Harbin Russians after 1945: Recollections

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I am glad and honored to be invited to International Joint Workshop on Harbin at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, but my first reaction to the proposed topic for my paper was to decline: it was too personal, too painful. But, as a researcher into the Russian emigration in China, I realize that history is not dry facts and dates, but people's lives, and that it is necessary to speak of what happened to us Harbin Russians after 1945. I use Harbin Russians as a short cut for all Russian-speaking nationalities from the former Russian Empire who lived in Harbin and along the Chinese Eastern Railway: Russians, Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Tatars, Georgians, Armenians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Germans, Czechs, Yugoslavs, and a few others.

In August 1945, I was seven and a half years old. My account is based on my childhood recollections, inevitably mixed with stories heard and overheard from adults, and on some facts learned later as a researcher. I must add a word of caution: memories are fragile, individual, selective, and colored by a variety of conscious and subconscious, personal and political reasons. The same events are remembered differently by different people. This is what I recall.

I will begin by telling how our family settled in China. My paternal grandfather, Lieutenant-General A.S. Bakich, a Montenegrin, served in the Russian army and fought in the First World War and in the Civil War. In 1920, the White Army corps under his command retreated to Mongolia, where, in very harsh circumstances, it was preparing for further struggle. At the end of October 1921, General Bakich and his staff were captured by Mongolian revolutionaries and handed over to the Red Army. In May 1922, after a publicized show trial in Novosibirsk (at the time Novonikolaevsk), he and a dozen of his officers were shot. His widow with three small children fled from Vladivostok to Harbin, China; the oldest child was my father. On my mother's side, my Russian grandfather P.N. Abloff worked on the Chinese Eastern Railway as a dispatcher and took a Soviet passport. In 1935, when the CER was sold to Manchukuo, he was arrested by the Japanese and deported to the USSR. In 1937 he was arrested again, this time by the Soviets, and spent the next twenty years in Stalin's camps as a Japanese spy. His only daughter, my mother, stayed in Harbin to marry my father. I was born in Harbin, and China remains my beloved homeland.

In the last years of the Second World War, our family lived in Xinjing (Changchun), where my father, an engineer and architect, along with a Chinese builder-contractor, had a small construction firm. The war was expected, and in Xingjing, as in Harbin and other cities and settlements of Manchukuo, the Japanese authorities made everyone train in anti-aircraft and

other forms of defense. We lived on the outskirts and, together with our Japanese and Chinese neighbours, had to go down to a large ravine at the back of our yards and dig caves in its banks for bomb shelters. In early August 1945, on the first night that Changchun was bombed by the Soviet air force, at the first sound of an air siren we all ran and hid in these caves. On the next few nights, we simply went outside, took wooden boards stacked in the backyard, lay on the ground, and placed the boards on top of our bodies, holding them above our faces with our hands. The ground shook hard when the bombs hit the darkened city. I was very frightened, but a neighbour, lying next to me, said: "Listen, if a bomb hits us, we would not have time to feel anything at all, but if a bomb falls nearby, the boards on top of us would protect us from bomb fragments."

On 15 August 1945, the surrender speech of the Japanese Emperor was transmitted on the radio. On that day, my father went to see a Japanese customer of the firm. The man was listening to the radio and asked my father to wait. After the broadcast, the man, who spoke some Russian, told my father that Japan surrendered. He then took a gun out and said that he would kill himself, his wife and children, and my father. My father froze and then softly tried to console him and talk him out of it. Eventually the man put the gun down and wept. That's how we learned that the war was over. We saw Japanese civilians leaving Changchun on foot, carrying their children and a few possessions; as soon as they left, the Chinese looted their houses. Then the Red Army came and completed the looting.

As we learned later from our Harbin relatives and friends, the news of the Red Army crossing the Manchukuo borders on the night of 9 August caused great panic in Harbin. The leaders of the Bureau for the Affairs of Russian Émigrés, an organization set up by the Japanese to control Russian émigrés, turned to the Japanese Military Mission, but received no instructions. The Japanese then provided a train for the Bureau officials and those who wanted to leave Harbin, but only a few took the train. Others were frightened and uncertain; moreover, as the war progressed, many felt more and more patriotic and anti-Japanese. When the Red Army took Harbin on 18-20 August, many Harbin Russians welcomed the troops in the belief that after the war a new era would begin in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Military Command stayed at Yamato Hotel, and crowds of Harbin Russians gathered in front of the hotel to talk with the guards and soldiers. Archbishop Nester, the former honorary member of the Harbin Russian Fascist Party, conducted a thanksgiving service for the Red Army at the Cathedral Square in the presence of Red Army command, officers, soldiers, and many Harbin Russians.

The euphoria was short lived. SMERSH came to Northeast China with the troops and immediately started arresting many Russians in Harbin and other cities and settlements in Manchukuo. It turned out that some senior members of the collaborationist Bureau for the Affairs of Russian Émigrés, such as Colonel Nagolen, L. Chernykh, M. Matkovskii, were Soviet agents. When the news of the Red Army crossing the border reached Harbin, Matkovskii in particular was entrusted to burn the files which the Bureau kept on most

Harbin Russians; a large hole was dug out and fuel stocked up, but Matkovskii did not do it. SMERSH, which already had some lists from its secret agents, seized the entire Bureau's archive.

At first, prominent Harbin Russians were arrested by invitation. On Sunday, 19 August 1945, the Red Army Command asked representatives of the Russian community to attend a special meeting and form a Social Committee which would ensure peace and security, help with food supplies, and compile a list of some 250 leaders of various organizations and activists. The Social Committee's headquarters was in the Commercial Club in Pristan', and many enthusiasts, who only a few days ago were members of White organizations, went there to make posters and banners glorifying the Red Army and Stalin. On 21 August 1945, many leading figures of social, cultural, and educational organizations were invited to Yamato Hotel for an evening meeting with the high Soviet Command. On arrival, they all were taken to the building of the Japanese Consulate-General, now SMERSH headquarters, across the road and incarcerated. On 25 August 1945, the Colonel-General A.P. Beloborodov, Commander of the First Red Banner Army, invited Harbin cultural figures and artists to a banquet to celebrate the victory in Yamato Hotel; all were arrested in the same manner.

Many Harbin Russians rushed to inform on their personal enemies. The number of the so-called "White Bandits" (*belobandity*) arrested in Harbin and other former Manchukuo cities ranges from 15,000 to 17,300; the latter figure came from the Soviet Consulate in Harbin. The arrested included not only most of the leaders of the Bureau, Russian Fascist Party, and former White generals and atamans, but ordinary apolitical people. Some simply worked for the Japanese as railway employees, teachers of Russian, clerks, cleaners, servants; others were active in Russian social or cultural organizations, wrote for newspapers or published books, yet others were of no significance. All were, as Harbin Russians said, "seized" (*zabrany*). So many were seized that the basement of the former Japanese Gendarmerie was full, and people were kept in old stables and barracks, and taken away in cattle trains, usually at night, to the USSR.

The SMERSH net was wide, indiscriminate, and arbitrary: there was no rules, no principles, no justice. Most arrests were groundless and blatantly illegal. Most of the arrested were not and had never been Soviet citizens; others were born in China; all were seized in a foreign territory under the occupation. When I was growing up, many of my classmates and friends had no grandfathers or fathers: grandfathers were killed in the Civil War, and fathers seized and taken to the USSR in 1945-1946. Some Harbin Russians, including myself, later tried to record the names of the seized, but the number is too large.

A year later, after a trial in Moscow, Ataman G. Semenov was hanged; Generals Vlas'evskii and Baksheev, Fascist leader K. Rodzaevskii, Shepunov, and Mikhailov shot. Many others were either shot or sentenced to hard labour in concentration camps. A few managed to escape an arrest. One Russian military, who served in the Kwangtung Army, dressed like a Chinese,

glued a false mustache on his face, and went to Shanghai and then Australia, where he lived in fear of revenge from Harbin Russians, whose sons perished because he had forced them to join the Asano Russian detachment in the Kwantung Army. This man put a notice in Russian on his door, which said that if anyone would try to break the door or windows to get in, he would shoot. Some members of the Russian Fascist party hid for some time in underground shacks in the Winterdocks on the other side of the Sungari River.

My father, a quiet apolitical man, but a son of a White General executed in the Soviet Union, was immediately arrested in Changchun, but, as a civil engineer and architect with the knowledge of local conditions, he was turned over to the Red Army engineers, who were given the task of building monuments to the Soviet soldiers in Harbin, Changchun, Mukden, Dal'nii, and other cities. The engineers battled SMERSH to keep my father because they needed him, and he worked for them designing and overseeing the construction. The first monument was built in Changchun, the next one was in Harbin, and my father begged them not to leave us in Changchun. Our family was taken to Harbin in a cattle train, filled with many Red Army soldiers, who marveled at our good Russian. It was a bitterly cold winter, and a small pot-bellied stove heated the carriage. At the stations, the soldiers either bought some food or trinkets from the Chinese, or simply grabbed what they wanted without paying and pushed the peddlers away from the train. By the time all the monuments were built, the Red Army was leaving, and my father miraculously survived.

The Red Army occupied the Northeast from August 1945 to the end of April 1946. Many soldiers had been transferred to the Far Eastern front after the victory over Nazi Germany, when they had thought that the war was over and they could return home. We were nothing but White Bandits to them. Some went on drunken rampages, robbed and assaulted people, and raped women. Their victims included Russian, Chinese, and the remaining Japanese. A few years ago, in Toronto, I met a young Chinese, whose parents were from Harbin; when I wanted to meet them, he said that they hated Russians because Soviet soldiers raped and killed his mother's sister. When people dared to complain, one Soviet response was: "You should have seen what we were doing in Germany!" In spite of all this, some women had affairs with Soviet officers, although the Red Army personnel were forbidden to marry. After the army left, a number of fatherless children were born in Harbin.

It was a time of great fear and utter helplessness. First, the Japanese controlled and terrified Harbin Russians, then the warmly welcomed army from their homeland treated them as enemies, traitors, and targets for assaults. Many people were so traumatized by those events that even now, over sixty years later, they refuse to talk about it and advise you to forget what happened or warn you that it is dangerous to speak about it or study it.

When the Red Army left, there was a very unsettled period in Harbin, but once the Chinese Eighth Infantry Army came to Harbin, order was restored, and the contrast between its disciplined soldiers and the Soviet soldiers was striking. The Soviet Consulate soon announced

that the remaining Harbin Russians could and should apply for Soviet passports, though these passports were not real, but some kind of surrogate "residence abroad documents." In spite of all they had witnessed since the Red Army came, many applied. Some people believed that, while collaborators would get what they deserved, justice would prevail for others, their innocent relatives would be released, and they would be reunited in the USSR. Others succumbed to the powerful and insidious Soviet indoctrination that Russian émigrés needed to atone for their guilt, first in fleeing from their homeland and then allegedly living in peace and quiet in a foreign land, while the Soviet people heroically fought the war. It was the same mass psychosis as in Stalin's Russia. Soviet officials called these newly-minted Soviet citizens as "local Soviet citizens" or "war-trophy citizens." Some people, however, were issued receipts for their applications, had to wait, and were refused. My father also applied, but our application was refused.

The Soviet Consulate replaced the Japanese stooge, the Bureau for the Affairs of Russian Émigrés, with their own stooge, the Society of Soviet Citizens. Russians in Harbin and other cities and settlements of Northeast were subjected to intensive brainwashing. Most schools were closed and replaced by Soviet-type schools. I was enrolled in one, as my parents wanted to give me a Russian education; they would not hear of sending me to a Chinese school. The director of my school was a woman, who prided herself on the fact that her family took Soviet citizenship in the 1920s and held on to it in spite of the heavy and most unpleasant pressures to give it up and register with the Bureau. Our teachers were Harbin Russians, who were quickly retrained and now told us to study well in order to be worthy of becoming Soviets. Older schoolchildren told me how, within a week, they had to switch from schools with portraits of Emperor Pu Yi, Manchukuo and Russian Imperial flags, and pro-Japanese propaganda to portraits of Stalin and Lenin, Soviet flags, banners, and Soviet propaganda. Harbin was flooded with cheap Soviet books, journals, and newspapers. We read the Soviet journal *Murzilka* for children and the illustrated weekly *Ogonek*; watched Soviet films, and sang Soviet songs. Sometimes we were asked to take out our textbooks and blacken out some text and portraits of scholars or writers, who were purged in the USSR.

These Harbin Soviet schools, on the instructions from the Soviet Consulate, established an organization Young Activists (*Iunyi aktivisty*), similar to Soviet Red Pioneers, for young children and the Union of Soviet Youth (*Soiuz sovetskoi molodezhi*), similar to Komsomol, for teenagers. We juniors were told that only the best pupils would have the honor to be Young Activists. I was a very good pupil, but, to my dismay, my application was rejected: my grandfather was a White General, our family was refused a Soviet citizenship, and our family was of Yugoslav origin at a time when the relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia soured. On that long day, I cried and cried in every class. Teachers were annoyed with me, and one of them called me to the blackboard to write a Russian saying along the lines: "don't cry, don't cry, I will give you a bun," and my classmates laughed. A few days later, most pupils went to

an official ceremony, where they gave an oath, got a red neckerchief, were treated to a musical performance, and given sandwiches and sweet pies, the latter a great treat in a semi-starving Harbin. I was told to go home. Needless to say, when I got older, I was not even allowed to apply for a membership in the Union of Soviet Youth.

The propaganda machine was so powerful that I became a patriotic girl, devoted to the Soviet Union and deeply wounded by the rejection. I felt unworthy of being a Russian. In the last year of school, we studied the history of the USSR, starting from the Revolution and the Civil War. One of the large maps showed the defeat of the White Armies in Siberia and the Far East, and one of the large arrows extending to Mongolia said: Bakich. One day a teacher called me and asked to talk about the defeat of the White Bandits in the Far East. I could not. I said that I did not prepare the lesson and got yet another bad mark against my name.

Another remarkable thing of those years was that Soviet consular officials in Harbin and a large number of Soviet specialists, who came to work in the People's Republic of China, were forbidden to have any contact with any of us, even those who had their "special" Soviet passports. The real Soviet citizens had their own club, their children went to their own special schools and could not play or even talk with us. When I, on graduating from the Harbin Soviet school, worked in the Russian sector of a large Chinese library, the Soviet specialists spoke to me only via a Chinese interpreter, to his and my quiet amusement.

On 6 March 1953, when the news of Stalin's death reached Harbin, we had a huge sand storm, which often come from the Gobi desert to Manchuria in spring. The wind howled and raged, masses of sand flew in the air, getting everywhere; there was no electricity, and no streetcars were running. We were kept at school, because it was dangerous to send us home. The teachers all gathered in the teachers' room, leaving us alone. We huddled in classrooms, and many girls cried. We felt as if it was the end of the world.

The dispersal of the remaining Harbin Russians began in the early 1950s. Russian Jews started to leave for Israel, and Poles, Czechs, and Yugoslavs were repatriated to their countries. With great difficulties, some Harbin Russians managed to get visas and sponsorship, via the International Refugee Organization and the World Council of Churches, to leave for Australia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Paraguay. In 1952, the USSR handed the Chinese Eastern Railway, renamed Chinese Changchun Railway, over to the People's Republic of China. In the spring of 1954, at Russian Orthodox Easter, the Soviet Consulate announced that the Soviet government had kindly permitted Harbin Russians, with their phony Soviet passports, to repatriate to the virgin lands of Kazakhstan and similar rough regions. Many did quite willingly, for patriotic reasons or hoping to find their seized relatives; others were pressured. The offer split many families; some members decided to go, others refused. Some young people, members of the Young Activists or Union of Soviet Youth, forced their parents to repatriate, saying that they would go to the Soviet Consulate and ask to be repatriated on their own. Most of my close friends went to the USSR with their families. In 1955-1957,

the pressure to repatriate increased; there were meetings, where Soviet consulate officials threatened not to let anyone abroad and to close Soviet schools. People were now permitted to repatriate to some provincial cities, not only to virgin lands and other remote areas.

In spite of this bullying by the Soviet Consulate and its stooge the Society of Soviet Citizens, some people kept waiting for visas abroad. To get such visa was hard: you had to find a country willing to accept you, a sponsor in that country, and some funding to get there. We had an aunt in the USA, but were not even considered because the quota for the Chinese was taken out for the next few years, and my brother and I were born in China and thus Chinese for all intents and purposes. Another difficulty was that when people with their phony Soviet passports were accepted by some countries, such as Australia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, etc., they had to get a permission from the Soviet Consulate, without which the Chinese would not issue an exit visa. Sometimes people had to wait for this permission and the exit visa for so long that their entry visa to another country expired. The Consulate demanded large sums of money for this permission and, knowing from their stooges who had some money, adjusted the sum accordingly. Some simply gave up and accepted the repatriation. On the instigation of the Soviets, the Chinese started to say that most possessions of Harbin Russians belonged to China and had to be left in return for an exit visa. One Harbin Russian, who had come to built the Chinese Eastern Railway, said: "I came to China with a bag and one suit, I worked so hard, raised a family, retired, built a house, survived first the Japanese occupation, then the Soviet occupation, and now I am leaving with a bag and one suit. I am lucky that it is not the same suit." When I left China, I took my love for it with me.

Three generations of Russians had lived in Harbin: in my case, my maternal grandfather, my paternal grandmother, my parents, and I who were born there. By the end of the 1960s, there were some two dozen Russians, mostly elderly, left in Harbin. The large and vibrant émigré community had dispersed all over the world. Its fate, especially after 1945, is a tale of great tragedy and injustice, never fully acknowledged in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russia and little known to the rest of the world.