

**Birobidzhan: An Historical and Personal Account
of the Jewish Autonomous Region**

by

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For my parents, who have always supported me.

"But those who would attempt to convert Jews into peasants are committing a truly astonishing error."

--Theodore Herzl, *The Jewish State*

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The Pale of Settlement

On September 22, 1772, Empress Catherine II of Russia signed an agreement with Frederick of Prussia and Kaunitz of Austria that became known as the *rozbiór Polski*, or First Partition of Poland. In doing so, the Russian empire gained not only land in Eastern Europe, but also a large Jewish population which it had sought for years to remain without.¹ Some 19 years later, Catherine II issued an *ukaz*, or edict, which created the Pale of Settlement (*Cherta osedlosti*, or "Line of Settlement" in Russian) in what is now modern-day Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. This ukaz dictated that there were certain areas in which Jews would be permitted to live, run businesses, and own land. It covered approximately one million square kilometers, and was home to an estimate of 4,899,300 Jews, or 11.6% of the total population of the Pale of Settlement.² Within the Pale, as historians Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinhart note, "the tsars attempted to undermine the Jews' traditional way of life... to direct them into useful "non-Jewish" occupations and to encourage their assimilation."³

The Pale of Settlement would be Russia's first attempt to answer what would become known as the "Jewish Question." In 1804, Alexander I issued an edict citing that "...numerous complaints have been submitted to us regarding the abuse and exploitations of native farmers and laborers in those provinces in which the Jews are permitted to reside,"⁴ where the "abuse and exploitations" refer to money-lending and other Jewish

¹ Paul Mendel-Flohr and Jehuda Reinhart, *The Jew in the Modern World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 372.

² Ibid., 379

³ Ibid., 372

⁴ Ibid., 375.

business endeavors that relied on usury and non-physical professions to earn livings. As a result, 90% of Russia's Jews were confined to the borders of the Pale of Settlement. Of that 90%, their occupations displayed their decidedly non-agrarian tendencies. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* writes of Russians from 1772 to 1881, "[these Jews] essentially formed the middle class between the aristocracy and the landowners on one hand, and the masses of enslaved peasants on the other."⁵ The article goes on to note that some thirty percent of those Jews were involved in innkeeping and money-lending, another thirty in trade and brokerage, fifteen percent in crafts, twenty-one percent without a fixed occupation at all, and only one percent involved in agriculture.

Alexander's edict had a profound exclusionary impact on the Jewish population. As Yaakov Ro'i writes, "Demographically, the Jews of Russia were numerous and confined to large concentrations within the Pale of Settlement, which hindered the possibility of a rapid social and cultural assimilation."⁶ Additionally, a vast majority of the Jews in the Pale spoke Yiddish, making them a distinct group within the surrounding gentile population. The Pale of Settlement was anything but Russian when a census was conducted in 1897. In some urban centers, Russian speakers comprised less than 5% of the population, and 96.5% of Jews claimed Yiddish as their native language.⁷

The Jewish prevalence in industries like "leaseholding, commerce, money-lending, and the sale of vodka,"⁸ took firm hold in the Russian psyche. They were considered "...parasites who exploited the defenceless peasantry."⁹ This propensity

⁵ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Russia."

⁶ Mendes-Flohr and Reinhart, 372.

⁷ Yaakov Ro'i, *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*. (Essex, England: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1995) 22.

⁸ Ro'i, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

would lead to a general impression of Jews as a people of intangible and esoteric business that would be revisited many years later when Khrushchev said to *Le Figaro*, a French newspaper, that "[the Jews] do not like collective work, group discipline."¹⁰

It was the nature of Russian legislation at the time that steered the Jewish people towards such "parasitism." Since the inception of the Pale of Settlement in 1791, "Jews had always been forbidden to acquire serfs or peasant land, lest they 'gain mastery over Christians.'"¹¹ As a result, the Jews of the Pale adopted any number of positions in trade and business to eke out a living in a society predisposed to making their lives difficult. Heavy economic tariffs hit Jewish enterprises hard. Of these taxes, the *korobka* (Russian for "box") was especially damaging. It was imposed in 1839 and served as a levee on kosher meat everywhere but in Russian Poland. There, a similar tax had existed since 1809.¹²

During the time that most of the Jews of the Russian Empire were confined to the Pale of Settlement, a series of other laws were passed regarding military conscription among the Jewish populations. According to Benjamin Nathans, "Nicholas [the First] sought to break down Jewish separatism and autonomy through state-sponsored 'merging.'"¹³ To do so, he passed a law in 1827 mandating that the draft be extended to Jews living in the Pale and forbidding the then-accepted practice of buying one's way out of conscription for all but ten percent of the Jewish population. While the first few waves of Jewish conscripts did in fact assimilate with their gentile counterparts, additional

¹⁰ Israel Emiot, *The Birobidzhan Affair: A Yiddish Writer in Siberia* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960) Introduction by Stanislawski, Michael. xvi.

¹¹ John Doyle Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question: 1855-1881* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 290.

¹² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Korobka."

¹³ Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002) p. 27.

measures were passed in 1829 and again in 1832 to separate Jewish soldiers from the army at large, and whatever assimilatory effect the conscription might have had was lost. Nathans notes, "Although Jewish soldiers often served in the Empire's interior, in areas otherwise off limits to Jews, upon completion of military service they were required to return immediately to the Pale."¹⁴

The emancipation of the serfs by Tsar Alexander II in 1861 changed the Jewish trade situation considerably. While Jews were still prohibited from owning land directly -- and indeed most of them were too poor to even consider the notion -- a small minority enriched by military contracts and favorable business positioning managed to use the newly liberated serfs to their benefit. These Jewish "plutocrats," most notably the Gintsburgs, the Poliakovs, and the Varshavskiis, accumulated vast wealth during these times.¹⁵

The "28 June 1865" law illustrated the change in Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement. Four years after the emancipation of the serfs and nearly 80 years after the creation of the Pale, the Jews of the region were finally free to move about outside the Pale of Settlement freely and publish Yiddish periodicals at will.¹⁶ Such a loosening of the restrictions was not reflective of a more tolerant or accepting Russia. Instead, these changes were born mostly out of the fact that Russia itself was undergoing a Reform Era, and restrictions everywhere were largely being lifted. Such continued distaste for the Jews can be seen in the works of N. B. Gersevanov, a nineteenth century Odessan journalist, who cited Jewish characteristics of "polygamy, human sacrifice, and false prophets," as aspects of a Jewish nationalism "...cemented on hatred toward all other

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Klier, 291.

peoples."¹⁷

Gersevanov was by no means alone in his outcries against the Jews. Perhaps most often cited is the example of the revered Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. His depiction of Isai Bumstein in Notes from the House of the Dead where the author describes the money-lender as a " ... thin, feeble, puny man ... with a wrinkled white body like a chicken's ... " and " ... a most comical mixture of naïveté, stupidity, craft, impudence, good nature, timidity, boastfulness, and insolence,"¹⁸ play on the Russian stereotypes of Jews at the time.

Dostoevsky also lashes out against Judaism with a passage in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In chapter XI, the disturbed and unstable Liza carries on a conversation with Alyosha, the sensitive and sympathetic hero. The following passage is often cited as evidence of Dostoevsky's instinctive anti-Semitism,

"Alyosha, is it true that the Jews steal little children at Passover and kill them with knives?"

"I do not know"

"Well, I have a book in which I read about a trial somewhere, where a Jew first cut off all the fingers of both hands belonging to a child of four years old, and then crucified him against a wall, hammered in nails and crucified him, and then at his trial he said that the boy died quickly, within four hours. That was quick! He said that the boy had groaned and groaned and that he had stood feasting his eyes on him. That is good!"

"Good?"

"Yes, good. I sometimes think that I myself crucified him. He hung on the wall, groaning, and I sat down opposite him and ate pineapple *compôte*. I'm very fond of pineapple *compôte*, are you?"¹⁹

¹⁶ Klier, 30.

¹⁷ Klier, 44.

¹⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead and Poor Folk*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004) 117-118.

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. and ed. David McDuff (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 672.

A careful reader will notice that throughout the entire exchange, the normally kind and sympathetic Alyosha pays this horrifying myth little heed. His answers are distracted and disinterested, and Liza speaks idly of a preference for pineapple compote while reading about a Jew torturing a small boy, as if there was nothing at all unusual about it. Dostoevsky, who throughout his professional life maintained that he was not an anti-Semite, has been quoted in letters to his brother as saying that he had an "...innate, almost organic aversion for Jews..." and held "...a priori feelings of repugnance..."²⁰

Discrimination ran rampant in the Pale of Settlement outside the confines of literature as well. Jews were subjected to higher taxes, difficulties in gaining higher education, and required special permits to live in urban centers, among them Kiev, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. Jewish populations in censuses of St. Petersburg remain under 3,000 up until 1881, when they explode from 2,179 (three-tenths of one percent of the total) in 1869 to some 16,826 (nearly two percent) twelve years later.²¹ The Russian gentile population was sufficiently aware of the population boom that the St. Petersburg police department commissioned a map in 1890 of Jewish population densities by district.²² Restrictions and privileges were applied uniquely to different ethnic groups throughout the Russian Empire, but the peasant population and their well-educated intellectual gentile counterparts continued to view Jews especially as wealthy, licentious spies who had grown rich on the hard work of the poor. Jews were described time and time again in the tone of V. R. Zotov, an editor for the St. Petersburg publication, *Illustratsiia*. It was in his column, "Diary of an Acquaintance" that he described village Jews as "coarse... opportunistic intermediaries between the Polish nobility and the

²⁰ David Goldstein, "Dostoevsky and the Jews," *Commentary Magazine*, June 1981.

²¹ Nathans, 92.

peasants." Urbanized Jews were considered to be, "swindlers, usurers, who survive by greed, cunning and a piece of herring, so as to increase their capital..."²³

Prominent wealthy Jews like the Gintsburgs and Poliakovs could do little to sway public opinion. The Gintsburg family kept their roots in mind and served as *shtadlanim*, or "court Jews" for their impoverished brethren. Samuil Poliakov, who had built his fortune on a series of early railroad systems (called derisively "Jew-roads"), was a large benefactor in the creation of the Society for the Promotion of Handicrafts and Agricultural Work Among the Jews of Russia (*Obshestvo remeslenogo zemledel'cheskogo truda* or ORT).²⁴ Additionally, Poliakov hired predominantly Jewish staff, providing work for the poorer Jewry in addition to the legal right to reside outside the Pale. It would be this hiring practice that would lead to accusations and suspicions that Poliakov was promoting a Jewish success over the Russian majority and trying to colonize Jews along the railroad lines.

The frustration with the apparent wealth and success of the Jews began to brew even more fervently as time went on. Pogroms in 1871, 1881-1882, and again in 1905 brought violence, vandalism, and arson. The destruction was widespread. Often, newspapers would run special sections of their news under the headline, "Jewish Pogroms," and list the numbers of atrocities on any given day. Perhaps equally destructive was the constant threat of violence where there hadn't been yet. *Syn otechestva*, a Russian newspaper cited by Yaakov Ro'i, reported, "The Jews of Moscow spent an extremely anxious night expecting a pogrom. Almost no one slept in his

²² Ibid. 118.

²³ Klier, 54.

²⁴ Klier, 291.

apartment; they all hid with Christian acquaintances."²⁵

Even in the face of these massacres, the Jewish people remained divided. With no central house of religion or leader, each community remained its own separate entity, with little in the way of intercommunity unification. "There was little beyond that minimal similarity [of being Jewish] that bound the Jews of Russia to each other as a *national community*..."²⁶

Even after the pogroms, Jewish life remained largely trade-based. Yuri Slezkine notes that at the turn of the twentieth century, "...most of the Jews of the Pale of Settlement (all but about 4 percent, who were farmers and factory workers) continued to pursue traditional service occupations as middlemen between the overwhelmingly agricultural Christian population and various urban markets."²⁷ He continues to say that "...the majority of Russian Jews continued to live in segregated quarters, speak Yiddish, wear distinctive clothing... and follow a variety of other customs that ensured the preservation of collective memory..."²⁸

After the October Revolution of 1917, Vladimir Lenin found himself in control of the most geographically and culturally diverse empire in the world. Ideally, in the words of Zvi Gitelman, "the proletariat would come to realize that its common interests transcended national borders and that all workers together should combat the exploiting capitalists, who themselves were a transnational class."²⁹ As such, there would be no "Circassian" or "Chechen," no "Georgian" or "Jew." "Ethnicity would no longer serve a

²⁵ *Syn otechestva*, 24 Oct. 1905, 2 cited from Ro'i, 129.

²⁶ Ro'i, 19.

²⁷ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) 105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

²⁹ Zvi Gitelman, "Communism," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (Yale University Press: forthcoming, 2008).

useful purpose [under Communism]... and social class would be the only organizing principle of society."³⁰

However, there were literally hundreds of nationalities all under the Soviet flag, from the European-influenced St. Petersburg residents (who would soon become Leningrad residents) to the Evenk peoples of eastern Siberia, a land so murderously cold and uninviting that the main town is named Butugychag, or "the Place where Reindeer Sicken."³¹ To unify this fragmented, fragile empire, Lenin created what became known as Soviet ethnofederalism, whereby such peoples would have their own individual national states within the Soviet Union. Such an idea arose from a branch of Austrian Marxism, which posited that "national-cultural autonomy should be developed so that the proletariat could achieve political unity while preserving the cultural autonomy of the ethnic groups within it."³² There would be a Ukrainian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), a Byelorussian ASSR, a Chechen, a Tatar, and so on. Through such ethnic tolerance and cultural embrace, the splintered minority groups would all support Lenin and his new government together, and additionally, the world community would look favorably on the Communist Revolution. Such republics were formed by December of 1922, but it would be two more years before the Soviet government would turn its attention once more to relocating its sizable Jewish population.

The idea in creating a Jewish homeland was not to preserve Jewish culture, as the Austrian Marxists had proposed for autonomous states in general, but rather "...[to facilitate] the integration of Jews into Soviet society... the government hoped to resolve the Jewish question in the 1920s by refashioning the occupational profile of the Jews and

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Colin Thubron, *In Siberia* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2001) 274.

transforming them into farmers."³³

It is noteworthy that for the ethnofederal movement, the prevailing paradigm -- except in the case of the Jews -- called for the preservation of national language and culture. A 1923 resolution regarding the creation of these autonomous regions "...established *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) as the most urgent item on the Soviet nationalities policy agenda."³⁴ Indeed, these assertions emphasized the preservation of indigenous populations so as to make Soviet culture understandable and more popular among other peoples. The goal was to make the Soviet philosophy a philosophy for the entire world, and in doing so, symbolic ethnicity was allowed under the new resolution. The Jews, however, presented a unique problem, for Judaism is not just a culture, but a religion as well, and Socialism called for an abandonment of religious practices.

³² *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, "Communism."

³³ Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998) 16.

³⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2001) 12.

Zionism/Bundism

While this notion of autonomous Soviet republics was a new concept, the idea behind a separation between Jewish and gentile populations was not. The Bund was founded in 1897 in Vilnius, Lithuania when a group of Marxist Jews gathered secretly to form the "Algemeyner Idisher Arbeter Bund in Liteh, Poyln un Rusland," (the Jewish Workers' Alliance in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia).³⁵ Members of the Bund believed that a Yiddish-speaking Jewish cultural homeland should be created, but that it should exist exclusively for the preservation and proliferation of culture. As with most Marxist groups, it opposed the incorporation of religion into the idea of a Jewish region.

Zionists, on the other hand, argued that not only should Jews have a homeland to themselves, but that it was essential to the survival of the Jewish people. This movement, dating back to the 1880's, called specifically for the Jewish nation to be based in Palestine, the ancestral and biblical home of the people, and for such a homeland to be both cultural in nature and clearly autonomous. One of the Zionist tenets was the foundation of the independent homeland with Hebrew as the official language.

The battle between Yiddish and Hebrew was the locus of the competition between the Zionists and Bundists in the area of the former Pale of Settlement, which had been officially abolished in 1917. The Bund saw itself as representing the working classes and socialists. Bundists advocated the common man and appealed strongly to socialist values. Zvi Gitelman notes, "Hebrew, said the Bundists, was a language that only rabbis,

³⁵ Zvi Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press,

scholars, and the highly educated *maskilim* [proponents of Hebrew enlightenment] could understand."³⁶

However, the Zionists countered with their own assertions, claiming that Yiddish was a product of the *galut* [Diaspora]. If Jews were ever going to gain their own autonomy, the Zionists argued that they should do so while speaking *lashon ha-kodesh*, or the Sacred Tongue.³⁷

The *Evseksiia*, or Jewish section of the Communist Party, also lashed out against the Zionist movement for different linguistic reasons. To this socialist group, the idea of a sacred language could not be tolerated. Gitelman continues, "Hebrew became the only language that the Soviets made virtually illegal, as the *Evseksiia* activists persuaded the party that Yiddish was the language of the 'toiling masses,' whereas Hebrew was the language of the 'class enemy...'"³⁸ Zionism became a euphemism for anything bourgeois and anti-Soviet, and Russian Zionists were soon silenced, exiled, or thrown into prison and labor camps.

When the time would come to create a Jewish homeland within Russia, it would be the language of the common Jew that would prevail. This decision would be significant in the eventual failure of the Birobidzhan project. Hebrew had been the sacred language among Jews living in the Soviet Union, but Russian was the language of commerce and prosperous city life. "Russian and Russian culture were seen as 'higher,' more useful, and more socially prestigious than the provincial Yiddish by Soviet Jews, many of whom were streaming out of the *shtetlekh* to the larger cities. Therefore, the

2003) 4.

³⁶ Gitelman, *Emergence*, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁸ Weinberg, 6.

idea of a territory in which Yiddish would be the dominant language...had limited appeal to Soviet Jews in the 1920's."³⁹ While it is true that the choice of language certainly served to work against continued success of the Jewish territory, other variables like climate, under-funding, and disorganization would doom the project as well.

³⁹ Weinberg, 7.

Inception

In August 1924, the Committee for the Rural Placement of Working Jews (*Komitet po zemel'nomu ustroistvu trudiashchikhsia evreev* or *Komzet*) was organized to examine the practicality of creating a Jewish region. Its main charge was to draw up a plan for a Jewish autonomous location, but with one particular caveat: it had to be done in the Leninist school of thought that demanded that this new community be centered on the idea of agriculture and attachment to the soil. Financing this undertaking and gaining popular Jewish support for this agrarian project fell to a similar, non-Party organization called the Public Committee for the Rural Placement of Jewish Workers (*Obshestennyi komitet po zemel'nomu ustroistvu yevreiskikh trudiashchikhsia* or *Ozet*). *Ozet* was seen as a public organization designed to advertise and encourage settlement of Soviet Jews to the new territory, but its independence was largely a sham. *Komzet* members played a major role in the actions of *Ozet*.

The decision about where to build this new Jewish homeland was cause for some debate. While many members of *Komzet* asserted that the Crimea would be the most logical place for a Jewish territory (given the large Jewish population already living and with significant roots to the cultures there), Mikhail Kalinin, the Chairman of the All-Union Executive Committee, disagreed and proposed a desolate area in the far east of Siberia as an alternative.⁴⁰ There were several reasons for Kalinin's decision, not the least of which was to force Jews into a situation of mandatory agriculturalism and

⁴⁰ William Siegel, "Nation Making in Russia's Jewish Autonomous Oblast: Initial Goals and Surprising

socialism. By removing the urban centers and opportunities for trade and loan professions, the Jews could finally be integrated. William Siegel writes, "the establishment of the JAR [Jewish Autonomous Region] was designed to normalize the status of Soviet Jews, thereby facilitating the development of a secular, Yiddishist culture and a Jewish society rooted in socialist principles."⁴¹

The justification for the decision wasn't all cultural, however. The Soviet Far East was essentially a wasteland. The proposed site, originally called Tikhonkaia, was a lonely outpost along the Chita-Vladivostok railroad line, which would later grow to become the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The name "Birobidzhan" was a contraction of two tributaries of the Amur River: the Bira and the Bidzhan.⁴² The area itself measures approximately 34,000 square kilometers, or roughly the size of Belgium and Holland combined. It is approximately 8,500 km from St. Petersburg, making a trip there in the 1920's a two-week ordeal on which "...sagging ballast and buckled steel had turned the track into a roller coaster where the passenger trains never exceeded 13 m.p.h."⁴³

Russian forces had annexed the region from China in 1858, and in the 70 years leading up to the establishment of the Jewish district, had yet to establish any significant population or economic interests there. Siegel posits that "Stalin was eager to accelerate the settlement of this Far East territory in order to provide a human shield against potential attacks from Japan or China."⁴⁴ Additionally, Birobidzhan and the area around it was rich with mineral deposits, timber interests, and untold other natural resources. Michael Stanislawski, in his introduction to Israel Emiot's The Birobidzhan Affair, states,

Results," *Demokratizatsiya, Journal of Post Soviet Democratization* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 423.

⁴¹ Ro'i, 88.

⁴² Weinberg, 21.

⁴³ Thubron, 50.

"In 1926, 53% of the area was covered with thick virgin forests, 16% with swamps, and 14% with meadowland."⁴⁵ By selecting Birobidzhan, Stalin and his government had been able to establish a location that would Sovietize Jews, protect the USSR's borders, and reap the natural wealth of the region all at once.

The land, for all its natural resources, was by no means ideal. A research expedition of 180 scientists and government officials set out in 1927 to chart Kazakhstan and the Azov Sea region. As part of their duties, they spent a month and a half in Birobidzhan and in doing so, reported back to their superiors concerns of "...swamps, a lack of roads, overflowing rivers, heavy rains, and a proliferation of vermin."⁴⁶

Mosquitoes and humidity ravaged the town during the summers, and brutal cold paralyzed everything in the winters. "Although the harsh climate and poor soil would make agricultural development difficult, the area was rich with natural resources that the party leaders intended to exploit."⁴⁷

Today, the Jewish Autonomous Region's website suggests, somewhat comically, that "the region is one of the most favorable places in the Far East as for climactic conditions."⁴⁸ It goes on to concede that "monsoon rains cause river floods" and "average temperature in January is -24° C. [-11 F] Minimum temperature is -49 C. [-56 F]" With such harsh conditions, the dream of a Soviet Jewish agrarian utopia quickly became a nightmare.

On March 28, 1928, the "Decision of the Presidium of the Central Executive

⁴⁴ Siegel, 423.

⁴⁵ Emiot, Stanislawski introduction xii.

⁴⁶ Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917, Volume I* (New York: New York University Press, 1988) 285.

⁴⁷ Siegel, 423.

⁴⁸ Jewish Autonomous Region, "JAR - The Government Official Website," <http://www.eao.ru/eng>

Committee of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in support of Jewish colonization in Birobidzhan" was handed down from Avel Enukidze, a member of the Soviet Central Committee, stating,

"Resolved: To assign to the *Komzet* for the needs of compact settlement by toiling Jews a free land in the Amur zone of the Far Eastern territory, which comprises the Birobidzhan district... following the favorable results in the compact settlement of the region delimited in article I, the possibility of the formation of a Jewish national territorial unit on the territory of the said region shall be borne in mind."⁴⁹

With those words, the Birobidzhan Jewish National Region was created.

Mary Leder, an American-born daughter of two Communist parents, moved to the region in 1931 and describes the scene she encountered in her memoir,

"...this was where our journey from California had ended, on a wooden platform in the middle of nowhere, on an island in a sea of mud... there were no bathrooms and no running water, just a backyard privy reached by planks laid over the mud. We got our water from a tin washstand nailed to a wall on the ground floor, a tin cup and tin basin on a stool underneath the washstand, and an empty bucket to be filled at a pump outdoors."⁵⁰

Slezkine paints a similarly bleak portrait of the conditions in the region. In his usually academic and factually rich study of Soviet Jews, he makes a special point to mention quite bluntly, "In 1930, Birobidzhan was proclaimed a Jewish National Region; in 1931, my grandparents arrived there from Buenos Aires by way of Hamburg and Leningrad; in 1932, their first daughter froze to death..."⁵¹

A decree in March of 1928 made special accommodations for Jews in the newly-formed Jewish National Region, forbidding non-Jews from working in agriculture in the region and suggesting to Jews that if a substantial Jewish community was created, further

(accessed September 29, 2005)

⁴⁹ Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, 446-447.

⁵⁰ Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001) 17-18.

administrative privileges and greater autonomy would be granted. Incentives were created by the *Komzet* to attract poor Jews to this new way of life. Travel and food vouchers, tax exemptions, and voting privileges were offered to non-agricultural Jews willing to move to Birobidzhan and work the soil.

The migration began to the "island in a sea of mud" with 654 Jews, mostly Ukrainian, who packed their belongings and traveled out to Birobidzhan by the end of spring 1928, despite the fact that the exploratory party had decreed that prosperous, sustainable development could not begin until necessary improvements had been made on the land. They had suggested 1929 as the earliest possible date, and were roundly ignored.⁵² Additionally, the *Komzet* member Iurii Larin estimated that in order to support 9,000 families in Birobidzhan in the first five years, a government allocation of 20 million rubles would be required. A meager 3.3 million, or just 16.5% of that estimate, was actually allocated.⁵³

Other firsthand accounts of early conditions in Birobidzhan are similarly grim. Soviet journalist Viktor Fink traveled to the region in 1929 as part of a fund-raising operation and concluded that living conditions would "...put prisons to shame." He continued, "...the colonization of Birobidzhan was begun and executed without preparation, planning, and study."⁵⁴

Despite this, the Jewish population continued to rise. In 1930, Birobidzhan's 1,500 Jews made up 8% of the population, and in 1932, a record-high of 14,000 settlers,

⁵¹ Slezkine, 248.

⁵² Siegel, 423.

⁵³ Levin, 285.

⁵⁴ Weinberg, 25.

again mostly from the Ukraine, made the trip eastward.⁵⁵

Soviet propaganda appealed to few or no Jews at all. *Ozet*, in an article from *Tribuna*, their official newspaper, attempted to attract Jewish settlers with the following propaganda:

The masses of Jewish toilers, who are permeated with loyalty and devotion to the Soviet regime, are going to Birobidzhan... they are not only fighting for their country, not for a new fatherland, as the USSR is already for them, but for strengthening the Soviet Union in the Far East.⁵⁶

Such nationalistic, physical labor-intensive fervor struck few chords among Jews, whose years of commerce and business practice had left them largely without agricultural knowledge. Indeed, in the first 654 Jews, not a single one had ever farmed before or knew anything about land clearing or drainage. The floods of 1928 and 1932 wreaked almost complete havoc on the region, leaving many fields inundated with brackish water. Year after year, Jews who had worked as blacksmiths, tinsmiths, tailors, and the like migrated to Birobidzhan to try their hands at the new project and to take advantage of the food and travel vouchers, and consistently, they gave up in almost equal numbers.

The original 654 settlers of March 1928 quickly dropped to 339 -- nearly half -- by October of that year. Statistics vary on the settlers of 1932, but *Ozet* approximated 80% and the first party secretary of Birobidzhan guessed that 66% of all Jewish immigrants to the region left within a year or two.⁵⁷ Of those that stayed, many remained in the urban center of Birobidzhan and took up the same jobs they had occupied in the west. By 1939, only 25% (4,404 of 17,695) of Jews lived in the countryside.⁵⁸

Efforts to attract Jews to the region continued despite the widespread emigration.

⁵⁵ Siegel, 423.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 424.

Ozet organized a lottery system to raise money for the fledgling region and commissioned famous Jewish artist Mikhail Dlugach to design posters and propaganda flyers promoting the lottery and various social programs and updates pertaining to Birobidzhan.

One such poster, created in 1933, happily announced and supported the Central Executive Committee's decision in 1931 to change the region's designation from the Jewish National Raion to Jewish Autonomous Region, taking effect in 1934. This declaration meant that Birobidzhan would become the newly-formed EAO's official capital and that the Jewish territory could join the ranks of other minority territories as having full autonomy. Finally, it decreed that the once-stringent agriculturally based doctrines were to be replaced with a more relaxed, economically well-rounded philosophy.

It was the early 1930's; the EAO had gained national status, Jews were moving to the region in record numbers, and their inabilities as farmers were finally being addressed by the government. While independent sources still observed that Birobidzhan still lacked plumbing and public lighting, and a doctor reported that conditions were "ungraceful[ly] unsanitary," the EAO's capital city boasted 30,000 inhabitants and a better standard of living than it had ever had before.⁵⁹ The region grew to be a vital source of products like cement, bricks, clothing, and tin for the Far East. It seemed, finally, that things were looking up for the Jews of Birobidzhan.

Perhaps most significant was the transformation from a society struggling to survive the harsh conditions to a community with culture, art, and education. A 1935

⁵⁸ Weinberg, 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

decree mandated that all government printings, from street signs to advertisements, had to be in both Yiddish and Russian.⁶⁰ Police proceedings would also be conducted in Yiddish, provided the parties involved were Jewish. Such allowances and cultural sensitivities were virtually unheard of toward Jews in the Crimea, and they fostered a surge of Jewish culture in the region. *Birobidzhaner Shtern* [Birobidzhan Star] began printing as a Jewish daily newspaper in 1930, and the Jewish Theater was founded four years later. Its first performance was a Sholem Aleichem story.⁶¹

Israel Emiot, a Yiddish writer and former resident of 1930s Birobidzhan, recalls that the cultural embrace extended far beyond the range of government organizations. He remarks that in 1937 and 1938, "Jew-haters (especially in the Ukraine)... now found their tongues again. In Birobidzhan this did not happen."⁶²

News of this unique, Jewish entity in the Soviet Far East spread around the world. In the United States, ICOR (*Idishe kolonizatsie organizatsie* or Association for Jewish Colonization) was founded to support agricultural Jews in the Soviet Union. With membership in the tens of thousands, and hundreds of local communities supporting the cause, ICOR raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Birobidzhan settlers and bought farming equipment. AMBIJAN (the American Birobidzhan Committee) was a similar organization, dedicated to recruiting Americans to settle in Birobidzhan. The efforts of these agencies were rewarded with independent and mass pilgrimages, like Mary Leder's family and the 32 Jewish families from Los Angeles who made the move in the 1930s. While Zionists around the world argued and fussed that the Birobidzhan experiment didn't satisfy the need for a Jewish homeland, ICOR solicited thousands of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁶¹ Ibid., 61.

sympathizers and donors from Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay.⁶³ The novelist Lion Feuchtwanger, having never been closer than six time zones from Birobidzhan, even went so far as to proclaim in 1937, "The Jewish socialist republic of Birobidzhan is a reality."⁶⁴

⁶² Emiot, 7.

⁶³ Weinberg, 55.

⁶⁴ Lion Feikhtvanger, *Moskva 1937: Otchet o poezdke dlia moikh druzei* as cited in Weinberg, 53.

The Great Purges

All was not well, however, for the Jews of Birobidzhan, or for the Jews of Russia and Europe in general in the 1930's. As Adolf Hitler began his rise to power in Germany in 1933, Joseph Stalin began to initiate purges of opposition leaders and forces within the Soviet Union. The panic began with the death of Sergei Kirov, a youthful and well-liked Party leader who was killed on December, 1, 1934. While Kirov's death remains shrouded in mystery even to this day, his murder was officially blamed on Leonid Nikolaev, a minor Party member. In the ensuing investigation, however, sixteen prominent Soviets, including some well-known Jewish Communists like Grigorii Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, were arrested and shot for their part in what was framed as the creation of a "terroristic center" against Stalin.⁶⁵ It would mark the beginning of the Great Purges, which lasted from 1936 to 1938. During this time, widespread paranoia gripped the Soviet Union. Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov, the new head of the NKVD (Soviet secret police), fed these fears as no other had done before. Those arrested were detained, questioned, and forced to confess to crimes of espionage and conspiracy with Trotskyites and bourgeois nationalists. Nora Levin states bluntly, "Estimates of the number of victims range from three to nine million."⁶⁶

The Jews of Birobidzhan, for all their isolation on the border with China, were by no means sheltered from the purges. Professor Yoysef Liberberg, a leader in the orchestration of a Yiddish language conference on the EAO, was suddenly and

⁶⁵ Levin, 316.

mysteriously called to Moscow in August 1936. For two months, no one knew of his fate, until the *Forpost*, a Yiddish literary journal, announced that Liberberg had been " ... unmasked as untrustworthy, counterrevolutionary, and a bourgeois-nationalist."⁶⁷ He was never seen again. Perhaps most preposterous about the entire event was that one of the charges brought upon Liberberg was the accusation that he had "...attempted to establish the EAO as the center of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union."⁶⁸ His replacement at the Yiddish conference was M. Katel, leader of *Ozet* in the Ukraine. He too was arrested and made to disappear.

Matvei Khavkin, a party leader, was arrested with his assistants in 1937 and held without trial for four years. When he finally faced a military tribunal in January 1941, he was missing teeth and had suffered a permanent back injury.⁶⁹ Khavkin eventually survived the fifteen years of forced labor he was sentenced to, but his wife Sofia, tried and convicted of poisoning NKVD official Lazar Kaganovich with gefilte fish, went insane in a labor camp and was committed to a mental hospital.⁷⁰

The wave of terror hit every aspect of Jewish life in Birobidzhan. Jewish interest in Jewish affairs plummeted, as more and more families began to see Russian as the language of future prosperity. Nearly every Yiddish school in the EAO was closed, the pedagogical college was torn down, and it is estimated that untold thousands of Jews were arrested and executed. *Ozet* and its magazine *Tribuna* were closed in 1938, and after that, information to the outside world about this small corner of eastern Siberia virtually disappeared. Census figures no longer tracked the Jewish population, and news

⁶⁶ Ibid., 320.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 308.

⁶⁸ Weinberg, 67.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 67.

of events in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast became the fictive creations of the Soviet government. Reports from writer Yaacov Lvavi praised "transformed men" whose work was "excellently paid and the earnings of the medium family reach 12,000 roubles a year..."⁷¹ For all the trouble it had brought upon the government and people of the EAO, the Soviets were still preoccupied with settling the land along the Soviet-Chinese border. There was even a plan devised in 1940 to resettle 30-40,000 people from the newly-occupied lands of Poland, Romania, and the Baltics, but the Nazi offensive put a halt to that project.⁷²

Little is written about the Jewish Autonomous Region during the Second World War. Robert Weinberg, in his comprehensive analysis of the history of the region, mentions only briefly that "...the war years had witnessed the continuation of prewar trends in the region..."⁷³ He notes that the *Birobidzhaner Shtern*, the Yiddish daily newspaper, ceased printing in 1941 and didn't resume until 1944, and then moves directly into the Renaissance period of Birobidzhan from 1946 to 1948. Nora Levin, too, for all her 800 or so pages on Soviet Jews, simply states that "during the war, there had been rumors that Jewish orphans had been evacuated to Birobidzhan."⁷⁴ She continues with a small description of an American fund-raising drive for orphans, but says that only 95 war orphans were ever brought to Birobidzhan, and that for all intents and purposes, "...Jewish life had essentially come to a standstill in Birobidzhan."⁷⁵

What is most surprising is that there seem to be no accounts of this time period.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁷¹ Yaacov Lvavi, *Ha-Hityashvut Ha-Yehudit Be-Birobijan* as cited in Levin, 310.

⁷² Levin, 311.

⁷³ Weinberg, 71.

⁷⁴ Levin, 489.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 489.

During the most trying and horrific years in all of Jewish history, this tiny exclave seems to have shut its printing presses down and waited to see what would happen. There are no letters to relatives, no accounts of fearful anxiety or of grief. The absence of information in texts usually so diligent and thorough is so consistent as to be somewhat mysterious. Lev Toitman, chairman of the Jewish community of Birobidzhan in 2006, had been sent away to fight in western Russia and Germany during the Second World War, but he commented that during this time in the history of the EAO, essentially nothing happened. Both he and Elena Sarashevskiaia, Yiddish writer and resident historian at the *Birobidzhaner Shtern* newspaper, agree that the *Shtern* closed during the war because its funding dried up, but as for accounts of those 95 orphans, other refugees, and other fallout from the war in Europe, there seems to be no information.

Post-War Birobidzhan

The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of a cultural revival in Birobidzhan. As many as six thousand Jewish settlers migrated to the region in 1946, "...viewing the region as a land of opportunity and a way to escape the war-ravaged conditions of the western Soviet Union. Personal loss and a sense of tragedy motivated many prospective migrants to seek new lives in a new venue."⁷⁶ Upwards of ten thousand Jews made the trip between 1946 and 1948, and it is easy to understand why. The former Pale of Settlement, where Jewish forebears had been subjected to special taxes and restrictions, had turned into a mass grave, and many survivors returned to their towns and villages to find that local townspeople had taken over Jewish houses and jobs. The prospect of having to fight for the return of one's property and live in the shadow of all that had just happened proved to be a strong motivation for resettlement, and the city and region of Birobidzhan boomed because of it.

Culture, in particular, thrived with this new influx of immigrants. The Jewish Theater in Birobidzhan grew and put on plays, the main street in the city was renamed Sholem Aleichem Street (*Ulitsa Sholem-Aleichema*) in honor of the famous Yiddish writer, and a literary journal *Birobidzhan almanakh* was founded to take the place of the defunct *Forpost*. A museum even opened in May of 1946 to serve as a cultural center and tribute to the "...way of life of the Jewish laboring masses in the Soviet Union."⁷⁷ This new growth prompted waves of migration from the Ukraine and Samarkand. Some

⁷⁶ Weinberg, 73.

war veterans and survivors, as well as many *kolkhoz* [collective farm] farmers, poured into the Jewish Autonomous Oblast from 1946 until October of 1948. The last train of this renaissance arrived around 9 o'clock on the morning of October 9th, 1948 filled with émigrés from Samarkand, and "...officials clustered around a podium to greet them."⁷⁸ This would prove to be the final wave of people before the Black Years set in.

⁷⁷ *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda*, July 10, 1946 as cited in Weinberg, 76.

⁷⁸ *Einkayt*, October 12, 1948 as cited in Levin, 492.

The Black Years

"Many years ago a friend of mine said that the basic rule of life for a Jew is caution, caution."

--Anonymous⁷⁹

Barely three years after the end of the Second World War and the attempts at systematic annihilation of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany, a wave of anti-Semitism crashed over the Soviet Union. The Red Army had scarcely returned from liberating the death camps at Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Chelmno before their own brand of Jewish hatred was unleashed. Most historians agree that the Black Years in the Soviet Union essentially began with the death of famed Jewish actor Solomon Mikhoels, a man "...who had personified, since 1941, the trend toward organized Jewish communal life in the Soviet Union."⁸⁰

Ro'i notes post factum, "Stalin highly praised the operation and ordered that the people who had performed it be decorated..."⁸¹ At the time, however, no one knew that Stalin had ordered the death of Mikhoels, though some -- including Mikhoels himself -- suspected that a plot like this might one day be ordered. The revered actor had been shot, then dragged to a remote alley and run over with a lorry "accidentally," crushing his skull so severely that those wanting to pay their last respects were discouraged from doing so

⁷⁹ "The Road Home: A Russian Jew Discovers His Identity," *Bulletin on Soviet and East European Jewish Affairs* as cited in Levin, 508.

⁸⁰ Gilboa, op. cit. as cited in Levin, 494.

by a shout, "Don't go up there! It's not the old man any more!"⁸² The collaborator and lone witness to the murder, V. Golubov-Potapov, was also killed in the same way after he had completed his task. An anonymous phone call to the Yiddish Theater in Moscow proclaimed, "We have finished off your first Jew, and now comes the turn for all the rest of you."⁸³ At the same time, famous cultural figures like poet Anna Akhmatova and composer Dmitrii Shostakovich (a friend of Mikhoels) became targets of public criticism. The two campaigns, one against "formalist" artists and the other against Jews, spun into high gear simultaneously.

Il'ia Ehrenburg, a famous Jewish writer in the Soviet Union, was called upon by the editor of *Pravda*, the preeminent Soviet newspaper, to write an article reminding Jews of their loyalty to the government and not to their race. He called Zionists "...those anti-Semites who uprooted the Jews from their long-established homes..." and called the newly-formed State of Israel, "...a bourgeois state and a tool of Anglo-American imperialism."⁸⁴

As 1948 gave way to 1949, the anti-Semitism continued to build. The last remaining Yiddish schools in the cities of Vilnius and Kaunas were closed. In a move seemingly inspired by Germany's *Kristallnacht*, Jewish books and manuscripts were burned and Yiddish typefaces destroyed alongside Yiddish records and libraries.⁸⁵ All the while, Jewish intellectuals were being rounded up by the dozen and denounced as spies and nationalists. Approximately 430 Jewish professionals were exiled to labor camps in the winter of 1948-1949, and it is believed that many of them ultimately died

⁸¹ *Argumenti i fakti* 2, 1992, as cited in Ro'i, 121.

⁸² Levin, 494.

⁸³ S.M. Broderzon, *Mayn laydsvveg mit Moyshe Broderzon* as cited in Levin, 494.

⁸⁴ Levin, 499.

there.

All this led up to the *delo vrachei* ["Case of the Doctors" or "Doctor's Plot"], which began in October of 1952 and continued until Stalin's death in May of 1953. Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov describe the plot as "...alleged at the time to be a widespread conspiracy in the Soviet medical profession organized by Jewish physicians against Kremlin leaders."⁸⁶ During this time, Jewish doctors were arrested, accused of the most atrocious acts (among them, according to Brent and Naumov, "...poisoning Russian children, injecting them with diphtheria, and killing newborn infants..."⁸⁷), and imprisoned. After Stalin's death in 1953, some of the accused were released and their records wiped clean. When the files came to light, it became apparent that only about half of the imprisoned doctors implicated in this supposed Jewish conspiracy had actually been Jewish.

Stalin's intentions and the notion that his ultimate goal was the extermination of the Jewish people are eerily similar to those of Adolf Hitler only twenty or so years before. Even the plans for such a deportation and mass human liquidation rang of the Nazi methods. The lawyer and journalist Arkadii Vaksberg was cited in Brent and Naumov as having written,

The trial was planned for March, but by February thousands of barracks unsuitable even for cattle had been hammered together in Birobidzhan... reserve tracks around Moscow were filled with freight cars, militia headquarters in large cities were writing lists of citizens subject to deportation -- those 100 percent and 50 percent Jewish blood...⁸⁸

The similarities are so clear as to even copy the idea of identifying *mischlingen*,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 504.

⁸⁶ Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against Jewish Doctors* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3.

or the German term for mixed-race Jews. What is interesting, however, is that Brent and Naumov cannot find a trace of evidence to support the allegations of barracks in Birobidzhan, railroad facilities, or anything else mentioned in Vaksberg's claim. Other sources over the course of my research, several other sources have asserted this same universally-held suspicion, but none have been able to validate the rumor. In Yale Strom's movie, "L'Chayim, Comrade Stalin," the narrator mentions a Stalinist plot to send all Soviet Jews to Birobidzhan and kill them on Purim, the Jewish holiday celebrating the foiling of a similar plot in biblical Persia, but the allegation is quantified as "widespread rumor."⁸⁹ As Brent and Naumov recognize, "rumor substantiated rumor and beliefs were taken as facts."⁹⁰

Whatever the status of Stalin's plan for the Jews, it is entirely possible -- indeed perhaps even likely -- that Stalin was betrayed by his physicians and staff in the hours leading up to his death on March 5th, 1953. Nearly every published account of Stalin's death, is in some regard at odds with every other published account, and reports vary even regarding his time of death, whether it was 9:50 A.M. or P.M. Amy Knight, a specialist on Soviet political science, was quoted in Brent and Naumov as saying, "Members of the leadership may have deliberately delayed medical treatment for Stalin -- probably for at least ten or twelve hours -- when they knew he was seriously ill. Then they covered up this delay..."⁹¹ Stalin's son, Vasilii, was said to have yelled, "They've killed my father, the bastards!"

The death of Stalin is attributed more or less universally to a cerebral hemorrhage,

⁸⁸ Arkadii Vaksberg, *Stalin Against the Jews* as cited in Brent and Naumov, 298.

⁸⁹ *L'Chayim, Comrade Stalin*, DVD. Directed by Yale Strom (New York, Blackstream Films, 2002).

⁹⁰ Brent and Naumov, 298.

⁹¹ Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant* as cited in Brent and Naumov, 313.

but whether or not he was poisoned is still a matter of debate. Viacheslav Molotov, a member of the Soviet *Presidium* and a major player in Soviet politics, wrote in his 1993 memoirs that Lavrentii Beria, the one-time NKVD head who had had a hand in the Doctors' Plot, boasted after Stalin's death that he had killed Stalin. Molotov, as quoted in Brent and Naumov, alleges that Beria said, "I did him in! I saved all of you!"⁹² In addition to this, *Stalin's Last Crime* maintains that every stick of furniture from Blizhnaia Dacha (where Stalin died) was removed immediately, and every worker at the facility was immediately discharged. According to Brent and Naumov, "...the deputy head of the guards was sent to the Tula region and lives there to this day. He has refused to tell his story for the last fifty years."⁹³

Even without a proven and implemented plan for Jewish extermination, and regardless of the plot to kill Stalin, Birobidzhan felt a great deal of the terror brought on by the Black Years. Prominent Jewish authors like Israel Emiot, Liuba Wasserman, and others were arrested on or near the famed Sholem Aleichem Street, and many were never heard from again. Donations from AMBIJAN and other foreign Jewish groups fueled the suspicions of party officials that the Jews in the EAO were not to be trusted.⁹⁴ Eventually, all contact with non-Soviet Jewish communities ended, and Birobidzhan was plunged into a metaphorical darkness. With no support from the outside world, no art or culture, and the closing of Yiddish schools in the region, Jewish life in Birobidzhan came to a grinding halt. Indeed, the Black Years would come to represent the death of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast as a viable Jewish homeland. Boris Miller, a survivor of the

⁹² Felix Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics, Conversations with Felix Chuev*, as cited in Brent and Naumov, 320.

⁹³ Brent and Naumov, 322.

⁹⁴ Weinberg, 84.

gulags, remarked, "...the Jewish Autonomous Region did not fulfill our hopes; it became instead a factory for Jewish assimilation."⁹⁵ A current resident of Birobidzhan, unnamed in Yale Strom's film, comments,

"I always think that if my father were able to come out of his grave and see what had become of the world that he created with his own two hands, he would want to die again. His whole generation, his peers he grew up with, who raised this land out of the swamps, came to the conclusion that they wasted their lives."

⁹⁵ Gennadi Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows: Anti-Semitism in Stalin's Russia. From the Secret Archives of the Former Soviet Union* as cited in Weinberg, 85.

1953-2005

To study the history of Birobidzhan's Jewish life from Stalin's death in 1953 to present is an essay in the mundane and largely inconsequential. Robert Weinberg, with his comprehensive analysis of the inception of the Jewish Autonomous Region and its first thirty years across some eighty-five pages gives the period between 1953 and 1996 a mere two pages. He takes time to note that Nikita Khrushchev commented in 1958 that "the Jewish settlement in Birobidzhan was a failure."⁹⁶ Weinberg also mentions that the Jewish population dwindled to under 9 percent in 1959 (14,269) and to under 7 percent in 1970 (11,452). For reference, today's Jewish population, by the estimation of the local Lubavitch rabbi, is around 5,000 out of some 100,000 residents of Birobidzhan town in general.

Weinberg also refers to the "remarkable sterility" of Jewish life. He continues, "The newspaper *Birobidzhaner Shtern* lacked any serious Jewish content..." The synagogue in town had been destroyed in a fire in 1956, and a handful of Jews continued to congregate in a wooden shack a short distance from the rubble. A Jewish Chamber Music Theater was formed in the late 1970's as a result of way of replacing the lost Yiddish Theater, but it too abandoned the EAO. The Jewish Chamber Music Theater left for Moscow and eventually toured the Soviet Union.⁹⁷

William Siegel asserts that in a 1989 census, 0.2 percent (578/214,085) of Jewish Autonomous Region residents could read or speak Yiddish. His analysis from 1997 claims that, "While dozens of Birobidzhaners, regardless of nationality, can tell a visitor

⁹⁶ Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews* as cited in Weinberg, 85.

⁹⁷ Weinberg, 86.

that there is a synagogue in town, few know exactly where it is. When the synagogue is finally located, the visitor will soon learn that the building is used by Christian groups rather than Jews."⁹⁸ He goes on to impress upon his reader the destitute and terrible conditions that residents of the EAO faced, stating that "...conditions in the Jewish autonomy are significantly worse than in the neighboring territories of Khabarovsk Krai and Amurskaya Oblast." Siegel also mentions a farmer he met in Valdgeim Kolkhoz whose monthly salary of 200,000 rubles (about U.S. \$40) had not been paid in four months.

In the 25 October 1991 Declaration on the State-Legal Status of the Jewish Autonomous Republic, Russian was declared the titular language of the EAO. It also served to imbue the EAO with the exclusive rights to timber, mining, airspace, and other natural sources of income, and to declare the EAO a full republic. Those rights allowed the government of the EAO to assert greater control over the resources and administrative duties that had previously been attributed to the national government.

⁹⁸ Siegel, 429.

Birobidzhan Today

As of the fall of 2005, the most recent definitive academic survey of Jewish life in Birobidzhan was Robert Weinberg's indispensable but dated 1996 book entitled, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*. He concludes his work with an ominous observation that, "...the state of affairs in 1996 strongly suggests that the future of Jewish life in the region is bleak..."⁹⁹ Since his book, CNN, The Jerusalem Post, and several other news organizations and a smattering of interested tourists had visited Birobidzhan and reported their findings. Their accounts varied greatly on every conceivable aspect of life, from tales of abject poverty to moderate economic success (relative to the rest of the Russian Far East), from kiddish cups filled with vodka because wine was impossible to come by to press releases about new community centers and internet laboratories.

In the fall of 2005, during work on my honors thesis for my major in Russian at Colgate University, I thought that there was simply too much hearsay and non-academic testament regarding the status of the Jewish community in Birobidzhan to be able to write a factually accurate recent account of it without going and seeing firsthand. Ekaterina Shevchenko, a friend of my father's and an employee at the Russian Consulate in New York, asked my father who I would be going on the trip with. When he replied, "No one, he'll be going by himself," my father received a rather sharp reply.

"He needs a bodyguard, then," Ms. Shevchenko asserted.

My father inquired, "Well, how much does that cost?"

⁹⁹ Weinberg, 92.

"Less than it would cost to claim your son's body."¹⁰⁰

In short, the outside perception of this corner of the Russian Federation is that of a lawless, wild, impossible-to-govern region. Dr. Samuel Kliger, director of the Former Soviet Union department of the American Jewish Committee, also expressed a general widespread distaste for the Birobidzhan project. He wrote in an e-mail to me, "For us, Russian Jews, this Republic was just another Soviet (Stalin) trick staged to deflect attention from the real situation with 'Jewish question' in Soviet Union to a remote Eastern Siberian region with no historic Jewish roots whatsoever. We saw it as a mockery."¹⁰¹ In the months approaching my trip, I received e-mails and articles from concerned friends and contacts regarding human trafficking in the area, kidnapping, and mafia corruption. The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that this area on the edge of the Russian tundra was a colder version of Chechnya.

As the wheels of Asiana Airlines flight 572 touched down on the icy tarmac in Khabarovsk and a recording thanked me for my business in English, Korean, and Russian over an instrumental version of "Walking in a Winter Wonderland," I became keenly aware of how much had changed in the eighty-year history of Birobidzhan and the Jewish Autonomous Region. When the first blast of -30 degree Siberian January air froze my lungs and sent me into a fit of coughing, I found it even more difficult to understand the fortitude and courage of the original men and women who braved the winter here in huts without sufficient food or electricity.

¹⁰⁰ Ekaterina Shevchenko (Employee of Russian Consulate in New York) in discussion with Howard Frankel, October 2005.

¹⁰¹ Dr. Samuel Kliger (Director, Former Soviet Union branch of the American Jewish Committee), personal electronic correspondence, Sept. 14, 2005.

I would soon come to realize that while nearly everything about Birobidzhan had changed from the original Yiddish-based Jewish "homeland" of the early 1930's, a few things have remained brutally consistent: among them the weather and the xenophobia. During my time in January in the Far East, the temperature hovered at around -20 degrees ("*Po farengeitu ili po tselstii?*" ["In Fahrenheit or Celsius?"]) I asked my cab driver at the airport, who responded, "*Eto ne vazhno,*" ["It doesn't matter."]). At night, when the thermometer dipped below the -30 mark, the ice on the ground creaked loudly underfoot and exposed skin froze almost immediately. The stereotypical large Russian *shapki*, or fur hats, ceased to be a symbol of Russian culture and instead came to represent a very real survival requirement for protection against pneumonia. My Swiss ski parka, which had been touted back in New York for its fortitude in extreme weather conditions, became brittle and stiff on the coldest nights.

During my time in Khabarovsk, I had an opportunity to sit down with Father Joseph McCabe, a Catholic missionary from the Maryknoll order. According to Father McCabe, Khabarovsk boasts a Jewish population of 11,000 (more than double that of Birobidzhan), and that group interested me as many are descended from Birobidzhan settlers who abandoned the town in its infancy. I was curious to find out how interfaith communications worked here. After all, I reasoned, we were in a period of relative openness and acceptance in the grand scheme of Russian history. After I asked him about it, Father McCabe replied, "The religions keep to themselves out of fear. I've been here for four years, and I've only met the rabbi once. It's a complicated situation here; the government doesn't like religious groups, and some people don't like the groups working together. I've been detained and questioned by the police five times, each time they tried

to find a reason to deport me. I'm a guest in their country. If I do something people don't like, or I upset the government, it gives them a reason to kick me out, which is all they're looking for."¹⁰²

The Khabarovsk Chabad rabbi, Rabbi Iasha Snetkov was, as Father McCabe had predicted, none too forthcoming. The first time I went to the synagogue, the three-man security team dressed in identical black suits and gray dress shirts turned me away without explanation. They wouldn't even tell me whether or not the rabbi was in. I returned after a week in Birobidzhan, and this time I was allowed to leave a note for him stating my purpose and leave it with his secretary, though I was escorted straight to his office and out the door. Finally, the next day his secretary called me at my hotel at 10:30 AM and told me that the rabbi could see me at eleven.

After racing the ten blocks to the synagogue, I arrived in time for my audience with Rabbi Iasha. He was courteous and polite, but short in his answers. Born in Soviet Georgia, Rabbi Iasha studied in yeshivas in Chicago and New York before coming to Khabarovsk some six years ago. He is the father to four children, and rabbi to some twelve thousand Jews living in the Far East city today. According to Rabbi Iasha, the biggest problem facing the Jewish community in Khabarovsk was education.¹⁰³ Schooling the generations who grew up in the midst of Soviet religious oppression and their children remains his top priority, though he concedes that the education of non-Jews in the city is also severely lacking. Indeed, a Russian *babushka* [grandmother] peering at the synagogue from behind the tall iron gate stopped me on my way out of the complex

¹⁰² Father Joseph McCabe (Maryknoll Catholic missionary to Khabarovsk, Russia) in discussion with the author, January 4, 2006.

¹⁰³ Rabbi Iasha Snetkov (Rabbi of Khabarovsk Synagogue, Khabarovsk, Russia) in discussion with the author, Russian language, January 13, 2006.

and asked me what exactly the building I had just emerged from was for. I replied that it was a synagogue, and when that was met with a blank look, I realized the full extent of her lack of exposure. "*Eto evreiskii khram,*" [It's a Jewish church,] I conceded.

The rabbi's seclusion and fear is all too often warranted. The day of my meeting with Rabbi Iasha, news came from the West that a skinhead in Moscow had attacked congregants at the Chabad Bronnaia Synagogue there with a knife, stabbing eight people before being subdued.¹⁰⁴ The attacker, identified as a 20-year-old Muscovite neo-Nazi named Aleksandr Koptsev, allegedly screamed, "I came here to kill!" as he wielded his knife around the synagogue. Pravda, the pre-eminent Russian newspaper, cited Koptsev's relatives as saying, "*Aleksandr mnogo vremeni provodil za kompiuternymi igrami...*" [Aleksandr spent a lot of time playing computer games] and named a game called *Pochtal'on* as being primarily responsible.¹⁰⁵ The attacker was sentenced on March 28, 2006 to thirteen years in prison. The New York Times reported that Koptsev said that he attacked the members of the synagogue because "their living standards were better than his."¹⁰⁶ The same reasons for the pogroms of the late nineteenth century resurfaced in this attack.

Koptsev's father insists that his son, despite his shaved head and overt anti-Semitic stabbing spree, had no skinhead affiliation. Most disturbingly, according to the *Moscow Times*, "The stabbings are the latest in a growing series of incidents apparently involving skinheads or racist groups in Russia." The article went on to quote President

¹⁰⁴ Oksana Yablokova and Kevin O'Flynn, "Synagogue Rampage Leaves 8 Wounded - January 12, 2006," *Moscow Times*, <http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2006/01/12/002.html> (accessed March 10, 2006)

¹⁰⁵ Pravda. "Aleksandr Koptsev zaranee gotovilsia k ponozhovshchine v sinagoge," <http://www.pravda.ru/news/accidents/12-01-2006/73591-0> Russian language. January 12, 2006, (accessed March 20, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ "World Briefing: Russia: Synagogue Attacker gets 13 years," *New York Times*, 28 March 2006. A7.

Vladimir Putin a year earlier when he said to world leaders at the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, "...we sometimes unfortunately see manifestations of this problem, and I too am ashamed of that." It also points out that only a few weeks before Putin's speech, a group of State Duma deputies alleged that Jews themselves were "fomenting ethnic hatred" and demanded that all Jewish organizations be outlawed.

Among those Jewish organizations allegedly "fomenting ethnic hatred" is the Hillel of Khabarovsk, a group of about 120 or so Jewish teenagers and young adults who gather on Friday nights to light the Sabbath candles, sing traditional songs, and socialize. On any given week, about twenty or thirty members will attend, and many of them go out to dinner in smaller groups after the services. Khabarovsk Hillel's director, a short, gregarious college student named Il'ia Baru, organizes and supervises the operation. After I observed their *kabbalat shabbat* service (that is, the traditional Jewish Friday night service to welcome the Sabbath), Il'ia and his friends told me over dinner at a nearby Bulgarian restaurant that the Far East was a much better place for Jews in Russia than in the west. "*Zdes' spokoinee*," [It's calmer here] Il'ia said.

"But isn't it sad that for it to be calm, Jews have to live so far away?" I asked.

"*Mozhet byt', no u nas est' novaia kultura, novaia synagoga, i mir. Ia bolee religioznii chem moi roditeli. Luchshe v Khabarovske chem na zapade.*" [Maybe, but we have a new culture, a new synagogue, and peace. I'm more religious than my parents. It's better in Khabarovsk than in the west.]¹⁰⁷

It appeared to be true. Of the eight Hillel members seated around the table, taking shots of vodka and joking around in between text messages on their mobile phones, six of

¹⁰⁷ Il'ia Baru (Director of Khabarovsk Hillel Jewish youth group) in discussion with the author, Russian language, January 13, 2006.

them said they were more religious than their parents, and the other two were immigrants from Israel, whose families had moved away after the fall of the Soviet Union and had recently returned. The Jewish community in Khabarovsk seemed to be thriving here in the Far East.

The train to Birobidzhan -- no longer an exhausting all-day ordeal but rather a three-hour leisurely trip through the tundra -- provided me with my first insight into the world of Russian anti-Semitism. Each of my three couchette-companions and I had contributed a bit of food for an ad hoc breakfast among strangers, and it was over bread, butter, caviar, and tea that one of the men, a man in his sixties, asked me, "*Chto ty delaesh' v Birobidzhane?*" ["What are you doing in Birobidzhan?"] Sensing some uneasiness in his question, I lied and told him that I was a student observing how different religions lived together. Then, on a lark, I asked him what he thought about the Jews in Siberia, and he replied between mouthfuls of my mother's pumpkin bread, "*Evrei kak tsigani: inogda ty mozhesh naiti odnogo khoroshego, simpatichnogo tsigana, no ochen' chasto...*" [Jews are like Gypsies: sometimes you can find a good, nice Gypsy, but often...]¹⁰⁸

Upon arriving at the Birobidzhan train station, I immediately recognized the enormous bilingual train station sign that is mentioned in nearly every description of the town. The ten foot-high Cyrillic and Yiddish letters have been cited time and time again as a metaphor for the dual cultural and linguistic natures of the city. Weinberg, Ro'i, Thubron, and others all take time to note that street signs are in both Russian and

¹⁰⁸ Zhenia Sergeevich (Russian pensioner) in discussion with the author, Russian language, January 5, 2006.

Yiddish. As of January 2006, however, this was no longer the case. While it is true that the train station, synagogue, city hall, and *Birobidzhaner Shtern* headquarters all bear Yiddish signs, they are largely alone. The Yiddish language in Birobidzhan has faded into nearly complete obscurity, as approximations put Yiddish speakers at around 1,000, or about 20% of Jews and less than 1% of the total population.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, if the train station sign were to be an accurate metaphor for the combination of Russian and Yiddish speakers in Birobidzhan, and the Russian letters were to remain ten feet in height, the Yiddish characters would be no taller than an inch and a half.

The storied *Birobidzhaner Shtern*, with its long-standing tradition of Yiddish and Russian sections, is still printed three times per week, eight pages per edition, but only two pages once per week are in Yiddish, and even that would have been cut long ago if a wealthy philanthropist from Miami hadn't provided the funds. In a way, this ersatz, artificially-supported Yiddish culture is representative of the language situation in Birobidzhan today. In the secular forum, there is a sense of an involuntary obligation to the region's linguistic origins, and it is for this reason alone that the symbols of Yiddish culture remains in public places.

The city museum also fits this description of apathy. The day I visited, it had been open for two hours before I entered, but none of the lights had been turned on. I was charged an entrance fee of one hundred rubles (about four dollars) by the listless teenage girl behind the counter, even though the sign above her head plainly said that the fee for adults was twenty rubles and only ten for students. She seemed not to care if I chose to pay the inflated admission price or walk back out the door, so I elected not to

¹⁰⁹ Rabbi Mordechai Sheiner (Rabbi of Birobidzhan Synagogue) in discussion with the author, Russian language, January 5, 2006.

argue. Instead, I accepted my yellowed ticket and followed her into the first room. The attendant abandoned her post at the front door to walk me around, and it was clear that I would most likely be the only visitor today. I trailed my "guide" from room to room, waiting for her to silently turn on each light before proceeding. The two floors were dutifully decorated and labeled with historical documents, Soviet-era farming and industrial equipment, and aged Judaica, but I had the distinct impression that I was keeping my lethargic companion from something far more pressing, so I walked quickly through the last few rooms. A sensation of "it's officially here to see if you really want to," was ever-present in the museum.

The antithesis to this was the home and family of Rabbi Mordechai Sheiner, a Lubavitch rabbi from Israel who moved with his wife and children to Birobidzhan four years ago. He is a short, bespectacled man of generous proportions and temperament, and it has been his influence that has brought about a renaissance in the Jewish community. During his tenure, a new synagogue, sukkah, three large *hanukkiot*, and a headquarters for the Jewish community organization "Freid" have all been built, and Rabbi Sheiner ("Mordechai," as he's known to his congregants) works daily on his newest project: a Jewish learning center. While he shapes styrofoam into a Kotel replica and prints labels for plastic lulav and etrog (traditional religious symbols for the holiday of *Sukkot*), his six children, all of whom are under the age of eleven, roam the halls of the synagogue, pushing the youngest in a stroller. The children do not attend secular school, but instead are taught by Sunday school teachers all week long. Each one of them speaks or will eventually speak fluent Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew, switching seamlessly between the three, at times even mid-word. One of the middle children, a six-year old

boy by the name of Levi, expressed the number "fourteen" to me as "arbanadsat," a contraction of the Hebrew word "arba" ("four") and the Russian "teen" ending, "-nadsat." His Yiddish comes from occasional instruction from his father when the mood strikes them.

Mordechai Sheiner's enthusiasm for his faith and his endless projects dominated our conversations, as he spoke quickly and with kinetic hand gestures while describing grand plans for kosher restaurants, kosher butcher facilities, and a mikvah. The most modest estimates anticipate that a restaurant would cost around \$20,000, and a mikvah another \$140,000.¹¹⁰ The money is donated partially from private philanthropy and partially from the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee, whose Far East headquarters is in Krasnoyarsk), but the contributions are slow in coming, and usually not as grand and ambitious as the plans that the rabbi has made for them.

Despite his economic frustrations, Rabbi Sheiner is a man who seems content in the knowledge that his work will never be done. I asked the rabbi, who is in his mid-thirties, if he thought he would spend the rest of his life in Birobidzhan or eventually move back to Israel. He replied in his rapid, broken Russian, "*Ia zhivu v Birobidzhane seichas, no kogda Moshiakh pridet, ia budu zhit' v Israele eshche raz.*" [I live in Birobidzhan now, but when the Moshiach comes, I will live in Israel again.]¹¹¹ He continued with a smile, "*Ia nadeius chtoby on bistro.*" [I hope that he is fast.] A gigantic three-foot-by-three-foot blow-up picture -- larger than all but two of the children -- of the Lubavitch Rebbe Menachem Schneerson hangs imposingly in the dining room cum rec room cum library.

¹¹⁰ Lev Toitman (Chairman of FREID Jewish organization in Birobidzhan) in discussion with the author, Birobidzhan, Russia, Russian language, January 10, 2006.

While Rabbi Sheiner spends his days at the synagogue, constructing and planning, his wife Esti tends to their three-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a crumbling, Soviet-era complex. With the help of her eldest daughter, Musi, who at eleven has already been consigned to laundry and infant-tending duties in addition to her schoolwork, Esti manages to keep pace with her children while baking loaf after loaf of challah for members of the community. In her spare time (if she can be said to have any), Esti has written nearly a dozen children's books in Russian on the family computer, which is tucked away in the back of a walk-in closet next to bottles of laundry detergent and boxes of Shabbat candles. The books have titles like *Iosef, pochitaiushchii subbotu* [Joseph, Admirer of the Sabbath] and *Prints, stavshii evreem* [The Prince Who Became a Jew] and address Jewish customs like the Sabbath, *kippot* (Jewish religious skullcaps), and various holiday stories. Esti's tired eyes revealed her years of service to her husband, her family, and the community that she helps to support. Scarcely a moment goes by in their cramped three-bedroom apartment where something isn't spilled, broken, or overcooking on the stove, but as the Rabbi Sheiner describes her devotion to him, "*My kak dekabristskie zheny.*" [We are like the Decembrist wives."] His comment is a historical reference to the wives of Decembrist revolutionaries who dutifully followed their convicted husbands to the lands of exile they had been sentenced to. As I took note of the two year-old toddling around pieces of fallen plaster, the kitchen covered in flour and dirty dishes, and the -30 degree weather howling outside the rusted metal door, I realized how apt the analogy probably was.

The luxuries that the family Sheiner is missing by living in Birobidzhan weigh heavily on the parents. I brought a small box of Hanukkah chocolates with me as a gift,

¹¹¹ Sheiner, discussion, January 5, 2006.

for which both the rabbi and his wife thanked me profusely. Rabbi Sheiner later confessed somewhat sadly to me that it was the first chocolate his children had eaten in nearly four months. The family observes strict kosher dietary laws, and since there are no kosher shops, restaurants, or facilities for thousands of miles, they must make their own food, churn their own butter, and once in awhile, travel to the countryside to observe the kosher milking of a cow if they are to have any dairy. Twice a year the family receives a shipment of kosher food from Israel, and they have ample money for fruits, vegetables, and eggs from the local markets, but simple foods like chicken and chocolate are rare delicacies. I was told that Doli, the sweet and perpetually smiling third child, would be celebrating her eighth birthday the week after I left. I asked the rabbi if they would have any kind of celebration, and he shook his head. "*V Izraele. My budem prazdnovat' potom.*" [In Israel. We will celebrate then.]

Despite all of the privations that he and his family have endured here in the Far East, Rabbi Sheiner is unfailingly kind and accommodating to his constituency. At the Friday night Shabbat services I witnessed, he greeted each of the twenty or so elderly men who attended with warmth and patience. Throughout the blessings, Rabbi Sheiner served the dwindling Yiddish minority with page number announcements like "*Dvadtsat chetiri, i fir un tsvantsik.*"

After the service, I spoke with a member of the congregation, a Iosef Beckerman, who had come to Birobidzhan from Ukraine in 1948. "*Birobidzhan sovsem drugoi seichas,*" [Birobidzhan is completely different now] he began,

"Eto luchshe. U nas est' evreiskie knigi, kneset, ravin, i ego mishpokhe. Seichas mozhem molit'sia i ne boimsia. Po-moemu, eto samaia khoroshaia vremena v istorii Birobidzhana." [It's better. We have Jewish books, the synagogue, the rabbi, and his *mishpokhe* (Yiddish for "family").

Now we can pray and not be afraid. I think this is the best time in the history of Birobidzhan."]¹¹²

The wizened congregant may very well be right, though it is ironic that now that the Jews of Birobidzhan are truly free to do as they please, the culture and language are in somewhat of a lull. According to Rabbi Sheiner, "*Na typichnii Shabbat, dvadtsat chelovek prikhodiat v synagogu. Na yontify, mozh et byt' piat'desiat ili shest'desiat.*" [On a typical Shabbat, twenty people will come to the synagogue. On a *yontif*, a holiday, maybe fifty or sixty.]¹¹³ The facilities may be brand-new, and the rabbi may be excited and outgoing, but there have never been fewer Yiddish-speakers in Birobidzhan or more Jews with a significant lack of Jewish knowledge. While it is true that in the early 1990's, the Jewish population had dwindled much lower, the community elders kept the traditions and the cultural aspects. As time passed, the last of the old, religious generation was lost. Today's Birobidzhan elderly are the first Soviet generation, raised in fear and religious persecution. At Shabbat services, Rabbi Sheiner accommodated them as best he could as he passed out painstakingly-compiled Russian translations and transliterations of every prayer, yet some of his audience dozed or whispered to one another throughout the proceedings. Until Rabbi Sheiner succeeds in educating this first post-Soviet era generation, he will likely be reading the Torah to himself.

Since there are no Kohens -- that is, Jews descended from the ancient Kohanim tribe of Israel -- in Birobidzhan, the rabbi solicited me for the first *aliyah*. I was honored, and though I am not by nature a very religious man, I was able to recall the *brokhas*, or blessings, from the days of my childhood with ease. The situation was not

¹¹² Iosef Beckerman (Jewish resident of Birobidzhan) in discussion with the author, Birobidzhan, Russia, Russian language, January 6, 2006.

the same for the other men called to the Torah. For most of their lives, these men had lived largely without religion, and until Rabbi Sheiner came to Birobidzhan four years ago, only the most devout men ever bothered to go to the services held in private apartments or the one room of a building which served as a makeshift synagogue. The decades of religious suppression in the Soviet Union became apparent to me as each of the six elderly men who followed me struggled through the relatively simple three-line benedictions.

The city itself seemed to be struggling as well. When I asked an American businessman in Khabarovsk about what he had heard of Birobidzhan, he replied, "That's where you go if you want to sell a stolen car." Indeed, after I returned to Khabarovsk, one of Father McCabe's godchildren told me that he had a friend whose missing Toyota had been recently recovered in Birobidzhan. While I was there, I wasn't able to identify any stolen cars, but I did see that garbage had piled up on nearly every street corner. Though the Birobidzhan Philharmonic building stood tall and gleaming in the Siberian sun -- a product of state and philanthropic funds -- many of the residents continued to live in abject poverty. The building next to the rabbi's house, for example, had a single wooden outhouse with two commodes to serve a building which probably housed close to two hundred people. The stench from thirty feet away was nearly unbearable, and it was difficult for me to imagine having to use an outdoor facility in the brutal cold. Many other residences throughout Birobidzhan had cracked windows repaired with makeshift wooden planks or cardboard, offering little protection from the elements.

Across the street from the westernized Vostok Hotel, gypsies warmed their hands by a trash fire. One of them noticed me exiting the hotel with my camera one day, and

¹¹³ Sheiner, discussion, January 6, 2006.

the group quickly closed in around me, tugging at my clothes and gesturing to me to take a picture of them. I complied and tried to leave, but they immediately demanded one hundred rubles for the picture. As I argued with them as best I could, they shoved me to the ground and closed in tighter. I dumped a handful of ten-ruble notes and change on the ground and forced my way out of the circle. All this took place on Sholem Aleichem Street -- the main thoroughfare -- in broad daylight in front of the only hotel in town, and in plain sight of at least twenty passersby.

Valdgeim, the Jewish Soviet *kolkhoz* of the 20th century has declined into penury and destitution as well. Information on its inception is scarce, even in the usually comprehensive histories of the EAO, but what is known is that it was founded under the direction of one L. Gefen, whose full first name seems to have been lost to history. According to Weinberg, the *kolkhoz* was founded in 1928 by thirty-two settlers who dropped their tents about ten kilometers from Birobidzhan and began to farm the area.¹¹⁴

Birobidzhan's resident musician, an aging but active man by the name of Roald Vasiliev, arranged for his granddaughter, Ol'ga, to drive us to the cultural museum in Valdgeim. Roald's cousin, a woman by the name of Mariia Leonidovna, was the curator there, and my new elderly friend of unique dentition insisted that we pay her a visit.

While the distance between Birobidzhan and Valdgeim is no more than about fifteen kilometers, the situation there was infinitely worse. What we saw in Valdgeim made Birobidzhan's gypsy vagrants and overflowing, trash-riddled outhouses look cosmopolitan by comparison. The basic trappings of civilization like commerce,

¹¹⁴ Weinberg, 27.

industry, and administration appeared to be missing. Valdgeim seemed to have collapsed upon itself after the *kolkhoz* at its economic center disappeared. According to Mariia Leonidovna, all but eighty or so Jews have moved out or abandoned Valdgeim in favor of Israel, and those who remain are mostly too poor or sick to make the trip. The caretaker is one of the last able-bodied Jews in the town, and she curates the hall largely on her own budget. Most of the old photos that adorn the walls of the one-room museum are of Mariia's family, and Roald laughed as he found himself in several of them. The Judaica section was comprised exclusively of cheap plastic trinkets donated by one synagogue or another, the kind young Jewish children are given to play with on holidays. There was a plastic *shofar*, a *hanukkiyah* meant to be filled with crayons, and a colorful Purim *grogger*. A sample *kippah* was displayed prominently in the center, and I thought perhaps this would be a piece of authentic Jewish history from Valdgeim. Careful inspection, however, revealed that the *kippah* was in fact from the bat mitzvah of one Adrienne Kirshbaum, six years earlier, in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. Of ancient, ornate candelabras, religious Hebrew and secular Yiddish books of the past eighty years, and sacred prayer shawls and *tefillin*, there was not a sign.

An immense bust of a man identified as Vladimir Peller stands imposingly and nearly six feet tall in one corner of the *Dom Kultury* room, comprised of a sooty bronze. The man is shown with six Soviet medals, and the sign next to the sculpture boasts that Peller was a hero of the Soviet Worker. Mariia Leonidovna showed me around the bust and the ensuing articles with considerable pride, and she seemed disappointed and surprised that I didn't know who this man was. I made a note to do more research on this apparent hero after I left the museum, but upon reaching an internet source, I found not a

single website that mentioned his name, nor a book or history of the region that gives him so much as a footnote. He is, however, apparently the most touted and prized man that this town has ever produced.

When I asked about the large Soviet seal emblazoned across the *Dom Kulturnii* entrance, Mariia replied with enthusiasm, "*Eto nasha istoriia. Nam nado pomnit' chto proizkhodit v proshem.*" [It's our history. We have to remember what happened in the past.]¹¹⁵ Olga, Roald's 23-year old granddaughter, commented derisively as we left the museum that the seal was still there because it was made of heavy concrete and there were no construction machines or sources of money left in Valdgeim to take it down. " '*Nasha istoriia.*' *Eto bred. Kogda upadet, nikto ne pochinit, i my ne budem pomnit' nichego.*" ['Our history.' It's nonsense. When the sign falls, no one is going to fix it, and we're not going to remember anything.] Valdgeim today, it seemed to me, is a place where the failures of the grand Jewish homeland plan are illustrated most acutely. Whereas in Birobidzhan, the new Jewish culture may be imported with Rabbi Sheiner from Israel or artificially supported with money from Florida, in Valdgeim it is simply dead, or at least it will be soon with the passing of the last few dozen elders. The Jewish community here has fallen, and perhaps there is no reason to fix it. All throughout the *Dom kultury* and the town of Valdgeim itself, celebratory banners and monuments stood marking the sixtieth and seventieth anniversaries of the establishment of the now-defunct *kolkhoz* -- and subsequently the town -- in 1928. It would appear that there is nothing left to celebrate about this town but the passing of time. The eighty-year celebration, at the time I visited, was only two years away, but there will almost certainly be no Jews

¹¹⁵ Mariia Leonidovna (curator of *Dom kultury* in Valdgeim, EAO) in discussion with the author, Russian language, January 9, 2006.

living here to see Valdgeim turn ninety.

Like the entire town of Valdgeim, the old, multi-ethnic cemetery of Birobidzhan has fallen into ruin and disrepair. Rabbi Sheiner, despite being a wealth of information about most things Jewish in town, couldn't tell me how to get there, nor could most of his congregation. The *kladbishche* lies about two kilometers from the town center in a lonely patch of woods next to an industrial gasoline storage facility, and filled with the graves of Jews and non-Jews alike who pioneered the efforts to start a city in this foreboding environment. The cemetery is completely unmarked, and it was only for Roald's memory that we found it at all. His granddaughter, for all her 23 years living as a part of the Jewish community in Birobidzhan, had never seen it.

The grave markers, regardless of religious affiliation, were broken and overturned. Pictures glazed onto the stones had long since faded, rusted, and cracked. There was no organization or symmetry to the tombstones whatsoever; it was as if each time someone was buried there, a new grave had been dug at a different angle and at a different random distance from the others. Skinny birch trees and tufts of undergrowth made walking in the knee-high snow a challenge, and there were gaps between groups of unrelated plots for no apparent reason. Jewish headstones of indeterminate age rusted next to imposing metal Communist star-laden markers from the 1960's. The twisted points of individual plot gates lay at threatening angles. The brave, enterprising pioneers of this corner of the Siberian Far East -- Jewish and Christian alike -- who survived the murderously cold weather, the barren farmland, and the almost unthinkable isolation to create a city on the very edge of nowhere are now forever interred in a pocket of overgrown forest next to large gray tanks filled with petrol. Those marked by softer

stones have had their names worn away by the same winter which tried to kill them, and those whose names remain are seen by no one. History, if it was not already evident, has not been kind to Birobidzhaners.

Lev Grigorievich Toitman, chairman of the Jewish community of Birobidzhan, is a man of ample proportions, with a hacking, wheezing voice and yellowed fingers that perpetually fidget with a matchbox. After spending his first eight years in Odessa, young Lev and his family moved to Birobidzhan in 1934, right after the Autonomous Region had been officially founded. In between hoarse cries of "Lenochka!" to his assistant for one paper or another, Toitman told me the story of his life, beginning with his conscription into the army in 1942 and through his thirty-year career in various businesses and trades in Birobidzhan. In 1985, as Perestroika took hold in Russia, Toitman joined the administrative end of the Jewish community in Birobidzhan, and when Freid, the Jewish community's governing body for the EAO, was created in 1997, he became a charter member.

Toitman spoke fondly of the days of yore, way back before even the Great Purges of the late 1930's. He recalled how all communication, government dealings, printings, and art were all in Yiddish, and he seemed disappointed that I couldn't speak the *mama-loshen*. As he spoke of the artists, poets, and writers from Poland and Ukraine who had all come to Birobidzhan during that time, he reflected, "*Uroven' byl gorazdo vyshe.*" [It was a much higher standard.]¹¹⁶

At the same time, Toitman identified the Black Years, 1937 and 1938, to have

¹¹⁶ Lev Toitman (Chairman of FREID, the Jewish Community in Birobidzhan) in discussion with the author, Russian language, January 10, 2006.

been the worst in the history of the region. According to his recollections, many Jews had abandoned the Soviet Union for America and France, and for those who stayed, "*Shis. Ty znaesh chto eto 'shis' ?*", using the Yiddish word for "to shoot" and pointing his fingers accordingly. Mr. Toitman remembered a group of as many as a thousand Jews being arrested and shipped to a gulag in Magadan, and that only one of them returned.

The future of Birobidzhan according to Lev Toitman looks bright. Though as little as fifteen years ago, nearly everyone packed up and left for Israel, the chairman remarked that many have since come back to the EAO, and that culture was thriving. He commented with a smile, "*V 1992-om godu, ne bylo biznesa, ne bylo liudei, ne bylo nichego. No segodnia, my ne kak Brighton Beach, ne kak Brooklyn, gde vse na idish, no zdes' u nas Tsimes.*" [In 1992, there was no business, no people, nothing. But now, we are not like Brighton Beach, we are not like Brooklyn, where everything is in Yiddish, but here we have Tsimes.]¹¹⁷ The "Tsimes" he referred to is a chain of supermarket/deli shops all throughout Birobidzhan which feature Yiddish-style lettering and menorahs on their signs.

For all the heritage "Tsimes" brings to its external decorations, the inside is completely secular. There, one can buy ham, salami, or any other pork product, as well as cheese and other dairy items, often cut on the same block. On the bottom shelf of the liquor section, there was a small collection of vodka bottles with Hebrew and Russian letters on it. Curious, I asked to be shown one, and upon inspection, I saw that the bottle was labeled, "*Evreiskie shtuchki*" or "Jewish Delights." The vodka was pronounced kosher by one Pinchas Goldschmidt, chief rabbi in Moscow. I would learn later that

Pinchas Goldschmidt had landed in Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in October of 2005 after a trip abroad and was turned away by border guards, who canceled his visa without explanation.¹¹⁸ Russian officials surrounding the case and the 52 other religious workers who have been expelled without explanation have commented that "religious expansion represents a threat to Russia's national security." President Vladimir Putin in 2000 called for a "counteraction to the negative influence of foreign religious organizations and missionaries." Goldschmidt may have been expelled for months by the time I entered "Tsimes," but his vodka is still on the shelves. Most interesting about the entire situation is that neither Pravda nor its main competitor, Izvestiya, carried the story. If it were not for the Asia News, based in China, and a handful of Jewish news sources, the expulsion of Rabbi Goldschmidt would have gone unnoticed by the world community.

As for safety and prosperity, Chairman Toitman seemed pleased with both. He cited a *Birobidzhaner Shtern* article which had pronounced Birobidzhan the "*samii spokojnii oblast' vo vsej Rossii.*" [the quietest oblast in all of Russia.] The souvenir bruises from my gypsy friends outside the hotel smarted in dissent, but I said nothing. I also found out later from the rabbi that the chairman's only daughter had been murdered some five years earlier, under unclear and mysterious circumstances. Those events and the recovered Toyota aside, I had to concede that for an impoverished city in rural Russia, the city was remarkably calm. "*Tol'ko nemnogo mafii,*" [Only a little mafia] he added with a smile, as if to say, "Kids will be kids."

On the issue of anti-Semitism, Toitman was adamant that it simply did not exist in Birobidzhan. "*U nas net skinheadov,*" he proclaimed proudly, and it seemed to be true.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Asia News, "Moscow's Chief Rabbi Denied Entry to Russia - October 7, 2005,"

In my week in Birobidzhan (after getting off the train), I saw not a single piece of racial graffiti and heard not a single slur. Unfortunately, Roald Vasiliev's granddaughter Ol'ga and a fifteen-year old boy named Oleg Reis I spoke to in the synagogue told me a different story. Ol'ga noted that in the past few years, skinheads had become a minute but disturbing minority in the community, and Oleg said that at times he has been derisively called "*Zhid*," [Yid] in school. Neither one seemed upset or overly concerned about these developments. After all, Rabbi Sheiner walks down the street every day with his *kippah* in plain sight, receiving a "Shalom" from everyone he knows, Jew and non-Jew alike. While everyone I spoke to in Birobidzhan showed an extreme fondness for their community and a strong emphasis on interfaith cooperation and understanding, but it should be noted that anti-Semitism does in fact exist in Birobidzhan, if only on a small scale.

Minor racial disharmony notwithstanding, there is an extreme pride in Birobidzhan among its residents. Roald Vasiliev, the composer, has compiled and composed two entire books of songs for the accordion about Birobidzhan. Their titles include, "*Ulitsa Sholem-Aleikhema*," [Sholem Aleichem Street], "*Ya zhivu v Birobidzhane*," [I Live in Birobidzhan], and "*Liubliu Tebia Birobidzhan*," [I Love You, Birobidzhan], the chorus of which goes simply,

*"Liubliu tebia, Birobidzhan,
 Poiu tebia, Birobidzhan,
 Mechtoi tvoei, vesnoi tvoei,
 Liublius' i gorzhus'."
 [I love you, Birobidzhan,
 I sing of you, Birobidzhan,
 Your dreams, your spring,
 I love and I admire.]*¹¹⁹

<http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=4293> (accessed March 8, 2006).

¹¹⁹ V.N. Vinnikov, R.L. Vasilyev, and N.B. Livant, *Podari mnye vstrechi mig* (Publishing location

In addition to Vasiliev and his accordion, Lev Toitman told me a story about a meeting between Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Russian premier Vladimir Putin. The two met in 2004 in Moscow, and as the chairman tells the story, Putin said something to the effect of, "You know, we also have a Jewish homeland. You should visit." Both Toitman and Rabbi Sheiner grinned broadly at the prospect of playing host to Ariel Sharon, and Chairman Toitman was insistent that the prime minister wanted to make the trip, but that he couldn't for some reason. I smiled as I thought of the leader of all of Israel, with his vast military and political clout, staying in the thirty-dollar-a-night Vostok Hotel and playing Peek-a-Boo with Levi and Doli at the crowded Sheiner dinner table as I had. Prime Minister Sharon suffered a stroke on January 4th, 2006 and fell into a deep coma. As of April 2006, he has not emerged from it, and neither he nor Premier Putin has ever visited the EAO.

On February 23rd, 2006, a month or so after my trip to the Jewish Autonomous Region, a cache of Judaica was found in a long-disused storeroom in the old Birobidzhan synagogue. Among the contents were books nearly eighty years old, *tefillin* [traditional head and arm wraps], *tallit* [traditional prayer shawls], and quills for the writing of new Torah scrolls. According to Rabbi Sheiner, a letter was found among the pieces from a Holocaust survivor to the community at large, chronicling the author's emigration to Birobidzhan with his two daughters after the death of his wife in Europe. The artifacts will be put on display in a special room in the new synagogue, much like author David Vaiserman hoped for when he wrote in 1993,

"*I togda, ya uveren, vozrodit'sia vnov' moia rodnaia evreiskaia avtonomnaia oblast'.*"

[And then, I believe, my native Jewish Autonomous Region will again be revived.]¹²⁰

Conclusions

Until my train left Birobidzhan station (and that ubiquitous sign) on January 10th, 2006, I couldn't comprehend why anyone would ever willingly stay in this place when alternatives existed. I had been to Israel, seen the beautiful vistas, walked the warm, sunny beaches, and experienced what it was like to be surrounded by Jewish culture and prosperity. Who would ever pass up the chance to live there or New York or California or anywhere else where the weather wasn't deadly and the buildings weren't crumbling? Wouldn't any Jew want to live in a place where the Jewish community was prominent and prosperous, the tzedakah box was always full, and the nearest kosher restaurant was closer than a thousand kilometers away? It made no sense to me, and I attributed the whole phenomenon to a strange, inexplicable Russian personality trait that I was helpless to understand... that is, until I bid the Sheiners -- all eight of them -- goodbye. It was their family that made Birobidzhan today make sense.

In most places around the world, from Westchester, New York to Tel Aviv and all the way to Perth, Australia, Jews congregate in numbers and follow the proscribed rituals with relative ease. There are synagogues, rabbis, congregants, *chazzanim*, Torah scrolls, and Men's Club and Sisterhood presidents in sufficient quantities so as to provide a person, a place, and a time for everyone in the community. Hebrew school books are

¹²⁰ David Vaiserman, *Kak eto bylo?* Russian language (Birobidzhan, s.m., 1993) 232.

bought where else but at a bookstore. Kosher food is a matter of driving perhaps a mile or two further than the normal supermarket to the kosher butcher across town. For the Jews of Birobidzhan, the Jewish bookstore is a ten-hour flight and a thousand dollars away. The distance to the kosher butcher isn't measured in miles but in time zones. Religious objects in this place are revered, treasured, and well cared-for because replacements are anything but readily available. The rabbi and his services are respected because he is *the* authority on Jewish matters. As Rabbi Sheiner himself joked, "*V Ierushalime, ia tol'ko odin ravin v tolpe. Zdes', ya samii luchshii ravin v gorode.*" [In Jerusalem, I am only one rabbi in a crowd. Here, I am the best rabbi in town.]

The Jews of Birobidzhan, since the day Tikhonkaia became the site of the new Jewish Republic, have been fighting a war on several fronts. They fought against the elements, they fought against the government at times, and they fought against the almost inconceivable isolation. At times they appeared to be winning, like when the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was first officially recognized as such or when construction began on the new synagogue four years ago. Other times they lost terribly, as during the Great Purges and the Black Years. Some places, like Valdgeim, continue to falter to this day, but for the past 88 years, Jews in the Jewish Autonomous Region have kept sight of what it means to be part of their unique community.

Being Jewish in Birobidzhan doesn't mean paying dues, or going to minyan duty one week a year. It means being a part of a group which huddles together for survival. At the community level, it means laying *tefillin* with Rabbi Sheiner when one gets the chance, or going to the *hanukkiyah* lighting ceremony, or contributing a family book or piece of Judaica for the new learning center. At the microscopic level, it is the family,

the *sem'ia*, the *mishpokhe*, however one expresses it, that makes life -- particularly life as a Jewish minority -- possible in a locale so foreboding. It's eleven-year old Musi Sheiner hanging the laundry to dry not because the family can't afford a dryer, but because when they tried to buy one, no one in Birobidzhan even knew what it was. It's Doli Sheiner, a week shy of her eighth birthday, helping her younger sister with her mittens without even being told to. It's Esti writing children's books about Judaism for her family and for others in town. It's Rabbi Mordechai, whose devotion to his faith and his desire to serve his community led him quite literally to the ends of the Earth. Each member of this family works as a responsible, diligent piece of the whole to ensure prosperity and survival, just as each member of the community at large contributes something. Eighty-year old Pesach, one of the community elders, sweeps the snow from the synagogue pavilion every day. Roald Vasiliyev, with his toothless grin, plays the accordion once a week to his fellow aging pensioners. These aren't chores for the children or tasks to keep the old men busy. These are responsibilities to one another.

Nothing is taken for granted in Birobidzhan, and nothing goes unappreciated. I will never forget the look on the faces of the Sheiner children when I gave them that cheap box of kosher Hanukkah chocolate. To them, it could have just as easily been bars of gold. Those children are grateful for what they have, and not sorry for what they don't. The community bands together to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that have been thrown in their way. Perhaps it is the rest of the world that has eaten from the forbidden fruit and lost its religion in a world of yountif politics and Hebrew school lessons cut short by soccer practices. Perhaps in Birobidzhan, this land flows with the milk and honey of a people unmolested by material wants or personal gain. Perhaps, on

the tiny "island in the sea of mud," despite the motivations or intentions of the Soviet government which founded it, there really does exist a *tsiyon*.

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