

## **The SHANGHAI REUNION 2006**

### ***A Report by Peter Witting***

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April we twiddled our thumbs for our end of day departure for what was called the "last Reunion". Our flight with Malaysia Airlines via Kuala Lumpur was excellent as was the food and service. A slight hiccup at Pudong airport waiting 2 hours for the shuttle to the Regal International East Asia Hotel at 516 Hengshan Rd. in the former French Concession, was hard to take after a long flight. The usual hugs and kisses and tears were part of the scene upon arrival at the hotel, about 6.00pm on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> April, where we met up with our daughters Helen and Naomi, my sister Marion had joined us in Kuala Lumpur, and other good friends from Seattle. The hotel was very comfortable.

The official program began next morning, Wednesday 26 April, with a bus trip to the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai (CJSS) for a welcoming orientation and get-together. The Center, founded in 1988, is located on the campus of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in the heart of the city (622-7 Huai Hai Zhong Rd.) and features a permanent display on the history of the Jewish community in Shanghai. We were welcomed by the Dean of the Center Professor Pan Guang, Professor Zhang, Rene Willdorff the organizer of the Reunion, and various other Chinese officials.

We were given some background on the former Jewish communities in Shanghai and the present community, which numbers some 1,000 persons. Various publications produced by the Center on the Jewish communities were available for purchase. The CJSS specializes in Israel and Zionism as well as the history of Jews in China, which goes back about 1,000 years when Jews came from the Middle East along the Silk Route and settled in small numbers to trade in central Chinese cities such as Kaifeng. The next wave of Jewish settlers arrived with the British, mainly in Shanghai, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and were of Sephardic origin, coming mainly from Baghdad and Bombay. They soon became prominent in business and included members of several notable families such as the Sassoons, Hardoons and Kadoories. They were followed by Jews escaping Czarist pogroms and the Russian revolution in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The next influx of Jews came from Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1930's - early 1940's in order to escape from Nazi persecution, of which

my family and I were part. It is estimated that up to about 30,000 Jews may have resided in Shanghai pre World War II, of which some 20,000 to 25,000 were refugees from the Nazis. These numbers declined rapidly after the end of World War II when most Jews emigrated to the USA, Israel, Canada, Australia, etc.

A wonderful Buddhist vegetarian lunch boosted our flagging energy. There was any amount of delicious food and drinks, much of it indefinable. We returned to the hotel in the early afternoon for a rest before the official welcome reception and dinner in the Grand Ballroom of the hotel at 7.00pm.

The Gala Dinner Banquet was organized by the Rickshaw Reunion West and the Center for Jewish Studies to celebrate Sino-Judaic friendship and to honor Shanghai for its meaningful role in Jewish history. It was attended by many Chinese officials and members of the CJSS, Shanghai Hongkou District People's Government, Shanghai Society for People's Friendship Studies, Shanghai International Association For Friendly Contact , Shanghai Society for World History and Mr.Maurice Ohana, President of the present Shanghai Jewish Community. Various moving speeches and toasts followed. I had been honoured by being invited to sit at the official table, representing Australia. My table companions were Associate Professor Hua Jun Hao, General Secretary of the Shanghai Society For People's Friendship Studies, and the official translator, a student of Professor Pan Guang.

Rene Willdorff was presented with two beautiful large Chinese calligraphy scrolls and in turn made presentations to the Chinese officials. Gary Matzdorf amongst others also spoke and displayed most probably the only extant example of the sheet metal signs which had been at the exits leading from the restricted area during the War - "Stateless Refugees Are Prohibited To Pass Here Without Permission".

Musical presentations by four ladies dressed in beautiful cheongsams and playing on traditional Chinese instruments were given throughout the dinner.

Television crews were busily filming all proceedings during the Reunion as well as interviews being conducted by a documentary filmmaker and reporters from the local newspapers interviewing and filming individual participants. My sister Marion Segal and I had a lengthy session with the documentary film crew. However, for one reason or another, we never managed to see any of the

interviews on the local TV. I hope that we will get a copy of the documentary that had been filmed.

On the morning of Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> April we were taken on a city tour of Shanghai (population 17 million) which left us agog at the amount of building going on everywhere. New apartment and office buildings, elevated ring roads and freeways, and spaghetti junctions to relieve some of the tremendous vehicular traffic (very few bicycles these days except in the older parts of the city), interspersed by some of the old and beautiful buildings from former colonial times. New York has a serious rival with Shanghai's ultra modern skyscrapers, which have been designed by some of the world's best architects. It is a truly amazing city!

We spent a lot of time at the Ohel Rachel synagogue in N. Shanxi Rd., formerly Seymour Rd., and also visited the adjacent former Seymour Rd. school which is now occupied by the Education Department. The synagogue featured a very interesting exhibition called "Noah's Ark on Fire and Sword - an Exhibition of Jewish Refugees in Shanghai in Memory of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Victory of Anti-Fascism War". Lots of photos were taken of the material exhibited and the synagogue itself. It brought back many memories of our time in Shanghai during the war years.

Next came a brief visit to the outside of the Shanghai Exhibition Centre, which had been built as a present from the Russian Government in the early 1950's on the grounds of the former Hardoon house and gardens on Bubblingwell Rd.. This was followed by lunch in a Restaurant close by. Whilst commuting, our tour guide mentioned that to show your appreciation when food was good you put your thumb up; if food was bad you put up your little finger; and if the food was so-so you say "Mama Hoo-hoo".

We then went for a drive to and around Pudong city - an ultra modern metropolis with wide and beautifully landscaped avenues, the Oriental Pearl Tower, and very attractive office and apartment buildings, which is located across the Huangpo River opposite the Bund.

This was followed by a visit to Hongkou (formerly called Hongkew) where we were welcomed at a reception at the Ocean Hotel by local government officials and our dear friend Mr. Wang Fah Liang from the Ohel Moshe synagogue. Again, there were a number of speeches, television and newspaper interviews, etc. before we were taken on a walking tour to Huoshan Park on Huoshan Rd.

(formerly Wayside Rd.) where we viewed the monument for Holocaust survivors, which had been erected in 1994. At the park were assembled many officials and aged Chinese residents who had lived in Hongkou together with the Jewish refugees in order to welcome us. There was music and there were speeches and a table on which there was spread out a long white banner-like petition calling on the United Nations to list Shanghai's Tilanqiao Area (the area in Hongkou which comprised the main part of the Designated Area during World War II) as a World Heritage site. We all signed the petition and hope that it will be successful. The reception at the park and the genuine affection shown to us by the Chinese, as well as the memories this visit evoked, brought tears to the eyes of many of the refugees. It was a very emotional event.

From the park we walked along Chushan Rd. (formerly Chusan Rd.) to the Ohel Moshe synagogue in Chang Yang Rd. (formerly Ward Rd.) which had been built by Russian Jews in 1927 and used by our refugees. It now houses local Government Departments as well as a permanent exhibition on the Central European Jewish refugees who had lived in Hongkou during World War II. Here we met again good old Mr. Wang Fah Liang (about 85 years old) who has been so helpful over the years to so many of our compatriots. We returned to our hotel later on in the afternoon.

On Friday 28 April we had an early departure by bus to Suzhou, a trip of about 1 ½ hours on an elevated ring road out of Shanghai and then an excellent freeway. Suzhou is a beautiful and elegant city located near Taihu Lake, the richest area in the Yangtze River Delta. It has a population of about 6 million and is a 2,500 years old cultural city. Suzhou is famous for its ancient classical gardens which have been included in the UNESCO heritage list. The natural scenery of hills and water, streets and alleys side by side with canals, small bridges, white walls and dark grey roof tiles provide elegance and charm. Some 10% of the area is covered by cultivated fields, 30% by hills and the rest with water. There is a Chinese saying "paradise in heaven, Suzhou and Hangzhou earth".

As everywhere else in China, the traffic is breathtaking and one has to be very careful crossing roads. We first were dropped off at a lane covered on both sides with little shops selling anything and everything. A tourist shopper's delight, which tempted us all! At the end of the lane we entered the famous 400 year old "The Master of Nets Garden". Originally known as the "Fisherman's Retreat" it was laid out in the Southern Soong Dynasty and renamed in the Qing Dynasty. It combines living quarters with landscaped

gardens. The physical center is a pond surrounded by covered walkways and pavilions and decorated with trees, flowers and rockery. Every few paces there are different vistas - a truly magnificent site which we spent quite some time exploring. On returning to our buses we again had to run the gauntlet of the shopkeepers in the lane.

The next stop was lunch at a restaurant, which was part of a very large silk farm and factory producing silk and silk goods. We were given a conducted tour showing us the different processes involved in the production of silk which, inevitably, ended in the factory shops displaying all their beautiful wares. We then boarded the buses for another treat - a motorized boat trip on the river and canals. The views from the boat of the quaint small bridges, rivers and riverside houses were just breathtaking and will never be forgotten. We returned to Shanghai in time for the Shabbat dinner which had been organized by Chabad for those people who wanted to attend and had booked previously.

On Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> April a shopping tour to the silk, pearl, jade, cashmere, rug and handicrafts factory outlet store had been organized, followed by visits to the People's Park (formerly racecourse) and optional drop-off at the Shanghai Museum or Urban Planning Center. The afternoon was at leisure. Lesley and I decided to rest in the morning whilst the children went shopping on their own.

In the early afternoon Helen, Naomi, my sister Marion and I met with Dr. Michael Li, a businessman and former academic now living in Seattle, who is doing some research into the life of Charles Bliss, a former Shanghai refugee who had invented "Blissymbolics". Lesley unfortunately had not been well and spent the day in bed. Together we all went by taxi to Hongkou for a sentimental journey. The objective was to show my children where I had lived with my parents and sister for 8 years at 992 Tongshan Rd. (now Tangshan Rd.) at the corner of Dalny Rd. (now Dalian Rd. and turned into freeway connecting via a bridge to Pudong). We first were invited by Michael to a very nice lunch at a Restaurant on the former Wayside Rd.. We walked along the former Chusan Rd. to Ward Rd. and then retraced our steps from the former Ward Rd. Heim where we used to pick up our daily lunch for the family to our former home in Tongshan Rd. - a walk of about 25 minutes in rain, hail or sunshine! We reminisced on the way and were amazed how little had changed in those 60 odd years. Whilst there were a few new buildings and of course the before-mentioned new freeway, we were almost transported back in time - except that everything was much cleaner, no spitting and quite a few trees had been planted. Unfortunately, as a result of the widening of Dalny Rd., "our house"

and the factory next door at the corner had been demolished . I had brought along photos of the house and our room which I had taken in 1998 when Mr. Wang had kindly taken me and a friend of mine there. We then walked back along Tongshan Rd. looking into the lanes that were so familiar to our compatriots at the time, down Kungping Rd. where we caught taxis in Ward Rd. back to our hotel in town. It had been a rather emotional experience which brought back many memories!

That evening we attended the Farewell Dinner at the Bacchus Restaurant in the Regal International Hotel. It was a very sumptuous affair which was enjoyed by all. Various speeches followed. One by Vera Sasson, a fourth or fifth generation Jewish Shanghailander. Rene Willdorff was honoured by Gary Matzdorff thanking him and his organizing committee, on behalf of all participants, for the wonderful job they had done in making this Reunion one of the best, if not the best, ever. Rene was presented with a giant red concertina "Thank You" card signed by everyone plus a substantial amount of money which had been collected for Rene to dispose of to his favorite charity. Our various tour guides were thanked for their efforts and given some money. Lastly, the Australian contingent, which had been well represented, assembled and gave a rendition of the Australian National Anthem "Advance Australia Fair".

I should also mention that each participant had been presented with a beautiful jadeite chop and tin of red ink packed in a red presentation box with the compliments of the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai in commemoration of the Shanghai Reunion 2006.

It had been a lovely group limited to some 120 people - 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation ex-refugees - who all got on well together. A most enjoyable and unforgettable experience. For me it was particularly gratifying to see how much our children enjoyed this experience and, having never been to China before, how impressed they were with the country and its people. They vowed to come back with our grandchildren one day. It is a pity that our eldest daughter had not been able to come, however, she had been to Shanghai previously with her husband and had also been able to visit our little room in Tongshan Rd. thanks to our good Mr. Wang.

This was the end of the formal Reunion, however, many participants continued on the various extension tours. My sister Marion took all 4 extension tours whilst Lesley and our children only took the Yangtze River cruise, which we did together with Marion.

This required an early start on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> April to catch our flight to Chongqing (formerly Chungking) which was the embarkation point for our Yangtze cruise. The Chinese name for the Yangtze River is Chang Jiang, which means long river. It is in fact the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest river in the world - 6,300 kilometers. The flight on China Eastern Airlines which was very comfortable, took about 2 hours.

We were met and first given a brief tour of Chongqing, a city of about 31 million which is located at the confluence of the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers. It is one of China's historical and cultural cities and the largest industrial and commercial base in southwest China, surrounded by water on three sides and mountains on four sides and hence very hilly with few bicycles being seen. It has a humid climate and is called the "Capital of Fog". During World War II it was the capital of Chiang Kai Check's government and is famous for the Burma Road and the Flying Tigers. We saw the Peoples Congress Hall and Peoples Hotel, and the Museum which houses relics from the submerged areas of the Three Gorges. We visited the former residence and headquarter of General Joseph W. Stillwell, Chief Commander (1942-1944) of US Forces in China - Burma - India. Followed by a visit to the Flying Tigers Museum and Exhibition where we were given a talk about General Claire L. Chennault's Flying Tiger airforce team recruited from US airforce volunteers to assist China in fighting against the Japanese invaders.

Late that afternoon we boarded the "Victoria Katarina", our home for the next 3 days which was going to take us from Chongqing downstream to Yichang. As the tide had been out, there was a very long and somewhat hazardous walk across pontoons, etc. to the ship. Lesley would have been unable to negotiate that and had to be carried in a wheelchair by 4 porters who tried to make a claim for outrageous charges which were eventually reduced by 75% as a result of our tourist guide's intervention. The ship accommodates about 250 passengers and was very nice and comfortable, the staff very friendly and helpful, food excellent and plentiful.

On the morning of Monday 1st May we were given an informative talk on the Yangtze River and the Three Gorges. All cruises sail through the ship locks adjacent to the Three Gorges dam. The river cuts through the Wushan Mountains with sheer cliffs and mountains rising on either side, creating ever changing fantastic sights along the Three Gorges - the Qutang, Wuxia and Xiling Gorges which extend from Fengjie in the west to Yichang in the east, a total of

193 kilometers. Along the Three Gorges are many historic sites, cliff inscriptions, suspended coffins of the Ba tribe, temples, caves and and tombs dating back up to 2,000 years. When the Three Gorges Dam is finished the future water level will rise to 175 meters above sea level. The present level is 138 meters above sea level. Water markers are everywhere to show the present and future levels. The huge project has resulted in the relocation of some 1.5 million people. Evidence was everywhere of submerged or about to be submerged villages. Huge ship locks lowered our ship by up to 60 to 70 meters. This will increase to about 113 meters when the project is completed.

The above talk was followed by another talk by Dr.Liu, the ship's doctor, and demonstration of Chinese medicine and traditional healing methods such as acupuncture, moxibustion (cupping) and herbal medicines. Our dear daughter Helen arranged and paid for appointments with Dr.Liu for all of us over the next two days. Lesley, after the first treatment of acupuncture, moxibustion and massage of her feet had an almost miraculous improvement in the swelling and stiffness of her feet and pain levels due to the neuropathy caused by her diabetes. If it had not been for this improvement she would not have been able to do half the things she did. This relief has lasted until the present and will hopefully continue. Relief to a lesser extent was experienced by the rest of us for our various minor ailments.

That afternoon we arrived at Fengdu, the "City of Ghosts", home to many legends and displays of local interpretations of hell, purgatory and the "underworld". An excursion to the Ming Mountain by cable car was available, however, we all stayed aboard ship and just admired the scenery. A welcome reception by the Captain and staff preceded dinner. After dinner the crew modeled a variety of Chinese traditional costumes from all regions and periods of Chinese history.

Early on the morning of Tuesday 2nd May we approached the entrance to the first gorge, the Qutang Gorge. It is the shortest, narrowest and most dramatic of the 3 gorges, only 5 miles long and 500 feet wide. Passage through the gorge took only 20 to 30 minutes. After breakfast we disembarked for a shore excursion. A smaller motorized vessel carried us through the picturesque Lesser Gorges, along a tributary of the Yangtze, the Daning River. Thereafter, we boarded smaller motorized sampans to take in the sights of the Mini-Three Gorges. The views were just magnificent. At regular intervals along the river there were Chinese musicians serenading the tourists (of which there were many). It was just idyllic.



After lunch the ship approached the second of the three gorges, the 25 mile long Wu Gorge where we passed the famous Goddess Peak. The gorge is known for its beauty, forest covered mountains and cliffs so sheer that the sun barely penetrates the precipices. This was followed by a talk on the Three Gorges Dam Project. Before dinner, we approached the locks at the Three Gorges Dam. Passage through the 5-stage ship locks takes 3 to 4 hours.

After a magnificent farewell banquet dinner the crew and a couple of passengers presented a colourful show time cabaret.

On the morning of Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> May the Victoria Katarina docked at Sandouping for a visit to the world's largest hydroelectricity project - the Three Gorges Dam which is being built in the middle of the Xiling Gorge, the longest of the 3 gorges (75 kilometers). The dam will be 2,335 meters long, 185 meters high, 18 meters wide at the top and 139 meters wide at the bottom. The dam will raise the river to a level of 175 meters above sea level, creating a 600 kilometers long reservoir extending from the dam site to Chongqing. The current estimated construction cost is US\$70 billion. The purpose of the dam is flood control, electricity generation, navigation and irrigation. Construction began in 1994 and will be completed in 2009. The first generator began producing power in 2003. One's mind boggles at the immensity of the project.

After returning to the ship we sailed on through the eastern section of the Xiling Gorge and approached the Gezhou Dam, passing through a 1-stage ship lock. After lunch we docked at Yichang, our final destination, and after some sightseeing were transported to the airport for our return flight to Shanghai Pudong airport. In Shanghai we were met by our guides and taken to the Ramada Hotel close to the airport in Podung. The family, less Marion, had a lovely farewell buffet dinner at the hotel together with the few remaining Reunion participants. The next morning we said our farewells and went on our ways home. So ended an unforgettable Reunion, which will stay in our minds forever. We will now have to sort out and organize our numerous photos into a slide show, which will allow us to re-enjoy this wonderful experience from time to time.