Mitya's Harbin:

Majesty and Menace

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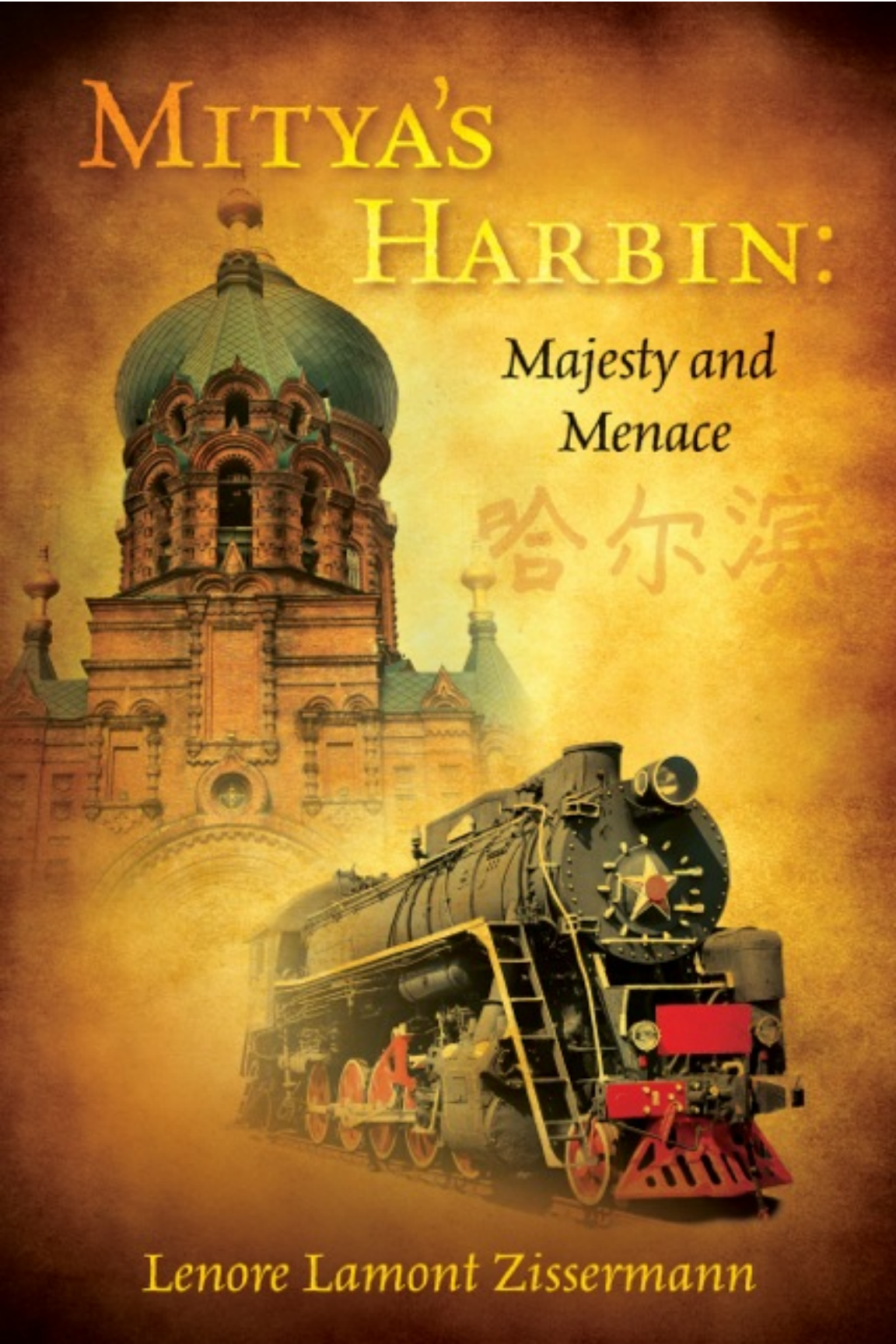

Lenore Lamont Zissermann

Mitya's Harbin:
Majesty and Menace

A Story of the City of Harbin, China, and the Turbulent Early Years of a White Russian Boy's Family inside Manchuria, China

Lenore Lamont Zissermann

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This book is dedicated to family and friends

Manchuria was China's wide frontier region north of the Great Wall. Larger than France and Germany combined, it was rich in fertile grasslands, coal and iron, grain and water power. It was the heartland of rival colonialisms, Russian and Japanese.

— Barbara W. Tuchman

I think, Mitya—and here I speak very seriously to you, not as a father but as a very, very close friend. . . . You ought not to try to "live down" and forget the past. . . . On the contrary, you should nurture and cherish it, the memory of your childhood, of your mother and grandmother and of all they stood for.

— Nikolay ("Nicholas") Vladimirovich Zissermann

Contents

List of Photographs

All photographs are from the private collection of Constantin Nikolayevich Zissermann.

Zinaida Dimitrievna Nefedieva
in the 1920s as a schoolgirl in Harbin, China.
(Constantin Nikolayevich Zissermann private collection)

Acknowledgments

> Harbin [is] … frozen by icy winds lying in the middle of one of the widest flat plateaux in the world … Harbin's architecture and street layout owes [sic] more to the Russians than to the Chinese. It is an attractive city of spires and cupolas, with many near-derelict churches.
>
> —*Patrick Whitehouse and Maggy Whitehouse*

Producing this book has been a real collaboration. Many people, at crucial times, made available documents, offered pertinent suggestions about additional resource materials, contributed their skills and time, or simply gave me the gift of encouragement, and they must be acknowledged. Patricia Polansky spent a considerable amount of time and effort reviewing parts of an earlier manuscript and making many extremely helpful comments and suggestions. Dr. Canfield Smith suggested that I read John J. Stephan's works, *The Russian Fascists; Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925-1945*, and *The Russian Far East; A History*, for information on and insights into the complicated early histories and politics of Harbin, Manchuria, and the Russian Far East. Victor Egorov, a Russian living in Australia at the time, provided a wonderfully illustrative map of the city of Harbin as she existed in 1938, a map now worn to shreds from being unfolded and refolded so many times.

Additional reference materials also include a series of articles by Victor Petrov on the "City on the Sungari" in *Edinenie*; the

publication *50 Years Later; Letters, Reminiscences, and Biographies of Former Students of Harbin Schools, Late 1940s to Mid-1950s*, published by former Russian émigrés from Harbin, many of whom now live in Sydney, Australia; and the journal *Polytechnic*,* published some time ago in Australia, also by Russian émigrés. This journal was named for the majestic and prestigious Harbin Polytechnic Institute, first established in 1920. It was very informative, either via my husband who translated its texts or directly through its photographs of the city and her people in earlier times.

Many facts about Harbin and Manchuria already have been documented by scholars and writers over the years, and I have included a chronology of dates and historical events, notes, and a bibliography to cite these works. Obviously, the chronology is not exhaustive, but I have tried to include the more important parts of Harbin's and Manchuria's complicated histories and more recent events most directly affecting the people whose stories are told here. Its length alone suggests how convoluted were the political conditions in Manchuria while they lived there.

We have some of our own photographs of Manchuria, Harbin, and the family, and these photographs helped, but only words could make the pictures move. In a sense, my husband and his family helped to write much of this story. The observations and other communications of my husband Dimitry ("Mitya") Nikolayevich Zissermann; his brothers Constantin ("Kostya") Nikolayevich Zissermann and Vassily ("Vassya") Nikolayevich Zissermann; his late father Nikolay ("Nicholas") Vladimirovich Zissermann; his sisters-in-law, one-time Harbin schoolmate Galina ("Galya") Anatolievna Zissermann and Natalia ("Natasha") Nikolayevna Zissermann; his aunt Anna ("Anya") Berger (Nicholas's sister); and others have given life to the history books and other sources to which I refer and from which I quote.

Kostya shared his own written memoirs, gave us photographs, exchanged emails with us, and loaned us irreplaceable journals with

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Politekhnik: zhurnal, 1969-1979 [*Polytechnic: journal, 1969-1979*], no. 10. Sidnei/Sydney, Australia: Association of Engineers Graduating from the Harbin Polytechnic Institute, 1979.

their historical facts. Information from his memoirs, especially, allowed me to describe the early years of Mitya and his family and to check and cross-check the extremely complicated details of those years, especially before the family moved back to Harbin from Changchun, Manchukuo, in 1946. Vassya also was kind enough to add his own colorful thoughts and memories about Harbin via emails, even though he still was quite young when the Zissermann family finally left China in 1957. Galya took the time to read and critique a much earlier manuscript and to translate some of the material she had published in *50 Years Later*, and her own memories of Russian life in Harbin also filled in gaps in Mitya's recollections.

Mitya's father, Nicholas, had made personal observations and had written his own memoirs before he died. These memoirs were so beautifully expressed that one could not only see but also almost hear and even smell the city as he described it, and they provided many subtle insights into what life was like for him and his family while they lived in Harbin. Anya Berger sent us a copy of "Anya's China Journal" and other keepsakes documenting her 2001 trip back to Harbin, China, and containing her observations of the city and region from that trip.

Equally important were my sons, Andy Zissermann and Nick Zissermann, and my daughter-in-law, Andy's wife, Katie Zissermann. Both Andy and Nick were invaluable in helping me to learn and apply the computer skills necessary to input this book onto an electronic device to get it into a form suitable for publication. And Andy, Nick, and Katie never failed to smile when, in my obsession with this story, I would bring up topics related to it, perhaps far too often, for discussion. Finally, Mitya sat patiently and dictated all he could remember of his boyhood in the city, translating numerous journal articles and other material from Russian into English throughout the years. He then patiently answered the hundreds of additional questions that I could ask only as they occurred, however inconvenient the time. And if I ever started to veer off course in documenting facts, he always set me straight. Although Mitya did not write this story, he *almost* did.

Writing an account of a topic as complicated as Harbin might be compared to chiseling pieces from a block of stone until it resembles

some kind of sculpture. One has to keep chipping away until its basic form and important details are revealed. Several people have helped me chip away at this story. My publisher Sheryn Hara carefully moved the book from its unfinished state to its final publication, sharing her no-nonsense but always kind direction based upon her years of publishing experience. Laura Zugzda created the book's cover illustration as I had invisioned it, almost as if she had read my mind. Julie Scandora edited the manuscript, and her meticulous attention to detail was invaluable. Melissa Coffman and her staff contributed not only their layout skills, but their genuine interest in the book. Carolyn Acheson created a comprehensive and detailed index, and Maggie Fimia, a family historian, gave me practical documentation suggestions and helped in electronically inserting photographs into an early draft. And, finally, to the many librarians who obtained, copied, emailed, or suggested reference materials for me, I only can extend a heartfelt "thank you" and say that all librarians *definitely* will go to heaven. Of course, any errors are my own, and no one else's.

Imagine Mitya's delight and my surprise when, unexpectedly, we found a photograph of an early graduating class from the prestigious Pedagogical Institute, another early and respected Russian educational institution established in Harbin, in an edition of *Polytechnic*. All members of a 1935 class of future teachers stood in this photograph looking happy, intense, or relieved. And in the last row, stood his mother, Zinaida ("Zina") Dimitrievna Nefedieva, as a very young woman. She had earned excellent grades and had received a silver medal from the institute. At her young age of twenty-three, life already had been difficult for her, but her future still was full of promise—it was a delight to see her there.

> The defeat of Russia in the [Russo-]Japanese war did not eliminate her from Manchuria. It merely reduced . . . the area of Russian influence there, while leaving in Russia's hands *the conducting medium for that influence, namely the main line of the Chinese Eastern Railway through North Manchuria to Vladivostok* [italics my own].
>
> —*Boris Aleksandrovich Romanov*

Vassily Nikolayevich Zissermann (on the right) and other children playing on swings in the wintertime, Harbin, China, date unknown.
(Constantin Nikolayevich Zissermann private collection)

Introduction

> Under the persuasive influence of his Finance Minister, Count Witte, [the czar] … dreamed of opening up to Russia the whole of the Far East, with its vast resources and markets, before these fell to other predators. … Russia would be a great economic power [and] … a great military one.
>
> —*Peter Hopkirk*

Describing my husband Mitya's early life in the city of Harbin in one book is like trying to push hundreds of corks floating in a swimming pool all underwater at the same time—and with only one hand. Located inside China's Three Eastern Provinces, or what was called Manchuria and, sometimes, "the granary" of China, Harbin was built inside a region with a background of so many alliances and webs of deceit that at times that region resembled a historical jigsaw puzzle with a thousand pieces. Uncovering one important event leads to several others, which also must be investigated or noted, and trying to find documentation for some happenings can be like going on an impossible treasure hunt. There are many detours one can take and still not have uncovered even a small part of the region's complicated history of noble human endeavors, political quagmires, environmental challenges and changes, technological innovations, and miraculous survivals.

It's easy to become lost in the details. There are stories within stories—and many more stories within *those* stories. There are

subplots within plots, ironies abound, and it becomes all too easy to digress. Wars are fought—some with soldiers and weapons, some with words and ideas, and most with both. Some wars are declared, but there are undeclared wars, which are just as brutal and destructive. Some treaties are signed under duress, and some have hidden agendas. Crucial details are forgotten, memories fade, rumors become facts, and emotionally laden opinions differ. Old animosities perhaps thought to be forgiven and forgotten, can resurface. National alliances, some ambiguous or forced, can shift, often in surprising, occasionally even perverse, ways. The same can be true for local political factions, both legitimate and illegitimate. The names of cities can change, some times more than once, as has been the case with present-day Dalian in China and Saint Petersburg before and after the Russian Bolshevik Revolution. The location of a nation's capital also can change, as has occurred in China. And, as is the case with all history and its many nuances and detours, generalizations are difficult, if not impossible. One treads so many fine lines in trying to be historically accurate and extract the real truth because even disciplined historians can be biased in their accounts of what happened. Teasing out the truth can be difficult. As one is lured deeper and deeper into studying such a complicated history, the mind reels.

Manchuria's history often is very different from that of the rest of China, and Harbin often was a part of, if not a reason for, this uniqueness. Thus, if making sense of Manchuria's history and politics is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, then making sense of Harbin's past is akin to taking one of Manchuria's puzzle pieces that has, in turn, been cut into its own tiny pieces and then putting it back together. Many of the city's early winds gusted and then petered out while her scholars studied and published and her scoundrels conspired and schemed. Unique economic, political, and social alliances were formed across nationalities—some amazingly strong and others, fragile and easily broken. And, throughout all this, those who controlled and ran Harbin and her railway managed to keep them functioning, for the most part, doing so from within the city's borders or from places far away. Again, there are pieces within pieces, but the city grabs your attention the minute you start to read

about her. Hopefully, this story of Mitya's Harbin fits together a few more pieces of that Harbin puzzle.

Because the city's earlier history is so complex, different people's accounts of their lives there can differ substantially from one another. Still, even the most complicated story must start somewhere, and this story begins, ironically, in the city of Birmingham, Alabama, in the United States. Dimitry ("Mitya") Nikolayevich Zissermann and his new Chinese acquaintance, whom I shall call Zhang Mĭn, sat together in the den of Mitya's home in the winter of 1983, deeply engaged in animated conversation while a phonograph played the melody "Moscow Nights." Zhang Mĭn instantly recognized the song and was delighted to hear it. He was from Communist China while Mitya now lived in Birmingham with his wife and two sons.

Zhang Mĭn was visiting the United States, but his home was in Harbin, in Heilongjiang Province in China, where Mitya and his parents, grandparents, brothers, and other relatives had been involved in an earlier, historically crucial part of that same city's history. These two men were brought together on this cool winter Alabama evening by this faraway industrial, railway, and tourist city in northeastern China where Zhang Mĭn and his wife and one son now lived and where Mitya had spent his early years as a child and young boy. The two recently had met in Birmingham where Mitya worked, and almost immediately they had discovered their shared interest in the same city of Harbin.

They discussed their work, families, and the acquaintances they shared as a result of Zhang Mĭn's current extended visit to the United States on business. But it wasn't surprising that for most of the evening Harbin should dominate their conversation from thousands of miles away. She is a city about which one could write either lyrical poems or Shakespearean tragedies. The capital of China's Heilongjiang Province, Harbin has a rich history and countless stories to tell. Sometimes unbelievably cruel, ugly, and vulgar, just as often beautiful, generous, and magnificent, Harbin was an absent evening companion Zhang Mĭn and Mitya could not ignore.

For a while Mitya and his Chinese guest recalled much about Harbin's earlier architecture, ecology, and more recent violent cultural upheavals as they talked. Then Zhang Mĭn rested his head

on the back of his chair as he thought about the early Russians who had lived in his city, and he reminded Mitya of her winters, still incredibly cold. Mitya nodded his head and thought of those cold months as they sat in his current Alabama home, warm and cozy even in the middle of December. His mind wandered for a moment as he remembered how Harbin's frigid winters had affected his life and the lives of his family in so many ways.

The physical conditions of Harbin could make her brutal, for her climate often dictated how, when, where, and even if her people lived; how closely together they lived; what they ate and wore; if, when, and how they traveled; and how far they were able to wander within or outside her boundaries. But more than this, Mitya also remembered Harbin when she was, perhaps, at her most awkward politically. During his last few years there, China was rapidly modernizing as a Chinese Communist nation while his family and many other Russians in Harbin were merely a shrinking number of people with dwindling ties to czarist Imperial Russia, a Russia which no longer existed. They were part of a disappearing "Russia abroad."

This story is not unusual when one considers when and where it takes place. Harbin was destined to become a major Communist Chinese commercial and industrial center not long after Mitya and most Russian émigrés, along with other foreigners, had left China. But describing the circumstances of the Russians in Harbin during Mitya's years there as being "in the wrong place at the wrong time" really is an understatement. These Russians were jumping from one political tightrope to another, all the while trying not to lose their balance and fall off. But, in the process, Mitya and his family witnessed some of Harbin's most wrenching cultural and political growing pains, and they were, in turn, deeply affected by them. Their story is much more dramatic and their living conditions were much more dangerous than any well-known saying might suggest. Furthermore, Mitya's story has some unique aspects making this account somewhat different from those of other Russian exiles living inside China.

My husband, Mitya, was born of White Russian parents inside a Japanese puppet state, which was, in turn, located inside China. This puppet state of Manchukuo was supposedly ruled by the former deposed Chinese Manchu emperor Henry Pu Yi, but in reality it was almost totally controlled by Japanese government officials and soldiers at the time. If this all seems strange, it's only because the full history of how these Russians came to be in China in the first place is not widely known. Thus, this is a story of some events leading up to the presence of the Russians in Harbin, and of my husband Mitya's childhood and early adolescent years, almost all of which were spent there. The story of his family's life there begins early in the twentieth century and ends in 1957 when he and what remained of the family were forced to leave the city and Manchuria, which by then had become part of the Communist People's Republic of China.

When Mitya and I first met as students at the University of Arizona in Tucson and he attempted to explain his background to me, I barely knew that the term "White Russian" existed. When we married six months later, I had become more comfortable with the term, but I still had no clear understanding of its content or meaning. When friends and interested acquaintances would ask about my husband's background and nationality, two points generally would emerge from the discussion and attempted explanation, which inevitably followed: one, that he was in some ways always destined to be a person without one country with which he could totally identify and, two, that his background was much too complicated to be explained in a single sitting, or even in a single evening.

In fact, Mitya's history and the history of the land where he was born were too complicated for me to understand throughout our early years of marriage with their routine joys, demands, and traumas. Many other members of my husband's immediate or extended family who might have remembered major parts or even bits of his childhood in the city and land where he grew up were living continents away or were deceased. This was a logical consequence of the political confusion existing in the territory where he spent his first fifteen years. Now, however, we have two sons with their own friends and families, along with other relatives

and acquaintances, who someday might wish to know the unusual story of Mitya's early years.

While he was alive, Mitya's father wrote to us regularly and included tantalizing glimpses of the family's days in Harbin. These recollections, along with conversations and more recent memoirs and emails shared with us by Mitya's brothers, their families, and others began to paint a clearer picture and to give a more accurate account of my husband's boyhood. I then wished to complete the story for our own family and for anyone else interested in reading and learning about it. It's a unique and compelling story, well worth telling.

The fact that so many people of different nationalities came and went during Harbin's turbulent early years makes the precise use of political categories difficult. Some migrated as individuals, some in groups, and some as members of huge populations. And even if one confines the discussion just to the Russians living in and around this one city, one must specify *which* Russians. The term "White Russian," as it is used here, is not to be confused with the geographical term describing residents of the country called Belarus situated to the north of the Ukraine. Rather, this use of the term is historical and political. It refers to those Russians having opposed the Bolsheviks, or Communist Reds, who overthrew Russia's last imperial Romanov czar, Nicholas the Second, and later established the Bolsheviks in power during and after the Russian February and October Revolutions of 1917. The White armies who supported the czar eventually were defeated by the Red Bolshevik forces after a bloody civil war, and many Russians were forced to leave their country for other lands, including China.

Some also use the label of "Whites" or "White Russians" to refer to the officers and Cossack soldiers of the armies who fought the Reds during the years of civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution. However, I have used the term "White Russians" in a more general sense to describe those Russian émigrés who had fled the Bolsheviks in 1917, whether or not they were soldiers. This term and the terms "Russians" and "Russian émigrés" are used in this story to refer to Russians living in China and in or near Harbin, Manchuria. Russian "Old Harbiners" or "veteran residents" had lived in the city from her beginnings or "pioneer days" at the turn

of the century and for many different reasons. They were colonists who had built the railway, were employed by it, or were engaged in other early enterprises. But after 1917, many of Harbin's Russians were indeed expatriates or émigrés, like Mitya's family, who had been opposed to the Bolsheviks having come into power in Russia after 1917—one of Harbin's major stories within a story. In the years after the Bolshevik Revolution, Harbin Russians sympathetic to the Bolsheviks and Soviets also entered the picture and often found themselves at odds with these Russian émigrés and with some Chinese. And, to further complicate matters, over time, various Russians also had dealt with or would deal with different Chinese groups or rulers, which included the Manchus, the Chinese Nationalists, warlords, bandits, and the Chinese Communists.

Many White Russians like Mitya's family had no homes inside Russia after the events of 1917, having been forced to flee either to the west or to the east. Mitya's parents and grandparents, as members of the ruling classes, intelligentsia, military, professionals, or other strata of pre-revolutionary czarist Russia, had been among those Russians forced to emigrate after the October Bolshevik Revolution, many to avoid being killed. These people came from all social classes, and many eventually ended up in Harbin, a city destined for a time to be the only truly Russian city in the world that was not inside the Soviet Union. She was only one of many such Russian émigré enclaves, but her story is especially intriguing because of her unique location and labyrinthine history and politics.

Mitya's family surname of Zissermann with its German origin belies the fact that he and his immediate family were, for the most part, culturally and socially true Russians. Most of them attended a Russian Orthodox church or a Lutheran church. And, despite the fact that he was born outside the Soviet Union and inside China, there never was any uncertainty in Mitya's mind that he was a Russian. His early years in Harbin left no doubt about this. He was to learn about and to retain his Russian identity throughout the fifteen years he grew up and lived in China, and he still speaks the Russian language fluently and regards himself as a Russian to this day. This is not unusual for former members of Russia abroad.

I have used artistic license by creating or recreating dialogue and some scenes in this book, but the historical facts are accurate to the best of my knowledge. Cultural and historical works have provided this story's bones. I also have attempted to describe some additional early history of Manchuria and Harbin in the three chapters of part 1 appearing at the beginning of this book. Direct quotations from various sources are included at points throughout, into which I have inserted explanatory terms or phrases within brackets only when I felt this to be necessary for clarity. Sometimes I have used the alternative spellings of terms used in the resources I consulted or during the periods discussed in the story, chronology, and notes. In most cases, however, rather than inserting alternative expressions of words, I have strived for consistency whenever possible by using the same spelling of a name or term throughout when I felt that this would minimize confusion.

The notes appearing in part 5 allow the reader to check the sources I used for particular items I thought should be documented. I used this manner of presenting this material, in lieu of footnotes within the text of the story. Dates and locations of battles, treaties, and other major events presented in the chronology, which precedes the notes near the end of the book, have been cross-checked, whenever possible. The reader may use this list as a reference for events discussed in the main body of the book. Very rarely, there may be some disagreement between or among different historical sources, and in such cases, I chose to document the reference I thought most reputable.

The name Harbin is very modest and unpretentious, yet the city almost always is mentioned in discussions of the political origins and geographical destinations of the White Russians who emigrated to the Far East. But, although one historian has written that the Russian presence in Manchuria from the very beginning was "centered on Harbin," people often don't know what to make of her. She became a crucial Manchurian administrative, distribution, and transportation center, but her early complex politics could overshadow these strengths. Still, her name often is used to facilitate

what otherwise might be a much more difficult description of the locations of people who lived there or of events that occurred even before the city was established. Thus, documenting some important historical facts and anecdotes relating to Harbin has helped me to place the lives of my husband and his family during the early part of the twentieth century and throughout much of the 1950s into a historical context, which, although very complicated, makes some sense in relation to the city.

Although there were times when destructive psychological pressures, and even damage, were brought to bear upon Mitya and other members of his family, the following account is not meant to be an examination of the psychological motives of any of the story's protagonists. Rather, it is a description of people's responses to a particularly difficult confluence of historical and social events, most of which were beyond their control. Mitya and his family often didn't have the luxury of self-reflection or of waiting for circumstances to adapt to them. They had to adapt to circumstances and, often, quickly.

The story's flesh and blood have come from the writings, recollections, advice, and photographs provided by my husband and others. It chronicles events in the lives of Mitya and his family, but describing their lives demands that one also describe Harbin's growth, development, and change. Thus, in a sense, Harbin is the real protagonist of this story. She has enticed many scholars to delve into her past, for she has a rich, exciting, and even romantic history, which can be gleaned from works describing her region in earlier times. Furthermore, Harbin now is something of a celebrity among cities, for her name appears, often unexpectedly, in many popular works, newspaper articles, and tourist brochures—and on many websites.

This is not a story of the city of Harbin, China, as she appears today. First-time visitors now may see Harbin as she is with her modern buildings and factories, international visitors, many colorful lights, and other twenty-first century trappings, but they won't see her as she lives in my husband's memory, a recollection of when she still was something of a Russian city, albeit on Chinese soil. Nurtured by foreign intervention, social unrest, and war, Chinese nationalist

pride had been growing inside China for decades, although this nationalism receded or intensified over time and was tempered in Manchuria during the 1920s as the Chinese and the Russians tried to work together to develop the region. They often succeeded in this. However, it was during Mitya's childhood and early teenage years when the Chinese, finally, were completing the task of making Harbin and all China their own. His and others' memories of his family's lives there have provided many of the observations upon which this story is based.

If cities had personalities, Harbin's might have been described in earlier times as very accommodating, elegant, and charming but, like all cities, she could be unbelievably brutal and uncaring. Although I have not physically walked her streets, I have spent hours becoming acquainted with Harbin through articles, books, face-to-face conversations with people familiar with her, emails, journals, photographs, and websites. Through her, I also have learned about some unbelievably complicated aspects of world history, little known to many living in the West.

Largely through research on the city in which Mitya grew up, I finally have begun to make sense of my husband's early years as a child and young boy. Learning about Harbin has helped me to understand his youth, spent in an area of the world so different from the West yet remarkably similar to other cities undergoing industrialization. I now understand why he hates cold weather, why he treasures the comfort and permanence of owning his own home, and why he always wants to be certain that there's enough food in the house.

Different people have many differing recollections and stories about Harbin. However, in researching this story, I noticed many similarities in accounts written by other Russian émigrés to political and everyday events experienced by Mitya and his family. They describe happy times often revolving around family meals and Russian Orthodox Church celebrations and holiday foods. They also tell of seasonal changes, inhospitable climates and the creative survival skills they bred, disease, death, revolutions and wars, displacements, migrations and emigrations, dreams and fantasies of returning to Mother Russia, immediate family members and good

friends parted for a time—or forever—and hopes lost or, perhaps, renewed. And, despite the chaos and the fighting between nations or just between neighbors, there were many instances of kindness and love, of families helping other families they never even had met, sometimes from halfway around the world, of individuals and organizations coming to the aid of complete strangers, and of seemingly insurmountable language, racial, religious, and other social barriers being overcome.

I also was struck by how often in these same accounts, be they scholarly or personal, people used the Russian phrase "*do svidaniia*," meaning "good-bye."

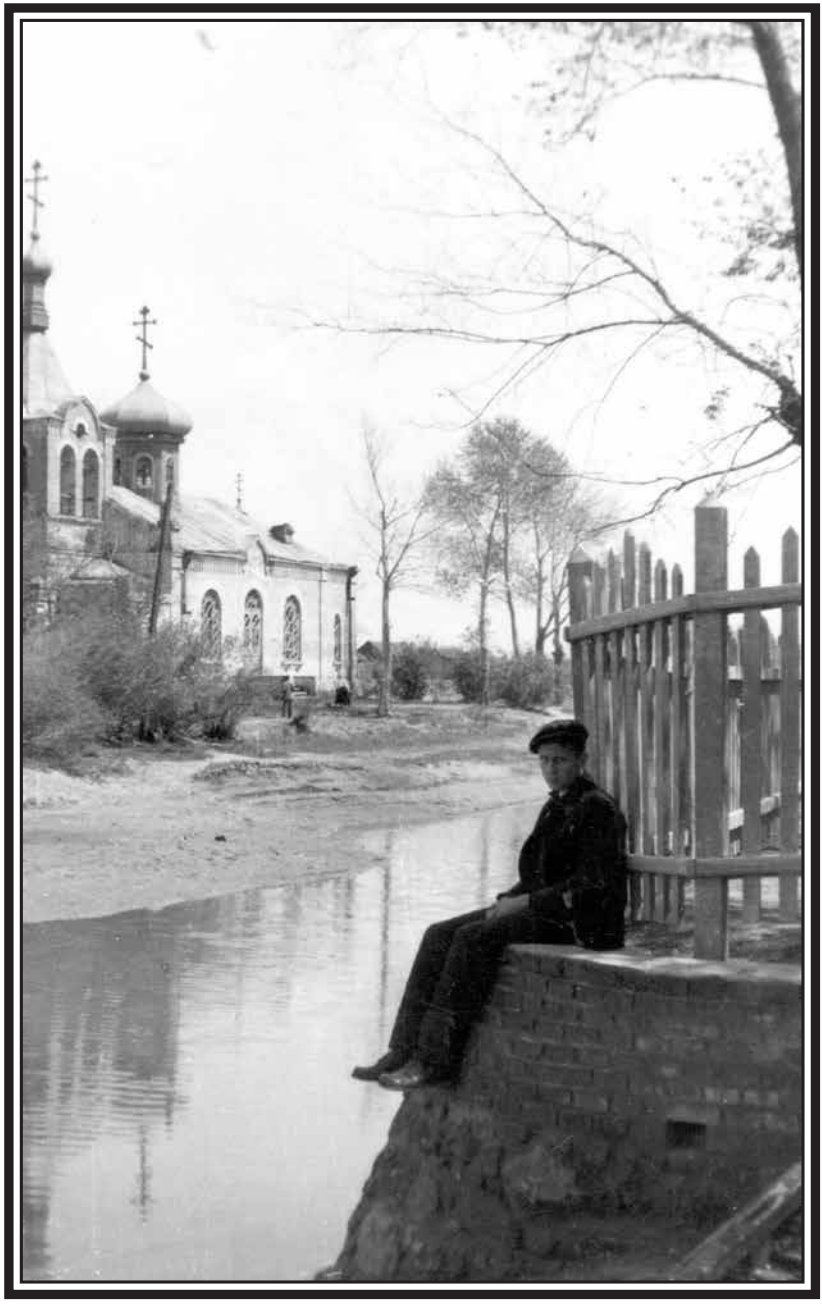
Like all cities, Harbin has had her ups and downs, and there probably are many life lessons that can be learned from her history. Still, because her area of the world was in such chaos during the early years of her establishment and, later, during Mitya's early life there, the framework offered by descriptions of Harbin and her Russian institutions lends some stability to this account. Through my research, she has whispered some of her most illuminating secrets and stories to me, for she was a spectator of the comical, dramatic, happy, suspicious, tragic, and violent events occurring within or around her. In studying these events, Harbin also has told me much about my husband's early life, which I never otherwise could have known. Historical milestones in her life often coincided with crucial events in the lives of the Zissermann family, for the fates of her Russians were deeply intermixed with Harbin's evolution into a modern industrial city and China's acquisition of a national identity.

This is one story of Harbin and her people and of the lives of Mitya and his family when she was their home. It also is a story of why she eventually had to cease to be their home. Still, when Harbin is mentioned, I have seen the smiles that appear on the faces of some of the Russian émigrés who once lived there. Although they are well aware of her more grim aspects, she still is remembered by many of them as an old friend and as a beautiful city, which once was full of active Russian Orthodox churches with onion domes and first-class Russian educational institutions.

"Aah, yes—Harbin," they would say. "Life was hard, but it had its happy moments there. The old Chinese were *wonderful* people, and it was a *beautiful* city."

Now, although my husband's family and many of the city's other former Russian residents live half a world away from him, perhaps they are with Mitya again, if only for a short while, in his Harbin.

> Caught up in a maelstrom of Chinese nationalism, Japanese imperialism, and Soviet communism [after the Bolshevik Revolution], Russian expatriates [in the Far East] had ... to move with the prevailing political currents. Living in turn under warlords, samurai, and commissars, they served each in order to survive.
>
> —*John J. Stephan*



Mitya (in the shadows) and the
Zatonskaya Church in Harbin, China, around 1954.
[Constantin Nikolayevich Zissermann private collection]

— PART I —

Maps, Family Diagram, and Background

The hunting season [in Harbin] usually started in September.… With the return of the hunting party, the game was sorted out and counted into batches of ducks, pheasants, hares, and an occasional deer. Frozen birds were kept in the cellar as it was easy to pluck them for preparation for cooking. The beautiful long pheasant tail fathers were hard to part with. My sister and I kept them for dressing up.… The wonderful aroma of the baked, wild game wafted through the house and the duck was served with fresh cabbage and the pheasant was served with cranberries.… To have a hunter in the family was a big plus.… Once, at the beginning of summer, a friend of my father's brought a cub bear. The hunter had killed his mother but felt sorry for the cub. We kept the bear for the duration of the summer as a pet.

—Galina ("Galya") Anatolievna Zissermann

To the Reader: Part 1, "Maps, Family Diagram, and Background" presents a summary of some available historical material describing conditions leading up to circumstances experienced by Mitya's family in Harbin and Manchuria. If you wish to begin reading the actual story of his family, please proceed directly to part 2, "Born in Exile."

China

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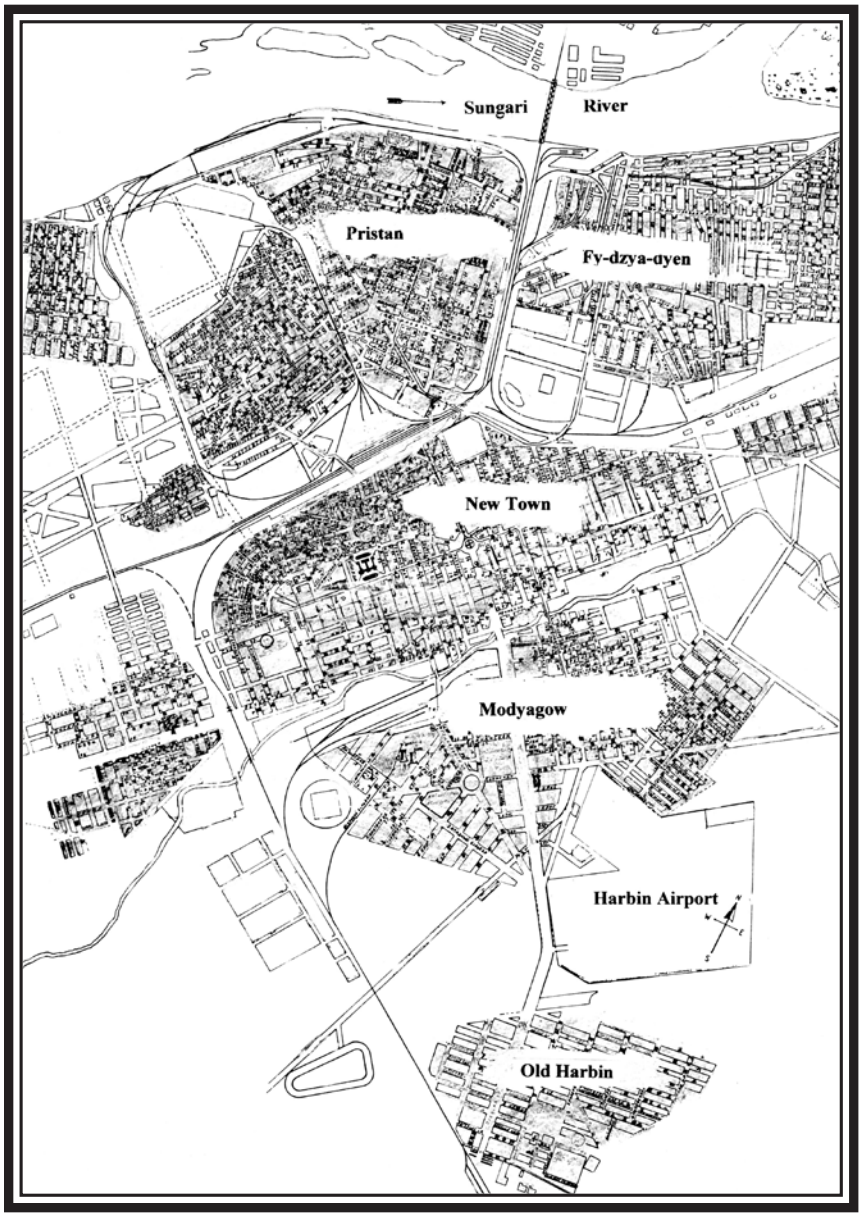
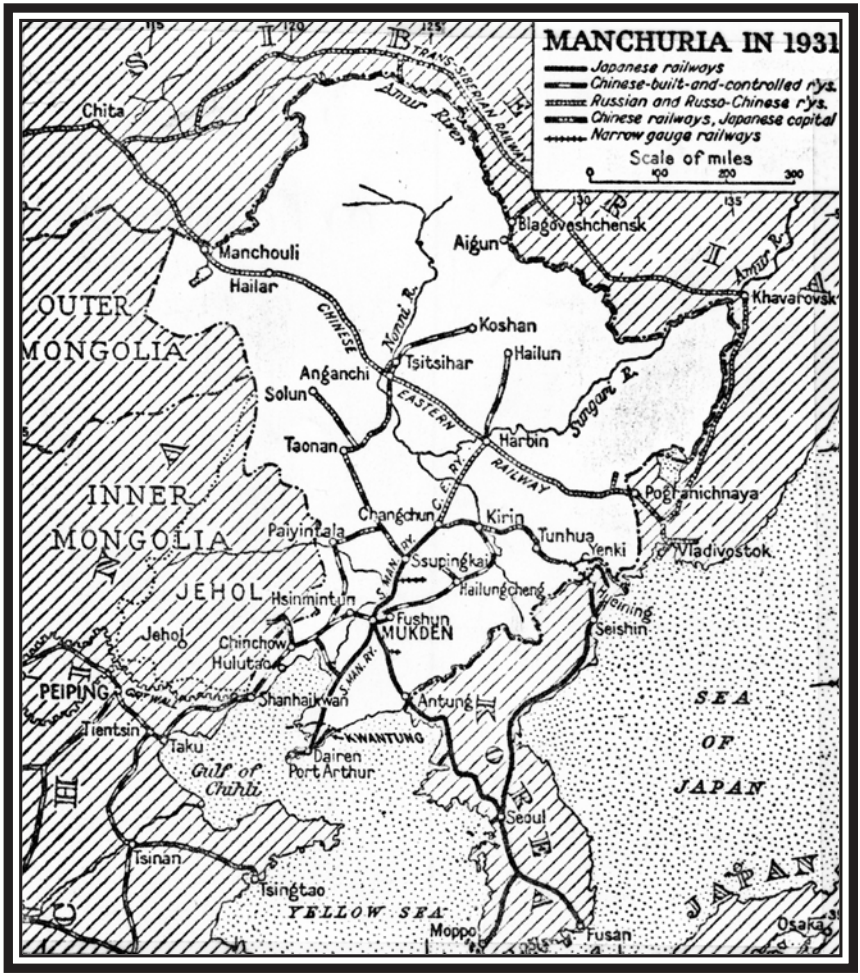
Harbin in 1938



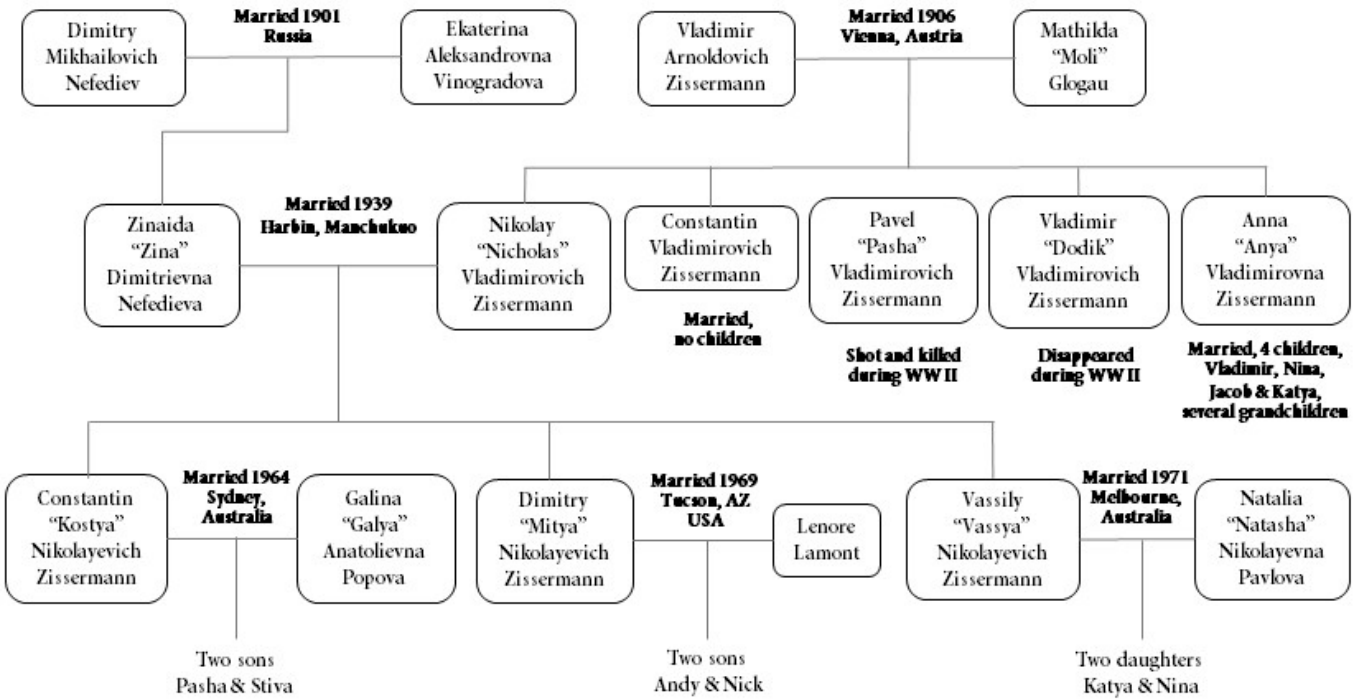
Polytechnic, *10, 1979, adapted from a map of "Harbin in 1938" included as a separate insert.*

Manchuria and Its Railways in 1931



Henry L. Stimson, The Far Eastern Crisis; Recollections and Observations *(New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 15. © 1936 by Henry L. Stimson.*

DIAGRAM OF FOUR GENERATIONS OF THE ZISSERMANN FAMILY



Family Diagram design by Marcia Breece, 2015.

Zina Dimitrievna Zissermann, Vladimir Arnoldovich Zissermann, little Kostya Nikolayevich Zissermann, and Ekaterina Aleksandrovna Nefedieva in Kwangchengtsu in northern Changchun, Manchukuo, 1940, during the Japanese occupation.
(Constantin Nikolayevich Zissermann private collection)

— CHAPTER 1 —

Manchuria Beckons

Throughout the centuries, Russia has somewhat resembled an amoeba, pushing out pseudopodia less in response to internal stimuli than to absence of external resistance.

In the remote Far East, so long as China remained powerful, she had been able to throw back the advance of Russian fur traders and Cossacks . . . In the nineteenth century, however, China's weakness was made manifest by the easy military successes of the English and the French in their imperialist pressure on the hidebound Celestial Kingdom.

—Jesse D. Clarkson

One must examine relations between China and Russia that began centuries ago to understand reasons for the Russian presence in Harbin, China, in the twentieth century. In 1969, Harrison E. Salisbury published a historical work on China and Russia, noting that even then Russia had been making advances into China for over two centuries. China and Russia were side by side historically and territorially for centuries, sharing a border about 2,670 miles, or 4,300 kilometers, long. Meanwhile, Japan to the east, made up of small islands, coveted China's land and riches and envied Russia's privileges within China. Manchuria and the Russian Far East already had a rich, eventful history centuries before Harbin and her railways were conceived by the Russians, and the interests

of the three nations, as well as those of other countries, came into conflict there. Following some of the early history of the region once called Manchuria is to understand much about Harbin and China's Russians, and this background is summarized in these first three chapters.

In addition to the rest of China to the southwest, Mongolia, Russia, North Korea, and the Yellow Sea with its Gulf of Chihli (Bo Hai) presently border the region. The Sea of Japan is nearby to the east. Covering an area of about 390,000 square miles, Manchuria is an area highly valued for its riches. Yet, until recently, it seemed to many to be a cold, dark, even frightening territory inhabited by mysterious people. During the reign of China's earlier southern rulers of the thirteenth century and the dominance of the southern coast, the northeast was an unexplored frontier. Most southern Chinese were strangers to Manchuria's people, many of whom were peasant farmers, nomads, or warlord-bandits.

Genghis Khan conquered much of Asia in the thirteenth century. Thus, in the late 1200s, both Chinese and Russian territory had comprised a portion of the Mongol Empire. However, the Manchus, to be distinguished from the more warlike Mongols to the west, probably came from the same racial stock as the Jürched, or Tungus, people who had ruled areas later to become Manchuria and the Russian Maritime Province in the Far East, while the Mongols to the west had occupied lands originally belonging to the Altaic peoples of Mongolia and who also can be found in some parts of West Asia and Central Asia.

During the Manchus' rule, they had tried to keep northeastern China separate from the rest of their Chinese Empire. They wanted to preserve their own racial identity, their territory, and control of their lucrative markets of fur, pearls, and ginseng, a valued medicine. Many southern Chinese were strangers to Manchuria's tribal people. These Manchus united other tribes and brought China under their rule, requiring two generations to accomplish this. In the process, they became China's last dynasty, ruling until China's ancient civilization began to suffer the stresses and indignities brought about by the incursions of outside nations. The Manchus had established China's last imperial dynasty in Peking in 1644 by overthrowing

the Ming Dynasty, and they ruled China through the nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century. Although Manchuria's stockier, more coarse-featured people of the north were feared and hated by many southern Chinese, the Manchus had ruled over China centuries before the first Chinese Republic was established in 1912.

Even though the Manchus had eventually taken on much of the Chinese culture, they tried to stop the incursions of fur traders into their Far Eastern territories with help from Jesuit priests, who had their own agenda of converting the Chinese to Catholicism. During the mid-1600s, Russian expeditions to explore the Amur River basin were carried out, and seeds of the city of Harbin's birth may have been planted with the Nerchinsk Treaty of 1689. This treaty was signed not too long after Peter the Great became czar of Russia and in the same century during which the Manchus assumed power. It was agreed upon after many conflicts between Russians or their hired Cossacks and the area's aboriginal people had taken place, and it established China's first international boundary with Russia.

Russia was not alone in its impatient designs upon China. Other countries besides Japan and Russia, including America, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and other nations, all eventually would have their own agendas for exploiting its riches. However, the Nerchinsk Treaty was destined to be one of so many signed by China or signed by other nations regarding China that foreign greed for Chinese resources may be the only concept making sense of them. Many such accords were ambiguous or even illegal, contributing to further exploitation of the Chinese and to misunderstandings, which eventually would come back to haunt foreign powers. Many of the seeds planted by the Nerchinsk Treaty and other agreements would grow and blossom centuries later, some into hatreds neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Trading in furs, or "soft gold," had been a big moneymaker for the Russians during the seventeenth century. Thus, hunters were very important in Russia's early incursions into the Far East, and the region's breathtaking pelts were some of the first riches drawing

early Russians into the territory called Siberia. As early as the 1500s, ambitious traders saw the enormous wealth to be gained by trapping, killing, and skinning the many varieties of animals with beautiful, thick coats bred so readily by the region's severe climate. Ignoring the protests of the indignant native people and often treating them badly, traders ventured further and further into the areas of the Amur, Sungari, and Ussuri Rivers, nearer to the Sea of Okhotsk east of Russia and northeast of Manchuria.

Rugged mercenary Cossacks, often loyal to no particular nation but allying themselves with adventure and wealth, were hired by early Russian entrepreneurs to fight the region's indigenous people and other more distant tribes as they ruthlessly battled, killed, trapped, and traded their ways farther and farther east. They braved the harsh Siberian and Far Eastern winters and were the equals of the hardy native people. But, while they furthered Russia's economic interests, they did little to cement cultural and social relations. Some fought back, but many of the region's native people could not stop Imperial Russia's hunters and fighters from moving in.

Thus, long before its railways were built, furs were among Russia's early Siberian economic enterprises. The small commercial trading forts built by the early Russians preceded by hundreds of years the noisy locomotives, which would exemplify Russia's more extensive commercial designs upon the area, as well as conflicting American, European, and Japanese goals for the land and its people. The Cossacks, traders, and later settlers simply would not stop coming.

In January of 1731, the Chinese sent their first diplomats to Russia, but the czar's official involvement with Manchuria remained limited for the next century. Unofficially, however, the cruelties of the Cossacks continued, and the Chinese hoped that treaties with the Russians might keep them under control, at least for a time. However, these Chinese hopes were not fulfilled. The appetite of Russia's Czar Nicholas the First for Manchurian territory only was further increased by receipt of furs from Alaska and by England's defeat of China in the First Opium War during the middle of the 1800s. That defeat posed a serious threat to Russia's own interests inside China.

Czar Nicholas authorized an early expedition to explore the delta area of the Amur River in 1845 and 1846, headed by Aleksander M. Gavrilov. Other expeditions followed. In 1854, 1855, and 1857 Russian expeditions into the region of the Amur River were supported by Imperial Russia and led by General Nikolay Nikolayevich Muravyov-Amursky. The 1854 expedition was large and came with women and cattle, further evidence of the Russians' serious intentions to occupy the region. Several Sino-Russian treaties and contracts that followed helped to establish Russia's position inside the region. Furthermore, it was during the second half of the nineteenth century that China was so weakened by pressures from foreign nations eager to trade, establish extraterritorial rights for their own people, and compete with other nations that the first Muravyov-Amursky expedition and the incursions taking place later could not be halted by the Manchus. Muravyov-Amursky and his people would not be stopped. The Russians now had a secure foothold inside Manchuria, which they intended to maintain.

In 1860, one year before serfdom officially was ended inside Russia, that nation placed a flag at Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan. Some thirty-one years later, Russia began construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Snaking its way across the Far East, it linked the cities then named Chita, Khabarovsk, and finally, Vladivostok. The port of Vladivostok, however, remained frozen for some months of the year, and Imperial Russia still needed year-round, ice-free access to the Pacific Ocean. Meanwhile, Russia's movement into Manchuria prompted the Manchu, or Qing, Dynasty to open the area to settlement by Han Chinese before the Russians could expand their presence there.

Other countries had exploited commercial opportunities on China's coast during the Ming Dynasty, but it was during the last complete century of China's Manchu Dynasty, in the 1800s, when foreign nations began to jockey and maneuver for the leaseholds, railway zones, trade rights, and spheres of influence that once threatened to tear China apart. During the early years

of modernization in the Western world, much of Manchuria was largely untouched by industrial technology. The region's indigenous people had been ruled by old traditions. But this would change. Russia's Czar Nicholas the Second, great-grandson of Czar Nicholas the First, furthered his country's penetration into Manchuria with the work of Count Sergei Yulyevich Witte. An ambitious and impressive man with great enthusiasm for building railways and expanding Russia's commerce, Witte was the czar's minister of ways and communication, later assuming the powerful role of minister of finance.

Witte had to contend with obstacles presented by China and by other Russian officials as he pursued his plans for developing his country's commercial interests in the Far East, but his social and economic policies for the development of what would become the city of Harbin and other areas prevailed, if by sometimes circuitous means, including bribery. By December of 1895, Russia had signed a contract with China to establish the Russo-Chinese Bank to finance new Manchurian railways. Russia and France had become allies with one another due to their mutual isolation from other great powers of the time, and Witte used French loans to help establish the bank and lay the rails.

A one-time Ukrainian railway manager himself, Witte thus provided the early administration and support for the czar that contributed to this period of Russia's speedy industrial penetration into the Far East via the laying of railway lines. In doing so, he also helped to grow Russia's capitalist enterprises there. With financial assistance from the French, anxious to become allies with Russia in case of war with Germany, Russia laid miles of railway lines throughout undeveloped parts of China before the latter even was truly united as one country. It was in building these railroads inside China to enhance its own commercial activities that Russia demonstrated its continuing interest in its large, southern neighbor. Furthermore, Imperial Russia would allow Russian people and others settling in Manchuria remarkable freedom in how they worshipped and ran their businesses. The Russian government believed that religious tolerance, often not practiced inside Imperial Russia itself, would best further Russian commercial interests inside

Manchuria. Russia wanted Manchuria's Russian settlers to be happy while they worked hard for the czar and his people.

Of more direct historical importance for Harbin, however, was the fact that this latest contract also established the Chinese Eastern Railway Company, an organization which was to build the Chinese Eastern Railway from a point on the Trans-Siberian Railway some miles from the city of Chita. This railway would have its headquarters in the new city of Harbin and would shorten the distance between Irkutsk near Chita and Vladivostok. It would cross the Sungari River and, eventually, link Chita and the Manchurian cities of Manchouli, Tsitsihar, Harbin, and Pogranichnaia (or Suifenho). It would proceed to Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan, as well as south to Port Arthur.

In March of 1898, Russia secured a controversial lease on the city of Port Arthur on the Liaotung Peninsula to the southwest near the Yellow Sea. In July of that same year, an agreement was signed by the Chinese with the Russian-managed Chinese Eastern Railway to build a south Manchurian branch. Thus, a section of the railway would connect the brand new Russian city of Harbin to the cities of Mukden (also called Shenyang), Changchun, Dal'ny (later named Dairen by the Japanese), and Port Arthur, a valuable ice-free port.

Meanwhile, Japan observed these activities inside Manchuria with keen interest. Before Russia had leased Dal'ny and Port Arthur in 1898, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and 1895 had gained for Japan possession of the strategic Liaotung Peninsula in southern Manchuria, west of Korea. This included control of the key city of Port Arthur. This arrangement had been formalized by the Treaty of Shimonoseki of April 1895. However, in November of that same year, Japan returned to China all territory ceded to it in this treaty, bowing to international pressures aggravated by Russia's fear of a Japanese presence in Manchuria. This fear would prove to be well-founded and long-lasting, but Japan would obtain railway property in south Manchuria in 1905.

Thus, after 1895, the Russians busily had continued pursuing their goal of building their railways in Manchuria with the signing of a railway contract in 1896 and the leases of Dal'ny, Port Arthur,

and the Liaotung Peninsula in 1898. Czarist Russia, which simply had taken control of parts of Manchuria formerly claimed by Japan after the Sino-Japanese War, now, for a short time, would have access to priceless resources and territories and a coveted port on warmer, friendlier Far Eastern waters.

Russia was able to populate parts of China's Three Eastern Provinces, as Manchuria was called, under the very noses of the Chinese, who were too preoccupied with other matters to remedy the situation. Russia's railways inside China were completed by Russian railway construction engineers, Chinese and Russian workers, and possibly, Russian convicts. Those who designed and supervised the building of these railways believed that they would fulfill their czar's dreams of industrial glory, thriving trade, and a sure-fire transportation route from Imperial Russia to the Yellow Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the Pacific Ocean. Because of its control of the Chinese Eastern Railway, the Russians also would be able to obtain the rights to mine ores, harvest timber, navigate inland waterways, and build more railways. She was not located by an ocean or a sea, but Harbin still would become even more important than the cities of Khabarovsk, where the Ussuri and Amur Rivers meet, and Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan, as a center of commerce and transportation.

Northeastern China was a land with enough coal, iron, gold, nickel, petroleum, and timber to satisfy the dreams of the most ambitious industrialist, resources only waiting for the forces of modernization finally to notice the region and exploit its slumbering wealth. Such riches attracted people from many countries, despite the often inhospitable climate. The possibilities of trapping furs and harvesting millet, soybeans, beets, rice, tobacco, cotton, silk, and other products lured Russians, Japanese, and other foreigners into its territories. More important for Harbin's Russians, there were abundant raw materials there to fuel the efforts of Imperial Russia and its later reincarnation as the Soviet Union to build and run its railways.

Thus, it was during the latter part of the nineteenth century and all of the twentieth century when modernization, with its triple forces of industrialization, large-scale bureaucratization, and urbanization, complicated the face of China and, particularly, Manchuria. The Chinese Eastern Railway and the other railways built by the Russians, the Japanese, and other nations near or in Manchuria, introduced some of the first machines not powered by humans or animals to be seen or used by many native people in the region. Czarist Russia organized the bureaucracies to run their trains and built Harbin to help support them.

For those who eventually emigrated to Manchuria, including the family of Dimitry ("Mitya") Nikolayevich Zissermann, whose story this book relates, the preconditions for their later presence in the region until the middle of the twentieth century had been laid down with the very first railway lines. The necessary raw materials were right there in Manchuria to fuel many of the engines of Russia's early industrialization by way of its railways in the Far East. Even before this time, Imperial Russia's incursions into Manchuria had, in a sense, altered what had been meant by the Russian Far East. As pointed out by John J. Stephan, although it is difficult to conceive of the Russian Far East as being located within "either Asia or Europe," Russia's activities inside Manchuria from 1896 until 1954 really comprised "an extension of the Far East into China."

Harbin grew into a major symbol of these Russian activities inside Manchuria. However, her populations would include not only Chinese, Japanese, and Russians, but also Armenians, Bashkirs, Estonians, Georgians, Germans, Jews, Karaims, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Tartars, and Ukrainians. Russian culture would be but one pattern in the total fabric of Harbin life, but it would be a dominant motif to which other cultures would conform for many years. A mere 250 miles south of the border between China and Russian Siberia, Harbin quickly became a strategic railroad city. It also was one logical destination for many White Russians displaced by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 taking place inside Russia a few years after the Chinese Revolution of 1911 had ended China's imperial rule.

There had been some Chinese resistance to the Russians' railways and other activities from Harbin's earliest days, but there also had been many instances of cooperation between the two nations in the region. However, decades later, while Mitya and his family were living there, the Chinese would undo many of the deeds and misdeeds committed by foreigners, including the Russians, within the city and within Manchuria and China. The power tools of industrial technology brought into China by foreign powers, eventually, would simply be taken over by the Chinese. Harbin's history would mirror the history of the interrelationships among China, Japan, and Russia during the first half of the twentieth century. It also would symbolize China's emergence as a Communist world power at the beginning of the century's second half, and Harbin's story also would be a story of many of Manchuria's Russians and of Mitya and his family.

Songs have been written about cities. Since first appearing, perhaps some five thousand years ago, they have harbored the best and worst of human activities, giving rise to noble ideas and humiliating social conditions. Cities, some write, first gave artisans and scholars the luxury of time freed from physical toil to pursue their activities. As vessels of culture and knowledge, they could place unbridled luxury and wealth side by side with decadence, misery, and unbelievable poverty. And, as cradles of magnificent intentions or vicious hotbeds of intrigue, they attracted the eager and the disenchanted, and their resources could provide opportunities for the gestations of coups, rebellions, wars, or simple ill-fated and long-forgotten political strategies left unfulfilled.

Perhaps ancient cities were states unto themselves, offering some protection and political stability in a very hostile, unpredictable world. Perhaps they exerted their dominance over the surrounding countryside in exchange for the relative safety they provided. As they grew and multiplied, cities took on symbolic meanings. Wars were won or lost with the acquisition of a strategic urban area, and they marked the beginnings, intermediate points, and endings of journeys.

People came to identify themselves with a particular city, and it competed with family names and occupational titles as a source of identity. Cities have united people who otherwise might share nothing in common, bringing together the most unlikely groups and uniting different races and nationalities in unique and unexpected ways. Such physical proximity has resulted in miracles of ingenuity and the expected human conflicts. Furthermore, the detached, formal exchanges also characteristic of many urban social relations can provide a welcome anonymity for persons who wish to remain inconspicuous. But, ironically, with their dense, impersonal social interactions, cities also can foster an indescribable loneliness, unknown to even the most isolated rural dweller, as well as the uncontrolled spread of diseases.

Social systems are greatly influenced by their physical environments. The uses to which a city's lands are put, the locations and sizes of its transportation routes, and its architecture ultimately depend upon the resources provided by nature. A city's ecology also affects its economy, its family structures, and how it controls and educates it citizens. Perhaps most significant, a city's buildings and monuments reflect the nature of the deities or leaders worshipped and honored by its people.

Almost all these facts of urban life have applied to Harbin at one time or another. Those who planned and built her and her railways did a remarkable job of adapting her to a harsh environment, and generations now have lived with some of the decisions of Harbin's original architects and builders. The geography and climate of that part of the world where she was established have molded her character, and they still do to this day.

Harbin is located in the Far East in that part of northeastern China east of Mongolia and northeast of the Great Wall of China at a latitude of approximately 45° to the north and at a longitude of approximately 126° to the east. Millions of years of geological activity formed what came to be called Manchuria. Time aged its topography and gave rise to its present climate. Coal-beds, gold, iron ore, timber, fertile soil deposits, and other resources were created

by natural forces oblivious to the many uses to which such riches would be put eons later as the Russians and other nations began to crisscross the territory with railways lines.

Mountains, rivers, and oceans surround the region. It is separated from Inner Mongolia by the Greater Khingan Mountain Range, from Russia and Siberia by the Amur, Argus, and Ussuri Rivers, and from North Korea by the Yalu and Tumen Rivers, along with a mountain volcano. Manchuria's upper northwestern portion juts into the present Russian Federation. It easily could have become part of the Soviet Union, and in fact, some might argue that it almost was a part of czarist Russia during the most complicated decades of the region's recorded history.

A major waterway within Manchuria is the Sungari River, possibly named for the Dzungar, an early western Mongolian tribe. It is frozen from the latter part of November until March. Flowing north, it eventually turns sharply to meet the Amur, or "Black Dragon" River, near Manchuria's northeastern corner. Here the Amur's waters proceed northeast to empty into the Sea of Okhotsk. Falling within Manchuria is the Manchurian Plain where Harbin was built on its northern portion. Aside from the less exotic cattle, goats, pigs, sheep, and other domestic animals raised in the region by farmers, there are bears, foxes, marmots, pheasants, sables, tigers, and wolves to be hunted there. Winters are longer, with shorter summers and more rain falling in the latter season. Summers can be hot, and winters, brutal and dry with frost. Winter temperatures can reach -40° Celsius, but rice, spring wheat, soybeans, and root crops, such as potatoes and sugar beets, still grow there.

Heilongjiang is the largest province of what was called Manchuria, and Harbin sits in the southern part of that province, of which she is the capital. She is located fairly near the center of the former Manchuria, and the Sungari River drains the Manchurian Plain there. Her sister city of Changchun lies to the south-southwest, with Tsitsihar located to the northwest. The port city of Vladivostok is located to the southeast, along the Sea of Japan. And the cities of Dalian (formerly called Dal'ny and then Dairen) and nearby Port Arthur lie on the Liaotung Peninsula to the south. China's Forbidden City and present capital of Beijing, also lies to the south, outside of

Manchuria and south of the Great Wall of China, while Harbin is located north of that Great Wall. The ancient city of Mukden once was the capital of the Chinese Manchu regime for a time before 1644, and it is the location of the tombs of early Manchu rulers. Now also named Shenyang, it sits north of the Liaotung Peninsula and of Dalian and Port Arthur and southwest of Harbin. The old age of Shenyang alone reminds one of how young modern Harbin is.

Harbin can serve as a reminder to the traveler proceeding north that she is, perhaps, one of the last metropolitan cradles of safety encountered before one braves the even colder and more inhospitable lands of Siberia. Harbin's region, with its harsh winters and rich terrain, has bred tough, resilient animal and plant life, as well as sturdy people. During the year's coldest months, it seems as if one's spit can freeze before hitting Harbin ground. Her winters are to be taken very seriously, but her cold weather does not completely dominate life year-round. Summer temperatures can be hot, but they still are a welcome relief from the frigid cold.

Lewis Mumford has suggested that the world's first permanent human settlements might have been graveyards, or villages of the dead. In such early, precarious times, perhaps only the deceased could reside together for any length of time. Maybe their final graves or tombs lured their loved ones back to their resting places time and time again until nature and human ingenuity finally allowed for the establishment of the first stable, permanent human settlements. Between that time and the present, however, many cities have appeared, and along the way, railways have been picturesque, romantic power tools of industrialization underlying the formation of many of them. The rails have planted cities across once unpopulated territories and have converted mere land into priceless real estate. Railroads also have transformed lives. Thus, one way in which social scientists classify cities is by describing each as a "preindustrial" city or as a much more recent "industrial" urban area.

Harbin, when described after the Russians built the railways, falls into the latter category. China's ancient cities had protected the seats of its emperors, but she is an industrial city, planned as

a crossroads of two major transportation systems. She grew from a Chinese hamlet during relatively recent times when industrial technology already was spawning the many settlements so badly needed to run the greedy factories of the so-called developed or developing world. She was established, and she grew to be a major provider of workers and supplies for her sister cities of Dal'ny and Port Arthur to the south when locomotives already were major transportation mechanisms. Coal and timber nourished Harbin during her infancy, and she cut her teeth on her railway ties laid down with Herculean efforts and at some human cost.

Thus, from the start of Harbin's growth as a city she was, above all else, a railroad settlement, established at a time when cities were not just self-contained city-states but also located within nation-states or under their control and, thus, subject to the policies of these larger and more powerful political entities. Although established inside China, at her heart and soul, she was in many ways a child of Mother Russia, but she also was, ironically, a social hybrid, cross-pollinated mostly by both the Chinese and the Russian cultures. As an industrial city, she still is young, so most of her history is yet to be. She grew so quickly in her early days that her polyglot populations were difficult to count. Although she changed hands at times, she still retained the same name she was given early on. Despite so many conflicts and changing politics, this is in itself something of an accomplishment.

Furthermore, while the buildings of some cities have been completely destroyed by such conflicts and changes, Harbin has retained a few examples of her original Russian architecture. All this has occurred despite the fact that as a modern city she has yet to boast of more than a few complete generations of inhabitants and despite the distinct possibility she has not yet reached the peak of her commercial, industrial, and technological prowess.

Harbin's story is more than just a blip in the history of the last century or so. She has overcome much and has, in fact, often flourished, despite her sometimes inhospitable climate and torturous history of political crises. Moreover, she has mirrored many of the conflicts and disagreements occurring among the nations of China, Japan, Russia, and others but often little known to many living in

the West. And, as always, the railways have been key to fostering her growth and enabling her to survive, and even thrive.

> [During the first half of the twentieth century] Manchuria has become a sort of common ground, a no man's land, in which the interests of China, Japan, and Russia have at times been almost hopelessly confused.
>
> —*Paul Hibbert Clyde*

Vladimir Arnoldovich Zissermann and his oldest son, Nikolay Vladimirovich Zissermann, in Manchukuo. Both had close connections with Harbin's originally titled Chinese Eastern Railway, which was given various new names over time, in 1938.

(Constantin Nikolayevich Zissermann private collection)

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