

# Far East East refugee

Deep in Shanghai, the White Horse Inn is a testament to a refugee Jewish community that found sanctuary in China during World War II





**JEWISH REFUGEES** are seen in housing in the Hongkou District of Shanghai, April 1946. (Courtesy the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum)

*Upwards of 30,000 Jews successfully journeyed to Shanghai in three waves of emigration. Between 1933 and June 1940, most came via ships from Italian ports*

• MARK ANDREWS

**A**re you going to let a person sit down when he's tired? It seems the most natural thing. The Chinese let us sit down, they let us live next door," says Izak Rosenberg-Aamidor, speaking of the goodwill that Shanghai residents showed to Jewish refugees – including his family – escaping war-torn Europe.

Upwards of 30,000 Jews successfully journeyed to Shanghai in three waves of emigration. Between 1933 and June 1940, most came via ships from Italian ports. With Italy's entry into World War II, this route was blocked, and until June 1941 refugees could still make the difficult trek overland through the Soviet Union. Outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union then largely blocked this route to all except those already in the region.

Most of those arriving in Shanghai were housed in the Hongkou District, an area designated for foreign immigrants.

"This was the poor section of the city



**HONGKOU REFUGEES** look for loved ones in the concentration camp survivors list, April 1946. (Courtesy the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum)

and there were a lot of empty buildings," explains Zhou Xiaoxia, director of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. Throughout the 1930s, the Japanese increasingly interfered in the city, culminating in a full takeover, causing many Chinese to flee from occupied areas.

Despite the unsettling situation, Jews continued to arrive and set about reviving the area around Tilanqiao in Hongkou. Businesses with German names sprang up and the area around Chushan Road (now Zhoushan lu) became known as "Little Vienna."

Last year, the museum reopened one such place: The White Horse Inn (Zum Weissen Rössl) now situated opposite the museum on Changyang lu – formerly known as Ward Road. Rudolf Mossberg opened the original establishment in 1939 after fleeing Austria. Modeled on the cafés in Vienna, and named after a popular operetta of the time, it provided a taste that many displaced German-speaking Jews dearly missed. In the evenings it became a nightclub with regular live music and offered dishes such as Wiener schnitzel.

The original inn – situated a little over a hundred meters away – was demolished in 2009. This occurred when city officials decided to widen the road, deeming the building unsafe, during efforts to improve the city for the 2010 World Expo.

UNLIKE MANY of the refugees, who were German speaking, Aamidor's family was from Poland. His father was connected with the Mir Yeshiva and they were conservative Yiddish-speaking Jews. When Poland was carved up between Germany and the Soviet Union, the family and most yeshiva members fled to Lithuania. The biggest problem for most Jews trying to flee Europe was securing a visa to grant them passage. Sugihara Chiune, the Japanese vice-consul in Lithuania, gave them a visa for Japan.

In 1941, they arrived in Kobe, Japan. Their original plan had been to go on to the US, but the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent entry of America into the war prevented the relocation. In 1943, they were moved >>



**IZAK ROSENBERG-AAMIDOR** at ease in today's White Horse Cafe. (Mark Andrews)





**VIEW OF** the traditional Chinese shikumen houses used to house refugees in the Hongkou Ghetto, April 1946. (Courtesy the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum)



*‘I’ve always felt comfortable in China. People are kind and they love their kids. China has been very good to Jews’*  
— Izak Rosenberg-Aamidor

**PATRONS AT** the original White Horse Inn, sometime between 1939 and 1948. (Zum Weissen Rössl)



**THE NEWLY** rebuilt White Horse Cafe opposite the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. (Mark Andrews)



**A MAN** enjoys playing the piano at the original White Horse Inn. (Zum Weissen Rössl)



**THE FULLY** stocked bar of the original White Horse Inn, which also served as a night club. (Zum Weissen Rössl)

to Shanghai due to German pressure on the Japanese to concentrate all Jews in the territories they controlled.

As part of this consolidation, the Japanese army confined all refugees who arrived after 1937 to a small part of Hongkou known as the Designated Area for Stateless Refugees. This, however, was the area in which many Jews were already living. Despite Nazi pressure to exterminate them, the Japanese failed to understand the Third Reich’s dislike for the Jews. This is apparent in one anecdote from the time involving Rabbi Shimon Sholom Kalish from the Mir Yeshiva. When asked by the Japanese about Nazi intentions, he replied, “The Germans hate us because we are Oriental.”

After 1941, the Japanese took full control of Shanghai, which had previously been under the administration of the British, French and Americans. Two years later, they established a ghetto, severely restricting the movement of Mir Yeshiva members and other Jews, dashing their hopes of finding employment in affluent areas of the city. Aamidor’s family survived largely through the charity of the Jewish community, while his father acted as a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) and his mother washed clothes for a limited income.

“We lived with the Chinese. In the European ghettos, the Germans completely isolated the Jews and moved the gentiles out, but we shared their life – and that also meant the hardships,” says Aamidor.

With Japan defeated and the war in Pacific over, peace was restored. Food parcels for the Jewish community began to arrive and these were shared with their Chinese neighbors, something that they remember to this day.

TODAY, POCKETS of this history still exist. A plaque at 818 Tangshan Road reveals that the area was filled with traditional Shikumen houses, which blend elements of Chinese and Western architecture. It was also one of the areas that housed refugees.

“My family lived in a small room on the top floor of a building like this,” says Aamidor.

Sometimes relations with Chinese neighbors became frayed. He remembers his mother telling him about the time his brother, playing with matches, started a fire. In a great act of strength, his mother picked up a large container of communal water and doused the fire. But their neighbors were not happy about the “wasted” water and wanted

them out.

Occupied Shanghai was in some respects a dangerous place.

“My mother saw Chinese being shot by the Japanese,” Aamidor said. “You had to be very careful, but at night no one was going to knock the door down. My brother could safely play in the street.”

Yet it was also possible to have a semblance of normal life, something impossible in much of Europe, and it was into this life and its relative sanctuary that Aamidor was born.

In 1948, at the age of three, Aamidor left with his family, bound for the US. However, Shanghai to him always meant a place of sanctuary; 15 years ago, fleeing from personal strife, he applied for jobs in Shanghai.

“I [feel that I] have two homes, Israel and China. Home is very important to me – we were thrown out of our home. My mother still thought of Poland as home. She loved the forests and the way of life, but that was all taken away,” he says.

Walking around the area today, there is still a great awareness amongst the residents of what happened, but not many eyewitnesses remain and the buildings from that era are also becoming fewer. Former Israeli journalist Dvir Bar-Gal has spent much time researching the area and has been leading regular tours of Jewish Shanghai since 2002 to bring the stories to life. He was responsible for tracking down the family in Australia who had originally owned the White Horse Inn, which enabled it to be reconstructed as faithfully as possible.

The new White Horse was opened to replace the museum’s much smaller Café Atlantic, which could no longer cope with the much larger visitor numbers. Separated by the road from the museum, it allows the new White Horse to act as a focal point for visitors exploring the area.

For the last 15 years, Aamidor has been reacquainting himself with the city of his birth. He has always felt welcome, and indeed the first word he received in reply to a job application to East China Normal University when he moved back here was “*Shalom*.”

“I’ve always felt comfortable in China. People are kind and they love their kids. China has been very good to Jews,” he says as he finishes the last froth of his cappuccino in the White Horse Café.

Memories may be fading, but a connection remains in this small part of Shanghai.