

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

**Name of interviewee:** Bergtraun, Eric

**Date of interview:** 3/11/2002

**Summary:** Eric Bergtraun was born Erich Maximilian Bergtraun on February 21, 1925, in Vienna, Austria, to Edmund Leon Bergtraun and Lilly Wagner Bergtraun. Eric's father served in WWI with the Austrian army and had been wounded three times. During the Depression, he worked as an insurance broker, and Eric remembers hard financial times. Eric's mother was a devoted Catholic before she met his father, and when she fell in love with Leon, he told her that she would have to convert to Judaism. According to Eric, she was the best Jew in the family.

Eric recalls that anti-Semitism in Vienna was not bad. Sometimes the kids would taunt Jews, but it was not until Hitler marched into Austria that the children began to ignore him. Eric's family was listening to the Austrian Chancellor on the radio announce that he would allow the Nazis to come. As they marched in, Eric clearly remembers the youth singing "Jewish blood will stream." His mother began to panic. Shortly after, the round-ups of Jews began.

Eric remembers walking to school with friends one day when a man stopped him and asked if he was Jewish. When he replied that he was, the man slapped him and told him that Jews have to walk in the gutter. Although he was young at the time, Eric said that he realized a new chapter in his family's life was beginning.

Eric's father said they would have to leave Austria. He went to the US consulate, but there were thousands on the list before them. His father knew they had to leave right away, and decided that the family would go to Shanghai, because he wanted there "to be an ocean between Hitler and our family." Before they left, Kristallnacht occurred. When the Germans came to their house to take his father, Eric's mother said they were too late, because he had already been taken - in reality, he was staying with Eric's mother's brother. After this, his father said they had to leave right away.

The family left Vienna and went to Milan for a few weeks. The Jewish community took good care of them there. When they left Austria they were only allowed to take thirty-six dollars, but when the trip to Shanghai ended they had over two hundred dollars in donations.

When they first arrived in Shanghai, Eric stayed with a nice Russian-Jewish family while his parents got settled. Soon his father got a job and rented a house; the Jewish community there would help new émigrés by buying houses and renting them to refugees. Eric said that his family did better financially in Shanghai than they had in Vienna. The Germans were putting pressure on the

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Japanese to begin killing the Jews, but they put them in ghettos instead. In the ghetto the community had an underground Boy Scouts, who met once a week; Eric was the Scout Master. He was able to get in and out of the ghetto because he had a job, but his father, who owned a store at this time, could not get out. Eventually the ghetto was completely sealed.

When the atomic bombs were dropped, his family felt safe again. Then the Americans came, and life began again. Eric got a job at a generator testing center at the Shanghai Airport. Later, his father decided it was time to go to the US. Eric didn't want to go, but he got his quota first and left because he only had 90 days till it expired. His father told him go to San Francisco, get a job, and rent an apartment until they could meet him. It was very hard at first, but he had help from the Jewish community, and later a Union. He got a good job at United Engineering, but lost it with the Waterfront Strike. He went to the Union to find another job, and at the same time he went to school five nights a week to get his GED so that he could go to college. When his parents arrived it was easier for him to go to school. He met his wife Polly (who has done an interview as well) at an International club, and she helped him type his thesis in college. Later, they married and now have two children, Alex and Caroline.