

COMMUNAUTÉ

ONCE UPON A TIME, BIROBJAN...

Joëlle Perelberg

When Olga arrived from her native Birobidjan to St Petersburg to continue her studies in lyrics in the cultural capital of Russia, the other students asked her: « so you are jewish? you speak yiddish? »...

Not at all.

As the Jewish Autonomous Republic - whose capital is Birobidjan, a creation from Staline at the beginning of the previous century - never got more than 20% of Jews in its population. Today stay only 3%, essentially Jews who could benefit from the Israeli « return law » and had some one jewish in the family, but much less Jews according to the halakha, inhabitants are essentially pure Russians. A Jewish operetta region!



When you arrive thru the road, you are welcomed by a giant obelisk showing from one part to the other the Birobidjan name in cyrillic and yiddish characters.

When you arrive thru the railway station there is a monumental menorah in front. So any traveler thinks he arrives « in another world ».

Another world imagined by the Party since 1917...

With the idea to give a land to the « Jewish nation », the leaders of the People's Commissariat of Defense imagined to dedicate that far-east piece of land to the jewish co-

lonisation. A desert land, almost inhabited, with harsh climate, at the frontier with Manchuria, occupied at that time by the Japanese.

It was supposed to make the unproductive Jews become farmers, they would speak yiddish, a language to keep them far from religious hebrew, yiddish would be the official language and taught in schools.

The JAR was officially created in 1934, followed by the colonisation time with an active propaganda offering free travel, lodging and plans to develop the region. Immigrants and significative help came from the States and Argentina as well... But a high proportion of immigrants went away as quickly as they had come...

One has fun reading the street names both in russian and yiddish on the blue plates, and signs on the shops show with cyrillic characters looking hebraic.

Beside, Birobidjan has the typical tired look of the soviet middle towns, with austere buildings, wide avenues embellished with green spaces but sidewalks knock-outs. The traveler is somewhat surprised to see so many cars with right direction driving, but you will learn that many Birobidjaners, as well as many Russians, buy used cars to their Japanese or Corean neighbors, countries driving left side. So you won't be surprised to learn the JAR asked the Central Power in Moscow to change that and allow they also drive left...

Downtown revolves around the Shalom Aleikhem square, very pretty with its flower beds, colored flags and balloons, and, of course, the monument to the master of Yiddish literature.

At the market place Chinese sell their products at an incredible low rate, fruits, vegetables, fish, clothing and everything for

COMMUNAUTÉ

Once upon a time, Birobidjan...

Joëlle Perelberg

the house, chasing and fishing. The Amur river frontier is very close and easy to go thru for these hard-working people. So Birobidjan is twinned with the close Chinese town of Hegang.

In these days you can feel a festive atmosphere and the two hotels are full: from September 4 to 7 is being held the Birobidjan Festival of Jewish Music, a very expected event happening every two years.

We have the opportunity to hear the « Dobranotch band » on the philharmonic theatre square, a very frenzied set originated from St Petersburg, we are fully delighted. This is also the place where we meet some » yiddische mamme ».

In the beautiful building of the « Philharmonia », we will assist to a number of concerts and shows, some of our loved well known yiddish songs being harmonized « contemporary Broadway-Russian style »... just horrible... but the Birobidjaner public is very enthusiastic!



By chance is the yiddische Birobidjan artificial Jewish???

Anyway we feel very proud of the French klezmer band who came with us, the Argentinian singer Lloica and her two French « Mentsh » musicians, Alexis the accordionist and Samuel the clarinetist.

Along the Mayakovska street stands an old blue wooden isba, the Beth Techuva Schule. A poor but warm house, where we



are welcomed by Valeria, her children and her father who, in a little while, will lead the prayers. Inside the synagogue stand two « aron hakodesh », one coming from a burnt synagogue. Torah scrolls come from a Japanese community, Hebrew Russian prayers books were offered thru the Joint. We meet there simple people, aged, who find here friendship, some comfort, a warm meal, some little financial help. But Valeria's husband just died two months ago, she is thinking to leave for Israel, what will happen to that modest community?

The two buildings of the Freyd Center proudly stand along Lenin Avenue. During the festival of Jewish music, here too there is music and dancing. Built in 2004 with the help of some sponsor and the Joint, one is the synagogue's building with at the first floor an interesting Jewish museum, the other one has meeting rooms. But today cooking is outside: the rabbi, born in Birobidjan, who emigrated to Israel with his parents and then came back to his native town, explains today their Muslim friends are cooking for them a special plate on a kind of barbecue. Under rabbinic control. A little further stands a 1940 building housing the museum, closed on that day, but also the Shalom Aleikhem library. Only

COMMUNAUTÉ

Once upon a time, Birobidjan...

Joëlle Perelberg

some thousands of hebrew and yiddish books survived the 1950's jewish culture pogroms, books coming from all over Russia. Among them a Talmud printed in Vilna in 1886, the original Lenin's yiddish manuscript about the Jewish question, printed in 1927 in Moscow, and, of course, numerous treasures of yiddish literature.

Facing that building stands the one hosting the « Birobidjaner Stern », the local newspaper originally published in yiddish. Today it is printed mostly in russian, but there are always some articles in yiddish to keep the language alive. On the front-page it is written in yiddish « true newspaper published in russian and yiddish since 1930 ». We wish it long life!

Thanks to an article found on internet, we found the jewish cemetery some kilometers outside the town. An old neglected cemetery, almost entirely sunken into the swamp and covered with undergrowth and trees. Gravestones from the 1940s through 1960s, engraved in yiddish and russian, marked sometimes with both a soviet star and a star of David, and sometimes... an orthodox cross... In fact jewish and orthodox gravestones are mixed together in a joyous capharnaum.



We also drove to Waldgaym, the first jewish colony of the region and the one survivor. People are finishing the painting of the brand new church... The life of a late kolkhoze lies in the pictures of the local mu-



seum... A member of our group is moved by the picture of a man holding a grape of tomatoes who looks as her father who dreamt to move to Birobidjan where he thought life would be better...

Theodore Herzl dreamt about it, Staline has done it!

He gave Jews the land they were hoping... a gift it seems they didn't fully appreciated... Eighty years later the JAR illusion still hangs. Most of the Jews who came to that given land left for Israel when the doors of the Soviet Union opened in the 90s.

This year, among the twenty-three schools of the town you will find only one which still teaches yiddish, and at the University the yiddish chair has been cancelled. Instead a chinese chair has been created.

But the comedy goes on...the memory of a jewish vanished world in the far-east...

Once upon the time, Birobidjan...

Text and pictures by Joëlle Perelberg

Toute l'équipe de Los Muestrós vous
souhaite
de très joyeuses fêtes de Hanuka !