**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF HARBIN  
How a Manchurian Fishing Village Became a Railroad Town and a Haven for Jews**

By Irene Clurman and Professor Dan Ben-Canaan

            Born out of a free-will business adventure and voluntary resettlement from Russia, the Jewish community of Harbin wrote a unique chapter in the history of the Diaspora. Starting with the settlement of the first Jewish family at the end of the 19th century, Harbin’s Jews arrived at a particularly fortunate moment in time. They enjoyed the “boom town” experience that accompanied frontier expansion, as well as the cultural development nurtured by the wealth of new entrepreneurs.  
            By the end of the 19th century, Jews in Czarist Russia were desperate to escape the country’s poverty, pogroms and institutionalized anti-Semitism. Visas to America did not grow on trees, and Jews had trouble obtaining permits for any kind of travel, even within Russia. However, in a little known footnote to history, the Czar who plagued and reviled his Jewish subjects also offered them an out.  
            The Russian government in 1895 had leased a land concession from China to build the Chinese Eastern Railway across Manchuria as an extension of the cross-country Trans-Siberian line. Once the tracks were laid, the Czar was so eager to establish Russia’s economic hold along the route that he offered Jews a chance to live without restrictions if they moved to Manchuria. They could chose between small communities in the Manchurian outback or the larger settlement of Harbin, which means “place of drying fish nets” in Chinese. Originally a cluster of sleepy fishing villages at the confluence of the Songhua (known then by its Russian name, Sungari ) and Heilong or Amur Rivers, Harbin had become the railroad’s administrative hub and was developing into a thriving frontier town.  
            The Czar’s offer had its drawbacks. Ukrainian Jews from the Pale of Settlement had to summon their courage, pack their possessions, turn their backs on all that was familiar and face several uncomfortable and uneasy weeks on the Trans-Siberian railroad to reach Harbin. Siberian Jews, just across the border from Manchuria, faced a shorter train trip but a similar plunge into the unknown. Harbin winters were bitterly cold, and in spring, gritty dust from Mongolia turned the skies yellow and covered every surface, animal, vegetable and mineral. In the early years, European-style amenities were few and far between, and Jewish institutions were nonexistent.  
            Despite these deterrents, waves of Russian pogroms provided Harbin with a steady supply of Jewish residents. Demobilized Jewish soldiers settled in Harbin at the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, and more Russian refugees, both Jewish and gentile, arrived during and after World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution.  
            Although desperation led many Jews to China, a large number new “Harbiners” also welcomed the opportunity to be pioneers in an uncharted land. The railroad brought prosperity and a need for all types of goods and services. Even better, local Chinese had no tradition of anti-Semitism. Word spread fast in the old countries: a Jew could live in Harbin without fear of persecution -- and make a nice living, too.  
            The Railroad Engineering Bureau moved to Harbin from Vladivostok in 1898 to begin construction. The first Jew, S.I. Bertsel, arrived in 1899.  Shortly thereafter, the first Harbin “minyan” took place. By 1900, the town had 45 Jews, and by the end of 1902, Harbin had 300 Jews and more than 10 Jewish-owned shops.  
            Although figures vary, the Harbin Jewish population reportedly topped 20,000 at its peak in the 1920s. There were two major synagogues, the Main or “Old” Synagogue and the New Synagogue. The Jewish community also established a library, a Talmud Torah, an elementary and a secondary school, a cemetery, a women’s charitable organization, a soup kitchen, a home for the aged and a Jewish hospital, which treated both Jews and non-Jews.  
             Jews were furriers, bankers, bakers, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, teachers and people of letters and the arts. They owned coalmines, lumber mills, breweries and candy factories. The Jewish-owned Hotel Moderne boasted a restaurant, a cinema, a billiard room, a bar and a barbershop. Because of its ornate, European-inspired architecture, Harbin became known as the “Oriental St. Petersburg” and the “Paris of the Orient”.  Its rich cultural life led to the nickname “City of Music.”  
            Between 1918 and 1930, about 20 Jewish newspapers and periodicals were published in Harbin. All but one – the Yiddish *Der Vayter Mizrekh* (The Far East) - were in Russian. Russian was the lingua franca for Jews and gentiles alike, as well as for their Chinese employees and business associates. Modern Mandarin speakers in Harbin still use a number of Russian loan words, such as *lie-ba*for bread, from the Russian *khleba.*         Zionism became a force during the leadership of Dr. Abraham I. Kaufman (1885-1971), who headed the Harbin Jewish community before and during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The Harbin Jewish Women’s Association, linked to the Women’s International Zionist Organization (WIZO), was established in 1922. Several Zionist youth organizations were active as well. The largest was Betar, which sponsored sports, scouting and other recreational activities as well as social action. Betar was the Hebrew abbreviation for Union of Trumpeldor, named for Joseph Trumpeldor, a Russian Jewish soldier who, on the way to a prison camp in Japan, passed through Harbin in 1905 and was killed in battle in Palestine in 1920.  
            Inspired in part by these Zionist activities, many Harbin residents made “aliyah” to Israel both before and after World War II. (In Chinese, “aliyah” is written as: 犹太人向以色列之移居, literally meaning “Jew direction Israel him/her migrate”.)  There they formed [Igud Yotzei Sin](http://jewsofchina.org/), the Association of Former Residents of China, whose members also include former residents of other cities in China.  
            In spite of their energy, enthusiasm and organization, Harbin Jews couldn’t avoid the dark clouds coming their way. World War I and the Russian Revolution brought scores of anti-Bolshevik White Russians to Harbin, along with a virulent strain of anti-Semitism. Although anti-Semitism was never institutionalized in Harbin as it was in Russia, bullying of Jews by Russian hooligans became common.  
            The Harbin Russian Fascist Party was established in 1931, the same year the Japanese Army invaded Manchuria. Japanese troops occupied Harbin in 1932, and the city became part of the puppet state of Manchukuo. The Japanese  immediately began expropriating private property and terrorizing the civilian population. They recruited spies among the locals and allowed Russian fascists to spearhead anti-Soviet and anti-Jewish campaigns. Foreigners as well as Chinese were kidnapped, tortured and often murdered by the occupying army and its collaborators. Fearing for their lives, ordinary citizens had no recourse against these injustices.  
            Jews began fleeing Harbin for Tientsin, Shanghai and abroad. By the end of World War II, only about 2,000 Harbin Jews were left to greet the city’s new authorities. The Soviet Army had taken over from the Japanese. Between 1945 and 1947, the Soviets arbitrarily arrested a number of Jews and “repatriated” them to Russian gulags.  
            Following the victory of the Red Army in 1949, Harbin became part of the People’s Republic of China, and about 1,000 Jews left for Israel. By 1955, only 319 Jews were left to maintain community institutions. The community continued to dwindle until its last Harbin member moved to Israel in 1985.  
            In recent years, the Chinese government has officially recognized the historic importance of the Harbin Jewish community in an effort to promote tourism and deepen economic ties with other countries, including Israel. Some of the remaining Jewish-built structures sport multilingual historic plaques. Both synagogues have been refurbished. The Main Synagogue is now a “no-star” hotel and guesthouse of the Harbin Railway Department. The New Synagogue houses the Harbin Jewish History and Culture exhibition.  
            About 600 graves from the original Jewish cemetery in central Harbin were moved to an eastern part of the city in 1952. Former Harbiners and their descendants from around the world have visited [Huangshan Jewish Cemetery](http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Sep/106964.htm) to pay their respects. In 2004, when he was Israel’s vice premier and trade minister, Ehud Olmert left a stone on the tomb of his grandfather Joseph Olmert, who died in Harbin in 1941.  
            In 2002, Professor Dan Ben-Canaan was proclaimed by the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences as the first Jew to settle in Harbin in the 21st century. He teaches in the School of Western Studies of Heilongjiang University and is director of the [Sino-Israel Research and Study Center](http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Sino-Israel_Research_and_Study_Center.htm) there, which maintains extensive archives on Harbin Jewish history. The center also produces films and articles and disseminates information throughout China and abroad on the subject of the Harbin Jewish community.  
            Former Harbiners and their descendants have put down roots in the U.S., Israel, Europe, Australia, Canada and other countries. Many of them have maintained a connection with each other across oceans and continents. They also have preserved a deep respect for the Chinese people, who welcomed Jews without prejudice and provided asylum during difficult times.