



上海
THE PORT OF SHANGHAI
1947

The Port of Last Resort

ZUFLUCHT IN SHANGHAI

a film by Joan Grossman & Paul Rosdy

selected for the Berlin Film Festival 1999
29th International Forum of New Cinema

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ZUFLUCHT IN SHANGHAI

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presents the little-known story of nearly 20,000 European Jewish refugees who fled to Shanghai in the years 1938-41. Shanghai was a free port that did not require papers for entry, and became the “last resort” to find a safe haven from the terror of the Nazis.

The film shows Shanghai in the 1930s and 40s, where wealthy foreigners had built the Far East’s **most exotic outpost** among a large population of Chinese. But as the Central European refugees flooded into Shanghai, the city was in decline and the world was on the brink of war.

This lost world is revealed through four survivors—**Fred Fields, Ernest Heppner, Illo Heppner, and Siegmund Simon**—and through a collage of archival materials: personal and published writings by refugees, relief reports, and secret documents, illustrated with rare home movies, photographs, newsreels, and propaganda films. **Extraordinary images** of refugees and uncommon views of Chinese life create a compelling vantage point for understanding and experiencing this story of survival.



Siegmar Simon was eleven years old in 1939 when his father narrowly escaped arrest by the Nazis. His family took one suitcase and left Germany for Shanghai. “I realized we were leaving what I at the time thought was a vacation.”

Fred Fields left Berlin by himself in 1938 at the age of 18, fearing that if war broke out in Europe the young Jews would be put on the front lines. Field’s mother stayed in Germany to witness the downfall of Hitler.

After failing to overcome quota restrictions for entry into the United States, **Ernest Heppner** arrived in Shanghai in 1939 as a teenager with his mother, leaving his father and sister behind in Germany. “I knew in my heart that I would never see them again.” The Nazis allowed refugees to take only 10 Marks out of Germany and Austria — the equivalent of 8 American dollars.

They arrived on the shores of a war in which Japan had occupied Shanghai’s Chinese territories and left parts of the city in ruins.

It was out of these ruins that the emigrants would build “**Little Vienna**” — a refugee community in the district of **Hongkew** with shops, cafes, nightclubs, and newspapers of their own. Hongkew was occupied by the Japanese, but their policies were favorable to the Jews, and allowed them to operate without restrictions.

In 1940, after war broke out in Europe, **Illo Heppner** and her mother left for Shanghai and joined her father who had fled Berlin a year earlier. The war in Europe had closed most ship routes and Illo and her mother traveled to Shanghai via the Trans-Siberian Railroad.



Personal letters portray **A. J. Storfer**, who had been the publisher of Sigmund Freud, founded a magazine, the *Gelbe Post*, devoted to psychoanalysis and Asian culture. **Annie Witting** wrote about the international business life in Shanghai and her attempt to start export businesses. Other refugees report about the **social and political troubles rippling through China**, and the emigrants’ attempt to start a new life.

History

Shanghai was a **city of extreme contrasts** that had quickly risen from a village on the muddy shores of the Whangpoo River into a thriving international metropolis. The British won Shanghai as a treaty port in the Opium Wars of the 1840s, and Shanghai became the “**Paris of the East**” where foreign enclaves had the right to operate under their own laws. A **decadent colonial life** flourished in the French Concession and International Settlement nestled among a dense population of Chinese, many of whom were low paid laborers who lived in dismal poverty.

By the end of the 1930s some **50,000 foreigners** lived in Shanghai, but the colonial life was ending. **Japan waged war against China** and occupied the Chinese parts of Shanghai in 1937. Chinese refugees came streaming into the city and the population grew to more than 4 million.

As the Jewish refugees arrived in Shanghai, two established Jewish communities organized relief. Several hundred Sephardic Jews had originally come from Baghdad via Bombay in the 1840s, and some were among the wealthiest industrialists in the city. 5,000 Russian Jews were also in Shanghai, fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. But the **flood of European refugees** overwhelmed the local Jewish communities who struggled as Shanghai’s economy collapsed.

In December of 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the Second World War began. The Japanese took



over the international parts of Shanghai and in 1943 forced the **Jewish refugees into a ghetto** in Hongkew. Disease and hunger spread, but most would survive. When World War II ended, civil war raged in China between the Nationalist and Communists. The Communists gained control and took over Shanghai in 1949. By then most of the Jewish refugees had left.

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Filmmakers Joan Grossman and Paul Rosdy have assembled rare and remarkable film footage. Sensational 8mm and 16mm home movies intimately portray the daily life of refugees and life on the streets of Shanghai. Refugee family films document the month-long ship voyage to Shanghai; films by Viennese emigrant Charles Bliss (who started a makeshift film studio in Shanghai), and films by Eric Schmidt, an American in Shanghai during the war, create a rich cinematic texture, along with films by the Japanese, and outtakes of American newsreels.



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. She was poison, and the old-time Shanghailanders were addicts who never could free themselves from being in love with her.

MAX BERGES, REFUGEE

The Port of Last Resort

Austria / USA 1998, 79 min, 16 mm
English & German version available
also 58 min. version available

written, directed, produced & edited Joan Grossman & Paul Rosdy
music John Zorn
cinematography Wolfgang Lehner
co-producer Lukas Stepanik
sound design Vincent Tese
voices Barbara Sukowa, Otto Tausig etc.
interviews Fred Fields

Ernest Heppner
Illo Heppner
Siegmar Simon

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Winter & Winter GmbH.
D-80803 Muenchen · Pündterplatz 8
Tel. +49 89 38 66 50 · Fax +49 89 66 50-22
info@winterandwinter.com · www.winterandwinter.com

Contact:
Rosdy Film KEG
Lustkandlgasse 51/4-5
A-1090 Wien
Tel. & Fax +43 1 319 81 42
rosdyfilm@aon.at · www.rosdyfilm.com

Pinball Films
18 Cheever Place
Brooklyn, NY-11231
T/F +718 855 9836
joanrg@earthlink.net