Becoming the Wagamama Bride
The beginning of my story

The Extraordinary Adventures of Two-Gun Cohen

Poetry by Yosl Mlotek

Cover art: Original painting by Liane Wakabayashi
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.

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Dear Editor:

I’m a 21-year old journalism student currently studying at Yeshiva University in New York City.

I’ve always held a fascination with East Asian culture and art. When I was 16 that passion took me to Japan. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I’ll never forget visiting the Jewish community in Kobe, sipping tea with the Rebbitsin of Chabad in Tokyo, and discovering and exploring an entirely different world than my own. I’m graduating next week and I would love to take another trip to the Far East. I was wondering if you could direct me to any programs specifically for college/graduate age Jewish students. I have a few friends who are also interested. I’ve heard of the program Justifi, which travels to Thailand. Are there any other tours/programs targeting young Jewish activists?

Thank you.

All the best,

Ariana Blum

Dear Ariana:

There are quite a few great programs to choose from in the region for young Jewish activists. In addition to Justifi, which you mentioned, other worthwhile programs include: JDC-Gabriel Project Mumbai Indian Internship Program, The JDC Jewish Service Corps, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) Volunteer Summer Program and Tevel b’Tzedek (The Earth In Justice) in Nepal. These are all organizations to explore and to follow their work in general. There are a number of other organizations also looking into developing young professional service-geared programs for the region.

We are going to look into putting together a comprehensive Jewish service guide for the region and hope to also be able to include more local, community initiatives.

Thanks for the message and we look forward to hearing what great things you accomplish in the region. Mazal tov on your graduation.

Best of luck,

Erica
Dear Readers:

Welcome to Issue 12 of Asian Jewish Life and welcome to the long days of summer. This is slightly different from others as it offers an extremely personal and intimate look into the lives of several incredible Jews in Asia. First, we have extended our poetry section to allow for a four-page spread featuring the poetry of Yosl Mlotek. These poems, printed with permission from the Mlotek family, were written by Mlotek between 1941-1943 in the Shanghai ghetto in the Hongkou District of Shanghai where he lived among nearly 17,000 other Jewish Holocaust refugees.

Connecting past to present, we bring a Traveler’s Diary piece by Shaun Goldstone, a JDC Ralph I. Goldman Fellow, An Unexpected Encounter in Shanghai. He writes about meeting two women whose mixed Chinese-Jewish identities left them behind when the stateless Jewish refugees eventually left Shanghai.

They however, of course, are not alone in being the children of a marriage between Jews and Asians. In this issue was also have included two very different stories from Jewish women who both call Japan home and have married Japanese men. The cover art is representative of the beautiful love story and courtship between artist Liane Wakabayashi and her husband, Aki. In Becoming the Wagamama Bride - The beginning of her story, we hear from So-Fan Han in Just a Chinese Jew and his Tefillin. So-Fan wrote a beautifully moving piece, My Two Diasporas-On being Jewish and Chinese for AJL in Issue 10.

Also beautifully blending identities, this time in the kitchen, we have included a recipe for Kosher Pad Thai by Allaya Fleischer. The recipe shows how even the most complex of Asian flavors can be adapted into a kosher recipe.

But our collaboration doesn’t end with flavors. We have worked with Segula magazine and are jointly co-publishing Two-Gun Cohen, by Sara Jo Ben Zvi, both in our current issues. It appears in AJL as The Extraordinary Adventures of Two-Gun Cohen.

Sometimes it is nice, though, to stay with the familiar. In that vein, we have of course, included Book Reviews by Susan Blumberg-Kason. Susan also interviews author Dana Sachs this issue in Penned with an Easterly Perspective, focusing on her new book The Secret of the Nightingale Palace but also discusses her four previous books, all four of which were set in Vietnam.

Tiberiu Weisz has also returned again to continue his series comparing and contrasting Jewish and Chinese wisdom. In this issue, Tiberiu discusses Derech Eretz and the Confucian Way- A study of roots and inextricable links.

Lastly, in case you missed it, AJL was awarded a New Media Award from Bechol Lashon for their write-up included in part, that AJL “represents the best of what Jewish media can be in the 21st century.” Thanks again to Bechol Lashon for the tremendous honor.

We have also been awarded a Natan grant which, as a non-profit, is essential for allowing us to continue the work we are doing. We are grateful.

And we have more great news. Susan-Blumberg Kason, AJL’s Books Editor, has a publishing contract for her memoir, Good Chinese Wife, with the publisher Sourcebooks. The forthcoming memoir’s publication date is Spring 2014.

Enjoy! Have a great summer.

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief

Asian Jewish Life is a free quarterly publication designed to share regional Jewish thoughts, ideas and culture and promote unity. It also celebrates our individuality and our diverse backgrounds and customs.

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Editor-in-Chief
Erica Lyons

Copy Editor
Jana Daniels

Books Editor
Susan Blumberg-Kason

Photography Editor
Allison Heliczer

Designer
Terry Chow

Board of Directors
Eli Bitan, Bruce Einhorn, Peter Kaminsky, Amy Mines, David Zweig
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 naïve 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.

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 bodyguard, 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, editor of the first English language Zionist magazine, Israel’s Messenger, produced in Shanghai.

I ... wish to assure you of my sympathy for this movement – which is one of the greatest movements of the present time... to restore your wonderful and historic nation... which rightly deserves an honourable place in the family of nations.

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 plummeting 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:


Many thanks are due to Cyril Sherer for his anecdotes, time, patience and references in the preparation of this article.

Segula magazine, http://www.segulamag.com
Just a Chinese Jew and his Tefillin
I lay Tefillin every day. I don’t consider myself a particularly good Jew. I don’t wear a kipa, I don’t keep kosher and I only observe Shabbat and the holidays when I’m with other Jews, which is seldom. I can’t speak Hebrew, I don’t know the songs; most of my friends don’t even know that I’m Jewish. But against all odds, I do lay Tefillin every day.

I don’t always do it in a timely manner. I try to do it in the mornings but often I end up doing it just before sunset, because I’ve put it off all day. Sometimes I have to rush across town to make it in time, because I didn’t bring my Tefillin with me. But if that’s what I need to do, it’s what I do, because I do Tefillin every day.

I always lay Tefillin by myself because most of my friends aren’t Jews, and those who are don’t do it. My rabbi, my relatives, and anyone else that I might lay Tefillin with live far away as my Judaism is now rooted in China (and Israel of course).

It’s hard to explain and most of my friends would be confused to see me do it. If people are around, I go somewhere quiet and private. When I lay Tefillin, I am alone with God - not an abstracted idea of God, but Hashem, the Name, the God of the Hebrews. The God who instructed my ancestors to bind His word to their hands and heads, the way I do every day, the way it has been done for thousands of years. When I say the prayers, I say them just above a whisper, because I can feel the ear of God close to my lips.

Sometimes, on Shabbat, when I don’t do Tefillin, I feel the urge to pray anyway. On one of these occasions I was with a Catholic friend of mine. I told him I felt like praying and asked if he would lead us in a prayer. I had none of my own. He said we could do the Liturgy of the Hours, a progressive daily prayer that is said at dawn, morning, noon, evening, and midnight. Each of the 365 days of the calendar has 5 different prayers, and they all change each day.

When midnight came, my friend pulled out a thick leather-bound Catholic prayer book. In it, we looked up the appropriate reading for the date and time, and turned to the corresponding verse in his Bible. He began reading the prayer out loud, saying “Hear, O Israel…”

It was the Shema, the prayer I say every day when I lay Tefillin, the only prayer that I know in Hebrew from beginning to end. It had found me, on my day off.

I have never said the Liturgy of the Hours before or since. The odds that I would have been there for this recitation on that day, at that time, are 1 / 1825. The odds of that verse being chosen out of the 31,103 verses in the Christian Bible for inclusion in the Liturgy of the Hours is about 1 / 17. The combined probability of those two things happening is 1 / 31,025.

Compounding the unlikelihood of that event is the fact that I even have Tefillin at all. I am not usually one to spend money
on expensive religious implements especially since I have only recently discovered and connected with my own Judaism.

My Tefillin, again an unlikely probability, were a gift from my Rabbi, Dovi, who I know from the Chabad house in Chengdu, China. The money to purchase them was gifted to him by someone he had told my unusual story to, my story of discovering my Jewish ancestry at the age of 21, and of being Bar Mitzvahed in China at the age of 28. They asked him “This Sasson, does he have Tefillin?” When he told them no, they offered to buy them for me.

By this time, Dovi was in Israel preparing for his younger brother’s wedding. I was en route back to the US by way of Israel and Europe, and Dovi had invited me to the wedding. He received the money for my Tefillin one week before the day of the wedding. He contacted a friend of his who is a Sofer and said “I need a set of Tefillin for my friend for next week.”

The Sofer said “Are you crazy? You can’t make Tefillin in a week. It’s not like milking a cow!” But he told Dovi about a friend of his, another Sofer, who maybe could help him. Apparently, someone had ordered a set of right-handed Tefillin and never come back to claim them. He didn’t leave a name or any contact information, and so Dovi bought them.

Somehow through all this my Tefillin found their way to me, on the balcony at a frenetic Hasidic wedding in Bnei Brak in mid-summer. I was breathless and soaked with sweat from hours of dancing and went outside to get some air. Dovi pulled me aside and said “Sasson, I have surprise for you. I know you want Tefillin…” He flashed a big white smile and proudly produced a little gray cloth pouch holding the shiny black talismans. “Promise,” he said, placing them in my hands, “Promise you will do it every day.”

Please see So-Han’s piece, My Two Diasporas - On being Jewish and Chinese, in Issue 10 of Asian Jewish Life at http://asianjewishlife.org/pages/articles/AJL_Issue_10_Sep2012/AJL_WritersDesk_My2Diasporas.html
“Japan is a difficult country to adopt from,” everyone says. Not only are there few children up for adoption, but it’s the only country in the world where you need to get the parents’ extended family’s approval for the process.

Bloodlines are seen as all-important, one’s ancestors are one’s link to the past. The family registry or koseki goes back generations and lists each birth and marriage, tying family to family. When we got married, I did not take my husband’s name, and this caused a commotion at the ward office, as the clerk said there was no “official space” to put my own name on the form.

My husband stood his ground. “Well, make a space,” he said, knowing that was impossible. One thing about bureaucracy is that it most definitely cannot make a space.

It would have been much easier for him to request or insist that I change my name, but he didn’t. He just waited for the bureaucrat to find a way to remedy the situation. I kept my own name and was added to the koseki.

Then doubts start to flood my mind. If we succeed in adoption, I’ll be bucking the system again.

I know how difficult it is to raise a child, let alone one who is adopted in a country that is not particularly “open” to adoption. In Japan, most adoptions are kept secret. Some children don’t even find out until their parents die.

So we brace ourselves and ask my husband’s father for permission. I find out, to my surprise, that his own father was adopted. Samurai on one side, gangster on the other. My husband has them all in his ancestry—geisha, gangster, samurai, rickshaw driver. This assortment of characters
pleases me, makes me feel less strange for my difference, more welcome. My father-in-law says yes.

We ask his sister, since she lives with us. She says yes. We breathe a big sigh of relief. But still I worry. All the possible scenarios tumble through my mind: I am a Westerner and the child will not look like me, so everyone will know he or she is adopted. I know of foreign women who don’t take their half-Japanese children to school as their children are ashamed and don’t want their peers to know they are “hafu.” And because he is “different,” I don’t want him or her to be the victim of ijime, school bullying. That could lead to hikikomori, someone afraid to leave the house who spends his childhood at home. Even worse, it could lead to jisatsu or suicide. I know I am being neurotic, already thinking about the difficulties the child will face in grade school, middle school, junior high, high school and beyond. I know I am already being a mother.

I share my fears with my husband. He was beaten up in school, too.

“’We turned out okay,” he says. It was why I studied karate and meditation, which ultimately led me to Japan.

“Yeah, but we got our asses kicked a lot!”

“Maybe we went through it so our child wouldn’t have to,” he says.

“That’s a nice thought,” I shake my head. If only that’s how it worked.

We decide that we are already a rainbow family, he with his long hair and stay-at-home job, me with my red streaks and funky yoga studio, not to mention our strange pit-bull mutt and his family’s eccentric lineage. In a conservative neighborhood in a conservative country, we already stand out as freaks. Why not embrace it completely?

Perpetual Yes

In September, the agency calls about a little girl. We say yes. Nothing happens. In December, they call about a boy. We wait. They offer the child to another family. Many young couples are waiting to adopt, and we are low on the list due to our ages.

I have to do something proactive. I am fiercely committed to living my dreams. If I’m not, who else will be? I contact a dozen international adoption agencies. Most of them don’t write back. The few who do bother to respond say they don’t work with families who live

Photo credit: http://www.123rf.com/photo_13872626_japanese-carp-kites-decoration-on-the-children-s-day.html
abroad. We apply in Vietnam. We wait some more.

Finally, I make Shogo call the orphanage. I insist that he tell them to stop calling us every month to ask if we are interested in a different child.

“Tell them to put a perpetual ‘yes’ on our file, ok? Tell them that whatever child they have available, we are interested.”

“What child?”

“Yes. Whatever child.”

I want to say all those things like “It isn’t fair,” and “Why us?” but I already know the answers to those questions, that there are no answers. This is our fate, our journey, our path.

And somehow, miraculously, it works.

The little boy they called us about a few months ago is available again.

“Yes!” we say, eager to meet the child who is destined to be ours.

But when they come to our house to tell us about him, the information is sketchy at best.

“Do you have a picture?” I ask.

No picture.

This astounds me. More people have cameras in Japan than have driver’s licenses. Japan is the land of the camera--how could they not have a picture?

“Are you interested or not?” they ask. They’re not messing around with this child. He’s suffered enough.

“We’re interested,” we say together.

And for the second time in my life, I get down on my knees and pray.

**Mothering Zen**

We visit Yuto in the orphanage for hours, days, weeks, months. Finally, we can bring him home for an overnight. Then, finally, we can bring him home forever, just after his second birthday.

We go to a playground where he can see the bullet trains passing overhead. At the playground, he comes up to the other kids and wants to play with their toys, or play with their balls, or play with them in general. He likes to hold hands. He wants contact, touch, closeness. Because he grew up in an orphanage where everything was communal, he misses it. He has no concept of personal ownership.

The first time we give him Ai-Ai, the stuffed monkey we’d brought to take with him in the car—he tries to leave it behind at the orphanage. We have to convince him that he can keep it: he’s never had a single thing of his own.

He is the opposite of other kids, who have to learn how to share. He brings his own toys to share, but the other kids don’t take much interest in them. I don’t want to try to make sense of things like this, or explain everything to him. He’ll learn. I want to cut a path in this crazy forest of life with him. Sitting Zen. Walking Zen. Playing Zen. Mothering Zen. It’s all practice, and we have a lifetime.

But my aunt doesn’t. I want him to meet her before she dies.

So we bring him to San Francisco. He loves his 7-year old cousin Shaviv, but he cannot pronounce Sh, so he calls him Habib. My sister tells me Habib means “friend” in Hebrew.

We see a homeless man with a cat on the street in front of Macy’s on Union Square. The cat has been hit by a car and the man needs money for its hospital bills. Everyone rushes by the man and the cat, but Yuto pulls my arm, insists on petting the cat. Then he sits down on the pavement and tries to pick up the cat to hug it. I tell him the cat is hurt and he shouldn’t touch it. So he pets it instead. Now people stop to look at the little boy sitting on the sidewalk, blocking their way. Some mothers pull their children away. A photographer stops to take a picture. Others put money in the basket. More children come to sit by his side.

Somehow, he brings together the splintered worlds of strangers. He is a healer of cats and hearts, a small wonder in this world of so many wonders. If I ever felt any doubts, I do not now.

**All That has Divided Us Will Merge**

Though there are many customs for birth in Japan—the mother returning to her parents’ house, a celebration of the child’s first solid foods—we’ve missed them all. So we return to California to hold a Jewish baby naming ceremony for Yuto. Many people from my mother’s community gather to welcome him, though we are strangers. Yuto is given the
name Benjamin after his maternal grandfather, who came from Ludz, Poland, and Walter Benjamin, the Jewish writer/philosopher and member of the resistance in WWII. There is a ceremony where we throw all of our sins into the Napa River. Any time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in the Jewish tradition, it is customary to throw breadcrumbs into a body of water as a symbolic act of repentance. The ritual is called Tashlich, A Sending Out. We gather at a waterfront to “cast away” the sins of the past and resolve to have a better year in the year to come.

My mother and stepfather, father and stepmother, my sisters and their sons are there. The whole family has gathered to heal and rejoice. All over the world, it is a holy time. In India it is the Ganesha festival, honoring the Elephant god of new beginnings and remover of obstacles. In the Muslim world, it is Ramadan.

My mother’s friends, most of whom I don’t know, come up to congratulate us. Some tell me their stories, of how they too were adopted, or how they have adopted children, and what a wonderful mitzvah it is.

Tossing bread into the water, everything is still. It is a beautiful moment.

The congregation has prepared a special blessing for the occasion. It says:

May the one who blessed your ancestors bless you. We hope that you will be a blessing to everyone you know, humanity is blessed to have you.

Yuto sits atop his father’s shoulders wearing his beaded yarmulke, smiling and dancing. Yuto is Jewish and Japanese, he is universal.

I look at Shogo and see that he is crying, too.

Humanity is blessed to have you.

The adults gather and say a Shabbat prayer:

And then all that has divided us will merge
Then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both women and men will be gentle
And then both men and women will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another’s will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
Then all will share equally in the Earth’s abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life’s creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the environment
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

My mother has ordered a special cake for Yuto decorated with Pokemon, though Yuto seems to be the only one there who does not know who Pokemon is. He devours the cake, which says: “Mazel Tov, Yuto. Welcome to the Tribe.”

And then all that has divided us will merge
Then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both women and men will be gentle
And then both men and women will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another’s will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
Then all will share equally in the Earth’s abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life’s creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the environment
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

This excerpt was adapted from a piece originally published by Shambhala Sun. It appears here with permission.
Shanghai (1942)

Shanghai --
The city beckons
With a thousand passionate eyes.
Neon lights dazzle
A marvelous rainbow.

Changing colors, moving
Glittering mercury.
Up and down, down and up --
An electric thunderstorm.

-- Buy, buy these cigars
The brand "Two Times F"!
-- Women don’t be fooled
Silks, socks, the brand "Blef."

On houses
On roofs
On chimneys
And still higher --
Buy! Buy!

Signal lights,
Messages
Call and pull, allure
Remind and caress
Buy! Buy!
And at the side
Runs
A man in harness -- a horse,
Feet barely touch the ground.
Behind him -- ten, hundreds more
Run, hurry, noisily.
They must run faster, faster --
Otherwise how to be sure
Though at night he runs
Even twenty times in a circle
Whether there'll be
A small bowl of rice.

--
"Your eyes, your glances
have caught me" --
He fell into the street, there he lays
Drunken sounds --

"International Bar"
-- Enter
-- Whisky, beer?
-- Well I prefer liquor....

-- How nicely you dance this waltz...
One, two, three
One, two, three
-- I kiss your swan-like neck
One, two, three
One, two, three
Please not so rigid,
Not nice like this...the guests
-- But you have strange
eyes...
Not here. My room -- higher...
upstairs...
One, two, three
One, two, three
"International Bar"...--

And outside
"Dear Sir, Sir,
I have not eaten so long...
Shadows at the wall
Pale hands are thrust:
Mister, food...food..."

Above -- jazz music
And drunken laughter.
Below a tight cluster
China's daughters
Stand at the wall
Together with their mothers
And above mocking them
A large lit advertisement:
Buy! Buy!

Shanghai
Nanking Road
The city screams
From a thousand throats
And from a thousand eyes.
Even louder, shriller
Shouts respond
Scream China! Shanghai, scream!
Through oceans and countries,
Through closures and walls,
I see my mother's
Cracked hands.

I hear my mother's
Sobs and laments
-- Where are my children
Lost and alone?

I hear her sobs,
Am aware of her grief
And each painful tear
Like a stone on my path.

My foolish heart
Races back toward home.
The heart knows no borders
Or artificial fences.

The heart knows no structures
Protected by guards.
Break down the gate,
I'm at her door.

I meet my mother
Already old with grey hair.
She hugs me, a caress,
And says:

"Flown away, flown afar like birds in autumn,
Tell, my children, my life, to that land.
Only yesterday have I rocked your cradle
Singing songs for you about golden happiness.

Today you flew away like leaves in the wind,
Already you're homesick, is it the truth my child?
Good, at least you've returned
To my dreams, my longing, my golden happiness."

Together I was
With mother.
No longer solitary
No longer alone.

I feel every tear that drops
On my like a blow.
Only at mother's side is it good --
Good, so...good....
A Letter (1943)

A word, a word about me -- I'll come for sure,
To me the great world's strange and tight.
Each night on firmaments I write
A fev'rish letter to you, "I long..."

I mark with all the brightest stars
The most beautiful, tender song of faith.
And when you hear the rustling evening song--
Know, that it brings to you my greeting.

And if the sun will once neglect to shine,
Is barely seen through foggy clouds,
Know, that it was extinguished by the flames
Reflected in my longing dreams.
A word, a word about me -- I'll come for sure,
My storms carry me far like grains of sand.
In wandering I have found neither
Clarity nor true pleasure...

In fev'rish nights I hear your name,
Your scorching tears my body burn.
Each wind whispers a reminder,
In every sound I hear your longing call.
Aki worked for Akahigedo, a traditional Eastern medicine clinic that based its work ethic on the old Edo practice of training staff to surpass acupuncture and shiatsu technique. To become a master, you had to become acquainted with your own soul. The master of this clinic trained young inexperienced doctors and therapists to empathize with patients of any age and illness. The tradeoff for the long hours at work was that these therapists became highly skilled and wizened at a young age. And because Aki had chosen to commit to the life of a therapist at Akahigedo, I was free to design my life as I wished. I threw myself headlong into journalism, which led to becoming a writing teacher, then an artist and finally after seven long years of waiting for Aki’s graduation from clinic life, becoming a mother.

My in-laws, Toshihiko and Hiroko, accepted me into the household in a way that allowed for as much or as little participation as I wanted. They did this so elegantly that I have often asked myself when I am in their shoes, when my son Seiji and my daughter Mirai bring home their future partners, will I be able to act as graciously, good-humored, financially generous and empathetic as Hiroko and Toshihiko have done for me?

The Wakabayashis got a wild card with me as their daughter-in-law. They thought they were getting an American and they assumed they knew all about Americans. Aki’s uncle Tsuneo married his college sweetheart and settled in California. Now as the second foreigner to enter the family, in the true Wakabayashi tradition, I was warmly accepted -- even though they didn’t know the first thing about Jews.
Toshihiko and Hiroko had no firsthand experience of the laws and customs guiding how a Jew leads their life. They didn’t know, for example, about the weekly day of rest, Shabbat. My in-laws would soon discover restrictions on what I could and couldn’t eat, baffling to this seafood loving family. However, good-natured tolerance was offered consistently. To this day, I am amazed by the Wakabayashi principle: if their son Aki was okay with my beliefs and practices they would be too. And that position — meddle-free marriage — keeps us going to this day.

We Jewish women in Japan married to local boys are rare. There are few of us in Tokyo, a city of 12 million at the core and 35 million if we include the suburbs. Yet here we are, a tidy dozen women. We see each other at Jewish holidays. Occasionally, we do yoga together and exchange homeopathy and meet up for tea. We say goodbye to each other as we depart Japan after long decades. And there is a reason why we must go. If the truth be said, it’s because we made difficult brides. We are feminists. We are educated. We want our careers. We need our free time for meeting friends, for continued education, for hobbies, relaxation and exercise. We are what you would call “wagamama brides.”

We appear selfish and self-serving. We are the center of our own stellar lives. We want trips overseas, not just a few days, we want weeks if not months of rest, relaxation and recharge in order to come back and appreciate all that is good here.

Speaking personally now, I am one of the few who remained. On September 27th, 2012 I marked my 25th year in Japan. Still, my ways are not exactly ‘local.’ I still can’t help indulge myself to a remark, a critique, a summary of life as I see it. In fact, to the untrained ear, I offer a running commentary from morning to night. Since it comes so naturally, I thought, why not write it down? I tried years ago when I assumed I had a lot to say on the subject of a Jewish woman’s marriage to a Japanese. This was before we had kids. This was before we reached the seven-year watershed in our marriage, that moment of truth that for us was the turning point in a relationship that was impossible, not because it was really difficult, but because we had impossible expectations of each other in the very limited time we were physically in each other’s presence. These were the clinic years—when Aki worked long hours. We both entered holy matrimony with assumptions that created pretty high expectations and when we both realized we had not married our perfect partner but we had married the partner perfect for maximum soul growth in this life, we resolved to breath easier with each other. We had no idea what our marriage would become once we actually spent time with each other. Aki quit the clinic in 1997. I sent him on a round-the-world trip for six months, told him to run our savings out, and through it all, Aki’s parents watched but didn’t bat an eye -- even though they knew that their penniless son would soon be returning from his grand tour in time to welcome our first child into the world—without a job prospect!

Aki and I were committed to getting along knowing full well that our thinking was different. We could laugh and that helped me remember that we both wanted all the same good things for ourselves and our family. Grasping this, really understanding that this was the heart of all that transpired between us, leads me to the beginning of my story.

This story is dedicated to my mother-in-law Hiroko and if he lives long enough to read it in print, my father-in-law Toshihiko Wakabayashi, the bedrock of my life. We continue to grow together through our differences. As we come to accept more of each other, life becomes magical. And as I write and recall these stories, I feel so many thanks in my heart for my home of 25 years and my dear family, the Wakabayashi family. ☮

Liane Grunberg Wakabayashi is a teacher and innovator of a Tokyo-based intuitive art workshop called the Genesis Way. Liane has lived in Japan for 25 years and is married to Akihiko Wakabayashi. Her children Mirai Miriam and Seiji Hillel inspire everything she does, especially her return to a traditional Jewish life in the Tokyo-based Chabad community. To find out more about Liane, see http://www.genesiscards.com. This piece is an introduction to her forthcoming memoir.
The Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong invites you to join us on a
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Maximum number of participants is 20 persons. Minimum age for participants is 16 years old.

Limited places remaining! Please contact Brenda at jcoll@jcc.org.hk if you are interested in joining. Allocation will be on a first come, first served basis from this list. A non-refundable deposit will be required in mid-September.
Allaya's Kosher Pad Thai
Possibly one of the most well-known and beloved Thai dishes among Westerners is Pad Thai, and really, what’s not to love? Hot, greasy, spicy noodles flung at you from a street cart promises all kinds of gastronomic adventure.

So what’s the secret to perfecting this divine heap of pasta? It sounds kind of obvious, but it’s mostly in the sauce. The “real” Thai dishes (that is, excluding the curries, heavily influenced from India and the Middle East) are simplicity incarnate, and it should come as no surprise that Pad Thai sauce is no exception. The ingredients are simple, but balancing them is an art; and this is what distinguishes good Pad Thai from great Pad Thai.

The challenge here is to successfully pull off the flavor-balancing act while still keeping it kosher. Fish sauce is an essential ingredient in Pad Thai. With fish sauce being a fermented mixture of anchovies, salt, and water, some traditions question its kosher status, since, at the time of writing this, there is no fish sauce that exists with a hechsher. In Thailand, our family always made our own fish sauce, which was a common practice among the families in the area, so this was never an issue.

Another concern comes from the status of fish. Even if fish sauce were deemed to be “acceptable,” many traditions hold that fish and meat must not be eaten together. So, as you can see, making Pad Thai kosher poses some challenges that are not easy to overcome.

I’ve often been asked about a kosher and vegetarian alternative to fish sauce. The answer is that there’s no definitive singular substitute. There are many recipes for vegan fish sauce online, but I’ve found most of them lacking. Although some taste good, and are relatively good condiments all on their own, as I said, in some applications, it’s easier to “swap” out this ingredient than in others. For this particular dish, we really need to try hard to replicate the essence and flavor of fish sauce, rather than simply adding an umami flavor, as we can in other dishes that have a more complex flavor profile.

For kosher Pad Thai, I substitute fish sauce with one part shiro miso to two parts Bragg’s Liquid Aminos (certified OU). In this combination, the miso adds the fermented “fishiness” quality, and the Liquid Aminos provides the saltiness while rounding out the flavors. This combination is much less salty than actual fish sauce, so please keep this in mind, as you may need to add extra salt (depending on how salty your miso is) to your final product. The other ingredients in the sauce are tamarind, which adds a tart fruitiness (at the time of this writing, does not require a hechsher, if it is “only” tamarind in the ingredients), and brown sugar (it’s traditional to use palm sugar, but brown sugar is more readily available most places, and the difference in flavor is almost indistinguishable in this application), which provides the sweetness. The paprika is really for making the color a little nicer, so if you don’t have any, there’s no need to panic.

The only element that may make this dish appear challenging is the sheer number of ingredients in it. You really don’t have to worry, though, since a lot of it can be made in advance and put together in a matter of minutes.

Allaya Fleischer is a foodie and world traveller who unifies her life experiences, diverse friendships, and family history through food. Originally from Thailand, her stays and travels took her through Germany, France, England, Barbados, Nepal, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, and finally to the United States, among other places. See Allaya’s blog, I Speak Food, at www.allaya.com and her companion Facebook page at www.facebook.com/ISpeakFood. You may also follow @allayaf on Twitter.
Lo Mein to Laksa

by Allaya Fleischer

Allaya’s Kosher Pad Thai

About 6 servings (you can halve the recipe, but still make the full amount of sauce and save the rest for later)

Ingredients:
• 1 package (about 8 ounces) chicken substitute, such as Smart Chicken or seitan, cut into bite sized pieces, or about 1 lb skinless, boneless chicken thighs, cut to bite sized pieces
• 8 eggs, beaten
• 1/2 block firm tofu, sliced into strips
• 1 pound bean sprouts
• 1 bundle of scallions, chopped
• 2 large shallots or 1 medium onion, finely chopped
• 4 cloves garlic, minced, or through a press
• 1/2 cup or so unsalted peanuts, finely chopped
• Chili flakes, as desired
• 1 lemon, cut up into wedges for serving
• 8 ounces rice stick noodles for Paad Thai (about the width of linguine or fettuccine)

For the sauce:
• 2 tablespoons tamarind paste
• 2 tablespoons shiro miso
• 4 tablespoons Bragg’s Liquid Aminos
• 8 tablespoons brown sugar
• 1 1/2 teaspoons paprika
• 4 tablespoons water kosher salt, to taste

1. In a large bowl, pour enough hot water over rice noodles to cover them and allow to soften for about 30 minutes. Drain in a colander and toss with a little bit of toasted sesame oil or other vegetable oil to prevent sticking. Set aside for later (can be made in advance)

2. Meanwhile, prepare other ingredients and prepare the sauce: Combine tamarind paste with four tablespoons of hot water and mix well, until mostly dissolved. Strain and discard the solids, if desired. In a small pot over medium heat, combine tamarind mixture with Liquid Aminos, miso, brown sugar, and paprika. Stir together until mixture begins to boil, then turn heat to low and allow sauce to simmer for about 10 minutes for flavors to combine. Adjust the sweet/sour/salty flavors by adding more sugar, salt, and/or vinegar, if needed, but this combination usually works pretty well, and is generally on the less salty side of the spectrum (you may need to adjust for this in the end). Set aside.

3. Heat about a tablespoon of oil in a large wok over medium-high heat and scramble eggs. Set eggs aside. Add some more oil and fry tofu and chicken substitute with about two tablespoons of sauce. If using real chicken, cook until the chicken is done and cook the tofu in a separate step. Set aside.

4. Add about a tablespoon more of oil to hot wok over medium high heat and add shallots and garlic plus about two tablespoons of sauce. Add noodles, tofu, chicken substitute, eggs, bean sprouts, and scallions and mix well, tossing in more sauce as needed to keep things moist. If the noodles are too hard/dry, sprinkle with some extra water (this rarely happens, though). Continue tossing over a flame until all the ingredients are heated through, but avoid overcooking, as the rice noodles will become mushy.

5. Serve hot with chili flakes and peanut crumbles on top and lemon wedges on the side. I personally like to use sriracha in lieu of the chili flakes.
Author Dana Sachs began her career as a journalist. In 2000, she wrote her first book, a memoir about her years in Vietnam, *The House on Dream Street: Memoir of an American Woman in Vietnam*. Since then, she has written three more books about Vietnam: *Two Cakes Fit for a King: Folktales from Vietnam*, *If You Lived Here* and *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam*. But in her latest novel, she breaks from Vietnam yet still writes about a very important part of Asian-American history. *Asian Jewish Life* recently sat down with Dana Sachs to talk about her new novel, writing about Asia and Jews, and how her background, particularly her Eastern focus, has shaped her work.

**Asian Jewish Life:** Congratulations on the publication of your new novel, *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace* (William Morrow, 2013)! It’s a heartrending story about Goldie, an 85-year-old grandmother, and Anna, her 35-year-old granddaughter. But it’s also the story of Goldie’s early adult life and is the perfect Asian Jewish love story a couple times over. In your first novel, *If You Lived Here* (Morrow, 2008), you wrote about Vietnam, where you lived in the 1990s, but not about Judaism. Can you discuss how you made these choices—writing about Jewish characters in your latest novel but not in your first?

**Dana Sachs:** First, thanks so much for your kind words about the book. As for the question of how I made the decision to focus on Judaism in one novel and not the other, *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace* reflects, in some ways, on the history of my own family. I wanted to go deeper into the experience of Jewish Americans and the challenges that they faced in the early- and mid-20th Century. One thing that particularly interests me is the chasm that divided Jews from different backgrounds at that time. Those who emigrated in the 19th Century, often from Germany, tended to be wealthier and better educated. Later generations of Jewish immigrants, often from Eastern Europe and Russia, were more likely to come from peasant backgrounds and have less money and education. These economic and cultural differences caused resentments andanimosity. My own parents experienced a lot of problems when they got married because my mother came from an older, more established family and my father from a more recent one. Both sides were suspicious and quick to judge the other.

**AJL:** In the 1990s, you and your sister made *Which Way is East: Notebooks from Vietnam*, a documentary that introduces Americans to the human beings on the other side of the war. Did your collaboration with your sister inspire the relationship between Anna and her sister Sadie in *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace*? Has your sister read your new novel? If so, what does she think about the sisters’ relationship in the story?

**DS:** I have a very close relationship with my sister, Lynne, which is similar in some ways to Anna’s relationship with Sadie. I wanted to get at that closeness and intensity in the novel. My sister and I have little fights with each other sometimes, but we always deal with it quickly and move on. Even though my sister and I are quite different from the characters of Anna and Sadie, I wanted to capture those little flares that can spark between siblings and then, just as quickly, die out. As to the question of what she thought of the novel, she told me she loved it, so I hope she did!

**AJL:** Your memoir, *The House on Dream Street* (Algonquin, 2000), chronicles your many great stories over the years, but I also had other stories I wanted to write. It was a challenge to write a book that didn’t have the word “Vietnam” in it, though! And, as you noted, I couldn’t get away from Asia entirely. I think it’s in my blood.
years in Vietnam, including a surprise romantic twist. Did your own story inspire some of the relationships in The Secret of the Nightingale Palace?

DS: I’d like to say that it’s all fiction, but we bring ourselves into every story, don’t we? The romantic relationships in The Secret of the Nightingale Palace come from my imagination, but my imagination, of course, is fueled in part by my own experience.

AJL: One of the most impressive parts of The House on Dream Street is how so effortlessly you adapt to Vietnamese culture, which twenty years ago was no small feat. But when your future husband visits, you grow a little frustrated by his refusal to eat pork and how that prevented him from assimilating as well as you had. It’s interesting that in Nightingale, Goldie is the only character in her family who doesn’t eat pork or shellfish. Did you base Goldie’s eating preferences on your husband’s? In your home do you keep a kosher-style kitchen?

DS: In many ways, Goldie is based on my own grandmother, Rose, who turned 100 last year. Goldie’s story is fiction, but there is a lot of my grandmother in Goldie’s personality. Our family practices Reform Judaism (and my grandmother actually converted to Catholicism many years ago—but that’s another story entirely!). Rose has always turned up her nose at eating pork and shellfish, but she would totally deny that her “dislike” has anything to do with religion. I’ve long wondered if it stems from her background, though.

AJL: In Nightingale, Goldie and Anna grow up in Memphis, which is where you were raised and which has a large and vibrant Jewish community. Did you have the same desires as Goldie’s character when you became of age—to travel the world and live outside Memphis in your adult years?

DS: Absolutely. When I was a child, I thought that Memphis was the most boring place in the world. Once I became a teenager, though, and started learning about the city’s history, culture, and music, I realized how lucky I was to have been born there. I grew up listening to the Blues, eating barbecue, and taking boat rides on the Mississippi River. My eighth grade class visited Faulkner’s house in Oxford, Mississippi. My uncle was Elvis Presley’s veterinarian. Plus, my family, on both sides, has deep roots there. I wouldn’t trade that history for anything. I’ve long wondered if it stems from her background, though.

AJL: You started primarily as a non-fiction writer and translator. Besides your memoir, you also wrote The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam (Beacon Press, 2010) and co-authored Two Cakes Fit for a King: Folktales from Vietnam (University of Hawaii Press, 2003). Was it difficult to make the transition to literary fiction? Do you think you will stick with writing novels?

DS: My own family is non-traditional, so that’s normal for me. My parents divorced when I was eight and my childhood became two worlds, my mom’s and my dad’s. It wasn’t always easy, but I value what I learned in both of their worlds and the fact that my life became a mixture of the two. Maybe because of that, I find any kind of mixing-up to be deeply interesting and valuable, so I gravitate toward those kinds of situations in my writing. As for death, well, it’s a great big terror for me. To be perfectly honest, I think I drag myself toward it in my writing as a way of preparing myself for the inevitable fact that I will lose people I love.
family spent much time in Asia? Have you taught your sons about Vietnam and other parts of Asia? They must think it’s very cool to have a mom who has enjoyed such a rich experience at a time when few Americans lived or even traveled to Vietnam.

**DS:** I don’t think my boys, who are 12 and 15, think that there’s anything particularly cool about their mom! They do value the fact that they have travelled, though, and they love to explore the world. I feel very lucky that we’ve been able to give them those opportunities. It has affected them in so many surprising ways. They’re open-minded and brave and curious, all of which are qualities we need to have in this world. Travelling also makes them able to see things from different perspectives, which is fundamentally important. When we were living in Vietnam, my kids went to an international school, so they had friends from all over the world and they spent a lot of time talking about cultural differences. One night, my older son, who was eight at the time, got up to go to the bathroom during dinner. When he came back to the table, his 5-year-old brother said, “You know, in France that’s considered very rude.” Of course, he was trying to one-up his brother, but I love the fact that he was able to think about manners from the perspective of a French person.

**AJL:** Can you discuss what you are working on now?

**DS:** My husband, who is a college professor, had a grant to teach in Hungary last year, so we lived for a semester in Budapest. As a result, I’m writing a new novel that takes place in that city. The story is about an aging American diplomat who begins to suffer from a form of dementia, and how his family comes together from other parts of the world to help him. The project has given me a great opportunity to research a wide range of subjects. For one thing, I’m learning as much as I can about classical music (the diplomat is a pianist as well). I’m also delving deeply into the history of the Holocaust. I’m interested in the issue of how Jews today live with the facts of what happened back then. Right now, the novel is called *Happy in Budapest*, though the titles of my books often seem to change along the way.
An Unexpected Encounter in Shanghai
In the game of Jewish geography some moments are priceless, as they bring together not only people from very different backgrounds but also from different eras, seemingly allowing history and the present to converge. None was as gratifying as my connection to two elderly Shanghai residents, Pasha and Betty. Their personal stories are filled with the remarkable indeed.

It all started one afternoon when my roommate, an expat from San Francisco, was helping me connect to two local women as part of my work. He dialed a number and began speaking Chinese to the person on the other end of the phone. As it turned out, his translation wasn’t necessary. Pasha, to our surprise, spoke perfect English.

I explained to her that I worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Shanghai and was checking in on her as a long-time recipient of JDC aid. After several moments of conversation, Pasha excitedly asked us to visit her the next day.

With the invitation to visit in hand, we traveled through Shanghai’s Xujiahi district. The building was 20 stories tall and looked as if it were built in the 1960’s. Inside was Pasha and, in another wonderful twist, Betty, another recipient of JDC help, had joined her. On entering and reminding them of why I was in China, the ladies became elated and said, “Oh! That makes us so happy! We are so happy to see you!!! The Joint is amazing!”

To understand better why we visited these two ladies and how they came to receive JDC aid, a bit of history is in order: In the 1930’s, Jews from Europe fled Nazi terror and arrived in Shanghai. Without visa requirements, the city was a safe haven. As other countries closed their doors to Jews leading up to the Second World War, more than 16,000 Jewish refugees found asylum in Shanghai. They included many people who would go on to become famous: artist Peter Max, former U.S Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal, fashion designer Ilie Wacs, and San Francisco philanthropist Deborah Strobin.

The Jews lived harmoniously with the locals in the Hongkou Ghetto, originally a place where the city’s poorest people lived. But times were very hard for the refugees – they could not work, struggled to make ends meet, and relied on the local Jewish community and organizations like JDC to ensure they were cared for. During that time, JDC, known as “the Joint,” stepped in to provide food, education, vocational training, built hospitals, and set up an emigration office. This was in addition to the vibrant Jewish community life – theater, sports, and culture – that popped up as a result of the refugees’ need to create a space of their own.

As often happens, the Jewish refugees integrated into their neighborhood and often mixed with locals – from black-market business dealings … to shopping in the markets … to social encounters. And that’s where Pasha and Betty’s stories begin.

Betty was born on August 7, 1941 in the ghetto to a Jewish father who escaped from Austria and a Chinese mother. Having been born in Hongkou where all the Jewish refugees were living, she immediately recalled how “the Jewish community always took care of my family. The Jews always helped each other pass those difficult days when we were most desperate. I used to go to the...
Joint office and meet with Mr. Levine who was the chairman. He left also— he was really a kind man,” said Betty.

In 1951 her father died and then in 1955 her mother also passed. Thus, Betty, at 14, and her sister, at 9, were left all alone.

“Luckily, the Jewish community took us in. Mr. Levine and his wife took good care of my sister and me. We would always go to their home, celebrate Shabbat, all the Jewish holidays. I remember eating matzah. Mr. Levine used to bring us to his office and since no one was able to take care of us, he did. What a generous and kind man. When Mr. Levine left, celebrating those Jewish rituals ceased since it wasn’t possible to carry them out.”

Today, Betty unfortunately suffers from hypertension and eye trouble. Though she has a hard time caring for herself, but short of a visit from her younger sister who resides in Australia, she does not see much of her family.

Pasha, on the other hand, was born in 1939 to a Jewish father who had fled Siberia and, like Betty, to a Chinese mother. Her father passed away in 1956 when she was 16 years old. She recalls, “Thanks to Mr. Levine who was the community leader, we were really cared for and they ensured we had everything we needed.”

Pasha discussed education with me at length and she mentioned how the Jewish community poured resources into guaranteeing her attendance at a very good school.

“I received a better education as the Jewish leaders in the community showed a lot of concern for me. I suffered from tuberculosis as a child and they cured me with medicine. They used to also give my family money for coal, milk, and other necessities,” she said. “After the war, when everyone started to leave, I was very eager to get away from China but unfortunately it was impossible.”

“Since I couldn’t leave, at the age of 14, I started to study Chinese,” Pasha continued. “I could speak a little bit of Hebrew too and I would follow prayers when attending services at the synagogue. I could recite the bible – I loved it. As I was very diligent and loved to study, the Jewish community paid my tuition to attend the Shanghai Private Business College.”

On the way home from my visit with Betty and Pasha, I realized that since the start
of my work as a JDC Entwine volunteer, I’ve been exceptionally fortunate to have witnessed firsthand the contribution of Jews and the Jewish people in diverse communities that are worlds apart. I have met people who are part of history and those that are changing the future, like Dr. Rick Hodes in Ethiopia.

Now in my second year of service in Shanghai, sitting for an afternoon with two women whose lives have been inextricably tied up with history, the Jewish experience, and the caring hand of Jews around the world, I understood for the first time the dictum, kol yisrael arevim zeh la zeh – all Jews are responsible for one another. Pasha and Betty attest to the fact of the importance of each individual in our tradition; though time and place might have separated them from community, they were not forgotten.

Perhaps a little trite, but true, this encounter impacted me more than any other experience I have had in Shanghai – experiences that included a visit to the wonderful Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum or to the historic and awe-inspiring Ohel Moshe Synagogue or helping to organize the recent Destination Shanghai gathering that included more than 150 Jews celebrating emerging Jewish life in Asia. It somehow tied it all together for me.

Needless to say, these last two years have changed my life. My professional trajectory went from attending medical school to observing and helping Jewish and non-Jewish communities around the world with an organization recalled by many with pride, the Joint. That legacy, and my own contribution, is not just the stuff of dusty history books and twenty-something wanderlust. It’s a palpable responsibility to building, with my own hands, the future for a people that, however far apart, always seem to find one another. And in Jewish geography, that means I win.

Thank you to Betty and Pasha for sharing an afternoon and your stories.

Shaun Goldstone spent thirteen months in Ethiopia in the JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corp and most recently was awarded JDC’s Ralph I. Goldman Fellowship in international Jewish service where he served in St. Petersburg and Shanghai, and will soon be heading to the Baltics to engage further in Jewish community development work.
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Derech Eretz and the Confucian Way

A study of roots and inextricable links

Without the Confucian Way there would be no fundamentals of Chinese ethics, and without Derech Eretz, there would be no Torah
Long before China turned to Confucianism (2nd century BCE) and long before the Oral Law/halacha (3rd century BCE) became the standard in Judaism, both cultures drew inspiration from ancient oral traditions. Those traditions were the cornerstone of China and Judaism and were known as the Confucian Way and Derech Eretz respectively.

What was the Confucian Way? What was Derech Eretz (The Way of the Land)? Semantically, both terms meant the same: conduct, customs and behavior. They both served the same purpose: to preserve the traditional ways and realign them with contemporary times. They were both similar in general terms but differed in particulars. The Way of the Land acted in tandem with Divine command, while the Chinese Way followed the yin and yang pattern.

The Chinese started to reexamine the ideals of Confucius (c.a. 551-479 BCE) after a rather brutal unification in 221 BCE. Frightened by the possibility of a future recurrence of such atrocities, the Chinese leaned towards a more humane way of dealing with social and political issues. These ideas eventually became so entrenched in the society that they became known as the Confucian Way of the Yin (Chinese) culture. In principle, they were very simple; in rites, they were very complex, and in application, they were widely practiced. Despite its broad appeal, the tenets of Confucian Way were not binding; they were merely considered advice and suggestions.

Not so in Judaism. The tenets of the Torah bound the entire Jewish world. No matter where a community was located physically, the Torah bound them to Judaism. Even if strict adherence was not possible, the local community had to conform to the local customs and follow a flexible and somewhat broad interpretation of the tenets of the Torah. The Talmudic sages reinforced this principle and ruled that Derech Eretz (local customs) took precedence over the Jewish customs (hallacha). “When you come to a town, follow its customs...” (Baba Metzia 86b). Inadvertently, the Jewish sages gave their blessing to a practice that at the time seemed quite unique, yet in the historical context of Judaism and China they ruled on a subject that emerged as the yang to the Chinese yin.

The Yin (Chinese) culture followed the Confucian Way without ever asking a kushia. Kushia was the Talmudic way of saying “let’s make it more difficult and ask further questions.” It was absent from the Confucian Way. Confucius had rarely, if ever, explained the reasons behind his teachings. He had never asked the question “why”, nor had he explained “how”. He only stated his principles in broad terms never going into details. When asked for details he said that he was just a transmitter and not the originator. In other words, he discouraged opposing arguments. Only his followers provided general commentaries to the Chinese Way, but they too, stayed away from detailed explanations. Historically, the yin culture developed unique customs burdened with human connections (guanxi), while the relations with heaven were completely ignored. They were relegated to a yang culture. The yang culture in the Chinese mind was a culture that contained detailed commentaries and interpretations, in addition to the affairs of heaven. In essence, it fitted the Talmudic method of inquiry called pilpul.

Pilpul, (heated debates as “hot peppers”) a Hebrew word that derived from the root for “pepper”, became a synonym to hairsplitting arguments on issues in matters of Judaism. Its analytical depth and rigor often bordered the absurd. Yet, Talmudic sages felt that it was their responsibility to interpret the Torah to conform to the local Derech Eretz. To this end, they debated, argued, analyzed and then reviewed again every sentence, every phrase, every word, and every punctuation mark to apply the laws in the context of local Jewish customs. No stone was left unturned. The Derech Eretz was so important in Judaism that the sages determined that “it preceded the Torah” and “without Derech Eretz there would be no Torah.”
Yet if we look at the origins of the Chinese Way and Derech Eretz we find that they stemmed from same principle. When Confucius was asked: “Is there one sentence that may serve as a rule of practice for one’s life?” He answered: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” Five hundred years later Rabbi Hillel (1st century CE) faced the same question. His answer was very similar: “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you. This is the Torah. The rest is commentary... “ Later this also became known as the Golden Rule.

The obvious question is whether there was a cross-cultural influence or was this pure coincidence? Historically there is no evidence to indicate that Rabbi Hillel knew anything about Confucius or the Confucian Way. From a Jewish perspective, we may say that the Golden Rule was universal in nature, and therefore the similarity with the Chinese Way was either coincidence or perhaps Divine intervention. It simply matched the local customs to the words of the Divine. The Chinese would say that the Golden Rule followed the natural course of yin and yang, and the Confucian Way was an extension of it. It was rooted in common sense in the same way, as the yin was in tandem with the yang.

Lets ask a kushia in the Talmudic tradition: Does it mean that the Golden Rule of Judaism and China had developed independently of each other? Apparently it did. We can find its roots in almost identical ancient traditions called the Five Human Relationships.

In China it was called wulun and consisted of the interaction between the following 5 categories: Ruler and subject, Father and son, Elder brother and younger brother, Husband and wife, and Friend and friend. The first four relations established the correct social conduct between people of higher and lower ranks, between elders and youngsters, between husband and wife. In each of these cases, the primary emphasis was on respect for superiors, respect for the elders, and respect for husbands. Only the relationship between friend and friend was on an equal footing. But this relation was relegated to second in importance. Intentionally omitted from these relations was the relationship with God.

Significantly, the relationship with God was paramount in the yang culture. It was of primary importance in Judaism and dealt with the relationship between man and his surroundings. According to Rambam (1135-1204 CE) the Five Human Relationships in Judaism were: Love your neighbor as thyself, Hate not your brother, Avenge not, Bear no grudge, and Love the stranger. Essentially, the Derech Eretz touched on every aspect of human life, from birth to the end of life. It guided the relationship between husband and wife, friend and friend, between Jews and non-Jews and between Jews and the local environment.

Why did the Chinese Way omit the relationship with God? Evidently Confucius understood that the relationship with God was outside the realm of human understanding and he refused to address the issue. He explicitly said that he did not deal with the affairs of heaven. “Heaven is far from us and we should deal with the affairs on earth.” Thus the Confucian Way evolved into a pragmatic approach to daily issues while the affairs of Heaven were left to a yang culture with a primary focus on the relationship with Shangdi, the Chinese Elohim. Derech Eretz on the other hand focused primarily on the affairs of Heaven, and accordingly it matched the percepts of the Torah with the local customs. Whether by Divine intervention or coincidence, The Way of the Land became the yang to the Confucian Way of yin.  

Tiberiu Weisz is the author of The Covenant and the Mandate of Heaven: an In-depth Comparative Cultural Study of Judaism and China. This article is part of a continuing series for Asian Jewish Life.
Two new novels feature Jews in wartime or other periods of turmoil. Jennifer Cody Epstein’s sophomore novel, *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* (W.W. Norton, 2013) is set in the Pacific theater of World War II, specifically the US bombing of Tokyo. (Epstein is also the author of the acclaimed book, *The Painter from Shanghai* [W.W. Norton, 2008].) Unlike in many novels set during this time, the Jews in this story are neither European refugees nor concentration camp prisoners, but peers of the men and women on the front lines of the war. These characters are sprinkled throughout the story, which doesn’t feature a main protagonist but rather a number of Japanese and American individuals who cross paths mainly in Japan before, during, and after the war.

The leading Jewish character in *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* is a co-pilot with the nickname of Midget, or just Midge. His real name is Joshua Friedman, but due to his six-foot frame, he picked up this moniker. Midge is featured throughout the story, both on the bombing raid and after he became a prisoner of war. Epstein characterizes Midge as both a comrade and an outsider because he’s the only Jewish officer on the raid.

When another pilot mentions in a derogatory way that Jews don’t believe in heaven, Midge affirms that and casually goes on to explain, “I learned that from the rabbi. And pretty soon after that decided to be pilot, since flying’s about the closest I’m ever gonna get to heaven.” Midge is especially close to Cam Richards, one of the main characters and fellow Doolittle Raid co-pilot.

Another Jewish supporting character is Erich Mendelsohn, “the German Jew who’d given the Berlin skyline much of its Expressionist mood before feeling the city in 1937.” In *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment*, Mendelsohn appears in the Utah desert where he built a block of German apartments so the U.S. Army could practice bombing before they carried out these attacks on Germany. Mendelsohn is joined in Utah by the character, Anton Reynolds, an architect who worked in Japan until the war started, and who built the Japanese counterpart to Mendelsohn’s model town.

Other Jewish characters appear in passing. “Your mother taught you piano too?” “No, a German Jewish lady did.” Or “George Yamashita and his family had been interned at Butte Lake up until a few months earlier, and it was only thanks to a good Jewish lawyer and Anton’s significant fiscal sponsorship that they were finally free.”

While the Jewish characters in *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* all have supporting roles, they are indicative of the fact that Jews played diverse roles during the War.

Another recent novel featuring a Jewish character in a time of turmoil is Ellen Sussman’s *The Paradise Guest House* (Ballantine, 2013). Jamie Hyde is a young American who travels to Bali for her job as an adventure tour guide. But days into her trip, the terrorist bombing shatters the tranquil island and forever changes the lives of those affected by the atrocity, including Jamie. A year later, Jamie returns to Bali to try to finally heal from her post-traumatic stress and to participate in a memorial ceremony in which the survivors are invited back.

It takes all her strength and energy to return to Bali, and her family back in the United States is worried, but Jamie is determined to make this trip and make it alone. Besides healing and trying to move on, she also hopes to find Gabe Winters, the man who saved her life on the night of the bombings.

Gabe moved to Bali years earlier to escape his own tragedy back in the US. After his young son dies and his marriage breaks up. He yearns for a change of scenery. Gabe moves to Bali to start over. On that fateful night when he meets Jamie, Gabe hadn’t been able to open his heart to another woman. Although Gabe and Jamie never discuss religion, the reader learns in passing that Gabe is Jewish when his sister offers some healing advice from her rabbi.

After the bombing, Gabe takes Jamie out of harm’s way and nurses her back to a stage where she’s able to get on a plane back to the US. Just before she leaves Bali, she and Gabe have a quick fling. Now that she’s back in Bali, Jamie hopes to find Gabe again.

Ellen Sussman beautifully depicts a serene yet distraught Bali a year after the bombings. Alternating between Jamie’s return and the days surrounding the bombings, Sussman keeps the reader engaged and rooting for Jamie and Gabe to get back together.

These books both treat tragic events in a serious way but with sympathetic personal stories. The Jews in Jennifer Cody Epstein’s novel enjoy a solid Jewish identity, whereas Gabe in Ellen Sussman’s book doesn’t define himself through his Judaism, but it shines through in his deeds and words.
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