

Go Team Harbin. Sports, Borders and Identity in the 1930s

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RESÜMEE

In den 1930er Jahren war Harbin eine multikulturelle Stadt, in der Menschen aus mehr als 50 unterschiedlichen Nationalitäten mehr oder weniger friedlich zusammenlebten. Der multikulturelle Alltag mit all seinen Besonderheiten und Konflikten sowie die dynamischen Beziehungen zwischen Menschen so unterschiedlicher Herkunft machten Harbin zu einem außergewöhnlichen Ort, der auch heute noch das Interesse von Wissenschaftlern verschiedener Disziplinen weckt. Wie dieser Artikel zeigt, ermöglicht Sport einen einzigartigen Einblick in die komplexen, vielschichtigen und zeitweise durchaus konfliktgeprägten Beziehungen zwischen den unterschiedlichen Gruppierungen innerhalb der Stadt Harbin. Dieser Artikel versucht anhand von Sport Prozesse der Grenzüberschreitung und Grenzziehung zwischen den verschiedenen nationalen Bevölkerungsgruppen im sozialen Geflecht Harbins der 1930er Jahre zu beleuchten, indem das eigentliche Spielfeld oder der Sportplatz als städtischer Raum (urban space) konzeptualisiert wird – also als ein gemeinschaftlicher Raum (common space) oder eine Kontaktzone, wo sich Vertreter der verschiedenen Bevölkerungsgruppen sowohl auf als auch außerhalb des Platzes begegneten. Mit Blick auf die multikulturelle Zusammensetzung der Bevölkerung, die wiederholten Machtwechsel und Auseinandersetzungen über die Identität Harbins waren sowohl die Ausgestaltung des als auch das Verhalten im städtischen Raum von größter Bedeutung. Dies führte häufig zu Konflikten. Ich argumentiere, dass aufgrund seiner besonderen Charakteristika das Spielfeld zu einem gemeinschaftlicher Raum werden konnte, auf dem ansonsten klar definierte Grenzen verschoben oder zumindest zeitweise aufgehoben werden konnten.

Introduction

Sport history is not “just for fans with an academic liability to negligibilities”¹, simply put because sports matters. Honduras and El Salvador fought a war over a soccer match in 1969. Over 140 million people worldwide watch the Super Bowl, the final game of the National Football League in the United States. And 4% of the world’s population plays soccer in a registered sports club. A closer look at the sources also indicates that sports mattered for the inhabitants Harbin, Manchuria. Contemporary newspapers reported regularly and in sometimes exhausting detail about sports events and tournaments even on a school level. Memories of former residents of Harbin are full of vivid recollections about all kinds of sports.² The journal of the IGUD YOTZEI SIN, an association for former Jewish residents of China and their descendants, still include references to the athletic qualities of deceased members in their obituaries.

Harbin, founded in 1898 on Chinese soil by Russians on the banks of the Sungari river, owed its existence to the construction of the Chinese-Eastern-Railway, which connected Chita with Vladivostok.³ Because the city was a railway junction and its favorable location in the resource-rich Manchurian plains, Harbin quickly became one of the most important cities in the region and attracted people from all over the world with its investment and employment opportunities. European and American investors, Japanese and Korean businessmen, Russian railroad personal and Chinese workers swarmed to Harbin. After 1917 the city became the centre of the White Russian Emigration to the Far East.⁴ At times over 50 different nationalities lived in Harbin.

That Harbin contained people of so many ethnicities and their vibrant interaction as well as their disassociation from each other is what made Harbin a unique place, attracting the attention of researchers of various disciplines today. Sports, as will be demonstrated in this article, can provide a unique insight into the complex and multilayered relationships between the different segments of the city. James Carter, for example, has already used the case of a basketball match between Russians and Chinese that ended brawl to

- 1 Olaf Stieglitz / Jürgen Martschukat / Kirsten Heinsohn: Sportreportage: Sportgeschichte als Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte. *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 28.05.2009, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/2009-05-001>>. p. 1. Last visit August 30, 2011.
- 2 See for example Yaakov Liberman, *My China: Jewish life in the Orient, 1900–1950*, Berkeley/Jerusalem 1998; Alexander Menquez, *Growing up Jewish in Manchuria in the 1930s*, in: Jonathan Goldstein (ed.), *Jews of China, Vol. 2: A Source Book and Research Guide*, New York/London 1999, pp. 71–84; Igor Konstantinovich Koval’chuk-Koval’, *Svidanie c pamiat’iu (Vospominania)*, Moscow 1996.
- 3 Steven Marks, *Road to Power. The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia, 1850–1917*, London 1991; Sören Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit: Russland, China, Japan und die Ostchinesische Eisenbahn*, Frankfurt a. M. 2008.
- 4 On the Russian Emigration to Harbin, Manchuria and China see Natalia N. Ablazheï, *S vostoka na vostok: rossiiskaia emigratsiia v Kitae*, Novosibirsk 2007; Elena Aurilene, *Rossiiskaia Diaspora v Kitae (1920–1950)*, Chabarovsk 2008; Olga Bakich, *Charbin. Russland jenseits der Grenzen in Fernost*, in: Karl Schlögel (ed.), *Der große Exodus. Die russische Emigration und ihre Zentren*, München, 1994, pp. 304–28; Amir A. Chisamutdinov, *Rossiiskaia emigratsiia v Kitae: opyt enciklopedii*, Vladivostok 2002; Reviakina, *Rossiiskaia emigratsii v Kitae: Problemy adaptatsii (20–40 gody XX v.)*, Moscow 2002.

outline his theses on Chinese nationalism in “Creating a Chinese Harbin”⁵. This article similarly attempts to use sport to shed light on the social fabric of Harbin and especially processes of border-building and border-crossing between the different ethnic segments of the population in the 1930s by conceptualizing the physical playing field as a so-called urban space. I will argue that the playing field, because of its particular characteristics, was a common space where usually clear and well-maintained borders could be shifted, partly lifted and even abandoned.

Because this article is based on various Russian newspapers from Harbin⁶ there are certain limitations to my study as well as my conclusions. First, casual sports, such as street soccer and the like, are left out simply because they are not reported. Due to resource constraints, I had to rely on the available Russian sources to the neglect of Chinese and Japanese sources. Therefore, the side of the Chinese, Japanese or Koreans might be underrepresented.

Urban Space and Sports. The Sports Field as a Common Space

The term ‘urban space’ is increasingly popular among academics from different fields of research. Most commonly the term is used in the context of architecture and urban planning, but is gaining currency in cultural studies, history and anthropology. The latter conceive urban space not just as any physical space within the borders of a city, but as a common space or contact zone where the inhabitants of a city meet on a daily basis.⁷ Specifically urban about this common space is the constant present of the “other”. Living in the city means permanent exposure to different lifestyles, ideas, values and identities as well as challenges to one’s own value system and identity. Relations, terms and conditions of coexistence or borders are represented, negotiated and sometimes contested in and about urban space. Because of Harbin’s multiethnic and multicultural population, its history of repeated changes of power and an ongoing struggle about the identity city as either a Chinese or Russian town, representation and behavior in, and the design of, urban space was of utmost importance and often disputed.⁸

Sports, or more precisely the field of play, is a particular common space with certain unique characteristics that distinguish it from other common spaces. First, since on the playing field the very same and usually clearly defined rules apply to everyone equally,

5 James Cater, *Creating a Chinese Harbin. Nationalism in an international city, 1916–1932*, London/New York 2002.

6 For this paper I consulted the most widely read Russian newspapers *Kharbinskoe Vremia* (Harbin Times), *Zaria* (Dawn), *Gun Bao*, a Japanese newspaper in Russian language and the liberal *Rupor* (The Mouthpiece) as well as the fascist *Nash Put’* (Our Way) and the Jewish *Hagadel* (The Flag).

7 So far no coherent concept of urban space has been developed, especially in differentiation to the public space. For me the later should be at least formally and ideally accessible to everyone for example without paying a entrance fee, while access to some urban spaces like the amusement park are restricted to people that can afford it. Therefore one could say every public space is also a common space, but not the other way around.

8 See for example Carter, *Creating a Chinese Harbin*.

sports allow all participants to be on a par with each other and meet on equal terms. Naturally, some athletes or teams might have had an advantage because they possessed the means to buy better equipment or employ an experienced coach, but at least in theory everyone can win, even if there is just a very slight chance of doing so. Second, sports have a dual or ambivalent character. Sports are always a competition, however amicable and playful it may be, but this also presupposes the presence of an opponent.

For many people in Harbin, Asians and Europeans alike, sports were an important part of their daily lives. Over 20 different sports facilities were scattered around town from the central districts of *Pristan* and *Novyi Gorod* to the suburbs of *Korpusnyi Gorod* and *Gondattievskii Gorod*. Some, like the City Stadium and the skating rink in *Pristan* were run by the city administration, while others belonged to different sports organizations and clubs. The local YMCA⁹ alone operated a stadium, an exercising field, which was sometimes used by up to a hundred people at a time and the biggest gymnastic hall in Harbin that was open every day from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m.¹⁰ Sports and physical exercise were also mandatory in most Chinese, Russian or Japanese schools as well as educational institutions for the children of Western expatriates.

Representatives of all ethnic groups took part in sporting competitions, like the citywide leagues and championships organized by local sports clubs sometimes together with the city administration. In 1937, for example, Estonian, Chinese, Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Russian teams competed for the annual championship of Harbin's soccer league.¹¹ Furthermore, if one thinks of sports or sports facilities as a common space, one should keep in mind that participation in a sports event is not limited to those directly on the field, but also includes coaches, administrators, care takers and most notably supporters and spectators. Since several games and competitions were free of charge, it is

9 The YMCA played the most important part in the introduction of Western types of sports in China. Before sports like athletics or basketball spread from the YMCA run schools and colleges, the dominant form of physical exercises, besides traditional forms like Chinese martial arts, was calisthenics and military drill at military academies. The YMCA had operated a branch in Harbin since the beginning of the 1920s, including a middle school and a college and was the first institution in Harbin that offered a sports program for girls and women. On the YMCA in China and particularly sports see: Risedorph A. Kimberly, *Reformers, Athletes, and Students: The YMCA in China, 1895–1935*, Ph.D. dissertation; Washington University, 1994; Graham / Gael, *Exercising control: Sports and physical education in American Protestant mission schools in China*, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* (1994), 20, pp. 23–48; Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2004; on the YMCA in Harbin see: S. Avenarius, *Pervye gody Russkogo ChSML v Kharbine*, in: E. Taskina (ed.), *Russkii Kharbin*, Moscow 2005, pp. 227–28; M. Dubaev, *Khristianskii soiuz molodykh liudei russkaia emigratsii v Kitae. Kul'turologicheskii aspekt vzaimodeistviia russkoi obshchiny s molodezhnymi emigrantskimi organizatsiiami*, in: *Istoriia i sovremennost'* 1 (2009) 1, pp. 33–44. See also in *Rupor* and *Zaria* on the occasion of the ninety years of existence/jubilee of the YMCA: *Devianostoletie Khristianskago Soiuzu Molodykh* [Ninety years Young Men Christian Association], in: *Rupor*, No. 305, 8 November 1934, p. 4; *Devianosto let Khristianskago Soiuzu Molodykh* [Ninety years Young Men Christian Association], in: *Zaria*, No. 304, 8 November 1934, p. 5.

10 *Khristianskii Soiuz Molodykh Liudei. Administratsionnyi Otchet. Starshago Sekretaria Kh.S.M.L. Sobraniu Deistvitel'nykh Chlenov. Harbin, 24 February, 1935*, p. 6.

11 *Razdacha prizov fultbolistam* [Award ceremony for the soccer players], in: *Rupor*, No. 308, 12 November 1937, p. 4.

reasonable to assume that at least some of them attracted a mixed crowd of spectators.¹² Evidently, sports in Harbin can be perceived as a common space or contact zone where representatives of different ethnic backgrounds encountered each other, be it on or off the field.

Sports and Ethnicity

Much of the research on sports in the first half of the 20th century focuses on topics like nationalism, ethnicity, gender and identity.¹³ One branch of sports research concentrates more on the exclusion of certain ethnic or religious groups, for example on the exclusion of Jews from sports during the Weimar Republic and the early Nazi regime in Germany and Austria,¹⁴ while others deal with the development of ethnic or national identity through sports, with notable recent work in connection with colonial regimes or racism against blacks in the United States.¹⁵ Despite their rather antipodal starting points, both branches deal with processes of exclusion, inclusion, border-making and border-crossing. This is not surprising since certain characteristics of modern sports seem to make an excellent arena for agents of nationalistic, racist or ethnocentric bodies of thought. Standardization and measurable results allowed for quick and easy comparisons even on a global scale and could be employed for a nationalistic, racist or ethnocentric rhetoric and claims of superiority and dominance,¹⁶ or, for that matter, to improve the self-esteem of marginal or oppressed groups. The clear division into teams, sometimes with their own uniforms, colors, songs, traditions or symbols, facilitates the identification with a specific team and allows the spectator to communicate and demonstrate ethnic (or other) belonging. Therefore, national, regional or ethnic identification was often emphasized in sports by contemporaries in the beginning of the 20th century and beyond.

12 See for example: *Segodnia – otkrytie dvorca sporta* [Today – opening of the palace of sports], in: *Rupor*, No. 76, 21 March 1937, p. 7.

13 See for example for ethnicity and identity: Amy Bass, *In the Game: Race, Identity & Sports in the Twentieth Century*, New York 2005; James A. Mangan (ed.), *Ethnicity, Sport, Identity: Struggles for Status*, London 2005.

14 See for example: Lorenz Peiffer, „... unser Verein ist judenfrei“ – Die Rolle der deutschen Turn- und Sportbewegung in dem politischen und gesellschaftlichen Wandlungsprozess nach dem 30. Januar 1933, in: *Historical Social Research* 32 (2007) 1, pp. 92–109; Michael John, *Anti-Semitism in Austrian sports between the wars*; and Jacob Borut, *Jews in German sports during the Weimar Republic*, in: Michael Brenner/Gideon Reuveni (eds), *Emancipation through Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe*, Lincoln 2006; Arnd Krüger, “Once the Olympics are through, we will beat up the Jew”: German Jewish sport 1898–1938 and the anti-Semitic Discourse, in: *Journal of Sport History* 26 (1999) 2, pp. 353–75.

15 Boria Majumdar, *Crickets in colonial Bengal (1880–1947): A lost history of nationalism*, in: *International Journal of the History of Sport* 23 (2006) 6, pp. 960–90; James H. Mills, *Subaltern Sports: Politics and Sports in South Asia*, London 2005; Annie Gilbert Coleman, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing*, in: John Bloom/Michael Nevin Willard (eds), *Sports Matters. Race Recreation and Culture*, New York 2002, pp. 141–68; Patrick B. Miller/David K. Wiggins (eds), *The Unlevel Playing Field. A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, Urbana 2003.

16 Of course, this can backfire disastrously as Adolf Hitler for example found out during the Olympics in Berlin in 1936.

Sports in Harbin was no exception and most organizations and clubs were still set up along ethnic lines. There were special clubs for Japanese, British and American citizens or for Chinese students. People of Polish origin joined the local branch of Sokół, and members of the Jewish community in Harbin could choose at times between the sports organizations Maccabi and Betar.¹⁷ Even in organizations like the YMCA, which was frequented by Russian and Chinese alike, specific teams were still usually ethnically homogeneous.

Border-Building and Border-Crossing in Sports. Spoiling for a Rout: Antagonism and Sports

In the following I want to trace processes of border-making or, more precisely, enforcement between two Harbin groups that particularly emphasized ethnic and national belonging: the aforementioned Jewish Betar and the Russian Vanguard Union. Betar was actually the youth organization of the so-called Revisionist Zionists an anti-socialist and nationalistic faction within Zionism.¹⁸ The Vanguard Union founded in 1934 was an organization for teenagers and young people run by the highly influential Russian Fascist Party in Harbin.¹⁹ Neither was a sports organizations in the classical meaning, since they also offered lectures on different historical and political topics, evening dances and other activities like a theater club, but each emphasized physical exercise and sports as one of the most important parts of their youth education programs.²⁰

For the Russian fascists in Harbin fierce anti-Semitism was a constitutive part of their Russian identity.²¹ Betar on the other side took considerable pride in defending their community against any possible offender. The fascists and especially their young followers regularly challenged the presence of Jews in the common space of Harbin. They attacked Jewish teenagers on the street, posted anti-Semitic slogans on walls in the main

17 Khisamudtinov, Rossiiskaia Emigratsiia v Kitae, p. 250; Luch Azii 1937 October, p. 5; Scharov: NSO razvivaet energichnyi sportivnuiu rabotu v Kharbine [The NSO expands their energetic activities for Sports in Harbin], in: Rupor, No. 80, 24 March 1933, p. 4.

18 On Revisionism see: Colin Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism. Nationalism and the Origins of the Israeli Right*, London/New York 2006; Eran Kaplan, *The Jewish Radical Right: Revisionist Zionism and its ideological legacy*. Studies on Israel, Madison 2005.

19 For the Russian fascists in Harbin, see: Aleksandr V. Okorokov, *Fashizm i Russkaia Emigratsiia: (1920–1945 gg.)*, Moscow 2002; Nadezhda Ablova, *Rossiiskaia fashistskaia partiia v Man'chzhurii*, in: Belorusskii zhurnal mezhdunarodnogo prava i mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii 2 (1999); John Stephan, *The Russian fascists. Tragedy and farce in exile, 1925–1945*, New York/London 1978. So far not much has been published about fascist youth groups in Harbin and Manchuria. See: Aurilene, *Rossiiskaia Diaspora*, pp. 203–11; Aleksandr V. Okorokov, *Molodezhnye organizatsii russkoi emigratsii (1920–1945 gg.)*, Moscow 2000, pp. 120–99.

20 For the Vanguard Union see for example: K Rozhdestvu, "Avangarda" stanet gorgostiu emigratsii [At Christmas the Vanguard will be the pride of the Emigration], in: Nash Put', No. 223, 8 September 1935, p. 8. Olishev, *Za fashistskoe Vospitanie* [For a fascist education], in: Nash Put', No. 321, 15 December 1935, p. 8; *Fashistskaia molodezh' prinimaet sportivnyi kompleks "Za Rossiuiu"* [Sport complex "Za Rossiuiu"], in: Nash Put', No. 77, 24. March 1937, p. 2; *Ustav Soiuzu Iunych Fashistov "Avangard"*, Harbin 1935.

21 A good insight into the anti-Semitism of the Russian fascists in Harbin is to be found in the "Testament of Russian Fascism", an entire book by their leader, Konstantin Rodzaevskii, on the alleged Jewish world conspiracy. Konstantin Rodzaevskii, *Zaveshchanie russkogo fashista*, Moscow 2001.

streets or smashed the windows of the main synagogue.²² Therefore, it is not surprising that the sports fields of Harbin became another battle ground for the fascists to attack and attempt to decry the Jews of Harbin.

For the self-perception of the fascists, and even more so for the image they created of Russianness and true Russian identity, it was crucial that Russians in general were head and shoulders above the Jews in sports. For example, their newspaper *Nash Put'* wrote about a series of boxing matches between members of Betar and Russians from the YMCA in 1935:

*And one can just be astonished why athletes like Ignatev, Varfalamev, Belii, Permiakov and others compete in a Masonic organization. Of course it was not bad when the Russians beat the Betar people, because in the end the Russian character showed and stepped out of the triangle (the symbol of the YMCA) into the Russian organization under the three colored Russian flag.*²³

Winning against a Jew is presented here as part of the Russian character that cannot be constrained. By joining the YMCA, Ignatev, Varfalamev, Belii and Permiakov in a way betrayed and negated their true "Russianness", but in the end they had no other choice but to capitulate and return to their own people.

Members of fascist youth organizations were also willing to apply unfair means, like threats, in cases where the superiority of a Russian athlete was in doubt. Yaakov Liberman, a very active member of Betar, describes in his autobiography how he was threatened on the streets and, according to his own account, needed protective help from his fellow Betar members, because he was the biggest rival of the Russian competitor for the 100 meter race during the Harbin championships in 1940. Radical Russians even hurled a stone through his window with a warning attached to prevent him from participating in the race.²⁴ Liberman explained this with the need to demonstrate superiority of Russians over other ethnicities and especially the Jews.

*The Russians outnumbered the Jews in Harbin by three to one, and were extremely proud of their predominance in sports. They were not prepared to jeopardize their standing more than they had to. [...] they were not about to risk losing their hold on the championship in the men's category, especially not to a Jew! [...].*²⁵

22 Hellmut Stern, Saitensprünge. Die ungewöhnlichen Erinnerungen eines Musikers, der 1938 von Berlin nach China fliehen mußte, 1949 nach Israel emigrierte, ab 1956 in den USA lebte und schließlich 1961 zurückkehrte als Erster Geiger der Berliner Philharmonie, Berlin, 1997. *Evreiskaia nasiliia nad plakatami Nashego Put'* [Jewish atrocities on posters of Nash Put'], in: *Nash Put'*, No. 64, 7 December 1933, p. 4; *Protiv bezobrazii tvorimykh khuliganami* [Against the mischief by hooligans], in: *Rupor*, No. 65, 10 March 1934, p. 4.

23 *Iudo-Masonskii boks* [Jewish-Masonic boxing match], in: *Nash Put'*, No. 319, 13 December 1935, p. 6.

24 "[...] my competitor was Vasili Protasoff, the former champion, from the White Russian Sports Organization. His supporters included "the musketeers," the Rodzaevsky fascist youth [...]. Since my reputation and 11.3-second record presented a serious challenge to Protasoff, I was often approached on the street by various unknowns who threatened to break my legs if I appeared at the championship competitions [...]" Liberman, *My China*, pp. 104-105.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

The fascists did not just attack Jewish athletes, but also the presence and especially the influence of Jewish citizens in the common space of the sport. In the beginning of the 1930s the main City Stadium of Harbin was administrated by a Russian Jew by the name of Matlin. *Nash Put'* defamed Matlin for the first time in an article at the end of 1933:

*During the long period of his service as the inspector for Sports, the Jew Matlin was mainly busy systematically wasting the property of the stadium. The debt totals 10,800 Ruble. This debt was caused by negligence and because Matlin subordinated the interests of the stadium to his own interests. [...] Nash Put' has testimonies which indicate that Matlin is practically a criminal.*²⁶

They also accused Matlin and the caretaker of the stadium, who happened to be a member of Betar, of failing to protect the property of the stadium during the catastrophic flood in the summer of 1932. *Nash Put'* demanded Matlin's dismissal because of fraud and misappropriation. But apparently this smear campaign did not achieve its goal. Matlin continued to play an important role in the administration of Harbin's sports facilities. In 1937 *Nash Put'* again tried to discredit Matlin by claiming that he, as a member of the supervisory board of the hippodrome, discriminated against the Russian members and tried to incite them against each other.²⁷ Presumably, this effort to strip Matlin of his prestigious positions was part of the fascists' attempt to relegate the Jewish community to the fringes of Harbin society.

Team Harbin: Identification with the Local

But this is just one side of the story. The *Novoe Sportivnoe Obshchestvo* (New Sports Organization – hereafter NSO), Harbin's biggest sports organization, was not in the hands of one particular political or ethnic group, but run conjointly by representatives of the Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Jewish community.²⁸ The well-established *Kharbinskoe Obshchestvo Tennisnogo I Kon'kobezhnogo Sporta* (Harbins Tennis and Skating Club - hereafter KhOTKS) recruited their members from among all the better of segments of Harbin's society, independent of their ethnic background.²⁹ The same applies for the local horse-racing society and the local yacht club, where financial ability mattered much more than skin color or ethnic origin.³⁰ And by no means were all sports teams ethnically homogeneous, but sometimes recruited their members from different ethnicities. In 1939, for example, a mixed team of Chinese and Russians from Harbin competed in

26 Kak evrei Matlin pazbazaril imushchestvo stadiona [How the Jew Matlin squanders the property of the stadium], in: *Nash Put'*, No. 84, 29 December 1933, p. 6.

27 Intrigi Ia. S. Matlina na gosudarstvennom ippodrome [The intrigues of Matlin at the public hippodrome], in: *Nash Put'*, No. 222, 24 August 1937, p. 5.

28 Scharov, NSO razvivaet energichnyiu sportivnuiu raboty v Kharbine [The NSO expands their energetic activities for Sports in Harbin], in: *Rupor*, No. 80, 24 March 1933, p. 4.

29 For the tennis and skating club see: V. P. Ablamskii, *Russkii sport v Kharbine*, in: Taskina, *Russkii Kharbin*, pp. 219-20.

30 E. Zentka, *Kharbinskii ippodrom*, in: Taskina, *Russkii Kharbin*, pp. 224-26.

the so-called First International Bicycle Race in Harbin.³¹ The city sent a mixed team of Chinese, Russians and Japanese to the so-called Manchukuo Olympics in 1935 and 1936.³² In 1934 the athletes Dun Yaoting, Belen'kov, Danilov and Liu Tai won nearly all skating competitions for the KhOTKS.³³

Sports in Harbin was apparently a relatively open common space where border-crossing generally prevailed over border-building. One reason for this might lay in a sense of local pride, loyalty and identification with Harbin itself. At the beginning of the 1930s several organizations, first and foremost the NSO, exerted themselves to raise the level of Harbin athletes and organize sports on a city-wide level because of the sometimes embarrassing performances of Harbin's young athletes in competitions against Western foreigners or teams from other Manchurian cities. As an employee of Harbin's main stadium said in an interview with the newspaper *Kharbinskoe Vremia*:

*The last series of competitions against foreigners revealed this to a high degree. During their appearance in the stadium several local athletes not only did not know the basic rules of their disciplines, but got into arguments with experienced instructors, who admonished them. Sports was without discipline. Everybody did what they wanted, thought or wished to do.*³⁴

So they planned the establishment of a special college for sport, which was to be open to the best representatives of all sport organizations to ensure a better representation of Harbin as a whole at regional and international competitions.³⁵ For them it was irrelevant whether the athlete was Chinese, Russian or Manchu as long as he was a worthy representative and not a source of embarrassment.

A similar tendency can be observed in semi-professional boxing, which was particularly popular in Harbin in the second half of the 1930s.³⁶ Interested spectators simply wanted to see a good fight. They cheered the impetuous attacks of Khan, who called himself Ginger³⁷, admired the brilliant technique of the Jewish boxer, Ilia Kagan,³⁸ or the heavy punch of Akita Iutaka.³⁹ Nobody really cared that the coach of Harbin's most famous boxer, Shiliaev, was a German Jew who also coached Betar's boxing team.⁴⁰

31 Gromadnyi uspek bcherashnikh velosipednykh gonok [Huge success at yesterday's cycling race], in: Zaria, No. 212, 9 August 1939, p. 4.

32 Rezul'taty pervago dnia IV. vceman'chzhurskoi Olimpiady [Results of the first day of the all-Manchurian Olympics], in: Gun Bao, No. 2830, 30 September 1935, p. 1.

33 Sportsmeny KhOTKS – pobediteli na ledianom fronte [The athletes of the KhOTKS – winners at the ice front], in: Rupor, No. 53, 26 January 1934, p. 3.

34 Fizicheskoe vospitanie molodezhi dolzhno byt' centralizovano [The physical education of youth should be unified], in: Kharbinskoe Vremia, No. 232, 29 August 1933, p. 7.

35 Ibid.

36 Vozprozhdaetsia interes Kharbincev k boksy [The interest in boxing is growing among people in Harbin], in: Rupor, No. 200, 26 July 1937, p. 4.

37 Kto pobedit? [Who will win?], in: Rupor, No. 296, 1 November 1937, p. 4.

38 Komu prineset pobedy voskresnyi boi? [Who will win the fight on Sunday?], in: Rupor, No. 188, 14 July 1937, p. 6.

39 Akita Iutaka ili Iuzefovich [Akita Iutaka or Juzefovich], in: Rupor, No. 251, 17 September 1937, p. 4.

40 Shiliaev actually went to the United States to become a professional boxer but died tragic in one of his first fights in San Francisco. He is still remembered as the greatest athlete that ever came out of the Russian com-

Boxing was also the only sport where athletes from Harbin could present themselves on an international stage beyond Manchukuo and Japan. In this context ethnic origin, the importance of political and religious beliefs faded as long as the local boy won. Harbin newspapers reported enthusiastically about the performances of Harbin's boxers in Shanghai and Manila, especially about Harbin's "wonder boy", the boxer Shiliaev, who was said to have what it takes to become an international champion.⁴¹

Training the Warrior versus Sportsmanship: Sport as a means or an end

In comparison to the above, for the Vanguard Union and Betar sports was never a value in itself, but more of an instrument to train their members for their future roles as the saviors of Russia or as fighters for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. As the fascist leader Konstantin Rodzaevskij said on the occasion of the ceremonial promulgation of the results of the examination and the bestowal of medals to outstanding members: "Physical preparation is of great importance, because today's struggle for existence and our future mobilization will require all of our strength. Our bodies must be steeled and trained."⁴² Charles Clurman, a Russian Jew and a very active member of Betar, also portrayed sports as means of preparation for future fights:

*Then there were the Trumpeldor (Betar) scouts. We had athletics. We had a skating team. Boys and girls. We were preparing to go to Israel to fight for the independence of Israel.*⁴³

Therefore, sports within Betar as well as the Vanguard Union was usually embedded in the overall ideological and political education of children and youth, and further, as part of their internal examination system. To rise within the different ranks, each member had to pass a combined examination of a written and a physical test. At the Vanguard Union, for example, boys between the ages of 15 and 18 had to play either soccer, volleyball or basketball, show their abilities in track and field and do a written test in Russian history and politics to reach the next higher rank.⁴⁴ Sports events at the Vanguard Union and, to

munity in the Far East. E. Shiliaev, Pamiati brata, Andreia Shiliaeva – Russkogo L'va iz Kharbina, in: Rossiiane v Azii. Literaturno-istoricheskii ezhegodnik (1998) No. 5, pp. 106-25.

41 Vallo-Spida priglasiat v Parizh. Kharbinskii bokser na poroge bol'shoi sportivnoi kar'ery [Vallo-Spida invited to Paris. Harbin boxer at the threshold of a great career], in: Rupor, No. 322, 25 November 1934, p. 8; Ia v etom mal'chike ne oshibsia! Trener Zeliikh schitaet, chto emu udastsia sdelat' A. Shiliaeva velikim bokserom [...], in: Rupor, No. 149, 5 June 1937, p. 4; S Shiliaevym nikto ne reshaetsia srazit'sia. [No one dares to fight with Shiliaev], in: Zaria, No. 119, 8 June 1937, p. 5.

42 Russkii deti verny Velikoi Rossii [Russian children are true to Great Russia], in: Nash Put', No. 220, 8 March 1935, p. 4.

43 Interview with Charles Clurman conducted by Irene Clurman 29 October 1982, transcripts on http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Charles_%28Ruvim%29_Isaac_Clurman.htm. Last visit 30 August, 2011. Similar also Yaakov Liberman: "Sports and physical fitness are the prerequisites of a healthy society. Zionists soon realized the importance of cultivating able-bodied women and men, who would one day stand at the forefront of the Jewish struggle for independence." Liberman, My China, p. 62.

44 Olishev, Za fashistskoe Vospitanie [For a fascist education], in: Nash Put', No. 321, 15 December 1935, p. 8; Za Russkost' Russkikh Detei! Rabota VFP sredi detei i iunoshestva [For the Russianness of Russian Children. The work

a lesser degree, also at Betar were also normally framed by uniformed parades, inflammatory speeches, the reading of nationalistic poems and singing of patriotic songs.⁴⁵

But many, if not most, athletes and officials in Harbin did not see sports and physical exercise only as a means to prepare youth for lives as fighters and soldiers or to demonstrate ostensible ethnic superiority, but rather the opposite. Just as many like-minded Europeans earlier, they believed that sports could improve the coexistence of different groups and promote values and norms like discipline and selflessness as well as tolerance and cooperativeness. In contrast to the Vanguard Union and Betar, the editor of the more liberal newspaper Rupor saw sports as an antithesis to chauvinism, intolerance and war-mindedness:

*On the field sportsmen show their success and their accomplishments and arouse feelings of competition as well as admiration. Athletes with their rules and traditions propagate the athletic nobleness of a gentlemen, fairness and mutual help. Sportsmanship in its contemporary meaning against a bellicose and chauvinistic spirit forms a strong and self-confident generation and teaches courtesy and mental balance.*⁴⁶

Some organizations, like the sports division of the local chapter of the YMCA, hoped “to strengthen interethnic relations among youth”⁴⁷ as one of the main objectives of their engagement in sports. To achieve this goal, the YMCA organized a city-wide basketball league in 1934 open to teams from Russian and Chinese schools, which, according to the YMCA administration, ended in a common celebration.⁴⁸

No man’s Land: Sport between the Fronts

And even the borders drawn between Betar athletes and members of the fascist youth groups was not insuperable and at times were crossed at least indirectly. Since the mid-1930s the Bureau of the Affairs of Russian Émigrés (hereafter BREM), an institution erected to preside over the Russian population of Harbin, was also in charge of Russian sports organizations, sports at Russian schools and the organization of several sports competitions, such as the annual school Olympics, with sometimes over 1000 participants.⁴⁹ At the same time, the leadership of BREM installed by the Japanese consisted to a significant degree of members of the Russian Fascist Party. Their leader Konstantin Rodzaevskij, a die-hard anti-Semite, was actually the head of the so-called Second Department for Culture and Education, which was also responsible for sports.⁵⁰ The actual

of the VFP among Children and youth], in: Nash Put’, suppl., 24 May 1935, p. 25; Fashistskaia molodezh’ prinimaet sportivnyi kompleks “Za Rossiiu” [Sport complex “Za Rossiiu”], in: Nash Put’, No. 77, 24 March 1937, p. 2.

45 Russkiiia deti verny Velikoi Rossii [Russian children are true to Great Russia], in: Nash Put’, No. 220, 8 March 1935, p. 4.

46 Politika i Sport [Politics and Sports], in: Rupor, No. 139, 26 May 1937, p. 1.

47 Christianskii Soiuz Molodykh Liudei: Administratsionnyi Otchet, p. 8.

48 Ibid.

49 Luch Azii, No. 22. June 1936, p. 6.

50 Aurilene, Rossiiskaia Diaspora, pp. 52-53; It is still not clear from the sources whether any Jewish organizations ever registered with BREM. Several revisionist associations, though, did press for membership in 1936, arguing

sub-department for sports was run by I. N. Dunaev, who was also the leader of the Union of Fascist Youth, the umbrella organization for all fascist children and youth groups.

Betar members repeatedly participated in sports events organized by the BREM. In November of 1937 Ilia Kagan, one of the most talented boxers from Betar, competed in a BREM-sponsored series of boxing matches.⁵¹ The same applies for Betar's volleyball, ping pong and the track and field team, who all took part in tournaments organized by the BREM. It is conceivable that the desire for a serious competition with other talented athletes beyond Betar overrode usually firm lines.

Members of fascist youth organizations and Betar also occasionally competed for the same team during the annual school Olympics.⁵² The participation of Jewish teenagers and youth at those events appears to have remained possible because it occurred in a different context, outside of Betar and the Vanguard Union. For example, the alternative identification in this case with one's school instead of ethnicity, nationality or religious affiliation seems to have enabled them to overlook the otherwise prevailing antagonism between the two groups.

Conclusion

By no means do I want to create the expression that sports in Harbin was a sphere of interethnic and interracial harmony and peace. As I have shown on the basis of the Russian fascists and the Jews, sports in Harbin was not devoid of ethnic antagonism and occasional violence, especially if it was just a side show of deep-rooted antagonism and an instrument to demonstrate superiority and debase the "other". If sports was "no longer [...] a competition between two sportsmen", but "a contest between "them" and "us", between White Russians and Jews",⁵³ as Liberman puts it in his recollections about his "famous" race in 1940, it would have served to reinforce borders much more than erode them. But if unhinged from a nationalistic and ethnocentric context, sport organizations, facilities and competitions seem to be a common space where otherwise clearly defined political, religious or ethnic borders could be shifted, adjusted, replaced and even sometimes abandoned.

that they also belonged to the Russian emigrant groups and the anti-Bolshevik coalition but there is no clear indication that they ever formally joined the BREM. See: *Evrei o Biuro po delam Russkiiskikh emigrantov* [The Jews about the Bureau for Russian Emigrants], in: *Zaria* (1936), No. 41, 15. February, p. 4. Altman says in his article that the Jewish organization joined BREM against Russian resistance, but he relies on the memoirs of General Higuchi, which Altman admits are of questionable reliability. Avraham Altman. *Controlling the Jews, Manchukuo Style*, in: Roman Malek (ed.), *Jews in China. From Kaifeng ... to Shanghai*, Sankt. Augustin 2000, pp. 279-317, here p. 290.

51 Sport v Betare [Sports at Betar], in: *Hagadel*, No. 23-24, 15 December 1937, p. 19.

52 *Luch Azii*, No. 22, June 1936, p. 6.

53 Liberman, *My China*, p. 106.