

The Russian Jews of Harbin

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were three well-established Jewish communities in China. Shanghai was the largest and best known, Tientsin (now Tianjin) was the smallest, and Harbin was predominantly a Russian community and the last to dissolve.

In Mara Moustafine's family narrative, *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files* (Random House, 2002), the author traces her mother's roots in Harbin, particularly what became of her deceased grandfather Girsch Onikul, aunt Manya Onikul and uncle Abram Onikul.

The Onikul family originally came from Minsk to Hailar, a trading town near Harbin, in the early 1900s. Moustafine herself grew up in Harbin and left at the late date of 1959 when her family immigrated to Australia. The Jewish communities in Tientsin and Shanghai had all but disappeared a full decade earlier.

It wasn't until the 1990s that Moustafine, who worked in Australia's foreign service, visited the Soviet Union and stumbled across a stack of documents at her aunt's house. What struck her were the pardons for a handful of her relatives, some of them posthumously. Thus began a decade-long investigation into how her grandfather, aunt, and uncles perished under Stalinist purges.

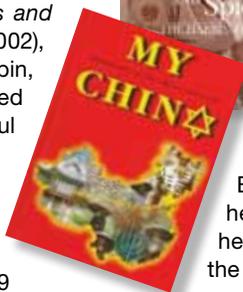
Although the Onikul family had strong ties to Harbin in China, many in the family felt like their future was in the Soviet Union. And with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s, it was only natural to look toward the stability of the USSR. Or so they thought.

Once the first set of family members immigrated to the Soviet Union, communication with China was all but cut off. So the next waves of relatives to arrive in the USSR couldn't have known how difficult life had become there. With the Onikul's history in China, the Soviet government branded them spies of the Japanese. The promised land of the USSR soon became an unfathomable nightmare to Mara Moustafine's family.

It's amazing how Moustafine uncovered the fates of her relatives. With the help of a former KGB agent, Moustafine learns most of the answers to this complex puzzle. *Secrets and Spies* is an eye-opening narrative of a Jewish family in China during the 1930s. It lends credence to the notion that China was one of the safest places for Jews during the war.

While many families in Harbin returned to similar fates in the USSR, others looked toward what was to become the new Jewish state of Israel.

Yaacov Liberman's family also came to Harbin from Russia. In his memoir, *My China: Jewish Life in the Orient, 1900-1950* (Gefen Publishing, 1998), Liberman writes about growing up



in Harbin in a family that is not overtly religious, but attends services on the High Holidays and when family and friends become Bar Mitzvah. As Liberman writes, the synagogues in China were built according the Orthodox practice of separating men and women, but as he explains, people were often much less observant in their homes.

Liberman's family and friends weren't left-leaning like the Onikuls in Moustafine's book. Instead, they were ardent Zionists. At a young age, Liberman joined Betar, a Zionist youth movement. He dressed in his Betar military uniform for his Bar Mitzvah and vowed that he would also wear it when he married. Still in his childhood, he became active in Betar athletic activities and excelled at the 100-meter track event.

Because his family was middle class, they had the funds to send young Yaacov to study in Shanghai before the age of ten. Later, he was sent to a Christian missionary school in Pyongyang, Korea, with another Jewish friend. There the boys never felt like they belonged, especially when a teacher tried to convert them.

For university, Liberman returned to Shanghai to study at St. John's University, but with the outbreak of World War II, Liberman became further involved in Betar activities. Word slowly leaked out of Europe about the Holocaust, although no one would learn the real truth until after the war. In the mid to late 1930s, Liberman witnessed mass migration to Shanghai by Eastern European Jews. By then his parents had moved to Shanghai, too, and lived in a quaint apartment in the French Concession. They were never forced into the Hongkew Ghetto as were the newer Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe.

With the conclusion of the war, many of Liberman's friends settled in the US for further studies, but Liberman set his heart on immigrating to the new Jewish homeland of Israel. Through his involvement in Betar, he became active in helping Shanghai, Tientsin, and Harbin Jews to immigrate to Israel. He and his wife Lea were among the first Jews who left China for Israel in 1948.

But Liberman didn't stay in Israel for long. In the 1960s, he lived in Japan long enough to finish his undergraduate degree and complete a master's degree. In 1975, he, Lea, and their three children moved to Taiwan. There, Liberman organized the first Jewish community and went on to lead it for the next decade until he settled in the US in 1985. As of the publication of *My China*, Liberman and his wife were retired and living in San Diego.

These two books show how even in a small community like Jewish Harbin, there was a great diversity of opinion, people held a wide range of political philosophies and expressed their Judaism in very different ways. ♯