

# Rescuing Shanghai's Jewish past

Dvir Bar-Gal, an Israeli who has made Shanghai his home, recently visited Australia. The journalist and tour guide spoke to **Peter Kohn** about his rescue of Jewish gravestones.

LOOKING for adventures in a hemisphere where Jewish connections are wrapped in mystique, Dvir Bar-Gal arrived in Shanghai in 2001, as he relates, "to follow my dreams".

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the Israeli photojournalist and TV documentary maker found Israel's focus turning almost exclusively to the Middle East, and there was not much news from Asia, a trend he wanted to change.

Little did he know then that three months after his arrival, he would stumble on a fascinating story and a life project - recovering Jewish gravestones from Shanghai's four old Jewish cemeteries that had been ripped up during the 1960s Cultural Revolution.

Bar-Gal's wanderlust also brought him on his first visit to Melbourne in December, to meet and greet Jews who for many years have taken his guided tours of old Jewish Shanghai and to catch up with friends he has made through the tours.

After World War II, Melbourne and Sydney drew significant numbers of European Jews who had taken refuge in Shanghai during the Holocaust. After hearing much about Australia from a stream of participants on his five-hour tour of Jewish Shanghai, Bar-Gal decided to celebrate his 50th birthday with a visit in December.

Haifa-born Bar-Gal had only been here once before - a brief time spent in Sydney in 2000, where incidentally he was contacted by *The AJN* to shoot news photos.

In Melbourne in December, Bar-Gal, camera at the ready, asked the usual tourist's questions during his interview with *The AJN* on Carlisle Street. What is a platypus, and where can his young daughter sight her first kangaroo?

Speaking at Caulfield Synagogue and Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne before heading to a private holiday in Sydney, Bar-Gal related his quest to locate and refurbish Shanghai's Jewish tombstones.

When Bar-Gal arrived in Shanghai, he told *The AJN*, he wanted to learn more about the city's Jewish past, so he took a tour run by Georgia Noy, another Israeli expat. (Some time later, Noy would hand over the tours to him).

She gave him a potential news lead - two Jewish gravestones had turned up in a local antique shop. With Jewish visitors on Noy's tour often asking directions to their relatives' burial places, Bar-Gal sensed he was on to a good story. He contacted the shop's proprietor who said one of the stones had already been sold.

When the shop owner heard the stones were gravestones, he became perplexed, as in Chinese culture gravestones are believed to harbour



Dvir Bar-Gal and his tour are joined by Buddhist Monks for a photo.



Dvir Bar-Gal with Bialik College students on Chusan Road in the old Hongkew Ghetto.



Dvir Bar-Gal leading his tour of Jewish Shanghai.

bad fortune. Yet the man was prepared to search for other gravestones at a price of \$US50. He referred the Israeli to his antique dealer who took him to a village on Shanghai's western fringe, where he had been buying up the stones for a pittance to sell them at great profit.

As they scoured through the village, they found several Jewish gravestones perched against a wall and discovered more stones at a cemetery where Chinese Muslims were buried. The younger villagers were just as puzzled by the origins of the stones as the two visitors but the elders who had lived through the Cultural Revolution knew more.

They had memories of Mao Zedong's orders to observe *Po-Si-Jiu* (*Four Old Things*), a disdain for tradition and memory, to tear up the past, especially all traces of Western legacy. Under Mao, the cemeteries where Jews were buried had been removed and the coffins and stones were recycled.

Over the next few years, Bar-Gal visited several villages west of Shanghai. Camera in hand to record the finds, he helped reclaim 105 Jewish tombstones and so far he has located around 30 of the families of the deceased. He is using the compelling footage to make a long documentary that tells the story of the search for the lost Shanghai Jewish

cemeteries and relates the history of Shanghai's Jews.

The search has been difficult because locals using the stones as pavers, sewer covers, washboards, even small bridges, often turned them face down, as they believed hiding the inscriptions would erase the bad luck.

WHEN Sydneysider Vera Karlikoff heard the gravestone of her mother Sara Voron had been located by Bar-Gal, she travelled to Shanghai to see it. For Karlikoff, who had been active in the Shanghaiandler community, it was an emotional discovery.

Bar-Gal sought halachic advice from Shanghai Chabad rabbi Shalom Greenberg on moving the stones. The rabbi explained gravestones have no *kedushah* (sacredness) but are merely the markers of remains that bear sanctity, so it was halachically permissible to move them.

The Israeli wants to reassemble the Jewish gravestones in a park located in Hongkew, a working-class district which in the 1930s and 1940s became the home of almost 20,000 Jewish refugees from the Nazis, even before the Japanese interned Jews there between 1943-45.

However, the lingering cultural reluctance by authorities to showcase gravestones, as well as the bureau-

cratic grid, have so far frustrated Bar-Gal's plans to locate the stones in Hongkew's Huoshan Park, where a small plaque pays tribute to the "stateless" Europeans, a euphemism for Jewish refugees.

"I've even brought in a Feng Shui master to make conditions better for placing the stones in the park," he reported, explaining that the smallness of the stones and the surrounding greenery might allay resistance to his plans.

Meanwhile, Bar-Gal continues leading his tours of Jewish Shanghai, explaining the history, and acting as a go-between when visitors ask to visit the tiny tenements that were their homes or the homes of their mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles.

Shanghai's status as an open port, an absence of European anti-Semitism in Asia, Chinese hospitality, the perception by Japan that there were strategic national advantages to holding out a lifeline to Jewish refugees, and the philanthropy of Russian and Middle Eastern Jews who had settled there decades earlier, combined to make China's largest metropolis a haven for Jewish refugees in an era when most other countries had slammed their doors.

Bar-Gal's tours are open to all ages and in November, 66 students from Bialik College in Melbourne took the

tour during their visit to Shanghai en route to a school trip to Israel, bringing with them a fresh set of questions about grandparents and older relatives who lived in Shanghai.

The tour takes in the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, housed in the former Ohel Moshe synagogue in Hongkew, where refugees worshipped. Samuel Antman, father of Melbourne's Fred Antman, a former president of Elwood Shul, was the chazan of Ohel Moshe.

The lively museum has been refurbished and it reopened last year to coincide with China's celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and liberation from Japan.

A travelling exhibition from the museum was shown at Sydney's Chinese Museum and at Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre last year.

Shanghai has three Chabad centres and a thriving Progressive congregation, all serving a largely transient Jewish population of Western business people, professionals and academics.

Bar-Gal believes China will become a more prominent corner of the Jewish Diaspora as the 21st century unfolds. "Jews are seeking places of safety that are free of rampant anti-Semitism - and Shanghai is a great example of this."