Jewish Heroes in Troubling Times

It’s not uncommon to hear about heroic Jews who lived during World War II, but most of these stories focus on the war in Europe. This year, however, two new books take a look at Jews who made significant advances in Asia during World War II.

Daniel Kalla, an emergency room physician in Vancouver as well as a renowned author, has written his first work of historical fiction, The Far Side of the Sky (Tor|Forge, 2012). The novel tells the story of Franz Adler, a prominent surgeon and widower who flees Austria with his sister-in-law, Esther, and young daughter, Hannah.

Frantic to find passage on a ship out of Europe, Franz has no choice when a kind travel agent finds three berths on a liner destined for Shanghai. While the three Austrians have no idea what awaits them in China, they’re relieved to find a city that will unconditionally accept them. After all, Shanghai was the only place in the world to do so at that time.

As soon as the boat docks in Shanghai, the Adlers meet Simon, a New York relief worker, who points them toward a Jewish agency that runs a free hospital for Jewish refugees. Fritz meets a British Jewish doctor who offers him a paying job at another hospital, but as his assistant, not as a surgeon. Torn between supporting his family and following his heart, Franz juggles both jobs, sometimes squeezing in only a few hours of sleep in the doctors’ lounge.

In his work at the refugee hospital, he falls in love with Sunny Mah, a Eurasian nurse. But as with dramatic love stories, complications get in the way of the couple’s happiness. Franz is also put in uncomfortable positions when senior German and Japanese officials ask him to operate on their colleagues or spouses.

Heroes like Franz and Sunny kept Shanghai afloat as tens of thousands of refugees flooded the port city during the war. Kalla has a great knack for storytelling and his detailed descriptions of late-1930s and early 1940s Shanghai are vivid and colorful, complete with battle wounds and outbreaks of cholera and typhoid. It’s one of the most comprehensive novels written about this era.

Tim Luard, a former BBC journalist, recently penned a historical narrative of perhaps the most thrilling escape in the Pacific theatre in Escape from Hong Kong: Admiral Chan Chak’s Christmas Day Dash, 1941 (Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

The book opens with the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong. After two weeks, surrender is inevitable, and certain people must leave the colony in order to protect Chinese intelligence. One of these people is one-legged Admiral Chan Chak of the Chinese Nationalist Navy. Never far from Chan’s side are his bodyguard and his side-de-camp, Henry Hsu. Because it’s imperative that Chan and Hsu leave before the Japanese can capture them, the British Navy agrees to smuggle them out of Hong Kong.

Part of the British Navy team—which is also made up of nationals from Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—is one Monia Talan, also known as Emmanuel Moses Talan or simply John, formerly of Russia and Shanghai. While Talan’s character is not a major one in this story, he does play a significant role in the escape team.

Talan left Russia just after the Bolshevik Revolution and fled to Shanghai. While author Luard labels Talan a White Russian, it’s soon apparent from his background that he’s Jewish. In Shanghai, Talan becomes “a lieutenant in the Jewish Company of the Shanghai Volunteers before moving to Hong Kong in 1934.” (page 35). During the Japanese invasion, Talan is one of the top intelligence officers in the navy and is known as one of the three ‘cloak and dagger boys’ (page 40).

Once he escapes Hong Kong with some sixty British and Chinese officers and enlisted men on Christmas Day, Talan leaves China in July 1942 to be stationed in India. After the war, Luard writes that Talan returns to Hong Kong as a distinguished MBE and works first for the government and then in the business sector. He also spends his free time at the Jewish Recreation Club and becomes a director of Jimmy’s Kitchen. After failed attempts to gain British citizenship, he eventually immigrates to Australia. While Talan isn’t well-known for his efforts during the war, his role in the Christmas Day escape can not be overstated.

Another Jewish character in Escape from Hong Kong is legendary Morris ‘Two-Gun’ Cohen, Sun Yat-sen’s former bodyguard. Cohen left London for Canada, where he “learnt to ride, shoot and gamble.” After moving to China, he becomes a general in the Nationalist Army and later makes a living from “arms-dealing and all-night poker sessions at Short-Time Susan’s in Shanghai before winding up in Hong Kong.” (page 37)

One of Monia Talan’s intelligence colleagues pays Morris Cohen to gather information he might overhear at the Hong Kong Hotel, dressed in his “trademark white suit, shoulder holster visible beneath the jacket.” (page 37).

But that wouldn’t be the last sighting of Cohen in Escape from Hong Kong. When the British Navy’s and Chan Chak’s two-car motorcade speeds away from the Gloucester Hotel for a pier near Pok Fu Lam to begin their escape, Morris Cohen appears on Queen’s Road East brandishing two revolvers. A British naval officer offers Cohen a place in one of the cars, but Two-Gun wishes to stay in Hong Kong.

In a footnote, Luard writes that Cohen survives prison camp in Hong Kong and lived until 1970. After the war, he traveled to the People’s Republic of China as a guest of Zhou Enlai and on two visits to Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—is one Monia Talan, also known as Emmanuel Moses Talan or simply John, formerly of Russia and Shanghai. While Talan’s character is not a major one in this story, he does play a significant role in the escape team.

The story of the escape is fascinating in itself, but these Jewish characters add to the color of this death-defying account.

As books about Jews during World War II remain popular with readers around the world, we can only hope that we will see more set in Asia.