

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Frank, Walter

Date of interview: 5/15, 6/14 & 7/24/1990

Summary: Walter Fackenheim was born in May 1920 in Wiesbaden, Germany, the first child of his physician father Willy, and homemaker mother. Growing up in Wiesbaden, he attended school there with his younger brother Eric until 1936. Up until that point he recalled having few encounters with anti-Semitism, even though the school he attended was populated with Germans of all backgrounds, including Nazis. Gradually the atmosphere in Germany started to change and at age 16 he realized that rising tensions against Jews would make it impossible for him to advance on to college. He then started a job as a commercial apprentice while attending a commercial training school in Wiesbaden. His family enjoyed relative prosperity during the early 1930's. His father was well respected in the community, having served in the German Army in World War I as a physician and then establishing a practice with both Jews and Gentiles as patients. However, as time went on his father's ability to practice medicine was restricted. By 1938 it became non-existent. Walter's family then started to attempt emigrating out of Germany.

Following the events of "*Kristallnacht*," the Gestapo visited Walter's family and both Walter and his father were arrested on November 10, 1938. The following day both men were made to board trains bound for Weimar, the site of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Upon arrival Walter was almost immediately separated from his father. Walter's father was released two weeks later due to his military service. Walter had to wait another four and a half months. While his release had been secured in February due to his being granted a visa to go to England, the SS Police had declared a quarantine of the camp due to an outbreak of "typhoid fever" (more likely a result of a germ warfare experiment gone wrong). Walter was unable to leave until this quarantine was lifted.

Released on April 12, 1939, Walter returned to Wiesbaden for five days and then departed with his family for Shanghai on April 18, 1939. On May 19, 1939 they arrived in Shanghai and were sent to a refugee camp. Almost immediately Walter's father moved his family out of the refugee camp to a small nearby apartment in Hongkew, the Jewish refugee section of town. Walter quickly became involved with one of the relief committees in Shanghai – The International Committee for the Organization of European Immigrants in China – that helped people find jobs or sell their belongings in thrift shops for a fair price. Walter's first job in Shanghai was as an accounts receivable clerk for a Cathay Laundry. At this job Walter began to learn Chinese, as well as a little Portuguese and English to communicate with other immigrants and nationals in Shanghai. However, Walter lost this job after a six-week stay in the hospital with amoebic dysentery.

Unsure of where else he could find employment, Walter then went to

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consult with the founder of the Committee, a Mr. Komor. Mr. Komor took note of Walter's language ability and hired him on the spot in a gofer/assistant type position. In the interview, Walter describes how each family member gradually learned to adjust to life in Shanghai, all the while they never intended to stay there in the long term. In Germany Walter's family had applied for visas to the United States and in Shanghai they waited for their number to come up.

In December of 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese took over control in Shanghai. Walter recalls how conflict existed between the Japanese soldiers and the few German Gestapo members in Shanghai. They differed both in their reverence for the Nazi swastika banners and in their ideas of how to deal with the "Jewish problem". According to Walter, the Japanese had no intention of carrying out German plans or else their attentions were focused elsewhere.

Even under occupation Walter was able to work, first for the chairman of the committee and then later at a haberdashery started by him and another former co-worker. In 1943, Walter's father passed away after a short illness. Walter and his brother then worked to support their mother. Between 1943 and July 1945, Walter witnessed several American air raids although the Americans did not bomb Shanghai until July 17, 1945. One of the bombs was dropped fairly close to the Jewish district but neither Walter nor his family was harmed. In August of 1945 Walter learns of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and on August 15, 1945 peace was declared.

Around that time Walter's mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and died in September of 1945. Shortly thereafter, Walter and his brother found jobs at the Shanghai air transport field, now under the control of Americans. Walter worked in the department of statistics, his brother for operations. In 1947 both brothers immigrated to the United States, after having lived eight years "temporarily" in Shanghai. Walter Fackenheim, now Frank, settled in Oakland, California and found work at a store and began a correspondence course in accounting, which eventually became his career. In 1949 Walter met Ida Katz, an American born Jew, and married her on August 20, 1948.