

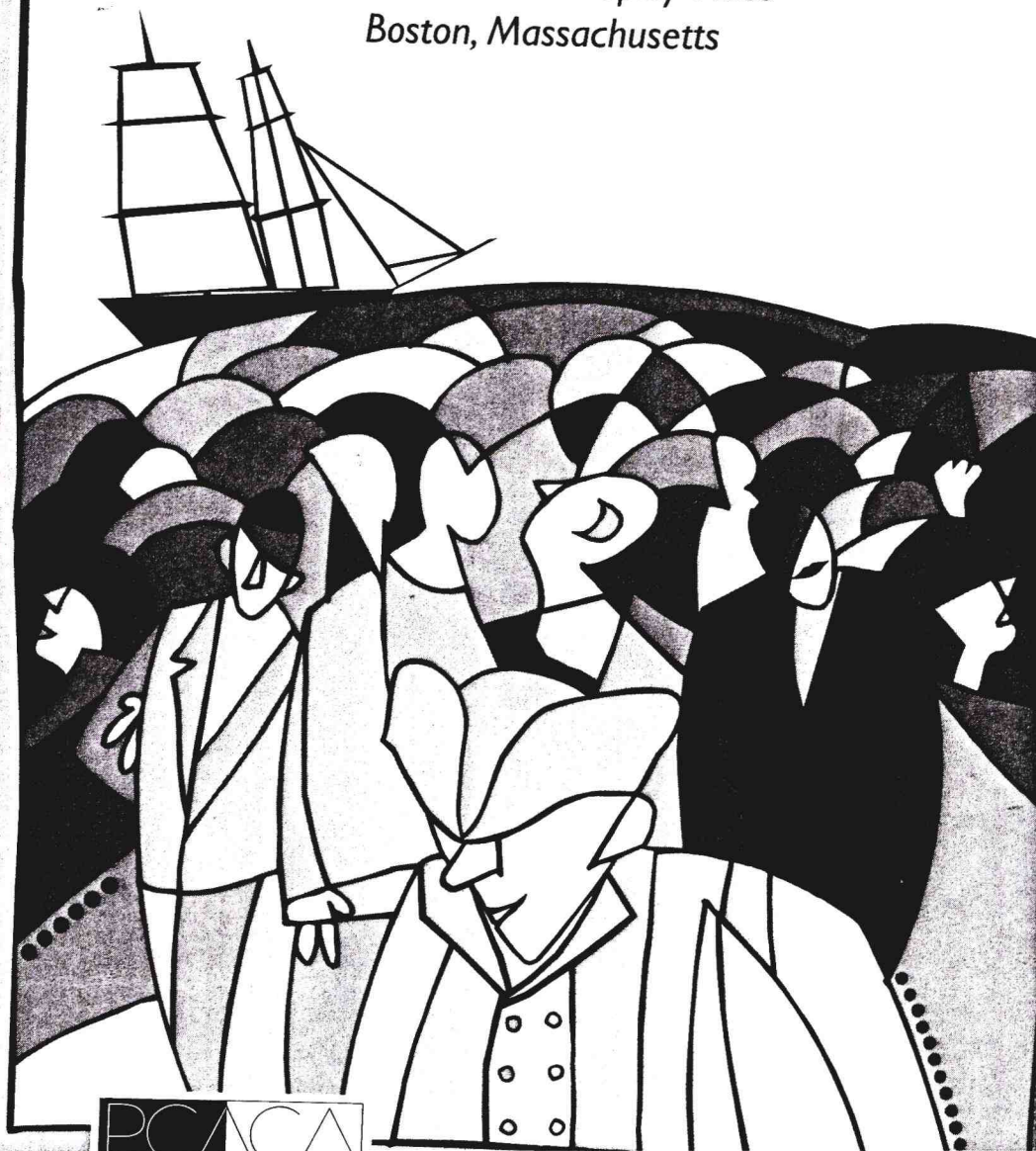
42ND ANNUAL

PCA-ACA

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Boston Marriott Copley Place

Boston, Massachusetts



(Hancock): Global Dress, Fashion & Culture: Rm. - Salon K

Session Chair: Marcia Morgado, University of Hawaii at Manoa

DESired Beauty: A study of the emerging ideals of beauty among Asian-Indian American Women

Sailaja Joshi, Harvard University & Simmons College

From Tiki to Tango: Fashion Fetishizations of Latin and Polynesian Cultures in 1950s America

Paris Brown, San Diego State University

Integration of specialty commercial accumulation-A case study of Shibuya area

Jin Nakamura, The University of Tokyo

Manja Weinstein's Halloween Kimono

Marcia Morgado, University of Hawaii at Manoa

2420 War After 1945: Literature, History, Culture, and the Arts

(Prescott): Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan: Rm. - Maine

Session Chair: Shawn Picht

Herblock's Korean War

Alexandra Boni, George Mason University

Post-9/11 Humanitarian Discourse: The Controversy over Greg Mortenson's Three Cups of Tea as a symptom of imagining Afghanistan

Shawn Picht, Brown College

The Kremlin and Kabul: The 1979 Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in Retrospect

Charles Sullivan, The George Washington University

2430 Eastern European Studies (Johnson): II: Rm. - Suite 3306

Session Chair: Alina Haliliuc

A Social Body without Gender: The Memory of Communism in the Reception of 4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days

Alina Haliliuc, Denison University

Proselitism for Birobidzhan: Hannes Meyer and the Jewish Autonomous Region

Raquel Franklin, Universidad Anahuac Mexico Norte

The role of positive stories in the re-creation of social fabrics in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Insights from the field

Sasha Poucki, Rutgers University

Nicole Bryan, Montclair State University

Westerners' travel stories from Russia (XVIth century): From popular culture to stereotypes, constructing the representation of a new space

Igor Delanoe, University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis

2440 Documentary (McIntosh): Documentary as a Tool for Social

PROSELITISM FOR BIROBIDZHAN: HANNES MEYER AND THE JEWISH AUTONOMOUS REGION

Dr. Raquel Franklin

Universidad Anáhuac México Norte

With the partitions of Poland by the end of the 18th century, the Russian Empire acquired a large number of Jewish subjects. Jews were confined to the limits of the Pale of Settlement, an area comprising mainly the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Since then, both, the Tsarist and Soviet regimes looked for solutions to the “Jewish question,” sometimes through repression and others through relaxation. Tsar Alexander I (1777-1825) 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 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. Mikhail Kalinin, Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets of the Russian SFSR, saw agricultural colonies as the only means to maintain the Jewish nationality, he said: “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 hundreds of thousands. Only

under such conditions can the Jewish masses hope for the future existence of their nationality.”¹

For that end, in 1924, the CPSU (*Communist Party of the Soviet Union*) established the KOMZET (*Committee for the Settlement of Toiling Jews on the Land*) a government commission in charge of land distribution among Jews, and its civil counterpart, the OZET (*Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land*) aimed at assisting the colonists in the logistics of settlement, including housing, training, education, provision of tools and cattle, etc. On the other hand, local peasants resented the project as being intrusive and dangerous to their own interests. The initiative did never achieve 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.

In 1928, the designation of an urban settlement for Jewish colonization in the Far East was suggested, apparently by Stalin himself.² The area comprised between the rivers Bira and Bidzhan, both tributaries of the Amur, was soon to become Birobidzhan, the Jewish *rayon*. The selection of the site in the Khabarovsk province responded to various reasons. First, bordering with China and extremely under populated, the region was vulnerable to Chinese and Japanese attacks. Second, unwanted Jews from bordering 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 get full recognition of the Jewish

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

² *Idem.*, p. 103

nation, and finally, the Soviet Union would achieve foreign appreciation and financial assistance for their generous solution to the Jewish condition.

Notwithstanding the adverse evaluation of the project by the Yevseksia anticipating its failure, Yiddish became an official language, 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), with the hope to become in the future a Jewish Socialist Soviet Republic.

Hannes Meyer had arrived in the Soviet Union in 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. On August 1, 1930, followed by seven of his students, Meyer began his journey eastwards in order to “contribute as a comrade in the construction of the socialist nation.” After working for the WASI academy in the training of architectural faculty, he participated in the competition for the enlargement of Moscow, getting involved in the field of urbanism. He then became part of the Giporgor, the Russian Institute for Urban and Investment Development, working on the urban planning of several cities, including

Molotovo and Nishni Kurinsk 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, having, 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 prejudicial. He described the place as a chaotic mixture of building techniques, following the national customs brought by the settlers from their homelands. He wrote:

During our daily wandering through the site of Tikhonkaia, we unsuccessfully looked for an impression of a collective building desire 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 look like a chaotic display of a housing exhibition of the various peoples on earth. The national basic 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 get transformed in the hands of the dweller, depending of his origin, in the block-houses of Latvian or White-Russian Jews, the lime-plastered adobe buildings of Ukrainian Jews or the two-storey adobe structures of German Jews.³

Weather was unbearable; temperatures rose as high as 46°C and flooding of the Bira was frequent during the rain season. Mosquitoes abounded and food rations barely sufficed. Nevertheless, Meyer foresaw some possibilities for industrial development derived from

³ Hannes Meyer, *Bauen und Gesellschaft: Schriften, Briefe, Projekte*, VEB Verlag der Kunst, Dresden, 1980, p. 143

the mineral wealth found in the area as a strategy very much in the sense of the new official guidelines.

By the end of the First Five-year plan in 1932, foreign specialists were no longer in demand by 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 discourse, 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 on the state of Soviet architecture and two, one in Prague and another in Brno, specifically on 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 and the reactions of European Jews to the latter talks.

Two facts stand out from the Yiddish chronicle; first, being the specialist in charge of the planning of Birobidzhan, at no point in his lectures the architect referred 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 second, 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 are very little interested in the climate and its benefits. They had already lived the flavor of the worst "climatic services" and other good stuff. Their only question was a short one: How do we get to the JAR the fastest?⁴

If the talks were spontaneous, how could a German Jewish family get the information and 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 to encourage Jewish immigration to Birobidzhan, not only of Soviet Jews but of European and American 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 opposite 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 little is the impact of its agitation against the JAR. 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.⁵

⁴ Hannes Meyer, The Jewish Autonomous Region and the Czechoslovakian Jews, Der Emes, May 28, 1936

⁵ Idem.

Moreover, Meyer attributed to Zionist agitation the misinformation and prejudices 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, mirrored in these precise questions, is the result of the ugly anti-Soviet agitation, the wild fabrications of the Zionists and the eternal reaction they have been spreading about the Soviet Union for a long time."⁶

Meyer finished his article with an euphoric narration of an event in a movie theater in Prague. He emotionally described the heartfelt applauses each time an image of Lenin or of the Red Army appeared on the screen and the mockery of Hitler and 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 torment of applauses begins. The applauses are not only for the pilots but for the entire Soviet Union, the homeland of every worker in the world, to which the light and esteem of Czechoslovakia grows every day."⁷

If the talks targeted foreign Jews, the article was meant to attract the locals. Why did Meyer, under the difficult personal situation he was going through, decided to take the risk of publishing in a Jewish newspaper? Perhaps proselytizing for 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, 1936, Meyer and his wife Lena left the USSR for good and established 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

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

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. I can therefore honestly answer that I, at no point whatsoever between 1930 and 1935 fell 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!!⁸

Meyer barely mentioned Birobidzhan again, or for that matter, his opinion on the fate of the Jewish people especially 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 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. Significant in that sense was his confrontation with Paul Merker, one of the leading members of the German exile 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

⁸ Hannes Meyer, *Op. Cit.*, p.198

Party in the Mexican exile, published in the group's magazine *Freies Deutschland* the article "Hitler's anti-Semitism and us". It

was the 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.⁹

Soon after, a manifesto denouncing Nazism under the title "Homage of the German-speaking anti-fascist writers to the USSR" appeared in the magazine. Without previous authorization, among the signing was Hannes Meyer who reacted badly to his inclusion. He wrote: "What responsibility do us, Swiss, have in front of 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 to feel responsible towards Herr Hitler and his bands. I say this to the "German group".¹⁰

In 1946, 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 of espionage. Two years later, he was arrested and trialed for being an agent of American Imperialism and Zionism, 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? The hero of the German résistance?"

⁹ Jeffrey Herf, "East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 29, No. 4. (Oct., 1994), pp. 627-661.

¹⁰ Hannes Meyer, Letter to Paul Merker, Alexander Abusch and Bruno Frei, Mexico City, November 6, 1942, DAM 82/1-927(2)

etc., etc., etc. This little chief of the Germans between the years 1942 and 1947 was thrown down and soon the corresponding trial will begin in Berlin."¹¹

Was Meyer's scolding for Merker simply an old resentment for the issue with the manifesto or was there a deeper disagreement worth of his contempt? Were Merker's ideas on restitution and Jewish national aspirations had 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 opposed the mainstream of Soviet and German Democratic policies. Being Meyer a Stalinist, aligned with the regime even during his exile, it is possible he truly considered Merker a traitor deserving punishment. Though, 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 did 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*; maybe due to the fact that 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

¹¹ Hannes Meyer, Letter to Pablo O'Higgins, November, 8, 1950, DAM 82/1-880 (44)

Stalinism. Unable to participate in the European reconstruction, sick, tired and disillusioned, Meyer died in 1954 in his homeland, Switzerland.