"Home Afar": The Life of Central European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai During World War II

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Currently Dr. Vámos is a research fellow in the Institute of History at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Published below is an abridged version of his presentation.

Introduction

Between 1938 and the outbreak of the War in the Pacific about 20,000 Jewish refugees escaped to the international city of Shanghai. In the past twenty years, a number of books and articles have been published about their story both in Western languages and in Chinese. Some are memoirs by the refugees themselves, who were part of this unique community, that existed for about one decade. They are trying to preserve their memories for future generations. W. Michael Blumenthal, U. S. Secretary of the Treasury under President Carter and former refugee in Shanghai, comments on the interest in this story for historians: "it is perhaps, above all, an interesting and important story to research and retell because it is so odd and improbable a tale. Interesting, because of its peculiar setting; important because it involved a mixed and motley group of Holocaust survivors ... in an obscure corner of the world." 1

Shanghai, Open Port

This 'obscure corner of the world', Shanghai, had been an open port since 1843 when Great Britain defeated China in the first Opium War. After the first foreign residential quarters were set up, change was rapid in the small fishing village ‘on the sea’, the literal meaning of Shanghai.

Politically, Shanghai became a treaty-port of divided territories. It consisted of three districts, with the Chinese sections in the northern and southern parts of the city separated by foreign concessions—the International Settlement (British and American) and...
the French Concession. The foreign zones—which were under extraterritorial administration—maintained their own courts, police system, and armed forces. Like other treaty ports in China, Shanghai was open to foreign trade, and by the 1930s it was one of the biggest ports in the world with a population of four million people, among them about 100,000 foreigners.

Shanghai was a city of contrasts. As one of the Jewish refugees described the specific atmosphere of this extraordinary city:

"the many smells ranging all the way from the burned incense in the temples to the carts in which human excrement was collected for fertilizer; the peculiar sounds and noises emanating from the great variety of people from the poorest coolies to the wealthiest men in the world; from the life of the socially accepted taxi-dancers to the puritanistic British society ladies—Shanghai was neither occidental nor oriental."

It was a place of extremes where even such bizarre figures as Trebitsch Lincoln could live in peace. Born the second son of an Orthodox Hungarian Jewish family in a small town south of Budapest, Ignácz Trebitsch went to Canada as a Christian missionary. Then after an eventful career as Anglican curate in Kent, liberal member of the British Parliament, German agent in both world wars, and adviser to warlords in China, he became a Buddhist abbot in Shanghai.

**Jews in Shanghai**

The Jewish community of Shanghai consisted of four rather distinct groups. The first Jews to settle in China were Sephardim from Baghdad, who migrated eastward to newly established trading ports in India and China in the second half of the nineteenth century. Encouraged by the British to expand commerce in China, families such as the Sassoons, Kadoories, Hardoons, Ezras, and Abrahams became wealthy merchants, and many of their members soon acquired British citizenship.

The most prominent family by far were the Sassoons, who remained the most influential Jewish family in the Far East until the communist takeover of Shanghai in 1949. "The Rothschilds of the East" established an economic empire with centers in Bombay, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai, and were involved in great charitable enterprises. The headquarters of this empire, the Sassoon Building, stood at the intersection of Nanking Road and the Bund. Completed in 1929, this 77 meter high art deco palace was known as the most sumptuous house in the Far East.

While the Sephardi community in Shanghai numbered only about seven hundred people, the Russian Ashkenazim arriving in Shanghai in the 1920s numbered over five thousand. For the first group of Jewish immigrants, Shanghai was a land of opportunity. The second group came to China only partly in search of greater economic opportunities. Seeing China more as a haven, Russian Jews escaped the pogroms and the civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution. However, in the course of a few years, they were able to find jobs and earn a modest living. They served as the ‘middle class’ of the Jewish community in Shanghai.

The third group of Jews arrived in Shanghai after a pleasant journey on Italian or German luxury liners, sometimes in first-class berths. They took the one month long trip from Genoa or Hamburg to the other end of the world not because they were rich merchants or adventurers, but because they were German and Austrian Jewish refugees who wanted to flee Nazi Germany. For them Shanghai was the only choice.

The fourth group consisted of about 1,000 Polish Jews, including the only complete European Jewish religious school to be saved from Nazi destruction, the Mirrer Yeshiva. Its rabbis and students, about 250 people, took the route from Poland to Lithuania, from Lithuania across the Soviet Union to Kobe in Japan, from Kobe to Shanghai, where they continued their prewar routine of Torah study until the end of the war, when they finally reached Brooklyn.

**The European Background to the Emigration**

The anti-Semitic policy of Hitler’s regime included the forced emigration of the Jews from Germany as early as 1933. The goal of the Nazis was a Judenrein Germany, a country free of Jews, which was to be achieved by economic measures, mass arrests, and persecution. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews
of their full citizenship in the Reich—they thereafter became subjects of the state and those who left Germany lost even that lesser status in 1941. Many Jews living in countries and territories under German occupation or political influence considered emigration as a possible solution. Nevertheless, a major obstacle to leaving the organized terror behind and finding at least temporary shelter in other parts of the world was the fact that the Western countries were unwilling to open their doors to further Jewish immigration. This became obvious at the Evian Conference in 1938.

On the other hand, as Germany kept expanding its territory with the incorporation of Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia into the Reich, and as more and more Jews fell under German control, the organized terror campaign against them intensified. The expulsion of the Polish Jews from Germany in October 1938 and the pogroms of Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938 were followed by well-organized and controlled violence. Jews were rounded up, arrested, and taken to concentration camps, and many of them were released only on the condition that they leave the country within a limited period of time. This was the moment when most Jews decided to flee to countries that might offer them a haven.

There was only one place, which, at least until August 1939, required neither visas nor police certificates, neither affidavits nor assurance of financial independence: it was the open port of Shanghai. The International Settlement seemed a viable option for these desperate refugees; this in spite of the fact that they hardly knew anything about China, and what they did know was not favorable at all. The Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, and the Japanese, allies of Nazi Germany, occupied parts of the city.

**Japanese Attitudes towards Jews**

The Japanese attitude towards Jews was totally different from that of the Germans. As there had never been a sizeable Jewish community in Japan, most Japanese knew little about the Jews and were unfamiliar with Christian theology and religious anti-Semitism in the Christian world. In Shinto Japan the tradition of anti-Semitism did not exist. Although throughout the 1930s Japan was greatly influenced by Nazi propaganda, Hitler's inferior racial classification of Asian people vs. the excellence of the German race was incomprehensible and unacceptable. However, the Japanese had their own racial classifications and considered their own Asian neighbors as inferior.

Contrary to the German plan of Entjudung ('removal' of the Jews from Germany), the Japanese wanted to make use of alleged Jewish wealth and influence on behalf of Japan's New Order. They believed that Jewish capital, knowledge, and technical skills could contribute to the economic development of Japan and the settlement of Jewish professionals, businessmen, and technicians in Japanese occupied territories, apart from being useful to Japan, would also help import American capital for the industrialization of Manchuria.

As early as 1933, Manchukuo had become the destination for Jewish professionals fleeing Europe. During this same period, Jews, mostly businessmen and professionals, went to Shanghai in ever increasing numbers. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 the Japanese took control of Greater Shanghai (the Chinese parts of the city) and also occupied Hongkou7 and two other northeastern sections of the International Settlement, establishing a Chinese municipal administration under strict Japanese control.

After the refugee flow began Japan faced the constant problem of how to cope with the Jews without antagonizing either Germany or the United States. Although they viewed the growing refugee influx with deepening anxiety and tried to halt it, they wanted to make use of the economic and political power of the Jews. They also thought that restrictions to Jewish entry into Shanghai might worsen Japanese–U. S. relations and endanger the inflow of foreign capital needed for economic reconstruction. Furthermore, Jewish refugees were still in possession of valid German passports, even if there was a big red 'J' stamped on them, and visas were unnecessary for Germans. (In August 1938, Jews were required to bear certain first names, and those who did not have the easily identifiable, approved names had to take the middle name Sara or Israel. In October of the same year, Jews were required to exchange their German passports for new ones, clearly identified by a large red letter 'J'.)
The official Japanese policy towards Jews, formulated by the Five Ministers Conference held in Tokyo in December 1938, stated that although Japan should avoid actively embracing Jews who were expelled by her allies, to deny Jews entry would not be in the spirit of the empire’s long-standing advocacy of racial equality.8

As a result of this policy, between the fall of 1938 and the winter of 1941 about 20,000 refugees traveled to Shanghai, their temporary home afar.

**Passage to Shanghai**  
Shanghai could be reached from Europe via two different routes: by sea, and by land. Jews from Germany and Austria traveled mostly on Italian ships from Trieste or Genoa, or on German liners from Bremen or Hamburg. The journey took about four weeks through the Suez Canal, but some ‘cape-ships’ that wanted to save the canal tolls took the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope, which lasted about ten weeks.9 After Italy entered the war in June 1940 the sea route was virtually blocked; only a few more ships could set sail from Portuguese ports and Marseilles until early 1942.10

The land route led through the Soviet Union to Manchukuo, and from there refugees traveled to Shanghai or other Asian destinations by Japanese ships. These trips were organized by Intourist, the official Soviet travel agency, and were to be paid for in US dollars. Soviet authorities granted transit or exit visas for those who possessed an entrance visa for any third country. Refugees could journey east via the Trans-Siberian railroad until June 1941, when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union.

**Entry to Shanghai**  
In Shanghai no country represented was authorized to exercise passport control after the outbreak of Sino-Japanese hostilities in 1937, as the city was not under the jurisdiction of China or any other single power. Immigration to Shanghai was de facto controlled by the Japanese Navy, since they controlled the harbor.

As the number of refugees grew (and by the early months of 1939 reached about ten thousand), restrictions were imposed upon immigration by both the Japanese authorities and the Shanghai Municipal Council, the governing body of the International Settlement. According to the measures taken in August 1939, only those who had sufficient financial means to support themselves, had a landing permit on the basis of a contract of employment, or a marriage contract with a local resident could enter Shanghai. The aim of these regulations was to control and limit immigration, so that refugees would not become a financial burden on the foreign community of the city. As a result of these regulations, fewer people applied for immigration certificates, and not all applicants were granted entry permit.

**Refugee Life in Shanghai, 1938-1941**  
The first arrivals were able to bring some of their possessions with them, such as furniture, tools, even sewing machines, or simply to smuggle some money out of Germany across England or other routes when they left.11 As they were not without any means and had the ability to start businesses, some of them became quite well off. However, those who managed to get out of Germany under the strict control of the Gestapo, arrived with only the clothes they were wearing and one handbag each.12

If the newly arrived refugees had no friends or relatives who had prepared lodging for them, they had to stay in one of the camps set up by the relief organizations. The first such organization, the International Committee for the Organization of European Refugees in China (I.C.), was established in August 1938 and financed primarily by Sassoon.13 It was also known as the Komor Committee for its honorary secretary, Paul Komor, a Hungarian businessman who had lived in Shanghai since 1898, and who had been involved in relief work as trustee of the Komor Charity Fund and chairman and treasurer of the Hungarian Relief Fund since 1924. Another important refugee organization was the Committee for Assistance of European Refugees in Shanghai, under the direction of Michael Speelman.

Both organizations had departments in charge of housing, food supplies, medical care, education, etc. Nevertheless, after the establishment of the Speelman Committee, the I.C. became primarily involved in providing identification cards for the refugees. Stateless refugees received identification cards signed by Paul Komor. These documents were accepted by the Shanghai Municipal Council as well as the Japanese...
authorities, and even by some foreign countries, such as Australia."

As the refugees settled in, the few of them with sufficient financial means started their own businesses, or if they were fortunate, got a job in foreign companies that enabled them to live in confined, yet total, privacy. Families with sufficient income (about 4,000 people), could rent a house or apartment in the more elegant French Concession, or in the western parts of the International Settlement. The majority of the refugees, however, could not afford expensive housing, and had to settle in Hongkou, the Japanese occupied northeastern part of the International Settlement, partly demolished during the 1937 hostilities, where rents were much lower than in the more prestigious districts of the city.

Local relief organizations with the support of the International Red Cross and the American Jewish communities provided thousands of penniless refugees with temporary homes.\(^{14}\) The first such 'home' (from the German word *Heim*, a term commonly used by the refugees) had been used by the British as an Old Women's Home. Later the refugees were housed in partially destroyed factory buildings or barracks, with blankets and bed sheets serving as walls between the individual families. There were homes where men and women were separated in different dormitories.

The first one, set up in January 1939, also had a kitchen that could serve about 7,000 meals three times a day. Two other kitchens were established, one in a synagogue and the other in the reception center. In spite of the fact that only a minority of the refugees were observant, all kitchens served kosher food.

Bad sanitary conditions and insufficient food resulted in widespread disease. The relief committees organized medical care in the form of outpatient clinics for every inhabitant of the homes, and there was an Emigrants’ Hospital attached to the Ward Road *Heim*, lead by a Hungarian physician Dr. Veroe as superintendent.

Sir Victor Sassoon, a philanthropist and a good businessman too, bought some houses in Hongkou and let the refugees rebuild them for free lodging. Refugees also rented houses from Chinese landlords and had them renovated by European craftsmen, who installed electricity and water pipes. Then they applied for a water permit from the City Council and after the necessary bribe the permit arrived.\(^{15}\) Entire streets in Hongkou were rebuilt by skilled refugees. With its European style houses, cafes, bars, restaurants, nightclubs and shops, the commercial center of the district was called Little Vienna.

During the three-year period between 1938 and December 1941 most newcomers were more or less able to be integrated into Shanghai's economy, despite the fact that they had come to Shanghai out of political necessity, and not due to economic prospects. In addition, only a few of them had a good command of English, the language commonly used in business circles.

Although many people had to live on charity, there was a rich cultural life within the Jewish community. Horace Kadoorie set up a school for Jewish children, where the language of instruction was English, but Chinese and French were also taught, and only after the Japanese occupation were German and Japanese introduced. The I. C. organized English classes for adults, and English was also taught in the refugee homes. ORT, the Organization for Reconstruction and Training had six-month training courses in twenty-one crafts. The refugees published several newspapers and journals, professional musicians gave concerts, and theater plays were performed. Zionist groups were united into the Zionistische Organization Shanghai, with its headquarters in the restaurant ‘Hungaria’.\(^{16}\)

**Life after the Outbreak of the War in the Pacific**

The outbreak of the War in the Pacific brought about the first major change in refugee life. On December 8, 1941 the Japanese military forces took control of the entire city, including all foreign sections.

As a result of the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, the economic situation of the refugees significantly worsened. All allied business establishments were closed, and those who worked for companies owned by enemy nationals lost their jobs. The
legal status of the majority of the refugees also became uncertain just before the outbreak of the War in the Pacific, as those holding German passports were declared stateless on November 29, 1941. Without a valid ID the last hope of leaving Shanghai seemed to disappear for the refugees.

After Japan's active involvement in World War II, the Nazis felt that they had every right to demand more cooperation from their allies to solve the Jewish problem. In the summer of 1942 rumors made the rounds among the refugees in Shanghai about Josef Meisinger, representative of the Gestapo in Tokyo who was sent to Shanghai to discuss the question of Jewish refugees with the Japanese. It was said that Meisinger, the 'Butcher of Warsaw,' who in 1939 was responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of people in the Polish capital while head of the Gestapo there, met in Shanghai with representatives of the Japanese Consulate, the military police, and leaders of the Japanese Bureau of Jewish Affairs to discuss the German plan for the final solution in Shanghai.17

The Japanese, however, did not want anything to do with the Jews that might have inspired enemy counterpropaganda and thus were unwilling to engage in the final solution. Nevertheless, as stability in Shanghai was the most important priority for the Japanese, on February 18, 1943 the military authorities issued a proclamation about the establishment of a restricted area for stateless refugees in Hongkou where many of the Jews were already residing. Refugees were ordered to move inside the restricted area within three months. The proclamation did not speak about Jews in general (actually, the word Jew was not used at all), as not all Jews were subjected to the new regulations and forced to live in Hongkou. Stateless refugees referred only to those who arrived in Shanghai since 1937 from Germany (including former Austria and Czechoslovakia) Hungary, former Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Those who came before 1937 (the Japanese occupation of Shanghai), including most of the Russian Jews, were not subject to internment and remained free of restrictions. Also, the Japanese committed no acts of violence against Jewish religious institutions, schools, synagogues, or cemeteries.18

The relocation of the refugees to the designated area was assisted by the newly established SACRA (Shanghai Ashkenazi Collaborating Relief Association), with Dr. Abraham Cohn, a Romanian Jew who was raised in Nagasaki and spoke Japanese fluently, as its chairman. Following the establishment of the restricted area, SACRA became the main local body for relief work, but most of the money came from the JDC.

**Life in the Ghetto**

The restricted area—or ghetto, as the refugees used to call it—had no barbed wire or walls around it, but people were not allowed to leave without a special pass. The proclamation meant that about 8,000 persons who had become settled in other parts of Shanghai had to give up their homes, shops, and offices, and sell them to the Chinese or Japanese.19 The establishment of the ghetto ended most people's careers because if they worked for bigger companies outside the designated area, they could not receive a pass to enter or leave the ghetto from the Japanese authorities. Only qualified people whose business served the public, such as physicians and engineers, could attain the permit easily and have it renewed every month, thus continuing to work through 1945; however, most employees and businessmen became jobless.

The ghetto in Shanghai was not the same as its counterparts in Europe. The 15,000 refugees were not totally isolated as the small district of about one square mile had a population of about 100,000 Chinese, most of who were unwilling to leave their homes. The Japanese did not even guard the boundaries of the ghetto; only barriers were erected at some of the checkpoints, where Japanese soldiers, Russian police, and Jewish civilian guards guarded the exits. Moreover, every stateless refugee in the ghetto had to register with the Japanese police.20 It was not difficult to leave the ghetto illegally; however, it was a rather risky enterprise because a foreigner in a Chinese city was easily identifiable by the Japanese patrols.

Russian Jews had interests in several businesses in Hongkou, and after the establishment of the ghetto they set up even more. Some refugees had small
enterprises—such as carpenters, locksmiths, shoemakers, and tailors; others had small cafes or restaurants. Intellectuals gave private lessons for a lunch, but the majority were dependent upon charity. The situation for the poverty-stricken refugees became even worse in the winter of 1943 when coal virtually disappeared (it was cheaper to buy boiled water than to buy coal briquettes and boil the water at home), electricity was rationed, and there was not enough food to keep them from starving. Free meals in the soup kitchens were reduced to one per day, and the portions were carefully weighed.

In early 1944 the JDC resumed sending money through indirect channels via Switzerland to Japanese-occupied Shanghai, in spite of the American ‘Trading with the Enemy Act’ which forbade any Jewish or other organization in the United States to transfer funds to enemy controlled areas. The quality and the quantity of the food were improved, and although there was still serious undernourishment, there was no starvation.

The Shanghai Jewish Chronicle and German-language radio broadcasts reported about the development of the war in Europe. The news about the German retreat and the surrender was greeted with quiet celebrations.

The end of the war in Europe brought greater intensification to the war in the Pacific. The steady advance of the Allies in the Far East resulted in aerial bombardments in Shanghai. There were no bomb shelters or even basements in Hongkou. The Japanese, hoping that the Americans would not bomb the district inhabited by foreigners, had a radio transmitter and stored ammunition and oil in the restricted area.

On July 17, 1945, Okinawa-based U.S. bombers attacked the radio station that had been directing the Japanese shipping lines. Civilian areas were also hit by the bombs, leaving hundreds of Chinese and thirty-one European immigrants dead and several hundred wounded.

The Post-War Period

The Japanese surrender in Shanghai was announced on August 15. The Japanese military remained in the city maintaining order until August 26, when a small landing party of American forces arrived. Shortly after the end of the war, all of Shanghai was occupied by Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang forces. The pass system and the segregation were terminated. Jews were now allowed to move freely about the entire city. Nevertheless, the Jewish refugee area in Hongkou remained almost intact because most of the people did not have the money to move back to their former homes or to rent private rooms. The representatives of the local relief organizations and the JDC returned from the internment camps, and UNRRA supplies were available.

The end of the war also opened up the possibility of leaving Shanghai. As Shanghai’s economy was quickly revitalized, some refugees, especially the Russians who did not suffer any wartime disabilities, sought to stay and establish their new life in Shanghai (Mao’s regime, however, did not allow them to stay without Soviet papers), but the overwhelming majority of the refugees wanted to leave.

By the time of the war’s end, news that millions of Jews had been killed in German death camps reached Shanghai. The refugees were informed about the Holocaust from local and foreign press and through personal correspondence. When they learned what happened to their relatives in Europe, most did not want to return to their homeland. Those who had the fewest possibilities of resettlement anywhere—mostly elderly people who did not want to or were not allowed to emigrate to the United States or other Western countries—returned to their home countries, but the rest wanted to emigrate. Hundreds of people left for the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America. After 1948, thousands of Jews, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Russians and Germans alike went to live in the newly established State of Israel.

“When they learned what happened to their relatives in Europe, most did not want to return to their homeland.”

2. From the documentary film, The Port of Last Resort—Refuge in Shanghai, directed by Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman


4. The Sassoons and the other Sephardi families did not break their ties with Shanghai. In the 1990s the Kadoorie family donated 500,000 USD for the construction of the new Shanghai Museum, and Albert Sassoon was first president of present day Jewish Community of Shanghai. This community is comprised of international professionals, businessmen and entrepreneurs of various backgrounds and affiliations, and has a resident rabbi.


7. Hongkou is the Chinese official pinyin transcription of the district's name. In the 1930-40s, it was known and referred to as Hongkew by the foreigners in Shanghai.


15. Linden, p. 8.


17. The details of the plan are described in Tokayer's book based on interviews with former refugees in Shanghai; nevertheless, in the course of my research, I have not found any archival evidence for the German Endlösung plan in Shanghai.


20. A "List of Foreigners Residing in Dee Lay Jao Police District including Foreigners holding Chinese Naturalization Papers" which includes 14,974 names and dates from August 24, 1944, has been discovered and published recently in Germany. see Exil Shanghai. CD-ROM, 2000.


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