

**Editor’s note:** Readers interested in the plight of Jews in East Asia during World War II are strongly encouraged to read Professor Gordon’s article “A Tale of Two Diplomats: Ho Fengshan, Sugihara Chiune, and Jewish Efforts to Flee Nazi Europe” from the winter 2014 issue of *EAA* at <https://tinyurl.com/y8xmr7xy>.

*Above the Drowning Sea*

Written and Directed by Rene Balcer and Nicola Zavaglia

Narrated by Julianna Margulies

88 minutes, Color

Time & Rhythm Cinema, 2017

Reviewed by David B. Gordon

The documentary film *Above the Drowning Sea* ambitiously attempts to address a variety of themes related to the Jewish refugee community that took shape in Shanghai, China, during the late 1930s. The subject of this film is especially apt at this historical moment, in the wake of the recent terror attack on Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the eightieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, the November 9, 1938, pogrom against Jewish institutions in Germany and Austria that prompted numerous Jews to seek refuge in China.



Screen capture from *Above the Drowning Sea*.

The documentary is beautifully filmed, covers important ground, and includes vital testimony from refugees from this period. Despite these strengths, it is less tightly organized than such films as *Shanghai Ghetto* (2002)<sup>1</sup> and *Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness* (2000)<sup>2</sup>, which similarly address the migration of several thousand European Jews to Shanghai to escape the Nazi Holocaust. As a result, it lacks the focused intensity that lengthy documentaries require in a classroom setting.

Indeed, the opening sequence displays the dilemma well. *Above the Drowning Sea* begins with a quotation from noted Holocaust author Primo Levi: “We the survivors are not the true witnesses. The true witnesses are the drowned, the dead, the disappeared.” From here, the film shifts first to an image of a dinghy carrying refugees from the war in Syria and then to other images of Syrian refugees crossing Europe and encountering resistance. While the seriousness of the theme is evident, the footage does not show Levi’s drowned or disappeared, only those struggling to find a place to rest. Next, we move to the plight of European Jews in the 1930s, some of whom noticed “one thin hope . . . at the far end of the world” in China. The Chinese character for “home” and several other words are painted by an unseen calligrapher, following which we shift briefly to the German attachment to land and how that attachment curdled into hatred toward outsiders in the early twentieth century. The thematic jumps here are rapid, and it becomes difficult to tell what will actually be important to the film moving forward.

For all the directors’ laudable intentions, a similar effort to juggle multiple themes hobbles the remainder of the film, which has difficulty deciding whether to focus on the pain of refugees generally, the valor of Chinese



Ho Fengshan. Screen capture from *Above the Drowning Sea*.

Consul General Ho Fengshan (who saved thousands of Jews with the visas he wrote against orders from above), or the rise of Chinese–Jewish friendships in wartime Shanghai. All these are worthy topics. In particular, Ho Fengshan deserves his own film, not only for his commendable efforts to save Viennese Jews but also for his later career as an ROC ambassador playing diplomatic chess against PRC efforts to isolate Taiwan. However, Ho Fengshan is just one element in the tapestry that *Above the Drowning Sea* tries to weave, and the total effect leaves the viewer at times more bewildered than moved.

A brief comparison with *Shanghai Ghetto* is instructive. *Shanghai Ghetto* is inexpensively filmed and keeps its focus firmly on the testimonies of five survivors from wartime Shanghai. Two professors—David Kranzler and Irene Eber—provide rich historical context for these testimonies. The counterpoint between testimony and context works in part because of the emotionally arresting quality of the testimony itself. Interestingly, *Shanghai Ghetto* mentions neither Ho Fengshan nor Sugihara Chiune, a Japanese diplomat rescuer from the same period. Though not a move for other films to emulate, their absence would at least train the spotlight on the survivors themselves.

In contrast to the low-budget *Shanghai Ghetto*, the gorgeous sequences in *Above the Drowning Sea* create a bit of dissonance: the feel is of well-heeled people trying, with some difficulty, to reencounter a horrific past. In the end, the present—whether in Vienna, Shanghai, or the United States—tends to overwhelm. In a climactic scene near the conclusion, survivor Vera Sasson reunites with Zhou Huizhen, a Shanghai childhood friend, at her comfortable Florida home. Perhaps unintentionally, the scene is interesting primarily for the contrast it displays: though Vera had eagerly looked forward to their meeting, when it actually occurs, she is far more reticent than the emotionally demonstrative Zhou, neatly turning any ideas of stolid Chinese and emotive Westerners on their head.

Overall, the foremost value of *Above the Drowning Sea* lies in its survivor testimonies, which could be employed in short sequences for courses on Chinese, Jewish, or modern world history. Although all the testimonies are precious, for students, some of the most engaging may be those by psychologist Lotte Marcus and entrepreneur Jerry Moses. When these and other survivors speak, the past—by turns terrible and comforting—springs alive and we learn, again, how badly the world needs the compassion that only we can offer it. ■

## NOTES

1. *Shanghai Ghetto*, Directed by Amir Mann and Dana Janklowicz-Mann, Rebel Child Production, 2002, 95 minutes.
2. *Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness*, Directed by Robert Kirk, PBS and Dentsu Inc., 2000, 90 minutes.

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