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4-22-1989

## **Pollack, Curt oral history interview**

Steve Hochstadt

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**CURT POLLACK  
SHANGHAI, CHINA  
APRIL 22, 1989**

**Interviewer: Steve Hochstadt**

**Transcription: William Myers  
Steve Hochstadt**

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Curt Pollack: My name is Curt Pollack. I was born on August 14, 1927, in Berlin and went to school in German public school until 1937, at which time by decree of the Nazi regime, all Jews had to transfer to Jewish-run and Jewish-administered schools, which I did in 1937 until early 1939, at which time I left Germany to come to Shanghai. What was the reason for deciding to come to Shanghai? Obviously I was a child, so my input was not considered a great deal and I was really not fully aware of the goings on, except that there were personal discomforts, such as beatings by schoolmates who were non-Jewish, being unable to go to certain parks because Jews were not allowed, unable to go to playgrounds, movies, and things like that, that normally children of that age group would have enjoyed. But beyond that, there was really nothing that I understood as far as the Nazi oppression, you might say, of the Jewish people.

But on November the 9th, 1938, which is commonly known as the *Kristallnacht*, it was brought home to even an eleven-year-old boy at that time how severe the situation was, because not only did the synagogues burn all over the city, that was unavoidable for anyone to recognize, but my father, who was on a business trip between Berlin and Hamburg, never returned home. And obviously, what we found out later on, he was taken into custody by the Gestapo on the train and directly transferred after various other places to Buchenwald, which was a concentration camp for retraining at that time, political retraining camp, as they were called in those days, and held incognito for probably several days or so, until we found out where he was. And that was not a unique case, there were thousands of Jews in Berlin, thousands of Jews all over Germany, who were incarcerated that particular evening, taken they were, as the Germans called it, into protective custody from the mob of angry Germans, because of the reason for the *Kristallnacht*, which I'm sure are familiar to you, the shooting of the German ambassador in Paris by a Polish Jew. And therefore there was no other alternative but to make a decision finally to leave Germany, because obviously my father had many opportunities in the years 1933 to 1939 to do that, but being of German origin and having been born there and his fathers had been born there, so he was very Germanic in his thinking, very assimilated, and he felt that this is going to blow over, like so many Jews did and then everything is going to go back to normal, but it obviously didn't, as we all know by today. So, being in a concentration camp, we had no communication with him. They kept, the only thing was one postcard, from what my mother told me, saying that he was in a, in a place for his own safety and, you know, he will return when all this anger has blown over. And then my mother went to the Gestapo, I guess, and found out that the only way that you could get his release was if you showed some proof of leaving the country.

Well, in the meantime, there were other things involved: his business had been confiscated, the automobile had been confiscated, the bank accounts had been closed. There were all kinds of other restrictions that were placed upon Jews, they had to pay one million Marks as a restitution to

the German government for the atrocities committed, and each Jew was assessed based on his ability to pay. That meant they took most of the money you had in the bank. So we didn't have much left, there was really no money, and so my mother took me by the hand and we went from one consulate to the other, all over Berlin, together with 15,000 or 100,000 other Jews who did exactly the same thing, trying to obtain passage, or a visa, to get into a foreign country. And in January and February of 1939, there was hardly a country left that, unless you had great numbers of dollars on the outside somewhere and could come in as a capitalist, would want to take a Jew from Germany into their country.

Steve Hochstadt: Do you remember this trip around?

CP: Exactly.

SH: Standing on lines . . .

CP: I remember standing on my feet for hours, in long queues, in long lines, trying to get up to the door, where you were either let in or told that "No visas, no more visas", and everybody turned around after 6 hours of standing there, cold weather, was still in the wintertime in February, and going home and trying another consulate the next day. Or all of a sudden, a rumor spread that the Cuban, somebody just came from the Cuban consulate, they were all pretty much in the same area, it was consulate row, the Cuban consulate said that they were issuing visas, so in five minutes this row had dissipated at the Dominican and everybody ran over to the Cuban, and then found out that that was a bunch of you-know-what and so it didn't work out all that well. And after doing this for months on end, my mother and father had friends, obviously, who were doing the same thing, someone called my mother and said, you know, we're getting tired of this whole thing here and we seem to be going nowhere. There is one place we can go, we just found out, if you want to go to China, say where the hell's Shanghai, where's Shanghai? Well, the other end of the world, terrible conditions, I mean, disease and vermin and, well my God, should we take, well, long and short of it was that there was no other choice. We couldn't get to America, we couldn't get to England, we couldn't go anywhere. So my mother, I guess in desperation, said, O.K., fine, we'll go to Shanghai, what the heck.

SH: Your mother had to make these decisions.

CP: My mother made all these, my father was in camp so he had no, you know, he didn't know from nothing. So without consulting except consulting some of our relatives, that we still had at that time in Germany, her sister, her brother, and all that, who said, well you go, we don't want to go we're not gonna take a ch-, I'll go to Belgium, I'll try to get to Switzerland or we'll go,

they all stayed behind and unfortunately we've never seen them again since. My mother says, no, I'm not going to take any chances, I gotta get my husband out of the thing and the only way I'll get him out is through some legal paper that I can, so we went to the Italian consulate, I remember that very distinctly, the Italian consul was a very nice man, the vice-consul, and they basically said, O.K., we can issue you a transit visa, which is like a visitor's visa to Italy, which is extended for six weeks. And during, (Hi there!) during those six weeks, it is up to you when you get to Italy to find a consulate in Italy that may look at these things differently and allow you to leave Italy to go to Spain or Cuba or America, or wherever, but at least we'll allow you to get your husband out of the concentration camp and out of Germany.

See the Italians were not anti-Semitic, they were Axis allies in various ways, but they didn't have the same attitude towards the Jews, at that point in time, anyway. So my mother said fine. So we got the visa and with that you went to the Gestapo and then you got the permission to get issued a passport. They issued you a German passport with this visa paper and with that again, after having weeks and weeks of negotiations, my father was given permission to be released from the camp. But he wasn't allowed to come home. The only release date, we had it all set up, that on the 25th of May we had tickets, train tickets, to go from Berlin to Genoa, on a train, and so he was released and we met him at the railroad station in Berlin. He came off one train, and there was a one-hour time delay, and then we got right onto another train. He never left the railroad station, and we were on our way to Genoa, Italy. When we got to Italy, and as we got off in Genoa, there were already on the railroad station numerous people waiting for us with armbands, most of them were HIAS, Hebrew International Aid Society people,<sup>1</sup> who could see already our attire and my father's exterior, I mean, being very skinny and shaven head, and clothes didn't fit him and all that, who come over and say are you, yes, OK.

SH: So they weren't waiting for you, they were waiting for anyone.

CP: They were waiting for, every train that came in had refugees or people like us on board and so they knew that as we were coming off the trains they could pretty much tell, or we already, if we didn't know what to do in Genoa, went to them and these people spoke German and English and Polish and Russian, they had all the different languages. And they took us to a little room or little office on the train station and they gave us little tickets. One

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<sup>1</sup> HIAS stands for Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (in Europe the organization was known by the acronym HICEM). It was the oldest of the societies for helping Jewish immigrants. HIAS had been located in Harbin since 1922, helping potential settlers in China. Several hundred concentration camp inmates, like Curt Pollack's father, were aided in their migration to Shanghai by the HIAS donations.

was a hotel chit, the other ones were meal tickets, and even a ticket for the taxi to go from the railroad station to that hotel. It was all pre-paid, pre-arranged.

SH: Pre-paid by whom?

CP: By the Hebrew, by the Joint Distribution Committee in the United States with funds given to these various agencies at these locations. And we got into a hotel, nothing fancy by any means, in fact, it almost looked like a red-light district hotel, but who cared? Point was that we were safe, we had a place to stay, we could go and eat, and then they asked us the next day or so to come to their offices, which were nearby where we stayed, and I don't remember exactly, and then we were interviewed about our finances, relatives in the United States, various other factors, and then given a ticket on a ship that was leaving Genoa on the 31st of March, of May, 1939, to go to China to Shanghai. Because we had no money, so it was paid for by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, they paid for our ticket, which we in later years repaid, when I came to the United States, but at that particular time it was just a matter of getting the ticket for the three of us and getting out of Germany. And so we stayed those four or five days in Genoa and then got on board ship and the 31st of May, '39, we set sail for Shanghai.

SH: Now let me stop you for a minute, and go back a bit. Can you remember preparations your mother made for the trip? Selling things?

CP: Yes, yes, some of the things . . .

SH: . . . closing up things . . .

CP: Yes. The business was closed out very, very quickly, because as I said there was very, there was no money practically left, that was already confiscated. We had a car and a delivery truck, because my father was in a chemical and floor polish business and so forth, that had been confiscated, so that was gone. As far as, there were no, not too many assets, we had no house, we lived in an apartment, and the furniture, some of it was damaged at the time when the Nazis came in and looked for my father on November the 9th. You know, they came in very brutally, broke doors down if you didn't open immediately and smashed everything with rifle butts, but there was still enough there that we were able to sell to people in our building. They bought the stuff for peanuts. And then the only thing was, there was, we bought some clothing in Berlin yet, clothes for my father, clothes for me, for my mother. But you couldn't take any money out of Germany. All you were able to take, and I remember right was, either was ten marks or ten dollars per person, the equivalent I'm not sure, but ten of something. So all we had is we had two suitcases full of clothing that we were able to take and that's it and

the rest of the money we left back home with my aunt, I think, because we couldn't take it, weren't allowed to take money out. And so we arrived in Italy basically with just, I don't know if it was ten dollars apiece or ten marks, I really don't know more, and the clothes on our back and a suitcase of, some change of clothing, and that was about it.

SH: Can you remember how you felt about leaving? Was this . . . ?

CP: Very exciting. Very adventurous. No thought of danger or fear whatsoever. I cou-, I, I, Shanghai when I heard, I found out about it, I got a big atlas, you know a big world map, and I looked to see where Shanghai was, and mapped out pretty much how we would be getting there, so for a young boy of 12, that was a great adventure, not knowing the dangers and the frustrations and the sorrows, I guess, that my parents felt, but for me it was something, I, of course, they tried to keep that away from me as much as possible. But no, I was very, very excited going on a train, going to Italy, I mean, you know, this is, was a big thing. But fortunately enough, everything went smooth between Germany and Italy without any major upheaval, because we had all the proper documentation, so we weren't doing anything illegal. We weren't, the only thing is the customs people grilled you pretty thoroughly before leaving the German border place, because they thought you were smuggling diamonds. And that's the one thing, is that we made sure that we did have some, we smuggled some stuff out of Germany, personal things that my mother had, and they were sown by my grandmother into a pillow, that I carried as a child under one arm and a teddy bear or something in another.

SH: What were they?

CP: Well, there was, one was a very, very long gold chain necklace that my father used to have, it was like a watch chain necklace, it was this long, solid gold, and she put that into the bunting of the pillow, all the way around so it couldn't be felt, and inside the teddy bear's nose, the teddy bear's nose or, I, I was not aware of any of this, I knew this later on, there were rings that my mother wore, diamond rings and things, that they had stuck in there with a, teddy bear's were stuffed with some kind of horse, whatever, horsefeathers or something, they put those in there, they put the nose back on. So they disguised a lot of it. Had they caught us, it would have been, but my mother realized that with ten dollars or ten marks, you're not going to be able to do anything. We had no idea that in Italy people would be generous enough to, we had no idea of that, so she stuffed as much of the jewelry and things she could into the teddy bear and I carried the teddy bear under one hand and the pillow under the other as a child, you know. And for some reason or another, they just never suspected. It was too early, in later years they realized when Jews left that they were doing these kind of things. They

checked people's mouths, I understand, and they took out their gold caps and all. But in those days when we left, that was not apparent.

So as a result of it, we were able to bring some jewelry and things to Shanghai, which was the money that helped us in the beginning when we first got there, to sell it and to buy a house and to establish a business and to do things that you couldn't have done if you wouldn't have had to sell it. We couldn't keep any of it, but at least it was some, some, something that you had that you were able to sell which was very valuable here in China when we first got here. I mean, a diamond ring, you could at that time sell maybe for a hundred American dollars, let's say. Well, a hundred American dollars could buy you two houses, I mean, you know, that's how it was.

So, but that was the way we got on the boat and then we shipped over here and after 27 days going through all the various ports that were all British-owned at the time, from the Suez Canal to Bombay to Ceylon, we couldn't get off. Many of the people as we stopped at these ports were given work permits and taken off the ship. They were musicians and doctors and lawyers, and things that were needed by these communities. They came on board, the British authorities, and said are there any doctors on board? Yes. Well, we need three doctors here, so they packed their stuff up and they left and went if they wanted to.

SH: And that's where they spent the war then.

CP: Many of them spent the war in those places, and so, of course, those who went to Singapore maybe weren't the greatest decision-makers at the time, because the Japanese occupied Singapore. But in those days people tried to get off before they got to Shanghai. A few of them went to Manila, mostly musicians were needed in those cities, entertainers. And the rest of us, my father was just nothing special, I mean that they wanted, he was just an ordinary merchant. We all wound up eventually in Shanghai 27 days later and there the Japanese allowed us to come aboard or ashore in their occupied territory.

Now that's a story of its own, if you're familiar with it, that the Japanese fought the Chinese in 1937 for the city of Shanghai and the only part of Shanghai that they were able to fight for was that which was controlled by the Chinese. The other settlements were under British, French and American rule, so to speak, and they were not allowed to violate those treaties, but the Chinese part, which was Hongkew, was the area in which the Japanese battled the Chinese forces and won. By the time that battle was over, Hongkew was a, was a tremendous mess. It was pretty well bombed and burned out and everything, and that is the area into which the Japanese allowed us to come. And whatever their purposes were, whether it was to help rebuild it, or to repopulate it, because many of the Chinese had left and fled during the war years.

So that's what we did, we went into these big warehouses that were



either partially burned out or had been partially restored, and that's where camps were established, again by a committee that had been here in early 1938, that was established for the purpose of receiving Jewish refugees in Shanghai. It was called the COMAR Committee, and there were people out of Czechoslovakia, Austria, and some from Germany, who formed this committee here in, I think, July of 1938, in preparation of receiving the first Austrian Jews that came here in the latter part of 1938, because after the Germans had occupied Austria they, the first Jews started leaving for Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> And those camps were, one of them which we looked at yesterday, where the reception of one truck after the other of people who came off the boats, were brought to that camp, were registered, then assigned a bunk in one of these camps, and then they had a kitchen that was a big community kitchen with huge kettles, and each one got a cup, (laughs) and they gave you a cup full of soup, and then you had metal plates. So in other words, they started like in the military, when you were inducted to the service, you go through a complete initiation phase, you know, you get your bunk assigned, and your, you eat at 11 o'clock, this next shift eats at 12, this one eats at 1, and so gradually you were registered and involved. And then afterwards, once we were all settled then the children were taken to school registration, they opened a school,<sup>3</sup> and the men then were more or less in various meetings trying to see if they could be utilized by the community, like those who were doctors and didn't get off of the ship, they started a hospital. Nurses started to work as nurses. Then they had the ones who took care of little children, they had nurseries.

So what they did is they basically established a regular communal life within the circle of people, and more and more people came off the ships. And then the first one started opening a bakery, and the next one opened up a tailor shop, and the next one opened up a shoemaker shop, and, you know, little by little, you built a community which became very thriving, and many of the people who did get their checks, maybe their money that they had stashed away in the United States, or relatives who sent them \$500, they started moving out of the Hongkew area into the better districts of the French Concession or the International Settlement, many of them got jobs with

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<sup>2</sup> COMAR stands for the Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai; it was usually abbreviated CFA. Founded in October 1938 by a group of prominent Sephardic and Russian Jews, the CFA raised significant relief funds, ran the "camps" or *Heime* to which Pollack refers, complete with soup kitchens, established a school, and provided medical care to the refugees.

<sup>3</sup> Pollack might be referring to the Kadoorie School, set up in Hongkew in 1939, or to the elementary school classes in the Chaoufoong Road Heim supervised by the CFA.

Sassoon, with the Hardoon companies.<sup>4</sup> So there were quite a few good jobs, supervisory jobs, given to those people who had a good educational background from Germany, who spoke English. And we established ourselves quite well here, and many of the people really lived very comfortably until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1941.

SH: Well, now let me, let's go back to you, when your family arrived . . .

CP: Yeah.

SH: . . . you, tell me about selling the diamonds and establishing . . .

CP: We went into one of the camps first, and then sold, I don't know if it was a diamond or whatever, but something was sold to get money, and then within two months after we had been in the camp, my father first got ill right away and was in the hospital, but came back out again after he was well, and we got a little room near the camp. That was our very first endeavor, and we bought a couch, two couches and a bed, (laughs) so we could sleep under the table. And then he started to look around to see what kind of work he could do, and he found a job with a Swiss laboratory, Hoffman-Laroche, which was a very international, still today I think, is a pharmaceutical house, and the local laboratory here in Shanghai was called Joffe Laboratories, and they hired him as a sales representative for the American and British doctor community to sell pharmaceuticals, injections and pills and things like that. So he got a sample case, and he started going out and contacting the doctors, and started to build up a very nice clientele of business, and we were starting to do better.

He made some money, and then we bought a house in Hongkew. We weren't planning on moving out. Why I, we didn't move to the other area, I don't know, but he was obviously satisfied to stay in Hongkew and we bought a house. Buying a house here meant obviously that you just leased what you called key money. You didn't buy, because it never belonged to you, except the structure you were entitled to, but the land belonged to the city. And then we renovated the place in a European fashion. We put a regular water toilet in when they didn't have one. We made it liveable after, according to European standards, painted it, built stairways, the things that weren't there. And then rented it out to other refugees who were not in a position to buy a house, but who were looking for rentals. So we rented the place out, and the rents we charged, I guess, were adequate to pay for the monthly cost of the house plus gave us a profit. And then we bought a second house, so we had two houses, one we lived in and one we rented out totally, both of which were

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<sup>4</sup> The Sassoons and the Hardoons were extremely wealthy Sephardic families in Shanghai.

in Hongkew, but outside the later on Designated Area.<sup>5</sup> And we lived there for about two, two years, and I would say for Hongkew standards, we did very well. We ate, we were able to buy, we got food from the camp, but we supplemented that food with things we could buy in stores, like a little butter and some fresh coffee and cold cuts and things like that.

SH: Is it time to go?

CP: But from the...

Gisele Pollack: You're not taking your camera. Can you go get it? Thank you.

SH: Is it time to go?

GP: I don't know, I'll let you guys know.

SH: O.K.

CP: In five or ten minutes.

SH: I wanted to ask you a question. Did you have Chinese servants?

CP: No. No. We never had servants all the years I was in Shanghai. We . . .

SH: Wasn't that unusual?

CP: No. That was not unusual for any of our Hongkew group. We were not wealthy enough to have servants. First of all, we had no room for them, we lived in one room. And number two, we couldn't afford them. Servants were something that the European community that has been here before us had. I wouldn't say that not all, there were some that were wealthy all of a sudden, they had money coming from America, they moved to the French Concession, yes, they had, but the, in general, no, we were too poor. 90% of the people in Hongkew had just barely enough to eat and survive, we were not doing well. Although my father had a job, but that still didn't pay much, and others had jobs, we were never doing well.

SH: Now I have another question for you. Your, your mother did all this arranging while your father was in Buchenwald, and after he came out, did he then take over all the decision making again, about buying houses and . . .

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<sup>5</sup> In a telephone conversation of 5/12/91, Pollack noted that his family had only one house, part of which was rented out.

CP: Yeah. Pretty much. My mother was not really much of a decision maker ever in life, I mean, up to that point, then she learned a lot, but no, she was a housewife, she had never worked in Germany. And, yeah, my father took over again afterwards and made the various decisions of buying houses and all that. And she returned to being a housewife, and did the marketing and the cooking, and she helped in renting the places and all of that. But then basically nothing changed really. I went to school, for a year and a half, and then was finished whatever schooling there was available and went to work as an apprentice in a bakery, confectionery, baking cakes, and danish, and rolls and things like that, and learned that for four years. All through the years that, during the war I became a master baker. And during that time, of course, the, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. And that changed my . . .

Yehuda Halevy: Good morning, gentlemen.

CP: Good morning! My, aren't we all dressed up again!

YH: I was asked to come with a jacket. I called yesterday, I, I came but the only one I should have got, it doesn't matter. This isn't working. What is the plan for today, all day?

CP: Shopping.

GP: They said that we are not coming back. We are going for din . . .

END OF SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW