

# Chronicle

## *Summaries of Events and Background Information*

### Jews in China

The first authentic evidence of a Jewish presence in China is found in some 8th century Hebrew documents discovered during the 19th century. The earliest known group of Jews arrived in China in the 10th century from India or Persia, or both, by invitation of the Chinese emperor during the Song Dynasty (960-1280). They came to help develop China's cotton trade and settled in Kaifeng, the Song Dynasty's capital, located in today's Henan province. They are referred to as the "Chinese" Jews in contradistinction to the "foreign" Jews mentioned below.

Over the centuries those Chinese Jews, numbering some one thousand and calling themselves "*tiao jin jiao*" ("those following the doctrine which plucks the sinew"), were gradually assimilated by the surrounding Chinese and Muslim communities, and today only around 250 of their descendants are still living there. This number has been confirmed by recent foreign visitors to Kaifeng and by the Chinese journal *On the Social Science Front* (November 1981), which refers to the members of the Kaifeng community as practising Jews. This assertion has been questioned by visitors, who say that the Jews there have largely forgotten their roots and are described locally as the "blue-capped Muslims".

The Kaifeng Synagogue was destroyed by disasters several times, and poverty in the community forced Jews there to sell many of their relics. By the late 18th century very few Kaifeng Jews could read. In the early 20th century the community was so poor that the Anglican mission bought their land and their scrolls. They also bought two steles recording the history of Jews in China and discovered

that Kaifeng Jews were explaining Judaism in Confucian, Buddhist, and purely Chinese terms.

Chinese Jewish communities other than that of Kaifeng had all vanished by the 18th century. The so-called "foreign" Jews of China began to arrive after the First Opium War (1839-42), and can be divided into three historical groups.

The first of these comprised mainly British Jews who arrived in China from India and Iraq after the "unequal treaties" which ended the Opium War had provided for the cession of Hong Kong to Britain and the establishment of foreign concessions in Shanghai, Tianjin and other major cities. Most prominent among those Jewish migrants to the Treaty Ports were members of the Bombay-based Sassoon family, who prospered through real estate, commerce and finance in southern China.

The second modern group of foreign Jews came to Manchuria with the Russians who were granted the concession to build the Chinese Eastern Railway under the "unequal" Russo-Manchurian Treaty. That Jewish community centred on Harbin, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang, and it peaked at 15,000 members in the 1930s, having established a synagogue, a hospital, a home for the aged, clubs and some 20 Jewish newspapers and periodicals. They later scattered to Shanghai, Tianjin and other Chinese cities.

The third group were refugees from Nazi persecution in Germany and Austria, who started to arrive in China as a trickle in 1933 and became a flood in 1938-39. Their number finally swelled to 14,000 in Shanghai during

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## BOOKS RECEIVED

## CHRONICLE OF EVENTS

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the Japanese occupation in August 1939. The Japanese had at first made it easy for Jews to move to Shanghai because they had earlier benefited from Jewish finance, but when numbers grew the Japanese began restrictive measures and many Jewish refugees had to live under curfew in a small ghetto of only one square mile.

Mr Victor Zirinsky is the Honorary Consul-General of Israel in Hong Kong. He is a Russian Jew who lived in China from 1932-46. He now represents the Hebrew Immigration Assistance Society (HIAS), a charitable organization which looks after the migration of Jewish refugees worldwide, including those in China. He estimates that, before the 1949 Chinese communist victory, there were up to 30,000 "foreign" Jews still resident in China, of whom some 20,000 lived in Shanghai. The largest group, around 20,000, were refugees from Germany, while there were 6,000 to 7,000 Russian Jews and some 2,000 from Poland. The "foreign" Jews have been allowed to leave China since just after the second world war, and now according to Mr Zirinsky's records there is only one left. It was two years ago that the most recent Jewish emigrant left China, and the last-but-one foreign Jew on Mr Zirinsky's records, Max Leibowitch, of Polish origin, died in Shanghai in January 1982 and was interred in Hong Kong's Jewish cemetery the following month. Mr Leibowitch had lived with two Chinese servants, one of whom he married, and both of whom were with him for over 30 years.

Through Mr Zirinsky the Jewish charity had sent him 100 yuan monthly, plus 50 yuan each to the servants and all medical expenses.

There remains on HIAS records only the 73-year-old Hannah Agre, a Russian Jewess living in Harbin. There are also six "part-Jews" in Shanghai, who do not practise the religion. Hannah Agre is mentally handicapped, and Mr Zirinsky has experienced great difficulties in attempting to move her out. He obtained a placement for her in Denmark in 1963, but she was adamant about not leaving. "Here is where I was born," she said, "and here is where I shall stay". She was recently interviewed by an Associated Press reporter in Harbin, who quoted her as saying: "I am a Harbinian and I have lived in this room for 36 years". She said she did not want to go to Palestine and "Israel can do without me". (See the article "The Last Foreign Jews in China", *International Herald Tribune*, 3 March 1982.)

There are no functioning synagogues in China today, but the authorities are aware of the historical Kaifeng Jews and are taking measures to protect the site of their synagogue with the establishment of a museum there, for which American money is reported to have been offered. In 1974, before the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Foreign Ministry had denied to foreign correspondents in Peking that there were any Jews or had ever been any Jews in China.

PETER HUMPHREY

## The Serbian Orthodox Church Speaks out in its Own Defence

The disturbances last year in the Kosovo — the autonomous province of Serbia populated largely by Albanian citizens of Yugoslavia — have provoked a backlash among Serbs who were the butt of last year's attacks by the Albanians. Kosovo is the heartland of Old Serbia and includes a number of, historic monasteries, the best-known of which are Gračanica and Dečani, and the ancient and beautiful Patriarchate of Peć, the seat of the original Serbian Orthodox Church. It is also the site of the Battle of Kosovo where the Serbian prince and saint Lazar was defeated in the 14th century by the invading Ottoman Turks; since then it has been hallowed ground for Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

On 26 February of this year a group of priests from the Raško-Prizren diocese sent an impassioned plea to Patriarch German to speak out in defence of the Church. They did not confine themselves to the events in Kosovo but ranged widely over the Church's other grievances. They complained that Serbian children knew nothing about Christ and that attempts to set up catechism classes in the Šabac-Valjevo diocese were always followed by interrogations and harassment so that families were reluctant to send their children. They pointed out that others (i.e. Roman Catholics) enjoyed to the full the right to send their children to religious instruction; it was to the shame of the Orthodox Church that this