

Ma Haide



*The Saga of American Doctor
George Hatem in China*

Sidney Shapiro

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Huang Hua, former Chinese Ambassador to Canada, China's Chief of Mission at the UN, and later Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was a young interpreter in 1936 when he met George Hatem, who had not yet acquired the name Ma Haide.

Zhang Wenjin, who later became China's ambassador to the United States, knew Ma Haide since 1947 in Yanan.

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Israel Epstein, presently Chief Editor of *China Today*, was a war correspondent representing the *New York Times* when he met Ma Haide in Yanan in 1944.

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Needless to say, none of the above can be deemed to endorse my views or bear any responsibility for my errors.

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PROLOGUE

Membership in the Chinese Communist Party is not the sort of thing one would have predicted for the American son of immigrant Maronite Catholics from Lebanon. But the metamorphosis was, in a way, inevitable. Travelling to Shanghai in 1933 as a young doctor fresh out of medical school, he intended only a short stay picking up experience in the tropical and venereal diseases with which the port city was rife. The sufferings of the people and the horrors he saw soon drove him into the arms of the resistance, first as a sympathetic helper, then as a full participant.

He was sent to Yanan—"cradle of the revolution"—deep in the hinterlands of the beleaguered Liberated Areas. The first foreign doctor to arrive, he treated peasants and soldiers and members of the top leadership, dressing wounds at battle fronts and setting up a medical network. In Yanan he married a beautiful actress, acquired the Chinese name "Ma Haide", and joined the Communist Party. Unofficial greeter and volunteer guide to the "liberated areas", he helped foreign visitors—from journalists to the US Military Observers Group irreverently labelled the "Dixie Mission"—better comprehend China's amazing new social experiment.

After the People's Republic was established in 1949, Ma Haide was appointed Advisor to the Institute of Dermatology and Venereology in Beijing. His talents as doctor and medical administrator flourished while China moved from one shattering development to the next—Land Reform, the Korean War, the anti-Rightist campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Communes, the Cultural Revolution—events in which he was deeply involved. An entry in the forties in his Communist person-

nel record by the fanatic head of Party Security smearing him as a “suspected foreign agent” severely limited his political activities and affected his professional status.

But he never lost faith in China’s future, and pushed on with his pioneering medical reforms. His achievements in leprosy, venereal diseases and public health were internationally hailed as unique, as comparing in importance with the eradication of yellow fever and the bubonic plague!

“Dr. Ma” lived and worked with a gusto, a brio, that charmed Chinese and Westerners alike. He knew more about New China than any living foreigner. Journalists, medical specialists, international figures, sought him out in China and lionized him when he went abroad. A superb “diplomat without portfolio”, he created reservoirs of good will at a time when China was being harried and boycotted by the West.

Ma Haide, George Hatem, was an integral part of China’s crucial half-century from the thirties to the eighties. He participated in the unprecedented changes from feudalism to a closed Soviet-type socialism to an era of reform and opening to the outside world called “socialism, Chinese style”. His personal story, fascinating in its own right, is at the same time an inside view of the revitalized great Asian Dragon, reflecting the triumphs of New China and probing the causes of its failures. For this reason famous writers and film makers begged to be allowed to record Ma Haide for posterity. But he was always “too busy” with matters he considered much more important—world health and harmony.

We were close friends for the last forty years of his life, and I knew him better than most. Although he seldom spoke about his past, from what he himself told me, from what others recollected, and from what I personally witnessed, after his death I was gradually able to piece it together. I have put it all down in this biography—the remarkable saga of a remarkable man, Ma Haide, George Hatem, and the milieu in which he lived.

NEW AMERICA, OLD CHINA

His father, Nahoum Hatem, came to America from Beirut in 1896 at the age of 14 with a group of other Maronite Catholic Arab teen-agers. They had been indentured by a Lebanese contractor to work for five years, first slicing sugar beets, then in a woollen mill, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, until the cost of their passage was paid off. After completing his stint in the mill, Nahoum enlisted for five years in the Army and obtained U.S. citizenship. Then, in 1908, silver dollars from his discharge bonus jingling in his pocket, he returned to Lebanon.

He rode slowly on a spirited horse through the streets of Hammana, his home town, looking for a bride to bring back to America. Peering over the low courtyard walls lining the road, finally he found her. Fair-complected, with lustrous black hair and dark eyes, she was charming as she sat quietly embroidering in the garden. He tossed a silver dollar into her lap. She glanced up and saw a dashing fellow with a fine mustache and curly hair, boldly staring at her, and she blushed.

From then on, events moved quickly. Her name was Thammam Joseph. Nahoum called on her parents, who came originally from the neighboring village of Bahannes. Like Nahoum, they too were Maronite Catholic Arabs. He begged for their daughter's hand in marriage. Since the young man was a "well-to-do American" of good character, consent was soon granted. The happy couple were wed in a Maronite church, and sailed off for Lawrence, Massachusetts.

After a brief period in Lawrence, they moved to Buffalo, New York where, on September 26, 1910, George was born. His parents spoke Arabic to each other, and at home they called

him Shafik. Sister Shafia was born in 1912, Freda in 1914, and Joseph in 1915.

That same year, 1910, Nahoum's brother—another George—arrived in America from Lebanon and married Ma Haide's mother's sister Zmurad, then also living in Buffalo.

"It was kind of funny," Dr. Hatem recalled. "George was my uncle because he was my father's brother, but also because he was married to my mother's sister. And Zmurad was my aunt because she was my mother's sister and also because she was married to my uncle George. They produced four children—Theresa, Martha, Amelia and Ernie, who were, in a sense, doubly my cousins. Our two families, maybe because we were so closely interwoven, were always very devoted."

Things went fairly well for a while. Little George's parents—whom he called Mom and Dad, were a handsome pair. Thamam's soft beauty, Nahoum's bold good looks, his wax-tipped mustache, were a joy to behold. They were a loving family. The children were kissed and hugged a lot. The warm, emotional atmosphere of George's childhood permanently shaped his temperament. He felt deeply, though he covered it with an insouciant air.

By the twenties, times were hard in Buffalo. Nahoum, unemployed for several years, took whatever short-term jobs he could find—from brass foundryman to carpenter. The Hatems sank deeper into poverty. The children were undernourished. Thamam fed them with batches of round flat breads she baked once a week in a home-made oven, filling the breads with white beans, and sometimes olives — when she could get them. Because she needed coal for the baking, George would go with the other poor kids and pick clinkers near the railway station until the yard detectives chased them away.

"It was a little scary," he said, "but I liked the excitement."

His illiterate parents, like so many other immigrants, were determined to give their children an education. George started primary school in 1916 at the age of six. Run by Maronite Catholic priests, nuns and brothers, it was called St. John Maron's School, and discipline was very strict. The teaching was in English, but George also learned to read and write a little Arabic. He still remembered a few phrases in later years.

"Each morning I set out in a cut-down old suit of Dad's and a pair of second-hand shoes," George said. "They were girl's shoes, which he had bought because they were the cheapest he

could find. I refused, in horror and indignation, to wear them. I knew the other boys would tease the life out of me, but Mom and Dad insisted. I didn't want to hurt their feelings, so I would leave the house with the shoes on. But the moment I was out of sight I would hide them beneath the platform of a nearby warehouse and put on my old tattered pair which I had concealed in my schoolbag. I would reverse the process on the way home. Dad often complimented me on having kept the girl's shoes in such excellent condition."

Although the Hatems had to watch their pennies, George was inherently cheerful and optimistic. The boys he played with were children of other immigrants living in the same neighborhood. They fought and wrestled, Blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, quite unconscious of the racial and religious prejudices bedevilling their parents.

"I don't remember being particularly depressed by our poverty," George said. "All my schoolmates were just as poor, and kids can usually find ways to create their own pleasures. A few of us agreed to sweep out the local movie theatre every day after school in exchange for being allowed to watch the next performance. I fell in love with Alma, the young lady who played the piano accompaniment to the silent films. I thought she was beautiful—slim and blue-eyed and blonde, like the Good Fairy I read about in my storybooks."

The boys found a silver dollar someone had dropped beneath a seat, and squabbled over who should have it. The noise brought the manager out. He settled the argument by announcing the coin was his and coolly walking off with it. George was furious at this injustice. He laughed when he told me about it, and said Marx or Mao would probably have called it his "first encounter with the perfidy of the monied class"! At the time to George it was yet another proof of the unreasonableness of the adult world.

Nahoum got a job in the Lackawanna plant of the Bethlehem Steel Mill, and they moved to Lackawanna, New York. George transferred to P.S.3, subsequently named Roosevelt Primary. His father gradually worked himself up to the position of foreman, but the plant went on strike and he was fired. Once again the Hatems were broke.

During the 1918 epidemic the whole family came down with influenza. They lived on food brought by local charities and neighbors. But there was a positive side to this disaster. An old

family practitioner attended all the immigrant families in their area. Very poor himself, he never asked for money. People repaid him with a little of whatever they had in the house. He gave the children candy, nuts and the like, and saw the unemployed through all kinds of illnesses and injuries. He remained George's lifelong hero. The boy decided some day to be a doctor like him.

"Though I must admit," George recalled with a grin, "at the age of eight that was not the only reason I had for wanting to practise medicine."

The flu had given him emphysema from a chest infection. In the charity hospital the overworked interns were quick and crude. After freezing his skin with ethyl chloride, which didn't really kill pain, they would poke in a drain very roughly and leave it there.

"Maybe if I become a doctor I can do the same thing to them!" George thought darkly.

Lackawanna was a grimy smoke-filled milltown. Thamam's plump face was becoming care-worn. Although Nahoum managed to retain a dapper appearance in spite of his threadbare clothes, illness, poverty and worry were making him irritable. They lived upstairs in a dilapidated wooden frame house which swayed a little in the wind. There seemed no end of petty squabbles.

George was bored by P.S.3's dull teaching methods. His quick mind was generally far ahead of the lectures, and he couldn't be bothered to do his home work regularly, or make an effort on the tests. This, plus the unhappy family atmosphere, brought out an obstreperous streak. He was disobedient, he got poor marks in school. Beatings with a strap on the backside, and even on the soles of the feet, Arab style, did nothing to improve his disposition. Weeping, he would bury his face in Thamam's soft bosom.

"We love you, Shafik," she would whisper in Arabic. "Be a good boy."

But George, beset with growing pains, couldn't seem to change. Nahoum was called into the principal's office and persuaded to send him to a Maronite reform school in Buffalo run by Father Baker, a fanatic disciplinarian.

"Even today, years later, people still scare their kids by saying, 'If you don't behave we'll send you to Father Baker's,'" George remembered.

He went at the age of ten for about a year. There was a some classroom teaching in the mornings. In the afternoons, the children learned a trade—and the school made a profit selling the things they made. George's trade was printing. The school was dim and smelly, and so, it seemed to George, were the teachers.

"Kids couldn't really be kids in such a place," he said. "When you first came the older boys would set you up to fight the others, one by one. Who you could lick, who you couldn't, determined your status. That's where I learned to fight. It was one way I could work off some of my resentment. The teachers seemed to enjoy hitting us."

After a year he told his father, "If you don't take me out of here, I'll run away. They beat you all the time."

Nahoum brought him home.

"Why can't you behave?" he demanded. "It's so much better here than in the old country. Be grateful for what you've got, try to improve yourself."

"I just don't like being pushed around," George muttered.

His parents insisted that he attend the regular services in the Maronite Catholic church, hoping this would have an edifying effect. They led him in, washed spotless and wearing his best suit with its short pants, shod in new leather shoes over long black stockings. He was a nice-looking boy—curly black hair, large expressive eyes under heavy dark brows, regular features, his white teeth flashing in a quick smile.

George at first was enchanted by the lovely colors shining in through the rose window, and the harmonious singing of the choir. He even became an altar boy because he admired the attractive surplices the boys were allowed to wear. He also joined the choir and developed a love of singing. Thamam and Nahoum were very pleased. But George never became religious, and his enthusiasm for church attendance soon wore off. He had a vague belief in God, picturing Him as a benevolent old gentleman with a long white beard, who kept an eye from Heaven particularly on adults, and occasionally on children, down on earth below.

By 1923, George had finished grade school. The family couldn't afford to support four children, so they sent him to live with a Lebanese merchant friend in Greenville, North Carolina. Greenville was very different from Lackawanna. There were trees and flowers everywhere. The weather was

warmer, the pace slower. People were courteous, spoke with a gentle drawl.

There were other differences as well. Accustomed to the free and easy playing and brawling of kids of various ethnic origins in the North, George was taken aback to see white boys knocking down colored children returning home from school. He couldn't understand the contempt and hostility on the part of the whites, and he instinctively reacted against it. Though he was years from having any political concepts, "unfairness" angered him, then and always.

The Lebanese merchant undertook to put George through high school in exchange for work in his general store evenings and on Sundays. A stern Maronite, he had several children like George doing all the cleaning, cooking and housework. He was another tyrant, and George hated him from the start. As a teen-ager he never had time for baseball, basketball, football, or any other sport. George's days consisted of classes, store and homework. If the children played after school they were scolded or beaten.

"I was a good student in high school because I was never allowed to do anything but study," George said. "I finished at the top of my 1927 graduating class, and was chosen to deliver the valedictory address. The WASPs were quite upset because I was named valedictorian, instead of the girl 'of good family' they were rooting for."

His parents had moved to Greenville in 1924, where Nahoum opened a haberdashery store. It did fairly well, but the Hatems felt it would be an extravagance to buy a pair of light flannel trousers which George needed for the graduation ceremony but would have little occasion to wear otherwise. He had to borrow a pair. Inwardly humiliated, it gave him considerable satisfaction to think, as he looked down at the sprucely dressed boys in the audience, "You may be wearing your own pants, but I'm the one making the valedictory speech!" He vowed to himself that some day he would earn enough money to be able to hold his head up with the best of them.

"We were regarded as foreigners, Catholics, or Jews. Lebanese were generally lumped with the latter. Our black hair made suspect," George recalled. In the South while Blacks were openly discriminated against, immigrants and their children were treated with veiled prejudice.

"Sure, we went to school with the white Protestants, but we

never mixed socially. Even when I was asked to go to their homes to tutor kids who weren't doing well in school their parents made it plain I had to leave right after the lesson. I tutored because I needed the money, but I never liked those people. From what I saw of them I didn't think they had anything to be stuck up about."

In Greenville high school George also had his first impressions of China. One of the issues of a magazine used for teaching civics and current events was devoted to that exotic land. It told how the warlords were fighting each other, and printed two rows of their pictures. Most of the children liked Feng Yuxiang because he was known as the "Christian General", although it was rumored he frequently baptised his troops with a firehose. The pupils had to do an essay on the Chinese. George favored leaving them alone and letting them solve their own problems.

In his church, as in others, collections were made for "the starving Chinese". That was all he knew about China then. It seemed very far away. Never in a million years would he have dreamed that he would spend most of his life in China.

His education broadened, in more ways than one, when he went to college. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was quite liberal—for the south. He took a straight B.Sc. course because he wanted to go on to medicine. Apart from the little help his family could give, he worked his way—waiting on tables weekdays, which paid for his food, and selling shoes in a dry goods store Saturdays for extra income. He took no holidays at all and cut college time down a year by continuing in school every summer.

At Chapel Hill again he encountered discrimination, though more covert than it had been in high school. He was attracted to long-distance running, but the coaches recommended wrestling, which was considered a "foreigners" sport. He could sense he was being sized up at the college entrance interview by seemingly innocent questions. "What color tie do you prefer?" "Who is your favorite baseball player?" The answers, he suspected, were taken as indications of the student's background and values.

Dormitories were allocated according to family names. Assumed to be Jewish, he was assigned a room with a boy called Harry Schwartz. The fraternities never approached him, except for one Jewish club. They said it didn't matter when he told

them he was born a Maronite Catholic. But he had to decline. He couldn't afford to keep pace with their well-to-do membership.

Perhaps because they both suffered from discrimination, George was always closely associated with Jews and had many Jewish friends. When he decided to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor he discovered there was an unspoken quota at that time in American medical colleges against Jews, Blacks and children of immigrant parents. The only medical school which would accept him was the one in the American University in Beirut, Lebanon. Mom and Dad were happy that their Shafik would be returning to the old country as a "scholar". They gave him letters to relatives and friends, urging that he be received with suitable warmth and deference.

In Beirut in 1929 George met Robert Levinson and Lazar Katz, also from the States, two Jewish boys who were to become his close friends and professional associates. "Katie", a volatile green-eyed redhead, was in interesting contrast to "Rob"—tall, slim and sophisticated. Tuition and living expenses were much cheaper in Lebanon than in the States, and the university, a Rockefeller institution, rated high.

It was also happily free of racial and religious prejudice. George did well in school, joined the basketball team, and had the beginnings of a social life. Though he was welcomed in Maronite Christian homes, Arab girls—Christian or Muslim—were not allowed to go out with American bachelors. But George had little trouble in finding dancing partners at the Saturday night parties thrown by one or another segment of the foreign colony. His olive-complected good looks and his jocular manner brought him frequent invitations.

He loved moving in rhythmic coordination with the music, and the feel of a healthy young girl in his arms—a fondness for which never left him. But he was too innocent to know as a rule when his charm was producing a response, and too shy to press his advantage when he did.

In 1931 he and Katie and Rob Levinson transferred to the University of Geneva to complete their medical studies. For one thing, it had excellent hospital intern training conditions. For another, in Geneva a few wealthy Jewish friends of the Levinson and Katz families could be depended on for frequent good dinners. The Jewish boys would bring George with them.

"That's the least we can do," Rob said. "In Beirut you were

always taking us along to visit your Arab friends.”

They introduced him as their “Sephardic” classmate. Since the Sephardis are Middle Eastern Jews, and George clearly bore signs of his Middle Eastern heritage, the deception worked for a while until the boys broke down and confessed, and everybody laughed.

Despite a heavy school program, the trio managed to cram in a variety of extra-curricula activities. They swam, climbed mountains, skied, went on bicycle tours and, on Saturday nights, danced—George’s great obsession. The magnificent scenery both stimulated and soothed him. He had become fluent in French, and loved meeting and talking with people. George blossomed out. He felt more relaxed, more mature. There was a Belgian girl, also a medical student, he thought he was in love with, but the affair petered out and died of its own accord. They remained friends, and corresponded for a year or two afterwards.

It was not all fun and games, however. The young medics were becoming increasingly aware of the tensions building in America and Europe. Millions were unemployed. The whole world was in the grip of a severe depression. President Roosevelt ordered the closure of U.S. banks. America went off the gold standard. Hitler was named German chancellor and given dictatorial powers. Opposition parties were dissolved in Germany, strikes banned, and all aspects of economic, cultural and religious life brought under government and Nazi party control. Systematic persecution of Jews began. Only in the Soviet Union were some efforts being made to bring about social and economic reform. But the measures introduced were clumsy, impractical, with disastrous results.

Throughout Europe repressive regimes fought to retain their grip. In Switzerland, troops shot up a demonstration of the unemployed. George and his classmates worked all day on the wounded in their university surgery. In their boarding house they met so-called “perennial students”—revolutionary exiles from fascist Hungary and Bulgaria who sold newspapers like *Drapeau Rouge*, published by the Swiss Communist Party.

Lazar Katz had a brother in the USSR, which many young people then considered the hope of the world. At one time George thought about leaving medical school and going with Katzie to work in Moscow. Though he had neither the money nor a strong enough desire to carry this out, George was