The Sungari River Flood and the Jewish Community in Harbin, China

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BETWEEN THE LATE 19TH century and mid-20th century, Harbin, a multicultural city in northern China, was the largest political, economic, and cultural center for Jewish people in East Asia. Between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century, Russian Jews migrated to Harbin in several waves, in part to escape pogroms, deportations, and restriction they faced in Czarist Russia, in part to follow the economic opportunities provided by the building of the Trans-Siberian Railway connecting Moscow and Peking (now Beijing). Russian Jews were railway workers, merchants, suppliers, businessmen, and professionals. In Harbin, they could live with full civil rights; they built a thriving community; and at one time, 12 of the 40 Harbin city councilors were Jewish—although Jews probably did not make up more than 10% of the population.

Floods, famines, and epidemic diseases were recurrent threats to life in China. Conditions deteriorated further when the Japanese invaded Harbin in September 1931 and settled in as an army of occupation. The next summer, floods compounded the problems faced by the city's residents. Here, we focus on the Sungari River flood of 1932, a devastating time for the residents of Harbin. That August, 21 days of constant torrential rains converted Harbin, a city with a population of about 100,000 people, into a gigantic lake. The Chinese residents who lived in the lower part of the city were forced to abandon their houses and become homeless. Three thousand Chinese were reported missing, and 250 were found dead. Because flooding ruined the harvests, food was scarce. The water was contaminated, and many died from cholera.1

Not a single death was reported in the Jewish community. During and after the flooding, community leaders immediately organized the delivery of bread and water to families in need, physicians made rounds by boat, and Betar, the Jewish youth organization, moved Jews living in flooded areas to the synagogue and the cemetery, both located on high ground. Volunteers assisted the elderly and the sick by bringing them food from a central soup kitchen until the water receded some five weeks later.

Avraham Kaufman, MD, the head of the Jewish community and of the Jewish clinic, led the fight against the cholera epidemic. All members of the Jewish community boiled the contaminated water before using it all summer and ate only boiled and peeled vegetables and fruit. Every family had a jar with little crystals of “kalium permangan,” an antiseptic used to wash grapes. Doctors educated all community members in the best methods to prevent cholera and other diseases. The Jewish doctors used their boats to visit and treat Chinese cholera patients all over the city. In this image, we see the Jewish pharmacy during the flood and the boats that helped transfer people and supplies.

Despite the community's social cohesion and success in coping with the floods and with the threat of cholera, the number of Jews in Harbin dwindled during the Japanese occupation, and most fled south, first to Shanghai, and then to the United States, Australia, Canada, and other destinations.2 Later, the community reestablished itself in Israel.

The Jewish pharmacy in Harbin, 1932.

Source. Reprinted with permission from Teddy Kaufman.3

References

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