



Discovering/ Rediscovering Jewish Shanghai

An Insider's Tour of Shanghai Today

Ellis in Shanghai

Shortly after arriving in Shanghai for his high school reunion, my husband, Ellis Jacob—an Iraqi Jew and native Shanghaileander—was walking along the Bund when a stranger grabbed his arm. “Ellis, come talk to my people,” implored Dvir Bar-Gal, an Israeli photojournalist who conducts tours tracing the history of Jews in Shanghai. His “people” were the dozen or so men and women taking his tour.

The story Bar-Gal tells began with Baghdadi Jews like Ellis’s forebears, the first of whom settled in Shanghai in the mid-1800s. In a book titled, *The Shanghai I Knew*, Ellis details his family’s migration from Baghdad (and Basra on his mother’s side) to Shanghai by way of Bombay and Calcutta, and his early life as “a foreign native in prerevolutionary China.” Bar-Gal has Ellis’s book and had

recognized him from the picture on the back cover.

The next morning—my first day in Shanghai—Ellis and I took Bar-Gal’s tour. In our group were an Australian couple who’d arrived in the city ahead of their scheduled trip to be sure they didn’t miss it, several New Zealanders and Americans, and a young Chinese woman whose Jewish boyfriend had piqued her interest.

As we gathered around Bar-Gal to hear about Shanghai’s first Jewish settlers, I had a powerful sense of déjà vu. Although I’d never before been in China, I was familiar with the names of Shanghai’s most prominent Sephardic families: the Abrahams, Hardoons, Kadoories, and the Sassoons. All these families are not just names to us; they make an appearance not only in Ellis’s book, but frequently in his conversation as well. All were attracted by

the opportunity for commerce Shanghai offered after the British won the Opium Wars and opened it to international trade.

With the still-bustling Huangpu River as a backdrop, evidence of the Baghdadi Jews—and the wealth they amassed—is all around. The still stately, if slightly shabby, Astor House Hotel, on a corner where Suzhou Creek and the Huangpu River converge, was the headquarters for Ellis’s reunion. Owned by Kadoorie until the Communists took the city, the hotel’s lobby is filled with pictures of famous guests, from US President Ulysses S. Grant to Charlie Chaplin, the Duke of Edinburgh and Albert Einstein.

A block away is the former Broadway Mansions, an upscale residential building in the 1930s and ‘40s, now a 5-star hotel. In the opposite direction is Nanjing Road, much of it developed

Feature

by Helen Lippman



The former Hongkou Ghetto today

by Silas Hardoon. Hardoon rose from poverty, working in a mailroom, as a doorman, and as a rent collector, according to Bar-Gal, before becoming the richest man in the Far East.

Later that day, Ellis and I walked a mile or so up Nanjing Road—through a crowded, noisy shopping area where neon lights, flashing signs and stores selling the latest electronic devices assault your senses. Nanjing Road in Hardoon’s day was equally crowded, Ellis recalls. There were big department stores then, as now, and lots of little eateries, take-out stalls and small markets—but without the buzz and bright lights.

When Ellis lived here in the 1930s and ‘40s, Nanjing Road became Bubbling Well Road as you headed west, and his home—on the second floor of an apartment building—was on Seymour Road, just off Bubbling Well Road. The building looks different now; a verandah that was accessible from the Jacobs’ second-floor apartment has been closed off. Its history lives on nonetheless, with a plaque on an outer wall identifying the complex as the “former Cosmopolitan Apartments.”

Back down Nanjing Road along the Bund is the legendary Peace Hotel—built in the late 1920s by Victor Sassoon. Sir Victor, a British baron as well as an Iraqi Jew, lived in a wood-paneled penthouse apartment atop the green-domed art deco building.

The splendor can still be seen. The night before, shortly after I arrived, jet-lagged from a 14-hour flight, Ellis and I sat, with some of his former classmates, inside Sassoon’s old apartment. We listened to a presentation about today’s Shanghai American School, a modern iteration of the high school from which he graduated. After the talk we had cocktails on the roof—with a spectacular view of the older, elegant buildings along the Bund and the newer, sleeker architecture across the river in Pudong.

Victor was the grandson of David Sassoon, who hired Ellis’s grandfather, Jacob Shalom Jacob, in the 1880s, thereby making it possible for the Jacob clan to escape from an Iraq that was increasingly intolerant of Jews. The elder Jacob’s first job was in Bombay. Around the turn of the century, as Sassoon’s real estate holdings expanded, he was sent to Shanghai to help manage them.

While the Iraqi Jews were amassing their fortunes, a second wave of Jews began arriving, fleeing from pogroms in Russia. The Russian Jews traveled by train across Siberia to China. Many disembarked and settled in Harbin, but a small enclave continued on to Shanghai. As Bar-Gal spoke of Shanghai’s Russian Jewish community, I couldn’t help thinking of my own heritage. My grandparents, too, were driven out of Russia by the pogroms. By fate or fortune, they boarded a ship bound for the United States rather than a train to China.

Refugees fleeing the Nazis comprised the third and final wave of Jews to arrive in Shanghai, starting in the late 1930s. Eventually expanding to about 20,000, refugees from Germany, Austria, and Poland were settled with the help of both the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi communities. Soon, bakeries, cafes, and music venues began to appear in what became known as Little Vienna.

The next group to take Shanghai by storm wasn’t Jewish, but Japanese. They swarmed the city in 1941, the day of Pearl Harbor. Ellis remembers awakening the next morning to find

armed soldiers on every major street corner. But despite their presence, the Japanese left the established Jewish communities alone. Ellis celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in 1944 at the Orthodox Ohel Rachel Synagogue while the city was under Japanese occupation. (He graduated from high school in 1949, just days after the Communists took the city.)

This wasn't the case for the refugees who had fled the Holocaust for this safe haven. Their experience in Shanghai was dramatically different. In 1943, under pressure from the Nazis, the Japanese ordered all "stateless refugees" (defined as those who arrived after 1937) into a ghetto in Hongkou—the next stop on Bar-Gal's tour

I 'd known about the ghetto for years and seen the documentary, "Shanghai Ghetto." Now, Bar-Gal led us down a dark and dreary lane and into a tiny dilapidated apartment occupied by Jewish families some 70 years ago. The refugees, restricted to an area of roughly one square mile, lived in squalor, crowded in among some of Shanghai's poorest Chinese.

A short distance from the ghetto is the old Ohel Moshe Synagogue, a former spiritual home to the refugees that now commemorates them. The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum includes a restoration of the old synagogue, a bookshop, and dozens of photos, art works, newspaper clippings and a short film about life in the ghetto, as well as some rotating exhibits. The museum also houses a plaque honoring Ho Feng Shan. Ho, a little-known Chinese diplomat serving in Vienna, personally saved thousands of Jews from the Holocaust by issuing documents they needed to leave the country.

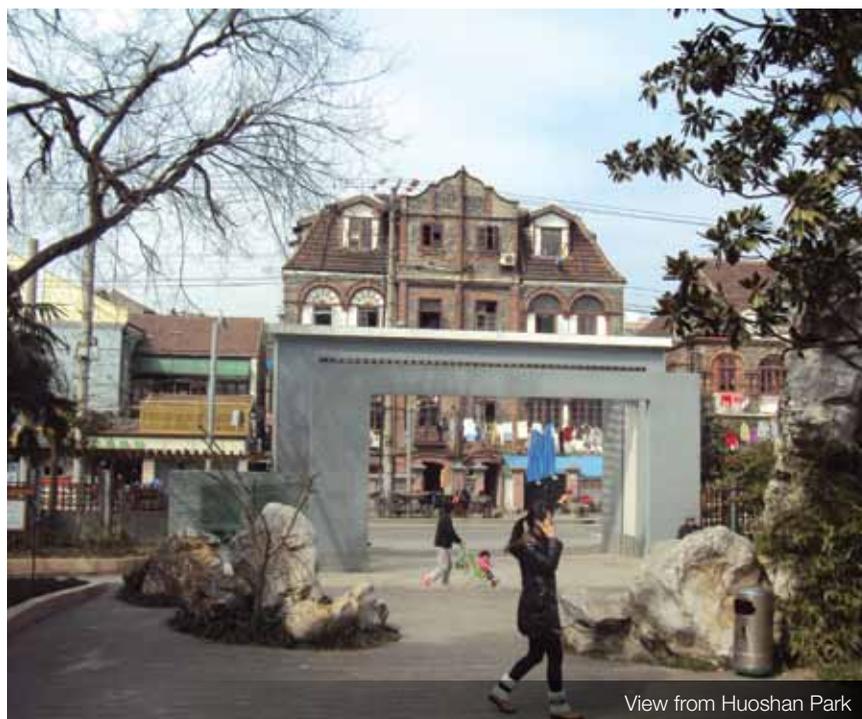
In nearby Huoshan Park, through a gate in a quiet, peaceful setting, stands a stone memorial to the refugees. A

simple paragraph, written in English, Chinese and Hebrew, tells of how they escaped Nazi persecution and came to Shanghai, then suffered at the hands of the Japanese. Disease was rampant in the ghetto and, Bar-Gal told us, about one in 10 refugees died.

If Bar-Gal has his way, another Jewish memorial will be erected in Shanghai—this one in memory of every Jew who died and was buried here. There were four Jewish cemeteries in Shanghai. All were demolished during the Cultural Revolution. Soon after he arrived in 2001, Bar-Gal heard about two headstones with Hebrew writing sitting in an antique store. His interest was piqued. Gradually, he said, "what started as a journalistic story became a mission."

In villages outside the city, headstones were tossed into the river. Bar-Gal has used bulldozers to pull them out, seen villagers using headstones as scrub boards and moved the ones he has reclaimed from one site to another. The 100-plus headstones Bar-Gal has found thus far are catalogued (and searchable) online at shanghaijewishmemorial.com.

This piece of Shanghai Jewish history, too, has special meaning for Ellis. Four of his relatives were buried in the city: a maternal grandfather whose name he doesn't know; his paternal grandfather, Jacob Shalom Isaiah Jacob; and two uncles, Ezekiel Jacob and Saleh Jacob. Perhaps, through Bar-Gal's efforts, their headstones may be found and their lives—and deaths—memorialized. ✧



View from Huoshan Park

Helen Lippman is the managing editor of *The Journal of Family Practice* in Parsippany, NJ. She has written about outdoor activities, science and technology, and employee benefits, as well as travel and US health care.

Please watch for our review of Ellis Jacob's memoir, *The Shanghai I Knew: A Foreign Native in Pre-Revolutionary China*, in an upcoming issue of *Asian Jewish Life*.