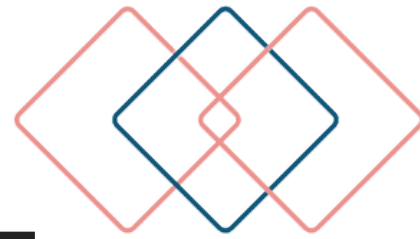


QESHER MAGAZINE



Status Quo Ante Synagogue in Targu Mures, Romania



Qesher - Connecting Jewish
Communities since 2020

SEPTEMBER 2021 • ISSUE 2 • ROSH HASHANA EDITION

ROSH
HASHANA
EDITION

WE WISH YOU A HAPPY NEW YEAR!

We would like to wish a very happy and healthy new year to all of our participants, speakers and partners. We would like to do this through sharing with you the second edition of our magazine. We are grateful for everyone who joins us and shares their stories, their thoughts, their projects with us.

In this edition you will meet three amazing people from very diverse backgrounds but all with a similar mission: bring back to life different pieces of the Jewish past and create awareness about its history for those who come next.



Shanah Tova u Metuka

INTERVIEWS

GET TO KNOW:

PENINAH ZILBERMAN

FOUNDER OF TARBUT FOUNDATION,
MARUMURES, ROMANIA

OMAR MOHAMMED

SPEAKER OF "JEWS OF MOSUL",
FOUNDER OF MOSUL EYE

FAITH GOLDMAN

PARTICIPANT - SHARING THE STORY OF
HER HUSBAND AND THE SHANGHAI GHETTO



Jewish Museum of Shanghai



TARBUT FOUNDATION, MARAMURES, ROMANIA

GET TO KNOW PENINAH ZILBERMAN, FOUNDER OF TARBUT FOUNDATION IN MARUMURES, ROMANIA

BY DORA KORANYI AND SEBASTIAN MIZRAHI



Sighet Marumures

We interviewed Peninah Zilberman, founder of Tarbut Foundation in Marumures, Romania. She told us about her personal story, and how the Tarbut Foundation brings together Holocaust survivors while also teaching the local community about the once very rich Jewish culture of the region.

Where does your strong connection to Romania come from?

I was born in Haifa, Israel, in 1950, to Holocaust survivors from Bucharest and Maramures, which is in the northern part of Romania. My parents had a pioneer spirit and they established a farm for Romanian immigrants in Israel, so I knew many people from

this community. On top of that, my paternal grandmother gave me the gift of teaching me Romanian and the culture of Romania. She spoke to me about the history of my family and of the Jews of Romania, including what she went through in her own life.

How did you actually start working with Jewish heritage?

When I moved to Canada in 1969, I became a Hebrew teacher and after some years I was offered the opportunity to be the principal of a Jewish school, and not much later, at the young age of 38, I was asked to become the director of the Holocaust Museum in Toronto.

In a sense this was the beginning of something that

I felt deeply connected to, since already at the age of 12, I had decided I was going to write a bibliography of books that deal with the Holocaust and here I was decades later being given this chance.

It was not an easy task because of a few reasons: Even though the Canadian society is quite open-minded, two things were against me a) I was very young and b) I was a female. So, I had to prove that I was really up for the task.

Luckily, I am very fast with languages, and in my childhood, I had a friend whose parents spoke Yiddish. So, one of the things that helped me to be accepted by the big Board of Survivors was that I could speak to them in Yiddish, so they felt I was not just any Israeli or Canadian girl.

SHANAH TOVA!

And then, once I got the job, I proved to them that I listened to their needs and could accommodate them. I was there for 10 years, but no matter what else I did after that, from that moment I was always involved with the Holocaust subject one way or another.

Then, Communism fell in Romania in 1989 and I came here for the first time in 1998. That's when I found my mother's first cousin in Sighet, who's still alive at 93. I participated in various conferences and seminars, and started to develop a much closer relation with the Romanian people and the country.

In 2010 I went for an early retirement and decided to move back to Israel, but I would still come to Sighet every summer. In July 2013 I was sitting on a bench next to Elie Wiesel's house, when suddenly I realized that the following May would be the 70th anniversary of the deportation. I felt that we had to do something to commemorate the event, and I decided to organize a march of 2 Km from the house of Elsie Wiesel, where the ghetto was, to the train station, where the Jews were taken.

I have a friend who is the curator of the Elie Wiesel Museum and she helped me to get in touch with the mayor, who was a very open-minded person. He gave me a letter of invitation for all the survivors and their descendants from the Sighet Maramures region, saying he would be thrilled if at least 25 people came. May 2014 arrived and we had 120 people from around the world. He was amazed!



Elie Wiesel Museum, Sighet



Peninah Zilberman speaking at a student event in Sighetu Marmatei in April 2019.

We held a 4-day conference in which people found relatives that they didn't know were alive; it was all very emotional. We also went to speak at different schools, because the new generations don't know about the Holocaust or the Jewish people who no longer live in Sighet. They pass by Elie Wiesel's house every day not knowing who he was.

After the event was over, I had to decide what to do next. That brought me to create the Tarbut Foundation in October 2014 with some money that my late parents left me. I established it in the memory of my mother's family and the rest of the Jews that did not return.

Can you tell us more about the activities of "Tarbut"?

I divided the mission of the Foundation into two:

One for the Jewish people or their descendants, and the other aimed at the locals, mostly high school students, the future generation.

SHANAH TOVA!

For the students we have workshops and educational sessions to learn about the past Jewish community. Although of course, during the last two years it was impossible to run activities for the schools.

For the descendants we provide genealogy research assistance, and we organize the gatherings at Sighet as well as family root tours. These events for tourists are not happening right now either. However, it is a good time to do genealogy research. When we do have our gatherings, we always bring together the Jewish visitors and the students. And when we have the cultural programs, we invite the general audience of Sighet. Once we had a concert with Hebrew and Yiddish songs that we taught to the school choir. When you involve children, their parents and grandparents always come, so that is like half of the city!

I have a team of about 10 people who join and help me, especially at the gatherings, and my own son is very much involved as well.

In the first gathering we had 125 participants - both survivors and 2nd generation

In the third one we started to see 2nd, 3rd and fourth generations.

The last gathering of 2019 brought 75 people, mostly 4th generation. There were many mixed marriages, for example, two participants, a Korean and a Native American, who were married to descendants of survivors. It was a very interesting interaction.

That year we also had Eli Wiesel's son who came with his own son, who just had his Bar Mitzvah. The best-seller author, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach also took part, so we really had a very unusual combination.

Do you encounter any negative reactions from the local community?

Every time I am asked if there is any anti-Semitism in Romania, my straight answer is that I don't look for it. What I try to show to the locals at all levels of generations is that even though Jews are not physically present in big numbers in the city as they used to be, we are coming back, we visit, we are guests and you will always find us here. Now even many non-Jews are interested in preserving Jewish heritage.

I believe that by highlighting the positive you reach more people. It is true that Romania didn't have many righteous among the nations compared to other countries, but it had the Queen Mother Helena, who was awarded the title by Yad Vashem in 1993. That is something very big, because many citizens in Romania are missing the kingdom, and when you tell them that the queen saved Jews, that sounds very good.

What plans do you have for the Tarbut foundation in the next few years?

As far as my future plans go, I want to write a book that will involve my work, and also continue with the school activities as much as the health situation allows it.

Besides that, in 2024 it will be the 80th anniversary of the deportations. That would be a very interesting gathering to organize. There probably won't be any survivors and probably even very few second-generation participants will be able to join. So, we expect that the 3rd and 4th generation will be the majority and they will continue to carry the legacy of their Marmaures ancestors.



Memorial Monument at the exact location where the largest Synagogue in Sighet stood.

GET TO KNOW OMAR MOHAMMED

BY SYLVIE HODES

The Jewish community of Mosul, stretching back 2,500 years, is intertwined with the city's ancient history. It was home to the legendary female Torah teacher Asenath Barzani, it housed the holy tomb of the Prophet Jonah (until its tragic destruction in 2014 by ISIS), and, the appropriately named Babylonian Talmud was – you guessed it! – from Babylonia, ancient Iraq. For centuries, Jews from around the region would visit the nearby village of Al-Qosh on a pilgrimage to the tomb of the Prophet Nahum, a tradition which even Benjamin of Tudela participated in. It goes without saying that as the community flourished, Jews contributed to the economy, prosperity, literature and culture of the region. The old bazaar was a hub of intermingling between Jews, Muslims and Christians.

So, it came as a shock when, in the 1940s and 50s, most of Mosul's Jews were deported. Nazism had spread to the Middle East and the King of Iraq enjoyed positive relations with Germany. Nazi ideology began to permeate Iraqi society as state-sponsored newspapers stirred up public antisemitism. Jews were attacked on the streets on a daily basis amidst accusations of Zionist activity – the consequence of which meant deportations, imprisonments, and executions. Muslims who aided Jews were themselves attacked.

Things were worse yet for the Jewish community of Baghdad who suffered the infamous Farhud and the confiscation of property, but the Jews of Mosul did not escape lightly. The population gradually dwindled, as people left both voluntarily and by force, without any assets. By 1952 around 120,000 of the 130,000 Jews in Iraq had left.

Today, just 3 Jews remain in Iraq. Along with the community, 6 of Mosul's original 7 synagogues have disappeared, either destroyed or repurposed.

A Mosuli Jewish woman said she didn't feel anything was unusual until the day she overheard a preacher in the local mosque calling "خايبير خايبير يا يهود، جيش محمد سوف يعود" [Jews of Khaybar, the army of Mohammed will return] – a threat towards the Jews based on the massacre enacted in the early period of 14th century Islam. Once she heard that, she knew that things had changed irreversibly, and Jews were no longer safe.

Despite the trauma they faced from their own city, Mosuli Jews maintain a strong heritage and a deep connection to Mosul. Around the world, they identify as not only Iraqi but as Mosuli too, with a distinct dialect, cuisine, international journals and cultural clubs for the community.



Tomb of prophet Daniel, before its destruction by ISIS

SHANAH TOVA!

I interviewed Omar Mohammed, a historian, journalist, and creator of the Mosul Eye.

Born and raised in Mosul, Omar Mohammed is a historian and journalist now living in exile in Paris. When ISIS arrived in 2014, he knew that the cultural history of the city was endangered. The once perceived spiritual protection over the city, thanks to the numerous prophets entombed there, was shattered.

The ISIS occupation with all its terrible consequences commenced. Fear was widespread. Omar realised this was not the first disaster Mosul had witnessed. Through his research he came across atrocities like the 1933 massacre of Assyrians and, of course, the sad fate of the city's Jews. He knew that in order to prevent future recurrence, he needed to document the past and present.

And so, despite not being Jewish himself, he took the responsibility of preserving Mosul's Jewish heritage. He interviews Mosuli Jews abroad collecting names and information from them, aiming to make an online museum exhibiting the history of the Jews of Mosul.

He set up Mosul Eye, an online blog which reports on Mosul's condition and ISIS brutality there, and broadcasts them to the world. For many years it was regarded internationally as one of the few reliable sources of information about life under ISIS.

Mosul was liberated from ISIS rule in July 2017. Although countless sites were destroyed, many others survived and are in various states of disrepair, currently undergoing reconstruction. Many ancient artefacts and sites, including



including synagogues, were hidden/disguised and successfully avoided being targeted. The Nahum Shrine reconstruction project aims to finish in just two years' time, ready for public pilgrimages once more.

The university library of Mosul was sadly destroyed, but despite rumours to the contrary, the fire did not reach the basement stocked with roughly 30,000 ancient manuscripts – and which survive to this day! It is currently functioning from a temporary location while it is rebuilt, and Mosul Eye is in the process of resupplying it with over 300,000 books.

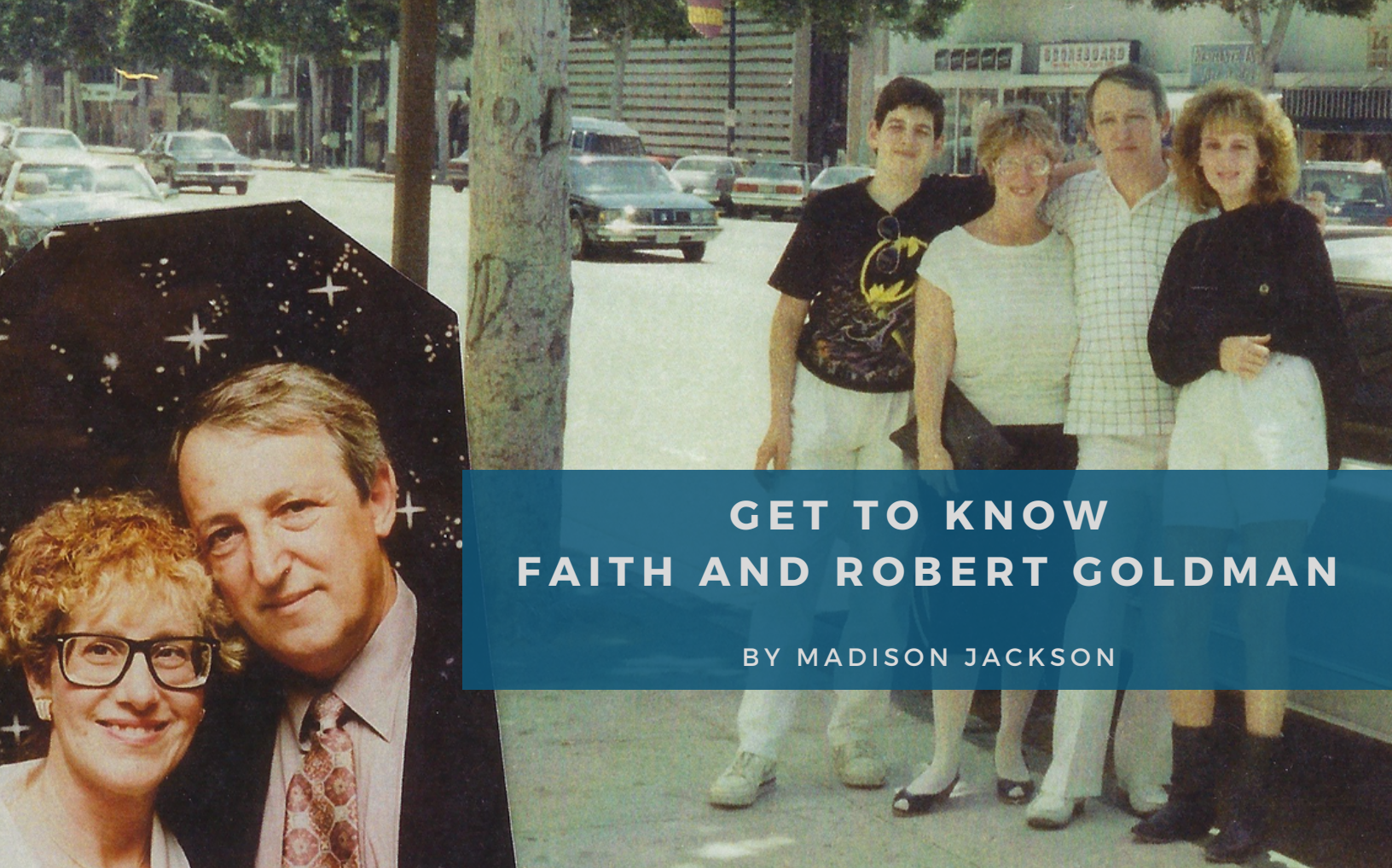
Most Mosulis do not know about the Jews who once lived there. When Omar first organised an online event about Mosuli Jews, he invited some of his old friends from Mosul. They described their surprise upon seeing fellow Mosulis who looked like them, shared their dialect and love for their city.

ISIS presence lingers to this day – in a country with no state protection, people often see ISIS as the only alternative guardian. Fear and censorship remain and there is a long way to go. The revival of infrastructure, economy, spirituality, and society will take time and courage. But Omar remains hopeful.

He hopes to return one day to Mosul to achieve his goal of building an opera house and restoring the city's soul. The opening song, he promises, will be Itzak Perlman's song from Schindler's List, paying homage to Jewish resistance against the Nazis.

Tomb of prophet Jonah after its destruction by ISIS.





GET TO KNOW FAITH AND ROBERT GOLDMAN

BY MADISON JACKSON

Faith Goldman was a participant in a Qesher talk, who reached out to us to share the story of her husband who lived in the Shanghai Ghetto.

Robert and Faith Goldman's story originally unfolded through pens and paper.

A mutual friend connected the two in 1965 while Robert was serving as a soldier in Germany. The pair became pen pals, writing back and forth to each other for eight months across the Atlantic Ocean. In the beginning, the writing consisted of basic surface questions, but as time went on, and they got to know each other, the conversations became a lot more personal.

Eventually, Robert and Faith met in person. According to Faith, her future husband "had a very romantic hunger for a family." She explained that his desire for a family likely stemmed from his lack of a family structure during his time growing up in Shanghai.

Robert's family was originally from Berlin, Germany, but in 1939 they left for the open port of Shanghai, along with 18,000 other Jews.

One year after the family's arrival in Shanghai, Robert was born, and a year after that his parents got divorced. At just the age of one, Robert already found himself in the midst of a "convoluted family." It was no wonder that years later he longed for a family that stayed together.

Robert's mother remarried and moved to the United States of America, and Robert's father, who had custody of his son, kept Robert with him in Shanghai after all the other family members, and most of the Jews, had left by 1948. In addition to the family hardships, Robert and his father lived in the Shanghai ghetto during the Japanese occupation.

Yet, while Robert's father only went into a synagogue one time during all the years living in Shanghai, Robert was connected to his Jewish identity. His family had strong ties back in Europe, and when Jews came to Shanghai, very often one of the few things they brought with them were Shabbat candles. In Shanghai, there was a Torah Academy run by rabbis, where Robert went to study Torah since he was three years old. Even when most Jews had left Shanghai, the synagogues remained open, and Robert had his Bar-Mitzvah in the New Synagogue in 1953.

SHANA TOVA!

"Robert had a Bar-Mitzvah the old traditional way," Faith said. "He read from the Torah, they had a piece of sponge cake and a little bit of wine, and that was it."

Finally, in 1952, an opportunity came up for Robert and his father to leave behind the trials and tribulations of Shanghai: out of the woodworks, Robert's half-sister in England emerged, and Robert's father was determined to go to that country. It took 6 years of negotiations with multiple world organizations for them to leave in 1958.

After 18 years living in a one room house in Shanghai, and eating only with chopsticks, there was a lot that Robert and his father had to learn during the luxury boat ride over to England. Learning how to eat with regular silverware was only step one. By this point, Robert's father was legally blind, and Robert had to grow up fast.

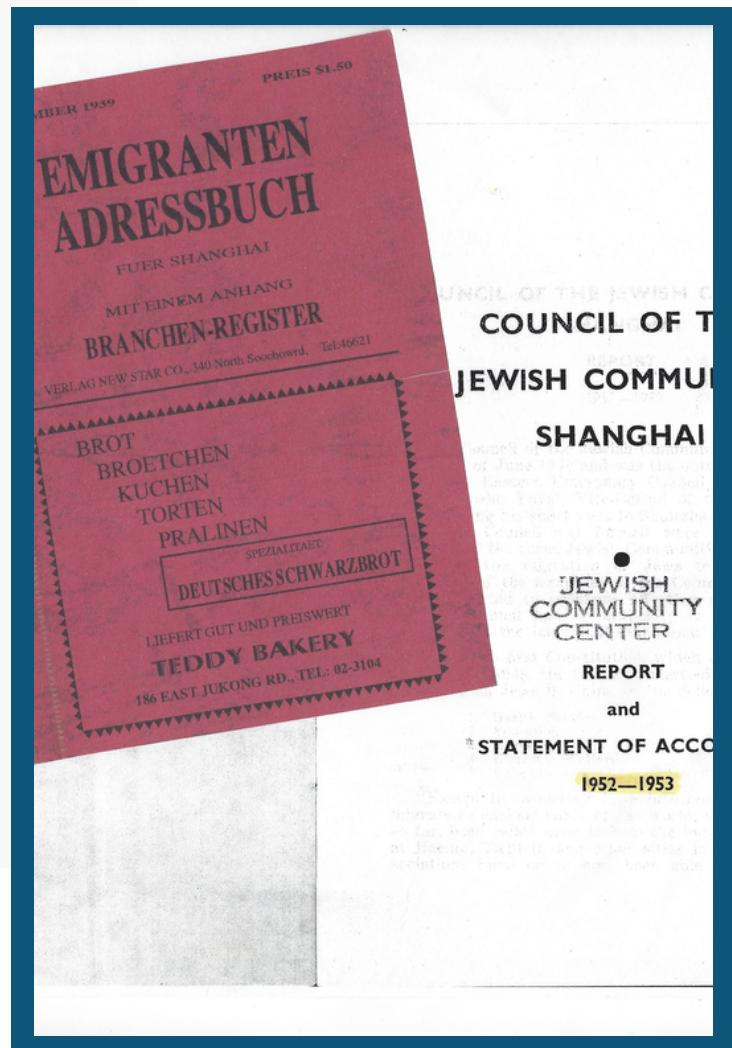
"He was an adult in children's shoes," Faith said. "But he did very well on the ship. All the women wanted to dance with him; he was young and cute."

Although Robert kept busy in England, he was itching to go to America and wasn't ready to settle down. His mother sponsored him to come to the United States, where he had to sign up for the army, got drafted and went to work as a soldier in Germany until 1965.

"Working in the army gave Robert structure," Faith said. "He felt valued and did his due diligence. When five years were up, he went to the American embassy in Germany, but they would not give him citizenship because he was not on American soil and so, when he got back, he got citizenship in the United States with such pride!"

In 1994 Robert passed away unexpectedly. Before he died, he had written 27 pages about his life, over the course of many years. "This only happened after we all saw Steven Spielberg's movie EMPIRE OF THE SUN in 1988. He emerged in tears and began sharing his life there for the first time. And his nightmares slowly disappeared. He was 'safe'".

"The pages were systematic, non-emotional and very factual, as if writing a history book," Faith said. "Where the [27 pages] stopped, was at the point where Robert was age 8 when his mother left Shanghai. Whether he stopped there because it was too hard for him, we don't know."



In a way, through his writing, Robert gave his wife permission to finish telling his story--which is exactly what Faith did. Through searching archives and placing classified ads in European Jewish newspapers, Faith has spent years researching her late husband's life story.

Most of the research came from conversations with the kids she found that knew him. Faith said. "I found seven kids who were in Shanghai with Robert until 1958, and I ended up meeting 5 of them who were able to fill in pieces of Robert's childhood through 1958."

In 1987, the couple had plans to travel to Shanghai together. But as they prepared to leave, for one of the few times in his life Robert began crying and shaking. He couldn't go.

SHANA TOVA!

Q“I think it was too painful for him,” Faith said. “That is why [years later] I went for him and walked in his shoes. “I needed to walk in the places that Robert was in, on my own.”

Taking a freelance writer and a photographer with her, Faith visited the places where Robert had lived in Shanghai with his family. The last place she went was the last house that Robert and his father had lived in, on the outskirts of the ghetto.

The houses on his former street were largely demolished, and were being torn down right and left. Miraculously, Faith came across a man around Robert’s age who had known him. He led them to Robert’s former home: the houses on both sides of the home were gone, but the one room that belonged to Robert and his father remained intact.

Two weeks later that house was also demolished.

“The fact that it was gone two weeks later was an act of G-d,” Faith said. “After that trip to China, I stopped writing. I was going to stop doing any of this research, I didn’t have to look anymore. But then I got called upon to do some speaking engagements.”. The 2nd generations of Jews, Chinese, and Japanese do not know this history.



While Faith has not finished writing the book about Robert and his journey, she is currently looking into creating a documentary instead and has presented their story from home to Shanghai and back again.

“A documentary] can visually take people through what I went through and what Robert went through,” Faith said. “It will be more of a teaching element than a book would be.”

“Steven Spielberg wrote of Robert when he sent me a huge poster of Empire of the Sun – TO LIVE IN A WORLD AT WAR, HE MUST FIND A STRENGTH GREATER THAN ALL OF THE EVENTS THAT SURROUND HIM. THESE WORDS SEEM TO DESCRIBE YOUR HUSBAND VERY WELL.

Robert – you not only survived but thrived and have left a beautiful legacy to me, our children Sam and Naomi, and the world”, concludes Faith.



2006 Shanghai - Ye Cuier, Caregiver 1948 -1958
This family lived in the Goldman family's old residence from 1958 - 2006

**THANK
YOU FOR
BEING
PART OF
THE
QESHER
FAMILY!**

