

# The plight of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution: two films

## Shanghai Ghetto and Nowhere in Africa

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Shanghai Ghetto, directed by Dana Janklowicz-Mann and Amir Mann; Nowhere in Africa, written and directed by Caroline Link, based on the novel by Stefanie Zweig

Horrible events in the year 1938 caused a dramatic increase in Jewish emigration from Nazi Germany. The *Anschluss*—the annexation of Austria in March; a sharp jump in personal assaults on Jews during the spring and summer; the nationwide *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) pogrom in November; and the subsequent seizure of Jewish assets caused a flood of visas applications.

Approximately 36,000 Jews left Germany and Austria in 1938, and 77,000 in 1939. This outflow created a major refugee crisis. Summoned by the US in 1938, 32 countries met in Evian, France ostensibly to address the problem. However, little was offered by the conference except excuses for not accepting the desperate German and Austrian refugees. Furthermore, the gathering's scope was limited to the two offending countries despite the fact that throughout east central Europe the situation facing the Jewish population was rapidly becoming untenable.

The Roosevelt administration claimed it was restricted by its quota system. Britain, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and others argued that high unemployment levels prevented absorption of refugees. Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico and Peru were among the countries that stated their unwillingness to accept any more “non-Aryan” immigrants. Australia's representative hypocritically declared: “It will no doubt be appreciated that as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large scale migration.”

Two current films deal with the traumatic consequences of the Jewish flight from Nazi persecution: *Shanghai Ghetto*, a feature-length documentary, and *Nowhere in Africa*, a German film based on a semi-autobiographical novel. That the experiences of the twentieth century are being addressed by filmmakers is a welcome trend, although neither work breaks new ground in either form or content.

*Shanghai Ghetto*, produced and directed by Dana Janklowicz-Mann and Amir Mann, and narrated by actor Martin Landau, recounts the little known story of Jewish refugees in Shanghai, China. Under Japanese occupation, the city became a safe haven because it did not require strict documentation for entry. Interviews with survivors and historians, still photos and footage shot in modern Shanghai, where the neighborhood housing the refugees remains essentially unchanged, chart the fate of some 20,000 Jewish émigrés.

Filmmaker Dana Janklowicz-Mann's father, Harold, was eight years old when he left Germany with his mother following *Kristallnacht*.

They were barely a few steps ahead of the Holocaust.

On the *Jewish Journal* web site, Janklowicz-Mann elaborated: “Jewish men were being picked up and put into concentration camps. They were told you have ‘X’ amount of time to leave—two weeks, a month—if you can find a country that will take you. Outside, their wives and friends were struggling to get a passport, a visa, anything to help them get out. But embassies were closing their doors all over, and countries, including the United States, were closing their borders.”

“It started as a rumor in Vienna,” continued Mann. “‘There's a place you can go where you don't need a visa. They have free entry.’ It just spread like fire and whoever could went for it.” It was an odd political loophole that turned Shanghai into a shelter from persecution. Each of the warring colonial factions—the French, the British and the Japanese—shunned controlling the passport department thus avoiding responsibility for the chaotic area, according to *Shanghai Ghetto*.

The conditions facing the arriving refugees were abysmal—10 to a room, near-starvation, disastrous sanitation and scant employment.

“Can you imagine how shocking it was for someone from what was the height of European culture to land in Shanghai,” said Mann. “We show the culture shock in the documentary.... Shanghai was a cheaper place to live but the refugees were often living on 5 cents a day.”

Generally, the Japanese occupiers regarded Jews as “foreign nationals.” Jewish property was confiscated and permits were required for travel within Shanghai. Most of the refugees arrived between 1937 and 1939 and immigration restrictions were imposed in 1939. However, large numbers of Jews continued to arrive until the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. In 1943, the Japanese authorities declared a “Designated Area for Stateless Refugees,” ordering all 20,000 Jews to move into the one-square-mile Hongkou area of Shanghai.

One survivor explained that while the ghetto had no barbed wire, there was a curfew and the area was patrolled, making it impossible to find or travel to work. Many spoke of the strong bonds established with the Chinese people, who were generally worse off than the émigrés. Still photos show that there were intermarriages and a great many friendships and small business partnerships.

Faced with language disparities, extreme poverty, rampant disease and a terrible feeling of isolation, the refugees were able to make the transition from being supported by welfare agencies to establishing a functioning community. Newspapers were published, schools set up and even cabarets and sports teams thrived.

The Jews of Shanghai, confined to their ghetto, were largely unaware of the horrors being perpetrated in their countries of origin.

Says one of the historians in the film: “They had concentrated on the misery in Shanghai and, lo and behold, after the war they found out they were living in paradise compared to what happened to their brethren in Europe.” Images from the concentration camps of charred bones and fields of shockingly emaciated corpses drive home the point.

In April 2000 the filmmakers traveled to Shanghai with two of the survivors, including the filmmaker’s father. Wandering through slums that have largely remained unchanged since World War II, the duo movingly describe details of their forced sequestration. Their memories are very visceral. “It all comes back. It all comes back.”

Through shedding light on a largely eclipsed historical event, the film introduces remarkable people whose remarkable stories deserve wide attention.

Another unusual haven for Jews fleeing the Holocaust was Kenya. *Nowhere is Africa*, adapted from the fictionalized memoir of Stefanie Zweig, is the story of Walter and Jettel Redlich (Merab Ninidze and Juliane Köhler), a successful German Jewish lawyer and his wife who are forced to take up residence in Kenya in 1938 with their daughter Regina.

The film was nominated as Germany’s Official Selection for the Academy Awards, prompting director Caroline Link to state: “I am keenly aware that the subject matter of the film—dislocation and relocation of a Jewish family due to the ugliness of war and all its political, social and emotional ramifications—is as relevant today as it was more than 60 years ago, when the story actually occurred.”

Link did not attend the March Hollywood ceremony, but speaking from Berlin she expressed her opposition to the US aggression against Iraq and her perception of popular support for George W. Bush’s policy: “I don’t really like America at the moment. Such a high percentage of the population stands squarely behind their president’s politics. I find that a real turnoff.” *Nowhere in Africa* is Link’s third feature and second Oscar nominated work.

In an interview posted on *theage.com.au* web site, Link speaks of her attraction to the Zweig novel: “I was really fascinated by Africa and by the chance to make a movie there and also fascinated about the fact that we don’t know very much about the Jewish refugees who went all over the world to save their lives. We know about those who went to New York or London, but what about Shanghai or Peru or Africa?”

At the movie’s start, Jettel and Regina are living an upper-middle class life in Frankfurt and Walter is sick with malaria in Kenya. After surviving the disease with the help of Owuor, a serene Kenyan, he sends for his wife and daughter, who manage to board a ship just before Germany’s borders are closed. Upon arriving in Kenya, Jettel is resentful of Walter for bringing her to a place so terribly different from the “land of Goethe and Schiller.” She berates her husband: “We’re supposed to live here? Why are we then living at all!”

Each of the three Redlich family members has a different reaction to his or her exotic new home: Walter, now an ill-paid overseer on a British-owned cattle ranch situated in the desert, understands that the family has narrowly escaped the growing Nazi menace; Jettel, disbelieving her husband’s negative predictions for German Jews, angrily resists assimilation; daughter Regina embraces the wild environment and its people, forming an intense bond with Owuor, a member of the Masai tribe.

Filmed on location, the incredible images of the surroundings do much to highlight the causes of both the tensions between the parents and the great love that Regina develops for her new home, its culture

and its inhabitants.

As World War II arrives in Kenya, life is again transformed for the Redlichs. The British authorities intern German nationals and only after Walter convinces the colonialists that he is not a Nazi supporter is the family released. Walter is allowed to join the army and fight with the Allies. During the internment, Jettel seeks, without success, the help of a rich, long-established Jewish family in Nairobi.

Letters arrive with news of family members deported to death camps. As the war ends, it is now Jettel who does not want to return to Germany, considering it a place where her family’s murderers are still at large. Walter, keen to participate in Germany’s reconstruction, wants to accept a judgeship offered to him by the post-Nazi judiciary.

The couple’s relationship is now transposed: when Jettel first arrives in Kenya, Walter accuses her of not loving him because he is no longer a wealthy lawyer. Now Jettel resents Walter for wanting to take her out of Kenya and return to his old profession. Eventually love and commitment win out and the family leaves on a train bound for the continent. The film’s final sequence shows a poor Kenyan woman selling bananas to the passengers on the stopped train. Jettel cannot buy a banana because, as she tells the vendor in Swahili: “I am as poor as a monkey.” With a remarkable graciousness, the Kenyan woman hands her the fruit, saying: “This is for your monkey!” The women’s hands intertwine.

“We became very close to the people of Africa,” author Stefanie Zweig told the *New York Daily News*, speaking of her childhood. “They knew at once that we weren’t English and that we didn’t belong with the rich people. They knew we were Jews—I don’t know how—and they used the Swahili word for Jews.”

*Nowhere in Africa* is worthy, intelligent and limited. Notable is the respect accorded by the filmmakers to the Kenyan population. Shooting in isolated communities, the director explains how the extras from the Pokot and Njem tribes were compensated: “The tribal elders sat under an acacia tree and talked about it. They decided it wasn’t a good idea to pay individual people money because that creates tension. Instead, they told us what they wanted for the community—a road connecting them to a bigger village nearby, which we’re building together with the Kenyan state government.”

However, despite the best intentions, the film’s melding of cultures is a bit too symmetrical and formulaic done with insufficient nuance and contradiction. The various stages in the chronicle of the German exiles are too easily correlated with natural events (for example, following a scene of marital discord, a swarm of locusts descends). There is something slightly condescending about this approach. Character transformations are also a bit facile, with the German-Kenyan interplay overly evenhanded and idealized.

Nonetheless, *Nowhere in Africa* has a dignified and emotionally balanced quality that pays tribute to the seriousness of the subject matter while largely avoiding sentimentality. Director Link “wanted the viewers to slowly fall in love with this alien world, just like my protagonists.” In this, she has largely succeeded.



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