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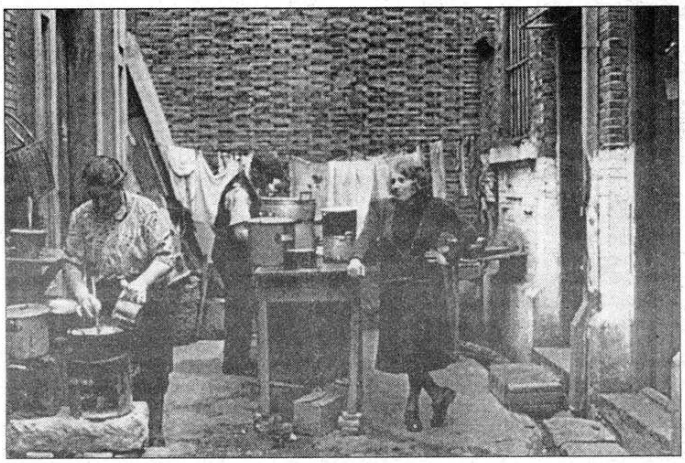

A lane in Hongkew, where Jewish refugees lived among the poverty-stricken Chinese. photo: United Nations Archive

Jewish Immigrants in Shanghai

Rare Original Footage in *The Port of Last Resort*

Most documentary filmmakers wishing to deal with the dramatic events of Jewish emigration under Hitler, have no choice but to rely heavily on what is known in the trade as "talking heads." Even when those interviewed are vivid and articulate personalities, the result is rarely cinematically exciting. The beauty of Joan Grossman and Paul Rosdy's film* The Port of Last Resort*, the story of the more than 20,000 Jews who found a haven in the free port of Shanghai between 1939-1941, lies in the original footage on view through almost the entire film.

It took the directors of the documentary three years to unearth the fascinating material filmed by amateurs, local filmmakers, and the producers of Japanese propaganda films and American newsreels. From the moment the film opens with a home movie taken by an emigrant en route to Shanghai, complete with the usual shipboard high jinks for the camera, the viewer is caught up in the reality – at once both exotic and painful – of the Chinese exile.

Shanghai became a free trade port after the Opium Wars with Great Britain in 1840, and foreign enclaves were given the right to operate under their own laws. No official permit was required for entry and by the 1930's it had become a prosperous, bustling metropolis. In the film's first views of the city, the modern skyline presents a startling contrast to the Chinese junks on the waterfront and the scurrying population going about on foot or in rickshaws along the harbor.

Russian and Iraqi Jews had settled in Shanghai previously – the Russians after the 1917 Revolution, the Iraqis, many of whom were among the city's richest industrialists, in the aftermath of the Opium Wars. The new Jewish emigrants had little to offer on arrival. having been forced to leave Germany and Austria with scarcely any money and no possessions. Initially, many of them lived under extremely primitive conditions in refugee camps, but it did not take long for them to create their own community by settling in Hongkew, an abandoned section that had been bombed by the Japanese a few years earlier. They rebuilt the houses, established businesses, founded a newspaper, and, needless to say, quickly set up their own cafes. A view of Hongkew's main street with all the shop signs bearing German names made clear why this part of the city soon became known as "Little Vienna."

Dramatic tales of four witnesses

The haunting black-and-white footage (with the exception of some unusual color images of anti-semitic graffiti taken in 1938 Vienna by an American tourist), is enhanced by the original music, evocative and never intrusive, by John Zorn. A composer known for his mixtures of musical modes, he makes particularly effective use of the pipa, a traditional Chinese string instrument. (See also the article on Zorn's work on page 10.) There are also snippets of 1930's big band tunes, Chinese songs, and even Viennese *kaffehaus* music composed by three former participants in Shangai's brief Austrian flowering.

The film does not do without "talking heads" entirely, but the directors limited themselves to four witnesses, each of whom has a different but equally dramatic story to tell. Fred Fields who left Berlin in 1938 at the age of eighteen became a journalist in Shanghai, working at first for *Gelbe Post*, a magazine put out by A.J. Storfer, a refugee who had published books by Freud in Vienna. Articles included discussions of "Pidgin English" and "Psychoanalysis in Japan." Fields then moved on to the *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle* and became something of a bon vivant exploring the exotic pleasures of Shanghai's night life.

Siegmar Simon was only eleven when he arrived in Shanghai with his parents and at fourteen had to leave school to work as a day laborer, making as little as the poorest Chinese. The images accompanying his description of being reduced to wearing unwieldy and painful wooden sandals for want of any other footwear, are among the most heart-rending in the film.

The Heppners, Ilona and Ernst, met in Shanghai and married there. Ernst arrived with his mother in 1939, while Illo came in 1940 on the Trans-Siberian Railway after the war had ended the possibility of escaping by boat. In addition to the narratives by these four very different personalities, the directors include excerpts from the lively letters written by Storfer and by Anna Witting, a young woman from Berlin. These are read by the actors Otto Tausig and Barbara Sukowa.

The energy and entrepreneurship that had produced "Little Vienna," was cut off with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the occupation of Shanghai by the Japanese. By 1942, the Jews had beem forced to give up their enterprises entirely and were confined to the most crowded section of Hongkew, a ghetto they were forced to share with the poorest of the Chinese. The degree of hunger suffered by the ghetto population is demonstrated by scenes of women sweeping up individual grains of rice found on the floors of trucks or in the streets.

Even though the situation in the ghetto grew increasingly hopeless from day to day, Illo and Ernst decided to marry. She recalls that her father procured a very expensive delivery of hot water for a bath as a wedding present. So luxurious was the experience, that Illo found it hard to emerge for the ceremony.

The last blow for the survivors was the American bombing of Hongkew on July 17, 1945 killing many refugees as well as Chinese. Ernst, who worked at a Chinese bakery, reported for work only to find that not only the shop, but the entire street had disappeared.

With liberation, life changed drastically. Siegmar Simon, speculating in American currency, was transformed from the poorest laborer into a big spender almost overnight. But for all the survivors, the joy of having come through was only momentary as they received the first news of what had happened to the friends and family they had left behind.

By 1947, with the Communists on the march in China, most of the German-Jewish emigrants had left for new homelands. None of their destinations, however, could duplicate what one refugee called "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." The audience viewing *The Port of Last Resort* leaves the theater convinced of the truth of that statement.

Monica Strauss

The Port of Last Resort, a co-production of Pinball Films New York/ Vienna and Extrafilm, Vienna, will be shown in a number of Jewish Film Festivals throughout the country and will open in Berlin in February.

The placards of German-Jewish doctors seen on a Shanghai office building. photo: Pinball Films

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