Preface

A year and a half before his arrest in Moscow, and three years before his tragic death in a labor camp hospital not far from the Arctic Circle, one of the most significant Soviet Jewish writers and, perhaps, one of the most studied today, Der Nister (Pinkhas Kahanovitsh/Kaganovich, 1884–1950), made a trip to Birobidzhan, the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) in the Soviet Far East. He traveled there on a special migrant train, together with a thousand Jewish Holocaust survivors, mostly from the Ukraine. This trip, made in the summer of 1947, is a rather well-known historical fact, usually portrayed in biographical essays about Der Nister as one of the significant events in his life. “Now, after the Holocaust, Der Nister viewed himself as being obligated to raise his voice in matters he had kept away from previously,” the prominent scholar of Yiddish literature Khone Shmeruk wrote about the writer’s journey.¹ However, what, in fact, had Der Nister wanted to say?

In February 2009, I found myself in Kibbutz Merhaviva in the Galilee as a guest of Shalom Luria (who, unfortunately, has since passed away), the keen adept and translator of Der Nister from Yiddish into Hebrew. It was Shalom who asked the question above. He then proposed that I take it upon myself to “look the writer in the face” in this matter and publish my findings in the scholarly journal he edited.² During the second half of the 1940s, for a short period, the Soviet authorities enabled a renewal of mass Jewish resettlement in Birobidzhan.³

1 Hone Shmeruk, “Der Nister: hayav u-yetsirato,” in Der Nister, *Hanazir ve-bagdiya: sipurim, shirim, maamarim* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1963), 46.

2 It was a Haifa University journal, *Hulyot/Ringen*, dedicated to Yiddish literature and its ties with Hebrew literature, which was folded after Luria’s death in 2011.

3 For the scholarly books devoted exclusively to the project, see Ya’akov Lvavi (Babitski), *Hahityashvut bayehudit be-Birobidzhan* (Jerusalem: Historical Society of Israel, 1965), Robert Weinberg, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making*

My family was among those directly affected by this development, and so it had always attracted my interest as a topic for research. I was not as interested in the factual aspects of the episode (which are still far from being well known) as in the spiritual quests of those who participated in it. Der Nister, with his characteristic pathos, called these quests a matter of striving for “consolidation of the Jewish people” and “reconstruction of the broken wholeness.” The settlers themselves looked upon their move more simply. Thus, in my family there is a story about my grandfather on my father’s side (a former Red Army soldier whose first wife and small son were killed in a Nazi action) suddenly deciding to “go away *tsu undzerike* [to our own people]” after someone complained loudly in his presence that it was too bad that not all [the Jews] were killed.

Gradually I began to collect material. Apart from the travel notes written by Der Nister himself,⁴ and by the Yiddish newspaper *Eynikayt* correspondent Ilia Lumkis, who was traveling on the same train with the writer,⁵ two other items were available to illuminate those distant events with especial vividness and brilliance. One item was the reminiscences of the poet Isroel Emiot, whose manuscript I found, thanks to the prompting of Mordechai Altshuler of the Hebrew University, in the store rooms of the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem.⁶ The other item was the memoirs of the

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), and Ber Kotlerman, *In Search of Milk and Honey: The Theater of “Soviet Jewish Statehood” (1934–49)* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2009). See also the special issue on Birobidžan of *Jews in Eastern Europe* 3, no. 49 (2002).

4 See below in this book.

5 Ilya Lyumkis, *Eshelonon geyen keyn Birobidžan* (Moscow: Der Emes, 1948).

6 Emiot’s manuscript no. 544 from the collection of documents of the Israeli governmental liaison organization “Nativ” is held in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem (hereinafter: Emiot, CAHJP). The manuscript is much more detailed than its published version, Yisroel Emiot, *Der birobidžaner inyen (khronik fun a groyliker tsayt)* (Rochester, NY: Sol Bogorad, 1960), and than its English translation, Israel Emiot, *The Birobidžan Affair: A Yiddish Writer in Siberia* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

poet Yosef Kerler.⁷ It seems that these two poets were among the persons closest to Der Nister during the time of his Birobidzhan tour. Their highly emotional approach helped me greatly to “look the writer in the face” more intently.

Then, when I received an invitation to speak at the Der Nister conference to be held at Oxford’s St. Hilda’s College in August 2012, I became seriously involved. Preparing my paper,⁸ I reread once again the materials of Investigation Case No. 68, conducted by the Khabarovsk Directorate of the USSR Ministry of State Security (MGB) in 1949–50, where the name of Der Nister is mentioned more than once. These materials were given to me by Mikhael Zozulya, a doctoral student at the Bar Ilan University’s Center of Yiddish Studies. He did so at the request of Mark Miller, now deceased, son of one of the figures implicated in the case. In the mid-1990s, not long before immigrating to Israel, Mark got the opportunity to look at the case’s documents in the former archives of the KGB in Khabarovsk and to photocopy that part of them concerning his father, the Birobidzhan Yiddish writer Buzi Miller. From the six bulky volumes of the investigation, Mark chose about one hundred pages. He did not limit himself to records of the investigations of his father exclusively, but he made an effort to take a more or less representative sample, including documents touching upon other persons involved in the case, such as the Yiddish writers Heshl Rabinkov, Luba Vasserman, Ber Slutski, and Isroel Emiot, the Yiddish theater actor Faivish Arones, and the JAR Regional Executive Committee Resettlement Department employee Shimen Siniavski-Sindelevich. They were all arrested in July–October 1949 and sentenced in absentia by the Special Council of the USSR MGB on May 31, 1950, in Moscow to ten years in labor camp.

7 Yoysef Kerler, “Der Nister (1884–1950),” in *Geklibene proze (eseyen, zikhroynes, dertseylungen)* (Jerusalem: Yerusholaymer almanakh, 1991), 109–24.

8 For the abridged version of the paper, see Kotlerman, “We Are Lacking ‘A Man Dieth in a Tent’: Der Nister’s Search for Redemption in the Summer of 1947,” in *Uncovering the Hidden: The Works and Life of Der Nister*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh, Kerstin Hoge, and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2014), 174–84. The editors of this collection organized the abovementioned conference.

By a malicious twist of fate, just several days after the pronouncement of this sentence, Der Nister died in a special camp for political prisoners, located in the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, about fifty kilometers from the Arctic Circle. However, his name continued to appear in trials that ensnared other Birobidzhaners, including figures active in Jewish culture and former public leaders of the JAR. In the very beginning of 1956, all the accused in the “Birobidzhan Affair” were released from prison ahead of schedule and later restored (rehabilitated in Soviet terminology) to the state of acquittal. Two of the accused, the writer Ber Slutski and the former chairman of the JAR Regional Executive Committee, Mikhail Levitin, died before their release.

The publication of the materials of the Khabarovsk investigation available to us is important in itself, especially in light of the fact that the stenograph of a similar *nepravednyi sud* (“unjust trial,” to use Vladimir Naumov’s phrase) has been published, that is, the stenograph of the notorious Moscow trial, known as the “Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee’s Case,” in which charges were brought against the Yiddish writers David Bergelson, Perets Markish, David Hofshstein, Itsik Fefer, Leib Kvitko, and others.⁹ And if, in the latter case, we are dealing with statements made by the accused during the actual court proceedings, then the Khabarovsk materials enable us to gain insight into how the pretrial preparations for similar cases were conducted. The obviously fabricated character of the “Birobidzhan Affair,” which became one of the elements in the anti-Semitic campaign orchestrated in the USSR in 1948–53, cannot be demonstrated today with any greater clarity. The investigators acted brutally in their efforts to break the spirit of the accused, using various types of physical coercion, such as punishment cells and nighttime interrogations. Today, in the court of history, the “confessions” and mutual recriminations beaten out of these exhausted,

9 Vladimir Naumov, ed., *Nepravednyi sud: poslednii stalinskii rasstrel: Stenogramma sudebnogo protsessa nad chlenami Evreiskogo antifashistskogo komiteta* (Moscow: Nauka, 1994); also Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov, eds., *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press/The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001).

intimidated, and humiliated persons—who, with their last bit of strength, resisted the pressure being put upon them, and sometimes even managed to compel their inquisitors to change tactics—by no means reflect badly upon them. They reflect, rather, the inhumanity and cruelty of the Stalinist system, which tried to conceal its immorality behind a farcical imitation of legality, and in doing so spawned a countless multitude of innocent victims. The records of the interrogations of the Birobidzhaners have also a clearly anti-Semitic tone that underlines all the more distinctly the perversity of that system, whose prosecutors turned both the leading cultural figures of the “Soviet Jewish Statehood” (the regime’s own creation) and Jewish culture in general into outlaws. Furthermore, this was done at a time when the Holocaust and the war against Nazi Germany were fresh and painful memories. It is not necessary to look for any signs of guilt in the figures interrogated. Peter Maggs of the University of Illinois, an expert on Soviet law, expresses this conclusion forcefully and concisely when giving his evaluation of the procedure followed in the arrest and sentencing of Der Nister. He writes, “These documents certainly do not tell the truth, let alone the whole truth . . . because they are based on what George Orwell called ‘THE BIG LIE.’”¹⁰

The materials of Investigation Case No. 68 reveal that Der Nister was cynically chosen by the MGB investigators to play the fabricated role of organizer and catalyst sent by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee to set up what the MGB called the “anti-Soviet nationalist grouping in Birobidzhan”—whose existence the investigation ostensibly aimed to prove. However, these materials not only reflect the jesuitical character of the criminal charges brought against the Birobidzhaners connected with Der Nister. Directly and indirectly they also reveal many details about Der Nister’s acts while in Birobidzhan, and give some glimpses of his conception of a postwar Jewish renaissance. The writer formulated this vision more clearly in his previously unknown notes (called herein “Birobidzhan Manifesto”), the last that have reached us from

10 Peter B. Maggs, *The Mandelstam and “Der Nister” Files: An Introduction to Stalin-era Prison and Labor Camp Records* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 3.

Der Nister's creative legacy, which are being discussed for the first time in this book. Without the territory the Jews could call their own, Der Nister said, the Jewish people were like "a soul without a body or a body without a soul, and in either case, always a cripple."¹¹

The materials relating to Investigation Case No. 68 are valuable in their own right, both as a vivid example of state-supported anti-Jewish policy in the USSR in the late 1940s to the early 1950s and as a companion piece to the materials relating to the "JAFK Case."¹² At the base of this book, however, lies the contextualization of these materials in connection with Der Nister, in particular, and this dictated the work's structure.

Part One, with the writer's 1947 trip to the JAR as its background, is devoted to a historical and literary analysis of Der Nister's writings, thoughts, and real deeds in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Also included in Part One is a complete translation of Der Nister's impressions of his journey on the migrants' train, which became a literary memorial to the postwar Jewish migration to Birobidzhan.

Part Two concentrates on the formulation of the charges against Der Nister and the Birobidzhan Yiddish writers associated with him. It includes the translation of fourteen records of interrogations, testimonies, and confrontations, along with several accompanying documents. In addition, a photocopy of Der Nister's "Birobidzhan Manifesto" in the original Yiddish is presented as an appendix to the book.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to all the people who helped me in this project. I thank first of all Shalom Luria, z"l, for his proposal to "look the writer in the face," and Yaacov Ro'i of Tel Aviv University for encouraging me to study the postwar resettlement in Birobidzhan as a whole. Special thanks are due to the Yiddish writer Mishe Lev, z"l, and to the composer Sergo Bengelsdorf, son of the

11 Der Nister, "Birobidzhan," Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 3121, op. 1, d. 32. See Appendix, 255.

12 For the connection between the two cases, see Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust, and Stalinism: A Documented History of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg: Harwood, 1995), 150.

poetess Luba Vasserman, the only witnesses of Der Nister's trip with whom I had occasion to talk, for sharing with me their valuable recollections, and also to Mark Miller, z"l, without whom the records of the Birobidzhaners' interrogations in the prison cells of the Khabarovsk MGB would never have reached us. I thank Mikhael Zozulya for copying the interrogation records and Ekaterina Melnik for typesetting them on the computer; Aleksandr Frenkel, director of the St. Petersburg Jewish Community Center, for the help he rendered in working with the materials of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg; Vera Knorring, archivist of the Russian National Library's Yiddish collection; Mordechai Altshuler of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for supplying information about Isroel Emiot; Zvi Mark of Bar Ilan University, for consultations on questions of Hasidism; Daniela Osatsky-Shtern, director of the archive of the Mordechai Anielewicz Memorial Holocaust Study and Research Center in Givat Haviva, for help in working with the Shlomo Perlmutter collection; Arkadi Zeltser, director of Yad Vashem's Center for Research on the History of Soviet Jews during the Holocaust, for help in working with Yad Vashem's archives; Anna Sorokina, teacher at the Moscow "Poly-Cultural Center," for help in working with the Der Nister collection at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow; and to the English translators, Irwin Michael Aronson of Raanana, Shifra Blass of Neve-Tsuf, and Sara Davolt of Kfar HaNassi. I also thank the patient archivists and other employees of the National Library of Israel and the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, the Bar Ilan University's Wurzweiler Central Library, the Mehlmann Library at the Tel Aviv University's Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, the Oral History Division of the Hebrew University's Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem, the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, the State Regional Museum of Local History and Lore in Birobidzhan, and the State Archive of the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan, the Documentation Department of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and the YIVO Institute in New York. Special thanks are due to the Academic Studies Press staff and the editor of the

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Ber Kotlerman