Food in Jewish Exile in Shanghai

An Investigation Concerning the Aspect of Culinaristics

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Abstract *The present work seeks to understand the phenomenon of 'food' as an access to the past. Serving as an example is the Jewish exile in Shanghai because alimentation or gastronomy plays an important role in those historical records and literary depictions. The phenomenon of 'food' allows a micro-perspective with which this special chapter of the history of Shanghai can be viewed differently and understood better.*

1. The Jewish Exile in Shanghai and the Aspects of Culinaristics

After Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, many Jews had to leave their native country and were driven into exile. Because of its extraterritoriality, the Public or International Concession in Shanghai was not under Chinese administration and was designated as a free seaport. Therein lies an extremely widespread misunderstanding, namely that the city of Shanghai was open for everyone. More precisely, it was not Shanghai but the International Concession in Shanghai that was open for everyone and, until 1941, became one of the last places to which Jewish refugees could flee.

The political situation which existed at that time in Shanghai, characterized as it was by complexity and chaos, offered an unexpected possibility of survival for Jewish refugees. Japan, which actually had occupied Shanghai since the end of 1937, was not interested in the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question.' In an article published in the *Gelbe Post* on June 1, 1939 under the title *Japan and the Jewish Immigration in Shanghai*, one reads, for example, that the spokesperson for the Japanese mission in Shanghai let it be known "that Japan does not intend to undertake special measures to bring this immigration to an end. All in all, this matter does not directly concern Japan." (Storfer 1939b: 64) The Jewish refugees used these special circumstances in the city of Shanghai or the disinterest of the Chinese and Japanese in order to find and to enhance their own chances of survival. The survival or rescue of the Jewish refugees in China was accordingly the result of many interconnected factors which had not been planned or predicted by any country.

At that time, Shanghai constituted one of the last chances for flight from Nazi Germany; however, it was not desired as a permanent destination by the Jewish refugees but was considered to be only "a site of transit, a place for waiting" (Buxbaum 2008: 52). For that reason, an emotional and cultural distance existed between them and their place of refuge. This was confirmed, for example, by the survivor W. Michael Blumenthal in an interview in February 2006: "It was not customary to occupy oneself with Chinese culture. Unfortunately, the emigrants adopted this attitude." (Sherman 1973: n.p.) This emotional and cultural distance gave rise to a contradiction which became particularly apparent in the details of everyday life – for example, with regard to food. On the one hand, the refugees were compelled to adapt to the living conditions current in China at that time. On the other hand, consciously or unconsciously, they endeavored to preserve and to perpetuate their own living and eating habits, even during their exile. Coming to light in this contradiction between the obligation to adapt with regard to food and the inability or unwillingness to make this adjustment were the psychological and sociocultural problems of the expatriates: namely their identity crisis as exotic figures or as 'white' persons: in other words, as Jews, as Germans or Austrians, and as stateless individuals.

In his theory of culinaristics, Alois Wierlacher has investigated the function and meaning of the phenomenon of 'food' and points out that "all foodstuffs have a corporeal-material and a psychological-sociocultural aspect" (2008: 3). And with regard to these aspects, it is possible to observe and to imagine from a micro-perspective the story of the exile of the Jewish refugees with the help of the phenomenon of 'food.' At the same time, according to Wierlacher's theory (2011: 5–6), the concept of relatedness with regard to food belongs to the cultural form of hospitality. Particularly with respect to the concept of relatedness, one recognizes the circle of acquaintanceship and communication experienced by the Jewish refugees in Shanghai as well as their relationship to the events occurring at that time in China.

2. Food as a Reflection of Jewish Exile in Shanghai

2.1 Food as the Foundation of Corporeal-Material Existence

Viewing the Jewish exile in Shanghai from the corporeal-material perspective of culinaristics entails above all a delineation of the situation of the refugees with regard to foodstuffs. Confronted as they were with an existential crisis immediately after arriving in Shanghai, the Jewish refugees struggled above all with a lack of food. The assistance and provisioning provided by various organizations in Shanghai covered only the bare minimum necessary to sustain life: "every new arrival received a blanket, a sheet, a plate, a cup and a tin spoon. Food was likewise provided

by the kitchens of the organizations." (Buxbaum 2008: 47) These measures assured the recipients a humble existence. The lack of preparation for exile and the difficult circumstances confronting the refugees may clearly be recognized.

Likewise the food which guaranteed their corporeal-material survival was dependent on the actions of strangers or the various aid organizations. According to a contemporary report, the International Committee for Granting Relief to European Refugees (IC) alone maintained a kitchen that prepared food for 8,000 refugees each day (Buxbaum 2008: 49). On the one hand, this figure shows the approximate number of Jewish refugees present in Shanghai in 1938; on the other hand, it also indicates the situation and influence of the Jewish community that had long existed in Shanghai, because all aid organizations had a Jewish background[1].

At that time, the chances the Jewish refugees had of surviving in these new surroundings were also closely connected with gastronomy and, in a certain context, were even dependent on it. For example, the exiled Franziska Tausig remembers that the passengers were registered on board the ship even before it had docked in the harbor: "The highest demand was for women to work in bars." (2007: 92–93) This scene is also described in detail in the novel *Shanghai fern von wo* by Ursula Krechel, in which the protagonist, once a cultivated lady in Vienna, was called upon to bake an original apple strudel in order to apply for a job in the Concession. All of her refined management of a complex household in Vienna was reduced to baking a cake. She was nonetheless fully aware of the value of this opportunity: "The apple strudel was a lifesaver, a wonder." (Krechel 2008: 36)

In the recollections of the Jewish refugees with regard to food, one can find a clear contrast between the early and late phases. Whereas the lack of food and the difficulties with nutrition are repeatedly noted and emphasized at the beginning of the exile in Shanghai, later on food is discussed and described as a normal, everyday phenomenon. This clarifies the transition from the initial crisis of survival to what was subsequently a relatively normal life.

2.2 Food as the Foundation of Socio-Cultural Identity

As soon as the scarcity of food during the initial phase had been resolved to some extent and the refugees' very lives were no longer threatened by starvation, more meanings and functions could be ascribed to the phenomenon of 'food' and it could

1 The Jewish organizations known at the time were: *Shanghai Jewish Communal Association* (SJCA), *Shanghai Jewish School* (SJS), *Shanghai Volunteer Corps* (SVC), *Shanghai Ashkenazi Collaborating Relief Association* (SACRA), *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society* (HICEM), *Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai* (CFA or COPMAR), *American Joint Distribution Committee* (JOINT).

be viewed from a metaphysical or psychological-sociocultural level. Food symbolized the native country and identity of the refugees which, in spite of the deprivation of their citizenship, they were unable and unwilling to renounce.

Food is depicted as a connecting link to the lost homeland and culture both in personal memoirs and in literary depictions. Food meant not only the satisfaction of hunger but also a homesickness; it is for this reason, for example, that in the novel *Shanghai fern von wo* by Ursula Krechel, the figure Lothar Brieger attempts to come "for the second or third time to eat apple strudel" (2008: 134). A new significance and function had been integrated into what had previously been an utterly normal, everyday dessert. To the refugees, this customary apple strudel meant a concretization of identity and a reminder of their beloved homeland; it conveyed to these homeless persons the comfort and illusion that it had been possible to reconstruct a piece of the native country they had lost.

In this way, the refugees simultaneously tried to avoid the identity problem. Here one reads of the return to a sort of normality in everyday life, inasmuch as the refugees can once again enjoy the old, familiar taste and can establish a hermetic, illusory homeland. Having been expelled from Europe as Jews, they were viewed by the local inhabitants of Shanghai as 'white people,' 'exotic figures' or 'stateless persons.' Consciously or unconsciously, however, they continued to consider themselves, depending on where they had come from, as Germans or Austrians.

Identity or the crisis of identity during exile in Shanghai was repeatedly thematized in a scholarly or literary context. For example, this identity with one's own land of origin or native culture is directly evident in the advertisements for food in the *Gelbe Post*, which was published by the Jewish refugee A. J. Storfer. The grocery store Vienna Food run by Oskar Weiss offered typical products, even specialities, from Germany and Austria such as, for example, "pudding powder, baking powder, vanilla sugar, mustard, etc." ("Vienna" Food Produce 1939: 47). At the same time, there was a special emphasis: "Produced according to original Viennese recipes, certified by the Public Health Department. Import of Hungarian paprika, Dutch caraway, Singapore pepper, and all sorts of spices." ("Vienna" Food Produce 1939: 47) On the one hand, the claim of genuineness served to guarantee the promised quality; on the other hand, it awakened an emotional connection with the homeland, even if at that time in Shanghai, a non-German business was not permitted to set up a German sign (Storfer 1939a: 45). In accordance with this regulation, the name of the store was written in English, but the description remained in German; an attempt was made to exhaust all possibilities in order to maintain a connection with the refugees' own past.

This emotion can be recognized even more distinctly in another advertisement for the Austrian restaurant The Palm-Garden, Café-Restaurant-Bar, where "a piece of Grinzing has been brought to Shanghai!" (Rosdy 1999: 6). And in a report in the *Gelbe Post*, a booth selling sausages on a street in the Shanghai ghetto is described

as "the remains of the homeland" (Rosdy 1999: 6). Since the stomach never lies, the attempt was made to find a circuitous path to the taste from back home. The Café Louis operated by the Eisfelder family adapted its menu to the foodstuffs that were available. It as well was familiar with the so-called "coping strategy […] of always searching for what could be produced under the given conditions while maintaining an orientation towards the taste of the customers" (Weißbach 2017: 214).

The connection between the lost homeland and gastronomy was so pronounced that, according to the statistics in *Shopping News* on May 29, 1939, twenty-nine coffeehouses and one sausage factory were opened by Jewish refugees (Storfer 1939c: 85). Also later in the ghetto, which had an overall area of only around 2.6 square kilometers, and despite its critical condition during the war, many known coffeehouses maintained their operations (Buxbaum 2008: 77). For this reason as well, there arose in a short period of time the so-called 'Little Vienna,' where "may be found the bright, vibrant, cheery Hongkou with its restaurants and bars in the European style, actually the Viennese style" (Buxbaum 2008: 72).

Culture and the phenomenon of food have a mutual influence on each other and are connected with the identity of the refugees. Even if their respective German or Austrian citizenships had been officially terminated, their eating habits as Germans or Austrians continued as before. Herein lies the cause of the identity crisis experienced by the Jewish refugees in Shanghai, because even the designation as Jews was problematic. Most of the Jewish refugees were not orthodox, but instead assimilated Jews who had been expelled not because of their religious faith, but because of their Jewish background. Their identity as Jews served the Nazi regime merely as a pretext for their expulsion; but it did not change the social prestige of the persons, and especially not their living habits. This corresponds to the fact that it is scarcely possible to find traces of Jewishness in the area of gastronomy. With regard to food, the Jewish refugees maintained their own identity, which they could in no way renounce. The refugees identified with the place they had come from, and only seldom with Jewish tradition and religion.

2.3 Food in the Concept of Relatedness during the Exile in Shanghai

The concept of relatedness that is mirrored in gastronomy brings clarification to the circles of communication or lifestyle experienced by the Jewish refugees during their exile in Shanghai. It in fact answers the question of whom one eats with.

One seldom finds in the contemporary reports and documents indications regarding the communication between Jewish refugees and their Chinese fellow human beings in the area of gastronomy. Only in the memoirs from a later time is there a description of the approach between the two sides. The extremely limited emergency assistance from the Jewish communities in Shanghai separated the refugees from the native residents, so that a functioning and normal communication be-

tween the two sides was scarcely possible and necessary, totally disregarding the fact that language was an insurmountable barrier. All in all, the Jewish refugees constituted a separate group closed within itself. Their communication with the external world was often limited to the Westerners in Shanghai, even if from 1941 onwards Germans were no longer allowed to enter Jewish businesses in Shanghai (Buxbaum 2008: 59.x). Their shared fate – misery and destitution – brought the Jews and their Chinese counterparts closer and closer during the wartime years and even left behind many moving stories, but it did little to improve mutual understanding. Warnings were even issued – for example, by the chief editor of *The Shanghai Times*, A. Morley, who observed that "Jews should heed as a warning the example of Kaifeng, where the longstanding Jewish community gradually died out or was absorbed by the Chinese population" (1939: 27).

At that time, the restaurants operated by Jewish refugees not only offered gustatory delights but also constituted a certain circle of communication. Upon reading the guests' book of the Fiaker restaurant operated by the exiled persons Hans Jabloner and Fritz Strehlen, such names are to be found as Zhou Enlai, Song Qingling, Mei Lanfang, Pearl S. Buck, Pu Yi, Douglas MacArthur, etc. (Buxbaum 2008: 83–84) The circle of guests included almost the entire prominent society of modern Chinese history. This circle represents social success, not the struggle for survival. And the reason for this success lies precisely in their Western originality and exoticism. In no way did the Jewish refugees manage to achieve an acculturation[2] in the host country or in Shanghai.

Now in this context, it can be understood why the exile of Jews in Shanghai scarcely found an echo in the Chinese press of that time, even if Song Qingling, the widow of Sun Zhongshan, publicly criticized the treatment of Jews by Nazi Germany[3]. Even though this history with regard to exile proceeded in parallel to the ongoing events in China itself, it nonetheless had a separate and different impact on the Jewish refugees on the one hand, and on their Chinese fellow human beings on the other.

2 This acculturation refers to the process of approach and assimilation with regard to the culture of the country of exile, to its established values and lifestyle habits. The figures in the novel scarcely evince an identification with the history and culture of the host country. The gap between the two remains unbridgeable from beginning to end. (Kreuter 1998 305)

3 On May 13, 1933, Song Qingling and a few other prominent persons such as Cai Yuanpei, Lu Xun, Lin Yutang et al. delivered their protest against the Hitler regime to the German Consulate in Shanghai. (Qingling 1952)

3. Food as Access to the Real China for the Jewish Refugees

In conveying what it was like to be in a foreign country and culture in Shanghai, there was a pronounced tendency to focus on the phenomenon of 'food.' For example, a photographic portrayal of the Jewish refugees shows everyday life in Shanghai at that time by presenting "Rikschakuli breakfasting in the street" (Friede 1939: 134). Food is a clear example for the state of being foreign in exile. It is for this reason that one finds in the *Gelbe Post* numerous articles about nutrition in China or about the diets of certain social echelons, in order to make it possible for the reader to imagine in any way what actual reality in China was like.

For example, poverty and distress were perceived differently by the Jewish and Chinese contemporaries. Upon disembarking in Shanghai, each Jewish refugee received between fifty and one hundred U.S. dollars (Buxbaum 2008: 47)[4] as well as a bed in a residential accommodation. This gave rise provisionally to a 'cultivated life' of which their Chinese fellow human beings had no idea whatsoever. Nevertheless, each refugee attempted "to leave the hostel as quickly as possible" (Buxbaum 2008: 47), because the living conditions there were a 'shock.' The gap that had existed from the beginning between the Chinese and the white Europeans persisted to the very end.

Many years later as well, after more and more memoirs by the Jewish refugees had appeared, there are scarcely any personal memories to be found with regard to their Chinese contemporaries. The emotionally impactful stories that can be read today come in most instances from the research of scholars or historians from a later era. The reason lies in the facts that on the one hand, China was in a state of war with Japan and had no interest in the state of Jewish refugees, and on the other hand that the poverty and distress of the Chinese people was not perceived by those who shared their fate at the time, because poverty and hardship are relative concepts which can only be imagined and understood through comparison and relationship.

In this context, the phenomenon of food also provided the Jewish refugees with some access to the China of those times. The *Gelbe Post* often reported about the situation with regard to food in China. In an article entitled *Street Children*, for example, one can read about the nutritional crisis that Chinese children were suffering from (Storfer 1939d: 86). In other articles, the newspaper described the desperate situation in a Chinese refugee camp and told about beggars on the street. The critical situation in China was also evident in the lack of hygiene in gastronomy. In the article *Filth in China* that appeared on November 1, 1939 in the *Gelbe Post*, for example, Carl Crow reported on "the indescribable filth […] that is felt by many foreigners to

4 This amount constituted a large fortune at that time, because the month's rent of an apartment in Shanghai, according to the specific conditions, was approximately 1.5 to 15 U.S. dollars.

be completely intolerable" (1939: 157). These impressions and experiences served only to deepen further the homesickness of the homeless persons because, in the initial moment after disembarking, they compared their present suffering and desperation with a past that they had spent in contented prosperity. The destitution and privation were not on the same level for the two sides.

This contrast gave rise to a sort of comfort and compassion, a recognition that there were even worse things. Otherwise persons would have lived in a mood of permanent melancholy. In the article *The Standard of Chinese Farmers and Agricultural Workers*, the author, Professor Wolfgang Wilmanns (1939: 57), endeavors to convey to his readers the situation in China by drawing a comparison between the calorie intake and the share for purposes of nutrition between the Chinese and other peoples in the world. For the Jewish refugees, food provided an easier and more immediate access to the Chinese reality of the time. The critical situation being endured by the Chinese was also evident in the depiction of the circumstances with regard to foodstuffs: "Chinese refugees in Shanghai, as far as their nourishment comes into consideration, cost the International Red Cross six-and-a-half Chinese cents per day, […] which means 6.50 dollars for one hundred daily rations." (Storfer 1939c: 85) It is for that reason that the editor-in-chief of *The Shanghai Times*, Mr. A. Morley, observed that the living standard of "foreigners […] is significantly higher than that of the Chinese" (1939: 27).

4. Conclusion

If one considers the phenomenon of 'food' as providing an access to history, then it functions like a door swinging in both directions. On the one hand, food counts as an access for the contemporary Jewish refugees to the China of that time, so that they could better understand their country of exile as well as their own situation; on the other hand, this can also be understood as a reflection of current events for the later generation, so that it becomes possible to imagine the past from a microperspective. The phenomenon of 'food' also serves simultaneously as a concrete criterion for the analysis of or comparison between varying perceptions of reality. The perception of history is based on complicated background circumstances and is always linked to a relative evaluation. For this reason, there is need for a dependable benchmark or a double perspective so that the historical 'truth' remains ascribable and recognizable in subsequent remembrance.

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