

Diplomat who saved thousands is honored

Jewish families given visas needed to escape Holocaust, find safety in China

By CECILY LIU in Milan
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On Thursday, a square in Milan's Chinatown became the first location in Italy to be dedicated in honor of a Chinese person, as Piazzetta Ho Feng Shan was named for the remarkable achievements of a 1930s diplomat.

Ho Feng Shan was the Chinese consul general in Vienna from 1938 to 1940, a time when the Nazi authorities would only allow Jews to leave if they had a visa to another country.

Consulates were flooded with applications from Jews desperate to escape the Holocaust, but while many countries were unwilling to accept more refugees, Ho saved thousands of lives by issuing visas to Shanghai, allowing Austrian Jews safe passage to China, away from the horrors of Europe.

Some applications were even stuffed into his car — but were treated and granted just the same as by more conventional means.

Even when he was in the process of returning to China in 1940, Ho kept up his work — delivering the priceless signed papers to Jewish refugees standing on railway station platforms.

Born in 1901, Ho obtained his PhD from the University of Munich in 1932, and spent nearly 40 years in the diplomatic service before retiring to San Francisco.

He died in 1997, and, in accordance with his wishes, was later buried in his beloved hometown of Yiyang in China's Hunan province.

During his lifetime, he

Ho Feng Shan.
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rarely spoke about his work with refugees. Even in his 700-page memoir *Forty Years of My Diplomatic Life*, published in 1990, he gave it just the briefest mention.

"Since the Anschluss (when Nazi Germany took over control of Austria), the persecution of Jews by Hitler's 'devils' became increasingly fierce," he wrote. "I spared no effort in using every means to help, thus saving who knows how many Jews!"

It was only after his death that his daughter, journalist Ho Manli, began to investigate her father's past and also the stories of the survivors he helped, a process during which she scoured archives in Washington, Vienna, and Israel.

Her inquiries began when she received a telephone call from the curator of a touring photographic exhibit on diplomatic rescuers of Jews. Almost immediately, she started uncovering the stories of many survivors, such as Eric Goldstaub, who applied to 50 consulates without any success before Ho came to his rescue, granting 20 visas for his entire family.

Goldstaub took refuge in Shanghai from 1939 to 1948, and never forgot Ho's assistance. After the war, his story was recorded in



A Chinese boy and a Jewish boy play together in Shanghai (above). A Jewish boy with a Chinese shop vendor (above right). A Jewish refugee girl playing with two Chinese girls in Shanghai.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

the US Holocaust Memorial Museum archives.

His cousin Harry Fiedler still possesses one of the visas issued by Ho, serial number 1193, issued on July 20, 1938, four months after the Anschluss. This was Ho Manli's first indication of the volume of visas her father had helped issue.

In subsequent years, many other journalists, scholars and writers have followed in Ho Manli's footsteps, in investigating the story.

Last year, Canadian-American producer Rene Balcer directed a documentary *Above the Drowning Sea*, which recorded many first-person accounts of Jewish refugees, and the Chinese residents of Shanghai who became friends with them during the World War II period.

This year, Elisa Giunipero, director of the Confucius Institute at the Catholic Uni-

versity of Milan published a book on the same topic. She said remembering Ho is crucial for Europeans to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust.

"We always think of the Holocaust as European history, but, in fact, it is the history of human kind. What I find really interesting is to look at this history from another perspective," she said.

As Ho's story becomes better known around the world, he has received numerous commendations. In July 2000, Israel bestowed on him the title of Righteous Among the Nations, one of its highest honors. In 2015, the Holocaust Museum of Houston honored Ho with the Lyndon Johnson Moral Courage Award.

Last week, a new stone plaque in Ho's name was unveiled in Milan's Monte Stella Park. Gabriele Nissim, president of the Milan-based



charity Gariwo which organized the memorial, said in the modern world, said more than ever, it was vital to remember the importance of human kindness as shown by Ho.

The on-going European refugee crisis, said Nissim, with hundreds of thousands fleeing from Asia and Africa, and thousands dying while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, demonstrates how impor-

tant Ho's example was.

"Remembering Ho and other WWII heroes is the process of remembering the possibility of humanity to do kindness and take care of each other," said Nissim.

"After WWII, we thought what happened to the Jews would not happen again, but that is not true. So, this day, we push young people to take responsibility for what happened in history."

The naming of Piazzetta Ho Feng Shan came about through a two-year process by the Italian Chinese Entrepreneurs Union. Luca Song, chairman of the group, said the naming of the square meant Ho's story would continue to inspire generations of Chinese living overseas.

"His humanitarian deeds provide guidance to our conduct, so we must remember him," he said.

Holocaust survivor never stops praising Shanghai for its role

By CECILY LIU

In 1939, Sonja Muhlberger arrived in Shanghai in her pregnant mother's womb.

She went on to live a happy childhood in the city's Jewish quarter, where she was sheltered from the awful abuse that Jewish people were enduring at the time at the hands of Nazi Germany.

"If we hadn't fled to Shanghai, I would not be alive now," says the 79-year-old. "I love Shanghai. It is my home."

Muhlberger was one of 18,000 Jews who fled European countries between 1938 and 1940, to seek refuge in Shanghai and escape the horrors of persecution by the Nazis.

Muhlberger, who lived there until she was 8, recounted her story to students at the Confucius Institute within one of Milan's universities. Last week, the university organized various events to remember Ho Feng Shan, the Chinese diplomat who issued thousands of visas to Jews in Austria.

Although the visa to Shanghai that Muhlberger's mother obtained was issued by the Chinese consulate in the Netherlands, and not by Ho, she said she respects Ho as a man and what he did for so many others who were in a similar situation to her family.

Muhlberger went to school, played with other children, and lived what she called a "sheltered childhood" in Shanghai's Hongkou district, together with many other Jewish refugees.

"My mother read and sang to me, my father answered all my questions and took me to kindergarten and to school every day on his bicycle," she recalled, adding that her parents also

“If we hadn't fled to Shanghai, I would not be alive now.”

Sonja Muhlberger, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust

found happiness in Shanghai.

She recalls the excitement of seeing snow for the first time, which allowed her to truly understand the meaning of Snow White from the fairytales her mother had read to her. Her father took a wash pan to collect the snow from the roof of the family's home and asked her to hold out her hand so she could feel it.

Among her valued possessions are the Shanghai visas that were issued to her parents, and a photograph of her parents running around together on the ship bound for Shanghai on March 29, 1939.

"After all the years of suppression in Nazi Germany, they were finally free and happy again," she said.

Two years after the end of World War II, in 1947, the 8-year-old Muhlberger moved back to Germany with her parents, because her father wanted to contribute toward the building of a new post-war Germany.

But her childhood memories of living in Shanghai sparked curiosity in her about the importance of the city in the history of the Holocaust. Over the years, she has conducted research into the stories of Jewish refugees in Shanghai, and compiled the information into articles, and the book *Evil Shanghai 1938-1947*, which she co-authored, and which was published in 2000.

She said she felt a sense of responsibility to tell the stories, to do history justice. "Today, I'm so happy to be here and be one of those who never gave up talking young and old people what happened," she said.



Sonja Muhlberger, a Jewish woman who was born in Shanghai, gives a talk at a Confucius Institute in Milan. CECILY LIU / CHINA DAILY

It's important to build shared history

Standing on the hills of Milan's tranquil Monte Stella Park and witnessing hundreds of Italian children remembering humanitarian heroes they had learned about in class brought back memories of my childhood.

I was attending the ceremony in which Milan's government was honoring the memory of Ho Feng Shan, the Chinese diplomat who saved

thousands of Jews from the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The simple gesture of unveiling a stone plaque recounting his story put Ho alongside 55 other humanitarian heroes who have had such stones unveiled in the park, among them South African anti-apartheid leader Nel-

son Mandela, and Pope John XXIII, who is also credited with saving Jews during World War II.

I watched as hundreds of Italian children repeated Ho's name to each other and hugged Ho's daughter, Ho Manli. They asked her to sign their notebooks, which carried classroom essays that told of how Ho issued thousands of visas to Jews between 1938 and 1940 that enabled them to travel to Shanghai and escape the Holocaust.

"Manli, Manli, we want to thank your father, we want to be your friends," they said. Their eyes twinkled, their voices were full of warmth and respect.

Watching their excitement, I remembered the way I always looked forward to the trip every spring that my primary school organized, in which we visited a local park and paid our respects to Chinese war heroes who had

learned about in class.

On this remembrance day, our teacher would ask us to visit a stone monument inside a local park in Chengdu, on which was engraved messages commemorating Chinese soldiers who died during the Long March undertaken by the Red Army between 1934 and 1936, and those who perished in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45), and in the many other battles that paved the way to create the China of today.

My classmates and I would sing songs we learned in class that describe how people fought bravely in battles, how they refused to surrender under torture by their enemies, and how they supported their fellow soldiers in the hope of creating a better China.

After the songs, we would each place a small bunch of flowers next to the monument and pay our respects silently. Those memories have charac-

terized my understanding of China's 20th century history, and I still feel deeply inspired and touched in my heart when reflecting on them.

Fast forward 20 years and I see Italian children remembering Ho, accepting the Chinese hero into their understanding of the history of World War II, and I feel moved. I felt moved that through the efforts of scholars and the government in Milan, Ho has taken his rightful place in history.

As our world increasingly moves toward a model of globalization, the next generation of young children around the globe will take on the responsibility of building a shared community for mankind. And perhaps the fact that Ho is being remembered in Europe, in the United States, and other countries is one example of building a shared memory of history, to guide us into this shared community of the future.



A stone plaque is unveiled to honor Chinese humanitarian hero Ho Feng Shan. CECILY LIU / CHINA DAILY



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