JEWISH REFUGEES IN SHANGHAI (1933–1941)

A Journey of Hope for More Than 18,000 Jews to China

March 19 – May 7, 2015
We would like
to specifically
acknowledge the
contributions of friends,
including:
Otto Bremer Foundation
of Minnesota
Robyn Awend
Professor Alejandro Baer
Pearl Bergad
Helen Bix
Judge Gail Chang Bohr
Professor Richard Bohr
Neil Bray
Laura Chin
Chinese Heritage Foundation
Sharon Fong
Sherri Gerbert Fuller
Manny Gabler
Paul Gam
Provost Karen Hanson
Kurt Hort
Hoyt Hsiao
Greg Hugh
Jolie Klapmeier
Steve Klepetar
Judge Tony Leung
Doug Lew
Linda Mealey Lohmann
Dr. Kin-Shing Lun
Walter Pistner
Professor Riv-Ellen Prell
Mindy Ratner
Katherine Tane
Ming Tchou
Jodi & Jeff Upin
U.S. China Peoples Friendship
Association
Mary Warpeha
Ellen Wiss
Professor Xu Xin
Consul General Zhao Weiping
DEAR EXHIBIT VIEWERS,

It is a genuine pleasure for the Confucius Institute at the University of Minnesota and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas (JCRC) to partner with the Sabes Jewish Community Center to bring Jewish Refugees in Shanghai (1933–1941) from the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum to Minnesota. The substance of the exhibit provides a great teaching moment as does the programming associated with the exhibit.

Long before Nazi persecution brought Jewish refugees to Shanghai, the ancient Chinese and Jewish civilizations were making historic contributions to humankind, and encountering each other in history. Jewish traders followed the Silk Road to commerce and knowledge into China, which was opened by Marco Polo. An indigenous Jewish community flourished in Kaifeng for approximately 700 years followed by the arrival of Jewish merchants from the Middle East (such as the Sassoon and Kadoorie families) in the 19th century, which brought a Jewish presence to Hong Kong and Shanghai.

In the 20th century, persecution and statelessness also brought the Jews and Chinese together. As Nazi anti-Semitism reverberated throughout Europe, Chaim Weizmann, the greatest Jewish statesman of his age, noted ruefully in 1936 that for Jews, the world is divided into two places: places where they cannot live and places they cannot enter.

Across thousands of miles and culture, though, the Chinese opened the doors of survival to Jews who could reach Shanghai. One year after Chaim Weizmann's assessment, Japan invaded China and subjected the Chinese to vast and horrible atrocities. Nevertheless, the Chinese protected the European Jews in the open city of Shanghai as both peoples descended into their respective dark and dangerous passages of the 1930s and 1940s.

This is the story of the exhibit and the lives of the people from that time and place—the Chinese and Jews of Shanghai. Among those Jews are the Shanghai survivors in Minnesota: Helen Bix, Manny Gabler, Kurt Hort and Ellen Wiss. We are grateful for their presence in the community and the stories they have shared.

Let us take this opportunity to acknowledge the individuals and institutions deserving of great thanks: The Sabes Jewish Community Center for graciously hosting the exhibit; partners at the University of Minnesota: Center for Jewish Studies and Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies; and the St. Paul JCC.

Staffs from the Confucius Institute and the JCRC are greatly responsible for the detail and logistics of the many moving parts of the exhibit: Emily Hanson, Pashoua Vang, Emily Ruskin, Yongling Zhang-Gorke, Susie Greenberg, Laura Zelle, and Anthony Sussman.

The exhibit has provided an opportunity to bring the Twin Cities’ Jewish and Chinese communities together in collaboration—a foundation upon which we will hopefully build in the years ahead.

Joan Brzezinski
Executive Director
Confucius Institute
University of Minnesota

Steve Hunegs
Executive Director
Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas
Ohel Moshe Synagogue, 1940s.
Current location of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum.
中华人民共和国驻芝加哥总领事馆
CONSULATE GENERAL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN CHICAGO
100 W. ERIE STREET, CHICAGO IL 60654  TEL: (312)/803-0095

Message from the Chinese Consul General to Chicago

Mr. Zhao Weiping

On behalf of the Chinese Consulate General in Chicago, I wish to congratulate the Confucius Institute at the University of Minnesota, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, the Sabes JCC and the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum on their collaboration to bring the extraordinary exhibit, Jewish Refugees in Shanghai (1933-1941), to Minnesota.

This exhibit shows the life of the Jewish refugees in Shanghai who fled the atrocities of the Holocaust and the friendship between the Chinese and Jewish people during the traumatic years of the 1930's and 1940's. Recalling that part of history, I always feel proud that China provided refuge for the Jewish people. And I also admire the determination and perseverance of the Jewish refugees as we can see in the exhibit.

Zhao Weiping
Consul General of the People's Republic of China in Chicago
March 4, 2015
A Journey of Hope
for More Than 18,000
Jews to China (1933–1941) is a collaborative community effort to share information about the unique experiences of Jewish refugees in Shanghai during World War II. The cornerstone of this project is a historical exhibit curated by the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum.
ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

Jewish Refugees in Shanghai (1933–1941) is a traveling exhibit created by the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. Located in the former Ohel Moshe Synagogue in the Tilanqiao Historical Area, the museum has taken a significant role in educating local and international visitors about the unique story of Jewish refugees in Shanghai. From 1933–1941 Shanghai opened its doors to over 18,000 Jewish refugees fleeing persecution and war in Europe, transforming the city into an “open city for Jews” at a time when much of the rest of the world was closed.

The traveling exhibit has given communities around the world an opportunity to learn about this significant but little-known story of Jewish immigration and settlement in world history. The 40 panel exhibit highlights historical content and biographies of many “Shanghailanders” who escaped Europe and made Shanghai their temporary home. In Minnesota we have enhanced the exhibit with additional stories of four Shanghailanders with deep Minnesota connections. Their personal stories, family photographs, and surviving artifacts have been added to the existing traveling display.

The exhibit, either in part or in its entirety, has traveled to the Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Kansas, Chicago’s Thompson Center, and New York’s Rockefeller Center. Additionally, the exhibit has served as a springboard for symposiums, conferences, and education initiatives among middle schools and high schools across the country. After the exhibit is hosted in Minnesota, it will continue to various Confucius Institutes in the U.S. and their associated institutions of higher education. The first Confucius Institute to host this exhibit was the Confucius Institute at the University of California Los Angeles.
The Confucius Institute at the University of Minnesota and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas sought out and interviewed four Minnesotans who fled, with their families, to Shanghai during the onset of World War II. The stories of these four Minnesotans provide a local context to the traveling exhibit *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai (1933–1941)* while it is displayed at the Sabes Jewish Community Center. These Minnesotan stories are also on display at the St. Paul JCC. Each story is enriched by the display of historical photos, official documents, and other family treasures which tell of their journey and survival. By sharing the unique stories of Helen Bix, Kurt Hort, Manny Gabler, and Ellen Wiss, visitors will be inspired to learn about this period in history and about the people in our community.

Additionally, the Confucius Institute was able to connect with a local Chinese Minnesotan who grew up in Shanghai during this time period. Doug Lew’s story shares one perspective of the Chinese experience in Shanghai’s international concessions. During the period 1933–1941 Chinese families struggled with the direct impacts of the war and the Japanese occupation in Shanghai.
THE HAGGADAH OF THE CHINESE JEWS

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10
Long Journey to Success

The aftermath of Kristallnacht led Helen Bix, at the age of four, her mother and brother to embark on a long and arduous trek that lasted four months to Shanghai, an Open City for Jewish immigrants. Helen’s new life exposed her to different cultures, language barriers, rampant tropical diseases, and unsanitary conditions.

Helen attended the Shanghai Jewish School, where she received an excellent education. She describes her life as “the life that a typical Jewish child would have anywhere else in the western hemisphere.” Her 10 years in Shanghai resulted in close friendships with classmates, many who she still talks to today.

Helen’s mother, Berta Helman, was a remarkable woman whose courage sustained their family. Berta struggled alone to feed her family after Helen’s step-father died in 1941. She opened a tailoring store, making clothing to order, working long hours under difficult conditions. Money was hard to come by and Helen vividly remembers being called to the principal’s office on several occasions when her mother had difficulty making her tuition payments. Like her mother, Helen also had faith in Judaism, which they both believed helped them persevere throughout life.

After the war, through the efforts of the Jewish Agency and HIAS, Helen’s family was resettled to Minneapolis. Helen’s mother opened a factory first making aprons, which later manufactured ladies loungewear. At the age of 19, Helen had to take over the business while her mother convalesced from heart disease. Although inexperienced, Helen designed and sold garments, traveled to New York buying offices, and kept the operation running. At the same time, Helen continued her education at the University of Minnesota in the evenings. It was at the University that she met Harold who she married. Together they expanded the loungewear business with incredible dedication and many hours of hard work. After selling their business in 1991, Helen and her husband traveled extensively around the world for three years. They now reside in Florida.
Survival in Shanghai

Manfred Gabler was born February 18, 1938 in Milan, Italy. Before his birth, Manny’s parents, Simon and Esther Gabler, were able to flee their home in Germany because they had family living in Italy. Manny’s father was a Polish citizen working in Germany. Manny’s mother, a German citizen originally named Irmgard, converted to Judaism in 1935 when they married, and took on the Jewish name Esther. She was largely cut off by her family who disapproved of their union and her conversion.

The couple arrived in Milan just before Manny’s birth, and in 1939 when Manny was one year old, the family departed for Shanghai. The Gablers arrived in Shanghai’s Hongkew district where most of the Jewish refugees settled. Manny’s brother Ralph was born in 1940.

Manny’s father found work outside the Hongkew district and was therefore able to pass through the checkpoints more easily than others, consequently creating some interaction with the local Chinese community. Manny remembers recognizing how many of the Chinese people in their community were suffering from extreme poverty, illness, and starvation. He recalls positive interactions with his Chinese neighbors—that they displayed no prejudice against the Jews.

Beginning in 1943 Manny attended the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School run by the Kadoorie family. In 1948, the family was granted permission to emigrate to the United States. They arrived in San Francisco, and then settled in Pittsburgh.

In 1961 Manny joined the U.S. Army. After his tour of service, he worked as an international sales representative for a guitar company, traveling to many cities across the world. In 1982 Manny settled in Minnesota, and started a successful business.

Manny and his brother returned to Shanghai in 1998. While touring their old neighborhood they identified the door to their former apartment and found that the doorframe had not been painted for 50 years. The holes where their mezuzah had been were still clearly visible.
Surviving by Serving Others

Kurt Hort, the son of a pharmacist and language teacher, was born Kurt Horwitz in Berlin, 1921. During the Kristallnacht attacks, Kurt's father was taken to the Oranienburg concentration camp. After Kristallnacht, Kurt's mother was able to secure tickets to Shanghai through the help of a well-connected friend. In an act of ultimate bravery, she then visited the concentration camp where his father was held to deliver his ticket. He was miraculously released and the family fled to Shanghai.

Upon arrival in 1939, Kurt and his family lived in the Choufoong Hou Heim refugee camp in the Hongkew District. He worked as a ghetto guard before landing a job in the Stateless Refugee Hospital. In 1942 Kurt met and married his first wife, Perla, a Polish refugee and in 1946 their daughter Vivian was born.

In 1947, Kurt, his new wife, and their baby received permission to enter the U.S. via San Francisco. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee placed his young family in Minnesota, where Kurt continued his career in pharmaceuticals. Kurt's parents were unable to travel with him at the same time, and were taken to a communist army POW camp. Hubert Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis, later helped Kurt locate and bring his parents to Minnesota.

Despite his success in sales, he started his own business when Perla fell ill with cancer. Kurt met his second wife and business partner, Louise, and the two married in 2000.

In addition to being a successful businessman, Kurt has been a respected community leader. He was president of the Saint Paul chapter and entire Midwest region of B'nai B'rith. Kurt actively participates in Holocaust remembrance activities and educational opportunities for new generations to learn about the ghettos of Shanghai. Kurt says he is "proud and happy" to call Minnesota, “a place of such decency and liberal values,” his home now.
Ellen Eisner Wiss was born to Bernard and Hildegard Eisner in Shanghai on March 30, 1945, her parent’s 6th wedding anniversary. Her father was at work, so her mother walked to the hospital and labored to the sound of American planes in the sky and bombs falling on Shanghai.

It was November 1939 when Jewish men in Koenigsberg, Bernard and Hildegard Eisner’s hometown, were taken into “protective custody” by the German Army. Although they were released, it was a sign that it was no longer safe to stay. It was spring 1939 when Ellen’s parents arrived in Shanghai. Her parents avoided the Shanghai “Heime” by securing a room on Chusan Road in the Russian Concession. Her father found work repairing radios and bicycles, and then as a driver for the American army after Shanghai was liberated. Her mother supplemented their income by allowing members of a Russian orchestra to use their room as a practice studio. Even though they lived in a single room with no indoor plumbing, her mother was able to employ household help and an “Ama” for her children. However, their life took another tragic turn when their first daughter died of dysentery in 1942.

Memories from Ellen’s childhood in Shanghai are limited to impressions of their room and playing at Wayside Park. After the liberation most of the refugees were able to leave quickly, but because Ellen had been born in Shanghai, she was considered “stateless” which fell under a separate quota and that delayed her family’s departure by more than two years.

Ellen’s family finally arrived in San Francisco on April 20, 1948 and then took the train to Denver. Her brother John was born on July 1, 1949. They did not have a lot of money, but their house was filled with laughter, music, books, friends, great food, and an expectation to excel. In 2008, Ellen reclaimed her German citizenship. Ellen had a career as an educator and currently resides in Duluth.

Life is a Journey

Ellen Eisner Wiss was born to Bernard and Hildegard Eisner in Shanghai on March 30, 1945, her parent’s 6th wedding anniversary. Her father was at work, so her mother walked to the hospital and labored to the sound of American planes in the sky and bombs falling on Shanghai.
While Jewish refugees struggled to rebuild their lives in Shanghai, Chinese families grappled with political changes and threats to their own country. In 1931, Japanese forces began to invade China, slowly claiming territories in a series of military incidents. In 1937, Japan took control of Shanghai after a long drawn out urban battle. However, residents of Shanghai’s International Settlement and French Concession were under different jurisdiction and were protected from Japanese occupation and brutality. Outside the concessions the Jewish residents of Hongkew and their Chinese neighbors were treated with similar levels of disrespect and brutality by Japanese soldiers. The international settlements fell to Japanese control in 1941 after China declared war on Japan, but the lives of those living in the concessions remained comparatively secure.

During these years of political upheaval and military struggle in Shanghai, the lives of Jewish and Chinese residents sometimes crossed paths. While collecting the stories of the four Minnesotans profiled in the exhibit, several stories of friendships between Jewish and Chinese citizens of Shanghai came to light.

Doug Lew (pictured above), a resident of Edina, was born in Shanghai in 1931. His parents, who had been raised by missionaries, attended university in the United States in the 1920s. In 1946, when
Doug was 15, his father was offered a faculty position in the United States, but the family had trouble securing immigration visas. During the two year wait for their visas to be approved, Doug enrolled at the Shanghai American School, a preparation for his move to the United States. There he met a Jewish classmate, Ellis Jacob, whose family had come to Shanghai as merchants. Today Mr. Jacob lives in the United States. The two have reconnected and shared memories of the Shanghai of their youth.

Included in the exhibit at Sabes JCC is a painting by the artist David Ludwig Bloch. A German Jew, Bloch managed to secure a Chinese visa from the Dachau concentration camp, and arrived in Shanghai in 1940. He married a Chinese woman, and upon the birth of their child, he presented this painting, depicting his wife and child, to their obstetrician, Dr. Baer, who was also a Jewish refugee from Germany. Bloch eventually settled in New York and gained international recognition, particularly for his wood-cuts depicting the horrors he witnessed at Dachau. Dr. Baer and his wife Ilse eventually settled in Minnesota. This painting, currently in the collection of Walter Pistner, carries the story of two Jewish refugee families whose paths crossed in Shanghai.
Converging Histories Timeline

August 29, 1842
Treaty of Nanking signed, which marked the end of the First Opium War (1839–1942) and opened Shanghai to foreign trade.

1911
The Republic of China was founded following the collapse of the Qing dynasty.

1927

September 18, 1931
Japan bombed and invaded Manchuria in northwestern China, which initiated the Japanese invasion of China.

November 9–10, 1938
Kristallnacht (German: “Crystal Night”), also known as Night of Broken Glass. German Nazis attacked Jewish persons, property, and businesses. The name refers ironically to the litter of broken glass left in the streets after these pogroms.

December, 1937
Battle of Nanking. National Revolutionary Army of China and the Imperial Japanese Army fought for control of the Republic of China. China’s defeat was followed by the Rape of Nanking, when tens of thousands of civilians were murdered by Japanese soldiers.

August 6, 1945
The United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later another atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. The death toll reached over 150,000 by the end of the year.

August 15, 1945
Japan announced their surrender. Documents signed by Japanese Emperor on September 2, 1945, which formally ended WWII.

May 14, 1948
State of Israel was founded.

October 1, 1949
People’s Republic of China was founded.

August 29, 1842

Treaty of Nanking signed, which marked the end of the First Opium War (1839–1942) and opened Shanghai to foreign trade.
Academic Lecture
China’s premier Judaic scholar to provide a lecture on the topic of Jews in Modern China
Professor Xu Xin, Nanjing University
Monday, April 13, 2015 – 5:00 p.m.
University of Minnesota
Carlson School of Management
3M Auditorium
321 – 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Register at: http://confucius.umn.edu/jewish-refugees-in-shanghai/

Professor Xu Xin
Xu Xin (徐新) is the Diane and Guilford Glazer Chair Professor of Jewish and Israel Studies and Dean of the Institute of Jewish/Israel Studies at Nanjing University, China, and is President of the China Judaic Studies Association, Editor-in-Chief and a major contributor of the Chinese edition Encyclopedia Judaica. He is author of Anti-Semitism: How and Why, A History of Western Culture and The Jews of Kaifeng, China: History, Culture, and Religion. He teaches courses such as Jewish history, Jewish culture and Judaism and has both MA and Ph.D. programs at Nanjing University. He served as a Fellow or a visiting scholar at Hebrew Union College, Harvard University, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Bar-Ilan University, and Tel Aviv University. He has organized many exhibitions and conference on Jewish topics in China. His activities in promoting the study of Jewish subjects among the Chinese have been supported by a number of foundations. In 1995, he was honored “James Friend Memorial Award.” In 2003, Bar-Ilan University awarded him the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Honoris Causa in recognition of the extremely important work he has done on research of the Jewish people in China.
SEEKING SHELTER

A Poem by Steve Klepetar

*Born in Shanghai, 1949*

In Henry Moore’s painting, shelterers huddle, hairless, hooded against curved walls, squeezed in a cave, tunnel mouth tube of black, still air.

My father walked Shanghai streets, 1939
Japanese bombs blooming into flaming orange fruit. Better than burial, he thought beneath the weight of brick, better fire roar than dark.

Patient, they sit out another air raid, muffled sirens screaming to folded hands. They wear heads like birds owl woman with black bruised eyes, quill beaked ibis man staring down, falcon child and mother dove, gathered like gods in gloom.

I see him walking, hands behind his back, long strides in deserted streets weeping for his parents, dead at Auschwitz, for his lover lost at Terezin, for his broken life. In Shanghai tiger heat he sweats in bed, sleepless in the ghetto of Hong Kew, typhus-shrunk, slugs vodka until sleep comes or he no longer cares.

Their doughy bodies bulge and glow white and pink, fired from within as if your hand could touch their breasts like lantern skin and burn.

Resources

The Jewish Refugees in Shanghai exhibit provides an opportunity to learn and explore a significant time in history that is little-known. This exhibit presents a unique opportunity for educators to cover topics like the Holocaust, World War II and Chinese history through a different perspective. Additional resources for exploring this topic are accessible on the exhibit website and include resources created by other educational organizations, as well as books and films documenting personal stories.

School field trips to see the Jewish Refugees in Shanghai exhibit are welcomed and can be scheduled by contacting Robyn Awend at rawend@sabesjcc.org or 952-381-2416.