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Kevin Ostoyich
Valparaiso University

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Records of Shanghai: One Man's Quest to Validate Memories of a Family's Refugee Past

Kevin Ostoyich

Eric Kisch is a historian. Although he does not hold a Ph.D. and made a comfortable living as a market researcher, he is a historian nonetheless. The signs are all there: the storytelling, the pictures, the artwork, and the shelves of countless books, vinyls, CDs, and DVDs. His house is a veritable feast for curious eyes. No matter where one looks, there is something to engage. In their home in Shaker Heights, Ohio, Eric and his wife, Sue, have created a space in which the past literally dances with the present. Eric's exquisite hifi

system envelopes the living room with sounds of a Leonard Bernstein recording of Shostakovich's 5th Symphony and the drum strokes of a Joe Morello drum solo of fluctuating time-signature. Just like Morello, Eric Kisch plays with time. In the Kisch living room, those drum beats struck in the 1960s are to be experienced in the here and now. But history is not for the ears alone. The pictures on the walls of the Kisch home may date from the late nineteenth or the early twentieth centuries, but Eric talks about the people in the photographs with a familiarity and warmth that makes a visitor feel an instant bond. While pointing out the pictures of his long-deceased parents, Eric speaks in the present tense.

Like any good historian, Eric Kisch wants to record history, validate its authenticity, and bring it in conversation with us in the present. Also, like most historians, Eric is a collector. His vinyl and CD collection would rival any old record shop in Brooklyn. And for the last thirteen or so years, Eric has been putting these audio gems to good use on his weekly program "Musical Passions" on Cleveland's classical music station, 104.9 WCLV. Every week Eric brings sounds of the past to listeners in the present.

Like most historians, Eric often feels himself to be a charlatan. He sheepishly admits that although he hosts a weekly radio station on classical music, he has never played an instrument, and his children would gladly pay him not to sing a tune. Like most surviving former Shanghai Jewish refugees, Eric was very young at the time and does not personally remember much of the experience. He was troubled, for example, when he went back to Shanghai in 2000 and visited the Ohel Moishe synagogue. There he had felt nothing, no real connection to the past. Perhaps the space was too actuated by the present for it to be an effective conduit to the past. Eric is more comfortable with records and documents, for primary sources do not bear the accruing patina of time. As with his hifi system, so it is with his Shanghai past: He has spent his "whole life trying to eliminate distortion." What then is the clear, documented past of Eric Kisch?

Eric's parents were Walter Kisch and Grete Kisch (née Prossnitz). Walter was born on May 29, 1896, in Vienna.[1] He worked for twenty-five years for Neusiedler Papier Fabrik, the largest paper company in Austria. Walter's father, Alfred, served as the export director for the company, and Walter worked in the finance department. Grete was born on November 21, 1909, and grew up in an orthodox family.[2] She was sent to a girl's finishing school in Frankfurt and, according to Eric, was a "real Austrian Jewish princess." Family photo albums document a comfortable life in Vienna with frequent vacations to beach paradises

in Italy, Switzerland, and Abbazia (Opatija, Croatia). Grete was a striking beauty with piercing eyes and pensive countenance.

Eric does not know how his parents met and notes that there was quite a gap in age between them (thirteen years). They also possessed very different personalities. Walter had been a “very dashing man around town,” with a “very wide circle of friends” and was often “cutting up.” This contrasted starkly with Grete’s “very sheltered existence” and reserved character. Be that as it may, the two fell madly in love and married in 1932. Eric shows sepia-toned photos from the “very fancy wedding.” In 1937, Eric came along, to be followed the next year by the *Anschluss*.

After the *Anschluss* the German anti-Jewish laws were imposed in Austria quickly and severely. Jews had their properties and belongings confiscated and were subjected to public humiliation. Eric explains, for example, that when his Aunt Emmy and her cousin Edith graduated from the medical school at the University of Vienna, their “graduation present” was to be [ordered] on their knees [to scrub] the pavement with toothbrushes while [...] being spat on.” While Aunt Emmy was able to escape to America, Eric’s family was not and stayed in Vienna. In the spring of the *Anschluss*, on May 29, 1938, Walter and his brother Dr. Ernst Kisch exited a tram near the apartment building where the Kisch family lived, and someone said “*Na ja, die zwei seien Juden.*” (“Hey, those two are Jews.”) They were then apprehended by the Gestapo, put on a truck, and incarcerated. The brothers then spent the next nine months in Dachau and Buchenwald performing slave labor. They were released from Buchenwald in February 1939. Eric shows a photograph of his father taken immediately after his release: His head is shorn, his eyes distant.

It had long been a mystery to Eric how his family managed to get the money to pay for this passage. The only way to be released was to show proof of passage out of the country. The problem was that Jewish assets were being confiscated, and this was the case for the Kisch family as well. It was not until much later (in the 2000s), after Eric’s stepmother died, that he found a carbon copy of a letter that solved the mystery. On September 9, 1958, after having received his first reparations payment from the Austrian government, Walter sent this letter with accompanying check to a company in Amsterdam. Walter was making good on the money that had been advanced to his father, Alfred, to pay for the passage to Shanghai for Walter and Ernst. The proof of this passage had been the condition for their release from Buchenwald. In March 1939, Walter and Ernst embarked on their journey to China. Walter settled in Shanghai, and Ernst joined an American mission hospital in Shaanxi Province in Northwest China. Eric remembers his uncle, Dr.

Ernst Kisch, as having been “a mysterious person, who would show up a couple of times a year wearing a tropical pith helmet and bringing a jar of fresh eggs or some sort of farm produce which we were completely starved of in Shanghai.”[3]

In Shanghai Walter Kisch established a leather-goods retail store known as The Handbag in the French Concession. The store was designed by Walter’s cousin, Oscar Steiner. It was very upscale with lots of glass and mirrors and high-end merchandise on display.

In August 1939, Walter petitioned the Shanghai Municipal Council for permission to allow Grete and Eric to come to Shanghai despite a prohibition on the entry of more refugees. His request was denied.[4] Eventually, though, the influx of refugees resumed and Grete, Eric, and Grete’s mother, Anna Prossnitz (née Deutsch) made the long journey to Shanghai. On the way to Shanghai, they got a train from Vienna to Genoa. While staying in a hotel in Genoa as they waited for their voyage on the *Conte Biancamano*, Grete received a telegram from her uncle instructing her to visit a bookkeeper in the city, who would help her. Grete went to the man’s address, knocked on the door, and said, “I am Grete Kisch, niece of Pepi Deutsch.” The man let her in, directed her into another room, locked the door, got down on his knees, and told her that he loved her uncle and would help her; however, he implored her not to say anything to anyone about their meeting, for if it were to be found out he had helped Jews, he could be killed, and his family imprisoned. He then opened his wallet and gave her all he had. With this money, Grete, Eric, and Anna were able to subsist until their ship departed.

Grete’s brother Ernst Prossnitz had made it from Austria to Australia. He was able to get permission for his mother to come as a dependent widow (given that her husband had recently died). So when Grete, Eric, and Anna arrived in Shanghai, Anna then traveled on to Melbourne, Australia via Japan. In Shanghai the Kisches lived in a comfortable apartment in the French Concession on the Rue Maresca. Grete helped Walter in the store, and the family was able to secure the services of an *amah* (a Chinese domestic) to look after the young Eric. Walter, Grete, and Eric were joined in Shanghai by Walter’s aunt, Tante Lina,[5] and her two daughters. The daughters had married two brothers, one of whom was Oscar Steiner, the man who designed Walter’s store. Another of Walter’s cousins had also made it to Shanghai with his wife. The family lived in comfort; however, Eric’s parents started to experience marital strife. This was kept from the boy.

Life took a decided turn for the worse in 1943 when the occupying Japanese forces declared that all stateless refugees who had arrived after January 1, 1937 (meaning, in

practical terms, the Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, and Eastern Europe) had to move into the Hongkew section of Shanghai, which Eric describes as having been “the worst, bombed-out slum of the city.” After the proclamation, the stateless Jews—including Eric’s family—were forced to give up their dwellings and businesses for pennies. Making matters worse, landlords in Hongkew set rents at exorbitantly high rates knowing full well that the Jews were now compelled to live there. The Handbag was no more, and the Kisches had to move from their comfortable apartment in the French Concession to a cramped, one-room apartment in the Designated Area. Here the family was joined by Tante Lina. Walter was unemployed, and the family depended on meals provided by a soup kitchen sponsored by the Joint Distribution Committee and started to sell their belongings. The Hongkew experience took a great psychological toll on Grete. Later, in Australia after the war and her divorce from Walter, Eric asked his mother why she always kept so much food in the house for just the two of them. Her answer: “After Shanghai I promised myself I would never go hungry again.”

Eric attended an English-speaking school known as the Shanghai Jewish Youth School. This school had been founded by the Kadoories, one of the wealthy Sephardic Jewish families. Eric enjoyed his schooling in Shanghai. He did not participate in many activities outside of school, however, and took no interest in sports. He had a few friends but was somewhat reserved as a child. (This will no doubt come as a shock to Eric’s students and “Musical Passions” listeners today!) Like most other Shanghai refugees, he and his family had little to no interaction with the Chinese inhabitants of Shanghai and the Japanese occupation soldiers.

As the war progressed, his family increasingly had to go down into their cellar during air-raids. He explains that they would put a rucksack with their provisions on the dirt floor of the cellar. Eric would then lie on top of the rucksack, Grete would lie on top of Eric, and Walter would lie on top of both Grete and Eric. Eric remembers after these raids, he would go out and collect shrapnel. He remembers well the time the Americans accidentally bombed the Designated Area on July 17, 1945. One of Eric’s friends had been playing on a balcony in an apartment building, when his mother came and took him down to the cellar. Their apartment was right next to where the bombs hit. When they went back up to their apartment after the raid was over, they saw the balcony littered with shrapnel; had the mother not fetched her son, he would have been “ripped to shreds.” Walter was part of the first-aid brigade and helped out after the bombing. Eric explains that his father had served during the First World War, so “he was probably not too much of a stranger to this sort of carnage.” Within a month of that awful raid, the Americans dropped atomic bombs

on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese surrendered. Eric remembers much jubilation in the streets and a quick disappearance of Japanese soldiers from Shanghai. In the year that his family stayed in Shanghai after the war, two memories stick out in Eric's mind: The first is his having unknowingly served as a "pimp" for American sailors by leading them to nightclubs for coins. He remembers while celebrating his twenty-first birthday in Australia, his mother asking him, "Eric, did you ever notice that always the doors were opened by women?" It then dawned on him that his services on behalf of the gleeful Americans had been somewhat less than pure. The second memory is his finding discarded crates of oranges in the docks near the American ships. Most of the oranges were rotten, but Eric sifted through them, "rustled up a rickshaw, loaded it up with as many crates as would fit with me on board and went home back to Hongkew. And [...] that was the first time we had ever seen fresh fruit. [...] And to me, to this day, *Sunkist* is a holy brand!"

The Kisch family had never viewed Shanghai as a permanent home; they wanted out as soon as possible. A return to Austria was out of the question. Eric explains, "Shortly after the war ended, the full extent of the devastation of the Holocaust began to be revealed. And the death camps and the millions killed, and families that just literally disappeared off the face of the earth." Given that Grete's brother Ernst and other family members were already in Australia, the Kisch family decided to go to Australia. Ernst sponsored the family, and since the Australian government was opening up the country to immigrants, the migration process was fairly easy. The family left Shanghai in July 1946 on the U.S. troop transporter the *General Gordon* to Hong Kong, where they waited until late November 1946. They then flew from Hong Kong to Singapore (with a stop in Bangkok) on a DC3 and then from Singapore to Sydney, Australia, on a Sunderland Flying Boat. They eventually arrived in Melbourne on November 26, 1946.

The Shanghai experience was not something that Eric and his family spoke much about in Australia. In the 1960s Eric moved to the United States in order to attend graduate school at Columbia University. As Eric pursued his studies and then his career as a market researcher, Shanghai did not factor largely in his mind. In fact, the Shanghai past did not really start to grab hold of Eric until the deaths of his parents: Walter in 1983 and Grete in 1993. After their deaths, Eric received documents and photographs pertaining to their lives. These documents lay dormant in the Kisch basement until Eric was asked by his cousin, Alice, in 2001 if he would speak about his experiences to a Children of the Shoah group in Melbourne. It was at this time that Eric's wife, Sue, went down to the basement, brought up the bins with the documents and said, "Now's the time to go through them."

As Eric started to go through the documents, he read an account that Grete wrote about her time in Shanghai. Alongside this brief memoir were photographs and the telegram Grete had received from her uncle about going to see the man in Genoa, who proceeded to give her all the money from his wallet. This telegram inspired Eric to start his quest to find documents to “validate his memories” of Shanghai. Given that he had been so young while his family lived in Shanghai, most of his “memories” are collections of stories that had been told to him while he was growing up in Australia after the Shanghai experience. It has become very important for him to “validate” these memories with historical documents and spread awareness of this history to others. He now characterizes this quest as an “obsession.”

In addition to hosting his radio program, Eric teaches courses at the Siegal Lifelong Learning Program at Case Western Reserve University. In the classroom and on the radio he explores the works of composers who were banned by the Nazis, as well as the contributions of immigrants to American classical music. Eric explains that his experience as a former Shanghai refugee and American immigrant has inspired him to focus on these themes.

As Eric has been inspecting documents and lecturing on the history of the Shanghai Jews, he has been confronted with the meaning of that history. History, after all, is not about memorizing dates and events, but rather finding meaning within them. Eric thinks the history of the Shanghai Jews has a meaning, the knowledge of which will enrich anyone who learns about it. He believes “it is a very worthwhile story to tell people, even though it’s from the perspective of just our family. [...] It is an amazing story [...] of survival for a huge number of people, and it’s one that has influenced me personally, and if I can make [others] feel some degree of empathy to what went on there and get [others] on a journey of study and learning, then it is worthwhile.” To Eric the meaning of the Shanghai history starts simply with the acknowledgement that it happened. He points out that not many people know that approximately 20,000 Jews found haven in Shanghai when the rest of the world closed its doors to them. Eric believes it is important to remind people that he and others actually survived. The destruction of the Holocaust is important to remember but so too is the survival from it. Although Eric is not a particularly observant Jew, he still holds Passover, the festival of freedom, very dear. He explains, “I won’t eat bread [during Passover], not for liturgical or theological reasons, but somehow as a symbol that we survived this horrendous time, and [to] never forget that we were fortunate enough to do that.” The memory of Eric’s Shanghai past finds symbolic expression every year in the matzo he consumes.

For Eric, the lessons of the past should inform one's actions in the present. Specifically, the history of Shanghai Jews should be broached in current discussions about immigrants and refugees. Eric sees clear parallels between his family's refugee history and the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric of today. For this reason he feels he has "a duty to speak out": "The details I have gained by studying [this history] I feel have enriched my life and my understanding of this past. [...] It has made me very mindful of what's going on [today]. [For] once a refugee you see them everywhere. And my heart bleeds for all of them."

As Eric's heart bleeds, those of others, it seems, have turned cold. He notes with growing frustration and unhappiness "the kind of atmosphere that is being bred [by] our leaders" and finds "the kind of acquiescence to intolerance and racial hatred that is evident in Congress [...] terrifying." When contemplating this acquiescence to intolerance and racial hatred toward immigrants and Syrian refugees, Eric is reminded of the famous quotation of Pastor Martin Niemöller:

*"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."^[6]

Speaking from a history in which Jews have been targeted and abandoned, Eric says, "The question that some of my Jewish friends ask—and we ask this in the presence of our non-Jewish friends—is 'Who's next?'" As he thinks about the indifference and hatred shown toward present-day refugees, he turns to other historical quotations for guidance, stating "I am appalled by the insensitivity to the refugee refusal, and it resonates very deeply personally to me, you know, 'There but for the grace of God go I, and there by the grace of God did I go.' And one of our family mottos is from *King Lear*: 'Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel...[That thou mayst shake the superflux to them, And show the heavens more just.]'" In the courses Eric teaches in the Siegal Lifelong Learning Program, he tries to incorporate historical examples of people who have lived in accordance with this motto. People like the American Varian Fry, who worked to help over 2,000 people escape the

Nazis. Eric notes that, unfortunately, people tend to forget such cases of courage and empathy much too easily: "It is that loss of memory that we seem to be going through right now, historical memory. Does history repeat itself? Yes, because people forget."

Today people are forgetting, and history is repeating itself. Today hatred is again on display. Immigrants are again vilified and refugees dehumanized. The president's distorted response to Charlottesville has served as an endorsement of racism and hatred at a time when political rhetoric has increasingly become divorced from historical documentation. Just as the music the millennial generation hears has been digitally compressed beyond recognition, the history it encounters is channeled through talking heads of cable news networks. If this generation is to learn where such vilification and dehumanization can lead, it must start to learn from a record's needle. The message of Eric Kisch's family—those who survived in Shanghai, those who were shot in Rotterdam, and those who perished in the extermination camps—needs to be conveyed with the precision of a Bernstein down beat and a Morello drumbeat. Although historians such as Eric Kisch and myself may feel at times to be charlatans, knowing full well that the past can never be merged perfectly with the present, the Holocaust we record is not "fake news." The records of the past reveal without distortion that unchecked hatred and dehumanization lead to death and destruction. Now, more than ever before, the history of those Jews who found refuge in Shanghai and those who did not needs to be transmitted to the present in high fidelity.

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[1] Walter had a total of four siblings: 1) Annie, who was the eldest child and had married a Czech. She and her husband ran a suitcase factory in Czechoslovakia and had two children. The whole family was killed by the Germans, and Eric says that his father, Walter, once alluded to the fact that Annie had been subjected to Dr. Josef Mengele's medical experiments. Eric explains that when he learned this, "even as a callow teenager, I knew, you do not ask a follow-up question to that." 2) Ernst, a medical doctor who traveled with Walter to China. 3) Robert, who lived in Prague with an Irish wife (Louie). 4) Edgar, who married a woman named Edith and had a son named Peter. After putting Peter on a *Kindertransport* to England, the parents went to Rotterdam. Edith wrote to Peter that Edgar had found a good job in Rotterdam, and they were going to stay in Rotterdam and then try to go to England within six months. Three months later the Germans invaded Rotterdam and Edgar and

Edith were shot. Given that he had been brought into England in the *Kindertransport*, Peter survived and moved to New York City and has a daughter. Peter and his daughter are the only surviving relatives Eric has on his father's side.

[2] Grete was one of four children. She had two brothers and a sister. Her sister, Emmy, emigrated to New York after graduating from medical school in Vienna. In New York her medical credentials were not recognized so she had to start from scratch. She worked as a nurse, and eventually became an anesthesiologist. Grete's brother Paul became an ardent Zionist and left for Palestine in either 1936 or 1937 and later emigrated to Australia in 1948. Grete's brother Ernst, an engineering graduate in Vienna, had learned English and befriended an elderly Australian, who needed an assistant, who could act as a translator and guide for him. Ernst agreed, and the man sponsored Ernst's entry into Australia via Italy.

[3] After his years as a mission doctor in China, Ernst went briefly to the United States. Feeling disrespected in New York, where his medical credentials were not readily transferable, Ernst signed up to work for an American mission hospital in Kaesong, South Korea, in June 1950. Three weeks after he arrived, the North Koreans invaded and he was captured. After having saved many lives of his fellow prisoners, he died of malnutrition in captivity.

[4] The correspondence regarding Walter's unsuccessful attempt in August 1939 is to be found on the fourth microfilm reel of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-62.001M, "Selected Records of the Shanghai Municipal Archives, 1930-1947."

[5] Tante Lina Winkler was the sister of Walter's mother, Emma.

[6] <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>