

Kären M. Mason, Curator (retired), Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

*In the years that I was Curator of the Iowa Women's Archives, I crossed paths with Miriam Gelfand from time to time, and was always interested in the story of her life. In 2016 I conducted an oral history interview with Miriam as part of the Jewish Women in Iowa Project underway at the Archives. We touched on many topics, beginning with her parents' migration as children from Russia to China. I was especially fascinated by Miriam's description of her education in Shanghai, China, and the languages she learned and spoke there. The following is an excerpt from that oral history interview, edited for readability. It is published here by permission of the Iowa Women's Archives. The full transcript is available at the [Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries](#).*

Miriam Gelfand: I'm of Russian descent. My father's family grew up in Russia.

Kären Mason: And was your mother from the same part of Russia?

Gelfand: No, my father came from Crimea, and my mother came from Odessa. But my mother was only four years old when they left Russia. I must say right now, I'm Russian Jewish. My mother came to China in 1906. She was four years old. The Jews in the Odessa area and some other areas close by had [experienced] very strong antisemitism. So the families left, and some went to Europe, some went to America, if they were lucky enough. Some went to China, and the reason they went to China was because, one, China did not demand any visas. The other [reason] was that the Chinese Eastern Railroad was built. My grandfather was a trader, and he thought he could work doing import or export with China or whatever. At that time he had the three older children – my mother was the second one – and they moved to China and then they had two more. They went to a town called Harbin.

My father was eleven years older than my mother, but my father came from a very large family, there were eight kids, and he was number seven of eight. The older ones, as they grew older, went to China to work. They went into lumbering or railroad or whatever. My dad and his youngest brother and their parents stayed in Crimea, in that area. They lived in a village. My grandfather was a scholar; he read Hebrew and he knew Hebrew. And that was important to him. When my dad was 14 or 15, he couldn't get into high school, by taking a lottery, because he was Jewish. At that point my grandparents said, "It's time to move." So they and the two younger boys went to China.

Mason: And when about would that have been?

Gelfand: That also would be about 1906. Or 1905.

Mason: So do you remember much about Harbin?

Gelfand: Absolutely nothing. I was five years old when we left Harbin. My parents left in 1930 because the Japanese were moving toward taking over Harbin and businesses were falling apart. My father was in business and decided [he] can't earn a living, he's got to go to the bigger city. Almost everybody else around his age moved to Shanghai or other cities in China.

Mason: So, Shanghai, what an amazing place.

Gelfand: Shanghai was amazing, and I'd like to say what [languages] I speak. I spoke Russian at home. Russian was my native tongue. I went to a French school because Shanghai had concessions, and we lived in the French Concession, and I went to the French public school, which was run by the French city council. And it was a very good school.

Anyhow, so I spoke Russian at home, French in school, but from kindergarten on English was compulsory in the school one hour a day, every day. Everything else was in French.

Mason: Because the French believed [English] was important for. . . ?

Gelfand: In Shanghai everything was in English, in general. In the French concession the schools were French, but basically everybody spoke English on the streets. So I spoke English on the streets. Basically, my friends and I all spoke English and not French. We spoke French only in school. None of us spoke Chinese.

Mason: Did you have any connections with Chinese people?

Gelfand: Really not until I went to college in Shanghai, and then I took Chinese because I had to. That was during the war. And I swore in Chinese. So I spoke Russian at home, French in school, English on the streets, and I swore in Chinese. That's the story of my language.

Mason: That's great. You had every language you needed. So you lived in the French Concession. Were there a lot of Jews living in the French Concession?

Gelfand: Yes. Either in the French Concession, or the International Settlement.

Mason: How did your family end up living in the French concession?

Gelfand: When we first went to Shanghai, my father and a partner opened a factory; they made quills, feather down quills. The factories had to be on the border of the concession, and so that's where we first lived.

Mason: And so you went to the French school because it was convenient, and it was a good school?

Gelfand: Well, it was the school in the French Concession. It had a very good reputation. However, my father went first to Shanghai to set up the factory. My mother and I moved in October, when school was already on. When she came to register me for kindergarten they said, "Does she speak French?" "No." "Does she speak English?" "No." They said, "Well, school has already started, and we can't accept her." So they suggested that I go to a private kindergarten in English, and learn at least one language, and [then] I could enter the French school because there were English teachers there. And that's what happened. [Until] the end of that school year, I learned nothing but to speak English. And then I entered the French school, in kindergarten—and I was a year older than most of the kids—but I only stayed there for three months, and then they transferred me to a class called "Preparatory Course" and I knew enough French to understand and finish that. And then I skipped first grade and went directly into second grade, which was nice because I caught up with my own age.

Mason: So at home were you reading books in Russian?

Gelfand: No. And that's another story. I read books in English and French and belonged to the English and French libraries. When I was entering high school, you had to take a third language. At that time the languages offered were Latin, German, and Russian. So I signed up for Latin, and the reason for that is that with German I knew that there would be a problem at home. It's not that I was growing up anti-German, but I knew all the problems involved. I felt I knew Russian, so I didn't have to study Russian. How wrong I was! I felt that I'd have to compete for essays with French kids and if I knew some Latin I would be able to write in French better.

Anyhow, I came home and told my parents that I had signed up for Latin, and my mother said, "You're not taking Latin." I said, "Why not? What am I taking?" She said, "Russian." I said, "I know Russian!" She said, "Who told you?" Those were the exact words. She said, "Do you read in Russian?" "No." "Do you write Russian?" "No." She said, "You speak Russian, and you speak well because you hear correct Russian and you have a good vocabulary, but you don't know Russian." Anyhow, I took Russian for four years, and I was very, very grateful

because I was doing very poorly in Chemistry, and I needed my Russian grades, which were excellent. I had no idea that I would end up doing something with Russian.

That's another story, and I'll tell you because it relates to this. I always wanted to go away to college, and some of the people that I knew in Shanghai left for either the University of Hong Kong or the University of the Philippines. That was the plan, but then of course the war started so I didn't go. So I went to college during the war because we were not interned, since we were not American or British citizens; we were considered neutrals at that time. The Germans didn't think so, but we were still considered [neutral]. I went to a university called St. John's University, which was an Episcopalian school originally run by Americans for Chinese students, and they allowed 2.5% foreigners. I graduated in three years. But the Americans had already been interned, and the Chinese did not want the Japanese to take over the university per se, so it was run by Chinese scholars, except that it was semi-controlled by the Japanese by then.

I'd wanted always to be a teacher. [But when] I came up to the Education desk to have them sign my registration for sophomore year, the Chair of the Education Department said, "I'm not signing that." There were about seven of us standing there, foreigners. And he said, "I am the head of the department, and I want Chinese teachers only. No foreigners can major in education, because you're all going to leave after the war, and I need Chinese teachers. And I am going to teach all the required courses in Chinese."

So when we stood there, not knowing [what to do], I had a friend who said, "Oh, I like to read, I'll go to the English Department." I said, "I like to read, too, but I cannot go into the English Department." She said, "Why not?" I said, "Because it's hard for my parents, during the war, to send me to college. If I came home saying that I was majoring in a non-profession," I said, "Dad would say quit school and go to work." I said, "They're all for education, but there's a limit." I was standing next to a fellow whom I knew, a classmate of mine, and he said, "I have the same story." He said, "Let's go to the Economics Department." I said, "What are we going to do with Economics?" And he said, "Well, we'll take accounting, so we can get a job in accounting. Or we can work in a bank or a realty company." I said, "Fine, let's go." So I have a degree in Economics. I hated it with a passion, but I have a degree in economics.

Mason: You learned Chinese then?

Gelfand: I learned Chinese in order to graduate from St. John's. You had to take a Chinese language exam. I graduated from college in January 1946.

*Miriam worked at Texas Oil and Shell from January until September 1946 as a file clerk and, because she had family in Seattle, applied to the University of Washington as a graduate student.*

Gelfand: The only department I could apply for was Economics [laughter], oh holy terror. I studied economics until December. And I hated it. The next quarter I took Chinese, and then I took Far Eastern History, which I loved. But my father died in February, and I realized I couldn't stay in school unless I had a fellowship.

*The head of the Far Eastern Department, which included the Russian Department, suggested Miriam apply for a graduate student position on a new project called "Soviet Press Translations." She was hired to translate articles from the Soviet press into English.*

Gelfand: That's what I did for about three years. Then there was an opening teaching Russian. The people in the Russian Department knew that I wanted to teach, so one of my professors said, "You know, there is an opening. If you want it, you can have it." And so I did that.