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**SUCH STUFF AS DIASPORA DREAMS ARE MADE ON: BIROBIDZHAN AND THE CANADIAN-JEWISH COMMUNIST IMAGINATION**

Perhaps the quintessential diaspora people are the Jews, who existed without a state from 70 C.E. to 1948. Statelessness, however, was not without problems, and over the years, various movements arose offering solutions to these diaspora dilemmas. In the last 300 years, religious, assimilationist, completely universalistic, and nationalistic solutions were suggested. I have been examining a political movement that combined elements of the last two: Marxist universalism and Jewish territorial nationalism. They were promoted by like-minded organizations, which were active mainly between 1917 and 1956 and belonged to the Jewish Communist movement. The latter claimed members throughout the diaspora, especially in Europe, North America, South Africa, and Australia. The groups were formally connected through international movements such as the World Jewish Cultural Union (*Alveltlekher Yiddisher Kultur Farband* [YKUF]).

Jewish Communism evolved following the Russian Revolution and the founding of a Soviet state guided by the ideals of Marxism-Leninism, but it was part of a much larger socialist and left-Zionist Jewish milieu, already in full flower by the turn of the twentieth century. While some Jewish revolutionaries in Europe and North America distanced themselves from their Jewish background, others viewed involvement in Jewish left-wing and labour groups “as the preferred means of

resolving both the class and ethnic oppression of Jews.”<sup>1</sup> Their struggle to achieve a better world “overlapped with the liberation of the Jews—whether as individuals or as a people—from the thralldom of generations.”<sup>2</sup> In Canada, many Jews wished to retain their Yiddish-based culture and managed, within strict ideological limits, to blend ethnic identity with “internationalist,” class-based politics.<sup>3</sup> Their Jewishness was secular and rooted in social class, the Yiddish language, and political activism, and it served as an alternative to identity based solely on religion or ethnicity. The secularists established non-religious institutions such as the *Arbayter Ring* (Workmen’s Circle), the mutual benefit society founded in the United States in 1900 which had branched out to Canada by 1907.

Although Jewish socialism was secular and its discourse radical, its roots lay within Jewish tradition, which, although far from monolithic, has always manifested what Zvi Gitelman calls “the quest for utopia.” Jewish Communists sought “to create both a Jewish socialist state and a socialist world.”<sup>4</sup> Activists such as the Canadian Communist, Joshua (Joe) Gershman, who was born in Sokolov, Ukraine in 1903 and came to Winnipeg in 1921, were typical. Two years after coming to Canada, he joined the CP. In 1926, he moved to Toronto, where he became a professional Communist organizer. He claimed never to have had “a conflict about being a Jew and being a Communist. I became a Communist because I am a Jew.”<sup>5</sup>

While its members and organizations considered their primary affiliation to be the Communist parties, the Jewish Communist movement was nevertheless Jewish. Despite major disagreements with other groups, it belonged to the socialist family that included the Jewish Labour Bund with its diaspora-oriented nationalism and socialism and the Poale Zion and other socialist Zionist movements, which hoped to build a socialist Jewish entity in Palestine. Like the others, Jewish Communism was the movement of an oppressed nationality, of a people in exile who had yet to achieve ethnic or national freedom. All of the Jewish socialist groups initially supported the

overthrow of tsarist autocracy, which had legitimized economic, political, and residential restrictions on Jewish life and even violent pogroms.

Jewish Communism combined socialism and secular Jewish nationalism, although the latter was submerged or only implied. The two strands meshed and affected each other: proletarian Jewish culture—especially in Yiddish—constituted the most authentic expression of *Yidishkayt* for Jewish Communists. Yiddish language and literature were perceived as the primary vehicles of Jewish continuity, hence the importance accorded to a secular, radical Yiddish school system and to cultural production. Indeed, poets, novelists, and essayists often took pride of place over political figures for Jewish Communists.

For most Jewish Communists including those in Canada, the “homeland” was the new Soviet Union and then Birobidzhan, in particular, because the Bolshevik revolution had liberated Russian Jewry. The USSR was their North Star, mainly because of its positive relationship to its Jewish population and to the Yiddish language and secondarily because of its economic and political accomplishments. When Soviet support for Jews was shown to be illusory in the mid-1950s, most Jewish Communists chose Jewishness over attachment to pro-Soviet socialism. Belonging to a Communist party proved to have been utilitarian, not basic, to their identity.

The members of the Jewish Communist movement were not assimilationists, at least not consciously, unlike some Jews who belonged to mainstream, non-Jewish Communist parties. The former sought not to supplant Jewishness with socialism and support for the USSR, but to enhance their Jewish identity through Communism. They judged the Soviet state from the vantage point of Jewish politics and supported it because they believed that the elimination of antisemitism was a consequence of socialist construction. While Jewish emancipation throughout the Diaspora was the long-term goal, the short-term Communist frame of reference was remarkably similar to that of Zionism: emancipation and rejuvenation, and the creation of

a “new” Jew. The Communists believed that this transformation would take place in the USSR, particularly in Birobidzhan.

Although the horizons of Canadian-Jewish Communists stretched far beyond Canada, their actual geographic boundaries were circumscribed: they lived, worked, and played in the downtown “areas of first settlement” of Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and smaller centres, neighbourhoods where Jewish immigrants congregated after arriving in Canada. Their world was that of St. Lawrence Boulevard (“the Main”), Esplanade Avenue and Mt. Royal Avenue in Montreal; Spadina Avenue, Brunswick Avenue and Markham Street in Toronto; Main Street, Salter Street and Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg. “This left-Jewish community, particularly in the early years, formed a *gemeinschaft*, an intimate, familiar, and sympathetic human association.... Thus they were neighbours, friends, co-workers, as well as fellow Jews and comrades with a strong sense of solidarity...bound by common language, culture, and political ideals....”<sup>6</sup> The neighbourhood served as a cultural and educational home and a political and personal support system sheltering newly arrived immigrants from an alien environment where people spoke languages they had not yet mastered. The Communists avoided insularity and parochialism, because the issues they grappled with and the ideas they espoused had wide-reaching consequences and transcended their immediate locality.

The Jewish Communists included a panoply of big and small groups with specialized functions operating primarily in Yiddish. “Fusing radical and ethnic culture, they created an alternative to mainstream culture that reinforced their political commitments”<sup>7</sup> and provided the symbols, rituals, ideas, and commitments around which adherents could organize their lives.<sup>8</sup> Often characterized by interlocking personnel, their common denominator, apart from their similarity of purpose, was their link, often surreptitious, to the Communist Party and thus to the Soviet Union itself.

While a part of the Communist “family,” the extensive network of groups fashioned by the Jewish Communists

enabled them to remain somewhat independent of the Communist Party. (One could belong to the Jewish movement without formal adherence to the Party.) Among these groups were two left-of-centre organizations whose specific aim was to provide support for the Soviet project to establish a Jewish socialist republic in the Birobidzhan region in the far east of the USSR. One was the Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia (*Yidishe Kolonizatsye Organizatsye in Rusland*), known by its Yiddish acronym, ICOR, founded in the United States in 1924 and active within the immigrant working-class milieu there and in Canada and other countries. Its members were mostly first- and second-generation, Yiddish-speaking Jews of east European origin. The second was the American Committee for the Settlement of Jews in Birobidjan (Ambijan), a popular front group for English-speaking, middle-class Jews. Ambijan was founded in 1934 during a period when the Communists were seeking alliances against the increasing menace of Nazism and fascism, although it reached Canada only after World War II. Little has been published about ICOR and Ambijan in the U.S. and even less about their Canadian activities.<sup>9</sup>

First, a brief look at the Birobidzhan project itself. Lenin had acknowledged Jews as a legitimate nationality. As a result, the Bolshevik regime decided to set aside territory for Jews who wished to build a socialist national life. At first, Jews were settled in agricultural colonies in the Crimea and Ukraine; by 1934, there were 83 Jewish collective farms in the Crimea alone. But many, including Mikhail Kalinin, chair of the Central Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet, argued that Jews should enjoy a greater measure of territorial concentration somewhere in the Soviet Union in order to develop as a full-fledged nationality.<sup>10</sup>

On 28 March 1928, the Soviet government approved the choice of Birobidzhan, a sparsely populated area of 36,490 square kilometres in the Soviet far east, as a national Jewish entity. Kalinin enthusiastically predicted that 500,000 Jews would settle there within a decade. Jews in Birobidzhan were to

possess their own administrative, educational and judicial institutions and would function in their own language, Yiddish.

Jewish settlers began moving to Birobidzhan in late 1928. By 1932, 25,000 Jews were living in the region, many in communes. In an effort to make the project more attractive to Soviet Jews, Moscow declared Birobidzhan a Jewish Autonomous Region (oblast) on 7 May 1934, with the promise that when Jews would number at least 100,000 or form a majority of the total population, the region would become a Soviet republic. The “burning desire for the creation of a homeland,” stated the decree, “has found fulfilment.” Birobidzhan was to become a centre of national Jewish culture “for the entire Jewish toiling population” including Jews abroad.<sup>11</sup>

In these years, many Jews in Canada gave uncritical support to the Soviet Union, and some became involved with the Canadian Communist Party (CP) either as members or sympathizers. Founded in 1921, the CP had formed a Jewish section by 1927 with members in Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg.<sup>12</sup> Historian David Rome has asserted that the Jewish group was the most vital faction in the Canadian Communist movement: “It was a total society with its own political and cultural institutes.”<sup>13</sup> Communists active in the Jewish community encouraged the formation of organizations that would appeal to Jews interested in preserving their Jewish culture in non-Zionist ways. They would combat ethnic nationalism while harnessing Jewish identity to the class struggle. Not surprisingly, Canadian supporters of Birobidzhan were soon involved in the work of ICOR, which by 1933 claimed a North American membership of 10,000 in 165 branches in 25 states and four Canadian provinces.<sup>14</sup>

After 1933, awareness of the danger Hitler posed to European Jewry led many Canadian Jews to see the USSR as a potential bulwark against the spread of fascism. Thus many more were receptive to the politics of the pro-Soviet Jewish organizations, and various pro-Soviet and anti-fascist front groups, including ICOR, flourished.<sup>15</sup> The Canadian-Jewish

Communist groups also began to benefit from the rightward shift in the world Communist movement which had embarked on its reformist, popular-front, anti-fascist strategy.

Given the close geographic and cultural proximity of Canadian Jews to American Jews, Canadian ICOR at first functioned as a section of the American organization. Sam Lapedes of Toronto, chair of the Jewish Bureau of the Communist Party of Canada, spoke at the March 1932 national plenum of American ICOR and boasted of the growing strength of ICOR in Canada.<sup>16</sup> At the sixth national ICOR convention in New York, 8-10 February 1935, the 565 delegates included a large contingent of Canadians headed by Harry Guralnick, editor of the Canadian Communist newspaper, *Der Kampf*.

By then, Canadian ICOR had begun to establish its independence from the Americans. At a conference held in Toronto on 11-12 February 1933, delegates from ICOR branches in Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, Windsor, and Cornwall decided that the eastern Canadian section should formally incorporate the newly formed western branches into a national organization with headquarters in Toronto.<sup>17</sup> A conference in Toronto the next year (10-11 March ) brought together 56 delegates from five eastern Canadian cities; they vowed to make ICOR a mass organization that could defend the Soviet Union and fight fascism and Zionism.<sup>18</sup>

The delegates to the 1934 Toronto ICOR conference decided to publish a periodical, the *Kanader "Icor,"* with Harry Guralnick as editor; not surprisingly, the first issue carried as its lead story the decision of the Soviet government the month before to transform Birobidzhan into a Jewish Autonomous Region.<sup>19</sup> An editorial called the launching of the journal a sign of ICOR's increasing relevance to the Jewish working class in Canada and declared it the duty of ICOR members to disseminate the journal everywhere that Jewish workers gathered.<sup>20</sup>

Prior to the launching of the *Kanader "Icor,"* little information is available about the activities of individual chapters except for Hamilton, Ontario and Edenbridge, Saskatchewan.

The minutes of the Hamilton branch demonstrate close ties between Canadian ICOR and the national office in New York. Almost every meeting between 1930 and 1937 began with reference to letters from New York asking for money for various campaigns. On 8 December 1930, for example, the minutes record an appeal from Leon Talmy, a member of the U.S. ICOR national executive who had recently visited Birobidzhan with an ICOR fact-finding mission and now sought to raise \$50,000 for agricultural machinery for the settlement. The Hamilton minutes are also instructive regarding the role of women. They were as active as the men. The 21 December 1931 minutes mention the “ladies auxiliary,” which in late 1933, became a separate women’s branch, since “the women were doing better work than the men.”<sup>21</sup>

The ICOR branch in Edenbridge, an agricultural community that had been founded in 1906 with the help of the Paris-based Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), was formed in December 1932. In 1932, the settlement comprised some 42 families. The farmers were particularly enthusiastic supporters of Birobidzhan because, as they put it, unlike urban and bourgeois Jews, they understood the hardships facing the pioneers in Birobidzhan. Like the Edenbridge colonists, Jewish migrants to the Soviet far east had to forego big-city amenities. The Edenbridge ICOR leadership carried on a lively correspondence with the editors of *Der Kampf* expressing their pride in having “responded with enthusiasm to the call ... to help in the work of Jewish colonization in Birobidzhan.” An ICOR organizer from eastern Canada, who visited the colony in 1932 to lecture on “The Bankruptcy of Zionism” and on “Palestinism and Birobidzhan,” reported that he had seen “on walls pictures of Lenin which had been clipped from newspapers and framed.” He departed to a chorus of the “Internationale.”<sup>22</sup>

From 1934 when the *Kanader “Icor”* began publishing, more information about ICOR chapters is available. The June and August 1934 issues, for instance, provide an overview of ICOR work in Canada. Abraham Shek, secretary of the



Canadian section, noted that celebrations in honour of the 7 May 1934 declaration had been held throughout the entire country. Concerts and mass meetings took place on 27 May at the Labour Lyceum in Toronto and two days earlier in Montreal.

Moishe Katz, an editor of the *Morgn Frayhayt*, the American, Yiddish-language, Communist daily, who had visited Birobidzhan on behalf of American ICOR, spoke to the Hamilton chapter on 7 January 1934 to ask for money to buy tractors for Birobidzhan. A fund-raising concert there on 20 May attracted a large turnout, despite calls by rabbis and businessmen for a boycott. The small Cornwall, Ontario branch complained of being ignored by the national body, which had only once sent a lecturer. But Cornwall actively supported *Der Kamf* and held a celebration for Birobidzhan on May Day 1934. Windsor also reported participating in all the ICOR national campaigns and, aided by the Detroit chapter offered lectures and other activities. An Ottawa branch was organized in September 1934.

In the West, Moishe Katz spoke at a celebration in Winnipeg marking the sixth anniversary of the selection of Birobidzhan as a site for Jewish colonization. The Winnipeg branch, which spearheaded an anti-fascist campaign among the various Jewish organizations and also ran a summer camp in Gimli, Manitoba, organized a celebration on 9 June 1934 of the Soviet decision to make Birobidzhan a Jewish autonomous region. Vancouver did exemplary work on behalf of the tractor campaign, and the Calgary branch, which was new, contributed \$50. The Calgarians held a Birobidzhan banquet and celebration on 23 May. In Saskatchewan, both Edenbridge and Saskatoon were active in support of Soviet Jews.

By October 1934, there were 5,000 ICOR members in Canada.<sup>23</sup> The next year the Canadians became independent of the Americans and held the first Canadian national convention in Toronto. War and fascism were condemned, and the delegates called for the “Jewish masses” in Canada to mobilize for the defence of the Soviet Union, which had “eliminated the bleak

lack of rights which the Jews had experienced in tsarist Russia, abolished pogroms, anti-Semitism and in general every form of national oppression.” The convention saluted the Soviet Union, which had spared no effort to rejuvenate the life of the Jewish masses, by drawing them into industrial and agricultural work, encouraging Jewish culture “national in form and socialist in content,” developing autonomous Jewish districts in the Crimea, Ukraine and Belarus, and finally designating Birobidzhan as an area of concentrated Jewish settlement which would become a Soviet Republic. The Soviet solution of the national question had justified the confidence of ICOR’s members in the socialist state. ICOR called upon its members to organize celebrations throughout the country and to defend the “only homeland of all the oppressed and the exploited, the country that had liberated all national minorities, including the Jewish masses—the Soviet Union!”<sup>24</sup>

ICOR now made efforts to expand westward by sending prominent people on speaking tours. On 29 January 1935, Professor Charles Kuntz, president of ICOR in the United States, addressed a public meeting in Winnipeg. A former *maskil* in Russia, he had taught at Rutgers University and remained aloof from Jewish life until the 1917 Russian Revolution awakened his socialist and Jewish sensibilities. Kuntz’s speech, which drew an overflow crowd, described the economic progress being made in Birobidzhan, where Jews “have lost their national clannishness and ... welcomed into their midst people of other racial origin with whom they live like brothers.”<sup>25</sup>

In the fall of 1935, Harry Guralnick undertook a tour of Winnipeg, Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, Regina, Edenbridge, Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver and was received with great enthusiasm, according to the *Kanader “Icor.”* The Vancouver and Calgary branches were collecting money for Yiddish typewriters for Birobidzhan. In Edmonton, Guralnick was interviewed by a reporter from the *Edmonton Journal*, who remarked that “it is with Biro-Bidjan...that he deals most lovingly.”

Guralnick told the journalist: "Fascism endeavors to solve national problems by exterminating national minorities both physically and culturally.... The Soviet solution of national problems means full freedom of cultural, economic and political development." "By the end of 1937, Biro-Bidjan will be a Jewish Soviet republic,"<sup>26</sup> he assured his interviewer. "Such an interview with a capitalist newspaper is especially fortunate," observed the *Kanader "Icor"*, because it reaches a set of people which we are still unable to reach with our own declarations."<sup>27</sup>

The second national convention of Canadian ICOR, attended by 76 delegates, was held in Montreal on 8-10 May 1936 to coincide with the second anniversary of the Birobidzhan autonomy declaration. "Onward to a Jewish Soviet Republic!" proclaimed the May 1936 issue of the *Kanader "Icor."* Abraham Shek, the national secretary, reported that Birobidzhan had made "great strides" and provided statistics on the numbers of kindergardens and schools, scientific and technical institutes, evening university courses, clubs, reading rooms and libraries, and sporting groups in the region. In 1935, he asserted, 10 million copies of newspapers had been distributed in Birobidzhan compared to two and a half million three years earlier. According to Shek, the Jewish Autonomous Region was now home to many fine Jewish writers, although he mentioned only David Bergelson by name. By contrast, Shek claimed that bloody pogroms, racial discrimination, and economic destitution were the lot of Jews in capitalist countries. "Here in Canada, too," he noted, "capitalism tries to divert the wrath of the masses by inciting them against the foreign-born and the unemployed."<sup>28</sup>

In the spring of 1937, ICOR took note of the ninth anniversary of the beginning of Jewish colonization in Birobidzhan and the third anniversary of the proclamation of Jewish autonomy with celebrations by the various chapters. In Toronto, the Garden Theatre showed the movie, "Birobidjan: A Greater Promise." The national executive boasted that a "*new Jewish people has been born*" and that "Birobidzhan is the

evidence of this rebirth.”<sup>29</sup> Herman Abramovitch, a Hamilton activist who sat on ICOR’s national executive, saw in the transformation of formerly *déclassé* Jews into productive workers a dream realized: Soviet Jews now had “a healthy economic existence that would ensure their future.” He rhapsodized about the 29 August 1936 Soviet decree which had named Birobidzhan the cultural centre for all Soviet Jews: “A Jewish state, a homeland of our own—what joy we find in these words!”<sup>30</sup> The Soviet ambassador to the United States, Alexander A. Troyanovsky, sent a telegram calling the anniversaries “important historic milestones in the political, economic and cultural growth of the Jewish labouring masses in the Soviet Union.”<sup>31</sup> Tim Buck, head of the Canadian CP, declared the national question in the Soviet Union “solved” and added that Birobidzhan was an inspiration for Jews and “should receive the utmost in aid from everyone.” He hoped that ICOR’s efforts would prove fruitful and that Jews would come to recognize “the historical role that Birobidzhan plays and will play in the solution of the national question for the Jewish masses.”<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, Jewish Communists saw Zionism as their main enemy, and they spared no effort in contrasting Jewish colonization efforts in Soviet Russia to the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Unlike Palestine, *Der Kamf* stated, Birobidzhan was “not soaked in the blood of race hatred.”<sup>33</sup> In another article in the same journal attacking Zionism, the prominent American Communist journalist Paul Novick, one of the founders of the *Frayhayt*, urged that “not one cent” be donated to the “spies for British imperialism,” “chauvinists,” “race-baiters” and “Palestinian Hitlerites.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1934, Moishe Katz reported in the *ICOR Bulletin*, that, despite the “fantasies” of the Zionists, the reality in Palestine was one of mass unemployment. Instead of siding with the Arab workers, he wrote, the Zionists were in league with British imperialism and encouraged British troops to suppress Arab demonstrations.<sup>35</sup> On other occasions the *Bulletin* asserted that the Histadrut, the labour federation in

Palestine, was collaborating with Hitler by selling oranges to Nazi Germany instead of joining a worldwide boycott of German goods. By themselves practising “the darkest chauvinism,” the Zionists were doing the Nazis’ work.<sup>36</sup> A “declaration of chairs of mass revolutionary organizations” reminded the “Jewish masses in Canada” that the “historic decision” to create a Jewish entity in Birobidzhan was “entirely different” from the “Balfour Declaration” about “a ‘Jewish homeland’ in Palestine,” which had been nothing but a wartime manoeuvre on the part of the British imperialist government. The creation of Birobidzhan was said to be a “catastrophe” for the Zionist servants of British imperialism and would serve as a “death blow” to their “adventure” in the so-called “Jewish homeland.”<sup>37</sup> Zionists, it was claimed, opposed the Birobidzhan project because they feared they would lose some of the vast amounts of money they needed, in order to “rob” land from the Arab peasants by buying it from their landlords. Birobidzhan “was no ‘rival’ to Palestine but rather a symbol and a message for the Jewish masses throughout the world, including Palestine.”<sup>38</sup>

The period following the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in August 1939 was a difficult one for Jewish Communists, and ICOR fell silent. Since the Communists opposed Canada’s declaration of war against Germany, the CP and many of its fronts were declared illegal in June 1940 under the War Measures Act; many Communists were arrested, and *Der Kampf* was shut down. It was succeeded in late October 1940 by a new publication, the *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*.

The new *Vochenblat* turned its attention to Birobidzhan at the beginning of 1941. The capital, a sleepy village named Tikhonkaia in 1928 with 600 people, had blossomed into a “superb, beautiful” city of wide boulevards and parks with a population of more than 40,000. The paper claimed the region was now a centre of coal mining, that there were 18 large collective farms and more than 100 elementary and secondary Yiddish schools, as well as agricultural, mechanical, medical, and pedagogical institutions of higher learning. Hundreds of

millions of rubles had been invested by the Soviet government since 1928, it was asserted.<sup>39</sup>

Hitler invaded Soviet Russia on 22 June 1941; the *Vochenblat* that appeared four days later ran the banner headline: “‘We Will Wipe the Fascist Barbarians from the Earth’ Declare the Soviet Workers.” The tone was upbeat; the Red Army would soon “halt the march of the Nazi aggressor,” and Hitler would meet the fate of Napoleon.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the remainder of 1941 and into 1942, page-one stories about the eastern front put the best light on the situation; Soviet defeats and retreats were minimized or seen as strategic withdrawals.<sup>41</sup>

Even in wartime, the Jewish Autonomous Region was not forgotten. Montreal poet Shabsie Perel published a very long article on the occasion of Birobidzhan’s 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the 9 April 1942 *Vochenblat*. “Jews have become a people the equal of other peoples—a people with their own sense of nationhood, with a recognized language, with their own cultural institutions,” he wrote. Birobidzhan was a “gigantic” territory, as large as Belgium and Holland combined. “It is a fat land, a rich land, a land of tremendous natural resources, with tremendous forests, with rivers full of fish, with unlimited agricultural and industrial opportunities.” Many had been the pessimists who did not have much faith in the potential of Birobidzhan. “But the fact is, *that in the course of building this new country, the Jews have reconstructed themselves*,” Perel said, appropriating the words of a popular Zionist song. “Yesterday’s Menakhem Mendels [unsuccessful businessmen], yesterday’s *luftmenshen* [people with no visible occupation or means of support] have turned into excellent collective farm workers.... People now knew that Jewish pioneers “worked, worked, worked without cease.” Birobidzhan, declared Perel, was the symbol of the freedom and friendship of all Soviet peoples, and the Soviet Union “may justly point to it as one of the most beautiful achievements in the history of mankind.” This anniversary was being celebrated in the midst of a world war in which Birobidzhan had sent her finest sons to the front. Jews the world

over could be proud of Birobidzhan and have deep affection for the country that was in the process of destroying Nazism and liberating the peoples of the world, concluded Perel.<sup>42</sup>

A year later on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Birobidzhan, the *Vochenblat* editorialized that March 28 would ever remain one of “the great dates in the whole history of the Jewish people.” Birobidzhan “was the most noble manifestation of the correct and equitable nationality policy... part of a series of laws designed to give Jews the same rights as other nationalities in the Soviet Union.” In the postwar world, predicted the paper, “Birobidzhan will grow and blossom and forever remain a symbol of hope for the Jewish people and a symbol of the recognition of the correct and equitable nationality policy of the Soviet Union.”<sup>43</sup>

Though the Communist Party had been banned in Canada at the start of the war, with the Soviet-Western alliance in place, it re-emerged as the Labor-Progressive Party (LPP) in 1943 and achieved a measure of electoral success.<sup>44</sup> In Montreal, the city’s predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods elected long-time Communist leader and pamphleteer Fred Rose to Parliament for the riding of Cartier in a by-election in August 1943 and reelected him in the general election in June 1945. In the August 1944 Quebec provincial election, Michael Buhay, who had been elected to the Montreal city council two years earlier, ran a respectable second to the Liberal in St. Louis riding. In Ontario, the well-known Communist, J.B. Salsberg, won a seat in the provincial parliament in August 1943 representing the predominantly Jewish constituency of St. Andrew’s and reelected in June 1945. Aldermen Norman Freed was elected to the Toronto city council in 1944. As the war came to an end, the Communists were riding the crest of the pro-Soviet wave, and this extended to their work on behalf of Birobidzhan.

In June 1945, Ambijan in the U.S. announced the creation of an “Einstein Fund” to resettle 30,000 Jewish war orphans from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in Birobidzhan. (Albert Einstein was a long-time supporter of



Ambijan.) The Canadian Jewish Communists decided they needed a new, more broadly based Canadian organization to support this work. On 19-20 November 1945, J.M. Budish, the Russian-born American Communist who had been instrumental in creating Ambijan and now chaired its administrative committee and served as executive vice-president, traveled to Montreal to attend a dinner at the exclusive Montefiore Club. Some 60 people representing various Jewish organizations agreed to form a Canadian Birobidzhan Committee with national headquarters in Montreal. Budish returned to Montreal on 17 February 1946 as a guest speaker when the Committee held its first citywide meeting, which was presided over by Max Bailey, a future Montreal municipal councillor, and Joseph Yass. The meeting was attended by over 200 delegates, including MP Fred Rose; organizations represented included the Russian Farband, the Romanian Farband, the Polish Farband, and many *landsmanshaften* and unions. Budish reported on recent developments in Birobidzhan and on the activities of Ambijan on behalf of war orphans. He reminded the participants that the Jews of Birobidzhan were at this moment the only ones in the world who exercised sovereignty, and he appealed to the Jews of Canada “to share in this broad movement.”

The meeting proposed raising \$200,000 to equip a Jewish vocational institute in Birobidzhan that would include an infirmary, a gymnasium, and a library. Delegates were urged to promote participation in work on behalf of Birobidzhan in the organizations to which they belonged, so that Jews throughout the country might participate in “this constructive humanitarian undertaking.” Fred Rose, soon to be revealed as a Soviet spy, hoped “to see in Birobidzhan a monument from Canadian Jewry,” he told the gathering.<sup>45</sup>

B.Z. Goldberg of the New York Yiddish daily, *Der Tog*, who was visiting the Soviet Union in March 1946, cabled the 669 delegates and 1,500 friends at the national conference of Ambijan, meeting in New York that the Soviet Union had embarked on its first postwar, five-year plan and that



Birobidzhan, part of the reconstruction effort, would soon become a full Soviet republic.<sup>46</sup> Seventeen delegates from four cities in Canada attended the conference, which united ICOR and Ambijan in both the U.S. and Canada. “We have become a united movement on an international basis,” Budish announced. “Canada has established a Birobidjan Committee.”<sup>47</sup>

The Canadian Birobidjan Committee now began a Dominion-wide, fund-raising campaign. In early May, the 106-member Toronto Jewish Folk Choir gave a performance of the oratorio “Biro Bidjan” at Massey Hall; in the words of Sam Carr, a leading Jewish Communist official, it was “a rhapsody of gratitude...to the Jewish Autonomous Region of the Soviet Union.” Events publicizing the new drive also took place in other Jewish communities.

The Committee held its first Dominion convention on 26 May 1946 in Montreal. Accompanied by a mandolin orchestra, the Montreal Jewish Folk Choir performed Birobidzhaner songs and the cantata, “Der mogen dovid bagrist dem roytn shtern” (The Shield of David Salutes the Red Star). The guest speakers were Rabbi Abraham J. Bick of New York’s Warsaw Center, a member of Ambijan’s National Committee, and Dr. B.A. Victor of Winnipeg, a long-time activist in ICOR, who drew on personal experiences of Birobidzhan, which he had visited in 1936. A message of greetings from the Soviet embassy praising the committee for its efforts was read. Reports gave accounts of activities across the country: Montreal had sent clothing for 3,500 orphans to Birobidzhan, and the Russian-Ukrainian Jewish Farband of Toronto committed itself to raising \$50,000. The 125 delegates from across the country, representing 52 organizations, pledged \$150,000 more.

The convention issued a manifesto describing the tragic condition of Jews in postwar Europe. “In the present gloomy circumstances,” stated the manifesto, “the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan shines like a bright beam. The history of Birobidzhan is the history of the triumph of national liberty and equality over anti-Semitism and racial hatred.” In Birobidzhan,

Jews would “build their own country,” while proving “that the desire of winning full equality for all Jews is not a futile one. Biro-Bidzhan gives strength to those who hope for a future more free and secure.” Birobidzhan would resettle thousands of Jewish war orphans, children who had fled into the Soviet Union ahead of Hitler’s advances. The manifesto urged all Jewish organizations to help set up aid committees for “this urgent work.”<sup>48</sup>

The Canadian Birobidzhan Committee was very active in 1947 holding its second national convention in Toronto on 8-9 March. The Toronto branch worked at raising \$10,000 for Jewish orphans and immigrants to Birobidzhan. Joseph Morgenstern, chair of the Cleveland Ambijan Committee and a prominent figure nationally, travelled to Windsor, where the Communists had succeeded in persuading the Windsor Jewish Community Council to donate \$2,500 to the Canadian Birobidjan Committee. Rabbi Bick embarked on a western Canadian tour and was well received. During the year, the Committee sent clothing, medicine, trucks and tractors to the JAR. Thousands of Canadian Jews had donated to the cause “with love and joy, in the knowledge that their gifts would lighten the burden of those building the Jewish Autonomous Region and would help resettle Jewish refugees and Jewish orphans.” A Montreal meeting of the national executive on 1 February 1948 sought to widen its activities throughout the country, and made plans to celebrate the forthcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Birobidzhan.<sup>49</sup>

Early in the next year, 67 crates of goods were dispatched to Birobidzhan, including children’s clothing, blankets, and various medicines destined for Jewish war orphans, tools, sewing machines, two Chevrolet trucks, and a number of tractors. The funds to purchase these goods had been raised by local committees in Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, Windsor and the Niagara District.<sup>50</sup> Dr. Rose Bronstein, a member of the national executive of the Canadian Birobidjan Committee and secretary of its Toronto section, wrote a piece for the English

page of the *Vochenblat* in which she summarized the region's history and its Jewish character. Bronstein mouthed the usual glowing statistics and extolled Birobidzhan as "the centre of [Soviet] Jewishness, the very heart of their developing nation, from which the Jewish population of the USSR will draw its lifeblood—a healthy rich productive lifeblood." Canadian Jews, she wrote, "should be anxious and willing to extend a helping hand, to give of our brotherly love and send a fraternal gift. We owe it to them." She contrasted the life of Jews in western countries, where antisemitism was again on the increase, to that in the USSR:

It is comforting to know that the Jewish Yishuv in the Soviet Union, in Birobidjan, is forever free from that evil, that they are constantly surrounded by friendly neighbourly people united in the common work of building socialism. It is good to remember that they have become healthy productive citizens and are building a national Jewish state, national in form and socialist in content. It is good to think of their progress and development and may they serve as a guiding light to us.<sup>51</sup>

Alfred Rosenberg, a leading activist in the Canadian Birobidjan Committee and the brother of Fred Rose, reprised the history of the Jewish Autonomous Region in the *Vochenblat*. He noted that Jews had full rights in the USSR, neither more nor less than other peoples. The reasons behind the founding of a Jewish entity involved the nationality policy of the Soviet Union that grants all peoples equal rights including the right to self-determination. Since Jews lived everywhere as a minority, they could not acquire the means to become a self-governing nationality. Hence the decision to make the almost empty region of Birobidzhan a Jewish region where Jews could develop as a majority community. Every new family received a credit of 10,000 rubles towards the building of a house and 400 rubles more to furnish it, 3,000 rubles to buy a cow, and 300 kilograms of flour. The Canadian Birobidjan Committee would

soon be shipping another transport of needed goods to Birobidzhan, he wrote, to demonstrate “our friendship towards the Soviet Jews and [our support] for the healthy national policy of the Soviet government towards the Jewish masses.”<sup>52</sup> The *Vochenblat* also carried stories from the *Birobidzhaner Shtern*, the Moscow *Aynikayt*, and other Soviet-Jewish papers attesting to the “immense cultural and industrial achievements” being made in the Jewish Autonomous Region.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, the Jewish Communists were forced to take note of postwar events in Palestine where the British still held the Mandate. There the Jewish community was demanding a sovereign state, and the Communists now took a stand dramatically different from their prewar stance. “We do not see a conflict between Biro-Bidzhan and Palestine,” the Canadian Birobidjan Committee asserted in a 1946 manifesto. “There is room for [both] Zionists and non-Zionists in the aid work on behalf of Biro-Bidzhan. Just as all Jews are interested in helping with the construction of Palestine and in aiding those Jews who wish to settle there, so too should the work on behalf of Biro-Birobidzhan and the Soviet solution of the Jewish question be evaluated by all Jews, without regard to party affiliation.”<sup>54</sup>

In 1947-1948, the Communist attitude towards Zionism underwent a further shift that corresponded to the Soviet Union’s decision to support the creation of a Jewish state. On 29 November 1947, the Soviets and their east European allies supported UN General Assembly Resolution 181 to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. The *Vochenblat* now referred to the country as *Erets Yisroel* (the land of Israel),<sup>55</sup> and the Canadian Birobidjan Committee dutifully fell into line.<sup>56</sup>

By now, the cause of Birobidzhan had meshed with support for Holocaust survivors, for Israel, and for the “new democracies” building socialism in eastern Europe. When J.B. Salsberg addressed a Jewish conference in Winnipeg on 2 May 1948, he asked those in attendance to raise \$3,500 on behalf of an orphanage in France, a trade school in Poland, a children’s home in Belgium, a lending bank for trades people and workers

in Tel Aviv, and a school for the mechanical trades in Birobidzhan.<sup>57</sup> In the Ontario provincial election in June 1948, Salsberg rode a wave of good will to defeat the Tory candidate, Nathan Phillips (a Jew and a future mayor of Toronto), in his St. Andrew's riding. A front-page editorial in the English section of the *Vochenblat* of 13 May 1948 was headlined, "Salute the Jewish State and the Jewish Army."<sup>58</sup> Alongside it ran a piece by the Soviet ambassador to the U.S. entitled, "Birobidjan Living Example of Soviet Attitude to Jewish People's Rights."<sup>59</sup> The paper's Yiddish pages were devoted almost exclusively to the two Jewish "states"—the new one about to be proclaimed in Tel Aviv and the one in the USSR, now 20 years old.<sup>60</sup>

Alfred Rosenberg pointed to the aid the Soviet government was providing the embattled Jews in Palestine as a reason for Jews in Canada to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Birobidzhan.<sup>61</sup> Rosenberg took note of "two historic dates in the evolution of Biro-Bidzhan," 28 March 1928, when the Soviet government proclaimed Birobidzhan a site for Jewish colonization, and 7 May 1934, when it attained the status of an autonomous region. The Soviet Union had helped to make a reality of "an age-old Jewish dream, that of obtaining a sovereign state." Jewish teachers, doctors, architects, engineers, technicians and other professionals had thrown themselves "with the greatest enthusiasm" into the task of building their socialist republic in Birobidzhan, wrote Rosenberg. So many were the numbers of new people coming to Birobidzhan that they were outstripping the number of new houses, factories and other necessities being made ready to accommodate them. The Jews thanked "the great leader Stalin for his fatherly concern," as they realized "their beautiful desires and aspirations—building and developing Soviet Jewish nationhood." In no way, was Birobidzhan a competitor to *Erets Yisroel* nor would it be a hindrance to it.

Indeed, with the growth of democracy and freedom in the east European countries, it is now

possible to solve the Jewish problem on an entirely new basis. The establishment of a Jewish state in erets yisroel is one aspect of the determination to solve the problem of the Jews overseas and is in compliance with the national feelings and interests of the Jewish masses in other parts of the world. No sincere Jew can see a contradiction between Biro-bidjan and erets yisroel. Their aims lie in the same direction, though they are taking different paths.... Both however deserve our fullest aid and cooperation.<sup>62</sup>

On the very day Israel was proclaimed a sovereign state, Toronto's Birobidjan Committee celebrated the twentieth anniversary of Birobidjan's designation as a site for Jewish settlement. A meeting attended by over 1,000 people was held in Montreal four days later. The chief speakers were Professor John Somerville of New York's Hunter College, a specialist in Soviet philosophy, and Rabbi Bick, who devoted much of his address to the complementarity between the new Jewish state of Israel and the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan.

The 20 May issue of the *Vochenblat* carried yet another piece on Birobidzhan by long-time activist Abraham Nisnevitz. "Twenty years ago the bright message spread across oceans and continents, and wherever one came across a Jewish community, wherever one found a Jewish heart...it was recognized that we had to identify ourselves with the pioneers of Birobidzhan," Nisnevitz claimed, and, he reminded his readers, none of this would have been possible without the "ten days that shook the world," when "the prison house of peoples" had become a "union of liberated peoples ... building a new life on new principles, where exploitation, hatred, oppression, racism—the roots of all the wickedness in the world—have been eliminated forever." And now,

Our brothers and sisters in erets yisroel, who are engaged in a life and death struggle against the dark forces of reaction and oppression for their survival and self-determination, should be

encouraged and strengthened by the hope that Birobidzhan brings to the Jews of the world. Because those who granted Birobidzhan to the Jews of the Soviet Union are also those who are struggling to make certain that *erets yisroel* will be granted to the Jews of the world.<sup>63</sup>

Alongside support for Israel, then, the work for Birobidzhan would continue. The *Vochenblat* published a report from J.M. Budish on 24 February 1949 announcing that two weeks earlier Ambijan had sent a transport of goods worth \$65,463 to the Soviet Union, destined for new settlers in Birobidzhan as well as an orphans' home in Stalingrad and a hospital in Minsk. An earlier shipment worth \$29,107 consisted of a tractor, a trailer, and machinery for excavation; Ambijan had also sent incubators for a chicken farm in Birobidzhan. On 27 March 1949, the Toronto Committee held its annual celebration of the anniversary of Birobidzhan's designation as a Jewish region. Abraham Jenofsky, executive secretary of Ambijan, wrote a lengthy piece in the *Vochenblat* commemorating the occasion, which included the customary inventory of successes.<sup>64</sup>

Between 1947 and 1949, the Canadian Jewish Communist movement reached its high water mark. The Soviet Union had fathered one Jewish "state," Birobidzhan, then celebrating its second decade; by its support of the *yishuv* in the UN, it assisted in the birth of a second one, Israel. The new eastern European "people's democracies" had provided the military arms that enabled Israel to fend off the invading Arab armies. This followed upon the Soviet participation in defeating Hitler and liberating the remnant of European Jewry in 1945 and the establishment of socialist governments in Hungary, Poland, and Romania, thus supposedly putting an end to the antisemitism rife in that region for centuries. The USSR and its allies would now foster and protect the individual and national rights of Jews within the socialist bloc's own borders as well as in Israel. There were as yet only hints in the West about repression in Stalinist USSR, nor were there any indications that Moscow

would soon become the main diplomatic, political, and military backer of the Arab states. No one—certainly no Jewish Communist—could as yet imagine that the Soviet Union itself would soon become a centre of virulent antisemitism.

As the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, the *Vochenblat* could still editorialize, in its “Balance Sheet” of the previous half century, that among the greatest achievements of the previous 50 years had been the outlawing of antisemitism in the USSR and the creation of two Jewish states, Birobidzhan and Israel.<sup>65</sup> The national conference of Ambijan, held in New York a few weeks earlier on 10-11 December 1949 had heard greetings from the Toronto Birobidzhan Committee. Joshua Gershman, editor of the *Vochenblat*, wished the conference “best success for the good of the Jewish people.”<sup>66</sup> But this was not to be.

Already in 1949, disquieting reports about Soviet anti-semitism were circulating in the general and Jewish press, and the Communists were soon on the defensive. To counter the rumours, the English page of the *Vochenblat* printed an article about a report on Birobidzhan purportedly by the noted Soviet Yiddish poet, Itzik Feffer, which ostensibly “exposes” the charges being made “disparagingly” about the region. Feffer claimed that once the number of Jews in Birobidzhan reached 100,000, it would graduate from autonomous region to autonomous republic, as postwar immigration “has exceeded all expectations.” In the obligatory style of such articles, he listed the accomplishments to date, all part of “the renaissance of all aspects of Jewish cultural life in the Soviet Union in the postwar years.” He hoped that all Jews would be impressed by the “solicitude for the Jewish people in the Soviet Union” and concluded with a question: “**In what other country...does the government assign colossal sums for Jewish theatres, libraries, newspapers and other cultural institutions, for the settlement and rehabilitation of the Jewish masses?**”<sup>67</sup> The bitter irony was, however, that Feffer had never written this article. As we now know, he was by this time under arrest and being



tortured in the notorious Lubianka prison on charges of being a “nationalist” and a “Zionist.” He would be shot by the NKVD three years later.

In honour of the fifteenth anniversary of Birobidzhan “statehood” in 1949, Abraham Nisnevitz recycled for the *Vochenblat* a piece he had written earlier on the twentieth anniversary of the 1928 Soviet proclamation of the founding of the JAR. He still claimed that Birobidzhan was a place of “great possibilities and great expectations.” And the Soviet Union deserved credit not only for the JAR, but also for helping Jews to establish Israel. As the reputed helper of the helpless, the USSR aided all “oppressed and enslaved peoples,” Nisnevitz reminded those caught up in the anti-Soviet “lies and provocations,” which were helping those who wished to “wipe the Soviet Union off the face of the earth.”<sup>68</sup>

Soon, though, the bubble burst. The Soviet espionage ring uncovered after 1946 resulted in the incarceration of Fred Rose, Sam Carr, and other prominent Jewish Communists; even people on the fringes of the movement saw their livelihoods threatened and their mobility circumscribed. On 27 January 1950, the Quebec provincial police “anti-subversive” squad, using the provincial “Padlock Law” allowing the provincial government to shut down any institution and imprison any person disseminating Bolshevik propaganda, raided the Morris Winchevsky Cultural Centre and the Morris Winchevsky School operated by the United Jewish Peoples Order, the Communist-dominated and pro-Soviet fraternal organization.<sup>69</sup> To use a current phrase, this created a “chilling climate” for those engaged in pro-Soviet activities. A few weeks later, the Korean War began, and the Communists found themselves accused of supporting Canada’s enemies in a shooting war.

At the same time, the Soviet Union became more of a closed society, and comparatively little appeared in the pages of the *Vochenblat* about Soviet-Jewish life after 1950; quite significantly, the seventeenth anniversary of Birobidzhan’s elevation to the status of Jewish Autonomous Region in May 1951 passed

without mention. As the Soviets began systematically to obliterate Jewish culture, eliminate Jewish organizations, and abandon even the pretence of a future Jewish republic in Birobidzhan, organizations such as Ambijan lost their purpose.

By the late 1940s, many Jewish Communists had begun to doubt seriously the politics of the Soviet Union; some diverted their nationalist sentiments towards the new state of Israel. The members of ICOR and Ambijan and other Jewish Communists were caught in the contradictions of their own ideology: an abstract, though pro-Soviet, internationalism combined with an interest in Jewish national regeneration, support for a Zionist-style enterprise in far-off Siberia but opposition to Zionism itself.

Economic and social changes also hastened the decline of the pro-Soviet Jewish movement. The Canadian-Jewish community in the immediate postwar era was very different from what it had been in the 1930s and 1940s. Jews were moving out of the old downtown neighbourhoods and into the suburbs; they were leaving the work force in the garment industries and entering business and the professions. Their upwardly mobile children were earning university degrees, entering the professions, or going into business; they found it hard to accept the dogmas that regarded Soviet society as superior to Canada's, and most had little interest in Communists and their front organizations.

An even greater challenge awaited the Canadian-Jewish Communists. In 1956, Stalin's crimes against the Jews of Russia were made public by his successors, and the Birobidzhan project was exposed as largely fraudulent and a failure. All the stories and statistics had been, simply put, lies and fantasy. The crisis affected all Communists, but none more than the Jews; they abandoned the movement *en masse*.<sup>70</sup> While news about Birobidzhan appeared occasionally in Jewish Communist publications after 1950, never again was the JAR a basic component of pro-Soviet publicity. Nor were there any support groups working on its behalf.

As Karl Marx famously remarked: “All that is solid melts into air.” The Birobidzhan project, however, was never solid. Birobidzhan was a “Potemkin country,” the product of the misplaced hopes of desperate people far from the tempest of reality. It was “such stuff as diaspora dreams are made on.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Philip Mendes, “The Rise and Fall of the Jewish/Left Alliance: An Historical and Political Analysis,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45 (December 1999): 497.

<sup>2</sup>Anita Shapira, “‘Black Night—White Snow:’ Attitudes of the Palestinian Labor Movement to the Russian Revolution, 1917-1929,” *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 241.

<sup>3</sup>The literature on Marxist attitudes towards the national aspirations of the Jewish people is vast. For a recent summary, see Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843-1943)*, trans. Bernard Gibbons (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994). See also, Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ronaldo Munck, *The Difficult Dialogue: Marxism and Nationalism* (London: Zed Books, 1986); and Ephraim Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism: Theoretical Origins of a Political Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 1991) for a survey of Communist positions on nationality.

<sup>4</sup>Zvi Gitelman, “Introduction,” *The Quest for Utopia: Jewish Political Ideas and Institutions Through the Ages*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. x-xi.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Irving Abella, “Portrait of a Jewish Professional Revolutionary: The Recollections of Joshua Gershman,” *Labour/Le Travail* 2 (1977): 204.

<sup>6</sup>Ester Reiter, “Secular *Yiddishkait*: Left Politics, Culture, and Community,” *Labour/Le Travail* 49 (spring 2002): 125, 141.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Snyder, “The Paterson Jewish Folk Chorus: Politics, Ethnicity and Musical Culture,” *American Jewish History* 74 (September 1984): 27.

<sup>8</sup>Robbie Lieberman, *“My Song Is My Weapon”: People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 15-16.

<sup>9</sup>I have written about some aspects of this history in “Red Star Over Birobidzhan: Canadian Communists and the Jewish Autonomous Region in the Soviet Union,” *Labour/le Travail* 44 (1999): 129-47.

<sup>10</sup>See his speech to the GEZERD convention in 1926, cited in Chimen Abramsky, “The Biro-Bidzhan Project, 1927-1959,” in *The Jews in Soviet Russia Since 1917*, 3rd ed., ed. Lionel Kochan (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 69.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism: The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Community, U.S.A. 1919-1941* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1959), 309-10.

<sup>12</sup>Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), p. 273.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Lewis Levendel, *A Century of the Canadian Jewish Press: 1880s-1980s* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1989), p. 151.

<sup>14</sup>“Barikht fun general-sekretar tsum `Icor’ plenum, gehalten in New York 25tn marts, 1934,” *ICOR* 7, April 1934, p. 19 and May 1934, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup>S Lapedes, “Der ‘Icor’ oyf breytere relsn,” *“Icor” Bulletin*, 5 January 1935, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup>“Protokol fun plenum,” *ICOR* 5, May 1932, pp. 8-9.

<sup>17</sup>“ICOR optaylung” [Yiddish], *Der Kampf*, 14 April 1933, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup>Minutes of Hamilton ICOR meeting of 24 August 1932, “Minute Book of Hamilton Chapter of ICOR.” Abe Victor, “Oyfn 3tn tsuzamenkumpft fun alkanader Icor sektsye in Toronto 10tn un 11tn marts, 1934,” *ICOR Biro-Bidzhan Souvenir-Zhurnal* (New York: ICOR, June 1934), p. 40.

<sup>19</sup>“Biro-bidzhan farvandlt in yidisher autonomer sovyetisher teritorye,” *Kanader “Icor”* 1, June 1934, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>“Editorials: A vikhtiker shrit foroys,” *Kanader “Icor”* 1, June 1934, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup>“Minute Book of Hamilton Chapter of Icor,” 23.11, 8.12.30; 25.1, 1,29.3, 21.12.31; 3.4, 15.5, 11.9, 23.10.32; 26.2, 19,23.11.33. Goldie Vine papers, 1930-1948, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Series 85, Jewish Canadian papers, F1405, File 085-015, MU 90042.01, deposited in

the Archives of Ontario, Toronto; "ICOR optaylung" [Yiddish], *Der Kamf*, 14 April 1933, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>"Edenbridge sec. vert a tsvayg fun 'ICOR,'" *Der Kamf*, 9 December 1932, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup>"In der Icor baveyung," *ICOR* 8, January 1935, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup>"Editorials: Grayt zikh tsu di november-fayerung!," *Kanader "Icor"* 2, October 1935, p. 1. See also, the reprint of an article from the New York *Frayhayt*, "Yidn hobn buzundere grintn tsu frayen zikh mit dem oktober-yubili," *Kanader "Icor"* 2, November-December 1935, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>"No. 744: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada, 13th February, 1935," in *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935*, ed. Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker (St. John's, Nfld.: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1995), p. 105.

<sup>26</sup>"Jewish Editor Lauds Soviet, Flays Fascism," *Edmonton Journal*, 31 October 1935, Section 2, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>27</sup>"'Icor'-taytikayt iber Kanada," *Kanader "Icor"* 2, November-December 1935, pp. 10-11 [Yiddish section].

<sup>28</sup>Front cover, *Kanader "Icor"* 3, May 1936; A. Shek, "Foroys, tsu a brayter folks-organizatsye fun dem 'Icor' in Kanada!" *Kanader "Icor"* 3, May 1936, pp. 5-7 [Yiddish section].

<sup>29</sup>"A nay folk vert geboyren," *"Icor" Bulletin*, April 1937, p. 1 (emphasis in original).

<sup>30</sup>H. Abramovitch, "A troyim vert farvirklekt," *"Icor" Bulletin*, April 1937, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup>"Troyanovsky bagrist 'ICOR'," *"Icor" Bulletin*, April 1937, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in "Vikhtike perzaynlekhkaytn vegn birobidzhan," *"Icor" Bulletin*, April 1937, p. 2 .

<sup>33</sup>Y.G., "Fun yordn biz amur," *Der Kamf*, 9 December 1932, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup>P. Novick, "Der hitlerism kumt vider tsu di yidishe arbayter," *Der Kamf*, 16 December 1932, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup>Moishe Katz, "Di letste antviklungen in Palestina," *"Icor" Bulletin*, 5 January, 1934, pp. 6, 8.

<sup>36</sup>"1 milyon mark Hitler-gelt far der Histadrut," *"Icor" Bulletin*, 5 January, 1934, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup>“Der historisher bashlus fun der sovyetn-regirung vegn biro-bidzhaner teritorye,” *Kanader “Icor”* 1, June 1934, pp. 5, 10; A. Hamer, “Biro-bidzhan—an umglik far di tsyionistn,” *Kanader “Icor”* 1, June 1934, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup>A. Minsker, “Nisht kayn ‘konkurents,’” *Kanader “Icor,”* 3 May 1936, p. 15. The Zionists reciprocated in kind: The Zionist Socialist Council (Poale Zion) of Montreal in 1935 printed a declaration charging the ICOR with fraud and challenged its leadership to prove it was not a purely Communist organization. The pamphlet, titled “From ‘Non-Partisanship’ to ‘Fraud’ or Worse,” is in the Canadian Jewish Archives, Montreal. See *Canadian Jewish Archives: Jewish Archival Record of 1935*, New Series, 7, ed. David Rome (Montreal: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1976), p. 71.

<sup>39</sup>“Di lage fun di yidn in farsheydene lender,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 16 January 1941, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup>“Mir velen opvishn di fashistische barbaren fun der erd’ deklarn di sovyetische arbeter,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 26 June 1941, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup>See for example, “In nayem yor mit frishen mut foroys tsum zig,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 1 January 1942, pp. 4, 7; “Nor in gayst fun ofensive ken men givenen di milkhome,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 8 January 1942, p. 4; “Demoralizatsyeh khapt arum di fashistische armayen oyf aleh fronten,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 15 January 1942, pp. 1, 7; “Der rukn-bayn un der gayst fun der nazisher krig-mashin iz gebrokhen,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 26 February 1942, pp. 1, 8; “Oyf di Nazis in Poylen tsitert di hoyt,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 26 February 1942, p. 4; “Daytshen zaynen zikher, az zay farlirenen di milkhome,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 18 June 1942, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup>S. Perel, “Fertsen yor Biro-bidzhan,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 9 April 1942, p. 2 (italics in original).

<sup>43</sup>“15 yor Biro-bidzhan,” *Kanader Yidishe Vochenblat*, 1 April 1943, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup>See Reg Whitaker, “Official Repression of Communism During World War II,” *Labour/Le Travail* 17 (spring 1986): 135-66. The name was restored in 1959.

<sup>45</sup>“Alef Raysh” [Alfred Rosenberg?], “Biro-bidzhan konferents bashlist oysstatten a fakh-shul far yidishe yesoymim in biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 21 February 1946, pp. 1-2; “Canadian Birobidjan Committee,” *Ambijan Bulletin* 5, February 1946, pp. 7-8.

<sup>46</sup>B.Z. Goldberg, "Birobidjan in the Soviet Five-Year Plan" and "Greetings to Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee Moscow," both in *Ambijan Bulletin* 5, April 1946, pp. 5, 6 respectively.

<sup>47</sup>"Telegrams and Messages of Greeting to the Conference" and "Proceedings of the National Conference for Birobidjan," *Ambijan Bulletin* 5, April 1946, pp. 4 and 7-10 respectively; J.M. Budish, "National Conference Rallies American Jews to Birobidjan," *Ambijan Bulletin* 5, September 1946, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup>S.C., "Classic, Say Critics Hailing New Concert by Jewish Folk Choir," *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 9 May 1946, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*; "Groyse delegatsye kumt tsu birobidzhan konferents, Zuntik, May 26-tn in Montreal," *Vochenblat*, 16 May 1946, p. 1; H. Abramovitch, "Kanader Biro-bidzhan komitayt bashlist ayntsuordinen toyzent yidishe yesoyimim," *Vochenblat*, 30 May 1946, p. 1; "Ruf fun Biro-bidzhan komitayt tsu di yidn fun Kanada," *Vochenblat*, 6 June 1946, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup>"Alef Raysh," "Kanader Biro-bidzhan komitayt vet oysbraytern zayne taytikayten ibern gantsn land," *Vochenblat*, 29 January 1948, p. 1; "Biro-bidzhan komitayt vet durkhfiren groyse fayerungen fun 20 yor yidishe autonomye teritorye," *Vochenblat*, 5 February 1948, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup>"Ershter matoneh-transport fun kanader yidn kayn Biro-bidzhan shoy n aroysgeshikt," *Vochenblat*, 5 February 1948, p. 6. See also, "First Shipment to Birobidjan," *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 5 February 1948, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>51</sup>Dr. Rose Bronstein, "On the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Birobidjan: Canadian Birobidjan Committee Plans Extensive Program," *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 11 March 1948, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>52</sup>A. Rosenberg, "20 yor Biro-bidzhan," *Vochenblat*, 25 March 1948, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup>Some examples of articles cited are: M. Ziv, "Vos hert zikh in biro-bidzhan," *Vochenblat*, 11 March 1948, p. 5; 18 March 1948, p. 3; 1 April 1948, p. 3; 24 June 1948, p. 6; Y. Kerler, "Naye ibervanderer flaysik in biro-bidzhan," *Vochenblat*, 15 April 1948, p. 3; "Hekher tsvantsik toyzent yidn zaynen gekumen kayn biro-bidzhan; nokh masn yidn grayten zikh tsu forn," *Vochenblat*, 22 April 1948, p. 2; "Naye boyer fun der yidisher oytonomer gegnt," *Vochenblat*, 6 May 1948, p. 5; M. Ziv, "Shnit-tsayt in Biro-bidjan," *Vochenblat*, 9 September 1948, p. 6; and M. Ziv, "Ibervanderer fardinen gut in Biro-bidzhan," *Vochenblat*, 13 January 1949, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup>H. Abramovitch, “Kanader Biro-bidzhan komitayt bashlist ayntsuordinen toyzent yidishe yesoymim,” *Vochenblat*, 30 May 1946, p. 1; “Ruf fun Biro-bidzhan komitayt tsu di yidn fun Kanada,” *Vochenblat*, 6 June 1946, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup>“J. B. Salsberg ongekumen in Erets Yisroel; vert dervartet tsurik onhayb Februar,” *Vochenblat*, 22 January 1948, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup>“Biro-bidzhan komitayt vet durkhfiren groyse fayerungen fun 20 yor yidishe autonomye teritorye,” *Vochenblat*, 5 February 1948, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup>L. Guberman, “Winnipegger yidn hobn mit groys interes oyfgenumen grus fun J.B. Salsberg vegn der lage fun di yidn in Europa un Erets-Yisroel,” *Vochenblat*, 20 May 1948, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup>“Salute the Jewish State and the Jewish Army,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 13 May 1948, English page (12) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>59</sup>Alexander S. Panyushkin, “Birobidjan Living Example of Soviet Attitude to Jewish People’s Rights,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 13 May 1948, English page (12) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>60</sup>A. Bakhmutski, “Groys zaynen di dergraykhungen fun 20 yor yidisher melikhe’shaft in biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 13 May 1948, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup>A. Rosenberg, “20 yor Biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 25 March 1948, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup>A. Rosenberg, “Tsvay historishe dates in der antviklung fun Biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 13 May 1948, p. 7. See also “Zayt gegrist, boyer fun Biro-bidzhan!” *Vochenblat*, 13 May 1948, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup>A. Nisnevitz, “20 yor Biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 20 May 1948, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup>“Need Greater Understanding of the Soviet Union,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 27 May 1948, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*; “Amerikaner Biro-bidzhan komitayt shikt op transport matones kayn Biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 24 February 1949, p. 2; “Groyse Biro-bidzhan fayerung Zuntik Marts 27-tn, in Toronto,” *Vochenblat*, 17 March 1949, p. 2; A. Jenofsky, “Yidishe autonomye gegnt, Biro-bidzhan kumpt mit groyse dergreikhungen tsu ir 15-yorikn yubilay,” *Vochenblat*, 24 March 1949, p. 5; “Dr. L. Zhitnitski fun Argentina in reikhe muzikalishe program bu Biro-bidzhan fayerung Zuntik,” *Vochenblat*, 24 March 1949, p. 1; “15 Years of the Autonomous Region,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 24 March 1949, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*; Ber Green, “Ambijan Pledges Closer Ties With Soviet Jewry,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 22 December 1949, English page



(8) of the *Vochenblat*; “Forthcoming Events,” *Ambijan Bulletin* 7, May 1948, p. 2; “Organizational Activities,” *Ambijan Bulletin* 7, May-June 1948, p. 15; “National Committee Maps Extended Program of Cooperation With Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidjan,” *Ambijan Bulletin* 7, December, 1948, p. 4; J.M. Budish, “Report on the Activities of Ambijan, Nov. 1947 to Nov. 1948,” *Ambijan Bulletin* 7, December, 1948, p. 14.

<sup>65</sup>“Balance Sheet—And Survey,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 5 January 1950, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>66</sup>“The Ambijan Annual National Dinner, 1949,” *Ambijan Bulletin* 9, January-February 1950, p. 13.

<sup>67</sup>[Itzik Feffer], “The Truth About Birobidjan,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 6 January 1949, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat* (boldface in original).

<sup>68</sup>A. Nisnevitz, “15 yor yidishe autonome gegnt in biro-bidzhan,” *Vochenblat*, 12 May 1949, p. 3. See also, “A Centre of Jewish Life,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 12 May 1949, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>69</sup>“Masn-oyfbroyz kegn fashistishn akt fun Premier Duplessis nemt arum dos land,” *Vochenblat*, 2 February 1950, pp. 1-2; “Demand Reopening of Cultural Centre,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 2 February 1950, English page (8) of the *Vochenblat*.

<sup>70</sup>For more on this period, see Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1994); and Reg Whitaker and Gary Macuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). The works contain much information on the trials of Carr, Rose, and others.