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Emilia Rydel graduated in history and philological and historical studies of Central Europe from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. She is a doctoral student at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences. Her research interests focus on the twentieth century, the history of the Jewish diaspora, the Holocaust and comparative literature. She works as a history and civic education teacher.

e-mail: emilia.rydel@gmail.com

Emilia Rydel

## The postcolonial perspective in Jewish diaspora studies: A “Jew-Chinese” in Anka Voticky’s memoir

This article aims to familiarise the reader with the complex transnational history of the Holocaust which goes beyond the canonical, well-known narratives about the period, particularly those written in Europe.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it does not simply provide an account of a wartime story, another record of tragic memories, but attempts to apply the postcolonial perspective in the study of the Jewish diaspora in a rather peculiar place and time: the period between 1939 and 1945 in China and Japan. Reading the memoir of Anka Voticky, a Czech Jewish woman who spent the period of the Second World War as a refugee in Shanghai, I try to capture the double otherness of strangers living side by side: I am interested in the story of the Jews and the Chinese and relations between them, particularly the margins of these contacts. The area of Shanghai known as the Hongkew ghetto saw many stories that can be traced in her memoir, published in English and Czech, which is my main source. Born in an assimilated Jewish family, the author was both a Czech and a Jew. She arrived in Shanghai in 1940; after the war she settled in Canada. Her wartime memoir contains passages which are rather enigmatic and open to interpretation. I think it is

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to broadly discussed and analysed publications. Noting the phenomenon of the literary canon of the Holocaust, Aleksandra Ubertowska (2009, p. 220) mentions such authors as Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi and Adam Czerniaków. Although rather eclectic in its approach, the first issue of the journal *Narracje o Zagładzie* (The Narratives of the Shoah), entitled “Kanon Zagłady” (The Canon of the Shoah), is also limited to the European context. In my opinion, the flight of Jewish refugees (facing racial discrimination and death) from Europe to Asia should become part of this canon.

The study was conducted at author's own expense.

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particularly important to discern three figures that provide a link between postcolonial and Holocaust studies: the *amah* (a female domestic servant), the coolie and the rickshaw puller.

## Historical background

The earliest records of Jewish families settling in this part of Asia suggest that the history of the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai most likely goes back to the late eighteenth century, when the city developed into a large centre handling trade with Korea, Japan and the Ryukyu Islands (Goldstein, 2013, p. 216). The so-called unequal treaties of 1842–1844, following the defeat of China by Britain in the First Opium War, marked the beginning of the colonial period in its history. Under the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), Shanghai became one of five Chinese ports open to foreign trade, with British merchants allowed to settle and carry their business. In the following years, foreign powers established their extraterritorial settlements outside the city walls. As a result, Shanghai came to be composed of three entities: the British-American International Settlement, the French Concession and the so-called Chinese City (where the majority of the population was native).

Some foreign entrepreneurs who arrived in China were members of the Baghdadi Jewish community who had fled from persecutions in the Ottoman Empire. Over the years, the Kadooris, the Harpoons, the Hayims, the Abrahams and other Baghdadi families established their strong position in Shanghai (Heppner, 1995, p. 38). A number of Russian Jews arrived in the city after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905); there were also those who fled from Manchuria. Established in 1909, the Shanghai Jewish Communal Association (SJCA) aimed to bring together the Jewish communities of the city. Most European Jews arriving in Shanghai made their way by ship from Genoa, Trieste, Venice or Marseilles. The newcomers received support from cultural and relief organisations active in the city. However, the funds at their disposal were insufficient to offer help and assistance to all those who arrived. In reaction to Hitler's rise to power, in 1933 the Russian Jews formed a separate Jewish Company in the Shanghai Volunteer Corps (SVC), which later planned to join British forces fighting against the Nazis (Kranzler, 1988, p. 379).

The last wave of Jewish migration came with the flight of Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe; most of those who arrived were originally from Germany and Austria. The number of Jewish refugees in Shanghai during the Second World War is estimated at about twenty thousand (less than one per cent of the total population of the city). They most often

settled in Hongkew, one of the cheapest areas of Shanghai at the time, which had a large Japanese community. During the Sino-Japanese War the district was occupied by Japan. In 1939, the area of refugee housing available for Jews was restricted to a few streets where public buildings were turned into shelters; there were also multi-room terraced houses, shared by a number of families each. This congestion of Jewish refugees amounted to their ghettoisation, although it needs to be stressed that they did not live in isolation. Tens of thousands of Chinese civilian refugees also sought shelter in the city.

Importantly, despite pressure from Hitler, Japan (Germany and Italy's ally) did not introduce the policy of extermination of Jews. However, in February 1942 there were rumours in Shanghai about a visit by Josef Meisinger (Voticky, 2010, p. 58), the former head of the Gestapo in Warsaw. According to Voticky's information, he proposed plans for the extermination of all Jewish refugees in the city: he suggested they could be packed onto derelict barges with no engines or steering and set adrift to die. On 18 February 1943, Japanese authorities issued a regulation designating the Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees, known as the Hongkew ghetto. Once an American colony, Hongkew had been an area of great prestige from 1932 to 1937, but had suffered severe damage during the Sino-Japanese War. At the time, it was a place of isolation and poverty, with the Chinese population of the district particularly affected.

## Biographical background

Anka Voticky's memoir was written in the 2000s and has three versions. The first of them is *Clinging to Life*, a manuscript by Teresa Ho and Cameron Moser, who attended her talks at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. Commissioned by Voticky, its Czech translation (*Zachráněna v šanghajském ghettu*, 2010) does not include some fragments concerning the author's personal experiences. The best-known and most popular version is *Knocking on Every Door*, published in Canada as part of the Azrieli Series of Holocaust Survivor Memoirs in 2010 (print and e-book edition). Although both language versions preserve the original first-person narrative, the author-narrator in fact gives voice to her family and Czech friends. The reader does not gain an insight into her feelings and emotions. In this way, her memoir is first and foremost a story of a small community, a kind of memorial book (*yizkor bukh*, *sefer ha-zikaron*) commemorating not only the life of Czech Jews in Shanghai but also their pre- and post-war paths.

At the same time, it cannot remain unnoticed that Voticky marginalises her Jewish identity: the Czech translation of her wartime story was published under the name Anna Votická (Anna is a name of Hebrew origin, and the form Votická follows the Czech pattern of formation of female surnames), and the English version – Anka Voticky, an internationalised form most likely reflecting her assimilation to the English language. This comes as a mark of identity that can be classified as suspended or liminal, characteristic of what Robert Young refers to as “cultural inbetweenness” (Young, 2001, p. 422); it also confirms her sense of belonging to two cultures, involving a kind of cultural hybridisation (Braidotti, 1994, p. 10), which is the case among migrants in a globalised world. It is a paradox that although Voticky adopts a transnational strategy of writing/translation, in fact she produces a portrayal of a Jewish, and at the same time Czech, community, constructing a myth of its lost homeland in the process.

Anka Voticky was born in the Czech town of Brandýs nad Labem in 1913 as Anna Maria Kanturková. Her middle-class family – her father (like Franz Kafka's) owned a shop selling clothing accessories – soon moved to Prague. Her parents were Czech patriots. They had a strong affection both for Tomáš Masaryk, the first long-serving president of Czechoslovakia, and Emperor Franz Joseph (Anka was born when the country was part of the Habsburg Empire). Their first thought of leaving Czechoslovakia came in 1936. They wanted to emigrate with the entire family to the United States, where they had some relatives, but their attempts proved unsuccessful, as did their plan to leave for Yugoslavia. When trying to leave the country, the Voticky family abandoned their Jewish faith.

The opportunity to emigrate to China came just after Britain joined the war. The Votickys forgot about America and Anka managed to obtain transit visas for the whole family at the Swiss consulate in Trieste. They arrived in Shanghai on board the Italian ocean liner SS Conte Rosso and rented a house in the French Concession, one of the best areas of Shanghai. Her husband, together with his brother, set up a jewellery workshop offering custom-made products, so they could afford a relatively comfortable life in a spacious villa with five Chinese servants. In 1943 the family had to move to the Hongkew ghetto, which suffered from overpopulation and epidemics. The Votickys were unaware of the fate of the Jews in Europe until just after the war, when they found out that sixty-five of Anka's close relatives had been killed in Treblinka and Auschwitz concentration camps. The Voticky family left Shanghai in 1946. Having tried to settle back in Prague, they decided to leave Europe for Canada because of growing antisemitism.

## The postcolonial perspective and Holocaust studies

Considering the application of the postcolonial perspective in Holocaust studies, it is particularly important to note works by scholars who have a personal experience of diaspora, migration or exile. Indeed, a number of leading researchers of colonial heritage are academic migrants, polyglots from multi-cultural and multi-ethnic backgrounds. In this way, postcolonial studies are dominated by authors who do not represent the Western perspective: they are often of non-Western, "colonial" descent, residents of the former colonies or members of colonial diasporas in the West, with roots mainly in South Asia (Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) or the Arab world (Edward Said, Leila Abu-Lughod, Talal Asad) (cf. Kalmar & Penslar, 2005, p. xvii).

One possible way of describing and analysing postcolonial subjects relies on Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism", from which, however, she backed away as early as 1993 (Bill, 2014). Spivak's suspicion of identity strategies, her search for the moment of separation of the individual as a textual form, the reading of a human being as a sign ("antrophos") independent of history, is grounded in positivist tradition and thus does not necessarily fit in with Holocaust studies. In the case of Voticky's memoir, "strategic essentialism" can be applied in the description of the myth of "Yiddishe mame", particularly that Spivak makes use of feminist theory and the myth in question can be seen as an oppressive patriarchal construct.

What can serve as a point of departure for discussing the Jewish diaspora in terms of the postcolonial perspective is a close reading of Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), where she argues that Nazism is "racial imperialism". Indeed, Edward Said (1980) stresses her pioneering role for the development of postcolonial studies. Paul Gilroy, in turn, notes a great role of *Origins* not only for the study of history of European Jews and other minorities, but also, even more importantly, for integrating the study of racism, Nazism and colonialism (Gilroy, 2000, p. 77). Arendt's approach, however, is not without its limitations: her universalist perspective fails to give justice to the unique experience of particular Jewish communities in different parts of the world (including the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai). Some critics also observe that her explanation of relations between antisemitism and imperialism is rather unconvincing, as opposed to her clear articulation of their respective interrelationships with totalitarianism.

According to Bryan Cheyette, the recent proliferation of studies attempting "to draw connections between Jewish, colonial and postcolonial history" does not change the fact that contemporary academic disciplines "tend to stress specific histories of victimhood and exile

rather than 'common enslavement' across Europe's minorities and the colonies" (Cheyette, 2013, p. 19). Analysing the iconic interdependence between modern philosophy and colonialism, Michael Rothberg (2009) takes a close look at Boris Taslitzky's painting *Riposte* (1951), which depicts a violent protest against the Indochina War and makes significant references to Theodor Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819). Rothberg concludes that "in Taslitzky's painting the figure of Hitler returns in the struggle over colonialism and decolonization" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 69). This bears analogy to Arendt's writings, in which she argues that racial hierarchies produced in the colonies returned to Europe in the form of genocidal antisemitism. Interestingly, Taslitzky painted *Riposte* in the same year that Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Rothberg stresses the role of Aimé Césaire (who was Frantz Fanon's academic teacher) as a pioneer of investigating interrelationships between Nazism and colonialism. His *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) introduced the concept of *choc en retour* (reverse shock, backlash, close to Arendt's "boomerang effect"), which "has contributed to an important tradition of 'provincializing' European trauma and continues to inspire scholars in postcolonial studies" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 70). This voice on the "provincialisation of Europe" came long before the publication of Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential study (*Provincializing Europe*, 2000) and the advent of trauma studies. Césaire's thought also contributed to the "colonial turn" in Holocaust studies:

Césaire's multidirectional discourse on colonialism suggests that the etiology of intra-European trauma of Nazism lies not only in the empirical colonial encounters tracked by Arendt but also crucially in European *fantasies* about colonial peoples. (Rothberg, 2009, p. 77)

These fantasies are most often narrative creations manifesting themselves in language and idiom, an instrument of both inflicting and concealing violence. Since identity is grounded in linguistic expression, it seems only reasonable to thoroughly investigate the issues of language in the context of imperialism. It is worth stressing that contemporary trauma studies include attempts to approach the experience of the Holocaust within the postcolonial framework (cf. Kołodziejczyk, 2013, pp. 500–505), and that colonial experience is often conceptualised in terms of collective trauma.

The German historian Martin Broszat argues that the Third Reich is approached as an "island" in modern German history, which prevents the study of the Nazi era in the context of the trajectory of global history (Broszat, 1986). The fact that this isolated "island"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The "island of communism" can be identified as another such enclave.



is symbolised by Auschwitz has blocked European historians from investigating (Jewish) wartime stories in other parts of the globe. It is hardly a coincidence that Jewish refugees in Shanghai have mostly been studied by North American scholars, with their European colleagues developing an interest in the issue only in the 1990s. This certainly stemmed from the existence of the Iron Curtain and its impact on the formation of collective memory of the Holocaust. In general terms, the period until the late 1980s can be approached as the time of instrumentalisation of the Shoah by communist authorities. In Poland, the national debate about the difficult past, about the victims and perpetrators of the Shoah, was initiated by Jan Błoński's essay "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" (1987) and Jan Tomasz Gross' book *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2000/2001).

Although transnational history is considered one of "the most dynamically developing sub-disciplines of historical studies" (Domańska, 2013, p. 223), this perspective is rarely applied in Holocaust studies. While transnational historiography stems from the critical approach to European and national historiography (cf. Müller, 2013, p. 17), the narrative of the Holocaust mainly adopts the European point of view. Consequently, it seems reasonable to call for a history of the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai. Although the topic goes beyond the framework of European memory, it concerns a community of people originating from Central Europe. This historical phenomenon lends itself as an interesting case for the study of mutual cultural impact, communication process and interaction of hybrid cultures. Also, Shanghai is a space where migrations created new transnational places of memory. The practice of such comparative historical studies is focused on interactions between groups of people, which makes it go beyond the artificial image of nations as collective subjects.

## **The Jewish diaspora and the postcolonial perspective**

"No partition or else predition! Muslims are the Jews of Asia"  
(Rushdie, 1981, p. 72)

The term orientalism, a standard catchphrase of postcolonial studies associated with Edward Said, is also useful in the study of Jewish diaspora. As such, orientalism refers to images of the Orient generated in the West, or, in other words, to European projections of Middle Eastern and Asian cultures. Postcolonial scholarship displays far more interest in the world of Islam rather than the Jewish world, which tends to be regarded as peripheral to the field

and thus marginalised. This, however, does not change the fact that the Western perception of Muslims is inextricably linked with the image of the Jew. One example of this connection is Eugène Delacroix's painting *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834), where the artist's intention was to translate the orientalist idiom into an Arab context. In fact, the iconic harem scene depicting Arab women smoking a narghile<sup>3</sup> features his Jewish Algerian models (Kalmar & Penslar, 2005, p. xxx). In this way, the stereotypical representation of North African women turned out to be a variation on the European image of the Middle East.

The volume of studies *Orientalism and the Jews*, edited by Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar from the University of Toronto, presents a number of interesting observations on the subject. In their introduction, Kalmar and Penslar write that the Western world has seen Jews as occidental and oriental at the same time. Although today they are considered people of the West, this perspective is nuanced by the fact of the geographical location of the Jewish state in the East. It is also worth noting that Israel is home not only to Jews of European background, but also to "oriental" Jews and Arabs. Jews, in turn, identify themselves both with the West and with the ancient Israelites, who established their monotheistic tradition in the "oriental" location. It is not without a reason that the German Enlightenment philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder referred to Jews as the "Asiatics of Europe" (Herder, 1967), an expression of the standard European conception of the figure of the Jew. It is also important to observe that the rise of modern antisemitism coincided with the birth of imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Discussing the image of the Jews in colonial discourse, Tudor Parfitt examines numerous cases of European expeditions claiming to have discovered the Lost Tribes of Israel also in earlier historical periods (Parfitt, 2005, pp. 51–67).

One of the lesser known racist theories, proposed by the famous French sociologist Gustave Le Bon (the author of highly influential *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895)), included a link between the Semitic peoples and the Chinese and Japanese. In his *Psychology of Peoples* (1894), he argued that human races could be divided into four groups (primitive, inferior, average and superior), and classified the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mongolians and the Semitic peoples as "average races". Importantly, Indo-Europeans were the only race classified as "superior" (cf. Gawrycki & Szeptycki, 2011, p. 29).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is worth noting a certain analogy with the figure of a Chinese man smoking an opium pipe as a stereotypical image of licentiousness (cf. Maxwell, 1999, p. 64).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to the reviewer of this article for his/her suggestions concerning the connections between antisemitism and the so-called Yellow Peril (racist and xenophobic attitude towards Asian migrants in the West, particularly the United States), which, however, cannot be presented here in more detail for reasons of space. I discuss these connections in my MA thesis:



Kalmar and Penslar identify three models of Jewish response to orientalism, or, perhaps more precisely, of its interpretation. Firstly, the overall rejection of orientalism and of the figure of the Jew as "oriental". Secondly, the idealisation and romanticisation of the Orient and, consequently, self-representation of the Jews as "oriental". Thirdly, classification of traditional, orthodox Jews as "oriental", in opposition to modernised Jewry, described as "Western". This clearly points at the followers of the Jewish modernisation project (and the impact of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement), which tends to be associated with German-speaking Jews as opposed to their Eastern European compatriots – the *Ostjuden* (Volkov, 1985). The Jews from the Habsburg Empire, including Voticky herself, belong to "Western" Jewry. It needs to be noted, however, that borders between these groups are by no means fixed. Indeed, not all Eastern European Jews are considered *Ostjuden*.

Kalmar and Penslar propose the following periodisation of orientalism with reference to the history of the Jewish people (Kalmar & Penslar, 2005, pp. xxiii–xl):

- (1) the Saracen period, from the rise of Islam until the end of the fourteenth century, when all comparisons were founded on religious grounds with no necessary geographic correlation; the common Islamic enemy was known as the Saracen;
- (2) the Turkish period, from the late fourteenth until the late eighteenth century, when the prototypical Muslim in the Western imagination was a "Turk";
- (3) the Arab period, from the late eighteenth century until the 1960s, when the "Turk" as the stereotype of the oriental was replaced by the figure of the Arab (the Bedouin);<sup>5</sup>
- (4) the postcolonial period, when discourse about Muslims becomes political and only Jews with roots in the Arab world (Mizrahi) are called "oriental".

In terms of the above periodisation, the Holocaust belonged to the era when the stereotype of the Jew was grounded in categories that were not only cultural but also racist in nature, with Jews distinguished on the basis of their appearance. On the other hand, however, the Zionist movement of the 1920s and 1930s can fall under the rubric of postcolonialism, since the Israel project came as a Jewish response to anti-Jewish orientalism, and was a cultural and political

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*Diaspora żydowska w Szanghaju z perspektywy postkolonialnej. Przypadek Anki Votickiej* (The Jewish Diaspora in Shanghai in Postcolonial Perspective: The Case of Anka Voticky) (MA thesis, The Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> One of the more interesting examples of the "Bedouin" Jew figure is Omar al Raschid Bey (a Jew by birth who converted to Islam in 1886), who demonstrated his orientalism in the circles of the Munich bohème by his appearance: a yellow and green cummerbund, a red fez, high leather boots and a long grey beard (Mendes-Flohr, 1991, p. 77).

venture at the same time (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 125–141). The Arab period saw the emergence of the idea of a Semitic Orient, which developed as a result of the continuing decline of the Ottoman Empire. With language regarded as the principal distinguishing factor, the Turkish language, which is not Semitic, became the object of what can be regarded as racist-linguistic oppression. One interesting example of the colonial position of the Jewish minority in the Arab period was the short-lived domination of Lithuanian Jews in the South African crystal industry.

The term diaspora, long used almost exclusively in reference to the dispersion of Jewish people around the world, denotes the state of hybridity, cultural inbetweenness. Some scholars argue that the history of the Jewish diaspora came to an end with the Holocaust (Cheyette, 2013, p. 30), and that all its later forms are in fact different varieties of Jewishness. As in the case of the colonial condition, the experience of the Jewish diaspora inherently involves exile and homelessness. Although the latter category is sometimes understood literally, I am convinced that the experience in question is characterised by the state of unhomeliness rather than homelessness. Homi Bhabha argues that "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 10). His observation is more than relevant to Jewish identity, both collective and individual, consolidated by the trauma of the Holocaust and inextricably linked with subsequent migration choices, where – also for political reasons – the ultimate destination has not always been the Promised Land. A sense of unhomeliness was also part of the experience of Jewish refugees in the exterritorial and multicultural metropolis of Shanghai.

Historically, the image of the "Chinese Jews" played an important role in the occidental construction of oriental Jews. A key figure in the process was Menasseh ben Israel, a Sephardi living in Amsterdam (known as the Jerusalem of the North), one of the most renowned rabbis of the seventeenth century. He strongly believed that the coming of Messiah depended on the Jews being found at "all ends of the Earth". He constructed a story of the "Ten Lost Tribes of the New World", rendered the Norman term for England "Angleterre" as the "end of earth", and claimed that the "land of Sinn" from Isaiah's prophecy referred to China. At the time, the European reading public was fascinated by the discovery of a Jewish community in the Chinese city of Kaifeng, described in the journals of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (Xun, 2005, p. 68).<sup>6</sup> His discovery sparked a chain reaction in religious circles

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<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century, James Finn (a British diplomat, scholar and member of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews) came across the books about the Kaifeng Jews written by the Jesuits two centuries earlier (including Matteo Ricci's work), which were held at the British Library. He also wanted to save the Jews of Kaifeng, but his Chinese delegates sent there found no Torah scrolls.

and among theologians, including Rabbi ben Israel, who began to examine biblical evidence concerning the signs of the Messianic Era. The followers of Menasseh's vision even managed to secure permission from the English government under Oliver Cromwell for the readmission of the Jews to the country (1656). However, the expedition to China failed to materialise (Xun, 2005, p. 70).

## The Jews and the Chinese:<sup>7</sup> Coexistence on the margins

### The *amah*

Until 1949 "China had one of the largest and most comprehensive markets for the exchange of human beings in the world" (Watson, 1980, p. 223). Since the Jewish refugees in Shanghai who were in a good material position often hired domestic servants, the status of these employees requires a closer look. Considering that after their arrival Arnold Voticky, Anka's husband, set up a jewellery workshop employing a staff of twenty-five, I assume that the financial situation of the family in Shanghai was good, at least until 1943, when they had to move to the newly established Hongkew ghetto. This is also confirmed by the fact that the children received private education. In this case study, I focus on the description of Chinese servants with whom Anka Voticky was in direct or indirect contact. In her memoir, she writes as follows:

I soon learned that the foreigners did not treat the Chinese people very nicely in their own country. The Chinese servant who worked for us would never look at me, even when I spoke to him. At first I thought that it was because he was shy, but I later found out that a Chinese man was not allowed to look a white woman in the eye. There were other restrictions as well – parks were off limits to a Chinese man unless he worked there and a Chinese *amah* – a female domestic – could only enter a park if she had a white child with her. The foreign residents in Shanghai had many ways to show the Chinese who was master. They didn't like the recently arrived refugees from Europe because, as a rule, we treated the Chinese with more respect. (Voticky, 2010, p. 46).

This quotation provides a deconstruction of the stereotype of a Chinese servant, with its typical binary structure, based on the opposition between the male and the female,

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<sup>7</sup> Since both the Jews and the Chinese were considered "worse" by the Japanese, their stories in Shanghai display a similar pattern of oppression.

and between the free and the unfree. It is also a comment on how foreign residents of Shanghai discriminated against the Chinese. It is worth stressing that the sphere of domestic service in China became a female domain only in the 1920s (Constable, 2007, p. 47), when new employment opportunities for Chinese men opened in construction industry and other types of physical work, although they still worked in households as chauffeurs and gardeners (Cheng, 1976, p. 47).

Domestic servants in China were a particularly heterogeneous group, including different types of workers and master-servant relationships. I will only focus on three most commonly used terms. Apart from *amah*, described further below, there were also *muijai*, young female bond servants who were separated from their parents around the age of eight or ten and worked without being paid; they were generally considered the property of the master of the house (Constable, 2007, p. 49). Their only chance of liberation was marriage, usually arranged by their masters, who made additional profit offering them as brides, most often to much older men (Jaschok, 1988, pp. 102–103). Another category were *sohei*, also known as *mahjeh*, sworn spinsters who had more independence than *muijai*. After 1945, there was also a wave of women refugees who migrated, usually to rural areas, in search of employment. This was the case of Anka Voticky's *amah*.

Although slavery was formally abolished under the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), the implementation of these reforms in provincial China was rather ineffective. A unique feature of the Chinese slave market was its concentration on children, particularly those under the age of ten (Watson, 1980, p. 223).

Voticky uses the term *amah*, which does not have an equivalent in English. While some see its origin in the Portuguese word *ama* 'nurse', others argue that "it may be an Anglicised form of the Chinese *ah mah*, *ah* being a common name prefix, and *mah* a term of endearment meaning 'little mother'; another possible source is *nai mah*, literally 'milk mother' in Chinese (Constable, 2007, p. 52; cf. Chan & Kwok, 1990, p. 205). Anka comments on her *amah* only on one occasion, which comes as an important trace of colonial culture, and, most importantly, of the heritage of oppressive practices in Shanghai. When the Voticky family rented a villa in the French Concession, they employed five Chinese servants, although Anka complains that "a house that size would normally need at least ten" (Voticky, 2010, p. 78). She also adds that the servants had their meals in a separate room. The fragment quoted below, which mentions her *amah*, refers to the situation in the ghetto, where the family's living conditions were much worse:

We certainly lacked luxuries, but I had had a maid, an *amah*, since our arrival in Shanghai. When the Americans began bombing Shanghai in July 1945, however, as many Chinese as were able escaped to the countryside. My *amah* was one of them, so after she left I had to take care of all the household duties myself. (Voticky, 2010, p. 78)

Although the use of the phrase "my *amah*" might indicate a certain strategy of appropriation, a suggestion of personal ownership, it is probably more accurately interpreted as a manifestation of familial attachment. Treating domestic servants as family members was a typical pattern in the period. Indeed, back home in Prague Anka used to call her nanny the second mother. Surprisingly, the entire fragment quoted above is not included in the Czech translation. While some middle-class households in China even employed English-speaking butlers or valets, it is porters (most often coolies) who carried their masters in sedan chairs and rickshaw pullers who drove them around that make more vivid examples.

## The rickshaw puller

In the early twentieth century the rickshaw became a symbol of backwardness and certainly stressed the exotic character of Chinese cities. The word "rickshaw" originates from the Japanese term *jinrikisha* 'man-powered vehicle'. In Shanghai, the rickshaw was first known as *dongyangche*, which literally meant 'East-foreign vehicle', or, in other words, 'Japanese vehicle'; the name did not survive very long. As regulated by the Shanghai Municipal Council (1913), all public rickshaws were painted yellow, so that they could be easily distinguished from private ones (Lu, 1999, p. 68).

Rickshaw pullers can be seen in many photographs documenting the life of the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai during the war. One of such examples is the picture taken by Arnold Voticky of Anka's children, Vera and Milan, and niece, Eva, on a family ride (included in the version of her memoir published in English (Voticky, 2010, p. 145)). The rickshaw man in the photograph is most likely one of those working on the Bund, Shanghai's waterfront boulevard, as he wears a European-style flat cap and confidently looks into the camera. It was the only part of the city where pullers were seen wearing such caps and sometimes even smiled at tourists and journalists who took pictures of them (Lu, 1999, p. 74). Voticky's photograph shows that rickshaw pullers were not necessarily poor and unhealthy-looking by definition, as often described. The Shanghai Municipal Council issued a regulation that they must be "decently clad", and some private rickshaw companies provided their pullers with work uniforms.

The economic situation of rickshaw men varied: some of them were able to single-handedly provide for themselves and their families, others had to rely on additional employment, most often in factories, or remained part-time farmers. For upper-middle-class families, owning a rickshaw and employing a private puller was a sign of status, much like an automobile with a driver among the higher class. In spite of their low status, rickshaw men commanded a certain respect: a local saying had it they were people who "know the market and situation" (Lu, 1999, p. 103); they also used pidgin English phrases, including *Mai-da-mu* 'Madame', *Mai-si-dan* 'Master', or *li-ke-xi* 'rickshaw'. The rickshaw business in Shanghai was long dominated by foreigners, who owned companies renting out vehicles. It was almost entirely taken over by the Chinese in the 1930s (Lu, 1999, p. 72).

Voticky first encountered a rickshaw puller when she was stranded during a shopping trip in the International Settlement: streets in the area were flooded by torrential rain and she could not get home. As she describes it in the fragment quoted below, her experience of using this means of transport can be seen as a case of culture shock:

We hadn't been in Shanghai for very long and I didn't know that when it rained there, it really poured. Another peculiarity of the climate was that the more it rained, the hotter it got, and May was the rainy season. Alarmed, I ran back upstairs to call the only person I knew who had a telephone, a Czech woman named Mrs. Riga who was married to a German. She and her husband had lived in Shanghai for many years. She calmed me down and advised me to go back down and call a rickshaw. "The man will wade through the filthy water," she explained. "He will carry you to his rickshaw on his back and take you home." Being carried on the back of a strange man wasn't exactly an inviting thought – the rickshaw drivers were all wet and sweating from the rain and the heat – but we didn't really have any choice. It happened exactly as Mrs. Riga said. The rain had stopped by then, but it took some time for the water to subside. It was the first time we used this means of transportation and it was quite a distance from the International Settlement part of Shanghai to the French Concession. Needless to say, it was quite an experience for us! The man took us to dry land from where we could walk the rest of the way home. (Voticky, 2010, p. 51)

## **The coolie**

Considered the lowest of all Chinese menial occupations and bonded workers, the coolie was subject to particular discrimination. A closer look at the following fragment of Voticky's memoir reveals another story of oppression and dehumanisation of the individual in Shanghai:



I woke up the next morning to strange singing sounds... "Hai how..." When we got dressed and went downstairs, ready to face a new day, I asked Mr. Stembera at the breakfast table about this constant sing-song sound. He explained that somebody was building a house in the neighbourhood and a Chinese "coolie" – the word used for an unskilled male labourer in Asia at the time – had to make this sound while carrying a load so that the supervisor would know where he was so the labourer couldn't steal his load. (Voticky, 2010, p. 46)

I interpret the mention of "strange singing sounds... 'Hai how...'" as a case of animalisation (of language), i.e. attribution of animal features to a human being. The onomatopoeic "hai-how" used by the author resembles a sound uttered by dogs. Also, the similarity between the words 'coolie' and 'collie' (as in 'border collie') makes them near homonyms, which, I believe, is hardly a coincidence. The coolie is bonded to his master by means of dog-like sounds he makes while working. In other words, the sound he utters holds him in colonial bondage. (Analysis of pidgin languages reveals certain analogies to the case in point: their clause structure often resembles the language of orders;<sup>8</sup> the legacy of colonial practices is petrified in the structure of language.) The nature of the sounds/words uttered by the coolie reveals his symbolic bondage: he is deprived of the faculty of speech, a typically human feature, and thus reduced to the status of a sub- or even non-human creature in the hierarchy of beings.

The process of translation of cultural difference is a complex form of signification, or, to be more precise, a dialogic, hence unique, process of articulation of otherness. The quasi-dialogue between Anka and Mr. Stembera quoted above, a rare example of dialogic form in her memoir, provides a description of this difference. In terms of de Saussure's components – the signifier (the sound form *hai how*) and the signified (the layer constructing its meaning) – signification consists in the generation of image in the act of enunciation. Consequently, the act of uttering the onomatopoeic "hai how" unwittingly creates an image of dog's howling and carries a great potential of linguistic violence.<sup>9</sup> The perpetrator, the owner of the coolie, is also suspended beyond the text. This conveys the performative function of translation, since the "public sphere of language and action (...) must become at once the theatre and the screen for the manifestation of the capaci-

<sup>8</sup> I discuss this issue in more detail in the chapter of my MA thesis entitled "Imperializm lingwistyczny" (Linguistic imperialism) (2016, cf. note 4 above).

<sup>9</sup> At this point, it is worth noting the problem of "the violence of the letter", discussed by Homi Bhabha (1994); his observations were inspired by ideas proposed by Derrida in his *Of Grammatology* (1967).

ties of human agency" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 188). This agency, which I take here as a need for responsibility for the word/sign, becomes collective. No one is personally responsible for the fate of the slave. The adoption of collective perspective casts shadow on the object of violence and is another manifestation of "the feint of writing". Voticky's use of quotation marks around "hai how" confirms that the signifier is a hybrid, as it is in fact untranslatable. Since the sounds uttered by the coolie cannot be expressed in the human alphabet, the myth of universality of language is shattered. The coolie is suspended in translation, which confirms an aporia in the transcription of difference.

In European culture, the problem of discrimination against coolies was addressed by George Orwell in his essay attacking Rudyard Kipling, a Nobel Prize winner in literature:<sup>10</sup>

We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are 'enlightened' all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our 'enlightenment', demands that the robbery shall continue. (Orwell, 1946)

Today, we also rob coolies by following the practice of postcolonial theory focused on the issues of racial imagery and colonial administration, while at the same time overlooking some particular forms of slavery which can be interpreted in terms of Foucault's counter-history.

The migration of Asian indentured workers to other parts of the world, including not only Latin America, but also Mauritius, Australia, Fiji and Singapore, makes the coolie a figure of transnational history (Yun, 2008, p. 7). In Cuba, the "wages" of Chinese coolies were three times lower than those received by African slaves (Yun, 2008, p. xx). Lisa Yun observes that in fact they were "mobile slaves": "Coolies were marketed, sold, re-sold, rented-out, lent-out, and named and renamed by owners, traders, and police" (Yun, 2008, p. xx). Moved between plantations, prisons, depots and railways, they were reduced to the status of mere objects or means of transport.

The above observations on Anka Voticky's memoir lead to the conclusion that her narrative constructs the invisible Other, whom I identify to be the figure of the Chinese. Homi Bhabha writes about the type of stereotypical representation which he calls "the feint of writing" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 46), where a character who appears in the text becomes blurred, transparent and invisible. Indeed, in Voticky's *Knocking on Every Door* the Other appears

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Orwell's criticism of Kipling, see Łuszczkiewicz, 2012.

only on the margins of the story, in two paragraphs and in some photographs appended at the end of the book. This amounts to a kind of colonial mimicry, which consists in masking certain elements of culture, since the effect of mimicry is camouflage. Lacan argues that the real world can be seen in what is in brackets. In this way, otherness can be deconstructed looking at the margins. What should not be overlooked in this case is the cultural stereotype of the inscrutable Chinese, a form of representation of discriminated subjects in colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994, p. 111). Voticky reproduces this stereotype and avoids meeting the Other or his/her more profound identification. This amounts to avoiding the question of how to write a story of those who have been deprived of their history.

My point here has been to show how research on the Jewish diaspora in the period of the Holocaust can be reconceptualised and expanded to include global aspects and, most importantly, postcolonial meanings. I am aware of the fragmentary nature of my observations, since one voice, that of Anka Voticky, is not sufficient to make more general conclusions about the discourse on Jews in Shanghai. I treat this article as a critical voice against Central Europe's amnesia about the so-called Shanghai ghetto, which I think is the case. In this way, I follow the path set by David Kranzler, who focused his research not on those who perished, but on those who survived (in the Far East, for example). If this voice is heard, it will become a case of postcolonial intervention and at the same time testify to the causative power of a quasi-literary text.

*Translated by Piotr Styk*

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## **The postcolonial perspective in Jewish diaspora studies: A "Jew-Chinese" in Anka Voticky's memoir**

### **Abstract**

This article attempts to make a connection between reflection on Jewish refugee memory and the postcolonial perspective. The primary source of my considerations is the memoir of Anka Voticky, who survived the Second World War in Shanghai and the Hongkew ghetto. As applied here, the postcolonial theory is used in conjunction with Holocaust studies and

diaspora studies. I discuss mentions of the co-existence of Jews and the Chinese in her memoir as a sign of departure from the tradition of overlooking colonised people (*amah*, rickshaw puller, coolie) during the Second World War.

**Keywords:**

Jewish diaspora in Shanghai; Hongkew ghetto; Anka Voticky; postcolonial studies; *amah*; rickshaw puller; coolie

## **Perspektywa postkolonialna w badaniach nad diasporą żydowską. Żyd-Chińczyk we wspomnieniach Anki Votickiej**

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł ten stanowi próbę refleksji nad pamięcią żydowskiej uchodźczyni odczytaną z perspektywy postkolonialnej. Głównym źródłem rozważań i analizy są wspomnienia Anki Votickiej, czeskiej Żydówki, która II wojnę światową przeżyła w Szanghaju i getcie Hongkew. Jako punkt wyjścia, używam teorii postkolonialnej do pokazania bliskiej relacji tej teorii ze studiami nad Holocaustem i tzw. diaspora studies. Ponadto, pokazuję ślady koegzystencji Żydów i Chińczyków przełamując praktykę niepisania o skolonizowanych – *amah*, rikscharzu i kulisie.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

żydowska diaspora w Szanghaju, getto Hongkew, Anka Voticky, studia postkolonialne, *amah*, rikscharz, kulis

**Note:**

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