# AJEWISH PIANO SHANGHAI LOVE

Bei Za

# A JEWISH PIANO Rei La

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#### A Jewish Piano

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This book is respectfully dedicated to my Dear Mother and my mother river — the Huangpu River.

Beila

## **Preface**

# A PAIR OF HOLY HANDS WHICH PLAYED "A JEWISH PIANO"

#### An Bo-Shun

After hatching the plan to publish "Wolf Totem", until the appearance of "The Jewish Piano" in front of me, I have not read again any good literary book which could give me such a strong spiritual shaking and strength.

After reading the book, the my eyes were filled with tears, and I was extremely excited. Being a publisher and senior literature editor for a few decades, who almost everyday reads manuscripts and books, I may say without any exaggeration that from among the contemporary pure literary works which I have read, I can find a few extremely outstanding books, but there has never been appeared a masterpiece which moves people's hearts, which is regarded as great and which can dialogue with the world literature. A pair of those holy hands which played "A Jewish Piano" has already played a musical chapter which has moved people's hearts strings to the highest degree in China's contemporary literary books.

This is a musical and religious song which is unparalleled in this century. There reappeared the miserable fate of the Jewish people in Shanghai during the Second World War. This is also a breath-taking national picture which has cut out a huge scene of tolerance and universal love among different races. Even more, this is a great tragic love epic which surges forward with tremendous momentum which has depicted love symphony of a Poland's pianist and his passionate lover. This is a creation of the overseas romantic writer Beila's quiet concentrated mind which took three years. This novel is a contribution to her hometown Shanghai and it has moved the world and surprised the people in the

same way.

We often say that God is with us. But in reality, when any country, any nationality or any individual faces disaster, disease, war, and sorrow; God is often absent, or we can say that He is not present at the time and compels human beings to suffer alone from sorrows and injustice. At that time, what can we do? What should we do so that the human beings continue to live with dignity? This book's story has given us an answer: Only by learning tolerance and love, we can live through chaotic time.

Talented pianist Adam is a depressed Jewish youth. If there were no exclusion of the Jewish people by the Nazis, he would not have escaped to Leningrad. If she had a harmonious family, Li Mei, who was orphaned from the Red Army in Russia, would not have met Adam on the eve or war between Russia and Germany. They were like clouds floating in different cities. They did not have any omen, so in the sanctuary of music they silently fell in love. Together they composed the "# 8 Romantic tune in descending D major".

One of them had a passion for remembering and comparing the wide fields of his motherland, the other had enormous soft feelings for classical China in her bones. They yearn for love as two free birds, two clouds embracing each other, two trees with branches meeting together and two blades of grass entangled with each other. Nevertheless, when the German army launched a plan of Barbossa War, the Jewish people in exile had to find home again. Almost every country in the world had closed the doors to the Jewish people. At this time, the Shanghai of China was the legend of "Noah's Ark" to the Jewish people which made Adam and Li Mei escaped to the Far East at the same time. After reaching Shanghai, Adam and a big group of Jewish people were first admitted to a refugee camp, later they were taken to the "segregated district" of the lewish people in Hongkou which was the same type of concentration camp occupied by the Japanese army. Because Li Mei was an orphan from the Red Army, she was at once admitted into an anti-Japanese base of Northern Jiangsu's New Fourth Army. The war led their love to look far into the distance and they could just bid farewell to each other. They prayed to God. The awkward thing was that Li Mei gave birth to a mixed blood baby in the base of New Fourth Army; therefore, happiness was

rippled in misery. The conflict among races, cultures, religions, and love were unfolded at the same time in the seized area of Shanghai and the base of Northern Jiangsu.

That was a difficult era of bizarre thoughts which gave rise to miserable life that is difficult for modern man to imagine.

While facing war, killings, hunger, and diseases, Jewish people, who earnestly believed in God, who had the agreement of Ten Prohibitions with God, a small number of them joined anti-war movement, a big number of them fell into waiting unlimited loss by God. But the Chinese people, who were struggling in miseries like them, opened their hearts and accepted them. In the eyes of Chinese people, these Jewish people with blue eyes and golden hair were superior to them. To them, they were foreigners.

These foreigners, Jewish people, who were superior to them, were facing miseries as well, as if they were princes and princesses who had fallen into difficulties. They especially made people sympathize with them. Moreover, in Chinese culture there had never been inheritance of racial discrimination; therefore, the disappointed Jewish people received the risky aid from the people of Shanghai. They used various methods to smuggle food and medicines to them. In this way, so many Jewish people maintained their lives. Li Mei was the planner and executor of this risky aid plan. Adam and his community group expressed gratitude. On July 7th, 1945, when Allied Forces bombarded Japanese troops warehouse and radio station, they also bombarded Hongkou's segregated district of the Jewish people and the Chine refugees' area. A big fire burned down the wall between the segregated Jewish people and the Shanghai refugees; therefore, in the end, people of both races were brought together. In the flames and debris of ten miles long street, people rushed to save other people. A sad song of this century was performed, which moved several generations.

When Sino-Japanese War ended, internal war started. Adam and Li Mei again missed the time and location of their meeting. New China was formed. Due to various mistakes and political reasons, Adam and Li Mei remained away from each other. Many times they lost the opportunity to be near to each other. Only the music of their sincere love was spreading boundless ideas and guarding. They were silently waiting to meet each

other in heaven.

This work is unfolded by surrounding the story of a black piano which was made in New York in 1858. This piano, which was taken overseas to New Zealand from America, was later transferred into the hands of a Jewish pianist, Adam Yitzchaki from Poland who was wandering in Russia. After that, the piano wandered about to Shanghai with its owner. Each female owner of this piano including Li Mei in this book, because they missed the letters inserted in the piano plank by their lovers, experienced a big love tragedy in their lives.

In this novel, besides this miserable "cursed piano", there is one more clear point, that is a button which is made with pure gold and which is a symbol of the brightness of love and belief. In the era of (fleeing), the Jewish people were habitual to make clothes buttons or shoe nails with gold. They used to paint colours on them. In the time of need, they would take one button and get it exchanged for cash. Adam gave his last button to his baby who was in swaddling clothes. Later, this gold button became a bright light for Adam's next generation to find a spiritual home. He wandered about on the sea for nearly one month on a cargo ship which started off from the Mediterranean. When it was about to reach New York, which is on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, he was breathing scarcely in the dark hold of the ship. He was tightly holding this gold button in his hand. He exerted his whole strength to bring it in front of his eyes. In its shine, it was as if he saw his father Adam walking towards him.

The miseries of war, poetic thinking, holy belief, the strength of tragedy, the glory of human nature, the penetrating force of artistic imagination, romantic emotions of nihilistic parting forever; all these elements are deeply immersed in this work; therefore, they have reached a common spiritual surface of mankind to create resonance sympathy with the readers of the whole earth and to dialogue with the world literature. This is a classical writing's model of globalization and humanization. In the bones of human beings there are traditional emotions of romanticism. This is mankind's great pain and great love. This belongs to the glorious history of Shanghai and memories of the Jewish people's miseries. Even more, it belongs to the world. A few scholars, who have read the manuscript of this book, have agreed with my viewpoint without prior

consultation that is "A Jewish Piano" is the only fine masterpiece in Chinese contemporary literature which is on par with European and American literature. My saving will perhaps arise debate, but we may let the time and the facts prove it. Like four years before, Ph. D students' guide Professor Wang Ning of Tsinghua University Foreign Language Department said these words while evaluating "9. 11 Celestial Wedding" — "Almost there is not any contemporary Chinese writer like Beila who can be intensely concerned about mankind's common calamities like this; moreover, who can give this kind of deep discern and exposure to man's psychological world. She belongs to the new generation of romanticist writers. She calls for sincere love by her soft voice and strong literary force." If, in the beginning, there was still somebody who raised different opinion toward the higher evaluation of Bei La's work by Wang Ning, Ye Shu-Xian, Wang Yi-chuan, etc. who are leaders of China's contemporary comparative litrature, then today, before "A Jewish Piano", by paying reverence to our spirits, we can only show respect and veneration seriously because this is a holy music which makes us listen to it mindfully!

From that year's chaste "Philosophy of Love" to Bei La's using literary method to explain "The Religion of Love", in different cras both the romanticist authors who were studying overseas, in the same way, have brought the love to the point of most lofty and ultimate significance. This is holy and magnificent.

In the human world, besides the religion of love, is there any other religion which is even loftier?

This work has made the towering China express this kind of message to the world: No matter in the past or at present, or in the future, the Chinese people, who have been nurtured by the Chinese culture, are humanitarians who love peace. They have enough mindfulness and tolerance to blend with different cultures and civilizations. They are going towards universal brotherhood and harmony. Facing the distress in today's world, due to the conflict between civilizations and contradiction between religions, the Middle East is burning fire of a hatred, so this work's practical significance is: In the past, forgiveness and love that took place in Shanghai, China during the Second World War, had surpassed the harmony of nationalities and cultures. Why cannot it be a model of

peace in today's world?

In Bei La's novel, the artistic feeling of refined piano music, the psychological description of Jewish piano prince Adam's sensitivity and friability, the free writing and detailed stating of strong emotions, the moving portrayed sorrow, happiness, parting, meeting of the characters; all these have already reached a very exquisite artistic level. Even more important is: Her words, her story are passing on a strong force, human concern for universal love, intense compassion in misery as well as a sudden emergence of respect and veneration towards dignity and human character. The thing that is endlessly sought after is utopian style eternal love which is treasured in human world, which has surpassed the barrier of any country or nationality, sex or race, skin colour or language and ideology or religious belief. These are the things which really make people shake uncontrollably. As literary commentator Bai Ye says: "A Jewish Piano is clearly said to be a refined literary composition. I consider that regarding Bei La's work, it already possesses a distinguished significance; moreover, from this difficult transcending it has given rise to a new feeling: Bei La is an author who possesses feelings of universal love and holy belief; therefore, everything is possible for Bei La. It's really worth a wait!"

I respect Bei La's selection. Let this work about Shanghai, which is written by this overseas Shanghai writer, be published in Shanghai because this belongs to Shanghai.

This Shanghai story which brings tears to people's eyes will surely go to each corner of the world.

January 18, 2007 Beijing's Wang Fu Summer House

"In our Torah, it is said that rescuing one life is like rescuing the whole world. I want to say that Shanghai is like rescuing the whole universe."

Holocaust survivor Rosa

### **PROLOGUE**

This story happened in Shanghai; the time was December 1999.

Grandmother's house was a blue-grey coloured, old styled apartment building near Huangpu River which was situated at the intersection of East Beijing Road and Middle Sichuan Road. Looking out the window of the house, we found that a crowd of people swept across, we could see in an oblique manner that Su Zhou creek's water was flowing.

For as long as I can remember, my grandmother has always lived here.

Grandmother's house was not considered big. On the left side of the hallway there was a small room which was not more than thirteen square meters; on the right side, there was a suite which was about fifty square meters. It was a British style old apartment building with especially high celings and rather good soundproofing. The furnishings in the house were simple, with one exception — a grand piano. This black grand piano was horizontally laid down in the corner of the white wall and it occupied a very big space. In twilight, it looked like an experienced old person who had bestridden a century.

This seemed to be a classical piano of great vehemence. If we lifted up piano's cover, we could see the words"1858, New York", engraved on the plank. Again, if we shifted wooden support to open up the piano's lid, it would immediately look like a huge falcon spreading its wings. This grand piano, which was horizontally all of seven feet across, was supposed to be a performance piano. In common families, it was very rare to see.

As it was many decades old, the black paint on its surface had worn off. The plank and the strings had become a dark grey color. Even on the plank, dust had gathered.

It was only when you played this piano that you would realize its

extraordinariness. Each black and white key possessed a magnetic force. As soon as you tread on the treadle, its grand sound would directly resonate through the entire building.

In those years, this kind of scene was continuously repeated in front of my eyes: In the opposite corner of the piano, in a wheelchair, a pair of wrinkled eyes would often stare longingly at it . . .

Then her wheelchair would move towards it silently, her feeble body which was sinking into the wheelchair would be wrapped in a black and blue checked blanket. Although her hands were pale and weak, they would still pull out the piano stool, shift the wheelchair little bit upward and use her fingers to play with the sounds without delay. While playing, her still gaze would fall upon a big photograph on the wall.

Actually, it was not a photograph but a propaganda poster of an American musician Adam Yitzchaki who had come to Shanghai to conduct and perform with the New York philharmonic in December 1979.

In that photograph, Adam appeared to be about seventy years old. He was wearing a long swallow-tailed jacket to conduct an orchestra, and there was a golden button pinned to the left side of his chest. His arms were raised in spherical angle, his curly hair was disorderly strewn to one side, and that pair of bewitching and intoxicating eyes were staring intently at that little golden luster of the conducting rod. It was as if, in that little luster, there was the warmth of the Holy Mother and the dreams of his childhood. It was starlight that came out after condensing numerous splendid musical notes.

When she watched sillily, the piano sound would stop discordantly. In a few seconds, it was as if the world dwelled around her had disappeared, her hands would put down on piano keys twistily. Although her eyes would shine brilliantly for a moment, they would soon be filled with tears, yet Grandmother never used her hand to wipe tears from her face, as she would never allow her tears to spill from her eyes.

This was my grandmother Li Mei, an old woman who considered the piano her lover.

Grandmother was already over eighty. Her health was deteriorating day by day. Every few days, she would come to her senses for a few hours, but most of the time, she was in a deep slumber because of her extreme weakness. She was maintaining her life by depending upon transfusion of fluid and meticulous care nurse.

But every time, when grandmother came to her senses, she would demand to get down from the bed. Sitting the wheelchair, she always loved to comb her hair carefully. On special holidays, she would also let her nurse apply a touch of lipstick to her lips. She would dress quickly, as if she had to rush to an appointment at the time.

Yes, her life had been continuously waiting for an important appointment. She had always been preparing for this appointment. Grandmother was a meticulous old person, even the border of the blanket on the edges of the wheelchair should be retrieved inside the wheelchair every time. Even the wrinkles in the corners of grandmother's eyes were orderly. They were like a lonely five strings melody, and it was only when she laughed occasionally that a floating musical note could be seen.

Today, she got up early in the morning. The weather was unseasonably warm. Grandmother was also especially in her senses. She sat on the edge of the bed and spread a very big four-cornered scarf at the bottom, then piled up her clothes one by one in an orderly manner. In addition to her most favourite clothes, outside the scarf, there were those articles which did not part with her for a few decades; for example, a few ornaments, a few letters written in Russian, and a few old photographs that had already turned yellow. She tied a knot on two opposite corners of the scarf then on the other two ends she also tied a knot, made it into a package and put it beside her pillow as if she had to go to some faraway place.

"Grandmother, where do you want to go? I will go with you."

"I want to go to the faraway place," she said.

"After all, what place is that?"

"That place." Grandmother's voice was so soft that it sounded like a final tone in music. On her face, there was the bashfulness and nervousness of a young girl. She pointed northward with her very skinny right hand. Her fingers appeared to be curved. The joints were prominent. This was the disease that was left behind by playing piano for the last half century.

I did not dare to look into my grandmother's eyes. I just held her ice-cold hand in my hand silently.

"Grandmother, I know. You must be thinking of Leningrad, although it is now called Saint Petersburg."

While hearing the name of Leningrad, my grandmother's eyes shone?

"Grandmother, let's go to the Bund to have a look! When your health improves a little bit, I will really take you back to Saint Petersburg for a visit."

"Just wait, child." She gestured for me to pull her in front of the dressing mirror.

In the front of the mirror, as she tidied her hair, she murmured to herself: "I really do not dare to look into the mirror. How could I have become like this? Luckily, Adam did not see this ghost-like shape."

In the recent years, grandmother raised this name "Adam" more and more frequently

On the surface of the Huangpu River, the siren of a pleasure boat sounded. I pushed grandmother's wheelchair to the deck of the boat. As the boat slowly left the wharf, a rare happiness suddenly appeared on the face of my grandmother. Both of her eyes were looking far into the distance. Her spirits were lifted, and she uttered a string of sounds in Russian "Volga River" ... "Leningrad ..."

Yes, this experienced old person, the happenings of the past intermittently flashed in her mind like a scorched old print of a film.

"Grandmother, I have already said that when your health improves a little bit more, I will take you to that most unforgettable place. Please try to set your mind at ease." I said coaxing my grandmother.

"But, I will never be able to see Adam Yitzchakí. As she said these words, the happiness on her face was replaced with a hopeless sadness.

That evening, grandmother again asked me to push her wheelchair in front of piano, but she did not play piano. She was sitting expression lessly.

"Child, everything, everything is because of this piano." Grandmother said, "My days are not many, Bei, let me tell you the story of this black piano. Adam and I, as well as a few people, and this piano were destined to that fate."

"Grandmother, what are you saying? Have you become foolish in your old age? You still have so many, so many days. Aren't we planning to go to Leningrad? As to this piano, I have already guessed, that it is

connected to that romance between you and Adam all those years ago, don't think about all these memories again. Your health is more important than anything else!"

I walked to grandmother's side, squatted down beside her, and looked in her eyes.

Grandmother just smiled. The wrinkles on her whole face were like a fully blossomed flower. My inarticulate, feeble, and foolish grandmother was suddenly back to her senses as if revived of the dealth transiently, she revived her self-confidence. Out of surprise, I jumped back for a moment. Then, I as I went closer to my grandmother, she said with profound implication: "I am not foolish today. I am very much into my senses. Listen to me, my child. Everything was because of this piano. This is a secret. Yes, I have a secret I must tell you."

With effort, grandmother pressed her dry and withered lips near my ear and whispered in a quiet voice:

"After listening, you will come to know that your grandmother has been making dealings with an evil for her whole life . . . "

After hearing her words I was frightened.

Grandmother closed her eyes slightly and she was talking falteringly.

"Today, everything can be believed. That was pre-destined by fate . . . "

In 1858, New York, there was an American pastor of British descendants named Robert Jones. He bought a piano from a famous local piano manufacturer as a wedding present for his wife June. They spent three years with happiness and affection. June, a young woman who was very fond of piano, naturally, loved this piano too much to part with it. Whenever she had a spare moment, she would play the piano, and every day she would polish the piano until it shined. She often used the black shining piano cover as dressing mirror in which she would admire her own beauty.

One day, she attended a dinner party with her husband. Although they did not return home until after midnight, June did not immediately go to the bedroom to take rest with her husband. Instead, she went to the drawing room and sat in front of the piano alone. As it was very late, she did not play the piano, but those black and white piano keys started playing together in her heart. She felt as if there was a hot flame burning in her heart, and she was unable to forget the eyes of a man whom she met at the dinner party. He was a connoisseur of artifacts who had gaze warm enough to melt a woman's heart. Though it was his elegance and extraordinary temperament, bewitching mannerism, his coiled beard that deeply attracted her to him. Her heart was in turmoil . . .

June, who worked as a piano teacher, was also a Christian. Every Sunday, in church where her husband served as pastor, she would be responsible for playing piano to accompany the followers who came there to worship and sing devotional hymns.

After meeting this stranger, however, she began to play the piano half-heartedly. She was making mistakes again and again. Although these mistakes were covered by the loud singing, her pastor husband could hear the troubled sound of her heart.