

*Part One*

## THREE VISITS TO THE LAND OF CHANGE

*Chapter One •*

RUSSIA, 1934 —

## ALIBI AND PROMISE

It was a cold, dreary autumn morning in Kiev in 1934. A leaden gray sky hung depressingly low overhead. Mist, drizzle, and wind quickened the steps of the seemingly listless people in the street. The atmosphere was heavy with longing for home and hearth.

Most of the tourists had returned to their native lands. Only a few stragglers remained behind, some detained by unfinished business, others because they had no good reason to hurry back. The United States was deep in the Depression, with 14,000,000 people out of work. The great social change that was to follow the legislation of the New Deal had not yet come. The Capitalist Humpty Dumpty had had a great fall, and neither horses nor men seemed able to put it together again.

But as the sun appeared to be setting in the West, a new luminosity was evidently rising in the East—no unemployment, no periodic crisis, nobody fallen out of the social fabric; an end to economic anarchy, to iniquitous inequality, to the exploitation of man by man; all hands joined together in a common effort to build a great future for all.

True, certain blots and splotches disfigured this dawning—ruthless dictatorship by a self-glorified autocrat; an ubiquitous secret police, Star Chamber trials, and slave labor camps; not to speak of general destitution. But the American tourist in Russia in 1934 could be persuaded to accept explanations, and to condone. There were spots even on the sun. And there were such things as the disorders of hurried growth. You might have

to dig your spurs into your horse's flanks to make speed, but you unharnessed him and gave him hay when you reached your destination. The vices of the present would be washed out by the virtues of the future.

I was one of those who had remained behind because of unfinished business. I was awaiting clearance for a projected visit to Birobidjan, an arduous journey at that time, some nine days and nights on the trans-Siberian railway out of Moscow.

This section of eastern Siberia had originally been set aside for Jews six years earlier. It lay in the valley of the Amur River, and although large enough to contain millions, was practically unpopulated. In the May preceding my visit, it had been officially designated as the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Like the Revolution itself, this raised great hopes in the hearts of a homeless people. Soviet Jews had been given the territory and now would be aided in developing it as a country of their own, with their own national language and culture. In the West, sixteen years earlier, Palestine had been promised to the Jews as a homeland. But Britain, as the mandatory power, had been nullifying the promise by all sorts of sabotage, including restriction of Jewish immigration. Here in the Soviet Union, Jews were being urged to help themselves to a homeland, with all the assistance of a great power behind them.

I had spent the summer traveling in the Soviet Union, observing general conditions, visiting factories, collective farms, and cultural institutions, and making a special study of the situation of the Jews in the places I visited. Now I was to top that by going to Birobidjan, the first American journalist to see it in its new status.

On that cold bleak morning in Kiev, I was walking the streets just to be away from the cheerless room at the hotel. As I turned into a side street I came upon a synagogue, and entered. The morning service was in progress. A few dozen nondescript men, middle-aged and elderly, with worn prayer shawls over their shoulders, were thinly scattered at the front of the house of prayer. Beardless, but unshaven for days, in threadbare clothes and ragged shoes, they appeared like defeated men who had nothing more to lose nor anything to expect. The day being Monday, the service included the reading of a portion of the

Law in the Scroll. At the conclusion of the reading came the special prayers recited before the open Holy Writ, as though this would facilitate their reaching on high.

One of those special prayers sounded pathetic, and it has recurred in my memory on many occasions. It read thus: "Our Brethren, all the Children of Israel, who find themselves in distress and captivity, who stand between land and sea, may our Father in Heaven take pity on them and lead them from distress on to solace, from darkness on to light, and from bondage on to redemption, now and very soon and without delay, and let us say Amen."

Devoid of the floridness and rhetoric characteristic of so many prayers, these simple words, like those of the Pater Noster, derived their power from the heart the worshipers poured into them. Here was an ancient prayer they well understood, and they could read into it a relevance they dared not let pass their lips. A Child of Israel myself, I had the feeling I was involved with them in this supplication. One of the worshipers looked at me meaningfully as he said the amen. It was the gaze of recognition one Jew gives another when formal or articulate identification is inappropriate. What did he want to tell me? Who were the Children of Israel for whom these worshipers in Kiev so feelingly prayed? Which of our brethren were now "in distress and captivity, between land and sea"? Could the worshipers mean us, American Jews? Or the Jews of England and France? They might be thinking of the German Jewry recently come under Nazi rule. But they had been isolated far too long to know the situation of Jews elsewhere. Could they possibly mean themselves?

The question was on my mind as I trudged back to my hotel through the penetrating drizzle turning into a slow rain. If any Jews seemed to be in distress and captivity, they were the congregants at the Kiev synagogue. But it was a captivity they shared with the communicants of other faiths, for this was to be a godless country. Karl Marx had said religion was an opiate for the people, and Lenin regarded this opiate as baneful and corrosive at a time when all the energies of the people must be mobilized for the building of Socialism. Hence, the taking of this opiate must be reduced as much as possible, and its addicts

stigmatized. The worshipers at the Kiev synagogue may have found the disapprobation particularly repressive, since as Jews their entire spiritual life—indeed, their very daily living—was impregnated with their faith. Possibly they were given less consideration than other believers, being a small minority, with their own intelligentsia the more zealous in its atheism in order to prove itself untainted with the ancient belief. The truth was that Jews, to a greater extent than followers of other faiths, were deprived of the opportunity to implant their religion into the hearts of the new generation, to raise a clergy for the future, and even to obtain the minimal objects of worship, such as phylacteries, prayer shawls, prayer books.

It was deplorable to find religious Jews in Socialist Russia bereft of the means of self-expression they had been free to use under the Czars. Yet there was some compensation in other spheres. Anti-Semitism had been put on the statutes as an offense against the state. Insult to a Jew as a Jew was duly prosecuted. Far from being discriminated against in the economic field, Jews were encouraged, and were aided to “productivize” and enter all fields of agricultural, industrial, educational, and civic endeavor.

The very forces which were instrumental in destroying the religious and national tradition and in pulverizing the centuries-old Jewish communities now seemed to be building a secular Jewish culture in Yiddish on a scale undreamed of before, and reconstructing a new Jewish communal life on a Socialist foundation. In the Ukraine alone there were then eleven theaters, ten newspapers, 116 libraries and reading rooms, 765 schools, sixteen technical schools, five agricultural schools, fifty rural cultural centers—all in Yiddish. There were, of course, more Yiddish theaters, newspapers, schools, and other cultural institutions in other parts of the Soviet Union. Over 160,000 Jewish children were attending Yiddish schools, and several thousands were studying in higher schools of learning in Yiddish.

As to communal Jewish life, there were probably more Jews in the Jewish soviets and Jewish collective farms—all autonomous—than in all the synagogues in the land. That number, plus the Jews in local autonomous regions, of which there were

seven, came close to 400,000. In Birobidjan, as I was to learn later, there was a small Jewish population but much Jewish spirit, Soviet style. The number of Jews may have been only about 15,000, but they constituted a third of the population and were the largest single national group. There was not a synagogue in the region, but 1,100 children attended Yiddish schools. Yiddish was the official language in all state institutions and enterprises, although many of the officials had no command of this tongue. There was talk of organizing special Yiddish courses for them. Top Jewish Communists charged the leaders in Birobidjan with neglect of Yiddish in the scientific laboratories and in the instruction of technical courses. Similar complaints were heard about the autonomous districts in European Russia. Some of the Jewish Communist leaders acted as though they had a personal stake in the development of Yiddish as the language of the Soviet Jews and in the continuance of the Jewish community. Perhaps they had.

To be sure, there was not much Jewishness in the Yiddish they were promulgating in the Soviet Union. Taking the guiding principle of the Soviet nationalist policy—“national in form, Socialist in content”—more literally than the Communists of other national groups, Jewish Communists reduced the “national” in their case to mere language and expanded the “Socialist” to exclude any other content. They discarded the Hebrew language and all the culture created in it. This meant the entire spiritual heritage and tradition down to the middle of the nineteenth century, and most of the Jewish culture since. Primarily, the Jewish element in their Yiddish culture was centered on what they had written since 1917 which dealt with the Revolution and Socialist reconstruction. Out of the great storehouse of the Jewish spirit, the Jewish Communists garnered only those bits of Yiddish literature that could serve as background for what they had begun in 1917. The Ukrainian Communists did not disown their national poet Franko because of his collaboration with reactionaries and his ultra-nationalism. On the contrary, they gave his works greater prominence than their literary merit warranted. But the Jewish Communists banned the works of the Jewish national poet Bialik and maligned him, even after his death, as a Fascist who “blessed the

emergence of Hitler." The Islam peoples in the Soviet Union were free, and in fact encouraged, to celebrate the anniversary of the eleventh-century physician, philosopher, and religious scholar, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), who wrote in Arabic. But Soviet Jews did not dare observe the anniversary of the twelfth-century physician, philosopher, and religious scholar, Maimonides, who also wrote in Arabic as well as in Hebrew.

The Jewish masses in the Soviet Union resented the purge of Jewish content in the Yiddish culture that was offered them. They could not be satisfied with Yiddish words alone. Jews had never made a fetish out of language, not even of the Sacred Tongue. Some of the greatest works of Judaism were written in languages other than Hebrew. It was the essence, the wisdom, the precept, contained in the words that counted. Even the continuing attachment to the Hebrew word was due to its association with content. It was not surprising, then, that the Jewish Communists found they could bring the horse to water but could not make him drink. Many more Jewish parents did not send their children to the Yiddish schools than did. A comparatively small number partook of the cultural fare that was prepared for them. Those who did not supplement their sustenance with whatever was left on the religious table lived on a starvation diet.

However the situation looked to Jews in the Soviet Union, the liberal American Jewish tourist in 1934 could take the situation philosophically. After all, Soviet Jews were caught in the undertow of a great social revolution which must take its course. True, it had dealt devastatingly with them, affecting the entire nation and not merely a class, as in the case of other peoples in the land. But one must bow to the inevitable. Perhaps after the Revolution had taken its course and the Jews had been integrated into the new social system—after the new secular Yiddish culture had taken root; after Birobidjan had developed into a Jewish state—the regime would become more tolerant and understanding. The Jewish content of the Yiddish culture would grow in depth as well as in width. It would encompass the past as well as the present. Yiddish culture would be as Jewish as Russian culture was Russian. And then those Jews who still clung to their faith would find themselves neither in



Part of a press exhibit in Russia in 1918. A group of newspapers in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian, organs of one of the minor Zionist parties at the time. (Tseire Tzion.) There were 171 such publications.

distress nor in captivity. If the God of Israel followed His Chosen People into Exile, He would also be redeemed with them. The ancient Jewish faith had seen great social changes in the millenniums of its existence. It had survived the transition from slavery to feudalism and from feudalism to Capitalism. It would also somehow cross the bridge between Capitalism to Socialism.

### *People and Places*

I stayed on in Kiev for several days. The continuous slow rains stopped. The weather turned crisp and clear. The trees stood still and bare, except for a stubborn leaf clinging for its

life to the cold bough. I had been thinking of the aggregate, the mass, the people. Now my mind turned to the individual. How about him? Where did he stand in the raging confusion of change, in the prodigious exploit of reconstructing the train while it was in motion?

I met quite a few individuals in my travels through the country. They came from all strata of society. I might have said from all classes, but there were not supposed to be any social classes. There was a social ladder, rising from the lower depths to the stars on the steeples of the Kremlin. The rungs were not of privilege but of service—the more you contributed to the building of Socialism, the higher up you were on the ladder. And it was more comfortable, if not more secure, to be higher up. Then, too, there was the natural human failing of the fellow below—he looked up to the man above.

Jewish individuals occupied positions all the way to the top, but not quite on it. Trotsky had been demoted a decade before. The other Jews of Lenin's immediate entourage—there were seven Jews among the twenty-four members of the Party's executive in 1917—like Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others less famous, had also been shoved aside. Only one Jew, a comparative newcomer, sat with Stalin and ten others on the top of the heap, Lazar Moiseyevich Kaganovich. But there were more Jews on the rung immediately below. Of the twenty-one members of the Council of Commissars (Ministers), seven were definitely Jews, a few more might have been Jews, but their nationality was generally unknown. The number of Jews increased as you stepped down another rung to the major executive and administrative posts. There was even a sort of Socialist "royal family." Of the seven children (four sons and three daughters) that Moshe Kaganovich left in the little town of Habne, the Ukraine, one, Lazar Moiseyevich, was the secretary of the Central Committee and deputy to Stalin, another son was Vice-Commissar for heavy industry, a third was Party secretary in the Gorki district (an important local post), and the fourth ran a chain of state food shops. The daughters were married to executives. A granddaughter, the 21-year-old daughter of the 43-year-old Lazar Moiseyevich, was the current wife of Stalin.

Some of the Jewish executives were interesting types. One of

these was Perchik, head of the City Planning Commission of the capital. His room was full of maps, blueprints, and miniature models. He could tell you all about Moscow today, tomorrow, and after tomorrow, just what would be where and how it would all look five years, ten years, fifty years, hence. The famous British novelist, H. G. Wells, who loved to peer into the future, spent three days talking to Perchik. "Who is Mr. Perchik?" I asked one of his secretaries. "What is his nationality?" She did not know; he might be a Georgian, he was dark. When I went into his private office, we talked of Moscow. Perchik wanted the workers to live no farther than twenty minutes' walk from their place of work. He would have five huge central heating plants supplying heat to all apartments in the city. He would try to keep all housing construction down to seven stories, with an elevator, of course. He planned large, luxurious apartments for those who earned more, or preferred to pay a larger share of their income for housing, and smaller, modest apartments for those who could not afford better; he would locate the luxurious apartments in one section and the poor ones in another. Was he not disturbed by the appearance of rich and poor, by the apparent social inequality? No, at this stage he was more concerned over the equality—the professor, the professional, the director of a factory, the Stakhanovich, they were people on a higher cultural plane and had greater demands. Did that not indicate social classes? No, they had no class differences, but there existed different cultural levels, which they did not deny; on the contrary . . .

Before leaving, I told him I was writing for a Jewish newspaper. He wanted to know if it was printed in Yiddish. When I said it was, he smiled and remarked, "If you had a copy of your paper with you, I'd read it for you." He said he "came from Jews"—not that he was a Jew, but that he *came from* Jews. Perhaps this was for the benefit of the blond secretary who sat in on our interview.

Occasionally I ran into Jewish executives who did not "come from Jews" but were themselves Jews. And some of them were quite outspoken about it. One day I was talking to the director of a factory in a fairly large city, the fifth or sixth in population. Having done with the facts and figures, we retired to the social

room in the back for a drink. We were alone, and he was as curious about the Jewish newspaper in America as I was about him. He spoke Yiddish freely, and enjoyed peppering it with Hebrew words and expressions. He also liked to drink and talk. His father was a *sofer*, a scribe of sacred scrolls, which nobody wanted now, he said with a laugh. Despite his non-proletarian background he had risen to a high position—he was the director not of that factory alone but of three others in the same industry. He was the head of that particular industry in town. He ran off the names of his assistants, engineers, chief bookkeepers, foremen, to indicate they were Jews.

"Don't think we're here because they love us," he said with a smile. "Why should they love you?" I countered. "Love does not enter into this situation. Are the managers of factories in America appointed out of love?" He seemed about to reply, but he hesitated. Then, skipping my remark, he continued his own thought. "We're here because they need us, and need us badly. But someday they won't need us, see?" Our conversation drifted to the inevitable subject of anti-Semitism. Of course, there was a law against it, and the local Soviets had been specifically charged with the task of promptly suppressing any manifestation of it. And they were doing that, too. Still, it had seemed to me that anti-Semitism was sticking out of every crack in the Socialist structure. How long did he think would it take for the disease to be eradicated? Again he did not reply but reverted to his own line of thought. "They" were up against it. The Russian intelligentsia had boycotted the Revolution, either fled abroad or remained behind sulking, sabotaging. The peasants, the city proletarians, were too ignorant and inexperienced. Who could run the stores, manage the factories, administer the offices? The Jews, naturally. They had done so before—to the extent that they were given the opportunity. Even if they did not have the experience they easily learned. That was why there were so "many of us" here. But for how long? "They" might have "goyish heads," but they learned. I would be surprised to see how quickly they learned.

"Why do you speak of 'they' and 'we'?" I asked. "Aren't you all one? This is the first time a state is seriously undertaking to eradicate the difference between Jew and Gentile; why do you

keep the differential?" He looked at me with a broad smile. For reply, he filled the glasses with vodka, and toasted in Hebrew, "*Lehayim . . .*"

Down, down the Socialist social ladder I went—to a small place, with little people, petty wants. The issue was not even bread and butter; it was just bread. On the river Sozh, a narrow, sluggish stream out of the city of Gomel, I watched a flatboat. It had no propulsion of any kind. The boat was heaved by men walking on shore, pulling heavy ropes bound to hooks in the hull. But it carried a lot of people on deck and much freight below, and made several stops to pick up sacks and baskets of produce and fruit.

At one stop there was a commotion. The captain had an order to pick up a load of fruit there. The load was on shore near the makeshift dock, but a bearded Jew who was guarding it would not let it be moved on board. He had orders to guard the fruit, and no more. He presumed it was to be loaded on the boat, but he had no authority to release it. His boss would be down soon. The captain waited patiently for a while, then began pleading with the Jew to release the shipment. The boss had not appeared, and the captain could not delay the boat any longer. The Jew stubbornly refused. At first this impasse was a source of mirth for the young passengers on deck. Then it developed into the subject of serious discussion. Orders were orders, of course, but here was a clear conflict between orders and common sense. How far one might digress from the words of an order seemed to be a problem that struck home.

Some of the passengers went ashore, stood at a respectful distance from the Jew, and looked on. The Jew seemed to enjoy the sudden limelight. I went down to talk to him. You have to act that way with them, he explained. You never know when they may try to make a case against you. How did he get involved with fruit? He grinned wryly. He had been the administrator of the orchards of the entire district for their landlord—the peasants had been his farmhands. They would not have dared to stand in his presence with their caps on. Now they were the masters, and he was serving them. Strangely, there was no bitterness in his voice. He quoted a talmudic scholar, Hillel, who said, "If a wave came upon me, I bowed my head

under it." He had bowed his head, too, yet kept it high. Your dignity is within you, he said; nobody can take it away. He was an articulate man, and gave me a graphic description of the situation of the Jews in the small towns, which ran as follows:

Where there had been a score of small Jewish shops there was now one large state store, and the Jewish shopkeepers had become superfluous. State agents picked up all the surplus the peasants could spare, or be compelled to give up, and the Jewish trader in agricultural produce was now unnecessary. Transport had been taken over by the state; besides, nobody went anywhere unless sent on a mission—and so the Jewish coachman had nothing to do. Even the artisan had a desperate struggle, with competition from the new factories, scarcity of raw materials, and the tax on "private enterprise" eating up whatever he earned. To these, add the unemployed former community functionaries, the Hebrew teacher no longer permitted to teach, the scribe with no calls for his scrolls, the kosher slaughterer and butcher, the beadle, the cantor, the rabbi, all of whom were much restricted by administrative devices, economic pressures, impoverishment of the Jewish community, and you had an entire people shipwrecked in an economic storm, with only a meager few life belts to keep them above water.

And what were those life belts? Well, there were only two. A man might leave town and go to a factory in the city, where he would not qualify for work that paid anything but a most miserable living, or to a Jewish collective farm far in the south to till the soil, a task for which he did not have the strength. The other life belt was the *artel*, the co-operative—several artisans or would-be artisans joining together to work as a unit. There a man worked harder than before, and earned less—since he could not charge much—but "they" did not hound him. On the contrary, they helped him and regarded him as a friend. He was helping them to build Socialism.

Finally, the flatboat captain ordered his men to load the fruit cargo by force, but the Jew did not resist. An outcry of hilarity greeted the cargo as it was carried aboard. The boat moved on, but the Jew remained in the same position—gazing into the distance.

I visited a few *artels*. In Minsk I had my hair cut at a barbers *artel*. It was early morning, and only two barbers were in attendance, a young man and an older person. To my query about how things were in Minsk, the young man answered, "How are things? *Svoboda*, freedom, we have." The older man added: "If we only had a little bread, too!" I was amazed at the open criticism to a foreigner. Soon I learned the young man was serious about the *svoboda*. "Why look far?" he asked, trying to explain. "We need look only as it affects us Jews. When did Jews have so much freedom? A Jew can become the greatest man. If a Jew shows any ability, it is 'please come ahead.' Listen, I have seen here all sorts of regimes, the Czarist, the White Guards, the Germans. I saw them kill, torture, rape, first rape then quarter. Now the Jews are safe, secure, and treated like the rest. Where do you have another government that is so good to Jews?" The older man was not impressed. Yes, but there was no bread. The young man went for him. The old fellow did have bread to eat—why should he talk like that? Here was the old fellow's budget: He was earning twelve rubles a day. Six went for bread, three for potatoes, and three for milk or vegetables. And what about his rent? That was a trifle, only half a ruble a day. How about other necessities, like a herring, a piece of meat, something to wear? The young man was peeved. If the old fellow had had sense he would have it now as good as the others. They had invited him to join the *artel* when it was being organized, but he declined. He preferred to remain on his own; he was earning over a hundred rubles when they were to draw only fifty. The old man came around later, but naturally they were taking care of the original members first. Take his own case. They had been about to send him on a free vacation to Kislovodsk. Had he not gone? No, he had lost it by doing something he was not supposed to do. After work he had hustled down to another place to give a few haircuts and make a little extra. That was against the law, and he had been deprived of his vacation for it. But he was not complaining; it was coming to him. Again, he said that if the old fellow had had sense he would now have it much better.

"Yeah, sure," the old fellow said ironically. "Sure, I'd now have eggs and butter for my children." The young man's temper

rose. "He's talking about butter and eggs! Do I ever see them in my house? So long as you don't go hungry you should be satisfied. Only a year and a half ago I had no bread in my house for weeks. I'd eat in the artel kitchen, and when no one was looking, I'd slip a piece of bread into my pocket to take home for the children. Now we have all the bread we need, even white bread. Someday there will be butter and eggs, too. There will be, you'll see."

One week later, I was at a place where they already had butter and eggs as well as bread. What was bothering them was beyond physical hunger, for as they knew from their Bible, not by bread alone doth man live.

It was a long way from the cobbled streets of Minsk to the vast steppe of Astrakhan. One stretch of it took two nights and a day on the train, and the passenger was expected to provide his own food, bedding, and candles, there being no facilities whatever on the train, not even light in the cars at night. At the end of that stretch there was still a bit of traveling to do, some sixty miles by automobile over dusty, roadless steppe. My destination was a kolkhoz or collective farm called Stalindorf, originally established for declassed Jews but subsequently taken over by Russian peasants who had embraced the Jewish faith, a strange community in godless Russia.

The story of this kolkhoz began in 1930, with an effort to settle twenty-two Stalingrad Jewish families on land. They had been classified as "exploiters"; i.e., they had employed labor under the old regime. As such, they were now deprived of all rights and privileges of citizenship. They could, however, rehabilitate themselves by becoming tillers of the soil in a collective farm. The twenty-two Stalingrad families received 5,000 acres and 25,000 rubles for equipment. These former urban middle-class families were not the type to turn virgin soil and live in dugouts until they had built themselves homes with their own hands. After three years only nine families remained, and the kolkhoz might have been dissolved if the Russian Jewish converts had not come to the rescue.

The newcomers were typical Great Russian peasants, strong, hard-working, ignorant. With no sense of history, they did not

know how they had come to their Jewish religion. But they had a tradition that long ago, in the Confused Times (periods of stress and civil wars, of which there were several in Russian history), their forefathers had turned to the true faith, and they had been persecuted for it ever since. The Czarist government had sought to disperse them, and kept driving them from one part of the country to another. The Revolution found them on the Volga, some 450 families of them. Hearing the rumor that Jews were to be given an autonomous territory in the Crimea, they wrote to the Comzet, the Soviet agency dealing with the resettlement of Jews, asking to be included in the project. Since nothing came of the Crimea project, the result of their request was another dispersion, as in the days of the Czars. Some of them were resettled in the Crimea, others in the Urals, still others on the Volga. Fifty families, 228 persons, were sent to the kolkhoz Stalindorf, to join the several remaining Jewish families.

The chairman of the kolkhoz, a Jew married to a convert, sought to impress me with the efficiency of the enterprise. They had a nursery for babies and pre-school children, a classroom and a teacher for the forty children in the elementary classes; boys and girls over twelve years were sent to a boarding school in a neighboring town, their keep paid for in grain. All grown-ups were thus free for the various chores on the farm. They did very well. After the last harvest they had paid out eight kilograms of wheat for every workday. In addition, every family had its own cow, chickens, and ducks, to do with as it pleased. Here was one place in the Soviet Union where food was no problem.

That was fine, I thought. But there were fifty families and only twenty-two houses. Why must families double up, and some even triple up? The chairman did not like the question. Everybody had a roof over his head, he said, and good enough shelter. First came the animals and the fields, of course—the means of production; comfort would come later.

The converts preferred to speak of spiritual matters. Of the chairman, one oldish man said to me that "he was a Jew, but a decent fellow, nice, honest . . ." It was strange to hear the "but" from a Gentile who had become a Jew himself. But he meant it spiritually. The Jews in the kolkhoz were the super-super-



atheists. "Being a Jew, but decent" meant that although the chairman was a militant atheist, he did not interfere too much with their religious practices.

Another old convert talked theologically. He didn't know, nobody knew, the truth. But folks believed. Nobody had yet returned from the hereafter to report that there actually was a God. Nobody had yet got hold of God's boots. But people had minds and they reasoned. You could look about and see a great world, a beautiful world. You planted a seed and it grew into a plant, a tree. So there must be a God. The old generation believed in a God, but the young ones didn't, and what could you do about it? Nothing. I ventured to console him by saying one could be a Communist and still believe in God. Oh, no, no, no, he insisted. Impossible. Communism was opposed to religion, and they didn't let you practice it. "We believe inside, in our hearts, and pray when we are alone."

I discussed the matter with another older man among the converts. I was a stranger there, I told him. On the one hand I had been assured that there was freedom of worship, and on the other I had heard they were not allowed to practice their religion. What was the truth? Taking a straw from between his teeth, the older man answered that they were not lying and yet were not telling the truth. The folks here would not have pigs on their land, and they had none. But they could not get kosher meat, either. They wanted the day of rest (Sunday) to be Saturday, and they got it. But there was always something extra coming up that made some of them work on the Sabbath. They would have preferred a Jewish teacher for their school, one who could tell the children something about Jews. But the District sent in a Christian woman who talked only of Communism. It was like what happened in Novorossisk. There were two synagogues there, not too many for the thousand Jewish families. And just now, as the High Holidays were approaching, they had requisitioned both synagogues, one for a museum and the other for a club for the military. The Jews would have to pray in one room of some private house. "They let you pray, but they close the synagogue," he said with a laugh, and replaced the straw between his teeth.

One convert was a pathetic figure. Big, burly, hairy, and

bearded, he was a mountain of a man, yet mild and sentimental. He was ignorant himself, he said, could not even read the prayers, but he had seen to it that his children got a good Jewish education. They could read the prayers, and a bit of the Lord's Book. His pride was his son Vaska, who had learned some Gemara (Talmud). But what was the use? They didn't pray. Vaska was a very able boy, and had a big engineering job in town. Occasionally he came to the kolkhoz for a visit. They all took pride in his son. But he asked him, "Tell me, Vaska, do you still remember the Gemara?" And what did Vaska say? "No, Batka, I'm forgetting. So much to carry in the head. The Gemara does not stick in the head; it's slipping out." The big husky peasant swallowed his tears. I commiserated with him. Yes, he had tried hard, but the current was against him. After the old folks were gone it would be all over. He shook his head, and pointed to the ceiling. "He will not let it happen. He will not permit people to go on denying Him. There is a great God in Heaven, a wise God . . ."

The greatest optimist in Stalindorf was the humblest man in the kolkhoz, the watchman of the crops in the field. He was the scholar, they said, and I went out to his straw hut to meet him—a lean, rather short man, with long silvery hair, straight yellowish-flaxen beard, and deep blue eyes. He was barefoot and wore a torn shirt and patched trousers. He was overwhelmed—an *Amerikanetz* all the way here in the kolkhoz in the steppel! All his life he had heard of America, thought of America, and here was a real *Amerikanetz* right before his eyes. He touched my arm as if to make sure that I was real. *Amerikanetz*, he kept murmuring, and looked at me in wonderment. Then he wanted to know if the American Jews were praying to the Lord. Yes, they were; was he praying? He laughed. Of course, of course. *Baruch ata Adonai, Adonai ahad*. He raised one finger. One God, just one, only one God over all, a single one, and He was right there over his head. But the others in the kolkhoz—hadn't they given up praying? Nonsense, *nitchevo*, they gave up and will take up again. God would not let them go on without praying. He was stronger than they. He was wonderful, their Only One.

His earlier amazement returned. *Amerikanetz!* I must have

passed through many lands coming to the kolkhoz. For a moment he remained frozen, as though struck by a vision: Could I, had I, perhaps, been to the Holy Land too? When I told him that I had, he stepped back to take a full view of me. Then he said: "In the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, the holy, beautiful city of Jerusalem!" Tears began to flow into his beard. Jerusalem—all wanted to go there, but "they" would not let them go. They would go to Jerusalem yet. It was written that all who believed in the Only God would go to Jerusalem. *Dai bog, dai bog* (God will it).

### *Out of Vladivostok*

I left the Soviet Union after a visit to Birobidjan (of which later), by steamer from Vladivostok. It was a slow three days' voyage to Japan, giving me time to mull over what I had seen and heard in the Socialist land. The light and shadow in the picture I had left behind generated doubts, fears, and hopes. The economic situation was hopeful, although dismal at the moment. A nation had been put into harness and was being ruthlessly driven, like galley slaves, up the steep, rocky hill of industrial progress. But the first and most difficult leg was now over—the Five-Year Plan, the collectivization of agriculture. It had been carried out at a most terrible cost of literally millions of lives. But a foundation had been laid, and now a new life could be built upon it. It would still be like raising oneself by one's own bootstraps, but it could be done. Someday they would be reaping in joy what they were now sowing in tears.

The social and spiritual climate, however, was more disturbing. More than deprivation, suffering, and physical life had gone into the hopper. Moral values and human dignity had been sacrificed as well. Nature would make up the loss of life, but only man himself could raise his spirit from perdition. Would he find the strength for it? The Jews were right under the wheels of the Giant Grinder. Yes, the Revolution must take its course. But would there be Jewish life left at the end of the course? True, the old was being done to death and the new brought to life. But would the new be stillborn? Content was all-important, but form was all-pervasive, like the Einstein the-

ory for matter and energy. If form was destroyed, could content survive?

Yet there was hope against hope. In their darkest hour Jews always fell back on the Promise. The Eternal One had promised eternal life to the seed of Abraham, and He would not go back on His promise. The Eternal One of modern man is The People. They go on forever. So, many of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union were building their communal and spiritual life in the Yiddish language. The language would persist along with the people, and in time embody the full historic spirit of the people. But I thought of the defeated men in the Kiev synagogue—their prayer for their brethren who "find themselves in distress and captivity, who stand between land and sea," kept reverberating in my ears. There *was* distress, and there *was* captivity.

On board ship I met a Soviet diplomat who was returning to his post in Tokyo. He was a youngish, handsome man, well groomed, well mannered, soft spoken when he did speak. Like many Soviet officials abroad, he was retiring and silent in the presence of strangers. Like them, too, he spoke surprisingly frankly, and turned out to be a warm, friendly person once the ice of formality had been broken and a measure of confidence established. He was given to categorical statements. To my question as to whether he thought my letters from Moscow had been "read" (by a censor), he replied that everywhere all letters addressed abroad were "read."

He volunteered the information that he was a Jew, although his name was not Jewish and he did not look like a Jew. His parents had been born in Moscow, and their native tongue was Russian. He knew no Yiddish, and had only vague ideas about things Jewish. Strangely, he was not enthusiastic about the situation of the Jews. Most of what I told him about the cultural life of the Jewish people in his own native land was news to him. He was not impressed. His only reaction was, "Why Yiddish?" He had thought that few Jews spoke Yiddish, only those in the small towns. Now that the Jews were spreading all over the Soviet Union, they would all be speaking Russian, he believed. The concept of Jewish nationality was foreign to him. I remon-

strated. Had he not heard of Birobidjan? Was this not intended to give full opportunity to the Jewish national aspiration? Had not President Kalinin said that the intent was to have Birobidjan as much Jewish as the Ukraine was Ukrainian?

He slid back into his silent diplomatic shell. His face was blank, his eyes expressionless, as though he looked but saw nothing. He made no reply to what I had said. Only after a while did he evince awareness of it, and then he made a rather irrelevant remark—that he was disappointed in the Jewish performance in Birobidjan. He had expected the Jews to take to pioneering with zest and develop the region quickly and well, so that it would serve as an example for others to do likewise in other parts of Eastern Siberia. Actually, the progress in Birobidjan was lagging far behind the achievement in neighboring places, like Khabarovsk and Comsomolsk. That was not good. Eastern Siberia must be developed and populated quickly. What was it they said about nature abhorring a vacuum? The same might be said about countries.

The next day he avoided me. But the last evening on board he invited me to his cabin for a drink. After a few vodkas, he remarked to me banteringly, "So, you are going around the world checking on your Jews and writing about them in the press?" "Not exactly," I said, "but I will accept that." His tone became serious as he went on, "There's too much ado about Jews everywhere, too much. This is not good. It only makes for trouble. Do you know it's getting hard for a Jew to take a diplomatic post? The people he has to deal with are often anti-Semites."

"Frankly," I said, "I would expect a country like the Soviet Union to make a point of sending Jews as its representatives just to show that it will have no part of anti-Semitism."

In a second, the diplomatic mask was on again—blank face, expressionless eyes. We changed the subject. But he returned to the theme at our parting. "Don't write too much," he said with a smile, and I thought I saw a shadow cross his brow when he repeated, "Too much ado about Jews." Definitely, here was one Soviet Jew who wished the world would forget about Jews.

The next morning we reached port. The Soviet diplomat was the first to land. Our eyes met as he turned down the gangplank,

but he gave no sign of recognition. It was as though we had never met. And once again the prayer at the Kiev synagogue came to mind. "Our brethren, all the Children of Israel, distress, captivity . . ." The words hovered—might they not embrace this diplomat going down the gangplank?

### *Chapter Two •*

## RUSSIA, 1946 — RUIN AND HOPE

Twelve years elapsed between my first visit to the Soviet Union and the second. And much transpired during this period. The Locust had been over the land—trumped-up trials, brutal purges, Nazi Pact—and had stripped the Kremlin towers of their golden varnish. Then came the Flood, the Second World War, which washed away all that was before, including the shock of the purges and the anger at the pact. The Western world was willing to forgive and forget. The man who had maneuvered the intervention in Russia when the Bolsheviks took power, Winston Churchill, went on the radio on June 22, 1941, to give the Communist leaders, in their darkest hour, moral support and a promise of all-out aid.

Clouds of distrust hung over the heads of both the Allied states and the Soviet Union even as they tried to work as one against the common deadly enemy. One side suspected the other of machinations behind its back, betrayal of the common cause, and possibly seeking a separate peace at the other's expense. But the hearts of the people in the West went out to the suffering Russians. Everywhere throughout the Allied world there were organizations for Russian war relief, to aid the civilian population of the Soviet Union. American people to whom Communism was the devil incarnate took coats off their backs to send to the freezing Russians, and removed watches