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Jewish Ties That Bind in Taiwan

December 09, 2010 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

Although Taiwan is a small island nation, you need at least a week to explore its riches, from the lush landscape of Taroko Gorge to fascinating indigenous cultures to the gastronomic safaris of night markets and street food to the architectural marvel Taipei 101, the tallest building in the world for a brief time.



Some travel writers introducing Taiwan to the West liken it to what mainland China might have been like had it developed as a democracy, which only tells part of the story.

The old "Made in Taiwan" image has been replaced by an upgraded one. That new image blends "Asian Tiger" commercial success and technology with historic Chinese legacies that thrive because the island escaped the grasp of Mainland China's Cultural Revolution.

This rich melting pot is also home for Don Shapiro (senior director and editor of *Taiwan Business TOPICS* at American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei, and Taiwan Jewish Community president) and Dr. Ephraim F. Einhorn (Taiwan's chief rabbi, and a certifiable Jack of all trades -- with diplomatic credentials and a stack of business cards to prove it).

Though each man comes from a different generation and political outlook, the one thing they have in common is that they came to Taiwan for a (relatively) short visit and ended up building full, multifaceted lives over several decades.

Taiwan's Jewish community took root in the '50s, when U.S. troops were stationed there, and hit its peak mid-1970s, when foreign corporate executives began bringing their families over.

Shapiro, who came of age in Buffalo, N.Y., and graduated from Columbia University's School of Journalism, arrived in 1969 to cover the political scene for 10 months. Instead, he found Taiwan's real "story" to be its emergence as a major Asian powerhouse.

He also took an interest in Taipei's restaurant/food scene. He started out joining a

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Wednesday-night dining club, and years later, established a special annual edition of *TOPICS* dedicated to Taipei's rich bounty of Pan-Asian culinary adventures.

"When I arrived in Taipei, I did not actively seek out the Jewish community," says Shapiro. "It was only after my daughters were born that I realized I needed to have some identification with the Jewish community, and I wanted them to be exposed to customs and traditions, and learn about their Jewish identity."

He further explains that during Taiwan's manufacturing boom in the 1960s, the Jewish community grew to 50 families, which made up two small congregations. In Shapiro's group, laypeople conducted services in converted chapels, while a Philippines-based rabbi came in on major Jewish holidays.

He also recalls how his congregation transformed a rented house into a community center that became the epicenter of Jewish life.

The other home for the city's Jewish community was the President Hotel, which had a room for services and a staff trained to prepare kosher meals.

When that hotel was torn down, facilities moved to the Landis Hotel, and more recently, the Sheraton Taipei (www.sheraton-taipei.com/english/index.htm), an elegant, centrally located luxury hotel. This is now officially the prime site for services and Jewish events.

The Sheraton Taipei's Suite 577 is Rabbi Einhorn's spiritual home, as well as a safe haven for the many prayerbooks and Jewish religious volumes he has rescued over the years.

Several more books in his prized collection, said to be the largest in Asia, are found in his business office across the street from the site of a former U.S. military installation that is now part of Taipei's ongoing urban "greening" efforts.

At 92, Einhorn fancies himself a modern, youthful individual (even well-versed in online social networking), as well as a real-life international man of mystery, whose narrative could translate well into a Steven Spielberg or Robert Zemeckis film, where the lead character serendipitously ends up being a witness to history over several decades.

Although he won't discuss his survival of the Holocaust or details about his colorful diplomatic missions on the record, he will muse about what keeps him young and busy enough to justify the dozen business cards he hands out to people who seek an audience with him.

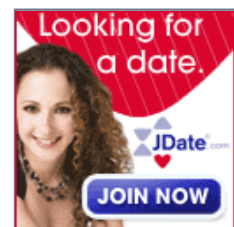
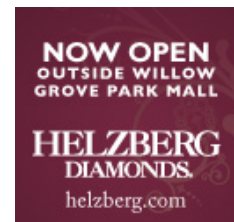
"I reversed my biological clock," proclaims Einhorn. "If you were to see what I do on any one day and how I become involved intensely in many projects at once, it is that I often do my best work after midnight."

He talks about his diplomatic work, which placed him in every Mideast country at one point or another.

While keeping Taipei's Jewish community in swing, he also serves as its colorful uncle.

To experience greater Taipei, I refer back to Don Shapiro, whose knowledge about food is as encyclopedic as his coverage of Taiwan's strong influence on the world business stage.

Whether dining at Xiao Wei -- one of his favorite go-to spots for authentic Szechwan fare -- or innovative destinations like AoBa, one simply cannot go wrong with anything that he and his team suggests in *Wine & Dine*, TOPIC's eagerly anticipated food issue.



When I ask Shapiro about places he would take friends and family visiting Taiwan, he particularly likes the National Palace Museum, with its vibrant and exquisite collection of dynastic treasures.

While a fashionista cannot go wrong at SOGO department stores, tiny local boutique jewels abound, such as Hui Liu Teahouse, with its darling assortment of artisanal teas, kitchen accessories and handmade computer bags rendered by local artists.

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