

25/12/1999



CAFE MAGNET MODERN BAR AND CAFE

A street scene in the early 1940s of the Jewish quarter of Shanghai, above left, and refugees and locals in a Shanghai bar.

Escape to Shanghai

By JANE FREEBURY

A LITTLE-known dimension to the Holocaust — the escape to the Far East by 20,000 European Jews between 1938 and 1941 — was the subject of a documentary screened at last month's Jewish Film Festival.

The Port of Last Resort, by young filmmakers Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman, reconstructs the experience of the thousands of European Jewish refugees who escaped to the international port of Shanghai, through the fragments of memory present in letters, photographs and film footage.

Shanghai was home-in-exile for the refugees for close on a decade, before the survivors left for new lives in Canada, the United States, Israel and Australia. Peter Witting is a Canberra resident and former refugee who was present at the screening, with one of the film's co-directors, Paul Rosdy. Letters written by his mother Annie Witting are among the materials in the film that try to reconstruct the refugee experience, and he spoke of his experiences in Shanghai where, with his parents and sister, he spent most of his teenage years.

Initially he was approached when the filmmakers Rosdy and Grossman came across his mother's letters: "a series of letters written from the time we left Germany until we came to Australia" that Peter had donated to archives in Jerusalem and New York.

The family sailed from Germany in 1939 to the only place that would give them entry, the international port of Shanghai. At first his father was able to secure a job as a clerk in an American import-export business, but then came Pearl Harbour, followed by outright Japanese occupation of the entire city.

The free port of Shanghai was a "last resort" for Jews, made stateless in their homelands by the Nazis and without international ID. Survivors such as Fred Fields, an interviewee in the film, say it was not that it was so difficult to leave Germany, it was that the free world refused to give sanctuary to people without identity papers. There was one place to go — and you just got yourself there — Shanghai.

The "Paris of the East" was a prosperous, modern, international metropolis where 50,000 foreigners lived among 4 million Chinese. It was one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the world, a safe haven not only for Jewish refugees, but for all, including international criminals.

"Before the war started the Japanese were one of the extra-territorial powers with the same rights as the others (French, English, etc) but after Pearl Harbour they occupied the rest of the city."

It was an occupation that for the refugees still meant relative safety, and they continued to make the city their home, overlorded by occupying sol-



Young filmmakers Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman.

diers who apparently didn't care to make a distinction between Jews and Gentiles, all were simply Westerners.

"They didn't really distinguish between Christians, Jews, Moslems, or others. It didn't make any difference to them, they didn't discriminate.

They resisted the pressure of the Germans to treat us more severely, though they might have responded to this pressure towards the end of the war. They treated the Jewish refugees no differently from other Allied internees."

The refugees re-created aspects of life they had left behind them — orchestras, clubs, cafes and businesses. Among Peter Witting's happiest memories of his expat life from from 11 to 19 years of age, was the camaraderie of belonging to the

British Boy Scouts. He went to a school founded for refugee children by wealthy Jewish philanthropist Sir Horace Kadoorie. Every graduate of the school was guaranteed a job.

Privations for the refugees were many, and these are documented in the film. The Witting family home amounted to a single room.

But Shanghai was also an "extraordinary" city, where many foreigners lived "a life of luxury you couldn't imagine." Fortunes were made and lost and abject poverty lived alongside conspicuous prosperity.

Some of the memories of survivors like Peter Witting are on record in footage by amateur photographer Charles Bliss, who also came to Australia. Formerly an industrial chemist from Vienna, he developed a means of communication for those unable to speak or hear, and in later years was an honorary fellow at the ANU.

At the time he was a refugee he had a studio in Shanghai, and filmed what he saw around him — destitute Chinese on the streets, truckloads of arriving refugees, and aspects of the lives of the Jewish refugees.

Peter Witting alerted Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman to the existence of the Bliss footage, that had found its way to Canberra and the National Film and Sound Archive (ScreenSound Australia). It was only many years later in Australia that Shanghai refugees Bliss and Witting finally met.