

INTERVIEWEE: BALFOURA FRIEND LEVINE

INTERVIEWER: Rose Horowitz

DATE: July 4, 1992

RH: It is Saturday, the Fourth of July, Independence Day. We are sitting at the UBC [University of British Columbia] Conference Center, Vancouver, Canada, where there is in progress right now the Second Old China Hands Reunion. And on behalf of the Old China Hands Oral History Program, I, Rose Horowitz, am interviewing an old school and family friend, Balfoura Friend Levine, who now lives in Atlanta. She has kindly consented to tell us her story of life in China.

Good afternoon, Balfoura. Could you please start and tell us how you came to be in China, and if you were born there, as I believe you were, how and where your parents came from and settled in China?

BL: I was born in Shanghai in 1925, but my parents came from Lithuania and Russia.

RH: Who came from where, please?

BL: My father came from a town called Brainsk, B-R-A-I-N-S-K, which was near Vilna, and it was a small town. His father, my grandfather, whose name was Joshua Selig Freund, which later became Friend, F-R-I-E-N-D, when he was a young man, left Brainsk to go to study in Vilna. He was going to become, and did at some later date become a rabbi. Then he traveled to a little town called Smargon, S-M-A-R-G-O-N, where he was a rabbinical student.

As was the way they did back then, he went to my grandfather's house, my mother's father's house, and it was called in Yiddish to *essen-tag*, *essen* meaning to eat, *tag* meaning days, and he would go there and have . . . On Tuesdays, for instance, he would eat at the Kovarskys' home, that's my grandfather, Hlavno, H-L-A-V-N-O, Kovarsky, and he would eat at their house, sort of working his way through school, so to speak, and he would sing the *Z'miros* and say the grace and he'd have a nice dinner with them. Then the next day he'd eat dinner with somebody else and do the same there. At my grandfather's home, after . . .

(tape is turned off)

RH: Okay, you were telling us about your grandfather's home?

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BL: At my grandfather's home my grandfather and grandmother had four boys, one after the other, and then finally came the birth of my mother, Frieda Kovarsky, and she was a beautiful child. My mother told me that my grandfather gave my grandmother a beautiful diamond ring to thank her for the girl child that she had just given birth to after the four wild boys that they had. Then of course they had another daughter, but my mother was the first princess in that family and my father fell in love with her then. Then she went off to school in Dvinsk and he went to another little town called Olkiniki, O-L-K-I-N-I-K-I, something like that. He started a little Jewish school, a cheder, and he and another man started that school. At the same time, about the same time, my grandfather's business, he was in the . . .

(tape is turned off)

RH: He was in the . . . ?

BL: He was in the yeast business and he had a brewery in Smargon and it failed so he went to Olkiniki and there, lo and behold, was my father Jacob Friend teaching school. My mother came back from Dvinsk, which was another little town where she was attending school, and he pursued her and begged my grandfather for her hand. My grandfather did not want her to marry my father, but he told her he was fleeing. At sometime shortly in the future, he would be leaving Russia in order not to serve the tsar.

RH: Was this before, during, or after the First World War? Have you any idea?

BL: That was after the revolution, which was . . .

RH: After? So it was the Soviet . . .

BL: The tsar.

RH: Oh, the White Army?

BL: No, he had a letter from the tsar's . . .

RH: Oh, calling him up?

BL: Calling him up.

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RH: He was called for his draft?

BL: For his draft. And in those days, I'm not sure if it was Jewish boys only, but all boys had to serve twenty-five years.

RH: Jewish boys only.

BL: Jewish boys only, okay. So he went over the hill, so to speak, and he went down to Shanghai, south of Russia into Manchuria and then to Shanghai.

RH: Did he come by train on the Trans-Siberian?

BL: He did indeed, which went around Lake Baikal, and he came to Shanghai. He knew not one word of English, but he learned English and subsequently he wrote beautifully and he spoke quite well. In 1923, which was probably two or three years after he got to Shanghai, he sent my mother money, passage to come, and they were married in Harbin [Manchuria], which was by the famous Rabbi Kissilev, who was the chief rabbi in Harbin. He married them and I have the announcement of their marriage.

RH: In Russian or in Yiddish?

BL: In Russian, in English and in Yiddish.

RH: All three?

BL: Three cards, like little business cards, a little bigger. Then they came down to Shanghai, and everybody in the Shanghai Jewish community wanted to know who is this wonderful bride that this man has waited for so many years to marry. At that time, he had already befriended many lovely people in the Sephardi community. Notably, Mrs. Somekh was a very dear friend, and Mr. and Mrs. Ruby Abraham and Mr. and Mrs. David Abraham, D.E.J. Abraham, and the Moses family. I can't remember the Moses . . . Aaron Moses, Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Moses, and the Toegs--I can't think of his name.

RH: Nobody used his first name. It was Isaac, everybody called him I.A. It was I.A. Toeg.

BL: Uncle Toeg. And they were very kind, and in later years when they'd go and have tea at the Marble Palace of the . . .

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RH: Kadoorie?

BL: Of the Kadoorie, they called it Kadoorie Hall or Marble Palace.

RH: The Marble Hall.

BL: Marble Hall, that's correct. The grownups would sit and have tea and us children would play in the yard and play in the zoo. They had a zoo of animals. My father didn't want me to go to the Jewish school, he wanted me to go to the public school. And he only spoke in English to me, he refused to speak Russian to me. He said that tongue, the Russian tongue, was distasteful to him. However, Mother spoke Russian to me and my amah spoke Chinese to me.

RH: So you grew up tri-lingual.

BL: That's correct, and then, of course, in school we studied French. The Russian language has come in most handily to me now in Atlanta, Georgia, because of all the influx of immigrants. I'm at a great advantage over a lot of others because I drive and I speak Russian fluently and I'm able to take the Russian immigrants to visit doctors and translate for them. I'm doing a lot of nice things for them on a volunteer basis now that I'm retired.

RH: That's wonderful. Now, could you tell us a little something about your feel for school, what it was like, the friends you made, what it was like growing up in Shanghai? What stands out in your memory the most? Fun, school, the different wars we had, the Chinese about us, what stands out most? Just talk and tell us.

BL: Well, I went to the Public School for Girls. We lived in Hongkew a long time ago, as did most of the Russian Jewish community, the same Hongkew that was populated by the exodus of refugees from Europe in the late thirties and early forties. I was an only child and I had a lot of friends, the Rabbi Ashkenazis--Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi, I think--and his two daughters were school chums of mine. But we were very poor, unlike a lot of others who were pretty well-off.

RH: What did your father do in Shanghai at that time?

BL: At that time, he taught a little Hebrew. We didn't have things like Sunday school, so he taught Hebrew to certain children, and then he was the clerk in the Shanghai Jewish Communal Association and he could translate. By then his English was fairly good and he had beautiful penmanship, and he translated a lot of things for the newly arrived Russian Jews who knew no English at all.

In fact, he used to go to the H.I.A.S., that's the Hebrew Immigrant Aid [Society] Association. And while he was sitting in there with a gentleman, Mischa . . . I can't think of his last name, I would sit on the floor and color and draw pictures on pieces of paper. And now, in Atlanta, I'm a very close friend of this Mischa's niece.

(tape is turned off)

RH: Well, when the Big War hit, I mean Pearl Harbor, how much do you remember of that very day?

BL: I seem to remember hearing about it on the radio.

RH: Did you know it was coming? Or did your parents tell you anything?

BL: Well, we were reading all about the war in Europe, and Pearl Harbor was what, three years later, so we followed the war in Europe. But we were teenagers, and once Pearl Harbor started, the Americans and the British and other allies were interned in various camps around Shanghai, but we were not because we were White Russian. But my father was . . .

RH: What kind of papers would you have then to travel? Or did you travel out of Shanghai?

BL: We did not travel, but my father was already on business in Manila at the time when Pearl Harbor . . .

RH: What did he travel on, do you know?

BL: He traveled on stateless . . .

RH: A Nansen passport, was it?

BL: It was called stateless White Russians, and even though . . .

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RH: Some of them had what they called Nansen passports, so I was wondering if you know of it or had one or something, because that's unusual.

BL: No, I've never heard of it.

RH: And so he was stuck in Manila through the war?

BL: Right.

RH: And what happened to him? Was he interned? You said you were not interned. Was he?

BL: He was not interned, but a couple of times he got really frisky about it when the Americans were bombing. The Japanese had taken over the Philippines and the Americans were bombing them and they . . .

RH: Before the landing? Before MacArthur came back?

BL: Yes, before he came back. They would all go [into] bomb shelters, and my father was in charge, or something like that, of closing the door. The Japanese gendarmes came and knocked at the door and he refused to open it, and when they did force the door in they took him in as a spy, as an American spy, and he had a hard time . . .

RH: How long was he locked up? You don't know?

BL: I don't think he was locked up, but he was interrogated and he had to really talk quick to get himself out of the predicament that he was in, because they just were sure he was a spy because he did not open the door, and he should have.

RH: And as for you and your mother, now your father had gone, what was your situation during the war and what were your reactions when Jewish refugees came to Shanghai?

BL: Well, during the war, I had finished high school, the Public School for Girls, and I had no skills, really, and I went to the first year at Saint John's University. Then I got some little menial job in some little medical office. But we were getting some money every month from the Woodcraft Works

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where my father worked. They were giving my mother and me a little subsistence check to pay our bills.

RH: And that's what you lived on?

BL: That's what we lived on, and then the little job that I had. Then, when the American Army came and liberated us, I was able to work for the Air Force at Kiangwan Air Base and I brought home a nice salary.

RH: And that helped.

BL: And that helped tremendously.

RH: Your mother never did work?

BL: No, she was the old-fashioned mother to stay home and . . .

RH: And look after the child.

BL: And look after the child, exactly right. In 1945, after the war was over, I knew that my father had two brothers in the United States, and I wanted to transfer to a university here in Georgia where my Uncle Louis lived. He got me a transfer from Saint John's University to the University of Georgia.

RH: In Athens?

BL: In Athens, Georgia, where I subsequently graduated with a degree in journalism in 1950, and worked in the Atlanta area at various places. In 1953, I met a German refugee boy, Hans Mayer.

RH: Had he been in Shanghai, too, or . . . ?

BL: No, he had come to his great-aunt in Savannah, Georgia, from Germany as a young thirteen-year-old, and he was raised by his great-aunt.

RH: What happened to his parents?

BL: His parents and baby brother all went in the gas chambers. So we were married in 1953, and I have three children. My oldest daughter, Sandra Mayer Baumwald, is thirty-eight now. She's an attorney, she has two

children, married to Larry Baumwald, an insurance agency owner. They live in Athens, Georgia, and I have two precious grandchildren with them. My middle child is my son, Ronnie Mayer, and he has an executive class car towing service in Atlanta. And my youngest daughter, Laurie Mayer Phillips, lives around Atlanta in Buford, Georgia, and she works for the Salvation Army in their computer division. My first husband passed away and I was married for the second time, and after twelve years of marriage my second husband passed away. I am now married for the third time to Nathan Levine and we've been married eight years now and we live in Atlanta. His children and grandchildren are all in the immediate Atlanta area, and so are my children and grandchildren.

RH: That's wonderful. Did either of your parents come to this country to join you?

BL: Yes, they did. I came here in 1947, my father came in 1949 and became a teacher, a Hebrew school teacher at the Achavat Achim Synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia. He taught school there until his untimely death right outside the synagogue on the day of his eighty-fourth birthday. He was hit by a car and died. My mother was in China until about 1950, and then she could not get a visa to come to America. She could, however, go to Israel, which she did, and she stayed in Israel till about 1954, at which time she came to the United States.

RH: Did she also come to Atlanta to be near you?

BL: At the time, my first husband Hans Mayer and the children, we were all living in Hawkinsville, Georgia. We had shoe stores in that and neighboring towns, and the children were raised there until Hans Mayer's death in 1968. My mother lived with us for awhile and then she moved to Atlanta. My father was moving in Atlanta also, and they were living across the street from one another.

RH: Still close by?

BL: Still close by. Neither one had ever . . .

RH: They just couldn't live together.

BL: They couldn't live together . . .

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RH: And they couldn't live apart.

BL: Right, that was it.

RH: You know, you have quite a story there. There is one more thing--two things I want to touch on. I think I started, and then we digressed, what were your impressions when the Jewish refugees came from Europe, first of all? And the second was I believe you worked in some sort of Jewish context, too, in Atlanta for the B'nai B'rith. Could you tell a little something about both of those?

BL: Well, some of the refugees came to our Public School for Girls, but I was quite young, I was still a teenager at the time.

RH: What was the impact on you, if any?

BL: I thought that us native girls were a little bit snotty about the whole thing, and we looked at the refugees . . . We called them refugee girls, and we were, of course, the natives, and I thought we were a little high-handed about it. But our parents and their generation, they tried to help the refugees very much in establishing the home there and the food chain and other communal affairs. I've made some wonderful friendships with the refugee girls, many of whom are right here.

RH: The ones from school or the others from Hongkew? Only the ones from school?

BL: Oh, from school, right.

RH: Only the ones that you had associated with?

BL: Correct.

RH: So you had no contact with the ones on the other side of the bridge?

BL: Not really, no. Some of them used to come, and I remember some musicians who were very fine musicians and they just couldn't make a living. They used to go from apartment house to apartment house playing down the streets, and we used to throw pennies or whatever it was . . .

RH: This was on Yu Yuen Road?

BL: On Yu Yuen Road, and it seemed so sad to me to see these elderly men playing the violin, trying to eke out just pennies so that they could eat. It seemed a very sad commentary.

RH: That's the first time I've heard of that and I'm glad you brought it up. Now, tell us a little bit about your work for B'nai B'rith.

BL: After my [first] husband passed away, I brought my children and myself to Atlanta, which was a big city, and I figured they could go to Sunday school, I would be able to go to the synagogue there. I started working at B'nai B'rith, and I worked there for seventeen years, and I was the membership secretary for the Fifth District, which is the Southeastern United States. I kept up with a lot, and still do keep up with a lot of friends through B'Nai B'rith, which I have acquired addresses of old friends that I had forgotten all about, and I loved the job. The money wasn't so great, but I have continued my father's tradition of communal service. Now that I have retired, I still go to the office and I help out and do various things as a volunteer. I'm an officer with a Hadassah group and with ORT, and I am a member of the Chevra Kadisha Burial Society of my synagogue, which I am following my father in that tradition as well. I have acquired all of my father's sense of *tsedaka* in every measure, I think.

RH: And he had a very great sense, because I do remember him. That's wonderful.

BL: Yes, and I feel wonderful wherever I go and I say I'm Mr. Friend's daughter, everybody says . . .

RH: Their faces light up.

BL: They do. And he named me after Lord [Arthur] Balfour, because he was a great Zionist, my father was. When Lord Arthur Balfour, who was the British Prime Minister at the time, promised Palestine to the Jews, my father thought, "Oh, that's a lovely thing," and I was born about that time, or some years later, and my father put an A to feminize the name. I think he also thought that by naming me Balfoura that the British government would give him British citizenship, which of course was not . . .

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RH: It didn't help him.

BL: No, it did not happen that way. But at the time in China, British citizenship was mostly highly prized. The American citizenship was no big deal while we were little. The British were on top of it all, I would say, in Shanghai.

RH: But after the war . . .

BL: After the war it was a different story, and American citizenship was most prized. My children, who were born here, of course, in Georgia, they smile whenever they watch me pledge the flag, because I just puddle up. See, I just even puddle up just thinking about it. I'm just so proud to be American and I'll just scratch anybody's eyes out who says anything derogatory about America.

RH: Isn't it a wonderful country? But I want to add one little thing, and I hope you don't mind my adding it to your tape. This country here, Canada, is almost as great. It's certainly great, it really is, perhaps because Canada gave me asylum when I had to leave and I came here. And it's that same feeling. Probably the two of them are the greatest countries in the world. When I say, "God bless America . . ." there's a part of me that also wants to say, "God bless Canada." Silly, but as you can see, my eyes are going like yours. I think it's time we stopped here. Do you have anything you want to add?

BL: No, I'm just real happy.

(End of Side A) *Note by RH: The following was taped later.*

RH: Who was the director of the H.I.A.S.?

BL: It was Mischa Beerman, who was the director of H.I.A.S. in Shanghai, and my father Jacob Friend would go to his office, type the letters in English for him, and help him find relatives of newly arrived Jews from Europe. At that time, the office consisted of a tiny room, a couple of desks or tables, and floors piled high with boxes of correspondence. Now Mr. Beerman's niece in Atlanta and I are both officers in our local Hadassah chapter. It is really a very small world.

I also have in my cedar chest from China my kindergarten school uniform, a navy wool tunic made of the finest English soft wool. We used to buy the material at Whiteaway, Laidlaw, an English department store on our

famous Nanking Road. The one item I always longed for, but which we couldn't afford, was a maroon blazer with our school emblem on the pocket. This was worn by the girls in the upper forms, or classes, and was something I bought for myself as soon as I came to the States and could finally afford to buy for myself the long-dreamed about red blazer.

Our Public School for Girls was located on Yu Yuen Road and separated from the boys' school next door by a bamboo fence. Our teachers were all English women, while the boys were taught by English men. I remember asking our headmistress, a maiden lady, if we could have a dance for our graduation, and she said, "Of course, dear." Then I asked her if she'd prefer to invite the graduating boys next door through their headmaster, and she recoiled in horror, "Good heavens, no! We can't have any boys at the dance!" Since we didn't want to dance with other girls, we politely declined and then enjoyed some private parties with lots of boys, lots of good food and a lot of games like "Spin the Bottle."

We lived up the street, the same street as the school was on, which was part of the International Settlement and governed by the Shanghai Municipal Council. There was also the French Concession, governed, I suppose, by the French government. There were parts of town that were exclusively Chinese, like Hungjao and Chapei. The Shanghai police force was run by the British. The officers were mainly Englishmen, but the mounted police were Indians, mostly Sikhs, in their multi-colored turbans and elegant uniforms, mounted on magnificent horses. I recall my father hoisting me on his shoulders when I was a child to watch them on their very colorful parades. There was also a multi-national volunteer force, amongst which was the Shanghai Jewish Corps of our fine young Jewish men.

When I was very young we lived in Wayside, just a block away from our Ohel Moishe Synagogue and Rabbi Ashkenazi and his family, who also lived a few doors from us. Rabbi Ashkenazi signed my birth certificate that I have in my possession now, and his daughters Esther and Manya and I grew up together. They both live in the New York area now and we still keep in touch.

I attended the public school in Wayside, then the Public & Thomas Hanbury School [PTH] on Boone Road, also in the Hongkew or Wayside area, and finally to the Public School for Girls on Yu Yuen Road when we moved to the Western District. It must be noted that all these so-called public schools were actually private schools and we paid school fees. Somehow the \$18 per month or quarter amount sticks in my mind. These were run by the Shanghai Municipal Council, but the curriculum was on the lines of the British school system.

We were quite poor and Papa worked as a clerk in the local Jewish communal association. We were so destitute, actually, that I did not have even an extra dress besides my school uniform. One of the lovely ladies in Shanghai, Mrs. Maisie Abraham, who is Mrs. Ruby Abraham, gave some material to my mother to have a dress made for me. There was nothing ready-made in stores in those days, and we had to have a tailor come and make up that dress for me. I remember it was very pretty. It was a piece of pink material and we were very grateful to Mrs. Abraham for giving us that lovely piece of material that I had my first pretty dress made from.

I was also a Brownie, and then I joined the Girl Guides, which is the actual origins of the Boy and Girl Scout movements in America. Later, when I came to the States and I was married and had children, I became a Girl Scout leader when my daughter was a Girl Scout in Hawkinsville, Georgia, where we lived. Now even my granddaughter Erika is a Brownie in Athens, Georgia, where she lives with my daughter, her husband, and the rest of the family.

In spite of our very modest lifestyle back in Shanghai, we always had a maid servant. And like all other children, I loved my amah, who lived with us. But she used to take me visiting to her home, which was a few miles away, and we'd walk over there, and where I'd enjoy eating with her Chinese food, eating with her husband and children. Amah would let me play with her children in her husband's barbershop, which was down below, and would show me and my fluent Shanghai dialect off to her friends and their barbershop customers.

I was about twelve or thirteen when there was a typhoid fever epidemic, and I was fortunate to be hospitalized at our Jewish Polyclinic in the French Concession, or French Town as we called it, which was run by our local B'nai B'rith and staffed by excellent Jewish doctors and nurses. A Chinese barber came in and shaved my head with a straight razor because all my hair was falling out anyway. The all-liquid diet and high fever kept me abed for weeks, and when it was over I had to learn to walk all over again, I was that weak. Slowly my hair grew back, and I have photos of me with a scarf over my head and thin and pale as a ghost. How I wish I could have worn a wig, but a big woolen scarf was all that was available for a bald-headed teenager. It was a sad time for me, and a year later a bout with paratyphoid, which was less serious but another shaving of the head. Some years later, malaria, then pneumonia, and a year's stay in a sanitarium in Hungjao since my parents were so afraid I'd contract tuberculosis in my weakened state.

Yet, today at sixty-seven I'm in good health, thank God, albeit a little overweight and have overcome a mastectomy seventeen years ago and

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everything is just fine. I'm grateful for a wonderful life here with my husband Nate Levine and my children are in the general Atlanta area and Nate's children and grandchildren are likewise close-by to us.

(tape is turned off)

RH: This is Rose Horowitz. Today is August 28, [1992] Los Angeles, in my own home where I have just received Balfoura Levine's addition to the tape. There was a gap on the first side of the tape, side A, where we had taped our session in Vancouver, B.C. When this was discovered, I sent a copy of the tape, this very one, to Balfoura in Atlanta and asked her to please tape on the other side those items that were omitted, plus whatever else she could remember or wish to add, and I'm very grateful she did just that and returned this tape to me. Now the finalized tape will be turned in to both Cal State Fullerton's Oral History library and the HUC Skirball Project Americana Oral Histories. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW