



Laura Margolis in the Spotlight
Portrait of a heroine
in Shanghai



Shanghai refugees receiving clothing

The story of Laura Margolis reads like an epic novel. She embodies what larger-than-life literary heroines are made of, though without embellishment, exaggeration, panache or hubris. She was the real thing. Yet despite this, to most, this remarkable and dignified woman remains unknown.

Imagine the scene: Japanese-occupied Shanghai. The city has been ravaged by war. Hardships and serious deprivations abound. Then add in the arrival of over 20,000 Jewish refugees desperate to escape the fate of their brethren in German Nazi occupied Europe. They arrive in the last free port in the world, seeking refuge. A lone American woman travels by boat determined to help as many of these refugees as possible to emigrate to America, as well as to assist in meeting the daily needs of all the Jewish refugees in the interim. After assisting in saving thousands of lives, often forced to rely on little more than her own tenacity, she is interned by the Japanese. Once her release is negotiated in a prisoner of war exchange, she is able to smuggle vital information out, hidden in her pants and written on toilet paper. Following an arduous sea voyage towards repatriation, she accepts another assignment in Europe, still in the throws of war where she flies in an American bomber over Nazi controlled Europe. She is issued an army uniform and given the rank of Colonel, so that she could fly back and forth over Europe to continue

relief work. Ultimately, postwar, still in a field position, she finds her true love in Paris.

This is not from the dust jacket of an epic novel but rather the historical account of a most uncommon life.

To go back to the beginning, and conceptualize the willingness on the part of Laura Margolis to even accept the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's (JDC) assignment in Shanghai in 1941, at the insistence of the State Department, one almost has to suspend belief. She was to travel by ship, a long and arduous journey in wartime, to Shanghai, China. She would be traveling alone, something quite rare for a woman in those days and to a country where she did not speak the language. Even in peacetime, these factors would make this journey something out of the ordinary. But one can't ignore the fact that she agreed to undertake this field position in the throws of war and in an occupied city. But Ms. Margolis was someone who focused on her mission and goals and, if necessary, shunned conventional fears. In her previous posting in Cuba, where she aided German Jewish refugees, she became the first female overseas representative for the JDC. On the back of this experience, she was thought to be the perfect candidate for this new, most difficult posting.

When she arrived in Shanghai in 1941, the scene was tumultuous, chaotic. The Jewish community was struggling to meet the



Refugees queuing

needs of the over 20,000 Jewish refugees that had poured into the city overnight. The JDC had been funneling money in for refugee aid to a local Jewish committee since 1939 but the task of attending to the needs of such a large number of people was seemingly insurmountable. A staggering 8,000 of the refugees, having fled Europe with little more than the clothes on their backs, were classified as destitute. She estimated that 12,000 of them were clustered in camps in the Hongkew district, living in makeshift barracks, improvised dwellings in buildings that had barely survived bombings. The JDC was providing not only food, but in many instances, clothing, housing medical care and education as well.

In a 1944 statement, she explained that, "Shanghai was totally unprepared to receive invading hoards. Shanghai was economically unable to absorb them...a very serious situation developed...Nothing permanent was ever constructed and nothing constructive was ever planned." She explains, "If I hadn't seen this myself, I could never have believed it."

There were few economic opportunities in Shanghai due to the ordinary deprivations of living in an occupied city during wartime, coupled with the influx of refugees from all over the world in response to the city's open door policy. The city had suffered considerable damage. Overcrowding was a reality and starvation and disease rampant.

Compounding the challenges Ms. Margolis faced, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States' subsequent entry into the war further complicated the situation. The JDC, as an American organization, was suddenly precluded from transferring funds into Shanghai as it was now in enemy territory. December 8, 1941 at 4:00 am Shanghai time (December 7 in the United States), the bombing on Pearl Harbor, was certainly a pivotal moment that further pushed the limits of the human spirit.

That same day, as America was being bombed, Ms. Margolis recounts seeing ships in Shanghai's harbor on fire and hearing that the Japanese were crossing the bridge into the heart of the city. While many were thrown into a state of panicked frenzy, Ms. Margolis maintained her acumen and she and Manny Siegel, who had arrived just days before at her insistence to help with the operation, began shredding the carbon copies of their communications and records they had kept. Realizing the potential damage their reports could cause for them now in an enemy occupied city, they flushed the evidence down their hotel toilet.

Her leadership was truly tested, in January 1942, when it became clear that the available funds would be insufficient to feed the 8,000 refugees even the meager one bowl of stew they were being provided. She was forced to make the very difficult decision to temporarily only offer food to 4,000 of the 8,000, saving these portions for children, the elderly and the



Cramped living quarters

sick, in other words, the most vulnerable among the population. (An interesting contrast to Germany's treatment of its most vulnerable during the war.)

In another incident, countless recalled in interviews and organizational records, Ms. Margolis approached a Japanese official and requested assistance, describing the dire situation in the Hongkew ghetto. To her surprise, he acquiesced under the condition that she, along with the assistance of Siegel, take charge of the operation. An order of business was to reconstruct the soup kitchens in order to increase capacity. She used her complex network to discover that two new boilers had been delivered to the Sassoon Company just before the attack on Pearl Harbor and they were not put to use. With Japanese support, she requisitioned two large boilers to be fitted into a new planned soup kitchen as the old kitchen was not operable because it relied on old and ill-fitted Chinese equipment whose fuel requirements were too expensive to meet. This proved vital in the continued delivery of nutritious meals to the refugees; the capacity was increased to be able to provide for meals for well over 10,000 refugees daily. She also continued to help provide them with medical aid, economic aid, vocational training and schooling.

In addition to daily deprivations, the real threat of eventual internment in a Japanese camp as an enemy alien always

hung over them. When her own inevitable internment occurred, in February 1943, she was sustained by her fortitude but furthermore she was able to excel in extremely difficult circumstances, marked by Japanese austerity, and maintain her tenacious approach. Though healthy, she was able to feign illness and get herself in a hospital and away from the inherent dangers in camp life.

Prior to their internment, she and Mr. Siegel had the foresight to develop what they named the Bitker Committee, essentially giving Mr. Bitker, a member of the existing pre-war Russian Jewish community of Shanghai, power of attorney to ensure that all aid would continue should something happen to herself and Mr. Siegel.

Once it was imminent that her release was secured, she was able to arrange a meeting with Bitker in order to obtain an up to date account of the financial situation of the relief project so she could report back to the JDC. Recognizing that prior to repatriation, she would be subject to a body search by her Japanese captors, she wrote the entire record on toilet paper and hid it in her undergarments to ensure they would not be detected.

Despite these most extraordinary events and the remarkable qualities she possessed, Laura Margolis maintained humility and even a sense of humor. In her United States Holocaust



JDC soup kitchen

Memorial Museum (USHM) July 1990 interview, she joked that when asked why she took these roles on and why she was willing to travel the world, her response was that she was obviously in search of a husband. (She did eventually find her husband in France, Marc Jarblum, and married in 1950 at the age of 47.)

When reflecting on her wartime activities, in that USHM interview, at the age of 87, she stated, "I wish I were 10, 15 years younger. Not more. Because I find the world so interesting. I find what's happening now in the world very exciting. I can't be a part of it anymore. I can only be platonic. I'm a voracious reader. I think since I'm back I've enjoyed the pleasure of catching up on my love for history, and understanding so many things that I never understood before when I was in action." She never lost perspective or focus.

The JDC's comprehensive historic archive carefully detailing the plight of the refugees in Shanghai noticeably contains only a scintilla of photographic proof of the role Ms. Margolis played. Though she was larger-than-life and her bravery, deftness and persistence are rightfully credited with saving thousands of lives, she seemed in photos content with remaining out of the spotlight. Perhaps this is the mark of a true hero. ✧

Note: Laura Margolis Jarblum died September 9, 1997. A plaque in the JDC headquarters serves as a daily reminder of her incredible accomplishments.

All photographs are courtesy of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

About the JDC

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) is the world's leading Jewish humanitarian assistance organization. JDC works in more than 70 countries and in Israel to alleviate hunger and hardship, rescue Jews in danger, create lasting connections to Jewish life, and provide immediate relief and long-term development support for victims of natural and man-made disasters. To learn more, visit www.JDC.org.

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