Harbor from the Holocaust
DISCUSSION GUIDE
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The Filmmaking Process

In Harbor from the Holocaust (60 min.), director Violet Du Feng shares the story of 20,000 Jewish refugees who fled Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II to the city of Shanghai. The film explores the remarkable experiences of these Jews in their adopted city, including the bitter years of Japanese occupation 1937-1945 and the Chinese civil war that followed. Through personal recollections, interviews with historians, archival footage and music, the documentary tells the story of a group of people who, in tragic contrast with those who could not escape, were given a second chance.

Much like the divided city of Shanghai itself, the personal journeys of the Shanghailanders were nuanced and complex, reflecting the many groups of foreigners, Chinese classes, kinds of Jews, and the multilayered society that was Shanghai. As these survivors share their recollections, viewers are afforded the opportunity to ponder questions of identity, kinship, tolerance, and acculturation. Looking through their eyes, we consider what it means to be a refugee facing limited, difficult, and life-changing choices.
**SHAGHAILANDERS**

**W. Michael Blumenthal**
(Princeton) Michael was 13 years old when he arrived with his parents and older sister in Shanghai. They fled after Kristallnacht, when his father was arrested, and his mother’s store was wrecked. After three years in Shanghai, his parents divorced. He left school to earn money, working in a laboratory washing bottles and helping the chemists do their experiments.

After eight years in Shanghai mostly on his own as a stateless refugee, he learned that titles didn’t matter, that money is transitory, and that what you make of your life depends on your own inner resources. He saw there were uneducated people who had the courage, optimism, and drive to survive. Meanwhile some highly educated were unable to cope with the transition from the top echelons of society to the subsistence existence of the Ghetto.

Michael learned the lesson that out of adversity can come energy for much positive action. He served as Secretary of the Treasury under President Jimmy Carter and has been an internationally distinguished lawyer, academician, and author. For the past 20-years, he has served as the Director of The Jewish Museum of Berlin, the largest Jewish museum in Europe.

**Doris Fogel**
(Chicago area) Doris was 4 in 1939 when she and her mother left Berlin for Shanghai. They thought their boat would take them to the U.S., but it was turned away and went through Panama before ending up in Shanghai. Despite being educated at the University of Berlin, Doris’ mother worked in the Ghetto’s soup kitchen to survive. She recalls hiding under the desks at school, not knowing if her mother survived the bombing that liberated the city from the Japanese. The family was on the second boat out of Shanghai in 1947. She celebrated her 13th birthday on the ship to the US, weighing just 68 pounds.
Claus Hirsch
(New York City) Claus was 6 when his family left Berlin for Shanghai. It was autumn 1940 and they went by “closed train,” fortunate to escape at such a late date. His father was a corporate lawyer in Berlin, but could not find work in Shanghai. The family of 4 lived in a 250 square foot space. They were kept alive by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, where he now volunteers in the Archives. He recalls the difficulty of families like his to take charity and sees his volunteer work as giving back to those who helped him. In 1947 the family left for San Francisco, and Claus ended up at the Wharton School and finally in a position on Wall Street.

Lotte Marcus
(San Francisco) Lotte was 11 when her family received one of Ho Feng Shan’s life-saving visas. After arriving in Shanghai on a luxury cruise ship, the family was taken by cattle truck to a refugee camp in the Hongkou district of Shanghai. They shared a cramped living space with more than 50 other people for a year. They stayed in China for nine years before immigrating to the United States. In her later years in life, she connected with and formed a deep friendship with Ho Feng Shan’s daughter, Manli Ho (who also appears in the film).

Vera Sasson
(West Palm Beach, Fl) Vera was eight months old when her extended family of 17 left Vienna for Shanghai. Her father was a furrier, and his partner in England sent the funds for the family’s passage. They lived in Hongkou, on a Chinese lane where they were the only white family. She recalled that the father of a Chinese girlfriend arranged for a rickshaw to take her to and from school every day. He made sure that she had food, even though it was hard to come by in the Ghetto. It helped keep her alive. She also recalls spending time at the restaurant run by her aunt, Cafe-Restaurant International, at 81 Chusan Road (in the Ghetto). After they left Shanghai, Vera’s family first went to Israel and then to the U.S.
**Helga Silberberg**
(San Francisco) Born in Berlin, an only child of a family who owned a furniture store, Helga was 6 when the family fled after Kristallnacht made it clear that neither the business nor the family was safe in Germany. She attended the Kadoorie school for eight years, until the family was sent to a camp and then the Ghetto by the Japanese. After the war, she learned that her grandparents and her mother’s entire family had been victims of the Nazi genocide.

**Laurence Tribe**
(Boston) Laurence was born in the Ghetto in Shanghai in 1941. His family had immigrated there from Russia after the Russian Revolution. He credits his Shanghai experiences with inspiring his life, fighting for social justice as a renowned Constitutional lawyer and Harvard professor. Among his students were President Barack Obama and Supreme Court Justice Elana Kagan.

**Sigmund (Sig) Tobias**
(Sarasota FL) Sig was ten years old in Berlin when Kristallnacht forced his Orthodox Jewish family to flee. His parents were originally from Poland, but his father had illegally come to Germany, so he was technically already stateless at the start of the Nazi era. After the War, Sig became a research psychologist, a field he believes he went into because of his own traumas and his mother’s breakdown, which he attributed to losses of family and personal history.
Religious Jews on Street in Hongkow
Horst Eisfelder Photo

The Ghetto Alley in Hongkow
Horst Eisfelder Photo

Japanese teacher with children of the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School.

Erwin & Louis Eisfelder with Chinese employees circa 1940, Horst Eisfelder photo
BACKGROUND

**Jews in Shanghai before WWII**

Before the arrival of Jews fleeing the Nazis, there were two groups of Jews in Shanghai: Baghdadi Jews, and Russian Jews. The Baghdadi Jews (a small group of approx. 1,000) originated in Iraq (primarily Baghdad) and established homes in Shanghai in the mid-nineteenth century. Members of this group included the Sassoons and Kadoories (the name-sake of the school attended by the survivors in the film), and a few other wealthy businessmen who identified with British colonial powers in India and China. A significant part of their fortunes derived from the opium trade.

The Russian Jews (a somewhat larger group of approx. 6,000) fled their homeland in the early twentieth century, following pogroms, wars, and the Russian Revolution’s upheavals. Compared to the Baghdadi Jews, this community was much less wealthy, but neither were they poor.

Refugees from Germany and Austria, mainly educated professionals who had means, began to arrive in Shanghai in the 1930s. By 1939-1941, destitute refugees were entering by the thousands, including some 6,000 from Poland and Lithuania. Eventually these European refugees would outnumber the Baghdadi and Russian communities by a magnitude of 3:1. The newcomers, even those who were professionals or educated, were destitute. The existing Jewish community understood that their own fate would necessarily be tied to these newer arrivals. In part out of obligation to other Jews, and in part out of self-interest, they provided food, shelter, and education.

**Sources**

https://www.yadvashem.org/
https://forward.com/culture/books/442250/when-jews-were-kings-and-opium-lords-in-shanghai/
FA C I L I T A T I O N  T I P S

Before You Start the Film

Briefly welcome everyone thank sponsors, introduce partners, and remind people to stay when the film ends for whatever you have planned (e.g., to join in the discussion, listen to speakers, participate in planning a follow-up event, sharing a meal, etc.).

Review any essential logistics (e.g., location of restrooms, phone ringers on silent). This intro should not take longer than two minutes.

Introduce the film in a sentence or two by explaining why you organized the screening, especially if there is a particular goal for the event. For example, you might say something like, “We chose this film because it can expand our understanding of the diversity of survival stories.” Or perhaps event organizers are hoping to link to today’s refugees’ broader initiatives or draw attention to a community project to record oral histories. Sharing the goal of the event at the beginning will help you keep the discussion focused later.

When the Film Ends

To avoid the scenario of people drifting away when the film ends be prepared with a discussion prompt as soon as the lights come up. The guide provides a wide variety of prompts to choose from. They are not intended to be used in any particular order, and there is no expectation that a group would cover them all. Look for one or two that match your audience and event goals. The questions are simply tools to get the conversation moving.

To aid in the transition from film to speakers or discussion, give people a few moments to reflect or stretch before inviting answers, but don’t take a break.
At the Beginning of the Discussion

Structure the discussion to provide everyone who wants to speak with a chance to be heard and let everyone know the plan. Strategies might include using go-rounds (where each person takes a turn speaking), limiting opportunities to talk for a second or third time until everyone has had a first chance, or dividing the audience into small groups or pairs. You might also consider adding interactive elements by creating a unique hashtag for your event, or Google+ Hangout group so side conversations can occur online during and after the event. Encourage people to speak only for themselves and not generalize or presume to know how others feel.

Decide ahead of your discussion whether you want to invite people to share their family’s personal survival stories. If so, consider how to carve out time for that without shutting down discussion of other interests. Again, let everyone know the plan upfront.

If your event has a particular purpose (e.g., encouraging participation in a local initiative to help current refugees), be sure that everyone understands the goal upfront. If so, consider how to carve out time for that without shutting down discussion of other interests. Again, let everyone know the plan upfront.

The film’s tone is positive, even though it recounts difficult events. You can model that tone by inviting people to look for inspiration as well as injustices.

Remind your audience of the difference between debate and dialogue. A debate is about staking out a position and trying to convince everyone else that you are right and they are wrong. A dialogue is about exchanging ideas to learn from one another. That means actively listening as well as talking.
During the Discussion

The best conversations happen when the facilitator can fade into the background because the participants are moving in a productive direction. Be prepared to course correct, but try to avoid “directing.”

Think of the film as the teacher and avoid filling in with your own expertise. If you know, you can answer simple fact-check questions about names, dates, or places. Otherwise, if you are asked questions, turn them back to the group and ask what others think.

The film tells the story of people who found themselves in difficult and complicated situations where choices were often limited and alternatives confusing. Use non-judgmental language to help steer participants away from posturing, blaming, or judging. For example, start questions with, “What did you learn from so and so...” rather than “What did you think of so and so...” Help participants think beyond the actions of individuals to ways that structures, institutions, and communities can change going forward.

Differentiate between comprehension questions and discussion prompts. Comprehension questions test for understanding and typically have a clear, correct answer (e.g., What was the make-up of the Jewish community in Shanghai before World War II?). Such questions can be integrated into a discussion by occasional “check-ins” to make sure everyone has a common understanding of events or critical concepts. In con-
Trast, discussion questions are always open-ended. These are questions for which multiple valid answers are possible (e.g., What motivated Shanghai’s established Jewish families to help the newcomers from Germany?).

**Navigating Potential Conflicts**

As much as possible, anticipate potential conflicts and how you will diffuse them. For example, people can sometimes get caught up in comparing suffering. Below are some specific examples and models for ways to respond.

People can sometimes get caught up in comparing suffering. We don’t weigh oppressions in ways that make one more important than another or insisting that one should overshadow the others. Suffering as the result of injustice harms everyone. Specific forms of injustice are important to see and name, as is the idea that they are interconnected, and we work to end them all.

- If someone says: “You think that was bad? What we went through is worse than what you went through.”
- You might respond with something that acknowledges and values everyone’s experience: “Thanks for sharing. There are important things to learn from everyone’s experiences. One person’s story doesn’t negate the importance of anyone else’s story.”

At events focused on refugees, you may want to be prepared for someone to raise issues related to the status of Palestinians. You can keep the discussion from becoming acrimonious by:

- **guiding the focus back to the film** – e.g., “could you share one lesson you took away from the film that you think applies to the situation of the Palestinians today?” or “What might the survivors in the film think about that issue and what makes you think so?”
- **again reminding people of the difference between dialogue and debate.** You aren’t going to resolve decades-long (or even centuries-long!) conflicts at your event, but everyone in the room might be able to learn something new by listening carefully to others.
• If things get heated, ask everyone to pause, take a breath, affirm and appreciate the energy and commitment and take a cue from the Shanghailanders: Invite people to find common ground with those who seem very different.

**Wrapping Up**

*Leave time to plan for action; it’s the best way to help people leave the event feeling energized and empowered instead of mired in history they can’t change or focused only on injustice. Allow people to brainstorm next steps and/or let event organizers provide a call to action.*

*As much as is possible, be prepared to help facilitate the step(s) that participants choose with things like sign-up sheets or a specially designated social media group they can join.* Be familiar with local resources. You don’t want to reinvent the wheel or the group to end up competing with existing efforts. Be prepared to partner with local groups and/or recommend participation in existing listservs, social networking sites, or
DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Below are some suggested prompts that you can use during your conversation. You will not be able to discuss all of these, so we recommend selecting ___ prompts per ____ of conversation and keeping it relevant to a theme or your audience.

Opening Questions

In a word, what was your reaction to the film?

Was there a moment or story that you found to be especially interesting, inspiring, or disturbing? What was it about the story that moved you?

Name one thing you have in common with someone in the film and one thing that surprised you.

Warning Signs

Claus Hirsch says, “The Jews were very proud to be German. At first, there were people, including my father, who thought that, well, you know, ‘I fought in World War I. Surely, they will leave me alone.’ Well, that did not happen.” How might their economic or cultural success have masked signs that Jews were in danger from the rise of fascism?

Sigmund Tobias recalled being especially frightened by seeing a smoldering Torah scroll the morning after Kristallnacht. The gradual increase in discrimination hadn’t convinced the majority of Jews to leave. Why was it so difficult for so many Jews to decide to leave? What was it about Kristallnacht that clarified the danger?
Refugee Life

Sig Tobias remembers being shocked and frightened by witnessing drunk Japanese soldiers accosting her and feeling between her legs. As you listened to each of the stories, what did you notice about how age or gender shaped the children’s experiences?

How did religion serve as an anchor in turbulent times?

What did Jewish refugees in Shanghai expect from their lives before the Nazis, their stay in Shanghai, and their opportunities after the War? How did those expectations affect their ability to cope with the transitions?

Lotte Marcus recalls, “My mother was terrified of Shanghai. She said, ‘Isn’t this where they kill white people?’ That’s how much we knew.”

What role did racial identity play in Jews’ experiences in Shanghai?

Jonathan Kaufman points out that German and Austrian Jews fled neighbors that hated them. In contrast, “In China, everyone was kind of equal. They were living so close together that if they heard a baby crying, they would offer some of their food to the family with a baby whether they were Chinese or Jewish.” Given that one group was living in its own country, and the other were newcomers from another continent, what do you think he meant by saying they were “equal”?

Are there people in the film would you consider to be unsung heroes? What did they do that was heroic?

Describe each of these people’s role in the story of the Shanghailanders: Ho Feng Shan, Laura Margolis, Lucy Hartwich, Victor Sasson, Horace Kadoorie. Based on what you see in the film, do you think their actions were heroic? Why or why not?

Dianne Jacob, the daughter of Orthodox Iraqi Jews who worked for an opium dealer, says, “In some ways, it was like they were not in China. They were in their own little bubble. Shanghai in the ’30s was a place of immense wealth, and the Baghdadi Jews were a huge part of the wealth.
Families had servants, and there were dance halls. They had horses at the race track. Once the refugees started arriving, it was overwhelming for our Jewish community. And my mother was quite astonished by their condition and said that she had never met a poor Jew before.” How did these established Jews’ situation influence their response to the refugees and the refugees’ relationship with them?

Artist David Bloch was deaf. As his son Dean recounts, “He was an orphan, and he was poor. In Germany, he had a whole completely different social circumstance. So when he got to Shanghai, he was a bird that could soar. He was on equal footing with every European in Chinese culture because nobody knew the language. So that deafness actually became an attribute because he communicated as he always did through his life by using sign.” Can you think of any other ways that the circumstances faced by refugees turned former disadvantages into advantages?

Helga Silberberg remembers the Chinese as being “very, very gracious to the immigrants. We lived amongst them. They were poor. And they accepted us. There was definitely compassion for each other.” What did these very different people have in common, and how did their commonalities provide a foundation for the bond they created?

Refugee Policy

Laurence Tribe’s experiences led him into social justice advocacy work: “We are one of the lucky people who had a door open when so many others have doors shut. Opening those doors is an obligation, not just an opportunity.” In your view, what lessons do the Shanghai Jews’ experiences offer for situations involving refugees today?

Vera Sasson recalls being stateless with no clear destination after the war. Michael Blumenthal describes statelessness: “How do you feel if you are marginalized if what you want doesn’t matter if you don’t have a government to protect you if you think nobody even knows you exist? It’s a feeling I’ve never forgotten, and that’s how the refugees felt.”

How does being stateless make one vulnerable? What are the possible parallels with populations that are stateless or at risk of being stateless today (e.g., Palestinians, Rohingya, Syrians)?

How does the spread of war, like Japan’s invasion of China, create added danger and uncertainty for Jewish refugees?
Laurence Tribe witnessed his father’s injustice being imprisoned just for who he was, not because he had done anything wrong. The renowned lawyer credits such experiences for inspiring his current commitment to social justice work. **What did you learn about how experiences in the formative years influenced who these people became? What might today’s refugees need to have similar outcomes?**

What was your reaction to scholar Jonathan Kaufman’s conclusion that more than just individual efforts or stories, Shanghai was “the most unexpected of places, that saved these Jews when they needed help the most? Beyond politics, beyond rivalries and economics and military things, in the end, there was a human connection that was established between the Chinese and the Jews, and I think that created a common bond that you certainly didn’t see anywhere else in the world.”? What could you do to establish a human connection with people in need in your community?

**Preserving Identity**

Doris Fogel says, “It’s very important to have some culture so that you don’t feel, even though physically you’re alive, that your mind has gone dead.” Sig Tobias observes, “Studying the sacred texts really meant that Judaism was alive, and therefore that I was alive.” In Europe, Judaism made people targets. In Shanghai, it kept them alive. **What does this suggest about the reasons that refugees might hang on tightly to familiar aspects of their lives, including their cultural or religious traditions? Why would people resist assimilation, even in situations where it could improve their ability to fit in and succeed in a new place?**

How do you think the people in the film define “community”? What communities do they shift in and out of? What factors determine who belongs and who doesn’t?

**What role did language play in integrating or separating communities? How was it used to provide comfort, strengthen identity, or set boundaries?**

In what ways did Jewish identity separate the refugees from the Chinese and other residents of Shanghai. In what ways did it help them forge positive relationships with people from different groups?
The Daska Amusement Centre
circa 1942
Horst Eisefelder Photo

Young performer at a
Shanghai nightclub. Lucie
Hartwich, left, looks on.

Corpse on Ave. Edward VII
c.1941 (under Japanese occupation)
Horst Eisfelder photo

Tongshan cafe 1944.
Shanghai
Why did the school insist that students learn English? What did this signal about the community’s ties to British imperialists? Why might some have felt that they had more in common with the British than with the Chinese?

Terms like Near East, Far East, Middle East are all relative. When we use them, what does it signal about the source of our worldview?

Michael Blumenthal noted that “the energy of adversity ended up in some kind of creativity, and that helped the people to survive.” How does adversity spark creativity? How might communities spark creativity without imposing adversity?

Memory

Before viewing the film, did you know about the Shanghailanders or the Baghdadi Jews? What dominates our images of Jews from this period of history, and why? Why do you think the story of Jews in Shanghai been less well known?

What is significant about the Shanghailanders remaining in touch years later, and how does this serve to legitimize their experience? What does it mean to have collective memory?

How does refugees’ collective memory of war differ from the history written by governments, the military, the victors, or the conquered? How might we use civilians’ memories to reimagine that which is held sacred or true when we recall war?

The film shows David Block’s block prints, noting that he honored the people in his community by depicting them in his art: “Even though he was deaf, he had this amazing ability to understand life on a very profound and deep level...“Look at his artwork. You can see what he heard.” What can art convey that history textbooks can’t?

The film ends with children of the Shanghailanders sharing the personal legacies they received from their parents (e.g., strength and resilience). What do you see as the legacy of the Shanghailanders?
Discussion Wrap-Up

The story of the Shanghailanders is important because ____________?

Who would benefit from seeing this film? What do you hope their take-away(s) would be?

One new thing I learned from this film was ___________. Now that I know this I will ___________.

Follow-up

If possible, leave time after your screening for interested audience members to brainstorm and plan possible follow-up actions.

If they need some help getting started, you might offer these possibilities:

David Block gave voice to a vulnerable community through his art. Make your own art or create audiences for artists who are doing the same for refugee communities today.

Investigate U.S. refugee policy and find ways to support refugee assistance efforts in your region or community.

Use the film as a springboard to an ongoing discussion about diversity within the Jewish community.

RESOURCES

History of the Holocaust

US Holocaust Memorial Museum
https://www.ushmm.org/ - In addition to its function as a public museum, the USHMM conducts significant research related to genocide. The website includes a wealth of historical information about the murder of Jews and others during WWII and anti-Semitism.
Yad Vashem
https://www.yadvashem.org/ - Located in Israel, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center is a memorial and also a research institution. The website includes dozens of videos and documents covering the genocide of WWII. Search on “Shanghai” for documents related to the events described in the film.

Jewish Virtual Library: Refuting Holocaust Denial
https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/how-to-refute-holocaust-denial - A point by point factual refutation of the most widely disseminated claims used to argue that there was no Nazi genocide of Jews during WWII.

Jews in Shanghai

The Forward: Interview with Jonathan Kaufman
https://forward.com/culture/books/442250/when-jews-were-kings-and-opium-lords-in-shanghai/ - Kaufman is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has written about Iraqi Jewish families who became wealthy and influential in Shanghai.

Leo Baeck Institute
https://www.lbi.org/ - Specializing in the history of German Jewish culture and history, the site includes art by David Bloch, whose work is featured in the film.

Congregation B’nai Emunah
https://www.bnaiemunahsf.org/about/history/ - San Francisco synagogue founded by a small group of Jews who left Shanghai together. The synagogue serves more than 100 households today and is affiliated with Judaism’s Conservative Movement.
Refugees

Joint Distribution Committee
https://www.jdc.org/ - Information on the current work of the JDC, which, based on the Jewish value of collective responsibility that Jews have for one another and a desire to preserve Jewish identity, includes rescuing Jews in danger and providing material support to vulnerable Jews around the world.

UNHCR

HIAS
https://www.hias.org/ - Originally founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to help Jewish immigrants, the organization now works through a lens of Jewish ethics to aid a wide range of refugees. The site includes information about advocacy for refugees in the U.S.

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Entry Visa for Gerhard Danziger, 1939