

Shanghai's Most Charming Gangster:
Elly 'The Swiss' Widler (1940)



*'All Shanghai is agog with the news of Swiss-subject Elly Widler's alleged involvement in the removal of \$2,000,000 worth of copper from a Commercial Express warehouse.'*²⁰⁹

The red gold robbery

It took four hours for Elly Widler's 'Swiss' crew to clean out the godown of the Commercial Express and Storage Company on the Szechuen Road. They arrived after midnight on September 2nd, 1940, chloroformed the White Russian gate keeper, backed up half-a-dozen flatbed delivery trucks stolen from Hongay's coal depot two hundred yards up the road and started to pick the place clean. The Swiss gang loaded copper ingots, known in the late 1930s as 'red gold', worth US\$2 million (about US\$12 million in 2018 money) onto the back of the trucks and drove them away to who knows where. By 5 AM, when someone raised the alarm, the SMP arrived to find that Shanghai's largest-ever heist had happened on their watch. Elly Widler's boys – Swiss by name and Swiss by nature – left the place spotless. The commissioner of the SMP, Kenneth Bourne, was furious and demanded Widler's head.

Never had so much been stolen in one robbery in Shanghai; probably never in China. Elly Widler, already one of Shanghai's more colourful characters, had made himself a criminal legend. It was an open secret in Shanghai who had committed the heist. The newspapers wrote about it obsessively, Widler's audacity was the



Elly Widler's 'wanted' photograph in the 'China Weekly Review'

talk of every Blood Alley bar, Badlands casino and exclusive Shanghai club. Some said it was Elly himself who had tipped off the police. Ever the self-publicist with an ego the size of the South China Sea, he delighted in topping the Shanghai criminal league ladder. The Chinese newspapers called Elly and the Swiss gang '*ming huo*', 'daring robbers', and people speculated on the true amount stolen, pushing the total up and up ever higher.

For days nobody had the faintest idea where Elly or any of his gang were. However, in 1940, the Shanghai International Settlement and Frenchtown was *gudao*, the 'Solitary Island', surrounded by the Japanese and with all ships entering or departing by the Whangpoo River searched by the Japanese River Police. Getting out of town was no simple proposition. Elly was lying low, somewhere within the foreign concessions of Shanghai. . . .

'Elly the Swiss'

There are many fantastic stories about foreign adventurers in China at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Elly Widler's has to be in the top five at least.

Elly was the second son of David Jaffa, who'd been born in Constantinople, Turkey in 1855 when it was still the Ottoman Empire. Tales of the Jaffa/Widler clan abound but it seems David Jaffa moved to Jerusalem at some point, trying to do business trading with various Swiss-based companies. However, the anti-Jewish laws in Ottoman-controlled Palestine, which limited his freedoms, frustrated him. He changed his name to David Widler, dropped his religion and declared himself Swiss – whether Switzerland ever knew anything officially about their new citizen is unclear!

Around 1905 Widler senior got fed up with Palestine and relocated to China with his two boys – Naoum 'Ned', and Elly. There's a tale that says he left Palestine and bought a plantation in, or near, Singapore but that the business was ruined by the Krakatoa eruption. But that was in 1883 and the dates don't really match up. Whatever the route – the Widlers were settled in China before World War One. Rumour has it that David set up a travellers' inn at Kalgan in Hebei province where a railway line had just been

established, opening the interior of northern China to trade. Kalgan, in the late nineteenth century, was a crazy town of about 70,000 – bandits, robbers, Russian tea merchants, camel trains heading for or just departing Peking, and assorted adventurers both foreign and Chinese. A British diplomat passing through at the time noted:

The Police in Kalgan wore white arm bands bearing the word 'Police' in both Chinese and English while Chinese, Mongol and Russian (and other European) business people spoke a sort of bastardised pidgin Mongol to communicate. Russian tea agents had European style houses and there was a Russian Post Office with a Russian Post Master too, as well as a Greek and a Russian Orthodox church. There were some English and Swedish missionaries, a Russo-Chinese bank, a post of the Imperial Chinese Telegraph Administration that connected China to the telegraph lines in Siberia.²¹⁰

The Widler family inn seems to have been a place thieves could bring stolen goods to sell and trade. Of course that too may just be a rumour – there are other tales that say David was simply a humble merchant and philanthropist. Whichever, sometime around 1907 or 1908, David Widler died.

His two sons, Ned and Elly, set out to make their own fortunes. Ned reportedly became a noted photographer running the Pluto Photography Studio on Shanghai's Bubbling Well Road where, it has been claimed, he took portraits of visiting maharajas, the Burmese-Chinese 'Tiger Balm' King Aw Boon-Haw and, so it is said, even travelled to Tokyo to photograph the Japanese emperor and his family. The stories about maharajas and Aw Boon-Haw are probably true; an emperor sitting for a portrait is a bit of a stretch.

Elly followed his older brother Ned to Shanghai, gaining a job as a clerk in 1908 with Moller Bros., Merchants, Ship Agents and Ship Owners in their building at No. 9 Hankow Road close to the

210 C.W. Campbell, *Journeys in Mongolia*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1904)

Bund. But the routine life of an office clerk in Shanghai did not suit Elly for long. And so he left the International Settlement soon after arriving and went in the other direction, heading back into the Chinese hinterlands.

On the run

By November 1940 Elly was hiding somewhere deep in the Badlands, that area of western Shanghai that had once been the peaceful and pleasant Western External Road Areas (*huxi* to the Chinese) just beyond the Settlement boundary. Now the streets around Avenue Haig, Columbia Road, Edinburgh Road and the far reach of the Great Western Road were a lawless morass of illegal casinos, opium dens, nightclubs, *shabu* (methamphetamine) shacks and brothels.

Initially the SMP had raided Elly's luxury penthouse apartment in the Broadway Mansions, right by the Garden Bridge, overlooking the Soochow Creek. Elly had long resided there, running scams, controlling his 'trading empire', planning heists and living in some splendour. Elly was in his early fifties; his beautiful Russian girlfriend was barely twenty. Elly had lived virtually his entire life in China; he'd never been to Switzerland; yet he'd remodelled his



The Widler family at home; Elly far left rear, grinning (1920s)

Broadway Mansions apartment to look like it was a luxury chalet in a wealthy Swiss canton – cuckoo clocks, a roaring log fire, cow bells, wooden ornaments, fondues and *bündnerfleisch* for his whole gang of Swiss and French outlaws on Fridays! The police had kicked the door down and found the penthouse vacated.

Elly was at his bolt-hole in the Badlands, beyond the reach of the SMP. A giant nightclub and casino in the Badlands on Avenue Haig, the Six Nations covered an entire block and, except for the famous Farren's joint, was the largest club in the district of sin. Elly and his Swiss gang moved in, set up cot beds and poured themselves large glasses of *kirsch* to celebrate life beyond the (not so) long arm of the law.

'Just a normal Swiss businessman'

Elly liked to call himself 'just a normal Swiss businessman'. That was stretching the truth. At first he set up a fur-trading business in Daqianlu. The town had a population of barely 5,000 but was known as the 'Shanghai of Tibet'. It was where a half dozen trade routes converged out of China and into Tibet – tea, Yachao wickerwork, and all manner of skins and furs were traded there. Although China had ruled Daqianlu, on the border between far-western China and the Tibetan province of Kham, since the eighteenth century, the streets felt more Tibetan than Han.²¹¹ Comparisons to Shanghai may have been a bit far fetched. Beyond a branch of the China Inland Mission and a house occupied by the consular agent representing British interests, there wasn't much for the assortment of Chinese, Tibetans, Russians, other merchants and one Swiss fur trader to do.

So Elly based himself in Chungking, visited Daqianlu regularly, bought up fox and other furs from local hunters, took them back to Chungking and then shipped them down the Yangtze to Russian and Jewish furriers in Shanghai. For a few years Elly was constantly moving between Tibet, Chungking and Shanghai. He pocketed a

211 Gary Tuttle and Kurtis Schaeffer, *The Tibetan History Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 497.

very decent mark-up over what he paid the local trappers in Daqianlu. It was a profitable business and Elly put the proceeds into opening the Cosmos Club in Chungking.

It's highly doubtful if Chungking had ever had, or has ever since had, a dodgier nightclub than the Cosmos. Elly brought jazz, gambling, opium smoking in public and Russian prostitutes to Chungking. For Elly, what the Cosmos provided, apart from a pleasant venue to relax in when he got back from long trips to Daqianlu, was a focal point for anyone with money in Chungking. With the profits from the Cosmos nightclub he set up a savings trust promising big interest payments for those who chose to trust their money to 'Elly the Swiss'. Many did, foreigners and Chinese. After all, who doesn't trust the Swiss with money?

And there were other opportunities. In the chaos of 1920s China, as warlords rampaged across the country with their private armies grabbing territory the size of European countries, they needed arms and had the money to pay for them. When they came to Chungking many of the western Chinese warlords found their way to the Cosmos. Elly worked his Shanghai contacts and started dealing guns and ammunition to the warlords in the Cosmos. The money rolled in in even greater amounts – furs, nightclub profits, and now gun running.

In 1923, two warlords fought a series of battles not far from Chungking. Elly sold guns and ammunition to both armies simultaneously. The losing warlord, General Yang Sen of the Sichuan Clique's Second Szechuan Army, took umbrage and sent his men to seize Elly in his office out the back of the Cosmos Club, taking him hostage. Yang Sen was a Taoist master with numerous wives, concubines and children, and not shy of a bit of duplicity himself. When it came to warlord manoeuvrings, last week's ally was this week's nemesis. But he didn't approve of Elly selling guns to his foes. Yang Sen hastily convened a court martial to try Elly for treachery. None of the foreign consuls in Chungking – not Swiss, French or from anywhere else – would represent or recognise Elly as their problem.

Barefoot, with a rope around his neck and his hands tied behind him, Elly was led at the head of Yang Sen's mercenary army for two

hundred miles into Yang's Sichuan province stronghold at Wanxian.²¹² Holding the rope was Yang Sen's powerful Chinese executioner, his head-chopping broadsword slung over his back. Along the way Elly was taken for several days to the remote camp of General Lan Da Ju Ban ('Big Natural Feet'), a thirty-year-old female warlord in command of 6,000 men and whose bodyguard was her sixteen-year-old sister who always held a Mauser pistol by her side.

Yang Sen then kept Elly in a jail cell for six months until some generous foreign diplomats (none of whom could actually work out who was ultimately responsible for Elly) managed to secure his release on the grounds that, even if he wasn't their national, it was bad form to leave a white man in the hands of a Chinese warlord. Some said the diplomats hadn't had to negotiate too hard. Yang Sen was reportedly glad to get rid of him²¹³ – Elly had taken over the jail, organised the other prisoners into a gang that had then made a small fortune from dealing opium, cigarettes and women of dubious occupation brought into the prison. The gang terrorised the warden into staying in his office all day! Others said that the deal was 200 Mausers plus ammunition in return for Elly.²¹⁴

Free, Elly decided to head to Shanghai once again. He didn't stop in Chungking on the way to say farewell – nobody who ever invested in his savings trust ever saw their money again! Elly immediately set about telling his tale of captivity and within a few months of his release had a best-selling book in Shanghai.²¹⁵

212 Now Wanzhou District of the Chongqing Municipality and the border between that Municipality and Sichuan Province.

213 Yang Sen went on to become the Governor of Sichuan Province and eventually a loyal general to Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Army. In 1949 he moved to Taiwan. Naturally for a bloodthirsty former warlord he finished out his days as the Republic of China's Olympic Committee chairman and chairman of the Taiwan Mountain Climbing Association. He died in 1977, leaving behind twelve wives and at least forty-three children.

214 The latter story about the Mausers is probably the true version of events. Warlords regularly used prisoners to raise money or secure additional arms while they weren't overly worried about conditions in their prisons.

215 Elly Widler, *Six Months Prisoner of the Szechwan Military*, (Shanghai: China Press, 1924).

'A man fighting against the odds'

Hiding out in Shanghai in 1940, Elly appealed to the Swiss consul general, Emile Fontanel, arguing that he hadn't stolen the copper ingots but only removed them on orders of the Japanese Army, and who could say no to them! Widler wrote to the local English-, French- and German-language newspapers telling the people of Shanghai they should believe him, that his mother had been given a medal by Queen Victoria (there is absolutely no evidence for this), that he was 'a man fighting against the odds ... chivalrous, generous, courageous.'²¹⁶



Elly demonstrates a bulletproof vest to the SMP

Actually many would have agreed with him. Elly was a charming gangster. There were few inhabitants of the Shanghai *demi-monde*, the Badlands casinos, clubs and bars, who hadn't regularly been stood a drink by stand-up Elly the Swiss. Elly had somehow secured a cache of German bulletproof vests in his various business dealings. The SMP actually needed bulletproof vests as the city's crime rate spiralled in the 1930s and guns became everyday items. But could you trust 'Elly the Swiss' to sell you decent goods? So Elly took the police over to Hongkew Park, donned a vest and told the nearest copper to shoot him in the chest. The policeman obliged, fired at

216 'Widler's Request is Rejected', *China Weekly Review*, November 16, 1940.

a range of about twelve feet, and Elly went down hard in the Hongkew dirt and stayed down. But then he rolled over, got up to his knees, showed the police the bullet lodged in the vest, took it off and revealed his bruised chest. The Municipal Police bought the whole consignment and toasted the deal with bootleg champagne Elly had on ice in the boot of his car. Even the Shanghai coppers liked Elly.

Life was good – business was up, heists and robberies were plentiful in wealthy Shanghai. Things went bad a few times – Elly's brother Ned died in 1936, of poisoning, with foul play suspected. The police looked into it, there were a lot of suspects, though none were ever prosecuted. Elly got rich, trading guns to warlords, bulletproof vests to the SMP, occasionally still acting as a conduit for Daqianlu fur traders to the best furriers in Shanghai, though he never went near Chungking again. Elly got a young girlfriend and rented the most sumptuous pad in the newly completed Broadway Mansions.



Widler's Six Nations Club

As Shanghai falls, so Elly falls. . . .

The end of Shanghai was the end of Elly's run of luck. He robbed the Commercial Express godown in September 1940. For a year he hid out in some style at the Six Nations Club in the Badlands and then, on December 8th the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and, at the same time, occupied the International Settlement of Shanghai.

Elly still claimed that he'd had the permission of the Japanese military to remove the Commercial Express copper. He remained a free man, still claiming Swiss nationality (and now neutrality) until the spring of 1942. Emile Fontanel, the Swiss consul, was never convinced of Elly's claim to Swiss nationality but represented him anyway. Fontanel denied the Japanese had ever provided him with evidence that they had sanctioned Elly's heist. If he did have 'permission' then it was from corrupt elements in the Japanese army looking for a cut. Unsurprisingly none came forward.

Then, somehow, Elly got on the wrong side of the Japanese army. They locked him up in the notorious Bridge House interrogation centre on the Szechuen Road. Elly may well have been struck by the irony that Bridge House was just a stone's throw from the old Commercial Express godown he'd robbed in September 1940.

Unlike many others less fortunate, Elly managed to survive the depredations and tortures of Bridge House – there are rumours he even drove his guards demented with his antics and they kicked him out the door and sent him on his way into occupied Shanghai. He managed to somehow get out of Shanghai to the United States at the end of the war; though it's unclear whether or not his young wife, who was a stateless White Russian, was able to remain with him or what became of her. Elly died in 1962 in Manhattan. He lived a pretty good life and his post-war days were said to have been quite comfortable though nobody in New York was quite sure how he came by the funds to keep himself so comfortable – but then not one single copper ingot from the Commercial Express heist in Shanghai was ever recovered.