

# Worlds Apart: Displaced During World World War II

During the early years of World War II in Europe, when Jews had few options—and opportunities—to flee their homelands a small window for escape opened, they turned to faraway and exotic places, including Asia and Africa.

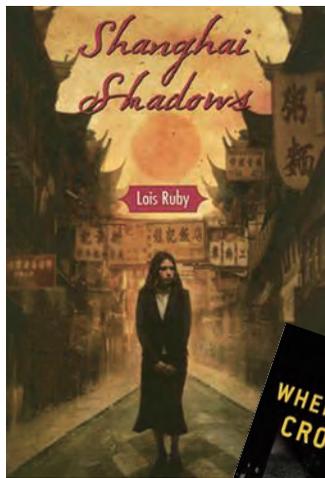
In *Shanghai Shadows* (Holiday House, 2006), Lois Ruby chronicles the fictional story of Ilse Shpann, a 13 year-old Austrian Jew who flees Europe in 1939 with her parents and older brother, Erich. The Shpanns settle in Shanghai, the only place that took in refugees without visas back then.

At first the Shpanns live a comfortable life in Shanghai. It's not what they were used to in Austria, but their three room apartment in Shanghai's International Settlement is adequate. The family subsists on Ilse's father's violin teaching salary and the money her mother earns from a part-time bakery job and English tutoring. They enjoy Austrian pastries, classical music, and the freedom to travel around the city. But that's the highlight of their existence in the Chinese metropolis.

After the US enters the war, tens of thousands of Shanghai Jews are rounded up and sent to the former Chinese section to live in a ghetto. Ilse's family is cramped into one room. Her parents lose their jobs and the family struggles to survive, barely able to scrounge up enough food for one meal a day. In the course of the story, Ilse falls for a young Polish Jew and learns a dark secret her mother has kept for years, one that tears her family apart during the Japanese occupation.

Lois Ruby vividly recounts the lives of the Shanghai Jews in *Shanghai Shadows*, touching upon the resistance, the brutal Japanese military, and the citizens of Shanghai—Chinese, Jewish, and Japanese—who join together to support one another during this dangerous time. The Shpanns' elderly Japanese neighbors prove to be some of their most loyal friends.

Other books set in Shanghai during the war, such as Emily Hahn's *China to Me* (Country Life Press, 1944) and Vicki Baum's *Shanghai '37* (Oxford University Press, 1986) also touch upon the Jewish community there. But *Shanghai Shadows* (which is marketed as a young adult novel, but includes mature subjects like prostitution) differs in that it provides a comprehensive understanding of daily Jewish life in wartime Shanghai.



European Jews in the 1930s also chose other continents to escape, such as Africa.

Peter Godwin's riveting memoir, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* (Little, Brown and Company, 2006) recounts the current problems in Zimbabwe, where he was born and raised. Godwin also reveals a long-kept family secret he learns about just before his father passes away.

At first, Godwin's book narrates the eviction of white farmers from their Zimbabwean land starting around the year 2000. The more violent the conditions in Zimbabwe, the more frustrated Godwin becomes as his parents refuse to leave their home out in the countryside. Living in fear that their house will be taken from them—or worse—the elderly Godwins love their country so much, they not only refuse to leave, but Mrs. Godwin insists on continuing her work as a doctor, even though she's years beyond retirement. To protect themselves from being murdered in their own home, Godwin's parents erect metal guard rails around their bedroom. Sometimes Godwin can't reach his parents because the phone lines go dead or the power shuts off. It's like a war zone, and Godwin starts to feel like he's become the parent of his own parents.

During one visit home, Godwin discovers some old framed black and white photographs, tucked away in his father's closet, of people he doesn't recognize. And then one day he father tells him about those photos. They were taken in 1930s Poland. And the people in the photos were Godwin's deceased grandparents and aunt. He didn't even know he had had relatives in Poland, or that they were Jewish.

Godwin always knew his father had arrived as a young man in then-Rhodesia. But he'd also assumed his dad was British and that his ancestors had lived in Britain for centuries. His father never spoke much about his childhood until his health deteriorated, when he unraveled his family's tragic story during the war. And as Godwin learns his family's true background, he better understands his parents' loyalty to Zimbabwe.

Like *Shanghai Shadows*, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* is also a heart-wrenching story of displaced people in a land where the government no longer welcomes them. ♪

