

A Living Memorial in their own words

Family of Sigmund Tobias

I was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1932 and before Kristallnacht attended Hebrew School at the *Ryker Strasse Synagogue*. Kids from the *Hitler Jugend* often waited after school to taunt us, while throwing stones and trying to beat us. I did not go to that Hebrew school for long.

During Kristallnacht in Berlin I heard the sounds of shattering glass. The next day it was safer to go out and my family walked to our synagogue. It had been vandalized but not burned because the adjacent apartment houses would also have been set ablaze. In the synagogue's courtyard mounds of ashes and burned prayer books were still smoldering. In the center of the mound the charred handles of the Torah scrolls could be seen sticking out of the simmering pile of ashes. I knew then that we were in danger.

After Kristallnacht my father tried to escape from Germany to Belgium, was caught, and imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp for two weeks. At that time release from Dachau was possible by leaving Germany, and the Japanese occupied section of Shanghai, China was one of the few places where Jews could go without a Visa. My father returned to our apartment from Dachau a changed man. His hair had been cut off, he limped after having been beaten, was gaunt from losing 20 pounds, and huddled close to the stove after freezing in the camp's bitter cold against which the thin, pajama like inmate uniforms and unheated barracks provided little protection.

My father told of dawn line ups in the bitter winter cold in front of the Dachau administration building wearing only the thin prisoner uniforms. Heavily armed guards with thick uniforms prodded inmates with rifles and forced them to run around the square for exercise. Prisoners, weakened from the meager rations, who stumbled and fell had to remain lying helplessly in the mud while others were forced to step on them as the enforced exercise continued. Those trying to avoid stepping on fallen comrades were also forced to lie in the mud. Even though Dachau was not an extermination camp, 46,000 inmates died there. A crematorium was built to dispose of the huge number of bodies.

Before Dachau, I had always thought of my father as a giant who could protect me from anything. After Dachau, I was

shocked to realize that he could not even pick me up anymore. My father left for Shanghai the day after his release, and my mother and I followed six months later.

In Shanghai we lived in one of the poorest parts of the city (Hongkou) for over 10 years among a community of perhaps 17,000 other Jewish refugees. Under German pressure, the Japanese interned the refugees in a Ghetto during much of World War II. We lived in primitive conditions- whole families to a room, one shared kitchen and restrooms usually without running water. Others lived in group homes with even more primitive conditions. We were frightened because there was little medication to treat life threatening diseases, we never had enough to eat, and Kanoh Ghoya- the Japanese administrator of the Ghetto was a deluded man calling himself "the emperor of the Jews." An American bombardment shortly before the War's end killed 31 refugees, the largest single loss of refugee life during the war. At war's end we felt that we had survived difficult times, until we heard about the Holocaust and realized how fortunate we were to have escaped to China. Fourteen of my aunts, uncles, and cousins, whom I had visited in Poland every summer, were killed by the Germans.

I came to the US in 1948, settled in New York, completed my education and earned a Ph. D. in clinical psychology from Columbia University. I married Lora Sussman Tobias, and we have two daughters. In 1988 I was invited to return to Shanghai as Visiting Professor at the Shanghai Institute of Education, where I began "Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai", describing the refugee community in Shanghai. A paperback edition was issued in 2009. I also participated in the documentary "Shanghai Ghetto." Both book and DVD are available in the Hatikvah library.

Most of my academic career was spent the City College of New York. I moved to Fordham University as Distinguished Scholar in Educational Psychology and then was Distinguished Research Scientist, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University. I am now Eminent Research Professor, Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, University at Albany, SUNY.



Passport photo with mother.

(right)
Sigmund
Tobias
and
parents
Frieda and
Moses in
Shanghai.



Refugees looking through lists of Holocaust survivors for names of their relatives, 1946.

(From the Archives of the YIYO Institute for Jewish Research)