

Temporary Haven: The Failed Assimilation  
of the Shanghai Jews after World War II

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## ABSTRACT

The Jews have been forced to leave their homelands throughout history. Typically, they established permanent communities in new lands. They assimilated into different cultures, by learning the language and customs. However, the Jews who escaped to Shanghai, China, and survived the Holocaust all dispersed after World War II. This essay explores why the Jews went to Shanghai and why they left.

When preparing for a visit to China, I learned that the largest Synagogue in Asia is in Shanghai. Tourist officials informed us, however, that there were no longer any congregants of this temple. In fact, no Jews reside in Shanghai today. Our tour guide introduced us to a former Hongkew resident who knew the Jews. The elderly Mr. Wong, showed us around, told us the history of the Jewish community, and shared his impressions of the Jews who were interned in his neighborhood during the war. When I returned to Tallahassee, I was amazed to learn of several local residents who had been Shanghai Jews. I interviewed Lawrence Friedlander, and I met with the daughter of Ruth Spiegler, who loaned me books and a video taped interview of her memories of Shanghai. I also did research in the Library of Congress, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, and local libraries. Historical sources revealed that a community of Jews existed in Shanghai before World War II. An additional 20,000 Jews went to Shanghai during the war, hoping to find refuge from the Nazis. They faced difficult conditions, but most survived, establishing a vibrant Jewish community. By the time Communism overcame China, most had abandoned their new homes. They left because they sought a more stable political environment, an economy with adequate food sources and low inflation, and safety from the imminent risk of another war.

Jews have been dispersed throughout the world for thousands of years and have always assimilated and prospered within their adopted cultures. One notable exception was the experience of the Shanghai Jews. Initially the Jews were able to establish a unified community and develop social institutions in Shanghai, which would have predicted another successful Diaspora. However, at the end of the war, when societies historically recover, rebuild, and prosper, these Jews slowly abandoned a relatively hospitable environment, to start over in totally new ones. This paper will explore the historical setting for this twentieth century Diaspora, the reasons one would have predicted a successful acculturation, and possible explanations for the inevitability of their departure.

The largest atrocity that Jews were forced to face began in 1933, when Hitler came to power. His ideas that the Jews were a lesser type of human being because of their religion and culture led to the deaths of over 6 million innocent Jews. According to Tobias, Hitler's goal was to expand Germany so it encompassed all culturally German people, and then make these territories free of Jews.<sup>1</sup> The persecution began in 1935 when the Nuremberg Laws came into effect. The result was that Aryans, full blooded German and Christians who typically had blond hair and blue eyes, were separated from Non-Aryans, people of any other religion, culture, sexual orientation, or with a disability, whose citizenship was revoked.<sup>2</sup> When Hitler first came to power, the majority of European Jews believed that his influence and anti-Semitism would be short lived. Those who left the country had a better chance of surviving as long as they did not end up in another country that Hitler would conquer. During Hitler's sovereignty, the German army invaded the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland; and they occupied Denmark, Norway, parts of France, and the Western Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> This left few places for the Jews to go.

It was much easier to leave Germany before Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, than after because of increasingly restrictive German laws and increased territorial expansion.

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Tobias, *Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), xv.

<sup>2</sup> David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazi and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community in Shanghai 1938-1945* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1988), 27.

<sup>3</sup> John P. McKay, Bennett D. Hill, and John Buckler, *A History of Western Society: Since 1400* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 988 and 996.

During Hitler's first five years in power, over 150,000 Jews left Germany, and 50,000 of those went to Palestine.<sup>4</sup> However, as more Jews sought to leave it became more difficult to find countries that would accept the Jews because of the Evian Conference in the summer of 1938. Many nations gathered at this conference in France to find a solution to the Jewish refugee crisis and each country either claimed they must stick to their immigration quotas, they did not want to create a religion problem, or they blatantly refused to accept refugees.<sup>5</sup> There was one city that was a free port, where visas were not required. That city was Shanghai, China.

Shanghai, the Paris of the East, was the most crime-ridden city of its time. It was the home of over 4 million people in a country where human life was not considered precious. Why would anyone want to go there? Yet for 20,000 European Jews this was their only choice. To enter Shanghai one did not need a visa, affidavit, police certificate, or assurance of financial independence.<sup>6</sup> Not needing these nearly impossible to get papers made Shanghai attractive, especially because so many Jews denounced or lost their citizenship. Shanghai lay on the severely polluted Yangtze River, which got to its terrible state because of over-population. Shanghai was made up of four million Chinese, 100,000 foreigners from Britain, France, America, Germany, and many other countries.<sup>7</sup> In 1937 the Japanese occupied China adding 30,000 Japanese to the city of Shanghai, city with so much diversity and so many cultural differences unfamiliar to European Jews, who would much rather have gone to America or Palestine.

The Jews were able to get to Shanghai in a variety of different ways. Some, who left early, like the Rubin<sup>8</sup> and Tobias<sup>9</sup> families, were able to take luxury ships out of Italy. On these ships like the Conte Verde, Conte Rosso<sup>10</sup> and Conte Bicanamo people ate lavish foods, and had enjoyable and relaxing journeys. Those who left early were also able to ship lifts, which contained a majority of their possessions. After Kristallnacht a few thousand Jews, like Lawrence Friedlander and his family, escaped to Lithuania and

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<sup>4</sup> Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazi and Jews*, 27,30.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Pike Rubin, *Ghetto Shanghai* (New York: Shengold Publishers, Inc., 1993), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazi and Jews*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazi and Jews*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Rubin, *Ghetto Shanghai*.

<sup>9</sup> Tobias, *Strange Haven*.

<sup>10</sup> James R. Ross, *Escape to Shanghai: A Jewish Community in China* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 3.

from there took a train on the Trans-Siberian railroad.<sup>11</sup> The majority of the Jews who made it to Shanghai by way of the Trans-Siberian railroad were part of the Fugu Plan.<sup>12</sup> This complicated plan involved the Japanese foreign minister, Yossuke Matsuoka, writing exit visas, and the Dutch consulate in Curacao, in the Dutch West Indies, Jan Zwartendyk, issuing entry visas.<sup>13</sup> These Jews were taken by train and boat to Kobe, Japan, where they were then routed to Shanghai. The Japanese consul in Lithuania, Sugihara, also worked to help the Jews escape. He was a family man who was willing to risk his job to save many Jews. He would work long hours everyday preparing visas so that the Jews could leave Europe.<sup>14</sup> After having issued well-over 2,000-exit visas, he was dismissed as consul to Japan. According to his wife, his only regret was not being able to save more Jews.<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi Packman said that Jews moved to various places in the world based on where they were welcomed and encouraged to live.<sup>16</sup> Even though Jews were not entirely welcomed into Shanghai, there were several positive aspects about the city. First, there were already Jews there, Jewish merchants who had created a vibrant social environment. Second, they were not being physically harmed or threatened. Finally, the Jews and Japanese had established good relationship based on past business endeavors. These factors would have predicted a positive acculturation. The Jewish non-assimilation is especially surprising because Jews had assimilated into other countries that were much less accepting, such as Spain, Portugal,<sup>17</sup> and Russia.<sup>18</sup>

To the surprise of the displaced European Jews, there were already two small Jewish communities in Shanghai with well-developed business, educational, and religious institutions. There were about 450 Sephardic Jews who had come from Spain

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Friedlander, interview by author, 21 July 2001, tape recording, Tallahassee, FL.

<sup>12</sup> Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews during World War II* (New York: Paddington Press Ltd., 1979).

<sup>13</sup> Tobias, *Strange Haven*, xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 237.

<sup>15</sup> Yukiko Sugihara, *Visas for Life* (San Francisco: Edward Brothers, inc., 1995.)

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Packman, *The Jewish Diaspora...An event remembered by few, but significant to many* [Data online]; available from <http://www.snu.edu/syllabi/history/f96projects/diaspora>; Internet; accessed 13 September 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews in Modern Times*, (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 11, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Howard M. Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958), 82.

and the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> The majority of these Jews went to Shanghai to establish businesses and had become very successful and wealthy. Famous Sephardic Jews, such as the Sassoons and the Kadoories, gave money to aid the refugees, to build schools, and to construct other useful public buildings.<sup>20</sup> The other Jewish community in Shanghai was made up of about 4,500 Ashkenazi Jews who were from Russia<sup>21</sup> and had escaped to Shanghai during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. This was a time of many pogroms against the Jewish community. These Jews, often not as wealthy, tried to aid the new influx of Jews despite their social and language differences.

In Shanghai, education was a very important aspect of refugee children's lives, and they had a choice of schools. Rubin described the French Aurora, the British Public Thomas Hanbury School, the Shanghai Jewish School, and the Kadoorie School.<sup>22</sup> Most refugee children went to the Shanghai Jewish School, which was founded by wealthy Sephardic families, and it had a Sephardic Synagogue at the far end of the grounds. The Kadoories, who were also wealthy Sephardic Jews, donated the Kadoorie School to the community. Kadoorie supported the Jewish refugee children because he wanted them to overcome the inferiority complex that they developed by being forced to leave their homeland.<sup>23</sup> At school, most refugees learned English and French, as well as Hebrew in their religion classes. Many of the teachers were young refugees, including Germans and other Eastern Europeans, who had learned English or French at school in Europe or older adults who were former teachers. School kept these children's lives routine, busy, and productive, which made life seem fairly normal. The richness of educational institutions in this community would have predicted successful assimilation.

Religion played varying roles in the lives of the refugees in Shanghai. In 1938, the Judische Gemeinde, or Jewish Communal Association, was formed with elected persons to represent the wants and interests of the community, especially in reference to

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<sup>19</sup> Joan Grossman and Paul Rosdy, *The Port of Last Resort*, 79min., (Production of Pinball Films and Extrafilm, Austria/USA, 1998), featuring interviews with Fred Fields, Ernest Heppner, Illo Heppner, and Siegmur Simon.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest G. Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Grossman and Rosdy, *The Port of Last Resort*.

<sup>22</sup> Rubin, *Ghetto Shanghai*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Grossman and Rosdy, *The Port of Last Resort*.

religious needs.<sup>24</sup> Many of the Jews who came from Germany were not very religious and went to the most liberal synagogues. They would only attend synagogue during the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and Passover. However, some Jews who were from the Mirrer Yeshiva of Poland, devoted their lives to God, practicing and learning their religion constantly, and going to the Orthodox synagogue.<sup>25</sup> Synagogues also varied because of cultural differences, splitting the Sephardic Jews, of Spain and the Middle East, from the Ashkenazi, of Russia and Eastern Europe. Some of these groups established permanent Synagogues, which became important landmarks to the Jewish community. Two of these synagogues were Ohel Rachel and Oihel Moishe.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes religious services were held in movie theaters because the Jewish community did not have enough money or the resources to build new synagogues. Their common religion and belief in God brought the Jewish community in Shanghai together despite their cultural differences. Being able to establish houses of worship and blend with the other Jews would seem an indication that Jews would assimilate.

To maintain good health, a difficult accomplishment, the Jewish community established two hospitals.<sup>27</sup> Europeans living in Shanghai's sub-tropical weather had little resistance to diseases, like typhus, cholera, dysentery, malaria, pox, and fevers that became deadly because no medication was available.<sup>28</sup> Their cramped housing and meager diets due to the scarcity of food did not help the refugees remain in good condition. All community residents, Jews and Chinese alike, were cared for at the two hospitals by Jewish doctors who were frustrated that they had no medicine for treating the patients. During the years that the refugees were in Shanghai over 5,000 died, filling up three Jewish cemeteries. Nevertheless, the Jewish hospitals had a positive impact on both the Jewish and Chinese communities. Mr. Wong, a Chinese man who lived in the Hongkew region of Shanghai, was most impressed by the Jews' ability to set up hospitals and their willingness to help the Chinese residents in the community.<sup>29</sup> Establishing

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<sup>24</sup> Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Tobias, *Strange Haven*, 60-61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Grossman and Rosdy, *The Port of Last Resort*.

<sup>28</sup> Tobias, *Strange Haven*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Mr. Wong, Oral lecture, 27 June 2000, Shanghai, China.



hospitals, a permanent institution, would have predicted that the Jews would have stayed in Shanghai.

Another reason one would expect the Jews to have stayed in Shanghai was because the Japanese refused to persecute the refugees. Many times in history Jews have assimilated into cultures that were much less accepting, like the Christian Roman Empire.<sup>30</sup> The Japanese believed that by treating the Jews well the Americans would have better relations with them and may be influenced by the refugees to not attack them.<sup>31</sup> The Japanese also said that their belief in racial equality was why they allowed the Jews to stay in Shanghai. Additionally, during the 1905 Russo-Japanese War an American Jewish banker, named Jacob Schiff, had supported the Japanese financially, which made the Japanese feel indebted to the Jews.<sup>32</sup> On March 2, 1929 the Foreign Minister, Hashiro Arita, declared that there was to be no discrimination against the Jews. In response to growing pressure, the Japanese were able to pacify the Germans by making the Jews live in Hongkew, which was really a military security necessity<sup>33</sup> rather than a form of persecution. However, after the Jews were interned in 1943,<sup>34</sup> not all Japanese felt that they had to treat the Jews with respect. Ghoya, who titled himself King of the Jews, was in charge of giving passes so that the refugees could leave the ghetto in Hongkew and would travel to other places in the city. When people did not respond to his questions quickly and intelligently, he was known to stand on his desk and slap the person,<sup>35</sup> making him much feared by the Jews. Other times, Japanese officers would arrest refugees suspected of spying, and put them in lice and disease-infested prisons, which usually led to death. Nevertheless, the Shanghai Jews were grateful to the Japanese who protected them from Hitler's fury. In July of 1942, Mitsugi Shibata contacted Ellis Hayim, a prominent Sephardic Jew, and warned him that the Germans were proposing to annihilate the Jewish refugee community, giving Hayim time to inform other community members.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> L. B. Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism*, (Leuven, Belgium: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Tobias, *Strange Haven*, xxii.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Kranzler, 23

<sup>35</sup> Rubin, 123.

<sup>36</sup> Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge*, 105.

Life became increasingly difficult and dangerous when the Jewish refugees were restricted to Hongkew. Social establishments began to break down. These refugees from Europe, most of whom lived much more luxurious lives before, were not going to stay in Shanghai any longer than they needed. The Jews faced many difficulties, which made them want to leave. However, they had no opportunity to leave until after the war ended. The primary reason for their unhappiness was the living conditions. Most families were living in extremely small one-room apartments, with no running water or flushing toilets because they were illegal; had very little food; were uncomfortable because of the extreme weather; and were suffering from numerous diseases. Many families were extremely poor because of the scarcity of jobs, especially for older men.<sup>37</sup> All Shanghai Jews believed that they had a better chance of succeeding elsewhere, which made them search for a way to leave.

The Jews also left Shanghai because of the increasing inflation. Inflation became one of the largest problems for the refugees because it made eating and staying healthy a challenge. Each day that the war progressed and materials became scarcer, inflation would rise, making goods remarkably costly. As the war progressed, they realized that they were not going to be able to prosper financially; they began to look forward to other places. The Chinese government tried to fix the problem by circulating a new currency of money, but this just made inflation worse. The financial difficulties led to starvation and medical problems, which could not be overcome because medicine was not affordable or available. Under these conditions, the Jews could not prosper anymore.<sup>38</sup> For example, Peter Eisenfelder went into business with Mutual Chemical Industries and began making good money and was hoping to continue working there in the future, remaining in China. However, when inflation steadily increased making one million Chinese National Currency worth one U.S. dollar, he realized that he would not survive and had to leave.<sup>39</sup> By 1949, inflation became horrific as it took 2,325 trillion Chinese National Currency to equal one U.S. dollar.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Diane and Willy Perelsztejn, *Escape to the Rising Sun*, 95 min., (Presented by the National Center for Jewish Film, Belgium, 1990, ZDF-German TV, RTBF Belgian TV.)

<sup>38</sup> Kranzler, 544-546.

<sup>39</sup> Eisenfelder, H. Peter, *Chinese Exile: My Years in Shanghai and Nanking 1938 to 1947*, 3 ed., September to December 1992, from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library in Washington D.C..

<sup>40</sup> Heppner, 141.

The Jews began to leave Shanghai as soon as the war ended in 1945 because they feared that if they did not leave soon they would have to endure another war. Within China two opposing groups were gaining power, the communists led by Mao and the nationalists led by Chiang Kai Chek's army.<sup>41</sup> This fear of war made the refugees try to leave quickly so that they would not be trapped in China. Many of these fears began as the Jews lost confidence in the Kuomintang, Chinese soldiers, who were using their power to frighten and take advantage of the population.<sup>42</sup> By 1949, when Mao occupied Shanghai, many of the refugees were gone, but for those who remained, leaving became even more difficult, as did the conditions.

Another reason why the Jews did not assimilate into Asian culture and stay in China was because they went with the mind-set that Shanghai was just a place they could go to escape persecution. None of the refugees were planning on establishing themselves in China and staying there, which is why they did not try to learn the language or understand the customs. The ideal, for most of the refugees, was to get to America, the land of opportunity. This ideal was based on stories of relatives' success, propaganda, and the helpful American soldiers. Immigration was extremely difficult because of the strict American quotas. However, it is interesting that the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews also left, even though they had been living permanently in Shanghai prior to World War II. It is important to note that most of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews were living in the International Concessions of Shanghai, which had much better living conditions than Hongkew, where the refugees were. The refugees were able to tolerate their terrible conditions because they had hope, and the belief that they were only going to have to tolerate these conditions for a period of time helped many of them survive the War.

As soon as the war ended in 1945, the refugees began looking for ways to leave Shanghai. Though a few had become successful businessmen or musicians, the majority of refugees were struggling to survive on one meal a day. They needed a destination if they were going to leave Shanghai. After hearing about the atrocities that occurred in Europe and learning that most had lost all relatives, going back to Europe was not an option. Their knowledge of America's success in the war and of how many other

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<sup>41</sup> Tobias, *Strange Haven*, 118-119.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

immigrants had built a solid life made most Jews apply for visas to go there. However, the quota system remained intact, allowing very few Jews entry into the United States. A significant number of Jews took boats to Palestine or Australia, some even went to Canada, all places where they could start lives and build futures.<sup>43</sup> Some waited too long to figure out how to leave and where to go, and needing to leave China, as life was becoming more difficult, they boarded ships, which went to the United States. Once there, they were put on locked trains, taken to New York, and put on a ship to Europe.<sup>44</sup> Even though Europe was not their desired destination many were able to work there and become successful again.

There were problems with the sources for this essay that created both bias and an incomplete picture of the historical facts. First, there were not many history books written by different historians, giving various perspectives and ideas about why things happened the way they did. As Westerners, we often neglect the history of Eastern countries, Asia particularly, which is another reason why little study has been done about this event. Few historians have studied the Jews who went to Shanghai during World War II, and many of those who did were Jewish and had a personal connection with this part of history. Most of the sources were primary, being personal recollections of what happened by either the person himself or herself or someone interviewing them. Bias is reflected in the fact that most authors spoke positively of their lives in China, despite the torturous hardships, because they knew that if they had not been lucky enough to go there, they probably would have died in concentration camps. Another problem is that the people who lived in Shanghai during the war are now in their 70's and 80's, and as they age so do many of their memories. Thanks to the SHOAH program, begun by Steven Spielberg, to record interviews done with holocaust survivors, many stories are being captured before it is too late. Even though, the first hand recollections of people who lived there provided wonderful and rich information, the lack of objective historical analysis on this subject makes the accuracy of the memories questionable.

Many Shanghai survivors who wrote their memoirs, reflected very positively about their experiences. This may be because they realized that they probably would

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<sup>43</sup> Grossman and Rosdy, *The Port of Last Resort*.

<sup>44</sup> Perelsztejn and Perelsztejn, *Escape to the Rising Sun*.

have died if they had not had the good fortune to go to Shanghai. Many lost all of their other family and friends back in Europe, making their writing positive because they did not want to sound ungrateful. Nevertheless, there were differences in perspective about the Shanghai experience. The greatest difference in perspective was revealed in the interviews of two Jews who lived in Shanghai during the war, Ruth Spiegler and Lawrence Friedlander. Ruth Spiegler arrived in Shanghai in August of 1939, early enough to have traveled by ship. When asked about her memories of how the non-Jewish population in Shanghai treated her as a child of 6-12 years old she said, “I would say there was a sort of indifference. They did not mistreat us. We had all the freedom. There was not fear of walking in the streets, or being attacked. My mother never worried when I went to school as [she would have with] the problems we have today in major cities, and [Shanghai] was a city of six million at the time. We lived in poverty, but there was no violence or cruelty against us.”<sup>45</sup> To Spiegler, living in Shanghai was not a very negative time, and much of her life seemed very normal.

In contrast, Friedlander, who was a young man of 17-22 years, remembered the interaction between the Jews and Chinese as, “Very little because they did not want us.”<sup>46</sup> Friedlander realized that living in Shanghai was extremely hard. When asked how he thought he survived he stated, “Because you had a will to survive. It was very awful. We barely survived, and lots of occupants did not survive, but we did by the grace of God.”<sup>47</sup> He is one of the few survivors who said how awful it was to live in Shanghai, while still being extremely grateful that he survived. These differing perspectives are important to note. These have to do with the age of the survivor, their actual living conditions while there, and how much time had passed since the event. Friedlander was a young man while in China, who had to work just to help put a few sweet potatoes on the table for dinner. In contrast, Spiegler was a younger girl who went to school, giving life a normal routine, and she did not have to worry about providing food for her family.

This largely untold chapter of history, the experience of Jews in Shanghai during World War II, is necessary to complete the accounting of the Holocaust. Although the Holocaust is most remembered for the millions of people who died because of the Nazis,

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<sup>45</sup> Ruth Spiegler, interview by Frederic Neve, videocassette, 22 July 1996, Boca Raton, FL.

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Friedlander, interview by author, tape recording, 21 July 2001, Tallahassee, FL.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

it was also about survival under hard conditions. Twenty thousand Jewish refugees found themselves in Shanghai, China, a land with different cultures, a different language, and a different habitat than what the Europeans were used to. Miraculously most of them survived. Throughout history the Jews have been persecuted and forced to leave their homes and travel thousands of miles to foreign lands where they then assimilated into other cultures. The Shanghai experience is another example of the adaptability of the Jews, who are not a people who want to wander throughout the world, as their history would suggest. They were really just looking for a place where they could live comfortably and prosper. Unfortunately, political and economic conditions prevented their full assimilation into Chinese culture and forced them to continue their search elsewhere.

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