HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

WALTER H. SILBERSTEIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Marcia Goldberg
Date: November 16, 1999

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WS - Walter H. Silberstein [interviewee]
MG - Marcia Goldberg [interviewer]
Date: November 16, 1999

Tape one, side one:

MG: Tape one, side one. My name is Marcia Goldberg. Today is November 16, 1999. I will be interviewing Walter Silberstein at his home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This is an extension of the Rickshaw Reunion[1]. Mr. Silberstein, where were you born and when?

WS: I was born in Berlin, Germany, of course, in January 6, 1931.

MG: Is Walter Silberstein your correct name?

WS: Close. My first name was Horst, H-O-R-S-T, my middle name was Walter after my uncle but the Horst lends itself-- not only is it very German, but it also lends itself to an awful lot of children calling you "Horsy" and so when the chance came after the war to apply for a visa I officially changed it. So now I'm Walter H. Silberstein.

MG: Is Silberstein your…

WS: With a "B".

MG: …original name?

WS: Yes, yes.

MG: And where did you grow up?

WS: Well the first seven, eight years in Berlin, of course, and then for the next nine in Shanghai, China.

MG: Tell me about your family. What was your father's name?

WS: My father's name was Alfred, A-L-F-R-E-D, Alfred Silberstein. He was a criminal lawyer in Berlin, a very well-known criminal lawyer. My mother worked for him for many years after they got married in the office as a secretary.

MG: What was her name?

WS: Kaethe, K-A-E-T-H-E.

MG: What was her maiden name?

WS: Crohn, C-R-O-H-N. I was an only child being born in '31 might have something to do with that. I had two sets of grandparents.

MG: Now where did they come from?

WS: They were all, all Berliners, my father, my grandfath-- my father's father was a banker in Berlin. He owned a bank. My father had one brother and my mother had a sister and a brother.

MG: And what language did they speak?

WS: In Germany, German.

[1]A meeting of refugees who found refuge in Shanghai during World War II, August 1999.

MG: Did they-- did you ever hear them speak other languages?

WS: No. Not at that point. I found out later my father spoke French. But no, I've never heard them speak anything else but German.

MG: What was the economic status of the family?

WS: Very well to do. I probably would have been an original playboy if we weren't chased out of Germany. My father was very well to do. Besides being a lawyer, he was also involved in the banking business.

MG: And what do you remember about your home and where you lived?

WS: Oddly enough the place where we lived I can remember very well but incidents I don't-- cannot separate between re-telling and what I actually remember. We had a rather large apartment in Berlin in a big concrete building or cement building, I guess it wasn't concrete then, which had two large bedrooms, a maid's room, another room that my father called a smoking room with a balcony and a huge kitchen and a pantry. It was rather large and the size of the rooms from what I can remember it's huge because we brought the furniture with us in Shanghai and they barely fit into our apartment in Shanghai so the place was huge.

MG: What were your religious affiliation during that period of time?

WS: Well, of course, we were Jewish. My father has always been very active in the Jewish community. How much that had to do with a social idea and how much it had to do with religion I really didn't discover until I was grown that he was really more social, just like I was, in religion.

MG: Did you keep the Shabbat?

WS: No.

MG: …keep kosher?

WS: We did not keep kosher. We did not keep the Shabbat. We did keep the holidays.

MG: Did you belong to a synagogue?

WS: We did belong to a synagogue as far as I remember. I was just about eight when I left so I really don't remember and how many synagogues were there at the time I got a little older. They were gone by then by eight. Now in Shanghai we did belong to a syn-- but I'm getting ahead of you.

MG: Did you go to school while you were in Germany?

WS: I did start out in school and then of course after Kristall night-- I'm not sure what happened where they sent me after. I could no longer go to the school that I started out with from my lack of ability to read and write German. I assume I really never went back to school because I never learned to read or write German.

MG: Tell me about the school you went to originally.

WS: I can't. I don't remember anything. It was called *Kaiser Wilhelm Schule*. That's all I remember. There's, there was a tradition, whether it's amongst Jews or amongst Germans I do not know, but they used to give out presents to children that were

just starting school. They were huge cones with toys and candy and all sorts of things and I have pictures of me on the balcony in the, the apartment with a couple of those, but I remember nothing of the school.

MG: Do you remember any of your friends in school or even out of school?

WS: In school, no. Out of school, yes-- because many of them ended up in Shanghai and we became firm friends for years and years and years.

MG: But during the time you were in Berlin, do you remember any of the friends or…?

WS: Only two daughters of a doctor that lived in the same apartment building. They also ended up in Shanghai. They now live in California.

MG: What do you remember as far-- what is your impression of your child, your early childhood in Berlin?

WS: I really don't have much except that we used to go on vacations out of town. Many times I-- from what I can make out from the pictures and from what little bits I remember-- into Lithuania and some place called Willheide [phonetic]. I have no idea where that is. But we also-- we used to go on fairly extensive, fancy vacations.

MG: Where and why did you go to Lithuania?

WS: I guess because my parents liked boating and, and swimming. It was right on the Baltic. It was a place called Memel. I don't know why I remember that now. It's a town in Lithuania [unclear].

MG: Do you recall whether you felt Jewish at that time?

WS: Honestly I can't tell you that. I don't know.

MG: Do you have any recollection of being a happy child?

WS: Yeah, at least I don't have any recollection of being unhappy. I had two sets of grandparents that I associated with though I do have vague recollection of one set of grandparents trying to get a real suit on me which itched like crazy and I refused to wear it and hid under a dining room table and to this day I have a wool allergy so it must have been real even then.

MG: Do you remember when things changed for you or for the family?

WS: No. Not, not that I can honestly say it's my own memory. From re-telling and the stories that happened and our leaving and all that sort of thing, yes I can recall and it probably happened like with everybody else with Kristall night.

MG: Do you remember…?

WS: I don't remember Kristall night but I vaguely remember my mother getting very upset with me and my little girlfriend that lived upstairs, when we piled up a bunch of chairs and benches and knocked them over to imitate the noise of *Kristallnacht.*

MG: Did you, do you remember noise or destruction?

WS: I can't honestly say I remember noise. I don't know, I don't even know if we lived in a real Jewish, Jewish neighborhood. There was a sub-- elevator train-- that

went right by the apartment building where we lived. I don't know if that was a real Jewish neighborhood so I don't know.

MG: You said when you were imitating it making noise?

WS: But again I might be just re-telling from what my parents talked about.

MG: Did you know anyone that was affected by *Kristallnacht?*

WS: No.

MG: Your grandparents?

WS: No, not that I know of.

MG: Was there any effect from the Nuremberg Laws that you knew about?

WS: Not that I know of.

MG: Do you recall any restrictions on your family?

WS: No as far as I know my father still practiced law but he probably lost many of his clients that were non-Jewish that wouldn't talk to him anymore. Whether he could still go to regular courts and practice there in cases I don't know. I really don't know. The fact that I was taken out of school I remember vaguely but what they did with me after that I do not remember either.

MG: Do you remember why-- what they said to you about leaving school?

WS: No I don't. Honestly, I don't.

MG: Did you encounter-- if you do remember, any antisemitism?

WS: In Germany? No not that I recall.

MG: Do you remember hearing your parents discussing anything about…?

WS: Probably and also, you know, when you have a seven year old you try to shelter them probably as much as you can from all of this nonsense. So they probably talked about it after I went to bed or were in another room. I really can't honestly say that I heard much of a discussion about this.

MG: When was the first time you heard that you were going to leave Germany?

WS: When the friend of a very old friend of my father's who was a Police Chief of Berlin-- non-Jewish was one of his clients--, called one afternoon and asked my mother if she knew where my father was and if she did to contact him and tell him not to come home because the Gestapo was looking for him.

MG: And what happened?

WS: He didn't come home and he contacted us and my mother started making arrangements for leaving. This was getting pretty late. This was 1939.

MG: Now where did your father go?

WS: Where he hid I have no idea, I have no idea. I'm not sure my mother knew.

MG: And what happened after that?

WS: Well once, once you had the papers, you were free to leave. Germany did not really restrict anybody from leaving. They wanted to get rid of them at that point still. So we left.

MG: Let me go back a few minutes. When your-- how did your mother approach you to tell you that you were leaving?

WS: I can't tell you that. I don't remember. I don't remember.

MG: So when was the first time you knew you were leaving?

WS: Well, I guess when we went to various offices to get passports which I also needed, at least I was an insert in my mother's and probably went to a doctor's to get inoculations and made arrangements with grandparents who were going to come with us. At least three of them-- my mother's father was dead by then, and I guess those were-- that running around which must have been sometime in early 1939.

MG: How did you feel about leaving?

WS: I have no recollection about that. I don't remember much about the trip until we maybe got to Italy.

MG: Where did you leave from?

WS: Well from Berlin, of course, by train.

MG: Now who left with you?

WS: Two grandmothers and my parents and I and a dog.

MG: And your one…?

WS: My father's father died very shortly before we left, got ready to go. You had all the papers already and whether it was a reaction to the immunization, the shots that he got or as my father later said, he probably died of a broken heart. He couldn't bear to leave. But he died within a couple weeks I guess, or a week before we left. So it was just the two grandmothers and my parents and I and the dog.

MG: Do you remember anything about the trip once you left Berlin?

WS: Not the train trip, not the train trip, at all.

MG: Where did the train take you?

WS: It took us to Italy. We actually left from Trieste but we first went to Genoa for some reason. I guess that's where the train went. And I have pictures of me feeding pigeons and that sort of thing and then getting on this rather large luxury, Italian luxury liner in Trieste.

MG: Do you remember the name?

WS: Yes, the *Conte Verde*, the *Conte Rosso*, excuse me. The *Conte Verde* was a sister ship. *Conte Rosso*.

MG: Did you travel with other refugees?

WS: Yes, there were a lot of other refugees but I don't remember any of them. It turns out that [unclear] happened to be on the same boat from talking to them but I don't remember them.

MG: Now where did you meet your father?

WS: He must have come back once we had the papers because we all traveled together as far as I know. It wasn't one of those separation things where mother and I went ahead.

MG: Do you remember how your parents felt? What was their impression about leaving?

WS: I think my father was very, very upset about this whole thing. I mean, he considered himself a well-known renowned lawyer in the city of Germany. He was a wounded World War I veteran with the attitude, they will never touch me, and when the realization came of yes, they would, I guess that sort of crushed him somewhat.

MG: What was his position in the service?

WS: He was just a soldier. He was just a soldier.

MG: But he was on active duty?

WS: Oh yes, he was on active duty. Yeah, yeah, he was on front lines. But, I think he was-- he got buried somewhere on the line by some shell, so he was a wounded veteran.

MG: What about your grandparents? Had they been in the service at all?

WS: Not that I recall. They would have been, it would have been the Kaisers, I guess.

MG: Did you know anybody else that you traveled with?

WS: No. Not that I recall.

MG: Now how old were you then?

WS: Eight. I was eight in January. We left in May.

MG: Before you left do your recall whether you had to wear a yellow star[2] or there was rationing?

WS: That, I don't remember. I'm sure that if everybody else wore the yellow stars that we did too, whether they put them on children, I don't know.

MG: What was the most frightening experience to you? Were there any…

WS: I don't recall any. I don't recall any. The frightening experience happened on the ship, that was my own doing.

MG: And what was that?

WS: I had a shared a cabin with somebody and I don't know who it was. It was another child. We traveled first class. There were no steerage for us, and one of the-- of course, on that, on that Italian ship was not only we had swimming pools but we also had movies running and although I was told not to go to the movies, I snuck out and went to see that movie. It was called "*Der Berg Ruft."* I remember that to this day. "*The Mountain Calls"* was a mountain climbing movie and what upset me so terribly was all these horses and mules falling off the mountains as they lost their footing. The people never seemed to have bothered me when they went with them but the animals did and I had nightmares. So I ran to my mother who was at the pool and she said, "I told you not to go" and she made me sleep on the floor in her cabin.

MG: Do you know why your parents decided to go to Shanghai?

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[2]The yellow star was introduced in Germany January 15, 1941. www.USHMM.org.

WS: Oh yeah, at least I found out afterwards. I mean there was no other place we could go to. We had no relatives in the United States. England wouldn't take us. I don't think he ever considered going to Palestine at that time. The only other open area was Argentina and Argentina seemed to have told them that send us your assets so we can make sure that you can support yourself during the war and then we will let you in. And my father being a rather shrewd lawyer says, "Yeah, yeah, I believe that when I see it," and we went to Shanghai like a lot of other people.

MG: Do you know if any agencies helped you?

WS: I don't think so. I don't think--. My father as I said was very well to do and somehow and I don't know as you probably talked to a lot of other people who managed to get out with their shirts on their back and a suitcase and ten dollars or something-- we brought everything with us, all our furniture, everything. I have no idea how he managed it.

MG: How about money?

WS: And money, oh yeah. Whether he moved it through Switzerland, I have no idea. He would never talk to me about that afterwards.

MG: Were you able to take with your books and toys?

WS: Yeah, everything.

MG: So how long was the trip?

WS: Four weeks. We went out through the Suez Canal and then of course as you get to the tropics it became a-- that I remember some of the stuff. Every time you pulled into a port, whether it was Colombo or Bombay or Singapore you had those dozens and dozens of natives in little boats trying to sell you fresh fruits and vegetables by throwing them up on deck and you'd drop the money down. Wonderful bananas, pineapples and then up through Malaya, Wanmalaya [phonetic] up the coast to Hong Kong then to Shanghai.

MG: Did you ever disembark from the ship?

WS: I don't think so. I don't remember.

MG: Tell me about your arrival in Shanghai.

WS: I don't think I can tell you much. We moved in an apartment some place on a temporary basis. I don't know where it was or anything until we found a permanent apartment in the French Concession area which we lived on the entire time until we left Shanghai.

MG: What was your impression when you got off the ship? Do you remember?

WS: The impression getting off the ship. I don't remember getting off at all. I just…

MG: What was your first impression?

WS: My first impression was, I guess was just living in that apartment with the two grandparents and my parents and being enrolled in school and trying to cope with

learning English at the same time I learned other subjects because I only spoke German at the time and as-- because all the instruction was in English.

MG: So tell me about the school. What was the name of it?

WS: The school was the Shanghai Jewish School. It was originally built and funded by the Sephardic Community. Later on it became a sort of mix between Sephardi and the Russian Jewish community and then a lot of the other refugees that came, the ones that lived in that area, even some of the others traveled up because they thought it was a better school then the one that was in Hongkew. There was a pretty mixed bag of people. It wasn't very large. I think if I remember rightly, we only had one class for each level, each form, so it was not a very large school.

MG: And how many students were in your form?

WS: Probably, from what I recall, probably I doubt if there were more than 30 or 35 at least looking at some of the class photographs. But it went from first grade all the way up to graduation, High School graduation.

MG: And how long did you go to school there?

WS: I went the entire time until we left in October 1948. I would have graduated the following June.

MG: So you didn't graduate?

WS: I did not graduate, no. I left unfortunately just before that. [Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

MG: Tape one, side two of an interview with Walter Silberstein, November 16, 1999. My name is Marcia Goldberg. Okay, Mr. Silberstein, we were discussing your education in Shanghai. Tell me about the school. What was it like, what you remember?

WS: Well the school changed drastically over the years.

MG: Well tell me about…

WS: When…

MG: …the beginning when you first started.

WS: …when we first got there, as far as I remember, many of the teachers were Russian. And then some of the refugee teachers moved in and helped out. There were also a number of English teachers. They disappeared at the beginning of the war, because they were interned by the Japanese. After the war was over, we went back to a British system. As a matter of fact, our final exams, the last two years, our final exams came from Oxford or Cambridge, rather came from Cambridge. Our principal, Headmaster as we called him was English.

MG: Were the teachers Jewish?

WS: No, no, some of them were, of course, some of them were, not all of them.

MG: Were there Russian teachers?

WS: Some of the English teachers weren't. There was a-- I mean one of my class teachers was a woman by the name of P. Kelly, [unclear] Kelly. I don't remember her name. I know she was not Jewish. I know Mr. Holland, the Principal, the Headmaster, A.F.T. Holland, looked like he came right out of the British Foreign Service, the ramrod type guy with a, like a stick down his back. My gym teacher was Russian. He was not Jewish either whom you've probably have talked to, Kovenchikov [phonetic].

MG: What about the, the other students, were they Jewish?

WS: The vast majority of them were, the vast majority of the students were Jewish. Many of them were, at the time Sephardi, a lot of the Russian Jews and some refugees, yes. After all it was called the Shanghai Jewish School. I am not sure whether anybody that wasn't Jewish, at least, I don't recall.

MG: Did you make friends?

WS: Oh yes, oh yes, to this day I know many of these kids. We're all grandparents now. Oh yes, quite a few of them both in school, the ones that lived in the neighborhood. We hung around after school, formed regular gangs like any group of kids do. Sure.

MG: What was a typical day for you like?

WS: Well, it probably changed drastically as I got older, but the, the way I got to school was by bicycle. I rode a bicycle, most of us did because transportation was difficult to come by, especially during the war years. Ride bicycle to school.

MG: Well how about before the war? You came in 19…

WS: Even then…

MG: It was 1939.

WS: Well, it was 1939, 1940, it was only a year before the war started. I don't ever recall taking a bus to school, so I must have ridden my bicycle to school all along. I spent most of the day in school, then came home. I guess did homework, under duress probably from my mother.

MG: What did you do for entertainment?

WS: Everything anybody else does. However at that time, I didn't join the Boy Scouts yet but went to the movies. We had a group of people, kids that we played together with, out on the street, in each others' apartments. There was a bicycle store down in the apartment building where we lived and I hung out there, down there, and watched them repair bicycles. They were Chinese owned and most things that kids do.

MG: What was your relationship with the Russian community?

WS: The strange thing is, many of the Russians, Jews have names that do not sound Russian and it wasn't until I ran this first reunion in 1991 that I realized that most of the people I knew were Russian and not the refugee community. I had completely forgotten that somehow or never knew that many of them were actually Russians. All the ones that I hung around with, or the vast majority of them anyway were Russian Jews. People like Zagerman [phonetic], that sounds German but they were Russians, very Orthodox Jews. It never occurred to me that when I ran this reunion, this first reunion that I hardly knew any of the people that showed up and that was because I never lived in Hongkew and didn't really associate with these people very much.

MG: Well the Russian Jews that you knew, how long had they been in Shanghai?

WS: Well most of these kids were born there. The Russians came between-- well there were two, probably two distinct groups of Russians that came. The non-Jewish Russians probably came at the turn of the century when they fled the Czar and then the-- most of the Jews left after the Russian Revolution, made their way through Siberia, into Northern China and many of them then filtered down to Shanghai. Most of them were fairly well to do, had made their businesses, were there many, many, many years.

MG: You said you lived in the French…?

WS: French Concession, yes.

MG: What about the French, or why was it called the French?

WS: Well, the French Concession and the International Settlement were really subdivisions of the city of Shanghai which was obtained by the British after China lost the Opium War in 1845, '48, something like that. I think they arranged five treaty ports which were open to the world, controlled by whatever nationality wants to control their section of it, and in the British section, the International Settlement. Actually it was the British section and the American section, but they sort of merged and I don't know when

that happened, long before we got there into the International Settlement. But the police were all Sikhs. The telephone company was Bell Telephone. In the French Concession many of the police and the courts were French. But that's about the only French I saw. I never remember speaking to any French citizens. I don't know where they went to school.

MG: Did you have any contact with Sephardic Jews?

WS: Oh yeah, they were in our school, too, quite a bit of it. As a matter of fact, the school was built of course by the Sephardis and their main Synagogue was on the same grounds.

MG: Did your family belong to a synagogue there?

WS: Yes, but we already belonged to the Russian Synagogue. The Russian Synagogue originally was in what eventually became Hongkew, and when they outgrew that in about 1928, '29, '30, built a new synagogue in the French Concession, which never got a name. It was always called "The New Synagogue."

MG: And what type of synagogue was it, what…?

WS: Orthodox, it was very, very Orthodox, it was actually run by Rabbi Ashkenazi, himself. He was a Chief Rabbi and men and women were separated for all holidays, Friday night services, everything else. As a matter of fact, a core group of that including Ashkenazi and the Zagermans [phonetic] for High Holidays, for Yom Kippur spent the night there, went through a 24 hour cycle in synagogue, never left.

MG: What about your father?

WS: As far as what?

MG: As far as religion.

WS: We did the same thing as far as I remember that we have always done. We went for the High Holidays. We occasionally went for other things, but no, he was not active in that synagogue.

MG: Were your family members active in the community?

WS: My father was and my mother was, both of them. Yes, because we I guess were much more well to do than most of the other refugees. Many of the refugees were destitute. He eventually became very active in relief work in the Hongkew Ghetto area and whether he formed it or not, but eventually became the chairman of something that was called the Kitchen Fund which supplied meals to many of the refugees in Hongkew, in the camps.

MG: Did he work while he was in…?

WS: He had a store. He and a friend, lifelong friend, opened up a partnership selling crystal, china, linen ware, things like that which before the war they started importing. Later on, I got the feeling much of the stuff they sold was from what the refugees had to get rid of to make some, have some money. And then again, after the war he started importing again until we left in '48. But he got very active in that relief and because once the war really got going and the funds from the United States were cut off,

and even from Switzerland, he became very active in the Russian and Sephardic community, raising money to keep this Kitchen Fund going and because of that we got permission from the Japanese authority to stay out of the ghetto area. That's really why we managed to stay out.

MG: Did you ever work?

WS: No, not in Shanghai. No. No, I went to school and did everything else. I was a scout leader, not a leader, a patrol leader. I joined the scouts, Boy Scouts. First the British Boy Scouts, after the war the Americans Scouts. I belonged to the Jewish Recreation Club and boxed for them and was active on half a dozen school teams and volleyball and track and that sort of thing. Even joined ORT class for a couple of years.

MG: Did you ever experience any antisemitism?

WS: In Shanghai?

MG: Yes.

WS: None, none whatsoever.

MG: Now this is before the war in '41 so did-- what was the relationship with the Chinese people?

WS: Personally? I've had no problems whatsoever. I mean we lived in amongst them even though it was the French Concession. There were a lot of Chinese that lived in that area. They had stores there. I associated with them. As I said earlier, one of the things was a bicycle store that was in the same building. It was owned by Chinese. They did repairs down there, and I use to hang out down there when I was a kid, trying to help them as much as I could, if they let me.

MG: Was there any difficulty in obtaining food or medical facility?

WS: Again, our situation was probably very different from the people in Hongkew. No, as far as I know, I never went hungry. My mother always cooked. Where she got the food from I couldn't, cannot tell you. Where she obtained it as far as medical goes, most of my father's fraternity brothers were doctors. Some of them were quite active on the Kitchen Fund, too.

MG: Were they practicing there?

WS: They were practicing and so we never lacked for…

MG: Did you belong to any Jewish Youth Organizations?

WS: Yeah, I belonged to the Jewish Recreation Club which was headquartered in Hongkew and that's where I boxed. A boxing trainer over there oddly enough was the same man that my father took me to back in Berlin when I was five year old and I quit after I got hit in the nose for the first time but then went back to it and fought until I left Shanghai.

MG: Did things change for you when the war broke out after the Americans were attacked?

WS: I really can't say that they changed drastically except that our teachers changed.

MG: Do you remember when the war broke out?

WS: Yes, to some degree I remember when the war broke out. For one thing, the big announcement on the radios, you heard that Pearl Harbor was attacked. And then there was a sort of running gun battle on the river between a couple of American and British gun boats firing on the Japanese, sort of a perfunctory show of force before they surrendered. And there also was a Italian luxury liner in the harbor which was the sister ship of the *Conte Rosso* we came over, the *Conte Verde* and the Italian captain of that refused to turn the ship over to the Jap, to the Japanese even though they were allies. And he scuttled the boat right in the middle of the river. And it just went phbttttt lay over on it side and bottled up the river for the entire war. But beyond that, well the American school across the street closed and it was taken over by the Japanese Gendarmerie as their headquarters. But again it did not affect me that much since we did not have to go through the border area of the ghetto. I rode my bicycle anyway to school for there was less transportation now on buses since there was no gasoline. There was gasoline rationing.

MG: Was the religious life able to continue?

WS: Oh yeah, oh yeah, not only in where we were but also in the ghetto area.

MG: Were you Bar Mitzvah'd?

WS: Yes, yes, as a matter of fact, I rode my bike to Hongkew for months on end to get private tutoring from-- I don't remember what the man's name was or why my father chose that particular man. And as a matter of fact, my Bar Mitzvah itself was, took place in Hongkew because that's where most of my parents' friends, relatives were, so it took place at the other school, the Kadoorie School in Hongkew.

MG: Was it…?

WS: I vague and not vague, I have memories of my mother and my father and myself all dressed up for Bar Mitzvah. My father wore-- my mother with a fur stole riding a bicycle to the Bar Mitzvah.

MG: Did the weather affect you at all?

WS: No, as a kid it was hot as heck, but we survived. I don't remember being particularly uncomfortable. I don't know how thinking back now what those temperatures and humidity was like. I don't recall the winters ever being very cold. I remember one small snowfall and it never stayed. It did get cold and damp. And we had a charcoal stove to heat the place during the war because there was no steam heating anymore in that apartment. But no, I don't remember being particularly-- I'm sure my parents were.

MG: Did any members of the family die during the time in…?

WS: My father's mother died in 1943, '44, during the war and just before Rosh Hashanah. I remember that. I don't know the exact date anymore, the year even, yes. And she was buried in Shanghai…

MG: And…

WS: Mother's mother lived to join us, to come with us to live in Philadelphia.

MG: Was your grandmother buried in a Jewish…

WS: Yes, there were three or four Jewish cemeteries.

MG: …cemetery?

WS: There were four Jewish cemeteries in Shanghai, which unfortunately are all gone now. They've been bulldozed over.

MG: When did that happen?

WS: During the Cultural Revolution. The-- they claim that they saved the stones but nobody's ever been able to find them.

MG: Did your family have any correspondence with the family, rest of the family in Germany or anywhere that they had settled?

WS: Not in Germany as far as I know. But we did have some correspondence with cousins that went England, went to England, got to England. When they got to England it was before we even left Germany, they got to England. And there's a sort of strange little tale involved in that I have. My father's brother and his wife did not leave for Shanghai. They decided they were going to move into Belgium. They were just one step ahead of the Germans moving into Belgium. They also had a couple friends with them and a dog, and then decided to go to France and they won't let them on the train with the dog. So they sent the two women ahead. They went to Paris. Something was happening in Paris so they decided to make it to the French Coast, and somehow they got involved in the British expeditionary force that was being evacuated at Dunkirk and got themselves evacuated with them.

MG: Did you and your family know anything about what was happening to the Jews in Germany?

WS: There were rumors. As far as I know there were some rumors that, that concentration camps-- well, they were more than rumors, because we had friends that made it to Shanghai that were released from concentration camps, once they had papers. We have-- but there's a very good friend who was a *Hazzan* [Heb.: Cantor] has the number stamped on his arm. I don't think anybody until after the war knew of the full horror of the extermination camps.

MG: During the war, was there any restrictions or any difficulty getting food or medical supplies for you and your family?

WS: For me and my family, not that I recall. Not at all, I mean. For one thing, I was never sick. Back in Berlin, till the time I was eight, I was constantly ill. I had ear infections, I had jaundice, I had scarlet fever, you name it, plus all the children's diseases I got through. Very poor climate and everything else in China and I was never sick a day in nine years I was there, so…

MG: Did you have any relationship with the Japanese?

WS: Very little. I personally didn't. Except for about two years they enforced the school to have Japanese language classes. They threw out the Chinese language. I

went to the school which was basically in English. I always spoke German, and it was an academic school so we had French, and it was a Jewish school so we had Hebrew, and then when we were in China, we also had Chinese as a language. And between all of them I managed to learn English. I used to refuse to learn Japanese. I never took any part, any active part in it. I did what I had to. I never learned it.

MG: What about your parents? Did they have contact with the Japanese?

WS: My father of course did, and to some degree my mother did too because of their involvement in this Relief. We meet every three months. We got an extension for our permission to stay out of the ghetto.

MG: And you were able to stay out throughout?

WS: Never moved at all, never moved at all, the entire-- until we left in 1948.

MG: Did your relationship with the Chinese change?

WS: No, not that I recall. No.

MG: Do you remember any of the bombing?

WS: Yes, of course by that time I was, I was already older. For one thing there was an air raid on the night of my Bar Mitzvah. We got stuck where we were. After the Bar Mitzvah we went to some restaurant and nightclub and got stuck there for hours. We couldn't leave because there was air raid and you couldn't get outside. But a number of the times later on when the air forces, American air force, came over, before they actually hit Shanghai, you could see them fly by. I used to climb onto the roof of a building next door and watch them go by. And then of course there was that disaster in 1945 I guess it was. They missed what they were aiming for in the ghetto area where the Japanese had put some communications equipment in those ammunition storage. And I remember 30, 40 some refugees were killed but hundreds of Chinese. But that was the only real air raid that really did some damage to the ghetto area, nothing in our area at all. The only other thing that I remember about bombing wasn't really bombing as much as the Japanese tried to raise that Italian luxury liner and during that they raised little by little and ran huge anchor chains around the boat, across the Bund which was a huge wide waterfront and around the buildings and always tightened them. Well every time they got it three quarters of the way up, the air force came over and submachined those machine gun chains and it went pbtttt right back into the water. They just wanted that river bottled up all during the war.

MG: Did you hear or know of any antisemitism from the Japanese?

WS: Well the only thing I heard was because of some of the individual Japanese, like Ghoya who put himself out as what he'd call himself, King of the Jews, I think was his favorite expression, but real antisemitism? The official policy as far as I have read of the Japanese government was not to be antisemitic. In the back of their minds, the entire American financial establishment and the press was in Jewish hands and if this war was over if they ever wanted to go back and become into trade business, they

better not do what the Germans were doing, and there was an official declaration to that point.

MG: Did you hear of any situations where there was cruelty that was exhibited?

WS: Individual Japanese, sure, soldiers and people like Ghoya and some of the refugees got themselves into trouble. I guess through black market or some other stuff. And they ended up in jail. Jail could very well be a death sentence, not because they torture or kill people but because of diseases you picked up from your fellow Chinese prisoners.

MG: How did your parents adapt to all of this?

WS: From what I could make out, I think my father-- my mother was adapting no problems. My father adapted very well, too, as far as I could make out, better even than he did to the United States afterwards. Why? [Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

MG: Mr. Silberstein we were discussing your parents. This is tape two, side one of an interview with Walter Silberstein, November 16, 1999. My name is Marcia Goldberg. Your parents and their adjustment to the new environment they were living in, how did they?

WS: I thought they adjusted very well. Probably because they were so busy. My father with his relief work. He had his store, which kept him busy. My mother also helped out in the store, plus she did a lot of work with the children in Hongkew, organizing things like Hanukah parties and other holiday activities. So they were both busy, all through the war with this effort and I never got the feeling they were unhappy at all.

MG: Did they ever speak about missing Germany or returning?

WS: I don't think so that they ever did. At least not at that point. There was no use talking about it. There was no way to go back and, no I don't think that was ever discussed.

MG: What happened after the war?

WS: Aft…

MG: Excuse me. Do you remember when the war ended?

WS: Oh sure, oh sure, there was a lot of celebration going on of course. Actually the thing I remember even more than that was the announcement that President Roosevelt had died. But then when the war was over that announcement was made too. You saw it primarily because all the sudden you got up one morning and the Japanese soldiers were unarmed. They had just put their weapons away. I guess they must have gotten orders from above to put their weapons away. They were still on their posts across the street at the American School Gendarmerie that they set up. But their weapons were gone. So we had a pretty good idea and then peoples' radios came out and the news was passed around that the war was over. I cannot recall ever hearing about the atom bomb before, while, when they were dropped. Some people say they heard rumors, some bomb. I can't say that. But definitely on the way to school you suddenly noticed that the Japanese were no longer armed.

MG: Going back you mentioned when Roosevelt died. You remember that announcement?

WS: That announcement -- I don't remember why or how it was made, but that must have flashed through Shanghai, for some reason and I guess it put everybody in a big depression for a little while. And because of the day difference between United States and China, China, the announcement was made in Phila-- in Philadelphia, in China it was Friday the 13th. And I think he actually died on Thursday 12th here in the States, if I remember rightly.

MG: What changes did you observe after the war?

WS: Well, I guess we said the Japanese disappearing. The British and Americans came back from internment camps, the school, the American School reopened. I guess things became-- a lot of the Hongkew children came back to our school, some of the British teachers came back, or new ones were hired. I guess this life was a lot simpler, easier anyway, not simpler, easier again whether again. As I said, I didn't remember any food rationing or my mother having problems getting food so I wouldn't know if there was any increase in that. I never paid attention to that. I had my own little world I lived in.

MG: So your life really didn't change?

WS: My life did not change. No.

MG: And you continued to go to school?

WS: I continued to go to school and actually was making plans to --we had no intention of leaving Shanghai at that point. My father was beginning to make contacts again to import for the store that he had. I was talking about college. I think if all things would have stayed equal as they were right after the war we would've stayed. It was…

MG: You…

WS: It was under the threat, the more threat of communist takeover that forced us anyway to leave.

MG: Now when was that?

WS: It started going downhill late 1947. You could already see the handwriting on the wall. That Chiang Kai-Shek was no match for Mao Tse-tung and by 1948 it behooved you to leave, so...

MG: When were you aware that you were going to leave?

WS: Oh we had made arrangements sometime during middle, I guess early 1948, to leave and applied for visa. We were lucky being with the German quota. There was no problem getting it and then oddly enough we couldn't-- well we could get out-- but we couldn't get into the States even with the visa because there was a shipping strike on the West Coast. The longshoremen, which was then Communist run, I forgot the man's name that ran that union, but he shut down the whole West Coast so you couldn't go. And finally at the last moment we had to fly before our visa ran out and that was October 1948.

MG: Did your parents consider going anywhere other than the States?

WS: I don't think so. My father once mentioned that he could have gotten or that Germany offered him a judgeship if he would come back and asked what I would do if he decided to go back. I don't know whether it was a hypothetical question or not and I said, "Well, I will keep going on to the United States."

MG: Would you have?

WS: Probably, probably. It was never brought up again to my knowledge. That's why I think it might have been a hypothetical question more than anything else. Whether he seriously considered ever accepting that and going back, I don't know.

MG: So when did you leave?

WS: October 1948, with…

MG: And who went with you?

WS: My father, my mother and one grandmother who was still alive, flew from Northwest Airline, old prop planes from China to Tokyo, Tokyo to the Aleutian Islands, the Aleutian Islands to Anchorage, Alaska to Seattle and then to San Francisco.

MG: How did you feel about leaving Shanghai?

WS: I think I was kind of sad. I mean I enjoyed my life there. I had a good time. I left old friends behind. Scouting was -- I was doing fairly well with my boxing career, amateur boxing career and all considered…

MG: Tell me about that. You had mentioned before…

WS: Well I had gotten involved in this recreation club and started boxing and we boxed within the club and some of the Chinese clubs and after the war was over in 1945 we even had matches against military people. They arranged cards for the entertainment of troops. Even one fight I had was actually onboard a cruiser, an American cruiser in the harbor.

MG: And how good were you?

WS: I was pretty good. I'd won most of my fights. I don't know if it would have gotten me anywhere. I don't think I ever had the intention of becoming a professional. I don't think I did.

MG: What were your ambitions?

WS: I somehow always thought I always wanted to be an engineer. What kind? I don't know. As a career that I pursued when I first got to Philadelphia in the States after I got out of the service.

MG: Well what happened when you arrived here? Where did you stop?

WS: Well the various refugee groups that sponsored the refugees to come in under the Stateless refugee act that congress passed in '47 or '48 made it a point that you could not settle in either New York or San Francisco because they were overloaded with people.

MG: What organization was that?

WS: I think it was the Joint and also some organization called the Red Feather, that's who put us up here in Philadelphia. I don't remember who ran it or what. It was the Red Feather Organization[3] and so we stayed. They put us up for a month or so in San Francisco, in hotels until we made up our mind what we wanted to do. And, I guess we decided on Philadelphia. My father decided on Philadelphia for once because my mother's sister already lived in Philadelphia and it was close to New York. So we went to Philadelphia.

MG: So when did you move, arrive in Philadelphia?

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[3]Red Feather Organization - logo for community Chest, established 1923 for distribution of needed funds in an orderly manner. In the '60s, became United way. www.UWlafayette.org/history

WS: Just before, just after the, just before the elections in 1948. So it must have been November sometime because I remember Harry Truman running.

MG: And then you-- did you continue school?

WS: Well, I-- first of all, I had to get a high school diploma. I didn't have a high school diploma. So I went to Temple University evening High School. They had such a thing then. Because I had no background in American History-- in Pennsylvania you needed Pennsylvania History. And I took a G.E.D. and got that**.** Then I started getting jobs hoping to get more money to go to college at that point. And then the Korean War broke out.

MG: Did you, your father able to bring his money and his possessions here?

WS: We could not bring the possessions because we flew. It was a spur of the moment. We had to get out. We left it behind. Somebody was supposed to sell the stuff for us. I don't think we ever got our money back really.

MG: Well what about the money that your father had?

WS: How much money he had left at that point, I don't think there was much left. Most of it was spent in Shanghai.

MG: So what were your impressions of your new country?

WS: Again, I was really busy going to school, working. Don't have too many of that new, that small era. There was several groups of former Shanghailanders that had clubs, Jewish clubs that I was associated with. We all went out on, on dates or parties and swimming in summer, that sort of thing. But that was my social life primarily.

MG: Did you go to college?

WS: Not until I got out of the service. I-- well, when the Korean War broke out in 1950 I decided that I would be better off or I would prefer to spend four years in the Air force in a bed than two years in a foxhole in Korea. So I enlisted in the Air Force and eventually landed in Japan for two and a half years through the Air Force and then I came out. After I came out I went to college under the GI bill. And that's where I met my wife, in Japan.

MG: How did that come about?

WS: Her father was Korean military by that time. He was giving-- he was a doctor who was spent the entire World War II in the Service and then was given 48 hours to get back into uniform when the Korean War broke out. And he decided the heck with it, I better stay and make this a career. And then by 1952, I guess it was, he could bring his family over and that's where we met.

MG: Where were you married?

WS: We were married in Oklahoma. After they came back they were stationed in Oklahoma and I was stationed in Kansas. But the reason, actually we got together, it was a very small Air Force base that I was in, in southern Japan and he was the surgeon at a small hospital where they brought the wounded from Korea in. And they had no Jewish chaplain. There were only about 30 Jews in the whole outfit and I volunteered to

run Friday night services. And Nancy's parents, her mother decided that, well we do all this, why don't we have an Oneg Shabbat at our house after Friday night services. So that's how we got to know each other.

MG: Well when did you become discharged from the Army?

WS: January, 1955.

MG: And what was your rank?

WS: Not much of anything. I was a rebel. I got to what they call Airman First Class, E-4.

MG: Were you in active duty?

WS: Oh yeah, for four years, sure. Yeah, but then since I had four years, I didn't have to join any kind of reserves and I refused. Military and I just don't get along. I'm just too much of a rebel for that.

MG: So did you start school when you returned?

WS: I, matter of fact, I got discharged two weeks early to start Drexel University. I made arrangements via mail to get accepted at Drexel. Actually, Nancy and I were married already. And then we left Kansas directly and started school in a week.

MG: So you got your degree from Drexel?

WS: Yes but not in engineering.

MG: What was it?

WS: I found out that the mathematics and the higher mathematics involved in engineering and I just didn't get along and we switched over to Business Administration with a minor in Accounting.

MG: What did you do in the-- after you finished your schooling? What was your career?

WS: I actually, I worked for the entire time that I-- except for the first year. After that I worked the entire time that I went to school. It took me nine years to graduate Drexel. I started out working for the Telephone Company for six years. And when they gave me no career path when I was graduating I went over to General Electric and worked for them for a couple years and got laid off the same week Kennedy was assassinated. And then eventually joined the War on Poverty, became a Youth Counselor for the State of Pennsylvania and then moved up into the Federal Government doing about the same thing but administering those programs for 24 years. The Department of Labor.

MG: Did you retire?

WS: [signified yes]

MG: When was that?

WS: I retired from the Department of Labor in 1992 and thought I'd get a temporary job just to keep busy because Nancy was still working and had a while to go. And she helped me get a job in a hospital, University of Pennsylvania doing data input

and report writing but from home. I refused to go to an office anymore. And I was going to do that for two or three years. I just retired from there after seven.

MG: When you think back on your life in Shanghai, how do you think this affected your future?

WS: Interesting question. Well of course, as I said before, I really enjoyed myself. I had a good time. I did everything that a normal child can do. But at the same time, I guess it did form my personality. Probably more so than if I would have stayed in Germany because of the different types of people that you came across there. Rather than being a completely homogeneous group like there would have been in Germany or in the United States if you lived sort of insular. Living with Russian Jews, Sephardis and the Chinese and Jews and non-Jews and everything else I thought gave me an awful broad background and…

MG: [unclear]

WS: …tolerance and getting along with people and probably got me involved in social work and all the activities I'm involved now, labor unions and all the other stuff that I have done.

MG: So it was a positive experience?

WS: Oh I think so absolutely, absolutely, it's a positive experience.

MG: Have you been back there?

WS: I organized a trip, what do you call it, Rickshaw Reunion in Shanghai in 1993. And there were 36 of us including again some spouses. And we had a wonderful time. We made a custom-made trip. If you get a package tour, you spend a day and a half in Shanghai. We had it altered and we spent five days in Shanghai and we actually had a little reunion with the meeting and everything else in the hotel in Shanghai with a couple of guest speakers and all. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. Being in a group I think made it much more emotional than if you go by yourselves.

MG: Are you still in touch with the people that you've met in Shanghai?

WS: Some of them, yes. Well for one thing, one of the-- my boy scouts in Shanghai was a Chinese boy who I kept in contact with after I left and then made a very unfortunate error on my part for him. When I got to Japan and got my new blue uniform, I sent him a picture of me in my uniform, and I got him in trouble with the Chinese government. What is he doing with a picture of an American soldier? He ended up in a retraining camp for a number of years. He never told me about it. After the Cultural Revolution, I got in contact with him again and we wrote back and forth and I asked him about it and he would not tell me. But when we went over for this reunion that's in 1993, I had suggested-- it's not that he no longer lived in Shanghai, he lived near Canton-- said I would send him the money for him to fly up and meet me. And he said "No, my sister still lives in Shanghai, I'm going to come up anyway. Do you happen to have a picture of us in the Scouts because I can't find mine." And I happen to have an 8 x 10 of our last meeting, which I brought with me. So to this day, I'm still corresponding with him.

MG: And you have other friends from then?

WS: Not friends because everybody that I knew-- the Chinese friends, no. I don't have any other real Chinese friends, but the other friends are scattered around the world. Yes, I keep in contact with them. That's what got me started on the reunion in '91. I was trying to get together with some of them. You know this game of "What ever happened to?" and you put a name in there and that's what got me started. I do have some other contacts in Shanghai from running the reunion and running other things like I guess you've come across the name of, Professor Phong Quong [phonetic] whom I seem to get together, well not get together, but correspond by email regularly.

MG: Another question, one more for you, you have children…?

WS: Yes. Three boys.

MG: What are their names?

WS: David is the oldest who is now 42, Alan is three years younger and David is three years, I mean John, three years younger than that.

MG: And do you have grandchildren?

WS: I have three grandchildren, David has two sons, a fifteen year old and a ten year old, and Alan has a daughter who is now six.

MG: And what are their names?

WS: The oldest is Ryan, and then comes Justin, and Samantha.

MG: Well thank you very much.

WS: You are more than welcome. [Tape two, side one ended. Interview ended.]