The Harbin Files

Postscript to Chinese Edition

I was amazed at the exposure and acclaim my book received when it was published in Australia in November 2002 and of the interest it attracted from a very broad audience. Apart from book reviews and interviews in newspapers, magazines and online journals, over the months that followed, I was interviewed on a range of national and local radio programs, spoke at several writers' festivals and gave public lectures at institutes and universities. *The Australian*, a national daily newspaper for which I had once worked, even ran extracts and photographs from the book over two days during the New Year holiday period, when people have more time to read. How eerie it was to see Manya's dark eyes peering out mysteriously from the pages of an Australian newspaper.

Thanks to this publicity, I received emails, letters and phone calls from around Australia and across the world, from people that I knew, as well as complete strangers. Some wrote to say how surprised they had been to discover that such a large community of Russians had made China their home for so many years and had lived through such extraordinary political upheavals. Many had previously only known of Harbin as a temporary refuge for "white" Russians fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution. Several readers wrote about how moved they were by the "indomitable courage" of my relatives, their will to survive and their passion for justice which came through so clearly from the transcripts on the files. Such comments pleased me immensely as it had been my aim to give the family back their voices.

Quite a few Russian *Harbintsy* got in touch to say my book had given them insight into the possible fate of members of their own families who had disappeared in the Soviet Union at the time of the Purges or were deported there from Harbin after the war ended in 1945. Friends from Russian school days said my book had helped them put their parents' stories about Harbin into a broader context. My book inspired quite a few people to take up their own searches and journeys and I was happy to share my insights on accessing archives in Russia, as well as the names of contacts in Harbin and Shanghai.

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It is August 2004 and I am in Harbin to participate in a conference billed as "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), it brings together people from all over the world – from Israel, Canada, the United States, Russia and Australia. Most are former residents and their families, but there are also some interested academics, journalists and film-makers. Among them are quite a few of our family friends, as well as people who had helped me when I was researching my book.

Although the timing of the seminar is problematic for me because of work commitments in Australia, the minute I received the invitation, I knew I had to go, if only for a few days. Going to the second or third such seminar just wouldn't be the same. Besides, it's an opportunity to visit my friends in Harbin and see what has changed over the past four years. As the theme of the "academic thesis" I have been asked to prepare for the meeting, I choose the obvious one – my family's life in Harbin over fifty turbulent years. Here is a chance to bring home our family's story.

Arriving in Harbin on an overcast Saturday afternoon, I am struck by how much the city has changed in the four years since I was there last. Everything I see on the drive in from the airport is faster, bigger, brighter and more modern. When I walk into the elegant lobby of the five star Shangrila Hotel, I could be anywhere in Asia. Then, through the crowd of people milling in the lobby, I spot a couple of family friends from Sydney, one couple with their adult children, another woman with her granddaughters. Deep in conversation on a settee are a professor I know from Los Angeles and another I'd met in Moscow the previous year. Professor Lu Shi Xiao from the Jewish Research Centre comes over to welcome me. It must be Harbin.

I have deliberately arrived a few days ahead of the seminar to see my Harbin friends. The first one I call is Valia Han, the Russified Korean woman I had befriended on my previous visits.

"Let's meet tonight at Kolya Zaika's place" she tells me. "He's invited some people for dinner and asked me to invite you too." Kolya is another Russian *Harbinets* from Sydney who now spends part of the year in Harbin, living in the former house of his

grandfather. I remember meeting him with Valia at the Russian cemetery on that first visit with my parents.
"But I don't really know him, I protest". "Of course, you do – and you will. Here we Russians are all family."

I arrive at Kolya's in the August downpour, which so often floods the drains and causes severe traffic congestion in the narrow streets of the old Daoli district. Stepping inside I am overwhelmed by the warmth and noisy chatter of a quintessentially Russian house. Kolya greets me like a long lost friend introduces me to his guests, sitting around the dining room table laden with cakes and delicacies, cups of tea and bottles of liquor. Valia is there, as well as the professor from Moscow, whom I'd seen earlier at the hotel, Chinese friends and a couple visiting from Europe. Next to arrive is my friend Zeng Yizhi, the journalist who has written the stories of Russian *Harbintsy* in the local newspaper and was so helpful in sending me the book from my grandmother's old friend Frosya. Then, a few more *Harbintsy* who are here for the conference from Israel. 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.

Next day I rise early and skip breakfast to head down to the Songhua embankment to observe the local people starting their day. It is my favourite pastime 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 on the river bank below. Others perform *tai chi* in slow motion, their gaze focused on some internal horizon. These are people of my parents' generation and I recall how much they enjoyed talking to them on their return visit in 2000.

Further along, in the riverside park playground, women swing backwards and forwards on metal swings and other exercise contraptions, while gum-booted fishermen sell their morning catch from plastic tubs and Styrofoam boxes at the side. Over by the former yacht club which was such a landmark of my parents' youth, middle aged women dance gracefully with bright red fans. One man sits to adjust his roller blades, another stands reading a letter. A couple of cross-bred Pekinese dogs

survey the scene. Everyone savours the calm before the onslaught of the working day noise of traffic jams and construction jackhammers.

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. But Chinese editions of Hilary Clinton's biography, *Gone with the Wind* and *A Little Mermaid* at the adjacent book stall reflect some cultural balance. 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. Early morning shoppers carefully choose fresh vegetables from huge piles laid out on sackcloth. There are tables laden with every kind of meat, sacks of grain and dried spices and plastic vats full of assorted pickles. I breath in the rich aromas and cannot resist the cobs of yellow corn, being grilled on a small charcoal fire. I buy one and eat it as I make my way back to the hotel.

That afternoon, Zeng Yizhi takes me to see Frosya. In her small and crowded room at the top of a dark stairwell, nothing much has changed, 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 photographs in my book which I have brought her and says she is happy to have helped me tell me story.

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, her old friend and colleague from the pharmacy has recently moved to Beijing to live with her daughter. 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.

The following morning, while the conference group go on a sightseeing trip to Sun Island, I go with Valia to the Hungashan cemetery to visit my family’s graves. 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 weather-worn 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 grave yard 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 violinst 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 my husband 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 the recently published book on the Jews of Harbin, but had no idea that they would be used to such effect.

I congratulate the Director Qu Wei on the exhibition and ask about his plans to have the synagogues refurbished and one of them used as a museum. "Tomorrow you will see", he tells me proudly. Sure enough, when the bus drives us to visit the former Jewish quarter the following afternoon, we see the former New Synagogue on Jingwe Street fenced off and covered in scaffolding. Back in 2000, it was being used as a Public Security Bureau club. Now it will be a Jewish Museum. No such luck for the Old Synagogue nearby which is still operating as a guesthouse of the railway carriage factory.

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 Xu Xin from Nanjing. The 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. At the end of my presentation, I make another plea for access to the archival records and files of the Jews and Russians of Harbin to be made available while those who have interest or knowledge are still alive: "because history belongs to all of us".

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In July 2005, Andrew and I are back in Harbin. With four days to spare between academic conferences in Beijing and Jinan, it's too good an opportunity to miss. 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. I also want to explore the possibility of putting up a plaque at the

mosque to honour my Tatar grandfather, whose grave has long disappeared. For convenience as much as nostalgia, we stay at the Holiday Inn on Jingwei Street, 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 is the New Synagogue, which had been under scaffolding on my last visit. Now it 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 litter bin 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, 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 Min Xu, 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 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 set up by my friend Zeng Yizhi, one of the mosque elders tells us that the mosque is again functioning as a Moslem place of worship. He says the elders want the administration to establish 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." This seems an appropriate moment to ask about the plaque for my grandfather, Muhamedjian Mustafin, once an active member of Harbin's Tatar community. The response is positive. To accomplish my mission, I invoke the help of Kolya and Zeng Yizhi to have the plaque made once I agree the wording with my father and have it translated.

Our four days in Harbin are 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. We lunch with Qu Wei, Li Shu Xiao and others from the Jewish Research Centre, where Andrew, shares with them some ideas about the use of multimedia for online exhibitions that he has used in his own research. An Israeli friend, Dan Ben Canaan shows us the amazing hi-tech Heilongjiang Television Station where he works and takes us on a tour of the colourfully lit Nangan district by night.

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 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 Nikiforova, the last Russian émigré in Harbin is gone.

On our last afternoon in Harbin, we walk down to our favourite haunt, the Songhua River embankment. It is Saturday and the place is a melee of people of all ages engaged in a variety of recreational activity – 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". "Odalia", 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*). My new friends get it. They clap and shout out what I've said. As I look over at the ensemble I hear they are now playing *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.

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