
A Legacy of 20th Century Jewish Industry in Modern Harbin

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This paper will discuss a 20th century Harbin Jewish business virtually unknown to Western literature, the Lopato Tobacco Company, and how it played an indispensable role in the industrialization and cultural shaping of the city. Through cultural, societal, and historical-economic reasons, the Lopato Tobacco Company shows that a combination of Jewish business ingenuity and Chinese labor drove the modernization of Harbin. As the first cigarette manufacturer in China, Lopato introduced cigarettes as the main form of tobacco intake to Chinese culture. Lopato's employment of thousands of Chinese, especially female, workers shaped the societal makeup of Harbin. The preservation of the company's integrated Jewish and Chinese history is an important goal of the business today, as well as motivation for higher factory production.

Background and History of Harbin

Census Data Taken in Harbin, China in 1903 and 1913¹

	May 1903	February 1913
Russian	15,579	34,313
Chinese	28,338	23,537
Semites	--	5,032
Poles	--	2,556
Other	659	3,111
Total	44,576	68,549

Prior to the 20th century, Harbin was a small fishing village, its Manchu name meaning “a place to dry fishing nets.” The industrialization of the city was activated by the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) starting in August 1897, following the Russian invasion of Manchuria and the Russo-Manchurian treaty, which gave Russia the concession to build the railroad line. The CER opened for traffic in November 1903, leading to an influx of Russian Jewish families. The Czarist government, interested in developing the region, allowed Jews in Harbin more freedoms than in Russia.²

At the same time, many Chinese laborers from the south came to Harbin for temporary work as stonemasons, bricklayers, and carpenters for the construction of the railroad and city. Initially, few settled down due to the requirement of being a merchant, artisan, shopkeeper, businessman, or servant. In 1903, the ratio of women to men was 1.8% for the Chinese and 44% for the Russians.³ As shown in Table 1, the Chinese population at the beginning of the century remained around 25,000 people, even decreasing a little from 1903 to 1913, while immigrants of many different nationalities settled down in Harbin.

Background and History of the Lopato Brothers

Eli Aaronovich Lopato (E.A. Lopato) and his younger brother Abraham Aaronovich Lopato (A.A. Lopato) were born to a poor family in Trakai, Lithuania in 1874 and 1877, respectively.⁴ They were part of an ethnic group known as the Karaims, or Crimean Karaites, who reside mainly in Crimea, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. The Karaims believe in the Old Testament and are part of a religious minority known as Karaite Judaism.⁵ It is said that the Crimean Khanate sent several Karaim families who could grow vegetables and fruit trees to Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1397-1398.⁶ The Lopato brothers were part of this tribe of Lithuanian Karaims.

During his youth, Eli helped his father with work in the vegetable garden. At the age of 14, he started apprenticing at a shop before moving to

Moscow to work at the I.I. Ferick Tobacco Company, where he worked his way up from apprentice to shop manager. He opened his own tobacco shop in Moscow in 1898 before moving to Harbin in 1904.⁷

Unlike many of the Russian Jewish families who would later come to Harbin in search of a better life, Lopato came early, almost immediately after the railroad line opened, with a business venture in mind. An excerpt from “Reveal Enigmas of the Jewish History in Harbin—A Survey of the Harbin Jewish Community” by Tiejiang Zhang describes the first time Eli Lopato stepped foot in Harbin:

On a sunny morning in the spring of 1904, a train from Moscow slowly drew into Harbin. From the crowd walked out one short and stout, yellow-eyed, half-bald man with a broad forehead in his thirties...After arriving in Harbin, he checked in to the New Bala Hotel at China 13th Street (now West 13th Street, Daoli District).⁸

Picture 1. A photograph of E. A. Lopato⁹



Cultural Modernization: Manufactured White Paper Cigarettes

Through the introduction of manufactured cigarettes, E. A. Lopato's work in the tobacco industry led to a cultural modernization of China. Upon arrival in Harbin, he quickly noticed how Westerners preferred to smoke Musdouke cigarettes, or manufactured white paper-rolled cigarettes, in contrast to the Chinese tendency to smoke raw tobacco in pipes or smoke bags.¹⁰

In the beginning, E. A. Lopato imported shredded tobacco and white cigarettes from Russia and hired a Chinese worker to sell these goods. As there was no established tobacco industry in China, he was able to profit through the strategy of buying low and selling high. Later, the Lopato brothers expanded their business by opening the first cigarette factory in China, which dominated the tobacco market of Manchuria and spread its influence to Europe. The manufactured paper cigarettes became popular even among the Chinese population and replaced pipe smoking as the main modality of tobacco intake. Lopato Tobacco Company became highly successful and its successor, Harbin Tobacco Company, now advertising to the mostly Chinese market, is still one of the most profitable businesses of the city.

In May of 1904, E. A. Lopato bought a small retail space in Butou District, as well as two Russian cigarette machines. He started manufacturing his own Russian cigarettes in packs of 50, 100, and 200, with the help of eight Chinese employees. Barefoot children were also paid to walk around in the streets wearing tall hats, covered in colorful signs, and ringing bells to sell cigarettes.

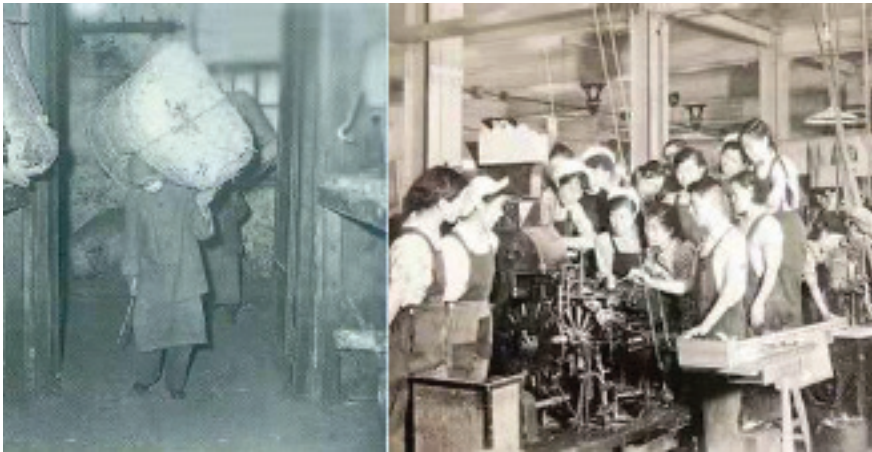
Demand soon surpassed supply, and E. A. Lopato wrote to invite his brother, who was a technical expert in the tobacco industry, to help with the business in Harbin. E. A. Lopato closed his shop in Moscow and set up a factory for hand making cigarettes on China 13th Street called Gavana Tobacco Shop. Dozens of workers were hired and Lopato was soon reaping huge profits.

Societal Modernization: Female Workers

In 1909, E. A. Lopato founded the "Lopato and Son Tobacco Company". According to "Reveal Enigmas of the Jewish History in Harbin—A Survey of the Harbin Jewish Community" by Tiejiang Zhang¹¹, the factory mostly employed girls:

Of the 700-800 employed, most were girls aged twelve or thirteen, who could do adult work at a fraction of the wages. The “light work” consisted of separating the tobacco from the stalks, and the “heavy work” consisted of moving 30-kilogram cigarette trays from one workshop to another. The workday was 13 or 14 hours long, and they received a few dimes a day.¹²

*Pictures 2 + 3. Heavy work of transporting bags full of raw tobacco leaves (left). Female workers observing tobacco machinery (right)*¹³



By 1911, machines replaced handcraft production in the tobacco factory. Although human workhands were still needed to feed tobacco into the machines, production quality and efficiency was greatly improved. Soon, the Lopato and Son Tobacco Company rose to a position of great economic influence in Manchuria.

Although the factory exploited child labor, not unlike what was happening in America at that time, it set a precedent for female workers, leading to a modernization in society. To this day, Lopato’s company, renamed the Harbin Tobacco Company after being sold to the

Communist Party of China in 1952, is a female-dominated workplace. My grandmother was born in 1934 and started working at the Lopato Tobacco Company around 1950. Although she had working hours, wages were based on production rates, a new system set by the Jewish executives that promoted efficiency and dedication among the Chinese employees.

In 1982, my mother enrolled into a technical school, majoring in the tobacco industry, and apprenticing at the Harbin Tobacco Factory. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, China adopted a policy of enrollment into college based on standardized testing and allocating permanent jobs from higher education. Upon graduation in 1984, my mother was given a permanent position in the Harbin Tobacco Factory. As the first female tobacco engineer in Harbin, she worked a highly technical job running new Czech tobacco machines.

The personal accounts of my mother and grandmother show how the employment patterns of the Lopato Company caused a modernization of Chinese society, allowing women a more liberal role in the workforce. Although the initial reasons for hiring girls were not based on societal change, it later led to increased opportunities for female workers, including traditionally male-dominated jobs such as engineering. Early on, this may have led to an increased move of female southern Chinese workers into Harbin, causing a rise in the “non-native” Chinese population in an immigrant-heavy city. In contrast to the temporary jobs offered to the Chinese by the construction of the railroad, jobs offered by Lopato were permanent. As more Chinese families settled down, they established higher societal functions, much like other immigrant populations who had grown large enough, such as the Ashkenazi Jews.

Economic Modernization: Sales and Modern Success

Lopato's economic relations with various parties, including the local Chinese government, greatly shaped the modern Harbin economy. In 1912, the brothers decided to expand their company through a big move: partnering with the British American Tobacco Company for investment in large-scale cigarette manufacturing. This led to further success, and the Lopato Company became a prominent part of the Harbin economy for several decades.

In 1941, the Japanese forcibly took over the company, which struggled under their rule, including high rates of worker dissatisfaction. The factory was reestablished in 1945 with the surrender of Japan. However, it was not until 1950 when the Harbin Tobacco and Alcohol Company signed a lease with the Lopato Company that sales started to return.¹⁴ Even when the Chinese Communist Party took over Harbin in the late 1940s, dictating the state ownership of businesses, the Lopato Company was treated leniently because taxes from cigarette sales were so integral to municipal finances.¹⁵ The workplace system set in place by the original E. A. Lopato also remained unchanged.

E. A. Lopato's son left Harbin for Hong Kong in July 1950 and emigrated to the United States in 1951. In 1952, the company was officially nationalized by the Harbin Municipal People's Government and renamed as the Harbin Tobacco Company.

In 1985, my mother took a short break to study history and journalism at a liberal arts school and was later promoted to the History Department to research the Lopato Company in preparation of its 100th anniversary. A historical documentary was produced with her research which featured company propaganda and the current Chinese owner of the Harbin Tobacco Company emphasizing the company motto: "Preserve the past through making the future."¹⁶

Over the years, from a Jewish startup to Chinese cooperation, Lopato Tobacco has made numerous contributions to the economy of Harbin, giving the city a large source of income and considerable chance for growth. To commend its greatness, leaders of the Harbin Tobacco Company applied and were approved for a Cultural Heritage site for Dahuanglou (“the big yellow building”), the original factory where Lopato first started manufacturing cigarettes.

Conclusion

There is much more to be said about how the interactions between the Lopato family and the Chinese population shaped Harbin society, culture, and economy, ultimately leading to the modernization of the city. For instance, from working at Lopato, my grandmother adopted the word “machine” from the Russian “machina” and still uses it to describe any kind of mechanical contraption. The influence of Lopato in the international tobacco market and the numerous shareholders the brothers collaborated no doubt continues to impact the modern economic sphere. When World War I disrupted importation of tobacco from Russia in 1914, Lopato turned to local sources from Heilongjiang’s black soil to produce unique brands of tobacco. The relationship between Lopato and the Communist Party of China should also be further investigated. These are all stimulating topics to be further explored and can be researched with a combination of Russian and Chinese documents. Lopato viewed Harbin as his second home, and the story of his tobacco business is an important keystone in the development of the city and its peoples.

Lucie Song is a freshman from Wayne, PA. She is majoring in biochemistry and plans to study medicine. Although she is fond of ice cream and ice skating, she is unfavorably lethargic in cold weather.

Endnotes

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