



The **JEWISH
AUTONOMOUS REGION**

By D. Bergelson

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By
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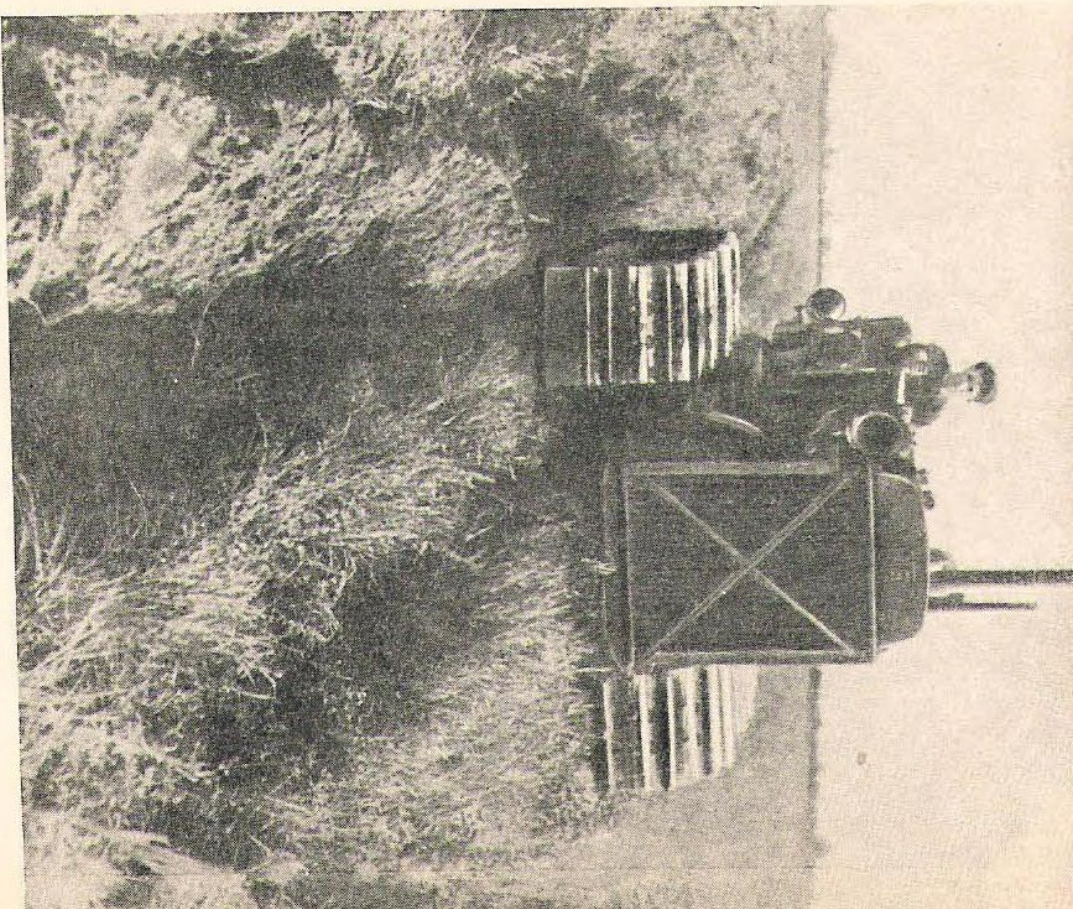
1.

THE Soviet solution of the national question is strikingly illustrated by the way the problems of the Jewish people have been dealt with in the Soviet Union.

In Russia in the past the tsarist government pursued a policy of national oppression and national antagonism. In order the easier to keep the people in subjection, it incited the various nationalities against one another. It treated the border regions as colonies. It suppressed the national culture of the various nationalities, striving to keep them in a state of ignorance so as to be able to exploit them

more ruthlessly. The Jews were subject to special restrictions; they were denied the right of domicile in the greatest part of Russia, and were confined within the narrow boundaries of the so-called Pale of Settlement.

With the establishment of the Soviet system every trace of national oppression was destroyed on the territory of the Soviet Union. By wiping out every vestige of national or racial inequality the Soviet Government has swept away all the artificial barriers that divided the various nationalities. The Soviet Government consistently carried out the policy of helping the peoples that were once backward in their development to catch up with the most advanced peoples both economically and culturally, and has thereby brought about the political and economic unity of the Soviet Union. All its peoples are imbued with the common idea of Socialist construction and Socialist life, and all of them feel and know that their homeland extends far beyond the particular territory where they happen to live, that



*Ploughing up virgin soil at the Icor Kolkhoz,
Jewish Autonomous Region*

their home is the entire Soviet Union—from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea and from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Every citizen—whether worker, peasant, engineer, doctor or artist—is as welcome, useful and at home in any part of the Soviet Union as he is in the republic or autonomous region of his own nationality.

The culture of the various nationalities is flourishing in the Soviet Union, and their languages have become enriched. Some peoples, which lived in a state of utter darkness under the heel of tsardom, have for the first time obtained their own alphabet—their written language—under the Soviet Government. The once most backward peoples now have their universities and theaters, their national poets and artists.

The changes have been particularly striking in the case of the Jewish people, the most oppressed and persecuted in the Russia of the tsars.

In the twenty-one years of Soviet power the Jews have been drawn into every phase of economic life and activity. Jews are now

employed in heavy industry and engage in agriculture—pursuits which were formerly entirely closed to them; and Jewish scientists are members of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R.

Jewish fliers took part in the historic expedition to the North Pole. Thousands of Jews operate machines in factories and mills. In the city of Gorky (formerly Nizhni-Novgorod, in which Jews were not allowed to live in the times of tsardom) there are about eight thousand Jewish workers employed in the automobile works alone. Among the prominent Stakhanovite workers we find many Jews like Blidman, Khenkin, Yussim and others, whose names are known all over the country. Jewish Red Armymen who took part in the battles at Lake Hassan were among those decorated by the Soviet Government for their heroism and devotion. Jewish names are among those of the Heroes of the Soviet Union, as well as among those of the Deputies to the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. and the Supreme Soviets of the Union Republics.

The culture of the Jewish people has taken its place alongside the culture of the other nationalities. Just as the whole country celebrated the anniversary of Pushkin, the great Russian poet, and of Rust'hveli, the great Georgian poet, and just as it is celebrating the anniversary of Shevchenko, the great Ukrainian people's poet, so it is also celebrating the anniversary of Sholem Aleikhem, the great writer of the Jewish people. Thus a common culture is being created—the great Soviet culture which absorbs the best that there is in the culture of all the nations of the Soviet Union.

In the twenty-one years of Soviet power the Jews, like every other people in the Soviet Union, have enjoyed every opportunity of developing all branches of their national culture—literature, theatrical art, science, etc.—throughout the territory of the Soviet Union, as well as in their own national districts in the Ukraine and Crimea. In addition to securing to the Jews full equality, the Soviet Government has set aside a large district—Birobidjan—as a

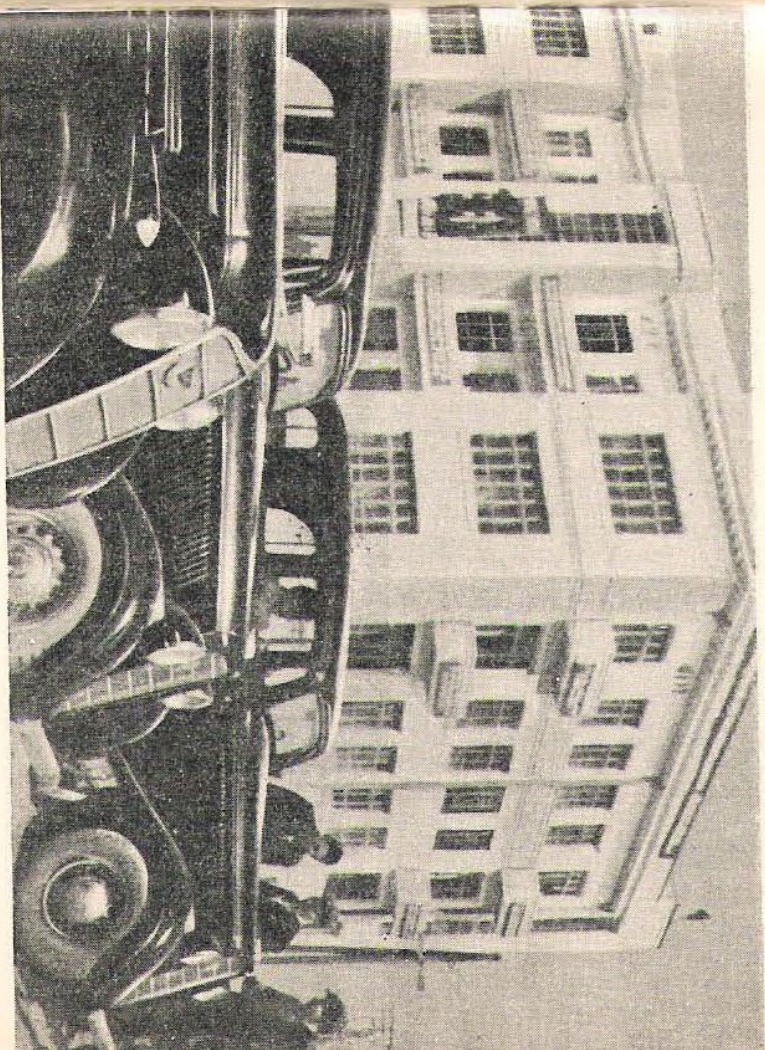
Jewish national territory. The Jews have thus acquired their statehood in the Soviet Union—the Jewish Autonomous Region, which is a unique and a most momentous development in the history of the Jewish people as a whole.

Like all the other national territories in the Soviet Union, the Jewish Autonomous Region is incorporated in the Constitution of the U.S.S.R., and like all of them it has progressed and developed in every way.

2.

Across the vast expanses of the country a train carrying settlers to Birobidjan is speeding over the great Trans-Siberian railroad.

The train crosses the Urals and passes from Europe into Asia. But none of the passengers notices any difference. Socialist construction has obliterated the distinction between the European and Asiatic part of the Soviet Union. Soviet Asia is humming



Building of the Regional Executive Committee of Soviets and of the Regional Committee of C.P.S.U. (B.) in the City of Birobidjan

with life and activity. It presents to the view new and reconstructed cities, each of which would be a fitting capital of many a big country.

The train passes Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk. It speeds along the shore of the magnificent Lake Baikal, along the famous Shilka and Argun rivers where flourishing settlements have sprung up in recent years, and finally reaches Obluchye—the first station in the Jewish Autonomous Region.

The train now proceeds through magnificent scenery. Dense forests rise on both sides of the road. Here one sees the sturdy oak, the stately poplar, the tall Manchurian ash which reaches a height of 115 ft. and is over 3 ft. in diameter, the fragrant Amur and Manchurian linden, the giant Dahur larch, tall cork trees (Phelodendron Amurensis), huge cedars and white birch.

Swift rivers and brooks, teeming with fish, flow through the land. (The total length of the large and small rivers of the Jewish Autonomous Region is over 2,200 miles.)

The meadows are covered with tall and succulent grasses. Wild swans, geese, ducks and pheasants abound in the meadows and near the streams.

Stags and deer, wild boars and gazelles roam the virgin forests. The brown bear feels quite at home in the dense taiga, and occasionally, though rarely, an Ussuri tiger may be found prowling there. It is easy to see that these forests are a paradise for the hunter and trapper. They abound in valuable sables and ermines, in martens, raccoons and foxes, in hares and squirrels.

The sun is warm and invigorating. Under its rays ripen tomatoes, luscious melons of enormous size, watermelons, cucumbers, corn, sunflowers, and the like.

3.

This much can be seen even from the train crossing the region from west to east—from Obluchye to Khabarovsk, a distance of over 230 miles.

While we are thus traveling in the train

let us get acquainted with some of the information that has so far been obtained with regard to the region's natural resources.

Its territory extends over an area of 90,000,000 acres. About 50,000,000 acres are covered with forests and brushwood. There are about 19,000,000 acres of natural meadows and prairie land, and another 19,000,000 acres of marshy land requiring melioration. About 2,000,000 acres are under cultivation.

The great Amur River washes the western and southern boundaries of the region along a distance of 400 miles.

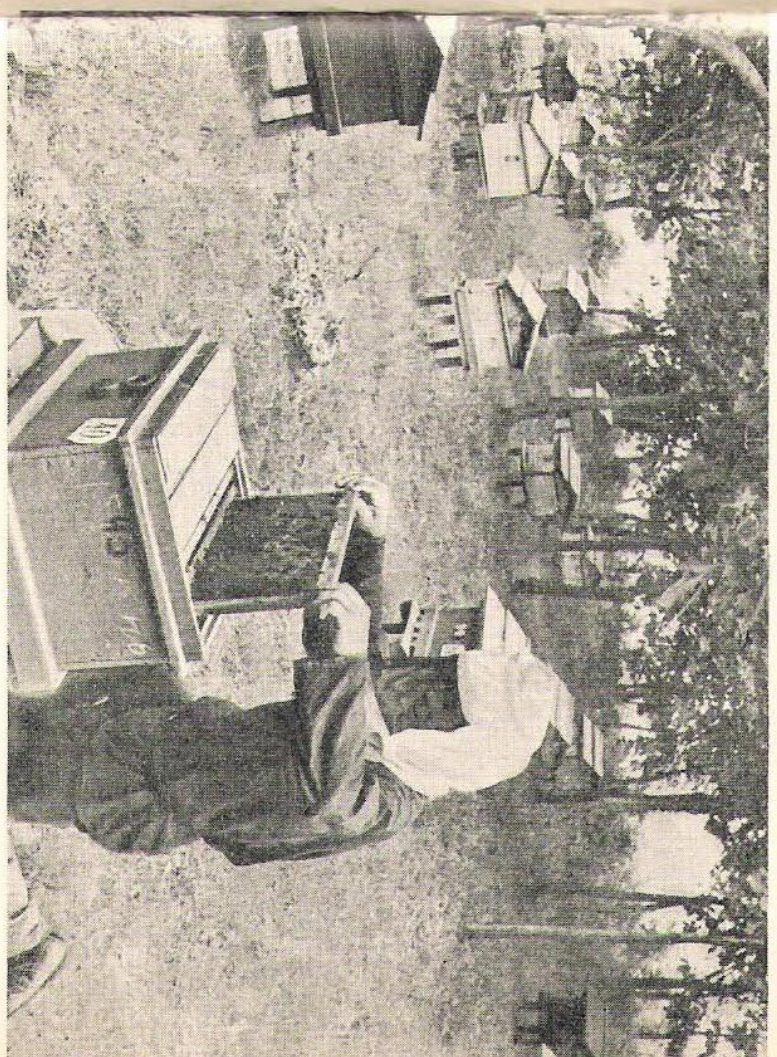
The earth is rich in mineral deposits. It contains fine building stone: granite, basalt, quartzites and porphyry. Wood-covered mountain ranges extending for tens of miles are made up of high-grade limestone. There are extensive strata of beautiful marble of a variety of colors—pink, red, green, etc. Rich deposits of graphite and magnesite are found in the vicinity of the railroad line and deep in the taiga. Fields of placer gold stretch along the Sutar River. Deposits of high-grade iron ore, tentatively

estimated at 3,400,000,000 tons, have been found near the Birakan and Kimkan railway stations and in the vicinity of the Amur. Geologists have discovered rich coal deposits which still have to be investigated.

Prospecting and investigation is going on all the time. The Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. and its various institutes have sent quite a number of scientific expeditions to study the Jewish Autonomous Region, and each expedition brings new information concerning its inexhaustible mineral resources.

The soil covering the rich mineral deposits hidden in the bowels of this earth yields abundant harvests of wheat, oats, buckwheat, rice, soy beans and other cereals and leguminous crops. The air is pervaded with the intoxicating perfume of flowers and honey-bearing plants. The tall and succulent grasses provide abundant fodder for horses and cattle.

It was to this bountiful land, which had been so much in need of the labor of bold



Apiary at Waldheim, Jewish Autonomous Region

pioneers to explore and develop it, that the first Jewish settlers came in 1928.

4.

The story of the settling of this country is a story of great courage and perseverance.

In 1918-22 it was the scene of war against the Japanese forces of intervention and Whiteguard generals. Here the Partisans and Red Army detachments fought bitter battles with the oppressors. In the decisive battle of Volochayevka the revolutionary forces—ill-equipped, barefoot and ragged—defeated the well-armed and well-trained regiments of the counter-revolution.

This land has now become the scene of a joyous and persevering struggle with the forces of nature; a struggle to master the resources of the land, to develop it, to transform it into a flourishing Socialist garden.

Up to 1928 there existed in this territory just a few small villages and railway sta-

tions, tucked away amid the stillness of the forests—lonely settlements in a vast expanse of virgin country. There were a few tiny islets of cultivated land in the endless sea of forest wilderness.

The year 1928—the first year of the First Five-Year Plan period and the first year of the settlement of Jews in Birobidjan—marked a great beginning in the history of this region.

The first Jewish settlers were confronted with innumerable difficulties: marshes, floods, absence of roads.

The tractor drivers who were the first to break the stillness of these parts with the rumbling of their tractors relate:

“We travelled on two tractors through marshes and woods. It was dark and dead quiet all around us. In the absence of roads the only way we could travel was by tractor.”

That was in 1928.

Today the Jewish Autonomous Region has four machine and tractor stations with a large fleet of tractors. The tractor has

become a “domestic” machine, a friend and assistant of the people.

In 1928 a group of Jewish settlers left Tikhonkaya—the railway station which was later to become the city of Birobidjan, the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region—to look for a place to build a settlement. They went in carts drawn by horses. After four hard days of traveling they found a place which seemed suitable for their purpose. It was an elevation in the midst of the forest, a dry spot with timber near at hand.

They decided to settle there and began to build a village for themselves. With their own hands they cleared the place, felled and sawed the timber and built houses to live in. Today it is a large village—Waldheim—about eight miles from the city of Birobidjan.

Together with the older inhabitants the Jewish settlers cleared the land, built houses and roads, overcame difficulties and hardships. The stillness of the taiga was invaded by the roaring of tractors and

automobiles. Melioration groups began to work on draining the marshes. Excavators began to dig into the mountains.

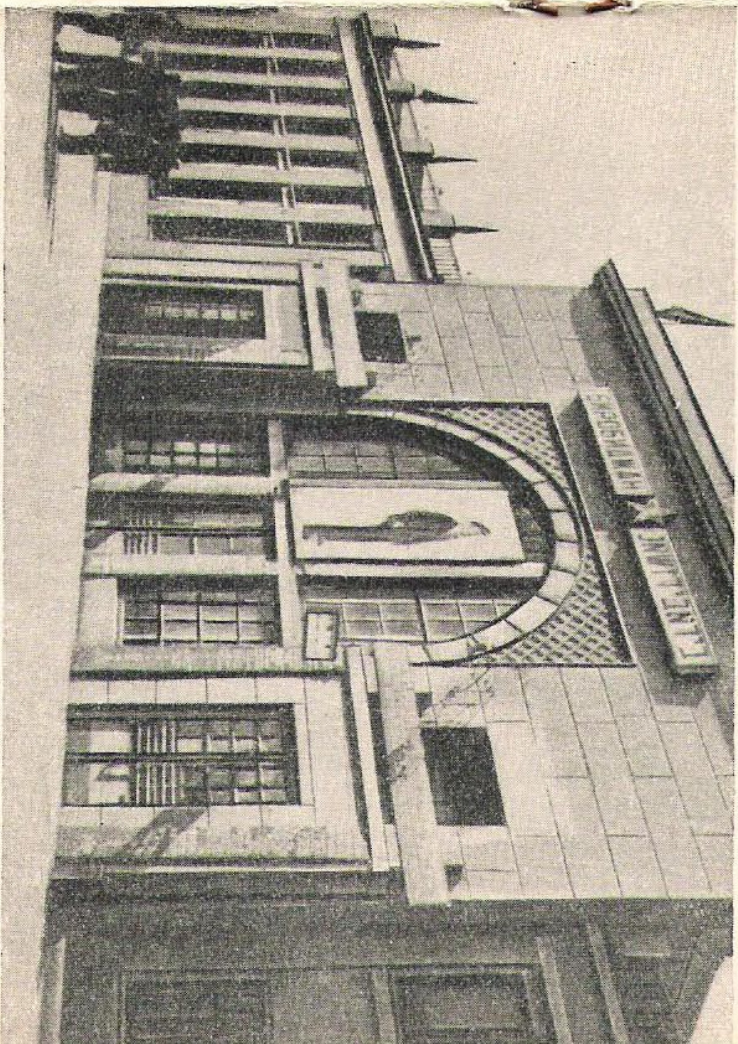
Thus it was that the future Jewish Autonomous Region began.

5.

Let us now take leave of the train that has carried us so faithfully from Moscow all the way through the vast expanses of the Land of Soviets. Let it proceed farther on its way to Vladivostok, while we stop over at Birobidjan, the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region.

It is a fairly big city, and you will find it no easy matter to see it all in a hurry. Therefore take an old Birobidjanian to show you the way and start by climbing with him to the roof of a four-story building.

"Please note," your guide tells you, "a four-story building. You are climbing its stairs as if it meant absolutely nothing—but you must bear in mind that only five



Birobidjan Railroad Station

years ago there was not a single decent house around here."

The wide panorama of the young city opens up before you.

"Look at the streets," your guide continues. "They are paved, and lined with trees and hedges. Quite recently—as recently, in fact, as 1933—crossing a street presented a problem. The former Tikhonkaya was built on virgin soil. All it consisted of was a tiny railway station and several wooden shacks in which lived some railroad workers and a few hunters and trappers. It was out of this village that the present city grew up. It grew under extremely difficult conditions. Everything had to be built anew. In order to build a house, it was necessary to find clay in some convenient place, lay out a makeshift road to it, set up kilns and make bricks, get horses that had been brought from Siberia and trucks obtained from the central regions of the Soviet Union to convey the bricks to the construction site, and then the house could be built. And this was not so easy as

it may seem today. Well, now look around you."

In the distance looms the big new railway station. Three and four-story houses seem to glow in their newness and freshness. The streets are thronged with people who seem to be on holiday. There is the fine building of the moving picture house. A little nearer is the city's theater. On a large island in the Bira River you see a beautiful park with pavilions and sports grounds.

Further, on the outskirts of the city, you can see its various industries:

The wagon plant and an adjoining settlement with straight rows of two-story houses and tree-lined streets; the clothing factory with its spacious buildings; the big furniture plant which supplies furniture to the entire Far Eastern territory; the new electric power plant; the sash and door plant on the bank of the Bira; the machine and tractor station; the large new printing plant; the veneer factory, several brick works, new construction sites. It is a city

bustling with activity, throbbing with the life of joyous labor.

Look at the people. They know that what they are doing is of significance. The people who live in this city are its first inhabitants, and they are proud of it. It was they who built the city. The Birobidjan furniture worker is the first furniture worker in Birobidjan; the actor is the first actor in the city; the typesetter is the first typesetter; the barber is the first barber; the photographer is the first photographer. Before they came here, there had been no furniture workers, no actors, no typesetters, no barbers, no photographers, no workers of other trades and professions.

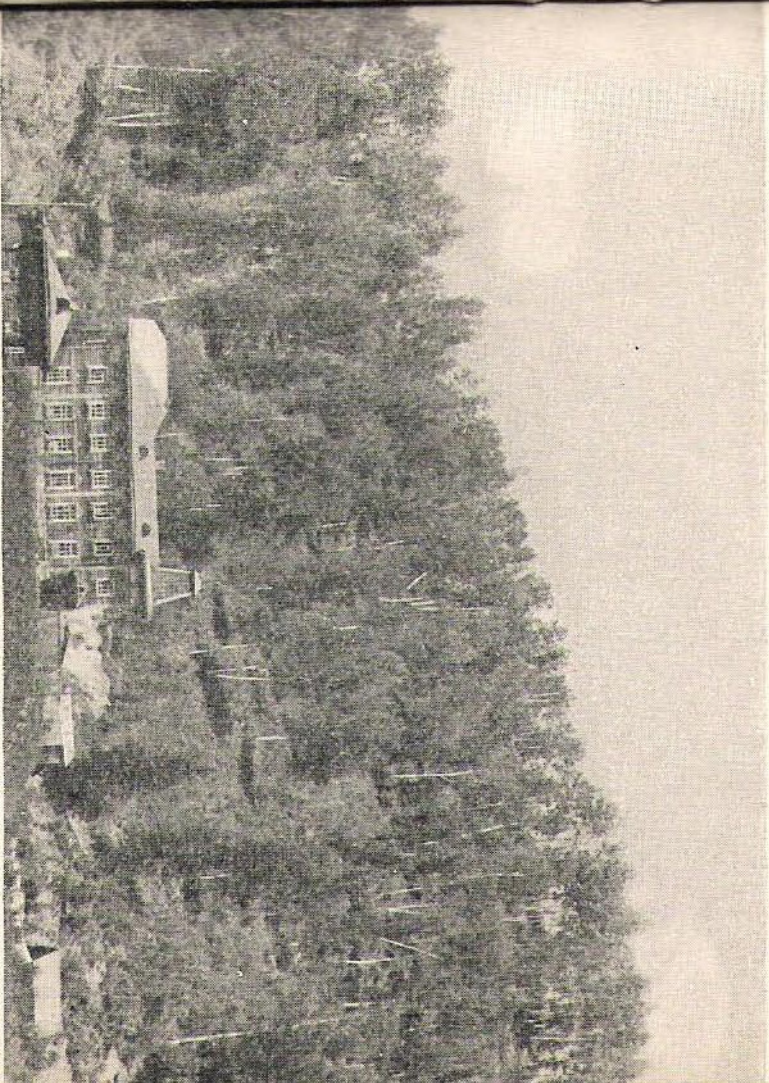
Nobody here feels remote from the center of the country. In the theater one enjoys a highly artistic performance. In the moving picture house one sees the latest pictures that are shown in Moscow and Khabarovsk. Over the radio one hears the broadcasts of the Moscow stations.

In the course of a few years a new city has grown up—the flourishing city of Birobidjan.

Simultaneously with the city of Birobidjan a number of other settlements have sprung up and developed in the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Waldheim was built in a wilderness. Today it is a busy village. Its inhabitants are members of a rich collective farm (*kolkhoz*). The Jewish collective farmers who built this village are prosperous. The collective farm sends its vegetable and dairy products to the market in the city. The village has a good clubhouse, a school, a library, kindergartens and nurseries.

Birofeld, another village built by Jewish settlers, is situated about thirty miles from the city of Birobidjan. The collective farm here owns apiaries extending for miles. Jewish settlers, men and women who never handled horses or milked cows before, have become expert collective farmers, and their collective farm is growing more prosperous from year to year. Their land is cultivated with the most up-to-



A Sanatorium at Kuldur, Jewish Autonomous Region

date agricultural machinery and yields a steadily increasing harvest.

Among the builders of Birofeld is the Lishnyansky family. The wife—Leah Lishnyansky—the best milkmaid on the collective farm—is now a member of the Soviet Parliament, a Member of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. She was one of the first settlers and has set many examples of great devotion to the cause of building up the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Leah Lishnyansky's eyes look grave and thoughtful as she now recalls her own and her husband's first steps on the virgin land here amid the taiga. Every step was beset with difficulties. But she and her husband, together with the other collective farmers of their village, overcame all difficulties and obstacles. The collective farm has succeeded and grown and they have grown with it. The fruits of their labors and their success can be seen in every new house, in every new acre of cultivated land, in their entire happy life.

The Birofeld Experimental Station is situated a few miles from the village. It is

an agricultural research institute engaged in the study of the possibilities and methods of agricultural development in the region. The Station carries on diversified farming on a large scale under the supervision of scientific workers. It maintains contact with all the collective farms of the region, keeping a close connection between science and practical endeavor. It experiments with many varieties of seed in order to establish which are the best suited to the conditions obtaining in the region. It also carries on research work to determine the varieties of fruits and berries that should be grown in the region.

The village Amurzet on the Amur River was also built on virgin soil. It is now a large village and the seat of a rich wheat-growing *kolkhoz*. It is perhaps the most beautiful of all the new collective farm settlements and villages in the Jewish Autonomous Region. The *kolkhoz* has cultivated large tracts of virgin land which yields big harvests of grain crops. Endless fields of tall wheat meet the eye at the entrance

to this collective farm. The wheat has enabled the collective farmers of this village to build a number of cultural institutions as well. Amurzet has an elementary and secondary school and a children's theater. Recently a large clubhouse was built.

Across the great Amur, in Manchuria, you see the remains of some small village, a dreary landscape of ruin and wilderness.

Here, on the Soviet side, you hear the clatter of tractors, the hum of automobiles, a lusty song spreading over the collective farm fields. Here life is in bloom.

Not far from Amurzet is the Stalinsk State Grain Farm—a large farm with thousands of acres of cultivated fields and a considerable fleet of tractors. A new settlement has sprung up next to the state farm—the village of Stalinsk, with large white two-story houses, with electricity, and with a population of splendid young men and women: tractor drivers, agronomists, chauffeurs, fitters, etc.

Since the Jews have begun to settle in this region, fifteen new collective farm villages

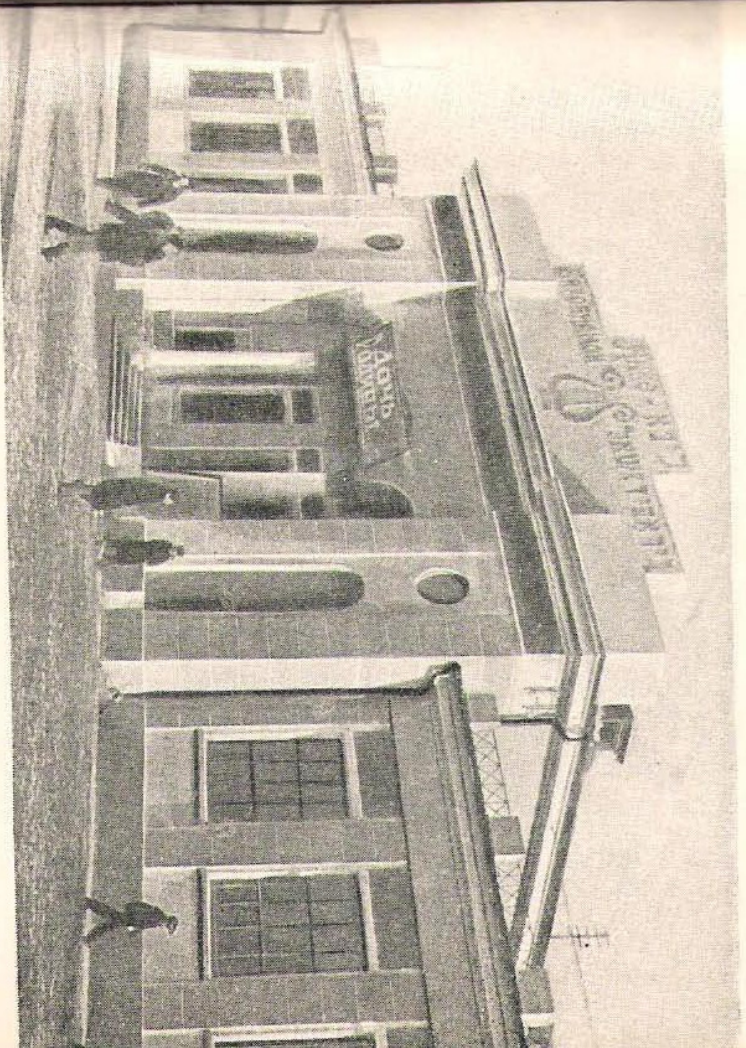
have sprung up here. As soon as a group of houses is built in the taiga, and as soon as the tractor-drawn plows turn up the first layer of the virgin soil, the wilderness becomes alive and hospitable, and the somberness of the primeval forests begins to recede.

The achievements in agriculture are amazing. There has been a large increase in the harvest yield. The collective farms of the Jewish Autonomous Region have been gathering nearly a ton of wheat, more than a ton of oats, nearly a ton of soy beans, about 20 tons of potatoes and 3.3 tons of hay per acre. The yield of honey per hive has reached 155 lbs. Nor are these figures the maximum obtainable.

7.

Agriculture, however, is not the only line along which the Jewish Autonomous Region has been developing.

Simultaneously with the building of new farming settlements work has been going on in the older settlements which have de-



Moving Picture House in the City of Birobidjan

veloped into centers of new industries based on the newly discovered resources of the region.

One of these is Obluchye—a fair-sized town, second in size to the city of Birobidjan. It has a railroad repair shop, a fine railway station, and a large clubhouse. It is situated in the vicinity of the Sutar gold fields. The town has grown up in recent years. Londoko is another old settlement which has developed enormously in recent years. Formerly it was a tiny village with a small railway station. It has grown considerably as a result of the discovery of rich limestone deposits in its vicinity. The limestone quarries and the lime plant which has been built in Londoko are among the largest in the country.

Birakan, another settlement, is situated in one of the most beautiful spots along the railroad line. The story of this village is similar to that of many other settlements in the Jewish Autonomous Region. Formerly a tiny railway station, today a flourishing settlement with large marble quar-

ries and a marble polishing plant. Birakan produces the beautiful green and rose-colored marble which has gained renown throughout the country. Carloads of marble slabs are sent to Moscow where they are used to decorate the walls of the most beautiful subway stations in the world.

"People tell us that our marble is beautiful," say the marble polishers of Birakan. "We ourselves know it to be true. We never really thought before that we would be working at such a nice trade—to beautify the world."

This is what a former water-carrier or tailor from a small town in the Ukraine tells the visitor while affectionately caressing the polished green slabs of the Birakan marble.

From Birakan a road leads deep into the interior of the country to Kuldur—the pearl of the Far East and of the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Once upon a time a hunter shot a deer in the forest. But he had only hit it in the leg, and the deer succeeded in making its

escape. It was winter, and the hunter followed the deer's trail of blood on the snow, until he came to a beautiful valley inclosed in the mountains. Here the hunter perceived a sight which left him speechless. The deer was standing at a spring which gushed forth from the rocks and was letting the water wash its injured leg. The hunter approached the wonderful spring and put his hand into its waters. It was hot.

That was how man found out what had been known to the beasts of the forest from time immemorial: that there were healing springs in the taiga. A large health resort has now sprung up on this spot. Kuldur is one of the best health resorts in the country. Its mineral waters have been found to possess excellent healing qualities, particularly in cases of rheumatism and stomach trouble. Patients from all parts of the Far East come to take their cure at Kuldur.

Another settlement worth noting is In. It is a large railway station, with a round-house and railroad shops. It has a considerable population, chiefly railroad workers.

Here, at In, the older Russian locomotive engineers teach the young Jewish railroad workers the art of driving locomotives pulling heavy trains, and the exact science of the great mechanism of railroad transport.

This is how new settlements have been springing up and growing in the Jewish Autonomous Region. In one decade, between 1928 and 1938, the population of the region has increased nearly tenfold.

In 1928 the people who lived in the territory of the present Jewish Autonomous Region received a total of 3,000 letters and telegrams. In 1937, the Jewish Autonomous Region received 9,500,000 letters, 7,500,000 copies of newspapers, and 500,000 telegrams.

The region has made giant strides. Its industry and agriculture have greatly expanded since 1928. In view of its considerable progress and achievements the Soviet Government, on May 7, 1934, proclaimed the Birobidjan district the Jewish Autonomous Region. A Jewish state unit has thus been created in the Soviet Union.

8.

Before 1928 there was not a single newspaper in this region. Today six dailies are published here—two in the city of Birobidjan—the capital of the region—and four in the various district centers. It has six printing shops, of which one, in Birobidjan, is a large modern printing plant equipped with up-to-date machinery.

The best Jewish writers of the Soviet Union contribute regularly to the *Forepost*, a bi-monthly literary and political magazine published in Birobidjan.

The Jewish Autonomous Region has a large number of schools with an excellent teaching personnel. It has also a pedagogical school, a medical training college, a railway school and an agricultural college. Many hundreds of young people attend these special schools.

The Jewish Autonomous Region has ten radio centers, 15 moving picture houses and 21 portable moving picture projectors. There are 12 collective farm clubs and a number of village reading rooms, two region-

al and four district libraries, and 25 libraries in the various factories and collective farms.

The L. M. Kaganovich Jewish State Theater is one of the most popular cultural institutions in Birobidjan. It has gained wide popularity not only among the working people of the Jewish Autonomous Region, but throughout the Far East where it has given guest performances in many cities.

Another fine cultural institution of the Jewish Autonomous Region is its music school. Here gifted children are taught to play the violin, piano, 'cello, etc.

The young people of the region go in a great deal for sports and athletics. Practically the entire youth of the region are members of athletic and sports societies.

Amid construction and other work the new Soviet culture is developing in the Jewish Autonomous Region—a culture national in form and Socialist in content.

9

The entire country, all the peoples of the Soviet Union, have helped the Jewish

Autonomous Region to grow and develop. This sympathy and assistance has been expressed in many and wonderful Socialist forms.

When the young autonomous region was passing through its most difficult period of construction, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic took patronage over it. Large factories and mills, such as the Kirov Works (formerly Putilov Works) in Leningrad, took patronage over the young industries of Birobidjan. The Kharkov City Soviet, with its wide experience in city planning and city improvements, took patronage over the City Soviet of Birobidjan. Every plant and collective farm in the Jewish Autonomous Region has been connected with and received the fraternal assistance of some great industrial plant or collective farm in other parts of the Soviet Union. Russian, Georgian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian workers and peasants displayed a warm solicitude for the youngest national state unit of the Soviet Union, rendering it material assistance—sending skilled work-

ers of all kinds, as well as machines, tools and equipment.

When a Birobidjanian visits in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk or any other city or town of the Soviet Union, he immediately feels how popular the young Jewish Autonomous Region is among the working people throughout the country. As soon as people find out that he has come from Birobidjan, they shower him with questions about the life of the Jewish Autonomous Region and its development. This may happen in a street car, or at a railway station or in a hotel. Perfect strangers of various nationalities display a keen and warm interest in the Jewish Autonomous Region.

The same spirit of cooperation and mutual interest reigns among all the nationalities within the Jewish Autonomous Region. All the nationalities inhabiting the Jewish Autonomous Region are working hand in hand for its development. The Russian or Ukrainian who lives in the region takes an active part in building up the Jewish Soviet state, and is just as enthusiastic about it as

the Jewish worker or peasant. Many Russians in the Jewish Autonomous Region are learning to speak Yiddish. Russian children sing Jewish songs and speak the Jewish language. Russian workers attend performances at the Jewish theater and applaud the Jewish actors.

There is a Russian veterinarian in the city of Birobidjan who is a great lover of music and plays the concertina. He is a frequent visitor in the Jewish club where he often gathers a circle of Jewish workers or collective farmers around him and rehearses some Jewish song with them. He is happy and beaming when he can tell them at the end of the rehearsal:

“Now you’ve got the tune right.”

Like every other part of the Soviet Union, the Jewish Autonomous Region is a home for the working people of all the nationalities inhabiting it. Like the Jewish working people they are enthusiastic builders of the Jewish Soviet state unit.

* * *

In the struggle to master and develop the natural resources of this region a new type of Jew has emerged—a type that is becoming increasingly characteristic of the Jews all over the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Jew feels fully at home in his country; he lives the great life of the country, is not afraid of difficulties and faces the world and nature as an equal, as a builder of Socialism, as a worthy son of his Soviet homeland.

Like the members of all the other nations of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Jew is alive to all the beauty of the world. Enjoying the full assistance of the Soviet state, which helps him in his labors and struggle, bound with fraternal ties to all the nations of the Soviet Union, and having his Jewish national Soviet state unit, the Soviet Jew is indeed an equal among equals.

The bright glow of the ruby stars on the Kremlin towers beckons equally to all the nations. And for the once-oppressed Jewish people as well, the Kremlin stars shine with the great light of humanity, of Socialism.

