

A TRUE STORY OF LOVE AND SURVIVAL

THREE BROTHERS IN SHANGHAI

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR NICK ANDRUS

Q: What sparked the idea for the film?

When I first started filming my grandfather Heinz and his brothers Ehud and Walter, it wasn't with a documentary in mind—I was a recent college grad with a DV camera who wanted to preserve their stories. The brothers didn't get together often, because Ehud lived in Israel, but when they did, I'd record their conversations about growing up in Shanghai. It wasn't until many years later, when my grandfather began his battle with dementia, that I began shaping the interviews into a documentary. I thought that people would be interested in the intriguing story of the Shanghai Jews, a lesser-known but important chapter of WWII history.

Q: What background did you bring to the project?

Since graduating from the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California over fifteen years ago, I've worked as a unit production manager and line producer on narrative films, documentaries, music videos, and commercials. My focus has been on helping directors bring their creative vision to life, experiences that left me with an understanding and appreciation of the filmmaking process. I particularly love seeing historical stories translated onto screen. Stepping into the director's role for the documentary felt like both a challenge and a natural evolution. It pushed me outside my comfort zone, but in a way that felt necessary—as the next step in my own creative life.

Q: What pressures did you feel making the film?

I felt like it was a race against time. I had been interviewing the brothers since they were in their late 70s, but by the time I started formally working on the documentary, they were in their early 90s. The clock was ticking, and I realized the importance of getting first-hand, professional quality accounts of their experiences before it was too late.

Q: There are other films about the Shanghai Jewish experience, what makes your film different?

I've watched and enjoyed many of the other Shanghai Jewish films, including *Shanghai Ghetto* (2002), *Above the Drowning Sea* (2017), and *Harbor from the Holocaust* (2020). *Three Brothers in Shanghai* stands out by offering a more intimate perspective. By focusing on one family, and specifically the memories of siblings, it gives you a sense of what it was like to grow up as a refugee child in Shanghai. Hearing the brothers' recollections makes the history personal. It's not just about survival, but about relationships, the long-term impact of parental decisions, and the bond between siblings. Those elements make the story relatable to viewers.



Heinz and Nick
Photo Booth

Q: How did you research the documentary?

I immersed myself in history, reading more than 30 nonfiction books on Jewish Shanghai refugees, many of them first-hand accounts. Last spring, I traveled to Shanghai with my wife and father-in-law, where we retraced the Gewing family's journey. Walking the city's streets helped me imagine my grandfather there with his brothers. We even managed to find the site of the family's store in the French Concession district. Much of old Shanghai—particularly the Hongkew Ghetto where they lived—is gone, but fortunately the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum offers a vivid window into that world. Meeting with the museum's director and staff was a remarkable experience that deepened my appreciation for the Chinese people whose open borders saved the lives of my family and so many others.

Q: How were family members involved in making the film?

I worked on the documentary with my mother, writer and co-producer Jenny Gewing Andrus. Turns out we are great collaborators! Together, we visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where we looked through archival materials from the 1930s and 1940s. My mother's background as a librarian definitely helped. We also approached interviews with the film's experts as a team: I was in front of the camera; mom worked behind the scenes.

My wife Ashley assisted me throughout the process, including when I interviewed my great-uncle Walter in the Bay Area shortly before he passed away. Walter showed us the incredible collection of documents he had saved from his time in Shanghai. Some of these materials ended up in the film, including the family's Austrian passports stamped with a large J for Jew.

Q: Was there something surprising you learned out about your relatives?

The three brothers were each committed in their own way to the Jewish concept of tzedakah (giving back). My grandfather was a big supporter of refugee rights. After he passed away, I found out that for most of his adult life he made annual donations to HIAS, a Jewish organization that helps refugees and displaced people of all faiths and backgrounds. This same organization had helped his family when they arrived in the U.S. from Shanghai in 1948. I know my grandfather would have been pleased by the mention of HIAS in the end credits.

Q: Were there any funny anecdotes that didn't make it into the film?

Walter enjoyed telling the story about his grandfather's false teeth: One afternoon, grandfather left his false teeth sitting on the window sill of the apartment where they all lived in Shanghai. Grandmother was cleaning and accidentally knocked them onto the street below. She ran down three flights of stairs as fast as she could, but the teeth were already gone. Someone had stolen them! I suppose it wasn't funny at the time, but the Gewing brothers had a way of finding humor in every situation.

Q: What are your personal wishes for the film?

I hope my family is proud of the film. Sadly, my grandfather Heinz and great uncle Walter passed away before the film was completed, but both expressed excitement about the project in its early stages. The only surviving member of the trio, my great-uncle Ehud, has seen the film and told me he was very moved by it, which meant a lot. I am now a father myself, and I look forward to watching the film with my son when he is older, so he can see who his great grandfather was and where he came from.

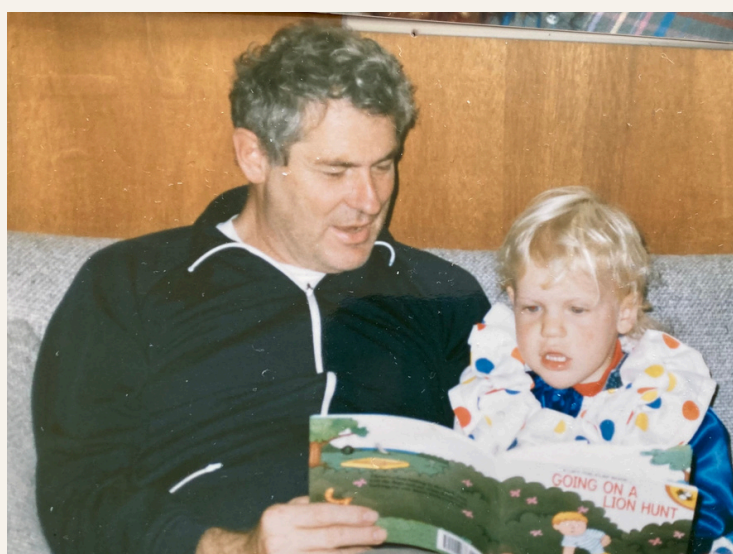
Q: What do you hope audiences will take away from the film?

In the film, Walter remembers trying to outrun bullies after school in Austria, and being told by a policeman not to enter his father's shop because it was owned by a Jew. Anti-semitism, which forced the Gewing family to flee Europe, is again on the rise.

The brothers' experiences are rooted in a specific time and place, but parts of their story feel universal. There are more displaced individuals worldwide now than at any other point in history—people who are desperately seeking safety as borders close and hostility towards refugees grows. Families still face the most difficult, heartbreaking choices.

I hope audiences leave the film not only with a deeper understanding of Jewish history, but also feel moved to stand up and make a difference in the lives of refugees.

Despite a difficult start to life, the Gewing brothers went on to lead long, fulfilling lives, sustained by their connection to one another and to their own families and communities. I hope viewers feel uplifted by that outcome. Most of all, I hope they enjoy meeting the Gewing brothers.



Heinz and baby Nick



Heinz and Nick with camera



Nick and baby Arthur



Jenny and Nick