

Light and Shade

Sketches from an Uncommon Life

Solomon Matthew Bard



香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

Hong Kong University Press
14/F Hing Wai Centre
7 Tin Wan Praya Road
Aberdeen
Hong Kong

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ISBN 978-962-209-949-4

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Secure On-line Ordering
<http://www.hkupress.org>

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue copy for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by Liang Yu Printing Factory Ltd., in Hong Kong, China

The image shows the Chinese characters for '香港大學' (Hong Kong University) written in a square word calligraphy style. The characters are arranged vertically from top to bottom: '香', '港', '大', '學'. Each character is contained within a square frame, and the overall composition is a vertical column of four squares.

Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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1

SIBERIAN CHILDHOOD

"One day in the depths of a winter most cruel
I came from the forest. 'Twas frosty and still,
I saw an old horse with a sledge-load of fuel
Come painfully dragging its weight up the hill"

Preamble

This stanza, sensitively translated by Juliet M. Soskice, comes from an enchanting poem "Peasant Children" by the Russian poet Nicholas Nekrassov.¹ As a child of three or four I had often and with great gusto declaimed these lines to the delight of my parents and occasional guests. Although not a peasant child, I felt deeply the words. Images of cold, frosty and interminably long winters, of great forests and white snow-covered plains, were never far away from where I was born, on 13 June 1916, in Chita, a small thriving town in Siberia, a remote and inhospitable eastern region of Russia.²

A child's recollection may not always be accurate. Sometimes it is hard to tell how much may have been added to the story by later information. However, I believe that my first memory, at the age of two and half, of a very sad and tragic event, is true: it was the funeral of my eldest brother David. I see myself on the windowsill being held by my nanny and looking through the window at the snow-covered yard outside. People are moving about and a coffin is being placed on a hearse. Although I could not have understood what was going on, the scene has remained in my mind ever since.

1. *Poems by Nicholas Nekrassov*, Oxford University Press, 1929.

2. Russia at that time still adhered to the old calendar. The Gregorian or Western calendar, which became known as the New Style, was adopted by the Soviets on 31 January 1918, as part of the Regime's reforms. The calendar was advanced thirteen days and my birthday became 26 June.

Go East Young Man

Both my parents came from the western parts of Russia: my father from Poland, at that time ruled by Russia, my mother from the Crimea, on the Black Sea. What then brought them to Chita thousands of miles away from home? I should have liked to imagine my father as a pioneering adventurer seeking fortune in new, as yet little explored lands. It was only partly true. Coming from a poor family with a large number of siblings, father was apprenticed at the age of thirteen or fourteen to a watchmaker and silversmith somewhere in Poland.³ Then, at the age of seventeen, he moved to Sevastopol, in the Crimea, to work for his uncle. There were few prospects for quick success in Sevastopol for a young watchmaker with few connections and no money. Moreover, he was courting my mother, three years his junior. No doubt father was looking for an opportunity for a quicker and shorter way to prosperity than that offered by his current position. This came unexpectedly from a distant relative in Chita who needed an assistant in his expanding shop; it was specified that the new assistant must be married! My parents arrived in Chita and were married there in 1906. My father was twenty-one, my mother eighteen.

Chita

It is said that Chita owes its origin to an enterprising Cossack chieftain as far back as the 17th century, when it was probably little more than a camp. Mineral resources, especially silver and gold, discovered in Siberia in the 18th century, advanced Chita's position, but its political history was made in 1827 when a number of early Russian revolutionaries, known as the Decembrists, who included leading intellectuals and academics, were exiled to Siberia.⁴ Many were placed in Chita, no doubt raising this small Siberian town to at least a minor cultural centre.

Chita's next important phase came with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, built in stages between 1891 and 1916. This nine-thousand-kilometre railway, linking Moscow in the west to Vladivostok in the east,

3. "Watchmaker" is not an entirely accurate translation from Russian. The Russians use the word "master", in the sense of a master craftsman, in describing one who repairs and maintains watches and clocks, but not necessarily makes them.

4. The Decembrists were a group of army officers who led an uprising against Imperial Russia in 1825. It was regarded as the earliest Russian revolutionary movement against the autocratic repressive government. Because the uprising occurred in December, rebels were called the Decembrists.

passed through Chita. In 1901 the town became a junction station for the new East Chinese Railway linking the Trans-Siberian Railway with the Chinese province of Manchuria, further boosting Chita's place in the wilderness of Siberia.

Early Success

My father, realizing that there were better prospects in Chita than working for his relative, left his employer after less than two years. Using every penny (sorry, kopeck) they saved, my parents opened their own watches-and-jewellery shop, called somewhat pretentiously "Renaissance". They lived in the spacious premises at the back of the shop; both worked at the counter, and the shop was doing very well. Their success in a relatively short time was not surprising. Chita, while not exactly a frontier town, was a boom town. Private gold and silver prospectors and hunters for valuable furs came to Chita to sell their spoils and buy luxuries such as watches and jewellery and other consumer goods. My eldest brother David was born in 1908, then Leo in 1910. By the time I was born six years later, we had become a well-settled, moderately prosperous family.

Clouds Gather

Those early years in Chita must have been very rewarding for my parents who were bringing up a family and working hard to build for us a comfortable and prosperous life. The harsh Siberian climate, the frugal life-style, and the great distance from their families were not serious problems for the young couple. But far away in the west, sinister events were gathering momentum towards a global conflagration. In 1914 the Great War started in which Russia played a major role. In 1915 my father was called up to serve in the army but was spared active service at the front because of severe myopia (shortsightedness). He spent the next two years as an army clerk mostly in Irkutsk, Siberia, and so was able to come home on leave from time to time. Mother was now fully occupied with looking after the shop, my brothers were nearly old enough to look after themselves, but when I was born a nanny was engaged to look after me. She was Polish and spoke to me mostly in her language. She looked after me until I was four and I was told that my first spoken words were in Polish. I remember my nanny and the thick Polish potato soup she cooked which I loved, but nothing whatever of the Polish language. Apart from the strain imposed on mother by father's absence, our life was relatively unaffected until 1917.

The War and the Revolution

After initial successes against Austro-Hungary, the Russian armies suffered a series of crushing defeats at the hands of the Germans in 1915. There were huge casualties. As the Russian front gradually disintegrated, there were widespread discontent and early signs of an impending popular uprising. Revolutions were not new to Russia. The Decembrist uprising of the 1820s was mentioned earlier. In 1905 a revolution sparked by the failure of the government to put into effect reforms it had promised earlier was crushed within a year, but some reforms, notably the establishment of the Duma, a legislative body, were forced from the government. My mother's sister Luba, who was an active participant in the revolutionary movement, was exiled to Siberia. Unlike the Decembrists, political prisoners of this period were no longer sent to Chita, but imprisoned in much harsher conditions in the far north of Siberia. She was freed when the 1917 Revolution had finally succeeded. Sadly, although we were in Chita at the time, my mother was either unable or not allowed to visit her sister.⁵ The February 1917 Revolution appeared to have achieved moderate results with the abdication of the Tsar and establishment of the provisional government, but it was a case of "too little too late". Eight months later, in what is known as the "Great October Revolution", the Bolsheviks seized power, abolished the provisional government and set up the Marxist Soviet regime.⁶ While this was the end of the old regime, it was also the beginning of the civil war which lasted for another four years.

The cataclysmic events of the Revolution were as yet too far away to seriously affect our life in Chita. Many, like my parents, were convinced that the forces of the old regime, often referred to as Whites, in contrast to the Red forces associated with the communist movement, would prevail.⁷ This belief was reinforced by the Allied Intervention which began in 1918 and involved

5. I am not sure of the dates when aunt Luba was exiled and released, probably sometime between 1910 and 1917. She was a social democrat, and although released by the Revolution as a political prisoner, would have had no part to play in the Bolshevik government which was strongly opposed to social democrats. On release, she married a Latvian, settled down in Latvia and had three children, but maintained little connection with her family. Her health was undermined during the exile, and she died at a relatively young age.

6. The date, 25 October, became 7 November, New Style, (see note 2) and was subsequently celebrated in November.

7. White Army: An umbrella term for the various counter-revolutionary armies that fought the "Bolshevik" Red Army in the Russian Civil War. The name "White Russian" has also been used to describe Russian emigrants, or émigrés, who fled Russia

several foreign powers. These occupied portions of the Russian territory in the west and in the east, including Siberia. Surely the optimists reasoned, the Revolution could not succeed in the face of such opposition. However, some of the effects of the Revolution soon began to reach our region, such as devaluation of the currency and resulting inflation. My parents decided on what seemed to be the only plausible course: in 1917 they bought property and we soon moved into it. In retrospect this proved to be a big mistake, for contrary to most predictions, the Reds were getting the upper hand, and as the Revolution rolled steadily east with the Whites in retreat, property too lost its value and in any case was difficult to sell. We were tied to it and in the end had to give it up and leave, but this part of my story is still to come.

New Home and Tragic Loss

It was a substantial piece of property, centrally placed and comprising four houses, spacious grounds and a garden, all in one block, at No. 5 Argunskaya Street. I remember it well, the main house — our residence — was an attractive solid stone-and-brick building which stood in the middle of the compound facing a wrought-iron ornate gate and the street beyond. Two houses abutted the street while the fourth, the smallest of the four, stood at the back. Gradually we acquired an ample household staff, some with children; I also recall hens, ducks and geese at the back of the yard, and a large dog of uncertain pedigree called "Yellowpaws" (for obvious reason). There were fruit trees in the garden, but we, the children, much preferred small dark-coloured berries which grew on trees and which resembled blackberries; I think they might have been wild cherries. The echoes of the civil war were still too far away to affect us, and life in our new home during these early upheaval years of 1917–18 was uneventful and happy. My father had been released from the army and was back at the shop. Some years earlier, he brought his younger brother, Jonah, from Poland to Chita and helped him to open a stationery shop; I soon became uncle Jonah's favourite. Then suddenly tragedy struck. My eldest brother David developed a bone infection which spread to his blood; he died in December 1918 at the age of eleven. It was a cruel blow, which my parents tried to bear stoically, but which brought gloom and grief

as a result of the Revolution. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth Century World History*, "Whites" has been used to describe those loyal to a monarchy, ever since the French Revolution (1789), when monarchist forces adopted the white flag of the Bourbon Dynasty as their symbol.

into our life and took a long time to heal. David was a gentle, loving boy. It is sad that I can only remember his funeral and know him only through family photographs.

My Mother — The Good Samaritan

An episode, of which I was completely unaware until many years later, occurred sometime in 1918. Many prisoners-of-war of the Austro-Hungarian forces captured by the Russians were sent to Siberia where some worked in private households or on farms. The surveillance was light as an escape from Siberia was regarded as unlikely. In the turmoil of the Revolution, some had tried to escape making their way east towards the sea hoping to reach their homeland by ship. One day a man, exhausted and hungry, turned up at our house. He admitted he was an escaped prisoner-of-war and asked for help. Mother took pity on him and kept him hidden on our property for two weeks while he was recovering his strength, then provided him with food, clothes and some money and sent him on his way. There is no doubt that mother's "Good Samaritan" deed was a risky action. It could also be regarded as foolhardy, though I prefer to think of it as brave. In the event, this single unconnected episode would have an unexpected sequel years later.⁸

The Civil War

The Revolution was opposed by the monarchist, counter-revolutionary forces — the White forces. By 1918 Russia was engaged in a ruthless, cruel civil war. Consisting mostly of regular army regiments, well-trained and organized, and Cossacks, the Whites were expected to defeat the Soviets and, indeed, they scored some initial successes. However, the tide later turned in favour of the Reds. Amazingly, although formed from scratch and led by the commissar of war, Trotsky, who was without any military training, the Red Army did turn the tables and by 1919 the Whites were in retreat. Admiral Kolchak, the main hope of the White movement, was retreating east and the ill winds of the civil war were now blowing across Siberia and were felt as far as Chita. After the relative calm of the two previous years, 1919 and 1920 were troubled years for Chita, which changed hands between Whites and Reds several times though little actual fighting took place in the city.

It was during a "White phase", in 1919, that three officers of the White Army were quartered in our house. I assume we had no choice, but in the

8. To be described in another essay.

event their stay with us seemed to have passed pleasantly. I am not sure how long they stayed, perhaps several months, but during that time they took a great liking to me and spoiled me atrociously. They took me with them when they rode to water their horses in the river, carefully holding me in front while I clutched at the horse's mane, giggling uncontrollably from pleasure all the way. On one occasion they dressed me up in their uniform, many sizes too big for a three-year-old child and took a photograph of me. They also taught me to swear like a trooper to the great distress of my mother, and the amusement of my father. Then suddenly the officers were gone and the city was occupied by the Reds. It soon changed hands again, but this time it fell to a White Cossack chieftain by the name of Semionov and his men, with a sinister reputation for lawlessness and strong anti-Semitism.⁹ Many believed that Semionov was in this for his own power and gain rather than for the White cause. My mother related how the city lived in fear, not knowing what to expect, and how one day my father was taken away and locked in a railway car with several other local merchants, under threat of being blown up. Evidently some sort of ransom was expected. My mother rushed to Semionov's headquarters demanding to see him. To her utter surprise he received her courteously, listened to her plea and had my father released, reputedly in the nick of time. The other captives were released soon afterwards. I was never told whether in fact a ransom was paid, but I suspect it was.

By the end of 1920, the Whites were decidedly defeated, though sporadic skirmishes between small isolated groups continued until 1922. The fruitless foreign intervention fizzled out and the Allied troops departed, except the Japanese who remained in some parts of the Russian Far East until 1922.

The first Soviet government, established in 1918 as the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, or R.S.F.S.R, did not at once exercise central control over the whole of Russia. In our region, the Far Eastern Republic declared itself in 1920. Ostensibly democratic, it was nevertheless under Communist control. The D.V.R., as it was called (Russian initials for the Far Eastern Republic), lasted until the end of 1922, when Soviet power was finally established over the whole of Russia under the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or U.S.S.R.

9. Semionov later found refuge in the southern part of Manchuria, which was under Japanese control, and there engaged in some, mostly ineffective, anti-Soviet activities. When the Soviet Army overran Manchuria at the end of the Second World War, Semionov was arrested, tried in the Soviet Union and executed.

Life at Home

In Chita by late 1920 conditions began to return to near normal. Although we were now under the rule of the D.V.R., my family was not as yet affected by the new regime. Father continued to run the shop. We could hear him coming home daily after work, always playfully scolding "Yellowpaws" and receiving happy barks in return. Mother was busy in the house, and my brother Leo was attending high school in his black uniform with shining brass buttons and smart peak-cap. Sometime after I had turned four, my nanny left, retiring to her native Poland. At the same time I began attending cheder, a Jewish primary school. Although the school was some distance away, I walked there alone carrying my books and an ink bottle tied to my wrist. On the way back from school I invariably stopped at my uncle Jonah's shop where I pretended to help him in return for packets of candy. In winter, although wearing thick woollen mittens, I recall coming home with my hands numb from the cold and tears running down my cheeks, having stopped at uncle Jonah's, to "warm up" I explained, though his shop was further away from school than my home. At school I learned almost nothing of Hebrew, but showed excellent progress in reading and writing Russian. Perhaps my parents were aware of this, for the following year, after I had turned five, I was enrolled in a Russian primary school.

Expropriation

As children, my brother and I were largely unaware of the momentous events unfolding around us. In spite of apparent normality, my parents must have been living in constant expectation of drastic changes in our life and fortunes, knowing that in the eyes of the Soviets they were the despised bourgeois — landowners and merchants — exploiters who must be eliminated.¹⁰ The blow finally came in 1921, though I am not sure exactly when. I recall the scene as I stood with my mother in the hall of our house: two men in leather jackets, high boots and peak-caps, were informing mother that our immovable property — the houses — was being "expropriated" in the name of the Soviet government. My father was not present, he was probably at the shop. I believe my mother took it stoically, for I do not recall her crying or reacting with shock to the announcement. The blow was softened by the men further announcing

10. The term "bourgeois", which in French means mainly "middle class", in Soviet Russia acquired a somewhat different connotation — a derogatory term for the class enemy, or those who did not belong to the proletariat.

that we would be allowed to occupy the small house at the back without rent. The new regime was living up to its proclamation "all power to the Soviets". This was now a land for workers and peasants, and those who belonged to the upper and middle classes lost their property and were regarded at best as suspects, or at worst as enemies of the people.

Looking back at this turn of events in our life, I am amazed how quickly and realistically my parents accepted our new situation and adapted to it. In part this may have been due to the fact that they had been expecting this development for some time, that although dispossessed, we were not deprived of our personal possessions and were certainly not destitute, and that we were not alone in this condition. Moreover, somewhat contrary to their expectations, we were not subjected to any ill treatment. We moved into our new home, which we found big enough for the family and which proved comfortable and manageable. The entrance led, through a small hall, into the kitchen, where an enormous stove reaching to the ceiling helped to keep the whole house warm in winter. From the kitchen the door opened into a large sitting room which continued into a smaller dining room. Three bedrooms were all on the same side, separated from the sitting/dining rooms by a corridor. The other three houses in the compound were occupied by government agencies, the main building housing some sort of trading department. One of the remaining two houses was occupied, to our consternation, by the infamous "Cheka" — the Soviet State Security Organ — an early version of the KGB.

Winters

As the years 1921 and 1922 rolled on, and we settled down in our new home, our daily life continued in a near-normal way. Father still went to the shop, but I believe it was to wind up the business; Leo and I attended our respective schools. At the approach of winter, frantic activity would develop in our household. The entrance door was padded with felt on the inside to keep the cold out. The double window panes were sealed, leaving only a small hinged pane which could be opened for ventilation. Known as "fortochka", it is a feature in most Russian houses. One or two days were devoted to shredding and salting cabbage which was then stored in barrels. A favourite ingredient in Russian cuisine, the cabbage would be served throughout winter. Leo and I loved this ritual since we enjoyed eating the sweet, crisp left-over heads of the cabbage. Winter was also a time for cooking meat and cabbage pies, known in Russian as "pirozinki". Throughout my life I have retained a very strong fondness for Russian meat pies. Another favourite winter dish, especially popular in Siberia, was small boiled meat dumplings called "pelmeni". An

entire meal would consist of "pelmeni", and partakers would often compete at eating the greatest number of them.

Winters were long and very cold, temperatures sometimes reaching minus 30 degrees Centigrade, but it is impossible not to admire and love the sight of a pure white, far-reaching snow carpet in the open countryside. For those who have never seen snow, the first sight of it must be an unforgettable experience. I remember how many years later my own children, who saw snow for the first time when already in their teens, rushed about madly throwing snowballs at each other in sheer exhilaration. Growing up in Chita, we were used to the snow and the cold and enjoyed our outdoor pastimes. We wore warm underwear, thick overcoats, hats with flaps to cover our ears, and felt boots. After school, Leo and I with our friends played in the snow or went sleighing or skating on our frozen river. Chita had two rivers — Ingoda, wide and swift-flowing, and its narrow quiet tributary called Chitinka (small Chita). Both froze in winter, but we skated mostly on Chitinka. Sleighing in winter was great fun, but not without its dangers, as I learned by bitter experience. It was during one of these rides that Leo, pulling the sleigh with me on it, ran fast over frozen ground and overturned the sleigh. I fell off, nearly biting off a slice of my tongue. Bleeding profusely, and Leo in a panic, I was brought home with fuss and alarm, but fortunately the damage was soon repaired. A faint scar on my tongue is still visible. There were days, however, so cold that we spent the time indoors, reading or playing with mostly home-made toys. Leo became quite adept at carving "soldiers" from spent wooden spools. Unlike the present age of mass productions, we had few toys, at least in Chita. Rarely, when we were given a real toy, it was an occasion for great jubilation, such as happened when a toy wooden cannon, which I had admired many times in a shop window, was brought home by my father and given to me. Siberian winter also brought some bizarre incidents such as when our watchman Alexander brought into our kitchen a goose which had its fleshy tongue frozen to its back where it had been licking its feathers. Soon unfrozen in the warmth of the kitchen, the poor bird seemed none the worse for its unpleasant experience and presently returned to the yard.

Summers

At the onset of spring, we would all go to watch the frozen river coming to life. Listening to the grinding noise of the breaking ice, as the large ice-floes begin to move, has always been an exciting experience. As much as we enjoyed our winters and springs, the short and hot summers provided us with different pleasures. On some holidays or Sundays, father would hire a large

horse-drawn cart with a coachman, pile on old rugs, pillows, a hammock or two, and plenty of food and drink, and the family, often with friends, would go for a picnic in the wood by the Ingoda river. I looked forward immensely to these outings. There, in a Chekhovian atmosphere, in the shade of sweet-smelling pines, the older folk would relax on rugs or in hammocks, chatting, sipping tea or just sleeping, while the younger set and the children swam in the river or played games.

The near-idyllic picture I have drawn should not detract from the overall sad state of the country. The civil war left Russia exhausted and ruined. Nationalization of industry, suppression of private trade, and other drastic economic measures contributed to the breakdown of the economy. There were shortages of food and other commodities. Private land was confiscated and those belonging to the upper and middle classes suffered discrimination. The western regions of the country, with their larger population, were especially badly affected, but by 1921 Siberia too was experiencing shortages.

Armed Hold-Up

Although we belonged to a privileged class, despised by the new regime, we were not harassed and were largely left alone to get on with our lives. Since we did not seem to suffer any obvious privations, I assume my parents still had money and were able to keep their personal valuables. In 1922 father had wound up the shop and was able to spend more time at home. We had become accustomed to our new status and were comfortable in our new modest house. Life seemed almost normal: there were dinner parties with friends in our house although with less cognac and fewer cigars than before, but with the usual game of preference after dinner.¹¹ Leo and I were usually allowed to sit at the table with the adults, but after dinner were sent to bed. It was during one of these dinner parties that we had an armed robbery. At the height of the party, two masked men appeared in the dining room. Brandishing a revolver, one of the men ordered everyone to stand up and raise their hands. My father, thinking someone was playing a practical joke, said something to the effect: "stop fooling". The next command came in such a menacing tone that there was no longer any doubt that this was a real armed hold-up. Suddenly all was quiet. Everyone stood up with hands raised; I cannot remember whether I raised my hands, probably not. The ladies were then told to remain at the table but warned not to move, make any noise or raise an alarm.

¹¹ Preference: a card game not unlike whist or bridge, which was very popular in Russia and generally in Eastern Europe.

The men, including Leo, were ordered into the bathroom where they remained guarded by one of the robbers. I suspect Leo was proud of the fact that he was counted as an adult. The other robber ordered mother to show him where money and jewellery were kept. I followed mother, the man paying no attention to me. I remember mother opening some drawers and I presume money and some items were taken. Strangely, I do not remember being frightened; perhaps I did not fully appreciate the situation.

Suddenly the loud sound of a shot fired was heard. Apparently one of our guests had tried to escape from the bathroom and the man guarding them fired his gun. Fortunately no one was hurt. Shortly afterwards the two men left after wishing us a "good night". We learned later that there were two other men — one was in the kitchen watching our domestics, and the fourth was keeping watch outside. A few weeks later we were told that the robbers were apprehended and mother was summoned to the police station to identify them. She did not; she was either unable or unwilling to identify them, I never learned which. There was still a good deal of lawlessness in Chita, some perpetrated by the former members of the White army, mostly destitute and desperate, who may have turned to crime. It was ironic that we were robbed under the very noses of the dreaded Cheka housed in our compound.

Home Life and Books

When I think of my home and family, I believe we were a happy close-knit unit with my memories predominantly of warmth and love. But punishment was also administered when deemed necessary: being placed in a corner facing the wall was the standard form for being naughty or disobedient; recourse to a belt was used but rarely. Leo, though always protective of me, preferred, understandably, to spend time with friends of his age: six years' difference at that age was a very wide gap. I think I grew as a quiet, shy, introspective boy prone to imagination, even some phantasy. I, too, had my own friends, but seemed to prefer books. By the time I passed my sixth birthday I was becoming a voracious reader. Fortunately, when my parents had bought the property, they also acquired with it a sizeable library. Apart from the Russian classics, there were translated works of foreign writers. There was also a marvellous set of four large volumes called "Wonders of the Universe" which Leo and I browsed through repeatedly, mainly for their fascinating coloured pictures. I recall that my favourite books were adventure novels by Jules Verne, Mayne Reid and Fenimore Cooper. They stirred my childish imagination and I often

pictured myself in them. At one time our house was the *Nautilus*, of 20,000 *Leagues under the Seas*, and I was its captain Nemo; at another it was the steam house, Jules Verne's fabulous steam engine in the shape of an elephant. I liked to share these adventures with my friends, and with our household domestics to whom I would excitedly relate the stories I had read.

Journey to Moscow and Sevastopol

As I was approaching my seventh birthday, I learned with surprise and much excitement that I was to embark on a real adventure, the greatest adventure of my childhood far surpassing my imaginary ones in the world of Jules Verne: a trip with my mother on the Trans-Siberian Railway across the whole of Russia to the Crimea. Mother had made this trip twice before, on both occasions taking with her my two elder brothers, and each time combining seeing her parents in Sevastopol with buying some merchandise for the shop. This time there would be no stock buying and I alone was to accompany her. No doubt, the thought of possibly leaving Russia in the near future and perhaps never seeing her parents again played a part in mother's wish to visit them. I was told later by my parents that around 1922 they began contemplating leaving Russia. We had no future in the new Soviet Russia, simply because we belonged to the wrong class — the despised bourgeois. Moreover, there were persistent rumours that emigration from Russia would soon be drastically restricted and even stopped altogether.

Mother and I left Chita in May 1923 for Moscow where we spent three weeks with mother's younger sister Sonia and her husband Grisha. Then, with Sonia, we travelled to Sevastopol and spent three months with grandparents before returning to Chita. The time for our journey was well chosen. The New Economic Policy, or N.E.P., introduced by Lenin in 1921, which relaxed many of the early drastic economic measures and even allowed a limited measure of private enterprise, had now reached our distant region. It was a welcome reprieve from previous hardships and shortages. Relaxation of restrictions on farming resulted in better supplies of food and other provisions. The N.E.P. was a great success, but after the death of Lenin, in 1924, it was effectively at an end, although not officially stopped until 1928. In the meantime travelling around the country was also made easier and we departed Chita full of cheerful expectations.

The journey to Moscow took seven days. During that time, we must have made not a few friends among our co-travellers, but curiously I remember little of the actual journey. Among my few recollections is that of the train

passing through countless tunnels, I believe there were about forty, as the train rounded Lake Baikal, reputed to be the deepest lake in the world. The train stopped by the Lake and we were able to get off the train and walk for a few minutes along the shore; I stared across but could not see the opposite shore of this huge lake. I remember the rush for boiling water at every station and the hurrying back in constant fear of missing the train. I recall one unpleasant incident when the train ran over a cow. I suppose, excited as I was to be on this trip, much of the long journey had assumed a monotonous routine. In Moscow at last, we were met at the station by uncle Grisha and aunt Sonia, and driven home in a hired motorcar — my first experience of a motor vehicle. It was a very thrilling experience. Years later I could still remember the joy of this sensation, but could never recapture it, once it had become commonplace.

My uncle and aunt occupied a small flat of two rooms, one of which served as uncle's studio (he was an artist), the second room served all other purposes. Half of uncle's studio was now converted into mother's and my bedroom; the other half was crammed with canvasses and panels. To reach their flat one had to walk through a long winding corridor in almost total darkness. There was a communal kitchen which served several flats in the building. Every morning, it became my task to walk to a bakery one block away and buy the most delicious fresh raisin bread, which had only recently become available thanks to the N.E.P. Aunt Sonia was a large plump woman with a kind, always smiling face, but it was uncle Grisha who totally won my heart. He was a tall, thin handsome man with a serious face and an animated manner when he talked. He usually wore a wide-brimmed hat and dressed in a somewhat Bohemian fashion. This is, of course, a description by an adult; to me as a child, he seemed a large man, gentle and kind. As he confided to me later, his ambition to paint art-works was constantly frustrated by the government which employed him, and for which he had to produce stereotyped propaganda posters depicting happy wholesome-looking workers and peasants standing in defying poses with hammers and sickles in their hands. Grisha had taken a holiday for our visit, and while mother and Sonia had a lot to talk about, he spent most of the time with me, taking me on exciting trips all over Moscow, including many art galleries. He talked to me as if I were an adult and seemed to enjoy explaining and describing to me the things we saw and the places we visited. I remember vividly our visit to the famous Tretyakov Gallery which houses paintings by the great Russian masters like Repin, Vasnetsov and Levitan. It is difficult to describe adequately the overpowering effect I felt, transported from a small backward town into the largest city in

the country: fine buildings and paved streets, the wonders of the Kremlin, the onion-domed churches, the river embankment and other wonderful sights — all made an unforgettable impression on me. Three weeks passed quickly and I was sorry to part from uncle Grisha, but I was excited at the prospect of visiting another city and meeting my grandparents for the first time. Soon mother, Sonia and I were on our way to Sevastopol — a three-day journey south by train. I remember nothing at all of this journey, probably because nothing much happened.

Sevastopol, located at the tip of the Crimean peninsula on the Black Sea, was founded by the empress Catherine the Great in 1783, though some might argue that the city had its origin in an ancient Greek colony Chersonesus as far back as the 5th century BCE.¹² Indeed, while in Sevastopol we visited the remains of the ancient Chersonesus located a short distance from the city, Sevastopol's more recent importance dates from the early 19th century when the city was fortified and used as a naval base. It played a central role in the Crimean War of 1854–55 when it was attacked by the combined British, French and Turkish forces. To the Russians, as I was soon to learn, it was not the eventual outcome of the war, which they lost, that mattered, but the glorious defence of the city which held out for eleven and a half months, and in which admiral Nakhimov, killed in action, and the troops under his command displayed outstanding courage and heroism. A statue of the admiral stands prominently in the central square of the city overlooking the sea. Years later I was able to appreciate the opposing side's view, which also had its gallant moments such as the British cavalry action at Balaklava, immortalized in Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade".

We arrived at Sevastopol in the early evening just as it was getting dark and were met by my grandfather. Ourselves and all our baggage were placed in a long, open horse-drawn carriage with two central back-to-back benches, called, I subsequently learned, "lineika".¹³ Instead of going home, we were first taken to a bath-house, no doubt to wash off the grime of the long train journey. Russians are very fond of these bath-houses in which a whole room serves as a steam bath, not unlike the present-day sauna. By the time we arrived home where grandmother was waiting with delicious hot dinner, I could hardly keep awake and was soon packed off to bed.

12. BCE = Before Common Era; CE = Common Era.

13. "Lineika" means (measuring) ruler. I have no idea why the vehicle I described should also be called by this name.

Grandfather

My grandfather was a short sturdy man in his late sixties. He had a beard and at home always wore a skull-cap. I suspect my grandmother wore a wig, as prescribed for married women by the Jewish religion, but I am not sure. Like so many others, my grandparents suffered hardships and privations in the early years of the Revolution when Sevastopol, like Chita, changed hands in the ensuing fighting. Their two sons, my mother's younger brothers, managed to escape to Greece, on a Greek destroyer, in remarkable circumstances. But now, the city had largely recovered and was enjoying the plenitude brought by the N.E.P. Grandfather ran a small business at home as a furrier, still apparently tolerated by the Soviet authorities. It seemed an unlikely profession in Sevastopol which has a mild warm climate.

He seemed always in a cheerful mood, his only worry being grandmother's health as she was suffering from diabetes. He and grandmother were obviously delighted to welcome their two daughters and discuss family matters with them, but after a few days grandfather devoted most of his time, when not busy with his furs, to me. One of our first visits was to a special museum housing the famous panorama painted on a huge cloth, depicting scenes of the defence of Sevastopol, 1854–55.¹⁴ As in Moscow, what impressed me enormously were the paved streets and footpaths in contrast to Chita where there was mostly sand and mud. As I walked with grandfather, I admired the city's fine buildings and its many monuments, but the biggest thrill was the sight of the sea, the first time for me. The harbour, the pavilions on the waterfront, the warships anchored in the harbour, and people strolling on the promenade by the sea — for me these were scenes from a different world. One day grandfather took me to the beach and taught me to swim. I learned quickly and after that we went swimming often. It was so different from my home river Chitinka in which I was allowed to wade up to my knees but not to bathe because of the current and dangerous eddies. There were trips on a hackney-coach by the whole family to the neighbouring resorts of Yalta and Evpatoria to look at the beautiful "dachas", to have a picnic on a long sandy beach, and swim. Then the return journey, feeling tired but happy, through copses of walnut trees, with the coachman niftily knocking off walnuts with his whip into our laps.

14. This picturesque panorama, painted on a cloth by the artist E. F. Rubo, extends in an endless circle along the wall of a rotunda-shaped building.

Grandfather had interesting stories to tell about his life. Before becoming a furrier, he worked as a flautist and music teacher but found it difficult to make a living in that profession. Then a family secret was revealed: my father had taken violin lessons from him. "Your father had no talent and was not really interested in music," grandfather said, "it was a ruse to get close to my daughter, your future mother, because he had fallen in love with her". Grandfather learned to play the flute in the army. At the age of eighteen he joined the army in place of his elder brother who had recently married and was called up to serve shortly afterwards. Apparently such "replacements" were quite common and legal. Unfortunately for my grandfather, just as he was completing his normal four-year army service, in 1877, the war between Russia and Turkey had broken out. There was no discharge from the army, and grandfather soon found himself marching under the Russian general Skobelev, popularly known as the "White General" because he always rode a white horse. They reached Turkey and, grandfather declared with some pride I thought, laid siege to the Turkish fortress of Plevna.¹⁵ Serving in the band did not offer any protection; on the contrary, my grandfather explained, bands in those days marched in front of the troops and were therefore exposed to the first volleys from the enemy.

I listened fascinated to the stories of his war experience. The one I liked best, and wanted to hear again and again, was the story of the "restless pillow": after marching the whole day in hot weather (it was June, there was no transport for infantry in those days), they stopped for the night in a field. Grandfather was very tired. As it grew dark, he folded his greatcoat, put it on the first large stone he saw and using it as a pillow went to sleep. During the night he felt a strange sensation that his pillow was moving, but too tired to get up, he went on sleeping. In the early morning as he got up to the bugle call, he lifted his greatcoat to discover to his amazement that the "stone" turned out to be a tortoise, which obviously was not amused at being used as a pillow! In another war story, my grandfather with several of his comrades went on a food-foraging expedition. They climbed a steep hill and as they reached the crest they came suddenly face to face with a small party of Turkish soldiers, obviously on a similar mission. "What happened,

15. Actually the war was with the Ottoman Empire, often referred to as the Turkish Empire or simply as Turkey. Plevna (or Pleven) is in present-day Bulgaria, at that time part of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike the Crimean War of 1854–55, the 1877–78 war resulted in a decisive Russian victory. However, under pressure from the Western powers, Russian gains in the subsequent peace treaty were significantly reduced.

grandpa!" I cried excitedly. "Did you fight?" "No," he replied, "we looked at each other for a moment, then turned and went our separate ways." One day, at my request, grandfather took out his flute and began to play. Music so far had not played any part in my life or in that of my family. The piano at home was merely a piece of furniture, though mother occasionally would sit at it and improvise, rather poorly, some familiar tunes. Now, suddenly I wanted to learn to play the flute and to start at once. But grandfather said that I was too young to learn a wind instrument, but he would teach me when I was old enough. He did, years later when he came to live with us after the death of grandmother.

Return to Chita

With so much to do and to see, the three months soon passed and it was time to leave. We stopped in Moscow on the way back for a few days and then embarked on the long journey back to Chita. I recall nothing of the return trip. Chita seemed dreary after Moscow and Sevastopol, but it felt good to be home with father and Leo. I soon realized that my parents were now making firm plans to leave Russia. Our destination was Harbin, a city in Manchuria (now called Heilongjiang), the northern province of China, two days' journey from Chita on the Chinese Eastern Railway. Harbin had become a regular destination for émigrés from Soviet Russia. The Railway was managed jointly by China and Russia, and the former Russian technical staff had not yet been replaced by the new Soviet personnel. Thousands of Russians, before the Revolution, had settled comfortably in Harbin, many fine schools had been established and a rich cultural life had developed with theatre, symphony orchestra and other fine amenities. It was decided that father and Leo would leave first, to find accommodation and father to explore business and work prospects in Harbin; mother and I would then follow. In retrospect it was a dangerous plan since the Soviet authorities were rapidly shutting down emigration from Russia and there was a real possibility of our family becoming split. About two months after our return from the Crimea, in the early autumn of 1923, father and Leo left Chita for Harbin. Leo was very sad at leaving his dog, a black mongrel called Mishka. Shortly after they left, mother and I moved from our home into a boarding house. Before leaving, father advised uncle Jonah to follow us to Harbin but Jonah, now married, decided to stay. The government allowed him to continue running his shop provided he did not employ any staff.

Farewell to Russia

In January 1924 Lenin, the all-powerful leader of the Soviet Union, died.¹⁶ The whole country was plunged into mourning. In Chita everybody, it seemed, was wearing a black armband. With Lenin's death, the benefits of the N.E.P., his creation, were beginning to disappear, and leaving the country was becoming more difficult by the day. In the boarding house many, like us, were also apparently waiting for exit visas. Mother now began her regular visits to the government department and dealing with rigid, unsympathetic officials in the visa section. Fellow boarders kept telling mother that our chances of leaving the country were extremely small. In spite of the prevailing gloom on the subject of exit permits, there was a great deal of partying at the boarding house, perhaps born of general desperation, or the Russian spirit which finds reasons for having a good time under any circumstances. I stopped going to school and spent time with the children at the boarding house or reading the few books we took with us. There was a little girl of my age at the boarding house with whom I played a curious game. In it we alternately sentenced each other to hard labour and then pardoned. Psychologists would have had a field day trying to understand our minds. Looking back, although I find it a very odd game for children to play, I am certain there was nothing sinister or cruel in our minds, for I recall distinctly that we both experienced pleasure in the pardoning, not the sentencing. Occasionally I went to our old compound on Argunskaya street where the domestic staff, now working for new employers, welcomed me with my favourite meat pies. I would eagerly relate to them a story from one of my favourite books. I recall that on one of my last visits it was *The Last of the Mohicans*.

At the boarding house the residents seemed to be like one, though not always happy, family, and celebrated every successful granting of an exit visa. Then, one late afternoon mother returned from her usual visit to the visa office holding in her hand, and waving triumphantly in the air, her passport, and everyone knew that she had at last the precious exit visas for us. That night there was a big celebration at the boarding house, everyone congratulating mother and wishing us good luck. We left Soviet Russia for Harbin at the end of June 1924. I had just turned eight; we were heading for a new country, new home, and a new life.

16. V. I. Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik party and the supreme head of the Soviet Union, died on 21 January 1924 at the age of fifty-four. The death was regarded as due to a series of strokes possibly aggravated by the injury sustained in an assassination attempt in 1918.

ETON IN CHINA

"That's the reason they're called lessons,"
the Gryphon remarked:
"because they lessen from day to day."

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898), *Alice in Wonderland*

Destination Shanghai

In October of 1932, my brother Leo and I left our home in Harbin, North China, where I had graduated from high school and where I had concurrently attended a music school for three years, studying violin, piano and conducting. I was sixteen, Leo twenty-two. Our destination was Shanghai, on the eastern coast of Central China's Jiangsu (Kiangsu) Province. The circumstances and reasons for our departure are described in my essay "Manchurian Adolescence".

My main, indeed, my sole, purpose of coming to Shanghai was to enroll in an English school where I would learn English and prepare myself for the matriculation examinations for entry to the University of Hong Kong to study medicine.¹ In the summer of 1932, I met Ben who had been a year ahead of me at high school and was then on vacation from Shanghai where he was studying in an English school, the Public and Thomas Hanbury School for Boys, and was preparing for matriculation examinations to the University of Hong Kong. At high school Ben was a brilliant student especially in maths and science. He came from a poor Russian/Jewish family and had obtained a

1. The University of Hong Kong was established in 1911, its medical faculty stemming directly from the Hong Kong College of Medicine founded in 1887. Acknowledged as the foremost bearer of Western culture and science in the Orient, its medical degrees are recognized throughout the British Commonwealth.

scholarship to the University of Hong Kong established by a rich Sephardi Jew with widespread business interests in the Far East. What Ben told me about his school planted an idea in my mind to follow in his path and try to enroll there as well. In the meantime I began to attend English language classes at the YMCA college. Although I had had some English lessons at my high school, I retained little of that, but the YMCA was a different matter. After two months of concentrated and very productive teaching, I made significant progress. By the time I left Harbin for Shanghai, I could communicate and make myself understood in English, even if somewhat hesitantly.

Since by this time my parents were already making tentative plans to emigrate to Argentina, it might seem strange that I was not going with them. I was only sixteen and it would have been natural for me to follow them. Yet I recall no such thoughts: it seemed as if I had already firmly resolved to enter a British university. Even stranger was the fact that my parents voiced no objection to my plan and had accepted my decision, which would very likely take me on a different course in life from the rest of my family. Could it be that, faced with their own uncertain future, they decided to let me pursue my own destiny?

Leo and I travelled by train to Dairen, the southern port of Manchuria, where we embarked on a Japanese passenger ship operating between Dairen and Shanghai, with a short stopover at Tsingtao, a former German possession. The ship journey took two days. The whole of southern Manchuria was under Japanese control since the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, and was now incorporated into the newly created Manchukuo Empire, effectively a Japanese protectorate. Several seaside resorts around Dairen, scrupulously maintained by the Japanese, were very popular with summer holiday-makers from around the region. I recall our sea journey to Shanghai as enjoyable; we found several old friends on board and made some new ones. In Shanghai we were met by uncle David who had arrived in Shanghai a month before us. A room was reserved for Leo and me at a boarding house, run by a Russian family, in the French Concession.

Shanghai

Shanghai was exciting. The size of the city, the traffic comprising vehicles of every possible type, the streets teeming with people, European and Chinese, and the large imposing buildings, some in grand neo-classical style, lining the waterfront — the famous Bund — these were all beyond anything I had imagined. It was a new world opening before my eyes. To understand how a

Chinese city had become a great modern metropolis, one has to look at its history, especially during the preceding one hundred years.

Shanghai means "upon the sea" but in fact it is not. It stands on the banks of the muddy Huangpu River which opens into the mouth of the mighty Jiang (Yangtze) River some twenty kilometres from the East China Sea. Like many Chinese cities, Shanghai has an early history going back many centuries, but its real importance dates from the time it was opened to foreign trade in circumstances particularly humiliating to the Chinese. Britain and China engaged in armed conflict between 1839 and 1842 in what became known as the First Opium War, in which the Chinese, with their antiquated methods of warfare and ineffective weapons, were defeated on land and at sea. This phase of what became a protracted conflict ended with the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing), 1843, by the terms of which China opened to foreign trade the five ports of Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo) and Shanghai, known as the Treaty Ports, where foreigners might reside and trade.² Among the five, Shanghai had a phenomenal rise, growing within the next fifty years into a great commercial centre.

Gradually foreign traders developed small autonomous settlements, usually referred to as Concessions, dominated by the British, American and French, in which they were not subject to Chinese law — a political status usually described as "extraterritoriality". In 1863 the British and American concessions amalgamated into the Shanghai International Settlement, soon to be joined by several other nations. The French remained separate as the French Concession. The International Settlement was managed by the Shanghai Municipal Council which was almost entirely British in character. It was an anomalous situation in which a Chinese city with an overwhelmingly Chinese population was ruled by foreigners subject to their own law. The Municipal Council continued to function until December 1941 when the Japanese occupied Shanghai at the outbreak of the war in the Pacific. It was also effectively the end of the International Settlement and foreign extraterritoriality.

Shanghai, sometimes referred to as the "Paris of the East" because of its exotic nightlife, gambling and racing, as well as its rich cultural life, was certainly a successful enterprise in which foreign expatriates enjoyed a comfortable life and prosperity while the Chinese provided the backbone of the labour force. Behind its exterior of glamour and glitter, however, lay the ugly side of exploitation and poverty. I can do no better than quote Robin

2. By the same treaty Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain as a permanent possession.

Hutcheon: "The Europeans in that city [Shanghai] for the most part lived a detached existence, performing useful services and making big profits. Except for occasional emergencies, however, they were largely untouched by events. Not for them the grinding poverty of the masses who endured the hardship of civil war, unemployment, disease, squalor, crime and later, the all-out Japanese attack on the city. There were two worlds side by side: the world within the international settlement and the world outside. While the foreigners lived a comfortable and largely trouble-free existence, China played out its tragic search for nationhood and national identity."³ Not all the foreigners, however, were rich and happy: there were scores of Russian refugees, mostly stateless, and although some had managed to make a success of their lives, many lived on the edge of poverty. China, with its lax immigration rules, proved a haven to refugees, initially to Russians fleeing from the Revolution since the early 1900s, and later, in the 1930s, to German/Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.

Years later, I sometimes wondered whether, as a young teenager at the time, I was aware of that aspect of Shanghai identity. I was, of course, preoccupied with my immediate problems of learning English and getting admission to a university, but I do recall reflecting upon stories I had heard of the city's opium and vice dens, of child labour, and of the appalling treatment to which the Chinese were subjected in their own city.⁴ I was also aware that many Russian refugees who had settled in Shanghai were poor, earning meagre wages, their daughters working as dance hostesses in cabarets of doubtful reputation. When later I heard the "old China hands" reminiscing nostalgically about the "good old days in Shanghai", I thought their perceptions of that period insensitive and shallow.

After a year's sojourn in Shanghai, I came to dislike its climate. Unlike Chita and Harbin, where I grew up, and where the seasons were well defined, Shanghai, being a coastal city, had a winter which was neither cold nor hot, the rare snowfall soon turned into mud and slush; summers were hot and humid, and the other seasons were not noted for pleasant weather or temperature. Although the city boasted fine buildings in a variety of architectural styles, it had few parks and, in my view, insufficient greenery adorning its streets.

3. *Shanghai Customs* by Robin Hutcheon, p. 4. Galisea Publications, Australia, 2000.

4. It was reputed that initially segregation was enforced on public transport in the International Settlement, but certainly there was no evidence of this during my stay in Shanghai.

It could never be a city of my choice to live in, I thought, but at the time it served my purpose well — to learn English and to prepare for university entrance examinations.

Search for a Guardian

A week after our arrival in Shanghai, Leo and I presented ourselves at the Public and Thomas Hanbury School and said that we wished to enquire about my admission to the School. We were ushered into the headmaster's office. Mr Crow, the headmaster, was a tall handsome middle-aged man with a kindly face. He had recently arrived from England to take over from the previous headmaster who had retired. I explained that I had already graduated from a Russian high school in Harbin, but wished to enroll in his school in order to learn English and to take entry examinations to Hong Kong University. Mr Crow enquired about my residence and family, and it soon became clear that to be admitted into the school I had to have either a parent or a legal guardian who was a ratepayer and of adequate residential record in the International Settlement. Neither my brother nor my uncle had either of these qualifications. It was not merely a matter of fees, but also of responsibility for the health and behaviour of a student. Leo and I were incredibly naïve to have imagined that I should be admitted simply on our word.

Crestfallen we left the school. We had no close friends or relatives in Shanghai; in short, we knew no one in Shanghai who could possibly act as my guardian. The new academic year at the school was due to start in January (1933), only two months away, and I could see no solution to my problem. Coaching by private study was a possibility, but I felt strongly that I needed full-time exposure to the English language and the benefits of a curriculum designed for the matriculation examinations which only an English school could offer. Feeling desperate, I wrote to my parents in Harbin describing my dilemma. In the meantime, uncle David made a useful practical suggestion, unrelated to my immediate concern: he had recently secured a job — leading a small orchestra in a Russian-owned cabaret called "Kavkaz" (Caucasus). Why not join as a second violin in his band and earn a little money while waiting for a solution to my problem? It seemed a sensible idea. Dressed in a hired dinner jacket, I joined his orchestra playing light music during dinner time, from 8 to 10 p.m., after which the place was turned into a dance-hall and I was packed off home. I enjoyed the attention of the young, pretty dance-hostesses who made quite a fuss over a sixteen-year-old lad in the orchestra. The rest of my time was now spent working on my English, mostly with a grammar book and a dictionary, and practising the violin. In November

Leo went back to Harbin. He had gathered the necessary information about starting a business in Shanghai and now wanted to discuss the matter with father. I contacted my friend Ben and one or two other boys whom I had known before, and felt less lonely.

When there seemed to be no solution to my predicament, a letter arrived from mother which offered a ray of hope. Three years ago (1929), she wrote, during a brief holiday with a friend in Dairen spent mostly shopping, a man rushed up to her and said he recognized her. He then revealed himself as the escaped prisoner-of-war whom she had sheltered and then helped on his way in Chita in 1918.⁵ He told mother that when he reached Shanghai, he saw great opportunities there and settled down. A pharmacist by profession, he now had a well-established, successful pharmacy in Shanghai. Professing eternal gratitude, he said that if he could ever repay her the kindness and compassion she had showed him, it would make him very happy. "Find this pharmacist," mother wrote, "and I am sure he will help you." Unfortunately she remembered neither his name nor the name of his pharmacy.

There was no time to lose. I decided to start my search in the popular shopping area of the main artery of the International Settlement — the Bubbling Well Road. The first pharmacy I chose, if I recall correctly, was called "Regal". I entered and asked the girl at the counter if I could see the owner, and added that it was a personal matter. She went inside and a minute or two later a short portly man came out. He looked not unkindly at me with a questioning expression on his face. Not knowing his background, I spoke in English. My opening gambit was first to apologize for disturbing him, then asking whether he was on holiday in Dairen in 1929. Looking surprised, he answered that he was. I could feel my heart beating faster; could I have been so lucky as to find the right man on my first try? He had a similar accent to mine, but I decided to continue in English. "Then you must know my mother, Madam Bard, whom, I believe, you met on that occasion"; I do not know why I called her "Madam" and not "Mrs". Then came surprise and shock. He did not meet anyone by that name and the name was totally unfamiliar to him. I was taken aback. The man looked pleasant, agreeable. Why did he deny it? I muttered some excuse and started for the door, confused and a little angry. Then I heard him call back. He said he suddenly remembered that there was another pharmacist in Dairen that summer ("A summer of pharmacists!" I thought). And then he added: "His pharmacy is two blocks

5. Described in "Siberian Childhood".

away on the opposite side of the street — the Cathay Pharmacy — perhaps he is your man." Then, obviously overcome by curiosity, he asked me what it was all about, and when I explained briefly — the matter of a guardian — he said, "If things do not work out, come back and we will talk about it." This from a total stranger. "There are good people in this world!" I thought.⁶

Things did work out. Inside the Cathay Pharmacy a large corpulent man stood behind the counter. He had a double chin and a very kind benevolent face, which for some strange reason reminded me of Santa Claus. At the first mention of my mother's name he rushed out from behind the counter and nearly knocked me off my feet as he gathered me in a huge bear hug and kept repeating how happy he was to meet me. He was Mr Baruksen. Two days later I was back at school, this time accompanied by Mrs Baruksen who introduced herself as my guardian. Everything was arranged swiftly and efficiently. Mr Crow called a senior master into his office and after a brief discussion with him, informed me that since I had already graduated from a high school, they were placing me into the 6th Form (final year), provisionally for three weeks to find out if I could cope at that level. If not, the 5th Form might be more suitable for me. This both delighted and worried me: delighted because, if I managed to stay in the 6th Form, I should be able to sit for the matriculation examinations in November 1933 (by this time I had found out that the Hong Kong University intended to shift the start of the academic year in 1935 from January to September, which would mean an extra nine months of waiting). Worried, because I had only eleven months to prepare for the examinations in a foreign language.

I now had not only a guardian, but a family where I was welcomed like one of its members. Mr and Mrs Baruksen were warmhearted wonderful people. They had two boys, the younger about my age, but both boys went to a French school. Although both spoke English well enough, the language at home was either Czech or French. The new academic year at school was due to start in January, just three weeks away, and I threw myself into work even harder than before, determined to try to stay in the 6th Form. My friend Ben started school the previous year in the 5th Form and now we would be together in the 6th Form. Just before Christmas I finished my evening work at "Kavkaz" with a small party and was kissed goodbye by the friendly hostesses who professed to be saddened by my departure.

6. I never saw him again. By coincidence he turned out later to be a distant relative of my wife.

Public and Thomas Hanbury School for Boys

Thomas (later Sir Thomas) Hanbury (1832–1907) hailed from a prominent English Quaker family involved in a variety of mercantile and philanthropic activities. As a young man of twenty-one, he set up as a silk merchant in Shanghai and soon built up a prosperous business. He also became an ardent horticulturist and retired in northern Italy, where his gardens at La Mortola became renowned throughout the country.

Less known were Hanbury's efforts in promoting education. Around 1870, a few years after the establishment of the Shanghai Municipal Council, Thomas Hanbury was responsible for establishing a School for Eurasian Children which a few years later received grants from the Council. In 1890 the School was taken over by the Council to become The Public and Thomas Hanbury School for Boys, the first municipal school for the sons of foreign, i.e. non-Chinese, nationals. Located in Hongkew, a northern district of Shanghai, the School was housed in a splendid building with ample grounds and was well equipped. It had a boarders' section, an Officers' Training Corps, the Scouts, and laid strong emphasis on sport. The teachers were mainly from Britain. Over the years the School became increasingly cosmopolitan, but in all other respects was a typical English public school.

As is generally known, the so-called public schools in England are in fact private, fee-paying, independent schools. Some like Eton and Harrow have become famous as the breeding grounds of England's statesmen and leaders. There is little doubt that the Public and Thomas Hanbury School, far removed from its home soil, strove to emulate what was best in a typical English public school.

Back at School

In the first week of January 1933 I became a schoolboy again. It felt strange. Only six months before I had finished high school in Harbin. I was happy. I thought I was through with school. We celebrated, threw our school caps in the air. And there I was — back at school, sitting behind a desk. Unlike my first day at school in Harbin, I do not remember what happened on the first day at this school. During the first few days I observed my classmates, as they surely must have observed me — the new boy. They were a polyglot bunch, among them an Italian, a Spaniard, a Greek, a Latvian, two Chinese (both American subjects), a Japanese, a German, several Sephardi Jews, a few English and Scottish boys; some, I discovered later, were Eurasian. All spoke one common language — English, in which they seemed completely fluent. They were mostly friendly and within days I began to feel at home.

Not surprisingly I found many features of the school strange and very different from my old Russian school in Harbin. Classes started at 8.30 a.m. with a parade on the school ground commanded by the school captain — the most senior boy in the school. We then marched into our respective classes. Relations with teachers were strict and formal, unlike the liberal, mature atmosphere in Harbin. The boys called each other by surnames, which I found very odd. The system of prefects was altogether abhorrent to me, while punishment such as caning, or slapping hands with a ruler, seemed to me outlandish, cruel and primitive. It must be added, however, that Mr Crow, the newly appointed headmaster, had abolished caning for 6th formers, at the same time making uniforms for 6th formers optional. There were also many positive features of the school which I liked: the variety of activities offered, the excellent laboratories which made science so interesting, and the strong emphasis on sport. The School was divided into four Houses: Clare, Hertford, Lincoln and Pembroke, which encouraged a healthy competition within the School in areas such as chess, debate and sports. In spite of the unfamiliar features of the English school system and its more authoritarian rules than the ones I had previously experienced, I found myself liking my new school more and more. Was it, I wondered, that at some stage in our life we all like a certain amount of strict discipline over us? What was certain is that I was gradually embracing this atmosphere and liking it.

I was in the 6th Form on probation and I became worried when a test in geometry was announced just three days after I had started school. The subject was still fresh in my mind from my high school in Harbin, but I had no idea how the solutions were presented in English. My friend Ben, who was now in the same class with me, came to my rescue: he spent an hour with me explaining the format of a theorem solution used in an English school. I passed the test, but my status in the 6th Form was still in doubt, as two weeks later the class was given an essay to write. I struggled hard over my essay, but I knew that I was not yet good enough for this task. When Mr Rood, the English master, handed back the corrected essays, I did not receive mine, but was told to see him after the class. Dear, kind Mr Rood informed me gently that my essay was uncorrectable and that he would give me extra coaching after school during the next two or three weeks. He did not report me to the headmaster and to my great relief I was allowed to continue in the 6th Form. The extra coaching bore fruit, as two months later my first corrected essay earned me five marks out of ten.

Living on My Own

I continued to live in my rented room on Rue Bourgeat, in a dreary part of the French Concession. I remember nothing of my landlord, or was it a landlady? I hardly ever saw them. But I do remember lonely dinners at a nearby restaurant, and the long evenings spent alone in my room studying. If my social life was limited, it was not entirely absent. I visited my guardians regularly; the Baruksen boys sometimes took me to the YMCA for a swim in an indoor pool. Ben remained a close friend and I also made several good friends among my classmates, who invited me to their homes. On Sundays I sometimes went to Jessfield Park, in the western part of the International Settlement, to look at the beautiful display of flowers or simply sit on a bench with a book.

Of course, I saw my uncle David, though not as frequently as I would have liked. He was still working in the "Kavkaz" cabaret, but found time occasionally to supervise my violin practice. Then, just before the summer of 1933, by a stroke of luck, he obtained a position in a viola section of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra — a steady, well-paid job with regular hours of rehearsals and concerts — and so much more preferable to playing in a cabaret. After starting his new job, once or twice a month he would take me to a concert, through the stage door, and I was able to hear some of the greatest musicians in the world who came to perform with the Orchestra. I missed playing in a full symphony orchestra and recalled nostalgically my two summer seasons with the Harbin Symphony Orchestra.⁷ Leo was still in Harbin and I missed him very much.

The School

My lodgings were a good six or seven miles from the school. I had my bicycle sent from Harbin and rode to school, skilfully threading my way through the heavy morning traffic of rickshaws, cars, trolley buses and trams. The lunch break at the School was from 12 to 2. I usually spent it either in the school library or in the cafeteria opposite the school, where usually the same bunch of boys from the School would gather. The cafeteria was owned by a short and very fat Greek of genial disposition, who was passionately fond of opera. He did not mind us spending much time but little money at his establishment; I think he rather liked our company. The gramophone was continuously playing records of famous singers. Galli-Curci and Gigli were his special favourites. The atmosphere was pleasant. We ate our sandwiches and sometimes did our

7. Described in "Manchurian Adolescence."

homework, while listening to the marvellous arias, often accompanied by the gentle humming of our Greek host. I must confess that in my previous musical education I paid little attention to voice, and those midday breaks at the cafeteria, with operatic accompaniment, awakened in me a taste for singing which eventually developed into a deep admiration of voice as a great musical instrument. Classes resumed in the afternoon at 2 p.m. and went till 4 p.m. Wednesdays were half-days, while Saturdays were devoted mainly to sport.

My progress at school, I felt, was satisfactory. I had no problems with maths and science. My essays were improving and within six months I was getting 7 and 8, and once, a triumph, received 9; no one in my class, as far as I know, ever gained 10. But English literature was still difficult, especially since my vocabulary was far from adequate. On one occasion, during an English class, I stood up and asked "What is a beetle?" The whole class erupted into laughter, to my intense embarrassment. Mr Rood raised his hand and the class became quiet. He calmly explained what "a beetle" was. After this episode, I resolved never again to reveal openly my lexicographic deficiency. If I encountered an unfamiliar word, the simple and obvious course was to look it up in a dictionary. We were studying Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In spite of the difficulties encountered, I enjoyed the rich language which was a revelation to me. I knew about Shakespeare from my Russian school, and it was exciting to be reading his work in the original.

I was adjusting well to the School's system, accepting features of the school which were initially so foreign to me, and enjoying the class atmosphere and the new friendships, the fine facilities of the school and especially the multiple sporting activities. There was one feature, however, I could not come to terms with — the prefect system. As a result, a confrontation was inevitable. It came one day when I was making my way to the library. I was stopped by a prefect, a Japanese boy from my class called Doi, in a corridor which was apparently out of bounds to pupils at that particular time. He promptly ordered me to write five hundred lines "I must not, etc". Politely but firmly I refused, saying that I had no way of reaching the library except through this corridor, and that anyway I had no time for writing such nonsense. The same afternoon I was brought before the headmaster. Mr Crow, a sympathetic man with a reputation for fairness and progressive ideas, listened to me but declared that the authority of a prefect must be observed. I then suggested a compromise: I would write five hundred lines from our set book *Macbeth*. Doi agreed, Mr Crow approved, and the matter was settled. As far as I know, my tactic did not create a precedent.

Sports, Games and Music

Saturday was sports day and I enjoyed and participated in games and athletics, though with little success. At rugby, I was probably the only player who never learned the rules, and I recall one game in which I ran a lot, was in a scrum every few minutes it seemed, but never had a ball passed to me. Mr Tingle, our sports master, was an Australian, short and strongly built. He used to be a lightweight boxing champion. His nose was flat and slightly crooked, no doubt from countless boxing bouts. He tried to impart to me the intricacies of cricket, but without success; I could not see the purpose of so many ways of hitting or stopping the ball. In Harbin I played, and was good at, a Russian bat and ball game, a fast game which resembled baseball more than it did cricket, but I found the latter too slow and uninteresting.⁸ I had some talent for long-distance running and basketball, but my only real achievement in school sports was in tennis. I was elected captain of the Pembroke House tennis team and we won the inter-house competition. On one occasion when I arrived at school I was informed by Mr Tingle that I was to run a cross-country race. Surprised, since it was not Saturday, I was not allowed to refuse. It was still cold, in March I think, and the ground very slushy. It was not an enjoyable run, but I managed to place twelfth out of more than forty runners, which was not bad at all.

The music master, Mr Kane, was a strict, somewhat unpredictable and generally feared man. He was, however, pleasantly disposed to me after he discovered that my violin playing and general knowledge of music was far in advance of the other boys. At the same time, I discovered to my delight that the Italian boy in my class called Puppo, a member of my tennis team, also played the violin; his father was a professional violinist and the principal of the second violins in the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra. Moreover, we both could play the piano. Thereupon Puppo and I devised a musical number which delighted Mr Kane immensely. Puppo and I would come out on stage, myself carrying the violin. We would perform a couple of pieces with myself on the violin and Puppo accompanying me on the piano. We would then retire and reappear on the stage, this time Puppo with the violin and I at the piano. This would usually bring the house down. So popular was this that Mr Kane took us to several schools to perform this act. Puppo and I also played in the school's small band, which, however, was of poor quality.

8. After the war Mr Tingle turned up in Hong Kong where he opened a private sports school teaching young children a whole range of sporting activities. My children went to him for training, thus becoming his second generation pupils.

Summer Vacations

July and August brought the long summer vacations. Ben and I went back to Harbin, travelling from Dairen to Harbin on a goods train to save money. I arrived home unannounced and unexpected, just for the lark of it I think, and it was something to see the expression of utter surprise on mother's face when she opened the door. It was wonderful to see my family again, to be surrounded by the familiar loving faces. Having spoken very little Russian in the preceding months, I found it a little strange to revert to it now. I brought with me my Shakespeare and Milton and read parts of them every day. When I was invited to play tennis with some English staff members of the Harbin branch of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, I was surprised to find that I lapsed back into English quickly and easily.

Some of my old friends were still around and with them I again enjoyed some of Harbin's summer pleasures – swimming and canoeing on the river. I was also in time to attend my old school's Graduates' Ball to which all alumni were invited. It was a most enjoyable occasion. It was exciting to see the familiar classrooms, to feel again the old atmosphere. How different it was, I reflected, from my English school.

By 1932 conditions in Harbin were deteriorating, and many people were leaving. The city was slowly dying. Father was trying to liquidate his share in the optical business, while Leo was making plans to return to Shanghai to open one. Father and mother were still waiting for entry visas to Argentina which was proving more difficult than originally envisaged. In the autumn of 1935, after my last summer visit home, my parents left Harbin for permanent settlement in Buenos Aires. Amid the changing fortunes and turbulent events around us, they had given my brother and me a loving, happy home during the vital formative years of our childhood and adolescence. From the age of sixteen I no longer shared with them a home, a city or a country, going along a separate path of my own, but the memory of that happy childhood has remained fresh in my mind. The family link was never severed nor ever grew weak.

Examinations

When Ben and I returned to Shanghai, we decided to live together, which was both economical and convenient as we were preparing for the same examinations. We rented two rooms, a shared bedroom and a study, with a nice, friendly family in whose company we sometimes spent the evening, and who, by the way, had a very pretty young daughter. It is interesting to recall that by this time Ben and I no longer used Russian, our mother tongue, but spoke to each other in English.

Most of the boys in my class were preparing for the Cambridge Senior (C.S.) examinations to be held in December. The C.S. was equivalent to the present-day High School Certificate. A few were sitting for the London matriculation.⁹ By the middle of the academic year, Ben and I had to make a choice of subjects to sit for the Hong Kong University (HKU) matriculation. The requirement was a pass in at least five subjects, with Maths and English compulsory. For me, as an entrant to the medical faculty, a second modern language was also required; I naturally chose Russian. The other subjects I chose were chemistry, physics, trigonometry, history and art.¹⁰ Hong Kong matriculation examinations were regarded as tough: the pass mark was 50% compared with 33% in the C.S. Maths and science were regarded as more difficult than the C.S., but English was fortunately easier, only one set book required instead of three for the C.S. It was then that we discovered that the HKU matriculation set book for that year was Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. It was clearly unrealistic for the school to prepare its only two candidates, Ben and I, in *Julius Caesar* while its own set book was *Macbeth*. A letter was dispatched to HKU requesting it to set for us specially papers on *Macbeth*, and a prompt reply was received agreeing to this. During the classes which we were not taking, such as geography and French, we were allowed to leave the classroom and study in the library.

As the date of our examinations approached Ben and I worked harder and harder. It was crucial for us to pass. In Ben's case, who was embarking on a three-year engineering course, there was a scholarship at stake. I, although still only seventeen, was facing a six-year-long medical course. We sat for our Hong Kong University matriculation in November 1933. The examinations took place in a Chinese school, I do not recall its name. We were slightly apprehensive when opening our English Literature papers: did HKU remember to set the paper on *Macbeth*? They did. All was well. The results did not reach us until five weeks later. We passed. There was a hitch with our visas to Hong Kong (described in my essay "Mr Healey"), so that we were three weeks late for the start of the academic year in Hong Kong.

I left the School in December 1933. Although I was keen to get on with the next phase of my life, I could not help feeling a little sad. In just one year, I developed a strong affection for the School. The teachers were kind

9. I believe five credits in the Cambridge Senior gained a student the London matriculation.

10. Because maths consisted of arithmetic, algebra and geometry, trigonometry counted as an extra subject.

and helpful, and I made many friends among my classmates with whom I stayed in touch for many years. At the end-of-the-year ceremony I received a school leaving certificate and a handsome inscribed volume of Shakespeare as a prize. I still have it.

The Public and Thomas Hanbury School for Boys no longer exists. In December 1941, on Japan's entry into the war, the Japanese occupied the International Settlement, the Shanghai Municipal Council was abolished, never to be restored, and the School was closed. I know that the few of us, the old boys of the School, who may still be alive today, cherish the memory of this splendid school.

Postscript

What of my old classmates, the 6th formers of 1933? There have been no class reunions to keep us in touch. With the end of Shanghai we knew, most of us, I suspect, have scattered over many lands and continents. I know what befell some, can speculate about a few, and know nothing of the rest. Willis (Canadian) stayed two more years in the 6th Form just to become school captain. He appeared in Hong Kong after the war as the Canadian medical examiner for prospective migrants to Canada; we resumed our friendship until his return to Canada some years later. Baker, Knox and McCormick were with me in the battle of Hong Kong in December 1941; McCormick was killed. Baker and I both later migrated to Australia where we kept up our friendship until his death a few years ago. Drake joined the RAF and was killed in the battle of Britain. Thompson, I heard, was killed in North Africa fighting the Germans. I sometimes wonder if Ohrenberger, Doi, and Puppo went back to Germany, Japan and Italy (the Axis), respectively, and fought on the opposite side to us. Wolnizer settled down in New Zealand and died there. Moore qualified in England as an aeronautical engineer. Lipkowsky built up a successful business but died when only in his fifties of a heart attack in the Philippines. Litvin (my friend Ben) had a very successful career in South America as an inventor and businessman, and retired in Israel; we stayed in touch sporadically.

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