Becoming Observant in Tokyo
A Personal Shabbat Journey

An Accidental Israeli
A Trip to Manila Paves the Way Home

Thai Spices of Chanukah
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 picked up a copy of *Asian Jewish Life* while traveling in Asia and want to know how to get a copy in the US. I especially enjoyed the article last issue on Two-Gun Cohen and have a few questions.

I heard a movie is coming out. Do you know about this? Also, is it possible to get a copy of the original book still? Which book do you recommend?

And I wanted to mention, I was in Hong Kong recently and someone pointed out Two Gun's photo on the wall in the Foreign Correspondents Club. Have you seen it?

Keep up the good work.

Jeff

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Dear Jeff:

Thank you for the letter. Glad you found us. To get a copy outside of Asia, we request a donation of US$50. Please see our website or our Razoo page at http://www.razoo.com/story/Asian-Jewish-Life.

As for *The Extraordinary Adventures of Two-Gun Cohen* (Issue 12, *Asian Jewish Life*), we are glad you enjoyed the article. The original book you referenced, *The Life and Times of General Two-Gun Cohen*, by Charles Drage, was published in 1954. It is out of print, but I was able to actually track down a used copy recently online. I also highly recommend Daniel S. Levy’s book, *Two Gun Cohen: A Biography*. Published in 1997, this book is comprehensive, accurate and also readily available.

A film? We did hear one is in the pipeline and can’t wait. Apparently there was a film, *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), which was based on his story.

Lastly, the photo in the FCC is great. I think it is from Morris Cohen's famous run-in with journalist Marvin Farkas.

Thanks for reading and the interest.

Kind regards,

Erica Lyons

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The above three photographs, also by Jason Jia, are shown to reflect the contrast between life in Kaifeng, China and life in Israel. For a look at the lives of a few of the Jews of Kaifeng, after they have made aliyah, please see Jason’s photo essay in this issue entitled *Fully Jewish Fully Chinese*. The ancient Jewish community in Kaifeng numbered as many as 5,000 Jews at its height. There are about 1000 people today who trace their root back to this community. Only a very small group has made aliyah.
Dear Readers:

Happy Chanukah and welcome to Issue 13 of Asian Jewish Life. While this issue was initially meant to be a celebration of food and festivals, the recent disaster in the Philippines has turned it into something a bit different. We have put a couple of great food pieces on hold in order to bring the Philippines into the spotlight. In a later issue we will discuss, in depth, the incredible response from the Israeli/Jewish world to this disaster.

For now, we bring you a very different look at the Philippines in Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines, The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story (Part 1) by Bonnie M. Harris. This is a very detailed account of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ Jewish refugees made their way to the Philippines during the Holocaust.

In a very different piece, we hear from Carl Hoffman his personal story of his Jewish-Filipino family’s connection, or reconnection for Carl, with Judaism and their decision to make aliyah. His piece, originally appearing in Lovetaps, a collection of short stories by Hoffman, is entitled, An Accidental Israeli- A trip to Manila paves the way home.

We take another look at aliyah, we look at the story of the Kaifeng community and their journey in a beautiful photo essay by Jason Jia, Fully Jewish-Fully Chinese. We have decided to highlight the photos that specifically highlight their life in Israel. See page 2 for a glimpse at their life in Kaifeng.

And since I do love a great Jewish journey story, we also hear from Liane Wakabayashi in our cover story, Becoming Observant in Tokyo - A Personal Shabbat Journey. The original artwork on the cover was also supplied by Liane.

Also related to a journey, in our Travel Diary we hear about Rabbi Judith Edelman-Green’s trip to Mumbai in Spirituality as Spice to Life- My time with the Bene Israel.

In Film in Focus, we look at a journey to freedom following the liberation of the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. We focus on one very small part of the film, Harbour of Hope, that explores the friendship between a Chinese woman and a Jewish mother and daughter while in the camp.

Our Book Reviews also look at World War II and the Jewish refugee experience in Shanghai. AJL Books Editor Susan Blumberg-Kason discusses the books Survival in Shanghai: The Journals of Fred Marcus and Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich by Steve Hochstadt.

And while talking books, Jocelyn Eikenburg interviews author Rachel DeWoskin in On Stardom in China, Award-Winning Fiction and Judaism.

And last, but certainly not least, because it is Chanukah we do need to celebrate. Allaya Fleischer presents two Thai recipes, one more traditional but fried in oil, Mee Krob, and the other the perfect Jewish-Thai fusion, ‘Tom Yum Latkes’.

We hope you have a very happy Chanukah.

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief

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Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief
An Accidental Israeli
A Trip to Manila Paves the Way Home

Congratulate me.

I have just reached an important milestone in life: five years in Israel. I realize, of course, that this short span of time pales before those reached by people who have lived in this country for decades—who built houses amidst sand dunes, who ventured out to establish communities in the middle of vast orange orchards, and who fondly remember their now-bustling cities back when they were miniscule moshavim, lacking traffic lights or even paved roads.

My unique milestone draws its significance not from the amount of time I have spent here, but rather from the sheer irony of my being here at all. I hold the distinction of being perhaps the least likely human being on this planet to have made aliyah. Five years in Israel is no mean feat for a guy who spent most of his life swearing that he would never, ever, set foot here.

I was Bar Mitzvah’ed almost 40 years ago in a Conservative synagogue on the outskirts of Boston, where my famously non-religious parents piously attended services for an hour or two every Yom Kippur. That Bar Mitzvah, attended by my large family of Kennedy-style super-liberals, proved to be my last brush with Judaism, in any shape or form, for more than three decades.

I walked out of the synagogue and into the 1960’s. Following a rather colorful Flower Child adolescence, about which the less said the better, I went on to college—in New York’s Greenwich Village—where I majored in anthropology and minored in East Asian studies. My subsequent graduate school years saw me in Indonesia, doing my doctoral fieldwork on the island of Borneo, where the only Jewish face I saw in two years was my own reflection in the turbid, slow-moving water of jungle rivers and streams.

Those two years in Indonesia were followed by thirteen in the Philippines, where I lived with a hill tribe in a remote mountain village for three years, lived and worked among Indochinese boat people in a refugee camp for six years, and then hopped around the country’s 3,500 islands teaching and consulting for a year or two after that. I met, chased and eventually married a hard-working provincial social worker, had two beautiful children, and quickly learned to enjoy the life of an "expat" American in the lush Philippine countryside. Judaism was, at best, a distant and irrelevant memory.

Then, when I least expected it, life’s Great Referee flashed me a yellow card. An unexpected job offer with the Philippine government’s Department of Education brought us out of the boondocks and into Manila, where I soon heard faint but persistent rumors of the existence of a small but viable Jewish community. Intrigued by the image of Jews in the Philippines, I set out one Saturday to find them.

After I had wandered around Manila’s business district for more than an hour, a small, squat, gray building adorned with a large iron menorah and topped with a golden dome loomed sharply into view. Cleverly camouflaged amidst the
gleaming office towers and five-star hotels, set behind a tall wrought-iron gate and protected by uniformed Filipino security guards, the Philippines’ one and only synagogue stood shockingly before me. Passing the rather elaborate security check, I entered the amazing little building to find an Orthodox congregation of roughly 80 people, devoutly praying the morning service for Sabbath. Later, at the lavishly catered kiddush, a pale, bespectacled and very young man in a black velvet kippa introduced himself to me as the Rabbi (The Rabbi! I gawked. In the middle of Manila!) and asked if this was my first visit to the shul.

"It’s my first visit to any shul in more than thirty years," I said to him.

He smiled, shook my hand, and said, "Welcome home."

Now, those of you who misspent your 1950’s childhoods reading comic books will no doubt recall that Superman had a weekend getaway place at the North Pole, which he fondly referred to as his “Fortress of Solitude.” Hidden and buried amidst the windswept snow and ice, the Fortress was filled with a myriad number of souvenirs, trophies, mementos and assorted brick-a-brack gathered from years of fighting crime in Metropolis, safeguarding America, and patrolling the immediate galaxy.

Still with me? Among Superman’s favorite tchotchkes at the Fortress was the Bottled City of Kandor—an actual, living city from his home planet Krypton, shrunk, somehow, to miniature size and housed in a small climate-controlled glass jar, which Superman kept on a lovely walnut Queen Anne side-table at the end of an upstairs hall. When Superman felt that he needed to be with his fellow Kryptonians, speak a little Kryptonese, eat a bit of heimische Kryptonite food and just generally reconnect with his Krypton roots, he would enter the Bottled City. Emerging from this sentimental journey a few hours later, a refreshed, recharged and re-motivated Superman would leave the North Pole and fly back to Metropolis, back to his never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way—and his somewhat complicated relationship with Lois Lane.

Well, the little synagogue in Manila—nestled amongst the towering office buildings and five-star hotels of the city’s business district—became my Bottled City of Kandor, a weekly haven from the stress of life and work, and a revitalizing return to my roots. I went every Saturday morning to surround myself with Jewish faces, recharge my mind with Jewish conversation, and stuff myself with Jewish food.

But the trouble with having a bottled city, as Superman no doubt discovered after he finally broke down and married Lois Lane, is that sooner or later your wife wants to go into the bottle with you. After several weeks of wondering where I was sneaking off to every Saturday morning, my non-practicing Catholic Filipina wife decided to accompany me to shul.

You can imagine, of course, what happened next: as it has so many times before, in places scattered throughout the world, the synagogue cast its irresistible spell. My wife found a seat in the women’s section, and I spent the next couple of hours discreetly watching her watch Judaism as it unfolded
before her. I watched as she opened a prayer book and slowly became engrossed in portions of the English translation. I saw her eyes widen as the ark was opened and a huge ornate Sephardi-style Torah, with gleaming polished silver crowns, was paraded around the sanctuary and taken up to the bimah. I caught her faint smile as the congregation began to sing. And later at the kiddush I noted, with little surprise, her evident fondness for kugel and chopped herring.

As we walked home I said, "Well, that's what I've been doing every Saturday. No big deal, right?" To which she replied, "Next week, we'll bring the kids."

Bring them we did—the next week, and every week thereafter. It soon became apparent to me that we were well on our way down a long new road I had never expected to travel. Regular synagogue attendance, involvement in the Jewish community, the beginnings of Sabbath observance, some tentative stabs at keeping kosher, weekly study sessions with the Rabbi, Hebrew lessons for the children—a gaudy kaleidoscope of Judaism flashed around us at dizzying speed and soon enveloped us completely.

When, after a year or so of this, my wife announced that she wanted to formally convert and raise our children in an authentically Jewish environment, I knew that it was time to leave the Philippines and make aliyah to Israel. My relatives in the U.S. simply sighed, shrugged, and pronounced this as fresh evidence of the sort of bizarre behavior they have always expected of me.

As no one from the Philippines had made aliyah since the end of World War II, a helpful young first secretary at the Israeli Embassy in Manila appointed himself as our sheliach, faxing Jerusalem almost daily with questions about how to do the paperwork. The Ambassador summoned us to his office, to satisfy himself that we were, as he put it, "for real." A stamp for our immigrant visas had to be sent by diplomatic pouch from the Israeli Embassy in India, as no such stamp was to be found any farther east then New Delhi. After more a year of planning, processing and paperwork, we were on our way.

We arrived at Ben Gurion Airport, dazed but excited. In due course my wife was converted, the children studied and flourished in religious schools, and we slowly but inexorably became "Israelis."

Life, I have learned, is something that goes on while you are planning something else. Or, as my grandmother used to say, "Man plans, God laughs."

This story originally appeared in Lovetaps, by Carl Hoffman, iUniverse, Inc. (August 26, 2003).

Carl Hoffman, originally from the US, holds a Ph.D degree in Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania, and has lived among headhunting groups in Borneo and a remote hill tribe in the Philippines. He has worked as a university lecturer in the United States, a research anthropologist in Indonesia, and as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines; followed by a series of odd jobs with the US State Department Refugee Programs, the Philippine Department of Education, and the Japanese Embassy in Manila.

He has lived in Israel since 1997 with his wife and two children. He is the author of two books: Punan (1986), an anthropological study of jungle tribes in Borneo, and Lovetaps (2003), a collection of short stories. Hoffman also teaches advanced courses in reading comprehension of academic writing for students in the social sciences at Israel's Open University.

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Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines
The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story

(Part 1 of 2)
Though I have never met him, I feel as if I know more about Cantor Joseph Cysner than any other person alive – perhaps even more than his children. I spent the better part of a decade researching this remarkable Holocaust survivor story. While documenting and penning his incredible tale, I often times felt the human at the center of the story was getting lost. Writing this article has helped me to find him again.

Joseph Cysner, born in 1912 in Bamberg, was the 7th and last child of Jewish parents from Eastern Europe. Regardless of the fact that he was born, raised, and educated in Germany, he was still classified as a Polish Jew under Nazi Germany’s racial laws. He left Bamberg in 1929 to attend the Jewish Theological Seminary in Würzburg and graduated in 1933. Joseph began his career as a Cantor in Germany the same year that Hitler was appointed Chancellor. As Joseph labored in the Jewish communities of Hannover and Hildesheim between 1933 and 1937, he witnessed the rising flood of antisemitic legislation marginalizing the political, economic, and social positions of Jews in Germany. Nazi anti-Jewish measures in Germany accelerated with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, in which German Jews lost their citizenship rights. Joseph's older brothers all emigrated in the early 1930s, one went to the United States and two others went to Palestine. His sisters both married and moved to Berlin. In 1937, Joseph received a lifetime contract as Cantor at the Verband Reform Synagogue in Hamburg, the same year his father died. Joseph shouldered the financial responsibility for his widowed mother for the rest of his life. He never saw his brothers that went to Palestine again, nor his sister Charlotte and her family, who all perished in Auschwitz.

The critical year of Joseph's story is 1938. Poland passed legislation aimed at its Jewish citizens living abroad that virtually rescinded citizenship for all persons holding Polish passports who have lived outside of Poland for 5 years or longer. These series of new statutes essentially made nearly 60,000 Polish Jews living in Germany, and the newly annexed territories of Austria and the Sudetenland, stateless. This enraged Hitler, who demanded that Poland rescind the decrees. The Anschluss of Austria and annexation of Czech territories earlier in 1938 had sent thousands of Jews to consul offices trying to flee back to Poland, which Poland frantically tried to halt as a tidal wave of Polish Jews attempted to return. Hitler decided to trump Poland's play, and on October 26, 1938 he ordered the arrests of all Polish Jews still residing in Germany and Austria in order to transport them en masse to the Polish border in the first massive deportation of denounced Jews by Nazi Germany. An estimated 17,000 Jews in Germany and Austria – men, women, children, elderly, cripple, whatever – were arrested on October 27, held overnight in centers, jails, parks, or other large facilities, trucked to train depots, locked into passenger cars, and transported to the Polish border on October 28th and 29th of 1938. Imagine trains from all over Greater Germany packed with thousands of frightened and disoriented people all headed in one direction – East.

Joseph was one of nearly 900 Jews deported that night from Hamburg. His mother, still in Bamberg, was spared. Cantor Cysner wrote a memoir of the event and the terrible scene of chaos, suffering, and terror at the border when masses of Jews were driven by bayoneted German soldiers across the border and Polish border guards fired rifles into the air to stop them. It was pandemonium.

These stateless Jews were sheltered all along the German-Polish border in makeshift tent camps until many were sent on to Warsaw. Joseph and about 8,000 others were detained at a Polish border town called Zbaszyn. His memoir tells of his experiences during the 6 months he was held there. An important fact of history should be noted – part of that transport of Jews that were taken to Zbaszyn included Jews from Hannover, where Joseph had once lived and worked. The Grynszpan family from Hannover also ended up in Zbaszyn. The refugees at Zbaszyn were able to send out telegrams and the Grynszpan family sent some to their son, Herschel, who was at school in Paris, telling him about their terrible expulsion from their home. In his despair, Herschel went to the German Embassy in Paris and shot and killed a consular official, Ernst vom Rath. This act triggered Kristallnacht, the infamous night of broken glass on November 9, 1938. After hearing about Kristallnacht while being held at Zbaszyn, Joseph knew he and all the other refugees at Zbaszyn would never again live in Germany.

While interned at Zbaszyn, Joseph received a telegram from his friend and colleague, Rabbi Josef Schwartz, who had immigrated to Manila from Hildesheim in September 1938. Schwartz had convinced the leaders of the Jewish Community in Manila...
that the growing diverse ethnic community of Jewish refugees needed a Cantor to help unite it and when he sent the telegram to Joseph, he did not know that Joseph was no longer in Hamburg. But the telegram, through good German bureaucracy, found Joseph in Zbaszyn. Joseph answered yes to the job offer and was able to leave Zbaszyn in April 1939, arriving in Manila in May 1939. Joseph was met by other refugee Jews who had escaped Europe through the efforts of Philippine officials, Philippine President Manuel Luis Quezón y Molina and High Commissioner Paul V. McNutt, and a rescue committee led by wealthy American merchant Jews in Manila. Over the course of 3 to 4 years, 1300 refugee Jews from Europe found a safe haven from Nazi tyranny in the Far Eastern paradise of Manila.

Depending when in the time frame of the pre-WWII era in which refugees left, there were two different major routes that provided transport for refugee Jews from various points of departure in Europe to ports in southern and eastern Asia. From the early 1930s to the mid-1940s, the first route, by sea, carried fleeing refugees from ports mostly in Italy on to Alexandria, Egypt and then through the Suez Canal to ports-of-call in Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Shanghai, and Kobe and Yokohama, Japan. Other vessels that left from seaports in northern Europe, such as Bremen or Hamburg, usually sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, extending the already four week voyage time to east Asia by another six weeks. Ships could be booked six months in advance and carry as many as one thousand Jewish refugees per voyage. The other major route of transportation to the Far East was the land route across Russia and Siberia via the Trans-Siberian Railway and Chinese Eastern Railroad that had once brought Russian Jews to Asia two decades earlier.

Jewish refugees escaping Nazi persecutions began arriving in Asian ports as early as 1933, following Hitler’s ascent to power. Some refugees en route to the open city of Shanghai jumped ship in Manila, seeking asylum in an American overseas colony rather than an Asian one. The number of refugees seeking asylum in Asian ports corresponded to the waves of increased antisemitic violence in the Third Reich under Nazism. In Joseph’s flight to the Philippines, he shared quarters on ship with many refugees bound for Shanghai. In one year’s time, the Jewish refugee numbers in Shanghai went from 1,500 near the end of 1938 to nearly 17,000 by the end of 1939. Stripped of their assets and property, these refugee Jews augmented the already destitute population of Hongkew with their similarly impoverished numbers. Large-scale relief plans implemented by the existing Jewish communities of Shanghai collected funds and provided affordable lodging and food distribution centers. Much needed aid also began to arrive from foreign offices of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, commonly known as the Joint or the JDC, and from the American Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS). But as time advanced and as more and more refugee locations around the world competed for funds from the JDC, HIAS and other Jewish relief organizations of the world, it became more difficult to fill the needs of the thousands of Jewish refugees in Shanghai, and by extension, to other Asian ports as well, Manila included.

Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany arrived in the Philippines as early as 1933, but they were few in numbers and their escape almost entirely undocumented. However, the first significant influx of European refugee Jews to arrive in Manila did not come directly from Europe, but rather from the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai. With the renewal of hostilities between the Japanese and Chinese in 1937, which resulted in the occupation of Peking by Japanese forces, the four million inhabitants of Shanghai faced the dangers of war in an occupied territory and various civilian communities sought escape from Shanghai’s battle grounds. Germany’s shift of alliance from China to Japan at this time alarmed German Jews in Shanghai, who feared German pressure on Japan to adopt Nazi discriminatory policies against Shanghai’s German Jewish population. The Manila Jewish community shared that fear and organized the Jewish Refugee Committee of Manila (JRC) with the intention of rescuing German members of the Shanghai Jewish community. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out on July 7, 1937, the JRC received a telegram seeking assistance for Shanghai’s refugee Jews. The small Jewish community in Manila immediately raised $8,000, but the money was not
needed as the wealthier Sephardic Jews of Shanghai stepped up and cared for the needs of the Shanghai refugees on their own. The JRC in Manila decided to hold the funds in escrow for future needs, which came almost immediately.

One month later the German government sent a ship to Shanghai to evacuate all German nationals from the war zone to Manila. In the evacuation, they also took aboard about 30 German Jewish refugee families. The Jewish community in Manila took charge of the refugee Jewish families at the request of the German Consul in the Philippines. This spontaneous rescue of German refugee Jews from Shanghai became the impetus for the devised rescue plans that followed, bringing Joseph and 1,300 like him to a safe haven in the Pacific.

Refugee rescuers in the Philippines operated selection and sponsorship programs unlike any Jewish rescue operations executed anywhere else in the world during these years. The plans involved a collaboration of efforts from political dignitaries and businessmen in the Philippines, relief organizations in both the United States and in Germany, and even government officials in the often antisemitic-leaning U.S. State Department. While some programs proved most successful, others were thwarted, and ultimately, the few who were saved underwent further depravations under the invading Japanese. Joseph’s story helps bring to light the efforts of the many to rescue the few, or in Joseph’s case, the one.

The rescue of the German Jews from Shanghai came to the attention of the Refugee Economic Corporation (REC), an affiliate of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) headquartered in New York City. Incorporated in 1934, the REC, originally called the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee, specialized in funding Jewish settlements in countries that agreed to take in refugee Jews. Exactly how the plan to initiate rescue in the Philippines was conceived has become shrouded in legend over the last seventy years. Stories credit President Quezon for initiating the offer, others claim High Commissioner McNutt devised the plan, and still others place members of the JRC at a poker table with General Eisenhower, President Quezon, and High Commissioner McNutt, where these gambling buddies hashed out a rescue plan while indulging in fine cigars rolled by S. Frieder & Sons Manufacturing. But according to the documentary record, once information spread to the REC that the Philippines could be a safe haven for further Jewish immigration, the notable correspondence between the real initiators began: Charles Liebman and Bruno Schachner of the REC in New York; Paul V. McNutt, the U.S. High Commissioner for the Philippine Islands; Philip Frieder and his brothers, of the successful Jewish merchant family in the Philippines and directors of the Jewish Refugee Committee in Manila; Manual Luis Quezon y Molina, President of the Commonwealth nation of the Philippines; and J. C. Hyman of the New York-based American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

According to correspondence between Liebman and McNutt in May and June of 1938, the REC initiated contact with McNutt through mutual acquaintances with two brothers, Julius and Jacob Weiss, the former an associate with the REC and the latter an Indiana State Senator and personal friend of McNutt. McNutt’s May 19, 1938 letter to Julius Weiss, brother of his friend and colleague Jacob Weiss, is the earliest official record discussing rescue in the Philippines in which McNutt refers back to a promise he made to Jacob’s brother that he, McNutt, would discuss a rescue program with leaders in Manila, confirming that he did and plans were in the works.

Jacob Weiss had sent a letter to McNutt in the Philippines perhaps as early as December 1937 on behalf of the REC, inquiring if it were possible to allow 100 German Jewish families a haven in the archipelago. McNutt replied that he would be in the USA in just a few weeks and that they could talk about it then. McNutt arrived in Washington D.C. on February 23, 1938 and did not return to the Philippines until April 1938. During that time, McNutt and Weiss attended a reception together and talked for about 10 minutes, making arrangements to talk again over breakfast in about 2 days’ time. McNutt indicated that he had several meetings to attend in the meantime with Pres. Roosevelt and the Secretary of State, to name a few. When they met up again, McNutt indicated to Weiss that “it was all
arranged,” and that visas for refugee Jews would be approved and issued by him without U.S. State Department interference — “When I get back to Manila I’m going to arrange for the proper reception of these refugees.” 10 Communications then rapidly ensued between the Weiss brothers, Paul V. McNutt and Charles Liebman of the REC in New York City.

The REC advanced funds in conjunction with the JDC to meet stipulations voiced by McNutt that the refugees not become public charges. The importance of McNutt’s role in the selection plan, and the sponsorship that came later, cannot be overstated. Without his initiation of the dialog between the Philippine Government, the U.S. State Department, the Jewish Community in Manila, and the American Jewish relief organizations, it is doubtful the plans would have ever germinated. McNutt’s willingness to work with the many agencies involved in these rescue efforts was key to the success of the programs.

Suffice it to say, that when the Philippines was occupied by the Japanese in January 1942, all civilian aliens, who held a passport from a country at war with Japan or Germany, were arrested and interned for 3 years at Santo Tomas University, which had become a civilian prison over night. The irony is that the American and British Jews who were the benefactors of the Jewish refugees were now interned and the majority of the refugee Jews who were German and Austrians were not. But Joseph had a Polish passport and he too was arrested and interned at Santo Tomas. He survived Nazi arrest, expulsion, imprisonment and escape only to encounter the same things at the hands of the Japanese.

Exactly what were these programs and how did they operate? The case study of Joseph’s rescue is a good example. These questions and others will be explored in the second part to this article. ✩

To learn more about Dr. Harris’ extensive research on the Jews in the Philippines, please visit her site at http://www.bonniesbiz.com.

4. Frank Ephraim, Escape to Manila: From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese Terror (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 22. Frank Ephraim, a survivor of the Jewish refugee Community in Manila, presented a complete database of all the Jewish refugees who came to the Philippines to the JewishGen Family Genealogy website, in which he identified 1301 names.
6. Ibíd., 145.
9. Paul V. McNutt to Julius Weiss, May 19, 1938, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, JDC Collection 33/44, File #784.
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The Story of My Parents

Tales of Grandpa Eli

(Part 1)
belong to a family that in these times would be called dysfunctional. Things were quite different back then. My parents met each other for the first time at a party given by Mr. and Mrs. Avaskar, my mother's parents in which the all the members of Bene Israel community in Calcutta were invited. The Avaskars had purchased a new flat in Park Circus. My father's family was among the guests. My father pleaded a previous appointment but his father determined that he would accompany them even if it was only for half an hour. He complied rather grudgingly. This changed when he saw Leah, who would later become my mother. An electric current passed through his body leaving him momentarily immobile and tongue-tied. The appointment with his friends was forgotten. He watched her from a distance. He did not have the courage to approach her. They had not been formally introduced and he had no excuse to speak to her. By the time the family returned home his mind was made up. He told his father that he had met the girl he wanted to marry.

My father worked for an import and export firm. His salary was large enough to support a wife. He had been promised a promotion so he knew he could support children as well. Grandpa Eli listened to his son's arguments in favor of setting a wedding date as soon as possible. He thought matters over. My father was a bit young for the responsibilities of marriage. On the other hand he might meet a girl outside the community and want to marry her. My mother was a pampered child used to having her own way but she had the advantage of being Jewish. Grandpa knew the girl and her family. He did not have to make any inquiries about them. He simply went up to my mother's parents with an offer of marriage for his son.

My father had been struck by her beauty. She dressed stylishly but modestly and carried herself with dignity. Grandpa Eli knew no reason to prevent a marriage between them. She had never been seen with a man who was not a close relative. There was no gossip in the community or with his friends about her. She had done well in school. He reasoned that children born to her would have the advantage of genes that gave them intelligence. She would teach her children at home and give them an advantage over their classmates. He waited impatiently for his father's return from her home although he was sure that the proposal would be accepted.

Grandpa Eli had not remarried after the death of his wife, my grandmother. He would have preferred his daughter Erusha to be the first to marry but my father was the eldest child so it was not an unreasonable request. Immanuel was the second son. Nobody got along with him. Grandpa Eli had tried to involve him in everything the family did but Immanuel remained the odd man out. The other children did not include him in their frequent discussions or ask him to accompany him to places they went. Immanuel never said anything and that disturbed everybody. He did not talk much and hardly ever expressed an opinion. The family never knew what he was thinking. When he smiled they believed it to be sarcastic or cynical. Erusha was the third child and Joshua was the fourth. He was still in college at the time of my father's engagement. Sipporah was the youngest. She had been a toddler when her mother died. Immanuel had cared for her when their father was at work. She was the most antagonistic towards Immanuel. She did not realize how much she added to the tension between him and the rest of the family. She believed that she was protecting her father. Although Immanuel did everything he could for her she could not stand the sight of him. Grandpa Eli's family was not as dysfunctional as my immediate one but it had its tensions and underlying currents.

Very soon after my parents' marriage I, Samuel, entered this changing world. It was around that time that grandpa saw Erusha outside a cinema house with a group of other young men and women. One young man in particular seemed to be paying her more attention than he would have liked. There were no Jewish youth in the group. Grandpa had no reason to upbraid his daughter but he began to worry about the future of his daughters. Sipporah was headstrong and would do whatever she wanted. He decided that the time to move to Israel had arrived. Grandpa spoke to the family that evening. My father told me about this meeting. He and my mother were opposed to the move. The rest of the family thought it a good
idea. He looked at Immanuel questioningly. This son seemed undecided. “You know that I’ve promised never to leave the family,” Immanuel said. Sipporah wanted him to explain his words but Grandpa Eli restrained her. “There is no need for argument. The decision has been reached,” he said. “I will fill the forms tomorrow. I’ll ask the landlord to make a new contract in David and Leah’s name.”

Grandpa and the rest of the family immigrated later that year to Israel after Joshua got his degree. My father and my mother, with me in tow, did not follow for another ten years. I still have memories of Park Circus, my school and of my friends there. They were very happy years.

Grandpa Eli was given a flat in Ramat Gan. Since he had worked in an ordnance factory in India he was given a job with an ammunition factory close to Tel Aviv. Immanuel became a career army officer. Joshua began to sail with Zim, Israel’s merchant shipping company as a ship’s engineer. Erusha had worked as a secretary in Calcutta. It was not difficult for her to find employment. Grandpa had made the move at a time when it was still easy to find work in Israel. Sipporah was doing her army service when we arrived.

By the time our family came to Israel the clerks in the Housing Ministry had no flats to offer immigrants in the central area. The only housing available was in new settlements. My father and my mother accepted a small flat in Dimona, a town in the Negev desert. It was on the fourth floor of a building that had no elevators. The only work my father could get in that town was in a factory that made aerated drinks. Mother searched for work. Eventually she accepted the position of chambermaid in a four star hotel on the Dead Sea. Father believed the work to be beneath her dignity but she reminded him that all work was dignified. Her strongest argument was that we needed the money.

My mother did not have to wait with other people for public transport at the bus stop. A van from the hotel picked her up from the entrance to our apartment block every morning and brought her back in the evening. She left before I awoke. My father left soon after. I was left on my own for most of the day. It did not take much time for me to become quite wild. School presented challenges I was unwilling to take. The language was new and difficult to master. I seldom did my homework because the teachers in school never punished us if the work was not done. In India, I would have been caned and then obliged to stay in Detention Class to complete the homework. I stopped taking school seriously. I had not learned much in India either. I scraped through each year at the bottom of the class.

My mother’s beauty led to trouble at home. She had not used make-up or cut her hair short in India. In Israel things were different. The majority of the women painted their faces. They did not consult their husbands and seek their permission for everything they did. Women sat together in coffee houses and went to the movies together. They joined women’s groups that discussed each other’s problems, exercised, learned Hebrew and went on trips – all without their husbands. Their opinions were not the same as those their husbands held. My mother reveled in the change but he did not like it. It undermined his authority. She cut her hair and then told him that it saved her time getting dressed in the mornings. When she came home she did the housework in a hurry and went out to the club. She did not spend her money only on household expense but used a part of it to buy new clothes and make up. She sometimes had foreign money in her purse, which she had received as tips. He began to suspect that she was having relations with the rich foreigners who stayed in the hotel. She did not have to keep up with the latest fashions or use makeup for her husband.

Mother kept the foreign currency in a jar in the kitchen cabinet. She said that it was a saving for a trip abroad, which she intended to make with us. One day my father counted this money and was surprised at the sum total. He confronted her. He claimed that the other maids did not earn as much in tips as she did. She explained that she had been saving for almost two years. He
calmed down after a while but he could not put his suspicions to rest. He began to pry into everything she did, sneer at every opinion she had, go through her bag and cupboard and ask the husbands of other women whether there had really been a club meeting. Mother usually found out from the women that he had been questioning their husbands. She accused him of causing trouble for other women as well. It was not long before he began to raise his hand to her. After one argument she gave up her job at the hotel. She was fed-up with finding excuses for bruises and black eyes. Father was pleased in the beginning. He believed that he had simply asserted his manhood.

Matters at home did not improve. We were in debt within a few months. She refused to go to work again. She reminded him that he had kept insisting that he was man of the family. As man of the family he was supposed to support his wife and child. The notes I brought home from my teachers added fuel to the fire. He refused to sign the notes. She took my side. She began to sign the notes before he saw them.

Mother began to stay in her room. Dishes collected in the sink. She spent most of her time sleeping. When she came to watch television with us she was usually dressed in an old shapeless dress. Her hair had grown longer and it hung uncombed around her face. If I did not cook there would be no dinner. Then he would lose his temper. I was the one who had to go to the store for milk and bread every morning. The rest of the shopping was also my responsibility. It was done after school. I hated my parents and my home. I wished I had never been born.

One day Father announced that we were going to visit his father in Ramat Gan. Grandpa Eli, my uncles and aunts had visited us a few times but we had not left Dimona. I was excited. My father usually worked shorter hours on Friday but this Friday he took the day off. The journey was arduous. We had to rise early and walk to the central bus station. Then we changed busses three times, first at Beersheva, then at Tel Aviv and then in Ramat Gan. I was pleased when the travelling and waiting for the next bus finally stopped. Mother always got sick on a bus so the intervals were somewhat welcomed by her. She was pale and shaking by the end.

Grandpa asked my father to say the Kiddush prayers but my father refused saying that grandpa was the oldest male present. My mother prepared the meal because grandpa's children did not live at home. They all arrived for Friday prayers and dinner because we were visiting. Usually they visited him one family at a time. Their children were younger than I and they made quite a racket in the small flat. I felt sorry for the neighbors. Sipporah, Grandpa's youngest daughter was in the army and was based somewhere in the Galilee. She did not spend every weekend with her father. Erusha had married and she lived in Ramat Gan not very far from grandpa.

After Immanuel read the Grace after meals, my father spoke about the true purpose of our visit. “Daddy, I want to leave Samuel with you,” he said. “The boy is going to the dogs in Dimona. I am afraid that he will become like his mother.” He gave my mother a contemptuous look and she hung her head.

“You should not talk about your wife in that manner,” Immanuel rebuked him. “Settle whatever problems you have among yourselves, not in front of us especially not in front of your son. He will never respect his mother if you don’t.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” my mother sprang to my father’s defense, “Samuel did not have much of my attention. His schoolwork is poor and he has begun to smoke. We know that drug peddlers hang around the schools. Someone might slip something into his cigarette and he will get hooked. We fear for him.”

“We are counting on you to keep him for at least a year. We have brought his clothes,” he said to grandpa.
I now understood why we had carried such a large suitcase. Anger began to rise within me. Nobody had asked my consent. This was not India where children were sent to boarding schools, made to live in other homes, or given in marriage without their consent. I refused to agree. “I won’t leave my friends,” I began.

“You will do as you are told,” grandpa said. “If I had known that your parents were having such a bad time I would have brought you here earlier. You will stay with me until your mother returns and your parents can cope with you.”

“Good thing, we’ve only one child,” my father tried to joke, “or you would have had more kids to put up with.”

My mother gave him a sour look. My birth had been a complicated one. She had not become pregnant after it. “You can’t manage the one we’ve got,” she said spitefully. She believed that her husband blamed her for not having more children.

“Or control my wife either,” he returned.

“That’s the problem. You want full control over everybody’s life. Try to trust others for a change,” she said.

I retreated to the room I was to share with my parents that night. I pulled the door shut behind me, kicked off my sandals and got into bed without changing into my nightclothes.

“Look at yourself. How can I trust you?” Father was almost shouting. I pressed the pillow over my ears. Harsh words from their quarrel and grandpa’s calm voice trying to mediate between them still came through to my ears. I began to sob for the shame of it all.

The next morning everybody behaved as though nothing unusual had happened. We went to the local synagogue and returned to a cold meal. In our house my mother kept food on a hot plate throughout the Shabbat. Grandpa did not even have a big Shabbat kettle for hot water. He believed that we could do without tea or coffee once a week.

We sat out on the balcony waiting for the sun to go down. My parents would return only after Shabbat was declared officially over with the Havdalah prayers. They would not reach home until midnight. A cock crowed somewhere and I perked up. The sound reminded me of India. Grandpa Eli saw me and smiled. “I’ll tell you about a rooster I once had,” he said.

Immanuel wished us a hurried goodbye and left before Grandpa could begin narrating the tale about his rooster. It was the first of many stories he told about how he met and married my grandmother.

Banta

Grandpa was what my father called, “a bit of a bullshitter.” He told his grandchildren wonderful stories with such a straight face that none of us knew whether they were true or not. It was difficult to prove that his stories were a bundle of lies because there were always elements of truth in them that could be verified. The one person who knew the entire truth was not available for comment. My grandmother had passed on…
FULLY JEWISH
FULLY CHINESE

A Photo Essay

And He shall raise a banner to the nations, and He shall gather the lost of Israel, and the scattered ones of Judah. He shall gather from the four corners of the earth.

Isaiah 11:12
Around the 9th or 10th century, a group of Persian Jewish traders traveling through the Silk Road arrived in Kaifeng, the then capital city of China. As with other peaceful traders, they were warmly welcomed; one of the Jewish families was even granted the Emperor’s surname, Zhao. In return, the Jews offered “boundless loyalty to the country and prince” and established a significant community that lasted for centuries.

They identified themselves as Yicileye people, a direct translation of “Israel” at a time long before the modern state of Israel existed. They worshiped G-d and kept a kosher diet though they became accustomed to their surroundings and were absorbed in the local culture. They lived a Jewish life in a Chinese way and thrived for many centuries until their synagogue was destroyed by flood only two hundred years ago. It was never rebuilt.

Since then the community dwindled, many of them dissolved into the larger population. Without a place for worship, many of the religious activities no longer continued. As a result of intermarriage starting around 14th century, they began to look similar to other Chinese. But one thing never changed: they knew where they were from, and longed to go back. Although the Kaifeng Jews have been there for so long, today most Han Chinese are barely aware of their existence.

Some of the Kaifeng Jews believe that it is time to return home. Applications were filed with the Israeli embassy in Beijing as soon as these two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992. But the road to return home is not as easy as it seems. Different from Jewish matriarchal tradition, the Kaifeng Jews passed down their heritage, as do the Chinese, through the paternal line. The ancestors of the Kaifeng Jews married local Chinese women and then had children. But this created a problem for their descendants. According to the Law of Return, a person is born Jewish only if his or her mother is Jewish, otherwise a conversion is needed.

Further, the road of return has been made more difficult as the Chinese authorities, not recognizing Jews as an ethnic minority, say that there are no Chinese Jews, only Chinese, that they are Han now.

Even with so many obstacles, some have successfully made Aliyah. The preparation process starts in China with learning basic Hebrew and Torah. The final step is a conversion in Israel. On average this takes at least five years. But this does not stop them.

After years of waiting, some of these Chinese Jews have finally been fully accepted and granted Israeli citizenship. They are home now. A small community of the returned Chinese Jews has slowly begun to emerge in Israel and begun to thrive.

Here are the photos that tell the story of their return to Israel.

Jin Guangzhong stands before the Western Wall, Jerusalem. He travels to visit his elder daughter almost every year.
Feature
by Jason Jia

Gizzon prays by the Western Wall and draws attention from a curious boy.
Shai in class discussion with Rev. Menachem

Building a sukkah

Gizzon in Jerusalem
Jia Shuo (Jason Jia) graduated with a BA in International Journalism from Hong Kong Baptist University. In 2011, he decided to pursue an MA in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London.

In 2012, Jason was selected as the recipient of the Royal Photographic Society Postgraduate Bursary. He was also one of the Ideas Fund Innovators winners, awarded by IdeasTap. With support from RPS and IdeasTap, Jason began working on his ongoing project on the Jewish community in Kaifeng, China and their return to Israel.

Jason is currently based in Beijing, China, shooting personal projects and assignments. You can find him at http://www.jasonjiafoto.com.

All photos courtesy of Jason Jia.
Jin Guangzhong walks with his daughter Jin Jin and Nina Wang. Wang also made aliyah from Kaifeng.
Becoming Observant in Tokyo
A Personal Shabbat Journey

by Liane Wakabayashi
This is the account of my journey-in-progress toward becoming Shabbos-observant in Tokyo. I have been married for 22 years to Akihiko Wakabayashi, a practitioner of Eastern medicine and an increasingly supportive student of Jewish custom and faith. In a leafy suburb in Setagaya ward, Tokyo, we raise our two children, Mirai Miriam 15 and Seiji Hillel 10. Ten kilometers away, a fast drive down Kanana Dori, the Chabad House run by Rabbi Binyomin and Efrat Edery, leads to the beginning of my story.

Becoming observant in Tokyo? How could this even be possible when I was raised in the very Jewish New York neighborhoods of Great Neck, Long Island and Forest Hills, Queens. Never for a second would I have considered the “restrictions” and the “severity” of an Orthodox Jewish life. My English-born mother and Rumanian-born father weren’t Orthodox. Their parents weren’t either. And even my parents’ grandparents’ images are captured in sepia photographs dressed in dandy Paris fashion. Yet the unbroken chain of Jewish genes was indisputable in our looks, in our behavior and in our value system. Here in Tokyo, I started to crave Jewish life and tradition like never before.

Chabad House came into our lives in 2001, shortly after 22-year old Rabbi Binyomin and his bride Efrat arrived in Tokyo. My brief foray into country living in coastal Chiba ended abruptly soon after their arrival. I packed up our household 100 kilometers away, said goodbye to the ocean and the ledge of trees in front of the mountain getaway I had called home for two years. It was now back to city life, to crowded little streets that led to the home of our new Chabad rabbi. I started to crave Jewish life and tradition like never before.

As I came to know Efrat and Rabbi Binyomin, I started noticing how they balanced the financial struggles and stresses of daily life, frequent house moves, the task of aiding Jews that had been incarcerated and those that had been hospitalized. Those that they helped were able to live their lives in difficult circumstances with a bit more comfort knowing Binyomin and Efrat were both there to support them, whether this was with smiles, with Torah study, or just laughter. I saw Efrat raise a large family with such ease while my struggle to raise ‘only’ two children left me exhausted. How did Efrat do it? I would be standing in the kitchen helping her chop a bucket of onions, a bag of potatoes, squeezing lemons, dicing carrots . . . and the clock would be ticking with only hours left before Shabbat, that moment 20 minutes before the sun goes down when candle lighting is supposed to take place. I would race home, pick up my kids from school, then make the half hour trip back to Chabad just in time to light candles. Some Shabbats I’d be successful. And often times I missed the boat. I found it an almighty struggle just to get the timing right.

But Efrat, besides cooking for at least 25 people each week, would also prepare meals ‘to go’ for kosher visitors to Japan, homeschool her own children, answer endless emails, relay messages back and forth with Binyomin and seamlessly adjust and adjust to whatever challenges took priority that day. Despite the endless emails, the weekly email newsletter to compose, and a relentless vacationless schedule, Efrat would always find time to speak one to one with anyone who needed her.

And then she would pause for Shabbat candle-lighting at precisely the perfect time.

There had to be an engine running this superhuman activity with a capacity that allowed her to do it all with precision and with a smile. My first step toward “observancy” was just that: observing how all this activity in the weekdays would come to a natural halt on the eve of Shabbat. I observed how Efrat and Rabbi Binyomin appeared just as “busy” as ever, leading song and prayer at Shabbat meals, the discussion of the weekly Torah parsha, the davening from prayer books, and striking up conversations in at least 4 different languages with out of town guests.

I began to observe how every Shabbat has its own rhythm. I gradually learned to see the beauty in deterring my own cravings to check emails on the iphone. I slowly came to enjoy ignoring relentless to-do-lists just for a day and trust that whatever great urgent matter I was in the midst of attending to could wait until after Shabbat.

I discovered that the prayers sung at the start of Shabbat have a mysteriously feminine slant. What did this mean? In L’ha Dohdi we would welcome the “Shabbat bride.” In the Eshet Chayil prayer we praise the chief keeper of the...
Jewish home, the wife, for running her household with love and compassion. In the early days, I didn’t understand why Shabbat would be called a “bride” when we didn’t on balance recognize the Shabbat “groom.” I talked this over with my husband Aki, who is well versed in Eastern philosophy’s yin-yang principles of complementary but opposing energies, the “yang” -- the pushing, striving, creative energy that drives forward the workweek and the “yin” of Shabbat, a calming-down energy that rises as the sun sets on Friday night. As I started taking this Shabbat bride analogy to heart, it became easy to turn off one electronic gadget after another. In its place I experienced how Shabbat peacefully opens a door onto a new state of mind where I yield my own agenda to a higher will, the will to rest and see rest as a gift, a supremely life-affirming, healthy gift. The door opens to the Shabbat table, to laughter and conversation, to bowls heaped with salads. And after the meal, in the long slow hours before sundown, Shabbat could become quite boring at moments. This too was a gift: to see boredom as a chance to observe my reactions to surroundings without constantly being busy. I discovered the pleasure of taking a walk with nothing in my pockets, just an open mind to stop and pause before a beautiful garden or an ancient tree that I would normally miss in the rush to always get somewhere.

An overarching principle in traditional Eastern medicine, from which natural healing occurs, is that you get well, first and foremost, by making lifestyle adjustments that require small sacrifices and self-regulation. To change eating patterns or sleeping routines, you have to change your mind. By correcting what led to physical imbalance in the first place, you come to appreciate how lifestyle adjustments to diet, to sleeping patterns, to work and exercise routines are not really much of a sacrifice at all, but rather can be seen as a gift that add years, if not decades, to a life well lived.

I scrutinized my lifestyle. There’s no doubt that I’m a pusher. If I can’t find time to do what needs doing in the daytime I would burn the midnight oil, working until one or two am. I would cram as many hours as possible under the harsh light and opaque radiation of the computer. I was multitasking for sure, tutoring my kids while dinner boiled in pots on the stove, taking phone calls with a free hand while stroking an Absynian cat with the other. And I was doing this six days a week. The seventh was a break in routine— but its wasn’t quite Shabbat, although it looked like a pretty good facsimile.

I complained to Efrat that no matter how much time I spent at Chabad House there always seemed to be a glass wall between their lives and mine. We were occupying the same space, doing the same activities, but the energy or consciousness behind the acts was so different. Shabbat involved driving or taking buses and trains and always the nervous tension that comes from facing traffic or crowded public transportation. Being out of walking range from Chabad House, I just could not figure out how to make Shabbat one continuous night and day of rest, a full day of recharge for not just me but the children and Aki too.

In Tokyo, where you can count observant Jews on two hands, the arrival of a new family can have meteoric impact, as it did for us with the arrival of
Rabbi Daniel and Yael Aldrich in Tokyo half a year ago. Their spacious home was set up generously to accommodate guests for Shabbat. We were invited repeatedly to experience Shabbat as they experienced it—attending Shabbat services in the beautiful new shul opened by the Chabad House run by Rabbi Mendy and Chana Sudakevich. Experiencing many kinds of Shabbats with different families, even different rabbis, led me to the realization that every family creates its own Shabbat rhythm and over time I would need to as well. Strolling the streets with empty pockets and no wallets, a day of singing and prayer, one colorful plate of hamishy Mediterranean food after the other, my kids look a bit sad now when Shabbat finally comes to an end at the Aldrich house.

Growing up in a Jewish household where my mother lit Shabbat candles and prepared a festive meal, I didn’t know how to incorporate the “add-ons”. I saw them as unfamiliar customs. The beautiful melodic prayers before the meal, the washing of the hands before eating, the Birkat Hamazon prayers after the meal. . . I didn’t have the confidence to replicate this Shabbat experience at home and in truth, having a Japanese husband who was supportive and happy to make Jewish life the heart of our household, I was nonetheless alone here, challenged to do every step of it myself. I was distracted by the overwhelming urge to create Shabbat perfection rather than Shabbat peace. Family Shabbat dinners at home might quickly deteriorate into shouting matches as family members would choose to bring grievances they had been bottling up all week to the Friday night table. Or the next morning we’d be volleying emotions and my child’s insistence on watching a television program called Battle Spirit could set off yet another household drama.

What I had to learn, and I’m still learning, is to honor Shabbat as a day when thematic family issues and verbal provocations are set aside. If someone’s not pitching in to help set the table, let it slide. If someone arrives half an hour late to the family dinner table, holding up the start of the meal, so be it.

Every week now, I see tiny adjustments in the right direction. The routine remains the same but what changes is the level of refinement we bring to peace in the household. I negotiate with my son for a tape recorder so we are able to turn off Saturday morning television forever. By the time we are ready to buy the recording machine, my son had lost interest in Battle Spirit altogether and he came to the conclusion that television is not necessary on Shabbat. He has found another game, chess, which he was introduced by Rabbi Binyomin and Efrat’s chess-loving sons. Together on Shabbat afternoon the children hone their skills in order to be the first to cry out checkmate! Seiji is now so excited to refine his chess skills that he has persuaded his Battle Spirit loving classmates to switch to his new game too.

Every week, bit-by-bit, we add a refinement. One week we’re eating kosher chicken, tasty, mouthwatering and so unlike the store bought chicken we usually eat. So after a few months of eating kosher chicken the family consensus is to only eat kosher chickens. Just as we make this decision, we find out Chabad is out of chicken and it will be months before kosher chicken is again available in Tokyo. But our family resolve is already unanimous, and so life goes on as vegetarians, at least until kosher chickens become available again.

We are still on this journey of refining Shabbat and where we need most strength and resolve is in the communication. It helps me to think of Shabbat as a 25 hour cruise on a ship that our family enjoys together, with good people we know, with people we are just getting to know, with strangers we will exchange emails and addresses with at the end of a brief but unforgettable Shabbat together.

Every week, Shabbat is unique. The meals have a different flavor, new faces, a different spiritual message. At the Aldrich dining table, we read the weekly Parsha, the Torah portion. It will be discussed at lunch, debated, challenged, a source of nachas as the kids relate their questions about the Parsha to their own sweet lives. Finally there’s Havdallah, the beautiful closing ceremony that takes us back to the shore of everyday busy life.

And thus ends another trip on our ‘Tokyo Shabbat cruise ship’. We’ve had to hop on board at candle-lighting time Friday night and stay on board until the ship returns to “shore” an hour after sunset, taking us back to the port of our busy weekday lives with a fresh mind, and clarity about what takes top priority.

The lights go on. The vacuum cleaner gets plugged in. The computer is switched on. The cell phone hums to announce a phone call. The race to juggle two children’s busy school life routines at opposite ends of Tokyo, the responsibilities of writing and running my own art school, my husband’s requests for support as he takes over his late father’s work in property management—all of it is back again to embrace us as a new week begins.

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, a practitioner of Eastern medicine. To find out more about Liane, her art and writings, see www.genesiscards.com

To read Liane’s memoir, The Wagamama Bride see http://www.lianewakabayashi.com. To find out more about Liane’s intuitive art workshops see: http://www.genesiscards.com
On Stardom in China, Award-Winning Fiction and Judaism

Interview with Rachel DeWoskin
During the mid-1990s, Rachel DeWoskin first dazzled audiences as the unlikely star of the Chinese soap opera *Foreign Babes in Beijing* -- an experience she captured in her 2005 memoir of the same title, exploring life and love (both onscreen and off) in a changing China. *Foreign Babes in Beijing* has been published in six different countries and is currently being developed as a television series for HBO.

More recently, Rachel DeWoskin has dazzled readers with her award-winning fiction set in Asia and beyond, exploring themes such as sameness and difference, empathy, women's relationships and the Jewish experience. Her 2009 debut novel *Repeat After Me* won a Forward Magazine Book of the Year Award. *Big Girl Small*, her 2011 novel, received the 2012 American Library Association's Alex Award and was named one of the top three books of 2011 by *Newsday*. Rachel DeWoskin was also the 2011 recipient of a three-month M Literary Residency in Shanghai, where she completed the screenplay for *American Concubine* and was inspired to develop a forthcoming novel to be set in Shanghai.

While Rachel DeWoskin currently resides in Chicago, where she is a faculty member in the Creative Writing Department at the University of Chicago, she returns to China every year and considers Beijing a second home.

Asian Jewish Life sat down with Rachel DeWoskin to learn more about her ongoing relationship with China, her forthcoming novels and screenplay, and her interest in exploring Judaism -- including in Asia -- through her writing.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Your memoir *Foreign Babes in Beijing* introduced you to American audiences as Jiexi, the young American who moves to Beijing in the mid-1990s. When you were writing that memoir, what did it feel like to relive your days as a Chinese television star?

Rachel DeWoskin (RD): Hilarious! The only excruciating thing about writing *Foreign Babes in Beijing* was revisiting the death of one of my close friends in Beijing in a drunk driving accident. I was of course sick with guilt and misery when he died, and remembering how young and oblivious we were was more painful than I’d anticipated it would be. In a way, “youth” provides an excuse for our most egregious mistakes, but being an adult also gives me a lens through which to calibrate the horrific tragedy and loss of his life. It’s difficult and fraught to re-evaluate the ways you’ve behaved in both your own life and in someone else’s culture. But it’s also important, and I felt like if I was going to tell my friends’ stories in *Foreign Babes in Beijing*, it was important to ask difficult questions about my own story as well.

The tale of *Foreign Babes in Beijing* itself I had more or less come to terms with. And frankly the ludicrousness of both the show and the experience made that part easier to write. I had to re-watch the show in order to write the book, since I had only watched it when it was on Beijing TV. In those days, I thought it was possible that I would never recover from the embarrassment. But watching it again almost ten years later, I enjoyed it wildly and found it incredibly funny. Thank you, distance.

AJL: Do people in China still recognize you from the TV series *Foreign Babes in Beijing*?

RD: Sometimes. But only old people in Beijing and when they do, they’re very funny about it. I’ll have an interaction at the Ghost Market, and at the end of it someone will say, “Thanks Jiexi.” No one is in a frenzy about it, and most young people have never heard of it.

AJL: Could you talk about what you’ve been working on recently?
While in residency in Shanghai, I was staying in the Embankment Building, an iconic, fabulous mix of urban and old-school Shanghai, next to Suzhou Creek, across from Pudong and lined with tiny automotive shops.

My neighbors were a terrific mix of Shanghai-ers, from retired government officials in their late 80s, to yuppies, business owners, teachers, and children.

I was inspired to write a novel set there, called Beautiful Girls Club Shanghai, about three generations of Chinese women who live in the building, as well as an American woman married to a Chinese reporter. It’s about family, identity, corruption and love. And like all my books, it’s about people trying to figure out who they are across big distances – linguistic, cultural, and in some cases generational and geographical as well.

I also have a new novel forthcoming this year from Viking Penguin, called Blind. It’s about a young woman who loses her eyesight and has to reconfigure how to make meaning in the world, how she’ll see, really.

Blind is not China related, but, It’s still concerned with my favorite central questions: of sameness and difference. I leaned Braille in order to write the book, and that was the most imagination-bending experience I’ve had since learning Chinese.

I’m also at work on a second novel set in Shanghai, which I’m calling Second Circus. It’s about a father and daughter who escape to Shanghai from Poland in 1941, and wait out the war in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. I was in Shanghai this summer, and Patrick Cranley, a fabulous and generous historian, took me on a tour of the former Jewish ghetto of Hongkou, which remains in some ways staggeringly unchanged.

AJL: How often do you get back to China?

RD: At least every summer, sometimes more. Now that we have kids, it tends to be once a year, so we have enough time to recover from jet lag, take bullet trains and bamboo boats, and make a long stay of it.

AJL: So you’re exposing your kids to Chinese culture and the language. Are they taking classes in China?

RD: They take Chinese in the summers. Dalin’s first Chinese sentence was “Bao bukeyi chi ren,” “Cougars can’t eat people.” She loves animals. And they learned to sing “Liang Zhi Laohu” before they learned “Are You Sleeping.” I’m proud of that.

My kids have a funny way of thinking about culture and ethnicity. When I met Dalin’s assistant kindergarten teacher, she was surprised, and she said, “Oh! It’s nice to meet you. But Dalin told me you were Chinese.” So I asked Dalin that night whether she’d told the teacher I was Chinese, and she glanced up at me shrugging and said, “yeah,” and I realized she thinks I’m Chinese.

And I didn’t contradict that idea, because I thought about it and decided that her way of dividing the world up is based on variables not entirely external.

They’re about how you identify in the world and where you like to spend your time and what kind of food is your default dinner plan. Ours is Chinese. Little kids are smart about important things.

Human beings have a compulsion to organize material. We organize, we like to categorize. When it comes to people, we defy categorization, so it’s a dangerous business. One of the things I decided when I was writing Foreign Babes in Beijing was that you can’t really be a writer and try to answer questions, because you become a propagandist. If you’re looking for simple categorizations — or what I think of as, “sum-it-up-dom” — when you try to take some issue and
make some unambiguous moral end to it, you become an ideologue and your work isn't art, it's propaganda. So the writer's project is more about unpacking or complicating, asking questions from all sorts of different angles. And for me those questions tend to be more about culture, Judaism (as I get older and older), gender, language, and difference -- as in how are you the same as everybody else and how are you different.

When I was a kid, being Jewish set me apart from everyone in my, very Christian, very Republican primary school. We lived in a neighborhood in which my parents were freaks. My dad is a Sinologist who fixes cars in the driveway and built our television set from a heath kit. He's an Ozarkian Jew from Missouri and a classical Chinese scholar and my mom is a dancer and an English teacher and an absolute firecracker of a person. We never boasted any kind of shiny normalcy, even though like most kids I wanted more than anything to be "normal". There were no other Jews for a million miles around. And at my primary school, my parents famously — and this is in Blind, I put this straight in my new novel — my parents complained that we were singing "Christ in a manger is born" at the holiday sing-along, and they complained about the Christmas tree. They felt church and state should be divided and it was inappropriate and they suggested that it alienated some of the kids (meaning me). The school, in its well-meaning way, added "Dreidel, Dreidel" to the holiday roster, entirely missing (or ignoring) my parents’ point.

So when the holiday sing-along came along, everyone was singing. And then they started "Dreidel, Dreidel" and I burst into song before realizing no one else knew it or was singing. I sang the whole thing alone.

AJL: Do you actively seek to explore Jewish identity in your books?

RD: Most of my characters turn out to be Jewish in the same way that I am. Emma Sasha Silver, the protagonist of Blind — who my sweet daughters think of as a real person — is Jewish. Her family has Friday night dinners and her parents think about the world in a way similar to the way in which my parents think about the world. And of course Liese, the protagonist of Second Circus, is a Jewish young woman escaping from Poland.

AJL: Do you think there's generally an increased awareness of all things foreign in China? I'd say there's more familiarity and camaraderie between Chinese and expatriates.

In the 1990's, there was deep curiosity on both sides. Foreign Babes in Beijing, the TV show, was an apt expression of that curiosity. It's a little muddled and gawking, and I'd say that now it's got more nuance and subtlety. There's no need for a show like Foreign Babes anymore.

I’ve always found Chinese people to be unbelievably welcoming of foreigners and Jews in particular. I’ve never said to a person "I'm a Jew" without applause or a warm response along the lines of, "Chinese and Jews are so similar, we care about family and education, and we’re great at making money." Not always accurate descriptions of entire groups of people, but the feeling behind these responses is always one of connection and warmth and the connection between us has real depth. Researching that for Second Circus has been not only inspiring, but also reassuring. 

Writer and founder of the award-winning blog Speaking of China, Jocelyn Eikenburg is one of the most prominent voices on the web for Chinese men and Western women in love. She draws on her own marriage to a Hangzhou native to explore love, family and relationships in China through her writing. Her writing credits include Matador, the Global Times and the Idaho State Journal.
MISSING

Nadine Hwang

Last seen at the harbor of Malmö, Sweden. Pictured here on April 28, 1945, the day she arrived in Sweden after being liberated from Ravensbrück Concentration Camp in Germany.
The film Harbour of Hope presents original archival footage, mainly shot on April 28, 1945, the day several hundred concentration camp survivors came to Malmö, Sweden on ships from Copenhagen. The film also tells the story of life after the Holocaust for some of these survivors.

While Nadine Hwang was just one of many, this story connects the Jewish and Asian experience in the most unexpected way.

Nadine Hwang was one of two Chinese women that escaped the horrors of Ravensbrück concentration camp, the only main camp designated almost exclusively for women. (The other was a woman by the name of Emma Esther Yang.) Documents, testimony and photographs all confirm that Hwang made her way to Malmö on April 28, 1945. Research reveals that she left Sweden for China in July 1945, but there ends her paper trail.

She had been deported to Ravensbrück in Germany toward the end of the war in 1944, for reasons we can only guess. While in the camp a friendship developed between Nadine and Rachel Krausz (a Jewish British-born woman) and her nine-year old daughter Irene, who is one of the main characters in Harbour of Hope. According to testimony given by Irene, Nadine helped them to get out of the camp. Years later, Irene named her own daughter Nadine as a token of appreciation for the aid she offered and the kindness she showed to Irene and her mother.

Prior to interment in Ravensbrück, Hwang had led a life most uncommon. She was the daughter of a Chinese Ambassador and was raised in China and Spain. She became a lawyer and was appointed honorary general of the Chinese Army in 1920, during the civil war. In the mid-1930s she moved to Paris and became the mistress of Natalie Clifford Barney, a very prominent figure with the Parisian salon set.

Irene Krausz-Fainman was born in Holland in 1935 and now lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. She has been haunted by memories of the camp for most of her life.

Harbour of Hope has been featured in countless film festivals including the UK Jewish Film Festival in November 2013 in London and the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival in December 2012. In fact, it was during a 2012 screening in Jerusalem when a woman afterwards raised her hand and identified herself as a baby in the film.

It was then that they realized it was still possible to continue the quest to document and preserve these stories. The filmmakers of this harrowing but life-affirming documentary are continuing to look for additional survivors who began their lives anew in Malmö for their ongoing testimony and memory project. They are relying on photographs, archival footage and passenger lists to help make these identifications. If you have any information, particularly with respect to the group of survivors that arrived on April 28, 1945, please contact them at harbourofhope@autoimages.se.

Or, please see the Harbour of Hope site at http://harbourofhope.com to see how you can otherwise help provide information on Nadine Hwang or any of these other 30,000 survivors.
Thai Spices of Chanukah

As many of you know (especially if you are from, or have family or friends in the United States), this Chanukah is a rather historical one, where both Thanksgiving and Chanukah overlap. The first time this happened was in November of 1888, very shortly after Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday, and once again in 1899. Since Franklin Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving back a week, thinking it would better stimulate the economic conditions of the country, this phenomenon happened once more in 1918, and never again until now. This year, 2013, Thanksgiving will fall on the second night of Chanukah. An occasion such as this won’t be seen again until November of 2070.

For many residents of the U.S., the idea of "Thanksgivukah," took to the social media outlets like wildfire. The culinary possibilities, after all, left many drooling where they stood. Turkey? Latkes? Cranberry sauce? Sufganiot? Pumpkin pie? The excitement on Twitter is palpable. Except for me, for, I have a confession: I hate turkey.

As a native of South East Asia, I tried really hard to like turkey. I ate it faithfully every year, to show my solidarity to my new homeland. I watched it roasting, turning a beautiful shade of caramel brown. Every year, my hopes lifted. Every year, I choked down bite after stinky, gamy bite of this foul bird (Yes, pun intended). Over the many years that I have now lived in the United States, turkey proponent after turkey proponent eagerly sought me out, thinking I needed to only taste theirs, and my aversion to turkey would be a thing of the past. "But, I’m sure they didn’t make it like I do. I have a secret." They all had secrets. Brines similar to witches’ brews, paper bags, marinades, special sauce, smoke houses. All promised to be the cure to the run-of-the-mill turkey. Admittedly, some were better than others, but I, too had a secret: I’d rather be smoking, brining, saucing, or marinating a brisket. A sausage. A chicken. Anything. I kept my mouth shut. Far be it from me, a sweet Thai woman to be opinionated.

After I got married, I decided to take things into my own hands for Thanksgiving. I generally don’t serve turkey. My guests are confused, but overall, they’re okay with it. When I do serve turkey, I curry or spice the living daylights out of it, hoping against all hope, it will transform into something else. Sometimes, it does, but I can’t help thinking at times, how much better it would have been, had it been a chicken. Many people ask me about my Thanksgivukah menu, as the day approaches. It’s become a standard greeting these days in the foodie community. I proudly announce that, yet again, I will not be roasting a turkey.

But, if you’re anything like me, turkey’s no exception; anything can benefit from spice and curry. So ditch the turkey and add Asian flavor to your holidays this year. Here are two Thai-inspired twists on otherwise "traditional" Chanukah foods, sure to zest your holidays up a bit.
Mee Krob, As I Remember It
(About 4 Snack-Sized Portions)

• 1 “bail” thin rice vermicelli noodles
• 1 cup (approximately) vegetable oil, for deep frying
  (there will be plenty of leftover oil)
• 2 tablespoons tamarind paste (or unseasoned rice vinegar)
• 1/4 cup palm sugar or brown sugar, packed
• 2 tablespoons chili sauce, like Sambal Oleak

Make the Noodles:
Rice vermicelli, unlike their thicker counterparts, need no reconstitution prior to use – at least for our purposes. It usually comes in large bundles, composed of several smaller “bails” inside. Since the ingredients are rice and water, Star-K, as of this writing, approves the use of rice noodles without a hechsher.

Rice vermicelli, the noodles used in this recipe, comes in large bundles containing several smaller “bails.”

We will simply fry the noodles first. This process is extremely fast, and pretty entertaining to watch. If you'd like, you can fry up multiple bales and reserve some for other uses. They make dramatic salad toppers; just make sure you top the salad AFTER you apply the dressing.

1. In a wok over medium heat, add oil and heat until glistening. Test the temperature by tossing in a piece of rice noodle. If it immediately sizzles and puffs up, it’s ready. While the oil is heating, fluff and separate the noodles in a large (clean) paper grocery bag (this cuts down on pieces of rice noodle flying all over the place when they break). It’s okay to break them, so don’t worry too much. The objective is to spread the noodles out into as much of a single layer as possible.

2. When oil is hot, carefully place a small quantity of the noodles into the hot oil. When they puff up, carefully turn them over, so as to get any un-puffed noodles that might be hiding on the other side. Remove immediately from oil and drain on paper towels. Repeat until all the noodles have been fried.

Frying rice vermicelli is very quick, and requires not rehydration of the noodles before hand.

Now Make the Syrup
This syrup is made from tamarind, a sour fruit which can be found all over Africa, the Middle East, and throughout Asia, and is readily available in specialty shops with a hechsher. It’s generally sold as “paste,” or “concentrate,” but you can use either interchangeably in this recipe. If you can’t find any, unseasoned rice vinegar is an acceptable substitute.

1. Pour out the oil from the wok into a heat-safe container, being careful not to splash it onto yourself. Wipe the wok clean. While still keeping the wok over medium heat, add tamarind, sugar, and chili paste and stir to combine. When the mixture begins to bubble, lower the heat and allow to boil for about two minutes, or until mixture becomes slightly thickened and syrupy.

2. Place fried noodles into the wok, and “fold” the noodles into the syrup. This will take a few minutes, but the result should be a more or less even distribution of the syrup coating the noodles. You will also break some noodles. Again, it’s okay, as long as it’s not excessive.

The syrup can be made in advance, as well as the noodles, but it’s much easier to coat the noodles when the syrup is warm, so if you decide to do this, just heat the syrup up a bit in the wok before putting the noodles in. Mee Krob is generally eaten at room temperature, so there isn’t any rush to eat it.
"Tom Yum" Latkes

Seasoning:
- 2 stalks of lemongrass, trimmed with dead leaves removed (alternatively, use 2 tablespoons or so of dried, powdered lemongrass)
- 3 shallots, quartered
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper or, to suit taste
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 1/2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 4-5 kefir lime leaves
- 1 teaspoon oil
- 1 handful cilantro (optional)

For Latkes:
- 2 pounds (approximately), shredded potatoes
- 2 eggs, beaten
- lemon juice
- kosher salt
- potato starch

1. Up to a day in advance, shred 2 pounds of potatoes. Liberally sprinkle with lemon juice and kosher salt, and toss to combine. Place potatoes in a colander to drain. The lemon juice will prevent the potatoes from discoloring, and the salt will help remove moisture.

2. For the Tom Yum paste: wash lemongrass and remove the fibrous bottom and the scraggly top portion. There should be a good 10 inches or so that is light green; this is what you want to use. Slice and place into a food processor (this can also be done with a mortar and pestle). Add peeled and quartered shallots, cayenne pepper, salt, pepper, paprika, kefir lime leaves, and sugar. Process for a few seconds at a time, scraping the sides down with a spatula. When the particles become fine, slowly drizzle about a teaspoon of oil while processing and blend until the ingredients come together into somewhat of a paste. If it’s a little lumpy, that’s okay, as long as you can’t easily distinguish one ingredient from the other.

3. Place shredded potatoes, a few handfuls at a time, into a dish cloth and fold cloth into thirds lengthwise. Wring the cloth with potatoes inside until you’ve extracted as much moisture as you can. Set aside in a large bowl. Continue with remaining potato shreds. Sprinkle potatoes with kosher salt, to taste (about a tablespoon will do it). Add beaten eggs and about 1/4 cup of potato starch. Add Tom Yum paste from food processor, and toss to combine.

4. In a large skillet over medium heat, add about 1/2 an inch of oil. When glistening and hot, carefully add potatoes. It’s best to spread out the piles of potatoes into uniform patties, rather than a mound. Flip latke when browned on one side, and continue browning on the other. Remove when desired crispness is achieved and drain on paper towels. Serve hot.

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.
Spirituality as Spice to Life
My Time with the Bene Israel

Color. Spice. Bene Israel undulating tunes to Kol Nidre and “Selichot.” Women wearing saris and kipot. How does one do a “Mi Sheberach” at the URJ Rodef Shalom in Mumbai? One holds out one’s hands like “Namaste” and everyone else, one by one, puts their hands outside this sign of prayer, and then kisses their own hands. My goal in leading this community through the holidays was to enter into a process – as they only have rabbinic leadership during the High Holidays. They themselves report that they are “thirsty” for learning.

We met in August for a Selichot service, during which I introduced themes, questions, tunes which would accompany us throughout. I also asked congregants what they wanted from their High Holiday experience. The answers were “community involvement”, “belonging”, “inner peace”, “deep learning”, and “personal growth.” Another goal was to learn from their Indian context and to bridge Judaism and the larger Hindu world with hints of Buddhism in which they live. We continued the process by holding a study session on interpersonal dynamics and how to actually do repentance, Teshuva. A lively discussion with texts was the first gate which opened up on our way to unlocking many gates.

On Erev Rosh HaShanah, with a wild and loud Ganesh festival with firecrackers competing outside... and the monsoon rains bucketing down, we did a play reading of the Akedah as it was a way to involve everyone and allow them to play a part in the retelling and examination on this difficult narrative. But this is not the only way in which the unique and lovely voices of the community were heard. Many congregants, young and old, took their place on the bima to read the prayers. On Rosh HaShanah, during the Torah reading, we had a very emotional communal experience. The last couple to be called up was expecting a baby within a week. As I chanted “May your descendents be as plentiful as the stars in the sky and the sands of the sea”, I stopped and translated, and then blessed the couple so that they and their baby would keep the traditions of Bene Israel alive. Their healthy baby boy was born the day before Yom Kippur and we again came together to bless the new parents during our communal Sukkah building.

On the afternoon of Rosh HaShanah, the entire Jewish community of Mumbai gathers together for a “Tashlich” ceremony, to symbolically throw their sins into the ocean. There are prayers, the shofar is blown, but something else was bubbling under the service. Chatter also rang loudly through the community for it is also the community’s traditional time for matchmaking. Parents, mostly mothers, are responsible for finding a suitable bride or groom for their children so everyone wears their best and brightest clothes.

In all gatherings, the treasured and holy Bene Israel tunes are always included and remain a defining element of the prayer community. This is a community of strong tradition.

On Yom Kippur, we opened the ark to invite each and every person to have private and special holy time before the Torah.

During my Yizkor sermon, walking across the theological bridge between Judaism and the dominant culture in India, I was asked about reincarnation, the World to Come and our varied tradition. The answers are multi-layered and ambiguous, with many colorful midrashim speaking of the World to Come for the righteous as a collective. But using the ambiguity to the full, I suggested that Yom Kippur is a day between life and death, which ends with Shema Yisrael. Here is a time to choose life and to begin again, making our lives as full of meaning, community and learning as we can.

I have a sense that India, in general, is in need of so many faces of God and of spirituality because of the harshness of life. You see people praying everywhere, or doing yoga or meditating. And wearing bright colors, no two materials seem the same in the sea of colors. Yet despite the color and spices of communal life I witnessed and took part in, it would not be a full picture of India without mentioning the great poverty that is part of life in the streets.

The morning of Erev Rosh HaShanah, I woke up early, before my traveling companion and walked outside our modest hotel to the promenade along the seafront. There, on the pavement, right outside our hotel, was a family of six asleep on the pavement. The youngest children were not wearing garments of any kind on the bottom half of their bodies. I supposed to myself that the parents couldn’t afford diapers and had nowhere to wash soiled clothes and dry them. On my way back from the seafront, the family was awake, seemed to have no breakfast. The mother was selling roses. I bought two bunches and paid enough for the family to buy food and maybe some clothing. The mother looked deeply into my eyes, she understood my intention. I thought of the liturgy, Repentance, Prayer and Tzedaka avert the evil decree. I thought of the limitless luxury of our Western lifestyle.

India smells of incense and cardamom, and cows and sometimes too many car fumes. One feels that there is a sitar in the air, and a pipe of music and often there is, because there is always a festival. Among the mixed spices of many religions, we as Jews together lifted our voices in song and prayer.

Rabbi Judith Edelman-Green was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. In the fall, she was sent by the World Union for Progressive Judaism to URJ Rodef Shalom in Mumbai.
Firsthand Accounts of the Jewish Experience in World War II Shanghai

In early 1939, Fritz Marcus and his father fled Germany for the only place in the world that would accept them: Shanghai. For the second half of his ten-year stay in Shanghai, Fritz began to keep a journal of his daily activities and the events that unfolded in Shanghai, but after he moved to the United States, he changed his name to Fred and eventually married his wife, Audrey. The diaries were never translated into English during Fred’s life. After he passed away in 2002, Audrey came into contact with Rena Krasno, another Shanghai Jew. Although Krasno’s family came from Russia, Rena was fluent in German and willingly agreed to translate Fred’s journals. Krasno had previously penned her own family history in two works: Strangers Always - A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai (Pacific View Press, Berkeley, 1992) and its prequel, That Last Glorious Summer 1939 Shanghai – Japan (Old China Hands Press, Hongkong, 2001). Sadly, Krasno died in 2009.

Survival in Shanghai: The Journals of Fred Marcus 1939-49 (Pacific View Press, 2008) by Audrey Friedman Marcus and Rena Krasno provides an insightful look into the daily lives of young Jewish refugees during and just after World War II. Fred was only fifteen when he arrived in Shanghai with his widower father. But the two wouldn’t live together for long as the elder Marcus died in Shanghai. So this book is also a coming of age story and a story of survival in more ways than one.

The diaries are telling in that they show that the European Jews in Shanghai led anything but a typical refugee life. Fred often attended lectures and music performances. He dated women, which usually took the form of group outings with other friends. They would chat in cafes and go to the cinema. Fred was involved in the Pao Chia, or police corps that the Japanese set up for the Jews to patrol their own community.

From his entries, he shows that he took an active involvement in the Shanghai Jewish community and kept up to date with the latest news there. He covers many important events in Jewish Shanghai: the 1943 round up of the refugees in to the Hongkou designated area, which is also referred to as the Shanghai Ghetto; the end of the war; life in Shanghai under US occupation; and resettlement in the west and Israel. Rena Krasno and Audrey Friedman Marcus supplement the journals with historical events that concurrently took place.

While Survival in Shanghai tells the story of the Shanghai Jewish experience through the eyes of one young man, Steve Hochstadt’s book Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) showcases the stories of thirteen men and women who fled Europe for Shanghai between 1938 and 1940. He writes: “They embody the variety and similarities that characterized the Shanghai ordeal for thousands of Jewish refugees.” Hochstadt has studied the Shanghai Jewish refugee community for twenty years and has interviewed over one hundred former refugees. His own grandparents were Shanghai Jewish refugees.

Hochstadt believes that the best way to tell the stories of the Shanghai Jews is by way of interview. Therefore much of this book is a first person narrative, although like in Survival in Shanghai, the author inserts the relevant historical events that coincide with the timeline of the refugees’ stories.

Exodus to Shanghai is one of the most comprehensive books about this unique Jewish enclave. The Shanghai refugees, unlike the wealthy Jews who found refuge in the US and the UK, were common people without resources or connections. And they waited until the last minute to leave, when they had no other options. Unlike those who were able to find visas to North America, South America, and the UK, the Shanghai refugees had the most to risk. They took a gamble on leaving behind their lives in Germany and Austria—a life that many thought would return to normal after people wised up about Hitler—and set sail or embarked on a Trans-Siberian train trip across the Soviet Union and down the width of China to Shanghai, the great unknown.

But as history would show, Shanghai turned out to be a wise decision. And the story of the Shanghai Jews, according to Hochstadt, tells us more than just an unlikely destination for a desperate people, but also about the mass exodus of Jews in the late 1930s in general. “Their last-minute escape, their middling social position, and their lack of integration in their temporary Chinese home created experiences that allow us to better understand the hundreds of thousands of German-speaking Jews displaced by the Holocaust.”

These two books give the reader a comprehensive understanding of what it was like to flee Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s and settle in a faraway, unknown land. They also include the important historical characters that were involved in settling the Jews: the Sephardic and Russian Jewish communities, the American relief agencies, and even the Japanese occupiers.
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