

6. Shanghai: a Haven for Holocaust Victims



Jewish refugees arrive on the Italian ship "Conte Verde" in Shanghai, China, 14 December 1938.

*Photo Credit: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.
Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*



Professor Pan Guang

Professor Pan Guang (China) is the Vice Chairman and Professor of the Shanghai Centre for International Studies and the Institute of European & Asian Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. He holds a number of prestigious posts at Chinese institutions on International Studies, Asian Studies, Middle East Studies and Jewish Studies.

Professor Pan served as a panellist in the Holocaust Programme's observance of the anniversary of the Kristallnacht pogrom, held at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 10 November 2008 under the theme "Nowhere to Turn". The event focused on immigration policies and their consequences for the Jewish people, who found it nearly impossible to escape Nazi persecution and murder in Europe during the Second World War. Professor Pan provided an overview of the Shanghai Ghetto, which was one of the only safe havens for Jews during that time.

For his work in the field of Holocaust Studies, Professor Pan has received several awards, including the James Friend Annual Memorial Award for Sino-Jewish Studies (1993), Special Award for Research on Canadian Jews from China (1996), the Saint Petersburg-300 Medal for contribution to China-Russia relations (2004) and the Austrian Holocaust Memorial Award (2006).

He has served as a member of the High-Level Group for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) since 2005 and was appointed as Ambassador of the AoC in 2008. He has travelled and lectured extensively in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Professor Pan has published books and articles on a variety of topics, several of which are on the history of Jews in China and Asia.

Shanghai: a Haven for Holocaust Victims

by Pan Guang

Professor and Vice Chairman of the Shanghai Centre for
International Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences

From 1933 to 1941, Shanghai accepted almost 30,000 European Jews who escaped from Nazi Persecution and the Holocaust. Excluding those who left Shanghai for other countries, by the time of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the city was sheltering 20,000 – 25,000 Jewish refugees. According to the Simon Wiesenthal Centre on Holocaust Studies, Shanghai took in more Jewish refugees than Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India combined.¹ Like “Schindler”, “Wallenberg” and “Sugihara”, the name “Shanghai” has now become synonymous with “rescue” and “haven” in the annals of the Holocaust.

Why Did Shanghai Become a Haven for Jewish Refugees?

The accepted historical account is that Jews came to China as early as the Tang Dynasty (around the 8th Century). The Jewish community in Kaifeng, which took shape during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), is known to all.² In modern times, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tianjin and Harbin had become the places where Jews chose to live. Shanghai,

¹ Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (ed.), *Genocide, Critical Issues of the Holocaust* (Los Angeles: 1983), p. 299.

² There are many books about Kaifeng Jews. For a general picture, see Sidney Shapiro (ed.), *Jews in Old China* (New York, 1984).

in particular, had a Jewish community of about 5,000 people in the early part of the 1930s, comprised of Sephardic Jews who came to do business in the city from Baghdad, Bombay, Singapore and Hong Kong in the second half of the 19th century and Russian (Ashkenazi) Jews who came to make a living in the city via Siberia and Harbin after the pogroms, revolutions and civil war in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. The community had its own communal association, synagogues, schools, hospitals, clubs, cemeteries, a chamber of commerce, political groups, publications and a small fighting unit (a Jewish company belonging to the Shanghai Volunteer Corps).³ Several notable families such as the Sassoons, the Hardoons and the Kadoories became economic powers not just in Shanghai but throughout the whole of China and even East Asia. The important point is that although many Jews have inhabited China from ancient to modern times, no indigenous anti-Semitic activity has ever taken place on Chinese soil. That is why European Jews retain a friendly feeling towards the Chinese and cities like Shanghai.

Viewed culturally, most Chinese are influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism rather than Christianity, and Chinese and Jewish cultures share a great deal in common. For example, both lay great stress on family ties and educational values, and although both have absorbed various exotic cultures, their central core has never changed. On a stone monument erected in 1489, the Kaifeng Jews wrote: "Our religion and Confucianism differ only in minor details. In mind and deed both respect Heaven's Way, venerate ancestors, are loyal to sovereigns and ministers, and filial to parents. Both call for harmony with wives and children, respect for rank, and for making friends".⁴ For this reason, the religious roots of anti-Semitism do not exist in China, and never have. No doubt, this environment was strongly appealing to Jews who had suffered untold tribulations in Nazi Europe.

³ See Pan Guang (ed.), *The Jews in Shanghai* (Shanghai: 1995 and 2005).

⁴ Chen Yuan and Ye Han, *Study on the Israelite Religion in Kaifeng — Commentaries on the Stone Inscription of the Israelites* (Shanghai, 1923), p. 2.

The international environment of that time also accounted for Shanghai's popularity among Jews. In the wake of the global economic depression and imminent threat of war, many countries refused to accept immigrants. In July 1938, representatives from 32 countries attended the Evian Conference on Jewish refugees, but, with the exception of the Dominican Republic, no country was willing to take in more Jews. In May 1939, the British government issued the White Paper which imposed strict restrictions on the entry of Jewish immigrants into Palestine.⁵ The United States, which has the world's largest Jewish community, also closed its door to Jewish refugees.⁶ It was in these desperate days that the European Jews found Shanghai, the only metropolis in the world at that time where foreigners could enter without visas. These advantages were particularly important to Jewish refugees, most of whom were penniless and some of whom had just escaped from concentration camps.

It was in these desperate days that the European Jews found Shanghai, the only metropolis in the world at that time where foreigners could enter without visas.

All these factors conspired to turn Shanghai, a Far Eastern metropolis, into an ideal haven for Jewish refugees, adding a bitter but memorable chapter to the history of Shanghai.

"Final Solution" in Shanghai and "Hongkew Ghetto"

As Japan had declared war against the United States in December 1941, Nazi Germany assumed that Japan would be certain to begin implementing German-type anti-Semitic policies. In July 1942, eight months after the Pacific War broke out, Colonel Josef Meisinger, chief representative of the Nazi Gestapo in Japan, arrived in Shanghai and put forward a plan for the 'Final Solution in Shanghai' to

⁵ H.H. Ben-Sasson (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People* (London: 1976), p. 1034.

⁶ Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (ed.), *Genocide, Critical Issues of the Holocaust* (Los Angeles: 1983), p. 299.

the Japanese authorities. It was designed to be implemented in two steps. Step one was to arrest all Jews in Shanghai in a surprise attack as they were spending the Jewish New Year with families. Step two was to 'deal with' the problem they were assumed to create in a decisive manner. The plan suggested three ways of 'dealing with' these Jews. They could be placed in old ships and set a drift on the East China Sea, so that they would eventually die of hunger; they could be forced to toil themselves to death in the abandoned salt-mines on the upper reaches of the Huangpu River; or the Japanese could set up a concentration camp on Chongming Island, where the Jews would be subjected to medical experiments and die of their sufferings.⁷ Although the "Meisinger Plan" was not put into effect, the Japanese authorities established "the Designated Area for Stateless Refugees", ordering all Jewish refugees from Central Europe to move into the area — Hongkew.⁸ The whole operation was similar to setting up a concentration camp.

Why did the Japanese not carry out the "Meisinger Plan"? There are four main reasons: (1) The lobby within Japan which advocated peace with the United States still considered the Jews in Shanghai to be a means by which good relations with the United States could be restored and exerted their limited influence over the Japanese leadership to this end. (2) Japanese leaders were still hoping to maintain non-belligerent relations with the Soviet Union. If the Jews in Shanghai were to be slaughtered as the Nazis demanded, no doubt this barbarism would involve Russian Jews and would have an adverse influence on relations between the two countries. (3) The Jews in Harbin and Japan, who spoke up for the Jewish community in Shanghai with Japanese senior officials in an attempt to persuade Japan not to carry out the "Meisinger Plan", also exerted some influence. (4) As a result of the Confucian

⁷ Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan, The Untold Story of the Japanese and Jews during World War II* (New York and London, 1979), p. 223.

⁸ David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews, the Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai 1938-1945* (New York: 1976), pp. 489-490.

cultural tradition, East Asia did not foster the same religious, racial, and cultural prejudices against Jews, which were prevalent in Christian Europe. Even the Japanese and the puppet officials at the middle and lower levels in Shanghai found it hard to accept the “Meisinger Plan” both intellectually and emotionally. For example, Mr. Shibata, Japanese Vice-Consul in Shanghai, was arrested because he gave secret support to Jews.

All the factors mentioned above notwithstanding, the Japanese fascists were still Hitler’s allies, and the probability that they would take sudden action against Jews in Shanghai was an ever-present threat. The pressure and the capriciousness of Japanese policy towards Jews put the Shanghai Jews in a difficult, unpredictable and sometimes dangerous position for nearly four years.

Hongkew soon began to take on the appearance of a small German or Austrian city. Chusan Road, once a small, dingy, typically Chinese lane, now looked like a street in Vienna.

How were Jewish Refugees able to Survive in Shanghai?

Firstly, Determination of the Jewish Refugees. The move to the ghetto imposed tremendous economic, physical and, above all, psychological burdens on Jewish refugees. Malnutrition and disease brought the total mortality figures for 1943 to 311.⁹ Everybody waged a vital, dire struggle to survive. Despite such difficult conditions, on the whole the community showed a surprising amount of solidarity. The majority of refugees maintained a remarkable degree of stability and equilibrium. They reconstructed dozens of shattered streets, using the rubble to erect new buildings and shops, and Hongkew soon began to take on the appearance of a small German or Austrian city. Chusan Road, once a small, dingy, typically Chinese lane, now looked like a street in Vienna.¹⁰ Hundreds of business establishments were opened, catering mostly to refugee customers. There were groceries,

⁹ Comprehensive statistics according to materials from oral interviews and the International Red Cross’s report (1943) about Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

¹⁰ (Oral) interview with Michael Blumenthal, New York, June 17, 1996.

pharmacies, bakeries, plumbers, locksmiths, barbers, tailors, milliners, cobblers and, of course, there were the inevitable Viennese “coffee houses”. A few enterprising souls even established small factories, turning out such products as soap, candles, knitwear, leatherwear and especially European-type food products like sausages, confections, soft drinks, etc. There were a large number of medically trained personnel among the refugees, including 200 physicians. These doctors, dentists and nurses soon set up little clinics in Hongkew. They even established the first hospital for refugees with 120 beds.¹¹

One of the chief factors which made life bearable for refugees was the amount and variety of recreation they could enjoy. Among the refugees, there were many professional, as well as amateur, entertainers and they quickly swung into action. Actors and actresses organised drama groups, even a Yiddish theatre; musicians set up bands and orchestras; several singers even formed a light opera company, which put on some highly successful operettas.¹² Some musicians like Professor Alfred Wittenberg, a famous violinist from Germany, later became professors at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Refugees set up soccer teams and played annual tournaments before thousands of enthusiastic spectators.¹³ From 1938 to 1947, editors and journalists among the refugees ran more than 10 German publications, and several Polish and Yiddish ones. They included the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* (later *Shanghai Echo*), *Shanghai Woche*, *Acht Uhr Abendblatt*, *Die Gelbe Post*, *Yeddish Almanach*, *Unser Wort*, *In Weg*, *Dos Wort*, *Die Tribune*, *Medizinisch Monatshefte*, *Unser Weg* and so on.¹⁴

11 Annual Report of Shanghai Municipal Council, 1940, p.472.

12 (Oral) interview with William Schurtman, New York, Jan. 17, 1989 and with Heinz Grunberg, Shanghai, April 26, 1998.

13 (Oral) interview with Schurtman and Grunberg.

14 See Rena Krasno, “Jewish Publications in Shanghai during First Half of 20th Century”, *Points East*, Vol.6, No.1, March 1991, Seattle. See also Abraham Kaufman, “Jewish Journalism in the Far East”, *Our Press*, No.8, Tel-Aviv, 1991, World Federation of Jewish Journalists.

Secondly, Support from overseas Jewish communities. In the bleak ghetto period, various international organisations, especially Jewish communities and organisations all over the world, gave great support to Jewish refugees in Shanghai. The unremitting rescue efforts undertaken by the JDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) should certainly be mentioned. The JDC set up its office with a resident representative in Shanghai in 1938. At regular intervals it wrote a report detailing the situation of the Shanghai Jewish refugees and collected donations in the United States for Jewish refugees in Shanghai with monthly donations averaging \$30,000. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, fearing reproaches from the American government, the JDC headquarters in New York had to discontinue posting money to Shanghai in May 1942. This was just at the time the JDC's resident representative, Laura Margolies, was put into a concentration camp by the Japanese.¹⁵ Thanks to the efforts of Rabbi A. Kalmanowitz and Ms. Margolies, who was later released and returned to the States by the end of 1943, the United States government granted permission for the resumption of communication with enemy-occupied Shanghai. In March 1944, the JDC was able to transfer the equivalent of \$25,000 to Shanghai through Switzerland. Because of the steadily rising inflation in Shanghai during 1944, the rate of relief sent by the JDC soon increased. Starting with \$35,000 per month, it reached a sum of \$100,000 by January 1945, a rate which continued until the end of the war.¹⁶

Some other organisations and communities, which also played an important role in rescuing and aiding Jewish refugees in Shanghai, should also not be overlooked. They include: the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, the World Jewish Congress in New York, the Va'ad ha-Hazalah, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Polish Relief Committee for War Victims, the Jewish community in Kobe, the Jewish community in Harbin, Arbeitsausschuss zur Hilfeleistung

¹⁵ Laura Margolis, "Report of Activities in Shanghai, China, from December 8, 1941 to September 1943", *Shanghai Jews Memoirs*, ed. by Pan Guang (Shanghai: 1995), pp. 18-34.

¹⁶ (Oral) interview with Laura Margolis, New Jersey, February 24, 1989.

für Europäische Juden in Stockholm and the Comite Comunidade Israelita de Lisboa. Of course, there are too many to be listed in their entirety.

Thirdly, aid offered by Chinese people. When thousands of Jewish refugees arrived in Shanghai between 1937 and 1941, millions of Shanghai residents had themselves become refugees after the Japanese occupied part of Shanghai. However, in spite of this, the natives of Shanghai tried their best to help Jewish refugees in various ways. Chinese residents in Hongkew overcame all kinds of difficulties to vacate their own rooms to put up refugees. Before the hospitals for Jewish refugees were set up, Chinese hospitals treated a great number of Jewish refugees and saved many lives. In the hardest days in Hongkew from 1943 to 1945, Jewish refugees and their Chinese neighbours enjoyed mutual help and shared weal and woe. Though largely separated by linguistic and cultural barriers, they found themselves bound together by mutual suffering. Wang Faliang, who lived in Hongkew throughout the war, said: "The Japanese persecuted us; Hitler persecuted the Jews, we were all subjected to great hardship."¹⁷ Lilli Finkelstein wrote:

*We noticed that the Chinese in the neighbourhood behaved very well towards us. They knew how precarious our situation was, and they did not take advantage of it. They let us live our life unmolested. ... I even formed a kind of friendship with one or two of those women. Once a family invited us to their festive meal at their New Year's celebration.*¹⁸

Especially noteworthy is the close cooperation between Chinese and Jews on 17 July 1945, when American aircraft accidentally bombed the refugee area in Hongkew. Some memoirs described how Jewish refugees were ripping up the last of their treasured table and bed linen to make bandages, how the Chinese helped carry the

¹⁷ (Oral) interview with Wang Faliang, Shanghai, May 5, 1997.

¹⁸ Lilli Finkelstein, "Four Decades of My Life", *Shanghai Jews Memoirs*, Pan Guang (ed.) (Shanghai: 1995), p. 163.

wounded through rubble, and offered to transport heavy loads of cots, mattresses, and buckets of water to the clinics, and how the poor Chinese in Hongkew brought food and even money to the emergency clinics.¹⁹

These pages in history, composed on Chinese soil by many ordinary Chinese and Jews and cataloguing the traditions of Sino-Jewish friendship, form a chapter in the history of human progress that will forever shine.

Please see page 75 for discussion questions

¹⁹ (Oral) interviews with Schurtman, Wang Faliang and B. Lumenthal.

猶太避難民調查表
DIRECTORY OF JEWISH REFUGEES

29 MAR. 1948

編號 No.		
姓名 Name in full	CHASE GOTTFRIED	
男女別 Sex	FEM	
年齡 Age	40 YEARS	
國籍 Nationality	GERMAN	
使用言語 Language	GERMAN, POLISH	
現住所 Address	241, CHACUFEWA ROAD, HONGKONG	
職業或技能 Occupation or Ability	PRIVATE	
教育程度 Education	MIDDLE-SCHOOL	
宗教 Religion	JEWISH	

本件
差支
無之
右許
可矣



Directory of Jewish Refugees in Shanghai

Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Gottfried Family,
Published in The Jews in China, Pan Guang (ed),
(China Intercontinental Press, 2001) p. 113



A lesson at a secretarial school in the Shanghai ghetto.

Photo Credit: Yad Vashem Photo Archives

Shanghai: a Haven for Holocaust Victims

Discussion questions

1. Persecuted by the Nazis, European Jews attempted to flee the continent. What was the reaction of the countries that attended the Evian Conference? Why did Jewish refugees choose to go to Shanghai?
2. According to Professor Pan, unlike in Europe, anti-Semitism was not present in China. Why not?
3. What was the "Meisinger Plan"? Why was it not implemented?
4. What factors contributed to the survival of Jewish refugees in Shanghai?
5. What was the attitude of the local population in Shanghai towards the Jewish refugees?