

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

WARNER J. BERGH

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Marcia Goldberg

Date: October 16, 1999

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Gratz College

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WB - Warner J. Bergh [interviewee]

MG - Marcia Goldberg [interviewer]

Date: October 16, 1999¹

Tape one, side one:

MG: My name is Marcia Goldberg and I will be interviewing Warner Bergh. This is tape one, side one. The interview is taking place at the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at the Rickshaw Conference on October 16, 1999. Mr. Bergh, I was going to say, tell me your name please.

WB: My name is Warner (Velner) Bergh but when I was born my so, so maiden name [former name] was Velner Julius Silberberg.

MG: When did you change it?

WB: I changed it when I took out my citizen papers here in the states for the simple reason my mother figured that a name like Silberberg, B-E-R, B-E-R twice and the G this would be a little bit too complicated and maybe she wanted slightly to hide the Jewish pickup. I'm not, not fully sure what her motivation was, and we changed it to Bergh, and Berg in itself was a little, she said it's too naked, so she added an "H".

MG: That was not until you came to the United States?

WB: It was actually almost a half a year or a year later. I would say in 19, 1950.

MG: And when were you born?

WB: I was born August 14, 1923 in Berlin, Schöneberg.

MG: What were your parent's names?

WB: My parent's names, my father's name was Walter and my mother's name, and that is my life mother, maybe I'll mention it a little bit later, was my stepmother was Elsa, Elsa Miller. My father came from Saxony, which is about, a province I would say a 100 and some miles south, slightly east to Berlin, and my mother came from the Sudetenland, Bohemia. She actually, in other words, was an, originally an Austro-Hungarian citizen who had moved before the war, during the war to Berlin with her family.

MG: What did your father do to support the family?

WB: Okay. Long story. His last years he had been in the rubber manufacturing business, and that is probably from 1926 on until '38 that we left, but prior to that for a short time, he went in to the dental instrument business, so he was working in the dental instrument business. So he had a kind of a mixed background of many trades.

MG: What was your economic status?

WB: Middle-class.

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.

MG: Was your family affiliated with the synagogue or the Jewish community?

WB: Very loosely, what we call Rosh Hashanah Jews. For the High Holidays they would go here and there, they would go to Sabbath-- for a time they wanted to instill some Jewishness in me and we had a Sabbath at home and I learned the *brachas* [blessings] but otherwise not as, not a strong Jewish affiliation. No, I would be amiss if I say that.

MG: Who else comprised your family?

WB: The larger family comprised of four sisters of my mother, three were unmarried, one was married and another and a brother of hers, that was on my mother's side and I want to mention that those that were married, were actually a mixed marriage which was actually fine in the final [unclear] point that saved their lives, only the ones that survived, through mixed marriages. On my mother's, on my father's side, the story was similar. He had a younger sister. She was married to a Christian gentleman. He had a twin sister of hers, she was engaged but she died of leukemia. He had an older brother and he married a non-Jewish lady.

MG: And your grandparents?

WB: My grandparents on my father's side, his grandparents, one was a rabbi and came from a very good middle-class family and the, on my mother's side they had a mill and a bakery in a small town in Czechoslovakia.

MG: So you had no sisters or brothers?

WB: I had, no, I'm a step-, I'm an only child, as a matter of fact, the only relative I grew up with was a cousin on my father's side. That younger sister of his had a child. She was half-Jewish. Matter of fact she lives in Des Moines too, very close to us.

MG: Is that where you live now?

WB: That's where, in Des Moines, Iowa, I...

MG: Did you grow up in Berlin?

WB: I grew up in Berlin, that's, that, yes.

MG: What do you remember about the rise of Hitler or how your...

WB: How I was affected?

MG: How you were affected and how the situation changed.

WB: That's a very interesting part. First of all, when Hitler came to power, I was nine years old. So actually my memories are in a way vague or if whatever I remember it's probably tainted or I did not realize fully what was taking place. Let me be a little bit more to the point. I grew up in a neighborhood, which was called in Berlin, Bayerischen. The street names were named after Bavarian cities, etcetera in the center of it. But the nickname of that area was Jüdische die Schweiz, Jewish Switzerland for the simple reason that in the three districts around it, had up to 50% of Jewish population. The area of, this particular area had even more and I went to class later on and in high

school, public high school where in some classes the Jewish population was equal to the non-Jewish population.

MG: Where, where did you start going to school?

WB: Okay, I went first off to prep school, four years of prep school and then that...

MG: Excuse me. Was that a public school?

WB: Public school, all public school, always public schools and in that class of about 28 kids were about four or five Jewish kids, about, we did not have the religious class in our school because we were not enough Jewish kids; but four blocks over was a Catholic public school where most of the Catholic kids went to and in that particular class-- that's where we had to take our religious education-- 50% and even more or sometimes more were non-, were Jewish in that public school.

MG: Now...

WB: So that is the area I grew up in. So I, furthermore, I have to go a little bit further--this area satisfies as far as the non-Jews was concerned was mostly Social Democrats. Naturally there were some Nazis in between but primarily Social Democrats, something similar to our Democratic Party and no, there wasn't hardly any antisemitism in our area. So up to about '32 we, I did not feel much of an antisemitism in that sense. Yes, there was some Brown Shirts walking around but in the beginning they were a minority. They were not yet in power. We knew there was something coming. But Hitler was not taken that seriously in the beginning. People, people sat and-- speak of my parents-- what they told me later was that it's a democratic system. If he doesn't make it, he will be kicked out after a few years or if he stays in, all this is propaganda talk and he's not going to do what later happened. Nobody ever even thought he would do anything like that, and it took a while till, till people changed their minds. I mean on my level of thinking. He came to power on January 31st, in '33 and then it started where all the Jewish teachers had to, were relieved of their jobs, and there were certain restrictions, certain Jewish, Jews could not have certain office anymore and so on. It started, but by the same token, Hitler did one thing he said in the beginning, soldier, people who had fought in the army, war veterans are not affected. So we, many of the Jews said okay, we were real German soldiers, so to say. It won't be that bad.

MG: Had your father fought in the army...

WB: Whichever...

MG: ...in the war?

WB: My father had four years in the army. His older brother had been in the army. My grandfather had been in the Prussian, Prussian-Franco War in 1870 - 1871. On the other side, on my mother's side, they were in the Austro-Hungarian Army. One was killed on the Russian front, the other one just made it. Yes, we felt very pro-German, and I would like to go one step farther. For instance, they lived in the, on my mother's side, the family lived in Sudetenland and when that became Czechoslovakia,

those, some of those Jews felt they strongly fought for German culture, not Germany, Reich, the land of the borders drawn on the map, but for German cultural background. Yes, they felt like Germans.

MG: So when did you, things start to change and when did you feel threatened?

WB: I think I felt, okay, I, I finished prep school in '30, in '33 and I had to go on, my parents had selected a high school for me and they selected what's called Bellezina-Fair-Arg-gynasium [phonetic] after [unclear]. At this school, about 50% of the population were Jewish kids. So I myself did not feel threatened in any way. Sure you heard remarks here and there, and probably my parents discussed it. As a matter of fact, for a while they thought of going to England since my mother spoke fluent English and start a business over there, but she did, we did not, when she went to the British Consulate, she was told she has to, they have to have enough money to provide, I think, 10 workers there, form a factory or form some kind of business that would provide work for English subjects and that was, that was out of the question. But for a while this whole thing was sleeping for us, we did not feel like emigrating.

MG: Was your father restricted from working?

WB: No, not for quite a-- as a matter of fact, and this is kind of a para-, a paradox, his business started to boom shortly after this for a very, for two peculiar reasons. First of all, the Germans started building up armament, they built up their street systems. For that you needed tires and rubber goods and he was in that business, that was reason number one, and by the same token, the German government did not have enough *Valuta* foreign currency, so they had to kind of re-use their old tire and that, again that was his business, so actually for two, three years his business was booming. So he did not see a reason to leave. His brother, his brother left Germany, went to France and after three months, he came back because he couldn't make it. He felt out of place and he stayed on in the war, through the end of the war.

MG: So when did your family start to make arrangements to leave?

WB: The families did not start to make arrangements to leave. The German government made arrangements to leave for the basic reason on June 20th, my father was put into a concentration camp.

MG: Excuse me. What year was that?

WB: Nineteen thirty-eight. Let me, we-- in '38 business started slacking off. The Germans were able to make an artificial rubber and with his name Silberberg, his company's name worked under that name, business slacked off. But he did, he was not ready to leave. He was a man of close to 50. He did not really feel like leaving, but as I say, then it became tougher and tougher, and he felt uncomfortable but the real plan to leave was not established at that point. Then, as I say, then he was put in to a concentration camp and we were notified one month after we release him, he has to be out of Germany proper otherwise he has to go back.

MG: What reason was given to put him into concentration camp?

WB: There was an action in which they took about 2, 3,000, maybe more, I'm not sure of the number of Jews and put them into concentration camps...

MG: Which one did he, did they place him in?

WB: Sachenshausen. That is a, near Rhineland, north of Poland. He was there for nine weeks and I cannot show you pictures but he was a strapping man in good health and when he came back, he was a frail broken man, burned out physically and mentally.

MG: Now . . .

WB: Head shorn, he looked like a, like being in a, a penitentiary.

MG: What do you remember as far as what transpired after he was released?

WB: Afterwards he was released, but first of all, when he came back on August 20th and I saw him, I was deeply shocked. His first emotion was to talk about that concentration camp but then he suddenly stopped himself and he realized he, if, that G-d forbid if I repeat something of what I have heard what happened there, it would be the end of him so immediately then, enough, I don't want to talk about it anymore. But he had a big wound in his back and he was half his size which, he was a changed man. It was a bigger-- out at any cost. And at this point, we had two choices. One was going to Columbia, South America or going to Shanghai, and my mother's speaking English, she had a good high school education preferred Shanghai on the-- furthermore, Columbia somehow suddenly was restriction so it was simply Shanghai or nothing and we decided to go to Shanghai. My reaction was that was simply a boy going on a big trip. I mean I was going from, to Italy, through Suez Canal, through India, etc., etc. It was a big adventure and I must say it still-- I've traveled since several times to Europe and then other places and it still was the biggest trip I ever did made.

MG: So when did you leave?

WB: We left on, we left Germany on September 27, 1938. We embarked on the 1st of October '38 in Trieste. I will tell you on an Italian liner.

MG: What was the name of it?

WB: *Conte Verde*.

MG: You left before Kristallnacht?

WB: I left 10 days before Kristallnacht. When we were in Bombay, we, we heard about, we heard about Kristallnacht. I eventually had a big fear what had happened to my family.

MG: Tell me about your voyage.

WB: The voyage? Well, as I say, I was a little bit over 15 years old and, I had been before as a child to Czechoslovakia where I had relatives but I never had been farther than that and it was naturally a big adventure. For the first time, I saw not only foreign countries and cultures, foreign languages, but there was a very interesting minor experi-, first of all, I went through the Suez Canal and a little bit south of the Suez Canal going through the Red Sea, I saw the Sinai Mountains and I think it is one of three or four moments in my life where I felt a special closeness to G-d. The other one was later on in,

in, in the Mosque in Jerusalem. Where I was standing in a place that most probably had been the Temple, [unclear] Mosque. There I felt a very close relation of G-d, and another occasion or two. But okay, there was, I'm just putting that in, but we went to Aden, which was the British stronghold, navy port and there we saw suddenly a flotilla of British warships and we hadn't-- we knew Britain was a strong power but then we saw and we figured my gosh, German, you are a part as a German and so you-- our whole culture was centered around Germany and we saw other countries-- also they also know how to do things. They are there. We are not the only ones. Suddenly our perspective changed quite a bit. Even with that remote experience. Then we went to Bombay and then we found out about what happened, *Kristallnacht*, but that was only a newspaper report. You still did not get the full dimensions, the full impact of what went on there. It is only later when we went to Shanghai that we realized that, probably got the first wave when we saw some of what was going on in Germany.

MG: You went from Bombay to where?

WB: From Bombay to Malay- to, to Colombo, Ceylon, to Singapore, to the Philippine Islands, to Hong Kong, to Shanghai.

MG: How long did it take you?

WB: Twenty-four days.

MG: What happened when you arrived? When you disembarked?

WB: Disembarked, there again, we came from a luxury liner. We were traveling in economy class but the food was excellent and the treatment was good, and then we came to, we came down on the Bund, we cleared the Custom House which was right there on the Bund, and we suddenly, we were put on lorries, on trucks, and they took us to Hongkew. Hongkew was across the Garden Bridge. It was the Japanese-occupied area, the settlement there were huge bank buildings. I mean there was Europe in its or Asia whatever in full bloom, and five blocks farther to the east, to Hongkew, suddenly we came to an area which there were one year earlier had been street to street fighting and we went into a district which was partly bombed out or some, some areas there wasn't a full, [unclear] and suddenly everything was upside down. We had, my father had a friend or somebody who had been in the concentration camp with him, and he had made arrangements for us in a boarding house to give us, to rent a room for us, but the first night that room wasn't ready, we had, we slept in the basement, in a basement room the size of this hotel room; in the middle of it was a curtain, on the left side was a Japanese family sleeping and we slept on cots for the first night in Shanghai. So that was a kind of a, quite a eye-opener but I was 15 and you know, at 15, I was 15, I was tired but my reaction was not that of my father, and my father had been in the war, or my mother who came from very good middle class background; to her it must have been a shock.

MG: When you left Germany, did any agency or individual help you?

WB: Definitely, it was the Jewish HICEM,² the organization cooperating with the Joint. Actually we did not have the currency to pay for our passage, so it was supplied in British funds to the Italian shipping line.

MG: Were there many refugees on your ship?

WB: On my, on our ship there were about I think 100, give or take a 100. Ours was the first big ship before there were individual groups but that was the first big ship, yes, as a matter of fact, [unclear] no, [unclear].

MG: Was there much interaction among the refugees?

WB: Yes there was a certain amount of interaction.

MG: Was it positive or negative?

WB: Yes, it was fairly positive but somehow it was a big eye-opener in many a way. Further, Berlin was divided in East Berlin and West Berlin. East Berlin was the Eastern-- Jews that came from Eastern were Eastern part and the Western Jews, which were the two, three, five, 10 generations earlier, longer. I was, I grew up in the Western part and we were, suddenly we were mixing with other Jewish people who were our own brothers but still we did not have much, much contact with. There was first of all an eye-opener. The second eye-opener was a very peculiar one and that was people started talking eventually about their past and I remember very clearly one instance where one gentleman, a gentleman the first day we talked to him, he said, I drove a taxicab. Fine, he drove a taxicab. After five days, he had a fleet of three taxicabs, and I don't know when he arrived in Shanghai whether he didn't have 10 or 12. In other words, the embellishments, embellishments started. People had a little, little store somewhere, they called it a depart- we had a department store. So you know I started to become, skepticism was something I never had in me until I was 15 years old and from then on I became skeptical. Whatever I hear, I hear with two ears, one is questioning it and analyzing it, the other is, what have you said?

MG: Now how old were you when you arrived in Shanghai?

WB: I was 15 and three months.

[Tape one, side one ended.]

²HICEM – immigration society working with the Joint to assist European Jews fleeing Germany.

Tape one, side two:

MG: This is tape one, side two. My name is Marcia Goldberg and I'm interviewing Warner Bergh. Today is October 16, 1999. The interview is being held at the Rickshaw Conference, the Holiday Inn, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. All right, Mr. Bergh, we were discussing your arrival in Shanghai, and you told me about this first night that you spent there.

WB: [signified that was correct]

MG: Let's backtrack, when you arrived did any organization or individuals help you?

WB: There was some of the Jewish Joint or whatever the local organization, at this time it was called the who in charge of that but somehow it was connected with the Jewish Joint because the funds must have come from there directly or indirectly.

MG: What happened after the first night?

WB: After the first night we moved upstairs to a regular room, but a fairly large room and that was our room for over, for several weeks. As a matter of fact, my father was interested in starting, going into the rubber business and he kind of rented out a little room downstairs. This was on the first floor downstairs, where he tried to start, going into rubber, rubber business for a few weeks, until later on he had a chance to go into another place and found a gentleman who was willing to be his partner and this, they tried to and they started a little rubber factory, I guess.

MG: What were you allowed to take with you from Germany?

WB: We were allowed to take, as officially I think it was some of, give or take 50 dollars. I, I'm not absolutely sure, but nothing, nothing of consequence. On the other hand, my, since my stepmother came also from Czechoslovakia, so she had relatives in Prague and they provided some funds, some. So there was a little bit money available and all, I think the sum of close to maybe 200 dollars and 200 dollars then were, were probably something right now of 4-5,000 dollars of buying power today. Also, my father being a man of ingenuity, he took an iron to press clothes with, took out the heating element and he put some jewelry in, so he had some hidden, doubly hidden funds, you know. So he had some jewelry there.

MG: What about furniture or any other belongings?

WB: Furniture, we might have been allowed but we didn't want to take it along, no, where the costs, the costs would have been enormous.

MG: You mentioned your stepmother.

WB: Yes.

MG: When did your father remarry?

WB: My father remarried in '32. My father, my mother died in the Spring of '32 and a few months later my father remarried. He felt a necessity raising a child to look for a spouse as soon as possible.

MG: What was her name?

WB: Her name was Henny Matissen [phonetic]. That was her maiden name.

MG: And what was your relationship with her?

WB: Okay. In the beginning, it was-- you know, you are the child of somebody and in two months your mother dies and a few months later there is somebody else who is supposed to be your mother and it's a little bit hard to overcome. As a child I read Grimm's Fairy Tales [unclear], the bad stepmother who has nothing else in mind but to, to, to destroy the child. So naturally, I was very tense about it and I had to be bribed. In other words, when my mother met me, my new mother met me for the second time, she took me to a department store. She bought me new clothing, she bought me a leather soccer ball and a few other things just to ease the tension. It was probably equally hard for her not having had children before and being considerably younger than my father, getting into that role, but I, eventually it was a very, very good relationship.

MG: Now tell me about you and what you did when you were in Shanghai. Did you go to school?

WB: Shortly before the war, before we left, my father, my parents had come to the conclusion, Jewish kids were not allowed to continue in, in public schools or if they were, at least they thought it would come, and they had the feeling it would not be advantageous to me to, to take a career in, become a lawyer or anything which I probably was suited for or rather learn a trade and since my father had that little rubber factory, he took me in as an apprentice. So actually, I had worked some time already for my father as an apprentice. And I must say, I felt I had to be as good as grown workmen and I put everything in my head. I kept, always have kept that attitude.

MG: What were the surrounding conditions like where you lived?

WB: In Shanghai?

MG: In Shanghai.

WB: Okay. We lived at this time in Hongkew as many of us did. That area one year earlier had been scene of house to house fighting [unclear] so there were houses that they're completely demolished, two or three houses were in good shape and so on. So physically we went into a practically half bombed-out area. There were some streets that did not have light yet even. The houses may have had light but the street light. There was no street light. And, so for my parents, it must have been an awful culture shock. My father still was in a trauma from what happened to him in Germany. There was one instance or an episode I remember very clearly now 60 some years later. We, we were told about 10, about four or five blocks up there would be a soup kitchen where we should go and eat when we get there if we want to have something to eat. On the way we went there and a dark area and on the other side of the street was a Chinese walking, and my mother, my mother is outspoken and has a good loud voice, made some remarks about Germany and my father lost his temper. "Shut up! You don't know who is listening. That guy may be a spy of the German government trying to listen in on what

you are saying.” I mean that fear was as unmotivated and unreal as was, he was still under tremendous fear of the power of the Germans.

MG: What was the situation as far as food was concerned?

WB: Food is concerned; if you had money very good. The, the U.S. dollar exchange rate was six, six Chinese dollars to one. At that time an egg would sell for about four cents American money. That’s less than a penny, American money then. A pound of meat was 20-some cents. That would have been four or five cents American money. So food was absolutely cheap. Housing, I think we were charged 30 dollars local money, which would have been five, six dollars American money for the month, but I could be wrong. A good wage for a Chinese was probably five dollars, five U.S. dollars a month.

MG: So was food a problem for you?

WB: Food was, at that time, no problem at all. As a matter of fact, the opposite, my father believed that the more you eat, the healthier you are and he stuffed...

MG: You mentioned going to a soup kitchen.

WB: Yes, there was a two, three day, more of a convenience reason than anything else.

MG: What was the situation as far as being able to cook, and also the water situation?

WB: The, we were told, whatever you do, to boil your water first. So in the beginning, yes, we boiled, we boiled our water; then we went to, if you want to eat a fruit, you have to wash it. So we put in potassium carbonate into the water and we washed everything in potassium carbonate solution and left it there for several minutes. We were told that if you drop something to the floor-- my father once dropped cigarettes and naturally his idea was to pick them up and he stopped himself. It’s on the floor. You can’t pick it up but then after a while, you changed your attitude; first of all, a cigarette was valuable later on and second of all, no, you saw nothing really happen until you normalized your attitudes. But, yes, in the beginning, yes, food was, you washed food. As far as cooking was concerned, you probably are familiar with a kind of a Coleman camp stoves, something similar but it was, kerosene was needed and you, you had kerosene in a little tank and you pumped it and it, it created a pressure and little stream went up and it was like some a similar system to a car, you ignite it and you have a flame and a fire, yes.

MG: And what about the sanitary facilities?

WB: Okay, sanitary facilities, at the first place, we had a W, WC and I was saying on Christmas 1938 we took a bath and I can picture that and that was the last bath I took until later we moved, until I came to the United States. At that time, matter of fact, I think the only possibility to heat that water would have been by gas heat which that house did not have, so what we did is, four or five houses down was a store that was

selling hot water, something which is unimaginable for an American that you sell hot water. [tape interrupted]

MG: To that.

WB: Whatever.

MG: You were telling me about taking a bath.

WB: Between my last bath-- I took some showers later on, but [chuckle] full six months, yes. As a matter of fact, even to embellish it, my mother took a bath first and I was the second one to use the bath after that. So that was my last bath I took for 10 years and shortly after that, my parents had, in the beginning they had rented only, they were able to kind of sub-rent a house somewhere else, but that house did not have a bath, it only had a shower upstairs. And that's where we moved, we lived on the upstairs and downstairs was used for rubber manufacturing purposes.

MG: Did you belong to any youth groups while you were in Shanghai?

WB: Not at that time. Not much later, not till much later. At this time it was essential for us, for me to produce and I was learning Chinese fastest in the family and since we had some Chinese employees there was somebody needed either to speak English to them as much as they could speak English or Chinese. No, for the longest time I did not belong to any youth group.

MG: Did you have any friends your age? Was there any social life?

WB: Not really I must say. Yes, you saw a few people, you talked to them, but I did not form any friendships at this point until much later.

MG: What was your relationship, or was there any, between you and the Chinese people?

WB: I do and I did like the Chinese. We had Chinese, we had Chinese that were working for us. We had later on Chinese partners and there the relationship was sometimes good and sometimes bad. But by and large, I was very pro-Chinese and very strongly anti-Japanese, but again I must say that in a kind of quotation. When our relationship with the Chinese business-wise was good, I had a desire to learn Chinese and to speak the language. When we had problems with Chinese or something went wrong, I was less interested. So it's not a straight line, it's a curve.

MG: Now, what about the Japanese?

WB: The Japanese, first of all, the incident where my mother was beaten because we had a little Pekinese dog and he barked at a Japanese, and my mother got beaten by a Japanese. So I, I never felt too, even before that, too strongly about the Japanese. Besides maybe you had, I shouldn't use that term, racial prejudice against them. They were small, they had bow-legged, their faces were a little bit like monkeys, and somebody phrased, coined the phrase, they looked like monkeys. They used bicycles for transportation, and somebody coined the phrase, they looked like monkeys on a grindstone and that image stuck with me forever. For me they were monkeys on a grindstone. I dislike them.

MG: What about your relationship with the other Jewish community?

WB: Good. It was a good relationship. With more and more people were coming in and you felt probably a little bit more secure of having more, being stronger in number. It was a good relationship.

MG: What about the Sephardic community, or the Russian?

WB: I went to the, to the Sephardi-- okay, there was a, the part we lived in, Hongkew, had a few Russian Jews, and yes, there was a relationship, a loose relationship. But the relationship between the Sephardic Jews was practically non-existent. We went once or twice over to the synagogue which was in the French Concession, [unclear], other, practically other end of town. No, we did not feel any close relationship to them.

MG: Did you attend synagogue?

WB: Rarely.

MG: Were you Bar Mitzvah'ed?

WB: Yeah, but not much more.

MG: That was in Germany?

WB: In Germany.

MG: What was the health situation in the family?

WB: Our family, good. I mean I was in excellent shape. As a matter of fact, a few years later, my nickname was Tarzan because I was in very good health. My father recovered from his shocks. He was in good health. My mother was, in a way, a little bit frail. No, not frail, I make not too much, but she was not the healthiest person, but she was not unhealthy either. By and large, outside of having once in a while dysentery or something like that, nothing serious.

MG: Did you, was there any correspondence with the family in Europe or did you hear of anything that was happening in the war?

WB: A few, a few letters were exchanged but that was all. A letter took about a month by road and even longer or six weeks, and from '38 till the war started, was only 12 months, there was only a minor exchange of letters. I would not know the contents of any of the letters. My parents probably received some letters but that's all.

MG: Now how did things change after December 1941?

WB: Okay, actually I should even have to go, give you a little bit of a preceding. We had Chinese partners, went into manufacturing, moved over to the Settlement where my father got a nice apartment there where we lived, which was paid by the, would you say by the Consortium and he was the part-owner and boss of the manufacturing plant of the company, and I was working for, as you say, the number two man in that company. But that relationship broke up for various reasons, and we had to move back to Hongkew, and we moved back, the machinery was left there, and we kind of with practically nothing, went back to Hongkew and we moved to a one-room apartment near the wharf, near the waterfront. And on December 7th, there were rumors, okay, the British army, okay, which was actually one regiment, had left Shanghai. The

Fourth Marine, U.S. Marine had left Shanghai. They went to Singapore and the Philippine Islands. The, on the Bund were two big ships, one was the *Augusta*, the American ship, and you always felt a certain amount of security as long as those guns are pointing in the direction of the neighborhood, you are protected. And then they left and there was a certain emptiness, but that was already about a few months before. And then there suddenly was a report in-- you see our communication was, we could, we could, we had our own, our own press, we had English-speaking papers and we had German-speaking papers because it was an International Settlement, and I recall that around December 4th or 5th there was an article in the *Ostasiatische Lloyd*,³ *Ostasiatische Lloyd*, that was the name of a paper. The Russ-, the Japanese fleet has left Nagasaki for maneuvers, and we kind of felt uneasy about it. We had the feeling something is coming and they went in the direction, west, no that's east, east to Pearl Harbor. Now Pearl Harbor, on August-- we lived in that little house in Hongkew and December 7th there were some loud noise, looked like shooting, sounded like shooting, but since on the other side of the river the Pudong ⁴, yeah, Pudong, is about probably the size of the Delaware River here twice, on the other side were guerillas. Was a little bit guerilla warfare. We said there's a fight. And then in the morning we woke up and we found out what actually happened is that the Japanese had asked the British and American gunships, there were two gunships left, to surrender. The Americans surrendered if for no other reason that half of the sailors, I think it was on a Sunday, were offshore and were in bars, sleeping with girls, and the British were there and they felt was beyond their dignity and they would not surrender. They fired a few shots and the Japanese returned and then they striked the flag and surrendered. Then we knew the war started. Now, Shanghai was surrounded altogether anyhow by Japanese, so all they had to do is march over the bridge and we were in occupied territory and surrounded, Shanghai was surrounded by occupied territory. It was like, so to say, when the Germans marched into the Rhineland. There was nothing to do for them. They took over.

MG: Now how did that affect you, and your family?

WB: Okay, first of all, naturally you started to turn on the radio.

MG: Okay.

WB: The reports were absolutely devastating because we heard about what happened in Pearl Harbor. The Japanese said, we have sank this ship, that ship, and our troops are, have landed down here. We couldn't believe it. Shortly after that we found out that they were not lying, maybe they were painting it a little bit better, but they spoke the truth. And that was not only the shock of now being completely again in the hands of power aligned with the Germans, but it was a racial shock because they were people that we disrespected, that we disliked, and they suddenly were our masters. Yes, it was a very tremendous shock. How did it affect us? Economically, there was poverty. Still food

³German language paper published in Shanghai.

⁴Pudong is the district of Shanghai east of the Huanpu River.

was available but we got less and less, yes. It affected us and from our father who wanted to be, to go back into the manufacturing field, it became obvious since he as a man could not get raw material to manufacture, that was giving up everything and he decided instead of manufacturing anything-- and he at this time was in an in-between position. He did not, he was not manufacturing at that time. He decided instead of manufacturing anything or trying to manufacture anything, to repair and the economy in that area, or in China was that absurd, such a low level that you repaired everything, a hot water bottle to warm yourself, and since you didn't have stoves you needed hot water bottles to go to bed in the evening in the winter, which was maybe five, six years old and brittle. You repaired again. People had goulashes. This was a country where you did not have much, not much snow but you had rain, heavy rains and people had, their shoes were not in such, [unclear] so they needed goulashes. A goulasha [sic] had a, the heels would run down, you repaired, you did not, there was nothing practically you did not repair. The mode of moving was bicycles. If a bicycle tire broke, you repaired, rickshaw coolies repaired, everything was repaired and repaired until there was nothing else. So for several years, we lived by repairing, repairing rubber goods.

MG: Did, were you, were any restrictions placed on you?

WB: What happened first, was, I had a-- at that point, I had a few friends because you asked me that question, question before. That house was, we lived in was sold to a Japanese family and he said in a nice way, "I want you to be out in three months." So we looked for a new place and I moved to 499 Wayside Road and you have a tape where? You have a tape there from another gentleman in your archives of Robert Sokal and he became a very close friend of mine. As a matter of fact, he intro-, kind of introduced me to young people of my own age more than anybody else and Harry Meffner who was, who is here. Yeah, at this time, at this point, in other words, in '41, I really started to form friendships with people of my own age.

MG: Did you belong to any groups?

WB: Yes. I belonged then, first of all to Jewish Zionistic Youth Organization.

MG: I'm sorry, what was...

WB: Zionistic Jewish Youth Organization and that was kind of a, at least semi-political group because I was not much of a, we were not that much Zionists at that point and, so that was one of our affiliation. And then there was a, a group of ex-scholars, those were kids that had left school and I was introduced to them, and I became a member of that group and there I had some other social, stronger social contacts and, as a matter of fact, those social contacts are still the contacts which I am having now. So those were my, my, my affiliations at that time, clubs or otherwise. Then I also a little later I, in the begin-, in the begin-, actually in the beginning [tape interrupted] you know, sports or so but then I started to play ball again and soccer and I started to form friendships with people of various sports and there was, it was, maybe when I was 18 or so, I started to socially bloom. [Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

MG: This is tape two, side one of an interview with Warner Bergh. My name is Marcia Goldberg. Today is October 16, 1999. The interview is taking place at the Rickshaw Conference at the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. All right, Mr. Bergh, you had described your social life while you were in Shanghai and how it picked up when you were 18. What was life like after the Pacific war broke out?

WB: First of all, there were people were depressed, it seemed like the military was going on for we always felt that the Americans and British would be able to at least contain the Japanese and then the disaster came, and we made it almost to Australia, Burma, etc. So there was a certain amount of hopelessness and we always had feelings, can we, will we survive? The Germans, at that time, were deep in Russia and the British newspapers had stopped. Now luckily one thing happened that, that Russia, Soviet Russia was, as far as the Japanese were concerned, a neutral power, and the Russians at least were allowed to give a 15-minute radio report every day. So at least we got a second opinion and when the Germans said we had taken this, the Russians would say, no we haven't taken that or etc., or the losses of the Germans. So actually we were, at least as far as information was concerned, we had a little bit of an inkling. The economical situation and that's probably more important to you, it went down drastically.

MG: Now what about your restrictions as far as movement? Were you allowed to live in your home?

WB: We were allowed to live in our home till 1943, yes. We were allowed to live in our home and we could, we could actually move freely. We could move to the Settlement [unclear]. At that point it was more a question of why would we go? The purpose of poor people that we are. Why would we go to the Settlement? We would maybe go to a movie house, the younger people. We hardly could afford the better things in life then to go to a good department store so in a way we, as much as we knew we would have liked to, we didn't have the financial needs to go there and buy the things that were nicer there.

MG: Was your house considered or your apartment, was that considered part of the...

WB: It was...

MG: ...district?

WB: It was in the district, so we did not have to move, no.

MG: If you did, did you need permission to go in or out?

WB: If we, yes, definitely, that so-called restricted area. It was probably an area of 20 to 30, 25 - 30 city blocks, and I could be wrong one way or the other. In that area where every European Jew had to move into was about 16,000, 17,000 Jews but around us was probably 2-300,000 Chinese. So we were a minority in that area. There were quite a few of us, but the bigger part of the population were Chinese.

MG: Now what was your relationship with the Chinese at that point?

WB: My personal relationship has always been a fairly good one. The Chinese needed change somehow a little bit. I had the feeling. They maybe had the feeling first that we, again that the Europeans would be able to contain the Japanese, and now they were beaten too, so we looked, in their eyes, we lost face. That was number one. Number two, for economical reasons, conditions worsened, so now the people that were in fairly, at least decent shape, now became poorer and poorer and we had some people that lived in camps. They had practically-- all they had to wear was on their bodies. There were some cases where they couldn't afford shoes anymore, and they had straw, rice straw shoes. In other words, conditions over the years worsened rapidly, and the term *nacht-coup-pee-saya* or *yuka-pee-saya* [phonetic] Jews was formed, which means European Jewish beggar, you know that name? Our position went down quite a bit in their eyes.

MG: Did the Sephardic or the Russian community help you in any way?

WB: The Russian hardly, at least to my knowledge. The Sephardic, okay, the Sephardic Jews were several hundred, among them were people like Serbic, the Sassoon, the Kadoories, etc. Those were extremely wealthy people. One of them, for instance, owned the gas company of Shanghai, the other one the Ka-, the Sassoon had some of the biggest buildings in Shanghai, those were extremely wealthy people and with the money of the Kadoories, the school was founded.

MG: Now...

WB: And they had also given money, too.

MG: So other than economically and with the decline of your financial situation, were there any other changes in your life during this time?

WB: Except that we had less, and that the situation in Europe, the Germans were winning and winning. It was very depressing. The restrictions that you could not leave the designated area, although later on my parents had a little, made a little bit of money, had a little bit of money, and my father for a while had quick jobs for a Chinese company, and he figured it was best for me to go to college and without actually a full European background I made my entrance examination and I went to college, and I needed [unclear], studied chemistry but I was allowed, I had to have a passport, a Japanese passport. I had to go to a certain police station, there a Mr. Ghoya and a Mr. [unclear], I had to apply for that and that was the second time I got a beating because I didn't bow low enough which coming to think of it, he considers himself the representative of the Emperor of Japan and he expected to, of me to pay respect to that man. Maybe not to him but to the Emperor, and I didn't do it, so I got kicked out and I went back again, and I was more polite and I got my papers, yes, [unclear].

MG: Other than this incident was there any other contact with the Japanese?

WB: No.

MG: ...or Germans, any Nazis?

WB: No, not with the Germans whatsoever. Japanese were obviously, this was occupied area and the municipality was Chinese. They were, they were still seikhs, Indian policemen, there were Chinese policemen. There were even a few Jewish policemen, Russian policemen. But by the same token it was occupied area, and you had Japanese army patrols going through with guns and bayonets. They were going back and forth. They didn't do anything to us, but you know you see those people, you don't feel easy about it.

MG: Now, what year was it that you applied to leave?

WB: To leave Shanghai, after the war?

MG: You told me you went to get-- was this after the war that you applied for papers to go...

WB: To University?

MG: Yes.

WB: No, that was obviously during the war because I [unclear] '44, 1944.

MG: All right, now explain that to me.

WB: Okay, as I said, Dad had a year earlier or so had a fairly good job with a Chinese company and he made some money, and he felt kind of it would be advantageous for me, for his son, to, to get an academical background in my profession which was organic chemistry. And since I did not have a full German schooling which would have allowed me to go automatically, I had to take an entrance examination which I passed. And I went for a while to St. John's University but I must admit that I was not the best student and it was considered better not to follow up, but I had to have papers from the Japanese authorities to go there every morning, and I went to school on my bicycle. I rode through two-thirds of Shanghai on my bicycle to the other end of town.

MG: What was the name of the University?

WB: St. John's University, this was originally an American university.

MG: And who was running it at this time?

WB: Probably the Chinese? The teachers, I don't think they were the Japanese provost. I don't think so, I could not tell you for sure.

MG: Were the classes in English?

WB: Classes were in English, as a matter of fact, the, most of the kids were Chinese. In my class maybe there were out of a class of 20, there were maybe four or five foreigners and the rest were Chinese but the class was conducted in English.

MG: And who conducted the classes?

WB: Chinese. In some instances also, very few foreigners at that time, as a matter of fact.

MG: Was...?

WB: [unclear] the teachers.

MG: Was this unusual for someone to attend college during this time, a refugee?

WB: It was very unusual. I would say about, I probably, there were about seven or eight of us at different times that went to either St. John's or to the French university. Yeah, I would say altogether, not more than 10.

MG: So you spent most of your time at this point, going to school?

WB: At that short period, yes.

MG: How long did you attend?

WB: About half a year, and then I figured I didn't like it, my grades weren't up too well. I could not concentrate at home. There was too much noise and so on. And I had to give it up. [unclear]

MG: So what did you do after that?

WB: My father, my father was continuing to be in the repair business. I went back to and repaired.

MG: Now what happened after the war?

WB: After the war, my first impulse actually was to get a job with the army. I applied, for some reason it didn't work out. I didn't get a job and maybe it's in my nature to give up easier, and my father said, "Heck it's not so important," and I didn't follow up. I didn't have the emotion that my former colleagues had. I did not have a job [unclear].

MG: Did you continue to live in the same area?

WB: We continued to live in the same area. As a matter of fact, considering the general situation, the [unclear] had lifted in Shanghai that if you made a living, if you did manufacture, if you had a trade or were selling or exporting/importing, you could make a good living. And the first thought of my father was, it would be peace, we will start anew and we will continue to live in China and make a decent living there. He was afraid of going back, of going to, not a, to Germany for several reasons and then we found out what happened and the country was bombed out. There was no sense to go to Germany. He was afraid of the United States. For some reason, he had in mind, what happened in '29 and '30 in this country, and he felt that suddenly uncomfortable. He did not realize yet that there was a complete change here, and he was afraid to come to that country. However, he said, "What will I do? I do not speak the language, I cannot have a position in manufacturing. I will, the night watchman." It was practically his thoughts. "I will not end my days as a night watchman." And there was a chance to go to Australia, you know, [unclear] and he felt a better chance to go to Australia but that didn't work out. And then for a while, he was again undecided and then Chiang Kai-shek, one day, said "I want all the foreigners out," and that on the one hand. On the other hand, the Civil War started to get bad and then we realized, and then suddenly we realized, yes, we wanted to get out. And at the same time, my mother had a brother who had emigrated in '38, a little bit earlier to the United States. He was a chemist and somehow we were able to contact him. I don't recall how we got his address. And shortly after that he said he was moving to Clinton, Iowa, which is on the Mississippi River, and a job as a research chemist, and then we maybe started to correspond with him more and we changed our mind about

going to the United States. And we had his help and we said at least there's somebody to go to and slowly and surely for the reason of not doing, being able to do something in China and then again we have leave to be motivated again, to go to this country.

MG: So when did you leave?

WB: We, okay, we wanted to leave in '48 in the fall. Then there was a strike, and the ships wouldn't go, and the Red Army was coming closer and closer [unclear]. And on January 1st the first ship came in and we could leave now. January 1, 1949, I left Shanghai.

MG: And where did you arrive?

WB: We arrived in San Francisco.

MG: With your parents?

WB: With my parents.

MG: And where did you go from San Francisco?

WB: We stayed for over two months in San Francisco, and then my parents were given the alternative either go to one of the larger cities, or medium size cities. And my parents were a little bit sick and tired of living in a crowded city. They wanted to see some trees again, and again my uncle lived in Clinton, Iowa, which was about 120 miles east of Des Moines, and Des Moines was offered to us and so we tried Des Moines, Iowa.

MG: You say it was offered to you. Who offered, who helped?

WB: The Joint, in San Francisco.

MG: So you located, relocated to Des Moines.

WB: To Des Moines, right.

MG: And what was your life like then?

WB: Well actually the first few months, weeks and months, were pretty hard. The Jewish community did not do too much to find, help us finding jobs that we could go to. You speak English, go and find yourself a job. And so we, I started out, we started out with an odd job of washing walls for a company. I did that for a few weeks and then I went to another company which was in the rubber manuf-, dealing with tires, which I had a background in. And I started there, but they didn't, after a while, they were remodeling, they didn't need me after a while and they had another, it was another company associated with them, which was in a transportation fleet. And I started there, and I can't recall if my parents was, maybe it is better for a Jewish boy not to become a merchant or a lawyer but do something practical with his hands and go into that field. I tried to get into rubber manufacturing business again, but I did not have a degree so they would, they would not take me on a level I would like to be. I could have worked as a common laborer but that is hard work because it's hot and dusty and so on. I went into an entirely different field. I went into the kind of automotive business trying to learn that trade but I was, doubly not my strong side, level that I like, and I, in September of '50 I was jobless, and for a little bit earlier, and another friend of my father's, somebody he knew, he worked there too, another refugee. He said, "We need somebody." There was a

wholesale house for sporting goods and toys and drugs. "We need somebody to help us as a shipping clerk, to help us." This will be from September till Christmas. I said, "Okay, why not?" And after a while, there were three shipping clerks, I was the number two man or so. The main shipping clerk left, and I became the number one shipping clerk. The supervisor of the warehouse left and I took over the warehouse, and I was in charge of the warehouse of a wholesale company. Then something partic-, peculiar happened, the Korean war started, and this gentleman who owned that company was under the assumption, now we were war conditions, materials will be short, and he started buying like mad, stocking up, thinking he's going to make a big kill, and conditions were normal and he didn't have anything, so he started a retail store competing against his own customers, and he killed himself. After a while he came to the conclusion, all I can do is converting my wholesale house, selling to the smaller communities but as far as Des Moines is concerned, I become a discounteer. And I grew with that company, and I soon would be the number three. He had a son-in-law in the company, he had a few people that were, had a very good background, merchandise wise, we needed jewelers and so on, but I was the number four or five man in that company and I grew with that company, and worked myself even higher up.

MG: Did you stay with them until you retired?

WB: No, this gentleman by the same token, he branched out too fast. He started having a store in Des Moines, he started to have two or three stores around Des Moines, and he did not have proper control and he lost money and he sold out and he sold out to another company. And I didn't feel too good about that and with that company and I went into as an assistant store manager to another discount chain, but that discount chain didn't make it and finally I wound up with K-Mart, and I took a lower job there, and stayed with them for 20, 25 years plus four years later when after retirement. What's more, I decided now I have to go back into my family life. I got married in '58 to a young lady from Bavaria. She had a more Orthodox, very opposite background, opposite background, and she kind of converted me, so I became Jewish more so than...

MG: And what was her name?

WB: Her name was Esther Lasker, later on Esther Bergh and what's more, she, she was raised in England and she was in the Anna Freud Institute and she was studying under Anna Freud, and she was in child development. When she came over-- my mother, matter of fact for a time was a secretary of a Jewish synagogue, and they needed somebody and she introduced her, and she said, we need somebody like you with that background, and her first job was she was taking over the Jewish pre-school and after a while she was the head teacher and later on she became the Director of the Jewish Pre-school, and so my, so actually my whole life became more Jewish-oriented and much more community oriented. And since she had an excellent job there which was a half-day job. In the afternoon, she didn't have to teach, with a good salary, it kind of hampered me because if I had given up-- I had an offer for instance to go to Minneapolis to another

company and become, takeover the store management and my heck, I'm going there blind, not knowing what's what, you have a good job here, no, I'm not going to do it. So I figured I rather scale down here in Des Moines and go that way and try to work myself up here again if possible than relocating.

MG: In all the time that you were doing all of this, well, since Germany, did you ever experience antisemitism?

WB: In Shanghai, in Des Moines?

MG: Yeah.

WB: Not really. There probably would have been a few people that [siren, tape interrupted]⁵ not anti, anti-, no, not to my knowledge. Maybe the only episode I strongly remember was not in Des Moines, it was in Washington D.C. and maybe that's for a different reason. I went to Washington, D.C. with my children and [unclear] time when, when [unclear] the President of Russia came to visit and there were demonstrations, some brown shirts here were walking with banners that said, "Release Hess," you know the war criminal Hess⁶. And I was going there and there were about six or seven and I started to attack them [unclear]. I think it ended, I could not count them. I saw the swastika, I said [unclear].

MG: How many children do you have?

WB: I have two lovely girls.

MG: What are their names?

WB: Jackie Bergh, now Hermanson and Heady Bergh, now Grant. One is 41 and the other one is 39.

MG: Do you have grandchildren?

WB: I have five grandchildren; three girls, two boys. They are all in Kansas City, which is 200 miles away. As I say I have a lovely grandson who was raised in Philadelphia.

MG: When you reflect on the time that you spent in Shanghai and the things that happened to you, what impact do you think it had on your life?

WB: I think it made a man and a human being out of me. I see that all races and all religions have a lot to offer if properly enforced. I feel human beings are, they are very much the same all over the world. They have the same aims and goals in life. School, Shanghai is a very hard school for you, so you learn to live with less. Material values don't count so much for you, it's relationships that count, maybe good music that counts, but whether you have a new, the latest car with air conditioning and all, it's not that important.

MG: Have you ever been back to Shanghai?

WB: I have not been back to Shanghai but I've been to Germany and all over Europe, yes.

⁵Fire alarm in the hotel. Ended quickly.

⁶Rudolf Hess, Adolf Hitler's deputy, was sentenced to life in prison at Spandau Prison.

MG: How was it to go back to Germany?

WB: Okay, [unclear] we were invited. I didn't want to go but we were invited at the cost of the German government and I said, on the other hand, why not? I like to, I like to see it again and I think it was a good experience in many ways. At least Berlin, because I came to an area, which I considered pro-Jewish. I went to Hamburg where I had relatives there, that was fine, then I went to Munich where my wife came from and there I felt a certain antisemitism symbolically, it happened in front of the house where she was raised when somebody made an anti-Jewish remark, and...

MG: Well thank you...

WB: I'm very proud.

MG: Thank you very much.

WB: I thank you.

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