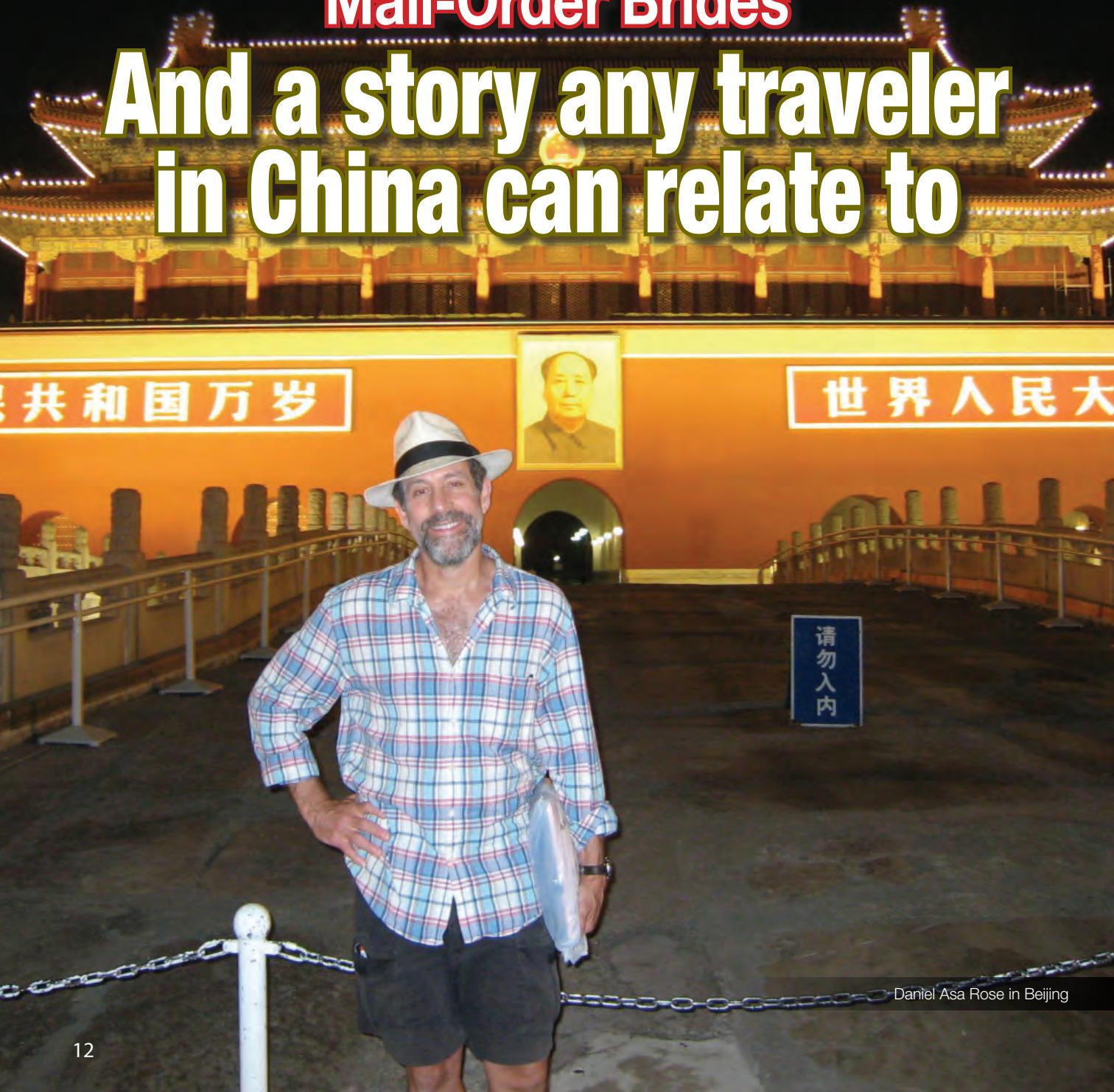


Feature

by Susan Blumberg-Kason

Black Sheep Cousins, Illegally Obtained Organs, Mail-Order Brides

And a story any traveler in China can relate to



Daniel Asa Rose in Beijing

In 2008, author Daniel Asa Rose traveled with his cousin Larry to Beijing in search of the impossible: a new kidney. While it's illegal for Westerners to obtain organ transplants in China, Larry's life was on the line. Rose chronicled these adventures in his second memoir, *Larry's Kidney: Being the True Story of How I Found Myself in China with My Black Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Skirting the Law to Get Him a Transplant—and Save His Life* (William Morrow, 2009). Asian Jewish Life's Book Editor, Susan Blumberg-Kason sat down with Rose to discuss his earlier trips to China in the 1980s, his unbelievable adventures with Larry, and what happened afterward. It is a story where anything is possible.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): I found it so fascinating you'd traveled to China in the early 1980s. You were quite a pioneer! Had you ever thought of writing a book about your time there in the 1980s before you came up with the idea for *Larry's Kidney*?

Daniel Asa Rose (DAR): No, but I wrote a few articles about these early trips in *Esquire*. I also wrote a short story titled *The Road to Lhasa* about the time when I was thrown in jail for three hours in a remote military outpost of Tibet. I was coming out of my first divorce and traveling with a writer buddy. We were downing barley beer in a yurt. And then we saw a group of Chinese soldiers. We thought it was the height of hilarity to ask these soldiers if they knew a shortcut to the Dalai Lama's house. But they weren't very sympathetic. Those were the longest three hours of my life. I think I lost three pounds in jail, one an hour. I thought we'd never be heard from again.

AJL: Which cities did you visit back in 1984?

DAR: I traveled to China three times that

year. On my first visit, I was going to meet three other writers in Beijing, but I had a week to myself before the others arrived. I had my red-flag limo, my own driver, my own translator. Everyone was smoking on the plane and everyone wore gray. Since China had just opened to foreigners, the state-run tourist bureaus didn't know how much to open up. I wanted to see Peking Man, so they opened it up for a private viewing. I wanted to see Mao's tomb, so they brought me to the front of the line. We four were the first foreigners to visit sections of Jinan province. We rode an old steam train, accompanied by fireworks as we rolled through the province. People there had never seen Caucasians.

On my second trip, I traveled to Hong Kong and took the ferry over to southern China. I also stayed in Macau, which was just a small fishing village back then. I remember there was an old fireworks factory along the waterfront. I stayed around there, renting a room in an old colonial house with a front porch—a very different experience.

For my third visit, I went to Shanghai and Chengdu. That's also the trip where I went to Tibet and landed in jail for three hours.

AJL: And then you returned to China after being away for 25 years! When you stepped foot in Beijing several years ago, what had changed the most since your last visit in 1984?

DAR: Back in '84, I didn't remember ever seeing rubber bands or plastic bags. I remember looking out over the roof of my hotel in Beijing and all I heard was bicycle bells. When I came back with Larry, I was struck by a multitude of colors, noise, food, modern architecture, and the highways that flew over everything.

AJL: Your visit to a Beijing synagogue was a pivotal moment in your memoir. Had you encountered other Jews in

China back in the '80s?

DAR: In 1984, I don't remember Judaism coming up at all. I hadn't really come into my Judaism back then. I was still rebelling. It wasn't until 1988 when I took my boys to Belgium and France to trace my family's escape from the Holocaust. [Editor's note: Daniel Asa Rose wrote about this trip in his first memoir, *Hiding Places: A Father and His Sons Retrace Their Family's Escape from the Holocaust* (Simon & Schuster, 2000)].

AJL: So going to synagogue on a Friday night wasn't something you'd normally do at home?

DAR: I would not have gone to synagogue. I find God in my own ways, often on my bicycle and in other times. I'm very aware of my own need to give thanks. I'm always delighted when I bump into other Jews. Growing up in WASP Connecticut, as I describe in *Hiding Places*, I've always had this sense that we were this secret cult, not to reveal ourselves to outsiders.

AJL: It's ironic that even though organ donation has been a controversial issue in some people's interpretation of Jewish law, you found such great support in Beijing's Jewish community.

DAR: Yes, there was something about the Beijing Jewish community that was so giving. At the end, I couldn't believe they had said the *Mi Shebeirach*, the Jewish prayer for the sick, every Friday while Larry awaited his kidney. That's what this trip was all about—learning about family. What constitutes family? Larry's family had failed him. He turned to me because I was the only one in the family who he thought could help him. I then turned to the larger Jewish family halfway across the world in Beijing.

Both Jewish and Chinese cultures believe you should bury bodies intact,

and in many other ways the cultures are very similar. I think we're very ignorant of what the Chinese are doing. We read our media scare stories, but I can't help but think there's a tinge of red menace in them. We in the US demonized the Chinese in the 1950s, and now we're doing that with China and organ transplants. There are people in China who are very concerned about the morality of organ transplants. People in the US don't have a monopoly on morality. People can act very righteous, just like in the 1950s.

AJL: Whatever happened to that iconic black and gold yarmulke that makes appearances throughout the book?

DAR: I have it. I wore it at my youngest son's bar mitzvah last month.

AJL: You're quite an adventurous eater, while Larry preferred to stick with Girl Scout cookies and US fast food. Do you keep kosher or try to adhere to a kosher-style diet when you can?

DAR: No, I eat everything. That wasn't a problem.

AJL: I heard on your CNN interview that Larry has vanished again. Have you talked to him since the book came out a couple years ago or now that the book is out in paperback?

DAR: It was a very intense two months with him in China. I found him utterly fascinating and sympathetic. We spoke at the beginning after the book came out and discussed how there may or may not be a movie deal. He said, "It's my story and you can't have it." Although I knew what Larry was all about, it was still a surprise.

AJL: That must have been so difficult after everything you'd been through with him.

DAR: That time with him was full of



revelations. The final revelation was that he turned on me. It ruptured the whole family.

As for the person I call Burton, I was nervous about how he would take to the book. Eventually I received a note from him. He wrote that he loved the book. He laughed and he cried. And he signed his note Cousin Burton, which is not his real name. I was thrilled by his response.

I will say this for Larry: I asked him after we returned if he acknowledged the book was written with love. He said he got that.

AJL: Do you know if Larry has returned to China since his transplant surgery? Did he ever marry?

DAR: I do not know. We haven't spoken in four years.

AJL: Did you come up with the title, *Larry's Kidney*? I especially love the subtitle: *Being the True Story of How I Found Myself in China with My Black Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Skirting the Law to Get Him a Transplant—and Save His Life*. Was that your idea?

DAR: That was always the working title between my agent and me. I'd just call it the *Larry's Kidney* book. I toyed with the idea of titling it *Zhong Mei You Yi Wan Sui (Long Live the Friendship Between the Chinese and American Peoples)*, which would have been fun because it

was so difficult to say, at least for me.

AJL: Have you kept in touch with any of the Chinese friends you met during your trip to China with Larry?

DAR: I've been in touch with my guide Jade. Jade to me is still the 24-year old woman with bubbles in her teeth. I don't know what I believe about her. Maybe she was reporting on my activities. We'd had very intimate conversations. I kind of adopted her as my daughter. There was never impropriety, but there was love. She said people in China don't talk about love, but it was a real love affair. I really fell in love with China. My heart was very, very full in those last few pages in that solo lift to the airport.

AJL: It was very brave of you to write so honestly and openly about your relationship with Jade. Many memoirists only select choice things to write about, but you didn't hold back.

DAR: I learned a long time ago to just shoot it all—don't hold it in. Back in my 20s and 30s, I didn't want to tackle certain subjects. Now I'm 61 and I want to shoot it all.

AJL: That's very admirable—and courageous of you. Are you working on a new book?

DAR: Yes, I'm writing another memoir. Believe it or not, it's as crazy and unlikely as *Larry's Kidney*, but takes place in the southern high desert of New Mexico. I've fallen in love with my little community out there as much as I fell in love with China. ✎

Daniel Asa Rose has offered *Asian Jewish Life* readers the opportunity to purchase autographed copies of his book. Kindly and quite bravely, he also welcomes comments and questions. You can email him at rose@danielasarose.com.