

Diplomatic Rescue: Shanghai as a Means of Escape

By Ho Manli

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It is a privilege for me to be here today and I wish to thank the city of Shanghai and Professor Pan Guang for including me in such distinguished and august company for the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II and the survival of Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

The city of Shanghai not only served as a refuge of last resort for European Jews during WWII, the very use of its name as a destination provided thousands with a means of escape from the Nazis in 1938 and 1939.

Well before Nazi policy turned to genocide in 1941, anti-Semitic violence and persecution prompted thousands of Jews to flee Germany and from 1938 on, from Nazi occupied territories. Their flight was fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Jews seeking to emigrate needed permission in the form of an entry or end destination visa from the countries they were trying to enter. Even the countries they would pass through required permission in the form of transit visas. Many countries, and certainly almost all of the 32 participants of the Evian Conference in 1938, had anti-immigration policies and were unwilling to open their doors to Jewish refugees.

If a Jew was able to obtain a visa from a foreign consulate, the next step was to obtain permission from the German authorities to leave. Following the annexation of Austria in March 1938, Adolf Eichmann and the Nazis set up a Center for Jewish Emigration in Vienna, which became a “model” of systematic persecution and oppressive bureaucratic policies for emigration. This “model” which combined economic expropriation with the coerced expulsion of Jews was subsequently instituted in all Nazi-occupied territories.

The American journalist Dorothy Thompson wrote: “It is a fantastic commentary on the inhumanity of our times that for thousands and thousands of people a piece of paper with a stamp on it is the difference between life and death.”

From 1938 on and into the war, a number of foreign diplomats working in Nazi-occupied territories seized a unique opportunity to save Jews. These diplomats took advantage of their special status to engage in a bureaucratic shell game, often going against the policies of their home governments or bending the rules in ingenious and intricate ways to help Jews.

My late father Dr. Ho Feng Shan was one of the first diplomats to do so. He was stationed in Vienna, Austria in 1937. Two months after the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Germany, he was appointed the Chinese Consul General. He watched in horror as Hitler marched triumphantly into Vienna, and as Austrian anti-Semitism

erupted in full force. In Vienna in particular, the historian Saul Friedlander wrote, persecution of Jews “outpaced that in the Reich. Public humiliation was more blatant and sadistic; expropriation better organized, forced emigration more rapid. The Austrians - their country renamed Ostmark... seemed more avid for anti-Jewish action than the citizens of what now became the old Reich.”

Less than a month after the *Anschluss*, the first Austrian Jews were sent to Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. They were told by Nazi authorities that if they emigrated from Austria immediately, they would be released. Many Austrian Jews wanted to emigrate to the United States, but the US not only required an affidavit of financial sponsorship, but had long ago filled its Austrian quota. Those who wished to go to Palestine found that Britain, under pressure from the Arabs, had severely reduced the quota for Jewish emigrants. In order to bar Jewish refugees from crossing their border, the Swiss demanded that Jews be identified by a red “J” stamped on their passports.

Obtaining emigration papers became a desperate and agonizing quest for survival. This is how one Austrian survivor described this nightmare:

“Visas! We began to live visas day and night. When we were awake, we are obsessed by visas. We talked about them all the time. Exit visas. Transit visas. Entrance visas. Where could we go? During the day, we tried to get the proper documents, approvals, stamps. At night, in bed, we tossed about and dreamed about long lines, officials, visas. Visas!”

All the foreign consulates in Vienna were besieged by desperate Jewish visa applicants day after day, but most did not offer help. My father could not bear to stand by. He recalled: “Since the annexation of Austria by Germany, the persecution of the Jews by Hitler’s ‘devils’ became increasingly fierce. The fate of Austrian Jews was tragic, persecution a daily occurrence. There were American religious and charitable organizations which were urgently trying to save the Jews. I secretly kept in close contact with these organizations. I spared no effort in using any means possible. Innumerable Jews were thus saved.”

The means my father used to help Jewish refugees was to issue them visas to Shanghai, China. He practiced what he called a “liberal policy”, authorizing visas for any and all who asked. Having been turned down by other consulates, Jews soon discovered that they could get visas at the Chinese Consulate.

The interesting point is that no visa was needed for entry into Shanghai. By 1938, as noted in an American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee legal document, the Chinese Nationalist government itself “had been ousted from authority there by the Japanese...”

“Surely this was only too well known to the Chinese consul, a representative of the Nationalist government, who unquestionably knew or must be regarded as knowing that no representative of his government exercised authority at the ports to which the applicant could go...”

“...in fact” the AJJDC document said, “the real and underlying purpose for the visa was to assist as an act of mercy and humanity these persecutees to escape from Austria...”

So how were these visas used if not for entry into Shanghai? The common assumption is that because the Chinese visas were for Shanghai, all those who received them must have escaped to Shanghai. That is understandable because visas are normally intended for entry to the destination for which they are issued. However, in the case of diplomatic rescue, it is not that straightforward or obvious.

Diplomats who were trying to help Jews escape the Nazis often had to find ways around the restrictions imposed by their own governments or by the Nazis. So, they used visas, papers and documents in many ingenious and unorthodox ways. Some stretched the interpretation of the policies of their home governments; some used every nuance and loophole, or feigned misunderstanding of directives or purposely violated their orders.

My father chose to violate his orders. He was quite clear in his intent in issuing the visas to Shanghai. They were meant as proof of emigration to leave Austria and a means to go elsewhere. He said: “The visas were to Shanghai ‘in name’ only. In reality, they were a means to help Jews to leave Austria and eventually find a way to the US, Britain or other preferred destinations.”

These visas provided proof of an “end destination” so that refugees could legally obtain transit or temporary visas from countries which otherwise would not have allowed them in. Armed with a Shanghai end destination visa, refugees were able to obtain transit visas and temporary visas to other countries. In fact, the majority of Shanghai visa recipients from Austria did not go to Shanghai, but used these visas to find their way to the Philippines, Cuba, Palestine, England and even the US.

During the trial of Recha Sternbuch, a Swiss Jewish rescuer of Austrian and German Jews in 1938 and 1939, her lawyer explained how these visas were used in the illegal Palestine transports in the spring of 1939:

“... there were hundreds of passports that were equipped with Chinese visas, although the real goal was to land illegally on the coast of Palestine. These visas were used with the intention of fooling the countries where they passed through, because Italy, for instance, would never give a transit visa unless the final destination was indicated.”

Among those who escaped to Palestine on the “Sakaria” with Shanghai visas from my father’s consulate in Vienna, were the sisters Ricarda and Lilith Lilienthal, whose good friend Mrs. Ruthi Shany is here with us today.

Later examples of visas used for purposes of escape were those issued by the Japanese Consul Chiune Sugihara and the Dutch Consul Jan Zwartendijk to Polish Jews trapped in Soviet occupied Kovno (Kaunas) Lithuania in 1940. Both consuls knew that their visas would only be a means of escape. The end destination visas issued by Zwartendijk were for the Dutch Caribbean possessions of Surinam and Curacao. Zwartendijk in fact called

them “bogus” destination visas. With them, the Polish survivors obtained 10-day transit visas from Sugihara to Kobe, Japan. From there, many went to the US, Canada, Australia, Latin and South America. A small number came to Shanghai, including the entire Mirrer Yeshiva.

More importantly in 1938 and 1939, the Shanghai visas were useful to gain the release of those jailed or in concentration camps such as Dachau and Buchenwald, especially after *Kristallnacht*, when 30,000 German and Austrian Jews were arrested and deported to these camps. Some, like the journalist Joseph Kalmer narrowly escaped deportation to Dachau with a Chinese visa. Others, like Arthur Kerdeman, only heard about a Shanghai visa after being interned at Dachau and wrote to his family to get him one. The Austrian physician Jacob Rosenfeld, who was deported to Dachau and then Buchenwald, was released in 1939 and came to China, where he joined the Chinese revolution and became a general in the People’s Liberation Army Medical Corps.

By the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939, 130,742 of the 206,000 Jews living in Austria during the *Anschluss* on March 13, 1938, had emigrated. Of those only 5,800 to 5,900 Austrian Jews came to China.

How many Shanghai visas were issued under my father’s watch by the Chinese consulate in Vienna? We shall never know the exact figure. The best we can determine now is that they numbered in the thousands, based on the serial numbers of some still existing visas and the only surviving documentation from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, a report written by my father’s successor as Consul General in early 1940. According to that report, the Chinese Consulate in Vienna issued an average of 400 or 500 visas a month to Jewish refugees from 1938 through 1939.

In this same report, my father’s successor said that “the Foreign Ministry had long ago dealt with this issue (of visas to Jewish refugees)”, leaving little doubt about what the official Chinese policy was. Therefore, he reported, when he assumed his post, he “adhered strictly to regulations” and “had reduced (the issuing of) these kinds of visas to the very lowest level.”

The government had attempted to curtail my father’s visa issuing activities in various ways. His superior Chen Jie, the Chinese ambassador in Berlin, was mindful of maintaining good diplomatic relations with Germany and angry that my father had disregarded his orders to desist from issuing visas to Jews. He used the pretext that there was a “rumor of the selling of visas” to launch a witch-hunt. Chen dispatched an investigator to Vienna, who left no stone unturned yet could find no wrongdoing and left empty handed.

On April 8, 1939, roughly a year after he began issuing visas, my father was punished with a demerit by the Chinese Nationalist government for disobeying his orders. Around the same time, the Consulate building at 3 Beethoven Platz was confiscated by the Nazis. The Nationalist government not only did not protest this breach of extraterritoriality, but

refused to give my father funds to relocate. My father moved the Consulate to much smaller quarters around the corner at 22 Johannesgasse and paid all the expenses himself.

My father was never reunited with any of those he had helped. He was unknown to most of them. After his death in 1997, it was only by chance that the extent of his mass rescue activities became known, even to his family. I have spent the past eight years documenting and piecing together this history.

During his lifetime, my father neither sought nor received recognition for his deeds. In fact, he rarely spoke of his tenure as the Chinese Consul General in Vienna. Of his reason for helping Jewish refugees, he said simply this: "I thought it only natural to feel compassion and to want to help. From the standpoint of humanity, that is the way it should be."

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