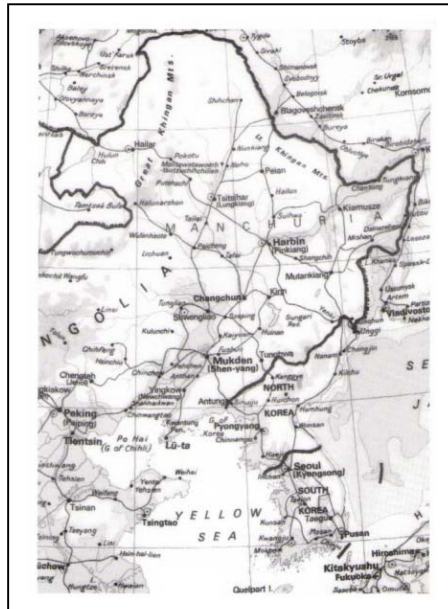


HARBIN—A RUSSIAN ENCLAVE IN MANCHURIA  
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Anyone who has grown up in one of several Russian communities on the West Coast has come across individuals and whole families, European in appearance, who claim China as their birthplace. “Funny, you don’t look Chinese” would not be a typical reaction here, as it would in the case of someone encountering for the first time an individual with a European accent, perhaps blond and blue-eyed, saying “I was born in Manchuria.” In fact, a significant portion of Russian citizens fleeing the advent of Communism headed east and eventually settled in the major urban centers of China, such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin. But for many the most desirable destination was the brand new city of Harbin in Manchuria, which was for all practical purposes a Russian city outside Russia proper, a haven for those not wishing to subject themselves to the Soviet government and yearning to retain their political, economic, and religious freedom. For many of those who settled there it reflected a vision of what life in Russia could have become had there been no Communist takeover.

How did this ready-made Russian city come about? If we look at the map of Manchuria we can see that this territory sticks out like a large thumb extending northward from mainland China into Russian territory. Siberia lies to its north and west, while the area to the east, reaching to the Pacific coast, is known as the Ussurian Region and includes the port city of Vladivostok. In the heady economically optimistic 1890’s, with the ascent of the young Emperor Nicholas II to the throne, Russia was in the process of building the 3,000 mile Trans-Siberian Railroad, providing a direct rail link from the Ural Mountains to Vladivostok. The only snag in this project was the fact that the Chinese province of Manchuria lay precisely where the last leg of this railway, connecting the Siberian and Ussurian Railways, would need to be built. It so happened that in 1895 Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War, after which Russia, along with France

and Germany, was able to persuade Japan not to take over a part of Manchuria it got in a post-war treaty. In return for this favor Russia, in the person of Count Sergei Witte, her illustrious Finance Minister, asked for and received permission to build the Chinese Eastern Railroad (CER) across Manchuria. In 1896 a contract was signed between the Chinese government and the Russo-Chinese Bank allowing not only for the building and exploitation of the railway, but also for a rather wide strip of land on both sides of the Railway line to be placed under Russian administration. This was to remain in force for 80 years following the completion of the line, with the proviso that China could buy back the railroad in 36 years.

After a year of intensive surveying, it was decided to move the railway headquarters from Vladivostok to the Manchurian interior, in order to allow for the building of the railroad from its center, and a party of engineers was dispatched to where the Sungari (*Songhua*) river crossed the projected line. Among the various fishing villages in a swampy area called “Khaabin” (a Manchu word meaning “a place for drying fishing nets”) an abandoned distillery was found and purchased, becoming the new headquarters for the construction administration, which arrived at that location on June 9, 1898, generally considered to be Harbin’s “birthday.”

From that point on Harbin and other communities along the line started growing by leaps and bounds. By 1900, when the construction of permanent housing began, there were already 5,000 Russians living in Harbin. While the total number of Chinese workers on the railroad had increased by then to 75,000 from the initial 15,000 that had arrived two years before, 12,000 of these were living in Harbin in 1901. An urban development plan was drawn up for the Sungari section, later to be known as the New Town District, producing an instant city, with the new CER headquarters, a grandiose train station, and the wooden St. Nicholas Church (later to become the Cathedral) as its principal landmarks. What emerged was a singularly contemporary city, with public buildings in the art nouveau style that was being favored for new construction in such cities as London, Paris, or Vienna. The 1903 completion of the CER and the aggressive colonization policy of the Russian government guaranteed a steady rise in Harbin’s Russian population, to about 40,000 at the outbreak of World War I.

It was in this period between 1903 and 1917 that Harbin was transformed from a chaotic boomtown into a rather sophisticated European-like city with all the requisite cultural, educational, religious, and social institutions. These were already in place when the cataclysmic events besetting Russia between 1917 and 1920 tripled the city’s Russian population to 120,000 by 1922, and it was to remain near that level for the next two decades. The administrative structures that had been in place for the Russian population along the railroad line were replaced, first by an Inter-Allied Committee and later by the Chinese military, albeit with White Russian technical management in place. But in 1924 China signed an agreement with the Soviet Union for joint management of the CER, with the latter as the dominant partner. This brought about a tremendous influx of Soviet citizens as well as pressure on those Russians who had been working for the railroad to apply for Soviet citizenship. With the 1927 victory of the anti-foreign Kuomintang Party in China the Sino-Soviet partnership soured, leaving a great degree of administrative and political chaos in Harbin as the three basic forces—Soviet, anti-Soviet, and nationalist Chinese—vied for power. Discovering evidence that the Soviet leadership in the city was working toward the eventual domination of Manchuria by the Soviet Union, the Chinese

arrested and deported many top local Soviet officials, bringing about threats of sabotage and armed intervention in certain areas by Soviet troops. There were even instances of massacres and forced repatriations.

In spite of this, the 1920's could be regarded as the heyday of Russian Harbin. Just about every aspect of life in Russia was transplanted to this ready-made city—it was truly a “community in exile”, set apart from the surrounding Chinese society in many respects. A newspaper article from the period could justifiably claim “We have created an illusion of our native land.”<sup>1</sup> The Orthodox Church was very much in evidence—in addition to the aforementioned St. Nicholas Cathedral in the center of town Harbin had 22 churches by the 1930's, and the rest of the Manchurian Diocese had 24. Originally an outgrowth of the Russian Church's Beijing Mission, Manchuria's churches were incorporated into the Vladivostok Diocese in 1907, and in 1922, when all the Russian churches in China ended up in the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, they were granted the status of a Metropolitanate, with a Metropolitan in Harbin and two auxiliary bishops. In addition, two monasteries were founded in 1924, one for men and another for women, and the diocese established pastoral theological courses, as well as a Theological Seminary and the St. Vladimir Institute of Theology. The men's monastery had a fully equipped printing press which produced service books and a periodical entitled *The Heavenly Bread*, dealing with various church-related issues.<sup>2</sup>



*Saint Nicholas  
Cathedral*



*Church of the Annunciation*



*Our Lady of Iviron  
Church*

The influx of refugees from Communism inevitably created a need for charitable services, and it was here that the Orthodox churches played a leading role. Just about each parish had something to offer in this regard—helping the poor, the aged, the infirm, and orphans became a priority for them. And larger-scale projects were initiated by the Church's hierarchy, especially by the first Metropolitan of Harbin, Methodius (Gerasimov) and his auxiliary, Bishop Nestor (Anisimov), both of whom worked hard to ease the lot of their countrymen. (see boxes)

The situation of the Russian population of Harbin underwent another great change when the Japanese overtook the city on February 5, 1932, having gradually overtaken the rest of Manchuria since the previous fall. Manchuria was now Manchukuo, and a puppet Chinese government formally headed by the child emperor Pu Yi of *The Last Emperor*

<sup>1</sup> Elena Taskina, *Neizvestnyi Kharbin* (Moscow: Prometei, 1994) p. 28

<sup>2</sup> G.V. Melikhov, *Rossiiskaia Emigratsiia v Kitae* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1997) pp. 66-67

fame. The Soviet Union sold the CER to Japan, and 20,000 Soviet railroad employees (13,000 of them Harbin residents) were returned to their homeland. But for the remaining non-Soviet Russians life under the Japanese was no piece of cake, and Harbin in the 1930's was described as "a worn-out, decadent, almost desperate, but still charming beauty, clinging to her reputation as the Paris of the Far East, but step by step being taken over by the new Japanese masters."<sup>3</sup> There was an aggressive policy of Japanese settlement, with the best jobs, including, of course, those on the railroad, going to the Japanese. And a number of non-Soviet Russians fell victim to Japanese red-baiting—there were political repression and arrests. It is no wonder that by 1939 only 28,000 Russians remained in Harbin, for by then the rest had immigrated either to North or South America, or to major Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Beijing.

As difficult as life was under the Japanese, the final blow for the Russian community in Harbin came in 1945 with the Soviet occupation following Japan's defeat, and the takeover of Harbin by Red China the following year. Now just about everyone was striving to leave Harbin, but these efforts were generally frustrated by an uncooperative Soviet consulate. Throughout the next few decades the remaining Russians did get out little by little, usually after overcoming immense obstacles. And not all of them headed for the "free world"—a significant number, including Metropolitan Nestor (see inset), fell prey to Soviet persuasion and patriotic fervor, returning to the Soviet Union, for which they paid a heavy price. By then the church situation had completely deteriorated, as church after church was closed down. St. Nicholas Cathedral was razed in 1966, and another church was turned into a circus. According to the most recent report, ten of the 23 churches are still standing, but only one is functioning.

But the memory of this unique city remained fresh in the minds of those hundreds of Harbin natives who ended up mostly in the various urban centers of the West Coast, whether it was in the twenties and thirties, or after the war, after a stopover in mainland China, Australia, or South America. Many of them were instrumental in the establishment and development of various Orthodox parishes, including several of our diocesan parishes and were active in diocesan affairs—C. Chekene and K. Tsenin in San Francisco and L. V. Leonard and L. Golitzin in Los Angeles come to mind, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Others, who had either already made a name for themselves in Harbin or were raised there were able to make significant contributions to the cultural, intellectual, and economic life in their adopted countries in the Western Hemisphere. Just one example of this is the Riasanovsky family—Valentin, the father, was an expert on Mongol law and taught at Harbin's Polytechnic Institute. His book on the subject was published by Indiana University Press. Antonina, the mother, wrote two novels (under the pen name Nina Fedorova) about the lives of Russians in Harbin, the first of which, *The Family*, won the a prize from Atlantic Monthly in 1940 and went on to become an American best seller. And their sons, both of whom spent their boyhood years in Harbin, went on to become distinguished Russian history professors. Nicholas, an active member of St. John the Baptist Church in Berkeley and now retired from U. C. Berkeley, authored the classic *A History of Russia*, while Alexander just retired from Pennsylvania University and is also a poet. .

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<sup>3</sup> Soren Clausen and Stig Thogersen, *The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography in Harbin* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995) p. 116

In the 1980's it became possible for U. S. citizens to visit Harbin, as well as other Chinese cities. Visitors found very few vestiges of Russian presence, and only a handful of elderly Russians. By 1988, according to one report, only 30 Russians remained in the city. Today Harbin is a thriving and entirely Chinese industrial city, and has been characterized as “the political, economic, scientific, cultural and communications mecca of Northeast China,”<sup>4</sup> with a population approaching one million. But it still bears traces of its Russian past in its architecture, availability of certain foods, and availability of Russian-made items in its stores.

## NOTABLE HARBIN HIERARCHS

### Metropolitan Methodius (Gerasimov) (1857-1931)

He was the first to occupy the newly-formed see of Harbin and Manchuria and successfully met the challenges of bringing together all the Orthodox of Harbin at a time when Harbin was inundated with immigrants from Russia and making the Church the center of their lives. His top priority was the extension of aid to the least fortunate, and he went ahead in 1929 with building a church-sponsored home (later named The Metropolitan Methodius Shelter) to take care of the needs of the elderly and young orphans, which opened its doors to around 500 even before its completion.

### Metropolitan Nestor (Anisimov) (1884-1962)



From his earliest days Metropolitan Nestor displayed a great deal of missionary zeal. After completing missionary courses at the Kazan Theological Academy, he was tonsured and ordained to the priesthood at the age of 23 and went to a remote village on the Kamchatka Peninsula, where he immersed himself in missionary work, establishing schools and clinics, dealing with widespread alcoholism, going from village to village by dog or reindeer sleds converting thousands of natives in this pagan land. He learned a number of native languages and translated the Liturgy, parts of the Gospel, and various prayers into the native languages. And his efforts brought about the Kamchatka Charitable Brotherhood to promote church growth and basic human services on the Kamchatka Peninsula. This body's membership grew into the thousands and its principal

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harbin>>, “Harbin”

benefactor was Czar Nicholas II himself, who made an annual commitment of school supplies, church furnishings, medications, and other donations for the region. By 1917, thanks to Fr. Nestor's efforts, there were 35 churches, 38 chapels, and 42 schools all over Kamchatka.

Fr. Nestor spent the World war as a volunteer medical corps chaplain and in late 1916 was consecrated Bishop of Kamchatka and Petropavlovsk. Soon after his return he took part in the All-Russian Church Council, after which he was not able to return to his diocese due to the Communist takeover, and ended up in Harbin, where he became auxiliary to Metropolitan Methodius. Here he resumed his charitable work, eventually building the much-needed Home of Mercy which housed orphans, the elderly, and the disabled, providing them with a whole array of opportunities to engage in productive activity--through workshops featuring iconography, carpentry, bookbinding, sewing, embroidery, and various crafts. It also housed a school, an outpatient clinic, a small hospital, a library, its own bakery, and a candle making plant. And a church in honor of the icon of the Mother of God "Joy of All Who Sorrow" was erected on the site.

In 1948, after being elevated to Metropolitan, Vladyka Nestor decided to return to Russia, and was promptly sent to the gulag. Upon his 1954 release he served in the dioceses of Novosibirsk and Kirovograd, reposing in 1962, and was buried in Peredelkino, behind the altar of a metochion church of the Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra.

### **Metropolitan Melety (Zaborovsky)--The Hierarch Who Stood Up to the Japanese**



Metropolitan Methodius was followed in 1931 as ruling hierarch by this worthy successor, who had the unenviable task of guiding the Church in Harbin and all of Japanese occupied Manchuria at a period when it was under great pressure, up to the time of the Soviet takeover, which he survived by less than a year. His unequivocal defense of Orthodoxy was demonstrated by his response to the Japanese insistence, in the winter of 1943-44, that worship in the direction of the temples dedicated to the Japanese goddess Ameterasu be conducted in Orthodox Churches. On January 30, 1944 (o.s.) he issued a ringing statement condemning such practice, and also sent a protest to the local authorities. This substantially lifted the spirits of the entire Orthodox population of

Manchuria and was successful in preventing its spiritual enslavement, for this requirement was withdrawn, as if nothing had ever happened.

### The Harbin Train Station and St. Nicholas



This ornate landmark in the center of town featured something that no other train station had at the time—a large, prominently displayed icon of St. Nicholas. But in 1924 the CER was placed under Sino-Soviet management and everything under its control was secularized at the insistence of the Soviets. The Chinese generally went along with this policy, but refused to allow the removal of the icon from the station on the grounds that it was held in esteem not only by Russians but by the Chinese as well. One of the top Chinese officials of the railroad, in fact, said at the time “This old man has been standing here for a long time already, he is a kind and good old man, so let him stay.” And a Chinese tradesman, who had been caught in a storm while swimming in the Sungari River, was rescued after praying to St. Nicholas and from then on would come to the station to light candles and pray before the icon.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bishop Nestor, *Manchuria—Kharbin* (Belgrade, 1933) pp. 38-39

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