

August 14, 2013

This article is from the Chicago Tribune article dated August 14, 2013

No photos on website

'The whole world had shut the door to them'

Aug 14, 2013 (Menafn - Chicago Tribune - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) --Ralph Cohn slept in a crib during the first 10 years of his life, living with his parents in a single cramped room with a small charcoal cooking stove but no running water, toilet or fresh fruit.

The conditions were squalid and unsanitary -- and bombing raids were a regular part of life -- but the Jewish refugees who fled Europe to escape Nazi persecution felt lucky to have landed in the Shanghai Ghetto, one of the lesser-known havens during World War II, Cohn said.

Cohn, now 75 and living in Lincolnshire, northwest of Chicago, is among 13 former refugees invited to meet this week for the 70th anniversary of the Shanghai Ghetto's formal inception. They are expected to arrive from Illinois, Wisconsin, California and Georgia to attend a dinner Thursday in Rosemont before visiting the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie the next day.

The wartime Jewish community in Shanghai -- a city at the time occupied by Japan, an ally to the very force that would seek to eliminate the Jews -- was created in part by a "fantastic fluke" of history involving a Japanese diplomatic official who took risks to provide visas to refugees, said Michael Berenbaum, a Holocaust scholar and professor at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

Other diplomatic officials also took risks to help refuge-seekers, and the museum on Friday will feature a speech by the daughter of a Chinese diplomat in Austria who issued coveted visas to imperiled Jews.

An estimated 18,000 to 20,000 Jewish refugees lived in the Shanghai Ghetto over the course of the war, according to historical reports. During World War II, Berenbaum said, "the difference between life and death was very often a stamp on a piece of paper."

Cohn said his family left Germany for Shanghai in 1938, shortly after he was born, during a window of time when few other places in the world would accept Jewish refugees. Cohn grew up speaking German at home, Chinese when playing outdoors with his friends and English at a school he attended, he said.

"I thought everyone lived like that," said Cohn, a retired teacher who to this day sleeps in a fetal position, a habit from years in the crib.

He has mixed emotions about the reunion, which is sponsored by the nonprofit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation of Lincolnshire.

Like many other Jewish survivors from the World War II era, "I really didn't talk about it most of my life."

At her ranch home in West Rogers Park, a Chicago neighborhood dotted with synagogues, Chaya Small recalled how her family spent time in Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Kobe, Japan, before going to Shanghai as Europe slid deeper into war. With a wry smile, she declined to pinpoint her current age but said she was a young girl when the war drove her family across the world.

In Lithuania, Small said, her father was one of many Jews who secured the ability to travel through Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomatic functionary who scholars say risked his career and life early in the Nazi onslaught to issue visas to refugees.

Boston University professor Hillel Levine wrote a book in which he tried to determine what drove Sugihara to help the Jews. Unlike his better-known European historical counterpart, businessman Oskar Schindler, Sugihara's work wasn't entwined with any kind of financial interest, Levine said.

Asked about Sugihara, Small leaned in, lowered her head and whispered, "Amazing."

Sugihara was not alone in helping Jews leave Europe. Manli Ho, who will speak at the museum Friday, has spent almost 16 years gathering information about her late father's work finding refugees safe passage, she said.

A Chinese diplomatic official in Nazi-occupied Austria, Feng Shan Ho defied his superiors to issue visas liberally to Jews, his daughter said. In 2000, the official Holocaust memorial in Israel awarded him its "Righteous Among the Nations" title, which is reserved for those who helped Jews during the Holocaust.

"These are people that are giants," said Sam Harris, 78, a founder of Skokie's Holocaust museum. "That is what the world must know, that there are such people who have given so much of themselves and have accomplished tremendous things."

In Chicago, Small described as "insane" the plan for survival that worked for her immediate family -- fleeing Europe on a train through Russia, ultimately headed for Shanghai.

Small, her parents and three siblings lived in a single room roughly the size of her current dining room, she said. And her family's home was more spacious than some, she said, because her father held distinguished status as a rabbi. Still, people tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy, starting small businesses to subsist.

"You notice life went on," Small said, grinning as she pointed to a picture of families posing in Shanghai, one woman holding a baby.

Some established families had resources while others lived in poverty, Small remembered. Her family sometimes split a single chicken with another family for a week's meals, she said.

"We had all the things that happen in the ghetto ... but we weren't in the camps," she said, adding that people adhered rigidly to religious and cultural traditions. "Come rain or high water, we had matzo on Passover."

Those in China were isolated from reliable news from Europe during the war, Small said, and her parents learned shortly after the war that most members of their extended families had died.

After coming to the U.S., she married a rabbi, Michael Small, and settled in Chicago. He died two years ago. Small, who works as a real estate agent, has remained in touch with people she knew in Shanghai, she said.

Ellen Wolf's family was allowed to live outside the designated borders for Jews because her father had been a well-respected doctor in Berlin, said Wolf, 83, of Highland Park.

The family had lived comfortably in Germany, where they had servants, and they resisted leaving until it became clear it was no longer safe, Wolf said.

"One of my father's patients called in the middle of the night," Wolf said. "He said, 'You have to leave the apartment. They're on their way.'"

The family spent the night at the patient's house, and Kristallnacht, known as the Night of Broken Glass, erupted over the next few days, in November 1938. Throughout Germany, hundreds of synagogues were burned and desecrated, Jewish stores looted and men arrested and taken to concentration camps.

Once in Shanghai, Wolf's family shared a single room and sold off personal belongings to get by. Wolf's father found it difficult to make a living because the Chinese didn't trust his medical training and the refugee patients had no money, she said.

Still, "we as children had a good time," said Wolf, who was 9 when her family escaped to China. "We didn't feel it like my poor mother."

Danny Spungen, whose family foundation is sponsoring the event, said he knew nothing about the Shanghai ghetto until a few years ago.

Since then, he has helped finance the making of a "Shanghai Memory" silver medal dedicated to the historical events of those days, and tracked down survivors for the reunion largely by word of mouth that spread after he reached out to some Jewish and Holocaust remembrance groups.

The medal, which will be unveiled during a numismatic convention in Rosemont this week, will be presented to each former refugee attending the reunion.

Members of the Chinese Consulate and community are also planning to attend this week's events.

Siva Yam, president of the U.S.-China Chamber of Commerce based in Chicago, said few people are aware of the role that China played in creating the Jewish haven.

"It is very important, not just for China and the Jewish community, but for the whole world," Yen said.

"The Jews had nowhere to go at this time," he said. "The whole world had shut the door to them. And China at that time was also in a difficult situation. ... Virtually, at that point of time, the Jews were facing death and, fortunately, they faced some avenue. It shows humanity does exist."

lblack@tribune.com
dhinkel@tribune.com

© 2013 the Chicago Tribune Visit the Chicago Tribune at
www.chicagotribune.com Distributed by MCT Information Services
Copyright © 2013, Chicago Tribune