

BOOK REVIEWS

GOODBYE SHANGHAI – A MEMOIR

By Sam Moshinsky

Melbourne: Mind Film and Publishing, Armadale, 2009, 219 pp.

Sam Moshinsky OAM is well known in the wider Jewish community, having worked in a senior capacity for numerous organisations at both State and Federal levels, including the United Israel Appeal and the Jewish Museum of Australia. This book will thus be of great interest to all who came into contact with Sam whilst he was active in those roles.

But on a wider level, there are many Jewish families who achieved eventual sanctuary in Australia after a sojourn in China, and particularly in Shanghai, before and during the war. Those families and their descendants will be fascinated with this memoir, as will Sam's own children and grandchildren, to whom Sam has dedicated it.

The origins of the author's deep involvement in civic affairs must surely lie in his family history – his Russian-born parents and grandparents were displaced first from the Ukraine and Siberia, then from Vladivostok at the other extremity of the Russian empire. The First World War and the Russian Revolution eventually wrought intolerable change to what had been their happy and peaceful Jewish lives in the far east of the empire – Harbin and Shanghai beckoned.

By 1930 Sam's grandparents, with their only son Abe, took advantage of Shanghai's open door policy, having neither passports nor visas. They established a coated-paper and cardboard box business in three floors of a factory in the French concession, and the family lived in a spacious apartment on the top floor.

Sam's parents were divorced after a brief marriage. In those early childhood years, he was largely brought up by his grandmother and his Chinese *amah*, his constant companion. Then Abe met and married Eva in 1939, when Sam was five years old. Despite the challenges of immediate motherhood, Eva approached Sam with wisdom and sensitivity, and from the first she treated Sam as her son.

The family were sustained by their business initiative and experience, and by their Russian Jewish culture, but in a world of conflict and violent nationalism, somehow survived as stateless residents. Religiously, the family were traditional but not observant, and social life largely revolved around the Jewish Club and the Russian Synagogue. Sam was sent to an ultra-Orthodox cheder, where his knuckles were often rapped with a ruler!

Sam's descriptions of Shanghai, quite possibly the most unique city in the

world, are fascinating and perceptive. Despite the tensions, general anxiety and deprivations of the war years, and the cruelty of the Japanese to the all-suffering Chinese, Shanghai was not bombed. Despite the rationing and shortages, the resourceful found food if they could afford the black market. By 1944 there were educated whisperings about the end of the war against the Nazis, but by early 1945, ominously for all in China, the Japanese military became far more aggressive. The tensions worsened until, in August, the Soviets declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria, and the Japanese gave little resistance. Yet the defeat and surrender of Japan only followed the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the middle of August, and only then did peace return, briefly, to the lives of Shanghai's Jewish community.

Sam gives us rich recollections of life in Shanghai after the war, and describes the growing assertions of Chinese authority, with the reality of economic mismanagement and corruption. Descriptions of his Chinese bar mitzvah, membership of Betar, schooling by the Marist Brothers, summer holidays in the cool mountain resort of Moganshan, and then two final years of schooling by the Jesuits, are recalled with fondness.

But by 1950 civil war came to Shanghai, and it was time for the family to find somewhere to go. The United States was no longer available since the Russian quota was full, and Canada reneged on its earlier undertaking to accept the Moshinsky family. The communists were pressing and although negotiations with the Chinese authorities were protracted it became possible for Sam to leave for Melbourne, ahead of the rest of the family.

The book goes on to describe departure from Shanghai, arrival and survival in Melbourne and then Sam's eventual marriage to Ada that has produced three remarkable sons, Mark, Randall and Richard, and now the ultimate blessing of eight grandchildren.

Moshinsky's memoirs give a penetrating insight into the formative factors that have produced an outstanding communal leader, but they are essentially only the story of his first 17 years, leaving out much of what followed.

We should hope that Sam will one day tell us more about the next 60 years of his eventful life, and more about his singular brothers, both of whom have also left their mark, Nathan as a leading Melbourne QC and Elijah as an internationally acknowledged opera, theatre and film director.

The book is highly readable and very beautifully produced. It was published to celebrate Sam's 75th birthday, in July 2009.