

“I don’t want to go to China!” I shouted, stamping my foot. “We live in Germany. I want to stay in Berlin.”

“Isaac, we were lucky Kristallnacht didn’t destroy our home and business. Here Jews are arrested for no reason.” Papa put his hands on my shoulders to calm me down. “There aren’t many countries that will accept us. Some would make us wait many months, even years, for a visa to enter. We must move quickly, and China accepts Jews without a delay. We’ll be far from Hitler there until, one day, it will again be safe for Jews to live in Germany.”

Kristallnacht. I remembered the crash of broken glass on that terrible November night when soldiers smashed our neighbor’s store and shattered the beautiful windows of our synagogue. My parents worried all the time. Mama said it was difficult to explain to a nine-year-old why such bad things happened.

We left Berlin by train to Genoa, Italy, in mid-May 1939. Mama packed very little for our journey, just some clothes and a few photographs. In Genoa, we boarded a big ship with other Jewish passengers. It seemed like forever until we arrived in Shanghai, forty days later. Dozens of square-rigged junks on the water and the Chinese men working on the wharf reminded me I was 10,000 miles from Berlin.

# Isaac’s New Life



by Fanny Wong

“Remember this day, Isaac.” Papa held my hand tightly. “It is the beginning of our new life as refugees.”

A representative from the new Jewish settlement welcomed us.

“These open trucks will take you to the district of Hongkew,” he explained. “You’ll be assigned housing until you find some other arrangement.”

Shanghai was hot and humid in July. I was overdressed and sweat trickled down my forehead. The trucks wound through wide roads and narrow streets. I had read about rickshaws, and there they were weaving in and out of traffic—two-wheeled passenger carts pulled by men in sweat-stained shirts. I had never seen so many beggars, pedestrians, bicycles, and cars all in one place before. China must be a crowded country.

“There are soldiers here, too, Papa,” I said.

“These are Japanese soldiers,” Papa said. “The Japanese have invaded and occupied Shanghai.”

We passed rich areas of sturdy houses with gardens, and streets with ramshackle buildings. I was disappointed that Hongkew was in a poor area of narrow alleys and closely packed small houses. I pinched my nose but could still smell the stench of the overflowing big garbage containers.

KRISTALLNACHT, OR THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS, WAS A WAVE OF ANTI-JEWISH VIOLENCE THROUGHOUT GERMANY AND AUSTRIA ON NOVEMBER 9 AND 10, 1939. JEWISH CEMETERIES, SYNAGOGUES, AND BUSINESSES WERE SMASHED, AND 30,000 JEWS WERE ARRESTED AND SENT TO PRISON CAMPS.



REFUGEES ARE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TO FLEE THEIR COUNTRY IN TIMES OF POLITICAL UPHEAVAL.





"We're going to live among the Chinese," Papa said, frowning. "They look very poor. I thought we'd be in an area of Europeans."

"This is not what I expected. Shanghai is supposed to be the Paris of the East," Mama said, holding a handkerchief over her nose and mouth.

We moved into a downstairs apartment of a two-story building. My bedroom in Berlin was bigger than this two-room flat. In the

bathroom, there was a sink and a big wooden bucket with a removable lid. Was I supposed to use it as a toilet? My parents were upset, too. A sob escaped from Mama, but she forced a smile when she saw my tears.

"I want to go home!" I wailed.

"Isaac, it's a new life for us, too," Papa said. "We'll all be brave and do the best we can."

Doing the best we could meant eating in a soup kitchen. At least the food was familiar: stew, cabbage, and potatoes. I had heard the Chinese ate dogs and snakes. I couldn't get used to sitting on the wood bucket. It was disgusting. Papa brought the "honey pot" out late at night, and early in the morning a worker emptied it into a large wagon on two wheels. It left a trail of smelly brown liquid.

I hated China! I hated my new life! Smoke from the coal-burning stoves turned the sky gray and stung my eyes. The rats scampered about even in daytime. My neighbors looked so different from me. I didn't understand them, and they didn't understand me. They always talked loudly. Did they have poor hearing?

I started going to the Kadoorie School. It was supported by the wealthy Jewish Kadoorie family that had come from India. They had settled in Shanghai years before. I



went with children I had met on the ship and those who had arrived before us. They lived on other streets, and I didn't see them after school because Mama was afraid I would get lost in the warren of alleys.

Soon a Jewish relief agency helped Papa find a job as a tutor of German and English for two Chinese families in a rich district of Shanghai. We couldn't afford rent for better housing with the little money he made. Jews could take only a very small amount of savings out of Germany. Papa bought a Chinese-style charcoal cooking stove. With little to spare, Mama learned to haggle with the vendors over prices of rice, vegetables, and very little meat. To communicate, she used hand gestures, exaggerated nods, and shakings of her head. We spent our money on a supply of soap and bleach to disinfect the apartment. Mama mixed the bleach with plenty of water to kill lice on our heads.

A family of a boy, his baby sister, and parents lived across the alley. The mother car-

ried the baby on her back with a big piece of square cloth that was tied in the front with four attached strips of cloth. Sometimes the boy, who was about my age, had the baby on his back! He was always outside his tiny house when I came home from school, as if he were waiting for me.

One day, this bold boy walked the few steps to my side of the alley. We stood face to face without saying a word. Then the boy did the strangest thing. He put his dirty hand on top of my head. I was about to swipe it away, when he took a clump of my curly hair, pulled it up gently, and let go. He took another clump and did the same thing.

"You're testing my curly hair!" I said, knowing he didn't understand me.

I put my hand on his closely cropped head. His short hair tickled my palm. We stared at each other some more and burst out laughing at the same time. We both had lost one front tooth! He gave me a gentle push on my chest, and we laughed again. I pointed to



myself and said, "Isaac." I repeated that a few times. Finally, he got the message.

He patted his chest. "Lup Chee." I repeated after him and he grinned, crinkling his eyes. That was when I made a Chinese friend.

Lup Chee didn't go to school. Papa said that his family was too poor to send him to school. Besides, he helped take care of his baby sister. He waited for me to come home on school days. I was glad to see him because he was always cheerful, even with a baby on his back. I taught him how to spin my top, the only toy I could bring from Berlin. He taught me to play a Chinese version of jacks with five small bean bags. It was the only toy he had.

Now, his parents and mine would nod and smile whenever they saw one another.

We were getting used to being refugees. The cockroaches didn't bother us as much. My parents read the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* printed in Hongkew. Occasionally, Papa treated us to lemonade and pastry in the Vienna Café, which had been opened by Germans. We went to a synagogue and sometimes a concert. There were many musicians among the refugees.

One morning in November, the most horrible thing happened. Papa didn't go to his tutoring jobs. He helped a nurse put Mama onto a stretcher. She had been using the wooden bucket a lot and was feeling weaker and weaker.

"Where are you taking her?" I gasped.

"Mama has cholera. She'll get good care at the Ward Road Hospital," Papa said. "With the poor hygiene around here, we're fortunate you and I didn't get it."

"Isaac, be good and listen to Papa," Mama said, clutching her tummy. "I'll be back soon."

I howled when Papa and the nurse took Mama away. I didn't care that Lup Chee and his mother were watching me cry like a baby. I was heaving with sobs when Lup Chee put a warm, white steamed bun in my hand.

I was heartbroken, but I was also hungry. Lup Chee's dirty thumb print was on the bun. The steamed bread was bland and could use a meat filling. I devoured it and felt better in my stomach and my head.

Every day, after school and before Papa came home, this Chinese family shared with me what little they had. That was how I

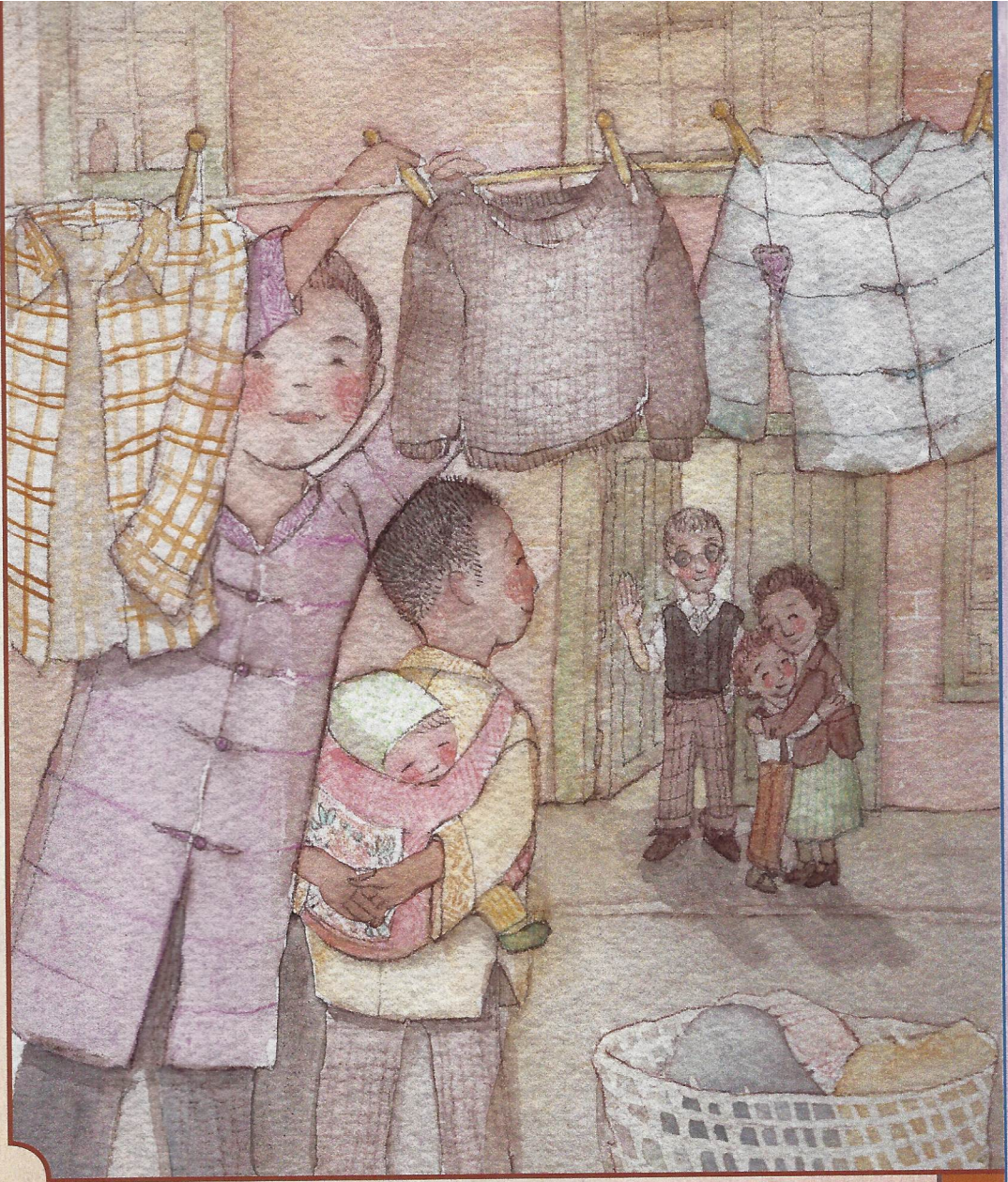


learned to like pickled cabbage with rice. With Mama in the hospital, we returned to the soup kitchen for our meager dinner. Papa was grateful to our Chinese friends because he knew how hard Lup Chee's father worked to support his family. Papa had seen him on the streets of the city, carrying two heavy baskets on a bamboo pole. Papa offered a small amount of spare change to the father, who said his thanks by putting his closed right fist into his left palm, bowing at the same time.

It wasn't just us that got along well with the Chinese.

"I could never have imagined 20,000 Jews living peacefully among 50,000 Chinese in Hongkew," Papa said. "Shanghai has a bad reputation of criminal activities, but we've found a safe haven."

Three weeks passed slowly. Children were not allowed to visit the sick ward, but Papa gave me reports of Mama's recuperation. Then I received the best surprise birthday present. Mama came home, looking better than she had since we arrived in Shanghai.



We laughed, hugged, and kissed to make up for the lost weeks. Papa and I told her how good our neighbors had been to us, sometimes even doing our laundry and adding our clothes to their clothesline.

"We and the Chinese keep to ourselves, and yet . . ." Mama said.

"Our boy has made a true friend," said Papa.

RECUPERATION IS THE  
PROCESS OF RECOVERY.



GET WELL  
SOON!



HUMAN BEANS SURE  
CAN FACE A LOT  
OF HARDSHIP.



BUT THEY GET THROUGH!  
ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY  
HELP EACH OTHER.

What could a boy do for a friend?


"Can I give Lup Chee my extra wool sweater?" I asked, even though it was the warmest I had.

"Are you sure?" Papa said. "You're always cold."

"But he is freezing. His quilted jacket is thin, and he shivers all the time."

When I handed Lup Chee the sweater, his eyes lit up and he grinned from ear to ear.

He had lost another tooth, and so had I. He ran inside and came out wearing the sweater under his jacket. His mother appeared and bowed to us. Papa gave us a few pennies, and with our arms on each other's shoulders, Lup Chee and I went looking for the candy vendor.

Even though I'd rather have my old life back, my new life in Hongkew was all right, after all. 

**AUTHOR'S NOTE** Between 1933 and 1940, many Jews fled Europe from Hitler's grasp to the only country that would accept them, China. Among countries closed to Jews were Canada, France, Switzerland, Australia, and England. In the U.S., hundreds of thousands of Jews languished for years on a long waiting list for the relatively few visas available.

The refugees traveled by boat from Italy to Shanghai, where a Jewish community had been established during the nineteenth century. In all, about 20,000 refugees settled in the Hongkew District, living in poverty among the Chinese population. Some rented cheap housing, but the less fortunate ones moved to crowded shelters. The refugees learned to use buckets for toilets and ate in a communal kitchen if they could not cook themselves. But they also had a synagogue, schools, concerts, Viennese cafés, and a thriving social life.

The Chinese population, even poorer than the refugees, not only got along with the newcomers but were sympathetic to their plight. There was no anti-Semitism toward them.

Shanghai in the 1930s was the Paris of the East, glamorous, with casinos, clubs, great

department stores, and a movie industry. But the gap between the rich and poor could not have been greater. Hygiene was poor, as in most parts of China at the time. In periods of heavy rain, sewers overflowed into the streets, spreading diseases such as typhoid, cholera, dysentery, and malaria. Education was only for the children of parents who could afford to send them to school. Among Shanghai's immensely wealthy Chinese citizens were criminal entrepreneurs. Shanghai was known for its criminal activity, including gambling and drugs, which ensnared the desperately poor.

In 1941, the Japanese army took control of Shanghai. It established a ghetto, a restricted area within Hongkew, for the Jews. There were no walls or barbed wire in the ghetto, but it was patrolled, and everyone needed passes to enter or leave. In 1945, after the end of World War II, most of the refugees began to leave Shanghai. Some went to Israel, others to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Latin America. By 1949, almost all the Jews had left, but they fondly remembered the "spirit of kindness" of the Chinese.