

A Short History of Harbin and Tientsin Jewry

Preface

The history of Jews originating from China is not as well-known as that of European Jewry. When I gave my talk about my life on zoom (www.162smilingfaces.com) I realised that there was an interest in understanding the historical background to my parents' story. I found the same interest when David Layman gave his talk.

I therefore thought that a short article giving that history would be appreciated. This article covers Harbin and Tientsin since nearly all former Betarim born between 1930 and 1950 who have come from China came from there. I have not included Shanghai. Its history basically is similar to that of Tientsin, but is much more complex.

I have deliberately kept the article general and have not included any personal stories.

Acknowledgements

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I am also deeply grateful to all the other Betarim of China origin who have expressed their support for this project.

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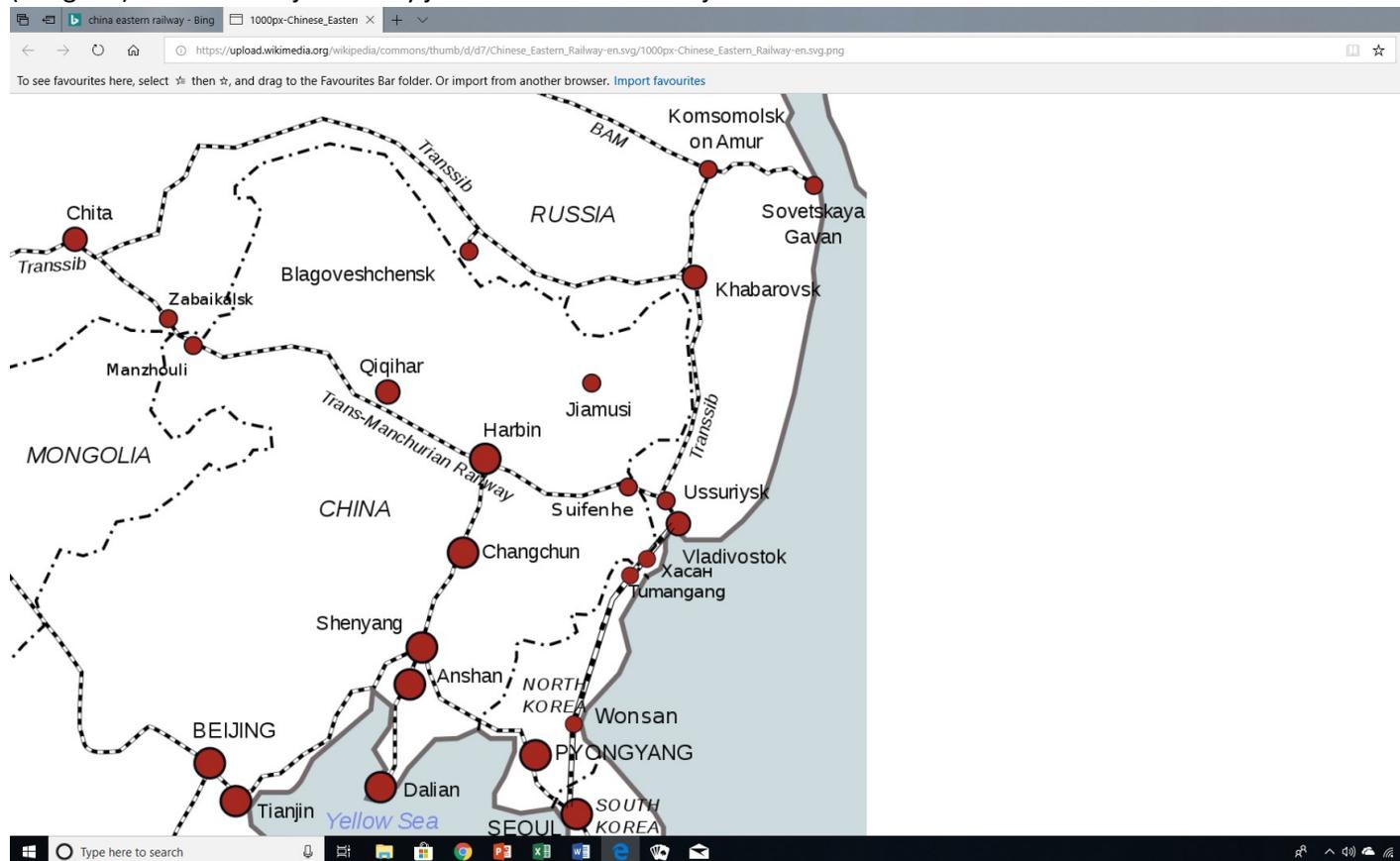
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HARBIN

Construction of the China Eastern Railway

Under Tsar Alexander II, Russia expanded eastward from Moscow with the building of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the late 19th century. In 1896, agreement was reached with China for the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway across Manchuria and construction began in 1898. The purpose for this railway was two-fold. One was to continue the line through China to Vladivostok because this was the most direct route. Construction of the current line completely through Russia was not completed until 10 years later. The second purpose was to reach the strategic warm water port of Port Arthur (Lushun) as the sea at Vladivostok iced over in winter. The port of Dairen (Dalian) is a few miles north of Port Arthur on the same peninsula and also on the same train line.

A secondary purpose was to contain Japan in Korea which was under the influence of Japan by the Japan-Korea treaty of 1876. Thus, Harbin changed from a sleepy fishing village on the Sungari (Songhua) River to a major railway junction under Russian jurisdiction



The China Eastern Railway

Russia under the Czars

Czar Alexander ruled over an oppressive regime and was assassinated in 1894. His son, Nicholas, was unprepared to rule as czar and has been characterised as a naïve and incompetent leader. Under his rule, the economy collapsed, military skirmishes lost with the loss of many lives, and food became scarce. Pogroms against Jews were used as a tool to distract the people from the czar's incompetence, culminating in the horrific Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and again in 1905. As a result, many Jews sought to leave Russia. Whilst many left Russia for America, some came to Harbin. Some Jews had already arrived from Siberia with the establishment of the railway in 1898. They, too, were escaping antisemitism.

The Russian Japanese War of 1904-5

In 1904, Japan declared war on Russia, thus beginning the Russian Japanese war of 1904-5 in which Trumpedor lost his arm. Because of superior tactics and more modern ships, Japan won the war, thus consolidating Japan's hold on Korea. In addition, Japan gained control of the southern arm of the China Eastern railway from Changchun to Dalian which included Port Arthur and which also included a branch line into Korea. (See map above).

The Russian Civil War

The Russian revolution of 1917 saw the abdication of the czar and the beginning of a civil war between the red army, the Bolsheviks, and the white army, the monarchists, which did not end until 1922. With the red army victorious, many of the monarchist white army escaped to Harbin, to which they brought their rabid antisemitism.

The City of Harbin

Harbin was a typical Russian city without the civil war. For many, life was wonderful. Plentiful servants to look after the house and prepare food freed women from housework. There were many cultural activities, both for the Russians and the Jews. There were two synagogues. Hashomer Hatzair was formed there in 1927, and many of their members went on Aliyah to Palestine. When Betar was formed in 1929, most of the initial members came from former members of Hashomer Hatzair.

Bullying of Jews and scuffles between Jews and fascist white Russian antisemitic hooligans were common and it was the members of Betar that protected the Jewish community.

The indigenous Chinese community in Harbin was completely ignored by the Russians who did not bother to learn Chinese. Many of the Chinese were extremely poor and starving, and were commonly found begging in the streets. When the Japanese came, these beggars were shot.

China

Meanwhile, China itself was undergoing a revolution. The rulers of the Qing dynasty were inward looking and ultra-conservative. They opposed any foreign ideas and refused to modernise. Eventually, they lost the support of the people and in 1912 Sun Yat Sen overthrew them and established a democratic republican government.

In 1920, China ended the Russian territoriality in Manchuria but in 1924 agreed to joint administration of the China Eastern Railway with the Soviet Union. In 1929, this arrangement was disputed.

In 1925, following the death of Sun Yat Sen, the leadership was taken over by Chiang Kai Shek. With the rise of communism in 1927, a civil war began that ended with the communist victory in 1949.

The Mukden Incident

As stated above, Japan had control of the southern part of the China Eastern Railway starting at Changchun. In 1931, the Mukden Incident occurred. A train was travelling in Mukden (now called Shenyang-see map) when an explosion occurred under the train. The train was unharmed and continued on its way. The railway line was also not damaged. Nevertheless, the Japanese called this an act of sabotage by the Chinese who had an army camp nearby. Using this as an excuse, the Japanese invaded Manchuria and in February 1932 occupied Harbin. In 1935 the Soviets sold the whole railway to the Japanese.

Life under the Japanese

Life under the Japanese was fraught. Businesses were taken over and many people were arrested. Many of those were murdered, tortured, or medically experimented on. Others were arrested to extort large sums of money from their relatives for their release.

The Japanese were paranoid that there were Russian spies in Harbin spying on the Japanese for Stalin. They employed trusted White Russian Anti-Soviet monarchists to ferret these out and to report them. Since these White Russians were deeply anti-Semitic, many Jews disappeared, never to be seen again.

Jewish Exodus from Harbin

Because of antisemitism, the China Russia dispute over the railway and the Japanese, many Jews left Harbin. Some tried to return to Russia, but were accused by Stalin of being Japanese spies and either murdered or sent to Siberian labour camps. Others moved to Tientsin (Tianjin) or Shanghai.

Conditions in Tientsin and Shanghai under the Japanese were much more peaceful than in Harbin. These places differed from Harbin in that they housed Americans, British, French and other foreign people living in special areas called Concessions and initially, at least, they acted as a brake on Japanese excesses. Jews were protected by some Japanese because it was thought that they had influence in high places internationally and could be used to Japan's advantage.

After the War

Japan was defeated in 1945, and Russia reclaimed Harbin. Many Russians, including Jews, were rehabilitated to Russia and sent to Siberian labour camps. Jewish property was confiscated, and many Jews were tortured.

Harbin was given administrative control to the Peoples Liberation Army by Russia some 7 months later, but they still maintained overall power. Jews were not allowed to leave Harbin until 1948, when Russian influence began to wane.

TIENTSIN

Before 1900, Tientsin (Tianjing) was a walled city. It lies on the Hai (Peiho) river which runs a short distance from there to the Port of Tientsin at the Bohai Sea which opens out into the Yellow Sea. It is also close to Beijing (Peking).

Establishment of Foreign Concessions

In 1858, British and French forces prevailed in the second opium war, and the Treaty of Tientsin was signed, which, by the 1860 Peking Convention, opened Tientsin to foreign trade. Between 1895 and 1900, these two forces were joined by Japan, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Belgium in establishing self-contained concessions or settlements there, each with their own prisons, schools, hospitals and barracks. Each was extraterritorial, that is, not subject to Chinese governance.

The Boxer Rebellion

Following the defeat of the Qing Chinese army in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 over Korea, Christian missionaries were allowed to proselytise there, and foreign spheres of influence increased. Villagers around there were increasingly resentful of this.

In June, 1900, during a severe drought, thousands of Chinese peasants, trained in martial arts, (called Boxers by the West because their movements resembled shadow boxing) rampaged through the walled city destroying Christian churches and killing Chinese Christians. Some of these later advanced on the foreign settlements, but were driven off. The Chinese army, on orders from Peking, attacked and the settlements were kept under siege. In July, a multinational military force, representing the eight-nation alliance, defeated the Chinese army and the Boxers, thus rescuing the besieged population of the settlements.

Jewish Immigration into Tientsin

Before 1917 there were fewer than 10 Jewish families in Tientsin. With the Russian revolution, 500 to 600 additional families settled there and the Jewish population grew from then on. By 1939 there were between 2,000 and 2,500 Jews there, including between 50 and 100 from America and Europe. The Tientsin Jews generally engaged in commerce, though a few were physicians, teachers, or consular officials. The community had its own synagogue and a Jewish school. Betar was established in 1932 and was the only Jewish youth movement in Tientsin. Life was pleasant in Tientsin. Antisemitism from White Russians was kept at bay by the concession authorities and people were free to go about their business, isolated from the civil war raging in the rest of China.

Tientsin under the Japanese

Japan invaded Tientsin in 1937. Initially, Japan respected foreign concessions. In 1941, after Japan had joined the Axis powers, Japan occupied the British and American concessions. Nevertheless, the Jews were mainly left alone. The primary reason was that there was a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Japan, and Jews were treated as Russians. When Russia did declare war on Japan in 1945, Japan began losing the war and had its attention directed elsewhere. Many white

Russians were sent north to fight the Soviet Union, and some Japanese protected the Jews when they could.

Contrast between Harbin and Tientsin

The difference in Japanese behaviour between Harbin and Tientsin was stark. The reasons for this may have been:

1. Tientsin was further from Russia than Harbin and so the fear of soviet spies in Tientsin was less
2. Japan entered Tientsin four years after it entered Harbin
3. The presence of the foreign concessions in Tientsin may have acted as a brake on Japanese excesses. It was not until Japan entered the war allied with Germany that it occupied the British and American concessions and sent some of its inhabitants to prison camps
4. Jews were thought to have influence in high places internationally and could be used to Japan's advantage.

After the War

With the defeat of Japan in 1945, America entered Tientsin. Fighting between the Americans and Mao Tsetung's communist forces soon broke out. Americans started to leave Tientsin in 1946 and in 1949, the communists entered Tientsin. Between 1945 and 1949 Jews emigrated to America, Israel and Australia.

Disclaimer

This article is not an academic treatise. It is my understanding of events as obtained from my reading and memories of discussions with my family. It is therefore subject to error. It is intended to supply a historic background to the personal stories of those former Betarim who came from China.

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