

Breaking the Ice

Rod Beecham

Mara Moustafine

SECRETS AND SPIES: THE HARBIN FILES

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HARBIN IS A CITY in north China. In the 1920s it was a city of Russians: workers and their families associated with the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), effectively a Russian colony in Manchuria; Jews who had fled from Tsarist persecution (discriminatory policies were not practised in Russian Manchuria); 'Whites' driven out more recently by the Bolshevik victory. Mara Moustafine was born in Harbin, in 1954: on her father's side half-Russian Orthodox and half-Muslim Tatar, on her mother's all-Russian Jew.

By the late 1950s the cumulative effect of Sino-Soviet tension, the sale in 1935 of the CER by the USSR to the occupying Japanese, postwar Soviet pressure to return 'home' and Maoist xenophobia had decimated the Russian population of Harbin. In 1959 the young Mara and all but one of her remaining family emigrated to Australia. Bilingual in Russian and English, Moustafine completed a Masters in International Relations at the Australian National University and subsequently forged a successful career as a diplomat, intelligence analyst, journalist and senior business executive in Australia and Asia. *Secrets and Spies* is her first book. It records her search for the missing chapters of her family story.

The prologue describes a photograph, reproduced on the cover of the book, of Moustafine's great-aunt Manya, the younger sister of her grandmother Gita. The author details her response to the photograph: 'Though I had never known her, Manya struck me as someone I could relate to.' Manya had been killed in Stalin's purges, as had her brother, Abram. In 1992 Moustafine, at her grandmother's suggestion, took time out of a Moscow holiday to visit Riga to meet Galya Sviderskaya, widow of Yakov (Yasha), the younger brother of Abram, Gita and Manya. At Galya's flat, she was shown family photographs and other memorabilia, including the certificates of 'rehabilitation', or *spravkas*, for Abram, Manya, Yasha and their father, Girsh. These were issued in 1956 and 1957: too late for all but Yasha, who survived his time in prison camp and, it would seem, redeemed himself by his medical work during the war before his official rehabilitation. He died in 1985.

In a country still run on papers with crests, signatures and stamps, the *spravkas* prove to be the keys to the family history. What follows details Moustafine's efforts, in Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod (formerly Gorky), Shanghai, Stanford, New York, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and Harbin itself, to find out what happened to these and other members of her family.

The book unfolds rather like a murder mystery — which, in a sense, it is. Moustafine's procedure resembles that of the forensic scientist as she disinters archival material, noting, comparing, verifying and applying her own critical judgment. The search is recorded in loosely chronological fashion, although she abandons strict chronology to allow the stories of particular individuals to be told in single chapters.

Her investigations were remarkably successful: partly through luck, partly through contacts, but mainly through her own thoroughness, tenacity, scholarly training and linguistic ability. I will not reveal the stories of Abram, Gita, Manya and Yasha, nor those of their father and their remarkable mother, Chesna, whose phenomenal endurance of the unspeakable was not, I suspect, an uncommon lot for Russian women of her generation. Their stories are told well by Moustafine. The story I want to reveal is the author's own. How did she feel during her journey through this Byzantine labyrinth? How did it change her? What did she learn?

That I cannot answer these questions is a weakness of the book. The voice is one of reportage rather than evocation. Visiting her grandmother's relatives at their Moscow apartment for the first time, Moustafine writes: 'I am met with warmth, traditional Russian family hospitality.' Reading this, I believed that there was warmth and I believed that there was hospitality, but I wasn't taken there.

Similarly, when Moustafine dines with her contact in the far east of Russia, Sasha Lavrentsov, she writes: 'There is nothing like black bread, icy cold vodka and a dill cucumber to break the ice in any Russian social interaction.' The combination of flavours is irresistible and I read on eagerly, hoping for further sensual delights: descriptions of the décor, what the light was like, the weather, something to animate and illuminate her conversation with Lavrentsov, and to throw the two of them into relief. But nothing happened. The narrative took up the threads of investigation once more, like an Agatha Christie novel, sustained solely by the intricacy of its plot.

Perhaps the author was motivated by a tactful desire not to intrude herself into other people's stories. If so, the tact was misplaced. It's a pity, because *Secrets and Spies*, a fine book in so many ways, would have been all the richer for it.