

Interview

by Susan Blumberg-Kason

Our Intimate Relationship with Places

Interview with Maria Tumarkin



Author and historian Maria Tumarkin was born in the former Soviet Union and has made Australia her home since she emigrated in 1989. Her books include *Traumascapes* (Melbourne University Press, 2005), *Courage* (Melbourne University Press, 2007), and *Otherland* (Random House, 2011), the last of which is a memoir of her return to Russia and Ukraine with her pre-teen daughter, Billie. *Asian Jewish Life* recently sat down with Tumarkin to discuss her first trip to China, her Jewish identity, and her family's connection to Central Asia.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): You traveled to China earlier this year for the Shanghai Literary Festival and Australian Writers' Week in Beijing. How did this come about?

Maria Tumarkin (MT): I came as part of the annual Australian Writers' Week. Each year a group of Australian writers are invited by the Australian Embassy to come to China. I was lucky to be part of the group this year and thrilled to discover that Australia's new Ambassador to China, Frances Adamson (I think I should be saying Her Excellency at this point) is a voracious reader.

AJL: Can you discuss your first impressions of China?

MT: This was my first time in China so the whole trip felt pretty eye-opening. Certain things instantly made sense to me, because I grew up in the former USSR and so have a non-Western DNA. Things like pollution, for instance, or the tireless sloganeering of the official media, or the complex dance of what

you can and cannot say were familiar. And, of course, as were the very excellent, very serious questions asked by students at Chinese universities we spoke at – yet another reminder of the vast respect afforded to education. But, of course, other things were totally new to me – state capitalism, for one, or how a country such as China deals with the anarchic, borderless world of internet and social media. And inevitably, of course, just the sheer size of it all.

AJL: What did you think of the literary scene in Shanghai and Beijing?

MT: It felt vibrant, alive. The festivals I attended had brilliant line-ups and really engaged audiences. But I only caught the ex-pat side of things, so have a very limited view.

AJL: During World War II, Shanghai was home to both Russians and Jews. Were you able to tour the old Jewish Ghetto while you were there?

MT: Yes, I was very fortunate to be taken to the site of the old Jewish Ghetto by the Shanghai-based historian Tess Johnston. Tess knew the story of every corner on every building. She took my breath away. Visiting the site of the ghetto was probably one 'must' I had in my head for this trip.

AJL: Besides Shanghai and Beijing, did you have the opportunity to see other places in China?

MT: I traveled to Hefei with another Australian author Janette Turner Hospital, who just happens to be one of my favorite Australian writers. In Hefei, we spoke to students and staff at the Anhui University

and I must say that for both Janette and myself that talk – we didn't want it to end – was one of the genuine highlights of our trip. Sometimes things just come together and feel right for everyone.

AJL: In *Otherland*, you write with a strong Jewish identity. Unlike many Soviet Jews, your parents never shied away from their Jewish identity. You were clearly identified as Jews in your passports and school rosters. After you moved to Australia as a teenager, have you and your family assimilated into mainstream Aussie society, or have you embraced the freedom to practice religion and become more observant, even if it's in a secular/cultural way?

MT: We were godless Jews in the former USSR and we remain godless Jews in Australia. Amongst my parents' many virtues is their great distaste for hypocrisy. So, on their arrival to Australia, my parents said: "If religion mattered to us, we should have practiced back in the Soviet Union when our lives were on the line." We didn't practice then and we don't practice now. Our Jewish identity – and it is undoubtedly Jewish – is cosmopolitan and secular.

AJL: You write in your memoir about your visits back to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Karkov, among others. But you also tell the fascinating story of your grandmother's escape to Uzbekistan during World War II and how your mother was born there.

MT: My grandmother Faina learned about Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 in the Ukrainian village of Dubovyazovka, where she was holidaying with her three-year old

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daughter Lina (my beloved auntie). At the time of the invasion Faina was pregnant with my mum. I should explain here too that my grandmother happened to be in Duboviyazovka because her sister Tamara, who was a young doctor, was sent there for work. Tamara and Faina couldn't go back to Kiev because their city was being bombed, and so they had to join the massive exodus of war refugees across the European part of the Soviet Union, many of whom made their way to the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Tamara was actually assigned to Uzbekistan as a doctor and so they found themselves at the Station Maljutinskaya, a tiny kishlak (Turkish for 'winter hut' or 'wintering place') deep in Uzbekistan, where the residents had never seen a doctor and where official medicine of the kind my great-aunt practiced was as alien as they came. The Asian parts of the Soviet Union were, on the whole, not directly touched by the war. This is where my mother was born. I should say that my grandmother pleaded with her sister to help her terminate the pregnancy, because carrying a child at such a time seemed like an act of pure insanity. And Tamara, of course, was a determined pragmatist and besides, she had no objections in principle to abortion. Yet she refused. 'No, this child will bring light', she said, and that was that. When Tamara delivered my mother at Station Maljutinskaya in the early days of January 1942, the baby was named Svetlana; svet means 'light' in Russian.

AJL: Have you traveled to Uzbekistan? Does your family feel special ties to Uzbekistan because, as you mention in your book, it offered refuge to your grandmother, thus saving her from the massacre at Babi Yar?

MT: I don't know about special ties, but certainly for my mum and my auntie, Uzbekistan is not just any place. When a great Russian writer, Dina Rubina, who was born in Uzbekistan just like my mum, wrote a book set there called *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, my mum loved it and read it in a state of heightened recognition. We haven't been back though.

AJL: The trip you write about in *Otherland* wasn't the first time you'd returned to Russia and Ukraine since you left as a teenager. When was your first visit back? Was there a startling difference between that year and when you moved away in 1989?

MT: I first came back to Russia in 1999, when Billie was two and a half. We didn't go to the Ukraine on that trip. I was too scared of having an intensely emotional response to my city and to my childhood friends. So I stayed away. Now I wish I didn't. The late 1990s in Russia felt pretty hopeful to me despite all the hardships. It was still the pre-Putin era, the very end of it, and my friends there, and their friends, were writing, reporting, directing, staging plays, playing music with a sense of urgency and compulsion I envied madly. Many people still do, but over a decade of Putinism has taken its toll – assassination of journalists, incarceration of oligarchs, brutal suppression of dissenting voices and so forth.

AJL: In *Otherland*, you travel with your preteen daughter, Billie, in order to show her where you and your family came from. From Billie's diary entries in *Otherland*, she's quite an accomplished writer herself. Do you hope she'll follow in your footsteps?

MT: Billie, who is fifteen now, writes quite a lot and she definitely has things to say. But she also sings, draws, debates and does drama. She is an arty type. I like that. I like passing on books that I just finished reading. I like going to see the same films and exhibitions. I like the camaraderie we have developed. The rivers of our conversations never run dry. We're never bored with each other. As to whether she becomes a writer or not, I don't care either way. Let the child be, I say.

AJL: Now that you've been to China, do you have plans to return? Which cities would you like to see?

MT: I'd love to return. Most definitely. I am interested in people as well as in places. Philosopher Edward Casey in his book *Getting Back into Place* has put forward a really interesting argument that neither people nor places should be thought of as entirely independent entities. Instead, he suggests, we imagine a far more complex unity, let's call it 'persons-in-places'. For Casey, and I would have to agree with him, our relationship with places is that fundamental and that powerful. Places we inhabit are not backdrops to our activities, we are marked by them and we are transformed by them in all kinds of invisible, and sometimes insidious, ways. So I'd love to have that sense of people's lives enmeshed in their native and adopted country. That would be the best way to travel. ✎

For more about Maria Tumarkin, you can find her online at www.mariatumarkin.net.