

**My family and its city: fifty years in Harbin**

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**Mara Moustafine** was born in Harbin, China into a family with Jewish, Russian and Tatar roots and came to Australia as a child in 1959. Bilingual in Russian and English, she completed a Master of Arts in International Relations at the Australian National University. She has worked as a diplomat, intelligence analyst, journalist, a senior business executive in Asia and as National Director of Amnesty International Australia.

She is author of the award winning book, ***Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files***, which tells the story of her family's life over fifty turbulent years in China and the fate of those who went to the USSR in the mid 1930s to escape the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, only to be caught in Stalin's purges. Her book was awarded the 2003 NSW Premier's Literary Award and was a finalist in the Kiriyaama Book Prize 2004 and the Australian National Biography Award 2004.

This paper is based on material from:

Mara Moustafine, ***Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files***, Random House Australia (Vintage) 2002; and Mara Moustafine, *The Harbin Connection: Russians from China* in Shen Yuanfang and Penny Edwards (eds) ***Beyond China: Migrating Identities***, Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University, 2002.

Four generations of my family lived in Harbin and Manchuria for over fifty years. On my mother's side, they were Jews from Byelorussia, who arrived in the early 1900s. On my father's side, they were Russians and Tatars from central Russia, who fled the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War. They lived through extraordinary times: the Japanese occupation under the puppet Manchukuo regime in 1932; liberation by the Soviet Red Army in 1945; and the first ten years of the People's Republic, until we left for Australia in 1959.

Much of this history is covered in my book, ***Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files*** (Vintage, 2002). Today, I would like to focus on the experience of my Jewish family (my grandfather's family, the Zaretskys and my grandmother's family, the Onikuls) to provide insight into the socio-political history of the community in which they lived.

### **Why Harbin?**

As many of you know, it all started with the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER/KVZhD). A deal was struck in 1896 between the governments of Qing China and Tsarist Russia, whereby Russia was granted a concession to build the railway across Manchuria, linking the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok. With this came extraterritorial rights in the zone along the route of the railway. Manchuria in effect became a Russian colony, and Harbin its *de facto* capital.

From the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people from the far reaches of the Tsarist empire came to settle the new frontier and build a new life. Keen to attract entrepreneurs and to help develop Manchuria, the Russian authorities deliberately created an environment of tolerance, equal opportunity and actively encouraged minorities – including Jews, Tartars, Georgians, Poles, Armenians and many others – to come and live there.

For Jews of the Tsarist empire, Russian Manchuria was the land of opportunity. The discriminatory laws and restrictions which prevailed in the empire proper - like those confining the Jews to live in the Pale of Settlement, excluding them from certain professions and setting quotas for their numbers in schools and other educational institutions - did not apply there. Most importantly, there were no pogroms and little overt anti-Semitism, at least until the late 1920s.

Jews started coming to Manchuria from 1898. They played an early role in developing natural resources and commerce in Manchuria. Most Jews who came to Manchuria settled in Harbin, though smaller communities were also established at small towns along the railway at Hailar, Manchuria Station, Mukden and Tsitsihar.

Harbin was a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, with many nationalities and religions living side by side in relative harmony. As well as establishing a range of their own community institutions, Jews were active in the

commercial, cultural and public life of Russian Harbin. They also participated actively in Harbin's municipal affairs—making up 12 of the 40 members on the city council in 1909. Although there is no evidence of Jews being employed by the CER before 1915, this may have been in deference to the hiring practice in Russian state enterprises, as there was no law to this effect.

In most families, the pattern of migration was that one member of the family would come first – to test the opportunities in their new homeland – then others would follow – brothers, sisters, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins.

So it was, with my family from Byelorussia – early settlers on both sides. My great grandfather, Girsh Onikul followed his brother and cousins to Harbin from Moghilev in 1909. Instead of staying in Harbin, 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 later had a small dairy business. His wife, Chesna Klebanova, joined him the following year, with her son and my 6 month old grandmother Gita. Other relatives followed.

My grandfather, Matvei Abramovich (Motya) Zaretsky, arrived in Harbin from Kopis in 1912 as a teenager to join his older brother, Ruvim, who had come in 1906 and by 1909 set up the family meat business “Zaretsky and Zalmanov”. His sisters and parents followed. They had a small *kosher* butchery in Yamskaya Street and a retail outlet at Harbin market. By 1921, Motya was a partner in the business, responsible for cattle purchase and slaughter. In 1924, he set up a cattle trading partnership “Myasotrud” and headed up its Hailar office for 8 years.

It was during this time, that he met and married my grandmother. Although their parents on both sides were observant Jews and my grandparents were married by a Rabbi under a *chupah* in Hailar and observed the high holidays, like many Russian Jews in Harbin at the time, Motya and Gita were secular rather than religious Jews.

During the civil war that followed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the numbers of early settlers in Manchuria were swelled by thousands of refugees. At its peak in the mid 1920s, the Russian community in Harbin numbered about 120,000 people, with another 30,000 living in the smaller towns along the railway's route. Jews in Harbin numbered around 13,000, with around 2,000 in other towns – so about 10 per cent of Russians were Jews..

During the turbulent civil war years, while its political status was in limbo, the CER zone was a staging ground for the anti-Bolshevik White Guard and Cossack armies. With this came a rise in anti-Semitism, as the Cossacks regarded all Jews as Bolsheviks who deserved to be punished as perpetrators of the revolution. For Jews living in areas close to the Russian border, like Hailar, life became especially dangerous. In 1919, my great-grandfather Girsh Onikul was captured by one of Baron Ungern-Sternberg's men, though miraculously he escaped alive.

In 1920, the Chinese ended Russian extraterritoriality. But in 1924, after protracted negotiations, China recognising the Soviet Government and 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; though a few did so out of sympathy for the revolution). The rest chose to remain 'white émigrés'.

At this stage, these citizenship choices had little impact on the lives of Russian *Harbintsy*. They continued to live side by side, mix socially and to do business with each other. But the division into White émigrés and Soviets would have far-reaching consequences for those who remained in Manchuria during the 13 years of Japanese occupation under the guise of the Manchukuo puppet regime.

### **Exit Harbin - 1930s**

Life for Jews in Manchuria deteriorated seriously after the Japanese occupation. The Japanese themselves were not driven by anti-Semitism and publicly maintained good relations with the Jewish community. But they associated closely with militant anti-Soviet Whites, such as the Russian Fascist Party (RFP), whose ideology of anti-Bolshevism and nationalism was laced with virulent anti-Semitism.

In the early 1930s, Russian thugs linked to the RFP engaged in a campaign of kidnappings, extortion and murder against wealthy businessmen, mainly Jews, masterminded by the Japanese military police, the *Kempeitai*. Faced with a declining economy, the rise in banditry, anti-Semitism, the takeover of their businesses by the Japanese and political intimidation (particularly of those who had Soviet citizenship), many Jews left Manchuria. Some went to other cities in China, notably the international settlements in Shanghai and Tianjin. Others left for the USSR, among the 30,000 families who departed after the Soviet Union sold the CER enterprise to Japan in March 1935, losing its influence in Manchuria for the next decade. While most were CER employees, there were others who felt there was no future for Russians in Manchuria.

By 1935, Harbin's Jewish community had declined from 13,000 in 1931 to only 5,000. By the end of the 1930s, the Russian population of Harbin had dropped to around 30,000.

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 a two story apartment block and joined his brother in a new firm "Brothers Zaretsky and Co". However, my grandmother's parents and siblings – the Onikuls – decided to seek refuge in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s. 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. My book *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files* tells their story, based on their secret police files which I obtained from the former KGB after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **Harbin under Manchukuo (1932-1945)**

For many of those who stayed on in Harbin during the 13 years of Manchukuo, 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'.

In garnering support of Russian émigrés for their occupation, the Japanese rekindled old dreams and prejudices. As a mechanism to control the Russian population in Manchuria, in 1934 the Japanese established the Bureau of Russian Émigré Affairs in Manchukuo (BREM). Nominally under Russian control, it was headed by a succession of White Army generals and run by members of the RFP and their sympathisers, thereby giving implicit sanction to their fiercely anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic ideology.

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 Inna 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. At first, she would walk her friends to meetings or sporting events to share a little of the excitement, then have to turn around and go home. Eventually, even this was stopped as émigré parents were warned there might be consequences if their children associated with 'Soviet' friends.

But even émigré status did not save my grandfather's brother, Ruvim. In 1940, the Japanese arrested him and took over his retail business at Harbin market. Ironically, they kept my grandfather on 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 from the documents I uncovered in the BREM archive in Khabarovsk, concocted a case full of bizarre anti-Semitic and anti-Soviet innuendo to secure his removal.

Still, the family fared much better than friends and relatives in Hailar, some of whom were imprisoned by the Japanese as alleged Soviet agents; others

were among the 47 Jews and ‘Soviets’ rounded up and beheaded by the Japanese on the eve of the arrival of the Soviet Red Army in August 1945.

### **Soviet liberation?**

When the Soviet Red Army arrived in August 1945 to “liberate” Manchuria from the Japanese, they were welcomed with flowers and euphoria by most *Harbintsy*, regardless of their political tags. Still, thousands of innocent émigrés, including representatives of Harbin’s various communities and social organisations, were rounded up by Soviet military intelligence agents of SMERSH! and deported to prison camps in the USSR, along with Japanese collaborators. Among them was Jewish community leader Dr Abraham Kaufman. Their crime? Representing their communities to the Japanese authorities.

### **Exit Harbin – 1950s**

In 1956 my family started to make concrete plans to leave Harbin. With one campaign being rolled out after another, like many other Russians, they found it difficult to adapt to life in Harbin with an increasingly Maoist flavour.

By that time, my parents, both graduates from the Harbin Polytechnical Institute’s new Faculty of Oriental Studies and fluent in Mandarin, had spent several years as technical interpreters working with the Sugar Refineries Construction Bureau. They had resisted first the invitation, then pressure to repatriate to the Soviet Union as part of Khrushchev’s “Virgin Lands” campaign. Now they were at risk of being sacked from their jobs. Even so they refused to contemplate the proposition of taking me to the Soviet Union to build the ‘socialist paradise’.

Pre-empting the nationalisation of private enterprise, my grandfather and his partners had already liquidated their meat and livestock business. Since 1951, Motya’s main occupation was as director and manager of cash transactions at the Jewish Bank in Harbin. He later took on the additional role of *shochet*, performing the kosher slaughter of animals for the dwindling Jewish community, and served on its audit committee.

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 obtain visas, co-ordinate the exit and entry permits required and conclude all 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 Russian community in Harbin had dwindled to a couple of thousand and a couple of hundred Jews. Some of our relatives, unable to secure visas earlier, left China in 1964, bearing the repercussions of the breakdown of relations between China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s.

### **Harbin Jews in emigration**

In emigration, Harbin and China have remained central to the identity of most Jewish *Harbintsy*, as indeed it has for Russian *Harbintsy*. Asked about their ethnic identity, most identify themselves not just as “Russians” or “Jews”, but as Russians or Russian Jews “*from China*”. In their literature, they describe themselves as the “Chinese” branch of the Russian or Jewish diaspora. Jewish *Harbintsy* are able to maintain their links with each other through the Association of Far Eastern Jews established in Israel 53 years ago, with branches across the world 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, necrologies and nostalgia. There are similar examples among Russians from Harbin. In Australia, the alumni of the Harbin Polytechnical Institute, Harbin’s main tertiary institution, have been meeting regularly and publishing a journal for over 30 years. Not long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, active “Harbin” associations sprang up in a number of Russian cities, suggesting that informal networks existed long before. Now, their periodicals, with names like *In the Hills of Manchuria*, *Russians in China*, and *Harbin*, have a substantial following among *Harbintsy* worldwide.

To a large extent, this is an identification with the world of Russian or Jewish Harbin, which the *Harbintsy* created, then lost, rather than with China itself. For during their years in Harbin, most Russians and Russian 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. Most of their interactions with Chinese were confined to their domestic assistants, tradesmen and merchants, who spoke pidgin Russian, or with educated Russian-speaking Chinese. Yet in emigration, the reverse has proved to be true. However removed they may have been from the reality of China, for most *Harbintsy*, their life in China has become the defining element of their Russian identity.

Today there is a great desire on the part of former Jews and Russians of Harbin and their children and grandchildren to reconnect with their history, to honour their antecedents, who once lived here. And there is a great opportunity to forge a strong link between us and the government and people of Harbin, who can help us do this, including scholars, researchers, building conservationists and archivists.

I remember how important it was when, in May 2000, I made my first return visit to Harbin after 41 years, together with my parents, that we were able to visit the recently restored Jewish cemetery and find the Zaretsky family graves and those of other friends and relatives, with the help of Director Liu Jun. Although it was sad to find that our apartment block had been knocked down, my parents were heartened to visit their old schools which were both still operating – my father’s as the Korean School and my mother’s as a girls school. They spent time talking with the students and teachers and old people round the town and making living connections. It was on that visit that



I first met Professor Qu Wei and his team from the newly formed Jewish Research Centre.

On my second visit six months later, with my partner and a colleague, Professor Qu Wei invited us to a seminar, where we heard about the priority being given at both provincial and municipal level to preserving the vestiges of former Jewish life in Harbin, including plans to transform one of the former synagogues into a permanent Jewish museum. Why not both, we asked? It is very exciting to hear that matters are now progressing apace on this development. I commend the efforts of Professor Qu Wei and all others involved in this initiative. I also congratulate him, together with the People's Government of Harbin and Teddy Kaufman for organising this international seminar. I hope it will be the first of many.

In closing, I would like to make one suggestion. The archival records and files of the Jews and Russians of Harbin are very precious historical resource. In writing my book, I had the good fortune to access such records in many places in the world, including some here in Harbin. I cannot urge strongly enough the importance of making access to these records available while those who have interest in or knowledge about them are still alive and can help us all understand them. History belongs to all of us.

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