Jewish Women Refugees in Wartime Shanghai

1937-1945

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Introduction

One of the most well-known documentary films about the history of the Jewish refugees in Shanghai, “The Shanghai Ghetto,” relates the story of a woman who escaped the Nazis and fled to Shanghai with her husband in 1939. In Shanghai, they opened a shop where he worked to repair typewriters and she worked as a clerk. Their business was successful and they had many loyal customers in Shanghai. Their livelihood changed dramatically when in 1943, along with all the other Jewish refugees who had arrived in Shanghai after 1939, they were forced to move into the restricted area set up for the refugees by the Japanese. This “Designated Area for Stateless Refugees”, most commonly called the ghetto, confined the refugees to a specific neighborhood in Shanghai, Hongkou. Their typewriter repair business was outside the ghetto, so they had to receive permission and special passes from the Japanese to travel to their shop. Shortly after their move to the ghetto, her husband died. Left on her own to figure out a way to survive, the woman devised a plan that involved acquiring a pass from the Japanese allowing her to continue her husband’s typewriter repair business. Instead of continuing his business, she used the pass to sneak into the Chinese areas of the city and buy items on the black market. She would then smuggle these items back into the ghetto and sell them for a profit to the desperate refugees.

This film, chronicling the story of a number of Jewish refugees that experienced Shanghai as a refuge from Nazi control, adds to the memoirs, biographies, novels, and scholarly accounts have been written about the Jewish refugees in Shanghai. These works invariably describe the three major migrations of Jewish people to Shanghai: the Sephardic Jews who came from the Middle East and India in the mid-19th century
seeking trade and entrepreneurial opportunities, the Russian Jews who migrated to Shanghai after the Russian Revolution in the early 20th century, and finally the Jewish refugees coming from Western and Central Europe to escape the Nazi Regime in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. When this last group of refugees came to Shanghai, the city was a bustling treaty port made up of foreign settlements governed by the British, Americans, French and Japanese and inhabited by a large number of Chinese as well. Arriving in Shanghai was traumatic for many of these refugees who had fled their homes with few possessions and very little money. A number of relief organizations in Shanghai established refugee camps and houses for those refugees who could not afford a place of their own.

The literature about the Jewish refugees in Shanghai provides detailed descriptions of their lives there—their living conditions, work, community organizations, cultural life, and religious activities. None, however, focus specifically on the lives of women refugees. In recent times, it has become more common for scholars and students to pay particular attention to women’s historical experiences, yet in the case of the Jewish refugees in Shanghai, this has not yet been done. Hopefully this paper will therefore contribute both to the history of "Jewish Shanghai," as well as to the history of European women during the Holocaust. It would be impossible to cover the entire experience of Jewish refugee women in Shanghai. The experience of the woman with the typewriter repair business suggests some of the complicated strategies women used to survive economically. This paper, then, will focus on the many ways women supported themselves and the crucial role they played in the economic survival of their families. We will see that there was no single work experience for Jewish women refugees in
Shanghai, but rather their situations depended on education, privilege, skill, and creativity. As life changed so much for the refugees after Pearl Harbor and the establishment of the ghetto in Shanghai, it is important to differentiate between the experiences of the refugees before and after these major events took place. These periods represent a drastic transition in the ways that women were able to earn money and access resources.

**Life for Refugee Women Before Relocation to the Ghetto**

The most common way that women first experienced the availability of work was through the refugee shelters that many refugees lived at initially. Upon entering Shanghai, many refugees were taken directly to the refugee shelters set up by relief organizations established to deal with the huge influx of refugees, unless they made prior arrangements or had contacts in Shanghai. Refugees were free to move around as they pleased and could live in any area of Shanghai, including the International Settlement and the French Concession. Outside of the shelters, the housing options available to refugees were most commonly one room in a large house with access to shared toilet and washrooms. Most of the Jewish women refugees came from families of professionals or intellectuals, so they were not familiar with living in these conditions. Most homes in Shanghai had no running water and no Western-style toilets, leaving the refugees to become familiar with toilet pots that were emptied into the streets (Eber 34). The situation was worse though in the refugee shelters, also referred to as the *heime*. The shelters were very crowded, with cot after cot filling up rooms and only one room full of toilets for many refugees (Ristaino 118). In order to make these shelters livable all refugees living in the shelters were responsible for various jobs that were assigned to
them. It was common for the refugees to participate in workshops repairing shoes and working on repairing the camp structures. Many women refugees spent time tailoring and mending clothing and sewing bed sheets on the sewing machines that were provided for the camps. Women also helped prepare and cook in the camp kitchens (Ristaino 120).

Many of the refugees, coming from middle and upper class families of intellectuals or professionals in their homelands, were not accustomed to these kinds of conditions. Finding work was very difficult. Some refugees were able to market their skills from abroad in Shanghai, resulting in the establishment of European style restaurants, cafes, kosher butchers, dressmakers and many more (Ristaino 131). Many couples that were able to afford it or acquired funding for it, opened stores that appealed especially to the refugee’s nostalgia for their homes. These kinds of shops were often religious, selling Jewish candles that burned for 24 hours or leather strips used for praying. These businesses were often beneficial to the refugees in many ways. Besides providing a feeling of home, it was common for a group of refugees who could provide different services to start a business together. For example Lotte Schwarz and her husband received a loan from a Jewish organization in Shanghai and were able to open a coffee shop. At this coffee shop, they employed the help of the couple they lived with as well as a German butcher, whose salami and hot dogs they sold at their café. They also made connections with a rich German man who was involved in importing German beer. They made a deal with him and were able to sell his beer in their café as well (Hochstadt 84).

Many stories describe families in which both men and women worked in order to make enough money to survive. There are accounts of women finding jobs as
manicurists, English teachers, needlepoint teachers, bar girls, hostesses, saleswomen, hat and clothes makers, and many others. The kinds of jobs that women found were based on the skills they learned in their lives previous to Shanghai and the resourcefulness they were forced to learn in their desperate situation. Some women whose husbands or other male supporters in their families made enough for them to not have to work outside of the home crafted and made goods that could be sold at markets. According to a JDC report “The Labour Conditions of the Jewish Immigrants in Shanghai,” some of these women who made goods in their home were able to contract their labor to a factory that allowed them to work in this way.

Many refugees had access to opportunities associated with trades and skilled labor. Refugees who came to Shanghai with experience in a trade were fortunate because often times it provided them with work. One refugee told the story of his mother who was able to receive training through the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training, which was a Jewish organization with branches all over the world. In Vienna before the war, she learned how to make gloves and also attended a baking school through the ORT (Hochstadt 81). This man remembered that the first thing his mother did when they came to China was make hand-sewed gloves. He recalled, “She had blisters on her fingers from doing it.” His father was a businessman and was able to go door to door and convince people to buy the gloves she sewed (Hochstadt 81). He remembers that they were able to make a good amount of money by selling her gloves. Another woman, who had taken a course in making gloves and belts before leaving Europe, found a job working for “people who manufactured gloves” (Hochstadt 93).
The most fortunate women were educated. This usually meant that they could find some dignified work with decent pay, such as a nursing or teaching English at a relief organization (Ross 93). One woman, who happened to speak some English and was also a trained nurse, was able to find work through a Jewish organization. She was initially a private nurse to English and Americans and then later in an English hospital. She made enough money to support herself and her husband (Hochstadt 122). Educated women were able to find jobs fairly easily, sometimes with the help of other established people in Shanghai. One woman refugee who was trained at a fashion design school in Vienna was able to use these skills to find work in Shanghai. With the help of investors, she was able to gather enough money to rent a shop space and set it up so that she could make clothes and dresses. She hired Chinese seamstresses, because they were known for being much quicker and paid less. This woman eventually became very well known for her dresses amongst the upper class in Shanghai and made a great living making clothes for them (Hochstadt 120). Others had to depend on trades they could pick up easily and quickly in order to keep their jobs. One refugee summed this up nicely when she said, “You get a job through luck, and you keep it through ability” (Hochstadt 93).

Women from middle class families seemed to have less of a shock to their lifestyles in Shanghai. Annie Witting, for example, was a Polish native who fled to Shanghai with her husband and children in 1939. Her conditions were especially different from those of other refugees because she had a brother who lived in South Africa that supported her and her family while they lived in Shanghai. This allowed them to rent a room that had many luxuries not available to others in Shanghai, including running hot and cold water and a toilet. Even with this help, the Witting family was still exposed to
the unsanitary conditions of Shanghai that made everyone prone to diseases. She and her husband both suffered from dysentery, but his illness lasted far longer than hers. This forced her to think of innovative ways to earn money for her family, which was not something she was accustomed to previously in her life in Poland. Luckily, Annie possessed items that she could sell for a profit and also found a way to become an agent for an insurance company and a hosiery company. It seems that Annie was not employed in her life previous to Shanghai, and her outlook on being forced to work is very positive.

Annie’s perspective on her experience in Shanghai is different from that of most refugees. She understands Shanghai as a place to start a new life, whereas many other refugees treated Shanghai as an unsatisfactory temporary situation. The time that she did spend in the *heime* refugee house was quite brief, which explain her optimistic view of life in Shanghai. When describing the *heime*, she mentions only in passing that the quality of living was very poor “from a European perspective” (Eber 34). This is different from other refugees’ descriptions in which they dwelled on the terrible and unsanitary conditions in Shanghai and complained about not having electricity or running water. Receiving money from her brother and her ability to think of ways to earn money allowed for Annie to view Shanghai as an exciting adventure, in which she visited department stores and went to movies. This does not seem to be the common experience among refugee women who were not financially supported from outside of Shanghai and did not have the same opportunities to find work.

**Women Refugees and Sex Work**

Many refugees were not as lucky as the men and women mentioned above. For women who did not have a family or anyone to support them, life was much more
difficult. This forced many women into jobs that were not considered moral or dignified for a Jewish woman. This usually meant becoming a bar girl or working as a prostitute. Bar girls were not necessarily paid to sleep with men, but were hired by bar owners in order to provide men with a good time. They would interact with the men in the bars, usually soldiers or other foreign men, and make them feel good about themselves and dance with them to ensure that they were happy with their experience at the bar. The bar girls would “drink” with these men, which usually meant that the women were drinking tea disguised as alcohol in order to stay sober. These jobs were always available to women as there were many men looking to have a good time at a bar almost every night. Gerard Kohbieter, for example, arrived in Shanghai as a teenager on his own, and frequented Shanghai’s nightlife where he made a living performing magic. He recalled that, “The bar girls were not prostitutes. They usually had husbands, that was just the job” (Hochstadt 90). Though, sometimes these bar girls would provide sexual services to these men and the bartenders would act as pimps in these situations (Ross 72). The women who took these jobs though were not the majority. Many women would rather starve than degrade themselves or disgrace their families. As Kohbieter remembered, many of the people in the Jewish community of Shanghai thought very poorly of the bar girls and looked down on them (Hochstadt 90).

Even more of a disgrace was the job of prostitution. Most of the prostitutes in Shanghai were of Chinese or Russian descent, but one can find instances of Jewish refugees as prostitutes in Shanghai. Most of the time refugees who became prostitutes were alone in Shanghai, with no connection to families or friends from their homes. There are also cases where women from middle class families would become prostitutes
in times of great need, in order to just get by (Hochstadt 150). Jewish women prostitutes are not widely talked about in memoirs or reports from this period in Shanghai most likely because they would not want to admit to these activities. Yet their experience is implicit in reports on medical issues including abortion and venereal diseases. Dr. Didner, a doctor from Austria who was able to have a successful practice serving the Jewish community in Shanghai recollects performing at least two abortions a week and treating many patients with venereal disease, some of whom he remembers as prostitutes (Ross 72). Most of his patients, though, were young women who could not afford to raise a child or were afraid to bring a child into the world in which they were living.

The attitude of refugee women towards individuals who engaged in sex work is conveyed in Ten Green Bottles, Vivianne Jeanette Kaplan’s retelling of her mother’s experiences in Shanghai, there is an acquaintance that her mother made on the ship to Shanghai who resorted to prostitution. This woman, Herta, came to Shanghai alone and was not able to find a suitable job. Nini, Vivianne’s mother, had lost contact with Herta until one day when she encountered her on the street. She was shopping for food alongside another woman whose ratted hair and heavy makeup indicated that she was a prostitute. It took some time before Nini recognized Herta and when she tried to say hello to her, Herta brushed her off and told her she had mistaken her with someone else. This experience suggests that women who found themselves in these situations were very ashamed of it and wanted to keep away from people who might recognize them in order to save face. Nini’s feelings towards Herta after this encounter also tell us a lot about the refugee women. Nini is not embarrassed for Herta or judgmental of her (Kaplan 212). She understands that Herta must do what she has to do in order to survive. It seems that
many women in the ghetto were not judgmental of the prostitutes or the bar girls because they knew they were not so far away from becoming prostitutes themselves. Prostitution became much more common in the ghetto, as many women lost members of their families or simply could not find another way to feed themselves.

**Women after Pearl Harbor in the Hongkou Ghetto**

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II in 1941, the city and all of its foreign residents in it went through a major transition, as Japanese control became very strict and pervasive. In memoirs and interviews, many refugees remember this as a time of complete upheaval. Otto Schnepp recalled his family’s difficulty earning enough money to survive before Pearl Harbor and how “everything sort of broke up” after Pearl Harbor (Hochstadt 96). The Japanese authorities began to take over the parts of Shanghai that they did not already control, specifically the International Settlement and the French Concession. All refugees were required to register with the Japanese officials and were forced to carry identification at all times. The Japanese censored access to news and radio in order to control information about the war. Eventually, all those considered “enemy nationals” in Shanghai, which included Americans, British, Dutch, Italians, and those considered members of colonies of the Allies meaning some of the successful Sephardic Jews, were interned in camps around Shanghai (Ristaino 188). The Japanese cut off all communication with the United States and other countries that were its enemies in the war.

When the Japanese declared that all of the Jewish refugees must move into a “ghetto” in Hongkou, many of the refugees were terrified. The ghetto changed their lives in Shanghai very much, especially for the refugees who had jobs or businesses in the
International Settlement and elsewhere outside of Hongkou. The refugees were not allowed to leave the ghetto unless they had a specific pass allowing them to do so. Japanese officials, one of whom was named Ghoya, issued these passes. He was widely known as unreasonably cruel and would deny people passes and abuse them for no reason. This made these passes very hard to possess, especially because they had to be renewed every month. This involved standing in a very long line that began to form very early in the morning because Ghoya was also known for closing his office even when a long line still remained (Kaplan 214).

Due to the strict crackdown by the Japanese, all of the businesses and companies owned by those who were interned were closed and many jobs were lost. Many refugee families, who might have once been considered well off working in one of these companies, were now left unemployed. Refugees who could afford to rent space and reopen their stores in the ghetto did. Many other refugees did the same using loans or money they earned over time. These stores and cafes provided a similar feeling of home to the refugees, even if many were too poor to enjoy them regularly.

Many refugees lost their jobs and were forced to find other ways to survive within the ghetto. In this context, women’s earnings became more crucial to their families. In many memoirs and interviews with Jewish women refugees, they recount the Japanese being sympathetic to them or treating them leniently because they were women, even though there were rumors that Goya hated the Jewish women most (Kaplan 214). Others remember that women had no problem with Goya at all (Hochstadt 156). Gerda Haas, a Jewish refugee woman in Shanghai, describes an encounter that she had with the Japanese when trying to acquire a pass to leave the ghetto for work. She remembers these
Japanese officials being very harsh and even abusive at times, but she had heard that one of them really loved children. She used this to her advantage and was able to receive a pass by bringing along her small child (Gerda Haas Interview). This is also seen in the story of the woman who was easily able to receive a pass under the pretext that she was continuing her deceased husband’s typewriter repair business. She was able to continue leaving the ghetto everyday without being questioned or found out by the Japanese.

Gerda Haas and her husband were both able to keep jobs while in the ghetto, which was not necessarily the case with many refugees. In other cases, such as in Rena Krasno’s family, the men would refuse to work for the Japanese due to loyalties they had to British or American companies in the International Settlement. Rena’s father was this way because he had a good job with a British company before the Japanese occupied and interned the “enemy nationals” who were British and American (Rena Krasno Interview). Rena and her family were considered stateless refugees and had been in Shanghai for a few decades at this point. Rena herself was born in Shanghai. These refugees had a bit more freedom under Japanese occupation because they were not forced to move into the ghetto. During this time, Rena’s father was an editor for a Jewish magazine, but was not paid for this work. This prompted her mother to open up a children’s toy store in order to make some profit for the family while Rena and her sister attended the French university in Shanghai (Rena Krasno Interview).

The situation in the ghetto left many women refugees with even fewer occupational choices than they had before. Disease was much more prevalent in the ghetto due to the even poorer conditions and closer quarters. Many women lost their husbands to disease or were forced to work if their husband’s fell ill. This lead some
women to discover a sense of resourcefulness founded on their basic need to survive another day. Many women became involved in creative schemes based on the resources they had available to them. This was common among the refugees before being forced to relocate to the ghetto, but was exaggerated in the ghetto due to the refugee’s lack of contact with the rest of Shanghai. The kinds of schemes that women became involved with usually consisted of gaining some connection or access to goods that were not allowed or available in the ghetto and then smuggling them into the ghetto to sell for higher prices to those who could afford these items. Women were also involved in what seemed to be door-to-door sales consisting of items they purchased on the black market that were valuable to refugees. Another way that desperate women supported themselves in the ghetto was by prostitution, which was not uncommon among the refugees, as is mentioned earlier. What changed within the ghetto for prostitutes were the people they were allowed to do business with. Some of the refugee women who became prostitutes in the ghetto interacted only with the Japanese (Hochstadt 149).

Many of these women’s stories discuss the change that this kind of work represented for them, especially when they became the breadwinners for their families. In her diary, Shoshana Kahan described her feelings of “becoming a merchant”, which she was not satisfied doing because she was a professional actress (Eber 113). When writing about her work as a merchant, Shoshana Kahan states “many a “madam” regards me with disdain” (Eber 113). We cannot be sure what she means by this statement, but several interpretations are possible. She could be referring to women who are involved in prostitution, who might be envious of her position as a saleswoman. She also could be referring to other women refugees who do not have her freedom and might be judging her
for the work that she does. Either way, we can use Kahan’s experience to elaborate on the schemes in which women were involved and the ambiguous ways that women remember and retell these stories. Because of this, it is evident to us that many women involved in these types of occupations were not necessarily proud of their situation, but felt that these actions were necessary in order to survive.

In many cases, it was women refugees who were more able to find work than their husbands. Kahan relates the story of a woman who was forced to work to earn money for her family because her husband could not find a job. She described this woman as hard working and energetic, but also mentions that she was “used to every comfort in life” (Eber 115). Kahan described this woman’s husband as being very grateful to his wife for working, but also feeling very inadequate as a man because he was not able to provide for his family. Unfortunately the husband was killed when the U.S. bombed Shanghai in 1945. This shows the ways in which women were depended upon to provide for their families and how typical gender roles might have been reversed in these desperate situations.

The situation in the ghetto worsened towards the end of the war when the U.S bombed Shanghai in the summer of 1945. The U.S. targeted the parts of the ghetto that were centers of Japanese control. Many Jewish refugees died or were injured in these bombings. Not only were people physically harmed, but also their homes and businesses might have been completely destroyed. Furthermore, clean water, supplies, and food were much harder to obtain. The refugees had no way to occupy their time or distract themselves from their current conditions, especially because no one knew when the next attack would happen (Kaplan 241. This situation continued until late August 1945 when
news of the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan and the declaration of the end of the war reached Shanghai.

Very soon after the war’s end, the Japanese fled Shanghai and the U.S. soldiers arrived. The American’s presence in Shanghai brought many benefits to the refugees, including the outpouring of relief from organizations like the Red Cross and the United Nations Relief Agency (Kaplan 246). Refugees were overjoyed to be provided with luxuries that they had not experienced in a very long time, especially specialty food items such as chocolate and fresh fruit. Shanghai itself experienced an economic revival that in turn provided the refugees with more prosperity. Many refugees were able to reopen their businesses and repair their homes in Hongkou, where they felt a community had formed. Nini and her husband, for example, were able to reopen their fur shop and make a modest living selling furs to the refugees and other foreigners who had once again become rich (Kaplan 249). Much of this revival was due to the American currency that was being pumped into the city by the celebrating American soldiers who were enjoying themselves and buying a lot of souvenirs to take back to the United States. Many refugees decided shortly after the war’s end that it was time to move from Shanghai and migrated to the United States, Israel, Australia, Canada, South America and some even returned to their homes in Europe (Kaplan 275).

Conclusion

The experiences of Jewish refugee women in Shanghai varied in many ways, usually depending on their skills, education, family ties, and level of desperation. Many women were faced with a greater responsibility to earn for their family than they had experienced before. The way that women refugees remember their experiences in
Shanghai also varies greatly, especially because many refugees look back on their time in Shanghai as one of the darkest times in their lives. For women though, it seems that this independence they came across in Shanghai brought a purpose into their lives that they had not expected. Although it came about through the most desperate situation, it seems that these memories are looked back on with fondness and pride. Their memories are also very specific to their experiences and the types of work they had to do in order to survive. Those who were able to work in dignified positions remember these times fondly, while others who might have been forced to scheme to make money, are not proud of that and acknowledge that they had to do it in order to survive. Women depended upon each other and reached out to each other in order to provide strength and hope for their families and their communities.

Bibliography


