

Pola Ash

Wartime Experience: Fled to Shanghai

Date and place of birth June 1, 1927 Krakow Poland

Name at birth Pola Rosenbaum

Father, Abraham had a factory that made fur coats and sold fur. He had stores in Krakow, Vilna, Lodz and Warsaw. He was a wealthy man. We had a large home in Krakow in a non-Jewish section and some Jews lived there. Father had a younger brother, William who went to New Jersey US in 1939 and married an American and had one son. My father had also gotten the papers but his parents decided that William should go

Mother, Esther helped selling furs. She was an only child

My parents left everything in Krakow and went to Vilna in 1939. Parents left everything and ran. In Vilna my father had a store. It was safer because it was in Russia so it was safer. In 1940 we left because it was not safe for the Jews to stay. So we went by train from Vilna through Russia and then we took a boat to Japan from Vladivostok. We did not have any permits but we had transit visas. We were not able to take anything with us in fact I had two rings and one ring I had to leave in Russia because they told me I could only have one ring. We landed in Japan and were transported to Kobe. We had Polish passports and my father went to Tokyo to extend the passport which he did in the Polish embassy. When our passports expired again the embassy had moved to Shanghai.

We were living in one room and it was in a home that was all for refugees. It was not living it was existing. My father was not working We managed to get food and supplies through the Japanese people communicating in English though I knew very little. We went from Japan to Shanghai in 1941 and we stayed in one room in the ghetto by the Japanese who occupied Shanghai. We did not know anyone there. I was 12 years old and I went to a British school and the Japanese let the teachers out of the camps to teach. I spoke Russian and was learning English. We were there for almost the whole war.

In 1944 my uncle from New Jersey sent an American soldier who brought chocolate and food to us. In 1945 I left Shanghai as a student and came to New York. My parents had to stay back in Shanghai. My father was sent to prison because he defied the fellow in charge and he sent my father to prison for 24 hours when the rabbi found out and got him out. During that time he contacted a disease. In New York, I stayed in a room that I rented and I went to college. I was not permitted to work. I studied to be a psychologist. My uncle helped me get the papers but after I arrived he did not help me. My great aunt Gussie who lived in Manhattan was retired and had four sons. She gave me money. My parents lived through the war in Shanghai and were brought over my father's cousin, helped financially by William. I was reunited with my parents in San Francisco. I left NY to meet them. My parents bought a small clothing store in the

Fillmore district. My father became ill with the disease he contracted in the prison and died when he was 54 years old. My mother had the little store and I used to help her. I used to work in an office too. I met Mervin at a dance at Hillel in 1950 and we got married and had two children a boy Avrom in 52 after my father and a daughter Shereen in 1954. We live in San Francisco.

The following addition was written with assistance from Pola's daughter Shereen

FROM KRAKOW TO SAN FRANCISCO:

THE FLIGHT OF POLA ASH

EARLY DAYS IN KRAKOW, POLAND

(June 1, 1927 to September, 1939)

It all began in our apartment at number 20 Sarego Street, a nice residential section of Krakow, Poland. I lived there with my parents Abraham Rosenbaum and Esther Steinhof Rosenbaum. I attended a private Hebrew-Polish school. In September 1939, I was to attend a Hebrew-Polish gymnasium. My father was in Portugal on a business trip buying fur pelts from Spain and Portugal to be shipped back to his factory in Poland that he owned with his partner. It was rumored that Hitler was planning to invade Poland so he flew back to be with the family. We had two cars, one big and one small. A Polish army officer took our large car leaving us with the small one.

LEAVING KRAKOW

(September 3, to December 1939)

On September 3rd 1939 my parents and I and a young couple with their baby packed into our small car, leaving Krakow just ahead of the German army. We drove at night because the German planes were strafing people on the roads. We drove to Lublin, Poland where my father had a friend. We planned to go there to shop for clothes in the morning. In the morning Lublin was bombed by the Germans. My father had a carpenter build a roof carrier for the car to hold our few bags and to give us some room in the car. He covered it with branches as camouflage. It might have been one of the first roof carriers.

WILNO, POLAND TO RUSSIA

(December 1939 to early January 1941)

From Lublin we drove until we ran out of gasoline. I do not remember the name of the town where we rented a room. My mother and I stayed there while my father took a train to Wilno, Poland where he had a wholesale store. My father went there to make arrangements for us to stay. It took several weeks to make the trip. He returned and we all left for Willno. In Willno we

rented an apartment and I went to a Hebrew school. Russia took Willno and gave it to Lithuania and later took it back. When the Russians came we were forced to abandon speaking Hebrew and use Yiddish, which I had to learn. A high-ranking Russian army officer moved in across the hall from our apartment. We stayed there quite a long time until we learned that the Japanese consulate, Chiune Sugihara, was issuing transit visas. We applied for a visa and my father made arrangements to travel on the Trans-Siberian railroad. If you were caught with U.S. money you could be thrown in jail. However, the Russian government agency for the Trans-Siberian railway insisted upon being paid in U.S. dollars.

WILNO TO VLADIVOSTOK, RUSSIA

(approximately 3 weeks)

From Willno we went to Moscow where we stayed a few days. The Russians questioned my father extensively many times. He had a feeling that we would not be allowed to leave Russia. During our trip on the Trans-Siberian railway we were kept from making contact with anyone else and were watched. We arrived at Vladivostok and disembarked.

VLADIVOSTOK TO KOBE, JAPAN

(approximately 1 week)

In Vladivostok we boarded a small Japanese vessel for our trip to Japan. My father did not believe we would really leave Russia until the Russians left the boat and we set sail.

KOBE, JAPAN

(February 1941 to October 1941)

In Japan we were taken to Kobe where rooms were arranged for us. It was a small community. We stayed in Japan for about nine months. I went to a Japanese school. My father had to go to Tokyo to renew our passports. On the trip back somebody stole our passports. The Japanese police said that they would find them. We waited a considerable amount of time and then my father decided to go to the Polish consulate again to get new passports. However, the Polish consulate had moved to Shanghai, China so we had to go to Shanghai.

SHANGHAI, CHINA

(October 1941 to December 1941)

Upon arriving in Shanghai we found a small room in the French section. We got new passports from the Polish consulate. On December 8, 1941 we tried to get a visa to go to the United States at the U.S. consulate office but we could not. They were destroying their records because the war begun. Within a short time Shanghai was occupied by the Japanese army. The Japanese insisted that all of the stateless people move into the Shanghai ghetto. At that time, I was sick with Scarlet Fever and could not be moved until I was better. My family went to the ghetto after the deadline. As a result, a Japanese commander named Goya threw my father into jail. We were very lucky that the Shanghai Rabbi interceded on behalf of my father and he was released

within less than 24 hours. The people who were in jail for more than a day died. Ever since then my father was continually sick. We believe he was poisoned while in jail.

SHANGHAI GHETTO

(December 1941 to September 20, 1946)

From the French section we moved to the Shanghai ghetto. Most of the Polish people formed community groups and helped each other. We shared a communal kitchen and worked together. Our life was extremely difficult. I went to an English school outside of the ghetto. Every few weeks I had to apply for a new pass to leave the ghetto. Goya issued the passes after he slapped me around. The Japanese informed us where the bomb shelter was and told us we should go there if there was an air raid. My father would never let us go there during an air raid. We stayed put in our tiny one room apartment. Later, the Americans told us that that building was on top of an ammunition dump and was one of their targets.

THE WAR IS OVER

The American troops came and life was easier. I applied for a visa to go to the United States. I had a scholarship to attend a women's school in New York City. After much work I obtained my visa. I purchased a ticket to travel to San Francisco by boat.

MARINE LINKS TO SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

(September 20, 1946 to October 29, 1946)

I was fortunate to get a ticket on the Marine Links that was to sail from Shanghai to San Francisco. Many people offered to buy my ticket, but I kept it. The trip was to take about ten days. It took nearly three weeks because of mechanical difficulties and fierce storms. We stopped in Hong Kong for repairs and then later in Manila.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

(October 29, 1946 for about 3 weeks)

In San Francisco I stayed with friends from Shanghai before going to New York where I had family.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

(November 1946 for about 1 ½ years)

In New York I attended college for 1 1/2 years. I had a student visa but I wanted a permanent visa. After a pre-examination I was able to travel to Canada and return to the United States with a permanent visa. I wrote to my parents telling them I thought it would be better for them to settle in San Francisco when they came to the United States. After obtaining their visas and arriving in San Francisco my father traveled to New York to visit me and our relatives. He returned to San Francisco where my mother was waiting and they settled there.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

(1947)

I joined my parents in San Francisco. We worked very hard at a clothing store my parents opened and lived in a small apartment. My father continued to have problems with his health. On January 14, 1951, I married Mervin S. Ash and became Pola Rosenbaum Ash. On October 22, 1951, my father died. We believe he died from an infection or condition he developed from his stay in the jail in Kobe, Japan. On November 15, 1952, my son Avrom was born. On November 25, 1957, my daughter Shereen was born. On October 18, 1966, my mother died. I continue to live in San Francisco with my husband and son. My daughter is married and has two daughters.