



A moving account of a close-knit family during a tumultuous era.

Tarasov, a colonel in the 'White' Russian army, his wife Aida and their five children suffered the traumas of the Revolution and the Civil War which followed it. The story details Aida's search for her husband across the vast expanse of Siberia, her separation from her five children during the turmoil, and the unbelievable events which led to the family's eventual escape into China in 1922. A new life began in the bustling city of Harbin, the 'Moscow of the Orient'. Years of hard work and deprivation brought them some semblance of a good life, only to have it shattered by the arrival of the Japanese aggressors in 1937. The War years followed, and then a few years of relative peace before the arrival of the Chinese 'Reds'. The consequent mass exodus of the 'White' Russians from China in 1949 to a Displaced Persons' Camp on the remote Philippine island of Tubabao is chronicled with startling detail. The final leg of this epic journey brings the whole family to Australia.

The story gives a vivid description of life in the Chinese city of Harbin under strong Russian influence, the Foreign Concessions of Tientsin and Shanghai, and the exclusive resort of Peitaiho Beach. Richly illustrated with dozens of photographs, it also contains interesting, little known historical details about Russia and China.

Nash writes: "The tough life, the deprivations – these are what made our parents and grandparents courageous and resilient. They had to fight for everything. They learned not to wilt under pressure, nor to take anything for granted. They treated hardship as just a normal phase of life, a stepping stone to a brighter future."

Gary Nash (born Igor Ivashkoff), the grandson of Colonel Tarasov, was born in Tientsin, China, and lived there for 17 years before migrating with his family to Australia in 1949. The story is based on the vivid recollections of the Tarasov siblings and his own memories.

The photograph on the front cover shows Leonid and Aida Tarasov in Habarovsk in 1911.

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[... excerpts ...]

"The Weihsien episode."

© By courtesy: Gary Nash

THE PERILOUS GAMBLE. 1942

Towards the end of 1942 the Japanese decided to move the 'enemy' nationals into various internment camps around China. The Tientsin enemies were told they would be taken to a camp in Weihsien. Before leaving, all their possessions would be confiscated, including any real estate.

And that's when my mother Nina took the greatest risk of her life.

Lena, my father's sister, was married to an Englishman and had become a British subject ... and by definition an enemy of the Japanese. However, she had elected not to change her maiden name of Ivashkoff to Howell and many of their possessions, including the

apartment, were shown in her name — which was the same surname as Nina's (this was a few months before she married Vasia Arremieff). And that is what gave Lena the idea of hatching a plot to save her possessions.

'Listen, Nina,' she said. 'The apartment is in my name, Ivashkoff which is the same as yours. So how would they know it's not your apartment? The Japanese will leave you alone — you're stateless and not their enemy — and you can then live in my apartment until the war is over. What do you think of that?'

Nina was not too happy with the idea. She asked a lot of 'what if?' questions, but Lena had answers for all of them. She had thought it all through. Reluctantly, Nina agreed to the deception. It was a huge risk to take. I suppose she went along with it because she felt she owed a great debt to Lena for all the financial assistance she had provided for my education.

Lena immediately set about training my mother to forge her signature, which Nina picked up very quickly. When the Japanese officials came to do an inventory of the goods to be confiscated, Lena told them the prearranged story and Nina nodded in agreement. They

must have both lied convincingly, because Lena and her husband were carted off to the internment camp and Nina moved quietly into the apartment.

But that was not the end of the saga. A few weeks later the Japanese officials returned to interrogate Nina further. They asked to see the documents of sale for the apartment and asked Nina to sign a blank piece of paper so they could verify the signature. They also asked her to show them where Lena and Howell had been sleeping. Nina's knees were shaking as she pointed to a bedroom, the one decorated in Chinese style, which contained many valuable artefacts. The officials examined the room and then went into a huddle, while casting suspicious glances in Nina's direction. She was terrified, fearing her story was not holding together. After what appeared to be an eternity, the officials announced they would return in a week.

It was an agonisingly long week of waiting. Nina's friends and relatives were no help. They just kept telling her how dangerous this deception was, and how she could even be shot if the truth were uncovered. But Nina had promised Lena to do her best to save her possessions, and she was determined to go through with it. Anyway, it was now too late to back out. The deception had already begun.

When the officials returned, they proceeded to seal the room where the Howells were supposed to have slept. They then instructed Nina to vacate the apartment within three weeks, removing all the remaining possessions. This was a strange decision. It seemed they were not quite sure whether Nina's story was true or not, and had come up with this compromise. After they left, she collapsed with relief on the sofa. The perilous gamble had worked and the remaining furniture, grand piano and chests of goods were moved to Vasia's place on the Italian Concession.

With Lena's departure, her contributions to my schooling stopped and my mother could not afford to have me continue as a boarder. At the age of eleven I became a normal day student, living at home — at last.

I had been a boarder for over four years, and I must say the memories are not unpleasant. Apart from the fact that I would have liked to have gone home on Saturday afternoons instead of Sundays at 10 a.m., I did not feel in any way underprivileged. And there was certainly discipline in the college — not harsh, but quite strict and generally fair.

INTERNMENT CAMPS.

1943-1945



The internment camp to which the Howells were sent was at Weih sien, a small city on the Shantung

Peninsula, 500 kilometres from Tientsin. Situated in the compound of the former Presbyterian mission, it was about three kilometres from the city proper. The old gate to the former mission was graced with Chinese hieroglyphics proclaiming 'Courtyard of the Happy Way'. Fortunately, most of the inmates could not read Chinese or they might have



been lulled into a false sense of wellbeing. It was definitely not going to be a happy time.

The camp housed 1800 people — Americans, British, Belgians, Dutch — all the nationalities that were then at war with Japan. The inmates hailed from Tientsin,



Peking and Tsingtao. All were housed in dormitories often to thirty for the singles, and in rows of three-by-four-metre rooms for families of up to four. A separate isolated compound housed a group of Italians, whom the Japanese considered traitors after the downfall of Mussolini and were determined to treat worse than the rest.

The buildings were in a terrible state of disrepair, with leaking roofs, cracks in the walls and broken windows. There were no private facilities. The toilet consisted of four blocks of five toilets each, Chinese squat-style, which worked out to be one cubicle for every ninety inmates. As the flushing systems did not work, each user had to bring his or her own supply of water in a can. Because the water supply was generally limited and had to be pumped by hand from a single well, the inmates brought their slop water for this task. There was no toilet paper or cleaning material or disinfectant available.

Washing facilities were primitive, consisting of four washrooms with faucets supplying a trickle of water into cement troughs. Food came from communal kitchens run by the inmates. The raw material was of dreadful quality rotten vegetables, smelly meat — and there were no refrigeration facilities. Outbreaks of diarrhoea and dysentery were common.

In winter the temperature often fell below freezing point and there were even occasional snowfalls. But heating facilities were practically nonexistent. There were tiny stoves in each dormitory and some in the mess halls, but they were largely inadequate. To make things worse, there was no kindling wood or paper available to start the fires, and hardly any coal to stoke them.

The Japanese supplied the kitchen with daily rations of flour for bread. Apparently they were of the opinion that Westerners all ate a loaf of bread a day, and the flour ration was accordingly generous. The Japanese were, of course, not informed of their miscalculation and a bit of good, old-fashioned ingenuity came to the fore. All eighteen hundred loaves were baked daily and the unused loaves were split down the middle to dry in the sun. The dried loaves were then used to fuel the stoves. When the Japanese inquired about the rows of loaves in the sun, they were told they were being toasted 'for the children'.

Although nowhere near as bad as a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, the internment camp was pretty awful nevertheless. But Weih sien was less onerous than some of the other internment camps, especially one of the Shanghai Camps, Pootung, which had been set up in a condemned tobacco warehouse and was

ruled by a despotic commandant.

Compared to the Japanese commandant of the Pootung internment camp, the Weih sien commandant was quite humane. He even allowed the inmates to receive food parcels. More often than not, these parcels arrived intact with only a few items pilfered by the Japanese. Luckily, their taste in food was quite different to that of the Westerners, and not much was stolen.

Lena used to write to Nina, asking her to send food parcels. 'Sell whatever you have to,' she would write, attaching a list all the items she needed. Nina sold two of Lena's carpets and two of her three fur coats. She had to. She could not afford the provisions from her own salary. However, Lena's beloved furniture remained intact and so did the rest of the goods in her chests.

Mr Howell, who was much older than Lena, died in the Camp after a long illness.

Towards the end of the war, the food in the camp deteriorated both in quantity and quality.

Representations to the commandant were rebuffed with the statement that the inmates still had better conditions than the besieged citizens on the Japanese mainland.

As mentioned earlier, during 1938 and '39 some 20,000 European Jews, mainly from Germany and Austria, had sought refuge in Shanghai. The Japanese established a ghetto for them in the Hongkew area and most lived there without being bothered by the authorities. Over the years, many of them moved out of the ghetto and established residences and businesses in other districts, including the old foreign Concessions.

In 1942, the Japanese made the following proclamation: 'Since Germany has deprived the Jewish people overseas of their nationality, German Jews will hereafter be treated as de-nationalised Jews. Those who are or will be made use of on our part will be treated in a friendly manner. The rest of them will be placed under strict surveillance so that any hostile activity may be eliminated or suppressed.'

So they too, like the 'White Russians, became stateless.

At the end of 1943, when the enemy aliens were sent to internment camps, Shanghai was visited by Germany's infamous 'Butcher of Warsaw', Colonel Josef Meisinger, who insisted the Japanese apply Hitler's 'Final Solution' to all the Shanghai Jews. The Japanese rejected this demand, but it was not because they were fond of the Jews or had any moral scruples. The likely reason was that the execution of 20,000 people would

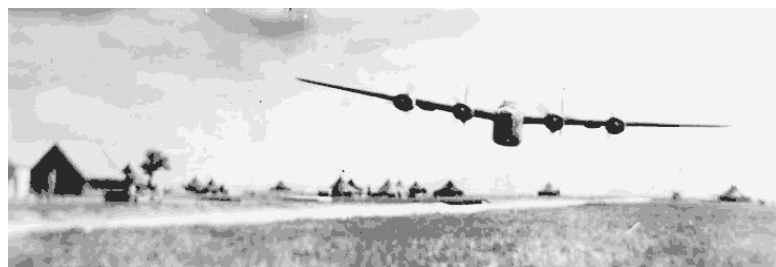
have taken considerable planning and effort, and would have been rather messy. Anyway, the Jews were not in their way and they did not cause any trouble. Besides which, the Japanese had no great love for the Nazis.

However, they did agree to a compromise — they would transform the Jewish ghetto in Hongkew into a prison of sorts. Surrounding it with barbed wire, they instructed all the European Jews living outside the area to move to the ghetto and posted guards at all entry and exit points. From then on, the inmates were required to obtain exit passes if they wanted to venture out, specifying where in Shanghai they could go and when they were to return. Violations of these rules were punishable by beatings or incarceration.

Apart from that, their life was allowed to go on as before. The Chinese still sold them the necessary provisions, the Jewish shops and businesses in the ghetto still operated, and the only serious inconvenience was the curtailment of their freedom to move outside the ghetto.

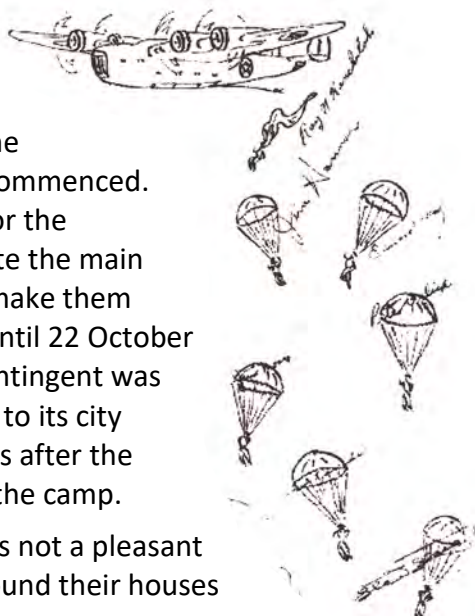
END OF THE WAR. 1945-1946

On 6 August 1945, an atom bomb devastated Hiroshima. On 9 August, another one demolished Nagasaki. And on 10 August, Japan surrendered.



American troops entered the Weihsien camp on 17 August and the liberation process commenced. It took some time for the Americans to liberate the main cities in China and make them safe, so it was not until 22 October that the Tientsin contingent was finally airlifted back to its city more than two years after the initial formation of the camp.

Homecoming was not a pleasant experience. Most found their houses



and apartments empty no furniture, no fittings, no clothes or any other possessions. The Japanese had cleaned out their homes and the Chinese had pilfered whatever was left. In addition, many found their previous jobs had been filled or the companies they had worked for had ceased to be.

The future for foreigners did not look at all bright. There were few opportunities left. The foreign Concessions had been abolished. Industries were shrinking. Unemployment was high. All this resulted in a massive exodus of foreigners to their mother countries. The same happened in Shanghai. In addition, of course, the Japanese, Germans and Austrians were deported en masse back to their countries, so the foreign population was dwindling at an alarming pace.

The Chinese, however, welcomed this exodus as a cleansing of their country from foreign domination. They were finally winning jurisdiction over their own land. The only foreigners who did not leave were the stateless Russians. They had nowhere to go...

For Lena, the perilous gamble had paid off. Nina returned all her possessions including the furniture and the grand piano. Lena had only lost the contents of the sealed room and the few items Nina had to sell to pay for the parcels. Unfortunately the relationship between them deteriorated when Lena began to voice her unhappiness with Nina's choice of the items she had sold.

How could you have possibly sold that fur coat? It was my favourite. You should have sold the other one.'

The complaints were petty and unreasonable, and Nina was deeply hurt by them. The camp experience and the death of her husband seemed to have affected Lena's perception of things, and as a result their friendship could not be rekindled.

For me, the big loss was the beautiful grand piano. I had had it as my very own for over two years.

Soon after, Lena sold all her possessions and migrated to Canada.

At the end of the war the Kiesslings firm was expropriated by the Chinese government and Tobich and Reichel were deported to Austria. Their employees, both Chinese and Russian, were sorry to see them go and gave them a big farewell party. They had been good employers and were well liked. Many of the staff even went to the railway station to see them off. The firm continued to operate under the Kiesslings name, and Nina and the Russian salesgirls kept their jobs. The new Chinese bosses were kind and polite to the staff, and life at Kiesslings went on with little change.

When the American forces entered Tientsin in late 1945 everyone was delighted to see them. As for the

US soldiers, they had fought a terrible war and were very happy to have won it and to have come to a civilised town like Tientsin. Having been away from their families for so long, they yearned for family life and were anxious to make friends with the white population. They had no great love for the Chinese. To them, they looked too much like their hated enemies, the Japanese.

At that time we were still living on the Italian Concession in Vasis apartment, and the Kozlovskys, having returned from Harbin, were living with Jenia and Volodia in Alda's boarding house. All of us made friends among the American military and often invited them to family dinners and gatherings. The Americans, in return, bombarded us with gifts soap, chocolates, nylon stockings.

The only problem with the Americans was their tendency to drive on the right-hand side of the road, whereas the standard in China was the British left-hand drive. As the Japanese standard was the same as the British there had been no problems during the occupation. But the Americans were the conquerors, the liberators, and as far as they were concerned they could drive on any side they damned well pleased, scattering the local traffic in the process. Friday nights were especially hazardous, when a few drinks made the Americans forget which country they were in. The resultant accidents brought in additional business for Dr Nathing, our venerable Russian doctor.

Whereas Tientsin and Shanghai were liberated by the Americans, Harbin was liberated by the Russians. On 8 August 1945, two days before Japan surrendered, Soviet Russia declared war on Japan and the Soviet army entered Manchuria and Harbin.

Most of the Japanese army retreated from the Russian onslaught. But a number stayed back, rather than return home in disgrace, and continued their fight as guerrillas, inflicting as much damage on the Chinese and Russians as they possibly could. The Japanese guerrillas often wore civilian clothes and mixed with the Chinese, believing, correctly, that the white people would not be able to tell the races apart. In one incident a guerrilla masquerading as a shoeshine boy plunged a dagger into the throat of a Russian soldier. There were also instances of Kamikaze-style attacks, where a Japanese armed with grenades would run into a group of Russian soldiers, blowing himself up and killing many of his enemies. It is alleged more Russian soldiers died in Manchuria after the war than during the initial battles against the Japanese.

On the civilian front, however, the occupying Russian soldiers were eager to associate with the local Russians and the Diakonoffs made many friends with

them — after all, the whole family carried Soviet passports. Kolia, in particular, took every opportunity to be with them and talk fondly about 'Mother Russia.

An unfortunate consequence of the end of the war was the loss to Natasha of her Japanese husband Matsuda. He and the rest of the Japanese War Ministry were forced to flee from the Russian onslaught. To stay would have meant possible execution. There was, of course, no way Natasha and the two daughters could have followed him.

Boris' father was deported to Russia for trial and found guilty of treason. His crimes were that he had been a White Russian officer and that he had collaborated with the Japanese by working as a teacher of English in the Japanese War Ministry. As far as the Soviets were concerned, these were acts of treason and he was sentenced to twenty years of hard labour. He died in a prison camp five years later.

As a postscript to the above, it was recently made known that in 1938 the Japanese built a vast complex just south of Harbin for the purpose of germ warfare research. It was named Unit 731 and staffed by some 3500 military personnel and civilians. This facility was used to carry out grotesque experiments on Chinese, Russian and Mongol prisoners. The experiments included injections of plague, cholera, typhus, and bubonic plague; freezing of limbs; infection with syphilis; prolonged exposure to X-rays; and vivisections. The insiders, apparently, referred to the human guinea pigs as maruta (logs of wood). These experiments are estimated to have caused the death of at least 3000 prisoners.

At the end of the war, as the Soviet army was sweeping south to Harbin, the Japanese gassed the remaining prisoners and destroyed the facility. There is some evidence to suggest that, if it had not been for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese could have commenced a germ warfare campaign against the Allies.

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