

George Reinisch

Title: *Shanghai Haven*

Author: George Reinisch

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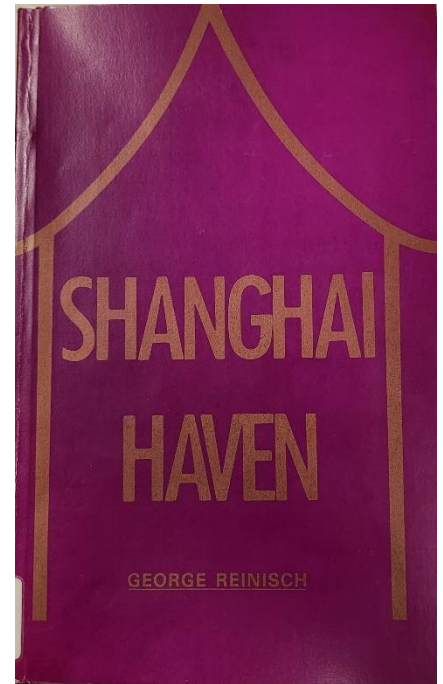
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, University of Melbourne, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Austria: Vienna; China: Shanghai, Hongkew; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Jewish refugee; Japanese-occupation; Hongkew ghetto.



Shanghai Haven is the 104-page memoir of Austrian child survivor George Reinisch whose parents fled to Shanghai following *Kristallnacht* when he was an infant. He endured the war years in the Hongkew ghetto before emigrating to Melbourne in 1949.

Pages 1-35 briefly recount the author's life in Nazi-occupied Vienna before giving a pre-war history of Shanghai. Pages 36-74 describe his family's flight to Shanghai in 1939 and wartime experiences. Pages 75-85 recount the Japanese surrender, post-war years, and the family's emigration to Melbourne in 1947. Pages 86-104 cover the history of post-1949 Shanghai.

George Reinisch was born on 28 April 1938 in Vienna, six weeks after the Nazi *Anschluss*, the only child of Ida (née Glass) and Bernard Reinisch. His father, a sales representative in a Jewish hardware store, was dismissed when the business was Aryanised, and the family lived off their savings while he took work at a Jewish soup kitchen. As decrees were enacted, their household maid, who was like a member of the family, was forced to resign under laws forbidding "Aryan" women to work in Jewish households.

As life under these restrictions became intolerable, the Reinisch family sought to emigrate, but delays forced them to remain in Vienna. In November 1938, *Kristallnacht* devastated the Jewish community. Now desperate – and as emigration to Western countries proved too difficult – they decided on the open-city of Shanghai.

With maternal relatives already in Shanghai, Ida secured documents, passports and passage, an exhausting process that depleted the family resources. Heavy taxation of Jewish property brought bankruptcy to the Reinisch family, who were forced to sell their possessions at a fraction of their worth. After their apartment was requisitioned by a

Nazi official and using the last of their funds, the family purchased passage on the Italian liner *Giulio Cesare*, departing from Trieste in August 1939, shortly before Shanghai closed its borders to refugees

Arrival in Shanghai brought them to the International Settlement and the district of Hongkew – the poorest district, where European refugees were concentrated. With the help of relatives, they secured accommodation in a dormitory for refugees, but conditions were severely overcrowded and unsanitary. Many refugees were malnourished, pests and rodents infested houses, and disease was rampant. The streets of Hongkew were littered with garbage, flies, the sick, and corpses.

His parents took odd jobs before finding employment at a German handbag factory. Bernard was successful in making many contacts in the industry. After a fallout with the owner, George's father established a small workshop with the help of Chinese workers. Through his connections, Bernard was able to secure visas for his parents, despite new migration restrictions.

Sometime in 1940, George's grandparents arrived. The growing success of the business enabled the family to relocate to a larger apartment and obtain slightly better living conditions. His grandparents moved in with the family and began assisting in the business, establishing the workshop in their home. The household achieved modest stability, although conditions were crowded and ill-health still plagued the family.

Following onset of the Pacific War in 1941, conditions further deteriorated. In November 1942, Japanese authorities confined Jews to a designated area of Hongkew, effectively creating a ghetto. Identity cards and travel permits were issued and wartime scarcity intensified. Compounding food shortages, gas, coal and electricity were severely limited, leading Ida to cook using a combination of wood, paper and garbage. Japanese soldiers patrolled the streets and menaced the population, particularly targeting British and Chinese civilians, as well as imprisoning Jewish refugees found without papers. As the war progressed, epidemics, hunger and poverty took many lives.

To survive, George's parents worked tirelessly amidst rising inflation, although illness and malnourishment took a toll on their health and George's mother was bed-ridden for several weeks. Living conditions continued to deteriorate as their home workspace became crowded with Chinese workers. Compounding their fears, reports of Nazi death camps filtered in from Europe.

Despite these difficulties, in 1943 George was enrolled in a Jewish school. That same year, his grandmother died of heart problems and, due to material shortages, was buried in a bamboo coffin. In 1944 the Allied bombing of Shanghai began. Without shelters, the family hid on the ground floor of their building during raids.

In August 1945, following the Japan surrender American troops arrived, lifting restrictions and bringing relief to the refugees. Soldiers often visited the Reinisch home, sharing meals and offering goods and luxuries such as chocolate. The family business

continued and life improved. George excelled at school, later gaining admission to Seymour College, where he studied a curriculum that included Latin and Chinese.

However, with the American departure, inflation again soared. The Chinese civil war and the approach of communist forces in 1946–47 brought renewed fears of persecution. With the help of the UNRRA, many refugees were repatriated or resettled. Determined to escape, the Reinisch family appealed to contacts worldwide. Through friends in Melbourne they secured landing permits for Australia, and with assistance from the Joint Distribution Committee obtained passage. In February 1947 George, his parents and grandfather arrived in Sydney, later settling in Melbourne.

Part memoir, part history, *Shanghai Haven* provides an eloquently written account of the author's wartime experiences in Shanghai, alongside a carefully researched history of the city. Alternating between personal reminiscence and broader historical analysis, the memoir offers a vivid portrait of the daily life of Jewish refugees in wartime Shanghai, as well as a wide-ranging account of the city's political, social and environmental history. The memoir does not extend to George's life in Australia.