

THE FUTURE JEWISH SOVIET
REPUBLIC

I.

THE ECONOMIC AND PARTICULARLY THE CULTURAL renaissance of Russian Jewry, which I have described in the previous chapters, commenced less than sixteen years ago. Historically, sixteen years in the life of a people is a very short time, but for the Russian Jews these sixteen years have taken the place of centuries. Still, it is only a beginning. As yet, I believe, it is premature to write the final chapter of this renaissance.

Of one thing, however, I am certain: the path of the Jews under the Soviet regime is straightforward and clear. It is the path of all Soviet citizens. It is organically linked up with the destiny and progress of the country's Five-Year Plans and the Revolution in general. In the Soviet scheme of things, the Jew is primarily a worker, farmer, artist, or poet. He benefits from the country's wealth. He also shares the burden of Russia's reconstruction period. This is most lucidly expressed by those Soviet leaders who are directly or indirectly concerned with the Jewish question.

"As far as the Soviet Government is concerned," says Mikhail Kalinin, President of the Soviet Union and chief patron of the Jewish colonization movement, "all nationalities are equal. It wants to transform them into productive members of society. Because of a cruel historical fate, the Jews were primarily a city and town people. To work on land was for them a forbidden fruit . . . Out of these ghetto Jews who had never had a firm base in life, the Soviet Government strives to make working people . . . We have already great accomplishments in this field . . . Every honest man ought to know that Soviet Russia could not and cannot act otherwise than she did."

Kalinin also believes that a powerful "subconscious stimulus to preserve the national Jewish character" is inherent in the Jewish back-to-the-land movement. "There is no doubt," he says, "that the organization of agricultural colonies is perhaps one of the best means of preserving the Jewish nation as a nation."

A similar view was expressed by the late Commissar of Education, Anatol Lunacharski. In an even bolder tone he called for a unity of all the seventy-four nationalities that inhabit the vast Soviet Union. It is the task of the Bolsheviks, he said, to assist the weaker and more backward nationalities and elevate them to a higher cultural and economic level. And the Jews? "The Jews who are a cultured people can aid us in this task . . . Then the sorry villages with the fantastic people so vividly described by Shalom

Alechem and Perets will disappear forever . . . In their place will arise the Jewish proletarian, peasant, intellectual, our friends and brothers . . .

"Fear not the grumblings of the anti-Semites," he assured the Jews. "As long as the workers' and peasants' government remains in power, not even one hair of your head will fall . . ."

One could cite many such statements by responsible Soviet leaders. This, indeed, is the official attitude of the Soviet Government. Even those who at one time were critical of the Soviet approach to the Jewish question are beginning to realize, as was recently expressed by Felix M. Warburg—a man who is by no means a Communist or even in sympathy with Communism—that "no government has gone so far beyond its contract to aid Jews as the Soviet Union."

2.

In spite of its indisputable progress, Soviet Jewry has suffered from one drawback. Unlike the other national minorities of the country, it lacked one definite centre where it could concentrate its creative energy. The Ukrainians had their Ukraine; the Uzbeks, Uzbekistan; White Russians, White Russia, etc. These lands belonged to these people before the Tsarist Government took it away from them. It was returned to them by the Bolsheviks. The Jews, on the other hand, dispersed as they were throughout the colonies of the Crimea, the Ukraine and White

Russia and through the industrial centres of the country, felt the need of a national territory which would above all assure their continuance as a distinct national group with its own culture and traditions. It was a problem. With its characteristic thoroughness, the Soviet Government set out to solve it.

In May, 1928, the world was startled by the announcement that Soviet Russia intended to establish a Jewish national territory in Biro-Bidjan. "Let the Jews of the Soviet Union," Kalinin prefaced this announcement, "have their own little republic and then everybody will know that they, too, have their own state."

Biro-Bidjan is a small part of the Far East in the Amur-Ussuri region. It extends from the Amur river northwards. It is in the proximity of Kahabarovsk, the capital of the Far Eastern territory, and less than an eighteen-hour journey from Vladivostok. The area allotted for Jewish settlement is washed by two rivers, Biro and Bidjan, from which it takes its name.

The whole Amur-Ussuri region was granted to Russia by China after the conclusion of the peace pact of 1855. Having acquired the territory, however, the Tsarist Government never took much pains to cultivate it. Except for about 40,000 people composed of some Cossacks, exiled Ukrainian peasants, Yakuts and Koreans, it remained wild and uninhabited. This, incidentally, was one of the reasons why the Soviet Government had chosen Biro-Bidjan for the establishment of a Jewish national unit, and eventually a Jewish republic.

Palestine, for instance, has the Arab problem which, as it is well known, seriously hinders the creation of a Jewish homeland there. In Biro-Bidjan, on the other hand, for the first time in history the Jews are given a territory to which no other people has a prior claim.

Another reason for choosing Biro-Bidjan is the fact that the country is extremely rich in natural resources. Last year an expedition of Soviet scientists discovered there gold, coal, copper, graphite, marble and iron. Also, its land is fertile, while its proximity to the Pacific markets—Japan, China,—may eventually transform the territory into a great industrial centre.

The chief attraction of Biro-Bidjan, however, is the fact that the Soviet Government is willing to throw open its doors to Jewish settlers from outside the Soviet Union. It is this aspect of the Biro-Bidjan project which immediately captured the imagination of world Jewry. With the ascendance of Hitler to power in Germany, this prospect for a Jewish national homeland stands out like a beacon of hope for the harassed and suffering Jews of Germany.

According to Lord Dudley Marley who has recently, on behalf of the Committee to Aid Victims of German Fascism, conducted negotiations with Soviet Russia, the Government is not only willing to allow German Jewish refugees to settle in Biro-Bidjan but has also expressed its willingness to provide free transportation and land to all those who agree "to take part in the normal communal life of

the area." And the country is vast, larger than Belgium and Holland combined. The number of Jews it can admit is unlimited.

Thus, without any strings attached to it, as is the case with Palestine, not only the Jews of Russia but Jews the world over are given an opportunity to establish their own republic.

3.

When Soviet Russia first announced her intention of establishing this Jewish national territory in Biro-Bidjan, curiously enough it did not find an enthusiastic response among the older generation of Jews. To be sure, their arguments against the territory were legitimate enough. The country, they generally claimed, was too far. Its climate is a typical Siberian climate, extremely cold in the winter; the Jews who have always lived mostly in the south of Russia are accustomed to a warmer climate. The civilization there was more Chinese than Russian, hence alien to Jews who have been among the oldest members of the European civilization.

To the younger Jews, however, these arguments were not convincing. Such disadvantages did not terrify them. A Jewish homeland! A "Kingdom" of Jews! Wasn't this what the Jews have longed for for many centuries? Immediately many young Jewish pioneers packed their meager belongings and set out to Biro-Bidjan to build a Jewish Soviet Republic.

Victor Fink relates an interesting story about these

pioneers. In May, 1928, in the first days of colonization, when only the first few colonists were beginning to arrive, some enthusiastic official conceived the brilliant idea of sending a Jewish telegrapher to Biro-Bidjan. He was placed at the telegraph station of an old Cossack village. In those days telegrams came rarely to that part of the country. The telegraphist had little work to do. Finally, when a telegram did come, it was for a Korean. But that mattered little to the Jewish telegrapher. He sent out the telegram scribbled in Jewish characters. After all, he said, paragraph five of the resolution of the Central Executive Committee refers to the creation of a Jewish republic in Biro-Bidjan. The fact that according to the resolution there must first be settled 10,000 Jews in Biro-Bidjan before the region could become an autonomous national territory and 50,000 Jews before it would be given the status of a republic was of little significance to him. A Jewish Kingdom!*

This incident, amusing though it is, emphasizes once more how drunk the Jewish youth of Russia became with the idea of a national home.

4.

I once interviewed a young official of the Komzet. He couldn't have been more than 22 years old. He

*As I was writing this chapter, the following dispatch appeared in the New York Times of May 9, 1934: "Soviet officials informed the Jewish Telegraphic Agency today that the Jewish settlement in Biro-Bidjan was proclaimed a Jewish autonomous unit by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Republic."

had just arrived from Biro-Bidjan to get a supply of tractors for his kolhoz and also to stir up some enthusiasm among the Jews of Moscow.

My first question was the same one I asked almost everyone who had anything to do with the Jews in Russia:

"Do you think that the Jews will remain a distinct national group in Russia?"

"Yes," he replied readily and without any hesitation, "we have made tremendous strides forward. But that is only the beginning . . . A drop in the ocean, I should say . . . A dress rehearsal for the great show. The real thing will only come after the Jews have their own homeland."

"But there are many Jews who are already settled in the Crimea and other parts of the country," I said, "what will happen to them? Will they, too, be transferred to Biro-Bidjan?"

"Not at all. Biro-Bidjan does not compete with the Crimea. They will remain where they are. But a Jewish homeland with a flourishing Jewish culture will exert a tremendous influence upon them, too . . ."

That night I listened to this official delivering a lecture on Biro-Bidjan at the Jewish Workers Club. I wrote down everything he said without changing a word. He spoke of the accomplishments and hardship connected with building of the Jewish national territory.

"Comrades," he said, "I want you to remember well that the objective conditions for work in Biro-

Bidjan are at this moment much more difficult than in any other part of the country. The reasons for it are quite simple. In other parts of the Soviet Union the cities and towns have already been in existence for hundreds of years. The land has been cultivated for generations. In White Russia and the Ukraine from which the majority of the settlers come, the houses have been built dozens of years ago . . .

"All this we haven't got in Biro-Bidjan. We may not have it for many years to come. Why? Because the country is wild. We must create there new cities and agricultural colonies. We must even build new houses for the builders themselves. Every hectare of land has to be cultivated, for the land is virgin. Where no human foot has ever trod, we must make new roads. We have to dig wells and cut down forests . . . All this we must do under very difficult conditions. There are times when our pioneers in Biro-Bidjan have neither a roof over their heads nor enough food for their bodies.

"Understand, comrades, that all things are inter-related. As long as nothing grows in Biro-Bidjan, we must bring food from other places. But when the roads are bad, we cannot always get the necessities of life in time.

"Yes, tremendous obstacles lie in the path of our pioneers. When you hear about these difficulties, here in Moscow, you usually say: 'It doesn't matter. We shall get everything. Suppose we do suffer hardship for a while?'

"True enough. Eventually we shall have every-

thing. Workers are not afraid of difficulties. Think of our brothers in the capitalist lands. However, he who really wants to overcome these difficulties must be stubborn and disciplined. Only such an approach will lead to victory.

"Another thing, comrades, we must remember: the Jews are not only the colonizers of Biro-Bidjan, but also its carriers of culture and civilization. Not because they are Jews, but because they are being sent there by the Soviet Government. And the Government knows that without modern technique the country cannot be developed. Thus, following the Jew, there came to Biro-Bidjan tractors, automobiles and excavators—products of civilization that until recently the local population considered devils, 'unclean spirits.'

"Can we do it, comrades? I say yes. But always bear in mind that the development of our national home must proceed along socialist lines that would be akin to the socialist spirit of the Soviet Union as a whole. Let non-creative elements and weaklings stay away. As yet, Biro-Bidjan is no place for them . . ."

Having painted this dark and gloomy picture, the orator then proceeded to cheer up his audience. He told them of the progress already made.

In 1928, only 500 Jews settled in Biro-Bidjan. In 1933 there were already 12,000 settlers. Here, too, as in the case of the Crimea and other colonization districts, there was at first a tremendous turnover of settlers. Many Jews came, could not stand the hardship and returned. Others came to take their place.

At this moment there are about fifty collective farms in Biro-Bidjan. They have organized a net of their own coöperative stores. In the six state-owned farms already in existence, more than fifty per cent of those employed are Jews. New industries are being developed in connection with wood-cutting for building purposes, as well as coal, copper, gold and iron mining. Besides these there are other industries which include fish, game, furs, fruit, tobacco and the usual agricultural products of soya, wheat, buck-wheat and rice.

The growth of the administrative city of Biro-Bidjan, Tichonkaya, in a sense symbolizes the growth of the area as a whole.

Before the Jews began to settle there, Tichonkaya was a tiny, little known station on the Ussuri railroad line. It had only one railroad track and the fast train going from Moscow to Vladivostok never stopped there. Tichonkaya, unknown, stood in obscurity in the wild Taiga.

Since the Jews settled in Biro-Bidjan, a new life has commenced in Tichonkaya. This little quiet (Tichonkaya literally means "quiet") railroad station became the centre of a new country.

Now the name of Tichonkaya has been changed to Biro-Bidjan City, for it is no longer a tiny railroad station but a lively city. It has its own city Soviet, several schools and even an electrical power house. It is the nerve centre of the whole Biro-Bidjan district. There is unceasing activity in Tichonkaya. Trains full of freight unload there. New groups of

settlers arrive there daily. They are met at the station by special Ozet and Komzet men. In order to serve the Jewish settlers better, in order to make them feel at home from the very outset, the Government has recently appointed a Jewish station master.

This, in brief, is the story of the future Jewish Republic. When the orator concluded his lecture, while the enraptured audience was applauding violently, I made the following notes:

"He is young, bright, enthusiastic and has much faith in the future . . . This is nothing unusual with Soviet youth, particularly with the Jewish youth . . . After all, he grew up in a country that for fifteen years has been feverishly building a new life . . . The new life has not yet arrived. . . . There are still tremendous obstacles in its path . . . But it is human material like this youth that assures its ultimate success . . . Indeed he speaks of this 'Jewish Kingdom' as an already accomplished fact . . . I have no doubt that he is right . . . But even if Biro-Bidjan, as the Zionists and other opponents of Soviet Russia insist, were not to be successful, as far as the economic life of the Jews is concerned, it wouldn't matter anyway . . . The purpose of this Jewish national territory is to strengthen the Jews as a national and cultural group and not to solve the Jewish problem in Russia . . . As long as the Soviet Government remains in power, I am firmly convinced that there will be no Jewish problem in Russia . . ."