

## 22 *Birobidjan; Thriving on a Myth*

The ICOR was completely overshadowed by the JDC in the 20's. The *Forward* could, without trespassing on the truth, state that the ICOR was unnecessary and merely a *Communistische pushke* (a collection box). And though some tools and tractors were sent overseas, the ICOR never published a financial report.

The ICOR was rescued by Birobidjan. The projected Jewish region in the Far East, on the Amur River, was set for Jewish settlement on March 28, 1928.<sup>+45</sup> It proved a veritable boon to Jewish Communism, opening a new and fertile field for propaganda and fund-raising. The ICOR developed an intense campaign around Birobidjan, solemnly calling upon the American Jews to fulfil their duty toward realizing the future "Jewish state." And to bring this idea closer home, a commission of experts was sent, in 1928, to study colonization possibilities in Birobidjan.

The experts were Professors Franklin S. Harris, president of Brigham Young University in Utah, chairman; J. B. Davidson and Charles Kuntz, of Rutgers University; Benjamin Brown and K. B. Sauls. Leon Talmi, a Communist, acted as their guide. Charles Kuntz was also chairman of the ICOR. Their report could be summarized in the laconic phrase of one of them, that they had not found obstacles that were unsurmountable.

The report of the commission, including their interview with Soviet Premier A. Rykov, was published by the ICOR in 1930. Asked whether Moscow planned to industrialize the region, Rykov said that they would do everything possible, but lacked sufficient funds.

**KUNTZ AND BRAININ, TWO TYPES OF MASKILIM**

The ICOR deemed it profitable to embroider upon the rather sober and factual report of the experts. Kuntz and Brown lent themselves to this fancy work. The two Jewish agriculturists were blissful dreamers of cooperative farming as the panacea for most social ills. Brown, a bit on the adventurous side, had been a leader of a large farmers' cooperative in the Far West, and, later on, one of the founders of the ill-fated Heightstown project, in New Jersey.

Kuntz was a rare type of an idealist. An old Russianized—and, later, Americanized—radical *Maskil*, he had previously remained aloof from Jewish public life, busy in his own work. But the revolution in Russia awakened in him a social as well as a Jewish interest. He looked at the Soviet Union through the lenses of a social utopian, believing that the voice of Moscow was identical to his own. On numerous trips to the agricultural districts of Soviet Russia, and later to Birobidjan, he would put on his high boots, march over the fields all day long, and conscientiously work out a detailed plan for highly advanced cooperative farming. The Soviet authorities would politely take his plans, and put them away to gather dust. The Communist movement knew how to attract men of standing like Kuntz; they were immensely valuable as fronts.

Another find was Reuben Brainin, an old *Maskil* but of a different stamp. A lucid Hebrew essayist, Brainin was one of those who had opened a window to Europe in the ghetto. But he was totally alien to any of the radical schools or to the labor movement. He came to America in 1910, edited a Hebrew magazine and contributed to the *Tageblatt* and, later, to *The Day*. After World War I he settled in Montreal, Canada. In 1930, at the age of 68, Brainin went to Russia to visit relatives and friends. There he met the remnants of Hebrew writers who, undoubtedly, poured out their hearts to him; Hebrew was already under an actual ban. But, to everyone's amazement, he returned favorably disposed to the Soviet regime and impressed by the plan for Jewish rehabilitation there.

Brainin was immediately grabbed up by the Communists. He became an honorary member of the ICOR. His long record as a "Lover of Zion" and a devotee of Hebrew and the respect he enjoyed on both sides of the ocean were tangible assets. Brainin, with his fine flowing white beard and dignified bearing, was a decorative

figure on the stage of Carnegie Hall and other ICOR gatherings.

Brainin seemingly never wavered through all the bloody liquidations in the 30's and through the Stalin-Hitler pact. In his later years only his secretary could understand his speech, and no outsider could be certain whether his words were accurately transcribed.

The author is at a loss to account for Brainin's puzzling backing of the Soviet regime. Hebrew writers here have ascribed it to the rather cool reception Brainin received in America. Accustomed to a leading position in Hebrew-Zionist society in Europe, Brainin was hurt by his neglect, and his vanity drove him to seek recognition elsewhere. Another possible influence might have been his son, Joseph, owner or manager of Seven Arts, an advertising agency, and a Left-Winger. In 1943, Joseph Brainin managed the well-advertised visit of the two Moscow emissaries, Solomon Michoels and Itzik Feffer.

**THE SMALL TREK TO BIROBIDJAN**

Running far ahead of the Soviets' actual plans, the "Jewish territory" became the most effective campaign appeal of the ICOR. And, over the stiff opposition of the Zionists and the Right-Wing Socialists, it penetrated many communities, especially the smaller ones, far from the political turmoil and the tense partisanships of the large centers. The campaign, coming in the midst of the great depression of the early 30's, was bound to meet with a response, particularly among the new *declassed*, small business people and young professionals. Many of them were ready to pack up and go to Birobidjan to start life anew through "honest labor."

Gina Medem, attractive widow of the Bundist leader, Vladimir Medem, a fiery but irresponsible speaker, who joined the Left, was the first to return from a visit to Birobidjan in 1931. In a rhapsody over the region, she told extravagant tales of budding Jewish life there, in her cross-country lecture tour for the ICOR and in her stories for the *Freiheit*. She figuratively kissed the soil of that bleak region. Her ardor started a small-scale stampede for Birobidjan. This writer, on a speaking tour a few months later, had the difficult and delicate job of dissuading many would-be colonists, obviously unsuited for Birobidjan, without dampening their enthusiasm for things Soviet. But one group of 32 families from Los Angeles did

leave for Birobidjan on January 26, 1932, turning all their property into agricultural machines. Other groups were ready to follow. However, the first group came back a year later, and the others stayed home. Individual families from other cities also went, and some, immediately giving up their American citizenship, could not return.\* +46

The decree of May 1934, proclaiming Birobidjan a Jewish Autonomous Region and the hints emanating from Moscow that Jews from the neighboring countries would have a chance to settle there made Birobidjan a telling weapon in the relentless Communist struggle against Zionism. Peaceful settlement in Birobidjan, the friendliness of the natives, the Kazaks, and the wholehearted support of the government were contrasted with the Zionists in Palestine "playing the game of the British imperialists" and in daily friction with their Arab neighbors. The enormous potentials for Jewish culture in the Autonomous Region were compared with the unending difficulties that beset the work for its survival here.

#### SOVIET INTENTIONS FOR BIROBIDJAN

The intention to grant some form of constitutionality to its Jews was first announced in a speech by the Soviet President Michail Kalinin at the All-Soviet Congress, November 17, 1926. It was rumored among high-placed Communists that the speech was meant to check the anti-Jewish sentiments that, abetted by the struggle for power between Stalin and Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, was spreading alarmingly, penetrating the ranks of the party. Kalinin was chosen for this delicate task because of his closeness to the people and his peasant origin.

(Several Jewish party members in Moscow confided to the author that during the height of the struggle in the party, they were met in their party cells with the derisive "Here are the Jews!" "It was painful to sit out a meeting," was the comment of a woman Communist.)

(In one of the several conversations the author had with Trotsky in Mexico City shortly before his death in the summer of 1940, Trotsky told him that during the stormy session of the Russian CC that had expelled him, he had passed a note to Bukharin calling his attention to anti-Trotsky resolutions by two party units savoring of

\* For the story, see Melech Epstein, op. cit., 1914-1952, pp. 256-257.

anti-Semitism. When Bukharin rose to speak—and he made a devastating attack on Trotsky—he warned, without mentioning details, that "The Black Hundreds are raising their heads in our party.")

The decree on Birobidjan two years later had, in the opinion of the author, a duofold purpose. One was the wish to settle an industrious and dependable element at a point where military trouble with Japan was brewing, another was a genuine desire to create a compact Jewish community which would, at the same time, strengthen Soviet propaganda abroad. Moreover, there was no more free land in the Ukraine and the natives in Crimea disliked seeing land being given to others. On the other hand, Birobidjan numbered only about 10,000 people, who would welcome newcomers.

That the plan for Birobidjan also aimed at impressing popular opinion abroad can be seen by Kalinin's speech at the second convention of the GEZIRD, December 10-15, 1930. "Four years ago," he said, ". . . the task was to save the Jewish masses from dying out. . . . Now this question is eliminated.

"It is my opinion that the task at present is the formation of a Jewish republic. . . . Let the Jewish people, who number about three million souls, have a small republic, and let all know that in our constitution they are a nationality and that they have in our territory a constitutional title, if one may thus term it." \*104

Jewish Communists in Russia were not in favor of Birobidjan. They preferred Northern Crimea; first, because of its large nucleus of Jewish colonies; second, because of its proximity to the old Jewish centers. However, they did not dare express their misgivings once the party had acted.+47 Still, the head of the GEZIRD, Abram M. Merezhin, a pro-Crimea man, was removed in 1931, accused of sabotaging Birobidjan. Mikhail Rashkes replaced him.

#### FAILURE WAS INEVITABLE

Birobidjan was doomed to failure. The poor soil, heavy rains during July and August, when the crop was about to ripen, hordes of mosquitos and flies, and a very cold winter with little snow were hard on the settlers. Moreover, the choice of the human element was not the best available. As most of those with occupations refused to leave their home towns for the unknown Far East, the quotas assigned to the local committees were filled largely with *luftmenshen*,

an element least suited for colonization, to say nothing of pioneering under formidable obstacles. Clumsy bureaucratic management of the state farms and collectives added their share to the failure of each annual plan. The quality of the settlers later improved, but the production plans still lagged far behind.

There was also a crippling shortage of material for industrial development. Many a barrel of cement, box of nails or of tools rolling across the vast stretches, secured after much pleading by the local authorities, never reached Birobidjan. The Red Army was then turning the Amur shore into a fortified line against the Japanese in Manchuria, and a barrel of cement and a box of nails were too precious to be allowed to pass. Birobidjan could not, of course, stand up against the Red Army.<sup>\*165</sup>

An overriding reason for the failure was the refusal of Jewish Communists to admit the Jewish aspect of the proposed territory. They had one slogan only: *Jews will Build Socialism in Birobidjan*. The author spent several evenings with Rashkes in Moscow, on the latter's return from Birobidjan in 1930, arguing that without a clearcut Jewish goal Birobidjan had no chance. A Jew from Minsk, Kiev or Odessa had no reason whatsoever to settle in a far-off wilderness to "build Socialism." He could do this at home, and with less sacrifice. But Rashkes obstinately clung to the "line" that purely economic needs would move Jews to settle in Birobidjan. He and his comrades knew better, but fear of being accused of Jewish nationalism tied their tongues. After all, their Communism was of post-civil war vintage.

To borrow a standard Communist phrase, the Jewish Communists were trailing far behind their party. Even after Birobidjan was declared a Jewish Autonomous Region, in 1934, S. M. Dimandshtein still resisted attaching any Jewish significance to the Region. In an article in his Russian magazine, *The Revolution and the Nationalities*, for June 1934, Dimandshtein wrote, "We must now increase our struggle against Jewish nationalism, which is trying to utilize the Jewish Autonomous Region for its own aims. . . . Our goal is not the creation of a Jewish majority in Birobidjan. . . . This would be in contradiction to internationalism." Two years later, Moscow proclaimed Birobidjan "the center of Soviet national Jewish culture for the entire Jewish population."

In the absence of any personal or Jewish incentive, Birobidjan

became for many Jews merely a stopover. They soon escaped to the neighboring city of Khabarovsk, where life was less severe.

The truth about Birobidjan had not yet reached here, and the campaign for settling Jews from abroad would have assumed national prominence were it not for the purges in the 30's. Of them later.

(Nikita Khrushchev, secretary of the Communist Party and Soviet Premier, in an interview in the Paris *Figaro*, April 9, 1958, placed the entire blame for the failure of Birobidjan on the Jews. "Jews from all over Russia," he asserted, "came to settle in Birobidjan. They came full of enthusiasm, but soon the majority left. . . ." He cited as the reasons: "Jewish individualism . . . , their inability to lead a collective life . . . , unwillingness to exist on manual labor . . . and opposition to group discipline. . . ." <sup>\*166</sup>

(This is one of Khrushchev's numerous distortions of the truth. No one was "enthusiastic." The author, present at the meeting of the party fraction on the eve of the convention of the GEZERD in Moscow, 1930, saw that the entire project was forced upon the Jewish Communists. Khrushchev was silent about the great physical hardships of the settlers. Whole families lived in single rooms in long wooden barracks, without so much as a kerosene lamp or a wood stove. In a letter received by the author from Birobidjan in the winter of 1934, an American couple named Hurwitz wrote that the ink was freezing while they were writing, and they existed largely on carrots. No wonder the majority had to run away.)