's still a country where you can speak out, and say whatever you want, as long as you stay within the law, you're allowed to. And you couldn't do it in Nazi Germany. In today's Germany, maybe you can, I don't know. I never was back, went back.

SH: You wouldn't want to go back.

GB: Oh, for a visit, only. Yes. For a visit, I would like to go back. See the, find some graves from past times, you know. Visit the graves. See where I went to school, where I went, where I was bar mitzvahed, and so on. That's all, you know.

SH: But you knew people who went back to Germany from Shanghai?

GB: Well, don't forget there were a lot of elderly persons who could get, who, they would be lost here. Over there, they came back and they got their restitution, that they could live on. If they would come here, what would they do? Or to Israel, what would they do? I knew some, they went to Israel and they had to leave. They didn't know the language. They came there, now we are here, we, we always wanted to come here, now, what do we do here? They had no use for them, you know. They felt themselves lost there.

SH: So what happened to you in Israel, when you arrived?

GB: Oh, when I came to Israel the first thing is we had to live in a tent. It was the first few things were disappointing, you might say, because we came in the rain and the tent and the storm and, it's something that you always wanted. I always was a Zionist in our own home, you know. And you come there, and then you have it there, so what do you do with it, you know? I still love Israel, but I personally wasn't happy there. I still love Israel very much. But I personally wasn't happy there. That's, my mother convinced me,

by the way, to come here. It was she who dragged me out. I had a little store, I went, after one year I went to the army. I had two years regular duty and then six, seven years reserve duty. I had a nice time in the army. Nothing to say against the army, I had a nice time. After boot, boot camp was tough. Boot camp was very tough. But then, I went in a professional unit. I was group leader, I had a nice, it was nice. I have nothing to say against it. Later I had with someone together a store, radios, where we made repairs, and built radios, sold. It's very hard to make a living. And we lived in a little room with a little kitchen. The toilet was outside, shared with others together, you know. And to get a good apartment you need key, you pay a lot of key money, which I didn't have at that time, you know. And, and then, the mental attitude, let's say, towards us and I towards them, if, maybe if I would have lived in a big city, and I had some more friends, maybe it would have been different. But I lived in a little town, most of my friends had left already, I was the last one.

SH: So you knew many people who came to Israel and then left?

GB: Yes.

SH: Because of this disappointment, do you think?

GB: I don't know, I don't know why. Maybe they all, all had their different personal reasons. With me it was like that, as I said, I made a little living, not much, and I would be always living there in that little room with the little kitchen, that's all, wouldn't be able to buy a big apartment because of the key money. And, as I said, I personally, though I loved Israel, at the same time, I personally wasn't happy there. Can you understand that? And, so I've, and it's very hard to get from Israel to United States. And you had to wait years and years, but we were registered to come to America already in Shanghai. So what my mother did, behind my back I must say, because I always say, "No, no, I'm not going." Behind my back she wrote to the Consulate. In the meantime the American Consulate went from Shanghai to Manila, that's what she heard. She wrote to the Consulate, that we are registered already and I was in 1947, something like that, and, and before the registration, every registration takes ten years, about that, '48, something, '48, I think, I don't know, takes ten years, and then they get registration for us, you know. So we want to renew the registration and they still had our names and everything there. And since it was that long ago we were the first on the line to be asked for, in the meantime, friends of ours from Shanghai who came here on that cooperative affidavit, they became, had become citizens. And they sent us affidavit, so I had three affidavits to come here. That's how I came here in the United States, in March '58 I came here.

SH: And where did you arrive?

GB: In New York. I stayed in New York for two weeks and then I came to San Francisco and I lived in San Francisco for twenty years.

SH: Why in San Francisco?

GB: Because all those people who gave me affidavit lived in San Francisco and the

friends that I have lived in San Francisco. That's why San Francisco. That's where I got to know my wife, she's an American. She's in the back, but she's sick. And, and that's how I got to live here.

SH: Did you renew your relationships with Shanghai friends . . .

GB: Oh yes.

SH: . . . in San Francisco?

GB: Whatever, there are some Shanghai people which I didn't know. There were quite a bit of Shanghai people in San Francisco, quite a bit. If you, if you want to get in contact with them, all you have to do is go to the Congregation B'nai Imuna.

SH: Ted Alexander? Is that . . .

GB: Right. Were you there?

SH: No. But I've heard, a few people . . .

GB: They're, they're, they're mostly Shanghailanders. There you've got all the Shanghai information you want. Yes, he is also a Shanghaileander and a lot of Shanghailanders are going there. So what else would you like to know?

SH: What else would I like to know? What you think now about this time in Shanghai? About what it did for you?

GB: Yeah, well, that's what I said . . .

SH: You said a few things about it already.

GB: Already, yeah. That's what I said. As I look back partly with a nostalgic look, partly with a friendly look and partly with a hard look, you know. As I said, I lost my father there, and we had some hard times, but we also had some happy times. So it's a love-hate relationship. It saved, it did save our lives, it brought us over the war, and it took us out of there, China. So it had both positive and negative. So, I don't regret the, my time in Shanghai, because otherwise maybe I wouldn't sit here, be sitting here, you know. And I would say Shanghai, and for those times, Second World War, the following, Shanghai, our Shanghai, is a little footnote on history, a little footnote, not a big paragraph, but a little footnote, but it's there. It's there. Then I heard the following thing, that there were, of course, there was a Nazi colony in Shanghai, who built gas ovens for us on the isle of Pootung, that's opposite Shanghai. I never saw those ovens, but you heard about it, and we spoke about it. And some signed already, our destiny to be the gas ovens. And some Japanese officials signed for it, too. Now, Ghoya, he was approached too, he was the one who was so rough on us and so tough on us, he did not sign. He got out alive of Shanghai, by the way, to Japan. But there was a certain Okura, and that's what I heard again, I don't know what, but that's what everybody was talking

about. That he was always friendly and so he signed. He was hanged, they hung him. All those people who signed that document, they, they were put before the law court . . .

¹⁰

SH: After the war?

GB: After the war.

SH: By the Americans?

GB: The Germans. Oh, oh yes, the Germans who bought and made the document and the Japanese who signed it. And they hung them. That's what I know, I mean, we all knew that, you know. It was common knowledge, let's say it that way, I mean.

SH: Was there a common fear that this was going to happen to you?

GB: No, we didn't know about the gas ovens. We didn't know about Auschwitz and so we didn't know about the gas ovens. We didn't know. It came out after the war.

SH: Now, that was what I wanted to ask you, because you, you talked about the period after the war and there were some things, there was liberation, and able to go out . . .

GB: Yes.

SH: . . . and the Americans coming, and more money, and more jobs, so all these good things.

GB: Yes.

SH: But then there was this knowledge of what had happened in Europe . . .

GB: Yes.

SH: . . . and there was the fact that friends and acquaintances were leaving all of a sudden.

GB: Yes, yes.

SH: So it seemed to me there might be some, a lot of sad things and a lot of happy things.

¹⁰ Okura worked with Ghoya in the Bureau of Stateless Refugee Affairs. He was not as irrational as Ghoya, but he sent some refugees to their deaths by imprisoning them in the typhus-infested cell at the police station. The rumors about the construction of gas ovens, signed documents, and post-war executions cannot be confirmed.

GB: Well, what happened there, that's what I said, we were all, we were waiting for our quota. I mean, I was ready, my mother wasn't ready because of her Polish quota, we were waiting. That was that period, that, you know. And we, we only knew that the Communists were coming closer and closer and closer. And we wanted to get out. And then they shot at the ship. So, I mean, more or less, that happened with most of these people. I remember that a young man, you could say a friend maybe, he lived in the same house where I lived, in Shanghai.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

GB: . . . as I said, oh.

SH: Go ahead.

GB: A friend of mine, who left on the second ship, now I left on the "Wooster Victory". He came later to Israel with the "Casa Bianca Manc-", "Casa Bianca Manco"? Yes. Something like that.¹¹ And he said after we left, there was a feeling of despair in Shanghai, I mean, among the emigrants. A feeling of despair. And till they got out, you know, that's what they felt.

SH: Because there were so few left?

GB: Well, there were only a, I don't know how many, thousands left already. Maybe there were, I don't know, five thousand left, I don't know. And, I remember, I, I, as I said, I had a job at the hospital and I was, when my replacement came in, I had to teach him how, what to do and so on, you know, you know. He said, "Well, I was wait-, I am waiting also just to get out," you know. So, but they had different quotas, they wanted to get to America, and they had to get the Polish quota, Austrian quota, German quota. I had the German quota, my mother had the Polish quota. So what else would you like to know?

SH: I think that's everything.

GB: That's everything? Okay, we can . . .

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

¹¹ The name of the Italian ship was the "Conte Biancamano".

Gerard Bigus was born in Berlin. His family owned a gentlemen's outfitting store, which was destroyed in the night of November 9-10, 1938. He was fourteen years old when his family left Berlin in April 1939, and took passage on the "Conte Rosso" to Shanghai. There Bigus became an apprentice in the radio trade, passed his journeyman's exam, and worked in radio repair. His father died just before the war ended. After the war, Bigus worked for the U.S. Army as a warehouseman and for a hospital as a stock clerk. In December 1948 he and his mother sailed for Israel on the "Wooster Victory". There he served in the army. In 1958 they moved to the United States. Gerard Bigus lives in California with his wife, also a Shanghailanders.

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.