

## **Photos of Old Shanghai (1920-1938) from my Grandfather's Albums**

My grandfather was born in Oslo, Norway, in 1893. In 1920, he moved to Shanghai where he lived and ran his own business (Jensen & Co. Scandinavian Stores) until 1938.

My grandmother was also born in Oslo. She married my grandfather in 1928, moved to Shanghai and together, they had three children. She was carrying their third child when she returned to Oslo in 1931.

And so that's how my mother came to be born in Oslo. She saw her father for the first time on his return to Norway when she was nearly five years old. Following the Japanese attack in 1938, where large parts of the city as well as his business were destroyed, he left China forever.

I grew up surrounded by an assortment of trunks, tables, lamps and pieces of porcelain belonging to my grandparents. When, last year, I came across my grandfather's pictures from his time in China, I felt as if I were experiencing a piece of my family's history, and they suddenly took on a new meaning for me. These small black and white photos had been hidden away for a long time in albums in the attic. After my elder brother, Espen, had scanned these old photos from China, retouched them and had sent them to me on a CD, I looked at them with more awareness, and was immediately captivated by them.

Some of the pictures are important historical documents. They are moving thanks to their emotional depth. Because we can experience what my grandfather saw through the camera, or gathered in his albums, we have become witnesses of the destinies of people from a foreign and distant land, and from another time. We are able to relive the experience of war, and what it means to those affected.

The first pictures document the journey to, and the arrival in, China, and still feature the visitor's 'touristy' perspective of standing on the outside and looking in. Later on however, you can feel how the photographer becomes immersed in the world in which he finds himself. Gradually, there is a shift from images of exotic and daily life elements, captured as if they were examples of still life paintings, to breathtakingly beautiful landscapes and pictures of people, of whose lives we can share a fragment. We can perceive how these people were fascinated by the European photographer, just as he was with them. The mood of the pictures becomes transformed at the moment of the Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1938. With a sense of unease, we experience the destruction of the city through these pictures, of people fleeing in masses, whose lives from one day to the next

have been ripped apart, soldiers, the injured, and the dead. These victims are not simply anonymous beings. Thanks to these photos, we are able to experience them as individuals. We can relive some of their feelings, and their desperate attempts to rescue whatever they could from what they built up during their lives. Yet we can't help but wonder what happened to them? Where did their destinies eventually take them?

We only know all this from my grandfather and his friends. They, too, were unable to go on with their lives as before. We can see the damage done to their flats and their businesses, the injuries they received, and also their sometimes bordering on the absurd attempts to distance themselves from the suffering surrounding them... along with the desire to return to an old way of life which can never be the same again.

When my grandfather set off on his travels with the Trans-Siberian Railway to Oslo, he left Shanghai behind him forever, returning to his family in time for Christmas in 1938.