

**Prewar Japan's Perception of Jews and  
the Harbin Jewish Community:  
The Harbin Jewish Community under Japanese Rule 1932-1941**

Chizuko TAKAO

**Abstract:**

After the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War, more than 10,000 Jews lived in Harbin, a Russian city constructed in Manchuria at the end of the 19th century, forming the largest Jewish community in the Far East. With the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the establishment of Manchukuo in the following year, Harbin and other Russian settlements built up along the Chinese Eastern Railway came under Japan's rule.

There had only been a few Jewish communities in Japan. For this reason, Japanese perception of the Jews is generally considered to have been only conceptual and notional, and Japan's anti-Semitism was an "import" from the West. However, after the establishment of Manchukuo, Japan confronted the reality of the "Jewish question" there, i.e., the problem of the anti-Semitism by the White Russians who emigrated from Russia after the defeat of the White Army. In a sense, Japan inherited the Russian Jewish question in Harbin. This paper examines how the rivalry between the Russian Fascist Party and the Harbin Jewish community influenced prewar Japan's perception of Jews.

**Keywords:**

Harbin, Manchukuo, Jews, anti-Semitism, Zionism

## **Introduction**

Despite the fact that there used to be small Jewish communities in Nagasaki, Kobe and Yokohama, Japanese perception of Jews often does not derive from firsthand experience of communicating with Jewish people. After the introduction of Western civilization during the Meiji Era (1868-1912) and later, the European Christian view of the Jews was imported to Japan as part of Western “education,” along with conceptual images of Jewish people, as exemplified by the so-called “Jewish conspiracy theory,” which had nothing to do with real Jews.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that actual contact with Jewish people did not have an impact on how the Japanese perceived them. Japan’s actual contact with Jews took place in northeastern China, that is, Manchuria, over which Japan and Russia had contested. With the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the establishment of Manchukuo in the following year, the community of 100,000 Russians came under Japanese rule. Since then, Japan confronted the real “Jewish question.”

This paper examines the relationship between the Harbin Jewish community and Japan, focusing on Japan’s perception of and policy regarding the Jewish question in Manchukuo, under whose jurisdiction Jewish people unwittingly came, when Japan made inroads into Manchuria.

### **1. Harbin — The “Jerusalem of the Far East”**

In its closing years, Tsarist Russia launched the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railroad (CER), of 2,500 kilometers in total length in northeastern China, as a shortcut for the Trans-Siberian Railroad connecting Vladivostok, a naval port in the Far East, to Moscow. Russia obtained the rights to the CER through the Triple Intervention following the first Sino-Japanese War (of 1894-5), by deliberately extending a favor to China in expectation of receiving a favor in return. In the areas along the railroad, Russia enjoyed extraterritoriality rights, and many cities were constructed, populated with people from the inland areas of Russia. In particular, Harbin was created in 1898 at the point of intersection of the Songhua River (Sungari River) and the railroad. Shortly after its inception, Harbin became a base for Russia’s expansion into the Far East.

In late Tsarist Russia, Jews were placed under strict residency restrictions. The overwhelming majority (4.9 million out of a total 5.2 million) of Russian Jews were concentrated in the Pale of Settlement (present-day Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania) and Poland. However, during the short period following the Russian Empire’s expansion into

Manchuria and the construction of Harbin, Russian Jews established a firm economic and social position in Russian Far East. According to a census conducted in 1912, out of a total of 43,691 “Russians” in Harbin, the number of Jews was 5,032, accounting for 11.5%. In Harbin, where the influence of Russian culture was noticeable, the residents living there tended to be collectively referred to as “Russians.” In actuality, however, they comprised Ukrainians, Tartars, Jews, Germans, and other various people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The Russian city of Harbin built in Asia was dubbed the “Moscow of the East” or the “Paris of the East.” However, in several Jewish memoirs, we can also find the expression the “Jerusalem of the Far East.” Harbin was an enclave of Russian Jews that had suddenly emerged in Asia.

Why were so many Jewish people attracted to this Far Eastern city of Harbin, so far from European Russia, shortly after its establishment? One reason was that Harbin, located at the frontier of the Russian Empire, was a city that represented the more liberal aspects of Tsarist Russia. In line with the policy of the Finance Minister Sergei Witte, who focused on economic development in areas along the CER, the Empire legalized Jewish residence in these areas. As a result, many entrepreneurial Jews were attracted to these areas.<sup>2</sup> In 1903 when the CER was opened, the Harbin Jewish community was created. In the following year, the first rabbi arrived from Omsk in Russia. Harbin was called the “Happy Horvathia” under General Dmitri L. Horvath, who had been the General Manager of the CER from 1903 to 1920. Harbin conveyed the tolerant aspects of Tsarist Russia, quite different from Russia Proper.

During the Russo-Japanese War which broke out in 1904, Harbin functioned as a supply base for the Russian army in Manchuria, attracting many people, ranging from munitions dealers to speculators who dreamed of making a quick fortune. For the war, about 30,000 Jews were called up for military service from various parts of Russia. Many Jews were included among the Russian soldiers held in Japan’s prisoner-of-war camps in Matsuyama and other locations.<sup>3</sup> In the context of Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and the turbulence of the First Russian Revolution, pogroms were rampant across Russia, and many Jewish communities in the Pale were destroyed. Some of the demobilized Jewish soldiers did not return to their devastated hometowns but decided to stay in Harbin, bringing over their families.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Abraham Kaufman and Harbin Jewish Community**

Jewish people in Harbin played a pioneering role in promoting the development of

natural resources as well as the growth of forestry, flour-milling, alcohol production and other local industries. A number of Jewish capitalists, including Leonti Skidel'sky (a forestry and coalmining contractor) and Roman Kabalkin (a soybean exporter), were active in such industries as sugar manufacture, flour-milling and the fur export. They also played an important role in the city council founded in 1908. It was Abraham Kaufman (1885-1971) who assumed the leadership of Harbin's Jewish community. He was a medical doctor and served as the chairman of the Jewish Community of Harbin from 1919 to 1945.

Abraham Kaufman was born to a wealthy Orthodox Jewish family in 1885 in Mglin in the Chernihov gubernia within the Pale. In his memoir, Kaufman stated "the passion of Hasidism lives within me." His mother was thought to have been the great-granddaughter of Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad Hasidism, a mystical Jewish sect initiated in Lithuania in the 18th century. When Kaufman was five years old, his family moved to Perm in Russia proper. After graduating from a gymnasium, he was unable to enroll at Kazan University due to a restriction in the number of Jewish enrollees, so Kaufman went to Switzerland where he studied medicine and qualified as a medical doctor in 1909. He then returned to Russia. While working as a doctor in Perm, Kaufman engaged in Zionist activities in various provincial cities. In 1912, Kaufman arrived in Harbin, where he started social activities in a wide variety of fields. He served as the leader of the Harbin Jewish community for a quarter of a century, from the Civil War period after the Russian Revolution to the collapse of Manchukuo. At the same time, he worked as the Far Eastern representative of major Zionist organizations, such as the Jewish National Fund, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency. Kaufman was the chief editor of the *Evrejskaia Zhizn* ("Jewish Life"), a Russian language Jewish weekly, published in Harbin between 1921 and 1943. After the foundation of Manchukuo, he chaired the Far Eastern Conference of Jewish Communities, organized for three consecutive years from 1937, through which he communicated Japan's policy toward the Jews to overseas countries. In 1939, Kaufman visited Japan at the invitation of the Japanese government, and held talks with top-level Japanese officials of the authorities concerned. Through these activities, he functioned as a "*shtadlan*," an intercessor between the Japanese and the Jewish people. Abraham Kaufman was a figure who exerted great influence on how the Japanese military and government authorities perceived Jewish people in the prewar period.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Harbin Jewish Community and Japan's Policy toward Jews in the Manchukuo Period

#### 3-1. Anti-Semitism of the Russian Fascist Party

The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 divided Russia into two camps: the Reds and the Whites. Fierce battles broke out in the Far East and Siberia, with rulers changing many times. Many refugees, including remnants of the White Guard, were dispersed to various part of the world. These Russians (often referred to as "White Russians") fled primarily to Berlin, Paris, Prague and Harbin. More than 200,000 people fled from Siberia and the Russian Far East to Manchuria, crossing the border between Russia and China. Most of them remained in Harbin, whereas many others moved from Manchuria to the United States, Australia, or Shanghai and other Chinese cities.

There were many Jews among these refugees from Russia. Due to the influx of the refugees, the population of the Harbin Jewish community dramatically increased to between ten and twenty thousand people. The Harbin Jewish community organization had to accept in great haste the flood of refugees from inland Russia, which was devastated by the Civil War. By around 1921, the *Pristan* (wharves) district, the business center in Harbin, became home to two synagogues, a Talmud Torah school, a Jewish library, a gymnasium, a mutual-aid funeral society, a graveyard, a home for the aged, a clinic, an eating house, a Gmiluth Hesed (a free-loan society), a refugee relief organization, and other substantial mutual aid organizations. These facilities were concentrated in a triangle-shaped area, about one kilometer along one side, delineated by Kitaiskaya Street (Chinese Street), the main street running through *Pristan* district in a north-south direction, Kommercheskaya Street (Street of Commerce) to the north, and Diagonalnaya Street (Diagonal Street) to the west.

After the October Revolution in 1917, there was a rapidly spreading view associating the "Bolshevik disaster" with the Jews, in which the revolution was regarded as the result of a Jewish conspiracy, among people both in and outside Russia. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, forged by the Russian secret police at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were suddenly spotlighted to imply that the *Protocols* had predicted the Russian Revolution and the "breakdown of the world order," and spread to various parts of the world at that time. Japan was no exception.<sup>6</sup> In the Japanese troops in Siberia which supported the Whites were inundated with information about the close connection between the Bolsheviks and the Jews. In particular, the Japanese Consulate General and military authorities in Harbin supplied anti-Semitic information to Japan, with the proviso that the information was reported from White Russians. Merged with

anti-Bolshevik sentiment, anti-Semitism posed a threat to the Jewish community of Harbin.

With its population dramatically increased due to the influx of the post-revolution refugees, Harbin came to have the largest concentration of counter-revolutionary Russians in the Far East. In January 1927, a Russian fascist organization with the aim of overthrowing the Soviet regime came into existence under the slogan of “God, Nation, Labor,” to establish a fascist dictatorship in Russia. Multiple fascist groups assembled to form the Russian Fascist Party in May 1931.<sup>7</sup>

In February 1932, when the Kwantung Army made a triumphal entry into Harbin, the army used the Russian Fascist Party, which had just been formed at that time, as its collaborator. Immediately afterwards, there were frequent incidents of Jewish people being kidnapped by the Russian Fascist Party with its intent to demand ransom. According to the records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a number of abductions targeting wealthy Jewish shopkeepers occurred immediately after the foundation of Manchukuo in 1932.

Since earlier times, northeastern China had suffered frequent cases of abductions for ransom committed by marauding Chinese bandits known as *Honghuzi*. Kaufman recollected that after the Japanese military had swept away these Chinese marauders from Harbin, the Black Hundreds and Russian fascist bandits replaced them.

“In March [1933], a Jewish social activist called Koffman was abducted on his way home from work. He was taken away by car [...] and killed during his capture. His dead body has not been found. Two months later, a butcher called Grinberg was kidnapped. [...] On the night of Yom Kippur, a son of a merchant called Shetel was abducted by a group of bandits. The group caught him on Konnaya Street, forced him into a car, and drove off. Shetel’s son was kept trapped in a dark, damp cave for 100 days, and sometimes tortured. Later he was freed for a ransom of \$25,000. In May 1937, the decomposed body of a shopkeeper called Leonson was found in a well in a newly developed urban area of Harbin. He had been kidnapped by bandits for ransom in June 1935.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Boris Bresler, a historian who was born in 1918 in Harbin and later emigrated to the United States, Harbin transformed from a “city of tolerance” to a “city of hatred and harassment” after Japan expanded its influence following the Manchurian Incident.<sup>9</sup> During the early 1920s, between ten and twenty thousand Jews lived in

Harbin. However, after the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932, many Jews left Harbin and emigrated to Shanghai or Tianjin, causing the number of Jews remaining in Harbin to fall to 2,251 at the end of 1938.<sup>10</sup>

### **3-2. Impact of the Kaspe Affair on Harbin Jewish Community**

There was deep involvement by the local police authorities behind the kidnappings of Jews by bandits. The Kaspe Affair involved a conspiracy between the Russian Fascist Party and the Japanese army and police, which escalated into an international scandal. The incident took the following course. At midnight on August 24, 1933, Simon Kaspe, a young Jewish pianist was kidnapped by unidentified attackers. Simon was the son of Joseph Kaspe, who operated the Hotel Moderne, the most prominent hotel in Harbin, which hosted the Lytton Commission in 1932. It was Kostya Nakamura, an interpreter of Japanese military police (*kempeitai*), who conceived a plot to extract a ransom from this wealthy father. When Joseph Kaspe refused to negotiate the ransom with the kidnappers, they sent him his son Simon's ear. However, following instruction from the French deputy consul Albert Chambon, Joseph did not comply with the ransom demand, and attempted to identify the kidnappers through his own investigation and to rescue Simon. On December 3 of the same year, Simon's mangled body was found. In October 1934, six suspects were arrested, including Martynov who was a member of the Russian Fascist Party and a police officer of the Criminal Affairs Division of the Harbin Police Agency. Their trial began at the district court in Harbin in June 1935. The accused were sentenced to death in June 1936. However, in response to a petition by the White Russian side, an appeal was filed. Then the kidnappers were retried in a higher court, which reversed the decision of the district court, and all of the convicts were acquitted in January 1937.<sup>11</sup>

Since the victim Simon was a French citizen, the French Consulate was involved in the Kaspe Affair, which became a scandal that caught worldwide attention. Jewish newspapers in Shanghai as well as Europe and America reported the details of the Kaspe Affair, and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic missions abroad exchanged information and made inquiries into the affair. For this reason, Japan's diplomatic documents include materials regarding the Kaspe affair.

Behind the Russian Fascist Party, which was directly responsible for the crime, were the Japanese Military Mission (*tokumu kikan*) and the military police. White Russians had exercised great influence within the police structure in Harbin since former times. After the establishment of Manchukuo, Japanese police organizations, including the Harbin Military Mission and the Manchukuo military police took advantage of the

Russian Fascist Party as their subordinates.

On September 19, 1936, the Harbin Consulate-General Shoshiro Sato sent a report to Shigeru Yoshida, then ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the United Kingdom, admitting that Jews being persecuted throughout the world, but the degree of persecution was particularly serious in Harbin. Sato explained the reasons as follows: in Harbin, several hundred White Russians worked for the regulatory police authorities, military-police and the railway police. They had lost their homeland and ended up suffering extremely miserable vagrant-like lives. They believed that it was the Jews who had reduced them to an unfortunate existence, and so saw them as their enemies. In addition, there were many “bad” Russians who abused their positions to commit illegal acts under the pretext of raising funds for anticommunist activities. Sato also bemoaned the fact that, of the Japanese officials who should have been cracking down on such “bad” Russians, very few were capable of seeing through these worrisome conditions.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the Harbin vice consul Hanroku Nagaoka submitted a report dated January 14, 1935 to Foreign Minister Koki Hirota. In the report, Nagaoka candidly admitted that the Jews were suffering military-sanctioned persecution committed by the Russian Fascist Party in Harbin, but expressed his view that taking a policy of siding with the Jews, who comprised a minority of the Russians living in Harbin, would never be convenient for the sake of governance, because that policy would alienate the White Russians.<sup>13</sup> It can be said that this report indicates the actual conditions and Japan’s real intention concerning the governance of Manchukuo, which were incompatible with the official principles for governing Manchukuo, such as “Five Races Under One Union” and “Racial Harmony.”

### **3-3. Trial of the Kasper Affair**

After the Kasper Affair, the Russian Fascist Party's newspaper *Nash Put'* (“Our Path”) carried even more slanderous articles connecting the Jews with Bolshevism. In addition, in November 1934, Osamu Eguchi, a chief of the Criminal Affairs Division of the Harbin Police Agency, stated in a Russian newspaper published in Harbin that the suspects in the affair were patriots who had committed the crime to raise funds for patriotic activities from Jews who had ties with the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> According to his statement, those accused of kidnapping and murdering Simon Kasper resorted to the crime motivated by patriotism, in retaliation against the Jews who constituted the central force of the communists that had collapsed the Russian Empire. Eguchi defended the murderers saying, “If high-spirited men are placed in such a situation as a people without



a country, they may well resort to anything to attain their purpose and unexpectedly violate laws, and such examples abound,” and pleaded extenuating circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

What was the response from the Harbin Jewish community to the Kasper Affair? The day of the funeral for Simon Kasper, all Jewish shops and stores in Harbin were closed to offer their condolences. At the funeral, Kaufman gave the following speech:

“The Jews were the first people in the world to declare the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ We do not pursue revenge, but we seek legal protection of our lives and properties. The state authorities have an obligation to establish peace. The [Japanese and Manchurian] authorities must fight against and sweep out the bandits who foment the hatred of citizens against Jews and sow seeds of discord among citizens.”<sup>16</sup>

In response, *Manshu Nippo* (“The Manchuria Daily Newspaper”), a Japanese newspaper published in Dalian, criticized Abraham Kaufman stating that he had “behaved outrageously by delivering a fierce anti-Manchukuo speech on the street.” Likewise, right-wing newspapers in Harbin reported that Kaufman had made a speech to strongly protest against the “negligence of the authorities that allowed the despicable crime but failed to protect the residents from murderers.”<sup>17</sup> These media reports indicated that, after the Kasper Affair, Kaufman, the central figure of the Harbin Jewish community, was under personal attack. By contrast, the issues of *Evrejskaia Zhizn* (“*Jewish Life*”),<sup>18</sup> a Russian Jewish journal in Harbin for which Kaufman served as the editor in chief, carried almost no reports or comments on the Kasper Affair — Kaufman kept his silence. This shows that the Jews, who were the victims, were in a very vulnerable position.

In this abnormal trial, both the police and the prosecution defended the group of Kasper’s murderers as “patriots.” On June 13, 1936, the Chinese judge of the Harbin district court handed down stiff sentences, contrary to most expectations; death sentences for four of the suspects and life sentences with hard labor for the remaining two suspects.<sup>19</sup>

*Kharbinskoe Vremia* (*The Harbin Times*, a daily newspaper published in Harbin by the Japanese authorities for Russian émigrés, with a circulation of 25,000) sought “fair justice” and a “retrial,” using an analogy between Kasper’s kidnapers and Sholom Schwartzbard, who had assassinated Simon Petliura.

“In the Kasje Affair, the Jewish community is well aware that the accused committed the crime from political motives. Jewish people who remember the Schwartzbard case expected the trial to be political. However the court’s decision did not meet such expectations. That is why the entire population in Harbin hopes that the case will be reopened in the near future, and that justice will triumph.”<sup>20</sup>

The Schwartzbard case refers to the trial concerning the assassination of Symon Petliura by a Jew in Paris in 1926. Petliura was the Supreme Commander of the Ukrainian Army who was considered to have borne the greatest responsibility for the pogroms that occurred in Ukraine during the Civil War period after the Russian Revolution. After being defeated by the Bolsheviks, Petliura fled to Paris and assumed the reins of the Ukrainian government in exile.

In May 1926, Petliura was assassinated by Sholom Schwartzbard, who had lost several family members in the Ukrainian pogroms. After the trial held in France in 1927, the jury acquitted Schwartzbard on the ground that Petliura had been responsible for directing the pogroms.<sup>21</sup> This court decision, in which a vengeance murderer was found not guilty, split public opinion in half in France, its pros and cons drawing the attention of the international community. As mentioned above, the *Kharbinskoe Vremia*, a daily newspaper that represented the viewpoint of the Japanese authorities, asserted that the accused of the Kasje Affair should be retried and acquitted, associating the murderers with Schwartzbard. It is presumed that this assertion had an incomparably greater impact on the Jewish community than the petition for retrial by the Russian Fascist Party, which had always set forth an anti-Semitic argument.

This was when Kaufman finally voiced his opinion, after having kept silent until then. Kaufman<sup>22</sup> praised the decisions handed down by the Harbin district court, saying “The trial for the criminals who kidnapped and murdered Simon Kasje is over. The blackguards have been found guilty. Four have been sentenced to death, and two have been sentenced to life imprisonment. Punishments have been assigned to these bandits. We have not made any comments until now, because [...] we have been waiting until details of the case were clarified before the court and fair decisions were handed down.”<sup>23</sup> Kaufman criticized the tenor of the argument that saw the Kasje kidnapers and murders as heroes as follows:

“Newspapers published in Harbin carried opinions full of falsehoods and

despicable slanders [...] seeing the murderers as national heroes and turning the trial into a political one. Kaspé was considered to be an agent of the Comintern, and the Kaspé kidnapers to be virtuous fighters who acted with patriotic motives. These opinions accordingly asserted that their crimes were not deserving of punishment but rather of admiration. [...] I don't know how anything could be found in common between the Schwartzbard case and the Kaspé Affair. Schwartzbard assassinated Petliura to avenge him for directing 400 pogroms in Ukraine and victimizing 200,000 Jewish people. I doubt that abducting an innocent Jew [Simon Kaspé] who had no relation to politics [...] could be considered a heroic and patriotic act. I think it was purely based on an extremely low-level animal instinct.”<sup>24</sup>

*Ha Degel* (“*The Flag*”),<sup>25</sup> a Russian language bulletin published by Betar, a Zionist Revisionist youth organization, also had kept silence over the trial of the Kaspé Affair until then. However the bulletin conveyed a sense of crisis, saying that “It has now become necessary for Jews to make statements regarding this matter.” *Ha Degel* also protested against the comparison between the “bandits who kidnapped Kaspé for ransom, sliced off his ear, finally killed him, and laid the blame on each other” with Schwartzbard, and required that their sentences should be solemnly carried out.<sup>26</sup>

The trial of the Kaspé Affair constituted a crisis, in which the Harbin Jewish community confronted the Japanese authorities that held effective control over Manchukuo. However, the community's protests were in vain; soon after the death sentences were handed down in June 1936, the High Court of Justice ordered a retrial, and in January 1937, all six accused persons were granted amnesty.<sup>27</sup> The trial of the Kaspé Affair and its outcome may lucidly illustrate the true nature and fraud of what was called Manchukuo, how the “rule of Law” operated there.

#### **4. Why Abraham Kaufman Cooperated with Japan?**

In 1937, when the embers of the Kaspé Affair still lingered, Kaufman and Japan rapidly reached rapprochement. Some materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicate that, in the spring of the same year, Kaufman “suddenly changed the shy-away attitude” toward the Japanese authorities that he had adopted until then, and approached the Japanese Military Mission, culminating in the 1st annual Conference of Far Eastern Jewish Communities being held in Harbin upon the initiative of Kaufman. The

conference was organized in December 1937, bringing together 21 Jewish delegates from Harbin, Tianjin, Dalian, Mukden, Hailar, Qiqihar and Kobe, with the attendance of 700 participants. At this conference, the Jewish side declared full cooperation with Japan concerning the state policy of Manchukuo.<sup>28</sup> The Conference of Far Eastern Jewish Communities was held for three consecutive years until December 1939. The Jewish delegates admired the “Racial Equality” promoted in Japan and Manchukuo, declared their cooperation with Japan, and demonstrated their findings to Jewish communities in Western countries.

The Japanese side actively publicized the conference to exhibit to other parts of the world the success that Japan and Manchukuo had achieved in ruling their Jewish communities, as well as their racial equality measures, winning Kaufman’s support for Japan’s policy toward the Jews. Almost without exception, previous studies consider that the initiative for the conference was taken by the Japanese side, namely by the Kwantung Army.<sup>29</sup> Certainly it is clear that the Japanese side had an active intention to take advantage of the Jewish community under its rule. For example, Japan was apparently considering a plan to take advantage of the Jews to attract American investment to Manchukuo. Besides, Japan attached importance to the possibility of improving relations with the United States by playing the “Jewish card.” In addition, the author thinks that Japan intended to capitalize on Kaufman’s Zionist leadership to provide centralized management of Jewish communities in Manchukuo and Japan, as well as in Tianjin and Shanghai. Following a command given by Kaufman, not only the Harbin Jewish community but also other Jewish communities in various regions of the Far East expressed their obedience to Japan’s national policy. In places other than Shanghai, which did not participate in the conference, Ashkenazi (Russian) Jews were the primary constituents of the Jewish communities; in these places the network of personal connections established by Kaufman, as the Zionist representative of the Far East, was effectively utilized.

Thus far, many studies based on Japanese materials have placed emphasis on Japan’s policy toward the Jews, and usually Jewish communities under Japanese rule have been treated as an object at the mercy of changes in Japanese policies. However, by studying archival documents in Israel, the author has identified cases of autonomous actions of the Jews. For his cooperation with Japan, Kaufman was captured by the Soviet Union in 1945 and sent to labor camps, where he was forced to serve for eleven years as a camp doctor. He emigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union in 1961. In 1967 in an interview (held in Yiddish) regarding his experiences during the Manchukuo period,

Kaufman talked about Japan's prewar policy toward the Jews and the roles he had played at that time, insisting that it was the Jews who had taken the initiative regarding the Conferences of Far Eastern Jewish Communities.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, we would like to discuss the background behind Kaufman's change of stance toward cooperation with Japan.

The Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem house some interesting historical records proving that Kaufman began to consider collective emigration of the Jews to Palestine from Harbin, where anti-Semitism was growing following the Kasper Affair in 1933. These records comprise correspondence between Kaufman and the Jewish Agency from 1935 to 1936. Around that time, exchange of practical correspondence was commenced between Harbin and Palestine concerning *aliyah* and visas. In a letter dated November 5, 1935, Kaufman wrote to the authorities in Palestine as follows:

Recently 25,000 Soviet citizens have escaped from Harbin. They include about 1,000 Jews. As a result, commerce has stagnated and the Jewish economic foundation in Harbin has collapsed. A great many people are considering leaving Manchukuo, and Palestine is the first choice of destination for all of them.<sup>31</sup>

In 1935, the Soviet Union sold the CER to Japan, following which the families of the railway workers began to return to the USSR. Due to the mass exodus of people, the economic foundation collapsed, and the ensuing reduction in demand for housing caused real-estate prices to plunge by as much as 40%. Under these circumstances, some Jews living in Manchukuo began to consider emigrating to Palestine. In his letter of November 5, 1935 to the Jewish Agency, Kaufman asked whether or not Palestine could accept immigrants from Manchukuo, and emphasized that Jewish life in Manchukuo under Japan's rule was no longer peaceful and quiet, saying "Here Jews' enthusiasm for exodus to Palestine is growing daily. [...] The living conditions here are suggestive of those of our fellow [Jews] in Germany."<sup>32</sup>

Kaufman requested the Jewish Agency to provide information on obtaining category A3 visas for craftsman with small capital. In response to his request, however, the Palestine Jewish Agency wrote a reply dated December 31, 1935, stating that "Palestine primarily accepts immigrants from Warsaw, Berlin, and Bucharest. Currently there is no room for Jews from Harbin to enter Palestine using category A3 visas." In 1933 and later, the Jewish Agency's policy for immigrant acceptance came to place the greatest focus on

how to absorb German Jews from Nazi Germany, in addition to Jews from Poland, whom Palestine had primarily accepted since before that time. During the single year of 1935, a great many Jewish immigrants, equivalent in number to that of the 30 years preceding World War I, arrived in Palestine from Europe. However, there was no quota for Harbin Jews. Yitzhak Oren recalls that “Among the Jewish Diasporas, a remote forgotten community like that of Harbin was assigned only a small number of certificate. Given the calamities suffered by Jews in Eastern Europe and Germany, the Jewish Agency could not afford to be generous to a wealthy community like ours.”<sup>33</sup>

The possibility of emigrating to Palestine became even smaller thereafter. In April 1936, Palestinian Arabs rioted in protest against a huge influx of Jewish immigrants. The British mandatory authorities changed their policy to limit Jewish immigration. Furthermore, the Sino-Japanese war broke out in the summer of 1937, and the Jewish communities in Tianjin and Shanghai, which had been destinations of emigration from Harbin until then, came under Japanese occupation.

As described above, unable to leave Harbin for Palestine, the Harbin Jewish community in the latter half of the 1930s was at a stalemate. Kaufman attempted to ensure the safety of the Jewish communities in Manchukuo and under Japan’s control, by cooperating with Japan and by actively using Japan’s “plan to take advantage of the Jews.”

In May 1939, the Japanese government invited Kaufman and his wife<sup>34</sup> to Japan. They toured Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, Tokyo, Kamakura and Nikko, and visited the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; to the latter, Kaufman reported an improvement in American Jewish sentiment toward Japan. After observing various parts of Japan, he said to Japanese officials, “I keenly realize that Japan’s territory is so small that it is natural for Japan to seek expansion into the continent.” Meanwhile, the Military Mission concluded that Kaufman’s visit to Japan had significant meaning in terms of Japan’s scheme to maneuver the Jews.<sup>35</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

After the Russian Revolution, Harbin had the greatest concentration of the Jewish population in the Far East. Even during the Manchukuo period, which was in effect ruled by Japan, Harbin was home to a close-knit Jewish community comprising several thousand Jews. In 1939, when the anti-Semitic arguments such as “Jewish conspiracy” and “international secret power” were discussed among the anti-Jewish “experts” in

Japan, South Manchurian Railway Research Department in Dalian made the following observation: “Dr. Kaufman, the Jewish leader approved by Jews living in Harbin, has such overwhelming influence over the Jewish community that no individual or group is any match for him. For this reason, no “secret Jewish headquarters” can exist in Harbin. In addition, in view of the divided state of the Jews in Shanghai, we can ascertain that the level of integration of Jewish people is not as high as people fear.” Based on this observation, the report was apparently dubious about the Jewish conspiracy theory.<sup>36</sup> Anti-Semitism in Japan is often referred to as “anti-Semitism without Jews.” However, the real existence of the Jewish community in Harbin had a certain impact on Japanese perception of Jews.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As for the Japanese perception of the Jews and the history of anti-Semitism, see: Masanori Miyazawa, *Zoho Yudayajin Ronko (Studies on the discussions of the Jews [Enlarged Edition])*, Tokyo: Shinsensya, 1982; Masanori Miyazawa, *Nihon ni okeru Yudaya Isuraeru rongi bunken mokuroku 1877-1988 (Bibliography of Discussions on Jews and Israel in Japan 1877-1988)*, Tokyo: Shinsensya, 1989; David G. Goodman, Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype*, New York: The Free Press, 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> David Wolff, *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898-1914*, Stanford University Press, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> In and after the Russo-Japanese War, about 70,000 Russian soldiers were taken as prisoners of war to various parts of Japan. The prison camps, with the knowledge of ethnic and religious enmities within the Russian Army, housed Jewish and Polish prisoners separately. Among these prisoners, as many as 10,000 people nationwide applied to be naturalized as Japanese (source: Tokio Saikami, *Matsuyama Shuyajo: Horyo to Nihonjin (Matsuyama Prison Camp: Prisoners and Japanese People)*, Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc., 1969, p.52). A magazine published in Japan at that time sympathetically introduces the words of a Jewish soldier: “I am a Jew, and I am disappointed because the Russian military system does not allow a low-ranking soldier to be promoted to a commissioned officer, no matter how accomplished he may be in terms of military service. I have always thought that this war is so absurd for me. As such, I have decided to surrender.” (“Yudayajin no Rohei Toko” (“Jewish Russian Soldier’s Surrender”), *Senji Gaho*, vol.38, 1905, p.90.)
- <sup>4</sup> Abraham I. Kaufman, “Poselok Kharbin,” *Biulleten’ Igud Iotzej Sin*, No.296, 1988.
- <sup>5</sup> In addition to an autobiography “Lagernyj vrach” (“Doctor in the Labor Camp”) (Tel Aviv, 1973), in which he described his experience in the forced labor camp, Kaufman wrote many other memoirs. These include “Listki iz moej zhizni” (“Pages of My Life”) in which he recalls his life in Russia from his birth to the days before moving to Harbin, and in his days when he studied in Switzerland (1885-1911), and “Poselok Kharbin” (“Harbin Settlement”) which describes his life in Harbin. However, the memoir of his life in Harbin is incomplete as it ends

with the description of the Kaspé Affair in 1933. The memoir of his Harbin days appeared serially in the Russian version of the Bulletin from December 1987 to April 1998, published by the Igud Yotsei Sin (Association of Former Jewish Residents of China) — an organization for mutual friendship of the Jews hailing from the Far East and its Chairman was Abraham Kaufman's son, Teddy Kaufman. The Bulletin also serialized Kaufman's memoir on his life in Russia, from February 1998 to 2006. Some materials regarding the Harbin Jewish community are said to be retained in the Harbin Municipal Archives but they are not disclosed. However, the Igud Yotsei Sin Archives in Tel Aviv, the Yad Vashem Archives, the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, and Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan contain materials regarding the Harbin Jewish community and Abraham Kaufman.

- <sup>6</sup> Chizuko Takao, "Shiberia Shuppei to Shion Giteisho no Denpa 1919-1922" ("The Siberian Intervention and the Dissemination of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Japan: 1919-1922*"), *Studies on Jewish Life and Culture*, vol.27, December 2013, pp.23-36.
- <sup>7</sup> John Stephan, *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925-1945*, London: Hamish Hamilton, pp.48-59.
- <sup>8</sup> Kaufman, "Poselok...", *Biulleten'*, No.350, 1997.
- <sup>9</sup> Boris Bresler, "Harbin's Jewish Community, 1898-1958: Politics, Prosperity, and Adversity," in Jonathan Goldstein ed., *The Jews of China*, vol. 1 Historical and Comparative Perspectives, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999, p.209.
- <sup>10</sup> "Zai Harubin Yudayajin no Jokyo" ("State of the Jews Living in Harbin"), *Gaiji Keisatsu-ho (Foreign Police Report)* vol.199, the Home Ministry Police Bureau, 1939, p.118.
- <sup>11</sup> John Stephan, *op.cit.*, pp.81-89.
- <sup>12</sup> Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), *Minzoku Mondai Kankei Zakken / Yudayajin Mondai (Miscellaneous Affairs Relating to Ethnic Issues / Jewish Problems)* vol. 3 (I-4-6-0-010).
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Takeshi Nakashima, "Kaspé Jiken wo Meguru Zai Harubin Roshiajin Shakai to Nippon" ("Russian Society in Harbin and Japan concerning the Kaspé Affair"), *The Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, March 2014, p.44.
- <sup>15</sup> JACAR, Ref.B04013204500, *Minzoku Mondai Kankei Zakken / Yudayajin Mondai* vol. 3 (I-4-6-0-010) (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). The consul general of the Soviet Union protested against Eguchi's statement, saying that it would promote anti-Soviet activities.
- <sup>16</sup> Kaufman, "Poselok...", *Biulleten'*, No. 353, 1998.
- <sup>17</sup> *Manshu Nippo (The Manchuria Daily Newspaper)*, December 8, 1933.
- <sup>18</sup> With a circulation of 4.5 million, the *Evrejskaia Zhizn* had readers not only in Harbin and various other parts of Manchukuo, but also overseas countries including Palestine. "Zai Harubin Yudayajin no Jokyo" ("State of the Jews in Harbin"), p.128.
- <sup>19</sup> John Stephan, *op.cit.*, p.166.
- <sup>20</sup> *Kharbinskoe Vremia*, 15 June, 1936. *Kharbinskoe Vremia* was a Russian daily newspaper launched in November 1931, with the aim of guiding Russian public opinion in Harbin to Japan's advantage.
- <sup>21</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Antony Polonsky, "Introduction," *Polin: Jews and Ukrainians*,



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- vol.26, Oxford, 2014, pp.28-29.
- <sup>22</sup> The article was written under a pseudonym Nemo (Silence). Later Kaufman confessed in his memoir that it was he himself who wrote the paper. Kaufman, "Poselok...", *Biulleten*, No.353, 1998.
- <sup>23</sup> *Evrejskaia Zhizn*, 25 June, 1936, p.8.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ha Degel (The Flag)* was a biweekly Russian language magazine, which was launched in 1932 by A. Y. Gurevich, who was the President of the Betar (Brit Trumpeldor), a Jewish youth organization in Harbin.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ha Degel*, 26 June, 1936. The magazine explained that the reason why it had kept silent until then was that "Essentially, Zionists should concentrate solely on building a Jewish nation in Palestine."
- <sup>27</sup> According to Takeshi Nakashima, all the perpetrators in the Kaspé Affair were acquitted because the Russian Fascist Party, the Japanese military police and the Japanese Military Mission engaged in a conspiracy. The Japanese side therefore had to avoid at any cost the risk of losing its faithful Russian cooperators and also the risk of bringing its wrongdoing to light. Takashi Nakashima, op.cit., p.56.
- <sup>28</sup> JACAR, Ref.B04013204800, *Minzoku Mondai Kankei Zakken / Yudayajin Mondai*, vol. 3 (I-4-6-0-1\_2\_003).
- <sup>29</sup> Avraham Altman, "Controlling the Jews, Manchukuo Style," in Roman Malek ed., *From Kaifeng to Shanghai: Jews in China*, Sankt Augustin, 2000, pp.279-317.; Boris Bresler, "Harbin's Jewish Community, 1898-1958: Politics, Prosperity, and Adversity," in *The Jews of China*, vol. 1, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999, pp.200-215.; David Kranzler, "Japan before and during the Holocaust," in David S.Wyman ed., *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp.554-572.; Naoki Maruyama, *Taiheiyo Senso to Shanhai no Yudaya Nanmin (The Pacific War and Jewish Refugees in Shanghai)*, Tokyo: Hosei Daigaku Syuppankyoku, 2005.; Hiroshi Bando, *Nihon no Yudayajin Seisaku:1931-1945 (Japan's Policy toward the Jews)*, Tokyo: Miraisya, 2002.
- <sup>30</sup> Yad vashem Archives, 06/3168. Regarding the assertion of Kaufman, a study poses the question: "Was Kaufman really unaware that he was being exploited by the Kwantung Army? Or did he attempt to fabricate stories of the past that were convenient for him and the Harbin Jewish community?" Altman, "Controlling the Jews...", p.317.
- <sup>31</sup> Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, S6/3809.
- <sup>32</sup> For details of the correspondence between the Jewish Agency in Palestine and Kaufman, see Chizuko Takao, "Aburahamu Kaufuman to Harubin Yudayajin Shakai: Nihon Touchi-ka Yudayajin Shakai no Ichi Danmen" ("Abraham Kaufman and the Harbin Jewish Community: One Aspect of the Jewish Community under Japan's Rule"), *Roshia no Naka no Ajia / Ajia no Naka no Roshia (Asia in Russia / Russia in Asia) (III)*, Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2006, pp.47-58.
- <sup>33</sup> Yitzhak Oren, "Studencheskij sertifikat (Student Certificate)," *Biulleten*, No. 352. The Israeli writer Yitzhak Oren was born in 1918 in Siberia and raised in Harbin. He emigrated to Palestine to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1936. Moris Farhi, "A Profile of Yitzhak Oren," *Jewish Quarterly*, vol.36, Issue 4, 1989, p.13.

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- <sup>34</sup> JACAR, Ref.B04013207200, *Minzoku Mondai Kankei Zakken / Yudayajin Mondai* vol.7 (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). Some materials and opinions hold that the wife of Kaufman who visited Japan was a Japanese woman named “高橋満” (Mitsu Takahashi). For example, Hiroo Yasue wrote that “In May [1939], Kaufman left Harbin with his Japanese wife Mitsu (her maiden name was Takahashi)” in his book *Dairen Tokumu Kikan to Maboroshi no Yudaya Kokka (Dalian Military Mission and a Phantom Jewish State)*, Tokyo, 1989, pp.155-156. However, according to a report of June 1, 1939, by the director of the Japanese Administration Office in Dalian, the name of Kaufman’s wife was Esther (Esfir D. Kaufman 1902-1984) (Esfir is the Russian version of Esther). After his first wife died, in 1933 Kaufman remarried a Jewish woman named Esfir Davydovna, hailing from Bessarabia (*The Concise Harbin Jewish Dictionary* [in Chinese], Harbin, 2013, p.252). It is interesting to consider the reason why the Japanese wife theory came into existence, but the theory presumably derives from misunderstanding due to the name of Kaufman being written as “高福満” in Chinese characters.
- <sup>35</sup> During this visit of Kaufman, Takeo Koyama, an “expert on Jewish question” from the special research team of the Manchurian Railway Investigation Department, served as a Russian-Japanese interpreter. Koyama criticized anti-Semitism in Western countries and maintained that Japan should adopt its own policy of controlling and instructing the Jews and having them cooperate with Japan, for the sake of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere vision. Masanori Miyazawa, *Zoho Yudayajin Ronko (Studies of the Jews [Enlarged Edition])*, p.197.
- <sup>36</sup> “Zai Harubin Yudayajin Oyobi Yudayakei Kikan no Saikin Jijo” (“Recent Situations of the Jews and Jewish Organizations in Harbin”), *Yudaya Mondai Chosa Shiryo (Research Documents on the Jewish Question)* No.17, Manchurian Railway Investigation Department, 1939.