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## Holocaust refugees who fled to China reunite at banquet

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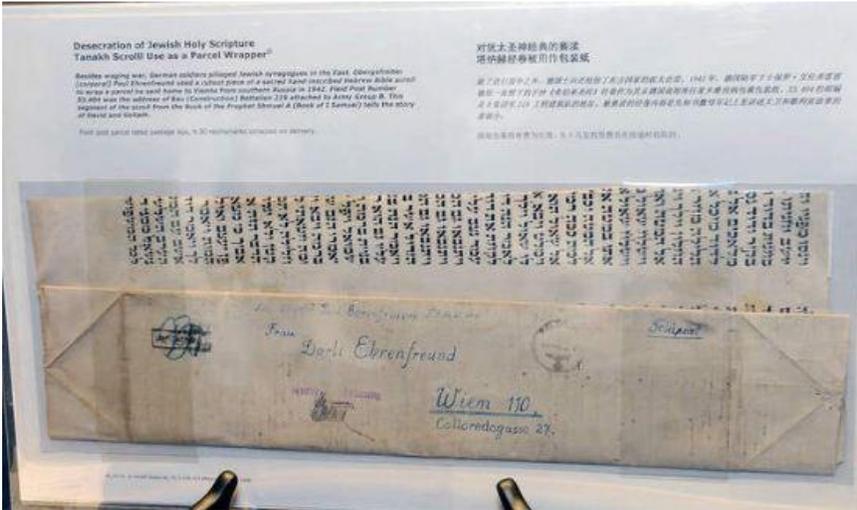
THINGS TO DO

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Ellen Wolf of Highland Park, examines some mementos of the Shanghai ghetto before the dinner. The non profit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation host a dinner for former residents of the Shanghai China Ghetto that provided a refuge for 20,000 Jews who fled the WWII Holocaust in Europe. The event was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel O'Hare at 9300 Bryn Mawr, Rosemont, IL on Thursday evening 8-15-13. Judy Fidkowski - For Pioneer Press Sun-Times Media ORG XMIT: 01106880A



German Soldiers pillaged Jewish synagogues. A German soldier used a cutout piece of Hebrew Bible school to wrap a parcel that he sent home in 1942. This was on display at the dinner. The non profit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation host a dinner for former residents of the Shanghai China Ghetto that provided a refuge for 20,000 Jews who fled the WWII Holocaust in Europe. The event was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel O'Hare at 9300 Bryn Mawr, Rosemont, IL on Thursday evening 8-15-13. Judy Fidkowski - For Pioneer Press Sun-Times Media ORG XMIT: 01106880A



Kurt Jacoby (Shanghai Ghetto refugee) of Highland Park speaks to dinner guest Arif Qureshi on Thursday night. The non profit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation host a dinner for former residents of the Shanghai China Ghetto that provided a refuge for 20,000 Jews who fled the WWII Holocaust in Europe. The event was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel O'Hare at 9300 Bryn Mawr, Rosemont, IL on Thursday evening 8-15-13. Judy Fidkowski - For Pioneer Press Sun-Times Media ORG XMIT: 01106880A



Mementos on display from the Shanghai Ghetto. The non profit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation host a dinner for former residents of the Shanghai China Ghetto that provided a refuge for 20,000 Jews who fled the WWII Holocaust in Europe. The event was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel O'Hare at 9300 Bryn Mawr, Rosemont, IL on Thursday evening 8-15-13. Judy Fidkowski - For Pioneer Press Sun-Times Media ORG XMIT: 01106880A



Judy Kolb of Northbrook, IL was one of the Shanghai Ghetto refugees and was born in the ghetto in Shanghai in 1940. The non profit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation host a dinner for former residents of the Shanghai China Ghetto that provided a refuge for 20,000 Jews who fled the WWII Holocaust in Europe. The event was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel O'Hare at 9300 Bryn Mawr, Rosemont, IL on Thursday evening 8-15-13. |Judy Fidkowski -For Pioneer Press Sun-Times Media ORG XMIT: 01106880A



Carla Shock of Palos Hts and Trixie Wachsner of Los Angeles, both Shanghai Ghetto Refugees are recognized during the event. The non profit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation host a dinner for former residents of the Shanghai China Ghetto that provided a refuge for 20,000 Jews who fled the WWII Holocaust in Europe. The event was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel O'Hare at 9300 Bryn Mawr, Rosemont, IL on Thursday evening 8-15-13. |Judy Fidkowski -For Pioneer Press Sun-Times Media ORG XMIT: 01106880A

They escaped to a place where their lives would no longer be in jeopardy — but to do so, they entered a world of squalor.

Sixteen survivors of the Jewish ghetto in World War II-era Shanghai reunited Thursday night at the Hyatt Regency in Rosemont for “Shanghai Memory,” an event organized by a Lincolnshire nonprofit. The Spungen Family Foundation brought a crowd of around 200 together to honor the men and women who, as children and young adults, lost comfortable lives in Nazi-controlled Germany and learned about poverty in the only nation that would harbor them: Japanese-controlled China.

“We wanted to get out of Germany, because things were getting bad,” said Ellen Wolf, an 83-year-old resident of Highland Park, born in Berlin. “China was the next-best thing.

“We thought it would be a temporary haven.”

It turned into a years-long stay that lasted after World War II’s conclusion. The guests of honor at the gathering spoke of being grateful to have escaped into a city that never persecuted them, but also spoke of the hardships they became accustomed to in a city that had no means of offering its new residents much help.

“The toilet was a bucket behind a curtain, which had to be taken downstairs for the sanitation department in the morning,” said Gary Matzdorff, 92, a native of Berlin now living in Los Angeles. “Fill it with lye, bright it back up again.” He, Wolf, two other residents of Highland Park, two now living in Lincolnshire and two from Northbrook joined transplants of Chicago, Georgia and California to eat dinner, hear a speech from Illinois College history professor Steve Hochstadt and receive five-ounce pure-gold medals from China’s national mint in Shanghai. Danny Spungen, a Lincolnshire resident and Spungen Family Foundation trustee, said he and Zhang Yuequn, one of the mint’s directors, came up with the idea of making medals for Shanghai’s Jewish ghetto refugees on Dec. 7, 2010, while Spungen was touring the mint on the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

“I do a lot of crazy things,” but he said it took years of negotiating to get approval from the communist state to put a menorah and other symbols of a foreign religion on one of their official products.

“Shanghai Memory” was timed in part to observe the 70th anniversary of the occupying Japanese military’s official creation of a Jewish ghetto, and in part to coincide with the World’s Fair of Money in the adjoining convention center. Spungen said he had the Shanghai mint create more than 6,000 duplicates of the survivors’ medals: 570 with one ounce of gold, and 5,773 (the year 2013 on the Hebrew calendar) with one ounce of silver, which he is showing at the neighboring convention.

Jenny Schwartz, a Highland Park denizen who was born to German parents in Shanghai in 1941, said she came to the event “trying to jar some of my memories” of her birthplace, which her family left for Chicago in 1948.

What she was trying to recall: a place of freedom and a reminder of lost opportunity.

The Jewish diaspora from Europe began with the Nazi Party’s rise to power in 1933, but became a much higher priority for many at the end of 1938, when the Kristallnacht attack brought Adolf Hitler’s plan into clearer focus. By that point, though, most of the world’s nations, enveloped in World War II, refused to allow European Jews to enter.

On the other side of the world, though, Shanghai had a century-old tradition of welcoming foreigners, and was now under Japanese control. The word got around Germany that families who could afford the train tickets to Genoa, Italy and, from its port, the boat ride to Shanghai, would be permitted to enter.

The 17-year-old Matzdorff, being raised in a middle-class family, took that trip. He recalled smelling Shanghai's odor as his Lloyd Triestino ship approached, but said he quickly found things to enjoy in the new city.

"For me, it was an adventure," Matzdorff said. "My father, he had the burden of supporting a family."

Matzdorff and his German friends were permitted to explore the Shanghai nightlife, and he learned the local dialect and dated a Chinese girl for two years. Before, during and for decades after his nine years there, he worked with leather products — with a chuckle, he noted that some of the ladies also being honored that night brought wallets he made for them long ago.

"You learn very fast," he said of coming of age in a free-but-foreign environment. "You experience at a rapid pace. Fighting for life, fighting for a job."

Jobs were part of the reason the Japanese government began to restrict Jews movements around Shanghai. By 1943, more than 18,000 Europeans had immigrated, creating a work force large enough to take a notable amount of jobs away from the locals. On Feb. 18 of that year, the occupiers designated one square mile of the city as the "Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees." The ghetto now had an official designation and, while it never had walls, its denizens could only hold jobs in that packed area and eat rationed food. They needed a pass to enter the city outside.

Allied liberators reached Shanghai in 1945, but the Jews' stay lasted about four more years, as many nations still would not accept them. Some immigrated illegally to Canada, some legally to Australia; those who attended "Shanghai Memory" all waited until the United States opened its borders.

"I remember very, very, very little," Shanghai-born Schwartz said. "I feel like I was pretty unscathed."

She said she was surprised by how many of the ghetto's older generation were still alive, and in touch with each other. At the table next to her, Wolf and Jerome Schachter of Northbrook met for the first time.

During his speech, Hochstadt noted the variety of survivors and their supporters that Spungen had found.

"This is a really peculiar crowd," he said.

Spungen, noting the advancing age of his guests of honor, said he was trying to make as many memories as possible.

"This is the last time this group will be together."

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