

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

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Name of Interviewee: Alexander, Ted

Date of Interview: 5/22/2002

Rabbi Theodore (Ted) Alexander was born Theo-Rolf Alexander on November 6, 1920 in Berlin, Germany. Although Ted's mother was not raised as an observant Jew and identified as being very Germanic, the Alexander family kept Shabbat, attended synagogue, and lived in a predominantly Jewish, upper-middle class neighborhood. With Hitler's rise to power, Ted's father lost his position as a salesman; during this time the family made many attempts to leave Germany. After Kristallnacht, Ted and his father hid in a widowed aunt's home for three weeks. Ted's mother was able to obtain tickets for Shanghai for the entire family. They arrived in Shanghai in March 1939; Ted got a well-paying job with the British ED Sassoon Company. However, once the Japanese removed the British executives of the company, Ted quit his job and the family was forced into a ghetto. After the war, Ted and his new wife made their way to the United States where they docked in San Francisco on Yom Kippur in 1947.

Summary Version 2

Name of interviewee: Alexander, Ted

Date of interview: 5/22/2002

Summary: Rabbi Theodore (Ted) Alexander was born Theo-Rolf Alexander on November 6, 1920 in Berlin, Germany. His father, Hugo, the second of three sons, was ordained as a Rabbi, but did not practice during his time living in Germany. Instead, Hugo worked as a salesman for various firms. Hugo came from a long line of rabbis and his older brother, Dr. Siegfried Alexander, was the last remaining rabbi in Berlin before he was brought to Auschwitz and killed. Hugo's mother was an American, from Baltimore, with whom Rabbi Alexander would practice his English.

Rabbi Alexander's mother, born Katie Spiegel, is described in the interview as not very educated in the traditional sense, but very smart, assertive and feminist. Rabbi Alexander claims to have inherited his egalitarianism from his mother, who met Hugo in Bucharest after World War I and married him in 1918. Although Katie was not raised as an observant Jew and identified as being very Germanic, the Alexander family (including Ted's sister, Gerda) kept Shabbat, attended synagogue (they were a part of the same congregation as Albert Einstein), and

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lived in a predominantly Jewish, upper middle class neighborhood in northwestern Berlin. Both of Ted's parents were members of non-Jewish lodges (similar to social clubs) and Katie had some gentile friends, but on the whole, Ted remembers his parents' friends as mostly Jewish. Because he attended a Jewish school, he did not know many gentile children himself.

Ted recalls his childhood in Germany as being a "family life". He grew up with a lot of aunts, uncles and cousins. At parties at his house, Ted would play "synagogue" with one of his cousins (in which one boy was the rabbi, and one was the cantor) and the two would make the rest of the children pretend to be the congregation. Ted does remember some incidences of anti-Semitism in the early 1930s, even though the Jewish community in Berlin was very unified, and Jewish presence very strong. In 1933, he was jumped by a group of five or six boys on the playground, who called him a "dirty Jew" (31:43, tape one). With Hitler's rise to power, Hugo lost his position as a salesman and had to open a stationary store under the family's apartment. Germany's boycott of Jewish stores and goods actually helped Hugo's business, however, because Jews began to buy only at Jewish stores and Hugo gained a monopoly on that demographic.

During this time, the Alexander family made many attempts to leave Germany for places like Costa Rica and South Africa, but Ted insists that they were only feeble attempts. Then, on November 10, 1938, they realized, along with practically all of the other Jews in Germany and Austria, that getting out of Germany was a necessity. On Kristallnacht, the Alexanders' got a phone call that a cousin, who attended a Jewish boarding school, and a neighbor's daughter (who went to the same school) were on their way home because the school had been damaged. As Ted sat home alone, the Gestapo came to the apartment looking for the neighbor who was with Hugo. They searched the Alexanders' apartment and when they could not find the neighbor, Ted knew that they were considering arresting him as a replacement. Instead, the Gestapo let Ted "escape" through the back entrance of the apartment. He immediately went to the train station to warn his father not to go home. Hugo and Ted hid for three weeks in a widowed aunt's home (the Nazis did not yet search widows' homes), where Katie and Gerda eventually joined them. When the family returned home after those three weeks, they found that the commander of the police station had boarded up the windows of all the Jewish stores so that the Nazis could not break them and ransack the buildings. On November 30, Ted went with friends to take the Torahs out of the burned synagogue. That same day, Katie left the house and did not return until she had tickets for the whole family to Shanghai, China.

In preparation for leaving, the Alexanders sold their store to the German government for 1% of the purchase price. They were only allowed to take ten marks with them, but Katie managed to sew stock and bonds certificates into the mattresses and Ted smuggled out gold and other jewelry. The ship ride through the Suez Canal and past India and Hong Kong took three weeks and, due to a big storm, most of the passengers were sick for much of the journey. When they arrived in Shanghai in March of 1939, they found a stockbroker, sold their shares and moved into the French concession. Ted got a well paying job with the British

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ED Sassoon Company and he socialized with the Jewish immigrants from Western Europe (Germany, Austria and Belgium) as well as the British Jews from Baghdad. Until the Japanese occupation of the city, Ted found Shanghai wonderful and exciting. Gerda worked in a preschool in Shanghai and Hugo founded the first liberal congregation in the city. Meanwhile, Ted resumed his rabbinic studies that had been interrupted in Germany (in 1943, Ted was ordained in Shanghai). After he was ordained, Ted became an assistant time rabbi in the liberal synagogue.

Once the Japanese occupied and fired the British executives of ED Sassoon, Ted quit his job. The family had to give up their nice apartment in the French Concession in exchange for a "slum" in the ghetto that consisted of two rooms for four people, no toilet, shower or hot water. No member of the family was able to get a real job, with a steady income and Ted went from 190 lbs. to 108 lbs. during his time there. Yet, the Jewish community still managed to maintain social lives and would meet to talk about literature and philosophy with the hope of keeping themselves educated (1:27:08, tape one). At 1:25 on tape one, Ted describes Mr. Goya. They heard about the end of the war over their illegal shortwave radios and Ted remembers everyone getting drunk and beating up any Japanese that they could find. The next morning, Ted went downtown with his future wife and took possession of his old property. Then they went to open the gates of the British camp -- and found that the Brits had been too afraid to leave. Ted resumed working at ED Sassoon and received a telegram with a check for three years salary for the time that he had missed while in the ghetto. On June 2, 1946, Ted got married and he and Gertrude moved into a nice apartment provided by Ted's firm. Ted and Gertrude had a lot of friends (including the United States consulate with whom Ted played cribbage), and saw no reason to leave China. One day, however, the consulate from the U.S.A told Ted that he had received and approved an affidavit from Ted's sister (who was already living in Chicago) for him and Gertrude to come to the States. Ted had not known anything about the affidavit, but he and Gertrude decided to go to the States "just to look." Shortly after they arrived in California, they heard about the communists' arrival in Shanghai and never returned to China to live.

Ted and Gertrude docked in San Francisco in 1947 on Yom Kippur. They stayed aboard for the holiday and conducted services with about forty other passengers and the torah that Ted had rescued from the synagogue in Berlin. Gertrude got a job as a saleswoman at the Emporium and Ted began work for the Hartford Fire Insurance Company. The couple lived in Berkeley until their daughter, Leslie, was born when they moved to Oakland. Ted continued in business, but also became a part time rabbi with a number of congregations. He did not have a full time congregation until he came to his current synagogue, B'nai Emunah, in 1968. Ted's parents immigrated to the States some years after Ted and Gertrude and Hugo became a chaplain for an old age home in Oakland. Since coming to the United States, Ted has been very politically active, especially during the Civil Rights Movement. Leslie has continued her family's legacy in becoming a conservative rabbi in California.

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Ted has been back to Germany several times and is adamant that he has no hatred toward the German people. On the contrary, Ted is very impressed with Germany's zero tolerance policies on anti-Semitism and with the comprehensive Holocaust education that German children receive in school. He talks a lot about his theories of why the Holocaust happened as well as why it will not happen again. He stresses the importance of remembering the era and not letting it just become a part of history. The tape ends with Rabbi Alexander showing a couple artifacts from pre-war Berlin.