Feature
by Sara Jo Ben Zvi

Cohen cartoon, published by the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1944. Courtesy of Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee National Archives.
Eight o'clock at night in the East End of London, 1929. The smell of frying fish and latkes wafts deliciously through the house. The table is laid with the finest china. “Who’s it all for?” the eight-year-old asks his mother. “The Chinese general is coming,” she answers cryptically.

Cyril Sherer, now ninety, remembers the large hand that patted his head, the heavyset man in the suit who smelled vaguely of cigars, and how quickly the fish and latkes disappeared. The fellow had asked to use the phone – “This is General Morris Abraham Cohen” – and spoken to “Sir John” about buying trucks – hundreds of trucks – for millions of pounds. Trucks for China.

Morris Cohen, or Ma Kun, as he was known in the country where he felt most at home, arrived in England at age three from Radzanow, a Polish shtetl not far from Warsaw, where he was born in 1887. His father, wheelwright Joseph Miaczyn, had left for America some years earlier but never got farther than London’s East End. He changed both his name and his profession, becoming Joseph Cohen – easier for the English to pronounce – and toiling over a sewing machine in a garment workshop, like thousands of other Jewish immigrants. His son would later use the original family name as a code to identify arms shipments.

Morris showed his independence early – at age five he was already chopping up empty fish crates with his mother’s meat cleaver and selling them for firewood. The enterprising youngster also earned halfpennies drumming up business for a glazier by breaking windows, and before age ten was a regular spectator – and contestant – at boxing matches at blacksmith shops and arcades. Under the name “Cockney Cohen,” the pudgy nine-year-old with the oversized head walked away with a small portion of the money betted on his victories – as well as numerous broken noses.

A Reformed Character?

School threatened to end Morris’ wheeling and dealing, so he ran away from the Jews’ Infants School (where he’d been dragged by his older sister Rose, and stayed out all night for fear of being beaten. He came home to find his father waiting for him, having searched for him all night, ready to deliver the punishment he so richly deserved. After that Moishe (as he was known by the family) stayed in school, at least during the day. His father bribed him to attend evening classes at the Jews’ Free School, unintentionally giving him the means to enjoy the temptations of the East End – music halls, variety shows, and freak displays like the famous “Elephant Man.” He dropped boxing for more lucrative and less painful pastimes, helping “Harry the Gonof (Thief)” attract naieve customers to his sixpenny purse stand in the hope of winning the “lucky purse” that held a shilling. Morris’ job was to “buy” the purse and “find” the shilling, then return it to his boss that evening. He soon graduated to pickpocketing.

In April 1900 Morris was nabbed by the police. Not yet thirteen, he claimed to be only ten, making him ineligible for prison. The magistrate sent him to a workhouse for two weeks, then sentenced him to five years of reform school under the charge of Israel Ellis, a Hebrew master retained by the Jewish community to keep an eye on its boys. Morris was lucky – within a year
the Hayes Industrial School was set up for Jewish boys, with Ellis as headmaster. Compared with the overcrowded East End, the twelve-acre site and brick building with dining hall, gym, and library were luxurious. Discipline was strict – the boys kept the place spotless, and grew vegetables and raised poultry to supply the kitchen as well as for sale, all in addition to their regular studies, military drills, and exercise.

But in 1905, with his schooling behind him, Morris had to seek new horizons. Not keen on having another mouth to feed, Joseph and Sheindel Cohen adopted the British Empire’s solution for a large proportion of its undesirables – its vast, empty colonial territories. With his few possessions in a tin trunk and five sovereigns in his pocket, Morris was sent to Canada, to the province soon to be known as Saskatchewan. Abe Hyams, an acquaintance of his father’s, met him in Wapella, a small settlement some fourteen hundred kilometers west of Quebec, and helped him find employment as a farmhand with a homesteader named Robert Nicholson. “I am now busy with the fall plowing and am putting in twelve hours a day,” he wrote to his ex-headmaster, adding that he’d bought a fur coat, since the climate in Saskatchewan rivaled that of central Siberia. Coworker Bobby Clark taught him to shoot at beer barrels with a gun in each hand, and how to cheat at cards, especially poker.

After a few months as a brick laborer, and a few weeks with a traveling circus, Morris settled in Winnipeg, the “Chicago of the North,” selling fake gold rings and watches. Jailed together with a friend for suspicious involvement with an underage girl, Cohen spent six months “cooling off,” then left to try his luck in Saskatoon. He joined a gang of pickpockets, and discovered a convenient gambling joint in the back of a Chinese restaurant.

The Chinese were one of the largest and probably most visible immigrant populations in British Columbia, brought there as miners during the gold rush, then as laborers building the transcontinental railway. Many provided much needed services in these male-dominated towns – laundries and restaurants as well as brothels and gambling dens. Cohen converted his daytime “take” into higher sums at night, practicing the skills he’d learnt from Bobby Clark, and sometimes playing for the house, splitting his winnings with the restaurant’s owner, a Chinaman in his fifties named Mah Sam. Morris formed ties within the close-knit Chinese community, becoming particularly close to Mah. Perhaps the persecution and discrimination suffered by the Chinese struck a chord. In any case, the relationship changed Cohen’s life.

**White Knight in Chinese Restaurant**

Coming into the restaurant late one night, he found Mah frantically twisting a diamond ring off his finger, apparently at gunpoint. Silently approaching, Cohen attacked the thief. It was an unheard of act, a white man coming to the aid of a Chinese, and brought Morris into the inner circle of the Cantonese exiles living in Saskatoon.

Mah told Cohen about the open-door policy the British had forced on China after its defeat in the Opium Wars, and the establishment of International Settlements in various Chinese ports – notably Shanghai – in the mid-nineteenth century, which had introduced Western ideas of freedom and social reform. After a decade of political upheaval had crippled the Chinese imperial dynasty, China was ripe for change. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), a medical student from Guangdong (Canton), began plotting to capture the province and reform China. Sun’s plot was discovered and he fled to Japan. He traveled widely, gaining
support for his Chinese Nationalist League, which aimed to bring swift progress as well as socialism to China.

Branches opened across the U.S., then spread to Canada. Mah Sam joined the league and became politically active. Sun arrived in Canada in February 1911, drawing huge crowds of Chinese immigrants. Large sums were raised, and membership reached ten thousand worldwide. But Cohen was in jail, this time for pick-pocketing. Mah too was taken in after a raid on his gambling joint, bringing the two men even closer.

Meanwhile, revolution broke out in China. Sun made his way back and, largely due to internecine bickering, was elected provisional president of China. The child emperor Puyi abdicated, Sun stepped down in favor of the imperial general Yuan Shikai, and a republic was declared.

As Chinese throughout Canada celebrated, Mah Sam took Cohen to the Nationalist League lodge in Calgary. Mah vouched for him, and two hundred Chinese members voted to accept Cohen as a member. Cohen took the oath of allegiance, “pledging to devote his life to the service of Sun Yat-sen and the liberation of the Chinese people.”

By 1912, Cohen had moved to Edmonton, Alberta, and was selling real estate. His success allowed him to visit his parents, buy them a new house in a better neighborhood and shower his many siblings with gifts. He used his new respectability to become an oaths commissioner, helping Chinese immigrants with the naturalization process. Meanwhile, Sun Yat-sen had run into trouble in China. General Yuan was crushing opposition and trying to reinstate the monarchy with himself as emperor. Sun launched a counterrevolution, recruiting squads of overseas Chinese for his brigades. Cohen helped drill some of these units before their departure, and reputedly also acquired some two hundred rifles for Sun, posting them to China as sewing machines.

During World War One, the Canadian economy deteriorated. With legal employment scarce, Cohen enlisted, joining the British war effort along with numerous other Canadians, working his way up from lance corporal to acting sergeant.

His unit built and maintained the railway system that supplied the British front near Ypres, Belgium and transported the wounded to field hospitals. Chinese coolies employed by the army helped clear land, build bridges, and drain swamps for the tracks, and Morris, who was good at motivating these workers with whom most officers couldn’t communicate, was put in charge of a battalion. Once the war ended in 1918, however, he became increasingly impatient with army discipline and was constantly punished, his pay docked and his rank reduced, for being absent without leave.

Back in Edmonton, Morris struggled to maintain respectability as a war veteran and an advocate of Chinese rights, although jobs were scarce and he ran afoul of the law on suspicions of gambling. He campaigned for Chinese cooks to be paid the same as their white counterparts, and fought hard to dispel fears that the immigrants were taking jobs away from war veterans.

Eyes on Madame Sun

In China, meanwhile, President Yuan had died and Sun Yat-sen was working to establish himself, if not as president of a united China, at least as ruler of Canton. Seeking a foreign contractor
to accelerate the development of China’s railways, he engaged Cohen, who was looking for a reason to visit the country. Morris contacted the former commander of his railway battalion in Belgium, J. W. Stuart, and arranged to represent his firm, Northern Construction and J. W. Stuart Ltd., in negotiations with Sun in Shanghai. It was 1922. Cohen secured an interview with Sun Yat-sen in his home. Morris recalled this first meeting with his idol: “...we’d hardly begun to talk when Madame Sun walked in, and after that I’d only got eyes for her” (Charles Drage, Two-Gun Cohen, p. 83). Cohen subsequently snagged a job organizing security for Sun’s household. The relationship formed as a result would change this street-smart drifter into the last thing he’d expected to be – an idealist.

A constant womanizer, he nevertheless worshipped Madame Sun to the point of self-sacrifice. In a country where anything could be bought, he was unbribable in arms negotiations for Sun’s troops, apart from his standard four-and-a-half-percent commission. He knew how to do favors and how to call them in, and money always burned a hole in his pocket. He was famous for his generosity – and his parties, especially among the Europeans living in Shanghai’s International Settlement.

At first, Cohen’s role was quiet enough. He lolled on the sofa outside Sun’s rooms in Shanghai, inspecting everyone who came to meet the politician. Cohen trained Sun’s bodyguards to box and fight, adopting the Chinese nickname Kow-hen or Mah Kun (the closest the Chinese could get to Moishe Cohen). Then in February 1923, forces allied with Sun defeated his rival, Chen Jiongming. By early March, Sun was generalissimo of China’s military government, effectively head of state.

Cohen’s role expanded. Although still essentially a body guard, his negotiating partners were now foreign governments, and he claimed a role in setting up Sun’s officers’ academy in Whampoa. His contacts were legendary, although once, when his boasting about his influence reached Sun’s ears, he was summarily dismissed. Cohen went cap in hand to Sun and was soon reinstated.

When Stalin sent an agent, Michael Borodin, to promote communism in China, Cohen communicated with him in Yiddish while conspiring against him behind his back. Morris was friendly with Zhou Enlai, founder of the Chinese Communist party, but also had close ties ardent capitalists such as the powerful Soong family, notably T. V. Soong, brother of Madame Sun and Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

The Zionist Connection

An ardent Zionist, and it could be that he had something to do Sun’s response to a letter from Nissim Elias Benjamin Ezra, founder of the first English language Zionist magazine, Israel’s Messenger, produced in Shanghai.

Cohen carefully kept a copy of this letter, dated April 24, 1920, which proved crucial in confirming Sun’s support for the Zionist enterprise many years later.

When Sun Yat-sen died suddenly in 1925, Cohen was away, combining a visit to his family in London with a trip to Canada to buy weaponry. He hurried back for the funeral, then remained in China to work for Sun’s successors – first for his son, Sun Fo, who became mayor of Canton, and then for Chiang Kai-shek, who imposed martial law in 1926 to prevent a communist uprising. In the ensuing destruction of communist strongholds in 1927 – including the indiscriminate killing of all communists after
they’d staged a revolt in Canton – Cohen scrambled to protect the central bank, where he was responsible for security under T. V. Soong. Madame Sun, refusing to renounce communism, left China for Moscow, returning only in 1929.

Cohen busied himself as a brigadier general under Chiang, touting himself among foreigners – including the press – as an expert on the latest developments in China, but he was also involved in the local Jewish community. When young representatives of Jabotinsky’s Betar Revisionist Zionist movement came to raise funds and awareness in Shanghai, he took them under his wing, introducing them to the International Settlement’s glittering nightlife. After Joseph Cohen’s death in 1935, Morris always visited the synagogue in Shanghai on the Sabbath closest to his father’s yahrzeit – each time leaving a hundred dollar check on the cantor’s platform.

From 1931 onward, the Japanese saw the ongoing rivalry between communist and nationalist forces as a golden opportunity to realize their territorial ambitions in China. The conflict peaked in 1937 with the Japanese capture of Shanghai and Nanjing, accompanied by the appalling torture, rape, and murder of Chinese citizens. The International Settlement was initially spared, and as a result was flooded with Chinese refugees from the carnage, who added to the Jewish refugees seeking refuge from Hitler’s Europe in the one location where no entry visa was required.

A Japanese Prisoner

Cohen had moved south, first to Canton, then to Chongqing (in Sichuan province), along with the fleeing Chinese government, although he also spent extensive periods in Hong Kong, which as a British colony seemed fairly safe from Japanese attack. Madame Sun had settled there, and Cohen served as her bodyguard. In December 1941, he started urging her to escape, sure she would make an ideal target for the Japanese. She was finally airlifted out to Chongqing with other prominent members of the Chinese government.

The Japanese attacked Hong Kong, Malaya, and the Philippines concurrently with Pearl Harbor, on December 7–8. By December 25, the British had lost Hong Kong. Foreign residents, Cohen among them, were interned in horribly overcrowded hotels and brothels on the waterfront, then moved to internment camps. Cohen was sent to Stanley, an isthmus at the southern end of Hong Kong.

The internees received very limited rations, from which the prison governor and staff took extensive cuts for sale on the black market. Cohen was taken to the mainland for questioning because the Japanese were aware of his reputation and close ties to the Chinese government. He was imprisoned and beaten. After a week or so, a rumor spread that he was to be executed. He gave away everything he had to other prisoners, and was then forced to kneel down in the interrogation room. A Japanese officer drew a huge Samurai sword, and Cohen muttered Shema Yisrael and awaited his end. Instead he got a kick in the ribs and was sent back to Stanley. Newspaper reports of his execution circulated, but his family continued to hope he might still be alive.

The Japanese gradually reduced the camp’s electricity, so inmates were forced to cook on makeshift fires and burn peanut oil – if they could spare it from cooking – to light the long nights. They carried water from a nearby stream. Cohen’s broad girth was quickly depleted, his flesh hung loosely on his wide frame, and he wandered the island – like most of the men – bare-chested in the heat, wearing shoes with their backs cut away for sandals. The Red Cross once distributed seventy-five dollars among the prisoners. Cohen spent his entire share on Chinese brown sugar, giving it all away to the other internees’ children. An exchange of Japanese, Canadian and American prisoners was finally arranged in August 1943, and Cohen, as a Canadian citizen, boarded the Red Cross ship Teia Maru, transferring to the HMS Gripsholm at Goa. The last internees were released only with the Japanese defeat in 1945.
Cohen’s family heaved a sigh of relief when he wired them on his arrival in South Africa. He sat out the rest of the war in Canada, and eagerly awaited developments in China. In the meantime, he was feted by the Jewish community in Montreal. After a whirlwind courtship, Morris married Judith Clark, a divorcée eighteen years his junior. Though Cohen tried to play the doting husband, he needed an occupation. Unable to find anything that suited him, he lived off his wife’s dress-shop income, lectured on Chinese affairs as well as on the ancient Jewish community of Kai-feng, and tried to organize material for his memoirs.

Capitalizing on the Past

In April 1945, two weeks before the surrender of the Reich, the United Nations’ first conference opened in San Francisco. Jews the world over wanted this successor to the obsolete League of Nations to ensure that the British honor their commitment to creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. A delegation of eminent Jews, including the Canadian magnate Samuel Bronfman and American Zionist rabbi Israel Goldstein, descended on the conference to lobby as many countries as they could. Mindful of Cohen’s relationship with the Chinese, Bronfman and Goldstein arranged for him to attend, hoping he could influence the Chinese delegation to support a motion establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. T. V. Soong and Chinese ambassador Wellington Koo greeted him as an old friend. Cyril Sherer claims that Cohen produced Sun Yat-sen’s letter expressing his sympathy for Zionism, and that clinched their support.

By January 1946, Cohen was back in China looking for his niche. He spoke to the Jewish Agency about importing potash from the Dead Sea as fertilizer for China, delivered Zionist lectures among Betar supporters in Shanghai, and intervened to save a Jewish merchant from Tianjin who was being prosecuted for collaborating with the Japanese. But no business materialized, and he had a wife waiting back in Montreal. China was in turmoil, with Chiang’s nationalists battling Mao Zedong’s communists for control of the nation. Cohen was convinced that his nationalist friends would win out. “Communism is an aberration in the Chinese character,” he asserted, but circumstances soon proved him wrong.

In the tense period before Israel’s independence in 1948, on one of his many trips to Shanghai, Cohen was introduced to two Irgun agents who were planning attacks on British installations in south-east Asia – the dry docks of Singapore and the Hong Kong airport – should the British not leave Palestine as planned in May. Cohen helped them plan the onslaught and supplied them with rifles, machine guns and identity papers, but thankfully the British left and the plans never came to fruition.

By 1949, a plunging Chinese economy and rampant corruption among the nationalist forces had made Chiang Kai-shek increasingly unpopular. Civil order broke down, and he invited the U.S. to help him negotiate with the communists. By the end of the year he had left with two million troops to establish a government in Taiwan. But Cohen’s romance with China was far from over. His marriage deteriorated, as Judith became disillusioned with a husband who spent more time abroad than at home and treated her earnings as if they were his own. She filed for divorce, and Cohen moved near his sister in England. His memoirs, a wild mix of fact and fiction written by his friend Charles Drage, were published, and he set out on a series of trips to promote the book. But nothing really worked for him.

Eventually, in 1959, Rolls-Royce realized that Cohen’s Chinese contacts might be useful, and he began negotiating contracts for airplane engines with Beijing. The communists cultivated him as a useful mouthpiece, and the government in Taiwan paid him a monthly fee for contributing historical material to the Historical Commission of the Revolution. He continued to see himself as a likely go-between in a possible reconciliation between Taiwan and mainland China. Though Mau Zedong’s resettlement policies created widespread famine in China, Cohen consistently complimented the regime, ignoring the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution.

In 1966, Cohen was invited to make an official visit to China in 1966, for the hundredth anniversary of Sun Yat-sen’s birth, where he was the only Westerner on the podium. He stopped en route in Israel, returning in 1969 when, according to Cyril Sherer, he was again asked to intervene with the Chinese. The detonators for button mines, small plastic explosives used by Arab terrorists against Israeli civilian targets, (most notably in Haifa), were thought to have been supplied by China. Cohen made no promises, but after he met Zhou Enlai in Geneva that year, the button mines ceased to be a hazard.

Cohen died in Manchester in 1970 at age eighty-three, and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Salford. Madame Sun paid for his tombstone, dictating the inscription in English and Chinese via the Chinese Embassy in London: “This is the tomb of Ma Kun inscribed by Soong Qingling, vice chairman of the People’s Republic of China Beijing.” He was a friend of China to the end.

Further reading:

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