

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

**Name of interviewee:** Gelnay, Walter

**Date of interview:** 2/19/2003

**Summary:** Walter Gelnay was born on December 8th 1910, in Vienna, Austria. His parents were Adolph Gelnay and Mary Lastic, and his two sisters Matilda and Igy. Walter's father had Austrian nationality, but since he was established in Prague, his nationality was Czech. Adolph was a determined person, who always got what he wanted. He was a dentist in Vienna, but he started working in the hotel industry, which he had learned in the United States. Adolph also remodeled or built new buildings and he owned the first hotel with hot and cold water in Vienna. In addition, he built six hotels, and one of them had a movie-house, which was the first hotel with a movie house in Vienna. Walter's father was an active, industrious person with a hot temper, while his mother was the opposite.

Before World War I, Walter's parents had two apartments made into one flat. Then, his father worked as a dentist under a famous regiment near Brattice. One officer was wounded and only his father could treat him because not even American people knew about artificial fixtures, but Walter's father used artificial materials to connect the two chewing bones through reconstructive surgery. The six buildings in Vienna were confiscated by the Ministry of War, which had a small building in the first district of Terin. The Ministry of War compensated him after the war. After World War I, Walter's family moved to Vienna. Since Austria was in a very difficult economic condition, people offered a lot of money to his father for his hotels, but he went bankrupt because he had made bad investments and lost almost everything.

Walter mentions that school was a sad chapter. In 1914 his family went to Bratislava where his grandfather was a veterinarian employed by the government of Austria, which was German, and the school was also German. As Walter had had five years of primary school and a tutor, he did not like school when he was eleven years old because the class was very big, and he felt disoriented because there was not a routine. When the family came back to Vienna, he was ten years old and he registered in a gymnasium, which is like a college preparatory. There he had eight classes and after the gymnasium he was going to take a test to admit him to the university.

Walter attended only one semester at the university in Prague, but he was kicked out because Hitler's system started to set in. Walter was good in languages and therefore, used this later when working. Walter received his religious education at school, and from his neighborhood, which was predominantly Jewish. Since Walter wanted to be a mechanic, he worked for a friend in a car tire company. His father went to the United States again in 1931 and lost his money; the rest of the family remained in Vienna. Upon his return, he bought a tire agency in

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Europe, and asked Walter to work for him. Walter quit his friend's company to work with his father, but his father went bankrupt once more. Walter then worked for his brother-in-law for two and half years. His father worked for a prince who had a Slovakian property, an electric plant that Adolph developed and made into a big business.

After Hitler had come to power, his father went to Beirut, but he wanted to come back to Prague. Walter knew his father would die if he did so. Therefore, Walter suggested that he should go back, instead of his father; Walter took the ship to Athens and the Orient Express back to Prague. His mother and youngest sister were in Prague already.

In Prague, because he was good in languages, Walter worked for one of the biggest exporters of Czechoslovakia that sold wood to England, but the owner closed the business in 1939 and went to England. Walter couldn't go to England because the police told him that they didn't have a visa for him, and he stayed in Prague. Having a visa and passport were necessary to exit Czechoslovakia, which was independent and allied with Germany. Since no visa was necessary in Italy, he went there. His mother and youngest sister were in Holland because his brother-in-law wanted his niece to be born in Holland. Since his sister was born in America, they could go to Holland without any trouble. His oldest sister was married to a Polish man, who didn't want to go to the United States because he didn't speak English.

The French army was recruiting Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks, amongst others, and Walter enrolled himself. Walter went to Beirut, Lebanon, and the police confiscated his passport. Walter's first wife had an acquaintance, who checked the records and found him on a black list. Walter's job in Beirut was to supervise the military commission installed there because he knew French. Moreover, he learned Arabic from the friendly people in Beirut because he was good in languages. He got a job in Beirut at a hotel in 1941, but the German military came. Then, Walter went to Palestine and Russia, and the police stopped him, but he showed his permit from Lebanon. When he went to Lebanon, he was working when the military got him. They were three officers who scared him with rifles, but he managed to escape.

After the war, Walter started some business in Czechoslovakia, but later he went to Australia where the government promised him that if he worked two years the military would find him a job. Walter worked thirteen years in Australia for a Jewish company. His mother and sister were in New York, and he sold everything in Australia to go to the United States to visit them as twenty-seven years had passed without his seeing them. Later he met his wife's cousin in Toronto, where he lived for twenty-six years in order to come to the United States frequently to see his mother and sister.

He thinks his Jewish heritage affected his life; otherwise he wouldn't have left

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Prague. His father died in Prague at the age of 55. After Walter went to Australia, he didn't see his father again, nor did his relatives see each other. Walter says that he didn't experience anti-Semitism in Prague because when the Gestapo was active in Prague, they seemed to treat Jews fairly, but the Jews were afraid of the Gestapo.

Walter recommends people realize that one never know how things will turn out. At the end of the interview he showed some pictures: one of his parents in Czechoslovakia, another of a building of the hotel and the movie house in Vienna, one of himself by a car in Prague, another of the headquarters of the Czech forces of the British army in Jerusalem where he served for four years, and the last, of his son's family, with his son, son's wife, and grandchildren.