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TRAUMA AND TRANSCENDENCE: THE SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST ON AN ISRAELI SINOLOGIST

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Trauma and Transcendence: The Shadow of the Holocaust on an Israeli Sinologist*

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Abstract: The late Irene Eber (1929-2019), professor of East Asian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a long-time affiliate of the Fairbank Center of Harvard, is arguably the scholar on the intercultural and transnational encounters between Jews and modern China. She is also a Holocaust survivor who wrote an inimitable memoir, *The Choice: Poland, 1939-1945*. It offered an unparalleled chance to unravel how China is construed by a Jewish Sinologist haunted by an all-pervasive mood of subdued obsession and inner wrestling with her memories of the Holocaust. This essay, sitting on the intersection of China studies, Jewish studies, and Holocaust studies, examines the nexus between her Jewish identity and her academic vocation, and discusses how this tormented scholar made a variety of personal and academic choices and managed to repair the self in this world of imponderables.

Where Angels Fear to Tread

To probe the interrelation between individual experience and academic choice is a worthwhile and even scintillating project, although it is not immune from justifiable qualms. On the one hand, applying the views, perspectives and emotions formed by personal experience to the object of study has undeniable legitimacy, and may even play a pivotal role in opening up new vistas. On the other hand, highlighting these points of connection may create the impression that subjectivity trumps objectivity, thus not only affecting the credibility of the research, but also unavoidably touching upon the initial motivation and ultimate concern in the spiritual journey of scholars. Therefore, once the personal is involved, one would rather be reproached for hesitancy than for boldness.

The above observation may be offered to answer a question: given the disproportionately high number of Jewish scholars among western Sinologists or scholars of China studies, why is the research on the impact of Jewish identity on the scholarship so bewilderingly scarce? An exception to the rule is a recent study on Joseph R. Levenson (1920–1969) which argues that Levenson's

understanding of Jewish tradition plays a crucial role in his analysis of the history of modern China.[1] Indeed, as early as 1972, the great Arnaldo Momigliano was convinced that had Levenson lived longer he would have reinterpreted Judaism in terms of what he had learned from the Chinese historiographical tradition.[2] In another memorial essay, the eminent Harvard intellectual historian Benjamin Schwartz (1916–1999) alluded to his and Levenson's Jewishness as a key to their deep empathy with China:

> His interest in the relationship of modern Chinese to their cultural heritage was intimately tied to his undisguised concern with his own Jewish past. It is a concern which I share with him and which made me feel very close to him. Far from impairing his objectivity, it seems to me that it lent an honesty and authenticity to his thought which is not readily found in the writing of many supposedly objective scholars who vainly fancy that they are leaving themselves outside of their work.[3]

Unfortunately, due to his premature death, Levenson's own testimony to his Jewishness can be measured only tantalizingly from an unfinished draft entitled "The Choice of Jewish Identity." The cluster of tensions – between history and value, cosmopolitanism and provincialism, separation and assimilation, authenticity and artificiality, continuity and change – that characterizes all his historiography also informs this vignette. Nonetheless, not a few felt it was "incongruous" with the rest of his writings.[4]

Almost thirty years after its appearance, the specter of the title manifested in the title of a truly inimitable memoir of the Holocaust, *The Choice: Poland, 1939–1945*. [5] Irene Eber (1929–2019), its author, is also a renowned Sinologist and, in my eyes, the high priestess of China studies in Israel, obviously felt an intellectual affinity with Levenson's magnum opus *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, which she cited in the memoir. It seems almost certain that the paths

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[1] Madeleine Yue Dong and Ping Zhang, "Joseph Levenson and the Possibility for a Dialogic History," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 8:1 (2014): 1–24.

[2] Arnaldo Momigliano, "Tradition and the Classical Historian," *History and Theory* 11:3 (1972): 292–93.

[3] Benjamin I. Schwartz, "History and Culture in the Thought of Joseph Levenson," in *The Mozartian Historian: Essays on the Works of Joseph R. Levenson*, eds. Maurice Meisner and Rhoads Murphey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 101. See also Thomas M. Levenson, "Joseph R. Levenson: A Retrospective," *The Harvard Crimson*, April 6, 1979, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1979/4/6/joseph-r-levenson-a-retrospective-pithis/, accessed 28 June, 2020.

[4] Joseph R. Levenson, "The Choice of Jewish Identity," in *The Mozartian Historian*, 180-193. According to his wife, he "took a deep and somewhat surreptitious delight in the writing of it"(178). See page 3 for the "incongruous" remark made by the editors.

[5] Irene Eber, *The Choice: Poland, 1939-1945* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).

of the two Sinologists crossed. In 1966, when Eber received her Ph.D. from the Claremont Graduate University in California with a dissertation on Hu Shi (1889–1962), the leader of China's New Cultural Movement, Levenson was already Sather Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. And when Levenson drowned in a canoeing accident in 1969, Eber had just ensconced herself at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she would eventually retire as the Louis Frieberg Professor of East Asian Studies. [6]

In any event, the memoir, which is overtly incongruous with the rest of her writings, offers an unparalleled opportunity to unravel how China is construed by a Jewish Sinologist haunted by an all-pervasive mood of subdued obsession and inner wrestling with her memories of the Holocaust, as well as an irresistible temptation to rush in where angels fear to tread – that is, to explore the nexus between her Jewish identity and her academic vocation.

The Choices in *The Choice*

The memoir is fraught with choices Eber made, but one of the choices is only perceptible in its Chinese version. Her mother and sister survived the Holocaust because their names appeared on the famous Schindler's list.[7] In the Chinese translation, "Schindler" was idiosyncratically rendered into 辛得乐尔 [*xin de le er*] rather than the standard 辛德勒 [*xin de le*]. Not only that, all the words with the sound of *de* in Jewish names are invariably rendered into 得 instead of the conventional 德 which habitually means 'German' in modern Chinese, evincing therefore an unmistakable avoidance of the association of "German" with Jews and the righteous gentiles. According to the translator, this is Eber's choice: the word 德 that denotes 'German' cannot appear under any circumstances in the names of Jews and the righteous gentiles who saved the Jews, in order to "show respect for the dead." [8] This attitude is not uncommon in some of the German-speaking Holocaust survivors, who never again spoke or wrote in German, visited Germany, or bought German goods—they are constantly struggling with the memories of the past.

In effect, Eber revealed only on the very last pages of the memoir that she was born in Halle, Germany, where she lived until age eight and was engulfed by racial discrimination from her classmates and teachers. Eventually the family was forced to depart for her father's hometown, Mielec in Poland. In later years,

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[6] For the story of the endowed chair and Eber's move to Israel, see Yitzhak Shichor, "Professor Irene Eber, 1929-2019," 12 April 2019. http://www.mei.org.in/mei-remembers-18 accessed 10 December, 2020.

[7] She once remarked to me that "there are nearly 1,000 men on the list and less than 200 women." Personal correspondence, on October 30, 2010.

[8] Yi Ailian, *Jueze: Bolan, 1939-1945* [Irene Eber, *The Choice: Poland, 1939-1945*], trans. Wu Jing (Beijing: Xueyuan Chubanshe, 2013), 1-2 (under "The Translator's Words").

realizing that her family had all along been unwelcome strangers in Halle, she never bothered to return to her birthplace.

Mielec was her home in the true sense of the word, albeit for less than four years. "After Mielec all other homes were merely places for me, the sojourner's impermanent rest."[9] In the aftermath of the German invasion of Poland, Jews were driven out of Mielec in 1942 and deported to death camps. At this point, she made what was clearly the most critical, and traumatic choice in her life: when an opportunity came, she escaped alone and left behind her family, as if imposing orphanhood on herself. Yet this was *the* choice against the will of her father, Yedidia Geminder. The last thing he said to her, which was etched in her memory and would haunt her forever, was "Don't go."[10] In this zero-sum game between survival and family, she chose life and, as punishment, the ordeal of self-acceptance for the rest of her life. She didn't hear of her father's death until much later, and at the time she "had not learnt how to mourn," as she confessed on the very first page of the memoir.

Gone with her father was the belief of father's generation. After the War, she was convinced that she was the last Jew left alive, even embarking on constructing a new self to become a Catholic nun and to pursue a noble cause of peace and selfless dedication. At this juncture, her sister showed up out of the blue, as though *deus ex machina*, and dragged her out of the convent. But it was no longer possible to return to her father's traditional Judaism, and Jewish festivals such as Passover would only bring back the guilty memories of her betrayal and of the irretrievable integrity of the family. Because of the Holocaust, the evil of man and the intention of God are the subjects of innumerable theological reflections. However, in the conversation in which the survivors in a displaced persons (DP) camp gathered to discuss why they were spared, she heard the name of Darwin for the first time in her life, but she did not remember that they also talked about God. "It was enough to know that the catastrophe had not been averted. Why bother speculating about theological reasons it hadn't?"[11] She told a friend that she survived out of sheer luck and for no explainable reason, and "there seemed to have been only two ways after 1945: fervent belief, despite God's design which strangely seemed to include the destruction of an entire culture together with those who cherished and nourished it, or abandoning belief."[12] She chose the latter; meanwhile, it occurred to her that

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[9] Eber, *The Choice*, 208.

[10] Eber, *The Choice*, 47.

[11] Eber, *The Choice*, 156.

[12] Marián Gálik, "'Wild Goose' Letters: A Correspondence of Three Decades as Seen from the Other Side," in *At Home in Many Worlds: Reading, Writing, and Translating from Chinese and Jewish Cultures. Essays in Honour of Irene Eber*, eds. Raoul David Findeisen, Gad C. Isay, Amira Katz-Goehr, Yuri Pines, and Lihi Yariv-Laor

"being Jewish with other Jews — all of them so different — was increasingly comfortable."[13] In other words, she chose to be a Jew without Jewish faith, or what Isaac Deutscher called a "non-Jewish Jew."[14]

In the DP camp, whether or not to emigrate to Eretz Israel/Palestine was keenly discussed. The glib Zionist emissaries from Palestine preached the gospel of redemption through labor, depicting the kibbutz as a paradise of carefree singing and dancing. Yet in the eyes of Eber, by then age fifteen, right out of unspeakable darkness in a chicken coop where she had been hidden for almost two years, it was simply too surreal to believe in, not to mention that the agriculture training in preparation for life in Palestine increasingly made Eretz Israel seem "to be made up of kibbutz kitchens, where I would be told to peel potatoes until the end of my days." The claustrophobia persisted. Quite understandably, she did not wish to go to the Promised Land. Nor did she opt for marriage, which was so popular and powerful a means among the Jewish DPs to reestablish a normal life and to banish the despair and loneliness of being *She'arit Haplita* — the saving remnant. Instead, her mind was on books, study, learning, and a career. [15] Soon, she made another fateful choice: to depart for the United States, apparently a vast and brave new world — the polar opposite of the chicken coop – and to leave behind the newly reunited sister and mother as well as a shredded self. This choice was made not for survival, but for knowledge, to make up for lost learning opportunities. She unequivocally rejected her German roots, but paradoxically embodied the very ideal of *Bildung*—a self-cultivation or character formation, a moral imperative to grow into free, creative and independent individuals through continuous and enlightened pursuit of knowledge—which was enthusiastically embraced and enshrined as a sort of civil religion by many German Jews. [16]

It was in the United States that she began to navigate in the sea of knowledge, thanks to a public library in New York. She first dabbled in western philosophy, thinking with dismay it "is not dealing with human beings." When she started reading Chinese philosophy, she felt that "it was like coming home,"[17] thus "beginning a new journey, a journey of the mind, which took me far away

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(Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 15.

[13] Eber, *The Choice*, 155.

[14] Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 25–41.

[15] Eber, *The Choice*, 166–167. For her reflections on the DP Camps, see also Irene Eber, "Holocaust Education and Displaced Persons (DP) Camps," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3:3 (2016): 231-236.

[16] For the centrality of *Bildung* for the German Jewry, see George L. Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[17] An interview of Irene Eber by Pei-Ying Lin dated 1 Feb 2015 at Eber's apartment in Jerusalem, 18. http://www.china-studies.taipei/comm2/eber%20interview_locked.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1AxeFc7_u42Gyx0zvwJf3oCFY9buwjxxbWYgU_g_23kTZs7uKdE9cTLYQ, accessed 20 July, 2020.

from Mielec and from Poland."[18] Poland was never far away, in fact – it had simply metamorphosed into a crouching beast in the jungle. Whenever it jumped out to bite, she felt that

> [i]t was important to conceal from others our anxieties, and the physical maladies such as various intestinal disorders, undiagnosable aches, and fatigue. More difficult to hide were skewed emotional reactions to certain situations, when we laughed instead of crying, or reacted stonily when an emotional response was called for.[19]

These abysmal symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) obsessed her on her journey to learn Chinese culture and language, which must have functioned as a sort of therapeutic balm in alleviating the wound that the beast of darkness had caused. Eventually, these two heterogeneous elements ended up being in the same cluster, like a grain of sand in an oyster turned into a pearl. At the age of eighty-six, Eber commented on a Hasidic story to describe how she felt when she saw Chinese script:

> [B]efore the souls are born as human beings, they learn Torah in Heaven. Then comes the angel, who puts his fingers on the [souls'] head, with a clink. And when they are born, they forget everything. Then, when they go to school and learn Torah it is really relearning what they learned already. Therefore, learning Torah is very easy. Now, I have a commentary to this story. Some of the souls are very mischievous. They ran away from the Heaven of Torah learning and they came to the Chinese Heaven. There they lived, learned the *Lunyu* 论语, *Mengzi* 孟子, the *Daodejing* 道德经… When they are born they forgot everything, and when they started to learn Chinese, it was easy and sweet.[20]

She did not forget to tell the Chinese interviewer that Hasidism "originated in the vicinity of the town where I lived"— that is, Mielec. Learning Chinese was literally a journey of home-coming indeed.

Back in 1980, at the age of fifty, Eber already opened her heart and revisited Mielec, her father's home and her home of choice, perhaps guided by her father's lingering injunction — "Don't go." As a result, awakening memories emerged one after another, in a fragmented and elusive way, with images and implications both familiar and strange, near and far, revealed and concealed. Her journey would finally lead to the birth of this poignant and disturbing memoir more than twenty years later. The long period of gestation and recollection resulted in a variety of choices. Many Holocaust survivors permanently sealed away the past, preferring to live only in the present. The past was a shameful burden, the mark of Cain. She not only saw in it the depravity of an innocent girl next door, but

[18] Eber, *The Choice*, 175.
[19] Ibid.
[20] An interview of Irene Eber by Pei-Ying Lin, 18.

also had to confront her own betrayal driven by the instinct for survival. To tell, or not to tell, or how to tell: that is the question.

A prolific scholar of academic writings notwithstanding, Eber had a passion for writing, reading, and translating poetry. She chose to intersperse the memoir with classical Chinese poems, which makes it truly one of a kind in the avalanche of Holocaust literature. Those poems, conveying grief over war-afflicted human suffering or woe for parting with friends, seem to have had special appeal for her. Most strikingly, she felt that the vain quest for some meaning in the wanton destruction of the European Jews could best be articulated in a couplet of Lu Ji, a poet of the third century CE: "Always dissatisfaction remains when the end is reached / —dare we then be complacent and cherish our conceit?"[恒遗恨以终篇 / 岂怀盈而自足?], with which she ended the memoir. As a son of a great general, Lu Ji witnessed the demise of his father's country and lived in an extremely tumultuous time. His poems are imbued with laments on the lost country and friends, the vicissitudes of fate, and the hardships of life. Interestingly, Lu Ji has often been belittled by modern literary critics of China as the representative of formalism and 'groaning without illness' [无病呻吟, or 'namby-pamby].[21] Eber's quotation not only exhibits her profound empathy with Lu Ji, as well as her ingenuity in figuring out how to bear witness with poetry after Auschwitz, but also may well help reevaluate the modern criticism of Lu Ji.

On setting out to translate her memory into words, she would be tempted to forge from the enigmatic past a coherent and seamless narrative, as the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi brooded: "A memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, which installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense."[22] Eber kept a vigilant eye on this trap while writing her own memoir. She understood that her horizons were like those of a frog looking at the sky from the bottom of a well. She knew "that even if it is a small portion of history regained, other fragments of history will in turn be lost."[23] Accordingly, her memoir does not have a coherent or single narrative thread, and the past scenes in her life are presented neither in a chronological order nor in the form of a story, but in a cascading series of discontinuous shards. The gaps between the shards are filled with her research, reflection, and introspection, so that the whole narrative moves back and forth between a past that could hardly be recalled and a present that could vaguely sense the past — a choice of literary elegance and eloquence.

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[21] I am grateful to Professor Zhang Bowei for bringing my attention to this point.

[22] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 2013), 16

[23] Eber, *The Choice*, 5.

Repairing the Self through Academic Choices

The various choices in *The Choice*, on the other hand, bespeak a character of great fortitude, immense powers of concentration, and an unflinching determination to go her own way upon setting a goal. She herself admitted, "Because I have once saved myself from certain death, obediently dependent behavior could not be expected of me."[24] In other words, once the choice was made against her father's wish, it would be no longer possible to remain passively as one of the chosen.

Eber chose a career studying China, a sheer Other with no connections whatsoever to her previous social, spatial and intellectual backgrounds. One's ability to connect and understand is often the result of how adept one is at creatively transforming the Other. It was Chinese culture that placated this tormented scholar at a time when the memory of Poland remained dormant in her. To pursue the knowledge of China, I would like to argue, was to repair (*tikkun*) the shredded self.

For Eber, Chinese culture held not only the promise of a road that went the long way home, but also, as many western Sinologists in her generation must have sensed, a vast and strange new world. The understanding of this world involves what Joseph Levenson called "an appreciation of amateurism":

> In studying something about which little was known, there was the promise of no boredom. There was no attraction in becoming involved in a very developed field like American history, where one had to fit himself into an environment of nasty arguments over minor details or over issues of revisionism.[25]

By contrast, inspired by her Chinese mentor Professor Chen Shouyi (1899-1978) who pioneered the studies of Western receptions of Chinese culture, especially the influence of China on central thinkers in the West,[26] Eber developed an abiding interest in this intellectual and cultural history from an intercultural perspective. Her publication topics range from classical Confucianism and its Hebrew translations to Daoism and Martin Buber, from the reception of modern Chinese litterateurs such as Lu Xun (1881–1936) in Europe and America to Kafka, Yiddish, and Polish literature in Chinese translation. In an age of specialization, she was unabashedly catholic in her choice of subject matters and is eulogized as "at home in many worlds," to borrow the title of a festschrift in her honor.[27] Yet she did create a niche for herself by writing with particular authority on three

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[24] Eber, *The Choice*, 153.

[25] Quoted in *The Mozartian Historian*, 77.

[26] See Chen Shouyi, *Zhongou Wenhua Jiaoliushi Luncong* [*Essays on the History of Cultural Exchange between China and Europe*], Taibei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1970.

[27] For her partial bibliography, see Findeisen, et al., eds., *At Home in Many Worlds*, 312-320.

aspects of Sino-Jewish connections: Yiddish letters and China, the Bible in China, and, above all, the Jews in China.

In the beginning, she paid attention to the translations of Yiddish literature from English or Esperanto by such prominent Chinese writers as Mao Dun (1896–1981) and Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967). Yiddish, a kind of lingua franca spoken and read by the majority of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe before World War II, is one of Eber's three mother tongues, the other two being German and Polish. She pointed out that the reason these Chinese writers thought Yiddish mattered was not merely that they had great empathy toward 'weak and small peoples'[弱小民族] or 'oppressed peoples'[被压迫民族], but also from a misunderstanding. That is, Yiddish was mistaken for the vernacular [白话, *baihua*] of the Jewish people whereas Hebrew was deemed as their literary language [文言; *wenyan*]. Just as *baihua* was taking the place of *wenyan* in literary composition in China, which was championed relentlessly by these Chinese writers, Yiddish, they believed, was also replacing Hebrew. Thus, in Yiddish literature, the Chinese writers found affirmation and endorsement of their own goals. It never occurred to them, however, that Hebrew was also undergoing a similar literary revolution, much less that it was being revived as a modern spoken language of the Jews. A thorny issue she particularly noted was that these Chinese writers frequently translated under pseudonyms, making the identities of some of the translators elusive.[28] For Eber, trans-culturalism was by no means a one-way street. In her later years, she also investigated the image of China in the eyes of Yiddish writers contemporaneous with those Chinese writers.[29] Her earlier concerns with how cultures and peoples so different have found ways to communicate through translated texts, with where such communication becomes problematic, and with the quest for identification of the translators and sources, continued unabated.

The same concerns are arguably most palpable in her magnum opus on S.I.J. Schereschewsky (1831–1906).[30] Born a Jew in Russian Lithuania (later an American citizen) and educated in a progressive rabbinic school (*yeshiva*), Schereschewsky eventually fashioned himself into an Episcopal bishop in Shanghai and the founder of the first Christian college in China. He translated

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[28] Irene Eber, "Yiddish Literature and the Literary Revolution in Modern China," *Judaism*, 16:1 (Winter 1967): 42-59; Irene Eber, *Jews in China: Cultural Conversations, Changing Perceptions*, ed. Kathryn Hellerstein (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019), 132-156.

[29] Yi Ailian, "Renzhi bici: Yidixuyu zuojia he zhongguoren" [Irene Eber, "Getting to Know One Another: Yiddish Writers and Chinese"] in *Youtai Liusan zhong de biaozheng yu rentong* [*Representations and Identities in the Jewish Diaspora: Essays in Honor of Professor Xu Xin*], ed. Song Lihong (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2018), 3-13.

[30] Irene Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible: S. I. J. Schereschewsky (1831-1906)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). See also Eber, *Jews in China*, 87-120.

the Old Testament into northern vernacular Chinese directly from the Hebrew Masoretic Text for the first time. Later on, this translation provided the basis for the Bible translation most widely used by Chinese Protestants within and outside of China in the twentieth century. In her definitive biography, Eber explored what had been terra incognita in previous scholarship, that is, Schereschewsky's Jewish background. Among the missionaries who came to China, he benefited from his unparalleled proficiency in the Hebrew and familiarity with the traditional Jewish Biblical exegeses. This Jewish past was finally crystallized in his translation techniques and notes that opted to avoid being literal by giving a more explicit rendition in the Chinese where the Hebrew text tended to be suggestive and ambiguous. Eber thus restored the hidden traditional Jewish learning to the history of Protestant missionary work in modern China.

In her view, Schereschewsky is "the Jewish bishop." From a Christian perspective, this coinage is pointless, because once baptized "there is no such thing as Jew and Greek [gentile], slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus."[Galatians 3:28] However, as she pointed out, in terms of Jewish law (*halakha*), Schereschewsky is an apostate (*mumar*), who accordingly lost certain legal rights under Jewish law but he did not cease to be a Jew by conversion, as it is technically impossible for a Jew to change his religion.[31] The apostate is a sinner, but he is a Jewish sinner, or a "non-Jewish Jew," so to speak. What strikes her most is Schereschewsky's independence and his

> uncanny ability to make the right decisions at the right time. He was in Germany when the great emigration to the New World was under way; he was in New York when missionary recruitment for China was beginning; he was in Shanghai when foreign residence in Peking became possible. Whether he made these decisions on the advice of friends is again not important—ultimately it was he who had to decide whether or not to grasp the offered opportunities. Deciding between one course of action and another also meant that choices existed.[32]

This credo is without doubt a confirmation of her own life choices. She was in Europe when rising antisemitism forced her to make the fateful choice against the will of her father; she was in New York when her intellectual fascination for China was beginning; she was in Israel when the return to Mielec became possible. She believed that the way in which Schereschewsky made his choices had much to do with his self-perception as an outsider.[33] In this central figure in the history of Chinese translation of the Bible, what she saw and stressed was his marginality: as an orphan, he was marginal in Jewish society; as a Christian, he

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[31] Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible*, 243-244,

[32] Ibid, 236.

[33] Ibid, 237.

was much more interested in translating than in preaching and evangelizing, which placed him in a marginalized position within the missionary community.

Isn't Eber herself defined by marginality? She was a Jew amidst Germans and Poles, a runaway from her family, a "non-Jewish Jew" among Jews, an immigrant in the United States, a Holocaust survivor pretending to live a normal life in Israeli society, and a female professor of Sinology at the male –dominated Mount Scopus. The reconstruction of Schereschewsky's life seems to blur the distinction between the author and her subject and intermingle the subjective self with the objective other, while at the same time insisting on the subject's distinct personality. The resultant tension between biographical and autobiographical writing must have been therapeutic, providing a healing not just for history but for the integrity of self as well. In her later years, an unexpected telephone call gave her an afterglow of this research. A man in Jerusalem telephoned, full of excitement, saying that his mother's maiden name was Schereschewsky and that the family was from the same town as the bishop — he was probably a descendant of the bishop's half-brother. She could not help but meditate with delight, "It is not often that we find our place in this world of imponderables."[34]

Besides the "non-Jewish Jew" Schereschewsky, Eber's quest to find a meaningful place in history for the Jews coming to China runs through her academic career. According to Bernard Lewis, a distinguished Jewish scholar of Islam and the Middle East, Jews in the Diaspora can only flourish under the aegis of Christianity and Islam, two successor religions of Judaism; Jewish communities elsewhere, such as those in India and China, "appear to have played no role of any importance in the history or culture of those countries or of the Jewish people."[35] Eber the Sinologist would certainly have disagreed.

With regard to Kaifeng Jews in traditional China, the so-called 'Sinification' [华化] issue is controversial.[36] Chinese scholars, almost without exception, regard Sinification as a process that leads to total assimilation into Chinese culture. In contrast, Eber's stance can be captured in the following key words, which are central to her life experience too, "survival" and "family-centered." Sinification, she posited, meant the gradual adaptation of customs from the Chinese environment that led not to assimilation and disappearance, but to retaining a Jewish identity for 800 years. Of these customs, the adoption of patrilineal kinship organized into lineage families was, in her eyes, of paramount

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[34] Personal correspondence, on January 27, 2014.

[35] Bernard Lewis, *Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 240; Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), IX.

[36] For a full discussion, see Song Lihong,"Reflections on Chinese Jewish Studies: A Comparative Perspective," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China*, eds. James Ross and Song Lihong (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 217–226.

importance. As a result, the Jewish identity, while becoming geographically defined – since Chinese lineages are always associated with specific localities – was shifted from the community (*kehillah*)-centered to the family-centered. This transformation of Jewish identity, on the one hand, made them no longer strangers and allowed them to integrate into Chinese society. On the other hand, by virtue of maintaining this new identity, they managed to preserve the Jewish memory to this day as long as they were domiciled in Kaifeng.[37] Sinification guaranteed survival. The historical experience of Kaifeng Jewry thus underscored the importance of institutional life in the preservation and perpetuation of Jewish values.

The meaning of the Jewish presence in China was also personal for Eber. She confessed in 2015:

> I came to feel very strongly that, since I survived the war, remained alive, I owe a debt. Nothing is free in this world. You have to pay for everything. And I survived. I still, sometimes, wonder how I managed writing the books, but I really have to pay my debt, so I started writing about Jews in China.[38]

In retirement, after the publication of the memoir in particular, she continued to work hard, focusing on the problem of Jewish refugees in Shanghai during World War II. Her career even entered an admirable Indian summer that led to the birth of a trilogy on Ashkenazi Jews in modern Shanghai.

This renewed and accelerated productivity must have something to do with a growing awareness of the shortage of time. If not now, when? She sensed at this stage, as indicated in her previous quote, the destined imperative to retrospectively locate a point of origin for herself, to lay out the path to her present being, and to wrap up her career. It was a spiritual journey of homecoming. The choice of Shanghai is a natural extension of her work on Schereschewsky, but it also betrays "a form of exile," in the parlance of what Edward Said remarked of "late style,"[39] the wisdom and sadness that come from experience. Just as Schereschewsky, who published the foundational Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible, never went to Palestine, Eber, who did the foundational work on Jewish refugees in Shanghai, never set foot on mainland China. To anchor her concern with Shanghai Jewry is a form of self-imposed intellectual exile that is both heroic and intransigent, and both *in* and oddly *apart* from the present.

In *Voices from Shanghai*, she compiled and translated (mostly from Yiddish

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[37] Irene Eber, "K'aifeng Jews Revisited: Sinification as Affirmation of Identity," *Monumenta Serica* 41 (1993): 231-247; Eber, *Jews in China*, 3-53.

[38] An interview of Irene Eber by Pei-Ying Lin, 25.

[39] Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 3-24.

and Polish) the letters, diary entries, poems, and short stories written by the Central and Eastern European Jews who took refuge in Shanghai during the Nazi rule.[40] Recovered from archives, private collections, and now-defunct newspapers, this literary collection testifies to, as Kathryn Hellerstein aptly puts it, "the role that literature and culture play as modes of human survival under the direst circumstances" in general,[41] and to the variety of Jewish secular culture in the assertion of Jewish identity in particular.

Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe reconstructed the exile condition of the refugees, shedding an indispensable light on the context in which those literary compositions were produced. Eber upheld the necessity for truth in historical studies and maintained that the growing number of Holocaust memories was not a substitute for historical research. This position may serve as a corrective to some of the current scholarship motivated by contemporary agendas. For instance, she pointed out that the Jewish arrivals had little or no inkling of Shanghai's war-afflicted situation; they did not realize that the pictures of abject poverty and of Chinese indifference to the suffering and death of the needy that they saw daily in streets were those of refugees made homeless in war. In light of this reminder, the heated debate concerning how much interaction occurred between the Jewish refugees and the resident Chinese smacks of anachronism. She also discussed with candor the crimes the refugees committed.[42] On the other hand, she defined the story of Shanghai as part of the history of the Holocaust — "a story of survival, even of heroism, and of stubbornly defying fate"[43] – and warned that "neglecting or ignoring even a portion of this history puts us in danger of forgetting that, above all, this is also the history of human lives and human loss."[44] Subjectivity amalgamated with objectivity, which "lent an honesty and authenticity" to this book.

In the course of writing the book, she managed to collect over 2,000 documents. And from these she selected 184 documents in six languages (German, English, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Chinese), classified them into eight chapters, and added long introductions and copious footnotes, thereby achieving a stupendous 700-page tome of documentary history examining the whole gamut of the story from multiple perspectives.[45] Its self-evident foremost

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[40] Irene Eber, ed. & trans., *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[41] In Eber, *Jews in China*, ix.

[42] Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 133-137.

[43] Ibid, 3.

[44] Eber, *The Choice*, 205.

[45] Irene Eber, ed., *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai 1933-1947: A Selection of Documents* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018). In many ways, it is modelled after her friend Paul Mendes-Flohr's widely acclaimed

importance for the field notwithstanding, her meticulous attention to — indeed her obsession with — the biographical information of each and every refugee mentioned in the documents, as embodied in her footnotes, is noteworthy. Knowing her days were numbered and the passing of her generation inevitable, Eber concurred with Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's endorsement of historical research: "My terror of forgetting is greater than my terror of having too much to remember."[46] Her Sisyphean efforts to provide the forgotten refugees with identifications might be viewed as an echo to Saul Friedlander's suggestion for historians of the Holocaust, i.e., historians should heed the individual voice of the victims and introduce it into "a field dominated by political decision and administrative decrees which neutralize the concreteness of despair and death."[47] In tracing these victims' whereabouts before and after their sojourn in Shanghai, Eber was somewhat like a medieval artist, working in grottos on the silk road of western China, who repeatedly repainted the Buddhist frescos therein and untiringly delineated facial expressions and gestures of the tiny figures thereon. With this panorama of the Jewish refugees of Shanghai, she paid off her debt.

Exile in the Holy Land

Yet there is no redemptive end at the individual level, which was undeniably true at least for Eber. In Chinese studies there were big open spaces and the promise of a road that went the long way home. That home, however, no longer exists: "Polish Jewish culture was Yiddish culture."[48] After the Holocaust, the obliterated Yiddish-speaking community is a lost home toward which the saving remnants can only look back with nostalgia, and Yiddish becomes "a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government."[49] Of all the marginal features defining Eber, perhaps the most nagging one is that she, no matter how prolific, could not write and publish in *mame-loshn*—the mother tongue, and had to make do with the adopted languages. This state of linguistic orphanhood was doomed to accompany her to the very last of her days. Even after living in Jerusalem for many years, she could not blend in:

> I am a stranger here, because when walking in these sunlit, noisy streets, I also

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documentary history. See Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[46] Cited in Eber, *The Choice*, 205.

[47] Saul Friedlander, "Trauma, Memory, and Transference." In *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 262.

[48] Personal correspondence, on October 30, 2010.

[49] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Nobel Lecture, 8 December 1978," https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1978/singer/lecture/ accessed 5 August, 2020.

> continue to walk through fields of snow and death where Father's song of Zion is no longer heard and where my childhood picture of Jerusalem was long ago torn to shreds.[50]

Being a polyglot in academia established her international reputation of being "at home in many worlds," but she was a homeless stranger everywhere nonetheless, eternally wandering on the earth that the Lord has given to humankind.

At the collective level, the mushrooming of Holocaust museums and monuments seem to promise a redemption of its universal memory. Desirable as this would be, she contends that the "museumification" of a living, changing culture is lifeless.[51] This neologism is borrowed from Joseph Levenson who has a comment on Lu Xun, which undoubtedly resonates with Eber – Lu Xun

> would not see himself as a happy antique. He could not bear to see China as a vast museum. History had to be made there again, and the museum consigned to the dead, as a place of liberation for the living, not a mausoleum for the modern dead-alive.[52]

Likewise, Eber, as a saving remnant, could not bear to see the Yiddish culture that nurtured and nourished her as a vast museum. Being alive meant she could choose to assume the "responsibilities not only to ourselves but to the dead for whom we had to speak."[53] To view the story of Jewish refugees in Shanghai as part of the history of the Holocaust was thus to accommodate a past that is apart from her to a past that is in her. It was her personal memory of the Holocaust that bridged the past with the present, and connected the life experience to her academic choices. This memory was indeed the source of incurable trauma, but it was also the driving force moving her forward step by step. Just as the Jewish past of Schereschewsky was not an obstacle but an asset to his later translation project, Eber eventually sublimated her early dark years into a lush achievement in China studies. In this self-fashioning crucible, the ingathering of the sparks of Yiddish culture that were scattered to the four corners of the world, in my opinion, is both *the* choice she made in her academic career and the most steadfast embodiment of her Jewish identity. Yet it is precisely here that we may perceive the most profound discrepancy between her life experience and her academic choice. She found herself in exile in the holy land on the one hand, but internalized the Zionist discourse of the ingathering of the exiles (*kibbutz galuyyot*) in her scholarly efforts on the other. The irreconcilable discrepancy not only attests to the flesh and blood of her being but casts a long shadow of the

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[50] Eber, *The Choice*, 24.
[51] Eber, *The Choice*, 210.
[52] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, *Vol.3: The Problem of Historical Significance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 118.
[53] Eber, *The Choice*, 157.

Holocaust whose darkness is visible on almost every page of her writings.

At the end of World War II, Abraham J. Heschel (1907–1972), the scion of a Polish Hasidic dynasty, delivered a speech in Yiddish in New York, which was later translated into English and published under the title *The Earth is the Lord's*. In this poetically charged little book bathed in a dreamlike glow, Heschel composed an elegy for the lost Jewish world in Eastern Europe.[54] In *The Choice*, by contrast, Eber reproduced in a realistic style the guilt, despair, and agony of bereavement experienced by a survivor from a middle-class Jewish family in Eastern Europe. If Heschel's book is an echo in an empty mountain to a vanishing *niggun* (Hasidic melody), then Eber's memoir is a recitative mourner's *Kaddish*, with which she finally learnt how to mourn for the annihilated congregation (*Gemeinde*) in the world of her fathers.

[54] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's: the Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950).