# Older Jewish Refugees in China: From a History of the Other to Multidirectional Memories

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## Introduction

From the 1930s onwards, as Hitler came to power and the anti-Semitic acts of Germany’s Nazi regime intensified, countless European Jews were forced to leave their homelands and flee to different parts of the world. Eventually, more than 20,000 Jews, mainly from Germany and Austria, arrived in China as refugees following a period of displacement. They spread to Harbin, Tianjin, Beijing, Qingdao, Nanjing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Hong Kong and other Chinese cities. However, most lived in the port metropolis of Shanghai, where they formed a Jewish refugee community of over 10,000 people.

In recent decades, works on the Jewish diaspora in China have addressed the overall political, lifestyle, and cultural history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai more systematically. Jewish history is undergoing a process of shifting from the East-West historical writing of the “other” to the opening up of a multidirectional dialog of memory. At the same time, academics have yet to give sufficient focus on the subgroups of the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai, such as the elderly. In recent years, as the international academic community has continued to expand in the field of Holocaust research, social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class have been incorporated into the research landscape. Hence, the study of the relationship between the elderly and the Holocaust is gradually deepening.

In this paper, I select several elderly Jewish refugees in Shanghai as case studies based on Western and Chinese historical archives from the global perspectives and topics of Holocaust studies and Jewish diaspora studies. Through exploring their individual destinies as elderly refugees, we can get a glimpse of the group circumstances of elderly Jewish refugees and re-examine the history and memory of Jewish people’s exodus into China. Through exploring their individual destinies as elderly refugees, we can get a glimpse of the group circumstances of elderly Jewish refugees and re-examine the history and memory of Jews migrating to China. The issues that will be the focus of this article’s investigation and discussion are: 1.) What role did aging factors play in the experience of exile for these Jewish refugees who fled from Europe to China with their families? 2.) What role did aging play in their life decisions? and 3.) What inspiration does this provide for future generations when it comes to understanding the connections between the elderly, the Holocaust, and exile?

## The Jewish Diaspora in China: A Reflection

In post-World War II historical writing on the Holocaust and exile, Jewish refugee groups fleeing to China were long considered “emigration on the fringe” (see Dreifuß 1980) and “exile of the little people” (Hans 2012). It was not until the 1970s that historian, David Kranzler, first systematically studied the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai (see Kranzler 1976). In the half-century since then, international scholarship on Jewish refugees in China and the practice of memory have yielded fruitful results. This history has gradually become known to a wider international public through image production, museumization, and media dissemination, thus transforming itself from a “memory reservoir” (“speichergedächtnis”) in Assmann’s sense to a functional and significant cultural memory (see Assmann 1990).

We can see an important feature when we look back at the writing and commemoration of this period of history over the past 50 years. The relevant historical research and memory discourse has gone through a process of transformation from Western-led “Orientalist writing” to China’s “self-Orientalized narrative,” and finally towards a shared history and a multidirectional memory dialog. In one respect, for the Jews, China was a last option for escape out of necessity and a transit point for their post-war emigration to Western countries, such as the United States.

This kind of thinking has profoundly influenced the mainstream Western history of the Jewish diaspora since 1970. In many memoirs and historical works, it is the “norm” for Jews to immigrate to Western countries such as the U.K. and the U.S. while fleeing to Third World countries is often regarded as a “special exception.” Thus, W. Michael Blumenthal, a Jewish refugee via Shanghai, and former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, wrote:

Thus, the Jewish refugees lived for several years isolated and crammed together in a ghetto in China, a most peculiar and special variation of the emigrant fate of German Jews in other parts of the world. There the emigrants tried to settle into a new society [...]. We saw Shanghai only as a temporary shelter. Everyone wanted to leave again as soon as possible, to more ‘normal’ countries, some – at least in the beginning – even back to their so-called homeland.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This kind of “exceptionalism” essentially points to a narrative of Jewish/Western civilization’s self-rescue in the exotic Orient after a period of hardship against the backdrop of the Holocaust and exile. Behind this lies a binary logic of “self/modern/advanced” versus “other/pre-modern/backward” that has its roots in colonialism. Thinking about China through this logic is not completely free from the framework of Orientalism.

In his discussion of Orientalism, Edward Said accurately points out that Orientalism otherizes, marginalizes, and symbolizes the East, shaping a fantasy world of the East to highlight the superiority of Western culture and to achieve Europe’s own subjectivity and cultural identity (see Said, 1978, 2014). Some Chinese scholars have also pointed out:

The image of China in the Western eye [...] has always been historically shaped to represent values that are considered different from Western ones. China, India […] have all served as foils to the West at one time or another, either as idealized utopias, alluring and exotic dreamlands, or lands of eternal stagnation, spiritual purblindness, and ignorance (Zhang 1988: 127).

Moreover, these stereotypes of China are directly reflected in many Jewish diaspora historical narratives, including Kranzler’s writings. Therein, China is only a storyboard with Jews/Westerners as the protagonists, and Shanghai, where Jewish refugees are most concentrated, is described as both a “sin city” and a “city of hope” (Buxbaum 2008: 25). Such characterizations still fall into the mold of a false cultural view of the East.

At the same time, in the context of China’s Opening Up Reforms, Chinese scholars since the 1980s have begun to translate, draw on, and learn from the past research of Western historians. By building on “Orientalist writing” made from the perspective of the European-centered (Eurocentric) point of view, they have increased the collection, collation, and research of Chinese historical materials, and gradually developed “a Chinese reading of its own” (Kreissler 2012: 237). This means a historical narrative and memory discourse that takes the perspective of being Chinese-centered (Sinocentric) and that also emphasizes China’s specificity. For example, a historian from the Center for Jewish Studies Shanghai concludes:

This historical memory of Jewish refugees taking refuge in Shanghai during World War II is a unique part of the Holocaust research community in China and abroad. Others commemorate the dead. Only Shanghai commemorates the living, commemorates the survivors, and commemorates the rescue. The Sino-Jewish friendship forged in this ordeal is the most humane page in the tragedy of the Holocaust (Wang 2016: 305).

Nevertheless, if we look at the global historical context of the Holocaust and Jewish diaspora, this conclusion of shaping China as a “special” place of exile from another perspective is undoubtedly debatable. Behind this “auto-orientalism” narrative is China’s own consideration of diplomatic issues and the politics of memory. There has been a clear trend of politicization, diplomacy, and instrumentalization of the attention and commemoration of this period of the Jewish diaspora in China, especially since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel in 1992. The former “Hongkew ghetto” and the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Memorial Museum have not only become tourist attractions bringing in foreign tourists but also the “necessary agenda” for many Western politicians visiting Shanghai (“a quasi-compulsory programme”; Kreissler 2012: 233). Hence, one scholar has commented:

Thus, the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum can be seen as a process with which Chinese authorities could present China as a mirror image of the West. The museum epitomizes a historical self that is eager to be affirmed in the eye of the others, that is, by assertion from the West. In this sense, this endeavor to be in line with the West, discourse serves as a means of articulating the spectacle of China’s imagined modernity (Pan 2014).

Thus, we can see that the memory discourse of the Jewish diaspora in China was once shaped by the East and the West. Moreover, this past is written as a history of the “other”: Jews are not only “fringe people” expelled from their European homeland, but also “foreigners” in the eyes of the Chinese. Yet, China and the Chinese also constitute the “other” in the East from the perspective of Jews/Westerners.

Therefore, when people completely accept and believe in the specialness of “other” writing and exile, or when the historical premises of Orientalism and Colonialism are internalized to some extent, it may unconsciously consolidate the cultural hegemony under certain political struggles over memory. This results in the relativization of the global history of refugee exile in the context of the Holocaust. Thereupon, the intrinsic complexity, diversity, and heterogeneity of each place of exile itself may also be obscured and weakened.

It is in the context of a new global history that we need to re-examine the history and memory of the Jewish diaspora and consider whether and why it has a “local character.” The “local character” here should not be a simple substitute for the “other” writing and “exceptionalism,” nor should it be interpreted simply as the symbolic relationship between Jewish refugees and exiles. Rather, it should fully uncover the true specialness and universal spiritual core and value pursuit contained in this history and memory from the transnational perspective of culture, global archives, and international cooperation. Therefore, we can observe that this field of research has been undergoing a shift in position, perspective, and thinking, from “Jewish/Western” to “global/local” since entering the 21st century.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let us take China as an example of a place of exile. First of all, this period of Jewish diaspora history occurred in China. Regardless of the perspective from which it was written, ethnic and social groups living in China at that time, including the Chinese, were important actors, participants, and witnesses of this period of history.[[3]](#footnote-3) Secondly, with the precipitation and shaping of relevant historical materials into a rich memory culture, various ethnic and social groups, including Chinese, have also become the core constructors and disseminators of this historical memory.

Under the perspective of postcolonial theory, the scholar Michael Rothberg has proposed the concept of “multi-dimensional memory.” This theory emphasizes the fluidity and openness of memory, wherein the history and memory of different ethnic and social groups can intersect, refer to, engage in dialog with, and learn from each other (see Rothberg 2009). The history and memory of the Jewish diaspora in China are being passed down from generation to generation in different corners of the world, from the Harbin Museum of Jewish History and Culture and the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum in China to the Jewish Museum Berlin and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In this sense, the Jewish refugee experience in China has built a bridge beyond time and space. Not only is it carrying the shared history of different peoples and countries, but it also brings new opportunities for cross-cultural dialog between different ethnic and social groups to enhance memory and seek shared values among all humankind.

## Older Jewish Refugees in China

In addition to the foregoing background, it is worth considering two further points in the relationship between the Holocaust, the Jewish diaspora in China, and the social group of elderly refugees as part of a new stage. First, as mentioned above, the history of elderly Jewish refugees in China is a common history mixed with the experiences of different ethnic groups and social groups. Therefore, it is not possible to explore the history only from the perspective of elderly Jewish refugees themselves. Rather, it is necessary to use transnational archives and documents to introduce the perspectives of local people, institutions and other actors to examine the relationship between elderly Jewish refugees and other ethnic groups and social groups in the local society in as many dimensions as possible.

Second, it is necessary to view the history of elderly refugees in China from the perspective of global history, and not just look at the problem in isolation. This means that we need to examine the role of aging factors in the arrival, transit and final destination of the Jewish refugees, not only in the historical dimension of time, but also in the global chain of mass exile and migration. We also need to take into account the cases of elderly refugees in other places of exile and make horizontal comparisons and analyses of such different places of exile.

Taking the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai as an example, based on the above considerations, this paper does not intend to offer a detailed historical review of the historical situation at that time.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nor is it the purpose of this paper to carry out rigorous and comprehensive statistics and surveys from a sociological perspective. Rather, this paper aims to re-examine the historical overview and individual situation of the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai from the perspectives of aging and the elderly.

At a time when society is increasingly aging, the World Health Organization defines a 60-year-old as an elderly person. However, there have been different understandings of the elderly in different periods, countries, and cultural circles. The definition of old age also distinguishes between age/birth age, biological age, psychological age, and social age. In the previous century, the life expectancy of the male population in the United States in 1930 was 58 years old (life expectancy at birth) and that of the female population was 62 years old, due to various factors.[[5]](#footnote-5) The average life expectancy of China’s population at that time was less than 40 years old.[[6]](#footnote-6) When the Nazis came to power, the life expectancy of the male population in Germany in 1934 was 59.9 years.[[7]](#footnote-7) Therefore, there may not be a strict, uniform, and unambiguous definition of what constitutes “older Jewish refugees.”

However, no matter how the elderly are defined, aging is often accompanied by new health problems and physical limitations. Therefore, in a period of violent turmoil such as World War II and the Holocaust, the elderly are undoubtedly in an extremely vulnerable situation. Nazi ideology held that the value of individuals was in their ability to work. After suffering from malnutrition, disease and violence caused by expulsion, selection, and persecution, countless elderly people not only had a low chance of survival, but even if they survived, major physical and mental trauma and darkness would accompany them for the rest of their lives.

At the same time, aging was not conducive to the flight and exile of Jews. Many elderly Jews either underestimated the anti-Semitic nature of the Nazis and the gravity of the situation or firmly believed that Germany was their fatherland which they were unwilling to leave. Some believed that they would not be involved [as victims of antisemitism] due to their social contributions and status, such as some Jewish veterans who had fought for Germany in World War I, or some “privileged” elderly Jews who had been sent to the so-called “special ghetto” (“Sonderghetto”) of Theresin (Theresienstadt). Some could not withstand long distances and long periods of drifting and migration due to various factors such as physical condition and medical problems.

In fact, in the case of Shanghai alone, the number of elderly Jews who fled Europe to China in safety were not in the majority. Most German-Austrian refugees arrived in Shanghai by sea (they usually departed from Italian ports, a situation that lasted until Italy entered the war in 1940), while Polish refugees traveled by train. By the time Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the land route was no longer viable. As a result, both the sea and land routes to China were severed. In other words, in the end, there were very few elderly people who possessed the physical, family and economic conditions, and who successfully seized the opportunities and time windows, to obtain documents such as immigrant visas. As a result, Jewish refugees in Shanghai were mainly middle-aged men.

However, there is no accurate data on the number of elderly people because different agencies had different statistical specifications for records on the entry of Jewish refugees at different times. According to scholars, Jewish refugees in Shanghai were from all walks of life, and their overall age and living conditions were very unfavorable:

There was an unfavorable age structure: on average, the refugees were already over 40 years old and most of them arrived physically and physically exhausted in an unfamiliar environment where the language and living conditions were foreign and unknown to them (Löber 1997: 17).

Therein, elderly refugees found themselves in an even more difficult situation. They usually fled Europe with their families or took refuge with relatives who had settled in Shanghai. Those who arrived before 1938 were technically not refugees. They were expatriates living in the former public concessions and French concessions in old Shanghai. But after “Kristallnacht” in 1938, the ability of the city, itself in the throes of war, to receive refugees was greatly challenged by the influx of Jewish refugees from Europe to Shanghai.

Most of the refugees who came later lived in temporary shelters in Hongkou, which were rented or purchased by the Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai (CAEJF). Many refugees who arrived in Hongkou wanted to leave the shelter, but finding a place to rent or a job was no easy task. In such circumstances, resettlement, food, medical and social assistance for the elderly by relief organizations could not be comprehensive or in-depth. Compared to young people, the overall situation of the elderly in Shanghai was much more difficult when it came to settling in and earning a living.

As for individuals, whether elderly Jewish refugees could truly adapt to and survive in the years of exile in China depended not only on their own age, gender, occupation, personality, family, skills, and physical condition, but also their experiences before, during, and after [their time in] China. By combing through historical materials, this paper divides the elderly Jewish refugees coming to China into two categories: the first type were still middle-aged when they fled Europe, but they gradually aged during their exile in China and began to enter the ranks of the elderly; the second type fled to China at an older age (55 years old and above).

An example of people from the first category was the musician group the “Wolf Brothers” (die Gebrüder Wolf) from Germany. The Wolf Brothers came from a Jewish musician family in Hamburg. Generations of the family had been active on the German and European tour stages under this name as well as in the form of duets. The songs they wrote had been widely sung in the local area. Before World War II, these Jewish musicians had a great influence on jazz and pop music in Europe, and in particular made an important contribution to the performance genre of cabaret (Kabarett).

Following “Kristallnacht,” James Iwan Wolf (1893–1981), a core member of the “Wolf Brothers,” was arrested and transported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he was eventually released for submitting proof of permanent departure from Germany. Between 1939 and 1947, he and his younger brother, Donat Wolf (1902–1984), lived in exile in Shanghai. There, they rebuilt the “Wolf Brothers” group, continuing the family’s musical tradition with performances in Shanghai theaters and makeshift Jewish refugee homes. After the war, they emigrated to the United States and still performed as a family of artists. Today, the story of their lives and music are constantly commemorated and circulated in Germany. They are known as the “Sons of Hamburg,” and the city of Hamburg has held various commemorative events for in their honor.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Adolf Josef Storfer (1888–1944) was a Romanian-born Austrian-Jewish journalist and publisher whose story is similar to that of the Wolf Brothers. As a student of Freud, Storfer served as president of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Press before World War I. He fled to Shanghai at the age of 50 and founded a newspaper for exiles, The Gelbe Post (“die Gelbe Post”) within a few months, even though he was penniless and exhausted.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Although Storfer lived in exile in Shanghai for only three years, the newspaper he founded was rated as the best German newspaper at the time. The Gelbe Post was extremely rich in content. Storfer was not only a knowledgeable scholar, but also had formed a team of authors and editors who were “China Hands” or “China Experts.” The Gelbe Post systematically introduced Chinese history, culture, art, and society to exiles from Europe, and traced the history of Jews coming to China. He Fengshan (何风山), now known as China’s “Schindler,” also wrote for the Gelbe Post and showed great sympathy for Jews.

In 1941, Japan occupied the public and French concessions in Shanghai. Storfer then moved from Shanghai to Australia and continued to live in exile. He no longer engaged in any news activities and died in Melbourne three years later.

It can be seen from the above examples from the first category that Jewish refugees still actively managed to gain a foothold in Shanghai, despite their advancing age and the difficulties they faced. While struggling to make a living, they also dedicated themselves to creating and providing intellectual nourishment for themselves and other refugees.

We will focus on the second category in the next section of this article. Therein, I list and analyze two examples of elderly Jewish families, so as to offer a glimpse the inherent heterogeneity of Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

## The Flecks and the Wittenberg Family: Two Cases of Elderly Shanghailänder

Luise Fleck was born into a French aristocratic family and was the second female film director in the world after the famous French female director, Alice Guy-Blaché. In 1910, she co-founded Austria’s first film production company (Wiener Kunstfilm-Industrie/Vienna Art Film Industry) with her first husband, Anton Kolm, and Jewish photographer, Jacob Fleck, who later became her second husband. In the 1920s, the Flecks directed a number of films at the German company UFA and became a famous “director couple” (“Regieehepaar”) throughout Europe.

After Austria was annexed by Germany in 1938, the couple was imprisoned in the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps for 16 months before they were lucky enough to escape the clutches of the Nazis with the help of their friend and famous German director, William Dieterle. In 1940, with Luise at the age of 67, and Jacob at the age of 59, the couple arrived in Shanghai along with many other Jewish refugees. This started seven years of exile following their many hardships.

In virtually the same period, in 1939, 58-year-old Alfred Wittenberg fled to Shanghai with his wife Paula Wittenberg, who was 15 years younger, and his mother-in-law, Eva Fuss, 66. A close disciple of the world-famous nineteenth-century Hungarian Jewish violinist Joseph Joachim, Alfred was a prominent violinist and pianist with a reputation in European music before World War II. In Germany, in addition to his time as the first violinist at the Royal Opera House and participating in the music evenings held by the Schnabel Trio for many years, he had also taught violin for decades, accumulating extremely rich teaching experience. But, similar to the Flecks, with the escalation of Nazi antisemitism, he also had to make up his mind to relinquish his noble status in the Berlin music scene and join his family in the wave of refugees.

### Figure 1: Basic information about the Flecks and the Wittenbergs (Compiled by the author of this paper.)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Gender** | **Birthplace** | **Year of Birth and Death** | **Years in Shanghai** | **Occupation** | **Post-War Destination** |
| Luise Fleck | Female | Austrian | 1873–1950 | 1940–1947 | Director | Returned to Austria |
| Jacob Fleck | Male | Austrian | 1881–1953 | 1940–1947 | Photographer  Director | Returned to Austria |
| Alfred Wittenberg | Male | German | 1880–1952 | 1939–1952 | Musician | Stayed in China |
| Paula Wittenberg | Female | German | 1895–1944 | 1939–1944 | Nurse | / |
| Eva Fuss | Female | German | 1873–? | 1939–? | ？ | / |

So, what are the similarities and differences between the two families of Jewish refugees in Shanghai, both of whom were elderly and equally culturally elite? What role did the factors of aging play during their lives in exile in China?

Based on ideas proposed earlier in this paper, the following will focus on analyzing and exploring this issue from a “global perspective” and a “local perspective”. First, by combining the historical processes of the flight, transit, and post-war destinations of these two Jewish refugee families, we can be seen that aging constitutes a key factor in their decision-making that cannot be ignored. If it is fortuitous that two families fled to Shanghai (the Wittenbergs were unsuccessful in their attempts to go into exile in the U.K., and the Flecks fled Europe almost at the last minute), then they both made choices based on age when they had more autonomy than during their exile and after the war.

For the Wittenberg family, Alfred immigrated to the United States before the outbreak of the Pacific War. German students and musician friends had previously invited him to live in the United States, but he repeatedly declined: “He said that he was old, had a wife and a mother-in-law, and did not want to travel far and wide” (Xu 2007: 67). After the war, the Flecks chose to return to their native Austria for retirement and the final chapters of their lives: “At that time, they had both reached old age. Jacob was 66 years old, and Louise was 74 years old; they had reached retirement age. It seems that they never worked on any further films” (Xu 2007: 125).

It is worth noting here that aging is often accompanied by a greater possibility of losing one’s partner. Facing the death of oneself and one’s partner was a subject that these former Shanghai Jews had to face. A parallel horizontal comparison of cases of older refugees in other places of exile across the globe reveals different findings on this issue. When they became elderly widowers, Alfred, who stayed in China, and Jacob, who returned to Austria, chose to live alone. James Iwan Wolf, who immigrated to the United States, remarried at the age of 72 (Guderian 2006: 88).

From the perspective of social construction theory, aging and the accompanying adjustments and changes are a unique personal process, dependent on each individual’s own construction of his/her social perceptions and reality. Therefore, widowhood may have been a new opportunity for self-development for these people.

However, for Max Ludwig Berges (1899–1973), a Jewish refugee who had also emigrated to Shanghai and then to the United States, the elderly widower was waiting for death. The playwright and his wife, who, like the Wolf Brothers, came from Hamburg, went into exile in Dalian, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Manila, and later, California, from 1935 to 1938 (see Weinke 2006). While in Shanghai, he completed the novel *Cold Pogrom*, at which time he had already foreseen the escalating persecution and massacre of Jews by the Nazi regime. After living in the United States for many years, the elderly Max ended his own life following the death of his wife, who had been his companion for 42 years.

Let us now return to the case of the Flecks and the Wittenbergs. In addition to putting the relevant history into a global perspective, it is perhaps more important that we examine the relationship between elderly Jewish refugees and local ethnic and social groups in China, organizing and interpreting the “local” social construction of elderly refugees at that time. On the one hand, aging and being elderly brought more inconvenience and disadvantage to their life in exile. Alfred’s hearing gradually deteriorated upon entering old age, and his intonation was often inaccurate when playing the violin. In addition, he not only hunched his back and often had lower back pain, but after the age of 70, he “could no longer move his legs in a continuous motion but had to walk and stop step by step” (Xu 2007: 67-68).

His wife, Paula, suffered from mental illness due to aging and died at the age of 49. Soon after, her elderly mother-in-law, Eva, also died due to the pain of bereavement and the hardships of life. (The time of Eva’s death is not accurately recorded, but according to the data, it would have been between 1944 and 1945).

Long periods of poverty caused the Flecks to lose weight, which made them weaker in old age. In 1941, Luise weighed 120 pounds, and in 1945, she weighed 83 pounds. Jacob’s weight also dropped, from 162 pounds in 1941 to 110 pounds in 1945 (Teng 1997: 53).

On the other hand, it is doubtless that the elderly refugees, the Flecks and Alfred Wittenberg, truly continued their achievements in their own way during exile in Shanghai, leaving an important spiritual heritage and cultural imprint on China. During this process, rather than becoming an obstacle, the elderly played an unusually active and positive role.

Shortly after arriving in Shanghai, the Flecks showed great interest in the development of Chinese films and visited film institutions in Shanghai, where they met the outstanding Chinese film director Fei Mu (费穆). Fei Mu was China’s first director to accompany silent film with ethnic music, the first director to shoot color films, and is regarded as a “pioneer of modern Chinese cinema.” As pioneers in the film industry in their respective countries, both parties were genuinely happy about such an unusual encounter and wanted to collaborate on a film.

Fei Mu graciously invited the Flecks to direct a film, for which he paid them a very handsome director’s fee. This was a lifesaver for the couple, who were Jewish refugees in dire straits. Fei Mu held that:

The world has changed like this. The Flecks left the embrace of their motherland and came to China during times of trouble. That they have great sympathy for China goes without saying. I think they can work with us in China and contribute with their rich experience and knowledge, at least in terms of improving the level of technology (Teng 1997: 51).

In the end, many people from both parties took part and made constant refinements to create a script that had both Chinese and foreign narrative content and characteristics. The title of the film was *Children of the World* (“Söhne und Töchter der Welt” in German and “世界儿女” in Chinese). The film tells the story of several young Chinese people who have gone through the baptism of war and love. The two male leads love the same woman, but they decide to put aside their personal feelings and go to the battlefield together to fight off the Japanese invaders and keep the interests of their own country at heart while also placing the good of the whole world first, making them “children of the world.” On October 4th, 1941, the first film in the history of Chinese cinema produced by both Chinese and foreign film artists was released at the Jindu Grand Theater in Shanghai, which attracted great attention. Shanghai film critics regarded it as “a film that is both patriotic and serious.”

At the same time, the Flecks met the best filmmakers in China and set up a school called the Academy of Movie Arts, China, in Shanghai. They hired many well-known Shanghainese film actors of the day to teach. This was one of the few film schools in the history of Chinese film, which has played a positive role in cultivating Chinese film talent. With the Japanese army occupying the Shanghai Concession at the outbreak of the Pacific War, ongoing screenings of *Children of the World* were forced to stop. The film was later banned from being screened and the film school was also forced to close. However, the Flecks left a great legacy for the history of Chinese film with their experience, broad international perspective, deft film production, and training up of talent.

Similar to the Flecks, Alfred Wittenberg, used his deep musical qualifications and superb violin and piano skills to seize an opportunity to host a chamber music concert soon after arriving in Shanghai. Afterwards, he became famous and began to recruit local students. Many of these Chinese students were musicians who had already made their own achievements at that time. They included Tan Yuzhen (谭抒真), who was known as the “pioneer of Chinese violin production,” and Fan Jisen (范继森), former head of the piano department of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Hence, Wittenberg became respected as a “professor of professors” (Xu 2007: 60).

On the one hand, Wittenberg was both talented and humble. The German newspaper, *Berliner Volkszeitung*, wrote in an article celebrating his 50th birthday: “His large circle of pupils reveres him as an artist and a human being, and his magnificent art as well as his modest kindness have earned him numerous loyal friends.”[[10]](#footnote-10) After arriving in Shanghai, Wittenberg always maintained such world-class mastership and humble altruism, striving for perfection in art and being approachable to others. Although he “had been performing with students and the next generation [of musicians] for a long time, sometimes accompanying them, he always took it seriously, just as he did when he was young and cooperated with the world’s top musicians” (ibid: 61).

On the other hand, respecting teachers, respecting the elderly, and caring for the young are traditional Confucian ideas and social virtues in China. In stark contrast to the expulsion of Jews by the Nazis, Chinese students formed deep friendships with the elderly refugee musician who had left his homeland and treated him as a guest of honor. All of Wittenberg’s former Chinese students went on to become great masters of Chinese music history and held their teacher in great esteem. They eagerly learned extraordinary playing skills and profound musical knowledge from him. They took good care of both their teacher and his family in going about their daily lives. In this way, they built a cultural bridge of emotional resonance and mutual understanding through music. It is precisely because “the Chinese students treated him so well, and the teacher and students were deeply affectionate, that he was really reluctant to leave them and fly away” (ibid: 67).

Even though Wittenberg was invited to the United States many times, he was not moved to go. Following World War II, he remained in Shanghai to teach at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Wittenberg lived in China for more than a decade as a representative figure of Jewish musicians in exile in Shanghai. He regarded Shanghai as his home and considered it a joy to “educate talented people.” He worked hard to cultivate many fine musicians on both the violin and the piano. He ultimately stayed in Shanghai until his death and was laid to rest next to those same Chinese students who held him in such esteem.

### Figure 2: Alfred Wittenberg and his Chinese Students.



By sifting through the experiences of the Flecks and Alfred Wittenberg in Shanghai, we can see that being seniors and aging played a positive role in their exile years for these successful artists. What they lived through as they grew older allowed them to gain more experience and wisdom than young people. They had experienced more challenges and difficulties while demonstrating strong adaptability and maintaining the continuity of their careers and mental stability. In addition, they had wider and deeper interpersonal relationships than young people and were able to quickly connect with their existing circles as soon as they arrived in Shanghai. At the same time, they had the courage to break through cultural barriers, meet Chinese intellectual elites, collaborate with Shanghai’s cultural and artistic institutions, and develop local social resources and support, so as to gain recognition for themselves and others.

From the perspective of role theory, neither the Flecks nor Wittenberg, who were all elderly people, were attached to the fixed lifestyle they once had in Europe. They constantly adjusted to changes in their social environment. They actively participated in social and cultural activities in Shanghai, seeking new secondary roles for themselves. Furthermore, they relied on their own strength to find ways to regain control of their lives, bringing meaning to their existence in China. In these ways, they injected cultural character and content into life and gained spiritual strength beyond time and space [*sic*].

Following their deaths, their stories and memories have continued to be told and passed down. For example, in 1986, *Children of the World* was collected by the China Film Archive and taken to Hong Kong for screening. In 1991, the Vienna International Film Festival specially selected this film directed by the Flecks during their retrospective exhibition of Chinese films. Whether in the Flecks’ hometown or in Shanghai, where they lived in exile, this film by Sino-Austrian film artists will be a testimony to their precious cooperation. The film also encompasses the memory and respect that future generations have had for the Flecks and Chinese film artists.

Many Chinese students have retained precious historical materials about their mentor, Alfred Wittenberg. In 1999, Chen Yifei’s (陈逸飞) film, *Escape to Shanghai* (逃往上海), was the first film in China to focus on the Holocaust and Shanghai Jewish refugees. The film shows Wittenberg and his students as the protagonists and reviews the history of Jewish refugees exiled in China. In 2005, the Shanghai Oriental Television Music Station (上海的东方电视音乐台) filmed and broadcast the documentary, *Jewish Musician in Shanghai* (犹太音乐家在上海). Therein, they returned to Wittenberg’s former residence in Shanghai to remember the music master. At the same time, local actors (individuals, communities, institutions, and organizations) in the film respected, accepted and admired Wittenberg, showing a social and historical picture of China that reflects the inclusivity and spirit of the city of Shanghai.

Since opening up to foreigners in recent times, Shanghai has become a highly diverse, heterogeneous cultural space, where cultures from all over the world meet and exchange in the city. This urban personality embodies a modern version of Chinese civilization that blends various regional cultures and absorbs different excellent cultural nutrients. For example, the period from the 1920s to the 1940s is known as the “Golden Age” of Shanghai cinema. At that time, Shanghai had become one of the most important film centers in Asia, attracting international capital and talent. Various film companies were established one after another. Film productions were huge, there was a huge variety of genres, and movie culture was extremely prosperous. *Children of the World*, a collaboration between the Flecks and Fei Mu, epitomized Shanghai as an international metropolis and center of cinema of the time.

As far as music is concerned, some scholars have summarized the important role played by exiled musicians such as Alfred Wittenberg in the development of Chinese music. One scholar wrote:

To some extent, we can say that mainly Jewish musicians and Soviet musicians have cultivated Western art music culture in China: Belarusian and Russian Jewish musicians before and after World War I, Jews from Central Europe before and after World War II (mainly German and Austrian-Jewish musicians), and Soviet musicians in the 1950s (Tang 2007: 154-155).

At that time, there were many globally renowned music masters in Shanghai such as Alfred Wittenberg. Some Jewish refugee musicians joined the Shanghai Public Band (the predecessor of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra), which was famous for being “the first orchestra in the Far East,” and some were employed in various departments of the National Conservatory of Music (the predecessor of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music). In this way, they left a precious wealth of music for China, making Shanghai a city with world-class music and laying the foundation for the development for future musical culture in China. Therefore, recounting the Fleck’s and Wittenberg’s history of exile from both the perspective of Jewish refugees and the elderly leads to more levels and a broader culture of memory. This in turn helps to open a multi-dimensional dialog between different ethnic groups, histories, and cultures.

## Concluding Observations

This paper re-examines the history and memory of the Jewish diaspora in China in a new context by taking the elderly and aging as the starting point. By examining the cases of several elderly Jewish refugees, we initially explored the different roles played by aging in the exile of individuals and groups. It is my hope that this will generate further discussion, providing reference for more in-depth, detailed, and rigorous study of elderly refugees in the future. As the current international community gradually ages, examining the history of the Holocaust and exile centered on age has, to some extent, brought them closer to the past and the present, to us, and to here and there.

For this emerging field of study, it may not be important to define what aging and older people are. Instead, it may be more important to explore how aging and elderly people understand themselves and society, how society constructs them, and how the factors of aging intersect with other categories of analysis (such as gender, occupation, ethnicity, etc.), and how to have a dialog with more dimensions of cultural memory in both global and local perspectives.

While this article focuses on examples of several elderly Jewish cultural elites, it also generates and leaves more issues for us to note and solve. For example, Eva Fuss, the mother-in-law behind Alfred Wittenberg, was a female Jewish refugee who also arrived in Shanghai at an old age. However, she was an ordinary elderly person for whom we have scant historical records. Who was she? What did she go through? What did she leave behind? Who else did they [*sic*] have? What else have they [*sic*] been through? What else did they [*sic*] leave behind? Such questions will be subject to ongoing exploration by researchers and the public.

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## Biography

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1. See text written by Blumenthal for the 1997 Shanghai Jewish Exile Exhibition in Berlin, taken from the front and inside cover of the exhibition catalog (see Barzel/Jüdisches Museum Berlin 1997). Text cited originally in German has been translated into English by the author of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Related studies such as: Jüdisches Museum Berlin and Stiftung Haus der Geschichte 2006; Franz and Halbrainer 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, in 1933, in order to protest the persecution of European progressives and Jews by German fascists, Song Qingling (宋庆龄), Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培), Lu Xun (鲁迅), Lin Yutang (林语堂) and other well-known Chinese intellectuals went to the German consulate in Shanghai to submit a protest letter. The national government during the War of Resistance also planned to resettle Jewish refugees on a large scale in the Chinese frontier province of Yunnan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See relevant historical works in recent years: Freyeisen 2000; Pan 2000; Hochstadt 2012; Eber 2012; Gao 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Life Expectancy for Social Security,” The United States Social Security Administration, accessed October 17, 2023, https://www.ssa.gov/history/lifeexpect.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the 1930s and 1940s, China did not have a comprehensive, large-scale census due to the war, only statistics on the life expectancy of the population in some areas. Data have shown that the overall life expectancy was less than 40 years old (see Wang 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Rahlf, ed., Deutschland in Daten. Zeitreihen zur Historischen Statistik (Bonn: Bundeszentralefür politische Bildung, 2015), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a study of the cultural memory of the Wolf Brothers, see Guderian 2006; Tong 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For research on Storfer and the Die Gelbe Post, see Yuan 2008; Pape 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quoted in Sophie Fetthauer, “Alfred Wittenberg,” in Lexikon verfolgter Musiker und Musikerinnen der NS-Zeit, ed. Claudia Maurer Zenck, Peter Petersen, Sophie Fetthauer, and Friedrich Geiger (Hamburg: Universität Hamburg, 2022), https://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm\_lexmperson\_00002496. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)