

Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

The Jews in China: an enduring friendship between two ancient cultures

**Soloway Jewish Community Centre
October 02, 2002**

Slide 1:

- I want to thank the Soloway Jewish Community Centre for inviting me to speak today, and on behalf of the Senate of Canada - Welcome.
- The talk I'm giving today came about from a conversation my husband had with our dear friend, Bev Shapiro....

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- Two years ago, on March 21st, on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, I made a statement in the Senate about Dr. Feng Shan Ho, Consul General of China in Vienna, an extraordinary man who saved many Jews during the 2nd World War.
- I learnt about him and other heroic diplomats from the exhibition of Visas for Life that was on at the United Nations that year. I also saw the exhibition of Dr. Ho in the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver. Since then, I have been encouraging the Chinese community across the country to work with the Jewish community to put on the exhibition.

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- Earlier this year, I was invited by Manli Ho, Dr. Feng Shan Ho's daughter, to attend the opening of the traveling exhibition of Visas for Life at the Shanghai Library in China, which documents the heroism of Dr. Feng Shan Ho, as well as many other diplomats who saved tens of thousands of Jews during the second World War.

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- I have spoken a few times on this topic, but each time it was only for a few minutes. In May of this year, I also spoke at the Gift of

Friendship Tribute Exhibit, an exhibition of Canadian Jewish and Chinese artists in Toronto, which commemorated the long and enduring friendship between the Chinese and Jewish people that took place at the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto. The exhibition will be permanently housed in the Ohel Moishe Synagogue in Shanghai.

- I have always been fascinated by the affinity between the Jewish and Chinese peoples ever since I was a child.
- I would like to draw upon a few events in history to illustrate the long-standing friendship between the Chinese and the Jewish people which has endured for over 2,000 years.
- Throughout this long period, Jews have never been persecuted in China. In fact, they have always been made welcome.
- I will give you an account to illustrate how, for 2 and ½ millennium, China has been a place of refuge for Jews, who were often fleeing persecution elsewhere.
- Some historians have traced the Jewish presence in China to the time of the first Temple, when Israel was divided into 2 kingdoms. In approximately 721 B.C.E., the Assyrians invaded the northern Kingdom, exiled the 10 tribes and enslaved them in Assyria.
- The B'nei Menashe, a community of some 5,000 Jews still living in India, have passed down their oral history for 2,700 years, describing their escape from slavery. They passed through Afghanistan to Tibet, reaching the Chinese city of **Kaifeng** (in Henan province) in the year 240 B.C.E. I will speak more about Kaifeng later because there was a well-established Jewish community there for a long time, and the descendants are still there today.
- The B'nei Menashe believe their ancestors then went in various directions from China, to Vietnam, the Philippines, Siam (Thailand) Malaysia, Burma (Myanmar) and India.

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- Another area where there is a tribe who may be the descendants of the Israelites is in the mountainous area of northwest China near the border between Szechuan, and Tibet. These are the people called Chiang or Chiang-Min of West Szechuan, who number about 250,000, and who live in fort-like villages in the high mountain ranges.

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- The Scottish missionary Torrance, who visited **Cheng-du** in the early 1900's, insisted that the Chiang-Min strongly resembled the ancient Israelites because of their customs and traditions, including the use of an ancient Israelite-like plow drawn by 2 oxens, and they never use an ox and an ass together. According to the Biblical stipulation, "You shall not plow with an ox and ass together."
- According to their oral history, the Chiang tribe members are the descendants of Abraham, who had 12 sons. They believe in one God whom they call Abachi, meaning father of heaven. This God is all-powerful, watching over the entire world. The Chiang-Min priests wore girdles to bind their robes and bore a sacred rod shaped like a serpent, reminiscent of the brass serpent fashioned by Moses in the wilderness.
- In the past they had written scrolls of parchment and books, but today they have only oral traditions. They don't understand the prayers they recite every week, but continue to practice the custom of animal sacrifices.
- The Chiang tribe see themselves as immigrants from the West who reached China after a journey of three years and three months.
- They don't have statues or images, but do have two symbols of holiness: a clean white sheet of paper and a piece of natural white stone, symbolizing absolute purity. Their altar is built of earth, which is molded into stones, and are then laid one on top of the

other without being cut or fashioned by any tool of metal. This custom may have been derived from the Torah's requirement that the altar not be made of cut stones (Exodus 20:25), since the sword or other tool used to cut the stone could be an instrument of war and harm. Among the ceremonies still practiced by the Chiang tribe is the sprinkling of blood on the doorpost to insure the safekeeping of the house, and a purification of the earth ceremony with a white scroll or parchment.

- They also have a custom of closing all forests for 50 years, after which they have a special ceremony to mark their opening, similar to a custom of ancient Israel.

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- Another way the Jews had reached China was via the **Silk Route**, which for more than 4,000 years had been the main avenue of communication between the Mediterranean and China. It is believed that this was the Route taken by the Israelites following the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, in order to seek freedom in China.
- In the 7th century, there was tangible evidence of a Jewish presence from Persia in Xi'an, a major city on the Silk Route, and the capital of China for 11 dynasties.
- In the 13th century, Marco Polo, traveling in China spoke of meeting Jews or hearing about them during his travels in the Middle Kingdom. Polo recorded that Kublai Khan himself celebrated the festivals of the Muslims, Christians and Jews alike. Historical sources also describe Jewish communities at various cities, including Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Ningbo, and Yangzhou. Only the community in Kaifeng (Henan Province) survived since its founding around 240 BCE.

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- By the Northern Sung dynasty (960-1127 CE) there was a thriving Jewish community in **Kaifeng**, which was then the capital of China, and the final destination on the Silk Route. It survived peacefully with its Chinese neighbors for 1200 years.

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- The first synagogue was erected in Kaifeng in 1163 (Southern Sung Dynasty, 1127-1278) because the Emperor ordered the Jews to “keep and follow the customs of your forefathers and settle at Bianliang (today Kaifeng). The inscription on the synagogue stone draws parallels between Confucianism and Judaism, which both emphasized family, honour, tradition, and the moral basis of one’s daily life. The notion of Tzedaka (charity) is common to both.
- Jesuits visited Kaifeng during the 18th century, intent on befriending the Chinese Jews and studying their holy writings. They wrote letters to Rome describing the daily life and religious observances of these Chinese Jews. Sketches of the interior and exterior of the synagogue show a typical Chinese courtyard structure with many pavilions dedicated to ancestors and illustrious men of Jewish history. A separate hall for the ritual slaughter of animals included a front table with incense sticks burned to honor the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- Over the following centuries, assimilation, lack of a rabbi, and few resources, diminished the confidence of the Jewish community in Kaifeng. Poverty even led to the sale of parts of the synagogue building and even some of their manuscripts. Scrolls of the Law and other Hebrew manuscripts were sold to Protestant missionaries during the 19th century. Many of these are now in the Klau Library of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.
- Due to natural disasters, the synagogue had been rebuilt a few times, but in 1866, the Kaifeng synagogue was destroyed for the last time, after being flooded, and was never rebuilt again.

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- To this day, several hundred residents in the old Song capital, Kaifeng, continue to think of themselves as bona fide members of the House of Israel. However much they have been assimilated, they still don’t eat pork in keeping with tradition. They hold firm to the belief that they are the descendants of the ancient Israelites

despite the fact that their features are indistinguishable from those of their Chinese neighbors. They haven't had a rabbi for the better part of two centuries, no synagogue or other communal organization for several generations, and they remember virtually nothing of the faith and traditions of their ancestors. Quite surprisingly, the street on which many of them now live bears a sign that was erected, somewhat less than a hundred years ago, whose Chinese characters read "The Lane of the Sect that Teaches the Scriptures."

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- From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Sephardic Jews moved to **Shanghai** in great numbers, mostly from Baghdad, Spain, Portugal, and India, to trade. The most prominent were the ones who came from Bombay.

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- Bombay – story of Sassoon, Harpoons, Kadoories, and Jardine Matheson.

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- In the early 1900s, these Sephardic Jews were joined in far greater numbers by poverty-stricken Jews from czarist Russia fleeing the pogroms, filtering into other cities as well as Shanghai, becoming shopkeepers, bakers, and milliners. Their presence in Harbin alone was approximately 8,000 by 1908, and in Shanghai they soon far outnumbered the Sephardis. The Russian Revolution of 1917 practically doubled the size of these communities.
- In Shanghai, the Russian Jews had their own communities and didn't mix with the Sephardic Jewish elite. They were the artists and musicians. They had their own stores, restaurants, newspapers, and theatres.
- In 1920, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen wrote to the leaders of the Jewish community in Shanghai “all lovers of democracy cannot help but support the movement to restore your wonderful and historic nation, which has contributed so much to the civilization of the world, and which rightfully deserves an honourable place in the family of nations.”
- In 1922, China was among the members of the League of Nations that voted in favour of the Palestine Mandate, proposing a Jewish homeland.
- Now, I'll talk about the exhibition of Visas for Life we saw in Shanghai in March this year. The following photographs were taken by my husband in Shanghai.

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- Shanghai was a very unique city. Visas or any official documents were not required for entrance. During the Holocaust, 18,000 German and Austrian Jewish high school students, their Rabbi's and 2,000 Polish Jews were refugees in Shanghai. Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Shanghai and other organizations had provided much help to Jewish refugees there. The Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees assisted hundreds of Jews to find housing and gave food allowances. They also offered social and legal services. In 1945, most Jewish refugees left Shanghai for western countries.
- In the 1930's, Shanghai was one of the world's few refuges to Jews fleeing Nazi aggression. It was an open city with no passports or other documentation required. A total of about 30,000 Jews found shelter in the city, forming a thriving community before the floodgates were entirely closed by the Nazis.
- In May 1933, Madame Sun Yat-sen headed a delegation from China that included all the important leaders of the China League for Civil Rights, which met with the German Consul in Shanghai to lodge a strong protest against Nazi atrocities in Germany. Throughout the 30's, Shanghai was the center of numerous protests against the treatment of Jews in Europe.

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- During the war, it was truly the heroic individuals who made a difference in saving the lives of the Jews in Europe. Many of these individuals have since been honoured by Yad Vashem as the "Righteous Among Nations. In 1963, the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) empowered Yad Vashem to bestow the honorific title of "Righteous Among the Nations" to these individuals as a gesture of thanks in the name of the Jewish people. A Supreme Court Justice chairs a committee of public personalities who ensure that nominees acted to save Jews: wholly at their own discretion; in territories under the control of the Germans or their collaborators; at risk to their own lives, freedoms and safety; without receiving remuneration or reward as precondition for the help they gave.

- The situation of diplomats, official representatives of foreign governments, was unique since the dangers to their personal well-being were significantly less than to others. Therefore the criteria for recognizing them as Righteous Among the Nations are: that they acted against explicit orders from their superiors; at direct risk to their careers, and, that they extended their efforts to a sizable number of people.

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- One of these heroic individuals was Dr. Feng Shan Ho, the Consul General of the Chinese Republic in Vienna at the beginning of World War II. Born on September 10, 1901, in rural China to a poor family, and fatherless at age seven, Feng Shan Ho overcame his humble beginnings by graduating *Magna Cum Laude* with a doctorate in political economics from the University of Munich. He then entered into the Foreign Service of the Chinese Republic, and was posted to Vienna in 1937. Because he had studied in Germany, Dr. Ho was very much aware of the political rhetoric in that country.
- Dr. Ho vividly recalled a triumphant Hitler parading through the streets of Vienna. He was horrified by the fanatical welcome the Austrians extended. "They were shouting and extending their arms in the Nazi salute at mass rallies with banners waving. The women were especially zealous. Dr. Ho was invited to meet Adolf Hitler who he later described as "an unspeakable martinet."
- Dr. Ho never forgot his own humble beginnings, and as a truly moral man, he reached out to those in need.
- After the Third Reich's annexation of Austria on March 12, 1938, thousands of Jews swamped Vienna's foreign consulates, desperately seeking visas that would enable them to flee persecution. Many consulates, including Canada's, carried out discriminatory policies, and did not grant visas to Jewish refugees.

- Consul General Ho, however, issued visas to Shanghai for any and all who asked. Shanghai was then under Japanese occupation and visas were not required for entry. But a visa, as proof of emigration, was necessary to leave Austria.
- The Nationalist Chinese government, which had diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany, instructed Dr. Ho to stop issuing visas, but he ignored his superiors. A year later, when the Nazis seized the Jewish-owned building that housed the Chinese consulate, and his government refused to open a new office, Dr. Ho moved the consulate to another location, and paid all the expenses himself, so that he could continue saving lives. In all, approximately 4000 visas were issued, and 4,000 lives were saved.
- There was a story of him confronting the SS in a Jewish home, where the occupants were about to be arrested. He took his Jewish friends, under the noses of the SS, and brought them to the train station himself.
- Two of the individuals he saved were the parents of Dr. Israel Singer, Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress. They escaped to Cuba with visas issued by Dr. Ho.
- How did the visas work? They are for exiting Austria, and with these visas, the Jewish refugees could go anywhere where they were accepted, even those who were already arrested could still use the visa to leave the country. Many went to Shanghai because it was the easiest city to get into.
- After serving four decades as a diplomat to different countries for the Nationalist Chinese government, Dr. Ho was discredited by his government when he retired to San Francisco in 1973, and was denied a pension for his 35 years of service. He died in 1997 at the age of 96. He will forever be remembered as a man firmly rooted in Confucian principles, a man of both intellect and compassion, and as a champion of humanity. The words of Dr. Feng Shan Ho serve as the most eloquent tribute to his actions: “I thought it only natural to feel compassion and to want to help.

From the standpoint of humanity, that is the way it should be.” Dr. Feng Shan Ho is only now being recognized for his considerable achievement as the “Chinese Schindler” with a traveling exhibition called Visas for Life: The Story of Dr. Feng Shan Ho.

- The reason no one knew his story was because he didn’t talk about it. Also, the memoir he wrote was in Chinese, and it was not translated.

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- On July 7, 2000, Israel posthumously awarded Feng Shan Ho the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" for his humanitarian courage. He is one of 27 diplomats officially recognized by Israel for rescuing Jews during the Holocaust.

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- In 1985, another unsung hero of WWII was finally recognized for his bravery. Chiune Sugihara, Japanese Consul General in Lithuania in 1939-1940, was recognized and honored for issuing some 6,000 to 10,000 visas to Polish Jews in Kovno, Lithuania. Again, Sugihara defied orders by the Japanese Foreign Ministry in Tokyo in issuing the visas. Those visas allowed thousands, including the entire Mir Yeshiva of Poland, to obtain safe passage to Shanghai and elsewhere.
- A monument to him was erected on a hillside in Jerusalem and he was awarded the Righteous Among Nations medal by Yad Vashem. On the hillside overlooking Yad Vashem, a tree was planted in his honor and an entire forest of trees planted in his name south of Jerusalem. An estimated 40,000 descendants of his visa recipients, now known as Sugihara Survivors, are alive because of his extraordinary courage and the courage of his entire family. This was one of the largest rescues of Jews in the Holocaust. One of Sugihara's Survivors, Zorach Warhaftig, became Israeli Minister of Religion and was one of the original signers of the Israeli Declaration of Independence.

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- Citizens of other countries also played a role in rescuing the Jews during the Holocaust. These pictures show some of the individuals, from various countries who are included in the Exhibition in Shanghai.

Slide 23, 24:

- Of particular note are the Swiss, and the role of the Red Cross, In the winter of 1944 to 1945, neutral countries, the International Red Cross and other organizations provided “safe houses” and “protective passes” to Jews after they protested the Hungarian government’s dreadful treatment of Jews. A total of 25,000 Jews were protected in “safe houses”. The “safe houses” were buildings erected by the embassies of neutral countries. Foreign countries protected people with “protective passes”. There were thousands of “protective passes” issued. Even though “safe houses” and “protective passes” were not officially recognized, they were the main reason that 120,000 Jews were spared during the Holocaust.
- Another hero from WWII is the Chinese-Viennese doctor Jakob Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld was imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1938, released and travelled to Shanghai for refuge in 1939, where he enlisted in Mao Zedong's Liberation Army in 1941, and set up clinics and public-health systems, delivered babies and worked long hours under gunfire, finally being promoted to General in the Chinese Liberation Army. In China, he was adored and beloved for his humane acts, and the dedication and self-sacrifice with which he treated his patients - soldiers, generals, and peasants alike. With the help of the Israel-China Friendship Society, his grave has been restored in Israel and has become a place of pilgrimage for visiting Chinese delegations. In Shandong Province in China, a statue of Dr. Rosenfeld was erected in 1992, created on the occasion of festivities marking the 90th Anniversary of his birth.
 - Now I will bring you to the Hongkou District in Shanghai where most of the Jewish refugees lived during the 2nd WW.

Slide 25:

- Hongkou District – working class neighbourhood – then and now
- This was where the Jewish refugees lived side-by-side with their Chinese neighbours

Slides 26, 27, 28:

- The Japanese, who had control of Shanghai, during the war, allowed Jews to live anywhere they wished for most of the war, and move freely. Most crowded into the Hongkou District, but some settled in other parts of town. The area was a slum, but they managed to create a community teeming with life, printing newspapers, putting on theatrical productions, forming sports groups and orchestras, gathering regularly at local cafés, and setting up shelters for those in need. The area was dubbed Little Vienna.

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- In 1942 things changed when Joseph Meisinger, the Butcher of Warsaw, representing the Gestapo, arrived in Shanghai on a German U-Boat to force the Japanese to impose the "Final Solution" upon the Jews there. The plan was to liquidate the city of Jewish inhabitants by rounding up the Jews on Rosh HaShanah, load them onto ships, send them out to sea, and starve them to death. The Japanese were not interested in Meisinger's plans and did not yield to SS power in Shanghai. In compromise, they ordered recent and undocumented refugees to a "stateless" area, thus establishing the Hongkou Ghetto. Passes were needed to go in and out of the ghetto, and the Japanese soldiers had to be saluted.

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- Relations between the Chinese and Jewish peoples have never ceased. The newly-formed Israel voted United Nations membership to the People's Republic of China against Nationalist and U.S. pressure. China and Israel established formal relations in January 1992, and trade and cultural exchange between the two countries are flourishing.

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- In March 1992, the Israel-China Friendship Society was established with the goal of strengthening the friendship between the two countries. The organization has been instrumental in assisting both Israel and Chinese delegations in their travels back and forth, as well as the restoration of Jewish artifacts and buildings in China, and the funding of exhibits and memorials that honor the Jewish-Chinese friendship. In March 2002, the Society celebrated its tenth anniversary.

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- In 1998, the Shanghai municipal government provided extensive renovation of the historic **Ohel-Rachel and the Ohel Moishe Synagogues**, restoring them to their original beauty. **Ohel-Rachel Synagogue** was built in 1920 by Victor Sassoon in memory of his wife, Rachel. The Ohel Rachel Synagogue holds almost 1,000 people in its sanctuary. The largest remaining synagogue in the Far East, it has been visited by numerous distinguished guests, including Bill and Hillary Clinton and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder. Marble pillars flank a walk-in arch, and wide balconies overlook the sanctuary. For the first time in nearly 50 years, the building was used for High Holy Days services led by Rabbi Greenberg in 1999. Of seven synagogues that existed in Shanghai, only this one and Ohel Moishe (built in 1927) remain.
- Yes, Rabbi Greenberg is now stationed in Shanghai to serve the small Jewish community there.

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- **Ohel Moishe Synagogue** – built 1927
- The guide in the Ohel Moishe Synagogue is Old Mr. Wang, who is retiring this year.
- The art pieces from the Gift of Friendship Tribute Exhibit in Toronto will be housed on a permanent basis in this Synagogue which is now called the Jewish Refugee Memorial Hall.

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- Now back to **Kaifeng** which is now the home of China's newest Jewish museum, located within the Riverside Park of the Qingming Festival. The park itself vividly recreates bridges, streets, shops, canals, docks, teahouses, and folk customs of the Song Dynasty. Moshe Zhang, a descendant of Kaifeng's original Jewish settlers, runs a display of China's Jewish History, donated by the Sino-Judaic Institute. The materials depict China's Jewish life with pictures and guides in several languages, as well as replicas, books, photos, maps, artifacts, and stone tablets displaying the Jewish history in Kaifeng.

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- This photo taken on the roof of the Peace Hotel, which used to be owned by Victor Sassoon, who, at one time was reputed to have owned 1/3 of the real estate in Shanghai. He was also reputed to be the only person who sold his real estate to the Chinese Communist government. The picture was taken by our Israeli guide, Chamolta, and Pudong, the famous commercial centre, is in the background.
- I have often wondered why the Jews were persecuted everywhere they went, and yet they have been able to live in peace in China for over 2,000 years.
- 1. Similarity in our cultures and traditions; 2. Religion; 3. they went in peace, seek refuge, to trade
- respect for our elders
- close family tradition
- Jewish, worship of ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Chinese, ancestral worship
- Education
- Keeping our cultures alive