

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

LEO AWIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eva Abraham

Date: October 19, 1991

© 2000

Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

LEO AWIN [1-1-1]

LA - Leo Awin [interviewee]
EA - Eva Abraham [interviewer]
Date: October 19, 1991

Tape one, side one:

EA: This is the 19th of October, in Philadelphia. I'm sitting here with Mr. Leo Alwin, Awin.

LA: Yeah.

EA: And I would like to hear something about yourself.

LA: What would you like to hear?

EA: I would like to hear first of all, you were born in Austria?

LA: Vienna. Yes.

EA: In Vienna. May I, is it too personal a question to ask when?

LA: When? 1919.

EA: 1919. And you were there at the time of the *Anschluss*?

LA: *Anschluss*, yes.

EA: And, could you tell me something about your family, at that time?

LA: Well, we were well-established in Vienna. We were not millionaires-- in case some people pretend, you know, they had fortunes hidden away there before, but, just regular working people. We made a comfortable living. I learned my trade there.

EA: Oh you did.

LA: I was a jeweler.

EA: You already had your...

LA: I learned my trade and I had my journeyman's tests there, so when I left Europe I was already well-established in the trade.

EA: And your...

LA: In fact, I grew up in the jewelry business. My uncle had a jewelry workshop in our place where we lived, and I grew up over the years in all this family. So I was very much familiar with the trade.

EA: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

LA: I have a sister. She lives in the States now, in St. Louis.

EA: She's older or younger?

LA: She's ten years younger.

EA: So she was born in...

LA: She has her own family and she was...

EA: 1929.

LA: So 1929, 1930 actually she was born, yes.

EA: In what *Bezirk* did you live? In...

LA: In, what, what...

EA: What area...

LA: What area?

EA: In Vienna.

LA: Central. First District.

EA: First District, yeah.

LA: You know, in Vienna, yeah.

EA: And...

LA: First district, it was...

EA: So you had all your schooling...

LA: All my schooling and everything in Vienna. Basic school, middle school, and trade school. Everything in there.

EA: What do you remember about the *Anschluss* time?

LA: Well, it was, really more, actually it came as a shock more or less, because we knew it was coming sooner or later, but we didn't know it will come to that extent, you know. That time was the Christian Social Democra--, Christian Democratic Party, you know, under Dollfuss regime, you know? And protesting, and the police had prepared the Swastika armbands in their pocket, and twelve o'clock at midnight, you know, they changed from one side to the other, you know, put on the armbands and they were all of a sudden National Socialists. You know that was the way it became, not gradually, you know? A big...

EA: In your family, were you religious at all? Were you Zionistically oriented? What was the religious orientation?

LA: We were not Zionist, and we, but we were traditional...

EA: You were traditional Jews.

LA: Traditional. We kept the holidays. We kept all our religious needs, you know, including observing, you know, the *Yahrzeit*¹, and all this Jewish edu-...

EA: Did you belong to synagogue?

LA: We did not belong to synagogue. It was not required in Europe, you know, like here, to belong to a synagogue for social and so on, you know?

EA: So what you're saying is your mother had a Jewish home.

LA: We had a kosher home in Vienna.

EA: A kosher even!

LA: Yes. It was kosher, you know. We even tried to keep it up to a certain extent in China, you know, as far as possible, but it was not always 100% in China, you know.

EA: What was your mother's name?

¹*Yahrzeit* - anniversary of a death.

LA: Helene.

EA: Helene. And, tell me something. She, what is her maiden name?

LA: Schneider.

EA: Where does she come from?

LA: She came from Romania. She, actually that was all Austrian-Hungarian, this was actually Austria altogether. This was Austrian-Hungarian monarchy, you know, and it just, she was born, you know, in Romania. It was still Austria at that time, but today it's Romania.

EA: And your father?

LA: My father was also from, now it's Poland. But that time it was also Austria, that was part of Poland, you know, Lemberg that was Austrian occupied, [unclear] Austrian Franz Josef's that came after the First, after the World War, First World War, you know? It...

EA: And his name was?

LA: Ignatz.

EA: Ignatz.

LA: Yeah.

EA: So there were just the four of you living together as a family...

LA: Yeah.

EA: Or did you have grandparents also?

LA: Oh yeah, they were all in Vienna. Aunts and grandparents. There was a big family in Vienna, you know? Cousins and second cousins, on the father's side, the mother's side, aunts, grandparents, you know? I'm sure there were at least, oh well, over 100 people, you know, maybe more, I don't know they were there...

EA: Relatives.

LA: Yeah, relatives, you know?

EA: So the *Anschluss*, at the time of the *Anschluss*...

LA: They were all there. They all lived there happily, you know.

EA: So what preparations were made...?

LA: Well...

EA: For [unclear]?

LA: Preparations were made at the begin, nothing, you see in '38, you know, everybody hoped it would be over in a few weeks, a few months. Even so we know that it, in Germany it went on since '33, but people don't, didn't want to believe that things will happen, you know? We thought it will be just like any political things, you will get out of view.

EA: And then?

LA: And then, naturally, things became gradually progressive for us, with the height of the, the 10th of November, the Crystal Night, you know. That was actually the signal that he meant business. Up till that time, that was about

almost from March till November, you know, we were still, you know, hoping things will change. Some people left, you know. They were afraid of it, mostly people with, they had a lot to lose, you know, financially or so. They could still leave Europe, you know, I mean, Austria, Germany, you could take a certain amount of personal possessions along, you know? So those people, they, also they were politically, you know, involved, so they naturally made sure they get out of it. But we had nothing to fear. We were just regular working people. We figured, "Well, what can happen to us? Nothing.?" So, but things turned out to a different way of thinking from. So, 10th of November was the day we should warned that things got worse, you know, since they shipped people off to concentration camps and start burning the synagogues, which were already well-established, and everybody knows about what happened. So our family, gradually we discussed what to do next. All kinds of plans came up, and ideas, you know? Nothing worked, because we had no relatives in the States to send us Affidavits and things like that, and so finally my uncle, you know, got friendly with the boss of Lloyd Triestino. It's the Italian shipping line, the Far Eastern shipping line. And he offered his help for free in his office.

EA: How do you spell that? Delloyd? Like D-?

LA: Lloyd, not D, L-L-O-Y-D.

EA: L-L-O-Y-D.

LA: Lloyd Triestino. That's a Italian shipping line.

EA: Triestino?

LA: Triestino, like Triest.

EA: Oh, Triest.

LA: Yeah, Triestino. [pause] Still running, the machine?

EA: Yeah.

LA: Yeah.

EA: And then he...

LA: He offered his service for nothing in order to get acquainted, you know, to get frien-, so he called, those who were people who sold bookings, you know, to the Far East. It was naturally very hard to get bookings, since it became known that it was the only place to try to get out of Europe, you know? So finally he got around and he acquired certain amount of tickets for us, against payment, naturally. And so...

EA: How many tickets did he manage to get?

LA: Well, we got for four, six, about ten or twelve tickets he got gradually, you know, not at once. It was part of my aunt, the other brother aunt they had to leave a month later, you know? Europe. Anyway, we acquired about that amount of tickets, you know.

EA: Was there any option for places?

LA: No. No. We just got tickets, you know, and we had to leave. That's all. I mean, what option you...

EA: I mean, was there another country that you could go to?

LA: No other country, no, because we had no possibility. Roosevelt was buttoned up to the neck. Nobody wanted Jews, and nobody wanted refugees, including our country where we, I am living now, Canada, was buttoned up, you know, didn't want to know anything about European Jewish refugees.

EA: So Shanghai was the only...

LA: China, but the only place you could leave there without even, you didn't need even a passport, you know, what Shanghai was concerned. But you had to, needed a passport to leave Europe, you know? But in Shanghai we arrived. The main thing was for them inoculation papers. You have to be inoculated against tropical disease-- cholera, typhoid, and so on, you know?

EA: You had those in Vienna?

LA: These we had in Vienna. We got another shot on the boat, before we embarked. That was the main required. They didn't want to bring in, people should come in with diseases. There were plenty of them in there.

EA: So you had typhoid? And...

LA: A combination, combination shots. Yeah.

EA: Oh the three, yeah, okay.

LA: Typhoid, paratyphoid, [unclear], you know, we had combination shots. So that was the requirement, you know, to go to Shanghai, and naturally besides having the...

EA: The tickets.

LA: Transportation, yeah, yeah.

EA: Were they very expensive?

LA: They were pretty expensive that time, but they were standard price. I mean anybody who had that amount, I can't remember anymore how much it was, equivalent to approximately three or four hundred American dollars per person. I can't exact any more. It was paid in Austrian, actually in German, marks. So I don't know at, that time it was approximately four American dollars to yeah, ten marks to four American dollars. Yeah, ten marks.

EA: So you went how? What was your route?

LA: My route was, our route was from Vienna, train, to Genoa, Italy.

EA: And then?

LA: And then by boat, twenty-one days by boat to China, through the Suez Canal and part of Asia, you know, Port Said, Singapore, Manila, Hong Kong, and then Shanghai.

EA: Twenty-one days?

LA: Yeah.

EA: Better than from Naples, it took 31.

LA: Right. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

EA: [unclear] taken 31 [unclear] talk about.

LA: Naples? 21 and 28, yes, it depends on what boat you had. Some of them, you know, we were lucky we got a better boat, *Victoria*, you know, it was one of the better ships at the Italian steamship line, you know? Then there were slower boats and there were freighters, you know, that went there, you know. They took longer naturally. They stopped in different ports and so on, you know? But our boat went more or less, 21 days there.

EA: Did you know any other people on the boat? On...

LA: On the boat? We met people, you know, they were, the boat...

EA: But none of your neighbors, or...

LA: No, no, no neighbors, just immediate family, you know, and [unclear]...

EA: What happened to your business in Vienna before you emigrated?

LA: Well, I, I didn't have my own business. I was employed, you know...

EA: I see.

LA: By my boss, you know, I was just journeyman, you know. I wasn't ready to become a master spe-, certificate, you know...

EA: What about your uncle?

LA: My uncle, he left illegally, you know, to Belgium in 1938 already, middle of '38, cause his wife was chased by the Gestapo. She was given 24 hours to leave Austria. So his only choice was, since he didn't have anywhere else to go, to go illegally via Aachen, you know, like hundreds and hundreds of other people. It cost him some money. I don't know how much, but with a briefcase in the hand, they went over the border, and they established in Brussels. So that was the, I was supposed naturally to take over his business eventually, you know, over the years, but it never came to it.

EA: Did he stay in Belgium?

LA: He stayed in Belgium. At that time, I mailed him afterwards, it was allowed to send 20 kilo parcels after a few months later to, out of the country. That time I sent him tools, and whatever I could send officially, with 20 kilo parcels to Belgium, you know. He received all of them. And with that he could establish himself over there, you know. He had tools to work with, and money I couldn't send him any more, because first of all we didn't have enou-, anything to spare, but at least he had some, and I liquidated his work shop, you know? Then I took whatever tools or whatever I had along to China, you know? This was allowed, personal belongings and tools at that time were still allowed to be taken.

EA: You could take...

LA: Yeah. We could take tools along. Even people they left earlier

between '38 and '39 they could even take furnitures and things to China, you know?

EA: So you had lifts?

LA: I didn't have lifts, no. We didn't bother taking furnitures. We just took personal belongings, beddings, and, you know, tow-, household, you know...

EA: Right.

LA: Dishes and whatever we could carry, you know. That was about we had, the suitcases, you know? We had about ten or twelve suitcases. I mean, there was no...

EA: There was no limit.

LA: There was no limit as long as they were checked by the customs, you know. And at that time, when we left, it was relatively easy to go through customs there, because they were still the old Austrian customs inspectors, you see, they didn't like the German style either, yeah. So they were very much against what was going on, you know, but they couldn't show it, because they had to keep going. It was their living.

EA: [unclear].

LA: Because I remember on the, on the train station where I had to put, bring all this goods to be shipped out, you know, I had to bring there for customs control, you know. So when I was finished, it took five minutes, you know, to go all through. So he asked me, "Do you have any, before I seal the envelo-, the crates, do you have anything to put in additional?? What the guy didn't-- you know, he was, stood there, they waiting for it. So for a few dollars, you know, you gave him, there for a few minutes he turned his head, you know? I didn't have anything of value to put in, because, as I said before, we were not rich people, but we managed to get together an amount of money to leave Europe because I had worked illegally there for about a year.

EA: So we haven't arrived in Shanghai yet.

LA: No, no, no, from Vienna, I mean. In Vienna, I worked illegally in Vienna, you know, as a jeweler, you know.

EA: Why illegally?

LA: Because as a Jew you couldn't work officially any more. You had to give back the...

EA: From '38 to '39.

LA: Yeah. Yeah.

EA: Oh. Okay.

LA: Yeah. You had to give back the concession papers, you know, the *Konzession* they called it, there is a licenses, business licenses. My father had to gi-, return it, you know, so he couldn't work, but I could work, you know, in off hours, you know. I did pieces to take along for people. I was melting down, you know, jewelry and gold things, so people could take along since money was not allowed

to take out. So people went to jewelry, personal jewelry you could take out up to that time, you know. So rings, wedding rings, chains and things like that we could take along, you know. No, you give yourself a *Aitza*² [laughs] what we called it, you know? So that was still allowed at that time, you know.

EA: I didn't realize that the jewelry was allowed to be taken.

LA: Not in quantities, but they did, they didn't, later on it got worse, you know, after that time, after, after the outbreak of the, when Poland was occupied from Germany then you couldn't leave any more, you know? It was outbreak of the World War II, you know? And Germany started occupying Poland and all the other places, you know. Then it got progressively worse. But up to that time, you know, we left in May, '39, and in September the War started, you know. So up to September you could still take, you know, and then they couldn't go you out by boat any more.

EA: I know, so you, in, you left in May, '39.

LA: Yeah.

EA: [unclear].

LA: Yeah.

EA: And then 21 days later you arrived...

LA: We arrived...

EA: In Shanghai.

LA: In Shanghai.

EA: Tell me about your arrival in Shanghai.

LA: Well, it's not very much to say, unless you want to make a big story out of it. We arrived there, you know, and they embarked there, the American Joint³ had some people there waiting for us, you know, because we didn't know where to go and what to do. So they put us in schools, you know, in HongKew, that was a district of Shanghai.

EA: In schools?

LA: In empty schools, in...

EA: Oh, oh...

LA: Empty schools, they were the classrooms, they put up beds, you know, bunk beds, you know, metal ones like army, you know, but bunk beds with straw sacks.

EA: And families [unclear]?

LA: And families, every, in the begin-, everything together, you know? Eventually then they sorted out, you know, the kids got their own room, you know. The adults had their privacy, and then [unclear]...

EA: So you were twenty; you were considered an adult...

²*Aitza* - good advice, ruse.

³Joint - American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

LA: I was considered an adult, but I still lived with the family for a while, a couple of, three weeks, you know, until things got sorted out. Because there were hundreds of people, you know. They had to be looked after, you know. So...

EA: Was the Joint only responsible, or do you know of any other agencies?

LA: Well, there's, there were local philanthropists, you know: Sassoon, Ellis Chaim, Hardoon⁴, you know, those are people from the, from the far eastern Jewish society, some of them were Hong Kong, and, I believe, one of them came from Iraqi Jews, you know? They had one of the families, you know, distributed. Kadoorie, you know, he was also one of the, he had the schooling system mostly was, he fancied the schooling system so he, so these people contributed also, you know...

EA: Financially, and also...

LA: Financially also.

EA: As person power.

LA: Financially and, for both, you know, because we were...

EA: Do you remember any of them?

LA: I saw them, you see, I couldn't talk to them because I was just small, you know?

EA: Yeah, sure.

LA: But they looked after the Committee there, you know, and the people, we got organized, you know. And then gradually the population of Jewish immigrant, you see, grows, you know, up to twenty, over 20,000 people. And they have to be fed, sheltered, you know, and it was mostly, you know, money came from America and from those people, you know? There were very few, you know, that will talk about these things today, you know, because they took most of these things for granted, you know?

EA: Have you any idea of what proportion was from local funding or, has that [unclear]?

LA: None local, there should be...

EA: No, I just want...

LA: There should be records, but I have no idea what it is, you know. There will be maybe you know some organization that, maybe the American Joint might have some information there, you know?

EA: After that, Mr. Awin, you were fed and housed and...

LA: Yeah.

EA: In that...

LA: Yeah, for a while, you know.

⁴Sassoon, Ellis Chaim, Hardoon - all members of Sephardi community of Shanghai, well established merchants and philanthropists.

EA: By the Joint.

LA: Naturally, people with occupations like me, they were easier to find and work, you know. It was a strange country. We didn't speak Chinese. We didn't, but the business language was English there, since we learned it in the International Settlement of China, of Shanghai. And HongKew was actually attached, you know, to the International Settlement, what at that time occupied the Japanese army, that the leftovers from the Japanese-Chinese war in 1935, '36, you know, so they...

EA: By the Chinese army?

LA: By the Ja-, no, Japanese army. China didn't have an army then. It was oc--, Shanghai was occupied by Japan at that time, you know? Only the international settlement they couldn't touch, because that was occupied by British, American, there, the French concession there, Italian, and some Germans were there, too, you know? But the...

EA: I want to ask you about the Germans.

LA: Yes, but there were Germans. There was a, quite a big German...group there, you know, the...

EA: What kind of German?

LA: Those were, actually I couldn't say that they were National Socialists, you know, but they were influenced through the German Consulate, you know? Most of them, they, they were not Nazis, you see.

EA: Not Nazis.

LA: Not Nazis. There were some of them, you know, I know. I happened to know some of them eventually, you know? But businesswise they tried to conduct themselves straight, you know, not show anything that they are, they were anti-Jewish or antisemitic, you know? Afterwards...

EA: You personally had no...

LA: I personally had nothing to do with the Germans there, the German population, the non-Jewish population.

EA: Okay. How about the French or the British?

LA: French, British, well, they were nice. You see, they were all polite, you know. They helped as much as they could, you know. But then it was also short-lived, because then the, the war, the Pacific war started, you know? So we had to get ready for, you know, the other eventualities.

EA: How did you get a job? With the Chinese...

LA: Well...

EA: Or...

LA: No, no, no, I couldn't speak Chinese. I couldn't-- my first job was two days after arrival in Shanghai. I just took off and went to a jewelry store on the main street, you know, a ninety-year-old that happened to be a Jewish, Russian Jewish jeweler, you know. He was there from the First Revolution, you know,

actually a Revolution there in 1918, you know, White Russia, you know. So he lived there for about 20 years before that. So anyway I went there and I talked to him, you know, to ask him if he has some work he can give, help me out, see I just arrived here and I need some work. So he offered me to come to his workshop and see what I can do for him, you know? The conversation went on in Yiddish, you know, because I couldn't speak any Russian, and my English was not as well as it should be at that time. So finally we arrived in Jewish, you know, Yiddish. So, he was quite good. So he brought me over to his shop. And there were four Chinese guys working there under very primitive situations there. I was not used to seeing things like that. The work benches, I did, matter of fact, I didn't have any tools available that time, because they were all packed up still. But he told me he has enough tools there I should come and work there. So I says, "Okay, fine. Let's see.? So, I came there. The Chinese were skeptical about me, what I can do as a foreigner. Now here's a newcomer, you know, the *Nakoni* you know, comes there, for...

EA: What is *Nakoni*?

LA: *Nakoni* means "European.? *Nakoni*. That is a foreigner.

EA: N-A-...

LA: Foreigner. Foreigner.

EA: K-O-M-I?

LA: N-I.

EA: N-I.

LA: Yeah, that means a foreigner, you know? Anybody who's not Chinese is a *Nakoni*, you know?

EA: Uh huh.

LA: And, the European. Then the Americans are *Makonis*, you know? So they see...

EA: M-A-K-O-N-I...

LA: Yeah [unclear] the...

EA: Is the American.

LA: Yeah, so the, every nationality had their own expression. So, but generally there...

EA: Anything for Jew?

LA: Eh, Jews? Yeah, *Yutani*. *Yutani* is a Jew, but they didn't know anything about, you know? They were not well-educated to them to make a distinction between a Jew and another Jew. For them it was either a foreigner—a white one—or a Chinese, you know? Same thing it happened afterwards with Germ-, Japan. They couldn't distinguish after a few years later, you know, after the Germans did their homework with the Japanese. They had to educate them, who is who and what's what, and so, but otherwise we were treated, we were treated as foreigners and, politely, you know, so they were not anything against, so. So,

anyway, to go back to the workshop idea there. It was very primitive, as I said before. If somebody's familiar with the jewelry trade, I don't know it's maybe easier to understand, but anyway they had no practical tools, wire mill, that is, a mill where you're rolling your gold and things like, see, there was none existent, you know. Their material was hammered out with hammer and plier, you know. They hammered out the material until it stretches and forms. There was no casting equipment and smelting equipment available like, they worked very primitive and their tools were pliers, they were shaking, you know, between these two handles and so on, you know. The torches were leaking and the gas came out, you know. Besides, they were spitting on the floor and cleaning their noses, you see, in front of, on the floor, you know? Very un-aesthetic and unhygienic, you know? I was not acquainted to those things, and I was not familiar to those things. And then, naturally, after a week time like I told him, "You see, I cannot work under those things, circumstances, you know. And, I have to look for something else, because it's, it's not for me. It's beyond my--? So, and he tried to talk me in. He said, "*Mitcheh dich*." You know, that means, try to force yourself. It will be better you will get used, and so forth. I couldn't. So I stood another day. And then gradually, after a couple of weeks, you see, we found, and I found another occupation with a, one of our Jewish emigration, of the refugees in Shanghai. He was there a few months longer already. He left earlier, so he had a little better idea what's what. So he told me I should come and help him out. He told me he can't pay me a lot, because he can't make a lot of money. But I knew him from Vienna too, because he was a former employee of my uncle, you know, the jeweler, you know, and he went ahead of it. So naturally he was interested to help me out in a way, you know. So...

EA: Who were your customers?

LA: Customers? In the beginning we tried to make our pieces and tried to sell it to the Chinese, to storekeepers in the city, you know? They knew very well that we had to sell cheap because we are newcomers-

Tape one, side two:

LA: [unclear]

EA: Once you mentioned something and we're going back for a minute on side two, on tape one, with Mr. Leo Alwin, Awin. I always put, give you an extra "l".

LA: Don't worry.

EA: Eh, you mentioned something that, before you left Austria, because you were already in your, more, adolescence, let's put it that way, and you were involved with the *Kultusgemeinde*.

LA: Yeah.

EA: Could you tell me something about that, what that was...

LA: Well...

EA: And what were you involved?

LA: I wasn't too much involved. I was just a [unclear] orderly there, you know, to keep order, you know. People have to stay hours and hours in line to get their immigration papers ready, you know. And people got unruly at times, you know, because they got impatient, you know. And at that time the building was already occupied by the S.S., you know.

EA: You're talking, do you have the dates?

LA: The date was after '30, the end of '38, beginning of '39.

EA: Oh, after *Kristallnacht*, then.

LA: After the Crystal Night, yes.

EA: Okay.

LA: People returned gradually after some of them they were released from concentration camps, in a small manner that time in Dachau and so on, with the promise they had to leave Vienna within a short time, a week or two-, or two weeks at the most, you know. So they had to produce travelling papers somewhere. So they came to the *Kultusgemeinde* because they were in charge of these, helping people finishing up the immigration papers, you know, passports and they have also, you know, the *Steuerun be den klichkeit* card. That's hard to translate.

EA: Oh, taxes.

LA: Huh?

EA: Your taxes.

LA: Tax, yeah, tax papers, you know that they are don't owe any money, you know, to the taxes. That's was it, but there was a, it was a typical German word, you know? The *Steuerunbedenklichkeit*, you know? So anyways, their, the, we helped them there, and people took, had to stay there hours and hours in line, and we had to keep them more or less in order, better we were than the S.S. police was standing there, you know. Many times people came there from these concentration

camps excited, and they wanted to get out, and they had no patience to stay there in line. It's understandable, you know. We had to talk to them, and we had to make him a, help him out, you know, in any way we could, you know, to help him filling out the hundreds of forms that were required just to make people uncomfortable. Some of the forms had no value whatsoever. They were just made there to, to do there, you know, to. So, we got the group of people, we were called, you know, orders, you know, and so we were, we got a identification papers so they were protected for any, so we couldn't be sent away or any. We picked up on the street, you know; it was very common that people on the street were picked up. "Are you a Jew,? you know? They should say, "Yes.? "Come with us," you know. And then either you could clear your name somehow, you know, or they sent you away for a few days, or maybe for good or for months, you know, but if you can show this paper that you were in the immigration department, you have a good chance...

EA: So you did it for protection.

LA: For protection. I had no other, so, but anyway, it was hard to get in there, too, but then I was protected. Even so on the...

EA: At the same time as you were working for your tickets to go to Shanghai, or...

LA: Yeah, well, this was on the...

EA: Were you trying other places too?

LA: These were, no, I didn't work anywhere else. In the day time I worked in the...

EA: Jeweler.

LA: With the jewelry business, and then in the afternoon, you know, and evenings I spent there as *Ordner*⁵. Then later on things got more tougher, you know, so I had to forget about the jewelry business, because it was too risky, you know; because you had neighbors, they could hear you banging and things that. So I concentrated full time as a orderly there in the...

EA: Did you apply to any other country other than tickets for Shanghai, [unclear]?

LA: No there was nothing else available at that time.

EA: Nothing else available.

LA: No, people were standing in different consulates, consulates, you know, hours and hours, and came back with zero results, you know, and wasting their time. So finally word got along, you know, that Shanghai was the only place--no visa requirement, and no formalitie--just a valid passport, and inoculation papers, you know, plus, naturally, transportation. So...

EA: Well, I, there, so that was where we really were in Shanghai

⁵*Ordner* - monitor.

already...

LA: Yeah.

EA: But I felt that to be important.

LA: Yeah.

EA: Let's go back to Shanghai now. You were with your broth-, eh, your sister and your parents.

LA: Whole family, yeah.

EA: All the time.

LA: Yeah.

EA: And you were working in your profession.

LA: In my profession, yes.

EA: And, how was the social life? How was the religious life? How was the community life? Could you talk a little about that?

LA: Well, community life was pretty good in a way, you know, because people stuck together, you know. They had no other way of doing it, and we tried naturally to keep, there were groups in existence, cultural groups, you know. They had theater performances to try to organize from after all, in the 20,000 people there were talents there, you know, big, well-known talents in Europe. But without any financial means or anything in China, you know, because most people had to leave there, you know, without any bank accounts or things to transfer, you know, whatever they could put in their pocket, you know. Officially you could only take out ten dollars, ten marks. It was equivalent to four American dollars per person? So what can you do first with four American dollars? Nothing. So that was pocket money what you could get when you leave Europe. Some people were fortunate. I'd like to mention especially people from Germany. They got the financial help from the HICEM⁶.

EA: The who?

LA: HICEM. HIAS. This was a HIAS. The, I mea-,

EA: Spell that for me.

LA: H-I-C-E-M, you know. That was the ac-, affiliated with the HIAS in they got, they got checks, you know, up to \$400 American dollars per person.

EA: Why should the Germans get it and not anybody else?

LA: They were, I couldn't answer that question why. But the fact was people came there. If there's a family of four or six people, they got up to \$400 a person, you see. That was known when we arrived in Shanghai, you know. Some people all of a sudden had money, you know, available. They could open up a little store. They could open up a little business. But we from Austria couldn't do because it was not known. It was not widely spread, you know.

⁶HICEM - Paris based (later Lisbon), central organization for several organizations and groups involved with Jewish immigration, including HIAS.

EA: Did you meet any Poles at all? Eh, either were...

LA: Poles? They came afterwards via Siberia. There were some Poles came after the occupying, after the occupation of Poland from Germany. Polish people, you know, they retreated through Russia, you know, and came with the trans-Siberian train to, over Japan, you know, down to Shanghai. Matter of fact I worked with one of them, you know. He came from Lodz, and was a jeweler, too. But he came in many years later. He came about 1943 or '42 or something like, '43 I think he came to Shanghai, with a group of Polish refugees. But most people that knew about Shanghai was Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. That was known that we could go to Shanghai without any, there was a very big Czech community there, and they kept as much as they could by them selves. They had their own club house, and they wanted to be, you know, by their own. But they still lived in the same district, and they were same, same, Jews as anybody else, just their nationality they tried to keep a little bit more to themselves.

EA: How about the Austrians and the Germans? How did *they* get along?

LA: Austrians? Germans? They got along very good, you know; naturally they were always how would you say, one thinks the translations, you know, what was one word in German didn't sound very good to an Austrian, you know, besides between *Knödel und Klösse*⁷, you know, and things like that.

EA: *Schrank und Kasten*⁸?

LA: *Schrank und Kasten*. There was even one person down there he tried even to make a German-Austrian dictionary, you know.

EA: [laughs]

LA: Put it together [laughs] too.

EA: But on the whole there was cooperation?

LA: There was cooperation. There was no any, well, naturally, you know, individual people didn't like that person, their expressions, you know, the way, you know, but our, all, you know, and it was a good relationship, you know. Because all were in one boat. We were all Jews, and we were all refugees. They were bo-, all kicked out from Germany, you know. So there was not too much we could do, you know, because after all you're s-, but life was good, and in a way, you know, culturalwise, you know. It was tough for the performers. It was tough for people, you know, but they tried to bring opera, operettas, like music, you know, musicals over the years, you know. We had a nice...

EA: Did you have any Chinese attendees at all, or was it totally a closed shop?

LA: The...

⁷*Knödel, Klösse* both meaning dumplings.

⁸*Schrank, Kasten* - cupboard, chest, cabinet: differing German and Austrian words for same object.

EA: Or Japanese.

LA: The Japanese came to the performances during the war, when we were, had the district, or the ghetto we called it, you know, the district. We performed some light operas there, you know, as I said, *The Fledermaus* or *Merry Widow* and all those things, all in German, you know. And they came out of interest, you know. They liked it. Some of them were very musical and they wanted to know what's all about. Even from the non-Jewish German community they came, because the, it was, something like that never happened before in China, that they could hear a German operetta, you know, and play it in Shanghai, you know. So they were very, they came there with tuxedos even? You know, they came there from the, from the French and the International Settlement they came down there to watch these performances, you know? So it was quite rewarding for the workers to, there, you know, there were quite a few musicians there. And it was worth...

EA: Then, when the Japanese were at war, did you notice any changes then, I mean with, so American was, of course, the enemy. Italy was the ally. The, Germany was the ally.

LA: The, yeah, you mean the Axis, yeah, German, Austrian...

EA: Yeah.

LA: The German, Japanese Axis, you see they called it, yeah.

EA: Did you notice any kind of change...

LA: Well...

EA: That you remember?

LA: I remember, you see, well the day of Pearl Harbor, you know.

EA: Okay.

LA: I happened to be in the Japanese district, you know, from Shanghai, you know. That was, and it, just shopping for material or for things like, you know, what I need for work. I didn't know what was going on. In the middle of it, Japanese army trucks drove up, you know, and then blocked off the streets, you know, with barbed wire and with machine guns. Nobody knew what it was all about, you know. So, I made my way back. That didn't bother me as a foreigner, you know. They looked at me but they didn't interfere with me, and when I came back home I heard on the radio what was going on, you know, that was the Pearl Harbor, you know, the, anybody's probably familiar what happened in Pearl Harbor, you know. So, and that, that, yeah...

EA: How about the Germans, the German Germans...

LA: Yeah.

EA: Who were really then allies...

LA: Yeah.

EA: Of the Japanese? In a way, so were the Jews, except that the...

LA: Yeah.

EA: Nazis hated the Jews.

LA: Right. Right.

EA: It, to me, I'm just trying to visualize...

LA: Oh, the German Germans at that time, they were not that many there that they could influence, you know, the population, you see.

EA: No.

LA: I myself as it happened worked after the, worked for a German firm, a jewelry firm on the main street, and he was there for over 30 years, you know, the company, a German company. Matter of fact, I had to speak German with him I came in there, the Chinese wouldn't know what I'm talking about. He didn't want to know that the, that he does business with other people besides Chinese, you know. So, and he told me that time, you know, that he doesn't like the German system there. He was everything but Nazis, and whatever he could, that he says, "That's why I give you work, I know who you are, that you are a Jew. I give you work and I don't like to, I don't agree what's going to happen.? Finally he was forced by the German consulate and by the German occupation, to curtail the, that he, to work, to come to connect with Jews and so on. But, he let me always come to a certain times to the back door. He says, "Don't come in to the front door any more. I may be watched. But you come in the evening and see to the back door and I'll give you work and I'll give you the money.? And there was one episode, you know, I remember very well that time. The Japanese needed platinum, you know, for the warfare. And he had a big stock of platinum. That was actually his capital, you know. But he had, at that time he had it in his safe there in the shop, you know. And he asked me that time. He says he's worried that one day the Japanese will come and take these things away, you know. "What shall we do with this?? I says, "Well, what can I help you?? He says, "Do you, are you willing to take a certain amount of platinum to you in trust and whenever I need something you will give it?? So I says, "Well, I can take a little bit. I haven't got any big safes or anything in Shanghai, you know.? And so he gave me a big piece for me, that time it was a fortune, you know, and from my, to keep, and I worked with it, you know, and until one day what he expected happened, you know. The Japanese drove up to his store and confiscated all his platinum. They didn't touch the gold. They didn't touch any other jewelry, just platinum, and gave him a piece of paper that he can, as a receipt, yeah. And he was crying like a little child the next day when I came there. And he told me, "See what happened? It was good thing I gave you a little bit, like a pea, you know, a little small amount of it, to," he says, "I will never see my platinum again.? And I felt very sorry for him, because I said, "Well, that's about the same thing we felt in Germany when they took away the Jewish things.? "So see, you don't have to be Jewish," he says. "They take you either way, the Japanese.? So I kept the material until this was, I used everything up, you know, and that-- what we kept

very good relations till, almost till I left Shanghai.

EA: When did you leave Shanghai? Did you...

LA: '49.

EA: '49.

LA: 1949.

EA: You had an Affidavit to...

LA: I had no Affidavit. I had just...that's a story by itself, you know, to leave. Because nobody, I had nobody in the States to send me an Affidavit that time. We had no relatives to speak of in there.

EA: So how did you get out?

LA: We got all since we were in Shang--, eh, had a, Guild of Craftsmen there, and the ex-president, he immigrated to, ahead of time, to Montreal. His name was Max Brandt. He doesn't live any more. He passed on many years ago. But he interested a Canadian Congressman of the Jewish people living in Shanghai being under threat of Communism, because the Chinese, you know, the Communists start closing in on the city of Shanghai, under, you know, under Chiang Kai-Shek, under the Chi-, the Chinese Communist regime. You know Chiang Kai-Shek was already in Formosa. But to interest them, you know, to do something about these people. They might be good people, of value for Canada, because Canada needs immigration. So they made, they passed a special bill at that time, just in time before to allow 400 families with Austrian valid passport. They specified Austrian passports, because anything else they didn't want to commit themselves. So he...

EA: Austrian, though!

LA: It was Austria, Austrian passports, yeah. It was 400 families, and, you know, dependents, to leave, to come to Canada. So, that was the re--, that was my way out, you know? As I happened to know the Canadian Vice Council in Shanghai was a customer of mine, so he told me, too, "Canada is the country for you. We need people like you."

EA: When you say for you, what about your sister and your parents?

LA: No, I mean for me and my family.

EA: Oh, he meant it for your family.

LA: You know, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

EA: You were not married of course at that time.

LA: I was married, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Good thing.

EA: You met in Shanghai?

LA: Yes, we got married in Shanghai in 1947.

EA: How did you get married?

LA: Oh, we went to a...

EA: A real rabbi?

LA: A real rabbi, a real synagogue...

LEO AWIN [1-2-20]

EA: Rabbi Cohen?

LA: Rabbi Cohen, Erich Cohen, you know him?

EA: No, bu-- Mrs. Zaharias got married by him.

LA: Eric Cohen, matter of fact before I left here, I found a con--, a letter from him at home, you know the invitation with...

EA: Where is he?

LA: He is dead, no, he's many years dead, you know. He lived in California. [tape off then on]

EA: Tell me a little about the conditions under which you left Shanghai.

LA: The conditions were, well, not the best any more, because the war kept on closing in to the main, to Shanghai itself. There were many nights we could see very far bombardments, you know, from the on-coming Communist troops, you know, but before that, you see, when that bill was passed in Ottawa, you know, so we know that we could go, so our preparation was, we could go first, quite sudden, you know. Some people, you know, when they have to leave, they have a few weeks' time to prepare. We had less than two weeks to get ready. And I was still working. I still had my shop going. I still had my employees working for me, and I had to liquidate everything in, within two weeks? So, I told my employees that time that I'm going away, and naturally I had to finish them off, I had to give them a...

EA: Severance pay.

LA: Severance pay, and kind of, everybody had to get a sack of rice. That was better than money at that time, because the currency was not stable, you know. What was worth today's was worth a third less the next day. So we settled. Everybody got a sack of rice from me. And that, so at least they knew they could eat for so many weeks, you know, they and their family. What happened, us, you know, we could, we were fortunate in one way. We knew we had to leave Shanghai sooner or later. So we sent personal belongings, what we didn't need immediately, ahead to New York in bond. So I figured from New York...

EA: New York, in bond, not to Toronto?

LA: No, I didn't know at that time that we were...

EA: Oh that was [unclear].

LA: [unclear], so I figured when, from New York I can have it shipped anywhere in the world, you know, wherever I will land. So meanwhile the things, the travel arrangements for Canada came through and we got examined within 24 hours, including x-rays and all medical examination in Shanghai that had to be go-, done all in a telegram style—very fast and quick. And the passports we had, naturally. There was no visa requirement, except we got from the Canadian Consulate the transit visa, you know.

EA: Did the Canadian Consulate arrange all this for you?

LA: Partly, yes. Through the authorization from Ottawa. That their...

EA: There were 400...

LA: ...400 Jew...

EA: ...Austrian passported families...

LA: ...port...

EA: Available.

LA: Families. It was more than 400 people, you know, but there's 400 families. It was close to about 600, 700 people, they came over here. No, not everybody stood in Canada. Quite a few were on transit to the United States, waiting the quota up, you know, because they had to wait for the quota to be valid. So there were a few hundred, you see, they eventually over the next time...

EA: Right.

LA: Next few months went over to the States from Canada. But at least we were safe, and we could go in, on their convenience, you know, whenever they were ready. What happened to us? We left with a, four planes, you know, two days before the city was taken over from the Communists, you know? Two days, yes. And the last day, you know, when we were ready to go, you see, there were no planes there, you know, because the [unclear]...

EA: From where were the planes?

LA: American army planes. They had to be sent in. They were sent in, American army planes were sent in from Tokyo on a special request from the Joint. They were sent under emergency to Shanghai, and there was only the pilot, co-pilot, and radio man. There was no stewardess, no food, nothing on the plane. So we only had to leave, we left that time, you know, with forty pounds per person. We couldn't take any more. So they were interested to be less luggage and more people, you know. So that was the arrangement. And we were waiting about a couple of hours in the airport until the plane arrived, you know. Finally, it was early morning, so in the afternoon finally the plane arrived. They didn't even shut off the machines, you know? They let their machines running and let people go on on the board-- on board, you know, and closed up, and up we went. So the last two planes were shot at, you know, from, from ground. But nothing happened, nothing, they only could see the puffs in the air, you know...

EA: [unclear].

LA: Yeah. So they all arrived safely, you know, in Tokyo. Then six months later the rest of the Jewish refugees, you know, gradually could leave by boat, to wherever they, you know, but they had to stay there six months until travel arrangements could be made, the...

EA: Six months.

LA: More in Shanghai.

EA: Did they all get out?

LA: They all got out, yes. Eventually they got, so there are no the more

Jews in Shanghai to speak of right now. So...

EA: The Joint was the most active...

LA: Sure. The most. The American Joint, yes, was most...

EA: Organized.

LA: The biggest organization. They arranged everything. They arranged for some people that didn't have money to pay for the plane ride [unclear]. They chipped in, you know, with the promise to, when they come to the landing sit-, the landed country, eventually if they get the money to pay it back. Some did and some did not, you know, so, anyway that's the arrangement, you know...

EA: So what you're saying is...

LA: To, [unclear] we left.

EA: They wanted the refugees...

LA: Yeah.

EA: Who could afford to pay for...

LA: Pay for the...

EA: ...some of the refugees who could not afford to....

LA: ...ford, they were helped all these financially. There was nobody left behind who could not afford it because of, on money, you know? So...

EA: That's the Jewish way, isn't it?

LA: Yeah, yeah, that's typical, you know it is the way because that was, well, the people had to stick together. By that time it was known already what happened in Europe, very well, so the world looked with a different eye to the refugees in Shanghai. Very few people knew at all, you know, that 20,000 people cheated Hitler, you know, with their lives.

EA: And there they go again!

LA: Yeah, that's it. So, we were, we, there were rumors in Shanghai, you know, that we were registered for, eventually that they will try to do something similar in Shanghai like they did in Europe, you know? But it never, the Japanese never agreed with that idea, you know, to kill people like dogs or cattle, you know, like they did in, eh...

EA: Did you witness personally any atrocities by the hands of the Japanese on the refugees?

LA: [unclear], individually, you know, because we had the Ghoya⁹, you know...

EA: Right.

LA: That he called himself King of the Jews, you know? I think the story is well known all over, so I don't have to repeat it. And, uh...

EA: I just wondered if you witnessed...

⁹Ghoya - a Japanese official, in charge of issuing passes for leaving ghetto, feared for his erratic behavior.

LA: And he...

EA: Anything personally.

LA: Personally? No. I didn't have any personal things. As I said, we were recognized as foreigners, you know? As white, you know, so the Japanese know he was, even so he was a farmer boy standing on the bridge guard with a gun, you know, but he know that we were not Chinese, you know. The Chinese did not get away that easy, you know. They had, they were...

EA: Were they cruel? Did you observe any...

LA: Against the...

EA: Cruelties towards the Chinese?

LA: Ah, yes, this, cruel? Yeah, this, against Chinese, I observed quite a bit, you know.

EA: Bayonets being used?

LA: Bayonets being used, and they were, they were completely, they had to stay nude on the street there, in view of people passing by for about eight to ten hours, you know, that...

EA: Did you see any of that?

LA: I saw them trying to, yeah, many times, you know. Just, because they were, they did something minor, you know. It was up to the Japanese in charge, you know, to do those things, you know.

EA: Was that cruelty?

LA: It was cruelty, sure, sure. They didn't kill them, you know, but they did, they hit them, and they banged them with their wooden, you know, sticks, you know. There was one episode I would like to mention, you know that one of our refugees, you see we had kind of a private police, you know, the *Pao Chiai*¹⁰ they called it, you know. We had to stand on the ghetto borders, you know, to watch out and to come check the passports if people come in and out, you know, in times, because that was enforced as quick as possible, you know, so from Jewish people, you know. So they were lenient, you know, against Jews what's could do. But there was one of our Jewish people. He caught him up in rank, you know. It went to his head, you know, that he was in charge of the, to check them. So he had a car accident with an Amer--, with a Japanese army truck. He was riding a bicycle. And the army truck hit him somehow, you know, to damaged his bicycle. He opened a big mouth against the Japanese soldiers there. They didn't understand a word he was saying. Finally they somehow got scared and they wanted to get out of the situation. They told him to put the bag on the truck and with him up there, too. They said, "We never saw him again." They dumped him somewhere. They killed him somewhere, you know. That was the, was a big, you know, but it was partially

¹⁰*Pao Chiai* - auxiliary police organized by Japanese.

maybe his own fault.¹¹

EA: But just one case.

LA: It was one case, yeah. It was not done...

EA: It was done not as a routine...

LA: No, no, no, no, no. I wouldn't say that.

EA: Mr. Awin, I think we have done very well.

LA: Yeah, I hope so.

EA: And I really appreciate...

LA: I might be of any help.

EA: Your doing this interview. I think we are just about at the end of the tape. This is October the 19th, in Philadelphia. And I hope you enjoy the rest of your conference here, and our beautiful city of Philadelphia.

LA: Fine. Thank you very much.

EA: Thank you very much.

LA: Thank you for having--

¹¹incident is described by D. Kranzler in his *Japanese, Nazis & Jews*, p. 494.