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Research article

Shanghai Exile Narratives: The Russian Jewish Community as Hosts and Polish Jewish Refugees as Guests during WW2

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Abstract:

This article examines three exile narratives by Eastern European Jewish refugees who documented a major world-historical event: when 6 million European Jews perished in Nazi concentration and death camps in WW2, approximately 20,000 Jews were saved in Shanghai. By employing a conceptual framework inspired by the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, my article interprets various instances of hospitality in Rena Krasno's *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai* (1992), Anna Lincoln's *Escape to China (1939–1948)*, published in 1982, and Samuel Iwry's *To Wear the Dust of War: From Bialystok to Shanghai to the Promised Land* (2004). This article deals with spatio-temporal and bodily thresholds where hospitality is unconditionally manifest.

Keywords:

Shanghai, WW2, exile stories, Russian Jews, Polish Jews, Rena Krasno, Anna Lincoln, Samuel Iwry

Shanghai Exile Narratives and Hospitality

As documented in numerous historical studies, many European Jews found refuge in Shanghai during WW2, where they arrived in five waves. Since the 1990s, former Shanghai Jewish refugees have authored several exile narratives,[1] memoirs which Michael Seidel defines as stories written by 'someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another,'[2] signifying a dual consciousness of displacement. I regard these exile narratives as dialogues between continuity and disruption which shed new light on the trauma of refugees forced to relate to a strange place where they have become the uninvited guests of hosts who have themselves been exiled.

Several studies have addressed the historical facts relating to this episode and reference the exile stories of German and Austrian Jewish refugees, which considerably outnumber the memoirs of the Russian Jewish community in Shanghai and Polish Jewish refugees. According to David Kranzler, 'between 1938 and 1941 some 17,000 to 18,000 refugees, including 1,500 Gentile "non-Aryans" and 1,100 Polish Jews found their way to Shanghai.'[3] Polish Jews largely arrived later than German and Austrian Jews, with the last wave of refugees before the outbreak of the Pacific War (June–December 1941). 238 of these Polish Jews were teachers and students of the Talmudic College Mir Yeshiva.[4] Between 1938 and 1945, the Russian Jewish community in Shanghai comprised no more than five or six hundred people yet played a crucial role 'as catalysts for the industrialization and commercial development of the Far East'.[5] This was mainly achieved through the endeavours of prominent, wealthy families such as the Sassoons, Hardoons, Kadoories, Ezras, and

[1] Annex 1 contains a selection of studies and films on the Shanghai Ghetto and Annex 2 is a comprehensive list of WW2 Shanghai memoirs (published in English and German). There are several others in Hebrew.

[2] Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. ix.

[3] David Kranzler, 'The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945', in *The Nazi Holocaust: Part A. Bystanders to the Holocaust*, ed. by Michael R Marrus, vol.1 (Berlin: De Gruyter Saur, 1989), p. 210.

[4] Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence, and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), p. 162. The name 'Mir Yeshiva' derives from the small town of Mir in Poland, where one of most important centres of Jewish higher learning in Europe was founded as early as 1815.

[5] Kranzler, 'The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945', p. 213.

Abrahams who also played a major role helping Jewish refugees who arrived in Shanghai from Poland.

To this day, the exile narratives of Russian Jews who settled in Shanghai prior to WW2 and those of Polish Jews who fled to the city[6] during the war remain unexamined. Rena Krasno's *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai*, which begins in January 1942 and ends in August 1945, relates the experiences of a Shanghai-born daughter of two Russian immigrants from Vladivostok. Anna Lincoln's *Escape to China* is the memoir of the daughter of Aron Szpiro, a prosperous textile industrialist from Bialystock who sailed with his family to Shanghai by way of Vilnius, Moscow, Vladivostok, and Japan. Samuel Iwry's *To Wear the Dust of War: From Bialystok to Shanghai to the Promised Land, An Oral History*[7] relates the author's escape from the same town fled by Lincoln's family, Bialystok, during almost the same time and taking nearly the same route.

Unlike the other two memoirs which focus mainly on the authors' families, Iwry's story offers an illuminating account of exile through the eyes of a scholar who, after studying in Vilnius from 1926 to 1930 and graduating from the University of Warsaw in spring 1937, became director of a Jewish School and wrote extensively on the Mishnah, Talmud, Tosefta, halachic Midrashim, and other Jewish texts. The account was transcribed from tapes by an editor and revised by Samuel's son, J. Mark Iwry, whose foreword bears witness to the 'unnarratability' of the events his father endured, indicative of the victim's 'absolute inability to know' invoked in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*.[8] Samuel Iwry who 'never left those horrors behind' was aware that '[f]or every grateful survivor with a story of miraculous escape, there were 100

[6] The most comprehensive study on Shanghai Jewish refugees' exile narratives is Irene Eber, *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Several other studies explore some exile narratives of German and Austrian refugees: Jennifer M. Michaels, 'The Struggle to Survive: German and Austrian Refugees' Depiction of Daily Life in Their Shanghai Exile', in *Exile and Everyday Life*, ed. by Andrea Hammel and Anthony Grenville (Amsterdam: Brill, 2015), pp. 131–53; Arleen Ionescu, 'Traces of Survival in a World of Terror: Kathy Kacer's *Shanghai Escape*', in *Memories of Terror*, ed. by Mihaela Gligor (Frankfurt a.M.: CEEOL Press, 2021), pp. 173–202.

[7] I excluded from this corpus Rena Krasno's *Once Upon a Time in Shanghai* and Sam Moshinsky's *Goodbye Shanghai: A Memoir*. The former is a restyled form of *Strangers Always*, which recounts the same events, some fragments repeated verbatim. Moshinsky was born in 1934 and his father in whose custody he was after his parents' divorce shielded him from what was taking place in Shanghai.

[8] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 92.

innocents, including his parents and sisters, and his wife's parents and sisters, whose lives were cut off […] in a manner that was – for him, quite literally – unspeakable.'[9]

My article proposes a new theoretical lens for interpreting memoir literature on this subject which I examine specifically in relation to instances of hospitality. Immanuel Kant claimed that 'universal hospitality' signifies the relationship between a host and a guest, wherein the guest has a 'right to visit'.[10] Yet, as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have argued, hospitality should encompass much more than a mere right to visit; it should be, as Levinas asserted, the 'transcendence of the Other,' the 'infinite responsibility' we have towards the Other.[11] Surpassing the paradoxes inherent to it,[12] Derrida characterised hospitality as an act that needs to be governed by an 'unconditional law,' 'a law without imperative, without order and without duty.'[13]

My article examines the ways in which Krasno's, Lincoln's, and Iwry's exile narratives deal with notions of welcoming and being welcomed in a new, albeit temporary 'home' and the reception of unconditional support. Krasno's memoir is written from the host's perspective: she recounts the efforts of her Russian Jewish community who, lacking the status of Shanghai citizens or homeowners, nonetheless welcomed Polish Jews fleeing Europe. Lincoln's and

[9] Iwry, p. viii–ix.
[10] Immanuel Kant, 'Toward Perpetual Peace', in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. and intro. by Pauline Kleingeld, trans. by David L. Colclasure (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 82.
[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 27. The scope of this article does not allow for a comprehensive discussion of Levinas's 'explosive concept of hospitality' and Jewish exile, since 'Levinas himself was a stranger throughout his life on a foreign land'. See Spiros Makris, 'Emmanuel Levinas on Hospitality: Ethical and Political Aspects', *International Journal of Theology, Philosophy and Science*, 2.2 (2018), 79–96 (p. 80). See also Derrida's contention that hospitality 'is ethicity itself the whole and the principle of ethics', in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 50.
[12] See Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, foreword by Giorgio Agamben, trans. by Elizabeth Palmer (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016), pp. 61–73.
[13] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*: *Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 83.

Iwry's memoirs are written from the perspective of the guests of powerless hosts in Shanghai and attest to the pure form of unconditional hospitality which Derrida repeatedly invoked.[14]

Methodological Issues

My categorisation of German and Austrian Jews' exile narratives as distinct from those of Russian and Polish refugees is not an arbitrary one, but can be accounted for by two main reasons. Firstly, as previously mentioned, both German and English language scholarship on German and Austrian Jewish refugees has been thoroughly and systematic produced, while fewer studies are dedicated to Polish Jews in Shanghai who were outnumbered by Germans and Austrians. David Kranzler's ground-breaking study, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945*, documents the relationship between Russian and Polish Jews. Andrew Jakubowicz's monograph, *Stopped in Flight: Shanghai and the Polish Jewish Refugees of 1941*, profits from the author's access to correspondences between the Hongkew[15] Japanese military authorities, the Shanghai Jewish leadership, and the International Council of Shanghai, as well as the archive of the former Polish ambassador to Japan, Tadeusz Romer, which attests to the efforts made by the Russian Jews' aid committee, EastJewCom, to help the Poles.[16] In a second, co-written study, Jakubowicz reasserts that '[t]he Russian Jews were able and willing to support the Polish Jews.' For example, the Mir Yeshiva students 'took over the Russian synagogue Beth Aharon where it re-established the

[14] On Derrida's engagement with issues of hospitality, apart from the texts mentioned above, see also Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 65–83; Jacques Derrida, 'Hostipitality', *Angelaki* 5.3 (2000), 3–18; Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality', in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and intro. by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 358–420; Jacques Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality', in *Paper Machine*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 66–69.

[15] In this essay, I adhere to the former spelling Hongkew for the district which is nowadays named Hongkou.

[16] Andrew Jakubowicz, 'Stopped in Flight: Shanghai and the Polish Jewish Refugees of 1941', *Holocaust Studies*, 24.3 (2018), 287–304 (pp. 288–91). See also Joseph R. Fiszman, 'The Quest for Status: Polish Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, 1941–1949', *The Polish Review*, 43.3 (1998), 441–60 and Olga Barbasiewicz and Barbara Dzien-Abraham, 'Remembering the Origins: Everyday Life of Polish Jewish Refugees' Children in Shanghai under Japanese Occupation', *Maska: Magazyn antropologiczno-społeczno-kulturowy*, 40.4 (2018), 115–30, which provides the statistics on refugees presented in the newspaper *Echo Szanghajskie* (Shanghai Echo), and its supplement *Wiadomosci* (Tidings), published in East Asia upon their arrival (p. 118).

scholarship and rituals of Eastern Europe, which were unknown to the Jews of Germany and Austria, foreign to the Sephardic Jews, and being lost among the Russians from Harbin and their westernised children.'[17] Secondly, to quote Jakubowicz once again, '[t]he experience of the Polish Jews […] differed distinctly from that of the stateless Germans and Austrians',[18] an assertion which is substantiated in both Lincoln's and Iwry's memoirs. Lincoln observes that

> The German Jews were very different from us Poles [...] Most of them were better educated and, even though they had been chased out of Germany by Hitler and labelled 'undesirables,' they always referred to everything as 'bei uns in Deutschland,' which meant that in Germany everything was better than anywhere else.'[19]

Iwry admired both the German Jews, who were 'professionals,' 'able to earn a living, as doctors or lawyers or teachers,'[20] and the Austrian Jews, who did 'such an incredible job that parts of Hongkew became known as Little Vienna'.[21] He compared them to the less practical 'grand mix' of Polish Jews: Orthodox yeshiva students, a few Hasidic Jews, and 'doctors of philosophy […] all very well educated […] artists, writers, even sinologists […].'[22] However, he observed that Russian Jews had much in common with and 'were more sympathetic' toward Polish Jews, who were ultimately different from the German refugees who were perceived to be barely aware of their Jewishness and 'insisted on speaking German, which was offensive to Russian and Polish ears.'[23]

The 'Hospitality of Catastrophe'

All three memoirs recount unprecedented historical circumstances which take place in a hostile context: in Krasno's case, hostility takes the form of the Japanese authorities who conquered part of Shanghai, while in the cases of Lincoln and Iwry, hostility is embodied by the Soviets who occupied Bialystok and forced both families to flee Poland, as well as the

[17] Andrew Jakubowicz and Aleksandra Hądzelek, 'The Polish Jews of Shanghai and the Political Sociology of Historical Memory', *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 19.2 (2013), 27–64 (pp. 49, 45).
[18] Jakubowicz, 'Stopped in Flight', p. 300.
[19] Anna Lincoln, *Escape to China (1939–1948)* (New York: Manyland Books, 1982), p. 169.
[20] Samuel Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War: From Bialystok to Shanghai to the Promised Land. An Oral History*, ed. by Leslie J. H. Kelley (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 104–05.
[21] Iwry, p. 105.
[22] Iwry, pp. 105–06.
[23] Iwry, pp. 96–97, 106.

hostility of the Shanghai Ghetto. In order to demonstrate that even in conditions of hostility, hospitality can exist, I return to Derrida who probed whether hospitality can aspire to purity, creating 'a politics, an ethics, a law that thus answers to the new injunctions of unprecedented historical situations'.[24] This radical conception of hospitality renders urgent the necessity of welcoming the Other.[25] An instance attesting to the verity of Derrida's thought on 'hospitality' as a politics of unconditional generosity which can exist in hostile circumstances is an episode in Derrida's own life which Benoît Peeters recounts: Derrida arrived in Prague to deliver a speech at Czech philosopher Ladislav Hejdánek's clandestine workshop in December 1981, when 'the situation was extremely tense throughout the entire Soviet bloc.'[26]

Upon his departure to France, someone planted some drugs in his bag which led to his arrest.[27] While in his cell, Derrida met a Hungarian Romani who could not understand English but could recognise the philosopher's distress and offered him 'pure,' 'true' hospitality, 'the hospitality of catastrophe – […] heterogeneous to politics and to law.'[28] Derrida describes this impactful life event in Safaa Fathy's film, *D'ailleurs, Derrida* (1999):

> I have experienced what could be called the opposite of hospitality from the country and the police who arrested me and from the prison guards who threatened to hit me, […] – there was something in me […] that rehearsed this scene […] this rehearsal was like a certain desire that stemmed from hospitality. I was welcomed in a place that was already prepared within me.[29]

The three memoirs under examination exemplify Derrida's thought on 'hospitality of catastrophe' as a gesture which endures on a threshold in the face of surrounding hostility. I

[24] Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, p. 149.
[25] Jacques Derrida, 'Hostipitality', *Angelaki*, *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5.3 (2000), 3–18 (p. 4).
[26] Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2013), p. 333.
[27] Peeters, pp. 334. Otherwise, Derrida's philosophy was shaped by his life experiences of inhospitality, beginning with his Algerian childhood when he was expelled from the Lycée Ben Aknoun in 1942 for being Jewish: 'It was as if his entire life had been "framed by two sets of bars, two heavy, metal interdictions."' (Peeters, p. 341).
[28] *D'ailleurs, Derrida*, dir. by Safaa Fathy (La Sept Arte, Gloria Film Productions, 1999), 00:54:43–00:54:49.
[29] *D'ailleurs, Derrida*, 00:50:18–00:52:35.

will look for such thresholds — spatio-temporal and bodily — in Krasno's, Lincoln's, and Iwry's narratives, whose hosts offer their guests abundant hospitality, and whose guests are saved by their hosts' generosity.

Spatio-Temporal Thresholds

In spite of their titles, all three memoirs depict events which take place both before and after their narrators' arrival in Shanghai, thereby necessitating a methodological effort to delineate the different spatio-temporal thresholds where hospitality flourished. This section deals with matters of spatiality in terms of the transition initiated by hosts and guests from a space of hostility to one of hospitality, as well as matters of temporality relating to the significance of the memoirs' accounts of the lives of Russian and Polish Jews before and after WW2.

Before Shanghai

Before delving into Lincoln's and Iwry's stories, I will attempt to give a timeline and trace the route that most Polish Jews took to arrive in Shanghai. After the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany on 1 September 1939 and by the Soviet Union (secured by the non-aggression Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) on 17 September 1939, the lives of Jews in both occupied territories were endangered. In her detailed historical account of these Polish refugees, Eber notes that 'rabbinic school (yeshivoth) students and their rabbis as well as secular journalists, writers, poets, and actors' fled to Lithuania in 1939, obtaining visas from Jan Zwartendijk (1896–1976), the Dutch consul in Kovno for Curaçao (a Dutch colony), then transit visas from the Japanese consul Chiune Sugihara (1900–1986) in Kovno. In this way, they were able to travel on the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok and then sail to Tsuruga on the Japanese coast; however, instead of leaving for 'Curaçao, their supposed destination, they remained in Kobe until shipped to Shanghai in 1941 by the Japanese.' [30] Iwry belonged to the group of intellectuals Eber lists, while Lincoln's father, Adam Szpiro, was a rich merchant. Both Iwry and Lincoln lived in Bialystok which after 28 September 1939 became Russian-occupied territory. Both fled to Vilnius in December 1939 (at the time called Wilno by the Poles and Vilna by the Jews) which had been returned to Lithuania on October 29 1939. On June 17 1940, Lithuania was occupied by Soviet troops and became dangerous terrain. Although their routes were slightly different from one another, the similarities between the hostility and hospitality they experienced on their way to Shanghai are striking.

[30] Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, p. 110.

Lincoln's story begins in late 1934 when hostility emerged in their house in the form of her German governess who read *Mein Kampf* and listened 'to Hitler's intoxicating orations with fervor',[31] inflicting upon the child 'the rantings of the Fuehrer as he expounded on the supremacy of the German people and his vision for them as the Master Race.'[32] In January 1936, she even ventured the idea of taking Anna (also known as Niusia) with her to Germany for the Olympic Games, which marks the point at which Niusia's father hands the governess her final check and bids her farewell. Following the governess' departure, it would seem that the 'master of the house' had regained his sovereignty; however, the overnight Soviet occupation of Bialystok leads to a scene in which Niusia's father becomes a helpless host to hostile guests who barge into his home. On the threshold of hospitality, Szpiro attempts to welcome them, but his gesture is swiftly rebuffed:

> 'You're welcome in our house,' father was saying. 'Please come in.'
> 'It's not for you to welcome us,' said the General curtly. 'We've orders to occupy these premises; Army regulations in wartime.'
> 'Certainly, General,' my father said bending his head, 'but I didn't know that Russia was at war. We had been expecting the Germans.'
> The General remained silent for a moment, then answered:
> 'There's a pact; it's the Stalin-Ribbentrop agreement. The Russian-German alliance has not been publicized.'[33]

The Szpiros were aware that once their house and then the factory were taken over by the Soviets who promised to 'reform'[34] Anna's father, saving their own lives meant becoming nomads. Their escape to Vilnius was concocted furtively while their house remained under occupation. To avoid raising suspicion, Niusia's father and mother left separately, followed by Niusia who was later picked up by her grandmother. As guests in a country where Jews could still hide at the time, 'hospitality of catastrophe' took the form of covert help towards the family: 'Clandestinely the government aided the refugees fleeing death and war and did not look into their records too closely nor did they ask too many questions.'[35] In Kaunas (Lithuania's capital at the time), locals helped the family secure 'falsified documents' which attested that they were 'legal citizens of Lithuania;' however, six months after they escaped

[31] Lincoln, p. 1.
[32] Lincoln, p. 3.
[33] Lincoln, p. 35.
[34] Lincoln, p. 47.
[35] Lincoln, p. 85.

from Bialystock, 'fear swept through the city,' and Niusia's father procured 'visas to go to Japan via the Trans-Siberian route to Vladisvostok and then by sea to Japan.'[36] The train the Szpiros boarded along with over 'five-hundred Jewish refugees' in January 1941 was the final before the 'exit visa quota' was formally fulfilled. The narrator testifies to the exceptionality of her family's circumstance: '[W]e were a part of a stream of humanity running for their lives; we were the lucky ones who escaped the macabre dance of death as it twisted and turned to the strains of exploding bombs.'[37]

Similarly to Lincoln's story, Iwry's narrative begins by relating hostility against Polish Jews and the permanent risk his people faced in Poland:

> First of all we were always aware of the threat from both the Russians and Germans, who hated each other almost as much as they both hated Jews. And secondly, we always had in our consciousness that as Jews we are living in a country where the majority of the population was either indifferent, or simply unfriendly and sometimes directly hostile.[38]

It then describes how Iwry gained refugee status in Lithuania in December 1939, where he also experienced the clandestine hospitality of the authorities prior to his departure for Japan and Shanghai:

> When we arrived in this little town, the local Lithuanian police stopped us. But we were not afraid. They stopped us with a smile. They knew who we were. Hundreds of refugees were entering these little towns near the border. We knew they would not do anything to us, they will not send us back across the border. To me they only said one thing, 'Your name cannot be Iwrycki, it must be Iwryckis, because it is more Lithuanian.'[39]

The purpose of this name 'correction' was to transform Jewish people into anonymous Lithuanians, hiding any trace of their Jewishness which would land them in trouble. Iwry recounts the disorder in Vilnius upon his arrival as his host who recognised him as her former student-tenant observed that it was a matter of luck that he had not arrived a few months

[36] Lincoln, pp. 91, 93.
[37] Lincoln, p. 131.
[38] Iwry, p. 13.
[39] Iwry, p. 46.

prior when a riot against the Jewish population took place, making the city 'a no-man's land' of vandalised shops and synagogues.[40] Indeed, not only prior to Iwry's arrival, but also following his departure, the situation in the city was dire. As Taly Matiteyahu documented: '[w]hile the Soviet occupation served to postpone the Holocaust in Lithuania by a year by keeping the perceived Nazi menace at bay, it ultimately "heightened the tragedy" as Jews' role in the Soviet administration inspired widespread local hostility among Lithuanians, many of whom subsequently became willing and significant collaborators in implementing the Final Solution after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941.'[41]

When Iwry resided in Lithuania during the summer of 1940, around 14,000 Jewish refugees had escaped from Poland. They organised themselves into 'a council, where representatives of all these different Jewish groups met and collaborated.'[42] As Jakubowicz and Hądzelek attest, '[t]oday in Vilnius the rehabilitated centre of the city has preserved the memory of the Jewish ghetto,' but little about the approximate '80 Jewish community organisations that were active up to the Soviet takeover in August 1940, some surviving until the Nazi invasion the following year, including many that worked in welfare,'[43] as corroborated by Iwry. On 2 August 1940, Iwry's friend, Leon Ilutowicz, obtained a transit visa from Japan's Consul Sugihara which Iwry and his companions copied to apply to Intourist for exit visas. Iwry succeeded in crossing Russia by train and arrived by ship in Kobe, Japan in March 1941, where he was appointed by David Ben-Gurion[44] as a representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in the Far East, an organisation working to rescue Jews and enable their emigration to Palestine. Iwry continued his refugee work upon his arrival in Shanghai two months later.

Shanghai as a 'Safe Haven'

Russian immigrants had been in Shanghai as early as the 1840s, contemporaneous with the first Sephardi and Ashkenazis Jews, followed by a second group of Russian Jews after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and a third wave following the Bolshevik Revolution (1917–1918).[45] Krasno's memoir offers a detailed account of Russian emigration to China

[40] Iwry, p. 48.
[41] Taly Matiteyahu, 'Strategies of Survival: Lithuanian Jews and the Holocaust,' *Ezra's Archives*, 2 (2012), 77–110 (p. 86–87).
[42] Iwry, p. 49.
[43] Jakubowicz and Hądzelek, 'The Polish Jews of Shanghai and the Political Sociology of Historical Memory', pp. 37, 36.
[44] Ben-Gurion became the first Prime Minister of Israel in 1948.
[45] Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, p. 1.

which may have been documented in her father's memoirs to which she makes reference. Occasionally, this is marred by errors such as employing the term Russia instead of the Soviet Union to describe events after 1922, as well as generally vague references. She goes as far back as 1921 (the year her own parents emigrated there) when about 500 Russian Jews lived in a part of Shanghai known as the French Concession. Krasno approximates that by 1924, 'the number of Russian Jews in Shanghai reached 800,' following a rise in antisemitism in Russia after a pogrom in Ukraine which resulted in

> 500 Jews slaughtered –
> 200 Jews burned and buried alive –
> 40,000 Jews dead as a result of neglected wounds –
> 20,000 Jewish women raped.'[46]

Comparing this data to what can be found in different archives, it is unclear to which pogrom in Ukraine Krasno refers. Pogroms broke out in Novgorod–Volynsk in January 1918, continued in February and March along the route between Zhitomir and Kiev with the offensive launched by the troops of the Central Ukrainian Rada against the Bolsheviks, and in March 1919, they continued in Korsun, Brusilov, Bucha, Gostomel, Khabnoe, Brovary, and Gogolevo. In February 1919, they reached the provinces of Kiev, Poltava, and Kherson. The official yet incomplete data on the pogroms in Ukraine between 1918 and 1924 identify at least 100,000 Jewish victims.[47]

During WW2, Shanghai became one of the most popular destinations for Jews from Europe because of its status as an open port to foreign merchants since 1860, after China lost the Second Opium War against the Anglo-French troops. Colonialism and Western occupation had divided Shanghai into four main areas: Japanese, French, British-American, and Chinese governed sectors whose populations interacted with one another considerably less than before the Japanese invasion of China, which began in 1931 with the assault on Manchuria

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[46] Rena Krasno, *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai* (Berkley, CA: Pacific View Press, 1992), p. 9.

[47] See Vladimir Danilenko, *Jewish Pogroms in Ukraine, 1918–1921*, Fond FR-3050 Kiev District Commission of the Jewish Public Committee for the Provision of Aid to Victims of Pogroms; Opis 1-3 <https://www.bsb-muenchen.de/mikro/lit485.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2022]; *Jewish Pogroms in Ukraine, 1918–1924. Documents of the Kiev Oblast' Commission for Relief to Victims of Pogroms (Obshetskom)*, Fond 3050, RG-31.057M, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives <https://collections.ushmm.org/findingaids/RG-31.057M_01_fnd_en.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2022]

where many Russians had settled previously. As Krasno describes, 'terror and extortion became the order of the day' and Russian Jews who had previously settled in Harbin fled once again, this time to 'the haven of Shanghai.'[48] However, their safety in Shanghai became precarious after the Battle of Shanghai (August–November 1937) which ended with the Japanese occupation of the city, excluding the International Settlement and the French Concession. After the attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941, the Japanese took control of Shanghai's International Settlement, too.

From the perspective of a Shanghai-born Russian Jew, Krasno describes a cosmopolitan Shanghai prior the attack on Pearl Harbour: '[A] vibrant, multifaceted city with clearly defined social stratifications' which added to 'the huge, massive, subdued background' of Chinese people. Of these social stratifications, the 'highest echelon' comprised the representatives of the Great Powers: the United States, Great Britain, and France, as well as Germany and 'citizens of "lesser" nations': Greeks, Turks, Spaniards, Italians, Iraqis, and Syrians. Secondly, there existed white stateless Russians who were divided into the Sephardis and the Ashkenazis, and the third stratification was the refugees.[49] However, in January 1942, the city fell under the occupation of 'all-powerful, all-feared, bayonet-armed Japanese soldiers' with a deleterious effect upon the city's cosmopolitan social life: 'Greeks, Iraqis, Syrians, stateless Russians, and Jews, reinforced by refugees from Hitler's horrors are but droplets in a sea of Chinese – unwanted, unneeded, alone.'[50]

Iwry relates a similarly vivid description of the 'corrupt life' of Shanghai by evoking the 'enormous waterfront of skyscrapers called the Bund, facing out to the Whangpoo River' four years before he disembarked from his ship and became 'nothing new' among the countless Jewish refugees who had been arriving there ever since *Kristallnacht*.[51] Iwry's explanation of the title of his memoir, *To Wear the Dust of War*, bears witness to the terrible isolation of the once cosmopolitan city:

> You could stand in the midst of the millions of Shanghai, this enormous city of Chinese, and see human beings passing by, passing by. And every one of them leaves

[48] Krasno, p. 9.
[49] Krasno, p. viii.
[50] Krasno, p. 3.
[51] Iwry, pp. 92–93.

> on you one speck of impression, and this becomes dust, becomes a layer. And you feel it so well, without ever entering into discussion with them.[52]

However paradoxic, hospitality took place during this catastrophe. By 1942, Russian Jews like Krasno's family were among the Shanghai refugees living in an environment of hostility and anger. She recounts that, in July 1943, the dockyards located in the French Concession were 'requisitioned for the sole and exclusive use of the Imperial Japanese Navy' and her family received the unexpected visit of a Japanese couple who had come to 'inspect' their house, a euphemism signifying that the Japanese had in fact occupied their home. In spite of their recognition that no reimbursement would be made for the use of their apartment, Krasno's mother adopted a positive attitude and acted as perfect host in a manner which her daughter characterises as 'Siberian hospitality':

> I assumed it was a reflection of the famous 'Siberian hospitality' in which she (and we) were brought up. […] Mama treated them so politely it seemed as if she were doing them a favor. 'I hope you'll enjoy it,' she said. They seemed surprised. They didn't expect hospitality from a person whose home they were taking.[53]

On the other end of the host-guest relationship, Lincoln's memoir offers striking insight into how Polish Jews felt in Shanghai. The author describes her family's arrival at the harbour on the Whang-poo River in April 1941 when, with 'feverish excitement,' the child sees for the first time a pedicab and a rickshaw, the unfamiliar clothing of the Chinese, and experiences the hospitality of the Customs Office. With the help of her Uncle Jacob and Aunt Genia who had arrived earlier, Lincoln's family was first housed in an apartment with a Russian couple from Moukden, the Christenkos, and then moved to a finer apartment owned by another Russian couple, the Froffs. Niusia describes the Christenkos' 'warm welcome' and her sense that they were safe at last.[54] She also describes the impeccable manners of the Froffs who did their best to prevent their poverty from marring their culinary etiquette:

> Although food was scarce during the Japanese occupation, the Froffs made every meager morsel look like a feast. I remember their kidney stew and banana pie, fit only for a dog, or so I thought after having eaten them. The kidneys were disgusting to the taste and the crust of the pie stuck like glue to my throat. The Froffs ate in great style,

[52] Iwry, p. 90.
[53] Krasno, pp. 73–74.
[54] Lincoln, pp. 161–62.

> laying out their best China and silver, sitting upright, heads held high with their impeccable Russian manners on display.[55]

Lincoln's memoir also testifies to the recreation of familiar places which offered 'a shelter' for Polish refugees in Shanghai, such as a restaurant named Polska 'that catered especially to the many displaced persons':

> Polska provided a good meal, inviting atmosphere, and a pleasant place where refugees could meet and talk. […] We felt at home here and, after settling down at a cosy table and ordering food that we were accustomed to, father would come up to other people, chat with them while standing or sometimes join them for a short of Vodka. Polska was not only an eating house but it was a kind of news center where all the information trickled in, was repeated, and passed on to where it might do the most good.[56]

Iwry's welcome to Shanghai was quite different from that of Lincoln's family, yet it was also ameliorated by Russian hospitality. As a '[r]epresentative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in the Far East,' Iwry was housed by Russian Jews in a small room in the French Concession. Boris Topas, the president of the Russian Jewish community, offered him 'a desk in his office, some secretarial assistance if necessary, and a Chinese servant who would make telephone calls if needed.'[57] Unlike Lincoln who was warmed by the hospitality of her impeccably mannered hosts, Iwry was stricken by the 'hostile military establishment'.[58]

Despite the pressures of their Nazi allies, the Japanese did not implement the Final Solution, but in February 1943 set up the Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees (also known as the Shanghai Ghetto), forcing the Jews who arrived in Shanghai after 1937 to move to Hongkew within three months.[59] Lincoln's family was relatively economically advantaged and managed to bribe authorities to remain outside the Ghetto, while Iwry had to move inside after May 1943. From Lincoln, we learn about Hongkew indirectly, mainly by way of her relationship with her friend Nina to whom the unconditional hospitality of Anna's family's took the form which Levinas equated to an 'infinite responsibility' towards the Other. They provided the

[55] Lincoln, p. 183.
[56] Lincoln, p. 163.
[57] Iwry, pp. 94–95.
[58] Iwry, p. 104.
[59] Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, pp. 169–88.

little girl with proper food during the weekends when she was allowed to leave the Ghetto: 'Judging by her appetite, I could guess that she was starving in the ghetto. Her beautiful blue eyes widened as she watched mother prepare a meal rich in meat, vegetables, and fruit.'[60] From Iwry, we learn about the humiliations endured by Jews who applied for a pass from Okura or Ghoya to leave the Ghetto for a few hours and the fear when '[t]he Japanese appeared willing to set up "a final solution" for these stateless Jews,' followed by the arrests of those who tried to prevent it, including Iwry's interrogation and beating.[61]

Bodily Thresholds: Hosts and Guests

Instances of hostility in the form of antisemitism become a daily scene in *Strangers Always* after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In May 1942, Krasno's mother brings the news that a German client announced that her husband no longer allowed her to buy from Jewish shops. Instead of condemning the woman, Krasno's mother pitied her: 'I am sure he is a tyrant and that she is afraid of him. Poor woman!'[62] After intense study for her French baccalaureate, Krasno received her *Médaille d'Honneur* in private from her principle who 'muttered something about the Vichy government,' thus 'inflicting a permanent wound' in Krasno's heart: 'The coveted Medal, far from being a triumph, was an affront. I never told my proud parents of my pain in accepting this surreptitious distinction…it would hurt them perhaps even more than it did me.'[63]

Krasno's father lost his job and her mother, who had a children's toy and fashion business, became the family's sole provider. Nevertheless, Krasno recounts in February 1942 that '[n]either the bombs nor the Japanese dampen Mama's *joie de vivre*.'[64] Again, Derrida's notion of 'hospitality of catastrophe' finds its illustration in Krasno's memoir: in spite of difficult living conditions, her family and the community of Russian Jews as a whole offered hospitality to new-comers. Krasno's father became involved in creating an administrative unit to issue documents to stateless refugees who had neither an embassy nor a consulate. He also participated in the efforts of the Russian Jewish community to open a public library of Hebrew and Yiddish books at the Shanghai Jewish Club and to organise cultural activities for

[60] Lincoln, p. 204.
[61] Iwry, pp. 13, 53, 104, 119, 120, 125, 126.
[62] Krasno, p. 20.
[63] Krasno, p. 84.
[64] Krasno, p. 11.

the refugees.[65] Prior to enrolling in a medical programme, Krasno accepted a teaching position at a Jewish school where she devoted herself to helping others in need; for instance, she donated food from her mother's 'declining reserves'[66] and gave money to a poor Sephardi girl in filthy clothes whose mother was dying of cancer.

Krasno's mother provided food not only for her family but also for 'a little group of talented and dedicated workers' with whom her husband set up The Jewish Book Publication Society, which translated Russian versions of English and Yiddish fiction. Krasno's father edited *Nasha Zhizn* (Our Life), 'Shanghai's National Independent Democratic Organ of Jewish Thought', published in both Russian and English to accommodate new members of the Jewish community arriving from Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. His greater aim was 'to create a center of Jewish culture […] far from Europe, far from Hitler, from the German Reich.'[67] In Krasno's memoir, 'hospitality of catastrophe' also takes the form of friendship. During the July 1945 raids, as her friends recount, 'refugee doctors took immediate care of all the wounded without discriminating between Jews and Chinese'. In response, the Chinese who were very poor 'brought food and even money to the emergency clinics to show their gratitude for the indiscriminate medical care given to them.'[68]

Iwry also witnessed the tremendous hospitality of the Iraqi Jews who maintained little relations with the Ashkenazi Jews. In spite of the climate of hostility during the Japanese occupation which 'had disrupted their businesses,' creating 'financial troubles'[69] and depleting their resources, the Sephardic community assumed 'infinite responsibility' for the Polish refugees. They organised a relief committee which assigned refugees who had no family to support them to a *heime* and transformed 'the dreadful *heimes*' into more liveable places with kitchens, clinics, and even a maternity ward. They also rebuilt the Shanghai Jewish Hospital, where Baghdadi-born Jewish businessman, Sir Elly Kadoorie, donated X-ray equipment and other supplies.[70] Iwry and his Polish compatriots felt most at home as the guests of Russian Ashkenazi Jews who 'were more sympathetic' toward them because the Russian community saw Polish Jews as 'the most Jewish of the Jews' and, thus, the best to preserve Jewish culture and traditions:

[65] Krasno, pp. 10, 37.
[66] Krasno, p. 16.
[67] Krasno, pp. 5–6.
[68] Krasno, p. 189.
[69] Iwry, p. 97.
[70] Iwry, p. 107. Kadoorie, who had come from Baghdad, was a British citizen who made his fortune in Shanghai in banking, real estate, and rubber (Iwry, p. 95).

> I must say we had quite an effect on Shanghai, though we were the smallest group of refugees. […] And we really changed our small corner of Shanghai. […] there in the midst of the millions and millions of Chinese, we organized and began a Talmud Torah school, and later, after the Mir Yeshiva students arrived, there was begun a rabbinical college taught by these yeshiva students.[71]

Conclusion and Afterthoughts

Beginning with a series of definitions of hospitality taken from Derrida's thought, particularly his concept of 'hospitality of catastrophe,' this article offers an interpretive reading of three memoirs of Eastern European Jewish refugees. These exile narratives testify to how, in spite of the hostile environment of Japanese-occupied Shanghai, the Russian Jewish community — as hosts in a country which was not their own — offered their Polish Jewish guests who had fled Hitler's hell the hope of a new life. This article's reading of instances of 'hospitality of catastrophe' in these memoirs situates Derrida's concept in both spatio-temporal and bodily thresholds.

It is striking to re-read these exile stories while watching news about the present-day tragedy in Ukraine which relates the hospitality of Polish, Romanian, and Moldavian people warmly greeting their 'uninvited' guests, such as Ukrainain women fleeing their invaded homeland with their children. One can certainly draw a parallel between the events in Shanghai between 1938–1945 and the actions of fellow Eastern Europeans towards Ukrainians today as prime examples of the host's 'infinite responsibility' towards the Other in the form of 'hospitality of catastrophe.' Just like Krasno's, Lincoln's, and Iwry's Shanghai exile narratives, contemporary events demonstrate that the true gift of hospitality lies in its generosity and the transcendence experienced by the guest which turns a stranger into a friend for a brief moment in time.

[71] Iwry, pp. 107–08.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by the Program for Professor of Special Appointment (Eastern Scholar) at Shanghai Institutions of Higher Learning and by the Double First-Class Project, 'China's Politics of Hospitality: The Shanghai Jewish Community during WW2' (School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University). I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the two editors, Margo Bondarchuk and Saffy Mirghani, for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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