The Hungry Steppe (Mirzo-Chul): The Implementation

On the agenda of a kolkhoz there were two ongoing topics: Constructing a storehouse and building communism. Due to lack of building materials, the first item was scratched, and those present turned immediately to realize the second.

(‘a 1930s Soviet joke’)

The official declarations of supervisory authorities – the party decisions and official decrees – were not always grounded in realities, coordinated with executive authorities, or accompanied by budgets. Thus, Jewish settlement (and not just Jewish) existed in two different spheres, one, of the planning authorities; the second, of those for whom the plans were shaped, the settler population itself. The detachment between the two which was so typical of the Soviet managerial framework, dedicated to serve the proletarian, but without taking into consideration he’s needs or wishes, was characteristic of Jewish agricultural settlement in Uzbekistan, as well. Settlement authorities and settlers in most instances, were unconnected to one another, and operated in ‘parallel universes.’ Settlement authorities sought grand projects that would resonance with superiors, advance their own careers, and most important – mobilize special budgets, while the individual sought in every way, means to grapple with the Soviet system, survive within it, and utilize or exploit it as much as possible.

Funding the Kolkhozes

Already at the outset of Jewish agricultural settlement in Uzbekistan, it became apparent that the most disruptive factor in the orderly development of agricultural settlement and the settlers’ ‘staying power’ was the nearly total
absence of housing constructions for the settlers. Since the majority of Jewish settlers were situated on land that had not been cultivated previously, there was no housing in the vicinity of their land. At the beginning, the settlers were forced to camp out in the open, or live in temporary huts. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that the farmers’ families didn’t join them and stayed in the city; and the farmers themselves took advantage of every opportunity to return to their families. In 1928, Ozet activists estimated that an investment of 128,000 RUB would be needed to establish permanent housing in the Jewish kolkhozes in Uzbekistan.1

When it became evident that such large sums could not be mobilized from local budgets, Ozet Uzbekistan turned to the society’s headquarters Ozet Moscow and requested a 40,000 RUB budget to construct living quarters in the Jewish kolkhozes. Ozet Moscow replied that this requirement was not included in the year’s budget, and that it was giving priority to development of settlement to the east (in Birobidjan), and therefore had no idea how it could assist in this matter.2 In addition, Komzet Uzbekistan sent an urgent letter to Narkomzem, requesting that the Ministry of Agriculture budget a construction loan for 22 Jewish kolkhozes totaling 26,500 RUB (an average of a thousand RUB per kolkhoz), but this request as well failed to receive approval.3 It is interesting to note that although the requests were written close to one another chronologically, they were not written in the same manner, and each requested different sums for the same objective. The amounts were only cited in general terms; consequently, it is impossible to establish on what basis they were calculated. It is possible that the amounts stated were based on the assumption that they would not receive the full sum at one time, and therefore requests were for the absolute minimum needed. According to estimates of building prices done at the time, the cost of a square meter was ten RUB, thus, the request of a thousand RUB could underwrite construction of 100 square-meter house.

In August 1928 the Agricultural Bank published the terms of eligibility for building loans (criteria that apparently didn’t exist up until this point in time). The Agricultural Bank clarified that only kolkhozes which had completed their “land arrangements” would be eligible for building loans (Settling one’s land affairs apparently referring to land officially transferred to a given kolkhoz for

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1 On May 1928 Ozet had addressed with this issue the Komzet, Narkomzem and the Selkhozbank, see: UZRMDA-R-227-1-45-42.  