

**Document 11.10: Excerpt from *Shanghai Diary: A Young Girl's Journey from Hitler's Hate to War-Torn China* by Ursula Bacon, 2002**

*While violence escalated in China and many Chinese escaped the coastal regions or China altogether, the Jewish population in Shanghai grew. Ursula Bacon fled Nazi Germany with her parents in 1939. They were among the last Jews to escape. They sailed from Genoa, Italy, to Shanghai, the only port in the world that did not require an entry visa. There they joined some 18,000 Jewish refugees. The family spent most of the war years in a Japanese-controlled "designated area," where the "Shanghai Jews" lived. In 1947, Ursula Bacon, like most of the Jewish refugees in the city, came to the United States.*

**Chapter 1 March 1939 – the Year of the Hare**

We made it! We escaped! Father, Mother, and I made it out of Germany in the middle of a cold, fog-shrouded March night. Stealing out of town like thieves, leaving the scene of the crime of being Jewish. I shall never, ever forget those last few days we spent at home. Horror, fear, and panic closed in on us like an evil fog, sinister and unforgiving. Like the whirlpools of a gray churning river it threatened to pull us down, swallow us and leave no sign of us behind. I don't want to remember getting my father out of the Gestapo prison. I'm petrified that just thinking about it could bring it all back. But we made it; we did!

At last, we were on board our ship. There I was—tucked away in my little pocket of a cabin adjacent to the bigger one of my parents, about to sail on the steamship, *Gneisenau*, on our way to China. Still docked in the harbor, we were not scheduled to depart for another three hours. My parents had locked themselves and me into our suite, afraid some Nazi could find us and order us off the ship. "After all," Mother remarked, "we are on a German ship and that is as good as being on German soil—Nazis everywhere." How we made it to Genoa is another story....

Actually, I was excited now that we were on our way to China. Just think, I was traveling to China! Nobody I knew had ever been to China—India, yes, but China, no. I kept thinking of what I had learned about that country... Marco Polo... big-bellied, golden Buddhas... lotus blossoms... cool green jade... ivory trinkets... pagodas... rickshaws.... dancing paper dragons... chopsticks, rice paddies, and water wheels...

When I read about that faraway land, I saw lovely pictures of dainty Chinese ladies in long silken gowns with velvet slippers on their tiny feet, strolling in beautiful gardens. Their shiny black hair was twisted and sculpted into tall hairdos that almost touched the gaily painted umbrellas that shielded them from the bright sun. Seven-story pagodas stood out against deep blue skies, butterflies fluttered about the snowy-white heads of huge chrysanthemums, and whimsical birds hovered over the branches of blossoming trees. Pristine water lilies floated on clear ponds, and colorful ceramic house gods squatted and scowled from the corners of slanted tile roofs, guarding the houses against evil spirits....

## **Chapter 2** *May 1939 – The Year of the Hare*

Shanghai's waterfront offered an imposing view of a wide street lined with massive stone buildings that ranged from square and squat to tall and towering. Colorful flags whipped gaily in the wind from several rooftops. Mutti [Mother] gasped, and pointed to a large, gray stone building. From its balcony flew the offensive red, white, and black flag of Hitler's German Reich—the huge, hateful swastika fluttered mockingly in the breeze under a clear china-blue sky.

My father took one look at the arrogant display of Nazi presence on foreign soil and turned to Mutti. "We shouldn't be surprised, after all. Don't you remember the Fuehrer's threatening promise? He said that his 'arm was long and would reach around the world.' We have come more than halfway across the globe," he sighed, "only to see that the madman kept his word."

Beginning to perspire profusely in the moist heat, we put our suitcases down and, as though looking for strength and encouragement from each other, held hands and began to take in the scenery around us. It was quite a sight!

Why, it was nothing like the pretty pictures of fragrant gardens, petite silk-clad ladies, butterflies, and flowers. The air was thick and moist, filled with the strangest pungent odors. Not at all pleasant. Mother insisted it was heavy with the smell of human excrement and urine. It turned out she was right.

Coolies in dark cotton pants and sweat-stained tunics, each with a wide, peaked straw hat tied under his chin, with flimsy straw sandals on bare feet, carried heavy loads suspended from a bamboo pole on his shoulders. The muscles on the calves of their legs bulged like knotted ropes. Their loud singsong, which sounded something like “Yeho-Heho,” mingled with the cries of street vendors offering their goods....

In this symphony of sounds and smells, filthy beggars—men, women, and children—their bodies barely covered by pitiful rags, exposing nasty sores—littered the dockside and packed every available nook and doorway of the handsome, broad riverfront street. In high singsong voices, they cried out for alms. Food peddlers cooked and fried their offerings over portable charcoal fires, and peddlers offered their wares from baskets suspended from a bamboo pole....

Like many of our fellow refugees, Mutti pressed a snowy handkerchief against her nose to ward off the offensive smells. Dressed in our thick European travel clothes, we soon were hot and sticky. Finally, several men appeared on the scene, and made their way to where we were waiting. They introduced themselves as representatives of the new Jewish community. One man stepped on a wooden box and over the din of the city tried to make himself heard.

His name was Werner Silberman, formerly of Berlin. He informed us that we would be transported to a place called Hongkou, an area adjacent to the International Settlement.

Hongkou had been “won” from the Chinese in 1937 by the Japanese war machine and was still occupied by the victors, who invited the Jews to settle there.

He went on to explain that Shanghai was divided into several areas: the International Settlement, leased by the British for ninety-nine years, was the heart of the city, beginning at the riverfront. Then there was the Concession Française, a pleasant residential area, tucked in where the International Settlement ended. The huge Chinese Quarter was off-limits to foreigners, he warned, unless of course a person wanted to vanish from the face of the earth....

Two large trucks rumbled toward our hot and weary group of travelers, which had thinned out a bit. Some of the refugees had been picked up by family members or friends who had preceded them to the Orient. How nice it must have been for them to be met by familiar faces—relatives who already knew their way around.

We crowded into the open truck bed, sat on our luggage, and held on to each other as the driver slowly weaved his way through the heavy traffic. When a big bridge came into view, we were told it was the Garden Bridge that crossed the Suzhou Creek and that it had two owners. The first half of the bridge belonged to the International Settlement, and the second half was claimed by the Japanese. Suzhou Creek divided the city into two territories: the English “occupied” International Settlement and the Japanese-occupied Hongkou. The first half of the bridge was patrolled by the British and the second half by Japanese soldiers. But just the same, people were free to come and go as they please. Sometimes the Japanese soldiers played the role of the big conqueror and pestered the Chinese citizens crossing the bridge by searching their meager bundles. More often than not, they confiscated a few handfuls of rice, food items, a trinket, or whatever caught their eyes. These two nations had hated each other for centuries. Chinese people called their enemy “apes.”...

Barely avoiding a collision with a wildly weaving, rattly old automobile, our driver suddenly turned away from the harbor side and entered the web of crowded, narrow,

intersecting streets of inner Hongkou. Finally, we came to a stop at a large, run-down building that squatted in an equally run-down courtyard, where a handful of refugees had gathered to greet the new arrivals.

A dark-haired lady in a simple cotton dress stepped forward when the truck squealed to a stop, and with a friendly smile welcomed us in a heavy, unmistakable Viennese dialect. We climbed down from the truck, grabbed our suitcases, and on unsteady sea legs, followed her into the building. A blending of fried onions, stewed cabbage, and a hint of 4711 Cologne greeted us when we entered a large hall-like room. Several rows of rough wooden tables and benches for eating and meeting occupied the center of the hall. The rest of the area was divided into cubicles equipped with two to four cots, which were separated from each other by flimsy sheets or thin blankets hung on clotheslines in an attempt to provide a semblance of privacy....

“Good God in Heaven,” [Father] whispered hoarsely, “what kind of a hellhole is this place? This is horrible! This country invented gun powder and porcelain before anyone else on the globe. The Chinese weave the most intricate patterns of fine silks, they carve ivory and jade pieces that defy European craftsmanship and artistry, but they can’t build a water closet, a bathtub, have clean water? This is the twentieth century. What have I done to us? What?”

He sat on his cot and buried his face in his hands. His body shook and harsh sounds of sobbing emerged from behind his slender fingers. I was stunned. My father—that strong, tall, erect man—was crying. I had never seen him like that. My whole insides quivered.

Mother stepped over to the huddled figure of despair, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, brought him close to her, and shushed him, speaking softly. I couldn’t hear what she was saying, but Vati [Father] soon recovered from this outburst and said good night in a quiet, controlled voice.

I stretched out on my cot and looked around me. Mutti had hung our traveling clothes from one of the rods that held the sheets dividing the cubicles. The main bare-bulb ceiling lights that illuminated the big hall were still on, and the place two hundred people or more called “home” for the night was buzzing with conversation. There was laughter, chattering, and visiting, without a thought for those bone-weary, worn-out souls who yearned for silence and sleep....

I must have been asleep for a while when I woke up to the heart-breaking sounds of Mutti’s soft sobbing.... I heard people talking in foreign languages, their voices hushed. Outside of our circle, people were coming and going in the night. Occasionally a child cried or a baby complained, and all around me were the unpleasant, clinging doers of crowded humanity.

Some of the lights had been turned off, but the big room was far from dark. I wanted to go to my mother’s side and say something nice to her, but I didn’t know the words. I was sad, forlorn, empty, and hollow. Purposefully, I forced my mind to reach back and create once again the soul-soothing images of the same dream, spun from yesterday’s beauty and safety.

Source: Bacon, Ursula. *Shanghai Diary: A Young Girl’s Journey from Hitler’s Hate to War-Torn China*. Milwaukie, OR: Milestone Books, 2002. 13, 21, 31-41.