

LOST and FOUND – Nazi-era Passport Connects Four Continents

By Peter Nash

When a curious Chinese collector of old items found two Nazi-era issued passports in a flea market in Shanghai in 1999 he did not know what to do with them. Some years later he heard that a Jewish cultural site was planned to be built to commemorate the flight of 20,000 Jews from the Nazi occupation of Europe and their refuge in Shanghai in the years 1939 to 1945 and some even up to the early 1950s. So the collector Zhu Peiyi contacted the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Memorial Centre and they posted the story and names of the passport holders on the ex-Shanghaiander website: www.rickshaw.org

As a German born refugee who escaped and found refuge in Shanghai, I recognised one of the names, Viennese-born Gerti Waszkoutzer. We were together in a kindergarten class and she also emigrated to Sydney after the War and our parents maintained a friendship. Gerti later married and became known as Gerda Brender. I contacted her with this incredible story not knowing if it would be of interest to her but quickly learning that she was overwhelmed with "nostalgia, excitement and nervousness". As she had no siblings and her parents had passed away this was her only physical link with her childhood in Shanghai. "It was a great shock to have found it and it sent shivers down my spine ... but it was a wonderful surprise".

Gerda and her immediate family decided to travel to Shanghai to reclaim the passport amid great excitement by the Shanghai authorities as well as media coverage in Shanghai and Sydney daily newspapers and the Jewish press.¹

The second passport was in the name of Manfred LICHTENSTEIN who was born in Halle, Germany, reportedly on 24 August 1932 and as no one claimed it I decided to try to find Manfred or someone connected with him. After all I had many Shanghai resources in my possession and also knew where other valuable resources were available.

The first resource I looked at was the Japanese controlled 1943-44 Census for the Europeans and other Nationals forced into the Shanghai Hongkew Ghetto.² Manfred was not listed which was odd but not totally unusual. I also knew that the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in Shanghai took applications from most of the Jews migrating to other countries after 1945. These so-called Shanghai HIAS Lists³ have been microfilmed and are searchable⁴.

Valery Bazarov heads the HIAS Location and Family History Service in New York and he found an application from Hermann Lichtenstein, his wife Esther and children Manfred and Ruth, also giving their place and dates of birth and other data. My excitement in knowing the names of the other Lichtenstein family was tempered slightly by the fact that their application did not list potential sponsors, an extremely valuable part of the HIAS Lists which often gives a clue to onward migration. However I also now had their birth dates and this showed up an anomaly, namely, Manfred was born on 24 June 1923 not 24 August 1932.

To find where any or all of the Lichtenstein family migrated from Shanghai was the next key step. About 7000 settled in the United States the highest number to any country, with about 5000 going to Israel, 3000 to Australia and the remainder spread throughout the world.

My wife Rieke suggested I look at the National Archives of Australia (NAA) website⁵ and search for Manfred's name. I immediately found a file existed for Manfred. To access this file at NAA

in Canberra I asked our Canberra-based AJGS member, Frank Atkinson if he could retrieve the file and send a copy. Now I found that an application by the then Australian Jewish Welfare Society (AJWS - now JewishCare) for entry to Australia was approved in 1948 for Esther, Manfred and Irmgard Lichtenstein. It also gave their ages. Post-1945 AJWS files are still archived in Sydney and Melbourne, but neither Bella Sharp-Collins (JewishCare, Sydney) or Lionel Sharpe (AJGS Melbourne) could find one for this Lichtenstein family, casting doubt on their migration to Australia.

As Ruth and not Irmgard was included on the HIAS List, I felt that Irmgard may be Manfred's wife and that Ruth probably married in Shanghai and emigrated elsewhere. This thought induced me to do a reverse search of the 1943-44 Shanghai Census. I searched for those with the first name Irmgard and based on nationality, ages and occupation (Census versus NAA file) I matched up with an Irmgard Haas, possibly her maiden name, which I thought may be useful information.

Next I looked at my copy of Shanghai Death Lists which except for one year includes the deaths of refugees in the years 1940 to 1948 and I found that the father Hermann had died in 1946. Surely Esther born in 1896 would also have died by now. With no confirmation that any of the Lichtenstein family actually migrated to Australia, I searched the very accessible Mormon's database for US Social Security Death Index using Stephen Morse's versatile and valuable website⁶. Luckily the HIAS Lists gave me Esther's exact date of birth as there were other possible matches, but I was able to confirm that she died in 1975 and that her last residence was Astoria, Queens, NY. But more than that it also showed that her Social Security was issued in Illinois – perhaps Chicago?

It then occurred to me that over about 60 years starting from 1934 a vast number of former German speaking Jews used the New York published German language periodical *Aufbau* for a variety of personal notices (as my family certainly did). I also knew of the so-called Aufbau Indexing Project (AIP) which aimed to have a searchable database. However after several years it had still not been launched and I was unsure of its status.

Through JewishGen's German SIG⁷ I found the name and contacted the current AIP coordinator, Alex Calzareth, who said the AIP was partially completed but that if I gave some details he would check with the issues that had been scanned and indexed so far. I was in luck, as there was an obituary for Esther S. Lichtenstein née Friedler, originally from Halle in the 21 March 1975 *Aufbau* issue following her date of death.

The bonus was that other surnames mentioned in the obituary were LAUB, LIGHT and LEIB. My hunch that *Aufbau* could help was right. But I was also confused as I had no prior connection to these names. Noting the order of the names in the obituary, my thoughts then were: "Esther's husband Hermann died in Shanghai, so did she re-marry (someone) Laub, and live and die in New York?"; "Did Manfred and Irmgard (possibly his wife) change their name to Light?"; "Did Ruth marry (someone) Leib?"

To get answers to these questions I re-visited the 1943-44 Shanghai Census List, Social Security Death Index website, and also searched online White Pages Directories for Illinois, New York and Florida (a popular destination for many American Jews). I could not connect anything with any certainty. As luck often begets luck, Alex Calzareth decided out of interest in this unusual story to search submitted family trees on worldconnect.rootsweb.com a website linked to ancestry.com (not necessarily with a Jewish focus). On a tree submitted by Harold J. Schmidt, he found Manfred Lichtenstein from Halle, Germany, his correct parents' names and that he died on

20 February 1996 in Chicago. Given this date and his birth date 24 August 1923 (not 24 June 1923 nor 24 August 1932!) he also cross-checked the SSDI and found a death for Fred LIGHT! Thus some mysteries were solved: Manfred changed his name and his wife was Rosie (surname unknown) - not Irmgard Haas.

The Schmidt Family Tree (last updated in 2002) showed that Irmgard Lichtenstein married Herman Laub and that Harold married the daughter of Ruth and Joseph Leib. The Tree showed that as well as Manfred, Irmgard and Herman Laub and Ruth Leib had died – but not Joseph Leib. It also seemed that neither Manfred nor Irmgard had children. In submitting his tree, Harold J. Schmidt also provided an email address. I sent a message, did not get a 'bounce' and waited and waited ... but I never got a response.

I was disappointed of course but thought it may have been for a variety of reasons: spam control, sender's name not known and therefore blocked, etc. I then searched the online White Pages Directory for Chicago/Illinois, found some possible hits for Harold J. Schmidt, phoned, but could not make a connection.

As ex-Shanghaianders have Reunions every two or three years I consulted attendee lists, especially the 1993 Reunion held in Chicago. I found that the Laubs and Joseph Leib had attended. With the given address for Joseph who now would have been 92 I wondered if he was still alive and at that address. So I contacted an ex-Shanghai school classmate, Joan Deman, in Chicago for assistance and also mentioned that Irmgard Laub had only died within the last year making it more likely to find an informant for her death. Joan then told me that another Shanghaiander, Kurt Jacoby, worked for the Chevra Kadisha (Jewish Burial Society) in Chicago. I contacted Kurt and not only did he know the Leib family but he also believed that Joseph Leib was still alive and would try to locate him.

The breakthrough finally came when Joseph Leib's daughter, Susan Schmidt, phoned me, first apologising for taking a while to respond. It seems that she was very pre-occupied with her father as he needed a lot of care lately. Susan was born in the US but she was in awe of how her grandparents and parents and their siblings came to Shanghai from Germany and survived the harsh conditions and then built new lives in the US. She was very keen to claim her uncle Manfred's passport so I gave her the necessary contact details in Shanghai.

Even though there was no direct connection with my own family history, it felt as though there was and so I was very thrilled with the outcome.

The strange discovery of Manfred Lichtenstein's passport and the search for him connected four continents: Europe, Asia, America and Australia. However, there is still no explanation as to how Manfred and Gerda Brender's passports mysteriously appeared in a Shanghai market and it also makes one wonder if there are still more to be found.

References

1. Peter Nash, "Reclaiming Lost Passports", *Kosher Koala*, Vol 12 No 2 (June 2005)
2. The Gross-Hongkew 1943-44 list is on CD-ROM attached to the book *Exil Shanghai 1938-1947* by Armbrüster, G; Kohlstruck, M; Mühlberger, S.; Teetz, Germany, Hentrich & Hentrich, 2000
3. Peter Nash; "Shanghai HIAS Lists"; *Avotaynu* Vol. 17, no.4 (Winter 2001); 19

4. Shanghai HIAS Lists on microfilm searchable on site at Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem [<http://sites.huji.ac.il/archives>] and YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York [www.yivoinstitute.org]

5. www.naa.gov.au – also see Home Page of AJGS website: www.ajgs.org.au for how to search NAA site

6. www.stevemorse.org

7. JewishGen's German Special Interest Group: www.jewishgen.org/GerSIG

Peter Nash (formerly Nachemstein) was born in Berlin, found refuge in Shanghai, lived there from 1939 to 1949, then emigrated to Sydney. His keen interest in his family genealogy together with his China background has enabled him to research the available resources for finding former Jewish residents in China. He authored the chapter on China in the "Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy".