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Jonathan Goldstein

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The Lazar Epstein (1886-1979) Papers in YIVO: Their Usefulness to Scholars of Asian Jewish History

Jonathan Goldstein

University of West Georgia

Summary

Lazar Epstein (1886-1979) was a moderately important Menshevik and leader of the *Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland* (The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, usually referred to as “The Bund”) in Imperial Russia, Japan, China, and ultimately the United States. He also made a fact-finding trip to the Philippines en route to the United States in 1938 in order to determine the viability of the Philippines as a safe haven for refugees from Hitler. After his death his family donated his papers to the New York City branch of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research [*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*]. The documents are mainly in Yiddish—Epstein’s mother tongue—but also in Russian and English, his second and third languages, and some are in French. These documents shed light on some of the major transformational events in modern Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Russian/Polish, and Jewish history. They also document Jewish relations with ethnic Russians who lived both in China and the United States. Finally, they may have value for researchers interested in the phenomenon of psycho-history, that is to say, psychological factors which motivate individual behavior. The Epstein papers suggest an intergenerational conflict which expressed itself as an ideological quarrel between Lazar the father, who was a Menshevik and Bundist, and his son Israel Epstein (1915-2005), who, with equal passion, defended Third International Marxism-Leninism and ultimately Maoism.

Lazar Davidovitch Epstein, who lived from 1886 to 1979, was a moderately important Menshevik and leader of the *Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland* (The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, usually referred to as “The Bund”) in Imperial Russia, Japan, China, and ultimately the United States. His first name is pronounced “LAZER,” as in “LASER BEAM.” After his death a relative, Beba Leventhal, donated a large quantity of his papers to the New York City branch of the YIVO (Yiddish acronym for *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, or Institute for Jewish Research). These documents have been cataloged as YIVO’s record group #1475. Other Epstein papers can be found in YIVO’s general collection, especially its archive of the Jewish immigrant assistance associations

abbreviated “HIAS” and “HICEM.” “HICEM” is the acronym of the organization formed in 1927 with the merger of HIAS, the American-based Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; the Paris-based ICA, or Jewish Colonization Association, and the Berlin-based Emigdirect. Many Epstein documents are in Yiddish, Lazar Epstein’s mother tongue. Some are in English and Russian, his second languages, and a few are in French. Lazar Epstein almost certainly knew some Polish, although I have found no Polish documents in the archive. Despite his years of residence in both Japan and China, there is no evidence among these papers of his fluency in either of those languages.

The letters, telegrams, photographs, and clippings from newspapers and other periodicals constitute several thousand pages and are stored in eleven boxes. They were cataloged into the main YIVO collection in 2011 and are open for general public use. No special permission is required. A finding aid is available at YIVO. For further information contact YIVO librarian Leo Greenbaum at (212) 246-6080 or lgreenbaum@yivo.cjh.org.

The Epstein papers, still a largely untapped resource for historical research, have special value for scholars because of the inaccessibility to the public of four hours of interviews of Lazar Epstein conducted and recorded in 1977 by Moshe Rosman, then a graduate student at Columbia University in New York City and today an associate professor of Jewish history at Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. Rosman’s recordings were made under the auspices of the American Jewish Committee, who subsequently donated them to the Dorot Collection of the New York Public Library. Although Epstein clearly wanted his story to be told, as otherwise he would not have allowed the interviews to be taped, he did not sign a public release document prior to his death. This inadvertent omission left the New York Public Library in the embarrassing position of having to store the taped interviews perpetually as historical relics *and* deny scholars access to them. Despite the willingness of Professor Rosman to have the tapes released, as of 2013 they are still inaccessible to researchers. This author’s appeals to both the New York Public Library and the American Jewish Committee were of no avail.¹

Because of the inaccessibility of Epstein’s tapes and the absence of any biography of him, Epstein’s YIVO papers have special relevance. They document some of the major transformational events in modern Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Russian/Polish, and Jewish history. They also touch on the theme of intergenerational conflict between Lazar Epstein and his Maoist son Israel Epstein. I will first discuss the documents which concern Lazar Epstein’s life and activities in Japan and China up to 1938, when he and his wife Sonia set forth from China. I will then describe the post-

1938 materials, making mention of his brief but significant trip through the Philippines en route to the United States in 1938.

Pre-1938 Materials

Lazar Epstein and his wife Sonia Moiseovna (1890-1972) were both born in Vilna, a city that was for many Jews the cultural and religious capital of Imperial Russia.² The Epsteins were a close-knit family who broke with the Orthodox religiosity of their parents. Well before World War One, they became totally secular and sought economic betterment in the bustling commercial metropolis of Warsaw. Their only son Israel recalled fleeing in his mother's arms from Warsaw when it was under German bombardment early in World War One. The family then escaped further East, seeking commercial opportunities in Kobe, Japan, where Lazar entered the maritime insurance business. Because the Imperial German navy had sealed off European Russia from all maritime commerce, the Russian front was supplied by goods which the Allies shipped westward across the Trans-Siberian Railway. Kobe was a vital transshipment point in this process, especially for goods destined for Dalian (Dairen), the southern terminus of the Southern Manchurian Railway. From Dalian goods were shipped northward to Harbin and from Harbin, via the Chinese Eastern Railway, to the Trans-Siberian Railway.

We know little else about how Lazar and his family spent the war years in Kobe. By 1919, with the war over, the Epsteins sought economic betterment in Harbin, the rail and commercial hub of northeast China. In 1920, after a brief residence in Harbin, they relocated once again, this time to Tianjin (Tientsin), the north Chinese port that serviced Beijing and its hinterland. There Lazar resumed his maritime insurance business and expanded it to include the importation of dental supplies. In Tianjin Lazar and his family finally found the financial stability they had sought since leaving Vilna.

During a residence of seventeen years in Tianjin Lazar, a totally secular Jew, immersed himself in the cultural and political activities of Tianjin's Jewish Cultural Club, or "Kunst," of which he was chairman. The Epsteins lived continuously in Tianjin through the outbreak of Sino-Japanese hostilities in 1937. On July 7, 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) erupted as a result of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident or the *Lugouqiao* Incident (盧溝橋事變; also known as 七七事變, 七七盧溝橋事變), a battle between the Republic of China's Nationalist Army and the army of Imperial Japan. In July 1938 Lazar and his wife immigrated, via Shanghai and Manila, to Chicago and ultimately to New York, where they continued their Bundist political activity until their deaths in 1979 and 1972 respectively. Their son Israel chose to remain as a journalist

in China, where he would witness and document the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese Revolution, and the earliest decades of the People's Republic of China.³

Over and beyond offering a record of commercial history and peripatetic wandering, the Epstein archive from before 1938 is the record of a family which was intensely political and highly vocal when it came to expressing its social concerns. They were part of the Russian *haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment which, in the wake of the Scientific Revolution, fired the minds of Russian-Jewish intellectuals. They spoke Yiddish at home but, like other *maskilim* [enlightened ones], had an enthusiasm for the Russian language and literature, which Israel claims to have learned and appreciated "at his mother's knee."⁴ The parents were fervently atheist, anti-Zionist, and, needless to say, never gave their son a Bar Mitzvah. According to a January 3, 2013 email from Rabbi Marvin Tokayer, a close friend of Israel's, Israel was circumcised. If so, that ancient ritual, as well as the naming of their son with a traditional Jewish first name, would have probably been done in deference to the religiosity of grandparents or other older and more tradition-bound relatives.

Both parents saw no conflict between their petty-bourgeois status and the politics of the Bund, which, through its affiliates in Russian Poland, China, Japan, and the United States, advocated moderate social reform through either the ballot box or revolution.⁵ A 1905 photograph shows Lazar among fellow Bundists in Minsk at the time of the abortive revolution against Czardom. Some sixty-five years later an eyewitness recalled Lazar's passionate rhetoric during that event [see below]. Another photo shows Lazar at the time of the March/April 1917 "Bourgeois" revolution in Russia, which successfully overthrew Czardom and briefly installed a democratic government. Lazar is sitting in St. Petersburg, wearing a tuxedo and smoking a cigar amongst his Bundist friends. At one point Sonia was exiled to Central Asia for revolutionary activity against the Czarist regime. The YIVO archive provides little information on her time in the pre-Revolutionary *gulag*. It would be interesting to know how difficult her exile was and whether it was short or long.

Other pre-1938 documents concern the Epsteins' relations with indigenous ethnic Chinese, an important topic broached but not fully examined in Hebrew University Professor Irene Eber's 2008 anthology *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China*. Eber surveys Polish, Yiddish, and German-Jewish memoirs from Shanghai in the 1920s through the 1940s. She concludes that most authors expressed at best a transient interest in things Chinese.⁶ In contrast to this, Lazar Epstein took an unusually empathetic view of the people and culture he was living amongst. He wrote for Harbin's Bundist-oriented Yiddish-language newspaper *Der Vayter Mizrekh* [The Far East], edited by Meir Mendelovitch Berman (a.k.a Meyer Eliash Birman, b. Ponevezh

[Panevezys], Russian Lithuania 1891, d. New York 1955) as well as for the English-language *Peking and Tientsin Times*, the most influential English-language paper published in China north of Shanghai. In an October 21, 1931 article for the *Times*, Lazar advocated Jewish acculturation. He pointed out that immigrants in the West, by the second generation, knew the language of their new homeland and contributed to their adopted culture. Jews in China, in contrast, lived on cultural “. . . scraps from Europe. . . . Does China lose by this lack of cultural intercourse? Probably not, but the permanent Jewish resident here does. He. . . has sunk no roots into the soil where he shall probably spend all of his days, and his children theirs.” While Lazar and his wife Sonia ultimately left China with their cultural goals unfulfilled, their son Israel remained in the Middle Kingdom and embedded himself in Chinese society, as will be described below.

Post-1938 Materials

Post-1938 documents reveal Lazar Epstein’s deepening commitment to Bundism and to Jewish social welfare causes as the Holocaust decimated his native Polish-Jewish constituency. In July 1938, en route to the United States, he visited the Philippines and investigated its possibilities as a haven for Jewish refugees. A July 8, 1938 letter in Yiddish from Meir Berman in Harbin to the New York office of HIAS mentions Lazar Epstein’s visit to the Philippines and stresses the importance of Manila Jewry signing affidavits of support for Jews immigrating from Germany and Austria.⁷ An October 10, 1938 letter from Epstein to the Paris office of HIAS describes his efforts in the Philippines to find a safe haven there for Jews fleeing from Hitler. As in other parts of the world, opposition to Jewish settlement arose from well-established members of the city’s Jewish community itself, leading Epstein to comment that the Manila Refugee Committee did not want to invite too many Jews as “they are under the impression that it may affect their own status.”⁸

After emigrating to the United States Epstein held a variety of social welfare positions for the moderately leftist, Bundist-oriented Jewish Labor Committee. He made a living through daytime jobs as an importer of Chinese furs and skins, trades he had become familiar with in Kobe, Harbin, and Tianjin. In a letter of October 25, 1938, James Bernstein, the Paris representative of HIAS, offered Epstein employment in Manila working for HIAS, in an attempt to solidify that destination for a large number of Jews. Having just settled in the United States, Epstein turned down Bernstein’s offer.⁹

But Epstein remained deeply concerned with the fate of his brethren who managed to survive the war in China, Japan, and the Philippines. Numerous letters in his archive contain eyewitness testimony to the extent to which the Holocaust had

decimated Polish Jewry by 1942 and his concern for the *sherut plita*, the surviving remnant. These letters document the devastation of Polish Jewry at a time when many in the West proclaimed ignorance of such atrocities, despite evidence to the contrary.¹⁰

Epstein spent the rest of his life assisting these refugees. He spent his last days in the Bund's old age home in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Eulogies at his funeral attest to the depth of his concern for his Bundist comrades as well as for many other emigres.¹¹

Other Aspects of Social and Psychological History Which Can be Explored in the Epstein Archive

The collection also contains letters Lazar exchanged with the ethnically-Russian Riasanovsky family, who had also fled eastward. The Riasanovsky family originated in Riasan and left St. Petersburg for Harbin at approximately the same time as the Epsteins travelled from Vilna to Harbin to Tianjin. The elder Riasanovsky, Valentin A., was a distinguished authority on Chinese and Mongol law. He had matriculated at Imperial St. Petersburg's *Orientalny Institut* and taught at Harbin's Juridical Institute. His sons Nicholas V. and Alexander V. were both born in Harbin, where the two families became acquainted. The Riasanovskys emigrated to Oregon shortly after Lazar and Sonia moved to New York. The Riasanovsky sons also became distinguished Slavic scholars, Nicholas at the University of California at Berkeley and Alexander at the University of Pennsylvania. The Epstein-Riasanovsky correspondence describes a shared experience of Asiatic/Russian immigration to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Since Lazar and Sonia's immigration preceded that of the Riasanovskys, Lazar was in a position to advise. This batch of letters reveals a friendship between sophisticated ethnic Russians and Russian-Jews that was uncommon among less enlightened brethren from both constituencies.¹²

Another experience documented in the Epstein archive is Lazar's complex relationship with his son Israel. This intergenerational conflict falls into the realm of "psycho-history," the study of psychological forces motivating individual behavior. I have written about the psycho-history of Epstein father and son elsewhere and refer the reader to that study.¹³ In brief, in a fashion totally uncharacteristic of the Russian-Jewish family experience, Israel Epstein remained in "the old country," i.e. China, when his parents immigrated to the United States in 1938. Israel then threw himself into the nascent Chinese Revolution, met Mao, wrote a biography of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's widow Song Qingling, edited *China Reconstructs* magazine, became a Chinese citizen, and in 1984 was elected to membership in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), one of the highest honors any Chinese can receive. Apart from a

brief sojourn in the United States from 1945 to 1951, Israel Epstein was one of a handful of expatriate Jews to remain in China after its 1949 revolution out of a Chinese Jewish population which peaked at over 20,000 during World War Two.¹⁴

Why did Israel Epstein stay when his father and mother left? Psychological factors appear to have been as much a motivation as political or economic considerations; one can hardly imagine Israel thinking he would have had a more prosperous existence in wartime China than in the United States. Just as Lazar clashed with his staunchly bourgeois and religiously-observant parents, so did Israel with his moderately conservative dad. Shortly before he died in 2005, Israel revealed to this author the saga of his reunion with his father in America in the 1970s, after Israel had been imprisoned for six and a half years during China's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." By the time of their reunion, Lazar was living in an old age home in New Jersey run by the social welfare arm of his political movement, the *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen's Circle) of the Bund. After a separation of nearly three decades and brief embraces, father and son fell into a fierce war of words, with the son espousing Maoism and the father still vigorously defending the Bund. A fellow resident overheard the altercation and remarked, "Lazar, I haven't heard you so agitated since you spoke in Minsk during the 1905 revolution."¹⁵

The conversation was undoubtedly in Russian or English (the son could not recall in which language) and bore testimony to the linguistic legacy which father bequeathed to son. Father and son also shared a respect for the Russian *haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment. Both also inherited the ancient and revered Jewish tradition of intense disagreement, disputation, and dialogue. Father and son were also atheists and could totally agree on the "outmoded" and "hopelessly degenerate" nature of their inherited religious beliefs. Epstein the father had also passed on to Epstein the son a profound respect for Chinese culture.

Despite these intellectual similarities which were also legacies, deep differences divided the two Epsteins. Both men clung tenaciously to political ideologies which had become increasingly irrelevant by the 1970s. The notion of creating a respected Jewish life within a secularized multi-ethnic Poland was, to use a leftist expression of the early 20th century, pure "pie in the sky." Even if post-war Poland could overcome its traditional anti-Semitism, Poland was by then a country almost without Jews. It could no longer be multi-ethnic due to the Holocaust and subsequent Stalinist depredations and deportations. And, as a final nail in the Bund's coffin, in 1949 "People's Poland" declared the Bund illegal, effectively making it irrelevant for Polish society thereafter. The major activity of the Bund by the 1970s was maintaining a handful of old age

homes and cemeteries outside Poland for soon-to-be deceased stalwarts such as Lazar Epstein.

In dismissing his father's faith as unrealistic, the son embraced Maoism as an alternative dogma. But that ideology also had had its day. Even as father and son engaged in a war of words in New Jersey in the 1970s, Maoism was going into eclipse in China and would soon be replaced by the free market reforms of Deng Xiaoping.¹⁶ The Epstein family quarrel over what had become by the 1970s two outmoded political strategies bore a stark resemblance to the ancient and abstract Rabbinic practice of *pilpul*, an argumentative ritual which both father and son would have dismissed as "archaic" and "superstitious." They would have been profoundly insulted by a comparison between *pilpul* and their dialogue, having vigorously rejected all Judaic customs decades before. The fierceness of their debate in the 1970s says as much about intergenerational conflict as it does about the truthfulness of ideology or its application to either East Asia or Poland. Their dispute, and its psychological implications, is perhaps the most distinct feature of the rich Epstein archive. YIVO is to be congratulated for preserving these important documents which shed light on both history and psycho-history.

Endnotes

¹ The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research is located at 15 West 16th Street, New York, NY, 10011-6301, USA. TEL: 212-246-6080, FAX: 212-292-1892, www.yivo.org. On the American Jewish Committee's New York Public Library tapes, see emails to the author from Angela Mehaffey [Carrollton, Georgia], March 2, 2012; Moshe Rosman [Ramat Gan, Israel], March 3, 2012; and Steve Bayme [New York City], March 6, 2012.

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² My statement about Vilna intellectuality and religiosity excludes regions of the Russian empire where the Hasidic or other movements predominated.

³ Obituaries for Lazar appeared by M. Klyaver in Russian and by Moses Todrin in English in the *Bulletin of the Igud Yotzei Sin* [Association of Jewish Immigrants from China] (published in Tel Aviv) no. 239 (1979), 12, 28-29.

⁴ Author's interview with Israel Epstein, Beijing, August 27, 1990.

⁵ On the politics of the Bund, see Zvi Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003); Yosef Gorni, *Converging Alternatives: The Bund And The Zionist Labor Movement, 1897-1985* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Jack Jacobs, *Bundist Counterculture in Interwar Poland* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press in cooperation with YIVO, 2009); Jack Jacobs, ed., *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2001); Henry Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia from Its Origins to 1905* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); and Abraham Brumberg, "Anniversaries of Conflict: On the Centenary of the Jewish Socialist Bund," *Jewish Social Studies* 3 (1999), 196-217.

⁶ Irene Eber, trans. and ed. *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China*. (Chicago, Illinois, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁷ Meir Berman, HICEM/DALJEWICIB, Harbin, to Isaac L. Anofsky, HIAS, New York, July 8, 1938, YIVO archives, HIAS-HICEM, I, MKM, file XV, D-1.

⁸ Lazar Epstein to HIAS, October 10, 1938, in YIVO HIAS-HICEM, 1, MKM 15-57, file 15, D-1. The German-Jewish family of Otto Emmerich did wind up briefly in Mindanao but was driven away after a short residence by inhospitable living conditions. See Frank Ephraim, *Escape to Manila* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 47-48; Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 62-64; and Jonathan Goldstein and Dean Kotlowski, "The Jews of Manila, Manuel Quezon, Paul McNutt, and the Politics and Consequences of Holocaust Rescue" in Manfred Hutter, ed. *Between Mumbai and Manila: Judaism in Asia since the foundation of the State of Israel* (forthcoming, 2013).

⁹ James Bernstein, Paris, to Lazar Epstein, New York, October 25, 1938, in YIVO HIAS-HICEM, 1, MKM 15-57, file 15, D-1.

¹⁰ For a summary of the literature on the lack of both publicity and concern about the Holocaust, see Henry Srebrnik, "Why did the Holocaust go relatively unnoticed in America?" *Jewish Tribune* [Toronto, Ontario] (December 4, 2008), 4. Reports which received minimal attention in the Western press, not to mention action in response, included the August 8, 1942 telegram from Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress representative in Geneva, alerting the world to Hitler's mass murder of Jews; two controversial 1942 pronouncements from the Vatican; the announcements in 1942 of various Allied nations about Jewish annihilation, including those of the Polish Government in Exile in London and radio reports from the Polish underground in Warsaw; and eyewitness reports about genocide from approximately sixty Palestinian Jews who returned to the *yishuv*, or Jewish community in Palestine, after observing conditions in Eastern Europe first-hand.

¹¹ See obituaries for Lazar by M. Klyaver and Moses Todrin in the *Bulletin* of the Igud Yotzei Sin no. 239 (1979), 12, 28-29.

¹² According to Nicholas Riasanovsky's 2011 obituary in *American Historical Association Perspective*, he ". . . may have been the best known historian of Russia of the last half-century." (*American Historical Association Perspective* 49, no. 7 [October 2011]: 4).

¹³ See Jonathan Goldstein, "Israel Epstein in China: A Case Study of Father/Son Conflict in Jewish Ideological Formation," in *At Home in Many Worlds: Reading, Writing and Translating from Chinese and Jewish Cultures. Essays in Honour of Irene Eber*, ed. Raoul David Findeisen, Gad C. Isay, Amira Katz-Goehr, Yuri Pines, and Lihi Yariv-Laor (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2009), 295-311.

¹⁴ See Israel Epstein's autobiographical "On Being a Jew in China: A Personal Memoir" in Jonathan Goldstein, ed. *The Jews of China. Volume Two. A Sourcebook and Research Guide* (Armonk, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 85-97; Epstein, "Vignettes of Past and Present" in *Living in China by Twenty*

Authors from Abroad (Beijing: New World Press, 1979), 277-306; and Epstein, *My China: Memoirs of a Jew and a Journalist* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 337 on his membership in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. See also Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 90-118, *passim*; Brady, "Red and Expert: China's Foreign Friends' in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution 1966-1969," *China Information* 11 (1996): 113-14, 131, 135; and Brady, "'Treat Insiders and Outsiders Differently': The Use and Control of Foreigners in the PRC," *The China Quarterly* 164 (December 2000): 943-64. In November 1956 Israel Epstein mailed his parents a first edition of his treatise *From Opium War to Liberation* (Beijing: New World Press, 1956). It is inscribed "To dearest Mom + Dad—Izzy." Copy courtesy of R. Stevenson Upton of Concord, New Hampshire. This book appeared in three English-language editions, all published in China, and was translated into Chinese, Italian, Japanese, and Portuguese.

¹⁵ Israel Epstein, interview by Jonathan Goldstein, August 27, 1990, Beijing.

¹⁶ Gal Beckerman wrote in a review of Israel Epstein's *My China Eye* in *The Forward* that . . . "there has been no real airing of the horrors perpetrated by the regime that Epstein proudly supported. Epstein's book is the portrait of a man whose professed idealism was more precious than anything reality could dish up." (Gal Beckerman, "Seeing Red," review of *My China Eye* by Israel Epstein, *The Forward* [English edition], October 28, 2005, Book section).