

## **The First Yiddish Summer Program in Birobidzhan (August 13 – August 30, 2007)**

*Holger Nath*

In the late 1920s, Birobidzhan, a remote area in the Far East of Siberia near the Chinese border, was declared a Jewish homeland. In May 1934, this area between the rivers, Bira and Bidzhan, was officially named the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) of the Soviet Union. As an Autonomous Region in the Soviet Union, bilingual instruction in Russian and the other official language of the region, in the case of Birobidzhan, Yiddish, was guaranteed. As a result, Yiddish schools, a Yiddish theater, etc. were built. However, the idea of establishing a secular Jewish area, as a response to Zionism, was not very successful. The hard living conditions in mosquito-infested and almost inaccessible swamps with harsh winters and hot summers caused a large number of the first settlers to move back to their home towns. Overall, the number of Jews who had migrated to Birobidzhan was quite small, so they still constituted a minority in relation to the Ukrainian and Russian inhabitants who had emigrated at the same time. Then there were Stalin's purges which extended into the Far East and even as far as Birobidzhan, where political and cultural leaders were arrested and liquidated. This was certainly a severe blow to the Jewish community and the development of Yiddish culture in Siberia. At the end of World War II, a new wave of Jewish immigrants came to Birobidzhan. Yet, the Jewish population still constituted a minority. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, much larger groups of Birobidzhan Jews emigrated. Today about 4,000 Jews still live in Birobidzhan and we hear about emigrants returning to the native JAR.

From August 13-31, 2007, a Yiddish summer school was held in Birobidzhan for the first time. It was organized by Dr. Boris Kotlerman of the Rena Costa Center for Yiddish Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Israel in cooperation with the Center for the Research of the History and Culture of Yiddish at the Far Eastern State Academy for Humanities and Social Studies in Birobidzhan. Forty students from abroad (primarily from Israel, the USA, Great Britain, and Japan) and students of the Birobidzhan Far Eastern State Academy attended the three-week long program. The Russian students had already studied Yiddish for two years at the Academy. The knowledge of Yiddish ranged from the level of very

beginners to native speakers eager for the opportunity to see the former ‘Stalinist Zion’ with their own eyes.

Getting to Birobidzhan required an extraordinary long trip. Some participants took the slower way with the Transsiberian Railway which goes directly to Birobidzhan. But the faster option included an almost eight hour flight from Moscow to Khabarovsk. Fortunately, the organizers of the summer program provided transportation from Khabarovsk to Birobidzhan which is located 180 km west of Khabarovsk. This drive was a good introduction to the landscape of Birobidzhan. The ride went through flatlands with swamps, drainage canals, and small villages where residents would sell products from their private estate or berries and mushrooms from the nearby forests. At the city border stood an impressive bilingual monument marking the beginning of the city of Birobidzhan in both Yiddish and Russian.

Since I did not know what to expect in Birobidzhan, I was surprised and pleased to see a modern city with some older architecture. The style ranges from quaint, simple wooden structures from the 1930s (used as temporary housing for the incoming migrants) to Soviet style 1950s and 1960s buildings as well as more contemporary architecture. The city itself is very green with many parks and tree-lined streets. The beginning of the Sholem-Aleichem-Street was turned into a pedestrian zone with shops, flower beds, and the farmer’s market. There was also some construction work under way, a fountain representing Noah’s Arch was being built and it seemed that much effort was made to finish the work before the onset of the International Festival of Jewish Music (which we unfortunately missed).

The summer program offered the participants a unique opportunity to learn the Yiddish language and about the history of Yiddish and Jewish culture in Birobidzhan.

Three levels of Yiddish classes were taught six days a week by the instructors: Sheva Tzucker (League for Yiddish, New York), Khanan Bordin (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), and Holger Nath (University of Trier, Germany). In addition to the language courses, an introduction to the history of Yiddish language, Yiddish literature, and film, and classes on Judaism were offered by Boris Kotlerman and Michael Zozula. Cantor Zalman Deutsch taught classes exploring Yiddish song, various cantorial styles, and the tropes for chanting the Torah.

Organizers of the course worked at getting the the local population involved. The course was advertised in the local newspapers to attract people interested in Yiddish. Yiddish films were shown without charge at the local movie theater,

with introductory talks in both Yiddish and Russian. In addition to some classic Yiddish films, Soviet Jewish/Yiddish films like “Yidishe glikn”, “Glikzukhers”, and “Gelekhter durkh treyn” were also screened.

In addition to the classes and lectures, a number of excursions and gatherings had been organized. It would have been difficult to arrange these excursions without local support from the Far Eastern State Academy, as well as the local businessman and historian, Iosif Brener. The Lubavitcher Chief Rabbi, Mordkhe Sheiner, and his wife who have been very active in reviving Jewish culture in the JAR, prepared a number of shabes lunches and dinners. Since 2005, Rabbi Sheiner has been hosting the weekly show ‘Yidishkayt’ on the local TV station.

An important factor in these excursions was to acquaint the participants with aspects of Jewish life and culture in Birobidzhan. Bilingual signs were all over the city of Birobidzhan, less so in the JAR itself. The farmer’s market, for instance, had both a Russian and a Yiddish sign at its entrance, saying: ‘landvirtshaflekher mark’. Signs on government buildings, for example, the state prosecutor’s office, and plaques marking the homes of accomplished Yiddish writers and Jewish artists were also bilingual, like R. Shoykhet, Buzi Miller, Lyuba Vaserman. Clearly, there was once a rich Yiddish culture and active Jewish community in this city. Today the Yiddish language seems to play a significantly smaller role in Birobidzhan. Although Middle School No. 2 offers a few years of Yiddish language instruction before shifting to Hebrew, it is mostly only the older people who are able to speak Yiddish well. About 700 students attend the school and about 20% of them are Jewish.

The official opening of the summer program coincided with the presentation of Iosif Brener’s book about Birobidzhan, ‘Lekhayim, Birobidzhan!’, which is both a personal memoir as well as a history of Jewish Birobidzhan. Among the attendants of the book release party and the official opening were the deputy governor of Birobidzhan, the mayor of Birobidzhan and other state officials who demonstrated great interest in the summer program.

One of the highlights was a visit of the offices of the Yiddish newspaper ‘Birobidzhaner shtern’ and of the Russian newspaper ‘Birobidzhanskaia zvezda’. The ‘Birobidzhaner shtern’, founded in 1930s (along with the New York Yiddish weekly ‘Forverts’) is the oldest existing Yiddish newspaper in the world. But even here the decline in the use of Yiddish is noticeable, since only two of the eight pages appear in Yiddish. The ‘phonetic’ spelling of the Hebrew component is still maintained for reasons of tradition, as one of the editors explained. However, the use of final letters was introduced long after all other

Soviet Yiddish publications, such as the Moscow literary journal 'Sovetish heymland' and its successor 'Di yidishe gas', had already made that switch. The editors of both newspapers asserted that they continued to focus on many Jewish themes, even though most of the articles in the 'Birobidzhaner shtern' are now printed in Russian.

The transformation of the Sholem-Aleichem library is emblematic of the state of Yiddish and Jewish culture in Birobidzhan. Originally created as the central library for Soviet Yiddish publications, it once housed over 35,000 books in or about Yiddish. In the early 1950's, approximately 30,000 volumes and rare books were burned during the last waves of Stalinist antisemitism. The library now owns about 4,000 books on Yiddish. A card catalogue in Russian transliteration is the only reference available for the Yiddish and Hebrew collections. While the librarians in charge do not speak or read Yiddish or Hebrew, they expressed a strong interest in learning it.

The local dance troupe 'Siurpriz' gave a very enthusiastic performance of Israeli folk dances. They had just won the first prize in a Jewish folk dance competition in Berlin. The troupe consists of ca. 240 performers, about 30% of them Jewish who practice three to four times a week for three hours. A specialty of 'Siurpriz' are large open-air performances with all members participating. With all the other local activities there does seem to be some hope for a Jewish revival in the JAR.

An international conference on Birobidzhan coincided with the summer program and took place at the Academy. Specialists on Soviet Jewish history and Soviet Yiddish presented their research in English, Yiddish, and Russian. This event was open to the public, and the participants of the summer program attended as part of the curriculum. Here, they were exposed to current research on Birobidzhan which is due to be published in the journal 'Mizrakh', recently founded by the Far Eastern division of the Academy of Sciences.

Since the city of Birobidzhan, or as it was called in former days, Tikhonkaya, was only a way-station for migrants to other areas in the Autonomous Region, we also visited the surrounding former Jewish kolkhozes Valdheim, Birefeld, and Nayfeld. Unfortunately, only a few Jewish families are still living there, but the communities maintain little museums or rooms in the schools or libraries dedicated to the history of the respective kolkhoz. School children are encouraged to research the history of their communities. One sad aspect was that in the 1980s someone had taken old photos and documents about the Birefeld from the library and had burned them. No one knows who the

perpetrator was, and the library has been asking for documents from former residents in an attempt to reconstruct the local history.

I found it particularly interesting to visit the sites described in the works of Yiddish writers in person. For example, one of the ‘monuments’ of Birobidzhan, the ‘sopke’, a little hill near the Bire River, became a central element of almost mystical proportions in some Yiddish poetry and in Bergelsons’s novel ‘Birobidzhaner’.

In addition to visiting sites connected with Jewish history, the program offered visits to the natural areas of Birobidzhan. One high school offers extracurricular projects on local ecology and the preservation of natural resources. High school students presented a talk on Swan lake located near the Chinese border, a unique spot in the Russian Far East. The lake is filled with lotus flowers and is named after the many migrating swans who stop there. A boat trip on the lake as well as a guided tour of the local flora and fauna provided an excellent introduction to this habitat and ecological systems. It was good to see that environmental consciousness is increasing and that young people feel connected to and are proud of their natural heritage.

Two trips led us outside of the Jewish Autonomous Region: One day, we visited the so-called neighboring city of Khabarovsk. After a walk in the city and along the Amur river, we visited the central building of the Jewish community which houses the new synagogue, the mikva, and which serves as the cultural center. A visit to the Jewish kindergarten completed the excursion to Khabarovsk. But Russian and Hebrew, and not Yiddish, were the languages taught there.

One of the most fascinating excursions was to a Nanai village Sikachi-Alian, north of Khabarovsk on the Amur river. The Nanai are an indigenous Tunguse people. Signs in their village are displayed in the Nanai language, but the younger generation is frequently not able to speak the native language. Since there are about 10,000 Nanai with only a few speakers, their situation is much more precarious than that of Yiddish. In Sikachi-Alian, we visited a museum, saw reconstructions of Nanai dwellings, petroglyphs (stone carvings) depicting traditional Nanai beliefs and legends on the Amur, and attended a performance of dance and song.

The publicity connected with the summer program seems also to have sparked some interest among the local population. Numerous people expressed their intention to promote the use of Yiddish in the Jewish Autonomous Region. Whereas in other autonomous regions bilingual education has been

established as the norm, Yiddish is being taught only at a single school in the entire JAR.

I personally found the summer course very inspiring and enjoyable. The atmosphere in Birobidzhan was extremely friendly and welcoming. The synagogues were not guarded as they are here in Germany. Pedestrians would greet students wearing kippas with a friendly ‘Shalom’, some of them would strike up a conversation. Maybe due to the unique setting of the program, a community of ‘Birobidzhaners’ evolved who are still in contact, many months after the course ended.