

Margaret Theresia Jordan's Journey from Shanghai to Fairfax, Virginia: 1924-2016

by Stephanie Hysmith

Whenever I tell people that my mother was born in Shanghai, China, they usually ask whether her parents were missionaries. The story is more complicated. It begins in Vienna, Austria where her father, Josef Schürer, was born in 1891. After his father was killed in a traffic accident, his mother, Theresia, was left to raise three children on a limited income. World War I interrupted Josef's engineering studies. He was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army and sent to the Eastern Front. Captured by the Russians, he spent the rest of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp in southern Siberia.

No one tried to escape, because in Siberia there's really nowhere to go. And they were over 6,000 miles away from home. I did some research to try to figure out how my grandparents met. As in all POW camps, officers received preferential treatment. Apparently, there was some confusion over determining rank equivalents between the Austrian and Russian armies. This caused a "promotion" of cadets and ensigns, ensuing in the inflated number of 54,000 officers among Austro-Hungarian POWs. Many were allowed to visit towns for recreational purposes. I don't know whether Josef was one of the lucky ones assumed to be an officer, but in any case, he was allowed to go out to try to make some money. His Polish friend, Karol Ripa, spoke French and Josef played the piano, so the two went knocking on doors to offer their services. A Polish émigré, businessman Karl Kasimir Wolodkowicz and his wife Anna, a White Russian, accepted lessons for their two daughters, Albina and Tonia.

With Russia's withdrawal from the war after the Bolshevik Revolution, Austrian and German prisoners-of war were set free. Josef and Albina married April 1918, and Karol Ripa married Tonia around the same time.

The newlyweds had to decide where to go. Returning to Vienna was risky; Europe was still at war, and economic conditions deteriorating. Staying in Siberia was riskier as the conflict between the Red and White armies that followed the revolution engulfed the region.

Josef and Albina, with their first child Gertrud (Trudy), born April 1919, decided to head east to Vladivostok on the Trans-Siberian Railroad on a train chartered by the Swedish Red Cross for prisoners-of-war.

They lived for a few months in Harbin, Manchuria, where the enterprising Josef gave Japanese lessons, staying one textbook chapter ahead of his students. According to family history, my grandmother was standing on a street in Harbin holding the infant Trudy. A Jewish dentist approached her and asked what she was doing there. He said they must go to Shanghai where there was an international community. When the dentist offered to pay for the family's passage from Vladivostok, Josef eagerly accepted.

In the 1920s, Shanghai was a booming city, the commercial gateway to China. Josef played piano in silent movie houses while he looked for a permanent position. He found it as a secretary at the Siemens China Company, the German-owned manufacturer that was doing business worldwide. The family moved to Shanghai's international settlement, a 1920s equivalent of a gated community for the expatriate population of businessmen, diplomats, teachers and missionaries. Margaret was born in January 1924, and her younger sister Stephanie (Steffi) in September 1925. Margaret and her sisters were well cared for by Chinese amahs (nannies) and cooks at their comfortable home. My Aunt Trudy told me she could say her address in Chinese when they needed to tell a driver where to take them, but didn't know what it meant!

The family's languages are interesting. Albina had no affinity for languages, although she probably spoke Polish as well as Russian; Josef had learned Russian, so that's what they spoke together; the girls all played with the local children and went to German and English schools—the servants spoke only Pidgin English, and that was probably my mother's first language.

In 1930 the family took an ocean freighter to Europe to visit Josef's mother in Vienna. They made many stops along the way. The new sights and tastes made a deep impression on Margaret. Coming back in 1931 in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), she remembered the monkeys and sumptuous meals served by a small army of liveried waiters. She tasted curry for the first time and loved it; it became a favorite family dish.

While in Europe they rendezvoused with Albina's sister Tonia. Karol Ripa and Tonia had traveled west to Warsaw, Poland while my grandparents went east to China. The only grandparent I ever met was Tonia and Albina's mother, whom everyone called Babushka, and who moved to the United States with Karol and Tonia.

Josef rose in the company hierarchy to become the director of the Shanghai office, overseeing the office and bridge construction projects that were to shape the city's skyline. He was shocked when, in 1937, around the time of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai, Siemens decided to replace him. He was offered a transfer to the company's head office in Düsseldorf, Germany.

In 1940, the family moved from Düsseldorf to Josef's home city, Vienna. Josef became vice-president of the Hermann Goering steelworks, producing armaments for the army and air force. I believe he was working at the headquarters in Linz, while the family lived comfortably in a large home in Vienna. When she finished high school, Margaret wasn't sure what she was going to do but thought she'd like to study fashion design or some other artistic profession. The Nazi

authorities had other plans for her. The Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich's labor service) conscripted girls and unmarried women under 25 for a year called the Pflichtjahr (year of service).

They were sent to replace men called up for military service. About 300,000 were called up each year. They were meant to work for two months either in an agricultural setting or helping out households with too many children. Later they might be sent to a factory. It was devastating to her to think about having to do this and disrupt all her plans. My grandmother knew my Aunt Steffi, the party girl, wouldn't be able to handle this and arranged for her to be married at 16. Trudy was married with two toddlers. But Margaret was eligible; still she did everything she could to postpone or avoid it.

Unfortunately, like everything the Nazis did, everything was well-documented. If you did not fulfill your Pflichtjahr, you were ineligible for any further education or training.

This is how she described it to me in 2005:

"I did not want to do that; I had other hopes in my life. I wanted to go into a career of artistic things, and develop myself. But they did not give me the chance. So I escaped using a different excuse that my mother was coming down with tuberculosis, and my father was incapacitated ... they needed me to be at home. I could do it for one year, but then I was called in to an office where they said, 'All right, if you don't come and get in here, we have to call you and arrest you.' So I didn't dare do that. Horrible thing to my family."

She agreed to a one-year assignment and was sent to the mountains of the Tirol. She found farm work hard and unrelenting. She understood that she was helping women who were struggling to run farms without husbands and sons, but resented Nazi ideology.

"We were indoctrinated ... that Hitler was the greatest thing in our lives. We had to salute the flag, and I was already feeling rebellious against this whole system. I thought you cannot pray to Hitler. He's not a god. He's a Hitler, but I didn't tell them that, because I knew I had to keep my mouth shut."

After serving on various farms for a year, here's her telling of what happened:

“So when the year passed, we were all supposed to be released. Oh, no, sorry girls, we cannot let you go, because you are all needed. We have to serve the country, so we will take you to Swarovski's factory to work over there, because they are short of men and there you will have a little more freedom, and it will only be a year there, definitely only a year. All right, what can you do? You can't disobey them; you can't run away, because they'll put you in jail, so here we stupid girls had to go all the way to Wattens which is close to Innsbruck, and you all are aware of what that place is, Swarovski, the very famous factory, glass cuttings, diamonds that Liberace used.”

After her second year was over, she returned to Vienna where she met a handsome lawyer who:

(her words)

“was the first one that told me the horrible things going on. He told me, ‘I'm in the prime of my life. I'm a young lawyer and I know the Nazis are not doing too good, but I want to be alive. I don't want to be killed at the fronts.’ My father was beginning to worry about me, so he approached this lawyer and he said, ‘Can't you help me out and get my daughter over to Krakow? Maybe she can work over there for you’... Yes, I did work there. I went there and stayed there for a very few months and it was quite an experience. Here I was put into this huge castle. I was left alone most of the time, all on my own, sat in a room with some women who looked at me like I was an idiot, which I probably was, because I was sitting there. Meanwhile still Russian troops were coming close to Poland so this young officer, said, ‘I have to tell you, it's not safe, and we don't know how the Russians are advancing, but I think you should go home to Vienna.’”

In Vienna, her father asked a chemistry professor if he could put her to work. She spoke a little Russian and had taught herself to read a bit. The professor said he sometimes got scientific papers in Russian and that she could translate them. She was not well prepared. “No idea about chemistry, but I said yes, I will do it. I would sit there and I would translate one word by the other, and meanwhile we were being bombarded by the Allies.”

Her family had long before left the city for Vorderstoder, a village in Upper Austria. Margaret remained in the family home. As the Soviet army closed in on Vienna, the professor gave Margaret and other staff a way out. He had secured a facility in Upper Austria, and believed General Patton's Third Army would reach the area before the Soviet army. He was taking his parents there, and had obtained papers and permits to transfer staff. "So I thought about it. I had no connections, no contacts in Vienna and I decided I'm going to leave and I was lucky." She used wine from her father's cellar to bribe horse carriages and wagons to get her to the train station. She also had the good sense to grab all the family photographs, which she felt more important than any material goods. Her train was the last one to leave Vienna that wasn't bombed.

She rejoined her mother and sisters in Vorderstoder. As the professor predicted, the area was liberated by the Third Army.

"I remember walking down the street and a truck with American boys was going down to Czechoslovakia. [They said] Come on! You speak English! Why don't you come along? And I smiled and they gave me chocolate as they always did to the young girls." The GIs, when told her name was Margaret, called her Margie, a name she embraced and went by for the rest of her life.

Albina died from tuberculosis in March 1947; the next year, Josef suffered a stroke and died. The three daughters returned to Vienna to find that Soviet soldiers had looted the family home. With their English-language skills, they found work as interpreters. Margie worked at the U.S. Embassy on the Marshall Plan for post-war reconstruction. Trudy introduced Margie to Army Air Corps officer Logan Earl "Hy" Hysmith, legal adviser for the American sector. She was finally able to enjoy herself.



Post-war Vienna. (Shadow of Hy Hysmith)

When Hy had to return to Oklahoma to care for his mother, Margie followed. They were married in Wilburton, Oklahoma, in October 1948. Two daughters, Rita and Stephanie, were born. In 1951, with the outbreak of the Korean War, Hy was posted to Washington, D.C. The family moved to Arlington where a son, Logan, was born, and later to Fairfax, Virginia.

In many ways, Margie lived the typical suburban life of the 1950s, engaged with her children and their activities. Margie was an animal lover and the family always had a dog, sometimes two. In summer, they packed up the car and went tent-camping.

When Hy died suddenly in January 1967, Margie, now in her early 40s, was left with three children and a limited income. She took a full-time job with an insurance company where she worked until retiring at age 62. A few years after her husband's death, she met retired Commander Charles "Joe" Jordan. They married in September 1973.

Margie and Joe bought a boat, a camper, a beach cottage, and a home in Florida where they spent the winters. They travelled extensively throughout the U.S. as well as overseas. After Joe died in

Florida in 1998, she continued to travel. In her 80s, she joined her daughter Rita and her husband on trips to Europe and a sea voyage around South America and her daughter Stephanie and her husband on trips to Thailand, Turkey, Republic of Georgia and, lastly, South Africa when she was 88.



Blyde River Canyon, South Africa, March 2013.

She finally passed away in September of 2016 at the ripe old age of 92. She had quite a ride.