

# Zero point - Birobidzhan and Tel Aviv : annotations to a letter from Hannes Meyer to Arieh Sharon

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## Zero Point – Birobidzhan and Tel Aviv: Annotations to a Letter from Hannes Meyer to Arie Sharon Ita Heinze-Greenberg

On September 26, 1937, Hannes Meyer (1889–1954) sat down at the desk in his temporary Geneva apartment in the Corbusier-designed Maison Clarté to write a letter to his former student and office assistant Arie Sharon (1900–1984). Almost seven years had passed since they had handed over the Bundesschule in Bernau to its future users. Sharon, in 1930 the principal architect in Meyer's Berlin office, had been in charge of supervising the

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**fig. 1** Founding photograph of Tel Aviv. Lottery of the parcels in the sand dunes off Jaffa, 1909. Photograph by Avraham Soskin.

general construction on site. With the Bundesschule, probably the best edifice Meyer had ever conceived, the since-dismissed Bauhaus director and his younger collaborator had shown what they understood by building. In Adolf Behne's words, "It pretends nothing, it represents nothing, it marks nothing, it *is* what it *is*, in the simplest, clearest, most sympathetic way. ... One can certainly describe the basic attitude of this building as one in the best and richest sense Marxist." <sup>1</sup> Soon after completing the Bundesschule, Meyer's and Sharon's paths diverged. On October 11, 1930, Meyer left for the Soviet Union. <sup>2</sup> Sharon took a detour to Mandatory Palestine, from where he had set off in summer 1926 for his training at the Bauhaus. Despite positive impressions of Moscow gained during a visit to the Vkhutemas as one of three student delegates of its sister institution in Dessau, Sharon resisted the attractive offers he received from Meyer in Moscow and from Mart Stam in Magnitogorsk. <sup>3</sup> Both had urged him to join up and "to work where the real proletarian art is forged." <sup>4</sup> Doubtlessly tempted, Sharon nevertheless decided to put his professional

<sup>1</sup> Adolf Behne, "Die Bundesschule," *Soziale Bauwirtschaft* 10, no. 17 (1930): 376.

<sup>2</sup> Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, *Der Architekt Hannes Meyer: Anschauungen und Werk* (Berlin: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1989), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Arie Sharon, *Kibbutz + Bauhaus: An Architect's Way in a New Land* (Stuttgart: Karl Krämer; Tel Aviv: Massada Publishing, 1976), 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> Hannes Meyer in *Pravda*, October 12, 1930, cited in Winkler, *Hannes Meyer* (see note 2), 131.

experience at the service of the Zionist project – the national revival of his own people on its biblical land.

The address on the envelope of Meyer's letter places Sharon at Pinsker St. 14, Tel Aviv. This north–south street branches off from the busy Allenby Street and merges after seven hundred meters into the prominent Dizengoff Square, an icon of modern Tel Aviv that was still under construction in autumn 1937. The more southerly developments of the 1920s on Allenby, Nachlath Binjamin, Yavne, Achad Ha'am, and other streets are characterized by an eclectic mix of styles in the nineteenth-century fashion

**fig. 2** Tel Aviv, Allenby Road, corner Nachlath Binjamin, 1920s.



of the East European hometowns from which the architects and their clients had emigrated. Some were even tempted to refer to the new town on the Mediterranean (Tel Aviv was founded in 1909) by nicknames such as "Little Odessa" or "Little Warsaw." <sup>5</sup> Sharon, on his return from Berlin, had nothing but disillusioned words for what he saw: "I remember, when I came back from the Bauhaus after six years of absence, I walked through Tel Aviv, and I was depressed by its architecture. After Berlin, which in the late twenties, was the liveliest city in the world, Tel Aviv was a shock." <sup>6</sup>/figs. 1–2 The comparison was unfair. The first Jewish city in the world – endowed with its own city rights by the British Mandate for Palestine in 1923 – was only twenty-three years old at the time of Sharon's walk. In 1932, Berlin had more than four million inhabitants; Tel Aviv had sixty thousand. However, together with other "suffering colleagues," Sharon set out in the following years to transform Tel Aviv into a modern metropolis. Inspired by the Berlin association of avant-garde architects Der Ring, they founded the Chug (Ring), in which a recently immigrated, younger

<sup>5</sup> For a huge collection of contemporary descriptions of the city, see Joachim Schlör, *Tel Aviv – Vom Traum zur Stadt: Reise durch Kultur und Geschichte* (Berlin: Insel, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Sharon, *Kibbutz + Bauhaus* (see note 3), 46.

generation of Tel Aviv architects joined forces: Ze'ev Rechter and Sam Barkai, both just returned from Paris as convinced Corbusians; Carl Rubin and Joseph Neufeld, who had worked with Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin; Benjamin Chlenov, a Parisian Beaux-Arts graduate; and many more. All brought experience from within the circles of the contemporary European avant-garde. <sup>7</sup> The journalistic mouthpiece of the Chug was the magazine *Habinyan* (Building), edited by Julius Posener for some time. Posener himself arrived in Palestine in autumn 1935, and after a short interlude in Mendelsohn's Jerusalem office he settled in Tel Aviv. In his suitcase Posener had a letter from Le Corbusier, allowing him to acquire commissions in his name. In the end, however, no projects were forthcoming. <sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Pinsker St. 14 and many of the buildings in its vicinity testify to the successful assertiveness of the young architects in using a modern vocabulary that is named "Bauhaus" in Israel today.

## The Letter, Part One

Meyer's letter — written in lower case — starts with a keen interest in the work of his ex-student and in the architecture of the region:

*"dear a. sharon, while traveling through zurich recently, bella ullmann and your wife told me about the building activity of the last few years, especially yours. i would like to obtain information about what you have achieved there and would like to know whether there are any suitable professional publications."* <sup>9</sup>

The just-printed August 1937 issue of *Habinyan* would have fit the bill, but Sharon is not likely to have included it in his response to his former teacher. Published in Hebrew, the old-new language being revitalized as part of the national Jewish project in Mandatory Palestine — or, in Zionist terminology, Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel) — the issue was devoted to "Planning of Co-operative Houses" and included an editorial by Sharon. <sup>10</sup> Without question, the theme would have been of utmost interest to Meyer; it was the very topic that had turned Sharon into Meyer's disciple at the Bauhaus. <sup>11</sup> Both men shared a common interest in the alliance of agriculture and

<sup>7</sup> See Ita Heinze-Greenberg, *Europa in Palästina: Die Architekten des zionistischen Projekts 1902–1923* (Zurich: gta, 2011), 124–25. For an overview of the Jewish architects active in Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s, see Gilbert Herbert and Ita Heinze-Greenberg, "The Anatomy of a Profession: Architects in Palestine during the British Mandate," *Computers and the History of Art* 4, no. 1 (1993): 75–85.

<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier to Julius Posener, Paris, September 10, 1935, in *Julius Posener — Ein Leben in Briefen: Ausgewählte Korrespondenz 1929–1990*, eds. Matthias Schirren and Sylvia Claus (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Hannes Meyer to Arie Sharon, Geneva, September 26, 1937, Archive of Arie Sharon, <https://www.ariesharon.org/Archive/Bauhaus-and-Berlin/Letters-from-Hannes-and-Lena/i-rkRpFCp> (accessed March 7, 2019). Translated from German by the author. Sharon's first wife was Gunta Stölzl, head of the Bauhaus weaving workshop. They had a daughter, Yael. Stölzl-Sharon went to Switzerland in 1931 and, after some initial difficulties, established herself as a weaver in Zurich. The second woman mentioned in the letter, Bella Ullmann, was educated at the Bauhaus weaving workshop under Stölzl from 1929 to 1931.

<sup>10</sup> Arie Sharon, editorial for the first issue of *Habinyan: A Magazine of Architecture and Town Planning* 1 (1937): n.p.

<sup>11</sup> See also Zvi Efrat, "Arie Sharon und die Architektur des neuen Staates Israel," in *Hannes Meyers neue Bauhauslehre: Von Dessau bis Mexiko, Bauwelt Fundamente* 164, ed. Philipp Oswald (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019), 466–82.

12 See Heinze-Greenberg, *Europa in Palästina* (see note 7), esp. 159–90. The city of Basel played a major role in both the Swiss cooperative movement and the Zionist movement.

13 For further information on Konrad von Meyenburg's lectures at the Bauhaus and his early impact on Meyer, see Gregory Grämiger, "Landwirtschaft und Siedlungsbaulehre bei Konrad von Meyenburg," in *Hannes Meyers neue Bauhauslehre*, (see note 11), 316–27.

14 Arieh Sharon, notes from lectures by Hannes Meyer and Konrad von Meyenburg, Archive of Arieh Sharon, <https://www.ariesharon.org/Archive/Bauhaus-and-Berlin/Bauhaus-Materials-1927-29/i-HQqKFqg> (accessed March 7, 2019); designs for kibbutz Gan Shmuel, <https://www.ariesharon.org/Archive/Bauhaus-and-Berlin/Cooperative-Dormitory-For-A/i-BqWF49h> (accessed March 7, 2019).

15 Meyer to Sharon (see note 9).

16 For comprehensive accounts on Birobidzhan, see Vyacheslav Kostikov, *The People and Land of Birobidzhan: The Jewish Autonomous Region* (Moscow: Novosti, 1979); Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion – Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland: An Illustrated History 1928–1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Antje Kuchenbecker, *Zionismus ohne Zion – Birobidžan: Idee und Geschichte eines jüdischen Staates in Sowjet-Fernost* (Berlin: Metropol, 2000); Ber Boris Kotlerman and Smuel Yavin, eds., *Bauhaus in Birobidzhan and Eretz Israel: 80 Years of Jewish Settlement in the Far East of the USSR* (Tel Aviv: Bauhaus Center, 2008); Masha Gessen, *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Autonomous Region* (New York: Schocken, 2016).

communal forms of settlement. Meyer's cooperative housing estate Freidorf, which he had not only planned but inhabited, had been informed by theories such as the *Freilandbewegung* (freeland movement) that were equally referred to by the leaders of the Zionist movement.<sup>12</sup> This cross-fertilization had become apparent to Sharon in the courses taught by Meyer and by guest teachers such as Konrad von Meyenburg on the development of the co-op system and on the natural connections between agriculture and settlement.<sup>13</sup> Sharon would find in these courses the theoretical platform for the kibbutz model he had practiced before joining the Bauhaus. He produced meticulous transcripts of the respective lectures, and his first student works were an extended layout scheme for Gan Shmuel and a kibbutz dormitory.<sup>14</sup> During the 1930s in Tel Aviv, he would apply the co-op idea as an urban model.

## The Letter, Part Two

In the following passage from his letter, Meyer refers to the topical purpose of his writing:

*“since i got involved with the urban development organization in BIROBIDZHAN in 1933/34, i would also be interested in the character of jewish construction. are there also attempts to create a special national-jewish style? even if it were the purest kind of pretentious kitsch, i would be interested. is there a comprehensive work about the Jewish settlement and the activities of the last year, in which also the economic conditions are outlined? do you have any printed material of your own buildings? bella ullmann told me about a hospital construction?”*<sup>15</sup>

Birobidzhan was one of the major projects Meyer was engaged in during his five-year stay in the Soviet Union. As chief architect at the Moscow-based Giprogor Urban Planning Institute, he was assigned to the Eastern Siberia and Far East sectors. His involvement in Birobidzhan related directly to Josef Stalin's objectives in the USSR's second five-year plan (1933–1937): the industrialization of Siberia and the implementation of Vladimir Lenin's nationality policy. In 1928, Stalin had designated a 38,600-square-kilometer area (almost the size of Switzerland) as an autonomous Jewish settlement realm.<sup>16/fig.3</sup> The project was to serve two purposes: to give the scattered Jewish people a territory where they could settle and live largely according to their own rules; and to provide the Communist Party with the means to colonize and cultivate previously underdeveloped areas far from the center (the designated territory was 6,000 kilometers from Moscow, close to the Chinese border). Tichonkaya, a village at the intersection of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Bira and

Bidzhan Rivers, was chosen as the future capital but soon adopted the name of the entire region: Birobidzhan. At the end of May 1933, Meyer, accompanied by an economist and an engineer-architect, both Russians, traveled 197½ hours by train from Moscow to the Soviet Far East. Their commission was to draw up a development plan for the designated capital that would turn the existing small town, which had a population of about five thousand in 1933, into a city with a prospective 37,000 inhabitants, laid out in such a way as accommodate future expansion to 75,000. Meyer and his colleagues worked on the project from spring 1933



to autumn 1934, including several months spent on-site. They produced a detailed master plan for Birobidzhan based on careful studies of topography, vegetation, temperature, hydrology, and wind conditions. 17 The future architectural design of the buildings played an important role from the start. In accordance with the self-image of the Bolshevik state as a federation

fig. 3 Distances from Birobidzhan to Tel Aviv and other world cities, map by Darya Oreshkina.

of national autonomies, the character of each nation should be reflected in its cultural production. For Birobidzhan, this meant that Meyer's conception should "equally reflect the cultural greatness and distinctiveness of Jewishness and the very nature of a capital in a socialist country." 18

Ideologically, Meyer was in complete agreement with the Soviet requirements for national stylistic manifestations: "I fully approve," he wrote to Carola Bloch, "of the 'national shift' that architecture (and other cultural productions) ... must take. This is simply a political necessity in a world where 'national concerns' have become the weapon of cultural defense." 19 Meyer's extensive exploration of the designated settlement area, which was to inform, among other things, his analysis of local Jewish building traditions, led to a diagnosis similar to the one Sharon had made about Tel Aviv's jumble of styles. "With its colorful pattern map of various construction methods," Meyer observed, "the town looks more like a somewhat chaotic housing exhibition of the most diverse peoples of the earth." 20 He identified a range of building materials — "wood, reeds, straw, clay, sand, gravel, lime and limestone" — that "in the hands of the settlers" were "transformed into

17 Winkler, Hannes Meyer (see note 2), 162–63, 164–67 (for the development plans). The plans are also published in Deutsches Architekturmuseum et al., *Hannes Meyer, 1889–1954: Architekt, Urbanist, Lehrer* (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1989), 283–85. Meyer describes his journey to Birobidzhan as well as his stay there in his letters to his later wife, Lena Bergner, partly published in Hannes Meyer, *Bauen und Gesellschaft: Schriften, Briefe, Projekte*, ed. Lena Meyer-Bergner (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1980), 131–39.

18 Hannes Meyer, "Bericht einer Stadtbaubrigade," in Meyer, *Bauen und Gesellschaft* (see note 17), 139–47, here 146.

19 Hannes Meyer to Carola Bloch, Geneva, August 13, 1937, cited in Deutsches Architekturmuseum et al., *Hannes Meyer* (see note 17), 292–93, here 292.

20 Meyer, "Bericht" (see note 18), 143.

21 Ibid. For Russian, Hebrew, and English translations of the entire report, see Kotlerman and Yavin, *Bauhaus in Birobidzhan* (see note 16), 30–36, 98–111.

fig. 4 Street in Birobidzhan. Photograph by Hannes Meyer, 1933.

the blockhouse construction of Latvian or Belarussian Jews or into the two-story clay brick construction of the Reichs-German Jew, depending on their origin.”<sup>21</sup> As solid as his research and analysis was, he remained at a loss as to how to define a mutual stylistic denominator that could reflect Jewish identity on the basis of national tradition. **fig. 4**

The question of how the Jewish nation would express itself played an equally important role for the Zionist project in the Levant: Where to find common ground, a collectively shared platform for the founding of a new homeland? During the 1910s and 1920s, the Zionist discourse engaged in several controversial positions but ultimately focused on two polarizing approaches, Occidental or Oriental, each fostered by a competing ideological orientation: political Zionism and cultural Zionism. Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau intended to transport European culture to Asia. Achad Ha'am and Martin Buber, on the other hand, had hoped for an inner cultural renaissance of the Jewish nation through contact with the land of its forefathers. While the revitalization of the Hebrew language had tied in to the Jews' Semitic tradition and thus harmoniously combined national goals with integration into the region's linguistic family, an equally satisfying solution was missing in respect of architectural vocabulary. There were simply no role models of traditional Hebrew architecture that would differentiate the Zionists' architectural vocabulary from that of its Semitic-Arab neighbors. The idea of linking to an own past in the "Old New Land" through a reception of Arab culture, an approach advocated by a group of Jewish artists and architects, was commonly rejected, as it would have amounted to a new assimilation.<sup>22</sup>



22 The phrase "Old New Land" refers to a novel of the same title in which Theodor Herzl outlines his concept for a future Palestine under Jewish control. The novel was originally published in German as *Altneuland* (Leipzig: Seemann Nachfolger, 1902). For a discourse on Hebrew style, see Heinze-Greenberg, *Europa in Palästina* (see note 7), esp. 148–53.

23 For a linguistic and philosophical differentiation of the terms *origin* and *beginning*, see the studies of Emil Angehrn; in particular, *Die Frage nach dem Ursprung: Philosophie zwischen Ursprungsdenken und Ursprungskritik* (Munich: Fink, 2007), 23–29.

The 1930s brought about a realignment of the architectural discourse. The needle of the Zionist compass, which previously had pointed to the past, was now oriented toward the future. The myth of the origin was replaced by the pathos of a new beginning.<sup>23</sup> The new direction was triggered by the immigration of young professionals from Europe who carried the tool kits and mindsets of modernism in their luggage. Among them were many architects who had just graduated from the various technical universities in Europe, including the Bauhaus. They set about making Tel Aviv into an international metropolis, applying what would



eventually be coined “International Style.” It fit well with Zionist practices, matching closely with the multi-geocultural origins of its immigrants while also serving as a common formal denominator. The unconditional rationale of modern architecture provided a suitable projec-

**fig. 5** Arie Sharon, cooperative housing on Frishman Street, Tel Aviv, 1934–1936. Photograph by Itzhak Kalter.

tion screen for the “New Hebrew,” which had to be extracted or re-created out of the diversity of Jews who had immigrated from the diaspora. The *tabula rasa* attitude of the Neues Bauen accommodated the Zionist idea of a national new beginning from point zero by leveling the various preexisting identity models and fostering a general alignment. The “White City” of Tel Aviv, created by Sharon and his colleagues during the 1930s, stands for a lack of history turned into a virtue. The very idea of tradition-less novelty became the essence of the city’s urban character and a symbol for a national new beginning. <sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the *tabula rasa* stance seems to contradict the geohistorically founded Zionist claim of a return to the land of ancestors. But here, too, modern architecture proved to be operable. The flat-roofed, white cubic buildings of the twentieth-century architects were indebted to the enduring vernacular building culture of the Mediterranean region and thus transported notions of timeless duration and belonging. Posener liked to hint at the fortunate coincidence that connected the new immigrants from Germany and Central Europe with the Neues Bauen in Eretz Yisrael. He meant that between Jews and modernism, both loathed by the Nazis, something like a mutual declaration of solidarity was emerging in a new homeland. And the modern architecture of Mandatory Palestine appeared, like the migrants, as if it was making a return from Europe to its land of origin, to its Mediterranean roots. In that way Posener also explained the broad acceptance of classical modernity among the new Jewish immigrants. <sup>25</sup> Modern architecture in Tel Aviv seemed to display Janus-like qualities. Situated at point zero, it gestured toward both the past and the future and thus referred to both place and time, origin and new beginning. **fig. 5**

Sharon’s 1935 co-op building block in Tel Aviv was an example par excellence of the architectural style that successfully established itself for the Zionist project in Mandatory Palestine. However, it could hardly provide a useful answer to Meyer’s burning

<sup>24</sup> Ita Heinze-Greenberg, “Zionistische Architektur zwischen Moderne und Traditionalismus,” in *Exil und Architektur: Kulturtransfer und architektonische Emigration von 1930–1950*, ed. Bernd Nicolai (Trier: Porta Alba, 2003), 87–100. For a literary studies perspective, see Barbara E. Mann, *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Author’s recollection of conversations with Julius Posener between 1980 and 1994.



26 For a fictional answer to Meyer's question that is both witty and informative, see Zvi Efrat, "Is There Such a Thing as Jewish Architecture?" in *Israel*, special issue, *bauhaus 2* (2011): 15–16.

27 Winkler, Hannes Meyer (see note 2), 156.

28 See Hannes Meyer, "Der Architekt im Klassenkampf," in *Schweizer Städtebauer bei den Sowjets* (1932–1935), eds. Hans Schmidt and Hannes Meyer (Baden: Lars Müller, 1990), 24–30, here 25.

29 Heinrich Heine, "Gesändnisse: Geschrieben im Winter 1854," in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 6.1, ed. Klaus Briegleb (Munich: Hanser, 1975), 443–501, here 483.

30 Zvi Gitelman, "Introduction," in Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion* (see note 16), 12–26.

31 Mordkhe Schaechter, "Yiddish Language Modernization and Lexical Elaboration," in *Language Reform: History and Future*, vol. 3, eds. István Fodor and Claude Hagège (Hamburg: Buske, 1984), 191–218, here 195–96.

32 Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion* (see note 16), 33.

question, which remained unanswered. 26 His interest "in the character of Jewish construction" that might be applicable to the contemporary Soviet Union was directed to an existing or revived national tradition. Edifices in the wake of the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau or the Bundesschule in Bernau would have been criticized in Moscow as abstract, cold, soulless, inhuman. 27 Meyer accounted his own conforming development from functionalist to proletarian architect as personal progress. He saw his earlier rejection of artistry at the Bauhaus as a relic of a collapsing bourgeois-capitalist society, and he welcomed his new access to art at the service of the masses. 28 His request for examples "even if [they] were the purest kind of pretentious kitsch" was meant seriously – for the sake of the collective will. Yet, identifying an indigenous artistic expression that could be instrumentalized for the goals of Stalin's nationality policy proved difficult in the case of the Jews. The "People of the Book," whose history in the Russian Empire as elsewhere had been for centuries repeatedly marked by forced exoduses, had hardly had time to build firm houses, let alone develop their own architectural style. The ethnic identity of the Jews in the diaspora was preserved solely by the Holy Scripture, which contained all that was fundamental for sustaining national existence: history, myths, and laws. Heinrich Heine thus aptly had coined the Torah the "portative fatherland" of the Jews. 29

In Stalin's Jewish enterprise, as in the case of the Zionist project, the determination of the national language had been a matter of quick settlement. In contrast to Eretz Yisrael, in Birobidzhan the old struggle between Hebrew and Yiddish was won by the latter. The decision was based on a mutual agreement between the Communist Party and its Jewish representatives. Yiddish was deemed to be the voice of the "afflicted masses," while Hebrew was considered to be the language of the "class enemy" – the bourgeoisie, Zionists, religious orthodoxy – and thus declared illegal. 30 Yiddish, an East European vernacular based on German with Hebrew elements and strong Slavic coloring, connected its speakers to the Soviet realm in much the same way as Hebrew connected the Jewish immigrants in Palestine to the Semitic linguistic family of the Middle East. Yet, other than Hebrew, Yiddish had been the living everyday language of the East European Jewry since the early Middle Ages. 31

The establishment of a Jewish homeland rooted in Yiddish and committed to socialist principles was, apart from being the USSR's effort to solve its Jewish question, decidedly conceived as an alternative to the Zionist project in Mandatory Palestine. 32 Both homeland ventures drew successfully on language as a common

denominator of national identity, each opting for a site-specific solution. Yet, the world's two Jewish state projects differed fundamentally in their goals and their means, starting with the crucial fact that the one in the Middle East was launched from bottom up, while the development of its counterpart in the Soviet Far East was dictated from above. The final goal of the Birobidzhan enterprise was total integration of the Jews into the Soviet federation. In this, it followed the logic of Lenin, who had condemned discrimination against Jews and ordered assimilation in the belief that without Jews there could not be a Jewish problem.<sup>33</sup> With a few exceptions, which advocated the integration of the Jewish state into a Semitic Commonwealth, the Zionist answer to the Jewish question came from a basically anti-assimilationist stance.<sup>34</sup> It advocated a self-expression that would clearly distinguish itself from the neighboring Arab countries. *figs. 6–7*

Tel Aviv and Birobidzhan, in a sense the founding capitals of two state projects, both share the myth of a zero point. The soil in which their foundations were laid — sand on the Mediterranean coast, mud on the banks of the Bira — is described in both cases as precarious ground for the construction of buildings,



thus invoking the topos of the difficult beginning and its mastery by the heroic work of pioneers. At both locations, architecture was discursively integrated into the process of national identity formation and tasked with launching groundbreaking sociopolitical processes. And in both locations, diametrically opposed international and national values were fused. In Tel Aviv the International Style was used to promote the national alignment of immigrants from various countries. In Birobidzhan a stylistic solution was sought to express the

federal structure of the Bolshevik state, which defined itself as international in spirit and national in structure.

<sup>33</sup> Zvi Gitelman, "Introduction," in Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion* (see note 16), 12–26, here 18.

<sup>34</sup> On the exceptions, see Erich Mendelsohn, "Palestine and the World of Tomorrow" (1940), in Erich Mendelsohn — *Gedankenwelten: Unbekannte Texte zu Architektur, Kulturgeschichte und Politik*, eds. Ita Heinze-Greenberg and Regina Stephan (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 144–53.

**fig. 6** Poster celebrating the establishment of a Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan, as decided by the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, 1933.

## The Letter, Part Three

Meyer concludes his letter to Sharon with indications that he has not yet ruled out a return to the Soviet Union:

*"if other bauhäuslers are in your vicinity, please give them my regards. from time to time i could send you some material about building + architecture from the USSR if you expect a counter service. i can probably be reached at this address in Geneva until spring 1938.*

*are there also attempts in the field of painting and sculpture? with best regards from lena and me. hannes meyer"* <sup>35</sup>

When Meyer wrote the letter, the commission for a children's home in Mümliswil was on his desk. However, Switzerland did not offer a long-term option for him at the time. A month earlier, he had complained in a letter to Bloch about the harassment of Jews in Zurich and the smearing of Nazi symbols

on the facade of the Bern synagogue. <sup>36</sup> Above all, the increasing reports of the persecution of Jews in Germany made the Birobidzhan project appear more topical than ever for Meyer. Before returning to Switzerland in early 1936, he had spoken on Soviet city planning and architecture during an extensive lecture tour through Czechoslovakia. Since that country was an important exile destination for Jewish refugees from Germany, he had used the example of the Jewish autonomous republic of Birobidzhan when describing Lenin's nationality policy. The

twenty-two stops of his tour started with an event in Prague, to which the Society of Friends of Birobidzhan had invited him. <sup>37</sup> By the mid-1930s, thousands of Russian Jews and several hundred Jews from other countries had moved to the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Soviet Far East. Meyer's master plan for its capital was largely used as a blueprint for its urban development. Birobidzhan was granted town status in 1937. By then, the number

<sup>35</sup> Meyer to Sharon (see note 9).

**fig.7** Poster, *Eretz Yisrael*, by Franz Krausz, 1934.

<sup>36</sup> Hannes Meyer to Carola Bloch, Geneva, August 13, 1937, cited in Deutsches Architekturmuseum et al., *Hannes Meyer* (see note 17), 292–93, here 293.



<sup>37</sup> Winkler, *Hannes Meyer* (see note 2), 178.

of Jewish inhabitants in Stalin's Zion had reached 20,000, about one-fifth of its total population. <sup>38</sup> Before a Jewish architectural style could be found or invented, however, let alone be implemented in Birobidzhan, the Stalinist purges started.

Yiddish-language activists began disappearing in Moscow first. By 1937, when Meyer wrote his letter to Sharon, the Great Terror had reached the Soviet Far East. Joseph Liberberg, a scholar of Yiddish culture and head of the Birobidzhan regional executive committee, was among the first to be arrested. He had promoted Jewish settlement in the region, which he hoped could be developed into an all-Soviet Jewish cultural and academic center. He was executed on 9 March 1937 on charges of bourgeois nationalism. Further arrests and executions followed. The Jews of Birobidzhan were targeted for the very reasons they had moved to the region: national values and their own language. In 1938, Klaus Meumann, Antonin Urban, Béla Scheffler, and Philipp Tolziner, four of the seven Bauhäuslers who had gone to Moscow with Meyer, were arrested, taken to the notorious Lubyanka Prison, and charged with "espionage." Whereas his three friends were killed, Tolziner, after torture and a blackmailed "confession," was sent to a work and re-education camp for ten years. <sup>39</sup> In February 1938, the former Bauhaus secretary, Margarete Mengel, who had followed Meyer to the Soviet Union, was arrested on suspicion of spying. She was executed a few months later. <sup>40</sup> Stalin's purges would profoundly affect Birobidzhan, which in the end was destined to become "one of the world's two Jewish states — the one where the Jews did not live." <sup>41</sup>

**38** The percentage of Jewish inhabitants never exceeded one-third of Birobidzhan's population. After the great migration wave of Soviet Jews to Israel in the 1990s, the percentage of Jews in the Birobidzhan oblast fell to below 1 percent. See Zvi Gitelman, "Former Soviet Union," *American Jewish Yearbook* 102 (2002): 480–89, here 486.

**39** Winfried Nerdinger, "Philipp Tolziner: Lebenswege eines Münchner Bauhäuslers," *Münchner Beiträge zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur* 6, no. 2 (2012): 55–61, here 59–60.

**40** "Mengel, Margarethe," in Bundestiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur, *Biographische Datenbanken*, <https://www.bundestiftung-aufarbeitung.de/wer-war-wer-in-der-ddr-%2363%3B-1424.html?ID=4772> (accessed March 12, 2019).

**41** Gessen, *Where the Jews Aren't* (see note 16), 8. For information on Birobidzhan's further development, see Frank Grüner, *Patrioten und Kosmopoliten: Juden im Sowjetstaat 1941–1953* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), esp. 316–25.