

The Last Kings of Shanghai by Jonathan Kaufman tells the multi-generational story of two rival Jewish dynasties who thrived in twentieth century Shanghai and Hong Kong. This non-fiction chronicle of the Sassoon and Kadoorie families reads like a novel. Remarkably both clans were displaced Baghdadi Jews who eventually settled in Shanghai and by the 1930s each had achieved great wealth and influence there. The Sassoons were loyal English citizens and advisors to royalty. The foundation of their fortune came from working in the opium trade. Victor Sassoon was an astute businessman who became hugely successful in real estate. He was also known as a playboy that entertained lavishly. Brothers Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie were held to a tight rein by their father Elly, but this was not a hinderance. Lawrence and Horace worked together to maintain Elly's standards and greatly increased their fortune. Today the Kadoorie family continues to control China Light and Power and the Peninsula hotel chain that they built. There are many fascinating facets to each family's history, but most revealing is when they worked together to assist Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis. More than 18,000 Jews from Austria and Germany escaped to Shanghai as no visa was needed to enter. Shanghai did not turn the Jews away. The Kadoorie and Sassoon families helped build schools for the refugees and provided personal and financial assistance. Kaufman gives his reader great insight into the choices these powerful families made and how their decisions shaped Shanghai and Hong Kong today.