CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE TIES THAT BIND

My father Alec died peacefully on the morning of 13 February 2016, a sunny summer day in Sydney. Immobilised by a debilitating stroke two and a half years earlier, he was unable to live at home and had to move into a nursing home. Although often drowsy, his ability to think and to communicate was, thankfully, not impaired and he could still speak four languages. Alec particularly enjoyed speaking Mandarin with his chief nurse, Wendy, who came to Australia from Shanghai. Occasionally, he would also try out his Japanese with another nurse.

Before he closed his eyes for the last time, Alec's gaze likely fell on the painting of the old Harbin yacht club, hanging on the wall in front of his bed. It was an unexpected gift to me from the Chairman of the Heilongjiang People's Committee, Du Yu Xin, when I visited Harbin in September 2015 with my husband Andrew.

'It's a very good copy of a painting by a very famous artist, Sun Yan Tai', Du Yu Xin tells me when he presents the painting, mounted in a heavy gilded frame.
I am captivated by the image. 'My parents always talked about that yacht club', I tell him, 'It was a very important feature of their life in Harbin'. The more carefree part, at least.

'Do you mind if I hang it in my father's room at his nursing home?' I ask Du Yu Xin, explaining Alec's condition. He agrees, of course. Yet I doubt he can imagine the significance this gift would come to have.

On our return from China, Andrew and I carry the painting, carefully wrapped in bubble wrap, to my father's room at the Montefiore Nursing Home.

'Wake up, Pa. We have brought a present for you from Harbin', I say. Alec opens his eyes. When we unwrap the painting, he stares at it for a long time as we relate the story of our meeting with Du Yu Xin.

'It's the Yacht Club', he says. A gentle smile spreads across his face in recognition. The image of the wooden boats moored in the shallows along the stone embankment wall outside the club against the backdrop of a cloudy blue sky reminds Alec of happy and active summers spent yachting with friends on the Songhua River. Navigating its strong currents as he swam from one side of the river to the other. Crossing the frozen river by foot in winter.

Each day he would remark about the painting to my mother.

This touching gift from a senior Chinese official also symbolises the renewal of our family's ties with Harbin. Walking tentatively through vaguely familiar streets to search out the landmarks of our family's life on our first return visit to Harbin in May 2000, neither my parents, nor I, ever imagined the rich web of relationships that would develop over the next two decades.

---0---

Our visit to China in September 2015 coincides with the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Pacific. Officially, it is referred to in China as the 'Victory of the Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War'. On Victory Day – 3 September – Andrew and I sit in our Shanghai hotel room, transfixed to the television screen as row upon row of young soldiers goosestep in formation through Tiananmen Square in the military parade. The backdrop is a crystal-clear blue sky, thanks to the shutdown of factories and ban on vehicles in central Beijing for two weeks prior. The slick cinematography would have made German film propagandist Leni Riefenstahl proud.

Throughout the day, television stations screen documentaries, rich with historical wartime footage. They show the suffering of the Chinese people at the hands of the Japanese, carefully positioning China's war against Japan in the context of the overall allied war against fascism and the friendships forged through mutual struggle.

The same motif manifests itself in several musicals we see performed in Shanghai to coincide with the 70th Anniversary commemoration. All take the theme of imagined wartime love stories between Chinese people and Jewish refugees, thousands of whom found refuge in Shanghai from the Nazi holocaust. In the 'Jews of Shanghai', the daughter of a Chinese industrialist falls in love with a young Jewish engineer from Germany, who later helps her father sabotage the Japanese war effort. We attend the opening night with our friend Professor Pan Guang from the Jewish Research Centre at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. Pan Guang, who has long been gathering the stories of the Jews in Shanghai, is very proud of his involvement with this Sino-Israeli co-production. He hopes to see it made into a movie.

Several nights later, we attend a performance of 'North Bank Suzhou Creek: The Musical' at the former Ohel Moshe synagogue in Hongkou, which has now been refurbished as part of the Refugee Museum. Here, it is the daughter of a Jewish cafe owner in the Hongkou ghetto, who protects a young Chinese revolutionary from the Japanese *Kempeitai.* At the Shanghai Conservatory of Music we learn that we have missed their operetta about the love story between a Jewish refugee violin professor and his Chinese student. However, we are presented with DVDs of the performance by the composer and school director after Conservatory staff discover Andrew's connection with Shanghai. Seeing us poking around outside the administration building, which originally housed the Shanghai Jewish Club, they ask what we're doing there.

'My father, Boleslaw, worked as the accountant at the Jewish Club after the family fled here from Poland,' Andrew tells them.

Immediately the doors are flung open and we are ushered inside to take a look. The building, to which the Jewish Club moved soon after the War, still retains its old-world charm and even some of the old furniture. Wandering up and down its creaky staircase, we imagine what it must have been like in the 1940s when it was the hub of the Jewish cultural and social scene.

The Conservatory staff are even more amazed to learn that, back in Poland, Andrew's father sometimes played the violin in a string quartet led by his grandmother.

'My father was working in Shanghai at the time his mother played her last recital in the Lodz ghetto', Andrew tells them. 'After learning that she had been killed in the death camp in Chelmno he refused to ever play again'.

Boleslaw never forgave himself for failing to persuade his parents to leave Poland in 1941, together with him and his wife's family. Ironically, it was thanks to exit visas issued by Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese Consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, that they were able to reach Shanghai where they spent the war years.

---0---

For Harbin, occupied by the Japanese from February 1932, five years before the outbreak of full-scale war between Japan and China in July 1937, the commemoration of the end of the war is particularly poignant. The 70th anniversary of the Japanese surrender on 15 August is marked by the opening of a new Museum of Evidence of War Crimes by Japanese Army Unit 731. It sits on the site of the secret biological and chemical warfare research base, where Japanese doctors carried out medical atrocities on prisoners whom they called *maruta* or 'logs', as well as developing germs, including bubonic plague, typhoid, anthrax and cholera. Most victims were Chinese, but there were also Russians and others among them. It has crossed my mind that perhaps my father's maternal uncle, Vladimir, who disappeared in Harbin in 1939 at

the age of twenty-three, might have met his fate here. However, researchers from the Museum later advise me that they have no trace of him.

---0---

'Harbin Institute of Technology', the sign proclaims as our car turns off Xidazhi Street in Nangang into the main campus of the university that was once my parents' alma mater. It is the first of several visits to the university, where Andrew and I have been invited to make presentations in the context of the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, as well as meeting with academics and visiting the HIT Museum.

I am struck by the vast scale of the university, its modern buildings and wide, open spaces. The students, dressed in fashionable casual gear, chat to each other on the lawns or fiddle with their mobile phones – like students the world over. This should not surprise me. The institute, known as 'HIT' for short, is one of China's largest and most prestigious universities, with a global reputation and campuses in three cities in China, attended by over 45,000 students.

Yet fixed in my mind is the image of the Harbin Polytechnical Institute, which my parents, Inna and Alec, attended, and the building featured on the cover of their alumni journal 'Polytechnik'. As we drive through the university grounds, I am searching for the art deco arched entrance with Chinese doors. I have seen Alec and Inna photographed in front it separately, together and with their respective classes on graduation day. It is the backdrop to their student love story.

Back in 2000 when we all returned to Harbin for the first time, this building was one of the landmarks of their previous life, to which Inna and Alec took me. We found it in a state of disrepair, the entrance obstructed by debris and the door firmly shut. It was unclear whether it was in the process of demolition or renovation. For old times' sake, I photographed my parents against the arched doorway, as before.

As we pull up at the steps of a small historic building, my heart skips a beat. There is the famous arched entrance. The building has been elegantly restored and the door is open.

'Welcome to the Museum of the Harbin Institute of Technology', says a young man who introduces himself as our guide as we enter the foyer. We are faced with a photomontage of students of various nationalities who have studied here against the backdrop of the famed entrance. Speaking impeccable English, the young man guides us through several rooms of exhibits of the institute during its various administrations, reflecting the shifts in political power in Harbin in the first half of the 20th century.

The Museum opened in 2010 in the building where the institute was first established 90 years earlier under the auspices of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The earliest photograph of the building bears the name 'Sino-Russian Technicum', as it was first known, before being renamed the Sino-Russian
Polytechnical Institute in 1922 and the Harbin Polytechnical Institute – known as HPI – in 1928. A large bronze replica of the original building is also on display.

Originally courses at the institute were taught in Russian to a mix of Russian and Chinese students. That ended in the mid 1930s when the Japanese took control. Japanese then became the language of instruction. Russian teachers were dismissed, and only Chinese and Japanese students could enroll. With the defeat of Japan in 1945, the Russian staff and language returned, and a Soviet curriculum introduced. Finally, after the institute came under Chinese administration in 1950, courses were taught in Mandarin and attended predominantly by Chinese students, while Harbin's Russians dispersed around the world.

The displays include photographs of the institute's leaders, teacher and students, plans of buildings, graduation diplomas, exam timetables, textbooks, tools and interesting artifacts of daily life. Tucked away in a glass display case, I also notice a couple of

volumes of the 'Polytechnic' journal published in Russian by the association of HPI graduates in Sydney over many years.

While celebrating its past, HIT's eye is clearly on the future. The walls of the former assembly hall are decked with the emblems of foreign universities with whom HIT has cooperation agreements and the flags of their nations. Among them is the University of South Australia.

In discussions with HIT's International Department, we hear that a delegation from HIT will visit Adelaide later in the year for academic discussions and to meet alumni. I mention that there was a strong association of the Institute's Russian alumni in Sydney for many years.

'Oh! Our delegation would love to meet them.'
'You'd better hurry', I respond, 'They're in their eighties and nineties and there aren't many of them left.'

When the HIT delegation transits Sydney in early November 2015, they visit our apartment between flights with some local Chinese HIT alumni. There, over afternoon tea, I introduce them to a small group of Russian graduates of HPI, including my mother. They chat together in English and Mandarin, poring over photographs of the Russians as students in Harbin. Having felt the impact of political tension between China and the USSR on their daily lives in their final years in Harbin in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the elderly alumni are touched that their institute's Russian past is now regarded as an asset.

Interesting news about possible future links between HIT and Australia emerges when Andrew and I visit the School of Foreign Languages, to make presentations to a group of English language academics arranged by Professor Li Yao, who has joined us in Harbin. At a meeting before the seminar, the Dean, Professor Liu Kedong, tells us that HIT is thinking of establishing an Australian Studies Centre in his school. This is

an exciting development as many of the academics we meet have had an association with Australia as students or visiting scholars, but also because so many Russians from Harbin, including alumni of the institute migrated there. The Centre's opens in early January 2016, adopting life writing as one of its research themes. Later that year, I am honoured to accept their invitation to be a guest professor.

---0---

Apart from official commitments, our visit to Harbin is an opportunity to meet friends, some of whom I have not seen for some years. Top of my list in Harbin is my dear friend Zeng Yizhi. Since we first met in 2000, the former *Heilongjiang Daily* journalist, who first introduced herself to me as Isabella, has been an integral part of my Harbin story. In spite of our inability to communicate in the same language, I have always felt that we had a special understanding. Perhaps it's because we were both born in the Year of the Horse?

I am full of admiration for Yizhi's work in bringing the life stories of the old Russians of Harbin to the attention of Harbin readers and her unceasing efforts to preserve the city's historic old buildings. I saw for myself how much the elderly Russians who remained in Harbin, like my grandmother Tonya's friend Frosya, valued her friendship and care. Sadly, Yizhi and I lose touch some time after my 2009 visit when the Yahoo email system is closed down in China. New Year and birthday greetings that I email her bounce back or go unanswered. Miraculously, Li Yao helps me track her down ahead of our visit. I am devastated to learn that over the previous year, my friend has been seriously ill with cancer.

Andrew and I meet Yizhi for dinner several times, together with her daughter, Zhang Tian, who has moved back from Beijing to look after her mother. To our good fortune, Zhang Tian speaks excellent English and, over plates of steaming dumplings (*jaodze), lian tsai* salad and other Dongbei delicacies, we are able converse with Yizhi freely. Yizhi's illness has slowed her down, but she is still full of passion for her

causes, pointing out interesting remnants of old Harbin as we wander the streets of Daoli and never without her camera to snap a photograph.

Walking down Zhongyang Street, crowded with people in the balmy autumn evening, we see groups of musicians playing on makeshift stages in every nook and cranny along the walking street, classical music competing with jazz and rock. Particularly popular is the string ensemble playing Russian songs on the balcony of the Hotel Modern above its famous street side ice cream stall.

Yizhi tells us this is small by comparison with the Harbin's biannual music festival, which takes place in August. It has become even more spectacular since UNESCO declared Harbin as China's 'City of Music' in 2010. 'Maybe you could come back for the next one in 2016', she muses.

On our last evening in Harbin, the three of us attend a chamber music concert at the former Main Synagogue on Tongjiang Street. Carefully restored to its original structure, is dedicated to the former leader of Harbin's Jewish community, Dr Abraham Kaufman and his son Teddy, who did so much to restore Jewish ties with Harbin, but sadly did not live to see this day.

Earlier in the day, when buying tickets for the performance, Andrew and I wander into the building of the old Jewish school adjacent to the synagogue, which housed my father's high school in the 1940s and most recently a Korean school. We are surprised to find that it is now a music school, named after the Russian composer, Alexander Glazunov, just as it was in the mid 1920s. Looking out from large panels headed 'Harbin Russian Emigrant Music Education' in the entrance lobby are the faces of prominent Russian musicians and artists.

'The musicians who fled here from Russia in the 1920s brought Harbin a great musical heritage. They established music schools, a symphony orchestra, choirs and

ensembles. How wonderful that their role is now being openly recognised', I say, scanning the photographs for people I know.

'There's my mother's piano teacher - Valentina Gershgorina', I point to a photograph of an attractive dark-eyed woman. Gershgorina was Director of the First Harbin Music School and also had a private music studio for budding young pianists. At the annual recital her young students would play in the first half of the program, while accomplished pianists performed in the second half, together with the Harbin Symphony Orchestra.

'Mum was very upset when she was not allowed to study with her anymore because the Japanese stopped 'Soviet' children associating with stateless 'whites'. Playing in the recital was a great occasion for a young girl like my mother and she couldn't understand what she'd done wrong to be excluded.

She keeps the programs among her Harbin memorabilia to this day.

Later, many Harbin musicians came to Australia with their families in the 1950s and 1960s. Some joined symphony and opera orchestras, others taught music and ballet to new generations of *Harbintsy*. This included the violinist Vladimir Trachtenberg, the Dean of the First Harbin Music School and concertmaster of the Symphony Orchestra.

'My piano teacher in Sydney was also from Harbin,' I tell Andrew. 'Maria Gerasimovna Antipas-Metaxas. She drove all over Sydney giving home piano lessons to Russian children from Harbin'.
'Was she Russian or Greek with a name like that?'
'Her family were Russianised Greeks. Her father was a wealthy entrepreneur in the Russian Far East, who owned the vodka distillery in Harbin. Their house in Dongfeng Street was famous for the Grecian statues on its roof.'

'Perhaps that's where all those statues in Zhongyang Street came from', laughs Andrew.

We later discover that the Antipas house stood across the road from the building where one of Andrew's uncles lived for a while in the early 1940s as a Jewish refugee from Poland, renting a room from a Jewish refugee doctor from Vienna.

Russians, Jews, Poles, Greeks, Tartars. Harbin was truly a truly cosmopolitan city, where so many different worlds intersected.

---0---

On our last Sunday afternoon in Harbin, our young friend Xiao Zhang takes us to Jile Si, the Buddhist Temple of Bliss. We have spent a fairly intense week, with meetings and presentations, visits to the cemetery and other family landmarks around Daoli. It is a welcome relief to be able to spend some time walking around its serene pagodas, just chatting and taking photographs.

We first met Xiao, when he lived in Sydney for a year while studying for his Masters of Animation at the University of Technology Sydney, where Andrew was Professor of Sociology. Xiao was introduced to me in a letter from his father, Zhang Tianbo, whom I met during my visit to Harbin for my first book launch in 2009.

In Sydney, Andrew and I introduced Xiao to scuba diving. He took to it with passion and later qualified as an instructor. A true entrepreneur, on return to Harbin, Xiao established a successful scuba diving school – Ice Dive Harbin. He now divides his time between teaching a university course in animation and training people to dive, then taking them to famous dive sites in countries around the world.

Later that evening, we join Xiao's parents and his wife for dinner. While we all enjoy a delicious hotpot, Xiao puts his language skills to good use, interpreting the

conversation between his parents, Andrew and myself. Andrew and I talk about our activities in Harbin and catch up on the latest news in the Zhang family.

I happen to mention our trip to the Huangshan cemetery and my concern about the ongoing maintenance of my great-grandparents' grave, which I have paid to be renovated. Later in the evening, when proposing a toast to our enduring friendship, Zhang Tianbo declares that my family will be his family and that he – or Xiao – will visit my family's graves when they attend their own. I am deeply moved.

True to his word, in a message on Chinese New Year, Xiao tells me he has been to see the Zaretsky grave several times and emails me photographs showing the renovation work completed. Several months later, around the time of Tomb-Sweeping (Ancestor's) Day, I receive a photograph of the grave with the following message:

> On the eve of the 'Qingming' festival commemorating the deceased, in the name of Mara and her husband we paid tribute to her 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!

---O---

In June 2017 I am enticed back to Harbin to participate in the first international conference of former foreign residents organised by the Harbin Municipal Foreign Office with the theme, 'Looking Back to History, Working Together to Create a Strong Future'. This event brings together former *Harbintsy* and their descendants of diverse cultures and ethnicities – Russians, Poles, Jews, Georgians, Karaites and Tatars. We arrive from various countries in which our families resettled, including Russia, Poland, Israel, the United States, Australia, Latvia and Japan.

'Why are the authorities doing this?' 'Why now, after all these years?', some participants ask.

I see it as the culmination of steps the Harbin authorities have been taking for over a decade to forge links with various communities who once made the city their home. Now Harbin's cosmopolitan history is being leveraged in support of President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road' foreign policy initiative, with its emphasis on connectivity between people, as well as economic imperatives. In his remarks at a round table meeting with scholars and experts, Mayor Song Xibin positions the conference squarely in this context. He also lauds the contribution Harbin's cultural diversity has made to the spirit of the city.

Such recognition of our shared history is welcome. The Mayor also invites us to put forward ideas on preserving the history of Harbin's former residents and attracting more visitors to the city. As on previous occasions, I emphasise the importance of making personal and community archival records accessible to descendants and qualified scholars to inform our understanding of our shared history. I also raise the issue of the former Tatar mosque, which my paternal grandfather attended.

Wandering down Tongjiang Street from the former Jewish school and synagogue which have new life as a music school and concert hall, I had been disappointed to find the Tatar mosque in the same precinct in a bedraggled state with its door firmly shut to the public. I suggest to the mayor that, at a time when the city is celebrating Harbin's multicultural diversity, the mosque would be the perfect venue for a museum commemorating the Tatar community of Harbin, which has special significance as the first Tatar community outside the Russian empire in the Far East. Like the exhibition on Harbin's Jewish community in the former New Synagogue in Jingwei Street, this would educate visitors about another important community that once thrived in Harbin. It would also correct the inaccurate impression that the building is a 'Turkish' mosque. While the Tatars are part of the 'Turko-Tatar' linguistic grouping from the former Russian empire, the mosque itself has nothing to do with Turkey.

Apart from the formal conference sessions, our time in Harbin is packed with activities. We pay respects to family and friends at the Huangshan Cemetery, visit the Buddhist Jile Si temple and interesting museums, walk down the Songhua river embankment. We are blown away by Harbin's new opera house on the other side of the Songhua, whose futuristic architectural design challenges the iconic status of ours on Sydney Harbour. Yet my visit is tinged with an overwhelming sadness.

On 19 February 2017, my friend Zeng Yizhi lost her battle with cancer.

It hits me hardest during an interview ahead of the conference when a journalist from the *Heilongjiang Daily* asks me how it feels to be back in Harbin. I completely lose my composure and burst into tears:

'It's the first time in seventeen years that I am here without my friend Zeng Yizhi.'

In the months before her death, through email messages transmitted by her daughter, Zeng Yizhi agrees to my proposal to oversee the translation of her book, *The City and the People: Stories of Harbin* into English. Comments by Chinese readers that reading my book had opened their eyes to things they never knew about their city brought home to me the importance of sharing our stories in translation. My aim is to enable non-Chinese readers to gain insight into the history of the city from Yizhi's interviews with Chinese and Russian *Harbintsy* over many years – my tribute to my friend.

I left Harbin too young to have a sense of nostalgia for the city. I 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. But above all else, I treasure the growing and unexpected web of relationships I have formed in Harbin, the experiences we have shared and the opportunities we have to enhance these further.

These are the ties that bind.