young men and women who were heading in the opposite direction. Rather than fading away, they were moving toward the rising sun. They had just become conscious of being Jews, and their new awareness was leading them to search for meaning, to grope for substance. They were asking themselves: What is Jewishness? How did it come to be? How is it related to our personal lives? The answers were not easy to come by, particularly in their world. So they were turning to Israel as the essence and source. However they regarded the state politically, its very existence became a factor in their lives.

Another Soviet Jewish intellectual, with more Jewish background, said to me: "You can't imagine what Israel meant to us in 'those days.' The trap door closed, the sky came down, we were on the spot. Then came the gleam of faith and hope from the East. Not for us, perhaps; not even for our children; but for the Cause. We have been taught to live and die for a Cause. Here was our own Cause, for which some have paid with their lives and many of us been made to suffer. But the Cause would survive, and carry us along into the future. There is a poem—by Heine, I believe—about a fir tree wrapped in snow in the winter cold of the north, dreaming of a palm basking in the sun of the south . . . "

Chapter Four •

BIROBIDJAN — THE DREAM THAT FAILED

> " . . . The Bira is not the Jordan. It never was the Jordan and it never will be."
>
> —Dominik Horodynski, in *Swiat,* Warsaw, December 7, 1958.

The project of Birobidjan caught the fancy of Jews in all parts of the world. For next to the dream of the Return to Jerusalem, there was always the Fata Morgana of territorial concentration; for some Jews it served as a surrogate for the dream; for others, merely as a makeshift until the dream would come true.

Traditionally, Jews blame all their troubles on their *galut*—i.e., their being scattered in small minorities over the lands of other peoples. To be gathered again in the land of their forefathers became the national ideal, the essence of the Messianic dream. As the ideal receded beyond reach, a new vision—actually only an iota, if at all, closer to reality—occasionally flashed, like a falling star, for a generation walking in darkness: a new homeland in a new place, regrettably with no ties to the great past, but with hope for a better future.

In a difficult hour for Zionism, in 1903, when the Sultan of Turkey closed all avenues to the realization of the dream, Herzl himself turned to the Fata Morgana. The Father of Political Zionism was willing to consider a territory elsewhere. He preferred a land close to the ancient home, one with which Jews had historical association, like the Sinai Peninsula. But when this was unavailable, and Britain offered a stretch of 5,000 square miles of Central Africa in her colony Uganda, Herzl was inclined to accept the offer. It took two years of bitter intraparty struggle for the Zionists finally to reject it. A relic of the splinter of that day, a Territorialist group, may still be found in some changeless nook of the Jewish community. Illegitimately, Zionist Redemption begot Territorial Deliverance.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 made the fulfillment of the ancient dream international policy, and Great Britain was entrusted with its realization. But the trustee had designs on the trust. At times it seemed that the Jews might encounter greater difficulty in achieving statehood in Palestine under the British than under the Turks. The Balfour Declaration was barely ten years old, and the Jewish state in Palestine still invisible on the horizon, when the Fata Morgana of Birobidjan rose brightly into view. Here was a territory for Jews minus all the handicaps such a project entailed elsewhere, and without some of the disadvantages of Palestine.

Its area was about three times the size of the land offered in Uganda a quarter of a century earlier and about one-third larger than Palestine after the amputation of Transjordan in

1920. Its climate was continental, tempered by proximity to the Pacific: cold winters with much sun and no wind, hot summers with lots of rain. Its natural resources were considerable—coal, iron, tin, copper, asbestos, gold, dense virgin forests, rivers, lakes, streams. The Trans-Siberian Railway ran for 200 miles through the territory, and the Amur River, which forms the Soviet-Chinese border, was navigable for 350 miles along the frontier. Navigable also was the Biro River and, in part, the Bijan River—the two streams from which the territory derived its name. Above all, this large area was practically unsettled; only some 30,000 acres were under cultivation, and the population in 1926, when the region first came into consideration as a territory for Jews, was 33,000. It consisted of diverse national groups: Russians, many of whom were Trans-Baikal Cossacks, Koreans, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Chinese, and native peoples like the Tungus, Goldi, and others. It would take no time at all for Jews to become the largest single national group, and with a little colonizing effort they would constitute the majority nation.

As a virgin land Birobidjan required reclamation, drainage, and roads. But this would be the case with any unsettled territory. The difference here was that the government of a mighty state would undertake all the necessary improvements—with its own experts and at its own expense. Similarly, all other investments, from exploration to equipment for collective farm, artisan co-operative, and industry, would come from the state. In addition, the state would subsidize the new settler with free transport, a gift of land and lumber for house and garden, and a loan for household necessities and tools. In short, all the costs which under Capitalist conditions would devolve upon the settlers themselves were here to be borne by the Soviet government. The Jews were expected to provide only the human material, the settlers, the pioneers to go to Birobidjan and create their own homeland, clear the forests, engage in agriculture and the basic trades, and establish the social institutions. Some of the toughest jobs, like road-building, irrigation projects, and mining, could be done by the sturdier natives.

Hard as pioneer life in Birobidjan was bound to be, it would be comparatively much easier than Jewish pioneering in other

parts of the world. Fifty years after they had settled on land in Argentina, Russian Jewish pioneers were still living out in a wilderness, without telephone and telegraph connection, without electricity, railway facilities, or modern farm machinery. In Birobidjan, the new settlers were to have some of the advantages of the modern industrial age at once, and more as soon as the Soviet state could provide them. In Palestine, the early Jewish pioneers, erstwhile university or yeshiva students, worked on dusty dirt roads in a blazing tropical sun, wielding hammers to crush rocks into gravel for road construction; they cleared hills of stones with their bare hands, and struggled with the corroded soil without farm machinery or proper fertilizer. In comparison, pioneering in Birobidjan would not be an overwhelming undertaking.

And in addition, the reward in the colonization of Birobidjan was the greatest imaginable, something the Jewish pioneers in Argentina could not dream of, something for which the Jewish pioneers of Palestine had, eventually, to take on the British empire. It was no more and no less than a Jewish republic, Socialist, of course, but with national status equal to other republics in the Soviet Union. The official records are explicit on this matter. President Kalinin explained the project to representatives of Moscow workers and the Yiddish press on May 5, 1934, as follows: "The principles of Soviet national policy are such that each nationality is granted an autonomous political organization on its own territory. Hitherto the Jews lacked such a political organization, and this placed them in a peculiar position in comparison with other peoples. The Jews are now receiving what other nationalities possess—namely, the possibility of developing their own culture, national in form, Socialist in content." On the appointment of Yosif Liberberg and Matvei Khavkin as top officials of the newly designated Jewish Autonomous Region, President Kalinin told them that they would have fulfilled their commission well if, after a reasonable time, they had made Birobidjan "as Jewish as the Ukraine is Ukrainian." And a resolution adopted by the Central Executive Committee, August 29, 1936, stated: "Birobidjan has completely justified the status of Jewish Autonomous Region which has been granted it. For the first time in the history of the Jewish people

its ardent desire to create its homeland, to achieve its own national statehood, is being realized. The Jewish Autonomous Region is fast becoming a center of national culture for all Jewish toilers."

Set against the background of rising anti-Semitism in Europe and the increasing restriction on Jewish immigration into Palestine, the Birobidjan project received the general esteem, and often the plaudits, of Jews everywhere. Even the president of the World Zionist Organization, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, greeted the project as a constructive turn in the life of Soviet Jewry, regarding it as a "station" on the road to the Jewish homeland in Palestine. To some Jews the Birobidjan project was Soviet Zionism, possibly intended as a competition to Zionism, but of service to national Jewish survival. Most Jews saw it as the next best thing to Zionism, a chance for a full national life, an urgent need of the Jews of the Soviet Union, where Jewish content had been withering since the Revolution. Yiddishists were elated, inclined to ignore, if not accept under protest, the iniquities of the Bolshevist regime because it had enthroned the Yiddish tongue.

Strangely, the spell of the project was weakest among the Jews for whom it was intended. There was greater enthusiasm for Birobidjan in New York or Buenos Aires than in Moscow or Kiev. In 1931 and 1932, when the territory was briefly opened to foreign Jews as well, a thousand would-be settlers arrived from many lands, including the United States and Palestine. But Soviet Jews did not flock to the region. With all the means of propaganda, enticement, inducement, and pressure at their command, the Soviet sponsors of the Birobidjan project could not create a genuine mass movement of Soviet Jews to the new land of promise.

The colonization plans were within reason. They envisaged the immigration of a couple of thousand new settlers a year, rising to a crescendo of 10,000. The goal was a Jewish population of 100,000. Then, according to Kalinin's promise, a Jewish republic would be proclaimed. (This goal was to be achieved by 1942.) An average immigration of 7,000 a year for fourteen years, out of a total Jewish population of between two and three million, could hardly be regarded as an unattainable aim.

Pre-Revolutionary Russian Jewry, from a population of between five and six million, had sent out over 100,000 emigrants a year. Nevertheless, the Birobidjan quota was never filled in any single year. In the one year that the influx came near the quota, it proved catastrophic for the colonization. In the year 1932, about 9,000 new settlers arrived in Birobidjan, and about one-half of the entire Jewish population left.

By the fall of 1934, when I arrived in Birobidjan, a total of more than 23,000 had come, but less than one-half of them remained. By 1939, the population of Birobidjan did reach 100,000, but only about one-fifth of them were Jews. The 1959 census gave Birobidjan a population of 163,000, but the number of Jews there has not yet been made public. Estimates by travelers, both Soviet and Western, run from less than one-half to about one-third, the concentration of the Jewish population being in the city of Birobidjan and other urban centers. These estimates included, of course, the Jewish orphans brought to Birobidjan from other parts of the Soviet Union during the Second World War (with the aid of the Ambijan of New York), whose number was unofficially given as 3,500, and the new wave of immigration generated after the Second World War by an official propaganda campaign, plus the inducements of free transport, a per capita bonus of 300 rubles, and a loan of 10,000 rubles to be repaid in ten years. When Nikita Khrushchev told an editor of the Paris *Figaro* in April, 1958, that the project of a Jewish Birobidjan was a failure, he was terribly right, although he gave the wrong reasons for the failure.

The response of the Soviet Jewry appears smaller still when we look at the elements constituting the immigrants. First to come were the young Jews among the Party activists, who deemed it their special Party duty to help develop this sector of the Far East. They were not personally concerned by the national essence of the project. At the other end were adventurous characters, likewise with little interest in the Jewishness of the project, who came "just for the ride" or to "look and see." There had been so much ado about the Jewish Autonomous Region, and transportation was free—so they came to see what it was like; they could always return on their own. In between were the genuine settlers who came to Birobidjan just because it

was to be a Jewish region. They came not to build the Far East, but to found a Jewish republic in the Far East. Some of these were Communists who had retained a deep attachment to the Jewish people and culture, ex-Bundists, ex-Poale Zionists, and Yiddishists, a volatile element easily disillusioned.

The backbone of the colonization was the simple folk, honest souls from the small towns who had not quite found themselves in the new social order and were still looking back longingly to the Jewish life that had been. In Birobidjan, they hoped, Jews might live again as they had used to, in the true Jewish spirit. Under a Socialist system, of course, but Jewishly and by themselves. They were the proletariat who could be expected to make the national Jewish revolution. But they were not many. The Jewish intelligentsia did not go to Birobidjan, not even those who had been active in Yiddish cultural life and were propagandizing others to go there. Missing also were the religious Jews. Thirteen years after the Kalinin Declaration, there was not a single synagogue in the entire Jewish Autonomous Region.

In the summer of 1934, I happened to be talking to a group of Jews in Kiev, and we came to the subject of Birobidjan.

"What a wonderful opportunity!" I said.

"Where?" one of the group asked, as though he had not been following the conversation.

"Birobidjan, of course."

"Ah," the man said, and turned away. The others agreed that it was a good opportunity, but changed the subject.

Definitely, the Soviet Jews did not take to Birobidjan. Why were they unwilling to go there? Why has the project failed so miserably?

Visit to Birobidjan

Birobidjan was young when I visited there in 1934. The land had always been there, of course, but the name had been coined less than a decade before. The concept of its being a geographic unit was not much older. The sense of urgency in its colonization still fluctuated, rising with the strain in the international situation in that part of the world. Like the Czars before them,

the Soviet leaders were uneasy about the emptiness of this vast border area coveted by whichever power, Chinese or Japanese, ruled over Manchuria. The Czars had made sporadic attempts to colonize the region early in 1860 with Cossacks, and again in 1908 with Ukrainian peasants. The Soviet leaders had endeavored the same, with little more success, in 1926. But since 1928 hope had been centered on the Jews. They were a capable people, as everybody knew. They were enterprising and energetic, and they would have good reason to give the project all they had.

In 1934, Birobidjan was still an empty pocket in the Amur River, 5,100 miles east of Moscow. Tourists did not go there, or anywhere else in Eastern Siberia. Foreign correspondents did not travel that far either, except when headed for Japan or China, in which case they would hardly get off at the tiny station once called Tikhonka (Tranquility), now renamed Birobidjan, and take a chance on getting a place on the next train. Few of them, in fact, were aware that any change was taking place there. Only those foreigners who were especially interested in the project, like Dr. Rosen of the American Agro-Joint, or A. Epstein of the Icor Movement, visited the region. At the Intourist in Moscow, they said they could not arrange my visit to Birobidjan since they had no service there. At the foreign office the chief press officer, Constantine Oumansky, said he could not arrange it since such service did not come within the purview of his department. But he seemed to indicate that such a trip was possible. I read into his words that I was on my own in this matter.

Constantine Oumansky was the most knowledgeable press officer the Soviets ever had. He had a good intellectual background, having come from a well-to-do, educated Jewish family in Kiev. He had traveled much and spoke several languages. Above all, he had a keen mind and a fine sense of humor. He rose quickly in the hierarchy of Soviet diplomacy, and reached the post of Ambassador to the United States. During the Second World War, when Mexico became a sensitive spot, he was transferred there to become the most popular diplomat in the country. He spoke Spanish, met everybody with a hearty *abrazo*, and never missed a bullfight. His brilliant career came to a

tragic end in Mexico in 1945 when his plane exploded while taking off at the Mexico City airport. A strange fate, for as he had taken the plane for Mexico in Moscow, his only child, a daughter, had committed suicide because of an unfortunate love affair. This was never reported in the press, since there were not supposed to be unfortunate love affairs under Socialism, and no one ever committed suicide.

In 1934, when I told Oumansky about my desire to go to Birobidjan, he asked, with a poker face: "Why Birobidjan?" In the sophisticated, worldly, upper echelons they regarded the Birobidjan project as one of the antics of Mikhail Ivanovich (Kalinin), who was too artless for them. Kalinin was Bolshevism's gift to the plain people. At the entrance to the large reception hall in his official residence, as late as 1946, there was a sign reading: "Wipe your boots on the mat." Inside, there were several signs on the bare walls: "Don't spit on the floor."

My problem of getting to Birobidjan was solved in the simplest manner. I asked my Intourist guide, an immense, good-natured girl with red eyes, if she would like to visit Birobidjan. She replied that she would, of course; she had relatives in Khabarovsk whom she might visit on her way back. (I was to leave the Soviet Union for Japan from Vladivostok.) I said I would take her along as my personal guide if she could arrange the trip. She could, she said. And she did. It was as simple as that—although I often wondered if Oumansky were not behind it all. Presumably, she did it all by herself: spent the greater part of a day in line at the depot to purchase the tickets; made the arrangements for accommodations in Birobidjan; established the contacts that would make it possible for me to move about the region as I pleased and to visit settlements, collectives, and institutions; even obtained a special permit from the Minister of Communications, Tomsky, for me to cable news and articles direct from Birobidjan to New York, without their being relayed through Moscow. And all went smoothly, the near eleven days and nights on the train and the full three weeks in Birobidjan.

Some things were trying, like getting from Birobidjan to Smidovich by train, the only feasible way of getting there. We had our tickets, but no train that stopped at Birobidjan had

taken on new passengers in weeks. There simply was no room. But we needed no room. We were to go only one station, less than two hours; we would gladly stand. However, no conductor would hear of it; when there was no room, there was no room. The young lady suggested that we jump on the first train that stopped at the station, just as it was pulling out. They would have no time to put us off, and by the time we argued it out, we would be at our destination. She wanted me to speak English only, and not let on that I even understood Russian. They would be more considerate, I supposed, or perhaps they would feel I was not dangerous. We did just that, but as chance would have it, we jumped on a military train on which not even Russian civilians were permitted.

The conductor was horror-stricken—a foreigner in his car! "How could you do it? How could you?" he wailed, looking at the Intourist lady. "You're one of us, you knew this was not permitted, you knew this was a military train—how could you do it? What'll happen to me?"

She tried to calm him, first clearing herself: "What could I do? This crazy American jumped on the train. I *had* to follow him—I'm responsible for him. Don't worry, Little Father, we'll get off at the next station and nobody will be the wiser. If anyone brings it up, tell him it was a crazy American with not a word of Russian, and an Intourist girl after him."

There were also other situations where only the young lady seemed able to find the way out. On our way to a collective village, we unexpectedly came to a body of water our car could not cross without stalling. The choice lay between giving up the trip, and leaving the car at this spot and appealing to the military patrol for horses. The local official who accompanied us would not hear of our approaching the military. But the young lady did approach them, and she prevailed. When we had to fly to Amurzet, a point that could be reached only by plane at that time of the year, and the local planes were two-seaters and we were a party of three, the young lady managed to charter two planes—to the amazement of the local officialdom.

A strange young lady was that Intourist guide whom I had most to thank for my visit to Birobidjan. Her name escapes me. For all the time we spent together, I learned very little about

her. She was a typical Russian woman with a touch of Sovietism: big, strong, hard-working, self-effacing, motherly, efficient, without sophistication or a sense of humor. There were many like her, mothers of the race, and the race still needed their mothering.

We arrived in Birobidjan late in the evening, and my first pleasant surprise was the climate. I had heard so much about its being terribly rigorous. It was mid-October now. Weatherwise, I had left Moscow under the murky skies, cold winds, and driving rains of autumn. After a couple of days on the train, at the Urals we had ridden into the midst of winter, deep snow covering everything in sight, and mountains of it where it had lain undisturbed. You had the feeling the snow had been there since the Ice Age. As we got closer to Birobidjan, the snow thinned and dark patches of naked earth emerged from the vast whiteness. Now there was no snow at all. It might have been a cold, snowless day in December back home. The two young men who came to meet us wore ordinary winter coats, not furry wraps like the one with which I had outfitted myself for this visit. The station was a sprawling, two-story, wooden structure not unlike others we had passed. But here the sign bore the name in two languages, Yiddish and Russian.

The two young men represented two official bodies, the local government and the authority dealing with the settlement of newcomers. One was rather talkative; the other said hardly a word. They conducted us to the station dining room for dinner. This was the best eating place in town, the talking young man said, and we had better plan on taking all our meals there. The dining room, a large place, served as waiting room as well. Plain, square tables and hard wooden chairs—all made right there in town, the talkative young man said with pride. The people who operated the restaurant were Jews, and spoke Yiddish among themselves, but the help seemed to be Mongolian. The atmosphere was more like that of a café, with people sitting around the tables for sociability or warmth as much as for food or drink. They looked like simple folk: nondescript clothes; unshaven; big callused hands; distinguishable by their racial features as several different types of Mongols, Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews. Not many Jews.

I was put up in the one lodging place in town, actually a shelter or clearing house for new arrivals. It was a long house, with a corridor stretching through its entire length, from which doors opened to ten rooms, all of about the same size and each with one window to the street. Each room was occupied temporarily by a whole family that might have as many as six or even eight members, with all the belongings they had brought with them, bedding, linen, kitchenware, and dishes. Each room contained at least two beds, sometimes also a hard wooden couch, and a table and several chairs. There were a can of water and a large bowl for washing. The heating was the old Russian style: a tile stove opening in the corridor but extending into two adjacent rooms to heat them both at once.

The lodging place was real Yiddish territory. No other language was heard there, but the people were not concerned about linguistics. They were not speaking Yiddish for a cause, nor had they come there for the sake of speech. Although they knew Russian, their language at home had been Yiddish, and quite naturally they continued to speak it in Birobidjan. Their concern was with the practical matter of how they would ever get settled. None of the people I met there found the place better than they had expected. Most found it much worse. Some took the situation philosophically: Rome was not built in a day. Others, especially the practical wives, complained and protested. They had not been told the truth. They had not wanted to come in the first place. A frequent complaint was that although they had not expected to find a Garden of Eden, they had not expected such a hell, either.

"What is the 'hell' of it?" I asked one disgruntled woman. She looked at me as though she had just noticed my presence, and must size me up to find out if I was acting the fool or had merely been born stupid. Hell meant a variety of things: the terribly crowded room at the clearing house, for instance, with no prospect of decent living quarters. They were told to be happy with what they had—the earlier pioneers had had to live in dugouts. Well, they had not come out here to live in dugouts. They had not had it that bad where they were. Hell meant joining a miserable collective farm, "compared to which the Byelorussian peasant village was Paris," or going to work in a

factory and earning more money, but finding nothing to buy with it, not even food, "plain food—say, a potato."

I wondered what had brought these frustrated, resentful people to Birobidjan. I happened to be present at a family quarrel, when the wife was berating her husband for his unconcern. In a moment of respite, I asked, "Why did you come out here?" There was a brief, strange silence; then the wife looked knowingly at her husband, and said to him: "This man wants to know why we have come out here. Tell him why—tell him." The husband did not tell, and the woman said no more. My question remained unanswered.

Some were a bit more communicative. One woman told me she and her husband had come for the sake of the children. What had been wrong for the children in their former home? Would it not have been more practical for the children to grow up in a large western Soviet republic than in this Godforsaken place? Her response was terse: "They are Jewish children." Well, now that they were in the Jewish country, they should make the best of it, shouldn't they? The woman lowered her eyes, and said nothing.

As might have been expected, rank adverse criticism came from the returnees, the would-be settlers on their way back. I ran into some of them at the *tolkutchka*, the flea market of Vladivostok.

The *tolkutchka* is the last vestige of free enterprise in the Soviet Union. There anybody can sell anything at any price he can command. I found a surprising number of Jews selling personal effects and household goods. Were they strangers in town? Of course. Where were they from? The Ukraine—Byelorussia. How did they happen to be in Vladivostok? The answer, with a derisive motion of the thumb toward the west and a wry smile: They had been to Birobidjan. Did they not like it there? The answer: Who did? What was wrong there? The answer: What was right there? What had made them go to Birobidjan? To see what the Jewish country was like. Well, what was it like? It was not Jewish and it was not a country.

Some of the returnees made a serious effort to analyze the reason for their coming and their leaving. It came to this:

Life had become hard and unpleasant for them at their native places. Vis-à-vis their non-Jewish neighbors, their social and economic position had been reversed, and their non-Jewish neighbors remembered them from the old days. They could not join the peasantry and their ex-bourgeois status rendered them declassed, excluded from industrial employment as well as from civil and economic administrative positions. The only avenues open to them were the artel (the artisan co-operative) and the Jewish collective farms, mostly in the south. In Birobidjan, they thought, they could have these and more. They would at once lose their ex-bourgeois status, have the opportunity to work in factories and in the administration, and above all, "live among Jews." After all, this was supposed to become a Jewish country. But what had they found? Terrible conditions, worse than they had ever had where they were.

But what did they expect? A country handed to them ready-made? Was it not up to them to pioneer and build it up? They could make conditions there as good as they liked.

"Listen, they are not developing that place for the Jews. It is just another part of the Far East that requires development, and they have stronger people than small-town Jews to do the job."

But if other people did the job, it would not become a Jewish country, would it?

"So what? Listen, it's all up to them. If they want it to be a Jewish country, they will make it so no matter who clears the forests and exterminates the mosquitoes. And if they don't, it will make no difference how much pioneering the Jews put into it."

But were they not taking the matter too lightly? At stake was a national Jewish home, a Jewish country.

The reply was a shrug of the shoulders and the cryptic remark: "Jewish? How Jewish?"

Yet there was a brighter phase to the Birobidjan reality. There were true Jewish pioneers in the region, dedicated men and women motivated by a high ideal, who had come not to take but to give. They sought neither ease nor comfort, and were ready for any sacrifice for the great cause: a Jewish republic in the Soviet Union.

There was the tall, square, swarthy man in a tiny, partly

cleared area of virgin forest, melting pitch in an immense black kettle over an open fire. His long hair and trim beard were black, his eyes fiery black, and his working clothes black as well—a pillar of blackness against the eternal shadows of the ancient trees. Standing immobile against the glow of the burning sticks, hardly taking notice of our passing car, he might have been a fire worshiper performing his devotions in a world of darkness. We stopped, and as I walked toward him, I noticed back in the woods a powerful horse hitched to a tree.

The man was visibly flattered by our unexpected visit. Yet he affected to be unimpressed. True, America was far away, but he had come there from a place farther still. Alaska was nearer to "his forest" than the Ukraine. How did he feel living alone in the forest? Fine, wonderful. Was he not afraid? It was his own forest—what had he to fear? His ego, his pride, his self-assurance, seemed to expand and encompass the entire forest. Nobody had been there before; nobody could claim it. For once, he had got there first. That forest was as much his as the forests of the Ukraine were "theirs." Here was one Jew happy to have his roots in the soil, in soil he could call his own.

Much the same spirit I found at Waldheim, a show place then as it still is. This settlement looked like a well-established, old-fashioned Russian peasant village: solidly built log cabins, each occupied by a single family—no doubling or trebling up as in other parts—with ample gardens well cared for. The people seemed hardy, well-fed folk. There was an evident abundance of partridge meat, pot cheese, and honey. "All you see here is the fruit of our own toil," one of the pioneers told me. "There was nothing here when we came—less than nothing, for we had to clear the trees before we could start. Now look at us. I step outside and expand my chest—it's all my own, all our own."

One man insisted upon showing me his pig. He was raising a big white sow for his own use. There was, of course, also a collective piggery. I would be surprised to hear, he said, what he was feeding his pig. Milk—good, fresh milk. She loved milk, he said, patting her snout, trying to impress me with both the prosperity of the settlement and the settlers' complete break with Jewish tradition.

The most eloquent affirmation of the faith of the true pioneers I heard in the Icor settlement, the poorest in the region; its population had come mostly from the United States.

I had great difficulty in getting to Icor. The reason was not so much its physical inaccessibility as the disinclination of the local authorities to have me visit there. First, they kept postponing the trip—there were more interesting, more important, places for me to see. Then, transportation was not available at the moment. Every time I brought up the subject I was given another excuse. As the time of my stay was running out, I became insistent, and finally received a definite no. This was one visit they could not possibly arrange. I begged, cajoled, threatened—to no avail. In the end, I appealed to the highest authority in the region: I was the first American journalist to visit Birobidjan in its new status; there was an American colony there; I had been in every other nook and corner of the territory—so how could I pass up Icor? The permission was finally granted.

Perhaps it was unfair to come upon the good people of Icor unexpectedly. But there was little they could have done to lift the gloom of distress from the place. They might have cleaned up their yards or tidied up their crowded quarters, but the depressing state of their settlement could not have been concealed. The rundown condition of the property, the drab, ramshackle buildings, the barren waste, their scrawny animals and fowls, were unmistakable signs of poverty and privation, of an unequal struggle with an unfriendly environment, of a defeat that they refused to accept.

We arrived toward evening, when the people were returning from the fields. The dirt of toil was on their hands and in the wrinkles of their faces, but there was no indication of happiness derived from communion with the soil. They looked more like Chinese coolies than Americans or people who had lived in America. Their old, threadbare American clothes showed through the openings of their short padded coats. They were embarrassed at having little to offer me in refreshment, but would get up something—if they had only known that I was coming!

"They've had hard luck," my driver, a local man, sought to

enlighten me in a whisper. "Two crop failures in a row. Complete—crops, fruit, pasture, everything. Wonderful people, fine spirit, but not really farmers. In America, perhaps. Everything is easy there, too easy. Easy life makes people soft. You have to be tough to make a go of it here. They might do better if they concentrated on woodwork. . . . No, they're not carpenters either—but a Jewish organization in the United States sent them equipment for woodwork and carpentry."

They were anxious to hear from me about conditions in the United States, particularly in the cities they had come from. Perhaps it was a rash inference, but it did seem to me there was nostalgia and a note of sadness in their inquiries. At the end, the manager himself touched on their own situation. As I must have noticed, he said, they were up against it. They had found it tough when they started out; then had come one piece of bad luck after another. But they were still on their feet, and fighting. And they would fight it out. They had the courage and the determination. He was not putting up a bold front; that was really how they all felt. Whatever I told about them in America, would I please also say that they were all happy, very happy, in Icor?

I looked about for a trace of the happiness I was being asked to report. All I saw was grimness—hard, haggard faces without a semblance of a smile. The manager may have read my mind, for he appealed for understanding. All their lives, he said, they had been Socialists, having dedicated themselves to that ideal while still in their teens. In America they had sought neither comfort nor preferment. They might have gone into business and amassed fortunes, as many of their friends had done. Instead, they had thrown themselves into the labor movement, the Socialist party, the Communist party. It was the Socialist ideal they had always lived by. Socialism was bound to come in America, of course—as all over the world. But it was still beyond the horizon. In the Soviet Union, it had already arrived. You only needed to build it up. Not talk about it, argue about it, demonstrate for it—but just live by it. Could this be hard for a real Socialist? Could a real Socialist be anything but happy in it?

And they were also Jews, Socialist Jews. Like the proletariat

itself, the entire Jewish people were victims of the Capitalist system. Jews had been persecuted, discriminated against, martyred. Jews called this Exile. But Exile was not a geographic entity. It was a reflection of a social system. There was no future for Jews under Capitalism. But in the Soviet Union, under Socialism, the Jewish future was already here. After making the individual Jew fully equal with the others, the Soviet Union was undertaking to do the same for the Jews as a people—make the Jewish people like other peoples, give them a country of their own, a national Socialist Jewish home. Could a real Socialist Jew stand aside and just look on? Could a real Socialist Jew be anything but happy in lending a hand?

Now take the matter of Yiddish and culture. They had never been just Socialists. They were definitely Jewish Socialists. Their language was Yiddish, their culture the one created by the plain people in that language. They knew enough English to join the general American Socialist or Communist movement. But they had not. They had maintained their own Jewish party in their own language. They supported their own Yiddish press, literature, and cultural activities. They even taught their American-born children to speak, read, and write Yiddish. Yiddish, too, had become part of the ideal they lived by. Now, what future was there for Yiddish culture in the United States? Or in any Capitalist country? But here in the Soviet Union the future of Yiddish was assured. It had already become a way of life. Its persistence had been underwritten by the mighty Soviet Union.

Now take it all together—imagine the great opportunity to help build a Jewish Socialist state in the Yiddish language and culture as part of the great international Socialist fatherland, the Soviet Union! What more could a real Socialist Jew wish for? Of what consequence were hard work and temporary deprivation against this great mission? Happy the man who could serve this ideal and live by it!

The manager was inspired by his own eloquence. A tint of watery pink appeared on his pallid cheeks. His wife came from across the room to stand behind his chair. She took new pride in her husband. The stolid faces of the others, who had listened attentively, showed a marked vivacity. They had needed that

little speech as balm for their weary hearts. Perhaps they were happy, really, without knowing it. I thought of a Salvation Army street meeting without passers-by, the speakers preaching salvation only to themselves. For myself, I appreciated their idealism, but could not help thinking of their economic misery and of their fewness. I could hear no echo of their attitude among the masses of Soviet Jewry. But I said nothing. Imagine a stranger at an agape rite of the early Christians, listening to an exhortation on the immediacy of their Saviour's return, then coming up with the remark: "Yes, folks, but what will you eat tomorrow?"

The one cheery, heartening phase of life in Birobidjan the new settlers seemed to be taking for granted. This was the predominance and pervasiveness of the Yiddish language and Jewish culture. This was not much in net weight. The local Yiddish newspaper, *Birobidjaner Shtern*, could not hold a candle to the Yiddish newspapers then appearing in several of the major cities of the country. There was as yet no literary journal, though there were a few in European Russia, and no book publishing and no theatre. The building for a theatre had just been put up, but only an amateur dramatic group was in formation. There were Yiddish schools, of course, but you could find more and better ones in Minsk or Berdichev, and there were no Yiddish high schools or academies—not yet. Those were the key words: not yet. There was only a beginning, but already the beginning had a distinction not found anywhere else in the vast land. Here *all* Jewish children went to Yiddish schools; practically all Jews spoke Yiddish; the government was conducted in Yiddish; and what little culture existed in the region was Jewish. Here was one spot—indeed, the only spot in the world—where the language and culture of the Jewish masses was primary, not secondary; dominating, not dominated; and practically exclusive. Whatever cultural activity another nationality had in its own language was there too, in its own little ghetto, off the beaten track which had already been pre-empted by Yiddish. I wondered how the non-Jews were taking it. Judging by the general atmosphere, I had the feeling that they were accepting the novel situation rather good-naturedly and kindly. They had their own national homes, bigger and better ones; let the Jews

also have something of a national home. They were more curious about what the Jews would accomplish than concerned about their own status.

Why Birobidjan?

What prompted the Soviet Union to undertake a Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidjan?

Technically, it was a further step in the long and arduous effort to solve the Jewish problem. The problem was only fundamentally inherited from the Czarist regime. The current severity was a result of the October Revolution, which had washed away the sources of livelihood of most Jews without providing others to take their place. The solution lay in normalizing the economy of the Jews. Under the prevailing conditions, normalcy meant principally agriculture, with artisan co-operatives a paltry second.

As I have explained earlier, a serious endeavor was therefore made to turn Jews into peasants, as Czar Nicholas I had attempted to do a century earlier. There was a special government agency for that purpose, a Commission for the Rural Placement of Jewish Toilers (Komzet) attached to the Presidium of the Soviet of Nationalities of the Central Executive Committee. There was a corresponding civil organization, Association for the Rural Placement of Jewish Toilers (Ozet). These bodies gladly accepted the material help of Jewish organizations abroad, like the Joint Distribution Committee (Agrojoint) of New York, the Jewish Colonization Association (Ica), and a Jewish organization specializing in teaching trades to poor Jewish children (Ort). Between them, these foreign Jewish organizations spent close to $20,000,000 in aid to the various reconstruction efforts. With the Soviet population about 70 per cent agricultural, the ambition was to have at least 40 per cent of the Jews in agriculture. But that meant settling a million Jews on land. Actual plans were for half that many.

At first, the intention was to assign Jews land in their immediate neighborhoods, and a number of Jewish collective farms came up close to the thickly populated Jewish towns of Byelorussia and the Ukraine. In fact, there grew up Jewish districts,

tiny bits of autonomic Jewish territories, with Yiddish as the language of the administration, the schools, and the local courts, right in the heart of the Russian peasantry. Soon it was realized that this was neither feasible nor desirable. Agriculture had not yet been collectivized, and a large segment of the peasantry still had little or no land. These peasants would resent giving land to Jews, who had never tilled the soil, when they themselves had none at all or too little. They would certainly object to having land kept idle for future colonization by Jews. Besides, the end result would be small agricultural Jewish ghettos like the Jewish towns of the Czarist days. The anomaly of the Jews would be modified but not eliminated.

Of necessity, then, Soviet thought turned to the more distant large and unsettled areas, where no local problems would arise as the result of a territorial concentration of Jewish population. Utilizing these areas had several advantages. It would relieve the immediate Jewish situation. It would correct the status of the Jews in the Soviet Union, bringing them within the Stalin definition of a nation. And it would involve no radical departure from Soviet practice. Resettlement of the Jews would be only an item in the general plan of populating and developing the unsettled distant areas.

The Komzet was charged with finding a suitable territory for the Jews. Several localities came under consideration, among them the marshy land near the sea of Azov and the dry steppes of Kazakhstan in Central Asia. The choice narrowed down to two, the Crimea and Birobidjan, each of which had ardent advocates among the satraps of the Jewish community, the Jewish Communists who were active in Jewish life. In general, the Birobidjanists represented the two extremes among the Jewish Communists: those who were really assimilationists and whose concern with Jews was a Party assignment, and those who had been Jewish nationalists, Bundists, or Socialist-Zionists, and were still emotionally involved in matters Jewish. To the first, the primary consideration was the larger interest of the Soviet Union, and so of course the Far East had priority. To the second, the aspect of speedy statehood was paramount, and for this Birobidjan offered greater promise. Still fighting Zionism or purging themselves of that taint, they needed a setup which they

could parade as an antithesis to World Zionism. Like Jereboam presenting the Golden Calf, they would point to Birobidjan as the real salvation of the Jewish people.

Those who were worried about the current Jewish situation and sought a short cut to its amelioration chiefly preferred the territory in the Crimea. They regarded that location as more suitable for Jewish colonization. It was close to the large Jewish centers and hard by the area where Jewish colonies had existed for many years before the Revolution. The climate was equable and the pioneering conditions not exacting. Many more Jews would be inclined to go to the Crimea than to Birobidjan, and they would adjust quickly and comfortably there. The money that would have to be spent on improvements in Birobidjan could be put to better use in assisting the existing colonies in southern Russia. Those who preferred the Crimea also thought that transferring Jews to Asia was an unnecessary concession to anti-Semitism in European Russia. Their spokesman, Yuri M. Larin, a member of the Central Executive Committee, bluntly said that the "unsound noise about Birobidjan was in reverse proportion to the real importance that area had for the Jewish proletariat."

However, the arguments adduced by the two factions had no bearing upon the ultimate choice. The final decision came from authorities who were concerned with Birobidjan, not with Jews. Their problem was not to ascertain whether Birobidjan was suitable for Jewish colonization, but to determine what to do about Birobidjan. The first Five-Year Plan, which had just been launched, called for colonization in the Far East. That vast region contained a population of only 1,300,000, lower by 200,000 than the figure for 1913. The international Asian situation was worsening. Chiang Kai-shek, in control of most of China through the Kuomintang, had just broken with Moscow. Japan was maneuvering for dominion over Manchuria, which she achieved in 1931 by setting up the puppet state Manchukuo with Henry Pu-yi as emperor. The Amur region, particularly, was in danger of infiltration from Manchuria, and steps had to be taken to forestall the encroachment.

A scientific expedition was therefore sent out in 1927 to explore the territory, primarily its agricultural possibilities.

When the scientists returned with a favorable report, the territory was deemed a "natural" for settlement by Jews. There the Jews could have all the land they needed without depriving their neighbors, and they would be removed from the scene of the encumbrances of the past. On the other hand, the Jews, fired by their national mission, would rush to Birobidjan and develop the region with all the energy, enterprise, and intelligence at their command. And before long, Birobidjan might serve as an example to be emulated by other parts of the Far East.

However the decision was reached, the Birobidjan partisans prevailed and set to work with a vengeance. Their ardor nearly wrecked the project. The original Komzet plan had called for a year's preparation of the ground and of reception facilities before the first settlers came. But no sooner had the decision been made public than the Ozet began sending out would-be settlers. Before the first month was out, some hundred immigrants had arrived at Tikhonka, then only a little town of huts, but today the city of Birobidjan with a population of 40,000. By the end of the summer, the number of newcomers had reached 654, and 200 more were to come in the fall. But more than half of them ran away before the snows fell, to spread a tale of woe about their dismal existence in miserable tents, without supplies or employment; to tell of burning heat, of floods and dreadful pests laying low man and beast. Theirs was a small voice against the thunder of the propaganda for Birobidjan. Yet it could not be drowned out, particularly when it was reinforced by the plaints of settlers who came the following year and the next. The gap between propaganda and reality was widening. Before long, the propaganda became more valuable than the reality.

The prospect of a Jewish autonomous region in the Soviet Union assumed importance in the general Soviet public relations abroad. America had not yet recognized the Soviet Union. France was still hostile, and Britain was wary. The Five-Year Plans required large purchases abroad in goods and know-how, but the supplies of foreign currency were low. Credit and trade were vital for the success of the Revolution. Neither could be easily achieved in the existing hostile climate. And there was nothing in the Soviet policies, nor in the nature of the regime or its attainments, to improve that climate. In this conjunction, the treatment of the Jews in the Soviet Union was a feather in the Red cap, and the endeavor to create a national Jewish state would be bound to create a measure of sympathy. Here was one Soviet policy none could quarrel with, one area in which the Soviets had the edge on the West. With anti-Semitism on the rise in Europe and America, some Western statesmen had a guilty conscience about the Jews. Others may have had the strange secret notion that a Jewish state in Russia would somehow reduce the pressure of the Jewish problem in their own country, or at least that their Jewish Communists would go there.

Most of the Birobidjan propaganda was directed at the Jews in the Western world. They were regarded as the first target in the stratagem of public relations, for they were concentrated in the principal centers of Europe and America, and were worldly and articulate; they were represented in the organs of public opinion, engaged in trade and commerce, and were not without influence in Western political life. In the view of the Soviet leaders, the Jews could be instrumental in helping them attain their objective of better public relations with the West.

Although most Jews looked favorably on the Birobidjan project, it could not be taken for granted that their attitude toward the Soviet Union as a whole was affected by the propaganda. For the anti-Communist Jew, the small promise of some good could not outweigh the evil they saw in the over-all system. The Nationalist Jew was too much concerned about the problems and the national effort in Palestine to be affected by this territorial project that precluded Jewish nationalism and tradition. To the religious Jew, no amount of Yiddish culture could compensate for the total suppression of religious teaching in, and the study of, Hebrew. Still, there was a small segment of the Jewish intelligentsia—bourgeois liberals predisposed to sympathy with the purpose of the Russian Revolution, though not with its methods, and intelligent workers of leftist or Yiddishist leanings—that responded to an appeal generated by Communist or pro-Soviet individuals for assistance to the pioneers of Birobidjan. This response was by no means extraordinary,

for American Jewish relief organizations were still operating in the Soviet Union. Groups for lending material aid and moral support to the builders of the Jewish state in Russia were formed in the United States and other countries. They issued publications, held public meetings, and collected money for equipment and other needs of the new settlers in Birobidjan. Some of these groups were of considerable importance. One American committee for Birobidjan had, at the height of its popularity, a budget of $750,000, and its annual dinners were a gala event. Among its guest speakers were such prominent United States senators as Elmer Thomas and Alben Barkley, and during the war years, when it feted Soviet Ambassador Gromyko, the United States government had a military representative on the dais.

To the extent that these groups nurtured a friendly interest in the progress of the Soviet Union and stressed the good work for Soviet Jewry as part of Soviet national policy, they served the propaganda end of the Birobidjan project. But their influence on Western thinking was limited by the meager results of the colonization in Birobidjan and more particularly by the lack of direct contact with Birobidjan. For all their devotion to the cause, the leaders of these groups rarely received anything directly from Birobidjan but sheer cheap propaganda. They had no exact information on conditions there and no true indication of the existing problems. Letters containing inquiries of a material nature went unanswered. Even acknowledgments of the receipt of equipment shipped from America were difficult to obtain. Indeed, those shipments did not always reach Birobidjan after their arrival in the Soviet Union. They were not necessarily used elsewhere; some may have been left to rust and rot unused. Clearly, the Soviet Union had little interest in the actual material aid. The *campaign* for the material aid, the moral support created thereby not only for the settlers of Birobidjan but for the Soviet Union generally, was of infinitely greater importance than the monetary results.

All through the years the relationship between Birobidjan and its friends and advocates abroad was largely a one-way traffic. The channel of communication between the Jews in Birobidjan and the Jews of the world was little more than an

outlet for the export of publicity material. The Jews of the world were told how many centners of grain the colonists in Birobidjan were getting out of a hectare of land, or how many articles of clothing the clothing factory was turning out a month; they were treated to paeans about every hillock of the foothills of the Khingan chain and the variety of fish swarming in the Bira. The Jews abroad were expected to be interested in such items about their brethren in Birobidjan, to tingle with excitement at the glad tidings and pour out their hearts in friendship for the Soviet Union. But the Jews in Birobidjan were not supposed to be interested in—and were not permitted to learn—even the most elementary facts about their brethren abroad, such as their number, their principal pursuits, and their cultural achievements, nor were they given details about the groups active in behalf of Birobidjan. All that the Jewish settlers heard was an echo of the enthusiasm for Birobidjan among Jews abroad and distressing news about their conditions—the anti-Semitism, discrimination, oppression, and suffering. There was evidently nothing, absolutely nothing, else to be reported about the Jews of the world that could be of any interest to the Jews in Birobidjan.

The tragic fact is that the Soviet rulers never regarded the Jews of the Soviet Union as a part of the Jewish people, and dogmatically severed all national ties of Soviet Jewry. They refused to face the reality of a world Jewish people, except when it was opportune for them to do so. At most, they envisioned a Soviet Jewish entity developing into another Soviet nationality, national only in form, after territorial concentration. Even Kalinin did not go beyond this, and other Soviet leaders, apparently even Stalin, did not go that far. Stalin went along with the other members of the Central Committee for practical considerations, though his heart was not in it and he had no faith in the project. Although he could accept the reconstruction of a Jewish state ideologically, as this was well within the purview of his own national theory, his contacts with top Jewish Communists, from Trotsky to Kaganovich, resulted in his accepting their assurance that Jews needed no Jewish home under Socialism and wanted none. Jews wanted to be assimilated, they insisted, as they themselves had been. Perhaps they

feared that identification with a distinct Jewish entity—if such were formally to exist—would jeopardize their position in the All-Soviet hierarchy. Of course, there was an Armenian nation in the Soviet Union, yet Mikoyan was sitting in the Kremlin; and Stalin himself was a Georgian, and there was a Georgian nation. But these men were not Jews.

This ambivalence toward Birobidjan in the Soviet leadership had as much to do with the failure of the project as did the indifference of the Jewish masses. While Kalinin was talking of Birobidjan in terms of Jewish nationalism and a spiritual center for all Soviet Jews, the Jewish Communists were stressing the need of colonizing the Far East for the good of the Socialist fatherland. At the very time the Ozet was campaigning for Jewish emigration to Birobidjan, the Komzet resettled Ukrainian or Byelorussian Jews in colonies in the Crimea. And at all times, non-Jews were also encouraged to go to Birobidjan. In fact, considering the increasing disproportion between Jews and non-Jews in Birobidjan, one might well conclude that the non-Jews either came in larger numbers or that fewer of them went back.

Time played havoc with the ambivalence of the Soviet leadership. With the progress of the Five-Year Plans, the urgency of the Jewish situation eased. The solution of the Jewish problem now seemed to lie more in and around the new state enterprises than in agricultural settlements in a separate territory in a distant corner of the land, and the original basic motive for Birobidjan fell away. The more enterprises the state started, the greater was the shortage of labor and the demand for people with administrative experience or background, the Russian bourgeois intelligentsia either having emigrated or remaining sulking in passive resistance. Many Jews stepped in to fill the gaps. Those Jews who could not make use of the new opportunities were hardly the people to pioneer in the wilds of Birobidjan.

Moreover, the expectation that Jews would quickly populate and develop Birobidjan, and create an example for the entire Far East, failed to materialize; hence, another excuse for pushing the project lost its validity. As much as the Jewish Communists tried to conceal the failure—they had the Presidium of the Central Committee pass a resolution in 1936 that the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Region had "totally justified itself"; Khrushchev still believes that at first Jews "flocked" to Birobidjan—the net result was there for all to see. Those responsible for the colonization of the Far East soon came to realize that the Jews alone would not do the job in Birobidjan, and thereafter they directed non-Jewish immigration to the region as well.

There remained, then, the motivations of Jewish nationalism and public relations abroad. But no Soviet leader except Kalinin showed continuing interest in the creation of a Jewish national home after it became obvious the Jews themselves were cool to the project. As for public relations abroad, they were not dependent upon the progress of the Jewish settlement in Birobidjan. By magnifying the achievements and withholding the news of failures, Soviet propaganda could do well enough with the mere existence of the Jewish Autonomous Region. To the Soviet leaders, advancing steadily on an ever greater stage of Socialist construction at home and increasing prestige abroad, the propaganda value of Birobidjan became negligible. The project was left in the hands of the minor local officials. Only in a general epidemic of purges did Birobidjan rate some attention in certain quarters in Moscow.

Two Missed Opportunities

Twice within one decade the promise of Birobidjan soared strikingly, only to sink down to lower depths. Both times the force was the Jewish national sentiment. The first was in 1936; the second, and apparently the last, was in 1946.

By late 1936, the population of Birobidjan was a little over 60,000, of which the Jews constituted some 30 per cent. The Presidium of the Central Committee, as already indicated, expressed satisfaction with the achievement. Perhaps the record of immigration during the last two years—9,000 in 1935 and 7,000 in 1936—was the basis for their gratification. The fact that many, if not most, of the newcomers were non-Jews, and that a number of old Jewish settlers left during the same period, did not seem to trouble the Presidium. The net result, as far as

the region was concerned, was progress. And the Presidium recognized the basic reality that whatever enterprise there was in the region came from the Jews. Encouragement of the Jewish effort was therefore called for. And how was it done? By a direct appeal to the nationalist Jewish sentiment—within Soviet ideological limits, of course.

The statement of the Presidium stressed the fact that it was the first time in history the Jews' aspiration to a national home and a state of their own had been achieved, and that Birobidjan was due to become a center of Jewish culture. Earlier in the same year Kaganovich, on his visit to the region, also stressed the objective of creating a Jewish cultural center, and called for wider use of the Yiddish language in all phases of life and particularly in all departments of the administration of the region. The secretary of the Party for the region, Matvey Khavkin, thereupon issued a call to all Yiddish writers and Jewish scholars to settle there and help create the Jewish cultural center. Khavkin had great plans, including a Jewish opera, which would be "the only one in the world."

These expressions—"the only one in the world," the Presidium's reference to "the first time in history," and Kalinin's talk of Birobidjan being the home of "all Jewish toilers"—were of great significance. They all went beyond the confines of the Soviet Union. By implication, they took cognizance of a world Jewry. The Jewish cultural center in Birobidjan would have meaning for all Jews everywhere. Out of the new Socialist Zion would come the new Socialist torah for all Jews.

Strangely, young Birobidjan was passing through a stage not unlike one we encounter in early Zionism. When the prospect of the ingathering of the Exiles into Palestine dimmed, Ahad Ha'am came forth with his Cultural Zionism. The new Zion in Palestine was to grow into a cultural center for all the Jews of the world. Primary consideration was therefore to be given to the quality of the settlement, not to the number of settlers. So was it also to be with Birobidjan. The Jewish settlers there should not be discouraged by their fewness; neither should their enthusiasm be dampened because they were a minority. Birobidjan was to be their national home, and they could create

there their national culture for "all Jewish toilers," wherever they might reside.

It is idle to conjecture where this new trend in Birobidjan would have taken Soviet Jewry if it had not been cut short almost immediately. The history of the Jews in the Soviet Union during the last quarter of a century might have been quite different. Suppose Khavkin's call had met with a favorable response. Suppose Yiddish had become the all-pervasive language of the region. Suppose a real center of Jewish culture had developed in Birobidjan. Is it not conceivable that Birobidjan might have become a great moral force in the life of the Soviet Jews, sustaining them in their dark hour of moral and physical crises, and a refuge from the Jewish problem wherever it re-emerged in the Soviet Union? In all Soviet purges it was the cultural leaders who were purged. The culture itself was permitted to continue under new leadership. Only in the case of the Jews was the culture liquidated as well. If Jewish culture had been rooted in Birobidjan, it might have survived the deluge at the turn of the 1950's. Even such as it was, it held up a slight semblance of Jewishness, or a reminder of it, during those years—the Hebrew characters and Yiddish words, however devoid of Jewish content, were tolerated in Birobidjan when they were taboo elsewhere in the land.

In the tragic wearisome sameness of the Soviet system, a blight on high does not pass the lowly. If a conspiracy, real or imaginary, is discovered in Moscow and Leningrad, everyone takes it for granted that its ramifications and its agents will reach out into the humblest hovel in the remotest corners of the land. The eradication of the plotters cannot be regarded as complete unless their accomplices, real or supposed, are apprehended throughout the entire country. Accordingly, Birobidjan could not be bypassed in the purges of the latter half of the 1930's. The secret agent sent there to check on the conspiracy had to show results, and so naturally he found the place overrun by "traitors, spies, Trotskyites, Japanese agents, etc." The first victim, Joseph Liberberg, who held the office of chairman of the region's Executive Committee, was arrested in August, 1936, and never heard from again. He was reportedly executed. Matvey Khavkin was nabbed in May, 1937, and shipped to a

labor camp. The interval was a period of terror and fear, all sorts of people being picked up in the dead of night, to disappear forever. No sooner had a substitute for Liberberg arrived—and an important man he was, the head of the Ozet in the Ukraine—than he was purged. Chairman followed chairman into liquidation; one secretary after another landed in jail before he could warm his seat of authority. Both the Komzet and Ozet were dissolved in 1938. The entire Far East was declared out of bounds for security reasons. Immigration into Birobidjan was transferred to the migration department of the Secret Police (NKVD), which sought new settlers in the large industrial centers with a considerable non-Jewish population. A Jew had to be bold to resettle in Birobidjan in those perilously confusing days. Indeed, anyone had to be intrepid to get out of his groove.

As might be expected, Jewish immigration into Birobidjan materially decreased with the onset of the purges. In addition to the deterrence of the general atmosphere, word was spread in the Jewish communities that there was a run on Jews in Birobidjan. The fact was that most of the arrested were Jews, but this may have been because of the number of Jews in administrative and sensitive posts (they were the most urbanized and intelligent element) which made them vulnerable to calumny and intrigue. Immigration decreased to a trickle after the Secret Police took over the resettlement, and petered out by 1939. During the war a number of Jews left for the front, but none came in to take their place. Only the import of Jewish orphans augmented the Jewish population by immigration.

After the war, the original, but subsequently regarded as obsolete, reason for a Jewish autonomous region literally rose from the ashes. Once again the Soviet Jews needed a territory to relieve their distressing condition. Jews were returning from the front, and from partisan camps or evacuation in Central Asia, to their homes in the western and southern parts of European Russia, which had been under enemy occupation. They found that their kin had been slaughtered by the Nazis—with the co-operation of the local population in some parts of the Baltics and the Ukraine. Their homes were occupied by others, their positions filled by others, who themselves in many cases

had been uprooted by the war, and in any event, had no place to go. For these reasons, and because of the residue of anti-Semitism in the air, the reception of the Jews by their neighbors was less than cordial. The departure of a returned Jew for Birobidjan would have been welcomed by his neighbors. There were still others reasons why Birobidjan loomed brighter for the Soviet Jews at this time. The material differential was now in reverse. Their own economic situation had deteriorated while conditions in Birobidjan had improved. And their nationalist sentiment had never been more potent. The awakening of national consciousness permitted to the peoples of the Soviet Union during the war years had stirred no Soviet nationality so deeply as the Jews. They did not have to be reminded of their identity and their historic past—that they well remembered—but they were nonetheless only too tragically reminded by the savage enemies of their race. In their bit of national freedom, they sought solace in the essence of their past and in solidarity with their own. Now they were weary of living in a hostile environment, and many would be willing to go to Birobidjan just to be among Jews, where it would be natural to be Jewish. And now there was an official stamp of approval!

Whether the Soviet authorities realized they had a Jewish problem or not, they were aware that they had a postwar problem with the Jews in their land, and they turned to Birobidjan as a ready-made solution. But some reorientation in the administration of the region had to be made, for much of the machinery of Jewish autonomy had been dismantled in the years immediately preceding and during the war. The local Yiddish newspaper, *Birobidjaner Shtern*, had been closed. The literary Yiddish publication *Forpost* had been discontinued, and no Yiddish books had been published in spite of the availability of Yiddish type and compositors. The Jewish division of the Pedagogical Institute, which had been preparing teachers for the Yiddish schools, had also been closed. Yiddish was no longer in use in the administrative apparatus and public institutions. In fact, all that was left of the Jewish autonomy was the Yiddish theatre and a Yiddish intermediary school. But now the clock was to be turned back—not all the way to 1936, although quite a distance in that direction.

The *Birobidjaner Shtern* was revived, issued twice weekly at first, then four times a week. A new literary publication, *Birobidjan*, was started to take the place of *Forpost*. Plans were drawn for reopening Yiddish elementary schools, and the Yiddish theatre began assembling a troupe of the first order, even going to the extent of obtaining the release from a labor camp in Kolima of a prominent Jewish actor who had been sent there in the purge of 1938. The region library now had 30,000 books of Yiddish and Judaica in the 100,000 of its collection. The local museum was expanded to contain matters of Jewish interest and to stress the connection of Jews with the region.

At the head of the administration there were again Jews, Silberstein and Bakhmutsky, young people with ambition for the Jewish character of the autonomous region. And again the idea of Birobidjan's becoming the cultural center for Soviet Jewry came to the fore. Jewish intellectuals were urged to go to Birobidjan, and a number did go. A Leningrad Jewish artist, Tshimerinoff, founded a studio for instruction in art. A Minsk composer, Rabunski, came to reorganize the Birobidjan music school. Noted medical men left their posts to serve the expanding Birobidjan hospital. Once more there was talk of a new institution which would be "the only one in the world"—not a Jewish opera this time, but a Yiddish university.

The movement was sparked by a decree of the Presidium of the Central Committee on January 26, 1946, aimed specifically at Jews and calling for renewed efforts in developing the Jewish Autonomous Region. A delegation of representatives of the Birobidjan Jews toured a number of towns with a large Jewish population, telling of the achievements in Birobidjan and exhorting Jews to join them in building the Jewish Autonomous Region. Their visits were dramatized by the local authorities with public receptions and accompanying publicity in the local press and on the radio, all of which was reflected in the organ of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, *Aynikite*, the only Yiddish newspaper in the Soviet Union outside Birobidjan. Clearly, the heat was on for a large-scale Jewish emigration to Birobidjan.

Now there was consideration for the would-be settler and also proper organization. He was given free transportation, a

per capita bonus of 300 rubles, and a credit of 10,000 rubles for "inventory," which included house furnishings as well as tools and trade equipment. The settlers were fitted out in groups and sent in echelons, their departure, stops en route, and arrival at destination serving as occasions for public functions to propagandize the movement. In Birobidjan the newcomers found living quarters prepared for them and employment arranged for. The response was greater than ever. In a little over two years, the new immigration brought as many settlers to Birobidjan as had collected there during the preceding eighteen years.

The quality of the immigration improved likewise. The newcomers included good, sturdy, experienced farmers from the Crimea and the Kherson district, highly qualified industrial workers, engineers, doctors, teachers, and even top managers who had to go to considerable trouble to be released from important posts, like the noted director of the Kherson Elevator (grain distribution center), who preferred a more modest position in the Jewish Autonomous Region. Israel Emiot, a Jewish poet who lived in Birobidjan at the time, reported the old settlers as saying that they had not seen so many new arrivals, so much energy and enterprise, and had not heard Yiddish spoken so much, since 1936. The time had never been more opportune. Back in the 1930's, going to Birobidjan had called for considerable sacrifice in physical comfort and economic opportunity, although the compensation in Jewish atmosphere was slight. Any sizable Jewish community in western Russia had much more of a Jewish life than Birobidjan could offer. Now the situation was reversed. The sacrifice was small indeed, so many Jews having been uprooted during the war and now seeking new moorings, and the compensation was significant psychologically, if not materially. After being exposed to wartime anti-Semitism, Jews longed to be with other Jews, and the prospect of living in a Jewish territory was alluring.

The new liberal spirit manifested itself also in renewed contact with Birobidjan sponsors in the United States and elsewhere, even though communication was still largely a one-way affair. Now, at least the aid sent to Birobidjan duly reached its destination. Canned food, articles of clothing, diesel motors, mechanical saws, and factory equipment that had been shipped

long before at last arrived and were properly distributed. In the city of Birobidjan a new street was built with prefabricated houses bought in Holland by American friends of Birobidjan.

I saw the reflection of the new trend at the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in Moscow. There was much talk about it among the members of the committee, although some were not without misgivings. Ilya Ehrenburg continued his hostile attitude toward any territorial concentration of Jews, which he called a "new ghetto." He wanted all Jews to be assimilated as he had been. This would simplify matters all around. The Jewish nationalist sentiment had done its work during the war. Now that the war was over, it should be laid to rest. He was already keeping away from the committee and all things Jewish. Other Jews prominent in Soviet life, like the *Pravda* publicist, David Zaslavsky, kept an unfriendly silence. This new Birobidjan movement was the will of the Party, and the Party's will must be respected. But they had no faith in the results and hoped it was all a wind that would soon blow over. Only the "Jewish Jews" of the committee, those whose life work lay in the field of Jewish culture, kept their faith in Birobidjan.

I happened to be present at a briefing Solomon Mikhoels, the president of the committee, gave the chairman of the Region Executive Committee, Silberstein. This new head of Birobidjan was a young man who had grown up after the Revolution. His knowledge of Jewish culture was limited to what he had learned in the Communist Yiddish schools and what he remembered of his grandfather's tales. But he seemed to be very serious and sincere about the little that he did know. Like an elder statesman initiating a novice politician, Mikhoels pointed out the pitfalls to avoid and where the stress must be laid. He advised Silberstein to keep a firm, steady hand on the two ends of the lever, on the elementary school and the top government office. If Silberstein held these two Yiddish positions well in hand, all in between would follow naturally. Silberstein seemed very respectful and willing to learn.

Itzik Fefer, the secretary of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, contrived a plan for the two of us to make a grand tour of Birobidjan, with a film record from beginning to end. We were to leave the Moscow airport after due ceremonies, and have

receptions at all the stops en route, in order to show the enthusiasm of the people in the Soviet Union, Jews and non-Jews, for the development of the Jewish Autonomous Region. Our extensive visit in Birobidjan would, of course, be filmed completely. The film would then be shown in the Jewish communities of the Soviet Union as part of the propaganda for emigration to the Jewish Autonomous Region. In his amusing, tongue-in-cheek manner, Fefer turned to me and said: "And if you cared to, you could have a print of the film to take with you to America."

I realized that if Fefer's plan had a chance, it was only because the film might be shown in America. Yet I was ready to underwrite the entire cost, if necessary, for I was anxious to see Birobidjan again after a lapse of twelve years, and this would be my only opportunity. There was no Intourist service whatever beyond the Urals. Moreover, the Far East was practically out of bounds for foreigners. Only Molotov, who then served as foreign minister, could give the permission to travel there. Lozovsky, himself a deputy foreign minister and sponsor of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, was supposed to take the matter up with Molotov. As I have explained elsewhere, apparently Molotov was either abroad or too preoccupied with weighty affairs to be approached. At any rate, Fefer never received a formal refusal—at least to my knowledge. After waiting weeks for a decision, I decided to leave. Perhaps the bitter brew for Jews was already being mixed within the Kremlin walls. Perhaps this effort was subsequently used as evidence in the trials. However, I came away from the Soviet Union with the definite impression that now the Soviet Jews themselves wanted Birobidjan and were ready for mass immigration. If the current trend were only permitted to run another decade, I felt sure there would be a real Jewish autonomous region, and probably a Jewish republic. But the movement was halted at its first spurt.

The anti-Jewish madness that began flowing out of the Kremlin at the end of 1948 did not bypass Birobidjan. In fact, the Jews there found themselves in a worse position than Jews elsewhere. They were more exposed—collected in small communities where everyone knew everyone else, and where many were

involved in what could be called Jewish activity. Any Jewish activity—indeed, any item on the regional cultural program, any act of Jewish character, even if it had had formal official sanction at the time—constituted a crime or incriminating evidence. The official charge ran from artifically implanting Yiddish culture in order to impose it on the rest of the population, to treason and foreign espionage.

The Crimean plot charged against the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was here turned into an indictment for seeking to detach Birobidjan from the Soviet Union, turn it over to Japan, and convert it into an international anti-Soviet base, as I have already mentioned. This was supposedly part of the treacherous plan Mikhoels had brought with him from his visit in the United States in 1943. The same two American Jewish journalists who had been implicated in the plot against the Jewish writers of Moscow were also involved in the conspiracy of Birobidjan. They allegedly had come to the Soviet Union in 1946 to check not only on the progress of the "treachery" of the Crimea but on the "treason" of Birobidjan as well. The chief of the Secret Police for the Far East, Major General Goglidje, regarded the latter as the more dangerous, since it concerned an entire territorial unit, a possible Soviet state.

The bill of particulars at the Birobidjan trials contained strange items. One concerned itself with articles of clothing and shoes from America. These had been shipped by friends of Birobidjan in the United States, who were well known to the Soviet representative there. The funds for them had been raised at public meetings, many of which had been addressed by Soviet diplomatic personnel stationed in the various localities. The articles of clothing and shoes had been cleared for shipment to the Soviet Union by the appropriate official at the Soviet consulate; they had passed customs at the Soviet border in the proper manner, and been transshipped to Birobidjan by the proper authorities. It had been as open, above-board, legal, and friendly a transaction as could be, made with the knowledge and approval of various officials, high and low. Nevertheless, the unfortunate people who took over the shipment in Birobidjan and distributed it to persons admittedly needy after the de-

structive war were rounded up as traitors who had manipulated the whole thing as part of the conspiracy.

Another charge asserted that the exhibits in the Jewish museum were unrelated to the region and were meant to indicate stages in the history of the Jews. Still others concerned the expression of bourgeois-nationalist ideas: speaking of the unity of the Jewish people; the efforts toward expanding the *Birobidjaner Shtern*; the intention to establish a Jewish publishing house and the plan for a Yiddish university—in short anything that gave a national character to the projected national Jewish home. But was Birobidjan not meant to offer all this and more to the Jews? The answer now was that it was all "artificial," the majority of the population being non-Jewish. But if there had been a Jewish majority in Birobidjan, those items would have been quite in order; how could they be acts of treason now? The answer was that they were manifestations of Jewish nationalism, which was as dangerous as Ukrainian nationalism. Besides, Jewish nationalism was linked with the supposed Jewish reactionism and with the bourgeois Jewish enemies of the Soviet Union.

There is a telling remark by a noted Jewish writer who went through this torture in Birobidjan, spent a number of years in a labor camp, and finally managed to reach the free world—he still retained a tender feeling for Birobidjan. He said that in the brutal, frequently bloody, encounters with his inquisitors, it often seemed as if they were throwing the *Protocols of Zion* at him, as though the entire Jewish people were there on the cross with him. One of the inquisitors, a Judge Oziersky of Khabarovsk, boasted that he had read thirty books on Jews in preparation for the writer's case. Perhaps he had not actually read that many books, but he had certainly read the classic book on Nazi anti-Semitism by the high priest of Nazi racialism, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* by Adolf Rosenberg, for he quoted passages from memory, to his Jewish victims.

Cracks in the Wall

A dark curtain fell between Birobidjan and the rest of the world at the beginning of 1949. Even the one-way communica-

tion halted completely. People in Moscow knew next to nothing about the situation in the Jewish Autonomous Region except that "there it was worse." It was six years before the first glimmer came out of the dark. An American newspaperman, Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* managed a peep behind the curtain. He obtained permission, rarely given, to visit the Far East. In Birobidjan he was the first foreign visitor since the war. And what did he find?

Salisbury quoted the administrative head of the region, Lev Yefremovich Vinkevich, as saying that, from the "factual viewpoint," the Jewish Autonomous Region might as well be called "Soviet Autonomous Region" since the Jews were actually "only one of a number of nationalities living in the area." Vinkevich further told Salisbury that "except for insignificant older elements, all [Jews] read and use the Russian language and in fact prefer Russian to Yiddish." Also, that the Yiddish theatre became "unprofitable," and had been converted into a club for young people. At an amateur show put on at the club to mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Jewish Autonomous Region in 1934, "there were Jewish folk dances and songs along with Russian, Ukrainian, and Tatar." Mr. Salisbury found no Yiddish schools. There was a Yiddish edition of the *Birobidjan Star*, the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, appearing three times weekly, and two radio programs a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, in Yiddish. Salisbury did not report on the content of the paper or radio programs. At the local museum, he found "no emphasis on the Jewish side" except for a copy of the *Birobidjaner Shtern* of 1935. At the library, he was told there were 29,000 Yiddish books among the 100,000 books at the library. He was shown a 1938 edition, in Yiddish, of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* and a Yiddish translation of a novel by Flaubert published in 1937. At the local book shop, Salisbury reported, Yiddish books were to be found, including "a 1939 edition of a *Short Course of the History of the Communist Party* and several volumes by Sholom Aleichem published in Moscow in 1948."

Salisbury asked Vinkevich to "explain the difference in emphasis given to the Yiddish language and culture in Birobidjan, compared with that placed, for example, on the Yakut language and culture in Yakutia." Vinkevich did not deny the difference, and explained it by saying that the Jews were "a matured nationality and therefore there was neither need nor place for the kind of helping hand the Soviet extends to less developed nationalities in aiding them to develop their language, literature, history, and cultural heritage." Apparently, since according to his opinion the "Jews preferred Russian to Yiddish," there was no longer any more need for their "literature, history, and cultural heritage" than for their language. All street signs, Salisbury reported, were in Russian and Yiddish. "Most public institutions and some industrial establishments post their names in both Russian and Yiddish. However, the oblast's [region's] party and administrative offices carry their designations only in Russian."

Salisbury also reported—I suspect with tongue in cheek—that "as far as the knowledge and interest of Birobidjan Jews in foreign developments concerning fellow Jews is concerned, [he] was repeatedly told by Birobidjan officials that this interest was no greater on the part of Jews than among any other groups of Soviet citizens. Never during question periods, which uniformly occurred when the correspondent was escorted through schools, factories, or other institutions, were questions asked about Jews abroad, Israel, Zionism, or other matters of Jewish interest. Officials said this reflected a lack of interest on the part of Jews in such matters."

On general conditions, Salisbury reported being given the figure of 200,000 for the total population, with the proportion of Jews "about 50 per cent." In the current immigration there did "not appear to be a very high Jewish percentage among the newcomers, but the movement of Jews to Birobidjan has not completely stopped. There is a movement out of Birobidjan as well as into it . . ." The biggest enterprise in the town of Birobidjan was the state clothing factory. Jews played an important role in the Birobidjan government.

Now, what did this first report after six years by an admittedly impartial observer add up to?

The figures given Mr. Salisbury were obviously inaccurate. Five years after his visit, the official census gave the region a population of 163,000. The estimate of "about 50 per cent" for

the Jews could have been close to reality, for most of the localities he visited were towns, industrial centers, or major co-operatives. Those spots had always had a concentration of Jews. The state clothing factory had initially been a totally Jewish enterprise, fewer and fewer Jews having gone into agriculture. Obviously, too, there was very little left of the cultural autonomy, and nothing at all of the great plans projected seven and eight years earlier. All the "Jewish" there was in the Jewish Autonomous Region was the names on the street signs and some names on the signs of institutions, the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, and the two radio programs, and the latter two were Jewish only in the linguistic sense. There was no Jewish content whatever, as we know from other sources, either in the *Birobidjaner Shtern* or in the radio programs.

This situation was corroborated by the poet Israel Emiot, who returned from a labor camp to Birobidjan two years after Salisbury's visit. He reported finding the same Jewish cultural void as Salisbury. As one who had lived and worked in Birobidjan and knew the languages, Emiot could, of course, delve deeper into the situation. He found only a few drab shelves of Yiddish books in the library. All the works of Yiddish writers who had been executed or sent to labor camps had been destroyed. These embraced most of the Soviet Yiddish literature. The large Judaica collection was rotting in a cellar. The poor librarians had no heart to destroy it, yet dared not have it in public view. Most Yiddish books owned by individuals had also been destroyed for fear of incrimination. On display at the new, large, modern bookshop were sections of books in several languages, but no Yiddish section. Only a few faded old Yiddish pamphlets lay in a corner of a shelf. The librarian, a naïve Russian woman, asked him: "What happened to the Yiddish writers? Did they all stop writing?"

The *Birobidjaner Shtern* had run a series, in translation, by a member of the Nanaite tribe on the fishing habits of his people, but not a line on any phase of the life of the Jewish people. The Yiddish radio programs dealt exclusively with the general local situation, with never a word about Jews or Jewish matters. After going to considerable trouble, some leading Jewish citizens obtained a permit for a literary evening at the

library (it still bore the name of Sholom Aleichem), at which a few of the Yiddish writers who had returned from labor camps (this was in 1956!) were to read their unpublished writings. The program was opened by a representative of the Culture Department, who spoke in Russian. The audience had no patience with her, and voices called: "Yiddish! Yiddish!" These were the same people Vinkevich had told Salisbury preferred Russian to Yiddish.

The curtain rose on Birobidjan again in the spring of 1958. Perhaps it was inadvertently lifted by Khrushchev himself. The subject of Birobidjan happened to come up in an interview he gave to M. Serge Groussard, an editor of *Figaro*, which appeared in that Paris newspaper on April 9, 1958. Mr. Khrushchev said: . . . "The Soviet Union was the first in the world to decide to help the Jews, not only as individuals, but also as a people. We have chosen for this Birobidjan, a region little populated, in Siberia, north of Manchuria. We have put it at the disposition of the Jews and accorded it a special status. It was a remarkable gift. The land of Birobidjan is the most fertile there is. Over there the climate is meridional, the cultivation of the soil a pleasure. There are water and sun. There are immense forests, rich earth, minerals in abundance, rivers swarming with fish. And what happened? Jews went to Birobidjan in masses. They were enthusiastic, exultant. From all corners of the Soviet Union —and I could say from all countries of Europe which they could leave to escape persecution—they rushed there. And then? And then, very few remained. Lately, the arriving and returning have continued, but one must recognize the fact that the returning has more and more exceeded the arriving.

"How many Jews remain in that beautiful region? That I could not tell exactly in the absence of documentation. But there must remain a large enough number. Why, in 1955 I passed through Birobidjan myself, and, contrary to your informants, I have seen many inscriptions in Yiddish on the stations and the streets about the stations. It must be admitted, however, that if we were to strike a balance, we would have to state that the Jewish colonization in Birobidjan was a failure. The colonists arrived there full of fervor, aflame with enthusiasm, and then, one by one they left.

"How to explain this disagreeable phenomenon? In my opinion, by historical conditions. The Jews have always preferred the artisan crafts—they are tailors, they work with glass or precious stones, they are tradesmen, druggists, carpenters. But if you take construction or metallurgy, where people work as a team, you would not find a single Jew—to my knowledge. They don't like collective work, group discipline. They have always preferred to be dispersed. They are individualists."

Both Khrushchev and *Figaro* were doubtless surprised at the impact his words made on public opinion throughout the world. Whether the reason was that this particular item was the only new thing in the interview, or that this was the first time the new ruler had expressed himself on Birobidjan, or—and this is more probable—that Khrushchev was casting a reflection on the character of the Jewish people, his words were carried around the world and commented upon universally and unfavorably. Their implication was forbidding. To be individualistic in a collective society was apparently tantamount to being Communistic in a Capitalist society. Moreover, here was public admission of the total failure of a policy—a thing simply not done in the Soviet Union, particularly in an area in which the Soviets had persuaded the world to believe that they had succeeded most—the solution of their nationalist problems. And all this coming to pass when the new State of Israel was forging ahead and already carried some weight in world affairs! Capitalism was doing better with the Jewish problem, for all the braggadocio of the Soviets.

As in other cases where Khrushchev talked too freely, Soviet propaganda stepped subtly into the breach to correct the Boss. First, it feebly disavowed the text of the statement in *Figaro*—Khrushchev had not said just that. What he had said was not given. This equivocation was not convincing, but it was a straw for those who were struggling to hold on to their belief in the pristine innocence of the Soviet state. Then on August 6, 1958, an article on the Jewish Autonomous Region by one V. Pakhman appeared in the Moscow newspaper *Sovietskaya Rossiya*. Ostensibly it was only a bit of travelogue, just one man's impression of Birobidjan today, but indirectly the article contradicted everything Khrushchev had told the editor of *Figaro* about Birobidjan.

The burden of the Pakhman article is that Birobidjan is not a failure: "All of a sudden the taiga ends, and before the eyes come factory chimneys, houses, and neat streets . . . Fifty-three per cent of all arable terraces (in the Khabar district) are concentrated in this area, also 39 per cent of the collectively owned big-horned cattle." The success of Birobidjan is presumably due to the efforts of the Jews, at least principally so. The other nationalities are assigned a secondary role: "Side by side with the kolkhoz members of the Jewish nationality, there toil here Russians together with Ukrainians, White Russians, Mordvinians, and Far Eastern natives." Not a single name of a non-Jew appears in the article, which mentions a score of individuals. The Jews had not run away from Birobidjan, but had remained and become attached to the soil; neither had their children left the region. "The bee-master Zelman Gershovitz Volfson . . . arrived at Waldheim in 1928"; Yekhiel Yosifovich Rak arrived in 1931, has brought up nine children, three of them working under him in his tractor brigade. Mordko Davidovich Zaslavsky had been working at the same plant for twenty years, has brought up three daughters, two of whom were highly educated and returned to their native Amur land. The eldest is a schoolteacher, the middle one a counsellor in a children's home, the youngest still in school. The Yiddish writer Boris Israilevich Miller, who knows the entire region intimately, says, "I became wedded to this country; I do not know where else I could have lived." So runs Pakhman's article.

By the same method of careful selection of facts and of suggesting the general by the particular that he used to convey the impression all Birobidjan was Jewish, Pakhman also wanted to persuade his readers that the culture of the region was Yiddish. He did not mention Jewish cultural institutions, nor did he give an indication that there were Russian cultural institutions. But he states that at the library "named after Sholom Aleichem there is a large collection of literature in Yiddish . . . evening meetings were held for reading the works of the poet Samuil Galkin and those of the local poet-song writer, Isaac Brofman . . . Artists recite poetry and sing Jewish folksongs."

He sums up: "Much can be told about the cultural life in the region, and about the regular and interesting radio-broadcasts in the Jewish language by the local union [of writers]. Also about the literary union set up at the editorial office of the paper, and about the literary and artistic anthology *Birobidjan*, which will be published on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the autonomous region, and will be issued both in Yiddish and in Russian."

The pay-off comes in a seemingly irrelevant final section of the article bespattering the State of Israel.

"How could one change this land [Birobidjan] for somewhere else?" Pakhman quotes the "local inhabitants" as asking. Well, it seems that some of the people of Birobidjan had made the change—and were they sorry! Pakhman happened to visit one pensioner, Peisakh Yakovlevich Mikhelson, whose daughter Rakhil had married in 1946 and gone with her husband to Israel. "Her letters are documents of a great human misfortune," Pakhman writes, and quotes from the letters: "I curse the minute when I parted from you . . . I was young and foolish . . . I suffer terribly here . . ." And, to her sister: "You should never do such a foolish thing as I did. You are happy with what you have . . . The Soviet Union takes great care of you, and gives the people every opportunity for a decent life. In the Soviet Union everything is by far better."

On his own, Pakhman tells what some of the Birobidjan Jews who, "under the influence of Zionist propaganda," left for Israel found there. "Immigrants, especially those arriving from the Soviet Union, Peoples' Democracies, India, and some other countries, the Israeli authorities treated as unwelcome guests. The people were cooped up in barracks, often could not find work, dragged out a half-starved existence, and all the time were being scoffed at." Why "Zionist propaganda" should entice Jews in the Soviet Union to go to Israel only to be treated there as "unwelcome guests" and be scoffed at was no more intelligible than Rakhil's staying on in the land of her "great human misfortune," inasmuch as, unlike the Soviet Union, Israel permits people to leave the country.

On the basis of Pakhman's article alone, one could conclude that although there are some non-Jews in Birobidjan, the region

is almost wholly Jewish; that the cultural life of the region is exclusively Jewish; that no Jews ever leave Birobidjan except the few who succumb to "Zionist propaganda," which is about the only evil in the glorious Jewish homeland, Birobidjan.

The Pakhman article was not merely just another piece published in a newspaper. It represented a new turn in Soviet public relations. As devoid of Jewish meaning or values as Birobidjan now was, it was to be put back into circulation as a pro-Soviet propaganda piece. In addition to counteracting the bad effect of the *Figaro* interview, the article was expected to cover up, if not refute, the repeated rumors about the hapless state of Soviet Jewry. It was translated into a number of languages, republished in all the Jewish Communist publications and in some non-Communist pro-Soviet magazines. Moreover, in some countries it was sent out by the Soviet embassies to persons inquiring about the status of Jews.

I happen to know of one naïve American Jew who wrote to the Soviet Ambassador in Washington asking in all sincerity why there were no Yiddish publications, books, and schools in the Soviet Union. He said he realized that the murder of the Jewish writers and the suppression of the Yiddish cultural institutions had been the acts of Beria and Stalin. But Stalin had been dead six years, and Khrushchev had been in power for some years. He could not bring the martyred writers back to life, but he could revive the Yiddish cultural institutions. Why did he not do this?

He received a reply from the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy that in response to his questions he was being sent a translation of an article that had recently appeared in the Soviet press, and that its contents, the First Secretary hoped, would satisfy him. The article was Pakhman's. But significantly, the part about Israel had been omitted. The anti-Israel paragraphs were meant apparently for home consumption, or at least not for a country like the United States.

The Pakhman article set the tone and served as a pattern for subsequent articles, correspondence, and radio broadcasts from Moscow.

Within the month another article on Birobidjan was sent out of Moscow, and was published, among other places, as far away

as Montevideo, Uruguay. The occasion was the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow. The author, I. Berezin, reported on the "exhibits of Birobidjan" at the Far Eastern pavilion. We learn that the Birobidjan tomatoes received "recognition not only in the Far East, but on an All-Union scale." The Kirov kolkhoz of Birobidjan "supplies with vegetables the inhabitants of the cities of Komsomolsk on the Amur and Khabarovsk." We learn also that the colonists have learned to cultivate maize, which gives them the opportunity to expand cattle raising, and they are getting "pure milk, the average amount per head being 3,000 litres." In short, the forty-two large kolkhozes and seven sovkhozes of the region "enjoy the bounties of successful production." One kolkhoz has been able "to acquire the necessary counting-machines"; another was able to purchase at the machine-tractor station 14 tractors, 4 combines, 13 ploughs, and other inventory for 6,000 rubles." All agricultural settlements "grow richer and richer every year," which makes it possible for them "to construct new houses, well-ordered settlements, and to raise the cultural level of the inhabitants of the region."

But who are the inhabitants of the region? Even if we accept the exaggerated estimate of a 50 per cent Jewish population, Jews could not constitute more than 25 per cent of the agricultural population, and probably not that much. For the Jews are admittedly concentrated in the larger towns, in industry, and in the administration. On the other hand, the large majority of the non-Jewish immigration went into agriculture. In fact, several months later, a Polish visitor to the Pravda Kolkhoz in Birobidjan was told by the chairman, Comrade Peller, that only six out of the 167 families in the kolkhoz were Jewish, and he added laughingly, "Here we, the Jews, hold the positions and run the kolkhoz." Yet there was no mention of the non-Jews in the Berezin article, except a special remark in connection with the Thirty-third of October Kolkhoz—that "in this particular kolkhoz there are working together successfully side by side Ukrainians, Russians, and representatives of other nationalities." But immediately thereafter the names mentioned were unmistakably Jewish: "The president of the kolkhoz, D. Galperin, was awarded a little gold medal; the agronomist Friedkin and the cattle breeders Bauman and Kol were likewise awarded gold and silver medals." Other names mentioned with high praise were Nakhum Ladizhinsky, Itzik Kandaly, Itzik Gurshen, Nakhum Lagertan. Not a single non-Jewish name appears in the article. At the beginning of the article, where the area of the Jewish Autonomous Region is given, the comparison used is "nearly twice the size of the State of Israel." The concluding sentences, summarizing the article, state: "The working Jews have established themselves well in the Jewish Autonomous Region. They live here free and happy."

Of similar nature was a travelogue on the beauties of Birobidjan broadcast over the Moscow radio in November, 1958. Once again there was a glowing description of the beautiful landscapes and enthusiasm over the material success of the region. And again the non-Jews of Birobidjan were missing from the picture. Twice it was mentioned that the signs are in Yiddish and Russian; once, the impression was given that the signs are in Yiddish only ("All morning we walked through the city, seeing what the houses were like and examining the signs with inscriptions in Yiddish"). Listeners were told that "Birobidjan is not a Jewish word," and that "in the 1930's the first Jewish settlers made their homes in the valleys of these two rivers, and it was they who formed their autonomous region in the Far East." In this travelogue, too, the people and the names mentioned were exclusively Jewish.

The old newsman in the street (he knew everybody and everybody knew him, of course) sold the *Birobidjaner Shtern* as well as the Russian local paper. He introduced the radio correspondent to three old ladies who, he explained, were very religious and were returning from the synagogue. One of the two persons whom the radio correspondent visited was Ilya Bekherman, who had emigrated from the Soviet Union to look for work in South America. "I stayed there for two years," Bekherman told the correspondent, "but had no luck, and in 1931 I came to Birobidjan and helped to build the city. There were plenty of difficulties in those days. We had to uproot the trees in the taiga and build houses. That was the kind of work I liked because I knew I was working for myself. I've been living in Birobidjan ever since. We have three children. Our eldest son has finished

college and is working at a factory as a mechanical engineer. Our second son is now in college, and our daughter is still a schoolgirl. Not once in the twenty-seven years I have spent here have I been without work." The second person the correspondent interviewed was Paulina Gofun, a member of the Executive Committee of the City Council. She told him of the marvelous growth and industrial development of the city, adding, "Most of the people are Jewish, but there are also Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians living in Birobidjan."

The Tatars and native strains were not even mentioned. The Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians were given the cold shoulder with the phrase "also living" there. Only the Bekhermans were flaunted for all the credit. The Soviet people have never been exposed to greater national chauvinism than appeared in the Birobidjan propaganda issued by their own government.

Four Eyewitnesses

Birobidjan has never been on the Intourist itinerary. Generally Irkutsk is about the farthest point east open to foreigners. Still, exceptions have been made in special cases, mostly for certain newspaper people. After years of prohibition, exceptions were made again, particularly after Birobidjan was put back in the news, but the exceptions were definitely one-sided—only for people who had no personal interest in the Jewish character of the region. During the latter part of 1958 and the first half of 1959, two journalists from Communist publications, Gunter Linde for *Wochenpost* of East Berlin and Max Léon for *Humanité* of Paris, and a correspondent for *Swiat* of Warsaw, Dominik Horodynski, visited Birobidjan. At the same time, two editors of two Jewish Communist papers, one in Western Europe and one in America, could not obtain permission to go to Birobidjan, although they tried hard for weeks while in Moscow. During the summer of 1959, a correspondent of the *New York Times* visited Birobidjan, but a columnist from a Jewish newspaper in New York was not allowed to do so, perhaps just because he had been there before, had come out with a favorable impression, and joined an organization of the friends of Birobidjan in the United States. It seemed that the less one knew about the Jewish Autonomous Region and the less one cared about its being Jewish, the easier it was to get permission to go there.

What did these reporters have to say about the Jewish character of Birobidjan today?

Dominik Horodynski of *Swiat* was apparently the most inquisitive. He asked direct questions and wanted clear answers.

Are there Jewish schools? "There were primary and secondary Jewish schools. After the war they were liquidated, because parents preferred to send their children to Russian schools, as this would make it easier for them to continue their education. . . ." In what way is the Jewish character of the region expressed? "There is a Yiddish newspaper. Jews rise to administrative positions. The official signs are bilingual."

Horodynski says that the Jews of Birobidjan had built a synagogue in 1947, which burned down two years later, and the religious community then bought a small house and converted it into a synagogue. There is no rabbi, and the services are conducted by a cantor. The community has twenty-four members; the cantor told him that on Yom Kippur and Succoth more than fifty people attend. One Jew at the synagogue volunteered in Yiddish to the visitor: "My daughters left for Israel, but I will remain here. I have a pension, and it is much better here than it was in the past." Horodynski asked the cantor if there were any young people among the fifty believers. "For a moment it was quiet, and then a firm voice answered, 'No, there are no young people.' The cantor's unexpressive glance was directed into the far distance."

Horodynski also gives his own impressions. "As far as I could see," he writes, "the Birobidjan Jews do not attach great importance to their Jewish origin. On the contrary, they assimilate rapidly, and even desire assimilation. . . . True, complete assimilation is not an easy process. There remain and exist differences of temperament, disposition, interests. For instance, the principal pastime of the non-Jewish residents of Birobidjan is hunting. Most of them spend every free moment in the taiga. But it is a fact, as it was told to us, that no Jew spends his time hunting. This fact makes a distinction, and separates people."

He concludes as follows: "The experiment to turn Jews into farmers and to settle them east of the Mongolian border, in a place where there was no Jewish tradition, could not be crowned with glory. The Bira is not the Jordan. It never was the Jordan and it never will be . . ."

Gunter Linde's report on Birobidjan ran in two installments in the *Wochenpost*. There is not a line in the two articles on the present Jewish character, or the Jewish culture, of the region. His only reference to the Jewishness of the place is in connection with its political origin. He, too, mentions many Jewish names, but he merely observes that they sound German (Eisenberg, Becker, Grossmann, etc.) and that their bearers not only speak Yiddish but also understand German, or refers to them in connection with their economic activities. He is the only one among the correspondents to manifest an ethnic interest in the region, but it is limited to the aborigines, his entire second article being devoted to them.

We do learn from him, indirectly, a few interesting details about the Jews there generally. One-third of the members of the Waldheim Kolkhoz, the pride of the Jewish pioneers, is non-Jewish. The kolkhoz specializes in raising hogs, and also boasts of the number of deputies it has produced. Two members of the kolkhoz, Rachel Fredkina and Shifra Kotchina, were until the year before deputies of the Supreme Soviet; a third woman member is a deputy of the Regional Soviet of Khabarovsk. Five members are deputies in the district soviet and eighteen are deputies in the Waldheim village soviet. Boris Halpern said to Linde, "Together, twenty-six deputies. Pretty good for one kolkhoz, isn't it?"

The old Waldheimers also take pride in the achievement of the new generation. "So many of the young people study at the several universities of the Far East. Nachmen Berger's daughter studies at the Pedagogical Institute of Khabarovsk; Riand's son lives in the city as an author and art critic; and the son of Yekhiel Yosifovich went to Moscow as an engineer."

To the un-Marxian mind, this might look like a bourgeois trend, at least in the sense of social values. But then the Waldheimers are called "the millionaires"—their kolkhoz makes so much money.

Linde's figures are far out of line. He gives the total population of Birobidjan as 250,000 (census figure is 163,000), and the Jewish proportion as one-half. His general impression is rhapsodic. Here, in what he calls the "Pearl of the Far East," is the true wonderland. There is neither want nor contention. You are almost back to the days before the Tower of Babel, when all the people were one. At the textile factory, Klara Mikhailovna Malkina is astonished at Linde's question about how many nationalities are represented in her brigade. She has no idea. "We never ask," she says, "about the origin of a person. What matters is his contribution to production and his behavior to others." The same sentiment is expressed by Comrade Kul, the Party secretary of Waldheim: "Sound friendship and good co-operation of people from all nationalities, this is our might and our pride."

According to Gunter Linde, the future has already arrived in Birobidjan. The Jews and the others have already come through the Socialist melting pot as one people.

Max Léon's article in *Humanité* is more knowledgeable. The figures he cites are reasonably correct. He understands the historical background of the Jewish Autonomous Region, makes reference to the condition of the Jews under the Czarist regime, and even mentions the Nazi atrocities. He evinces an interest not only in the scenery and production of the Jewish Autonomous Region, but in the Jews of the region as well—primarily their welfare, but also their cultural life.

Of the Jewish cultural life Max Léon has this to tell: At the tractor plant, a group of amateurs "presented a spectacle in Yiddish, inspired by Russian and Polish folklore." The local radio broadcasts regularly "political, literary, and artistic programs" in Yiddish. A group of Yiddish writers, organized around the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, fill one page of that publication weekly "with novels, stories, and poetry"; these writers also are simultaneously being published in *The Extreme Orient* (non-Jewish); the better-known among them are Boris Miller, Isaac Bronman, Max Riant, Nicolas Kapousto. A printing for Yiddish books will be begun, using new type cast in Moscow and due to be delivered. (The article appeared July 14, 1959.)

The burden of Max Léon's report is that there is no discrimi-

nation in the Jewish Autonomous Region against—Jews! He quotes the director of the tractor plant, Lev Moyseevich Slutzky, whose name recurs in all the articles on Birobidjan, as saying: "Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, Jews and non-Jews, we work together, never raising the question of one's origin. We don't even think of the fact that I am a Jew, and that the chief engineer is a Russian of an Orthodox family. We have the same ideal, the same objectives. We are one family." And speaking of his own observations, Max Léon says that Jews are found in the most responsible posts in the Party as well as in the soviets. "Two of the three secretaries of the Party of Birobidjan are Jews. The regional commissions for health, finance, and agriculture are headed by Berdichefsky, Breugel, and Kharfin. Comrade Kisselgofi is the director of the clothing factory, Stoinko of the shoe factory, Feldman of repairs of agricultural machinery. Fishman is the president of the largest kolkhoz of the region, which exploits 7,000 hectares of arable land. . . . The theatrical troupe that presented its first spectacle, *In Search of Joy* by Rosov, contains a number of Jewish artists. The directress is Mira Chimenko. At the School for Teachers, Cecile Dvorkina is responsible for the section of graphical arts."

All this is good news, of course. But would Ukrainians boast that there is no discrimination against Ukrainians in Kiev?

The "pleasantest memories and realities" that the correspondent of the *New York Times*, Max Frankel, carried away from his visit to Birobidjan were of gefilte fish with horse-radish and cheese blintzes with sour cream. He also had a sip of cream soda, which the people there enjoy cold, "like the people on Seventh Avenue" and "unlike most Russians." What else that was Jewish did Max Frankel find in Birobidjan? Well, not very much outside the street signs. Here is his report on the Jewish aspect of Birobidjan as of May, 1959:

"No Yiddish is taught in schools, no Yiddish films are shown, no Yiddish books are printed. A well-stocked bookstore had not heard of a commemorative Yiddish edition of some works of Sholom Aleichem, published in Moscow this year. At the library there are said to be 12,000 old Yiddish volumes among the 100,000 books. Three times a week a two-page Yiddish newspaper, the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, appears. Soviet reference books

list its circulation as 1,000. Two newsstands had a few copies; a third, placed near a publicly posted copy of the paper, has not heard of it. The *Shtern* is a party organ and in large part carries translations from the daily, four-page *Birobidjanskaya Zvezda* (*Zvezda*, like *Shtern*, means 'star'). A municipal culture official says there are occasional Yiddish radio programs. They are not advertised.

"Yiddish, in short, is a billboard language here. If Riga speaks Latvian and Tiflis is run in Georgian, the most that can be said is that Birobidjan recognizes Yiddish."

Frankel reports that "most opportunities for the young are outside the region." Many youngsters leave—"they aspire to assimilation, to opportunity alongside the Russians. They might rebel against the Yiddish culture even if it were sanctioned."

As to the Jewish religion, Frankel reports: "No youngster ever shows up at the shack that serves as a synagogue. Friday night and Saturdays, on the Jewish Sabbath, Cantor Kaplan (there is no rabbi) leads prayers for thirty persons, more women than men. Last Yom Kippur, the most important Jewish holiday, 400 worshipers walked to the little house, about half a mile from the paved city. A few packages of matzohs arrive each Passover from Israel, but the local bakery may one day produce

Metamorphosis of a postmark: The first, dated August 5, 1935, has the word Birobidjan in Yiddish at the top, the same in Russian at the bottom, with the initials of Jewish Autonomous Region at the side. The second has the letters USSR at the top, the word Birobidjan in Russian on the left side and in Yiddish on the right, with the initials as on the first. The third, dated December 5, 1955, does not have the word Birobidjan in Yiddish nor the initials of the Jewish Autonomous Region, only USSR at the top and the words for Birobidjan Region.

for the local faithful, it is said. Two big prayer books and three Torahs (scriptures) were contributed by the Moscow synagogue long ago. Jewish farmers in the province, most of them settled twenty-five years ago or more, are a majority among the worshipers . . ."

How the fifty worshipers on Yom Kippur reported by Dominik Horodynski grew into the four hundred reported by Max Frankel is one of the secrets, and hazards, of the correspondent's trade in the Soviet Union. The two correspondents may have tapped different sources, or the same source may have had its reason for understating to Horodynski and overstating to Frankel. Horodynski was a Polish Catholic, Frankel an American Jew.

End of Hope

What can be said with absolute honesty about Birobidjan as the Jewish Autonomous Region today? What may reasonably be expected of it in the future?

Twenty-five years ago, I left Birobidjan with my chief impression compounded of misery and hope. The misery was obviously transitory, deriving from the raw pioneer conditions in a virgin territory with a severe climate, from lack of planning and inadequate prior preparation, and from the character of the new settlers, urban people, unused to hard work and to roughing it. Someday the marshes would be drained, and the debilitating mosquitoes would decrease; the taiga would be pushed back, and the pesty *gnus* would disappear; then people would just plow and sow and reap. Someday there would be solid, livable houses affording shelter in inclement weather; there would be enough food to go around, and work not only in the taiga but also in shops and factories. Life would be easier and more comfortable, and many more Jews would be coming "to fill the land," as they remembered the expression of the Bible. And it was all to be Jewish. In 1934, this was as certain as any historical process can be.

The mayor of the town of Birobidjan was a handsome young Jewish man who spoke Yiddish with difficulty. His vocabulary was poor and his accent and grammar terrible. I suggested that

we speak Russian, but he shook his head. "When I sit at this desk," he said, "I have to speak Yiddish."

I cabled about a dozen 2,000-word articles direct from Birobidjan. The telegrapher, a Korean girl, was bewildered. She had never wired such long messages, and they were so foreign to her, Russian being the only European language she knew. She apologized for "not knowing Yiddish yet"—she was about to begin a course in that language at night.

All Jewish children attended Yiddish schools, of course. There were also Russian schools for Russian children. Visiting a Teachers' Institute for these Russian schools, I happened on a class where Yiddish was taught. Some of the towheaded young men with upturned noses spoke Yiddish no worse than that of the Jewish mayor of Birobidjan. Since they were not going to teach in Yiddish schools, why were they studying Yiddish? Well, inasmuch as they were to be teachers in the Jewish Autonomous Region, they had to know the language of the Region.

One could well have quarreled with the substance of the Jewish culture then being cultivated in Birobidjan, but there was no question as to its being Yiddish.

Today, as of this writing, we can say with absolute certainty that there is not a single Yiddish school, or any other form of instruction in that language, in the entire region. There is thus no provision for the continuation of the language. It may also be said without fear of contradiction that Yiddish is no longer an official language, necessarily used in public institutions, or informally or customarily used there. Even the signs on the buildings of the governing institutions and the Party and regional administration are in Russian only. In short, Yiddish is no more the official language in Birobidjan now than it is elsewhere in the Soviet Union, except for what Max Frankel aptly called "the billboard"—the signs on the station and most of the streets and some of the older institutions. Like the "Jewish" in Jewish Autonomous Region, the old signs persist. Like the "Autonomous," they have become meaningless. They might be regarded as a tombstone on a stillborn hope.

As to the extent to which Yiddish is spoken privately, this much may be said with a fair degree of accuracy: It is no longer the means of communication in economic pursuits inasmuch as

there are no exclusively Jewish enterprises. When I was in Waldheim in 1934, there was not a single non-Jew about. Consequently, the records of the kolkhoz were kept in Yiddish and this language was spoken at all the meetings. Now that even at Waldheim one-third of the members are non-Jewish, the records and the meetings are necessarily in Russian. At home, among the family or in social contacts with other Jews, when non-Jews are not present, Yiddish is more likely to be spoken in Birobidjan than in similar circumstances in the large metropolitan centers like Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev, but no more likely than in the small towns of the Ukraine and Byelorussia. In other words, Yiddish is in greater use in Birobidjan because most Birobidjan Jews came from small towns.

In yet another area has Birobidjan failed as a Jewish autonomous region. This is the economic sphere. A national home presupposes a national economy. A nation striving to be culturally self-contained must make sure that it is economically self-sustained. It must create a balanced economic entity with its own work and enterprise, if not with its own means. This was understood by the early Jewish pioneers in Palestine, who fought for the "conquest of labor"—that is, participation in all fields of effort, however lowly or exhausting. There would be no Israel today if all the common labor in Palestine had been done exclusively by the Arabs. At the beginning of the settlement of Birobidjan, when the national ideal was stressed, there were Jews there willing to do all the pioneer work themselves. They cleared the forest, turned the virgin soil, built roads, learned to fish and hunt. They laid out streets, built houses, and put up shops. But as the vision of a national home blurred, the impetus weakened. They reverted to their old endeavors, congregating in the towns, engaging in what Khrushchev called "craftsmanship" (actually, small industrial co-operatives), and naturally tending toward the widening fields of management, administration, teaching, and the arts. Today there is no marked difference in economic structure between the Jews of Birobidjan and Soviet Jewry generally.

Nevertheless, there are entries on the credit side of the ledger as well. For the Soviet Union there was distinct gain here. Small as the Jewish contingent has always been, it was their initiative

and drive, if not always their physical energy, that brought about all the progress of the region. Without the Jews, there would have been no industry to speak of and hardly any commercial farming. There might, instead, be in Birobidjan today only a barely self-sustaining peasantry. This is the reason why the visiting correspondents found so many Jews in the top positions. It is no exaggeration to say that the Jews are responsible for those achievements of Birobidjan which the Far Eastern authorities put forth with pride.

Although the Jews gave much to Birobidjan, there is no doubt they also received something in return. Individually, as Soviet citizens, they could have done as well—and many of them, definitely better—in the more developed parts of the country. As Jews, they had in Birobidjan an illusion that has left a trail of "billboards." Yet there was value even to such an ethereal phenomenon as that illusion, and there still may be worth in the "billboards." It was good for the Soviet Jew, trampled by the Revolution and slaughtered by the counter-revolution, to be told that he was to be like the rest, a people like all the peoples in the vast Soviet land. He saw himself lifted from his historic homelessness, removed from the gypsy category, raised above the marginal position in which he found himself despite his equality. The wandering Jew was finally to reach home. It helped him to regain his pride, his faith in himself and in humanity.

There is little that is Jewish in the *Birobidjaner Shtern*. But the ancient square letters, the words reading from right to left, are there. And they have been there openly, legally, approvedly. Occasionally a bit of Jewishness creeps into the paper, a poem or a story—on a safe subject, to be sure—yet it may be regarded as Yiddish literature. The Yiddish radio program deals only with crops and tractors, machines and suits and shoes, and the local weather report. But the words are the same as mother, or grandmother, used. There is not a Jew in Birobidjan who needs the Yiddish sign on a street or building. But its presence sets the language of the Jew alongside the Russian language. That is almost like sitting next to Khrushchev. Of course it is pitifully little compared to what Jews have in other parts of the world. But tragically, it is something over there.

The Jewish autonomy in Birobidjan is dead. Why don't they bury it?

In the Soviet Union one hears various answers to this question: It would require a change in the Constitution; the region is listed there as the Jewish Autonomous Region. It might create a bad impression abroad, especially in countries with large Jewish communities. It would pull out a prop from the Soviet propaganda which may be urgently needed sometime to counteract the news spreading in the Capitalist world that all is not well with the Jews under the Soviets. The shell must be preserved in case it becomes necessary to fill it again. None of these explanations excludes the others. There may be some ground in all of them. The last one is intriguing. Can there be such a possibility? Is there any basis whatever for hoping for a return to the original intent on Birobidjan?

Revision of the policy on Birobidjan could come only as part of a review of the general Jewish situation. If the Soviet leaders really believe what they say about their Jews, there is nothing to review and no reason for a Jewish autonomous region. If there is no Jewish nation or people, if Soviet Jewry consists of Soviet citizens who happen to be of Jewish extraction but have no relation to Jews in other lands or do not share in a common culture, if these Soviet citizens of Jewish extraction are already assimilated in the general population, except for some leftovers from the old generation who still cling to some of the old tradition—if all these premises are true, then the conclusion the Soviet leaders draw therefrom must be correct as well. And that is to let well-enough alone. Time, the Reaper, will before long remove the leftovers, and there will be no Jews in the Soviet Union, and no Jewish problem. Why bother about a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidjan?

No effort by the Soviet leaders, short of expulsion, which is out of consideration, will bring large masses of Jews to Birobidjan under the prevailing cultural conditions there. It is too late in the process of crystallization of Jewish national consciousness in the Soviet Union for the Soviet Jew to be attracted by a "billboard" Jewish culture. He sees too clearly and knows too well what he needs and wants.

It is conceivable, of course, that the Soviet leaders will face

up to the reality of the Jewish situation, realize the existence of the problem, and accept the challenge, as Lenin did in his day. Should the Soviet leaders recognize the Jews as a people—past, present, and future—and give them actually the equality and national opportunity guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution and enjoyed by many other nationalities, they may find it necessary to fill the empty shell of Jewish autonomy in Birobidjan with Jewish substance to attract a large number of Jews. But in that case, much more would have to be done. Birobidjan could no more contain all the Jews of the Soviet Union than Israel all the millions of Jews in the world. The great majority of Soviet Jewry would remain outside Birobidjan, and their problem would require other solutions, as we shall find in the succeeding chapters. The Jewish Autonomous Region thus becomes only a part of the general Jewish problem in the Soviet Union.

Birobidjan was a beautiful dream, but like other dreams it was shattered on the rocks of reality.