

# A Manchurian footnote to Jewish history

*Irene Clurman*

While thousands of their brethren were sailing to America at the beginning of the 1900s, my Russian-Jewish grandparents took the Trans-Siberian Railway in the other direction. After a three-week journey from the Ukraine, they disembarked in the bleak northern outpost of Harbin, Manchuria, and helped transform a cluster of muddy fishing villages into an international center of commerce and culture.

In the process, they also transformed themselves. More than half a century after they left Harbin for good, my relatives and their fellow émigrés referred to themselves not simply as Russian Jews but as “Russian Jews *from China*” – or *Harbintsy*, people from Harbin.<sup>1</sup> In Russia, Jews were second-class citizens, subject to institutionalized anti-Semitism and terrorized by pogroms. China was the first place they encountered in untold generations where there were no laws limiting their opportunities and no institutionalized local anti-Semitism. My paternal grandmother, who moved to Harbin as a child after surviving the 1905 pogrom in Odessa, marveled to the end of her life that “Chinese never threw a stone at you.”<sup>2</sup>

Harbin’s development into an international city with a Russian flavor dates from its selection as the hub extending Czar Nikolai’s Trans-Siberian Railway into Manchuria in the late nineteenth century. Eager for colonists to protect his interests in China, the Czar dropped travel and other restrictions on Jews who agreed to settle a place unknown to most of the world. Construction on the railway connection began in 1898. The first Jew arrived in Harbin in 1899, and by the mid 1920s Harbin’s foreign population of about 120,000 included a community of more than 20,000 Jews.<sup>3</sup>

For Jews and gentiles alike, the new settlement was a wide open, Russian-speaking boomtown. Ambitious entrepreneurs like my grandfather could arrive penniless, work hard and make fortunes.<sup>4</sup> Jews established stores, hotels, cafés and banks and published more than a dozen newspapers in Russian and Yiddish. They were key figures in logging, mining, fur trading, sugar processing and many other industries. Jews built Beaux Arts mansions, apartment houses, schools, a library, a hospital open to all, music conservatories, two synagogues, a cemetery, a home for the aged and a soup kitchen.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish-owned Hotel Moderne, often the setting for Jewish social and cultural events, boasted a restaurant, a cinema, a billiard room, a bar and a barbershop.<sup>6</sup>

After peaking in the mid 1920s, the Jewish population of Harbin began to decline in response to political and social upheavals. Hordes of anti-Semitic thugs fleeing the civil war in Russia made Harbin an increasingly dangerous place for Jews. The situation worsened and emigration increased during the brutal Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s. Soldiers terrorized the civilian community, and criminals of various nationalities collaborated with the Kempeitai secret police, the Japanese Imperial Army’s version of the Gestapo, to kidnap foreigners for ransom. When plans went awry, as they often did, victims were tortured and even murdered.<sup>7</sup> Soviet forces took the city in 1945 and sent the leaders of many ethnic groups, including Dr. Abraham Kaufman, longtime president of the Harbin Jewish community, to Stalin’s gulags after accusing them of collaborating with the Japanese.<sup>8</sup> Virtually all remaining Jews left Harbin after the Chinese Red Army took control in 1949, and Manchuria became part of Heilongjiang Province in the new People’s Republic of China.<sup>9</sup>

Somehow, the violence and chaos did not weaken *Harbintsy* nostalgia for China, and their connection to each other remained strong. After World War II, they kept in touch through the bulletin of the Association of Former Residents of China (*Igu• Yotzei Sin*), based in Tel-Aviv.<sup>10</sup> When possible, they settled near each other and continued to socialize. Probably the largest American community of *Harbintsy* was in San Francisco, California, where I was born shortly after World War II. I heard so many tales about China from my family and their friends I felt as if I, too, had lived there. Half a century later, when my father Charles (Ruvim) Clurman passed away in 2001, the majority of our *Harbintsy* friends and relatives were gone. What remained for me from the Harbin years fit into a packing box with room to spare: oral history audiotapes I'd made with my father and grandmother, a small album of black-and-white Harbin photos, a few legal documents, a couple of copies of the *Igu• Yotzei Sin* bulletin, my grandfather's pocket watch, a cigarette case inscribed in Russian, and a fat, laughing porcelain Buddha from China. A few things went on display and the rest into storage. I assumed our Harbin story was over, but I was wrong.

At the start of the new millennium, the Harbin government began to renovate buildings in the historic city center in an effort to attract tourists, especially Jewish tourists, as well as potential American Jewish and Israeli investors. For better or worse, modern Chinese at times stereotype Jews as savvy business people.<sup>11</sup> I knew nothing of these changes until 2006, when my Israeli cousin Nurit Eshtein and her husband Itzik took a business trip to China and made a side trip to Harbin. What they found astounded me. The New Synagogue our family attended in the 1920s had been converted into a museum of Jewish history!<sup>12</sup> Nearby European-style buildings, many built by Jews, boasted historic landmark plaques in Chinese, English and Hebrew. The Jewish cemetery had been spruced up for a 2004 visit by Ehud Olmert, then the Israeli trade minister. Olmert unveiled a new tombstone on the grave of his grandfather, who died in Harbin in 1941.

My cousins connected me via email with their new friend, “the only Jew in Harbin,” Professor Dan Ben-Canaan. A native Israeli, the professor moved to Harbin in 2002 to teach in the School of Western Studies at Heilongjiang University. He now teaches at the Northeast Forestry University in Harbin, a national institution, and continues as chair of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center, founded in 2002. The center houses an archive of oral histories, documents, photographs and other materials related to Harbin Jewish history and supports research into all aspects of early Harbin. I provided the professor with copies of my family narratives, photos and documents for his archives.



*A guesthouse for many years after World War II, the Old (Main) Synagogue of Harbin was transformed into a concert hall in 2014.*

*Photo courtesy of Dan Ben-Canaan*

Inspired by his interest, I began searching the Internet for more information. When I contacted the online genealogy clearinghouse [www.Jewishgen.org](http://www.Jewishgen.org), the site's KehilaLinks (formerly ShtetLinks) coordinator emailed with regret to say there was no page for the Harbin Jewish community. Then she invited me to create one! As luck – or *bashert* – would have it, my husband Vincent Prichard is a retired information

technology manager who knows his way around a website. This gave me the courage to accept the invitation.

Vincent designed our home page around an enlarged version of a two-inch black-and-white 1930s photo of my grandfather, Isak Grigori (Isko Gershevich) Clurman, standing on the coal pile in his Harbin lumberyard, with the city's New Synagogue in the background. The image sums up the story of pioneering Harbin Jews and is also a memorial to my grandfather, who was abducted by the Kempeitai in 1938 and never heard from again.

Below the photo, we listed links in five categories:

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION. This section includes the article "A Brief History of the Jews of Harbin," written by Professor Ben-Canaan and myself, as well as a PowerPoint presentation on Harbin history. I also created a bibliography of books and articles.

2. PICTURES AND MAPS. Launched with my family photos, this category continues to expand, thanks to submissions from *Harbintsy* descendants. It includes a rare 1938 Russian map of central Harbin and vintage and modern postcards of the city. Photos from private collections capture sunbathers at the Sungari (now Songhua) River in summer, ice skaters on the river in winter, gala Russian-style banquets, costumed Purim celebrants, clusters of playful high-school students, Zionist Betar scouts in uniform and Jewish businessmen meeting with their robed Manchurian counterparts. A documents page includes birth and marriage certificates and passports in Russian and Chinese.



*Isak Grigori (Itzko Gershevich) Clurman poses on the coal pile of his Harbin lumberyard in the 1930s. The city's New Synagogue, built in the 1920s, can be seen in the background. Photo courtesy of Irene Clurman*



*Long Harbin winters and the frozen Sungari (now Songhua) River made skating a popular sport. Speed skater Charles (Ruvim) Clurman is on the far right. Photo courtesy of Irene Clurman*

3. PERSONAL STORIES. I requested authors' and publishers' permission to provide excerpts from first-person books and complete articles about life in Harbin, and all my requests were granted. Also for this section, I transcribed and edited conversations I taped with my father and grandmother in 1982, long before I could imagine what a website looked like.<sup>13</sup> I wish now that I'd asked even more questions. If I ever do another oral history interview, I'll use a prepared list of queries from a genealogy website.<sup>14</sup>

4. SEARCHABLE DATABASES. This section contains links to Internet sites such as *Igu• Yotzei Sin's* Russian-language list of graves in the Harbin Jewish cemetery.<sup>15</sup> In 2009, we added an English-language roster of graves with photographs of tombstones, a project carried out by researchers from the University of Heidelberg in Germany under the supervision of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center.<sup>16</sup>

5. OTHER HARBIN LINKS. This section features links to articles on Harbin Jewish history and the history of the railway.

Our Harbin page went live in 2007 at <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin>. My volunteer role now focuses on answering email inquiries and sorting new submissions, which Vincent posts. After creating our

website, he was recruited as a KehilaLinks volunteer and has created three other websites for people who have historic materials from Jewish communities but no computer expertise.<sup>17</sup>

The site has allowed me to honor the past and to participate in a global online conversation about the history of Harbin and the families who lived there. I've rekindled friendships with *Harbintsy* descendants and compared notes with many new correspondents. This year a scholar wrote from China to ask permission to translate into Chinese a self-published memoir he found on our site. The thrill the author and I experienced from this international connection will remain, no matter what the outcome of the project. It is also very gratifying when a visitor finds the grave of a family member through our cemetery links. Only a third of the graves were preserved when the Jewish cemetery was moved to a Harbin suburb in the 1950s. Some tombstones are illegible, and many graves on the current cemetery chart lack any stone at all. Nonetheless, even the sight of a name on a chart is meaningful to those searching for a long-lost relative. I share all new materials and email contacts with Professor Ben-Canaan and am pleased to help expand his archives this way. He in turn attempts to find answers to inquiries. He also shares his scholarly research and reports on new developments regarding the renovation of old Harbin.

A roadblock for us is the Chinese government's refusal to open the Harbin Jewish community archives, which were locked in the 1980s. No official reason has been given, but Professor Ben-Canaan reported that he received a "semi-official" explanation from a government official three years ago saying that "there is a [sic] very sensitive political information there and the closure of the archives comes to protect rather than to block ...".<sup>18</sup> Because the closure followed the opening of China to the West, there is some speculation that the government wants to avoid supporting reparations claims from former Harbin residents.<sup>19</sup>

Like the people who email me, I am left with many unanswered questions about Harbin history. However, I also have gained a deeper sense of my ancestors' lives and am glad our website can offer a trip through "virtual Harbin." When I was growing up, the city of Harbin was beyond reach, but the links among former citizens remained vibrant. Those citizens are now gone, but the city is once again accessible. I like to think that its former residents' links to each other have been preserved as well, twenty-first century-style, via the Internet.<sup>20</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Moustafine, Mara, "My Family and Its City: Fifty Years in Harbin 1909-1959." Text of a paper presented at the International Seminar on the History and Culture of Harbin Jews in 2004. [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Mara\\_Moustafine.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Mara_Moustafine.htm) : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
2. JewishGen KehilaLinks, "Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China: Harbin Memories from Ethel Rachel (Roza) Keilis Clurman" [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Ethel\\_\(Roza\)\\_Keilis\\_Clurman.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Ethel_(Roza)_Keilis_Clurman.htm) : accessed Oct. 2, 2015.
3. Wikipedia, "Harbin." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harbin#International\\_city](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harbin#International_city) (Note: Population figures for this period are approximations and vary slightly depending on the source.) Accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
4. "My husband was 15 years old when he came (to Harbin) with a brother. You know what he had? He told me, 'I had one ruble and 50 kopeks.'" JewishGen KehilaLinks, "Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China: Harbin Memories from Ethel Rachel (Roza) Keilis Clurman" [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Ethel\\_\(Roza\)\\_Keilis\\_Clurman.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Ethel_(Roza)_Keilis_Clurman.htm) : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
5. Brooks, Andrée Aelion, "Honoring Our Ancestors." *Haassah Magazine*, February/March 2011 Vol. 92, No. 4: p. 47.
6. From a vintage Hotel Moderne flyer in the collection of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center. [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Sino-Israel\\_Research\\_and\\_Study\\_Center\\_Harbin\\_Photos.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Sino-Israel_Research_and_Study_Center_Harbin_Photos.htm) : accessed Oct. 9, 2015.
7. The most famous case was the kidnapping, torture and murder of Simeon Kaspé, a young Jewish concert pianist and son of the owner of the Hotel Moderne. The convicted abductors were released by Japanese authorities after six months on the grounds that they had acted as patriots. [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Simeon\\_Kaspe.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Simeon_Kaspe.htm) : accessed Oct. 5, 2015.
8. After spending eleven years in a Stalinist camp, Dr. Kaufman was able to move to Israel in 1961. He died there in 1971. <http://www.jewsofchina.org/Dr.-A.-J.-Kaufman> : accessed Oct. 2, 2015.
9. Clurman, Irene and Ben-Canaan, Dan, "A Brief History of the Jews of Harbin," [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Brief\\_History.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Brief_History.htm) : accessed Oct. 2, 2015.
10. The IYS Bulletin is still published twice a year in a print edition combining English, Hebrew and Russian, in spite of the dwindling numbers of original members and the death in 2012 of founder Teddy Kaufman, son of Dr. A. J. Kaufman.

Association of Former Residents of China, P.O. Box 29786, Tel-Aviv, Israel 61297. [www.jewsofchina.org](http://www.jewsofchina.org) : accessed Oct. 2, 2015.

11. "How-to books on making money like Jews have become best sellers in China." Brooks, Andrée Aelion, "Honoring Our Ancestors." *Hadassah Magazine*, February/March 2011 Vol. 92, No. 4: p. 46.
12. The New Synagogue got its name because it was built eleven years after the opening of the Old (Main) Synagogue. The latter was converted into a concert hall in 2014. Photos and a description of the renovation are on our site at [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Renovation\\_of\\_Old\\_\(Main\)\\_Synagogue.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Renovation_of_Old_(Main)_Synagogue.htm) : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
13. "Harbin Memories from Ethel Rachel (Roza) Keilis Clurman," [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Ethel\\_\(Roza\)\\_Keilis\\_Clurman.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Ethel_(Roza)_Keilis_Clurman.htm) and "Harbin Memories from Charles (Ruvim) Isaac Clurman," [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Charles\\_\(Ruvim\)\\_Isaac\\_Clurman.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Charles_(Ruvim)_Isaac_Clurman.htm) : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
14. For example, "Great Questions from StoryCorps," <https://storycorps.org/great-questions/> : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
15. <http://www.jewsofchina.org/jewsofchina/Templates/showpage.asp?DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=84&FID=927> : accessed Oct. 5, 2015.
16. "Harbin Jewish cemetery," [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Harbin\\_Jewish\\_Cemetery.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Harbin_Jewish_Cemetery.htm) : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
17. To volunteer to host a page or assist with the technical aspects of creating a page, go to <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org> : accessed Sept. 30, 2015. If you have historic materials relating to an existing page for a Jewish community, contact the page host whose email is listed on the community's home page within KehilaLinks.
18. Email from Dan Ben-Canaan received Oct. 10, 2015.
19. Lord Robert Skidelsky of the British House of Lords, a descendant of one of Jewish Harbin's most prominent business families, was among many disappointed foreigners who applied for reparations. "In 1984 I received a cheque from the British government for £24,000 in full settlement of a claim for compensation which amounted to £11m," he wrote in "A Chinese Homecoming," *Prospect Magazine*, January 2006. Reprinted in "Harbin Memories from Robert Skidelsky," [http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Robert\\_Skidelsky.htm](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Robert_Skidelsky.htm) : accessed Sept. 30, 2015.
20. As of October 2015, the Harbin website has been viewed more than 24,000 times.



*Russian and Chinese signs shared space on Kitaiskaya (Russian for "Chinese") Street, now Central Street, in the foreigners' district of early Harbin. Vintage postcard from the Sitsky/Toper Collection*



*Pavel and Sofa Toper hosted this Russian-Jewish social gathering in Harbin in the 1920s. Photo courtesy of Bob Sitsky*



*European-trained architects designed many buildings in early 20th century Harbin, including Peter Gorfung's compound on Konnaya (Russian for "horse") Street, now Dongfeng Street. Photo courtesy of Katherine Bader Nigel and Marcia Nigel Grant*



*Maurice Nigel (formerly Nigniewitzky), fourth from left, stands with Russian and Manchurian coworkers at a horsehair factory in Harbin. The cold Manchurian climate produced strong horsehair, still valued as an export. Photo courtesy of Katherine Bader Nigel and Marcia Nigel Grant*



*Russian-Jewish youth, both male and female, were active in Harbin's Zionist Betar Scouts, and many subsequently immigrated to Israel. The Gideon Betar troop included Charles (Ruvim) Clurman, front row second from right. Photo courtesy of Irene Clurman*



*A horse and wagon passes Slutzky's Economy Store circa 1925. Due to a harsh climate and muddy roads, horse-drawn wagons and carriages remained an important form of transportation in Harbin in the 1920s and 1930s. Photo courtesy of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center*



*This iconic portrait of two girls, one Chinese and one Jewish, dates from about 1922. Photo courtesy of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center*