

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**ON THE BANKS OF THE SONGHUA RIVER: FOUND IN TRANSLATION**

My two visits to Harbin in 2000 are the first of many over the next two decades. Drawn back initially by my curiosity about my family's past there, I find myself enmeshed in efforts by the city's authorities to acknowledge its cosmopolitan past and engage with its former residents.

In August 2004 I am invited to participate in the 'First International Seminar on the History and Culture of Harbin Jews' organised jointly by the Jewish Research Centre of the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences and *Igud Yotzei Sin* (the Association of former residents of China). Asked to deliver an 'academic thesis' at the meeting, I choose the obvious one – my family's life in Harbin over fifty turbulent years. Drawing on my research for this book, it is my chance to bring home our family's story.

The transformation of Harbin in the four years since I was there last is striking. Everything is faster, bigger, brighter and more modern – at least on the outside. The elegant lobby of the five-star Shangri-La Hotel where the conference takes place could be anywhere in Asia. But only Harbin could attract the particular crowd milling around the registration table. Former Jewish *Harbintsy* have come from around the world – from Israel, Canada, the United States, Russia and Australia. Some have children and grandchildren in tow. There are also some academics, journalists and filmmakers.

Keen to catch up with my Harbin friends, I have deliberately arrived a few days ahead of the seminar. When I call Valya Han, the Russified Korean woman I befriended on my previous visits, she invites me to dinner at Kolya Zaika's place.

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‘But I don’t know him’, I protest. ‘Of course, you do. You met him with me at the Russian cemetery when you first came with your parents’, she tells me. ‘He’s invited some people for dinner and asked me to invite you too. Here we Russians are all family.’

Kolya, another Russian *Harbinets* from Sydney, now spends part of the year in Harbin, living in the former house of his grandfather. My taxi arrives there in the midst of the late afternoon downpour, which so often causes floods and severe traffic congestion in the narrow streets of the old Daoli district in August. Stepping inside, I am overwhelmed by the warmth and noisy chatter of a quintessentially Russian house.

Kolya greets me like a long-lost friend and introduces me to his guests, sitting around the dining room table laden with Chinese delicacies, cakes, cups of tea and bottles of liquor. Valya is there, as well as some Chinese friends and several other *Harbintsy* who are here for the conference – Professor Georgi Melihov from Moscow, whose books on Russians in Manchuria I found so interesting and useful. The doorbell rings again and in come Yossi Klein and Seva Podolsky from *Igud* in Israel, their clothes damp from the rain. More plates, glasses and chairs are found, and everyone welcomed with typical Harbin hospitality. Squeezed closely around the table, we talk and laugh and raise many a glass to each other’s health and to the city that has drawn us all together.

Last to arrive is Zeng Yizhi (Isabella), the journalist from the *Heilongjiang Daily*. I thank her again for sending me the precious book of poems from aunt Frosya, given to her by my grandmother Tonya when she was leaving Harbin. Yizhi has now published her collection of newspaper feature stories about the people of Harbin in a book – *The City and the People: Stories of Harbin*. She presents me with a copy, flipping it open to the story about my family. It covers our life in Harbin, my visits in 2000, the extraordinary meeting with Frosya and her discovery of my grandmother’s book. In turn, I give Yizhi a copy of my book.

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We laugh at the fact that some of the same photographs appear in each book but lament that neither of us will be able to read the other's work since I don't read Mandarin and she doesn't read English. My inability to communicate with Yizhi, with whom I share so many interests, underscores my deep regret that I did not learn Chinese when I had the chance. It also plants the seed of the idea that I should have my book translated into Chinese.

Rising early the next day, I skip breakfast to head down to the Songhua river embankment. Observing the local people starting their day is one of my favourite pastimes in Asian cities, where so much life is lived in public places. As the morning mist rises from the river, elderly men and women are already taking their morning walk or sitting peacefully in the leafy gardens. Some, returning from the market, stop to chat or watch the fishermen tidying their nets on the riverbank below. Over by the former yacht club, which was such a landmark of my parents' youth, middle-aged women dance gracefully with bright red fans, while men perform *tai chi* in slow motion, their gaze focused on some internal horizon. Everyone savours the calm before the onslaught of the working day noise of traffic jams and construction jackhammers. These are people of my parents' generation and I recall how much they enjoyed talking to them on their return visit in 2000.

Among the stalls at the makeshift outdoor market, I notice Russian cigarette brands and gaudily painted *matryoshka* dolls, symbolic of the huge increase in Sino-Russian cross border trade since my last visit. Chinese editions of Hilary Clinton's biography and the American classic *Gone with the Wind* at the adjacent bookstall reflect some cultural balance, but I figure that a Chinese version of my *Secrets and Spies* might actually have more resonance.

I walk as far as the famous Flood Monument at the bottom of Zhongyang Street, the central walking street, then loop back through the covered market. I thread my way through the early morning shoppers carefully choosing fresh vegetables from huge piles laid out on sackcloth, past sacks of rice and tables laden with meats, dried spices and plastic vats of assorted pickles. Freshly caught fish flip around in buckets and

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Styrofoam boxes. Breathing in the rich aromas, I cannot resist a cob of yellow corn, grilled over charcoal to eat on the way back to the hotel.

That afternoon, Yizhi takes me to see Frosya. In her small and crowded room at the top of a dark stairwell, nothing much has changed in four years, except perhaps the new calendar on the wall and a couple of pot plants. Frosya herself is much frailer and sadder than before. She suffers from cancer. Her eyesight is failing, and she can't walk. On top of that, several fingers on her right hand are now paralysed, which she thinks is a legacy of pounding compounds at the pharmacy where she worked for many years. Still she peers at the photograph of herself in the copy of my book, which I have brought her. She is happy to have helped me tell my story. 'It's just a pity it's not in Russian', she tells me, 'so I could read what you've written'. 'Hopefully one day it will be', I say, but fear that Frosya may not live to see it.

On top of all her ailments, Frosya is deeply lonely. 'I don't go to Church – there is no service there anymore anyway. I can't speak Chinese. I have no friends left. The worst thing is there is no one to talk to' she tells me, her eyes misting up behind her thick glasses. Since my last visit, the other two old Russian *Harbintsy*, Mikhail Myatov and Nina Davidenko, have died, leaving Frosya the last of her tribe. What's more, the Chinese friend, with whom she worked for many years in the pharmacy, has now moved to live with her daughter in Beijing. Not only did she speak Russian, she also knew how to cook Russian food for Frosya. 'People would come on birthdays and Russian festivals and we would sit and talk and drink tea. It doesn't happen any more' she says sadly.

I sit with Frosya for a few hours and try to divert her attention with questions about the past. But she is totally preoccupied with concern that the building in which she lives is to be demolished to make way for new apartments. A meeting scheduled for the following day is expected to determine the timing. 'What frightens me most' she frets, 'is that they'll throw me into an old people's hostel. You can't imagine how awful it would be there'. In spite of her inability to look after herself, she regards this as a fate worse than death. I wonder if I'll ever see her again.

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The following morning, I skip the conference sightseeing trip to Sun Island and go instead to the Huangshan cemetery to visit my family's graves with Valya. Wandering down the freshly paved entrance pathway, I remember from my last visit the location of the Zaretsky graves and find them quite easily. On my great-grandparents' gravestone their names have been freshly outlined with black paint to make the weatherworn etching more legible. I notice that the same has been done on some other gravestones belonging to the families of conference participants in readiness for their visit in a couple of days. It's good to see the care now being taken of a graveyard that had lain abandoned for so long – and it's certainly attracting former residents and others in search of their roots back to Harbin.

In the afternoon, the whole conference group visits the Academy of Social Sciences to see an exhibition on the Jews in Harbin. Mounted on panels around the room are some extraordinary photographs of Jewish community life in Harbin over the last century. As I wander among the panels, I hear cries of excitement among the old *Harbintsy* as they recognise familiar faces or buildings or even themselves. My friend Peter Berton, a retired professor from Los Angeles stands before a panel featuring himself as a young virtuoso violinist in the 1930s. There are wonderful photographs of people, streetscapes, the old Synagogue and community institutions.

Suddenly I come face to face with my three-year old self, rugged up against the winter cold, staring from one of the panels. Below are other family photographs - the fateful photograph of my great-grandparents on the eve of their departure for the Soviet Union in 1936; the family with great-grandmother Chesna during her visit to Harbin in 1957; me and my parents in a canoe on the Songhua river in the 1950s and standing on the street where our house once stood during our visit in 2000. On another panel, there are photographs of a meeting which my partner Andrew Jakubowicz and I attended at the Jewish Research Centre later that year. I remember sending some of these photographs to the Centre for inclusion in their recently published book on the Jews of Harbin. But I had no idea that they would be used to such effect.

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Driving past the former Jewish quarter the following afternoon, the Director Qu Wei points to the former New Synagogue on Jingwe Street fenced off and covered in scaffolding and proudly tells us it is being refurbished as a museum. Back in 2000, it was being used as a Public Security Bureau club. The Old Synagogue nearby still operates as a guesthouse for workers from the railway carriage factory but there are hopes that one day, it too might be restored to its former glory.

The Seminar opens with all the pomp and circumstance of a Communist Party Congress. There are speeches from Qu Wei from the Academy and Teddy Kaufman on behalf of *Igud Yotzei Sin*, representatives of all three levels of administration – provincial, city and district and Ambassadors involved in the China-Israel relationship. The veteran Jewish journalist and writer Israel Epstein, who has lived in China most of his life, is there as a standing member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Translation is provided in three languages – Chinese, Russian and English.

The first speakers in the conference proper are the heads of two more Jewish research centres – Professor Pan Guang from Shanghai and Professor Xu Xin from Nanjing. The nascent interest of the Chinese in the former Jewish communities that lived in China never ceases to amaze me. Over the next two days, more than two dozen speakers take the floor to speak about the history of Jews in Harbin, some drawing on their own experiences, others on research they have conducted. I end my presentation, with another plea that access to the archival records and files of the Jews and Russians of Harbin be made available while those who have interest or knowledge are still alive: ‘because history belongs to all of us’.

A year later, in July 2005, Andrew and I are back in Harbin, seizing the opportunity of a few days gap between academic conferences in Jinan and Beijing. We’ve heard through our networks that renovations have been completed not just on one, but both Harbin’s synagogues, as well as the former Tatar mosque and are excited to see them. For convenience as much as nostalgia, we stay at the Holiday Inn on Jingwei Street,

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not far from where my family's home once stood. It puts us in walking distance to the river and all the key landmarks of old Harbin in all their multicultural dimensions.

Just a few blocks down our street, the New Synagogue, which had been under scaffolding on my last visit, now stands gleaming in the afternoon sun, a huge Star of David atop its golden dome. The theme is repeated in the ironwork of the windows and on the guard box. Even the light posts and litterbin mounts have Stars of David built into the design. As we peer inside at the fine restoration the building has undergone, a young woman invites us to purchase tickets to see an exhibition. 'Is it about the Jews of Harbin?' I ask her, remembering Qu Wei's plan that the exhibition I saw on my last visit would be located at the refurbished synagogue. She looks at me quizzically and responds, 'An exhibition of Russian art'. Jews, Russians - who are we to argue? It wouldn't be the first time we've heard those two used interchangeably in Harbin. We buy our tickets and enter.

The attendant is quite correct. Elegantly displayed along the walls of the former synagogue is an extraordinary range of Russian art – still life, landscapes and iconography. Centre stage is a modern painting of a striking buxom nude redhead. Directly above her in the former women's gallery of the synagogue, hangs a sculptured frieze of Christ's last supper. We climb another level to the top floor gallery. But there is no sign of the Jewish exhibition here either. Just some glass cases displaying Russian antiques and Siberian folk art, including Shamanistic masks and elephant tusk carvings. We chuckle at this incongruous juxtaposition of Christendom, animism and secularism in the former Judaic temple.

It turns out that the exhibits are part of a collection gathered over 16 years by cultural entrepreneur Liu Mingxiu, while he was a trader on the Sino-Russian border. We later come across a whole museum of Russian art he has collected in a building on Sun Island. It is in the grounds of the mock 'Russian village', where among some restored *dachas* where *Harbintsy* spent their summers, Russians from across the border are now employed to recreate ancient folk arts, dressed in colourful traditional garb. As for the Jews of Harbin exhibition, we find it locked away in a room at the

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Academy of Social Sciences. But a few months later, it opens at the newly renovated synagogue on permanent display.

Harbin is embracing its multicultural past with considerable vigour. The former Tatar Mosque where my paternal grandfather once prayed has been restored to its former Moorish glory. Its exterior has been freshly stuccoed in white with some traditional maroon stripes and a crescent moon mounted on top of the muezzin's tower. It is a far cry from the derelict old building I saw with my parents in 2000. Inside, the prayer hall is decorated simply but tastefully, with verses from the Koran embossed in gold on blue wall plaques.

At a meeting arranged by my friend Yizhi, one of the community elders tells us that the mosque can again function as a Muslim place of worship and that they would like to see a museum dedicated to the former Tatar community in one of the adjacent buildings. 'Although there are no Tatars here today, we want their children and grandchildren to visit and know that Harbin has not forgotten about the Tatars.' I tell him that my paternal grandfather, Muhamedjian Mustafin, was once an active member of the Tatar community. As I have been unable to find his grave at the cemetery, I ask whether I might put up a plaque in his memory at the mosque. My idea is met with a positive response.

As always our program in Harbin is packed with festivities and meetings with friends old and new. On our first night we join Kolya, Valya and others at a recital at the Harbin Music Hall by two visiting Russian pianists, followed by a lively supper with them all. The following day we meet colleagues at the Jewish Research Centre, where Andrew shows them his online documentary *The Menorah of Fang Bang Lu* about Jews in Shanghai and discusses ways of using multimedia for online exhibitions.

Sadly, this is the last time I am to see the two *Harbintsy* that have been my link to the city's past. Valya Han, who has been unwell, is taken to hospital a day after we see her at the piano recital. When I visit her there, she looks tired and frail. She tries to



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keep the conversation light-hearted and tells me that a Shanghai writer has recently published a book about her life titled *The story of Valia 'the Spy'*. She dies of a heart attack four months later, a week after her eighty-second birthday.

A day later I visit Frosya in another hospital. Already there for over a month, she looks haggard and lost. When she sees me, she bursts into tears. It is clear that visitors are infrequent. Frosya is desperate to go home. 'Marochka, please get me out of here' she begs, invoking the memory of my grandmother Tonya, her friend from long ago. She knows full well this is impossible. She dies fourteen months later at the age of 96. Efrosinya Andreevna Nikiforova, the last Russian émigré in Harbin is gone.

On our last afternoon in Harbin, we stroll down to our favourite haunt, the Songhua River embankment. It is Saturday and the place is teeming with people of all ages enjoying their day out – doing gymnastics on the exercise bars, eating grilled meat on skewers, playing cards, catching butterflies with a t-shirt. Music seems to be the order of the day. A man teaches his daughter the traditional three stringed lute. In one garden clearing a lone saxophonist plays Gershwin's *Summertime*. A little further along, we spot a man with a clarinet. Finally, we come upon a small ensemble, comprised of Western and traditional string instruments plus an accordion. We stop to listen to the Chinese music they are playing.

Assuming that, like most non-Chinese in Harbin, we are tourists from across the border, one of the onlookers says hello in broken Russian and asks where we are from? Expecting to hear 'Blagoveshensk' or 'Khabarovsk', he is confused when I respond in Russian 'from Australia'. 'Odalía', I clarify, in my best Mandarin. His friend catches on and explains what I said. Both look at me in disbelief. I desperately want him to know that I was born here in Harbin, to draw a common thread. I try Russian, then English, to no avail. Again I curse myself for not having studied Mandarin. Suddenly from some distant recess of my mind comes the Mandarin word for 'people' – 'ren'. I link it with Harbin and slowly say: 'Wo shi Harbin-ren' (I am a *Harbinka*). As the men clap and shout out what I've said, the ensemble strikes up the

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tune of *Katyusha*, a favourite old Russian song about the girl who comes out on the high riverbank to sing about her beloved, fighting on some faraway border.

This interaction reignites my dream to have my book translated into Chinese. After all so much of the story revolves around Harbin, China and my family's life there. I did receive several offers of quick translations after my presentation at the Harbin conference in 2004. Wary that it is better not to have one's work translated into another language at all, than translated badly, I did not respond.

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Back in Australia in June 2007, when I am least expecting it, an email arrives from someone named 'Li Yao' at an obviously Chinese email address headed 'Translation of your *Secrets and Spies*'.

Quickly scanning through the polite salutations, the sentence 'Now I am translating your *Secrets and Spies*' leaps out at me. The gist of Li Yao's message is that he hopes to finish translating the book by the end of the year and has already been in contact with a publishing house.

I am completely taken aback. Who is this person and what do they mean they are translating my book? Who gave them permission? My mind flashes back to translation offers I'd received after the Harbin conference a few years earlier. They came from a couple of Chinese journalists with good intentions but limited English. This message, written in correct and polite English, does not sound like them at all.

I am also reassured that in his last sentence, Li says he wants to meet me in Australia to discuss translation and publication, including royalty. So he acknowledges my proprietary rights, but how and when such a meeting might take place remains unclear.

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Reading the email again more carefully, I focus on a couple of sentences I had overlooked:

‘Your book was recommended to me by the Ambassador's wife two years ago. But I have been very busy, and this project had to be postponed until now.’

Now it all comes back to me. Over dinner in Beijing in 2005 with Ambassador Alan Thomas, whom I knew from my diplomatic days, his wife Sally Borthwick, a China scholar, asked if I had a spare copy of my book. ‘I know someone who might find it interesting’ she said, ‘a Chinese professor who specialises in translating Australian literature’. She reeled off a list of authors whose works he had translated: Patrick White, Thomas Keneally, Peter Carey. ‘Leave me a copy and I’ll pass it on to him’. I was under no illusion that I was about to join these greats but leapt at the opportunity – what did I have to lose? But back in Sydney, the rest of my life took over and I never followed up what might have transpired. Now I knew.

Several months later, Professor Li Yao visits Sydney during a tour to various universities and cultural events in Australia. Our meeting is memorable. A man in his early sixties, he has lived through half a century of change and upheaval in China and is a true cosmopolitan intellectual. As a young scholar at the University of Inner Mongolia in the 1980s, Li Yao had chosen to specialise in Australian literature after being given Patrick White’s *Tree of Man* by a visiting Australian teacher. Since then he has translated and published over 20 Australian books. Our conversation ranges across many subjects – from the intricacies of translating and publishing books in China to our common roots there.

When my parents join us, the conversation switches to Mandarin. It is a joy to behold. My parents are never more animated than speaking the language in which they specialised as young students at the newly formed Oriental Studies faculty at the Harbin Polytechnical Institute in the late 1940s. As they exchange stories, my parents discover that they have quite a lot in common with Li Yao. All three have worked

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with languages, were born in the north of China – Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, in Li Yao’s case – and share a love of spicy northern food. Having eaten their fill of Peking duck, *jiaozi* and other delicacies at our favourite Chinese restaurant, Li Yao and my mother sing in unison their favourite Chinese revolutionary songs, followed by a few Russian songs that were popular in China in the 1950s, simultaneously in Russian and Chinese.

Within a year, Li Yao completes his translation and my book is published in Beijing under the title *Harbin Dang’an (The Harbin Files)*. Sadly, I am unable to travel to Beijing for the launch in November 2008, which takes place during the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Australia China Council, which awards Li Yao a medallion for his contribution to Australian literature in China. But Li Yao persuades the publishers to organise a book-signing event in Harbin when I visit China in March the following year to speak at international literary festivals in several cities and with students of Australia literature at several prestigious universities as part of the Embassy’s Australian Writers week program.

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As Li Yao and I are hurried into the famous Zhongyang bookshop in the central street of Harbin’s Daoli district, where I once lived, I see a long queue of people winding its way up the stairs.

‘You see’, says Li Yao, ‘these people have been waiting for an hour already. That’s why the publisher asked us to come straight from the airport’.

It is two weeks since I started my speaking tour at the Man International Literary Festival in Hong Kong and the pace has been fairly relentless. I have spoken about my book at literary festivals in Shanghai, Suzhou, Beijing and Chengdu and participated in forums with several other Australian writers at universities in some of these places.

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While it's been my dream to bring my family's story back to China, I am physically tired and emotionally drained.

Now, as I walk up the stairs past the long queue of people winding its way around the bookshop, I feel embarrassed for insisting that I had to go to the hotel to change my clothes after the flight from Beijing. 'I never imagined there would be so many people', I tell Li Yao – three or four hundred he tells me later. Among them are my friends from the Jewish Research Centre, with whom I quickly shake hands and Kolya Zaika, who greets me with a bunch of flowers. Many of the people waiting patiently to have their books autographed are of my parents' generation, others of my own. But there is also a smattering of fashionably dressed young people. I smile to myself as I remember my mother's refrain when I was writing the book – 'Who on earth would be interested in all this?'

Finally Li Yao and I are seated at a table on the podium. Behind us is a huge red promotional poster, with an enormous blown up headshot of me and a picture of our book – *Harbin Dangan*. Each with pen in hand, we begin the signing, while the publisher hovers around urging us to 'sign faster' and hurrying along people who stop to make conversation. But two middle-aged women will not be moved. One, I recognise as Professor Guo Qiuping, a history professor from Harbin University doing research on the Jews of Harbin, whom I remember from my previous visits. Now, under the beady eye of the publisher, she introduces her classmate, Liang Zechao, who presents me with a small bouquet of flowers and a note written in neat English handwriting.

'My friend remembers you from the day you left Harbin', Professor Guo tells me, 'because when your family left, her family moved in'.

'Really?'

'Sure, in Jingwei Street.'

I am flabbergasted.

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When the publisher tries to move the women along, we almost come to blows. ‘Please don’t go away till we have a chance to talk’, I tell Professor Guo.

‘I remember you as a little girl’, Liang says when we meet in the bookshop manager’s office after the signing is over. ‘I remember on that last day in April 1959 you jumped into your bed while I was standing nearby. Then your mother called you and you left. When you left Harbin, you were wearing the same coat as in the photograph in your book. I was nine years old at the time and it was fifty years ago, but I have always remembered that moment’.

We agree to meet up in a few days’ time, when Li Yao and I are free of the official program, which I discover has been arranged for us by the Harbin City government. Liang asks if I would like to see what is left of our old furniture still in her possession. I leap at the opportunity.

In the early evening she takes us to a strange uninhabited apartment, most of whose contents have been removed. Perhaps Liang’s family once lived there, but it’s not where she lives now. Among the few items of old furniture still there is a tall dark wooden buffet. I vaguely recognise it from photographs.

‘This came from your house’ Liang tells me. ‘So did that cupboard’, she points to a light-coloured wooden wardrobe and opens the door to show me the fine carpentry inside.

As Liang shares her memories of growing up in ‘our’ apartment, her attachment to it is palpable. ‘I have very deep feelings for the place’. As we squat on some odd bits of furniture, Liang tells us about her family and their life in ‘our’ house. Her father, Liang Jianye, was an old revolutionary from Shanxi province who came to Harbin during the war of liberation with Lin Biao’s 4<sup>th</sup> Army. He left the Army after 1953 to become a government official. First, he was Deputy of the Harbin Public Security Bureau (DOB) and later he became a Director of the City Government in the Mayor’s office. He died in 1979.

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‘My father got that apartment because he was a senior official’, Liang says. We lived in our house – your house – for 35 years until November 1994 when the government decided to knock it down to make way for a new building. I know you went to look for the house when you came to Harbin in 2004. It’s a pity it is no longer there’.

Liang seems quite obsessive about the apartment. She says she really loved its tall windows, though they were difficult to clean. ‘Your family’s furniture was also very beautiful’. She says her father paid just RMB150 for all the furniture, including a piano – ‘so he said.’ ‘But my father suffered during the Cultural Revolution for

having this furniture’, she says. Still, when the Cultural Revolution was over, young newlyweds would come to copy its design’. She sketches the layout of the house and various items of furniture, including an extension table.

‘Do you know what happened to our old clock?’ I ask, ‘It used to hang in the dining room’. My mother has often said it was the one item of furniture she was sad to leave behind. Liang does not remember it. She says the government divvied up the furniture when we departed. Perhaps the boss kept it for himself?

‘What happened to the old caretaker and his wife?’ I ask, remembering my mother’s stories about the couple that lived there for as long as she could remember, and the fine embroidery the caretaker’s wife made for us as a farewell gift. Liang says the couple continued to live in the small house in the yard until the mid 1960s. ‘The old lady smoked a pipe and sat there like a Buddha watching everything’, she says, ‘They told us a lot about the house’. By my mother’s recollection, it was the caretaker who sat around doing nothing, while his wife did everything.

Liang remembers that there was an old Russian lady who lived across the hall - ‘Shcherbina, her name was, or Kuchihidze’. My mother subsequently confirms this.

‘She used to help me with my Russian schoolwork’ she reminisces. ‘Someone robbed her, and she never left her door open after that. She left in 1964 for Australia or the

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USSR. My grandmother embraced her saying ‘you are seventy years old now, yet you are going far away to another world’. I really missed her when she left.’

Liang shows me a photograph of her mother and her daughter standing on the balcony of the old apartment. I instantly recognise the classic Greek key design that formed the border of the wrought iron railing. It has featured in the background of many of our own family photographs. I later find a photograph of myself standing on the same balcony. I also recognise the motif in a pair of gold earrings, which my parents brought me from Greece as a gift many years ago. Could they have bought them with our Harbin balcony in mind? I wonder. When I ask my mother, she looks at me blankly. Perhaps it was subliminal.

‘That photograph was taken in October 1994, just before the government moved us out to make way for some modern buildings’, Liang says wistfully.

‘Where is your daughter now’, I ask.

‘In Australia, studying medicine’, she laughs.

‘Whereabouts?’

Liang tells me her daughter, ‘Alison’, has been in Australia for eight years – first studying in High School in Tasmania and now at Sydney University.

I shudder. ‘That’s where I studied too’.

During our time in Harbin, Li Yao and I are feted by the Municipal government. The Director of Foreign Affairs, Zhang Tianbo, hosts a dinner in our honour and personally escorts us around the Harbin International Sister Cities Museum, which showcases Harbin’s international links. He also arranges for one of his staff, a young woman named Yujia Jie, fluent in Russian and English as well as Chinese, to accompany us to various institutions we want to visit and ensure there are no bureaucratic impediments. Throughout my week in Harbin, I reflect on how far the city has come in embracing its multicultural past and reaching out to its former residents and their families in the decade since I first came there.



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At the cemetery, I now visit the graves of my recently deceased friends, Valya Han and Aunt Frosya in the Russian Orthodox section, as well as those of my extended family in the Jewish one. At Valya's graveside Yujia reveals that Valya was once her Russian language teacher, as she was to so many other young Harbin officials. There have been more renovations at the cemetery since my last visit, including the construction of a Memorial to Soviet soldiers who fell during the war against the Japanese and a Tahara house at the Jewish cemetery built to resemble the Old Synagogue in Daoli.

On my visit to the Heilongjiang Provincial Archive, I give them copies of *Harbin Dang'an* in gratitude for the access they gave me to my family records. In response, the Director presents me with a Certificate of Honour at an impromptu ceremony. I seize the opportunity to express my hope that my book may demonstrate the benefits of granting access to the valuable historical materials they hold about Harbin's multiethnic communities while there are still people alive who can help historians interpret the materials based on firsthand experience. It is a sentiment I later repeat to Zhang Tianbo and his staff at a lunch he hosts on my last day in Harbin.

Before I leave, I invite Liang to dinner, together with my friend Zeng Yizhi at a local steamboat restaurant in Daoli. To my surprise, she produces two large iron keys and a small slide lock. She tells me the keys are from the heavy wooden front door of our former apartment block leading onto the street at Jingwei Jie, while the lock is from inside our own apartment.

'I managed to rescue them before the apartment block was torn down in 1994 and replaced by a bank'.

I thank her and tell her that my grandfather built the block in the early 1930s. 'I will frame them and give them to my parents'. Returning to Sydney, I do just that and present this gift on the occasion of their joint 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. I try to find a photograph of the building but the only I have is one taken by someone while visiting Harbin in the 1980s – not an authentic memento of our time there. Instead I insert in

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the frame a photograph of my four-year-old self, standing in front of the big wooden door in my curly white sheepskin coat and high boots.

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From Harbin I fly back to Shanghai on the evening flight, finally free of speaking engagements and official obligations. When I close my eyes, I see again the image of Manya in her sepia coloured trench coat from the cover of my book projected on a screen at the Glamour Bar at M on the Bund restaurant during my presentation two

weeks earlier. The Glamour Bar was a fitting venue to bring Manya's story back to Shanghai, the last place she lived in China before departing for the USSR in 1934. But it was eerie seeing her there all the same and strange to tell a predominantly expatriate audience in 21<sup>st</sup> century Shanghai what I had been able to piece together of her life there in the 1930s and the fate that befell her family.

Manya was my link to a city whose history and glamour always fascinated me – it was so much more exotic and international than Harbin. Again I wonder what on earth prompted her to leave this city for the Soviet Union. And how different her life – and the lives of family members who followed her there – might have turned out if Manya had stayed in Shanghai.

Driving from Pudong International Airport in the darkness my taxi turns onto the Huaihai Zhong Lu – the former Avenue Joffre – towards the former French Concession where I am staying. Along its wide boulevards I see brightly lit new shopping malls and office towers. I recognise the Shanghai Library and the entrance to the Academy of Social Sciences, where my journey through Russian and Jewish Shanghai began over a decade ago.

I remember walking the streets of the French Concession with Professor Wang Zhicheng, the expert on Russian émigré life in Shanghai, for hours on end as we searched for the landmarks of Manya's life here. We climbed the stairs to the

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apartment of the family with whom she lived. Piecing together information she gave her NKVD interrogator that she worked as a dentist at the ‘Women’s Studio’ and an article in Jiganoff’s 1936 album, *Russians in Shanghai*, that such an organisation operated under the auspices of the Russian émigré newspaper *Shanghai Zarya*, we hunted down its approximate location on Huaihai Zhong Lu. But I am still mystified about Manya’s involvement with this establishment, which, being described as a White Guard ‘espionage organisation’ played a part in incriminating her as a ‘Japanese spy’. Did Manya really work there as a dentist, I wonder – or was it something she just told her interrogator?

I figure that if I am going to track down more information about the Women’s Studio, the pages of *Shanghai Zarya* may be a good place to start. Through Shanghai contacts I discover that the Shanghai Library’s extensive collection of old foreign newspapers are held in the Bibliotheca Zi-Ka-Wei. I arrive there to find a finely renovated white building adjacent to the old St Ignatius Cathedral in Xujiahui, the former Jesuit area. I know from Manya’s files that she arrived in Shanghai in October 1933 and left for Vladivostok to stay with her brother Abram towards the end of 1934. I submit a request for the volumes of *Shanghai Zarya* including those dates.

Leafing through the fragile yellowed pages of the newspaper, my eyes are peeled for mention of the ‘Women’s Studio’. I find it soon enough. At the top of page 2 in the 3 May 1933 edition is a bold headline ‘Register for the Studio ‘*Shanghai Zarya*’. Describing the plight of Russian women who fall on hard times because they are unprepared for life and have no professional skills, the article announces:

‘In order to meet the needs of the Russian colony, in the near future ‘*Shanghai Zarya*’ intends to open in association with its ‘Women’s Pages’ a studio, whose purpose will be to give Russian women, with and without means, the opportunity to study a range of useful professions’.

In the following weeks the newspaper runs a campaign of advertisements and articles about the Studio and the various courses it will offer – starting with dressmaking,

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millinery, manicure and hairdressing. In the days before it opens on 8 June 1933, there is an appeal to the Russian community to donate old furniture, children's books and toys for the Studio and to attend a public prayer service. In the months that follow there are articles encouraging women to attend the Studio as more and more courses are added – English and French classes, typing and stenography, ballet, sport, exercise for weight loss, corsetry and art.

In August 1933, the Studio moves from its temporary premises to 965 Ave Joffre above the *Marie* shoe shop. 'Studies at the Studio are in Full Swing' claims one headline, describing the facilities on offer. Others proclaim that 'The Women's Studio teaches independent and responsible work' and 'The Studio is widening its scope of work', with the opening of a milliner's workshop making hats to order and ladies dressmaking to follow.

By chance I notice in an article on 11 October 1933 about the Harbin equivalent of the Women's Studio a reference to their opening of a dental surgery. Probably because my mind is now focused on teeth, I start to notice articles on dental health, advertisements for toothpaste and mouthwash and, in the 8 January 1934 edition, an announcement of courses in dental technology, though not as part of the Shanghai Women's Studio.

My heart stops. Halfway down page 7 of the 11 January 1934 edition I see the following:

Dental surgery of Dentist

M.G. Onikul

At the Women's Studio 'Shanghai Zarya'

965 Ave Joffre

Treatment of teeth and gums. Painless tooth extraction

In conjunction with the Laboratory of artificial teeth and gold prosthesis.

Appointments from 9-12 and 2-6

Tel No 73927

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I continue to leaf through the rest of the volumes of *Shanghai Zarya* lying before me. Manya's advertisement appears in subsequent weeks and months, some smaller, some larger. A couple offer free service on Tuesdays. The last advertisement I see is in the newspaper of 18 July 1934.

So it's true. Manya did work as a dentist at the Women's Studio, as she told her interrogator in Gorky. It's not that I did not believe it before but seeing her name in bold print gives this truth 'real world' validation. I have also gained some insight into the role the Women's Studio played in the lives of Russian women in Shanghai in the

1930s. Yet I am still perplexed why, within ten months of her arrival, Manya chose to leave this vibrant city for her bitter fate in the USSR.

This, I will never know.

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It is a Jewish custom to leave a stone on a grave which one visits to honour the memory of the deceased and show that they are remembered. For my family and all those who suffered in Stalin's time, this book is my stone.