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Joe Lewinsohn | Refugee in Shanghai and Chile



Joachim “Joe” Lewinsohn tells the story of his escape from Nazi Germany as a young boy and his childhood in Shanghai, China; Santiago, Chile; and finally Seattle.

Joe was born in 1937 in Berlinchen, Germany, and lived in the town of Friedland with his parents and sister, Rosie. Joe’s parents, Edwin and Bertha, ran a store. Edwin had fought in the German Army in World War I, and the family felt like they were part of German society.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, the Nazi regime made life increasingly difficult for Jews in Germany. The violent, coordinated anti-Jewish riots known as *Kristallnacht* that occurred in November 1938 convinced the Lewinsohns to flee the country.

They obtained exit visas and tickets to sail from Hamburg, Germany to Shanghai, China. Until August of 1939 a visa was not required to enter Shanghai, and there were over 17,000 Jewish refugees living there when the Lewinsohns arrived in May 1939. Joe’s family lived in close quarters with other refugees. His mother sold eggs door-to-door.

In 1946, after the war ended the Lewinsohns moved across the world again to Santiago, Chile, sponsored by distant relatives of Joe’s mother. Getting by in Santiago was not as rosy as predicted. Joe’s mother immigrated to Seattle on her own in 1947 and started working at a hospital.

The rest of the family was able to join her in 1949. They were sponsored by a member of the Jewish community in Seattle. At this point Joe had little formal schooling, and had to learn another new language – English. He finished elementary through high school in Seattle. He then joined the Army in 1957. Joe later finished his Bachelor’s degree and received a Master’s degree, both at UW, and taught history and German for many years in Seattle-area high schools and community college.

Joe began sharing his Holocaust experiences as a member of the Holocaust Center for Humanity Speakers Bureau in 2018. He came to the Holocaust Center for support in telling this story of a refugee family. Using primary sources, documents and photos, he follows the journey of his family.

Joe has two grown children and four grandchildren, and lives in Seattle with his wife, Jan.