

China Images

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Shanghai Jews

“Jews in China?” my visiting son asked, looking quizzically at an article on my desk. It’s a typical reaction, including mine one sleety afternoon a decade ago when I found a book about old Shanghai Jewish families in an up-scale Western hotel shop. Paging through that book as I enjoyed the hotel warmth began a thread of curiosity that I have followed ever since. Pockets of Jews, it turns out, have been integrated into various Chinese cities for centuries.

My most recent investigation followed a month of Chinese language study. Before heading home to Los Angeles, I decided to spend a morning exploring an old area of Shanghai where many Jews had lived. With map and addresses in hand I headed for the Hongkou district north of the popular Hangpu River walk. I had a cab drop me in a working-class neighborhood untouched by the glitz and shine of new Shanghai buildings. Thousands of Jewish refugees lived here during the Japanese occupation of China and World War II, and I was hoping to find an old Ashkenazi synagogue founded in 1904 as well as traces of Jewish cultures.

People sat outside shops in the unseasonable autumn heat enjoying the shade of large-leafed trees. I sauntered down a main street passed plumbing parts shops, tea shops, and clothing shops. A yarn store displaying bright skeins out front enticed passersby to begin knitting winter garments. I maneuvered around parked bicycles and soaked up my leisure morning in this busy yet, for fast-paced Shanghai, laid back

atmosphere. Turning onto another street I headed for the Ohel Moshe Synagogue, trying to imagine the street during the mid-20th century with thousands of Jewish families crowded in among the Chinese.

I began looking for street signs and building numbers, thinking I must be near the former synagogue. At an intersection I admired a well-patronized fruit stall and, with bilingual map folded to the right section, approached a man and woman seated on stools chatting. After several moments of squinting at the writing, the man fetched his glasses, puzzled over the map some more, and pointed behind me. Seeing my blank look, he led me back a few buildings to one set back from the street. We bowed ever so slightly, and I walked through the open gateway of the synagogue. Though connected to buildings on either side, with its simple wrought-iron gate and brass signs even with the storefronts, it sits quietly back from the steady bustle of the street.

I was greeted at the open doorway with slight bows by an attendant and gestured up a narrow staircase to the second floor that consisted of two modest, high-ceiled rooms. One had a few pieces of heavy furniture including a large table; the other contained a display of posters and historical photographs. Eventually Wang Fa Liang entered, greeted me, introduced himself as the synagogue narrator for 12 years and apologetically requested a small entrance fee. I sat alone at the table with Mr. Wang,

84 years old and born in Hongkou in 1920, standing across from me, an array of reference books on the table before him. Our initial interchanges made it obvious his English was excellent, but that he was very deaf and questions were not an option. As Wang Fa Liang [Wahng Fah Lee-ahng] began his narrative recounting the history of Jews in China beginning with the 10th century, I realized I might spend much longer here listening to this congenial gentleman than I had planned. I settled in for whatever lay in store, and Mr. Wang continued uninterrupted for the next two hours.

The clear light of the November day slanted through the second floor window of the small synagogue. I jotted notes, sorry that I hadn't brought a tape recorder to more accurately capture the narrative unfolding before me. The cotton curtains behind him wafted in the autumn breeze and two sunlit spider plants basked on the windowsill. Beyond, the 19th century red-tile roofs of a once Jewish neighborhood caught the light in patchwork patterns. The plants undulating in the breeze seemed juxtaposed against the historical weight of the Jews' flight half way around the globe to seek refuge from Hitler. "And they found refuge," Mr. Wang emphasized. He then continued, "But we Chinese and the Jews lived in poverty and fear for many years here."

He outlined Chinese Jewish history, touching on various communities and showing me occasional photos from the books on the table. References of Jews in China date back as early as the 9th or 10th century but are often disputed by historians. More substantiated documentation comes from Kaifeng, southwest of Beijing, where Jews probably arrived about the 12th century. Stone monuments once located in a Kaifeng public square relate the histories of the Jews who came there. According to Irene Eber, a scholar of Chinese Jewish

history, the earliest of these four stellae, now preserved in the Kaifeng museum, states that they came from India as cotton merchants and that a synagogue was built there in 1163. In 1605 a Jesuit priest recorded extensive talks with a Chinese Jew from Kaifeng, and priests later visited Kaifeng, saw the 13 Torah scrolls, and witnessed synagogue members reading Hebrew. By the late 19th century, however, the synagogue had been dismantled, the last rabbi had died, and although those who still identified themselves as Jews could recognize Hebrew, they could not read it.

Mr. Wang was more interested in focusing on more recent times, beginning with the mid-1800s migrations of Jews to China. First came David Sassoon, a merchant from Baghdad based in Bombay. He brought with him members of his Sephardic community to open a trading house in Shanghai. Several became very wealthy while others were employed by them. Exporting silver and tea and importing textiles and opium, the Jewish merchant families formed an important community within the treaty port of Shanghai, where several Western powers occupied cultural and political enclaves. The names of Sassoon, Kadoori, Haroon and others linger today. "These merchant families were very, very rich," Mr. Wang commented as he showed me photos of their mansions. The Kadoori mansion "we Chinese call the 'little White House.' It's so large it's now the Children's Palace," where the city holds cultural classes and festivities.

While many in the Shanghai Sephardic community were becoming influential, Jews in Russia began fleeing civil unrest and rising anti-Semitism in the early 1900s. Seeking refuge in northern China, many eventually settled in Harbin, a city now famed for its ice sculpture festivals. Some of the poorer Harbin refugees then drifted south to Shanghai for employment. However, by the 1930s, Wang recounted,

when their numbers in northern China had grown to about 15,000, Japan set up a puppet government (Manchuko) and thousands fled the increasing violence against them. By the beginning of World War II several thousand primarily working-class Ashkenazi Jews from Russia had moved to the Hongkou District of Shanghai. Though many settled in the French concession of the city, the poorer ones went to Hongkou. “We Chinese were pretty poor, but the Russian immigrants who moved here were the poorest,” recalled Wang. “They became street vendors, knife grinders, and bus drivers. All the bus drivers were Russian, and many were Jews.” The much smaller group of Sephardic Jews lived in a more central part of Shanghai and many, if not most, held British passports. Each group built its own synagogues and established its own social organizations.

The next wave of Jews arrived in Shanghai as the world’s countries closed their doors to Jews being forced to emigrate by the Third Reich. Shanghai was a refuge because it was under the control of China’s invaders, the Japanese. As Japanese occupation and internal fissures fractured China this unlikely opening provided a sanctuary for Jews fleeing the grip of anti-Semitic brutality. Between 1937 and 1942, the Japanese eliminated passport control for entry into Shanghai. As a result, about 20,000 European Jews obtained the required documents to leave Germany and purchased passage on Japanese and Italian ships for the 8000-mile trip to an unknown world. They poured into Shanghai penniless and in a city much less stable than they imagined, with the Japanese grip becoming ever tighter and the world war about to erupt into the Pacific theater.

Wang Fa Liang spent most of his life in the Hongkou District. “I grew up among the Jews in this neighborhood,” living and working side-by-side with the Ashkenazi

Jews from childhood and with the European Jews when they arrived. “This has always been a labor area, not at all rich... a back water of working class Chinese and Jewish refugees from Europe.”

When the new refugees arrived the established Jewish communities—both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi—grappled with how to provide food and housing in an already densely packed city rife with poverty. Trucks carried them from the ships to massive dormitories and feeding centers. Many of the 20,000 immigrants lived in camps when they came and were supported by the rich Sephardic families plus aid from overseas organizations such as the U.S.-based Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The Kadoori brothers founded a school for Jewish children in the Hongkou District, and a place was found for an entire Yeshiva of 400 students and their rabbis who had escaped the Third Reich. Eventually the refugees found cramped housing in back streets and alleys of Shanghai, began finding jobs doing anything they could, and opened shops.

Wang described the Hongkou neighborhood during those times. The Jews here suffered a lot, he commented, but most survived. They called the immediate area near the synagogue “Little Vienna” and despite poverty and hardship they had many shops, a myriad of newspapers, and some restaurants and bakeries. Their biggest newspaper, the *Israel Messenger*, had offices next door to the synagogue, Wang said. The present synagogue building, which was constructed in 1927 when he was 7 years old, housed many refugees during the war.

He had many Jewish friends. They worked together, but led separate home lives. They worked outside the Hongkou District in the foreign concessions of the city when they could. He told stories of different places, especially restaurants where they did odd

jobs, washed dishes, and cleared tables. He eventually bought his house and furniture from a Jewish friend when the friend moved to the United States after World War II. Wang still lives in the house.

Then came Pearl Harbor, the beginning of the Pacific part of World War II, and the Japanese proclamation that required all stateless refugees who had arrived in Shanghai after 1937 to move to a “designated area” which was a portion of the Hongkou District. This included all of the German and Austrian Jews living in other parts of the city. Many lost everything they had built up. A life that had been very difficult, became much more so. Food was extremely scarce, housing and cooking conditions were crowded and unhealthy, and disease was rampant. Wang emphasized that despite hardship and hunger, the Chinese and Jews lived peacefully and amicably side-by-side. Japanese gatekeepers, hated by the Chinese and Jews alike Wang recalled, required a pass to leave the ghetto. After 1941 the Japanese took over the British and French sections of Shanghai, confiscated all possessions and property, and sent the inhabitants to internment camps. This included most of the Sephardic families who gradually slipped away to Hong Kong and elsewhere because they had lost everything. Almost no support remained for the destitute refugees.

Wang Fa Liang said the Jews suffered a lot, but the Chinese suffered even more at the hands of the Japanese. He paused, then added, “The Germans hated the Jews, the Japanese hated the Chinese.” His own family fled in terror two times in the middle of the night—once to the French Concession for a year, later to the British Concession for a year. Each time they took nothing with them. He also reported that the Gestapo sent spies to China and asked the Japanese to kill all the European Jews, but the Japanese ignored the request. Although the Japanese

were allies of Germany, they were ambivalent about the anti-Semitic policy. Jews who have told the stories of their lives in Shanghai report that any anti-Semitism experienced was perpetrated by outsiders and did not come from their Chinese neighborhoods.

At the end of the World War, the Chinese civil war between the Nationalist and Communist armies escalated, and the refugees began returning to their home countries or elsewhere, many going to the United States or Israel. They carried with them memories of hardships endured and of an amicable Chinese population who had enormous problems of their own.

Many Shanghailanders, as they have called themselves, stay connected with each other through reunions, newsletters, and an oral history project. Recently in a wonderful film, *Shanghai Ghetto*, refugees talked about their lives in Shanghai during the war. In China there has also been renewed interest in the Sino-Judaic connections. Recent seminars in Shanghai and Harbin have included former Jewish refugees, and several historical articles have appeared in government English-language papers and magazines. Chinese officials have urged Jews returning as tourists to invest in the Chinese cities and form joint ventures. These sales pitches appear to be taken good-naturedly. One recent visitor to a Harbin reunion commented with amusement, “Sure, it’s public relations. Everyone understands that. The mention of rich Jews isn’t meant as an insult. Many people in Asia think all Jews are smart and rich—if you’re rich, you must be a Jew.” Another said about crates of blankets he was buying to take back from Harbin, “It’s easier to do this in Guangzhou. But my memories are very good [here], and I feel like doing it because it’s my old hometown.”

About 400 Jews now live in Shanghai, with one active rabbi from New York. Their

synagogue is west of the city near the Hongquiao Airport. Two of the original synagogues are still standing—the one we were in, which is a museum, and a large one in the main part of Shanghai, Ohel Rachel Synagogue, built in the 19th century and recently restored. A museum of Jewish refugees to China is planned for the site.

From the second floor window Mr. Wang showed me places where now famous people once lived. Handing me a neighborhood map, he urged me to explore the surrounding streets for old buildings. I walked down the first side street filled with people chatting, sitting outside reading newspapers, hanging their laundry on long bamboo poles extended from upper floor windows and I could imagine the same scene with the mix of sounds and chatter of Chinese and Jewish communities.

I turned down another street, the laundry flapping slowly over my head, but it was too hot and too late to wander farther. Suddenly

I was exhausted. My exhilaration of the morning and of walking down the side street abruptly melted into the searing heat and I headed back to the Bund. It was a long walk.

Block by block I retraced the route of my early morning cab ride until I threaded my way through the labyrinth of traffic-laden streets, to the bridge over Suzhou Creek, where the Jews and Chinese had to be clever or obsequious to get past the Japanese occupiers. I found a bench looking out over the currents of the Hanpu River port with barges plying past, and watched the skippers and families onboard. The strong river breeze washed over me. The same breeze that had been wafting the spider plants in the synagogue. As the sun glinted off the new skyscrapers across the river, I realized I had touched history and the difficult, but determined lives of those who had inhabited one part of it. I crossed the main thoroughfare along the Bund, picked up my pace, and merged into the crowds of central Shanghai.

Resources

The Shanghai Ghetto (film and DVD) is a recently produced documentary of the World War II refugees' life in Shanghai, the events surrounding their arrival, and the network that attempted to aid them. It includes historical photos and interviews with several refugees and how they coped in this drastically unknown world. I would be glad to loan you my copy or you can find ordering information at <http://www.shanghaighetto.com>

The Sydney (Australia) Jewish Museum and an associated website have a very readable and varied set of information about Jews in China. The easiest way into the site is to search Google for: *The Menorah of Fang Bang Lu*. Starting from that page, there are a myriad of links.

The Sino-Judaic Institute (Menlo Park, CA) promotes friendship and understanding between the Chinese and Jewish peoples and encourages cooperation on mutual historical and cultural interests. A major focus is to assist the descendants of the ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng “in their efforts to preserve and maintain the artifacts and documents they have inherited from their forebears” and to reconstruct the history of their community. There are a number of articles at their site, <http://www.sino-judaic.org>