

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Bigus, Gary

Date of interview: 5/27/1998

Summary: Gerhard "Gary" Bigus was born on October 7, 1924 in Berlin, Germany. He and his parents were considered stateless and therefore were not citizens of any nation. He lived with his mother, father and half-brother Willie, who was 15 years older than Gary, and was Gary's mother's son from her deceased first husband. He gives the background on how his parents came to live in Berlin; his father came from Poland and his mother from West Prussia. Gary describes his neighborhood in Berlin as being middle class and mostly Jewish. He talks about the clothing shop his father owned and ran. He describes family vacations he went on with his mother in the summers of 1932-1934. He says that he was a rather politically educated boy for his age. His family would listen to Hitler's and Goebbels's speeches on the radio to keep informed.

He talks about his brother Willie's job working with radios and the progression from being a normal employee, to a Jewish but liked employee, to fired, to advised to leave the country, but he would not leave. Willie got married and had a son by 1938, and refused to leave Germany, because he didn't think things would get much worse.

Gary gives examples of anti-Semitic occurrences he witnessed in the streets and from boys his own age. He claims to be the only one in his family to see what was happening and urged his family to get out of Germany. He spoke of the boycotts of the Jewish shops in April of 1933 and of the Night of Broken Glass or Kristallnacht. He says that it was only after that night that his parents began to see the danger of staying in Germany. He and his father went into hiding for two weeks in a family member's attic for fear of being arrested. After that his father started looking for a way out of Germany. Around the same time the family received a letter stating that since they were not German citizens they were to leave Germany. First they planned to try to cross the border into Belgium, but the attempt failed because the formerly bribable guards had been replaced with SS officers who could not be bribed. Shortly after they heard that visas were not needed to immigrate to Shanghai, China. His father had to pay twice as much to get tickets, but they finally obtained passes out of Germany to go there. He describes how the family had to sell or get rid of most of their belongings and valuables, and were only allowed to leave the country with 10 marks each. He talks about an "idealistic" Nazi SS officer the family was friends with, and to whom they gave many of their valuables before they left. He then describes the train and boat voyage from Berlin to Shanghai. He describes life in the Japanese quarter of Shanghai. He speaks of his job, and the living conditions, and how his father supported the family. He describes the émigré culture that he was a part of with the other Jewish refugees who also lived there. He gives accounts of positive and negative episodes with Japanese people in the sector, and how the conditions changed after Pearl Harbor. His father died on

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July 27, 1945. After the war Gary and his mother tried to locate the family members who had stayed in Germany or gone to Belgium and elsewhere, only to find out that they had all died in the Holocaust. He and his mother stayed in Shanghai until the end of 1948, when they moved to Israel. They arrived in Israel on Feb 14, 1949, and lived there until 1958 when they came to San Francisco. While in Israel he worked in a radio shop, which he eventually took over when the owners retired. He served in the Israeli army but never in combat.

He came to San Francisco with his mother in 1958. They came to San Francisco because all the people they knew in the U.S. lived there. He met his first wife there, at a Jewish Community Center. Gary got a job through a man he worked for in Shanghai. He worked there for over 20 years and then decided to quit and move with his wife to Laguna Hills. He describes the location and the jobs he had there. After three years of living there, his wife got lung cancer and died after three years. Later (it is not clear when) he married a woman named Rose and moved back to San Francisco in 1995. After the interview he shows and describes photos and his German Passport.