

Synopsis

With vivid firsthand descriptions of Asia's most cosmopolitan city from the 1920s to the 1950s, this recollection chronicles Liliane Willens' life and trials in Shanghai as China collapsed under the weight of foreign invaders and civil war. Engaging and often humorous, this unique memoir relates Willens' experiences as a Jewish Russian living in early Communist China.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dr. Liliane Willens' book STATELESS IN SHANGHAI is an excellent memoir and narrative history of the era in which she was born and grew up in the city of Shanghai as a privileged, though stateless, Caucasian. I was moved that, after more than 50 years since arriving in the United States and becoming a citizen, Willens examines with a critical eye, the racist Colonial attitudes with which she was raised. For example: "When I was about six years old, my mother let me accompany Old Amah [the Chinese nanny] on her shopping trips in the streets of 'Chinese' Shanghai. . . Whenever I ate food in the street Old Amah had to shoo away beggar children who had gathered around me.... I yelled 'sheela, sheela,' (go away), not realizing they were hungry. The fact that they swore at me [calling me] 'yang gizi' (foreign devil). . . did not bother me. . . for I had surmised that as a white person I was superior to them." (p. 32) While providing a candid look into her formative years and

capricious youth, Dr. Willens also explains the historical events that were happening around her. The combination, accompanied by period photos, makes for a fascinating read. Willens' Russian Jewish parents, who fled to Shanghai, became stateless (and, by default, subsequently their three daughters) when the Soviets de-nationalized all who had left the "Motherland." Nonetheless, the family enjoyed a comfortable middle-class life in the French-administered part of Shanghai, the French concession, which became their "country." The author describes the family's active social life in the "dazzling mid-thirties," and her and her classmates' shenanigans at the very demanding French school she attended. But lighthearted memories are balanced by sobering ones, such as the Japanese occupation.

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