

# **Birobidzhan**

**Tomer Dotan-**

**Dreyfus**

## **Introduction**

Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus's *Birobidzhan* brings back to life the Stalinist experiment to create a Jewish autonomous zone in the Siberian Far East, only this time with a twist - the experiment is successful.

It is the second decade of the twentieth century, and the Shtetl, Birobidzhan, is getting ready for the Bundist youth movement's annual trip to Moscow, when a series of weird events cracks the gentle fabric of the peaceful place.

First, two foreign men appear in the town, bringing outside money into the circulation of the Birobidzhaner enclosed economy. Then, a brutal murder occurs in the woods and the oldest Birobidzhaner is found both beaten up and shot. Later that day, a little girl appears, who cannot or does not want to speak.

*Birobidzhan* follows two main storylines. The first is that of the Leibowitz family: Sulamith and her teenage sons, Joel and Alex, as they find themselves split and bitter in light of the new happenings in town. The second takes place in 1990 shortly after the fall of the USSR, when Sascha takes his best friend Gregory on a road trip to try to take care of his depression. The novel also follows the stories of Dmitri, the only person in Birobidzhan to own a rifle, making him the immediate suspect of the murder, Rachel, a bold teenager whose boredom drives her to test the limits of herself and those of everyone else, and finally the story of Smidowitch, an even smaller, more remote village founded one hour away from Birobidzhan by those who aspired to a religious orthodox lifestyle.

If *Birobidzhan* was a political experiment, the novel is a literary one. It experiments with time, narratology and borders; both actual geographic ones and how stretchable they can be, and artistic borders between authors and their works, exploring how far they are allowed to interfere in the magic of their own creation before it turns against them.

Birobidzhan – A shtetl tale  
A novel by Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus

Translated from German by Chantal  
Wright

I.

In Birobidzhan everything was topsy-turvy.

The fisherman had threaded his hook through the bait and thrown the rod out into the ice hole on the frozen lake. It was one of those quiet days at the beginning of spring when the inhabitants of Birobidzhan were still worn out from the long Siberian winter and not even the infamous *bocher* from nearby Kosnikova Street had turned up to get on his nerves.

Normally they spent hours there skating, and the fishing area was their favourite spot. The fisherman assumed that their activity was fuelled by adrenalin, since the *bocher* knew only all too well that sharp skates posed a danger on thin ice.

Boris's story begins in approximately 1932 when he was five years old. But why then? Who can say where the beginning of an individual's story lies? The individual in question, of course. But since he is no longer with us and we are unable to ask, his first memory will serve as our starting point.

The winter of January 1932 was extremely harsh. Boris had been born five years previously in a field near a tiny shtetl, 150 kilometres south-east of today's border between Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. His parents, a Jewish father and a Christian mother, had to hide from all sides. And in 1932 little Boris set out on his way home through the heavy snow in the village of Liuboml after watching his father ice-fishing.

There was a snowstorm and although Boris was properly and warmly dressed, he had great difficulty making his way forward. His black and overly large coat was borrowed from the neighbour's recently deceased husband, and every few steps it got caught up between his

legs and then stuck to the frozen ground. The cold burned his skin through the coat's three holes, holes that must have led to the death of its former owner. After thinking about his father and wondering how he would survive the storm, Boris decided that it was his shoes that were slowing him down and without further ado he removed them from his feet.

Carrying his shoes in his right hand and his father's sandwich tin in his left, he saw the first house on the outskirts of Liuboml. At that point he lost sensation in his

body and within a few seconds he had sunk down onto a bed of ice and snow, no longer able to differentiate between the colours around him. Everything was grey. Grey and triste.

What goes through the head of a five-year-old child as it lies dying? Boris is the only inhabitant of Birobidzhan who could answer this question for us.

An hour later, or three minutes, sometimes Boris told it one way and sometimes another, he felt a little hand gently stroking his eyelids. A wave of sudden warmth flooded over him.

So, as you correctly surmised, this was the first time he saw her. Shining like the moon: her face did not move, it just looked, stared even. At first glance her skin was scarcely distinguishable from the snow, her hair was black and pleasant as she began to lovingly stroke his forehead. She had placed one hand on his mouth, her small ear and her small head rested on his chest in almost an imposition. She had listened to him for several minutes. Her scent was one that Boris had never smelled before. As though she didn't come from around here but from the shores of Greece. She was missing the smell of sweat and dirt that sometimes characterised the farmers of the region, who knew one other only all too well and subsequently felt no need to wash more than once a week – washing more frequently was not only unnecessary, it was regarded as a waste of time.

The sweet scent of spring flowers, followed by that of bees and their honey, was also in the air at that moment. Honey like the honey that Boris and his young friends would frequently steal from the hives of the Christian beekeeper. The same honey that was absent twenty- five years later when Boris met his future wife at Birobidzhan station. Her scent, which was to reveal itself to him that evening, was made up of all the lovely scents he knew, but not that of honey. He had smelled honey for the first time in the snow. It was a pure, clean scent, pure as the fresh water of a newly molten glacier.

It seemed as though the girl was listening to another voice. Whispers? Boris, who had the feeling that somewhere, between his frozen heart and the strange girl, whispering was taking place, tried in vain to get up. The girl pushed him back into the snow with her free hand, looked at him and said admonishingly, "You! If you don't want my help, I'll go! Tell me: should I go?!"

Boris, confused and surprised by her unexpected reaction, replied in a stammer: "No. No, please don't go, but stop talking about me, you two!" "Who's talking then?" "Isn't there somebody there talking to you?" asked Boris, thinking that he

might have reacted too quickly. He felt a little stupid.

“Yes, there is”, said the little girl, “but I’m not replying. I’m listening to it. And you should listen to it too, then you would know that soon you will be strong and full of life and that you have no reason to be afraid.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. And felt stupid again.

“Are you sure?” she parroted back. Or asked back. He wasn’t sure what she meant but he was sure that everything would be fine again. That he wouldn’t stay in the snow, that he would make it to his feet, stand up and simply carry on home, walk the last eternity, the final two hundred metres. By the time all of his thoughts had come to an end – and he did his thinking a bit more quickly than you are doing your reading – he opened his eyes and she was already gone. He saw how she waved goodbye, her outline growing smaller as she moved further away. She left behind a trail of molten snow where she walked, as though she was actually warmer than anybody else Boris had met up until then. “That’s not a bad first memory”, Josef had said to him once, as the two were standing next to one another, fishing, two 32-year-olds in Birobidzhan, the new city of hope.

Boris and Esther had recently decided to get married and the wedding was to take place the following month at the community’s expense, though not in the large communal dining room. Boris the child got up and looked around. Suddenly he was able to run, not just walk. The three holes in his black coat had mysteriously vanished, all he had to do was choose his direction. Home, or the path left by the warmth of the small mysterious girl.

After three or four steps in her direction, Boris turned around and ran home. His mother hugged him, then she shouted at him, demanded information: Where had he been? Why had his walk taken such a long time? Who had his father been ice fishing with? What had they talked about? Had anybody seen him on the way (here Boris patently lied)? And again: why had everything taken so long?

“Mama”, he had said, “the snowstorm held me up, don’t you see?” He was proud, wanted to tell his mother how he had stood up to the weather, how he hadn’t given up in the storm.

Today he sometimes thinks of his mother’s answer when he goes to bed alone, or on cold April days when he sits among the young fishermen who converse, grumble, tell jokes that he no longer understands – or at least thinks he doesn’t understand.

Or as soon as thirteen-



year-old Hannah Greenboym smiles at him and at first glance it seems as though she's flirting, though somewhere between the first and second glance Boris Kleyn remembers that hers is a pitying smile, but regardless of whether Hannah means it one way or the other, she smiles at him which means that today he will return with a good catch, or at least carrying her smile in his fishing tackle. Yes, at exactly that moment the voice of Christina Kleyn pops up in his head: "Darling, there is no snow today! Look!".

On the other side of the window there was an unusually warm and white winter sun, which had bathed the entire village in a merciful light.

"My son", she continued, to whoever might be about. "The poor thing is delusional, just like his father!" Delusional.

Whenever Boris recalled his mother's voice, even years later, he'd also internally recite the poem by the same name, written by renowned Polish-Jewish poet Judith Gorenstein:

*When you crawl before me  
Along the dying verge  
I hear the descant moon  
And see that Polly's gone  
The rec-tangles are circling  
Remembering the visions  
They're just délà vusions.*