Introduction

Shanghai today is a city of nearly twenty million inhabitants. The largest urban center in China, it is a metropolis not only of skyscrapers, flourishing business establishments and shipping, but also of museums and many universities. At first sight, the traveler of six or seven decades ago, who arrived by ship at one of Shanghai’s many wharves, would not find much today that is familiar. Yet, the old alleyways with their two- or three-story unique Shanghai-style houses can still be seen in various places; the city even then was a large metropolis of over four million people. Indeed, neither Paris nor London could rival Shanghai in size. In the 1930s the city was a metropolis, a cultural as well as an economic center, the like of which a European from Russia or Germany had not seen before. It should not come as a surprise that, in spite of China’s political upheavals after the communist victory, Shanghai should be once more one of the great cosmopolitan cities of the world with a foreign population nearly as large as in the 1930s.

Among the earliest foreigners to arrive in Shanghai were the Sephardi, or Baghdadi Jews, who came with British traders in the 1840s. The Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905 brought a new influx of Jews who opted to remain in China rather than return to Russia. Settling at first in Manchuria, they gradually moved south and to Shanghai. The second group, also from Russia, came after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and 1918. Finally, after Hitler came to power in 1933, a small trickle of German Jews began to arrive. This turned into a veritable flood by the end of 1938 and the first half of 1939 and included Austrian Jews as well. By the end of 1941 when the Pacific War broke out, there were nearly 30,000 Jews in Shanghai; approximately 1,000 Baghdadis; nearly 7,000 Russian Jews; and somewhat less than 20,000 Central Europeans.

Although we might be tempted to refer to them as a Jewish community, the fact is that Shanghai’s Jews were a polyglot population consisting of several culturally and linguistically different communities. There were Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews; religious and secular; old-timers and newcomers; German, English, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish speakers. Their dislike of one another increased during the war years, exacerbated by the Japanese occupation, which brought vital consumer shortages and general impoverishment.

My aim in these pages is to understand the Central European refugees within the Shanghai setting. To what extent were they aware that they arrived in the city that only a short time before had been subject to war and to partial Japanese occupation? It will be important, furthermore, to understand their uneasy co-existence with the established Baghdadi and Russian communities. Equally significant are the German foreign policy and economic considerations.
that brought them to these foreign shores in the first place. On this point many questions still remain. Major among these is the position of the Yishuv, or the Palestine Jewish community’s attitude to saving lives of both young and old instead of selective emigration, that is of saving only the able-bodied young. Whereas the German Jewish leadership, on the whole, did not enthusiastically endorse the Shanghai escape route, the fact was that entire families, grandparents and small children came to Shanghai. Did the Yishuv never urge non-selective emigration and the saving of lives in Shanghai?

However, one must not be misled into thinking that Shanghai’s ruling authority, the Shanghai Municipal Council, welcomed the thousands of Jewish refugees with open arms. Quite the contrary, they tried to stem the influx by all means available to them. This put considerable pressure on the wealthy Jewish businessmen who made their living within the British mercantile community. The dire destitution of their co-religionists, for this is how they were perceived by non-Jews, threatened to greatly impair their standing. Not only the British, but also the Japanese authorities believed that the established Jewish communities were responsible for impoverished Jews. Any discussion of relief efforts in Shanghai must, therefore, consider the dilemma, if not nervousness, of men whose expertise was in business and management and not social work.

The lengthy ocean voyage undertaken by the majority of the refugees on luxury ocean liners afforded them weeks of respite from the anxieties of departure. Leaving loved ones and friends behind, not to mention the comforting certainties of familiar surroundings, must have been a harrowing experience. But nothing prepared these middle-class businessmen and professionals and their families for the squalor, unsanitary and crowded facilities, disease and vermin-ridden living quarters of Shanghai. For these Central Europeans the weather was especially taxing: hot and humid in summer, cold and damp in winter. In addition, the primitive cooking facilities made life indescribably difficult. It must be remembered that by the time these men and women reached Shanghai, the horror and deprivation of wartime Europe with German deportations, ghettos, and work camps had not yet begun. At first, many may have regretted undertaking this journey into the unknown.

With this in mind, one cannot but admire the stamina and energy with which many of the refugees devoted themselves to creating a semblance of cultural life in their strange new world. In Hongkou, where most lived in rooming houses and converted schools, cafes, restaurants, and shops featuring familiar items appeared. There were newspapers in German and Yiddish as well as theatrical performances, variety shows, and eventually even radio broadcasts in German. The ingenuity and inventiveness these strangers brought to
making a living was seemingly limitless. How to understand their exile condition is an intriguing question. Was it to recreate a minimal semblance to the places they had come from? Or was it simply to search for a livelihood with means that were familiar? More research is needed to better understand the meaning of exile for these individuals and groups.

How persons react to the unknown, what adjustments in thought and behavior they are able to make, is not easily reconstructed. In the case of Shanghai there are special difficulties. Not many diaries have survived the ravages of time and letters are practically non-existent after the outbreak of war in 1939. The literary record however, especially poetry written in reference to an event or situation, can be helpful in supplying an emotional dimension. Here the historian may find the emotional response of the moment needed to understand better how exile affected the individual, even if it is an outcry of pain or a statement of stubborn resistance.

The Japanese Proclamation of February 1943, confining those stateless refugees to a portion of Hongkou – the ghetto – was a major blow. It affected those Central Europeans who had arrived after 1937 when more than 15,000 people were crowded into an area of less than three square kilometers, which they could leave only after obtaining a pass from the Japanese. Conditions were harsh, made brutal by disease, a high mortality rate, and real hunger. The Russian Jewish community was spared the ordeal of the ghetto, and those Baghdadis who had British passports were interned in camps where conditions were even more intolerable. Yet most survived and saw the end of war in August 1945.

Although they no longer feared for their lives, not knowing what plans the Japanese invaders might have for them, the time of anxiety for the refugees was by no means over. News from Europe, when it finally came, told of the vast disaster that had decimated the Jewish communities wherever German armies had invaded. Therefore, only very few thought of returning to Russia, Germany, or Austria. Most wanted to settle elsewhere, far from the killing fields where once their homes had been. Even if some might have opted for remaining in Shanghai or elsewhere in China, the civil war that increasingly engulfed the country was hardly conducive to the settled existence they yearned for. Thus by the beginning of the 1950s Shanghai’s Jewish Diaspora had come to an end.

The Shanghai story is part of Holocaust history that is often forgotten or ignored. It is neither sufficiently considered nor explored, but it is a story of survival, even of heroism, and of stubbornly defying fate. To be sure, the memoirs that have been appearing in recent years are important and useful, but they are not a substitute for historical research and for attempting to establish
an historical record without mythologizing and without distortions. Stories of
courage and survival are part of the history of those dark years and with the
historian, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, I believe that it is better to remember too
much than to forget. Like he, I fear forgetting¹. This book is, therefore, not
intended as a definitive history of the Shanghai refugee community. Rather it
aims at establishing the context within which both arrival and survival in
Shanghai were possible. It furthermore aims to show the kinds of strategies
that could be pursued within the context of Shanghai to ensure cultural identi-
ties.

¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory, New York: