




Betar China: The Impact of a Remote Jewish Youth Movement, 1929-1949

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Introduction

Scattered over several provinces and cities¹ and gathered from many countries, China's modern Jewish communities had very little in common. Unlike Europe's Jewish communities, which had lived there for centuries, sharing histories, languages, and cultures, Jews arrived in China between the 1850s (mostly Baghdadi Jews who came by choice) and the late 1930s (mostly refugees who came by necessity). Representing different cultures and backgrounds, they could hardly communicate; professed various styles of Judaism, from orthodoxy to secularism; and belonged to a variety of socio-economic classes, some very rich, some very poor. Not surprisingly, China's modern Jewish communities, peaking at 20 to 30 thousand, were divided politically, ideologically, physically, and organizationally. BETAR was one group, in fact, a sub-group, one of the smaller, although at times,

in the 1930s, it was the only, and certainly the most important and influential, Jewish youth movement in China.

Established in 1923 in Riga, Latvia, by Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, BETAR (בית"ר) is a Hebrew acronym of Brit Joseph (Yosef) Trumpeldor (Yosef Trumpeldor Covenant). It is also the name of the Jewish fort that survived the Bar Kokhba Revolt and the last to fall to the Romans in 136 AD. A symbol of heroism, BETAR became the youth movement of the Revisionist Party, or faction, within the Zionist movement, which leaned to the right and opposed Zionism's leftist (i.e., socialist) factions. Several ephemeral "Zionist parties" had existed in Harbin, China, mostly short-lived, but the most permanent, in fact, an umbrella framework, was the *Algemein* Zionists, known as the General Zionist Organization. Its worldwide leader was Chaim Weizmann, but in Harbin, it was headed by Dr. Avraham Kaufman, who remained its undisputed and popular leader for many years and was accepted as such by the entire Harbin Jewish community, whatever its political orientation. While the leftist Harbin Jewish Bund opposition movement disintegrated, all the other groups were basically united under the General Zionist Organization, including BETAR, despite being occasionally rejected.²

BETAR was not the first Jewish youth movement in China. It had been preceded by Neurei Zion (Youth of Zion), Maccabi (that had been established twice for short periods and did not survive), and Hashomer Hatza'ir USSR (Young Guard) that had been brought to Harbin by David Laskov in 1927. An underground scout-vanguard movement that had emerged in Russia at the end of World War I (not to be confused with the better-known Hashomer Hatza'ir, which is still active), it attracted a

number of young people. They formed a branch led by Gera Mordchovitch (Zvi Maromi) with some 60 members (including Mordechai Olmert, 1911-1998, father of Ehud Olmert, later prime minister of Israel), whose duties were to keep public order and organize various activities. They considered themselves revisionists, which explains their wish to get in touch with the BETAR center in Riga.³ The initiative to set up a BETAR branch in China originated in Harbin – not in Europe.

Harbin was a Russian bubble in China. Jewish youth in Harbin belonged to a second generation of assimilated families whose lives were conducted in Russian, affected by Russian culture and history as taught in Russian schools.⁴ A Jewish school did exist but only had the first four grades and was attended by a minority of Jewish children. Attempts to create a Jewish secondary school failed. As the Russian Revolution was gathering momentum, Jewish youth in Harbin, who were seeking an alternative doctrine, were increasingly attracted by Jabotinsky's writings. His analyses and solutions to the Jewish situation worldwide – including Palestine – proved to be more acceptable and feasible to some of China's Jews than those of the General Zionists. Also, one of BETAR China's missions was to prevent mixed marriages and assimilation, as well as to block ideological assimilation and the influence of socialism and communism.⁵

Originally smaller than other Jewish movements, BETAR was more attractive not just to the Jewish youth but also to many adults who regarded its ideology, policies, and activities much more effective. BETAR China was much more influential than its small size suggested, not just in China but also in other Jewish Diaspora countries, and especially in Israel, before, as well as after, it gained

independence. BETAR China's veterans played notable political, military, and economic roles while still in China and after they left. Much of their story is unique and parts of which have never been told, at least not in public. There is no academic study, nor any article in English, on BETAR China. In the growing literature on China's Jewish communities, also in Chinese, BETAR is hardly, or only briefly, mentioned.⁶

Foundation: BETAR Harbin

Harbin's Zionist-Revisionist Alliance and BETAR were organized with the support of Alexander Yakovlevich Gurvitch (1899-1980), who had arrived from Haifa in 1928. China's BETAR branch was officially established in Harbin on May 18, 1929.⁷ Gurvitch was elected the first president of the Revisionist movement in China and became BETAR's *Netziv* (commissioner). Gradually, all of Harbin's active youth movements, including Hashomer Ha'tza'ir, disintegrated and decided to join BETAR. Its first head was Aryeh (Lev or Leo) Piastunovitch, who also served as leader of Tianjin's Jewish community. BETAR Harbin's first Executive Council included seven founders: Mordechai (Motia) Olmert, Gera Mordchovitch, Nissan Lifshitz, Pavel Pinsky, Reva Levin, Lela Kotovitch, and Abrasha Ifland.⁸ Piastunovitch left in 1933⁹ and was followed by leaders who served for short periods: Alexander Gurvitch (1933-1934); I. Molchanovsky (1934); Mordechai Lesk (1935); and Abram Milichiker (1936-1937), who died at an early age from tuberculosis. Sema (Shimon) Klein, the last head of BETAR Harbin, served from 1938 to 1945, when the Soviets arrived.¹⁰ He was arrested but managed to bribe his way out and immigrated to Israel in 1950.

BETAR founders in China were initially and primarily interested in setting up a youth movement to learn martial arts, self-defense skills, and sport. This long-run policy aimed at fighting British colonialism and Arab aggression for achieving Israel's independence. Meanwhile, anti-Semitism was a major problem in Harbin.¹¹ It was promoted by White Russian organizations led by Konstantin Rodzaevsky, who, since 1931, was the secretary-general of the revived Russian Fascist Party. He was also the editor of a daily newspaper called *Nash Put'* (Our Way) and *The Nation*. In addition to spreading false accusations and slanders against the Jews and Jewish leaders, the fascists used to beat Jews. In one case, they kidnapped and murdered Simon Kaspe, a talented pianist and son of the Jewish owner of Hotel Moderne – the best in Harbin.¹² Since they identified themselves as anti-Communist and supporters of Japan's policy in Asia, they enjoyed Japanese protection and tolerance.¹³ Yet, BETAR would find the White Russian anti-Jewish hooligans and punished them hard. Consequently, violence against Harbin Jews subsided remarkably. This was also a result of a change in Japan's attitude. Following the declaration of full cooperation with Japan's national policies by the First Far Eastern Jewish People's Conference in Harbin in December 1937, Japan adopted a policy of protecting the Jews under its rule (at least until late 1941). Rodzaevsky was dismissed after he rejected the request of Kiichiro Higuchi, Head of the Harbin Military Mission, to liquidate the Russian Fascist Party. The publication of the anti-Semitic newspaper *Nash Put'* was prohibited.¹⁴ In 1946, Rodzaevsky was executed by the Soviets in Moscow.

Apparently, China's Jews, Betar members included, collaborated with the Japanese but at the same time expected their defeat. Many left Harbin following the Japanese occupation since late 1931. They also tried to avoid friction with the Germans, Japan's allies. But there were exceptions. For example, born in Harbin in 1929, Boris Shteinman (Bob), who moved with his family to Tianjin in 1935, set fire to a German publishing house that had flown the Nazi swastika flag. In 1947, he moved to Australia and became BETAR commander in New South Wales.

BETAR Harbin had a number of facilities, including offices, boxing and physical exercise halls, a skating ring, running tracks, and volleyball and basketball courts. A big sign in Russian declared: "*Vzdorovom tele, zdorovyi dukh*" ("A healthy mind in a healthy body").¹⁵ BETAR's retaliation against White Russian and ordinary hooligans and achievements in sports competitions won the movement a reputation far beyond its actual size, both within the Jewish community and outside. In the 1930s, BETAR was practically the only youth movement in Harbin and attracted some 150 members, about half of all of Harbin Jewish youth.¹⁶ Its competence became evident in 1932 when the Sungari (Songhua) River overflowed, flooding Harbin's lower (and older) quarter. A small group of 50-60 BETAR members, headed by Lelia (Levi) Ravikovitch (father of Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch) helped fill sandbags to block the rising water and rescuing and transporting older people from their flooded homes. They distributed drinking water and food using rowboats day and night and won BETAR much appreciation and respect.¹⁷ BETAR played a similar role in the Tianjin floods in 1939.

Following its establishment, BETAR absorbed all the other Jewish youth movements, becoming the overall union of all Jewish youth in China and, in fact, the only one – for a while. Yet, after its dissolution, Maccabi Sports Organization was revived and absorbed those who did not identify politically with BETAR. Nonetheless, the two movements coexisted peacefully, sharing the same sports facilities. While Zionism and settlement in Palestine were the primary and long-term goals, many revisionists left Harbin for Palestine in the early 1930s. In addition to engaging in cultural activities in Zionism, Jewish history, and literature, BETAR launched its first sports ground on June 16, 1929, in an imposing military-style parade with marching bands, displaying their official uniforms, and hosting national (and Chinese) flags. Inconceivable in Europe (or Israel), where Zionism did not hide its hostility to Revisionism, the parade was greeted publicly by Dr. Avraham Kaufman (1885-1971), head of the Chinese Zionist Organization. As the editor of the Zionist newspaper *Yevreiskaya Zhizn* (Jewish Life), he allocated a bi-weekly section to BETAR. By that time, BETAR's membership in Harbin had reached 200, soon to reach 250, an impressive number (about 15 percent), given the small population.¹⁸

Shortly after BETAR Harbin was founded, a group of its members decided to leave for Palestine. On February 3, 1930, Kaufman sent a letter to the Zionist Federation in Jerusalem, asking for certificates:

Two years ago, a Hebrew Zionist youth association was founded here, acting first under the name "Hashomer Hatzar," and now moved under the flag of Trumpeldor Covenant [BETAR]. This association consists now of some two hundred, among them not small is the number of those who are dedicated with heart and soul to the idea of revival. Of this youth association, a group of 10 people decided to actively join the construction work and come to Eretz Israel in order to settle there as pioneers. [...] Many are graduates of higher education schools who had already left their studies. They wish to leave the Diaspora at the first opportunity.¹⁹

Many, however, left following the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and, by the end of 1931 – as China's Jewish refugees had reached about 18,000 – the number of BETAR members declined to 155, about 0.8 percent.²⁰ As mentioned above, despite the ideological differences and occasional debates, a basic solidarity existed between the Revisionists and the General Zionists. When the National Council of Far Eastern Jews was established and organized three conferences (in 1937, 1938, and 1939), the Revisionists and BETAR participated. In 1943, BETAR Harbin decided to hold a meeting to commemorate Jabotinsky three years after his death. As required, the program, including speeches and songs, was submitted to Japanese censorship. Tanabe, the Japanese "adviser" to the Jewish community, rejected the event, explaining that Jabotinsky died in the United States, which was at war with Japan. Kaufman wrote an elaborate letter showing the Jabotinsky – a fighter against the British

and, presumably, the Americans – was implicitly Japan's ally. The Japanese were convinced and permitted the event.²¹

In February 1936, BETAR China was divided into two regions, each headed by a different *netziv*. One covered northern China and Manchuguo (Manchuria under Japanese occupation). The other covered southern China, including Tianjin, Shandong (Qingdao and Qufu), and Shanghai.²²

Expansion: BETAR Shanghai

Unlike Harbin, whose foreign population – including the Jewish community (about 10,000 from 1932 to 1938 and some 4,000 in 1940)²³ – was culturally homogenous, mostly Russian, Shanghai was bigger, more heterogeneous and cosmopolitan, and was hardly infected by anti-Semitism. Still a young girl (born in 1917), Judith Hasser, who became acquainted with BETAR during a visit to Harbin, promoted the need to organize a BETAR cell in Shanghai. By that time, BETAR Harbin and the leadership abroad had already decided to set up a branch in Shanghai and, after some delay, sent Lela Kotovitch, a veteran Harbin and Tianjin BETAR member, to establish a BETAR cell in Shanghai. The founders included Reuven Slossman, Fred Fuchs, Judy Hasser, Misha Leimanstein, Sarah and Mara Morguleff, Yosef Gurin, Julius Feldstein, Eric Gabriel, Erik Levin, Leo Hanin, D. Hanin, M. Bach, H. Emberg, and Pana Samsonovich, Offices were rented on 722 Bubbling Well Road (an extension of Nanjing Xi Lu in central Shanghai), and the branch was inaugurated in June 1931 with about 25 members.²⁴ About the same time, a Revisionist Party was also organized. To increase youth membership, BETAR members started teaching in Jewish high schools.

Like in Harbin, the Shanghai Revisionists shared the long-term vision of settling in Palestine and founding an independent Jewish state with the General Zionists organization, known as “Kadima” (Forward). Whereas their relationships were good and centered around the “Jewish Club” (relocated to Avenue Pichon in the French Concession), their tactics were different. More moderate, “Kadima” used meetings and lectures, while the Revisionists and BETAR were more militant and practical. Ten years later, following the outbreak of the Pacific War, the BETAR Club moved to a private location donated by one of its supporters (Izia Chernomorsky) in Avenue Joffre. One of the assistants, Lily Frank, later migrated to Canada and became national executive director of the Zionists women’s world organization Hadassah and the Women International Zionist Organization (WIZO). Following Harbin, BETAR’s initial activities in Shanghai consisted not just of lectures but also of physical training to prepare youngsters for living in Eretz Israel, and it attracted a good deal of support – especially among the youth but also among older people who identified themselves as “Friends of BETAR” or switched over to the Revisionist Party. Friends of BETAR was formed in 1932 to help the movement, headed by Genia Korff, with Dr. Joffe, Gubbay, and B. Topaz. It relied on the generosity and devotion of some of Shanghai’s wealthy Jews, like Gita and Grisha Klebanoff, and Sava Yanroff, one of the early BETAR leaders in southeast China.²⁵ In addition to general and physical education, BETAR Shanghai was the only BETAR branch in the world that also offered professional military training and experience.

A Jewish Military Unit Formed in Shanghai

These were provided by the Shanghai Volunteer Corps (SVC), formed in 1853 to protect Shanghai's foreigners following the Opium War. At first, BETAR allowed its members over the age of 18 to join the Corps' British and American battalions as individuals. However, in the summer of 1932, BETAR proposed to the SVC to create a separate Jewish platoon. Approved almost immediately, a Jewish platoon was organized within the British "A" battalion.²⁶ Demand was so high that soon a second and, in 1938, a third platoon was launched, paving the ground for a full Jewish Company within the SVC, with a waiting list. It had its own emblem: a Shield of David with the letters SVC inside it and its own blue and white banner.²⁷ Deployed in several locations in Shanghai, the Jewish Company's duties were to guard the Settlements, and occasionally, they opened fire against intruders. Its aims were not only defense and acquisition of military experience but also to convince Britain to give immigration certificates to Palestine²⁸ to help in defense duties. Some of them joined the British forces in 1941 and later lost their lives.

In addition to the Jewish SVC Company, by 1935, BETAR Shanghai had also established a naval unit called "*Yamit*," probably hoping to use it in the future to assist Jewish (illegal) immigration to Palestine. They acquired land near the Shanghai River power plant on the northern shore of the International Settlement. Reuven Slossman became commander of the unit, and Eric Hasser, Judith Hasser's brother, became a non-commissioned officer. It was only in August 1937 that BETAR bought a boat and arranged for uniforms with a Menorah badge. "Brit Trumpeldor" was printed in gold on a black band of the naval cap. Yet, by that time, the group had difficulties in operating, and the Japanese – who already ruled Shanghai – soon

captured the mooring area, signaling the end of BETAR's "*Yamit*" unit. However, the SVC, including the Jewish Company, continued to exist until 1942, when it was abolished by the Japanese. In 1938, the Jewish SVC veterans were organized into the "Soldiers Alliance" (*Brith Hehaya*), which also included former Jewish officers and soldiers in the German, Austrian, Russian, and British armies. Its ties with BETAR were based on mutual assistance.²⁹

Even before he was appointed BETAR Commissioner (*Netziv*) of Shanghai and Southern China in 1933, Robert (Boris) Bitker had helped to create the SVC Jewish Platoon and became its sergeant deputy commander. Born in Warsaw (probably on June 27, 1896), Bitker had reportedly won three St. George Crosses as a Russian soldier, then fled the Bolshevik Revolution to the Russian Far East, joined White Admiral Kolchak fight against the Communists, and in the early 1920s left for the United States where he became an American citizen.³⁰ Back in Shanghai, he joined the SVC American Company and later the Jewish unit. There were many Jews in other SVC units, but most of the Jewish Company consisted of BETAR members and leaders. In addition to Bitker, they included Corporal David Hanin and his brother Corporal Leo Hanin (a marksman); Private Lela Kotovitch; Sergeant Mara Marguleff (marksman); Corporal Pana Samsonovitch (marksman), Corporal Julius Feldstein, and Private Elija Olmert (uncle of Ehud Olmert and brother of Motia Olmert). On May 26, 1933, Bitker was promoted to lieutenant and assumed command of the second Jewish platoon, formed on December 3, 1932. On July 1, 1933, the unit became all-Jewish, now known as Company H.

Converted to Judaism in order to marry a Jewish wife, British Captain (later Major) Noel S. Jacobs commanded the Jewish Company throughout its existence. In 1937-1941, it was regarded the most efficient in the SVC. As the war began in Europe, Shanghai BETAR members debated whether to volunteer to British forces against Germany or let the British bleed.³¹ Yet, despite the fact that Britain still blocked the flight of Jewish refugees to Palestine, some decided to join its forces fighting against Nazism, hoping to be sent to Europe. Most of them, however, were assigned to the British units in Asia.³² By that time, China's BETAR and the Revisionists had no organized framework to fight the British. Formed in 1931, the Irgun Tzva'i Le'umi (ETZEL, National Military Organization, the Irgun, in short) believed in using violence against the British (and the Arabs) to gain independence. BETAR, the Jewish SVC Company, and the Soldiers Alliance were used as a springboard and training ground for the Irgun (launched in China in 1946) – to fight the British first in China and then in Israel.

Bitker left Shanghai for Eretz Israel in October 1936. Other leaders, Sarah and Mara Morguleff, Lela Kotovitch, Nelli and Mark Yosilevitch (Avinaomi) also left. Vulia Zubitsky (Shanon) became the new *netziv* of BETAR Shanghai and South China in 1941. His relatives had been leaders of BETAR Tianjin. Leo Tomchinsky, a businessman from Harbin, became head of the Friends of BETAR and a leader of the Revisionist Party. Parallel to BETAR, a branch of the Revisionist Party was founded in Shanghai, primarily among the Russian-Jewish community. In 1943, Tomchinsky became the new leader of BETAR South China, and Michail Ionis was appointed head of BETAR

Shanghai. Iana Liberman became the general-secretary of the Revisionist Party.³³ BETAR was regarded as the Party's vanguard.

Some of the Jewish refugees who arrived in Shanghai from Europe had been BETAR members in Poland, Austria, and Germany and joined BETAR Shanghai. Official Shanghai Police figures indicate that the number of Jewish immigrants from 1938 to 1941 was 15,450.³⁴ In early 1942, after Jewish immigration to Shanghai had stopped, it was decided to open a special second *qen* (nest in Hebrew, or cell) in Hongkew (known as Shanghai's Jewish Ghetto), where most Jewish refugees were concentrated after the breakout of the Pacific War.³⁵ The new cell was located on the upper floor of the Ward Road synagogue and later moved to larger premises on Chungkung Road. After its foundation, this cell was led by Hans Dreyer, a Berlin BETAR member, and supported by several wealthy families (Zimmerman, Spiegel) and people (Paul Adler, Rudi Adda, and Kurt Seiden).³⁶ According to Police records, BETAR Shanghai's membership in 1940 was about 400.³⁷ Since mid-1941, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December that drove the United States to join the war, the Japanese attitude toward the Jews in China, including BETAR, became more hostile. Movement in and out of cities and other activities, including the publication of Jewish journals, were prohibited, and among those interned by the Japanese since 1942 were a number of BETAR leaders, primarily those with British papers.

Consolidation: Culture, Sport and Finances

BETAR China (and the Revisionist Party) published at least five journals since the 1930s. First, *Hadegel* (the Flag, *Gadegel* in Russian) was published in Harbin, from January 15, 1932, to September 1, 1941, as a bi-weekly. It was the first Jewish youth movement journal in the Far East. In addition, a weekly "wall newspaper" was published at the BETAR club. A monthly, *The Jewish Call* (Hebrew title *Ha-Shofar*, the Horn), was issued in Shanghai in Russian and English from August 1933, shortly after Haim Arlozoroff's murder (in June). Reportedly, the coverage of this issue won the Revisionists in Shanghai more sympathizers. Edited by Judith Hasser and Sava Yabroff, it ceased publication on April 12, 1941, but resumed in 1946, renamed *Tagar* (Struggle, Challenge). In 1934, BETAR Harbin began publishing an irregular literary journal in Russian called *Nashi Pervyye Shagi* (Our First Steps). At least 21 issues were published. In 1939 (March 7 to August 12), a weekly and then bi-weekly called *Kol BETAR* (The Voice of BETAR) was published in Tianjin in Russian and English, first edited by V.A. Haimovitch (issues 1, 2) and then by Lev Piastunovich. Finally, the (Struggle, Challenge), *Tagar* organ of the United-Revisionists and Brit Trumpeldor in the Far East was a bi-weekly published in Shanghai in Russian and English, from May 15, 1946, to November 15, 1948. Edited by Judith Hasser (in English) and Milia (Michail) Ionis (in Russian),³⁸ at least 61 issues were published.³⁹ While published in Shanghai, *Tagar* was less interested in what was going on in China and much more in Eretz Israel (Palestine). It focused on British policy and information from Eretz Israel, including one page assigned to *Kol Zion Halochemet* (The Voice of Fighting Zion), the Irgun's radio station, and pamphlets.⁴⁰ This was one way to overcome BETAR's isolation and distance

from the West. Another was to recycle and include Jabotinsky's articles and writings, which symbolized the connection between center and periphery. Yet some BETAR China journals preferred their independence. Jabotinsky himself noted, positively, that Alexander Gurvich, editor of Shanghai's *Hadegel*, had never asked him in its first five years (1932-1937) to write anything. It should be underlined, however, that following the split among the Zionist-Revisionists between 1929 and 1932, the movement in China remained consistently loyal to Jabotinsky.⁴¹

Although BETAR was constantly engaged in sports in both Harbin and Shanghai, the center for competitions was in Tianjin, being geographically midway. Whereas Tianjin's Jewish community was smaller than Harbin's and Shanghai's (some 3,000-5,000 at its peak), BETAR, established by Kantorovitch in autumn 1931 and the Revisionist Party, were still prominent organizations whose contributions to the cause were valuable. Military training, the most important mission, was handled by an "English sergeant for 50 Mexican dollars."⁴² Ara Prejensky set up the first BETAR executive council and became head of Tianjin's Revisionist Party. Unable to join the first Maccabiah in Tel Aviv in 1932, BETAR China held its own sports event, called Betariada, in Tianjin in 1934. Fifty BETAR sportsmen took part in the event whose importance exceeded just sport: it won BETAR China and the local Jewish community recognition and respect, pride, and prestige, even around the world. As the first Betariada anywhere in the world (the second was held in 1947 in Shanghai and the third in 1959 in Israel), it was exceptional. Substantially bigger BETAR movements – in other countries, primarily in Europe but also in Palestine – failed to organize a similar event on such a scale. It

underlined BETAR China's initiative and enterprise as well as capabilities and the advantages of being remote from the center and from the European bias against the Jews (and the Zionist bias against the Revisionists). In July-August 1947, the second Betariada was held, this time in Shanghai. By then, Harbin was already ruled by Chinese Communism under Soviet control, but a dozen Harbin BETAR sportsmen managed to sail to Shanghai to attend the competitions.⁴³ Nevertheless, BETAR Tianjin, the smallest of the three communities, still scored the highest number of points and emerged the winner.⁴⁴

These and other BETAR activities required funds, all raised in China. This was usually done through holiday parties and communal events, individual generosity, the creation of philanthropic agencies, organized collection of donations, and even gambling. On one occasion, within 40 minutes, "Betar raised sufficient funds to cover all its expenses for the next two years."⁴⁵ Most, if not all, of BETAR's activities in Harbin were funded by Leo (Lev) Zikman, who owned the biggest sugar factory in Manchuria. He was chairman of the BETAR Committee, paid for its uniforms, and help establish BETAR Harbin's wind instruments band.⁴⁶ Pre-war China's Jewish community was relatively wealthy with some millionaires on a world scale so that it was easy to raise funds for charity. Furthermore, in the spring of 1947, Mordechai Olmert, whose family was still living in Shanghai, had been sent to China to lead the money-raising campaign called "The Iron Fund." During his stay (Harbin had already been beyond reach), the Jewish communities in Tianjin and Shanghai raised \$100,000 (well over \$1,000,000 in today's value) as a contribution to the Irgun (ETZEL) in Israel. The money was used to buy arms and ammunition in Europe, to be loaded on the *Altalena* and transported to

Israel.⁴⁷ When *Altalena* was attacked on Ben-Gurion's orders upon arrival to Israel, a huge protest meeting was held in Shanghai, attended by nearly 3,000 Jews, who condemned "this act of fratricide."⁴⁸

Accomplishments: Personalities

There is little doubt that, compared to other Jewish organizations in China and later in Israel, BETAR's impact was unique. In China, and especially in Harbin and the northeast, its primary contribution was security and defense against Russian anti-Semites and hooligans. BETAR, with its elaborate uniforms, colorful parades, marching bands, sports competitions, and mass meetings, displayed not merely visibility but a sense of pride and respect, prestige, and morale. More important, BETAR actively promoted Zionism through education, lectures, social events, celebrating holidays, and encouraging immigration to Israel. By the eve of Israel's foundation and its liberation war, about 60 percent of BETAR China members had already arrived in Israel.⁴⁹ A commitment to settle in Israel was a precondition for joining BETAR.

BETAR members began immigrating to Palestine already in the late 1920s and early 1930s, well before the systematic persecution of Jews in Europe.⁵⁰ Their fundamental incentives in coming to Eretz Israel were positive, not negative. Unlike European Jews, they did not escape China – there was no reason for that. They eagerly accepted the British mandate certificates through Jewish Agency officials, which others declined. The trip could take some 45 days, first by trains (Harbin-Mukden-Dairen-Tianjin-Shanghai) and then by boat (Shanghai-Hong Kong-Saigon-Singapore-Penang-Colombo-Djibouti-Port Suez and Port Said, and finally to Jaffa).

Among those who left in March 1931 were some of BETAR China leaders, including Yaacov Lankin (later Lanir) and Gera Mordchovitch. Accounting for no more than a few dozen compared to countless BETAR members who arrived in Palestine from other countries, BETAR China immigrants were a tiny minority. However, they were not just very active in Israel but, moreover, became commanders and leaders. All of them joined the Irgun.

After Avraham Tehomi, the first Irgun commander, left for the Haganah, the Zionist-Revisionists recommended Bitker as the new commander. Jabotinsky agreed. In a letter dated May 21, 1937, he approved Bitker's appointment. Former *netziv* of BETAR Shanghai and South China, and deputy commander of the SVC Jewish Company, he did not know Hebrew; was unfamiliar and inexperienced with Palestine; did not get along with Irgun members: and was shortly tied to British authorities. Smuggled out of the country, he returned for a while to his former position in Shanghai. In 1940, he left for the United States, where he died in 1946.⁵¹ Mordechai Olmert became a Herut Party member of the third and fourth Knesset (Parliament). Abrasha Hanin also left Harbin early, becoming BETAR *netziv* in the United States. With Alexander Gurvitch, who had left for New York on business, he accompanied Jabotinsky to a BETAR summer camp near New York, where he died of a heart attack on August 4, 1940.

Another well-known "Chinese" BETAR member was Eliahu Lankin. Born in 1914 in Russia, his family moved to Harbin three years later, following the Bolshevik Revolution. At the age of 16, in 1930, he joined BETAR and three years later arrived in Eretz Israel. In 1934 he joined the Irgun (ETZEL), and in May 1944, Menachem Begin (who had become head of the Irgun in December

1943) made him the Irgun commander of the Jerusalem district. In December 1944, the Haganah informed on him to the British, who arrested and exiled him to Eritrea. Escaping in November 1945 through a 75-meter tunnel designed by a former "Chinese" BETAR member, Lankin reached Paris in January 1947 and was appointed ETZEL commander in Europe. He arranged a ship, the "*Altalena*," named after one of Jabotinsky's *nom de plume*, loaded with weapons to be sent to Israel, and became the ship's commander. After his disembarkation, he was arrested by the Israeli authorities and spent two months in administrative confinement. Soon after his release, he enlisted in the IDF, completed an officer course, and became a battalion commander. Joining the Herut (Freedom) Party, he was elected member of the first Knesset (Parliament). Studying law, he became a lawyer and, after the Likud Party won the election in 1977, was appointed ambassador to South Africa.⁵²

His elder brother, Yaakov Lankin (Lanir), also a member of ETZEL and BETAR, left China in 1931. Among other assignments, he was in charge of illegal immigration and then enlisted in the British Army as a sergeant in the second battalion of the Jewish Brigade. After the founding of Israel, he joined the Mossad and then was appointed head of the Administration Directorate of Israel's General Security Service (SHABAK), at the equivalent rank of a major general. In the mid-1960s, he headed the Foreign Ministry security, in charge of frustrating Soviet espionage on the eve of the June 1967 war. He then became a personal adviser to Prime Minister Golda Meir.⁵³

One of the well-known BETAR veterans in China was Joe (Joseph) Tukachinsky (Later Yosef Tekoa). He was born in 1925 in Poland (today Belarus) and moved with his

family to Harbin in 1930. Dealing successfully in international trade, the family then moved to Shanghai, where he studied law at the Université l'Aurore. A brilliant student and an eloquent speaker (including in Hebrew and English), he actively participated in public BETAR meetings. Before leaving China for the United States in 1947, aged 22, he had left BETAR and joined B'nai Brith. He then completed an M.A. in International Relations at Harvard University, and in 1948 settled in Israel. Joining the Foreign Ministry, he started as a legal adviser. Then he was appointed head of the Armistice Department, deputy and acting head of Israel's delegation to the United Nations, ambassador in Brazil, ambassador in the Soviet Union (1962-1965), deputy director of the Foreign Ministry, and finally ambassador to the UN (1968-1975). After leaving the Foreign Ministry, he became president of Ben-Gurion University and its governor after his retirement in 1981. He died in 1991, aged 66.

Epilogue: Homecoming

Following Japan's defeat in 1945, BETAR China expired in stages. Harbin was the first to feel the change. As soon as the Soviets entered Harbin, just three days before Japan's surrender, some two dozen Jewish community leaders of different persuasions, headed by Dr. A. Kaufman, were summoned to Hotel Moderne (Jewish owned). Transported to the Soviet Union where they were jailed in Stalin's Gulags, few returned. Kaufman was released from prison in 1956, and in 1961 arrived in Israel. Misha Kachanovsky, a former head of BETAR's Tel Hai Fund, also managed to survive. He was later rescued and arrived in Israel. Another BETAR member arrested by the Soviets, Yosef Halperin, a well-known poet, died in an

unknown camp at an unknown time.⁵⁴ By then, the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalists, still the official Government, had intensified.

In 1946, elections were held within China's Jewish community for the list of delegates to the 22nd World Zionist Congress, planned to be held in Basle on December 9-24 that year. Given the small size of the community, only three delegates were to be elected. Judith Hasser headed the list of the Revisionist candidates. Apparently, they had practically no advantages over the General Zionists who controlled immigration certificates, employment, and financial assistance, especially for Holocaust survivors – far away from China. On the other hand, the Zionists and the Socialists were much weaker in China. As other youth movements did not really exist, BETAR attracted most of the young people and the Revisionists most of the adults. Occasionally helped by Morris "Two-Gun" Cohen (1887-1970), who had been Sun Yat-sen's bodyguard and a Guomindang general,⁵⁵ Hasser won the elections whose outcome was unique. Of the three delegates assigned to China, the Revisionists easily won two (the other one was Alexander Gurvitch), while the General Zionists barely managed to win one. He was Leon Ilutovich (1914-1997), leader of the Polish Zionists in Shanghai, secretary of the World Jewish Congress in Shanghai, and the Jewish Agency representative in the Far East.⁵⁶ Hasser's mission was problematic.

While the other Revisionist delegate had a U.S. passport, Hasser was stateless. However, through her connections with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. George Yeh,⁵⁷ she managed to get a Chinese passport. She easily got a Swiss visa but was denied a British transit visa to pass through Hong Kong and India (evidently, because of her

anti-British sentiments). Again, using her connections, she got on a U.S. Navy plane, starting a long journey via Okinawa, Guam, Honolulu, San Francisco, New York, Paris, and a train to Basle. Disappointed by the Congress that "closed with nothing achieved."⁵⁸ Hassler used the time to meet with other BETAR and Irgun members. She wanted to use this opportunity to visit Eretz Israel but was rejected again by the British. She then went to Paris (where the headquarters of the international Irgun was located) and met Shmuel Katz, representative of the Irgun. She proposed to establish an Irgun branch in Shanghai, which would sabotage British naval facilities in the Far East. She joined the Irgun, and within a few days, her plans were approved, allegedly by Menachem Begin, who by late 1943 had replaced David Raziel as head of the Irgun.

Bold Plans against the British in the Far East

These plans were meant to urge the British to leave Palestine on the day assigned by the UN, and preparations had begun among BETAR members in Shanghai for actions to hurt the British in places they did not expect. BETAR prepared to attack military airfields in Singapore and Hong Kong as well as facilities of the British consulates in Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin.⁵⁹ As soon as she returned to Shanghai, preparations began for organizing the underground. Most of the recruits came from BETAR and some from the Jewish SVC Company, including officers with military experience. The first group of ten underwent intensive training in ideology and arms, including live fire. British destroyers anchored in Shanghai's Whangpoo (Huangpu) River were the first prospective targets. Two sampans loaded with high explosives were to be used against each destroyer.

Similar plans were made, using torpedo boats, for Canton (Guangzhou) and Hong Kong – with the help of Morris Cohen, who provided designs and information. Singapore, without an accessible hinterland, was more problematic. Although the people were thoroughly trained and had plenty of weapons, including machine guns, rifles, grenades, TNT, and detonators, the orders for action never came. Eventually, the British left Israel on time, and the Irgun's military actions were aborted. It was now time for political actions.

Since their settlement in China, no attempt was made by the Revisionists, let alone by BETAR, to somehow involve the Chinese Government in the fate of the Jews, in or out of China. Until the mid-1940s, this would have been pointless anyway because the vast majority of China's Jewish communities lived under Japanese occupation and because the "Chinese" Government was powerless anyway. However, after Japan's defeat, China became – at least officially – one of the Five Powers, a founder of the United Nations, and a permanent member of its Security Council. Domestically, however, it was engaged in a civil war with the Communists, which it was about to lose. Still, Judith Hasser, the last *Netziv* of BETAR China, now attempted to involve China's Republican Government. In addition to mass meetings of protest and demonstrations in support of Zionism and independence for Israel, speeches were made, and petitions were sent. Most important, using her successful business connections, some with government officials, and in her capacity as chairperson of the political wing of the United Zionists Revisionists of China, Hasser was in touch with Dr. Sun Fo (then vice-president of China and son of Sun Yat-sen) and Dr. George Yeh (now acting foreign minister). On July 4, 1947, Sun Fo wrote:

In reply to your letter, I wish to state that the Zionists movement is championing a worthy cause. I am glad that the late Dr. Sun Yat-sen's sympathy for, and support of, the movement has produced results. As a lover of democracy, I fully endorse my father's views.⁶⁰

Ten days later, on July 15, the United Zionist-Revisionists World Head-Office in Paris sent a copy of Sun's letter to the Directorate of the Zionist Organization in Jerusalem, signed by Dr. Shimshon Yunichman, member of the Secretariat:

Enclosed herewith, you'll find a copy of a letter sent to the Executive Committee of the Revisionist Party in China, by Sun Fo, vice-president of the Chinese Republic, in reply to the request of the Executive Committee for his support of the Zionist cause.

Although we avoid exaggerating the importance of political statements, we should also not undervalue them, and indeed there is a first-rate value for the support given to the Zionist cause by the Chinese Government, which is one of the main United Nations members.

The Revisionist Party in China succeeded in forming close relations with the Chinese Government, done through a member of the Revisionist Executive Committee – Miss Judith Hasser, who attended the last Congress in Basle as a delegate, maintains good relations with the responsible circles in the Chinese Government and with heads of the public in China. She is a person with an outstanding personality, which can be counted on to devote all her energy and power for any mission given to her. She is the most suitable person to become a liaison between the Chinese Government and the Jewish Agency. As of now, a political representation of the Jewish Agency in China does not exist. We propose, therefore, that a permanent connection between the Agency's Political Department and the Chinese Government be established and that the services of Ms. Hasser would be used for this purpose.

If you agree with us, we shall turn to Ms. Hasser to accept her agreement.⁶¹

On August 4, 1947, the Political Department of the Jewish Agency replied: "The establishment of a political representation of the Jewish Agency in the State of China is now under discussion in the directorate. We shall write to you once a decision will be made."⁶² They never did.

Judith Hasser attached another copy of Sun Fo's reply to a letter she addressed to the Chinese UN delegation in Lake Success, but it failed to convince China's representative Tsiang Ting-fu (Jiang Tingfu, 蔣廷黻, 1895-1965). Personally, and as an academic, he expressed sympathy with Hasser's arguments, but as a diplomat and given China's weakness, he could not take an independent stand. Relations with the British were now important for China, and there was no reason to irritate them. Still, and perhaps because of Hasser's letter, instead of voting *against* the Partition Resolution (as they had initially intended to do), China was one of the ten countries that *abstained*. As soon as the Partition Resolution was adopted, on November 29, 1947, BETAR launched a grand parade in Shanghai, accompanied by rallies and celebrations. By that time, the civil war between the CCP and the GMD had resumed, complicating overland travel. Flights became more convenient but very expensive. Like Harbin, BETAR Tianjin was practically cut off from Shanghai, which now became the center of BETAR's activities in China. To allow freedom of movement, it was needed to rely on BETAR members with valid passports and send them for military training abroad.

Ara Prejensky was the head of BETAR Tianjin at that time, but two young BETAR members, Arie (Harry) Marinsky and Shmuel (Samby) Muller, became more active and, in fact, responsible for setting up the Irgun branch in China.⁶³ Much of their initiative was private.

Unlike many in China's Jewish community, both had genuine Polish passports, and they convinced the Italian Consulate in Shanghai to give them authentic visas. They left in July 1947 and arrived in Naples a month later, in mid-August. Graduating from the first Irgun commanders course near Lago Maggiore, where they were trained in arms, explosives, sabotage, and ideology, they were sworn to the Irgun.⁶⁴ From Italy, they went to Paris, then to another course in Germany, and on to Czechoslovakia. They were nearly caught in a hotel but were smuggled out by a Jewish Soviet officer. Back in Rome, they received a visa to China, going via Palestine-Iraq-India-Bangkok, and Hong Kong. But, for Palestine, they needed a British transit visa. Believing they were Polish, the British Consul gave them official papers. After celebrating the UN Partition Plan on November 29, 1947, they boarded a ship in Venice, and, after arriving in Haifa, they were sent to an Irgun platoon commanders course in its training base in Shuni. Back in Tel Aviv, they were "kidnapped" by the Haganah in March 1948 and detained for a few days before being released. Altogether, they spent two months in Palestine and, on Begin's order, were sent back to China to organize an Irgun contingent there and undertake sabotage against the British along the lines suggested by Judith Hasser before.

Arriving in Shanghai, they began organizing 20 Irgun cells in China, commanded by Judy Hasser, Tony Gaberman, and Yana Liberman. Muller was the military instructor in arms and field training, while Marinsky was in charge of ideology. Their influence extended to East Asia.

Simultaneously, BETAR headquarters appointed Judy Hasser as *Netziv* of BETAR China and Liberman as head of BETAR Shanghai.⁶⁵ Obeying its orders, the Irgun began planning either to sabotage British ships in Hong Kong,

Singapore, and other ports in China in case the British fail to leave Palestine on the day assigned by the UN (as they believed) – or else to help in the war against the Arabs in Israel. For both purposes, and still in China, it began to acquire a “modest arsenal of arms” Help in getting weapons, which included machine guns and explosives for training, was provided by Morris Cohen. Over time, the amount of weapons and ammunition increased, and so was the need for more funds, raised, as usual, among the Jewish community. One of the main donors was Isador Magid, a successful businessman. Born in Harbin, he lived and studied for four years in Chefoo and, in 1940, moved to Shanghai. Known as Izia, he was sympathetic to the Irgun and familiar with its activities in Shanghai.⁶⁶ The arms acquired were stored in a rented apartment in an “inconspicuous side-street” of the former French Concession.

Now official representatives of the Irgun in China, Hasser and Marinsky met with Madam Sun Yat-sen (Song Qingling, 1893-1981, his third wife, who later became vice-president of the People’s Republic of China). She did not have any formal position and believed in communism, but she had a good deal of influence and had shown her sympathy to the Jews before.⁶⁷ Surprisingly, she was familiar with the situation in Palestine and knew the names of Menachem Begin and Yair Stern. “The revolution you are making is blessed,” she said, “and the Zionists’ struggle against the British would create a chain reaction against British imperialism all over the world.”⁶⁸ Trying to find guns and rifles for the Irgun, she believed in helping its cause. By that time, however, the British mandate over Palestine was about to end, and a new struggle was about to begin.

Since Britain was now committed, even eager, to leave Palestine on time, there was no longer need for sabotage activities against the British in the Far East. Instead, it became essential to enlist as many people and arms as possible and send them to join the struggle for Israel's independence.⁶⁹ New members were confidentially drafted, indoctrinated, and trained (including in live ammunition, explosives, and sabotage). All recruits were either BETAR veterans or new members. It was at that time that the idea emerged of buying a ship to carry people and weapons under a neutral flag, through the Panama Canal, all the way to Israel, circumventing the British blockade (Aqaba in Jordan was also mentioned).

Implementing this idea required a lot of money to buy and renovate the ship, get the arms, and – not less important – find a trustworthy captain. This problem was the first to be resolved. Instead of looking for one, he came and offered his services. Leon S. Goltzer was Hasser's former student at school, as well as a BETAR Shanghai member. Born in 1922, he left for the United States in 1942 and became a captain, first in the U.S. Navy and then in President Lines, a luxury liner. Next came raising the necessary funds, which Hasser managed to do. Initially thinking about buying a relatively small ship, Hasser preferred a bigger ship. A U.S. surplus Liberty type ship was located in the Philippines. Whereas its price was relatively low – repairs, equipment, and renovation were very expensive and required more funds. For arms, Hasser approached the Chinese War Ministry in Nanjing. Decision-making and hesitation took a long time, and Hasser decided to wait rather than send the ship only with recruits. Convincing Nanjing was difficult, and, in the meantime, the British left, and the State of Israel was proclaimed. By that time, mid-May 1948,

Republican China, on the verge of collapse, was flooded with extra outdated U.S. arms offered free of charge to anyone who wanted.

Despite, or because of this, the Chinese decided to approve the project, and on June 18, 1948, they sent a "go ahead" message to "export" the "cargo," addressed to Hasser's firm. A convoy of Chinese trucks, loaded with "considerable" quantities of arms, began to reach the dock where the ship was due to anchor (the Chinese wanted the ship to arrive at the last minute to avoid questions). Then, four days later, on June 22, as the plan was about to be accomplished, the news about *Altalena* reached Shanghai. An Irgun ship full of arms provided by the French (paid for partly by Shanghai Jewish community money) and Irgun members left Port du Bouc near Marseille on its way to the just established State of Israel. Upon its arrival, it was shelled and sunk near Tel Aviv by Israeli soldiers on orders of the new Government. As soon as the news reached Shanghai, the Chinese authorities decided to abort their involvement, thus scraping the entire plan. Ordered by Aryeh Ben-Eliezer of the Paris Irgun headquarters, BETAR and the Revisionists launched a campaign of protests and demonstrations in Shanghai. Hasser, as the *Netziv*, now decided to use the ship to bring the Irgun people to Israel without the weapons, but the Jewish donors who had covered the costs of buying the vessel now rejected this decision and preferred to sell the ship and recover their money.⁷⁰

Given this failure, the Irgun's French headquarters now decided that Shanghai's Irgun members would come to France by commercial flights and then by ship to Israel. Since only a few of them had official papers, they were divided into two groups, altogether 13 (eight and five), aged 20-21. One, led by Marinsky, was provided with

forged Spanish passports. The other group, headed by Muller, had no passports. Married to a Jewish woman, the French military attaché in China had sympathized with the Irgun and convinced the consul to give the group official "*Titre de Voyage*" ("travel document") on consular stationery (he was later dismissed). He was "proud" to support the Irgun; the French hated the British. Muller's group, which included two "Baghdadi" Jews, received the necessary stamps from the Iraqi Consulate and left on a KLM flight to Paris through Bangkok, Delhi, Karachi, Basra (Iraq), over Egypt, and with an unscheduled landing in Libya. It was a long and dangerous flight given the landings in Arab countries during the Arab-Israeli War (November 1948). Safe in Paris, they were nearly arrested because of their faulty papers. However, after the Police heard their story, they were released and even encouraged and were given a genuine French Ministry of the Interior *Laissez Passé*. In Marseille, they boarded the *Negbah* and, upon arrival, were sent to fight the Egyptians in the south. Muller still lives in Israel. A businessman, in 1998, he met PRC Defense Minister Chi Haotian when he visited Israel. Marinsky's team got the needed stamps at Shanghai's Syrian Consulate and landed in Damascus, some using Soviet passports, before arriving in Paris. They boarded the ship *Komemiut*, arrived safely in Haifa, and were also deployed to the southern battlefields. The whole "Chinese" BETAR detachment was later incorporated in the 8th Battalion of the Negev Brigade.⁷¹

While many former BETAR members left for the US, usually on student visas, and to Israel, those who wanted to settle in Australia or Canada, parts of the British Commonwealth, found it difficult or even impossible to get a visa because of their anti-British attitudes.⁷² It was easier to get a Soviet passport with which they could

return to the Soviet Union (and face arrests, "trials," and occasionally death), or they could get to other countries that, however, were suspicious about Soviet passports. Most BETAR members rejected them.⁷³ Many had to wait for three years until the foundation of the State of Israel in order to leave China. Immigration to Israel was controlled by PALAMT (Palästinaamt), the Jewish Agency Far Eastern Palestine Office in Shanghai, composed of delegates of the four main Jewish parties: General Zionists, Zionist-Revisionists, Poalei Zion, and Mizrahi. From August 1948 to September 1951, the Revisionist delegates were Jack Liberman (August-December 1948, Vice Chairman); Adolph Goldberg (from January 1949 Vice-Chairman); Judith Hasser (August 1948-January 1949); Abraham Ifland (January-March 1949); and Jack Gershovich (March 1949-December 1950).⁷⁴

Hasser and the executive council left Shanghai by air in a third group later in 1948. The rest departed by boats chartered by the Jewish Agency.⁷⁵ The first, *Wooster Victory* carrying 893 (or 882) immigrants, left on December 24, 1948, under Liberman's command. After switching to the Israeli liner *Negbah* in Genoa, they arrived safely at Haifa on February 13, 1949. Trapped under Soviet and Chinese Communist rule, most of the Harbin Jewish community, including BETAR and Revisionist members, were evacuated to Israel through Tianjin and Shanghai in 1951.⁷⁶ Several dozens of them, mainly from Harbin, founded a Moshav (cooperative agricultural community of individual farms) in April 1950, called Ammikam (Hebrew: "my people has stood up").

Conclusion

From the very beginning, BETAR activities and nature in China were not deterred by the distance from the movement's headquarters in Europe. Remoteness had advantages (more flexibility and freedom in decision-making and relations with other Jewish organizations in China), as well as disadvantages. For example, China's Revisionists could not attend the 4th Conference of the Union of Zionists Revisionists, which was held in Prague in August 1930, and invited Hans Werner from Berlin to represent them. Still, they could – and did – participate in the First World Convention of the Trumpeldor Covenant [BETAR], held in Danzig on April 12-15, 1931. By that time, there were 21 BETAR branches all over the world, representing 22,342 members and 556 cells, according to a January 1, 1931 census, which sent 103 delegates. Of the two from China, one was Mordechai Olmert (who came from agricultural training in Holland). BETAR China included 155 members, ranking 12 in size.⁷⁷ At the beginning of the protocol, China was named among the "main" participating countries (including Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Austria, Germany, and Eretz Israel).⁷⁸ In his opening speech, Jabotinsky mentioned the largest branch (Poland) as well as the smallest (Tianjin).⁷⁹

As small and remote as BETAR China was, it displayed strength and endurance that outclassed its size and distance. BETAR China members were primarily an urban elite, better educated, and wealthier. In Eastern Europe, the rural Jewish population was often bigger, less educated, and poorer than the urban and usually supported the General Zionists. In China, there were hardly any rural communities among the Jews. Western Jewish communities – and in Palestine as well – Zionists and Revisionists displayed mutual hostility and

occasionally clashed to the point of violence and betrayal. However, Zionists and Revisionists in China (BETAR included) were living far away from mainstream debates, shielded from World War II and from the Holocaust. They were unaware of the personal rivalries between the leaders of the different Zionist parties. None of them – Jabotinsky, Weizmann, or Ben-Gurion – ever visited China, and the Jewish communities in China were never exposed to their loud quarrels. Under these circumstances, China's Zionists and Revisionists found ways to cooperate and collaborate in "peaceful co-existence." For many years, the facilities of the Shanghai Jewish Club were also shared by the Revisionists and BETAR free of charge. Moreover, the Chinese Republican Government, which was not familiar with the Middle East situation, least of all with Palestine and its competing forces, was unaware of the differences between the Jewish parties. Consequently, the impact of the Revisionists and BETAR in China was more effective and impressive. Both were accepted and appreciated to a higher degree than in Europe, the United States, and Palestine. Also, although most of the Revisionists and BETAR were strictly secular and knew little about Conservative Judaism, they always celebrated the Jewish holidays, attended the synagogues, respected Rabbi Ashkenazi, studied Hebrew, and avoided mixed marriages.

As for China, on March 1, 1949, its foreign minister Wu Tieh-cheng (Wu Tiecheng), cabled Israel its official recognition. While BETAR may have played some role in China's decision, "by 1950, there was no trace left of Betar in China."⁸⁰ Moreover, within six months, GMD rule over mainland China ended. On January 9, 1950, Israel recognized the People's Republic of China but established

diplomatic relations only 42 years later. Israel has never offered to establish official relations with the Republic of China. In 1969, the 40th anniversary of BETAR's birth in Harbin, a convention was held in Israel in which hundreds of BETAR members from different countries participated. On this occasion, *Betar Sin* (BETAR China) was published in Russian, English, and Hebrew.

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Notes

1 Most important were Shanghai, Harbin and Tianjin, but there were also smaller communities in Mukden (Shenyang), Qiqihar, Qingdao, Dairen (Dalian), and Hailar.

2 Yaacov (Yana) Liberman, *My China: Jewish Life in the Orient 1900-1950* (New York: Gefen, 1998), p. 20.

3 This paragraph and further details are from Ch. Ben-Yerucham, *Sepher Bethar: Korot uMekorot* [BETAR Book: History and Sources], Vol. 1: *Min Ha'am (1923-1933)* [From the People (1923-1933)], (Tel Aviv: Publishing Committee of the BETAR Book, 1969), pp. 312-314. Discussions about joining BETAR had begun already in 1928.

4 In the 1980s, I used to teach an undergraduate course "Introduction to Chinese History and Civilization". One day I noticed a group of old people sitting in the front row among the younger students. During the break, I asked them why did they decide to take this course. They answered that they had lived in Harbin for quite a few years and knew nothing about Chinese history, culture, and society. After many years, they decided to complete their education.

5 Theodore (Teddy) Kaufman, *The Jews of Harbin Live on in My Heart* (Tel Aviv: The Association of Former Jewish Residents of China in Israel, 2004), p. 70, in Hebrew.

6 For example. BETAR is not mentioned, let alone dealt with, in Gao Bei, *Shanghai Sanctuary: Chinese and Japanese Policy toward European Jewish Refugees during World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Pan Guang and Wang Jian, *Yutairen yu Zhongguo: Jindai yilai*

liang ge gulao wenming de jiaowang he youyi [Jews and China: Contact and Friendship between Two Old Civilizations in Modern Times], (Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, 1991), pp. 108-116, provides a brief survey.

7 Official approval was given only in 1931. *Sepher Bethar*, Vol. I, p. 313.

8 Liberman, pp. 78-79. n. 1.

9 In 1951 he became the first president of Association of Former Residents of China in Israel, until 1953, when he left for Tokyo to work for Saul Isenberg. He died there on March 25, 1961.

10 Kaufman, p. 72.

11 More details in: *Sepher Bethar*, I, p. 218.

12 For the most detailed study, see: Dan Ben-Canaan, *The Semion Kaspe File: A Case Study of Harbin as an Intersection of Cultural and Ethnical Communities in Conflict 1932-1945* (Heilongjiang: Heilongjiang University, School of Western Studies, February 2008). See also: Gregory Belyi, "The Caspi Affair: A Literature Review," in: Rena Parkhomovskaya and Isaak Reznik (Comp. and Eds.), *To the Middle East via the Far East*, Russian Jewry Abroad, Vol. 19 (Jerusalem, 2009), pp. 153-173, in Russian.

13 Pamela Rotner Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats and Jewish Refugees: A World War II Dilemma* (Westport, KT: Praeger, 1998).

14 Chizuko Takao (Rikkyo University), "Russian-Jewish Harbin before World War II: Imperial Russian Jewish Policy and the Uniqueness of Harbin," *Bulletin Igud Yotzei Sin*, Vol. LVX, No. 408 (August-September 2012), p. 58. See also: Gao Bei, *Shanghai Sanctuary*, pp. 60-64.

15 Liberman, p. 37.

16 Kaufman, p. 70.

17 Liberman, pp. 42-43; "Tientsin Flood 1939," from *Betar in China 1929-1949* (Tel Aviv, 1973).

18 Peaking in 1920 (20,000), Harbin's Jewish population began to decline, reaching 1,329 in 1929, according to official figures. Liu Shuang, "Haerbin youtairen lishi huodong fenqi" [Periodization of Historical Activism of Harbin Jews], *Xuexi yu Tansuo* [Study and Exploration], No. 3 (2006), p. 153.

19 *Sepher Bethar*, Vol. I, p. 313. Of the ten, five managed to leave on March 8, 1931: Zvi Maromi, Ya'acov Lankin, Reva Levin, Reva Lifshitz and Izia Solovei.

20 *Betar Sin* (Betar in China), 1929-1949, (n.p, n.d.), in Hebrew, Russian and English, p. II.

21 Kaufman, pp. 117-118.

22 Ch. Ben-Yerucham, *Sepher Bethar*, Vol. II, *El Ha'am (1933-1939)* [To the People (1933-1939)], p. 837.

23 Liberman, p. 129.

24 This part is based on: Judith Ben-Eliezer, *Shanghai Lost, Jerusalem Regained* (Tel Aviv: Steimatzky, 1985), pp. 52-65. See also: Liberman, p. 128.

25 Liberman, pp. 120-121; Pana Samsonovitch, "Up to 1945 History of Shanghai Betar," *Betar Sin*, p. 86.

26 Martin Sugarman, "Hagedud Ha-Sini: The Jewish Company of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, 1932-42," *Jewish Historical Studies*, Vol. 41 (2007), pp. 183-208. The next two paragraphs are based on this article. See also: Benise M. Frank, "The Jewish Company of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps Compared with Other Jewish Diaspora Fighting Units," unpublished paper (April 26, 1992), available at: <https://net.lib.byu/estu/wwi/comment/svc.htm>, accessed on April 27, 2021; Ben-Eliezer, pp. 62-63.

27 Ibid.

28 Handling such certificates was controlled by the Zionist Organization, which prepared the list of prospective immigrants. Revisionists were largely discriminated against or excluded.

29 *Sepher Bethar*, Vol. II, p. 838.

30 There is conflicting information about him. He may have been born in Lublin in 1900 and joined the Polish Army in 1918.

31 In 1939 Poland agreed to hold a special professional officers course specifically for ETZEL. Of the first 25 young commanders selected for the course were three BETAR China veterans. One of them was Shlomo Lesk, one of the founders of BETAR Harbin. He arrived in Eretz Israel in 1935 and joined ETZEL. In 1969 he was one of the organizers of BETAR China's 40th anniversary.

32 Ben-Eliezer, p. 141.

33 Liberman, pp. 122, 144-145.

34 Marcia R. Ristaino, "White Russian and Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, 1920-1944, As Recorded in the Shanghai Municipal Police Files, National Archives, Washington, DC," *Republican China*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (November 1990), p. 63.

35 Ben-Eliezer, p. 136.

36 Liberman, p. 140; "Betar-Shanghai", *Bulletin of the Igud Yotzei Sin* (Tel Aviv, March 1973). German was "officially" spoken. *Sepher Bethar*, Vol. II, p. 994. See also: Judith Ben-Eliezer, "Hongkew BETAR Ken No. 2," *Betar Sin*, p. 107-108

37 Ristaino, p. 64.

38 After joining BETAR in Harbin, Ionis spent a year in Kobe, Japan, where he signed visas for the British Consul, enabling more than a dozen BETARI's to arrive in Palestine and join the War of Liberation. He then came to Shanghai where he headed BETAR Shanghai. He left to Israel in 1949, then to Tokyo and then to the US. Liberman, p. 112, n. 2, p. 113.

39 All information from Mina Graur (Comp. and Ed.), *Publications of the Revisionist Movement 1925-1948* (Tel Aviv: Jabotinsky Institute in Israel, 2000), pp. 209-211.

40 Mina Graur, *The Voice of a Party: The Revisionist Movement and its Press* (Tel Aviv: Jabotinsky Institute in Israel, 2002), p. 183.

41 *Sepher Bethar*, Vol. 1, p. 513.

42 "About News in BETAR World Movement" (Information for Officers, BETAR and the Commissioners), July August 1931, n.p. in Hebrew.

43 Liberman, 194-195.

44 Liberman, pp. 61-66. Heads of BETAR Tianjin: Ara Prejensky (1931-1935, 1943-1946); Misha Hutaransky (1935-1940); Grisha Zubitsky (1940-1943); Yasha Shtofman (1946-1948); Ara Shprahman (1949).

45 Liberman, p. 144.

46 Kaufman, p. 75.

47 Liberman, pp. 77, 212.

48 Liberman, p. 218.

49 Rena Parkhomovskaya, "'These Nestlings from the Nest of' Beitar," in: Parkhomovskaya and Reznik, p. 130, in Russian.

50 For a list, see: Liberman, p. 35, n. 3.

51 Liberman, 35. See also: "Etsel's Anonymous Commanders," in <http://www.news1.co.il/Archive/0024-D-105254-00.html>. In Hebrew.

52 Eliahu Lankin, *The Story of Altalena Commander* (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1967), in Hebrew.

53 Yossi Melman, "Our Man in the KGB", *Ha'aretz*, October 5, 2006; Kaufman, p. 84.

54 Liberman, p. 30.

55 Daniel S. Levi, *Two-Gun Cohen: A Biography* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

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58 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

59 "The ETZEL Planned Actions against British Targets in China," *Be'Eretz Israel* [In the Land of Israel], No. 189 (August–September 1988), p. 47, in Hebrew.

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61 Letter, July 25, 1947, No. 261/1196 (The Central Zionist Archives, hereafter CZA); Letter, July 15, 1947, No. 1429/47, CZA File S25/2021.

62 Letter, August 4, 1947, 804/57/2/1900, CZA File S25/2021.

63 Liberman, pp. 184–186, 209; Arieh Marinsky, *Baor uvaSeter* [In Light and in Darkness] (Tel Aviv: Edanim, Yediot Aharonot, 1992), pp. 22–30, in Hebrew. The following is also based on: Arieh Marinsky, "Pages from the Past," *Betar Sin*, pp. 128–130, in Russian.

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66 "I Was There," *Bulletin of the Igud Yotzei Sin* [Association of Former Residents of China], No. 350 (Tel Aviv, June–July 1997), pp. 6–8; Liberman, p. 211.

67 "A Denunciation of the Persecution of German Progressives and the Jewish People," (Shanghai, May 13, 1933), in: Soong Ching Ling, *The Struggle for New China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1953), pp. 57–60. See also: Tom Segev, "Zionism Had a Friend in the Far East," *Ha'aretz*, March 1, 2013.

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69 Ben-Eliezer, p. 352–353.

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71 Marinsky, *Ba'or uvaEther*, pp. 29-30. For more details see: Sam Muller, "Machal [Foreign] Volunteers from China," *Jewish Communities in China*, August 2002, in: <http://www.jewsofchina.org/machal-volunteers-from-china>. He gives the names of the thirteen, eight in one group and five in the other. See also: Marinsky, "Pages from the Past".

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