TO: Area Directors

FROM: S. Andhil Fineberg

SUBJECT: Birobidzhan in the News

January 14, 1959

In the attached item, which appeared in the New York Times January 11, disclosure was made of a projected "large-scale movement of Soviet Jews in Birobidzhan." As you probably know, Birobidzhan (or Birobizjan) is an area of about 14,000 square miles, over 5,000 miles from Moscow, in the Far Eastern Province of the USSR, close to the Chinese border, which was declared in 1928 to be an Autonomous Jewish Region. Its capital, also known as Birobidzhan, is 120 miles from the nearest large city. The area is a desolate, remote spot, where Jews are in no way indigenous and where no cultural or other ties have been established which would attract them.

The fact that plans for moving a great number of Jews to Birobidzhan are contemplated, and may be announced at the Soviet Communist Party Congress in January, has come through confidential sources to The American Jewish Committee. Though labelled "voluntary," this migration would be forced by various indirect means easily available to the government of the Soviet Union, since there is nothing to attract Jews to that bleak wilderness.

CONFIDENTIALLY, let me inform you that the AJC has been trying to take this matter up with Anastas Mikoyan and with the Russian Ambassador in Washington, in order to discourage this proposal on terms that would not involve open attack on the USSR. Thus far, no appointment has been obtainable. A week ago the Christian Science Monitor conveyed to its public information furnished by Judd Teller, which opened the subject. The AJC therefore provided this information to the New York Times.

It may well be that what would be, in effect, the exiling of a great many Jews to Birobidzhan cannot be prevented. The only way that this calamity might be averted is apparently to put the USSR on notice before the world that this action will be known and that it will draw censure from all civilized people. CONFIDENTIALLY, statements of the presidents of The American Jewish Committee, the Anglo-Jewish Association and the Alliance Israelite Universelle are ready for release in their respective countries. In the event that private negotiations are refused or fail, these statements will be given in the press. If the American statement is to go out, we shall try to apprise you in advance in order to obtain greater coverage locally.

Encl.
Jews' resettling by Soviet is seen

U. S. Group Says Moscow May Develop Birobidzhan Under 7-Year Plan

By IRVING SPIEGEL

A large-scale movement of Soviet Jews to Birobidzhan in Siberia may be proposed to the Soviet Communist party congress opening Jan. 27 in Moscow, according to the American Jewish Committee.

The agency expressed concern over "the future of Soviet Jews.

The committee, which has had access to information on developments concerning Jews behind the Iron Curtain, has received information from its Paris office indicating that such a proposal will be made.

The congress in Moscow will be concerned primarily with the adoption of the Seven-Year Plan for 1959-65, which provides for further economic development of Soviet Asia.

The committee said that within this framework the congress would deliberate on a working plan for the resettlement of Jews in the so-called Jewish autonomous region of Birobidzhan.

The committee cited Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev's statement last year that Jews were excessively individualistic and unwilling to participate in collective work.

This was followed by sudden publicity in the Soviet press in praise of Birobidzhan, where Jews were said to live a normal life and to enjoy their Jewish identity.

Birobidzhan was established by the Soviet Union in 1928, primarily as a Soviet alternative to Palestine for those Jews wishing a Jewish homeland. However, the number of Jews who moved to Birobidzhan was never more than a small fraction of the 3,000,000 Jews in the Soviet Union.

Many of those who did migrate left again, deterred by the climate and the primitive living conditions. Birobidzhan now has a population of about 150,000, of whom about 40,000 are Jews.

According to the information obtained by the American Jewish Committee, the plan for the revival of Birobidzhan could take three possible courses:

First, a larger Jewish settlement than the present one, but still only a token settlement.

This would enable the Soviet rulers to declare the Jewish population of the Soviet Union "wherever they may reside" as members of a "territorial nationality," and on that basis "to deny them their cultural and other rights outside of Birobidzhan." Jews in the Soviet Union are regarded as a nationality or ethnic group rather than a religious community.

Second, the forced mass resettlement of Jews to Birobidzhan.

Third, "Birobidzhan would officially be made available to the Jewish population as a Jewish territory, and various means of indirect inducement would be applied to the Jews to settle there.

According to the report, "what is involved in the situation is the reappearance in Soviet life of a Jewish pale of settlement, a vast official Soviet ghetto."