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Willner, Olga oral history interview

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OLGA WILLNER

VIENNA

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Steve Hochstadt: . . . start here, please.

Olga Willner: Yes, I already mentioned in our discussion, in our English discussion, that I, we were a separate case, actually, we were so-called non-Jewish refugees. And we did not stay in Shanghai for very long. That's, like very few, some, some escapees, which I also prefer this expression, also who were doctors mostly, medical doctors, were lucky enough that medical doctors, physicians, surgeons were needed in China.

And to start with all of, with the whole story, I was born in Sankt Pölten, as I mentioned. You know, a young American came up to me afterwards and said, "Oh, my God, my family comes from Sankt Pölten." I can't remember them very well, but I'm going to dig into that. And my father was a surgeon and gynecologist in Sankt Pölten, born Viennese. He was baptized, he was a Christian, termed a Christian, I think for my sake probably. I grew up as a Christian in a convent school, which was close to our house in Sankt Pölten. And my mother came from Austrian, what was Austrian Silesia, in what is now Czechoslovakia, German-speaking. And my father's family also comes from Bohemia, from Teplitz, a lot of people come from there, which was an old, very famous spa resort. But he was born in Vienna already.

And, well, we were a very happy family, and my Bohemian Silesian grandmother lived with us. And I was raised with great love and tenderness and understanding. And I went to this convent school called the *Englischen Fräulein* and, which was an excellent school and still is, and I graduated from what here is called, in these parts of the world, a *Gymnasium*, in 1938 at the age of seventeen.

And of course then the *Umbruch* came, Hitler, when he entered Austria with the army, occupied Austria, passed by our house, too. [ringing] Excuse me, sorry.

BREAK IN RECORDING

Olga Willner: And then of course, everybody knew us in Sankt Pölten, and I guess it is the human factor that some people stay friendly, others look away when you come. My father was a well-known man. So we decided, actually the, you know what the expression *Gauleiter*, the *Gauleiter* of lower Austria was a colleague of my father's, an obstetrician as it were, an obstetrician, who treated me through my childhood, who was a charming

man.[1] And when my father met him on the street after the *Umbruch*, he put his arm around him and my father said, "But you know, I am a Jew," and he said, "Well, so what? You didn't do anything wrong, you didn't commit any crime." Later on he finally killed himself, he committed suicide before Austria was liberated, and I think he did some bad things. He was a so-called *illegaler* Nazi before the *Umbruch.* He was in the beginning, I think, an idealist, and his wife was a patient of my father's, anyway. But finally, yes, and then my father also had every morning in the *Krankenkasse*, medical insurance, *Gebietskrankenkasse*, it's called in German here, had a surgical outpatient clinic every morning, for which he worked for about twenty-six years. And on March 13 or 14 or 15, he was called up, "Dr. Willner, you don't have to come here any more." So that gave him quite a shock, of course, and then later on Jewish doctors were not permitted to have non-Jewish patients. So when they came, my father had to tell them, "Sorry, I can't treat you."

So we decided, when we didn't know how the things would develop, we decided, my father decided that we should move to Vienna, nobody knows us there. We took an apartment in my mother's name. And then came the *Kristallnacht*, November 10. My father was taken in custody from, you know, on the street somebody, it was the first pogrom in Austria, they took people from the streets, collected them, put them in schools, arrested them. My father was accosted on the street and a policeman asked him, "*Sind Sie einer Jude?*" And he said, "*Ja*," and he said "*Kommen Sie mit.*" We didn't know where he was for five days. And then he came home during the night, after five days, and his first, rather unshaven and upset, and he said, "*Wir fahren nach Shanghai.*" We said, yes, fine, we go to Shanghai. That's what he heard, you know, because we, first of all, we had no money outside of Austria. Our American relatives had closer relatives that they had to guarantee for and took them in, because it was my father's cousin. He had to take in his brother's widow and so on and so forth, so he couldn't take us. Also my father then was 57, and going to the States meant to pass, repass or restart and repass all the medical exams, examinations, in order to practice medicine, which was out of the question.

So, yes, and when he, when he was in custody, he had to, some, a lot of people were sent to the fir-, to Dachau, to the first concentration camp, and there was a doctor also who was examining people and asking them, "Are you sick?" and so on. He was just making a choice of who would go to the concentration camp and who would be released. So he released my father, knowing he was also a colleague. But my father had to sign that he would leave the country by the 31st of December, 1938.

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[1] Hugo Jury (1887-1945).

Now this was easier said than done, because it was very difficult to get a passport, and it cost him, all expenses considered, at that time, ten thousand marks. He got it later, he was, he had a booking, I think, for December, we had to go by boat, and he didn't have his passport, so he postponed his voyage, his booking for the sea voyage. I think it was January 8. And then on December 31st, the bell rang and there was a policeman outside. And he, my father was afraid they would pick him up and send him. And the first thing, and I said, "Daddy, you are not going to open the door, I'm going to open the door." I would have done everything for my father. I adored him and adore him to this day. I said, "I'm going to the door," and the first thing this Austrian policeman said, "Don't be afraid." I'll never forget it. And he said, he'll extend the date. You see, I, we were always, I never really, how should I say, condemned the entire Austrian people, because we had been able to find good ones in this turmoil. And he extended this expiration, so, then he left, and then we left four weeks later. My mother's family, they were Nazis, illegal Nazis, *illegale* Nazis. They took over our apartment, they just moved in. We left with eight pounds in our, eight English pounds in our coffers in the way of money, nothing else. One crate, I think, with a few things, most of it was stolen anyway. And I think my mother's family hoped we would never come back. And . . .

Steve Hochstadt: They had not been happy about your mother marrying your father?

Olga Willner: I wouldn't say that, because that was at a time when, it was a good match, they were not very wealthy, and my cousin, my favorite cousin, Kurt, from that family, who was not a Nazi, but was killed in Russia, he died as a soldier. He adored my father, always asked his advice, he also wanted to become a doctor, I think my father was an idol for him, he was a wonderful person, he was wonderful. Well, my Jewish grandmother didn't, wasn't very happy [laughs] about my father or my mother's [unclear] . Then you might understand Mommy as a young girl, that's my friends, and he talked, he met her on the street. She was nineteen and he easily fell in love with her.

Steve Hochstadt: Yes, that I can see.

Olga Willner: This is during the First World War, that he was a captain in the Austrian Army. [laughs] They were both very good-looking people. So, where do we go from here? Well, we . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Your trip, and maybe other preparations that you and your family

made for the trip, things to pack or things not to pack, selling things.

Olga Willner: No, we didn't sell anything. [unclear] And, I did get a lot back, I must say. These, this, for instance, is from a, from a great uncle, [unclear] it's very old, very precious. They did keep, I mean, some of the things we got back from them. But we lost, I mean, all our money had to go, everything, bonds and everything, had to go to the Gestapo bank. And when, well, I'd better do it step by step.

Michèle Kahn: Yes, what did you take with you, suitcase or . . . ?

Olga Willner: Clothes, mostly.

Michèle Kahn: This was in one or two suitcases?

Olga Willner: I don't . . .

Michèle Kahn: You don't know.

Olga Willner: . . . I don't know, I don't remember that. We went to, we left from Trieste with the Italian line, Daddy was on, "Conte Verde" and "Conte Biancamano" were the two boats going to Shanghai. We were on the "Conte Biancamano", and I had a former teacher of mine, a former nun, who had escaped the convent and lived in Trieste and took care of us. She had heard from us and we stayed with her until, my father did four weeks earlier, and then on the end I did.

Steve Hochstadt: So you left separately. Why was that?

Olga Willner: Because Dad was in a hurry to get out, and we had just to take care of a few things and prepare a few things. And then we met in Shanghai, in Hongkou, in the [unclear] . And then he had already made a few contacts. He had, when we arrived, he had a dysentery and was not very well, and then, and then he showed me some cards he had from a Catholic mission, who were looking, who had made him an offer already, and from a Chinese doctor, who had studied in Germany and who offered a post in the city of Ningbo, south of Shanghai, to a Chinese hospital. Then, when he was still in the sick bay, I started to take up these contacts. He recovered afterwards. And then, so he had these two offers from a Catholic mission hospital in Shandong and from this Chinese doctor,

Fee was his name, at a Chinese hospital. Then he said, now what shall we do, which one shall I accept? So then, already the Japanese war had begun, Ningbo was bombed and connection was impossible to go there. So then he chose the mission and we went to Shandong.

Steve Hochstadt: When was that?

Olga Willner: Well, a few weeks later, we went, so, I'm not, I can't tell you much about the Shanghai community, next to nothing, because we were only there a short time.

Steve Hochstadt: You arrived perhaps in February or March?

Olga Willner: Well, the boat trip in those days took 25 days, so if we left beginning of February, some time in March, yeah.

Steve Hochstadt: Had you looked for an apartment in Shanghai, had you made preparations . . . ?

Olga Willner: We didn't have money to look for an apartment. We got a room paid, because my father was sick in the beginning. You see, he had had a dysentery during the First World War, so he was very, in that respect, he had a weakness, and that's why we got a special room, a room in a house, but in Hongkou for four or five weeks, which was paid for by the relief committee. But we were not considered Jews.

Steve Hochstadt: And what difference did that make?

Olga Willner: I don't know. For instance, we had no contact with, like Kadoorie or people like that. I mean, I knew that Kadoorie and Sassoon were the people who financed the whole thing, and I greatly admired them, and I'm very grateful for it, but, and we had some Austrian, there were some Austrian Jews that we were, became friends with, I mean, a small group.

Steve Hochstadt: Do you think that this committee that found you a room treated you any different than other refugees?

Olga Willner: I don't think so, I don't think so, I don't think so, no, no.

Steve Hochstadt: Did it make any difference on the boat over? There were probably lots of refugees on that boat.

Olga Willner: No, no. If I say Jews, I mean probably the orthodox Jews that did not consider us Jews. And I have never had any contact, unfortunately, never had any contact with Judaism until now, that I get interested again. Because my father didn't want to be different, mostly for my sake. But, of course, with Hitler it did make a difference.

Steve Hochstadt: So then you left Shanghai.

Olga Willner: We left Shanghai on the boat, on a boat for Tsingtao, and from there went by train into Shandong and then to a city called [Dienjo?] where there was a big, big Catholic mission with a hospital. [ringing] Excuse me, I'm sorry. So I started immediately to take Chinese lessons, and, except that the language spoken in Shandong, Shantung, or Shandong, which means east of the mountains, is a sort of farmer's coarse language, which I learned at first, and also I helped a bit in the hospital with this and that. My father had to pick up Chinese, a Chinese vocabulary by asking, "Where do you have pain?" and "Please hold your breath," and things like that. He learned, he got very enthusiastic about his work, and at his age, I must say, really remarkable. But unfortunately, yes, and then I went, then the great question was, what should happen, what should I do, what should become of me? Should I go to Peking to the Peking Union Medical College, a Rockefeller Foundation, where my uncle had practiced medicine after the First World War, when he came from Siberia, where he had been a prisoner, and there was still friends of his there practicing medicine and nursing and so on. So the question was, should I begin to study medicine or should I become a nurse? Both schools, because the certificate of the Pek-, of, the medical certificate you would get from that College was valid in the States, you didn't have to be, pass your examination. But then I decided, then a colleague of my father's, it was an American Presbyterian medical doctor in a Presbyterian mission, said, "Olga, you're going to get married anyway. Why do you want to study medicine?" So then I decided I would enter the nursing school and I applied for it. It was not so easy. And I needed one year, one freshman year, of biology, chemistry, sociology, psychology, and English, five subjects. And there was a big Catholic university in Peking called Fu Jen, also very famous, from the same mission that we were in. So I was sent to Peking and I studied there for a year. And when I first arrived with my Shandong Chinese, they said, "Oh, don't open your mouth, it sounds ghastly." So

quickly, quickly I had to change my Chinese into the Mandarin Chinese.

Steve Hochstadt: Was the language of instruction Chinese at the university?

Olga Willner: No, it was English.

Steve Hochstadt: I see.

Olga Willner: It was English. And I was the first, and I had to have this freshman year of biology, and after that date, which was, I think it was ‘42, ‘41, I have to, I have the certificate with me somewhere, no women, no lady students were permitted in the department of biology. So they had to make an exception for me and I was the only female student among Chinese students. One Russian was there, Boris [Bernglas?] and I, and the rest were Chinese, so that was great fun. And when I had finished that year, my father had a terrible accident. After an operation late in the evening, when he came out of the operating theater, he fell into a cesspool, which had been left open, because there was construction going on in the hospital, and they had left it open by mistake, and he fell into it, and we heard him scream and pulled him out. He had injured his knee very badly, never really healed, and he had caught an amoebic dysentery from that and became very, very ill. And then he had to leave the mission, the mission did not renew his contract, he was not in a condition to continue his work, and I must say, he never recovered from this accident and the disease that went with it.

So that, we moved to Peking and somebody had to support the family, and that was then my job to do that. And I tried as best I could. I had learned English immediately more or less, and did all sorts of work as a secretary and taught German. My mother was baking bread for the foreigners, just like that. And I, as I say, I was really integrated into this country, my parents were not, but I was.

Can I give her some more? *Ja*?

Steve Hochstadt: Thank you. That’s good, thank you. Just have this straight, the way it is.

Olga Willner: And I loved, really loved the country and the people. I would never have left, if it hadn’t been for the Communists coming in, because my parents left in ‘47, I think I told you already, they were eager to get home. And my father, not being well, died on the boat of a cerebral hemorrhage, was buried in the sea close to Singapore, and my

mother continued going home. I never wanted to go back to Europe, but had to consider that I would have to leave China as things were developing, and I wanted to go to the States. So I registered in '46. Of course, in East Asia, China, Japan, the war was over later, a few months later, after Hiroshima. So it was about August, September '45, not in May, was here, here it was May 8. And so in '46 I registered with the American consulate. It was this business of quota, immigration quota, and Austria was Austria again and had a small quota, it's a small country. And then they said, well, it would take some time. And during, after my parents left, I was offered a wonderful job as the president's secretary of Yenching University, which was the most famous American-Chinese university, Yenching, Y-E-N-C-H-I-N-G, Yenching. It is now part of the Peking University. It was outside of town, a beautiful campus, and affiliated with Harvard. And I became the president's secretary, actually the acting president's secretary, Dr. [unclear] , because the president had become the American ambassador in China and was a very famous man.[2] I met him also, he also, I also worked for him occasionally when he came up, and he also tried to help me with the emigration to the States, but couldn't, he couldn't do anything about the quota, I still have letters from him.

And then the situation became more and more precarious, and in December '48, I decided to go down to Shanghai. There were boats going down, and in Shanghai, of course, I checked again with the American consulate, no news. They had my file, the file had been sent down from Peking. I started working for ECA, Economic Cooperation Administration, the same one that was connected with the Marshall Plan in Europe. And then the transports of these so-called displaced persons began, operated by UNRRA, so I signed up for one and left Shanghai on February 8, I think it was, for Europe, which, I met a lady . . .

Steve Hochstadt: '49, this was '49?

Olga Willner: '49. And I met a lady now at this, at this conference and she was on the same, in the same group, but I could not remember her, she could not remember me.[3] We were about 250 people. Is the tape . . . ?

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[2] John Leighton Stuart (1876-1962) was a missionary educator, the first President of Yenching University and United States ambassador to China 1946-1949. In 1952, Peking University absorbed most of the departments of Yenching University.

[3] Just before this interview, the conference "*Flucht nach Shanghai: Vom Überleben österreichischer Juden in einer asiatischen Metropole, 1938-1949*," was held in Salzburg in May 1995.

Michèle Kahn: It's okay, thank you.

Olga Willner: It's okay. And that was a long trip, because we went on a converted troop transport ship, American, from Shanghai to San Francisco via the Pacific, of course. In San, and we had no American visa, no US visa, so we were put on a sealed train, you probably know from other people, huh?[4]

Steve Hochstadt: I've heard about this, but I'd like to know as much detail. This is such a horrible . . .

Olga Willner: It was a wonderful thing, I enjoyed it.

Steve Hochstadt: In some ways it's wonderful, but so horrible of the American government to have done this, I think . . .

Olga Willner: I never held it against them.

Steve Hochstadt: . . . not allowed people to get off. I'd like to know details of this trip. For example, what does it mean that the train was sealed?

Olga Willner: The train was sealed inasmuch as we couldn't get off it. We had security guards going along, who were very nice, and we went so-, via the southern route of North America, through Houston, you know. It was a lovely, lovely route. I enjoyed it, I mean, I was young enough to still enjoy it tremendously. And Washington up to New York. In New York, we were put on Ellis Island, and that was the first time I met my uncle who had gone to China in the twenties and . . .

Steve Hochstadt: He came to visit you?

Olga Willner: Hmm?

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[4] About 230 refugees from China, mostly Jews from Shanghai, were transported across the US in a sealed train in early 1949, and then put on a boat to Europe. They were not allowed to enter the US officially because they did have visas. Most went to Israel, but a small number went to Germany and Austria.

Steve Hochstadt: He came to visit you?

Olga Willner: He came to visit me, and he said I looked like my great-grandmother [unclear] he was very kind, and also Willner, Otto Willner, Dr. Willner, and . . .

Michèle Kahn: *Wie sagen Sie? Welcher Name?*

Olga Willner: Willner, yeah, Willner. Except in America, Villner turns into Willner, like relatives whom I'm going to visit in July. So this train trip took six days, or six nights and seven days, or five nights and six days, and I must say I had really crusts of dirt on my skin, because we couldn't really wash properly. So on Ellis Island the first thing we did, had to go under the shower for a long, long time to get it all off.

Steve Hochstadt: The train was filled with Shanghai refugees?

Olga Willner: The train was, Shanghai and North China.

Steve Hochstadt: How many, can you estimate how many?

Olga Willner: What is it? I think our group was 250 people. And of course we had no, no beds. I think the Pullman, we had just cushions. And, yes, I don't know how long we were on Ellis Island, a few days, I guess. And then we were put on another American boat for Naples. In Naples, we were sent to a camp in a place called [unclear] , which is near Bari, and stayed there for ten days, until we were put on another train for Austria. And the whole trip took two months, but it was very interesting. I met people everywhere, also, because friends of friends, and they said, like the trip from Shanghai to San Francisco, we went to Hong Kong first. I had been there before, at that time I had two different boyfriends in Hong Kong who came to see me. Then a Philippine Island called [unclear] , then to Manila, and everywhere I had people to come and fetch me and to . . .

Steve Hochstadt: You were allowed off the boat on that trip?

Olga Willner: Yeah, yes. As a matter of fact, I went to stay in a hotel in Manila for one night, because I wanted to get out of the boat for just one night, that I could do. But in

Honolulu we couldn't, we couldn't get off. So, *ja*, okay.

Steve Hochstadt: When you left China, what were you able to bring with you? Did you have some savings or . . . ?

Olga Willner: I had no savings. I don't know how much I had, but no savings. Nothing what you call savings.

Steve Hochstadt: Did you pay for this trip or was that paid for you?

Olga Willner: No, no, we didn't pay for the trip.

Steve Hochstadt: Again you had to leave behind a life.

Olga Willner: No, I took some crates with me. I had, well, not very much, one or two crates. And they nearly stayed behind in Tientsin, we boarded the boat in Tientsin for Shanghai, and by chance I saw them standing in the warehouse, and I said, "Come on, come on, that goes on this boat," because otherwise it would have been left behind. Not much, not much, a few Chinese things that you can see around. But we were not the only escapees in North China, because there were, there were, there was another Austrian doctor, Dr. Kandel, who was a dentist, Kaminski knows, knew him very well, Kaminski from the Austro-Chinese society, and he also was the one who arranged for our first passports in Washington, our first Austrian passport. Then there were two German doctors, Dr. Kamnitzer and Dr. Hirschberg, who were also escapees. Kamnitzer from Berlin, K-A-M-I-T-Z-E-R.

Steve Hochstadt: K-A-M-I or K-A-M-N-I . . .?

Olga Willner: No, K-A-M-N-I-T-Z-E-R, Kamnitzer, and Hirschberg, with *sch*, S-C-H, and Kandel was Kandel, K-A-N-D-E-L. And they were fairly well off. I mean, if my father hadn't become ill, he would have practiced medicine and we wouldn't have been in such a bad situation as we were, because of his illness.

Steve Hochstadt: Was he able to practice at all?

Olga Willner: Not after the mission, after the mission appointment, no, he wasn't. He

got very high blood pressure, I think, and this terrible dysentery, and the wonderful, and one thing I must say, the German community in Peking was wonderful to us really. There was a German hospital in Peking with three doctors, a surgeon, a gynecologist, and a GP, general physician. He was, yes, and when my father was so ill and we had no money, I thought he must have some medical attention, medical treatment, and I went to this general physician in the hospital, his name was Dr. Eckert, I had met him somewhere, and I said, "We have met and I'm here. We are refugees and my father is terribly ill," and I wonder whether he could help us. And he immediately packed his bag, went to our home, home, well, it was, couldn't even call it a home, and examined my father and he said, "My dear colleague, I'm taking you with me to the hospital." So Daddy said, "Well, first of all, we have no money. Secondly I am a Jew." He said, "And so what?" And he took him for ten days. And there was one Gestapo man in Peking. He objected very much afterwards, but Dr. Eckert didn't give a damn, he didn't have to give a damn.

I, in the beginning, I started working for a German import-export company called [unclear] and had a good pay, actually. And after three months, this Gestapo man went to the boss of that company and said, "You have to fire her." And he was a coward apparently, and he then, tears running down his face, said, "I'm very sorry, I cannot help you." But the rest of German community, I must say, were marvelous. There was a Lutheran pastor, his wife, his later wife was a friend of mine, and he paid for my tonsillectomy in the German hospital. There were, the Protestant nuns are called *Diakonissen*, and they were wonderful to us also. And yes, and then later on, when we, when the Jews had to leave town, lost their citizenship, their German citizenship, and had to turn in their passport with the "J" in it, I went with Daddy again to the German embassy to present his passport, and the embassy secretary there apologized all over again and again, and he said, "*Herr Doktor, es tut mich schrecklich Leid. Es ist mir sehr peinlich, dass ich das machen muss.*" And then he got a paper, just stateless.

Steve Hochstadt: To go back a little bit. You took this trip to Shanghai at about 18 years old, and then a couple of weeks later, off into the interior of China. What did you think about this as an 18-year-old?

Olga Willner: I think for that age it is an adventure. And I've been an adventurer since those days. [laughs] [unclear] except, that was, I was a great patriot, and I was homesick for quite some time in the beginning. And my mother, you see, my father's sister all perished, sisters all perished. Especially his youngest sister, who had not married, and my mother always looked after her a great deal. She came to stay with us,

and she was a spinster, and she made my father nervous, and Mommy always said, "We have to ask Hilda, and she has to come be with us." And when we were in China, Mommy pushed and pushed and she said, "Can't we get Hilda here?" But the dear bishop refused to have her in the mission, so she perished. It was my mother who was after it.

So I'm very grateful also for the last statement on our Salzburg meeting, where this German gentleman said he wanted to mention the non-Jewish escapees and the non-Jewish mothers, because his mother was one of them. My mother was one of them, and never hesitated a second that she would stay behind.

Listen, I was called a *Mischling*, *ja*, a bastard, and I had to have a special permission from the *Arbeitsdienst* to leave the country, because, I would have had, I was really, should have gone into *Arbeitsdienst*. And when I went to ask for the permission, he looked at me, he said, "Why, where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to China." He said, "For heaven's sakes," he was an SS man, I don't remember [unclear] "What are you doing in China?" I said, "Well, I'm going to work in China." I don't know whether he didn't realize that we want to work.

Steve Hochstadt: But this was all an adventure for you, seeing . . .

Olga Willner: Well, it was a painful adventure.

Steve Hochstadt: A painful adventure, but . . .

Olga Willner: Like, for instance, when we were, when my mother and I were in the train going down to Trieste, I cried and cried and cried. And the man in the train, the employee, came again and again and tried to console me in Austrian, you know. And when we got close to the border, he said, "Soon you will be free." An Austrian. So in the beginning, I was really very homesick, I must say, yeah. But still . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Would you say something about when you came back to, we were following your trip through the United States to Ellis Island . . .

Olga Willner: Naples and back, ja.

Steve Hochstadt: . . . and then Naples and then back here. Now would you say something about how you felt about coming back to Vienna, and what you were able to, you were able to get a job, and . . .

Olga Willner: My mother had, you see, apartments were very rare in those days in Vienna, and since my mother's family had taken over our apartment, my mother had, was forced to move in with them. And also in order to get her widow's pension, she had to pay a certain amount, I don't know which amount it was, but she had to pay to revive her pension, her widow's pension. I had a letter of recommendation from the ECA Shanghai for ECA Vienna, and I got a job immediately. It was a very good recommendation, I started working for them immediately, and I also lived with [unclear] it was a big apartment and I also stayed there in the beginning, because you couldn't get apartments. Later on I found a room in an apartment. And I was waiting for my papers to go to the States.

But another thing, I've always wanted to become a singer and an actress, and my father was very much for it, he was a great opera fan. I had my first voice lessons at the age of fifteen, I started playing the piano at the age of fourteen, and in China I continued to sing for myself. I sang German songs in Radio Peking for a whole year. I gave a concert in a North China city where there was a, this Presbyterian [unclear] Presbyterian mission. They asked me to give a concert because I accompanied myself in that church, full of Chinese. I had to laugh so much, because I heard on the radio yesterday "The Voice of Spring", it's a famous Strauss waltz. And I, it's a coloratura part, and during that concert in the middle of China I sang that, and the Chinese were intrigued with it, very funny. I had to think of it again. Well, the minute I came, of course, I was obsessed with the idea of becoming a singer, singer-actress, so three days after I arrived in Vienna, I saw a sign, our Imperial Palace, you can walk through, Michaelertor in Hofburg, well, anyway . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Hofburg, I know where that is.

Olga Willner: Yeah, Hofburg, and you can walk through . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Right, a big . . .

Olga Willner: . . . to the [unclear] and there was a sign, because people also had apartments in there, and there was a sign, the name of a singer, and . . .

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Steve Hochstadt: You had just seen the sign.

Olga Willner: . . . and she examined my voice, and she accepted me as pupil, and I started with her, yeah, okay, until in ‘51 my quota was, my number was called. And then she recommended me to also the former head of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra who had gone, who was not, who was also Jewish, and had gone to New York and had become a member of the orchestra of the Metropolitan.[5] So she, I met him in Vienna before I left, he was here for a visit, and then he passed me on, yes, and I went to Boston, because I, in the meantime, I also got engaged to an American, but . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Whom you met here?

Olga Willner: I met him here at the Marshall Plan, yes. But I changed my mind after I arrived. He was the one who gave me an affidavit, we were friends and I had no idea he had intention, any intention of marriage or love or anything, because we, I don’t know, he never said anything. And I didn’t go through with that, but that was the reason why I went to Boston. And then I found through the help of this gentleman a voice teacher, also a Viennese refugee, who was, he and his wife were teaching in Boston, and I worked with them for about five years intensely, but of course I had to work during the day. I worked most of the six years that I stayed there for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, I was assistant manager, but we were a small office, so I had to do all the work. And in the evenings, I went for my voice. And these aspirations, actually, were the reason why after six years I came back to Europe, because I wanted to start my career. I had come here for auditions in ‘55 to Munich, went back to Boston again, in ‘57 came back for more auditions in Munich. By that time I was 36, 37, but felt, I didn’t, couldn’t, didn’t make a go of it, and then I gave up this aspiration. And began working for the International Atomic Energy Agency, and I was with them for twenty-three years. In the beginning, I was head of the travel department, and then later on with other things, and retired in

[5] Willner may be referring to Hugo Burghauser, chairman of the Vienna Philharmonic orchestra after 1933, who was Catholic and had Jewish wife, and who was removed for refusing to fire its Jewish members. He became contrabassoonist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York.

1980. And now I'm a UN pensioner. But I also have a small Austrian pension, which is a sort of *Wiedergutmachung*, because I . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Because of Shanghai? Because of going to China, this pension?

Olga Willner: Because of going to China, yes, yeah. *Ein gutes Leben*.

Steve Hochstadt: *Ja, würde ich auch sagen*.

Olga Willner: *Es ist noch immer bunt.* I never married. That's another story, but that I keep to myself.

Steve Hochstadt: Would you say something about the music in China? You were singing on the radio in Peking.

Olga Willner: Yes, but only for one year, only for one year.

Steve Hochstadt: But you would also know, then, what kinds of music were being listened to, what the popular songs were. Michèle is especially interested in this question.

Olga Willner: Ah, yes [unclear] .

Steve Hochstadt: So the question was about music.

Olga Willner: About music, well, of course you have the Peking opera in China, Peking opera. I got very interested in it, I liked it very much. I still like it very much. I even wrote an article once about it and sent it to the New Yorker, but they sent it back to me, years ago. And I find it very interesting, because a lot is left, you don't have a stage, you, have you seen it, Peking opera?

Michèle Kahn: Yes.

Olga Willner: You have. I have one record, a very good one. Because you have no stage setting really, and you have wonderful costumes, you have cymbals, and a lot is left to your own imagination, and I like that very much. And I don't mind the sounds, the falsetto in which they sing, and, which goes like [sings] . Like that, you know, which

to some ears is horrible, but I rather like it. And otherwise . . .

Michèle Kahn: What about European music in China?

Olga Willner: What about what?

Michèle Kahn: European music?

Olga Willner: European music. In those days, there was, the Catholic mission university, the Catholic university in Peking had a choir. They put on "The Creation" by Josef Haydn with Chinese singers, and very good, they had a little orchestra there. And then there were foreigners who had little *Kammer*-, chamber music groups, and, but otherwise in those days . . .

Michèle Kahn: What did you play or sing for yourself?

Olga Willner: Schubert, Mendelssohn, Mozart, I sang that for myself. I love very much the Mendelssohn songs, which are not sung very much. Brahms, Schubert, but I stopped, when I gave up in '57, I actually didn't sing any more. Only about not quite ten days, ten years later, eight years later, a lady got interested in my voice again, who had been a very famous *Lieder* singer in Vienna. And I said, "I'm much too old for the operatic stage," and she said, "But you could sing oratorios and concerts," so we started working together, but with my temperament, I'm not an oratorio singer, and I ended up with Tosca, and I said, "No, I'm too old for Tosca," I give up again. [laughs] And I never sang any more, because, even not for myself, because singing for me was like leaking blood, really, really.

Steve Hochstadt: Hard work?

Olga Willner: I was quite obsessed with the idea of singing. I did not want to become, I did not want to become a singer or an actress to be famous, but I was convinced I had something to give and to say. So now I do a little writing every now and then, but it's not quite, I think, I think I am basically a performer.

Steve Hochstadt: You said you wanted to say something about classmates . . . ?

Olga Willner: About my classmates, yes, because we are having a meeting next week. They were absolutely wonderful to me, absolutely. Not one of them would neglect me or anything. And I have, a few years ago I've written a letter to all of them thanking them for their attitude. For them it was self-understood, they say to this day. So I really had good experiences also in those days. I had one girlfriend in Sankt Pölten, who didn't look at me the next day after March 12, you know, '38. But she was not a classmate. So one has varied experiences. Human beings are like that, I suppose, hmm?

Michèle Kahn: Could you go dancing?

Olga Willner: Did I?

Michèle Kahn: Dance?

Olga Willner: Dance? I start-, yes, well, at the age of five or six, I started to dance on my own, I don't know, to music and wear costumes. This is me, incidentally, *ja*. That was, I suppose, the beginning of an artistic yearning, and . . .

Michèle Kahn: But then I meant dancing waltzes and . . .

Olga Willner: Dancing waltzes? I danced a lot with GIs in Nanking, when the Americans came, [laughs] yes, then I did a lot of dancing. I love to dance.

Michèle Kahn: Do you remember the music, on what music?

Olga Willner: Oh, the Evergreens, what was it? [sings] "Tea for two, and two for tea, and I for you, and you for me," and God knows, "Begin the Beguine" and whatever.

Steve Hochstadt: So American songs.

Olga Willner: American, yes, the lovely Evergreens. There was in Peking the YMCA, Young Men's Christian Association, and there were dances there. And a very funny thing once, I danced with a GI and he said, [doorbell rings] oh, I'm sorry. And he came and he said he was an Austrian GI. "I hear," he said, "you are an Austrian. I am also an Austrian." I said, "Oh? Then we can speak German." No, I didn't say we can speak German, he started speaking to me in Polish. I said, "You know what you're speaking is

not Austrian." "Yes, it is Austrian," he said. I said, "I'm sorry, but it's Polish that you're speaking." "But my parents come, you know, from Poland, and it was Austria, and I'm Austrian and I speak Austrian." He really got mad with me, so then I didn't [laughs] [unclear] any more. But his parents were the old imperial Austria, Polish [unclear] .

Anything else? What else? Well, I did not become an opera singer, I became an international civil servant, I'm a retired international civil servant. I still travel a great deal, I write occasionally. I might show you one of my points about the Lotus Pond maybe, I can read it to you, yes.

Michèle Kahn: When you arrived in Shanghai, what were your first impressions of China?

Olga Willner: That it's a horrible city, Shanghai, I hated Shanghai. It was an international colonial city, and I didn't like it.

Michèle Kahn: And what about the Chinese things or way of life?

Olga Willner: In China? Do you mean, outside of Shanghai?

Michèle Kahn: What did you say, the first look, what was . . .?

Olga Willner: Well, the first look was that we got off the boat from a very nice cabin onto a truck. My mother cried and cried, and we were driven to Hongkou.

Steve Hochstadt: She cried because of being on a truck, of this reception?

Olga Willner: Well, I mean there was no other way, we were so many people. I mean, I didn't mind it so much, but my mother did.

Steve Hochstadt: That was what upset her?

Olga Willner: We had a beautiful cabin on the boat, and then she was off on a truck. And then we were in this huge camp, I mean, with lots of people, and, but she recovered immediately, except I didn't, we got soup, you know, to eat soup in a tin bowl, and I, the first few days I didn't want to. I said, "Eeuw, I can't eat it." Mommy said, "Wait a few days, you will eat it." I did, of course.

Michèle Kahn: But what you think of the rickshaws and . . . ?

Olga Willner: Oh, the first impression of a rickshaw was ghastly. I thought, oh, how can one, how can you, how can you go by rickshaw? Oh, another funny thing happened in Shanghai. I was, I don't know, we went to the French section, my father and I, I don't know for what one day, and all of a sudden there's a gentleman and he says, "Dr. Willner, we've been waiting for you." It was a patient of his from Sankt Pölten, who was not Jewish, and was working as an engineer in Shanghai, and we met on the street. And he said, "I've been trying to find you. I have heard from somebody that you are here." And they took us out to dinner a few times and every time we got sick afterwards, because we were not used to eating a lot any more. And, because the rations in the camp became smaller and smaller, so that you really didn't get enough to eat in the end. I mean, I could realize, because people were streaming in, and I made up my mind, I would never forget what it means to go hungry. I will never, and I never have forgotten it. I can understand what it means to be hungry. And so where were we, in Shanghai, well, and this gentleman was a former patient, and the whole family in Sankt Pölten, they were patients of my father, non-Jewish, and they were very kind to us.

But, what else, Shanghai, no, I loathed Shanghai, but I'm not one for these huge cities. But it is kind of colonial, I mean, I think it was my mother's education, educating me in such a way that you must never look down on anybody. We had a maid in Sankt Pölten. And when I was about that age, I began to treat her a little bit like that, and Mommy said, "Listen you, you don't do that ever to anybody." And that's what she kept teaching me, that you mustn't, and I could soon realize that the Chinese were second-rate in Shanghai. It was a colonial international town.

Michèle Kahn: What did your parents say when you chose to go to the States?

Olga Willner: Well, my father was already dead. Well, in '46 he was still alive. We left, they left in '47 and when he left he said, "We'll never see each other again." I have, won't forget that. My mother was happy that I found a nice young man to marry, mothers want their daughters married. She never forgave me for not marrying him. I think he was very lucky he did not get me, I really, he was spared quite a bit, I think, by not getting me in the end. And, but I want to, I did not use him to get to the States. I had had an affidavit, we were friends, I had no idea he had any intentions whatsoever, and he said, "Whenever the affidavit you have expires," it was only valid for a year, "I can give you another one."

I said, "Oh, that would be very nice of you. I would not be a burden to you, because I have friends and relatives in New York," and that's it. And when I asked him for the affidavit, he sent it to me with a proposal, and I was absolutely flabbergasted. I had no idea. And then my mother and friends, and they had met him, and he's so nice and so on, and, then I said, "Okay." But when I got there, he wanted to rush me into marriage, and I said, "Listen, we know each other, we don't know each other so well and give me time." And he didn't want to wait and I [unclear] . Then I was all alone in Boston, of course, didn't know a soul.

You falling asleep? Did you sleep at all last night? Two hours?

Steve Hochstadt: Last night, some, but this week, starting in Salzburg, I've been very busy.

Olga Willner: Well, of course, I could make some coffee, but the way I make coffee it takes quite some time, I don't have a machine.

Steve Hochstadt: It's not necessary, I just need to pull myself together.

Olga Willner: A quick one, hmm? *Ja?* Good. [laughs] Will you have some, too?

Michèle Kahn: Yes, please.

Olga Willner: Because I do it what is called the [unclear] way, which is a filter and you always pour small quantities of boiling coffee, so it takes a little time.

Steve Hochstadt: Can we help?

BREAK IN RECORDING

Steve Hochstadt: It seems as if your going to China did not disturb your ability to develop the interests that you had. Singing . . .

Olga Willner: Exactly, no, no, it hasn't, no, no, it hasn't. Except I have lost ten years in which I may have been, might have been able to really develop in such a way as to take

up my career at the proper time, the best years of my life, but *c'est la vie*. I don't, I mean, I don't have grudges or any [unclear] Kismet.

Steve Hochstadt: I see you have enormous numbers of Chinese things.

Olga Willner: Oh yes, yes, but not all of them precious, because I didn't have enough money, but some were gifts and things.

Steve Hochstadt: Are they mostly things you brought back from that time . . .

Olga Willner: Yes, yes.

Steve Hochstadt: . . . rather than things you've bought since then?

Olga Willner: Yes, yes. No, I really think that I've had a very interesting life, I still have an interesting life, and I'm immensely grateful. And I also think that my early childhood and my school, I mean, the family that we were, has given me a sound basis for all the troubles that were in store for me, and has given me my present security. Also my school, my upbringing, for what happened later. But it may also be the nature, mostly, my father was the sensitive, softer man, lovable. My mother was a practical, she was the one who had to tell me, "Listen, you don't do that." My father would never dare do it. [laughs] So they were a good match, the two of them, I must say, very good match, looking after each other. So I was brought up in that surrounding and I'm grateful for it.

Steve Hochstadt: I don't think we have any more questions for you. [unclear]

Olga Willner: Here is something that might, also you'll like in German.

Steve Hochstadt: Michèle is especially interested in which tunes, which songs were, German songs, were popular either in Austria just before you left or songs that you might have sung in your family in China.

Olga Willner: Well, I said Schubert, Mozart, all those. And in China, popular songs in China, I mean . . .

Steve Hochstadt: Do you mean songs that one might dance to?

Michèle Kahn: Yes.

Olga Willner: Well, the old Ever-, American Evergreens, what were they? “Tea for Two”, “Star-”, what was it? The Frank Sinatra songs, some of them.

Michèle Kahn: What would be played in a dance, dancing . . .?

Olga Willner: American tunes then, after the war, even during the war. There were American immigrants.

Steve Hochstadt: Then I think we’re finished.

END SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Olga Willner (1920-2005) was born in Vienna, daughter of Franziska Hillebrand Willner and Dr. Leo Willner (1881-1947). She grew up in Sankt Pölten, where she attended the *Englisches Fräulein* school. After her father was arrested in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, the family sailed to Shanghai in early 1939, where they stayed just a few weeks. Her father was able to get a position at a Catholic mission hospital in Shandong province. After an accident, he was no longer able to work and the family moved to Beijing, where she studied medicine for a year at Fu Jen University. To support her family, she worked as a secretary and taught German. After the war ended, her parents left for Europe in 1947, but her father died on the ship. She worked as the secretary for the president of Yenching University in Beijing, then for the Economic Cooperation Administration in Shanghai. She left Shanghai in 1949, sailed to San Francisco, was transported on a sealed train across the US, and sent further to Naples, and then back to Austria. She spent six years in the US 1951-1957, then returned to Vienna, where she worked for the International Atomic Energy Organization until retirement in 1981.

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.