

Sam Ginsbourg

My
First
Sixty Years
in
China

NEW WORLD PRESS

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BEIJING, CHINA

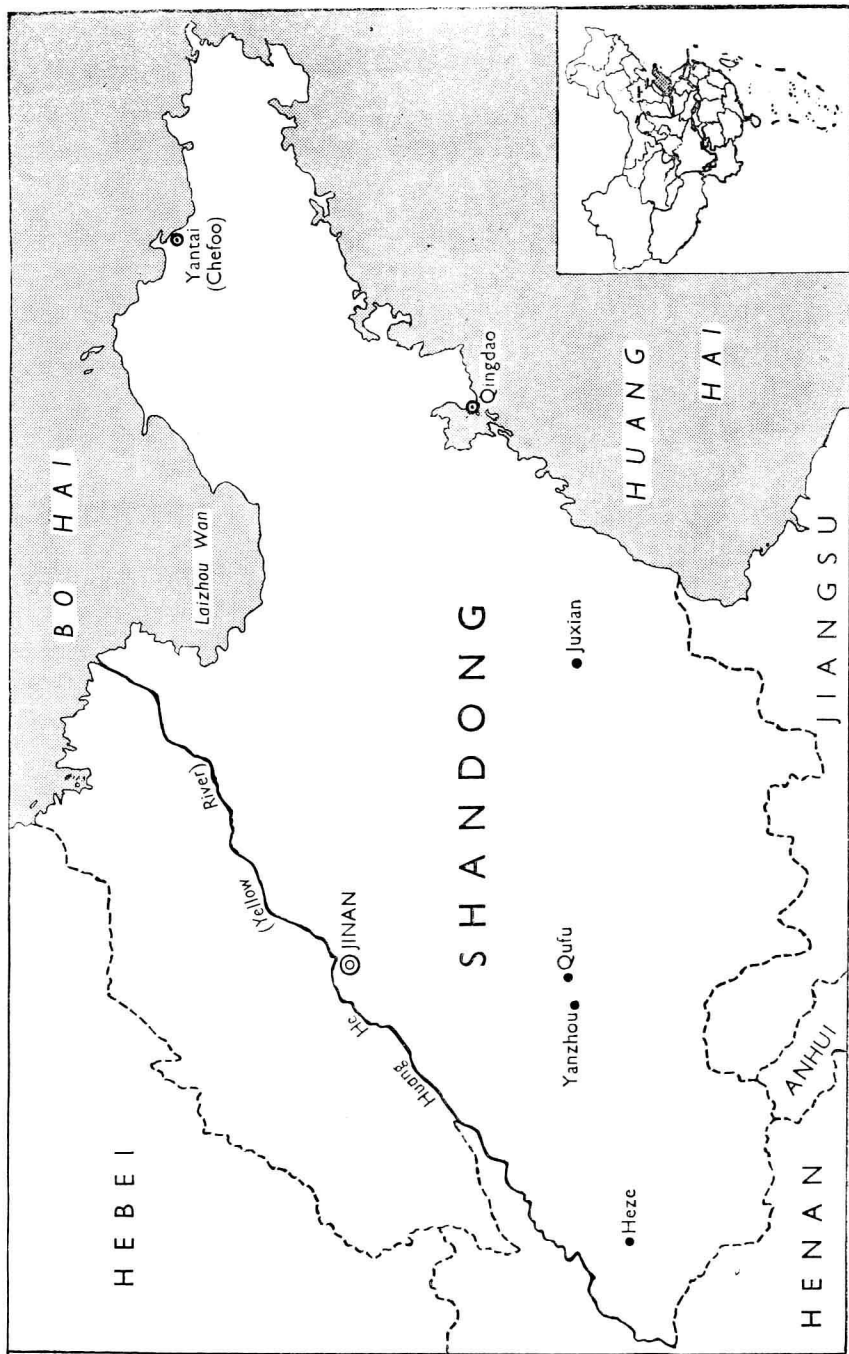
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FOREWORD

This is the story of my life narrated against the background of a half-century of the revolutionary struggle of the Chinese people.

I am not a professional writer. I am no more than a man whose life, with its peripeteia and aspirations, has taken him in his sixty-seven years from country to country, from epoch to epoch, from one type of society to another. I am not a close observer, I am but a man who has gone through more than his share of things and remembered many of them.

George Bernard Shaw has said somewhere that “. . . all autobiographies are lies. . . .” His explanation of this sweeping statement being that “No man is bad enough to tell the truth about his family and his friends and colleagues.” I must be bad, because I have done precisely this: told the truth about those around me and about the events in which I have been involved and of which I have been witness. If there are any divergencies from the truth, it has not been for the sake of embellishment, concealment or with any other motive.

In putting my story down, I have been faced with various problems, encountered, I suppose, by every autobiographer: how to organize the material in such a way as to keep roughly to the chronological order without spreading out more than is necessary; how to deal with the relationship between self and background, between artistic presentation and veracity. Perhaps, the greatest difficulty has been, particularly when speaking of my childhood and youth, not to give way to the temptation of putting into the mouth of a youth ideas and impressions which in fact belonged to more mature years.

There have been many other difficulties, which I am not sure I have been able to solve very well. But, on the whole, it has been

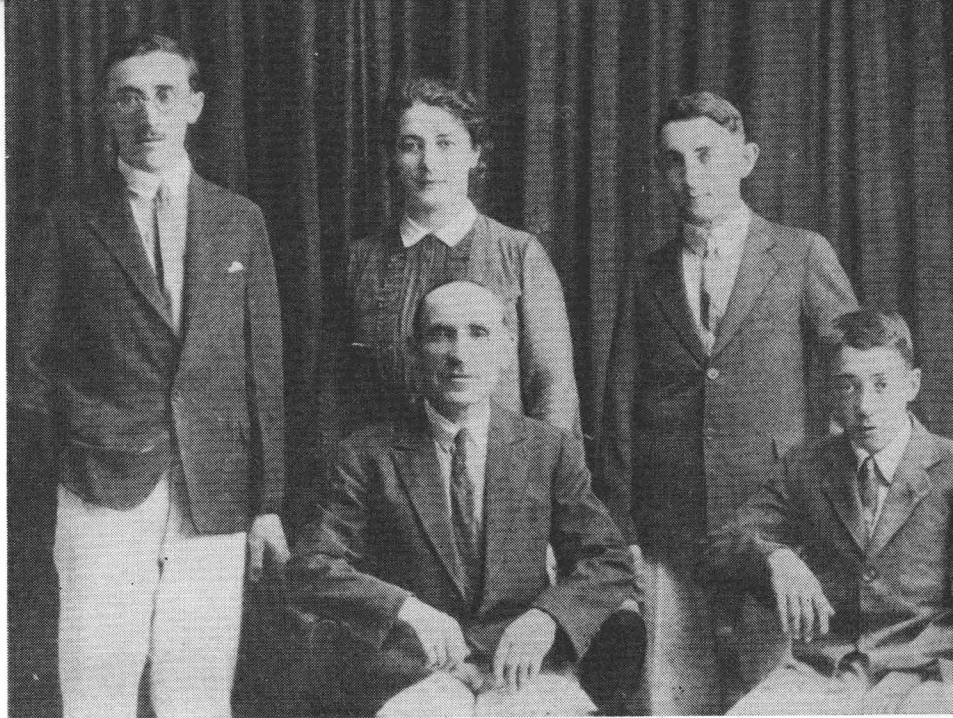
FOREWORD

tremendously exciting and gratifying to recollect and write down the events of my life and to evaluate them anew. I am more than thankful for the opportunity to do it. I only hope that my work will not disappoint the publishers and the readers.

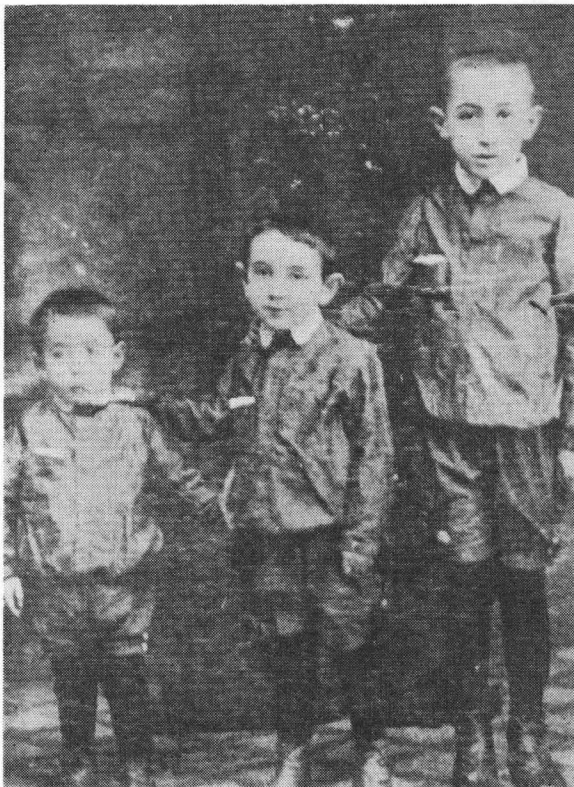
I have been asked about the title of my book. Why "first"? Are you thinking of a second sixty years? Well, it has never hurt anyone to have a try. And I do not suppose anyone will have the heart to blame me if I fall somewhat short of the target.

But of one thing I am sure: my China has given me all I possess, and it has a claim on all of me, no matter how long I live, until I draw my last breath.

The Author



The family in Shanghai in the early thirties. Front row, on father's left, is the author in his teens.

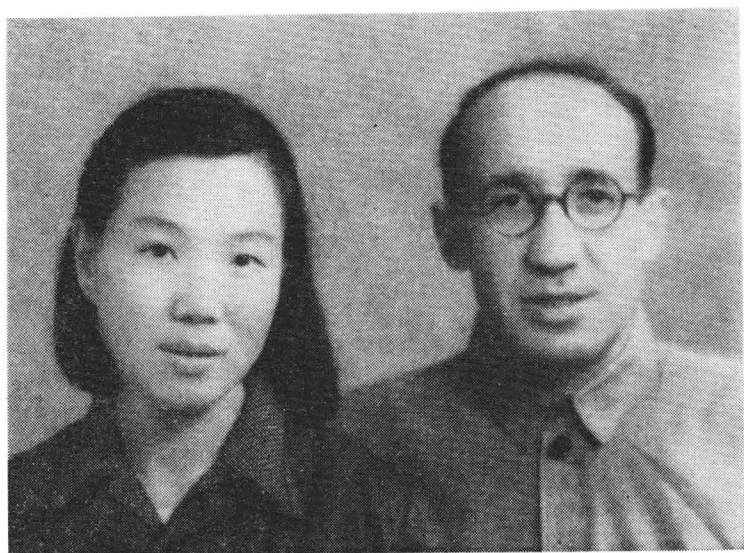


The offspring, in Harbin, around 1920. The youngest is the future author.



In Chefoo, in summer 1947, soon after arrival in the Liberated Areas. On the extreme right is the author.

The newlyweds. The unforgettable date is November 20, 1951.





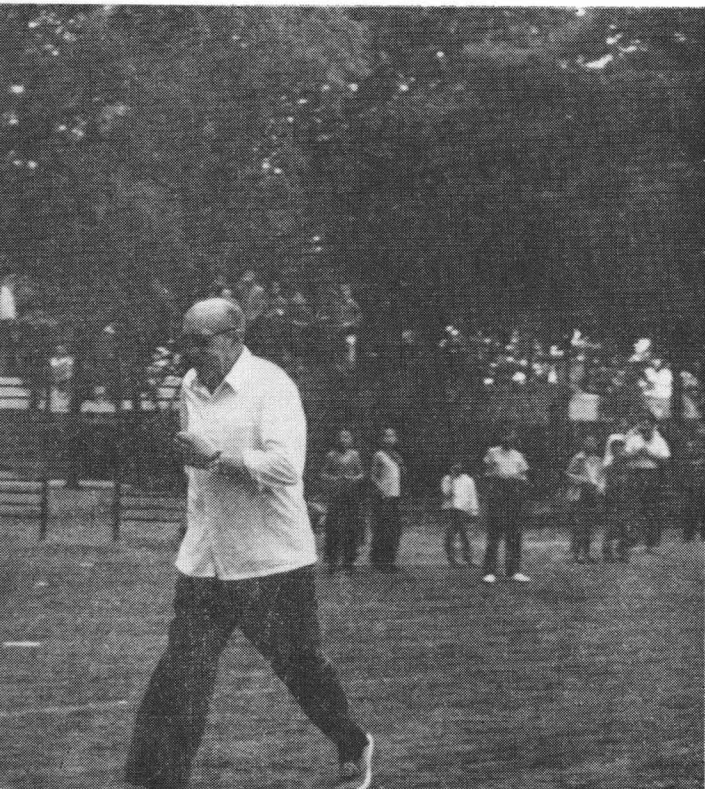
Thirty years later, in Fragrant Hills, Beijing.



Daughters and son, Jinan 1979.
Front row (from left to right):
the eldest, the second;
back row:
the only son and the baby of the
family.



The happy teacher among his happy students. Jinan, summer 1980.



Beating world records at the university sports meet at the "venerable" age of 59, Qufu, 1973.

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CHAPTER ONE

ACCURSED JEW!

1.

I was born in Chita, Siberia. At the age of one I was taken by my parents to Manchuria where I spent my childhood.

My father, a Russian Jew, was born and grew up in a small town in southeastern Byelorussia, in one of the districts where pogroms were the order of the day and where later the German fascists exterminated Jews by the tens of thousands.

I do not think he ever told me much about his childhood and youth, or, if he did, I must have forgotten. I do not know who his parents were. I only know that he began working on his own before he had gained the age of twenty. He traded in lumber. An enterprising young man, he felt his wings clipped by the various restrictions imposed on Jews in European Russia, and 1903 saw him fleeing the ghetto. He managed to reach Chita, Siberia. Here he continued to deal in lumber, here he found and wooed his love, my future mother. Here I was born in September 1914.

In 1908 father left Chita for Manchuria where the completion of the Chinese Eastern Railway in 1904 had given great impetus to trade and industry. Except for one trip to Chita on the eve of the First World War to visit his parents-in-law, he did not leave Manchuria again for fifteen years. Here, off and on, he took charge of the whole process of manufacturing railway ties, beams and planks for the well-known Manchurian millionaire Skidelsky. From the warlords Skidelsky had secured immense lumber concessions covering thousands of square miles, and father was always on the

go, organizing, supervising, inspecting. He never stayed in any one place for longer than a year or two. He dragged his family after him.

On the rare occasions father came home, I still remember him clearly. He was a clean-shaven thin little man with a liberal forehead, bushy eyebrows and a little mustache. Clad invariably in the Western European fashion, he would sit at the head of the table with a glass of boiling-hot tea in a beaten silver glassholder in his hand. He would take great big gulps of the aromatic liquid, bite at a lump of cube sugar now and then and his face would shine with perspiration and the most unalloyed bliss.

I would have loved father had he given me an opportunity to see him more often and for longer periods and to get close to him. Unfortunately, he seldom came home. When he did he was usually too busy or too tired to notice the family. It was much later that I came to realize that he deserved love and esteem: he was invariably kind, scrupulously honest, exceptionally industrious, utterly devoted to his work, innately unpretentious.

My mother, some fifteen years younger than father (she married at the age of sixteen), was also from a Russian Jewish family. She was the youngest of five daughters. I know little of her family, except that her parents had sentiment for religious tradition and insisted on the children observing some of the Judaic ritual.

Mother was an exceptionally good-looking young woman, with long wavy hair and large luminous eyes. She had the type of Jewish beauty so remarkably portrayed by the gentile Walter Scott. She was the possessor of a splendid contralto and would have gone on the operatic stage, but for grandmother's opposition ("Are you a *shiksa* [a non-Jewish girl] that you should make a show of yourself in front of strange men like some street-walker?!"). She became a dentist instead, graduating with honors from the Omsk Medical Institute when already a mother of three children.

I vaguely remember my mother, with four unmarried elder sisters, telling me how she came to agree on marriage with a man some fifteen years her senior. It had been her mother, who ran the family and who was herself some twenty years younger than her

husband, that had done all the deciding and the arranging. "Such a catch! Such a serious, solid, respectable young man," she kept harping. "And with good education!" (Father could read and write.) "And such good prospects. You'll be *mesbuga* (crazy) if you let the chance slip."

My mother suggested one of the elder sisters, but father was not interested. He wanted Manya — and no one else.

They were married after a brief courtship. The man was double her age; he was not in any way the life companion she had dreamed of. He was unromantic, affected neither by books nor music, with no taste for social life. Union with such a man was a source of constant regrets, complaints, bitterness.

However that was, my memories of mother picture her a spirited woman, with strong willpower, true and constant to the man she had given her hand to. Frustrated and deceived in her hopes of becoming an opera singer and in her dreams of a cultured life with a man of her own choice, she had a strain of melancholy in her. Still, she found courage in herself to accompany my father on some of his trips around the lumber concessions, to live in remote corners often infested by *bongbuzi** or wandering bands of warlord soldiery.

2.

I was the youngest of three sons. My eldest brother was born in 1909 in Barim, a tiny railway station on the Yalu River. The second child was born in 1912 in Weishahe, a small railway station near Harbin. I was the only child born in Russia.

My earliest childhood memories are imbued with sounds and smells . . . some pleasant, others that I should like to forget if I could.

The sweetest sound of all to me was mother's rich contralto in which she hummed or sang aloud, the arias from operas and

* The *bongbuzi* (Red Beards), the name popularly given to bandits in Manchuria.

operettas. She knew dozens of these. Depending on her mood, she would fill the house with gay, fast, lilting, or sad, doleful, plaintive, slow, solemn sounds. She was particularly fond of Lehar's and Kahlman's operettas *Merry Widow*, *Silva*, *Bayadere*, which were then very popular in Harbin. I came to know and love them, too.

It was from mother that I inherited a passionate love of music, which now extends to Peking Opera, local operas of Henan and Hebei, Shaoxing opera, Chinese folk songs. I often regret that I did not inherit a good voice as well, but friends console me by asserting that I have a good ear. It's a compliment often paid to those whose voice is, in the words of the Great Bard, "like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh".

There were other pleasant sounds: the melodious tinkling of little bells on the *droshkies** and sleds as they raced past our house, the crackling of logs in the big Russian stove in winter, the hissing of the huge samovar that always graced our table.

Disrupting this symphony were the gutturals, nasals, and sibilants of the sundry governesses and tutors, men and women, young and old, German, American, English. These succeeded each other in our home and did their best, with the help of rulers, spoons, knuckles and other such useful instruments, to inculcate in us his or her particular brand of culture and rules of behavior. For unpleasantness their voices were second only to the sound of mother's drill, with which she tortured her patients.

I do not remember any of the governesses and tutors except the last one. She was a middle-aged, rather fussy German lady, with no love for children, or laughter or play. She had a passion for decorum. Her guttural German was forever pursuing us, reminding us TO DO this, because that's what gentlemen ALWAYS did; and NOT TO DO that, because gentlemen NEVER did it. Her exhortations sounded more terrifying than the Ten Commandments; and the *Kinder!* with which she prefaced every command, did things to my sensitive ears and soul. She was expected, among other things, to teach us German. I do not know how much German

* A Russian horse-drawn, open four-wheeled carriage.

she managed to drive into me, but the fact that I can to this day say fluently, "*Kinder, Hande waschen!*"* would seem to show that her efforts were not entirely wasted.

Some of the smells of those days are still with me. I loved the invigorating smell of newly-fallen snow outside the windows, the hot breath of the steaming soil and the young trees when it rained, the fragrance of freshly-baked bread.

On the nasty side there was the odor of cod-liver oil, which I took in various forms and great quantities to cure anaemia. I drank it, I swallowed it in capsules, I smeared it instead of butter on slices of bread. There were traces of it in everything I drank and ate. I came to hate it, to loathe it. Oh, you children of today, whose cod-liver oil is odorless and tasteless, if you only knew how lucky you are!

Then there was the stench of rotting Dutch cheese. But of that later.

When the time came for me to attend school, I was enrolled in the Commercial School, so called because it was located on the Commercial Road, in Harbin. (The school was still there, under another name in 1953, when I re-visited Harbin for the first time since childhood.)

Very little remains in my memory of my years in the primary school. I was happy there, I did well in my studies, I liked attending classes, I liked my teachers, I liked my books. And, above all, I liked the uniform — the Ukrainian tunic with a tall collar, the broad leather belt with a lovely brass buckle and the cap with a stiff shining visor.

3.

My earliest memories of myself are linked with Harbin, in the years 1919-1922.

Harbin had been a small fishing village on the Sungari

* *Kinder, Hande waschen!* (German) — Children, wash your hands!

(Songhuajiang) in the early 1890's. Construction in 1897-1904 by Tsarist Russia of the Chinese Eastern Railway had transformed it into a town with a population of several hundred thousand. The town was divided into three sections: *Pristan* (Russian for Pier or Embankment); *Novi Gorod* (New Town) which adjoined it; and the native district, farther inland.

Pristan and *Novi Gorod* together were the part that had earned for Harbin the name Paris of the Orient. The population was predominantly Russian: those who had left Russia before the October Revolution and, later, exiles cast out by the Revolution. There must have been around a hundred thousand of these, many of them workers and employees of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The Russians spoke no Chinese and showed no desire to master the language; the Chinese living in this part had to learn Russian, and some of them spoke it quite fluently and idiomatically. Even the rickshaw pullers, peddlers, shop assistants and barbers spoke Russian, though mercilessly distorted and mispronounced. All the stop signs were in Russian. The architecture was Russian. The whole tenor of life was Russian. And, to cap it all, the main street was named *Kitayskaya* — China Street!

A Soviet of Workers' Deputies and a Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies had been set up here in March 1917, but were suppressed in December of the same year by the White Russians in collaboration with the troops of the Chinese warlords. By the time we moved here around 1918, the town was wholly "white", and getting "whiter" and "whiter" with the influx of ex-generals and admirals, bereft of their armies and fleets, ex-dukes and barons, deprived of their dukedoms and baronies, ex-millionaires and near-millionaires, dispossessed of their millions.

Each new arrival had a story of the "atrocities" committed by those "bloodthirsty" Bolsheviks, who feared neither God, nor Tsar, may they and theirs be accursed through all eternities!

The stories, told and retold, evoked in the listeners sympathetic Oh!'s, and Ah!'s, *Batyuski*'s, and *Matuski*'s, and who would believe it?! fervent signs of the cross and an occasional tear.