

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

IRMGARD ZACHARIAS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eva Abraham
Date: October 19, 1991

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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IZ - Irmgard Zacharias [interviewee]

EA - Eva Abraham [interviewer]

L - Lisa [grandson's wife]

Date: October 19, 1991¹

Tape one, side one:

EA: We are sitting in Philadelphia at the Shanghai Reunion and you were kind enough to volunteer to do an interview with me. Please give me your full name.

IZ: Irmgard Zacharias.

EA: And what was your maiden name?

IZ: Pinkus. P-I-N-K-U-S.

EA: And you were born in?

IZ: In a suburb of Berlin, Berlin Friedrichshagen.

EA: Okay. And what was your mother's maiden name?

IZ: Blum. B-L-U-M.

EA: All right. And you lived in Berlin, and went to school in Berlin, and...

IZ: I went to a lyceum, and this is something, like a private school.

EA: Right. Right. Were there, did you have siblings? Brothers and sisters?

IZ: I have one brother.

EA: And were you Jewish? Were you...

IZ: No, no...

EA: ...attending schools...

IZ: We are Jewish. We are Jewish.

EA: And you attended school in...

IZ: Berlin.

EA: In Berlin. And, what was the situation when Hitler came into power? Did your parents prepare at all for any kind of emigration?

IZ: No, you know, my father served in the First World War, and they said they that the officers from the First World War will not be persecuted.

EA: And your father believed that.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: He did not make any preparation at all.

IZ: Nothing in the beginning. And, nobody, you know, we lived in a small place. There were 17,000 people, and my parents had a store there for 33 years, and were very, how should I say...

EA: Popular?

IZ: Yeah.

¹Collateral Material file available through the Gratz College Tuttleman Library includes correspondence containing additional detail on life in Shanghai.

EA: Right, and you felt safe.

IZ: Yeah. We-- nobody bothered us, and my father belonged to different clubs, and my brother and I, we played tennis in, this was-- we were only exactly six Jewish families in the place where we lived.

EA: Say it again, Fredricks-...

IZ: Friedrichshagen. F-R-...

EA: H-A-G-E-N at the end.

IZ: Yes.

EA: Tell me, your mother was also a Berliner?

IZ: No, my mother was from Silesia.

EA: Oh, Silesia. And so then you believed, your father, your parents believed, did not make any real...

IZ: Efforts.

EA: Efforts...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: To emigrate, to anywhere.

IZ: No, and then, when it got worse, you know, it started slow and then it got worse...

EA: Right. What about the *Kristallnacht*?

IZ: There the store was smashed, and couldn't be re-, it wasn't supposed to be reopened.

EA: Correct.

IZ: [Talking to someone in background] Yeah. And then, my father realized we have to move. And I ran from one consulate to the other to get papers, and nothing, because Hitler confessed [she probably means confiscated] our money, and we didn't have the, how would I call that, the *Vorzeigen* [German: to show]. I, what is that in, you know to the United States, everybody had to bring under \$25. That would be...

EA: And you needed an affidavit.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: I didn't ask you when you were born. Is that too much of a personal question?

IZ: No, no. I was born on July 15, '04.

EA: '04. So in 1939...

IZ: 35.

EA: You were 35 years old. Did you have a profession?

IZ: No, I worked in the store with my parents.

EA: You helped out, and your brother also?

IZ: No, my brother had a job in Berlin.

EA: So you went to the consulate, tried to get the family out...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Your father was, too busy? Or, did not take it too seriously? Or...

IZ: You know, I was younger than my parents, so I said, I tried, you know, I have, did it for them. That they don't have to stand to line, in line, and, and my father was very depressed by all this, you know? He, he didn't think in the beginning that that could happen.

EA: How did you actually get out then, to Shanghai?

IZ: One of my cousins had connections with some Japanese people, and we got four tickets to a Japanese line.

EA: You bought them?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: How did you go, from where? From Hamburg?

IZ: No, from Berlin. We went from Berlin to Naples, and from Naples to Shanghai.

EA: Naples.

IZ: In Italy.

EA: Yeah. And, on a, on what sort of ship? On an Italian boat?

IZ: No, no, a Kamima, Kazima Mahos [phonetic] was the Japanese warship, just re-built for commercial travel.

EA: What is the date that you left Naples?

IZ: 17th of May.

EA: 17th of May?

IZ: No, we left Berlin...

EA: Oh.

IZ: ...on the 17th of May.

EA: Okay. And then when did you leave Naples for Shanghai?

IZ: On the 20th. And we were only half a day in Naples and one day in Rome.

EA: 20th of...

IZ: May.

EA: 1939?

IZ: 1939, yeah. [To someone in background, "You learned something?" Person responds, "I'm learning something!"]

EA: And, tell me-- this is so important, that's exactly why, I think, for the next generation, it is very important to do the history-- who, did you know anybody? So who, actually when you say 'we'? Who was...

IZ: My parents, my brother and I.

EA: Did you have any other relatives in Berlin...

IZ: Oh yeah.

EA: ...and, that you had left behind?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: They had also not made any kind of...

IZ: No, some, some couldn't make it, and my cousins were young. They didn't think about it. And my mother's sister, and her husband, I don't know. You see, by this time, more or less you thought only thought only about yourself. You want to make it. And everybody was on his own. You couldn't, like here, you can invite everybody to the reunion, but you couldn't do this. In the first place, there was not a money, enough money available. And you were happy when you had enough money to buy, to get out.

EA: So your cousins were the ones who gave you the lead...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: ...of the ticket and the emigration.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Did you know anybody on boat, on the boat at all?

IZ: On the boat?

EA: Yeah. Were they all refugees on that boat going from Naples to Shanghai?

IZ: Yeah. Yeah. But I, you know, they came from all over Europe, I would say. I didn't know anybody. We didn't know anybody. There was a group from Holland, a, how, how, young people, the *Bibleforscher*².

EA: Oh yeah? Who organized them?

IA: I don't know. This was a...

EA: Why did they leave Holland? Have you any idea?

IZ: Oh, they went to Israel to promote their religion.

EA: Oh, they were...

IZ: Yeah. They were missionaries.

EA: Missionaries. Okay. They did not leave because of the Holocaust, then.

IZ: No, no, no. they were not Jewish people.

EA: They're not Jewish. Okay. How, did you have many stops? How long did the journey take?

IZ: 31 days.

EA: And you went straight...

IZ: No, no we stopped in...

EA: ...to Shanghai?

IZ: ...Singapore, in Columbo, I don't know, Columbo came first, I guess. And then Hong Kong.

EA: What was waiting for you? Do you remember?

IZ: Pardon me?

EA: What was waiting for you?

IZ: Nothing.

EA: Did you have enough money? How much could you take out?

²*Bibleforscher* [German: Bible student] were targeted for persecution in Nazi Germany. Over 99% of these were Jehovah's Witnesses but a small number of other splinter unorthodox Christian religious minorities, including pacifists, were included. Most were incarcerated and made to wear a purple triangle.

IZ: I, this I don't remember. We had enough money, we stayed only one night in the *Heim*³, and then we had enough money to rent a place, a living quarter.

EA: How did you manage linguistically?

IZ: Pardon?

EA: You didn't speak Chinese.

IZ: No, but...

EA: Who spoke German?

IZ: We spoke German, and the Chinese spoke what we called the Pidgin English, you know...

EA: Oh.

IZ: A little English.

EA: And so you spoke English somewhat also.

IZ: Yeah.

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

IZ: No.

EA: ...am I correct? Okay. Tell me something about our life as you arrived. I just want to stop [tape off then on].

IZ: One of my cousins was there, and he greeted us at the port.

EA: How long had he been there?

IZ: I don't know.

EA: He was settled?

IZ: He, maybe a couple years. I could ask...

EA: Oh, so he was already settled.

IZ: Yeah. I could ask. His daughter is here, but, he was there already a couple months. [Possibly misspoke as she said "years" above].

EA: And he was living in an apartment, or...

IZ: Yeah, he lived in an apartment.

EA: And he could not put you up, then.

IZ: No, it was only, I guess, one bedroom, and a, kitchen, as a, small, small place.

EA: So you rented an apartment for...

IZ: We rented...

EA: ...the four of you?

IZ: ...two rooms and I don't know if there was a kitchen. We rented two nice rooms. And on the first day I was in Shanghai, I met my husband, my future husband [chuckles].

EA: He was one of the refugees?

IZ: Pardon me?

³Dormitory facility for many families.

EA: Was he one of the refugees?

IZ: Yeah. He, he came from East Prussia.

EA: Where?

IZ: From Lötzen⁴.

EA: How did you meet him? I mean, tell me about it. I'm sure she would like to know. Your niece would like to know.

IZ: We went to look for a place to live, and he was sitting in the foyer from that one house. And, I looked, and I thought to myself, he was a nice looking man. Dark, tall and handsome. [chuckling] And he didn't look at me, and I got mad. [laughing] And then, my brother got very sick. And it was raining cats and dogs and I had to go to the pharmacy and when I came out of the street, who came on? My husband, and blasted at me, saying, "Do you have to go out in this weather?" [laughing]

EA: This was a conversation in German, I assume.

IZ: Yeah, yeah. I say, "I have to go. My brother is very sick." And so, and the, you know, in the evening, there was the Broadway⁵, you know, people go out to get some air, and there we met again. Then from there he introduced me to his sister-in-law and his brother. And on Rosh Hashanah evening we got engaged.

EA: So that's only about...

IZ: Yeah, it...

EA: A few months.

IZ: ...was the 15th of September, because that was...

EA: But only from June till September...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: ...is not that long.

IZ: But that was his birthday. And, on the 7th of November we got married.

EA: How did you get married? Who, who, who married, who, was there a rabbi, or...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Tell me about that. Tell me about your life. Where were you living then, in Shanghai?

IZ: On the Kumping Road.

EA: Could you spell that?

IZ: K-U-M-P-I-N-G

EA: Kumping Road.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Now, this was not in a ghetto. This was...

IZ: No, no, that was before the ghetto.

EA: Before the ghetto.

⁴Now called Gizycko in Poland.

⁵Probably refers to the broad avenue in the center of the Jewish settlement area.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: And, your husband and you...

IZ: We were married by Rabbi Cohen, Eric Cohen.

EA: Where was, he was one of the refugees?

IZ: Yeah. You know, I met him-- this is interesting-- I met him in Berlin. I worked for a short time in a Jewish coffee house. And in the morning I had to open the store. And one day I came and there was a man standing in a ski outfit, you know, in dark blue. And it looked like Hitler. And I start to shake when I saw him. And then he came up to me and said if he could-- you know, when you, I had to open the store and set it up-- if he could come in with me. And I was afraid. I thought he is a Hitler man. But then finally I say, he says, "I don't do anything to you." So I say, "Okay." He came in, and said-- after we were settled-- he said he would like some coffee. And then he said, "I am Eric Cohen from," I don't know where he lived, Krasin [phonetic], "and I am here in Berlin to prepare my, *mein Auswanderung* [German: my emigration] for, my [unclear]."

EA: One of us.

IZ: Yeah. And he said...

EA: What type of store did you have, Irmgard, you didn't tell me.

IZ: What?

EA: Your store was in Friedrichshagen?

IZ: Our store.

EA: Yeah.

IZ: Yeah. But...

EA: It was in Friedrichshagen.

IZ: But I was in Berlin by this time, you know?

EA: Oh, okay. Then you did work in Berlin.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: What kind of a store?

IZ: That was a coffee house.

EA: Oh, it's your store.

IZ: No. Our store was ev-...

EA: What kind of a store?

IZ: Everything for the house and kitchen and toys.

EA: Like hardware.

IZ: Everything. Toys, and gifts, variety.

EA: So, you had to meet him. Did he remember you? Eric Cohen?

IZ: No, no. He didn't know me.

EA: But you re-, recognized him.

IZ: No, I mean, I, and then he told me his, where to get the *Auswanderung* [emigration] ready, and he comes in a couple of weeks with his wife. And then, in Ap-, no,

they left in, yeah, in April. And I thought, joking to him I say, “Rabbi, when you, when I come to Shanghai and I get, I will get married, I come to you.”

EA: And indeed that’s what happened.

IZ: It happened.

EA: But, so he had been there a couple of months earlier too.

IZ: Yeah. And I got married by an English attorney. I had to send my passports to the German authority, and then I got married in the Jewish religion. And after six weeks I got a letter I am not married.

EA: It wasn’t official enough?

IZ: I had to get married by a Chinese attorney. So, you know, we, we, you look, we laughed when it came. I mean, ridiculous, so, I got a beautiful Chinese wedding certificate. If you would see it, there’s pictures around it. It is really, I have it framed at home.

EA: How about a *Ketubah*? Did you get a *Ketubah*, you know, the Jewish marriage certificate from the rabbi?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: So you have two.

IZ: Yeah, I ha-, I am...

EA: The Englishmen should have given you something.

IZ: I am married English, Jewish, Chinese.

EA: Fantastic. It really became sure. And your parents continued? What did they do?

IZ: We bought a grocery store. You know, after I came, the fifth day in Shanghai I started to work as a cashier in this store. And there were two owners, and they split and sold the store, and my father bought it.

EA: Who owned it? Chinese?

IZ: No. Refugees. They came before us.

EA: Oh, some refugees.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: So there was interaction between, among the refugees...

IZ: *Ja, ja.* [Yes.]

EA: How much interaction was there with the Chinese population?

IZ: They accepted us, you know, and we had, we had Chinese customers. You couldn’t do what we did there. The Chinese came and bought, I would say, for \$100 sausages, and didn’t have money, and said, “I am here Wednesday by 2:00 I bring you the money.” We didn’t know his name. We didn’t know his address. Wednesday by 2:00 he was there and brought the money. That’s continuous...

EA: Honest?

IZ: Yeah. And this continued for years. And, we had a Chinese customer of this. He came too. You know, if they wouldn't pay, they would lose their faith. You know, the Chinese people they are very worried to lose their faith. They want to keep their faith.

EA: What were they?

IZ: Pardon me?

EA: By religion, you mean...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Their religious faith.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Were they on the whole religious people?

IZ: Ordi-- We don't know. Ordinary people. One was a customer of his, and the other one I don't know what he did. He bought always lots of sausages.

EA: They liked the European foods?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Is that what you're saying?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: How about the food that you ate? Did you acclimatize to the Chinese foods?

IZ: Yeah, in a way, yes. You know, you had to, because you didn't get everything what you were used to it.

EA: How was it healthwise?

IZ: This is another story.

EA: Your brother, you said, was ill.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: What kind of...

IZ: It usually, dysentery and, all kinds. The living conditions were very bad. I mean, we didn't have it bad compared to, I would say the majority in Shanghai. We lived in a nice house. You know, the store was downstairs, the living quarter upstairs. We had a beautiful tiled bathroom.

EA: With running water?

IZ: Yeah. No, we couldn't use the bath, the water from in the bathtub, because there was a boiler in the kitchen that nobody knew how long that was in use. We got, you know you got, on the corner was a water man. And for five *shtaypien* [phonetic], you know you got the bathtub filled with water.

EA: Those are the pieces of wood...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: *Shtaypien*.

IZ: You know, you gave one dollar [unclear], and you got there 10 *shtaypien*. And you got drinking water. For one *shtaypien* you got your thermos filled with water.

EA: So, but you, did you become ill? Did you parents become ill with dysentery?

IZ: No.

EA: No. Interesting. What sort of a doctor would you, would you have consulted for your brother, for instance?

IZ: For my brother I don't know in those years. And then later in years, Dr. Greenberger, Howard Greenberger, took care of my little boy.

EA: Oh, so what you're saying is you had refugee doctors?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Did they have to validate, re-validate their diplomas, would you know? Did they have to become Chinese, officially Chinese?

IZ: I don't, see, they had set really up offices. And we had hospitals, Chine-- a refugee hospital in Shanghai. You know, and we, very primitive, but sufficient.

EA: Financed by whom?

IZ: Pardon me?

EA: Who financed them? They were private, like pri-- they, the refugee doctors?

IZ: I, this, I don't know. You see, you didn't think about all those.

EA: Of course not.

IZ: Right?

EA: Of course not. But it was really like *ungesund* [German: unhealthy] you know that you really just transferred from Berlin to Shanghai.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Because, am I right in hearing you that you lived in a kind of refugee environment?

IZ: Yeah, you see, we, the refugees were put, or, in a certain area, not in a ghetto. The ghetto came later. But we were free to go where we want to go. This was a completely bombed out area. You know? There was a Chinese, the Chinese-Japanese War, and it was rat infested. You don't know what rats are, and how many that there are. But when we left, everything was built up. [unclear]

EA: Right, the Jap-, the Chinese-Japanese War was in...

IZ: Before we came.

EA: So it was rat infested?

IZ: Oh, you know what the, when we bought this store, on the shelves, the rats were sitting next to each other in a row there.

EA: What did you do?

IZ: What?

EA: How did you cope with...

IZ: Then we, we took a cat, and the cat took care of the rats. You know, you, or a thousand other people can't imagine how we lived and what we did.

EA: Well, that's why I want to do the interview. That's why we want to hear it.

IZ: But we survived. You know, there are rats, okay. And the cat took care of the rats. She was like this.

EA: Fat.

IZ: You know, there was a typhoon, and my mother was sitting what we called the living room. And all of a sudden the wall came up to her. You know, the wind, so, what we did, my husband moved the wall back and put some, what they have here, those washboards against it, to secure the wall. And, it was terrible hot. And it was winter. It was not so terrible cold, but then, and we had an iron stove. And the...

EA: How did you fire that? Wood?

IZ: But, yeah, now wait a minute. And, the pipes went right through the window. You know, there was a hole in the window and the pipes went through. And when the wind came towards your house, you couldn't use the stove, because the smoke came in, you know, the, so, we lived in Shanghai and had frozen feet, because it was so damp, and, I would say cold. But compared, it was cold. And our hands and feet froze.

EA: Did you have the right kind of clothing, or did you go, have to buy things in China, in Shanghai?

IZ: Now, we had our clothing from Germany and we had winter coats and summer things. I will tell you, there was a journalist from Breslau. He lived in our house. There was one extra room. And he came to me and say, "You know, I wish my coat had three sides." It was, the Chinese were marvelous. They turned the outside, the inside out, and you looked like you had a new coat. He said, "I am so sorry my coat has not three sides."

EA: So there was interaction with the Chinese population.

IZ: Yeah, oh yeah. You know, we wore handmade shoes. Clothes, I always thought they were ordered for smoking, when I came to the, and from his smoking I had a suit. You get, when you go here to American tailor he said he can do the...

EA: They really were fantastic tailors and dress makers. A "smoking," by the way, is evening tails, and...

IZ: Yeah, you know.

EA: Yeah. Just for the record, for the Americans.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: You had children?

IZ: I have one son. He was born in Shanghai.

EA: What year?

IZ: This is his daughter-in-law. I have three grandsons.

EA: And? He was, your son was born in Shanghai, yeah. In what sort of hospital?
A Chinese?

IZ: Yeah, what, no, what was that hospital's name?

L: You told me yesterday.

IZ: What?

L: You told me yesterday. You told me yesterday what it was.

IZ: There was an immigrant hospital, you know.

EA: Oh, it was an immigrants' hospital.

IZ: [Unclear], no, oh I, I am...
EA: It doesn't matter. You'll think of it later. So you raised your son in Shanghai.
IZ: We left when he was about six years old.
EA: So he started school?
IZ: And he started in Shanghai in school.
EA: When did the schools start in Shanghai?
IZ: I, I don't know.
L: He went to kindergarten.
EA: He did go to kindergarten?
IZ: Yeah, oh yeah. The, Mrs. Fratenschein [phonetic] was his kindergarten teacher.
L: He was born in '41.
IZ: Heh?
L: He was born in-- Frank was born in '41. Frank, Frank was born in 1941.
IZ: Yeah, no, no, no. He was born in '42. No...
L: '41.
IZ: He was born on the 22nd of December, in '41.
EA: You stayed how long in Shanghai?
IZ: Till 1948.
EA: He was six, so he was, 1947 you left...
IZ: '48. In October, '48.
EA: You, now, tell, tell me something about your-

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

EA: Mrs. Zacharias, you had, you worked as a cashier first, and then you married. Did you work after you got married?

IZ: We, we, yeah. We stayed in, we worked in the store, because my parents were old. By this time, old. I mean, today people get older. But by this time, you know, this is now 40 years ago. When you were between 50 and 60, you were old. Today, in a way, I am young.

EA: I hear, it was different. So your husband, did he have a profession?

IZ: Yeah. He was an engineer in Germany.

EA: But he went into the store with you.

IZ: Yeah, he did, because, there was no way for him to, to get a job.

EA: It was difficult to become employed?

IZ: Yeah, and then, it was very important that he helped us. He went in the morning to the market hall and got [unclear], and you know, and, he did things, and he, yeah, he worked a little bit. He had a, he worked for a salesman for somebody who had Nestle products for sale in Shanghai. And he worked for him. This man was more or less a friend to the Zacharias family, to my brother-in-law and to us. But he worked for him. And then, my husband died in '42.

EA: Oh. A year after your son was born?

IZ: Seven weeks after my son was born.

EA: Oh my. Oh my. He had been ill? Or...

IZ: He got the typhus fever.

EA: Oh my. Oh my. So you raised your son alone, in Shanghai.

IZ: Yeah, and in the United States.

EA: Wow, you had your parents in Shanghai still. Were they health-, you, they were around.

IZ: Yeah. My father died in '45 in Shanghai.

EA: Your brother continued staying on?

IZ: Yeah. My brother is here. We live together in Milwaukee.

EA: Tell me, then you were left to be a widow. That must have been very hard.

IZ: Yes, but I didn't have really time to think about it. You know? It came, later, it came, because I had to work. And I had the baby. And, there was really no time to think about it that was I left alone. Dr. Greenberger knows us. He, he, tended my husband, and then later on my son. You know, my son, when he got a cold or what it was, he went over DoDo's --this was Dr. Greenberger [her son's nickname for Dr. Greenberger]-- all by himself.

EA: Dr. Greenberger studied tropical, and, or did he learn on the job as it were? I mean, if he came from Berlin, or he came from...

IZ: No, he...

EA: ...Germany...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: ...did he study about...

IZ: He, yeah...

EA: ...tropical diseases?

IZ: I don't know. He just, I guess he just finished his study in Germany. The-- I mean, I have to ask him if he want to admit. And then, by and by, he was famous for treating, what is those, the, diseases, those...

EA: Infectious diseases?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Like typhoid and dysentery?

IZ: No, no, dysentery and so that he was famous. Then, not everybody got typhoid fever, but dysentery was normal. We got immunization sometimes every week, three, four, and sometimes there was no place to put even the needle. The streets were blocked off and everybody on the street got immunization, you know, because cholera and everything, it was awful. When my husband died, there was an, apparently 16 people died in I guess in one week. And all, big, strong people. They didn't have medication. See this was, I guess that was the biggest problem.

EA: And sanitation, it was that poor. Was there plumbing in, you said you had a bathroom.

IZ: We had, we had plumbing.

EA: Yeah.

EA: And you could boil your water, you had a kitchen.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: And in spite of that...

IZ: You know...

EA: ...you could not avoid it.

IZ: ...everything what you touched was infected. You see, people died. And they put the dead people on the streets. They wrapped them in mats, you know, in straw mats and put them on the street and twice a week the blue wagon came and picked the dead people up. And every, not everybody had plumbing. In the mornings around, between four and five o'clock they picked those up and, the, odor on the streets was just impossible. They, you know what the Chinese did? They used a, what they called a night pot to just throw it out of the window. You don't know how dirty they were. But I was back in '81, and I was amazed how this changed by this time for the better already.

EA: That's 40 years later.

IZ: The people were dressed clean and nice. The streets were clean. I mean, the shoemaker was in the house to us. And we had, there was a man, when you had a pot, cooking pot, and it had a hole. He went, you went there and he put, I don't know what in, and then you could use it again.

EA: He filled up the hole...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: With a plug?

IZ: I, no, I guess he used something like cotton. You know, you learn, when you live under circumstances like this, you learn to live this, the minimum of, of, how should I say it?

EA: Comfort.

IZ: Comfort, yeah. Here you can't imagine, oh, how did I do that? But we did it. You, you, you invent things. Sometimes I-- we, as I said before, I mean, I can close. You don't have, you don't have time or you have to, you know, we, my husband and I, we got a job in Tsingtao⁶. This is a beautiful island between Shanghai and Japan-- China and Japan. There was a German merchant who had a big department store there.

EA: Tzingto?

IZ: Tzingto.

EA: Could you spell that for me?

IZ: T-Z-I-N-G-T-O. [Tsingtao]

EA: T-O.

IZ: Yeah. It was Kiaochow before the war, before the...

EA: How did you get there? I mean...

IZ: By boat.

EA: You had a job there...

IZ: Yeah

EA: ...you say?

IZ: Yeah. This trip is something what I'll never forget in my life.

EA: Tell me about it.

IZ: My husband couldn't get with me, because he didn't get his visa the same time.

EA: You needed a visa.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Because it was Japanese owned?

IZ: I had to go alone. And my husband warned me, "Don't go down to that dining room, and try not to go to the ladies' room."

EA: Oh.

IZ: Yeah. So, when I came there, I was sitting on deck. And I got a little bouquet of violets when I left. And when it got dark-- in the first place I tried to go down to the dining room-- impossible. And when it got dark, all of a sudden, the rats came and ate my violets. And, I was afraid they go in my hair. And then, there was one white lady, and I. We were the only white people. All the others were Asian, you know. And this white lady,

⁶Now Qingdao, located on the coast of China, north of Shanghai.

she laid down on the table. You know, it was getting dark, and she was tired I guess. And all the sudden the rat jumped right on her chest. And she screamed. So, and I go violent sick. And there came an old man, a Greek man, and said, "I get you a blanket. You just sit here and that you lay on the bench. And I'll sit next to you and watch that nothing happens to you."

EA: What did the rats, they bit?

IZ: Sure. I mean, I don't know. I'm-- they eat everything what they could get. Maybe they had, need me. Then I laid down, and he was sitting, like, you were laying here and he was sitting here till in the morning when it got light.

EA: The rats disappear...

IZ: Right.

EA: And they...

IZ: They come in the evening, and they leave in the morning when it gets light. And, I, I don't know how I survived this trip, but anyhow, finally we came and then I stayed in a Jewish boarding house till my husband came. And there I met the American Consul. And we had *seder* together, because that was just Passover. And you know, I could speak English. I had four years of English in school, and I, it was like I have a frog in my hair, on my head. He noticed what, you know, he noticed how I fared, because I could hardly say yes or no.

EA: You could not understand him.

IZ: Yeah, I could understand him, but I was so shocked that I, I, impressed that the Shang-, that the Consul of...

EA: Oh, I see. You, you were so honored...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: ...that you were speechless.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: He was not Jewish?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: A Jewish Consul?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: American Consul?

IZ: Yeah. Dr., Mr. [unclear], sure. And he was married to a non-Jewish wife, that, we could, that must have been she, he was alone. Lisa, you learn something.

L: Mmm hmm.

EA: He was the American Consul in, on the island?

IZ: No, no, in Shanghai.

EA: Oh, in Shanghai. We're talking about Shanghai. What was his interaction with the refugees? Any?

IZ: Very good.

EA: Did he do anything for-- we are now talking '39, and when the Japanese were busy in Shanghai. Tell me about that changeover.

IZ: You know, he had to go to accept the Jewish people, I would say be-, no, his wife was not Jewish. And his daughter was educated in the United States. He told me, his daughter, is, he, China or Ja-, it's not a place for...

EA: Americans.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: But he became the enemy.

IZ: No.

EA: I mean, there...

IZ: He got transferred to [unclear]. That's when we left. And I don't know what happened.

EA: Wait a minute. There was a war between...

IZ: Later, this came later. The war between Shanghai, China and Japan started in '40, no wait a minute, my husband, in '42, because my husband died, then there was no restriction. But after, then we had to move in a ghetto.

EA: Okay. So you had to change with your parents, your residence?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: And go into the ghetto?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: In Hongkew.

IZ: Yes.

EA: How were the conditions there, in the ghetto? Could you tell me something about that?

IZ: You know, we were restricted. We couldn't go out and in. you needed a pass to go out in the city of Shanghai. And men were, you know, Ghoya⁷, was the king of the Japanese. He was the second Hitler in China, I would say. He was a small man, and we had tall Jewish men, you know. And he let them stand in the boiling sun for hours in order to get their pass. And some died of this. And he'd slap, he'd whip the men.

EA: Did you see any of this?

IZ: No, but I heard of it, and I lived in, they didn't let one of our men go. When I, when something was done in the city, I went and took care of it.

EA: Who, how did, it, was it communicated to you that you had to leave your residence outside of the ghetto? Who told you? How did you know about it? Can you remember?

IZ: The Japanese authorities made it. They declared, "This is a area where the refugees can live, and nobody is allowed to live outside."

EA: So were you forced? Were they there with bayonets, or...

⁷Sgt. Kano Ghoya, head of the Stateless Refugees' Affairs Bureau of the Japanese Army, who termed himself "King of the Jews." Leo Baeck Institute: Guide to the Jews of Shanghai Collection, 1933 – 2002.

IZ: I don't know, we were...

EA: How did...

IZ: In a way...

EA: Do you remember that?

IZ: Yeah. We, in a way were forced. Not that they killed us, but everybody was afraid to lose their lives. So when they say you have to move, we move.

EA: You became, abi-, you abided by that.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: And did you see anybody resist?

IZ: No. no. I can't remember. Everybody obeyed.

EA: So what happened to your possessions? I'm assuming that you had furniture and...

IZ: This, everything was moved. The store was moved. Everything.

EA: The store was moved? Into the ghetto area.

IZ: Yeah. And we couldn't open the store again for, I think three months. Some could open and some could not. We didn't, we were not allowed to open.

EA: They told you.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: How did you live? From what did you, what were the conditions like? What were you provided? What could you find inside the ghetto? I can't visualize it, can you, Lisa?

L: No.

IZ: You know, it's like the whole city will be transferred to another place. And, the refugees lived, how should I say, we had a, by this time we didn't have the store, but we had the store, and you needed something, you have to come and buy it, right? And some people could open, and they made an enormous business, because there were I would say 10,000 people moved, right, in one area. That made the area 18,000. The exact number isn't, I don't know if somebody knows the exact number, but they say between 18,000 and 20,000 refugees lived in Shanghai. So, and then when we can open the store, the business went like normal.

EA: People had money?

IZ: Yeah, because some people dealt with the Japanese and Chinese people. You know, very-- the people that sold it, goods that the immigrants sold, you know, how to live. They sold this and the Japanese and Chinese bought this. And, some, some people dealt with like, the stuff.

EA: Textiles.

IZ: Textiles, yeah. They sec-, you know, there was a section where everything was bombed out. And there they made stands and sold the goods.

EA: On stands? Like barrels?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: You mean like a...

IZ: No, like, like you have here, markets or so on.

EA: Would the Chinese or Japanese...

IZ: Buy?

EA: ...come into the ghetto to buy?

IZ: Sure. You know, it is a very inter-, I would say...

EA: Fascinating.

IZ: Yeah. You know, I always say I remember good times, and I remember bad times. There were both.

EA: Tell me about that exactly. What do you remember as good times?

IZ: When my son was born, his first birthday, you know? Can you imagine, you've got company, I would say. So we closed the store by seven o'clock, and then especially single men and women came and he tipped the leather on crates. Everybody brought his cup and a spoon, and we made tea. And everybody was sitting there on the floor, on the leather on the chair, and had tea and talked and laughed.

EA: Refugees?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: Were they all German Jews or Austrian Jews? Or were there some Russians and Polish and Chinese people too?

IZ: No, mostly, mostly, mostly the Germans.

EA: Did you remember any interaction between the German Jews...

IZ: Not any.

EA: German refugees and the Austrians and the Polish or the Russians?

IZ: I...

EA: Or the old-timers, with the Sephardim⁸?

IZ: No, no. I had a bad experience with a Polish immigrant.

EA: In what way?

IZ: You know, when we, we lost the job in Tsingtao from one day to the other. And, we didn't have the-- we lived from one day to the other with our money. And we didn't have money to go back, because we didn't think that we would go back so quick. And his, one, he came in the morning, and in the afternoon we didn't have a job.

EA: That was your employer?

IZ: Yeah. And my husband didn't want to sell anything what we had in order to have the money to go back to Shanghai. And then I say, "I will try if I can get, borrow, borrow some money form the Jewish committee." There was a Jewish committee in Tsingtao, because there German Jews, Austrian Jews. And I went to the office, and there was a Mr. Levin, Levine or Levinski. And I talked to him, and he said to me, "We don't have money for German Jews." You know I go so...

⁸Jews of Spanish or Portuguese descent who came to Shanghai from the Middle East before the central European refugees.

EA: Who was the committee? It wasn't the Joint? Or do you know the kind of, the name of the committee?

IZ: Oh, that's so long ago. And I was so mad, that I would like to have [unclear] the chicken thrown in his face, but all what I could say is, "Mr. Levinski, I'm so sorry that Hitler let you out." You know? He was sitting there and his mouth was open. This was really the only time I, I experienced a thing like this.

EA: So the good times you remember really were personal, warm interactions...

IZ: Yeah.

EA: ...with other human beings.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: And the bad times? Also the personal ones, I'm sure. But other than that...

IZ: I, *ja* [yes]...

EA: ...politically or...

IZ: We had, looking at, we had the war, you know? We got bombed in '40-- I would say '43, '44, from the Japanese, and the Americans.

EA: By both?

IZ: Yeah, because in our area was a radio station, and the Japanese want to destroy the radio station. And the Americans want to free us, you know, they knew what was going on. And we lost, I don't know, 18 people in one day. They got killed by bombs. And my son went to kindergarten, and the kindergarten just let out of the area where the kindergarten was hit.

EA: It's, children get, did children get...

IZ: No, not the children, but some refugees got killed. Even a man from my hometown, a neighbor of my hometown got killed.

EA: You say that it was in about 1944, '45?

IZ: No, no, '45...

EA: No, the, '44...

IZ: '43, '4-, '43 maybe. I don't know. You know, we didn't know when the American came, the war was over in Europe I guess in May or June. Do you remember? In September we knew it. We lived, two or three months even knowing, was the war on, or was the war off. The Second World War.

EA: How did you get the news? Did you have radios?

IZ: Newspaper.

EA: English? German?

IZ: *Ja*.

EA: Chinese?

IZ: No, English and German. You know, in the years everything went normal. You had stores with all the different merchandises. You had doctors you had a pharmacy, in fact two pharmacies. You had tailors and everything. Everything went, doc-, in, in eight, nine years, everything went normal, like, like a European village, I would say.

EA: So the outside periphery, they, it, were there, it was the Chinese or later on the Japanese didn't really influence your personal life much.

IZ: No, no.

EA: Is that what you're saying?

IZ: The Japanese and, you know, and we had to live in the ghetto. The Japanese, yes, they kept us down. But in general, the life went normal. You know, in a, how should I say, as I say, we had stores, we had doctors, we had everything what we had in Europe. Not in the big measures, but there was everything went then normal. And we adjusted to be careful in some respect with certain things, right?

EA: Did you see any of the cruelties that we read about, that the Japanese imposed on...

IZ: I didn't see anything. You know, the war was over, yeah, I came, no, I came back from Tsingtao. And there came a refugee lady, and said that there is a Japanese wedding and she wants us to make the platters and all this. And then she said to me if I would come and supervise the cooks. I say, "Okay." It was money you know. And, three days before the wedding I had to go to this house. She lived in a beautiful apartment. She was the chief of police for the Japanese. No, the-- I worked for the chief of police for the Japanese, because this refugee lady was friends with that Japanese lady.

EA: For the Japanese. But she was a...

IZ: Jewish. She was...

EA: ...Jewish refugee...

IZ: Yeah, yeah. And...

EA: She was working for them?

IZ: I, you see, I don't know. She was, anyhow, she was very good friends with the Japanese family. And three days before the wedding I went there, and we had nothing. And there was everything-- chicken and ham and eggs and everything.

EA: So there was a lot of black market going on?

IZ: Oh yeah. And, the house was beautiful decorated. You know, those Easter lilies, those calla lilies? In each corner were calla, Easter lilies. The tables were, they had flower boxes in the center and all white carnation, and that pine green. It was just beautiful. And it turned out, everything turned out just so. And guests-- Japanese authorities, Chinese military, English military. You know? I had shock. And, I just had to supervise this. And my husband says, "I hope you bring us something good home, so, when they." And I was afraid to eat, because we didn't have so much. And I was afraid to drink their coffee, you know, because, for...

EA: Your stomach wasn't used to it.

IZ: Yeah, so, everything went out, and the bride was a European bride.

EA: A European bride?

IZ: Beautiful.

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

EA: Now, we're sitting here in Philadelphia, at the Reunion, and how does it feel to meet old Shanghai friends?

IZ: Overwhelming.

EA: Overwhelming. Can you just give me an idea of how many people you saw here that you didn't expect to see?

IZ: Maybe three.

EA: Maybe three. And you saw, you said, your doctor?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: He is here?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: The pediatrician that treated your son in Shanghai. Who else did you meet?

IZ: I have a cousin here. I met her daughter and her son-in-law. I met my late cousin's daughter. And I met Kode Polag [phonetic] and his wife from-- they lived in, near LA.

EA: Kode Polag you knew in Shanghai?

IZ: No, I met, he was the guide in '81 when we went to Shanghai.

EA: You revisited. We didn't, you didn't tell us about that. You revisited Shanghai as a group?

IZ: Yeah.

EA: How many of you went to revisit Shanghai?

IZ: Maybe 30.

EA: And Kode Polag was the guide.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: That must have been interesting.

IZ: This was very exciting. You know, we wanted, I went to Shanghai to visit the grave. I have my husband buried and my father. But the cemetery was gone. And there was the children's park made out of it.

EA: This was a Jewish cemetery?

IZ: Yeah, yeah.

EA: And that had disappeared? Have you any idea what happened to the graves?

IZ: The graves were all flattened, and the monuments were moved. And we couldn't find out where they were moved. We went and inquired and inquired. You know, if I could at least see the monuments, this would be something. But, it was impossible.

EA: Did you have a stone?

IZ: Yeah, we had for my husband and my father.

EA: There was a stone. And they were totally gone.

IZ: Yeah.

EA: And you could not trace them.

IZ: No.

EA: Is there still a Jewish community in Shanghai now?

IZ: No. I, not, I mean, there I should have asked Kode Polag. I don't think so. When we went there, Kode inquired if there are some Jewish people. We would visit them. But, nobody could tell us. But then later on we knew there was one Jewish man living. And he was too sick in order to get transferred to, and he passed away. In the meantime he passed away.

EA: So there is no way that you could find out what happened? That must be very hard.

IZ: Yeah. You know, I went specially, I mean, I had my, I might have gone any way, but my main purpose was to visit the graves. You know, the Jewish cemetery was kept beautiful. I mean, if you can say this of a cemetery, was kept beautiful.

EA: Of course if must, if you said there were episodes and epidemics and bombings, there must have been graves.

IZ: Yeah, there was another Jewish cemetery in the city. You know, there was, before we came there were Jewish people.

EA: From earlier immigrants.

IZ: Yeah, yeah. And merchants, I mean, you see, Shanghai is a very, was and is a very important merchant city in China. You know, it's like, the people my husband worked for, they had a beautiful apartment with refrigerators and everything.

EA: Oh, there was a very wealthy...

IZ: Oh yeah. My brother played tennis with a Sikh factory owner. And the police, they played tennis. He had his own tennis court. I mean, and his wife was a French woman.

EA: Now, the cemetery where your husband and, and was buried, and your father, were buried, were...

IZ: In Shang-, in Hongkew.

EA: In Hongkew. Is the other city cemetery still in existence, do you know?

IZ: I don't.

EA: You don't know.

IZ: My husband was one of the first ones even to be buried there. My father was one of the last ones. I was-- Rabbi Cohen couldn't come on the cemetery. He had to perform the ceremony from the door, because he had...

EA: He was a *Kohen*?⁹

IZ: Yeah, and he had the graves behind him.

EA: Because he's a *Kohen*.

IZ: Yeah. And when my father was buried the bomber was flying over and, I mean, there were, as I say, good times and very bad and sad times. You know? When we got bombed my brother had to go out on duty, and it was very hard to see, the friend there was

⁹A Kohen is the Hebrew word for priest and signifies men who are believed to be direct descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses. They are not permitted to visit cemeteries.

dead, laying there, because he was-- and, you know, when the bombs came, how stupid we were. We had a window, a door out of the second floor, took out, and put it in front of the kitchen window. And we had a table made out of fruit crates. And there I put my son under as a protection. And I took all the blankets from the beds and put it on the table. And we had the doors open. And the men came in, who was on the street came in, and when the bomb came, everybody grabbed a little bit of that blanket and put it over their heads. I mean the men looked that, everybody, can you imagine? Six, eight people sitting there, then everybody grabbed a piece of the blanket and put it over their head as a protection. And, one day there was an oil deposit near us that was hit, and we were black, black with no expression. We were so black from that smoke. My son didn't recognize me and he started to cry and clung to a strange man. He didn't know where his mother went. I mean, there are so many little stories, and the big stories. And there are so many small tragedies and the big tragedies.

EA: Did you have any kind of feeling that there were some Nazis in Shanghai? Because the Japanese and the Germans were allies.

IZ: Afterwards.

EA: Yeah, in '41.

IZ: Yeah. Yeah, no, I, I can't say, no.

EA: I just wondered, you know, if there was any, they...

IZ: No, no. maybe the White Russians were a little against us, you know, but I myself didn't have any contact with that.

EA: Mrs. Zacharias, you have had a fascinating life.

IZ: They always say, "You had an interesting life." I wish it would be a little less interesting.

EA: I understand that. And Lisa, tell us a little about Lisa, who is here, sitting here with you, and came all the way from, to meet you and be with you at this conference.

IZ: She is my oldest grandson's wife, a very dear granddaughter.

EA: I can see that.

IZ: And she had two lovely children.

EA: Where are they?

L: They're with their dad. He took time off from work and he's taking care of the kids.

EA: He is taking care of your children so that you could come here with your mother-in-law.

L: Yes.

EA: Isn't that terrific?

L: Yeah, we have a wonderful family.

EA: I can see that. How old are your children?

L: Six and four.

EA: Well, this is going to be a gift. Think of it this way, to them, when they're older, to hear Irmgard's personal voice with her beautiful accent.

L: Right.
EA: And this is the best gift you could have given her.
L: They dearly love Oma. Dearly. They call her. They talk to her on the phone, and they're very excited whenever she comes to visit us in Minneapolis. And she's a very, very dear person.
IZ: I love them very much.
EA: It's just a shame that we all live so far away from each other, right? How often do you get together?
IZ: Three times a year.
L: Three or four.
IZ: Yeah.
L: Three or four times a year.
IZ: Yeah.
EA: Okay. That's just wonderful. Enjoy the rest of your stay in Philadelphia. Thank you for your time. And we will... [Tape two, side two ended.]

Note from Irmgard Zacharias dated 10-21-1991:

Date of Birth
1904!

Dear Mrs. Abraham,

I am sorry to bother you at home. I not even know whether you remember me, you interviewed me in Philadelphia. I had been very excited and forgot something what shows life in Shanghai. At the time we arrived many single men & women (families left behind) arrived. They had no cooking facilities and had to be fed. There was a kitchen to feed the Immigrants and the women had to go & peel potatoes & clean vegetables. We got there Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner. Later one we had Restaurants and most people had a chance to cook.

Not everybody had a stove, we cooked on something like a large Flowerpot and cooked with coal. every morning you saw the smoke rise in the back of the houses and you had to fan the coals till they start to burn.

What I say now is not a complaint it shows our life. WE did not sell Sausage by the quarter pound but by ounces. Please give me 1 oz, real thin sliced. So every family member could have a taste.

I think, that [shows] the life in Shanghai. We survived and could attend this Re-union.

This was very exciting days. Meeting so many old friends I hope those memories are interesting to you.

It has been nice meeting you With thank for your time and my best wishes.

Irmgard Zacharias