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IZAK AAMIDOR IS ONE OF THE LAST WITNESSES TO HONGKOU'S JEWISH LEGACY



Izak Aamidor: a former refugee in Shanghai





A street occupied by Jewish refugees



Foreign business signs

The Chinese gave us that simple goodwill," explains Izak Rosenberg-Aamidor over a cappuccino in Hongkou's White Horse Inn. "Maybe they didn't always smile at us, but they let us live."

The son of Jewish refugees from Poland, Aamidor was born in a traditional *shikumen* building on Tangshan Lu in early 1945. He is part of a dwindling band of witnesses to this part of Shanghai's history, as his family was one of the lucky ones that managed to flee war-torn Europe to the relative safety of Shanghai.

While exact numbers are hard to come by, it is estimated that upwards of 30,000 Jews were able to take refuge in the city during this time. Many of them settled in the area around what was once Ward Street—now Changyang Lu—in Hongkou District. Though many arrived with little more than the clothes on their back, the refugees set about reviving the neighborhood, opening businesses and recreating the lives they had led in Europe as much as they could. Chushan Lu (now Zhoushan Lu) and the streets nearby became known as "Little Vienna" due to the concentration of businesses with German signs.

In 1943, when Aamidor's family arrived, the Japanese army confined all refugees who had arrived after 1937 to a small part of Hongkou known as the "Designated Area for Stateless Refugees." Unlike many of the other refugees, Aamidor's family were Yiddish-speaking conservative Jews from Poland. His father was a member of the *Miryeshiva*, a school for religious learning. When Nazis and Soviets overran Poland, his eldest brother and mother witnessed a soldier put a gun to their father's head and pull the trigger. Thankfully, it failed to discharge.

LIFE WASN'T EASY, BUT WE SHARED THE HARDSHIPS WITH OUR CHINESE NEIGHBORS

this," says Aamidor of the *shikumen*. Jewish families lived among the Chinese residents, and often formed close bonds.

"Life wasn't easy in Shanghai, but we shared the hardships with our Chinese neighbors," Aamidor says. "My mother saw Chinese being shot by the Japanese. But my brother used to play in the street with the other children and learned to speak Shanghaiese." Aamidor recalls that for the first time in their lives, they didn't feel despised by the non-Jewish people around them. When peace came to Shanghai in 1945, it was therefore only natural that they should share the aid that they received with the Chinese living nearby.

Fleeing to Lithuania, the remnants of the *yeshiva* were granted passage to Japan by the Japanese consul. Aamidor's family ended up in Kobe in 1941, and were eventually sent to the occupied territory to Shanghai.

A walk around the Tilanqiao area of Hongkou still reveals pockets of this history. 818 Tangshan Lu is one such place. "My family lived in a small room on the top floor in a building like

Aamidor's family left Shanghai in 1948 for the United States, yet his birthplace always remained a place of sanctuary for him. That was why fifteen years ago, at a crossroads in his life, he chose to apply for jobs in Shanghai. According to Aamidor, "shalom" (the Hebrew word for "welcome") was the first word he received in a reply from East China Normal University. To him the word embodies what Shanghai did for the Jews during these difficult times: making them feel welcome when the rest of the world had closed its doors.

As he reminisces, Aamidor sips the last froth of his coffee and looks fondly at the painted scenes on the walls of the café. "The Chinese let us sit down when we were tired. That's the great thing about our experience."

***Mark Andrews**



The White Horse Inn at Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum, 62 Changyang Lu (near Haimen Lu) 长阳路62号(近海门路), Tel: 6512-6669, www.shanghaijews.org.cn

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