

Shanghaied

Port of Last Resort
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BY RYAN DEUSSING

Joan Grossman and Paul Rosdy's *Port of Last Resort* tells the little-known story of nearly 20,000 Central European Jews who—in the face of growing persecution from the Nazis—fled to Shanghai in the years leading up to World War II. A collage of stunning archival footage, letters, newspaper clippings, and interviews with former refugees, the film succeeds in conveying the peculiar combination of relief and despair that developed as these stateless exiles eluded European concentration camps only to be deposited in a seething, foreign metropolis largely controlled by Hitler's allies. Though they sought only a temporary safe haven, most of these Jews remained

in Shanghai for nearly a decade, moving from so-called Little Vienna, which sprung up as immigrants flocked to the free port, to Hongkew, the wretched ghetto overseen by the Japanese.

The material that forms the backbone of the film ranges from color footage of Vienna in 1938, in which storefronts are smeared with anti-Semitic graffiti, to a document printed by the German consulate in Shanghai warning residents that Jewish immigrants would bring with them "crime, sin, and intrigue." A particularly moving newsreel outtake shows starving Chinese—who also suffered during Shanghai's Japanese occupation—sweeping the street for individual grains of rice.

"It wasn't like China welcomed the Jews," explains Rosdy. "Shanghai [pre-Pearl Harbor] was under Japanese control, and the Japanese thought the presence of the Jews could help their relations with America. They believed

America was under Jewish control—they even thought Roosevelt was a Jew." One former refugee explains that throughout the war, rumors were afoot that Hitler had sent a special envoy to Shanghai charged with bribing the Japanese to murder Jewish refugees.

Though many refugees did die in Shanghai, especially in the ghetto, the film is ultimately a survival story, documenting the refugees' passage from persecution to freedom. The extraordinary circumstances of their exile in Shanghai are depicted in personal terms, through letters as well as through interviews with survivors, who ultimately abandoned Shanghai as the Communists took control. The recollection of one refugee depicts the city as a dangerous pleasure: "She was the most exciting and unique city in the world. She was poison, and the old-time Shanghailanders were addicts who never could free themselves from being in love with her." ▀