

SHANGHAI: Jews Live to Tell Their Tale

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 em. After half a century of reluctance by many to speak out about the past, and limited access to records and material in China, a new urgency has taken hold to give a slice of history unknown even to many Jews.

Academics have begun collecting oral histories. Survivors are writing memoirs. Diplomatic ties between China and Israel, established only five years ago, have finally made scholarly exchanges possible between the two countries.

"I see my work as racing against time," said Xu Buzeng at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, who is one of a handful of Chinese experts trying to document the Jewish wartime experience here.

Steven Hochstadt, a history professor at Bates College in Maine who has interviewed more than 100 Shanghai ghetto survivors, added: "The documents are getting old; the people are getting old. A lot of stuff has already been lost. The whole question of refugees, people who left [Europe] before 1941, hasn't received as much public attention, even academic attention, as what happened in Europe."

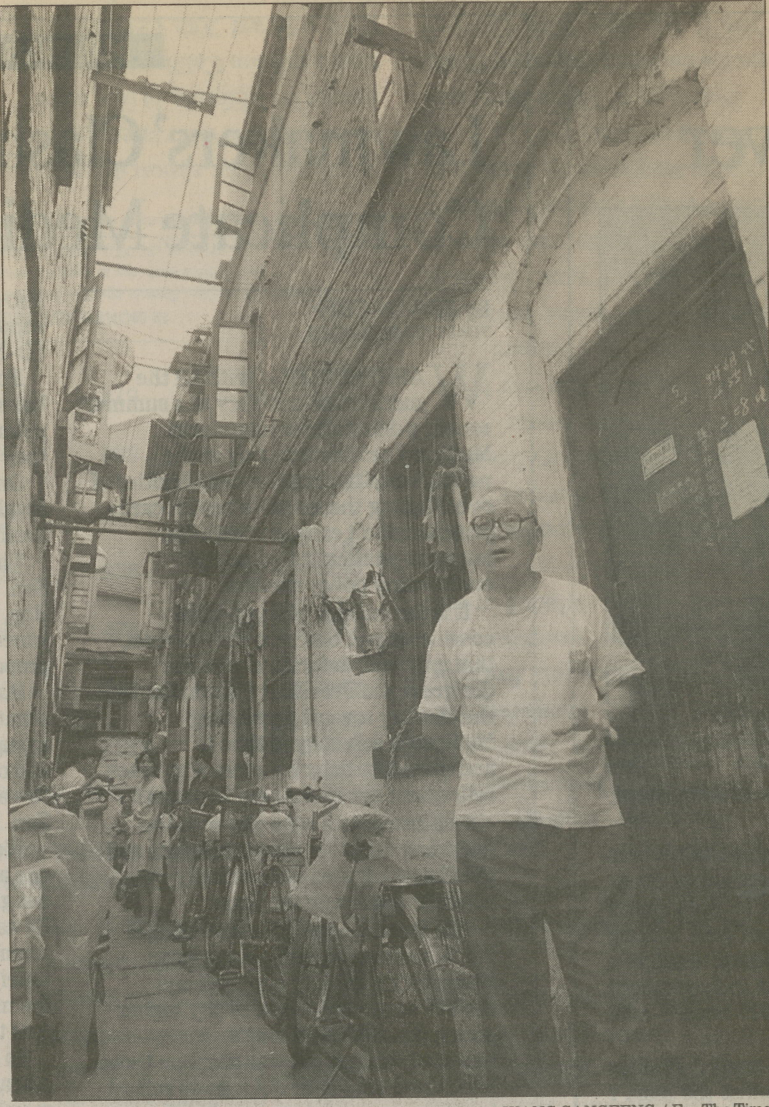
Even the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington issues only an eight-paragraph blurb on the Shanghai ghetto in its interactive learning center. Some of the hesitancy, however, has come from the former refugees themselves, who know that their tales of survival do not compare with the horrors undergone by those who stayed behind.

A True Survivor'

"It was always felt that anybody who was not in a concentration camp wasn't a true survivor, and we in Shanghai felt that a little too," said Evelyn Pike Rubin, author of "Ghetto Shanghai," an account of her childhood in Hongkew. "I wrote my book because I felt it was a story of the Holocaust that's a little different—and that needed to be told."

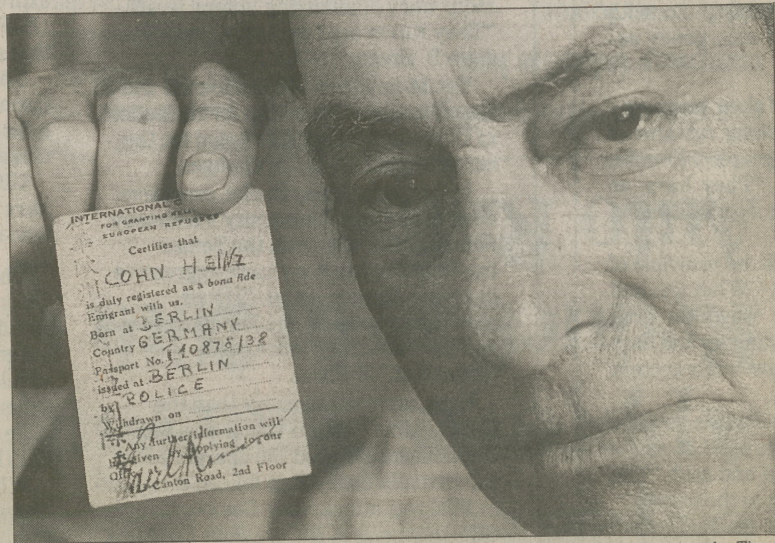
For her and thousands of Jews who escaped to China, the story started on Nov. 9, 1938, with the Nazi rampage known as Kristallnacht, when thousands of Jewish businesses were destroyed and synagogues burnt down in one of the Nazis' first pogroms. Terrified Jews began looking for a way out.

Word quickly spread that cosmopolitan Shanghai, even under its



WANG GANGFENG / For The Times

Wang Faliang, above, in the Shanghai district that was a Jewish ghetto during World War II. Heinz Joachim Cohn with his ID card.



CON KEYES / Los Angeles Times

Concession, with servants and spacious accommodations.

But most stayed in Hongkew, site of the future ghetto, relying on

be set up on nearby Tsungming Island. (Canisters of the same type of gas used in the death camps in Europe were later discovered in

services. The daily Shanghai Jewish Chronicle continued publication with carefully controlled news of the war. Merchants reopened shops and delis; dentists and doctors treated patients again.

Children were allowed day passes out of the ghetto to continue schooling. Adults too could travel outside the ghetto if they could convince Japanese authorities that they had legitimate business. But applying for a pass meant running up against the terror of Hongkew: the man described by survivors only as "Mr. Ghoya," the chief of police.

Mercurial, even psychotic, he was, according to accounts, the self-styled "king of the Jews" who ruled the ghetto with an iron fist that he used against anyone he disliked. Self-conscious about his short stature, Ghoya—whose full and proper Japanese name and post-war fate is unclear—would jump onto chairs and slap taller men. Whispers would sizzle down the queue outside his office daily, gauging his mood. If it was bad, requesting a pass was next to hopeless.

As the war drew to a close, ghetto residents scurried for cover from frequent strafings by Allied planes. The Japanese enforced nightly blackouts to block Shanghai from aerial view. In July 1945, U.S. bombers accidentally hit Hongkew, killing more than 30 Jews and injuring scores more.

When Aug. 15, 1945—V-J Day—

finally came, the Jews in Hongkew were exhausted from life in the ghetto they had endured for nearly 30 months. "Basically, we lived for the end of the war," said Schnepf at USC's East Asian Studies Center. "That was my attitude."

The bars were crowded, the streets flooded with celebration. But some felt angry that they had not waited out the war in Europe, unaware of the genocide of 6 million Jews. When word trickled to Shanghai, as the names of Holocaust survivors were posted on the walls of the liberated ghetto, the enormity of what they had escaped filled the Hongkew Jews with a terrible sense of awe, relief—and guilt.

That guilt lingered for decades, resulting in years of silence after virtually all the ghetto survivors left China in the late 1940s, mostly for the United States and the newly founded nation of Israel.

Richard A. Macales, a columnist for a national Jewish magazine and public information officer at UCLA Extension, knew from childhood that his great-uncle and great-aunt, Julius and Greta Scheiner, had lived in Shanghai. But memories of the Holocaust, in which dozens of relatives died, made it too painful for the older generation to talk about their wartime experiences. "I found out more about Shanghai from [other survivors] than from my own family," said Macales, 40.

In Shanghai today, nearly all physical traces of the European Jews' brief sojourn here in the Hongkew (now Hongkou) district have vanished, plowed under during China's 1966-76 Cultural Revolution or during the 1980s and '90s

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new Japanese rulers, placed no restrictions or quotas on Jewish immigrants—unlike the rest of the world, including the United States. Indeed, thousands of Jews were already living in Shanghai by the 1930s. Sephardic Jews such as the Sassoons and the Kadoories landed here in the mid-19th century and founded vast financial empires trading in silk, tea and opium. Decades later, Russian Jews poured in, on the run from political upheavals at home.

In early 1939, Heinz Joachim Cohn, then 12, watched his father, Carl, sell the rest of his once-successful hat factory in Berlin and buy train tickets to Italy for his family. Then, with hundreds of other Jewish refugees, the Cohns boarded the Conte Biancamano in Genoa and set sail for Shanghai.

"It took four weeks to get to China," recalled Heinz Cohn, now 70 and a resident of Chabad House at UCLA. "My father booked first class, but they were so overcrowded that we wound up in third class, which was a horror."

When they docked along the Bund, Shanghai's famed waterfront walk, the immigrants were greeted by an elegant skyline of European-style architecture, built by the colonial powers that had carved up the port between them. The city itself was a roar of bewildering sights, sounds and smells: the British gentlemen in their suits caning coolies and rickshaw drivers; the din of ship horns and crowds and street hawkers; the scent of death from the bodies that had succumbed to starvation, disease or cold in the muddy lanes.

"It was a culture shock for a Western European," said Rubin, 66, who now lives in New York.

Relief groups funded by U.S. and local Jews met the new arrivals and processed them at Embankment House. Those without sponsors or relatives in Shanghai were shipped to one of several shelters across the city.

The dormitories teemed with more people than could fit. At the Ward Road facility in Hongkew, scores of men shared a single washroom, said Cohn, who spent five years there. Scarlet fever killed 100 people in the shelters in 1939.

Jewelry and Skills

The luckier refugees had brought jewelry and furs to pawn or skills to put to immediate use, which enabled them to buy houses and apartments outside Hongkew, a rundown district badly damaged by Japanese bomb attacks. Some, like Wilmot, whose father had been an executive with Bally shoes in Vienna, settled in Shanghai's fashionable French

menial work or charity to eke out reduced existences. Cohn, barely in his teens, pulled in a meager wage mixing ash and water to mold into coal briquettes for stoves.

"It was kind of a hand-to-mouth life," said Vienna-born Otto Schnepf, 71, who bounced between the International Settlement and the French quarter as his father continued to practice medicine. Schnepf, who served as a U.S. diplomat in China in the 1980s, is now director of USC's East Asian Studies Center. "Sometimes you could earn something, sometimes it was harder."

For a while, the refugee community thrived alongside the established Jewish enclave. Children attended British-run Jewish schools. Synagogues held services on Friday evening. There were Zionist youth groups, Jewish recreational clubs, musical and theater performances, dances, boutiques, kosher butcher shops.

"We had a wonderful life in Shanghai," said Michael Medavoy, 78, who had arrived as a Russian immigrant in the 1920s and whose son, movie mogul Mike Medavoy, was born here.

But time was running out.

In 1941, after more than 15,000 Jewish immigrants had arrived in the previous two years—an influx that some Jewish relief groups had tried to stem for fear of overcrowding—the war in the Pacific broke out. U.S. and British citizens were interned. Jewish children stopped singing "God Save the King" and had to learn Japanese. Food was rationed and foreign aid to Jews was cut off.

The flow of refugees was also stanchied. One of the last groups to reach Shanghai comprised 1,000 Polish Jews, including 400 teachers and students of Mir Yeshiva, the only traditional Jewish religious school in Europe whose people nearly all survived the war. They had fled via Lithuania. There a sympathetic diplomat, Chiune Sugihara, often referred to as "the Japanese Schindler" because he, like legendary German businessman Oskar Schindler, saved many Jews—had granted them visas to travel to Japan.

Then, in 1942, Nazi Col. Josef Meisinger arrived in Shanghai. The "Butcher of Warsaw," Meisinger was the Gestapo chief in charge of the Polish ghetto, where up to 500,000 people died or were deported to extermination camps.

Meeting with Japanese officials, Meisinger proposed a "final solution" for Shanghai's Jews. They could all be rounded up while worshipping on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, he suggested. Then they could be packed onto barges and set adrift to starve or shipped to a concentration camp to

some German warehouses here.)

Exactly why the Japanese resisted Meisinger's recommendations remains a source of debate. Some say Japan still harbored a sense of gratitude to the Jews because Jacob Schiff, a prominent Jewish American, had lent Tokyo money during the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War. Others attribute it to a desire to use the refugees as a hedge with the United States, where the Japanese government believed Jews exercised great influence on Washington.

But bowing to continued Nazi pressure, Japanese military commanders issued a proclamation on Feb. 18, 1943, ordering all recently arrived, undocumented refugees—which did not cover the Sephardic and Russian Jews who had come a generation earlier or more—to move to the tiny ghetto in Hongkew within three months.

"The Japanese had to do something because Hitler was an ally," said Pan Guang, dean of the Center of Jewish Studies in Shanghai. "But they didn't want to say 'Jews' or 'concentration camp,' so they came up with the term 'designated area for stateless refugees.'"

'Best of the Choices'

Displaced yet again by Nazi anti-Semitism, Evelyn Rubin, whose father had died two years before, moved into a four-room house with three other families. "We took the best of the choices," she said, "which was terrible." Hot water could be bought only from shops; a bath was a huge luxury. People shampooed with kerosene to avoid lice.

Starvation and contagion became the ghetto's scourge, paring down once-prosperous Jews of the intelligentsia or European high society into wraiths clothed in tatters. The deplorable conditions claimed 1,000 lives by the end of 1944, mostly the elderly and infants, Pan said.

The Chinese in Hongkew and the rest of Shanghai also suffered horribly from poverty and atrocities by the Japanese, who murdered 300,000 Chinese when they took over the city in 1937. Soldiers raped local women and used men for live bayonet practice. The Chinese and their Jewish neighbors, though largely separated by linguistic and cultural barriers, found themselves bound together by mutual suffering.

"The Japanese persecuted us; Hitler persecuted the Jews," said Wang Faliang, 78, who lived in Hongkew throughout the war. "We were all under great hardship."

Still, the Jews tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy under the watchful eyes of their captors, holding social events and religious

COLUMN ONE

Shanghai's Jews Live to Tell Story at Last

■ As refugees from Nazis, they suffered but survived under Japanese rule. Now many are setting aside guilt they felt for avoiding the Holocaust to relate the history of their war years.

By HENRY CHU
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SHANGHAI—Ingrid Wilmot of Palos Verdes stopped eating apple cores just a few years ago. She had picked up the habit as a girl in this freewheeling treaty port during World War II, when food and dignity were scarce among the Jews who fled to China from the Nazi juggernaut in Europe.

They came by the thousands to the only city on Earth that would accept them without passports or visas—no questions asked. Shanghai, den of vice and iniquity, opium addicts and imperialists, was their improbable haven.

But in 1943, to appease the Nazis, the city's Japanese occupiers rounded up the newly arrived Jews into a ghetto here less than 2 miles square. For more than two years, 18,000 Jews, most from Austria, Germany and Poland, battled squalor, fear and want in the little-known Hongkew ghetto on Shanghai's northeastern fringe, half a world away from the Holocaust in Nazi-controlled Europe.

They fought diseases so virulent that even bananas and oranges had to be soaked in chemicals for an hour before being eaten. They sweated out rumors that they might all be deported without warning. They suffered at the hands of a capricious Japanese overseer.

Yet miraculously, they nearly all survived to see the end of the war, a testament to human resilience—and to the fact that their Japanese captors, who brutalized the Chinese, were less monstrous toward the Jews, despite Nazi proposals to slaughter them.

"The conditions in Shanghai were terrible, but it [wasn't] Auschwitz," said Wilmot, one of the scores of "Shanghai-landers" who eventually settled in the Los Angeles area after the war and who was interviewed by telephone. "So you have to be grateful."

Now scholars are scrambling to preserve stories of Shanghai ghetto survivors before time overtakes

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