

WHEN war broke out in 1939, Shanghai was home not only to local Chinese but to a ragtag bunch of stranded colonialists, Japanese occupiers — and nearly 20,000 European Jews.

Shanghai — the Paris of the East — was the only escape for these mainly German and Austrian refugees from Hitler. The rest of the world had closed its doors. Only Shanghai, a free port that required no papers, no entry visas, was open.

In this cosmopolitan city of gay night clubs, dance halls and Chinese gambling dens, these Jews waited out the war, cut off from the families they had left behind, uncertain of what the Japanese had planned for them.

The exiles created a community of cafes and theatre they called Little Vienna and experienced the last, extraordinary days of colonial China.

The story of Shanghai's emigrant Jews is the subject of *Port of Last Resort*, screening at this year's Festival of Jewish Cinema in Sydney.

The film-makers, Joan Grossman and Paul Rosdy, use rare home movies, stunning archival footage, letters and interviews to convey the exhilaration and despair of lives in exotic limbo.

Grossman, who is Jewish and grew up in Indianapolis in the United States, was captivated by the tales of endurance and achievement she heard from a pair of family friends, Ernest and Illo Heppner, who had come from Shanghai.

So too was Rosdy, who is not Jewish but has a long-running interest in Holocaust history. Rosdy flew into Sydney this week from Vienna, where he lives, to introduce his film at the festival.

"Most people don't know about this Shanghai emigration because it is a side chapter of the Holocaust," he says.

"There are so many other terrible things that happened that are more important to learn and read about, that most people don't get to read about Shanghai."

Jews from central Europe started trickling into the Chinese port city in 1938. They joined a small number of White Russian Jews, there since the 1917 October Revolution, and a prosperous group of about 500 Iraqi Jews who had come to Shanghai after the opium wars.

Some arrived with nothing and lived for years on welfare in the makeshift camp; some had enough money to buy something in a bombed-out part of the town, called Hongkew, that was gradually rebuilt into a bustling quarter. Others, funded by relatives overseas, could afford accommodation in the foreign concessions.

In 1942, the Japanese herded the Jews into Hongkew, creating a ghetto euphemistically referred to as the "designated area".

Just as in Europe, the Jewish refugees were forced to sell their businesses for a pittance and give up their homes. Food was scarce and clothes disintegrated in the bitter winters. Unlike Europe, though, the population around the Jews suffered equally.



Is there a doctor in the house? . . . some Jewish refugees were able to make a reasonable living in Shanghai.

"On the other hand I remember very vividly the nicer times. I was a member of the Boy Scouts Association and we had a group among the refugees affiliated with the association. I remember the camaraderie with the other boy scouts, all sticking together right through the war. We worked underground during the internment [in the ghetto] and we were awarded a medal from the British Boy Scouts Association after the war, recognising our service."

Witting donated his mother's letters to relatives and friends to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem — where Rosdy found them.

Grossman, 40, and Rosdy, 36, who met at the Vancouver Film School, spent four years chasing material on three continents.

Rosdy combed the collections in Germany and Australia, while Grossman worked her way through sources in the US.

Some of the archival footage in *Port of Last Resort* has never been seen before.

One of the major contributions is from a Viennese amateur cameraman, Charles Bliss, who spent the war years in Shanghai and later emigrated to Sydney. His 8 mm films ended up in the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra where Rosdy tracked them down.

"He got hold of all the amateur filming business for Kodak Shanghai," says Rosdy, "and for about a year was doing commissioned films about horseracing and golfing."

"But he also did his own stuff, in the lanes and streets of Hongkew where the refugees lived, and of poor Chinese people in the street, sweeping up rice."

The footage of women in aprons, their hair pinned up in neat chignons, following bags of rice being loaded on to trucks and sweeping up the scattered grains from the street is devastating. In those few shots, Bliss and the documentary sum up the unspeakable suffering of the Chinese population.

Much of the archival film was in terrible condition and required expensive restoration work. The result is remarkable: clean, beautifully lit scenes of Shanghai's teeming streets and neon nights.

Rosdy confesses he has fallen in love with old Shanghai. As one of the refugees says, "she was the most exciting and unique city in the world".

"To understand people's lives there and how they survived under difficult circumstances, you need to know what the place was like," says Rosdy.

"To paint a picture of Shanghai is also to paint a picture of what it was for these refugees to be in that place."

The Festival of Jewish Cinema begins today and runs until November 30 at the Chauvel, Paddington. Port of Last Resort screens on Thursday and on Sunday, November 28. Bookings: 9873 3575.

HEAVEN AND HELL IN EXOTIC LIMBO

Old Shanghai, the Paris of the East, became a haven for thousands of European Jews fleeing the Holocaust. HELEN GREENWOOD speaks to the film-makers who have chronicled their story.

In their film, Rosdy and Grossman focus on six characters: four of them are interviewees — the Heppners, Fred Fields, a young journalist, and Siegmund Simon. The other two, Annie Witting and A. J. Storfer, come to life through their letters.

"We chose the characters because they all tell a different kind of story that somehow speaks for the overall experience of this emigration," says

Rosdy. "There were a lot of young people who were sheltered, and others who had the most awful jobs."

The Heppners, young and optimistic, met and fell in love and decided to marry at the worst time. Simon left school and worked like a Chinese coolie, labouring every day to earn enough money to buy a bowl of soup at night.

Fields was alone and so was out on the town, savouring the

nightlife. He worked for A. J. Storfer who had been the publisher of Sigmund Freud and set up a psychoanalytical journal in Shanghai called *Gelbe Post*. Storfer got to Australia before Pearl Harbour and died here in 1944.

Witting, a mother of two, came here with her husband and children in 1947. Her resourceful, energetic voice is read by the renowned German actress Barbara Sukowa.

Witting was one of 2000 Shanghai Jews who wound up in Australia. Her son, Peter, 71, lives in Canberra and recalls "the starvation, the hardships, the hunger which affected most of the Jewish refugees in Shanghai".

"Some were relatively well off but the majority suffered from deprivations and the severe climate — humid, hot summers and cold winters," he says.