

ORTHODOX UNION

HISTORY

Survival in Shanghai

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The crowd at the premiere of *Survival in Shanghai*

As the daughter of Holocaust survivors, I either avoid or obsess over this dark period of Jewish history. This week, I couldn't avoid it.

I was asked to cover the US premiere of a film called *Survival in Shanghai*, a Chinese-made documentary that tells the story of more than 25,000 European Jews who barely escaped the Nazi nightmare. When the nations of the world closed their eyes and their borders to the Jews, the people of

Shanghai took these refugees in. Very inspiring, but the story is 76-years-old and has already been documented numerous times on film and paper. Frankly, I wondered who would show up.

To my surprise, when I arrived at Park East Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the host of the film's American debut, I had to nudge my way through the rapidly growing crowd to announce my Press status to the security guards. I sensed there was more than an interest in Holocaust history going on here.

We all took our seats in the packed synagogue and watched the story unfold.

Up until 1933, German Jews enjoyed peace and prosperity. The election of the Nazi party, the overtly anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws and most strikingly, the 1938 blood-drenched rampage Kristallnacht signaled a brutal end to life as they knew it.

German authorities merely looked on as SA paramilitary forces and German civilians wielding sledgehammers smashed and torched over 7,000 Jewish-owned stores, 1,574 synagogues and buildings, plundered Jewish homes, hospitals and schools, and murdered 91 Jews. They "arrested" 30,000 Jewish men and incarcerated them in concentration camps.

Betty Grebenschikoff (nee Ilse Kohn), 85, of Atlantic City, New Jersey, a Shanghai survivor featured in the film, remembers that night. “While the Nazis began arresting Jewish men, my family and I switched off the lights and sat on our apartment floor, hoping that the neighbors would think we weren’t home.”

Families were told that they would only release the men if presented with immediate proof of emigration from Germany, such as a visa.

Ho Chen Jie, the Chinese ambassador to Berlin at the time, witnessed the Nazi increasing brutality and began issuing Jews visas to Shanghai. Shanghai, an international city, occupied a unique position; it didn’t require a visa, passport, affidavit, or a certificate of guarantee for entry. Britain and the USA both then maintained small naval forces on the Yangtze River in order to protect their interests in China, which included what was known as the Shanghai International Settlement, an autonomous district of the city. From March 1938 to May 1940, Ho Chen Jie signed nearly 1000 visas a month. Betty’s family was among them.

“If we hadn’t gotten to Shanghai I wouldn’t be here today,” says Grebenschikoff, whose family fled from Berlin in the summer of 1939. “There was no other place we could go. It was the only thing left to do.”

Shanghai opened the first Jewish refugee camp in January of 1939. Although the daily meal was sparse and four hundred refugees shared one room, they were grateful to be alive.

Just eight months later, the Nazi’s invaded Poland and a flood of European refugees desperately sought haven in Shanghai. By 1940, the number of refugees in Shanghai exceeded 20,000.

On December 7, 1941, Hitler’s ally, Japan, attacked Pearl Harbor; the following day they occupied Shanghai and promptly imprisoned Jews and anyone with British and American passports. According to warandsecurity.com (2013), the Japanese also attacked British and US warships at Shanghai without declaring war.

The Japanese regarded the Jews as stateless refugees and blocked essential distribution funds coming in from the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Shanghai. Thousands of Jews living on relief were in danger of starvation.

“We didn’t know what would happen to us,” said W. Michael Blumenthal, 90, of Princeton, New Jersey, also featured in the documentary, “We were under the control of the Japanese military.” In a tone of obvious understatement he added, “They were not very nice people.” Blumenthal, who at the age of 12, watched the Nazis arrest his father and drag him to

Buchenwald concentration camp, is today an American business leader, economist and political adviser who served as United States Secretary of the Treasury under President Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1979.

Soon after the Japanese takeover of the Shanghai ghetto, Gestapo Colonel Josef Meisinger, chief Nazi representative in Japan met with Japan's officials to pressure them into devising a plan to exterminate the Jewish refugees, calling it "the final solution in Shanghai." Instead, the Japanese relocated the Jews to a designated area, a ghetto measuring .7 square miles.

100,000 impoverished Chinese and 20,000 Jews lived in crowded, squalid quarters, without plumbing. Hunger, as well as epidemic diseases, such as small pox, malaria, typhoid fever was rampant. Unlike the Chinese, Jewish refugees were forbidden to leave the area without a permit on the threat of severe punishment. An unpredictable, harsh Japanese officer named Koah Goya, deemed those worthy of receiving passes.

"A very short man, he'd stand on his desk and say, 'I'm King of the Jews,' recalls Kohn.

In stark contrast, Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who served as Vice-Consul for the Empire of Japan in Lithuania during WW II, wrote travel visas that facilitated the escape of more than 6,000 Jewish refugees to Japan risking his life and career. Most of the refugees were from German-occupied Western Poland or Russian-occupied Eastern Poland, as well as Lithuania. They were eventually deported to the Shanghai Ghetto. Among them were the leaders and students of Mir Yeshiva, the only yeshiva in occupied Europe to survive the Holocaust.

The children went to the Shanghai Jewish school and played in the ghetto streets with their Chinese peers. "They accepted us, took us in. We felt comfortable with them," says Ruth Zimmerman, 85, of Ramat Hasharon in Northern Israel, who was eight-years-old when her family arrived in Shanghai.

"I remember a type of homesickness and insecurity among the adults," says Sonja Muhlberger (nee Krips), 76, who was one of 400 babies born to Jewish refugees in Shanghai. "Of course, nobody knew what was happening with their relatives back in Europe."

And then, one morning in the summer of 1945, Blumenthal, who served as the bread delivery boy, stepped outside to find an eerie quiet in the ghetto streets. The Japanese guards had disappeared. "I thought, 'it's over; it's really over,'" he said, clearly reliving the moment.

Shanghai’s Jewish refugees were understandably anxious to contact family and friends back in Europe. “They were all murdered,” says Evelyn Pike Rubin, 84, of Long Island, was eight-years-old when her family fled Germany. “My mother figured that 60 to 80 members of our extended family were murdered.”

Rubin wrote in her memoir, *Ghetto Shanghai*, “When everything seemed hopeless, there was an open door. I don’t want anyone to forget where that door was. That is why the story needs to be told. Soon there won’t be anyone around to remember how we survived against all odds.”

I realized that what drew hundreds of Jews representing four generations and scores of Chinese reporters, wasn’t the film per se, or the VIPs in attendance, among them Ambassador Zhang Qiyue, Consul General of the People’s Republic of China, Honorable Amir Sagie, and Deputy Consul General of the State of Israel. It wasn’t even to meet the Jewish Shanghai survivors who came.

From the perspective of one who grew up with the agonizing repercussions of unthinkable human cruelty, I suspect what drew this audience tonight was the remarkable triumph of two individuals. A Chinese man and a Japanese man, who, in the face of evil, resisted complacency; they summoned the courage to risk their lives to save so many others. A message as relevant today as it was then.

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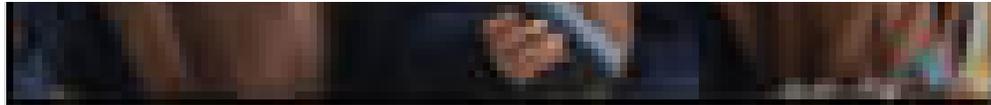
26 Nov 2015

I met some Lubavitchers in Crown Heights in the 70s saved through Shanghai. The three rabbis each learned a sefer baal peh while there. One learned the Tanya, one the Chumash, and one, I believe, Tehillim. One, I think was Shalom Goldshmid, a butcher; one was Bryski. I don't know what he did for a living. And, the other I don't recall. Anyway, maybe they were in Mir Yeshiva & got out with them.

Amazingly, now, I see Chabad has been active there. For example, this article:

http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/1192782/jewish/Shanghai-Jews-Welcome-World.htm





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3 Jan 2016
There was a branch of the Lubavitch Yeshiva there, alongside the Mirrer Yeshiva

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Blue Candy

26 Nov 2015
Great article! Thank you for writing and including my grandmother Evelyn Pike Rubin.

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Red Umbrella

17 Feb 2016
That was a great article. I was interviewed for this documentary last June when I was a speaker at a Touro Law Conference in Shanghai. I have been lecturing on the survival of the approximately 18,000 Jews in Shanghai since the 1980's and surprisingly, many people have not heard the story. Even now I have a few speaking engagements coming up and they are usually very well attended.

