

on top of the recently renovated station, the city's name is lit up in Hebrew, signposting Birobidzhan's status as capital of the Jewish Autonomous Republic, declared as such by Stalin in 1934. There are more clues: the out-of-town synagogue, a Jewish Sunday school and secondary school, Russia's only Yiddish newspaper, and a busy Israeli repatriation agency.

But many of the Jews here, who recreated these traditions post *perestroika*, have left for Israel. Of the region's 20,000 Jews, the Jewish Agency of Russia estimates that 70 percent have left, and most of those are young. The Jewish Theater has since moved to Moscow, and the social club for young Jews has closed. "We want to leave because Israel is our homeland; it's as simple as that. We've had to live in an anti-Semitic country all our lives, facing discrimination and intimidation, and now we have a chance to leave, so why stay?" said Slava Sherman, head of the Jewish Agency of Russia. The agency helps Birobidzhan residents leave for Israel by giving them information and help with plane tickets.

For many people, the choice of whether to stay or go is economic, tinged with hope of a more lively existence; Birobidzhan has little entertainment with the exception of a Jewish theater and a popular microbrewery restaurant. Factories have been closed, and in those that remain, the pay is low and irregular. Boris Vassilyev works in a television factory and has not been paid for six months. "At least if I go to Israel, I'll be guaranteed a pension, even work; it's more than I'll get here," he said while in line to see the repatriation representative.

But in 1927, when the Jewish professor Boris Brook arrived in the swampy area between the Bira and Bidzhan Rivers, there was a genuine belief among Jews that a homeland could be created. After the Soviets opened the area for settlement, in part to populate an area vulnerable to Japanese expansion, more than three hundred Jewish families arrived from Argentina, Venezuela, America, Germany, Switzerland, Byelorussia, and Poland, as well as from across Russia.

Some were communists, like Iya Beyekherman, 92, one of the fifty Argentinians who came to the area. Beyekherman lives in Birobidzhan still. "We arrived by train on the 20th of March. We had absolutely nothing but the wish to rejuvenate our culture and create a homeland. We built communes; life in the commune still remains a ray of light in my life. It was a very pleasant life; we ate fish we caught from the river and drank milk from the cows we kept. We all dreamed we would create a great industrial and agricultural city; life was very peaceful," he said. Beyekherman recalls the commune's football, volleyball and basketball teams, the library, and the Spanish-language radio station.

But after 1930, repression eclipsed the ideals of the fledgling homeland. First there were provocations; the secret services burned down the houses of prominent Jews. Then many of the Jewish families from abroad were declared spies

and forced to leave; the director of the commune was shipped off to a concentration camp, where he spent fifteen years. The twenty-six Jewish schools, the synagogue and the library were closed, and the Hebrew and Yiddish languages were banned. "It was a black and tragic period for the region and one of the reasons why so few people today speak Yiddish," said Inna Dmitrienko, editor of the *Birobidzhan Stern*, published in Yiddish and Hebrew and circulated in Ukraine, Byelorussia, America, and Israel.

"Many of our writers and poets were arrested, and some of them did not survive. Our tradition was destroyed. When the region was established, people only spoke Yiddish; today very few people know Yiddish," she added. At the state-operated Jewish School, which is in its fifth academic year, efforts are being made to teach the children Yiddish and Hebrew. Of the 130 pupils, whose number is continually diminished by families leaving for Israel, 40 percent are Jewish. Pupils attend lessons in Hebrew, Yiddish, Jewish tradition, Jewish dancing and music, and take part in Jewish festivals.

But the school feels more support could be given by Israel. "They promise books, but they never arrive. My feeling is that they (the Jewish government) do not like the idea of any other Jewish state than Israel," said Anna Piskovets, Deputy Head of the Jewish School. A representative from the Israeli embassy in Moscow visits Birobidzhan every month, but support is more moral than financial. "It's very important to help them learn more about their history, about their tradition because they know very little about it, almost nothing," said Aliza Shennar, the Israeli ambassador to Russia on her first visit to Birobidzhan.

"But many people are talking about Jewish autonomy and I don't know the meaning of it. It's very hard to see why they want to learn Yiddish in schools instead of Hebrew because the common language is Hebrew. The Bible was written in Hebrew. Of course, we dream of seeing all the Jews come to Israel. However, we understand that some of them are going to stay here, and Israel is going to support them in many ways." The regional government tacitly supports the new attempts to resurrect Jewish culture in the region, while at the same time fearing Jewish nationalism.

Victor Bolotnov, mayor of Birobidzhan, said, "The Jewish element gives the region identity and puts the place on the map." However, he hastened to add he was not Jewish but fully Russian. In the local government's glossy guide to the region, there is no mention of the region's Jewish culture and population. In the suburbs of Birobidzhan, next to a Baptist church, is the synagogue, partly funded by an American organization headed by Boris Kaufman. "The Holocaust has overshadowed the persecution of Jews in Russia," Kaufman observed. "But Jews in Russia have suffered immensely. Now is our opportunity to recreate the Russian Jew, but whether it will happen, I don't know."¹⁸