

Voices from Shanghai

Sephardic and Ashkenazi Families during WWII

During World War II, Shanghai was home to the largest and most diverse Jewish community in China. The Sephardic families from Baghdad and Bombay were the most prosperous and enjoyed the longest history among the Jews in Shanghai. Ellis Jacob came from one such family. Several years ago he wrote *The Shanghai I Knew: A Foreign Native in Pre-Revolutionary China* (Comteq Publishing, 2007), a memoir of his formative years in the city on the sea.

Ellis Jacob ties his family's story in with the modern history of China. Although he writes that the Jews and Chinese didn't mix much socially, his family had Chinese servants and as a result he learned to speak Shanghainese, the local dialect. He sprinkles bits of Shanghainese throughout his memoir, and tells the story of an American soldier who hires him to be his translator while he visits a brothel. At the time, Jacob was too young to understand just what kind of an establishment the American had taken him.

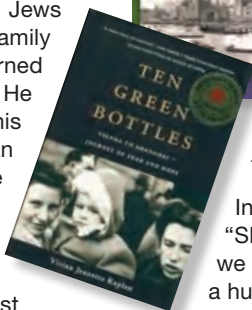
His family held British citizenship (most Sephardic Jews in Shanghai did) and arrived before 1937, they were not sent to the Shanghai Ghetto when other Jews were in 1942. But he wrote about the food shortages and political instability during that time. Ellis Jacob attended a British elementary school and an American high school. During the thick of the war, most schools closed. He was fortunate to transfer to the Shanghai Jewish School for a year, which stayed open.

In the appendix, Jacob includes images of money from the mid-to-late 1940s, family photos, and menus from ice cream parlors. Inflation ran wild after the war, and people had no choice but to carry their cash in suitcases. All that cash could only buy one ice cream sundae or a loaf of bread. He points out that the menus were continuously changed to account for daily changes in inflation.

When Ellis Jacob and his mother left Shanghai for Canada, he almost wasn't allowed on the ship, as there was some confusion over a debt that a different Ellis Jacob owed. With his father's quick thinking, teenage Ellis Jacob was allowed to depart as scheduled. Interestingly, only Jacob and his mother left on that ship; his father remained in Shanghai to finish business matters. He ends his memoir before the time his father was supposed to leave China, so the reader never knows what happened to the senior Jacob.

Another memoir from this period, written by a woman whose Austrian Jewish family had escaped to Shanghai, is *Ten Green Bottles: The True Story of One Family's Journey from War-torn Austria to the Ghettos of Shanghai* (St. Martin's, 2004) by Vivian Jeanette Kaplan. The author's family belonged to the largest group of Jews in Shanghai during the war: the European Jewish

refugees from Austria and Germany. Kaplan writes from the point of view of her mother, Nini, because young Vivian was just a baby when the family left Shanghai for Canada after the war.



Nini Karpel meets her husband-to-be in her mother's Vienna dress shop. Leopold, or Poldi as he's known, came from Poland and told of the persecution of the Jews. Nini couldn't imagine life would ever change for her family in Vienna because the Jews were assimilated into Austrian life. But as history would show, life did change for the Jews there. By the late 1930s, many found themselves desperate to leave. Emigrating to the US, Canada, and Great Britain were not usually viable options.

As Kaplan writes, word about Shanghai spread through Vienna:

In our quest for options, one word is beginning to recur: "Shanghai." We hear it whispered behind cupped hands when we pass haggard neighbours on the streets. News travels in a human telegraph line from one to the next. "Shanghai," they say, the strange word pronounced with an Austrian accent, odd, exotic, remote, spoken with fear and hope, the only possibility.

It is not without misfortune and anxiety that Nini and Poldi end up in Shanghai, Nini arriving first with her parents. Through the eyes of her mother, Kaplan so vividly describes Shanghai during the war: the grime, the excesses, the noises, and the smells. Nini finds a hostess job in the famous Bolero Club, where "glamorous women and powerful men mesh in a kind of dream world, like a scene from a motion picture."

The couple marries at Ohel Moishe, one of seven synagogues in Shanghai. Later Nini and Poldi go in with a Bulgarian Jew to run Marco's Bar, a dive establishment frequented by some of Shanghai's lowliest expats. Life for the Jews in Shanghai changes at the end of 1941 when the Japanese occupy the city. Ellis Jacob discusses the changes during the occupation, but families like Nini and Poldi's feel the effects of starvation more than those in the Sephardic community. To make ends meet, Poldi devises a plan to obtain American dollars from Harbin in northeast China, also home to a sizeable Jewish community. He and Nini risk their lives to travel up to Harbin and to Japan to trade goods for dollars.

Just like Ellis Jacob and his family, Nini, Poldi, and baby Vivian — along with other family members — emigrate to Canada in 1949, before the Communist revolution.

These memoirs show the diverse experiences of Jews in Shanghai during the war. While these families came from different backgrounds, they experience similar hardships during the war and all end up immigrating to Canada to start afresh. ♪