

A JEWISH MUSICIAN WALKS INTO A SHANGHAI NIGHTCLUB...

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our Acclaimed Author series, brought to you by HUC Connect, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, dean of HUC's Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host. Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our Acclaimed Author series and our conversation with Weina Dai Randel. Weina Dai Randel was born in China and she came to the United States at the age of 24 when she began to speak, write, and dream in English. She is the award-winning author of three novels, *The Moon in the Palace* and *the Empress of Bright Moon*, a historical duology about Wu Zetian, China's only female emperor; and *The Last Rose of Shanghai*. Interviews with Weina have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Huffington Post*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books* among others, and among those awards to which I referred, *The Last Rose of Shanghai* was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, in recognition of which we welcome Weina to our Acclaimed Author series. Weina Dai Randel, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Weina Dai Randel: Thank you so much, Josh. It's a pleasure to be here.

JH: Before we get into the love story about our protagonists, Aiyi and Ernest let's talk for a second about the backdrop, though many listeners I suspect may be familiar with the fact of Holocaust refugees in Shanghai. Your story draws upon a deeper history of colonial Shanghai that predates the war. Specifically I'm thinking about its tremendous cultural and demographic diversity. Tell us a bit about this setting to your story.

WR: Before 1940, in 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was a vibrant city for people of many nationalities. There were Russian Jews, they fled from Russia to Shanghai, and they found a place for themselves and they were able to make a living in Shanghai. There were also many British, Americans. They came to Shanghai after the Opium War in 1840s, when Shanghai was forced to open to accept foreigners, but there were also people from other countries, and they all lived in the place what we call International Settlement. It was the area designated for the British and the Americans and the Germans and the Italians. In 1937, the Japanese invaded Shanghai, and their nationalists lost the war, so the Japanese were able to stake a place for

themselves in north Shanghai, which is called Hong Kong district, which is also going to be designated for those Jewish refugees during World War II. Along the Huang He River, you would see the Shanghai International Settlement, in the south is where those Shanghai locals lived called Old City.

WR: And if you drive all the way up to the north, you would reach Hong Kong district, which was where the Japanese lived, and the Japanese had their hospitals there and they had the military bases there. So this is the demographic we're looking at. Because of many people from different countries, Shanghai was absolutely a very vibrant city with many types of cultures, and at that time, jazz was very popular in Shanghai. As we know, during the Great Depression in America, many American musicians, they couldn't find a job in New York or Chicago, so they went to Shanghai to make a living, and among all those musicians, there was a trumpeter called Buck Clayton. His music was absolutely phenomenal, and he played in bars in Shanghai International Settlement. He also played in the clubs in French Concession, and he was able to work together with a local musician called Li Jinhui. He is known as the father of Chinese modern music.

WR: And Li Jinhui used American jazz and infused it with Chinese folk song, and then now we have this Shanghai jazz. It's very interesting, and I love to listen to it. When you hear Shanghai jazz, you will be like, "Oh, there's a little bit jazz in it." But no, it's not exactly jazz because it's so smooth, and it has this swing, has this Chinese folk elements in it. If you watch the movies like Crazy Rich Asian, it's in a Singapore movie, but because of the influence, Shanghai jazz also traveled from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and then to Singapore. And while I was watching the movie, I was like, "Oh yeah, listen to that. That's Shanghai jazz." [laughter]

JH: So there are lots of cultural elements that you weave into your story. And against this really incredible background, bring us now into the foundations of The Last Rose of Shanghai and the love story that takes place against the backdrop, not only of World War II and not only of the Holocaust, but also the Japanese occupation.

WR: The Last Rose of Shanghai, first of all, is a love story that transcends class, race, religion, and even war. It features a wealthy Chinese nightclub owner and a penniless German Jew who fled from Nazi Germany to Shanghai. From the very beginning, I thought Ernest needed to be a musician because Aiyi was very fascinated with jazz. And because of the cultural difference, the love story is going to go through many obstacles, but also because it was set in war, they would make many hard choices. So the way I constructed this story was, you have the story before the war, you will see how they met, how they fall in love, and then how they forced to make the hard choices when war happens, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the Japanese also attacked Shanghai's international settlement, and the whole situation changed. Many foreigners in Shanghai were forced to leave the city because of war, and those people who stayed in Shanghai were all corralled and sent to five camps in Shanghai. Ernest was Jewish but then Germany denounced his citizenship, so he was stateless, so he actually was spared of this, the fate of sending to the camp.

JH: You set up these complicated relationships with all of these different interests and how they cut against different situations, and one of the really interesting tensions that exist is the rivalry, if that's the right word, between two Jews, the establishment, Victor Sassoon, and the artist refugee, Ernest Reismann, who is our protagonist. Tell us a bit about the power of that kind of rivalry in general, two people from the same group, at least partially, and also the specific energy between Victor Sassoon and Ernest Reismann?

WR: Oh, I love this question because I love Sir Victor Sassoon character. Before I started to research that novel, I spend extensive time reading about Sir Victor Sassoon. He was a historical figure, he was a Baghdadi Jew and he was the heir of enormous fortune, he was considered to be the richest man in Asia. It was said that he owned about 18,000 properties in Shanghai and many landmarks today in Shanghai were actually his properties. So yes, in 1940, he was still the richest man. He was very helpful actually in helping those refugees settle in Shanghai, and he let those refugees use the entire floor of the Embankment building, which was very helpful. So he was that man everybody wanted to make connections with. For Ernest though, he arrived at Shanghai, he basically had nothing, he only had 20 reichsmarks, and that was spent on the ocean liner, and he had a sister to support, he was desperate trying to find a job. When he came across Sir Victor Sassoon, he was a very bold man, "Hey, I need a job," or something like that, but of course, it didn't come out very well because Sir Victor Sassoon was also a man with a big temper. He didn't like to get interrupted, he did not like to be approached by somebody he did not know. So there was this kind of tension at the very beginning.

WR: However, the biggest conflict between them was probably Aiyi because Aiyi was also a businessman. She was also the rival of Sir Victor Sassoon. Sir Victor Sassoon was a bachelor, he liked women, he probably liked women way too much, but he also liked money, he liked money very much. He also likes photography, he was a very good photographer, everywhere he went, he took pictures of Shanghai, which was something I discovered when I was researching him. As a coincidence, Ernest also was into photography, which actually I didn't plan at the very beginning, but it somehow just came up. So because of the common interest, the rivalry between Sir Victor Sassoon and Ernest somehow softens, so then a certain friendship forms, but you can tell there's always some kind of tension there because Sir Victor Sassoon was a man of wealth and he considered himself this way. He does not necessarily always wanted to see eye to eye with a refugee. So yeah, you can see this friendship simmering but there's also conflict between them, and Aiyi was a big obstacle between them, as you can see. [chuckle]

JH: For sake of interest, is there a Sassoon photo archive online or no?

WR: Yes. Well, that's so good that you ask. I lived in Dallas for about 20 years, and in Dallas SMU, they actually have a whole entire session that was sponsored by Sir Victor Sassoon's family, and they collect all his photos there, and I actually contacted the museum and asked them permission to use some photos, and they were very kind to give me permission to use those photos. It's astounding. If you wanna know more about Sir Victor Sassoon. I would highly recommend the book called *The Last Kings of Shanghai* by Jonathan Kaufman.

JH: The College Commons Podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union Colleges' online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs: Webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion and redefining allyship; Community Connect, ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning; the master class, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni, and real soon because seats are limited; and of course, the College Commons Podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect, and now back to our program.

JH: You offer a great description in the voice of Aiyi at the top of Chapter 27, she says, "Dancers, they were always trouble, they were the beacon of my business in good times and the shipwreck in bad." [chuckle] I love that description. What did you learn about the intersection of business and art in these two very different realms of life?

WR: Okay, so let's talk about business first. I'm a terrible businessman, I don't know how to do business, but while I was writing Aiyi's story, somehow I was her, and I know it's very difficult to run a business as a woman in 1930's. Aiyi was based on a historical figure called Aiyi Shao, and she was the manager of the nightclub, Bai Lu Men, 100 Joys Nightclub. So I just imagine how difficult it would be for a woman to run this business, and you have to tell men what to do, and you also have to tell your dancers, taxi dancers, what to do. She basically created this career for those girls who can't make a living on themselves, because in the 1930s it was frowned upon for women to go out, find a job, and even though it's for supporting your family, yourself, it was still frowned upon. Also for music and art, I always think the music, the power of music, is extraordinary. Now, I become very emotional when I listen to classical music, or when I go to a concert, I just feel myself as getting really out of myself, and I'm really drawn into music. I'm not a musician myself, but I think in the time of war, the power of music is able to bind us, regardless of race, regardless of class. We all have the same kind of emotion, which can be seen and resonated through music.

JH: The other power that can bind us together, as you stated at the top of the interview, is the power of love, and this is a relationship story, but it depends in particular on Aiyi's self-assertion as a woman, and you just spoke about the need to assert herself as a woman in business, tell us a little bit about how she manages to assert herself as a woman in love.

WR: She was a very confident woman, she was educated, she was able to speak English, and she was raised in a home that has a certain status. So she was very familiar with the Chinese traditions about love for the family and love for the parents, but she also had this desire of making a path for herself because of her infatuations with music, with jazz. When she was young, she realized she wanted to do something with her own life, that probably had something to do with jazz, which was an idea frowned upon by many people around her. So when it comes to love, she didn't really know what she wanted at first, but because she was a woman from that

kinda family, she was betrothed to her cousin when she was basically in her diapers, she didn't have a say about that.

WR: This is the marriage that her parents approved, her mother approved, and it was a good marriage in Chinese sense. The families' wealth are similar, they were all wealthy and they knew each other, so that means it would be a secure marriage, but for love, I don't think it occurred to her, and that was something that was missing, and she felt it, but she was not able to name it. When she met Ernest, she wasn't exactly into Ernest because Ernest was a foreigner and she was Chinese and she was told not to have anything other than business with foreigners, but because of the common interest in jazz, she started to accept Ernest to perform in her club, so in that way she would be able to revive her business. So her intention was not exactly love either, but as they spent more time together and they found out they have more common interest... And it was also the quality in Ernest that makes Aiyi think he was different. He was unique, he was strong, and he was resilient, and these qualities were missing on her fiance's part.

JH: So it sounds like music and love worked together here to break down some of these distances about which we've spoken. I'd like to close, if I may, with a personal question, beyond the realm of *The Last Rose of Shanghai*. I'm thinking of the fact that the Chinese and the Jewish peoples share a very ancient commitment to the unique relationship between homeland and diaspora. You personally have spanned that relationship, having moved from the homeland, China, to diaspora in the United States. Would you be willing to tell us about that journey as you have experienced it?

WR: Wow, I have to say you're the first person asking me this question. I moved from China because of love too, and my husband and I, we met in Shanghai. When I decided that I'm gonna spend the rest of my life with him, the idea was not really welcome by many members in my family. So I basically just eloped with him, and then we went to Las Vegas and had a small dinner together, got married, and none of my side of family members showed up for my wedding, but what is the definition of homeland? I guess I still miss my family in China. I'm very concerned about happenings in China, but I think I consider here, where my husband is, where my family is, where my kids are, my home, and I really don't spend too much time to think about the past tense. Like, this is the choice I've made, I'm here because my love is here, and I should be able to find the peace in myself.

JH: Well, Weina Dai Randel, thank you so much for this wonderful conversation and for letting us learn about your life and the incredible lives of Aiyi and Ernest in *The Last Rose of Shanghai*. It's been a pleasure.

WR: Thank you so much, Josh.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of *The College Commons Podcast*, available wherever you listen to your podcast, and check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at

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