

HARBIN, MANCHURIA



1896 China grants Russia a concession to build the railway (CER) across Manchuria, linking the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok. With this come extra-territorial rights and Manchuria in effect becomes a Russian colony, and Harbin its *de facto* capital. Keen to attract entrepreneurs, the Russian authorities create an environment of tolerance, equal opportunity and encourage minorities – including Jews, Tartars, Georgians, Poles, Armenians to settle there.

From 1903 As well as establishing their

own community institutions, Jews are active in the commercial, cultural and public life of Russian Harbin.

1909 Jews make up 12 of the 40 members on the city council.

1917 The Bolshevik Revolution leads to arrival of thousands more Jewish refugees but Manchuria also becomes a staging post for anti-Bolshevik White Guard and Cossacks, many of whom are anti-Semitic.

1920s There are 15,000 Jews in Harbin and environs, about 10% of the Russian population.

1924 China recognises the Soviet government and agrees to joint Soviet-Chinese administration of the CER.

1931 Japan invades and occupies Manchuria which leads to lawlessness and frequent anti-Semitic attacks, prompting many Jews to move to Shanghai, Tianjin and Palestine.

1935 The USSR sells the CER to Japan. Many more depart, including to the USSR. The community is less than 5000.

August 1945 The Red Army liberates Manchuria. Their arrival is initially greeted with enthusiasm but soon leads to the arrest and deportation to prison camp in the USSR of thousands of Harbin residents among them Dr. Abraham Kaufman, the leader of the Jewish community.

1949 Chinese Communist Revolution. In the decade that follows, remaining Jews and Russians leave for the USSR, Israel, Australia, North and South America.

1962 The end of Jewish community activities in Harbin

1998 Restoration of Harbin Jewish cemetery begins.

2000 Harbin Jewish Research Centre established

2004 Restoration of former synagogue buildings. MM

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE MARA MOUSTAFINE TELLS OF HER FAMILY'S EXPERIENCES

Both my grandparents' families were early settlers, who came from Belorussia to escape discrimination, poverty, pogroms and to build a new life. My grandmother's father followed his brother and cousins to Harbin in 1909. He moved on to Hailar, a small trading post on the edge of the Mongolian steppes, where he was an agent for Singer sewing machines and ran a small dairy business. His wife joined him a year later, with six month Gita (my grandmother) and her older brother. Other relatives followed and the family grew.

My grandfather, Matvei Abramovich (Motya) Zaretsky, arrived in Harbin in 1912 as a teenager to join his older brother and, by 1909, set up the family meat business. Their sisters and parents followed. They had a small kosher butchery in Yamskaya Street and a retail outlet at Harbin market.

Although their parents were observant Jews and my grandparents were married by a Rabbi under a *chupah* and observed the high holidays, like many Russian Jews in Harbin at the time, Motya and Gita were secular Jews.

In 1924 China agreed to joint Soviet-Chinese administration of the CER, including the railway, schools, hospitals

and other institutions. It was decreed that only Soviet or Chinese citizens could work for what was effectively the civil service in the CER zone. Some Russians, Jews among them, registered as Soviet citizens, mostly to preserve their jobs or, like my mother's family, to avoid being stateless. A few did so out of sympathy for the revolution. The rest chose to remain 'white émigrés'.

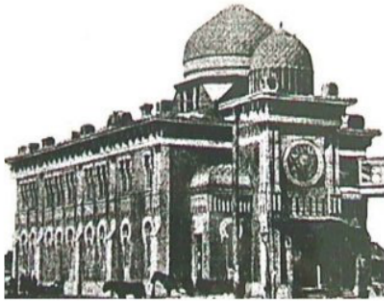
The Japanese occupation was a critical event in the lives of Harbin's Jews and Russians, as well as the Chinese. In

garnering support of Russian émigrés for their occupation, the Japanese rekindled old dreams and prejudices. They established the Bureau of Russian Émigré Affairs (BREM) as a mechanism to control the Russian population. It was headed by a succession of White Army generals and run by members of the Russian Fascist Party (RFP) and their sympathisers, thereby giving implicit sanction to their fiercely anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic ideology.

A rise in banditry, anti-Semitism and



Mostavaya St. in Harbin, postcard, 1920s Beth Hatefuisoth archive



The Main Synagogue, built 1907

political intimidation, together with a declining economy and the takeover of businesses by the Japanese, prompted many Jews to leave Harbin. Some went to other cities in China, notably Shanghai and Tianjin. Others were among the 30,000 families who left Manchuria after the Soviets sold the CER to Japan.

For our family, as for many others, the Japanese occupation proved to be a watershed. My grandparents and mother stayed on in Harbin, where my grandfather had recently built an apartment block and joined his brother in a new firm. However, my grandmother's parents and siblings decided to seek refuge in the Soviet Union. It was a fated choice. At the height of Stalin's Great Terror in 1937-38, they were among the 48,000 Harbintsy who were arrested as Japanese spies – some 31,000 were shot; the rest sent to labour camps.

For many of those who stayed on in Harbin, life was a harrowing experience. Suddenly people who for years had lived side by side, united by their Russian origins, became identified by the characteristics which divided them: 'white émigré' or 'Soviet', 'Orthodox Christian' or 'Jew'.

All adult émigré Russians were required to register with the BREM. Only then could they receive identity papers, residence permits, employment cards and travel documents. Those who did not were denied employment and education for their children. Though his brother and some other relatives 'converted' to émigré status, my grandfather insisted that being stateless, 'a citizen of nowhere', was too risky in the face of Japanese aggression and his family remained Soviets.

As a result, my mother was excluded from school and had to study at home with a tutor. Later, when contact between émigrés and Soviets was forbidden, she could no longer study music or participate at concerts at Madame Gershgorina's music school; nor could she

belong to either of Harbin's two Jewish youth organisations – Betar or Maccabi.

Though my grandfather's brother had Lithuanian citizenship, in 1940 the Japanese arrested him and took over his retail business at Harbin market. Ironically, they kept on my grandfather because of his experience in the wholesale business, making him an adviser in their meat monopoly association. Only in 1943 was he removed at the behest of BREM officials, who concocted a case full of bizarre anti-Semitic and anti-Soviet innuendo.

When the Soviet Red Army arrived in August 1945 to 'liberate' Manchuria they were welcomed with flowers and euphoria by most Harbintsy, regardless of their political tags. Still, thousands of innocent émigrés were rounded up and deported to prison camps in the USSR, along with Japanese collaborators.

As one Maoist political campaign was rolled out after another in the wake of the Chinese Communist revolution of 1949, Russians and Jews found it increasingly difficult to adapt to life in the People's Republic. Many Jews left for Israel in 1950.

At that time, my parents were still students at the Harbin Polytechnical Institute's new Faculty of Oriental Studies. When they graduated as fluent Mandarin speakers, they worked as technical interpreters with the Sugar Refineries Construction Bureau. In 1954, all Russians were first invited, then pressured, to repatriate to the Soviet Union to join Khrushchev's 'virgin lands campaign' in Siberia and Kazakhstan. At the same time, exit permits to other countries were halted. Because they resisted, my parents were eventually sacked from their jobs. In 1956, my family started to make plans to leave Harbin.

Our exit options were twofold – Israel, where some of the Zaretskys had gone on aliyah, or Australia, which was one of the few countries taking Russian refugees at that time. It took a while to conclude all the formalities. In the meantime, my family played their part in the Great Leap Forward, feeding scrap metal into the neighbourhood furnace on the street near our house and clattering saucepans on the roof to eliminate such 'superfluous creatures' as sparrows.

By the time we departed for Sydney in 1959, the Jewish community in Harbin had dwindled to a couple of hundred.

HARBIN JEWS IN EMIGRATION

During their years in Harbin, Jews lived in a predominantly Russian world, with little thought for the China around them. Few studied the language seriously or delved into the culture and most of their interactions with Chinese were confined to their domestic assistants and tradesmen. Yet in emigration, Harbin and China are central to the identity of most Harbintsy. The Jewish Harbintsy have maintained their links across the world through the Association of Far Eastern Jews established in Israel 53 years ago and the Bulletin of *Igud Yotzei Sin*. Its pages are laden with histories of Jewish institutions and life in China, personal reminiscences, searches for erstwhile friends, obituaries and nostalgia.

Returning to Harbin in May 2000, 41 years after our departure, my parents and I were distressed to find our apartment block gone and the two synagogues barely recognisable. But finding the family graves at the restored Jewish cemetery was heartening. Now the Harbin government's programme to preserve the relics of former Jewish life has gone further. The former New Synagogue has been restored as a museum of Jews in Harbin; the former Main Synagogue will remain a transport workers' guest house but the exterior is to be renovated. This is great news for the Harbintsy and all who are interested in Jewish history.

Mara Moustafine is author of the award winning *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files* Vintage 2002. She has worked as a diplomat, intelligence analyst, journalist and business executive in Australia and Asia. She is currently National Director of Amnesty International Australia.

Mara and her mother, Inna Moustafine, at the grave of Mara's great grandparents, Abram Itzik and Rachel Zaretsky, that is among some 800 graves at the Harbin Jewish cemetery

