Excerpt from *In Manchuria* by Michael Meyers

**Built from 1891 to 1916, The Trans Siberian Railroad was a massive Russian construction project that spanned the entire country. From Moscow in the East to Vladivostok in the West, the railroad carved through the sparsely populated Russian frontier. The railroad did have its’ challenges, amongst these was the border with China. China’s northeast border stood between Russia and its major port of Vladivostok and Port Arthur. In 1896, the Russian government signed an agreement with the Qing government to build a railroad through Chinese territory in exchange for protection from the Japanese. The Russians planned on building cities along the railroad to service the train. Harbin would become one of these cities. The excerpt below describes the Russian and Jewish influence on Harbin.**

“Starting in 1898, Russians in Harbin created what amounted to a concession-technically illegal, as their railway lease allowed for the construction and administration of a “zone” of control rather than an entire city with extraterritorial rights. They argued, however, that the railroad required more than tracks, and built offices, hotels, shops, and restaurants along broad lamp-lit boulevards extending from the station, where Moscow merchants alighted. Other settlers included Russian Jews fleeing first the Czars’ *pogroms* (programs that forcibly removed Jews from Russia), then White Russians fleeing the Bolsheviks. Harbin’s Jewish community grew to 30,000 people, with two synagogues, a library, and its own banks and twenty periodicals, including one named the *Siberian-Palestine Weekly*. Among those buried in its cemetery is the grandfather of former Israeli Prime minister Ehud Olmert, whose parents had fled here from Russia and Ukraine.

In 2004, the Harbin government restored one of the synagogues, featuring a large domed roof and pinnacled colonnade, into a Jewish history research center-this, despite the fact that the last remaining member of the city’s Jewish community emigrated in 1985. In 2013 the city announced it would renovate the other, older synagogue, which had been repurposed as a railway hostel. “

Most Jews of Harbin emigrated to the West in the years after World War II. During 1951-1953, about 3,500 of the former “Chinese” Jews, most of them from Harbin, settled in Israel where they established a society of Chinese Jews. The cemetery was moved from its old location to Huang Shan during 1958-1962, the year that marked the end of the Jewish community of Harbin. The last Jew in Harbin left in 1985. Although Jews no longer reside in Harbin, their legacy continues to this day. Many buildings and two synagogues remind residents and travelers of the city’s Jewish past.

