



**B'nai B'rith's  
vital role  
from 1928  
to 1949**

**Members of Shanghai Lodge at a dinner in the late 1930s. Their Chinese waiter is behind the palm on the far right.**

# Shanghai Fortunes

BY EDWARD YUTKOWITZ

One of the most unusual episodes in B'nai B'rith's colorful history occurred in a most remarkable community — Shanghai.

A center of commerce, this exotic city in Eastern China had become a haven for fortune seekers and refugees in the mid-1800s, when the British opened its port to foreign trade. Over the next hundred years, Jewish life would flourish in what was becoming one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities.

By the late 19th century Shanghai was home to about 1,000 Jews. Most of them were Sephardim of Baghdadi origin who had followed British trade routes to the Far East. Members of the prominent Sassoon and Kadoorie families were among those Sephardim who prospered in banking, transportation, construction and shipping.

At the turn of the century, the city's Jewish population, which included some Jews of Ashkenazic descent from America, Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, lived and worked largely in international zones administered by the Western nations.

The Sephardim dominated Jewish life in Shanghai. Often observant in religion and British in manner, they set up synagogues, schools and social clubs. They had little in common with the several thousand Russian and Polish Jews who sought refuge in Shanghai in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution. Many of the Eastern Europeans arrived in Shanghai poor and disoriented.

The time was right for the birth of B'nai B'rith, and in 1928, Shanghai Lodge was established.

According to lodge president George Sokolsky, writing in *The National Jewish Monthly* (NJM) of June 1930, "the circumstances of Jewish life in Shanghai are such that the organization of a B'nai B'rith Lodge was fraught with the most unusual difficulties. National divisions are sharp, particularly between the older Jewish families of the city and the more recently arrived Ashkenazim."

B'nai B'rith was considered an "Ashkenazic" organization, but a number of notable Sephardim were among the founders of the new lodge. Members of the Kadoorie family, for example, recognized that B'nai B'rith, as the foremost secular Jewish organization in the world, could be a unifying force. By 1931, a pleased Sokolsky wrote in the NJM that "B'nai B'rith in Shanghai has done much to bring

together the Sephardic and Ashkenazic elements of the Shanghai Jewish community."

From its inception, the lodge was committed to Jewish philanthropy. In the early 1930s, members formed an employment committee to find work for "young men who drifted into Shanghai expecting to find easy fortunes," answered appeals for relief from Jews in Palestine and aided Jewish refugees from northern China fleeing the 1932 Sino-Japanese fighting.

Concerns extended to Gentiles as well. Lodge members offered money, clothes and food to Chinese dispossessed after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1932, and to Chinese victims of the Yangtze River flood of 1931 and the great drought of 1936-37.

The lodge took particular pride in the realization of an early goal: the founding of a health care facility to serve the city of Shanghai. The B'nai B'rith Polyclinic and Hospital included a dental clinic and pharmacy, employed Jewish physicians and nurses, and even maintained a kosher kitchen.

The January 1936 NJM reported: "Since its inauguration February 1, 1934, until June 30, 1935, the Polyclinic and Hospital established by Shanghai Lodge No. 1102 treated 19,415 cases . . . . The institution is non-sectarian, and at least 10% of the cases were those of non-Jews . . . . This philanthropic enterprise has evoked a chorus of praise from all sections of the Shanghai community." During the Sino-Japanese fighting in the late 1930s, the hospital cared for more than 1,500 patients a month.

In addition to its charitable work, Shanghai Lodge enhanced the social life of the community. The fifth annual lodge report noted: "a Seder night [was held] for the members and their families, which was the first attempt of this nature in Shanghai . . . hospitality was extended to all Jews in the American, British and French service." B'nai B'rith shields were presented to the Shanghai Jewish Boy Scouts and Girl Guides; 500 children attended a Chanuka service and tea. The lodge also published a newsletter, sponsored lectures for the public and served dinner after every lodge meeting.

But establishing Jewish unity

was still B'nai B'rith's most formidable challenge. Through lodge efforts, the Joint-Committee of Jewish Organizations of Shanghai was formed to coordinate the various components of Jewish society. In 1932, newly-elected lodge president F. Reiss declared, ". . . members should be on constant guard and admonish every Jew that he is a member of that nation which, though it has lost its political, territorial and even linguistic unity for many centuries, has still retained the consciousness of our spiritual brotherhood."

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With Hitler's rise to power in Germany, the lodge was called on to demonstrate this solidarity. In 1933, when the first wave of German refugees hit Shanghai, the lodge formed the Committee for the Welfare of German Jews. The lodge gave moral and financial support to the new arrivals, and members "did everything in their power to entertain them and invite them to the various social functions, thereby introducing them to the general Jewish public," reported lodge secretary M. Brown in the minutes of the 1934 B'nai B'rith convention.

Although conditions in the Jewish community worsened as fighting continued between Japanese and Chinese forces, the city continued to absorb refugees, many of whom came overland on the Trans-Siberian railroad. In 1937, the Japanese occupied Shanghai, but remained outside the perimeters of the international sectors; Jews in the areas under British and French control were protected.

By the late 1930s, Shanghai was one of the few places in the world to accept refugees from Europe. Journalist Robert Berkov, writing in the October 1938 NJM, noted that the Jewish community in Shanghai, composed of "Jews

from every country of the world, speaking a score of languages . . . do business, and thrive in general, even despite the frightfulness of the Sino-Japanese war . . . the reason is to be found in Shanghai's complete emphasis on nationality, rather than on race or religion."

Berkov's optimism contrasted sharply with the more dire perspective presented in the NJM just one month later. Joseph Hollzer, an American businessman who had lived in Shanghai for four years, reported that many of the Jews in Shanghai at this time were barely "getting by," and that German Jews faced the constant threat of being put under the authority of the German consulate in the city.

There is probably some truth to both views. By the end of the decade, the Jewish population in Shanghai had indeed swelled to more than 35,000, and most of the escapees from war-ravaged Europe had left their possessions behind. For many, among them students and rabbis of entire yeshivot who had fled, life was extremely difficult.

Many survived only through their resourcefulness; some, for example, set up stands in the used clothes market on Kunping Road. Others desperately needed the relief efforts of the Shanghai Lodge and B'nai B'rith's governing body, Supreme Lodge. With other Jewish charitable organizations, B'nai

B'rith helped set up kitchens and public dormitories in hostels for persons displaced by the European war.

On the other hand, Jewish life was not entirely bleak. Some of the refugees started businesses and adapted easily to the sophisticated ambiance of the city. A Viennese-style cafe in central Shanghai, opened by a Jewish refugee, was crowded with well-dressed patrons; Jewish organizations, including the Betar Zionists, met regularly; the Jewish Company of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, an international militia, proudly marched through the streets of the city.

A number of B'nai B'rith members were among the refugees who arrived in the late 1930s. In 1939, with the assistance of Shanghai Lodge and Supreme Lodge, they formed an association of former European B'nai B'rith. While not officially a lodge, the association held regular meetings. Though many of its members were elderly and dependent on charity, the association set up a burial fund and helped in the adjustment to life in the Orient. During this stressful time, B'nai B'rith "gave our members brotherly love and courage," said Dr. Siegfried Neumann, president of the association, in the October 1952 NJM.

Shanghai was still an open port in the late 1930s. In 1939, when a Shanghai Lodge member

brought back news from America of the recently formed B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, the lodge set up chapters of Aleph Zadik Aleph (the boys' branch) and B'nai B'rith Girls. Yosef Yaakov, a founding member, recalls that Shanghai AZA was "very active, one of a kind."

"AZA took its cue from B'nai B'rith ideology," says Yaakov, a fourth-generation Shanghai Jew of Sephardic descent whose father and two uncles were early members of Shanghai Lodge. Yaakov, today the consul general of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C., and the 1986 recipient of the Sam Beber AZA Distinguished Alumnus Award, remembers the weekly meetings where chapter members focused on both Jewish studies and contemporary issues. "We discussed ways in which we could help other Jews. Jews visiting Shanghai would talk to us."

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## **Jewish unity was B'nai B'rith's most formidable challenge.**

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Until 1941, European Jews in Shanghai were still hopeful that the worst of their troubles was over. In the April 1941 NJM, journalist David Benz wrote that the Japanese did not have a history of anti-

Semitism, and optimistically noted that "many Jews now in the city look upon it as the jumping-off place to future prosperous settlement in China after the Sino-Japanese hostilities come to an end, and the reconstruction period begins."

The bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, which finally brought the United States into direct conflict with the Japanese, put an end to such hopes. Within days, Japanese forces marched into the international communities.

Japanese treatment of Jews varied during the war, but anti-Semitism was never official policy. In fact, some Imperial Japanese Navy officers had a great appreciation of Jewish culture and were aware of B'nai B'rith's charitable work. Nonetheless, as a "foreign organization," B'nai B'rith was closely scrutinized, and forced to cease functioning by early 1942. B'nai B'rith records were hidden and the B'nai B'rith Polyclinic's name was changed to the Jewish Hospital.

With travel restricted, the Jewish community of Shanghai was effectively isolated from the world. Generally, the Japanese regarded Jews as "foreign nationals," and imposed severe restrictions on Jews who were citizens of countries at war with Japan. At the urging of Japan's German allies, "stateless persons" — Jews from Germany and German-occupied countries — were interned in the ghetto in the district of Hongkew. Jewish property was confiscated, and permits required for travel within Shanghai. Because the Soviet Union was not at war with the Japanese, Russian Jews were not treated quite as severely, though some were required to pay a "ransom" to the Japanese occupiers to maintain a degree of freedom.

After the defeat of the Japanese, B'nai B'rith in Shanghai quickly reorganized. In 1946, the association of former European B'nai B'rith, with 120 members, was chartered as Renaissance Lodge 1651. On behalf of the Supreme Lodge, the president of Shanghai Lodge installed the new lodge.

Most of the European Jewish refugees wanted to leave Shanghai

as soon as possible, but emigration in the postwar years was a long and complicated process. B'nai B'rith recognized that the harsh realities of life in the city demanded immediate attention. The Chinese, who now governed Shanghai, got along well with the Jewish community, but were themselves faced with rebuilding in the devastating wake of the war. The lodges helped Jews cope with daily housing and economic problems.

The lodges also took up the fight for emigration, and inspired by the post-war Zionist fervor, renewed relief efforts for Jews in Palestine. With large contributions from Shanghai Lodge and Sir Victor Sassoon, a scholarship fund set up by Renaissance Lodge raised thousands of dollars and sent four young people to study in the United States. In late 1948, the first B'nai B'rith Women chapter in China was established.

In Washington, the Supreme Lodge launched the Adopt-A-Family Campaign and attempted to help the stateless Jews of Shanghai obtain visas. B'nai B'rith in the United States sent food packages to refugees in Shanghai who were members.

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### **The Supreme Lodge helped the stateless Jews of Shanghai obtain visas.**

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From 1945 to 1948, the Jewish population of Shanghai, threatened by Mao Zedong's Communist forces, dwindled. Some families, such as the Kadoories, prospered in the British protectorate of Hong Kong. Others went to Palestine, Australia and America, which had finally opened its doors to displaced persons. One of the Australian immigrants was Hans Mueller, now a B'nai B'rith senior vice president.

Within a few years of the Chinese revolution, the Jews who had been resourceful and lucky enough to find refuge in Shanghai were gone. Only a handful of elderly Jews remained, living out their lives under the Chinese Communists. An extraordinary period in Jewish — and B'nai B'rith — history had faded from sight. □