

**FROM COSMOPOLITAN HARBIN TO MULTICULTURAL  
AUSTRALIA: MY HARBIN JOURNEY**

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**FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF FORMER FOREIGN  
RESIDENTS OF HARBIN,  
HOTEL MODERN HARBIN  
26 JUNE 2017**

I congratulate the Harbin Municipal Government for organising this first World Conference of Former Foreign Harbiners on the theme “Looking Back to History, Working Together to Create a Strong Future” and celebrating the city’s cosmopolitan history.

Thank you for bringing us all together and offering such warm and generous hospitality – as only Harbiners know how. Thank you for inviting me to make this address.

My family has a long history in this city. I was born in Harbin in 1954 into a family of mixed Russian, Jewish and Tartar heritage, whose roots lay in the former Russian empire. Four generations of my family lived here over 50 turbulent years from the first decade of the 20th century until we migrated to Australia in 1959.

I first returned to Harbin with my parents in 2000. They were born in Harbin, within a month of each other in 1929 – but worlds apart. Their families were of different religions, cultures, economic means and political outlook. They arrived in the city at different times and in different circumstances. What made their union possible was the sort of city Harbin was, for which I am forever grateful.

My fascination with the city of my birth has brought me back here seven times. I have written a history-memoir about my family’s life here and was delighted to have it published in Chinese. Today, I would like to draw on my family’s story to illuminate aspects of Harbin’s cosmopolitan history<sup>1</sup> and the influence it had on the life that we and other Harbiners built in Australia.

From the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) drew people of many different nationalities, cultures, religions and languages<sup>2</sup> to Harbin and other settlements along its route. They came seeking opportunity and refuge. Apart from Chinese and Russians, there were Jews, Poles, Tatars, Latvians, Lithuanians, Karaites and other minorities from the former Russian empire.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘cosmopolitan’ deliberately – because of the transformative and interactive quality it connotes. These people transformed the city and in turn, their lives and interactions here, through periods of significant political turbulence, fundamentally transformed them – in ways that they carried with them to further destinations.

<sup>2</sup> The 1913 census identified some 55 nationalities, including Russians and Chinese, as well as Jews, Poles, Japanese, Germans, Tatars, Latvians, Georgians, Estonians, Lithuanians and Armenians, speaking 45 languages, the most common being Russian, Chinese, German, Polish and Yiddish.

## *Mother's family – Jews from Byelorussia*

On my mother Inna's side, the Zaretsky and Onikul families were early Jewish settlers in Harbin and Hailar. They came from the Jewish villages of Byelorussia to a land of opportunity because here the discriminatory laws of Tsarist Russia, which confined Jews to the Pale of Settlement, excluded them from certain professions and restricted their numbers in schools, did not apply<sup>3</sup>. Most importantly, there were no pogroms and little overt anti-Semitism, at least until the late 1920s. Families would arrive in chain migration, with one member setting forth to test opportunities in the distant new homeland, and others following.

Jews played an early role in developing natural resources, freight based export industries and commerce in Harbin and the smaller railway towns of Hailar, Manchuria (Manzhouli), Mukden and Tsitsihar. In 1903 they were the earliest minority community officially recognised by the CER Administration in Harbin. They established their own community institutions (schools, synagogue, a burial society and communal dining room and later a hospital and home for the elderly) but also played an active role in the city's commercial, cultural and public life and participated actively in municipal affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The first of the Zaretsky family to arrive in Harbin was my grandfather's older brother Ruvim. He came in 1906 with his brother-in-law, Samuel Zalmanov and set up the family meat and livestock business. My grandfather, Morduh (Matvei) Abramovich Zaretsky, joined them in 1912 and in the mid 1920s, established a major livestock trading partnership, which operated in Hailar and Harbin.

My maternal grandmother Gita's Onikul's family, took a different path, moving through Harbin to Hailar in 1909. There, her father ran a small dairy business and was an agent for Singer sewing machines, providing his children with a good education, including in Harbin.

After my grandparents married in 1926, grandfather Zaretsky built a two-storey apartment block at 155 Jingwei Jie (Diagonalnaya

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Abraham Kaufman, the former leader of the Harbin Jewish community, described how the CER Chief Administrator, General Horvath, thwarted attempts to impose restrictions on the Jews by the Governor-general of the Far Eastern Province, Gondatti, (Kaufman, AI. 2001, 'Lecture of 17 February 1962', *Bulletin of Igud Yotzei Sin*, vol. 336, p. 35. p. 34).

<sup>4</sup> In 1909, Jews made up 12 of the 40 members on the city council (Kaufman, *ibid*). They continued as an organised community until 1964.

Ulitsa) in Daoli, where our family lived until we left. From 1951 to 1959, he worked as a Director of the Jewish Bank.

### *Father's family – Orthodox Russian and Muslim Tatar*

My father Alec's parents both arrived in Harbin in the 1920s. They were among the masses of refugees crossing the border from Siberia with the retreating White Armies in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil war.

The family of my grandmother, Antonina Artemyevna (Tonya) Shelomanova, were wealthy Russian farmers from Samara on the Volga. But by the time they arrived in Harbin in 1922, they had to scrape together a living. At seventeen, Tonya married my grandfather, Muhamedjian Mustafin, a Tatar Muslim from Kazan, who arrived in Harbin in 1920 with the White Army. In Harbin he worked as an electrician and maintenance man, while Tonya qualified as a nurse and worked at the Kazem Bek hospital.

Notwithstanding their cross-cultural marriage, Tonya and Muhamedjian maintained their respective cultural and religious practices. My grandmother worshiped regularly at St Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral that once stood at the centre of Harbin and the Blagoveshenskaya Church near the Songhua River in Daoli, where the Gloria Plaza Hotel now stands.

My Tatar grandfather attended the Tatar mosque on Tongjiang Jie (Artillereyskaya Ulitsa) in Daoli on major celebrations and was involved in the Tatar community organisation, serving on its board in the late 1930s. The Harbin Tatar community was the first Tatar community in the Far East and became especially significant after the Soviet regime banned religion.<sup>5</sup>

At its peak in the mid 1920s, the Russian community numbered about 120,000 people, with another 35,000 living in the smaller towns along the railway's route<sup>6</sup>. They enjoyed a rich Russian cultural life, offset by a unique cosmopolitan flavour and the interplay of ethnic, religious and cultural communities. By this time the Jewish community in Harbin had grown to around 13,000, with around 2,000 in other

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<sup>5</sup> Usmanova, L. 2007, *The Turk-Tatar Diaspora in Northeast Asia*, Tokyo, p.117 and p.119.

<sup>6</sup> Stephan JJ, 1978, *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile 1925-45*, Hamish Hamilton, London. p. 56. According to Bakich, O. 2000, 'Émigré identity: the case of Harbin', *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 99, no. 1 (Winter), pp. 51-73. p. 56), between 100,000 and 200,000 Russian émigrés flooded into Harbin during this period, though many moved on to other cities in China and beyond.

towns. The number of Tatars in Daoli was around 1500<sup>7</sup>. People lived side by side in relative harmony, mixed socially and did business with each other. In Harbin, Jews and Tatars could be Russians, free to participate fully in either or both cultures.

It was, however, a predominantly “Russian world”, largely disengaged from the China around them. Few studied the Chinese language seriously or delved into the culture. Few ventured into the adjacent district of Daowai (Fujiadian), where most of Harbin’s 300,000 Chinese then lived.

### *Manchukuo*

The Japanese occupation, establishment of Manchukuo in 1932, and the Soviet sale of the Chinese Eastern Railway to Japan in 1935, turned this “Russian world” upside down.

The economy declines and a climate of intimidation, violence and anti-Semitism was unleashed. This polarised the community and drove thousands to leave Harbin. Some headed for the international settlements of Shanghai, Tientsin and beyond<sup>8</sup>. They were the lucky ones. For those who returned to the Soviet Union, at the height of Stalin’s purges, their Harbin identity often became a death sentence, as was the case for several of the Onikul family<sup>9</sup>.

For the Zaretskys, who stayed in Harbin through the thirteen years of Japanese occupation, life was especially harrowing. There were two groups of Harbiners who did not fare well under Manchukuo – Soviet citizens and Jews. And the Zaretskys were both<sup>10</sup>.

People who for years had lived side by side, united by their origins in the Russian empire, suddenly became identified by the characteristics which divided them: ‘White émigré’ or ‘Soviet’, ‘Orthodox Christian’ or ‘Jew’.

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<sup>7</sup> According to sources cited by Usmanova, p. 111

<sup>8</sup> By the end of the 1930s, the Russian population of Harbin had dropped to around 30,000. This figure is based on Japanese data given in ‘The White Russians of Manchukuo’ 1937, 1937, *Contemporary Manchuria* vol. 1, no. 3; Clausen, S. & Thøgersen, S. (eds) 1995, *The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography in Harbin*, M. E. Sharpe, New York. p.116). By 1935, Harbin’s Jewish community had declined from 13,000 in 1931 to only 5,000, Bresler, B. 2000, ‘Harbin’s Jewish community 1898-1958: politics, prosperity and adversity’, in J. Goldstein (ed.), *The Jews Of China Volume 2*, vol. 2, M. E. Sharpe, New York, pp. 200-215, p. 209.

<sup>9</sup> Moustafine, M. 2002, *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files*, Random House, Sydney.

<sup>10</sup> My grandfather took Soviet identity papers after the USSR was established in 1920 because he believed that being stateless was too risky in the unstable political environment in which they lived.

The Zaretsky meat business was seized by the Japanese and my mother was excluded from school and even from associating with children of white émigrés. Meanwhile my father, whose family were stateless ‘whites’, was forced to study Japanese at school and spent his vacations digging potatoes to feed Japanese soldiers.

When the Soviet Red Army arrived in Harbin in August 1945 to “liberate” them from the Japanese, most Harbiners, regardless of their political tags, welcomed them with flowers and euphoria. But soon thousands of innocent émigrés were rounded up and deported to prison camps in the USSR, along with Japanese collaborators<sup>11</sup>. This included representatives of Harbin’s various communal and social organisations, who had dealt with the Japanese during the war on behalf of their communities<sup>12</sup>.

### *Post war*

With the defeat of fascism in 1945, foreign Harbiners once more sought to regain those precious things the War had denied them – education, a peaceful community, security and prosperity. Some Jews departed for the newly established state of Israel, while Poles return to a liberated Poland. Increasingly the awareness of the new political reality of China took hold, especially after 1949.

When the Harbin Polytechnical Institute (HPI) – the forerunner of the Harbin Institute of Technology – reopened its doors to Russians<sup>13</sup> after the war, young people like my parents flocked there. Most studied Engineering, which was then still taught in Russian. My parents joined the new Oriental and Economic Studies Faculty and graduated in the early 1950s, fluent in Mandarin. They worked at the Sugar Refineries Construction Bureau as technical translators and interpreters between Chinese officials and visiting East European advisers. It seems that, even in the late 1940s, they envisaged their future life to be in China, serving as a bridge between communities that were coming ever closer together.

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<sup>11</sup> Bresler 2000, p. 211.

<sup>12</sup> This included Jewish community leader Dr Abraham Kaufman. (Kaufman, A. 1973, *Lagernyi Vrach (Camp Doctor)*, Am Oved, Tel Aviv; Kaufman, T. 2006, *The Jews of Harbin Live on in My Heart*, Association of Former Jewish Residents of China in Israel Tel Aviv, pp. 131-159.

<sup>13</sup> The Institute was closed to Russians by the Japanese in 1937.

## *Australia*

In the 1950s and early 1960s many thousands of Russians from Harbin and other railway towns migrated to Australia,<sup>14</sup> joining other Russians who had arrived earlier from Shanghai and Tientsin. Most settled in Sydney, though some also in Melbourne and Brisbane.

They adapted relatively easily to their new life. Most were well educated, entrepreneurial and often multilingual. They succeeded in business and worked in technical professions. Graduates of HPI, including my father, found ready employment as engineers and draughtsmen in various departments of the Australian public service. Musicians from Harbin's famous music school played in the Sydney Symphony and Opera orchestras and joined the Sydney conservatorium.

The Australia these Russians arrived in was predominantly mono-cultural and British. The White Australia policy, implemented in 1901 to exclude Asians, was still in force until 1968. It was a far cry from the cosmopolitan cities in China from which these people had come. Having experienced life in vibrant Russian diaspora communities, the former Harbiners established community institutions, Orthodox churches and Saturday language schools to ensure their children retained Russian language and culture. At the same time they engaged fully as new Australians, contributing to the development of Australia's multicultural society.

The graduates of HPI maintained their close social links. In 1969 they formed an alumni association and published seventeen editions of an annual journal – 'Polytechnik' – which recorded the histories of Russian institutions and life in Harbin. Two years ago, I was delighted to introduce some visiting academics from HIT to some of the veteran Russian alumni living in our city. In an exciting development, HIT has now opened an Australian Studies Centre, with which I am privileged to be associated.

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs, 2005, *A New Life for Refugees: Australia's Humanitarian Program*, Canberra, p.1, some 14,000 people arrived under the special humanitarian program for White Russians from China between 1947 and 1985. This program mainly included those from Harbin and other former CER towns, as well as Xinjiang. Russians from Shanghai were covered by other programs for Displaced Persons.

## *Returning to Harbin*

Over the past 20 years, former Harbiners and their descendants have started visiting Harbin to reconnect with their history, visit the landmarks of their lives and honour ancestors, who made this city their home. I first did this with my parents in 2000.

Rationally, my parents knew that in the forty turbulent years since they left Harbin, the city had withstood the ravages of the Cultural Revolution and had absorbed a huge influx in population. Still, it came as a shock to find no trace of our former house, the Orthodox churches where my grandmother prayed and a fun park on the site of the old cemetery where members of my father's family and friends were buried.

Still, my parents were heartened to find their former schools were teaching new generations of children and St Sophia functioning as an architectural museum. We were excited to locate the graves of my great-grandparents and other relatives at the Jewish cemetery in Huangshan. We stayed at the Hotel Modern, admired the familiar facades of Zhongyang Street and walked across the iconic Jihong Bridge between Daoli and Nangan, as before. At that time, other sites appeared to be in limbo. I photographed my parents beside piles of rubble at the famous entrance of the old HPI institute building, at the Tatar mosque and the boarded up synagogues in Daoli – lest they too would disappear.

But on each subsequent visit to Harbin, I was pleased to find that, amid the city's rapid growth, efforts were being made to preserve some of Harbin's history. The Jewish and Russian cemeteries at Huangshan saw gradual improvements. The two synagogues were restored as exhibition and concert halls. On my last visit in 2015 I discovered that the Polytechnical Institute building had become the HIT Museum and my father's former school next to the Old Synagogue concert hall was now the Glazunov music school. It is fitting too that, with Harbin's designation as a 'UNESCO city of music', the contribution of the many Russian musicians and artists to the city's musical heritage is now openly acknowledged.

Yet the former Tatar mosque, which lies in the same precinct on Tongjiang Jie and was renovated around 2005, still stands unused and has again fallen into disrepair. At a time when the city is celebrating its multicultural diversity, it would be the perfect venue for



a museum commemorating the Tatar community of Harbin, which was the first Tatar community in the Far East.<sup>15</sup>

The city of Harbin possesses a unique and precious architectural heritage and culture that must be preserved. This applies not only to places of worship and cultural relics, but other buildings and streetscapes in all parts of the city, including Daowai. Tearing down old structures to replace them with imitations will undermine the city's authenticity and prove to be a source of regret to future generations.

Another precious historical resource lies in the archival records of former Harbin residents and the various communities who lived here, their old books and Russian and community newspapers. In researching my books – *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files (Harbin Dang'an)* – I had the good fortune to access such records in Russia and many places in the world, including some here in Harbin. But sadly, the community records still remain closed.

I strongly urge the Harbin and provincial authorities to make these archival records accessible to qualified scholars and descendants – at least in digitised form – while those who have interest in or knowledge about them are still alive to inform our understanding of our shared history. Without such participation, the files in the archives can never recover their meaning.

In conclusion, I thank the Harbin Municipal Government for organising this Conference, for bringing us all together to celebrate the city's cosmopolitan history, to build understanding and opportunities for collaboration in the global future.

I left Harbin too young to have a sense of nostalgia for the city and do not yearn for some lost 'Russian world' on Chinese soil. As a historian, I have a curiosity and interest in the city's past, and the conditions that allowed this city to flourish through the shared input of people from so many different origins. But above all else, I treasure the growing and unexpected web of new relationships I have formed with Chinese friends, the experiences we have shared and the opportunities we now have to enhance these further.

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<sup>15</sup> Usmanova, L. p.117 and p.119.