

The Historical Track and Cultural Legacy of Jews in Harbin

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Abstract: *At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the construction of the Middle East Railway, Jews successively moved to Harbin, a central city in Northeast China as well as a strategic hub of communications between Europe and Asia in the Far East. In less than 50 years, the number of Jewish immigrants in Harbin has reached more than 20,000. The Jewish associations, communities, schools, chambers of Commerce and religious synagogues played an extraordinary role in the fields of politics, economy and culture. Due to historical reasons, there are few written records of the track of Jews in Harbin left. This paper reproduces the whole track of Jewish immigrants moving in, expanding, developing and moving out of Harbin from different aspects. The author consulted the remaining historical materials, combined with the city chronicles at that time and referred to the analysis of experts, to explore the impact of the legacy of Jewish culture in Harbin and surrounding areas and to show the merits of Chinese people in embrace culture variety.*

Keywords: *Harbin, Jewish, society, synagogue, commercial, cooperation*

1. Introduction

All begins from an old black-and-white photo.

One night before he immigrated to Europe three years ago, my uncle gave me an old locked iron Lying solely in the big box was an old black-and-white photo with yellow edges. On the photo, a traditional old-fashioned Chinese man was sitting in the middle, next to a white woman with a forehead holding a girl of about one year old in her arms. My uncle told me it was a family picture and baby girl is my grandma. Her mother, the family hostess was a Romanian Jew. That means I have 1/8 Jewish blood. I was astonished and it reminds me of some memories of those days as a little boy when saw my grandma set herself into silence and deep thinking when talking about family origins. As in Figure 1:



Figure 1: The family picture from the author. The baby girl in the picture is the author's grandma

As an orphan since 14, grandma finished her education in a Jewish school in Harbin and went to a medical university there. My uncle told me that most of the family photos and items tied to Jewish were destroyed during the Culture Revolution. What we now know is that the mother of my grandma who was a nurse in Romania immigrated to Harbin with her father and met her Chinese husband who a dentist here. Grandma did not tell me about this, because no one in the family think this would make any impact on my life, but I do. I wanted to find out that history and help my grandmother find out the bloodroot from her mother's side. I tried my best to leverage the resources as much as I can find. When am lucky to have Professor Fu Youde, a senior professor in Shandong University and a renowned in Jewish research in China as my tutor and mentor for the research, I initiated the research on the

Historical Track and Cultural Legacy of Jews in Harbin.

2. Timeline of Jewish migration to Harbin

The first Jewish immigrant to Harbin can be dated back as early as the year 1896 to 1903 during when Harbin acted as a strategic center of Far East. The key driver for the immigration was the construction of "China East Qing Railway" (hereinafter referred to as the Middle East Railway) led by the Russians to invade China and control the Far East area. During that time, a large number of Russian expatriates came to work and live in Harbin as skilled worker, among them were some Russian Jewish artisans. ^[1] Suffered from discrimination and persecution in the Russo-Japanese War, some Jewish officers, soldiers and prisoners of war who did not want to return to Russia chose to live in Harbin as well. In addition to Russia, a small number of Jews from Germany, Austria, Romania, Poland and other European countries also came to Harbin, an emerging city in the Far East for fortune. Most of these European Jews were artisans and businesspersons with certain skills. Professor Yuchun Guo, a famous Chinese expert on Jewish issues, described in detail the scene of this group of Russian Jews moving into Harbin in her book of Russian Jews (Heilongjiang People's Publishing House, 2015). A traditional Jewish building is shown in Figure 2:



Figure 2: A synagogue in Harbin. From "Jews in Harbin 2003"

The above picture showed a typical building of Jewish style in Daoli District in Harbin. According to the historical records of Jewish expatriates in Harbin, hundreds of people migrated to Harbin during the temporary completion of the Middle East Railway in 1903, and set up a community religious association there, that was what they called synagogue. ^[2] In addition to building the railway, they began to engage in commercial activities. From 1904 to 1905, the number of Jews increased sharply and developed rapidly in religion, culture and commerce. The commercial influence of Jews reached the peak at the "Harbin Trade Fair" in 1908.

In 1915, due to the upsurge of immigrants from Russia and European Jews to the United States and Australia, many European Jews first moved eastward to Harbin as a transit point for immigrants to the United States, Australia and other countries ^[3]. Two years later after the October Revolution when the discrimination and persecution against Jews in Russia were intensified, a "Far East Jewish Affairs Office" was established in Harbin. In the following couple of years, the number of immigrants and transits to Harbin continued to increase, with a maximum of more than 20,000, far exceeding the number of Jews in Shanghai, a Jewish society center in the east at that time.

However, with the expansion and rule of the Japanese in Harbin, the friendly environment to the Jews changed, adding to the misfortunes was the severe the conflict between China and the Soviet Union. What even worse was that the Japanese took over the management right of the Middle East Railway ^[4]. From 1924, the number of Jews in Harbin gradually decreased, and there were only a few thousand left by 1935. In 1945, almost all Jews withdrew from Harbin. You can say the Jews moving in and out of Harbin in less than 50 years ago was just a glimpse journey in the long course of history.

3. Religious Influence of Jews

Judaism is the spiritual root and faithful inheritance for Jewish people. Coming together with the Jewish immigrants to Harbin was Judaism and Harbin Jewish Synagogue, the Judicial religious association established in 1903 ^[5].

The Main Synagogue in Harbin, also known as the Old Church in Artilleriskaya Street, was

founded in 1907 and became the sites for Harbin Jewish religious association, Harbin Jewish Zionist Organization and major Jewish publications. Unfortunately, the Old Church was burnt and destroyed in 1931. The New Synagogue, which was built in 1918, became the largest Synagogue in China until today. Featuring the huge dome of double circles and the pinnacle colonnade, the New Church witnessed all the important events and moments for Jewish people in Harbin, from weddings and funerals, to festival celebrations and religious gatherings. A traditional Jewish building is shown in Figure 3:

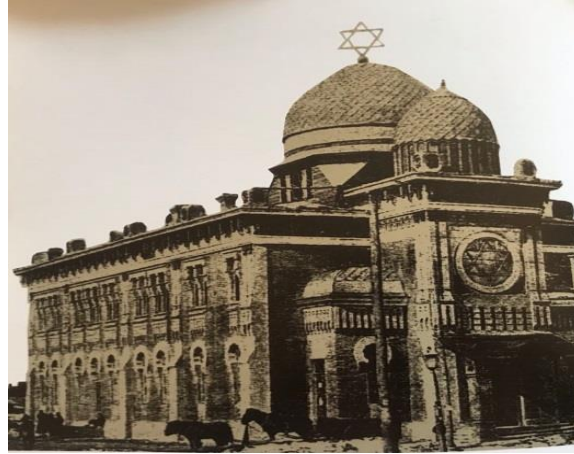


Figure 3: The Main Synagogue in Harbin, also known as the Old Church, from "Jews in Harbin" 2003

The Zionist Organization in Harbin which was established in May 1919 right after the Far East Jewish Zionist Conference held in the city played a great role in protecting and moving Jews to Israel and Palestine, together with. Other Jewish associations and societies including Betar Youth Organization, Jewish Nursing Home, Jewish Women Charitable and Relief Organization. ^[6]

4. Cultural Legacy of Jews in Harbin

Jews have always attached importance to education, especially vocational education. In order to help the immigrants improve skills to survive and integrate into the local business society as soon as possible, the Jews established the Harbin Co-ed Commercial School shortly after they set foot on this land. The school sharing campus with the Harbin University of Political Science and Law led by accomplished Jewish teachers performed an important role in spreading modern western methods of intellectual work in education. In 1917, Jews in Harbin successively established Jewish Middle School and Harbin No. 1 Social Middle School. ^[7] Many Jews who later immigrated to the United States and Australia studied here. According to historical records, many Jewish teachers worked in different schools in Harbin, including the China Russia Industrial Technology School later renamed Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin University of Political Science and Law.

Running newspapers and magazines was also an important medium for the preservation and development of Jewish culture in Harbin. The New Life Newspaper, known as Novaya Jizni, which founded in 1907, was managed and edited by Jewish founders and editors and later merged as Novosty Jizni. The newspaper which was once represented by the first woman publisher Elizabeth Kaufman played a great role in promoting Jewish culture and lifestyle. ^[8] Later, the "Rupor" registered as Luboer Newspaper in Chinese and "Rubej" weekly became very influential publications at that time.

In particular, what were worth mentioning are the achievements of Jewish people in Harbin in music. They established a symphony orchestra and music club, among which the Symphony Orchestra of Harbin Railway Club trained many musicians and conductors, and even had a wide influence after the Jews moving out of Harbin. Harbin First Conservatory of Music was deeply influenced by Jewish musicians in 1920, and the Dean himself was a Jew. The cradle of Harbin musicians, GLazunov Higher School of Music was also run by Jewish teachers.

Theaters run by Jews, the Middle East Railway Club and the famous Modern theaters all played an important role in promoting the cultural life at that time. These theaters brought the progressive culture of Europe to Harbin, making Harbin the "Oriental Paris" in the Far East at that time. ^[9] Jewish youth live a happy life in Harbin as shown in Figure 4:



Figure 4: Jewish youth attend masquerade ball singing and dancing. From *Les Juifs en Chine*

In terms of professional skills, medical doctors were a very influential industry for Jews at that time. According to incomplete statistics, before 1907, four fifths of doctors in Harbin were Jews. The father of my great grandma, the host on the old black-and-white family pictures worked as was a dentist under the guidance of a Jewish master's professor in a Jewish clinic where he met his Jewish wife. Harbin Jewish Hospital and Harbin Jewish Synagogue for the poor and sick were both first-class hospitals at that time, and played a great role in rescuing the poor and the disabled.

5. Jewish Commercial Heritage

It says in Talmud that anything in the hands of a merchant can be turned into a commodity. Where there is money, there is Jews. The Jewish people created a lot of economic miracle throughout the world. ^[9] They did the same in Harbin.

The industry and commerce operated by Jews in Harbin covered a wide range of fields. From coalmines, forestry, wood farms, paper printing, to almost all aspects of people's livelihood, including food-processing, department stores, knitted clothing, and pharmacies. Among them, Jewish breweries, tobacco companies, soybean factories, snack factories, candy processing and flour businesses are still deeply loved by the people in Harbin today. *Mardier*, the famous hotel and *Chulin Company* were invested and managed by Jews. ^[10] The Jewish family businesses that still have influences in Harbin include the flour industry operated by *SL.S.Skidelski* family, the shipping company of *I.H.Soskin* family, the fur industry of *P.A.Slutsiki* family, the soybean processing of *J.R. Kabalkin* family and the department store of *Samsonovich* family.

In addition, Jews acted as the vanguard in Harbin march towards the global financial industry and market.. From 1924 to 1927, the Jews established a large number of commercial banks and financial institutions in Harbin, including *Harbin Russian Bank*, *American Credit Bank*, *French International Bank*, *Far East Jewish Commercial Bank* and *Harbin Jewish People's Bank*. These financial institutions had played a great role in local financing and investment, as shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6:



Figure 5: An old Jewish Bank building. From *Les Juifs en Chine*



Figure 6: The Central Street in Harbin. From Les Juifs en Chine

Today, many shops once operated by Jewish merchants are still standing on The Central Street, the most famous commercial street in Harbin. Such businesses include Jewish National Bank, American International Insurance Company, Geneva Watch and Jewelry Store, Guangji Pharmacy, Eskin Brothers Chamber of Commerce, Bianté Brothers Firm, Zinger Sewing Machine Shop, Huikang Woolen Shop, Wopuqike Company, Azadovsky Candy and Dessert Shop, Mini Agur Coffee and Tea Shop, Mars Chocolate and Candy Shop and Moscow Pharmacy. It is amazing that a street less than a kilometer was the home to so many Jewish businesses of various industries. Indeed, as it says: where there is Jews, there are economic miracles.

6. Reasons for the survival and growth of Jews in Harbin

The Jewish nation has its distinctive culture and lifestyle, and the Chinese nation is a nation with profound and unique cultural influence. How could Jews settle down and survive in the territory of the Chinese nation and maintain their cultural legacy and identity? Professor Fu and many other Jewish scholars believe that the tolerance, hospitality and friendliness of the Chinese people endowed a favorable living environment for Jews to survive and settle down in China. In addition, the reasons why Jews could live in Harbin include:

The Jews who immigrated to Harbin were persecuted by poverty, exclusion, discrimination and persecution; this made them strong enough in spirit to bear any difficulties and hardships.

Large engineering projects such as the Middle East Railway required skilled workers, and offered many career and business opportunities, encouraging poor Jews to come here for fortune.

As a very open emerging city in the Far East at that time, Harbin attracted and accepted all kinds of talents from different countries in the world, and became a melting pot of immigrants. Ethnic groups with different cultures were not mutually exclusive, and each had its own community and lived in harmony.

Judaism and ethnic cohesion brought the Jews in Harbin together and formed their own closed-loop life circles such as Synagogue, business association, community, schools and arts & culture societies, which protected the uniqueness, freshness and inheritance of Jewish culture.

7. The Practical Significance of studying Jews in Harbin

Chinese people have the saying of "taking history as a mirror". By studying the historical track and cultural heritage of Jews in Harbin, we can find the continuous origin with Jews, which can play a beneficial role in promoting the cooperation between contemporary Harbin and Jews. As an important economic and cultural city in the Northeast China, Harbin has many opportunities to cooperate with Israel and other countries in agriculture and animal husbandry, tourism and comparative cultural exchanges. Many Harbin Jews have returned to Israel or immigrated to the US, Europe and Australia, but they regard Harbin as their second hometown and still have deep feelings on the city. With the

study of Jews in Harbin, the cooperation between Chinese and Jews would be further strengthened and wide spread.

8. Conclusion

Although the early Jewish immigrant in Harbin have only stayed there for less than 30 years, they have left a valuable cultural heritage, which provides significant resources for the study of Jews and Chinese, how they integrated together while keep separate ethnic identities. The author hopes that this essay will help promote cooperation between Jews and Chinese people in Harbin.

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