

# Red Star Over Birobidzhan: Canadian Jewish Communists and the "Jewish Autonomous Region" in the Soviet Union

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# RESEARCH REPORTS / NOTES DE RECHERCHE

## Red Star Over Birobidzhan: Canadian Jewish Communists and the "Jewish Autonomous Region" in the Soviet Union

Henry Srebrnik

THE JEWISH COMMUNIST movement, active within the Canadian Jewish community for some three decades, included various groups whose main aim was to provide support for the Soviet project to establish a Jewish socialist republic in the Birobidzhan region in the eastern USSR. One of these groups, the Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia (*Yidishe Kolonizatsye Organizatsye in Rusland*), known by its transliterated acronym as the ICOR, was founded in the United States in 1924, and was also active within the Canadian immigrant working-class milieu; its members were mainly first and second generation Yiddish-speaking Jews of east European origin.

Little has been published about the ICOR in the US, and even less is known about its Canadian counterpart. Erna Paris, who devotes three chapters to the Canadian Jewish Communist movement in her book *Jews: An Account of Their Experience in Canada*, has one passing reference to the ICOR, though Gerald Tulchinsky, in his *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish*

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*Community*, does devote over two pages to it.<sup>1</sup> Other histories of the Communist movement or the Canadian Jewish community ignore it altogether. This research note is therefore very much a preliminary undertaking; there remains much "digging" still to be done.

In the years following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet regime decided to set aside specific territory for those Jews who wished to build a collective Jewish socialist life. Two agencies were created to settle Jews on the land: the Commission for the Settlement of Jewish Toilers on the Land (KOMZET in Russian, KOMERD in Yiddish), a government body; and the Association for the Settlement of Jewish Toilers on the Land (OZET in Russian, GEZERD in Yiddish). On 28 March 1928, the Soviet government approved the choice of Birobidzhan, a sparsely populated area of 14,000 square miles in the Soviet far east, as a national Jewish unit. On 7 May 1934, in an effort to make the project more attractive to Soviet Jews, Moscow declared Birobidzhan a Jewish Autonomous Region (Oblast), with the promise that when Jews would number at least 100,000, or form a majority of the total population, it would become a Soviet republic.<sup>2</sup>

Many Jews in Canada during this period gave support to the Soviet Union, and became involved, either as members or sympathizers, with the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Founded in 1921, the CP by 1927 had formed a Jewish section, with members in Montréal, Toronto, and Winnipeg.<sup>3</sup> Historian David Rome 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>4</sup> The Jewish Communists, in particular, felt duty-bound to "counteract the nationalist, imperialist Zionist movement" by demonstrating that the Soviet Union had "the only true and sensible solution" to the "national question."<sup>5</sup>

The Comintern had directed Communists to create mass organizations which would unite people who were not necessarily Communists "in activities connected to the defense of the Soviet Union and the popularization of its achievements — particularly people who were pro-Soviet but not yet ready to join a Communist

<sup>1</sup>Erna Paris, *Jews: An Account of Their Experience in Canada* (Toronto 1980), 185; Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto 1998), 123-25.

<sup>2</sup>Much has been written about the Birobidzhan project. See the recently published account, including a useful bibliography, by Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland. An Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (Berkeley 1998).

<sup>3</sup>Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988), 273.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Lewis Levendel, *A Century of the Canadian Jewish Press: 1880s-1980s* (Ottawa 1989), 151.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band: The Clashes Between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment in Canada, 1928-1932* (Ottawa 1982), 98.

party."<sup>6</sup> Communists found such so-called front groups an effective means of attracting supporters for their causes; some who joined would eventually become full-fledged members. Less centralized and hierarchical than the CPC, fronts enabled the party to gain access to the broader community to further its goals. Although "nominally independent," they were "organized around single-issue or special-interest concerns, in which the Communists exercised effective organizational control."<sup>7</sup>

Hence, Communists active in the Jewish community encouraged the formation of mass organizations which would appeal to Jews interested in preserving their Jewish culture in non-Zionist ways and combat ethnic nationalism while harnessing feelings of Jewish identity with the class struggle. Canadian supporters of Birobidzhan were soon enough involved in the work of the ICOR, which by 1933 claimed a North American membership of 10,000, spread out over 165 branches in 25 states—and in 10 cities in 4 Canadian provinces.<sup>8</sup>

Given the close proximity, geographic and cultural, of Canadian Jews to American Jews, the Canadian ICOR at first functioned as a section of the US-based ICOR. Sam Lapidés of Toronto, chair of the Jewish Bureau of the Communist Party of Canada, spoke at the March 1932 plenum of the ICOR national executive in New York. He told delegates that the ICOR in Canada had recently gathered much strength, despite the reactionary politics instituted in Canada — a reaction, he added, that benefitted Zionism.<sup>9</sup> The March 1934 plenum again noted the reactionary character of the Canadian Conservative government of R.B. Bennett; ICOR literature and speakers from the United States, considered Communists by Canadian authorities whether or not members of the party itself, were often denied entry to the country.<sup>10</sup> The sixth national ICOR convention which gathered in New York 8-10 February, 1935 celebrated ten years of the ICOR. Included among the 565 delegates was a large contingent from the Canadian ICOR, headed by, among others, Harry Guralnick, editor of the Canadian Communist Yiddish newspaper, *Der Kampf*, and Toronto activist Abraham Nisnevitz, both members of the CPC. Guralnick promised that despite the political difficulties in Canada, the ICOR would gain hundreds of new members.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Sylvia R. Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937* (Madison 1968), 41.

<sup>7</sup>Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown 1982), 20.

<sup>8</sup>"Barikht fun General-sekretar tsum 'Icor' Plenum, Gehalten in New York 25tn Marts, 1934," *ICOR*, 4 (April 1934) 19 [Yiddish]; *ICOR*, 5 (May 1934), 23.

<sup>9</sup>"Protokol fun Plenum," *ICOR*, 5 (May 1932), 8-9 [Yiddish].

<sup>10</sup>"Barikht fun Icor Plenum, Gehalten Gevoren in New York, dem 25tn Marts, 1934," *ICOR*, 5 (May 1934), 21 [Yiddish].

<sup>11</sup>S. Almazov, "Di 'Icor'-Konvenshon un vos hot zi uns Gelernt," *ICOR*, 3 (March 1935), 5-6 [Yiddish]; "Baricht fun der Natsyonaler Ekzekutiv fun 'Icor' tsu der 6-ter Konvenshon,"

Following two small conferences held by eastern Canadian branches in Montréal in 1932, the third conference of the Canadian section of the ICOR, in Toronto 10-11 March 1934, had brought together 56 delegates from 5 eastern Canadian cities. Abe Victor noted that the ICOR was still technically banned in Canada. Literature sent from the New York office was returned by the postal authorities and ICOR speakers from the US were prevented from entering Canada at the border; sometimes ICOR gatherings were disrupted. When the Canadian Communist leader Rev. A.E. Smith, general secretary of the Canadian Labour Defence League, recently freed from jail, addressed the conference, it spontaneously broke out singing the "Internationale." Delegates vowed to make the ICOR a mass organization, one that could take action in defence of the Soviet Union and the battles against fascism and misleading Zionism.<sup>12</sup>

The conference decided that ICOR ought to begin publishing a periodical, and *Kanader "Icor"*, with Guralnick undertaking the editing duties, appeared in June 1934: the first issue, not surprisingly, carried as its lead story the decision made by the Soviet government the month before to transform Birobidzhan into a Jewish Autonomous Region.<sup>13</sup> An editorial entitled "An Important Step Forward" called the launching of the journal a sign of the ICOR's increasing relevance to the Jewish working class in Canada. It demonstrated that the organization was becoming strong enough to operate autonomously of the American ICOR and would be able to address the specific issues facing the pro-Soviet, anti-fascist, and anti-war Jewish masses in Canada. The ICOR would be more than just a "collection agency" or fund-raising organization.<sup>14</sup> Lapidès asserted that the ICOR provided a home for those who had realized that the Soviet Union had abolished racial hatred and pogroms, and was now a country where hundreds of thousands of Jews worked alongside other nationalities in socialist industries and agricultural production. The ICOR served as an antidote to the "divide and conquer" tactics of the ruling class.<sup>15</sup>

According to an undated letter (probably written in the summer of 1934) from the executive of the Canadian section of the ICOR, the Canadian movement, headquartered at 414 Markham St., in Toronto, the home of the Labour League, claimed chapters in Toronto, Montréal, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Windsor, Hamilton,

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*ICOR*, 3 (March 1935), 12, 16-18, 24-26 [Yiddish]; "No. 746: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada; 27th February, 1935," in Gregory S. Kcaley and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935* (St. John's, Nfld 1995), 129-130.

<sup>12</sup>"In der Icor Bavegung," *ICOR*, 5 (May 1932): 17 [Yiddish]; Abe Victor, "Oyfn 3tn Tsuzamenkumpft fun Alkanader Icor Sektsye in Toronto 10tn un 11tn Marts, 1934," *ICOR Biro-Bidzhan Souvenir-Zhurnal* (New York June 1934), 40 [Yiddish].

<sup>13</sup>"Biro-bidzhan Farvandt in Yidisher Autonomer Sovyetisher Teritorye," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 1 [Yiddish].

<sup>14</sup>"Editorials: A Vikhtiker Shrit Foroys," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 2 [Yiddish].

<sup>15</sup>S. Lapidès, "Di Sovyetishe Layzung iz di Eyntsike," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 9, 15.

Cornwall, Ontario, Ottawa, the farming community of Edenbridge, Saskatchewan, and the Niagara region of Ontario. There were also affiliates in Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, London, Ontario, Kitchener, and Halifax.<sup>16</sup> The October 1934 issue of *Kanader "Icor"* announced that there were 5,000 ICOR members in Canada, with thousands more supporting socialist construction in Birobidzhan.<sup>17</sup>

Local ICOR committees were active across Canada that year and worked hard to raise money for goods and supplies; the Canadian section of the ICOR, in its first national campaign, was collecting money for two tractors for Birobidzhan on behalf of two activists who had recently died.<sup>18</sup> Abraham Shek, secretary of the Canadian section, noted that the 7 May 1934 declaration of Birobidzhan's Jewish status had resulted in celebrations in its honour throughout the entire country — though, he added, the ICOR had not done enough to publicize this incredibly important decision among others in the community. In Toronto, the establishment of Birobidzhan as an autonomous region had been celebrated at a concert and mass meeting on 27 May at the Labour Lyceum; 2,000 special leaflets were printed for the occasion.

Shek commended Montréal's ICOR committee for its excellent observance of the 7 May declaration. Hamilton celebrated the announcement of Birobidzhan autonomy with a concert on 20 May, featuring the *Frayhayt gezang farayn un mandolin orkester* from the Toronto Cultural Centre. There was a large turnout, despite calls for a boycott on the part of various rabbis and businessmen. The Winnipeg branch had been spearheading an anti-fascist campaign among the various Jewish organizations. When news of the Soviet decision making Birobidzhan a Jewish autonomous region was heard, it decided to immediately hold a celebration on 9 June and make it part of its anti-fascist work. Vancouver, too, had done exemplary work, especially on behalf of the tractor campaign. The branch members also greeted a Soviet ship when it docked in Vancouver harbour.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>The letter is deposited among the papers of the Toronto political activist Moray Nesbitt (Abraham Nisnevitz). See Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Series 85, Jewish Canadian papers, F1405, File 085-015, MU 9003.02, at the Archives of Ontario, Toronto.

<sup>17</sup>"An Icor-nik," "Unzer-Rol-kol," *Kanader "Icor,"* 3 (October 1934) 8 [Yiddish].

<sup>18</sup>"Barikht fun General-sekretar tsum 'Icor' Plenum, Gehalten in New York 25tn Marts, 1934," *ICOR*, 4 (April 1934), 16 [Yiddish]; "Dem Dritn Yuni vert Oyfgedekt der Monument nokh Khaver Philip Halpern," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 4 [Yiddish]; undated letter, Moray Nesbitt papers.

<sup>19</sup>Minutes of Hamilton ICOR meetings of 19 November 1933; 5 February, 18 April, 17 June, and 11 November 1934; 14 February 1935, "Minute Book of Hamilton Chapter of Icor," Goldie Vinc 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-Taytikayt Iber Kanada," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 13-14 [Yiddish]; Y. Trachimofsky, "Icor'-Arbet in Montreal," *Kanader "Icor,"* 2 (August 1934), 10 [Yiddish]; A. Shek, "ICOR'-Taytikayt Ibern Land," *Kanader "Icor,"* 2 (August 1934), 12 [Yiddish]; F. Kudin, "Di Arbet fun Vinipeger Icor'," *Kanader "Icor,"* 2 (August 1934),

The struggle against Zionism remained a major component of the ICOR's work: a "declaration of chairs of revolutionary mass organizations" reminded the "Jewish masses in Canada" that the "historic decision" to create a Jewish entity in Birobidzhan was "entirely different" from the "hot air" "*belfer-dekleratsye*" about "a 'Jewish homeland' in Palestine," which had been nothing but a wartime manoeuvre on the part of the British imperialist government.<sup>20</sup> The Zionist movement, wrote Moishe Feldman, was fascist and a tool of the Jewish bourgeoisie, maintained the ICOR, and had preceded even Hitler in its use of ultra-nationalist discourse. Zionist fascism was no better than any other; indeed it was the most dangerous enemy of the Jewish masses. Birobidzhan, on the other hand, remained the "great shining hope of the Jewish masses world-wide."<sup>21</sup> The time had come, contended Y. Trachimofsky, secretary of the Montréal ICOR, to carry forward the battle against Zionism; in Palestine, the Zionists were "appropriating the land and appropriating the work" of the Arabs. While the Zionists had become servants of British imperialism, the Arab masses were carrying on the struggle against it.<sup>22</sup> The creation of Birobidzhan was a "catastrophe" for the Zionists. It would serve as a "death blow" to their "adventure" in the so-called "Jewish homeland."<sup>23</sup> Readers of the *Kanader "Icor"* were reminded in 1936 that the Birobidzhan settlement "was no 'rival' to Palestine but rather a symbol and a message for the Jewish masses throughout the world, including Palestine."<sup>24</sup>

Nor did the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), re-established in 1934, escape the ICOR's wrath. In its inaugural issue, the *Kanader "Icor"* castigated the Congress as the creation of the Jewish bourgeoisie, a means to control the masses and divert them from the path of revolution. The notion of "one Jewish people" was a fantasy which had been exposed by the realities of class conflict. Fortunately, the workers and impoverished masses of Jews would not allow themselves to be swayed by the "bigwigs" [*"karpfen-kep"*] of the Congress, whose aim was to perpetuate the

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13 [Yiddish]; "No. 727: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada, 10th October, 1934," in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934* (St. John's, Nfld. 1993), 325-326.

<sup>20</sup>"Der Historisher Bashlus fun der Sovyetn-regirung vegn Biro-Bidzhaner Teritorye," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 5, 10 [Yiddish].

<sup>21</sup>M. Feldman, "Der Yidisher Fashizm un Biro-bidzhan," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 8, 15 [Yiddish].

<sup>22</sup>Y. Trachimofsky, "Di Oyfgebun un Oyszikhthen fun Unser Arbet," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934) 10 [Yiddish].

<sup>23</sup>A. Hamer, "Biro-bidzhan—An Umglik far di Tsyionistn," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934) 11 [Yiddish].

<sup>24</sup>A. Minsker, "Nisht Kayn 'Konkurents' nor an Onzog," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 15 [Yiddish].

hegemony of the wealthy bosses and the religious "parasites" in the community, whose only aim was to keep the poor hungry and in darkness.<sup>25</sup>

For that reason, the ICOR in November 1934 sent speakers to western Canada to counter the anti-Soviet propaganda of the Zionists and the CJC.<sup>26</sup> On 29 January 1935, Professor Charles Kuntz, president of the ICOR in the United States, one of the speakers on the western tour, addressed a public meeting in the Peretz Hall in Winnipeg. It was such a success that hundreds of people had to be turned away for lack of accommodation. Kuntz described the economic progress being made in Birobidzhan and the increasing prosperity of the settlement. He also contended that Jews there "have lost their national clannishness and have welcomed into their midst people of other racial origin with whom they live like brothers."<sup>27</sup>

In 1935 the Canadian ICOR became a separate organization and held its first national convention in Toronto 24-25 March. The American ICOR activist and *Morgn Frayhayt* correspondent Gina Medem, widow of the Bundist Vladimir, and Joshua (Joe) Gershman of the CPC, were among the guest speakers. 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 Soviet solution of the national question had justified the perseverance of the ICOR's members and had confirmed their position in defending the correct line of the Soviet Union. The convention also resolved to initiate a campaign for a "people's delegation" to visit the Soviet Union, an idea that would gain wide currency in American pro-Soviet Jewish movements a year later.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup>S. Lapidés, "Di Sovyetishe Layzung iz di Eyntsike," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (June 1934), 9, 15 [Yiddish]. Lapidés also accused the Jewish garment manufacturers of colluding with the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec to keep French-Canadian women workers backward and exploited, thus driving many into prostitution.

<sup>26</sup>S. Lipshitz, "Der Maariv-Kanader Tur fun 'Icor'," *Kanader "Icor,"* 4 (November 1934), 10 [Yiddish].

<sup>27</sup>"No. 744: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada, 13th February, 1935," in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935*, 105.

<sup>28</sup>"Deklaratsye fun dem Ershtn Natsyonaln Tsuzamenfor fun dem 'Icor' in Kanada," *ICOR*, 4 (April 1935), 10-11 [Yiddish]; "No. 752: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada, 10th April, 1935," in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935*, 226-227. For a brief biography of Joshua Gershman, see Irving Abella, "Portrait of a Jewish Professional Revolutionary: The Recollections of Joshua Gershman," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 2 (1977), 185-213; and Sol Shek, "A Lifetime in the Labour Movement: Interview with Joshua Gershman," *Canadian Jewish Outlook*, 9-10 (September-October 1987), 7-8, 10, 37. Gina Medem was a frequent contributor to Canadian ICOR publications as well. See, for instance, her report on the 1934 GEZERD convention, "Rirndike Redes oif der Fayerlicher zitsung fun 'Gezerd' in Moskve," *Kanader "Icor,"* 2 (August 1934), 9 [Yiddish].



Should the ICOR concern itself with domestic political concerns? Some members felt that as a "non-partisan" organization the ICOR ought not to get mixed up in political campaigns. But they were wrong, contended Sam Lipshitz, a member of the national executive. "We here in Canada wish to deliver the strongest death-blow against international fascism" and "we want to halt the spread of the fascist blaze in this country. To do this we must fight against every manifestation of fascist tendency, in whatever form it appears," he declared.

"Does the ICOR have its own interests in the [upcoming] election campaign? Of course! The Bennett government carries on a consistently anti-Soviet, imperialist, warmongering policy.... Our government carries on a policy in the country which leads to blatant fascism." Clearly, therefore, the ICOR had to take a stand and endorse the Communist candidates.<sup>29</sup> None of these won seats in the October 1935 federal election, but the victorious Liberals did rescind Section 98 of the Criminal Code, which had effectively made illegal the Communist Party and groups such as the ICOR.

The Canadian ICOR was second to none in its praise of the USSR. Calling on Jews to ready themselves to celebrate the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, *Kanader "Icor"* in October 1935 noted that during the past 18 years Soviet Jews had been economically, politically, and culturally liberated and had been elevated by the Soviet state to equal membership in the Soviet family of nations. "Today we meet the Soviet Jewish masses as a self-governing nationality with its own autonomous nation governed in the Yiddish language.... The Soviet Jew was building a happy life, without fear of pogroms, anti-Semitism or worries about tomorrow. All this would have been impossible without the October Revolution, without the direct co-operation of the Soviet state." The journal contrasted this state of affairs with that of Jews in the fascist countries, where life had become arbitrary and the future one of uncertainty. The ICOR called upon its members to organize celebrations in Jewish communities 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>30</sup> Herman Abramovitch, another member of the national executive, recalled a time when tsarist Russia had been the "prison house of nations." Today, he wrote, "The Soviet Union is a family of peoples collectively building a happy, worry-free life. Is it any wonder that on the seventh of November — the day that they forever defeated not only tsarism but also capitalism — the Soviet masses dress up in their finest clothes and remonstrate their joy in front of the entire world?" For Jews, in particular, the

<sup>29</sup>S. Lipshitz, "Darft der "Icor" zikh Batayliken in Kumende Federale Valn?" *Kanader "Icor"*, 8 (June 1935), 2, 7 [Yiddish].

<sup>30</sup>"Editorials: Grayt zikh tsu di November-fayerung!", *Kanader "Icor"*, 9 (October 1935), 1 [Yiddish]. See also the reprint of an article from the *Frayhayt* in New York, "Yidn Hobn Buzundere Grintn tsu Frayen Zikh mit dem Oktober-Yubili," *Kanader "Icor"*, 10 (November-December 1935) 7 [Yiddish].

anniversary was an occasion for celebration; Abramovitch compared their current lives to those of Jews in neighbouring Romania and Poland, where destitution and anti-Semitism still prevailed. "Two worlds: the first a world of despair, hunger and need — those are the capitalist countries! The second — a world of good fortune and happiness — that is the Soviet Union, being built under the leadership of the workers and peasants."<sup>31</sup>

Even better, this regeneration of Jewish life in the Soviet Union was taking place through the medium of the Yiddish language, which was the "mirror reflecting their battles and their hardships." Yiddish had been denigrated as a "jargon" by "the capitalist class as a way of expressing their hatred of the masses and their language." They had preferred either Hebrew or Russian; "the language of the masses was excommunicated." But just as "the Jewish masses in the Soviet Union have prospered, so has their language — Yiddish." It was now gaining prestige, with the development of Yiddish-language technical institutes, universities, courts, literature and theatre. The government of Birobidzhan now functioned entirely in Yiddish, "further proof that under Soviet rule the autonomous cultural life of the masses was developing and that the Soviet government was quickly and with practicality fulfilling its promises." However, such progress was not accomplished without its own difficulties. One of the things that the Birobidzhan government lacked due to this transition to Yiddish were typewriters. The ICOR had received an assignment from GEZERD to provide five Yiddish typewriters to the Birobidzhan government and the national executive undertook this task with enthusiasm. "On our typewriters will be written the decrees, orders, proclamations, and other government documents that will improve, enhance, and make more joyful the life of the Jewish masses in Birobidzhan.... One typewriter from each branch — in the name of each branch — this should be our decision!"<sup>32</sup> GEZERD would later send a letter thanking the Canadian ICOR for its gift of eight Yiddish typewriters and for undertaking a campaign to send a linotype machine. This was especially appreciated as a number of Jewish writers, such as David Bergelson, had now settled in Birobidzhan, wrote GEZERD.<sup>33</sup>

In the fall of 1935, to boost the ICOR's fortunes in the west, Harry Guralnick undertook a tour with stops in Winnipeg, Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, Regina, Edenbridge, Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver. He was, reported the *Kanader "Icor"*, received with great enthusiasm, and it helped the ICOR branches strengthen their organizational work. While in Edmonton, Guralnick was interviewed by the

<sup>31</sup>H. Abramovitch, "Tsvay Veltn," *Kanader "Icor,"* 10 (October-November 1935), 8-9 [Yiddish].

<sup>32</sup>"Editorials: Biro-bidzhan vert Regirt in Yidish....," *Kanader "Icor,"* 9 (October 1935), 1 [Yiddish]; "An Icor-nik," "Zhargon' iz gevorn a melikhe shprakh," *Kanader "Icor,"* 10 (November-December 1935), 5 [Yiddish].

<sup>33</sup>"Mir Shiken Akht Shrayb-mashinkes Anshtot Finf," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 3 [Yiddish]; Yosef Blitshtein, "In Kanader 'Icor'," *Nailebn-New Life,* 4 (April 1937), 20 [Yiddish].

*Edmonton Journal* about the Soviet solution to the "Jewish question" and the building of Birobidzhan. The journalist described Guralnick as a Rumanian Jew educated in Russia and a Canadian citizen for the past fifteen years. He was "the fellow with the sensitive face, wide brows, piercing grey-blue eyes and heavy dark brows" and a "voice that is soft but impregnated by a guttural accent." Guralnick told the newspaper that the situation in Germany and the USSR were exactly opposite: "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." The *Journal* reporter noted that "it is with Biro-Bidjan...that he deals most lovingly." Guralnick assured the paper that "by the end of 1937 Biro-Bidjan will be a Jewish Soviet republic....My people have all the symptoms of a nation." He also made no secret that he had no sympathy with the Zionist movement, because the ICOR's aims were "entirely different" from those of the Zionists.

"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." In Saskatoon, Guralnick was asked by the chair of the ladies auxiliary of the Talmud Torah to speak to them. He also addressed, in English, a general meeting celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution on 7 November on behalf of the ICOR; the *Saskatoon Star* ran an excerpt of Guralnick's speech.<sup>34</sup>

The ICOR's view of Nazism reflected the standard Soviet line of the period. Herman Abramovitch provided a typically simplistic analysis in an article published in October 1935, arguing that the worsening condition for Jews in Nazi Germany was a function of the weakness of the Hitler regime. "The economic situation in the country grows increasingly worse," he wrote. Unemployment was on the rise, prices of essential goods were going up, and the unhappiness of the workers was manifesting itself in strikes and demonstrations. Hitler's promise to end class conflict "had come back to haunt him like a spectre." Even many rank-and-file Nazis were beginning to realize that Hitler, who had promised them jobs, "had duped them." Hence his use of the "race card" ["*rasn-mit*"]. Anti-Semitism and pogroms "are always used by capitalist countries as a device to cover up the class character of their power." No wonder Hitler had made the Jew "the scapegoat ["*kaporeh hindl*"] for his setbacks." Abramovitch concluded by pointing to the

<sup>34</sup>"Editorials: Der Tur fun Khaver Guralnick," *Kanader "Icor,"* 9 (October 1935), 1, 14 [Yiddish]; "Editorials: Der 'Icor' in Kanada vert Farshtarkt," *Kanader "Icor,"* 10 (November-December 1935), 1 [Yiddish]; "'Icor'-Taytikayt iber Kanada," *Kanader "Icor,"* 10 (November-December 1935), 10-11 [Yiddish]; *Edmonton Journal*, 31 October 1935, Section 2, 13, 15; "No. 774: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada, 25th September, 1935," in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935*, 500.

strong wave of protests and the united anti-Hitler campaigns now underway. "The progressive forces are demonstrating an impressive determination to vanquish Hitler fascism."<sup>35</sup>

In February 1936 Abramovitch reminded ICOR activists of the growing strength of anti-Semitic and fascist movements in Canada itself. Quebec, in particular, had become a province where anti-Semitism had spread "like wildfire." There had been some anti-Semitic rallies staged there by fascists such as Adrien Arcand "that would not be put to shame even by Hitler's bandits." Yet the government shut its eyes to these anti-Semitic activities.<sup>36</sup> The Jewish masses in Canada, he wrote in another piece, were beginning to realize that it had been an illusion to assume that under the "British flag" anti-Semitism and racial discrimination were impossible. Only in one country did Jews live in harmony with other peoples, without fear of pogroms or economic discrimination. It was a country without capitalism, "out of which racial hatred develops," a country under the rule of workers and peasants, whose solution to national problems "stands as an example to the whole world." Thus the creation of a Jewish region in Birobidzhan was "a slap in the face to all the capitalist countries which foment animosity between peoples apart from hatred of Jews, in order to preserve their shaky control."<sup>37</sup> Anti-Semitism in Québec would remain a matter of concern for the ICOR. "The whole province of Quebec is seething with the poison of fascism," it stated in the summer of 1939, commenting on the infamous anti-Jewish signs posted in the Laurentian resort of Ste. Agathe. "The French-Canadian part of Canada has obviously been chosen by the Nazis as a springboard for an attack upon Canadian democracy and as a probable base for an attack upon the United States as well."<sup>38</sup>

Given the increased awareness that Hitler posed a terrible threat to European Jewry, and that the USSR might serve as a bulwark against the spread of Nazism, many Canadian Jews became more receptive to the propaganda of pro-Soviet groups such as the ICOR. The Winnipeg branch was doing so well early in 1936 that it would soon move into larger quarters in the city's new Talmud Torah. As well, a youth branch had been organized in the city. It also organized a conference on Birobidzhan in April, which attracted 56 delegates representing 23 Jewish organizations. Dr. B.A. Victor, an ICOR activist who had just returned from a trip to the USSR, including Birobidzhan, delivered a lecture about the Jewish Autonomous

<sup>35</sup>H. Abramovitch, "In Kamf Kegn Fashizm in Antisemitism," *Kanader "Icor,"* 9 (October 1935), 7, 14 [Yiddish].

<sup>36</sup>H. Abramovitch, "Antisemitism in Kanada," *Kanader "Icor,"* 11 (February 1936), 6-7 [Yiddish].

<sup>37</sup>H. Abramovitch, "Vos Toronter Yidish Klal-tuer Zogn vegn Birobidzhan," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 11, 14 [Yiddish].

<sup>38</sup>"Anti-Semitism in Canada," *Nailebn-New Life*, 8 (August-September 1939), 3 [English]. The name of the American ICOR's English-Yiddish monthly magazine was changed from *ICOR* to *Nailebn-New Life* in May 1935.

Region—its location, land area, population, and natural resources. All this progress was made possible due to the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, contended Victor, “done not out of pity for the Jews but because of national duty.” His lecture “was a slap in the face to those who minimize or completely discount the significance and development potential of the Jewish Autonomous Region,” said Abe Zeilig, treasurer of the Winnipeg ICOR.

“Even in cold, far-off Edmonton hearts are beating with love for the Soviet Union, for the revival of Jewish culture in one-sixth of the world,” wrote Sam Wine, secretary of that ICOR branch. The new Toronto youth club, reported Adolph Epstein, had improved the overall tenor of ICOR activity in the city — and he hoped that a women’s group could be organized as well. Hamilton’s branches — which already included a women’s group — had begun holding frequently-scheduled open forums. More people were gravitating to the ICOR than to any other Jewish organization in the city, wrote protocol secretary Harry Price. “Our active members are progressive intelligent people, politically-astute comrades ... they are idealists, for whom the Icor is the organization helping to rebuild Jewish life on a healthy basis.” The Hamilton chapters had organized large protest demonstrations against Nazi Germany in the spring of 1936 and had persuaded the local CCF and the Trades and Labour Council to join in a boycott of German goods.

Montréal was the site of the second national convention of the Canadian ICOR, held 8-10 May 1936 to coincide with the second anniversary of the Birobidzhan autonomy declaration. It was attended by 76 delegates, who were asked to think of ways to broaden and strengthen the organization. Abraham Shek, the secretary, reported on the campaign on behalf of Birobidzhan, which had made “great strides” in the two years since the territory had been declared a Jewish Autonomous Region. “We are also taking note today with great pride another fact, that GEZERD at its last plenum reported that in 1935 *not a single settler abandoned Birobidzhan.*” Shek provided statistics regarding the increase in the number of kindergardens, elementary and secondary schools, scientific and technical institutes, evening university courses, clubs, reading rooms and libraries, and sporting groups. The Jewish Autonomous Region was now home to many fine Jewish writers; he mentioned David Bergelson by name. *On the other hand, bloody pogroms, racial discrimination, and economic destitution were the lot of Jews in the capitalist countries.* “Here in Canada, too,” noted Shek, “capitalism tries to divert the wrath of the masses by inciting them against the foreign-born and the unemployed.” He singled out Québec and Manitoba as particularly egregious examples of places where anti-Semitic baiting had become particularly severe.

Shek then turned his attention to the Middle East, where the Arab revolt in Mandate Palestine was underway. “The current events in Palestine, which have already cost tens of victims dead and hundreds wounded, and the destruction of hundreds of homes, is the result of the bloody politics of British imperialist rule in the colonial world, the politics of divide and rule, and also the chauvinistic racial

politics carried on by the leadership of the Zionist movement and on the part of some Arab landowners, against the interests of the impoverished Arab and Jewish masses.

"The ICOR believes that the only solution to the national question is the Soviet one. Every other solution is a diversion and weakens the struggle of the Jewish masses in the capitalist countries." Today, Shek warned, the world stood on the threshold of a war which the fascist powers planned to unleash against "the country that has liberated nations, that sustains culture and civilization, freedom and happiness for all of oppressed humanity.... It was more than ever necessary to mobilize the widest strata of the Jewish people for the defence of the Soviet Union."

The convention passed a resolution supporting the sending of a "people's delegation" to Birobidzhan; it instructed the national executive to select five to ten members who would travel to the region in April 1937. It noted that pro-Birobidzhan support groups had taken similar steps in the United States, Argentina, and Uruguay.<sup>39</sup>

Why had the "people's delegation" become so central an issue? The notion that Birobidzhan might serve as a place of political refuge as well as a centre of Jewish economic and cultural regeneration became more pronounced following Hitler's rise to power in Germany, and the ICOR saw its chance to recruit potential members among Jews who hoped that Birobidzhan would prove a potential haven from racial persecution for their European co-religionists. In August 1934, a front-page article in *Kanader "Icor"* datelined Moscow had announced that "Birobidzhan will accept Jewish Workers from abroad."<sup>40</sup> Moische Katz published a long

<sup>39</sup>Minutes of Hamilton ICOR meetings of 2 February, 1 March, and 19 April, 1936, "Minute Book of Hamilton Chapter of ICOR"; "Editoriale Notitzn," *Kanader "Icor,"* 11 (February 1936), 3-4 [Yiddish]; A. Shek, "Mit di Icor-Brenches iber Kanada," *Kanader "Icor,"* 11 (February 1936), 10-11 [Yiddish]; Front cover, *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936); Harry Price, "Der 'Icor' in Hamilton Gayt Foroys," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 2 [Yiddish]; A. Shek, "Foroys, tsu a Brayter Folks-Organizatsye fun dem 'Icor' in Kanada!," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 5-7 [Yiddish] (emphasis in original); A. Zeilig, "Der Icor in Winnipeg Fartsaykhent Groyse Dérgraykhungen," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 8 [Yiddish]; A. Trachimofsky, "Nor Nisht Kayn Falshe Oystaytshungen!," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 9-10 [Yiddish]; S. Wine, "Oykh in Edmonton Shlogn Hertser mit Libe far Birobidzhan," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 10 [Yiddish]; M. Speisman, "Unzer Idea Vortslt zikh ayn Tsvishn di Yidishe Masn," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936) 10 [Yiddish]; A. Epstein, "'Icor'-Arbet in Toronto," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 14 [Yiddish]; Toronto ICOR Youth Club ad in *Nailebn-New Life* 11, 11 (November 1937): 90 [Yiddish]; "No. 808: Weekly Summary Report on Revolutionary Organizations and Agitators in Canada, 27th May, 1936," in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part III, 1936* (St. John's, Nfld. 1996), 221. For more on Victor's Russian excursion, see B.A. Victor, "The Soviet Union Takes Great Care of the Health of its People," *Nailebn-New Life*, 11 (November 1937), 8-9 [English].

<sup>40</sup>"Der Gantser Sovyetsn-Farband' Boyt Di Yid. Autonomyé Gegnt in Biro-bidzhan," *Kanader "Icor,"* 2 (August 1934), 1.

piece in the June 1935 issue describing the proposal in detail.<sup>41</sup> "Birobidzhan will become the base for a mass migration not just of Jews from the Soviet Union but from countries beyond its borders," another article in late 1935 assured ICOR supporters.<sup>42</sup> Louis Koldoff, national chair of the ICOR, described the ongoing preparations by the American ICOR to send a delegation from the United States, and explained its importance. It would put to rest the lies that had been spread about the Soviet Union ever since the revolution. "The Jewish masses in America instinctively realize that something significant is taking place in the land of the Soviets.... Let the people's delegation travel [to Birobidzhan] and see for themselves how the Jewish question *should* and *can* be solved."<sup>43</sup>

But the American and Canadian Jewish Communists were not apprised of the real situation in the Soviet Union. A rising tide of xenophobia had begun to engulf the country and Stalin's great purges, which would also decimate the Jewish leadership in Birobidzhan, prevented the "people's delegation" from visiting Birobidzhan, thus placing the entire program in a political limbo. The whole matter remained an embarrassing incident, one that the ICOR's enemies would not let them forget.<sup>44</sup>

By 1937 the Spanish Civil War had taken centre stage in the Communist movement. In January Herman Abramovitch embarked on a six-week tour of western Canada to once again shore up the ICOR branches there. In Montréal, the ICOR had already taken the initiative in organizing a committee for Dr. Norman Bethune's medical unit in Spain; it raised over \$1,000 in May and June. A Toronto conference later that year decided to mount a special campaign to help the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, formed in July 1937 as a unit of the International Brigades. This culminated in a mass meeting and concert on 6 February 1938 in the Strand Theatre. Despite all these efforts, the Mac-Paps came home and the Loyalists went down to defeat a year later.<sup>45</sup>

The ICOR continued to defend the Soviet Union through the crisis precipitated by the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939. By checkmating Hitler and occupying eastern Poland, and later Bessarabia, Bukhovina, and the Baltic states, declared the ICOR, the Soviets had liberated some three and one half million Jews

<sup>41</sup> Moïshe Katz, "Sheftum iber Biro-bidzhan Oyslandishe Aynvanderung," *Kanader 'Icor'*, 8 (June 1935) 8-9 [Yiddish].

<sup>42</sup> "An Icor-nik," "'Zhargon' iz Gevorn a Melikhe Shprakh," *Kanader 'Icor'*, 10 (November-December 1935), 5 [Yiddish].

<sup>43</sup> L. Koldoff, "Farvos a Folks-Delegatsye?" *Kanader 'Icor'*, 1 (May 1936), 4 [Yiddish].

<sup>44</sup> 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 1959), 313-317.

<sup>45</sup> Yosef Blitshtein, "In Kanader 'Icor'," *Nailebn-New Life*, 4 (April 1937), 20 [Yiddish]; "In Kanader 'Icor'," *Nailebn-New Life*, 2 (February 1938), 35-36 [Yiddish]; "In Kanader 'Icor'," *Nailebn-New Life*, 3 (March 1938), 35 [Yiddish]; F. Golfman, "Montreal 'Icor'-Taytikayt in 1937," *Nailebn-New Life*, 3 (March 1938), 36.

who had been living in "enslaved and dejected" conditions under the rule of fascist regimes. Stalin had kept them safe from Nazi persecution, so that they had become "secure and happy as part of the Soviet family of nations and as a part of the fortunate Soviet Jewry."<sup>46</sup> There seemed to be, at least in official statements, little concern with the fate of Jews in occupied Europe nor any sense of danger that Germany might sooner or later turn on the Soviet Union itself. But that is another story.

The ICOR's backers included people of some note in Jewish circles. Probably the best-known was Reuben Brainin, the Russian-born *maskil* (Enlightenment scholar) well known in Zionist circles before World War I. He had come to North America in 1912, settling first in Montreal, where he edited the Yiddish newspaper *Kanader Adler* and was involved in trade union and Poale Zion activities. Brainin helped found the Canadian Jewish People's Alliance (*Folks Farband fun Kanader Yidn*), which would become the nucleus of the first Canadian Jewish Congress held in 1919. When he moved to New York in 1916, he was instrumental in working on behalf of an American Jewish Congress and for the Jewish Legion which fought in Palestine in 1918. During the 1920s, he moved further left and abandoned Zionism, which he had begun to criticize as being elitist and having lost its "Jewish spirit."<sup>47</sup> He was favourably impressed by Soviet plans for Jewish rehabilitation during a visit to the USSR in 1930 at the age of 68, and upon his return to America he joined the ICOR and became a well-known figure at gatherings on behalf of Birobidzhan until his death in November 1939. Former Zionist confreres such as Khaim Nakhman Bialik, shocked, denounced him as a traitor and falsifier worthy only of rejection and contempt.<sup>48</sup>

On 7 May 1934, when Mikhail Kalinin officially declared Birobidzhan the Jewish Autonomous Region, Brainin recalled that the ICOR was the first organization outside the USSR to provide aid. "Long live the Leninist national policy of the Soviet Union!" proclaimed rapturous ICOR members. Brainin related an encounter with former friends, still anti-Soviet, who were dumbstruck by the news. For them, he said, it was "Tisha B'Av," and they could only denigrate the wonderful news and try to make of little worth ["*ash und bloteh*"] the "great gift which the Soviet government has granted the Jews in the far east." But for the ICOR, which had helped build Birobidzhan by contributing modern machinery and techniques, it was a great "*yontev*."<sup>49</sup> At a rally held on 2 June in Madison Square Garden, New York, which

<sup>46</sup>S. Almazov, "Di Oyfgabe fun 'Icoi' in der Itstikn Momcnt," *Nailebn-New Life*, 10 (December 1940), 13-14 [Yiddish].

<sup>47</sup>Nakhman Meisel, "Reuben Brainin un Dr. Khaim Zhitlovsky," in Nakhman Meisel, ed., *Tsum Hundertstn Geborintog fun Reuben Brainin* (New York 1962), 147-148 [Yiddish].

<sup>48</sup>David Rome et al., eds., *Canadian Jewish Archives: The Canadian Story of Reuben Brainin Part 2*, New Series, 48 (Montreal 1996), 113-115.

<sup>49</sup>"Der Historisher Bashlus fun der Sovyctn Regierung tsu Farvandlen Biro-bidzhan in a Yidisher Autonomye Teritorye," *ICOR Biro-Bidzhan Souvenir-Zhurnal* (New York 1934),



included among its speakers Earl Browder, general secretary of the American Communist Party, Brainin called it a world event of the greatest historical significance. For the first time, a great power had of its own volition given Jews an area to call their own; the fact that it had been effected by a Communist state was no coincidence. "It is the logic of the whole construction of the Soviet Union, in which every nation has the right to its own territory, to its own language and culture." And, he added, Birobidzhan "now becomes the first fortress against the growing hordes of fascism, which infest the neighboring countries." Brainin called upon every Jew to help in the task of building Birobidzhan, so that "hopefully not too much time will elapse" before it would become a Jewish socialist republic. The ICOR deserved to be congratulated for its material and moral help, "which was the result of the sympathy of the Jewish workers of America with the workers' republic in the Soviet Union."<sup>50</sup> Leninist ideology allowed those Jews who wished to pursue a collective destiny to create a socialist state of their own. Birobidzhan, declared Brainin, provided "a shining example to the whole world [which] will show what Jews can create when they are set free. It must work, when one thinks of the new pioneering spirit of the Jewish youth in the Soviet Union."<sup>51</sup> Brainin noted that "the just treatment of nationalities under the Bolshevik regime is the highest joy for the Jews in the Soviet Union."<sup>52</sup>

On 14 April 1936, Brainin wrote a letter to the newly-formed English-language ICOR branch in Montréal, which had been named in his honour.

The task of building Birobidzhan should be strengthened and aided by all who want to contribute. Those who have carried the burden of the Birobidzhan concept in the face of narrow-minded opposition, in the face of fanatical ideologies and in the face of the wildest calumnies — they need new strength if Birobidzhan is to truly become a Jewish republic.

I have no doubt that history will validate the correctness of those who, despite opposition and hardships, became the shock-brigades of the Jewish settlement of Birobidzhan. You, as a new group, will encounter many difficulties. You will have a most arduous task in overcoming the obstacles placed in your way. It is a well-known fact that the Soviet Union stands for social justice and for eliminating all the evils that destructive capitalism has spread throughout the world. Because we are Jews, who believe in the true words of Jewish tradition

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9-10 [Yiddish]; Reuben Brainin, "Der Yontev fun Biro-Bidzhan," *ICOR Biro-Bidzhan Souvenir-Zhurnal* (New York 1934), 15-16 [Yiddish].

<sup>50</sup>Reuben Brainin, *Umshterblekhe Reyd vegn Birobidzhan un vegn der Sotsyalistishe Layzung fun der Natsyonaler Frage* (New York 1940), 3-4, 10 [Yiddish]. The celebration was covered by the *New York Times*, 3 June 1934, 26.

<sup>51</sup>Reuben Brainin, "Yidishe Pyonern in Biro-bidzhan Boyen far Zikh a Gliklekhe Tsukunft," in Brainin, *Umshterblekhe Reyd...*, 12 [Yiddish].

<sup>52</sup>Reuben Brainin, "Hot der Natsyonaler Yid a Tsukunft in Sovyets-Farband?," in Brainin, *Umshterblekhe Reyd...*, 26 [Yiddish].

and culture, we should be grateful and proud to become part of a country that carries the weight of a new and better world for all people.<sup>53</sup>

Interviewed on his 75th birthday in 1937 by *Nailebn-New Life*, Brainin, a member of the national committee of the ICOR, remained "firmly convinced that our pioneers in Biro-Bidjan will create new cultural values that will be altogether different from what is regarded in Jewish ghetto life as Jewish culture." The "Grand Old Man of Hebrew Literature," as the article referred to him, told interviewer Morton Deutsch that, although he had never totally turned his back on Hebrew, "Yiddish, which is spoken by the majority of our people, must be regarded by any realist as the language of Jewry." He also stated that one could support both Palestine, "provided it is based on social justice," and Birobidzhan, since Palestine by itself "cannot effect a normalization of Jewish life in the Diaspora." He criticized those Jewish leaders who were "rejecting the generous hand extended to them by the Soviet Government. I have a feeling that in the not distant future many world Jewish, and Zionist, leaders will have a lot of repenting to do."<sup>54</sup> Brainin, declared the magazine, had become "the symbol" of "the struggle of the Jewish masses for a revolutionary solution of the national question."<sup>55</sup> Brainin continued to defend the ICOR even after the Hitler-Stalin Pact was signed, stating by phone from his summer residence in Val Morin, Québec on 31 August that his belief in the organization remained unshaken. "In this sacred work I stand shoulder to shoulder with you, and I reject every attack hurled at you."<sup>56</sup>

Brainin died in New York on 30 November 1939, after a lengthy illness which caused him to be paralysed for the last three years of his life. *Nailebn-New Life* eulogized him as a "fighter for truth, a leader of the Jewish people towards a brighter future and a devoted friend of the Soviet Union." His commitment "remained unshaken and did not waver in these dark times."<sup>57</sup> Brainin's body was brought back to Montréal for burial, and, in the words of one writer, "to his funeral there came tens of thousands of people, to pay last respects to their beloved spiritual

<sup>53</sup>"Reuven Brainin Shraybt Tsum Kanader 'Icor'," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 2 [Yiddish]; "We Should be Happy and Proud to Become Part of a Country Which Stands as the Torchbearer of a New and Better World for All Men—Reuben Brainin," *Kanader "Icor,"* 1 (May 1936), 24 [English].

<sup>54</sup>Morton Deutsch, "Reuben Brainin at 75 Looks to Biro-Bidjan for the Future of Jewish Culture," *Nailebn-New Life*, 4 (April 1937), 6-7 [English].

<sup>55</sup>"Mir Grisen Khaver Reuben Brainin Tsu Zayn 75m Geburts-Tog," *Nailebn-New Life*, 4 (April 1937), 3 [Yiddish].

<sup>56</sup>"A Historische Erklerung fun Reuben Brainin Tsum 'Icor'," *Nailebn-New Life*, 9 (October 1939), 26-27 [Yiddish]. Brainin was by now paralysed and very near death; his son Joseph, a member of the Communist Party U.S.A., may have had a part in releasing this statement.

<sup>57</sup>"Reuben Brainin—Toyt," *Nailebn-New Life*, 11 (December 1939), 4-5 [Yiddish].

leader."<sup>58</sup> A memorial to Brainin was held at the Hotel Diplomat in New York on 31 January 1940. Shloime Almazov, national secretary of the American ICOR, recalled Brainin's presence at many ICOR events and also read out Brainin's "historic statement" reiterating his faith in the Soviet Union despite the Hitler-Stalin pact. Brainin had been one of the Jewish world's foremost Hebraists and Zionists, and was never a Communist or even socialist but a Jewish nationalist, declared Jacob Milch, a member of the national executive. But all that changed "*when Birobidzhan appeared on the scene.*" Although well advanced in years, he then became a champion of the Birobidzhan project, the Soviet Union, and the ICOR; "although he knew full well the price he would have to pay." Even after August 1939, he continued to support the Soviet Union when many others had "scattered like frightened mice." Concluded Milch, "coming generations will include [Brainin] among the greatest of Jews" ["*gedolim Yisrael*"]. Benjamin Schecter of Montréal, Brainin's grandson, described "the great crowds that thronged about the Talmud Torah Building in Montréal to get inside the hall where the funeral service was being held." Canadian Jews were proud, stated Schecter, "that for over a quarter of a century Reuben Brainin was connected with Montréal by close ties, that he spent at least a portion of each year in Canada, and that finally he lies buried in their midst." Schecter, too, said that when he had spoken to Brainin in Montréal the previous fall, "his faith in the morality and integrity of the Russian people was unshaken and ... his optimism regarding the destiny of millions of Russian Jews was undiminished."<sup>59</sup>

Today we know that the Birobidzhan project was largely fraudulent and a complete failure. When these facts, which have now been documented by numerous historians, were revealed after 1956, along with the crimes of Stalin, nowhere was the crisis of faith more profound than among the Jewish Communists.<sup>60</sup> Sam Lipshitz has acknowledged that in the ICOR "the political line was dominated by the Communist Party." By virtue of his position as a high-ranking CPC official, he said, "I was involved in the ICOR. I made it my business to in some way supervise their activities. At one point in the early 1930s, during the very deep economic crisis, when a lot of people were leaning towards the left-wing movement, and out of sympathy for the Soviet Union, the ICOR had a good following." As Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine intensified in the 1930s; he explained, the idea of a Jewish state

<sup>58</sup>I.L. Becker, "Reuben Brainin in Montreal," in Nakhman Meisel, ed., *Tsum Hundertstn Geborintog fun Reuben Brainin*, 106 [Yiddish].

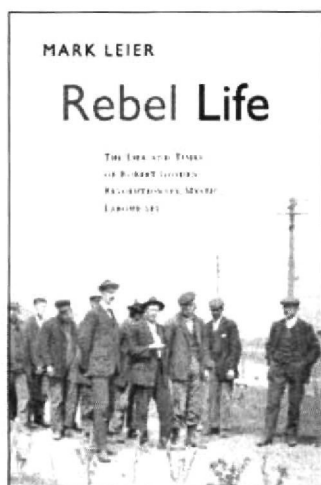
<sup>59</sup>Yacov Milch, "Der Umfargeslekher Reuben Brainin," *Nailebn-New Life*, 3 (April 1940), 15-17 [Yiddish] (emphasis in original); Benjamin Schecter, "Reuben Brainin was a Truly Great Man," *Nailebn-New Life*, 3 (April 1940), 6-7 [English]. After Brainin's death the ICOR printed 100,000 postcards of the "historic statement" alongside his portrait. "In Der Icor Bavegung," *Nailebn-New Life*, 3 (April 1940), 27 [Yiddish].

<sup>60</sup>For more on this period, see Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Montreal 1994).

in the Middle East began to seem more problematic, "so Birobidzhan was presented as an alternative. A lot of Jews who were not left-wing but nationalist, for them the idea of a Jewish state even under the Soviet regime, was very attractive. But later on it just disintegrated."<sup>61</sup> In 1940 Almazov, in defending the Soviet agreement with the Nazis, made reference to a phrase used by Brainin, who had died a few months earlier: "TO TRAMPLE UPON THE TRUTH IS NO LESSER A CRIME THAN MURDER."<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, the Jewish Communists, in engaging in the former, had ended up supporting those in the Soviet Union guilty of the latter.

<sup>61</sup>Interview, Sam Lipshitz, Toronto, 9 June 1998.

<sup>62</sup>S. Almazov, "Why Did Rabbi Theodore N. Lewis Slander Biro-Bidjan?," *Nailebn-New Life*, 3 (April 1940), 9 [English] (emphasis in original).



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