A Fool and His Gold
Representing Soviet Jewishness in Vladimir Korsh-Sablin's *Seekers of Happiness* (1936)

Saskia Heyn
University of Basel

Abstract: From 1917 onward, cinema as a medium occupied a position of considerable privilege in the Soviet Union. In the 1920s and 1930s, it saw increasing degrees of state regulation as well as the imposition of Socialist Realist standards as the government used film to further its agenda. Vladimir Korsh-Sablin's *Seekers of Happiness* (1936) is an excellent example of a Socialist Realist work. Despite this, it is absent from cinema readers and cinema dictionaries, leaving the intersection between its narrative choices and its historical context uncharted. *Seekers of Happiness* makes use of the antisemitic "Wandering Jew" and "*luftmensch*" stereotypes in its depiction and productivises these stereotypes: the "Wandering Jew" becomes rooted in the fabric of a collective farm, and the "*luftmensch*" is given concrete tasks with tangible outcomes. The film is more than a product designed for mass entertainment – it is a translation of Soviet policy onto the silver screen. This article considers *Seekers of Happiness* within the historical framework of its development as part of a Kremlin campaign aimed at encouraging Jewish migration to Birobidzhan oblast, as well as its aim to provide a model for "good" Soviet Jewry and, as such, a reflection of Soviet policy towards the Jewish population at the time. Additionally, the film argues in favour of secularisation as well as intermarriage between different nationalities or races, both of which are considered forms of assimilation and integration into the broader Soviet project.

1. Introduction: The Birobidzhan Project

> From many parts of the Soviet Union and from abroad, Jewish migrants from among the working people made their way in 1928 to the Soviet Far East, to the broad rich Taiga, to Birobidzhan that lay along the banks of the Amur River.[1]

The Jewish Autonomous Oblast of Birobidzhan was established by government decree in 1928. Located in the Soviet Far East, approximately eight thousand kilometres from Moscow, it was conceived as a secular socialist counterpart to a potential Jewish state in Palestine. The Zionist movement had been outlawed in the Soviet Union under Lenin, and in 1927 the decision was made to "turn Jewish nationalist longings to the advantage of Russia" in the form of an agricultural colony in Birobidzhan.[2] The Jewish population was told that "Zionism […] was a tool of British imperialism, while the Biro-Bidzhan [sic] scheme was a means of meeting the great […] need" of stabilization in the form of a "territorially-rooted nationality."[3]

At the time the Soviet Union was founded, no Jewish nation state existed (Israel was not founded until 1948, three years after the end of the Second World War), but nationalist voices among the diaspora were increasingly pushing for one. Francine Hirsch defines diaspora nationalities as those who were "connected to nation states or large ethnic communities […] outside the Soviet Union."[4] Soviet Jews formed one such group, although they did not have anything resembling a national territory of their

---

[1] *Seekers of Happiness*. DVD. The National Center for Jewish Film, 2007 [1936], 00:03:13. Translations given in quotations are lifted from the subtitles of this edition, they are not my own.

[2] Eckman, Lester Samuel. "Soviet Policies towards the Jews: From Lenin to Stalin." Essay. In *Austria – Hungary – Poland – Russia*, ed. Herbert A. Strauss, 1325-1341. Vol. 2 of *Hostages of Modernization*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 1993. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110883299.1325, p. 1333.

[3] Eckman, "Soviet Policies towards the Jews," 1333.

[4] Hirsch, Francine. "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics." *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 30-43. https://www.jstor.com/stable/2696979.

own, either within the framework of the Soviet Union or outside of it. Birobidzhan was meant to be the solution to this: "Komzet leaders," i.e., those responsible for establishing new Jewish kolkhozes throughout the USSR, "effectively used nationalist arguments in their appeals to Jews and sought to undermine the powerful Zionist sentiment among the Jewish masses by proposing an alternate homeland in Russia itself."[5] The underlying idea was that by providing Soviet Jews with a national territory, they would integrate more easily and more completely into the Soviet state. Unlike many of its contemporaries, the Soviet government pursued a policy of incorporation rather than assimilation regarding its Jewish minority. Birobidzhan was this policy made manifest, as it provided – at least in theory – a means to integrate a Jewish population into a Soviet system.

From its conception, the Birobidzhan project was riddled with problems. It was "not born of Jewish initiative," and faced strong opposition from various Komzet leaders who argued that "the climate was too harsh, the soil unsuitable for cultivation, and the area too far from the centres of Jewish population."[6] Despite being pushed as a Jewish homeland, the territory never had a Jewish majority population, and initial harvests were abysmally poor due to flooding and inclement weather. How, then, does a government convince its citizens to move to such a place?

The answer lies with mass media presenting Birobidzhan as a promised land. *Seekers of Happiness*, directed by Vladimir Korsh-Sablin and released in 1936, follows a Jewish family as they move to a collective farm in Birobidzhan from an unspecified region abroad. While most of the film's characters take to life at the kolkhoz like ducks to water, Pinya, the son-in-law, is a schemer who struggles to adjust to his new situation. *Seekers of Happiness* is a propagandistic film and, as such, provides an excellent means of analysing how a party program could be made palatable to a large group of people.

[5] Eckman, "Soviet Policies towards the Jews," 1333.
[6] Levin, Nora. "Birobidzhan 1928-40." Essay. In *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917* 1, 1:282-311. New York, London: New York University Press, 1988, p. 285.

The film functions in simple terms – at its core lie dichotomies of old versus young, capitalist versus socialist, good versus evil, all easily comprehensible:

> *Seekers of Happiness* presented Soviet Jews from an ideal perspective. The traditional Jewish identity was represented by the older generation, namely, Roza's [sic] mother who opposes the intermarriage at the end of the film. The 'positive' Jew sings optimistic songs, as a clarinettist plays, pessimistically, "The Lament of Israel on the Banks of the Amur."[7]

Although it is a wonderful example of Soviet propaganda filmmaking, there is not much academic literature pertaining to *Seekers of Happiness*. It is absent from Soviet cinema readers and cinema dictionaries, and in the instances where it is mentioned elsewhere, it is often not treated with much depth.[8] As such, the intersection between the film's narrative choices and its historical situation has largely gone unexplored.

The focus of this paper is how the Jewish population is depicted in *Seekers of Happiness* and how this fits into the overall framework of policies towards them within the Soviet Union at the time. In an initial section, the film is contextualized within the prevalent genre conventions of its time, along with how it was received by a wide audience. The following section focuses on two stereotypes of Jews that occur both within the story world of *Seekers of Happiness* as well as the framework of political discourse – the Wandering Jew and the *luftmensch*.[9] A final section is dedicated to the Soviet means of

[7] Shternshis, Anna. "Soviet in Form, National in Content: Russian Jewish Popular Culture." Essay. In *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 166.

[8] See Kenez for discussions of genre, Senderovich for notes on antisemitic tropes, and Shternshis for audience reception. While Weinberg does mention Seekers of Happiness, he only does so tangentially.

[9] For the sake of consistency, the names of characters are spelled/transliterated as they appear in the film's subtitles, unless quoted differently in a secondary source. The same applies to terms such as *luftmensch*.

responding to the presence of a Jewish minority and how these appear in the film: assimilation through agrarianisation, intermarriage, and secularisation.[10]

2. *Seekers of Happiness*: Genre and Audience Reception

From 1917 onwards, cinema occupied a position of some privilege compared to other media forms in the Soviet Union. Beginning in the late 1920s, however, the variety of films available decreased quite sharply, and imports of foreign films all but ceased under Stalin's rule.[11] While Soviet filmmakers continued to produce films, after 1932 their work grew more and more formulaic and repetitive due to the imposition of Socialist Realist standards upon them.[12] Peter Kenez notes that these standards are "bitterly hostile to experimentation with form, for this would impede immediate comprehension by the half-educated and therefore lessen the didactic value of the product."[13] Additionally, formal experiments inevitably bring about "ambiguity of meaning, […] [which] a totalitarian political order [such as the Soviet Union] cannot tolerate."[14] It is important to bear in mind that in spite of its name, Socialist Realism does not depict actual reality – it is not a documentary or 'slice of life' genre. Instead, as Kenez aptly remarks, it "replaces genuine realism with an appearance of realism," thereby "preventing the contemplation of the human condition and the investigation of social issues."[15] Socialist Realism exists with one sole purpose: to convince the viewer of the attainability of the Soviet project.

[10] Of course, these answers are inherently intertwined. Soviet Jews did not exist in a vacuum, and so it was of paramount importance for the government to target the question of their nationality and status on multiple fronts.

[11] Kenez, Peter. "Soviet Cinema in the Age of Stalin." Essay. In *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, edited by Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, 54-68. London, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 55.

[12] Kenez, "Soviet Cinema," 55.

[13] Kenez, "Soviet Cinema," 56.

[14] Kenez, "Soviet Cinema," 56.

[15] Kenez, "Soviet Cinema," 55.

Seekers of Happiness is one such Socialist Realist film. It is one of many artistic products of a Kremlin campaign "designed not only to publicize the Birobidzhan experiment but also to raise funds and to encourage migration to the region."[16] In typical Socialist Realist fashion, the film's characters are "cookie cutters," that is, they represent stereotyped ideas rather than complex, three-dimensional individuals. The idea was that there should be no other possible interpretation of Rosa, the daughter of a shtetl Jew other than that she is a representative of 'good' Soviet Jewry, a dutiful Communist and hard worker, and that the anti-hero Pinya and his avaricious actions can never be anything but an obstacle to the Soviet cause. The film's final sequence is heavy-handed in its unambiguity: the good Communist Jews all get their happy end, the "pest" Pinya, the sceptical and selfish *luftmensch*, becomes a criminal and loses everything.

The Socialist Realist form follows the *Bildungsroman* template: "In the process of fulfilling a task, the hero or heroine, under the tutelage of a Party worker, acquires an increased understanding of self, the surrounding world, the task of building Communism, the class struggle, the need for vigilance, etc."[17] Under the guidance of chairman Natan – the film's most prominently featured Party official – Rosa and her family assimilate into the community of the collective farm. Even Rosa's initially hesitant mother ultimately agrees that life on a farm under Communism is superior to life in the shtetl. The underlying message is exceedingly obvious: "Those who are content to work in the kolkhoz find their place easily, but the man who searches for gold is disappointed and attempts an illegal border crossing, falling into the hands of the NKVD."[18] While *Seekers of Happiness* has its comedic

[16] Weinberg, Robert. *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 32.

[17] Kenez, "Soviet Cinema," 56.

[18] Kenez, Peter. "Socialist Realism, 1933-1941." Essay. In *Cinema & Soviet Society 1917-1953*, 157-85. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 164. The NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), established in 1917, functioned as the Soviet secret police from 1934 onwards.

moments[19] (it is, after all, a work of middlebrow cinema, designed to appeal to a wide audience), it makes its political points with the utmost seriousness.

The film was exceedingly popular among Jewish viewers, who were happy to have a film depicting Jewish life in a positive light. Although it was by no means the only Soviet film to show Jewish characters onscreen, Anna Shternshis remarks that it was the exception to the rule that there is no evidence of the overarching popularity of Yiddish films.[20] *Seekers of Happiness* aside, "no other movie about Jews received as much attention at the time or made such an impact."[21]

The reasons for its popularity were twofold: For one, *Seekers of Happiness* was "about Jews and Jewish life in the Soviet Union" – people were over the moon to see characters like themselves represented on screen, even if it was in the form of a propaganda film.[22] Secondly, many viewers gravitated towards Pinya's character. Actor Venyamin Zuskin "received both popular and critical acclaim" for his performance, and Pinya was viewed as "the most likable and memorable character in the movie."[23]

Interestingly, given Pinya's popularity among viewers, the rigid narrative structure of the film appears to have backfired rather spectacularly. In a survey of 225 respondents, Shternshis notes that 211 were "able to quote Zuskin's lines from the movie, even though many could not recall the details of the plot."[24] Pinya's downfall was met with sympathy rather than with righteous satisfaction on the part of

[19] Such moments include the axe-murder of a mosquito and a sequence in which the Russian Korney very nearly gets his ears cuffed with a dead fish. They break up possible tensions and lend the film a decidedly comic slant.
[20] Shternshis, "Russian Jewish Popular Culture," 166.

[21] Shternshis, "Russian Jewish Popular Culture," 166.
[22] Shternshis, "Russian Jewish Popular Culture," 167.
[23] Shternshis, "Russian Jewish Popular Culture," 168.
[24] Shternshis, "Russian Jewish Popular Culture," 168.

the viewer. Clearly, the messages of productivisation and assimilation the Soviet government was trying to push got lost somewhere along the way.

3. Productivisation: The "Wandering Jew" and the *Luftmensch*[25]

Under the Tsarist regime, many Jews had dealt in commerce, crafts, or liberal arts, despite the varying levels of antisemitism displayed towards them by the government. Such professions did not fit into the society envisioned by the Bolsheviks, and these people "found themselves disenfranchised citizens (*lishentsy*)" under the 1918 Constitution of the Russian Republic.[26] Due to their status as representatives of "petit bourgeois professions," the *lishentsy* were "considered to be 'nonproductive,'" and, as such, they were "deprived of civil rights, employment, housing, and higher education for their children."[27] In theory, it would have been possible to escape such a label by working it off over the course of five years, but this was often more easily said than done, particularly in light of a lack of employment opportunities available to those who fell into this group. This status led some affected by this rule to "[gravitate] to murky business dealings, further imperilling their fate," and these forms of social and economic distress provided a "critical precondition for the appeal of [agricultural] colonization," which was one of the possible means the Soviet government used to transform Jews into "useful citizens."[28] Often, it was easier to simply pack up and start fresh elsewhere, rather than cling to the vestiges of a fallen regime.

---

[25] In the Soviet context, the term "productivisation" refers to a range of policies designed to integrate the Jewish population into Soviet society through "productive" (i.e. agricultural or industrial) labour. The goal was the transformation of Jewish life, moving it from the shtetl to the collective farm or industrial city, and thus rendering the Jewish population "useful" to the Soviet cause, while simultaneously improving their social and economic position within Soviet society.

[26] Dekel-Chen, Jonathan L. *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 7.

[27] Dekel-Chen, "Farming the Red Land," 7.

[28] Dekel-Chen, "Farming the Red Land," 8.

One potential issue the Soviet Union saw with its Jewish minority was "the ideologically suspect nature of Jewish economic life," referring to the commercial ties some had built up under Tsarist rule.[29] The petit bourgeois status held by some was deeply problematic to a Communist government, and, as such, the function of Birobidzhan – aside from providing a national territory – was to "'normalize' Soviet Jews" and to turn them into proletarians: "To transform a people whom the Soviet government considered as parasitic into useful Soviets."[30] A core aspect of "the program to 'normalize' Russian Jews" was "connecting them to the soil through agricultural labour," which followed the idea that "a people could only be regularized through agricultural activity," a deep-seated concept that the Soviets made use of.[31] Birobidzhan, being an agricultural colony first and foremost, "was designed by the Communist Party to wean the Soviet Jews away from capitalist, 'parasitic' jobs."[32] Following this logic, Robert Weinberg notes, the government aimed to "resolve the Jewish question in the 1920s by refashioning the occupational profile of the Jews and transforming them into farmers."[33]

In *Seekers of Happiness*, the "ideologically suspect" or "nonproductive" Jew appears in the form of two common antisemitic stereotypes: the Wandering Jew and the *luftmensch*. Each of these stereotypes are dealt with and productivised in the film, with varying degrees of success.

3.1 The "Wandering Jew"

The figure of the Wandering Jew has its origins in the Early Modern period, and the associated story tells of a "Jerusalem cobbler condemned to interminable peregrinations [i.e., endless wanderings] for

[29] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 18.
[30] Maroney, Eric. *The Other Zions: The Lost Histories of Jewish Nations*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010, p. 123.
[31] Maroney, "The Other Zions," 137-138.
[32] Maroney, "The Other Zions," 137-138.
[33] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 18.

failing to allow Christ to rest at his doorstep on his way to Golgotha."[34] Over time, it devolved from the story of a cobbler into a dehumanizing antisemitic stereotype, one that not even high-ranking Soviet officials were immune to. Lester Eckman notes the following:

> Stalin's agitators labelled them [opposition leaders Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, and Grigory Zinoviev] 'rootless cosmopolitans' – people who did not care for socialism in one country, in their own fatherland. So pervasive was their hypocrisy that the word 'Jew' was not used, but the point in those denunciations of 'rootless cosmopolitans' was well taken.[35]

Of course, such "rootless cosmopolitans" were not fit to be in government positions – how could they hold any form of political power, if they opposed the very thing the government stood for? Many Jews faced a similar conundrum. They were not truly welcome in the cities, where they were viewed as rootless, nor in the countryside, where they ran the risk of being viewed as representing the interests of an oppressor, often due to Party membership.[36]

The figure of the Wandering Jew, in all its varying iterations, is by Senderovich's definition "associated with the endless nature of Jewish displacement."[37] The stereotype of the damned wanderer appears in several Soviet works of fiction, including in *Seekers of Happiness*.[38] In fact, the film opens on a boat traveling in the direction of Birobidzhan, with an extradiegetic folk song playing:

[34] Senderovich, Sasha. *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022, p. 169.

[35] Eckman, "Soviet Policies towards the Jews," 1332.

[36] Eckman, "Soviet Policies towards the Jews," 1332.

[37] Senderovich, "How the Soviet Jew Was Made," 216. Some sources also refer to the Wandering Jew as the "eternal Jew," the "ewiger Jude."

[38] Other films that portray the Soviet Jew as an "ambivalent figure" include *The Return of Neitan Bekker* (1932) and *The Border* (1934), cf. Senderovich 2022.

The world is too large, too dull and too alien,

When one hasn't a place to apply one's effort.

I am tired of roaming around.

Will life be a song whither we are bound?[39]

The viewer meets a Jewish family that is tired of wandering and, more precisely, wandering around without a purpose. "Here we are traveling and traveling," wonders Pinya, "maybe we'll never get there…"[40] Soon after, upon being asked why they are moving from abroad, Rosa reiterates that they all wish to settle somewhere where there is good work to be found – they have left their home abroad because "there's no work there."[41] As Chairman Natan, speaking for the Soviet government, notes, "do you want to live well – then work."[42] The community will provide for those who pull their weight. At the collective farm, Rosa, Basya, and Lyova all eagerly pitch in. We see Rosa working horses, Basya farms hens, and Lyova chops wood. Even Dvoira, though old, helps out wherever she can. When Korney falls off a cliff by accident, she takes him into her home and prepares soup for him from a covey of birds brought to her by Shlyoma, a fellow member of the collective farm. It is made very clear that the kolkhoz functions smoothly precisely because of such mutual aid, and those who find a home there have no desire to leave once they have settled in. Pinya, Basya's husband, is the only one to be sceptical.

Prior to their arrival at the collective farm, however, the family must continue their journey by train. On this leg of the journey, they encounter a rather melancholy clarinettist who plays "The Lament of Israel on the Banks of the Amur." This clarinettist, arguably, is the film's most overt (and derogatory)

[39] *Seekers of Happiness*. 00:03:40-00:04:08.

[40] *Seekers of Happiness* 00:04:30
[41] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:09:56.
[42] *Seekers of Happiness* 00:10:05.

iteration of the Wandering Jew: deeply and vocally sceptical of the Birobidzhan project, he balks at the first sign of physical hardship and states he will only consider settling there "if it's any good," telling Lyova to write to him should it be worth his trouble.[43] Intriguingly, his jibes about not being "foolish enough to dig trenches in the Taiga and feed mosquitoes and tigers with [his] blood" are the closest the film gets to depicting just how tough life in Birobidzhan could get.[44] According to Senderovich, the clarinettist's presence on the train "serves as an unwelcome reminder of the unsettledness inherent in all modernization projects, including the Soviet one."[45] In spite of the shadow he casts on Birobidzhan, the kolkhoz "Rotes Feld" serves as a haven for reformed Wandering Jews. As the farm's chairman notes, "people who have been dispersed all over the world for ages, come here, build their lives here, seek and find happiness, [and] are beginning to come alive again."[46] Rather than having a "parasitic" relationship to society, the wanderers are now symbionts of the state. Rosa, with whom Pinya repeatedly clashes, proves herself such a strong worker that she becomes the collective farm's best and most productive shock worker.

3.2 The *Luftmensch*

Soviet Jews found themselves caught between a stereotypical rock and a hard place. Eckman remarks that aside from being persecuted as "rootless cosmopolitans" in some places, "the petty trader, the speculator, the luftmensch, became a common stereotype of the Jews, at the same time that Jewish professors, doctors, teachers, and other [sic] were contributing much to the development and modernization of Russia."[47] A *luftmensch* is a drifter, easily lost in airy intellectual pursuits, and, above all, someone who does not hold a single steady job – or, at the very least, not a "real" or "productive" job. Much like the "rootless cosmopolitan" or Wandering Jew, the *luftmensch* borders on

[43] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:10:25. Lyova calls the clarinetist a bum following this interaction, indicating that the "good Soviet Jew" will inevitably turn on the eternal wanderer.
[44] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:09:17-00:09:20.
[45] Senderovich, "How the Soviet Jew Was Made," 217.
[46] *Seekers of Happiness*, 01:09:50.
[47] Eckman, "Soviet Policies towards the Jews," 1332.

parasitic due to his unserious attitude towards proper hard work. In many idealized accounts, Birobidzhan is a place where "former luftmenshen [sic] […] strike out in the primeval forest, chop down trees, build huts, dig wells, and erect homes."[48]

Seekers of Happiness's *luftmensch* character is Pinya Kopman. He openly resents the family's decision to move to a collective farm and only becomes enthusiastic about it upon learning that a Jewish worker at a different nearby collective farm has found a nugget of gold weighing in at a whopping 800 grams. He is fascinated by numbers and the accumulation of wealth, even inquiring after the price of the ship the family travels on.[49] He only appears positively surprised by socialist organizations when he receives several newspapers and information pamphlets free of charge. While other members of the family worry themselves sick trying to find him a job, Pinya tells them not to bother:

LYOVA	Pinya, stop being a pest. I can't think.
PINYA	Think about what?
LYOVA	I am thinking how to set you up for some kind of work.
PINYA	Don't bother. You and Rosa will do the working around here.
LYOVA	And you?
PINYA	Don't worry about me. I've got a head on my shoulders. I'll find something to do.[50]

[48] Levin, "Birobidzhan 1928-40," 299.

[49] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:04:38-00:04:53.

[50] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:05:08-00:05:50.

Instead of being content with the job assigned to him at the collective farm, Pinya sets himself a task of his own. Armed with the knowledge that there must be precious metals in the soil of the kolkhoz, he steals a pan from Dvoira's kitchen so he can mine for gold in the banks one of the local rivers. His deep-rooted avarice – another antisemitic stereotype – becomes visible here, as he notes that "gold is money, and money is everything."[51] Pinya spends much of the film by the river, away from his work. When he is caught there by Lyova, Pinya initially attempts to hide the gold he has collected in the lining of his coat. Lyova presses on and Pinya caves, showing Lyova what he has collected. Pinya tells him that he aims to leave the kolkhoz with the gold he has found and that he intends to use the money it will bring him to open a factory and produce suspenders. His dream to be "Pinya Kopman, King of Suspenders" leads him to shirk his assigned work, abandon his post guarding the collective farm's vegetable patch and, finally, culminates in his arrest after attempting to flee across the Manchurian border.[52]

Pinya's relatives call him a pest to his face multiple times, hinting at the fact that he merely leeches off the kolkhoz without making any meaningful contribution to its prosperity himself. His primary concern is with personal gain, which is placed in sharp contrast with the actions of Katz, the farmer who found gold at the collective "Der Shtern." Katz, evidently a well-assimilated Soviet Jew, handed over the nugget to the chairman for the benefit of the collective, presumably to raise funds for farming equipment or the like. Pinya, on the other hand, squirrels his find away in a glass bottle and refuses to turn it over to Natan. Of course, the viewer learns Pinya did not actually strike gold – an acid bath at the hands of the border guard proves that he has found nothing but shiny, worthless dust.[53]

[51] *Seekers of Happiness*, 01:18:50.
[52] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:58:30-00:58:40. Following this confession by Pinya, Lyova attempts to confiscate the "gold" Pinya has collected in the name of the kolkhoz. After a brief scuffle, Pinya then beats Lyova unconscious with a shovel and leaves him for dead, catalyzing his attempted escape across the border to China. Lyova survives and is able to identify Pinya as the perpetrator of the attack.
[53] The border guard pours acid onto Pinya's find. It is highly likely that Pinya has stumbled upon a handful of pyrite, more commonly known by its colloquial name "fool's gold." Pyrite is not the hardiest of substances, prone to tarnishing and fading given prolonged exposure to water or sunlight and will dissolve when it comes into contact with nitric acid. A fool and his gold, of course, are soon parted.

Of all the family members, Pinya is the only one who does not settle well into the collective. He asks Natan, the chairman, for a different job, and repeatedly butts heads with Rosa and Lyova over his perceived laziness. Lyova in particular is decidedly unsympathetic to Pinya's lofty goals: "You're lazy and you don't want to work," he tells him after claiming to understand Pinya's situation.[54] In addition to abandoning his work to go out searching for gold, Pinya "has trouble believing that the people giddily felling trees and blasting rock to build roads are actually Jews."[55] According to his view, "Jews […] are people like him who aspire to make money rather than work in agriculture or construction for the sake of a nebulous collective good."[56]

4. Forms of Assimilation: Intermarriage and Secularisation

From the moment it was first conceived, Birobidzhan was designed to be an agricultural colony. The region was quite sparsely populated, unlike other existing or planned agricultural settlements in the south of the Soviet Union, so the Soviet government would not have to contend with nearly as much local resistance to settlement as it did in, say, Ukraine and the Crimea. The Russian government had made previous attempts to settle in the area of Birobidzhan, but nothing substantial or successful had ever come of these prior settlements. As the land was comparatively empty, the Soviets hoped for a "two birds, one stone" situation: Not only would the land become useable and produce crops or natural resources for the Soviet Union, but it would provide an answer to the question of Jewish placement.

[54] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:24:45.
[55] Senderovich, "How the Soviet Jew Was Made," 208.
[56] Senderovich, "How the Soviet Jew Was Made," 208.

The image of Birobidzhan as a Jewish territory was quintessential, as it was the region's main selling point. Conditions on the ground were less than ideal – winters were harsh, and summers were brutal, dense woodlands abuzz with mosquitoes and all manners of unpleasant insects. As such, advocates for the project hoped that "the image of a Jewish state would help in the recruiting of Jewish settlers, especially for Birobidzhan's collective farms."[57] Clear emphasis was placed on agriculture forming the economic foundation of the project: The Jews must return to the land. No other practice would ever quite integrate them as well into the fabric of a socialist society, as a sense of connection to place is strongest if the place is built from the ground up with one's own two hands.

In spite of the government's best efforts, Birobidzhan was not established particularly quickly. While the decree proclaiming it as the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was issued in 1928, it was not until 1934 that settlement began in earnest. The region was plagued by problems such as hostile geography or ecology, but also a lack of workers properly trained to work on collective farms. It is all well and good to have people at a kolkhoz, but an improperly trained or entirely untrained worker might well do more harm than good on a farm if they do not know what they are doing. In addition to the potential for accidents involving farming equipment or heavy machinery, crops may spoil if tended, harvested, or preserved incorrectly.

4.1 Intermarriage

Within the Soviet framework, racial mixing was considered a sign of considerable societal advancement. The more advanced a society, the more "mixed" it would be, and "the sooner 'race' would disappear" as a defining category.[58] As such, it is no wonder citizens of differing nationalities would be encouraged to marry. Intermarriage in Judaism is particularly effective in effacing this

[57] Levin, "Birobidzhan 1928-40," 304.
[58] Hirsch, "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," 36.

boundary, given its matrilineal nature. It was perhaps the most effective way to remove or blur racial and national distinctions. Depending on which parent is Jewish, this dictates the nationality of any eventual children. As the ultimate goal of the Soviet project was to efface such national boundaries, it was important to encourage intermarriage wherever possible. In addition to the issue of matrilineality, it is important to note that it is significantly easier for traditions and customs to fall by the wayside in mixed families than it is in homogeneous ones. It is only logical, then, that a propaganda film such as *Seekers of Happiness* would encourage marriage between characters of differing nationalities.

Intermarriage is not the only possible form of marriage the film's characters encounter. Out of the blue, Rosa receives a proposal from Shlyoma, an apparently dim-witted fellow Jewish worker who has been at the kolkhoz for some time. She turns him down, which visibly displeases both Shlyoma and Rosa's mother Dvoira. The viewer later learns that Shlyoma is quite bold in this regard, as he confesses to Natan that he loves Basya (who is still married to Pinya) and later asks an unnamed woman at a construction site if she will go to the park with him. Instead of indulging the overly forward Shlyoma, Rosa has her eye on Korney, who has been friendly with her since the family's arrival at the collective farm.[59] Korney is Russian, and Dvoira initially opposes his potential courtship of Rosa:

DVOIRA Rosa, what's going to happen? He's Russian.

ROSA Yes, he's Russian. But I don't know who's better – the Russian Korney, or the Jew Pinya?[60]

[59] Cf. *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:16:47. Upon meeting Rosa for the first time, Korney calls her a "fine girl."
[60] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:39:55.

Clearly, the film is in favour of Korney rather than Pinya. Korney is thoughtful and a hard worker, even offering Rosa his mosquito net at their first chance meeting so she can better protect herself. Pinya, as we have previously established, is airheaded, selfish, lazy, and rude to his peers, and his hunger for individual success is so great that it culminates in him breaking the law.

Like Dvoira, Korney's nameless father also opposes Rosa's and Korney's relationship – "we've never had this custom [of intermarriage]," he tells his son.[61] The opposition from the older generation is worn down, in part due to a conversation Dvoira has with Natan (cf. 4.2 Secularisation) and, additionally, due to a conversation the two parents have with one another. This exchange between different cultures indicates a clear positive stance on intermarriage, and Korney's father notes that "we all come from the same roots."[62] At the kolkhoz, "all nationalities are brothers […] Jews and Russians, and Tungus [i.e., the local indigenous population who are not seen in the film]."[63]

In addition to the ultimately positive portrayal of mixing nationalities through marriage, marriage between individuals of the same nationality receives a decidedly negative cast. Pinya is married to Basya, the second of Dvoira's two daughters. Unlike Pinya, Basya is happy to work at the kolkhoz and is incredibly upset when Pinya announces his intent to move on in search of greener pastures.[64] Basya begins to gravitate towards Natan, the chairman of the collective, and the presumably final nail in the coffin of her and Pinya's marriage is the revelation of the latter's assault on Lyova. While it is left unclear whether the two ultimately marry, Basya divorcing Pinya certainly would have been possible given the circumstances.

4.2 Secularisation

[61] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:45:06.
[62] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:49:35.
[63] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:22:13.
[64] Cf. *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:20:50 and 00:34:00.

Under Soviet governance, religion was frowned upon, and Judaism was no exception to this rule. Following the logic of Lenin and Stalin, "the Jewish question would ultimately be solved by facilitating the integration of Jews into Soviet society."[65] This assimilation would be greatly improved "with the disappearance of religion under socialism," as secularisation would help things "proceed smoothly and weaken obstacles to Jewish acculturation and integration."[66] According to Weinberg, the creation of Birobidzhan was deliberately and inherently secular in nature – it was, after all, "part of the Communist Party's effort to set up a territorial enclave where a secular Jewish culture rooted in Yiddish and socialist principles could serve as an alternative to Palestine and resolve a variety of perceived problems besetting Jewry."[67] Agriculture, not religion, would be the basis of settlement in the region. This form of colonization presented many Soviet Jews with "a major dilemma […] – the desire to integrate into secular Soviet society versus the inherited loyalties to traditional, paternalistic life in the shtetls."[68]

The use of Yiddish over Hebrew was one core aspect of secularisation. Hebrew was considered the language of "bourgeois Zionists," and Weinberg emphasizes that the use of Yiddish was meant to "ensure that the cultural politics of Soviet Jewry would hew closely to the dictum, 'nationalist in form and socialist in content.'"[69] Hebrew, being among other things a religious language, was decried as counter-revolutionary and backwards. Therefore, the primary language of Birobidzhan would be Yiddish, and not Hebrew or Russian. Street signs were written both in Yiddish and Russian, but the official language of the region was Yiddish. The local newspapers were published in Yiddish, as was a good portion of pop culture material such as plays, poems, or songs. This was as supporters of the Birobidzhan project had hoped: They believed that "a territorial homeland for Soviet Jews would

[65] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 16.
[66] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 16.
[67] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 13.
[68] Dekel-Chen, "Farming the Red Land," 8-9.
[69] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 59.

facilitate the development of a secular, Yiddishist culture rooted in socialist principles," while simultaneously consolidating Soviet Jewry.[70]

As a rule, linguistic prescriptivism is notorious for being ineffective, particularly at state level. It is immensely difficult to police how people speak, and forcing something to become an official language if it is not already widely used rarely goes to plan. The choice to use Yiddish as the local language rather than Hebrew was logical not only because Yiddish was less acutely associated with religion, but also the fact that, for millennia, Hebrew had been a dead language.[71] Additionally, following its revival in the 19th century, Hebrew was generally associated with the Zionist movement, which the Soviet Union had previously outlawed based in part on its ties to British imperialism.

In *Seekers of Happiness*, secularisation does not occur on the linguistic front, although this is due more to issues of audience design given that the intended viewer was Russian-speaking. Where relevant, street signs and the like are written in Yiddish script, but the language spoken onscreen is Russian. Instead, throughout the film, party structures take the place of religious ones. The most prominent example of this is the replacing of the rabbi with a party official. Upon noticing Rosa's interest in the Russian Korney, Dvoira is initially hesitant to let their relationship go ahead. She shares her concerns with Natan, the collective's chairman, and asks him to keep Rosa from the fish harvest so she cannot see Korney. Natan tells her that as Rosa and Korney are both adults, there is nothing she can feasibly do to stop them from interacting with one another, and he cannot keep Rosa from the harvest on her behalf.[72] Similarly, Shlyoma seeks Natan's advice when he believes Basya has fallen in love with him.[73] In both of these instances, Natan takes on the advising role that would, in the context

[70] Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion," 22.
[71] In terms of religious versus secular and dead versus living languages, imposing Hebrew on the Jewish population in Birobidzhan would be roughly equivalent to implementing Classical Latin as the national language of Italy instead of continuing to use Italian.
[72] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:40:57.
[73] *Seekers of Happiness*, 00:51:19.

of a shtetl, be held by the local rabbi. Dvoira and Shlyoma, in turn, appear to accept this new structure, as they do not protest against the advice he gives them.

Additionally, there is no religious iconography to be seen – there are no mezuzahs mounted upon the doorframes, no one at the collective wears a yarmulke, nor is the Star of David visible at any point.[74] Instead, the characters are surrounded by symbols of Communism such as the hammer and sickle or portraits of Stalin. This further indicates that the state has fully taken over the functions of a religious institution, and there is no need to rely on religion as a crutch. The state provides everything its citizens could possibly require, including alternatives to religious iconography.

Of course, the dismantling of religious structures was not merely conceptual or social. Quite the contrary – under the rule of Lenin and by encouragement of Jewish communists, synagogues and other Jewish establishments were demolished or repurposed.[75] The idea was that this would further incentivize the assimilation of Jews into agricultural and secular communities, as religious institutions and practices could no longer serve as the bedrock of community life following their abolition. Considering Jewishness – not Judaism – had been granted the status of a nationality by Soviet definition, "one did not have to be religiously Jewish to remain a Jew."[76] Secular assimilation was further emphasized by persistent propaganda, which continually hammered home "the national significance of the Jewish colonization of Birobidzhan."[77] This national significance was twofold: for one, colonization of Birobidzhan by a Jewish population would help to answer the Jewish question, as well as rendering the previously hostile land itself usable so as to help provide for the country.

[74] A *mezuzah* is a piece of parchment fixed to the doorway upon which specific verses from the Torah are written. A *yarmulke* or *kippah* is the skullcap traditionally worn by Jewish men.
[75] Eckman, "Soviet Policies towards the Jews," 1329.
[76] Gessen, Masha. *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region*. New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2016, p. 19.

[77] Levin, "Birobidzhan," 303.

5. Conclusion

> When we lived in the shtetl, I [Dvoira] was considered a good housekeeper. I could divide a small herring into nine servings. But when I was cutting that herring, I felt as though it were my own heart. When the children are following your every move, and each one asks for a larger piece, you feel bad for each of them. And in the house, there is nothing but this one, tiny herring. I don't wish this on anyone. Could my late Vrom Ber ever have imagined that his old Dvoira would ever live to see such happy days. Eat, my dear guests, eat, my dear children! Pour the wine and let us drink, let us drink to our country, to those who gave us such a good life.[78]

Seekers of Happiness is a textbook example of a Soviet Realist narrative on screen. It is exceedingly simple in its storytelling, both in terms of visual presentation and from a narrative standpoint, and it very clearly presents "assimilation […] as the solution to the Soviet Jewish question."[79] In order for their assimilation to be effective, its stereotyped characters must first and foremost become productive members of the new Soviet society. Both the Wandering Jew and the *luftmensch* are productivised through agricultural labour in the context of a collective farm. The Wandering Jew is anchored to the land in the form of the agricultural colony that doubles as a Jewish homeland, thereby putting a long wished-for end to the eternal wanderings he is subjected to. The *luftmensch* is productivised by being given concrete tasks – labour that is deemed actively and acutely useful to the community, such as chopping trees, tending livestock and crops, or clearing rocks to build a road, rather than being involved in lofty and unproductive intellectual pursuits. Additionally, the film presents secularisation and intermarriage as desirable outcomes, although it is not made clear whether they are a consequence of assimilation or a cause thereof.

[78] *Seekers of Happiness*, 01:24:05-01:25:22.
[79] Shternshis, "Russian Jewish Popular Culture," 166.

As is befitting a government-sponsored film designed to encourage settlement, according to the storyline, the Birobidzhan project is a resounding success. The Jewish family integrates seamlessly into the social fabric of the collective farm (Pinya being the notable, and only, exception) and have no desire whatsoever to move on after settling there.

For Dvoira and her family, moving to Birobidzhan was the best possible course of action. Nowhere else, by film logic, would they have received such an unconditional and immediate welcome as they did at the collective. Most importantly, it was their own choice to move to Birobidzhan – the Soviet government did not force the family's hand in any way, shape, or form, and even allowed them the freedom to choose which kolkhoz they wanted to work at rather than making the decision for them. A key aspect of long-lasting, sustainable settlement is its voluntary nature. Moving people by force, no matter how large or small the group may be, inevitably leads to resentment and resistance to the project, on the part of the settlers and on the part of those who may be driven away by settlement. Neither is conducive to a popular or strong long-term government.

The film not only juxtaposes relatives Rosa – the hardworking, assimilated Jew – and the *luftmensch* Pinya, but also places Pinya and the collective's chairman Natan opposite each other. It sets "the anachronistic globe-trotting shtetl Jew, represented by Pinya" against "the Jew as a New Soviet Man, represented by Natan."[80] Natan is "the exemplary Soviet citizen who displaces Pinya from his own family."[81] It is interesting, then, that Pinya should be the most popular and memorable character from the film, as this goes entirely against the grain of what *Seekers of Happiness* intends its audience to take away from a viewing. One is not meant to root for the lazy, thieving would-be killer.

[80] Senderovich, "How the Soviet Jew Was Made," 217.
[81] Senderovich, "How the Soviet Jew Was Made," 176.

In this context, it would be interesting to take a more literary-analytical approach to the film in a further research step, thereby further embedding it in the cultural context of its time. Given that *Seekers of Happiness* is the product of a highly specific and targeted propaganda campaign intended to increase migration to the region, it conveniently omits almost all traces of references to the very real and tangible hardships faced by real-world settlers of Birobidzhan. As such, one could apply a contrapuntal lens to the film. Edward Said defines contrapuntal readings as follows:

> The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded […].[82]

While usually applied to works produced in a more overtly imperial context, given the settler colonial nature of the Birobidzhan project, such a reading may well still yield intriguing results. A contrapuntal approach to *Seekers of Happiness* would allow for a different angle and an in-depth exploration of the deliberate and, frankly, glaring omissions of references to hardship, as well as of the local indigenous population (for example, the Tungus are only mentioned once, as a footnote, to underscore the apparently harmonious relations between the different nationalities living on kolkhoz soil).[83] Additionally, it would permit the viewer to take into account the subtle but pervasive ways in which music both punctuates and, in other instances, potentially contradicts the events portrayed onscreen. Folk music is a conspicuous element in this film, ever-present, and it is anything but meaningless.

[82] Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. https://monoskop.org/images/f/f9/Said_Edward_Culture_and_Imperialism.pdf, p. 66.

[83] Cf. also Senderovich 2022: 208 for a contrapuntal approach to folk music in *Seekers of Happiness*.

A contrapuntal approach would also be interesting considering that Kenez's definition of Socialist Realist film is a negative one – he defines the genre more in terms of what it is *not* than what it is.[84] Socialist Realism does not depict an objective reality, nor does it show its audience a pure utopia, which is by definition an imaginary place. The Birobidzhan depicted by Vladimir Korsh-Sablin is, although it is highly idealized and romanticized, a simulacrum of what could be – a theoretically attainable and desirable possibility presented to a wide audience in the hopes that, when confronted with it often enough, public life would finally begin to imitate art.

[84] Cf. Kenez, "Soviet Cinema," 55.

6. Bibliography

Dekel-Chen, Jonathan L. *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2005.

Eckman, Lester Samuel. "Soviet Policies towards the Jews: From Lenin to Stalin." Essay. In *Austria – Hungary – Poland – Russia*, ed. Herbert A. Strauss, 1325-1341. Vol. 2 of *Hostages of Modernization*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 1993. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110883299.1325.

Gessen, Masha. *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region*. New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2016.

Hirsch, Francine. "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics." *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 30-43. https://www.jstor.com/stable/2696979.

Kenez, Peter. "Socialist Realism, 1933-1941." Essay. In *Cinema & Soviet Society 1917-1953*, 157-85. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Kenez, Peter. "Soviet Cinema in the Age of Stalin." Essay. In *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, edited by Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, 54-68. London, New York: Routledge, 1993.

Levin, Nora. "Birobidzhan 1928-40." Essay. In *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917* 1, 1:282-311. New York, London: New York University Press, 1988.

Maroney, Eric. *The Other Zions: The Lost Histories of Jewish Nations*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. https://monoskop.org/images/f/f9/Said_Edward_Culture_and_Imperialism.pdf.

Seekers of Happiness. DVD. The National Center for Jewish Film, 2007 [1936].

Senderovich, Sasha. *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022.

Shternshis, Anna. “Soviet in Form, National in Content: Russian Jewish Popular Culture.” Essay. In *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, 143-81. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Weinberg, Robert. *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.