

Interview 07/19/89

Subject: Walter Donat

Interviewer: Reba Connell

Reba Connell: This is an interview with Walter Donat on July 19, 1989, by Reba Connell, at 9 Lakeshore Drive in San Francisco. And can you tell me your date and place of birth?

Walter Donat: I was born in Vienna in, on February the thirteen, nineteen hundred seventeen.

Q: And how long had your family lived in Vienna?

A: Well, my parents both were born in Hungary, but at that time, Austria and Hungary was one country. So they were all Austrians. And I think that my parents came before nineteen hundred to Vienna, where they got married, around nineteen hundred.

Q: And what were your parents' professions?

A: My father had a leather store. He was a supplier for shoemakers, where they buy, they buy all kind of materials, and this type of store my father had. Later on, they had different, they worked with, he sold then later on the store, and he had a different business.

Q: OK. And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

A: I have, we are seven children altogether. I have four sister, and we are three brothers. And we, I am the youngest boy. I have a sister which is a year younger than I am.

Q: OK. And where were your parents' brothers and sisters living?

A: OK, well, my oldest brother lives now in Israel, his name is Fritz, he was born in 1903, he is going to be now eighty-six. The strange story is that he was the only one who was in concentration camp because he lived at the time in Belgium when Hitler came. And he came out like you see there in

the persecution, with those, well, they look all like skeleton. He came, he was in the hospital for about two years before he went to Israel. And he is today, he is eighty-six and still blooming. Then I have a sister Else, she lives now in Vienna, but it is a long story, I will tell you later on how that happened. And she is born in 1904. Then I have a sister Elizabeth, she is here in America, and she is born 1906. Then my other sister Hansi, she is born 1914, and she went to Israel in 1933. She is still in Israel, and oh, I am sorry, I forgot the brother. (laughter) Sorry. And my brother Otto, they call him Asher in Israel, and he is in Israel since 1938. Then Hansi since 1933, and then I, and then my sister Sophie, the youngest, which a year younger. My brother Otto is born in 1910, and my sister Hansi 1914, I 1917, and sister Sophie 1918, which also lives in Israel.

Q: And when you were living in Vienna, with your parents when you were growing up, did your parents have brothers and sisters?

A: Not, not, yes, my father had a brother in, had a brother in Vienna.

Q: Did your father have other brothers and sisters who were living in different places?

A: Let me see...I don't think so. I don't remember. But my mother had a whole family living in Hungary. Which I don't know much about it because we were, you know, I was a little kid at that time, and so. I know one year when I was maybe seven, eight years old, my grandmother came once to Vienna from Hungary to visit us. Otherwise, I don't know much about my relatives in Hungary.

Q: So did you see your grandparents when you were growing up?

A: I saw my grandmother once, and the father from my father lived with us until he was dead, you know, till he died. Now, you reminded me that, I was

still a little boy, maybe I was, when he died, I must have been maybe five, six years old, but I remember that he lived with us.

Q: And when did you first leave Vienna?

A: I left Vienna on July the tenth, 1938.

Q: And when did you first come to the United States?

A: In 1949. I don't know anymore the month exactly.

Q: And did you come directly to San Francisco when you came?

A: No, no. I came to New York.

Q: To New York first.

A: Yes, I stayed in New York a year, till 1951, I came to San Francisco.

Q: And in between you were in Shanghai?

A: Well, in between, I, from 1938, first I lived a year in Czechoslovakia, and then I lived nine years in Shanghai, and then, when the Communists came from, to Shanghai, nobody stayed there anymore, all the foreigners wanted to leave, so in 1947, I left and went to, back to Vienna. And waited from forty-seven to forty-nine for my visa to America.

Q: And why don't you tell me about your childhood and what it was like growing up in Vienna?

A: Well, we lived in, Vienna has twenty-one districts, and we lived in the Seventeenth District, which were not too many Jewish people. So I grew up, and I went to school, I was the only child in my class, the only Jewish child in my class. It was, I was a boy, I was very sport-minded, and so I was, I always was able to take care of myself, you know? Which is, in Vienna, as a Jewish child growing up, was not very easy, you know, because you were, you were always marked, they always ask, wherever you go first, what is your religion? You know, and so you were marked as a Jew. So I grew up there, and I was very, I went, I was very active in sports always, and I think

that probably helped me to develop the way, you know, I became. Also, I went to four, to eight years of school. They have four years of grammar, and four years of, they call it *hauptschule*, which is a main school. You have it a little different.

And then when I was fourteen years old, you usually, either you, if you have the means, and you know, the inspiration, you tried to go to college. We were not very rich, as a matter of fact, we were more on the poor side, you know, I had to look for a job. I didn't have, I mean, that's what I wanted to do. And I somehow had in my mind, I like to be a barber, you know, like young people wanted to do something. So I, and I was fourteen years and out of school, so I tried to apply for an apprenticeship in, to, in a barbershop. So I must have gone to about ten different barbers. The first question they always, they asked me, what is your religion? You know, so, I told them, I am Jewish. Well, we can't take you. Finally, I found one, way out from, in the Tenth District, he smiled at me and said, well, I take you, but you, it cost you, you will, you have to pay for your apprenticeship. Well, first of all, I wouldn't want to do that, besides, I didn't have the money, and I didn't want that my parents should pay that I should become a barber.

So I had to go where a Jew has a store, you know? It was in the clothing business, most clothing businesses were in Jewish hands. You know, in a lot of things the Jews had businesses. One of the reasons was because there was no other possibilities, you know? So I became an apprentice in the store, and also I went for two years business college, you know? So that was till about, I did this till I left Vienna.

But in the meantime, in 1936, Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, and we in Vienna, it is strange how people are. You know, we had sometimes coming, I was very young, but I, people, Jewish people came from

Germany to Austria and said, told us about Hitler, you know? That it is pretty bad. Of course it wasn't this bad between thirty-three and thirty-eight in Germany, like from the beginning from thirty-eight on in Austria. And they told us, Hitler is there, and he is against the Jews, and we all were shrugging our heads, you know, shoulders, and didn't pay any attention.

The same thing happened to me then, when I came, but I will tell you that later, when I came to Czechoslovakia, you know, in 1938. When I told them, you know, my story, that it was pretty bad, that you cannot live like that, well, Czechoslovakian Jews told me that they are, I don't know, if this would be so bad, he probably did something that he had to leave Austria. They couldn't believe that just out of because you're Jewish that you, you know, that you to leave. They thought I had to be a criminal because I left Austria. And one doesn't learn from the other, you know? So that's hopefully, me telling you that, that somebody gets the idea that you should listen, that you should learn from other people's mistakes. And as a matter of fact, those people who didn't believe, they stayed after we went to Shanghai, they were laughing about us, that we went to, that we go to China. China is so far away, you know, look at this world, there will be all kind of things, the Russians will help us, the English and the French, and they all lost their lives. You know, those people. Well, I am getting ahead of my schedule. (laughter)

So, then, so I was employed as a, in this clothing business. And I was still playing soccer and somehow lived, you know, what I thought at that time, a halfway normal life. But you, the mood in, Austria has a very big Social Democratic party, and they had a Christian Socialist party, two parties, then they had a Nationalist party, it is the Nazi party. The majority of Austria is, even I think today, is the *Christlich*, they call it, I say *Christlich* in

German, it is Christ, something to do with the *Christlichsocial* Democracy.

Anyhow, they and the Social Democracy were the main part. But later on, of course, the smaller party was the National Socialist party, and before 1938, you probably heard about Schuschnigg, he was, he was a good Austrian, he felt Austria, you know, felt that he is for Austria. So I think there was a, he outlawed, I don't know exactly when, he outlawed the National Socialist party, and in 1938, I think Hitler sent a telegram to Austria, to Schuschnigg, you have to release all the National Socialists from prison. You know?

And on the day before he came to power, that was February the twelfth, was I think, he took over on the thirteenth. In Vienna, the main street, this is all what I remember of Vienna which sticks in my mind besides, you know, little things, there were, Vienna has the main street is called Kartnerstrasse, and on the day when he sent this ultimatum to Austria, that he has to release them from prison, he, there was a big demonstration on the Kartnerstrasse, on one side walked the Social, the Social Democrats, no, I'm sorry, not the Social, the *Christlich* Democrats, and on the other side, walked the Nazi party. Nazi party, and, no, was it the, wait a minute, excuse me...

Q: It's OK.

TAPE RECORDER OFF

A: So anyhow, those two opposing parties were shouting and they wanted to fight each other, they, on the left side they shouted 'Heil Austria,' on the other one said 'Heil Hitler.' And in the middle the police kept them apart. And then when they heard about this ultimatum from Hitler, that he is gonna march in, they somehow united. And they all became one Austria. And so a few minutes ago they wanted to kill each other, (laughter) and they

somehow became united. That is somehow what I remember on the day before Hitler.

Also there was, on the Kartnerstrasse, there was a German travel office, and there was a life-size picture of Hitler, and I saw women in front of that kissing the ground and saying 'Heil Hitler, Heil Hitler.' So anyhow, the poor Schuschnigg has had no chance, you know, he had to, you cannot fight the German army by itself, you know? So anyhow, that's when they marched in, on the thirteenth of February, and from then on, the job I had, I was able to stay there till July. But it was a terrible time for the Jews. When you go on the street and you, especially when you looked dark and the so-called 'Jewish look,' I mean, they know, everybody knew each other in where you lived, so they know where the Jews lived, they pulled them out from their house and they had to wash the street, which is all known.

So I saw all that, but somehow, my sisters, to come back from, to my brothers and sisters, my sister Hansi, we all belonged to a Jewish organization, you know? Long before that. Somehow, the Jews knew that you have to be, that you are just there for, that you are always a Jew. So somehow, as a young person, you look for different ideas. So we all joined this Zionist organization, and my sister Hansi, she was the first one in 1933, who got, she married, and they both, they both belonged to this Jewish organization, they got the certificate which were only fifty sent out from Palestine over the whole world. You know, the British, they sent out fifty, I guess, a year, and they got one of them, and she, they went to Israel. My brother Fritz, he very seldom lived at home, he was the oldest, and he was on the go, he was in Rumania, he was in Hungary, so he was not at home in 1938. And my younger sister left to, also she got a official certificate in 1938, five days before Hitler came to power. So I was at home only, and my

sister Elizabeth, and my sister Else, she didn't live at home, but she was also in Vienna. All the other, and Otto belonged to a Jewish organization, and he lived in Vienna with them, he was the leader of that, so he lived there with them. He had a group where he had to stay with them. And he left also, but after Hitler, he took the last Jewish transport which got official OK to leave for Palestine, at that time, that was also 1938. So I was only at home, and my sister Elizabeth, were the only children at home from all seven.

So I was able to work till on July the tenth, when there was a decree was written that no Jewish employees can stay on any job anymore. So what I am going to do, so in the morning on the tenth, on the eleventh, I told my parents, there is no future here, you know, we don't know what will happen with a young guy around here, what should I do? So I had, my future brother-in-law, you know, from my sister Else who didn't live at home, he went a few weeks sooner, he went to Prague, to Czechoslovakia, and he wrote that my sister should come, and if I want to come, you know, that, he showed us, he described a way how to, how we should do it. So I told my parents on the eleventh, that it's no future here, I will go to Czechoslovakia.

But, you know, to go from, now, you know, you think, you just go, you have a passport, and you get a visa, and you go. But it doesn't work out like that. First of all, I applied for a passport a few months before because, but nobody takes you anyhow. So I had the passport, I still have this, where they show where they put the 'J' in it, and write 'Walter Israel Donat.' So with this passport, you couldn't go to any embassy and ask for a visa, because the most important is that you be able to come back to this country, but the Austrians never will take a Jew back, you know? So on that reason, the other countries don't let you in. So the only way to go away someplace was illegal. And illegal, first of all, I didn't have much money. I had my last



salary what I got, and my parents didn't have much money. So half of it I left with them. And I had to go, you know, Austria is surrounded by Hungary, by Czechoslovakia, by Switzerland, by Germany. We're just in the middle.

And to go to Czechoslovakia, I had no idea, except the way he said, you go there, with the bus, to, I think, to the Twenty-first District, and by end of that, there is the Gestapo will wait for the bus. And they, they take you, and then when night comes, they will send you to walk to Czechoslovakia. You know, they just, without that you should be caught. So I did this, and as I came there, the Gestapo was waiting there, and they said, it was about, I came there maybe in the morning, so I stayed there till the evening. And I saw a lot of other people: women, the children. And they said, we'll bring you there at night, but you have to be able to pass. Austria was the borderline where the Sudeten German lived, and the Sudeten German, they were very friendly, they wanted to back, go back to Germany. If they catch you before you go inside Czechoslovakia, they send you back. And when they send you back, you go to, you will get to the concentration camp. We don't want you anymore. We let you go. But we don't want you. If you come back caught from the Sudeten German, we send you to the concentration camp. So you can imagine the feeling we had. So about eleven o'clock at night, they took us there on trucks, like animals, you know? And they said, it was pitch dark and you know, fields and cornfields and all this, and they said, you go in a straight line, and you hit inside Czechoslovakia, so that you cross the Sudeten German, then you'll be safe, but you...

So I had there another fellow, we start walking, so we, but he said, watch out when you go close to some villages, that they don't catch you. So

you couldn't ask anybody, you know, where were we? So we walked, we walked, and about maybe six o'clock in the morning, dead tired, you know, don't know where there is we were, and close we hear a dog barking, and this. We circle around, we don't want to be caught. So six o'clock in the morning, we don't know where we are. And we are afraid to ask. But finally, we decided, well, what good is that? Maybe we start, make a lie.

So we went up to a village, and we walked there into a restaurant. And we said, the waitress came and we ordered something, and she, I said, we had a car accident and we cannot move, we need to go to Brno, Brno, this is B-R-N-O, you know, this is the closest city in Czechoslovakia on the border. How far are we? Oh, she said, you are very close to the Austrian border. So what we did, (laughter) all night, we walked in a circle and came just around there, not there where we were, you know, but on another, but we didn't go straight, you know, we just walked. So we were desperate, you know, what, so if they send us back, they send us back, what can you do? So this waitress, she said, 'Are you Jews?' She said, (laughter), so what can you say? 'Yeah.'

So she called the boss, and the boss looked at us and said, 'You know, I am a Social Democrat, and I will help you. How much money you have?' So we had each on us maybe, I had about twenty or thirty schillings, like, you know, and the other guy, too. He said, 'Give it to me, and I am going to drive you close to where you, where they don't catch you anymore.' So we were shivering, I thought maybe the guy is just telling us a lie and so that he will send us back. So he said, he put us in his car, and he said, lie down that they shouldn't see you. We shivered there and said, what will happen to us? But he was honest. He brought us close to Brno, you know? And he saved our life.

And in Brno, I went to the, that was about five o'clock in the afternoon, I went to the, I heard there is a Jewish community. You know, the Jewish always help each other, which is very good. And I went there to this Jewish community and told them that I want to go to Prague, you know? They said, no, you cannot go to Prague, you have to stay here, this is dangerous because officially, we are safe, but don't have officially permission to stay in Czechoslovakia. But my brother-in-law was, my future brother-in-law, he didn't marry yet, he was in Prague, and I wanted to be with him. So they gave me about twenty or thirty kronen, that was the, and said you get a room there, and you stay, until we can make some other arrangement. But I was twenty-one years old, you know, I was, I wanted to do what I wanted to do. So, but in Czechoslovakia, you had to speak Czech, they didn't like the Germans, you know? So all I knew is, was the German language, you know? So I asked there, I had the address in Prague where my brother-in-law lived. So I asked, how do I say, 'Where is?' Only two words, (laughter) you know? So they told me, it's called, 'Gde ye'.

And so I went on a train, you know, and asked them, and bought a ticket with this money they gave me to Prague. And I came there around twelve o'clock at night. Not a word of Czech. Just except *Gde ye*, and I arrived there on the train station, and the first one I asked, *Gde ye?* (laughter) And he told me what street car, no, I met somebody on the train, he told me which street car to take. And then I come there about (laughter) two o'clock at night to this house where he lives. With all this, I found that. And so, he, I had to sleep the first night, he didn't have enough room, I slept the first night with the guy who takes care of the house, in one bed, I covered myself with the newspaper, (laughter) you know?

And in the morning, he took me there to an old Jewish lady and told her that I had to get a, to stay in Vien--, in Prague. And so she let me live there for about two nights. And as I mentioned to you before, I didn't know any language, but all I knew was to play soccer, you know? And somehow, there was somebody, he must have been Jewish or half-Jewish, he, they got in touch with this fellow, he was the president of a soccer team in Czechoslovakia, and he had a factory where they made like margarine, you know? And after a few days, he, I was able to, he was nice to me, and I got the permission to stay in Czechoslovakia, and he let me work in his factory, and I played soccer for them. And I stayed with this person, with his family, until I left in February, 1939.

But in the meantime, in 1938, in the fall, Hitler wanted to have the Sudeten German back, which, you know, is history, and all I think I can tell about the Czech people is that they were ready to fight the German all by themselves. You know, they didn't want to be occupied, to give back the Sudeten German just because Hitler wanted it, but then, you heard about Munich, that Daldier and Chamberlain went to Munich, and they made a compromise that they had to give it away. So, after he got the Sudeten German, I saw in Prague a lot of *Jederhosen* and white stockings, which they never wore, so this always, the Germans are here. So we said, well, he is going to take whole of Czechoslovakia, not only the Sudeten German. 'Ah,' the Jewish population thought, 'Ah, this is...' not only Jews, all the Czech thought, a lot of them, that this will never happen, they all will come to rescue us. But so, we being refugees there, we tried, but you couldn't go anywhere, we tried to get away, where, but Czechoslovakia is in the middle of anything. Hungary would be the same thing. Germany you cannot go anymore, so where can you go?

So luckily, there was a guy who looked for people, also a Jewish fellow from, a Jewish fellow from Vienna, he also was in Prague, and he looked for people who would go with him to Shanghai. Because Shanghai was the only country where you didn't need a visa, China was the only, that's why you hear about all the gangsters and all, they all went to Shanghai, you know, because they could go there without a visa. So he was looking for people to go to Shanghai with him. He will pay the fare, which was very expensive, you know, you had to go by boat, and the reason he did this, because as a refugee, or maybe he was a Czech person, you could only take out two hundred pounds. But he had twelve hundred pounds. So he needed five more people who take on their passport two hundred pounds, and for that, he will pay the fare, which was about forty-three pounds, you know, was very expensive. So my brother-in-law said, I am going, and I do this, I will take on my passport, and my sister, and if you want to, I will talk to him, that you also take two hundred pounds. And he had two other men, so there was desperation, what should we do? Somehow we had a feeling that Hitler will overtake Czechoslovakia, and then there is nowhere to run anymore.

So we were lucky, so on the twenty-eighth of February, 1939, we got the permission, we flew from Czechoslovakia to Switzerland, I still have this visa, because you cannot touch anymore German ground, so we had to fly over Germany, and flew to Switzerland, and from Switzerland, we took a train to Marseilles. And so, I want to mention also, on the airport before we left Czechoslovakia, they were making fun of us that we were stupid to go so far, what is China? where is China? You know, this sounds so far away from Europe, I mean, I don't know anything about it. You take a chance like that. So we took the chance into the middle of, on the thirteen, also again on the thirteen of March, when we were in Indochina, we heard that Hitler marched

into Prague, took all the Czechoslovakia, and those people who laughed about us, they're probably all dead. There was no, no escape from there. So that was our trip to, to Shanghai.

Q: Can I turn over the tape?

A: Yeah.

END OF SIDE ONE

A: So somehow that saved our life in going to Shanghai. I came to Shanghai, of course I had no money, there were, at that time, about, all together about twenty thousand people from Europe, from Germany and from Austria, mostly from Germany, and some from Poland, they came to Shanghai. But when we arrived there, I mean, it was a quite different experience, you lived in a different world. You know, coming from Europe, and to see that suddenly, the change. A lot of people committed suicide, you know? Because it was such a change. Well, the Jewish community in Shanghai, which was quite, very well-to-do, they supplied the Jews from Europe with some homes that they, I mean, it was not luxury, but at least, when you arrived, you had a shelter, and you had food. So it was up to you whether you wanted to go there, and so that you don't have to starve. It was, you know, not very nice. So that was, when they saw the change, to live there, there is just one bed on top of the other one, and, you know, you have to stay in line for your food, you know, you are just on charity. So a lot of people, you know, were somehow disappointed. But what can you do?

But somehow, it was up to you whether you wanted to go there. You can go, that was a, Shanghai was free, you can do whatever you wanted. So somehow, my brother-in-law, we, and I, and my sister, we decided, we don't go there. We try our luck on our own; somehow, we'll manage. Everywhere, then, in all these years, in all these nine years, I never went there and got

any charity or anything. Somehow, I survived on our own, on my own. And my brother-in-law and my sister also. We, they had a different concession, they had the French Concession, the English Concession, and the International, and then there were the Japanese. These were, the Jews had these homes, where they had this home, that was in the Japanese section. They called it Hongkew.

The fellow who I brought this money from, also something happened before, but I know, it's worthwhile saying. In, we had a collision, between Hong Kong and Shanghai, before we came there, we had a collision with a boat, with another boat. And our boat was ripped open in front, but we were able to go back to Hong Kong. And we stayed in Hong Kong to wait for a next, it was a French boat, for the next French boat. Which took us about, I think, eighteen days. And I was, I was invited there by the football association, because they were talking about football. I was invited to play there, it was the police department team. I still have this article here. And I played with them, on the Sunday, and they invited me to stay in Hong Kong, not to go to Shanghai. But I had those two hundred pounds, which was only, I had come to Shanghai. And so this guy didn't let me. You know, and so I had to go to Shanghai. So I had an opportunity really to stay in Hong Kong, which might have changed my whole life.

Anyhow, so after that, we came to Shanghai. And the fellow, his name was Stier, he gave each of us five pounds. As a, (laughter) that we can start on our own. But five pounds wasn't too much. Anyhow, we took a room in the French Concession, and I somehow, I had the experience as, you know, in the clothing business, as tailoring. So I opened out of, with guts, I opened up a tailor shop, I hired some of the Chinese there. They had a foreman, he spoke English. I spoke very little English, you know, almost nothing, I

learned. And somehow, I made a living, you know? And I learned English, and then they had their Jewish soccer club, you know? And I started to play soccer, and they had a very rich Russian population, of you know, people, they were there, they came from the Russian Revolution in 1918. So a lot of Russians, Jewish people, were very established, they had stores and, you know, stores and well-to-do businesses.

And somehow, when you're young, it's easier to survive. It was for the majority of people, it was very hard, especially older people. There was nothing to do, compete with the Chinese, you know? What could you do? The labor, the Chinese worked for a piece of bread, you know, it was for rice. So you couldn't compete. The women, the young women, had more of a chance. They could go, this was, a lot of sailors were in China, you know, in Shanghai. There was a sailor town, they could work as bar girls. So, it was, a lot of marriages were broken up because of the women able to work and the men couldn't do anything. It was quite miserable. And I found a job as a, as a waiter, you know? And most of time after that, it was only a short period there with this tailoring, because that didn't work out too good, most of the time, on the beginning, I, to work in a bar as a waiter, because you're white, you know, is, you somehow, there was a big English population, you know, well-to-do and American, they rather have a white waiter. You know?

So, and I also heard from my mother, I got a letter, they lived in Vienna, very, very poor, they starved to death. And with all this starving, she wrote, my sister Elizabeth, she also, she was able to go from Vienna as a household, like my wife, as a household help. She got permission to go to England. But in England, so she left also Vienna, but in England, when my mother heard in Germany, I mean in Vienna, that they bombed this London



so hard, so she was more concerned about the welfare of my sister in London. So she wrote, maybe you can bring Elizabeth to Shanghai. So I worked very hard so that I can save some more money, and I was able to get my sister with the last boat out of London. And she came also to Shanghai. So we are three of us in Shanghai.

And I was, my sister was a lady's tailor, and I got her a job with a friend of mine who was a refugee from, he was a Russian, but he was left, he stayed in Germany after, in Germany is a, you know, after the war, for the, after the First World War, he stayed in Germany and married there a German woman. And when Hitler came, he went by himself, the wife stayed there, he had two children, but she didn't want to go with him. And he went alone to Shanghai. And he opened there a tailor shop, he was very good with his, you know, with his hands. And I got my sister when she came from England a job there. And they got married later on, you know? And they came to San Francisco, and they had a very nice life together. So anyhow, so when my sister came, I was able, you know, to take care of her and, but she didn't need that much from us.

But we, in nine--, in, so, I always worked outside, and in 1943, the Japanese put out a decree saying all the people, it didn't say the Jews, all the people who came after 1937 have to go in a designated area. This is like a ghetto. They cannot stay like anymore in the French, and in the, in the French Concession or in the International, they have to go in this area. That means, we, there was not even enough room to go there. They had to build special buildings, very primitive, and you had to pay for it, but you had a be on a certain day in this ghetto. So we lived, that was in 1943, and we stayed in this ghetto for two years, until the Japanese surrendered.

But I wanted to tell you about the way the Jewish people are very ingenious, you know? This population in Hongkew, they, you know, they developed so much. They had their own doctors, and they had their own stores, and they had, all these people who came from Europe, a lot of them were very well-educated. And they had there a little town, you know, a little city. And they were very ingenious. And we had there our own symphony, and we had our own sports festivals. And so we, people who lived before outside, we always came to visit them. But in 1943, they had to, we had to stay all together in this area. And so, in many ways, it was, financially, it was very hard. But socially, it was nice, because we made our own festival, and we somehow lived those two years, we survived them.

But we were bombed out in 1945 by the Americans, you know? Right where we, where they built, where we lived, I lived with my sister and my brother-in-law together, where we lived, there was a radio station, the Japanese had a radio station. So the American bombed that. And thanks God, my sister was only at home. But nothing happened to her. But in this complex, quite a few people died, you know? Well, that was a radio station there, so the Americans didn't know exactly probably who lives there.

But after that, the war ended, and we were able to go out of this ghetto again. But for two years, we were in this ghetto. Well, after that, a lot of people got certificate to America, and to wherever you were able to go. I had nothing, nowhere to go, except to Austria, but I know, we had to leave. So I went to, back to Vienna, and I stayed there till forty-nine. And life in Vienna at that time was pretty bad. One guy made a joke, who knew me, he said, when he saw me, he said, you know, the Jews are like bugs. They come back after when they are poisoned. It was the welcome, you know?

And so from forty-nine on, we, I went to, I came to New York, and stayed there in about till 1951. But then the HaKoah here, the soccer team, they, they, a lot of my friends from Shanghai, from the soccer, they asked me, why do you stay in New York? It's too hot, and so I came here, and ever since that time I am in San Francisco. Which I, after 1953, I met my wife, here in San Francisco, and we are happily ever after. (laughter) Anything else that you like me to say?

Q: Let's see...wanna take a break for a little bit? OK.

TAPE RECORDER OFF

Q: OK, so during the war, how were you able to keep in contact with your parents and with your brothers and sisters?

A: About my parents, in nineteen--, I was able to get in Czechoslovakia a few letters. To Shanghai, they wrote me, when they told me about my sister should get out, and until 1940. Then I didn't get many letters anymore. So when the war was over, the first thing I wanted to know, what about my parents? You know? So I wrote to the Red Cross, and they answered me, and I have still this letter, that my parents, in 1943, were sent to Izbica, Poland. And nobody heard anything about them. So when the war was over, I thought, as long as I have no visa, anywhere to go, and I wanted to first, I wanted to know what happened to my parents. So in forty-seven, as I mentioned, I went back to Vienna and see what happened. And I found out exactly the same thing, (cough) excuse me, that they were sent in 1943 with a lot of other Viennese Jewish people to Izbica. But nobody heard anything about them any more. So after talking to neighbors of where we lived, they, I found out that they starved to death, they, there was, the Jews didn't get a rationing like the others. Whatever they got, this is, I can't even think about it, it is so bad, because the way I found out, they didn't have a

bread to eat. That's the way they lived there. So the way they described this, sending away to Izbica was a relief for them, so that they were able to maybe get a piece of bread or something. They themselves saw how they were starving to death.

So it's very sad even to think about it. This haunts me day and night. So whenever we talk about it, my brothers and sisters, we cannot even mention that. You know, you somehow live with it. And I, until today, I made myself, you know, thoughts. Seven children were not able to do anything for their parents, you know? Parents are able to take care of their children, but seven of us, we were not able to do anything for them. But that, we have to live with that. I always have an excuse, my father said, I am, was an Austrian soldier, nothing will happen to me. And there again, you see, we didn't learn any. We would have taken, we, we were poor, we couldn't do much. But a lot of people with money, Jewish people, when they heard this what is going on with Hitler in Germany, they could have packed up and do something in 1933, 1936, it wasn't that bad yet that you couldn't go anywhere. But especially when you had money, you still were able to do something. But you only hear what you wanna hear, you know? So you don't take advantage of that. The same thing happened to the Czechoslovakian Jewish people. They could have saved themselves, a lot of them, but they didn't take any notice, they thought that we coming to Czechoslovakia, we must have done something wrong in Austria.

Q: And you felt differently than the other people, than the other Jews in the community where you were, in Vienna, and also in Czechoslovakia. You saw that you were not safe staying there. Why do you think that that was, that other people thought that they should stay and you knew that you should go?

A: It's like my... Well, first of all, when you're older, you're more settled. My father was an Austrian. This is like, you know, this is, your roots are here, you, I went to war for them. You will think that you will be poisoned with gas? You know, even the young people, they say, why didn't you do anything? You know, why didn't you use force or anything? But it's, you go here, and somebody's doing something, you tell the policeman, he, this guy is molesting me, the policeman will do something about it. But you, as a Jew, in Austria, in Germany, you were open to do anything against you. You cannot go to the police, the police smiles at you, laughs at you. Because the government is officially, you are bait. They can do anything. So what can the person who is in this situation do? So that's why they said, why did they all go just without fighting? Somehow, your self-survival instinct took you, well, you try to do the best. You start shooting people, you won't live anymore. And now, of course, you see it differently. But there was nothing that they could do.

Q: You said that in a lot of ways you grew up with anti-Semitism, when you were young in Vienna. When did you first experience that?

A: You grew up with that. This is, in Vienna, this is, you, as a Jew, you are, you're the minority, you know, the worst minority, and they say the Jews, they were all rich, and they, especially when people are, in Austria, a lot of poor people. So when a lot of Jews, a lot of Jews, but not all of them, were prosperous, because they were smart, they saved their money, they didn't go to the bar and drink away their salaries. They saved it, and they were enterprising people. All over, the same thing happened in Shanghai, a lot of them very enterprising, and so they were able to live better than the others, but it has nothing to do only with the Jews. So this is what a poor person resented. You know, so they blame, and somebody was poor, he blames it

somebody who cannot fight back. So that was the anti-Semitism we grew up with.

Q: And what was the Austrian reaction to Hitler?

A: Well, I gave you this as an example, Austria, from many years ago, Austria is not a friend of Germany, you know? As tradition will tell you. But speaking the same language, so Hitler made, united them, but in their heart, I don't think that they loved the Germans. But they say they were an occupied country, but they were united in their hate of the Jews. This is what the Germans and the Austrians have in common. But for that matter, I don't think that too many countries in Europe which didn't hate the Jews. You know, I mean nothing in comparison what Hitler did, and I don't think that the other countries really loved the Jews. This is somehow, this is the majority, is the Catholic, which somehow, I think today, they changed more, their view, they know that it's not the Jews who killed Christ. But it is, they who are brought up that way, that it is the hate in them, to hate the Jew. But that's not new, it's what happened in all those pogroms, you know, in Russia and Poland. So that, as I say, it's not only the Germans and the Austrians. You see that the Polish people didn't help too much, the Polish Jews. You know all what happened, how the Jewish population in Poland had to fight, and how they had this ghetto there, even on the normal life, the Polish people were very, very mean to the Jews.

Q: Did you have non-Jewish friends when you were growing up?

A: Oh, sure, we were only--

Q: Because you were the only Jew in your school?

A: Yeah, you had to, yeah, right. And, I mean, close friends, I think I had only one Jewish boy who lived also in this neighborhood. He also was very sport-minded, and I was very close with him, but I, as friends, you know,

friends you could only be with a Jewish boy. But I mean, I had a lot of so-called friends which are non-Jews, but not as close as I could be with a Jewish fella. It's a different feeling, you know?

Q: And what happened to your relationships with non-Jews when Hitler came to power?

A: Well, as I say, I was not very close with anybody, and we had, the only relation which I had was some Jewish people which not lived exactly in my district, but close friends, I was only with Jewish boys. I still have pictures there, we were about six boys, you know, living in different closer districts, but this was the close friendship, so when you say about, ask me about non-Jewish friends, you could not have a close relation.

Q: And as soon as Hitler came to power--

A: Yeah, that was, you could not be, have any. They all, they all were, you know, somehow separated from the Jews. They always were. You were just somehow ignored. We, in our district, where we lived, we were there, so there was nothing they can do, but later on, you see what happened to my parents. They were, they just starved to death. Nobody lifted a finger to help them.

Q: When you came to New York, how were you received by the Jewish community there?

A: I think that the first thing that the HIAS tried to help us with a, for a job, but somehow, because when I came from Shanghai, I was already, I spoke already English, you know, which I still don't speak good. (laughter)

Q: No.

A: But, so, I was able to, as I say, even in Shanghai, I never wanted to have charities. You know? So on the first day in New York, I was looking for a job. And you, until I retired, I was in, never a very good job I got there, I

worked there first as a shipping clerk, but I was never, you know, never hungry, and I always worked. And even here, when I came here, there were a lot of refugees from Shanghai in San Francisco. And one guy, Lucky Kauf, he was a maitre d' in, on the Fisherman's Wharf. And everybody who came here who wanted to work had right away a job. So my first day here, I got a job as a busboy on the Fisherman's Wharf, in Alioto, as a matter of fact, they still owe me for about four days salary, (laughter) because after about two, three weeks, I quit, you know. But they didn't pay me for the last few days, you know? I quit, so now, that was 1951, they still owe me (laughter) salary. So anyhow, I always worked. I always worked, and I don't wait for charity, you know? So the job might not be not always the best, but I was able to, you know, not to wait that somebody gives me anything. Well, I, and I came here, so I worked first in the, as a busboy, and then I got a job in the American Can Company. That was a real hard job. I worked for all this, they made cans, but I had to, you know, had to go with these iron plates and put this all on, it was hard. But I'm, after I had always a dream to become a salesman, you know? And I made it, you know? So we always survived.

Q: And how did you meet your wife?

A: I went through a, through a friend. He introduced me, he says, 'I know a nice Jewish girl from Vienna.' (laughter) So he made us a blind, you know, a blind date. And from then on, we didn't take long. We got married. And we have a very lovely daughter which we're very proud of. And only the past hangs over us, which is very hard to forget. But I hope that in telling you all that, that maybe my grandchildren will hear it, and other people will somehow learn to listen, that you cannot ignore the plight of what happen to other people. You know? Somehow, you think, 'Ah, it will never happen to me.' But you never know what can happen.



Q: Do you experience any prejudice today?

A: No, I must say that I think I know what prejudice is, and we are very lucky here in America. Maybe one of the reason, that we are not the only minority. We are not, there is a lot of minority. And the Jews themselves have prejudices. So have other, anybody else, you know? So I think that coming to America, life in America, even you hear that somebody would say, 'Jew this,' but he says 'N■■■■' and he says other things, too. So there is no, as far as I am concerned, I don't experience prejudice.

Q: But you see prejudice against other minority communities here?

A: Well, just by ignorant people. They, not officially, there are no official prejudice. It is that, one guy who is, has red hair, might say, 'Look at this guy with the black hair,' and some, this is normal, you know, envious, some people who is rich, who is poor, envies the rich one, somebody is tall or somebody is fat. I think those are prejudices. But otherwise, I somehow think that everybody lives here, compared to anywhere else, better, better.

Q: Do you think that the Holocaust could happen again today?

A: I don't think in America, I don't think in America. And well, it's hard, hard to say. Well, I think it will not happen as long as there is an Israel. See, because of Israel, the Jews have quite a different life. So regardless, whatever happened, if we would have had an Israel, it would have been quite a different story. My parents wouldn't have had to, to, you know, die like that. And this is the, is like insurance. It's an insurance for the American Jews, it's insurance for the French Jews, it's... So we don't give only out of charity, we give it to, they have to give out of self-survival. You know, all those contributors, they don't only do it for Israel, they do it because somehow this is an insurance policy. Don't you think so?

Q: And you have family now living in Israel?

A: Oh sure, I have a lot. I have two brothers and two sisters. And about twenty-three grandchildren, you know, I mean, from their, the children. And they already have children. As I say, this one I mentioned to you, that my, my brother's daughter, who is in this religious kibbutz, she has seven children, and expects some more.

Q: And have you visisted there often?

A: Yeah, we were three times already. Yeah, I hope to go there again.

Q: And you were back to Vienna recently, right?

A: Yeah, my, because my sister, she is an American citizen, and her husband, when they came from Shanghai to America, somehow, he, he couldn't get used to it. You know, a lot of Jewish people with this, what happened to us, they cannot settle. Their roots are somehow up in arms, and they cannot settle. And he was one of them. He somehow felt, my roots are in Vienna, maybe there is change, and I think maybe I can do better. So he went to Vienna, but she didn't want to go. So she, he went to Vienna and stayed there, he was in Germany, and he made a nice living probably, but my sister stayed here. But it was a great love. So after about five, six years, she followed him. And she stayed in Vienna, but she is an American citizen. And then he died, and she stayed on in Vienna, and she visited us, and she went back again to Vienna. She somehow, she got settled there. And now, last year, all of a sudden, she is an old lady, you know, she is now, born in 1904, so she, I mean 19-- , yeah, 190-, she is 1904, yeah, so she is now eighty-five years. So about last year, all of a sudden, she, she, got sick. She didn't know where she was. She was always walking and this, exercising. But her mind somehow snapped. And they put her there in a Jewish home. My brothers and sisters from Israel came there when that happened, and they put her in a home. And my wife and I visited last year, and, but it was

her first trip. And we saw, you know, after forty-nine years, my wife was there. And so she, we went back, that was the reason a lot of us have not gone back.

Q: How do you feel about Austria now?

A: Well, I have not good memories because of my parents, you know? And I don't, if this, you know, if you lose people like that, you have a different feeling. A person, you know, you talk to a lot of people, they might think differently when you don't lose your parents, you know? So what kind of feeling can I have?

Q: And what does America represent to you?

A: Well, it represents a home where I am happy to live. Because I can only say good things about America. I feel, I have never felt in Austria like I feel in America.

Q: OK.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE.

Q: This is the second tape in interview with Walter Donat, July 19, 1989.

What are you the proudest of in yourself?

A: Well, I was able to marry a nice Jewish girl. And I have a very nice daughter, and we live comfortable, we are happy with our life. Thanks God, we are so far healthy. And happy to be in America.

Q: What do you think contributed to your survival?

A: Lots of luck. And God felt that I am not ready to, not to survive, you know? It was a lot of, we had to survive Hitler, and I had to go from Europe to twenty thousand miles to China to survive. And whatever happened, I was able to do it. I guess lots of luck.

Q: What do you feel that you have to teach from your experiences? What would you tell a young person?

A: Well, that they, I think, to listen what happened. And to take notice of what happened in the world, that what happened to other people, that it should not happen to them. So I think that's the best lesson what a young person can learn is from other people, so that it shouldn't happen to them.

Q: What do you feel that you have lost in your experience?

A: Well, I lost the most treasured thing, my parents. And that seven children were not able to do anything for us, for them. I think that, that this will hang with all of us for the rest of our life. That, whether we really could have done something or not, I don't know, but I think that when you, when I think about it, we could have done more.

Q: Do you feel that you have gained anything?

A: I don't know what you mean, gained anything, in gained.

Q: Did you receive anything, did you get anything that you feel is better, from what happened?

A: Well, only that I came to America, but otherwise, I didn't need all that. You know? I am glad that I am in America, that I am away from Austria, but I didn't need to have those circumstances (laughter) to do that.

Q: Do you want to add anything?

A: Well, I just, as I said, I hope that it contributes something to other people.

Q: How do you feel about having done this interview?

A: Well, I think it's good, maybe, having it on tape, what happened, maybe my grandchildren will know what happened to me and whether they're interested or not, (laughter) we'll leave it up to them. So maybe, maybe they will be happy to have it.

Q: Good. Well, thank you very much.

A: You're quite welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

## TAPE LOG: WALTER DONAT

Interview 07/19/89

### TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

000--088 name, DOB, family background  
089--111 childhood, school, sports  
112--130 looking for barber apprenticeship  
141--151 Hitler in Germany  
152--171 Czechoslovakian Jewish reaction  
172--198 political climate in Austria  
199--229 Nazi/Christosocial demonstration on day before Hitler  
217 TAPE RECORDER OFF  
230--246 Hitler in Austria  
247--283 siblings, Zionist youth organization  
284--301 decision to leave Austria  
302--325 preparation for illegal departure  
326--362 Gestapo taking Jews to Austrian/Czechoslovakian border  
363--376 walking in Czechoslovakia  
377--414 restaurant in Czechoslovakia, saved by Czech man  
415--445 Jewish community in Brno  
446--462 travel to brother-in-law's house in Prague  
463--486 living and working in Prague  
487--517 Hitler takes Sudetenland  
518--551 arrangements to leave Czechoslovakia  
552--582 leaving Czechoslovakia  
721 END OF SIDE ONE  
722--746 arrival in Shanghai  
747--758 living in Shanghai  
759--774 boat accident, soccer in Hong Kong  
775--794 soccer, tailor shop  
795--816 waiter job  
817--831 sister in London  
832--849 sister in Shanghai--job, marriage  
850--863 move to Japanese ghetto  
864--881 ingenuity of Jews in Hongkoyo  
882--893 bombed by Americans  
894--903 back to Vienna  
904--918 to New York, to San Francisco  
919 TAPE RECORDER OFF  
920--958 parents' death  
959--986 Jewish resistance to leaving  
987--1015 Jewish disempowerment

1016--1035 Austrian anti-Semitism  
1036--1074 Austrian reaction to Hitler  
1075--1074 Jewish/non-Jewish friends  
1115--1131 New York  
1132--1162 working in San Francisco  
1163--1183 marriage  
1184--1215 prejudice today  
1216--1245 potential Holocaust, Israel today  
1246--1260 family in Israel  
1261--1317 sister in Vienna  
1318--1338 Austria, America today  
END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

000--010 what proud of  
011--019 survival  
020--028 teach: learn what happens to others  
029--045 loss, gain  
046--056 conclusion  
END OF INTERVIEW