Five Star Refuge
A Week at The Pen
Manila Memories
History of Jews in the Philippines

Jewish refugees in The Peninsula Hong Kong, 1946
(photo courtesy of The Hong Kong Heritage Project and Fred Antman)
Asian Jewish Life is a celebration of the diversity of the Jewish experience in Asia as well as of Asian Jewry.

We publish a quarterly print magazine that is also available online that seeks to:

• Connect the separate pockets of Jewish life throughout the region by creating a contemporary creative outlet to share thoughts, ideas and promote unity through memoirs, poetry, short fiction, historical pieces, book and film reviews, viewpoint articles, artist profiles, photography and graphic art.

• Help preserve the long history that Jewish life has imprinted on the region.

• Break down common stereotypes about where Jews hail from or what we look like.

• Build bridges with local communities by sharing our celebration of Jewish life in the region with the aim of leading to a broader understanding of the richness of the Jewish tradition and culture.

• Help other Jewish non-profit organizations with a regional focus to grow along with us.

Invest in our vision! Make a donation.

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Dear Editor:

Here’s an update to Craig Gerard’s article (Playing Jewish Geography in Phnom Penh- The redevelopment of a community) you’re your September 2011 issue.

Rav Butman and Rabbanit Butman and family have been running Chabad House in Phnom Penh, Cambodia now for several years. Located in the center of the city, Kabbalat Shabbat services begin around 20 minutes after sundown. At least 35 people usually attend and join the Shabbat dinner. Many stay and chat afterwards too. Shabbat morning services start at 10 am and are followed by kiddush. Numbers vary, but there are usually about 15 participants. (You should give them a heads-up if you are a group of more than four.) You can find their contact info on the website below.

There is a kosher restaurant on site, computers with internet access and many kosher products for sale. Challah is available on Friday. Lucky Supermarket (the closest one is on Sihanouk Blvd./63rd Street) has quite a few kosher products, as well, but if you are a dairy lover, you’ll have to bring your own.

Rocky

Dear Rocky:

Thanks so much for updating us. We will definitely pass this information along. We get many requests from readers looking for local information for where their travels take them.

All the best,

Erica
Dear Readers:

Happy 2013 and welcome to the 11th issue of Asian Jewish Life.

In between issues, our staff has been very busy speaking on Jewish life in Asia and Asian Jewry. If you happen to be in Illinois, you can catch AJL Books Editor Susan Blumberg-Kason at a NCJW event on January 31 where she will talk about Jews in China and their contributions during World War II. She will also discuss Jewish novels and memoirs set in China during this world-changing era. Visit Susan at http://www.susanbkason.com for more information.

You can also catch a podcast on Hong Kong’s RTHK Radio 3 on Laura Margolis, adapted from our cover story (Issue 8), entitled Laura Margolis in the Spotlight - Portrait of a heroine in Shanghai. I will also be headed to Moscow in February to participate in the 20th Annual International Conference on Jewish Studies organized by Sefer, the Moscow Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization.

Please follow us for a daily dose of news on our Twitter and Facebook pages (@AsianJewishLife).

As for this issue, we are excited to bring you the cover story about the somewhat obscure story of a group of Jewish Holocaust refugees that were housed in Hong Kong’s Peninsula Hotel, entitled Five Star Refuge - A Week at The Pen.

We also have included the little known history of Jews in the Philippines by Bonnie Harris, Manila Memories - History of Jews in the Philippines.

Also travel with musician Irene Orleansky for a rare inside look at the Bnei Ephraim in A Musical Journey to Andhra Pradesh - Understanding the Bnei Ephraim.

Also from India, we bring you A Memento, a beautiful short story by Sophie Judah. Judah is the author of Dropped from Heaven (Schocken, 2007). A special thank you to Yoraan Rafael Reuben for the use of his photographs to go along with Judah's story. His photographs also appear on Page 2.

Again from India, we have our LoMein to Laksa food column. Yardena Ben-Israel offers her modernized version of Bene Israel Halwa, which she calls ‘sweet and simple’.

On the literary side we have included book reviews by our Books Editor Susan Blumberg-Kason as well as her interview of Xu Xi. Xu Xi, a Hong Kong writer, has interestingly woven Jewish characters into her novels and we have discussed with her why. (Being Hong Kong-based, we are also not quite impartial when it comes to all things Hong Kong.)

In this issue, we also hear from Gedaliah Gurfein, who has had some of his work translated into Chinese in Not Lost in Translation - A Torah scholar goes to China. And while we are looking at China, we hear from Tiberiu Weisz in Biblical Influence in Chinese Literature, a continuation of his AJL series that again explores the fascinating yin and yang relationship between Chinese and Jewish cultures.

Last, but definitely not least, For the Best of Asian Jewish Life feature, we look at the incredible regional work of AJWS in Feeding the World with Jewish Wisdom - A look at American Jewish World Services.

Thanks for reading!

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief
In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Portuguese vessels carried Sephardic Jewish merchants for the first time down the West Coast of Africa, around the horn and up the East Coast, and the across the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean to India, China, the Spice Islands of Indochina, and to the as yet unnamed islands of the Philippines. These Crypto-Jewish merchants escaped the persecutions of their time by migrating ubiquitously from the Iberian Peninsula to commercial ports scattered throughout the world.

Even before the arrival of these first Europeans in the Philippine archipelago, the socio-political fate of the Philippines was destined to be contested by the Spanish and Portuguese by virtue of the Treaty of Tordesillas that attempted to divide all New World discoveries between Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century. Disputes between the Iberian fleets over the Philippines and its neighboring islands, the Moluccas, resulted in the 1529 Treaty of Zaragoza, in which Portugal ceded the Philippines to Spain, which would remain under Spanish control for nearly four hundred years. Nevertheless, the Portuguese enjoyed an economic presence within the Spanish realm by virtue of Jewish merchants fleeing the Spanish Inquisition via Portugal to the New World. Medieval texts reveal that 180,000 Jews fled Spain and that of these, 120,000 entered Portugal raising the Jewish population numbers to 15% of the total population. When these Spanish Jewish refugees encountered a litany of extreme abuses, many accepted a forced conversion to Christianity as a means to escape death and eventually to escape Iberia – becoming explorers, mathematicians, cartographers, and especially merchants abroad Portuguese and Spanish vessels en route to New World ports – Manila being one.

When Marranos or New Christians, other distinctions for the conversos or Crypto-Jewish merchants, reached the Philippines they no doubt engaged in the Spanish Galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco. The New Christian brothers Jorge and Domingo Rodriguez...
are the first recorded Marranos to have arrived in the Spanish Philippines, reaching Manila in the 1590s. By 1593 both were tried and convicted at an auto-da-fe in Mexico City because the Inquisition did not have an independent tribunal in the Philippines. The Inquisition imprisoned the Rodriguez brothers and subsequently tried and convicted at least eight other New Christians from the Philippine Islands.iii Jewish presence in these islands during the subsequent centuries of Spanish colonization remained small and unorganized.

John Griese writes that “Spanish law would not have permitted an organized Jewish religious life," so that Philippine Jews would have practiced Judaism in secret as Marranos did throughout the world.iv But the Philippines had the rare distinction of being colonized by the Spanish, becoming the only Catholic enclave in an Orient world. Christian prejudices against Judaic adherents would have discouraged the settlement of Jewish practitioners, although as Crypto-Jews, they blended into the Spanish-Christian society of the elite and continued to fulfill their utilitarian mercantilist roles till the end of the 19th century.

When the Spanish Galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco declined, contact between Marranos of the Philippines and other merchant Jews of New World and Old World ports ultimately ceased, resulting in a decline of Jewish identity for the New Christians in the Catholic-dominated Philippines. The first permanent settlement of Jews in the Philippines during the nearly four hundred years of Spanish colonialism began with the arrival of three Levy brothers from Alsace-Lorraine, who were escaping the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

The opening of the Suez Canal in March 1869 provided a more direct trading route between Europe and the Philippines, which allowed all passenger and cargo ships to follow “a similar route: along warm-weather sea lanes of the Mediterranean through the canal along the Red Sea, and finally into the Indian Ocean.”v As businesses grew, the number of Jews in Manila grew as well. The Levy brothers were then joined by Turkish, Syrian, and Egyptian Jews, creating a multi-ethnic community of about fifty individuals by the end of the Spanish period.vi It was not until the Spanish-American war at the end of the 19th century, when the United States took control of the islands from Spain in 1898, that the Jewish community started to advance in the “first and only official American colony” in Asia.vii

When the Philippines became an American concern, this created opportunities for American Jewish citizens to take advantage of this new frontier – a wave of Jewish migration to East Asia that was neither Middle Eastern nor European. The arrival of American military forces to the Philippines brought a few Jewish servicemen who decided to remain in the islands after their military discharge and become permanent residents.

Jewish teachers from the United States also arrived with a contingent of “Thomasites,” a delegation of volunteer teachers, who gave public instruction to Filipino children. In 1901, 540 American teachers and some of their families boarded the U.S. Army Transport “Thomas” at San Francisco Pier, bound
for the Philippines. Trained by prestigious institutions in the United States, these young men and women were selected by the U.S. Civil Service Commission to establish a modern public school system in the newly acquired U.S. territory of the Philippines and to conduct all instruction in English. By 1902, the number of American teachers, labeled Thomasites, swelled to 1,074.

In addition to education, new markets for import-export businesses attracted young American Jewish businessmen, who set up new shops in the islands as well. In this regard, the attraction of the Philippines for Jewish American merchants in setting up outposts for their larger home companies back in the United States seems consistent with the Port Jew identity of the Sephardic Jews of the Atlantic seaports and merchant Jews of other port cities in Asia.

Three important names appear in the Jewish community of Manila shortly after the turn of the century: Emil Bachrach, Morton I. Netzorg, and Israel Konigsberg. Annette Eberly, freelance author and Philippine resident, recorded that Emil Bachrach arrived in Manila in 1901 and soon “built a commercial empire of fairly substantial proportions.” Because he is regarded as the first American Jew who permanently settled in the Philippines, the synagogue and cultural hall, which the Bachrach family financed in subsequent decades, bore his name: Temple Emil and Bachrach Hall. Bachrach encouraged his extended family to resettle in the Philippines and experience the good life provided by this beautiful archipelago. Eberly, quoting Minna Gabermann, Bachrach’s niece, stated that living in Manila “was distinctly colonial and elegant in those days. It had a special air of a sumptuous, civilized world.” Bachrach’s economic successes allowed him to be a generous philanthropist, who supported both Jewish and Christian causes.

By 1918, twenty years after the Americans took over the Philippines from the Spanish, the Manila Jewish community totaled about 150 families, including a small number of Russian Jews who sought asylum following the Bolshevik Revolution. Aside from these few Russian Jews who became a part of the multi-ethnic Jewish community in Manila, Russian Jewish immigration to Asia had little effect on the Philippines. Although institutionally trained rabbis, cantors, and shochetim did not appear on the scene permanently until well after WWII, lay members of the Jewish Community in Manila and Jewish refugees filled these roles at various times in the first few decades of the American period in the Philippines.

We must remember that peace did not prevail in the Philippines following the 1898 Spanish-American war until 1902, after the three-year long Philippine War of Independence. No formal religious Jewish community existed at that time and one would not be officially developed until 1917. It took about ten years of American rule in the Philippines for the influx of international Jewish businessmen, teachers, and ex-soldiers to gather themselves into an official community of Jews. Frank Ephraim recounts that by 1919, 150 Jewish families lived in Manila of various nationalities and denominations and that religious services at the time were held in family homes. Ephraim also states that “in 1919, Yom Kippur services took place in the Eagles Hall, where Motel Goldstein, a Russian Jew, officiated. That year the Jewish community was formally organized.” These events demonstrated a growing Jewish identity in Manila, led by the merchant Jewish families, which sought after the establishment of a form of Jewish worship that was sustainable within their unique community.

In 1911, the growing Jewish community in the Philippines gained one of its most important families, Morton I. Netzorg and his wife, Katherine. They came from the United States and joined the Philippine public school teacher corps of Thomasites. Their son, Morton “Jock” Netzorg, was born February 4, 1912 in the town of Nueva Caceres. His memoirs, written in 1987, relate the family’s many business ventures and the educational influence they had on the lives of the children of Manila’s most prestigious families. Some of those students included “the daughters of Paul McNutt, General Sutherland, Ambassador MacMurray, [and] General Casey.” Israel Netzorg became the representative of the Jewish Welfare Board in the Philippines, with...
the responsibility to oversee matters involving Jewish sailors and soldiers. He was also the representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).xv Jewish merchants in the Philippines filled multiple roles within their own Jewish community as well as the larger Philippine community, as they joined and frequently led civic organizations too.

According to Netzorg, businesses from the American mainland began to arrive with increasing volume in 1920. Manila Jewry included the founder of the Makati Stock Exchange, the conductor of the Manila Symphony Orchestra, and other professionals such as physicians, dentists and architects.xvi

The Frieder Brothers, the family most instrumental in saving German-Jewish refugees in the late 1930s, arrived in 1921 and expanded their family's state-side cigar business into a lucrative venture in Manila, the Helena Cigar Factory. The Frieder Brothers' economic prosperity, along with their high level of societal interaction, provided them with safety and status that allowed them to be leaders of the newly formed Jewish community. Eberly described this emerging Jewish society:

There was little Jewish flavor in this 19th century lifestyle of the very rich. The Jewish families did go to the Temple for special occasions, and the existence of the adjacent social hall [did] serve to centralize and focus Jewish interrelationships and concerns, but it was all very low-key.xvii

Once Temple Emil was built in 1923, primarily through the generous contributions of the Bachrachs, Netzorgs, and Frieders, the Jewish Community in Manila commissioned Motel Goldstein, the Russian Jew who had been serving as a lay rabbi, to hire an ordained rabbi from Shanghai. Israel Konigsberg, who had settled in Shanghai immediately after World War I, had been a Jewish Chaplain in the army of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. While in Shanghai, he had received cantorial training and upon meeting up with Motel Goldstein, he was hired to officiate services in Temple Emil in Manila in 1924. Jock Netzorg was the first bar mitzvah held in the Philippine Jewish synagogue.xviii Netzorg recounts how he later taught in the Jewish Sunday School at Temple Emil, relating how Emil Bachrach provided bus service by picking up Jewish children from all over town and driving them to Temple for Sunday School and then driving them back home again.xix

The Jewish community of Manila, which continued to gradually increase in size in the 1920s and early 1930s as businessmen and merchants from the U.S. and the Middle East began filtering into East Asia, along with political refugees from Russia and other parts of Europe, remained a predominantly American-led Jewish community.xx

By 1936, the Jewish community in the Philippines had a distinctly cosmopolitan makeup with a total population of about 500 persons. Even though there were no separations by communities as existed in Shanghai, one would not describe the Philippine Jewish community as uniform either. It wasn’t until the Nazi danger to European Jewry arose in the 1930s that a united Jewish consciousness in the Philippines sprang into existence.

The small, decentralized and mostly secular-minded Jewish community of Manila took heroic steps to save its fellow Jews from sure destruction. As Bachrach’s niece Gaberman told Eberly in 1975, “We only really became Jewish-conscious in a deep way when this terrible threat came out of Europe, and suddenly there were Jews in desperate need of help.”xxi Netzorg maintained that his father considered his most important deed in the Philippines to have been “bringing refugees out of Hitler’s Germany,”xxii when refugees, fleeing the encroaching Nazi expansion, found asylum in every country in the greater Asian world, including 1300 refugee Jews in the Philippines.

The occupation of the Philippines by the Japanese during WWII brought these refugees and their benefactors under Japanese rule until the liberation of the archipelago and the further dispersion of the Philippine Jewish Community to other ports of call. 🎥

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To learn more about Dr. Harris’ research, please visit her site at http://www.bonniesbiz.com.

Thank you to the Jewish Historical Society of San Diego for the use of their photographs.
Feeding the World with Jewish Wisdom

A look at American Jewish World Service
There seems to be an implicit understanding that our planet is divided into two entirely separate worlds, there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. The third world is the ‘them’, which we can tune out, address or not address, engage with or ignore. But Ruth Messinger, CEO/President of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), an international development organization motivated by Judaism’s imperative to pursue justice, does not divide the world in that way. As she explains, as Jews we simply can’t do this. “Jewish texts are very clear about this. Jews have a clear obligation to work towards global justice, to help both Jews and non-Jews. Everyone has been made in God’s image (b’tselem elohim).”

Listening to Ruth Messinger of AJWS espouse Jewish wisdom and Talmud, on the surface the way her message is expressed sounds different from the Ruth Messinger of New York City politics where she first made a name for herself. But even though her diction is much more haimisha, the message is very much the same. As she explains, it was her years of experience and advocacy within New York City that paved the way for her pursuit of global justice. Many of the skills she relies on in doing international development work for AJWS, came directly from her years working in government. Messinger made a seamless move from city development to global development, seeing the former as more of a continuation of her raison d’être but just on a different scale. “A big piece of what I did in New York City politics was to look at pockets of poverty in a rich city and try to understand how government could empower these people to do for themselves.”

While the phrase tikkun olam might not have been included in her New York City campaigns, her core values have carried through.

Often though it is not only about the work that is being done but also how it is approached. Messinger, and the organization as a whole, approach their work with some of the world’s neediest and most marginalized people with a sense of true humility. “Don’t go and tell everyone what they need,” seems to be Messinger’s mantra.

And everyone is their focus. “When one billion people go to bed hungry, we need to talk about ethics. This is a global issue.” So AJWS thinks globally, operating in countries throughout the Americas, Asia and Africa but effect real change in small communities through grassroots efforts and by working with over 200 local NGOs in a diverse range of projects.

Asia is of course a large focus for them. Regionally, they are primarily focused...
on five countries: Burma, Cambodia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In each of these countries they have local representatives who are best equipped to assist in identifying potential grantees, to monitor the grantees’ work and to provide them with support in terms of capacity development and networking opportunities. This list of countries however is not exhaustive. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, as a Jewish organization, they also have provided funding for grassroots organizations in Aceh, Indonesia and even Pakistan. The work in Aceh was focused on post-tsunami development and the work in Pakistan began in 2005 focused on emergency relief for earthquake victims. They also provided assistance in Pakistan in 2007 and 2010 with funding for disaster relief after massive flooding ravaged the country. Working in Pakistan has not been without extraordinary challenges. Security concerns were raised both with the content of their partners’ work as well as their affiliation with AJWS, a Jewish organization. The decision was therefore made not to publicize the names of these grantees.

In their response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami, it was not only about disaster relief, AJWS was at the forefront of reconstruction work. As Messinger points out, as an organization they were the first on the ground actually replacing fishing boats and nets, helping local people to begin to rebuild their lives. This is their model. They aim to move quickly from the initial and necessary emergency relief work into the next phase, which is engaging in development work post-disaster that will have a long-term impact on recovery. They specifically focus on projects that promote change from within and empower local people by funding grassroots/community-led organizations primarily focused on: civil and political rights, natural resource rights and healthcare.

Their grant making is guided by several main principles. They strongly believe that grassroots organizations are in the best position to evaluate and articulate their own needs. Likewise, they are the ones able to put these programs into place and drive them. Real change is made when it comes from within through the empowerment of marginalized people. In the same vein, AJWS recognizes that while women statistically are more marginalized than their male counterparts and suffer more from the effects of poverty, hunger and deprivation, when empowered they are real change makers. Unfortunately though, issues of gender-based violence and oppression, particularly in developing countries, often impede women from becoming the positive force for change that can improve their societies. AJWS is very vocal about the need to address issues like gender-based violence and oppression in order to overcome the obstacles they create in the fight for global justice. They know that nothing
can be gained from silence. They aim to inspire Jews to take part in the fight for a just world by becoming advocates and by helping to raise awareness of these critical issues.

Messinger highlighted recent political gains and progress within Burma in 2011 as a harbinger of positive changes for local peoples’ lives. The organization has been working with ethnic minorities and communities affected by the political crisis. And while the battle for human rights and justice in Burma is by no means over, AJWS volunteers are helping by working with organizations on the Thai-Burma border that provide humanitarian assistance to refugees as they look towards a better future.

While grant making is a central function of AJWS, there are also hands-on opportunities available in Asia. They have sent skilled volunteers to India, Cambodia and Thailand to build the organizational capacity of its grantee partners. These volunteer assignments involve staff training, project-based work and, in some cases, high-level strategic planning.

But for Messinger and AJWS, their focus is not exclusively the developing world. They seek to inspire Jews in America to understand how Jewish tradition binds them to this obligation of working towards creating a just world. By infusing textual and source study into their programming in the United States, they are able to inspire others to share in their pursuit of global justice. Sharing their understanding of the Jewish imperative to repair the world is the key to instilling sustainability among their core constituents.

It isn’t just that they integrate their volunteer service programming with Jewish text study, nor that they encourage and facilitate dialogue about Jewish values, that makes them a Jewish organization. Even without this important educational arm, they would still very much be a Jewish organization. For Messinger, the link is crystal clear. Their quest to alleviate world hunger, poverty and oppression is inextricably tied to Jewish values.

As for the positive PR attached to repairing the world and advocating for global justice couched in terms of a most definitely Jewish imperative, Messinger is seemingly somewhat indifferent, but she acknowledges that it certainly is to some extent on the mind of some donors. After all, a bit of positive PR never hurt anyone.

But speaking with Messinger, it is clear that it really isn’t about positive PR or fancy campaign slogans. This isn’t an organization that does lip service. They put their money where there mouth is. AJWS proves that advocacy couched in Jewish wisdom is a powerful force for change. ✨

To learn more about AJWS and the incredible work they are doing, visit them at http://ajws.org.
Sarah is cleaning her house before Passover. Her niece Daisy is helping her because Sarah has reached the age of eighty-three and it has become a difficult chore for her. Daisy does the scrubbing and washing and leaves her aunt the task of going through suitcases full of unused clothes. Sarah sits upon a chair in front of a metal trunk which has been placed upon an old wooden bench because her back hurts when she bends over. The clothesline is full of linen that needs fresh air and sunshine before it will be packed away for another year. A basket full of clothes that Daisy will distribute to the poor of the village stands beside the door.

Sarah’s hands stop moving when they come in contact with a little yellow suede bag. Her fingers close around the object and she sits back in her chair. Her mind wanders back to the time when she was a young girl living with her aunt and uncle in the Dadar district of Bombay.

“Sarah, you have an offer for marriage,” Miriam, her aunt had said to her. “He is a nice young man from an observant Jewish family. He has a steady job with the Naval Dockyard and will be able to support you and your future family.”

Sarah looked up from her sewing. She recognized the worry behind her aunt’s eagerness for an answer. “I don’t know if I am ready for marriage,” Sarah said.

“You are already nineteen years old. I was married at sixteen,” Miriam replied.
Two men had walked into the store. The older one did all the talking. He inspected several gold bracelets but insisted that he would only buy a pair that had an old fashioned design. Sarah thought that they were buying something for an aunt or a grandmother. She caught a glimpse of his final choice before the salesman slipped it into a little yellow suede pouch and drew the drawstrings. The design was of a gold braid fixed upon the flat broad bangle beneath. They made their purchase before Suzie decided which pair of earrings she wanted.

Suzie saw her friend Radha waiting at the bus stop. She was delighted. The two girls had not seen each other since their schooldays. Suzie ran across the road causing a taxi to screech to a halt and its driver to shout, “Are you crazy?” Sarah followed more cautiously. Ten minutes later the three girls sat in the ice-cream parlor called Joy. Suzie and Radha chatted and caught up on the news about their other classmates. Sarah rested her head on the back of the booth. She did not know Suzie’s friends. She had continued in the school where she studied before she came to live with her father’s older brother and his family. She could clearly hear a voice from the adjoining booth. She immediately recognized it as the voice of the older man from the jeweler’s shop.

“You should understand the reasons behind this purchase,” she heard. “You have to make the girl feel important as part of a tradition. She will not know that the bracelets did not really belong to your grandmother. She will think of you as a man who values and respects all the members of his family. If you are respectful of your grandmother’s wishes and family traditions you will be respectful of your wife’s wishes and traditions she is attached to too. If you are the kind of man who takes care of his family you will naturally take care of her and your children also.”

Sarah could not hear what the younger man said. Then the older one replied, “I know that you are getting married for your mother’s sake and not your own, but which young girl will agree to that? They all want something romantic in their lives. Believe me, no girl will be willing to leave the city and go to a village to care for your mother and your fields. I know what I am doing.”

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The other man must have said something about the new appearance of the bracelets because she heard the answer, “We will say that we have had them cleaned. Remove them from the jeweler’s pouch. It has his name and address on it. If the family decides to trace it they’ll discover the truth.”

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The men paid their bill and left. Sarah heard the waiter’s comment about the smallness of his tip. When they rose to leave she peered into the booth the men had occupied. The
little bag that had contained the bracelets lay upon the table. She picked it up. It would serve as a container for her threads and needles.

This memory had flashed through Sarah’s mind. She listened to David and Miriam’s conversation which was skillfully inlaid with questions about Joseph’s family, his work and his prospects. She listened with special interest when he spoke about his village outside Alibagh. His father had died a few years ago and his mother managed the farm with its animals, orchards and rice fields. Agriculture was hard work the dividends of which depended on the fluctuations of rainfall. He had wanted a steadier income so came to the city to work. He had rented a room in the part of Bombay called Andheri. David and Miriam also spoke of Sarah, her schooling and her achievements. Joseph nodded but made no comments and asked no questions. He did not speak directly to her. She thought of it all as the usual small talk people made when they wanted a young couple to get to know enough about each other before they decided to take the plunge.

“Auntie Sarah,” Daisy’s voice breaks into her reverie. “What are you dreaming about and what is this in your hand?”

Sarah laughs. Age has its advantages. She can throw aside all the conventions of what is proper and what is not. She tells her niece the whole story with droll humor. Joseph’s uncle is described as a pompous, know it all. The conversation when she met Joseph for the first time at David’s house is made to sound funny, bordering on the ridiculous. Sarah has to stop from time to time because Daisy is laughing.

“You married Uncle Joseph after knowing all that!” Daisy asks. She sounds incredulous. “You knew what a selfish man he was and you still went ahead and married him. You knew he would leave you in the village to tend the fields and care for his mother while he worked and stayed in the city.”

“Yes. I knew the worst I could expect when I consented. The rest could only be better,” Sarah replies. Then she smiles.

“There’s something more,” Daisy declares.

“He did not know the worst about me. He did not know the selfish reason behind why I agreed to marry him. I craved for independence and freedom. I did not want the constant presence of a man who would tell me what to do and what to say and what to think. My father and uncle were both overbearing dictators. I believed that all men are like that. On the farm I would be my own mistress. Daily decisions about running it would be mine. If I worked hard the laborers would respect me and come to me with their troubles. There was a certain power in all this.”

“But love and romance, Auntie!” Daisy exclaims. “Wasn’t that missing from your life?”

“No it wasn’t. During the early days of our marriage I discovered that Joseph was very different from what I had imagined he would be. He was considerate and caring. I fell in love with him. He loved me very much too. We lived our lives for the days we could spend together. After his mother died he wanted to take me to the city but I refused to sell this house or the land. It had become an important part of my life.”

Sarah looks down at the pouch. “One year we had a drought and there was much death and disease in the village. I sold the bracelets to pay for vaccines and medicines. I kept this old thing as a memento. Joseph never complained about my selling his grandma’s bracelets. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that I knew the truth about this so-called heirloom.”

Sophie Judah was born in 1949 in Jabalpur, in Central India, to Bene Israel parents. In 1972 she moved to Israel where she later studied English Literature at the Bar-Ilan University. In 2007, she published a collection of short stories, Dropped from Heaven, that chronicles life in a mythical Indian town, Jwalanagar, which is not unlike the Jabalpur of her youth.

Photography by Yoraan Raphael Reuben
A Musical Journey to Andhra Pradesh
Understanding the Bnei Ephraim

Shmuel Yacobi blesses a child
I have always been fascinated by the story of the lost tribes and wished to contribute to their return to Zion. Being neither an anthropologist nor a politician, I decided to go about it using my own talent, music. That is how in January of 2012, equipped with a small mobile studio, I came to start my journey through Africa and Asia to record a CD of music of the lost tribes. After visiting the African Hebrew communities in Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia and then Kaifeng, China my next destination was India.

After visiting and recording the music of the communities of Bnei Israel in Mumbai and Bnei Menashe in the North Eastern state of Manipur, my last destination was the community of Bnei Ephraim, the Telugu Hebrews of South India.

The Bnei Ephraim live in a few villages and towns of Andhra Pradesh. The first stop of my trip was a village near Chebrole in the district of Guntur, a poor village of mud houses adorned with menorahs and the Stars of David and a small white building, the Bnei Yaakov Synagogue, where I observed Yom Kippur and Shabbat. The second stop was the suburbs of the town Machilipatnam on so called Synagogue Street where there is a larger synagogue, where I spent Sukkot. My third and final short stop was the slums of the town Vijayawada, where I was welcome by the leader and founder of the community Shmuel Yacobi at his home.

What really struck me during my visit was the contrast between the poverty of the community members and their generosity, kindness and cordiality. The sari that the Bnei Ephraim gave me for my birthday will always be the sari that I wear for my most joyous and significant events. So it was was in the poor huts and slums of Andhra Pradesh, wrapped in a royal sari and surrounded by numerous “Yiddishe Mamas” of both genders, constantly worrying about whether my plate of rice is full, that I started my bitter-sweet journey into the past and the present of the Bnei Ephraim.

The Bnei Ephraim are a small community of about sixty families that practice Judaism and are part of the tribes Mala and Madiga that follow different religions, mostly Christianity. These tribes are so called untouchables, also called in India Dalits, which means “broken to pieces”. Though untouchability is prohibited by the constitution of India, in the democratic India of the 21st century, they are still very much deliberately discriminated against, humiliated and literally broken by the Indian caste system.

Much of what I learned about the community, I learned from Shmuel Yacobi, the leader of the community who carefully studies and records the traditions of the Bnei Ephraim. He was the first of the community to complete university where he obtained several bachelors degrees as well as a Master of Arts in Philosophy. His father, a subedar (an officer rank) in the British army, was able to save money to educate his son. For forty years Shmuel has been dedicating his life to exploring the history of his people, basing his research on ancient Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian literature. In our private conversation at his small and clean...
apartment in the slums of Vijayawada, over a cup of fragrant Indian tea, Shmuel revealed to me some of the stories of the Bnei Ephraim.

According to oral tradition, the Bnei Ephraim travelled with the Bnei Menashe from Persia through Afghanistan to Jammu (Jambu), part of today’s Kashmir and to Magadha Kingdom, part of contemporary Bengal and the North Eastern states of India. While the Menashe settled in North Eastern India, some of the Ephraim moved down to South India, to Orissa and Telugu land, today’s Andhra Pradesh. Further, according to oral history, about 120 families came to Telugu country. They were known as Vrathyas, the derivation of Ephrathias, or Parai, the derivation of Ephraim. Tradition tells that they settled down at the bank of the Krishna River where they erected a synagogue in the town of Amaravathi. Later the synagogue was destroyed and a Buddhist, and later a Hindu temple, was built on the site of the ancient synagogue. Archaeological excavations revealed copper plates with Hebrew inscriptions dated to the second century A.D. on the site of the former synagogue.

Shmuel explained that this is not the only evidence that proves the connection between Mala and Madiga and the lost tribes of Israel. There are 450 customs preserved in the summary of laws known as Kavilah, many of which have commonalities with ancient Biblical laws. For example, on the Indian subcontinent it is common to cremate the dead, while Mala and Madiga have always buried theirs, a tradition observed long before the British missionaries arrived. Although other tribes who adopted Christianity bury their dead North-Southward, Mala and Madiga of any faith will bury their dead only West-Eastward. When a child is born, a naming ceremony is conducted on the eighth day after the birth. When a girl reaches the age of eleven years and one day, or a boy the age of twelve years and one day, there is a coming of age ceremony and the child is considered an adult. Furthermore, disputes among tribe members are resolved by the court of elders- something not common among other Indian communities. In Shmuel’s view there are also some Jewish customs that penetrated into the Telugu culture. For example, the Telugu use a lunar-solar calendar similar to that of the Jews. Shmuel also conducts linguistic research of the Telugu language, and has counted more than two hundred words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin.

Today the Bnei Ephraim, or Telugu Yudulu (Telugu Jews) as they are called in Andhra Pradesh, have adopted a modern form of the practice of Judaism. They are mainly taught online by Yehoshua Yacobi, Shmuel’s son and the only member of the community who managed to make Aliyah to Israel. His brother Dan Yacobi also contributes to the Jewish education of the community. He studied at the Yeshiva Dvar Yerushalaim in Jerusalem and Yeshiva Chadar Hatora in Brooklyn and he serves as the chazan of the Bnei Ephraim synagogue in Machilipatnam.

While attending holiday and Shabbat services at the synagogues of the
community, I could not stop wondering how in total isolation, against constant persecution and with little support from world Jewry, the Bnei Ephraim maintain such a deep connection to Judaism.

Touched by their depth of determination, faith and kind-heartedness, I developed a special bond with the community. They accepted me as their sister and I also accepted them as my family. I was touched by their communal struggles as untouchables but also by their individual stories.

I think of Ovadia Kudara, 37, who lives with his wife and three children in a village close to the town Visakhapatnam. Though he got his B.A. degree and worked in a governmental institution as a social worker, he decided to leave his job, since his job required working on Shabbat. In his village, his family is the only one practicing Judaism, a religion unknown to the local institutions. Ovadia sees the only solution in spiritual understanding of the issue, and therefore is totally dedicated to studying Judaism.

Yaakov Yacobi, 38, lives with his wife and children in Chirala town. When talking about his challenges, he mentioned that he was discouraged when his visa to Israel was cancelled along with the other Bnei Menashe in 1994 and his family’s repatriation file was delayed indefinitely.

Yachin Raju Vepuri, 23, lives with his parents, two sisters and a brother in a village near Srikakulam. His parents rent fields where they grow rice and lentils. Yachin had to leave his college where he was studying electronic engineering to help his family at the farm. While still in school, he was continuously humiliated by students of higher castes.

Chandrababu Kale, 28, from Kunchinapalli village, tells that though he has his degree from an Industrial Training Institute in the field of electrical and communicational engineering, he works at a construction material factory and is paid less than other workers in the same position which he attributes to caste discrimination. While a student though, Chandrababu also became interested in photography and his hobby has become a part-time job. (Chandrababu provided most of the photographs for this article.)

Returning to Judaism created additional problems for Bnei Ephraim. There is a tense relationship with the Christians communities to which most of Mala and Madiga belong. As Shmuel Yacobi explained, “They express love outwardly but expect us to embrace Christianity. They always hate us inwardly.” In 2003 there was an attempted terrorist attack against the community by a Muslim terrorist organization. Another problem is the burial grounds. According to the laws of Andhra Pradesh, a burial ground is given according to the caste or tribe. Christians have a burial ground and this
is the only place where Bnei Ephraim can bury their dead as the other faiths cremate their dead. The Jewish graves are constantly vandalized. The community has requested their own burial ground for many years, but have been denied because Judaism is not a registered religion in the State of Andhra Pradesh.

The synagogue in Machilipatnam receives little support, aside from very small donations for their building and siddurim that have been donated from several Jewish organizations. For those that think that Bnei Ephraim adopted Judaism in an attempt to improve their economic condition and escape discrimination, they are obviously mistaken.

Even though their return to Judaism brought additional economic and social strain to the Bnei Ephraim, it is from their faith that the community members draw strength and motivation to overcome their difficulties. During long hours of intense conversation they shared their challenges, dreams and hopes with me through words and song. Among their highest aspirations and dreams, all the community members named studying the wisdom of the Torah and their return home to Israel. Their faith also inspires them to move towards prosperity.

Identifying with their pain and shattered hopes, I became one of them, a daughter of Ephraim, an untouchable, in the enigmatic land of snake charmers, yogis and maharajas. ☝️
Five Star Refuge

A Week at The Pen

A refugee family at The Peninsula Hong Kong
The lobby of Hong Kong’s Peninsula Hotel (or “The Pen” as it is often fondly referred to as) suggests the height of colonial elegance, framed by gilded columns with its marble flooring and high ceilings complete with ornately carved scenes. As the string quartet hums from the grand balcony above, over shiny silver three-tier stands of high-tea treats, with its grandeur and elegance, it is difficult to imagine that the Peninsula Hotel was once a temporary shelter for post-World War II Jewish refugees.

And while Hong Kong’s Peninsula Hotel is but a very small part of the larger story of the Jewish refugees in China, it brings together the best of Hong Kong in the most unexpected way. In recent years, there has been considerable attention drawn to the remarkable history of Jews who escaped the Holocaust by fleeing to Shanghai. Beautiful stories emerge of two diverse peoples coming together in trying times in an effort to survive the darkest period in history.

Left on their own, the Jewish refugees lucky enough to make it to Shanghai faced seemingly unbearable obstacles and challenges. These burdens were however eased by the relief work of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) with assistance from the established Jewish community of Shanghai, and most notably through the efforts and resources of Horace Kadoorie.

The end of the war marked the beginning of a massive relocation plan for the nearly sixteen thousand Jewish refugees in Shanghai. Though eager to leave Shanghai, especially in the shadow of the looming internal upheaval in China, they required documentation and visas for their final destination as well as transportation arrangements and the necessary funds to pay for their journey.

For many of the refugees, passage was secured using Hong Kong as a transit port. This was far from ideal as they lacked the necessary paperwork to even stop over in the colony. On the Hong Kong side, Lawrence (later Lord) Kadoorie, Horace’s brother, worked with the JDC who was coordinating the transportation as well as sponsoring it in most cases. Kadoorie also interceded on the refugees’ behalf before the local Hong Kong government to obtain the proper authorization for the refugees to stay in Hong Kong while in transit.

Special arrangements, however, were required for even the short accommodation of the refugees. Lawrence Kadoorie responded to the crisis by coordinating temporary accommodations for refugees in the Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon. A letter from Horace Kadoorie, in Shanghai, to his brother in Hong Kong dated 7 May 1946 references some 22 Jewish refugees that had secured visas and passage to Australia but their route would require them to stay over in
Hong Kong for a few days. The housing crisis in Hong Kong was acknowledged, but Horace suggested, “Maybe they could stay at the Pen and some kind of lady could look after them. All expenses, of course, would be met by the Joint [JDC].”

Charles Jordan, the JDC representative, further reassured Lawrence Kadoorie, via letter of May 15, 1946, “We are not planning to send anymore refugees via Hong Kong except on definite shipping facilities, because we realize the difficulties which will be created by such people having to remain in Hong Kong for indefinite periods of time…”

There are several pieces of correspondence that refer to small groups of Jewish refugees in transit who were accommodated in this manner. Somewhat ironically in light of events that would soon come to pass, in a letter from Lawrence Kadoorie to Mr. Jordan of May 30, 1946, he writes, “The possibility of opening a hostel for future refugees passing through the colony has been discussed, but quite frankly it would be difficult, if not impossible, to arrange for this.”

And even for those for with a promise of room and board by the Kadoories, despite their influence, it was by no means a legal right to stay in the colony as the city was already brimming over with displaced persons as well as British being repatriated and there was a concern that the refugees would compete for already limited resources. Transit visas were a must and came with strict limitations on time and privileges.

In a letter on July 4th, 1946, after accommodating the needs of another small groups of refugees in transit, Lawrence Kadoorie offers to reserve three rooms for $800 per month each, paid in advance, for the JDC’s use. The rooms would accommodate 10-12 persons “with a squash”. He further suggested that Mr. Jordan consider opening an account in Hong Kong to help streamline the payment process. It was further agreed that food could be provided for the cost of $5.50 per person per day. To supplement this, it is documented that the JDC also sent many of the refugees with $50 each in pocket money.

On a case-by-case basis the Kadoories worked with the JDC to take care of the special needs of the refugees. In some cases this meant arranging for individual seats on flights. In other cases, hospitalization was required and, for some, burial in the Hong Kong Jewish cemetery was eventually required. It was suggested that an additional small fund for emergency use be developed to allow for the Kadoories to meet these special needs of the refugees.

Despite these well thought out plans, nothing could prepare either the JDC or the Kadoories and The Peninsula for the events of July 1946. Arrangements were made for approximately 250 refugees (the exact number was not initially known) to travel to Australia via the S.S. “Duntroon”. While it was assumed that the Duntroon would sail from Shanghai, by mid-July 1946, it became clear that this was not possible and the Duntroon would instead depart from Hong Kong. Arrangements were made between the Kadoorie brothers to accommodate this group of 250 refugees as a stay over in Hong Kong would be the only way for them to secure their passage on the Duntroon and finally make their way to Australia.

By way of correspondence between Charles Jordan and Lawrence Kadoorie, additional details were ironed out and an understanding reached. Both parties understood that in order to obtain approval from the Hong Kong government for this highly irregular stopover, there must be a detailed plan in place and assurances that the refugees’ needs would be met and
the group would be kept in order. The group was scheduled to arrive in Hong Kong on July 30th via the “General Gordon” and then leave on the S.S. Duntroon on or about August 5, 1946.

Further arrangements were made to send each refugee in need with $30 of pocket money. Additional money was also set aside for emergency funds including medical expenses. On July 27, 1946, the final numbers were reported to The Peninsula and the group was to consist of 283 refugees: 141 men, 125 women, 15 children and 2 infants.

Given the room shortage in Hong Kong generally, arrangements were made to house the refugees in the hotel’s ballrooms. The 6th floor’s Roof Garden would be utilized for men and the Rose Room for 108 women. The remaining 17 women as well as 15 children and two infants would be housed in the Surgery on the Mezzanine Floor. Richard Flantz, who was ten years old at the time, recalls sleeping on “paliasses, like sort of straw mattresses”. Records reflect ‘camp’ cots were used.

There was “ample” toilet space on the 6th floor in the “Gents and Ladies Cloak Rooms” as well as two baths in the Surgery on the Mezzanine Floor. A meal schedule was arranged as well: Breakfast from 7-8, ‘Tiffin’ from 11:30-12:30 and Dinner from 6-7. The refugees were advised to only bring light baggage with them, as their heavy luggage would be transported directly to the godown (dockside warehouse).

While these arrangements were far from ideal, they certainly were ample to provide for the refugees’ needs for their brief stay in the colony. While still in the process of settling the refugees, on July 31, 1946, Lawrence Kadoorie writes in his private diary, “I spent several hours in the godown attending to their luggage. Have just reached the office and had a bombshell... the Australian Government has cabled that it intends to withdraw the Duntroon as it is needed to carry military to New Guinea and will not be allowed to take passengers back to Australia.” Kadoorie concludes the entry by stating, “Hong Kong now has its own refugee problem!”

And so the 283 refugees, settled in the Peninsula Hotel for what they thought would be a week, were to remain in the colony, some for as long as through December of that year. Initially there were discussions about whether or not to return these refugees to Shanghai, as the Duntroon’s delay was indefinite but the JDC and the Kadoories knew that there was a far better chance of finding transport from Hong Kong and a return to Shanghai would only further prolong their ordeal. Without visas, the refugees were unable to earn money leaving them to rely almost entirely on the basic food and modest supplies provided by the hotel staff. The Hong Kong Jewish community, though also still readjusting to postwar life, assessing their own loss and damages and for many fairly newly returned from Japanese internment camps, quickly mobilized themselves to supplement the efforts of The Peninsula.

A Jewish Women’s Association was immediately conceived to help distribute good to the refugees. Mrs. J. Frenkel served as chair this new organization which is referenced several times in the Kadoorie’s correspondence for their role in providing the refugees with much needed essentials as well as extras like baskets of fruit and candy. In later correspondence, the work of other women in the newly formed organization are cited, namely Dr. Sophie Bard, Mrs. Godkin, Mrs. Frenkel and Mrs. Poliak. Mr. Lew Cohen served as the local Jewish Welfare Officer and Captain Hebert, of the national Jewish Welfare Board, likewise also played leading roles in seeing that needs were met.
But the efforts were by no means limited to those in official capacities or to those in the newly formed organization. Mr. Weiss, a prominent member of the community, arranged a junk (leisure boat popular in the colony) outing and picnic for the children and their mothers in August. Lawrence Kadoorie also reported to Mr. Jordan that transportation for 60 was being arranged to take some of the refugees to his own home for a picnic and swim in the later part of the month. Richard Flantz recalls a local member of the Hong Kong Jewish community taking him for ice cream for his first time and taking him to swim, another first for him, out at Repulse Bay. Additionally, it should be remembered that this was a resourceful group of survivors who demonstrated the ability to not merely survive but to live life to the fullest despite the deprivations they suffered in Shanghai. There are even stories of refugee-organized markets for trading goods in the hotel's lobby.

Fred Antman, now living in Australia, was also among this group of 283 refugees. Born in 1930 in Germany, he was but 16 years old at the time of his family’s unplanned extended stay in The Peninsula. He recalls, “The staff of the hotel was fantastic... And I could not speak more highly of them as the, the hotel staff looking after us in a very awkward sort of a situation, you know. We had a Jewish New Year festival coming on and there is a very big day in the Jewish calendar and they made a certain provision for a room available to us, which we used to conduct our holy services, which we did. And they even provided us with a very festive meal on that New Year’s night; a little different to what we had previously, you know, but they could not do enough for us you know, and I, I will never forget the, the, the wonderful manner in which almost like brotherly love, that came from them looking after us.” He speaks fondly of memories of football matches against The Peninsula Hotel staff.

Overall though, despite the best efforts of the hotel, the Kadoories, the JDC and the Hong Kong Jewish community, this group of refugees were weary and grew restless and tired of living in a state of impermanence. Their one-week stopover in late July had now seen them through all of the summer and through the Jewish High Holidays. A request, via correspondence in September 1946, was made by the Jewish community of Manila to the Kadoories to begin moving some of their refugees through Hong Kong. Despite the willingness on the part of the Kadoories and the local Jewish community, this simply was inconceivable at the time given how far tight space and resources had already gone not to mention the flexibility on the part of the Hong Kong government in agreeing to allow the refugees to enter the colony in the first place and then their willingness to allow them to stay on for so long beyond the stay of an ordinary transit visa. By September, arrangements began to be finalized to finally move the refugees on to Australia but
this was done in a piecemeal fashion, some leaving on small ships and other on small aircraft. Antman, whose family was finally able to leave in mid to late October 1946, recalls the elderly being the first to be moved out followed by the families with young children. The last group remained in Hong Kong through December 1946.

Throughout the years that followed, other refugees similarly found themselves on the receiving end of Hong Kong Jewish hospitality but none in an ordeal as drawn out as the Duntroon’s ill-fated passengers. And as the historical record should reflect, the Kadoories played an incredible role in providing for the refugees in Shanghai as well as in Hong Kong with the backing and support of the JDC. Throughout the postwar years, the Kadoories served in many roles including acting as an informal postal and telegraph service for the refugees and sometimes even as medical advocates for refugee patients. Perhaps though the true measure of the care the refugees received while in Hong Kong can be best summarized in a letter by Ms. Rosa Huber following the death of her mother while she was in Hong Kong. To Sir Lawrence Kadoorie, she writes in August 1946, “It was a great comfort for me to learn that we were so fortunate to find in you a noble man and friend... There are no words enough to express the feelings of my deepest and sincerest gratitude. May God the Almighty reward you for all the good you have done to us.”

And while for most Hong Kong was but a brief stopover, for others it became one more hurdle to cross in a long struggle to build new lives for themselves. As for Antman, he recalls how he stayed at The Peninsula a few times on return trips to Hong Kong, “out of memory lane, I naturally went as a customer to The Peninsula, not as an immigrant.”

And so his story has come full circle. Many decades have passed since he, along with the 282 others, were displaced refugees sleeping on army cots and existing on a meal allowance of $5.50 per day. And while the city outside this icon rapidly reinvents itself, The Peninsula remains steeped in tradition and history. And if you close you eyes, for just a moment, as you sit at afternoon tea, perhaps you can imagine the band of refugees wandering through the lobby, congregating on the grounds outside, sharing what little they had as they patiently waited to start their new lives.

Special thanks to the Hong Kong Heritage Project for use of their archives and for permission to use their photographs as well as to Fred Antman for use of his photographs. The quotes from Fred Antman were taken from a Hong Kong Heritage Project interview of Mr. Antman on March 11, 2008. The quote and information from Richard Flantz was taken from his interview with the Hong Kong Heritage Project on April 5, 2008.
Lo Mein to Laksa
by Yardena Ben-Israel

Bene Israel Halwa - Sweet and simple
Corn flour halwa is actually the easier version of the more traditional and popular ‘Chikha cha Halwa’, which is made from wheat but involves a more difficult and time consuming process.

I learned these recipes from from my husband’s Aunt Rosy. Rosy Aunty is well known throughout the community for her excellent traditional cooking and always makes fabulous cakes for every occasion. For parties, she comes up with wonderful snacks and dishes, mostly her own invention; how all the family waits for her to bring her latest surprise dish.

In the Bene Israel community, halwa is a signature dish and a specialty for Rosh Hashanah, but it is also prepared during many special occasions like marriages, mehndi ceremonies which take place a day before weddings, brit milahs, bar mitzvahs, anniversaries and house warming ceremonies. I have many wonderful memories of eating halwa or helping to prepare it for such special occasions.

During Rosh Hashanah halwa is distributed among relatives and friends and even my non-Jewish friends wait for my chocolate halwa as it has become my signature dish thanks to Aunty Rosy.

Coconut halwa is another Bene Israel specialty. Many Bene Israel dishes (sweets, main dishes, deserts) contain coconut as the main ingredient since coconut is found in abundance in Konkan Coast. Today it is still an important part of many Bene Israel’s traditional celebrations wherever we travel.

Corn flour Coconut Halwa

- Corn flour – 250g
- Sugar – 350g
- Coconut milk – 2 liters
- Pistachios & almonds – 1 tbsp each
- Edible color – pink or orange (3 to 4 drops)
- Cardamom powder – Half tsp
- Nutmeg – ¼ tsp
- Salt – ¼ tsp

Sieve the corn flour and then mix with coconut milk. Add sugar, coloring and salt. Mix well. Cook over stove, stirring continuously to prevent sticking for 45 minutes. To test, spread a little on a plate. Halwa should come out clean and not stick to the fingers. Add cardamom & nutmeg powder & pour mixture into flat tins. Sprinkle chopped dry fruits on top & cut into desired shape when cooled.

Corn flour Coconut Chocolate Halwa

- Corn flour – 250g
- Sugar – 400g
- Coconut milk – 2 liters
- Cocoa powder – 4 tbsp
- Almonds & pistachios – 1 tbsp each
- Salt – ¼ tsp

Follow above directions substituting cocoa power for the cardamom powder.
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Not Lost in Translation
A Torah scholar goes to China
During my childhood growing up in New York I had heard about China. Chinese food on Sunday nights before the Ed Sullivan show was Torah from Mt. Sinai. Although I loved the food (especially the fortune cookies – I could never figure out how they knew much about us) the introduction to MSG left a lot to be desired.

There were always a couple of “Chinese kids” in school through the years; very smart but somehow “different” more than the rest of the “different” kids as if lost in an ancient world removed and mythical. In Junior High School my social studies report was on China. Tons of cut up National Geographic magazines and anything else I could puzzle together went into the report. I became fascinated with Mao Zedong and the struggle for change that the Chinese people were going through.

The Talmud says “there is no comparison between (merely) hearing about something and (actually) seeing it.” So I was left to but wonder each time we went to New York’s Chinatown if China was just like this but magnified a million times over?

It wouldn’t be for many years (about 40 to be precise) that I would have the chance to find out the answer. About five years ago, work (in high tech) finally provided me the opportunity to go to China.

All through the magic of email and SKYPE, I was now on an almost daily basis in contact with D&B China, communicating, of course in English, but that kind of Chinese English I remembered from Chinatown. Except this time it wasn’t about ordering egg rolls it was about talking to people whose brilliance shined. Sharp minds and curious thinkers, opened minded people with an excitement for life. These were the Chinese? I was impressed, amazed and thankful to “discover” another intelligent ocean on a planet that seemed to be drying up.

My virtual image of China’s tipping point to reality occurred as the Chinese New Year arrived. My new Chinese “friends” told me they were going to tour China and asked if I would I like to join. Wow! I had never been to China (although, when I was a Jewish teacher back in the late 1980s I had lectured in Hong Kong) and here was a chance to see China through the eyes and minds of the Chinese. I was there!

Of course everywhere we went I felt like “where is Waldo”. I thought it was cool, although my hosts were very embarrassed, when they told me the local children were making fun of me calling me “round eyes”. I have Woody Allen black rim round glasses. I’m sure for the kids it was an even more exaggerated sight! It brought back shades of the book Black Like Me and gave me my first feeling of being a minority. Here “Chinatown” was the whole city with little pockets that perhaps could be called “Western town”.

The Chinese were awesome. It was instant love. In Shanghai I felt the same energy I remembered in my youth in New York City during the “fun city” days of Mayor Lindsay. It was alive, growing and nobody knows or knew where it was heading – but who cared – the ride was incredible. Even in Beijing which had a much more sedate nature to it, the Forbidden City with Mao’s picture was a synapse between fantasy and reality. I mean when Mel Brooks said “It is good
to be the King”, had he known about the 3,000 wives (three times King Solomon’s harem) in the Imperial City, I’m sure he would have corrected that to “it is good to be the Emperor”. Personally I can confirm that. When we made it to West Lake there was a tourist trap renting Emperor clothing. I couldn’t resist and within seconds I had three wives! (Okay, at least 3,000 is a multiple of three).

Clearly the more important part of the trip was the exchange. There didn’t seem to be enough hours in the day (or night) for the dialogues, each wanting to know more and more about China and the Jews. I had never thought about it before, until my new Chinese friends brought it to my attention, the Jewish impact on Chinese life. Beginning with Jesus, who I quickly described as a distant cousin who had some “family issues” and then to Karl Marx, whose grandfather was a great rabbi and Kabbalist.

From their perspective they were most curious about the Talmud and Kabbalah. I told them the story that had just broken before my trip in Israel where the Ambassador from South Korea announced at a meeting in Tel Aviv that “more children in Korea know who Rav Pappa is than in Israel.” Sadly he is correct, because anyone who has studied more than ten (daf) pages of the Talmud will have come across the name Rav Pappa. Now, Israel suddenly discovered that Koreans study the Talmud and within months Korean TV crews were all over the Yeshivot (Talmud study schools) in Israel.

They told me that the Talmud was also now becoming of interest in China as the secret to Jewish success in business. I agreed, quoting Rava from the Talmud that anyone who wishes to become smart should study the section of Talmud dealing with business law (Nazikim). I also told them I had been a Rabbi. I know, my friends always say “once you are a rabbi you are always a rabbi” and I try to explain that was only true of the Jets (not Jews) from West Side Story. But I guess if it is in your blood it is in your soul.

So I began to share very deep ideas in Jewish thinking – why the moon was smaller than the sun, what does resurrection of the dead mean to modern thinkers, and how much cream cheese must be applied to the bagel for it to qualify as a smear (smear). It was incredible to see these young minds gobble up this information and retort with almost parallel teachings from the East.

Upon my return to Jerusalem I sent them two “Torah” books I had written, one called Good Morning, Moon and one called I Never Prayed for My Father. I was touched by the heartfelt feedback both positive and negative I received. Reminds me of a classic Charlie Brown cartoon where Charlie Brown is storming away from Lucy standing in her 5 cents Psychiatric box and she is yelling after him, “The problem with you, Charlie Brown, is you don’t know how to handle destructive criticism.” But I welcomed all of it. I always remember my rebbe teaching me, “We have two ears and only one mouth because we need to listen twice as much as we speak.” Considering I like to talk a lot I don’t know if I ever succeeded in following his dictate but it has been something at least worth striving for.

This story continues until about June of this year when I was blown away to find out my friends had translated Good Morning, Moon into Mandarin. I was so touched by this gesture that I decided to give the book away for free as an eBook and have posted the book on a website I helped to create for Jewish and Israeli books in general at www.peopleoftheebooks.com and have watched, in just a couple of months, an incredible number of the hits from China. These hits are not just coming in from the main cities but across the country. It has been forwarded by friends, in China, as a gesture to help bridge a better understanding of our two cultures.

The book is light on the heart and deep on the mind. I guess when you speak from the soul to the soul you can rest assured the content will not get lost in translation.
What bound Judaism and China into a seemingly yin and yang cultural relationship? The more I research these two cultures, the more they seemed to revolve around the perpetual changes created by yin and yang. Initially, I thought that the key might lie in mastering the Chinese language. But, once I felt proficient in Chinese (I was already proficient in Hebrew) I realized that even the two languages were following the yin yang pattern. Both languages are built on a similar system, the root words. Hebrew uses three letters for the “root” called shoresh, while Chinese uses 214 basic “radicals” called bushou. But the similarities in terms of language end here.

In Hebrew we form words by adding to the “root” words either with declinations of parts of speech or by conjugating the verbs in various tenses. Hebrew has a complex grammar. In contrast, Chinese is a very simple language. It is based on seven basic strokes to form 214 “radicals” and a combination of radicals with the basic strokes forms complex characters. For all practical purposes, Chinese has no grammar. And herein lies the difficulty. While Hebrew grammar tells us “who, what and when”, in Chinese we have to deduce these questions from the context. Such ambiguity makes any Chinese text, especially ancient writings, very difficult to translate. Historically, Chinese characters changed meaning significantly during their long history and when reading Chinese texts one has to know in what period of time it was written.
It is not surprising then, that Chinese and Israelites in antiquity did not have anything in common and knew nothing about each other’s culture. Israelites might have known about the “land of Sinim” from the Prophet Isaiah. But for the Chinese, Israelites were just one of the unidentified tribes of the uncivilized yi “barbarian” tribes. In biblical times, the Chinese called every non-Chinese “barbarians”. In this respect, they did not distinguish between the Mongols or Hun raiders. Nor did they distinguish between the peaceful tribes and settles, traders, and monks who occasionally intermixed with the Chinese in the north and west of China. Chinese annals portrayed the “barbarians” as raggedy looking, long red hair, dirty, unshaven and with repulsive body odor.

Yet, a sharp-eyed Chinese sage had indeed described in one sentence a tribe with a strange custom. He talked about a tribe that fasted, bathed and cleaned themselves before praying to God. This description puzzled Chinese and Western scholars alike. Who they were eluded an answer for a long time. It puzzled me too, but for a different reason. The description seemed familiar, I just could not identify where I had seen that before. Only when I worked on the translation of the Kaifeng stone inscriptions and came upon a similar Chinese sentence, did I realize that those exact words originated with a very influential Chinese sage.

Who was that sage?

In my book The Kaifeng Stone Inscriptions, I traced the journey of a group of exiled Levites and Cohanim (priests) from Babylon (6th century BCE) to the Kingdom of Ferghana (north Afghanistan today) to the Western Regions and ultimately their migration into China in the second century BCE. The migration from exile to the Western Regions took perhaps as long as four hundred years. Of course, the exiles themselves were not the original settlers in China but the descendants of their descendants were. They were sighted at the outskirts of China in the second century BCE, and accepted the Chinese offer to come and settle in the Western Regions in return for the protection of the Chinese. The Western Regions (xiyu in Chinese) stretched from northern Afghanistan to Dunhuang (the Pass in Chinese) in the northeast of Gansu Province today. Here ended the main trade route, the so called Silk Road that ran from Syria to Central Asia, to Northern India, and to the Western Regions. The Western Regions served as a buffer zone between China proper and the Mongol/ Hun raiders who frequently invaded and plundered China. To avert or minimize the impact of these raids, the Chinese encouraged “barbarian” tribes to settle at the outskirts of China in the Western Regions.

We know very little about these Israelites who lived in the Western Regions, at the outskirts of China for centuries. Most of our information was based on what the Chinese Jews inscribed in stone. Amazingly, after many centuries in isolation, the Jews in China (Kaifeng) still observed the precepts of the Torah.

Journeying in the vast desert land of the Western Regions, were two Chinese sages who had great influence on China. During their travels they might have come in contact with Israelites, and only a careful reading of their writing hinted at such an encounter. One of the sages was Mencius (372–289 BCE). His influence was second only to Confucius. His biography mentioned that late in his life he left China and had spent twenty years “beyond the Pass” in the Western Regions. We know very little of his whereabouts or what he did. Most of the information is deduced from his writings.

Apparently, he encountered a tribe during his journey that “fasted and bathed, and then they sacrificed to Shangdi.” Shangdi was the Chinese Almighty equal only to Elohim. Mencius, like most Chinese of his time, did not have a high opinion of the “barbarians” and this tribe was no exception. His exact words were rather unflattering. He said: “[if] Xizi had been covered in such a filth [alternative translation: “with filthy head dress/clothes”], people would hold their noses when passing by. Although [those] people were ugly, if they fasted and bathed, then they could sacrifice to Shangdi.”

It is not coincidental that Mencius used the word xizi (pronounced shee-tze). It means: “Son of the West.” And here lies the controversy. Who was Xizi? The Chinese suggested that it was the name of Lady Xi. But Lady Xi was female and the suffix zi (son, master) would indicate a male. The Chinese offered a simple solution; they replaced the character zi with the character shi (clan) thus clearing the name for a female name. This explanation is plausible, though I think it is far fetched. Alternatively, Mencius might have used the word Xizi as a derogatory term for the tribe that fasted and purified themselves before sacrificing to Shangdi in the Western Region.
Incidentally, the above description coincided with a biblical ceremony performed by the Levites (Numbers 8:21) and Cohanim (Leviticus 16:3-4) during the Temple period: “Wash yourselves, cleanse yourselves, put your evil deeds out of my sight!” before sacrificing. Reinforcing this commandment was the Prophet Isaiah (1:16) who reminded the Levites and Cohanim to purify and cleanse themselves before making their offerings to Elohim: “For this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you, of all your sins before the Lord. And when the priests and the people… hear the name of the Elohim come from the mouth of the high priest, in sanctity and purity, they bow down and prostrate themselves.”

Evidently during his travels to the Western Region, Mencius came upon a tribe that according to his description followed almost identically the rites of Israelite priests. Perhaps this was the first sighting of Israelites in the vicinity of China as early as the 4th century BCE!

Biblical Influence on Daoism

While Mencius perhaps left us a description of an Israelite tribe, another Chinese sage had displayed biblical influence in his writing. The legendary Laozi (6th century BCE), the founder of Daoism, better known in the West for his mystical Book of the Way and Virtue (Daodejing) wrote about topics that would have been more familiar to an Israelite than to a Chinese person at that time.

Laozi spent twenty years traveling in the Western Regions. Legend says that when he reached the Pass (Dunhuang today), Yinxi, the Keeper of the Pass, asked him to write a book. Evidently, Laozi obliged and wrote the Daodejing a five thousand-character book of wisdom that rivals only the bible in its depth and wisdom. Whether or not this legend is true is beside the point, what is important is that the Daodejing has greatly impacted China. Even though it has been translated into almost every language in the world, each translation is more of an interpretation than a translation. The Daodejing is extremely difficult to translate, if not impossible. Its language and concepts can be hardly matched in any other language.

Essentially, the Daodejing is full of concepts that would delight, and at the same time challenge, any biblical scholar. They would have to face text like: “Dao is [a] Dao but not [the] Dao, Name is [a] name, but not [the] Name…” or: “Dao is One...(we) see it, but it is unseen, it is called Invisible; (we) listen to it, but it is unhearable, it is called Inaudible; (we) touch it, but it is unreachable, it is called Intangible”(ch. 14).

A simple translation of Dao is the Way. Yet, we in the West have no single word that is equal to the Chinese Dao. Even though some translators translated it as the Way, others as Heaven, and yet others as God, disappointingly, none of these terms is equal to the Chinese Dao. Invariably we still wrestle with the basic questions: What is Dao? Or, how did Laozi come up with the idea of monotheism? Or, better yet, where did Laozi hear about “the land of milk and honey”? I will focus on the last item. Daoism was both new and strange to the Chinese in the 6th century BCE. At the time different schools of thought fought for the mind of the people. There were so many ideas vying for followers, that the Chinese called them the “hundred schools” of thought. Most of these schools faded from the Chinese mind and only Daoism and Confucianism prevailed. Confucianism dealt with government and ethics; while the Daodejing dealt with mysticism, monotheism and one chapter dealt with, …well, nobody is sure.

Unusual in style and content was chapter 80 of the Daodejing. Due to the lack of details about Laozi, both Chinese and Western historians thought that this chapter reflected his political ideology. Yet, it is not clear what his political philosophy was, let alone the source of this chapter. We only know for a fact, that the conditions described in this chapter were non-existent in China at the time.

It described: “…a small country with few people that makes weapons but do not use them… Although they have ships and carriages they do not ride them. Though they have armor and soldiers, they do not display them… They sweetened their food, adorned their clothes, were content in their homes and delighted in their customs… people grew old and died of old age.” In other words, Laozi described the Chinese version of the “land of milk and honey.”

There is no doubt that Laozi had come in contact with “barbarian” tribes during his travels in the Western Region, where he might have heard stories of such a country. He probably heard a story of a “land of milk and honey” (Exodus 33:3; Deut. 27:3) that in the Chinese version in his book became a country where people sweetened their food. Both milk and honey were luxuries for the few
in China, even though milk was not commonly consumed. Such a country according Laozi was a peaceful place where “people sweeten their food, they do not engage in wars... they live in prosperity, grow old and die of old age.” Realistically, such conditions did not exist in China at the time, and I think that in this chapter, Laozi described a utopian country about which he might have heard during his travels.

Furthermore, the description of “the small country that made weapons but do not use them...” resembled the conditions prevalent in Jerusalem at the time of King Solomon (c.a. 960 BCE). Solomon built the Temple with labor that had no blood on their hands, he encamped his army in Jerusalem to discourage aggression; his ships were manned by non-Israelites and reached the shores of India. People of Israel lived in peace and prosperity (1Kings 9:26).

It is evident that chapter 80 of the Daodejing differs substantially from the rest of the book. But if we read this chapter in a historical context of both ancient China and Israel, we can see that biblical stories had been circulating in Central Asia in the form of oral tradition, and some of them seemingly had made into ancient Chinese literature.

Tiberiu Weisz is the author of The Kaifeng Stone Inscriptions: The Legacy of the Jewish Community in Ancient China.
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Asian Jewish Life (AJL): In your most recent novel, Habit of a Foreign Sky (Haven Books, 2010), which was shortlisted for the 2007 inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, two of the most sympathetic characters have Jewish names. They both play large roles in the development of the story. Did you intentionally choose identifiable Jewish names for these characters in honor of people you know? Do Jewish characters play large roles in your other books also?

Xu Xi (XX): I am so pleased you picked up on the Jewish connection! That was deliberate on my part, not exactly in honor of any particular individual but to recognize the American Jewish world generally that I’ve come to know over the years. It was noticeable to me that many of the Americans abroad in Asia whom I met were Jewish, and it made me realize how much the diaspora Chinese and Jewish cultures had in common. Then later, living in New York City, I again met many Jewish people in the professional (and later literary as well) communities I was in (law especially), and the celebration of Jewish holidays in New York made me more conscious of the culture and religion. I did also date a couple of Jewish guys back in my twenties, and have had and of course still have a number of close Jewish friends. So yes I definitely did mean for both Jim and Josh to be sympathetic. Actually, Jim first appeared in The Unwalled City (2001) in a minor role and in my novel previous to that, Hong Kong Rose (1997), I had an American in Hong Kong's preeminent writer in English. She has penned nine works of fiction and essays, and has edited three anthologies of Hong Kong writing. Xu Xi received her Master’s of Fine Arts in Fiction at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and recently completed a three-year chairmanship of Vermont College of Fine Art’s MFA program. Now back in her home city, she spends her days as Writer in Residence, City University of Hong Kong, where she founded the first MFA program in Asia for English writers. Asian Jewish Life recently asked Xu Xi about her Jewish characters, the future of English literature in Hong Kong, and her writing career. She can be found online at www.xuxiwriter.com.
Kong named Elliott Cohen who had a major role in the story. Elliott was a pretty sympathetic character as well. So as you can see Jewish characters have appeared for some time in my work.

AJL: Your family hails from Indonesia, where the Chinese community has suffered terribly. Do you find an affinity with Jews due to a shared background of persecution based solely on ethnicity, or otherness?

XX: I have mixed feelings about the notion of “persecution” of the Chinese community in Indonesia. Yes, the overseas Chinese were definitely persecuted – this is a historical fact. Yet having grown up listening to the prejudiced way many in my family spoke about the Indonesians – they unabashedly looked down on Indonesians, calling them stupid and lazy – that gave me a sense of why the Indonesians might have hated the Chinese. I recall as a child feeling ashamed of my family’s attitudes and prejudices and rebelled as I got older. The Chinese community valued education and were ambitious in terms of trying to build a good life for themselves and their families – this was certainly true in both my parents’ family. And this probably gave rise to envy by a local population that watched these immigrants move in, take over, and boss them around. In a way, it’s the immigrant story the world over and there’s no simple way to parse it and say we were right they were wrong because it’s never that simple.

AJL: For much of your adult life, you juggled a corporate day job with writing in your spare time. How did you decide to leave the corporate world so you could devote all your time to writing?

XX: The Peter Principle. I’d risen to my level of incompetence in corporate life and had lost interest, frankly, in climbing any further up the ladder. Most of the time, I enjoyed my work in the various corporations I worked for, and was ambitious and sought better prospects and promotions. But by the time my third book was published, I no longer was as interested in making my mark in corporate life and could tell that if I hung on, just to have a job, I’d begin a downslide which wouldn’t be good for me or my employer. It was beginning to feel too schizophrenic.

As fate would have it, my aunt passed away which was very sad, because she was someone my family was very close to. She surprised my family with her wealth and I ended up with this inheritance (she was a schoolteacher who lived frugally, saved a bundle, invested smart and died a very, very rich lady). So I knew that as long as I didn’t expect to live as I used to when I had a full-time salary, I would be just fine. And I was fine for many years, picking up a little part time work, later some part time teaching, and all through this I traded stocks & futures to stay afloat (that was quite a lot of fun, I found). And writing, writing, writing. It was a fabulous life.

So it was a decision facilitated by an unexpected inheritance windfall, because it was as if my aunt were telling me – here, go live your real life, go.

AJL: Several years ago, you edited an anthology titled, Fifty-Fifty: New Hong Kong Writing (Haven Books, 2008), which addressed the years leading up to the year 2046, when China’s one country, two systems policy of governing Hong Kong is due to expire. What are your views on the future of English literature produced in Hong Kong in the years leading up to this next handover?

XX: Ask me next year and I’ll have more views because I’m currently co-editing another anthology of new Hong Kong short fiction for CCC Press in the U.K. There’s more literature in English these days, although I must admit I’m not wildly optimistic about the future of this literature. As Hong Kong becomes more Chinese, it may lose some of its international edge. The English literature from this city has always been a marginalized and marginal literature, and I’m not seeing much by way of emerging younger writers because the ones with talent get sidetracked by the money culture and societal pressures to do something “practical,” which writing isn’t (although from my standpoint,
what could be more practical than trying to understand your raison d’etre, which is what all serious writers are basically doing). Much will depend on the Hong Kong’s government, if it can provide any kind of visionary leadership that allows one country two systems to flourish. But from my perspective, I do feel like I’m watching one country two systems languish. I’m just hoping it won’t fizzle out and die, because that will be the end of Hong Kong as any kind of international city.

AJL: Over the years you have been published by several independent presses in Hong Kong. Can you discuss your experience with Hong Kong publishers and what you see as the future of small presses?

XX: I’m actually very optimistic about the future of small presses, both here in Hong Kong and the U.S. This largely has to do with the major publishers abandoning any kind of literary vision (except for a very small part of their business) in favor of producing books as a form of celebrity merchandise. Let’s face it, if you’re sports star or movie star or someone who became famous for five seconds for some notoriety (Monica Lewinsky is a good example), you can be an “author” without having to be a writer, we all know that. This may be profitable for so-called publishers, but is extremely destructive to contemporary literary culture. Lewinsky signed a hell of a lot more books than I and most writers I know ever will! Meanwhile the midlist no longer exists. But what I do see are a lot of small presses picking up the pieces for the major publishers who have abandoned their original calling.

AJL: Can you share a little of what you’re working on now? In the future?

XX: Sure. I recently finished a new novel which my agent is shopping around at the moment. The book took me nine years to complete, what with everything else I was doing (and I did publish two books during that time), so I think I’m suffering from a kind of novel fatigue. In the past I always was into a new novel once I finish one. I did start a new novel but almost immediately put it aside in favor a novella, short stories and essays. ¶
Voices from Shanghai
Sephardic and Ashkenazi Families during WWII

During World War II, Shanghai was home to the largest and most diverse Jewish community in China. The Sephardic families from Baghdad and Bombay were the most prosperous and enjoyed the longest history among the Jews in Shanghai. Ellis Jacob came from one such family. Several years ago he wrote The Shanghai I Knew: A Foreign Native in Pre-Revolutionary China (Comteq Publishing, 2007), a memoir of his formative years in the city on the sea.

Ellis Jacob ties his family’s story in with the modern history of China. Although he writes that the Jews and Chinese didn’t mix much socially, his family had Chinese servants and as a result he learned to speak Shanghainese, the local dialect. He sprinkles bits of Shanghainese throughout his memoir, and tells the story of an American soldier who hires him to be his translator while he visits a brothel. At the time, Jacob was too young to understand just what kind of an establishment the American had taken him.

His family held British citizenship (most Sephardic Jews in Shanghai did) and arrived before 1937, they were not sent to the Shanghai Ghetto when other Jews were in 1942. But he wrote about the food shortages and political instability during that time. Ellis Jacob attended a British elementary school and an American high school. During the thick of the war, most schools closed. He was fortunate to transfer to the Shanghai Jewish School for a year, which stayed open.

In the appendix, Jacob includes images of money from the mid-to-late 1940s, family photos, and menus from ice cream parlors. Inflation ran wild after the war, and people had no choice but to carry their cash in suitcases. All that cash could only buy one ice cream sundae or a loaf of bread. He points out that the menus were continuously changed to account for daily changes in inflation.

When Ellis Jacob and his mother left Shanghai for Canada, he almost wasn’t allowed on the ship, as there was some confusion over a debt that a different Ellis Jacob owed. With his father’s quick thinking, teenager Ellis Jacob was allowed to depart as scheduled. Interestingly, only Jacob and his mother left on that ship; his father remained in Shanghai to finish business matters. He ends his memoir before the time his father was supposed to leave China, so the reader never knows what happened to the senior Jacob.

Another memoir from this period, written by a woman whose Austrian Jewish family had escaped to Shanghai, is Ten Green Bottles: The True Story of One Family’s Journey from War-torn Austria to the Ghettos of Shanghai (St. Martins, 2004) by Vivian Jeanette Kaplan. The author’s family belonged to the largest group of Jews in Shanghai during the war: the European Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany. Kaplan writes from the point of view of her mother, Nini, because young Vivian was just a baby when the family left Shanghai for Canada after the war.

Nini Karpel meets her husband-to-be in her mother’s Vienna dress shop. Leopold, or Poldi as he’s known, came from Poland and told of the persecution of the Jews. Nini couldn’t imagine life would ever change for her family in Vienna because the Jews were assimilated into Austrian life. But as history would show, life did change for the Jews there. By the late 1930s, many found themselves desperate to leave. Emigrating to the US, Canada, and Great Britain were not usually viable options.

As Kaplan writes, word about Shanghai spread though Vienna:

In our quest for options, one word is beginning to recur: “Shanghai.” We hear it whispered behind cupped hands when we pass haggard neighbours on the streets. News travels in a human telegraph line from one to the next. “Shanghai,” they say, the strange word pronounced with an Austrian accent, odd, exotic, remote, spoken with fear and hope, the only possibility.

It is not without misfortune and anxiety that Nini and Poldi end up in Shanghai, Nini arriving first with her parents. Through the eyes of her mother, Kaplan so vividly describes Shanghai during the war: the grime, the excesses, the noises, and the smells. Nini finds a hostess job in the famous Bolero Club, where “glamorous women and powerful men mesh in a kind of dream world, like a scene from a motion picture.”

The couple marries at Ohel Moishe, one of seven synagogues in Shanghai. Later Nini and Poldi go in with a Bulgarian Jew to run Marco’s Bar, a dive establishment frequented by some of Shanghai’s lowliest expats. Life for the Jews in Shanghai changes at the end of 1941 when the Japanese occupy the city. Ellis Jacob discusses the changes during the occupation, but families like Nini and Poldi’s feel the effects of starvation more than those in the Sephardic community. To make ends meet, Poldi devises a plan to obtain American dollars from Harbin in northeast China, also home to a sizeable Jewish community. He and Nini risk their lives to travel up to Harbin and to Japan to trade goods for dollars.

Just like Ellis Jacob and his family, Nini, Poldi, and baby Vivian — along with other family members — emigrate to Canada in 1949, before the Communist revolution.

These memoirs show the diverse experiences of Jews in Shanghai during the war. While these families came from different backgrounds, they experience similar hardships during the war and all end up immigrating to Canada to start afresh.
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