

**Relief activities for Jewish refugees in wartime Japan  
as seen through the JDC archives**

**(Formative period: December 1939-June 1940)**

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The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), founded in 1914, was one of the organizations most actively engaged in supporting activities for the overflowing Jewish refugees from Nazi-dominated Europe. It is today well known that JDC strongly backed two communities of Jews in Japan – Tokyo/Yokohama based German Jews and Kobe based White Russian Jews – in their relief activities for 4,500 to 5,000 people who arrived at Japanese ports via Siberia in 1940-41.

This series of papers is based on a thorough search of digital documents classified under the rubric “Japan” in the rich collection of JDC archives in New York (the present first part covers the formative period of relief activities: December 1939-June 1940).

Through this contemporaneous and first-hand archival information, we can already obtain several constructive elements for the entire history of Jewish refugees in wartime Japan: (1) the role of Ernst Baerwald (1885-1952) as initiator of relief activities in Tokyo; (2) the shift from the Southern Route via Indian Ocean to the Siberian Route gestated, not with or after, but more than a month before Italy's entry into war; (3) the existence of a meticulous ‘guideline’ for the Jews willing to leave Germany and its occupied territories and travel to the Far East, provided by Otto Hirsch (1885-1941)'s Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland; (4) the JDC headquarters in New York harnessing ‘know-how’ previously acquired by Quakers of the “American Friends Service Committee” as for the transfer of refugee groups through Asia; (5) the contact established as early as in June 1940 between JDC and Jewish Community in Kobe (‘Jew Com Kobe’) headed by Samuel Ewanoffsky alias Sam Evans; and (6) the first group transport financed by JDC enabling forty refugees to leave Berlin at the end of June 1940 and board the Japanese SS Kamakura Maru at Yokohama, on July 11th, for San Francisco.