

The Ties that Bind: Jews, Chinese and Harbin's Cosmopolitan History

Mara Moustafine

author of

Secrets & Spies: The Harbin Files
and 哈尔滨档案



<http://maramoustafine.com>

SPEECH AT JEWISH BOARD OF DEPUTIES EVENT WITH CHINESE COMMUNITY ON 28 AUGUST 2018

I am delighted to be here tonight at this event to celebrate Jewish – Chinese friendship.

Jews have had a long association with China and Chinese people.

The earliest Jewish traders are reported to have made their way to China via the overland Silk Road as far back as back as the 8th century and a small Jewish community flourished in Kaifeng between the 10th and 17th centuries.

Many of you have probably heard of the Sasoons and Kadooris, Baghdadi Jews, who became major entrepreneurs in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 19th century. You would also be familiar with the story of Jewish refugees, who found refuge from Nazi persecution in World War II in Shanghai, which became known as the Port of Last Resort.

This evening I want to talk about a story that is less well known – about Jews in the city of Harbin in north China. You've probably heard about Harbin because of its famous Ice and Snow Festival. You may soon hear more about it for its new opera house on the Songhua River, whose architectural design may challenge the iconic status of ours on Sydney Harbour.

But did you know that Harbin was once home to the largest settled Jewish community in China?

Most of them came from the former Tsarist empire – from Russia, Byelorussia, the Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland. During WWII, refugees from Germany and Austria also found refuge there.

Many of their descendants later came to Australia – some directly from Harbin, others via Shanghai and Tianjin. It's great to see some of you here tonight.

Four generations of my family lived in Harbin over 50 turbulent years until we migrated to Australia in 1959. I was born there, as were my parents. We first returned there together in May 2000. Since then, I have visited Harbin 8 times. I have researched the history of my family's life there – on the streets and in the archives, participated in conferences and made new friends. Over the years I have observed the city transform from a sleepy town to a vibrant metropolis.

What has been particularly striking in this has been the city's embrace of its cosmopolitan history, including that of its former Jewish residents.

So this is what I'd like to talk to you about tonight.

So how did this all come about?

It all started in 1896 when the Qing emperor granted Tsarist Russia a concession to build and operate a railway across Dongbei (Manchuria) linking the Trans-Siberian to Vladivostok. Russia also got extraterritorial rights in the five mile zone along its route. It was a deal to resist the growing ambition of the Japanese empire.

Known as the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), it was Chinese in name only. Harbin was established in 1898 as the headquarters of the CER and became the de facto capital of the Russian colony in Manchuria. It grew into a Russian city reminiscent of Moscow or St Petersburg. Russian was spoken on the streets and became the language of administration, education and commerce.

The CER drew tens of thousands of people from the far reaches of the Tsarist Empire to Harbin and other settlements along the railway's route. Engineers and labourers came to build the railway; clerks, guards and civil servants to work in its administration. Merchants and traders came to develop natural resources and provide goods and services. Large numbers of Chinese construction labourers also came from southern China, mainly Shandong province.

From its early days, "Russian" Harbin was a community of diverse cultures and ethnicities, united by their origins in the Russian empire. Keen to attract entrepreneurs and private investors to drive the economic development of Manchuria the Russian authorities deliberately created an environment of tolerance and equal opportunity, actively encouraging minorities to come and

live there – including Jews, Poles, Tatars, Lithuanians, Georgians, Armenians and Ukrainians¹. Harbin offered them a Russian-speaking cultural, social and economic world, without the official boundaries and prejudices of the Russian state.

The second major influx of Russians into Harbin came in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and Civil war. Thousands of refugees flooded across the border with the retreating White Armies, including people from all walks of life and diverse nationalities. Later, Stalin's forced collectivisation campaign (1928-31) drove more refugees to make the dangerous journey across the Amur River from Siberia.²

Jews in Harbin

Jews were among the earliest settlers in Harbin and in 1903 became the first minority community formally recognised by the CER Administration.

Why did they come?

To escape, restrictions, poverty and pogroms and build a new life. In Harbin and the CER zone the discriminatory laws of Tsarist Russia, which confined Jews to live in the Pale of Settlement, excluded them from certain professions and restricted their numbers in schools³ did not operate, and there was little overt anti-Semitism at least until the late 1920s.

Families often arrived in chain migration, with one family member sent to test opportunities in the new homeland, and others following. So it was with the families of my maternal grandparents, who arrived in China from shtetls in Byelorussia in the first decade of the 20th century.

Jews played an early role in developing natural resources (lumber, coal, flour mills, distillery, sugar refining, meat & livestock), freight based export industries (grain, soya bean oil, wool, skins, furs) and commerce (hotels, restaurants, music stores, jewellers, pharmacies). My grandfather's family – the Zaretskys established a successful meat and livestock business in Harbin, while my grandmother's family – the Onikuls - settled in Hailar, running a small dairy business.

Jews founded their own community institutions – two synagogues, schools, a burial society, communal dining room, a library and later a hospital and home for the elderly, two Jewish banks, a newspaper, cultural groups and Zionist

¹ 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.

² In 1926 the border was closed on the Soviet side and in 1932 on the Chinese side by the occupying Japanese. (Kaufman 2006, p. 30)

³ 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).

organisations. At the same time, they participated actively in municipal affairs⁴ and played an active role in the city's commercial, cultural and public life.

At its peak in the early 1930s, the Russian population of Harbin had reached 120,000 with another 35,000 in smaller towns along the railway route. There were some 13,000 Jews in Harbin, with another 2,000 in smaller CER towns. People lived side by side in relative harmony, mixed socially and did business with each other. Harbin was a place where "Jews 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. They rarely ventured into the adjacent district of Daowai (Fujiadian), where most of Harbin's 300,000 Chinese then lived.

Exodus

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 declined in the face of business takeovers by the Japanese and a climate of intimidation, violence and anti-Semitism was unleashed. Thugs linked to the Russian Fascist Party engaged in a campaign of kidnappings, extortion and murder against wealthy businessmen, mainly Jews, masterminded by the Japanese military police. The most sensational was the kidnap and brutal murder in 1933 of Jewish pianist Simon Kaspé, whose father owned Harbin's Hotel Modern.

All of this polarised the community and drove thousands to leave Harbin. Some headed for the international settlements of Shanghai and Tianjin⁵. Others went to the Soviet Union where, at the height of Stalin's purges in 1937, they were rounded up as Japanese spies, as was the case for my grandmother's family⁶.

By the mid 1930s, the number of Jews had declined to 5,000. The exodus of Jews and Russians continued in the post-war years and in the wake of the 1949 Chinese Communist revolution. They left for the USSR, Israel, and other countries including Australia.

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ Moustafine, M. 2002, *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files*, Random House, Sydney.

By the late 1950s, there were just 200 Jews left among 1,000-2,000 Russians. Harbin's Jewish community organisation (HEDO) continued to function until 1962, helping Jews to emigrate and providing assistance to the needy. When the Chinese government decided to move Harbin's multidenominational cemetery from the centre of the city to the outskirts at Huangshan in 1958, it played a critical role in moving the Jewish graves (900 of 1800).

Sadly, when Harbin's former foreign residents departed, so too did the memory of their presence in the city. During the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976), Red Guards tried to erase all traces of these "foreign devils", blowing up St Nicholas Cathedral, Harbin's holiest Russian Orthodox shrine and other churches, desecrating both Christian and Jewish tombstones and other landmarks.

Recovering memory

Things slowly started to change in the late 1990s. By this time, China's ideological rival, the USSR had collapsed (1991) and diplomatic relations between China and Israel had been established (1992).

Although Harbin's centenary in 1998 was not officially celebrated, the steps taken by the Harbin authorities around this time seemed to signal some recognition of the city's cosmopolitan past. Cast mainly in terms of preserving the city's architectural heritage, they included the reopening of St Sophia Cathedral as the Harbin Architectural Museum, the transformation of Zhongyang (Kitayskaya) Street in Daoli district, where most Jews once lived, into a pedestrian mall and the preservation of many buildings in the area, among them Jewish community buildings. The authorities also began restoration of the Jewish cemetery, for which former Jewish residents had long been calling through their association, *Igud Yotzei Sin*.

When I visited Harbin for the first time with my parents in 2000, we were distressed that the apartment block built by my grandfather in 1932 in central Harbin had been replaced by an ugly new bank building. But we found the graves of my great-grandparents, the Zaretskys and other relatives at the Jewish cemetery in Huangshan. At that time, the former Main synagogue was still a guesthouse for railway factory workers, while the New synagogue was functioning as a club for the Public Security Bureau.

But on each subsequent visit, I found that, amid the city's rapid growth, concerted efforts were being made to preserve the memory of Jewish life in Harbin. Chinese scholars at various universities started working on the theme. The Jewish Research Centre, established at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences in 2002, produced several books and in 2004 hosted the first International Seminar on Jews in Harbin, which quite a few people from Australia attended.

Soon afterwards, work began on restoring Harbin's two synagogues, although it was not immediately clear to what purpose. The former New Synagogue became an exhibition hall, and since 2006 houses a permanent exhibit on the history of

Harbin Jews on several of its floors. As for the former Main synagogue, the building restored in keeping with its original specifications, was in 2014 reopened as a concert hall for chamber music. The reconstructed building has now been dedicated to the memory of Abraham Kaufman, long-time president of the Harbin Jewish community, and his son Teddy, who led the Israel-China Friendship Association and the Association of Former Residents of China (Igud) until his death in 2012.

The building adjacent to the Main Synagogue, originally built as a Jewish school and home to the Glazunov Conservatory of Music in the 1920s, has now reopened again as a music school in his name. It is fitting that, with Harbin's designation as a 'UNESCO city of music', the contribution of the many Russian and Jewish musicians and artists to the city's musical heritage is now being openly acknowledged.

Significantly, in 2017, the Harbin municipal government held a World Conference of Former Foreign Harbiners to celebrate the city's cosmopolitan history, with participants from all around the world, including Russia, Israel, the US, Canada and Australia.

Why has this happened?

As well as the intrinsic historical and cultural value, the Harbin authorities have been quite open that the aim is to attract tourists and investors. It is also part of an effort to leverage Harbin's cosmopolitan history in support of President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road' foreign policy initiative.

But what has struck me over almost two decades of engagement with Harbin has been the genuine interest shown by Chinese people in our shared history.

On my very first visit in 2000, I had the good fortune to meet an extraordinary journalist, Zeng Yizhi, who had been writing feature articles in the *Heilongjiang Daily*, later published as a book, about Harbin's former residents and was a lifelong campaigner for the preservation of historic sites and buildings. She remained my friend and Harbin sister until her untimely death two years ago.

A few years after my book was published in English, I was pleasantly surprised to receive an email from Li Yao, a Beijing professor specializing in the translation of Australian literature into Chinese, to say he wished to translate my book. He has become my Chinese older brother and met my parents several times when visiting Australia.

Through his wonderful translation, first published in 2008, I was able to bring my family's story back to China and as a result, made many new Chinese friends, who have become part of my story in this city.

There is one other person I want to mention. Among the 300 people who attended my first Harbin book launch in 2009, was Liang, the daughter of the official whose family moved into our old apartment. She said she remembered seeing me on the day we left Harbin and shared with me stories about our house.

Later she took me to see some of our old furniture and gave me a couple of old keys to the house.

I am also very proud that the Harbin Institute of Technology, the successor to the institute from which my parents graduated in Oriental Studies, has invited me as a guest professor put my English language book is on the reading list for the graduate course in the recently established Australian Studies Centre.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight this photo of the grave of my great-grandparents, Abram and Rachel Zaretsky at the Jewish cemetery in Harbin. On a visit in 2015, I had arranged for it to be repaired and mentioned to some friends my concern about the completion of the work and ongoing maintenance. Their immediate response was to declare that my family would be their family and that they would check on the work and visit my family's graves when they attended their own.

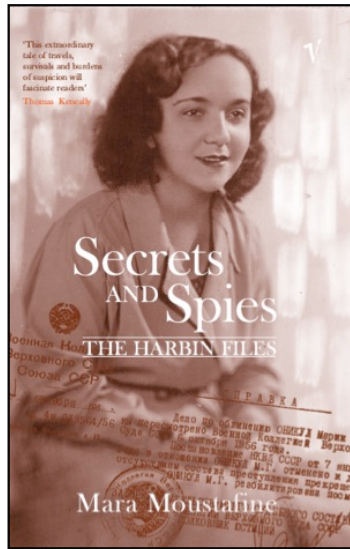


Several months later, they emailed me this photograph and a message that read:

“On the eve of the ‘Qing Ming’ festival commemorating the deceased... we paid tribute to your relatives buried in the Harbin Jewish cemetery. In accordance with Jewish tradition, we left three stones, and in the Chinese tradition, three incense sticks in a censer filled with rice, cigarettes, vodka, cakes and mineral water. In eternal memory of the departed!”

For me, the most important aspect of my reengagement with Harbin is these new friendships with Chinese people.

These are the ties that bind.



For more information: <http://maramoustafine.com>

BUY Chinese edition online at <https://item.jd.com/12341419.html>