

FEATURE

Remembering my Father, Dr. Feng Shan Ho

The ancient Chinese say:

“Shan yu ren jian bu shi zhen shan.

— *Good deeds performed to be seen by others are not truly good.*”

By Manli Ho

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I'm very happy to be here and I thank the Seattle OCA, the American Jewish Committee, the Wing Luke Museum and the Washington State Holocaust Education and Resource Center for inviting me here to share my memories of my late father, Dr. Feng Shan Ho. It is always a pleasure for me to come to Seattle.

It has taken eight years of ongoing research and documentation to piece together the story of my father's humanitarian deeds in Austria because in life, my father rarely spoke of his tenure as the Chinese Consul General in Vienna from 1938 to 1940, and much less about his rescue activities of Austrian Jews.

He told me only two anecdotes from that era. One was of his seeing Hitler's triumphant march into Vienna following the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938; how appalled he had been by the fanatical welcome the Austrians extended, and the immediate and public persecution of Jews.

The second was a more personal story and it occurred on November 10, 1938, which was Kristallnacht, the infamous Night of Broken Glass, the worst pogrom or persecution of Jews unleashed by Hitler up to that point. On that day, my father faced down the Gestapo to help his



Jewish friends, the Rosenbergs, to whom he had provided visas to Shanghai, China.

It was a vivid story to a child, and the lesson I derived from it was that one should stand up for what is right, help one's friends and not cave in the bullies, even at gunpoint.

After my father's death in 1997, it was only by chance that his help to Austrian Jews on a large scale became known, even to us, his family. But piecing together this puzzle more than six decades later means that we may never know the full extent of his humanitarian efforts.

We have learned that under my father's watch, the Chinese Consulate in Vienna issued thousands of visas to Jewish refugees, averaging 500 visas each month, and at times as many as 900, in the two years following the Anschluss.

My father's intent in issuing the visas to Shanghai was to provide safe passage out of Nazi-occupied Austria. He said: “The visas were to Shanghai ‘in name only’. In reality, it was a means for the Jewish refugees to find a way to eventually get to the US, England or other destinations.”

Shanghai harbor, which was under Japanese occupation, required no entry visa. But a visa with Shanghai as an “end destination” allowed refugees to obtain transit visas through other countries, such as Italy. The visas served as the proof of emigration required by Nazi authorities, both to be allowed to leave Austria, and to effect the release of those deported to concentration camps. Many visa recipients from Austria did not necessarily use them to go to Shanghai, but to make their way to Palestine, Cuba, the Philippines and other parts of the world.

One of the questions I am most often asked is: What would prompt a man from China to save Jews in Austria when others would not? My immediate response has been: “If you knew my father, you wouldn’t have to ask.” But of course, that is no longer possible. What I can tell you is that my father was a man who strove to live his life according to the best in Confucian and Judeo-Christian values.

He was born into poverty in rural China in 1901. He lost his father at age seven. He and his family were helped by Norwegian Lutheran missionaries in his hometown of Yiyang, Hunan Province, who educated him in their schools. Because of his scholastic brilliance, he was given a scholarship to the elite College of Yale-in-China. Subsequently, he obtained a Ph.D. in political economics from the University of Munich, graduating magna cum laude. In 1935, he joined the Foreign Service of the Chinese Nationalist government with a posting to Turkey, thus beginning a 40-year diplomatic career, and one that led him to Vienna, Austria in 1937.

My father always felt that he had received a full measure of gifts from God. He believed that these gifts were not bestowed upon him solely for his personal benefit, but for that of his fellow man.

In his memoirs, *Forty Years of my Diplomatic Life*, he wrote of the basis for this belief: “At the schools that I attended, from the schools of the (Norwegian) Lutherans, to the College of Yale-in-China...The emphasis in their education was to build individual character, that is to learn the Judeo-Christian values of self-sacrifice in giving unto others, and of service to society.”

He would impart this ethic to his children. When I turned 20, which is coming of age for the Chinese, my father wrote me a letter in which he said that after having raised and educated me, he hoped that I would live my life as a “useful” human being. I don’t think I could have asked for a better role model.

The most important things that he taught me, he taught by example. He was tireless in his pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement. He read avidly, always with a red pencil in hand to mark the important passages. His knowledge, especially of literature and history, some of which he tried to pass on to me, was encyclopedic. He had an astonishing memory. He remembered everything, from historical dates and events, poems, literary references, to whether I had studied my dreaded Chinese lessons that day. It was intimidating, but that memory also made him a wonderful storyteller. He told stories with verve and relish and with his wonderful sense of humor, which emerged slightly more often than his very hot temper- which I attributed to his love for the very hot peppers of his native Hunan Province.

Among his most valuable traits, was his capacity for love and for compassion.

Although he spent most of his adult years abroad, my father was inordinately proud to be Chinese, and reminded my brother and me constantly of our precious heritage. He named us



after two Confucian principles: De or Virtue for my brother and Li or Decorum for me.

Another facet which bears mention is that my father came from a generation of Chinese who felt that China had been humiliated and persecuted by 100 years of foreign imperialism. His generation was determined not to allow that humiliation to continue. In that sense my father was very sensitive to persecution and to bullying of any peoples.

His reason for helping Jewish refugees was simply this. He said: "I thought it only natural to feel compassion and to want to help. From the standpoint of humanity, that is the way it should be."

I believe this also answers a second question I am often asked: "Why did he not talk about it?" If helping those in distress was natural to a human being, why would it warrant particular praise or mention?

The ancient Chinese say: "Shan yu ren jian bu shi zhen shan. — Good deeds performed to be seen by others are not truly good.

During his lifetime, my father neither sought nor received recognition for what he did. I know he would have been astonished by the honors that have since been accorded him. Like many rescuers, I don't think that he thought of himself as having done anything particularly heroic. He was only being human.

Throughout his life, my father stood by his convictions and refused to renounce his principles for the sake of political expediency or even personal safety, and he bore the consequences without complaint.

In Vienna, he issued thousands of visas to help Jewish refugees, despite being ordered to desist by his superiors, despite the Nazis confiscating his Consulate building, and despite being reprimanded and later punished by his own government. He remained undaunted throughout.

He was never reunited with any of the people he had helped. But I have had the good

fortune to meet some of the beneficiaries of those visas.

One of them, Eric Goldstaub, was 17 years old when he knocked on the doors of 50 consulates in Vienna and was turned down by them all. He eventually went to the Chinese Consulate and on July 20, 1938, obtained 20 visas for himself and his extended family. It was to a place he had never dreamed of going: Shanghai, China. But before their departure, Eric and his father were arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis on Kristallnacht. Because they were able to produce the Chinese visas as proof of emigration, they were released within a few days and the family embarked on their journey to Shanghai.

As word spread that the Chinese Consulate was issuing visas, long lines formed in front of the Consulate building. When I met the late Gerda Gottlieb Kraus, she told me the story of how her husband Hans obtained visas for himself and his family.

She said: "He was 19 years-old at the time. There were long, long lines in front of the Consulate and while people were waiting, the Gestapo was outside harassing them and beating them up. There were so many people that Hans stood in line for many days, wondering when he would be able to get in. One day, when he lined up again, he saw the Chinese Consul General's car about to enter the Consulate gate. He saw that the car window was open, so he thrust his visa application papers through the open car window. Apparently, the Consul General received it because Hans then got a call and was told that visas were ready." Gerda Gottlieb met Hans Kraus in Shanghai and they were married there and later emigrated to Canada.

Most other visa recipients did not go to Shanghai, but escaped elsewhere. The Lilienthal sisters, for example, escaped to Palestine along with hundreds of Jewish refugees on board the Palestine transports of 1938 and 1939. One small anecdote about these two sisters, Ricarda and Lilith, affords us a glimpse of what had been the wealthy and cultured society of the Jewish

intelligentsia in Vienna. As the sheltered daughters of a very prominent Viennese family, the two sisters came to board the illegal transport ship for the harsh and hazardous journey to Palestine wearing white gloves and toting their hatboxes.

It is very special for me to meet survivors and to learn their histories. For even though my father is gone, it is as if he lives on through them. They have now become my mispocha, my family.

You may ask what relevance events from the first half of the last century has for us in the 21st Century. The Hebrew word for remembrance is “Zachor”. The historian Vera Schwarcz who wrote about Chinese and Jewish cultural memory in her book, *Bridge Across Broken Time*, says that “to recall and to relive” is the only means to approach catastrophe. To remember publicly, or as Elie Wiesel has said: “to shout from the rooftops” is to honor the memory of those who perished, to acknowledge the suffering of the survivors, and to ensure that their sacrifices were not in vain.

There are four kinds of participants in times of catastrophe: the perpetrators, the victims, the bystanders and the rescuers. The largest group and one to which most of us belong, is that of the bystanders, not because we want to hurt anyone, but because we are afraid to be hurt ourselves.

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Manli Ho, the daughter of Dr. Feng Shan Ho, was born in Cairo, Egypt and grew up in Mexico, Bolivia and Colombia. She graduated from Smith College in 1972 and was a reporter for the Boston Globe, and an editor for China Daily in Beijing. She now works for the executive search firm of Isaacson Miller in Boston, and divides her time between Maine and San Francisco. For the past eight years, Manli has been researching and documenting her late father's humanitarian work in Vienna, Austria, and is working on a book.

Now more than ever, we need to be reminded that we can choose, that there are those among us who dared to exercise their humanity in the face of incredible mortal danger.

Among them more than sixty years ago, was a small group of diplomats like my father – bureaucrats trained to promote the interests of their own nations, and not necessarily that of humanity – who transcended their differences in sex, race, religion, culture and social background to fulfill a potential we all possess – to be human in times of inhumanity and moral chaos.

The people who made this choice - not an easy choice, but the right one - left us a legacy, which not only serves as a lesson to us, but also provides us with hope and comfort.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with my father's own words about his choice in life. It was a poem that he wrote to my mother on New Year's Day in 1947. It is translated from the Chinese.

“The gifts Heaven bestows are not by chance,
The convictions of heroes not lightly formed.
Today I gather all spirit and strength,
Urging my steed forward ten thousand miles.”

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Thank you.