

Firsthand Accounts of the Jewish Experience in World War II Shanghai

In early 1939, Fritz Marcus and his father fled Germany for the only place in the world that would accept them: Shanghai. For the second half of his ten-year stay in Shanghai, Fritz began to keep a journal of his daily activities and the events that unfolded in Shanghai, but after he moved to the United States, he changed his name to Fred and eventually married his wife, Audrey. The diaries were never translated into English during Fred's life. After he passed away in 2002, Audrey came into contact with Rena Krasno, another Shanghai Jew. Although Krasno's family came from Russia, Rena was fluent in German and willingly agreed to translate Fred's journals. Krasno had previously penned her own family history in two works: *Strangers Always - A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai* (Pacific View Press, Berkeley, 1992) and its prequel, *That Last Glorious Summer 1939 Shanghai - Japan* (Old China Hands Press, Hongkong, 2001). Sadly, Krasno died in 2009.

Survival in Shanghai: The Journals of Fred Marcus 1939-49 (Pacific View Press, 2008) by Audrey Friedman Marcus and Rena Krasno provides an insightful look into the daily lives of young Jewish refugees during and just after World War II. Fred was only fifteen when he arrived in Shanghai with his widower father. But the two wouldn't live together for long as the elder Marcus died in Shanghai. So this book is also a coming of age story and a story of survival in more ways than one.

The diaries are telling in that they show that the European Jews in Shanghai led anything but a typical refugee life. Fred often attended lectures and music performances. He dated women, which usually took the form of group outings with other friends. They would chat in cafes and go to the cinema. Fred was involved in the *Pao Chia*, or police corps that the Japanese set up for the Jews to patrol their own community.

From his entries, he shows that he took an active involvement in the Shanghai Jewish community and kept up to date with the latest news there. He covers many important events in Jewish Shanghai: the 1943 round up of the refugees in to the Hongkou designated area, which is also referred to as the Shanghai Ghetto; the end of the war; life in Shanghai under US occupation; and resettlement in the west and Israel. Rena Krasno and Audrey Friedman Marcus supplement the journals with historical events that concurrently took place.

While *Survival in Shanghai* tells the story of the Shanghai Jewish experience through the eyes of one young man, Steve Hochstadt's book *Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) showcases the stories of thirteen men and women who fled Europe for Shanghai between 1938 and 1940. He writes: "They embody the variety and similarities that characterized the Shanghai ordeal for thousands for Jewish refugees." Hochstadt has studied the Shanghai Jewish refugee community for twenty years and has interviewed over one hundred former refugees. His own grandparents were Shanghai Jewish refugees.

Hochstadt believes that the best way to tell the stories of the Shanghai Jews is by way of interview. Therefore much of this book is a first person narrative, although like in *Survival in Shanghai*, the author inserts the relevant historical events that coincide with the timeline of the refugees' stories.

Exodus to Shanghai is one of the most comprehensive books about this unique Jewish enclave. The Shanghai refugees, unlike the wealthy Jews who found refuge in the US and the UK, were common people without resources or connections. And they waited until the last minute to leave, when they had no other options. Unlike those who were able to find visas to North America, South America, and the UK, the Shanghai refugees had the most to risk. They took a gamble on leaving behind their lives in Germany and Austria—a life that many thought would return to normal after people wised up about Hitler—and set sail or embarked on a Trans-Siberian train trip across the Soviet Union and down the width of China to Shanghai, the great unknown.

But as history would show, Shanghai turned out to be a wise decision. And the story of the Shanghai Jews, according to Hochstadt, tells us more than just an unlikely destination for a desperate people, but also about the mass exodus of Jews in the late 1930s in general. "Their last-minute escape, their middling social position, and their lack of integration in their temporary Chinese home created experiences that allow us to better understand the hundreds of thousands of German-speaking Jews displaced by the Holocaust."

These two books give the reader a comprehensive understanding of what it was like to flee Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s and settle in a faraway, unknown land. They also include the important historical characters that were involved in settling the Jews: the Sephardic and Russian Jewish communities, the American relief agencies, and even the Japanese occupiers. ♣

