

FROM POLAND TO SHANGHAI

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THE STORY OF THE MIR YESHIVA'S SURVIVAL OF WORLD WAR II

1939 Poland was an ominous place for a Jew. After the Nazi invasion that started World War II, the country was divided, with Germany claiming the western half and Soviet Russia claiming the eastern half. Neither of these occupiers were friendly to Jews, and the many Jewish citizens of Poland had to figure out their best means of survival. With the sense that their time was running out, a group of Polish Jews decided escaping from Poland was the safest option. Under the cover of night, they managed a daring run across the border of Poland to then-independent Lithuania. These refugees, numbering around 2,000, arrived in Lithuania uncertain of their futures and anxious to get to safety.¹ Among the group were all of the students and rabbis from the Mir yeshiva, who would later become the only European yeshiva to emerge from World War II intact.²

Two years later, this group of Jews would find themselves halfway around the world in Shanghai, China. Their path there was as unlikely and coincidental as it was complicated. However, anything was better than the sure suffering they would have endured in Europe. Incredibly, Shanghai already boasted a large Jewish population, as there were communities of Baghdadi and Russian Jews who had come years before World War II to the international city, in addition to the 1930s influx of German and Austrian Jews fleeing the Nazis.³

The Polish Jews, with the Mir yeshiva, made up the final wave of immigration to Shanghai. Unlike other refugee experiences, their immigration to China came in the early 1940s and was over land with various stops, contrasting the direct sea routes taken to Shanghai by the German and Austrian Jews.⁴ Remarkably, almost all of the Jews in Shanghai survived the Holocaust and settled around the world to live out their lives. The story of the Mir yeshiva, however, is quite distinct from that of any other Jews they were migrating with. Yeshiva students live completely devoted to their studies and do not compromise their positions as Torah scholars.⁵ How, then, was the Mir yeshiva the only yeshiva in Europe to survive the Holocaust? Why did other yeshivas, even from Poland and Lithuania, not assume the same path? Finally, how was the Mir group able to remain a functioning yeshiva during the war?

The other Jewish communities of Shanghai are all fascinating subjects that have received study, but are mostly outside the scope of this paper. Inevitably, there are

¹ Samuel Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War, an Oral History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

² US Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*,
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007090> (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

³ Avraham Altman and Irene Eber, *Flight to Shanghai, 1938-1940: The Larger Setting*,
http://www1.yadvashem.org/download/about_holocaust/studies/altman_eber_full.pdf (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

⁴ http://www1.yadvashem.org/download/about_holocaust/studies/altman_eber_full.pdf (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

⁵ Yechezkel Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1987).

interactions between communities that are integral to the Polish story that will be discussed, but in general this is the story of the Polish immigration to Shanghai and, more specifically, the distinctive account of the Mir Yeshiva during World War II. In the subsequent pages, I will detail its experiences by beginning in Mir, Poland, where the yeshiva started, and explain what life was like for yeshiva students and rabbis and how it differed from other Polish Jews. Then I will explore the yeshiva's peculiar path from Mir to Lithuania, and then to Japan. Finally, I examine the Mir experience in Shanghai, where the yeshiva's preferential treatment and strong attitudes are most apparent. During the process, I will show that the students and rabbis of the yeshiva were undergoing quite a different experience from their fellow Jewish refugees because of special assistance they received and their elitist attitudes that were emboldened because of that assistance.

LITERATURE ON THE MIR YESHIVA

The Holocaust and Jewish experience during World War II is one of the most studied subjects in history, with entire institutions dedicated to the topic. Endless amounts of memoirs, journals, and books exist and continue to emerge on the state of European Jewry through the 1930s and 40s. However, when one examines the subfield of the Jews of Shanghai and the Jewish Diaspora in Asia in general, valuable information is scarce and exists only through a few uncontested works. Works on the subject of the Mir yeshiva are even more limited and much of the literature is unscholarly. Furthermore, almost no analytical text exists about Mir and the information available is entirely fact-based.

However, the field of research on the Mir yeshiva is not completely inadequate; rather, it exists in fragments within works of grander scope like Hillel Levine's *In Search of Sugihara*, Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz' *The Fugu Plan*, and Samuel Iwry's *To Wear the Dust of War*.⁶ Each of these works has larger goals than to expose the Mir yeshiva story, but still explain it well when relevant. In Levine's book about the life of Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara, the issuance of Japanese transit visas to the Mir yeshiva and their method of escape from Lithuania is treated well. Tokayer and Swartz carefully cover the Mir experience in Shanghai, from their time of arrival through life in the ghetto created for Jews in the Hongkew district of the city. Iwry's work is a memoir but is quite historical and scholarly, describes his interactions with the Mir yeshiva from an important viewpoint. Iwry, in particular, is an excellent source because of his perspective as a fellow Polish refugee and Iwry's elevated role in relief efforts in Shanghai. However, Iwry's book is autobiographical and the Mir yeshiva only dots the landscape of his memoir. The three aforementioned works represent one of the main issues in the field of study: research on the Mir yeshiva only emerges in small portions in works of varying subjects on the Jews of Shanghai. Not to say that the subjects of these books lack importance, but in no scholarly work is the Mir yeshiva story treated with the significance it deserves. Nevertheless, Efraim Zuroff comes closest with his book, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust*. This is an important work that details the assistance that went to the Mir yeshiva from the Orthodox community in New York and explains why it happened, but does not focus on the Mir yeshiva enough to be considered a complete work on the subject.

⁶ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*.

The sources that **are** devoted to the Mir story are plagued with the second major issue in the field: the unscholarly nature of the memoirs and personal stories that exist about the Mir yeshiva. The most important source on the subject is Yechezkel Leitner's *Operation Torah Rescue*. Leitner tells the story of the yeshiva from start to finish, and follows the students and rabbis from Mir to Shanghai. Unfortunately, Leitner's work abounds with religious and emotional explanations that seem out of place in scholarship and lessen the value of his reliable facts. For example, he makes the claim that "In the episode of the Japanese visas, one cannot but be impressed by the sequence...through which Divine Providence paved the escape route for his Torah Elite".⁷ Rather than offer credit to the noble Chiune Sugihara and accept the amazing set of coincidences that allowed the Polish Jews to escape to Shanghai, Leitner claims that the intervening hand of God saved the Mir yeshiva because of their religious devotion. He continues to provoke the reader by asking "What but Divine Providence could explain" the manner by which Japanese transit visas were obtained?⁸ Leitner's utter disregard for historical explanations ultimately dooms the book as a scholarly historical work on the Mir yeshiva. Finally, Leitner does not come to any real conclusion or make a statement about the yeshiva. He just tells the story and does not relate it to the surrounding situations, like interactions with other refugees or the Japanese. Like Leitner's book, the other interviews and personal stories that exist about the Mir experience are religiously and emotionally charged and all put out by Orthodox Jewish sources trying to push their own agenda. Unlike Iwry's book, which appears to be the single reliable memoir, all of the rabbinical studies on the yeshiva contain questionable claims and unwarranted religious explanations. Nevertheless, they all still contain incredibly valuable facts and make possible the otherwise impossible task of compiling the Mir yeshiva story.

The final issue that must be addressed in the study of the Mir yeshiva is the lack of analysis in any work. When studying the incredible story of the Jews of Shanghai and how the Mir yeshiva fits in, many questions present themselves in a rather conspicuous manner. It is very clear that the students and rabbis in the Mir yeshiva were receiving special treatment and had a very different experience from the other Polish refugees or any Jew in Shanghai. However, no literature investigates the implications of this additional aid. The Mir yeshiva is simply grouped together with the other European refugees in Shanghai when it undoubtedly underwent a distinctive experience. Furthermore, the atypical attitudes of the Mir students and rabbis and their apparent ignorance of their surroundings are mentioned in certain places, but once again the implications of such matters are ignored.

In the following pages, I will fuse the fragments of scholarly work and emotionally charged and biased memoirs about the Mir yeshiva into a cohesive story. In doing so, I will show that the Jews of the Mir yeshiva had an experience quite different from the other groups of Jews in Shanghai, including their fellow Polish refugees. Finally, questions as to why and how the Mir yeshiva survived along with the rest of the Jews in Shanghai while undergoing a much different experience have yet to be addressed in literature. I will posit the theory that the Mir yeshiva survived the war intact because of their egotistical and elitist natures that grew over time, as well as special assistance they received which was not available to other Jews.

⁷ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 51-52.

⁸ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 51.

NOT SO HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The Mir Yeshiva began in 1817 as an institution for torah study in the tiny town of Mir in eastern Poland (today in Belarus). It was one of hundreds of yeshivas throughout Europe, where yeshiva culture was rich and flourishing. Yeshiva life was completely devoted to Torah and Talmudic study and played an important role in Judaism, particularly in Eastern Europe. Students and rabbis lived at the school and all life revolved around the building and town housing the yeshiva. Life at the Mir yeshiva was not too different from other yeshivas, but Mir did stand out in its prestige and reputation. Mir is a town so small that it wasn't represented on a Polish map, and indeed the yeshiva was the town's only notable landmark. There were some shops at a market in town whose income rested almost entirely on the yeshiva students, and such a location left the students with little to do but learn.⁹ The actual yeshiva building was too small for all the students, and they often had to find small corners of rooms to read. Daily life in the yeshiva left almost no time for leisure or noticing the outside world, as studying was required for at least nine hours a day and often extended well into the night. The Mir students were some of the most gifted yeshiva students in the world and were absolutely devoted to the Torah and Talmud.¹⁰ One must understand this context to yeshiva life, specifically at Mir, to appreciate the rest of the yeshiva's story. Study was the first and last order of business for the students and the rabbis, and that priority would follow the yeshiva all the way to Shanghai. Other Jews who escaped to Shanghai from Europe lived far more, if not completely, secular lives. These non-Orthodox Poles had jobs and families and lives they were completely leaving behind. Mir yeshiva students, however, thought about little more than Jewish scholarship. Their lives did not really depend on where they were located, but instead on if they could study. There were about 300 students in Mir and they were all honored and privileged to be attending one of the "Ivy League" yeshivas of Europe. Hailing from several countries around the world such as Canada, South Africa, and Denmark, the students had come a long way to devote their lives to study.¹¹ Furthermore, they saw themselves as much more important than other Jews, and even other yeshiva students, for Torah study was essential to Judaism and was especially important in Eastern European Jewish culture.¹² This mindset and way of life stayed with the Mir yeshiva throughout their journey.

The journey began in 1939, when the yeshiva realized it could not remain in Mir under the Soviets, who occupied the territory weeks after World War II started. Communist rule did not tolerate the practice of Judaism and the yeshiva relocated to Vilna, which was temporarily in independent Lithuania. Vilna was occupied soon after, and the yeshiva split up into four groups around Lithuania.¹³ It was at this time that the Mir yeshiva, as well as other yeshivas around Europe, had to decide their future. The Baltic States were under Communist control, and the thousands of Jews in Lithuania were in very precarious positions. Many Jews, especially those in the yeshiva community,

⁹ Theodore Lewis, *Bar Mitzvah Sermons at Tauro Synagogue: Remembrances of Mir Yeshiva*, <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rkimble/Mirweb/RememberMir.html> (Retrieved 2 April 2007.)

¹⁰ <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rkimble/Mirweb/RememberMir.html> (Retrieved 2 April 2007.)

¹¹ <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rkimble/Mirweb/RememberMir.html> (Retrieved 16 April 2007.)

¹² <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rkimble/Mirweb/RememberMir.html> (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

¹³ Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 242-248.

wanted to stay in Lithuania. Few understood Hitler's ultimate plans and thought it would be a better idea to wait out the war than flee. In fact, a German rabbi had even declared that "it is more honorable to suffer a martyr's death in Central Europe than to perish in Shanghai."¹⁴ Such an opinion was held by Rabbi Hayyim Grodzinski, who was the leader of the council of torah academies worldwide. Grodzinski made a public proclamation to stay put in Lithuania and wait for salvation.¹⁵ This decision was made over fears that trying to leave Russia would get the Jews deported to Siberia and be put in a worse situation than they were already in. However, the Mir yeshiva went against this proclamation and proposed to try and escape Communist Russia while there was a chance. The Mir proposal was tantamount to rebellion in the yeshiva community, as going against the higher rabbis was unheard of.¹⁶ In fact, the Mir survival is still a sensitive subject today among the Orthodox for this reason. It is almost taboo to mention that the only yeshiva to survive the war was the one that didn't listen to Torah superiors.¹⁷ But, such a brazen attitude was that of the Mir yeshiva, ready to challenge decrees from some of the highest authorities in Judaism. This manner would only manifest itself as the Mir yeshiva continued onto Shanghai. The brash nature of the group had its roots in their elite status in the prestigious Eastern European yeshiva community, and grew into arrogance as treatment for the group became more preferential relative to those around them.

This preferential treatment, it should be noted, was coming from a very exclusive source. While the rest of the yeshiva was plotting their escape from Lithuania, one of the head rabbis was able to escape by himself to New York. From the time he got there, he made rescue of orthodox Jews, especially the Mir yeshiva, his top priority. He organized the Vaad Hatzala, a relief organization whose sole purpose was to raise the aid that will be repeatedly mentioned in this paper. This aid came from orthodox communities already established in the U.S., as well as tireless fundraising. Money came to the yeshiva in the form of housing, food, visas, and transportation that far exceeded the amounts other Jews were receiving. As the Mir's demands increased because of their growing self-importance, so did the ability and willingness of the Vaad and other Orthodox relief groups to meet them.¹⁸ This willingness was due, in part, to the Orthodox community's dedication to look out for their own. As one expert puts it, "They did not want to leave the fate of the rabbis in the hands of the leaders of the [JDC], whose weltanschauung and lifestyle were so different from their own."¹⁹ So, as the war progressed, the Vaad Hatzala, along with other Orthodox organizations, became increasingly supportive of the yeshiva community. The same expert continues, "The Vaad was incredibly determined and dedicated, but also very stubborn and obsessed with its own, losing track of the larger picture."²⁰ This would come to play a crucial role in the Mir yeshiva's survival.

¹⁴ http://www1.yadvashem.org/download/about_holocaust/studies/altman_eber_full.pdf (Retrieved 2 April 2007.)

¹⁵ Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 243.

¹⁶ Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 242-248.

¹⁷ Marilyn Henry, *To Their Own: A Review of Efraim Zuroff* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Post, 2000), <http://info.jpost.com/2000/Supplements/Holocaust/Holocaust.6024.html>

¹⁸ Efraim Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust; the Activities of the Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Henry, *To Their Own*, <http://info.jpost.com/2000/Supplements/Holocaust/Holocaust.6024.html>

²⁰ Henry, *To Their Own*, <http://info.jpost.com/2000/Supplements/Holocaust/Holocaust.6024.html>

THE JAPANESE SCHINDLER

After the Mir authorities decided to pursue leaving Lithuania, they began to search for an adequate method to do so. Their solution came from one of the most unlikely sources: the Japanese consulate general to Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara. The story of Chiune Sugihara is one of the more inspiring tales to emerge from the Holocaust. He has been the subject of several books and is directly responsible for the survival of thousands of Jews during World War II. Unfortunately, his story can only be told in brief in this paper, yet his importance to the Mir yeshiva cannot be overstated.

In 1939, as Japan increased ties with Germany, Russia became more of an enemy and the Japanese wanted to spy on their Communist foes. Russia had become the dominant force in Lithuania, so Japan set up a consulate in the capital city of Kovno, which was the first time the two countries had diplomatic relations.²¹ The man sent to run the consulate was Chiune Sugihara, a gifted diplomat who spoke many languages and was well qualified to complete his primary objective of spying on the Russians.²² Due to the timing of Sugihara's placement, though, he was put in a position he never expected.

For the Jews to escape Lithuania, the first step was to begin talks with the Russian authorities in control. This in itself was very dangerous, because the mere mention of wanting to leave the "Soviet paradise" of Russia was enough to get exiled to Siberia. Through cautious wording, the Polish refugees were able to explain that they had fled Nazis in Poland (a careful lie) to come to Lithuania and now needed transit visas. The Russian authorities were hesitant, but ultimately needed money and knew that transporting refugees would bring them hard currency. So, communication between Kovno and Moscow concluded with the granting of travel across Russia to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast. However, Russia could not be the destination, and the transportation of refugees would only be allowed if they had a visa to a final destination outside Russia.²³ So, the search for countries that would grant visas began. A Dutch student at another yeshiva in Kovno named Nathan Gutwirth was good friends with the man who was recently made the Dutch ambassador. Gutwirth, who knew he needed an end country, requested permission to go to Curacao, a Dutch island in the Caribbean. However, Curacao needed no entry documents, and all Gutwirth could get was a statement from the Dutch government saying no visa was required for entering. He then had to find a country willing to grant him a transit visa overseas to Curacao. Gutwirth was turned down repeatedly by embassies until he went to the Japanese consulate. When Sugihara agreed to grant the transit visa, Gutwirth had complete documents and would now be able to survive the Holocaust.²⁴

At this time, the Mir yeshiva was still scattered around Lithuania looking for a means of escape. A rabbi with the yeshiva, Eliezer Portnoy, knew Gutwirth's story and decided he would go to Kovno and ask Sugihara not for one transit visa, but 300 for the

²¹ Jane Shlensky, *Considering Other Choices: Chiune Sugihara's Rescue of Polish Jews*, <http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/DFreedman/HCS/Shlensky.pdf> (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

²² Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*.

²³ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 59-60.

²⁴ Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 230-33.

whole yeshiva.²⁵ Here, the audacity of the Mir yeshiva is shown again. Most of the students and rabbis had never even seen a Japanese person, and yet they were about to ask for 300 visas through Japan when no other country would even grant one! There was certain opposition to Portnoy's trip to Kovno, and if it was not for Sugihara's extraordinary character, the mission surely would have failed. However, with much debate Sugihara decided to grant the means of transit to the group. As Sugihara himself put it, "The world says that America is civilized. I will show the world that Japan is more civilized."²⁶ After all, the U.S. consulate had already turned down the yeshiva's request, and Sugihara's actions were representative of a righteous nation.

What transpired once word got out about Sugihara and the curious road to safety was truly miraculous. Against the orders of the Japanese government, Sugihara started issuing transit visas to any Jew who came to him. He considered it his moral duty to not let these people perish when all he had to do was stamp a piece of paper. With help from Jewish volunteers, including some members of the Mir yeshiva, Sugihara worked day and night to write visas for the lines of Jews that went around the block at the Japanese consulate. In the end, he issued over 3,500 Japanese transit visas in a matter of weeks and saved even more lives than that.²⁷ Now known as the "Japanese Schindler", Sugihara was responsible for the survival of the Polish refugees in Shanghai. With respect to the Mir yeshiva, the students and rabbis all made it out of Lithuania with Sugihara visas and continued their journey to Japan.²⁸

Once the yeshiva was safe they began their travel arrangements for the expensive trip through Russia to Japan, made possible by the Vaad Hatzala and other Jewish support groups. While many other refugees had to raise their own funds for travel and received small amounts of aid, the Mir yeshiva and other Orthodox refugees were able to receive large amounts of assistance.²⁹ They left behind many Jews who did not have the foresight and confidence required to take advantage of Sugihara's life-saving offer. The unbelievable series of coincidences that led to an escape route through Japan to Curacao, and their lives being decided by a piece of paper, make the Mir story even more unique and demanding of distinction.

FROM EAST TO FAR EAST

With their rescue in place, the Mir yeshiva began their journey across Russia. Imaginably, conditions were poor on the twelve day long ride along the Trans-Siberian Railroad. However, the yeshiva was able to keep to their studies, even on the cramped train.³⁰ Transit through the Russian coastal city of Vladivostok to Japan was arranged, and the refugees were sent to Kobe, where Japan was settling its new Jewish populations. Having escaped the grips of Nazi and Soviet oppression, these Polish Jews had finally made it to Asia.

²⁵ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War, an Oral History*, 61.

²⁶ Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 242-48.

²⁷ <http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/DFreedman/HCS/Shlensky.pdf> (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

²⁸ <http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/DFreedman/HCS/Shlensky.pdf> (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

²⁹ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 95

³⁰ Leo Melamed, *Polish Jewish Refugees in the Shanghai Ghetto*, Interview with U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/oi_fset.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005588&ArticleId=36&MediaId=5242

Japan was exceptionally welcoming to the incoming Jewish refugees, and some even described their lives as that of privileged tourists.³¹ Behind the Japanese hospitality, however, were grander plans to incorporate Jews into their eventual East Asian empire. Based on different interpretations of Western anti-Semitism, the Japanese believed that Jews did essentially run the world and their wealth was behind most governments' operations. Thus, if the Japanese could court the Jews, then they would be in a better world position.³² Though the Japanese plans for using Jews for their benefit eventually fell through, during the refugee stay in Kobe this surprising treatment of Jews is quite apparent. The Japanese even arranged accommodations for the resident Jews in spite of the fact that the Sugihara transit visas had expired.³³

The temporary Jewish community was established in Kobe for the refugees and for the first half of 1941, when the Polish refugees were present, it functioned quite well. Relief organizations were set up in the city, including a branch of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or JDC, which was the primary relief fund for Jewish refugees throughout the war.³⁴ Almost all of the refugees were in good situations, and were living remarkably better than previous months in Lithuania and later years in Shanghai. Nevertheless, even in this situation the Mir yeshiva was given preferential treatment. As Samuel Iwry remembers,

The yeshiva students were particularly well taken care of. Many organizations, in New York and other places, were looking out for this group of refugees, and they were able to keep their daily routine intact. They even found a place to continue their traditional day of studies. So there in the middle of this Japanese town you could hear their humming and singing as they learned Torah.³⁵

Iwry was right when he observed that the Mir students were being especially well accommodated, as the Vaad was supplementing JDC funds. In fact, each member of the group assisted by the Vaad received almost four times as much as other refugees.³⁶ It should also be noted that, during the time in Kobe, efforts around the world were being made to get visas from Japan to countries across the Pacific. For many, these visas were obtained and safe passage was granted to another country. Students of the Mir yeshiva were sometimes lucky enough to be recipients of these visas, but according to Zuroff, "the Mir yeshiva sought to remain intact, and therefore in several cases individual rabbis and students who obtained visas to countries in North or South America did not utilize them."³⁷ These priceless visas did not get passed on to other deserving people, but just went unused. It seems immature and entirely inappropriate for these students and rabbis

³¹ Norman I. Swislocki, *Polish Jewish Refugees in the Shanghai Ghetto*, Interview with U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/oi_fset.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005588&ArticleId=36&MediaId=5242

³² Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews During World War II* (New York: Paddington Press, 1979).

³³ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 81-84.

³⁴ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, xv-xxiii.

³⁵ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 77.

³⁶ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 146

³⁷ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 164

to have turned down life-saving documents that were expensive and incredibly hard to get for the sake of staying together as a yeshiva. However, this kind of behavior began to define the Mir yeshiva in East Asia and is ultimately the reason they were able to survive the war as one unit. Even though it was probably at the expense of other Jewish lives, the Mir yeshiva's strong demands and regard only for their own well being was continuously supported by relief organizations.

The peculiarities of the Mir yeshiva's story continue to be well exhibited through the case of an achieved escape route to Canada. Through the extraordinary efforts of the Vaad Hatzala, in collaboration with other relief organizations, 80 Canadian visas were obtained and sent to Shanghai in September of 1941, where almost all European Jewish refugees, including the Mir, were now located. Countless bureaucratic obstacles were surmounted to collect such precious documents and arrangements were made on a ship sailing from Shanghai to America. Predictably, 51 of the chosen recipients of the visas were members of the Mir yeshiva, but they ran into problems when the ship's crossing of the International Date Line coincided with Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in Judaism. This meant that the refugee scholars would have had to fast for two days instead of one, and because of this the members of the Mir yeshiva categorically refused to get on the ship.³⁸ So, 51 refugees in possession of Canadian visas remained in Shanghai and tried to obtain other means of transport. Unfortunately, as US-Japanese relations deteriorated there were fewer viable options and eventually the bombing of Pearl Harbor meant that the 51 members of the Mir yeshiva would remain in Shanghai for five additional years. What makes this incident even more absurd is that the 29 refugees who did board the ship and escaped to Canada were no less religious than any of the Mir members, and all 29 managed to observe both days of fasting for Yom Kippur.³⁹ A relief organization member at the time commented that,

those from Mir...adopted a firm and independent attitude since they were the recipients of special aid from American Jewish Orthodox organizations and were not dependant on local assistance. The fact that both Canadian visas and U.S. transit visas had been obtained for them, an almost unheard-of phenomenon in those days, also strengthened their independent stance.⁴⁰

Due to the Mir yeshiva's impudence, which was now being emboldened by their special assistance, an opportunity that few other Jews would ever have was passed up. Moreover, this only happened because of the Mir desire to not fast for two days. At this time many Jews around the world, even some in Shanghai, did not have the means to eat or drink at all for more than two days! Thus, the previous self-centeredness exhibited in Europe by not listening to Jewish superiors was now becoming the Mir yeshiva's arrogance. Their selfishness had reached new heights, coming at the expense of others, and would continue during their time in Shanghai.

³⁸ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 185

³⁹ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 170-187.

⁴⁰ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 185

ARRIVAL IN SHANGHAI

The Mir's arrival in Shanghai was quite abrupt. As the Japanese began to prepare for Pearl Harbor in 1941, refugees lingering in Kobe were taken to Shanghai and efforts to move Jews from Japan to places across the Pacific ceased. It became more apparent that the remaining Jews would have to stay in Shanghai for the duration of the war. With ocean passenger traffic cut off and Japan's war machine activating, there was nowhere else to go but China. The members of the Mir yeshiva were outraged at the idea of Shanghai, and to them it was a "hellhole" and filled with criminals, prostitutes, and lawlessness that created a cesspool of a city.⁴¹ However accurate this interpretation may be, there seems to be a complete ignorance of the matters of life and death that surrounded the issues at hand and how lucky the Mir students and rabbis were to be able to seek refuge in Shanghai in the first place.

Shanghai itself was undergoing many changes by the time the Mir yeshiva arrived in late 1941. The city was by now completely overwhelmed with its Jewish population. Numbering over 20,000 refugees, there was little housing, food, and assistance to any Jews who weren't already established in the city.⁴² Local relief organizations and efforts from the likes of the JDC and the wealthy Sephardic families were already at their limits, and most of the incoming Polish refugees had to seek meager sustenance from the Russian Jewish communities.⁴³ The delicate relief situation was only exacerbated by the arrival of the Mir yeshiva, who once again exhibited their self-importance and disregard for their surroundings. For example, it was arranged that the refugee scholars would be able to receive the equivalent of \$5 per person per month of subsidies from the JDC. This was already more than others were receiving, but the members of the Mir yeshiva demanded that this was not enough and that they needed \$7 per person per month.⁴⁴ The demand was rejected, but such an outrageous idea prompted the local JDC representative Laura Margolis to remark that the refugee scholars from the Mir yeshiva had "no conception of realities, limitations, or of anything else except their own immediate problem."⁴⁵ Furthermore, while the rest of the refugees in Shanghai were greatly adapting their lifestyles to survive, the Mir student's "unique lifestyle of intensive Torah study was accepted" and even supported by relief organizations, especially the Vaad. In fact, even after the Mir students received better accommodation in Shanghai than most Jews, they appealed to Vaad Hatzala for additional help. They demanded more money because of the high cost of kosher food and "difficult physical conditions" they had to live under.⁴⁶ At this point, several observers were becoming increasingly troubled with the Mir yeshiva's behavior and the other lives being lost because of augmented aid. As one American Jew pointed out,

In their minds, saving the Torah equals saving the Jewish people. But it is hard to justify spending money to let people who are out of physical

⁴¹ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 90-91.

⁴² http://www1.yadvashem.org/download/about_holocaust/studies/altman_eber_full.pdf (Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

⁴³ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 106-107

⁴⁴ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 192-193.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 193.

⁴⁶ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 193-194.

danger sit and learn when masses of Jews were being killed daily... As far as I am personally concerned, I cannot see any reason on earth why these yeshiva students should be singled out for rescue any sooner than many others who lived in Europe. A life is a life, and the life of any layman is just as sweet to him as the life of a yeshiva student.⁴⁷

However, opinions like these were ignored by the Mir yeshiva and the groups supporting them. Calls for extra accommodations continued, and these excessive demands came under exceptional living circumstances, too.

When the Mir yeshiva arrived in Shanghai, they received very special housing conditions. Located on Museum Road in the International Settlement was the Beth Aharon synagogue built by Silas Hardoon, one of the wealthy Baghdadi Jews who were well-established in the city's elite class.⁴⁸ Hardoon built the synagogue in 1927 in honor of his father, but it remained relatively unused until the arrival of the Polish refugees. At the urging of Orthodox authorities, the spacious synagogue was made to house the entire incoming Mir yeshiva. Oddly enough, the amount of seats in Beth Aharon was almost the exact same as the roughly 300 members of the group. The students and rabbis established themselves in the synagogue and made it their home and center of study.⁴⁹ Without a doubt, the Beth Aharon synagogue was one of the best housing options available to any Jew in Shanghai at the time. When they arrived in China, according to one observer, "the Mir group was able to resume immediately its prewar Jewish purpose."⁵⁰ So, life went on for the Mir group relatively unchanged. They focused on their studies with comfort from their extra Orthodox aid and had few troubles at this time.

The experiences of the Mir are in contrast to the lives of other Jews in Shanghai during these years. By the summer of 1942, the effects of war were setting in and Japan tightened its control on the city. Inflation was rampant and anti-Semitism was spreading as the German influence on Japan grew.⁵¹ JDC relief, which was by far the most aid coming into Shanghai, was cut off and the JDC-supported refugee hospital was closed. The Sephardic Jews, once the wealthiest citizens of Shanghai, were considered British nationals because of their Baghdadi origins and had their property seized and were arrested. Japan had no problem prosecuting the British because Britain was at war with Germany, Japan's ally, and posed little direct threat to Japan. However, the Russian Jews were able to avoid such treatment, as Japan was still afraid of Russia, but pressure on them was growing, too.⁵² This unpleasant situation went relatively unnoticed by the Mir yeshiva, as Tokayer and Swartz point out,

With contributions coming in steadily from abroad, the students, teachers, and families of the Mir yeshiva were far more secure and comfortable than all but a few of the most well-connected of their fellow refugees...[a Mir

⁴⁷ Henry, *To Their Own*, <http://info.jpost.com/2000/Supplements/Holocaust/Holocaust.6024.html>

⁴⁸ Antonia Finnane, *Far From Where?: Jewish Journeys from Shanghai to Australia* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ Vera Schwarcz, *Bridge Across Broken Time: Chinese and Jewish Cultural Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 135-138.

⁵⁰ Schwarcz, *Bridge Across Broken Time*, 137.

⁵¹ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 124-126.

⁵² Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 113.

student] was quite content to be eating after-dinner cake and nuts [in Beth Aharon] while others in Hongkew scrambled for bread.⁵³

Nevertheless, such a privileged situation ended for the yeshiva when Japan started to meet serious difficulties in the war. In February 1943 the Japanese took steps against all of the Jews in Shanghai. All “stateless refugees,” a term that applied to the European Jews, were ordered to move into a small area of about a square mile in the Hongkew district by May 18 of that year.⁵⁴ This was the start of the Shanghai Ghetto, the first of its kind in Asia.

TOWARDS THE END OF THE WAR

The Shanghai Ghetto was not like the ghettos of Europe. Though it may have been more crowded with over 17,000 Jews in addition to the Chinese that already lived there, life was not as difficult. The Japanese did not work the Jews to death or slaughter them as the Germans did. They also gave the job of running the ghetto to the Russian Jewish community, which was governed by Shanghai Ashkenazi Collaborating Relief Association, or SACRA.⁵⁵

This is not to say that life in the ghetto was without troubles. Finding housing was nearly impossible, as the area was extraordinarily crowded. Many people had to sleep in closets, and most of the houses did not have toilets. There was no healthcare, and barely any food or clean water. The ghetto was not fenced in, but was heavily secured by Japanese guards. One of these guards, named Ghoya, was partially insane and declared himself “King of the Jews” and when he was in a bad mood, he would randomly beat ghetto residents. Those Jews with business on the outside of the ghetto were able to come and go with passes, but these were quite hard to obtain.⁵⁶ Ghoya was the arbitrator of passes and as one survivor puts it, “you never knew if you would get a pass after standing in line for two days.”⁵⁷ Thus, the ghetto was almost impossible to leave and by and large, life for most in Hongkew was a struggle and filled with fear.

For the Mir yeshiva especially, relocating in the ghetto was not easy to accept. They had already displayed their selfishness and self-righteous attitudes many times over by 1943, but had generally always gotten what they wanted. So, when the students and rabbis of Mir were told that they had to move from their synagogue to the ghetto, they did not respond well. SACRA had arranged a Salvation Army building in Hongkew to be converted into living quarters for the yeshiva. When the students heard of their new residence, they were outraged. They marched to the SACRA offices in Hongkew and began to riot. As Iwry puts it, “They shouted that the yeshiva is the highest of all Jewish cultural institutions, and that made them the cream of the crop and they would not be

⁵³ Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 211.

⁵⁴ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 113-114.

⁵⁵ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 114.

⁵⁶ Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 250-251.

⁵⁷ Ernest G. Heppner, *Polish Jewish Refugees in the Shanghai Ghetto*, Interview with U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/oi_fset.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005589&ArticleId=2578&MediaId=4015
(Retrieved 30 March 2007.)

thrown in with the cast-offs of Shanghai!”⁵⁸ After this, the students began to destroy the office. Chairs were smashed, windows broken, and it did not take long for the Japanese police to arrive. It took heavy bribes to the Japanese to avoid likely fatal prison terms for the student’s “revolutionary activities”. Amazingly, even a short time in prison was evaded and when the students were released from custody the yeshiva did not have to live in the Salvation Army building. Instead, they got some of the only private housing in Hongkew and received special privileges to leave the ghetto to study at their synagogue!⁵⁹ They also didn’t have to get passes through Ghoya, a torturous ordeal in itself, but instead got ghetto passes delivered to them directly from Japanese authorities in Shanghai, a privilege unheard of for Jews at the time and a reflection of the extensive bribes that came to the Japanese through the Vaad’s efforts.⁶⁰

The Mir yeshiva had been receiving extra assistance for most of the war and seemed to be taking it for granted. The group that began as elitists in the Torah community of Eastern Europe and continued to be treated as such grew into exhibitors of brash arrogance, even admitting that they thought their lives were more important than the lives of other Jews. They were so self-involved that they barely seemed to notice their Japanese rulers, having the audacity to riot and destroy an office when their occupiers were forcing them into a ghetto. Their lack of understanding for the situation they were in could easily have gotten them killed, but amazingly their caretakers bailed them out through bribes and once again showed the Mir yeshiva extraordinary treatment. Most other Jews would surely have been held responsible for their actions in such an instance and would have perished in a Japanese jail or from the typhoid they received in it. But at a time when assistance to the Jews of Shanghai was at its lowest, money was still gathered to bribe the Japanese and save the lives of the Mir.

After the SACRA riot, the Mir yeshiva reluctantly moved to Hongkew, but continued to study in the Beth Aharon synagogue with their ghetto passes. They still lived lives of Torah study and had to deal with very few of the hardships that other Jews were undergoing in the ghetto.⁶¹ For those Jews, the Japanese applied further restrictions on once they started to lose the war outright. Dealings with the local Chinese were put to a stop, and the slightest misstep would get one thrown in jail. Many Jews started to receive more beatings, especially from the ever-more brutal Ghoya. This was life in the ghetto until the end of the Japanese surrender in 1945.⁶² There was little news about the outside world, and the war updates heard on the radio were often from Japanese sources and would be incorrect. With the status of Allied progress in doubt, undeniable evidence of Japanese defeat came on July 17th of 1945 when U.S. planes bombed Shanghai. The air raid targeted Hongkew, where the Japanese were strategically storing military equipment.⁶³ Unfortunately, several refugee and Chinese casualties occurred, but with good news that the war would quickly end. Predictably, Japan soon surrendered and Shanghai was in pure jubilation.⁶⁴ By the end of August, refugees were making plans for

⁵⁸ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 115.

⁵⁹ Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 249.

⁶⁰ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 120-124.

⁶¹ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 118-119.

⁶² Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 117-126.

⁶³ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 128-129

⁶⁴ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 127-129.

new lives in places around the world. Of course, until they left Shanghai the Mir yeshiva “went on studying fourteen hours a day.”⁶⁵

Shanghai itself began to undergo further transformations as the Communists and Nationalists battled for control in China. By the time the Communists assumed power in 1949, nearly every Jew in Shanghai had left, ending years of Western Jewish life in the city.

SURVIVAL OF THE MIR YESHIVA

Following the Japanese surrender, the Jews of Shanghai found out for the first time the extent of the Holocaust and what they had escaped. Many in Shanghai wondered what had happened to their families for years, and hoped to see them again after the war.⁶⁶ The devastating news of the annihilation of 6 million Jews must have put their situation in Shanghai in a new light. Furthermore, it must have created different thinking about how inappropriate the constant complaints and demands of the Mir yeshiva were. One observer in Shanghai appears to put it best when he said he was “extremely critical of the ‘chauvinism and crass selfishness’ of the rabbis and students of the Mir yeshiva, who in his opinion refused to take into account the plight of the other refugees.”⁶⁷ How, then, did a group whose main objective was to perpetuate the survival of Judaism end up disgusting other Jews around them with their lack of regard for others? It seems that something changed in the Mir outlook once they arrived in Kobe. Having already seen themselves as the pinnacle of Judaism as yeshiva students and rabbis in Europe, they probably saw their duty to preserve their own lives and studies superior to all other war-time activities. Consider that they realized they were the only yeshiva who even had the chance to endure the war intact once they reached Japan. Thus, their survival at any cost became the status quo, and so arrogance and selfishness was embraced as a means of extra aid and therefore survival.

After Shanghai, the Mir yeshiva ironically split up. After insisting for years to remain a cohesive unit, half of the yeshiva students and rabbis went to New York, and half went to France with the ultimate destination of Israel. They reestablished themselves in both locations, with a school in Brooklyn and a school in Jerusalem. Both are still operating today, and Mir remains the only European yeshiva to survive the war.⁶⁸

Adopted arrogance was the source of the Mir yeshiva’s outrageous demands throughout the war, and the outward compliance with these demands is what enabled the yeshiva to survive. Had the demands of the students and rabbis not been met on occasions other than the 1943 riot, one must wonder how long it would have taken for a situation like the riot to have happened before 1943. Furthermore, if the yeshiva was as committed to their studies throughout their time in Japan and China but were not egotistical enough to demand extra care, trouble would have likely been met earlier as well. However, these scenarios did not play out and the Mir yeshiva did survive as one unit.

Hence, from their beginnings in Poland to the present day, the Mir yeshiva remains one of the most prestigious places for Torah and Talmudic study in the world.

⁶⁵ Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 269.

⁶⁶ Iwry, *To Wear the Dust of War*, 132-133.

⁶⁷ Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry*, 164.

⁶⁸ Leitner, *Operation: Torah Rescue*, 143-148.

Their unusual journey of survival through World War II only adds to the unique nature of this organization. Historians have yet to approach their story with serious scholarship, and many questions about the yeshiva remain to be answered. However, what can be said is that, for reasons discussed in this paper, the Mir yeshiva had a much different wartime experience than other refugees going to Shanghai and require a distinctive position in the history of the Jews of Shanghai.