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Shanghai's Forgotten Jewish Past

In the 1930s and 40s, the Chinese city hosted a large, vibrant community of refugees fleeing persecution in Europe. Can survivors, rabbis, and historians preserve this heritage?

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The Shanghai Jewish Refugees museum commemorates the city's large, vibrant community before and during the Second World War. (Wikimedia Commons)

SHANGHAI—When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Shanghai in May 2013 and hailed the city's role as a "haven" for Jewish people fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s and 40s, his comments highlighted a part of the city's history that many contemporary residents don't know. Today, few would guess that this quintessentially Chinese city once played host to a bustling community of over 20,000 Jews.

While a Jewish community has existed in Shanghai since the late 19th century, the first large wave of immigrants came in the 1920s and 30s, as thousands of Russian Jews fled the Bolshevik Revolution for the more business-friendly foreign concessions in Shanghai. A decade later, the mainly Russian and Sephardic Jewish community was supplemented by tens of thousands of Ashkenazi Jews from Europe, who fled during the early stages of Nazi rule in Germany.

Before Nazi policy turned actively genocidal in the late 1930s, exile was seen as a perfectly acceptable solution to the “Jewish problem” and German and Austrian Jews, stripped of their citizenship rights, property, and employment, were encouraged to emigrate to any country that would have them. Unfortunately, there were few options for these would-be emigrants: At the Évian Conference in 1938, the great powers collectively decided to shut their borders to all but a small selection of Jewish refugees.

Aside from the Dominican Republic, Shanghai was the only place that remained open to these refugees, and 20,000 or so European Jews found their way to the city in the late 1930s. Shanghai at the time was a political anomaly: Control was split between the beleaguered Republic of China, an increasingly aggressive Imperial Japan, and France, Britain, and the United States, countries that operated self-governing “concessions” exempt from Chinese law or influence.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, more European Jews had taken refuge in Shanghai than in any other city in the world. One was Gary Matzdorff, who left Germany with his family in 1937.

“My father heard from a friend that it was possible to go to Shanghai without a visa, but only Shanghai, because for the rest of China we needed a visa,” Matzdorff, now 92, told me during an interview at the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum. “We took a train to Genoa, Italy and boarded the ship—the SS Victoria—and one month later we arrived [in Shanghai].”

“It was a shock, culturally, language wise, but being young you adapt very quickly, and I made it my personal business to integrate into Chinese culture, to learn the

language, because I expected to spend the rest of my life in Shanghai.”

Matzdorff’s remembers a bustling, cosmopolitan city, not unlike London or New York. After days working at an import/export company, he was fond of exploring the city's night life.

“One of my favorite places was a dance hall at the Wing On department store. Up on the top floor there was a dance floor, big band.”

Shanghai was not without its problems. By 1937, Japan’s invasion of China was underway, and the Battle of Shanghai in November ended any remaining control the Republic of China had over the city. But despite being occupied, Shanghai’s Europeans did not bear the brunt of Japanese aggression: In the then-capital of Nanjing, Japanese troops murdered over 200,000 civilians that year, an incident now remembered as the Rape of Nanjing.

In December 1941 the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into World War Two, and soon thereafter Japanese troops invaded Shanghai’s international settlements and took full control of the city. Like many residents of Shanghai at the time—including author J.G. Ballard, whose book *Empire of the Sun* is based on his experiences as an internee of the Japanese—Matzdorff’s first warning that the Japanese were taking control of the city came when he heard the explosions that sank the HMS Peterel, a British gunboat anchored in the Huangpu River and the only foreign vessel which refused to surrender to the Japanese.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” he says, “because we heard the bombing of the ship—we didn’t know what it was, but we heard the explosions.”

With Japanese control came more restrictions on Shanghai’s Jews, as well as an end to the flow of money from American organizations that had served as the lifeblood of many of the more destitute refugees. By 1943, the majority of Jews in the city were forced into the Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees in Hongkou district, an area which would become known as the “Shanghai Ghetto.”

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But had Japan's German allies had their way, matters would have been even worse. Prior to the formal establishment of the ghetto, SS Colonel Josef Meisinger was dispatched to Shanghai, reportedly with a canister of Zyklon B gas in tow, to advise the Japanese on exterminating the city's Jewish population. Though Meisinger was unsuccessful in implementing this policy, pressure from the Germans did inspire the creation of the ghetto.

The Japanese occupation provided Shanghai's Chinese and Jewish population with a common cause—and a common enemy. Author Daniel Kalla has described the Shanghai ghetto as a “testament to human perseverance and dignity,” a sentiment Matzdorff echoes: “We lived side by side, we both had the same problem: the Japanese. We had the same fate.”

The ghetto, along with the rest of Shanghai, was officially liberated on September 3, 1945 in a combined American-Chinese effort.

“The word spread like wildfire: the war is over, the war is over!” Matzdorff recalls. “I got in touch with some of my friends—we had made an arrangement, when the war is over we're going to get revenge on the Japanese. So we went to the police station: empty. They disappeared into thin air overnight. We were ready to punch them out! But we didn't have that opportunity.”

Matzdorff had to settle for a more symbolic victory. “I climbed up on the telephone pole and tore down one of the signs that said ‘Stateless Refugees Are Not Allowed to Pass.’ I still have it, it's my souvenir, my payoff.”

Japan's defeat did not put an end to unrest in China, however, and the country soon fell into civil war. As the situation in Europe improved and conditions in China

worsened, many Jews began to leave the city.

“[Shanghai] was not a paradise for us, so everyone tried to improve their situation, to go somewhere new,” Matzdorff says. “Word got out that under President Truman you could apply for a cooperative affidavit of support, that the Jewish organizations would issue a combined guarantee for anyone who wanted to come to America.”

After the war, China’s Jewish population dwindled sharply. “From 1949 to 1956, the Jewish community in Shanghai effectively ceased to exist,” Rabbi Shalom Greenberg, who administers to the approximately 2,000 Jews living in the city today, told me in an interview. Matzdorff, along with his parents and his new wife, moved to the U.S., eventually settling in California, where he lives today. But he still likes to visit Shanghai, saying that the city “draws me back.”

“Every time I come here, huge changes. Rapid changes. Old neighborhoods being torn down. My desire [in returning] is always to see the old neighborhood, because that draws you back to a place.”

This is becoming less and less possible as China’s rapid growth outpaces the country’s nascent historical preservation movement. Shanghai’s city planners face enormous pressure—and incentives—to develop the modern city.

“We’ll do our best to remove and save some of the most valuable artifacts, if feasible,” Chen Jian of the Hongkou district government told NPR in 2007. “But that’s not to say that we won’t demolish these buildings.”

For those interested in Shanghai’s Jewish past, this is a worrying trend. “[The historic community] is very detached, but every Jewish person who comes to Shanghai, the first thing they learn is about this history. This is something that is unknown to most of us, I knew very little about it when I came here,” Rabbi Greenberg says, “it is a part of history that is almost untold.”

But while many landmarks and historical buildings did not survive the madness of the Cultural Revolution and China's subsequent economic boom and continuing obsession with growth, what does remain is a deep affection felt by the Jewish community for Shanghai.

“One thing we encourage our people to do,” Rabbi Greenberg says, “is find a way to give back to the aging Chinese people—especially those who live in [the former ghetto]—as a recognition and appreciation for their friendship during WWII, something which was uncommon in the world at the time.”

It is this desire to give back to a community which sheltered so many during the war that tempers any frustration Rabbi Greenberg might feel over the lost history, and makes him critical of those who seek to save history at the cost of the area's modern residents.

“These people, they were nice to you, why are you being mean to them? It should be the opposite, it should be ‘Here, new buildings! We’ll help you get new buildings!’” Rabbi Greenberg says, “of course if people want to maintain some buildings as a historic landmark so there is something to show people when they come here, it’s nice. But they don’t have to.”

Indeed, Rabbi Greenberg's efforts in creating a modern Jewish community that embraces but does not selfishly guard its links to the past may be more effective in honoring a city which harbored Jews while the rest of the world was turning them away.

Editor's note: Gary Matzdorff passed away on November 8, aged 92.

Kenneth Tan and Elliot DeBruyn contributed to this article.

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JAMES GRIFFITHS is the editor of [That's Online](#).
