

NEW WORDS

Eating 'Chicken Soup with Chopsticks'

By **Andrea Waxman**
of *The Chronicle* staff

Like many of his peers, Jack Botwinik said, he grew up in Montreal with "an affinity for secular Jewish culture," but "little interest in religious Judaism."

Then the Canadian author fell in love with Belinda, a Chinese immigrant, and his interest in religion began to evolve.

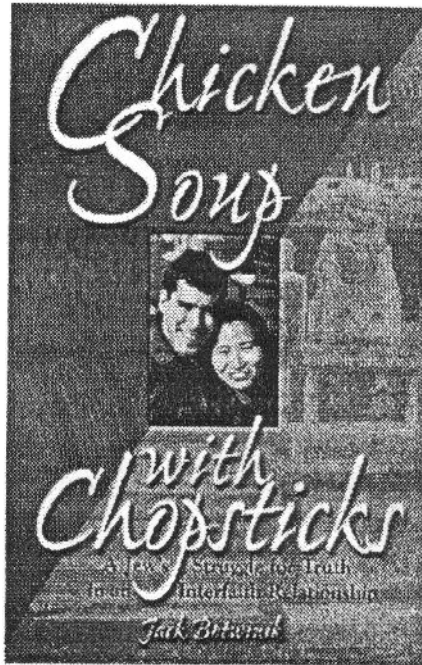
In his new book, "Chicken Soup with Chopsticks: A Jew's Struggle for Truth in an Interfaith Relationship," (Paper Spider, paperback \$18.18, hard cover \$22.18), Botwinik details his and his girlfriend's search for a spiritual home.

Written in a straightforward, informal style, "Chicken Soup with Chopsticks" is often engaging and readable, if somewhat choppy. Botwinik's musings on big questions of faith are intertwined with stories of his religious wanderings, courtship, family relationship and assorted facts and anecdotes about Jewish and Chinese culture and history.

Because Botwinik feared losing his connection with his parents and siblings over their opposition to marriage with a gentile, he undertook a serious process of self-examination and a study of a variety of religions, including Judaism.

Attracted to Belinda because of her similar values, authenticity and spiritual interests, he came to feel she was his soul mate.

He was loath to break off their relationship even though they both came to believe in the divine



authorship of the Torah and its command that a Jew may not marry a non-Jew. The problem remained: If they were to marry, Belinda would have to convert.

Botwinik, a purist and a sensitive soul, felt that if Belinda were to convert, it must be her decision and not a result of their relationship.

Belinda, also an uncompromising spiritual seeker, concurred and a long, painful struggle followed.

Though the circumstances of this particular couple are unique and may not apply to many prospective readers, the spiritual questions that Botwinik raises, the way that he thinks them through, and the kinds of conclusions he arrives at will probably interest many.

At times I found him irritating, self-centered and overly fastidious. For example, he wrote, "I dated

many Jewish women and found the vast majority of them materialistic." And the majority of all people on earth are not materialistic?

His parents, too, leave little to recommend them. Despite the fact that they are not religious, they expect their son to care about Judaism enough to avoid any consideration of a gentile partner.

His mother even goes so far as to write to Belinda and ask her to break off the relationship.

And toward the end of the struggle, when Botwinik is getting tired of waiting for Belinda to commit herself to an Orthodox conversion, he thinks he will break up with her because "her biological clock is ticking" and he wants to have many children.

He fears that if she converts in the future she may be doing so in the hope that he will take her back.

These exasperating expressions are tempered however by Botwinik's apparently sincere quest for a genuine life. And the tremendous efforts these two young people make in their quest for spiritual happiness and authenticity are admirable.

In the end, Belinda becomes Bina Esther. In a crowded kosher restaurant, Botwinik proposes to her in Cantonese and she accepts quickly in Yiddish.

Their story is thought-provoking and may help others facing the minefield of intermarriage to ask themselves some of the right questions.