My Life in Shanghai

The memories
Shanghai
we took with us
First of all, I would like to warn you: If you are expecting me to deliver a learned treatise about Chinese culture and the various dynasties, you will be sorely disappointed. When we reached Shanghai in the beginning of 1939, we did not have the slightest interest in Chinese culture, and when someone would mention that its culture was thousands of years old, there was inevitably someone else who would remark, having the rather primitive hygienic conditions in mind, that in all that time it had not mastered indoor plumbing.

Contrary to the general assumption, Shanghai is not a seaport. It is situated at the shores of a very wide river, the Yangtze, from which the Huangpu branches off. The latter divides the City of Shanghai into two parts. The moist tropical summer heat does not cool off at all, and the climate becomes unbearable.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

One of the first impressions that struck us when we arrived in Shanghai was the sight of the coolies. Between two of them, they could carry loads of up to 270 kilos on their shoulders. They lugged such loads over considerable distances at a fast trot. The rhythmic sounds they produced, which could be taken for singing, were meant to coordinate their movements and thus distribute the weight evenly.

At the time of our arrival, the entire city consisted of so-called settlements, which were strictly separated as to their administration. There were five distinct precincts: the English, the French, the American, the Japanese, and the Chinese sections, each one with its respective police and with some military presence in the uniform of the country of origin. No Chinese policeman or civil servant had any kind of authority with respect to a foreigner.

The infamous signs in the parks, which at the beginning of our stay in Shanghai were still in place, were shocking, to say the least. They read: DOGS AND CHINESE NOT ALLOWED.

The English sector was the center, consisting of banks and hotels, stores, and offices, but no residential housing or movie theatres. The residential and entertainment areas, serving the upper European and the rich Chinese populations, were situated in the French and American sectors at the other end of town. For refugees like us, the rentals there were out of reach. We were glad that we were able to rent a small room – 12 square meters – in the Hongkou district without having to resort to communal housing. Hongkou is on the other side of the Huangpu Bridge and had been conquered and completely destroyed by the Japanese shortly before we came. Japanese guards were posted on the bridge. Every Chinese had to bow before them, and every vehicle had to stop and wait for permission to proceed. Once, when the Chinese driver of a bus started one second too early in the opinion of the guard, the latter grabbed his rifle, discharged it into the crowded bus, and killed one of the refugees.

This sector was being rebuilt, somehow primitively, by poor Chinese and by Russian and German refugees. A family would have one room, usually without kitchen, bath, or toilet. The lack of toilets was altogether the biggest problem and the cause of a great deal of disease and of the staggering mortality among the immigrants: about 33%. The Chinese, even the rich ones, would often not use toilets even when available: their contribution to agriculture. The cooking was done on a small open stove without
In connection with this real estate business we were offered a photographic studio for sale. The owner was a Mr. Willinger from Vienna, whom my lodge brother Timar knew. We offered him a percentage of the turnover in return for the premises, and we decided to open a restaurant there. It was located right in the center, like the Ahumada in Santiago, Chile, and was strictly a daytime operation. We closed every night at 7 p.m., and also Sundays.

When everything was ready and furnished, personnel had to be hired. These were the operational steps:

First, the No. 1 Boy was hired. He was always very dapper and never did anything. He brought along whatever crew was necessary, and he was responsible for everything. He also received from each and every supplier his "Camish" – as it was called there – but one still got a much better deal than doing the purchasing oneself. He hired and fired entirely on his own authority, and if one failed to treat him with the greatest respect, so that, if, God forbid, he should lose face, he would walk out and with him the entire crew. This happened to us once, and all our friends and acquaintances had to help out for two days. It really was quite a crisis. This arrangement even required that no one other than the No. 1 Boy could give the crew any instructions. Everything had to be conveyed to No. 1, and he then passed on the respective instructions. It was a rather roundabout way of doing things, but it worked.

PICTURE A CHINESE STREET SCENE IN A MOVIE

You can all make yourselves a picture, more or less, of a Chinese street scene as you have seen it in the movies. But these teeming crowds of humanity, these colorful advertising banners, with music blaring full-blast form amplifiers in front of every store, all this is impossible to describe adequately. One peculiarity which immediately struck a newcomer was that each street represented a specific trade: fabrics could be bought only on Nanking Road, shoes on Peking Road, etc., with one store right next to the other. Each store was crammed full of goods, and whatever there was on display had been paid for in cash and was also being sold for cash. There was no such thing as a wholesale store. On the contrary, it could happen that the seller would raise his price for larger quantities. Bargaining went on with great relish, and the final price was reached only when the seller would wiggle his index finger. There was no such thing as to walk out at this point and come back later. If you did and then returned, it would cost three times as much. The seller would simply be no longer in the mood to do business with you.

The so-called signboards also took some getting used to. The Chinese dentist, for instance, displayed in his shop window a large pile of pulled teeth, and the gynecologist exhibited a big glass jar with an embryo in alcohol or a replica. In any case, it was so gruesome a sight that one had to avert one’s eyes.

Another custom hard for us to get used to was the hiring of women as mourners to weep when somebody had died. They were always eager to give good value for the money they received and yelled so terribly that it was impossible to close an eye at night if you lived anywhere in the vicinity. When you noticed that fake currency bills were being burned in front of a house in the neighborhood, then you knew what to expect at night.

It is, of course, general knowledge that Chinese children have great respect for and honor their parents. On the other
AWAKENED BY THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE

On December 8, 1941 we were awakened early in the morning by the sound of gunfire. It happened to be my birthday, but since we could hardly assume this to be the occasion, we were much upset. Also, on the day of the attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the Japanese in Shanghai crossed the bridge, placed the settlements under military occupation, and extended their control over all of Shanghai. On the Huangpu River which, as mentioned before, traverses the city, two gun boats had always been present, one American and one British, as symbols of protection for their citizens. The Japanese fleet, which until then had been stationed outside, now entered the river and, with its far superior forces, immediately opened fire. The Americans surrendered without a fight, while the British returned fire until their boat went down.

As mentioned previously, we had a restaurant in the center of town, where we served English style food, until one morning when I arrived there and found it surrounded by Japanese soldiers. Upon request of the German authorities, all European who had lost their citizenship - the so-called stateless refugees - were ordered to move to an assigned area, which then became a ghetto. No one was allowed to leave without a permit from the Japanese authorities, a permit that was hardly ever issued.

THE GHETTO DAYS

We lived in the most primitive kind of housing, together with the poor Chinese population, for three and a half years. Everybody was supposed to provide for himself with respect to food and clothing, but those who were not able to do that had the option of living in a kind of hostel, sharing a room with thirty or more people. Bread and one simple meal a day were also distributed to whoever was in need.

When we moved into this area, I again joined forces with my friend and partner, and we started a coal delivery business, supplying refugees and to a certain extent also the communal kitchens. It was a widespread custom in Shanghai to heat with so-called Waska stones, which consisted of compressed coal dust, were supposed to burn for twelve hours, and were used in specially designed ovens. We sold these stones in the summer for delivery in the winter and were, as it was the custom, paid at the time the order was received. The manufacturer, a Chinese, of course, had his factory outside the ghetto, that is, in an area where we were not allowed to go. He came to see us once a week, picked up the order that had come in, and received from us the money for the merchandise. He jotted everything down in his little notebook, and it would have been out of the question to ask for a receipt: One’s word was one’s word, and nobody dealt in any other way.

That year, inflation was rampant and coal went up to about three times the price quoted at the time of the first orders. Suddenly, towards the end of the summer, we read in the papers that the manufacture of these stones was to be forbidden for reasons of wartime economy. However, our supplier made no use of this opportunity to return the devaluated money. Rather, he began on that very day with his deliveries and within fourteen days he no longer owed us anything. The law was never enacted.

Another Chinese who lived in the same area was our source for coal. Since coal was scarce and expensive, it was being “stretched” with rocks which were broken in pieces, rolled in coal dust, and added to the delivery. Then we picked out the stones - or at least part of them - and sold the stuff at a slightly higher price to compensate for the loss. Toward the end of the season, I happened to mention to our supplier how many stones had accumulated on our premises during the year. The man asked the stones to be returned to him - it came to just short of a ton - had them placed on scales, and delivered to us the exact weight in coal. In contrast to these honorable merchants, who only agreed to supply people who had been introduced to them by other, well-reputed Chinese, there were also cases of shadier business practices.

A Mr. M. from Belgium had taken a lease on large business premises. There was a large and impressive front room, from which six smaller rooms fanned out and were sublet to various smaller firms...
as independent offices. The outsider would get the impression of dealing here with an important firm. For a short time we had rented an office in such a pigeonhole. The front room was always full of elegant Chinese in flowing robes who actually never did anything. Big black boards where hung on the walls, on which one could read for example, that the M.S. Chung Cha would lift anchor on September 8, and underneath there were written all sorts of Chinese characters. Two such ships were to sail in different directions.

**GUESSING GAME, WAITING GAME**

Shortly before September 8, the date was pushed back by a month. We used to play guessing games about which forthcoming sailing dates would be chalked up for the two phantom ships. This went on for several months until one day a different set of Chinese were sitting in the office. Soon thereafter, there appeared hordes of indignant Chinese with all their belongings. They had no intention of leaving the premises. They had paid for their return trip to the interior, had waited patiently for their departure with that patience which is proverbial for the Chinese, and had just realized that they had become the victims of fraud. Behind all this, of course, was the Belgian gentleman, but nothing happened to him. He was a Belgian citizen, responsible only to his Consulate, and he had seen to it that nothing could be brought up against him there. The salient point of the story, however, is this: The Chinese have a different concept of fraud. They shrugged and say, admiringly, “more clever.” What we call fraud is simply superior cunning to them.

The Chinese way of doing business also involved the following. Upon entering an office, or the premise of a Chinese barber, one was immediately offered a cup of tea and cigarettes. A haircut included a shoeshine at no extra charge. When one entered the house of a poor Chinese, hot water was served instead of tea, and you could not possibly refuse it. When difficult arithmetic calculations were necessary, they were preformed with a few balls on an abacus. I never learned how they did it. And frequently they are all as playful as children. They are especially fond of the game of Mah-Jong – a kind of draughts or checkers – at which large sums are won and lost.

The most terrible day of that period came shortly before the end of the war. It was the day of the American bombing raid. The Japanese had placed us in a part of the city where every third house contained a small munitions factory. Besides, there was also the broadcasting station, which transmitted all shipping traffic. They figured, it seems, that by placing the ghetto in this sector, it would be spared by the American bombers. The broadcasting station was the foremost reason why Americans could not or would not take this into consideration.

One day, at one o’clock in the afternoon, our shacks became targets for the bombers. Everything collapsed. There were many dead and injured among us and among the Chinese. Our family also lost its home, and by sheer miracle our little boy, who was an infant at the time, escaped being buried in his crib under the tumbling walls. We were among some 500 refugees who had been bombed out. We all moved into dormitories in a school building, and that is where we stayed until the end of the war.

**“AT LONG LAST PEACE CAME.”**

At long last peace came. For us too it was deliverance. A huge American plane flew over our camp. We ran to the schoolyard. The plane returned once more, flew very low above us, and showered us with fliers promising us that we would be liberated within a few days. We later found our children under the beds, where they were hiding in fear of air raids.

We stayed on in Shanghai for close to a year after the end of the war. From the very first day, we refugees were supplied with foodstuffs by the Americans. This help was given free of charge, most generously, and everything was of excellent quality. After all these years we again had butter and cheese and many things our children had never known.

In 1947 we made as quick an exit as possible from Shanghai. We took our memories with us, and were able to do so because we had survived this darkest period in history for the Jewish people. China and the Chinese people who suffered with us made our survival possible, and I am forever grateful for that.