



# Points East

THE SINO-JUDAIC INSTITUTE 中國猶太研究院 מכון סיני יהודי

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## Kaifeng Jewish Community Suffers New Suppression

By Wang Yichi

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Since Xi Jinping took power, the repression of religion has been increasingly vigorous. Religious movements that are non-officially approved or considered to be influenced by foreign forces have been subjected to the government's heavy crackdown. Even small religious groups like the tiny community of Kaifeng Jews are deemed as threats and thus persecuted by the CCP.

The Kaifeng Synagogue, or what was later indicated as "the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue," located in South Jiaojing Hutong, Shunhe district of Kaifeng city, in the central province of Henan, is the last synagogue in the area. Its fascinating and complicated story has been previously told in *Bitter Winter*.

Judaism has witnessed a gradual revival in Kaifeng since the 1990s. A woman of Jewish descent in Kaifeng told *Bitter Winter* that more than 30 years ago, a young Israeli had come over to teach Hebrew and traditional etiquette to the Kaifeng Jews, who had later started to gather to attend worship services, chant the Torah in Hebrew, and circumcise their children ever since. The number of attendees ranged from 40 to more than 80. Their religious activities were tolerated at the beginning, but suppressed after 2015 by the authorities, fearing they would lead to a reawakening of the Jewish faith. Traditional Jewish festivals such as Passover and Sukkot were prohibited. All Hebrew signs were removed.

### The Site of Kaifeng Synagogue under Surveillance

In 2019, the regime once again targeted the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue on the ground that Judaism was not among the "Five Authorized Religions" that are controlled by the CCP. In April, personnel from the local community forced their way into the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue, and removed all Jewish signs such as signs mentioning that this was indeed the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue and flag of Israel from the doors and windows.

Instead, signs promoting the government's attacks and repression against religion were hanging everywhere in the site. Among them there was an eye-catching sign that reads

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## Cities of Ice, with a Heated Response Cities of Ice

By Dara Horn

Excerpted from *Tablet Magazine*, 19 April 2019. [www.tabletmag.com](http://www.tabletmag.com)

...I was eager to make my way to a city called Harbin in a remote province of northeastern China, south of Siberia and north of North Korea, where the temperature hovers around minus 30 Celsius for much of the year, and where every winter, over 10,000 workers construct an entire massive city out of blocks of ice. I'd seen photos and videos of the Harbin Ice Festival, which dwarfs similar displays in Canada and Japan by orders of magnitude, its enormous ice buildings laced through with LED lighting and sometimes replicating famous monuments at or near life size. It attracts over 2 million visitors a year, because it's the kind of thing that needs to be seen to be believed. As I considered whether a trip to Harbin was worth it, my mindless travel-industry scrolling took me to a list of other local tourist attractions, including synagogues.

Yes, synagogues. Plural. And then I discovered something deeply strange: The city of Harbin was built by Jews. Only later would I discover that the ice city and the Jewish city were actually the same, and that I was being actively lured to both, in ways more disturbing than I could have possibly imagined...

### I Why the Jews Came to Harbin

Jews have lived in China for more than 1,000 years, which is as long as they have lived in Poland. But Harbin is a special case. The story of the Jews of Harbin, and of Harbin itself, begins with the railroad. Before the railroad, Harbin did not exist.

Like most Chinese cities you've never heard of, Harbin today is larger than New York, with a population around 10 million. But as late as 1896, there was no Harbin, only a cluster of small fishing villages around a bend in a river. That year Russia received a concession from China to build part of the Trans-Siberian Railroad through Manchuria—the traditional name for the vast, frigid, and at that time, barely populated region of northeastern China.

Building this route would shave two weeks off the trip from Moscow to Vladivostok, making every railroad tie worth its weight in gold. The route would also include a branch line deeper into China, requiring a large administrative center at the junction—essentially, a town. Mikhail Gruliov, a Jew who had converted to Russian Orthodoxy in order to become a general in the Russian army, selected the site that became Harbin.

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Chinos y Judíos: Puentes y encuentros entre dos civilizaciones milenarias

**SJI MEMBERSHIP**

Country	Total
United States	142
Canada	7
China	15
Israel	11
England	6
Australia	3
Japan	2
Germany	2
Greece	1
Singapore	1
South Africa	1
Taiwan	1
Total:	192

**FROM THE EDITOR**

Talk about a cultural chasm: consider the rat. If you live in the west, you probably associate rats with disease, filth and shiftiness. Maybe survivability if you want a positive attribute.

But in China, the rat is exalted by beginning the noble procession of the 12 mystical animals in the zodiac. In many legends, the Rat managed to outwit the rest of the animals in the zodiac in any race or competition. The Rat is an important figure in the Chinese creation myth. It was the one responsible for freeing up the life-bestowing air from the inert egg-shaped universe by gnawing at it. When the Rat made a hole in the egg universe, plants and creatures began to breathe and thrive on earth. In South China, the ancient people were very grateful to the rat because it introduced rice to mankind.

As a zodiac symbol, the Rat bestows the following virtues: creativity, quick wit, dynamic energy, versatility, open-mindedness, thriftiness, resourcefulness, passion and skillfulness.

It is good to be a Rat.

I think of this when I consider a number of crises now facing China and the Chinese people.

The country will need all the rattiness it can muster to contain the spreading coronavirus and learn to eliminate it.

Its leaders also will need to tap their rat-brains to deal creatively and constructively with the situations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong—and the people in those two places will need channel their rat-resourcefulness and creativity to deal with their government.

The Jews in Kaifeng will likewise need to be as ratty as possible to survive and thrive as they approach the fifth year of governmental suppression.

And while I think of it, we in the west could use a good dose of its attributes as well.

In short, the Year of the Rat has come in the nick of time for all concerned.

**Anson Laytner**

**Points East**

Anson Laytner, Editor

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**Please consider putting the Sino-Judaic Institute in your will.**

## In the Field

Professor **Dan Ben-Canaan**, of Harbin, is donating his entire huge archives to the Beit Hatefusot, the Museum of the Jewish People at Tel Aviv University. This will consist of hundreds of thousands of electronic files consisting of documents, memoirs, relics, historical photographs, historical films, collection of articles, letters, correspondences with over 800 families with roots in Harbin, official documents, government documents, and much more. The collection of physical materials will be transferred later. Part of his collection is stored at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in New York. Both collections are under the title The Dan and Yisha Ben-Canaan Collection.

In February, Prof. **Kevin Ostoyich** spoke at the University of Strasbourg and at the Deutsche-Amerikanisches Institut Tübingen. Both lectures were on Shanghai. He was on a research trip that includes Bremen, Cuxhaven, Limburg an der Lahn (as a base for Frickhofen and Altenkirchen). In Bremen he continued his research in the Bremen State Archives. In Cuxhaven he met with the current residents of Gary Sternberg's childhood home (see <https://www.aicgs.org/2019/04/the-dealers-cards-how-gary-sternberg-has-made-the-best-of-them/>). In Frickhofen and Altenkirchen he did research on the Abraham family (see <https://www.aicgs.org/2017/08/from-kristallnacht-and-back/> and <https://www.aicgs.org/2018/11/mothers-remembering-three-women-on-the-80th-anniversary-of-kristallnacht/>).

**Dr. Beverly Friend** reports that the Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute of Jewish and Israel Studies at Nanjing University is thriving. Here are some highlights from its annual report.

- Sponsorship of the Annual Conference of the China Middle East Studies Society was attended by over 100 scholars from over 30 universities in China.
- Prof. Xu Xin's tenure position was given a five-year extension.
- The student body has grown.
- Completion of a joint program between Nanjing and the University of Pennsylvania, which investigated language translations between Ashkenazic Jewry and Chinese.
- State grants for research projects and the publication of academic papers,
- Guest lecturers included: Prof. Yaron Peleg of Cambridge University, Dr. Marcela Simoni of Ca' Foscari University, Venice, and Dr. Chen Jian, the Director of the Museum of Jewish Refugees in Shanghai.

Got News for "In the Field"? Send it to [Laytner@msn.com](mailto:Laytner@msn.com). Lost While Looking for a Lost Tribe

## In Memoriam: Rabbi Joshua Stampfer

28 December 1921 – 26 December 2019



Rabbi Joshua Stampfer, a founding member of the Sino-Judaic Institute, died just two days before he would have turned 98.

Stampfer was born in what was then Palestine on Dec. 28, 1921. He moved to the United States as a child. Stampfer married his wife, Goldie, in 1944 and moved to Portland in 1953. The Stampfers had five children. One son died in a bike accident in 2001, and Goldie Stampfer died in 2016. The remaining children live in Israel, Boston, Ann Arbor and Portland.

Rabbi Stampfer is survived by his children, Shaul (Sylviane) Stampfer, Nehama (Rod) Glowgower, Meir (Claire) Stampfer, Elana (Matt, z"l) Emlen, and daughter-in-law Carol (Noam, z"l) Stampfer, as well as 20 grandchildren, and 16 great-grandchildren.

He is credited with helping grow the Portland Jewish community to what it is today. In addition to serving as the spiritual leader at Congregation Neveh Shalom for over 40 years and continuing to serve as rabbi emeritus until his death, Rabbi Stampfer was responsible for the establishment of many of the Jewish institutions in the state of Oregon. These include, among others: the Oregon Jewish Historical Society, the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, Camp Solomon Schechter, the Institute for Judaic Studies, and the Judaic Studies departments at both Portland State University and Reed College.

Rabbi Stampfer believed deeply in working together with people of other faiths to bring peace and well-being to our world. To this end, he was a co-founder of the Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East and served on the national board of Peace Now.

Stampfer was the author of *Pioneer Rabbi of the West: The Life and Times of Ju-*

*lius Eckman, and Cradle of Civilization in the Middle East.* He edited two volumes: *Prayer and Politics: The Twin Poles of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dialogue: The Essence of Buber.*

Rabbi Stampfer was one of the earliest Western visitors to Kaifeng, where he met in 1983 with members of the Jewish community there. The story of his visit is recounted in the volume *To Learn and to Teach: The Life of Rabbi Joshua Stampfer* by David Smith, pages 288-314.

Stampfer's recollections of the founding of the SJI, as told to Smith, were as follows:

*A year after Joshua's visit to Kaifeng, a Jewish professor, Louis Schwartz, was invited by the Chinese government to Beijing...to teach a course...During his stay, the professor wrote to Rabbi Stampfer. "He knew I had visited Kaifeng," says Joshua, "and also wished to explore the fading Jewish community there"... At the conclusion of the professor's year long tenure at Beijing University, he and the rabbi decided to form a society which would focus on learning more about Kaifeng's Jews, and to assist them, should any of them ever awaken to their heritage. Joshua and the professor contacted Leo Gabow...who lived in the San Francisco Bay area. Gabow had been a successful businessman, living in China for a number of years before returning home to settle in California. He suggested a meeting of interested parties in Portland. Joshua convinced him to host the meeting in San Francisco... Eight people attended the meeting. One of them Al Dien, a Jewish professor of Far Eastern Studies at Stanford University, had been to China on several occasions. The group initiated the Sino-Judaic Institute for the purpose of developing ties between Jews inside China and those in the rest of the world.*

Stampfer was elected SJI's first vice-president and served as a member of its Managing and Honorary Boards until his death. Following his visit to Kaifeng, he brought over the U.S. a young woman of Jewish descent, Qu Yinan, for the specific goal of studying Judaism in Portland. She went on to study at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and eventually chose to remain in the U.S.A.

"We have a Jewish tradition," Sarah Liebman, executive director of Portland's Florence Melton Adult Mini-school, told *The Oregonian/OregonLive* in 2010. "We believe that there are 36 righteous ones who walk among us, and upon them depends the survival of the world. Sometimes I wonder if Rabbi Stampfer might be one of the 36."

As has been said by so many, Rabbi Stampfer was ever the optimist. With his ready smile, positive outlook and open heart and mind, Rabbi Stampfer continued to educate and inspire us all.



"Management of religious affairs should be in accordance with the principle of protecting the lawful and banning the unlawful, boycotting the infiltration and fighting the crime."



The Jewish community in Kaifeng is the most well-documented Jewish community in China, and the oldest Jewish cultural site in East Asia as well. It has always drawn the attention of the visiting tourists and scholars from Europe, which increasingly disturbed the Communist regime.

To restrict the growth of Judaism, the CCP has set up layers of obstacles to prevent international organizations and foreign visitors from having contacts with the Kaifeng Jews. In the summer of 2019, the government rented a house next to the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue and converted it into "a 'Community Comprehensive Cultural Service Center.'" From Monday to Sunday, personnel assigned by the government are installed there, taking turns to closely monitor the activities in the site and the movements of the passers-by. A surveillance camera was installed at the entrance to the Synagogue.



"The surveillance camera was intentionally installed out there to monitor foreign-

ers. Basically, [the authorities are] afraid of foreign infiltration, and thus want to stop foreigners from coming here," a resident in the neighborhood told Bitter Winter.

One day in April, several students from Henan University came to the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue. They wanted to interview some Jews for their homework of a news report. As soon as the personnel of the community office learned the news, they hurriedly rushed to the Synagogue and drove those young people out.

"In the past, many experts and professors from Israel, as well as people from all over the world, came here to have a look. And the street was always crowded with foreigners. Even the personnel from the community office led visitors here, but now coming here has become dangerous," a woman of Jewish descent said sadly.

### Historical Site Forced to Vanish

All signs and sites connected to the history of Jews in the city are being eliminated. The woman added that there had been an old well drilled by Jews near the Site of Kaifeng Synagogue a thousand years ago, which was later listed as a "unit of special protection" by the Kaifeng Cultural Relics Bureau. In the spring of 2018, under the instruction from the government, the Kaifeng Cultural Relics Bureau dug out the stele bearing the words "Unit of Cultural Relics Protection," and the old well was also buried and sealed in.

"I still vividly remember that the stele with a base was dug out, leaving a pit there. We used to stand there to sprinkle salt and offer prayers. But now hollies have been planted on it, and no trace remains," she said.

*Wang Yichi is a pseudonym for security reasons.*

### Some Unanswered Questions About the Shanghai Jewish Experience

By Jonathan Goldstein

Lecture prepared for delivery at the International Symposium sponsored by the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, 23 October 2019

The history of Shanghai as a whole and of its Jewish community in particular are among the most exhaustively researched topics in modern Chinese and modern Jewish history, with a vast literature in Chinese, Hebrew, Yiddish, Japanese, Russian, German, English, and other languages. The late Hebrew University Sinologist Irene

Eber, New York's David Kranzler, Illinois College's Steve Hochstadt, and many other scholars have made Shanghai Jewry a major research focus. Is there anything left to be said? Do any major historical questions remain unanswered? I would suggest that there are at least four such questions. They concern Jewish participation in the China opium trade, the perception of Shanghai Jews as Communists, the predicament of many Russian Jews left in China after 1949, and the history of Chinese-Jewish mixed marriages and miscegenation. I will consider these questions in roughly chronological order.

[1] An evaluation of Jewish participation in the China opium trade focusses on Shanghaianders who formally observed the faith of their fathers, notably the city's long-resident Baghdadis. In 1844, Elias Sassoon of Bombay set up family business operations first in Canton and shortly thereafter in Shanghai. Elias was among the first Jews to engage in the opium trade in Shanghai, and that trade became the financial basis for Shanghai's Jewish community. Most of opium's stakeholders, from the growers of the drug to its shippers, supercargoes, and distributors, were fully aware that, apart from small amounts of opium gathered for genuine medicinal purposes, they were handling an addictive, physically debilitating, and socially-destructive recreational narcotic. The overworked, largely illiterate Chinese end users employed the drug for immediate relief and most likely were not fully aware of these broader social consequences.

The economics of the trade have been extensively analyzed by Carl Trocki and many other business historians. We are left with the unresolved question of how Jewish opium traders reconciled their business ethics with broader criticisms of the day. An anti-opium movement coincided with popular agitation against slavery, which, like opium, was an immoral but wholly legal activity in most parts of the world. How did Jews respond to criticism of their participation in this physically and socially destructive business? Did they remain silent and conduct business as usual? Contemporary Jewry needs to come to grips with its associations with the China opium trade much in the way the contemporary United States is in the process of reconciling its historical associations with slavery.

[2] The question of perceived anti-Semitism concerns Shanghaianders of Jewish descent who, unlike the Baghdadis, had minimal formal associations with Judaism and instead affiliated with a broad spectrum of Socialisms and other atheistic ideologies. Here we come across unresolved questions not about what the Jews thought of themselves but of how they were perceived by others. The British S.I.S. files on Shanghai Leftists are full of what I would call "casual anti-Semitism."

For example, they commonly assumed that Communists of European origin were Jewish, and often talked about this or that person having a 'Jewish appearance.' The late Israel Epstein, a long-term China resident and citizen and founding editor of China Reconstructs magazine, called this phenomenon "the Jew equals Communist equation." As but one example, the S.I.S. files, when trying to discover the identity of Hilaire Noulens of Shanghai, said they thought he was Jewish (from Belgium). And they were obsessed with Isidore Dreazen, who had many aliases and who was an American. They said he was Jewish, but we don't know enough about him to know whether that's true. We need to keep looking through British and French papers for evidence of the heretofore unexamined phenomenon of "casual" as opposed to "overt" anti-Semitism in Shanghai.

[3] A third questions concerns what happened to the Russian Jews who remained in China after the mass-exodus of 1949-50. Soviet passport holders were under the effective control of the U.S.S.R by means of its quasi-official "Soviet Citizens Committee," headed by Lev Shickman. Like comparable "exit visa" bureaucracies in the U.S.S.R. itself, the "Citizens Committee" could decide which Soviet citizens were allowed to leave China and who were left to languish in limbo. The Schickmans may have been the last Jewish family to immigrate from the P.R.C. In 1968, despite overt allegiance to the Soviet Union, they exited via Hong Kong, ignored appeals to return to the "welcoming embrace" of their "Soviet motherland," and skillfully negotiated passage to Israel. Hopefully the history of the Soviet Citizens Committee will be written by Lev Shickman's daughter Tzvia Shickman-Bowman, a professional historian affiliated with the University of London.

[4] A fourth questions concerns the challenges faced by Jews who attempted to integrate into Chinese society, to the point of miscegenation and/or intermarriage with Chinese.

While Jews as a whole did not generally assimilate into Chinese society, some Jews did intermarry, produce mixed-race offspring, and/or adopt ethnically-Chinese children. There are some well-known examples. Israeli Aluf (Vice Admiral) Eliezer (Eli) Marom ("Chayni") was the Commander of the Israeli Navy in the years 2007-2011. As of 2015 he served as the head of the Israel Airports Authority. His brother Moshe Marom was also a senior officer, a rear admiral, in the Israeli Navy. Their father Erik was a German-born Jew and their mother Leah (originally Chai Li) was born in China, the daughter of a Russian-Jewish woman and a Chinese man who had converted to Judaism. Their parents met when their father escaped to China as a refugee from Europe during World War II. Lev Shickman was twice

married to Chinese women and had three mixed-race offspring. What about the history of lesser-known mixed-race offspring?

Impoverished Jewish prostitutes in Shanghai were available to Chinese men, and vice-versa, and there presumably were mixed-race offspring from these liaisons. Bitter poverty must have driven these women to prostitution,, as well as the fact that this profession was so prominent and public in Shanghai. George Sokolsky broke a social taboo by marrying a woman of mixed Caribbean-Chinese blood. The Baghdadi Jewish immigrant Silas Hardoon had a Chinese wife and several adopted ethnic Chinese as well as Jewish children. Israel Epstein and his Caucasian wife Elsie Fairfax-Cholmeley (1905-84) adopted two ethnically-Chinese children. After Elsie's death Epstein, like Sokolsky, Hardoon, and the American-born Jew and Chinese immigrant Sidney Shapiro, married ethnical-Chinese women.

The Jewish immigrant to China and his or her Eurasian offspring or adopted children, while a vital part of the Jewish experience, are beyond the scope of extant literature, with two exceptions. There is a single vignette in Yiddish by Joseph Fizman, a Polish immigrant active in Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland, commonly referred to as "The Bund." The German play Fremde Erde (Foreign Soil), deals with a German refugee woman's relations with a Chinese man. Beyond these two accounts, what was the history of Chinese-Jewish marriages and liaisons and that of their mixed-race offspring and/or adoptees?

By way of conclusion, I am not suggesting that these are the only unresolved questions that emerge from a century-and-a-half of Shanghai Jewish history and historical writing. I am only proposing items for a future research agenda, alongside other issues suggested by historians. By considering these questions, we will not be wasting valuable time, effort, and resources attacking problems which have already been solved. We will thereby avoid the pitfall of reinventing the wheel.

*Jonathan Goldstein (B.A., M.A., and Ph.D., in East Asian History from the University of Pennsylvania) has been a Research Associate of Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies since 1985 and a Professor of East Asian History at the University of West Georgia since 1981. His books include Jewish Identities in East and Southeast Asia (2015), Stephen Girard's Trade with China (2011), The Jews of China (2 vols., 1999 and 2000), China and Israel (1999; updated Chinese edition 2006; updated Hebrew edition 2016), America Views China (1991), Georgia's East Asian Connection (1982, 2nd. ed. 1990), and Philadelphia and the China Trade (1978).*

## Lost While Looking for a Lost Tribe

By Israel Mizrahi

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The long exile of the Jewish people has contributed to an often intense yearning for the messiah, at times leading to attempts to locate the lost tribes of the Jews and perhaps speed up the ultimate redemption. A record of one such interesting attempt is recorded in a book I acquired this week, titled *Sefer Haberit Hachadash* [Book of the New Covenant], published in *Piotrikov* [then part of Russia, now in Poland] in 1911.



The book records information gleaned by a man named Uziel Haga from Boston, who petitioned then-president of the Unites States, William McKinley, to join a U.S. army expedition that was leaving to China. Permission was granted and he traveled to China, meticulously recording the customs, life, and habits of the natives he encountered.

His findings convinced him that some of their customs, such as a seven-day period of mourning, were remnants of their Jewish past, and that the Jews in Kaifeng in the Henan Province of China were descendants of the tribe of Asher. Haga argued that they were exiled to this area by the king of Ashur.

Unfortunately, the author's investigation coincided with the Boxer Rebellion in China, which took place between 1899 and 1901 and involved anti-imperialist and anti-foreign sentiments. Accused of espionage, Haga was imprisoned by the Boxers and died after suffering much torture at the hands of his captors.

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*Ice, continued from page 1*

With an enormous investment to protect, railroad officials quickly realized that they could not depend on local warlords or Siberian peasants to create this not-yet-existent town. They needed experienced Russian-speaking entrepreneurs. But who would ever want to move to Manchuria? That was when the railroad's administrator, General Dmitri Khorvat, hit on a genius idea: the Jews.

Russia's crippling anti-Semitic laws and violent pogroms were already driving hundreds of thousands of Jews to America, including my own ancestors. Khorvat argued that getting capital and talent to Manchuria was a piece of cake. Just tell the Jews that they can live free of anti-Semitic restrictions, he argued to the regime in St. Petersburg, without learning a new language or becoming bottom feeders in New York's sweatshops. The only catch was that they'd have to move to Manchuria.

The regime reluctantly agreed. So did hundreds, and then thousands, of Russian Jews. The first Jews arrived in 1898 and incorporated an official community in 1903, by which time this plan was working splendidly. A 1904 *National Geographic* article written by a U.S. consul to Manchuria reported, wide-eyed, that "one of the greatest achievements in city construction that the world has ever witnessed is now going on in the heart of Manchuria," and that "the capital for most of the private enterprises is furnished by Siberian Jews." These Jewish entrepreneurs created Harbin's first hotels, banks, pharmacies, insurance companies, department stores, publishing houses, and more; by 1909, 12 of the 40 members of Harbin's City Council were Jewish. These initial entrepreneurs were joined by Jewish refugees fleeing the 1905 pogroms, then by even more refugees fleeing World War I and the Russian Civil War.

At its peak, Harbin's Jewish community numbered around 20,000. The "Old" Synagogue was built in 1909, and by 1921 there was enough demand for a "New" Synagogue a few blocks away, as well as a kosher slaughterer, ritual bath, and matzo bakery, not to mention a Jewish elementary and secondary school, a hospital, a charity kitchen, a free loan association, an old-age home, multiple magazines and newspapers, performances of Jewish music and theater, and Zionist clubs that were the center of many young people's lives. Harbin hosted major international Zionist conferences that drew Jews from all over Asia. Zionist parades were held in the streets.

You already know this story has to end badly. Like almost every place Jews have ever lived, Harbin was great for the Jews until it wasn't—but in Harbin, the usual

centuries-long rise and fall was condensed into something like 30 years. The flood of refugees from the 1917 Russian Revolution included many non-Jewish "White" (anti-Communist) Russians, whose virulent anti-Semitism was soon institutionalized in a fascist party that burned the Old Synagogue in 1931. That was also the year the Japanese occupied Manchuria, noticed rich Jews there, and decided they wanted their money. Conveniently, White Russian thugs were ready to help.

The Japanese gendarmerie embarked on a partnership with White Russian criminals, whom they used to target Jewish business owners and their families for extortion, confiscation, kidnapping, and murder. Later they manipulated the Jewish community for their purposes, sending Abraham Kaufman, a respected physician and the community's elected leader, off to two separate audiences with the Japanese emperor, and forcing him to publish official statements from Harbin's Jewish community announcing their love for Nazi-allied Japan. Things did not improve when the Soviets took over in 1945; the first thing they did was round up the city's remaining Jewish leaders, including Dr. Kaufman, and send them to gulags. Dr. Kaufman endured 11 years in a gulag and then five years in exile in Kazakhstan before he was allowed to join his family in Israel. He was the luckiest; no one else survived. Then again, dying in a gulag was less dramatic than the fate of some Jews under the Japanese. While retreating from the Manchurian town of Hailar, the Japanese military beheaded its Jewish residents.

By 1949 Chinese Maoists controlled Harbin. The thousand-plus Jews still in town were gradually stripped of their businesses and livelihoods, while Israel's government made secret contact with Harbin's remaining Jews and began arranging for them to leave—a process that mostly involved submitting to extortion. As one Israeli official explained, "It is obvious that the Communist government is keen to clear the country of the foreign element. However ... the authorities make things very difficult as long as the person who wants to leave is still in funds, and lets the person go only after making quite sure that his personal funds are exhausted." The last Jewish family left town in 1962. After that, only one Jew remained in the city, a woman named Hannah Agre who refused to leave. Leaning into the crazy-old-lady motif, she moved into a tiny room in the Old Synagogue (by then the building, its interior subdivided, was being used as government office space) and died there in 1985, the official Last Jew of Harbin.

She wasn't quite the last, though. Today there is one Jew in Harbin, an Israeli in his 70s named Dan Ben-Canaan. Ben-Canaan was covering the Far East for Israeli news

media when he decided to go native, getting himself a job at a local university and settling permanently in Harbin in 2002. Ben-Canaan is a busy man, not only because of his university responsibilities and his work editing local English-language news programs, but because his enormous research into Harbin's Jewish past has made him indispensable to the local government as they restore Jewish sites...

Ben-Canaan spends enough of his time being the semi-official One Jew of Harbin that when I interview him over Skype, he has his one-liner ready: "I'm the president of the community here, which consists of me and me alone. It's great because I don't have anyone to argue with." Ben-Canaan's interest in Harbin's Jewish history, stemming from his days as a journalist, intensified when he learned that Harbin's government owns the Jewish community's official archives—and keeps them under lock and key. "I tried to get them to reopen the archives, and they refused," he tells me. "I've been given two reasons for it. One is that it contains politically sensitive material, and the other is that they're afraid of being sued for property restitution. There were some wealthy Jews here whose property was worth millions."

The lack of access motivated Ben-Canaan to re-create the archives himself by collecting photographs, memorabilia, and testimony from over 800 former Harbin Jews and their descendants around the world. As a result, as he put it, "I've become an address" for Harbin's Jewish history. When the provincial government decided—for reasons that only gradually become clear to me—to spend \$30 million to restore, renovate, or reconstruct its synagogues and other Jewish buildings, they hired him.

The One Jew of Harbin speaks with me for nearly two hours, because that's how long it takes him to describe the Jewish sites whose refurbishment he has supervised. There is, it seems, a lot to see. Being no chump, the One Jew of Harbin spends his winters in southern China. But he sets me up with a former student of his who now works as a tour guide, to see the sights.

## II The Jewish Cemetery

There is a tourist-industry concept, popular in places largely devoid of Jews, called "Jewish Heritage Sites." The term is a truly ingenious piece of marketing. "Jewish Heritage" is a phrase that sounds utterly benign, or to Jews, perhaps ever so slightly dutiful, suggesting a place that you surely ought to visit—after all, you came all this way, so how could you not? It is a much better name than "Property Seized from Dead or Expelled Jews." By calling these places "Jewish Heritage Sites," all those pesky moral concerns—about, say, why these "sites" exist to begin with—magically evaporate in a mist of goodwill. And not just goodwill, but good-

will aimed directly at you, the Jewish tourist. For you see, these non-Jewish citizens and their benevolent government have chosen to maintain this cemetery or renovate this synagogue or create this museum purely out of their profound respect for the Jews who once lived here (and who, for unstated reasons, no longer do)—and out of their sincere hope that you, the Jewish tourist, might someday arrive. But still, you cannot help but feel uncomfortable, and finally helpless, as you engage in the exact inverse of what Benjamin of Tudela once did: Instead of traveling the world and visiting Jews, you are visiting their graves.

Harbin is enjoying a heat wave when I arrive, a balmy 10 below with a wind chill of a mere minus 18. I only need to wear a pair of thermals, a shirt, a sweater, a fleece, a parka, a balaclava, a neck warmer, a hat, gloves, three pairs of socks, and three pairs of pants to go outdoors.

My first stop is the city's Jewish cemetery, billed by tour companies as the largest Jewish cemetery in the Far East—except that it's not a cemetery, since cemeteries contain dead bodies, and this one doesn't have any. In 1958, Harbin's local government was redesigning the city and decided that the Jewish cemetery, home to around 2,300 dead Jews, had to go. The city offered families the option of moving their dead relatives' graves to the site of a large Chinese cemetery called Huangshan, an hour's drive outside the city, for the price of about \$50 per grave. Many Jewish families were long gone by then, so only about 700 graves were moved—and, as it turned out, only the gravestones made the trip, since city authorities saw no reason to move the bodies, too. The human remains from the old cemetery are now in what the Chinese call "deep burial"—that is, the space containing them has been paved over and turned into an amusement park. "It is nice for them to be there," my tour guide—who I'll call Derek to keep him out of trouble—says of the dead Jews under the rides. "They are always with happy people now."

The drive to Huangshan takes about an hour through industrial wastelands and frozen fields, culminating in a grandiose toll plaza with enormous Russian-style onion domes and then several miles more of abandoned warehouses, with a few bundled people by the roadside selling stacks of fake money to burn as offerings—because Huangshan is really a vast Chinese cemetery, filled with endless rows of identical shiny white tombstones on miniplots containing cremated remains. After driving past tens of thousands of dead Chinese people, we find the entrance to the cemetery's Jewish section, pay our fee, and enter the gates.

The Jewish section is compact and stately, with gravestones elaborately carved in Hebrew and Russian, along with many modern

metal plaques sponsored by former Harbin Jews whose relatives' original stones weren't moved. Many of the original grave markers have ceramic inserts with photographic portraits of the deceased, which would have been intriguing if every single one weren't shattered or removed. The damage is clearly deliberate, which might explain the cemetery employee following us around. The idea that Jewish cemetery desecration is currently in vogue in Harbin is a tad depressing, but to my surprise, this snowy Jewish Heritage Site doesn't feel at all lonely or bereft. In fact, it's rather glam.

Inside the gate is a plaza with a massive granite Star of David sculpture, next to a two-story-high domed synagogue building festooned with more Stars of David. The synagogue's doors are locked, but through its windows I can see that the building is a shell, with nothing inside but some scattered tools and junk. When I ask what it's for, Derek laughs. "They built it for Olmert's visit," he explains. "Now it's just used by the cemetery workers to stay warm."

...Olmert's visit to Harbin in 2004 as Israel's deputy prime minister was a big deal, but the (fake) synagogue built in his honor at the (also fake) cemetery was just one part of an enormous and expensive project on the part of the local provincial government to restore Jewish Heritage Sites. The government's explicit goal is to attract Jewish money, in the form of both tourism and investment by foreign Jews.

In our interview, the One Jew of Harbin had only praise for these efforts, in which he is deeply involved. "The restoration cost \$30 million—it's unheard of here. Everything was of the highest quality," Ben-Canaan told me, adding that Harbin's Jewish Heritage Sites have the same official designation as Chinese landmarks like the Forbidden City. One of the many sources on Harbin he shares with me is a long 2007 news article from a Chinese magazine by a journalist named Su Ling, who he describes as one of China's rare investigative reporters. The article, titled "Harbin Jews: The Truth," traces a very particular history: not Harbin's Jewish Heritage, but the Heilongjiang provincial government's attempts to capitalize on that Heritage.

The story begins innocently enough, with a social-scientist-cum-real-estate-agent named Zhang Tiejiang, who discovered the prior Jewish ownership of many historic homes that he was supposed to demolish for a city-planning project in 1992. Taking an interest, he studied the Jewish graves in Huangshan cemetery, translating their Russian text with the help of a computer program. His timing was auspicious: 1992 was the year China established diplomatic relations with Israel, and in 1999 China's premier made his first official visit to Jeru-

salem. Also auspicious: Heilongjiang province, long reliant on declining industries like coal mining, had hit an economic slump. Zhang Tiejiang seized the moment in 1999 to publish his brilliant idea, in an article for a state news agency titled "Suggestions for the Study of Harbin Jews to Quicken Heilongjiang Economic Development."

This article made its way to the province's higher-ups, who dispatched an official to Heilongjiang's Academy of Social Sciences to "intensify the study of the history of Harbin Jews." A Center for Jewish Studies was established, complete with a massive budget. "Develop[ing] the travel industry and attracting business investments," the center's original website announced, was "the tenet of our existence and purpose." A boondoggle ensued, with unqualified people producing minimal research while enjoying trips abroad. In the years since, the government's \$30 million has produced more tangible results, including not only the cemetery refurbishment, but also the transformation of the New Synagogue into a Jewish museum, the reconstruction of the Old Synagogue and the Jewish secondary school, and the landmark-labeling of formerly Jewish-owned buildings in the city's historic heart...

This attempt to "attract business investments" by researching Jewish history seems, to put it gently, statistically unsound. Among the tens of millions of tourists to China each year, 40,000 annual Israeli visitors and even fewer Jewish tourists from elsewhere amount to a rounding error. And the idea that Israeli or other Jewish-owned companies would be moved to invest in Heilongjiang Province out of nostalgia for its Jewish Heritage seems unlikely. The only way to understand this thinking is to appreciate the role Jews play in the Chinese imagination...At a 2007 "International Forum on Economic Cooperation Between Harbin and the World's Jews," held in Harbin with dozens of invited Jewish guests who ranged from the Israeli ambassador to a group of Hungarian Jewish dentists, Harbin's mayor welcomed participants by citing esteemed Jews such as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller (neither of whom was Jewish). He then announced that "the world's money is in the pockets of the Americans, and the Americans' money is in the pockets of the Jews. This is the highest acclaim and praise to Jewish wisdom."

### III Harbin Remembered

Former Harbin Jews often remember Harbin as a kind of paradise. "They owned the town," Irene Clurman, a daughter of former Harbin Jews, told me, describing the nostalgia that many "Harbintsy"—ex-Harbiners—expressed for their beloved city. "It was a semicolonial situation; they had Chinese servants and great schools and fur coats." Or in the words of her grandmother Roza (later Ethel) Clurman in a 1986 interview, "Harbin

was a dream.”

It’s also worth noting here that Roza Clurman’s husband—Irene Clurman’s grandfather—was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered in Harbin during the Japanese anti-Semitic reign of terror, after which his lucrative business (he introduced indoor plumbing to Manchuria) and his high-end rental building were confiscated, leaving his family with nothing. But let’s focus on the positive: After all, Roza Clurman was 5 during the 1905 Odessa pogrom, hiding in an attic for days on end while the neighborhood was ransacked and her neighbors murdered. True, her husband also wound up murdered—but “my grandmother absolutely had a nostalgia for Harbin,” Irene Clurman insists. In her interview, Roza Clurman admits that “everything changed” in Harbin, but she spends far more time describing its glory: the steaks the family ate, their household staff, the children’s private lessons.

The ascent from pogroms to private lessons was dizzyingly fast, obscuring the community’s equally precipitous decline. One Harbinty descendant, Jean Ispa, told me how her father, an orphan, made his way to Harbin alone solely to study music, since Russian conservatories didn’t take Jewish students. “He was 16 when he made this journey,” Ispa tells me in wonder. “He gave concerts in Harbin. I even have the programs he played.” Another Harbin exile, Alexander Galatzky, was 8 during the pogroms of the 1919-1920 Russian Civil War, when he and his mother repeatedly barricaded themselves in their apartment in Ukraine and listened to the screams of their neighbors being murdered and raped. When the ship fare his father sent from New York was stolen, their only hope was to go east to Manchuria. In reminiscences he wrote down for his family, Galatzky described boarding a cattle car to leave Ukraine: “Mother has a bundle of old clothes with her. The soldier on guard of the cattle car is trying to take it from her. She clutches at it, crying, kissing the soldier’s hand. We have no money or valuables and the old clothes can be bartered for food en route. Without them we would starve.” After a life like that, Manchuria was paradise.

Of course, one could tell the same story about Russian Jews who emigrated to New York. But in Harbin, where Russian Jews created their own Russian Jewish bubble, their sense of ownership and pride was greater—and that pride turned the story of their community’s destruction into a footnote. Of the Harbinty descendants I interviewed, most mentioned friends or relatives who were kidnapped, tortured or murdered during the Japanese occupation. All had their family’s hard-earned assets seized by Manchuria’s various regimes. But in the next sentence they would tell me, again, how Harbin was “a golden age.” An entire organization in Is-

rael, Igud Yotzei Sin (Association of Chinese Exiles), exists solely to connect homesick “Chinese Jews” around the world with each other through networking, social events, scholarships, and trilingual newsletters which run to hundreds of pages. Until recent years, members gathered weekly in Tel Aviv to play mahjong, drink tea, and reminisce. Teddy Kaufman, who ran the organization until his death in 2012, published a memoir titled *The Jews of Harbin Live On in My Heart*, extolling the Jewish paradise. His father was the community president who wound up in a gulag.

Harbin’s Jewish “golden age” lasted less than one generation. Even before the Japanese occupation, things were unpleasant enough that leaving was, for many, a foregone conclusion. Alexander Galatzky, the boy whose mother bartered old clothes to feed him on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, kept diaries as a teenager from 1925 to 1929 that his daughter Bonnie Galat recently had translated. The diaries reveal assumptions that most happy teenagers don’t live with: Everyone plans to leave, and the only question is where to go. He counts off his friends’ departures—to Palestine, to Russia, to Australia, to America—and waxes nostalgic about leaving, as he capitalizes in his diary, “FOR GOOD.”

Many came to recall the community’s destruction as if it were almost expected, like snow or rain. Alex Nahumson, who was born in Harbin and emigrated in 1950 at the age of 3 with his family, reports only “very happy memories” discussed by his parents, like most Harbinty I spoke with. “The Chinese never did anything bad to us, just the Russians and the Japanese,” he tells me by phone in Hebrew from his home in Israel. This memory is remarkable, considering that his family’s assets were plundered by the Maoist regime. “When my parents talked about Harbin, they only talked about their dacha [country home], the theater, the opera,” he avers. The fact that his parents’ memories also overlap with the Japanese occupation is equally remarkable. When I bring up the kidnappings, he verbally shrugs. “That’s just crime,” he insists. “Crime happens everywhere.” Later in our conversation he mentions, almost casually, that his own grandfather was kidnapped and tortured by the Japanese.

#### IV The New Synagogue Jewish Museum

It is hard to describe what, exactly, is wrong with Harbin’s New Synagogue Jewish Museum—or as it says on my ticket, the “Construction Art Museum.” One feels the overwhelming need to applaud this (mostly) Jewish museum’s mere existence, to carefully delineate its many strengths, to thank the locals for their bountiful goodwill. For it does have enormous strengths, and the goodwill is abundant. Still, from the moment I arrive at the large domed building and enter its wide-open space with an enormous Star of David decorating the floor—it only

occurs to me later how ridiculous this detail is, since the floor would have been covered with seats when the synagogue was in use—I feel that creeping “Jewish Heritage” unease. But then, my actual Jewish heritage kicks in, consisting of centuries of epigenetic instincts reminding me that I am only a guest. I smile, and snap pictures.

The Jewish history exhibition fills the second floor—the women’s gallery of the synagogue. Here, in vast arrays of photographs, smiling well-dressed people build synagogues, celebrate weddings, attend Zionist meetings, patronize a library, pose in scout uniforms, work in a hospital, rescue neighbors from a flood, and skate on the river. The displays are informative enough, even if their translated captions sometimes descend into word salad. Beneath one portrait of a man wearing a tallis and a tall clerical hat, for instance, the English caption reads: “Judean assembly mark in harbin choir leading singer gram benefit maxwell minister radical.” I ask Derek what the original Chinese caption means. He smiles apologetically and says, “I’m not sure.”

It’s all admirably thorough, if a little garbled. But toward the far end of the gallery, on the part of the floor that has been constructed over the alcove where the ark for Torah scrolls once stood (the actual alcove for the ark is now a foyer leading to a restroom), I enter a set of little rooms whose content puzzles me. The first room is dominated by a large wooden desk, with a life-size white plaster sculpture of a bald and bearded Western man seated before an ancient typewriter. The brass plaque in front of him reads, “Real workplace of Jewish industrialist in Harbin.” Confused by the word “real,” I ask Derek if this is supposed to be a specific person. He glances at the plaque and explains, “It is showing a Jew in Harbin. He is doing business.”

In subsequent rooms, more tableaux of frozen Jews unfold. There are life-size plaster Jews frozen at a grand piano, a life-size plaster Jew frozen in a chair with knitting needles, and two child-size plaster Jews frozen on a bed, playing eternally with plaster blocks. This, the brass plaque informs me, is “The display of the Jews’ family in Harbin.” The plaque continues: “At the first half of the 20th century, not only was the display of the Jews’ family simple, but also practical and the children lived a colorful life there.” The children’s blocks, like the children, are devoid of color. Later I discover the unnamed inspiration for this display: Harbin’s annual Snow Sculpture Park, full of figures carved from blocks of manufactured snow.

After the rooms full of frozen Jews, the parade of mostly dead Jews resumes, dominated by photographs of “real Jewish industrialists” who “brought about numerous economic miracles” in Harbin, including the founders of Harbin’s first sugar refinery, first soybean export business, first candy facto-

ry, and China's first brewery. The wall text explains how Harbin "offered the Jews an opportunity for creating new enterprises and providing a solid foundation for their later economic activities in Europe and America." This is true, I suppose, if one thinks of Harbin as a kind of business-school exercise, rather than a place where actual Jews created actual capital that was subsequently seized, transforming them overnight into penniless refugees, if they were lucky.

One enterprise prominently featured in the museum, for instance, is the Skidelsky Coal Mine Corporation. The Skidelskys were among the "Siberian Jews" who provided the initial capital for Harbin—although "initial capital" is an understatement. In an account of his family's holdings in Prospect magazine, Robert Skidelsky, a member of the British House of Lords and a Harbin native, described how his great-grandfather Leon Skidelsky held the contract in 1895—prior to Harbin's founding—to build the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Manchuria to Vladivostok...In 1945, Solomon Skidelsky was still nine years shy of running out the lease when the Soviets sent him and his brother to die in a gulag, and Communists—first Soviet and then Chinese—seized the mines. Decades later, Lord Skidelsky filed his claim. "In 1984," Lord Skidelsky recounts, "I received a cheque for 24,000 English pounds in full settlement of a claim for compensation that amounted to 11 million pounds." When he visited Harbin in 2005, local TV crews trailed him and presented him with flowers, which were worth somewhat less than 11 million pounds.

When I express my sense that this museum is only telling part of a story, Derek raises an issue that Ben-Canaan brought up with me repeatedly, that this museum focuses exclusively on wealthy people—thus underscoring the idea that Jews are rich. "Obviously there were poor Jews here too," Derek points out. "The building across the street was the Jewish Free Kitchen."

It is only as I am leaving, through the enormous mezuzah-less door, that I look back at what was once the sanctuary and understand what, exactly, is wrong with this museum. Above the first-floor paintings of Russian churches, the museum is dominated by an enormous blown-up photograph of a 1930s farewell banquet, its rows of Harbin Jews in their tuxedos gathered to say goodbye to yet another Jewish family fleeing, as Alexander Galatzky put it, "FOR GOOD." Suddenly the Jewish Heritage miasma melts away, and I realize the blindingly obvious: Nothing in this museum explains why this glorious community no longer exists.

### V The Modern Hotel and the Old Synagogue

Harbin is a rather hideous city, its Soviet-style apartment blocks stretching as far as the eye can see. But the city's historic heart has been restored so thoroughly that if not for the Chinese crowds and street signs, one

could imagine being in Europe. The historic tree-lined Central Avenue has been transformed into a pedestrian mall that doubles as an outdoor architectural museum, where each original building—80 percent of which were once Jewish-owned—is labeled with a plaque describing its past. The restoration also included installing loudspeakers that constantly blast high-volume Western music that someone decided was atmospheric. When I arrive, they're playing "Edelweiss": Bless my homeland forever. The music makes it hard to think.

Derek points out the various restored buildings on Central Avenue and elsewhere in the neighborhood: the Jewish-owned pharmacy, the Jewish Free Kitchen, the Jewish People's Bank, and many private homes, all now occupied by other enterprises. The "Heritage Architecture" plaques affixed to each historic building couldn't be more direct: "This mansion," a typical one reads, "was built by a Jew."

The most impressive Central Avenue building "built by a Jew" is the Modern Hotel, a building whose story captures the Harbin Jewish community's roller coaster of triumph and horror. The Modern Hotel was built by the Jewish entrepreneur Joseph Kaspe, and from the moment it opened, in 1906, it was the height of Manchurian chic. The Modern wasn't merely a high-class establishment frequented by celebrities and diplomats. Its premises also included China's first movie theater. Kaspe also created other Modern-labeled luxury products like jewelry and high-end food. In other words, the Modern was a brand...

The Modern Hotel is still in operation today, though at a few stars lower than the Holiday Inn where I'm staying down the street. The large pink stone building with its glamorous arched windows and turrets still dominates Central Avenue, its girth expanding for an entire city block, Cyrillic letters spelling out "MODERN" running down one corner of its facade. Outside, a long line of people winds its way down the street toward one end of the hotel, the hordes queuing in minus-10 degrees. The line, Derek explains, is for the Modern's famous ice cream. "In Harbin, we love eating cold foods at cold temperatures," he grins. It's true; the streets of Harbin are lined with snack stands selling skewers of frozen fruit. The Kaspes figured this out and created China's first commercially produced ice cream. Passing up the frozen treats, I go inside.

The Modern Hotel's lobby today is shabby and nondescript, except for an exhibit celebrating the hotel's illustrious history. It begins with a bronze bust of Joseph Kaspe, with wall text in Chinese and English describing the accomplishments of the Modern Corporation and its founder, "The Jew of Russian Nationality Mr. Alexander Petrovich Kaspe." (The "Alexander" is inexplicable; Joseph Kaspe's actual first name appears in Russian

on the bust.) As the wall text explains, this impressive Jew founded this "flagship business in Harbin integrated with hotel, cinema, jewelry store, etc." "In recent years," the text continues, "the cultural brand of Modern is continuously consolidated and developed." It then lists the numerous businesses now held by this storied company—including the Harbin Ice Festival, which belonged to the Modern Corporation until the provincial government took it over a few years ago...

Here on its walls are enlarged photos of Joseph Kaspe's family, including his murdered son, sexy in his white tie and tails, frozen over his piano. Here, under glass, are Real Historic Items from the Kaspe family, including silver candlesticks, an old-timey telephone, and a samovar! And here, in one particularly dusty glass case near the floor, are "the Kaspe collection of household utensils of Judaism sacrificial offerings," including an actual Seder plate!

I squat down for a closer look at this display, and see that there are two plates inside it. The Seder plate has a bronzy Judaica motif suspiciously familiar from my own American Jewish childhood. I squelch my skepticism until I see that it is carved all around with English words. The second plate, a ceramic one, sports an Aztec-ish design, with the word "Mexico" painted across the bottom—a 1980s airport souvenir...

I put my balaclava back on and go out into the cold again...and head to the Old Synagogue, which is now a concert hall. The result of a multimillion-dollar renovation project for which the One Jew of Harbin served as an adviser, the building is part of an entire "Jewish block" that includes the music school next door, which was once the Jewish secondary school. Ben-Canaan was meticulous about the project, gathering and examining old photographs and descriptions to exactly replicate the ark with its granite Ten Commandments motif, the pillars, the gallery that was once the women's section, and the seats with their prayer-book stands. His only concession, he told me, was to make the bimah (the platform before the ark) wide enough to accommodate a chamber orchestra.

When the person manning the ticket booth refuses to let me peek inside, I buy a ticket for that night's string quartet...The Old Synagogue's interior shocks me. I don't know what I was expecting, but what I didn't expect was to be standing in a synagogue no different than every single urban early-20th-century synagogue I've ever entered around the world, from my own former shul in New York City to others as far as London and Moscow and Capetown and Buenos Aires and Melbourne, all those buildings around the world where you walk into the sanctuary (usually after passing an armed guard) and could literally be in any synagogue anywhere. The One Jew of Harbin did a marvelous job—so marvelous that as I

walk into the large hall and see the massive ark looming before me, with its familiar Hebrew inscription imploring me to Know Before Whom You Stand, I instinctively listen for what part of the service I'm walking in on... Then a Chinese string quartet walks up to the bimah in front of the ark, and instead of bowing before the ark, they bow before me. The lights drop, and they play, spectacularly well, Brahms' "Hungarian Dance No. 5," and Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet," and inexplicably, "Cotton-Eyed Joe." And suddenly I am very, very tired...

Nothing simply disappears. As I leave Harbin, I think of Hannah Agre, the last Jew of Harbin—the crazy old lady who refused to leave the city after every other Jew had gone, dying alone in 1985 in an office space that she had rejiggered into an apartment on the second floor of the Old Synagogue, 23 years after the last Jewish family left. It occurs to me, as I pass through the industrial wastelands and endless high-rises on my way to the airport, that maybe she wasn't so crazy. Maybe she didn't like being told to leave. Maybe she was physically enacting what all the other Harbintsy spent the rest of their lives trying to do, as they gathered in San Francisco and Tel Aviv to play mahjong and share photos of their samovars and fur coats. Maybe she wanted to keep the castle her family had built, preserved in ice...I think of Alexander Galatzky leaving Harbin "FOR GOOD," boarding the train to Shanghai and then the boat to Ceylon and on through the Suez Canal, nine years after he first traversed the world as a child on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, with his mother and her bag of old clothes...I think of the Clurmans, the Kaspes, the Nahumsons moving between the raindrops, ditching as needed, ditching as expected... Within two minutes of takeoff, Harbin is no longer visible. Outside my window, I see only snow-dusted farmland and the gleam of sunlight on the frozen river. The land is vast and empty. The enormous city is gone.

Dara Horn received her Ph.D. in comparative literature from Harvard University in 2006, studying Hebrew and Yiddish. Her first novel, *In the Image*, received a 2003 National Jewish Book Award, the 2002 Edward Lewis Wallant Award, and the 2003 Reform Judaism Fiction Prize. Her second novel, *The World to Come*, received the 2006 National Jewish Book Award for Fiction, the 2007 Harold U. Ribalow Prize, was selected as an Editors' Choice in *The New York Times Book Review* and as one of the Best Books of 2006 by *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and has been translated into eleven languages. Her third novel, *All Other Nights*, was selected as an Editors' Choice in *The New York Times Book Review* and was one of *Booklist's* 25 Best Books of the Decade. In 2012, her nonfiction e-book *The Rescuer* was published by *Tablet* magazine and became a Kindle bestseller. Her fourth novel, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, was se-

lected as one of *Booklist's* Best Books of 2013 and was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. Her most recent novel is *Eternal Life*.

### A Heated Response to "Cities of Ice"

By Dan Ben-Canaan

The Jewish community of Harbin left behind a very rich and admirable legacy that is celebrated in almost every corner of the historical parts of this very different Chinese city.

The government for its reasons, which are not always in line with the way it responds to the Jewish subject, yet in a typical "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics", ergo – ultra capitalism where money is of the utmost importance, never the less has put great efforts and huge funds into the preservation of Jewish relics and buildings, something that no other entity in China did independently (and even Shanghai cannot match it).

Moreover, after the reconstruction works of the Old Synagogue, the Jewish High School and two other buildings that form a Jewish block were completed in 2014 (with investment of over 110 million Yuan), the government approved my efforts to establish the Harbin Jewish Culture Association (a government body) and awarded me with funds that enables us to publish books about the history of Jewish Harbin, and acquire historical relics for a future exhibition I am curating.

In addition, we are now in a process of establishing the Harbin biannual international Jewish music festival (including Jewish folk music, Klezmer and cantillation). We have already submitted a report on the matter which is now in the working for approval and appropriation of funds.

The sad fact is Dara Horn's way of treating the subject, to which I have received responses from those who were on the list of people I provided and were interviewed by her.

"Dara Horn's article... as too negative and lacking in a feeling for the place that was... I do know for sure that I never told her that my father could not gain entrance to a music conservatory in Russia... Now I'm wondering if Dara misheard parts of other interviewees' stories and the materials you sent her as well... And, the tombstone inscriptions are in Russian and Yiddish, not Hebrew..."

What saddened me was the negative, sarcastic, cynic, and lacking in a feeling for the place, that was the overtone of the article. And I question why it should be so. Is it because it sells more copies of the magazine?

I wrote them in return that Horn's article is a perfect example of how subjects are being treated by journalists in the West. It must carry high dose of sarcasm and cynicism otherwise there would be no point there. I always disagreed with this line of writing.

What comes out is not clear enough to ren-

der a better understanding of what was, and why, and then, what is and why. If her aim was to show that Harbin did not exist or that the city's Jewish life was a waste, she succeeded. I would not suggest that someone write the story of the American Jews in such a manner.

Because the article has been published, there was no point in arguing this matter except letting her know, in a very gentle way, of my position. Thus, here is what I wrote back to her:

"Dear Dara,

I have read your article with great interest. With several mistakes it gives a panoramic point of view that is very different.

I thought about the sarcastic over tone the article carries and felt uncomfortable. Then, I reminded myself that I am living in China where such writing does not exist, and that western journalism is not like what we have here.

In this sense, the article presents an offering of my city, the government's aims, which in any other place will be labeled anti-Semitic, and the contradictions that nostalgic memories bring.

I want also to note that 'being' for me is something that is almost eternal. Thus the memory of the Jews who tried to make this space their home, should not fade away, and that their being or existence here will ever be a living thing. If not, then all Jewish spaces and memories elsewhere, are doomed to be in "deep burial". It is (therefore) that for me the Jewish legacy in this city must be preserved and the candle of its life here should be everlasting, and this is what I have been trying to do for the past 20 years.

In his book *Der Judenstaat* Herzl writes: 'The Jewish question persists wherever Jews live in appreciable numbers. Wherever it does not exist, it is brought in together with Jewish immigrants. We are naturally drawn into those places where we are not persecuted, and our appearance there gives rise to persecution. This is the case, and will inevitably be so, everywhere, even in highly civilized countries...'

I would add here that the Jewish question continues wherever a Jew lives as individual without appreciable numbers of his mates. And, it is true also, where there are no Jews at all. Almost all Chinese never met a Jewish person in their life, yet, their perception of us follows your description (of the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences) to the letter and even more."

I do not understand why one should put a legacy of a community on melting ice. I am sure Dara loves to celebrate the Pesach Seder in a traditional way, read the story of freedom in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. I wonder what she would have written and how she would have treated the stories of the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea if she was there as a

Western journalist at the time.

There is absolutely no wrong in conducting “heritage tours”. These, among other activities, help preserve the knowledge about and legacies of Jewish communities around the world, and there are no such undertakings by any other national communities to my knowledge....”

*Dan Ben-Canaan is Professor of Research and Academic Writing Methodologies, an Honorary Research Fellow at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, and Editor-in-Chief of English News at Heilongjiang Television & Radio Broadcast Center. He is the author of five books: 20th Century Diary - The Hebrew University of Jerusalem: From the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to the Twenty First 1925-2000; A Man of Seasons; General Yohai Ben-Nun; The Kasper File: A Case Study of Harbin as an Intersection of Cultural and Ethnical Communities in Conflict 1932-1945; Entangled Histories: The Transcultural Past of Northeast China; and Jewish Footprints in Harbin: Concise Historical Notes.*

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## The High School Youth Keeping Alive the Legacy of Chinese Jews

By Simon Rocker

Excerpted from *The Jewish Chronicle*, 17 December 2019

<https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/the-schoolboy-trying-to-keep-alive-the-legacy-of-chinese-jews-1.494363>

Two winters ago Nicholas Zhang, then 16, set off from Hong Kong on a 12-hour train journey. His destination: the city of Kaifeng, on the Yellow River, in the central-eastern province of Henan, some 1,000 miles away...

In Kaifeng, Nicholas met Esther Guo, who runs a Jewish museum in her home, and was

struck by some of the artefacts he was shown.

“Imagine going to a place in the middle of China and finding a fully handwritten Torah in Chinese,” he said. It was written as a book, like a Chumash.

For Nicholas, who is currently studying for the International Baccalaureate at St Clare’s in Oxford, interest goes beyond intellectual curiosity. “I want to play a role in preserving their culture and identity,” he said.

When he returned, not only did he create a website, *chinesejews.com*, and recruited some of his fellow students as “ambassadors” to spread the word, but remarkably, he has written a book, *Jews in China: A History of Struggle*. He also devoted his IB extended essay to the history of Kaifeng Jewry.

He was motivated to do his book because he wanted to produce something more accessible than the scholarly literature on the topic he found in libraries. “The average Chinese or Jewish person doesn’t read academic articles or books,” he said.

While he has no Jewish ancestry himself, his family story has a Jewish link. “My great-grandmother was from quite a wealthy family in China. She left for a holiday in 1949 but then the Communist Party took over and she couldn’t go back to China.”

She was able to find refuge in the USA after being given a job in the Concord Hotel in the Catskills, which was owned by a Jewish family, the Parkers. Separated from her five children, she was unable to go back to her homeland until some 30 years later.

By then, her children had families of their own. The Parkers agreed to sponsor her eldest child to come to the States and gradually her other children followed. “My mum’s cousin married a Jewish woman so now I have Chinese-Jewish cousins,” he said.

He grew up in Hong Kong, where his mother had moved in the 1990s. At 13, he was sent to study at a traditional English boarding school. “I love history,” he said. “I learned about the Cold War, the First World War, the Second World War and the Holocaust — it seemed almost surreal, I didn’t see how something like that could happen.

“When I was back in Hong Kong, I went to a Yom Hashoah event which was hosted by the Hong Kong Holocaust and Tolerance Centre. It was founded by survivors who came to Hong Kong. The guest speaker was Ronald Leopold, director of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and he invited me to visit.”

The story of Kaifeng Jews is a story of co-existence, and telling it, he believes, is a way to counter intolerance. “The confluence of two civilisations produced something special.”

As he wrote on his website, “After centuries of intermarriage and millenniums of assimilation, these children of Abraham and Sarah, sculpted by teachings of Confucius and Lao Tzu, emerged with an identity and culture that is uniquely their own, unseen anywhere in the world.”

## BOOK NOOK

### Chinos y Judíos: Puentes y encuentros entre dos civilizaciones milenarias

by Gustavo Daniel Perednik  
Universidad ORT Uruguay, 2018. 173p

Reviewed by Flora Botton Beja

*Chinese and Jews: Bridges and Encounters Between Two Old Civilizations* is a book that compares the Chinese and the Jews and also studies the presence of Jews in China. The author, a Uruguayan scholar in Jewish Studies, became interested in China in 1992 when he met a Chinese diplomat in Jerusalem, who attended his course on Jewish Thought. Since then, he has travelled to China more than ten times, especially to Kaifeng, and became involved in developing already existing programs on Jewish Studies in China and in creating new ones. As he remarks in the Preface, he intends to write a book on the relations of Jews and Chinese but wants to “spice it up” with his “own thoughts and experiences”.

The book is divided in four sections without a clear theme in each one of them or a historic sequence. The subjects discussed throughout the book are 1) Similarities of Chinese and Jews 2) Parallels in thought and tradition as found in the Chinese Great Tradition and in the Bible, 3) Some parallels in history, 4) The presence of Jews in China since ancient times, especially the Jews from Kaifeng, and 5) Jewish studies in China and present day relations between Israel and China.

In the first section, called Two Parallel Civilizations, the author makes the common comparisons of Chinese and Jews: emphasis on family values, the importance of education, respect for authority, group solidarity and the capacity to survive persecution, but he goes beyond and finds common values in Confucianism and the Bible. Chinese and Jews share a humanistic view in study and in religious practice; they like studying through dialogue in groups with a teacher and regard questioning as a positive action. He finds parallels between the Confucian *xin* and the Hebrew *lev* because both refer to feeling and thought (heart/mind). Both traditions have an optimistic view of human nature and their philosophies aim at self-improvement and the improvement of society. There is also room for comparison between the Mandate of Heaven/Tianming and Heaven/Shemaia because both Tian (Heaven) and God must approve the ruler’s conduct and, when he strays, misfortunes are the result of his transgressions. Language and writing are very important in both traditions and Hebrew and Chinese have a very long history and a great continuity. As far as historiography is concerned, in China, history is studied in dynas-

tic cycles, and the Bible describes the rise and fall of the kings of Judea.

Chinese thought flourished and became the paradigm for future generations in the Zhou dynasty and the author finds similarities with the development of Jewish thought and the texts in both traditions. He compares (by a long stretch) the travails of Job with those of Qu Yuan, and the battle of Muye (1046 B.C.E.), in which the Shang were defeated, to the Exodus from Egypt! Various other examples are mentioned without too much regard for the historic periods in which they were supposed to have taken place. Finally, there is a rather brief mention of Daoism, where he describes the Daodejing as a mystical text and points out that Martin Buber in "The Doctrine of the Tao" published in 1910, compares Daoism to the Hassidic Tradition.

In the second section: About Teachers and Fears, the author describes a trip to Qufu, Confucius's birthplace and compares him to the prophets. He finds similarities in the rather chaotic situation of China's Chunqiu period with what was happening in Israel/Judah, when Confucius and the prophets appeared with similar messages, ordering honor to one's father and to follow the doctrine of the mean. During the Han, the Academy was established to study the Classics in China and in Israel schools were founded to study the Bible; both Moses and Confucius are called "Master". Also in Han, there is evidence that Jews travelled in the Silk Road in Central Asia and continued doing so until the Middle Ages.

In the third section: Progress and Shared History, there is a discussion about the development of science in the Western World and the reasons why the Jews excelled in it disproportionately. He points out that the Chinese were pioneers in technological progress since ancient times and invented the compass, paper, printing, gun powder etc. but fell behind probably because of a great reliance on classical learning and the control of the state which interfered with individual thought.

The Jews also used printing before Gutenberg but were thwarted in their efforts because printing the Bible was prohibited. They also were advanced in astronomy. Columbus (who may have been of Jewish descent) sought the advice of Abraham Zacuto, professor of astronomy at the University of Salamanca.

There are stories about Jews living in China as early as in the Zhou dynasty, but there is no hard evidence about that, but there were Jews who settled in China later: in Guangzhou, Ningxia, Ningbo; yet no trace of them remains. The only Jewish community accounted for is the one which flourished in Kaifeng where Jews arrived about a thousand years ago either from Persia or

India. For several centuries they kept their traditions and built and rebuilt a magnificent synagogue. During the Ming dynasty the emperor Yongle, who favored the Muslim communities, gave the Jews seven surnames. This allowed them to participate in the Imperial Examinations and several successful candidates attained public office. After seven centuries of isolation they were "discovered" by Mateo Ricci and were visited by many Jesuit missionaries who have left detailed accounts about them and sketches of the synagogue. They describe a community of about one thousand Jews who possessed thirteen Torah Scrolls and struggled to keep their identity but had already intermarried and adopted many local customs. After the Rites Controversy and the expulsion of the Catholic missionaries in the 18th century, the Kaifeng Jews were again isolated until "rediscovered" a century later by Protestant missionaries who found a very impoverished community and bought the coveted Torah Scrolls and other objects. By then, the Jews had lost most of their traditions, had no synagogue, did not know Hebrew, had assimilated and accepted most of the Confucian rituals.

The fourth section, Modern Times, describes the presence of Jews in China in modern times in Shanghai (since 1845), Harbin (1896) and Tianjin (1906). All of these communities, which have since disappeared, had synagogues, charity organizations, schools, hospitals and clubs as well as Zionist organizations. In Shanghai, Jews from Iraq prospered and contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the city. In the wake of World War II, numerous Jews fleeing persecution, arrived in Shanghai but, after the end of the war and the triumph of the Chinese Revolution, most of them left. With the development of railroads in Northern China many Russian Jews arrived in Manchuria, followed years later by refugees of the Bolshevik Revolution. They also disappeared gradually. At present there are Jewish congregations in Shanghai and Beijing but their members are recent arrivals.

We are then introduced to Professor Xu Xin, an enthusiastic promoter of Jewish Studies in China who established a program in 1989 in Nanjing, and lectures on Jewish culture and Jews in China. Descendants of the Jews in Kaifeng (identified mainly by their surnames) did not get recognition as a minority by the Chinese government, which claims that they have not kept their Jewish identity. The rest of the section discusses relations between Israel and China, which were established officially in 1992. In China, there is no tradition of anti-Semitism, or as the author prefers to call it "Judeophobia", but the situation in the Middle East, has created tensions between the two countries, which are easing up in recent years. At the same time, interest in Jewish Studies and in the

presence of Jews in China is increasing.

Professor Pereldnik's bibliography on the subject of Jews in China is quite abundant and he has certainly read quite a lot on Chinese history and Chinese philosophy. This accounts for the fact that he has generally no false notes on subjects that are not his primary interest and expertise. He does not venture to make radical hypotheses, like the ones about the lost tribes or the possible influence of one tradition on the other. His text is accompanied by abundant footnotes and he draws heavily on research by Israeli writers, like Irene Eber, while at the same time, he is aware of what has been published in the last twenty years. Of course there is no doubt about his knowledge on Jewish thought and tradition. Sometimes, he has a very personal approach to the subject such as when he describes some of his visits to China and especially to Kaifeng, his exchanges with Chinese scholars, and his efforts in developing Jewish Studies Programs in China. There are problems of course in comparing civilizations and this can lead to generalizations and parallels that are sometimes slightly farfetched. The author is very thorough in detecting the presence of Jews throughout the history of China but there are odd omissions, for example, the presence in the 1920s of Jews like Adolph Joffe, an envoy from Russia who made deals with Sun Yat-sen's Guomindang. Also, nothing is said about many Jews who, like Sidney Rittenberg, Sidney Shapiro, David Crook and Israel Epstein, participated in Mao's revolution and stayed in China after its triumph. These men, despite of not always following Jewish tradition, did reflect about what it meant to be Jewish.

There are some editing problems, repetitions that could have been avoided and inconsistencies in romanization. Of course, it is difficult to find Spanish-speaking editors of texts that deal with China, but not impossible. There are serious programs in Chinese Studies in Mexico since the mid 1960s and in Spain since the 1980s and, more recently, as a result of the efforts by alumni of the Mexican program, in many other countries of Latin America as well. Although these programs are not devoted to studying Jews in China, there have been some articles on the subject. Professor Pereldnik's book is not strictly academic and is in many ways very personal, but it contains useful information on a subject that is very interesting and contributes to a discussion that is still ongoing.

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## Not Wiggled Out By Chinese Hair

By Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

Excerpted from *The Forward* 17 October 2019

Rochel\*, an educator and mother of three in Passaic, needed a new sheitel [wig]. The one she had bought over a year ago was already worn out, the hair was falling out, and she wanted something she could wear both to school and around her kitchen.

But when Rochel went to a local Jewish sheitel shop, “I saw crazy prices — \$1100, \$1200,” she told me. Like many young Orthodox women — including myself — she had shelled out that much (at minimum) when she first started covering her hair after marriage, but now, several children later, that price seemed out of reach.

Then Rochel remembered having seen a friend post on Facebook about purchasing a natural-looking wig from a woman named Cindy, based in Shengdao, China, and asked for her number. “It’s bizarre. You’re Whatsapping with this invisible person on the other side of the world, with a ten-hour difference,” Rochel recalled. She texted what she wanted — a band fall, or wig worn with a headband, and paid \$400, including shipping, via PayPal...

Jewish law calls for women to cover their hair after marriage, and many religious women see wigs as a more subtle covering than hats or headscarves. And the hunt for the right wig — the one that makes you feel like yourself — can be exhausting and expensive.

For generations, wig shops in Orthodox neighborhoods run by Orthodox women known as *sheitel-machers*, were the only option, and in recent years they have charged anywhere between, on average, \$1,200 to \$5,000 for each human-hair wig to what has seemed like a completely captive market.

But social media and global e-commerce is starting to push back against their monopoly.

In Orthodox women’s Facebook and Whatsapp groups, members feverishly discuss how to buy wigs directly from China, often through Alibaba, often dubbed the “Amazon of China”, where prices are typically \$300 to \$500 — a fraction of the prices in Brooklyn, N.Y., or Lakewood, N.J.. Search AliExpress using keywords like “kosher wig” or “sheitel”, and you’ll find dozens of sellers hawking their wares to desperate Orthodox women looking for ways to cut costs. “I look awesome in my new AliExpress sheitel,”

wrote Esther Kurtz in Mishpacha’s women’s magazine, *Family First*, in September 2017. “And I would do it again...and again.”

Rochel spoke on the condition that her full name not be used — she said she has friends who are sheitelmachers, and wouldn’t want to criticize their businesses publicly. She says that she does not plan to return to a sheitelmacher any time soon. “How do I know she is not buying from the same Chinese sellers? I’m telling you,” Rochel paused and lowered her voice. “This wig would have been sold to me for \$1,200.”

Cindy, the woman who sold Rochel her band fall, told me via WhatsApp that her company, EBM Wigs, sells more than 150 pieces a month, mostly to customers based in the United States and Israel. She said that she also sells to wig stores, but refused to tell me which ones...

Tali Kaufman, a rebbetzin in Montreal, spent a full year doing her research before buying from a Chinese supplier. “The sheitelmachers are seeing that we are getting wigs for a few hundred dollars and not saying anything — it makes me think the quality is just as good as theirs,” she said. “Having a cheaper option really helps. We are on a rabbi’s salary — it’s not like we can just stroll into wherever and get a \$2500 wig.”

Yet some *sheitelmachers* are quite comfortable speaking up. “I don’t mind speaking on the record, because I’m very confident, I know what I’m selling,” said Shulamit Amsel of Shuly Wigs in Boro Park. “With wigs, you get what you pay for — as with everything else. It’s like, are you going to buy a custom-made dress for a wedding, or buy from Macy’s, or buy from Alibaba and whatever you get, you get? The other day, a girl came in wearing a fall from Ali, she came in looking for a new fall. It was like straw what she was wearing — I didn’t say a word, but it looked scraggly on her. She didn’t end up purchasing anything with me, but she was telling her friend, ‘I wish I didn’t spend this money.’”

“I wouldn’t risk it,” Amsel added... “Girls will always pay for the service, the whole experience of going to a *sheitel* salon: color and cut, having someone to talk to if there’s a problem, and making it work so you could wear a sheitel for five to seven years,” she said. “I offer a year guarantee on all of the wigs I sell. But the culture of today is that some people just like disposable things.”

To make a successful wig purchase from across the globe, word of mouth is essential. In online groups, women pass along phone numbers of individual Chinese wig-makers, who generally go by English first-names

only — Jack, Judy, Alice. Nancy, Wendy. When I reached out to some of them via WhatsApp, their first question was: “Who gave you my number?”

Several women I interviewed said that it took several tries to get the wigs they wanted: often the first or second packages that arrived from China were slightly off in color or measurements, or the cap of the wig was not bleached to hide the knots that tie the hair. Many warned that this route only works for dark-haired customers — that blondes and red-heads would be better off finding their matching locks elsewhere.

“A lot of these Chinese companies will tell the customers that they’re making wigs for the Jewish wig companies, for me, for others,” said Amsel, the Boro Park-based wigmaker. “But they’re lying through their teeth. They’ll steal pictures from Jewish wig companies, they’ll even put fake labels on packages with a *frum sheitel* company’s address.”

Sara\*, a physician’s assistant living in Monsey, N.Y., said that she received a wig made with plastic strands from one popular seller who goes by Jack. “He insisted it wasn’t plastic,” she wrote to me on Facebook. At first, she said, “he wouldn’t take it back because it was a custom size cap,” so she filed a claim with PayPal “and they sided with me. Paid expensive shipping back so he couldn’t claim not to have received it and got a full refund.”

Tamar, a non-profit professional who lives in the New York area, said that online forums warned of nits in Chinese-imported wigs. “I always put them in the freezer for a day or two, just in case.”

And the ethics of the sourcing are also complicated.

The human hair trade is expected to reach revenues of more than \$10 billion by 2023.

Across Eastern Europe and Asia, hair brokers (often men) approach long-haired women and offer money for their locks. In Russia, women are paid anywhere between 8,000 to 13,000 rubles — \$137 to \$200 in US dollars — for the highest-quality hair on the market. In contrast, in Cambodia and Vietnam, most hair brokers offer just a few dollars for a village woman’s hair, Lexy Lebsack of Refinery29 reported.

And in India, Hindu female pilgrims shave their hair in religious rituals, yielding millions of dollars for their temples and local communities. This earned an outrage in the Orthodox Jewish community in 2004, when rabbis discovered that Jewish women were wearing wigs with “hair may have been used in Hindu religious ceremonies,” which are considered idolatrous.

China is the largest manufacturer of wigs and extensions, so regardless of where the hair is harvested and purchased by brokers, it is generally sent there, to factories, where

women sort hair into bundles and make them into wefts, lines of hair sewn onto mesh, which are then sewn onto wig caps...

The industry is unregulated, and brokers are not required to report the origins of their hair. Reporters have found that some Chinese dealers sell plastic mixed with what is known as "fallen" hair — collected from salon floors, hairbrushes and drains, combed and conditioned into locks. Some of the suppliers even attach Hebrew-language labels claiming that the wigs are deemed "kosher," and not sourced from Hindu temple rituals — though there is no such certification.

I often wonder about the woman whose hair I now wear on my head — the hair that I picked out at a discounted wig sale, surrounded by other giggling young brides and mothers and grandmothers, throwing off our head-coverings as we tried on new colors and new identities. Who was she? A Cambodian peasant woman, a Chinese teenager, a Peruvian prostitute?

Since I started following the Chinese-made wigs discussions in women's groups, I've been tempted to try it myself. Cindy of EBM Wigs has sent me videos of a few candidates that would match my hair color, but I have yet to muster the courage to spend \$500 without feeling the hair texture and trying on the cap first.

Yet enough women are willing to take the gamble, for the sake of saving money. "In our community, I feel like a few years ago it was looked down upon to be cheap," said Chana Snyder, a graphic designer living in New Jersey, who now only buys her wigs from China directly. "We're reaching a breaking point where more people want packages, money-saving deals."

For years, Jewish-owned wig brands have dominated the Orthodox market across price points. The conventional wisdom is that the more you pay, the more natural you'll look. A top-shelf wig, customers are promised, will make you look just like you did before mar-

riage (or even better). Pay a fortune, and it's practically like having your own hair again. These traditional companies, too, use social media to pitch their products, often running giveaways on Instagram, posting videos showing soft lustrous locks, thousands of women commenting and tagging friends, hoping to snag a free *sheitel*.

One Orthodox woman who lives in Queens, the granddaughter of a *sheitel*-macher, said she is sure the quality of the wigs from China "is no different from the Jewish brands," and that she has seen packages in Jewish-owned wig stores with labels from the same city in China where she and friends now order from directly. "I grew up knowing wigs," she said, on condition of anonymity. "The whole industry got turned on its head."

Rochel, the mother in Passaic, said the wig industry "has gotten out of hand," but that it is just one example of many in which companies — often run by Orthodox Jews — are "taking advantage of people's level of observance."...

Leah Amrani, a 26-year old Brooklyn resi-

dent, used to run a Facebook group sharing advice about how to measure one's head, color differences, layers versus no-layers, etc. "There are so many people who said, 'Thank you so much, I really needed a new wig, I couldn't afford another one,'" she told me. "People don't have money to just dish out. And all the big wig people don't care, they just mark it up."

But Amrani is hardly worried about hurting the *sheitel* industry. Some women, she said, just like to try things on before committing, and want to buy from a local shop where their wigs can later be serviced...

Chana Ben-Avraham, a mother living in Dallas, Texas, only shops for wigs on Ali-Express. "I think people being more open about how they spend on things will alleviate the burden on us," she told me over the phone as she scrubbed her stove. "I can't tell you how many of my friends say to me: 'Don't tell anyone your wig was that cheap!'"

But Ben-Avraham is proud of her penny-pinching. "Our kids are in Jewish schools, we buy kosher meat — we spend so much money on so many things," she said. "If there's one thing we can cut down costs on, we should be parading it and helping each other out."

She paused and added, "What are we doing as a society if we're just showing off how much money we're spending?"

\*— Names have been changed to protect subjects' privacy.

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