

22. Jewish Life in Tientsin

Some background notes on the political environment in Tientsin are necessary to show how it influenced the life of Russian Jews. In the period I am covering in these notes it is important to note that the Japanese occupied Tientsin from July 1937 to August 1945.

Before 1941, stateless Russian Jews living in China were better off than Soviet Jewish citizens who were exposed to the particularly nasty anti-Semitism of Russian fascist mercenaries who worked for the Japanese. However, probably the key criterion used by thugs when targeting Jews of Russian background in the 1930s was not the Soviet passport or lack thereof, but the apparent wealth of the victim and the victim's family. When the Pacific war broke out in December 1941, the situation reversed itself. The tenuous protection of the foreign Concessions was gone. The Soviet Union at that time was not at war with Japan so Soviet passport holders (including Jews) had a kind of protection from Japanese intimidation and attacks by Russian fascists. Our family did not have Soviet passports and were therefore vulnerable.

Russian Jews lived in China no more than two to three generations. Typically, one generation was born in Russia and then moved to China and the next two generations were born in China. Generally, the Russian Jews who lived in China viewed themselves as transient refugees. They knew that they did not belong to Northeast China. As such, they felt that they had a mission of preserving their identity and their culture as Jews and they resisted the influence of Chinese customs, art, and institutions on their life. Assimilation of Russian Jews into the Chinese community was almost totally absent.

Even though my maternal grandfather, Pavel, was a very religious man, and my paternal grandfather, Boris was active in the Jewish community, I would not describe my parents as being religious. They fasted at Yom Kippur and we celebrated Passover and the Jewish New Year but my parents never went to the synagogue on a regular weekly basis. Their religious observance was more of 'keeping up a tradition' rather than a belief. At home, neither father nor mother knew how to say the Jewish prayers. Therefore, after my grandparents left for the USA we did not have any formal religion at home. Therefore, Larry and I were brought up knowing we were Jews but no great emphasis was ever placed on religion.

At the Tientsin Jewish School we were taught to read and speak Hebrew, learned about the Jewish Holy days, and studied Jewish history. However, Russian and English were the main languages of the school, so most of the time 'being Jewish' was not a major aspect of our lives. (Larry may disagree with me, as he joined a Zionist Youth Group called Betar. This organization was very active in Tientsin).

The Tientsin Jewish Union built the Tientsin Synagogue in 1939. This was the result of large numbers of refugees coming to the city before and during World War II. It occupied an area about 600 square meters. Before 1939, Gordon Hall was regularly hired by the Jewish community to celebrate the holy days like Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah.

The local community started to learn about the destruction of European Jewry soon after the end of World War II. There were lists of communities and people that perished; these were published in the local press. When the full news of the Holocaust became known there was an outpouring of grief at a family level and at the community level. Mirrors in our house were covered and grandmother and mother sat 'shiva'⁵⁷ on the floor for one week. No doubt our grandparents read about deaths of distant family members in Europe.

⁵⁷ A mourning period ritual, during which family members traditionally gather in one home.

I clearly remember standing with my mother in our dining room and her telling me about the establishment of the State of Israel. I was eight and a half years old. She had a copy of a local (Jewish?) newspaper spread across the table. I remember a picture of Theodore Herzl on the front page and my mother telling me that this event was foretold nearly two thousand years ago.

I remember going to the synagogue with my class in May 1948 during the celebrations for the creation of the State of Israel. This day was undoubtedly the greatest public event in our lives in China. The synagogue was packed as the picture shows. The older generation were praying all their lives for a 'return to Jerusalem'. Now that their prayers were answered there was huge excitement in the community; people felt that they were privileged to be alive when this momentous event actually happened.

Alex Auswaks described the atmosphere in the synagogue the following way:

*"And then there was Krimchansky. He was just an outstanding cantor – his voice wept when he prayed Kol Nidre (prayer recited in the synagogue at the beginning of the evening service on the Day of Atonement); it resounded with thanksgiving when he sung Psalms on the 15th of May, 1948 - he was triumphant."*⁵⁸



The overflow of people can be seen standing on the steps of the synagogue and in front of the synagogue. Most probably, Larry and I are in the crowd. The weather was perfect for this huge occasion.

As a member of Betar (the Zionist Youth Organisation) Larry would have participated in the march from the Tientsin Jewish School to the synagogue. On that day people who never attended a service in the synagogue were there.

The Tientsin synagogue is now the only public building relating to past Jewish life in Tientsin that is still standing. It is located at the political and cultural centre of the city.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Alex Auswaks, *IGS Bulletin* 329

⁵⁹ The synagogue was located at the crossing of today's Nanjing Road and Zhengzhou Street.



Naturally the Jewish community organized a number of celebratory events and here is one example: Jewish community leaders sitting in front of a picture of Theodore Herzl with the Russian inscription behind saying ‘Free State of Israel!’



This same picture was published in ‘The Tientsin Evening Journal’ in May 1948. The names of the people in the photo were also listed.

The Chinese community, including the Chinese Communist Party, generally welcomed news of the establishment of the State of Israel. Below, the *Jizhong Duobao*, a communist newspaper, applauds the founding of the State of Israel.



The Tientsin Synagogue was run on traditional, orthodox lines. We never knew anything about reform synagogues. This is how the interior of the synagogue looked in the 1940s.



“There aren’t many cities in the world where the synagogue is aesthetically the most beautiful edifice. However, in Tientsin the most beautiful house of worship was the synagogue. It was a tall graceful building with insets, long upright windows and beautiful wooden doors. The ceiling was sky blue with a multitude of gold stars painted on it.”⁶⁰

The Synagogue building has now been approved as a State-preserved monument of architecture to be owned by the Tianjin Municipal government. In Appendix H are pictures of the restored building.

⁶⁰ Alex Auswaks, IGS Bulletin 341

Alex Auswaks remembers when the Jews of Kai Feng Fu once came on pilgrimage during Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur to the Tientsin Synagogue, and our grandfather Pavel, as Gabbai,⁶¹ arranged seating for them in the front row as a mark of respect.

I remember participating in the annual Passover holidays at our house in Rue Dillon. Grandfather was in charge of eliminating any traces of leavening from one's possession. Even the cracks of kitchen counters were thoroughly scrubbed, to remove any traces of flour and yeast, however small.

We also used a special set of crockery and cutlery for this holiday. During the first evening meal (Seder) it is the youngest person around the table that asks the question 'Why is this night different to all other nights?' - known as the 'Manishtana'.

I memorised the Hebrew text and recited the question without any difficulty – knowing how to read Hebrew certainly helped. Here is the Passover prayer booklet⁶² we used during our last years in China – note that it was available in China because of the presence of the US Army from 1945.



Our grandfather hid the '*afikoman*' (the piece of matzo that is hidden and then eaten at the conclusion of the Seder meal) and Larry and I had to find it and then receive a present. After our grandparents left for the USA our Seders changed significantly. Father was not able to read the Hebrew text and while mother was probably able to do so she did not take on this role. While we still had the traditional Passover meal there were no prayers or traditional songs.

It is fair to say that the Chinese generally did not show any prejudice against the Jewish community; anti-Semitism mainly came from the 'White Russians' as well as Germans living in their German Concession. Marriages across cultures and nationalities were easily arranged. Jewish conversions were carried out with minimum fuss.

While most of our friends were Jewish, our family did have some non-Jewish Russian friends. The Schelokhoffs were good friends of my parents. Mr. Schelokhoff and father both worked for the British American Tobacco Company and they were regular visitors to our house. Alexandra (Alya) Shadrin was in the same class with me at TJS and I regarded her as a friend.

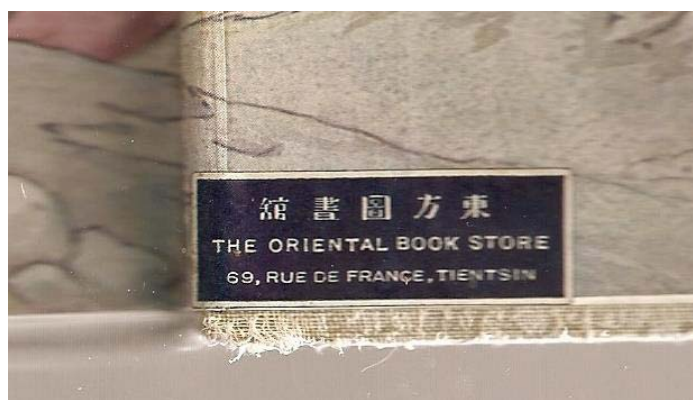
⁶¹ A Gabbai (Hebrew: גבאי) is a person who assists in the running of a synagogue.

⁶² The Haggadah (Hebrew: הַגְּדָה, "telling") is a Jewish religious text that sets out the order of the Passover Seder

The Jewish community in Tientsin was largely self-operating. Its people ate customary Jewish and east European food, often bought from Jewish grocers. There were shops of every conceivable kind. There were Jewish watch repairmen, jewellers, tailors for western-style suits and handmade footwear of relatively high quality and style, Jewish run pharmacies, Jewish doctors and dentists, Jewish barbers and beauticians, and of course Jewish charities. It was a generous, homogenous community, very conscious of the needs of the elderly and the less fortunate.

Mr. Lifshitz ran a photography business and he took all the official photos for the Jewish community. Our family also used him and you can see his signature on the bottom right of all his photographs. The kosher delicatessen was Levin's. The favourite butcher was the handsome Misha; he was Chinese but had married a Russian girl. Thanks to the generosity of Moses Triguboff, the Jewish Community had an old people's home.

New books were bought from the Oriental bookstore owned by Mr. Paradissis, old books from Life Bookstore. Russian books were bought at Serebrennikoff, who also sold toys and stationery.



I remember going shopping with my mother; she shopped mainly in the English Concession – Cousens Road, Meadows Road and Taku Road. She often shopped in non-Jewish shops, including a number of Chinese owned shops. I loved those shops that sold nuts and oils and herbs; I can still smell the aroma in those shops, everything was in large sacks or boxes, there was no packaging. A special treat was to be taken to the Kiessling restaurant for an ice cream.

I can't remember that any bartering took place in shops. Prices were generally fixed and customers just paid for the goods that they required. However, in markets it was customary to barter; prices would suddenly get inflated if a westerner wanted to purchase any item.

Two-tone shoes were very much in vogue in Tientsin in the late 1940s. Father decided that we should follow that trend and took Larry and me to a Chinese shoe shop on Victoria Road. We had our feet measured up and a week later the shoes were ready. So without any further ado we all walked out of the shop in our brand new brown and white shoes. Unfortunately for me, we met up with a number of my classmates who checked us out very carefully! The next school day I received considerable ribbing about our family's fashion statements!

The Tientsin Hebrew Association (established in 1904) took charge of religious and social affairs in the Jewish community. It existed over 45 years and built up a whole set of community facilities.

Here is the front cover of the Association's report for 1939. Note that the report was written up in the Russian language, even though English was the language used in all commercial activities.



The Russian/Jewish community in Tientsin was indeed very fortunate that it managed to escape any real form of persecution during World War II. The primary reason for this was that there was a non-aggression pact between the USSR and Japan during most of the war. In effect this meant that as 'Russians' we were not treated by the Japanese as aliens. When Russia finally declared war on Japan in 1945, the Japanese had far more pressing matters to attend to and so the Jewish community was spared any special attention. In fact, during World War II, the Jewish community maintained its original existing shape and became a refuge for Jews fleeing the Nazi Holocaust.

A Russian Jewish weekly newspaper was available in North China from 1921. It was originally called *Siberia-Palestine*. The name changed in 1926 to *Jewish Life*. There was an English Section within the newspaper.

This is how the front page looked like in March 1940.

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ЕВРЕЙСКАЯ ЖИЗНЬ — JEWISH LIFE —

<p>Подписная плата: На 1 год — 18.00 руб. • 6 мес. — 9.00 " • 3 мес. — 4.50 " • 1 мес. — 1.50 " За экспресс-доставку 24.00 руб. в год. Отд. №—50 Ф.</p>	<p>Выпущена 29-го Марта 7-й г. Ман-Дэ (1940.) 19 Марта 1940 г.</p>	<p>Registered at the Manchu-Ti-Kuo Post Office as Newspaper.</p>
<p>Адрес редакции и редакций: Харбин, Артиллерийская, 44, здание Главной Синагоги. Почтов. ящ. 450 Телефон № 53-80.</p>		

СОДЕРЖАНИЕ:

1. Нашей будет Эрец-Исраэль!	
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3. Американ. еврейство и евр. проблема	Д-р Н. ГОЛЬДМАН
4. Встреча с Бланком	Д-р З. АРИЭЛЬ.
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13. В Эрец-Исраэль.	
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15. А. Крейцер в Харбине.	
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Before my grandfather left Tientsin in 1947, he gave me a miniature Torah scroll. The Torah is Judaism's founding legal and ethical religious texts.



He also gave me and my father silk praying shawls (Larry was given one in 1947 for his bar-mitzvah).



Father's was a largish one – about one metre by two metres – one end of it is shown below.

Mine was a blue and white one – about half the size of my fathers.



Both my father's and my shawls had their own embroidered carry bags – as shown below.

