



# Strange Haven: A JEWISH CHILDHOOD IN WARTIME SHANGHAI

*Sigmund Tobias*

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## **Strange Haven: A JEWISH CHILDHOOD IN WARTIME SHANGHAI** Sigmund Tobias

In the wake of Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, Sigmund Tobias and his parents made plans to flee a Germany that was becoming increasingly dangerous for them. Like many other European Jews, they faced the impossibility of obtaining visas to enter any other country in Europe or almost anywhere else in the world. One city offered shelter without requiring a visa: the notorious pleasure capital, Shanghai. Seventeen thousand Jewish refugees flocked to Hongkew, a section of Shanghai ruled by the Japanese. Beginning in December 1938 these refugees created an active community that continued to exist through the end of the war and was dissolved by the early 1950s. In this exotic sanctuary, Sigmund Tobias grew from a six-year-old child to an adolescent. Strongly attracted by the discipline and rigor of Talmudic study, Tobias entered the Mirrer Yeshiva, a rabbinical seminary transplanted from the Polish city of Mir. The money and food the 1,200 refugees of the Yeshiva received from the American Jewish community made them a privileged elite within the Shanghai Jewish community. Tobias' own coming-of-age story unfolds within his descriptions of Jewish life in Shanghai. Depleted by disease and hunger, constantly struggling with primitive and crowded conditions, the refugees faced shortages of food, clothing, and medicine that became increasingly severe as the war continued. Tobias observes the under life of Shanghai: the prostitution and black market profiteering, the brutal lives of the Chinese workers, the tensions between Chinese and Japanese during the war, and the paralyzing inflation and the approach of the communist 'liberators' afterward. Sheltered from what was happening in Europe, Tobias recounts the anguish of the refugees when news of the Holocaust finally reached them. Richly detailed, "Strange Haven" opens a little-documented chapter of the Holocaust and provides a fascinating glimpse of life for these foreigners in a foreign land. An epilogue describes the changes Tobias observed when he returned to Shanghai forty years later as a visiting professor.

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