

Focus on Film

Above the Drowning Sea

Documentary
Holocaust

Tuesday, May 14, 2019 @ 1:00 p.m.

Directors: Rene Baker and Nicola Zavaglia, 2017 Canada

Running time: 88 minutes, English, Chinese

Above the Drowning Sea tells the story of the dramatic escape of European Jews from Nazi-controlled Europe to Shanghai during World War II. Written and produced by Rene Balcer (Law and Order) from Montreal, Canada and narrated by actress Julianna Margulies (The Good Wife), this documentary takes the viewer on an inspirational journey around the world. This film is a celebration of heroism and showcases the power of righteousness during extraordinary times.

After Hitler annexed Austria in March of 1938, most European Jews sought to emigrate although borders were essentially closed. In July of 1938, the Evian Conference was held with representatives from 32 countries (including the United States) affirming their policy of not accepting Jewish refugees. After Kristallnacht in November of 1938, most Viennese Jews were frantic to leave Austria as political leaders everywhere turned their backs on them affirming their apathy to the Jewish crisis. Only the Dominican Republic volunteered to accept refugees in exchange for large sums of money. However, soon word spread that Shanghai was an “open city” that offered a haven for Jews. Defying his government, the Chinese consul in Vienna, Ho Feng Shan risked his life and career

to sign visas allowing Jewish families to depart for Shanghai, then controlled by the Japanese. By the time he was recalled to China, Ho had signed an estimated 5,000 visas. After his death in 1997, Yad Vashem named him as one of the Righteous Among the Nations.

Above the Drowning Sea features interviews with some of the Jewish refugees who escaped to Shanghai and Chinese people who welcomed them despite their own impoverished living conditions. Archival film along with animated sequences capture the life of the Jews in Austria under Hitler as well as life in the cramped Jewish ghetto in Shanghai. This documentary warmly shows how Jews adapted to China and celebrates the bond that was created between the Jews and the Chinese as they were both respectively persecuted from the Nazis and Japanese. A beautifully depicted scene toward the end of the documentary captures a reunion between childhood friends Vera Sasson (an Austrian refugee) and Zhou Huizhen (a Shanghai native).

Above the Drowning Sea has relevance today as it features contemporary Syrian refugees in its opening and closing moments with the narration, “and still the wars are without end and refugees keep coming.”

Reviewed by Gail Fisher

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