

DID CHAIRMAN MAO HAVE A JEWISH DOCTOR?

By

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In his comprehensive historical survey *Jews & Medicine*, author Frank Heynick makes the following curious statement: “Mao tse-Tung would have a Jewish physician, yet this was not a Chinese but a Soviet Jew (who, incidentally, was arrested on Stalin’s orders for supposedly being involved in the so-called Doctors’ Plot).”¹ The words “would have” can be understood either as Mao “wanted” or “had,” but the phrase which follows in parenthesis suggests the latter. Either way, the idea of the Chinese leader having a Jewish physician is sufficiently intriguing as to warrant a review of the evidence.

Heynick’s primary source was Israeli journalist Louis Rapoport’s book, *Stalin’s War Against the Jews*,² which did not cite a specific Russian doctor with Chinese connections by name, reporting only that during the purge, Lavrentiy Beria, head of the secret police, “sent an agent to China to arrest Mao tse-Tung’s Soviet Jewish

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1 Frank Heynick, *Jews and Medicine: An Epic Saga*, Hoboken, KTAV, 2002, p. 163.

2 Louis Rapoport, *Stalin’s War Against the Jews: The Doctor’s Plot and the Soviet Solution*, New York, The Free Press (Macmillan), 1990, p. 174.

doctor." In turn, Rapoport's statement seems to have been derived from an earlier book, *Watchdogs of Terror* by former Soviet counterintelligence officer Peter Deriabin, who had been a member of Stalin's bodyguards until he defected in 1954. Deriabin described how the head of counterintelligence Colonel Nikolay Novik "sent a group of MGB Secret Political Directorate officers to China to arrest a Soviet doctor who was treating Mao." Note that Deriabin mentioned only a Soviet doctor, not a Soviet Jewish doctor, about whom "claims were also made that he was trying to poison the Chinese leader."³

In 1989, Peter Deriabin collaborated with Joseph C. Evans on what in effect was a second edition, entitled *Inside Stalin's Kremlin*.⁴ Deriabin died in 1992, but this second book was not published until 1998. Although the later book contains more detail, it is noteworthy that this time Deriabin does not mention that Mao had a Soviet Jewish doctor during the early 1950s who might have been implicated in the Doctors' Plot. However, in an appendix note, Deriabin reports that when Mao was visiting Stalin in 1949, doctors at the MGB-run Kremlin hospital "treated Mao for an ailment that prevented him from raising his arms above his shoulders. Stalin accepted Mao's request that two of the doctors return with him to Beijing." As we shall soon learn from the memoirs of Mao's personal doctor, this seems extremely unlikely and there is no other available evidence that Mao was ever treated by Soviet physicians in China.

Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov in their book, *Stalin's Last Crime*, meticulously review Russian archives concerning the Doctors' Plot which had been kept secret for fifty years, but the authors make no mention of any Chinese connection.⁵ Moreover, in

3 Peter S. Deriabin, *Watchdogs of Terror: Russian Bodyguards from the Tsars to the Commissars*, Frederick, MD, University Publications of America, Second Edition, 1984, pp. 324-325.

4 Peter S. Deriabin with Joseph C. Evans, *Inside Stalin's Kremlin: An Eyewitness Account of Brutality, Duplicity, and Intrigue*, Washington & London, Brassey's Inc., 1998.

5 Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime*, New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.

a personal communication, Dr. Brent recalled no reference to Mao ever having a Jewish physician and suggested that Peter Deriabin's sources may not have been credible. It also is conceivable that if there was such information, it might have been extracted under torture from one of the hundreds of falsely accused victims who were interrogated by counterintelligence during this time.

Under Stalin's long regime many Kremlin physicians were of Jewish background and when, on January 13, 1953, Pravda announced the arrest of eleven prominent physicians, eight had Jewish sounding names. These "monsters in human form" were accused of having murdered two leading Soviet politicians and intending to poison Stalin as well as several other leading military figures. It seems that the entire sequence of events had been conceived and orchestrated by Stalin himself over a period of several years. The Kremlin doctors and hundreds more had been arrested beginning in October 1952, "confessions" obtained and the "facts" then manipulated to suit Stalin's purpose. The Russian people were told that "enemies of the people" were serving as accomplices of western agents, notably the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and would have to be rooted out.

Although the evidence for an extension of the Doctors' Plot to China, perhaps mediated by "Mao's Soviet Jewish doctor" is dubious at best, we might reasonably ask whether there might be some kernel of truth to it? If Mao ever had a Jewish physician as suggested by Louis Rapoport, this in itself would be of historical interest. Surely the most authoritative information about Mao's later medical history is contained in the memoirs of his personal physician, Dr. Li Zhisui, who, beginning in 1954, worked for twenty-two years in close proximity to the Chairman as both medical advisor and confidant.⁶

Beginning in 1950, all of China's top leaders had been assigned personal physicians and before Dr. Li, Mao had several other doctors.⁷ Although Dr. Li initially was placed in charge of the

6 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, New York, Random House, 1994.

7 Zhisui, *The Private Life* (cit. n. 6), p. 640.

health clinic at the compound which was inhabited by Mao and other leaders, he was not appointed as Mao's personal physician until 1954, which was more than a year *after* Russia's Doctors' Plot. Dr. Li took the influential job reluctantly, yet for the first few years he revered Mao as a great leader. However, familiarity soon led to contempt, but out of fear for his own and his family's safety, Dr. Li never felt able to resign. It was not until a dozen years after Mao's death that he and his wife finally were able to join their family in the United States where Dr. Li began writing his memoirs.

No one was in a better position than Dr. Li to understand Mao's feelings about medical care and doctors. He described the Chairman as a medically unsophisticated person who despised all physicians and frequently advised others to follow only half of what was recommended by them. Based on this, it would seem most unlikely that Mao would seek out a consulting Russian physician as was suggested by Peter Deriabin. Indeed, Mao insisted that no one other than his personal doctor be permitted to attend him. As a result, Dr. Li was the Chairman's virtual prisoner and had to share his eccentric and insomniac life-style, which included being on call at all hours. Being in such close proximity to Mao, Dr. Li was not above suspicion by the sycophants and intriguers who surrounded the Chairman. It was not unusual for Dr. Li to have to sample Mao's medicine and, more than once, he was accused by Mao's neurotic wife, Jiang Qing, of attempting to poison both of them. Therefore, it is understandable that the Russians might have heard unfounded accounts about Mao's doctor's treachery.

When Mao's son, Mao Anqing, developed psychosis during the early 1950s, psychiatrist Chen Xueshi initially diagnosed him, but Anqing later was sent for treatment in the Soviet Union. Mao's first wife also suffered from schizophrenia and was treated in Russia. According to Dr. Li, "the psychiatric profession was nearly decimated under the communists and Chen later spent many years in jail." Concerning any other specific Russian medical connection, although Mao's second wife Jiang Qing also was sent to Russia in 1957 for successful treatment of cervical cancer, Dr. Li makes no

mention of either she or her husband being attended by a Russian doctor while in China.

In fact, there is only a single reference in Dr. Li's book that during his tenure any foreign physician ever attended Mao in China. It seems that among the Chairman's idiosyncrasies was his fondness for young women and until his final illness (he died from complications of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and heart failure), he surrounded himself with a virtual harem. Mao identified himself with the legendary first Chinese emperor, known as "The Yellow Emperor," who was reported to have become immortal by making love to a thousand young virgins. Mao believed that the more sexual liaisons he had, the longer he would live, and there was no lack of willing young women who vied for the privilege of being his bed-partner. However, on occasion Mao was impotent, and during the early 1950s when he was in his sixties he agreed to take daily injections of "formula Vitamin H3," which was nothing more than Novocain, that was prescribed by a Rumanian woman physician named Dr. Lepshinskaya. Of course, the injections were administered by Dr. Li, who first had to take the treatment himself in order to ensure safety. After three months, Mao, noting no aphrodisiac effects, discontinued the regimen. It is conceivable that Dr. Lepshinskaya could have been Jewish, but it is implausible that Russian agents would have been dispatched to arrest or kill "Mao's Jewish doctor" in this instance.

In fact there was a Jewish "doctor," albeit a dentist, who treated Mao-tse Tung in 1946, when he was located in the mountainous northern provinces. Magdalene Robitscher-Hahn was born in Bohemia and as a German-speaking Jew and with frequent shifting of government authorities, her dental license was not always recognized; for a time, she even was forced to take a job in Bolivia. After World War II, she seized an opportunity to go to China to work under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association (UNRRA). In her memoirs Dr. Robitscher described how she provided dental care to Mao on ten occasions, treating his

mild gum disease and filling several cavities.⁸ Her description is surprising in that Dr. Li's later memoirs related how the Chairman suffered from severe periodontal disease owing to the fact that he adhered to the Chinese peasant custom of cleaning his teeth by drinking tea rather than using a tooth brush; Mao reasoned that although tigers do not brush, their teeth are sharp. And so, Magdalene Robitscher was a Jewish "doctor" who treated Mao, but by the early 1950s she was long removed from China and certainly was not a potential poisoner or Soviet plotter.

Another western physician who had access to Mao, at least in earlier days, and who on occasion was mistaken for being Jewish, was George Hatem. He was born in Buffalo, New York in 1910, the eldest son of Maronite Christian immigrants from Lebanon.⁹ Both in college and medical school in the United States and in Europe, he frequently befriended Jewish students out of a common sense of being an oppressed minority.¹⁰ Indeed, Dr. Hatem entered China in 1933 with two young Jewish doctors, Lazar Katz and Robert Levinson, and the three opened a practice in Shanghai, which prospered largely by treating the venereal diseases of foreign prostitutes. Soliciting support from wealthy members of the local Jewish community, his friends encouraged George to say that he was a Sephardic Jew. After three years George's partners became disenchanted by Shanghai's corruption and poverty and returned home, but Hatem chose to remain and, having become supportive of the communist cause, declared that he wanted to be "a revolutionary doctor."

By 1936 Mao tse-Tung had begun his Long March to the mountains of Northwestern China and sent a message that he was in need of "an honest journalist and a doctor." The journalist turned out to be Edgar Snow and, as Dr. Hatem later recalled, "they didn't ask for an honest doctor so they took me." Together, Snow

8 Magdalene Robitscher-Hahn, *Im Geist Yanans*, Frankfurt/Main-Berlin, China Studien-und Verlagsgesellschaft, 1980.

9 Edgar Porter, *The People's Doctor: George Hatem and China's Revolution*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

10 Porter, *The People's Doctor* (cit. n. 9), pp. 113-126.

and Hatem traveled extensively throughout Shaanxi Province; but whereas Edgar Snow soon became world famous writing about what he had seen in China, George Hatem kept such a low profile that his family did not know whether he was even alive for nearly five decades.

Blessed with a congenial personality, Dr. Hatem gained the respect of the communist leaders and served as physician to Mao, Chou en-Lai and others in their mountain enclave. He became fluent in Chinese, married a beautiful young actress and assumed the name Ma Haide which meant "virtue from overseas"; he was familiarly called Dr. Ma. He was the first foreigner to be accepted in the Communist Party, and after the Revolution was completed in 1949, was made the first foreign citizen of the new People's Republic. Dr. Hatem did his best to distance himself from political intrigue and was completely dedicated to Mao's brand of communism; but as a foreigner his motives were suspect always.

As Dr. Hatem was reticent about discussing his background with visitors, there were frequent rumors and much confusion about who he really was. In later years he was accused of being an American spy, and once a Russian agent reported erroneously to Moscow that Ma was "Jewish by nationality [and] a citizen of New Zealand." During the 1950s, when relations between Russia and China were strained, it is conceivable that the Russians might have misconstrued that Dr. Hatem was Mao's Jewish physician and a traitor; but according to his biographer, George Hatem did not see Mao during the period from 1952 until a reunion that was held in 1960.

In his medical practice, Dr. Hatem attempted to integrate western and traditional Chinese medicine and emphasized hygiene and preventive public health efforts. He was credited with virtually eradicating prostitution and venereal diseases from China. He then turned his attention to eliminating the ancient scourge of leprosy, spending much of his time leading teams of what were known to the locals as "Chairman Mao's Doctors" into desolate areas of Central Asia. Only late in life was he reconciled with his American family and he was permitted to travel outside of China. Eventually

Dr. Hatem achieved international fame as a conqueror of venereal disease and leprosy. He died in Beijing in 1988.

Another western physician who was active in China during World War II, but who was Jewish by birth, was the Viennese urologist Jakob Rosenfeld. Lacking a visa, he could only flee the Nazis by way of Shanghai in 1938. There he was able to resume medical practice and among his circle of ex-patriot Austrian friends were people who were sympathetic to the cause of the Chinese Communist party. Dr. Rosenfeld favored Mao tse Tung's Chinese Communists in their battle against the Kuomintang forces led by Chiang Kai-shek and was so appalled by the abject poverty of the Chinese population and their desperate health conditions that he decided to join the Communist army in order to help.

Jakob Rosenfeld described his war experiences in a diary, which he dedicated to Mao tse Tung, "The Genius of the new China." Many years later these were collected along with other documents by his niece and were published by Professor Gerd Kaminski in Vienna in 2002.¹¹ The memoirs describe in great detail the physician's daily routine, including how he established clinics, instructed medical staff in the fundamentals of hygiene and sanitation and treated soldiers and civilians for malaria, typhus, dysentery, scabies, trachoma, malnutrition and anemia.

Dr. Rosenfeld initially could hardly speak a word of Chinese, but soon became acclimated to the army routine and became widely known both to army units and to civilians for his dedicated services as gynecologist, urologist and general practitioner. Rosenfeld joined Mao on his triumphant march into Beijing in 1948 and, together with hundreds of other officers, he attended a meeting at which he heard Mao proclaim the People's Republic and command "Complete the Revolution." This event was a high point of his life, and in his memoirs Dr. Rosenfeld compared the "Long March" led by Mao to refuge in the mountains to Moses leading the Israelites through the desert. However, although he was a great admirer of Mao, Rosenfeld apparently never met nor treated the Chairman.

Dr. Rosenfeld eventually was appointed as Commander of the

11 Gerd Kaminski, *Ich Kannte Sie Alle*, Vienna, Locker Verlag, 2002.

Medical Corps and given the rank of General, an extraordinary honor for a foreigner. However, Rosenfeld was troubled by heart symptoms and in 1949 he returned to Vienna for medical care. Failing to respond to treatment, he wished to return to China, but Mao's xenophobic government refused him permission to reenter. Dr. Rosenfeld felt betrayed and once again found himself a man without a country. After a respite in Switzerland, he was forced to seek asylum in the recently established state of Israel. Jakob Rosenfeld arrived in the summer of 1951, lived in Tel Aviv as an indigent immigrant and worked at Assuta Hospital. In April 1952, he died of a heart attack, nearly a year before Stalin's Doctors' Plot.

During the 1960s, a few westerners became aware of Jakob Rosenfeld's singular career and, in time, exhibitions and publications in Austria and Israel recalled his exploits. In 1992, to honor his 90th birthday, family members and Austrian diplomats gathered in Shandong Province where a hospital was named in his honor and a large statue of the doctor placed in front. In 1999, an exhibition at the Bet Hatefutsot Museum in Tel Aviv described his life and in 2003, a commemorative stamp was issued in his honor and a major exhibition about his career was held in Beijing.

Fifty years after Stalin's Doctors' Plot, the trail of Mao's alleged Jewish doctor has grown cold and there is no credible evidence that any foreign physician, Russian, Jewish or otherwise, had access to Chairman Mao during the early 1950s. The Jewish dentist Magdalene Robitscher had left China some five years earlier and Jakob Rosenfeld was no longer present and had never personally met Mao. Dr. Li Zhisui was on the scene, but had not yet assumed his position as Mao's private physician; and although his immediate Chinese predecessors had been criticized for various misdemeanors, there is no available information to suggest that any of them had connections with Russia. During the early 1950s, Dr. George Hatem, who at least one Russian agent had incorrectly reported as being Jewish, was no longer in contact with China's leaders and was busy combating leprosy in rural areas. Nevertheless, it is entirely understandable that in the overheated atmosphere of Russia during the last months of Stalin's life, when his paranoia and anti-Semitism

reached new heights, all kinds of bizarre rumors, misinformation and disinformation were being spread. Stalin died reportedly of a stroke on March 2, 1953, but the event was not publicly announced until three days afterward. Within a few weeks, all charges against the Kremlin doctors were repudiated. Lavrentiy Beria admitted that they had been unlawfully arrested and their confessions obtained "by unacceptable means."

In 1954, China had a doctor's purge of its own when several of the leader's personal physicians were accused of being counterrevolutionaries and disloyal to the party. The political intrigue involved in China's purge may have rivaled in intensity what had transpired a year earlier in Russia; but in this case there was one significant difference: there was no evidence of Chinese anti-Semitism or any talk of Jewish medical poisoners. Thus, to answer the provocative question posed in our title, other than the Jewish dentist Magdalene Robitscher, there is no evidence that Chairman Mao ever had a Jewish "doctor," nor that his personal physician was implicated in Stalin's Doctor's Plot. Nevertheless, the cast of western physicians Jews and others who were active in China during Mao's tenure was fascinating, their contributions considerable and their little known personal stories surely worth retelling.