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Shanghai Ghetto survivors to tour Illinois Holocaust Museum, receive medal

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The front of the Shanghai Ghetto 70th anniversary commemorative medal symbolically depicts a Chinese woman holding an umbrella over a young Jewish girl. | Photo courtesy of Donn Pearlman



The back of the Shanghai Ghetto 70th anniversary commemorative medal. | Photo courtesy of Donn Pearlman

The Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center has done a remarkably comprehensive job in covering not only the Holocaust of World War II but global genocide both historically and in current-day times.

And it has welcomed survivors and rescuers as well as everyday visitors to its sacred and powerful museum to remember the past and to take action in the present to make for a better future.

One group scheduled to tour the museum this week comes from a lesser-known chapter of World War II Nazi persecution. The Shanghai, China Ghetto provided refuge for an estimated 20,000 Jews who fled the World War II Holocaust in Europe.

Seventy or so years later, more than a dozen Shanghai Ghetto residents from Illinois, Wisconsin, California and Georgia were expected this week to attend the Foundation's dinner in Rosemont and then have lunch and tour the Holocaust Museum for the first time the following day.

"This is most likely the last time so many Jewish refugees from Shanghai will be gathering for such an event," said Danny Spungen, member of the nonprofit Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation of Lincolnshire.

The Shanghai Ghetto or Hangkew Ghetto was formally established in 1943 in China. It was located in about one square mile of Japanese-occupied Shanghai. The refugees lived mostly in an area among the poorest and most crowded in the city, but American Jewish charities often helped out with shelter, food and clothing.

This week's gathering is also special because survivors of "Shanghai Memory" were to be presented with new silver medals specially struck by the Shanghai Mint to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Shanghai Ghetto.

"This is the first time any China mint has ever produced numismatic items with a theme related to Jewish history," said Spungen.

The design of the medals is filled with symbolism related to the humanitarian efforts by China to offer safe refuge for those who fled Europe starting in the 1930s. Spungen has been involved with the planning of the project for the past three years after an initial meeting with Shanghai Mint officials in December, 2010.

One side of the medal depicts a street scene with a Chinese lady holding an umbrella over a young girl who is holding a toy panda. The other side has a harbor scene with the SS Conte Biancamano (one of the steamer ships that carried refugees from Europe), the Bund business district and the words, "Shanghai Memory." Birds in the sky over the harbor fly in a formation resembling the number 70 to represent the 70th anniversary of the Shanghai Ghetto.

By: Mike Isaacs misaacs@pioneerlocal.com | @SKReview_Mike