

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)**

### **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in America II**

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#### **Introduction**

Last month's column outlined some efforts during the first half of the nineteenth century to establish Jewish agricultural colonies in America. In only one case was a colony actually established. This was in 1837 at Wawarsing (Warwarsing) in Ulster County, New York, and it ended in failure a mere five years later. Other attempts, either to have Jews become individual farmers or to set up Jewish agricultural colonies, soon followed.

#### **Other Early Attempts End in Failure<sup>1</sup>**

“The immigration from Germany in 1848 opened a new chapter in the annals of American history. Many newcomers were anxious to settle on land, and among them were Jews. Some immigrants went west and bought farms there, while others settled in the existing agricultural colonies. The desire to turn to agriculture became so strong among the German-Jewish immigrants that the Jewish leaders in the United States proposed to establish colonies in Texas. The Reverend Leeser used the columns of the *Occident* to further the idea and to rally American Jews to its support.

“In 1852, Simon Berman, an immigrant from Galicia, arrived in New York, and the following year he tried to interest some of the leaders in a plan of settling Jews on land. Both the Reverend Leeser and the Reverend Dr. Morris Raphall of New York became interested in the project, but no concrete results were attained.

“In 1855, a movement arose, chiefly among the members of the B'nai B'rith, with Dr. Sigmund Waterman at the head. A committee was formed to popularize the idea, and it issued a leaflet entitled *A Call To Establish a Hebrew Agricultural Society*. The newly formed society promised to buy land to be cultivated by the colonists under the supervision of a competent manager. ‘Persons applying to be sent there must be of proper age and good character. They shall receive all the necessaries of life in consideration of their diligent and honest labors. They shall be well treated, used according to their capacities and be instructed in horticulture and agriculture theoretically and practically.’ A certain amount of the profits were to be applied to the building of houses, schools, and synagogues and to the purchase of the necessary supplies and implements. ... Officers were elected, with Dr. Waterman as president. The society hoped to build an agricultural school which would facilitate the settlement of Jews on

land. The support, however, was half-hearted, and nothing further is recorded about the work of the association.”

Thus we see that all of the early attempts to establish Jewish agricultural colonies in the United States ended in failure. This was because Jewish public opinion in America was not ready to support them, and the immigrants did not seem anxious to settle the land. These projects should not, however, be considered a total failure, because they laid the groundwork for efforts made in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

### **Colonies Founded by Russian Immigrants**

“The period from 1881 to 1891 were 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. American Jewry came face to face with an unexpected wave of Jews from Russia and other East European countries. These Jewish newcomers, who had been reared in a different environment, were totally strange to the indigenous American Jews. Indeed, these were difficult times for the immigrants. They had to adjust themselves to a new land, to new customs, to a new language, and above all, to a new way of life.”<sup>2</sup>

“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.

“The period of severe persecution and pogroms that followed the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 gave these theories and sentiments a practical urgency and provided a direct stimulus for the appearance of the *Am Olam* and *Bilu* movements — the former encouraging emigration to the United States, the latter to Palestine. The grandiose schemes and plans of the *Am Olam* groups, therefore, caught the imagination of the Jewish masses, and Eastern European Jewry eagerly awaited the results of these attempts at colonization.”<sup>3</sup>

Most national 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 more quickly be assimilated into the larger community. Despite this, almost twenty-five collective Jewish agricultural colonies were established in various parts of America beginning in 1881. Jewish agricultural colonies populated by Russian Jewish immigrants were established (in chronological order) in Louisiana, South

Dakota, Colorado, Oregon, North Dakota, Kansas, Michigan, Virginia, Connecticut, and New Jersey.

The history of the Sicily Island Colony in Louisiana is outlined below.

### **The Sicily Island Colony**

“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 Yelisaneograd. The colonists were recruited from three classes of immigrants. The first consisted of young idealists, professionals who looked upon colonization as an ideal. They wanted to show that Jews could be good farmers. The second class consisted of immigrants from southern and southwestern Russia who looked upon agriculture as a means of earning a livelihood. The rest of the immigrants had no definite aim and were largely influenced by the former two. 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 among themselves; they received an additional \$1,800 from the New York committee, and the Alliance Israelite Universelle sent \$2,800.”<sup>4</sup>

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 there and departed for the colony. The colonists were cordially welcomed by the citizens of Catahoula Parish, who promised them protection and cooperation.

“The colonists divided in groups and set to work. A German farmer was employed as advisor. The colonists were quartered in three big houses, but as the dwellings were found unsuitable, the New Orleans Jewish community built twelve others. The colonists worked hard and anticipated good results, and in appreciation of the cooperation shown by the New Orleans Jewish community the colonists wrote a letter of thanks to the president of the New Orleans association.

“The work of the colonists progressed. 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.”<sup>5</sup>

To be continued.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this section are from **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States**, by Leo Shpall, *Agricultural History*, 24, 1950, pages 120 – 146.

<sup>2</sup> **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.

<sup>3</sup> **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.

<sup>4</sup> **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States**, page 129

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 130 – 131