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Shattered by Glass: Working through Memories of Kristallnacht and Shanghai

Kevin Ostoyich

A Conversation on a Staircase

Dr. Karl Kollwitz, husband of the renowned artist Käthe Kollwitz, advised Else Engler against continuing her pregnancy. Hitler's Germany was no country in which to raise a Jewish child, he had claimed. When the distraught Else left the office, she encountered Käthe, who was ascending the staircase bringing sandwiches up to Dr. Kollwitz's office.

Seeing how unhappy Else was, Käthe stopped her and the two talked for a while. After the conversation, Else decided to go ahead with the pregnancy, and on September 12, 1934, she gave birth to a baby boy with Dr. Kollwitz attending. Given the important role Käthe had played in the decision to have the child, Else decided to name her boy in remembrance of the son the Kollwitzes had lost in the First World War: Peter.

Else was a milliner and had a salon in Berlin. Her father was a tailor and specialized in making uniforms and thus most of his customers were military men. Her husband, Dr. Leon Engler, had been born in what is now Romania, but as a child had fled to Vienna during the First World War. Leon would always consider Vienna his hometown. Leon had a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Vienna and worked in Berlin as a chemist in a sugar factory. The family lived in an apartment above a Jewish-owned store in a Jewish neighborhood in Berlin.

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Leon had felt protected in Germany as an Austrian citizen, but after the *Anschluss* in 1938 by which Austria was incorporated into the Greater German Reich, things changed, and Leon lost his job in the sugar factory. He unsuccessfully tried to run an ice cream parlor as a chemist and then started a lending library. During *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, when Peter was four years old, the windows of the Jewish store below the Englers' apartment were shattered. Leon decided to go into hiding, for any Jew with a doctorate was in jeopardy of being rounded up as a medical doctor and accused of malpractice and other such falsehoods. Else had two young non-Jewish German ladies who were learning the millinery trade in her hat salon; they were farm girls and took Leon into hiding. Meanwhile, Else found out at a travel agency that Shanghai was an open port and that a Japanese ocean liner was leaving in three weeks from Genoa, Italy. Else proceeded to sell most of their belongings in order to purchase three tickets. Once Else had evidence that they were leaving Germany, Leon could safely come out of hiding. She asked her father to accompany them, but he refused, thinking his military customers would protect him. He was wrong.

A "Colonialist Piss Pot"

The Englers arrived in Shanghai in early 1939. Peter distinctly remembers the incredible noise as the ship was unloaded by the Chinese laborers, known as Coolies, who chanted

as they carried the luggage off the ship. He also recalls the horrid smell.

At first the family lived in a refugee camp, but then Else found a job in a hat salon and Leon started producing gold alloys for dentists. Peter explains that in those days the Chinese would cap their teeth with gold as a sign of prestige “similar to how we drive cars that are much too big for us here in the States.” Given that both parents drew an income, they were able to afford a place in a fairly high-class neighborhood in the French Concession and send their son to the Western District Public School. Peter explains this was “a very, very British school. We wore uniforms and sang ‘God Save the King’ [...] every morning, and played rugby, but they never allowed me to play; I was too little.” Peter attended the Western District Public School until the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Thereafter the school was used by the Japanese as a prisoner-of-war camp for the British and Americans. Else and Leon then sent Peter to the Shanghai Jewish School. Peter remembers very little about his first year—1942—at the Shanghai Jewish School; he was to return there after the end of the war in 1945. Although boxing, for example, was very popular, Peter did not participate because he was too small and skinny. His parents rented a piano and secured lessons for him, but he did not play with much enthusiasm.

Looking back, Peter is not proud of how he acted as a child. He characterizes himself as having been “a colonialist piss pot.” He explains, “I learned very quickly that we [...] Europeans were the superiors of the natives. My parents hired a nanny, an *amah* who always called me ‘Master Peter,’ always walked three steps behind me when we were walking on the street. [...] And I very quickly became quite used to this. And there’s an anecdote that I like to tell: My parents also hired a private rickshaw coolie for me [...] who would take me to school in the morning and pick me up from school afterwards, and one day, [...] it was in the fall, there was a fairly severe monsoon rainstorm [...] and the streets were flooded, my rickshaw coolie couldn’t come to pick me up, and it was fairly late in the afternoon, he figured that I would be pretty hungry so he brought me something to eat, a Chinese delicacy, a meatball that was wrapped in seaweed and steamed. The most revolting thing you’d ever want to have cross your lips. I just took one bite of it and flung it back into this guy’s face. It’s not the man I became, but in this colonialist environment, I became a typical colonialist brat. And I regret this to this day. I even have a problem telling the story without tearing up. That’s how one’s environment can shape who you are and become who you are.” He says his friends were also typical colonialist brats. They had no Chinese classmates, no Chinese friends. His only interactions with Chinese children were violent: usually fights provoked by the European kids throwing stones at the Chinese kids. He regrets this and is ashamed of the Europeans’ behavior in China.

Life as a “Hongkew Kid”

In 1943, the occupying Japanese forces issued a proclamation that all stateless refugees who entered Shanghai after January 1, 1937, had to move into a Designated Area in the rundown Hongkew section in the northern part of Shanghai. Else and Leon moved into a house on Wayside Road, now Huo Shan Lu, with the same families they had shared a house with in the French Concession and hired a new *amah* to look after Peter. Peter was quickly transferred from the Shanghai Jewish School in downtown Shanghai to the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association (SJYA) school in the Designated Area in Hongkew. The SJYA was also known as the “Kadoorie School” after its Sephardic Jewish benefactor.

All the residents living in the Hongkew Designated Area had to receive permission from the Japanese to leave and enter. The SJYA was one or two blocks outside the Designated Area and Peter, too, had to receive permission. In order to continue her millinery work in downtown Shanghai, Else also had to acquire a pass. The distribution of passes was overseen by a notoriously sadistic man named Kano Ghoya, who, being short in stature, tended to take out his sadism on tall men. Else never encountered any problems, nor did Peter. Peter remembers a visit by Ghoya—who styled himself the “King of the Jews”—to the SJYA. Peter and his classmates had to sing for the Japanese official, who proceeded to tell them a bizarre story about his grandmother, who he claimed was such a noble lady that she always had her clocks turned off every few months so they could rest. Looking back now with a laugh, Peter claims this story “is so crazy, it’s got to be true!”

By this time Leon could no longer sell his gold alloys, and thus had no reason to leave the Designated Area. He still put his professional knowledge of chemistry to use, however. Peter notes, “The preferred currency in Shanghai was the US dollar, but in the middle of the war the inflow of US dollars was abolished, and a trade developed in US currency. It was the physical appearance of a dollar bill that substantially affected its value; a crisp new dollar bill was worth more than a soiled used one.” Leon used his chemical skills to devise an array of smelly detergents in the Engler’s kitchen and literally laundered money with the detergents and a flat iron in order to increase the value of the notes. Peter says he “has no idea how much of our sustenance” came from his father’s “money laundering.” This was illegal, and Leon was eventually caught by the Japanese; however, he was able to bribe his way out of trouble with cash and a wristwatch.

Peter often tries to “reconstruct what [his] youth was like.” He has come to the conclusion that he and the other Jewish children in Shanghai were afraid: “I think deep down [...] all us

kids—although we never talked about it—[...] were living in fear. We didn't know what's going to happen to us, what our parents were going to do, will this war end? We were bombed occasionally by the American Air Force and that was pretty scary. Although we did not experience any atrocities, we did witness some atrocities that the Japanese inflicted on the Chinese population." Peter vividly recalls a brutal beating of a Chinese coolie, who had been caught stealing a Salvation Army tea kettle tin cup: "I can still see the scene. He was on his knees with his hands up praying for them [...] to stop. His face was all bloodied up. That left an impression upon me. But [...] this wasn't something where you would run home and say 'you know what I just saw?' [...] You accepted these [events] as kids. You accepted these events as that's the way life is."

Peter says the Jewish kids did not have anything to do with the Japanese children, who were easily identifiable by their military uniforms—"even the little ones," he notes. Whenever he or his friends encountered Japanese kids, they would avoid them.

Peter notes that because his parents were relatively well off, their living arrangements were better than most other refugees. Many who were less fortunate had to live in barracks-style *Heime* with little to no privacy and subsisted on food provided by soup kitchens. Many of Peter's schoolmates lived under such conditions. The predicament of one boy particularly plagues Peter's memories. The boy's father had been a tobacconist in Berlin, and in the Designated Area, the father, son, and a hired Chinese coolie would spend the days going around picking up cigarette butts and the evenings taking the tobacco out and rolling it into new, whole cigarettes. The father and son used their sleeping cots in their squalid single-room home as their work benches. Given that the boy spent most of his evenings rolling the tobacco, slept where the cigarettes were rolled, and did not have access to a proper shower, he stank horribly. Because of his foul odor everyone avoided him. Upon the encouragement of Else and Leon, Peter eventually befriended the boy, although their friendship did not become close until after the Shanghai experience.

In general, the family had very little interaction with people from other nationalities and religions. Nevertheless, Else did have such interactions from time to time. One such interaction was quite remarkable and could very well have saved her life. Toward the end of the war, Else came down with a severe case of the intestinal disease known as "Asian" or Tropical Sprue. This disease can be very serious if not treated properly. One of the regular customers of the millinery shop was the wife of the German consul general. The two women became acquaintances, and when the lady found out that Else was sick she had her husband send away to Germany to have the necessary medicine delivered by

diplomatic pouch. The medicine arrived and was given to Else's doctor in order for her to receive treatment. Peter notes that had they been in Germany, such a bureaucrat could just as easily have "signed the document to send us on a cattle car to Auschwitz." He believes it very important that people learn this story: "There's a lesson to be learned from this story. I don't know what it is. But there is a lesson to be learned. [...] How our environment [...] [shapes] [...] who we are and who we become. And if we don't like it, we've got to do [something] consciously [...] for if we just let our environment shape us, we can become different people."

The worst day of the war for Peter and many other Shanghai Jews was July 17, 1945, when American bombs hit the Designated Area and many refugees and countless Chinese were killed. Peter underscores the word "countless" explaining "no one bothered to count them." Leon put on his Pao Chia^[1] uniform and started helping. Peter recalls how as they were approaching a Chinese victim on the street, a Japanese military ambulance showed up, three Japanese military men in uniform got out with a stretcher, put the Chinese man on the stretcher, took photographs, then put the Chinese man back on the street, got back in the ambulance, and drove away.

After the War

Peter remembers after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, there was speculation that perhaps the war would soon be over. He and his father went out after curfew to see what was going on in the streets. As they were looking around they were spotted by a Japanese officer who was riding in the sidecar of a motorcycle. Peter and his father saw the officer struggling to get up in the sidecar of the moving motorcycle and reaching for his sidearm, so they ran away as fast as they could. As they ran they heard the officer discharging his gun. According to Peter, "this was the closest encounter I ever had to becoming [a] [...] collateral victim." When the war ended on August 15, 1945, Peter said the Japanese soldiers remained briefly, but they no longer had bayonets fixed to their guns. Shortly afterward they just vanished.

The American Navy took over Shanghai and provided K-Rations to the refugees. The containers had typical WWII military rations like Spam, chewing gum, Hershey's chocolate, and coffee (the latter of which, Peter noted, "my mother quickly commandeered"). Peter also remembers a small military bible being included on one occasion. He recalls that by this time the refugee children had become so scrawny and miserable looking that the

Americans started distributing soy milk. "But not the kind that you can buy in a supermarket. This was actually just soy beans just ground up [...] with water. Disgusting stuff! I would rather drink cod liver oil than that stuff. But it helped! For all the time I was in the camp [i.e., the Designated Area] my front teeth had just begun to grow out and they didn't grow out for two and a half years. Within weeks after we got this soy milk, my teeth came out. And I also got for some reason [...] a liver injection. That's something I wouldn't volunteer for either! The liver is some viscous stuff and the needles are the size of hollowed out knitting needles!"

Peter says that the most dramatic change was that for the first time they were not afraid. The Americans were very friendly. He notes the sailors were definitely not interested in finding out where the opera houses were. "They wanted to know where the bars were and where the whorehouses were, and we took them to these places, and in return they would invite us on board their ships. [...] My friend [...] even got a sailor hat. I think he slept with this damn thing! He never took it off [...] he was so proud of it! [...] These were the good times."

Immediately after the end of the war, Peter went back to the Shanghai Jewish School. Now Peter travelled to school on a school "bus"—a bare truck with no seats. Peter believes that it was at this time he finally started to get a decent education, although he says the "Hongkew children" were treated as being somehow lower than the other kids. On one occasion, a teacher actually referred to them as the "Hongkew kids" in class. As a result, the children got together and talked about going on strike in protest to their teacher having called them this derogatory term.

Peter did not have a good relationship with his parents, who always seemed preoccupied with other things. Leon's business partner Fritz Adler and Fritz's wife, Stella, actually served more as surrogate parents for Peter in Shanghai. Fritz did not think that Leon was bringing up Peter properly as a boy, so he would give Peter gifts that he thought were more masculine such as soccer boots and boxing gloves. One of Peter's prized possessions growing up—and one he still cherishes deeply to this day—is the accordion that Fritz gave him for his Bar Mitzvah.

Peter played this accordion in what was undoubtedly the most important musical performance of his life. It transpired on a flight to Israel. Peter remembers having discussed the creation of Israel with his father in Shanghai. He remembers how his father went over a map with him and told him that the borders would most likely be problematic

and unstable and that the family was not going to go there. The family never seriously considered moving to Australia, and the United States also seemed an impossibility for them given the quota system. Else and Leon decided that Peter and Else would stay temporarily with Else's sister in Israel, while Leon would remain in Shanghai and see what the situation would be like under the Communist regime. Else's and Peter's journey to Israel lasted about ten days and involved trips from city to city by airplane. On the last flight when the pilot announced they had entered Israeli airspace, Else prompted Peter to take out his accordion and play the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah." According to Peter, "Even the cabin crew were wiping tears from their eyes."

Leon's plan was to set up a soap factory in Shanghai if the foreign concessions were reestablished. This plan was dashed, though, when the Communists took control of the city. Leon was then evacuated to Canada via San Francisco. Upon arriving in San Francisco, he was put on a sealed train to Vancouver because he did not have an entry visa for the United States. While Leon tried to establish himself in Canada and prepare the entry of his wife and son, Else and Peter left Israel for Rome, then Northern Italy, then Austria, until finally journeying to Canada on Austrian passports. "We arrived by boat in Halifax and as we [...] handed the immigration officer our passports, he stamped them, handed them back, and said, 'Welcome to Canada.' That had a big effect," Peter chokes up and says with tears welling in his eyes, "For the first time we were welcome somewhere and not being chased." Else and Peter were then reunited with Leon in Montreal.

Despite the fact that he was, in his terms, "literally off the boat," the teacher and kids in his new school in Montreal were very welcoming. On the first day, a group of boys took him out for a sundae, becoming lifelong friends in the process. Given his aptitude in mathematics, Peter pursued an electrical engineering degree at McGill University. Afterward, he moved to the United States to conduct graduate studies at Cornell University. After earning a Master's degree in electrical engineering in 1961, he started working in an applied research think tank affiliated with Cornell University in Buffalo, NY. The Vietnam War, which Peter vigorously opposed, was intensifying in the mid-1960s and Peter enrolled as a part-time Ph.D. candidate in the Biophysics Department at the State University of New York at Buffalo Medical School. He earned a Ph.D. in 1974 and found a job as a biomedical engineer in the Department of Surgery at the St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, NJ. In 1984, he was recruited to join the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department of the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) in Newark, NJ. In 2000, he was a charter member of the Biomedical Engineering Department at NJIT, from which he retired as Associate Professor Emeritus in 2002.

He is now retired and lives with his wife Dina, in New Jersey. Peter and Dina have two sons who were born in Buffalo, NY.

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The memories of his childhood continue to haunt Peter. *Kristallnacht* has cut deeply into his psyche: "For many years I had a very abnormal reaction to the sound of broken glass. I never knew it, I never related [...] it, I had no idea what that was. Even as an adult. In graduate school I worked in a lab, and every once in a while somebody [would drop] a beaker, and on one or two occasions I would have to go into the bathroom and put my head between my legs and get my act back together again. And I never related it to anything. Then when our oldest son [...] became [...] the age I was—four years old—during *Kristallnacht*, I went into a clinical depressive state, so much so, that I needed psychiatric help. And the physician, looking at my history, related that and suggested that that may be what today would be called PTSD, he suggested that somehow in the back of my mind the experience of *Kristallnacht* was embedded. [...] I was in treatment for quite a while."

About 20 or 25 years ago, Peter's Shanghai refugee experience started gradually to come back to him. It started when he was asked by the NJIT to tell his story to students. Then he was invited to speak to a Hebrew school for middle school children. He then started to be asked by the Holocaust Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Metrowest, NJ, in Whippany to speak to middle and high school students and the occasional synagogue. The engagements started to increase more and more, and Peter started to realize that whereas for the longest time no one seemed to care much about his Shanghai past, now everyone wanted to hear about it.

"You know, twenty years ago, if somebody asked me where I grew up, [...] I would say 'I grew up in Shanghai' [and then they would say] 'oh, that's interesting, how 'bout the weather?'" Now everybody is suddenly interested in all this. Peter wants to know why this is so, but for the life of him he cannot figure out why.

Peter's wife, Dina, thinks the reason for the recent interest may be that the *European* history of the Holocaust has "been done [...] there is so much out there" making the history of the Shanghai Jews something new or novel. Perhaps it also has to do with the fact that it deals with China, and people would not necessarily think of China as being a place of refuge. Regarding China, Peter notes that the Chinese government is very much interested in telling the story and says "We have an explanation for that...we, the handful of four or five

of us [former Shanghai Jewish refugees] who get together and are still in touch, and our explanation is that the Chinese government is interested in fostering better economic relations with Israel. [...] I was even interviewed [in 2015] by Chinese TV.”

Peter explains that when it comes to the issue of Jews finding refuge, one “ought to use the word [...] ‘Shanghai’ [...] rather than [...] ‘China,’ because Shanghai was this open port, all the other ports were not open, [so the fact that the Jews found refuge] can be attributed thanks to the Japanese, who eventually locked us up, not the Chinese. [...] In this interview with the Chinese TV, [the interviewer] keep saying ‘what do you have to say to the Chinese people?’ and I said ‘Xiexie ni,’ ‘thank you’ in Chinese, but that’s not what she wanted to hear. She wanted me to laud China as a whole. And it wasn’t China [...] Shanghai was run by the [Shanghai] Municipal [Council] and *not* the Chinese. They had no power whatsoever.” Peter says, “I didn’t tell her what she wanted to hear.”

Peter returned to Shanghai in 2005. He had gone to his former house and had been transported back in time: “As I walked into the house, I grabbed hold of the banister, and the feel of the banister was identical from what it was sixty years before and brought back memories, and the creek in the steps brought back memories, [...] It did a number between the ears [to] trigger these memories. [...] Not all of them were pleasant. [...] It’s astonishing how much information is in there and it just takes a trigger to bring [memories] to the forefront.”

Over the years Peter has gotten together with other former Shanghai Jewish refugees either at large-scale reunions or more intimate gatherings of friends. He has always been struck by how differently people have turned out from their Shanghai past. He believes anyone who does not realize this diversity of experience does not fully understand the history of the Shanghai Jews. To highlight this point, Peter talks about how he and a close friend of his are completely different aside from both having been refugee children in Shanghai. Whereas his friend became a lawyer, Peter became an engineer. Whereas his friend is very orthodox and recently welcomed his 24th great-grandchild, Peter identifies himself as a “remorseful, Jewish atheist”^[2] and has no grandchildren, let alone great-grandchildren. Peter explains, “We have nothing in common but our common experience in Shanghai, and we’d walk through fire for one another.”

Doubts

Peter has spoken to many audiences about his Shanghai experience. That audience is about to expand greatly given that his life story will be the subject of an episode in the new PBS history series titled *We'll Meet Again*, set to air in Winter 2018.

Peter often speaks to school children about his experience. He feels the task that lies before this generation is immense: "I'd like them to realize that my generation has left your generation and certainly their generation such a *lousy* globe, that they've got such a difficult task in front of them to make some, to bring some civilization [...] even to *this* country." He tries to convey to the students a message about the dangers of obedience: "I often ask permission of the teachers before I talk to allow me to tell the students about my 'hypothesis' that when you are asked [by someone in authority] to do something you are uncomfortable with, don't immediately obey and don't immediately say no, ask for an explanation."

Although Peter does feel that he has an important story to tell, he often is afraid that his story is just a series of anecdotes without any real "food for thought." One story that he thinks is particularly profound is the one about the German consul general procuring medicine that possibly saved his mother's life in Shanghai. "That's a 'food for thought' [but] what does that mean?" For Peter, the meaning speaks to the underlying importance of environment and authority in conditioning responses. That is why he always returns to the "hypothesis" he imparts to students: "If you asked me what caused this whole Holocaust, one of my hypotheses [...] is that the young people are *too* obedient. You think that being obedient is an asset and that's something you ought to praise young people for, and it's not that. You *can* be too obedient. And [...] at the Nuremberg Trials the universal defense was 'I was told to do it.'" Peter would rather that the next generation "not have this as a possible defense." This ultimately is the moral Peter tells school children: "Don't unconditionally do something someone else tells you to do, just because someone else tells you to do it." Although Peter tells his story and conveys this moral, he ultimately does not think he is making any meaningful contribution by telling his story. The current plight of the Syrian, Yemeni, Sudanese, Burmese, and other refugees makes him frustrated and angry. He believes the only difference separating these refugees from the Jewish refugees to be language and time. He states emphatically, "We should learn from this story [of the Shanghai Jews]. But we haven't learned."

Peter Engler bears the scars of history and is a reminder of how much the previous century shattered the world like glass. Named after a fallen German soldier of the First World War, plagued by the sounds of *Kristallnacht* and brutal images of the Japanese

occupation of China, and remorseful of his “Colonialist piss pot” childhood, Peter sometimes questions the counsel Käthe Kollwitz gave to Else Engler on a staircase early in Hitler’s Third Reich. He has tried to find meaning in his life and convey some lessons from his experiences to children, but ultimately does not think he has made much of a difference. “I wish I could pat myself on the back and say, ‘you’re doing something useful and meaningful’ but I don’t.” He hopes that the producers of the *We’ll Meet Again* series will be able to make something positive out of his story and that the younger generation will break the chains of obedience and somehow cultivate civilization in a lousy globe. He admits, though, he has his doubts.

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[1] The Pao Chia was a self-watch patrol that the Japanese occupation forces made compulsory for male members of the stateless refugee community confined within the Designated Area.

[2] Peter describes himself as being Jewish by heritage. He says that if anyone ever asks him his religious affiliation he says he refers to himself as a “remorseful, Jewish atheist.” He explains, “I am Jewish by heritage. I am an atheist, because I cannot believe in a higher being that controls my destiny. And I’m remorseful because I wish I could. That is my outlook on life, and I don’t mind publicizing that.”