Five Star Refuge

A Week at The Pen

A refugee family at The Peninsula Hong Kong
The lobby of Hong Kong’s Peninsula Hotel (or “The Pen” as it is often fondly referred to as) suggests the height of colonial elegance, framed by gilded columns with its marble flooring and high ceilings complete with ornately carved scenes. As the string quartet hums from the grand balcony above, over shiny silver three-tier stands of high-tea treats, with its grandeur and elegance, it is difficult to imagine that the Peninsula Hotel was once a temporary shelter for post-World War II Jewish refugees.

And while Hong Kong’s Peninsula Hotel is but a very small part of the larger story of the Jewish refugees in China, it brings together the best of Hong Kong in the most unexpected way.

In recent years, there has been considerable attention drawn to the remarkable history of Jews who escaped the Holocaust by fleeing to Shanghai. Beautiful stories emerge of two diverse peoples coming together in trying times in an effort to survive the darkest period in history.

Left on their own, the Jewish refugees lucky enough to make it to Shanghai faced seemingly unbearable obstacles and challenges. These burdens were however eased by the relief work of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) with assistance from the established Jewish community of Shanghai, and most notably through the efforts and resources of Horace Kadoorie.

The end of the war marked the beginning of a massive relocation plan for the nearly sixteen thousand Jewish refugees in Shanghai. Though eager to leave Shanghai, especially in the shadow of the looming internal upheaval in China, they required documentation and visas for their final destination as well as transportation arrangements and the necessary funds to pay for their journey.

For many of the refugees, passage was secured using Hong Kong as a transit port. This was far from ideal as they lacked the necessary paperwork to even stop over in the colony. On the Hong Kong side, Lawrence (later Lord) Kadoorie, Horace’s brother, worked with the JDC who was coordinating the transportation as well as sponsoring it in most cases. Kadoorie also interceded on the refugees’ behalf before the local Hong Kong government to obtain the proper authorization for the refugees to stay in Hong Kong while in transit.

Special arrangements, however, were required for even the short accommodation of the refugees. Lawrence Kadoorie responded to the crisis by coordinating temporary accommodations for refugees in the Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon. A letter from Horace Kadoorie, in Shanghai, to his brother in Hong Kong dated 7 May 1946 references some 22 Jewish refugees that had secured visas and passage to Australia but their route would require them to stay over in...
Hong Kong for a few days. The housing crisis in Hong Kong was acknowledged, but Horace suggested, "Maybe they could stay at the Pen and some kind of lady could look after them. All expenses, of course, would be met by the Joint [JDC]."

Charles Jordan, the JDC representative, further reassured Lawrence Kadoorie, via letter of May 15, 1946, “We are not planning to send anymore refugees via Hong Kong except on definite shipping facilities, because we realize the difficulties which will be created by such people having to remain in Hong Kong for indefinite periods of time…”

There are several pieces of correspondence that refer to small groups of Jewish refugees in transit who were accommodated in this manner. Somewhat ironically in light of events that would soon come to pass, in a letter from Lawrence Kadoorie to Mr. Jordan of May 30, 1946, he writes," The possibility of opening a hostel for future refugees passing through the colony has been discussed, but quite frankly it would be difficult, if not impossible, to arrange for this."

And even for those for with a promise of room and board by the Kadoories, despite their influence, it was by no means a legal right to stay in the colony as the city was already brimming over with displaced persons as well as British being repatriated and there was a concern that the refugees would compete for already limited resources. Transit visas were a must and came with strict limitations on time and privileges.

In a letter on July 4th, 1946, after accommodating the needs of another small groups of refugees in transit, Lawrence Kadoorie offers to reserve three rooms for $800 per month each, paid in advance, for the JDC’s use. The rooms would accommodate 10-12 persons “with a squash”. He further suggested that Mr. Jordan consider opening an account in Hong Kong to help streamline the payment process. It was further agreed that food could be provided for the cost of $5.50 per person per day. To supplement this, it is documented that the JDC also sent many of the refugees with $50 each in pocket money.

On a case-by-case basis the Kadoories worked with the JDC to take care of the special needs of the refugees. In some cases this meant arranging for individual seats on flights. In other cases, hospitalization was required and, for some, burial in the Hong Kong Jewish cemetery was eventually required. It was suggested that an additional small fund for emergency use be developed to allow for the Kadoories to meet these special needs of the refugees.

Despite these well thought out plans, nothing could prepare either the JDC or the Kadoories and The Peninsula for the events of July 1946. Arrangements were made for approximately 250 refugees (the exact number was not initially known) to travel to Australia via the S.S. “Duntroon”. While it was assumed that the Duntroon would sail from Shanghai, by mid-July 1946, it became clear that this was not possible and the Duntroon would instead depart from Hong Kong. Arrangements were made between the Kadoorie brothers to accommodate this group of 250 refugees as a stay over in Hong Kong would be the only way for them to secure their passage on the Duntroon and finally make their way to Australia.

By way of correspondence between Charles Jordan and Lawrence Kadoorie, additional details were ironed out and an understanding reached. Both parties understood that in order to obtain approval from the Hong Kong government for this highly irregular stopover, there must be a detailed plan in place and assurances that the refugees’ needs would be met and
the group would be kept in order. The group was scheduled to arrive in Hong Kong on July 30th via the “General Gordon” and then leave on the S.S. Duntroon on or about August 5, 1946.

Further arrangements were made to send each refugee in need with $30 of pocket money. Additional money was also set aside for emergency funds including medical expenses. On July 27, 1946, the final numbers were reported to The Peninsula and the group was to consist of 283 refugees: 141 men, 125 women, 15 children and 2 infants.

Given the room shortage in Hong Kong generally, arrangements were made to house the refugees in the hotel’s ballrooms. The 6th floor’s Roof Garden would be utilized for men and the Rose Room for 108 women. The remaining 17 women as well as 15 children and two infants would be housed in the Surgery on the Mezzanine Floor. Richard Flantz, who was ten years old at the time, recalls sleeping on “palliasses, like sort of straw mattresses”. Records reflect ‘camp’ cots were used.

There was “ample” toilet space on the 6th floor in the “Gents and Ladies Cloak Rooms” as well as two baths in the Surgery on the Mezzanine Floor. A meal schedule was arranged as well: Breakfast from 7-8, ‘Tiffin’ from 11:30-12:30 and Dinner from 6-7. The refugees were advised to only bring light baggage with them, as their heavy luggage would be transported directly to the godown (dockside warehouse).

While these arrangements were far from ideal, they certainly were ample to provide for the refugees’ needs for their brief stay in the colony. While still in the process of settling the refugees, on July 31, 1946, Lawrence Kadoorie writes in his private diary, “I spent several hours in the godown attending to their luggage. Have just reached the office and had a bombshell… the Australian Government has cabled that it intends to withdraw the Duntroon as it is needed to carry military to New Guinea and will not be allowed to take passengers back to Australia.” Kadoorie concludes the entry by stating, “Hong Kong now has its own refugee problem!”

And so the 283 refugees, settled in the Peninsula Hotel for what they thought would be a week, were to remain in the colony, some for as long as through December of that year. Initially there were discussions about whether or not to return these refugees to Shanghai, as the Duntroon’s delay was indefinite but the JDC and the Kadoories knew that there was a far better chance of finding transport from Hong Kong and a return to Shanghai would only further prolong their ordeal. Without visas, the refugees were unable to earn money leaving them to rely almost entirely on the basic food and modest supplies provided by the hotel staff. The Hong Kong Jewish community, though also still readjusting to postwar life, assessing their own loss and damages and for many fairly newly returned from Japanese internment camps, quickly mobilized themselves to supplement the efforts of The Peninsula.

A Jewish Women’s Association was immediately conceived to help distribute good to the refugees. Mrs. J. Frenkel served as chair this new organization which is referenced several times in the Kadoorie’s correspondence for their role in providing the refugees with much needed essentials as well as extras like baskets of fruit and candy. In later correspondence, the work of other women in the newly formed organization are cited, namely Dr. Sophie Bard, Mrs. Godkin, Mrs. Frenkel and Mrs. Poliak. Mr. Lew Cohen served as the local Jewish Welfare Officer and Captain Hebert, of the national Jewish Welfare Board, likewise also played leading roles in seeing that needs were met.
But the efforts were by no means limited to those in official capacities or to those in the newly formed organization. Mr. Weiss, a prominent member of the community, arranged a junk (leisure boat popular in the colony) outing and picnic for the children and their mothers in August. Lawrence Kadoorie also reported to Mr. Jordan that transportation for 60 was being arranged to take some of the refugees to his own home for a picnic and swim in the later part of the month. Richard Flantz recalls a local member of the Hong Kong Jewish community taking him for ice cream for his first time and taking him to swim, another first for him, out at Repulse Bay. Additionally, it should be remembered that this was a resourceful group of survivors who demonstrated the ability to not merely survive but to live life to the fullest despite the deprivations they suffered in Shanghai. There are even stories of refugee-organized markets for trading goods in the hotel’s lobby.

Fred Antman, now living in Australia, was also among this group of 283 refugees. Born in 1930 in Germany, he was but 16 years old at the time of his family’s unplanned extended stay in The Peninsula. He recalls, “The staff of the hotel was fantastic... And I could not speak more highly of them as the, the hotel staff looking after us in a very awkward sort of a situation, you know. We had a Jewish New Year festival coming on and there is a very big day in the Jewish calendar and they made a certain provision for a room available to us, which we used to conduct our holy services, which we did. And they even provided us with a very festive meal on that New Year’s night; a little different to what we had previously, you know, but they could not do enough for us you know, and I, I will never forget the, the, the wonderful manner in which almost like brotherly love, that came from them looking after us.” He speaks fondly of memories of football matches against The Peninsula Hotel staff.

Overall though, despite the best efforts of the hotel, the Kadoories, the JDC and the Hong Kong Jewish community, this group of refugees were weary and grew restless and tired of living in a state of impermanence. Their one-week stopover in late July had now seen them through all of the summer and through the Jewish High Holidays. A request, via correspondence in September 1946, was made by the Jewish community of Manila to the Kadoories to begin moving some of their refugees through Hong Kong. Despite the willingness on the part of the Kadoories and the local Jewish community, this simply was inconceivable at the time given how far tight space and resources had already gone not to mention the flexibility on the part of the Hong Kong government in agreeing to allow the refugees to enter the colony in the first place and then their willingness to allow them to stay on for so long beyond the stay of an ordinary transit visa. By September, arrangements began to be finalized to finally move the refugees on to Australia but
this was done in a piecemeal fashion, some leaving on small ships and other on small aircraft. Antman, whose family was finally able to leave in mid to late October 1946, recalls the elderly being the first to be moved out followed by the families with young children. The last group remained in Hong Kong through December 1946.

Throughout the years that followed, other refugees similarly found themselves on the receiving end of Hong Kong Jewish hospitality but none in an ordeal as drawn out as the Duntroon’s ill-fated passengers. And as the historical record should reflect, the Kadoories played an incredible role in providing for the refugees in Shanghai as well as in Hong Kong with the backing and support of the JDC. Throughout the postwar years, the Kadoories served in many roles including acting as an informal postal and telegraph service for the refugees and sometimes even as medical advocates for refugee patients. Perhaps though the true measure of the care the refugees received while in Hong Kong can be best summarized in a letter by Ms. Rosa Huber following the death of her mother while she was in Hong Kong. To Sir Lawrence Kadoorie, she writes in August 1946, “It was a great comfort for me to learn that we were so fortunate to find in you a noble man and friend... There are no words enough to express the feelings of my deepest and sincerest gratitude. May God the Almighty reward you for all the good you have done to us.”

And while for most Hong Kong was but a brief stopover, for others it became one more hurdle to cross in a long struggle to build new lives for themselves. As for Antman, he recalls how he stayed at The Peninsula a few times on return trips to Hong Kong, “out of memory lane, I naturally went as a customer to The Peninsula, not as an immigrant.”

And so his story has come full circle. Many decades have passed since he, along with the 282 others, were displaced refugees sleeping on army cots and existing on a meal allowance of $5.50 per day. And while the city outside this icon rapidly reinvents itself, The Peninsula remains steeped in tradition and history. And if you close you eyes, for just a moment, as you sit at afternoon tea, perhaps you can imagine the band of refugees wandering through the lobby, congregating on the grounds outside, sharing what little they had as they patiently waited to start their new lives. ¶

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