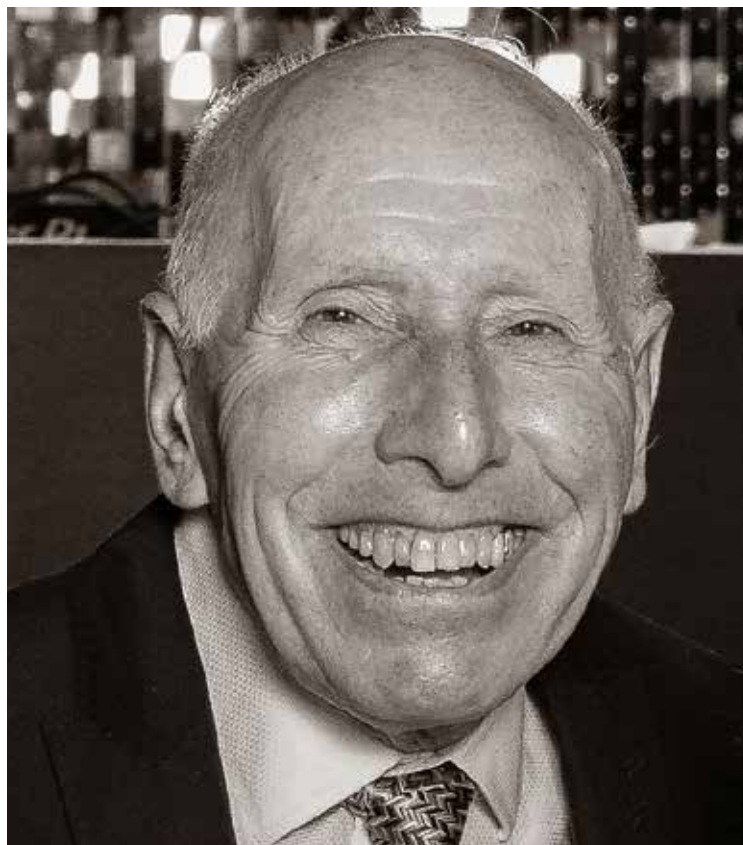


My Story

Kurt Wick



My Story
Kurt Wick



These are Kurt's words. This is his story.

'My Story' is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).

www.ajrmystory.org.uk

www.ajr.org.uk

Kurt Wick spoke to AJR volunteer Nick Stafford to share his story. Thanks also to AJR volunteers Alix Lee, Cindy Mindell & Shelley Hyams. This book was produced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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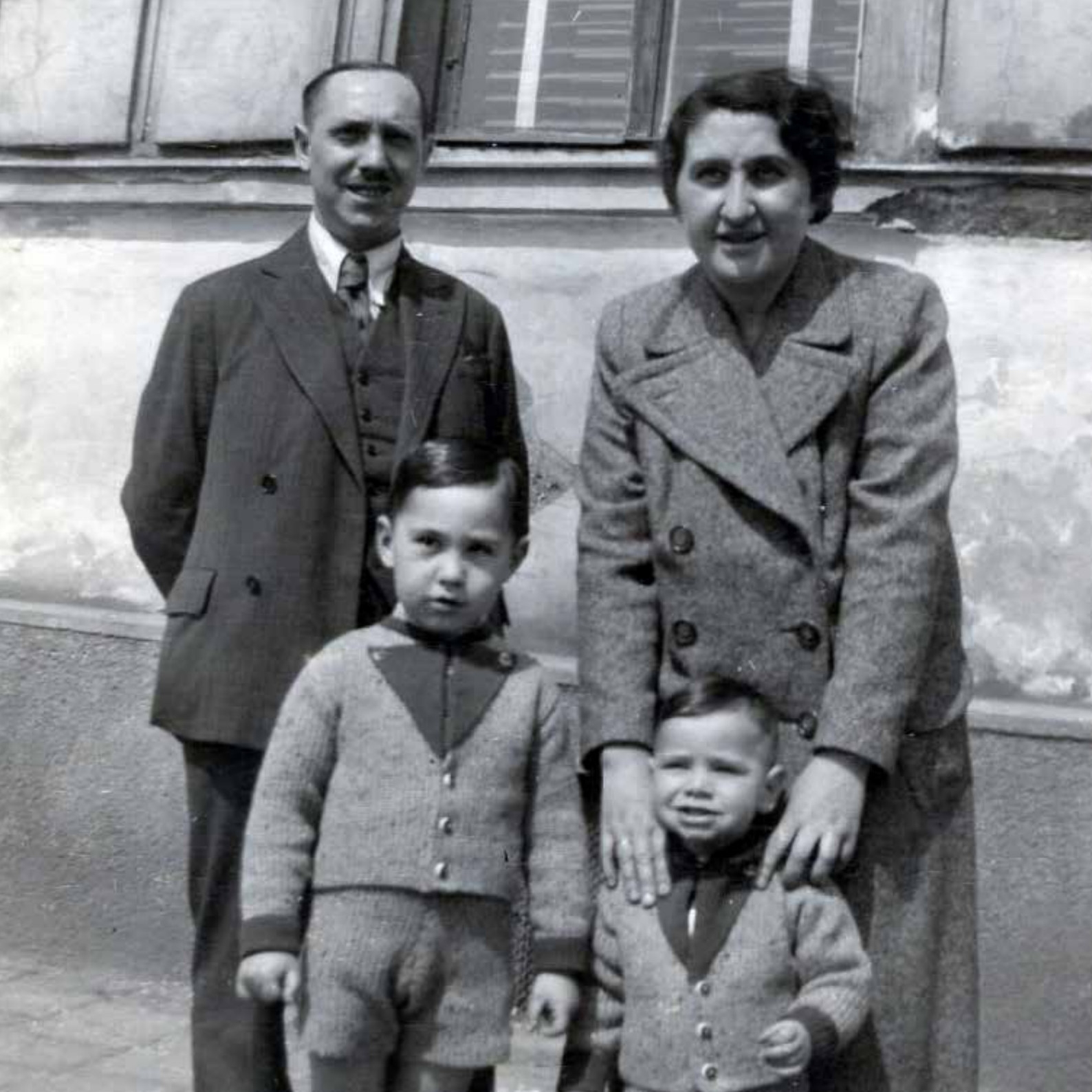
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My Story

Kurt Wick

“It was a miracle we heard about the Jews going from Italy to Shanghai, and we went by default because the rest of the world was closed to us. We made a little Vienna there, cut off from the horrors of Europe. It was pretty safe for us, as long as we didn’t annoy the Japanese.”



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How my parents met

MY MOTHER WAS called Josefina Koslitschek. She was born in Austria in 1905. Her parents were from Brno in Czechoslovakia, but they moved to Austria at the turn of the century. Shortly after they arrived, my mother's father passed away. Her mother was left to look after the four children – three daughters and one son. They were very poor. To make a living my grandmother took in washing and let one of the rooms of their apartment where they lived in Vienna.

My father, Moritz Wickelholz, was born in Vienna in 1904. His parents were from Warsaw and they were also quite poor. His mother died before he was 10 years old. His father married again and the stepmother was a terrible lady. She was only interested in her own children and she treated my father and his brother, Ernest, very badly.

When my father grew up, he made a living in leather, making handbags, and he happened to take a room in my grandmother's apartment. That's how my parents met. They married in 1931 in Vienna. My brother Sigmund was born in 1934 and I followed in 1937. ■

“To make a living my grandmother took in washing and let one of the rooms of their apartment where they lived in Vienna.”



My parents' wedding. Vienna, 1931



The three Koslitschek sisters, 1930

Looking for a way out

LIVING IN NAZI Austria was the most horrendous thing. There had been rising antisemitism for years, but everything accelerated after the Anschluss. My father told me that whenever he did go out – which he had to do because he was still managing to work – if he saw any of his old friends from school, he hid away from them in doorways. Once they put on the swastika armband, they became a different kind of being. Any time anyone pointed at you, you were in danger. Gradually, Jews were stopped from being able to make a living and were only allowed to take a little bit of money out of their bank account.

Things came to a climax after *Kristallnacht* (9 - 10 November 1938), one of the biggest Nazi pogroms ever. On that night and day, they arrested thousands of Jews. Most of the synagogues in Vienna were set on fire, and Jewish businesses were vandalised. We were middle class, but overnight we lost our business, our nationality. Life became impossible.

In Austria most people, unless they were extremely wealthy, lived in apartment blocks with a concierge. Ours was a nice non-Jewish lady who said to us, “Don’t worry, whenever we have any Nazis knocking on our doors looking for Jews, keep your curtains drawn, don’t make any noise, and I’ll tell them there are no Jews in this house.” Our luck was that this lady’s son was a top Nazi and he told her every time there was going to be a round-up of Jews. And thanks to them, my father was never arrested or sent to a concentration camp.

“We were middle class, but overnight we lost our business, our nationality. Life became impossible,”

After *Kristallnacht*, Jewish people mainly spoke about where they could go, but soon came to the realisation that no country would allow Jews in. Back in July 1938, President Roosevelt had called the Evian Conference to see which countries would volunteer to help in any way, because initially the Nazis were happy for Jews in Germany and Austria to leave. But while the 38 countries represented at the Evian Conference felt pity for the Jews, nobody opened their doors to us. Pity won't save someone's life.

There was one country after *Kristallnacht* that allowed in 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, and that was England. And even though the *Kindertransport* was a kindly gesture, can you imagine being a parent and sending your young child away to a country where they don't speak the language? Can you imagine saying that sort of goodbye? The first thing a child would say is, "What have I done? Why are you sending me away?" In most cases, they never saw their parents again. ■



Me with my brother Sigmund



Uncle Ernest and his wife Marie, 1934

Shanghai Solution

ONE DAY IN early 1939, Uncle Ernest met an Italian-Jewish lady whose brother worked in Trieste, Italy. It was from there that the luxury shipping line Lloyd Triestino was taking German and Austrian Jewish refugees every month to Shanghai, on their four ships. This had been going on since 1938, but the number of refugees increased dramatically after *Kristallnacht*, as people were desperate to leave. Uncle Ernest told my father about it, wondering if this would be a lifeline for us. They decided to ask the lady to see if her brother could get seven tickets for us – for Ernest, his wife Marie, their daughter Edith, my parents, my brother and myself.

A couple of weeks later, the lady got in touch to say we had seven tickets to leave in August. Uncle Ernest asked her why she didn't go to Shanghai herself. She said her son was living in Palestine and she was waiting for permission to join him. Unfortunately, she never made it. She was murdered. The Lloyd Triestino refugee route closed on 10 June, 1940, when Italy joined the war. By that time, 17,000 Jewish refugees had travelled to Shanghai on those four ships.

We got the tickets but it wasn't as simple as that. You still needed to get a visa to allow you to leave the country. If you'd ever been in hospital in Austria or ever had any state help in any way you had to pay it back with added tax. You would end up with no money left, but you were only permitted to leave the country with about five dollars anyway. You were allowed to take a big crate, about five or six feet square, called a lift, which you could fill with household goods and clothes but nothing of value: no silver, jewellery or paintings. My parents took a sewing machine so they could start making bags again once in Shanghai, and they also took our *badewanne* (zinc bath). A Nazi came to supervise what was put into the lift, which was then sealed and sent separately from Vienna to Trieste. ■

Leaving our family behind

MY MOTHER HAD her own mother, a sister and a brother in Vienna. She told us to go to Shanghai without her and she would follow us later. My father, my grandmother and my aunt persuaded my mother to change her mind and leave with us: they could see there might never be another chance. My father said, “We all go or none of us go.” My mother agreed to leave with us, but the trauma of leaving her beloved mother destroyed her for ever more.

The night before we left, we went to say goodbye to my grandmother. I never found out why my parents didn't get more tickets for the other three family members. They never spoke about that period. I can only assume that, even at that late stage, a lot of people thought the Nazis wouldn't kill older people like my grandmother. That's what most normal people would think. But my mother's mother, sister and brother were all murdered in Auschwitz.

We walked out of our apartment in Vienna with just a little case, so as not to attract attention, and we went to the station. There were Nazis on the trains and you could be arrested at any time.

We departed from Trieste on the *SS Giulio Cesare* on 2 August, 1939. It was a strange thing having all these people who lived in fear for their lives on a luxury shipping liner. The ship was run as a purely commercial enterprise. There were cases where, if you had a ticket that proved that you would leave Germany or Austria within a couple of weeks, they let you out of a camp – Dachau and other places – and you could go to Shanghai. But on 14 August a ban was introduced to stop allowing Jewish refugees into China. There were around 619 Jews on the ship and we were the last to depart from Italy. I was only a baby, just 18 months old, so I have no memories of the journey.

Most of the refugees were middle class people – doctors, lawyers, businessmen. We all came out penniless, but we were alive and better off than those left behind in Europe. ■



Sigmund and me with our mother's sister who was murdered at Auschwitz



Giulio Cesare passenger list, 2 August 1939

猶太避難民調查表
 DIRECTORY OF JEWISH REFUGEES

番號 No.	9566	(319)	29 MAR. 1940
姓名 Name in full	WICKELHOLZ ERNST		
男女別 Sex	本 件	MALE	
年齡 Age	24.4.1902	差 37 VIENNA	
國籍 Nationality	右 支	GERMANY	
使用言語 Language	許 無	GERMAN	
現住所 Address	可 又	1 TONGSHAN-ROAD 28187 JK. 54	
職業及一特技 Occupation or Ability		LADIS BAGMAKER	
教育程度 Education		PUBLIC SCHOOL	
宗教 Religion		JEW	
資產 Means		WITHOUT MODERATE	
護照番號 Passport No.	112166	發給官廳 Issued by	日時 On
		VIENNA POLICIE	23.3.1939

My uncle's Jewish Refugee Registration, March 1940






Hongkew. Where we lived when we first arrived in Shanghai

Arriving in Shanghai

WE ARRIVED IN Shanghai on 28 August. The city was divided: half was the International Settlement shared between the British, American and French, and the other half, the slum area called Hongkou, was under Japanese control. This slum area was designated for the Jews arriving from Nazi Austria and Germany.

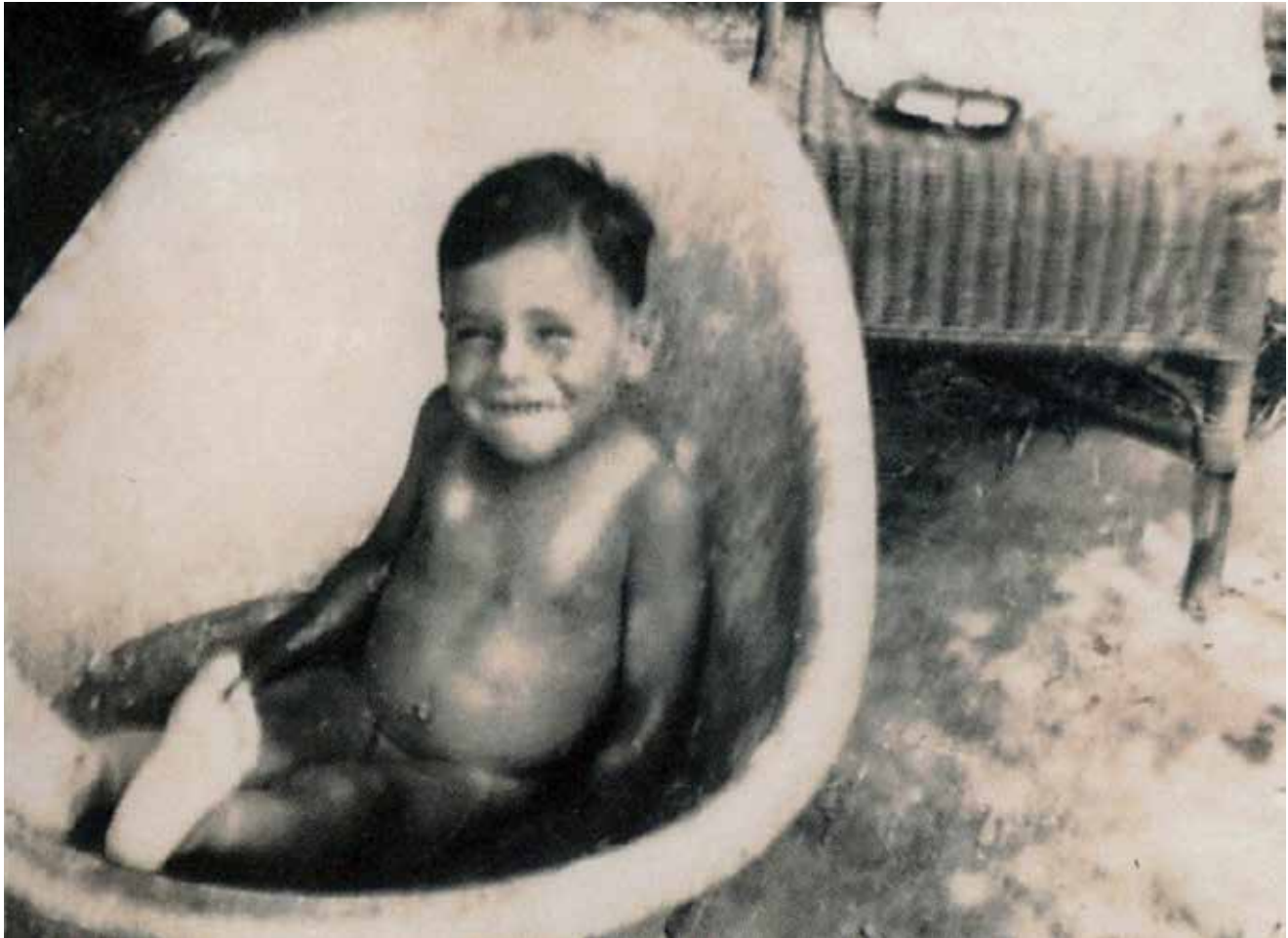
There was a community of Sephardi Jews who had come to Shanghai in the 1850s and made money from trading in opium, before expanding into banking and property. A lot of the *Bund*, the valuable Shanghai waterfront, was owned by the Sephardim, even though there were only about 700 of them. The three most prominent families – Sassoon, Kadoorie and Haroon – were philanthropists, and they took the Jews arriving from Europe under their wing. They set up food kitchens for us and bought up warehouses to give us homes, divided with curtains and blankets – the only privacy we had. I remember there were lines of cold-water taps, 20 on each side, so we could wash. We had the basics of life: food and a shelter over our heads.

When we arrived, there were lorries waiting to take us to these warehouses. Uncle Ernest, Aunt Marie, and cousin Edith lived a few streets away from us. Other refugees lived in Sephardi-owned hotels. People began to set up Jewish charities and committees, which lent refugees money to get their own places, ‘half-houses’. After a few years, my parents managed to get half a house. It had a large room where we had four beds next to each other. In front of the beds, we had a seven- or eight-foot space with a working table and our sewing machine in order to make handbags. Just outside the house there was a little patio and that’s where we put the *badewanne*, zinc bath we had brought with us from Vienna. In the summer, temperatures were 100 or 120 degrees, so my parents filled the bath with cold water – that’s all we had – and half an hour later, it would be hot enough to wash in.

	中華民國	中華民國二十一年十一月十七日發出 年 月 日	填寫機關上海特別市第一警察局 	姓名	推友休士克大
	外提第 14200 號 居住證 RESIDENT CERTIFICATE WICKELHOLT & KURT			國籍 Germ. Ref.	住址 舟山路一四七號
指食左 指食右  				注意 一、本證本人當隨時攜帶 二、遺失本證者應立即向最近警察局所及該管警察局報告 三、該管警察局調查認爲確係遺失得發收手續費重行發給	

<p style="text-align: center;">NOTICE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> This Certificate should always be carried by the person in whose name it has been issued. In case of loss of certificate, the holder should immediately make a report to the nearest Police Bureau and to Police Headquarters. After the loss has been verified by subsequent Police investigation, a duplicate certificate will be issued against Payment of a fee. 	<p style="text-align: center;">注 意</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 一、本證本人當隨時攜帶 二、遺失本證者應立即向最近警察局所及該管警察局報告 三、該管警察局調查認爲確係遺失得發收手續費重行發給
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My Resident Certificate



Me in the *badewanne*

Behind the main room, we had a kitchen and a 'comfort room', which is where the sink was. Next to that was a 'honeypot', a non-flush toilet that was emptied at 6 o'clock every morning into a wooden contraption that was pulled along on wheels. The contents were used as manure for growing fruit and so on - that's why you could never eat anything without washing and scrubbing it first. Across from the honeypot was a stove which was kept hot by briquettes, balls of compressed coal-dust. And that was our kitchen. It was maybe six foot by six foot; it was tiny and very primitive.

Most people in Shanghai lived in lanes which were crammed full of houses and people. At the corner of our lane was a shop which sold hot water - there was a water shop on every corner or two, as no-one had hot water at home. You would go with a big pot, fill it with hot water and pay with bamboo tallies - sticks with Chinese writing on.

Next door to us was the Hyman family. Mr Hyman was a hairdresser and would cut hair at home. He also had a radio and my father would put his ear to the wall to listen to the news. On the other side lived Mr Wartenberg, a Liberal rabbi from Berlin, with his family. Next was a butcher, Mr Kaiser, who made *wurst* and sausages; he had a daughter called Sonia who I had an eye for - we were both about four or five years old!

A few houses down and the lane turned into a slum where there were two open sewers. That's where the very poor Chinese lived in makeshift houses. There were always fights going on in the slum. One day my cousin Edith came to see her father who was working in our house on the sewing machine. She was very nosey and hearing one of the usual fights going on in the slum, she went to join the crowd watching - and ended up falling in the open sewer. She had to have an emergency wash in the zinc bath! ■

Our lives in Shanghai

WHEN I WAS four, I started going to school. The Kadoories built a school specifically for Jews, the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association. It was built in the shape of a gigantic 'U', all on one level. You could get to every room under cover without getting wet, which was important during typhoon season when it rained continuously for a month or two. The drainage in Shanghai was very poor and we would often have to wade through three feet of water on the way home from school. I remember it had a very big assembly room. I've still got 10 of my school reports from there. We were educated in English by teachers from Czechoslovakia, Germany and Austria, and I still remember them all.

My brother and I went to school every morning at 8am and came home for lunch. Then, in the afternoon, we could either go back to school and play American sports such as baseball, basketball, volleyball and table tennis, or we could go to the Talmud Torah (Jewish religious school), where we were taught in Hebrew how to pray, Jewish history, and so on. We went there often. At Chanukah, every boy who went consistently throughout the year got rewarded with a pair of handmade shoes, which were very valuable. We were not devout Jews, but we kept things like Passover. During the war years we didn't celebrate Passover at home – Sigmund and I joined the Talmud Torah's communal Seder. There would be several hundred boys there, sitting on long benches, eating borsht soup and matzo. The Seder would go on for three hours until nearly midnight and then our father would come to walk us home.

There were a few synagogues in Shanghai. Our family went some weekends and on the High Holydays. The more pious Jewish refugees spoke Yiddish, but we spoke German at home, interspersed with some Yiddish words. I never learnt to speak any Chinese. We used to have special Friday night dinners when we lit the Shabbat candles and would invite guests to eat with us, like Mr Altmann and Mr Lasowsky, two bachelors from Germany who lived round the corner from us. On Friday nights we ate fish, mostly carp in jelly. Mr Altmann used to talk a lot, but I remember one night he got a carp bone stuck in his throat for half an hour and wasn't able to speak. We were quite worried, but he managed to get it out in the end.



Sigmund and me in Shanghai, 1942

Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School

Report for the term ending December 1944

Name <u>Wichelholz Kurt</u>	Possible attendance _____
Form <u>Transition Lower 9</u>	Actual attendance _____
Age at end of Term _____ yrs	Number of times late _____
Average age in Form _____ yrs	Examination marks: Percentage _____ Order _____
No. of pupils in Form <u>43</u>	Daily marks: Percentage _____ Order _____

Grand Form Order

SUBJECT	Marks Gained in Examination		REMARKS	TEACHERS
	Percentage	Order		
Hebrew				
Scripture				
Grammar	70		good	} Ga.
Composition	65		good	
Reading	95		Excellent	
Dictation	30		Bad	
Recitation			Very good	
Arithmetic	10		good	} H. P.
General Knowledge - Spelling	28		Bad	
Copy Writing			good	
Art			satisfactory	
Rhythm, Exercise			Very good	
Singing			good	
Gymnastics			Very good	
Handwerk			satisfactory	H.P.

CONDUCT Very good

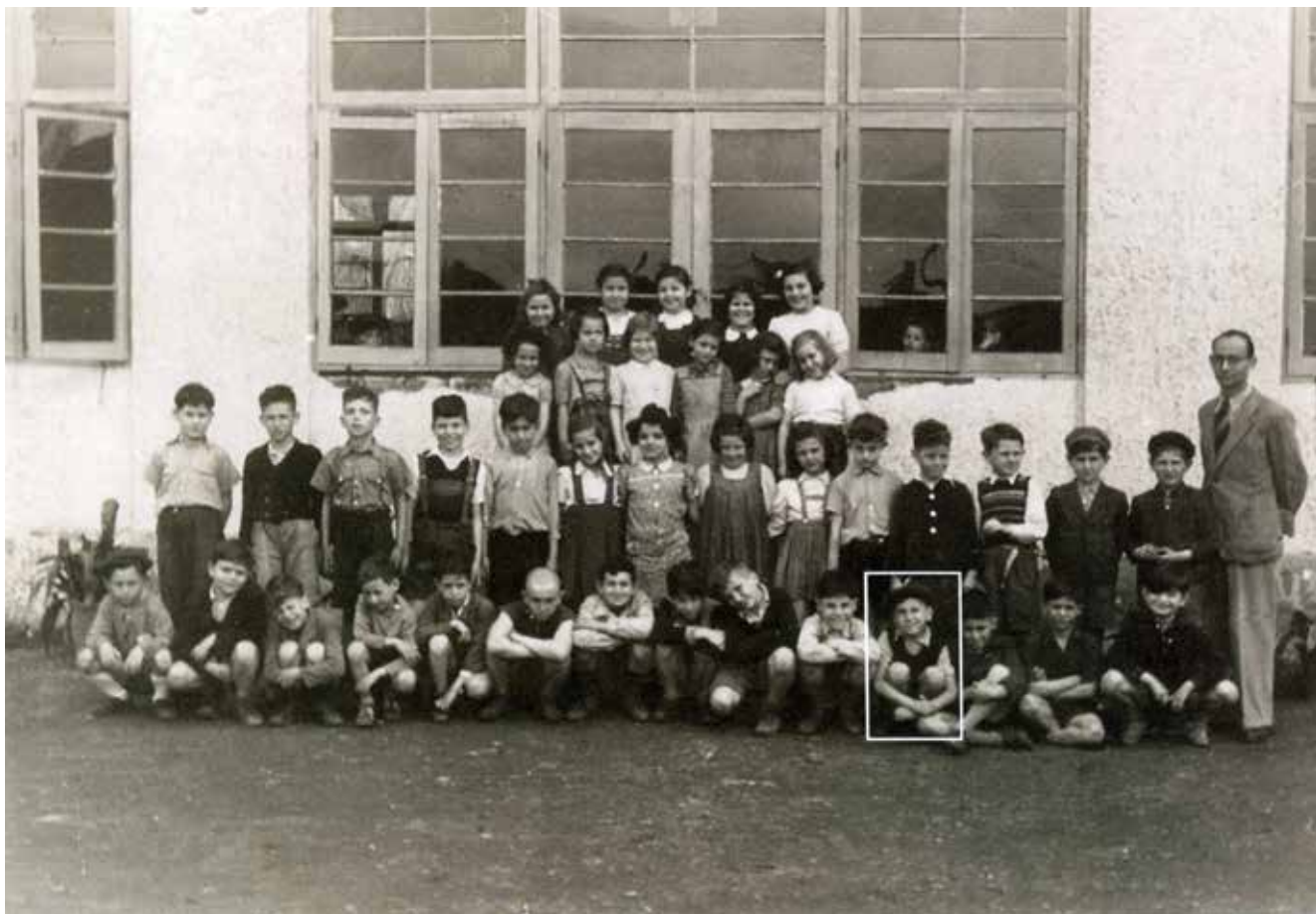
GENERAL REMARKS Progress very disappointing.


J. Sandheimer
Lucie Harfenist
 Principal

Promoted to: Transition Upper B.

School will re-assemble on January 3rd at 8 a. m.

My school report, December 1944



Me at the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association (Kadoori) School

There was a market where my mother shopped more or less every day, because nobody had a fridge. Our diet was mostly fish and chicken, which was what we had eaten in Vienna. We must have been able to buy meat too, because my mother also made *Wiener schnitzel*. As a treat I would go to the shop and get 100 grams of broken biscuits!

My parents opened a shop on East Yuhang Road. My father and Uncle Ernest tried to make handbags to sell but without much success. Most of their customers were Japanese and mainly bought bomber-pilot hats made out of leather and face masks made of fabric. The Japanese wore a lot of face masks, even in those days, to stop germs going around. It seems strange now that we are all wearing face masks due to the Covid-19 pandemic. So that's how my parents made a little bit of a living. It was a struggle, but there were Jewish charities which helped us too and no-one went hungry. ■

“There was a market where my mother shopped more or less every day, because nobody had a fridge. Our diet was mostly fish and chicken, which was what we had eaten in Vienna.”



Left to right; Mother, Sigmund and me at the park in Shanghai, 1947



Sigmund and me with Mother, Shanghai, 1947

Everything changes

SINCE THE END of 1938, there had been around 1,500 refugees arriving in Shanghai each month – so many that the little community of Sephardi Jews couldn't cope. They asked the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a charitable organisation known as 'the Joint', to send money to help. That changed when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and money from 'the Joint' stopped almost immediately. The Sephardi Jews were interned because they had British passports, so they couldn't help us any more either. However, one way or another, the Japanese were quite kind to us refugees: they made sure we always had something to eat.

In July 1942 Colonel Josef Albert Meisinger, chief representative of the Gestapo in Japan, was sent to Shanghai and proposed the idea of the 'Final Solution' to the Japanese authorities. He was known as the Butcher of Warsaw, because he had sent thousands of Jews to their death in Poland. Now his plan was to put the 20,000 Jews of Shanghai on ships destined for demolition and sink us in the Yangtze. The Japanese rejected this plan and, instead, created a Jewish ghetto in the Hongkou district of the city. We weren't prisoners there and we already lived in that area so we didn't have to change homes. We were confined to an area about a mile-and-a-half square where we could live freely, although we now needed passes to get to other parts of Shanghai. We had to go to Sergeant Kano Ghoya to get a pass. He was tiny, under five foot, and he was not a nice man. If he was in a bad mood, he might hit a person across the face and say, "No pass today, come next week." Our school was a 20-minute walk away, just outside the ghetto, but thankfully we didn't need a pass to go there.

They built an underground shelter outside our house where we would go during the bombing raids towards the end of the war. The Americans bombed Shanghai. They were usually careful, but one bomb went astray on a Jewish old people's home and 35 were killed.



Our family in Shanghai, 1947

We were pretty cut off from news, but I remember one day in 1943, when I was six, I got home from school and saw my mother crying. My father told me that she'd just heard from the Red Cross that her beloved mother, her sister and her brother had been murdered in Auschwitz. My mother never, ever got over that. She was traumatised for the rest of her life. She only wore dark clothes and I never saw her smile again.

Life went on in the same way until 1945, when the Japanese were defeated. After the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, China emptied of Japanese overnight. All of a sudden, we saw American ships arrive and everything felt more prosperous because the Americans brought jobs and food. But of course, the first thing that people thought was: where do we go to from here? Shanghai was never a place of permanent settlement. It was a place of refuge, a place to save ourselves. ■



Our luggage label, Shanghai to London

Moving on

A DOWNSIDE OF the arrival of the Americans was that we learned the news: what a price the Jews of Europe had paid in the past six years! We saw the lists that were posted with the names of thousands and thousands and thousands of lost people. They were all gone, all wiped out. You saw there was nothing to go back to. But Shanghai was always a place of refuge and not a place of settlement. Another difficulty was that a civil war amongst the Chinese Communists under Mao Tse Tung and the nationalists, under Chiang Kai-shek - which had been abandoned during the Japanese occupation - had now resumed and the Communists were winning. The question was: did you have anybody in your family who might have escaped? Through various agencies, people discovered long-lost cousins and uncles in North America or Australia. Thousands of refugees traced family survivors, and in many cases were allowed to join them. The only person we had who survived was my mother's sister, Lily Koslitschek. She had gone to London at the beginning of 1939 as a parlour maid. In those days, single Jewish girls could still get into England on a domestic visa, working as housekeepers or looking after children.

In 1945, after the war, Lily asked us, "Would you be interested in coming to London?" My parents didn't have much to think about because we had nowhere else to go. It took two-and-a-half years to organise, though. She needed to have about £1,000 as a guarantee that we wouldn't be a burden to the country. For a parlour maid that was a lot. She needed a flat and a job for my father. She managed to get him one in Dudley, near Birmingham, which wasn't great because he ended up living two hours away from the family.

I was 11 years old when we came to England in April 1948. We sailed on the *SS Orbita*, a British ship, which docked at Southampton. After nine years in Shanghai, it was amazing to see a bathroom with hot running water, and a telephone. All of a sudden, we were living in a new world.

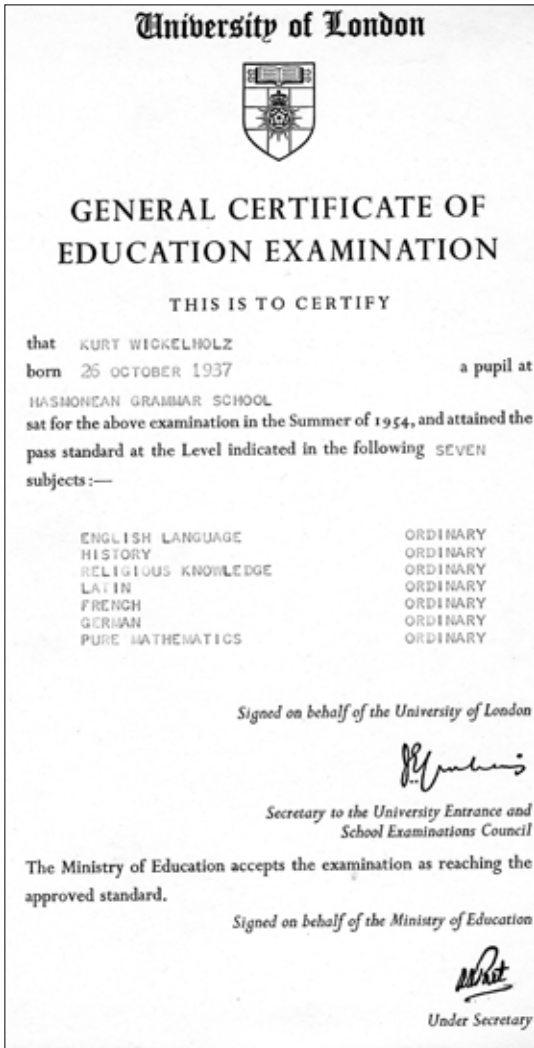
We were one of the few refugee families who came to England from Shanghai. Uncle Ernest, Aunt Marie and Cousin Edith stayed on in Shanghai because they didn't have a sponsor for England or America. They eventually went to Israel in 1949, where Edith married an Israeli car mechanic. In 1955 they all went to America, where Ernest and Marie opened a haberdashery shop. ■



Mother's mother and sister who were both murdered at Auschwitz



Lilly Koslitchek, 1937



My exam results

A new life begins

WE LIVED IN West Hampstead, in Priory Road. It was a strange time. Unfortunately, my aunt Lily was a damaged woman. She had suffered trauma. I don't blame her for anything, but she made my parents' life a misery. We all lived together in a small flat; it was very difficult. Lily had the garden room, and we had the room upstairs. But my life in London was good. I went to school and to the North West London Jewish Boys' Club in Cricklewood, where I played table-tennis and I made lots of friends.

My father came home from Dudley every weekend, but it wasn't a good way of living. After a month, he got a job in St John Street in Clerkenwell in a leather handbag factory. I went to the Harben Secondary School in Kilburn and every Sabbath to the Sarah Klausner Memorial Synagogue – which was then off Finchley Road, behind Finchley Road tube station. That building is now a Waitrose. The school was very rough. After about a year, my rabbi managed to get me into Hasmonean Grammar School in Holders Hill Road, Hendon. You needed an 11-plus to get in, but in my case they waived it. They said to me, "You realise this is a paying school?" and I said, "My parents are very poor." They said, "Can they pay £1 a month?" I said, "I suppose so." Luckily, there are some nice people in this world. When it came to the summer holidays, they asked me, "Do you want to go on a holiday?" I said, "Yes, but how much is it?" "In your case, it'll be £1 a week." They took over a luxury girls' grammar school in Bournemouth for six weeks. When it came to the exams, I got seven GCEs. ■

My working life

I WAS FROM a family of artisans. When my father was a child, he never had any education. His parents believed that as long as you can make something with your hands, you'll always have an income. Of course, I would later learn from experience that when you work with your hands you have to work very long hours to make a good living. When I came to leave school, the headmaster suggested I went into law. I'd never thought about it. All I knew was that law firms who offered Articles wanted about £1,000 per pupil, something we couldn't possibly afford.

Eventually, I found a firm who would give me Articles after about six months, if the Law Society allowed it. It wasn't easy. One of the partners made my life an absolute misery. He gave me all the rotten jobs and treated me like rubbish. I hated it. When I came in front of the Law Society panel, there were about 20 big lawyers questioning me, an inexperienced Jewish boy, and I didn't come over very well. They said I'd have to work for another six months before I could start my Articles. I just couldn't face that.

I went home and told my parents I needed to find another line of work. At the time, my brother was working in the handbag trade, like our father and uncle had in Vienna. Sigmund had just finished his training and decided to start off on his own. My parents agreed that I could also join the handbag trade, so I looked for an apprenticeship to enable me to learn the business. I found a firm of two Austrian-Jewish refugees, Mr Ungermunz and Mr Shragel, who had come to England in 1939. One of them had worked for my father in pre-war Vienna - how coincidental is that? They made lizard and snakeskin bags in their workshop near Edgware Road station. They took me on, and my luck was that they were both pretty lazy, because overnight I was forced into doing everything - cutting leather, marking, bench-work; virtually everything except stitching on a machine.

I started work at the age of 19½ for 25 shillings a week, which even in those days was a pathetic amount of money. One Friday, after I'd been there three months, I summoned up the courage to ask for a raise. I'd thought, maybe I can get another five bob (five shillings or 25p), but Mr Ungermunz just refused. He said, "Do you want to take your tools now?" So, I said, "Forget I ever asked!" I carried on working there for another three months, after which I joined up with my brother, and our father also joined us after a few years.

We called our business Mondaine Handbags, a name suggested by Sigmund's girlfriend because it sounded a bit French. There were three others working with my father, brother and me. We started working out of 45 Kilburn High Road before ending up at 306 Kilburn High Road, which was an easy walk from where we lived with our parents. Within a few months, we started supplying some of the top shops in Bond Street and Knightsbridge with our lizard, snake and crocodile-skin handbags. That's what we made for the next 50 years. I have the proud honour of owning a photograph of the Queen of England carrying one of the bags I made with my own hands.

We used to supply Susan Handbags, which had four shops in Central London, and also Jays of Bond Street, Finnigans, and Harrods. Our biggest customer was Mappin & Webb. They had a special lizard bag that they only sold in November and December of every year, a Christmas line known throughout the country. When we started making them, we produced 200 bags which sold out in a week. The following year, they sold 500. Then one thousand, then five thousand. We would start making the 'Mappin bag' in January and it sold in 33 of their shops.

I worked 100 hours every week, making every bag by hand. For each bag, I started off with skins. I cut the lizard and 'plated' the skins. This involves baking the skin, like bread in an oven, for only a few seconds, after which it comes out stiff, shiny and fantastic. Someone else would assemble the bag, sew the lining, attach the handles. It's a lot of work. We never charged what they were really worth, because we wanted them to be affordable and anyway, I enjoyed making nice things. ■



HRH Elizabeth II wearing her Mappin & Webb lizard bag



Falling in love

I MET MY wife, Caryl Granville, at the first dance she ever went to. She was 16 and I was 23. She is Jewish-English and she thought I was a very interesting boy. We went out together and she told her mother, “You’ll never guess his name. It’s Kurt Wickelholz!” Her mother said, “Well, what does that matter? You won’t marry the boy, will you?”

As it turned out Caryl’s mother was wrong. We got engaged when she was 17 and we were married two years later in 1964 at Dennington Park synagogue by Rabbi Isaac Levy. We had a party at the Northumberland Grand Hotel and went to Riccione, Italy, for our honeymoon. We’d had a holiday together before we married, to the island of Elba, but naturally my parents came with as chaperones. The hotel was spread out on one level – my parents and I had our rooms at one end of the hotel, while Caryl’s room was all the way at the other end of the hotel. Caryl came crying to my mother that she was so far away and all alone – so my father slept in Caryl’s room and Caryl shared with my mother for the whole holiday!

Caryl’s parents’ surname was originally Greenberg. When her father was in the British Army, serving in North Africa, he got all the lousiest jobs, like cleaning the latrines. He told his wife, “I’m fed up with this name getting me the worst jobs. I’m going to change it.” They changed it to the most English name they could think of – Granville – and from that moment on, he didn’t get any more rotten jobs.

After our children were born, we shortened our surname from Wickelholz to Wick. Wickelholz was very Germanic, which was not popular in England at the time, and Caryl wasn’t keen for our daughters to have that surname. My brother Sigmund had married Leatrice Caplan in 1961 and they had two daughters, Alison and Candice. Sigmund and his family also shortened their surname to Wick.

When Caryl and I first married we lived in Holders Hill Road. Our first daughter, Amanda, was born in 1967, and Chantal followed in 1971. In 1972 we moved to Mill Hill, and we still live there now. Caryl found the house; she convinced me when she told me it had a tennis court, because I was a keen player. It cost £36,000 and I had to get a mortgage for £10,000 for the first time in my life. ■



Sigmund and Leatrice's wedding, 1961



Our wedding at Dennington Park Synagogue, 1964.





My parents at my wedding, 1964

I returned to Vienna

I RETURNED to Vienna in 2009. There was an organisation in Vienna started by a Jewish committee, which invited those who had been forced to leave to return for a free holiday to show them that things had changed. Caryl and I were invited, as were my brother Sigmund and his wife. It was a very nice holiday. We were given a warm welcome by the Viennese authorities and taken around. I went back to the house where we lived, but I couldn't get into the apartment because there was no-one there.

I don't blame the Austrian people of today for what their parents and grandparents did to the Jews, but it's still unbelievable to me that people should stand by or laugh to see their neighbours abused, beaten and murdered. Of course, some people were kind. The day after *Kristallnacht* one of my father's customers came round with a basket of food telling us to not go out and offering to continue bringing us food. But most people were bystanders. I've been back to Vienna a few times since, but I don't think of it as my home. ■



Revisiting Vienna. Left to right Rita (Edith's daughter), Sigmund, me, Caryl, Leatrice, Edith



With Sigmund outside our apartment we had left in 1939, when we first returned to Vienna in 2009



My name amongst 20,000 others on the wall of the Jewish Museum, Shanghai

Return to Shanghai

IN FEBRUARY 2019 I returned to Shanghai for the first time after 71 years. My wife Caryl, our older daughter Amanda, and her husband Harvey came with me. Much of the area where I lived had hardly changed at all. I went back to the synagogue that's now a museum dedicated to the Jews who were saved in Shanghai. There is a wall there with 20,000 names of every Jew who lived in Shanghai, in alphabetical order. I walked in and found my name. I showed it to the people working there. They said to me, "This is very rare. Most people are so old that they've passed away." Out of those 20,000 people, I'm not sure if there are even 1,000 who are still alive. The museum filmed me when I went to visit. They told me there's so much interest now in the Jews of Shanghai that they had been given Government money to expand the museum four times, but they hadn't got enough material to fill it.

All my life, my main 'crime' has been that I've bought too many books. I started buying them 50 years ago, but I was always so busy working that I didn't have time to read many of them. I've always been interested in what happened to our people – Jewish history and the Holocaust, particularly survivors' memoirs – I could never resist a book on the subject. I must have bought 50,000 books in my lifetime. Luckily, I have a very tolerant wife – and a big garage. I never smoked, or played golf – books were my passion. I have about 20 memoirs of people who lived with us in Shanghai; reading those brought back lots of memories. I used to sell books at Greenwich Market for a few years; it was a hobby for me but I had to stop eventually. I still have 10,000 books for which I have to find a home.

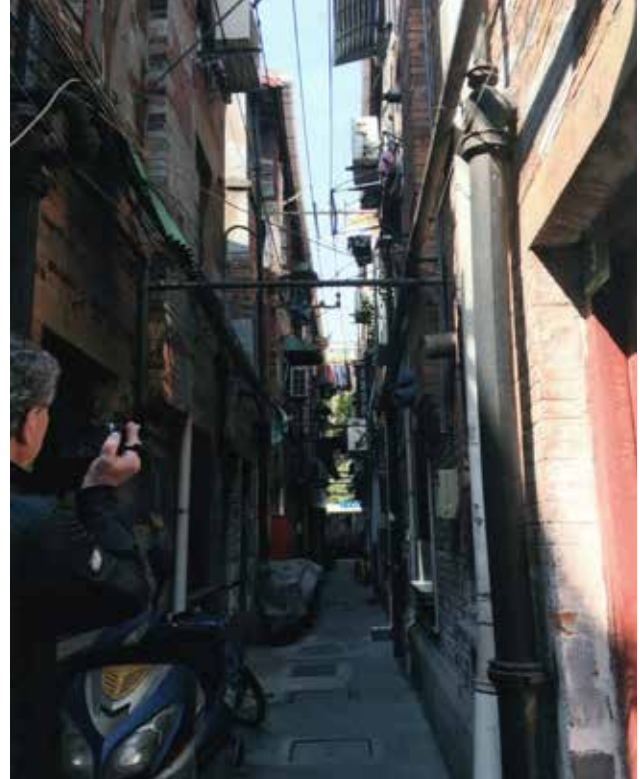
As I toured the museum, I noticed that they hardly had any books. I told them that if they were interested, and could arrange shipment from London to Shanghai, I would donate my collection of books and they could have a predominantly Jewish library. After visiting Shanghai I arranged for around 8,500 of my books – mainly about Jewish history and the Holocaust – to be shipped at the end of 2019. The library was opened in October 2020 in the name of my parents, Moritz and Josefine Wickelholz. (My father died in the late 1960s of a heart attack, and my mother died in the early 1990s). They phoned me from Shanghai to invite me to the opening, but unfortunately, I wasn't able to go because of the pandemic. Instead, I was interviewed remotely by the newspapers and Shanghai television.



Return to Shanghai in 2019 with Amanda and Harvey

I started giving talks about the Jews of Shanghai a few years ago, to community groups. It's such a little-known part of the Holocaust story, which people are very interested to hear about. Most don't know about what happened there. It was a miracle we heard about the Jews going from Italy to Shanghai, and we went by default because the rest of the world was closed to us. We made a little Vienna there, cut off from the horrors of Europe. It was pretty safe for us, as long as we didn't annoy the Japanese.

So that is My Story. I am now 83 years old and Caryl and I have been married for 56 years – happy and safe in this country. Thanks to us going to Shanghai there are now over 40 people alive who would not be here otherwise. ■



A lane in Shanghai now, similar to where we lived during the war



On holiday with Caryl in Israel



With my darling wife Caryl



My wonderful family at my grandson Harry's *bar mitzvah* in December 2021.



About the AJR

Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional groups offering members a unique opportunity to socialise in their local area. Members receive support from volunteers and can obtain advice and assistance on welfare rights as well as on Holocaust reparations.

The AJR is committed to the education of future generations about the Holocaust and is now the UK's largest benefactor of education and memorialisation programmes and projects which promote teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

About 70,000 refugees, including approximately 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, arrived in Great Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s. The AJR extends membership to anyone who fled a Nazi-occupied country as a Jewish refugee or who arrived in Great Britain as a Holocaust survivor. We also welcome the descendants and spouses of the refugees as members.



“It was a miracle we heard about the Jews going from Italy to Shanghai, and we went by default because the rest of the world was closed to us. We made a little Vienna there, cut off from the horrors of Europe. It was pretty safe for us, as long as we didn’t annoy the Japanese.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk