



Secrets AND Spies

THE HARBIN FILES

IN THE 1950s AND EARLY 1960s, more than 10,000 Russians from north China found refuge in Australia. Most came from the city of Harbin, which had been the centre of a thriving Russian community in the first half of the 20th century. Among them was author Mara Moustafine, who arrived with her family in 1959 as a young child. Mara's family witnessed 50 turbulent years of history in Harbin – the influx of refugees from the Bolshevik Revolution and civil war, the Japanese occupation in the 1930s, liberation by the Soviet army in 1945 and China's Communist Revolution in 1949.

Mara Moustafine's book, *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files* (Vintage, 2002), tells the story of her family's life in China through this period, as well as the tragic fate of her grandmother's family, who returned to Soviet Russia to escape the Japanese occupation, only to be caught in Stalin's purges of the late 1930s. Her book was awarded a 2003 NSW Premier's Award and short-listed for the 2004 National Biography Prize and the 2004 Kiriyaama Pacific Rim Book Prize.

Mara's quest to find her family history took her to the archives of Russia and China as well as the National Archives of Australia.

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Mara tells her story ...

‘TOTALITARIAN REGIMES tend to retain secret police files on their citizens, even decades after the people in question have died or emigrated. The information I found in such files in Russian and Chinese archives were an invaluable starting point for my book. But equally important were the human sources and historical material which helped put the information in context. It is now clear, many records were falsified and information manipulated to suit the politics of the day.’



Victims of Stalin

Growing up in Cold War Australia, I was curious about the fate of my grandmother Gita's family who had left China for the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s to escape the Japanese occupation – especially her father Girsh Onikul, her 26-year-old sister Manya and 30-year-old brother Abram, who had disappeared during the purges.

My chance to find out came with the release of documents from previously secret Soviet state and party archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as these included the secret police files of victims of Stalin's purges.

In 1992, I went to the old KGB (renamed the FSB) headquarters in Moscow, armed with the family's so-called 'certificates of rehabilitation', which had been given to me by a surviving relative. Issued in 1956 after Khrushchev exposed Stalin's crimes, these cleared the family members of any charges. These certificates proved to be my access to the Onikul family's secret police files.

Six months after my visit to the FSB, I received advice on four of the Onikuls from security authorities in Nizhny

Novgorod (previously Gorky) in central Russia, where they had gone to live, and on Abram Onikul from the military court in Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East. All had been arrested in 1937 as Japanese spies. Manya and her father had been executed, her mother and younger brother sent to labour camps, from which they were released in the 1940s. Abram had died in 1941 while serving his 10-year sentence in the Arctic Gulag.

In 1996, I visited the Nizhny Novgorod State Archive to see the Onikul family files. They were extraordinary. Starting with each individual's arrest documents, the files contained detailed biographies, records of interrogation, indictments, sentences, appeals, and later documents about their rehabilitation review. I still recall the emotional impact of reading the words 'To be shot' in Manya's sentence, with a scribbled note 'Shot 18 January 1938'.

Through a fortuitous connection with a former KGB colonel, I visited Khabarovsk in 2000, where I gained access to Abram's 200-page file at the FSB headquarters. The sad irony I discovered was that Abram had, in fact, been working for the NKVD (the KGB's predecessor), running operations against the Japanese in



Manya Onikul (1911–38) in Shanghai, 1934. Manya was Mara's grandmother's younger sister.



(opposite page) Abram Onikul (1907–41), one of Gita's brothers. 'Treasure the copy, but don't forget the original' he wrote on the back of this photo which he sent to Gita and her husband Motya from Mongolia in 1927.

(far left) Photo of Abram taken in prison, 1938.

(left) Motya and Gita Zaretsky, Mara's grandparents (left), Inna Zaretsky, Mara's mother (centre), with Girsh and Chesna Onikul, Mara's great-grandparents (right), Harbin, 1936.

(below) Mara Moustafine, author of *Secrets and Spies*.

occupied Manchuria. Appeals in his file graphically describe his treatment:

On 22 January 1938, soon after wake-up, I was summoned for interrogation by [name], the assistant to the chief... and was returned to my cell only on 25 January 1938, having spent three and a half days in the interrogation room without food or drink, being beaten mercilessly by [3 people named] ... The latter did not even let me out to the toilet. At the end, I barely made it back to my cell. But I confessed nothing as I had enough strength to fight the provocations of the interrogators...

From researchers at the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, I learned just how widely the Onikul family's experience was shared. In all, 48,000 Russians from China were arrested under a special Stalinist order – 31,000 of them executed, the rest sent to labour camps.

Russian life in Harbin, 1908-59

The biographies which the Onikuls gave in the course of their NKVD interrogations provided much information about their life

in China until 1935, as well as snippets on family members who had stayed there.

One rich source of material on my family's life during the Japanese occupation (1932–45) was the collection of files from the Bureau of Russian Emigrés in Manchuria, brought to Khabarovsk by victorious Soviet troops after the Japanese defeat in 1945. Apart from biographies in files on some members of my extended family and scurrilous informants' reports on others, the collection contains Harbin newspapers and magazines from the period.

With the help of researchers from the Harbin Jewish Research Centre at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, I also read the family's files from the former Harbin Public Security Bureau, held in the Heilongjiang Provincial Archive. Written in both Russian and Chinese, the files contained the detailed biographies that the family had to provide to obtain residence and other permits. The files also gave an insight into the administrative arrangements in Harbin during the Chinese Communist period up to the time we departed for Australia in 1959.

The Australian chapter

For those of my extended family fortunate enough to reach Australia, the passenger lists, immigration and ASIO files which I obtained through the National Archives of Australia completed the story.

Some of these files reveal that the complex geopolitics of Manchuria at the time were quite troublesome for ASIO as they grappled with security clearance issues for Russians from China. A marginal note in the hand of Immigration Minister Sir Alex Downer usefully pointed out:

The ASIO evidence seems to relate largely to pro-Russian activities during the war and shortly thereafter. Note the Russians were then our valued allies, the Japs our deadly foes. This part of the ASIO case should be discounted.

