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COLUMN ONE

Shanghai revisits its forgotten Jewish past

The history of the 20,000 European Jews who fled to the Chinese city during World War II is being rediscovered.

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1 2 next | single page

By Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times
September 17, 2012 | 10:08 p.m.



A tour group takes in Shanghai's former Jewish neighborhood, where European emigres found refuge during the persecution of World War II. (Barbara Demick / Los Angeles Times / September 17, 2012)

SHANGHAI — The family always knew there was something mysterious about Wang Fanglian, secrets he dared not share with even his closest relatives. Although he was just an ordinary worker at a diesel engine factory, he spoke four languages, among them English with a guttural German accent. His narrow brick-faced house had a flush toilet, a gas stove and a balcony for drying clothes, all strange luxuries in his rickshaw-wide Shanghai alley.

Only late in life did Wang explain himself, when it was safe to talk about his friendships with Jews.

During World War II, 20,000 European Jews fled to Shanghai, one of the few places in the world they could go without a visa, and one of the few that put no limit on the number of Jews it would accept. Under Japanese occupation, they were squeezed into one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, living cheek by jowl with working-class Chinese such as Wang.

"They were good friends. They lived together. They played together. They suffered together under the Japanese occupation," said Wang Fanglian's 21-year-old granddaughter, Wang Kaiyan.

The old man learned English and French from his Jewish neighbors — and Japanese from the occupiers. He bought his house, the one with the Western luxuries, at the end of the war from a departing Jewish family.

Then when the remaining Jews, along with other foreigners,



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fled China after the communist victory in 1949, this chapter of Shanghai history was tucked away and forgotten.

"Because of the Cultural Revolution, people didn't want to talk about relations with foreigners," said the granddaughter, referring to the communist purges of the 1960s and 1970s against what were seen as bourgeois influences.

To call it a revival would be an overstatement, but the Jewish history of Shanghai is gradually coming out from the shadows.

The old Jewish quarter is in a quaintly ramshackle neighborhood called Hongkou with red-and-gray brick houses, many of them with patterned gables and fluted turrets, a weird fusion of Asian and European architecture that is uniquely Shanghai. So many Jews were here, along with cafes, cabarets, German bakeries, delicatessens, dance halls and music conservatories, that the neighborhood was nicknamed Little Vienna at the time.

Most of the neighborhood has since been rebuilt, the European cafes demolished or turned into Chinese restaurants.

The only remaining Jewish landmark, a onetime synagogue that had been turned into a psychiatric hospital, reopened in 2007 as the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. Wang Fanglian conducted tours there briefly before his death in 2008. Wang's old house still stands and occasionally receives tourists, though there's little trace of the former Jewish occupants.

In March and April, a theater company performed a play about a romance between a young Jewish woman and a Chinese resistance fighter, with funding partially provided by the Israeli Consulate.

There are now more than half a dozen academic programs at Chinese universities — in Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu and

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Nanjing among others — devoted to Jewish studies. The Shanghai Jewish Studies Youth Forum, for Chinese students studying Jewish history, held a conference here in July.

The government-owned Shanghai Film Studios is developing a television miniseries about the Jewish emigres in partnership with "Black Swan" producer Mike Medavoy, who was born in Shanghai to Ukrainian Jewish refugees.

"We want something like 'Schindler's List,'" said Pan Guang, an advisor to the project, who heads the Center for Jewish Studies in Shanghai.

Pan says Chinese awareness about the Holocaust is a natural offshoot of rising interest in World War II and in the Nanjing massacre in 1937, when hundreds of thousands of Chinese were killed by the Japanese. The massacre was the subject of Zhang Yimou's film "The Flowers of War," starring Christian Bale.

"This is a very hot topic among graduate students right now," Pan said.

The story of Shanghai's Jews is also a feel-good one that runs counter to the criticism of China over its human rights record.

"No city saved so many Jewish lives as Shanghai," said Dvir Bar-Gal, an Israeli expatriate who gives tours of the old Jewish neighborhood. "For the Chinese, this is a 'good face' story."

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1 2 [next](#) | [single page](#)



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Mime Wonder at 10:03 AM September 18, 2012

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A simple google search shows the Sassons were leading opium smugglers in China. Why the LA Times chose not to include this information in this article that Sassons drug smuggling activities caused great harm to people in China.

wei hsu at 12:55 AM September 18, 2012

As a Shanghailander myself, I'd like to add some facts to set the record straight : My parents got visas from the Chinese consul in Vienna- a real Rigious Gentile , to Shanghai- which was still an "open City" in 1938. The visas were required to leave Europe , and buy tickets to China, so the "no visa" policy was not relevant. Shanghai was under Japanese control when they finally arrived, but the Japanese commander did not cooperate with the German requests to stop jews coming in, and arrest the jews already there. The jews in Shanghai were concentrated in HongKou ghetto . The Consul who handed out the visas was not recognised in time , and was not treated well by his superiors, so that the "generosity & humanitaranism" was limited to individuals . Wang's story about buying the house is familiar too- my parents had to sell al their belongings, including those brought from Vienna for 10 Chinese dollars, as the buyers knew they had to leave and could not and did not dare to bargain- so it's no surprise that some ended up with these "luxuries" - ask yourself how they could have afforded them?

F. Y. Lee at 11:39 PM September 17, 2012

That was a turbulent time in history. Outside of Asia, many people do not appreciate what actually happened in Asia during World War II. Many countries like China, Korea, Phillippines, Malaysia, Burma still commemorate their peoples' courage and preserverance that was exhibited throughout the war. We should acknowledge China's generosity and humanitaianism in saving the thousands of Jewish people during this awful time in history. Give China and her people the acknowledgment that has been long deserved.

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Opinion

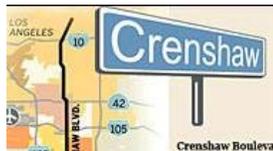


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