

The Agricultural Communes of the *Am Olam*

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THE WESTWARD MIGRATION of East European Jewry in the closing decades of the nineteenth century brought numerous attempts to establish agricultural colonies in such widely scattered places as Palestine, Argentina, and the United States. Among these emigres was a small atypical group of intellectuals, the *Am Olam*, who came to the United States with the specific goal of establishing socialist farm colonies patterned on the ideas of Leo Tolstoy, Robert Owen, and Charles Fourier. The number of *Am Olam* colonies actually organized is not known, simply because no one gave a precise definition or kept records.¹ This study focuses on four western colonies founded by organized groups of the *Am Olam*, namely: the settlement on Sicily Island, Louisiana; Cremieux and Bethlehem Yehudah in Dakota Territory; and New Odessa in Oregon.

Repression had long been the bitter lot of East European Jews. The mid-nineteenth century, however, was an era of social and economic progress throughout Europe. Rising industrialism created new wealth and career opportunities. The French Revolution brought a substantial measure of equality to the Jews of Western Europe. In Russia the serfs were freed during the reign of Alexander n, and a mood of hope and confidence sprang up within Russian Jewry. In the

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1. Abraham Menes in "The Am Oylam Movement," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 4 (1949) identifies four *Am Olam* colonies but does not specifically limit them to that number. *Jews in American Agriculture* (New York: Jewish Agricultural Society, 1954), p. 24, gives their number as about twenty-five colonies in eight states. *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (1939-43) "Colonies, Agricultural, United States," states that at least sixteen colonies were established within two or three years.

words of Ben Adir, "The air of political and social springtime penetrated the Ghetto and aroused in large sections of Jewish youth the yearnings for a new life."² They studied at universities and gymnasiums, immersed themselves in Russian affairs, and adopted the *Weltanschauung* of the Russian intelligentsia. In the judgment of George Fischer, "This outlook was one of anguished alienation from a society unwilling or unable to modernize."³ Embracing the populism of that day, which looked upon the peasant commune as the embodiment of highest social virtues, these privileged Jewish youth turned their backs upon their own people who stubbornly refused to shed their Orthodox Jewishness. Instead, these young intellectuals went out to the countryside to preach the gospel of socialism to the Russian peasants.

The tide of progress and tolerance turned in the latter part of the 1870's. A severe and prolonged depression gripped all of Europe, bringing with it a backlash of anti-semitism. The assassination of Alexander H on March 1, 1881, by revolutionary extremists became a watershed in Jewish history. As Louis Greenberg has indicated, "A squall passed through, thunder and lightning . . . and then a stillness followed as though everything in nature had died"⁴—thus the Russian-Jewish weekly *Razsvet* pictured the gloom that followed the death of the Czar Liberator. Waves of pogroms⁵ swept across the Ukraine like brush fire, shattering the hopes of the Russified Jewish intelligentsia for civil and social equality through assimilation. Betrayed and bloodied by the peasants, humiliated and guilt-ridden, these Jewish youth abandoned their Russian stance and vowed henceforth to share the destiny of their own people.

The pogroms sent shock waves throughout the Pale.⁶ Talk of emigration was everywhere, culminating in two movements: BILU,⁷ which sought the establishment of a Jewish nation in Palestine, and *Am Olam*, which looked toward free America. Both organizations sought to create a new life for themselves and for their people on the foundations of farm labor, which was considered the noblest of

2. Ben Adir, "Modern Currents in Jewish Social and National Life," *The Jewish People Past and Present* (New York: Jewish Encyclopedic Handbooks, 1948) 2: 291.

3. George Fischer, "The Intelligentsia and Russia," *The Transformation of Russian Society*, Cyril E. Black, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 255-259.

4. Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia: The Struggle for Emancipation, 1881-1917* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951), 2: 55.

5. Pogroms, as used in this study, are defined as officially condoned attacks by Russian peasants against Jewish enclaves.

6. The Pale consisted of those provinces between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea to which Jewish settlement was legally restricted in czarist Russia.

7. BILU: the Hebrew initials of *Beit Ya'akow Leklu ve-Nelkha* "House of Jacob, come ye and let us go," Isa. 2:5, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (1972), s.v. "BILU."

occupations. This was in keeping with the philosophy of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment). It was believed that "productivising" the Jew, that is, making him a producer rather than a middle man, would help to raise his status.⁸ Alongside this veneration of rural life lay an antipathy toward industrialism and its attendant evils.

Speaking of the *Am Olam*, the historian Abraham Menes, writing in 1949, stated:

In one respect, the *Am Oylom* movement has been less favored than BILU. An entire literature has been written about the latter, whereas the former has been practically neglected ... in spite of the fact that it was numerically larger and played a more decisive role in the life of the Jewish intelligentsia in Russia than BILU. BILU, however, became incorporated in a movement embodying the traditional Jewish aspirations of returning to the ancient historical homeland. And although the number of disillusioned settlers in the first colonies in Palestine had been no less than the number of such settlers among the *Am Oylom* group in America, the influx of new and somewhat like-minded immigrants to Palestine continued, whereas the original American group was not augmented by Utopian-idealist arrivals. Another cardinal difference between the two movements consisted in the fact that the leadership of *Am Oylom*, in direct contrast to the leadership of BILU, regarded the Jewish problem as essentially socio-economic and political, and not cultural and national.⁹

Am Olam was founded in Odessa by Monye Bokal and Moyshe Herder immediately following the pogroms of May 1881. It took its name from Perez Smolenskin's famous essay, "The Eternal People."¹⁰ Smolenskin was a Jewish publicist and protagonist of the *Haskalah* who rejected assimilation and laid the foundation for the Zionist movement. A correspondence committee headed by Hirsh Loeb Sabsovitch, then a second-year student at Odessa University, was formed to keep contact with *Am Olam* chapters that sprang up in Odessa, Kiev, Elizavetgrad, Kremenchug, Minsk, Vilna, and other towns. In addition to the intelligentsia, membership included artisans, traders, workers, drifters (*luftmenschen*), and others. This gave rise to factionalism. The student group, generally more Russified and socialistic, gradually gained leadership. Bokal and Herder, however, were teachers, not social theoreticians. Socialist and communist systems came to the fore somewhat later under the leadership of Sabsovitch.¹¹

8. Joseph Brandes, *Immigrants to Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 19-22.

9. Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," p. 11.

10. Perez Smolenskin, "Am Olam," *Ha-Shahar* 3 (1872). *Encyclopedia judaica*, 1972, s.v. "Smolenskin, Perez."

11. Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," pp. 14, 29.

Monye Bokal, the moving spirit of *Am Olam*, was born to a very religious family. He received a traditional Jewish training but lacked a formal secular education. Upon marrying the local rabbi's daughter he was given as dowry the position of town teacher, but soon left the job to learn the goldsmith trade in Odessa. While there, his shop became a popular gathering place for the youth who came to the city to learn a trade or attend the university. Townsfolk, such as merchants, brokers and tavern keepers, dropped in to hear the lectures and join the discussions. Though not an erudite man, Bokal had a warm, charismatic personality. "He powerfully attracted the people," wrote an *Am Olam* pioneer, "and the common folk trusted in him as in a savior. This trust Bokal fully deserved."¹² Contributing all of his possessions to the common fund, he lived the life of an ascetic, subsisting, we are told, on bread and tea while writing and traveling to organize new groups.

Groups from the various towns began to leave Russia in the late fall of 1882. "Ordinary folk too," wrote Abraham Cahan, "were attracted by the idealistic aspect of the movement. They showed enthusiasm no less than the intelligentsia. Simple artisans and tradesmen, who did fairly well in Russia, sold all their belongings and joined the groups departing for America to begin a new life."¹³ Arriving in New York, most of the *Am Olam* spent some time in the area, taking whatever jobs were at hand until they received a call to join a colony. It is hardly surprising that some, faced with a moment of truth, abandoned their dream and remained in New York. Others pressed on.

"The First Agricultural Colony of Russian Jews in America" was established in late 1881 on Sicily Island, Louisiana, by about twenty-five families for Elizavetgrad. They were joined by nine families from Kiev. "A more motley aggregation can hardly be imagined," reported a Jewish paper. "Its membership was composed of students, teachers, artists, merchants, craftsmen, and peddlers—educated and illiterate. None had ever farmed and few were accustomed to manual work."¹⁴ These colonists represented the more conservative segment of *Am Olam*. They had little interest in socialist or collective schemes, but simply sought to improve their own lot and that of others by means of "productive" work, namely, farming on a cooperative basis. Their leader, Herman Rosenthal, had preceded them to make the necessary

12. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 14.

13. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 12.

14. Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943), p. 205. Originally published as "Pioneers in the Land of Cotton," *The Jewish Tribune*, September 27, 1929.

arrangements. Rosenthal, a middle-aged and cultured man, was a wealthy merchant from Kiev who cast his lot with the *Am Olam* following the pogroms and became a leader of Jewish colonization in America.¹⁵

The Louisiana colonists collected \$3,000 from among their own members and received additional grants from the Alliance Israelite Universelle¹⁶ and the New York Emigration Committee.¹⁷ Arriving at New York on November 6, 1881, they immediately proceeded to Louisiana, where they were taken under the aegis of the New Orleans Jewish Community. Most of the women and children remained in New Orleans for the winter while the men proceeded to the colony site. A corporation was formed and a constitution adopted. According to Menes,

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. Paragraph six, for instance stated: "No member is allowed to produce alcoholic beverages. All commercial operations must have the approval of two-thirds of all members."¹⁸

It was the intent to divide the land into private holdings after the colony was well established.

Trees were felled to the rhythm of Russian folk songs, corn and cotton planted, and family homes erected. An active social life ensued. Evening gatherings at the "big house" featured discussions and debates, songs by Borowich (who had been a member of an operatic company), and humorous readings by Rosenthal. A school for children was organized. English instruction was offered by Rabinowitz, a linguist, and a weekly news bulletin, written in Russian, was issued.¹⁹

But all was not well. If man was the adversary in the Old Country, nature was the adversary in the New. The bayous teemed with rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, and malaria. The climate was hot and oppressive. And in that spring of 1882 the rampaging Mississippi River swept away houses, crops, and cattle, literally washing out the project. Nonetheless, a goodly number of the settlers resolved to try elsewhere,

15. Uri Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1981), p. 32.

16. The Alliance Israelite Universelle was the first modern international Jewish organization, founded in 1860 in Paris.

17. Leonard G. Robinson, "Agricultural Activities of Jews in America," *The American Jewish Yearbook*, 1912 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), p. 59.

18. Menes, "The Am Oylom," p. 23.

19. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 207; Herscher, *Jewish American Utopias*, p. 35.

joining colonies in Arkansas, Dakota, and Kansas. Rosenthal returned to New York and immediately laid plans to establish a colony in Dakota Territory. He was assisted by Benoir Greenberg, the immigrant son of a noted Russian architect and bridge builder, and by Michael Heilprin, a tireless friend and promoter of the colonies.²⁰ The northern site was selected because its climate was similar to that of the Russian steppes and government land was available under the Homestead Act.

The new colony was named Cremieux in honor of Adolphe Cremieux, a French philanthropist and president of the Alliance Israelite Universelle. It was located about twenty-five miles southwest of Mitchell, South Dakota, on the dividing line of Davison and Aurora Counties. The first families arrived in early July 1882. By fall Cremieux numbered twenty families, including twelve from the ill-fated Louisiana settlement. Cremieux was a cooperative farming venture. Courthouse records show that land was held in private ownership, with most of the members filing government claims for a quarter section (160 acres) at a cost of \$1.25 per acres.²¹ The more affluent, like Rosenthal and Greenberg, purchased their land outright. The holdings of the colony were extensive, but only a small portion of this virgin prairie was broken for cultivation. At its height Cremieux numbered about two hundred persons.²²

With preliminary arrangements completed, a committee was sent to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to purchase supplies. Colony funds were recklessly spent on fine cattle and horses and fancy lumber. The social life was similar to that of the Louisiana colony, with the spacious homes of Rosenthal and Greenberg serving as community centers. No mention is made of religious services. Cremieux had no synagogue or religious leaders. The highly idealistic *Am Olam* were secular and humanitarian in outlook. In stark contrast to the Orthodox Jew, they paid scant attention to ritual or tradition. Pigs, for example, were raised, used for food, and even given as a wedding gift.²³

20. Brandes, *Immigrants*, pp. 30-31.

21. Receiver's Receipts, Davison County Courthouse, Mitchell, S.D., and Aurora County Courthouse, Plankinton, S.D.

22. Figures vary. Richard E. Singer, "The American Jew in Agriculture," (1941) Jewish Institute of Religion, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio, gives 90 persons and 5000 acres; Davidson, 200 persons, property stretching over fifteen miles; *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1907, s.v. "Colonies, agricultural," 200 persons, extensive holdings; Herscher, 200 persons, 15 sections. Receiver's Receipts show that land holdings were scattered over fifteen sections or more and interspersed with noncolonists, considerably reducing the 5000-acre figure.

23. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 220; originally published as "An Epic of the Prairies," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, January 29, 1932. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, p. 51.

Despite their optimistic outlook, life on the Dakota frontier was harsh. A prairie fire on the eve of Yom Kippur, 1882, destroyed their hay supply. Inexperienced in the art of husbandry, they overlooked the need of water and shelter for livestock. The digging of wells was expensive. Grains planted in the spring of 1883 yielded a fair harvest. Wheat acreage was increased in 1884 but suffered from an infestation of the Hessian Fly. Drought dried up water supplies and cattle died. The third summer's crop, so crucial to the economic survival of Cremieux, was lost to hail, forcing farmers to mortgage their lands and pay extortionary interest rates.

Cremieux disbanded in 1885. Farmers not facing foreclosure sold out, salvaging what they could of their investments. A few families remained on the land and eventually gained title to it. Almost all eventually returned to New York.

The lack of adequate financial resources was a factor, not only in the survival of these colonies, but also in their establishment. Communal funds could not provide the necessary capital. However, in 1882 Michael Heilprin succeeded in obtaining monies from American sources, which, combined with gifts from West European Jewish philanthropic organizations, led to the establishment of two collective farming settlements: Bethlehem Yehudah in Dakota Territory, and New Odessa in Oregon.²⁴

Bethlehem Yehudah was founded in early September 1882²⁵ by a group of thirty-two single young males from Kremenchug. In the beginning only twelve of these men and a married couple worked on the farm. The others took jobs in the city to help support the colony. Located only three miles from Cremieux, Bethlehem Yehudah offered sharp contrasts in ideology and structure. Far more socialistic than their neighbors, these young men looked beyond a national revival to a new social order. Members lived together as persons of one household, sharing labor and holding all property in common. Their goal, as stated in their constitution, was as follows:

The colony Bethlehem Judea is founded by the first group of the Kremenchug *Bne Horin* [Sons of Freedom] 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.²⁶

Members of the colony considered it their duty to assist in the colonization of Russian Jews in America. Describing these visions of material

24. Menes, "The Am Oylam," p. 25.

25. Dates given vary: Menes, 1882; Herscher, 1885.

26. Quoted in Menes, "The Am Oylam," p. 26.

gain and expansion, Saul Sokolovski, leader of the colony, wrote: "Although the Jewish capitalists in Russia remain deaf to the outcries of their brethren ... the Jewish youth must not forget their people."²⁷ One-third of the colony's income was to be set aside for a special colonization fund. New colonies were to form one community with the mother colony and be subject to the same regulations.

Bethlehem Yehudah's governing council consisted of the president, vice-president, and judge, and was elected for a five-year term. 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 had the right of veto on all colony matters. Women shared equal rights with men. Disputes between members were to be brought before the judge. The commitment to farm labor is reflected in the stipulation that "all members . . . must engage in farming. Only when all work on the farm is finished may they engage in other productive occupations. Commercial activity is absolutely forbidden." This rule, they added, was not subject to revision.²⁸

The high hopes and aspirations of these young pioneers were soon laid to waste. The Dakota frontier was no kinder to the bachelors of Bethlehem Yehudah than to the families of Cremieux. They struggled against the same handicaps. In addition, the commune was splintered by bickerings over the planting and tilling of crops and work assignments. Eighteen months after their arrival the members agreed to shift to a private economy. Communal land was divided into private holdings and other shared property distributed among the members. This shift may have relieved stress but it was ineffective against the ravages of drought, storm, and insects. Bethlehem Yehudah, like Cremieux, disbanded in 1885.

The most successful of the agricultural settlements by organized groups of the *Am Olam* was New Odessa, Oregon. Four *Am Olam* groups from Odessa in Southern Russia arrived in New York between January and March 1882. They set up a communal dwelling and common fund and took various farm and city jobs while waiting to set up their own colony. Scouting expeditions were sent out and a 760-acre tract of forest land in Douglas County, Oregon, was selected. This was about 250 miles south of Portland.²⁹ The first group started for Oregon in July 1882, sailing to Panama, crossing the Isthmus, and proceeding to Portland by steamer. The trip took one month. Several

27. Ibid., p. 26.

28. Quoted in Menes, "The Jewish Labor Movement," *The Jewish People Past and Present*, (New York; Jewish Encyclopedic Handbooks, 1955), 4:337.

29. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 227-230; Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, pp. 37-39.

of the men immediately headed for New Odessa, the remainder waiting and working in Portland until called.

By August 1883 New Odessa numbered forty-seven persons: thirty-six males (four of them married), seven women, and four children. The ages of the adults ranged from nineteen to thirty-eight. Between them they owned four cows, three bullocks, one calf, and a team of horses, valued at \$225; two plows, \$26; a wagon, \$110; a cultivator, \$10; other implements and carpenter's and locksmith's tools worth \$500. On the debit side was a farm installment payment of \$1,200 to be paid after harvest, and a remaining mortgage of \$1,800 to be paid within two years; plus other debts totaling \$800. Their monthly income at the time was \$314 made by contracting lumber for firewood and ties to the railroads.³⁰

New Odessa eventually numbered sixty persons, including four non-Jews. The land was productive, but only a small area was cleared. Various grains and garden vegetables were grown for home consumption. A large two-story house served as the community building. The kitchen and dining hall were located on the ground floor; bedrooms, including a guest room, were on the second floor.

New Odessa had a charter but no constitution. Like its sister colony Bethlehem Yehudah it practiced community of goods and sought the establishment of a new social order. Unlike Bethlem Yehudah, New Odessa did not consider the regeneration of the Jewish people its specific mission. "The life of the colonists is fully established on a cooperative basis," wrote Sokolowsky, "with the national basis completely lacking. The colonists are permeated by cosmopolitan tendencies and regard their colony as an international organization."³¹ It is to be noted that Monye Bokal and Moyshe Herder, the organizers of the *Am Olam* in Odessa, Russia, did not join New Odessa in America.³²

The ideology and life style of New Odessa was shaped to a considerable degree by William Frey, a political emigre' from Russia. Frey, a non-Jew, was a fervent disciple of Auguste Comte's philosophy of positivism. During the 1870's he had attempted to establish religious-communist colonies in Kansas. When these failed he returned to New York where his "Religion of Humanity" made a profound impression upon the Odessa *Am Olam*, who invited him to join their colony in Oregon.³³ There he introduced religious-positivist services and vegetarianism. Life in the colony under the leadership of Frey is described as follows in a letter dated August 2, 1883:

30. From a letter quoted in Menes, "The Am Oylam," p. 31.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

32. Herder joined Carmel Colony; Bokal, Alliance.

33. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, pp. 45-46.

About a month ago the Frey family arrived. With their arrival a new regimen was established. We undertook the study of mathematics under the instructorship of Frey, and the study of English, under Marusia and Lydia, the wife and sister-in-law- of William [Frey], respectively. This is our daily schedule: We work from six o'clock in the morning till half-past eight in the morning. From half-past eight to three-quarters of nine we have breakfast. Work is resumed at ten o'clock and continued to four o'clock in the afternoon. Between four and five o'clock is dinner, followed by a rest period and intellectual activity. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday are devoted to the study of mathematics, English, and to Frey's lecture on the philosophy of positivism. On Wednesday, current matters are discussed and on Saturday, the problems of the "commune." On Sunday we rise at six o'clock and immediately a lively discussion begins on the subject of equal rights for women. In the beginning the women had demanded full equal rights. They had gone to work in the forest, with the men taking their turn in the kitchen and laundry. Soon, however, the women realized that they were not yet fit for that type of work and they returned to their previous tasks. Now they assure us that they have acquired the necessary physical strength and endurance for work in the forest. . . . Thus the time passes till breakfast. This meal consists of rice, oatmeal, baked and raw apples, beans, potatoes, bread, and milk. . . . After breakfast, one member goes to survey the farm, another reads a newspaper or a book, the rest sing, shout, and dance. At four o'clock dinner is served. Two men wash the dishes, the choir sings, the organ plays.... At seven o'clock in the evening begins a session of mutual criticism; then the work for the week is assigned.³⁴

The high intellectual and moral character of the members of New Odessa was universally acclaimed by those who made their acquaintance. Dr. Judah Wechsler, a rabbi of St. Paul, Minnesota, who had helped to establish the Painted Wood colony in North Dakota, described them as the most intelligent Russian immigrants he had encountered, most of them having had university training. He was impressed with the quality of their library and the harmony within the commune. "Whereas in our colony there is discord to this very day, here all live in peace, and the will of one is the will of all."³⁵ Their religion was the "Religion of Humanity." They lived by the Marxian dictum, "each man works according to his ability; each man receives according to his need." They observed neither the Sabbath nor the Jewish holidays.

The peace and harmony of the first two years gradually eroded. The original idealism waned. Their complete isolation from the Jewish world barred the influx of new blood and ideas. Writing in his memoirs, Abraham Cahan observed:

34. Quoted in Menes, "The Am Oylam/" pp. 30-31.

35. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 32.

The general atmosphere was not a happy one. . . . The forty members happened to have been gentle and mild-mannered people, avoiding open conflicts; nevertheless in a quiet way a deep-seated dissatisfaction was spreading. In addition, life in the colony came to be dull and monotonous for these former city dwellers.

The sex problem caused considerable difficulty. There were many cases of jealousy ... and all sorts of amorous intrigues, both open and secret. Also free love on a small scale was practiced in the colony.. .. On the whole, there was little privacy there____Some people confused communism with the concept of eating off the same plate and sleeping in the same bedroom.³⁶

Moreover, there was a festering friction between Paul Kaplan, the chief organizer of New Odessa, and William Frey, its spiritual leader. "Frey, wanting to introduce into the colony his 'religion of positivism,' acquired an organ, which accompanied the singing of 'positivist religious songs/ but Kaplan 'sat and grinned daggers,' "³⁷ Frey was spartan to the point of severity, insisting on a diet of simple foods such as peas, beans, and coarse bread. It was wrong to "gorge" oneself while others on this earth were suffering from want and hunger. A strict vegetarian, he even refused to sit with anyone who ate meat. His adherents followed him with a zeal and fervor akin to hero worship. The members of the other faction were not positivistic idealists, but of a more practical bent.

This strong diversity of views led inevitably to a clash of opinions. Two groups of young enthusiasts, both idealistic but along different lines, both headstrong, could not live and work together in amity. Realizing that their viewpoints were irreconcilable, Frey and about fifteen of his followers left the Colony. Yet such was the spirit of both factions that no enmity was engendered ... the pain of separation was so poignant, the sorrow at breaking of old friendships so profound that, in the words of a former colonist, "tears fell like rain."³⁸

Frey's departure and the loss of the community building and library by fire hastened the dissolution of New Odessa. There were also economic factors, such as the limited amount of land under cultivation and the loss of their lumber market after the completion of the railroad. By 1887, five years after its establishment, New Odessa began to break apart. A number pursued earlier interests in the professions. Several of the members set up a commune in San Francisco and later in New York, where they opened a laundry named the New

36. Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

38. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 233. Originally published as "A Unique Agricultural Colony," *The Reflex*, May 1928.

Odessa Cooperative Laundry. With the closing of the laundry several years later, the *Am Olam* as an organized group, came to an end.³⁹

Many factors contributed to the failure of the *Am Olam* colonies. They were "greenhorns" with a romanticized concept of living on the land. The farm economy was severely depressed. The best lands had already been taken. Looking for cheap lands, settlement was often made in marginal agricultural regions. Their isolation militated against them. Out of sight, out of mind, they received little reinforcement in either monies or new settlers. Markets were remote. Cut off from ethnic and cultural centers they became restive and prone to internal friction. It was not by accident that of the numerous attempts at colonization, the sole survivors were the New Jersey colonies of Carmel and Vineland. These were located in the vicinity of New York and Philadelphia and combined industry with agriculture from the start. Making the isolation more complete was the culture gap between the *Am Olam* and the typical westerner. The leader of a Kansas colony made the following entry in his diary:

I forgot to mention yesterday that in order to be in style here I put on my old blue suit a blue flannel shirt a broad brimmed straw hat and have dispensed with both coat and vest altogether with the fact that I have not been shaved since last Wednesday I think I compare favorably with the natives excepting that I am afraid I can't get used to carrying my pistol around all the time its too heavy and besides I am afraid they might criticize it as it is only a .38 caliber. While a .44 is regulation out here.⁴⁰

Moreover, the *Am Olam* were bucking current trends. Americans had abandoned Jeffersonian agrarianism by the late nineteenth century and were heading for the industrialized urban centers. In addition, the fierce competitiveness and strident individualism of the era provided a hostile environment for communal idealism.

Yet despite the crumbling of the communes, many among the *Am Olam* retained their faith in agriculture. They participated in the establishment of agricultural schools, marketing cooperatives, and farm publications. Other transferred their zeal for a more just society to the arenas of politics and labor. They became active members of the Socialist Party and provided leadership for labor, notably in the garment industries where exploitation of sweatshop workers was rife.⁴¹

39. Menes, "The Am Oylam," p. 33.

40. Charles K. Davis, quoted in Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 86.

41. J. C. Rich, "The Jewish Labor Movement in the United States," *The Jewish People Past and Present*, 2:402; Abraham Menes, "The Jewish Labor Movement," *The Jewish People Past and Present*, 4:338.

There were both similarities and differences between the *Am Olam* and the Owenites. The two groups shared the belief that societal regeneration was to be achieved by the creation of cooperative communities, rather than through massive political and economic revolution. Both envisioned these communities as models which would be voluntarily copied. Agriculture was held in high esteem by both; however, the *Am Olam* seem to have regarded it as an escape from industrialism, whereas Robert Owen was himself an industrialist. Owen was concerned to alleviate the plight of the laborer who was being victimized by the entrepreneur. The *Am Olam* sought the social amelioration of the long-deprived Jew. Practice in regard to private property varied among the *Am Olam* colonies; however, that which was communal property was shared by all equally, as was the practice in Owenite societies. There was also great stress on the common good and on equality of personhood, if not of wealth and class. All shared physical labor as producers, and all likewise were to share the wealth thus created.

Two conceptions held by the *Am Olam* that were not shared by the Owenites were (1) that work done on the land had more intrinsic value than other labor; and (2) linked to that, the belief that full personhood or "normalization" could only be attained through farm labor.⁴² In the years that followed Jews did become farmers, though mostly on an individual basis. East European Jewish immigrants also achieved full citizenship, not by virtue of agricultural communes, but through the democratic principles of the American society and political system.

Thus the ultimate goals of the *Am Olam* were achieved, though not in the manner or time they had perceived. Nevertheless, they deserve to be lauded for shedding the *shtetlgelassenheit*, for their dedication to principle, and their concern for their fellow man.

42. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, p. 113; Brandes, *Immigrants to Freedom*, p. 22.