

## 37 *Birobidjan, a Lucrative Affair*

Birobidjan was played by the Communists as a trump card to gain three objectives: one, to raise Soviet standing among Jews; two, to combat the old foe, Zionism; three, to strengthen their position here. It was no fault of theirs that the winnings were snatched out of their hands when they seemed so assured.

The political and emotional climate was becoming favorable for placing Birobidjan on the agenda of Jewish discussion. On the heels of the persecutions and discriminations in Europe came the ominous news of a resurgent, virulent Arab nationalism. At this very moment, the Presidium of the Soviet CEC issued a decree, August 29, 1936, which, if taken at face value, would justify the grandiose title given to it by the *Freiheit*—the Magna Carta of the National Liberation of Soviet Jewry.

The decree began with the hallowed theme that the wisdom of the Stalinist national policy had been fully confirmed by the experience of the last years. It went on to proclaim:

"In the course of centuries of persecution, the Jewish people fought . . . for the right to create their own national culture and for the right to live freely. For the first time in Jewish history, the burning desire for the creation of a homeland, . . . has found fulfillment . . . the Jewish toiling masses are developing and strengthening in their own home the Soviet system in all its forms, as they fit the national mode of life of their people. . . .

"They possess their own agriculture, and are learning farming, industrialization, etc. The Jewish Autonomous Region is being turned into a center of Soviet national Jewish culture for the entire

Jewish toiling population. *Not merely among the Soviet Jews, but among the Jews abroad, is the tendency growing to settle in the Jewish Autonomous Region.*" (italics M.E.) \*200

The decree also enlarged the area of land for cultivation and emphasized the necessity for more vigorous efforts at industrialization.

In the light of Stalin's repressive measures against Jewish institutional life and culture—begun as yet in the late 30's—one may presume that this "historic" decree was designed chiefly for foreign consumption, to win the good will of the Jewish people abroad. Perhaps the only one who meant it seriously was Kalinin, who was well disposed to the Jews. For one thing, the document concealed the general failure of Jewish settlement in Birobidjan.

This decree became the prized media for Communist activity. The *Freiheit* editorial, "A Statehood Title for the Jewish Nation," waxed enthusiastic, "(It) . . . is a lighthouse for the Jewish masses the world over . . . compared to the growing fascism in Europe and anti-Semitism here. . . ." \*201

*Nailebn*, the ICOR magazine, did not lag behind the *Freiheit*. The ICOR was prospering and its magazine was an illustrated two-language publication—Yiddish and English—with a colored cover for each. It later introduced a youth section for the youth branches of the ICOR. Its pro-Sovietism was no more restrained than that of the party papers. In its issue devoted to the 20th anniversary of the November Revolution—1937—the Soviet Union was characterized as "the most beautiful dream of humanity being realized."

#### THE FAILURE OF THE LITHUANIAN SETTLEMENT

The potentials of Birobidjan attracted the people of the World ORT Federation, devoted to training young Jews in useful trades. All of them known anti-Communists, they were ready to take a chance on Moscow's promise to settle Jews from neighboring countries in Birobidjan. Adolf Held, chairman of the Labor Committee of the American ORT and president of the Forward Association, went there in May 1936.

An agreement concluded by Held with the KOMZET stipulated that the ORT was to select about a thousand Lithuanian and Latvian Jews to send to the Soviet border, where the KOMZET would

take over. They were promised jobs and housing. Had this agreement been carried out, Birobidjan would have garnered an abundant harvest. But the Soviet authorities dropped the whole affair without a formal notice.

A year earlier, 1935, J. M. Budish had gone to Russia for the Left on the same mission. As a result of the unofficial promises given to him, Budish, Max Levine and a few others organized, in 1936, the Ambidjan, a middle-class counterpart of the ICOR, William W. Cohen, chairman. (On his return from Russia in 1937, Cohen stated that "No vestige of anti-Semitism [remains] in the USSR.") \*202

In their negotiations with Moscow through Ambassador Alexander A. Troyanofsky, it was agreed that every eligible family from a neighboring state ready to migrate would be supplied by the Ambidjan with \$200 cash and passage to the Soviet border. From there on the KOMZET would take charge, and provide the family with transportation, housing and equipment for agriculture. However, the initiators omitted to mention that the future farmers were not to be independent but members of *kolkhozes* and, what is worse, some were to land in *sovkhoses* (state farms).

As the plan could not get started without stirring up public opinion, the Ambidjan and ICOR began a campaign for a Jewish delegation of 50, from all parts of the country, to investigate the possibilities of this project. The idea caught on despite the vigorous opposition of the *Forward*, the Socialist Farband and the Zionists.

In the same year, Michail Rashkes, for the GEZERD, opened an office in Kovno, Lithuania, for such recruiting, the Polish government refusing to permit a similar office. In a short while, about a thousand families had registered for migration, and 108 actually arrived in Birobidjan in 1936. In the approved manner, they were received by deputations and music. But only a few remained as settlers.

The majority returned to Lithuania in rags, and a smaller number drifted to Khabarovsk and other Siberian cities. An extreme shortage of housing and food and other hardships were the reasons. The Lithuanians were amazed to find that the standard of living in the Jewish Region was much lower than in their homeland, which was low enough.

The Jewish Soviet press and the Communist papers abroad were silent about the exodus of the Lithuanian Jews. But Moscow could

not entirely disregard the stories about the plight of the Lithuanians. An article in the *Tribuna*, monthly bulletin of the GEZARD, attempted to belittle the whole affair. The *Tribuna* admitted "some errors and difficulties in the settlement . . ." Still, "the settlement from abroad was basically justified." \*293

The statement in the *Tribuna* that "A few thousand people, mostly from Poland, could be brought over in 1936" facilitated the campaign for a delegation from the United States.

#### A PEOPLE'S DELEGATION CATCHES ON

The call for a delegation to Birobidjan was issued by a special committee in January 1936. Jewish interests were heavily interlaced with high praise for the Soviets. In New York it was difficult to find prominent outsiders for the committee. Leon Kobrin, the writer, became chairman, and Dr. I. Fisher, secretary. As the presence of a rabbi on a committee of this kind was practically a must, a Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein was among the signers of the call. In Chicago, the Ambidjan-ICOR was able to enlist the names of Judge Harry Fisher, Judge Heller, Dean Abbott of the Chicago University, Professor Carlson and Rabbi Nathan Goodnitsky.

"Four thousand such settlers," the call asserted, "will be received from other countries. At a time when fascism and anti-Semitism are raging . . . it is gratifying to learn that in the Soviet Union, . . . the Jewish question has been completely solved . . . he (the Jew) is today the builder of his autonomous territory. . . . The possibility which has now been given to Jews from other lands . . . has caused Jewish people everywhere to become even more interested in the building of the first Jewish autonomous territory in the world. . . ." \*294

(The idea of a delegation was gaining friends even among non-Jews, who were beginning to look upon the Jewish Autonomous Region as a potential place of refuge for many persecuted Jews in Eastern Europe. Norman Thomas, John Dewey, George Gordon Battle were among those who sent greetings to the ICOR.) \*295

The method of electing the people's delegation was rather complicated. In order to involve as many groups as possible while providing Moscow with tangible proof of Jewish good will and appreciation for Birobidjan, every group participating in one of

the local conferences had also to collect signatures if they wished to put up a candidate for the delegation, the winner of the contest being the one to receive the largest number of signatures. The slogan was *250,000 Signatures*. As every signer had to pay a nominal sum, the *People's Book*, with a quarter of a million names, would, in addition to its demonstrative value, be a generous financial gift to the ICOR and Ambidjan.

As the tempo of the campaign for the delegation quickened, the propaganda became more bombastic. No less a person than Ambassador Troyanofsky, in his greeting to the New York conference, May 24th, at Hotel Astor, spoke of Birobidjan as having become "the symbol of the struggle against anti-Semitism and against the entire medieval darkness." \*296

Sixteen local conferences were held. Those in Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles and San Francisco were well attended. Many of the local groups there disobeyed the instructions of their national offices to stay out of the affair. In Cincinnati a few important groups as well as several professors of the Hebrew Union College joined the conference. The noted scholar, Jacob R. Marcus, was elected a delegate, and the *Nailebn* boasted that the college, aware of the significance of the delegation, had granted Marcus a leave of absence of two months. \*297 (But Professor Marcus later withdrew, as did many other supporters.)

The Communists were jubilant. They now had reason to hope that the community, a solid iceberg since 1929, would begin to thaw out toward them. The *Nailebn* exulted: "It is a real joy to know that Birobidjan has become the center which can unite Jews of various opinions. . . . We may anticipate that the national conference will represent at least half a million organized Jews. . . ."

And after the national conference, the *Nailebn*, repeating the boast about "half a million organized Jews," observed that the "incitement lately against the Left movement in connection with the events in Palestine has confused the minds of many. . . . In view of this, the success is still greater." \*298

#### DR. ROSEN'S CRITICAL COMMENTS

Communist jubilation was premature. Dr. Rosen's interview with the Jewish Telegraph Agency, on his return from Birobidjan in the

same summer, hit the delegation plan in its most vulnerable spot. The director of the Agro-Joint spoke favorably of the colonies in the Ukraine and Crimea, which he had helped to build. But he was cautious about Birobidjan. The gist of his opinion was:

1. Despite difficulties, there were possibilities for further Jewish settlement there;
2. Due to the complicated international situation, he did not see any chance of settling Jews from abroad in the coming years;
3. The Soviet government did not need outside aid in settling Russian Jews in Birobidjan.\*299

Dr. Rosen's remarks cut the heart out of the delegation plan. Those opposing Birobidjan, the entire press and most of the public men, now demanded that the whole venture be given up. Many adherents of the delegation began to waver. The initiators of the People's Delegation were thrown on the defensive. But, as had happened in the past, the anti-Communist zeal of the *Forward* editor caused him to ascribe to Dr. Rosen words that he had not said. And again as in the past, the Communists seized upon this inaccurate detail to becloud the real meaning of Dr. Rosen's critical statement.

Accuracy was not a Communist virtue either. To add fervor to the campaign, an expression of welcome sent to the ICOR by Professor Joseph Lieberberg, head of the government of Birobidjan, "The arrival of your People's Delegation will be for us a great holiday," was transformed in the *Nailebn* to "The coming of the delegation will be a holiday not merely to Birobidjan, but for all the nationalities in the Soviet Union, and will resound throughout Poland and Germany and all the lands of the world. . . ." \*300

In the midst of the campaign, someone in the ICOR conceived the idea of American painters and sculptors sending an art collection to the museum in Birobidjan. Nearly 150 artists contributed about 500 pictures and other art objects. Exhibitions were arranged in New York and Boston. The collection, accompanied by Frank Kirk, arrived in Russia March 1937. "Soviet artists showed a keen interest in the exhibits," wrote Kirk.+84

When the final tabulations were in, the catastrophic effect of Dr. Rosen's statement became evident. Instead of a quarter of a million signatures, barely 50,000 were collected. Moreover, the 28 delegates elected by the conferences could in no way be taken to represent varied social groups. The majority were active in the

ICOR and the IWO. Others, such as James Waterman Wise, were people friendly to Communism or to Soviet Russia. The delegation had only a sprinkling of known non-Communists: Congressman William L. Sirovich, New York; Abraham W. Katofsky, vice president of the ILGWU in Cleveland; and a couple of others.

#### THE DELEGATION DOES NOT SAIL

The delegation was to leave the middle of September 1936. But when the out-of-town delegates were ready to entrain for New York, passport and luggage in hand, they were informed that the trip had been postponed until December. The reason given was that the "situation in Europe is now severely strained. The fascist forces are working feverishly to ignite a world war. . . . We believe that this is not the opportune time. . . . Therefore, we have decided to wait a couple of months." \*301

Actually, no one here knew the cause of the postponement. All the ICOR had was a laconic cable from Moscow to stop the delegation.

To cover up their embarrassment, the ICOR spoke of "large scale preparations for a great people's holiday throughout the country as a send-off for the delegates, and a special extraordinary farewell in New York on the eve of the sailing of the delegation." \*302

The reason for the postponement became clear with the arrival of *Der Shtern*, the Birobidjan paper. It printed a resolution of the party convention in the Jewish Region, October 23rd, expelling from the party the "scoundrel-counterrevolutionary Lieberberg." \*303 The purge that began in Russia in the spring of 1936 had reached Birobidjan in the fall.

(The man from the GEZARD in Kiev who came to see Adolf Held off at the station looked pale and frightened. "I have just received news that Lieberberg is arrested," he whispered. "It looks bad." This was in October.) \*304

Professor Lieberberg, one of the most outstanding young Jewish-Soviet scholars and leaders, a member of the Ukrainian Academy of Science and Art, and the head of its Jewish Section, drafted in 1934 for Birobidjan, was arrested in the fall of 1936 on the charge of protecting Trotskyite bandits and spying for Japan. Some months later, the secretary of the party, M. P. Khavkin, an old and promi-

ment party worker, also drafted for Birobidjan, was arrested with his associates on the same charges. The proximity to Japan made the latter charge more convenient than spying for Hitler. They were shot without trial. Their execution left affairs in the Jewish Region in utter confusion. Obviously, Americans could not be permitted to visit Birobidjan at that time.

Moishe Litvakov, editor of the *Emes*, was impelled to write that the liquidation of the Lieberberg-Khavkin administration was an "abcess cut out from the body of the Jewish Region. Now Birobidjan will grow." \*305 By that time he must have been well aware that the long arm of the GPU was stretching out to him too. He, Alexander Khashin, editorial writer, and others on the staff were arrested in the summer of 1937. Litvakov died in prison. +85

Cutting out the Lieberberg-Khavkin "abcess" was only the first operation on the Jewish Region. B. A. Trotsky, who was sent to take Lieberberg's place, and some of his coworkers were the victims of the second operation. And Professor M. Kotel, who followed Trotsky, was the third. From the fall of 1936 to the end of the Yezhov-Stalin blood purge, in 1938, three successive administrations in Birobidjan were decimated.

The American delegation never sailed.

In the absence of show trials in Birobidjan, Communists could steadfastly deny the purges. Still, they could not be completely hidden. And to counteract the "slander by the enemies," who interpreted the purges as an indication of Birobidjan's bankruptcy, the *Freiheit* and the *Nailebn* printed a photostat of court proceedings in Birobidjan in Russian and Yiddish, November 1, 1936, and played up a Yiddish language conference there, February 9, 1937, attributing to it "historical significance." \*306

The purge, the cancellation of the delegation and of the settlement from abroad had their damaging consequences. Grave doubts of the entire plan were publicly raised. Particularly embarrassing were the articles by Rabbi Chaim L. Solomon, editor of the *American Jewish World*, Minneapolis, demanding an accounting of the money raised at the farewell dinner, September 23, 1936, in Hotel Astor, for Lord Marley, honorary chairman of Ambidjan, who was touring the country in behalf of Birobidjan. \*307

Commenting on the 10th jubilee of the Jewish Region, celebrated by the ICOR in Manhattan Opera House, April 17, 1938, Zivyon

wrote in the *Forward*, "The drummers of Birobidjan should have made a funeral instead of a jubilee." S. Dingol, an editor of *The Day*, expressed similar thoughts.

However, the ICOR and Ambidjan were not discouraged. They kept presenting Birobidjan as the solution to the Jewish problem and a potential refuge for masses of Jews in Eastern Europe. William W. Cohen sent a letter to the *Forward* categorically denying that the plan for settling Polish and Lithuanian Jews in Birobidjan had been given up. "(It) will be carried out completely and generously," he wrote. "J. M. Budish and George Siegel will soon leave for Birobidjan for that purpose." \*308

The purges and the failure to settle Jews from abroad hurt the Birobidjan campaigns here. Still, it remained a lucrative commodity for Communism until the ICOR-Ambidjan had to cease operations in 1949-1950.