

THE RURAL EXPERIENCE OF JEWS IN FARMINGDALE, NEW JERSEY

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BECAUSE NEW JERSEY contained more Jewish farmers in the middle of this century than any other state, it has been called variously "the cradle of the Jewish farm movement in the United States" and "the egg basket of America." In 1943, Gabriel Davidson cited Monmouth County as one of the first ten agricultural counties in the country and as home to more Jewish farmers than any other county.¹ The largest of the Jewish farm communities in Monmouth County was located in the area of Farmingdale.

The history of Jewish farming is not confined to the twentieth century or to New Jersey. It stretches back to biblical times and extends to all continents where Jews have lived. In America, since the middle of the nineteenth century, there has been a small, but continuous, migration of Jews to the farm. In fact, the idea of Jewish agricultural settlements in America dates back to 1783, when an anonymous letter to the president of the Congress of the United States proposed settling two thousand Jewish families on the land.² In 1820, a colony was actually attempted in Florida.³ Thereafter, Jewish farm colonies and settlements were attempted or established in such far-flung places as Louisiana, Arkansas, the Dakota Territory, Kansas, Colorado, and Oregon, and in such near-by places as New York and Connecticut, as well as in New Jersey.⁴

By the middle of the twentieth century, Jewish farmers had developed poultry farming into a major agricultural industry, and thus had made a significant contribution to American agriculture. Though the nineteenth century colonies were generally very short-lived, their histories provide a tradition or framework of which Farmingdale, New Jersey, becomes a part.

Although the immigrant Jews' efforts to establish themselves on farms in America have a substantial history, few people, including historians, are aware of it. A stereotype of the Jew as an urban dweller engaged in purely urban occupations has resulted in a serious lack of research on the subject and an almost total ignorance about Jewish farmers and the communities they establish.

The stereotype, which still persists, of the Jew as a nonfarmer — a person who cannot tolerate hard work and is not fit for agricultural pursuits — is a burden that Jewish farmers have had to endure. Often it has impaired their relationships with the non-Jews among whom they settled. The stereotype produced predictions of failure from agriculturists and seriously handicapped the Jews' efforts to obtain low-cost financing, particularly during the depression. In time, the Jews' efforts to break

the stereotype became intertwined with a need to prove their loyalty as Americans.

The stereotype appeared in America as early as 1820. With only a handful of Jews in the country, and an infinitesimal number considering rural life, an editor of *Niles' Weekly Register*, discussing the need to eliminate office holding restrictions from the Maryland constitution, wondered why most countries denied Jews the rights granted to others. He concluded:

There must be some moral cause to produce this effect. In general, their interests do not appear identified with those of the communities in which they live...they will not sit down and labor like other people — they create nothing and are mere consumers. They will not cultivate the earth...preferring to live by their wit in dealing, and acting as if they had a home nowhere.⁵

In 1824, the Princeton Auxiliary of the American Society for Meliorating the Conditions of the Jews evolved a plan whereby the Jewish immigrants would become “intelligent, respectable, and useful members of society.”⁶ The society’s aim was for the Jews to convert to Christianity; settling them on farms was the lure proposed. To show the feasibility of their plan, the authors of the report referred to Jewish history, noting that Jews had been agriculturists from Biblical times. In bringing history up to date, however, they resorted to the worst kind of stereotyping: the “present unsettled and commercial habits” and the “rapacious dispositions” of the Jews were a result of restrictions in the occupations placed upon them. Farming would do a great deal, they claimed, “to redeem the Jews from their . . . *golden* pursuits.”⁷

While the Jews fought the stereotype, they somehow internalized it and seemed to act as if it were true. In 1855, the B’nai B’rith issued a pamphlet entitled “A call to establish a Hebrew Agricultural Society,” which stated that “the nations of the world” looked upon the Jews as “having neither the desire nor the capacity to settle” upon the soil because Jews exhibited no interest in agriculture.⁸ Some time later, a group of rabbis in New York, urging rural colonization for new Jewish immigrants, argued that by becoming farmers Jews could prove to the world at large, and specifically to Americans, that they could be good and loyal citizens. Writing in the *Yiddische Volkzeitung*, these rabbis pointed out a rare combination of opportunities offered American Judaism:

to promote the welfare of our brethren and the advancement of the best interests and the glory of our eminent faith. Here are the means to refute the oft-muttered calumny that our people are unfitted by habit, nature, and sentiment for honest toil....

In colonizing them [the Russian immigrants] and settling them as agriculturists, we feel...every moral assurance that they will become worthy American citizens repaying the protection and rights they here receive, by becoming faithful and loyal denizens of the soil, and forming a class of useful and honorable men who, adhering to their religious convictions, will also be imbued with the spirit of American institutions.⁹

Agriculture as a means of promoting the best interests of the Jewish people is the theme of a Yiddish poem written for the 1914 graduation ceremony of the Woodbine School of Agriculture—the first secondary agricultural school in America, founded through the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Aaron Pincus, who wrote the poem for his fellow graduates, had been a Russian intellectual and premed student before becoming an American agriculture student. Later he crisscrossed the country following the sun and the crops as a migrant worker and eventually became a farm owner in Toms River, New Jersey.¹⁰ In the poem, Pincus reveals his sense of the far-reaching significance of successful agriculture to Jews:

I wish you to be good farmers,
Be devoted to our people,
And build for them a future,
Bright, and beautiful, and free.
And then will God grant you
Satisfaction and a place.
Oh, fare thee well my friends,
And fare thee well, my sweet home.¹¹

In the course of time, many Jewish organizations were established to encourage and help immigrants in their farming and colonizing efforts. The most successful and responsible of these organizations was the Jewish Agricultural Society, set up in 1900 by funds from the Baron de Hirsch. By 1933, the Jewish Agricultural Society had helped to settle 10,434 Jewish farmers on 9,228 farms in America; 6,608 of these farms were located in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.¹² Although these farmers were almost totally inexperienced in agriculture, few defaulted on loans made to them by the Jewish Agricultural Society.

Notwithstanding this interesting fact, in 1932, during the depression, the federal government, which had been another source of help for Jewish farmers, drastically curtailed its assistance to them. The stereotype of the Jew as a nonfarmer, and thus a risk to lending agencies, was implicit in the action. And on top of this stereotype another one was grafted: not only were Jews not farmers, but poultry raising was really not farming. Like the first, this idea was accepted by both non-Jew and Jew. Dr. Gabriel Davidson, director of the Jewish Agricultural Society,

which was hard pressed to meet the escalating needs of the Jewish farmers, expressed frustration and despair at an added unnecessary burden the Jewish farmer had to carry. In his report to the Baron de Hirsch Fund, Davidson felt impelled to explain that the stereotype about poultry farming was not true. Davidson wrote:

The restrictions imposed by Federal Land Banks are so rigid that large numbers of our farmers cannot avail themselves of the Banks' service. Poultry raising is a recognized branch of agriculture, considered as such by agricultural colleges, experiment stations and extension service agencies. Yet, because of the alleged risk of the industry and the large proportional investment in buildings, Federal Land Banks look askance upon loans to poultry farms. Poultry is a favored branch with Jews.¹³

That the federal action was directed against Jews seems even clearer from yet another statement in Davidson's report: "The banks are also opposed to loans to farmers who are engaged in the boarding business"; income from boarders typically supplemented the farm income of the Jewish immigrant farmer.¹⁴ Finally, Davidson referred to the prejudicial stereotype about the Jewish farmer:

There is another factor . . . namely, the prejudice grounded on the belief that a stranger, coming from the city, possessing no agricultural background, and especially the urbanized Jew, cannot make his way on the farm. Federal loans are made through local Farm Loan Associations composed almost wholly of staid native farmers who have fixed points of view and who are skeptical about the possibility of success of anyone not born and reared on a farm. This attitude works to the particular disadvantage of the new Jewish farmer, who has no farm record by which he can be judged . . . The same factors which work to the disadvantage of Jewish farmers in the matter of Federal Land Bank loans also work to their disadvantage in the case of loans through other channels.¹⁵

In spite of the difficulty in obtaining financing and the general economic insecurity engendered by the depression, a number of Jewish immigrants clung tenaciously to their dream of settling on a farm. Samuel Joseph, in his *History of the Baron de Hirsch Fund*, writes: "The Jewish farmward trend was as persistent as ever. The keen competition against which small business must contend and the unsettled conditions in many trades directed the thoughts of many toward the farm."¹⁶ In New York, the offices of the Jewish Agricultural Society were crowded with Jews who had lost jobs or businesses and were desperate to go on farms, where they could at least be assured of food supplies. Unfortunately the Jewish Agricultural Society could help only a limited number during that time, for its primary activity then was aimed at helping those who had already settled to remain.

With the curtailment of Federal loans, the Jewish Agricultural Society had to divert most of its funds to loans and often gave mortgages on the flimsiest security. For example, the Kassenoff family of Toms River applied for and received a chattel mortgage of \$1700 in October of 1935. As security, the Jewish Agricultural Society accepted

one Jersey cow called 'Daisy' weight 800 pounds, five years old; one Guernsey cow, called 'Becky' weight 1000 pounds, five years old. This chattel mortgage shall include the offspring of the above mentioned stock, or any stock replacing the existing stock now on the premises or mortgaged herein.¹⁷

Although the depression hit the Jewish farmers of Farmingdale very hard, most of them managed to hang on, overcome their inexperience, and establish their farms and their community—all disproving the general opinion of the professional agriculturists. That opinion, as late as 1952, was that a man can rarely become a successful farm owner unless he ascends the agricultural ladder from hired hand to tenant farmer to farm owner, thereby gaining the requisite experience.¹⁸ In the minds of the world at large, the Jewish farmers were destined to fail. However, the Monmouth County Agent's 1941 report to the Federal Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicated that the predictions had been ill founded. "In previous years," he wrote, "we have expressed concern about this expansion because we have felt that much of it was not on a sound business basis and that large capital investments by inexperienced people might result in more headaches eventually. So far, our dire predictions have failed to come to pass and we must admit that many of these people are having some success in their poultry enterprise."¹⁹ The Jews of Farmingdale had made it. By 1943, theirs was the largest poultry-producing community in Monmouth County.

FARMINGDALE as a Jewish community began in 1919, and it had a much more durable history than the earlier American Jewish settlements, enjoying a life span of close to fifty years. Located in Howell Township, on an area covering sixty-four square miles, it is referred to as "Farmingdale" because Farmingdale was its post office and its banking and trading center.

The Jewish farming community at Farmingdale was neither a Utopian communal effort like Sunrise Colony, Michigan, nor a cooperative settlement like Roosevelt, New Jersey, nor a planned community like Woodbine, New Jersey.²⁰ No coherent ideology motivated its settlement; no group came at once to form a core of pioneers; no benevolent organization in New York or Philadelphia planned its social and economic structure. Instead, through the years, as Jews continued to settle in Farmingdale, a Jewish farm community developed there. In this,

the community was similar to others—those at Toms River, New Jersey, and Petaluma, California, to cite but two. During its lifetime, it structured itself into a cohesive community, creating its organizations—economic, social, cultural, religious—in response to its felt needs.

Although its history is different from those of its nineteenth-century American predecessors, Farmingdale is typical of many Jewish farm communities which developed with encouragement from the Jewish Agricultural Society in the first half of the twentieth century. But the Jews who became farmers are not typical either of Jews or of American farmers. In choosing farming as a life-style, those Jews were going counter to the urban life-style of their own co-religionists and to the trend toward urbanization in America. Removing themselves from the security of organized communities, they settled in remote places among people whose rural ways and regional dialects and mannerisms they did not understand. But they continued to maintain themselves as a coherent enclave within an alien society, just as they had done in the cities.

Characteristically, the earliest Jewish settlers of Farmingdale were in their middle years. Their typical pattern of migration was from eastern Europe to western Europe, then to New York, and finally to the farm. Before coming to the farm, they had spent some years and untold youthful energies in city occupations: as pressers, tailors, cutters, painters, keepers of small shops, etc. They came to the farm with limited re-



Janey and Louis Cohen and their granddaughter, Sarah Cohen, about 1942. The Cohens moved to Farmingdale in 1926.

sources and could buy only marginal low-priced farms, usually very run-down, often without either indoor plumbing or electricity. Instead of experience in farming and deep-rooted attachments to the land, they brought with them their experience in political and social movements both in Europe and America, their motivating idealism, their attachments to their specific Jewish culture, and their ties to the Old World of eastern Europe and the New World of American cities where family and friends lived. Often, in order to eat, they had to create income from other sources. For many, the first successful crop was "summer boarders." Their inexperience in farming resulted in many costly errors and in serious traumas. But as farmers they persevered.

EVENTUALLY, Farmingdale was settled by four distinct groups: Jews born in eastern Europe, who arrived continually throughout the history of the community but in the largest numbers during the 1930s; German Jews, refugees from Hitler, who arrived in the late 1930s and early 1940s; American-born professionals and intellectuals, who came in the middle and late 1940s; and displaced persons, survivors of the holocaust, who settled in the 1950s.

For some of the Jewish immigrants, settling on a farm fulfilled an old dream of owning land—a privilege long denied to many in Europe—and made real the vision of America as a place of extended opportunities where they could send down deep roots. One Farmingdale informant speaks of the dream as a motive for his parents' settling on a farm:

They had a great yearning to be farmers in the old country, but there was a strict law against Jews being involved in farming. They didn't know whether they had a natural talent for farming, but they had a feeling this was something that they were always deprived of, the opportunity to try farming. And they always spoke of that. They always spoke of the...wonderful black soil of Russia which they weren't allowed to plow.²¹

For other settlers, those who could not adjust to the large cities where they had landed, the farm offered the peace and quiet they were denied in the city as well as an opportunity to labor with dignity. This was the expressed motivation of Israel Friedman, who, together with his brother-in-law Benjamin Peskin and their young families, was one of the "founding fathers" of the community. Friedman says, in an interview, "I wanted a better life for my family. I wanted not to exploit anyone and I didn't want to be exploited myself. On a farm I could do it." For Friedman, a laundryman in New York who worked seventeen hours a day, America was a pile of dirty linens. In contrast, the farm was free, liberating:

It was one of the best times in my life...it gave me a stimulus so that I could go around thinking...In New York I didn't have a chance to develop my mind because I worked from 7:00 in the morning till 11:00 at night, and I had no chance.... I was tired.... On the farm, in the wintertime I had plenty of time, and even in the summertime, I could take an hour or two and read or go somewhere. I could talk to people who understand... ideas. Over there I lived because I used my brain.²²

Many informants have spoken of the farm and the community as providing a kind of security—security of place, perhaps stability—which somehow goes beyond the economic. Although the parents of one informant settled in Farmingdale in 1932, during the depression, economic security represented only part of their search.

They always talked of an opportunity to be farmers...to own land, to earn a living from land. You see, there was a feeling of insecurity in earning a living in factories or in whatever work was available. There was a feeling that if you could own your own piece of land, there was a great security there.... You could eat.... My uncle...kept talking about an opportunity, once and for all, to get back to the land and to earn a living in a decent way on the land instead of struggling...as a painter.... In those years when he went on the farm, which was about 1927, 1928, it wasn't a depression which was driving him but he was looking, actually looking for a better way of life. He was trying to find something that was more secure and cleaner than what he was doing.... And then he felt there was no future as a worker because he always talked about..., 'Well, what happens when I get a little older, and I'm a little tired, and I can't paint so fast....' He felt that there was no future in simply being a painter, while as a farmer he would build up...something that would be all his own.²³

When I asked this informant whether his parents, who had landed and settled in New York City, liked the city or not, he answered: "They accepted it as an improvement over the village in Russia. But there was nothing to like. They lived in very deep poverty."²⁴

"Deep poverty" was the condition of many Jews in New York City during the depression. During the 1930s, in the years following the depression, the most significant growth of the Farmingdale community took place.

In New York City, Jews were the victims of social and economic discrimination which, according to John Higham, reached a peak between the two world wars. "It was generally understood in New York," writes Higham, "that a Jew stood no chance of getting a white-collar job if a non-Jewish applicant was available."²⁵

An informant talks about how the depression in New York affected



Hyman and Hilda Grossman, 1940

him after he graduated from City College in the top 2 percent of his class:

The problem was that when I got out of school I had three choices, roughly. I was given an offer to join a kibbutz in what was then Palestine.... Then I had a choice to join a group that was going to the South Seas to live on coconuts and fish.... Our alternatives were very limited. And then I was offered a job with a labor union...on an educational committee...you were supplied with a baseball bat, and you went out and educated the bosses.... Anyway, I did have one other choice, which I took for a while. I was offered a job at a lumberyard...pulling lumber around The only qualification [for the job] besides my recognized talents was that I must not be Jewish . . . so that was easily taken care of: I called myself Lawrence B. Hedley . . . When my uncle suggested I try farming . . . it sounded very tempting. In other words, we did have limited choices at the time.

When asked if he had considered farming before that, he responded:

No, not really.... It was the depths of the depression...and very talented and very able people were doing almost anything.... I knew people who applied to be teachers, who didn't have a chance of getting a job. People who were trying to get into

engineering were refused even an interview. Fields were pretty well closed, the opportunities were very slim, there was really nothing much you could plan on. And my feeling was that farming was about as good an idea as any other. I simply treated it as one other alternative.²⁶

However, this man's friends—college-educated young Jewish men, all unemployed—thought their classmate had gone crazy in deciding to go into farming. Indeed, they saw his act as an admission of failure. They had completely accepted the urban-Jew stereotype:

When I mentioned to some of my college mates that I was planning to go out on a farm, they felt very sorry, very sorry, for me because their feeling was that I had slipped my mind, my mind had slipped a little.... From the point of view of college graduates, my contemporaries, going on a farm was a complete confession of total collapse. But I got satisfaction... doing something completely different from my contemporaries.²⁷

This informant again encountered the idea that Jewish farmers were human failures when, as an unmarried farmer, he tried to date a Jewish girl from neighboring Freehold. When he introduced himself on the telephone to the girl's mother, she archly told him that "my daughter does not go out with farmers!" and quickly hung up.

The stereotype persists among Jews to the present—even, ironically, among the Jewish farmers themselves. The son of one of the earliest Farmingdale settlers, who had been raised on a farm and had made his primary living from a farm most of his adult life, spoke with great admiration for his father's intelligence, radicalism, and imagination in giving up a very good importing business in New York and settling his family on a farm in Farmingdale in the late 1920s. But when this informant and his wife were asked how they would have reacted had their daughter decided to remain on a farm, they were indignant: "Our daughter is a professional," they both said. "She has status. She is not a farmer." And a survivor of the holocaust, one of the very few still operating farms in Farmingdale, repeated the same sentiment. She spoke with great emotion of her years with the partisans in the Polish forests, and of the killing and torture she had witnessed. The farm provided much-needed tranquillity. "After what we had been through," she said, "how could we possibly think there were hardships on the farm?" Furthermore, the Jewish farming community provided an atmosphere of real *yidishkayt*, as she put it, which was of crucial importance to the whole family. But she, too, was shocked at the question: "My children. Farmers! It's not a Jewish life."²⁸

And yet, almost unanimously, the people interviewed claim that their

years on the farm were the happiest in their lives. And their years in the community were enriching, rewarding, and exciting.

AT THE HEART of the Jewish community in Farmingdale was the community center, built through the joint efforts of twelve families in 1928. Benjamin Peskin, the earliest settler and a real force in starting the community, donated the land, and others gave whatever goods or services they could, while the Jewish Agricultural Society advanced a loan on a very liberal repayment schedule. Before the building of the center, which served as a synagogue, social club, and lecture hall, services for religious holidays had been held in private homes, and the Torahs had been moved from place to place. The farmers, who could all read Hebrew, conducted the services themselves; there was neither the money, nor the desire, nor the need to engage a rabbi.

The completion of the center gave the Jews of Farmingdale a second home. Notices of the socials held every Saturday night said in Yiddish, "Come to our center. It is bright and warm every Saturday night." Peskin's daughter recalled what the opening of the center meant to her and to the other children: "Maybe it's not much—and by today's standards of temples and centers it might look like a shack—but to us children, it was like a fairy palace."²⁹

As soon as there were enough Jews to hold religious services, there were enough to establish a Yiddish school for the children. The National Council of Jewish Women played an integral part in the formation of the early school, sending teachers to the community and supervising the school's activities. The school, like the synagogue, rotated among different homes until the center was built.

In 1934 the *Sholem Aleichem folk shule numer dray* opened, and the children were taught by exceptionally gifted teachers. One, Dr. Boris Shegloff, was a young immigrant psychiatrist who took the job to supplement his meager earnings until he became established in his profession. His replacement, Leon Chanukoff, was an artist, a writer, and a sensitive creative teacher who inspired complete love for Yiddish as well as for himself.

The early school was cultural and secular rather than religious. In contrast, the school is now a Hebrew school, and like its counterparts everywhere, is almost purely religious. The curriculum then centered on a group of holidays, for which the children prepared plays—adaptations of *Sholem Aleichem* and *Peretz*—and learned the appropriate songs for each holiday and, of course, the history associated with it. At the presentation, the women prepared and gave a beautiful banquet, each outdoing herself with her special dishes until the tables seemed to sag under



Jewish Community Center

the weight of the food. People came from neighboring communities to see the children perform and to share in the festivities, leaving invitations for the Farmingdale *khaverim* to visit their communities in return.

The Jewish farmers came to all meetings and events, business or social, with their entire families. Babies wrapped in blankets were placed on the edge of the stage or, according to one informant, under the tables, and there they slept during the meetings, while their older brothers and sisters fell asleep sitting in the chairs next to their parents. The meetings generally ended with spontaneous group singing in which the children who were awake joined. As life-styles changed, and as baby-sitters came into vogue, the children were left at home, the singing stopped, the banquets shrank to refreshments—coffee and cake, first homemade and then store-bought—and the meetings took place less and less frequently.

According to the estimate of one early pioneer, there were six Jewish families by 1925. By 1930 there were roughly thirty, whose members had come specifically as chicken farmers—except for one family that started a vegetarian hotel and summer colony.

A typical pattern for the early settlers was for the wife and children to settle on the farm while the husband remained in the city earning money until the chickens came into production. This was the case of Benjamin Wishnick and his wife Rose, who, in 1932, bought a poultry farm in Farmingdale, about two city blocks away from the community center. The Wishnicks had neither friends nor relatives in the area; they were assisted in the move by the Jewish Agricultural Society. While Rose Wishnick settled with the children and started to raise a flock of baby chicks, her husband remained in New York to operate his hand laundry until the chickens began to bring an income. Rose sent letters back to her family in New York, telling the news on the farm:

Dear Mother,

I can write you that on the 14th of March we are getting in another 800 baby chicks. And the chicks are just fine. We have already separated them. The cockerels we are keeping in the garage.

Helen, write me if you and Frieda will come for Passover. If Mother does not come, I will not unpack the Passover dishes because I have so much work that I can hardly get finished. But don't tell this to Mother.

(Translated from the Yiddish).

And the children wrote to their father in New York City:

Dear Father,

I can let you know that we all feeling fine hoping to hear from you the same.

Dear Father since you are away from use we are feeling very lonsome without you we hope the day you are coming out to stay with use for life.

Father let me know how all my friends are in New York. I am not very lonsome for them.³⁰

For Rose Wishnick, the Jewish Community Center was extremely important, giving her contact with other Jewish people and relief from her loneliness. On frozen winter nights, carrying her wrapped-up baby and guiding the other children, she walked to meetings.

As lonely as it was for her, the early 1930s were nevertheless exciting for the small community that watched more and more Jewish families arrive. Said one informant: "We were like baby chicks under a hoover — huddling together for warmth. When a new family arrived, we were so happy. We had a committee to meet them and help them and welcome them to our community."³¹

MOST OF THE ARRIVALS were from the Jewish ghettos of New York City. Though the Christian residents of Farmingdale had at first been glad to have customers for parcels of their land, they later began to be resentful about the changing landscape and the changing character of their own community. Although most had never previously seen Jews, they were suspicious. Some must have felt intimidated by foreigners who not only had different ways but also spoke a different language. Insensitive to the feelings of their foreign neighbors, they mimicked the Yiddish speech of the adults and humiliated the children with crude ethnic jokes.

But there were exceptions. Rose Wishnick died a year and half after moving to the farm, the first such tragedy in the community. Some Christian neighbors were genuinely kind; Charley Hulick, who lived opposite the Wishnick farm, came without being asked and took care of the chickens during the painful days of the funeral and the mourning period that followed. He brought with him each day a jar of fresh cream or butter or freshly made cheese. The teachers of the public school came to visit the family, bringing flowers, not knowing that traditional Jewish homes do not permit flowers during mourning. The bereaved grandmother, Tsirel Katz, who never really found a home in America, opened the door for them, she not speaking any English, they uncomfortably holding the flowers, not understanding the strange culture they

glimpsed, the children watching and being acutely aware of different worlds. It was much more than just a door which separated them.

The Jewish child was intimately involved with two distinct cultures and had to straddle them. In Farmingdale, the Jewish child was different in yet another way. The child had invariably started school in New York City and was further advanced in basic skills. The public schools in Farmingdale were one- or two-room structures housing three or four classes in each room. The schools had no electricity, no plumbing, no central heating. Once a month, a bookmobile came from the county library to bring a supply of books, but there were never enough. A local farmer brought a pail or two of fresh drinking water every day, which the children drank directly out of a common ladle. When the PTA was organized, the Jewish farm women joined and attended all meetings. The first purchase the PTA made was a large soup kettle which circulated weekly from one parent to another, each taking her turn filling it with soup and bringing it to the children. One informant believes that for some children the cup of hot soup was the only meal. He claims to have seen children faint from hunger.

As for the curriculum, it consisted of little more than the traditional three Rs, which were presented three times each day: once for the fourth grade, once for the fifth grade, and once for the sixth grade. Thus the material was constantly being reviewed. Yet there were those who were hopelessly lost. They sat quietly sometimes, bored usually, waiting for school to be over so that they could go back to work on the farm or taunt other children, invariably the Jewish children, on their way home.



Sholem Aleichem Folk Shule, about 1938. Dr. Boris Shegeloff is at left. The author, Gertrude (Wishnick) Dubrovsky, is the tall girl in the back row next to Dr. Shegeloff.

The Jewish children, all of eastern-European-born parents, were at least bilingual; some could speak three languages well. Practically all did well in school, practically all went on to receive some kind of higher education; they are now in a wide variety of professions.

A persistent and painful problem for the Jewish child was an anti-Semitism which he neither understood nor could cope with reasonably. Religious holidays such as Easter and Christmas were stressed in school and studied as if they were as national as the Fourth of July. The older non-Jewish boys, quick to pick out of these studies that the Jews were the Christ-killers, tormented the Jewish children mercilessly. Little Jewish boys were dragged into the woods and made to expose themselves. The six-year-old Sophia Peskin, daughter of the first Jewish settler, was threatened with a knife. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross opposite the Peskin home in about 1923. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the Klan, robed in their white sheets, marched past the homes of new Jewish settlers. In 1942, swastikas and a picture of a Jew hanging from a gallows were painted on the wall of the Jewish center. Horror and dread seized the whole Jewish community, which understood by then what Hitler was doing to their families in eastern Europe. (In 1974, history repeated itself; as the walls went up on a new Jewish center in Howell Township, they were decorated with an eight-foot swastika. In 1976, our bicentennial year, the new Solomon Schechter Hebrew Day School in Howell Township, just completed and ready to open for the fall term, was destroyed by "a fire of suspicious origin.")

The parallel to the *shtetl* was obvious to the settlers. Once more they were living in an environment that was psychologically alien and alienating; thus, as in the *shtetl*, they had to draw together with their own kind, dealing with the Christian world only when necessary, and then with suspicion and reserve. The two worlds kept strictly apart; there was no social intermingling.

The earliest Jewish settlers in Farmingdale sought an environment in America that was compatible with their needs, yet they established themselves in a community that was as alienating as it was familiar. If they couldn't go home again, they could, at least, recreate their old home. Unhappy as some of their experiences were, the settlers were, in many ways, making a romantic effort at going back.

EQUALLY ROMANTIC was the effort of the American-born Jews who settled in large numbers in Farmingdale in the 1940s. In their words, the pursuits of the ideal took them "back to nature and in[to] contact with the strivings of the heart." Young professionals, liberals, radicals, and intellectuals, many returning from service, they settled on farms



Harry Sokol in a coop, with a brooder stove and chicks

as a commitment to a way of life that would be, in the words of one of them, “free of sham, free of hypocrisy, free of pettiness and meanness and the rat race of the city.”³²

Though Jewish, many of these settlers disavowed parochial ties and regarded themselves as a close-knit group of “humanists.” Many did not join the Jewish Community Center or attend religious services or send

their children to either the Yiddish or the Hebrew school. But they had a definite impact on the area.

Under the guidance of the Bank Street College of Education, they founded a cooperative nursery school—the first such school in New Jersey. It still exists, now a Montessori school and an excellent nursery. Yet in spite of strenuous efforts on the part of the directors, the school never succeeded in enrolling any significant number of non-Jewish children. Located in the town of Farmingdale, it was regarded with hostility and called a “Jew School.”

These “humanists” were also instrumental in establishing a feed cooperative which built its own mill, and they took an active part in the egg-marketing cooperatives established by earlier settlers. They also took an active part in local government, and their agitation was partly responsible for modernizing the school system.

ALTHOUGH THE INDIVIDUALS who composed the Jewish community of Farmingdale had different personal histories, they shared a common cultural heritage and many mutual interests. One thing they shared was the love of *pilpul*, the discourse and subtle disputation that accompanies religious study, which in eastern Europe had often been elevated to an art. Even though most of the farmers born in eastern Europe had thrown away their religious beliefs either before coming to America or shortly after their arrival, the form of the *pilpul* remained in the passionate discussions about new revolutionary socialistic ideals. Thus, many of the Jewish settlers of Farmingdale brought with them to the farm their insatiable appetite for discussion and argumentation and their zealous commitment to ideologies. In this, they were similar to their predecessors in America, the immigrant Jewish farmers in the short-lived nineteenth-century colonies.³³ Farming gave those who needed and wanted it the leisure to pursue meetings and ideas and it also gave them a ready group of people prepared to meet the intellectual challenges which opposing ideologies inspire. Said Israel Friedman, one of the first two settlers in Farmingdale, “We existed by means of farming. But we *lived*, we *lived*, because of our ideologies.”³⁴

The farmers thrived on a continuous diet of intense discussion. It was at the heart of their business and social lives. It attended everything—executive board meetings, farming instructional meetings, the cooperative effort in heavy seasonal chores such as chicken vaccinating, and even folk-dance socials. Ultimately, these discussions, which accompanied their work and their social lives, clearly identified opposing ideologies and polarized the community along political lines.

As everything was social, so, too, did everything become political. In

running a feed cooperative, for example, it was not enough to consider only sound business practices; one had also to consider such issues as profit motives and the exploitation of labor. Even in the Jewish Community Center, at a meeting called to discuss such a noncontroversial topic as the control of lice in the chicken coops, there was included in the agenda an item labeled "Good and Welfare," which was interpreted to mean the good and welfare of the world which Jews and others inhabited. One informant commented: "Solving the problem of the lice, that was easy. But solving the Spanish Civil War, that was a lot more complicated." Inevitably the discussions, which are reported to have gone on for hours and hours into the night, generated more and more heat; when the community began to break into various factions, each group accused the other of undermining the cause of the Loyalists.

THE DIVISIVENESS reached its height in 1953.

It was coincident with the decline of the farm economy. Overproduction of eggs, the recession following the Korean War, and the withdrawal of government price supports caused a severe trauma to the industry from which it never recovered. Many of the younger settlers had to find other means of making a living. Many went back to previous professions: law, accounting, teaching, social work, business. Some found work with the government at nearby Fort Monmouth.

At the same time, in 1953, the country was paralyzed by the hysteria of the McCarthy era. Accusations were being made about subversives in the U.S. Army, specifically at Fort Monmouth, resulting in dismissals, investigations, and frequent hearings. Reports in the local paper singled out witnesses with obvious Jewish names and specifically identified them as farmers. The manager of a local egg-marketing cooperative was summoned as a witness, although he had never had any connection with either the U.S. Army or Fort Monmouth. Of the more than 90 persons dismissed from their jobs, all but three or four were Jewish, and among these were some Farmingdale farmers.

The tension of those times adversely affected the Jewish community. Older farmers, frustrated by increasingly harder times and facing the grim prospect of actually losing their farms, began to blame left-wingers in the Jewish Community Center for the plight of the farmers. Some younger people, threatened by a loss of jobs because of past radical associations, turned on their neighbors. The deep split that developed among the Jews of Farmingdale was as painful as it was ugly. Some farmers wrote to the local press and the Yiddish press about what they considered communist influences in the area. At the community center, a group fought for the expulsion of "Communists." When that failed,

half the membership broke away and tried to form another Jewish Community Center. The Federal Bureau of Investigation were constant visitors to the community, questioning frightened and confused farmers about their loyalty.

In the minds of some, the Jewish farmer assumed a new image and a new stereotype. He was now suspected of being disloyal to the basic institutions of the country and of conspiring to overthrow the government. The government's withdrawal of price supports for eggs — but not for grain — seemed to come almost in reaction to this stereotype.

Poultry farmers, among whom were the majority of Jewish farmers, were caught in an unfair economic squeeze. Without a powerful lobby to fight for them in Washington, they were helpless. Nevertheless, the Jewish farmers fought, though ultimately without effect. They sent committees and delegations to the Department of Agriculture to present their grievances and to propose solutions that would save their farms. They also received help from outside. Governor Robert B. Meyner and New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Phillip Alampi were among those who tried to intercede on their behalf, and a non-Jew from Rumson sent a telegram to his friend, Representative Auchincloss, asking that the Congressman receive a delegation of farmers. He felt impelled to assure Auchincloss that the Jewish farmers were loyal Americans:

These men are 100 percent Americans and are representative citizens of one of New Jersey's outstanding industries. Therefore, I urge you to give them your invaluable counsel, advice, and help because the people behind the egg industry are in desperate straits.³⁵

Nothing helped. In addition to the political pressures the poultry industry and the Jewish farmer endured, there were also the pressures that accompanied the rapidly advancing technology. Like other small family farmers across America, the Jewish farmer could not compete against the giant conglomerates which had begun to buy up small farms and incorporate them into vertically integrated agribusinesses.

As New Jersey had been the first state where individual Jewish farmers developed poultry farming on a large commercial scale, so too — in the late 1950s — was New Jersey the first state where the process of decline in the American Jewish farm community started.³⁶

IT IS NOT the purpose here to account fully for the decline of poultry farming in New Jersey nor to prove or disprove the justice or injustice of the charges and "calumnies" directed against the Jewish farmer. It is sufficient to say that the charges evolved from a stereotypic way of

considering Jews which, in turn, produced other stereotypes.

In Farmingdale, the stereotype has gone full circle. Non-Jewish farmers today repeat the old saws: "Jews are not really farmers—they are businessmen. Besides, poultry raising is not farming at all." And another stereotype is being voiced: "The Jews came to the farm to keep their sons from going into the service. As soon as the war was over, they left." Some deny that the Jewish farmer made any significant impact on Howell Township or on United States agriculture generally. "Claims that he did," they say, "are greatly exaggerated."

Meanwhile, there are a handful of Jewish farmers still operating their farms in Farmingdale. But these are gradually easing out of the business. The old Jewish Community Center is gone. The new center membership is made up of an entirely new group of people who live in the rapidly expanding housing developments which are now claiming the land. Most of the older settlers—those who are still alive—no longer live in Farmingdale. Many have moved to the nearby community of Lakewood, where they live near to each other in apartment complexes, still huddling together like chicks under a brooder stove. Many retain their membership in the center out of sentiment, and because relatives are buried in the community cemetery. Some older people belong because they want to ensure their own places in the cemetery, among the friends they knew and worked with, and with whom they shared so much of their lives.

Notes

1. Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York: L.B. Fisher, 1943), pp. 150-51.
2. Hans Lamm, "The So-Called 'Letter of a German Jew to the President of the Congress of the United States of America,' of 1783," American Jewish Historical Society, *Publications* 37 (1947): 171-84.
3. Lee M. Friedman, *Pilgrims in a New Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1948), pp. 243-47.
4. Leo Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States," *Agricultural History* 24 (July 1973): 120-46; Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*.
5. John Higham, "American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered," in *Jews in the Mind of America*, ed. Charles Herbert Stember and others (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 248.
6. *The Second Report of the American Society for Meliorating the Conditions of the Jews* (Princeton, N.J.: D.A. Borrenstein, 1824), p. 13.

7. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
8. Morris U. Schappes, ed., *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875*, 3d ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 347.
9. Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," p. 128.
10. Interview with Aaron Pincus, Informant File, Farmingdale Collection, Archives, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York City.
11. Ibid., translation by Gertrude W. Dubrovsky.
12. Samuel Joseph, *History of the Baron de Hirsch Fund* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1935), p. 288.
13. Ibid., p. 171.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 172.
16. Ibid.
17. Toms River File, Farmingdale Collection.
18. Jacob M. Maze, "Farming by Jews in New Jersey," *Annual Report*, 1952 (New York: The Jewish Agricultural Society, 1952), p. 21.
19. "New Jersey Annual Reports, 1941," p. 27, Extension Service of the Department of Agriculture, Record Group 33, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
20. Joseph J. Cohen, *In Quest of Heaven: The Story of the Sunrise Co-operative Farm Community* (New York: Sunrise History Publishing Committee, 1957); Edwin Roskam, *Roosevelt, New Jersey* (New York: Grossman, 1972); Joseph, *History of the Baron de Hirsch Fund*, pp. 48-115.
21. Quotes from Farmingdale informants are taken from the tapes of interviews conducted with them. The Farmingdale Collection, housed at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York City, contains the tapes from 116 interviews.
22. Interview with Israel Friedman, Informant File, Farmingdale Collection.
23. Informant File, Farmingdale Collection.
24. Ibid.
25. John Higham, "American Anti-Semitism," p. 246.
26. Informant File, Farmingdale Collection.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. In those colonies, the social interaction and communal life was very similar to what it was in Farmingdale. For a discussion of earlier colonies, see Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, and Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies."
34. Interview with Israel Friedman, Informant File, Farmington Collection.
35. Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16, Box 2523, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
36. Herman J. Levine and Benjamin Miller, *The American Jewish Farmer in Changing Times* (New York: The Jewish Agricultural Society, 1966), p. 59.

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