Ruth Tanner

Wartime Experience: Fled to Shanghai

In March 1938, I was a patriotic Austrian schoolgirl in Vienna, trying to convince my ailing grandmother that she had to go to the voting polls to assure Austria's independence as each vote was so very important. Well, my grandma was spared the trouble of going to the polls--Hitler's troops marched in the night before the election after Austria's Chancellor Schuschnigg abdicated. My father had served in the Austrian army during World War I and started to wear his Iron Cross medal, hoping that this would help him. We soon found out that the only badge that was recognized and treated with respect by the authorities was the Hakenkreuz. The Hakenkreuz worn as a lapel button denoted that its wearer had been an "Illegaler," meaning that he had belonged to the Nazi Party when it was illegal in Austria.

My parents, Ignaz Fleischer and Margarethe (Grete) nee Priefer, as well as I were all born in Vienna. My dad's family consisted of his parents, Herman and Adele Fleischer, his sister Lore and brother Karl. Lore was single and Karl had married a Catholic woman who had a son from a previous marriage. He was a year older than I. My parents and I did not see the Fleischer side of the family often but always visited on Mother's Day. I distinctly remember the flowerpots we took to Grandma Fleischer each year and the living Christmas tree in Uncle Karl's house. The Priefers observed all the major Jewish holidays in my parents/maternal grandparent's house. We lived in the same flat with my maternal grandparents, Moritz and Sabine Priefer, until our immigration. My maternal grandmother was right out of the textbooks. Her children revered her and she expected all of them at her Shabbat table. Grandma's sister Marianne Mayer and her daughter Lony often joined us and always were at our Seder evenings. A great deal of fuss was made over Passover. We children had to take naps in the afternoon so we could stay up for the lengthy Seder observation. We had our first taste of wine! Lony was my first French teacher when I was five, and later my mother arranged for me to have piano lessons. All that came to an abrupt halt with the arrival of the Nazis.

By November 10, 1938, members of my family had had a number of unpleasant experiences, including altercations between some Nazi boys and me. We all had begun to realize that we were powerless and that there were no laws that protected Jews. When one of my uncles was detained on Kristallnacht and was almost deported to a concentration camp, the family decided that we no longer could afford to wait for visas and chose to go to the only place in the world that did not require one- Shanghai, China. The advantage of that decision was that not only did my parents and grandparents emigrate at the same time, but all of my mother's brothers, their wives and children and the in-laws of some of them left on the same train to embark on the Conte Biancamano from Genoa to Shanghai via the Suez Canal, Bombay, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Singapore, Manila, and Hong Kong. In all, there were 36 of us who either were related or betrothed to a family member of one kind or another. We were blessed in that regard, although we could not persuade my paternal grandmother and maiden aunt to come with us

These aunts led a very simple, humble life in a predominantly non-Jewish neighborhood. My paternal grandfather had been a barber in that location for many years prior to his death. Those two ladies felt that no one would harm them. How wrong they were! They ended in Auschwitz after having been deported to Theresienstadt. Adele and Lore Fleischer were just another two of the six million who were exterminated by Hitler's henchmen.

My Uncle Karl did not want to leave Europe and escaped to France without papers where he later served in the French Foreign Legion. His wife committed suicide during the war years after her son from an earlier marriage denounced her to his Hitler Youth commandant as-having committed "Rassenschande" (disgrace to the race) by having been married to Uncle Karl, a Jew.

Upon arrival in Shanghai, we were met by representatives of the Shanghai Jewish community and transported on the back of a truck to a very nice office building not far from the Bund, where we had landed. In retrospect, I see it now as an efficient handling station for transients. As a frightened child in February 1939, I asked my mother when I could have a bite to eat from the rolls she had taken along from our last breakfast on the ship. My parents had also bought with the last remains of their "board" money (Italian lire), a huge salami which I didn't dare hope my mother would cut in to. In fact, that salami sustained us for many weeks. My parents and I spent only two nights there I believe, sleeping on camp beds and receiving a hot meal or two. All the immigrants tried to find housing on their own with the very limited means at their disposal. My father, a goldsmith, had the foresight to bring his tools along to Shanghai and found a jewelry store owned by a Portuguese Jew that had a back room. The owner gladly offered it to my dad for a workshop. Thus, we were among the few fortunate ones who could take care of themselves in what soon turned out be a middle-class lifestyle.

We first lived in one room that served as bedroom, kitchen and living room for the three of us. My mother prepared meals on a camp stove set on top of our ship trunk. (My daughter now has that very same trunk. It's well traveled.) Our landlady was a Russian Jew who had been married, at one point, to a Chinese general and had four children of different nationalities. One had Chinese citizenship due to his father's nationality, but the others were American, British, and Portuguese. Our landlady went to Hong Kong to give birth to the child that could obtain British papers due to Hong Kong being a British Crown Colony. Her second child was born on an U.S. vessel on the high seas and thus acquired U.S. citizenship; and the third one was born in Macao, a Portuguese colony at the time. This savvy lady advised my mother to send me to a British public school, for which I am grateful. As my father's income increased, we moved to better living quarters.

We were significantly impacted by the events at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The Japanese army took control over the former International Settlement and the French Concession, where my family lived. They started interning British and American Nationals. In June 1942, they closed my school before I could take my Senior Cambridge Examination. I continued my studies at the Shanghai Business College, administrated by Miss Figueroa, a Filipino.

In May 1943, the Japanese issued a proclamation, that all stateless people--those who had fled the Nazis-- had to move into a Designated Area or DA. This meant loss of livelihood for many, inferior living accommodations and cessation of my schooling. Only those who were employed by people who were not stateless were able to apply for permits to leave the Area.

In order for my father to continue working at the same place, he had to apply for a permit to leave the D.A. The Japanese official who was in charge of issuing permits was a small, tyrannical individual who liked to refer to himself as "King of the Jews." This man, named Goya, appeared at a sports ground that my friends and I had frequented before, when we were playing volleyball. At the sight of him, our game slowed down and he bellowed at us, "Who gave you permission to play here?" Nobody wanted to single himself out by answering, so Goya asked, "Who's in charge?" and again no one answered. He repeated the question a couple times more, getting angrier each time, when I decided it would only get worse, so I spoke up and said, "No one is in charge," whereupon he dismissed everyone but me. He asked for my name and my family and after a few minutes he accused me of being an American spy because I spoke English so well. He hit me in the face a few times and ordered me to appear in his office the following day. This man was known to have incarcerated people, refugees like me, for no reason, in the dirty police station where his office was located, pending investigation. Some of these poor souls contracted typhus or cholera there and died soon after. I did not look forward to my visit with Mr. Goya, who greeted me by throwing an inkwell at me. He then continued to harangue me, like the day before; however, he allowed me to go home and told me to come to his office in a few days with my father. He kept this up for a while until, I believe, he saw that I was truly afraid of him. He did not take my father's permit away, but my dad had run-ins with other Japanese who thought that he might be dealing in platinum for war purposes and locked him up a number of times. We thought we had gotten away with just the scare, but I firmly believe that my father's premature death at the age of 52 from a heart attack was brought on by all the stress he suffered during the war years.

We had food rationing, gas and electricity quotas, blackouts, and air raids; but the worst was the fear created by the uncertainty of what the Japanese Occupation Forces could do to us at will. Rumors abounded; one of them was that the Nazis had requested the Japanese to send all of the stateless people to an island for extermination. World War II finally ended in August 1945.

I soon started to work for the U.S. Army Exchange Service, first as a secretary and later as the manager of a US Army Sales Store that housed 36 concessions. In the winter of 1946, I received a three -day TOY (Temporary Duty) assignment to fly to Nanking as a witness for the US Army. I flew there in a C-46 transport plane with metal bucket seats. Two US soldiers were on trial for damaging property that I had to appraise - me, the 'maven' on plaster of Paris dragons and tigers!

At about the same time, Austrian passports were made available to us. Everyone in our family applied for them to use as travelling documents. Everyone also registered at the U.S. consulate for immigration visas. My future husband, Fred Tanner, and his mother did the same. Fred and

I met when we had to move into the Designated Area. Our meeting was the only good thing to come out of that move. The Austrian consul married Fred and me on November 7, 1948, and we were married in the temple by Rabbi Ashkenazi on December 5, 1948, which is the day we celebrated. We needed Austrian passports for our intended honeymoon trip to Hong Kong, which we had planned to take place after our religious ceremony. It did not materialize, as the Chinese Communists were approaching Shanghai at a rapid rate, and we were afraid that we might be stuck in Hong Kong, leaving our parents and our personal belongings still in Shanghai.

My uncles applied for permits to go to Australia, and some of my family left before our wedding. Quota numbers to immigrate to the U.S. were slow in coming for Austrians. In February 1949, we were told that temporary visas to Canada were available for Austrian citizens. You had to have enough money to get there, and to deposit sufficient funds for the fare from Canada to Austria as a guarantee that the Canadian government could deport you to Austria at your own expense. We couldn't believe that Canada was opening its doors as a waiting room for refugees wanting to immigrate to the U.S. But it was true. My parents, Fred and I and his mother and maiden aunt all obtained Canadian visas and booked our passage on the U.S.S. Wilson for a May 25, 1949 departure. The U.S.S. Wilson never made it to Shanghai, as Mao Tse Tung's troops entered Shanghai on that day. We had sent our household goods ahead, packed in the Chinese chests we owned.

My mother-in-law lived across Shanghai's Garden Bridge, about an hour's bus ride from where we lived. She visited us on May 24th and called us the next morning with the news that Communist soldiers had occupied her section of town. She also had a harrowing experience trying to get home. Buses and streetcars did not go the usual distance. She had to use pedi-cabs and rickshaws for whatever distance they would take her, as nobody wanted to stray very far from where they were. We had given up our apartments and now had to find rooms. In September 1949, the first ship was allowed to enter Shanghai harbor to evacuate all who had the means to go elsewhere. We considered ourselves fortunate to board the troop transport SS Gordon and share our sleeping quarter with hundreds of women.

As we neared the Golden Gate early in the morning, we rushed out of our bunks to the top to see the long- awaited shores. Upon Fred's return to his bunk, he found the longshoremen stripping the bedding, and his wallet with $200 cash was gone. Since he was not able to point to a person who might have taken it, the police said they could not do anything about the theft. Two hundred dollars was a lot of money in 1946, especially for a young immigrant. We got over it soon enough in the excitement of landing in the U.S. Elaborate arrangements had been made between the Canadian and US Governments in preparation for our arrival in San Francisco in October 1949. In order not to lose our place on the waiting list for our immigration quota numbers, we were not allowed to step on U.S. soil. The U.S. government accommodated us by placing wooden pallets on the ground from dockside to the buses that transported us to the "bonded" train that took us to Canada accompanied by U.S. marshals. We were allowed off the train only in Vancouver, where we were met by a lovely group of Jewish people, who treated us to a sightseeing tour with their own cars and hosted us for the day prior to our getting on a

train to Montreal. We stayed in Montreal for a year and a half. During that time, on March 4, 1950, my father died.

In March 1951, we finally immigrated to the U.S., five years after applying for our visas. My mother and I were the only two out of the 36 who left Vienna together in 1939. My grandparents had died in Shanghai, and the others gave up waiting and opted to go to Australia. We took the train from Montreal to New York and were met by Fred's cousins at the station and marched over to the subway to Brooklyn. Our dream was to live in San Francisco, but we were happy to find jobs that allowed us to live in New York for four months so that we could see some of the sights.

We also connected with my mother's cousin, Hedy Porges, who had come to the States in 1939. She wanted to visit her sister, Jean Herley in California during her kids' summer vacation. So we took off in July in two cars to go west via Route 66 . How exciting - ah, to be young! I now wonder how our mothers felt. We had a second cousin in San Francisco, Ingrid Wilmot, who had been helpful with our household goods and now put us up for the first few days. We soon found work and an apartment.

Fred worked for over 25 years for the Bank of America and died one and a half years after retiring. I worked as a secretary and office manager from 1949 until 1965, with short interruptions when Sandy was born. In 1965, we moved to Marin County, and I retired to full time motherhood and wifehood and part time volunteer. I became quite active in Women's American ORT, becoming its chapter president twice and serving at the Regional and National level. In 1969, I also started my own business, Tanner Business Services, which I still conduct today.

In June 1955, our daughter Sandra was born. She started moving to music from the day she was born, and at the age of four, she received her first dance lessons. She continued her studies at the San Francisco Ballet and Marin Ballet Company until she left for college. In June of 1979, she received a Master of Fine Arts from New York University. She went on to perform. choreograph and teach. While a professor of dance at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, she met her husband, Tom Mack. Soon after their engagement, they decided to make California their permanent home. Unfortunately, my darling husband died in June 1986, a week before their move to California. Since then, Sandra and Tom have lived in Marin County with their two lovely children, Lauren Tanner Mack, born August 1, 1987, and Gregory Tanner Mack, born April 10, 1990. They are the apples of my eye. I am very blessed to have the same tight-knit relationship with them as my mother had with her family.

In reviewing my life, I have always felt fortunate that I was as young as I was when Hitler caused my family to flee from Vienna. My parents had to face the grave responsibilities and make the hard decisions. As a child I was unhappy, as were many others, passionate in my beliefs that good had to prevail and blessed that I had family around me. My parents afforded me not only as good an education as possible, but with a spirit of hope and courage. Due to circumstances

beyond my control, I have seen many places and met many people of diverse backgrounds that still make me feel optimistic.

My father's and husband's premature deaths I ascribe to the hardships they endured during their lifetime. Fred, I believe, never reached his full potential, but was a very wise man, who made peace with his circumstances. He was a loving father, husband, and son. His greatest achievement, on which I collaborated, is our daughter.

My photo shows me sitting on a camphor chest that my parents had given me for my birthday a few days before the end of the war. People did not want to be encumbered by large possessions, and my parents paid only $5 for it. The antique porcelain plate next to me was a gift from my husband before we were married.

This is my story to date. To be continued ...