

Victor Sassoon's Shanghai in Life and Literature

Two new books published this year are set in Shanghai during World War II and touch upon the Jewish community there. In *Tea on the Great Wall: An American Girl in War-Torn China* (Earnshaw Books, 2015), Patricia Luce Chapman writes of her childhood in China. Born Patricia Potter, she lived in Shanghai with her parents, older brother Johnny, and a handful of servants.

Although the Booker family was not Jewish, a good portion of Patricia Luce Chapman's memoir includes aspects of Jewish life in Shanghai in the 1930s and 40s. She writes lovingly of Sir Victor Sassoon, the great Shanghai philanthropist who hosted children's parties every year at his Cathay Hotel. She describes one party in particular that was garden themed and to which she wears a tailored dress fashioned after a rose.

Patty, as she was called in her younger years, attended the Kaiser Wilhelm German School while her brother went to the Shanghai American School. Her observations as one of the only American students at the German School are fascinating. Although half a world away from Germany, Patty experiences drastic changes at school starting in 1933. Her teachers are suddenly replaced with new, dogmatic teachers who support the recently installed Nazi regime in Germany. Nazi banners are hung at school and the students salute Hitler each morning. Parades, marches, rallies, and meetings all become commonplace. When Patty tells her parents about these changes, they tell her to wait and see what will happen.

The atmosphere at school suddenly becomes even more frightening when her once friendly classmates start attending Hitler Youth programs. As an American, Patty is not expected to join them, nor would she be accepted. The Hitler Youth activities were all held in secret at night.

Although Patty's family is open-minded and sympathetic to people from all backgrounds, they inadvertently hire a German nanny who supports Hitler and his plan to get rid of the Jews. She doesn't last very long.

By the fall of 1938, most of the non-German students leave Patty's school. Yet she remains and is soon the only American at the school. Her parents are still oblivious about the changes in Germany and how they are affecting Patty's education. In class, the students celebrate the Anschluss and are taught that Roosevelt is Jewish. Patty and her family are American and support Roosevelt, yet she feels peer pressure to put him down.

In 1939, a female classmate informs Patty about a terrible incident the night before at a Hitler Youth rally. Their classmate, David, was beaten up and half of his ear was torn off after the other children listened to hateful speeches about Jews. David was half-Jewish. Patty and a couple of her female classmates couldn't understand this blind hatred. When she tells her parents, they seem surprised and cannot understand how things have changed so drastically at school.

Yet they still don't withdraw her from school. So Patty confides in her brother, Johnny. Although he advises his sister to keep quiet so as not to cause their family trouble, Johnny writes unflattering cartoons about Hitler on one of Patty's school projects. The headmaster goes ballistic and informs Patty's father that his daughter is no longer welcome at the school.

The father finally understands what's going on and is relieved. Patty won't be attending school there anymore. She starts the 1939 autumn semester at Johnny's Shanghai American School.

The family's last nanny is Erika, a Jewish refugee from Austria. Patty's parents hire Erika as a favor to some Jewish friends in Shanghai and the children soon take to Erika as one of the family. Erika sometimes brings Patty to her family's home, where Patty learns about what it's like to be stateless and lose everything: jobs, money, possessions, property. Patty keeps in touch with Erika even after both leave Shanghai.

Although the Bookers do not want to leave Shanghai during the war, a brutal murder of a loved servant leaves them with no choice but to take their children out of China. Patty and Johnny go to the US with their mother while their father stays in Shanghai, where he is eventually imprisoned by the Japanese.

Life in America isn't easy for Patty. Her new classmates make fun of her British accent and no one understands the life she left in Shanghai. That is until she meets Henry Luce III, whose father was born in China and was the publisher of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines. The two marry and end up divorcing in the 1950s, but Patricia Luce Chapman goes on to remarry and continues to live in the US.

Another book that pertains to Jews in Shanghai during the war is Stuart Archer Cohen's new novel, *This Is How It Really Sounds* (St. Martin's Press, 2015). Victor Sassoon also appears in this book, as Cohen writes in the opening pages of his book. "It was Victor Sassoon's Shanghai: the real estate tycoon had built nearly all the signature buildings of the era. His dark art deco skyscrapers still gathered a sense of strange gothic foreboding about them." (page 20-21).

The story is set in the United States and Shanghai, and centers around two characters both named Peter Harrington. One, goes by Pete and is a famous rock musician who stirred up trouble on tour in 1992 Shanghai when he publicly supported the students at Tiananmen. The other, known as Peter, is a notorious Bernie Madoff-type investor who took millions from clients and wreaked havoc on the US economy. Peter Harrington moves to Shanghai and dabs in new investments there but basically lives a free and easy life as a pampered expat.

One of Peter's victims is none other than Pete Harrington, the rock musician. So to get back at the investor, the musician hires former CIA hit man Charlie Pico to bring the two together so the musician can punch the investor to get revenge. Charlie Pico, in his eighties, is eager to return to Shanghai. He spent time there in 1946 as a young spy who took revenge on a Nazi officer who had destroyed the family of a Shanghai Jewish refugee.

Cohen romanticizes the mélange of characters in present day Shanghai that Pico and the two Harringtons encounter as "taxi dancers and bar girls, bankers and businessmen, traders, veterans, hustlers, police: people who at this moment looked as modern as they had looked in 1946, still unexamined by the curious backward gaze of the future." (page 63).

Early parts of *This Is How It Really Sounds* tend to drag a bit, but all in all it's an entertaining story and one that includes an important part of Jewish history during World War II. 