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READER

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 9, 2002 | VOLUME 31, NUMBER 45 | CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

LOST AND FOUND

BY MARTHA BAYNE

A DECADE AGO Karol Verson was working at a Jewish senior center in Chicago when an elderly man wandered into the office with a battered paper portfolio under his arm. "Listen," she recalls him saying, "I found this in my basement. Does anybody here want it?" The portfolio contained 14 old woodcuts, most of them in pretty good shape. Verson thought the prints were interesting, so she took them. She didn't catch the man's name, and she never saw him again.

Verson's home is full of paintings, wood sculptures, antiques, and murals painted by her son-in-law. She didn't have space to hang the woodcuts, so they just sat for several years.

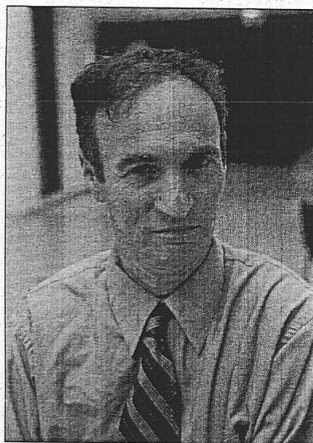
Early in 2001 she invited her friend Nathan Harpaz, curator of Oakton Community College's Koehline Gallery, to take a look at the woodcuts. He recognized the names of several of the artists as Chicago painters, printmakers, and muralists, including Aaron Bohrod and Mitchell Siporin. Many of the prints touched on popular Depression-era themes of struggle and social justice. Intrigued, he persuaded her to donate them to the college.

Harpaz then started trying to figure out what the portfolio was. Noticing that the prints "had some Jewish aspects," he called Olga

A MYSTERIOUS GIFT OF ART LEADS A LOCAL CURATOR TO CONNECT THE DOTS BETWEEN CHICAGO AND THE SOVIET UNION'S FAILED JEWISH HOMELAND.



"MILK AND HONEY" BY ABRAHAM S. WEINER FROM THE PORTFOLIO "A GIFT TO BIRO-BIDJAN"



NATHAN HARPAZ

Weiss, curator of the Spertus Museum. Verson had gone to the museum when she first acquired the prints, but Weiss identified them simply as WPA-era works identical to a set Spertus owned. Weiss gave Harpaz a bit more information: the limited-edition prints, titled "A Gift to Biro-Bidjan: From Despair to New Hope," had apparently been produced to raise money for Birobidzhan, the Soviet Jewish territory founded in the 1920s. But she couldn't tell him much more. Harpaz, an Israeli who'd emigrated to the U.S. in 1987 with his Chicago-born wife, was dimly aware of the story of Birobidzhan. But he says he wondered: "Why are Chicago artists during the Depression doing fundraising for something that happened in Siberia?"

THE 1936 SOVIET PROPAGANDA FILM *Seekers of Happiness* tells the story of a Jewish family that makes the arduous trip by boat and rail from the United States to the newly created Jewish Autonomous Region in the far eastern Soviet Union. Wise, pragmatic babushka Dvoira and her children—happy-go-lucky Lyova, beautiful brigadista Rosa, and long-suffering Basya, who's married to Pinya, an alarmingly stereotypical shiftless, gold-obsessed Jew—struggle against adversity

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BIROBIDZHAN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

to build a socialist Jewish homeland. The roof of the barn leaks, and there's rarely enough bread to go around. But by the end of the movie the wheat has been stacked high by cheery workers, good-for-nothing Pinya has been banished, and Basya is free to seek happiness in the arms of noble, hunky Natan, chairman of the Red Field collective farm.

The reality was different. In 1928 Stalin designated an undeveloped region in Siberia, some 5,000 miles from Moscow, the site of the new Soviet Zion, and it was formally established six years later. Sharing a border with Manchuria, the marshy, mountainous territory—about twice the size of New Jersey—was an inauspicious site for colonization. The land had been annexed by Russia in 1858 but was sparsely populated; its 27,000 inhabitants were clustered along the Trans-Siberian railroad and the Amur River, two of whose tributaries—the Bira and the Bidzhan—gave the area its name.

The creation of a Jewish Autonomous Region was in keeping with Lenin's policy of developing official territories for the more than 100 national and ethnic groups that made up the Soviet Union, which he saw as a critical step in creating a unified socialist culture. Soviet Jews had no historical connection to Siberia, but Birobidzhan was rich in natural resources. It was also of strategic interest to the Kremlin, given the potential for Japanese and Chinese aggression.

State officials envisioned the JAR as a secular, socialist utopia of farms and small towns, with Yiddish rather than Hebrew—the language of the synagogue and the bourgeoisie—as the official tongue. They also saw settling Jews on the land as a practical solution to the "Jewish problem": by turning shopkeepers and unskilled laborers into productive agricultural workers, the Birobidzhan project would both weaken anti-Semitism and strengthen the place of Jews in the new Soviet economy. Between 1928 and 1938 government subsidies, tax exemptions, and a propaganda campaign drew more than 35,000 migrants to Birobidzhan from within the USSR, many from Ukraine, where Stalin's brutal collectivization campaign had caused mass starvation.

Less than half of the pioneers lasted more than a few years. Plagued by mosquitoes, mud, disease, and repeated flooding, they lacked the tools with which to build barns and housing. Farming equipment promised by Moscow never arrived. Many of the new farms had no access to potable water. Winters were bitter, summers stiflingly hot. Robert Weinberg writes in *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, "The overwhelming majority of Jews who came to the JAR in its early years had little or no firsthand knowledge of farming, and many were unprepared psychologically and physically for the rigorous demands of pioneer life." Of those who stuck it out, most gravitated to the capital city of Birobidzhan and nonagricultural employment. Many lived in squalor and were forced to beg or turn to prostitution.

Conditions improved slowly, but the dream of an agrarian utopia never materialized, and by the mid-1930s the second Five-Year Plan had subordinated agriculture to industrialization. Yet for a brief time many saw the JAR as an international oasis of Jewish culture. Organized religion was banned, but Yiddish schools, Yiddish theater, and a Yiddish newspaper took root. Despite vociferous opposition to the experiment from supporters of a Palestinian Zionist state, communist and Jewish organizations worldwide raised hundreds of thousands of dollars on Birobidzhan's behalf, and a thousand Jews, inspired by romantic notions of building socialism and living on the land, emigrated from as far away as the U.S. and South America.

Harpaz was hired in 1998 to be the Koehnline's first full-time manager and curator. A specialist in 20th-century modern art, he'd taught museum studies at Tel Aviv University and spent eight years as director of the Tel Aviv Memorial Museum. In his four years at Oakton he's increased the profile of the gallery and the size of the museum's permanent collection, installing a sculpture park at the Des Plaines campus and creating a state-of-the-art on-line database of the college's holdings.

Harpaz says his role fits well into the larger mission of the college. "As a community college," he says, "we are connected to the suburbs around us. So the same way that we're serving them as a college with a formal education program we're also serving them as an art center." The 1,000-square-foot

gallery has only enough space for temporary exhibitions, so the college's permanent collection is scattered around its buildings.

That collection totals around 300 pieces, nearly two-thirds of which are by Chicago and Illinois artists. It includes works of Miro, Dalí, Calder, and Oldenburg, as well as a small Richard Hunt bronze, John Pitman Weber's 1968 eight-panel mural *Elements*, and pieces by eminent locals such as William Conger, Karl Wirsrum, and Ruth Duckworth. Harpaz doesn't have an acquisitions budget—all of the art comes from grants or private donations.

The introductory text included in the Birobidzhan portfolio indicated that it was commissioned in 1937 by the Chicago chapter of ICOR, whose acronym comes from the Yiddish name for the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union. Harpaz plugged "ICOR" and "Birobidzhan" into Internet search engines and netted a

handful of far-flung academics doing research on related topics. "It was like starting from scratch," he says. "Information was scattered—there was nothing specifically written on this portfolio."

He got in touch first with Weinberg, who teaches Russian history at Swarthmore and had helped mount a touring exhibition on the history of Birobidzhan that stopped at Spertus in 1999. Weinberg referred him to an archivist at New York's YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, who sent him information on ICOR. Slowly, he says, "I put all the puzzle pieces together."

"We, a group of Chicago Jewish artists," begins the introduction to the portfolio, "in presenting our works to the builders of Biro-Bidjan, are symbolizing with this action the flowering of a new social concept wherein the artist becomes moulded into the

clay of the whole people and becomes the clarion of their hopes and desires."

ICOR was founded in Philadelphia in 1926 to support Soviet efforts to further Jewish autonomy, first in Crimea, then in Birobidzhan. The group championed the goals of the American Communist Party and was openly pro-Soviet in its politics, but it also counted among its supporters such titans of capital as Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears, Roebuck and founder of the Museum of Science and Industry, who donated over \$2 million to the cause.

By the mid-30s ICOR had more than 10,000 members internationally, many of whom endorsed the Birobidzhan project less out of ideology than because it would help get European Jews out of Hitler's reach. Many also saw it as a realistic alternative to Palestine, which they believed posed intractable problems. "It created some debate

ON THE TRAIL OF A PURLOINED PAINTING

In 1935 ICOR embarked on what was perhaps its most ambitious project: acquiring a collection of contemporary art that would be used to start a museum in Birobidzhan. One hundred and twenty American artists—including William Gropper, Max Weber, Jose Clemente Orozco, and many of the Chicagoans who two years later contributed to "A Gift to Biro-Bidjan"—donated more than 200 oil paintings, watercolors, sculptures, prints, and drawings to this gesture of cultural solidarity. The ICOR art committee proudly announced that the works would form "one of the best and most complete collections of American art to be found anywhere outside the United States." The collection was displayed in New York City and Boston, and in late 1936 it was shipped to Russia, where it was exhibited in Leningrad and Moscow. Then it vanished.

For the past few years Efreim Ostrowsky has been trying to track down one piece of the collection. Now retired and living in Highland Park with his wife, Thelma, he grew up on the southwest side, where his father, Sam, had a small studio behind the family's house on Central Park Avenue. Sam, who was born in Ukraine in 1885 and trained at the Kiev Conservatory of Art, came to the United States in 1903 to be an artist. He got a scholarship to the School of the Art Institute, married Anna Israelson, a Lithuanian-born schoolteacher, and studied for a time at the Academie Julian in Paris, before World War I forced them to return to the States. In 1916 he began to design stage sets for the Yiddish theater, first in Chicago and Milwaukee, then as the principal designer for Maurice Schwartz's Jewish Art Theater in New York, a leader during the golden age of Yiddish theater. (Forty of his oil and watercolor stage designs were exhibited at the Spertus Museum in 1987.)

with the Chicago chapter of ICOR, who helped persuade him to donate one of his works to the Birobidzhan collection. "It was," says Efreim, "something to be done for the cause."

Efreim Ostrowsky served in the infantry during World War II, seeing six months of frontline combat and taking part in the liberation of Dachau. After the war ended in Europe he was sent to England to teach at a technical college for occupation troops. He



EFREIM OSTROWSKY

landed in London on V-J Day, and when his buddies dragged him out to join the thousands celebrating in the streets, he struck up a conversation with the girl standing next to him, who'd lost a brother in the RAF and a sister in the London Blitz. Five months later they were married.

After the war the pair lived in Chicago for a couple of years, then moved to Paris, where Efreim studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and Thelma studied French at the University of Paris and took care of the first of their three daughters. They returned to the Chicago area in 1953 and have lived here ever since. An accomplished sculptor, painter, and oboist, Efreim made his living for many years as a product designer and holds patents for such devices as a prosthetic heart valve and a soda-bottle cap.

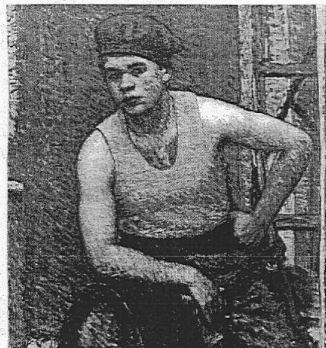
He says he'd always been interested in recovering his father's painting, but it wasn't until the Birobidzhan exhibit at Spertus in 1999 that he made a serious effort to find it. The catalog for the missing ICOR art collection was included in the exhibition, and Olga Weiss, with whom he'd worked to mount the 1987 exhibit of his father's theatrical work, recognized Sam's name in the list of contributors. She had a bad copy of the catalog and called Efreim to see if he had a better one. He didn't, but he did have a photograph of the original painting—was she interested in that?

After the exhibit ended he began making inquiries about the painting, almost all of which led to dead ends. Last March, for instance, he got in touch with Stephen Feinstein, the director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, who forwarded a color copy of the photo to a colleague in Moscow. They still haven't had a reply.

"I would dearly love to find out more," says Ostrowsky, who believes that since the Birobidzhan museum was never built and the painting never reached its intended destination, it should be returned to his family. The portrait, he wrote in a letter to Feinstein, "is truly one of [my father's] most important works and it represented a major sacrifice by my parents in letting ICOR have it."

The opening of archives in the former Soviet Union and recent international interest in restoring art lost during the Holocaust to the original owners' heirs have made Ostrowsky more optimistic. Recently a cache of art and documentary information on Birobidzhan came to light in the basement of a Saint Petersburg museum. Money is scarce, and it could be months or years before the material is inventoried. But the more than 100 watercolors, drawings, and sculptures are believed to be part of the missing ICOR collection. How they got there and the whereabouts of the oil paintings that were also in the collection remain a mystery.

—M.B.



"A WORKER" BY SAM OSTROWSKY

In 1929 Sam Ostrowsky gave up theater to concentrate on painting, and spent the rest of his life shuttling between his studios in Paris, the Catskills, and Chicago. He died in 1946, and today his landscapes, still lifes, and portraits are in the permanent collections of museums and universities in the U.S., France, Russia, and Israel. A 1936 French monograph on his work casts him as a prototypical "wandering Jew," forever aesthetically torn between realism and liberating fantasy, and compares him to De Chirico and Pissarro. His crowning work, says the monograph, is Efreim, his "luminant portrait" of his 14-year-old son, "a hymn to the sun and to the joy of life."

Among the Ostrowskys' friends, the fate of European Jews and the question of a Zionist state in Palestine was a matter of great concern. "I'm 83 years old," says Efreim. "My childhood was in the 20s and 30s, and I was on the fringe of all these happenings, but I absorbed enough to know what was going on. My father was never political. He was interested only in his art. But my mother was interested in the world situation, and she felt that [a Zionist state] would be a difficult thing to establish. She was very—what's the word?—prescient. So when this thing happened with Birobidzhan, it was announced as a way to get the Jews out of trouble at the time, even though it was way out in the boonies, next to China, and almost impossible to imagine."

In 1935 Sam was teaching art at the Jewish People's Institute on Douglas Boulevard when he and his wife met a woman involved



"EFREIM" BY SAM OSTROWSKY



between Jewish organizations, because traditionally they financially supported Jews to go to Palestine," says Harpaz. "But Rosenwald and other people that were involved actually thought that temporarily it would be easier to move European Jews to Birobidzhan than to Palestine, because of what had started already after the Nuremberg laws and the restriction in Germany. And they predicted that it was going to get worse. It was a way to save European Jews from a future holocaust—that was the whole idea." ICOR actively encouraged Jews worldwide to move to Birobidzhan and raised money to buy tools and equipment for the fledgling collective farms. The "Gift to Biro-Bidjan" port-

folio was one fund-raising tool. "At the time it was created, that was the glory years of Birobidzhan," says Harpaz. "That's when the population was at its peak and everything was really very optimistic. Just two years later it all started to fall apart." Birobidzhan wasn't spared Stalin's purges of the late 30s, in which millions of Soviet citizens, including several thousand Birobidzhan Jews, were arrested and imprisoned or executed for "counterrevolutionary activities." By 1937 official efforts to encourage migration to the region stopped, and when the USSR entered World War II only 16 percent of the estimated 109,000 inhabitants of the JAR were Jewish. Efforts to stimulate mi-

"CHICAGO TOWERS" BY TODROS GELLER FROM THE BOOK "FROM LAND TO LAND"



gration to Birobidzhan were briefly revived after the war, because government officials and international Jewish organizations promoted the area as a home for orphaned Jewish children. But in 1948 those efforts ended when Stalin began his campaign to wipe out Jewish cultural and intellectual activity throughout the Soviet Union. The Birobidzhan schools and theater were closed, the staff of the newspaper arrested, the Jewish wing of the historical museum destroyed, Yiddish books burned, and many thousands of Birobidzhan citizens were shot or disappeared into labor camps. Stalin died in 1953, before he could implement the next step in his "final solution"—the deportation of all Soviet Jews to camps in the far east. By then the Birobidzhan experiment was seen by its former champions as at best a noble failure, at worst a sinister hoax. Jewish culture all but disappeared in Biro-

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"RAISINS AND ALMONDS" BY TODROS GELLER FROM THE PORTFOLIO