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GÉRARD KOHBIETER-SLAXON

BERLIN

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Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt

**Transcription: Leslie Broch
Steve Hochstadt**

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Steve Hochstadt: I guess what I'd really like you to do is to start right at the beginning. Say something about when you were born and where you were born and your family, and then . . .

Gérard Slaxon: I was born in Berlin . . .

SH: . . . the whole story . . .

GS: Yeah.

SH: . . . life in Germany and getting to Shanghai.

GS: Yeah. I was born in Berlin, '22, on Decoration Day, I think, May 30th. I went to school there, the last two years in a Jewish school. By then it was '38, and when November 9th came, I mean, I had been thinking about emigrating and we had written to relatives in the States, distant, distant relatives, who didn't really care very much. Am I talking loud enough?

SH: No, that's, oh, that's fine.

GS: And then happened November 9th. I mean, nobody bothered us. We had, my parents had a big business, distribution of electrical stuff and lighters and so on. It was a big business, healthy business. We lost that, of course. And, but on my way to school I saw the Jewish stores, I heard the stories. And the guy across the street that had the biggest car on the block and a factory, a very civilized and cultured and powerful man, got busted, came back shaved, and packed his suitcases and left without saying anything. And I realized, I gotta go. I wasn't ready for this. My mother had been feeding me pacifist literature from the time I started reading, so that I had perhaps not a political view, but certainly developed a certain feeling for the dangers that can befall man in our society. And I started working on my mother. I was sixteen, not quite yet, yeah, sixteen. And she let me go. It took many, many evenings of persuasion, and, I lived alone with my mother. Papa had left earlier. But we saw him under good terms and all like that. It just wasn't enough to stay together, I guess. It happens. And, well, she said, "Okay. If that's what you want to do." We had a connection in Ber-, in Shanghai, a doctor that lived across the street that lived there already for quite a few years. Excellent doctor, woman doctor. And my mother wrote her a letter and said, "Listen. Perhaps you can help in this somehow." So I packed up and I went to Shanghai.

SH: When was that?

GS: That was in '39, in March, about six months before, before the invasion of Poland, before the whole thing started. So I had the doctor there and, of course, the committee that picked you up at the boat with busses. And then you were driven to a camp. I mean a camp, not a concentration camp, a camp with beds and a canteen. You had a place to

put your head. That's how I got to Shanghai.

SH: You had said that even before *Kristallnacht* you were thinking about emigrating, talking about it . . .

GS: Decidedly, decidedly. I mean, they had loudspeakers in Berlin. Not everybody had a radio in those days and they had loudspeakers, I guess to, to get a better listening rate for Hitler's speeches, or for whatever propaganda was coming through there. But when nobody was speaking, they were playing music. They were playing march music, which up to this day, I can't stand. Except maybe Charlie Mingus did a pretty neat march once. I mean, I heard the grown-ups talking, man, and what was happening and what happened, this one got busted, that one got busted, and businesses were closing and meanwhile the jokes were going, how that this can't last forever, you know. There was a significant joke about how two Jews meet on the Kurfürstendamm in 1960 and one says, says to the other, "Six months I give him." But I wasn't taken in by that. I felt danger. I had, it was like a cat reacts to, to people who are real nervous people, cats stay away from them. They don't hop in their lap, they make, *machen ein Bogen rum, weißt Du?*¹ That, it felt dangerous, all those clowns walking around, man, with this super-masculinity, this marching, this macho thing, God in heaven, and it was directed at us. I mean, I wasn't particularly a religious Jew or anything like that. My mother was an intellectual. She was politically very interested on the left. Although she did have money, which is a good combination, because those people can do things. I felt unsafe. A further complication was that my father was not Jewish and that there was a possibility of getting drafted. Well, man to tell you the truth, that was perhaps my biggest fear, because I couldn't see myself getting drafted by those clowns. Anybody, man, I mean, I've managed to evade putting on a uniform my entire life. In the States I just made it by a few months, I was really lucky, man, Korea was going then. But that was the early pacifist literature my mother had laid on me. I can even, I can even tell you the scene in the book that really did it to me. In Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues, wie heißt es auf Englisch?*

SH: All Quiet . . .

GS: All Quiet on the Western Front, yeah, there is a scene where, this is perhaps a little irrelevant.

SH: No, I'm interested always, in everything.

GS: There is a scene, they are all young kids, all college kids, high school kids, and they're dumb, but suddenly they real-, they are faced with these monstrous realities and they visit a dying friend. That did it. The sun is going down and the guy is weeping. Yeah.

¹ This means "give a wide berth to".

SH: Did you talk with school friends about emigrating?

GS: Probably. Probably. I never thought of that.

SH: Or, whom did you talk with about it?

GS: Well, my parents. My father, who was not, my father brought up arguments like, "My God, what are you going to do in Shanghai? We don't know anybody in Shanghai and you know, you don't know the language, and my God, how dangerous. How can you? It's quite an adventure that you're going and doing this." And I said, "Well, yeah. But look how dangerous it is to stay here. This is an adventure, too. I'd rather." But the decision was with my mother anyway. She was the stronger personality. But I do like women. So, where were we?

SH: Your mother didn't want to go?

GS: No, my mother had a love affair with somebody. I don't know exactly what her motivation was. She said, "Listen, you go. We'll fix everything up for you and then I'll come a little later." Well, there wasn't time. Shanghai was closed, they, at one point you couldn't come in any more. And that was it. Interesting woman, laughed a lot, had a great humor, social graces. Man, she was the kind of woman that in another time would have had a salon, some kind of a, I mean, not a big salon. But, you know, she always had interesting people around, creative people. Yeah.

SH: Gérard, could you say something about your preparations to leave, the kinds of things you decided to bring or didn't decide to bring.

GS: Well, first of all, you couldn't take money. I left, I left the country with four bucks, ten Marks. But you could take things. So I got myself all fitted out, I got a whole bunch of good clothes. I got myself a tuxedo and I got my magic tricks, got more magic tricks from the magic store. And had photos, because I knew I was going to need photos if I start a career as a magician. Man, I was sixteen. You know, I had never done this, but I had a magic teacher, who also showed up in Shanghai, who had showed me the business, how that you need photos and how you approach agents and so I had a little, little bit of a back-, a theoretical background. So [unintelligible] and the rest was taken care of magically by the parents. That's the beauty of being a child. I would sometimes think it wasn't really worth the trouble of growing up. They got the ticket, they did all the paperwork for me and that was that. I had a ticket. The ticket had to be purchased in Hamburg. Berlin was sold out, but in Hamburg there were some dealers. They bought up the tickets and then sold them for twice the price.

SH: That I never heard about. Who were these dealers?

GS: I don't know. I don't know who the dealers were. I know that Lloyd Triestino, the

line that a lot of the guys came on, that decidedly whole blocks of tickets gone and then showed up on a black market, which you knew because you heard so-and-so and so-and-so got tickets and he paid, I don't know, 1300 Marks for a ticket to Shanghai, that should have cost 650 or something like that. Somebody was making money. And even then you had, my mother's boyfriend had to fly to Hamburg, man, to nail it down. So those were the preparations. I took the train to Genoa and then 29 days, adventurous days. There were people that were pacing the deck all night, couldn't sleep, people that came out of the concentration camp, wasted, wasted. Yeah, I did a magic show on the ship to ingratiate myself, and made a little money, and I arrived in Shanghai with 150 bucks or something.

SH: Did you have some board money that was . . . ?

GS: Well, I had board money. I had 130 Marks board money, which I converted, I put on my tux. I knew how to get into the first class, and sat down at the bar, drank my first scotch. My God, I thought I'd die. At sixteen you don't drink scotch, you know? And I had, I had immediately developed a relationship with the bartender and I bought cigarettes. How did that go? I got cigarettes and I sold them to the crew or something, and that way I got cash. That was a part of the 150 bucks, the board money I converted. Lost my virginity aboard and that was pretty exciting. And I got the first whiff of emigrant talk.

SH: What was that?

GS: Well, of course you had all kinds. You really had a spectrum of society there. You had people that were, that came from, from very poor neighborhoods and talked *Milieu*. You speak German very well?

SH: Yes.

GS: And, respectively, French. The interesting people were the middle-class little businessmen, that were enlarging their achievements enormously. And you, when you're very young, you know when people are sort of putting you on. I still do, actually, most of the time. Then I was attracted to the Viennese. The Berliners didn't like the, the Viennese, they were too polite for them, too gracious. They thought that "*Sie sind falsch*." And they're talking, you know, they're talking, "*Sie schmieren Dir Rotz um die Backe*."²

SH: *Das verstehe ich nicht*.

GS: They put honey around your cheeks. But I figure everybody does that, only they do it more charmingly. So aboard these are my first contacts with such a, my God, I've never been to Israel. I keep saying, "Well, man, I don't have to go to Israel, I was in

² Berlin slang for buttering somebody up.

Shanghai." So, I hear marvelous things from non-Jewish friends from the university. We had a friend here with the FU.³ Loves it there and loves it for the human, human qualities, the human characteristics, the interest in other people, the interest in, well also, he hobnobs probably with, with other physicists and his crowd. And that kind of a crowd is interesting all over the world. Like Tom Wolfe wrote once in You Can't Go Home Again, that an American football player and a German football player have a hell of a lot more in common than an American football player and an American college professor. And that the nationalities were on, really on, on completely different levels in that respect. I'm sorry, I seem to digress a bit.

SH: Oh, that's fine, that's fine. You were talking about the Viennese and the Berliners on board and hearing emigrant talk.

GS: Yeah. It was a strange atmosphere, you know. People were on a boat and they thought, when you are on a boat that sort of feels like vacation, and, but on the other hand, you were really sailing into, into a black hole. You didn't know what in God's name awaits you there. There were reports. There were whole lists of things you should bring for the climate, because it's so different from here and a wee bit of stuff, also, I think, how to get along with the natives. Not much, so if there was anything, I'm not sure. But all in all, you didn't know much about what you were getting into. But you knew what you were getting out of. And that to me, that was a panda bear. I didn't care. Just like on Monday, man. I don't care what happens on Monday to me as long as I get out of there alive.⁴ Because I feel healthy, man. And I feel, I got a little more time. Yeah so the atmosphere was strange. The fear that people had was probably pushed back, you know. People tried to sort of put up a good front. Though it seems to be in the Jewish nature to *kvetch*, you know, to complain and so forth. The *kvetchers* were a big pain in the ass in Shanghai proper. During the really bad times, there was a time when there really wasn't enough to eat, where you lived on a, well, what one would consider a fairly large roll. That was your daily ration. The stuff didn't get through. You know, the Red Cross, something happened. It wasn't, I mean, it wasn't the kind of hunger that Knut Hamsun describes in his magnificent book Hunger. Do you know it?

SH: No.

GS: Oh, you must. It's one of the adventures in literature. It's a great book, Hunger. I think he got, no, he didn't get the Nobel for that, it was his first. But Hunger, it's in print, it's a classic. It's not that kind of hunger. It was, it was, you felt it. But attitude is everything, you know, and there were people who were *kvetching*, man, and that were really driving you nuts. "*Ah, Mensch, hab' ich einen Hunger. Mensch, hab' ich einen*

³ The Free University in Berlin.

⁴ Slaxon was scheduled for an operation the following Monday, December 12. He died on January 4, 1995.

Kohldampf." Well, this was senseless. Everybody else was in the same boat, man. You're just simply reminding people, "Oh yeah, that's right. My stomach is empty." Whereas other people had the wit to divert, entertain themselves somehow. They read something or they talk with each other or played billiard or something. The *kvetchers*, they were aboard too. But mostly people were sort of wondering and exchanging, exchanging stories, what they'd done at home. Smuggling stories didn't come out yet. Those are my favorite kinds. Those, those weird things how people got money out.

SH: I'd like to hear about them. Not necessarily if it's, if it's a digression now, but I'd like to hear about them, because I've asked many people whether they tried to get some extra things out. Did you have a smuggling story for yourself?

GS: No. No, there was a death penalty on smuggling money. And man, I wasn't about to risk that. I've never been able to risk jail, no matter how attractive the proposition may be. You know, like you can buy yourself a house and the hell with it, that kind of thing. Never. Don't have the temperament for it. There was usually fear then. The money was there. I could have, but other people managed. There was one guy, I'll tell you the story, but I don't want you to use it, because I want to use that in my book.

SH: Okay.

GS: If I die, you can use it, okay? This was not a German, this was a, this was not a Jew, this was a German. A real arrogant looking character, a jazz trumpeter, very hip style. And he, he wanted out. He went, he went to Italy, that you could do, that was the Axis partner. Got himself a boat, the Italians didn't care, man, who left. I mean, they were wishy-washy about things like that and you could also probably buy your way through there somehow, it wasn't like Germany. And he got himself a ticket to Singapore, where he had friends and where he was going to open, he knew how to repair instruments, he could make a living. And he was out of Germany. Okay, but he wanted to take some money. He put an ad in the Völkische Beobachter, which was the official Nazi paper, with a box number, and told them, "I'm going to be in Italy in, for the next couple of months. Please forward my mail with whatever responses I get to my ad." Then he sent himself responses with *valuta* in it, with currency, pounds and dollars. They got to the Völkische Beobachter, to the advertising section. They had a big manilla envelope with a big fucking swastika on it and Völkische Beobachter, you know. Nobody checks that mail! That got to Italy and he had his money. And if they had opened it, man, he was out. He watched it. I thought that was ingenious.

SH: Was he on the ship also?

GS: Yeah. He told me the story.

SH: So there were, there were non-Jews who were trying to get out or who were getting out also?

GS: Yeah, yeah. I met three guys in Shanghai, three Germans, Hamburgers all. They practically walked to Shanghai. They had really, one of the, like today hippies travel like that, you know, they made it somehow to Shanghai. One was a burglar, one was a chemist, the third one didn't do anything. Yeah. The burglar bridged the, the hard winters. Winter is unpleasant in, in Shanghai. It's very, very moist. It doesn't, I mean, it doesn't freeze, but it's, particularly if you are undernourished, you know, and you have a hole in your shoe and maybe you don't have a proper coat, because one sold a lot of stuff to, to get eating money, and so, you, if you didn't gauge it right, you wound up without a coat in winter. Well, he threw a brick in the window someplace and got himself in the pokey, and the judges knew him. They knew what he was doing. English judges for the English Concession. And he spent the winter in jail. I visited him a couple of times. And he had no, no status problems with that, because that was his life. Jail to him was just a place that you simply have to cope with once in a while, if you have that form of human endeavor. [laughs] Yeah. He even offered me a job once. He knew where to get something and he needed somebody to keep an eye on things and whistle when somebody comes. I couldn't see that either.

SH: You could tell on board the ship the difference between the men who had been in concentration camp for a few months and the people who hadn't?

GS: Well, you could tell who it had hit particularly hard. The people that were psychically so, so terribly hurt that they walked like animals, like the particularly freedom-loving animals in the zoo, like the fox. You can't put a fox in a, in a cage. The fox paces back and forth. Every time he comes, well, the fox that I watch, every time he goes to the wall, he puts his paw up, just touches it. Have you seen that?

SH: Yes.

GS: And it's a heart-breaker.

SH: It's very disturbing.

GS: And the fox reminded me of some of those guys on board. They weren't walking as fast. They were sort of walking slowly, like ghosts. I mean, I didn't sit there and watch them for a long time. I just happened to see them, you know, every time you go out there's somebody, there were those guys walking.

SH: Most of the people on board must have been in families and you were there alone as a teenager.

GS: There were a lot of families, yeah, yeah.

SH: How did that feel, being a sixteen-year-old among all these families? You've described it as somewhat of an adventure, your first drinks and being an entertainer

already.

GS: Well, it was, I'm not sure that I was aware of it at the time. It was like a Bar Mitzvah. It was my entry into adulthood. It was the first time that I was independent. That part of it had a certain charm, charm in the magical sense. It's something that attracts. I was a grown-up. I was, all decisions were made by me, though I had no trouble with decisions in the home. I had a very groovy mother. But I didn't feel lonely. I didn't feel, "Here I'm, all alone, and they are all together." That came later. And I had the confidence that young people seem to have, the over-confidence, that I'm going to knock everybody flat on their feet with my magic. Well, I did make, I did make a living there for a while, on and off. There were a lot of families. Did I give you tea?

SH: Yes. I'll take more if you have some. Thank you.

GS: I'll make some more. Do you want some milk or honey for that? I have sugar too.

SH: No, I like it plain.

GS: Saccharine? No.

SH: Did you get off at any of the stops that the boat made?

GS: Every one! Every one! Yeah, I got off in Colombo. I got off everywhere where they let you off the boat, which was, it was a leisurely way of traveling in those days. Twenty-nine days it took. The proverbial slow boat to China. In Colombo I got off and took my photos and went to a hotel on the foolish, in the foolish hope that they might say, "Ah, you are a magician. Good God, you're just the man we're looking for. Get off the boat and stay here." I figured that would, you know, but of course it doesn't happen that way. But I met a dance team there, Dutch people, that asked me where I'm from and all like that. And when we parted, the guy gave me twenty pounds. Twenty pounds was a reasonable amount of money, it was, hell, probably like a couple hundred bucks today. And it embarrassed me and I said, "Oh, no, no." He said, "Go ahead, son. Now take it. You're going to need it." And he was very natural about it. It was cool. Yeah, so, Bombay and Djibouti and all kinds of, in Manila I almost missed the boat.

SH: Got off and then it was about to leave . . .

GS: In Manila we had a whole day, man. And, oh my God, I've never seen so many pretty women in my life. Such pretty women. Such really beautiful people. I was wandering around there and I heard the ship's whistle and you can hear the ship's whistle right through the whole town and then you [unintelligible]. Yeah, sending postcards from each port. And all these guys trying to sell things, and no one had money. Well, I guess some people had money, but I don't know how. You know how it is in these places with, you know, with textiles and funny fountain pens and carvings. I

don't think they did much business with us. People didn't have money, but people had things. You could take things out. You could open a small night club there with a couple of Leikas.⁵ I mean, there, there were clubs where one knew that those two had started with a couple of cameras. Small, small. But everything was cheap, the band, the entertainers, you know, few bottles, man. Bars that had two kinds of whiskey, man, and a case of beer, that's how they started. Then worked themselves up, the profit is good on these things. The night life was interesting. There was considerable contact between the German community including the official, the guys from the Consulate. And also prominent Nazis were seen in clubs, sitting with the bar, with a Jewish bar girl and buying drinks. After the war with Japan started, after the English and the Americans and the Dutch were out, the Germans were the people that supported the night clubs, because they had the money [unintelligible] . Yeah.

SH: Did these Jewish bar girls come from the German community or from the Russian community or do you know?

GS: German. Both, both. There were a lot of Russian girls. Of course, they were there much earlier. They were there in the, in 1918 they came down there as kids and now they were grown-ups. Princesses all, everyone of them. Told you, again the emigrant talk. They were a lot of aristocrats, somehow aristocratically linked. I had good, good contacts with Russians. It was the first time that I've seen Russians, in the after hour joints, where the musicians go and the entertainers, because you didn't want to go straight home, because you're all wound-up, and I've seen guys sit there and weep bitterly and drink vodka out of water glasses. It's just like in Dostoyevsky, and I was touched, I was deeply touched by the Russians. The bar girls were Russian and I don't think I've ever seen a Russian-Jewish girl, of course, how do you know? The Jewish community, the Russian-Jewish community, was pretty well together. I think they were pretty well organized. They had schools for their people. They had a club, a Russian club, and it was a Russian Jew that arranged a tour for me in North China, that I could travel through North China, which you ordinarily couldn't, because it was all under Japanese occupation. And they got me permission to travel around there up to Peking, Tientsin and Tsinanfoo, Tsingtao, Tsingtao. And I played clubs there.

SH: When was that? What year?

GS: '40, 1940. It was a year after I got there. This school friend who lived with his family in Tsingtao had heard, a classmate, that I was in Shanghai and he came visit me and asked, "Would you, how would you like to come to Tsingtao for a while?" And [unintelligible] , it was a very beautiful place. It used to be German, by the way, and the architecture still is, it's like the Riviera. It's beautiful. Roads along the sea, and lots of little beaches, and great place. I went up there and then the Russian Jews arranged that for me. Well, it did a lot for my self-confidence . . .

⁵ The Leika was an expensive German camera.

SH: That trip?

GS: . . . as a performer. So there I was, pulling rabbits out of my ears, so to speak. These bar girls were, were not prostitutes. I mean, they, I mean, there may have been some that did a number if the price was right and if they were thus inclined, but there were also women that wouldn't dream of doing that. They usually had husbands and, well, you know, it was like everybody's driving taxis in Berlin. That was just, that's the job. Couple of friends were over last night. Highly qualified people, but you know, everybody's suffering these days and I asked him, "What are you doing?" "*Wir machen den Taxischein.*" He's an actor, another guy is a director and an actor. Qualified people. And I said, "Well, is that necessary?" And he said, "Well, it's the only job in Berlin where you can suddenly get a job whenever you want it and make good money." So that was the bar girl scene over there. And there were people in the community that put up their noses at these women, because they worked in a bar, because they were too bourgeois or too, simply too square, used to be the word, to swing with that. Not all Jews are tolerant. Bad scene. People were really talking about those women sometimes in a very derogatory way. But, I mean, so what? I mean, you have these people everywhere.

SH: But you knew them as colleagues, because they would be . . .

GS: Yes, of course.

SH: . . . they would be working in a place that you would be working in.

GS: Yeah, yeah. They were my audience too. They were the ones that, that were applauding nicely, they sort of dug the playfulness of it, you know, magic is this very playful thing. Unless you go at it in a very grim way, which I don't. There were hookers, sure there were hookers. But, I mean, I didn't find it all that terrible. Ask me questions.

SH: I was about to ask you how the night life changed over the years that you were in Shanghai, when first after you arrived, but then everybody was herded into the District, and then the Americans came later. There were hungry years and not so hungry years. How did this affect the night life or your ability . . . ?

GS: Well, as I said earlier, in the beginning the clientele was English and American, the business-, the foreign businessmen and of course the, the successful Chinese. They love to go to clubs. Then when they got the camps, it was the Germans, the Japanese, and still the Chinese, of course. Well, and when the war was over, you had the town full of Yanks. In fact, you had, I mean, wherever you went, there were Yanks. They came from Okinawa. They had spent terrible, terrible months, many months there, trying to push the Japanese off that island and had accumulated pay. They had no way to spend money there, man. They were busy loading the machine guns or whatever. So, these guys, I mean, some of these guys come from small towns where they're not used to having money. They're simple souls and the money burned a hole in their pocket, so they were

spending it really freely, all over the place. Every bar was making money. And the clubs. There was one club that wouldn't let enlisted men in. The fancy clubs, that no enlisted man was really [unintelligible] .

SH: Do you remember the name of the club?

GS: Yeah. I think it was called the Little Club, the Little Club. Yeah, good money was made then. The musicians, you had a lot of German musicians playing in clubs, including the Joachim brothers, who were sort of known in the classical field. But they played, played jazz too. Big Filipino bands that played swing charts, played Goodman charts and Miller, Glenn Miller and stuff like that. Big, big bands. Sounded great. And I was doing the silent act then, of course, because I couldn't speak Chinese, and they accompanied me. I would tell them what kind of music I wanted and had little rehearsals with the drummer when I wanted a roll. Russian bands. There was a Russian band that played jazz. They played really good jazz and they were going to go back to the Soviet Union and I said to the guy, "Man . . ."

END SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

SH: Okay. The owners of the clubs, were there Jewish owners and non-Jewish owners? I guess what I'm interested in is how much of the club scene or the night-life scene was run by emigrants or emigrants working in the night clubs.

GS: Well, in Hongkew, in Hongkew, of course most of it was in Jewish hands, the clubs, the cafés. The Viennese, of course were very quick to open coffee houses. In the city, the big clubs were in Chinese hands. The big hotels with their night clubs, the big clubs in the Badlands where there was gambling in the back, elegant, elegant gambling. Some refugees went to the gambling places because they were very generous in serving food. There were always candies standing around and cigarettes, to help yourself. And if you are broke, if you are flat broke, that's something to be considered. So they went to these places and played very carefully, a little bit red and a little bit black, and hoping that the zero wouldn't come, or played two, two, black and red. That's, that's just so to give the illusion. It was quite a hike out there, too.

SH: Where is that in Shanghai? Where were these places?

GS: It was in the western, in the western section. It was called the Badlands for some reason. One club was owned by an American that was known, known to be a fugitive from the law. He was a gangster or something, Jimmy, Jimmy's Kitchen. He had a night

club. But he was socially acceptable. He popped up in the social columns and society people sort of liked buddying around. They thought it was adventurous, I guess. It's a melting pot alright. There was one club that was owned by French Jews. Very good club, very well-run club, good music. In the city proper, the Russians had clubs there. Balalaika, which is now in San Francisco, which is my home, you know, I spent twenty-eight years in San Francisco.

SH: This is the same people who took the place over there?

GS: So I heard, yeah. Yeah, there are quite a few Shanghailanders in San Francisco. Have you been in other cities to find survivors from that scene?

SH: I've been around Los Angeles because my parents live there, and so when I would visit them I would find people in southern California. And I've been around Miami because my in-laws have a vacation home there and I've looked around. I haven't been to San Francisco yet, where there's more than any other place. And I haven't been to New York where there's quite a few.

GS: Yeah, San Francisco might be, I don't know anybody from Shanghai . . .

SH: Here in Berlin?

GS: . . . in San Francisco. Here neither.

SH: In San Francisco there's thousands.

GS: In New York I used to run into people. In New York, on Broadway and 103rd Street, I had a place, 102nd Street, 103rd Street, I had, it was my first furnished room in New York, and there was the cafeteria. Maybe it was further down, 86th Street or so. A cafeteria, and they were all sitting there, man, just like they were sitting around at the Alcock Home in Shanghai waiting for the war to end. They were sitting in the cafeteria waiting for heaven, waiting for Godot and looking pretty much the same, only they had a few more lines in their faces, but they still moved, the body language was still there and you know, "Hey man," and you were glad to be out of there. Talking the same bullshit, man. It's an interesting crowd anyway, cafeteria crowds. Well, in Shanghai I went to cafés. Sometimes it was a toss-up whether I'm going to buy myself a bowl of noodles for the rest of my capital that I had in my pocket or whether I go to a café, and in the café you could sit, it was warm. There were other people and they usually were in some place where there were people that you knew. And the main thing was they had a radio and you could hear music and that was a big attraction. You were sort of starved for music. I was starved for music. I was 16, 17, and I very, very quickly attached myself to the creative types. I tried to, sort of, buddy-up to them. And I was in some cases accepted. I mean, I was a young kid. I was interested in art, I was interested in this and that, but of course I couldn't contribute to the conversation an awful lot, but I had the

ability to keep my mouth shut and listen. Those were colorful people. They weren't dead yet. They weren't *kvetching*, you know, they were doing something, drawing or painting or putting little ships in empty scotch bottles or hell knows what, but they were colorful. They laughed, they laughed sometimes.

And I read a lot. There was a time when I read a book a day. And books, there were books, you know, Jews are readers, more often than not. And there were libraries and lending libraries where you had to pay and free ones, and I went, I read. I read my way through the Second World War, which isn't a bad, bad way to go through the Second World War, let me tell you. People are bitching. I heard refugees from Shanghai in San Francisco, they're not there, they're dead, all dead, bitching about Shanghai, and I said, "Man, look at the alternative." I mean, it was a lifesaver, and you were in an environment where *Ausländerhaß* existed perhaps, but it was never expressed. They are polite people, and the Chinese put up with a lot with us. The refugees were, a lot of, well, I don't know a lot, but some refugees had it in their head that they were superior to the Chinese, and that's a considerable error in thinking. And people feel that, the way they talk to them and so forth. There were frictions, some, but all in all, I must say they were good hosts. I'm grateful to them. And it shaped my attitude towards money. You know, I, in Shanghai I said to myself, when the war was over, this will never happen to me again. I will go to America and I will make money, baby. I will make money, money, money. And the first time I cried in a movie was in New York and I discovered that I wasn't really all that tough. And it quickly developed that making money wasn't really my thing and also that one didn't really [unintelligible]. A famous economist, I forgot who it was, said, it wasn't Galbraith, that the only way to solve personal economy is to reduce your needs, which [unintelligible] leaves quite a spectrum, but seen reasonably that works out, or the American saying, "All you need is one dollar more than you need." That too leaves a spectrum, but if you are modest, I'm content.

SH: And you think that that came from living in Shanghai?

GS: I think so. I think so. Maybe it would have, well, also the fact that I did have money once, that I come from a family that had money. Something that, I mean, if you are born into something like that, you accept it. Doesn't everybody, you know? It wasn't that big a carrot to hang before me. Maybe I would have know the same development. Maybe if Hitler hadn't come I would have inherited the business and found myself somebody to run that properly and gone into movie-making or something, or maybe an academic career. Psychology had always intrigued me. I like to think Shanghai had something to do with it. Mark Twain said once, "Broke don't scare me." Well, it doesn't scare me, but I've always taken care that that stage of affairs doesn't happen again. But loosely, without busting my fanny. And looking back, you know, when you are 72, you can sort of look back and see everything and figure, "Well, if you do that right, all in all, yeah," because I have lots of friends who've been successful, very successful, and, I mean money successful, and they seemed to be a little envious of me. I have more time. I laugh more. I do more interesting things. I have time to do interesting things. A city like this was very seductive culturally for me. Do you get around? Do you see things?

SH: We've begun to. We've begun to see what there is to see.

GS: There is, why don't you turn it off for a sec, or we can leave it on, it doesn't matter, but it's irrelevant, but I want to lay this on you. There is a circus in town. Three French people, two men and a woman.

SH: Oh, I've heard about this.

GS: Outside the Tacheles.

SH: The Tacheles.

GS: Don't miss it. That is an adventure. What these three people carry on, it's a circus, well, it's not really a circus, it's a happening with three very talented people, and there's meat on the bone. They are a little philosophical. Hooks here and there, and you don't quite know what's happening. It's beautiful. It's an adventure. You must see it. Don't miss it.

SH: Someone yesterday, a friend of mine, just gave me a card, because he'd been there and said the same thing, that they were wonderful.

GS: It's superb. Superb.

SH: Can I bring my children?

GS: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Your children are with you, how old?

SH: Ten and thirteen.

GS: No kidding. Well, hey man, when I come out of that thing, we must get together and I'll do a little magic show for your kids.

SH: They would like that.

GS: At the table, because it's small, huh? Or if you want to throw a party, I'll come and do a stand-up. I would gladly do this.

SH: That would be wonderful.

GS: Two other things. Mummenschantz, from Switzerland, if they come, if they ever, if they hit town while you are here, Mummenschantz, a Swiss group. They work with gigantic masks and things, and changes, and very beautiful stuff, very beautiful. And the Black Theater of Prague, the Black Theater. That's a joy too. And Marcel Marceau. Yeah, let's get back to Shanghai. Well, when I come out, we will be in touch, because I will

keep an eagle eye here on the entertainment thing. One gets more and more discriminating, so I can recommend good things to you.

SH: Good, good. Tell me more about the creative people that you met in Shanghai and some of the things that they did to survive. Again, I'm especially interested in emigrants and if you feel, if you feel okay about saying their names, that's helpful to me. Sometimes other people have mentioned names. I'll tell you one person that I've met, Ursula Melchior.⁶

GS: Actress?

SH: Right, because she lives in the same place that my parents live now, and so I interviewed her.

GS: Oh really, yeah. She was well known there. And her husband was a director, I think. Yeah. There was a painter who was a student of Kokoschka's, from Vienna. His wife was an actress. His wife's name was Eva Schwartz. I forgot his name. Good painter. And a miscellany of writers and poets. There was a rather high level of publication, were you, have you got Kranzler's book? That's a gem.⁷ I mean, for material, holy cow, what statistic he's got! He lists all the publications, and the "Yellow Post" was published by, well, anthropologists, I suppose.⁸ It was a professor from someplace. High level magazine about historical stuff, and articles about Chinese Jews and speculations where they were and what happened to them and so forth. A lot of actors. Couple of biggies. There was a chick from, Rosl Albach-Gerstl. She was a *Soubrette*.⁹ She was singing operettas and stuff, which wasn't exactly my cup of tea, but occasionally one worked together at what they called *Bunte Abende*. Have you heard the expression?

SH: A little bit, but tell me about it.

⁶ See interview with Ursula Melchior, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Laguna Hills, CA, June 10, 1990. Her husband, Fritz Melchior, was an important theater director in Shanghai.

⁷ David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1988), is the standard work on the Jews of Shanghai.

⁸ *Die Gelbe Post* was published by A.J. Storfer, a psychologist student of Freud, and represented the most literary and scholarly of emigré publications in Shanghai.

⁹ Rosl Albach-Gerstl was an operatic soprano, born in Vienna in 1898.

GS: *Bunte Abende* is simply, is kind of a mish-mash of comedians, a dancer, a magician, sketches, a lot of sketches that were often written specially for the occasion. Or there were old sketches that were tried and true.

SH: And who put these on?

GS: They were put on sometimes in the camps. The camp where I stayed for quite a while had a stage that was used for Friday night services and Saturday services, and it was also used for a stage for plays and for *Bunte Abende*. And then there were entrepreneurs who would rent a theater and do the publicity and rent a, hire a bunch of people and they had an MC there, a comedian and MC, very clever, hard, hard cat, Herbert Zernik, who was with the *Kabarett der Komiker* in Berlin, he said.¹⁰ But again, emigrants talk. You know, I tried to look him up once, it's not that important, but I had a bunch of programs from that cabaret and I didn't see his name, but maybe it was a different time. But he was good. Yeah, there's a list of plays that were produced in that Kranzler book. I knew Boris Sapiro, who was a Polish Jew, I think, a very small, very nervous, eccentric man that ran a little theater in a café and produced Yiddish, Yiddish plays occasionally. But he wasn't, he wasn't as far out in his artistic choices as he was as a personality. He was a true madman of the old school, 18 carat. A friend of mine did backdrops for him and he came home and he had to have a couple of stiff drinks after consultations with the maestro. The rest he did was boulevard theater. Do you know the expression?

SH: Yes.

GS: What Pauline Kael called entertaining trash.¹¹ Which is totally acceptable. Why not? Especially in those times when people have *tsouris* up to here.¹² Anything goes. But there were people who were pushing the drama. I've seen one guy standing on stage singing Toller songs. You know Toller? Spread legs like this. He was singing songs about coffee being put in the ocean to keep the prices up and about the *Stempellied*,¹³ about, well, very revolutionary stuff, which was of course received by the audience with, you again could see the split, the spectrum. Everybody went to the *Bunte Abende* because it was entertainment. It was cheap. If you didn't have the money, I think you could get

¹⁰ Herbert Zernik was one of the best-known and most accomplished actors in Shanghai.

¹¹ Pauline Kael was the longtime theater and film critic for the New Yorker.

¹² *Tsouris* is Yiddish for troubles.

¹³ Ernst Toller was a Bavarian writer and revolutionary leader in 1918-19. The *Stempellied* refers to the need of unemployed workers to get official stamps at government offices in order to receive welfare benefits.

tickets from the committee or so. They weren't very hard-nosed about it. So everybody was there and some people were saying, "Yeah, you know, that's it. That's the way to look at things and to interpret them. We've got to do something about that." And there were other people that put their noses up at this left-wing nonsense, as they saw it. But I mean there were never any fights or so. It was just, the next thing was a dancer, calm the waves. The Shanghai symphony had a, had a refugee conductor for a while. One was a doctor, Dr. Marcuse was a conductor, was an amateur conductor, but apparently he had what it took, because they let him conduct. That was more or less in English hands and there was another one that taught music at the university. Fuchs. Professor Fuchs, a dear, gentle soul who had a really intellectual, I mean that guy was all mind, all mind. Well, I think music colleges are usually gentle souls, from what I hear from the academic circles. They made an impact on Shanghai. You could feel them. There were guys going around to the German community and selling things. There was one, somebody made sausages, German sausages, and they went around to German households and were gladly received because where else could they get German sausage? I was dealing books for a while.

SH: So you're talking about Jews selling to non-Jews?

GS: Um-hm. Non-Jewish Germans. And I sold German books to them and I was very well received. I made appointments and I went there with a suitcase. I had a bunch of stuff there and always sold, I didn't, they didn't, I don't think they bought it out of pity or, you know, I think they were glad to get German literature. I didn't do that very long. It was a little stopgap, I think is the word that wants to get off my lips.

SH: When was that?

GS: In between, between '40 and '43.

SH: Where did you get the books? Could you say something about how this business came about?

GS: Well, there were German bookstores that were selling books, not just the lending libraries, and I knew one of the guys, Heinemann, very dear man, very knowledgeable, a real book person, and he let me, he let me take books on commission. He gave me a suitcase full of books and then what I didn't sell, he got back. It was good for him, it was good for me. Yeah, well, in between magic jobs. It really got too tough. I would put the tuxedo in a pawn shop and I could even, they even took the patent leather shoes on another occasion, and the shirts. I even pawned my rings, the magic rings, you know, that link together.

SH: Oh yes.

GS: Then when I got a job I had to go borrow money from somebody and get all my shit

out of the pawn shop, do my job, and pay this guy back, and, ahh, transactions. But most of the time you just lay there and read. I did. What did you ask me?

SH: I don't remember. But now I want to ask you about living in the camp.

GS: Yeah.

SH: I'll say why I want to ask you, because most of the people that I've interviewed, and I don't know why this is, but most of them spent a very little time in the camp, if at all. They all managed to gather some money or bring some money and rent an apartment someplace.

GS: Yeah.

SH: So I don't have much of an idea about what it was like living in one of the camps for any length of time.

GS: I can tell you about that. I spent considerable time in camps, in and out. Whenever I had a little money I rented myself a room and when that didn't work out, when I didn't have the money any more, I'd go to the camp. It was easy. At least you had a place. The camp I was in was, it used to be a factory, a huge factory building that had been cleaned up and there were, well, there were at least two huge halls and there were, I don't know, 80 beds, or 100, 100 people, but on double beds, so half the number of beds.

SH: They were bunk beds?

GS: Yeah, metal. Just one next to the other. And one guy was a head of the room, which you needed, that would sort of take care of disputes between people which would arise invariably. Tempers flew high, particularly when there wasn't much to eat and once in a while something got swiped. And then there was a big ado, of course, and just made sure that the place got swept out and that whoever was on duty actually did that and so forth. It was run alright. It, well, it was something that I could adjust to. It was a fact of life. There was nothing you could do about it. And I was glad that you had a place. You would put your suitcase under the bed and then they had a, I think they had a place where you could store things, for people that had too much stuff. I think they did. I didn't. I had sold everything, little by little, little by little, everything. I was down to one pair of pants, man, and that's, that's when poverty really knocks on your door, is when your last pair of pants, they go in the knees first, and you see the first thread there, and you say, "That's it, Charles. That's it." Slept on them to have a [unintelligible] it was a day when people had creases in their pants and always slept on them, you know, put them across the bed.

Okay, so then you had a day room, a huge day room, that had the above mentioned stage. It had a billiard table. It had long wooden tables with benches and all around it you had, you had some Frankfurters, Frankfurter people who were cooking

something that you could buy. And then there was one guy that was selling cigarettes out of the open package, one at a time. Then there was one guy that was selling pastry, manufactured, I think, by refugees. And then, of course, there was a Viennese cat that was selling coffee, [laughs] and that was about it. And some of them gave credit. I had a pretty good credit standing there. And so you sat there. And in summer you spent the night on the roof because they had bed bugs. There wasn't a damn thing they could do about those bed bugs. You can't sleep with bed bugs, man, it's just impossible. And the minute it gets light, they go away. Some people put, kerosene was hard to get, it was very expensive for our standards, and some guys had little tin cans with kerosene and put the legs of the bed into these cans in the hopes that the bedbugs couldn't crawl up there, but they fall off the ceiling. I don't know how they do it, maybe they can fly. But I spent many a night on the roof, just talking with people, and then curiously the minute the sun comes up, you went to bed. That was an unpleasant part of it. Then there was a courtyard, and there was a tinsmith that was building tricks for me once in a while. There was a barber and that was about it. There were other camps that had, that were for families. This was mostly for singles. The families got sometimes rooms of their own or maybe two families, and things were a little more genteel there, I think. But I only know that from visiting.

SH: What was the name of the camp you were in?

GS: Alcock. It was right next to the jail, huge jail where my burglar acquaintance spent the winter. Yeah, and then you got tickets, meal tickets. In the beginning there were, for each day there were three coupons. And then it was two. And then it was one. And at the worst time, they arrived at that enlarged roll that had to last you all day. And it was interesting to notice how people coped with that. Like I noticed that some of the older fellows very meticulously, I knew one guy, he took out a serviette, a napkin, and put the bread on it on a little piece of wood and he cut it in three pieces. He made himself three meals out of it, and he very disciplined ate one piece in the morning and so on, but we usually, the young ones, just ate it all up and hoped for the best and managed to scare up a bowl of soup.

SH: Was this, when was the worst time?

GS: I can't pin it down, but I think it's in the Kranzler book. It could be around '42-'46, uh, '42-'43 . . .

SH: So not right . . .

GS: It wasn't a very long period either. Sometimes things changed rapidly. I think Henry Morgenthau had managed to arrange for food and money to be sent into enemy

territory. They pushed that through in Washington.¹⁴ I was really impressed with that one. So that the Red Cross would bring sacks of flour and *Haferflocken*, what do you call it, rolled oats, *Grieß*, beans, you know, the stuff that keeps.¹⁵ Everybody had a bowl, you probably heard this one, everybody had a bowl and you got a bowl full of stuff and when that, then you quickly ate it and when there was enough, you could stand in line again and get a second serving, when there was more. At one time they had so much of the stuff, you could eat as much as you wanted. And that happened because it was a ship that was destined for Poland someplace, but they had wiped out the entire community. There was nobody left. Maybe it was *Warschau*. Who knows? But we knew that what we were eating there was there because our brothers someplace were done. No, we didn't know that. We didn't know that, because the extermination, this, this mass extermination, we heard about in '45, I think. I don't think it came through before, maybe rumors, but there were so many rumors, you, it was hard to believe such a thing anyway. The first documents I saw were Russian. The Russians were very quick to put that to the folks.

People had all kinds of enterprises in these camps. There was one guy that had brought along a little machine that sharpens razor blades. So he would sharpen razor blades for people. [unintelligible] So they'd sharpen them, it cost pennies. But, you know, he had a few pennies.

SH: Could you live entirely without money in the camp? Could you stay and eat without paying?

GS: Yeah. Yeah. Everything was free. I read in the Kranzler book what it cost to feed a Jew in Shanghai. It was like five cents or seven cents per day, well, just for the, for the food, but still. Yeah, it was free. Perhaps some people had to pay a little if they had an income. There were people that were working and lived in a camp anyway. And perhaps they had to pay a little something, but I think it was all done very reasonably. There was a committee, large, huge office with desks and so forth, social workers, and [unintelligible] all kinds of people, so they had social workers, too, who would assess the situation and what to do with people and where to put them and what's available. Can we put this family there? Do they all, do they have to separate? It was done reasonably. It must have been a lot of headaches to keep twenty thousand people together, under the circumstances. I have no beefs. I mean, I have a beef that I had to go there in the first place, naturally. Let's have no mistake about that.

SH: When you had some money and were able to leave the camp, where did you go? What kind of places . . . ?

¹⁴ Henry Morgenthau was the United States Secretary of the Treasury under Franklin Roosevelt.

¹⁵ *Grieß* is semolina.

GS: Oh, I'd rent myself a room. That's all, just rented a room. The meal tickets I could still get. And I had some pretty adventurous pads, as one used to say. One in a bakery. At night I had to go through the back and they were baking bread that you, you'd get the smell of freshly baked bread, man, and sometimes I couldn't buy one. Yeah, and, well, and then I shared it for a while. I met a guy from Berlin, a painter, an excellent painter. He's in San Francisco now. Man, you want to talk to him maybe, if he'll talk to you. We shared, we met, he was making a living singing. He could do, he had done Richard Tauber imitations in a Viennese night club, but he came from a wealthy home. He didn't have to do that for the money, but for kicks. And he went to the Reimansschule in Berlin and he painted over there. Had a show, had a couple of shows too. Marvelous painter. And he was five years older than I and he taught me a lot about art. He had brought, you know, the cigarettes, cigarettes used to have pictures in them, the Olympic games or classic cars or flowers or animals or cats. And they had a series on modern art and he had bought that and he introduced me to, well, to the whole bunch. It was, we got the reputation of being homosexuals, because we were always buddying around, but it was just a good friendship. And well, it didn't really bother me all that much either. And of course one didn't see us with girls very often, because girls were hard to come by. If a girl was good looking, she, she went out and she didn't look for a poor refugee [unintelligible] a bunch of interesting guys around that made a living and had money, Russian Jews or what have you. I had a girlfriend for a long time, a Russian acrobatic dancer. Yeah, rooms.

SH: How did you find out about these rooms?

GS: I don't know. People would talk about it, say, "Hey, there's a room free. Do you know anybody who needs a room?" or there'd be a sign in a window. It wasn't as tight as it is today everywhere in the cities. Berlin, San Francisco, New York, I mean, you name it, to get a room is like pulling teeth. We had moved to Portugal already. You know that I spent five years in Portugal with my wife and we had given up the Berlin apartment and we got this one.

[brief section of interview left out]

GS: No, it was easy to get a room, I think. Anyway, I never had any trouble as long as I had the change in my pocket.

SH: How much money are we talking about? For example, how much money for a room, or how much money might you get if you had a gig someplace?

GS: Oh, Jesus, those figures escape me. It was all small, small. What did a room cost? Well, if I had a couple of engagements, couple of weeks here and maybe a month somewhere else, I probably made enough money to rent a room for six months or something like that. It was touch and go, it was in and out. I was in and out of that place. It's impossible for me to give figures. But my . . .

END SIDE B, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2

SH: What was, what was a good night club to play as opposed to a not good night club to play?

GS: Well, a good night club to play was one that, where the money was good and, a job was a job, really. I performed in not just in night clubs. I worked in vaudeville houses, where the audience consisted of factory workers and rickshaw coolies. Good audiences by the way. Did my magic there with music and I started to talk a little bit Chinese because my Chinese girlfriend, my Russian girlfriend spoke Chinese. She wasn't really Russian. She always said, "I'm not Russian, I'm Estonian." But it was one of these countries that had been grabbed by the Soviet Union, so. Four shows, four shows a day. Hard work. But what the hell, I mean, it was just waiting for the war to get over, and whatever came, came. But the clubs were nice. Elegant. Really, they do it up, those night clubs in Shanghai were quite posh. You can see it even today when you go to a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco, I mean, they, it looks like fairy tale, and you, all that red and gold and the dragons and, it's, it's an adventure. It's a trifle over-decorated by European standard, but what the hell. I mean, you know, let's play a little. Well, this is Berlin actually.

SH: That's fine. I want to know about it, too.

GS: Yeah, we have friends, theater people and artists and ceramic people and people that don't do anything but they're interesting to talk with.

SH: Do you think there is more jazz or more cultural life in Prague than in Berlin?

GS: I think Prague has everything, it's a small town, but I think Prague has everything. I think Oistrach, that Russian phenomena, said, "Prague is the musical heart of Europe." He referred undoubtedly to classical music, but there is a lot happening down there it seems. But they do have jazz and they do have nostalgic jazz, and a lot of cabaret and off-beat entertainments. A lot of puppetry, but not the Snow White kind of nonsense, but really creative, fascinating stuff. I think I could live there, between Prague and Portugal, spend the winter in Portugal or something like that. And maybe a trip, a quick trip to Berlin, but . . .

SH: Is your attitude toward Berlin shaped by the Nazi time? Is there . . . ?

GS: Oh, you can bet your life. Well, you must turn this off.

INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING

SH: I guess we haven't followed your life at the end, say after the Americans come to Shanghai and then coming to America. If you could say something about how all that went.

GS: Well, I wanted to get out of Shanghai in the worst way. A friend of mine was with the Chinese army. He spoke fluent Chinese and he was with Chiang Kai-Shek's army and he wrote me from the interior, "The Communists are winning the war." And he wrote me that early in the game. And the Communists, one of the first things they did was to close all the night clubs, because they felt that it was counter-productive, or that there is no need in a poor country for that kind of conspicuous consumption. And I figured, well, I'll be dead, because that's the only, that's all I knew then. I didn't have, I hadn't learned anything else. I'd learned a lot, but nothing that you could turn into cash. So I tried to get out and didn't quite know, repatriation was out. And I applied for Australia on an outrageously racist application form. They even wanted to know the color of your eyes and the color of your hair and that kind of nonsense. And then a friend of the family found out that I was in Shanghai and asked me, "Would you like to come to the States?" and he was ready to give the affidavits, everything was cleared. We came to the States. Went to New York, the Big Apple, and had a marvelous year's stay. It was everything, it was everything I hoped for. In Shanghai I had once tried to make a deal with God, one good year. I was willing to settle for one good year, man, with everything.

SH: Was this at the end of your time in Shanghai?

GS: No. It was in the middle of the misery. One year of enough food and enough schnapps and a groovy chick and a groovy place to live. One year. So, in 1947 I was sitting in New York on the veranda of the Museum of Modern Art, upstairs in the club room, I had immediately joined the club there, and thought, "My God, you made it." I was delighted. Saw every film that they have in their archives over the years. Quickly found my way into Greenwich Village and had jobs. Did some magic, did some jobs. And, of course, New York is just full of fascinating people, if you, once you are connected, once you are plugged in, you are, there's no end to it. Always dreaming of San Francisco. San Francisco really did it to me. I spent a few months there when I arrived. We arrived there from Shanghai. One guy in a bar said to me, "Man, you've been talking about San Francisco for years. Why don't you just go there?" That really never occurred to you. It's like that story where they say to a New Yorker, "Why don't you move? Why don't you go to San, why don't you go to California?" and he said, "What, and move away from the ocean?" or vice versa, something like that.

But then it happened and I went to San Francisco and changed my life again. I was home. I had found, that rare, rare thing happened to me that I found roots again, a

second time. I was at home. I was at home there. Yeah. Went to college. Went to college in New York too, I would, but in New York it was more like going to the theater. You know, the New School for Social Research, you could buy tickets for single lectures. You could test out the courses to see, "Do I want this prof?" which is a reasonable way of running a university. And so I took all kinds of courses, but never for credit. It was foolish, but I just took them. It intrigued me, but I had a marvelous Belgian anthropologist there and heard good people. NYU too. And then, in San Francisco, I went to college, really, somebody had talked to me and said, "Man, why don't you do something with your life?" I thought teaching was it. I went to Summerhill, because I wanted a job there. I spent a month with Neill.¹⁶ Fascinating. Neil had a job and he would have given it to me, but I wasn't qualified for it. It was advanced French and my French wasn't advanced. It was, it was on a level where I couldn't work on the one-ahead system. I really had to know more than I did. But I left with a very full, feeling full of satisfaction that Neil would have let me at his kids and he's very picky. I was sitting with Neil once, and a kid came in for some reason, talked to him about something, and he said, "Well, how's your new teacher?" And the kid said, "Well, he's a little *streng*, *sagt man*, *streng*. Severe."

SH: Strict?

GS: Something like a little strict. When the kid was out of the room, Neil said, "You see, that's my problem. I have to let this guy go. I can't work with people like that. Kids don't have to go to classes, if they don't want to." A fine system, I mean, that way you got discipline. The kid [unintelligible] and you don't have to be here. Go. There are kids that haven't gone to classes for six months. Then there's discussion with Neil. And you say, "Hey, what's happening?" Gentle, gentle, gentle. Understanding, tolerant. Yeah. Got a bunch of schools in California like that. I taught at one. Joan Baez was, used to go there when she was little. Groovy people. Then '66, Germany and Europe. Ibiza. Spent six months in Ibiza, I was going to open a discotheque there. Took a thousand records with me. It was insane. Nothing happened, of course, and I was just sitting around there with the rest of the guys in the cafés, man. [laughs] A good time was had by all. Was it a waste of time? I don't think so. A great source of consolation has always been the saying, "When a writer looks out the window, he is working." That one really hit home. [laughs]

SH: So this trip to Europe in '66 wasn't just a trip. You thought you would do something permanent somewhere else?

GS: Yeah, I thought maybe settle in Ibiza, which would have been insanity, because that was a madhouse then. It was a poor man's Mallorca. In the meanwhile, it's pretty fancy, I hear. I haven't been there since. And then I came to Germany in '78 or something like

¹⁶ A. S. Neill (1888-1973) was a British educational reformer who founded Summerhill, an alternative school.

that and met Renate and I talked her into coming to the States. But she wasn't too happy with that. Well, we went back. She had a leave of absence, just in case, so she gladly got back into her job and then we got the house in Portugal, because I wanted someplace I can go in a hurry in case the shit hits the fan. And it looked a few times like it would. During the Cold War there were pretty hairy situations.

SH: So you've been back in Berlin for fifteen years or so?

GS: No, God no.

SH: When did you come back here?

GS: Well, I came back in '78 or something and then back to the States, and then back to Berlin, and then every year I would fly to California and live my California life, and on and off a few years. Yeah, we've been in this place for three years. Portugal five years. One should perhaps, at a certain age, try to forget what's happening out there. It's such a dangerous thing to do. If you have a social conscience, if you see injustice, if you see outrageous things are happening. And as a magician I am always interested in how it works. How do they do it? I know what they are doing, but how are they going to put it over, you know? It's like you know somebody is cheating at poker. As a magician, I want to watch this guy and see what, how he does it. It's a good comparison, I think. But as a consequence one suffers. I mean, I wouldn't sit sobbing for hours in a corner, but you push it away and I think your body reflects it. I'm pretty sure that what I got in my throat is possibly a psychosomatic development from rage and anger about things I've heard and seen that I've simply repressed, or suppressed, which would be conscious. Perhaps you can't do that. Maybe those oriental philosophies are right, that certain purities of essence. Renate suggested that I don't read the *Spiegel* any more, that has any, it's really one catastrophe after another. You say, "My God, they've done it all!" They couldn't possibly shock you any more. Next Monday, there it is, baby. Another hammer! It's like sitting on a sinking ship. And you drive yourself nuts thinking about it. I mean, the feeling of impotence is total. Nothing you can do. You can influence, perhaps, a few people that happen to be around you, by the way you live, by the way you act and think and feel, but I don't think that's terribly effective, really. The hippies had a rather exaggerated view of their influence on society, but I think they were naive, they were sweet and wonderful, man, it was, my God, a chick in that Haight-Ashbury during, when that hippie thing started, a young woman, 17 or 18, came up to me and had a bunch of flowers and gave me a flower and wished me a good day and that was it and then she walked away. She said it smiling and she meant it. That woman was really concerned whether I had a good day or not. It was touching. It was not a formality. It was, that was her way of spreading love or spreading good. Beautiful. Ain't going to change things in Washington a bit.

SH: But you remember it thirty years later.

GS: Yeah. Yeah. And it is important that people march. It is important that people protest. You protest enough, I mean, even in Nazi Germany there was an incident where they busted a bunch of Jewish husbands of Christian wives, and the wives got together and went to the police station, I think Alexanderplatz, a big one, and made a fuss and said, "We want our husbands back," and they got them back.¹⁷ Well, now, that gives one, that gives one room for thought, doesn't it? Didn't happen much, that people protested or. Well, I ain't gonna march. And I should stop reading the Spiegel, but I don't think I can. I'm too curious, man. It's like, again, I'm like a cat. I'm curious. Besides, you got pretty good book reviews.

My wife suggested that we take a trip to Shanghai, and I must say I haven't really got a desire for that at all, at all. I said to her, "Well, let's go to San Francisco and I'll take you to Chinatown." They've got the biggest Chinatown on the continent, I think. And you have the atmosphere of China. I mean, the area is really nothing but Chinese. I lived near Chinatown last year and did my shopping there and wound up with all kinds of strange things to eat and drink and could observe the Chinese way of doing things. That suffices. Shanghai, I don't think, besides from your article I read that things have changed there so much, that with due respect, what has been done there, and full awareness of what shouldn't have been done there. No, I think what time is left, I'd like to go to places where I feel really comfortable. Stockholm, perhaps. I love Amsterdam. There's a humanity in Amsterdam that touches me. This is maybe a digression again, but just as an example, I'm on a streetcar that goes through an insanely small street, really narrow, just two streetcars and a little sidewalk and the cars can only drive there when there's no streetcar. And it's getting dark and there's a car on the tracks and no person in it. And the streetcar halts, stops. And he doesn't start banging his bell like crazy or, "Hey, come on buddy, get your fucking car out of there," none of that. The guy just stops. He has a faith in his fellow Amsterdammer that this man is not insane enough to leave his car on the tracks, that he's going to be back any second. And sure enough, three seconds later a guy comes out of a store, begging in body language, saying, "Sorry, man, sorry," jumps in his car and drives off. This faith in, I was touched by that. It may have gone down completely differently, I don't know. Maybe it was his brother-in-law's car. [laughs] And they got a great cat museum.

SH: Do you think that living in Shanghai had anything to do with the way you observe humanity now?

GS: It probably does, but I couldn't pin it down. I couldn't say, because of this or because of that aspect. I mean, I have to consider that I spent 8 years, and crucial years, 16 to 24. I mean, you grow up in that period, you learn things, your personality forms, attitudes form. Certainly there must have been things. I had a lot of time to observe

¹⁷ This famous incident occurred in February 1943, when nearly 2000 Jewish husbands of Christian wives were arrested and incarcerated in the Rosenstrasse in Berlin on their way to deportation. The mass protest of thousands of women resulted in their release.

people and probably got used to doing that. It was later when I had less time. But the attitude towards money I attribute to Shanghai. At that time it was, of course, also a mild consolation that everybody was in the same boat. I mean, you weren't the only one that was running around with a hole in his shoe and it was raining and that didn't have enough to eat sometimes. Everybody else was, that was just the way it was. And you learned that being poor isn't the end. I mean, I couldn't see myself jumping out of the window, because I have, I don't have investments, but if I had investments and my stock was worthless probably, suddenly, I don't think I'd jump out the window. I mean, where is it written that you should lead the same life all your life? This rock, was it Phil Spector that killed himself?¹⁸ Big rock, wrote songs and stuff and suddenly he went dry. He couldn't write songs any more, had no ideas. Maybe too much dope, who knows? Anyway, he was dry. Killed himself. Not very old. I don't think that could happen to me. Well, not under those circumstances. I'll give you the name and the address of this fellow in San Francisco.

SH: I'd like that.

GS: Don't tell him I sent you, because we're not friends any more. Something happened, I'm not altogether sure what happened, but you'd best approach him otherwise.

SH: Okay.

END SIDE A, TAPE 2

END OF INTERVIEW

¹⁸ Slaxon's reference to Phil Spector, the famous rock-and-roll song writer and producer, is incorrect: he was still alive at the time of the interview.

Gerhard Kohbieter was born in Berlin on May 30, 1922. He sailed alone to Shanghai in March 1939 at age 16. In Shanghai he worked as a magician and lived mainly in the Alcock Heim. He also sold books. In 1947 he arrived in New York, and later lived in San Francisco, working as a magician under the name Gérard Slaxon. He finally settled in Berlin. Shortly after this interview, he died on January 4, 1995, of complications from an operation. He is survived by his widow, Renate Kohbieter.

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 Dimmer-Bergstrom Fund.