

Port of last resort: a memorial in Shanghai

By Gil Kezwer

TORONTO—What a difference 60 years can make.

In the spring of 1942 some 20,000 impoverished Jewish refugees found themselves penned up in the Hongkou ghetto slum of Japanese-occupied Shanghai with the city's pre-war Jewish population of 10,000. The refugees—who came from Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia—and the pre-war community of Sephardi and Russian Jews formed the largest Jewish community in the Far East, with its own communal associations, synagogues, schools, hospitals, clubs, cemeteries, Chamber of Commerce, publications and political groups.

They were thankful to be alive in a world where perverse notions of racial supremacy had led to a global conflagration in which Chinese were deemed racially inferior and Jews unworthy of life itself. In Canada, half way around the world, Jewish immigration was severely restricted by director of Immigration Frederick Charles Blair.

Asked how many Jewish refugees Canada should admit, he replied "None is too many." The vast and under-populated northern giant only admitted one quarter the number of those who found a precarious haven in crowd-

ed Shanghai.

Canada has an equally shameful history in mistreating Chinese immigrants. Under the discriminatory Chinese Immigration Act enacted in 1885 and finally repealed in 1947, bachelor Chinese males were admitted as labourers but were denied the right to bring spouses. The result? A lost generation of unmarried men and the spreading of prostitution.

Six decades later a group of wealthy Chinese and Jews met recently in multi-cultural Toronto's glittering new Chinese Community Centre to raise funds for a memorial to the Shanghai refugees to be erected at the city's historic Ohel Moshe synagogue built in 1927. After a dragon dance performance, the East meets West assembly of donors viewed the exhibit of art by 30 local Jewish and Chinese artists curated by Toronto painter Ian Leventhal. This October their work will be permanently installed at Ohel Moshe.

More than a fundraiser, the gathering—in the presence of Lieut. Governor James Barleemann and Senator Vivienne Poy—was also a celebration that the two ethnic communities had overcome colonialism and racism to enter contemporary Canada's multicultural, multi-racial mainstream.

And what of the refugees themselves? After a decade living in the Orient, most of the exiles found permanent asylum in Canada, the United States, Australia and Israel.

Ironically, this community vanished even more rapidly than it took root. When the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists enveloped China, the refugees fled again. By the end of the 1950s, Ohel Moshe and Shanghai's six other synagogues were shuttered and its Jews gone.

Today most of the Shanghai survivors have passed on. But among those artists who created the memorial was John Vainstein, today a professor in environmental studies at Toronto's York University. Vainstein grew up in Harbin, Manchuria, the son of Russian Jews who had fled the 1917 Communist Revolution to find refuge in a city which like Shanghai had been opened up to the Western settlers during a series of 19th century capitulations to European colonialists.

Henry Ho, another contributing artist, observed, "By reviewing this history, we uncover the friendship and harmony existing between two nations. This in turn inspires us to work towards making the world a more beautiful, peaceful place."