

ERIKA MEIER

Erika Meier and her family left Austria and found refuge in Shanghai, where they survived the Japanese occupation.

“Our doorbell rang, and there stood my best friend’s brother in full Nazi uniform. The Boy Scout troop in which he had been active was a disguised Nazi den. It was the first of many disappointments in people I had thought I knew.”

Erika Meier was born in 1921 in a small town near Vienna. Her father was an architect and civil engineer, and her mother was an opera singer and voice teacher. In March 1938 Hitler annexed Austria and much of the population became enthusiastic Nazis. In July a group of Nazis burst into the house in the middle of the night with drawn guns and ordered the family to leave within 24 hours. They moved to another area of Vienna and kept mostly indoors. Her father’s business was taken over by a Nazi.

Erika’s family wanted to immigrate to the US but the quota for people born in Austria was so small that it would have taken several years before they could hope to obtain a visa – and time was running out fast. No visa was necessary to get to Shanghai and Erika’s father contacted his cousin already living there. In 1939, holding “stateless” passports marked with “J”, the family crossed the border into Italy where they boarded a ship bound for Shanghai.

For a while it seemed as though things were going to be all right there. However, after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese took over Shanghai, and life became very difficult. Japanese troops entered the city and took over all “enemy” businesses. All stateless refugees had to move into a designated area where living conditions were very poor. There were barbed-wire barricades, nightly blackouts and the constant threat of air raids.

In Shanghai Erika met her future husband and when the war ended, they made plans to go to America. It took two years for them to get visas, and even longer for Erika’s parents and grandmother to join them. They eventually settled in Northern California living as was customary in the family with four generations together in one house.

An uncle and Erika’s maternal grandmother eventually joined them in Shanghai. But her father’s large extended family had hesitated to leave Austria, and all died in concentration camps.