



Refuge and Rejection: Hong Kong's Overlooked Holocaust History

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Key Ideas

- Holocaust studies have long centered on Europe, overlooking the little-known history of Jewish refugees in Hong Kong.
- Hong Kong played a conflicting role during the Holocaust, first providing shelter to Jewish refugees from Europe, and then later expelling them.
- Hong Kong's status as a former British colony reveals the contradictions of imperial policy during the Holocaust, simultaneously rescuing and rejecting Jewish refugees.

Recommendations

- It is important to recognize that **antisemitism has never been just a Euro-American idea; antisemitism can be traced around the world, including East and Southeast Asia.**
- **The story of the Holocaust must be told from multiple world regions to provide a global approach to the Jewish experience and to understanding antisemitism.**
- **As countries today face new refugee flows, experiences of Jewish asylum-seekers in Hong Kong show that offering refuge matters, especially at time of conflicts.**



Dr. Solomon Bard (pictured with wife Dr. Sophie Bard), a Russian Jew who fought with the Hong Kong Volunteers, was interned in the Sham Shui Po POW camp during the Japanese Occupation | The Hong Kong Heritage Project

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When most people think of the Holocaust, they picture the concentration camps in Nazi Germany and events in Europe. But the Holocaust reached far beyond Europe, following maritime routes to locations around the world. One of the lesser-known stories is how some Jewish refugees fled to distant colonial ports—like British Hong Kong.

Ryan Sun, a history PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, is studying Hong Kong's role in this global story. In the late 1930s, as Jewish families tried to escape Nazi persecution, British-controlled Hong Kong became a place of temporary escape and safety. But its hospitality was tenuous. Some refugees were welcomed at first, but later others were turned away, locked up, or forced to leave. Their fate depended on changing wartime policies under British rule and later Japanese occupation.

The Holocaust and antisemitism did not only happen in Europe. They were shaped by global empires, and decisions made by colonial powers often determined whether Jewish refugees lived or died. Hong Kong's place in Holocaust history has mostly been forgotten—left out of both local memory and global research. Looking at the journeys of Jewish refugees to Hong Kong helps us rethink what we know about the Holocaust. It also shows how forced migration, colonial rule, and racial discrimination are deeply connected.

Key Findings

Escaping Europe

In the late 1930s, anti-Jewish persecution escalated in Nazi Germany and Austria. Thousands of Jews tried to escape through increasingly limited and dangerous routes. Arthur Machol was one such example. After being released from an anti-semitism arrest in 1938, Machol decided to leave his home in Germany for his life. Transiting through Naples in Italy, Machol eventually arrived in Hong Kong, a lesser-known destination in the global network of flight from Nazi Germany. Hong Kong was an important port of transit, especially to Shanghai. As other major destinations such as the United States and France imposed strict immigration requirements, Shanghai became an alternative for Jewish refugees thanks to its relatively free entry status. For some, Hong Kong also became a temporary place of refuge. Though rarely seen as a final destination, Hong Kong was a critical waypoint—a threshold between persecution in Europe and the tenuous hope of safety elsewhere in Asia.



Figure 1. Jewish Refugees and Exiles to Hong Kong (Source: Jewish Refugees and Exiles from Europe, 1933-1943 by Michael J. Fisher)

Coming to and Leaving Hong Kong

The British colonial government in Hong Kong initially offered some limited protection to Jewish refugees, allowing some to land and remain temporarily. This guarded welcome reflected humanitarian impulses in colonial policies of the day and support from local Jewish societies. However, this openness quickly narrowed. Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939 and fears of espionage and national security mounted. Colonial officials began to withdraw protection towards Jewish refugees. In a stark twist of fate, German and Austrian Jews who had fled Nazi terror were now reclassified as “enemy aliens” because of their national origins. Some were denied entry at the border. Others already in Hong Kong were interned or deported. Viktor Lanzansky was one example who was interned after the Hong Kong government searched for all men of military age after the declaration of

war. The colonial government’s shifting stance—from reluctant protector to active persecutor—were shaped by racism and wartime pragmatism, even at the cost of human lives, as exemplified by the evacuation order during the Japanese invasion excluding non-white British citizens.



Rules and Regulations of the Ohel Leah Synagogue, dated 1902 | The Hong Kong Heritage Project

Locating the Holocaust in Hong Kong History

Despite the role that Hong Kong played in the global refugee crisis of the Holocaust era, Hong Kong is largely absent from public memory or scholarly studies of the period. After the war, the stories of Jewish refugees faded from public consciousness, overshadowed by the priorities of reconstruction and postwar identity formation. Local narratives instead talked about Japanese occupation and British colonial rule. This silence is mirrored in the field of Holocaust studies. Research on the Holocaust has been dominated by a Eurocentric framework that rarely considers how colonialism shaped Jewish survival outside of Europe. Ryan Sun’s research recovers the voices and travels of Jewish refugees who passed through this port city in the Far East, thousands of miles away from their European homes. This research invites us to reframe the memory of the Holocaust as a global crisis involving many places and the people who lived there. The geopolitics of refuge, whether now or almost a century ago, is a global one.

Methods

These findings come from a Holocaust Studies article by Ryan Cheuk Him Sun published in 2022. Sun analyzed survivor testimonies and newly published archival materials such as interviews and exhibits from the Hong Kong Heritage Project. The project showcases the narratives of hundreds of Jewish refugees.

Conclusion

Hong Kong's role in the Holocaust is a reminder that genocide, forced migration, and antisemitism were shaped not only by Nazi ideology but also by global empires and wartime governance. British Hong Kong is often seen as a peripheral location in this time period. But it was both a place of refuge and a gatekeeper to Jewish refugees by later interning or expelling them as "enemy aliens." For many migrants in the past and present, this labelling could often be arbitrary and discriminatory, used as a way to justify their expulsion. Today, countries continue to use the idea of "enemy aliens" to expel migrants, drawing a line between historic exclusions and the present-day.

References

- 1 Sun, Cheuk Him Ryan. 2022. "The Holocaust and Hong Kong: An Overlooked History." *Holocaust Studies* 29 (3): 393-413.

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About the Authors

Cheuk Him Ryan Sun is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at UBC. His transnational research expands the geography of Jewish exile outside Europe and beyond Shanghai, to consider the British colonies of Hong Kong and Singapore. He adopts a refugee-centered approach that highlights the agency and mobilities of Austrian and German-Jewish refugees in formulating their escape plans, while slowly becoming entangled with the wartime policies of British colonial administrations. His work shows how the distinct experiences of Jewish refugees in Hong Kong and Singapore have been ignored or subsumed within more standard narratives. He is particularly interested in Jewish refugees' ship-bound experiences, especially how transiting through colonial port-cities and encountering local inhabitants informed Jewish refugees' understanding of 'the Orient'.

Zixi (Peter) Zhang is a PhD student in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia. He studies early modern East Asia with a focus on China. His current research centers on the Chinese intellectual diaspora during the Ming-Qing transition in the 17th century.



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