

POLA ASH

A long and dangerous journey took Pola Ash and her parents from their home in Krakow, Poland, via Moscow, Vladivostok, and Kobe, Japan, to Shanghai, where they spent most of the war.

“All stateless people had to move into the Shanghai ghetto. Many of the Polish people formed community groups and tried to help each other. But our life was extremely difficult.”

Born in 1927, Pola Ash (née Rosenbaum) lived with her parents in a residential section of Krakow, where her father sold furs. Two days after the beginning of the Nazi invasion, the Rosenbaums together with a young couple and their baby crowded into a small car and departed for Lublin, driving at night to avoid German strafings.

When Lublin was bombed, the family drove on until they ran out of gas. Pola and her mother rented a room in the town where they stopped. Her father took a train to Wilno, where he had a factory, to arrange for them to stay. When the Russians overtook that city, the family obtained visas for Japan, thanks to Japanese consul Sugihara.

After a three-week journey Pola and her parents arrived in Vladivostok where they boarded a ship for Japan. They were sent to Kobe and stayed there about nine months, with Pola attending a Japanese school.

The family's passports were stolen when Pola's father was traveling back from Tokyo, where he had gone to renew them. He was forced to go to the Polish consulate to get new ones—but the consulate had moved to Shanghai, and so the Rosenbaums went there. Soon Shanghai was occupied by the Japanese, who forced all stateless people into the ghetto. Pola attended an English school outside the ghetto, but every few weeks she was required to get a new permit. Meanwhile, her father was briefly arrested. While in prison he developed an infection and was extremely ill. Pola believed he was poisoned while in that prison.

When Shanghai was liberated, Pola and her parents, aided by relatives, obtained visas to immigrate to the United States. She got a scholarship to attend college in New York. Her parents had moved to San Francisco, where they had bought a small clothing store. After finishing her studies, Pola joined them, and they worked together in the store and shared a small apartment. Pola remained in California where she married and raised a family.