

CHINA'S LOST MILLIONS

The Refugee Problem in the East

CVILIAN refugees, fleeing desperately from the Nazi war machine, and reduced to such bare essentials of clothing and personal effects as they can carry with them, have become a sad problem throughout Europe, a problem that has commanded the pity and taxed the resources of organisations all over the world. But in terms of magnitude and extent of human suffering, the refugee problem of China is an even greater one, and an even sadder one. For although China's refugees are counted in millions they have been able to turn only to the people of their own country, already impoverished and weighed down with the burden of Japan's invasion, and to necessarily limited European and American relief.

Miss Barbara J. Collins, who is giving four talks for the NBS on the refugee problem in the East, has recently come to New Zealand after spending eight years in Shanghai, during which time she had a close-up view of many more of the horrors of the Japanese war than she cares to remember. She was in Shanghai during both the '32 fighting and the '37 fighting; she helped run a school for refugee British children in Hong Kong; she was among the many Europeans of all nationalities who strove to do what little they could to lighten the misery of the millions — literally millions — of refugees who poured into Shanghai during the fighting of 1937. "It wasn't pretty," she says, simply.

Cosmopolitan Education

After one of the most cosmopolitan upbringings it is possible for a young Englishwoman to have — she went to school in England and Florence and to university in France at the Sorbonne and Poitiers, and in England at Cambridge — Miss Collins took a secretarial job in Fleet Street, then had the chance of a working trip to China and almost before she knew it had settled down on the staff of a school in Shanghai's International Settlement. Melting pot is an old and hackneyed term, but that is what Shanghai was and still is. Miss Collins taught English and French to pupils of 32 nationalities.

Outbreak of Hostilities

The fighting in 1932 came soon after her arrival. It was nasty, she recalls, but nothing to what happened five years later. It caught her unawares. The summer holidays had come, and she had decided to spend them down the coast in Siam. It was a fortnight's journey away, and when she set off there were

THE first talk on the Far East by Miss Barbara Collins (who is interviewed on this page), will be heard from Station 2YA at 11.0 a.m. on Tuesday, October 7. She is no stranger to the microphone, having sung frequently from broadcasting stations in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Her voice was trained in Paris by Blanche Marchesi, and she specialises in old French and Italian music. She has made one or two brief appearances in New Zealand, and will be giving a recital of pre-seventeenth century French music at the Wellington French Club next year.

only vague rumours of possible hostilities. Arrived at Bangkok, however, she saw from the papers that the worst was about to happen, and she returned by the same ship, receiving news while at sea of the first bombing of Shanghai. The next thing, shipping was suspended, and Miss Collins found herself in Hong Kong.

There was much work to be done, however. Ship after ship was arriving from Shanghai packed with women and children who had been evacuated under fire. Accommodation had to be found for them (eventually even a prison was commandeered by the Refugee Committee) and some attempt had to be made to continue with the education of hundreds of recently arrived children. Miss Collins was kept busy at this work for two months, and then returned to Shanghai.

She travelled on a sand-bagged ship, for the last 20 miles under fire, and she found conditions in Shanghai worse even than reports had made out, what with well over a million and a-half refugees crowding into the city regardless of continued bombing and fighting and epidemics which threatened to break out at any moment.

A City of Refugees

Shanghai was indeed a city of refugees. First of all there was the colony of some 70,000 White Russians who had fled from Russia at the time of the Revolution. Although many had lost their papers as well as their nationality, and were working at starvation wages, some members of the Russian community were still well-to-do, and for the most part looked after their own destitute people. More serious after 1938 was the Jewish problem. Shanghai was one of the very few places in the world where a passport was not necessary and thousands of exiled Jews arrived from Germany and Austria. Few of them had money, and Shanghai was facing blockade and trade depression. To-day only a

small percentage of them are self-supporting; the others are mostly dependent on charity.

Like Watching a Film

It was a strange battle that was raging in Shanghai. Only the International Settlement was respected, and from it you could watch the fighting just as though you were at a cinema screening of a particularly ghastly newsreel. You could see the progress of the fighting street by street; you heard the screeching of shells overhead; you could see the Japanese bombers overhead and the flash of explosions as their bombs crumpled up buildings a few blocks away.

The bombers did their best not to hit the International Settlement. "But if you know anything about the accuracy of Japanese bombing," says Miss Collins, "you'll realise that we weren't very much safer than the rest of the city."

There were critical days ahead. "We European women who remained in Shanghai knew what had happened during the rape of other Chinese cities. We could only hope and pray that the Japanese would respect the settlement's neutrality. At times, I can tell you, we shivered behind our barricades."

Father Jacquinot's Plan

In the meantime what was being done about the refugees? One of the most remarkable attempts to cope with the problem was the plan of a Belgian priest, Father Jacquinot. When it became apparent that the retreating Chinese troops would become entangled in the streets of the Chinese city, and that the many thousands of the civilian population who could not be accommodated in the International Settlement would in all probability be slaughtered with them, Father Jacquinot established a neutral refugee zone in the Chinese city which was respected by both sides.

One condition the Japanese laid down was that combatants must not retreat into the zone, and because of this, during a bloody battle round the perimeter early in November of 1937, one of the most heroic episodes of the war was enacted by a body of Chinese troops. In the face of strong opposition they had retreated as far as Father Jacquinot's zone when it was explained to them that should they retire further they would endanger the lives of thousands of civilians. Without a word of complaint these humble, rough soldiers, stumbled back from the zone to meet certain death.

When war threatened in the west, Father Jacquinot went to Europe in the hope of organising similar neutral zones in beleaguered cities there, but the Nazis completed their work of conquest too swiftly.

Communal Village Life

To Miss Collins it still seems miraculous that any organisation at all ever sprung out of the chaos created by such



MISS BARBARA COLLINS
"... We shivered behind our barricades"

vast numbers of refugees, that some attempt could be made to feed and look after their simplest necessities, that epidemics were checked before they could gain a hold in such a fertile breeding-place. Elsewhere in China the refugee problem was somewhat different, the evacuated Chinese being able to retreat to the interior before the advancing Japanese. The principal worry was to distribute and reorganise them in districts in the far west of China. This was done chiefly through a new system of communal village life organised by the Communists, who in China have done much to improve the social and economic conditions of the oppressed masses. This communal village life, Miss Collins says, is becoming the nucleus of the re-organisation of China's 60,000,000 refugees.

"Secret Agent of Japan"

During the last few years of her stay in Shanghai Miss Collins came in indirect contact with much of the feverish, behind-the-scenes diplomatic activity that added a bizarre Phillips Oppenheim touch to Shanghai life. She is familiar, for instance, with much of the background of Amleto Vespas' sensational book *Secret Agent of Japan*, and vouches for the facts of many of the incidents which Vespa relates. When Italy came into the European war, Miss Collins volunteered to help with Italian broadcasts from the British Embassy radio station, XCDN.

In 1938 Miss Collins travelled through Canada and England lecturing in aid of the China Relief Fund. This year, feeling the need of a change after her strenuous experiences in Shanghai she came to New Zealand to make her home, and is now teaching at Nga Tawa School, Marton.

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