

THE JEWISH AUTONOMOUS REGION AND THE CZECHOSLOVAKIAN JEWS: HANNES MEYER WRITES ON BIROBIDZHAN

ŽIDOVSKÁ AUTONÓMNA OBLASŤ A ČESKOSLOVENSKÍ ŽIDIA: HANNES MEYER O BIROBIDŽANE

V máji 1936 v sovietskych novinách Der Emes, ktoré vychádzali v jazyku jidiš, bol publikovaný článok pod názvom Židovská autonómna oblasť a československí Židia. Jeho autorom nebol nik iný než bývalý riaditeľ Bauhausu architekt Hannes Meyer. Pravdepodobne to bolo jeho posledné dielo napísané v Sovietskom zväze, keďže len o mesiac neskôr musel odísť do svojho rodného Švajčiarska – nemal na výber.

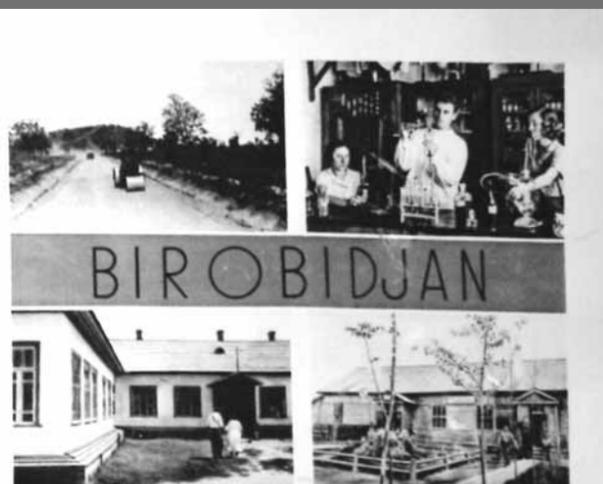
V tomto článku Meyer sumarizuje svoju skúsenosť z prednášania v Československu na tému nedávno vzniknutej Židovskej autonómnej oblasti Birobidžan na Ďalekom východe. Medzi januárom a májom 1936 mal v Československu dvadsaťdva prednášok, no len dve z nich – jedna v Prahe a druhá v Brne – boli venované spomínanej téme, zatiaľ čo ostatné sa zaoberali transformáciou sovietskej architektúry a urbanistického plánovania. Článok v Der Emes vyvoláva viacero otázok, napríklad – o čom vôbec je? Je o Meyerovej práci na urbanistickom plánovaní Birobidžanu? Ak áno, prečo napísal takýto článok pre židovské publikum, ktoré nemalo relevantné odborné vedomosti? A ak to nebola odborná publikácia, akú mal Meyer kvalifikáciu na vyjadrovanie sa k záležitostiam oblasti? Poveril ho niekto, aby v Československu hovoril o židovských záležitostiach? Na čo? Prečo on? Prečo vtedy?

V úvode textu Meyer vysvetľuje, že prednášky o Birobidžane vznikli spontánne: „Musím priznať, že som neplánoval hovoriť o Birobidžane. Zjavne to bola takpovediac náhoda“¹⁸¹. V texte sa však nachádzajú ďalšie indikácie toho, že prednášky naozaj boli naplánované a rozvrhnuté dopredu a mali špecifický scenár. Hannes Meyer sa stal bezprostredným zdrojom informácie o podmienkach v Židovskej autonómnej oblasti a do istej miery aj propagátorom Stalinoého politického projektu presídlenia Židov na Ďaleký východ. Ako predseda plánovacej komisie pre sovietsky Ďaleký východ od roku 1934 bol zodpovedný za plán vývoja Birobidžanu, hlavného mesta Birobidžanskej oblasti – regiónu v Chabarovskom kraji, ktorý sa nachádzal medzi riekami Bira a Bidžan, prítokmi Amura. V roku 1934, po šiestich rokoch od vzniku Židovského rajónu, Jozef Stalin oficiálne vyhlásil túto oblasť za autonómnu. Cieľom

Stalina pri presídlení Židov a ich transformácii na roľníkov bolo poskytnúť im územie pre normalizáciu ich národnostnej situácie a súčasne osídliť oblasť, vystavenú útokom zo strany Číny a Japonska. Projekt nikdy nenaplnil tieto očakávania: židovské obyvateľstvo aj pod hrozbou nacizmu vo východnej Európe neemigrovalo v rozsahu, ktorý od nich očakávala vláda, a tí, čo odišli, väčšinou neboli schopní prispôsobiť sa novým podmienkam a vrátili sa domov do západných oblastí. Ďalšou prekážkou Stalinoého plánu, ako vysvetlil Meyer, bol sionizmus, s ktorým mnohí z nich sympatizovali.

Ak Meyer očakával, že jeho spolupráca na podobnom počínaní mu prinesie stabilitu a zlepšenie podmienok jeho existencie v krajine ako cudzinca, čoskoro mal prísť na to, že sa tak nestane. V roku 1937, keď už bol späť vo Švajčiarsku, s lútosťou písal Nikolajovi Kollimu, že ako cudzo-krajný občan nemal žiadne miesto v Sovietskom zväze a nikdy by ho neuznali za svojho, nezávisle od toho, ako bol oddaný sovietskej moci¹⁸⁴. Pokiaľ ide o jeho pozíciu vo vzťahu k Birobidžanu alebo osudu Židov, v nasledujúcich rokoch sa k tomu takmer nevyjadroval.

V roku 1939 Meyer emigroval do Mexika, kde sa aktívne zúčastňoval na antifašistickej kampani nemeckých vyhnanco. Stretol tam Paula Merkeru, ktorý ako jediný z bývalých členov politbyra Nemeckej komunistickej strany žil v Mexiku. Medzi Merkerom a Meyerom existovali významné nezhody, ktoré sa znova obnovili po tom, ako bol Meyer bez jeho súhlasu zahrnutý do otvoreného listu na protest proti nacizmu, ktorý vyšiel vo Freies Deutschland Bewegung, kde Merker bol hlavným redaktorom. V roku 1946 sa Merker vrátil do NDR; bol zástancom reštitúcií a stránil židovskému nacionalizmu, v dôsledku čoho ho v roku 1950 zatkli: režim ho obvinil zo špiónáže pre americký imperializmus a sionizmus. Meyer sa tešil z Merkerovho osudu, snáď kvôli starému rozhorčeniu alebo hlbokému nesúladu ich politických pozícií vo vzťahu ku komunistickej odozve na sionizmus. V skutočnosti Meyerova reakcia na vznik izraelského štátu nebola jednoznačná, čo bolo určené oficiálnou líniou stalinizmu. Meyerova lojalita voči režimu bola neochvejná;



mohol odsudzovať Merkera pre antagonizmus vo vzťahu ku straníckej politike, a súčasne vydať album oslavujúci nezávislosť Izraela po rezolúcii Organizácie Spojených národov z roku 1947 o rozdelení Palestíny, ktorú ZSSR v tom čase podporoval. Kapitola o Birobidžane bola len

With the partitions of Poland by the end of the 18th century, the Russian Empire acquired a large number of Jewish subjects territorially confined to the limits of the Pale of Settlement, an area comprising mainly the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. From that time on, both the Tsarist and Soviet regimes looked for solutions to the “Jewish question”. Tsar Alexander I (1777

dalším odborným počínaním Meyera. Jeho rola propagátora mu neprinesla očakávané výhody, avšak jeho sympatia voči sovietskemu režimu ho sprevádzala až do konca a určovala väčšinu jeho rozhodnutí. V roku 1949 sa Meyer napokon vrátil do svojej rodnej krajiny, kde v roku 1954 zomrel.

– 1825) suggested for the first time in 1804 to settle Jews on the land, an idea the Soviet government would reenact years ahead as part of their program of collectivization of agriculture. By this means, the “futility” of the Jewish bourgeoisie could be transformed into a “productive, meaningful life” and their situation as an abnormal nationality could be solved.

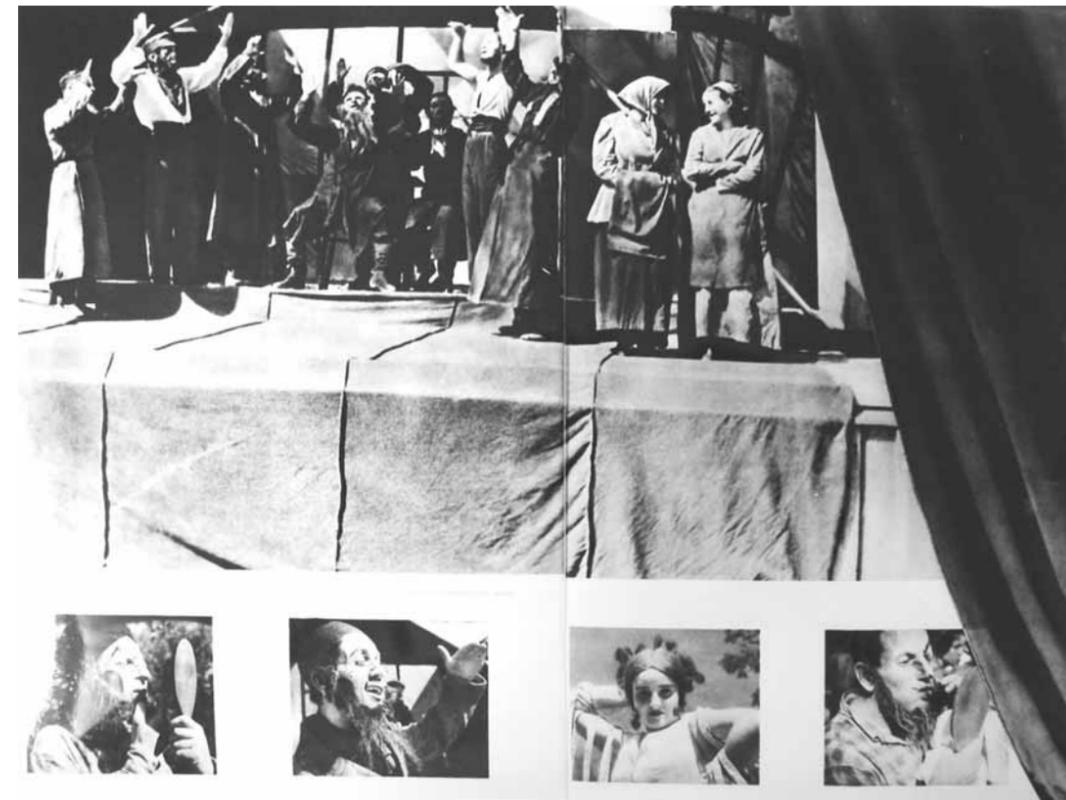
The first Soviet attempts to transform Jews into peasants during the early 1920s encountered mixed reactions. On the one hand, both the state and Jewish philanthropic organizations supported the idea of relocation, especially in the Crimea, while on the other, local peasants resented the project as intrusive and dangerous to their own interests. Mikhail Kalinin eagerly promoted the creation of Jewish agricultural colonies, which he believed were the only means to maintain the Jewish nationality. In his words: “The Jewish people faces the great task of preserving its own nationality, and to this end a large part of the Jewish population must be transformed into an economically stable, agriculturally compact group which should number at least in the hundreds of thousands. Only under such conditions can the Jewish masses hope for the future existence of their nationality.”¹¹

In order to facilitate the creation of such colonies, in 1924 the Communist Party established the KOMZET (Committee for the Settlement of Labouring Jews on the Land), a government commission in charge of land distribution among Jews, and its civil counterpart, the OZET (Society for Settling Labouring Jews on the Land) aimed at assisting the colonists in the logistics of settlement, including housing, training, education, provision of tools and cattle, etc. The initiative never achieved its goals; most of the Jews returned to their previous way of life in the shtetls, while others embraced Zionism instead. However, the Crimean experience opened the door to future proposals of the kind, mainly that of Birobidzhan.

Birobidzhan Area Map
Mapa oblasti Birobidžan



Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH: 28-F-1769



Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH: 28-F-1916/3:23 (1/30)

Jewish Theater in Birobidzhan
Židovské divadlo v Birobidžane

In 1928 Josef Stalin himself apparently suggested the creation of an urban settlement for Jewish colonization in the Far East¹² as a response to different concerns ranging from the situation of the Jewish masses to the national scale. First of all, lying on the border with China and extremely under populated, the region was vulnerable to Chinese and Japanese attacks, therefore, security could be enhanced by transferring people to the area. Secondly, unwanted Jews from the European republics such as Belarus and Ukraine could be relocated far away in order to provide them with the necessary condition of a territory to acquire full recognition of the Jewish nation, and finally, the Soviet Union would win foreign appreciation and

financial assistance for their generous solution to the Jewish condition. As a consequence of such considerations, an area about the size of Belgium and the Netherlands located between the rivers Bira and Bidzhan, both tributaries of the Amur in the Khabarovsk province, was soon to become Birobidzhan, the Jewish rayon.

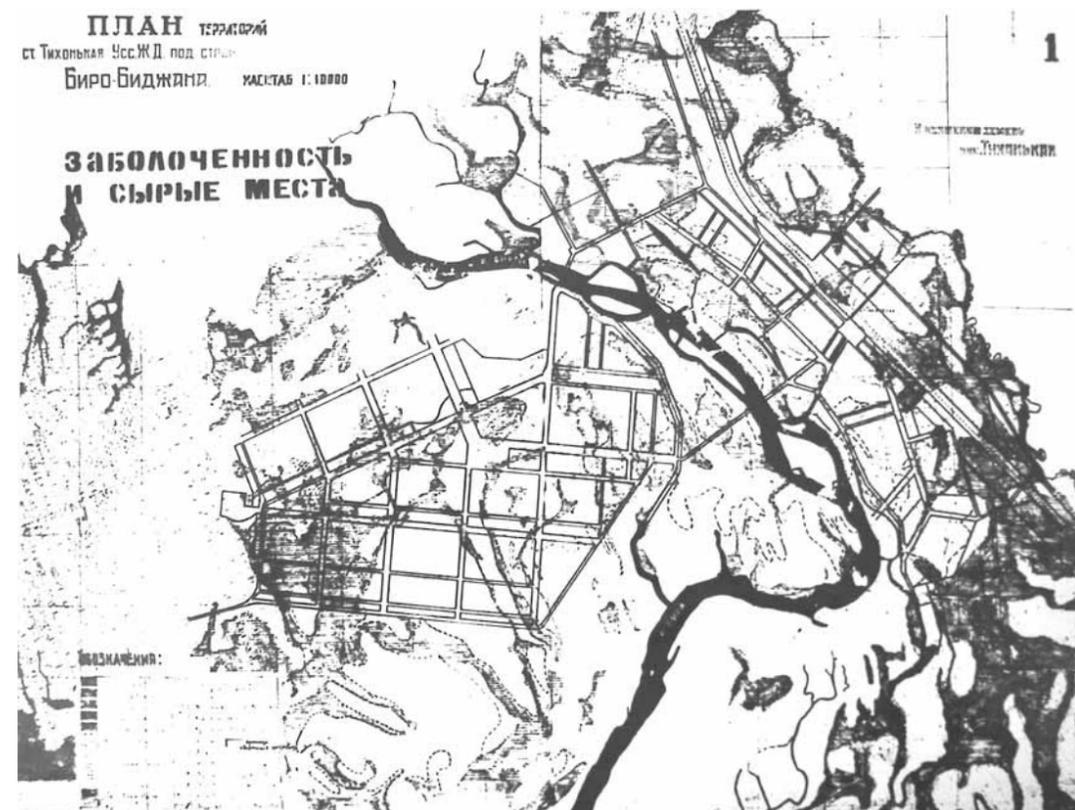
Notwithstanding the Yevseksia's (Jewish section of the Communist Party) adverse evaluation of the project, which anticipated its failure due to the remoteness of the site from traditional Jewish centers, Yiddish became an official language in the area, Jewish kolkhozes were founded with the financial support of foreign agencies, especially the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; Yiddish culture was promoted through a theater

and the local press, the Birobidzhaner Stern, and specialists, among them the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer, were brought from Moscow to help in the urban development of Birobidzhan, the capital city of the rayon established around the former station of Tikhonkaia. By 1934, in spite of the slow migration of Jews to the area (totaling far less than 20 % of the population) and the disenchantment and desertion of most of the pioneers, Birobidzhan acquired the status of an autonomous Oblast, the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR).

Hannes Meyer arrived in the Soviet Union in September of 1930, after being dismissed from the Bauhaus where he served as director for two years. His self-identification as a scientific Marxist,

in a Germany that was more and more leaning towards the right, made him not only undesirable for the Dessau administration but a potential danger to the political control of the school. Followed by seven of his students, Meyer began his journey eastwards in order to contribute in the construction of the socialist nation, as he acknowledged to Moisei Ginzburg. In his words:

"I and my young comrades have no more possibilities of practical work; we are coming to you to Russia. Our knowledge is unproductive here and leads to unacceptable situations. It is impossible to work under such reactionary terror. – From the best collaborators in the Bauhaus, there are those who wish to integrate a collective workgroup for



Urban plan of Birobidzhan
Územný plán Birobidžanu

Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH: 28-F-1790

the new construction of the USSR. We bring specialists in different fields. We would like to ask you to take our will with sympathy and help us to materialize it."¹³¹

Meyer was warmly received in his new position as professor at the VASI Academy of Architecture. On November 1st, before delivering a lecture on his experiences at the Bauhaus in the Institute's Trade Union conference, a protest against his expulsion from the German school was issued. The resolution used Meyer's arrival to foster their own political agenda regarding the development of art and science in the socialist state:

"The conference states that the fact of the arrival of comrade Hannes Meyer to the USSR reaffirms that within the borders of capitalist systems the free development of science and the arts is impossible. In that sense, internationally renowned scientists of diverse cultural areas are coming forward, and only in the USSR there is an open way to the development of science, technique and art" ¹⁴¹.

After working for the VASI Academy of Architecture, Meyer was appointed Chief architect of the Giprovut (Trust for the Construction of Institutes of Technology and Higher Education), where he worked together with his former students in the "Red Bauhaus Brigade". In 1931, he was commissioned with one of the eight projects for the enlargement of Moscow and left the Giprovut to engage in the study of the "current conditions of socialist town planning" ¹⁵¹ by accepting a position in the Giprogor, the Russian Institute for Urban and Investment Development. He worked there on the urban planning of several cities, including Molotovo and Nizhny Kurinsk near Perm in the Urals. Between 1933 and 1934, as head of the planning commission for the Far East, he would undertake his last project in the Soviet Union, the planning of Birobidzhan.

On May 31, 1933, the Swiss architect arrived at the Tikhonkaia station with the Giprogor planning brigade. For the next two months he would assess the region, interview its inhabitants, consult with geologists, topographers and other specialists in related fields, and present to the local council the first stage of an urban plan for the city, hav-

ing, back in Moscow, one more year to finish the project and deliver it to the authorities.

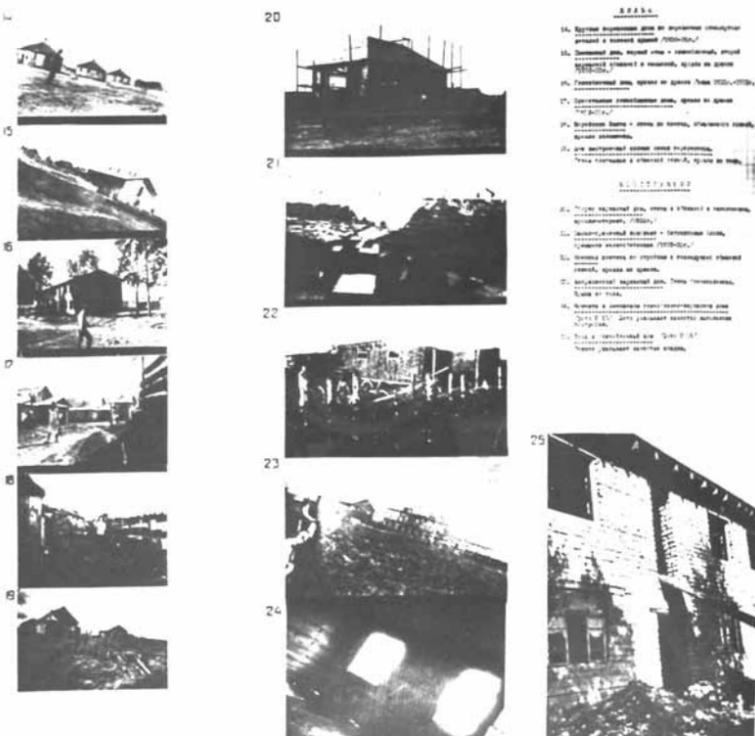
Meyer's first impressions were not very encouraging and to some extent prejudiced. He described the place as a chaotic mixture of building techniques, following the national customs brought by the settlers from their homelands. In his words:

"During our daily wandering through the site of Tikhonkaia, we unsuccessfully looked for an impression of a desire for collective building among its more or less 350 timber or adobe houses and almost 5000 inhabitants. The preference for individually decorated, detached houses, and the petty garden partitions, are worthy of a Jewish theatrical piece with petit bourgeois tendencies! – as a consequence of the diverse catalog of house construction methods, the place can only resemble the chaotic display of a housing exhibition of the various peoples on earth. The basic national materials for house construction are timber, reed, straw, adobe, sand, gravel, lime and limestone. Yet, during the process of individual or collective enterprise of self-construction, they are transformed in the hands of the dweller, depending on his origin, in the block-houses of Latvian or White-Russian into Jews, the lime-plastered adobe buildings of Ukrainian Jews or the two-storey adobe structures of German Jews" ¹⁶¹.

The weather was unbearable; temperatures rose as high as 46 °C and flooding of the Bira was frequent during the rainy season. Mosquitoes abounded and food rations barely sufficed. Nevertheless, Meyer foresaw some possibilities for industrial development derived from the mineral wealth found in the area, a strategy very much in the sense of the new official guidelines. He even admitted to his Jewish friend and former student at the Bauhaus, Lisbeth Oestreicher, that he enjoyed his visits to the site and gave a more sympathetic description both of the place and of its people:

"Now I want to tell you a lot about our work that dominates me obsessively. I am certainly not doing any world-transforming things. I have very concrete problems that I have to solve with my brigade. Next spring, around that season, I will be back in the Far East. It is good for me there. I can better let myself go, as in those times in Ziebigg. You have no idea how rich and strange is the

ЖИЛСТРОИТЕЛЬСТВО



Construction in Birobidzhan
Výstavba Birobidžanu

Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH:
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nature in the border of Manchukuo. There is gold, graphite and iron to collect from the ground. At the same time, the Taiga begins there towards the north: forest islands, swamps (all covered with irises), water currents or seas. In the farthest Tungus Mountains – if you want to study your poor compatriots from around the globe, you should go to the village promenade. I had not seen so many different types of Jews together. Our articles in the newspaper there are in Yiddish with Hebrew characters and from right to left. (...) We light a fire and we bathe for hours, we sleep by the fire, play the harmonica and tell jokes and serious stuff. – I am alone among Russian comrades”^[7].

By the end of the First Five-year plan in 1932, foreign specialists were no longer in demand from the Stalinist regime. The government became suspicious of alien citizens, and working opportunities were almost over by 1935. Meyer’s condition became precarious under the new circumstances, leaving him with no further options in the USSR. The establishment of a Spanish-French Institute in Spain appeared to be the next step; nevertheless, this initiative would also fail due to the outbreak of the Spanish civil war. Instead, Meyer went on a conference tour to Czechoslovakia perhaps to promote himself abroad and secure a position elsewhere, or, as a last resource, to try, through his public statements, to reassure his superiors of his loyalty to the regime.

Between January and May of 1936, Meyer delivered 22 lectures around Czechoslovakia, twenty of them speaking in the state of Soviet architecture and two (one in Prague and another in Brno) specifically about Birobidzhan. Upon his return, on May 28, Meyer published an article in the official Yiddish newspaper Der Emes entitled “The Jewish Autonomous Region and the Czechoslovakian Jews” in which he summarized his experience lecturing on this topic and the reactions to his talks from an audience mainly composed of European Jews.

Two facts stand out from the Yiddish chronicle: first, as the specialist in charge of the planning of Birobidzhan, at no point in his lectures did the architect refer to his project, to the future development of the town or to its architecture. Instead, he dealt mainly with social and political issues related to the immigration process and Jewish life in the region, topics that were not in his field of expertise. And secondly, he stressed the fact that those conferences were not planned in advance, but came as a spontaneous response to the interest of the audience, a statement that can be challenged by some of the facts he described in the same article. For instance, he wrote:

“The greatest interest in the JAR does not belong to Czechoslovakia alone. Extremely acute is the question for the Jews in Germany. Explanations are therefore unnecessary. For the German Jews, the JAR is a dream.

When I was in Czechoslovakia, some German Jews turned to me. They came specifically for a

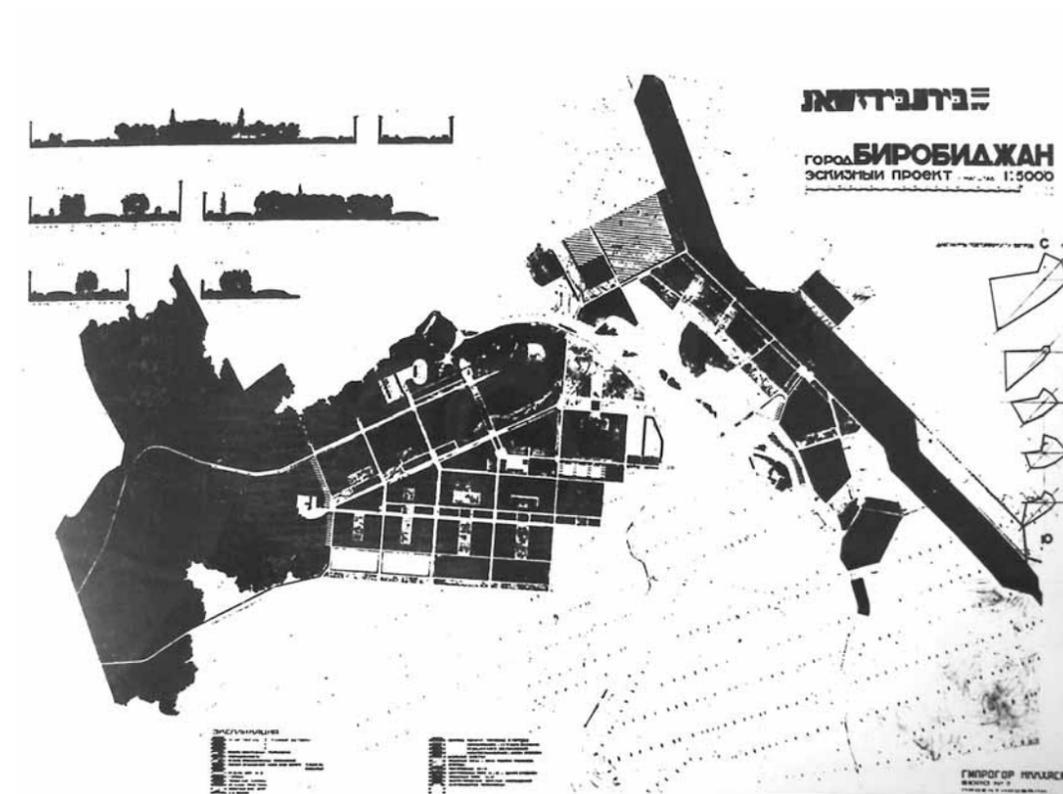
couple of days in order to be informed about the JAR. Naturally, they have very little interest in the climate and its benefits. They had already lived the flavor of the worst “climatic services” and other advantages. Their only question was a short one: How do we get to the JAR the fastest?”^[8]

If the talks were spontaneous, how could a German Jewish family acquire the information and the means on time to prepare for a trip abroad, especially in the midst of Nazism? On the contrary, if the lectures were planned and advertised in advance, what were their goals? To whom was Meyer serving by promoting life in the JAR?

In fact, there was a specific interest in encouraging Jewish immigration to Birobidzhan, not only of Soviet Jews but of Europeans and Americans

as well. The initial attempts to relocate Jews were far from the expectations, and the entire project was at risk. Besides, there was an increasing Japanese pressure on the region and Zionism, although struggling, was still a significant opposing force. Meyer wrote:

“The JAR highlights even more the Zionist illusions, the illusions of a “Home in Palestine”. The Zionist agitation for Palestine does not help, nonetheless, little is felt here and the impact of its agitation against the JAR is negligible. The Zionists are disliked. The Zionists have been seriously stricken by the current uneasiness in Palestine. These events had just happened while I was in Czechoslovakia. A complete sense of loss and pessimism has fallen among the Zionists”^[9].



Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH:
28-F-1916/3:23 (1/30)

Regulation plan of Birobidzhan
Regulačný plán Birobidžanu



Newspaper "Der Emes" Noviny Der Emes

Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH- 28-S-2

Moreover, Meyer attributed to Zionist agitation the misinformation and prejudices that the audience had about the Soviet way of life. When asked about the separation of children from their parents, he wrote: "Clearly, the weak conception they have of the Soviet Union, reflected in these precise questions, is the result of ugly anti-Soviet agitation, the wild fabrications of the Zionists and the eternal reactionary views they have been spreading about the Soviet Union for a long time" (10).

It is significant as well the fact that Meyer barely answered any of the questions addressed to him by the public; instead, he replied with another question or laughed with the audience. For instance, the architect relates, when someone asked "how are women treated in the JAR: according to the old Jewish traditions or under Soviet law? Unversed on how a woman is treated under the old Jewish tradition, I answered the question also with a question: How do the Czech Jews handle their women? The entire hall laughed" (11). He also explained to the

readership of Der Emes that the sudden interest in Birobidzhan, especially from Czech Jews, was the product of fear, since they saw emigration to the JAR as their "only way out". He wrote:

"The central matter is that the Jews feel very insecure in Czechoslovakia (...). The reason is that Czechoslovakia is thought as a future battleground, as an assault is assumed by Hitler's Germany (...). Here they have seen more than a few examples of Hitler's 'care' of Aryans towards Jews.

The Jewish population discounts the situation and looks for security. Palestine is no longer considered, so what remains then? Here they think naively that the way out for them, for all the Jews in the world, is the JAR. The Japanese are thought of as a lesser evil" (12).

Meyer finished his article with a euphoric narration of an event in a movie theater in Prague. He emotionally described the heartfelt applause each time an image of Lenin or of the Red Army appeared on the screen, and the mockery of Hitler or the indifference towards Mussolini's assault on Rome. He closed saying: "At the very end, a group of Soviet pilots is shown flying over Czechoslovakia in 1935. In the hall, a torrent of applause begins. The applause is not only for the pilots but for the entire Soviet Union, the homeland of every worker in the world, towards which the light and esteem of Czechoslovakia grows every day." (13)

If the talks targeted foreign Jews, the written article was meant to attract the locals. Proselytism for the JAR was of extreme importance for the Soviet authorities; however, Meyer was not necessarily the most informed propagandist on the subject. Thus, if that were the case, why did he, in his current difficult personal situation, decide to take the risk of publishing in a Jewish newspaper? Perhaps writing about Birobidzhan in Der Emes was another proof of his service to the nation, or he was simply following orders. One year later, Der Emes stopped publication and its leadership was purged.

Meyer's efforts were in vain. On June of 1936, Meyer and his wife Lena left the USSR for good and settled again in his homeland for the next three years. In a letter to architect Nikolai Kolli dated July 29, 1937, Meyer clarified some of Kolli's remarks about his presence in the Soviet Union.

Among the reasons the Swiss architect mentioned to justify his departure, one was especially painful to him: regardless of his commitment to the communist cause, he, as a foreigner, could never be recognized as one of them. In a resentful tone, he wrote:

I do understand that in the fight for a national expression of Soviet architecture, personal beliefs should fall aside. I can therefore honestly answer that I, at no point whatsoever between 1930 and 1935, came into contradiction on the current situation of Soviet architecture. Even after my departure from the USSR, I had often to explain, in the framework of the 22 lectures I delivered in Czechoslovakia (where the opposition to the architecture in the USSR is especially big among the leftist architectural milieu) and very much to my sorrow, these dialectical conditions to my numerous Czech Bauhaus friends! (...) But I am a West-European, a mix of Allemande and Huguenot, and I cannot contribute with anything "National" to Soviet architecture. For you and your colleagues, I will remain no more than a cold rationalist and a methodologist (at least for the time being) – therefore, useless. For that reason I stepped down (14)

Meyer barely mentioned Birobidzhan again, or for that matter, his opinion on the fate of the Jewish people even after the Holocaust. In 1939 he, his wife and their daughter Lilo immigrated to Mexico, where they would spend the next ten years. He collaborated with the German exile community in the Freies Deutschland Bewegung and the Heinrich Heine Club, participated in anti-fascist campaigns and edited the Black Book of Nazi Terror in Europe, published in 1943. However, his position towards the Jewish question, Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel remained, in the best of the cases, ambiguous. What was significant in that sense, however, was his confrontation with Paul Merker, one of the leading members of the German exile community in Mexico.

In October 1942, Merker, Secretary of the Latin-American Committee of the Freies Deutschland Bewegung and the only member of the politburo of the German Communist Party in the Mexican exile, published in the group's magazine Freies Deutschland the article "Hitler's anti-Semitism and us". It was their first statement by a leading

German communist placing the Jewish catastrophe at the centre of the struggle against Nazism. (...) Unlike previous communist statements on the issue, Merker focused on the fate of the Jews as a whole people, even the wealthy among them. He supported restitution (Wiedergutmachung), and expressed understanding for the growth of Jewish national feeling and the desire for a Jewish state. He urged punishment of those guilty of crimes (15).

Soon after, a manifesto denouncing Nazism under the title "Homage of the German-speaking anti-fascist writers to the USSR" appeared in the magazine. Among those who were listed as signatories without their knowledge was Hannes Meyer, who reacted badly to his inclusion. He wrote: "What responsibility do we, the Swiss, have when faced with the cruelties of the Hitlerist bands in the USSR? What is my right and what is my duty, as a Swiss, to suggest the German people what to do (or not) with the Hitlerist bands? I do not remotely think I can feel responsible towards Herr Hitler and his bands. I say this to the German group." (16)

In 1946, Paul Merker returned to Germany, where he joined the Socialist Unity Party of Germany in the DDR and was elected to the Central Committee. In 1950, he was expelled from the party accused and tried. Two years later, he was arrested writing about trials for being an agent of American imperialism and Zionism, and condemned to eight years in prison. In January 1956 his sentence was revoked and he was released and partially rehabilitated.

Hannes Meyer, already back in Europe since 1949, was aware of Merker's situation. On November 8, 1950, he wrote to Pablo O'Higgins: "What do you think of Paul Merker's case? The great friend of Clarita Porcet and Xavier [Guerrero]? The hero of the German resistance? etc., etc., etc. This little chief of the Germans between the years 1942 and 1947 was cast down and soon the corresponding trial will begin in Berlin." (17)

Was Meyer's scolding of Merker simply an old resentment over the issue concerning the manifesto or was there a deeper disagreement worthy of his contempt? Did Merker's ideas on restitution and Jewish national aspirations have something to do with Meyer's appraisal of his former acquaintance?

In fact, Merker's views on the singularity of Jewish suffering and his acceptance of Jewish nationalism stood in strong opposition to the mainstream of Soviet and German Democratic policies. As a believing Stalinist, aligned with the regime even during his exile, Meyer could well have truly considered Merker a traitor deserving punishment. Nonetheless, when the political line of the Soviet Union allowed it, Meyer himself was ready to take advantage of Jewish interests. For instance, in 1948, following the Soviet support of the November 1947 United Nations resolution for the partition of Palestine, while confronting the hardships of an economic crisis in Mexico, Meyer attempted to publish an album on the establishment of the State of Israel. The idea never materialized, perhaps due to the reversal of Soviet support for Israel.

The Birobidzhan experience was for Meyer just another professional commission. In his multiple résumés written throughout the years, he never mentioned the article published in *Der Emes*, perhaps because it was not a professional matter, perhaps because it had no impact on his fate in the Soviet Union or simply, because it was too compromising. As strong-minded as he was, Meyer was extremely cautious when expressing ideas that could jeopardize his position, especially in the political arena of Stalinism. He would never speak again about Birobidzhan or publicly denounce Merker.

As opposed to Merker and most of the German-speaking exile that went back to Europe around 1946, Meyer had to wait until 1949 to return home. It was already too late; sick, tired and unable to participate in the European reconstruction, Meyer retired to the province of Ticino where he died in 1954.

Album "The State of Israel"
Album "The State of Israel"



Source Zdroj: Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur Archiv – ETH:
28-F-1915:9 (1/9)

NOTES POZNÁMKY

¹ GITELMAN, Zvi: *A Century of Ambivalence: the Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press 2001, p. 98.

² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ MEYER, Hannes: *Bauen und Gesellschaft: Schriften, Briefe, Projekte*. Dresden, VEB Verlag der Kunst 1980, p. 198.

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