

Gertrude Speiser

Title: *Trude's Story: A journey from Vienna via Shanghai to Melbourne*

Author: Gertrude Speiser

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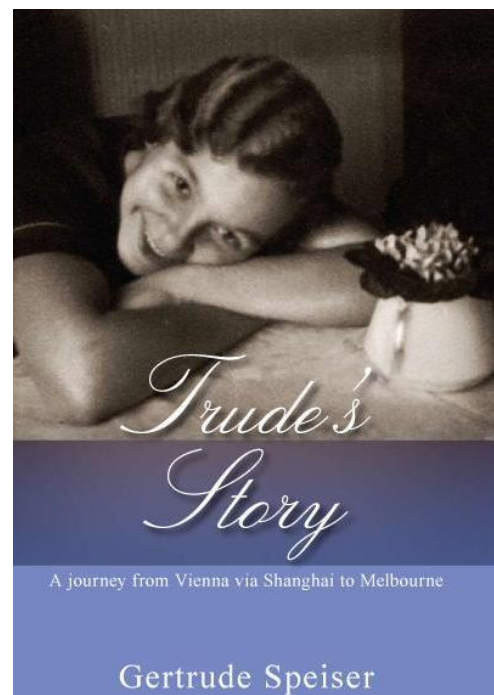
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Holocaust Museum, State Library of Victoria and National Library of Australia.

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

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

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: *Anschluss*; *Kristallnacht*; Jewish refugee.



Trude's Story is the 126-page memoir of Austrian survivor, Gertrude Speiser, who fled to Shanghai in the wake of *Kristallnacht*. Ten years later, she emigrated to Melbourne with her young family to start a new life.

Pages 1-20 briefly recount the author's family history and life in Vienna. Pages 21-30 describe the Nazi occupation of Austria, *Kristallnacht*, and her flight to Shanghai with her sister and brother-in-law. Pages 31-60 recount their life in Shanghai from 1939-49 and internment in the Hongkew ghetto. Pages 61-111 describe their subsequent emigration to and life in Melbourne. Pages 112-126 provide family photographs and a historical timeline.

Gertrude Speiser (née Laster) was born in Vienna 29 August 1915 to middle-class parents, Sofie Baron and Herman Laster. She had an older sister, Meli. In March 1938, when she was aged 22, Nazi Germany annexed Austria. Subsequently, Meli was fired from her job and the family experienced increasing antisemitic discrimination. In July 1938, Meli married professional photographer Steve Koenig. On the day of the wedding, her uncle was accosted on the street by a Nazi soldier and publicly humiliated by being forced to scrub the streets.

On 9 November 1938, during *Kristallnacht*, two Nazis arrived at the Laster home, arrested Steve, and forced him to assist in looting Jewish homes. After two days in custody he was released, but other members of the extended family were deported to concentration camps.

In the aftermath, the Laster family – along with many relatives and friends – made desperate plans to flee Austria. Emigration to Western countries proved impossible, so

they turned to China. The gruelling process of securing the necessary documents from Nazi authorities to enable departure drained the family's financial resources. Due to the extreme stress, Gertrude's father suffered a heart attack and was hospitalised, delaying his emigration.

After finally receiving all the necessary papers in January 1939, Gertrude, Meli and Steve booked passage to Shanghai from Genoa. While traveling to Genoa, Steve was briefly arrested by Italian authorities. The women were forced to continue on to Genoa and board the ship alone. Thankfully, Steve was released two days later and reunited with the women as the ship docked in Naples. They arrived in Shanghai on 24 February 1939. Their parents followed in July.

As conditions in Hongkew were appalling, they settled in the Ward Road refugee camp with the help of Jewish organisations. Gertrude learned English in hope of emigrating to the West. She obtained work at a children's home in the Western District, where living conditions were better, then as a live-in-maid for a British family living in the French Concession.

Following the onset of the Pacific War in December 1941, Japanese forces occupied Shanghai, and the British family employing Gertrude was increasingly harassed by Japanese police. In February 1941, her father tragically died due to his heart condition.

In February 1943, the Japanese authorities declared all Jews in Shanghai to be stateless refugees and designated the Hongkew district as a ghetto. All Jewish refugees were forcibly relocated there and the area quickly became overcrowded. Gertrude lived in a single room in a three-bedroom house that had no kitchen or bathroom. During this time, her future husband, Leo, became a regular visitor and the two fell in love.

A Jewish committee, the Shanghai Ashkenazi Collaborating Relief Association (SACRA), secured housing in the area for Meli and Steve. As the war progressed, food and resources became increasingly scarce, and the community began to rely heavily on aid from the UNRRA.

In July 1944, Meli and Steve welcomed daughter Rachel. In September, American air raids over Shanghai began and intensified in the last months of the war. During this time, the SACRA courtyard was destroyed by a stray bomb, mere minutes after Gertrude with baby Rachel had left. Unharmred, the Laster family sheltered under desk tables at a nearby school as raids continued. When they were able to return, they found their homes covered in dust and debris.

After Japan's surrender in August 1945, the city saw an influx of American troops and the Laster family obtained work with the U.S. Army supply department. As Jewish refugees began making plans to emigrate, Gertrude contacted a childhood friend who had emigrated to Melbourne after *Kristallnacht* to see if she could secure landing permits for them. While awaiting papers, she worked in a weaving factory.

In March 1946, Gertrude and Leo were married. Their daughter, Irene Esther, was born in January 1948 under difficult conditions – with Gertrude suffering from jaundice and driven to the hospital in a rickshaw while in labour.

Finally, in February 1949, shortly after Irene's first birthday, the Speiser family received their landing permits and left Shanghai with Steve, Meli, and Rachel. They boarded an American-chartered flight to Melbourne via Darwin, where they were aided by the Jewish Welfare Society. Three months later, Gertrude's mother joined them. After three years in Australia, the family became naturalized citizens. Their son Jerry was born in 1953.

Trude's Story is a lucid memoir recounting the author's experiences as a Jewish refugee in wartime Shanghai and her resettlement in Australia. Interwoven with original German poetry, the narrative is episodic and does not detail Nazi policies or wartime events. Instead, it offers a valuable contribution to the genre of women's wartime testimony, emphasizing the everyday realities of displacement and survival, and prioritising social, familial, and domestic concerns over political or military developments. It was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community Library's "Write Your Story" program.