

Jewish Colonial Farming in America: An Experiment That Went Terribly Wrong

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Introduction

During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries there were very few Jewish farmers in Europe and America. Indeed, in many parts of Europe Jews were forbidden to own land. Yet, there were Jews who always felt they should return to the agrarian way of life that their forefathers had pursued in ancient times. Some even went so far as to establish agricultural colonies in America populated by European Jewish immigrants.

In 1837 the first agricultural colony settled by Jews in the United States was founded at Wawarsing (Warwarsing) in Ulster County, New York, and named Sholom (“Peace”). Thirteen Jewish families settled there under the leadership of Moses Cohen.

“The land was divided into lots of 5 acres each, and a site was selected for a village. Contracts were awarded to build houses at a cost of \$400 each [**the equivalent of \$74,230 in 2009 money**¹]. The settlers requested the Congregation Anshe Chesed of New York to loan them a Sefer Torah (Scroll of the Law) until they could secure one from Europe, and they also asked for lamps for their synagogue.

“The newcomers cleared the land and built roads. For five years they tried to make farming pay, but circumstances forced them to add to their earnings from the produce of the land by manufacturing and trading. Notwithstanding, the colony carried on. The climax, however, came when the factories in the neighborhood were shut down. After a few years of further struggling, the settlers found it impossible to continue. They sold their belongings in 1842 and moved away.”²

Colonies Founded by Russian Immigrants

“The period from 1881 to 1891 was crucial years in the life of Russian Jewry. During these years, — years of persecution for Russian Jews, — Russian Jewry was compelled to seek refuge from pogroms and from economic and political restrictions. Most of the Russian Jewish emigrants streamed across the Atlantic in the hope of finding a new haven in the United States and, in American Jewish history, this decade marks the beginning of a new era, as has been observed by others.”³

“At the same time, many Jews were affected by the ‘Back to the Soil’ movement, then coming into popularity among the Russian intelligentsia, and expressed in the writings of such Russian literary greats as Tolstoy and Turgenev.

“It was also widely believed that anti-Semitism was at least in part due to the fact that Jewish people earned their livelihood as middlemen and were ‘non-productive’ members

of the community. One solution would be for Jews to turn to vocations requiring physical labor and to establishing agricultural colonies.”⁴

Most American Jewish communal leaders were not in favor of Jews setting up agricultural settlements. They preferred that the new immigrants be scattered throughout the country, so that they would become more quickly “assimilated” into American society. Despite this, almost twenty-five collective Jewish agricultural colonies were established in various places in America beginning in 1881. *Hamodia* presents the stories of two of these endeavors – the Sicily Island Colony in Louisiana and the Cotopaxi Colony in Colorado.

Sicily Island

“The first agricultural colony of Russian Jews was founded under the leadership of Herman Rosenthal on Sicily Island, Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, in 1881. It comprised 35 families from Kiev and 25 from Yelisanetgrad. The colonists were not very enthusiastic about the choice of location. Louisiana was not known to most of the colonists, and the climatic conditions did not appeal to them. They, however, had no choice in the matter as the land was selected without their knowledge.

“The colonists raised \$3,000 [\$427,750 in 2009 money] among themselves; they received an additional \$1,800 [\$256,650 in 2009 money] from the New York committee, and the Alliance Israelite Universelle sent \$2,800 [\$399,233 in 2009 money].”⁵

The Jewish community of New Orleans enthusiastically supported this project and supplied assistance in a variety of ways. Within a few days of the arrival of the immigrants in New Orleans, the men left their families and departed for the colony. The colonists were cordially welcomed by the citizens of Catahoula Parish, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who promised them protection and cooperation.

“The colonists worked hard and anticipated good results. They fenced the grounds and planted corn and vegetables; they cut down trees, planted fruit trees, repaired roads, dug wells, and built three two-room cottages. A governing board was elected, and a constitution was framed and adopted. A report published in the *American Israelite* of March 24, 1882, praised the work of the colonists very highly. The colonists themselves were very optimistic, and some of them wrote to their friends in Russia urging them to select Louisiana as their new home.

“With the approach of spring, however, things turned for the worse. The colonists began to complain of the heat; they were disappointed that their wives could not join them; malaria began its ravages; and to top it all the Mississippi River rose and swept away practically everything.

The New Orleans community was willing to continue its aid, but the colonists were discouraged.

“Most of the colonists scattered, abandoning everything they had left to take up peddling and factory work. This, in brief, is the story of Sicily Island.”⁶

Cotopaxi, Colorado⁷

Cotopaxi today is a small, unincorporated village located on the banks of the Arkansas River. It was given its unusual name by Henry Thomas, a nineteenth century prospector who was called “Gold Tom” by his contemporaries. When Thomas arrived in this area of the Upper Arkansas Valley in about 1872, he was particularly struck by one of the valleys. He felt that it closely resembled an area of northern Ecuador where he had once prospected for gold. The dominant feature of this Andean region was a volcano called “Cotopaxi,” so Thomas gave this area of Colorado the same name.

Shaul (Saul) Baer Milstein

Saul Baer Milstein was a well-to-do businessman and warehouse owner who resided in the city of Brest Litovsk (**which is located in what is presently** Belarus) during the nineteenth century. During the 1860s and 1870s he witnessed short periods of brief liberalization of Russian policies toward Jews which were invariably followed by increased government oppression. As a result, he concluded that the only solution for him and his family was immigration to America. Therefore, “in the late 1870’s, [he] sent his nephew, Jacob, to New York in order to scout out the political attitudes in America towards Jews, to find out about the Homestead Act, and locate land. In addition to this, a search was made to seek out interested relatives and friends for the eventual emigration. Saul Baer planned to sell his business in order to finance the endeavor once the appropriate arrangements were made.”

After arriving here, Jacob became acquainted with Michael Heilprin, a prominent Jewish leader who was instrumental in establishing the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (later known as HIAS – Hebrew Immigrants Aide Society). It was Jacob who interested Heilprin in the concept of starting agricultural colonies for Jews in America.

Emanuel H. Saltiel

Emanuel H. Saltiel (Shaltiel) (1844/45 – 1900) was a Jew of Portuguese (Sephardic) descent who had become a successful entrepreneur in Colorado during the 1880s. When he learned that Michael Heilprin was trying to encourage Russian immigrants to leave the crowded urban areas such as New York City and settle in the west, “Saltiel wrote an eloquent and convincing letter to Heilprin, offering to construct houses and barns, provide farm implements, livestock and seed for the colonists. He would keep the cost under \$10,000 [\$1,425,833 in 2009 money] and all the colonists would have to raise would be living expenses and transportation costs en route to Colorado.

“The deal seemed like a perfect fit. Each family would be indebted for less than \$435 [**\$62,023** in 2009 money], and because many of the Russians had experience in farming, [presumably on the land of non-Jews as sharecroppers] the situation would be ideal.

Heilprin sent his secretary, Julius Schwartz, to Colorado to investigate the situation and send back a report. During this time, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and under the new rule of Tsar Alexander III, a new set of repressive anti-Semitic laws were enacted, the worst of which were the May Laws of 1881.

“This has a strong impact on the [future] Cotopaxi colonists. What began as a well planned and thought out move, became an urgent necessity,” causing them to hurriedly leave Russia. Shortly after their arrival in New York, they were sent west without having any real knowledge of what they would have to deal with at Cotopaxi.

Arrival in Cotopaxi

“The people who comprised the Cotopaxi Colony in the spring of 1882 were [Chassidic] Russian Jews from the provinces of Volhynia, Kiev and Ekaterinoslav. Sixty-three persons in all, there were twenty-two ‘heads of family’, each of whom were eligible to file on 160 acres of government land. Actually, most of the sixty-three were members of only three main family clans, consisting of several generations and relatives by marriage. Among these three families, too, there was much intermarriage and nearly every colonist at Cotopaxi was related to the others by ties of blood or marriage, the only exception being close friends who had attached themselves to one ‘patriarch’ and were considered as ‘adopted.’ This aggregation had been well solidified in Europe, and the experiences of the pogroms, the emigration and the events at Cotopaxi served to weld it even more firmly together.”⁸

The group left New York by train on May 5, 1882 and arrived in Cotopaxi on May 12.

“They thought they were leaving the hardships of Tzarist Russia behind, but as it turned out they were exchanging the privations of ‘home’ for new hardships, which included non-arable land, broken promises, and the difficulty of living in a culture where language, religion, and terrain were foreign and inhospitable.

“Upon arrival in Cotopaxi, the colonists found that not all of the promises had been fulfilled. Four houses had been constructed two miles south of town on an arid plateau above Oak Grove Creek, which was both dry and sandy during the summer or roiling with water during periodic spring flooding. Eight more houses were constructed above 8,000 feet on dry rocky soil where no irrigation water could be acquired. The houses were only about eight feet square with flat roofs and lacked windows, doors and chimneys. Twenty houses had been promised, but only twelve had been constructed. The houses were unfurnished, and only four of the houses had cooking stoves.

“The supplies, too, were inadequate. When asked about this, Saltiel explained that labor and building materials were in short supply and were not available locally. He said they had been sent for, but had been delayed. Shortly after that, Saltiel left on an extended business trip and was absent for several months, leaving the colonists to cope with little more than the personal belongings they had brought with them from Russia.

“Because of the immediate necessity of planting their crops, the colonists decided to move into the unfinished houses. The colonists borrowed plows, horses, seed and other equipment from A.S. Hart who was in partnership with Saltiel and the co-owner of the store. The Jews were extended credit for the purchase of food and personal supplies. Rocks were cleared and crops were planted, chimneys were built, and the door-less, windowless houses were made into homes. Even then, it was near the first of June before their first crops were sown on the wind-swept slopes below the Sangre de Cristo Mountains where a ‘good’ growing season was less than four months.

“There were a few happy moments during the first summer in Cotopaxi. A Sefer Torah was donated to the colonists by the New York Orphan Asylum and the colonists were able to locate an abandoned building north of the General Store to use as a synagogue. The dedication of the synagogue on June 23rd held a mystical and divine quality, and was described with these words in an account sent to the *Jewish Messenger*⁹, in 1882: “The young secretary (Julius Schwartz) opened the Ark, and after the chanting of several hymns placed the Torah in its place.... Later they danced in their peculiar Russian manner and the silent moon sent its silvery rays upon the dancing and singing Russians.”

The Colonists Encounter Extreme Difficulties

Unfortunately, the joy experienced by the colonists during the summer soon ended with the onset of an early frost. This put an end to the growing season, the result being that the colonists did not have a profitable harvest. The colonists, already strapped for cash, were forced to turn to other work in order to pay off the debts they had incurred when they purchased farming supplies from the store owned by Saltiel and his partner Hart.

They also needed to purchase food and clothing for the upcoming winter.

“Many of the men took jobs as laborers in Saltiel’s mines but saw not a penny from it. Instead they were paid in vouchers for use in Hart’s store.

“In addition to the crop failure, the colonists were forced to use their winter supply of firewood for large bonfires to keep away the marauding bears. The extra houses, never having been completed, forced two families to set up camp in canvas tents and another family to spend their first year in an Indian dugout cave. During the first winter, the weather was severe, and starving Ute Indians frequently visited, begging for food.”

Eventually many of the men went to work for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, which was extending its line west from Salida. They received \$3 [\$427 in 2009 money] a day as track laborers. “This job held two benefits for the colonists, the first was that the railroad was happy to give them the Sabbath off in exchange for working on Sunday, and the second was that once the train firemen, conductors, and engineers learned of the colonists plight, they threw extra coal from the train along the tracks near Cotopaxi so that the women from the colony could gather it to use for heat throughout the long, harsh winter.”

“By the fall of 1882, it was clear that the colonists would need outside help. The promises Saltiel had made for the additional houses and supplies were never met.”

Word of the colony’s predicament reached Denver, resulting in visits by several interested groups. The Denver Jewish community provided as much help as it could, sending warm clothing, food, medicine and other necessities. “A number of reporters from the Denver newspapers appeared and interviewed the immigrants and the townspeople.

They had heard of this unusual agricultural experiment in Denver and had come down to check certain reports of mismanagement and illegalities.

“The colony did manage to survive the first winter, but they faced the coming spring with determination not to make the same mistakes nor rely on Saltiel for any further assistance. They observed their first Passover at Cotopaxi that April of 1883 [some of the men traveled 26 miles to Salida to purchase the flour they needed to bake matzos], and immediately after the rites were concluded, again borrowed seed and equipment and sowed their second crop. But nature seemed to conspire against them, for scarcely were the seeds in the ground when a late spring blizzard ruined a large part of them. These late storms are common in Colorado but to the struggling and discouraged colonists, it seemed a special punishment directed at them alone.

As their harvest in 1883 was no better than the first, several families prepared to leave as soon as they received their share of the removal funds. For the remaining families, help and encouragement during their second winter was again supplied by their friends from Denver.

“Those who stayed on that winter earned their living expenses by working in neighboring mines and on the railroad. The colony celebrated its second Passover at Cotopaxi in 1884, shortly after which a number of families left for new locations. Only six families decided to remain and plant a third crop, but when another late blizzard destroyed it, too, they at last recognized the futility of persevering in this spot and made plans to abandon the site. Each head-of-family had paid a fee of \$50.00 [\$7,129 in 2009 money] into a common fund back in New York for the filing of deeds. When they prepared to depart the county, they checked with the county clerk in Canon City and could find there no record whatsoever of any such deed or conveyance. They had simply been squatters or perhaps at best, tenant farmers on corporation town-site land.

They had wasted almost three years on Saltiel’s colony when they could have filed on public domain nearby as homesteaders.

“By June of 1884 the colony, as such, was formally dissolved. The Cotopaxi Colony had been a failure. But it had served to give its members valuable lessons in pioneering, and had taken them out of the crowded ghettos in the eastern cities and given them a glance at what was available on other farm lands in the West. Of the twenty-two families who lived through the bitter but edifying experience at Cotopaxi, only two failed to remain in

the West. The rest used their hard-won knowledge to try farming on better lands in the West.”¹⁰

Postscript

Saul Baer Milstein left Europe and settled in Denver in 1883 with his wife Miriam and their seven youngest children. Milstein became a leader of the religious Jewish community of Denver and a major contributor to many philanthropic causes. He went into the cattle business with two partners. As soon as he was able, he bought grazing lands near Denver and by the time his younger sons were grown, had built a stock-yard and packing house.

Sidebar I:

Who Was to Blame for the Colony’s Failure?

“Two completely different points of view emerged. According to Flora Satt in her master’s thesis detailing the history of the colony, the Denver Republican pinned the blame on Saltiel emphasizing his unsavory character, and they blamed the HIAS for sending the colonists into a situation which had not been fully researched ahead of time. A second newspaper, the Rocky Mountain News downplayed the situation by saying that ‘all pioneers must endure some hardship.’ They believed the colonists were not facing anything more difficult than other settlers, and felt they were far better off than most.

“There has been much debate about why the Jewish colony at Cotopaxi did not succeed. Poor timing, poor preparation, poor weather, poor funding, the cultural and language barrier, and the role played by Emanuel Saltiel have all been questioned. If any one of these things had been different, would the colony have been a success?

“In a recent paper written by a descendent of the Saltiel family, Miles Saltiel defends Emanuel Saltiel as a somewhat ‘rumbustious,’ but well-intended benefactor. He points out that there are no other cases of successful agricultural colonies in the United States during that time period. Perhaps this is so, but if nothing else, Emanuel Saltiel influenced the placement of the colony with his letter to HIAS, extolling the virtues of Cotopaxi and by promising to provide adequate housing and equipment to enable the colonists a good start. When asked for help, Saltiel at one point simply ‘shrugged.’”

Sidebar II:

List of names of original settlers, in case readers want to find relatives who might have been there:

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¹ Throughout this article, wherever a dollar amount is given for a given year, it have been converted into its equivalent present day value. There are a number of ways to convert money from a given year to money today. One is to use what is called the Unskilled Wage Rate. It is this method that has been used throughout this article.

² **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States**, by Leo Shpall, *Agricultural History*, 24, 1950, page 121

³ **The Russian Jews in America**, by George M. Price (translated by Leo Shpall), Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, *AJHS Journal*, 48, Sep. 1958 – Jun. 1959. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

⁴ **Jewish Agricultural Colonies as Reported in the Pages of the Russian Hebrew Press**, by Joel S. Gefen, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, *AJHS Journal*, 60, Sep.1970 – Jan. 1971. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

⁵ **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States**, page 129

⁶ *Ibid.*, pages 130 – 131

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated all quotes in this section are from **Cotopaxi Colorado History - Hard Times: The Jewish colony at Cotopaxi** by Nancy Oswald, *Local History*, February, 2005 - *Colorado Central Magazine* - No. 132 - Page 26. This article is available at <http://www.arkansasrivertours.com/cotopaxi-history.htm>

⁸ **The Cotopaxi Colony** by Flora Jane Satt, unpublished master's thesis 1950. Parts of this thesis are available at <http://cotopaxi.250x.com/index.htm> This quote is from Part II – The People (<http://cotopaxi.250x.com/Part2ThePeople>)

⁹ A weekly published and distributed in New York in English, German and Hebrew, between 1857 and 1902.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Part III - The Events (<http://cotopaxi.250x.com/Part3TheEvents>)