

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ILSE AWIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Inge Karo
Date: October 14, 1999

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Melrose Park, PA 19027

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IA - Ilse Awin [interviewee]

IK - Inge Karo [interviewer]

Date: October 14, 1999¹

Tape one, side one:

IK: This is tape one, side one of an interview with Ilse Awin, A-W-I-N at the Rickshaw Reunion at the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia by Inge Karo. Now Mrs. Awin, could you tell me where and when you were born and your maiden name?

IA: I was born in Munich, Germany in, on, I don't-- talk English, I talk in English?

IK: English?

IA: I talk in English?

IK: Yes.

IA: I'm sorry. I was born 1925, December 31, in Munich, Germany and I went...

IK: And your maiden name was?

IA: Maiden name was Mechlowitz, M-E-C-H-L-O-W-I-T-Z.

IK: And about how old were you when you came to Shanghai?

IA: I was thirteen years old, thirteen and a half. We left--it was already pretty late when we left. It was in May and we arrived in June in Shanghai.

IK: What year?

IA: And soon after '39, 1939, yeah, at that time, it was time it was time to leave.

IK: Now...

IA: ...high time...

IK: ...you mentioned-- do you want to talk about any of your memories of what your life was like before Shanghai?

IA: Yeah, it was, it was terrible. I mean we were always under, under, we were scared. Like I remember at home, we had heavy curtains and we always goes with heavy curtains so no light should get out and in case somebody, the soldier Nazis outside and marching around and...

IK: Well was that, was that because of a blackout or was that just so nobody could see in?

IA: It was that we wanted nobody to know that there's light upstairs, that we're home, just in case, because...

IK: And this was in Munich?

¹Recorded at the Rickshaw Reunion - a meeting in October 1999 at the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia of refugees who found refuge in Shanghai during World War II.

IA: It was scary. That was in Munich, yeah. It was, it required [unclear]—the Nazis-- I still went to a school, like a girl, all girls' school, and we got in the, in the gym, we marched around like soldiers, like they treated us so that you were just a little kid, I was in grade one and two, we had to mar...

IK: When you say they who did you mean?

IA: Like the kids, the whole school got together and we had to stand attention in the gym, we marched around.

IK: Was this a Jewish school or was this...?

IA: It was a public, it was an all-girls public school I guess, and after this I was about eight I think, we had to leave, my girlfriend and I, we were the last two Jewish girls in that school had to leave, had to go to a Jewish school which we had to take a street car to get there, and I'll never forget when we said goodbye to the teachers, she had tears in her eyes, when she shook our hands and gave us, like we said goodbye. I was quite emotional and then...

IK: Do you know what year that was?

IA: It must have been...

IK: Before the...

IA: ...thirty--, I was about...

IK: Was it after Kristallnacht?

IA: ...maybe '34. No, no, I was born in '25, so it was after the second grade, the third grade I had to leave, and that was already the last, we were the last two Jewish girls, but it was sad, I mean...

IK: Just to backtrack for a minute, what is your father's name?

IA: He, he was for big stores like here it's-- like in Germany it was Herr-T [phonetic] and some other stores, like he was a salesman and he had a special line and he sold to the stores, and he had to stop working and they all told him how sorry they are that he had, that they have to, that they can't buy from him anymore, through him, and he was long, long time with those stores and they really liked him, and that was another big, big...

IK: When that happened was it a long time [unclear] that they decided they have to [unclear].

IA: Yeah, yeah, we had decided. I remember, I remember my father he was ready to, wherever he thought there's somebody he knows, like all different countries and to see if somebody could, could help him to get a visa, to get there, but it was just not possible and we had some, some relatives in Vienna and he got in touch with them and we also, we considered already Shanghai at that time, but we were still hoping that something else would come up but it didn't, and then when we decided, my parents decided to go to Shanghai, it was already hard to get a place on the boat, like to get passage, and I think he somehow knew somebody in the, in the travel agency, whatever

that was and we got a cabin, maybe somebody canceled or something and we were lucky in this respect.

IK: And to backtrack a minute, of course, you may have been too young to know but do you know how did your parents find out that it was possible to go to Shanghai?

IA: Oh that was well known because I remember when he got in touch with the relatives in Vienna, they also considered to go; but we all said was the last, still hoping to go somewhere else but it wasn't possible, and in fact we had relatives in Munich and, and they went over the border through the night and three times they were caught and they had to, they came back, and the first time, they made it and then they were in Belgium and the eventually when Hitler came to Belgium they got a hold of them, they ca-- and they went to concentration camps and none of them came out, and they were young, like my cousins, in fact, my cousin was supposed to get married. She found somebody in South America through the mail whom she, who, who like she got in touch with and I don't know if it would have been a real marriage or not but in order to get out, and we had already an engagement party between us in Munich and when they went across the border like she and her sister and the brother and the parents they all, I think, I think the uncle and the cousin did, they came too. They were in Sachsenhausen, in the concentration camp and I think...

IK: You learned about all of this later?

IA: We heard about that later, yeah.

IK: [unclear] Now do you know if your family always meant to just stay in Shanghai temporarily or did they think it would be forever permanent?

IA: Definitely temporarily, definitely. We never thought that we'd be there for 10 years. At that time we never really settled and plus we had no money. We had to leave Germany without money. I think it was five marks of currency, and we had to, we had to give up the jewelry [unclear]. We got out a little bit jewelry, which we tried to sell in Shanghai.

IK: I don't know whether you mentioned it or not, did you mention the year that you actually left for Shanghai?

IA: '39, it was in...

IK: 1939.

IA: It was in June, I think in June '39 we left on the...

IK: Do you know...

IA: ...via Italy.

IK: Do you know whether any organizations helped your family or you did this all on your own?

IA: We did it all on our own because I mean there was such a mix-up. I mean there was so much in the-- the one time they helped, the one time the, some Jewish organization helped us, we, I, in fact I was in jail one night...

IK: Where were you in jail?

IA: That was so stupid, like...

IK: In Germany or in Shanghai?

IA: In Germany. I had, they came like-- we had Polish passport. We lived in Germany but a lot of people they could have like, they could keep their Polish account, their passport.

IK: My husband too.

IA: Yeah you see, yeah, was a lot like that. They didn't have to give it up, and then there was, in '38 they came-- it was so crazy-- in '38 they came to the house and they picked up all the Polish, Polish-Jewish with Polish passports. I mean we were German, we were 100% German because we didn't talk any other language...

IK: ...was it that they wanted to send you back? Is that what they wanted?

IA: They wanted to send us back. They wanted the next day, they picked up, they went from house to house and picked up, they picked people up to send them back to Poland and I mean, you didn't have time, they came to our house. Like we had this special bell on the house [unclear] downstairs, outside and then we could press the button and the door opened, and I looked down and I pressed the button, went out of the room and I looked down the steps and saw two Nazis coming up...

IK: I'll bet that was terrifying?

IA: It was terrifying and not only that, my mother had been falled that morning. She came to clean the chimney early in the morning and she had to open the door in the hallway, she fall down, hit her head because it was so early in the morning and I guess she must have been half asleep, and she hit her head on some of the furniture. She had to like opened it up, it was bleeding and she had to call the doctor. And so when the Nazis came up, she was in bed, and the Nazis came up, they took me because my parents, like my mother couldn't come. She had the hole in the head, so my father said, he had to stay with her, so they said they have to take me. I was 12...

IK: And how old were you at that time?

IA: ...12 years old. And my father said, "Why don't you phone in? I mean, it's impossible, it must be a mistake, we can't go, you know, my daughter shouldn't go anywhere." They phoned in, they took me. I went, I remember I jumped from room to room, I went to the washroom, they followed me out. As if I would what, disappear or something anywhere, I went along with them.

IK: So were you put in jail into a cell with a lot of others?

IA: It was a lot of, a lot of other people yeah, and, and in a way like, people came from some Jewish organization and they brought us food and stuff. They let them in, in the hall [unclear]...

IK: ...you don't know what organization it was?

IA: ...and *Gemeinde*, *Jüdische Gemeinde*, yeah, and then for dinner they brought us some food or something, it might have even been on a Friday, probably a Friday night.

IK: Did they mistreat you in any way?

IA: They did not.

IK: ...or did they...

IA: They did not.

IK: ...treat you better because you were a child?

IA: They did not mistreat us and I was in with all the other people but I, but then I think some people who came, like the ones from the Jewish *Gemeinde*, they came and they talked for me, they kind of-- and I was let out, just I think it was towards the middle of the night I was let out and I was on the street. I didn't even have no money to get home or anything and some people drove by with a car and they found me, they took me home. And I remember my father said every year he's going to put a candle on. Anyway, all these people who, the next day they all got on the train, came to the border of Poland and then they were sent back. They didn't come back. In a way there was an aunt and an uncle also, two aunts, I mean, two aunts of mine, they were also with that transport-- and I saw them in the jail there.

IK: But your immediate family was allowed to stay, after that?

IA: After that...

IK: After you got out of jail?

IA: ...yeah, they were allowed to stay but we, somehow we all knew people weren't as-- it wasn't going for long. Oh at one time, like my father and my uncle went to the-- that was after the Crystal Night, I think and my father and my uncle went to the Polish consulate to see what's going on there and they thought it's also like a refuge, and we were already, [unclear] after the Crystal Night...

IK: For protection they went there?

IA: They went there for protection and we all were at my grandmother's because there were no men there. At that time, '39 they went after the men, not the women and, and we were put-- we went-- we got a call early in the morning so we all went to my grandmother's because she had no man there and we slept there also a few nights but then the next day my uncle and my father they went to the Polish consulate to see what's going on, and you know, and then the uncle came back a few hours later, the uncle came back and he told me when they came out of the consulate...

IK: He came back to your house?

IA: To the grandmother's and then my uncle said that they were both came out of the Polish consulate and they were all put in a car by the Nazis they to take them away, and then when they went away from the car he tried to get some other people off the street, my father jumped out and ran away and my uncle saw him jumping out of one side, he jumped out of the other side, they could have been shot in the back, and anyway,

the uncle came back, he probably had a closer distance to, to, to run or something and my father comes back, I was so scared, I thought oh they, they shot him, whatever. Anyway he did come back, that was, I mean it was so scary.

IK: Especially for a child...

IA: Yeah, it's scary, very scary, yeah.

IK: Do you mind, we didn't establish were you an only child?

IA: Yes.

IK: So when you talk about your immediate family, it was your parents and yourself?

IA: Yes.

IK: And you mentioned *Kristallnacht*, do you-- did you, do you remember anything that happened to your immediate family during *Kristallnacht*?

IA: Well besides that one. Well, it was in the school for...

IK: Did you see the synagogue being burned?

IA: I did not see too much. I just seen the movies in school, like we still-- I missed most of the year in the school at that time, and I still have to have that with me when we were supposed to make some wishing sentences in school and I have four or five sentences that I wish I could be out of this country already, or I wish I could be somewhere else already, I wish, and on and on like that. That was all in our mind [unclear]. There was also another incident, we had a, we had a nice apartment, and like the room I was sleeping in, and there was I, I-- there was a lady with a mother, with her mother and her child. And they came, and my parents let them in to sleep in that one room because they used-- they lived in the country, and the man was shot. They-- she lived with her mother and her son and her husband, but her husband was shot.

IK: In Germany?

IA: In Germany, in the country, so my parents let the two women with the son stay in the one room in our apartment, because they, they had a chance to go to the States until that time they elected to stay with us.

IK: And did you know...?

IA: But they shot, they shot him.

IK: ...did you know who shot him?

IA: Oh the Nazis, who else? It was no other; that what it was. It was all over, people got shot, they got badly treated, they got hit, they came to some apartments they took out whatever they wanted, radio. We, I heard some people here talking, I mean I was only a child so they, but I know that they went to some places, they took away whatever they want. They could do whatever they wanted.

IK: Now, let's go back to Shanghai. What city did you leave from? You mentioned you went on an Italian Ship? What city did you leave from?

IA: Mentioned and then [unclear] Genoa.

IK: Genoa?

IA: Joe, in Italy what, what harbor did-- Genoa?

Joe: Genoa.

IA: Yeah.

IK: [unclear] It was Genoa? Do you remember anything about the trip?

IA: Oh yeah, I remember, I remember on the train there was-- because we were afraid to take some, like to take more money than we were allowed. We still had a little bit...

IK: So you went by train from Munich to Italy?

IA: To Italy. And I remember we had, we were just hoping that once we crossed the border that we were safe, but until then we were not sure. We heard some people were taken out of the train and had to take their clothes off and were searched. We didn't know anything. We were scared ourselves, anyway. We didn't, we had just a little bit extra money, and I remember before we came to the border, my father threw it out of the window, just because, you know, just because we were scared.

IK: [unclear]

IA: Yeah, and then another thing when just before the Nazis came in to check us, I was alone in the, in the compartment because my parents had gone to eat and they were going to bring me something back, something like that. I guess somebody had to stay, I don't know what happened. Anyway, they just came in but it was okay and we managed and we got across the border and at least we felt safe so far but, but then going to Shanghai, even that was so, like...

IK: Were they all, was the ship full of refugees or [unclear]?

IA: No, there were other people as well. In fact, I, I made friends with an Indian girl. She came with, with like a, like with somebody to take care of her, like a...

IK: A nanny, a governess?

IA: Yeah, yeah, yes, a governess and, and she must have been very well off and I may, she, we couldn't talk like, we couldn't understand each other, like, I didn't talk much English at that point, and she-- anyway we, we played games together on the boat even as we couldn't talk much, but we still managed to play. There were other people as well but I, I think the majority were immigrants yeah.

IK: And was it-- were the people crowded on the ship or was it a comfortable voyage?

IA: Well, we, we were lucky we were in-- yes, the voyage was, if-- I think if, I, we hadn't been scared even what's going to happen in Shanghai and where are we going, and nobody knew. I think you could have called it a luxury cruise. I still remember we were first class. We paid our, our, like my father was not too bad off in Germany because, but-- um...

IK: Did the ship make any stops or did it go straight to Shanghai?

IA: No, it stopped at every port and because we were not German *Staatsbürger*, German...

IK: Citizens.

IA: ...citizens, we could get off and we went off on a few ports but we could get off...

IK: So you actually could get off?

IA: ...and we saw it...

IK: [unclear]

IA: Yes, yes, not the Germans, not the Germans passports somehow.

IK: German Jews couldn't get off but...

IA: No.

IK: ...Polish Jews could?

IA: Yeah. If you, I-- now because we talk about it. I didn't know what.

IK: And what, which countries did you stop at?

IA: I think Bombay...

IK: Okay, you mentioned that the ship actually stopped in Bombay.

IA: Oh yes, in every port like, I think the first stop was Naples in Italy still and then we went on to-- I forgot a few ports but...

Joe: [unclear]

IA: Yeah and Bombay and Hong Kong...

Joe: Singapore.

IA: Singapore, I forgot, I forgot some of the places...

IK: Fast getting, were being able to get off in Hong Kong and Singapore. Did that prepare you for when you arrived and you got to Shanghai?

IA: No, not at all, not at all. In fact, I remember with the little bit of money my parents had, like they, what they could've done, they couldn't do, like bought, they could, they had bought money. Like that you could do, officially, and with that money. They bought, I remember they bought like we have in the garbage, garbage these, these hats what they wear in Africa they bought.

IK: Straw hats?

IA: Not the straw; no, no the heavy ones, like kind of for protection.

Joe: [unclear]

IA: Yeah, I remember they bought some hats like those, which were completely useless in Shanghai.

IK: Now when you say bought money, what do you mean, money that you could spend aboard the ship?

IA: You could-- yeah, what you can only spend onboard, on the ship, you could have some money. When you buy your tickets to go on the trip, you could have some, so much on the-- so I think he took the most because he had the money so he took whatever he could, but still...

IK: When you actually got to Shanghai, what was your first impression of Shanghai? What was arriving in Shanghai like?

IA: Well, I was, I think I was confused all the time. I guess I wasn't-- you know, being a child and still-- and then again like you grew up somehow.

IK: Did the anything surprise you? You must have had something you expected.

IA: Well, that's what it was. I didn't expect anything. I didn't know what to expect and that's why, you didn't, like it kind of makes you nervous maybe, but it was, I mean it, it did, everything they looked after us, and we arrived. They picked us up in some carts.

IK: Well that's what I was going to ask you?

IA: Yeah.

IK: Who met you? You wanted to mention...

IA: It was from [unclear].

Joe: [unclear] the Jewish community.

IA: It was from the Eastern Jewish Community.

IK: Sephardic?

IA: Sephardic Eastern Jewish Community.

Joe: [unclear]

IA: I guess Kadoorie did a lot for the people and they brought us. They put us on a big truck.

IK: They put you on a big truck?

IA: Yeah. They put us on a big truck and they brought us to that, to that home where we, we got a room, like my parents has a room without a door, and I got in a room with all children.

IK: Oh so you were separated from them [unclear]?

IA: I was separated from my parents because my parents didn't have their own room. They had to share with, I don't know how many other people, but they gave us room there which was...

IK: [unclear] the Jewish community.

IA: It-- yes, yes and I still must give, and especially the American President, the money what came in, especially from America was a big help.

IK: How did you know that money was coming in?

IA: We were told, we were told.

IK: They mentioned that it was from an organization or from an individual?

IA: It was, I think, mainly from individuals, but it was a big help. It was, because people try to say sometimes, you know, money gets lost in between and I'm sure some got lost but we did survive somehow, because I mean we couldn't have done it on our own. There was help there, mind you, it got worse when we started with the Japanese War it got worse. There was less money really and it was really hard, yeah.

IK: Let's go, let's backtrack [pause] I think the tape is running out.

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

IK: This is tape one, side two of an interview with Ilse Awin. Now, do you know what section of Shanghai that apartment house was in that where you stayed in?

IA: It was called the Kinchow *Heim*² and I think Kadoorie did a lot for us and there are some other, there were a few others like the...

Joe: [unclear]

IA: ...like there were also some people who lived in Shanghai for a long time. What Jewish school was that? [unclear] and they were well off and they helped a little.

IK: Did you actually get to meet individuals that had already lived in Shanghai or was it all...

IA: No, no.

IK: ...or was it only those organization?

IA: ...it was done through the organization. I didn't, but as a matter of fact, Kadoorie came. He also made a school there for the kids. I went a short time, just half a year, some, half a year, maybe one year. I went to the Kadoorie school and that was like a good school and...

IK: Why did you only go there for a short period of time?

IA: Because I think I wanted to make some money and tried to learn something. Because how...

IK: You wanted to learn a trade?

IA: Yeah, that was the only thing you could do there, because, like what else could you do? The people either dressmaking or hairdressing so I went-- oh yeah, people went into the bar, like bar girls but I was...

IK: Refugee girls you're talking about?

IA: Oh yeah, lots of women did that. That's how they made a little bit more money, and at that time they had-- and during the war, like the Japanese war, they had the Japanese, they had money, they spend the money afterwards what they make but I was nearly thinking of going to a bar-- they would have taken me, I was only 14.

IK: But you couldn't, you, you stayed in that, in the first apartment until you were 17? You stayed in that [unclear]?

IA: There was no apartment. There was no, I didn't even know what is apartment.

IK: Oh a room.

²*Heim* – German for home, *Heime*, plural. *Heime* was a euphemism for former barracks, warehouses or schools hastily converted to use as group homes.

IA: It was a room, yeah.

IK: How long did you stay there? Your parents and you stayed there?

IA: About a year and then we had to go to another home. There was a shelf home [phonetic] home and there we could...

IK: What kind of a home?

IA: I think shelf-home [phonetic] home. It wasn't a home, like it was like a school made in to, like the rooms, they put beds up, like double, like these beds, bunk beds, they put bunk beds up and that's how we were sleeping and they put how many.

IK: And when you moved there, did you live together with your family?

IA: No, no, but at that time my father was big and we got a room in a private home, and one room, we slept in that room, we ate in that room.

IK: While you were...

IA: We did everything in that room.

IK: ...while you were separated from your parents, were you able to see them regularly?

IA: Because the parents were not by themselves either. They were with other parents and the kids...

IK: So they did not have any kind of community room to share together.

IA: Community rooms, oh yeah, like in the dining hall, we could get together. Oh sure, it was like it was big, like a big place, like a school, and different rooms and they, in each room they put a few people in with bunk beds and that's how they slept.

IK: And did the women do their own cooking or how did you...?

IA: No, no there was-- my husband's mother was in, was in-- they had a kitchen there and there were a few people working in that kitchen. I guess they got a little bit money paid and then they gave out, then we were lining up to get the food.

IK: But the ladies who did the cooking were from the refugees?

IA: They were from the refugees.

IK: They would give them a job?

IA: My husband's mother was also in there. There was a kitchen there for the whole home, and there they had people to help, peeling potatoes and making stuff. It wasn't right food for my father because he had a stomach ulcer and eventually he couldn't...

IK: Now, what while you were going to school, what did you do after school?

IA: After school...

IK: Did you just go back and stay in the home or did they...?

IA: ...they had, no, they even, I must say at the school, at that Kadoorie school they had different things that people could get together and do their homework, or have even a game room where they could get together, and I also joined the Zionists and...

IK: Do you remember the name of the Zionists group that you joined?

IA: It wasn't the Betar. It was the Zionists. They had the, they had also the Betar there and they had the Zionists there. They'd take my parents also. They could be Zionists. I was in, for all the people.

IK: Did they, were they working on preparing you to make *aliyah*?

IA: Yeah, they were very much for Israel at that point.

IK: And what did they do?

IA: Oh we'd done before, we'd-- talking about, talking about Israel and all kinds of things. We even had, I remember, we even had a march through the city with a flag, you know, stuff, they were, and we had, they even some kids had uniforms and that's how we, that was a social...

IK: The Zionists group and what...?

IA: The Zionists group. The Betar too, Betar, yeah.

IK: Now what-- when you went to school, I forgot to ask you, what language were you taught in?

IA: English, in fact my teacher, my, my teacher was...

IK: The other teachers, were the teachers refugees?

IA: ...she was from England; she was from England. The Principal was a refugee.

IK: So you had to learn in English?

IA: Yeah, but like I said, I didn't stay long enough, I, to be real good...

IK: Now, once you left school, what trade did you learn?

IA: Hairdressing because there wasn't, wasn't that much you could do.

IK: And did you have to pay for that or was that free to learn?

IA: No, that was free to learn, but what I had to wash laundry, you know, and I mean and then eventually she let me as a hairdresser go here, go there. I found a place where she could get some bones at the butcher, she could get some bones, I remember I went far away to get those bones for her, for soup to make.

IK: Well you, the woman that you are talking about that taught you, was she also a refugee?

IA: Oh yeah, because...

IK: Was she one of the ones that had come earlier or?

IA: ...we were 18,000-- no, she maybe came a year earlier, but we were 18,000 and that's how--. There were some even lucky, they could go out of Hongkew, like me, all of us lived in Hongkew.

IK: And you had no real reason to associate with the established Jewish community, the Russians or?

IA: No, they, before the war, they lived, they lived somewhere, they lived in a different district, like they didn't live in Hongkew, that was the poorest district.

IK: And that where, you did live in the Hongkew?

IA: Right, right from the beginning. Some people...

IK: Now what did, what did your parents do? While you were going to school and learning to be a beautician, what did your parents do?

IA: Being miserable being at home. My father was sick. He got sick soon after he came to Shanghai because the food didn't agree with him, on top of it, so there was nothing.

IK: Did your mother try to find food?

IA: Are you kidding? There was no possibility, no, nowhere. She, unless you were a dressmaker or...

IK: It must have been very difficult for your parents?

IA: Well, she cooked and you have those stoves, you have to fan them so the fire kept going and...

IK: Oh, so she did have a kitchen that she cooked in the community kitchen?

IA: No, there was a, a like when we got our, I was going to say our apartment, our room in a private home.

IK: Oh then she...?

IA: A room in a private home. You couldn't cook in the room with your stoves. You have to do that outside, because it inhale like you can't inhale that. So she had it outside. She was cooking all day. You make something, you be there all day because the stove doesn't always, doesn't burn right.

IK: Did you have any contact with the neighboring Chinese population?

IA: Well, not too much we live, because there was so many of us. Like we lived all together, not really, not so much, no, no.

IK: Were you aware that the sanitary conditions and the living conditions were very different from what you were used to?

IA: That was terrible. That was very bad, even our doctors didn't know first how to handle it because it was completely new to them, the whole, like all these diseases, you got there. Like, I had everything, I had all kinds of worms, American dysentery worms, tape worms, the pin worm, and my mother eventually died of one of those dysenteries, lots of dysentery.

IK: Now when you or your parents were ill, were they able to go to any kind of a hospital?

IA: They had hospitals, yes. In fact, yeah, I was one time in, a few times. I mean one time especially, I still remember, I was in the one hospital...

IK: And was this a hospital that was specifically for the refugees?

IA: Yeah, yeah, there were a few, we had a, we had a few hospitals for the refugees, sure, 18,000 people.

IK: And who were the doctors that they treated you with?

IA: They were mainly also refugees, and that's why at the beginning when you went in first you knew, you knew how to handle it because they were not Jewish people. Diseases in the stomach mainly.

IK: Well did they have access to drugs and medications and bandages?

IA: Well up to a certain point. I don't think there was everything available, you know.

IK: You mentioned, did your mother die while you were in Shanghai?

IA: Oh yeah, both of them.

IK: Your mother and your father died in Shanghai. And what did you do then?

IA: Well at that, my mother, I was married.

IK: You were married?

IA: I was married.

IK: Now how about religious life in Shanghai? Did you or your family attend any religious services?

IA: There was a synagogue, yes; there was the one synagogue. We went sometimes, yeah, we did go sometimes, on the holidays.

IK: Was this Orthodox or?

IA: It was-- yeah, I think it was Orthodox because I remember the woman were upstairs and the men downstairs, but I mean it wasn't like it is now here.

IK: Now, did you, did you ever attend any Bar Mitzvahs or Jewish weddings while you were in Shanghai?

IA: Well our, even our own wedding. I still have some, I still have some cards that I received. They were written on a plain piece of paper-- congratulations...

IK: Was there a rabbi?

IA: Yeah, oh yeah because we had everything, everything we came from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, we had, we had entertainment, we had singers.

IK: Did you have any religious education at all besides [unclear]?

IA: In Shanghai, at the Kadoorie School there was religion education, yeah.

IK: And what was that, you learned Hebrew and you learned about the holidays?

IA: Well, yes, only that I was so short at this school. Yes, we had the religious teacher, still remember his name.

IK: History?

IA: History. W-E-S-E-L, we called him something else-- oh boy.

IK: Do you remember any holiday celebrations that you had?

IA: I, actually I remember Pesach because we had...

IK: When you say we, do you mean the whole group?

IA: ...with my parents. No, that was already in our room, my parents and I and the girl downstairs, she came up and we said the little prayer on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur I remember I did go with a friend to the synagogue, yeah.

IK: Generally do you think that most of the people there were interested in going to the synagogue and keeping up some religious activities or do you think they weren't interested?

IA: I think they were, but none of them were, were like we're because coming out of Germany and Austria in the last few years I still, I still have the card when we went in the from the synagogue my parents used to be in Munich, and I still have the card that says on the card, "Don't stand in front of the front door", you have to go, honest to G-d, I still have the card written in Germany, nobody should stand in front of the front door. If you want to go out, go back, go in backyard, you should go out, you leave immediately, that's when I see the people just walking around, you know without any concern. It's still in me, I can't-- I know who I am, but I will not, I will not show it, you know.

IK: And that was the front door of the synagogue?

IA: In the front door of the synagogue, nobody should stay around there. They should have to leave. I still have, I kept too, you know, I kept the ticket from the funeral home, nobody should be in front of the door, you leave, you leave immediately, yeah.

IK: Now did you...?

IA: Not to make it, to make it yourself noticed like, yeah.

IK: ...did you, you mentioned that you didn't see the Jews in Shanghai that came earlier and had been established, you didn't see the Chinese. Now the refugee, among the refugees...

IA: Oh yeah...

IK: ...were any of the refugees came from Austria or from Germany or from some other country, did they mingle with each other or did the German refugees stay with German, the Polish with Polish?

IA: I think that always more or less the same. I'm sure you may meet a little bit, my husband is from Austria but you know, from Vienna, but it still, there, there's always the same thing, they find something about the Viennese and the Viennese about Berlin and you know, it's just a fun thing, it's not real serious.

IK: Well you were young, did that help you to adjust to living in Shanghai?

IA: Oh no, never, never, because I just, I did never feel at home and nobody, well like I said, I can't always say nobody but I think the majority didn't because, because it wasn't a home, it wasn't home and I never even wanted to go, some people went back to see it. I'm not interested. I had no, I never really felt like, you know, like this is my life or it is going to be my life.

IK: Now did you-- let's talk, you maybe alluded it to it earlier; let's talk about the outbreak of the war between Japan and the Allies. How did you first become aware of the fact that Japan was now in the war?

IA: Oh they made, it was announced on the radio and in fact there was a time I think we were not allowed to-- when the Japanese-- to listen to all the, to, like other

stations but I mean we were, it's, it's not, it wasn't like out of this world. I mean there was a very different country, which was very much like on top.

IK: After the Japanese came, did you have to move or did you stay in the same place?

IA: The people who lived in the city had to-- we were already in Hongkew so with us was okay-- the people who still were lucky enough, the ones who came in '38. It was so many they lived, they lived in some other part of Shanghai and they had to move to Hongkew.

IK: And did your life, the life of the community change a lot after this? I mean were there restrictions on...

IA: There were restrictions.

IK: ...where you could go or what you could do?

IA: Yes, there were restrictions. Whoever worked, like my husband who worked in, out of the part, they made the part, every part of Hongkew where we allowed to roam around but if you leave that district you had to get a special passport and there was that guy, that Ghoya who was in charge, was in charge of giving out those passports and he was a nut.

IK: Did you have any personal experience with him?

IA: No, no, I didn't, I, because I just worked, I worked as a hairdresser in Hongkew, and I had, I didn't have to go anywhere.

IK: So did you, yourself, did you have anything to do with the Japanese at all?

IA: No, the only thing, there was curfew and stuff and again we didn't know what to expect, I mean we still don't like to, and then when we had the bombs falling...

IK: I was going to ask you about that. You did, you did experience the American bombing?

IA: Yeah, in fact was way close to where I used to live. We found out later on there was some kind of a factory near where we lived like they put, they put those little factories between residences, we didn't even know about it, and that was bombed.

IK: But you didn't know, you knew those were Americans doing the bombing at the time?

IA: Oh yeah...

IK: How did you know?

IA: ...the Chinese, it was funny when they were, we were more afraid of also I think of the Chinese when they were bombing with the planes because they went the wrong way too. The ...

IK: What do you mean, from the, from the ground?

IA: From the ground, yeah, and they were always late with their alarms also.

IK: And the anti-aircraft. You mean the Chinese were firing at the refugees.

IA: They'd fire, yeah.

IK: Not the Japanese, the Chinese?

IA: The Japanese, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, yeah. I mixed that up.

IK: The Japanese anti-Aircraft.

IA: Yeah, yeah.

IK: During this time did you know about the extermination camps at all?

IA: Well we had a good idea. Nobody knew exactly, but oh yeah, I must say that somehow in fact in the back of my mind when you said like my aunts and uncles they were in the ghettos that I knew afterwards about it. Somehow I think we heard already before that they did have to go to-- we didn't know if they got out and what really what, you know, how, I mean I guess we had a good idea.

IK: And how, how did you find out about the Japanese surrender? What happened in Shanghai when you found out the Japanese had surrendered?

IA: Oh boy there was several, we were, we were hoping, you know, we really were hoping and then they said the Americans were coming and then that was, that was really, that was a happy occasion because during the war, I mean there was still like the one, especially one time when the bombing was near where I lived and there were a lot of, some of our immigrants were hurt, and I remember one guy he used to live across the street from where we lived and he was brought over into our house and he was bleeding and he was somehow hit-- and yeah this was very scary and the surrender was, that was...

IK: That was during the bombing?

IA: ...during the bombing, it was so scary, but, but once they'd surrendered, yes, it was good.

IK: Now did you, when did you decide to leave Shanghai and how did you, how were you able to go someplace else? How were you [unclear]?

IA: That wasn't so easy either.

IK: [unclear]

IA: That wasn't so easy. The Germans used actually, in fact, I was, I was already-- this was so stupid. I could have gone already soon after-- the Germans quota was excellent, then came, like my mother was...

IK: So the quota for the United States?

IA: ...I was German quota. My mother was Austrian quota.

IK: For the United States?

IA: I don't even know what quota; she was Polish quota I think.

IK: But I mean are you talking for the United States?

IA: For the United States.

IK: Oh okay, the quota for the United States.

IA: Yeah, because I had already like, like my, some had relatives...

IK: Now are you talking when you were in Germany or are you talking when you were in Shanghai?

IA: Shanghai.

IK: In Shanghai.

IA: Yeah, from Shanghai, we wanted to leave again and we had to see where we go again and we didn't want to go back, and some people went to Israel. A few people went back to where they came from. And we, sure we tried to go to the United States which was, Austrian quota was practically impossible. The Polish quota, somehow my mother was Polish quota however or Austrian quota. I was German quota. I was born in Germany so I had already my visa to go. My mother didn't but in the meantime we got married. I gave back my, I gave back my visa and my husband couldn't go because he was Austrian quota, so we had to wait. We would have to wait another, quite another few years, so it came up with Canada that there was somebody, somebody was in Canada ready for Shanghai and he did something for the Guild of Craftsman and since he was a craftsman, so they had a group of people they let into Canada, and in fact, at that time too, it took seven years till they finally made us Canadian citizens, seven or eight years.

IK: What year did you finally leave Shanghai?

IA: I, it was 1949.

IK: 1949 and you went to Canada?

IA: Ten years, 10 years in Shanghai.

IK: You went to Canada?

IA: We went to Canada. We had no other...

IK: ...then from Canada, you went to the United States.

IA: No, we lived in Canada, we stayed already. We got already because by the time the visas came up for America we were already settled in Canada, so we didn't bother.

IK: Now you said 10 years after the war was over, almost 10 years, you stayed in Shanghai, so how did you live then? Were you able to get out of Hongkew or were you able to learn a living?

IA: After the Japanese surrender, yes. Everything was open again. We could go wherever we wanted to, and at that time you could even make a few dollars because the Americans came in and they even employed, like I was also only, just for a few months, I was employed at the American, at the PX.

IK: Yeah, Post Exchange.

IA: Yeah, and we got paid, you know. So that was, a lot of our people got somehow employed at that time. I mean I can-- like all the soldiers came in and that was good at that point. It was good, and we still had no intentions of staying in Shanghai, plus they started with the Communists you know. They started with the Communists and we didn't want to stay again with that.

IK: Did the communists put restrictions on Jews, on things they?

IA: No, they, I heard they didn't but we did not want to take that chance again and see what's going to happen you know? And in fact, we had sent some money out already at that point, what little bit to, just in case, but and some of our baggage but...

IK: I just want to ask you, to reflect on your life most in Shanghai, what experience, either positive or negative, do you think will Shanghai experience had for you?

IA: I could have been have very well, I could of managed very well without it, on the other hand, on the other hand, being in a concentration camp is still, you know, is not, then I must say, I prefer Shanghai.

IK: Except for the bad alternative, you don't think there was anything positive about that?

IA: No, no, no, I, no.

IK: Well, I'm listening to...

IA: I, it was really what we called the place that saved your life. I mean that's all what it was. That's really what it was. A lot of people saved their lives because Germany was in power, it was, it was crazy, it was a madhouse.

IK: Unless there's something that you want to say, is there anything I didn't ask you about that you care to talk about?

IA: Well it probably comes to me after [laughs].

IK: Okay, well I appreciate you making the time...

IA: Well I mean there's, there's, somehow I still see, the whole thing is like, like...

[Tape one, side two ended; interview ended.]

ILSE AWIN [1-2-20]