



Journey to the Other Side of the World

Excerpted from “Shanghai, Before and After the Fall-Caught Between Two Chairs”

The S.S. Scharnhorst slowly entered Shanghai Harbour while many of the passengers stood on deck watching their approach into the harbor. The smell and sight of human refuse in the river was overwhelming.

Further down the Yangtse towards land hundreds of sampans (little sail boats)

crowded in on the Scharnhorst with their crews yelling up to the passengers in a language the passengers did not understand. The boats seemed to house entire families, children, babies, grandparents, husband and wife, with either the husband or wife doing the rowing. When the physically, emotionally and spiritually reduced Seidel family arrived in Shanghai, together with

approximately some 800 fellow passengers they entered a new world.

What will the future bring, what will life be like here? Finally, when the ship docked near the Kumping Road dock and the gangplanks were secured the passengers oozed out of the ship onto the teeming pier. Cranes were slowly lowered from the pier into the ship's

cargo holds to retrieve the passenger's luggage and to unload them on to the pier.

Busy hands carried stretchers with people on them down the gangplanks and loaded a handful of sick passengers into ambulances and just drove off with them. No body knew where they were being taken. Maybe they were the lucky ones!

Local relief organizations which had been apparently quickly organized to meet the onslaught of refugees met the immigrant passengers at the pier. Indian men with their big turbans tried to put some order into the chaos, but to little avail. If there were any government authorities at the pier, they were certainly not visible and consequently nobody bothered to check the immigrants for visas and passports. As it turned out the Indian men with the turbans were the local police men.

Even though they were welcomed by fellow Jews who were just one step ahead of them the immigrés were pushed and shoved around and yelled at and finally packed onto waiting lorries and carted off to who knew whereto. Totally unprepared, or certainly ill-prepared for the subtropical, arid climate, many of the refugees were wearing what in Germany was considered to be their summer clothes, but were too heavy here in the sub tropics. They didn't know what to expect, so they brought along what was considered good, "strong" [read: "heavy"] clothes. But the sun was beating down on them so strong, that some of the elderly fainted from sun stroke right here on the pier or in the trucks.

Now reality set in. Up to now, as long as they still were on the German passenger



liner they still had enjoyed the German way of life, German culture, German food, German manners, German language, German service and German movies. After all, they were Germans. This was the only culture they had! Only two weeks before, my mother saw her favorite German actress Zarah Leander, the deep throated Swedish born sultry singer, here on board in the movie "*Zu Neuen Ufern*" (poorly translated as "New Beginnings").

The stewards on board gave them some fresh fruit and tried to prepare them for what to expect. "Don't eat anything that isn't boiled! Don't drink water unless it is boiled! Be careful! Watch out for mosquitoes! Put on some suntan lotion! Watch out for Tze tze flies! Watch for any flies! Make sure to cover all your food!" Whatever the warnings were, they weren't enough and they didn't stop!

On the pier hundreds of voices were competing for attention, drowning out each other, shouting, screaming and yelling. When that didn't help they started pushing, shoving, grabbing suitcases. But the Jewish organizers warned them not to entrust their belongings to anybody and to maintain a close watch on their belongings. This was China, not Germany! Strangers would help pack the belongings onto the trucks. It was a madhouse. They saw chaos like they had never seen before. The pier was teaming with a sea of human ants dressed in ragged clothes standing among their rickshaws vying for the business of the new immigrants who were dressed in fur coats and/or other heavy winter clothes. It was organized confusion! Passengers were looking for their luggage. Coolies were moving the luggage and trying to take it to their rickshaws to take the passengers to their destinations. In fact, the coolies were competing with the trucks/lorries brought to the dock by the local refugee population which was now trying to help the new arrivals. In some cases, already familiar with the meager circumstances in Shanghai, some of the earlier arrivals tried themselves to make a few German Marks or US Dollars. The pushing and shoving, the competing for the luggage, didn't want to end. Then came the calls: "A through D on Truck Number One", "E through I Truck Number Two" and so on. My parents' name was Seidel, my grandmother's name was Neumann. Two different trucks!

Well, at least the passengers were among their own kind which at least wouldn't hurt them because they were Jewish, as rough as the welcome may have been. In fact my parents were welcomed by my father's sister and in-laws who had

managed to get to Shanghai on an earlier boat.

The truck my parents were on snaked its way through the busy, hustle-bustle Shanghai traffic to the “Embankment Building.” At the Embankment Building (“Embankment”) the trucks unloaded their cargo. The passengers were led inside a reception hall where they were offered some water. The luggage which the refugees had brought with them was left in an open air holding area.

Here things were organized a little better, less chaotic, except there was no sign of my grandmother. Not to worry, my parents were told, my grandmother would be safe in another camp. Signs, in German, were posted pointing the arrivals to their intake section. Men were now being separated from their wives and sent to their respective sleeping dormitories. The women were also sent to their respective sleeping dormitories, with their own bathroom accommodations. There must have been hundreds, if not thousands of prayers reaching out to G'd for help and improved conditions that night and all the nights hereafter.

Conditions at the Embankment were deplorable, but everybody was nevertheless thankful to be out of Germany and not to be persecuted, to be able to walk freely in the streets and not to worry about the proverbial “knock on the door” which would be a signal that the “authorities” would haul somebody off to some prison, or worse, some concentration camp, just because they were of the Jewish faith. Here, everybody was in the same boat. But if reality set in at the pier, reality also now turned into shock. The sleeping accommodations were military cots, quickly set up to accommodate the onslaught of hundreds of people every week. Conditions were getting from bad to worse. On the ship families at least had their own cabins.



Here thirty to fifty people had to sleep together in one dormitory hall. The cots were makeshift, military style which had quickly been hammered together. So sturdy were these cots that the first day my brother Horst sat down on his cot it collapsed!

Privacy and space figuratively went down the drain in the community bathrooms. For middle class people who all basically came from normal, comfortable apartments in Germany this was a very painful and sudden adjustment. Undressing themselves in front of others, carrying out their most private functions without privacy, almost publicly in slum-like conditions was embarrassing. Never before in their sheltered lives in Germany did they encounter conditions similar to this. What could be worse?

At night married couples were separated from each other, only during the day did they get a chance to spend time with each other, commiserating about the

conditions. But credit has to be given to the aid groups who within extremely short notice found places to accommodate the thousands of new arrivals, good or bad. They tried their darnedest just to find a place large enough to handle such an influx of people! As is, conditions in China were just not what they might have been in Europe under the same circumstances, no matter what. How many tears must have been wept that first night? How many questions about the future, about the existence of G'd, must have been pondered that night and subsequent nights at the Embankment Building. If indeed there was a G'd, then why did G'd not help them? Why did G'd place them in these conditions? Did G'd not care about them? Who could they cry to? Who would protect them?

Meals were taken in one large canteen, in which the refugees all lined up with a small tin pot and were served the *entree du jour*. The food was about as good as the accommodations!



It was the demarcation line between poor Hongkew and the wealthy other parts of Shanghai, the International Concessions. So it made a lot of sense that the poor gathered here to hustle for a few cents, straggling women nursing babies from their empty breasts, invalids displaying the stumps of their limbs or other wounds and the children pushing and hanging on to the rickshaws. It took a lot of self control for my parents not to break down crying when seeing such misery. Even after World War I when conditions in Germany were at their worst they had not encountered misery and poverty at such a low level.

And the hodge-podge of different people and nationalities, not all refugees, but Indian Sikh policeman, Japanese soldiers, Chinese coolies, British Civilians, Russian civilians and, of course, the German refugees created a true Babel. Compared to some of the beggars they were still relatively fortunate. But how could anybody survive, working in this heat?

The thought of how to survive in this anthill must have crossed a thousand minds more than once, day in, day out. Maybe they should have stayed in Germany? After all, things weren't quite as bad as here! In Germany, at least they had decent housing, decent food. Maybe. But, like it or not, they had little choice now. They too, were now some of the ants.

My parents had been told that my grandmother, due to the fact that she was a single elderly woman, was taken to a different camp, the Ward Road Heim. Since my parents didn't want to spend the little money they had on tramfare, they decided to walk the approximately three miles each way. What a walk! What a revelation! They got to see Shanghai in three hours in a way that no tourist guidebooks would ever describe it!

But after breakfast, with little else to do, my parents with Horst in tow stepped outside to get a whiff of fresh air. "Fresh air" was an overstatement. The building was near the Garden Bridge, at a junction of the Wangpo and Yangtse Rivers. The stench from the rivers was worse than when they first smelled it on the deck of the Scharnhorst the day before when entering Shanghai. Now the smell was mixed with pollution from some of the mechanized vehicles. They also got a closer look at city life, Shanghai style.

Horst remembers the family being overwhelmed by the different kinds and number of vehicles. They started counting: trucks, buses, bicycles, trams, cars, rickshaws, pedicabs, wheel barrels, flatbeds. All of these vehicles seemed to converge and bottleneck on the Garden Bridge, which was one of only two links between Hongkew and the British Concession. What was amazing to them, something they had never seen

before, was a human pulling another human in a rickshaw, and especially up a hill, pulling out their guts, and then going downhill and trying hard to stop the rickshaw from rolling out of control. Equally never experienced before was the enormous number of beggars, especially on the Garden Bridge, trying to hustle some handouts by helping the coolies and pushing the rickshaws from the back uphill and then hanging on to them to break the ride when the rickshaws were going downhill. Since this was the age before globalization and sensitivity training, it seems almost a sign of the times, wherever there were still very strong class systems, especially in foreign colonies, that nobody thought of lightening the load for the coolie by getting out of the rickshaws while the poor coolies had to pull the rickshaws uphill almost tearing out their hearts!

The Garden Bridge was what we would describe as the "track", when using the expression "the other side of the track".

My parents were living in the Hongkew side of the bridge as was my grandmother. But clearly they could see that on the other side of the Garden Bridge there was a different Shanghai. Coming back from the more elegant foreign concessions to Hongkew was tantamount to going from heaven to hell.

Since living in the United States I have learned, that when you ask an American how they like something, anything, some written material, some painting, some clothes, anything; if they do not like the item, they very diplomatically say: "Oh, it is very "interesting". So, I will try to be diplomatic and American and facetiously say that their walk through the poor section of Shanghai, HongKew was "very, very interesting".

First and foremost they discovered the exact source of the stench. People were not only defecating directly into the gutters, they were also emptying their wooden buckets of human refuse into the gutters, hoping that eventually a swish of water would come down the road and take their refuse away, possibly into the gullies. There at least you would no longer see it. Once or twice they also ran into the "sanitationman", the person who had a large wheelbarrow into which he would empty the pots of refuse, take them to the river and dump the contents of the wheelbarrow into the river. Anybody that would go swimming would eventually meet some familiar "friends".

Many Chinese, but especially the children, would wear a long jacket and a pair of pants. The reason the jacket was long was to cover the slit in the back of the pants. And the slit was for the purpose of convenience when defecating. If a person needed to defecate, they just sat down and did their business.

Another source of the stench was the cooking being carried out in the open



and in the streets. Housewives cooked meals on little charcoal ovens which had to constantly be fanned to keep the fire alive. But there were also plenty of street vendors cooking food loaded with oil and selling this food in the streets. One thing was for sure, none of these vendors ever had any food inspections! They wouldn't pass them by the longest stretch of the imagination.

Finally, occasionally there were dead bodies just lying in the streets, including babies wrapped in newspaper. Now the warnings they had been given by the stewards on the Scharnhorst started to make sense. Compared to what they had seen that day, the conditions at the Embankment were the height of luxury!

As it turned out these experiences were not unique to my parents only. Sooner or later, every refugee in Shanghai got to know the "beautiful air of Shanghai"! And to see the squalor in which the citizens of Shanghai, the native citizens, bless them, not the new arrivals, lived in, made the new arrivals once again grateful to G'd, for all the good He had bestowed on them. So it seems that in life everything is relative, depending on your perspective.

As they got closer to their destination, perhaps two hundred yards from it, not

even, they stumbled upon a wrought iron gate with a Star of David in a circle on top of the gate. They couldn't believe their eyes. What? A Jewish Star adorning two iron gates. Here in this far flung part of the world? And as they looked closer at the cement columns anchoring the gates they saw Hebrew writing. What a sight for sore eyes! A synagogue? Could it be? No! Not in this part of the world! But there it was. Yes, a synagogue in this part of the world! For a moment they stood in disbelief. Then tears started to roll down my mother's cheeks. G'd had not forsaken them. There were Jews here! My parents embraced and hugged each other. For a moment they breathed a sigh of relief. G'd had not abandoned them, after all. Dealing with reality had overwhelmed them. The thousands of new images their brains had to process over the last few days made them forget everything, who they were, and why they were here. Now they remembered who they were and why they were here. G'd showed them that He had not forgotten them. Yes, G'd was here with them. ✡

Fredy Seidel's forthcoming memoir, *Shanghai, Before and After the Fall-Caught Between Two Chairs*, will be published late summer or early fall 2016 by iUniverse.