

Jewish Farmers in South Dakota—the Am Olam

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The early 1880s marked the beginning of large scale efforts to establish Eastern European Jewish refugees in agriculture in the Great Plains states, including Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana. Jewish leaders on both sides of the Atlantic favored the settlement of newcomers in the hinterland for a variety of reasons. Agriculture offered an attractive occupational alternative to the needle trades and peddling. Cheap land was available under the Homestead Act. Agricultural settlements would relieve pressure for city jobs and housing, thereby combating rising nativism. Furthermore, emancipated Jews of Western Europe and America, who looked with disdain on the outlandish dress, Yiddish tongue, and religious obsession of their impoverished Orthodox brothers, viewed dispersion as a means of hastening assimilation.

This study focuses on a small, atypical segment of these would-be agrarians, the Am Olam. In contrast to the destitute, harried *folksman* of the *shtetl*¹ and ghetto, the Am Olam were well edu-

1. *Shtetl* is a Yiddish word meaning "small town."

cated, secularized Russian-Jewish youth, who emigrated to the United States with the express intent of setting up utopian agricultural communities. Two such efforts were made in South Dakota, namely, Cremieux and Bethlehem Yehudah.

To understand these social innovators, we must examine the milieu from which they came.² The history of Russia's Jews had long been one of severe repression. However, their status improved considerably in the mid-nineteenth century during the reign of Alexander II. This period of general economic and socio-political progress brought emancipation to the Jews of Western Europe by the end of the 1860s. As a result of this progress, and with complete faith in the Enlightenment, Jewish intelligentsia of Western Europe and Russia viewed Jewish "separatism" as the major obstacle to the solution of the Jewish problem and advocated a policy of total assimilation.³

Beginning with the latter part of the 1870s, the situation deteriorated. A severe and prolonged depression gripped all of Europe. The political backlash was accompanied by rising anti-Semitism. The assassination of Alexander II, the *czar liberator*, on 1 March 1881, shattered the hopes of Russified Jewish intelligentsia for the attainment of civil equality. Furthermore, the waves of pogroms⁴ that swept across European Russia induced a mass migration. Fully one-third of the Jewish population within Russia's Pale of Settlement (*see* map), was expelled in the thirty-three year interval between the death of Alexander II and the outbreak of World War I.⁵

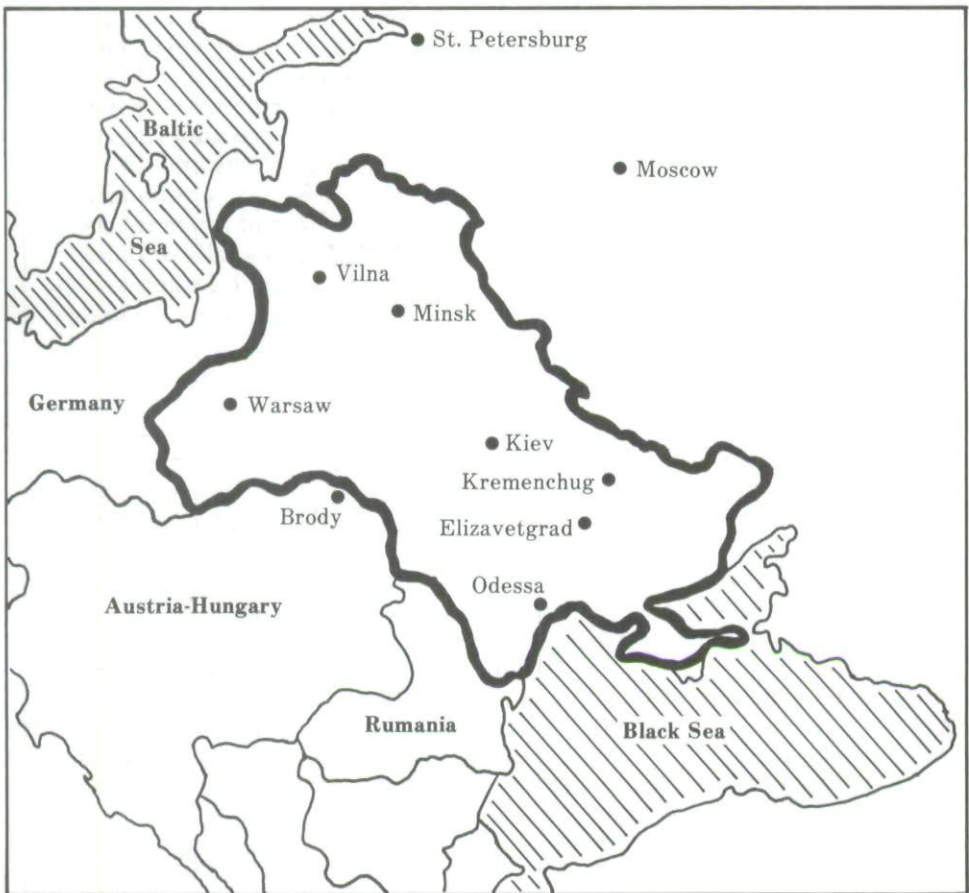
The revival of virulent anti-Semitism forced a reappraisal of the Jewish condition in Eastern Europe. Several new ideological elements came into being. "One," according to historian Judith L. Elkin, "was Zionism, which offered a political solution. Another was cultural nationalism, stressing the spiritual unity of scat-

2. For a comprehensive treatment of this era in Russian-Jewish history and thought, *see* Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia*, Vol. 1: *The Struggle for Emancipation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1944).

3. Abraham Menes, "The *Am Oylom* Movement," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 4 (1949): 9. This article was originally published as Chapter 4 in Volume 2 of *Geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeter-bavegung in di fareynikte shtatn* [History of the Jewish labor movement in the United States] (New York: YIVO, 1945).

4. Pogroms, as used in this study, are defined as officially condoned attacks by Russian peasants against Jewish enclaves, resulting in looting, destruction of property, and bloodshed.

5. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p. 26.



———— Jewish Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia:
Those provinces between the Black Sea and the Baltic
Sea to which Jewish settlement was legally restricted.

tered Jewish communities. The third was a return to nature and to productive labor on the land."⁶ The last mentioned, "a return to nature and to productive labor on the land," reflected the philosophical views of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Such eminent thinkers as Rousseau and Tolstoy extolled the virtues of living close to the land and working with one's hands to achieve a simple self-sufficiency. Belief in a return to the land reflected the populism of nineteenth-century Russia, which idealized the masses and looked upon the peasant commune as an embryo of national socialism.⁷ Farming was envisioned as a means whereby the Jew could be "productivized."⁸ It symbolized, not only a means of livelihood, but the attainment of full manhood and citizenship. The dream took form on the barren hills of Palestine, the pampas of Argentina, and the plains of the Dakotas.

None embraced the concept of national regeneration through agrarian enterprise more wholeheartedly than the disillusioned Russian-Jewish youth. Goaded by pogroms, they abandoned their hitherto close identity with Russian life and affairs and rallied to Perez Smolenskin's battle cry against assimilation. Smolenskin, a Hebrew publicist and protagonist of the *Haskalah* ("Enlightenment") in Eastern Europe, rejected assimilation as chimerical and became an outspoken advocate of Jewish nationalism, laying the foundation for the Zionist movement. This social and ideological ferment spawned two movements among enlightened Russian-Jewish youth: BILU (Hebrew initials of *Beit Ya'akov Lekhu ve-Nelkhal*—"House of Jacob, come ye and let us go," Isa. 2:5),⁹ whose destiny was Erez Israel; and Am Olam, who looked westward to the New World.¹⁰

Am Olam, the "Eternal People," named after Smolenskin's famous essay by that title,¹¹ was founded in Odessa by two Jewish teachers, Monie Bokal and Moses Herder, in direct response to

6. Judith L. Elkin, "Goodnight, Sweet Gaucho: A Revisionist View of the Jewish Agricultural Experiment in Argentina," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (Mar. 1978): 213-14.

7. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, s.v. "Socialism."

8. *Jews in American Agriculture* (New York: Jewish Agricultural Society, 1954), p. 23.

9. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972, s.v. "BILU."

10. *Ibid.*, s.v. "Smolenskin, Perez"; Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 10.

11. Perez Smolenskin, "Am Olam," *Ha-Shahar* 3 (1872). *Ha-Shahar*, a monthly publication in Hebrew, was founded, published, and edited by Smolenskin from 1868 to 1885. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972, s.v. "Smolenskin, Perez."

the pogroms of 1881. A correspondence committee, headed by Hirsh Loeb Sabovich, was formed to keep contact with neighboring and distant towns. The aim of Am Olam was to establish cooperative colonies in the United States on the plan of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier.¹² Its emblem was the plow and the ten commandments.¹³

Unity of purpose did not avert factionalism within the Am Olam membership. Students formed one group, and artisans, petty tradesmen, and workers another. There were also ideological differences. Tradesmen and workers thought of themselves primarily as Jewish and regarded this as a national movement. Students, generally more Russianized, tended to hold more socialistic views. Leadership gradually passed into the hands of the students.¹⁴ An Am Olam pioneer made the following observations in his memoirs:

Herder . . . and Bokal . . . were no socialists or profound social theoreticians. But social theory and scholarship were of little concern then. The people needed a comforter . . . and the two teachers became comforters, around whom the people rallied . . . merchants, brokers, tavern-keepers, people with no definite calling, half-baked intellectuals, and many students. The most prominent among the last was the later leader, Professor Sabsovitch [*sic*], then a sophomore at the Odessa University.

. . . Up to the time of Sabsovitch's entry into the movement, socialist or communist systems did not come into consideration there.¹⁵

Regardless of their other differences, the Am Olam held a quasi-religious belief in the spiritual value of farming and saw it as their mission "to demonstrate to the world that Jews could engage in manual labor, and particularly in the noble profession of agriculture which provides food for mankind."¹⁶ The prospect of political freedom, cheap land, and the knowledge that persecuted sects, such as the Quakers and Mennonites, had established a new life in America added to the lure. In addition to Odessa, Am Olam chapters sprang up in Kiev, Kremenchug, Elizavetgrad, Minsk, Vilna, and other towns.

12. Robert Owen (1771-1758), a Scottish industrialist, and Charles Fourier (1772-1837), a French socialist, promoted utopian communities that combined agriculture and industry and assumed group responsibility for the individuals' welfare. Examples of American attempts include New Harmony, Indiana, Brook Farm, and North American Phalanx.

13. Menes, "The *Am Oylom* Movement," pp. 12-13, 16.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

15. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 14.

16. *Jews in American Agriculture*, p. 23.

The first group to embark for America consisted of twenty-five families (about seventy persons) from Elizavetgrad who had pledged themselves "to engage only in farming on a cooperative basis."¹⁷ Included were craftsmen, artisans, and students. They were joined by nine families from Kiev. The leader, Herman Rosenthal, a wealthy merchant from Kiev, preceded the group to make the necessary arrangements, arriving in New York on 16 August 1881. Rosenthal is described as a middle-aged man with "remarkable energy, and good practical experience."¹⁸ He was also an author and well educated. The pogroms of 1881 had convinced him that "the solution to the Jewish problem in Eastern Europe lay in emigration from Russia and in agricultural settlement."¹⁹ He consequently became a pioneer of Jewish settlement in the United States.

The site selected for "The First Agricultural Colony of Russian Jews in America," was Sicily Island, Louisiana. Upon disembarking at New York on 6 November 1881, the Elizavetgrad/Kiev contingent proceeded to Saint Louis, Missouri. The men immediately began work on the colony, but most of the women and children remained in Saint Louis until spring. In Louisiana, the bayous abounded in mosquitoes and several children died of malaria. The climate was oppressive. In the spring of 1882, a devastating Mississippi River flood swept away houses, cattle, and crops. The project was washed out, but the colonists did not lose heart.²⁰

Rosenthal returned to New York and immediately laid plans for a new attempt in Dakota Territory. Associated with Rosenthal was another immigrant, Benoir Greenberg, the son of a noted Russian architect. Born to wealth and culture, Greenberg, like Rosenthal, was willing to risk everything for the Am Olam vision. Rosenthal also interested Michael Heilprin in the Dakota project. Heilprin, though not himself a colonist, was one of the foremost figures in the back-to-the-soil movement and a staunch supporter of the colonies.²¹

The first of the Am Olam to arrive in Dakota Territory were the Greenberg and Samuelwitz families. Stepping off the train

17. Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 17.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

19. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972, s.v. "Rosenthal, Herman."

20. Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943), p. 208.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

platform at Mitchell on 5 July 1882, they ordered a large can of boiling water and celebrated by brewing and drinking Russian tea on main street. The villagers, numbering about one thousand, turned out en masse to watch. A local Jewish businessman by the name of Weil assisted the newcomers in obtaining temporary quarters and advised them on land registration. Actual selection of the colony site was made after the arrival of Rosenthal and the Jacobowitz family about a week later.²²

The new colony was named Cremieux, in honor of Adolphe Cremieux, a French Jewish philanthropist and president of the Alliance Israelite Universelle.²³ Its location, as established by county courthouse land records, was about twenty-five miles southwest of Mitchell on the county line dividing Baker Township, Davison County, and Aurora Township, Aurora County, with the bulk of the settlements in Aurora Township (*see map*).²⁴ This land had been ceded to the government by the Yankton Treaty of 1858. It was virgin prairie, with black fertile soil and marginal rainfall. Mount Vernon, the nearest railroad station, was approximately fourteen miles distant.

The nucleus of Cremieux was formed by twelve families that had taken part in the ill-fated Louisiana project. As word spread east, other families arrived, swelling the number to twenty by August 1882. Most of these frontiersmen filed government claims for a quarter section (160 acres) at a price of \$1.25 per acre.²⁵ Some took advantage of government regulations that permitted adult family members to file separate claims. Rosenthal and Greenberg purchased their land outright, the former owning at least six hundred forty acres. Estimates suggest that the colony numbered about two hundred persons at its height.²⁶ While its holdings were considerable, only a small portion of land was actually under cultivation.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

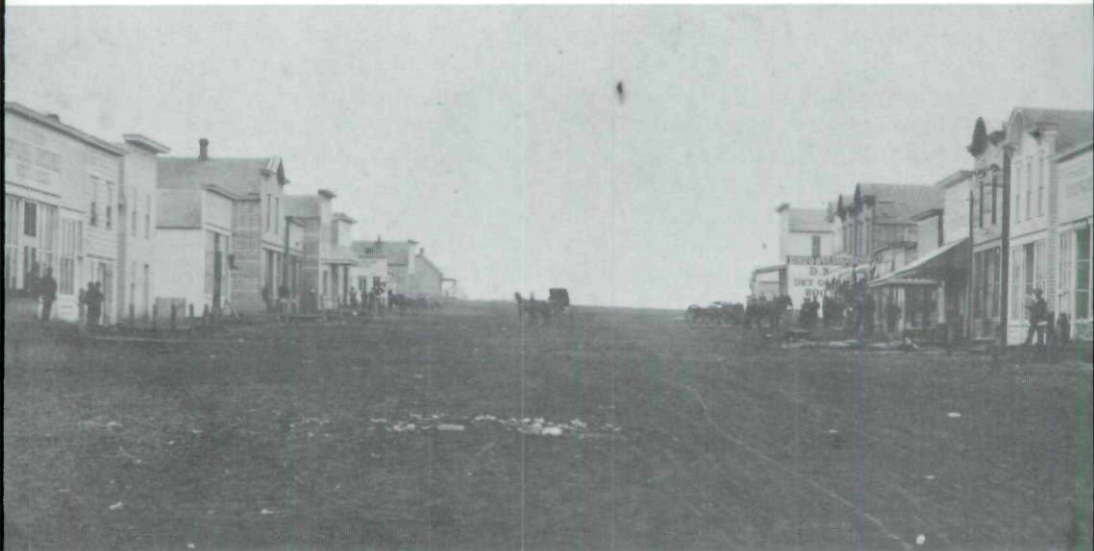
23. The Alliance Israelite Universelle was the first modern international Jewish organization, founded in 1860 in Paris. It was conceived as an organization of "fortunate" Jews who sought to help those of their faith who were less fortunate.

24. Receiver's Receipts, Davison County Courthouse, Mitchell, S.Dak., and Aurora County Courthouse, Plankinton, S.Dak.

25. Land Records, *ibid.*

26. Figures vary. Richard E. Singer, "The American Jew in Agriculture," 1941, Jewish Institute of Religion, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio, gives the number as ninety persons and five thousand acres of land. Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 215-16, suggests two hundred people with property stretching over fifteen miles. The *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1907, s.v. "Colonies, agricultural," also sets the number of people at two hundred with "extensive holdings."

It is apparent from a reading of the literature that there was no set pattern for Jewish agricultural colonies. They varied greatly in composition, means of financial support, and organization. This variation is in sharp contrast to the Hutterite colonies of the Dakotas and Canada, which are set up on a uniform pattern and whose membership is homogeneous and rigidly controlled. No doubt Cremieux, like other Am Olam colonies, formed a corporation with its own constitution. As noted earlier, Cremieux farmers held their land in private ownership, but some monetary funds were held in common. The following description of the



Mitchell main street, 1880s

earlier Louisiana colony is also appropriate for Cremieux: "It was not a socialist settlement nor was it regarded by its founders as a purely private enterprise. Hence the constitution represents a fusion of the principles of private ownership with advanced ideas of social control."²⁷ Since Cremieux was essentially a transplant of the Louisiana colony, it is highly probable that their constitutions were in agreement on basics. The Louisiana constitution called for an approval by two-thirds of all members for all commercial

27. Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 23.

operations. Immovable property belonged to the collective and could only be sold with the consent of the board of directors. Judges were elected to settle disputes among members.²⁸

Cremieux, more than most other Am Olam colonies, appears to have been very much on its own. No mention is made of outside financial support. Some help may have been forthcoming from Michael Heilprin. Heilprin, however, was not a wealthy man, and the Baron di Hirsch Fund, created at the behest of Heilprin for the express purpose of giving assistance to Jewish agricultural colonies in the United States, was not established until 1891, nearly a decade later. Although Rosenthal had personal resources to draw upon, most of the Cremieux colonists were poor and dependent upon their crops. When these failed, they were forced to mortgage their lands and borrow at high interest rates.

After the initial arrangements had been completed, the Dakota colonists sent a committee to Milwaukee to purchase the necessary supplies. The amateur farmers spent lavishly for fine horses (up to eight hundred dollars for a single team), choice cattle, and lumber. The building of houses began as soon as the lumber arrived. Rosenthal and Greenberg erected large, pretentious structures of eight to twelve rooms, which also served as community centers. The houses of the other colonists were more modest, but often beyond their means.²⁹ Nonetheless, at least one family began its Dakota existence in true prairie style with a log cabin caulked with mud, a span of oxen, and a makeshift "wagon" of chained logs.³⁰

It was during the building of one of these first houses that a German carpenter who was assisting the colonists noticed a haze of smoke in the distance. Gabriel Davidson, in an article for the *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, gave the following account:

Realizing its significance, he [the carpenter] immediately raised the cry "prairie fire." In Paul Revere fashion, he aroused and gathered the neighboring colonists and set them busily at work starting back-fires, to create a barrier against the raging conflagration. Men, women and children were pressed into service at firing a stretch of land several hundred feet in diameter, to denude it of all inflammable material. It is hard to imagine the terror in the hearts of these poor people, with the roaring of this fiery furnace in their ears, and the sight of the onrushing clouds of flame

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

29. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 217.

30. Interview of Jenette Agrant, 9 Sept. 1976, MS 1108, South Dakota Oral History Resource Center, Vermillion.

before their eyes, fighting grimly to save their possessions and their very lives. Fortunate it was for them that this carpenter understood the portent and knew how to ward off the danger. Otherwise the colony would have met immediate extinction and many of the colonists an appalling death. The drama of this event is heightened by the fact that it was enacted on the eve of Yom Kipper in 1882.³¹

Despite such alarms and muscles that ached from the unaccustomed and strenuous labor, the members of Cremieux maintained a cheerful outlook and an active social life.

The spacious homes of Rosenthal and Greenberg were the scene of many an evening's entertainment, including dances, concerts, and lectures. Farmers from the surrounding area were welcomed as guests. The colony had its own library and choral groups. One can assume that the grand piano in Rosenthal's home was frequently used to accompany the singers. Rosenthal employed the daughter of a neighboring farmer to tutor his children. Other families were urged to send their children to his house for instruction. Though highly idealistic and willing to sacrifice all for the common good, the Am Olam were secular in orientation, and, in sharp contrast to the typical Orthodox-Jewish immigrant, not overly concerned about religious observances. Cremieux had no synagogue or religious leaders. Housewives were under no compunction to keep a kosher kitchen. Pigs were raised, and a young litter was given as a wedding gift.³²

Although the social structure of Cremieux appears to have been very sound, its economic basis was shaky. It is the opinion of at least one historian that the initial indiscretion in the use of financial resources doomed the colony from the start. The harsh Dakota frontier allowed no margin of error in the grim struggle for survival. Furthermore, lacking both farm background and training in husbandry skills, these amateur farmers sometimes failed to anticipate needs, such as shelter and water for livestock. During the earliest months, water had to be hauled daily from a pond several miles distant. In the winter it froze en route. Later, wells were dug at considerable cost, but even these proved inadequate.³³

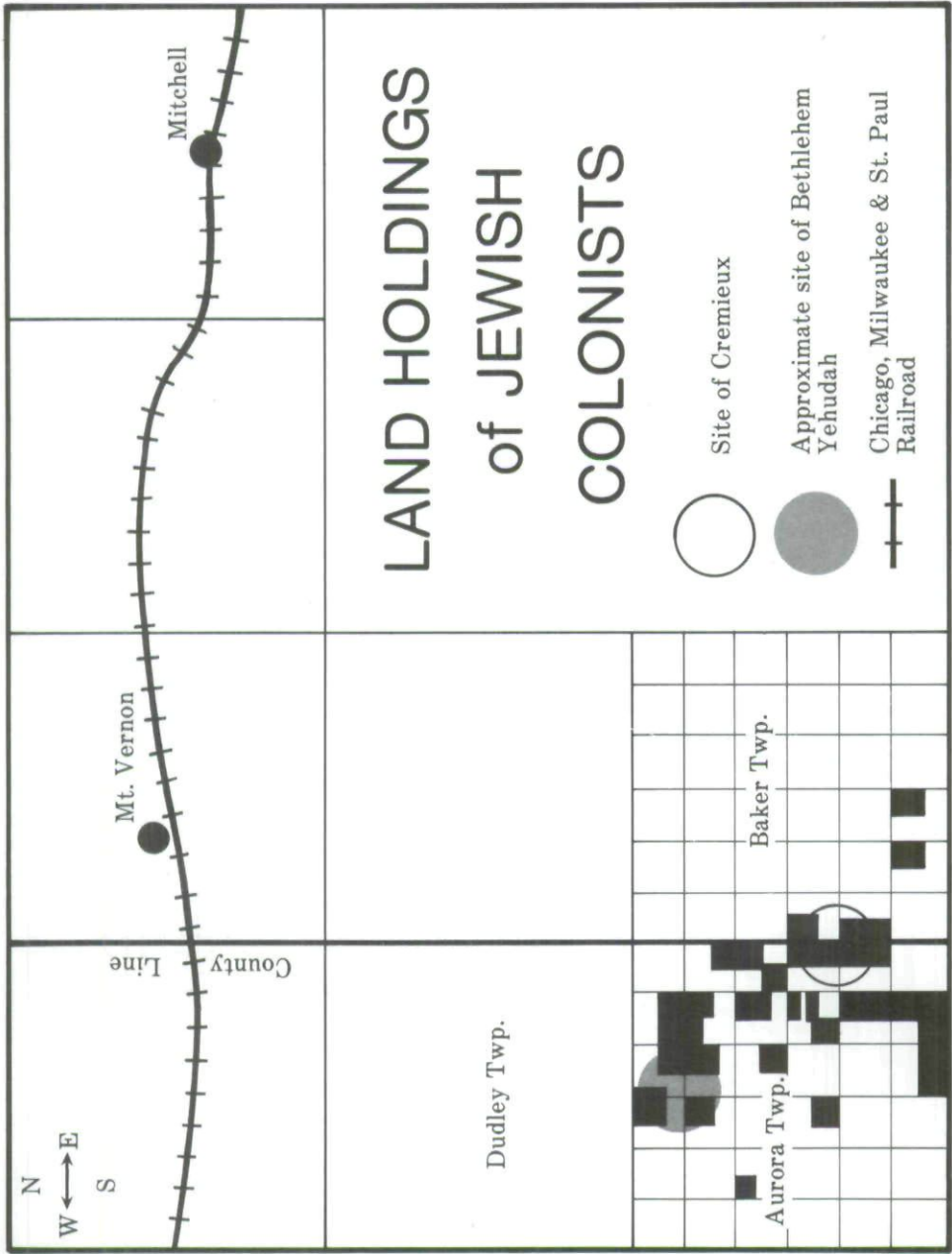
The first year's planting yielded a fair harvest of wheat, barley, oats, rye, and flax. Wheat was planted more extensively in the

31. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 217. Davidson's discussion of the Cremieux colony was originally published as "An Epic of the Prairies," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, 29 Jan. 1932.

32. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 219-20.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

AURORA COUNTY - S.E. DAVISON COUNTY - S.W.



LAND HOLDINGS of JEWISH COLONISTS

- Site of Cremieux
- Approximate site of Bethlehem Yehudah
- +— Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad

County Line

Dudley Twp.

Baker Twp.

Aurora Twp.

NAMES OF KNOWN MEMBERS OF CREMIEUX COLONY

Agrant, John
 Agrant, Rose
 Bernstein, Israel
 Chasnoff, Haim Moshe
 Chasnoff, Toby (two children, Jacob and Fanny, were born to Haim and Toby Chasnoff at Cremieux)
 Chasnoff (mother of John and Rose Agrant; stepmother of Haim Chasnoff)
 Chazenowitz
 Geshelin
 Godner (ex-soldier who had been in the United States for twenty years; name also given as Gouldner, Alexander)
 Greenberg, Benoir
 Greenberg, Grean
 Jacobowitz family
 Kelman, Moses
 Levitan, Adolph
 Marshbeer, Eleazer S.
 Petrofsky (poet and newspaper correspondent)
 Pflicht, Bernard
 Reinstein (father and three sons)
 Riess, Solomon and Paulina (name also given as Riss)
 Rosenberg (two)
 Rosenthal, Elias
 Rosenthal, Herman
 Samuels, Sam
 Samuelwitz family
 Sokoloff
 Stahl
 Waldman, Jacob
 Weinsinker brothers (four)
 Weinstein (two)

SOURCE: Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943), pp. 215, 220-21, 221n*; Interview of Jenette Agrant, 9 Sept. 1976, MS 1108, South Dakota Oral History Resource Center, Vermillion; Receiver's Receipts and Land Records, Davison County Courthouse, Mitchell, S.Dak., and Aurora County Courthouse, Plankinton, S.Dak. The county courthouse records list a number of other presumed Jewish landholders of the same time period in proximity to these known colonists, and these persons were possibly also members of either Cremieux or Bethlehem Yehudah. They include Jacob Brodsky, Leopold Jacobs, Moses Labensky, Solomon Mendleson, David Nefsky, Carl G. Nitchke, Moses Schatonowsky, George Stein, and Adolph Sternshuss. On the other hand, land records were not found for some known colonists, most notably, the Jacobowitz family, which, other sources indicate, held its land until 1889. Name changes and spelling variations may account for such seeming omissions in the records. Land records for Shlomo Promislovski and Saul Sokolovski, known members of Bethlehem Yehudah, were found in the Aurora County records.

second spring; however, an infestation of the Hessian Fly destroyed a large part of the crop. In addition, a prolonged drought took its toll in cattle losses. The third summer's crop, so crucial for the economic survival of Cremieux, was slashed by hailstorms. Farmers were forced to mortgage their land, and high interest rates devoured whatever funds remained.³⁴

By 1885, Cremieux began to disband. Some farmers sold out, salvaging what they could of their investment. Others faced foreclosures. A number stayed on until they got clear title to their land. Several purchased lots in Mitchell's Lawler Addition,³⁵ including Herman Rosenthal, who exchanged part of his farm for a Mitchell grain elevator. Several got jobs in neighboring towns or states. Others had no option except to work on the railroad or return to peddling.³⁶

One of the few members of the dispersed colony to forge a career in the Dakotas was John Agrant. He became a jeweler in Sioux Falls during the heyday of its divorce colony, supplementing his income from the repair of watches by purchasing diamonds from divorcees hard pressed for money.³⁷ Most of the colonists eventually returned to New York, including Herman Rosenthal, who later headed the Slavonic Department of the New York City Public Library. The Jacobowitz family, one of the first to come, was the last to leave, in 1889.³⁸ Thus, Cremieux passed into history.

The Am Olam's second attempt to establish an agricultural colony in Dakota Territory was initiated in September 1882, only a few months after the formation of Cremieux. Bethlehem Yehudah was located on government land, approximately three miles northwest of Cremieux near the division line of Aurora and Dudley townships in Aurora County. Bethlehem Yehudah had lofty goals, seeking the revival of the Jewish people within the context of a new social order: "The members of Bethlehem Judea believed that their enterprise would ultimately prove to be a great material and moral success and that large groups of immigrants would emulate them. They even anticipated profits that would form the financial basis for the establishment of new colonies."³⁹

34. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1907, s.v. "Colonies, agricultural." See also Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 218-19.

35. Land Records, Davison County Courthouse.

36. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 220-21.

37. Interview of Jenette Agrant.

38. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 220-21.

39. Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 27.

The main premise of Bethlehem Yehudah, as stated in its constitution, was "to help the Jewish people in its emancipation from slavery and in its rehabilitation to a new truth, freedom, and peace. The colony shall demonstrate to the enemies of our people the world over that Jews are capable of farming."⁴⁰ A Cremieux farmer gave the following rather rosy account of his new neighbors: "Bethlehem Judea, with the exception of one married couple, consists of young and strong unmarried men, well versed in the methods of American farming. Seeing these brave youths taking so eagerly and without inner conflict to hard physical labor and looking toward their future with confidence, one comes to the conclusion that the great spirit of Israel is still alive."⁴¹

Though coexisting side by side, Cremieux and Bethlehem Yehudah provided sharp contrasts in ideology and structure. The twenty-five to thirty-two (figures vary) single males of Bethlehem Yehudah were the vanguard of the Sons of Freedom (*Bne Horin*) of Kremenchug and were more inclined toward socialism than their neighbors. They lived as members of one family and worked the land on a communal basis. Initially, a number of the young men took jobs in cities to help support the colony.⁴²

As prescribed by its constitution, all members of Bethlehem Yehudah enjoyed the same rights and privileges: women had equal rights with men. All members were obliged to engage in farming. Commercial activity was absolutely forbidden. The council of the colony consisted of the president, vice-president, and judge and was elected for a term of five years. Officers for the first term (1 January 1883 to 1 January 1888) were Saul Sokolovski, president; Isidor Geselberg, vice-president; and Shlomo Promislovski, judge. Executive powers were vested in the president and vice-president, who were to submit an annual report to the general assembly of the colony. The president held veto power on all matters pertaining to the colony. Two-thirds of the colony's income was earmarked for maintenance and expansion. The remaining one-third was to be set aside as a special colonization fund for the establishment of new colonies of Russian Jews in America.⁴³

The planners of Bethlehem Yehudah had perceived that getting established on the frontier might be easier without the bur-

40. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 26.

41. Quoted *ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

43. Constitution of Bethlehem Yehudah, quoted *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

den of family. Nonetheless, these unmarried men faced the same overwhelming odds as the family men of Cremieux: the rigors and isolation of the frontier, lack of farming experience, repeated crop failures due to drought, insects, and storms. In addition, Bethlehem Yehudah was torn internally by constant bickerings and disagreements regarding the planting and cultivation of crops and the division of labor. Judge Promislovski appears to have been a busy man!⁴⁴

Despite support by the Alliance Israelite Universelle, Bethlehem Yehudah's existence was precarious at best. After a year and a half, its members agreed to divide the communal land into private holdings and to distribute other shared property among the individual colonists. Unfortunately, not even the shift to a private economy could save Bethlehem Yehudah. "Our experiment did not proceed beyond the initial stage. It did not yield the anticipated results,"⁴⁵ wrote Saul Sokolovski, president of the colony.

Both Bethlehem Yehudah and Cremieux were liquidated in 1885.⁴⁶ Given frontier conditions and the colonists' lack of experience, their failure seems inevitable. Perhaps the wonder is that Cremieux came so near to succeeding. Favorable crop and market conditions during the early years, or continued financial and moral support from the American and international Jewish community to carry them through the lean, could perceptibly have made the difference. Factionalism and other weaknesses inherent in communal living were an added factor in the failure of Bethlehem Yehudah and, later, in that of its sister colony, New Odessa, in Oregon. Looking back, Sokolovski observed that collectivist experiments might be continued, but with "select human material," and that intellectuals have no right to impose their views upon the masses.⁴⁷ In addition, the Am Olam emphasis on community and social equality did not mesh with the intense individualism and fierce competitiveness of late nineteenth century America. By then, Americans had abandoned Walden and Brook Farm for the New York Stock Exchange, and the Am Olam were out of step.

Perhaps all of these factors are best summed up by the expression "cultural distance." Irving Howe, in analyzing the failure of

44. Singer, "The American Jew in Agriculture."

45. Quoted in Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 27.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 28; *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1907, s.v. "Am Olam."

47. Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 28.

the Am Olam colonies, states: "Most important of all, the leap from a Ukrainian *shtetl* to Oregon or South Dakota—the cultural leap, the economic leap—was simply too great. What sheer will and purity of heart could do they did, but sheer will and purity of heart were not enough."⁴⁸

48. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 86.

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