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Hirsch, Ralph oral history interview

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Interview with Ralph Hirsch by Steve Hochstadt
Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project
Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

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Interviewer

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Transcribers

Wang, Hin-Cheng
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Date

4/22/1994

Extent

1 audiocassette

Place

Shanghai

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Biographical Note

Ralph Hirsch was born on December 2, 1930, in Berlin. After attending the Volksschule, he had to transfer to a Jewish school after Kristallnacht. The Hirsch family left Berlin in October 1940 by train to Moscow, and then with the Trans-Siberian Railroad to China. They settled in Hongkou. Hirsch attended the Kadoorie School. His father worked occasionally for the Joint Distribution Committee and as an accountant for some refugees' small businesses until the war ended. His mother opened a hat shop, and when that did not succeed, a candy store. In May 1947, the family left for the United States.

Hirsch is a city planner and lives in Philadelphia and in Germany. He founded and directs the Council on the Jewish Experience in Shanghai, an organization of former Shanghai refugees. He is married to Angelica Hack, an art historian and museum curator in Germany.

Transcript

Steve Hochstadt: . . . so we would suggest . . .

Ralph RH: Everybody is looking at me so expectantly.

SH: Yes, you are in the middle, you are in the middle here, you are the center of attention. And we would suggest that we want to know the story about Shanghai, but from the beginning, and the beginning means in Germany.

RH: Oh yeah.

SH: And maybe even before you were born, if you would say something about your family and what they did, where you were born, when you were born, and tell your story the way you want.

RH: You know, I can tell my story through a stream of consciousness, but it's better for me to, to respond to your questions, and then if there's some point where I want to go beyond it, I can do that, and if you think it's not particularly relevant or something, stop me. I would prefer to do it that way.

SH: You'd rather do it that way?

RH: Yeah. Because I don't, you know, I think there's, there's presumably something to be said for a certain degree of parallelism in what I am going to say with what your other interviewees are saying. I could talk probably for several hours with occasional drawing of breath about my own life.

SH: That would be fine. Not that we have several hours . . .

RH: But you don't have that much tape.

SH: No, I have a lot of tape.

Christine Lixl: Tape we have.

RH: Tape you have.

CL: It's only time . . . [laughs]

RH: Batteries you don't have. Batteries you don't have.

SH: I have batteries, too.

RH: Steve, you're embarrassingly well supplied.

SH: I came prepared.

CL: We did as well.

RH: Yeah.

SH: Well, say something then about your family and where you were born . . .

RH: Sure.

SH: . . . and give us maybe a sketch of your life in Germany, and then as it gets to be time to think about Shanghai, then maybe some more detail.

RH: I was born on December 2, 1930, in Berlin, in a, in a district which actually is known as a working-class district, which, and this was because the hospital, the big Virchow Klinik is located in that district. We, but we lived in a middle-class district, Neukölln. My birth certificate, I found out to my surprise some years ago, shows me as registered in Wedding, *der rote Wedding*. We moved once, probably about the time that I was ready to start school, to an area which is in Berlin Mitte, now Kreuzberg, and that area later was, that street, which was a short, two-block-long street, was later split by the Berlin Wall. There's a famous photo by Alfred Eisenstadt, which shows him on that street right in front of the Wall, called the Luckauer Strasse.

I went to school for, I think, the first two years in the *Volksschule* and, the public elementary school, and the last year I went to a Jewish school. And I'm not quite sure about the sequence, it's quite possible I went to that school as long as a year and a half, because I just don't remember when the school year started. Because I was born almost at the end of the year, I was in at the, with what actually would be the following year's class. In any event, I do not remember a great deal about either of the schools, except that I liked the *Volksschule* better than the, than the Jewish school that I was transferred to, partly because I had gotten used to the kids. I liked particularly one teacher a great deal at the *Volksschule*, and I very much disliked just the physical plant of the new school, which was dark and dingy and had only a small playground. And I wasn't particularly sad to leave it. I remember that.

SH: Did you have to transfer? Were you . . . ?

RH: I apparently had to transfer, but it was not, there, there never were any incidents that I remember at the *Volksschule* nor outside on the streets of Berlin that, that involved racial epithets or anything like that. I have absolutely no recollection of anything like that. So in some ways . . .

Angelica Hack: Was that part of the *jüdische Gesetze*?

RH: Hmm?

AH: Was that part of the *jüdische Gesetze*?

RH: *Ich habe nicht verstanden.*

AH: Was that part of the *jüdische Gesetze*? That Jewish children had to go to Jewish schools?

RH: Well, I assume so, I assume that that there must have been a requirement that my parents were, were then following. And, but, you know, it was, as I say, not very welcome to me to, to be changed in that way, or to be forced to change schools in that way. And, you know, I made, I made the adjustment, but it, it was not a particularly happy situation.

SH: So what year would that have been when you made . . . ?

RH: That would have been '39, '39, I think.

SH: When you made the transfer?

RH: Yeah, yeah. And, so probably, you know, thinking back about it, I don't believe I have the documentation any more, I think that got lost somewhere in one of the moves. I must have, I must have entered that school in the spring of '39, because I recall that I was, I was there for about a year. Anyway, that, that came sometime after Kristallnacht, although I don't remember how long after and that was sort of a turning point, because it shocked the family very considerably. And it started my mother pressing my father to find ways of getting us out of Germany.

My father, as I've mentioned to one of you at least, was, had been born in Berlin. His parents had been born in Berlin, and, although his mother's side of the family is Dutch, but the, he felt very German. Although he was, he was Jewish, he and all of his siblings were very assimilated, as was the household in which they grew up, although I didn't know either of my father's parents. And my father had served, had been decorated on the, on the Western Front in World War I. And he couldn't believe that the various measures, the successive deprivations and limitations of the right to work and so on, were aimed at him, and he ignored them all. For instance, Jews were not supposed to have a short-wave radio, and we had big short-wave radio, and listened to it frequently. And he went about and frequented the same restaurants and clubs that he always did and although there were signs by that time on the doors, "*Juden unerwünscht*". And he, in fact, he was never, he was never challenged, he was never arrested, he never, so far as I know, had any kind of direct unpleasantness because he was a Jew. He was not, perhaps he was never, not recognized. I mean, he was not recognizable by the, certainly the Stürmer image or

anything like that,¹ and somehow he was able to carry this off until actually the time we left Germany.

But my mother, who was not raised as a Jew, but converted to Judaism when she married my father, pressed, and whose family spent the whole war in Berlin, pressed my father and said, “With two small children we can’t risk staying here.” And he then after the Kristallnacht went seriously about the task of finding countries that would issue a visa to us, and he actually managed to assemble a whole slew of visas. I remember seeing visas from the Dominican Republic, from Bolivia, possibly from Cuba, and from several other countries, but not from the United States. And a couple of the visas, certainly I remember the Bolivian one, became invalid because of a change of government between the time that it was issued and the time he could book passage.

So it came down to going eastward instead of westward, to Shanghai, and using Shanghai then as the jumping-off point instead of Berlin being that point. And all of these, well, that decision then had to wait for the period after the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact between the Nazis and the Soviets in 1940. And a few months after the Pact went into effect, we left Germany. We left in, sometime in October and . . .

SH: 1940.

RH: . . . 1940, and arrived, I believe it was November 1st of that year in Shanghai. We went by train from Berlin. I’m not sure which train station it was, possibly Anhalter Bahnhof. But from, from Berlin to Moscow that was a German train, that took, I think, two days. We spent a day or two in Moscow at the Hotel Metropol, and did some sightseeing in Moscow. I remember distinctly being very impressed with the subway. Moscow, of course it, world famous underground, and we were just being amazed at how deep it was and how, how lavishly the walls were covered in marble and how clean it was. We visited Red Square and just looked around the city. And I remember enjoying the hotel. I can’t remember having stayed in a hotel up to that point. It was rather plush hotel. I think it was considered one of the two best hotels in Moscow. And my father had spent quite a lot of money on the, on the trip. And I believe the most of it, at least to the extent he could obtain it, was by first class, so, including the hotel in Moscow. So it was, it was very lavish, for a little kid taking a long trip for the first time, it was a very exciting period.

Or the start of a very exciting period and became, became even more exciting, when we got on the Trans-Siberian railway a couple of days later, because that was sort of a little world in itself. It was scheduled, I think, to take fourteen days for that trip, and indeed we were on that train for, I think, just about two weeks, with many stops in many places, and days and days where we went through deep green forests. And I remember thinking crossing on the south shore of Lake Baykal, which seemed to take forever, we rode there for hours and hours and hours, a long lake, it was like a riding along the ocean, except that

¹ The Stürmer was a violently anti-semitic Nazi newspaper published by Julius Streicher.

it was so wonderfully covered with trees, that it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. We stopped in several cities. I, I remember Omsk and Tomsk, and we made one stop in Novosibirsk, which was remarkable because there seemed to be no city there. There were just some temporary shacks, they were very large, but no real city. I think the city was in the process of construction then, or at least what was visible from the train station, was, of the city, was not much and I was surprised at that.

But then a lot of the things about that trip surprised me, including the fact that most of the passengers in that train were Russian soldiers. And my brother and I had a wonderful time. As soon after breakfast as possible, we escaped from my parents' compartment and spent the time with the soldiers. And we learned, we learned Russian words for cheese and tea and sausage and a few other things and we, they taught, they sort of adopted us and taught us to swear in Russian, which I can still do to this day. And tried to, you know, show us how their guns worked and various other things that appalled my mother. And every evening when dinner time came, she had to go through many cars on the train searching for us. We, of course, tried to make that a game.

That leg of the trip came to an end in a little border town in Manchukuo called Manchouli, which was a very primitive place and was the transfer point to the Japanese train. And I remember being very excited by Manchouli, because it seemed like a village out of Karl May, out of one of those adventure stories that Karl May wrote, and I was particularly glad because my Karl May books had been sealed up by the Russians. I had brought a whole batch of them, which my parents had bought me for the, for the trip, but the Russians sealed up all of our German books at the border. Presumably because they thought that it would contaminate Marxist doctrine or something. Anyway, there was a village right out of Karl May, with camels on the streets and tribesmen with guns slung over their shoulders riding shaggy ponies and wearing fur caps and so on. It was, but the down side that was, was the flea bag of a hotel, that was, I guess, was the only accommodation in town. And that's where we had to spend the night. And my mother looked, took one look at the bedding and said, "I'm not going to sleep on that!" [laughs] I guess somehow after a few hours she decided that it was that or nothing. So we did sleep there, we survived it.

And got onto a train that was extremely different from the Russian train. Where the Russian train had been very open and friendly and a lot of fun, the Japanese train was very regimented. All the windows were sealed, they had tape over the windows, and we were instructed that on pain of being shot by the sentry, there was a sentry of each car, we were not allowed to look out. And so of course my brother and I looked out. We peeled tape away from the bottom of the windows, whatever. One of us was the look-out, the other one was the peak-out. And whenever the sentry came, put the tape back and whistled so and so. But there wasn't a whole lot to see. The scenery was not so different from what we'd seen in Russia, but it was an interesting game. We knew the adults were not allowed to do that, to be able to look out.

SH: Who was on this train that they were sealing it up?

RH: Well, there was a rather mixed batch of passengers, quite a lot of the people from the Trans-Siberian were on there and various other mostly Japanese people. There were quite a few Japanese soldiers on there and we were not allowed to move so freely on that train. So I don't really know for sure who all was on there, because if we got too far from our car, the guards would shoo us back. But it wasn't nearly as much fun, so we were glad when we got to, my brother and I were glad when we got to the port city of Dairen, which was the end of the train journey. And, as I recall, we must've gotten there in the morning and probably left the same day. I don't think we stayed there overnight.

There was a big hassle, because the steamship company which my father had booked cabins for us wouldn't accept those tickets and so we just got some deck space between decks, plain flooring and not very clean. There were various people who looked Asian huddled there in little family groups, and my mother said, "Absolutely not, I'm not going to travel this way!" So my father went back and, I guess, slipped some money to one of the officers and so we spent the night, two nights in the officers' mess and slept on the benches in the officers' mess.

And we had good weather for those, for those two days that we were at sea. Mostly we, we played on deck, we tossed a ball or ran around. It was pretty crowded and the thing about that trip that sticks most in my mind is that while my brother and I were tossing a tennis ball back and forth, we, or I almost hit a Chinese man who was walking between us, I pulled back just in time and didn't hit him. Then when he was past, I said to my brother sort of loudly, "Some people just can't watch where they're going!" in German. And this Chinese man turned around and dressed me down in flawless German, and said, you know, something like, "You rude little boy. Why aren't you careful about how you throw the ball!" And I was absolutely thunderstruck to hear this beautiful German coming out of this strange looking face. And because I had never met a Chinese up to that point and although I had seen some. But of course they had spoken a very strange language, and I don't think I had ever spoken to one before. And this was a shocking experience for me, and my mother said I said hardly anything the whole day after that. So it obviously made an impact on me at the time. And the fact that I remember more it more clearly than anything else about, about the trip probably suggests it was a lasting impact.

We arrived in Shanghai at a wharf that was not far from the Garden Bridge, was during the daylight. I don't remember whether it was morning or afternoon, but I think it may have been morning. And after some formalities, we went ashore. There were a lot of people there to greet the ship surprisingly, including some, some refugees, and one of them was our friend and family doctor from Berlin. And he had arranged for a room for us at the New Asia Hotel, which is a Japanese-run hotel near the Garden Bridge.

SH: Do you know the name of this doctor?

RH: Oh, of course, I know him very well, yes, yes, I'll come to that. And all [unclear] is that he, he gave both my brother and me a quick physical to see how we were. Possibly

he examined my parents, too, but I don't remember that. But I remember that he examined me, because he always finished the examination the same way by pinching my cheek very hard. I hated that! So good old Uncle Harry, as he was Harry Salomon and he had two daughters. One was about a year older and one was maybe two or three years older than I, and I had known them in Berlin. Although they were not there the first day, we saw them later on many times in Shanghai.

SH: Their names? Do you remember their names?

RH: Oh, yes. One of them, who later also married a physician, is Inge Salomon, now Inge Wagner. They live in New York, in Brooklyn, and the other one is named Ellen and she, that I only found out somewhat later, married a man in, somewhere above Chicago and I saw her, I've seen her at, I think, both of the reunions that were held, one in '91 and one in '93, of the Shanghailanders. I think it may have been through Harry Salomon that we found about two days later, perhaps he had arranged it in advance, I don't know, a small apartment, which I think was probably intended as a makeshift place to stay on Kung Ping Road in Lane 305, Kung Ping Road. And some months later, I would guess within half a year, I don't remember exactly, we moved to the place around the corner, where we stayed the rest of the time in Shanghai, so about six years. That was in Lane 909, East Seward Road, and which, Kung Ping Road still has the same name, Kung Ping Lu, and East Seward Road in the meantime has been named Dong Changzi Lu and . . .

SH: Ralph, could I interrupt . . . ?

RH: I think you could.

SH: . . . and ask you to go back a little bit before Shanghai, to talk a little bit about the things that you know that I'm interested in, about your family preparations, or what you knew or heard about your family's preparations for leaving and maybe discussions about going to Shanghai, perhaps even including other relatives, your parents' parents, parents' siblings. You weren't that old at this time, but whatever you can remember or maybe whatever they talked about afterwards.

RH: I think at the time at which the decision was made was, or at least was precipitated, was, was, immediately after Kristallnacht. So at the time I was almost 8. And I remember there was, it was a time of great stress and people coming in and going out and a lot of talking in ways that were meant not to be understood by us children. In part it had to do with the fact that one of my father's sisters and her husband were very despondent after this, after, after Kristallnacht and finally committed suicide. And I think I only found out about that quite a lot later, I don't remember when, but it was obviously, the fact that they were in such despair and perhaps they had announced that they would commit suicide, I don't know, but in any event, it was a time of great stress for the family. And, of course,

there were many friends and colleagues who were suffering in various ways, whose businesses had been wrecked or whose practices had been, if they were doctors and lawyers, had been, had been ransacked. It was that kind of an attack, and who felt that they needed to think finally about getting out.

I think for a long time until then, my parents and their circle thought that probably Hitler, either that Hitler was sort of a temporary phenomenon or that the good Germans would put a stop to this kind of, these various sort of excesses. And when it seemed that that was a completely wrong hope, and they suffered these, you know, vicariously mostly, these, these blows, because in a sense in my immediate family we were not affected, but we were affected through what had happened to other members of the family and various friends and colleagues. There was a lot of discussion.

I know that my father, who had in his work travelled extensively, then spent a great deal of time going to consulates and so on and, you know, steamship companies and information bureaus, and whatever else was necessary to put the package together, that would enable us to get out, including various offices of the German government. So that a great deal of the time that he normally would take for his profession was taken up in that way. [unclear] one incident that I remember, it must have been, it was prior to Kristallnacht, I think. I probably was about 7 at the time. Was, happened when my father was at work and my brother and I were both at home. I don't, it may not have been a school day, but normally we would have been at school on a weekday. But the bell rang sometime in the morning and my mother went to the door of the apartment and there were two men in leather coats there. And I was, I walked out there with my mother, and they said, "*Heil Hitler! Gestapo, Geheime Staatspolizei. Haben Sie ein Rundfunkgerät?*" "Do you have a radio?" And my mother said, "No." They said, "*Danke. Heil Hitler!*" turned and walked away, went down the stairs. And about two minutes later my mother went into hysteria, because it was illegal for us to have the radio, it was a short-wave, big short-wave receiver, big Telefunken receiver, and it stood, if they had walked into the living room, in fact, if they had walked to the door of the living room, they could have seen it, because it stood there in plain view. And, but she waited until they were, she controlled herself until they were out of earshot, before she started crying, and then when she sort of collected herself, I know she called my father and told him, at his office, and told him what had happened. And I think after that we covered up the radio. It may be that for a while after that also we put it into a cupboard. But so it was no longer in plain view. But we continued to listen to broadcasts from, from England and just generally from other countries.

My father spoke, spoke English and French and Spanish, my mother spoke tolerable French, but little English. My father's work was, he had studied law and worked as a financial officer in several companies and was working as a, as an economic consultant to several large Jewish-owned textile firms in Berlin and often travelled on their behalf, on their business abroad. I remember cards from France and Spain. He spent quite a bit of time in Spain, Barcelona, in particular, which was a city he loved. And in the east I remember that he was several times in Budapest. And I think that probably Angelica and I

stayed in his, what I suspect may have been his favorite hotel, because I know he loved that kind of place in Budapest, the Hotel Gellert, when, an Art Nouveau style hotel, which was built in the twenties, when we were there about a year ago. And I remember various friends and colleagues from some of those countries visiting us from time to time in Berlin.

I'm not sure that I can say much about how the decision was made to go to Shanghai. It may have been, at that time, the only option. As I said, he had gotten, my father had gotten visas from quite a few countries, but for one reason or another, having to do with external circumstances, either of war or of the governmental situation in those countries, we couldn't use them. And so, as near as I can tell, the plan was to go to Shanghai and to try to have some money available there, so we could use that as a kind of a staging area for the next, the long trip across the Pacific to the Americas somewhere, depending on where we then could get access. And I don't know precisely what the reasons were that we couldn't go on from Shanghai to one, at least one of the countries for which we had valid visas at the time. I have some, some correspondence that, of my father's, that may throw some light on that, but I haven't taken the time to look at it yet.

But, in any event, after within a little over a year in Shanghai, the war in the Pacific broke out, and we heard it like thunder, because the, we heard the shore batteries firing at and, in the event, sinking the Yangtse patrol, and that distant sound of, of cannonading was our notice that the war in the Pacific had broken out. We found out about Pearl Harbor, only, I think, a couple of days later. And then the Japanese, *Danke*, and then the Japanese marched their troops into Shanghai and started interning the Allied citizens. We had several British and American teachers in our school and those one morning just didn't show up. I think it may have been late December or maybe January.

SH: What was your school?

RH: I'll get to it. I think, they, it was some time after, but not very long after the outbreak of the war that our teachers, who were all women, the British and, and American teachers were all women, were arrested. Our school was the, what in Shanghai was known as the old Kadoorie School, of course at that time it was still called the Kadoorie School in the old location, which was on Kinchow Road, I think. And that was the, the Kadoorie School was the familiar name. The formal name was the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School, was, the school had been set up by a teacher from Berlin named Lucy Hartwich, whom my parents, as it happens, knew in Berlin and who had been the headmistress of a school in Berlin. And she, I think, through the support of the Kadoorie family had been . .

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

RH: The old school had been inside that area, but of course that was irrelevant, because the area was not established yet, it wouldn't be for over a year. The big change then came in January and February of 1942, when a whole batch of teachers was recruited to replace those who had been interned, and these were Germans and Austrians and Czechs and Hungarians, it was all central Europeans. And what I think was, was pretty remarkable was that by and large they were more qualified, had more training and so on, and in some cases were university lecturers. But they were not subject to being interned as enemy aliens by the Japanese.

And some time later that year, it may have been in the summer, the whole school moved to a new building which was the new Kadoorie School, which is a large U-shaped, airy structure, very, very open, very inviting structure. Very different from the old school, which was kind of run-down. I think it must've been a makeshift arrangement to have the school in that old building. And it was the building that we visited yesterday, day before yesterday, day before yesterday, of which of course now only the gates are left and maybe some, some side building. One of those low buildings, that, that's all in, not far from the gates may have been part of the, of that complex.

But the school was, I think, in many ways a model of what a school could be in those days. Certainly it was better than any school that I had seen in Germany. The facilities were ample for the size of the student body, which was probably around 600. And what was lacking was equipment for doing science. The musical part of the, of the education came rather too short, I think. That, there was an old piano. It was very hard to get musical instruments to teach the children to play, so that was, that was rather neglected, although a number of the children got that privately, but it was not part of the school's education. But I think in terms of the humanities and so on, the school was very well equipped and certainly the instruction was extremely competent in almost all fields. One of the very nice things about the physical arrangements was that we had a running track and a playing field right in the middle of that U-shaped space. And so we could run out and play out in the open during breaks. The two long legs of the U had the classrooms in them and some other supporting facilities, the, the sick room, there was a doctor in the school full time, whose name . . .

CL: Just go on.

RH: Sure. There was a doctor in the school whose name also was Salomon, who was a different Salomon, and his offices were sort of, as I recall, in the middle of, of the west portion of the long leg of the U. But pretty much all of the two long legs were classroom space and the principal's office was on one end and the assembly hall and the library and so on were on the cross section of the U. And it was the school that I had attended then for the next four years and I think got a remarkably good education, quite aside from the, from the circumstances in which that education was administered.

SH: Would you say something about your father or mother finding work when they

arrived and were finding lodging and how that worked out?

RH: Yeah. I think that the lodging part was relatively easy, because that had been, if not arranged, at least facilitated beforehand. And so it didn't take at all long for us to find the first apartment. So I'm sure there must've been some kind of preliminary arrangement at least. It was spartan. It was an old building, very small, and I think because the structure itself was pretty rickety and, you know, had flaws that we could not change, remedy. I think, if I remember right, the water supply was outside rather than inside, the faucet. My father found another room in a recently built structure around the corner in that Lane 909, East Seward Road. That was nominally an apartment, but in fact it was just one room, one medium-sized room in which everything went on. We cooked, we slept, we studied. We cooked, my mother cooked, and, you know, we sometimes helped a little, the kids.

My father did not, did not cook, I don't think my father ever learned to cook. But he worked, he tried to find work in his field of economic consultant, tax advice, and so on, but there wasn't much, much market for that. He got a job with the Joint Distribution Committee administering one of the relief programs.² I don't remember exactly what, but he worked in that, and he also did some other work on the side, whatever he could pick up, sort of accounting things and various financial sorts of advisory work. And he supplemented that in a way that, I think, was very foreign to his nature, but very many people were forced to do it, just by going out in the street and selling various of the things, that, some of the more valuable things that we had, he had brought along from Germany.

And my mother, who had worked at home, well, since probably shortly before I was born, went back to her profession, or trade, occupation, whatever you want to call it, that she had trained for as a hat designer and milliner. And she opened a small shop where she in a, I think, in an overly optimistic mood made very elegant hats for the ladies of Hongkew, but the ladies of Hongkew didn't have any money to buy elegant hats. A few did, you know, sometimes for special occasions. But it was not a business that had a future, and that became more and more clear as time went on, particularly as the, when the Restricted Area, the Designated Area was set up in very early 1943 and living conditions became more and more miserable.³ So nobody really thought of wearing fine hats or dressing up generally, and, except for very, very few occasions, very special occasions. But my mother then retreaded and learned to make candy. She gathered from all of her friends their best recipes for candies, *pralinés*, and so on, and tested those out and opened up, in the same premises she opened up a candy shop, where the hats didn't sell, the candy

² The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was a major provider of welfare funds for Shanghai refugees before, during, and after the war.

³ On February 18, 1943, the Japanese authorities in Shanghai issued an edict forcing all "stateless refugees", meaning Jewish refugees who had arrived since 1938, to move residences and businesses into a bombed-out square mile in Hongkew, the so-called Designated Area. The move had to be accomplished by May 18.

sold very well. But the problem was, it was very hard to get decent ingredients. I remember that was great fun for us kids to be in the candy shop, and to help out with the making of the candy, except that, of course, we had to be watched, because we would snack on the ingredients from time to time. My, it was made clear to us that that was not acceptable.

Yeah, and in that way they managed to get enough so that they never had to take any, any, oh, of the charitable food. There were food distributions at the, at these various so-called *Heime*, where there were community kitchens and so on, but they didn't, they didn't use those. And although food was scarce, we never actually starved. We got pretty thin, but we never starved. But I remember it was an occasion when we managed to, when we managed to get half an ounce of butter, that was a big deal. And most of the time it was rather spartan fare that we subsisted on. We got one meal a day, the kids at the school, usually some sort of gruel, I grew to hate the stuff, but, but it was better than nothing. And so we kind of muddled our way through. There were a number of very, very big events that are still clear in my memory, that, that sort of broke the everyday rhythm. I think the biggest one was the air raid in July of 1944.⁴ It came the afternoon, at least that's when, that's when the actual bombing occurred. I think there were some planes that came over before that, but it was very common for the planes to come over. And although we often heard gunfire or bombs being dropped in the distance, it became so routine that people mostly didn't even take shelter any more. But on this occasion, the, the bombs were dropped on the heavily populated area, in fact, Tongshan Road was hit by several fairly large bombs. A number of houses were destroyed, others were heavily damaged. Several dozen of the refugees were killed and many Chinese. We knew a number of those who were killed and in particular the mother of one of my classmates was killed.

Normally, I would've been on my way home from school, we would have, all of us would've been on our way home from school at about that time, and this particular, this particular day, I got caught up in something, I don't remember what exactly, thanks, one of the, maybe one of the club activities at school. So I stayed, I think, yeah, whatever it was was in the classroom, although it was not part of the regular education program. I don't know, maybe, maybe, it may have been astronomy club or something like that, which was a big deal with me at the time. And then, all of a sudden, we heard the planes as we did every other day, then came great bursts of, of clouds and concussion, and we saw the, we saw the smoke rising just a block or two away. And so we dove under the desks and stayed there for a few minutes. And there were one or two teachers still in the school that came around and checked to see whether anyone was hurt. But I, to my recollection, there were only a few window panes broken in the school, but nobody was hurt. But the area along which my brother and I normally would have walked was devastated. It was

⁴ Hirsch refers here to July 17, 1945, when American planes dropped bombs in the heavily settled area of Hongkew. Most refugees remember this terrifying day vividly, and can say exactly where they were and what they were doing when the bombers struck. About thirty refugees were killed, and hundreds, perhaps thousands of Chinese and Japanese.

Tongshan Road, that was, that was the normal route that we took, and my mother, of course, didn't know where we were. She knew only that we hadn't arrived or that I hadn't arrived at the normal hour, and so she raced up Tongshan Road looking at all the bodies to see if she could find me. We met, I think, somewhere out near the school gate. Yeah.

We tried to follow the progress of the war as best we could with what was, what was seeped through the Japanese censorship. And there was, there was a rumor every two hours, a new rumor. The rumors were called *Bonkes*, and I don't know exactly what that, where that term comes from. But one hypothesis was that it derived from bunker, that people spun these in the bunkers. But we weren't sure, but there were *Bonkes* every, new *Bonkes* every day about what was happening in Europe and what the Americans were doing, what the Japanese were up to, what the latest plans were to, to further restrict the refugees in Hongkew, whether the, the Germans would succeed in setting up a concentration camp in Shanghai, which they had tried to do. And probably the telling and retelling of *Bonkes* was the major indoor sport in Shanghai.

The, the Hongkew community had two English-lang-, German-language newspapers and an English-language paper and some others that we didn't read but were aware that they were there. There was a Yiddish-language one, there was a Polish-language one. Every now and then somebody managed to get a paper from Germany, or from America, from Britain, but those were always very old, so it was no longer news, it was just interesting to read.

SH: But your family read the German-language ones?

RH: Yes, they read, they read the Shanghai, what was called the Shanghai Jewish Chronicle, but, and then I think it was later called the Echo. And that was actually a pretty remarkable paper. It was, it was conscientiously published every, I think it came out every day. For some period, it was weekly, but, if I remember correctly, I'm not too sure, but I think of it as a daily.⁵ And I remember it being hawked onto the street, in our street there. There was a news vendor with a particular chant, which always amused me, because he would chant, "Ay Croollee Gay," like that, "Ay Croollee Gay." That was supposed to mean Jewish Chronicle, but if you didn't know it, you would not have known it. [laughs] But anyway, the paper was sort of a crusading journal. Its editor was a man named Ossi Lewin, who again and again challenged the Japanese censorship and was thrown in jail repeatedly. One of, sort of a controversial figure in the community, but, you know, a great crusading journalist. I didn't know him, I was aware of him, he was my parents' generation. And he obviously was very dedicated to the principle of a free press, and he was willing to go to jail for it, which he did a number of times. And I think a lot of, a lot of people, including my parents, thought he might have been better advised to be more

⁵ The Shanghai Jewish Chronicle was founded in the spring of 1939 as a weekly, soon became a daily, and lasted throughout the war, closing in October 1945.

circumspect in his challenging, challenges to the Japanese. But he kept doing it, and every so often the paper would be suspended for a day or a week, but it always came back.

CL: Do you recall listening to the refugee radio program?

RH: Yes, we listened, we listened occasionally to XMHA, I think that's what it was called.⁶

CL: Yeah, XMHA.

RH: Yeah. And you know, listening to the radio, or trying to receive a short-wave broadcast, was a pretty thrilling occupation. Nowadays, it's hard to think back on the quality of the radio in those days, and particularly if you think about the inability to replace components, and trying to buy a radio tube, of course, all of those radios operated with tubes, was a major enterprise during the war. Because I don't know if they made any tubes that were available for civilian use. And if they did, they didn't find their way to Shanghai. So radio was a very different, technically very different kind of thing, but a lot of people spent much time listening to the radio. We listened some, but not, not a great deal. I think we were more inclined to read.

SH: Could you say something about your parents' social life, maybe about your own social life?

RH: My parents had a number of friends, who lived, almost all of them, in Hongkew, and would visit back and forth and occasionally go out to a café and spin out a cup of coffee for a very long time. There were great many cafés, and particularly the Viennese brought with them the institution of the *Kaffeehaus*, although it was, I remember, it became increasingly difficult to [unclear] and some of the, some of the refinements, but I learned to appreciate various types of *Torte* and so on. Some of them managed remarkably well to get ingredients to be able to bake *Linzertorte* and *Sachertorte* and all those other good things that the Viennese have contributed to civilization. I remember that sometimes my parents went to join their friends and shared a piece of *Torte*, or something like that. It was not always, particularly as the war went on, it became harder and harder to afford those things.

But quite, quite often my mother would bake a cake and we'd have friends over. The men usually played *Skat* and talked about politics, and the women talked about family things. I don't remember a lot, a lot of talk about, about art, about more philosophical issues. I think that those tended to be forced into the back a bit. There was conversation

⁶ XMHA was a refugee-run radio station, which was closed by the Japanese after Pearl Harbor.

about such things in Berlin, at a time when I understood very little of it. But somehow in Shanghai that was mostly just forced into the background, because there were so many other more immediate concerns, and the talk about politics was usually also very, very immediate, about the policies of the Japanese and what the chances are that the Americans would take new initiatives and so on. There was not much abstract discussion that I can remember. When I, when I got older, of course, we older kids talked about such things among ourselves, but that was quite separate from what the adults talked about.

I started out in the first year, or perhaps year and a half, playing a lot with the Chinese kids on the street, and I think as we got older, the play tended to be more among ourselves. That is we, it became more structured, you know, we got onto sports teams and so on. There was less contact, rather than more, with the Chinese. A lot of the activity that my brother and I had, and to some extent they were different, because we were somewhat more than three years apart in age, revolved around activities that were tied to the school in some way. I mentioned the astronomy club, we had various sports teams we played. We didn't have the facilities for real basketball, but the big sport was really soccer, football, *Fußball*. And, but we also played table tennis, and we played tennis, and although the school itself didn't have any facilities for swimming, we managed to do that through the Scouts, and that I think was the other major activity center. We were members of the 13th Shanghai Scouts, the British Boy Scouts. Our organization, although in our 13th troop there were only Jewish kids from, almost all from Germany and Austria. And between school and the Scouts, we pretty much filled in, filled in our time. And then there were some activities in the neighborhood.

SH: Is it true of the, of your parents' friends, that they were also German and Austrian, exclusively German and Austrian?

RH: Almost all, almost all. And quite a few were people whom they had known in Berlin.

Simon Wachsmuth: They came before or later?

RH: Hmm?

SW: Did they come before or later?

RH: Everybody came before we did. We were the last that we knew to arrive in Shanghai. I mean, there were, there were a number of people on the same train with us, but, and there were other Jews who came to Shanghai after we did, but they didn't come from Berlin, or at least none that we knew, there may have been one or two.

There was a substantial contingent that came over Kobe, and they came sometime in 19-, 1941. But they were not from Germany, I think they were Poles or Lithuanians.⁷ And altogether there was little contact with, with those who spoke Yiddish. Language was a big definer of the community. Although, you know, to my recollections, really the first time I heard Yiddish spoken was when I came to Shanghai, because I'd never heard it spoken in Berlin. But there were, there was a yeshiva not far from us, and we'd see the yeshiva kids when we were on the way to school. Sometimes we'd say hello to them, but that was the extent of it. There was no, there was no real interchange.

And there, there certainly was contact of various kinds with some of the other groups that were longer established in Shanghai, some of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi who had been there for a longer time. But we would meet, some of we kids would meet some of them in social activities or play against them on teams and so on. There were none, as I recall, in our Scout troop. There was one Russian kid in the Scout troop and a couple in the school. But we'd compete against them in various city-wide events and so on. After, after the war had ended, when we took the Cambridge School Certificate Exam in 1946, we met quite a lot of those kids, because they were also in the same schedule of preparations and so on, and so we had contact with them, and to some extent that was then continued. But we, my family left about six months after that, we left relatively early, in May of '47, which had to do with the fact that we were on the German quota, which was very large, the German quota for American, immigration to the United States of America, and also with the fact that my father, I guess, was determined not to, not to be caught making too late a move once again. So he got very busy quite early and managed to get us passage pretty early. We were among, not among the first, but probably among the first 20% or so to get out.

SH: There was no question that you were going to leave?

RH: No, there was no question. In fact, no, it was always clear to us that Shanghai was only a transient home for us. The only question was how short that transition would be. And, as I mentioned early on, I, there was some thought that it might be less than a year initially, if we had managed to get away before the, the war in the Pacific broke out. By the time the American immigration policy had changed after the war, to make it possible to take the Jews on the German quota, it became clear that the conditions for us were pretty good, because that was the second largest of all the immigration quotas after the British. And since we had relatives in America and my father, by now, knew the ropes, of course, so did everybody else, but, I mean, he got to the task early. We got out fairly

⁷ Polish refugees who came to Asia via the Trans-Siberian Railroad with visas issued in 1940 by Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consular official in Kovno, Lithuania, first landed in Kobe, Japan. In the fall of 1941 over 1,000 Polish refugees were transferred by the Japanese to Shanghai. For one such story, see the interview with Fanny and George Borenstein, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Del Rey Beach, Florida, February 22, 1990.

quickly and it was, so far as I know, the only, getting out was the only option, and the United States was the only serious des-, only destination seriously considered.

SH: You didn't consider going back to Germany?

RH: My father never, never thought of it for a minute. My father had vowed that he'd never set foot on German soil again. He had never forgiven the Germans for stripping him of his, of his German citizenship, which I fully understand. And he didn't keep that vow by the way, he went back about 25 years later at the urging of my mother, whose family was still over there. And in fact, her mother came over to live with us in the '50's. Her husband had died, my grandfather, my mother's father had died after the war and so she was alone and so she came over to America. Never, never really took root there. She didn't speak the language, she felt very isolated. She died perhaps a year later. But, no, going back to Germany was not an option. I don't think my father was particularly happy that I visited, I began to visit Germany and several other European countries, but particularly Germany in the 50's when I was a student. And it was only after my mother had been back a couple of times, I think perhaps, that he finally decided he would accompany her back, back to Germany. I think he visited Germany . . .

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END OF INTERVIEW