

Hailing an unsung Holocaust hero

Chinese diplomat honoured for helping Jews escape Vienna

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BY DEE GIBNEY

There's no doubt in Eric Goldstaub's mind. He owes his life to consul general Feng Shan Ho.

The Chinese diplomat, who died in 1997 at age 96, was an unsung hero for the lives he saved during the Holocaust in Vienna. But not even those he helped knew about him.

Only now is that changing, thanks to a recent exhibition entitled "Jews in Shanghai, The Story of Survival," a joint project mounted by the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto with the assistance of the Jewish communities in Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg.

Goldstaub knows the story well. He lived it. And now, at 80, he retells it in his North York home.

When the Nazis descended on Austria in March, 1938, life changed forever for Goldstaub. He was a 17-year-old student and he lived well, as did many of the more than 200,000 Jews in Vienna. His father owned a large store supplying fabric to clothing manufacturers.

The day after the Nazis rolled into Austria, Goldstaub, his father and countless other Jews were forced to scrub the streets clean of Austrian election slogans. They were hit, harassed and humiliated. But it was only the beginning.

"Every other day, there was another regulation against the Jews," Goldstaub recalls.

Jewish children could no longer attend regular schools. Families were evicted from their homes. They lost their jobs and were banned from public places. Their passports were stamped with a large red "J". Businesses were seized.

As the Nazi noose tightened, young Goldstaub made the rounds of Vienna's consulates, trying to secure visas for his extended family so they could leave. Day after day was spent in futile queues. He appealed to 20 consulates. Even as the desperate waited in line, they were harassed and beaten by the Nazis.

Then one day, after two months, a miracle. The Chinese consulate issued 18 visas to Goldstaub for his extended family. The man executing this liberal policy – in defiance of his boss in Berlin – was Dr. Feng Shan Ho.

According to daughter Manli Ho, 51, who now lives in Maine, Ho knew the visas were a ticket to freedom, a means for the Jews to leave and get to wherever they could. And for thousands, that was Shanghai, one of the few places that allowed a stateless person to disembark.

Goldstaub and his family obtained tickets on a ship sailing from Italy, on Nov. 28, 1938. But not before the ignominious Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, on Nov. 9. Synagogues were destroyed, thousands of Jewish shops looted and 30,000 Jews rounded up and sent to concentration camps.

"They plundered my father's store and confiscated our funds. They helped themselves to everything. Then they imprisoned us," Goldstaub recalls.

"The policeman who took us in knew us very well. And we were able to prove that we had the papers to leave. So he let us go. At that time the Nazis just wanted to get rid of us. It didn't matter how. As long as they had our money and everything we owned, they didn't care."

With only the clothes on their backs, Goldstaub and his relatives boarded a train to Italy, then sailed for Shanghai. Few had any idea of what lay ahead.

"A catastrophe," is how one survivor describes it. The Japanese had bombed Shanghai in their war with China and the city was in a shambles.

"It was crowded and there was sickness and the sanitation was not what we were used to," recalls Eva Huber, 65, who lives in Toronto. She remembers her mother writing to her sister and pleading for her to come to Shanghai.

"I would rather take my chances here than go to that hellhole," Huber's aunt wrote back.

"She perished. None of my relatives left behind survived."

Was Shanghai a hellhole? Huber answers without hesitation.

"No, because we were alive.

"If it wasn't for Shanghai, I wouldn't be speaking to you today. I would be one of the 6 million (Jews who died during the Holocaust). There was simply no place for us to go."

In fact, to help the newcomers, there was already an established Jewish community in Shanghai. Some had ancestors who had come from the Middle East in the mid-1800s and were now prospering. They set up soup kitchens and temporary housing in their warehouses. There were also Russian Jews who came in the 1920s to escape the pogroms. And help came too from international Jewish organizations.

Goldstaub's family was one of nine who lived in a three-storey house. There was one bathroom.

Goldstaub found a job in an import/export business. In the evening, the enterprising teen ran a small dance school with a partner.

"At least 40 people turned up every night. And today it's still what people talk about when they remember those times."

They may have been materially poor but the refugees were rich in culture, knowledge and education. There were doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects, engineers, pharmacists, reporters, editors, actors, accountants, artists, musicians. One account lists 15 orchestra conductors. They took whatever jobs they could.

They established their own health care, schools, clubs, publications, music groups and theatres. There was no discrimination. The Chinese who themselves had known persecution accepted the newcomers in their midst.

"They were always good to us – and they loved children," Goldstaub says, a fact that speaks eloquently from the pages of his many photo albums.

As World War II raged, Shanghai's Japanese occupiers confined all Jews who had been citizens of Allied countries to one small ghetto, Hongkou, where many Jews already lived.

It was only after the war that the Shanghai Jews learned of the horror in Europe and that their families had perished.

Restrictions on the ghetto were lifted, and once again the community tried to pick up the pieces. It's from this period that Goldstaub's albums nearly burst with pictures of his friends and family.

But it all came to an end when the Communists took over in 1949. Once again, belongings, now meagre, were surrendered and businesses liquidated.

"We were 300 Austrians in Shanghai waiting for the U.S. quota," Goldstaub says. "Canada agreed to let us stay until our turn came up. Most eventually went to the U.S. But in the end a few of us were allowed to stay in Canada."

Goldstaub, by then in his late 20s, landed a job as an export manager within a day. Two years later he sent for a neighbour from Shanghai, Jutta Pendzel, who had gone to Israel with her family. They were married within a week. They went on to have two sons and a daughter.

It wasn't until recently that Goldstaub learned the name of the man who saved him.

Ho himself never told anyone his story, says his daughter. She remembers him as dynamic and brilliant and absolutely unwavering in his principles.

"He taught us that whatever gifts we received in life were not for our own personal use but to serve others. His entire ethic was giving back and serving."

His story came to light when a number of people whose lives he saved appealed to Israel to honour him with the Righteous Among the Nations Award, which is granted to Gentiles who put themselves at risk to save Jews during the Holocaust (Oscar Schindler among them). The honour was bestowed on Ho in July, 2000.

Ho, who was posted to Vienna in May, 1938, two months after the Nazis annexed Austria, remained until May, 1940. It's believed he issued thousands of visas to Shanghai during that time.

To this day, Shanghai Jews over the world still call themselves "Shanghaianders" and consider Shanghai their "home city."

"Even now when we get together," Goldstaub says, "we still feel like a close family."

Now a widower, he still goes to work daily – a successful clock company he founded 35 years ago. And he still eats Chinese food almost every day.

"I still feel half-Chinese," he says with a laugh."