

RENA KRASNO

# ONCE UPON A TIME IN SHANGHAI

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A Jewish Woman's Journey through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century China



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the 20<sup>th</sup> Century China**

**Rena Krasno**



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Author: Rena Krasno

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***To Tess Johnston, Deke Ehr and all who love Shanghai.***

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## *Preface*

**I**n the spring of 1989, I met Rena Krasno in California, USA. Rena was very excited to see me, the guy from Shanghai. She asked me many questions about the city's changes and development. Her love for China and Shanghai moved me, especially when she said, "I really want to go back to my hometown—Shanghai, which I have left for 40 years."

In 1994, I got the chance to help Rena return to Shanghai. At that time, with the support of the Shanghai government, we decided to host the first international academic conference with the theme of "Jews in Shanghai". As a member of the conference's organizing committee, I suggested inviting Rena to attend and deliver a speech at the conference.

She recorded her feelings about revisiting Shanghai at the end of this book. She said that she could not express in words how excited she was upon receiving that invitation. She was trembling as the plane descended for landing. As soon as she set foot on Shanghai soil, she felt she had returned home. Rena delivered a wonderful speech at the conference. She said, her nationality aside, Shanghai was her hometown, because she was born and raised in the city. How touching is that?

In those days, Rena had been immersed in her memories and recollections. She walked along Huaihai Road (formerly Avenue Joffre) for a long time and never got tired. She revisited Aurora University (Shanghai Second Medical University in 1994) and College Municipal Français (currently Shanghai Science Hall), where had studied. She spent a lot of time in the city's old district and tasted many local snacks, such as bannock, twisted crullers and roasted sweet potatoes. Sometimes, she just sat and watched Shanghai people going about their time, living their lives. She also visited the Tower Apt. (Xiangyang South Road Junction, Huaihai Middle Road) where she

was brought up. There, she recalled her parents' love for her again in her "boudoir".

She has visited the city many times since then. I can't remember how many visits she has made to Shanghai, which she called "the city of youth". I am her loyal companion during her visits. Every time, we look around the city and discuss the changes it has undergone. She will tell the graduates in the institute many stories. I will meet her when I visit Mountain View, California. I have forgotten how many times we have sat together for a long talk, without regard for passing time.

Rena is one of the Shanghai people who can't speak the local dialect. The history of Shanghai shows that it has always been an open city. People could come and go freely —sometimes, even without passports and visas. Industrialists started their businesses in Shanghai, refugees found safe haven in Shanghai, and adventurers discovered "paradise" in Shanghai. Different languages, custom, beliefs and people from all races assemble in the city. As the intersection of cultural integration, the city has become an international metropolis. Shanghai culture has developed under such circumstances. It integrates different cultures of China and other countries, and is characterized by openness and internationalism.

Rena was born in a Jewish family and brought up in Shanghai culture. It can be said that she has an integrated Chinese and Jewish cultural background. She had stayed in Israel for some time, and then worked in the United Nations for many years. She can speak six languages and has travelled many places around the world. At last, she decided to settle down in the USA.

Rena's experience reflects the competition and complementation of multiculturalism, which is developed by adopting a multitude of approaches to life rather than a single one. It's like a long river with many tributaries. Each tributary is distinctive, but they will join together at the mouth to the sea. Such experiences make Rena's works rich and varied. They have the characteristics of different cultures, with the essence of Shanghai culture welling up from deep inside.

Although the stories of Rena took place in old Shanghai, she still feels very excited about the change and development of modern Shanghai.

Thirty years ago, China started to carry out the reform and opening



policies. It opened up to the world and began to boom. Under such circumstances, the openness and internationalism of Shanghai culture was highlighted and brought to new heights. That is why there are so many people from other parts of China and other countries in Shanghai today. Figures from 2002 indicate that 2.1 million foreigners came to Shanghai and stayed here for a certain period that year. It is predicted that 70 million people will visit the city by 2010, when the Shanghai World Expo is slated to run. It is said that Shanghai now has more than 150,000 foreigners, nearly equal to the peak number in the 1930s.

These people from other areas of China and other countries have become the “new Shanghai people”. The cultures they bring to Shanghai make Shanghai culture more attractive and have become the new landmarks of the city's development.

Meanwhile, many Chinese people, especially those from Shanghai, have gone abroad for business, education or travel. This drives Shanghai's cultural development, making the city more influential in the world.

All of these factors provide new elements for Rena's books and encourage her to write more excellent works.

As a good friend of Rena, I am so proud of her for having written so many excellent works. She is now over 80 years old. But she told me she had another four books to be published later. I know they must contain many stories about Shanghai.

I truly hope Rena will be able to keep her youth forever and write more stories about Shanghai.

**Pan Guang**

Prof. & Dean, Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai (CJSS) at SASS

November 6, 2008



*From you have I been absent in the spring,  
When proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim,  
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,  
That heavy Saturn laughed and leaped with him.*

William Shakespeare



## Chapter 1

# BEGINNINGS

I was born in Shanghai in December 1923 and left the city of my birth in 1949.

When I was young, Great Britain was the greatest foreign power in China. It had initiated the Opium War and defeated the Chinese who possessed neither modern warships nor armor. Until then, trade between England and China was one-sided. Great Britain imported silk, spices, objects of art in great quantities, but China was not interested in buying anything from Europe. The result: British ships sailed to China loaded with bricks for ballast, and returned packed with Chinese merchandise. These red bricks were eventually used to build the British Consulate in Shanghai.

The *Treaty of Nanking* in 1842 awarded the victor the status of "Most Favored Nation." Five Treaty ports were created: Shanghai, Foochow (Fuzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Canton (Guangzhou), and Ningpo (Ningbo). As time went by, the number of Treaty ports in China reached 80. The U.S. and France followed shortly after with bullying tactics and forced the Chinese to give them advantages similar to those of the British. In the concessions, each country established its own courts of justice, its own schools, its own police force, army, hospitals and clubs. Thus, Shanghai was divided into three: the International Settlement (British and American), the French Concession and the Chinese City.

Shanghai became open to all foreign imports, including high grade Bengal opium. Profits were immense.

My parents were Stateless Russian Jews. My mother had arrived from



Author with her mother and little sister, 1926. This is the photo for their identity card.

Siberia as a small child of 8 in 1912 with her parents and five siblings, to escape from cruel pogroms. Shortly after their arrival in the midst of a cholera epidemic, my grandfather came across a desperately ill Chinese man on the street, put him in a rickshaw and took him to the nearest hospital. The old man survived his cholera attack, but my grandfather—still a young man in his 40's—contracted the disease and died several days later. My grandmother, Ekaterina Abramovna, who knew no English and had no skills, started cooking cheap meals for poverty stricken Russian Jewish refugees. That is how my father eventually met my mother when having lunch at my future grandmother's home. They got married in 1921.

Ekaterina Abramovna who had got married when she was only 15 years old and her husband 15½, had had no education. Her ambition was for her sons to graduate universities in the United States. Her daughters had to start working early. When my mother Aida was small she was sent to a Catholic boarding school near the Bund. When I was little, she loved to tell me a true story about a "dragon."

One day, when my mother was about 9 years old, her classmates and she heard a big racket outside on the street: shouting, clanging of metal on metal, policeman's whistles and the loud ringing of a fire engine. In spite of the teacher's efforts to keep them quiet, they all rushed to the windows. A green alligator was ambling along the street followed by groups of noisy Chinese banging on saucepans of all sizes. Some pointed to it shouting "Dragon! Dragon!" A frightened policeman was frantically trying to regulate the traffic and a red fire engine was attempting to weave through the crowd.

It appeared that the alligator had crawled unseen into one of the opium crates as it was being packed for shipment to Shanghai. Then, when the case was broken open upon arrival, the alligator scrambled out and calmly went on its way. I was later told that "the dragon" was eventually stuffed and displayed in one of Shanghai's museums.

My mother started working as a typist when she was 13. She was very energetic, optimistic, hard-working and kind-hearted.

My father arrived in Shanghai at the age of 21 from Vladivostok, Siberia, on his way to Palestine. He was a Zionist strongly believing that Jews who were persecuted throughout the world had to have their own country. Unfortunately, he suffered an appendicitis attack in Shanghai, had to be operated and could not continue his trip. Like many other Russian Jewish refugees, he was penniless.

As far back as I could remember, I adored my father, David Rabinovich. He was a poet, a writer, a life-long idealist. When he got stuck in Shanghai, he learned English as quickly as possible. To survive, he gave Russian lessons to group Chinese students for a small fee. One day, one of his students, asked my father if he would be interested to meet Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) whom my father greatly admired. If so, her prominent uncle could set up an appointment for him. Of course, my father was delighted. When Dr. Sun approached him in the living room of his home where many Chinese were waiting to speak to him, my father stammered nervously his sympathy and respect for the national movement in China, and mentioned that he was a Jew. Dr. Sun responded that he had long admired the perseverance and courage of the Jewish people during centuries of persecution.

When my father had become a respected Jewish leader in Shanghai, he met General Ma, Sun Yat-sen's famous bodyguard. General Ma was born Morris



Editorial staff of *Our Life*, 1941. Author's father, David B. Rabinovich on the left.

Cohen. Later he earned the nickname 2-Gun Cohen because of the two pistols he always carried quite visibly. Cohen was the son of a poor London synagogue warden. His parents could not control him as a rebellious youth and sent him to Canada to a farm, which he quickly left. Soon he met Chinese revolutionaries who introduced him to Dr. Sun Yat-sen to whom Cohen became very attached and whom he served with the utmost loyalty. When Sun Yat-sen came to power he made 2-Gun a General, General Ma. During World-War II, Cohen went to Hong Kong to rescue Sun Yat-sen's wife who had established the China Defence League there. The Japanese arrested him and sent him to a concentration camp, which he managed to survive. 2-Gun often said:

"I only cried twice in my life. Once when my father died and when Dr. Sun Yat-sen died!"

The British had separate Girls' Schools and Boys' Schools. Public School girls wore white blouses and dark blue tunics. Purple was the elegant color of the Cathedral School. Sports were encouraged. To graduate High School, students had to pass the Cambridge Matriculation Examination.

British companies wrote "marriage" rules into contracts with bachelor

employees. They had to agree to serve the company 3, 5 or even 7 years before getting married. Then their boss would usually interview the young lady and decide if she would make a suitable wife. If the woman was Chinese, or mixed blood, usually no marriage permission was given. In some cases, the young man would be sent back to England, or transferred to a distant outpost to separate him from his beloved.

British citizens organized parades and celebrations on the King's birthday—first, Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, then her father ruled England. Races using swift Mongolian ponies were very popular, as were paper hunts, cricket and soccer. To satisfy cultural needs, the British founded the S.A.D.S.—the Shanghai Amateur Dramatic Society—whose performances were of a remarkably high standard. Opening nights at the attractive Lyceum Theatre (which still exists today) were important social events. Theatregoers turned up formally dressed and the ambience was one of excited anticipation. Seldom was the audience disappointed.

The British referred to Shanghai as the “Muddy Flats.” The Whangpoo (Huangpu) River embankment had not been reinforced as yet. Later, the river bank was consolidated in a process called “bundling.” This is where the name of the large avenue along the river, the famous Bund, originates. Later, when magnificent high-rise buildings were planned along the Bund, a British company, Dodwell & Co., where my father was employed, imported enormous tree trunks from the U.S. to reinforce their foundations.

In the late 1850's, the U.S. leased land north of the British areas. The United States never took over formally this land but later combined it with British owned land to form the International Settlement.

Like the British, the Americans in Shanghai had their own court of justice, their own church, their own school and their own clubs. The U.S. 4<sup>th</sup> Marines, many of whom later lost their lives when the Pacific War started, were stationed in Shanghai.

The Americans opened the first foreign school for Chinese girls in Shanghai in 1892, the McTyeire School. Its aim: to teach the best of both Eastern and Western culture. Its headmistress, Laura Askew Haywood, promised parents that their daughters would be safe in her school since “no man would be allowed beyond its gate.”

Later, the Shanghai American School was established. During the Japanese

occupation of Shanghai, the American School building on Avenue Petain (Beidang Lu today) became the headquarters of the feared Japanese Kempetai (military police).

In 1848, when Monsieur de Montigny, the first French Consul, arrived in Shanghai, the entire population of the French colony was only 87.

The largest French company was Olivier-Chine, which had huge godowns (warehouses) and workshops employing 300 Chinese. The job of the Chinese was, amazingly, to crack eggs using the yolks to soften leather sold locally and the whites to export for nougat manufacture in Southwest France. It is said the average coolie broke 2,200 eggs a day and the expert men as many as 4,200!

Felix Bouvier was called the “Uncrowned French King of Shanghai.” He built the Canidrome (today the site of a flower market) where dog races were held. The inauguration of the Canidrome took place in 1928. A frenzied crowd of 50,000 attended. In addition to the Canidrome, Bouvier constructed the Hai Alai (Jai Alai in Spanish, a Basque gambling sport) auditorium. Gamblers made or lost huge fortunes in both enterprises.

Like the British and the Americans, the French had their own courts of justice, their own troops (mainly Indochinese), their own police (which included White Russians) and their own tax system. The biggest holiday in the French Concession took place on July 14<sup>th</sup>, Bastille Day, which had marked the start of the French Revolution. French flags fluttered in the streets, the French army band marched down Avenue Joffre (Huaihai Lu today), the Concession’s main street, loudly playing the Marseillaise. Schools, offices and banks were closed. Celebrations took place in the art-deco-style French Club (today part of the Garden Hotel).

Sometimes problems arose between the Great Powers in Shanghai; one such was the question of the ricksha. It appears that the ricksha originated in Japan when a U.S. missionary in Yokohama—a certain Rev. Globe—had a baby carriage converted for his invalid wife in 1869 and thus produced a prototype of the ricksha, called by the Japanese *jinrikisha*. The word derives from the Japanese: *jin* meaning power, *riki* meaning man, and *sha* meaning vehicle. Not to be outdone, the French declared that it was a Frenchman named Menard who introduced the ricksha when he came to Shanghai in 1873 from Japan.





A rickshaw coolie waiting for customer, 1940.

Menard had submitted to the French Municipal Council “a project for the establishment of a service of small hand carts for passenger traffic in the Concessions,” demanding a 10-year monopoly for himself. Sensing the prospect of high profits, the French Municipal Council welcomed the introduction of rickshas, but would not accede to Menard’s wish for sole