HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

PETER CZIFFRA

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Meta Joy Jacoby
Date: October 15, 1999

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PC - Peter Cziffra [interviewee]
MJ - Meta Joy Jacoby [interviewer]
Date: October 15, 1999

Tape one, side one:

MJ: A little bit because there's usually a tag that doesn't record right at the beginning. All right--this is October 15, 1999. We are at the Rickshaw Convention in Philadelphia…

PC: Rickshaw Reunion.

MJ: Reunion. Excuse me and I'm speaking to Peter Cziffra, that's C-Z-I-F-F-R-A. This is tape one, side one and the interviewer is Meta Joy Jacoby. Would you just tell us your address? We'll put tha--we'll also put that on the tape. No, that's fine. When and where were you born please?

PC: I was born in Berlin, Germany October 6th 1930.

MJ: What are your memories of life before you went to Shanghai?

PC: Oh well, actually my father is a Hungarian, Catholic, my mother was German Jewish. My parents were divorced quite shortly, actually separated, very shortly after I was born so I was basically raised by my mother.

MJ: Do you have any siblings?

PC: No, I have none. Yes, I do. I have a half sister on my father's side and I didn't really meet her until, well, talk to her until much later but I was brought up my mother basically brought me up, I didn't really see very much of my father. And my grandfather had had a factory near Berlin that repaired railroad cars for the German government and they had about 750 employees so they were extremely well off, lived in *Kurfürstendamm* in Berlin, they would call it Park Avenue here, on the top floor of a large apartment house. I don't remember that very well, but I have a relative who visited there, stayed there once and I talked to her and she told me that there, you know, was a walk-in bathtub, marble bathtub and this sort of thing that she had never seen before. It was about a 15 room flat or something like that, you know. I still remember the address actually. It was 110 *Kurfürstendamm* and actually he didn't do that well after the de--when the depression came along, he didn't do that well. So we moved from a 15 room flat into a 12 room flat, he died of septicemia I never met him but I lived with my grandmother and my mother and they moved to a smaller flat also in the *Kurfürstendamm* with about ten rooms or something like that. So then…

MJ: What was your life like?

PC: I was only six. I left Germany when I was six.

MJ: Oh.

PC: So I don't remember that much about it and in 19, in 1937, my mother got, was getting remarried to a man who had a shoe factory in a place called Landsberg-an-

der-Warthe which is now Polish, and since my mother didn't want me to start--oh, I should tell you, I mean this story is kind of amusing. My mother was, of course, Jewish and we had a maid and the maid--my nationality was Hungarian because my father was Hungarian. We had a maid who once took me down to the police station and I loved uniforms and I loved people marching and so on and so forth. Well, we went to the police stat-, I went to the police station with her and as we left, the maid's, the policeman said *Heil Hitler* and the maid who was not Nazi said *Heil Hitler* back and I said, "I'm not allowed to say *Heil Hitler,"* and the policeman bent over and he said, "and why little boy aren't you allowed to say *Heil Hitler?"* and I said, "because" with the maid standing there shaking you can imagine, and I said, "Because I'm Hungarian".

MJ: Oh.

PC: And she turned, dragged me out of there, took me out and she was still white and shaking when she got home and then, you know, told my mother what had happened, but this was 19--this must have been in '36 or something. '37 my mother, as I said, was getting remarried. She actually remarried in New York because she couldn't get married--her new husband was named Lenki [phonetic] and he was Jewish--and they couldn't get married in Germany. So they ended up getting married in New York all, he was going on a business trip to inspect a shoe factory in the United States, and my mother went along and they got married and came back, but then I went off with my grandmother to live with grand-aunt, a sister of my mother's in Buxton, England where I learned to speak English and where I started school. So I started school in England. Then in 1940 my mother and stepfather got out of Germany. He had, he was forced to sell his shoe factory, was stuck in jail along with his brother until they agreed to sell, and when they sold, you know, the money, all the money went into closed accounts and all sorts of stuff was deducted, so they really didn't get any money out of it, and they decided that, you know, that they better get out. The only place they could go to was Shanghai. So they went to Italy and my mother wanted me along with them, so at the age of nine, I was put on a plane, at Croydon Airport by some friends who were in England, some flew to Paris, which is already during the war by the way. The war was on, but the Germans at that time were still busy in Poland and they, you know, they hadn't really opened the Western front and it was still quite peaceful at that point. Then I flew to Paris and someone from Cook's Travel Service picked me up and put me on the Sultan Express [phonetic] through Switzerland to Italy and to Milan where my mother picked me up, and from there we went to Trieste, and from Trieste we took the *Conte Rosso* which was the before last ship to go from Italy to Shanghai, because on the way, half way across we met this *Conte Rosso* sister ship the *Conte Verde* which was coming in the opposite direction. The *Conte Verde* got to Trieste, took on passengers, turned around and came back to Shanghai and then was stuck there for the rest of the war because Italy then entered the war. Italy hadn't been in the war and the *Conte Ros--Conte Verde* couldn't, you know, just couldn't travel safely and stayed there throughout the war. So then at that point

about sometime, I think it may have been May or something like that, all, of that year we, in 1940 we got to Shanghai.

MJ: Was your grandmother with you?

PC: No, my stepfather's mother was with us. My grandmother remained in England.

MJ: Did all the family leave Germany at this point?

PC: No, ok, my mother had, my mother had a sister and a brother. The brother left quite early; he went to South Africa and he was quite successful there. The sister was married and I think she ended up in Holland and she was caught by Nazis, and as far as we know, she and her entire family, the nearest we ever heard was that they were left to freeze to death in a railway car somewhere in Holland, and so I, I, I never saw her again and with my uncle went to South Africa to--did rather well there.

MJ: Are you, were you aware of the process of going to Shanghai…?

PC: Oh yeah.

MJ: …the decision?

PC: Oh yeah.

MJ: Can you tell me anything about it? Were there other options?

PC: Well I wasn't, I was not aware of the process to going to Shanghai because I was in England at the time…

MJ: I see.

PC: So I had no part in that. All I knew is that I was told that my mother, you know, that she was going, she had come to visit us in England a couple of times before the war broke out but then after a while, you know, I, she couldn't travel anymore.

MJ: So you knew nothing about the arrangements?

PC: I knew nothing about the arrangements. I do know something that you know is probably of interest is that, my mother remarked on that later that we had really sort of distanced our--I had distanced myself from her quite a bit because I was in England for three years. I guess, I don't know whether subconsciously I felt abandoned or what it was, but when my mother tried to embrace me and so on, I sort of pulled away and said, "I'm not a baby anymore" that sort of thing and she was very upset and very hurt by this, but I just, you know, I hadn't been with her for three years, and I hadn't had a very easy time of it in England because my grand-aunt who, my grandmother was a very good natured person and my grand-aunt was a real, very harsh way of, harsh person and I agree with that relative who lived with us, it was her daughter, we're in full agreement that grand-aunt is a real, a real unpleasant bossy person. All she'd ever say to me is, "Why don't you do this? Why don't you take a walk?" or "Why…", so it wasn't a very easy time. And but anyhow, we came to England, we landed in, in Shanghai…

MJ: First, tell me a little about the trip.

PC: The trip was on a nice steamer. I mean, for a little boy, it was great fun.

MJ: Were there other refugees?

PC: There were other refugees.

MJ: All Jews?

PC: Quite a few, yes, but again I was only nine years old, not really conscious of it, but actually on the ship there were some friends of mine, just by accident of my mother's and my, who ended up in Shanghai with us. He was, I think he was a photographer and she was also his wife was non-Jewish, so and that was a relationship that continued for years and years even in, when they finally, when we ended up in Long Beach. So, I don't remember that much about the trip, you know. I was still…

MJ: Do you remember any stops?

PC: Yes, we stopped in Singapore, well we went through the Suez Canal, we stopped in Singapore, we stopped in Hong Kong where they promptly took our passports away from us and where we…

MJ: Who took your passports?

PC: No, no, no, I'm thinking of the, that's the other trip. No, no, sorry I'm getting the trip from Shanghai mixed up.

MJ: Ok.

PC: …with, no, I was too young for anything at that point. But we did stop I think in Hong Kong and then we ended up in, we stopped in Shanghai.

MJ: What was, what were your mother's and her husband's attitudes? Were you aware of what they were talking about?

PC: No, this is a European family and problems are not discussed in front of children. I mean, it's, it's, it's the way, money wasn't discussed, these problems weren't discussed and it was all, I mean every attempt was made to shield the children from knowing the--they were very, very uncertain of, look these were very wealthy people. My stepfather had five cars or something like that and including Grand Pages and Superchargers. We actually took a BMW with us to Shanghai…

MJ: I was just going to ask you what you could take with you.

PC: We ended up taking a 1937 BMW sports coupe…

MJ: On the ship?

PC: …on the ship.

MJ: Did they take furnishings?

PC: No, we, the furnishings were sent to a guy in Sweden or Norway who was an associate or a salesperson, I think, working for my father, and he wasn't very honest so we never did get those furnishings. But there was a person, great deal of worry in Shanghai, everybody thought Shanghai was going to be very, very primitive indeed. It turned out to be not that primitive and people were really quite scared, but you know I was nine years old, to me this was one great big adventure. I didn't really care.

MJ: What was it like when you got off that ship?

PC: Well we had a relative waiting for us, of my father's, and we went around and we went to a hotel. They finally found a hotel for us on the Avenue Joffre called the

Waiter [phonetic] Hotel and it turned out that we were the only people who were going to stay for longer than a few hours in that hotel. We got very funny looks as we traipsed through the, through the lobby with, you know, my grandmother and all the luggage. Well we went up and I still remember very vividly, my mother decided she was going to take a show--a bath, and the bath, she went into the bathroom, turned on the light, you know, and the next thing we heard were these horrible ear splitting screams. So my, my stepfather and I rushed into the room to see my mother cowering in the corner clinging to the bathtub and you could hear this horrible rustling sound in the bathtub, and there was the bathtub full of *blattis orientalis*, the oriental cockroach. The oriental cockroach is about this big, it flies, I many times…

MJ: You're showing me about a three inch…

PC: Yes.

MJ: Ok, the tape recorder can't see this.

PC: Well I'll say two and a half, say two and a half inches…

MJ: Ok.

PC: It flies and it loves to come up sewer pipes and stuff like that.

MJ: Oh.

PC: And I've been hit in the face many times by one of, by a flying cockroach in the dark, and my mother really does not like insects very much. So, you know, we turned on the water and we flushed the animal down the, down the sink, down the, and then she took a shower, she took a bath. I think my stepfather had to stay with her, but that was basically--oh the first thing was, also we hailed rickshaws when we came. So we all went in with the luggage and everything. We took rickshaws to the hotel. So after a few days, my stepfather had located a house, in a very nice area. It was a newly built house, not far from the American School actually, and we moved into that and we stayed there for a few, oh, I don't know, maybe up to a year and my mother--I started school.

MJ: In the American School?

PC: No, in the Shanghai Jewish School, the Seymour Road School. Now there are two schools there and I don't know what other people call them but us in [unclear] refer to them as Seymour Road School and the Kadoorie School. The Kadoorie School is the one, you know. I should tell you the difference between--well you've probably heard that. The difference between Hongkew and the French Concession was that, other people, if you had a hundred dollars, what we called [unclear] per person, money to show, you could step out at the International Settlement or the French Concession. If you didn't have that amount of money, you had to, you didn't have to show anything to get off in Hongkew. So…

MJ: Whose, was, with the Chinese or the Japanese?

PC: No, well, Shanghai had administra--Shanghai had been taken over. Look, part of it was the French Concession which was run by the French, the other was the International Settlement which was basically run by the British with a lot of American

input and a few other countries**.** There was a coun--city council which was suppose to be International but the British basically ran it and. But the other parts of Shanghai that had not been taken over by the foreign powers had been conquered by the Japanese in 1936 or 1937 when there was, and was heavily, and had been heavily bombed and that was the part of the Hongkew area which was really badly demolished in bombing raids during that period.

MJ: By what authority?

PC: That was run by the Japanese.

MJ: Getting back to money to show…

PC: Yes.

MJ: So that you could live outside…

PC: Right.

MJ: …of Hongkew. Who…?

PC: I assume it would…

MJ: …by whose authority?

PC: I assume it was the International Settlement Authority, that you had to have--there were no visas requirements, but if you didn't have the 100 dollars--I don't know exactly how it worked but I presume you were sent straight to the Hongkew area which was under Japanese control. So that's why you had a lot of people originally living in Hongkew and you also had a lot of people who were somewhat better off. I mean they were by no means, had a lot of money at that point but we were still a lot better off then some of the people who had absolutely nothing who landed, ended up in Hongkew, and so that's why we ended up in French Concession. My mother went, opened a café yeah on Rue Cardinal Mercier which is very close to where the French Club was and the Cathay Theater and it's a very nice, very nice district, area of the French Concession, and she called it the Savoy, and it was a very small café, but--she was a very, very beautiful woman, very attractive, very well bred and so on and so forth and, you know, perfect hostess and the café did extremely well. It also had a slot machine in there, which made lots of money. So we made quite a, she made quite a successful living there.

MJ: What did her husband do?

PC: Well, you see, her husband--women recover better from this, he never really recovered. He had been the owner director of this large shoe factory, he had been given all sorts of awards as, you know, the most prominent. They made very, very expensive ladies shoes, EvaLuxus [phonetic] Brand. They were extremely expensive and well designed and stuff like that. So he had been very well off, and when he got to Shanghai, he, well, my mother was so successful he tried to open a café but he didn't run it, he hired people to run it. It kind of went under, and then he tried to open a cigarette store and that didn't work out because again he didn't want to do any of the work and it, it, he didn't really, I don't think he really didn't work.

MJ: So really your mother supported the family?

PC: The mother supp--my mother supported the family…

MJ: That must have been…

PC: No question.

MJ: … quite an adjustment for her?

PC: Yes, it was quite an adjustment for her.

MJ: Had she ever worked before?

PC: Oh yes, she had worked as a dress designer. Actually her proudest achievement was, she designed a hat that Marlene Dietrich wore in the movie and she knew a lot of people in, you know, in the movie industry and, as a matter of fact Marlene Dietrich wanted to offer to sleep with her.

MJ: Really?

PC: Yeah.

MJ: My.

PC: Was she was a very, very beautiful woman. I mean, I could tell you stories about other people. When she was sixty I introduced her to a friend of mine and after the next--with whom I rode to work, and for the next week I heard nothing about how beautiful my mother was. Anyhow, so we, ok, so she had worked, and she actually had her own dressmaking establishment operating out of her, out of the apartment. Because money was quite tight by that time, my grandmother, my stepfath--my grandfather had, had basically the business went under and there was some money left and property, but it still wasn't very much. So my mother opened this, she would actually make dress designing and she had some people sewing and stuff like that.

MJ: So she was always resourceful?

PC: She was always resourceful, yes. And it was she basically who made the decision I think to go to Shanghai because my stepfather's mother never forgave her for that. "Why did we have to leave and come to this terrible country?" and all this sort of thing. She was an old woman and the animosity between the two of them was, was, was palpable.

MJ: And you all lived together?

PC: Well, in Shanghai, we, it wasn't till we got to Long Beach she had a room upstairs and she lived separately. When we were in the French Concession she lived with a Russian couple, my grandmother. It wasn't until Shanghai that we all lived together, it was in Hongkew, we all ended up in the same house.

MJ: Now and you mentioned that you had this house in the French Concession about a year?

PC: Yes, and then we moved to another house in the French Concession close to where my mother, my mother had the café. Now, we owned the house and owned these in quotation marks because when you bought a house in Shanghai you never bought it. It belonged to a company. Shanghai was rent controlled, and in order to get into a

house, you would have to pay key money to the previous tenant and part of that went to the company but most of it the previous tenant got. And so, key money could go up, it'd be pretty high, I mean we're talking about 2,000 American dollars or something like that and something like a 1,000 American dollars for places in good locations, and that was considered buying a house. Now there may have been some people actually owned their villa somewhere but normally when you're at one of these townhouses, which is what all of these were, a condominium kind of a thing, they were bought. So we had, we bought this house on the Avenue De Wildberg [phonetic] it included a store down below. We had the whole upstairs portion and we rented the store out to the, to some Russian lady who was making clothes and selling clothes and stuff like that, and my mother had the tea room a block away.

MJ: You went to school?

PC: I went to the Shanghai Jewish School on Seymour Road, which is the old…

MJ: Tell me about that.

PC: That was the old Sephardic School. It was strictly on the English, based on the English system, and there were quite a few refugee children who, also some Sephardic children. I think the school must have had about 300. It was a big synagogue attached to it, nice, big land and it was a very nice school, very good school, good teachers, we ended up eventually getting some refugee teachers. I think my mathematics teacher for instance had a PhD from in mathematics from the University of Vienna, and very well educated teachers, I think excellent teacher, it was a very good school.

MJ: Did you mix with the Sephardic children?

PC: Well in the school, yes, not socially.

MJ: There was, was there any socialization with your mother and stepfather in…

PC: No…

MJ: …the…

PC: No…

MJ: …Sephardic community?

PC: No, no. My parents, my mother particularly, I mean was a snob. She was very, very snobbish. I mean she--I constantly heard remarks about well they're from a *Hinterpommern* which means back Pomeranians and stuff like that and these were not, she was utterly, you know the expression *Yekkes*?

MJ: Yes.

PC: Well these were upper-class, very upper-class *Yekkes*, and my grand, my stepfather wasn't quite as bad but he didn't come from the Berlin milieu of you know, of--my grandmother had a Salon actually where famous people Rabindranath Tagore the famous Bengali poet, Nobel Prize winning poet was once a guest. My mother

remembered being dangled on his knee when he was a guest at the house and so, I mean…

MJ: Did you have any socialization with the Chinese?

PC: Not really, not really, not really, we, I think we had our own--there were no Chinese in the school. I didn't really get to know any Chinese well until I started the University there in South China and that was in not until 1946. The Chinese we did encounter were, you know, working class people, salespeople and so on. We did have, we had an *amah*, a Chinese servant woman, who was a very nice woman from Nepal and for a while we actually had a boy, and that's what they were called. A boy is a Chinese servant who did cooking and stuff like that.

MJ: What did you do after school?

PC: Well there were some other children, refugee children who lived there and actually there were some British kids and they were Eurasian and one of them ended up I forgot which member of the family was Chinese. They were very conscious about it, very, very conscious. It was really very sad I remember. They knew they weren't really English and they knew they were never really gonna be accepted in the English and they would--it was a very sad thing.

MJ: Did your family belong to synagogue?

PC: My stepfather was an atheist, yet my mother went, and I think she took me along, yes.

MJ: Were you getting a Jewish education?

PC: I was in the Jewish School, but I became an atheist at the age of 14 too, so I really kind of resisted all the religion, managed to avoid it and again because I was half Jewish only. It wasn't pushed down my throat if you know what I mean.

MJ: Were you Bar Mitzvahed?

PC: No.

MJ: Do you remember any ceremonies, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, did you go to any of these? Did you, were High Holidays, any occasion?

PC: My mother took me to the synagogue on the high holidays for a while, for a while and at some point that stopped, I don't remember. She also, I think she stopped, basically stopped believing in God after the Holocaust. The Holocaust sort of destroyed it for her. She still went through, I think she still continued to go to synagogue but it was strictly a memorial thing for her parents and for the people who had died. The religious element in it, I think you know, some evaporated after the Holocaust, when we started find out about that.

MJ: When did you start finding out about it?

PC: After the war, and quite frankly we didn't, we, it was difficult to believe, you know. We, for the German Jews it was very difficult to believe because we grown up, they'd grown up in Germany and they expect some, imagine something like that to happen. But finally the proof I mean was just too overwhelming, but when it first came

out--people also remembered all the stories about World War I, all these exaggerations and things like that but it was very difficult to believe for the German Jews. They were the most assimilated Jews in the world practically.

MJ: Yeah.

PC: I know a lot of them basically would have joined Hitler if he hadn't been so damn antisemitic if you know what I mean.

MJ: Well there were Jews who supported Hitler early on.

PC: Well my stepfather didn't. He was a Social Democrat to begin with, so he, he was not very friendly.

MJ: Did you have any experience with refugee organizations in Shanghai?

PC: Well, we, my father I think tried to get some financial, do something financially with Kadoorie, and I actually met the old man and…

MJ: Kadoorie?

PC: Yes, the old man.

MJ: Oh what do you remember about him?

PC: That was, I was very young and this was of course before the war, and I remember going up into his office and of course I spoke English, not American at that point with a real English accent. I mean, I met some missionaries on the trip going to Shanghai and I opened my mouth and said three words. One of them turned to the other and said--these are the British missionaries. "Why the boys from Kent." And we chatted for about half an hour, about my school, I was wearing a British School cap and all that sort of thing, and then my mother came along and said something to me in German and I replied in the same language, and they almost fell off their deck chairs they were so surprised. So, you know, my parents introduced me to Kadoorie and we chatted for a little while but I don't remember much. I just remember a large, heavy-set man, very affable and that was basically it.

MJ: So you don't remember any experience with the Jewish organizations or the Youth organizations?

PC: We do after the war.

MJ: No this is before.

PC: No, no. We were well enough off at that point not to need help. I don't know what my stepfather was going to do with Kadoorie and what was involved there, they didn't tell me that, but we were, we didn't need it, really didn't need, we never really needed any aide until we, I think later on after the war we started getting some UNRRA kind of aide.

MJ: Were you aware of any Zionists Organizations?

PC: No! Well I was, I mean there were people who belonged to Betar and so on.

MJ: But did you belong?

PC: No, no, no.

MJ: What did you know about it?

PC: They did a lot of marching and this sort of thing, and I wasn't really very impressed.

MJ: Ok.

PC: But I don't know how much this is colored, when I was nine years old before the war, and I don't really know that much. All of this is colored by later things probably.

MJ: How long did you live in that second house in the French Quarter?

PC: Until shortly after Pearl Harbor until the ghetto…

MJ: Ok.

PC: …was set up.

MJ: First of all, how did you become aware of the outbreak of the war?

PC: I think the Japanese just marched in and it was announced on the radio.

MJ: And how were you affected?

PC: Not at all at the beginning, there was, the takeover was very peaceful despite what they said in that movie, there was a movie about Shanghai which is all wrong, streets were all wrong. I mean just a, just a, and all of the sudden there were only Japanese soldiers everywhere, and of course the war--United States was now in the war. There was, I think there was, I think there was some fighting in the Wangpoo River, I think, some ships got, got attacked by the Japanese, small boats but again, we didn't hear that up where we were and that was it. The takeover was totally peaceful and all the sudden it was just, you know, the Japanese had taken over, and the American--of course, we heard about Pearl Harbor and this sort of thing, and that was it. I continued going to school. My mother continued running her café. The French Concession of course wasn't affected—was probably even less affected than the International Settlement because it just switched over I guess to Vichy French and was basically left alone, and that was it until--all there were some Japanese who became customers of my, of the café and they behaved themselves very well, in Shanghai unlike Nanjing [Nanking is old name] the Japanese behaved themselves quite well, you know, for an occupying army.

MJ: And then what happened?'

PC: And then one day this announcement came out that everybody has to move into the ghetto, and my mother actually tried--there was a very nice Hungarian consulate who was an architect and he, she, I think we went to see him to see whether he could do anything because I was Hungarian, and he tried but he wasn't able to. Now I could of stayed--actually, he gave me a passport, a Hungarian, a temporary local Hungarian passport, which I had, and that made me my identification card. I was an access partner actually, so I was able to leave the ghetto whenever I needed to but my parents had to move into the ghetto. I think my mother might have been able to stay out but my stepfather couldn't and so we moved into the ghetto, we had to give up the Café. We moved into a house that, well we lived downstairs in one room and my grandmother

lived upstairs in another room that had been divided into two and another couple, the Cohens lived in the other room and there were three floors and in the middle floor was a family named Sobel. He was a doctor. And Sobels and the Cohens, no, the Cohens hated the Sobels for some reason that I was never able, I mean this close living, they hated each other. Oh my God, I never seen such hatred.

MJ: What were the cooking facilities in this house?

PC: We were aristocrats; we had gas.

MJ: Did you share a kitchen…

PC: No.

MJ: …all the people?

PC: No, we didn't. We had our own little kitchen attached and we, we, I think the Sobels I remember when they had gas too but they had a little kitchen and the Cohens--the Sobels had one room about the same size as ours and they also had the kitchen, and there was a bathroom right next to the kitchen.

MJ: That's my next question.

PC: Yeah, and we shared the bathroom. We did have a toilet in our, in our apartment. It never worked properly. On the other hand, we did have, in our kitchen we had running water and stuff like that, so you could wash and this sort of thing, but when you wanted to take a bath and use the toilet, you had to go upstairs and that was, you know, a lot, six, seven people sharing one bathroom basically, and that led to quarrels at the time, and of course. If you wanted to take a bath, you needed hot water, you went to the corner hot water store and brought two Chinese coolies would come with buckets full of hot water, which they would pour into the tub and your family would take a bath, one after the other.

MJ: All using the same tub of water?

PC: Yes, basically, yes.

MJ: What was your family economic status now?

PC: My mother opened another café, the Savoy, another Savoy in Shanghai and again did quite well. Our economic status, I mean, we didn't know how long it would have to last, but I do know something more. We had some gold bars put away and stuff like that and U.S. dollars and so on, and we weren't, I mean we were all living in one room which would be rather bad conditions for the United States but there was enough food. I never, I was never hungry. I was never cold. Never any difficulty and in my, and if there were worries they were well hidden by my parents…

MJ: Did you go to school?

PC: I continued going to the Shanghai Jewish School through the entire, all of Shanghai, every time, every day.

MJ: Really?

PC: Yeah, with a whole bunch of other kids. There were a whole bunch of us and we continued going to the Shanghai Jewish School.

MJ: Did you need passes? You didn't need a pass.

PC: I didn't need a pass. The…

MJ: Did the other children?

PC: The other children needed a pass and they had to see the infamous Ghoya to get them, the King of the Jews, you've heard of him.

MJ: Yes. Did you know Ghoya?

PC: No but my mother met, I never met him. My mother did once. He came in to the café, and he sat down and he ordered some coffee and then had some cake and then he started talking to my mother and my mother ended up sitting at the table with him, talking to him at great length apparently about London, Paris and so on, all the trips, and she looked up at one point to see my stepfather at the front door, and he looked in and saw who was sitting there and turned around and high tailed it out as quickly as he could. He realized that my mother was probably--well she was charming the pants, well not the pants off him but she was charming him thoroughly and he left. He, you know, I was talking to one of the other refugees, he was not nearly as bad a man as he seemed to be at that point. He used to hit people, but Japanese officials hit everybody, they hit them, they hit other Japanese, and the Japanese misbehaved, he would give a knock by other Japanese on the spot, and people did go in and tell the most outrageous lies about--they wanted, they needed money, some of them were starving, or were dirt poor and so they'd would make up any story in order to be able to get a pass to sell something and so on. So he never killed anybody. He threatened to a number of, pretend to, so, but he was a small man given a lot of power. My stepfather actually did get a pass a number of times from him in order to transact some business or whatever, but I never, I never had to go to see him. The children, my roommates, my classmates never had any trouble. They would go in, they would get their passports and he would, you know, sort of joke with them and send them on their way.

MJ: How--you went all the way through school then?

PC: Yes.

MJ: …and then? How old were you…?

PC: I graduated in 1946, from school so I went through the way, I mean, sometimes we would go to school and be, the city would be shut down, some sort of a problem or the Japanese were trying to show how strong they were, and no buses, no trams, nothing, all the intersections were roped off with Japanese troops standing by, and mostly this was done by people called *pao-chia* men. A *pao-chia* is an ancient Chinese custom of citizen police and everybody was drafted into the *pao-chia*, and my stepfather was included. They had to perform duties every week or so, stand at one of the entrances and check passports or they would be drafted, you know, to look after areas. The *pao-chia* would close off the streets with everyone carrying ropes which they would put--of course, as children we would love, we would jump, run under and the Japanese would be slashing their bayonets running after us laughing all the while, I mean, and we, would just

go under them and I'd walk home. It was about four or five, it would take me about two or three hours to get home.

MJ: It sounds as if you had no fear of the Japanese.

PC: No, we didn't.

MJ: You had no reason…?

PC: The idea, idea, idea that they would, they might threaten and they might bluster**,** and even there it was, we us kids it was usually with pretty good humor. I have not heard of a kid ever being hurt by one of the Japanese soldiers. After a while, you know, the school was taken over, and it was actually turned into a Navy place and they quartered horse in there I heard and then we went up to the Jewish Club which was quite a bit farther up and we had our classes relig--closed toward the end of the war.

MJ: Did you, were you aware of the progress of the war?

PC: Oh yes. There was a Russian radio station and they broadcast, they had a broadcast in German, and of course, Russian. Japanese were very careful, they were terrified that the Russians would enter the war, and they knew they were quite vulnerable up in Manchuria and that area, and so they left, left them to their own devices and they had it, everybody would gather up, not everybody had radios but there would be some, if a person had a radio in our lane where we lived in Hongkew, they'd put it by the window, everybody would gather around outside and listen to the German news and we'd hear all about, you know, the campaign in Germany. Not that much about the campaign in the, in the, you know, in the Pacific, but a lot about the campaign, we think, in Russia, and we heard about the atomic bomb when it was first dropped, that was announced by the Russian radio…

MJ: Really?

PC: Oh yes. Right the very day, that same day.

MJ: What were people's attitudes about that?

PC: Hooray, hooray! I mean, if we knew, we got a pretty good idea that there were a lot of Japanese killed but, well they were the enemies, so I don't think anybody shed any tears. I mean the war was such a terrible thing anyway. I don't think there was much concern, of course as I say, I was pretty young and young people are pretty bloody minded to begin with, but I don't remember any great complaints from, on the part of the grown-ups either saying the poor Japanese.

MJ: What about the bombing of Shanghai?

PC: Oh yes.

MJ: What did you experience?

PC: Oh well, the bombing, we were actually right on the dividing line where the bombs, we didn't, our lane was not bombed but things right next to it. There was a hotel there, which was the poorhouse hotel and one of the bombs fell right in it. I remember that day very well. My mother was home, I was, we were both home at that time. I don't know why she wasn't, maybe she was going to the Sav--Café late and all of

the sudden we heard the planes coming or the sirens, and there had been sirens all the time, but we'd look up and we'd see the Japanese fighters scooting down for cover and getting out of the way, and there would be ack, ack, you know, pom-boms and stuff like that, and that would take place at night and so on, but this time the planes came in very low and I remember my mother looking up and saying, my God they're coming in low and it was supposed to be pinpoint bombing apparently but there was too much cloud cover so they laid a carpet instead, and the next thing I knew was the building or the house began to shake and all was moving and I tried to get out the front door, we lived on the ground floor. There was a heavy metal bolt across the front, the door. We didn't use that door to go out. We, you know, when we came in and out, we went through the back door, so this bolt was very heavy and as I ran towards the door thinking that the house was coming down, the door bent inwards around the bolt. I could look out and it blasted there, blasted me away from the door. I didn't, didn't knock me over but it sort of really pushed me back, and then after a while, you know, I stood there and it stopped, and then I opened the door and I looked out and there was a bomb fuse still smoking right on our, we had two small steps that led us into the lane. There were bomb fuse right on our front steps and shrapnel, you know what the stuff is. I don't know if you really ever seen it but you can, you pick it up and you cut yourself. It's so sharp, I mean it's designed to break in such a manner, and all over the place, and if I had gone out that door I would have been cut to pieces. [tape one, side one ended]

Tape one, side two:

MJ: Peter Cziffra, did I get it right?

PC: Cziffra.

MJ: Cziffra.

PC: Yeah.

MJ: Tape one, side two, interviewer Meta Joy Jacoby. Now would you continue please?

PC: Ok, the bomb, I mean, as I got out, as I said I got out the front door and there was all the bombs, the bomb fuse and all these other things, and we, I don't know what I did then. I think we sort of stood there wondering what had happened, we could see the smoke, and we went out and I think my mother probably headed to the café to see what had happened. It turned out my stepfather was there at the time, and we just stood around, I mean there was nothing else to do. That, the whole area there, apparently, behind us was badly smashed. My stepfather tells a story that he was, when the bombs fell he was hiding under a table in the Café. He sort of dived under a table, the door opened and this Chinese woman kind of came running in and next thing they were both huddling under the table. And then you know, it stopped. We went around and we could see trucks coming, with some of them carrying dead bodies and stuff like that. A lot of people were killed. I don't think that many refugees. I think only about 30 or 40 refugees, but the estimates I heard were about a 1,000 people all together. A lot of the people who had open stands out in the open. A little while later, the next day we went out and then we started really exploring the area and we found, for instance, there was, a circle where there were two streets, or three or four streets coming in, and all around it were dead bodies and people were going out trying to identify their relatives. These were all, all Chinese. I mean, I think they, the local people the refugees took care of their own bodies and none of them were left in the streets. But a friend of mine actually, his name was Hans Hechter, he had lived with me in the same house, in the same area, in the French Concession up [unclear], his father was, he had his chest cut open and he died in his mother's, you know, in his wife's arms with his son standing by. You were able to see his beating heart actually, as he died because his whole chest was open. So and I think a number of friends of mine, a friend of my mom, of my parents lost his wife. It was pretty bad. What was just as bad was that for the next week the planes came back every day practically. They never bombed us again, and we had, we lived on the ground floor and above our kitchen was a roof, what we called a roof garden, a veranda and that was concrete rather than bricks, it was considered the safest part of the house and the Sobels came down. We all and, and also some people from the back, friends of ours who didn't have a veranda, they came down, and we all sat in this kitchen, shaking there while they dive-bombed and we would be wondering whether the planes, the bombs--I always sat there looking at the ceiling wondering whether I would see the bomb that would come

through. When a dive-bomber comes at you, I've heard discussed this with other people, they all agreed, it always seems to come, wherever it's going it always seems to be coming at you by sound. The one person who did not come down was Doctor, was Mr. Cohen and his wife. He was damned if he was going to die with those damn Sobels. His wife was a very nice person, a very nice, friendly person, you know, but he was a real curmudgeon. As a matter of fact, one time he came up the stairs in the dark and Mrs., Mr. Cohen and his wife, Mrs. Sobel came up out of the kitchen and proceeded to pat, you know, she knew her husband on the head and say, "Oh, Ziggaly you're home". Well, she came out and she patted him, patted this man on the head and she, he said, "That's [unclear] what's going on here? And it was Mr. Cohen." And she started out a little screaming and he remarked, "Next time I'm coming up backwards". So, I loved this animosity. I never was able to figure out. They never told me what had produced it.

MJ: You describe it so vividly it must have really been impressive.

PC: That day was, that day was very--I mean it was a day I'll never forget. We were on the it was interesting I think we were sort of kind of in a kind of a daze, for certainly that day. It, it, we really got an idea of what it felt like to be under fire, you kind of cut off, you're not [unclear] very quiet and say very little and everything, all the emotions are sort of damped down, and we saw, as I say, we saw trucks coming by with body parts and stuff like that and it was quite an experience. And I'd seen dead bodies before, for a while when I was going to school, I went to something called a *Mittag-tish*, which was somebody would have people come in to eat lunch in a private home, and on my way to that, I found, saw this dead beggar lying on the street, right up a few blocks from there and he had, apparently had been hit by a car because there was a big wound, you could see the bone through his leg, so I found myself going out to lunch still thinking of this beggar, and on the way, the beggar was lying there for about three days until somebody finally picked him up. So you got used to sights that you didn't normally see.

MJ: How did you find out about the Japanese surrender?

PC: On the radio, on the Russian, I think the Russian radio I think. Everybody celebrated and the Japanese sort of disappeared and of course, we were terrified. I mean, we didn't know what was coming in. We didn't know really what the Japanese were going to do at the very end, until those first American troops arrived, and we didn't have much confidence in the Chinese troops. I mean Chiang Kai-Shek was really a lousy marine. We were really, I mean that was a very terrifying period.

MJ: What was it like when the American troops came in?

PC: We didn't see them. I mean again, all of the sudden we heard American troops were here and the Americans started appearing and things started going, started getting back to normal. There was not a parade, not anything like that. Where we were, remember, Shang--Hongkew is the back waterway. It is the outskirts to the poorest part of Shanghai basically, only the poorer section of Shanghai. It's away from, I mean if there were any parades, they were up near the Bund and Bubbling Well Road and Najing

Road and Nanking Road, all this sort of thing, and we didn't see that. I think, I don't know, it may have been during the summer when school was out anyway, because I don't remember going to school at that period, yeah, it probably was, and then I continued going to school and everything, was more or less back to normal.

MJ: There were no big changes after the end of the war?

PC: Not really…

MJ: Your family?

PC: No. Well we did a little better because my mother had, we had, you know, more business, and we had a whole bunch of American servicemen coming in, and she started serving liquor and stuff like that, not much, but as a matter of fact, one day she told one of the servicemen that she'd been married in New York and they indicated that he didn't believe her. Anyhow she actually pulled out her marriage certificate and she was showing it to them, and he looked at the thing, looked at one of the witnesses and he said, "I know this guy." He was from New York too. It turned out she had, they had pulled in a clerk, a couple of clerks that worked there to be witnesses and one of them was a man he knew, small world.

MJ: Did your family then make any effort to leave Shanghai?

PC: What happened then was that my stepfather had an extremely serious heart attack and, I should add, at that point, I started, I had graduated from school, taken my Senior Cambridge with the University, where everybody took the University of Cambridge School matriculation. I, this is a test that is set up by the British so that people in the colonies would have school certificates that meant anything, and we were sent into the University of Cambridge to be corrected, and we came back and out of our school, I think two of us got first grade certificates. The Kadoorie School, I think out of something like eight people--I still have somewhere or other I have the clipping out of the *North China Daily News* where the schools were listed and all the people were listed and their certificate values. They came first grade, second grade, third grade. Well I think somehow the Kadoorie School something like five out of eight got first grade certificates. They beat the heck out of everybody else, but only three people who didn't get the first grade certificates, and then I went on to St. John's University.

MJ: Where was that? Was that Shanghai also?

PC: In Shanghai, it's in the northern part of Shanghai quite close to where the Club was, which is much farther up, and I started pre-medical student there. I was, there were two of us actually, one was a kid named Hansi Heimann who was from the Kadoorie School, and we were the only two, well there was some other foreigners there but, we were--also, we were the youngest people in the school, we were both 16 and everybody else was 18, so people would come to us, "Oh, are you in the…". There was also a middle school. "Are you in the middle school?" "No, we're at the University." "Wow!" It was taught in English.

MJ: I was just going to ask you what language. Were there Chinese students?

PC: Mostly, I mean there were about, I think there were five, maybe five or six non-Chinese, the rest were all Chinese. Now what sometimes would happen, is sometimes the professor would start giving the background, you know they'd give the details in Chinese and it'd get pretty tough, and the one psychology class I was in that happened, but otherwise it was taught in English.

MJ: Were you, you spoke Chinese at…?

PC: No.

MJ: No?

PC: …I spoke a little of Shanghainese, but certainly not enough, and it wouldn't have been in Shanghainese anyway. It wouldn't have been real, you know in Mandarin…

MJ: What affect now was your family feeling from the Chinese political situation?

PC: Well, as I say my stepfather had this enormously bad heart attack. It was so bad that I, they got a room for me across the street, and there was a doctor, I forgot what the doctors name was but he had pene--they managed to get some penicillin and they kept it in an icebox, a real old-fashioned icebox and it was just the old fashioned kind where they using beeswax or something like that and he had to have an injection every two or three hours for the penicillin to take, and he survived that, but he was very sick and it took a while. So we had to really wait until he got his strength back. In the meantime, in 1948 the American Jewish Joint was helping people get to the United States so my mother, my stepfather was still partly thinking of going back to Germany. My mother didn't want to. So I'm not really quite sure whether it was partly a ploy on her part or partly a ploy on my part, I don't know, but I ended up going to the United States in August, leaving in August of 1948 without them. I arrived in September of 19, of 1948 in the United States and stayed in San Francisco at a hotel on Taylor Street, I remember. For a while supported by the American Jewish Joint, and then for a while, then I was moved to Long Beach and lived with a family there for awhile, and then by about April or March or April I think of 1949 my parents came over, and they moved to Long Beach, too. My mother supported her, supported us, and the family, by working as a seamstress basically and doing alterations, making alterations in a clothing store in Long, in the Long Beach area until, until, I mean after a while I went up to, I went to Long Beach City College and then went into, ended up at the University of California.

MJ: Did your stepfather ever adjust to…?

PC: No. He got a job once or twice and in one place they got him this job. He used his heart attack a great deal, the heart attack where he would go out to look at cars, he loved cars and something, he would not be at all tired and then when my mother wanted to go somewhere or something, he would end up being tired. One time they got him one job at a liquor store and the person said well give him a broom and told him to sweep up out front and that was the end of that. He never adjusted.

MJ: Have you been back to Shanghai?

PC: Yes.

MJ: What was that like?

PC: It was very interesting. I, we took a tour starting in Beijing and we ended up, one of the stops was Shanghai and we had lunch at the, near the Garden Bridge which was, you know, at the end of the Bund, and then my wife and I separated from the group and we just walked down to Hongkew. I had a little table that I had made up of the new Chinese street names and the old Chinese street names. So I would look at the sign and then I would look at my chart and I would say "Oh that's road so and so…" And I knew, you would know where I was. We went down to Hongkew Road where we had lived. I bought a big expensive camcorder and taking pictures. Everybody was sort of glaring at me, wondering what this rich American is doing in this really poor neighborhood, you know. Am I making fun of them or something like that? One of the old grannies came over and started talking to me, and I managed to tell her with a dint of a little Shanghainese that I remembered and some writing down of dates, that I had lived in that house from 1942 to 1948 and everything changed, everybody was friendly and welcomed me in and they all invited us in and so on and so forth. I mean we were really very welcome and soon as they found out that we, why we were there then it all changed so. The house, that house was unchanged; the Hongkew area was unchanged.

MJ: You know I forgot to ask you about Cultural activities in your, well particularly in Hongkew.

PC: Well I do remember there were such things as, I remember attending a performance of one a, a Strauss Opera, may be *Die Fliedermaus* or something like that and I remember it very, very well because a friend, a relative of my grandmother's, a man named Mucks, Monks or Mucksbruk, Cockside I think it was who visited her regularly was acting in it. I think he had done some acting in Germany. It was a very good performance by my mother's standards a lot of professionals and there would be lectures at the Kadoorie School. I remember going to that and listening to, there was a professor there lecturing on the Wagner operas with illustrations. They had actually a good radio station with a lot of your classical music, and I used to stop off at the Shanghai Public Library a lot and take out books on my way back from school. I would stop off at that, and the nice thing about that was that the librarians didn't give a damn what books I took out. I could take out, you know, any book I wanted to. So there were no little children's books and grown ups books. So I ended up reading things like, my mother's she was a little unhappy I ended up reading a lot of Freud.

MJ: Oh really?

PC: Yes, well you know there's a lot of sex and a lot of other things. It's interesting but there's also a lot of sex in Freud. So I learned a lot about sex.

MJ: What was your social life as a teenager?

PC: Well we had stuff in the school. Other than that we just hung out basically. I mean, I had a lot of friends who, most of them were in the Kadoorie School. There were a lot of other kids living in the lane and that was about it.

MJ: Did you date?

PC: We did, no, I wasn't a good, great dater anyway. So your, I'm the wrong person to ask. I mean there were people who did, I didn't. We did go to movies and the movies, you know, were mostly in English but they had subtitles, and we saw a lot of movies. Of course, during the war that wasn't so common, but the Chinese loved movies and they had some of these old, real art deco Rococo you know enormous movie theaters with staircases to heaven kind of thing. The kind of thing, the same kind of thing they had in New York and other places, and it was very, some of them were very nice. My stepfather for a while actually played tennis before the war, and there was a famous place called the race course which was a race course and inside was tennis courts and I remember he belonged to a tennis club there and used to play tennis and I'd go over there and run around or play chess [telephone rang].

MJ: I'll turn it off. How do you feel your experience in Shanghai impacted on your, the rest of your life?

PC: I can't really tell, you know, I mean I have to have some sort of a comparison. For me, it's one item of; I call it one continuous item. There was nothing really, I mean there was the bombing, but I'm rather amazed the bombing had no affect on me. I never remembered it in a dream or anything like that or had a flashback to it. I mean I overcame it. There are other things, I lost a job once and I remembered that in dreams, you know, when I was older, and that I remember, but the bombing, I, you know, it's so hard to say because for my parents it probably really had an impact because their life was changed. My life wasn't changed. It was still sort of developing. Sure I, I don't know what, if it hadn't happened I would probably, my mother had married Gerhard Lenki and I would be living, you know, with this wealthy father and I'd be living a completely different life, probably much more restricted. I wouldn't, to me, I'm glad, I mean I'm fascinated by Chinese history for instance. I love Chinese food, I love Chinese culture, I've been taking courses in Chinese history at the Princeton University in my retirement and so on and so forth and doing an enormous amount of reading and, but emotionally it's very hard to say what, I have no idea what I would have been like if I hadn't had these experiences.

MJ: You've given us such a wonderful interview. Thank you so much.

PC: Thank you.

MJ: This is great. Let's see now. [tape one, side two ended, interview ended]