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# A Case of Two Literary Identities in Harbin and Shanghai

*Rachel Wechsler*

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When addressing identity, perhaps the greatest insight is provided in writing: authors unconsciously give clues to the complexities of their own contradictions and personal conceptions. Harbin and Shanghai, two cities in China whose people, environments, and identities are geographically and culturally distinct in myriad ways, were nonetheless the origins of two men who developed an intense love for their communities, and whose identities were manifested in both literary and textual capacities. Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra and Valerij Perelesin (Pereleshin) exemplify the intersectionality of cultural and literary identity. Ezra used his position as editor of *Israel's Messenger* as a means to explore his own religious and internal conflict, while Perelesin's multinational identity seeped through his translation and poetry pieces. The striking parallels and differences between these two men, who were both pillars of their literary communities, are found in their writings and in their respective biographies. In confronting their existential qualms, Ezra and Perelesin wielded their writing utensils and eloquently addressed the factors that shaped their respective identities.

The arrival of Jews in both Shanghai and Harbin in the 19th and early 20th centuries brought about cultural and societal revolutions. Although the visits were meant to be temporary, entire communities found a home and a lifestyle within these two distinct cities. Soon after the Baghdadi Jewish

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Community arrived in Shanghai, Jewish life flourished. In part because of the gratitude from the Sassoon family, Jewish social clubs, day schools, businesses, and institutions almost instantly made their marks within Shanghai.<sup>1</sup> The Jews, diverging from a historic habit, purposefully avoided assimilation. A new type of tradition was emerging, where a cohesive community emphasized their foreign origin to attain success. This tight-knit bubble occasionally interacted with the larger community of Shanghai, but “the majority of the Baghdadi Jews lived in an isolated world ... and showed little concern that events in China would affect their lives.”<sup>2</sup> They spoke English, never cared to learn Chinese, and looked upon the British flag with love and adoration. In other words, this isolated community lived a wholly Jewish existence, and Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra was one of the few who deviated from insular lifestyle.

Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra, an eloquent leader of the Shanghai Jewish community who lived from 1883 until 1936, first ascended to the role as editor of *Israel's Messenger* when he was twenty-two. This was no menial task, and Ezra soon poured every ounce of his passion and fiber of being into this English newspaper. He infused the local paper with youthful vigor, and in turn, left behind a sense of himself. In composing, reviewing, and adding editorials and commentaries, Ezra breathed life into his accounts of this community, and left a detailed history of a fascinating society that spans more than thirty years. Ezra utilized his role as editor to ultimately confront the developing issues within the Shanghai Jewish community. As a fearless champion of traditional Judaism, Ezra used his fountain of biblical knowledge to promote unity within the Jewish community and within the Shanghai community at large. As such, *Israel's Messenger* produced numerous pieces about the Ashkenazi Jews, the ancient Kaifeng Jews, and even the different denominations of Shanghai Baghdadi Jewry. Ezra clung onto his newspaper when he feared that his community was on the verge of assimilation, or acculturation—threats which he believed would ruin their heritage. But while

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he staunchly opposed intermarriage and various aspects of Reform Judaism, Ezra fervently supported a knowledge of the larger Jewish community. He extended the newspaper's scope to include the community's interaction with the wider public, both within China and beyond. He included stories of what was happening to Jews abroad, and reinforced links between European Jewry and Baghdadi Jewry. As he grew more invested, "the paper became his one and only passion,"<sup>3</sup> to the point where he proceeded to publish even with lukewarm support by his own community. In truth, the growing dissatisfaction had come about since he had transformed the local newspaper into a "sounding board in which to air his personal views and frustrations,"<sup>4</sup> a trait which is not advisable for an editor.

Ezra's investment and involvement, although well-intended, were far too intense, and at times, the paper seemed to serve as Ezra's autobiography. All of his inner struggles dealing with Judaism, Zionism, and cultural interaction manifested themselves onto paper and into articles. His authentic voice approached aggression and his opinions permeated the hundreds of pieces about controversial topics. Instead of treating the paper as an instrument in his career, he turned it into his life. He had no issues with confronting or expressing his identity, but rather his issue was separating his own bias and identity from the paper. Even in photographs of Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra, he is depicted with a pen, which symbolically illustrates his all-consuming dedication.<sup>5</sup> This commitment, although strenuous for him and his family, ultimately remains a treasure to the community, and despite his impartiality he is remembered as someone who "spent the greater part of his leisure doing what he could in the service of Zionism and communal amelioration."<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, a simultaneous cultural revolution was occurring in Harbin. After the bitter and long Russo-Japanese war, Harbin became a commuter stop where Russian soldiers could find cheap work, cheap goods, and little discrimination.<sup>7</sup> This town was populated by hundreds of Russian émigrés working on the Chinese Eastern Railway, and

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its distinct European culture shocked and intrigued the soldiers who longed for a taste of home. This mass influx of Russians brought forth the Jews who had been banished from the Pale of Settlement. Harbin's demography of became mostly Russian, with the large proportion of its resident speaking Russian.<sup>8</sup> This city was culturally European, in contrast to the culturally Middle Eastern atmosphere of the Baghdadi Jewish Community in Shanghai. In a Chinese city, hundreds of miles away from the border, the Russians had found an "almost totally Russian city, populated mainly by people with roots in the south of European Russia."<sup>9</sup> More importantly, these exhausted Russian soldiers and travelers had found a home. It was perhaps inevitable that a cultural revolution would arise in this atmosphere, and not surprisingly, social and institutional life soon grew rapidly. Just as Baghdadi Jews had done in Shanghai, Russian Jews were starting their own schools, synagogues, businesses, hospitals, and theatres. Historians argue that this cultural phenomena "testify to the outstanding intellectual level of the multinational Harbin community."<sup>10</sup> Into this environment that fueled literary passion and interaction, Valerij Perelesin was born.

Known today as the "twice born poet,"<sup>11</sup> Valerij Perelesin started his poetic career in Harbin.<sup>12</sup> Adept with many languages and the use of symbolism, Perelesin published several books and by the 1930s was one of the most well-known poets in Harbin.<sup>13</sup> His success followed him from Harbin, to Shanghai, Russia, and all the way to Brazil. Perelesin's identity conflict is rooted in this complex array of places that he was eventually able to call home. His career had begun in Harbin, where he reflected on Chinese themes and used them in his book of verses. Just as Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra was well-verse in Jewish texts, Perelesin was quite proficient in Chinese literature, and translated clippings into Russian.<sup>14</sup> Chinese theology had infiltrated his identity, and just as it had made its mark, Perelesin fled Harbin and became a monk, in hopes of avoiding Soviet persecution.<sup>15</sup> In this new phase and religious transition, he continued his studies of Chinese works, but soon felt

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out of place. He attempted to move to San Francisco, but was denied entry for his hobby of translating Russian, and was mislabeled as a Soviet spy. He finally settled in Brazil, and spent the rest of his life teaching English and Russian, and publishing for acclaimed Russian émigré magazines.<sup>16</sup>

At the outset, it seemed as though Perelesin was living a wonderful life full of illustrious travel and poetic experience. But his travels were not the result of a romantic endeavor, rather pure necessity. In the course of his life he had three different homes, three different languages, and three different lifestyles. His source of constancy, the phenomenon that kept him grounded, was literature and poetry. In each place, he spent countless hours devoting himself to writing. It was remarkable that despite the vast geographical barrier, he had managed to preserve ties to his Russian identity. His fame largely came from the fact that he had managed to appear in major émigré magazines and journals. He was, in fact, so eloquent with his words that Simon Karlinsky says his readers “gradually became convinced that Perelesin belonged in the front ranks of Russian poets.”<sup>17</sup> Here lies an important contradiction between Perelesin and Ezra’s roles as writers. While Ezra was involved in journalism and had to adapt to the public opinion, Perelesin was left to his own devices to write about that which he wished, which suggests perhaps a less stable income and a more introverted personality. This aspect of his identity is rooted in his writing, which “full of transparent images and metonymy ... on the one hand is full of spiritual stillness, and on the other is filled with youthful restlessness.”<sup>18</sup> The latter antithetical reflection of his career is directly correlated to his identity, which manifested itself on the one hand as consistent, and on the other, as ever-changing. As he moved and changed, his writing changed with him. But what remains so allusive about Perelesin is that he was able to capture his literary identity and use it in his work.

In analyzing the narratives of these two men, it is comforting to understand that the conflicts of identity exist regardless of location. Both Valerij Perelesin and Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra were struggling authors and

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poets. On the one hand, Ezra's impartial bias permeated his paper, which had become an outlet for him to express his identity. Similarly, Perelesin expressed his conflicts in the form of poetry and translations, which allowed him to tap into the multicultural and multilingual associations he had maintained. Their literary and cultural identities were inextricably linked to their writing, and in reading their various pieces, it is clear that their identities manifested themselves in a textual capacity. Writing molded the structure of each of their lives, and in both cases, produced noteworthy works that have subsequently received many accolades. Of course, there are differences in the medium of journalism and poetry. Ezra was subject to consistent public scrutiny in Shanghai, whereas Perelesin's works were rather private and intimate pieces. The descriptions of these jobs in and of itself reveals the differences in wealth, character, and identity between these two men. It was not just the location which had separated them, but also their outlook on life. Ultimately, in the framework of this distinction, the stability of the written word connected these two men in a way that narrates a spellbinding tale.

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Rachel Wechsler is a freshman in the college. She is from Denver, Colorado and loves to read Jewish History novels when she is feeling down.

### Endnotes

1. Irene Eber "Foreword" *Shanghai's Baghdadi Jews: a Collection of Biographical Reflections*, written by Maisie Meyer, (London, Blacksmith Books, 2015) 33
2. Ibid, 34.
3. Maisie J. Meyer "Nissim Ezra Benjamin Ezra" *Shanghai's Baghdadi Jews: a Collection of Biographical Reflections*. (London, Blacksmith Books, 2015), 225.
4. Ibid, 238.
5. Ibid, 244.
6. Ibid, 251.
7. Jian Wang "The Rise and Decline of the Jewish Community in Harbin" in *The Jews in*

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*Asia: Comparative Perspectives* written by Pan Guang (Shanghai: Shang Hai San Lian Shu Dian, 2007), 103.

8. Ibid, 101.
9. Simon Karlinsky “Memoirs of Harbin” Review of *Russian Poetry and Literary Life in Harbin and Shanghai, 1930-1950: The Memoirs of Valerij Perelesin* written by Valerij Perelesin, and edited by Jan Paul Hinrichs (Slavic Review 48, Summer 1989), 285.
10. Ibid, 283.
11. Ibid, 287.
12. Valerij Perelesin. *Russian Poetry and Literary Life in Harbin and Shanghai, 1930-1950: The Memoirs of Valerij Perelesin* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 10.
13. Ibid, 11.
14. Ibid, 13.
15. Karlinsky, 287
16. Perelsin, 12.
17. Karlinsky, 28.
18. Perelesin, 14