Worlds Apart in Singapore
A Jewish Family Story
A Family Flower Garden
Raising My Jewish Chinese Daughter
The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story
Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines

On the cover: Marie Clumeck and Baby Annetta, Singapore 1904
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.

For more information, please email us at giving@asianjewishlife.org or donate online at http://www.razoo.com/story/Asian-Jewish-Life

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Dear Editor:

I read the well-written and well thought out article about the popularization of Hitler in India (The Paradox of the Popularity of Hitler in India, Issue 14, Asian Jewish Life). I propose fear be replaced by redemption. I see great use in following Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ example in Great Britain where he united religious leaders towards the goal of protecting the rights of minorities. He was successful in projects such as in bringing religious leaders to Auschwitz and introducing religious tolerance as a subject to be taught at the elementary school level. I believe that this can be used as a precedent in India to do the same to protect minorities from the rapidly rising far right extremists. This is all the more so relevant in India where relations between the Bene Israel and the Muslim community have been traditionally and historically incredibly friendly, as well as India’s fast developing of relations with Israel.

May we merit to see the days of the prophet Isaiah, "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

With blessing,
Rabbi Nosson Rodin
Dear Readers:

Shana tova umetukah (wishing you a good and sweet new year).

Firstly, I apologize for the long hiatus. Like many other small charities, we are facing a substantial funding crisis as we recently lost our largest funding source. I truly believe however that when one door closes another opens. I have never openly appealed to readers, but please do consider us when you are making your charitable giving decisions for the year. One easy way to contribute is through our page on Razoo at www.razoo.com/story/Asian-Jewish-Life. Asian Jewish Life is a registered charity in Hong Kong and has 501c3 status in the United States through our fiscal sponsor, Center for Jewish Culture & Creativity.

Business aside, now onto what we love. In this issue, we again take you around the region for some very different types of stories and articles.

Our cover story is a Singapore story. This is long overdue so we made it a great one. Lisa Ginsburg has contributed her family’s extraordinary story in Worlds Apart in Singapore: A Jewish Family Story. And while the story is incredible, the photos are also not to be missed.

Also not to be missed is the interview of our Books Editor, Susan Blumberg-Kason, on her recently released memoir Good Chinese Wife: A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong. Mazal tov to Susan and a very special thank you to Jocelyn Eikenburg for this interview.

Susan has somehow also, in the midst of her very extensive book tour, managed to contribute her book reviews. In this issue she takes a look at multi-cultural middle grade fiction. While Susan explores fiction, Lauren Goldman Marshal looks at the experience of being raised in a multi-cultural environment through a very different lens. She tells her family’s story in A Family Flower Garden- Raising my Jewish Chinese daughter.

Another personal story is one of one man’s quest. We speak with Fishel Benkhal, a Jew from Pakistan, in Saving Jewish Graves- Salvaging a Pakistani-Jewish Identity.

Also writing a story that covers that same part of the region, Navras Jaat Aafreedi gives some insight into relations between Jews and Muslims in Jewish-Muslim Relations In South Asia - Where antipathy lives without Jews.

And since we have tried to cover much of the region rarely talked about in this issue, we have included a story from the Philippines, the long awaited Part II of Cantor Joseph Cysner’s story. Bonnie M. Harris concludes her piece with The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story- Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines (Part 2 of 2).

And last, but most certainly not least, we have Tiberiu Weisz in No Bread No Torah - No Degree No Honors (Traditional Education in Chinese and Jewish Culture). This piece is part one of a two part series looking at Chinese education and Jewish education.

I wish you a Chag Sukkot Sameach and hope you enjoy this issue.

Erica Lyons 
Editor-in-Chief
Interview with Susan Blumberg-Kason on

Good Chinese Wife: A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong
When it comes to the success of a cross-cultural relationship, does culture or personality matter more? Susan Blumberg-Kason’s stunning new memoir Good Chinese Wife: A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong offers a very personal answer to that question.

Set in Hong Kong, Mainland China and America, the story follows Susan’s whirlwind courtship and marriage to Cai, a dashing young man from Mainland China who turns out to be more trouble than she imagined. Instead of leaving, she resolves to become the perfect “Chinese” wife, a balancing act that becomes increasingly precarious after the birth of their son. Eventually, this initially shy young woman finds the strength to make a courageous escape, standing up for herself and her family.

A freelance writer in Chicago, Susan has written for an affiliate of the Chicago Sun-Times, the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, and Chicago Parent magazine. Her essay “Ninety Minutes in Tsim Sha Tsui” is included in the 2014 anthology How Does One Dress to Buy Dragonfruit. She also wrote All the Tea in Chicago, the ultimate guidebook to the city for tea enthusiasts. Susan also happens to be the books editor for Asian Jewish Life as well as a frequent contributor.

Needless to say it was a treat for Asian Jewish Life contributor, Jocelyn Eikenburg to sit down with Susan to learn more about Good Chinese Wife, discussing everything from her inspiration for the book to what it was like being Jewish in a Chinese family, as well as her current work in progress exploring her own Jewish ties to China.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Could you share with us the inspiration for writing your memoir?

Susan Blumberg-Kason (SBK): During most of my first marriage, I was constantly on the lookout to find a memoir to read about a western woman married to a man from China. I found a couple, namely Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro’s book, Son of the Revolution. There was also Betty Lee Sung’s Chinese American Intermarriage. The first was more about Liang Heng's experience in China and less about the marriage, whereas the second was all about cross-cultural relationships but presented in a case study format. Later, when I started writing Good Chinese Wife, I came across Ellen Graf’s The Natural Laws of Good Luck: A Memoir of an Unlikely Marriage. I love her book, yet thought there was still a market for one like mine because I was at a different stage of life when I was married to Cai.

AJL: Your love affair with Cai, a man from Wuhan, China, takes place in Hong Kong in the mid-1990s when you were studying as a graduate student at a local university. What was interesting about dating in Hong Kong back then?

SBK: Hong Kong was in a holding pattern back then. It was a few years before the Handover and no one knew what was going to happen after 1997. This was before the start of Mainland tourism to Hong Kong and even at the university where I studied, there were only 200 Mainland students, most of them in graduate school. For someone like me, who had studied Mandarin in the US, it was easy to meet Mainland men because the community was still relatively small and they tended to socialize amongst themselves. I attended Mainland dance parties and went with these students to the horse races and to the beautiful beach Shek O. I was the only foreigner on these outings, although there were quite a few at the first dance party. I think the culture on campus has changed now because there are so many Mainland students in Hong Kong and the community is not so tight-knit as it was in the 90s.

AJL: China has a history of welcoming the Jewish people with open arms. Did the fact that you were Jewish make you feel more comfortable in China – and by extension, more comfortable dating and marrying someone from the country?

SBK: Back then I didn’t meet many people in China who had ever met a Jewish person or who had even heard of Judaism. Even my former husband wasn’t really aware of Judaism. That said, I never experienced anti-Semitism in China, which made it very comfortable for me to be there. I do vividly recall when one of my former brothers-in-law learned that I was Jewish and he mentioned the Shanghai Jews during WWII. His mother
was from Shanghai and had told him about the Jews there during the 1930s and 40s. It was the first time I had heard of this relatively unknown history.

AJL: Your Jewish identity is an important part of your story – such as trying to explain to Cai’s parents that you don’t want to eat pork, and having a bris for your son. What was it like navigating a world where people might not always understand what being Jewish really means?

SBK: I really tried to fit in and was worried at first that Cai’s family wouldn’t accept me because I wasn’t Chinese. So I was careful not to draw more attention to my differences. For that reason, I wasn’t so open about my Judaism. In the beginning of my marriage, I only mentioned it in passing. My parents attended a lecture in Chicago by the renowned scholar Xu Xin and brought a couple copies of his Jewish encyclopedia (printed in Chinese) for Cai and his parents. I’m not sure they ever read the encyclopedia and at the time I didn’t want to make a big deal about it, so didn’t discuss it with them. Later when Jake was born, I asked Cai about having a bris for Jake and he agreed. It wasn’t easy for him, and I write about that in Good Chinese Wife. When Jake was a year old, I suddenly felt like it was important for Jake to be raised with a religion. That’s not uncommon for people who aren’t very religious growing up but then change when they have children. So I signed us up for an interfaith group run by the Jewish community in San Francisco. Cai went with Jake and me a couple of times, but then claimed he had no interest and didn’t want to continue going. I took Jake by myself until we left San Francisco. I am happy to say that Cai attended Jake’s bar mitzvah three years ago and was very proud of Jake. This fall Jake is studying in Israel and Cai will visit him there!

AJL: Few Chinese men marry Western women today, and you married Cai in the mid-1990s, which must have made you incredibly special. What did it feel like being the Western wife of a Chinese man during that era?

SBK: I definitely got a lot of stares in China, but I think the same would happen today because there still aren’t a ton of Asian male/Western female (AMWF) marriages. I think both Cai and I felt special at first. He would always point out mixed children and AMWF couples. But I knew I wasn’t the only one. Before I met Cai, I had quite a few friends in the US who dated or were married to Chinese and Taiwanese men. So I didn’t feel like a pioneer by any means.

AJL: Your wedding banquet took place in Mainland China in 1995. What Jewish traditions, if any, did you incorporate into the celebration?

SBK: Our wedding in Cai’s hometown, which was actually a two-hour drive from Wuhan, was purely Chinese. We didn’t have any Jewish or American customs. The special thing about our wedding was that as the child of a Communist Party member, Cai was able to include more cars in our motorcade and twenty tables at our banquet as opposed to the limit of ten for Party members’ families. This was allowed because I was a foreigner. Six months later when we traveled to the US, my paternal grandmother gave a bagel brunch for us in which she invited 100 friends and family to celebrate our wedding. So that was the Jewish component of my wedding celebration! As a side note, my parents had a big wedding reception for us in Chicago. They hired Chinese musicians who played an erhu and pipa. My mom decorated the tables with red and gold centerpieces she bought in Chinatown. And I wore a red qipao.

AJL: “A Love Affair With China Gone Wrong” is the subtitle of your memoir. Some might assume that your story perpetuates negative stereotypes of
Asian men or even China itself. What would you say to these readers?

SBK: To me, the subtitle points to me and how I wasn’t able to handle life in China and in a Chinese family. Saying that a love affair with China went wrong isn’t saying that China is bad, but just that it was different from what I first experienced as a traveler in my teens. And in all the reviews I’ve read, people have pointed to me, not to Cai, as the culprit. Some have praised my openness in writing this book and admitting my mistakes, while others have criticized my decisions in the story I’m telling. And I’m fine with this because I tried very hard not to demonize Cai in this book. That’s not easy to do when the person in question engages in abusive behavior. But in the end, I think the story is more compelling when it’s told the way I tell it rather than just blaming the other person and taking no responsibility for myself.

AJL: In cross-cultural relationships, it’s not always clear what’s culture and what’s personality. A lot of times, we even wonder if culture or personality influences the relationship more. Your story ultimately offers a personal answer to this question. Without giving too much away, what are some insights you’ve learned in this respect?

SBK: I wanted to show how people sometimes justify their relationship problems as cultural differences when they are involved with someone from another country. This happens with people from all over the world and isn’t unique to Asia by any means. What I’ve learned is that when something doesn’t sit well with someone, it doesn’t sit well. It doesn’t matter if this issue stems from a cultural difference or a personality one. Respect is crucial for a successful relationship. I think my problem was that I went into my marriage thinking I knew all about Chinese culture and would be able to handle our cultural differences. A handful of different friends even warned me about cultural differences before I married Cai, but I ignored them. I thought I knew it all!

AJL: You’re currently working on another memoir set in China, this time exploring your own Jewish ties to the country and Jewish history in Shanghai. Could you tell us about this?

SBK: After my divorce, I started to learn about the Jews in Shanghai during WWII. Although I wasn’t part of a Chinese family anymore, I felt more connected to China than ever when I read about Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Europe for Shanghai. Learning about the Shanghai Jews caused me to reminisce about my trips to Shanghai in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I realized I had visited many of the landmarks in the Shanghai Jewish community before I knew anything about this history. Then two years ago I was stunned to learn that my grandfather had a cousin who escaped Germany in 1939 and lived in Shanghai for eight years.

So I’m working on another memoir that takes up where Good Chinese Wife ends. I’ll weave in my trips to Shanghai with the discovery of my relative who lived in Shanghai and what he did there during and after the war. My working title is Once Upon A Time in Shanghai.

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.

Jocelyn found her passion for writing — as well as her true love — while living and working for five and a half years in China, including Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai. A Cleveland, Ohio native, Jocelyn is currently working on a memoir about love and marriage in China.
Abby was found at the gate of the orphanage complex on the night she was born. Our only artifacts are the handmade cotton clothes she was wearing and a scrap of ledger paper with her birthdate and time scrawled in imperfect Chinese characters.

In third grade last year, my daughter Abby had to do a family origins project for school. She was to answer questions such as “Where do your grandparents come from?” Wanting to simplify her job, I asked do you want to focus on your adoptive family or your biological family?

But to Abby this wasn’t an option. She couldn’t choose one over the other. A simple family tree wouldn’t suffice if she was to honor all her ancestry, Chinese and European. I had tried to simplify the matter, but Abby taught me that she needs to embrace all the aspects of her identity and create not a traditional family tree, but instead a “family flower garden”. And though a beautiful idea, this task proved to be complex.

“I wish I knew something about my birth parents!” she lamented.

“We could be detectives, like Nancy Drew,” I suggested, “and speculate from what we do know.”

We have no actual information about her birth parents. We can only surmise, from the scant information that we have, that her birth parents were poor and probably uneducated. But we can also surmise that they wanted her to have a better life.

For all that I can’t give her, there are many more things that I can. I can give her, the stories of my family and my husband’s. So I told her about my grandmother, Ruchel (Rose) Winarksy, who, in 1912, at age 14 fled the pogroms in Russia.
with her two older sisters and a younger brother, leaving behind their parents, whom they never saw again.

I told her about her paternal great-grandfather and namesake, Abner McCall of Texas, whose mother placed him in a masonic orphanage to receive a good education after his father died in the 1918 flu epidemic.

The sacrifice of parental rights to provide a better future for one’s offspring is a familiar theme in immigrant stories. It is something that can deeply resonate with Abby. It is also the Moses story, for Moses too was loved by his adoptive family, but he also learned about his roots. The story took on new resonance for me when I first read it to Abby.

But there is no one story that can encapsulate her history. Raising our Chinese daughter in a Seattle home also means giving her and exposing her to a variety of values and traditions as she herself is the product of many different cultures. She has a secular Jewish mother, an atheist father of Southern Baptist descent, and an older sister (who resembles her parents). How we blend and balance these influences will shape her self-identity.

Our approach has been to give the girls a heaping spoonful of Jewish and Chinese cultures, with a sprinkling of dominant American culture thrown in. When it comes to the holidays, it’s a joyful, if exhausting, undertaking: latkes for Chanukah, gingerbread houses for a taste of American tradition, and homemade jiaozi for Chinese New Year’s. Fortunately, I like to cook. My childhood family’s tradition of going to a Chinese restaurant (the only ones open) on December 25 later morphed into my sisters and I helping our mother prepare a twelve-course Asian holiday meal.

My family’s love affair with China may have started with cuisine, but there’s also an affinity between Chinese and Jewish values. We’re both people of the book. One civilization is grounded in the Confucian classics; the other in the Torah and accumulated commentaries. Both place a premium on education. And while both societies can be patriarchal and hierarchical, they share an ideal of the righteous rebel who overcomes a humble beginning to achieve personal and civic success through study, hard work and moral action. In different generations, Jewish and Chinese immigrants have become model minorities in the U.S., and weathered resentment for it. This kinship of values influenced our decision to adopt from China. It also means that when I push Abby to work harder on an essay or take supplemental math, I can imagine my mother and her birth mother approving.

Here in Seattle, Abby’s multi-cultural identity isn’t as unique as one might think. It’s actually somewhat common to meet children who are both Asian and Jewish, either because they are adopted or bi-racial. During an ancient civilizations class at the middle school, the teacher asked if anyone in the class was Jewish. Only two students raised their hands—one who is Chinese and another girl, who is part Japanese. “Asian domination!” they shouted, and everyone laughed. The fact that these Asian children don’t “look Jewish” may spare them from certain assumptions and stereotyping in the greater community, and that may
color their experience of what it means to be Jewish. For them it will not be a label, but a matter of personal choice.

I want to give my children a stronger sense of Jewish identity than I had. My family, an assimilated family in the Pacific Northwest, rarely went to synagogue, and I didn’t go to Sunday school, but we practiced the Jewish tradition of activism. My grandmother Rose was a seamstress and labor organizer, my mother was a dedicated community organizer for children’s welfare, and I have been active in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. The aspects of Judaism that I connect to most are its ethical underpinnings and emphasis on social reform, rather than religion or ritual.

When my older daughter Hannah reached middle school, I signed her up for a Jewish studies class, focusing on history and Torah interpretation. Now, at age 13, Hannah meets monthly with a rabbi to prepare for an alternative-style bat mitzvah. I hope both my girls will experience this important rite of passage, which I did not have growing up.

But to only speak of her Jewish connections is to ignore an important part of who she is. Bridging these identities is important to me. I want Abby to feel a part of the broader Asian-American culture, and not just our adoptive subgroup. After I did a Chanukah presentation in Abby’s classroom, her teacher asked me if I would do one for Chinese New Year.

As a white person, I felt embarrassed to appear before the class as an authority on Chinese New Year, so I invited a Taiwanese mom to join me. She probably would have been asked initially, except for the fact she works full time. For two years now, we’ve done our presentation together. She talks about the traditions in her family, and I read a book to the kids. As a result of our conversations, she signed her daughter up for the Chinese dance program that Abby and our friends’ children Ariana and June are in. Previously, that program catered mostly to adopted children. Step by step, our adopted children are building bridges across communities.

Here in Seattle, we’re also most fortunate to belong to a close-knit playgroup of families with children adopted from China. We meet regularly for holidays and outings, and traveled with ten of those families to China on a heritage trip. There are several families with one Jewish parent and a Chinese daughter.

Our friends. Julie and Michael, for example, have made a commitment to exploring their daughter Lucy’s Asian heritage. Lucy is learning Japanese in school and Mandarin on weekends along with her dad. Together they share Chinese traditions with a diverse community of adoptive, biracial and Chinese-American families at the Mandarin school. Julie acknowledges that emphasizing cultural community over religion means some trade-off, in the lack of a spiritual element. Still, for them, Julie’s Jewish and Michael’s Presbyterian values are best translated into action. For example, Lucy accompanied her parents to do phone-banking to protect same sex marriage in Washington State. “I hope it was empowering for her to see how beliefs can effect change,” Julie reflects.

In contrast, Karen and David share a connection to religious community,
despite coming from different faiths (she Congregationalist, he Jewish Conservative), and want to pass that on to their children. “For me it’s important to carve out time to talk about the sacred, acknowledge the miracle of life, and talk about the hard questions of right and wrong,” Karen explains. They joined a Reform synagogue and both their girls take Sunday school classes. For the girls, embracing their Jewish identity has been a way to connect with David’s family, which is observant. June loves the singing, while Ariana just loves meeting people, and both like learning languages. They also take Chinese dance class, where they learn Mandarin, and are active in our playgroup. “Our kids get overbooked,” Karen laments. “Something has to go.” They don’t play soccer.

Nancy and Steven, also an interfaith couple, take a middle ground approach. Nancy and her Chinese adopted daughter Lia attend a Jewish worship that incorporates elements of Buddhism. For Nancy, Buddhism provides a spiritual depth she found lacking in mainstream American synagogues. Yet the meditative practice of Buddhism is fundamental to Judaism, especially Chassidism. “It’s about mindfulness and presence, how we treat each other and what’s important in life,” Nancy offers. At Lia’s school, interestingly, there are many Asian kids, but few Jewish ones, so Lia likes to highlight her Jewishness as something that makes her special.

The extent to which our Chinese daughters self-identify as Jewish is influenced by the amount of family involvement. June and Ariana strongly identify with being Jewish, more so, it seems, than Abby and Lucy. “Still, if asked,” their mom Karen says, “my daughters would say they are ‘Chinese’ first.”

Our Chinese-Jewish adopted daughters have a foot in both cultures, but how fully do they belong in either?

A friend, who is Orthodox, once suggested that Abby could “convert” to Judaism, but in the more liberal-leaning Jewish communities, there is never any question that my adopted daughter is Jewish. At their Reform synagogue, Karen notes, “everyone’s very accepting.”

Integration into the Asian community seems a little trickier for our girls. Several of our playgroup families have at least one Asian parent, and there are connections through Mandarin teachers and friends they make at school. Still, when it comes to acceptance in the non-adoptive Asian
community, there can be cultural and socio-economic differences to bridge.

For example, Lia rides the bus to school with several girls from Chinese immigrant families who live in the predominantly Asian International District. They braid each other’s hair, and at recess, Lia bounces back and forth between separate circles of immigrant girls and white girls. Still, it took years of invitations, Nancy explains, before the immigrant girls finally came to Lia’s birthday party. Arranging playdates was even harder. Their parents work long hours, and the girls might stay after school with a grandparent who doesn’t speak English. One time, when an immigrant friend did come over for a play date, she came with several siblings and brought food.

My sister and her husband, who was born and raised in China, are both China historians, and their 3-year-old son is bilingual, so there was a compelling reason to learn Mandarin. I signed both the girls and myself up for Saturday Mandarin classes when they were little, although only Abby and I are continuing. She grumbles about it, and her sister takes her side, but she likes having a language that half the family can’t understand. The other day, she even tried to tell me in Chinese her idea for daddy’s birthday present.

Embracing our children’s multiple identities is about more than latkes and mooncakes. Comparing experiences reveals there’s no one way to raise a Chinese child in a Jewish home. But what we have in common is that we all do it thoughtfully. And while Abby and our friends’ children may find that they will never have all the questions about her earliest beginnings answered, they understand a great amount more about tolerance than most. Our children have the capacity to be spokespersons for a more tolerant world—a world in which we celebrate similarities, respect differences, and can see the beauty of every individual’s family flower garden. 

Lauren Goldman Marshall is an award-winning playwright and freelance writer. She lives in Seattle with her husband and two daughters.

Abby’s Family Garden
Jewish-Muslim Relations In South Asia
Where antipathy lives without Jews
The nature of relations between Jews and Muslims in South Asia is largely determined by Muslim attitudes towards Jews. This is because of the miniscule number of Jews both in absolute numbers and in comparison to the Muslim population. South Asia is an extremely important region for studying those attitudes for there are more Muslims in South Asia than anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, Muslims from this region have a diaspora larger in size and geographical spread than the Muslims of any other part of the world and they often take these attitudes and perceptions with them.

According to official sources, presently the only country in South Asia to have a significant population of Jews is India, and the Jewish population there was estimated to only be around 3,500 in 2014 by the Times of India. So few in numbers, they actually do not even find a separate mention in the census and are rather placed in the “Others” category, which constitutes 0.7 per cent of India’s total population that now exceeds 1.2 billion. Jews are India’s smallest religious minority and Muslims India’s largest. In fact, Indian Muslims are the largest minority community in the world. While Jews are hardly 0.0004 per cent of India’s population, Muslims are around 13 per cent. The highest the Jewish population ever reached in India was in 1951, just before a mass migration to Israel when the population was estimated to have been less than 30,000.

While 1,199 Jews were recorded in Pakistan in 1941, most of them had to leave Pakistan by 1968. A few years ago the only Jew known to be living in Pakistan was an elderly woman in Karachi. It is estimated that there were about 135 Jews in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1947, mainly concentrated in Dacca. Most of them also left for other parts of the world, leaving behind only two families who had converted to Christianity.

Muslim-Jewish relations in South Asia though, despite the small numbers of Jews, are almost as old as Islam itself, which reached India during the seventh century CE. The earliest Muslims in India were Arabs who settled with local women in Kerala and Konkan on the western coast of India. There they found Jewish communities that had existed for centuries, Cochin and Bene Israel respectively. The two groups, Muslims and Jews, became neighbors in both of these areas. Muslims in Kerala and Konkan as well as those in the cities of Mumbai, Kolkata and Ahmedabad actually went on to develop an exceptionally pleasant and cordial relationship with their Jewish neighbors. Together they produced beautiful examples of Muslim-Jewish amity.

Most of the synagogues in India today are now looked after by Muslims who act as caretakers. In Mumbai, where more than eighty percent of the Indian Jews live today, major Jewish sites are situated in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. Most of the students at two of the three Jewish schools in Mumbai are Muslim. The same is true for the two Jewish schools in Kolkata. In the households of the Baghdadi community, the last of the three South Asian Jewish communities to settle in India, only Muslims were taken on as cooks because of the similarities in Jewish and Muslim dietary restrictions. This subsequently heavily influenced the Baghdadi Jewish cooking in India. Likewise, living in close relation with their Muslim neighbors, the Bene Israel adopted a number of Urdu (the lingua franca of most of South Asian Muslims) words, mostly kinship terms and terms relating to religion into their language Marathi. For example they call a synagogue, masjid, which is Urdu for mosque and for their prayer, namāz, the term for Islamic prayer.

Interestingly, there are also several examples of foreign Jews who embraced Sufism, settled in India and came to be revered by Muslims there: Sarmad (c. 1590-1659/61 CE), Qāzī Qidwattuddīn (1133-1208 CE), progenitor of the Sunni Muslim community called Qidwai/ Kidwai, and Badi-ud-Dīn Shāh Mādār (d. 1436), founder of the Sufi brotherhood, Madārīs.

Even in contemporary times, there are Jews with a strong Sufi connection. Take for example, the Israeli singer, musician and poet, Shye Ben Tzur, the world’s only Hebrew qawvāl (one who sings Sufi songs).

An Austrian Jew, Muhammad As’ad ne Leopold Weis (1900-1992), is credited for one of the finest translations and commentaries of the Qur’an, The Message of Islam. After eventually converting to Islam he settled in India in 1932 and joined the movement for the creation of Pakistan and became the first recipient of a Pakistani passport after the creation of that state in 1947 and represented it at the UN in 1952 as its Minister Plenipotentiary.

Another Austrian Jew who made a significant contribution to Islam and to the Muslim State of Pakistan that emerged later, was Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, a great linguist, who wrote the History of Islam in Urdu in two volumes with the help of a well known Muslim scholar Maulvi Karim-ud-Din, published in 1871 and 1876. Within three years of his appointment as the Principal of the Government College in Lahore he raised its status to that of the University of the Punjab.

A person who emerged in South Asia as a bridge between Jews and Muslims is Munir Kazmir ne Munir Kazmi (b. 1957), a medical doctor who was raised as a Muslim in Pakistan but embraced his Syrian Jewish mother’s faith after settling...
in the US in 1984. He is well known for his philanthropy for Jews and Pakistani Muslims and for his Zionist activism.

It is actually a devout Muslim, Khurshid Imam, to whom goes the credit for reintroducing Hebrew Studies in South Asian academia at the university level. Prior to this, it was taught last in 1870 at the University of Bombay. In 2012 Imam came to hold the position of Assistant Professor in Hebrew at the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The only known Hebrew calligrapher in South Asia is also actually a Muslim from Kerala, Thoufeek Zakriya. Likewise, the only expert engraver of Jewish tombstones in Maharashtra is also a Muslim, a man by the name of Mohammad Abdul Yaseen.

And although perhaps taboo, there have been a number of instances of Jewish-Muslim romances and matrimones in South Asia. One of the few personal written accounts to emerge out of the unique experience of growing up as the product of a marriage between a Muslim and a Jew (in this case the Jew happened to be a grandparent) is Sadia Shepard’s *The Girl from Foreign* (2008).

There are certain Muslim groups in South Asia that even have traditions of Israelite or Jewish origin. This includes the Bani Israil in Uttar Pradesh, the Kashmiri, and the Pashtuns/Pakhtuns/Pathans in northeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan.

Although the Israelite connections in the Pashtun and Kashmiri traditions have been written about in a number of texts, there is widespread ignorance about the connections among the new generation. In fact, all they know about Jews is through secondary sources, like most of the South Asians, which in the case of Muslims happen to be primarily the Qur’ân, the Hadîths (teachings, deeds and sayings of Muhammad), the media, and for some, also the European fiction. Their perceptions of Jews are formed by negative interpretations of the Qur’ânic references to Jews, literal interpretations of the polemics in the Qur’ân and by their press. They have not based their opinions on any direct contact with Jews or any firsthand knowledge.

Even for the very few who are aware of the connection between their traditions and those of Israelites, they resist being connected to Israel and Jews through such theories of Israelite origin, for they fear it might make their Islamic credentials doubtful in the eyes of others. They have a strong dislike for Jews and Israel, influenced largely by the Arab-Israel conflict. The conflict has also led
to increasingly literal translations of the polemics in the Qur’an, yellow journalism in the Urdu press (which includes Holocaust denial), and frequent anti-Semitic discourse among many Muslims.

Despite this, however, incidents of Muslim anti-Semitic attacks have been few and are a relatively recent development in the long history of Jewish-Muslim relations in South Asia. Those that do occur have left deep wounds.

On February 13, 2012, a car bomb exploded when Tal Yehoshua Koren, wife of the Defense Attaché at the Embassy of Israel, was on her way to collect her children from school. Although she survived, she was injured. Following investigations, four Iranian citizens were suspected to be involved in the attack. A Shia Muslim Indian journalist, Syed Mohammad Ahmad Kazmi, has been charged in the case. When he was released on bail on October 21, 2012, he was greeted by a crowd of supporters and was taken home in an open, decorated jeep in a procession of five hundred people in buses and cars carrying posters of Kazmi and raising the slogan “long live Kazmi!”

The Arab-Israel conflict has a significant and very detrimental effect on the Muslim attitudes towards Jews, Israel and Zionism in some areas. Interestingly though it fails to leave any impact on Jewish-Muslim relations in India, where the two groups are in direct contact with one another. This differs greatly from Karachi in Pakistan, where they were attacked in retaliation to the establishment of the modern Jewish state of Israel in 1948 and also during the Arab-Israel wars that followed in 1956 and 1967. Actual personal acquaintance with Jews leaves little room for any negative stereotypes of Jews among Indian Muslims.

The Muslim antagonism towards Jews has also been a major influence on the foreign policy in South Asia. It is for this reason that the policy has often been one of having relations with Israel secretly, not publically, lest it provoke the general Muslim masses. Pakistan and Bangladesh still do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, though the Pakistani state has actually always maintained secret ties with Israel just as India did before the establishment of open diplomatic relations between the two states. While the Muslim factor alone would not suffice to explain the Indian policy towards the Middle East, it did play a considerable role in some of the critical decisions taken by India.

As one of the eleven members of the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP), India proposed a federal plan, despite the fact that seven of the remaining ten states supported the partition of Palestine. In spite of the opposition, India became one of the three non-Muslim countries to vote against the partition plan on 29th November, 1947. It took India two years to recognize Israel and it did so only after Shia and a Suni countries had recognized Israel (Iran and Turkey). Former Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was candid enough to admit during a state visit to Israel in July 2000 that the Indian Muslim sentiment against Israel kept India from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992.

Given the fact that opportunity to have personal connections to any Jews, in the region, is increasingly less likely, it seems that the relationship will remain fragmented at best. One can only hope that through education, we can work to strengthen these ties.

Navras Jaat Aafreedi has worked for two years, 2008-2010, in his hometown Lucknow, a major centre of Muslim scholarship, to bring about a positive change in Muslim attitudes towards Jews, under the auspices of the Centre for Communication & Development Studies, Pune. He continues to do so today through his NGO, Society for Social Regeneration & Equity.

The author is both an Indo-Judaic Studies Scholar and a Muslim-Jewish Relations Activist, employed as Assistant Professor at the School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, India. He can be reached at aafreedi@gmail.com.
Karachi’s Magen Shalom Synagogue was demolished in July 1988, to make way for the Madiha Square shopping mall. The majority of Pakistan’s Jewish community had already dwindled and left this now hostile environment and the remaining Jews there live in virtual anonymity. While the history of the community has been documented, there are few remaining monuments. There is perhaps though one seemingly unlikely champion for this lost community, Faisal Benkhal. He now chooses to be identified by the adopted name Fishel and he has taken on the task of attempting to preserve, clean and restore the Jewish cemetery in Mewah Shah Karachi.

He is outspoken and relentless in his efforts to make the story of this cemetery known and fears that it could potentially be entirely destroyed. In a place where a historic synagogue was grazed and the community now nearly entirely forgotten, this is perhaps not an unfounded fear. So what would drive one to protect neglected Jewish graves? Fishel’s own family story is largely responsible for this. He was born in Karachi to an Arab father and a Jewish mother in 1987. Though there is no way to verify it, he says that he was told as a child by an elderly Jewish gentleman that he knew only as Mr. David that there were 200 Jews living in Pakistan at the time.

He speaks of having a fascination with the cemetery since his teens and is perhaps clinging onto what little is left
part of town where notorious “war gangs and criminals” are commonplace. And while there are a few local Muslims that are sympathetic to his quest, he says that, “their support has only been verbal and am waiting for their worded support to materialize into a tangible form.” Perhaps this isn’t entirely unexpected.

He hopes that his efforts will ultimately “pressure the Pakistani government and local city government of Karachi to consider the Jewish cemetery as a protected heritage site”. Similarly he says the cemetery can’t be maintained by volunteers (there have been none

of his Jewish family’s roots in Pakistan. Orphaned when he was just 13, for Fishel this cemetery perhaps holds the key to his own past.

He seeks to have the Jewish section within the Mewah Shah graveyard preserved, cleaned and protected, as its neighboring Muslim graves would be (the Jewish graveyard is part of the larger Mewah Shah cemetery). And personal story aside, on a very fundamental level he recognizes the inherent social, historical, genealogical and cultural importance of the cemetery. This cemetery, like others around the world, provides a unique glimpse at a historical community and is an invaluable tool for understanding its values, its people, its demography and its spirituality.

Fishel has made a plea to local Pakistanis to allow him to borrow land surveying equipment in order to be able to accurately assess the cemetery grounds, which he indicates are heavily vegetated and many of the graves are hidden. He estimates there are anywhere from two to three hundred Jewish graves in the cemetery. His task is further complicated, he explains, by the fact the cemetery is in a dangerous
other than him) and he hopes that an N.G.O or Jewish organization will step in and create a fund that can hire laborers to work on the most damaged and eroded areas of the cemetery and that such a fund can later be used for timely maintenance.

Though Pakistan is likely not on the itinerary of any but the most intrepid Jewish tourists, Fishel is able to point out other Jewish sites in Karachi. Namely, the famous Merewether Clock Tower is recognizable not merely by its impressive size and Victorian Gothic Revival architecture but most notably by its iconic and prominent Magen Davids. There is also the Cutchi Memon graveyard located in another area of Karachi. Fishel indicated that this cemetery is under the care of Memon society. “The Memon society is is a very well organized and a close knitted community in Karachi. I spoke earlier with Mr. Aziz Memon who told me that there are just a few Jewish graves and the Memon community is taking care of them,” Fishel relays.

So that leaves Fishel perhaps alone on his campaign. And while for Fishel, this drive to protect and preserve the Mewah Shah Jewish cemetery comes from a deeply Jewish place in his heart, it comes from elsewhere as well. “My father being secular always emphasized humanity and reasoning with logic to differentiate between right and wrong, good and bad.”

Fishel may be reached through his Twitter handle @Jew_Pakistani

Please see our website for a list of the names and dates that Fishel has recorded from the Mewah Shah Jewish cemetery. He hopes to expand this list.
Worlds Apart in Singapore
A Jewish Family Story
Abraham’s friend warned them, “The Cossacks are coming. You’ve got to leave.” My grandfather said, “We will go to Borneo. I have a cousin who went to Borneo to prospect for gold, and he’s doing very well.” So, my grandparents left with their two small children, my mother, Marie, and my uncle Julian. They spent two months on a boat, most definitely not first class. My grandmother said it was a very hard trip, because she kept kosher, and all she could eat on the ship was hardtack and tea. Hardtack is a very hard biscuit, typically eaten by sailors at the time.

When they got to Borneo, my grandmother looked around, and there was no Rabbi, there was no kosher butcher, there were no Jewish people. Who would her children marry? So, Granny turned right back around and sailed back home with the two children. The Rabbi was surprised to see Granny back in their village. He says, “I thought you went to join your husband.” She says, “Yes, I went, but you know there are no Jewish people there. I can’t teach the children of their religion.” The Rabbi replied, “You go back. You can talk, you can tell your children of your religion. It’s a bigger sin to leave your husband.”

In the meantime, the gold prospecting hadn’t gone well for my grandfather in Borneo, so he had transferred to Kuala Lumpur to a tin mine there. He used to tell us how he’d work in the mines and leeches would go into his legs and he’d have to pick them out every day. He earned fourteen cents a day. Fortunately, during the time it took Rosa and the children to rejoin him, my grandfather had heard that there was a Jewish community in Singapore. He also knew it was run by the English who had a reputation for being fair. They decided to try to make a go of it there.

My grandmother, Annetta Ginsburg, was a captivating storyteller. With a regal British accent from her life in colonial Singapore, she adeptly narrated a dramatic family history, which spanned generations and continents. Her proper Queen’s English was mixed with Malay phrases and a colloquial syntax, reminiscent of the Yiddish spoken in shtetls her grandparents had left behind. In 1986, I informally interviewed my grandmother in her peaceful San Francisco apartment, high atop Nob Hill. My portable cassette recorder was set on the dining room table, where we sat drinking tea. I did not know how precious that recording would become. My grandmother, who was 81, died shortly thereafter.

The following are my grandmother’s memoirs, which I have woven together based on my audio interview and subsequent conversations with family to clarify certain events.

In the late 1800’s my grandparents, Abraham and Rosa Frankel, were living in a poor Jewish village called Drushkininkai in Lithuania. The pogroms were making life hard for them.
When my grandparents arrived in Singapore in 1888, they only spoke Yiddish. When Granny went to the market, she'd bring an eggshell to tell the man she wanted eggs or a chicken feather if she wanted to buy a chicken. Granny was a very good baker, so they rented a place where she could have a bakery downstairs, and they lived upstairs. Granny’s was the first bakery in Singapore and it became a great success.

When Granny was expecting another baby, my grandfather went to a furniture auction to find a bassinet. There were such bargains; he couldn’t resist buying up a lot of furniture. The furniture that didn’t fit upstairs, he left downstairs in the bakery. People came in to buy the baked goods, liked the furniture, and bought the furniture. My grandfather realized he was making good money with the furniture, so he started Frankel Brothers Furniture store.

My grandparents prospered and had three more children, six in all. One day my grandmother heard a knock at the door. When she saw two nuns standing there, dressed in black robes with crosses around their necks, she slammed the door in fright. All she could think of were the pogroms back in her village. The nuns knocked again and said politely through the door, “Excuse me, we have noticed your children out playing about, and wanted to recommend our school for them. We promise we won’t try to convert them.” Well, it took some doing, but they convinced Granny to send her children to the convent school, which was the best education available.

At sixteen, she fell in love with Victor Clumeck, a tall, handsome and very charming man. He spoke French and danced the waltz beautifully. The story of how Victor Clumeck came to be in Singapore is quite another matter altogether. But, like my grandparents, he started from nothing.

Victor Clumeck, who was my father, was born in Jaffa in 1876 when Jaffa was part of the Ottoman Empire. The rich Rothschild’s living in Paris had founded a French language school to educate boys in Jaffa, so, even though his parents were from Eastern Europe, French was his first language. His mother, Pearl, a great beauty, had been previously married four times (her husbands either died or they got divorced). When Victor was ten, his mother’s new fiancé moved to Saigon to work and sent money for her and Victor to come join him. They had to change boats in Singapore and get a French boat to go to Indochina.

While they were in Singapore waiting for their boat, Pearl went into a grocery shop with Victor. It turns out the shop owner was also from Jaffa and he was so surprised and happy to see their familiar faces. He asked, “What are you doing here?” And Victor’s mother replied, “Oh, I’m waiting for a boat, to meet my fiancé in Saigon. I’m going to take Victor with me.” And he said, “Why take such a little
boy, he'll only be in the way for the two of you. Leave him here. I've got a camp bed and he can work for me and earn his board.”

Victor’s mother left him with the grocer in Singapore and she went on to Saigon, just like that! He was quite miserable carrying groceries and doing other odd jobs, but he was very bright and ambitious and focused his energy on how to better his lot in life. He used all his free time to read and educate himself. I still have an eloquently written letter from my father, when he was just fourteen, dated 13 July 1892 to his best friend in Cairo. The letter said, “I’ve been working hard in this horrible hot climate, but my boss has his own son, so he’s not going to give anything to me. I’ve heard in America, if you work you can get ahead. You must come with me. You wait for my boat in Port Said, then we’ll both sail away to America.”

But before my father left Singapore, which was then a little place, he ran into Mr. Clouet. Mr. Clouet was a Frenchman who ran an import business and liked to speak with Victor in French. Mr. Clouet said, “What are you doing here in the middle of the day?” Victor replied, “Oh, I’m so happy. I’m leaving Singapore. My friend and I are going to New York where we can work and prosper.” And Clouet said, “Listen, what do you want to go there for? I hear the Americans are crooks. I need someone to help me in my business and you speak French.” My father was happy to finally earn wages for his work and the amount seemed like a great sum to him so he stayed with Clouet and never left for America.

Clouet & Company sold cans of sardines, building materials, tiles and whatnot, all along the Straits Settlements. Clouet’s goods would come from France, then he’d have Chinese women stamp on his “Chop Ayam” (“Ayam” is rooster in Malay, and “chop” is mark) which meant it was a first class product from Clouet & Company. As a young man, my father became a partner with Clouet and
The ceiling to keep a breeze going for us in the hot humid air.

When my parents, Victor and Marie, got married, Abraham bought them a one-floor cottage on Orchard Avenue as a wedding present. I was born a year later, when my mother was just seventeen. We lived in the cottage until I was seven. My parents had three of their six children while we lived there. The cottage was built on pillars, with high ceilings to help keep us cool in the tropical climate. We children used to play under the house, but awful turkeys would come after us.

I remember their beautiful estate, “Siglap” which was right by the sea. It had over two hundred acres of coconut and rubber plantations. Of course, the rubber became extremely valuable during the wars and the Frankels became even wealthier. Every Sunday we would go to Siglap for tiffin (a British colonial term for a lunch or light meal). There was a grand dining room with a long table that seated twenty people. Servants would wait on us, bringing us the curries and Malaysian delicacies we loved so well. One servant, the punkah wallah, had to stand there endlessly, poor fellow, tugging on a rope which pulled the punkah (ceiling fan) across the ceiling to keep a breeze going for us in the hot humid air.

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My parents called our new estate, Warringa Hill. I had a room and a sitting room with windows opening out to the garden. I loved to hear the birds, the parrots and kookaburras, calling to each other. I could smell the fragrant jasmine drifting through my window.

We lived such a charmed life. We had amahs, servants and Chinese cooks who did everything for us. None of us ever set foot in the kitchen, so we didn’t even learn how to boil water, let alone cook anything. It was a life of leisure. As children, we would play lawn tennis and swim in the sea. The men would go to horse races and cricket matches. We danced in the grand ballroom at the Raffles Hotel, with the gorgeous chandeliers. The prominent Jews formed a tight community and were included in high society. In 1921, the Governor of Singapore invited us to a dance they were giving for Prince Edward, The Prince of Wales, who was in Singapore on a round of the British Empire. He even danced with my Aunt Esther, who was twenty-one at the time and very vivacious. It was a high point in her life.

We took our first trip to San Francisco for a holiday the following year. We didn’t know what America was like; we had always vacationed in Europe. We thought it was barbaric and filled with cowboys and Indians. My youngest sister, Joyce, was just two months old. The amah brought the baby’s bathtub all the way from Singapore, because she liked it and didn’t want to do without it. Imagine us marching into the posh Fairmont Hotel where we were staying. The people in the hotel couldn’t get over it, this troop - a mother, father, and six children, followed by an amah carrying a corrugated iron bathtub, as if they wouldn’t have a bathtub at the Fairmont! I celebrated my seventeenth birthday on that trip to San Francisco.
When we returned to Singapore, the entire Jewish community was excitedly awaiting Albert Einstein’s visit on 2 November 1922. Einstein was on his way to Japan to deliver a series of lectures and Chaim Weizmann, a leader of Zionism, asked him to stop in Singapore to fundraise for the creation of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This was just before he received the Nobel Prize. Menasseh Meyer, the wealthiest Jew in Singapore, hosted a reception for Einstein and his wife at his grand estate, “Belle Vue”. Many of my family attended. When the Einsteins came back on their return trip, my grandparents gave them a tour of Siglap and he marveled at all the beautiful trees.

I married Charlie Ginsburg, who was fifteen years older than me, when I was twenty. He was a good friend of the family’s and I had known him all my life. We shared a love of literature and I always enjoyed talking with him. We had our three children in Singapore and would have stayed on, but Charlie suffered from manic-depression and the doctors thought the tropical climate was bad for that condition. We used to go to Switzerland for cures, but since San Francisco has such a mild climate and we already had family here, we went there instead in 1935. We fell in love with this beautiful city and decided to make it our home. Most of our family left Singapore during the 1920’s and ‘30’s to settle in San Francisco. The transition from our life in Singapore was easy, because San Francisco is such a world-class city. Auntie Esther, married to Lester Goodman, was able to continue her high-society lifestyle by living at the Top of the Mark, a penthouse at the top of the Mark Hopkins hotel in San Francisco. For decades their portrait hung in the lobby. Esther was a flamboyant and legendary socialite. Herb Caen called her “the Grand Dame of San Francisco” in his San Francisco Chronicle column.

She had her own table at Trader Vic’s, where they serve her a special tray of the hottest curries.

Then the war came. When we lived worlds apart in Singapore, we weren’t aware of the horrors the Jews faced in Europe. The Holocaust caught us completely unaware. We were living the life of luxury, while so many were tortured and killed. I can’t bear the thought of it. Part of my husband’s family had been living in France and for years we couldn’t trace them. We later found out they had all perished in a concentration camp.

The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor too came as a complete shock. I remember my husband running to tell me with his face half covered in shaving
cream, because the radio program had been interrupted with the announcement. Thankfully, there were only a few of our family left in Singapore when the Japanese invaded there. When they took over Singapore, they massacred people, threw others in internment camps and torpedoed ships filled with people trying desperately to escape. My brother Ned was still living there, running Clouet and Company. He had learned to fly planes for recreation, so he joined the RAF and flew planes to help evacuate women and children. In Sumatra, Ned stopped to help someone with a stalled car and saw that the car was filled with sardine cans, because people had been told to take as many non-perishables with them as possible. When my brother saw the Chop Ayam of Clouet & Company, he started to cry. No one knew how Singapore was going to get through those dreadful times.

In 1945, Lord Louis Mountbatten was in the port of Colombo, Sri Lanka, gathering a flotilla of battleships because they wanted to take Singapore away from the Japanese. Mountbatten called up Ned and told him, “You will be one of the first
to land, because you know Singapore.” As he was preparing to fly to Singapore, Ned suddenly heard that the Japanese had surrendered and the war was over. Ned told me, “It was if they said, ‘Heaven has opened, God has come down.’”

When the Japanese left Singapore, Ned was made Provisional Governor to help put things back in order. During the occupation, the Japanese had taken over the houses and Singapore was in shambles. Ned discovered that the Japanese had used his own house as a news agency during the war. They left behind an old Hebrew prayer book that our mother had given him many years before and thankfully had not damaged it. My brother had to rebuild our father’s business from the ground up. He ended up selling Clouet & Company, just before Singapore became independent and moved his family to San Francisco too.

Rosa, my grandmother, had flatly refused to ever leave Singapore, even though we begged her to join us in San Francisco. There she was at age 93, almost blind from cataracts, still living at Siglap when the Japanese first attacked in 1942. Anna, one of her daughters, lived next door with her husband to help care for her. We all thought that if the Japanese did attack Singapore, they would attack from the sea. We telegrammed them to go inland to another house the family owned, to be safer. They moved to the center of town and as fate would have it, that house was one of the first to be bombed. Anna was injured when the tile roof collapsed on her. Later we found out that the Japanese were probably aiming for the house behind them, because it belonged to a British Admiral.

Luckily, because of Anna’s injury and Granny’s age, they were given priority to evacuate. It took months for them...
Today, no one from our family lives in Singapore. I am told by relatives, who have gone back to visit the Singapore of our youth, that it has all changed. All of our houses and lovely estates are long gone. Singapore is now crowded with people and skyscrapers. They have filled in land to make room for more buildings. If the Frankel’s estate was still there, it would no longer be on the sea, but inland. Only the glorious Raffles Hotel is as it once was.

The world may have moved on, but I still have my lovely memories. It was paradise, simply paradise.

We had a joyous family reunion when they finally made it to San Francisco. Granny was surrounded by three generations of her family, some of whom she was meeting for the first time. On June 10, 1942, The San Francisco Chronicle featured an article about Rosa Frankel’s ordeal and journey here, calling her a “Grand Lady” who Singapore “adored.” Granny vowed to go back home to her beloved Singapore. She never made it and died in San Francisco in April 1945, just before the war ended.

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Much gratitude to the late Alan Frankel, the late Anne Lapporte (Frankel) and Ruth Jean Allen for sharing their memories and for their gift of storytelling and to Harold Clumeck for his extensive scholarly research. Many thanks, also, to my late grandmother, Annetta Ginsburg (Clumeck) and the rest of the Clumeck-Frankel clan, whose stories continue to inspire and amaze me.
No Bread No Torah - No Degree No Honors

Traditional Education in Chinese and Jewish Culture
t the Passover seder night, Jews ask: “Ma nishtana… Why is tonight different from all other nights?” Within the cultural setting of Judaism the question basically sums up the Jewish way of thinking: we want to know why. Irrespective of the topic or task, whether or not it is theoretical or practical, Jews want to know the reason behind issues or tasks. This mental attitude dominated Jewish thought from biblical times when Jews interpreted the Torah to adjust to the local circumstances, to the hairsplitting debates of the Talmud, with it all culminating in modern Israel with the “why not” of common parlance.

Similar to the ma nishtana, is the ancient Chinese quest for “how can I know [to obtain it],” that in modern times implies: “how can I become wiser and more clever?”. “Day alternates with night but how can we know where is its origin?” The wise searches for the “roots” of things, while the clever want to know how to put knowledge to practical use. Those who can understand, analyze and judge matters are considered wise. And those who can utilize, deal with, and control tasks are considered clever.

In traditional Chinese education, learning started with the “investigation of things”, or finding the source, that theoretically was in the surrounding nature. In reality however, they were in pursuit of the “roots” in their ancient writings. They looked for precedents. Once precedents were investigated, they wove the old with the new, the outcome of which indicated that knowledge was complete, and most significantly, everything could be put to practical use, every matter or task could succeed and nothing would go to waste. This method of aligning the past with the present led the Chinese to connect history to the present and future. It also provided continuity to China, and at the same time, instilled a high degree of pragmatism and elasticity in interpreting issues. Since antiquity Chinese education was geared toward these two goals, the search for the “roots” and how to take advantage of them.

Contrary to these goals, learning in Judaism was focused on theoretical, often abstract debates and to lesser extent on practical issues. The emphasis was on analyzing and exhausting the possibilities of each issue.

Comparatively speaking, the Chinese pragmatism is the yin to the Jewish yang of idealism, or in a narrower sense, the Chinese how is the yin to the yang of Jewish why, the anchors of their respective educational philosophy. Chinese sages in antiquity determined that the “investigation of things” was fundamental to Chinese education, and they believed that the past held the answers to the present and future. Furthermore, they believed that since history repeats itself, Chinese education must teach the past.

In contrast, the Jews believed that the Torah was the ultimate source of knowledge, and within the commandments of the Torah were the answers to their survival. Unlike the Chinese classics, the Torah referred to neither history nor precedents, it only provided the tenets as a general guide. Consequently, the words of the Torah contained subtleties that could be explained only through analysis and common sense; it left each and every Jew to find his way according to its laws.

These two opposing views contained the fundamental traditional epitome of education in both cultures. At the most basic level, children in both cultures started to study at an early age. Traditionally, Chinese children as young as two years old were encouraged to recite a certain poem and write each character without error. By the age of four a child was expected to memorize the entire 250 lines of the Premier One Thousand Characters and by age of five his vocabulary was greater than the average villager used in his entire life.

As they grew older, at least until age of ten, children spend hours upon hours in the never ceasing quest to conquer the art of calligraphy. First they had to master the right technique of holding the brush, vertical against the page and fill it with quick, confident strokes without blotting the ink once. At the same time the student labored hard at composing essays and poems. Each form of essay required special rules. A rule governed the number of words in a paragraph, the number of paragraph and their length, the type of language used – either highly formal or conversational. Other rules determined the stages of argument to be developed according to patterns of debate a thousand years old.

More flexible was the Jewish learning that started at age of five, or six in Mizrahi communities. The Babylonian Talmud did not consider age five ripe for learning: “Do not accept a pupil under the age of six; but at the age of six, stuff him with knowledge like an ox”. Irrespective of the starting age, children went to heder, study hall, to start with the study of the Torah. The Jewish child faced completely different circumstances than their Chinese counterparts. Living in the Diaspora, children were exposed to at least two different cultures simultaneously: the Jewish one at home and the culture of the country they lived in the Diaspora, in essence growing up bicultural at an early age. In addition to their native
tongue, Jewish children learned Hebrew at heder, the language the Torah. Equally important however was the perception that from the day that a Jewish child was brought to heder, he took the first steps in his journey toward manhood. At age of ten children started to learn reasoning with the reading of the Mishna, a primary companion to the Torah. Children learned the code of ethics including daily behavior under various social, economic, and religious conditions. Once a Jewish child reached Bar mitzvah (obligated to mitzvah) at age thirteen, the pupil joined the adult community. He could attend a minyan (the quorum needed to pray). It was also the beginning of independent and in-depth learning. They started to study the Talmud, also called the Oral Law. Students discussed and debated questions of law, ethics and morality in minute detail from every possible angle until all the "what ifs..."and "whys..." were exhausted.

To solve Talmudic riddles, students needed a lot of imagination, scholarship, memory, logic, wit, and above all, the courage to offer solutions to seemingly often-insoluble problems. Ultimately it provided each Jew with the tools to face ethical problems as they rose, and to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances in the Diaspora. The history of the Jews is full of ingenious enough interpretations that solved immediate dilemmas, and at the same time, remained true to the spirit of the law.

Chinese children of fifteen were considered mature enough to be able to fully use their reasoning power. The Confucian litmus test in antiquity was simpler: “If a student is told that one corner is a square and he cannot reply that the other three are also squares it is no use of repeating to him”. Those who figured this out could start with kai jiang “paraphrasing and explaining,” acquiring the basic knowledge and common sense, a premier to more profound learning.

Reasoning however was not necessarily among the forte of the Chinese education. The learning of the Classics was so uniform and predictable that one could ascertain the teaching of a person by what one read. When one read the Book of Songs, he was gentle and honest. When one was thorough and farsighted he read the Book of History. When one read the Book of Music, he was profound and good, when one read the Book of Changes, he was pure, quiet and subtle. When one read the Book of Rites, he was frugal, grave and respectful. When one read the Spring and Autumn Annals, he compared events and deeds. When one read the Book of Filial Piety one was compassionate of human relations. All these classics constituted the knowledge of virtue and perfection by the learned man.

According to Confucius (c. 551-479 BCE), self-cultivation and studying the past led to developing new ideas. In practice however, the old was so embedded into the system that new ideas were extremely hard to advance. Yet, in the course of a lifetime a Chinese underwent significant, but predictable changes, and accumulated wisdom that taught the Chinese to be resourceful.
The Chinese Way was like a pyramid of different perspectives built one over the other. In antiquity they believed in different spirits. Their earliest book of divination, The Book of Changes taught the Chinese that every story has a yin and yang side. Confucianism taught about ethics, knowledge and cultivation of the self. Daoism was about following the natural way; Legalism instituted ruthless pragmatism and order; Buddhism preached about letting go. Thus a Chinese person underwent a transformation from Confucian when everything went well, to a Daoist when things were falling apart to Buddhist when he approached death.

Jews also underwent profound transformations in a lifetime but they were contingent on local circumstances and individual cases. Each community or individual needed to adapt to their unique and constantly changing situations. Historically, kingdoms rose and fell and so did Jewish allegiance, but the faith of Jews in the Torah never wavered. A Jew is a Jew for life, from birth to death. Judaism was a clash between what ideally ought to be and reality. Ideally the Jews ought to live in the Promised Land by the mitzvot of the Torah. In reality, however, they were scattered to all corners of the world, following the local conditions and adhering as best as they could to the tenets of the Torah. Every Jew faced everyday common dilemmas that required locally based solutions, such as how to separate the Sabbath from weekdays activities, or how to interact with local non-Jewish population, or, even more important how to reconcile the precepts of the Torah with the power of money. Fortunately, the Talmudic sages solved some of these issues by agreeing that the Torah is best, money is good and the adherence to local laws is required.

Both cultures strived to attain moral self-perfection, and enlightenment, but for different purpose. Chinese were practical, they studied for recognition and honors, and expected to earn a living from their studies: No degree no honors. For Jews, learning the Torah was part of their daily routine, and they did not expect any material gains from the study of Torah. Nevertheless, Jews needed to be creative enough to provide for their families.

Studying the Talmud did not lead to wealth, it rather boosted the confidence, pride and recognition of the scholar (talmid hacham) and the family. Yet the Torah also recognized that learning alone was not enough to survive, therefore included a mitzva (good deeds) that required scholars to make a living, a parnusa in Yiddish. Without parnusa, daily activities cannot be fulfilled; there can be no study, no Sabbath dinner, no proper education, no “social justice”, and no donation to charity or as the Yiddish proverb said: Ein Kemach, Ein Torah - If there is no flour (bread), there is no Torah.

In China the notion of work had little to do with education, unless one studied for a civil service job. When Confucius, considered the first teacher in China, had asked: “Is it not a pleasure to practice what one has learned?” he implied that people should join shu yuan, book halls, to learn the basic tenets of the Chinese
classics. *Shu yuan* offered employment and a somewhat elevated social status to aging teachers, to candidates who repeatedly failed the examination, and to retired minor officials. Students attended a *shu yuan* to acquire the basic skills of writing, reading and memorizing sayings from the classics. In practice however, *shu yuan* had little to offer to students who wanted to use education for employment or to take the examinations for a civil service job.

By and large, education was not for everyone, and those who pursued it needed to conform to the rigid educational system. Even higher education was geared toward the civil service examination. The requirement followed a centuries old format, composed in poetical composition of five or seven characters and determined style. It discouraged personal initiatives, creativity and “out of the box” thinking. Chinese acquired new knowledge by studying the old. Not surprising that the public took little interest in schools. The ultimate goal of classical Chinese education was to pass the examinations that brought not only high honors to the candidate but also to his immediate and extended family. The candidate got instant recognition and began upward social mobility.

Jews on the other hand, were more modest, more idealistic and self-contained in their studies. They had never intended to make any material gains from reading the Torah. Historically Jews earned a living from manual labor, agriculture and trades unrelated to the Torah. They did not aspire to high positions, or to become civil servants. But the unintended consequence of meticulous Talmudic study was that while it inadvertently prepared Jews for positions requiring a high degree of literacy and the ability to think creatively and critically, it also transcended to the non-Jewish world. Western societies adopted many Jewish ideas but officially denied the Jew the contributions and recognitions they deserved. Instead they used the Jewish wisdom to inflame anti-Jewish sentiments.

Only in China, Jewish wisdom was equated with achievements and success. The Chinese perceived Judaism as an ancient culture just like their own with an education that produced many famous Jewish people like Freud, Einstein, Marx and many other Jewish Nobel Laureates to name a few. Chinese pragmatism admired fame, recognition and wealth, and for that reason they respected Judaism. Unfettered by racial and religious prejudices, Chinese Jews in antiquity attained high position in the Chinese bureaucracy; many of them held PhD degrees. Such degrees entitled them to the highest honors, high ranks, and utmost respect in the Chinese social ladder. And indeed educated Chinese Jews were appointed to Commissioners [Governors], held titles of Daifu (the highest title below nobility), and a Chinese of Jewish descent served as Prime Minister.

Unfortunately both sides have little more than a superficial understanding of the other’s culture. The Chinese study Judaism primarily to focus on the wisdom and success of the rich and famous Jews. They want to know how to translate the Jewish success to their advantage. For some reasons, the Chinese rarely mention the high price Jews have paid for their survival. Historical events such as the Inquisition, the expulsion from Spain or the Russian pogroms are generally omitted in Chinese writings. By the same token Jewish perception of China derives from anecdotal observations and is based on animated communications and economic opportunities. How many Jews are aware of the profound influence of the Chinese mindset of how can I know [to obtain it]?

Lack of cultural depth lead both sides to liberally interpret each other’s intentions. The Chinese flatter the Jews with words of recognition for their wisdom and wealth, while Jews praise the Chinese for not being anti-Semitic. Jews aggressively promote Holocaust studies to the Chinese, but the Chinese translate it as Datusha or the Nanjing Massacre, in memory of the atrocities committed in the city of Nanking by the Japanese in 1937. The Jews applaud the restoration of the one hundred five years old synagogue in Harbin, but the Chinese use it as a concert hall. China welcomes the Jews from afar?... as long as they come to pay tribute to China.

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**No Bread No Torah/ No Degree No Honors** is Part I of a two part series looking at Chinese education and Jewish education. Part II (in the next issue of AJL): “Tiger Mom and Yiddishe Mame” addresses the issue of how traditional Chinese education served as the driving force behind the Chinese Tiger Mom and how the Diaspora shaped the Yiddishe Mame.

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Maximum number of participants is 20 persons. Minimum age for participants is 16 years old.

Please contact Susan at jcclib@jcc.org.hk if you are interested in joining. Allocation will be on a first come, first served basis from this list. A non-refundable deposit will be required in mid-October.
The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story

Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines

Part 2 of 2
Josef Cysner, a German-Jewish Cantor deported by the Nazis to Poland, came to Manila in 1939, escaping the horrors of the Holocaust. This was possible through a sponsorship program that had the potential to save hundreds, if not thousands more, were it not for the bombing and occupation of the Philippines by the Japanese, at which point rescue turned into incarceration again for some, such as Cysner, and a struggle for survival.

In Cysner’s flight to the Philippines, he shared quarters on a 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 16,000 by the end of 1939. Many jumped ship in ports-of-call, disembarking in places such as Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Manila – especially Manila, since it was the only American-held port city in Asia at the time. When the already existing American-led Jewish community of Manila founded a refugee relief organization to assist their coreligionists in Shanghai, it started a series of events that ultimately rescued over 1,300 refugee Jews from almost certain death at the hands of the Nazis.

The remarkable feat of the rescue of refugee Jews from the warzone of Shanghai in 1937 inspired the inception of further rescue plans on a greater scale in Manila. The important players in that rescue, Philippine President Manual Quezon, U.S. High Commissioner in the Philippines, Paul V. McNutt, the Frieders (a family of influential Jewish merchants) and the directors of the Jewish Relief Committee in Manila (JRC), along with directors of various international Jewish relief organizations successfully implemented a selection plan to facilitate effective European Jewish rescue in the Philippines. Once McNutt was assured of his discretionary power to facilitate such a rescue, he immediately put the necessary players together to begin the process.

McNutt then immediately requested that the JRC present him with “a list of those who might be absorbed” into the 1938 Philippine economy. ¹ The leaders of the Jewish community in Manila composed a list of needed professionals totaling about one hundred families, who could readily assimilate into the economy and port city lifestyle of Manila. Once the JRC had completed its list and received approval from McNutt and Quezon, the list was immediately shared with the Refugee Economic Corporation (REC) in NYC and forwarded on June 1, 1938 to the Hilfsverein der Juden in Deutschland (Relief Association for Jews in Germany) in Berlin. ² The list included physicians, dentists, nurses, engineers, mechanics, accountants, dressmakers, barbers, cigar makers, and one Conservative Rabbi. Applications forwarded by the Hilfsverein in Berlin began arriving by the end of July 1938. Before they could even be reviewed and approved by the JRC, desperate refugees began independently arriving in the summer months of 1938, including a German Jewish Rabbi from Hildesheim named Josef Schwarz.

Preceding the first wave of immigrants designated by this McNutt-Frieder Selection Plan, German Rabbi Josef Schwarz and his wife arrived in the Philippines in September 1938. Schwarz, who had worked with Cysner in Hildesheim from 1933 to 1937, soon played a critical role in bringing Cysner to Manila. Schwarz’s settlement in the Philippines marked a historic moment, for he was the first ordained rabbi ever to reside and serve in the Philippines. ³ He faced a significantly diverse community of ethnicities, languages, cultures, religious practices, and especially, economic status. To bring religious unity to this conglomerate of differences, Rabbi Schwarz urged the Board of Directors of Manila’s Temple Emil to create a position for a cantor to officiate at religious services and who would also teach Sunday School, train choirs, and organize musical programs.⁴

Having obtained permission from the JRC, Rabbi Schwarz cabled his friend Cysner on November 22, 1938 at his last known place of employment, the Verband Reform Synagogue in Hamburg. Amazingly, the telegram made its way to Poland and found Cysner in his detainment at the Polish border-town of Zbaszyn. The English translation read: “Do you want to come? Modest Salary. Side jobs provided. Wire Manila today. Send response. Heartfelt greetings. Schwarz.” ⁵ Cysner responded in the affirmative – that simple short telegram became his passport to freedom.

Cysner’s name made it on the third list of refugees selected in December 1938 by the JRC and approved by McNutt and Quezon for visas to the Philippines. A dozen other names, mostly from Germany, appeared on that list as well. Cysner’s story helps illustrate the organization that went into effectuating the Philippine rescue of Jews from Europe. Once Cysner received his confirmation from the JRC in Manila, he worked to obtain the necessary papers to secure his release from Zbaszyn.

With the telegram from Schwarz and references from leaders of the refugee community in Zbaszyn, Cysner traveled to Warsaw to obtain a Polish passport and his visa from the American Consul General in Warsaw, John K. Davis. A few weeks later another communiqué from the State Department arrived on Davis’s desk, informing him that:

The Commonwealth Government [Philippines] has granted authority to issue permanent visa to Joseph Cysner even
though Polish Government will not permit him to return to Poland. Please issue instructions to American Consul in Warsaw authorizing him, to issue permanent visa for the Philippines to Cysner. 6

Apparently Cysner needed to return to Germany to settle his affairs and Poland was not going to allow him to return. Obtaining the visa before he left Poland was imperative. Unbeknownst to the State Department as of their April 20th dispatch quoted above, Cysner had already obtained his visa and was preparing to sail for the Philippines.

Cysner left Poland in April 1939, reversing the path that had brought him to the border-town of Zbaszyn in the first place. After boarding the train that carried him from Warsaw, past Zbaszyn, to Berlin and onto Hamburg, Cysner set his affairs in order, obtained travel money from friends and colleagues, and secured passage on the Scharnhorst, one of the new “East Asia Express Steamers,” sailing out of Genoa, Italy in April 1939. He docked in Singapore on May 11 and arrived in Manila on May 15. Cysner was just one of thousands of European refugees boarding passenger liners from Baltic and Mediterranean ports en route to Asian destinations.

Cysner’s odyssey illustrates the obstacles thousands of others endured in their quests to flee Europe and find safety in Asia. Having already suffered the loss of his citizenship rights, leaving him and over half a million other Jews in Germany and Austria with no legal recourse, Cysner and others endured the confiscation of their property and assets, termination of their jobs, expulsions from schools, random acts of violence, brutal arrests, forced deportations and/or incarcerations, starvation, and deprivations. If one was able to survive these and amass the small fortune sometimes necessary to secure travel papers and passenger tickets, the actual journeys themselves could take anywhere from four to ten weeks. For several years, when international immigration quotas drastically inhibited refugees’ chances in obtaining visas and other necessary travel permits to western countries, many refugees opted for more immediate travel opportunities to uncertain destinations in the Far East. Ships were often booked six months in advance and carried upwards of a thousand Jewish refugees per voyage. Cysner was one of these lucky few to escape Europe before all sea routes were closed to commercial and passenger shipping.

In 1940, when Denmark and Norway fell to the Germans in April and Italy entered the war in June, the Baltic and Mediterranean Sea ports closed to commercial shipping, so that refugees fleeing to the Far East now had only a land route by which to escape and this was a far more difficult journey. 7 Thousands of Polish Jews as well as Jews from western Europe labored to secure travel documents and train tickets to Moscow, where many boarded the Trans-Siberian rail for a 6,000 mile journey to Harbin in Manchuria, and then onto either the port city of
Dairen or Vladivostok, where they hoped to secure papers to final destinations anywhere within the Pacific Rim. Jewish refugees disembarked at nearly every East Asian port – such as Bangkok, Singapore, and Manila – where already existing Jewish communities hosted the new arrivals as best they could. As refugees arrived and readily assimilated into the economic environment of Manila and other Philippine neighborhoods, rescuers increased their quotas to five hundred.

When Cysner arrived in Manila in May 1939, the Philippine Jewish Community had already been augmented by several hundred refugees, bringing the total Jewish population, residents and refugees, to nearly 1,000, the largest number of Jews in Manila as yet ever assembled. Cysner’s unique talents and abilities enhanced the religious life of the Jewish Community in Manila in many ways, from conducting religious services, to forming and training choirs, teaching religion classes, and training young Jews for their bar mitzvahs. Under the tutelage of Rabbi Schwarz and Cantor Joseph Cysner - Jewish life in Manila flourished [...] the Sunday school was revived, a Chevra Kadisha (funeral and grave committee) was founded, a Jewish debating club brought those interested in discussing Jewish art and science together, a Youth Club was founded, regular performances were given by a Musical Club and a Dramatic Club, and a Woman’s Auxiliary was formed to assist in Jewish welfare work. In addition, a community home was founded in Marikina for the aged and indigent. Numerous social gatherings served to bring the Community together.  

The Jewish Refugee Committee of Manila, led by the Frieder Brothers, had composed three different lists of approved immigrants before the end of 1938, always receiving more applications than could possibly be approved. The JRC endorsed additional lists of immigrants in every month of the first half of 1939, which became progressively shorter as fewer funds were available until rescue by selection faced suspension in June 1939. By this date, 750 refugee Jews had arrived in the Philippines and two-thirds had successfully been placed in jobs. The Jewish community of Manila continued to raise $2,000 a month to support the indigent refugees. As 1939 wore on, the ability to procure employment for refugees declined, and the Frieder Brothers along with others of the JRC, devised recommendations for a revised future immigration program if rescue in the Philippines were to continue.

The McNutt-Frieder selection plan morphed into a sponsorship program to further immigration to the Philippines in response to the escalating economic trials in sustaining an increase in refugee population. The program involved securing “substantial affidavit[s]” guaranteeing ample support for the applicants; a cash deposit in the committee trust fund to sustain every applicant for a minimum one year’s support; and more careful scrutiny of applicants’ qualifications ensuring their ability to become self-supporting. 9 By the summer of 1940, sponsorship became the practiced extension of the selection program. Maintenance for a family of three for one year amounted to $1,800, plus an additional $100 per person also needed to be deposited for the administrative expenses of their rescue.10 By October 1940, sponsorship procedures were well established. Under the sponsorship program, more refugees found haven in the Philippines, as funds were continually made available for rescue in the Philippines by the JDC in New York. Rescue in the Philippines became a template for other sites of rescue being sponsored by these relief organizations abroad.

Cysner’s personal odyssey of rescue highlights the remarkable story of how one small nation in the Far East managed to do what so many more capable nations of the world were reluctant to do – save Jewish lives. It is remarkable because they managed to circumvent US State Department obstructionism to Jewish rescue and more than quadruple the population of the local Jewish community. By rescuing 1,300 refugees, plus Cysner, this US Commonwealth saved them from the fate of the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. While 1,300 refugees, when compared to twelve million victims of Nazi atrocities, are not so many, to those hundreds who found a haven in Manila, each individual life was significant, as was Cysner’s.  

To learn more about Dr. Harris’ research, please visit her site at http://www.bonniesbiz.com. Thank you to the Jewish Historical Society of San Diego for the use of their photographs.
The ‘Other’ in the Novel
Multi-Cultural Middle Grade Adventures

There’s been a drive for more diversity in children’s literature, and over the years there has been a noticeable increase in Asian characters in middle grade novels. This is a welcome change for children of multi-cultural backgrounds to begin to see ‘themselves’ in the novel. It’s still rare though to find Asian and Jewish characters together in one story, but Asian Jewish Life recently found a couple of books that feature both.

Pauline Chen’s novel, Peiling and the Chicken-Fried Christmas (Bloomsbury, 2007), may not seem like a Jewish story at first glance given its title and focus on a Chinese American family. The book centers around Peiling, a pre-teen girl who immigrated with her family from Taiwan when she was very young. Every year at Christmas, Peiling feels left out, especially as her arch-nemesis Laura ridicules her for not observing the holiday—or receiving an abundance of toys like most Americans receive. Children who don’t celebrate Christmas will be able to relate to Peiling’s feeling of otherness.

During the year in which this story takes place, Peiling’s family decides they will have a Christmas dinner. That’s also the year Peiling has a teacher who doesn’t celebrate Christmas, too. Ms. Rosenweig asks the students in her class to complete a project that shows how children around the world celebrate the winter. For once, Peiling doesn’t feel left out. She later learns that Ms. Rosenweig is Jewish and, like Peiling, doesn’t celebrate Christmas either.

When it comes time for Peiling’s family to cook their Christmas dinner, Peiling finds that they don’t roast a turkey or ham like most Americans, but rather cook a chicken with Chinese flavorings. Their side dishes are also cooked in the Chinese fusion style.

The biggest surprise for the Wang family is that Peiling’s Uncle Samson, a single man in his twenties, rejects the Chinese woman his family tries to set him up with that winter. Uncle Samson attends Peiling’s winter performance at school and when the family sits down for their Christmas dinner, Ms. Rosenweig attends, too—as Uncle Samson’s date! It turns out to be a happy holiday for Peiling after all.

While Peiling and the Chicken-Fried Christmas is slated for children eight to twelve years old, there’s another middle grade novel targeted at kids in the nine to thirteen age range. Mira in the Present Tense (Albert Whitman, 2013) by Sita Brahmachari is set in the UK and tells the story of a pre-teen girl whose grandmother is dying of cancer.

Mira Levenson’s mother is half-Indian and her father Jewish, and the author implies that the family is raising Mira and her brother Krish in a Jewish home. Mira’s paternal grandmother, Nana Josie, is a constant presence in the Levenson household. She even plans her own funeral, down to her coffin, which she asks Mira to paint in vibrant colors. But when Nana Josie’s health starts to deteriorate and she’s sent to hospice, Mira spends a lot of her time visiting her grandmother and starts to feel more distant from her best friend, Millie.

But the two friends do see each other in the mornings after they enroll in a small writing group before school with a famous writer, Pat Print. In the class are two boys, Jidé and Ben. The girls find they can comfortably talk about family issues in their writing class, as do the boys.

Sita Brahmachari tackles mature issues in Mira in the Present Tense and has been hailed as the multi-cultural Judy Blume. Mira and Millie talk about puberty and boys, while Mira and Jidé start a budding pre-teen romance. And because of Nana Josie’s declining health, the theme of death resonates throughout the story.

What Brahmachari doesn’t do is to show how her characters are Indian or Jewish or both. Mira doesn’t attend Hebrew school and there’s no talk about becoming a bat mitzvah. The family doesn’t celebrate Jewish holidays in this book, but they also don’t observe Hindu ones. Mira mentions to other kids at school that she’s Jewish, but the rest of the story doesn’t take on any Jewish themes. When Nana Josie orders her own coffin, she chooses a simple wooden one, but it’s not specified as pine, the material from which traditional Jewish coffins are made.

Both Peiling and the Chicken-Fried Christmas and Mira in the Present Tense are great examples of Asian-Jewish stories in middle grade fiction. The introduction of new multi-cultural characters is very much welcome in the ‘kid lit’ scene as they help bridge cultural differences. Although these books are marketed to pre-teens, the stories are enjoyable for adults too. They are also, in addition to being well-crafted stories, wonderful conversation starters to topics of multi-culturalism and diversity.
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