

Book Review

Zayde Tales of the East – A Tribute to Rabbi Marvin Tokayer

Marvin Tokayer and Ellen Rodman, *Pepper, Silk & Ivory – Amazing Stories about Jews and the Far East*. (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2014). ix + 316 pages. ISBN 978-965-229-647-4.

Reviewed by Nathan Katz

A Zayde (Yiddish for “grandfather”) is the one who tells stories to the next generation, but not just any stories. A Zayde story – unlike the unfairly much-maligned Bubbe-meisser, or “grandmother’s story” – conveys values, orientations, and models for thinking and behaving.

That could serve as a suitable introduction to Rabbi Marvin and his wonderful life, through his impressive new book. After serving as a U. S. Air Force chaplain in Japan and in search of a new career position, he tells of a fateful meeting with the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. Hearing about the young rabbi’s experiences in Japan, the Rebbe advised him to return there to serve the tiny local Jewish community, to redeem sparks from their shells.

And so he did, serving as the *de facto* “Chief Rabbi of Japan” for eight years. He became fascinated with Japanese culture and learned the language, eventually writing twenty books in Japanese. He explored Jewish connections in East Asia – a cemetery in Nagasaki, the “lost” Jews of Kaifeng in China, and researching Japan’s paradoxical role vis-à-vis the Jews during World War II. He collected stories of Jewish life there from those who lived the adventure as well as from arcane scholarly and other sources.

He built bridges, forged new cultural friendships, eventually pioneering Jewish tourism in Japan, China, India, and Southeast Asia, decades before it became fashionable. He also told his tales in synagogues and universities across North America. It was these tales that inspired his audiences to want to learn more, and among those to follow his lead was the next generation of specialists in this yet-to-emerge academic field of Jewish life in the East.

The best of his tales are in this book. But his deepest legacy is expanding Jewish friendship from the Indus to the Yellow River.

Each of the twenty-three chapters is a delight, appealing to the love of the “exotic.” The power of these stories rests upon the imaginative leaps they take. He writes in the preface, “In this book, while all of the stories are true, some may be anecdotal and some may have been embellished in the course of being passed down through the generations... In many instances I either knew the subjects of these stories or knew their relatives and still am in touch with many of them. In addition, I have access to, and even now possess, personal documents and artifacts relevant to their stories” (p. x).

Among the more amusing tales concerns a Dr. Leshiniskata, a Romanian Jewish physician who became “Mao’s sex therapist,” prescribing Novocain injections (local anesthesia used for dental problems) that of course did not work. But apparently Chairman Mao remained impressed by her. The role of Jews in Singapore was disproportionate to their small numbers and included David Marshall (1908-1995) who seamlessly moved from being president of the Jewish community to becoming the architect of Singapore’s independence and serving as the small nation’s first Chief (or Prime) Minister (page 271). Tokayer also writes fondly about Lt. Gen. Jack Jacob, arguably India’s greatest military hero of modern times and Chief Minister of the fractious Punjab and later, peaceful Goa. (General Jacob’s obituary appears in this issue of JJS.)

There are dozens of such tales, some culled from historical studies, and some from more recent times. This book, ably co-authored by Ellen Rodman, is a perfect popular introduction to the endlessly fascinating study of Jewish experience in Asia. It honors the visionary Rabbi Tokayer, and it blesses all of us with insights that can re-orient ourselves (no apologies for the pun!) as a truly global people.