

A New Film Tells the Story of Shanghai's Holocaust Survivors

HONG KONG — The grainy black-and-white footage of a young girl waving on a cruise ship could be from any holiday film unearthed in a family attic. Mom is leaning on a boat railing, in mock embarrassment as she shoos away Dad, who is gleefully using his latest toy, a brand-new 8mm camera.

But the footage is no typical home movie, and this is no ordinary cruise. The family is among a small group of lucky survivors, European Jews sailing to Shanghai—and freedom from the Nazi holocaust. The scratchy footage is the opening scene of a remarkable new film, "The Port of Last Resort."

Produced by Austrian Paul Rosdy and American Joan Grossman, the gripping 79-minute documentary about how Shanghai became a shelter for thousands of European Jews has already created a stir in Europe, where a German version was released a few months ago in Austria. An English version had much the same reaction during its Asian premier at the Hong Kong Film Festival last week.

In this era of "Schindler's List" and "Life is Beautiful," there seems to be no end to the public appetite for new material about the Holocaust, which claimed the lives of six million Jews and millions more gypsies and non-Aryans. At the same time, historians wonder whether there is really anything of significance left to say about the half-century-old human tragedy.

This makes "The Port of Last Resort" all the more remarkable. Using never-before seen home movies, letters from refugees and archival footage, the understated film successfully takes a new look at an old story, focusing on one small chapter in the Holocaust annals: the escape to Shanghai, where nearly 20,000 European Jews not only survived, but created a unique community. Why Shanghai? At that time, it was one of the freest cities in the world, offering no entry requirements at a time when other possible havens for refugees were shutting down.

"This is a little-known, and amazing story," says Ms. Grossman, who grew up in the U.S. in the midwestern city of Indianapolis. A pair of family friends were Jewish survivors from Shanghai, and one of them, Ernest G. Heppner, had recently published his memoirs. Ms. Grossman was enchanted, not only by the themes of hardship and accomplishment, but also by the legacy of this amazing wartime community.

"There is a lot of trendiness to the subject," admits Ms. Grossman, 39, who is Jewish. Mr. Rosdy, 35, is non-Jewish, but he also felt a special connection to the story. "I had read a lot about Austria and what happened to the Jews in World War II. But really, it seemed that everything had been done. This was a chance to tell the story in a new way, by looking at one layer of the entire story."

It was a challenging and time-consuming project for two filmmakers with no major experience. Financial support came from Austrian arts funds and HBO, which will be airing "The Port of Last Resort" on a specialty channel. Mr. Rosdy and Ms. Grossman also hope to release the documentary—shot on expensive 35mm film

rather than video—at festivals and in limited showing at art cinemas.

The pair spent four full years chasing down research material on three continents. Mr. Rosdy combed archives in Germany and Austria, while Ms. Grossman worked collections in America, where many Jews from Shanghai wound up after the mass exodus from China that followed the Communist takeover in 1949.

"We went through thousands of documents," says Mr. Rosdy. "There was so much material all over the world—different pieces, here and there. It was a real puzzle to put this all together."

In the end, the filmmakers focused on the stories of four survivors: Mr. Heppner and his wife, Illo, who were married in Shanghai, Fred Fields and Siegmar Simon. Present-day interviews with these four are intertwined with extraordinary images of Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s.

The film includes a rich vein of research material, backed by evocative period tunes plus an original score by the renowned jazz musician and composer John Zorn. Intimacy is added in actual letters from refugees to friends and family back home. The simple narrative structure of the film enhances the impact of the story. One gets chills hearing a refugee tell how none of the Jews in Shanghai even knew about the Holocaust until the war was over.

To be sure, there were hardships aplenty in Shanghai, where the influx of tens of thousands of impoverished refugees overwhelmed the abilities of the existing Jewish community, as well as the ruling Japanese, who eventually herded them into the Hongkew ghetto. Food was scarce and survivors vividly describe suffering through the bitter Shanghai winter in rags and homemade sandals. Unlike in Europe, though, the Jews in Shanghai's ghetto fared no worse than the population around them. And there was no policy of repression or genocide.

Quite to the contrary, the Jews flourished in Shanghai for a time. They opened so many German bakeries and Austrian coffee houses that one area of town was dubbed Little Vienna. Jewish musicians from Europe dominated the Shanghai symphony, and soon there were theatrical productions and newspapers in a myriad of languages including German, Russian, Polish and Yiddish.

"The Port of Last Resort" also depicts the mesmerizing qualities of one of Asia's most magical cities. One refugee recalls: "Shanghai was a fake, a phony, neither occidental nor oriental. And yet—God forgive me—she was the most exciting and unique city in the world." Yet the film wisely never veers from its tight focus on intriguing stories of escape and survival.

"Shanghai was a waiting station. That's really what makes it unique," Mr. Rosdy says. "No one planned to stay there. They just had no other options, so they went and that's what made them so lucky. They survived, not like the Jews of Europe. That's what makes this a different story. It's a story of survival."

MR. GLUCKMAN IS A HONG KONG-BASED WRITER.