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## Loewenberg, Lisbeth oral history interview

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**Interview with Lisbeth Loewenberg by Steve Hochstadt**  
**Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project**  
*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

**Interviewee**

Loewenberg, Lisbeth

**Interviewer**

Hochstadt, Steve

**Transcribers**

Adler, Natalie

Hochstadt, Steve

**Date**

4/21/1989

**Extent**

1 audiocassette

**Place**

Shanghai, China

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**Biographical Note**

Lisbeth Loewenberg and her mother sailed to Shanghai from Trieste in 1940, when she was eighteen. Her father had already sailed there in 1939. He died in Shanghai of cancer in 1942. She worked in Shanghai as a secretary. There she married Bruno Loewenberg from Berlin, who had spent thirteen months in Buchenwald. He ran a lending library on Ward Road. In 1948 they emigrated to the United States and settled in San Francisco, where Bruno opened a bookstore and Lisbeth worked for Collier's magazine. Lisbeth Loewenberg lives in San Francisco.

## Transcript

**Lisbeth Loewengerg:** Okay, there was the Anschluß. My father lost his job because all Jews were dismissed immediately. And he had a sister in Prague. Czechoslovakia at that time was not involved in the Nazi catastrophe yet. And so he went to Prague to see what, if life in Czechoslovakia could possibly continue. Well, it seemed that nothing, things were beginning to get rather iffy in Czechoslovakia to continue. There was nothing for him to do there, no possibility for him, and he didn't have anybody in the United States who we could ask for an affidavit, and nothing else was open, and my mother in a letter to my father in Prague wrote to him, "How about Shanghai?"

**Steve Hochstadt:** Do you know where she found out about Shanghai?

**LL:** Well, rumors were going on that people did go to Shanghai, that this was supposed to be where one could go without any visa, without anything. At that point my father turned around, sold his diamond ring, got the ticket for Shanghai, and went. And my mother said, "Well, I wasn't that serious! All I did was say, 'How about Shanghai?'" When he first came out here, he did live in Hongkew, like everybody else. Then it turned out that one had to have somebody guarantee one thing or another even to come to Shanghai. That was later already.<sup>1</sup> And it was difficult for him to get it, so we did write him again. We heard something, if you do not live in Hongkew, but live in the International Settlement, it would be, it might be easier to get that guarantee, that paper, to ask us to come. So he moved out from Hongkew into the International Settlement, and from there he sent us the necessary papers. And then my mother and I tried to get to Shanghai. The difficulty to get into Shanghai was to get a passage, a ticket on a ship, because there was only one ship a month leaving from Italy, either Trieste or Genoa. And I can still see us standing in line and we are not in a travel bureau, waiting in line for tickets, tickets, and people bought tickets, and just before us, last ticket sold, everyone went back home without tickets. But, you know, the organization in, that was very late already, the first transports to Poland were already going.

**SH:** Did you know that?

**LL:** Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, I would say, there was an organization in Vienna that was called "Jewish Cultural Community". This was really the place where all Jews had to register. They issued birth certificates for Jews, and they registered all marriages and everything. And we had told them, we, if they could help us in any way to get a ticket or tickets to Shanghai, because my father, my mother's husband, was already there and they had this guarantee, all they needed were tickets. So one day they called us and said, if you give us all the cash that you have, we have two tickets for you. So of course we did, there was nothing we could do, we couldn't take it out anyway. It didn't make any difference to us, because all you could take out was ten marks, three dollars, to start your new life on a different continent.

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<sup>1</sup> Until 1939 the Japanese, who controlled access to Shanghai through the Yangtze River, had allowed an essentially unrestricted influx of refugees. As Shanghai became more crowded with Jews fleeing from the Nazis, both the Japanese and the existing Jewish community began to consider limiting further immigration. In October, 1939, immigration was officially restricted to a resident's immediate family; persons able to show a deposit of \$400 (US) as "guarantee money"; persons with a contract for work in Shanghai; or the intended spouse of a resident. The Japanese attempted to close the Hongkew district to new refugees.

**SH:** Whose rule was that about ten marks?

**LL:** The Germans, of course. You couldn't take out any, supposedly not any jewelery, not anything of value, nothing. And, and ten marks. That was what they called, was called board money, so that you had money to spend on the ship, ten dollars, ten marks, board money, which was three dollars. Okay, so we got the tickets.

**SH:** When is this?

**LL:** In January 1940, after the war had started. And we went to, to Trieste. And I remember that, of course, we went by train from Vienna to Trieste, I remember that train journey so well, every detail of it. First of all, you sit there and you shiver and you are afraid. We are still in Germany. You have to know that in Vienna, when we lived there, we were every day already afraid of our lives, because so many people got either picked up and brought, not women at this point, to concentration camps. You know, most of the males that were still around that we knew didn't sleep at home, slept every night somewhere else, from one friend to another, so if they would come to their home to pick them up, which they did, they just knocked at the door to pick up the people, so they weren't home. It was true, they were somebody else, someplace else, you know. And so you'd shiver every minute for your life. And then we were so afraid of the, of the control, you know, at the border to enter. And, of course, we hadn't taken anything that we were not allowed to take, because whatever it was, you said, our life is not, whatever you can take, your life is more important. If they find something that you are not supposed to take, it isn't worth it. We got to the border of Italy, the German control opened the door and said, "Have a good trip," and didn't look at anything. There was a human being by mistake, of course. Okay, we got, we got to Trieste and when we got across the border, when we got to Trieste, I thought it was the most beautiful place in the world. Because you could breathe freely, you were not afraid for your life any more as of this moment. And Trieste is beautiful. There is this huge, were you ever in Trieste?

**SH:** No.

**LL:** There is this huge piazza directly at the Mediterranean, you see the ships lying out there. It's just absolutely gorgeous, it really is. But, of course, it probably wasn't as beautiful as it seemed to me at, at that time.

**SH:** Can I ask how old you were then?

**LL:** Eighteen, just eighteen. And . . .

**SH:** And just you and your mother?

**LL:** Just me and my mother. And there was an Italian committee. We came one day and our ship left, left the next day, and some, somebody, some sort of a committee took us over and gave us a place to sleep for that night, because of course we had no money, and the next day we went on the ship. And on the ship, that is the strangest thing in the world you know, it was like a luxury liner. And so my mother and I had a cabin together. But all of a sudden, you know, you could barely get any food in Vienna any more, and of course Jews didn't get anything. You had to stand in, there were, I want to talk about Shanghai actually not about .

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**SH:** I want you to talk about everything. It's perfect what you are talking about.

**LL:** Yes. Jews were allowed to go shopping in grocery stores only at certain hours. Jews from 2 to 4, I don't know what. And then people came by at this time when people were standing in line, everybody knew that they were Jews, because they had to, they were, were the only ones who went shopping in that hour. And they made nasty remarks, "dirty Jews," and this and that. And all of a sudden, we were, when we got to Italy, and you were on the ship and you had three meals a day served to you, you know, in the dining room of the ship, and it was just, for me it was a fantastic experience. And, of course, the trip is absolutely gorgeous. It takes four weeks from Trieste, first through the Mediterranean and then through the Red Sea, Aden, Bombay, Singapore, Manila, Hong Kong, Shanghai. The four weeks trip. Of course, we were not allowed to get on, off the ship at any of those places. I was everywhere, but only in the harbor, didn't see anything. But still it was an outstanding experience. The nights on the ship you see the flying fish, you know. It was like a luxury cruise. And, of course, you are free. You don't have to be afraid for your life any more.

**SH:** Were there a lot of other Jews on the ship, doing the same thing?

**LL:** Yes, there were. And I remember particularly one thing. There were some people, two young men, who had come out from the concentration camp. At this time, you know, people could still get out of concentration camps when they had tickets to go to some place. Like if somebody was in a concentration camp and their family was able to get ticket, ticket for them to Shanghai, is that the very least. And there were two young men on the ship, and they were playing the piano and singing in the evening, you know, light songs, popular music, like "Mack the Knife," and so on and so forth. And I said to my mother, "How is it possible that people when they come out from the concentration camp are able to, to enjoy themselves and sing and be so happy? It seems like a contradiction to me." And my mother said, "Well, it's because they came out of the concentration camp that they are happy." Yeah, there were any number of refugees and other people on the ship. It was a great experience. And finally after four weeks we arrived in Shanghai. And my father picked us up and we landed at the Bund, and then through the customs house to pick up our luggage. We saw that, the custom house and the Bund, and everything. And, and I remember saying to my mother, "Isn't that Papa?" That's what I called my father. Because he had lost so much weight and he looked so impossible, and for a moment we weren't sure it was him. But it was him, and, and I really don't know why we did not go home together. He told us where he had rented a room on Weihaiwei Road in the International Settlement. He told us to take a rickshaw and tell, and he told the rickshaw coolie the address. And I thought, how can you do that, here in a place where we have no idea where we are, we are landing on a new continent, and, and how do we know this guy is going to bring us there? There is this strange Chinese character running in front of a strange vehicle, if you might call a rickshaw that. But all I can say is that he did bring us there. And we came there, and I can't tell you why my father didn't, at the same time, did he have, go, or did he take just also a rickshaw because, and it turned out everything okay, we were all there. And he had rented one room, that had a sort of a balcony. This was by the way a nice house. On Weihaiwei Road, there was something called Young Terrace, there was a lane in there, but it was not anything like the lanes in Hongkew. Those were nice houses with front yards. And we had one room that had a sort of an alcove, and this was where my parents slept, and I slept on the sofa in the living, in the, in the room, the room. And that's where we stayed. And, of course, my father had a job already. That's how he could afford to rent this. He worked, as I told you, as a teacher, and in the Kadoorie School in, in Hongkew, in the school in Hongkew.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 1939 the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association, under the leadership of Horace Kadoorie,

**SH:** What was he teaching?

**LL:** History. And then, of course, my mother and I both (coughs) tried to find jobs, too, which wasn't very easy. I mean, before I left I had taken a course in making gloves and belts and some things like that. There were people who, who manufactured gloves and, and so I got a job there to work, to work (unintelligible). And my mother found a job as a sort of a baby-sitter. A couple, they were both working and they had a daughter, so she was there in the afternoons, and stayed there. And somehow through them she heard of a, this lady for whom my mother worked, heard about a job as a, somebody looked for a secretary. "Can I type? Can I take short-hand?" "Yes." Another thing I had learned, took a course in before I left Vienna, was English short-hand.

**SH:** English short-hand?

**LL:** Yeah, well, sure, it's different from German short-hand. Pitman, or whatever it was, I forgot, something. Now one doesn't take short-hand any more. You don't even know that there is something . . .

**SH:** My mother took short-hand. My mother was a secretary, so I've seen it.

**LL:** Yeah. So, anyhow, so I had taken the course and I could type. So I got that job as secretary, you see, there in Cathay Mansions, where we went, I used to work there. And then, of course, I was big lady, because I was paid very well. Comparatively. You know, I was paid better than the average person. I felt like a big-shot.

**SH:** How did you get that job? How did you know it existed?

**LL:** That's what I told you, the lady . . .

**SH:** Through this person . . .

**LL:** Yeah, through my mother, who had a job as the baby-sitter, the lady she worked for had heard about that job and . . .

**SH:** Other people didn't want, did you, were other people applying for that job, too?

**LL:** I don't think so. So, anyhow, through luck. But you get a job through luck, but you keep it through ability. So I had this job and I felt like a big-shot, as I said. And then, unfortunately, the man died that I worked for. He had typhoid fever. You know, that was one of those things. I had typhoid fever, too, but I didn't die, obviously, otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here. But this man was much older and when you are older, it's much more difficult to recover from things like that. So then I was desperately looking for a job. And there was this lending library, corner Moulmein Road and Bubbling Well. That's why I asked where

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established a school on Kinchow Road in Hongkew. In 1941 new quarters had to be found, and Kadoorie helped raise the funds for a new school on East Yuhang Road. Often called the Kadoorie School, it opened in January, 1942, with an essentially secular curriculum and English as the language of instruction. The student body reached 600, from kindergarten through age 14.

your parents lived, because that's only one block away from Seymour and Bubbling Well. Your grandmother, maybe she would remember the place. Maybe she wouldn't. Anyhow, so I applied for a job there, asking do they need somebody in the lending library. And I got the job.

**SH:** How did you hear about that job?

**LL:** I didn't so much hear about the job, that I applied for it more or less on a chance. Now I am a little confused. I mean, how did I know? Because, you know, later on I married my boss, the owner of that store, so therefore, and I'm trying to think. I knew him, we were, I mean, we were subscribers in that library and so I always went in there, because that was just around the corner, more or less, from where we lived. Because Weihaiwei Road is parallel to Bubbling Well, and both Moulmein Road and Seymour Road connect Weihaiwei to Bubbling Well, and it is only one block away. And one evening I met Bruno on Bubbling Well, but I didn't work for him then yet. And I said, and he asked me, "Where are you going?" And I said, "I am trying to buy apricots, because my mother wants to cook apricot dumplings." That was, that's how our acquaintance started. The famous story of the apricot dumplings. And he said, "Well." And he, I said, "Why don't you come and try to taste some or something." And so one day he came, but he didn't get apricot dumplings. But he came and he brought coffee and he brought crackers. He says, "Oh, whenever I go somewhere I'm afraid the coffee might not be good, so I always bring my own coffee." But you must realize that coffee and everything was extremely expensive then, and we didn't, we probably didn't even have any coffee at home anyway, because we never did drink coffee. My parents always drank tea and I drank tea, too. And I didn't work for him yet then. And then, he also lived in the same lane, a couple of houses further down. So matter of fact, he had rented only the balcony in one of those houses. These houses were all built similar. And he had rented in one of the further houses down, from people just the balcony to sleep on for, for his living quarters. And, and so maybe somehow we talked and I knew that the girl who used to work there left, and anyhow I applied and I got the job. And there we lived till the day of the proclamation.<sup>3</sup> I mean, I was working and we were sort of getting acquainted. But we didn't get married till we moved in the Designated Area.

Now, you must realize that, now I remember exactly Pearl Harbor. Up to that day there were, the police were Sikhs, you know, Indian police, with the turban, because it was British. The International Settlement was really British, the police and everything. And one day it says, there's war, the British are out and the Japanese are in. And all the Sikhs and everything was gone, and the Japanese police was there and everything. From that moment on, the situation became a little frightening again, because after all the Japanese were on the sides of the Germans. So our situation, though we didn't have to immediately move into the Designated Area, became, wasn't secure any more, because we were in enemy territory again, which is what we fled from. And I remember specially one evening. The store was not only a lending library, it was also a regular bookstore. And a Japanese customer came in and he bought many books. Japanese people, we had English and German books, and Japanese are very interested, were very interested in German books. And I think, as far as I remember, he bought mostly German books. And among other things he found in stock The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx. And he asked Bruno, "Why do you have that book here?" And he said, "Well, it's really a historical document and in a bookstore one doesn't ask about things like that." But he, he was, and he bought it. And he said, "Well, I'm going to buy it, so that it's in a safe place and other people won't see it." And he bought any number of books and asked Bruno to deliver them to his house. Bruno thought it was the end of his life, that he was only asking him to

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<sup>3</sup> LL refers here to the Japanese edict on February 18, 1943, which forced all stateless refugees to move to the Designated Area in Hongkew.

immediately put him into prison or some kind of a concentration camp again. But he delivered the books to him and he called, this Japanese man called in his son and said, "Now this is the book you should not read," to explain to him all the things, all the horrible ideas behind the book. But everything was all right and Bruno came back home alive, came back alive. And this is just an incident, you know, things, how one can get paranoid. About being paranoid, I have to tell you, I didn't mention, that Bruno had been in Buchenwald, in a concentration camp, for over one year and the reason, the way he got out, that his sister got a ticket for him to Shanghai, that's how his sister got him out of the concentration camp. And he, every soldier, and they had picked him up in Germany, you know, just like one day. He used to say when the police came, he had, of course, no idea what or why somebody knocks on your door, like the man with the hot water, and it happens to be the police, and they say, "Come with us." And he asked them, he told me, "Should I take a toothbrush?" and they said to him, "I think you better do it." And that, and that's, from that moment on, that was on his way to Buchenwald. And he had been there thirteen months. So he had a complete paranoia about everything that looked like policemen or soldier or anything. Okay, I only told you that because, to explain why he was convinced it was another, another concentration camp again, when the Japanese person saw The Communist Manifesto in the bookstore.

**SH:** Where was he from?

**LL:** Berlin. And so the situation became very iffy. And then came the proclamation. And we weren't married then yet, and I moved with my mother into what was called a special club for people who were in one way or another collect-, connected with Czechoslovakia. Because my father was born in Czechoslovakia and that's why he had gone to Prague, to insist that, so my mother and I could move in there. You know any place that had regular toilets and showers was a luxury. Because in those lanes, I don't know if you, you didn't see the place where Pollack lived, Curt Pollack,<sup>4</sup> all those places had no toilets but pots that you put out in the evening. You heard about that, did you?

**SH:** A little bit, but not much.

**LL:** Well. So, anyhow, so we lived there in that club that had regular showers and toilets. So it was a luxury, in that sense. And then I got married.

**SH:** Could I just ask one question? You and your mother lived, where did your father go?

**LL:** Oh, I forgot to mention that my father died. My father died in February '42, after the war started but before the proclamation. But even at that time the only hospital that any Jewish emigré, immigrant, would go to was the one in Ward Road. I'm sure there were other hospitals in Shanghai, but nobody could afford to go into the other hospitals. But as I said, he would have died any place. He died of lung cancer. And so, so he died a year before the proclamation, in February '42, yeah, in '43 was the proclamation. And, and my mother and I moved in there, and Bruno moved somewhere else in the, and he opened a lending library on Ward Road. Not right opposite the jail, but three blocks further up. We saw the jail today, the Ward Road jail, on that same street.

**SH:** He brought the books from . . .

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<sup>4</sup> See interview with Curt Pollack, Shanghai, April 22, 1989.

**LL:** Yeah, from . . .

**SH:** Seymour Road.

**LL:** He brought the books from Seymour Road, yeah, and opened the lending library there. And he lived behind the library. Was sort of, you see it was a huge, too bad that you didn't come along, because I found the house, so it's completely changed. But, still, some things are still the way, it was, the way it was. Some of the wood and the glass. It was an old mandarin house. That was first a front yard and then the second inner courtyard. And then there was a big room on this side and a big room on this side. And there was a huge hallway, a huge space in between, and that's where the library was. And then he made a partition at the end of it and he lived behind that. And there were lots of other rooms, and a second and a third floor on top. And every room was, another family was in another room. And then Bruno and I got married, and then he rented, that wasn't good, was good enough for him alone, and then we rented the one room on the right side of the, of the courtyard. It was a large, there were also showers and toilets in back. And we had even running water, a sink in the, in the room.

**SH:** Could you say, could you say something about getting married? That must have been unusual.

**LL:** No, people did get married all the, constantly, I mean, people did get married. The only thing, when the little girl from Taiwan asked me, and she asked me something, and I said I got married here and she said, "In what synagogue?" and I said, "I didn't get married in a synagogue," she could hardly understand that. We got married in a civil, in a civil service ceremony, and the way civil service ceremonies in Shanghai at this time were, you, a lawyer marries you, and it has to be in an open place, in a restaurant with the doors open, so that the whole public, it's a public event. There is nothing to hide, the whole world can be your witness. So that's how we got married, on Chu San Road, in one of the restaurants. Remember Curt Pollack saying, this is where the Chu San Road, this is where the life of the District, of the community was? It looked different then. There weren't any stalls. As I said before, the houses were forty years younger than they are now. And there was a nice restaurant and the food was good, and that's how we got married. And we had a beautiful Chinese marriage certificate with all kinds of birds, flowers, and everything is a symbol for something, for health, good luck, money, I don't know, you know. And Chinese characters and English and German marriage certificates and all kinds. But the Chinese, of course, are the only things that, the only ones that are decorative and lovely. The others are just plain simple. Okay, and we lived here till, then we opened branches of the library in some other places and everything was going well, and things were going well, I mean in business-wise and everything. But then the war was over and then the Americans came, and that was, of course, the great influx of business and everything.

**SH:** Can I just ask a question about the lending library?

**LL:** Yes.

**SH:** It's a business. People would pay to borrow books?

**LL:** Yes.

**SH:** And it was enough to support . . .

**LL:** Yes.

**SH:** . . . him or to support both of you or . . .

**LL:** Yes, to support both of us, and quite well, by standards of the time. Like we could afford to buy coffee and sugar. Now, sugar was, there was no, you see, there was only so much of everything, of all supplies left in Shanghai, nothing came in. Shanghai was completely closed off during the war. No new supplies came in and people had very little money and there was very little entertainment and what could people do? Read. So it was the one thing that people had, they were able to read. Yes, we could live, we could live on that. And our standard of living was, for the time during the war, a little higher than the average. I mean, there were many people who worked on the black market and they made much more money. I mean, we weren't rich at all, but we were better off than most, except the black market dealers. Yes, I mean, people did read everything that they could get their fingers on. And then, okay, then came the great influx, when the war was over, I mean. Now, I want to tell you, I'm now going back, and you, you don't mind.

**SH:** Not at all.

**LL:** All the time during the war people, there were always rumors going around. "It can't last and longer, this is only temporary." You know many people never really started out on anything. In that respect it was one of the things that Curt Pollack said, that was right, that some people got into the camps, and they never even tried, that were meant only as a place where people could stay till they got out on their own. But these people saw it, well, this is only temporary, the war will be over any day, and they never even tried to do anything. And they stayed and stayed, but it was only a small minority. The way he talked, you would think that of the twenty thousand, ten thousand were in the homes all the time, which wasn't so at all. There were very few people left in the home. The majority went out and did something, whatever they could do, I mean, tailors, grocery stores, electricians, bicycles, whatever. Whatever anybody could do, people, and it was a very interesting experience, I thought, that really showed the difference between people. The ones who had get up and go and the ones who didn't. Because practically everybody came out with no money. There were very few who had money already outside of Germany and, or one way or another. But 90% had nothing. And some made it and some didn't. I mean everybody started from the same, from scratch, from the same level. And it had nothing at all to do really with what people used to be. Like we had friends who were very well-to-do in Vienna and he got here, and he was completely helpless, and couldn't do a darn thing. And other people who never had anything before, all of a sudden had it in them to go out and do something about the situation. It sort of separated the men from the boys, or the women from the girls. Because everybody had nothing and they had to start from scratch in a place, in an unknown place, in impossible circumstances. But it's amazing what they did. And then when we had to move into the Designated Area, which was a bombed out, burnt out place, you wouldn't believe in how short a time this turned into a thriving little self-contained community. Because the majority of people did have guts and enterprise and did something about it and remodelled the houses and opened little shops and restaurants and bars. You know that many women, I'm sure you know that girls worked in bars. I don't know. I mean, there ought, I mean, people always said that they are, that everybody in Shanghai who works in bars can also, will also go home with customers and so on and so forth. I don't know. I didn't know anybody, I was never there, I don't know if that's true or not, but I know that's what they said. But they also, there was also the thing that it was much easier for women to find jobs or make money than for men. And if women, that was the only way that they could take care of the family and children, that was that. Something I wanted to say. Oh yes, I remember now. When I got married, I had to get a special permission from Mr. Ghoya, from that place that Curt pointed out, where all the Jews had to stand for hours

to get a pass to get out of the city.<sup>5</sup> And I had to get a special permission to change my name on account of marriage from the Japanese bureau. I had the document signed by Mr. Ghoya, I think I gave it to some kind of a museum, that it was okay for me to change my name.

**SH:** What was your name then?

**LL:** Epstein was my maiden name, from Epstein to LL, on account of marriage. That's funny, isn't it, when you stop to think of it? And Bruno had to go out of the District to buy books. He could buy better books in, in the International Settlement and the French Concession, because there was really no supply inside, so he always had to get a passport to get out of the District. And every time he had to go to Ghoya, he was for days already, because that passport had to be renewed every month, he was in a complete state of nervous collapse, practically. So, Ghoya never did anything to him. Because he was short and what Ghoya was, mostly objected to were tall men, because he was an extremely short man, and he made tall men kneel in front of him and things like that. But women never had any problem, but he had that obsession. When we first got married, he screamed in the night and it was always when he was dreaming of the concentration camp. And actually had this paranoia all the time till we got to the United States. The first, he couldn't believe that a policeman comes and asks you, "How are you?" he means that. That you don't have to be afraid of the policeman. But the United States cured him of, of all that.

**SH:** Can I ask you more about the buying of books? Is that where the lending library, is that where he originally got books, from other people in Shanghai?

**LL:** Yes. You see, many people brought books with them from Germany, strangely enough. And he bought books from those people who had brought their libraries. And then he bought books from Chinese booksellers.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

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<sup>5</sup> Ghoya was a Japanese official in the Bureau for Stateless Refugees Affairs, in charge of issuing passes for Jews to leave the Designated Area.

**LL:** He bought from people who had brought them along from Germany. (unintelligible) English books he bought from Chinese booksellers in the city. And I mentioned to somebody, I don't know if it was you, that the books were pirated, that the Chinese reprinted and pirated books, so you could get all the recent books that didn't come in, in the pirated editions. They didn't last very long, but they were good enough. They served the purpose and that's where he got the books. And that's why he always had to get a passport to go into the city to replenish the stock. And then there was the war. And you know that Shanghai was bombed by the Americans, and that many people died.<sup>6</sup> There was one corner in the Designated Area that all four corners, there were just corpses lying around, because it had hit right smack there and all four corner houses were hit, and some people, and the house that we lived in, as I said, one side of it, of the house was like glass windows and carved wood. Now, in the night if there were bombs, you thought, it sounded as if the whole house were collapsing, the glass and all. Now, the house was never hit and nothing happened, but it sounded really something awful. And once, I remember, I looked out of the window and watched the bombs flying. But they say that any bomb that you can see doesn't hit you, because the one that hits you is directly above you, obviously. And remember the jail? That, people said, was the only safe place, the only bomb-proof, bomb-proof building in the whole Designated Area. So many people, immediately when there was an alarm, ran over and fled in the courtyard or whatever they tried to, because I never did go in there, in the jail, where they could stand in certain places, that supposedly they were bomb-proof. Of course, there were no fall-out shelters or anything like that. Can't do that anyway. In Shanghai houses have no cellars, because it is all built directly like on water. It's, there is no grounding. The houses have no cellars and that was the only place. And, and, of course, there was complete black-out. And you could use electric light only in certain hours. You could lose, because the city was practically out of coal and you need coal for electricity. So you could turn the electric light on only, I forgot what hours, from seven to nine or something. And then you had to do without electric light. Of course, there were little oil lamps that we used and all various kinds of things, kerosene lamps, oil lamps, and so on. And there was complete black-out and you had to, well, that's normal. I mean, that is, all cities in the world, if there's war and there could be bombing attacks, had black-outs. And one night, all of a sudden, it was like a rumor spread. The war is over. And, in the same moment, the reaction was, in the whole city, everybody, in the whole street where we lived, in the whole Ward Road, everybody turned on the lights and took down the black-out. The lights went on. It was like a symbolic show of freedom from the complete darkness of black-out, when this rumor came the war was over, everybody had the same reaction, they turned on the light and they opened the windows. And then the next day, it turned out, the war was over two days later, but the Japanese tried to punish everybody. They said, well, the immigrants, the stateless refugees, had performed just so wonderful during the bombing attack. Which they had, because they opened first-aid stands in the street and they helped the Chinese, the Japanese, whoever was injured and everything. That was organized by, by the refugees. But now that they, because we all turned on the lights, now we will be punished. That wiped out all the things that we did during the bombing attacks. But, of course, that lasted only one day, it was the next day the war was really over and we could turn on the lights and American soldiers and sailors came in.

**SH:** Right away on that day?

**LL:** Yeah, practically, within a day or so. It was the Japanese out and the American in, just as one day the

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<sup>6</sup> LL refers here to the American air raid on the Japanese radio station in Hongkew on July 17, 1945. The bombs devastated part of Hongkew killing over 200 people, including 31 or 32 refugees, and wounding hundreds of others.

English were out and the Japanese were in, all of a sudden was the Japanese was out and the Americans were in. And that, all of a sudden, was a great economic boom, of course. And then there was this horrible thing that these horrible GI's did. You know what they did? They rented rickshaws and told the rickshaw coolie to sit down and they pulled the rickshaw. And the old, "What are they doing? The Chinese will be, they are undermining the whole colonial effort."

**SH:** Who thought it was horrible?

**LL:** Former English people, mostly. You know the English used whips when the rickshaw coolies didn't run fast enough? They did. That undermines, well, the Chinese might have the idea that maybe they are not extremely inferior to the white foreign devils, if the American GI's did that. Well, they were all young guys and they thought it was the greatest thing in the world. In other words, they upset everything, the old colonial traditions. And then many people got jobs with the American PX's and so on and so forth.

**SH:** There were a lot of American soldiers then stationed in Shanghai?

**LL:** Yes, yes, for a long time. And then they went, and then the economy went down, and then already rumors came that, and, that the communists might be coming. "They will not come, yes they will come, yes they won't come." So then the war is over, everybody wanted to leave. Well, this was only, they only came for a day, anyway. Now eight years later, it's time to go. And people started to leave in droves. And it was necessary, because really there was nothing that one could do after the communists came. The few that decided, that said, "Well, I have a business here." Like I knew a guy, he was also bookseller, and he said, "Well, I have never in my life been politically involved in anything and I like it here and why shouldn't I stay?" It didn't work out for anyone.

**SH:** What happened to him? What happened to his business?

**LL:** Well, there was no business any more. He thought there could be. Most of them then finally, the last, the people who wanted to stay, then most of them went to Canada. That was the only place where they were taken in. And, of course, people who went to Canada always liked it. Most people think Canada is a wonderful country. You must be going to Canada every so often. I mean, from Maine, Canada is very close. I've never been to Canada for a strange reason. And, and so, and so, since more people left and left, there was, of course, always fewer readers in the library, so sooner or later we had to leave too. And since Bruno was born in Germany and had a very good quota, so we applied, we registered with the American consulate, and our quota number came up pretty fast. And there was a general affidavit issued, from I don't know, the Joint,<sup>7</sup> some committee issued a general affidavit for any number, anybody who could come, more or less. And we came . . .

**SH:** What did the affidavit say? What was it an affidavit of?

**LL:** Pardon?

**SH:** What was the document about, the affidavit?

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<sup>7</sup> The Joint Distribution Committee.

**LL:** Well, the affidavit guarantees, guarantees that the person would never become a burden to the state.

**SH:** So when did you go to the United States?

**LL:** 1948. It was very late. It wasn't much later that the communists actually really came to Shanghai, where everybody said that they would never make it. They would never be able to cross the Whangpoo. You know, rumors are the things that, when you live in a closed community like that, rumors are what keeps people alive, practically, what keeps the community buzzing. This is going to happen, that is going to happen. They will never come in, they will come in, the war is over, the war is not over, it can't last longer, it can. The Japanese cannot hold out, they can hold out. I mean, it goes constantly and constantly. So, anyhow, so we had no problem getting to the United States. We came to San Francisco. On the most, just as beautiful as the trip to Shanghai, just as horrible was the trip from Shanghai to San Francisco. I have to tell you about that. There came on a, we made two mistakes. We paid, we had enough money to pay our own fare. Okay. And you could take 500 dollars with you and that's just exactly how much money we had, to pay, 500 dollars and money to pay for the fare from San Francisco. Okay. Of course, the only fare we could afford to pay was third class. Which means that like hundred women sleep in one dormitory and hundred men sleep in a dormitory. And you don't get meals served three times a day, but you stand in line in messes and pick up cafeteria stuff. Not only that, it was an extremely rough trip. I was seasick all the time. I slept in this upper berth with hundred women. I, I was so sick, I couldn't eat any of the stuff. They were no private, there was a huge toilet, you know, like twenty toilets, one next to the other, and with only swinging doors, so, I had never been in an open toilet like that in my life. I couldn't go to the bathroom, because there was no privacy, no real privacy. I was sick anyway. I couldn't eat anything. I had never eaten cafeteria style in my life. I hadn't seen, I had never seen a cafeteria. I couldn't stand the food. It was the most horrible, cheapest type of American food, same brown gravy over everything. The only dessert was jello. I couldn't eat jello for years after the trip. It was just, Bruno, he, of course didn't get seasick, it doesn't matter to him. He came to me at my bed, I was lying there in my bed. "You have to come up on board. You've never seen anything like it. The water is up here and the ship is down here." Leave me alone, I was up and down and up and down. No, it was really pretty bad. We should have not taken any money with us, and should have gone second class. It would have been better, that's where we made a mistake. Because, because we did have 500 dollars when we got here. When we landed a committee again greets you there. Here come the immigrants. And they looked at us, they said, "Oh, you have money, take a cab." They didn't do anything for us ever. That's why I said, we should have taken the 500 dollars, come here, and come second class in style, instead of coolie class. And come here without money. We would have been far better off. But anyhow we survived very well.

**SH:** When you landed, what happened then? You had no jobs or places to go?

**LL:** Of course, we had no jobs.

**SH:** What did you think would happen when you landed?

**LL:** I would, I would find a job and Bruno would open a bookstore, and that's exactly, after, what the committee did for us, rented a hotel room for us in a small downtown hotel. But we had to pay for ourselves. They wouldn't pay it, because, after all, we were rich, we had money. So one week we, we looked around there. After one week I decided I'll go and look for a job. I looked in the paper and went around and found a job the first day, fantastic job, as a, as a typist and a file clerk. That's how I started my career in the United States. And Bruno finally did open a bookstore. He did have bookstores always. It

didn't take him too long, either.

**SH:** Is that the end of the story?

**LL:** Well, that's, we are in the United States.

**SH:** Well, let me ask, what, after coming to the United States, then or maybe later or even now, what, how did being in Shanghai affect you? I mean, obviously you got married there, so that's one effect, but how did these experiences affect the way you thought about things, or the way . . .

**LL:** The way I thought about things.

**SH:** . . . the way you did things or what you did?

**LL:** Well, it affected me in the one sense that I think I mentioned already. That all things being equal, if all people start under the same adverse conditions, this is where your true ability will show or your true survival instincts or your enterprise, whatever you want to call it. That I realized. But it's, don't ever blame the condition, blame yourself. Because under the most impossible conditions, some people will be able to manage it and make it one way or another. It also taught me one thing: that happiness has nothing to do with possessions. That you can live under the, with minimal possessions or in one room. You can be just as happy in one room, as you can be in a, in a house. You don't have to have much. You know, once a week we had, somebody in the house where we lived was the proud possessor of a record player. And we had records and we bought records and he bought records. There you could get second-hand records and once a week we had a musical evening and people came and listened to records. You can have wonderful, and we served coffee and cake. Now that was the epitome of luxury. To come together an evening with coffee and cake and listen to classical recorded music.

**SH:** Now where was this again? This is . . .

**LL:** In Shanghai.

**SH:** In Shanghai.

**LL:** In Shanghai. You can be very happy just doing that. You don't have to buy opera tickets for fifty dollars. That's what it taught me. It taught me that it's, if you have things, it's very good to do with, but you always have to know that you can also do without. That's what it taught me. It also taught me to be arrogant.

**SH:** About what?

**LL:** About myself.

**SH:** Because you were able to survive?

**LL:** No, because, I don't know, maybe I would have always been arrogant. Maybe I'm not. It has also taught me that, that I, this will amuse you, my first job that I, the same job that I talked about, that I found after one week when I walked around, that was with Collier's magazine, I don't, you will not remember

Collier's magazine or you do, and what this place did, it took subscriptions, you know, they had salesmen go running around and selling subscriptions to Collier's, and other, Good Housekeeping and, and, I don't, Cosmopolitan, and so on and so forth, and I processed these orders. And people took subscriptions for one year. I couldn't believe. I said, "But how do people know that after one year they will still be at that address?" I couldn't, you see, I couldn't believe in permanence any more. I was completely shocked that people, and some people took two-year subscriptions. It floored me. Because I didn't, but you don't know where you are going to be tomorrow, was my reaction. And life has actually always seemed to me not permanent. It's all just transitory. At the moment you are here and I still don't have any belief in, and that next year it will be still there or something. I still laugh at people taking, so I do have, have some subscriptions myself, like to Time Magazine and Atlantic, but still I think it's funny that one takes subscriptions, how do you know that you'll be there tomorrow or next year or in a month? Those are the things.

**SH:** You've told me many things. Is there anything, anything else?

**LL:** No, I mean, as I say, one cannot describe the craziness of life that went on in that ghetto. I mean that we all bought half an ounce of liver sausage, and so on and so forth, people probably mentioned to you.

**SH:** No, assume that people have told me nothing, tell me whatever you think.

**LL:** I mean, that's how you, how we, well, though we did not have any refrigerators, we were very lucky, we had an icebox. That was, refrigeration, nobody had a refrigerator. And, of course, you know, you couldn't eat any fresh fruit without cooking or, or soaking them in various chemicals or boiling water over. And, of course, everybody, oh, I didn't tell you, besides when I came, that I thought I would never be able to breathe again on the day that we arrived. When I left Vienna it was winter. The streets were full of snow, completely white. I remember the last, the cab drive from our house to the train station, when we went to Trieste. It was early in the morning, the city was completely quiet. Vienna was a beautiful city. The white, covered in snow and we didn't see a person. When we got off that ship on the Bund and on Nanking Road in Shanghai, I saw these masses of people. And they were all Chinese and there was a different odor in the air. I thought that I would never be able to breathe again in my whole life. There was all this smell of cooking oil or incense all over, a mixture of cooking oil and incense, and masses and masses of people. And I thought that there has to be an accident or something going on, there cannot be that many people always, always, like ants, constantly, but you get used to it. You get used to it, to that sense, you don't see it, you don't smell it any more, and you don't feel the masses of people any more. When we got to San Francisco and we stayed in that hotel where they sent us to, and it was Sunday, and it's downtown, and I looked out of the window and there was nobody in the streets. I thought there must be martial law. Something is wrong, where are the people? I was afraid, because there was nobody there. That is, that was funny. In downtown, you know, in California, in San Francisco, people don't walk. There is nobody in the street. And on a weekend downtown, there isn't anybody. It shocked me just as much as the masses of people shocked me when I got here. Friends of ours went on a trip to China about a half a year ago, maybe more like a year ago, and of course I talked to her before I left and I said, "Are there still that many people in the streets, is it like ants swarming?" She said, "Well, yeah, I think so." But that's not the point, and actually, of course, here there aren't. But when we were on that evening down on Nanking Road, I finally felt at home again. It was like that, you saw the people, and I knew I was back home.

**SH:** Is this like a home?

**LL:** No. You see here is completely, it has nothing to do with the Shanghai that I knew, that didn't exist, nothing like that existed. Or even if it had existed, I wouldn't have known it, but you know these things were all built, how old do you think that hotel is, certainly not more than ten years?

**SH:** This one here? Oh, I didn't mean really this place.

**LL:** No, I know. And Hongkew has changed too much. It's barely recognizable, some things are recognizable, but really barely. Ward Road, it's changed tremendously, too. The only thing really has not changed is that police station, the Ghoya police station, that house still looks the same as it did. But that's about the only house, I would say, that looks the same, that I could say I truly recognized. Everything else has changed. But the thing that hasn't changed is Nanking Road, and the masses of people, that's the same.

**SH:** I have some more questions I'd like to ask, but we . . .

**LL:** Go ahead.

**SH:** . . . we've been talking a long time. I don't want to overstay my welcome.

**LL:** No, ask me anything you want. If I don't feel like answering, I won't answer, that's okay. But you can ask me any questions.

**SH:** I guess, I want to go back to your social life, or your social and cultural life. Could you tell me something about your connection with the Jewish religious community, synagogue, for instance?

**LL:** We didn't have any, neither Bruno or I. Bruno was a more conscious Jew than any Jew, and more fervent Jew than any Jew, I have ever known. But he wasn't religious in the sense of going to the synagogue. He told me that even as a boy on Yom Kippur, he went into the woods and not into the synagogue, so, so we didn't have too much connection with any, we had no connection with the synagogue in that sense.

**SH:** Okay.

**LL:** And thus, I mean, we were not religious at all. My mother fasted on Yom Kippur and went to the Kol Nidrei on Yom Kippur.

**SH:** Now let me ask you, you talked about having people come over once a week for music. What, were your friends mostly other Eastern European refugees or how did your friendships develop? Were they people like you or not?

**LL:** Another theory that I developed in Shanghai and then in San Francisco, that you meet the same type of people wherever you are. Because with the others that you are not congenial with, you don't meet. Somehow you will always have the same type of persons around you. Mysteriously or not mysteriously. How did, how did people meet? Well, first of all, it was a very close physically and through fate, the same kind of fate and destiny, a very close community. Everybody knew everybody, and there was more gossip going on than you can possibly imagine. Gossip was the main entertainment. But still, naturally, there were groups of friends. Well, we, first of all, we got to know almost everybody, because in the library, because everybody, most people did read. And that was the only entertainment, and yet you get to know people, you go, there were many coffee houses, restaurants, place like that and you see people. "Where do

you come from? From Vienna, from there, from there. Or where did you live, and what did you do?" I mean, everybody was, I mean, in the same boat. So there were no strangers in that sense. But then you, you get to meet and some people you like and you meet again and others you don't. But there was certainly no difficulty in meeting anybody as far as social life was concerned.

**SH:** What you just said would make me think that it was a friendlier place than either Vienna or San Francisco or anywhere else.

**LL:** It was. It was a close-knit community, even if, as I say, the main entertainment was gossip, it's because it was so close, and, everywhere to know who slept with whom. And it was a very close-knit, you hardly find as close-knit a community that isn't, not in San Francisco, not in Vienna where everybody is very selective, and you only talk to people you have been introduced to. I mean, it has to be somebody's friend or relative or this or that. Or, well, I don't know how snobbish your grandparents were, but in Vienna, exactly, you know, the first question is, "What's his family, where does he come from?" I don't have to tell you, apparently. I've been thinking about what you said. I thought that your grandmother must be about the same age as my mother would be if she was still alive.

**SH:** My grandmother is 91.

**LL:** I think my mother would be a little older now. But still, so if you want to know what my mother was like, she was probably very much like your grandmother. She was a very beautiful woman, right away. And, yes, of course, because all of a sudden, that was the interesting part, all the barriers fell. It didn't make any difference, what does your family do, where did she come from and so on and so forth, because everybody was there and started from scratch, nill, nothing, in Shanghai. And that's where the real abilities of people started to show. They couldn't call on family connections or rich friends or their bank accounts, or whatever any more, because it didn't exist. *Hic Rhodos, hic salta*.<sup>8</sup> Here they had to show what they could do on their own, without their exalted circumstances. It was a good experience.

**SH:** Could you say, talk about your mother, about what happened after you moved out and got married? Did she come to the United States, too?

**LL:** She didn't come the United States, because of the Viennese quota. I got in on the German quota from my husband. But the Viennese quota was extremely bad at that time, and the Austrian quota. And she went to England and then she came to the United States. After I was a citizen, then there was no problem any more.

**SH:** Did she leave at the same time that you did, or after?

**LL:** As a matter of fact, she left a little before me, a couple months, no, she left afterwards, not true, she left a couple months afterwards and went to England. Because she told me, when we left Shanghai, we had eaten breakfast apparently before we left, and when we left, since my mother was still there, we apparently left and left some food on the table or something. And she said, within a second from the street like

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<sup>8</sup> In a letter of 12/90, Lowenberg describes her use of this quotation: "A high jumper who did not make his jump said: 'But in Rhodes I could do it.' So the judge said the above: 'Here is Rhodes, here you have to jump!' Referring to: here in Shanghai you had to show what you could do!"

hundreds of people were coming in. And took everything out of the room that we lived in and it was gone. They sat down, they ate what food was there and whatever I'd left in the closet and not taken with me, for one reason or another, which I assumed that my mother would take care of and dispose of. It was all within one minute stripped.

**SH:** By Chinese people?

**LL:** Yes, of course. You know, in the entrance of that house there was a narrow entrance that you went in and then there was the first courtyard, and then there was the second entrance for the second courtyard, and then behind that was the library. At the narrow entrance a band of young Chinese beggars were living. Children, orphans, which nobody took care of. And they lived in that house entrance.

**SH:** This is after the war?

**LL:** No, this was during the war, during the time we lived in the Designated Area. And, of course, all the other people started to kick them like this. And one winter my husband gave them an old overcoat that they could use as a blanket. From that day on, they were like his slaves. They did everything for him. And he used them when he had to transfer books from one place to another and gave them something, a little money, and, and they did everything for him, because he had given them that overcoat. You have no idea of what was going on, the poverty and the beggars and people dying in the street in winter. You know there was absolutely no social consciousness, no social conscience, in the old regime. I mean, nobody took care of anything or anybody, there was nothing. The beggars in the streets, the children, there were no orphanages, those institutions, nothing, I mean, nothing for anybody. I'm sure you must be familiar with that, you must, the only institution that I saw that did anything and that was in the entrance of our lane in Weihaiwei Road, in the International Settlement, the Salvation Army had a soup kitchen there. And you should have seen the lines of people standing there every day at noon to get one bowl of thin rice soup. Ever since that, I have had a soft spot in my heart for the Salvation Army.

**SH:** Were these always Chinese people in line . . .

**LL:** Of course.

**SH:** . . . not refugees, not . . . ?

**LL:** Chinese beggars, Chinese in rags. You know, in the "Three Penny Opera", they tried to show the beggars, how they make them up. Nothing in the "Three Penny Opera", those are elegant gents in comparison to what beggars, Chinese beggars looked like, at the time, with open sores and open wounds. And nobody did anything, and people died in the street. And you know what they did, when people died in the street? The person on whose house, on whose property the body is found is responsible for the funeral expense. So they took the corpses and pushed them in front of the next house. We also learned that life is very cheap when you live in the Orient. Okay.

BREAK IN TAPE

**LL:** Lectures, there were some people like on art, on literature, on, and for young people.

**SH:** Lectures in the library?

**LL:** Yeah, in the library. Well, that was a place, where one could get together, and there were people on, well, as I said, on art, architecture, literature. I remember there was one guy who had worked for the Bauhaus, so he knew about things like that, and some other artists were there, they talked about art and, and there were some people who were, had been journalists in Prague, the editors of the Neuer, of the Prager Tagblatt, which was, and they talked history and politics, and things like that, general, so that young people could get some idea of those things, because there was no other place where they could learn about things like that, because the schools, of course, were the bare minimum. Okay.

END SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

