

# Community News

## From Shanghai to Charlotte

By Linda Griffith

When I first heard Frank Osborn's story, I thought it had all the makings of an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, but with a slightly unusual religious twist. Two young people flee Holocaust Germany in the 1930s and both end up in, of all places, Shanghai, China. They meet, fall in love, and before you know it, Frank Osborn is born.

But who has ever heard of Jews in Shanghai? I certainly hadn't. So before I even met with Frank, my research put his remarkable story into the greater context of a mass exodus to those foreign shores, which had become a safe haven for as many as 20,000 Jews during World War II.



Frank Osborne in front of the home he was born in, in Shanghai.

Frank has lived in Charlotte since the mid '90s, a far cry from his birthplace in the Hongkew district of Shanghai where he spent the first two years of his life. His family lived in one bedroom of a small house shared with three other families - a group home, known as a "Heime." Common space was comprised of a single bathroom and a tiny kitchen. Although conditions were cramped by any standard, Frank's parents considered themselves fortunate to be relatively free in Shanghai as opposed to being persecuted in war torn Europe. How ironic that those far flung shores, despite being under Japanese occupation, provided more accessible shelter for refugees than ports closer to their European homes.

His father, Max Oschitzki, born in 1903, was a musician by profession and had fled to Shanghai in 1939 along with two of his four siblings. Shanghai was one of the few cities which one could enter "freely," without visas or immigration constraints. Known as an "open city," the number of Jews who sought refuge in Shanghai equaled those fleeing to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Indian and Canada combined, roughly 20,000 in total. His mother, Alice, born in 1911, was sent to chaperone her younger sister in 1939, leaving three siblings behind in Germany. Documents confirming the extermination of Alice's remaining family in

Theresienstadt have been recently donated to the Holocaust museum and are currently being translated.

Despite their horrific torture of the Chinese, the occupying Japanese were relatively lenient towards the Jews and resisted Nazi pressure to eradicate the immigrants. In 1943, in the face of continued German interference, the Japanese rounded 18,000 Jews into a ¼-square mile area which became the Hongkew ghetto in the center of Shanghai. There they were left to their own devices and lived in relative peace. As a service to the Japanese, Max was required to walk bombing patrols after the Allied bombing raids to curtail looters in the wake of the devastation but apart from that service, he was free to conduct his life within comparatively normal parameters.

As the Jews assimilated and carved out an existence for themselves, life began to take on an almost European flavor. With characteristic entrepreneurship, the immigrants tried to reestablish their former lives, professions and talents. They built a community brimming with culture. Sports, theater, newspapers, restaurants, and bakeries thrived within the confines of the ghetto, so much so that it became dubbed "Little Vienna." Frank's father gathered together sufficient musicians to establish an orchestra, the member of which were all of European origin. These men remained lifelong friends long after they had left China and relocated to America, brought together by circumstance and talent and bound thereafter by a unique experience in a foreign land.

The Jews in Shanghai more or less existed in a bubble. They



Max Oschitzki's orchestra in Shanghai. Max is front and center.

relied on the Chinese for boiled water, raw materials and utilities, and most people spoke sufficient Chinese to get by. A photograph taken at Frank's first birthday party shows that his parents did have Chinese acquaintances; however, almost all of the social and economic interaction took place within the Jewish community. Apart from a few artifacts gathered during their time in Shanghai, the one enduring influence his parents lives in China had on Frank was the spectacularly authentic Chinese cooking skills his mother mastered and continued to use throughout her life.

As China fell to communism in 1949, Frank's parents, along with almost all the Jewish population sought the security of foreign

shores. Yet again their circumstances reduced them to refugee status for three years and the family spent eight months in a tented camp outside Rome. During this time, the Oschitzki family attempted entry into the United States, taking a boat to San Francisco, spending five days crossing the country aboard a locked train, only to reach Ellis Island and be refused immigrant status. They were literally shipped back to Italy where they returned to the refugee camp to await a second chance. Sadly, Frank's younger brother Peter, born during this period, succumbed to malnutrition and died in Italy before the family was eventually granted papers to join his maternal aunt in Canada. Having acquired Canadian citizenship after five years in Montreal, the family moved to Florida to join an uncle in 1955, where at last they put down permanent roots in American soil. Max and brothers changed their names to Osborne when Frank was in 9th grade. Upon turning 21, Frank relinquished in Chinese passport, thereby closing the door on an era he though would remain nothing more than a vague memory.

This past summer Frank and his wife Barbara embarked on a remarkable trip to China and reopened that door. They spent three days in the vibrant, thriving city of Shanghai which gave them a chance to delve into Frank's early childhood. A guide was able to locate the address from his birth certificate to the house where he was born. It still stands today and is home to numerous families. The current owner appeared while they were photographing the exterior and kindly offered to show them around inside. How remarkable that almost 55 years later, the house still offers shelter to a large number of people, eking out an existence, in cramped and difficult circumstances, people who are not entirely free and yet are grateful for the security and shelter of a shared roof over their heads.

Frank was even more amazed that the Ohel-Moishe Synagogue, built in 1929, and where his parents were married, is one of two synagogues still remaining in Shanghai and was the center of religious activities for refugees during wartime. It has recently been converted into a museum, and services are not held there. In the museum is a book documenting the names of all the German immigrants who had fled the Holocaust, and to his delight, Frank located the Oschitzki name inscribed therein for posterity.

A remarkable story of a family crisscrossing the globe in search of peace and acceptance, they countries they visited acted as stepping stone when the water was turbulent. As travel to China becomes increasingly popular, perhaps we can look forward to discovering more about this part of our history. There are currently

200 practicing Jews in Shanghai, a mere sprinkling of the former population, and we can be grateful they are keeping the Chinese-Jewish relationship alive. Frank Osborne's story is a testament to the resilience of the Jewish faith, and he is a credit to the pains his parents took to ensure his freedom. ☆

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