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BIROBIDZHAN 1990: A TRAVELER'S REPORT

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Answering the "Jewish Question": Zionism or Communism? / 1928: Founding the Jewish Autonomous Region / 1937: The Dream Fades / Emerging from Isolation / Rediscovering Jewish Identity / Adventures at Synagogue / The Fate of the Soviet Kibbutz / Envoys from the Outside World

[Editor's Note: One of the cruelest hoaxes that the Soviet Communists tried to play on the Jewish people after the Revolution was Birobidzhan, a cynical effort to distract Jewish attention from the true Zionism of rebuilding Eretz Israel to a fraudulent Communist substitute in the far southeastern reaches of Siberia. Relatively few Jews in the USSR were taken in by the hoax, but many left-leaning Jews outside of the Soviet Union were much intrigued by the possibility of combining their Jewish and revolutionary aspirations.

Needless to say, the experiment was short-lived. It "flourished" from the proclamation of Birobidzhan as a Jewish autonomous region in 1928 to the great purges of 1937. After that everything Jewish about Birobidzhan was suspect by the Soviet authorities. The Jews never made up more than a fraction of the population of the region, although it was and still is officially a Jewish autonomous area. Of course, Jewish cultural expression never was extensive and was subsequently reduced to the barest minimum consistent with the Soviet propaganda effort.

In this Jerusalem Letter, Rabbi Joshua Stampfer describes his 1990 visit to Birobidzhan where winds of change have touched the Jews as they have elsewhere in the Soviet Union. His traveler's report adds to our knowledge of the Jewish revival and exodus from that country, particularly as it applies to this failed experiment in Jewish "statehood."]

Answering the "Jewish Question": Zionism or Communism?

Birobidzhan -- a name deeply buried in my memory bank -- a dormant account that I thought would never be disturbed. As a young child in the early 1930s in Akron, Ohio, I remember the frequent public debates on the topic "Birobidzhan or Israel." It was a

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confrontation between Zionism and Communism, two of the most dynamic forces of the time. It was a struggle between Hebrew and Yiddish, the classic and the current universal languages of the Jewish people. There was no doubt in my mind where my loyalties lay. I was passionately committed to Zionism and Israel, so Birobidzhan represented for me a betrayal of the historic mission of the Jewish people.

Both Zionism and Birobidzhan were responses to the eternal "Jewish Question": what was the solution to the problem of anti-Semitism, the continued suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of their Christian neighbors and masters? When the modern age dawned on Western Europe with the overthrow of the royal house by the French Revolution and the proclamation of "liberty, equality, and fraternity," Jews began to experience a better life.

But the vast majority of world Jewry lived in Eastern Europe where democracy had not made an impact and where the will of the czar with his attendant Russian Orthodox church reigned supreme. They were still subject to an official policy of repression and oppression. The burden of taxation, excessive economic restrictions, and government-supported pogroms reduced the lives of Jews to poverty-stricken and fear-dominated levels. They desperately searched for a way out of their miserable lot. Many fled to Western Europe and America where they could find a new life. Others were inspired by Herzl to return to their ancient homeland and fulfill the Zionist dream. Many others engaged in revolutionary activities in their own land to replace the harsh czarist regime with a new political system that regarded all the inhabitants of the land as free and equal. When the Communist Revolution of 1917 overthrew the czarist system, it seemed like the dawn of a new age of hope and promise for those Jews who had dedicated their lives to this cause.

1928: Founding the Jewish Autonomous Region

Early on, Joseph Stalin, who had succeeded Lenin, the guiding spirit of the revolution, seemed to show much understanding and sympathy for the Jewish cause. In 1928 he announced the creation of a Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan, an area in the Soviet Far East on the Amur River which separated the USSR from China. Here, he said, Jews could find security and fulfillment. The entire environment would be Jewish, Yiddish would be their language, their government would be in Jewish hands, and at the same time they would fulfill the high ideals of the Communist cause -- labor and equality. Thousands of Jews from the major centers of Jewish settlement in Western Russia -- the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, and the Russian Republic -- streamed into Birobidzhan to create a Jewish homeland. They were joined by many more Jews from other parts of the world -- South America, the United States, and Western Europe. All were motivated by a high sense of idealism -- a passionate devotion both to their Yiddish cultural heritage and to the principles of communism. It was a great adventure and the physical difficulties that they faced only heightened their sense of achievement.

The decision to go to Birobidzhan was often a wrenching one. Young adults left their families without any expectation of ever seeing them again. It was as complete a parting as if they were on their way to America or Palestine. During our visit to Birobidzhan in 1990, our interpreter, Larissa Tsilman, a professor of English at the new Pedagogical Institute, told us that her father had come to Birobidzhan as one of the first settlers in the early 1930s and at that same time his brother left for Palestine to live in a kibbutz. From the day they parted they were never in touch with each other again.

At its height there were about 30,000 Jewish pioneers in Birobidzhan. They drained swamps and felled trees to clear land for farming. In their leisure hours they sang Yiddish songs, read from their large collection of Yiddish literature, and it seemed as though a dream was being fulfilled.

1937: The Dream Fades

In 1937 the fortunes of Birobidzhan

took an abrupt turn. Stalin embarked on an anti-Semitic program that was to intensify until his death. Support for the settlement enterprise was withdrawn and its numbers began to decline. The outbreak of World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is called in Russia, sealed Birobidzhan's fate. Today, the typical war memorial that overlooks the public square in every Russian city carries in Birobidzhan a large number of Jewish names, just as there are many Jewish names on the special monument to Soviet war heroes. Jews of Birobidzhan had a special reason for resisting Hitler and preventing his conquest of the Soviet Union.

When the war ended, the Cold War began with its isolation of the Soviet Union from the Western world. Travel to Russia was severely restricted and special permission had to be obtained for every city or town that one wanted to visit. I remember a tour to Russia that I joined in 1977 -- it was billed as a Siberian Holiday tour and it took us as far as Irkutsk in Siberia. We were scheduled to take a one-day side trip to Bratsk to see one of the world's largest dams. One of the members of our group had a sister in Irkutsk whom he had not seen for over fifty years and when he requested permission to skip the side trip to spend an extra day with his sister he was refused. Birobidzhan, like most of the USSR, was declared a closed area -- so it had no contact with world Jewry and was dependent upon its own resources to preserve its unique culture.

Predictably, those resources were inadequate. Knowledge of Yiddish declined precipitously as the younger generation no longer spoke it. Most of the cooperative settlements (kolkhozim) failed and others merged to form viable units. A daily Yiddish newspaper continued to be published -- the Birobidzhaner Shtern (Birobidzhan Star) -- but its readership dropped to about 2,000, most of whom lived elsewhere in the USSR. The general feeling in Birobidzhan was that a grand experiment had failed, not from lack of dedication and commitment, but from a deliberate government policy that was designed to choke off its growth.

Emerging from Isolation

With the ascendancy of Gorbachev, the winds of change began to stir. Perestroika and glasnost meant the opening up of Birobidzhan along with the rest of the Soviet Union, and foreign visitors with new ideas and new programs began to penetrate the cultural frost that had surrounded it for so many decades.

My own involvement with Birobidzhan stemmed from a combination of circumstances. My home city, Portland, Oregon, several years ago forged a sister city link with Khabarovsk, the capital of the region in which Birobidzhan is located. Sid Lezak, an active member of that sister city committee, traveled to Khabarovsk with the group to officially seal the relationship. When he returned, he told me of the three hour train trip he took to visit Birobidzhan. He brought back a copy of the Birobidzhaner Shtern which contained an interview with him and his words aroused all my old memories of the kulturkanopf (the cultural struggle between Hebraists and Yiddishists) in the 1930s in which Birobidzhan played such an important role. I had an insatiable curiosity to see what had happened to that dream and what Birobidzhan had become. In the end, I was able to visit there in August 1990 under a sister city arrangement between Birobidzhan and Beaverton, a neighboring city alongside Portland.

Rediscovering Jewish Identity

The city of Birobidzhan is an attractive community of about 85,000. It has many green parks and broad avenues lined with trees, giving a soothing sense of spaciousness. We were told that there were 8-10,000 "pure" Jews, but up to 50,000 stemmed from mixed marriages and regarded themselves to a greater or lesser degree as Jews.

The Jews of Birobidzhan were undergoing extraordinary changes in response to the efforts of the Jewish world to reach out and bring them back into the fold. B'nai B'rith International had sent in a team of three camping experts from their own staff to conduct a five-day camping program for local teenagers. The program introduced sixty youngsters to a totally new experience of Hebrew songs and dances, religious services, classes in Judaic studies, simulation games dealing with various Jewish dilemmas, and the like. Arriving just as the camp ended, I saw scores of exited teenagers moving back into the Jewish stream, looking for ways to express their new-found identity.

We met Rabbi Elliot Perlstein of Philadelphia who was winding up a two-week stint of teaching introductory Hebrew to all comers. He, too, had come through the interest and support of B'nai B'rith. During the two weeks he spent in Birobidzhan, Perlstein was actively teaching one class after another from eight in the morning until evening. In all, about 200 students from eight to eighty attended his classes, held on the top floor of the Pedagogical Institute. The students came with small children, with spouses, or alone, and they filled the room. They were a highly motivated group, all planning to emigrate to a new home in Israel, and they knew that every word of Hebrew they learned before their arrival would ease their path.

Perlstein knew the Hebrew name of every one of his students. One after another he drew them into the conversation: How will you travel to Israel? What will you say to the first Israeli you will meet? Will it be warm or cold in Israel? One could sense the excitement rise in the class as everyone began to see himself or herself landing in Israel and beginning a new life there. No wonder they flocked to these classes in such numbers. As soon as they entered the door they left behind the drab, unpromising world of a tired, old community and were embarking in their imagination upon an exciting, beckoning, new life.

On the eve of the last day of classes a closing banquet was held in the beautiful dining area of the Philharmonic, Birobidzhan's grandest building. Everyone was seated around tables laden with food and drink. One after another, students rose to toast their teacher and thank him not only for what he had taught but for what he had meant in their lives. Then a rock band began playing and the beautifully dressed men and women of Birobidzhan danced in a scene that could have come from London, Paris, or Portland, Oregon.

Adventures at Synagogue

The synagogue was both a depressing and somewhat mysterious experience. It is a small, dilapidated, wooden structure, its coat of blue paint faded and cracked, but it did carry an identifying sign. On Shabbat morning, just as I was about to walk in, a young blond woman approached me and asked in English if I were the rabbi. She told me that she grew up in a strict Polish Catholic home and was deeply affected by her religious training. When she began to attend university in Krakow she learned for the first time the role that Poles had played in the Holocaust. She learned of their profound complicity in hunting down Jews and handing them over to the Nazis, how Poles dispossessed Jews and took over their homes and all their worldly goods. She was overcome by a terrible sense of guilt for what her people had done, and decided, along with some of her like-minded friends, to atone for these irreparable misdeeds. She sought out some of the few remaining Jews in her city to offer her assistance in any way as an act of atonement for her people's guilt. I had the impression that she was not warmly received. Then she heard of Birobidzhan, an almost legendary Jewish region, so she and her friends traveled to Moscow and took the Trans-Siberian train all the way to Birobidzhan. She had just arrived the day before and was visiting the synagogue to find out what she could do. We agreed to talk further after the service.

I sat down next to a small, wizened old man who was wrapped in a large woolen prayer shawl. He was more than willing to engage me in conversation, in Yiddish, and it was quickly evident that he knew the prayerbook by heart and was very knowledgeable in traditional Jewish lore, probably the only person in Birobidzhan with that kind of background. He was not one of the original pioneers, but had come to Birobidzhan from the Ukraine to accompany his son. He was very tolerant of his fellow Jews, he knew that they had no religious feelings or interest in synagogue rituals, and was perfectly content to sit quietly in his corner and recite his prayers in a very personal and retiring manner.

Most of the people in the room were Sabotniks -- a sect very similar to the Seventh Day Adventists -- very simple, hardworking people who believed in Jesus but preferred to think of him as a Jew. They were very comfortable in making the synagogue their spiritual home. When I rose to talk about the weekly Torah portion, they sat with great quiet and respect. They reflected a certain degree of reverence for a Jewish "holy man," but it was clear that good relations did not prevail between the larger Sabotnik group and the smaller Jewish group. There were all kinds of mutterings among the Jews about the intruders who had taken over their house of worship. They spoke of the need for a new synagogue that would attract more Jewish worshipers and were perfectly willing to turn over their old building to the Sabotniks. What Birobidzhan clearly needed was a structure that could serve as a gathering place for Jews for whatever purpose they chose -- prayer or socialization, or just plain conversation.

The Fate of the Soviet Kibbutz

One of the terms that resonated throughout the years following the establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Region was the kolkhoz, the Soviet equivalent of the kibbutz. Just as in Israel, young men and women were inspired by the concept of a return to the soil. The Jews in the Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe were an urban population, earning their living by their skill and their wits. They lived in terribly crowded conditions, running little stores, working in the needle trade, performing all kinds of services to each other but clearly removed from that fundamental area of labor -- farming. The notion became widespread that this constituted a basic source for anti-Semitism -- that Jews were not producers but exploiters of other peoples' labor. That led to the philosophy of A.D. Gordon that the primary task of the modern Jew was to correct an age-old distorted social and economic structure. In Palestine he became the father of the kibbutz movement which set out to create a new Jew -- one who tilled the soil, who labored with fellow workers not for personal gain but to share as a community in the fruits of their work.

The kolkhoz was the same form of society, not in Palestine but in Birobidzhan, the newly created Jewish Autonomous Region. Here the highest principles of communal living could be fulfilled without having to travel to a foreign land or to learn a new language. But the history of the kolkhoz was not to be as fortunate as the kibbutz. In the late 1930s Stalin withdrew government support from this project. In addition, the climatic and soil conditions were not as favorable for agriculture and with the ongoing weakening of the Soviet economy, Birobidzhan suffered as well. One after another, kolkhozim were abandoned or merged with others.

The last surviving kolkhoz is Friedenheim, an amalgam of four agricultural cooperatives. Its director looked like a typical kibbutznik -- lean, weatherbeaten, with piercing blue eyes. He was a son of one of the founding families of Birobidzhan and he managed the extensive farm holdings of the kolkhoz. At his side sat the daughter of the hero of the kolkhoz, Comrade Peller, who enjoyed the rare distinction of being both a Soviet war hero and a Soviet labor hero. A very impressive statue of him wearing both of these medals stood in the park of the kolkhoz. Friedenheim evoked powerful memories of the early days when the pioneer farmers joined in the creation of a new society at Birobidzhan, but it was clear that agriculture was not viewed as their future. All the talk centered around various forms of industry including tourism, a direction that kibbutzim in Israel had long ago turned to.

Envoys from the Outside World

On our last evening we participated in a Town Hall meeting arranged by Einikeit, the organization devoted to rebuilding Jewish life in Birobidzhan. It was held in the Palace of Culture, a rather fancy title for a lecture hall, and it was comfortably filled with about 250 people. With the help of our able translator we expressed our pleasure at being with them and our hope that the newly created sister city bonds would bring much friendship as well as cultural and economic benefits to both Birobidzhan and Beaverton. Then the questions began, all written down and read to us by the chair, apparently to avoid someone in the audience taking the opportunity to make a speech instead of asking a question. For the most part the technique worked but not entirely. One man got up and planted himself right in front of the stage, speaking on and on, demanding that we provide a solution to their economic problems, obviously a mission impossible.

Most of the questions centered around Israel and the issue of immigration. What were the chances of finding jobs, of suitable housing, what was life like in Israel? A number of them raised the issue of why America was not opening its doors wider to immigration. Was it anti-Semitism that motivated a closed door policy? One questioner even wanted to know how extensive was the influence of Jesse Jackson in the U.S.A. Other questions centered around the sister city relationship -- what could they expect in the future from such a relationship?

The audience kept sending up new questions all the time. After an hour and a half, the chair, his hand full of slips of paper, called the meeting to a close. Afterwards, many individuals came to us to share their individual problems. Some wanted to reach relatives in the U.S.A. with whom they had not been in touch for years, others needed legal or medical advice. We were their link to an outside world that seemed terribly far away. In each instance we jotted down all the information we could so that we could fulfill their requests.

We left Birobidzhan with understandably mixed feelings. We were overwhelmed by the warmth of the people and their eagerness to establish new ties with the Jewish world. It was a community clearly in the throes of enormous change. Its founders had come as heroic pioneers to create a new society and had in large measure succeeded. But the entire framework in which they had labored was flawed and communism was collapsing all about them. The Yiddish culture that they had fostered and treasured was on its way to extinction as the great centers of Yiddish-speaking population were wiped out in the Holocaust. Their rejection of religion had left them with a sense of emptiness -- something vital was missing from their lives and they strongly sensed the lack.

Suddenly they found themselves projected from a state of rigid thought control by a central government and a sense of physical isolation from the world at large into an age of glasnost, of open, frank examination of every issue and to direct, personal contact with fellow-Jews from Israel and the U.S.A. What direction should they take? Aliyah to Israel along with hundreds of thousands of fellow Soviet Jews, or the rebuilding of a Jewish life at home where they today occupy leading roles in the community? Should they and their young be studying Hebrew or Yiddish? Are their primary loyalties to the Jewish people as a whole or to the unique community that has been fashioned by parents and grandparents in Birobidzhan?

We were not there to help them make these decisions. We were there, however, to pledge our support and assistance in whatever direction they would decide to move. Undoubtedly, many of them will opt for aliyah, for resettlement in Israel, and many others will decide to remain in Birobidzhan. We have the opportunity to help in both directions. They need education in Hebrew and in Yiddish. They need to learn Jewish history and Jewish religious practices and beliefs. They have been deprived of Jewish education for many decades and are hungry for instruction. We must reach out to them as brothers and sisters who have been reunited after many years of being apart and who have much to give to each other.

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