

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Inge-Ruth Sachs Fletcher**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill & Bruce Kelly

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location/Comments: Mrs. Fletcher's Home in Houston, Texas. Mrs. Fletcher's daughter, Julie Fletcher Hilderman, also participated in the interview.

22 Pages



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Ernst Prince, Inga's uncle

Transcript

GOODSILL: Good morning.

FLETCHER: Good morning.

GOODSILL: I know you have a story to tell us about your uncle who lived in Sugar Land.

FLETCHER: Yes. I'm his niece. Ernst came to the United States about ten years before I did. Maybe even longer. They left Germany a lot earlier than we did, mainly because Ernst was one of the very first Jews that was arrested by the Nazis. They put him into one of the very EARLY versions of a concentration camp. Chances are somebody reported him, someone who did not like the family. There was a lot of jealousy about Jewish families that had money. And they were a rather well to do family. Ernst was giving a ride home to a secretary who had worked for the family, the Prinz's, for a long time. Then, in Germany, it was P-R-I-N-Z. When he came to the states, he changed it to P-R-I-N-C-E.

GOODSILL: I notice on the documents that we showed you today from Imperial, that it was spelled P-R-I-N-Z. Do you know his whole name?

FLETCHER: As far as I know, Ernst Prinz. Nein, no, no, no. Ernst Prinz (pronouncing it the way it would be said in German). Then it would be just Ernst. He was arrested for being in a car with a non-Jewish person. THAT was not permitted at the time; they had just started not permitting Jews to employ non-Jews. We were not supposed to have any close contact with anyone who was not Jewish. And this person had worked for the family for a long time, and was STILL doing some jobs every once in a while. Basically she needed the money. Somebody who did not like it reported him, and they waited for him as he was taking the woman home. He never got home. He was imprisoned, as far as I know for about one year. From day one, my aunt tried with all her might to find him.

GOODSILL: Your aunt's name?

FLETCHER: Kate Gerstel Prinz. She worked very, very hard to try and locate him, find out what happened to him, and to get him out. I don't know the exact details. I know it took her about a year to accomplish all of that. The town where they lived was Strehlen. And that was very close to Breslau, which was a larger city where we lived. So when Kate had to come in to visit some official offices there, Nazi places, she would spend the night with us if it was too late to take a train home. She did NOT drive; people just didn't drive to various places. Even now in Germany you take the train. I was not supposed to know these things, but I had big ears. I would listen.

GOODSILL: How old were you?

FLETCHER: I was ten. And very, VERY fearful, because it was a very, very scary, fearful time.

GOODSILL: Was he the first person that you knew, that had been taken?

FLETCHER: YES!

GOODSILL: Kate had no idea where he was?

FLETCHER: No. She never did really locate him, as far as I know. But at least she got to talk with some officers that promised they could get her husband out. The final result was that she was told, "He WILL be released." I don't know the dates or where exactly but he would be released if she would pick him up at the place of release, put him in a car, and have every paper ready to put him on aboard a ship. The stipulation was 'never step foot on German soil again'. And she did accomplish that. She got the ship tickets; he wanted to come to America. At that time, to come to America, you had to have proof that you will NEVER be a burden to the state. Unlike today. And that meant, having a job. He had to have a job.

She had a sister-in-law who lived in Houston at that time. Her name was Mona Moser; she was Ernst's sister. And I think she was already here. The Moser's came earlier. Whether she made the connection to Sugar Land, we don't know. Ernst was an engineer; the highest level at that time in Germany, which was called the 'diplome engineer'. I don't know what that would be equivalent to in the states.

They found out that the owner of the Imperial Sugar Company would guarantee a job for Ernst. Which was the LAST little bit that Kate needed so that they may emigrate to the United States. She picked him up at the proper time, had a suit of clothing in the automobile, because he was wearing whatever garb they gave him. As far as the story always went, he changed in the car.



*Ernst Prinz, diplome engineer,
circa 1940-45*

She drove all the way to wherever the embarkation point was. They went on board ship and they sailed to the United States. She had meanwhile arranged to get all their household belongings, everything, put on board a ship. Everything was synchronized to the last moment. And that was the story of Ernst.

GOODSILL: If they were prosperous, they may have had a lot of belongings. Did they bring a lot of things over?

FLETCHER: Oh, yes! Yes, a houseful of furniture; big, heavy German, very modern furniture. It's wonderful. I mean, a living room, dining room, buffet piece...

GOODSILL: Does any of it survive?

FLETCHER: I sold it all when my aunt died. I couldn't find people that could even take it. One of my daughters has one piece, a night table still. It's beautiful furniture.

GOODSILL: I wonder if they brought it into their house, when they lived in Sugar Land?

FLETCHER: Chances are they did but I don't know.

KELLY: John Pirtle, who was a neighbor of theirs in Sugar Land, told me that they had beautiful furniture.

FLETCHER: Then they did! One part of the buffet could open up and it was lined in marble and was for the bar. It didn't have a wet bar, but the dry bar was mirrored in the back and had marble lining. It was very heavy. They bought their house in Houston because it had this huge living room/dining room combination. And it would hold the furniture. The house was on Keller Street.

GOODSILL: What stories have been told about what their life was like when they landed in Houston?

FLETCHER: We don't know much about that. Kate and Ernst really did NOT like to speak about the past. Whether this is something that came about because of his internment or whether Ernst had always been that way, I don't know. I was too young in Germany. I never really got to know him. Though I WAS their flower girl. I never thought of it before. I was the flower girl at the wedding and then I was the executrix for their estate. I sort of saw them through the whole thing, didn't I? Maybe that's why I couldn't let go of something that he had created. (referring to an engineering drawing she gave to the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation.)

GOODSILL: Do you know how old he was when he got conscripted?

FLETCHER: We could find out. The Holocaust Museum has their citizenship papers.

GOODSILL: I am curious about how old he was when this incident happened to him.

FLETCHER: In his thirties.

GOODSILL: In his thirties, and so he came here, maybe late thirties?

FLETCHER: Mid-thirties to late-thirties, yeah.

GOODSILL: And then when did he die?

FLETCHER: 1978 or 1979

GOODSILL: So, they got on the ship and when they landed here he had a job at Imperial Sugar.

KELLY: We know that they had a connection with the Weth family in Sugar Land. We pronounced it 'Weeth' in Sugar Land but it's probably 'Weet' in German.

FLETCHER: (laughing)

KELLY: Anyway, Mr. Weth was an engineer with Imperial and probably worked closely with Mr. Prinz. My assumption is they continued to be friends after Mr. Prinz left Imperial?

FLETCHER: They DID continue the friendship, because they visited back and forth. I never met them. My daughters did meet them, but I never did.

KELLY: Why don't you tell us your name, and then tell us your experience going to the Weth's.

HILDERMAN: My name is Julie Fletcher Hilderman. I'm Inge Fletcher's daughter. During the summers, I would go and spend a week or so with my aunt and uncle, Kate and Ernst. And I DO remember going to Sugar Land to the Weth's house. They had some kind of party, and they had a swimming pool. And I was really excited because it was very uncommon for me to be able to go to a pool. And, basically, I just remember being introduced to the Weth's, but I was maybe, I don't know, how old was I, Mother? Five or six?

FLETCHER: Five or six years old.

HILDERMAN: And, so I don't remember, really, anything about them. I remember the pool far more. And holding on to the edge of the pool, making my way around, since I couldn't swim.

KELLY: And, could you tell us about what year you would have visited?

HILDERMAN: Probably 1954, 1955.

KELLY: Ms. Fletcher, tell us a little bit about the gift that you gave the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation, which belonged to your uncle.

FLETCHER: When I was going through Kate and Ernst's belongings after Kate had passed away—Ernst passed away first, in early 1978 or 1979 – I'm not sure. If it was 1979, then it was early in the year. Kate passed away about six months after Ernst died. My husband and I came to Houston. In selling the furniture, and the last belongings, in one of the drawers, I found this tube. I DID look at everything because I did not know what they had from bank accounts to anything else. I had no idea. I had to look at every note, every piece of paper. And I found this one yellow piece of paper, all rolled up.

It was a flow chart for the Sugar Land refinery. I got rid of most things, but that one I kept. I didn't know quite what to do with it but it was something that Ernst had designed. I had heard them say that one of the first things he was asked to do, was to set up a flow chart. He had described it to me like a conveyor belt. That I remember. I realized that I might have found just the thing that he was asked to design. And so I kept it and called the people in Sugar Land, and could not find anybody who was interested, which disappointed me terribly. And I just held on to it until I found you guys. (chuckles) I had faith that it was good, so I did not give it away earlier.

KELLY: Yes, you contacted a Mr. George Muller, at Imperial. He knew we were associated with the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation, so he gave me your number, and I contacted you.

FLETCHER: That's right! I saw the article in the newspaper about him. Yeah, and I thought 'One more try'. (chuckles)

KELLY: And I also want to say that Mrs. Fletcher has given us a couple of photos of Mr. Prinz, a portrait photo of him, and also a couple of photos of him at their home at 800 Imperial Boulevard in Sugar Land, some time between 1940 and 1945.

GOODSILL: Bruce, why don't you read to us what your housing records say about when Mr. Prince lived in Sugar Land?

KELLY: The housing records say that Ernst Prinz rented 800 Imperial Boulevard, from April 15, 1940 to June 5, 1945, for \$22.50 per month, and his Imperial Sugar Employee Number was 1770-S. I was also able to find some very obscure pictures of their house. I've given those to Mrs. Fletcher along with pictures of Sugar Land and Imperial Boulevard.

FLETCHER: Thank you for this. We could never understand why he chose to live on Keller Street. He was looking at a house in Bellaire, which would have been just two-three blocks from where we lived, later. They opted for the one all the way there. They were buried there.

GOODSILL: But they had room for their furniture!

FLETCHER: That could be. You know, it really could be. Because it wouldn't necessarily have been money, because the land was not expensive at the time. This was certainly a much nicer neighborhood than Keller. We could never understand that.

GOODSILL: How long did he work for Imperial?

FLETCHER: Practically until he died. He drove out to Sugar Land every day, all the way there. Back and forth.

When I came to the States, I lived with Kate and Ernest. My husband was still overseas. He was working for Texaco. He got discharged from the military and was working for Texaco in the purchasing and contracting department. He wasn't quite sure whether I should go meet his family who lived in New York. So I went to Kate and Ernst.

There I was, grown up and married and had come from Shanghai. And the sidewalks were rolled up at 5 o'clock on Keller Street, and my aunt and uncle had never had a child. I WAS only nineteen at the time BUT I wasn't allowed out of the house without them! I sat in this house (laughs) and I wouldn't have known quite where a bus was, or anything. But I would have found my way. They could have shown that to me. So I was stuck on Keller Street. It didn't last very long. I got on a train and went to New York, and met my in-laws, which was very nice. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Did Ernst ever recoup his prosperity?

FLETCHER: No. He was not interested. He really wasn't. I think whatever occurred in Germany, in the Hitler time, changed him. When you look at the picture of Ernst walking on the street when he was young and Ernst after that — those were two different people. To Ernst, of course, being an engineer, a German university student was something very special. They had uniforms, very, very smart uniforms. At Kate and Ernst's wedding...

HILDERMAN: They stood with crossed swords.

FLETCHER: Going up the aisle, the bride and groom walked under the crossed swords from his university — students *espaliert* — in the uniforms, and I was the first one to walk under the crossed swords, as a four year old child! (laughs). I was scared to death! This is the type of life Ernst came from. Kate's family was well to do as well.

KELLY: The picture you were talking about, of him on the street, would you describe what he looked like, so we know?

FLETCHER: Oh, Ernst was very debonair, very, very debonair.

KELLY: Would you say confident?

FLETCHER: (pause) YES, absolutely! Absolutely.

KELLY: And the picture after he came here, how would you describe that?

FLETCHER: Ernst — here, you — you look at it.

GOODSILL: Very erect and dignified looking.

FLETCHER: Yes, but he was drawn inward. It was not necessarily that he didn't laugh and enjoy himself. He had a huge accordion that he would play. And I'm sure the people in Sugar Land must remember. In Germany the family would be the first ones to have an automobile, or more than one. And chances are there was the chauffeur that went with it in the event mother and sister wanted to go anywhere. Over here, Ernst had no desire to talk, in fact when we came over, my father wanted VERY much to talk about Shanghai and compare notes.

Kate and Ernst spoke nothing of what their experience was and did not let my mother and father talk about what they went through in Shanghai, during the war years. So father was very delighted when I came back to Houston after being with my in-laws in New York, because they could talk.

KELLY: So, do you think, just your own speculation, that your uncle Ernst had a different view of the world after the war?

FLETCHER: YES. Yes. Mmmm, his outlook on life had changed.

KELLY: A little disappointed, maybe?

FLETCHER: No. No, it would be far deeper than disappointed. Let me tell you one thing and that does not necessarily go with this. In going through the pictures and letters to show you. I found these three telegrams, and one of them was from my grandmother. My grandmother died in Theresienstadt, one of the concentration camps.

GOODSILL: Will you give us your grandmother's name?

FLETCHER: Julia Gerstel.

KELLY: Was she your maternal grandmother?

FLETCHER: Yes. Kate's mother. Whenever I go through these papers and letters, I have this really good and yet bad attitude. I fall into it. I LIVE it. I experience it. It is extremely strong. Grandmother was picked up from her home, the home she had lived in for at least sixty years. It was three stories high with the business part in front and then an open area for employee housing in the back end. She was picked up from there and taken to the concentration camp. I realized if an individual or an individual private group does something horrible to you, it is terrible, frightening. But if the State does it...

To think that she was put there by the State and knew that it would end in her death. And this is the first time that it, it really hit me. That must be the most devastating feeling you can go through. Being robbed or even killed by an individual, as frightening as it is, cannot be as frightening as the other.

HILDERMAN: It was how Ernst felt.

FLETCHER: YES. And from that we can maybe extrapolate about Ernst. He didn't KNOW Kate was doing all she did to get him out.

GOODSILL: It's very unusual to hear a story of someone who got released from a concentration camp.

FLETCHER: It was early. It was still early. They were leaving at the time when my father was still trying not to leave. We didn't leave until '199, the VERY last boat, to leave

Germany.

GOODSILL: Well, tell us some about your story.

FLETCHER: (laughs) The reason we left so late is because my father had photo equipment. And one of the laws that was passed was — No, I have to backtrack.

Hitler didn't want us in Germany but he didn't want us to GO. He wanted the fun of killing us. Which is really idiotic if you think about it. He — they didn't want the Jews. They wanted our belongings and our money, but he — they didn't want you to just go. It was far more interesting to do it the other way.

A few months after Kate and Ernst left, at that time they could still leave, with a few stipulations, but they could still leave. Later on, every month or so, a new law was passed that Jews couldn't leave any more. And there were laws — “If we let you go, you HAVE to do such-and-such.” I don't know all of them. At one point, they said, “AH, we pass a new law. You may go, if you can prove with a photocopy, not the original, but a photocopy, that you were a front fighter.” (There were two different categories: men that fought at the front and men that fought in the rear, in World War I. That was called the *In frontkämpfer*.) “But don't bring us the original. Bring us the photocopy.” On the same morning when this law was made, really a proclamation, on that very same day, all photo shops were out of bounds to Jews. They could not get photocopies any more. This is what life was like.

By that time we didn't even have our money anymore. The bank accounts were closed. You got more or less an allowance or you wrote a check and they issued from your account. I only know this because I listened, because I was very fearful. My father had photo equipment. I know he couldn't advertise. And we were in a town that nobody really knew us. Father had decided that the town we lived in before was too dangerous because everybody knew us. Everybody knew we were Jews. Maybe we'd better go somewhere where we're not known.

So here we were, in a city where people did not know us. But all of a sudden, people would come in the evening, women, usually, and bring these discharge papers to prove their husband was a *frontkämpfer* — was fighting in World War I, at the front, for Germany. Father and Mother sat and made copies all through the night. The people would come and pick them up, it was a LONG process, not like it is today. They had to be copied in the machine. Then it had to go to the developer, fixing bath, and then dried. Our bathroom became one part of the process.

We lived with blackout because Father and Mother were afraid that the light flashes going on and off would tell on us. I have NO idea how many Father did like that. I have no idea. I wish now I had asked 'Where did you get the chemicals? Who got you the paper? The photo plates?' I have no idea. But he wouldn't leave.

GOODSILL: Tell me your father's full name.

FLETCHER: Alfred Sachs, S-A-C-H-S. He was not a religious man, but he was a very conscientious Jew. Never went to synagogue. He took mother to synagogue.

GOODSILL: What was your mother's full name?

FLETCHER: Edith Gerstel Sachs. And Mother would plead, 'Make you a copy. Let's start.' And he would say, 'You know, if we stay, maybe another ten-fifteen tomorrow'. Mother wept. My mother wept and fell asleep on the machine she was operating, because they literally didn't sleep.

GOODSILL: She must have been SO scared.

FLETCHER: I don't know where he got the strength and bravery to expose us like this, because had he been caught, we would have all been killed instantly. There must have been other people who did this. It couldn't have been just us for all of Germany. I don't know. All of these questions didn't come into my thoughts, unhappily, until after he died. And I didn't ask enough questions because I was involved in all of it. I KNEW it all, I thought.

HILDERMAN: You were the courier.

FLETCHER: Yes, at one point, yeah. I had to. I looked very German. I had long blonde braids and I was sent to go tell somebody this or that and we're here. Scared half to death always. And of course you never knew when Hitler or any of his doubles appeared on the street. Or if they just broadcast the speech.

When Hitler spoke, there were loudspeakers on the corners, and his speech was broadcast all over Germany. And you stopped. And you saluted and, we were told 'try not to'. If you have to, fine, but if not, don't. So we would duck into doorways. (laughs).

GOODSILL: So how did your father decide to finally leave?

FLETCHER: I think maybe Mother got to him, finally. Or maybe he got scared too. He did finally copy his papers and got permission to leave. We got on the last GERMAN boat to leave and Mother was afraid. I remember her saying, "*auf einem Deutschen schiff*," on a GERMAN boat. You know, she thought the persecution would continue. But it didn't. They were absolutely charming and delightful. There was no difference in the passengers. Jews were treated no differently than anyone else.

GOODSILL: What year was that?

FLETCHER: 1939. That boat was sunk outside of Japan after we got off. We got off in Shanghai. The boat was torpedoed off of Japan. They never found out who did it. Never, never, never. They were beginning to play footsie with the Japanese already at that time. Whether it was the Americans, nobody ever claimed it, like nowadays, everybody wants to claim it.

GOODSILL: What was the name of the ship? Do you remember?

FLETCHER: *Scharnhorst*.

[Editor's note: The *Scharnhorst* was sunk off Norway. See link: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/scharnhorst_01.shtm]

GOODSILL: Do you know when Kate and Ernst left Germany?

FLETCHER: They left about a year before that. Would be 1938 when it was still fairly easy. You realize that I was only about ten years old when Kate started the process. And people did not speak with children, at the time. I grew up with, 'You're supposed to be seen and not heard'. But I listened a lot. I was a very lonesome child, extremely shy and lonesome. And therefore I was discounted a lot. My sister was more the outgoing kind.

GOODSILL: What's your sister's name?

FLETCHER: Ursula.

KELLY: Who in your family boarded the boat to Shanghai?

FLETCHER: My mother's sister and her family went at the same time; she and her husband and two children. We had cabins side by side. And unhappily, both men were seasick. And the six females in the group were not at all. We would go swimming and have our snacks. The ship was moving and we loved every bit of it.

I was very close to Father, and I felt SO sorry for him. I would go down there and listen. They had the adjoining door open, and talked with each other. “I think if you turn on the right side, it’s better.” “NO, look out the window—then it’s better.” (laughs)

KELLY: Which route did the ship take?

FLETCHER: Via the Suez Canal.

KELLY: Okay. Through the Indian Ocean.

FLETCHER: Yeah. LONG, long trip.

KELLY: Do you remember how long it took?

FLETCHER: At least four weeks.

GOODSILL: But it was wonderful for you.

FLETCHER: Oh, it was wonderful. The dessert was served in carved ice animals, and was on a conveyor belt that came around, and it was hollowed out.

GOODSILL: Did you have to pay passage on this ship?

FLETCHER: Well, from our account, yeah. I mean, we had money but we couldn’t take it out of Germany. When we left, we were allowed the equivalent of four dollars per person. My parents started life with sixteen dollars in Shanghai! And we could NOT take our belongings. The Nazis came and packed. We had to use one of THEIR transport companies to pack us, and they checked EVERYTHING. Anything that was gold, other than wedding bands, had to be left. Dresses, you could not take new dresses. I was ten years old and mother wanted to buy me clothes. She thought, “You can’t afford to buy clothes for a growing child in China.” They took it all. It was all taken away. Anything that was new. No furniture could come, nothing.

KELLY: Tell us why they went to Shanghai?

FLETCHER: Because by the time my father permitted us to go, all the other ports were closed. Nobody took Jewish refugees.

KELLY: Did he have to have a job in Shanghai?

FLETCHER: NO, no, no, no. Shanghai is an open port. Always was an open port. You did not need any papers. You could just book passage IF you could get passage to go to Shanghai, not China, Shanghai. You could go to Shanghai.

KELLY: Describe to us your memories of seeing Shanghai from the boat.

FLETCHER: It was night. I did not see Shanghai. The only thing I remember that was very interesting, I smelled sandalwood for the first time. My parents thought it was stinky. I asked the steward, I said, "It doesn't stink." He told us that there was a ship that was being unloaded. I detected the sandalwood. I smelled the sweetness. I was not fearful for the first time in so long. Maybe that's why I smelled the sandalwood.

KELLY: When you got off the boat, did your family have plans to go anywhere?

FLETCHER: No, no.

KELLY: So you got off the boat and what did you do?

FLETCHER: We were picked up in an open vegetable truck. We went from ice carved animals to walking down the gangplank. I actually have a picture in a book, of the way the refugees were picked up. We were taken to refugee camps. There were camps set up for all of us, because nobody knew where to go. At that time the ones coming in ALL had a total of four dollars per person, which you could have blown on the first night in a hotel, because the hotels were VERY elaborate in Shanghai. In Shanghai you could go from the worst poverty to most elaborate, beautiful hotels. But most of us wouldn't have known how to find out.

So we were taken to a refugee camp. The room we were put in had approximately a hundred people in it; men, women and children. There were iron bunks, one stacked on top of the other. What happened to our belongings? How my Father stayed sane, or Mother for that matter, I don't know. We woke up early in the morning to gunfire. Everybody else was calm. I was VERY excited. Here I felt so free and all of a sudden there's gunfire. They said, "That's the warlords, and it's okay. Don't worry. They don't harm us. (laughter) They are fighting with each other." At that time there were still warlords in the outskirts of Shanghai.

KELLY: How long did you stay in the camp?

FLETCHER: (big sigh) I ventured out that first morning. Mainly because my parents sent me out. Mother was gone. Mother could not stay. She would not have survived this. She had a sister that came to Shanghai earlier. They picked her up and took her home with them. And SHE had the ration cards that were handed to us the night we arrived, little tickets, in her purse. So my sister, my father and I could not get any breakfast or anything.

GOODSILL: They didn't serve you anything at the camp unless you had the ration tickets?

FLETCHER: You had to have the ticket. So between breakfast and lunch, I went out. HOW it was decided that I should go out and do it, I don't know. But I went and found where my aunt lived. (laughs) It never dawned on me until, what? Ten years ago or twelve, fifteen years ago when all of a sudden said, "How could they let ME go? At eleven?"

GOODSILL: How old was your sister?

FLETCHER: My sister was fifteen.

GOODSILL: Were you more clever?

FLETCHER: Maybe more resolute and I had a tremendous feeling of responsibility. I've always had a tremendous feeling of responsibility. Maybe that's why I listened in. But what is even MORE amazing, now that I'm an adult, is that my mother and aunt and uncle let me go back out alone. (laughs)

GOODSILL: With the ration tickets!

FLETCHER: WITH the ration tickets! I came back in time for lunch!

GOODSILL: So how long did you and your father and sister stay in the camp?

FLETCHER: Maybe two or three days then my father found a room. You didn't find apartments. You found rooms. He found a room for us. But we didn't stay there very long. We never unpacked. Mother sat on the suitcase and all of a sudden, she could smell the waft of incense. There was one window in the room. How we would have gotten our beds in there, I don't know. We went to the window and looked out. The lane had a main entrance, and from this entrance, on one side or both sides, are, it's like a tree with horizontal branches. And each branch had an individual house. The house where we were looked across this walkway into another house that was being used as a Buddhist temple.

All these wonderful, big, golden Buddhas were sitting there and the incense was wafting and Mother said, "I won't stay here." We were on the first floor and she could look right down into that. So we all marched down.

GOODSILL: What line of work did your father finally end up doing?

FLETCHER: He ended up doing photography and printing. He was allowed to bring his equipment. It was not new. He worked for a company — he was not employed, but they gave him a corner. Sort of like sharecropping, you know, they took part of what he earned at off-set printing, and photography, and so on.

HILDERMAN: May I interject?

FLETCHER: YES, please.

HILDERMAN: That was not his occupation in Germany. In Germany he was a state-certified accountant. Photography was simply his hobby.

FLETCHER: He started out with it just as a hobby. The printing machine, I think, came because the printing machine needed the photography to set up the plates for off-set printing.

GOODSILL: Did he ever become prosperous?

FLETCHER: NO. He was too ethical. And business in Shanghai did not exist unless it was crooked. If you wanted to slander people a little bit, you'd say, "Oh, he's in business."

KELLY: How long were you in Shanghai?

FLETCHER: Nine years.

KELLY: Do you have any experiences of the war you want to tell us about?

FLETCHER: Too many!

HILDERMAN: Have you got a day or two?

KELLY: Can you pick out one?

HILDERMAN: The Japanese school?

FLETCHER: Yeah (drawn out).

HILDERMAN: We've been telling Mother for some time, she needs to put all this down and have somebody ghostwrite it, and it will be a novel that nobody would ever believe was the truth.

FLETCHER: At the end of the war, we had American airplanes coming over and bombing Shanghai. Most of the refugees, like myself, were slightly crazy by then. Instead of being fearful, we greeted them. We were SO thrilled because every air raid brought us a bit closer to the Americans. That's how I began to fall in love. I knew I was American long before I even thought about coming here. They would announce the bombing and write a big V in the sky. That gave us approximately five minutes to get the heck out of wherever we were. They didn't realize we had no air raid shelters. But, still, they wrote the V in the sky, which was really wonderful. We were always thrilled and delighted.

It gave the Japanese time to leave their little anti-aircraft guns and go underneath. They also announced the attack in Japanese. We were under Japanese occupation at that time. But anyway it gave them time to go on to safety and then the Americans WOULD strafe. And they always announced on shortwave radio, which was strictly forbidden, but somebody always had a shortwave. "Don't worry, we know where you are." But at times, in strafing, it DID happen. They'd get a lot of our streets, which burned afterwards. It was very bad. I worked at a school, as young as I was. I was teaching because there were no more teachers left.

GOODSILL: Teaching what?

FLETCHER: Elementary school.

GOODSILL: In what language?

FLETCHER: English.

GOODSILL: Did you speak English before you left Germany?

FLETCHER: No. But I learned it very quickly. A child can learn. I spoke not a single word, but we were put into a school where not a word of German was spoken. Mother always said it took six weeks and I spoke English. They always said that if you don't know how to spell it, describe it. I mean, our compositions, I feel sorry for the teacher. It must have taken the poor woman all night to read through our compositions! Anyway, the Japanese would leave during the bombings and our tar top streets would burn.

One time it was so bad. One or two other girls and I would take the children and try and walk them home. The school was outside of the district. We were in a ghetto area. But my boyfriend came. He realized that the bombing was close to the school. I could hardly recognize him. He had no eyebrows. He was singed. But he had reconnoitered and knew what streets I could take to walk the children back. (hand clap) Okay. [meaning, story over]

KELLY: You met your husband in Shanghai?

FLETCHER: Yes. He was with the American Occupation Forces. They came in to Shanghai in 1946.

GOODSILL: What was your husband's name?

HILDERMAN: Carl Fletcher.

FLETCHER: He was an American soldier, a lieutenant. I worked in an enlisted men's PX. To date an officer was really a no-no. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Was he Jewish?

FLETCHER: Yes, he was. Yes, he was. I really didn't even pay much attention to him. We focused on our customers, you know. Here we were, maybe fifteen girls with maybe 2,000 men. I was working at the race course. The American Army took over the British race course. And there was LOTS of rooms to billet the men. There were other buildings behind it, and my husband was working in one of the other buildings. He was with the American Grave Registration Service.

GOODSILL: GRAVE registration?

FLETCHER: Yes. Officers have to take Duty Officer of the Day once a week or so. He would have to go around with this black band that said 'OD', Officer of the Day. He had his gun, and would patrol the area. He came in one day and he asked me if I could pin his band on. One of the guys later told me "Mmm, he stood in front of the door and asked some of us to take it OFF. (laughter all around) So, that's how I met my husband.

KELLY: Well, that's great! How did you get to Houston?

FLETCHER: We married in Shanghai. I had a fascinating little, totally incorrect, type of wedding invitation. I didn't know from Emily Post at the time. My husband was still working for Texaco. He was a P and C officer towards the end for the Army—purchasing and contracting. And dealt a lot with Texaco, for fuel, for the military. They said, 'You know, we have an opening. Would you, when you muster out, come and work for us?' He said, "Oh, sure!" And he did, and it was a lot of fun, but, he was under obligation to stay a certain length of time. He was a very, very wonderful, sweet man, and wanted to stay and make sure my parents got on board ship to leave Shanghai. He stayed until he could see them on board ship.

Meanwhile I had to leave because I was a war bride, as a dependent. The Communists were coming into Shanghai. We started to have Communist demonstrations, which are really wonderful. (said with irony) I know firsthand what Communist demonstrations are. And none of it is spontaneous. You could see the trucks rolling in, you know, and then they dump the people, organize them, and then they go demonstrate. (chuckles)

KELLY: What year was this?

FLETCHER: 1947. So the Army pulled out all its dependents. I had to leave. That's when they said, "Go to Houston."

GOODSILL: So you came and stayed with Ernst and Kate? At ten years of age you'd been wandering around Shanghai all alone finding your aunt's house and in Houston you couldn't leave Keller Street!

FLETCHER: Yeah, THAT'S RIGHT! You got it. (laughing)

KELLY: So instead of going to his parents, he thought it was best for you to be with your family.

FLETCHER: He had this glorious idea, my husband was very romantic, he wanted to WALK me into his parent's house. And it was so humorous. Though the parents had gotten wedding pictures and all of that, Mom was NEVER convinced that he might not marry a Chinese girl. "Oh, my goodness, he's gonna marry a Chinese girl." And the first thing, when I rang the doorbell, she recognized me from the picture, and she said, "You are NOT Chinese." (laughs)

GOODSILL: Your husband got your parents out of Shanghai?

FLETCHER: Yes. His sister gave them the affidavit. At that time you needed not job security but an affidavit to say that, if you cannot make it on your own, that someone will take care of you. So his sister, they had a hotel up in the Catskills, gave them the affidavit and they came out. You didn't have to necessarily live with those people. It's just that they had to sign for them. These people would have been responsible to literally take care of them if they ever showed up on welfare. The State would have said, "Okay, come, claim them." My parents moved to Houston. Meanwhile I went to New York thinking New York would be better. But it was so terrible. So very terrible, that I thought, "No, Houston is better." And it WAS better for them. They could not have made it in New York.

GOODSILL: Wow, quite a story!

FLETCHER: I didn't think it was. It was never, "Oh, me." It was just "Okay. Next page." I was always very, very happy. I was THRILLED to be here. When people talk about newcomers or refugees, I have NEVER felt like I didn't belong. I grew up with Houston. I had a job in a very small bookstore and I helped make this bookstore a very BIG bookstore. You know, that sort of thing.

HILDERMAN: It was on the edge of River Oaks.

KELLY: What was the name of the bookstore?

FLETCHER: Books Incorporated. Kirby and Westheimer. There was no Highland Village. There was nothing. We were the last little thing there. (chuckles)

KELLY: If you had experienced Germany in wartime and Shanghai, as an adult instead of as a child, do you think you would have had a different outlook?

FLETCHER: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely. Only as a child are you just totally insane, and feel secure and, NO, I didn't feel secure. I was always worried. I was a very worried person. I was an OLD person. I was always old. I was hardly ever a child. In fact, my unhappiest birthday was my twentieth. When I was 20 years old, when I turned 20, I was devastated. I had JUST discovered teens. I had never heard of the term "teenager". And I was working in this lovely little River Oaks area, where all the big River Oaks people shopped. And here were all these TEENAGERS. Of course I saw the very top of the teen-aged group, but I could see how wonderful, how carefree they were. It was lovely. It struck me, like a ton of bricks. "I've turned 20! I'll never be there. I wasn't a child, I wasn't this." I started to earn money from the time I was twelve but I missed all these teens. I was really very sad on my twentieth. No birthday has ever bothered me since. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Well, that's a mercy! (laughing)

HILDERMAN: Mother met people in that bookstore that are Houston history. Which Hofheinz was your worker? Was it Roy or Fred?

FLETCHER: Roy worked for them. We had customers that would come on Sunday. One of the things that we did was free gift-wrapping. No matter what was purchased we'd wrap it for free. There were Jeeps and longhorn steers which couldn't be brought into the dadgum store. So my boss and I had to go to the house to wrap these items. We got into a lot of trouble with that wrapping policy.

I taught gift wrapping first at the "Y" and other places, it got so popular. People at that time had so much money they didn't know HOW to get rid of it. So we would actually rent the Tower Theater and I would stand up there, and show them stuff I KNEW they'd NEVER be able to do but they'd follow me like a pied piper to the store, and the women would buy two hundred dollars worth of gift wrapping they would never use.

FLETCHER: Ben Love, who was the head of Texas Commerce, sold ribbon to me. He started out as a ribbon salesman. And after my husband died I went to see Ben Love for a loan. I couldn't even get to see him.

GOODSILL: He'd gotten so big?

FLETCHER: He got SO big that I could not get to see him. And here he started out with NOTHING. He came to the neighborhood stores first. And I used his paper for the store wrap, so it would be recognized. We had a different supplier, not unlike Ben. At that time people still were very polite. He was EXTREMELY courteous. And we went to gift shows together, and later he would NOT even see me. I DID get the loan.

GOODSILL: Did you ever get to tell him how disappointed you were in him?

FLETCHER: I wrote him a letter. (laughs) I found out that I never even got to his secretary he was so protected.

HILDERMAN: Was it Allred who quizzed you for your citizenship?

FLETCHER: No, Allred got angry with me that I didn't know who he was.

HILDERMAN: Former Texas Governor Allred.

FLETCHER: People would call and give huge orders at Books, Incorporated. We were THE store at one time. And somebody called and wanted blah-blah-blah-blah mailed, and I had such a hard time even trying to comprehend what he wanted. But I finally got it and I annoyed him, having to ask over and over again. And he said, "Just charge it to Governor Allred." I said, "I'm so sorry, PLEASE, I didn't understand." "Well, I will COME and teach you a lesson." And he DID come. "Here you are, are you out of high school?" "Yes." "And you don't know who Governor Allred is?" Well, he had been the governor. I don't know if you've heard for Governor Allred?

KELLY: Not really, no, and I'm a native Texan.

FLETCHER: (barking laugh) He had been a governor, maybe five years or so, earlier, and I certainly SHOULD have known Governor Allred. He was EXTREMELY offended. And my boss was one of those very cowing people. Oh, I mean, and here he had somebody who didn't know who he was. Now, when I was going for my citizenship. One of the judges that was a customer, Judge Haney, came and asked me questions in the morning. And President Bush. He was a sweet man, the first President Bush. And Barbara. They were customers. I mean, it was an amazing store for a newcomer, and it didn't really impress me because they were just customers. On the other hand, we had people that were movie-rich, we had started to have Chinese merchandise and I had a brass incense burner that was quite...

GOODSILL: Your mother would have rolled her eyes! (Referring to the Shanghai incense experience.)

FLETCHER: (laughs) Just about. And here comes this River Oaks woman who had NO idea of taste, all she knew was she had LOTS of money. And she fell in love with this lovely mustard pot. She was going to put mustard in it. And I tried SO hard not to offend her, and tell her that her mustard would turn everything green, and you can not put mustard in there. I did NOT sell her the brass incense burner. (all laughing)

KELLY: Oh, that's funny. Thank you so much for sharing your time with us and your stories. This has just been delightful.

FLETCHER: My pleasure.

GOODSILL: Thank you.

Interview Ends