Jewish Refugees in Shanghai’ tells story of survival
BY TOM TUGEND

For Jews desperate to flee the Nazi regime but barred from entry almost everywhere, Shanghai was the Last Place on Earth and a rescuing Noah’s Ark.

Between 1933 and 1941, some 20,000 Jews, mainly from Germany and Austria, found a harsh but safe refuge in the Chinese port city, and a UCLA exhibit and symposium will bear witness to one of the rare Jewish experiences of the Holocaust era with a positive narrative.

The “Shanghai miracles” is “a story of remarkable survival and hospitality,” summarized professor Todd Presner, director of the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies, who was one of the main organizers of the event, together with Chinese studies colleagues and the Shanghai Foreign Affairs Office.

Opening Oct. 27 and continuing through Dec. 14, the “Jewish Refugees in Shanghai (1933-1941)” exhibition will include historical documents, memorabilia, photos and artifacts, most on loan from the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum.

Two panel discussions on “Cosmopolitan Sounds and Jewish Music in Pre-1949 Shanghai” and “Transnational Shanghai, Modern Metropolis” will be followed by a celebration on Oct. 27 to mark the exhibit’s opening.

Participating will be Chinese and American scholars and artists, diplomatic representatives and two “Shanghailanders,” who will recall their childhood lives in the city.

One of the survivors is William Han, who was 4 when his parents left Vienna for Shanghai in 1939 and stayed until 1947, long enough for young Han to celebrate his bar mitzvah.

Han, now a visiting scholar at the UCLA Electrical Engineering department, recalled a “good childhood” in the cramped quarters of the Jewish-Chinese neighborhood of Hongkou.

A more somber memory is the July 1945 U.S. bombing of the city, which had been occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army since 1937. The bombs killed more than 30 Jews and some 500 Chinese.

In late 1942, Hitler started to put pressure on his Axis partner, Japan, to turn over the Shanghai Jews, so that they could become part of his “Final Solution.”

There are at least two curious explanations for the Japanese refusal to accede to the German demands. One goes back to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, when wealthy Jews in Europe and America remembering the pogroms under the czars — supported the Japanese side, an action that the Tokyo government never forgot.

The other explanation rests on an episode that took place in late 1942, when the Japanese military governor of Shanghai called in the leaders of the Jewish community.

When they arrived, the stern general asked why the Germans hated the Jews so much, to which the Amshinover Rabbi Shimon Sholom Kalish quickly replied, “Because we are Orientals.” At that, the general smiled for the first time and deprived Hitler of 20,000 more victims.

However, in early 1943, the Jews who had settled in various parts of the city were ordered to move into a one-square-mile ghetto in the rundown section of Hongkou, sharing the already crowded and decrepit neighborhood with the Chinese residents.

The two ethnic groups got along well, and, as they did in other locations in exile, the German and Austrian refugees soon created mini versions of their old Berlin and Vienna lifestyles, complete with theaters, opera, schools, sports clubs, bookstores and pastry shops.

Quite a different Jewish lifestyle was added by a few hundred students and teachers of the famed Mir Yeshiva, last located in Lithuania, which became the only yeshiva in Nazi-occupied Europe to survive the Holocaust.

The refugees were fortunate in receiving aid not only from their Chinese neighbors, but also from two earlier waves of Jewish immigrants to Shanghai. First came the Iraqi, or “Baghdadi,” Jews, some of who became great merchant princes, and later the Russian Jews, following the communist revolution in 1917.

Chinese officials first broached the idea of the Shanghai exhibit to the UCLA Confucius Institute, one of more than 300 such institutes in 98 countries supported by the Beijing government to promote the study of the Chinese language and culture.

The UCLA Confucius Institute in turn enlisted the participation of campus experts in Chinese history, ethnomusicology, Hillel’s Dorort Center for Creativity in the Arts, the German consulate in Los Angeles and the UCLA Library, which will mount a satellite exhibition from its own collection.

The Chinese government initiative in proposing the Shanghai exhibit at UCLA is another indication of the country’s more open attitude toward Western academicians, Presner said.

In particular, many Chinese intellectuals have long felt a certain affinity for the Jewish people, he noted, as members of an ancient civilization with a history of suffering and discrimination similar to their own.

“Chinese scholars are particularly interested in examining how the Jewish people have been able to adapt to the modern world while still retaining their own culture,” Presner observed.

China’s growing interest in American academic life is indicated by the increasing number of its students enrolling in American universities. During this year’s summer session, some 800 “fully paid” Chinese students attended UCLA classes, said Susan Portal Jain, executive director of the Confucius Institute on the Westwood campus.

The academic flow between the two countries runs both ways. One example is the Institute of Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, bearing the name of Los Angeles philanthropists Diane and Guilford Glazer.

Among co-sponsors of the Shanghai exhibit is Facing History and Ourselves, an international educational and professional development organization. It is hosting a Nov. 3 workshop for educators, focusing on using the personal narratives of survivors and survivors to teach middle and high school students about history, compassion and creativity.

The “Jewish Refugees in Shanghai” exhibition will be open to the public without charge Oct. 27-Dec. 14, Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.- 4 p.m., at Hillel at UCLA, 574 Hilgard Ave. Paid parking is available on campus at Lot 2, at the corner of Hilgard and Westholme avenues.

To attend the Oct. 27 symposium and opening celebration, pre-registration is required; call (310) 267-5327 or e-mail cfsrsvp@humnet.ucla.edu.