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Wartime Exile in Shanghai: A Socio-Demographic Portrait

Christian Henriot

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During World War II, Shanghai became an unlikely haven for thousands of European Jewish refugees and other foreigners fleeing persecution. The city's unique status as an open port (requiring no visa for entry into the International Settlement) made it a "port of last resort" when most of the world's doors were closed. By the early 1940s, over 18,000 Jewish refugees from Central Europe had arrived in Shanghai, joining earlier Russian Jewish émigrés and other stateless persons. Concentrated in the Hongkou (Hongkew) district under Japanese occupation, these refugees formed a vibrant but precarious enclave. This article provides a socio-demographic portrait of that exile community through the lens of a rare primary source: the 1944 "Register of Foreigners Residing in Dee Lay Jao Police District" (提籃橋分局外人名簿), an extensive registry compiled by local authorities.¹ Using this list of foreigners as data, we examine the population structure of wartime refugees in Shanghai. We contextualize these findings within the broader historical setting – the refugees' stateless condition, the policies of the Japanese administration (including the creation of a "Restricted Sector" or ghetto), and the critical role of aid networks like the Committee for Assistance of European Jewish Refugees and the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Drawing on the extensive scholarship by Marcia R. Ristaino, Irene Eber, Jonathan Goldstein, Steve Hochstadt, and others, we offer both granular analysis of the refugee community and comparative insights into this episode of urban exile.²

Refugees and Statelessness in Wartime Shanghai

Shanghai in the late 1930s was a city of complex political status, divided into foreign-controlled enclaves and a Japanese-occupied sector. Crucially, it was one of the very few places in the world where entry visas were not required – a quirk of extraterritorial treaty-port governance. As Nazi persecution intensified (especially after the *Anschluss* of Austria and *Kristallnacht* in 1938), thousands of Jews desperate to escape Europe found passage to Shanghai, "an unlikely destination"

¹ The primary source for the data analyzed here is the *List of Foreigners Residing in Dee Lay Jao Police District (Tilanqiao), including Foreigners holding Chinese Naturalization Papers*, compiled 24 August 1944". See Sonja Mühlberger's contribution in that volume for context on the source. The list is also discussed and partially reproduced in Irene Eber (ed.), *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai 1933–1947: A Selection of Documents* (Jerusalem: Hebrew Univ, 2018).

² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951). Hannah Arendt's reflections on statelessness (Chapter 9) provide a theoretical backdrop for understanding the refugees' predicament. While Arendt did not discuss Shanghai, her concept that "the stateless person is the ultimate outsider, dependent entirely on the grace of others" resonates with the condition of Shanghai's Jewish refugees under Japanese rule – protected by no state, yet surviving via an improvised social contract and humanitarian aid.

often chosen only when more preferred havens like the United States, Britain, or Australia were unattainable.³ Approximately 18,000–20,000 European Jewish refugees reached Shanghai between 1938 and 1941, primarily from Germany and Austria, with smaller numbers from Poland and elsewhere.⁴ They joined an existing Russian diaspora community of about 4,000–5,000 White Russian émigrés (many of them Jewish as well) who had fled the Bolshevik Revolution and civil war in the 1920s. Unlike the new arrivals, many Russian Jews in Shanghai possessed Nansen passports or other papers, but effectively they too were stateless – a status that would later take on a very specific meaning under Japanese rule.

When the Pacific War erupted in December 1941, the Japanese military took full control of Shanghai, ousting the remaining Western authorities. The Japanese had occupied Shanghai's Chinese areas since 1937, but after Pearl Harbor they interned Allied nationals and assumed authority even in the International Settlement and to a lesser extent in the French Concession.⁵ The European Jewish refugees were “stateless” in Japanese eyes because they had no diplomatic protection (their citizenship was either stripped by the nazis or rendered irrelevant, and they were not citizens of countries at war with Japan)⁶. Initially, the Japanese administration showed ambivalence toward the Jews. Influenced by a mix of Nazi alliance pressure and their own strategic misconceptions about “Jewish power,” the Japanese military authorities refrained from persecuting the Jews violently and even resisted early calls to halt Jewish immigration. In late 1938, when the Shanghai Municipal Council (dominated by Britons and Americans) tried to stop further Jewish refugees from landing, the Japanese refused to enforce such restrictions. Throughout 1939, however, as refugee numbers grew and local economic jealousy mounted, Japan's stance shifted. In August 1939 – on the eve of World War II in Europe – the Japanese naval authorities in Shanghai finally ordered a halt to refugee arrivals (closing the last loophole of escape). By then, around 18,000 Jews had made it to Shanghai; afterwards only a trickle of stragglers arrived, including Polish Jewish families and yeshiva students who came via Siberia and Japan (courtesy of transit visas from Chiune Sugihara).⁷

Despite Nazi pressure (which at times included wild schemes to exterminate Shanghai's Jews), the Japanese did not implement the Final Solution in Shanghai. However, they did impose onerous controls on the stateless refugees. Most notoriously, on February 18, 1943, the Japanese issued the “*Proclamation Concerning Restriction of Residence and Business of Stateless Refugees*” – an order confining all “stateless” European refugees who had arrived since 1937 to a designated zone in Hongkou.⁸ This zone (about 1 square mile in area) is often called the “Shanghai Ghetto,” though the

³ For a recent overview of statelessness in W.W.II, Kolleen Guy and Jay Winter, eds., *Statelessness after Arendt: European Refugees in China and the Pacific in the Period of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025).

⁴ The founding scholarship started with David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945* (KTAV Pub. House, 1988); Marcia R. Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford University Press, 2001). In her book, Ristaino details how Shanghai's status as an open port with no entry visa requirement made it a magnet for refugees of various backgrounds, despite its reputation as a “last resort” destination. For the number of Jewish refugees (>18,000 by 1940) and the absence of visa controls, see Ristaino, p. 144.

⁵ Christian Henriot, “From Paradise to Hell: The Downfall of French Interests in China,” in *Statelessness after Arendt: Refugees in Asia and the Pacific during the Global Second World War*, ed. Jay Winters and Kolleen Guy (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2024).

⁶ Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence, and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

⁷ The Sino-Judaic Institute, “Shanghai - Hochstadt Continued,” The Sino-Judaic Institute, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://sinojudaic.org/shanghai-hochstadt-2-1>.

⁸ Eber discusses the February 18, 1943 Japanese Proclamation and its effects: “Only ‘stateless refugees’ were mentioned, not Jews...” The use of the term “stateless” to exclude earlier Russian émigrés; and the creation of the Designated Area. Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees From Central Europe*, 67–75.

proclamation deliberately avoided using the word “Jew” – it applied to “stateless refugees” in general.⁹ In practice, virtually all those targeted were Jews, since Russian stateless residents from earlier years were exempt (and Chinese residents of Hongkou were not forcibly removed). By summer 1943, about 8,000 Jews who had been living elsewhere in the city were forced to relocate into the overcrowded Hongkou quarter already inhabited by many poorer refugees.¹⁰ Life in the Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees was harsh – living space was cramped and standards of housing and sanitation were poor. Yet, as survivors later noted, conditions were not as lethal as in European ghettos: there were no mass killings, and the Japanese ghetto authorities (though often brutal in individual encounters) permitted Jewish community institutions, religious services, schools, and even cultural activities to continue under supervision. The Japanese officer in charge of the Hongkou sector, Kanoh Ghoya, became infamous for his capricious enforcement of rules – for example, requiring special passes for refugees to leave the ghetto for work or medical needs, which he granted arbitrarily. Overall, the socio-legal status of Shanghai’s Jewish refugees was paradoxical: they were stateless – without citizenship protection – and subject to military decrees, yet they survived the war in a precarious semi-liberty, effectively hostages of Japan’s alliance with Nazi Germany but spared from genocide. As Irene Eber observes, the February 1943 confinement order, though ostensibly a security measure, was the first and only overtly anti-Jewish policy the Japanese enacted; it “was not taken because of military necessity... its purpose was to combat foreign influence”, concentrating a troublesome refugee population under tighter control.¹¹

The Tilaqiao Police District Register of Foreigners

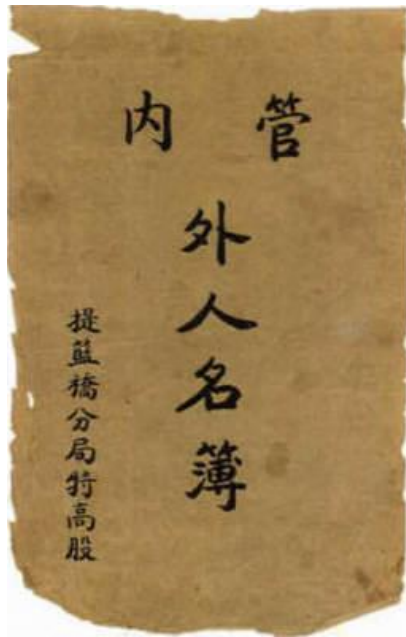
Amid these wartime conditions, local authorities kept detailed records of the refugee population. The most important surviving source is the “List of Foreigners Residing in Dee Lay Jao Police District (Tilanqiao), including foreigners holding Chinese Naturalization Papers,” compiled on 24 August 1944 (Figure 1). This document was a comprehensive registry of 14,741 individuals living in the Hongkou area who were classified as foreign. It was prepared by the municipal police under Japanese supervision, likely for security and rationing purposes. The list, spanning 473 typewritten pages, records each person’s name, sex, age, nationality, address, occupation, and any remarks. Importantly, it includes not only Jewish refugees from Europe but also other foreigners (such as Russians, stateless persons of various origins, and even some Asians holding foreign citizenship or local Chinese naturalization). The entries were grouped by nationality and alphabetized within household groups. Surviving copies of the list (preserved on microfilm and later digitized) show the data was originally typed on carbon-copy forms, some of which became degraded or partially illegible over time.

⁹ Shanghai’s *Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees* (the “Shanghai Ghetto”) is described in detail by David Kranzler, especially in Chapter 8. Kranzler provides Japanese proclamations and notes on Kanoh Ghoya’s administration. A Japanese justification for the ghetto stated that because certain stateless refugees “hampered the Japanese in conducting the Great East Asian War.” Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis & Jews.*, 255, 261–263.

¹⁰ Bei Gao, *Shanghai Sanctuary: Chinese and Japanese Policy toward European Jewish Refugees during World War II* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Françoise Kreissler, “Exil Ou Asile à Shanghai? Histoire Des Réfugiés d’Europe Centrale (1933-1945)” (Doctorat d’Etat, Paris VIII University, 2000).

Figure 1. Cover of the original “Register of Foreigners” (外人名簿)



This document was part of the archives associated with Ulrike Ottinger’s film *Exil Shanghai* (1997) and the book *Exil Shanghai. Jüdisches Leben in der Emigration 1938–1947* (edited by Georg Armbrüster et al., 2000). The 2000 publication included a CD-ROM with digitized historical documents, among which the register of foreigners was one of the most significant (Figure 2). In that edition, the register’s data were transcribed and standardized for analysis. The analysis presented here draws on that dataset, allowing us to quantify and profile the refugee population in considerable detail. In essence, this register provides a snapshot of the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai in mid-1944, at the height of its wartime existence. By that date, the community had endured over a year in the restricted ghetto area; many had been impoverished by years of exile, yet the population also showed signs of adaptation – from the proliferation of small businesses to the organization of schools and religious life. The following

sections explore the demographics and social structure captured by the list, and what they reveal about this wartime exile society.

Figure 2. Cover of *Exil Shanghai. Jüdisches Leben in der Emigration 1938–1947*



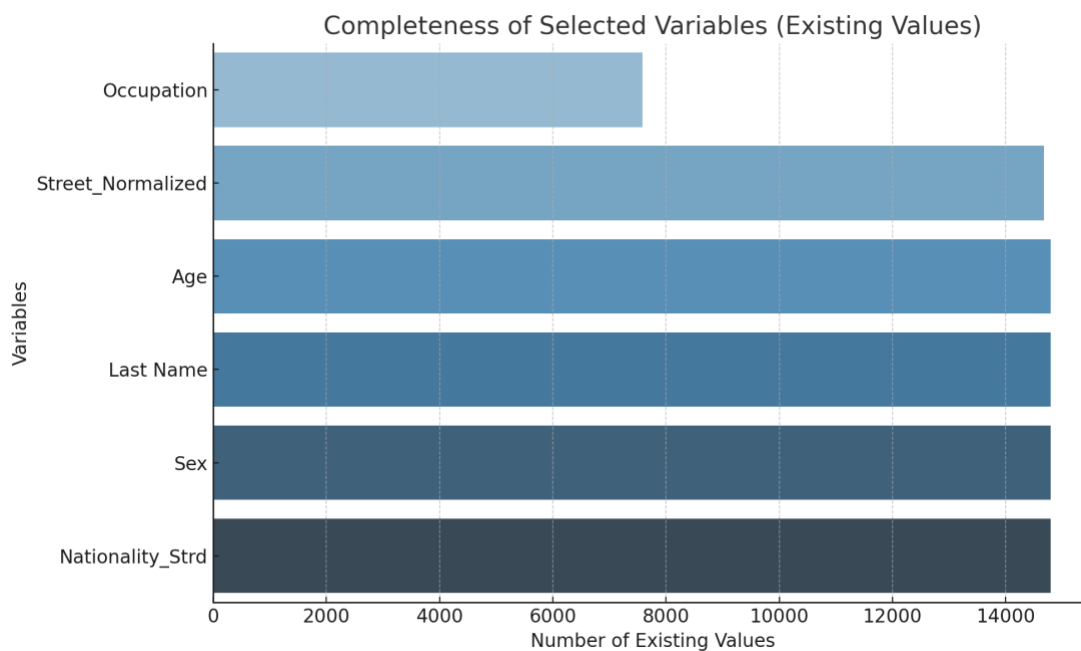
Before proceeding to the quantitative portrait, it is worth emphasizing the challenges of the source. The compilers were police clerks, not social scientists, and the information’s accuracy could vary. Ages were likely given as of 1944 and may occasionally be estimates; occupations were self-reported or assigned categories (with many refugees listing no fixed job, “unemployed,” or *ad hoc* trades). Nationality designations reflected legal nationality or lack thereof – hence entries like “Stateless” appear frequently. Some data suffered from *illegibility* due to poor carbon copies, especially at the beginning and end of the list, resulting in gaps.

Figure 3. Sample Page of the Register of Foreigners

FINNISH						
Name	Sex.	Age.	Address	Occupation	Remarks	
AARO Haro	M.	43	912/20 Tungwangdze Lu	Engineer		
AUNAHEN William	M.	43	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
AKTEROJHER Teivo	M.	25	170/30 Market Street	Nil.		
AATTA Matti	M.	22	170/30 Market Street	Nil.		
GUSTAFSSON Helge	M.	27	422/31 Kungping Lu	Nil.		
JOKELAINEN Kauno Imatio	M.	27	220/31 Kungping Lu	Employee		
JARONEN Paavo	M.	23	170/30 Market Street	Nil.		
JUVONEN Vaini	M.	42	599/31 Tungshan Lu	Nil.		
JUPPO Vaini	M.	37	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
JOHANSSON Anders	M.	24	50/12 Zangyang Lu	Nil.	Removed unknown	
KIIVAS Anter	M.	52	737/7 Tung Taming Lu	Nil.	Removed unknown	
KIHVANI Osmo	M.	27	35 Yulin Lu	Nil.		
KALSO Harold	M.	27	35 Kungping Lu	Nil.		
KUUSOLA Hannen	M.	70	41/20 Tan Tu Lu	Agent		
KOSKINEN Hugo	M.	42	^{50/26} 35 Kungping Lu	Sailor	Removed unknown	
KARSSIVA Hero	M.	24	243/119 Sanyang Lu	Nil.	Removed unknown	
KUVAS Antton	M.	54	737/7 Tung Taming Lu	Nil.		
KAUSTONEN Veikko	M.	34	737/19 Tung Taming Lu	Nil.		
KIEDNERO Walter	M.	28	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KATSSON Leo	M.	31	50/22 Zangyang Lu	Nil.		
KINNONEN Eino	M.	33	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KUHLING Bing	M.	40	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KATTILA Olavi	M.	33	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KOIVUMAKI M'to	M.	30	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KARJALAINEN Leo	M.	24	35 Yulin Lu	Sailor		
KOIVUMAKI Aimo	M.	40	36 Kungping Lu	Nil.		
KASSOJA Onni	M.	36	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KASSOJA Reino	M.	29	912/18 Tung Wangdze Lu	Nil.		
KI Karle	M.	47	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
KIANNEN Paul	M.	30	912/30 Tung Wangdze Lu	Nil.		
KED F.J.	M.	24	94 Hekshan Lu	Nil.		
Koko	M.	31	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		
	M.	32	630 Haimen Lu	Nil.		

In creating the dataset, the original researchers documented these gaps and standardized spellings of names and street addresses for analysis. Yet, street names required further processing to match with streets names in that period. Despite imperfections, the register of foreigners remains an exceptionally rich source. It allows us to reconstruct aggregate patterns of gender ratio, age distribution, family structure, geographic clustering, and occupational profile of the refugees in Hongkou (Figure 4). In the words of its modern editors, the dataset “*preserves historical granularity while enabling statistical and comparative analysis*”, making it a foundation for studying exile and urban refugee life.

Figure 4. Degree of Completeness of the data



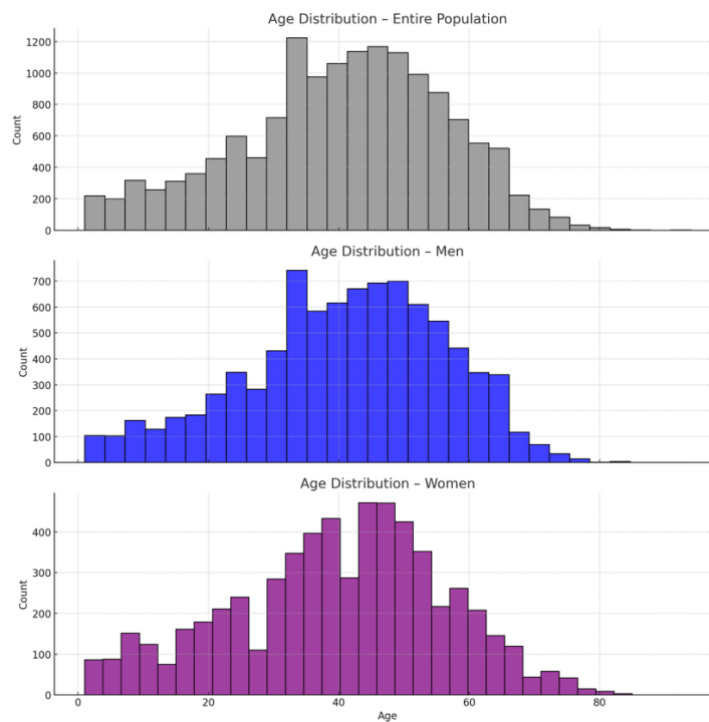
Demographic Profile of the Hongkou Refugee Community

By August 1944, the Hongkou foreign refugee population numbered just under 15,000 people (14,741 recorded). This community was roughly 59% male and 41% female, reflecting the gender imbalance often seen in migrant populations. Indeed, the list records 8,743 males and 6,049 females (with a handful of entries of unspecified sex). The predominance of men (approximately 3 men for every 2 women) likely results from several factors: many refugee families sent husbands or sons ahead or had men more able to flee; single men were over-represented among early arrivals; and wartime conditions made it harder for women (especially elderly or mothers with children) to undertake the arduous journey. Nonetheless, over 6,000 women were present, including many wives, mothers, and single women who escaped on their own – a significant female presence that shaped community life (from humanitarian work to education and cultural activities).

In terms of age distribution, the Shanghai refugees were largely adults in their prime working years (Figure 5). The list records ages for most individuals, from infants to the very elderly, but the median age was 42 and the mean age about 40.5 years. A striking concentration appears in the 30–52 year range. There were relatively few very old people (only a handful in their 70s, 80s or beyond – the

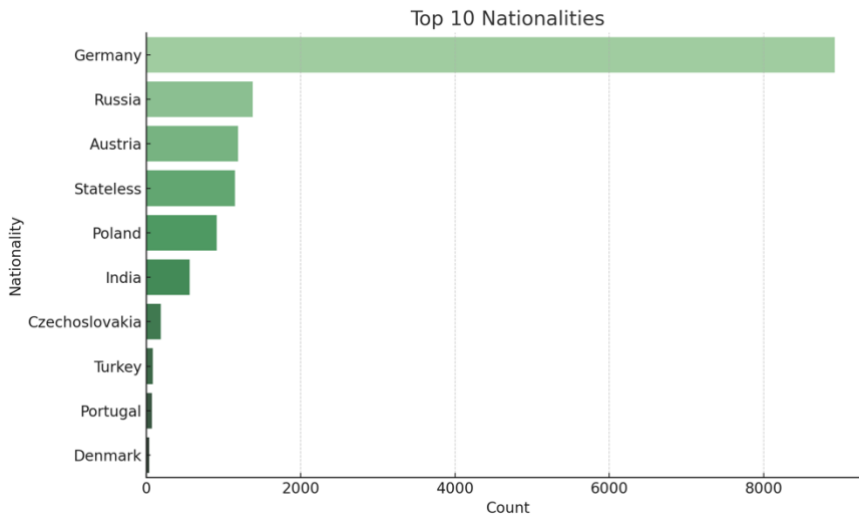
oldest recorded age is 94) and also fewer young children than a normal population pyramid. Children under 15 made up a modest fraction. This adult-heavy age profile reflects a community of exiles focused on survival and work, with many families having been split or having left grandparents behind in Europe. It also implies a future demographic crunch – which indeed materialized after the war, when most of these middle-aged refugees emigrated again, often to new continents, dispersing the community.

Figure 5. Age Distribution of the registered population



The national origins of the refugee population, as encoded in the list, underscore that this was predominantly a Central and Eastern European Jewish diaspora. Figure 6 presents the top nationalities reported in the 1944 registry.

Figure 6. The Top Ten Nationalities in the Registered Population



The registry data show a highly skewed distribution: fully 60% of the individuals were German or of German origin. Specifically, Germany accounted for 8,921 persons, the single largest group by far. This corresponds to the influx of German Jews after 1938. The second largest category was Russia (about

1,380 persons), many of whom were Russian Jews who had fled earlier or whose nationality was recorded as Russian (including some Polish Jews with travel papers via the Soviet Union). Close behind were Austrians (1,188 individuals, largely Jewish refugees from Vienna and other cities following the 1938 *Anschluss*). Remarkably, the next category is explicitly labeled “Stateless” with 1,151 people. In the context of the list, “Stateless” often meant European Jews whose citizenship had been revoked or who left on Nansen passports or as undocumented refugees. Many German and Austrian Jews became de facto stateless when the Nazi regime stripped Jews of rights; others from Poland or elsewhere might have lost papers. The prominent showing of Stateless as a “nationality” underscores the legal precariousness of the community – a large segment literally had no country. As one contemporary observer noted, “they are most certainly stateless, since they actually have no state – otherwise they’d be enemy nationals”.¹²

Beyond these, Poland appears with 914 individuals, reflecting Polish Jewish refugees (some came via Lithuania and Japan, e.g. the Mir yeshiva students, others were Polish Jews who had made their way from Danzig or via Soviet Asia).¹³ There is also a curious entry for India (565). This likely refers to a mix of Baghdadi Jewish merchants of Indian/British nationality (Shanghai had a longstanding Baghdadi Jewish community with British Indian passports) as well as Macanese or Goan Portuguese Indians who were in Shanghai.¹⁴ The presence of Indians in the list is not directly related to the Jewish refugee story, but they were lumped in as foreign residents. The remaining nationalities in the “top 10” are relatively few in number: Czechoslovakia (190), Turkey (85), Portugal (76), and Denmark (42). These likely include small groups like Czech Jews, a handful of Turkish Sephardi Jews or other Levantines, Portuguese Macau residents, and a few Danish or other Northern European Jews who escaped to Shanghai. In sum, the community was overwhelmingly Central European in origin, with a significant Eastern European element – German/Austrian Jews constituted the majority, followed by Russian/Polish Jews – and then a long tail of other foreigners. This aligns with

¹² Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe*, 177.

¹³ Andrew Jakubowicz, *Stopped in Flight: Shanghai and the Polish Jewish Refugees of 1941* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2018).

¹⁴ Maisie J. Meyer, “The Sephardi Jewish Community of Shanghai 1839-1939 and the Question of Identity” (Doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1994); Maisie J. Meyer, *Shanghai’s Baghdadi Jews: A Collection of Biographical Reflections* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2015).

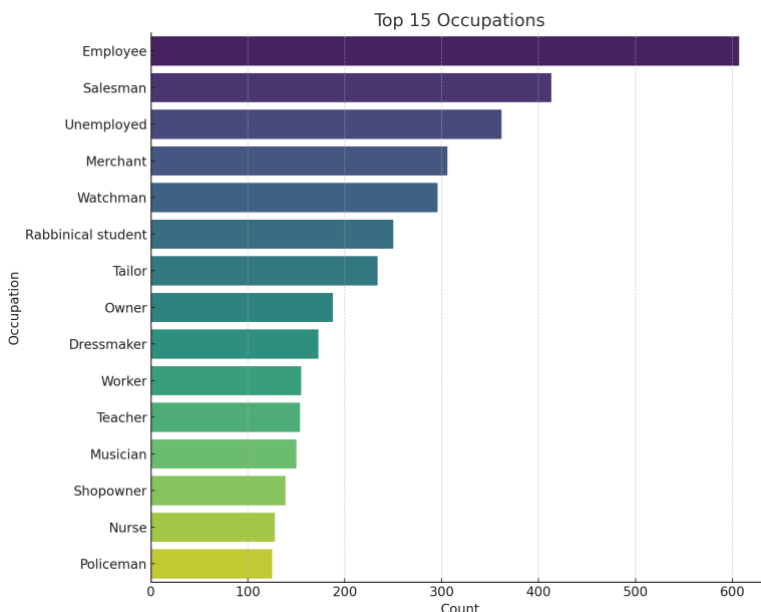
known immigration patterns: most of Shanghai’s Jewish refugees came from the German Reich and Austria in 1938–39, and a smaller wave from Poland and Eastern Europe in 1940–41.

In terms of observations, the dominance of the German group (over six times the next largest, the Russians) made German language and culture prevalent in the Shanghai ghetto. Yiddish and Polish were heard too, but “Little Vienna” in Hongkou was primarily a German-speaking enclave.¹⁵ The diversity of passports and statuses (stateless, various nationalities) created a mosaic of legal situations – some had consular protection from neutral countries, many had none. Notably, Russian Jews who had arrived earlier were not forced into the Designated Area because they were generally under “stateless White Russian” status and arrived before 1937; thus the Japanese proclamation’s cutoff date of 1937 spared them. This somewhat arbitrary distinction caused resentment and confusion – two stateless Jewish groups in Shanghai were treated differently solely based on arrival date. The Hongkou ghetto population in 1944 as captured by this list is essentially the universe of stateless Jewish refugees who arrived after 1937, plus a smattering of others living among them. It is thus an invaluable demographic portrait of those whom history often treats as faceless masses, but who here are listed name by name.

Occupational Structure

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the list is what it tells us about how these refugees survived economically. Each entry included an occupation field, though many entries are blank or say “Nil” (no occupation). The compilers standardized a set of job titles, which, when aggregated, reveal the occupational distribution of the community. Overall, the employment profile of the Hongkou refugees was extremely mixed – from former professionals and businessmen trying to ply trades, to artisans, service workers, and a very large number of unemployed.

Figure 7 shows the top fifteen occupations recorded:



¹⁵ Joanne Miyang Cho et al., *German-Speaking Jewish Refugees in Asia, 1930–1950: Shelter from the Storm?* (Routledge, 2025); Margit Franz and Heimo Halbrainer, *Going East--Going South: österreichisches Exil in Asien und Afrika* (Graz: Clio, 2014).

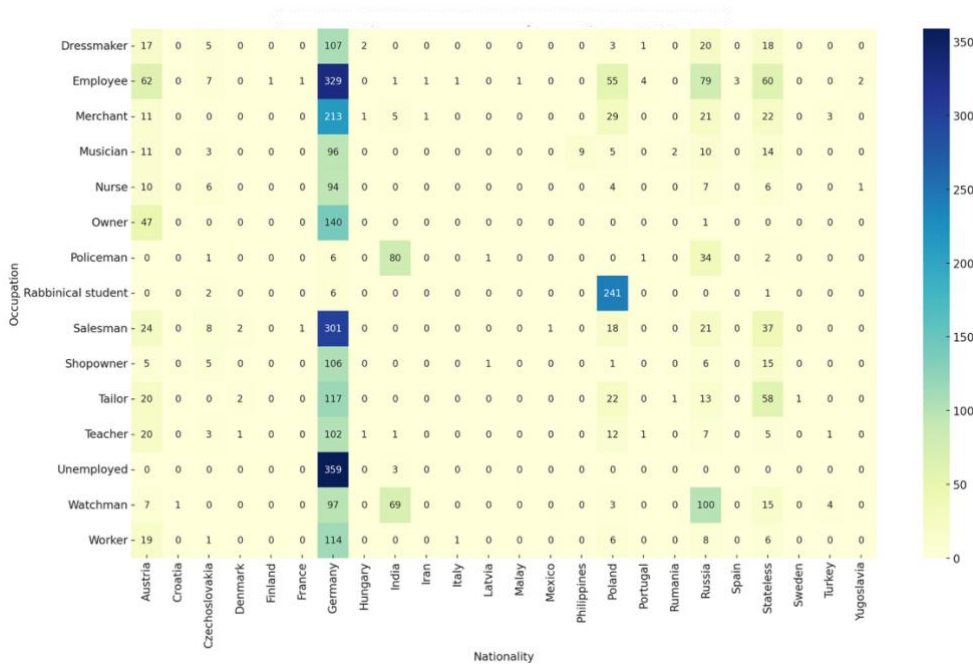
According to the dataset analysis, the single most frequent designation was “Employee” (607 individuals) – a broad term likely encompassing clerks, office workers, or company employees (perhaps in refugee-run businesses or local firms). The second was “Salesman” (413 people) – many refugees engaged in petty trade, peddling goods, or working in shops. The fact that so many identified as salesmen or employees suggests a community striving to be economically active, often in commerce. The third largest category was stark: “Unemployed” (362 individuals explicitly listed as such). In reality, the number without steady work was much higher – many women, elderly, or those doing odd jobs might have been recorded as having no occupation or left blank. Merchant was next (306 people), indicating those who managed to run their own trading ventures or shops. Another notable entry is “Watchman” (296 individuals). The refugees, being generally penniless, took any work available – a large number of men found work as night watchmen or guards in exchange for a basic wage and room. Other significant occupations included “Tailor,” “Dressmaker,” “Shopowner,” “Teacher,” “Musician,” “Nurse,” and even a handful of “Policeman”. A small but visible group of young men were recorded as “Rabbinical student”, reflecting the yeshiva students and others continuing religious study in exile.¹⁶

This diverse range of occupations paints a picture of an enterprising and improvised economy in the ghetto. Refugees turned to whatever skills they had: commercial and retail trade was dominant (salesmen, shopkeepers – reflecting the many small cafés, bakeries, tailors, and stalls that refugees opened, creating a “Little Vienna” business district in Hongkou). Another large sector was manual labor and skilled crafts (tailors, dressmakers, carpenters, mechanics, as well as watchmen and other security or maintenance jobs). A third area was professional services, though smaller in number – teachers, doctors or nurses, a few lawyers or engineers. The presence of musicians, actors, writers also indicates a cultural life (Shanghai’s refugees organized theaters and orchestras, performing operettas and classical music to maintain morale).¹⁷ Not least, the category of “Unemployed” underscores the hardship: many refugees relied on charity and soup kitchens. Indeed, poverty was rampant – by 1943–44, as their savings ran out, most refugees depended on relief for daily meals. As Steve Hochstadt notes, one segment of about 2,500 refugees lived in Heime (group dormitories/barracks run by relief agencies), having nothing left. A larger second segment squeezed into one-room accommodations and survived on one charity meal a day and occasional earnings. A relatively small top segment – early arrivals with some resources – managed to rent decent flats and even employ a few fellow refugees.

¹⁶ Jay Winter, “A Moveable Feast: The Mir Yeshiva from Vilna to Shanghai and Beyond,” in *Statelessness after Arendt: European Refugees in China and the Pacific in the Period of the Second World War*, ed. Kolleen Guy and Jay Winter (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2025).

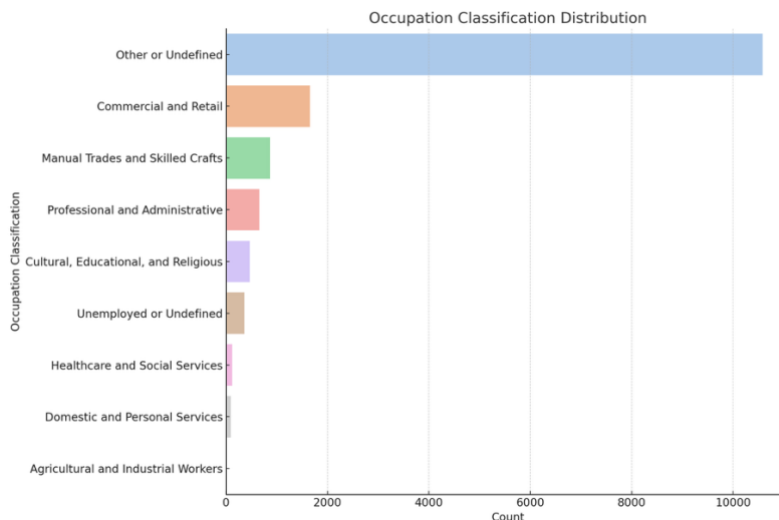
¹⁷ Yating Tang, *The Sound of Exile: European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, 1938-1947*, Modern Jewish History (Syracuse , N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2025); Sophie Fetthauer, *Musiker und Musikerinnen im Shanghaier Exil 1938-1949*, Musik im “Dritten Reich” und im Exil (Neumünster : Von Bockel Verlag, 2021); see also Wang Jian 王健. 上海的犹太文化地图 (Shanghai Jewish Cultural Map) (Shanghai : Shanghai Stories Culture Media Co., 2013).

Figure 8. Relationship Between Nationality and the Top 15 Occupations



To better interpret the occupations, I categorized them into broader classes (Figure 9). By their classification, about 1,653 individuals (the largest group) fell under *Commercial and Retail* (business owners, salesmen, shop clerks). The next was *Manual Trades and Skilled Crafts* with 867 people (tailors, dressmakers, cobblers, carpenters, etc.). *Professional and Administrative* roles accounted for 658 (teachers, doctors, nurses, administrators, engineers). A smaller number (few hundred) were in *Cultural/Educational/Religious* occupations (artists, musicians, rabbis, scholars). Meanwhile, a large number had *Undefined or No Employment* (including housewives, students, retired, and unemployed) – reflecting that many women were full-time caregivers and many men simply had no work.

Figure 9. Distribution of Occupations by Major Sector

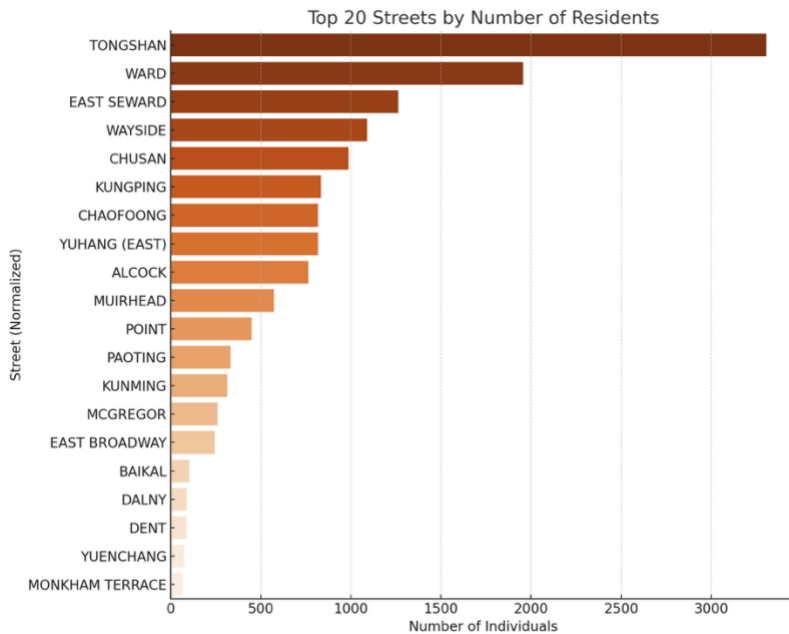


What these figures suggest is a refugee community that, despite extreme adversity, was economically heterogeneous and resourceful. There were tailors sewing Western suits out of Chinese fabric, bakers making *ersatz* rye bread, locksmiths and auto mechanics offering services, doctors treating patients in improvised clinics, and merchants trading goods ranging from cigarettes to pastries.¹⁸ The overrepresentation of certain jobs – e.g. watchmen – indicates refugees taking whatever jobs the host society offered to outsiders at low pay. The strong presence of “employee” and “salesman” also highlights that many refugees worked for other (often wealthier) Jews: indeed, the established Baghdadi Jewish community and the Shanghai Jewish Communal Association hired refugees as staff for hospitals, schools, and businesses. This mitigated unemployment to a degree. Still, unemployment and underemployment remained a critical issue, with all the social ills that accompany destitution. Contemporary accounts speak of malnutrition, with the Jewish relief committee feeding thousands daily in soup kitchens. That “Unemployed” was one of the top three categories in the police list underlines the reality that by 1944 many refugees had exhausted their means. It also reflects Japanese restrictions: stateless refugees had limited freedom to engage in business outside the ghetto without permits, curtailing opportunities.

This economic vulnerability was compounded by severe spatial concentration. As the spatial data clearly shows, a disproportionate number of refugees were crowded into a handful of streets within the Hongkou district (Fig. X). The top three streets—Tongshan, Ward, and East Seward—alone accommodated over 6,500 individuals, nearly half of the entire registered population. In total, just twenty streets housed more than 85% of all residents, underscoring the extent of geographic compression (Figure 10). Such density suggests not only the scarcity of available housing but also the coerced nature of settlement, shaped by both economic necessity and the constraints imposed by Japanese military authorities. The physical conditions of these overcrowded enclaves—often hastily converted warehouses, dilapidated apartment buildings, or shared tenements—must have magnified the health and sanitation challenges noted in contemporary reports. Spatial compression, therefore, was not merely a cartographic feature but a daily reality of hardship, surveillance, and constraint that framed the lived experience of exile in wartime Shanghai.

¹⁸ For a direct testimony, see Rena Krasno, *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai* (Berkeley: Pacific View Press, 1992); Rachel Meller, *The Box with the Sunflower Clasp: Uncovering a Jewish Family's Flight to Wartime Shanghai* (London: Icon Books, 2023); Sam Moshinsky, *Goodbye Shanghai: A Memoir* (Melbourne: Real Film Publishing, 2016); Sigmund Tobias, *Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

Figure 10. The Most Populated Streets in the Restricted Area



Despite the hardships, the list’s occupational data also hint at an impressive social resilience. Refugees did not passively languish; they built a semblance of normalcy. They founded coffee houses and restaurants where European pastries and coffee were served; they established a Refugee School (the Kadoorie School) employing refugee teachers to educate the youth; they had tailors making clothing for the community, and even a small newspaper (the Shanghai Jewish Chronicle). The presence of roles

like Rabbinical student shows that religious life and learning continued (notably, the entire Mir Yeshiva, around 300 students and rabbis, lived and studied in the ghetto). In short, the register of foreigners captures not only statistics but the lineaments of a refugee society busy reinventing itself in exile.

Community Institutions, Aid Networks, and Japanese Control

The survival of the Jewish refugee community in wartime Shanghai was not merely a matter of individual effort – it depended heavily on organized relief and communal institutions, operating under the watchful eye of the Japanese authorities. From the moment refugees began arriving in 1938, local and international Jewish organizations mobilized to assist them. The wealthy Sephardi Jewish families of Shanghai (the Sassoons and Kadoories) took a lead in funding relief. In late 1938, they helped establish a Relief Committee headed by Paul Komor (a Hungarian Jew and honorary consul) to provide shelter, food, and loans to the newcomers. This evolved into the Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai in 1939. Critical financial support came from overseas: the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) began sending funds that year, eventually covering the majority of refugee relief expenses.¹⁹ By 1941–43, the JDC was essentially bankrolling the Shanghai relief effort (around \$100,000 per month), enabling the community to run soup kitchens, hospitals, a pharmacy, and housing for the neediest.²⁰ The list itself is evidence of this infrastructure: many addresses in the Ausländerliste are the group homes (Heime) or shelters set up

¹⁹ Steve Hochstadt, *Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 30-35. See also Hochstadt’s online essay “[Shanghai](#)” (Sino-Judaic Institute), which describes the three economic classes of refugees in Shanghai (those with resources, those in poverty, those in barracks on charity) and the role of the JDC and local Jewish communities in funding relief.

²⁰ Cedric Devroye, “Jewish Presence in China and the Shanghai Ghetto,” *Témoigner. Entre Histoire et Mémoire. Revue Pluridisciplinaire de La Fondation Auschwitz*, no. 131 (October 2020): 22-29.

by the committee. For example, the Ward Road Heim or the Moiser Heim housed hundreds of destitute refugees who appear on the list with those addresses.

Under Japanese occupation, these aid activities had to be coordinated with or at least tolerated by the authorities. The Japanese established a “Bureau for Stateless Refugees” in Shanghai to oversee the Jewish ghetto affairs. After issuing the 1943 confinement proclamation, the Japanese insisted on reorganizing the refugees’ self-governance. They dissolved the existing representative body (the Jüdische Gemeinde Shanghai, which the refugees themselves had formed for community coordination) because it was deemed unsatisfactory in carrying out Japanese directives.²¹ In its place, a new council was imposed, headed by a Russian-born Jew, L.M. Rogovin, presumably more amenable to Japanese control. This council – sometimes referred to by historians as the Shanghai Jewish Council or a ghetto administrative committee – worked under the Bureau for Stateless Refugees. It was tasked with implementing Japanese orders inside the Designated Area, including registration, distributing ration cards, and policing minor infractions. Essentially, it functioned in a role analogous to a *Judenrat*, although in the Shanghai case the dynamic was different in that ultimate Japanese policy was not extermination. The council did, however, have to negotiate continuously for resources and liberties – for example, obtaining permission for a small number of refugees to leave the ghetto daily for work in other parts of the city.

Despite such constraints, the refugee aid networks proved remarkably effective in preventing starvation and disease. A hospital was maintained (the *Ward Road Hospital*), staffed by refugee doctors and funded by relief dollars. A maternity home delivered babies born in Shanghai (dozens of “Shanghai-born” children appear in the list with age 0 or 1 in 1944). Clinics vaccinated against cholera and typhus – diseases which periodically struck the crowded Chinese neighborhoods and could have ravaged the ghetto if not contained. The Committee distributed food rations: by mid-1944, each refugee received a small subsidy or food parcel; those in the *Heime* got free meals. Education for children continued at the Jewish Youth Association School (later Kadoorie School), which by 1944 operated inside the area with 15 teachers and hundreds of pupils. Religious life centered on the Ohel Moshe synagogue (a Russian-built synagogue in Hongkou) and various smaller shtiebels; remarkably, Japanese officers occasionally attended holiday services out of curiosity and generally did not interfere with worship. Cultural activities thrived: refugees organized theatrical performances, published a German-language newspaper, and held concerts. All these facets – hospital, school, synagogues, theaters – were supported by communal funds and relief organizations.²²

The Japanese administration’s role oscillated between neglect and interference. On one hand, the Japanese provided almost nothing in material aid – in fact, by early 1945 as Japan’s fortunes waned, even the basic rice rations for refugees were cut and the community had to fend off starvation by itself. On the other hand, the Japanese strictly controlled movement and censored communications. Tensions often ran high: the list itself was compiled by the *Kempeitai* (military police) or Special Police, reflecting an intent to monitor every foreigner. Yet the Japanese never fully trusted the refugees nor left them entirely alone. The Bureau for Stateless Refugees frequently issued proclamations accusing the Jews of black-market activities or “hampering the Japanese war effort” – propaganda used to justify harsh measures. One Japanese report in 1944 complained that “the

²¹ Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe*, 179.

²² Kathryn Hellerstein and Lihong Song, eds., *China and Ashkenazic Jewry: Transcultural Encounters* (De Gruyter, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110683943>.

refugees are all lawbreakers... although the Japanese authorities treat them leniently, their conduct is most unsatisfying,” a statement revealing the occupiers’ resentment and rationalizations.²³

In reality, relations on the ground could be pragmatic. Many refugees had daily interactions with Japanese soldiers or policemen. Some found ways to communicate or trade with sympathetic Japanese civilians or other Asians. A few refugees (especially from Eastern Europe) spoke some Japanese or had served in the Far East before – they sometimes acted as liaisons. Meanwhile, the Chinese population of Hongkou lived literally next door in equally crowded lanes; despite official barriers, there was significant coexistence and even friendship between Chinese and Jewish neighbors. Oral histories describe Chinese shopkeepers extending credit to Jewish customers and local Chinese youth playing with refugee children in the alleyways. This local goodwill, though not organized aid, helped the refugees psychologically and occasionally materially.

By late 1944, as reflected in our list, the community had reached a steady-state – augmented hardly at all by new arrivals (since immigration was barred) and not yet diminished by departures (which would only come after the war). It was a population in limbo, eking out survival day by day. Many by then had been in Shanghai 5–6 years and had adapted to a routine behind the ghetto’s barbed wire. They waited anxiously for news of the war’s outcome. In this context, the *Ausländerliste* is more than a census – it was effectively a wartime civic register of a community-in-exile, used by both the refugees’ own committee and the Japanese overseers to keep track of everyone’s whereabouts. The meticulous detail (addresses, age, etc.) suggests it was updated and checked, possibly as part of preparations in case of evacuation or tighter control (in fact, in mid-1945, as U.S. air raids intensified, there were fears the Japanese might relocate or harm the ghetto Jews; thankfully, these never materialized before Japan’s surrender).

Shanghai’s Jewish refugee community stands out in several ways when compared to other Holocaust-era refugee experiences. First, Shanghai was the only sizable Jewish wartime refugee community in East Asia, and indeed one of the few in the world that survived the war essentially intact. Unlike in Europe, where Jewish communities were annihilated, or in places like the Philippines (Manila’s small refugee community was disrupted by war), Shanghai’s refugees endured and could tell their tales. This has led scholars like Steve Hochstadt to emphasize *exile and survival* in Shanghai as a unique chapter of the Holocaust – one where a combination of luck, geopolitics, and local conditions provided a tenuous safe haven.²⁴ The list’s thousands of names are today engraved on a memorial wall at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum – each name representing a life saved, a narrative that continued after 1945.²⁵

Second, the legal category of “stateless refugee”, which the Japanese used to target the Jews, has broader resonances in 20th-century history. It highlights how the Nazis not only perpetrated genocide but also produced statelessness *en masse* by stripping Jews of citizenship (the 1935 Nuremberg Laws left German Jews as non-citizens; Austria’s Jews were similarly denationalized, etc.). Hannah Arendt famously identified the plight of “stateless people” as a defining condition of the mid-20th century. In Shanghai, we see a concrete outcome: thousands of people with no nationality, effectively outside

²³ Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees From Central Europe*, 176.

²⁴ Steve Hochstadt, ed., *A Century of Jewish Life in Shanghai* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019).

²⁵ Steve Hochstadt, *Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), <http://d-nb.info/1043472193/04>. Chen Jian (director of Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum) discussed the importance of the Wall of Names and the debates over refugee numbers are reported in Zhang Kun, “[Shanghai refugee book author honored](#),” *China Daily* (June 20, 2022). Chen emphasized using the list of names as evidence and mentioned Sonja Mühlberger’s contribution to documenting names. This underscores how the 1944 list has been used in public history to counter differing narratives about how many Jewish refugees found sanctuary in China

the international system, yet forming their own ad-hoc society. Marcia Ristaino's comparative study of Shanghai's Russian and Jewish diasporas underscores that both groups were displaced by authoritarian regimes and drawn to Shanghai by its lack of immigration controls, finding there a last refuge but also facing the challenges of stateless existence. Unlike many places where stateless refugees languished in camps, in Shanghai they managed to maintain a modicum of normal urban life – a fact that illustrates both the resilience of refugees and the particular environment of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan port city.

Third, the Shanghai case offers a precedent in refugee aid cooperation. The partnership of local Jewish communities (Baghdadi and Russian) with international Jewish philanthropy (JDC) and even Chinese charity (there were instances of Chinese civic leaders donating food or money to the Hongkou refugees) set an early example of global humanitarian response. Scholars like Irene Eber have documented how this transnational network not only sustained the refugees during the war but also helped resettle them after the war. In summer 1945, for instance, when an American bombing accidentally hit Hongkou and killed several dozen refugees (and many Chinese), the community rallied together, with the relief committee providing medical care to both Jewish and Chinese victims. Such solidarity forged bonds that lasted a lifetime. Many Shanghai survivors later recalled that Shanghai, for all its hardships, was a place where they felt a sense of community and mutual support that contrasted with the hostility they had known in Europe.

Finally, comparing Shanghai's Jewish exiles to other Jewish refugee experiences (such as those who fled to the Soviet Union, or to North America, or remained trapped in Europe) reveals an important counter-narrative: *survival through geographical displacement*. Jonathan Goldstein and others have framed Shanghai's refugee saga within the broader context of the Jewish diaspora in Asia, noting that it challenges Euro-centric Holocaust narratives that focus solely on victimization.²⁶ The Shanghai refugees were victims, but also agents – they moved across the world, interacted with Chinese and Japanese societies, and after the war many continued to contribute to new countries (some went on to Israel, others to the US, Australia, or back to Europe). The register of foreigners can thus be seen as a register of a diaspora in motion – most of those listed would leave Shanghai by 1949 (when the Communist revolution in China prompted almost all remaining Jews to depart). By the early 1950s, Shanghai's Jewish population had shrunk from ~20,000 at war's end to perhaps a few hundred. The names on the 1944 list scattered to the winds: some appearing in the refugee rosters of San Francisco, Melbourne, or Tel Aviv – a testament to the global dispersion of this community.

Yet, the memory of Shanghai remained potent. In recent decades, scholars like Irene Eber (herself a Shanghai refugee) and Sonja Mühlberger (born in Shanghai to refugee parents) have ensured that this story is recorded in detail.²⁷ The register of foreigners was first fully published in 2000, and new research continues to mine it to discover, for example, exact numbers and identities of certain groups (such as how many refugees from each European hometown ended up in Shanghai, or the fate of individuals after 1945). There have been debates, as noted by Chen Jian of the Shanghai Jewish Museum, over “the exact number of Jewish exiles in Shanghai” during WWII. The list provides “solid evidence” – real names that can be tracked – thus playing a crucial role in historical truth-telling against any revisionism.

²⁶ Jonathan Goldstein and Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The Jews of China* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015). Goldstein's introduction provides a historiographical overview of Jews in China, including the Shanghai wartime refugees. Additionally, Steve Hochstadt et al., *A Century of Jewish Life in Shanghai* contains essays that compare Shanghai's Jewish community with other diaspora experiences.

²⁷ *Exil Shanghai*, with Ulrike Ottinger et al. (Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion, 2002).

Conclusion

The Tilanqiao foreigners list of August 1944 offers an extraordinarily detailed snapshot of a refugee community that, against all odds, survived in the midst of war. Through analysis of this source, we have outlined the socio-demographic portrait of Shanghai's wartime exiles: predominantly Jewish, middle-aged, and male-skewed, hailing mostly from Central Europe, categorized by the occupying powers as "stateless," yet internally diverse in nationality and background. We have seen how these refugees adapted to their status as stateless urban aliens – concentrating in a densely populated district, forming their own economic niches, relying on extensive mutual aid and global Jewish philanthropy, and negotiating the strictures imposed by the Japanese military authorities. In the very data of the foreigners list – names, ages, addresses – one can discern the outlines of everyday life: clusters of families at the same address hint at crowded flats; repeated occupations like "watchman" or "rickshaw boy" (some younger refugees worked as pullers or coolies) speak to desperate livelihoods; notations in "Remarks" such as "invalid" or "blind" (which appear in a few cases) remind us of vulnerable individuals being cared for by the community.

Crucially, this case study underscores themes relevant to the broader history of refugees. It highlights how legal voids (statelessness) and geopolitical anomalies (Shanghai's treaty-port status) created both peril and opportunity – peril in that refugees were unprotected and subject to arbitrary rule, opportunity in that they could enter a place of refuge when no one else would have them. It also emphasizes the importance of documentation and memory.²⁸ The fact that the 1944 list survived and was preserved – through the efforts of archivists and historians – means that the identities of those thousands of refugees will not be forgotten. As noted in a recent commemoration, having the list of names is "solid evidence that tells the truth" of the Shanghai Jewish experience. Each name on that list represents a personal saga of escape, exile, and often rebirth in a new land after 1945.

In the end, the wartime Jewish community of Shanghai disbanded – but its legacy, documented by sources like the register of foreigners and kept alive by survivor testimonies, has become an integral part of Holocaust and diaspora historiography. It reminds us that sanctuary can emerge in unexpected places, and that even in the darkest times, refugees can organize a semblance of society and hope. As a microcosm of refugee resilience, the story told by the Tilanqiao foreigners list is both deeply poignant and profoundly instructive for understanding the human dimensions of global conflict and migration.

Dataset

[Exil Shanghai 2025](#)

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