

Clement's Apartments Rue Lafayette, Room 74

By Frode Z. Olsen

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It was the last Thursday of April 1943 when she arrived in Shanghai. She hardly noticed the warm promises offered by a mild and sunny spring afternoon. Six days earlier she had left Hong Kong on a Japanese steamer, for good, but without her beloved husband. She looked down into the face of the child on her arm. Together with the contents of her handbag, a few suitcases and the camphor-wood chest, he was all she had saved. From now on nothing in her life would be the same. It had been a dangerous voyage. The war was at its highest; the waters between Hong Kong and Shanghai were floating with sea mines and just below the surface submarines were lying in wait for potential targets.

She was met by a vice consul from her consulate. He was clearly older than her 25, friendly and well dressed. He asked how old the boy was. "Two in February," she answered. A young Chinese man took care of her luggage. They were taken to a hotel nearby, just for the first few days; then a small flat had been arranged for; one big room, but nice and with access to kitchen and ... so on. The vice consul told her, that life also was difficult for many in Shanghai; and of course attention had to be given to her financial situation. She had no savings left; all had been spent in Hong Kong to survive, and still things fell apart. From now on she would have a small monthly allowance, partly as a loan, but enough to cover the basic. Maybe she should look for an opportunity to work, the vice consul suggested. Inflation was high, fifty percent a month. Did she have any work experience?

Five days later she found herself in a place that would be their new home for ... as long as money allowed and the war prevented her from going home to Denmark.

The airplane carrying me all the way from my hometown Copenhagen to Shanghai gently touched the runway in Pudong airport on a hot sunny Thursday afternoon, the first in September 2016. In my suitcase I carried some notes and a question from the now 75 years old son of the woman. Did the safe haven in which he had spent his earliest childhood still exist? He told me the story of his parents when I met him by chance almost three years ago. Occasionally I travel to Hong Kong and when he heard, he told me, that Hong Kong was his birthplace. How come? "Please take a seat," he said.

His parents had been young and newlywed as they bursting with hopes and expectations for the future had arrived in Canton in 1937. His father had got a job with a Danish company trading in timber, silk, animal hides, sugar and anything else in demand between China and Denmark. When the Imperial Japanese Army attacked Canton in the last months of 1938 the young couple had no choice but to leave their home and flee to Hong Kong, where the Danish company had its main office in Asia. The hopes for the future were shaken but still high. And therefore, he was born in Hong Kong in February 1941. However, soon after the clouds turned dark; more and more often Japanese troops were observed rattling along the border. His father decided to join the local volunteer defence corps. This time their home should be defended, not abandoned. The day before the Japanese attack on Hong Kong, the first Sunday of December 1941, his father was called to report at his post as gunner at a coastal artillery position at the southern point of the Island. He took his son and his wife in his arms and hugged them both - for the last time. 19 days after, on Christmas Day the battle of Hong Kong was lost. Thousands were killed or badly wounded; thousands of homes and families were destroyed. His parents had lost all apart from the few personal belongings his mother had managed to grab as she hurried out of their home with him on her arm the morning the first Japanese air strike hit Hong Kong. The following weeks they had stayed in a big house with a safe basement together with other wives and children of volunteer soldiers. As Hong Kong was defeated the women and children had almost no food, no water and only symbolic protection. On the day of surrender, as soon as the fighting had ceased, all

Danish women and children assembled at their consulate and stayed inside until the worst part of the Japanese “celebration” was over. His father had survived the battle, but was taken to a camp for war prisoners located at the Kowloon peninsula. Bad turned into worse the following months. There was a shortage of everything, in particular food, milk, medicine and safety. Prisoners got sick of forced hard labor, malnutrition and bad sanitary living conditions. Soon the first ones died and many more followed. His father being a young strong man before the war died after eleven months imprisonment. His wife was told two weeks later. She was never allowed to visit her husband in the camp. Soon after, friends in Hong Kong managed to persuade the Japanese authorities to allow him and his mother travel to Shanghai, where the consulate better would be able to assist. Shanghai became their home town for more than two years, until the war was over. He remembers playing with some wood toys at the floor, taking walks with his mother in a nearby park, seeing many bicycles and cats, freezing cold winter months, being taken to a kindergarten with a mixture of Chinese and Western children as his mother had to go to work. Their home was small and in a white building, maybe second floor. He had showed me an old envelope addressed to his mother in Shanghai. At the front it said: *Mrs. Christensen, Clement’s Apts, Rue Lafayette, room 74.*

I find myself in a hotel room in the Jing’an quarter. It is 10 am, the air-condition runs high as the sun in the sky. Yesterday I went to the Shanghai Library and learned that Rue Lafayette was the name of a street in the French Concession in the old days. After the liberation it was renamed Fuxing Lu. According to the librarian Clement’s Apartment still exist; she wrote the address on a piece of paper.

I jump into the first taxi.

“Fuxing Zhong Lu,” I tell the driver. Surprisingly he instantly understands and turns on the meter.

“Your Chinese is very good,” he says mirroring me at the backseat. He is a slim old guy with a happy face.

Amazing judgement, I just spoke three words.

"Where are you from, America?"

I tell him I am from Denmark. Obviously he likes to talk and tells me, that he learned English by watching television.

"CNN, NBC and ABC, of course" he laughs loudly.

I join the laughing, as soon as I get the point of his joke.

"You can call me Jerry," he says. "Next month I will become grandfather, I will upgrade, ha, ha, ha."

It's going to be an unexpected witty trip; I hope he will not miss my street.

"Shanghai has many high rise buildings, good for neck. If you have problem with back, go to Japan, they always bow, good for back."

Shanghai is Jerry's hometown and he likes the city, even though the prices of flats in many parts of the center recently have been skyrocketing and not affordable for ordinary people any longer. As Jerry talks, I look out on his city. We are driving in green corridors of plane trees, passing numerous of shops and small restaurants - women's clothing, fruit, tea, women's shoes, fish in basins, children's clothing, hair dresser, men's clothing, convenience shop, women's clothing, jewelry, meat, ... and the suddenly, before I realize it.

"Here we are!" Jerry pulls the taxi in to the right and points to a compound at the left side of the road. Partly covered by the leaves of two old plane trees I notice the red and white facades of two three storey buildings. I pay him a ridiculous low price for the ride.

"See you later," he says; as he pulls away I hear him shout through the open window: "Never say that to your doctor, ha, ha, ha."

The two buildings are connected by an inviting arch-shaped entrance. A gatekeeper in a little cabin inside to the left looks up as I enter the premises. Being a stranger he clearly expects me to state the purpose of my visit. In few sentences I tell him about the young woman and her two year old son, who during the war lost everything in Hong Kong, fled to Shanghai and found refuge exactly in this compound. As I know Chinese people uses "uncle" and "aunt" quite stretchy, I indicate that I am a distant relative of the woman.

“She lived in flat 74,” I say in an encouraging tone, “If it’s not too much trouble I would really like to see the place.”

“We don’t have any 74; that number doesn’t exist here”

“Are you quite sure?”

He is positive.

As I stand there, doubtful whether I after all had come to the right place, my attention is caught by a small marble plaque sitting on the wall to the left of the entrance. *Heritage Architecture, Clement’s Apartments, completed 1929, brick-and-concrete composite structure, French style.*

No more doubt; this is the place, this is where she lived.

“Can I take a look, please?”

The gatekeeper nods.

As I walk around into the compound I realize that *Clement’s Apartments* consist of five buildings, one situated in the center of the compound and surrounded the other four located in each their corner of the premises. In between I also notice a few one storey structures housing shops or workplaces. The ground floor part of the buildings are constructed of red bricks, the rest is white concrete with red brick decorations around all the windows and appended all the way up along the corners of the buildings. Red tiles cover the sloping roofs. Here and there a white chimney reminds me, that Shanghai winters can be chilly.

I enter the dark staircase of the first block. Apart from the pale walls, everything else is wood. The floorboards are made out of light brown worn planks, the carefully carved stair railing and banisters are painted greyish-black, the same color covers all doors and door frames. On each floor one or two barred windows let the outside light enter and wander around the inside of the dusty staircase. Nothing appears to have been changed since 1929, when the first residents moved in - and yet. The number of the each apartment is painted in white on the door and on the black letter boxes sitting at the bottom of the staircase – opposite to the entrance door. The ground floor flats are numbered 101-109, first floor 201-209, and second floor 301-309. None of the numbers are below 100.

The next half hour I check all the five buildings with the same result. Nowhere number 74 is to be seen, all flat numbers are above 100. Outside in the courtyard, a lean old dog, one ear standing, the other hanging sends me an enquiring look and snuffles as I disappointed return to the first building. I remembered seeing an open door to some kind of a shop from where men's voices sounded.

It turns out to be a violin maker's workshop. Is he in his early sixties? I'm not sure, he looks energetic and without any retirement plans. His desk is covered with special knives, chisels, planes at the size of a human finger, special glue, paint brushes, a tea cup, papers and a half finish violin. Many violins, violas and cellos are hanging sideways in specially designed shelves along the walls. I'm met with curious smiles and a pleasant smell of fresh wood, lacquer paint and tea. The violin maker has company; three mature men sitting at a table in a corner are enjoying watching his work and each other's company.

I tell the violinmaker and his friends about the young Danish woman and her son, losing everything in Hong Kong and about how they found a safe haven in Clement's Apartments, room 74. I am offered a cup of jasmine tea while they listen to my story. Yes, that might be right. Many foreigners lived here before and during the war. But there is no number 74, no one has ever heard of such a number. The men look at each other and shake their heads in agreement. When was the Danish woman supposed to have lived here? I tell them she came in 1943 and stayed until the war was over in the autumn of 1945. No, none of them had ever head of her, never heard of a room 74. Maybe I had come to the wrong place. I don't think so, but I say nothing, just take a sip of the fragrant tea. The men continue to elaborate over the mystery. I hear one of them mentioning old Mrs. Wang, who lived here longer than anyone else. The youngest of the men get on his feet. Let's go take a look. He calls himself Michael, lives in America, works for a big car producer. Michael is an engineer specialized in developing environmental friendly cars. He is home on vacation to see his parents.

After examining the letter boxes in two of the blocks he also concludes there is no number 74. Maybe the numbers were changed at some point, I suggest. Maybe the all

the flats carried individual numbers from the beginning. We both do the calculation. Five blocks each having three floors, each floor contain five-eight flats, that would add up to at least ... 100, clearly within the range of including also a number 74.

Mrs. Wang lives in one of the small one storey buildings. Far from fancy, probably just two rooms all included. The door is open. Michael knocks at the frame and calls her name. Mrs. Wang appears with an annoyed face. Obviously she isn't prepared for guests. Michael apologizes on behalf of both of us and starts to explain while Mrs. Wang inspects me being *zhège wàiguórén*. As soon as Michael mentions a room number 74 she interrupts him firm and loudly. No such number exists; she lived in this place since 1958, and she never heard of number 74. Michael listens patiently, but doesn't give up. Could the numbers have been changed, perhaps after the war? She keeps her eyes on me as she considers. Did I really travel all the way from Denmark searching for such a flat? I nod. Maybe some files are kept with the old numbers of the flats. She kills the idea immediately, but she does remember that the letter boxes all were painted black at some point many years ago. Why don't we go and take a closer look at the letter boxes? Half an hour later - after the investigation of several black painted letter boxes, each with a clearly marked white number above 100 - persistence is rewarded. In one of five housing blocks the print of something appearing to be 68 is vaguely visible under the black paint. Michael's reaction is just as enthusiastic as mine. "There *has* been a chance of flat numbers!" He starts to count from the letter box until he reaches the potential number 74. Now number 308 is clearly painted in white at the front. Michael pulls out his mobile phone and turn on the light to better examine the surface. Both of us can see something under the black paint, but none of us are sure. It could be 74, but is it? Two minutes later we stand and the second floor in front to the potential entrance door. The door is marked 307-308-309 indicating that once upon a time three separate rooms were to be found behind the door. Today they seem to be merged into one flat. And then we discover the indisputable proof; at top of the door frame to the right small numbers painted in a yellowish color are still visible. They read 73-74-75. Michael cannot resist knocking on the door. An elderly woman opens and sends us a curious look. Also she gets the

story about the woman, the child, the war and me coming all the way from Denmark. Her husband appears attracted by Michael's story. Why don't we come in? Yes, why not! And then I find myself in the corridor, passing by the kitchen, the electric stove is new but the old wooden cupboards, the door handles and even the electric switches appear to be the original. Room 74 is roughly 12 square meters with a big window facing Fuxing Zhong Lu and the main entrance. As I slowly walk down the stairs I hold on to the handrail knowing that she and the boy must have done the same many times.

I wave to the caretaker as I go under the arch into Fuxing Zhong Lu. Just at the other side Mrs. Wang is talking to a young man. She sends me a broad smile. Walking down the street to find a nearby park I hear her tell him about the foreign woman and her son who used to live in number 74.