

# A Journey of a Thousand Miles



Kindergarten class photo in Shanghai, Robert is circled in the top row

## The Start of My Shanghai Bob's Story

It is said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Robert Goldman's last step and breathe were at the age of 54 in 1994. At that time, I wasn't sure I would ever breathe or step again, but I made a vow to share the story of my Robert, my late husband, with the encouragement of family and friends. But what started out as a vow to tell Robert's story— one of more than 18,000 Jews who called Shanghai home during the 1940's and 50's – evolved into an unexpected and rewarding journey of self-exploration. *Developing Slow Boat From and To China*, a work that is part family memoir and part historical narrative, has led me, someone with no formal training on research, from Shanghailanders groups to online forums to hallowed research halls and ultimately to the streets of Shanghai to walk in my husband's footsteps. My experiences have given me a deeper insight into the many Jewish lives impacted worldwide by the Holocaust shared by my late partner Harry Fischman who was a Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. And while this isn't the story I am telling here, Harry Fischman was to be my 2nd *B'Sheret*. This is the story of my Shanghai Bob.

I realized that drive and chutzpah are key to shepherding a project of this magnitude. This legacy is for my children, Sam and Naomi, who were just beginning to understand their father as they reached young adulthood. In the stories I have shared with young and old, I continue to marvel more than ever about my Shanghai Bob and the thousands of survivors who shared the Shanghai experience with him.

We must stop a moment and go back to 1945. I was 2 ½ years old living in Connecticut, the war was in full escalation, and my parents were still on food rations. I was born premature and continued to be underweight and fussy.

With my Mom's precious 2 rations, she bought a beautiful large sweet potato. It was baked in the oven until the skin was crispy. Upon slicing this potato, my Mom donned it with oleo and then a cinnamon topping. Just talking about it now, I am hungry. But not then. My physical actions said no. My Mother's comment, like many others of that generation, was "Don't you know there are children starving in China?" Little did we know then that my husband-to-be Robert Goldman was one of those boys starving in China. I was later to learn, that there were very strict food allotments for those living in the Hongkou Ghetto. Robert recalled one time when he got his one sweet potato, ate it fast because he was hungry and didn't want anyone to steal it. He snuck around to another line, took someone else's hand, and went to the head guard. Food rations were very much in effect and there were written checklists to see who got what. His name had already been crossed off and then he got his face slapped. Robert never ate another sweet potato after the war. Why – because he didn't have to. At 2 and ½, all I knew was that I wasn't going to eat that potato in any way, shape, or form. That event happened in the spring of 1945.

During my years in high school, from 1956 to 1960, my exposure to and awareness of personal stories about the Holocaust in Europe was limited. The story of Asia was much more obscure. What I learned came from World History books. Information was limited. While there were facts and dates and enemy lines given, there were certainly no firsthand accounts scattered among the dates. No one in our family ever talked about the atrocities of war. No one we knew was in that part of the war. It was too awful to talk about or to believe so it was hidden.

Fast forward to the spring of 1965. My friend from college, Jim, decided

he should play matchmaker. Jim was stationed with the U.S. Army in Germany. He spoke many languages, had security clearance working as a petroleum analyst, and had a bunkmate with similar interests. Jim wrote "I have a friend here that could use some mail from a nice Connecticut girl. May I give him your address?" I was in my last year of undergraduate school awaiting acceptance to Physical Therapy School outside of Pittsburgh, Pa. The last thing I had on my mind was writing to a stranger. However I said yes. In the 1960's it was very common to write to soldiers as a gesture of good will. The first letter came by airmail. It was beautifully scripted on thin parchment paper. The first sentence was – "Dear Faith. My name is Robert Goldman. I am 5'10" tall, have black wavy hair, hazel eyes, and, by the way, I was born and raised in Shanghai, China 1940-1958". The rest of the wording of the two page letter was a blur to me after reading that. I had hardly been out of Connecticut and here was a young man who circled half the globe two times before the age of 25. He and I wrote for eight months across the 4,000 miles of the Atlantic Ocean. Slowly there developed a bond of friendship, understanding, confidence, and trust. He and I opened about our past. His was most interesting to me and we soon made plans to meet in person once he was discharged from the Army. That date materialized in December of 1965 at my parent's home. The exact details of that 12 hour date is imbedded in my head and is a whole other story – it is already written and is called *In The Blink of Our Eyes, The Atlantic Ocean Disappeared*. I went back to graduate school, we had several visits in-between my graduation, and the rest is history. We married, raised two wonderful children, moved to Los Angeles in 1980, and had thriving careers until Robert's untimely death on September 17, 1994.

Robert's birth certificate in English and





School photo in Shanghai  
Top row left to right: Robert Goldman, Johnny Kost, Victor Netupsky, Vova Matvieff;  
Bottom row left to right: Jeannine Martinet, Lizzy, Christine Robert, Sylvia Talbot, Jackie Shlau

Chinese, a few pictures of his small family in China, and several classmates photos with names on the back stayed in Robert's briefcase at home in the closet. When Steven Spielberg's movie *Empire of the Sun* came out in 1988, Robert's flood gates of emotions opened up throughout the entire movie. Though the boy featured in the film was British and interned in a separate camp in Shanghai, that boy was Robert. We wrote to the author of the book James Ballard to ask if he would consider doing a sequel to his true story. In his own handwriting Mr. Ballard wrote that his past was so painful that he could not emotionally visit that lifetime again. We were so proud to have at least received a personal letter back from England.

Over the next few years, Robert painstakingly wrote 27 pages about his family's background and his daily life in Shanghai. You would think he could have written 3 books in the time he scripted

those 27 pages but 27 it was. Because of the active recording of his life until about age eight, I felt I had permission to write about the rest of those 10 years in Shanghai in the 3rd person. I've almost completed enough research, interviews, reading, and travels to fill in the missing pieces of Robert's life. During our 27 years of marriage, he shared much with us but not enough. In 1990, I gave him a 'this is your life' 50th surprise birthday and, via tape recordings, writings, and personal comments from far away guests, his cherished story and legacy was told. Thank goodness I had the wherewithal to have had the two hour presentation videotaped. And in an incredible stroke of compassion, Steven Spielberg gave me a signed poster of the *Empire of the Sun* when I told him that Robert had passed away with most of his memories.

One of the most significant as well as emotional times in my life was traveling

to Shanghai with the Rickshaw Reunion Group. This group is made up of first generation Shanghailanders who were in Shanghai between 1937 until the end of the War. I had been to and presented at several reunions in the United States over the years and felt very comfortable. My son Sam, who was serving in the U.S. Army in South Korea, and Robert's childhood friend Fredy Seidel\* traveled with me. I also hired a translator/photographer who spoke Shanghainese. A freelance writer, Adam Minter, who was working in Shanghai helped me map out our adventure. As we walked down King Chow Road to find Robert's home at #146, my heart sank as many of the homes were in partial or full stages of demolition. "Breathe," I was told when it was revealed that his home for 10 years remained untouched! The little lady who had been Robert's neighbour and caretaker for 10 years was home. She and her family had moved into the Goldman home from 1958 and

remained there until shortly after our visit. We went back the next day and were greeted by the rest of Ye Cuier's family, and the neighbors who had also been there 46 years earlier. Sadly, two weeks later her home was demolished to make way for high rise buildings. Our timing was indeed fortuitous.


While there are so many narratives that detail the plight of the Jews in Shanghai, the fact that Robert's family stayed on in Shanghai through 1958 makes his story somewhat extraordinary. There were of course others that did as well, but conventional wisdom has led most people to believe that all the Jews 'vanished' from Shanghai as soon as the war was through. This is far from the truth. The story of those years following the war and their emigration

and resettlement elsewhere is a story in and of itself. Though I have interviewed in person a total of seven of Rob-ert's classmates and friends that stayed on in Shanghai through 1958, there are about ten others that I have not been able to find. Those seven gave me incredible snippets of their lives there: stories of food, playing hooky from school, playing soccer in the alleys and stamp collecting. They put emotions to words. I want his story to be known. I have shared photos in the *Igud Yotsei Sin Newsletter*, *Points East* from The Sino-Judaic Institute, and Professor Pan Guang's books. On the wall of Exhibit Hall #3 at the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum hangs an exhibit with Robert's life portrayed including a picture of his friends.

I'll leave you with a quote by Elie Wiesel,

"Memory is Everything. It is a passion no less powerful or pervasive than love. It is the ability to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading, and to call upon the future to illuminate it."\*\*

\*An excerpt from Fredy Seidel's memoir is also published in this issue of *Asian Jewish Life*.

\*\* Incidentally, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Elie Wiesel about 20 years ago. Both Harry Fischman and Professor Wiesel lived in the same town of Sighet, Romania. They were taken to Auschwitz at the same time, lost all of their family, were in the Buchenwald Camp through Liberation on April 11, 1945, and went to the same French Orphanage for 3 years until coming to the USA in 1948. 



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