

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MANCHURIA – CHINA

When we stopped at Pogranichnaya at the border of Russia and China, we were taken into a customs house on the Chinese side and searched thoroughly to determine if any of us were smuggling opium. Dealers in the narcotic paid thousands of dollars to people who would smuggle opium into China, and all of us had been warned by the train conductors that customs was very strict and penalties high for smugglers. Men and women alike were thoroughly searched.

Afterward we were allowed to go into the town which, although owned by the Chinese, was under Russian control. I located a small Jewish community of ten families, a doctor, dentist, druggist and a few merchants. No further Jews were allowed to settle there by order of the Russian Government.

It was a warm and comfortable sunny day, and since it was close to our High Holidays and the Day of Atonement, I decided to stay over for a few days.

Walking up the main business street, I noticed that most of the people were primitive types of mixed nationalities - Chinese, Bashkirs and Buriats – all of whom spoke a little Russian. I saw some merchants that seemed to have Jewish names and went into their shops to visit with them. After pleasant moments spent with them, they directed me to the synagogue. At prayertime, some ten people were gathered there. The deacon was a Chinaman who knew the entire ritual prayers and could take care of the Synagogue as well.

Before the evening sundown prayers for the Day of Atonement, they called on me, with a few of the Jewish soldiers who were in the vicinity to guard the trains and rails, to join them for dinner. I went to the home of a cattlebuyer where I was given a meal I have never forgotten. Afterward those of us at the home were given a place to sleep, and the accommodations were the best I had had in a long, long time.

I saw there a large yard full of cattle being cared for by large, tall, yellow-complexioned men with prominent cheek bones and long braids of hair. I was told these men were Mongols who drove deep into the Mongolian territory and bought cattle for the Russian Government, bringing them there to the border to sell. Because of the High Holidays, many of the Mongols came to town to sell their cattle. After the fast of the Day of Atonement, another lavish feast was prepared and we ate and drank well.

I finally took my leave of this place and entrained for Harbin, noting that the trains were built of heavy armored steel, and the conductors were

Army men carrying pistols. I learned these precautions were necessary in Chinese territory, since Manchuria was not too well developed, the people still wild, and often formed into bands to attack the trains and rob them. To protect themselves against attack, they would shoot steam from the sides of the train, the passengers would lie on the floor, and the conductors and guards would shoot it out with the bandit gangs.

It was a great expense to the Russians to maintain this type of protection for the line, but it was necessary, since the two lines to Vladivostok, the main port of the Far East, was needed.

When any of the long-braided bandits were captured, they were either immediately shot, or two bandits would be tied together by their hair and chased torturously until they were finally killed.

As we travelled, we saw Mongols with cattle herds living in crude huts made from the hides of cattle. Most of the people we saw were nomads, and except for areas near railroad stations, there were very few settlements.

Further on the train began laboring. From its sides large amounts of steam belled forth. Looking out, I saw many camels, a number of which were lying on the tracks where the ground was high and warm. The steam frightened them away.

The train travelled at forty miles an hour through this undeveloped land. At one point, we saw a Mongol on a horse travelling faster than the train and marvelled at his extreme speed and ability.

During the time of the trip to Harbin, the conductor told me of the extreme troubles they were having with bandits. In the summertime the bandits organized into large bands in the woods and on the roads, and if any traveller came along he was held up, robbed and killed. Large merchants, who travelled by caravan with merchandise, hired special gangs of their own to counterattack or make friends with hostile bands along the route.

The bandit gangs in the winter would join the Chinese Army to get warm clothing, food and housing during the terribly cold months.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

HARBIN – LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

In Harbin at the Jewish Community Center I met again the three women who had advised me to go to America. Also waiting there were a number of other women and children, anticipating the letters and funds

from their relatives or friends in America that would enable them to make the trip.

Also in this center were two men from Minsk who had already been to America once, and were anxious to return, knowing that the country was the best place in the world to live.

At the Center a place was found for me and some other new arrivals. We were fed, and those without money were given a few cents. We were housed in the classrooms of the Hebrew school. Everyone was always alert to protect the women from the many Chinese who were always trying to kidnap or lure white women. Most of the Chinese men there were single, as few Chinese women would leave their native China for the Russian-dominated territory.

Harbin was a large city, but badly out-moded and old-fashioned. Most of the city was slums, where the Chinese lived. In the European quarters lived the business people, government workers, teachers, white collar workers, a few Chinese merchants, and the two regiments of soldiers who protected the city and the railroads. Shortly after arriving, I was invited to take charge of the Jewish Center. They wanted me to work with them especially in warning the women not to go out walking at night, as there were bands of Chinese who would attack any white woman and often throw them into the Sungaree River. The city was Internationalized, and the police force was unable to cope with its problems. Each church or religious body had the responsibility of warning and watching its people.

On my second day there I sent a registered letter to my relatives in America. I was told that a letter took four weeks to get there, and four weeks to return, and if for any reason they were unable to deliver it, I would know in about two months. I wrote and asked for two hundred dollars, the amount I figured it would take to bring me to America. I was confident I would get it right away, having always believed that everyone in America had at least that much always readily available.

In the business section of Harbin I noticed that all labor was Chinese, because they would work so cheaply. Many of the businesses themselves were owned by Chinese, since few could compete with their low expenses, few of them hiring salespeople, but doing everything themselves. From three to six people would open a business, living in the back of the store and taking turns waiting on the trade, cooking and cleaning.

Europeans in business there were mostly importers or owners of factories or large stores.

Talking to the Chinese laborers I was told that their demands were small. They could get by for about fifteen cents a day and a room using rags for cover at night. Their principle food was barley soup and steam biscuits.

Their clothes were never changed. They worked and slept in their clothes until they were completely worn to shreds, working seven days a week, and taking off only three or four days a year for religious holidays.

I asked one man if he didn't think that, since the Chinese worked for so little, someone was profiting from his efforts? He pointed out to me some men wearing beautiful silk shirts and fancy clothes and agreed, yes, some were profiteering, but they were very few, the ones who had all the power.

I asked him too how one could distinguish the men from the women in China, as it seemed that both men and women wore the same kind of clothes, coarse and poor, and in the same manner, and both men and women let their hair grow long in braids. He explained that the men shaved their heads around the sides, letting the hair grow in the center, while the women did not shave their heads at all. The people had to let their hair grow long so that Buddha would recognize them as Chinamen and allow them to enter Heaven.

Old-time Chinese women were always recognizable as they appeared to have no toes on their feet from the years of taping them.¹ I saw women holding each other's hands in strong winds to keep themselves from blowing over – as they swayed on the small stubs of feet.

When the Chinese Republic was established, the practice of taping feet was abolished under stern penalties.

I inquired about the Chinese slums, and learned that conditions there were terrible. Huge amounts of garbage were stacked in the streets, drawing dogs, cats, insects and flies. The people ate green stuffs largely, and the homes were filthy. Families lived eight or ten in a room and the stench was awful. Even in passing an open window, the odor would assail one's nostrils.

I saw a meat block placed right in the middle of the street, where a butcher was doing business, selling the black, poor meat there in the open amidst thousands of swarming flies. The Chinese do not eat much meat, but at holiday time they chop a little in with their vegetables.

Further down the street something was boiling in a large kettle. I thought at first they were heating something with which to tar the street, but found to my surprise that they were cooking barley soup. Many came running toward me, pleading: "Captain, give me something to eat." The soup was selling at three cents a plate, so I bought some for them, being repaid by the color that returned to their pale cheeks as they drank it.

Back at the Center, one of my jobs was to help set up accommodations for everyone, as they arrived. I went to the lumber yard and picked up some lumber, then tried to get a truck to deliver it. I found two

¹ Their feet were kept small by bandaging in childhood.

Chinamen with a horse and wagon who wanted two dollars to deliver the lumber. I was about to give them the job when I saw a mob of Chinese running toward me, begging me to let them carry the lumber on their shoulders for a small sum. I gave them the job, thinking it was better to give twenty people a job than to help feed two men and a horse. We had to take the lumber over a mile, and it was accomplished with much changing of the wood from shoulder to shoulder, and many rest stops. I had to keep a close watch to see that none of them wandered away with the lumber.

The Chinese in Harbin were treated very poorly under the Russians, but when I walked over the tracks to a town called Fudgigan, which was under the Chinese regime, I found conditions even worse. Stores had stocks worth perhaps twenty-five dollars, and six or eight children helped run them. People ate very little, there was no furniture in their homes, their clothes were in rags and if they had an income of fifty cents a day, it was considered a lot. The Chinese police were very rough, in addition.

There was a heavy traffic in vodka over the border in that area to the Russian soldiers. Although the police were continually checking, much vodka came across. The vodka was made of rice, which was cheap and plentiful, and this traffic brought a good income to the Chinese involved with it.

I tried to find a job for the two or three months I expected to be there, although I knew it would be difficult, what with the abundance of cheap Chinese labor.

I spoke to a lumber man, who told me he paid little or nothing for his lumber as, during the winter, he took a number of Chinese with him to the woods across the river, and for six or seven months they cut lumber and put it on the frozen river, and when the river thawed, they followed the logs down the river to Harbin. He obviously needed no extra help.

The Jewish Center decided to build a larger place for their classrooms and shelter. I was put in charge, as assistant to the architect. The Chinese laborers we hired tried to work very fast, and we had to keep steady watch on them to be sure they mixed the mortar well and built the place properly. It kept me busy going up and down the scaffolding to make sure the work was being done properly.

My pay was very small, and I had to buy a pair of shoes that cost me twenty dollars. My pay hardly covered my expense of eating, plus the shoes, which in peacetime would have cost five dollars. The job was finished in two months, and I was sure that my money from America would have come by then.

I decided to get my passport, having to wait ten days for it, and finding happily that they had reduced my price because I had been a soldier. When

I was asked why I wanted to go to America, I told them only to visit my relatives, and I expected to come right back.

I then went to the American Consul where I received my visa. They too asked me a number of questions, and I told them exactly what my intentions were. Now, I finally had all the necessary papers to go to America, but still lacked the means. I ran to the Chinese post office daily for word of my letter, but there was nothing, neither a reply to my own letter returned. I didn't know what to think. Meanwhile, the months were slipping past. It was December and the cold was unbearable. In the Chinese quarters the people huddled together pitifully. I would feed at least five Chinese a day despite the fact that I had very little money left, and the people would crowd around me and hang onto my overcoat in thankfulness. I never saw an example of the wealthy Chinese, well-fed, with warm clothes, seeming to care for their more unfortunate brothers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

IN VLADIVOSTOK

I decided to go to Vladivostock because I could not stay in Harbin any longer, since the Russians controlled Harbin and mistreated the Chinese. The Chinese had been weak about complaining to the Tzar about their treatment.

The railroad management and the civil help were against the Bolshevik regime, as were many of the people who came there for asylum, however the men in the two regiments which guarded the town favored Bolshevism and wanted affiliation with Petrograd. They demanded that the railroad authorities recognize Bolsheviks and, fearing the reprisals of the five thousand soldiers, the officials asked the Chinese Government to take over the control of the railroads and the city of Harbin. The Chinese accepted the proposition and sent in a few thousand troops with good artillery.

The Russian soldiers then barricaded themselves in their barracks, refusing to give up their weapons and leave the territory on the order of the Chinese Military Command. The Chinese soldiers were then ordered to attack the Russians, finally forcing surrender through the use of cannon.

The Russians left, and the Chinese were now in command. Many of their troops were ignorant, brutal men, and they began to terrorize the Russians wherever they were seen. There was little protection for a uniformed Russian soldier, as the Chinese could use any excuse for bayoneting him. The Russian civilians barricaded themselves inside.

In addition to this main reason for leaving Harbin, there was also the fact that I had received no answer to my letter to America, and hoped that in Vladivostok, a port city, I would find a method of working my way to America.

The trip to Vladivostok took three days. The city when I arrived was old-fashioned, and the streets had wooden sidewalks. Chinese and Japanese held most of the jobs. The Jewish Community gave me a place to sleep and bread to eat. It was a small community and they were unable to do much for those who came their way.

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