

# From Ghetto to Ghetto ... and Maybe a Farm, too

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The idea for this essay came from the theme, *Land in North America*, of a conference held in Helsinki in 1990. For the Jews of Eastern Europe, land was an unpossessable commodity and while land-ownership in the United States was not forbidden to them, their poverty, at least at the outset, precluded it. Since the notion of land in the traditional sense of owning and working it seems alien in respect to the Eastern European Jewish immigrants, my intent here is to consider it in terms of space: to discuss the conditions involved in occupying that space. First, a brief description of the *shtetls*, the Jewish hamlets of the Pale, especially the physical conditions and the structure and institutions of shtetl society, is required. This will be followed by a look at the conditions the immigrants encountered in the ghettos of American cities, exemplified best by New York City, still today the largest Jewish city in the world. This entails a discussion of the actual space they inhabited, be it on the Lower East Side of Manhattan or Brownsville or Williamsburg in Brooklyn and the consideration of questions like: How massive a change was the shift from shtetl to ghetto? What were the results of tenement housing and sweatshop labor on the health and minds of the immigrants?

The final section of the paper concerns the less commonly known fact that attempts were made to settle Eastern European Jews outside the great cities, to establish agricultural communities, to make farmers out of them. Some of these attempts were voluntary, for example, in the case of the Am Olam group or the community of Vineland, New Jersey. Others, like the failed experiments in Arkansas and the Louisiana swamps, were endeavors by German-Jewish refugee organizations to "hide" these Russian cousins who were proving an embarrassment to them. The reasons for the failure of these experiments will also be discussed.

## The Eastern European Jews at Home

The Pale of Settlement was an area to which the czarist autocracy, beginning with Catherine the Great in 1791, confined the Jews following the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century. "Congress Poland, Lithuania, Byelorussia and the Ukraine (excluding Kiev) constituted this great ghetto which endured until 1915..."<sup>1</sup> There were also other major regions of Jewish emigration lying outside the Pale, for example, Austrian-controlled Galicia, Moldavia and Bukovina.

Jews had lived in the area in and around the Pale since the thirteenth century, having moved west in their flight from the Inquisition and later during the religious wars in western Europe. They had originally been invited into the area by a Polish king, Boleslav the Pious, who wished to encourage commercial growth. The Jews functioned as "money-lenders, tax collectors, innkeepers, whiskey distillers, grain merchants, factors, stewards, artisans and general middlemen" and being necessary to the economy were in general treated decently.<sup>2</sup> Their situation gradually deteriorated, strongly worsening as the area came under czarist domination. Howe notes that the defeat of Napoleon "stabilized Europe as a concert of reaction" and that "the reign of Nicholas I, from 1825 to 1855, proved to be a nightmare."<sup>3</sup> Nicholas strove to reduce the number of Jews in Russia by forced conversion. Since the Jews did not convert en masse other measures had to be instituted. In 1827 special, military conscription laws for Jews were enacted, providing that:

at the age of twelve, Jewish boys were taken from their families and sent to military posts in the eastern provinces of Russia and Siberia for six years, far from any Jewish influence. Then at eighteen, they were subject to the regular twenty-five-year military service to which non-Jews were also liable.<sup>4</sup>

The shtetls were responsible for producing the young men for the army, a difficult task since families went to great lengths to keep their sons from being taken from them.

What was the life and culture of the shtetl that Nicholas I tried so strongly to destroy? Physically, the shtetls consisted of "thatched old wooden one-story hovels, leaning precariously on make-shift foundations, clustered together on streets of viscous black mud or, in dry weather, of choking dust that trans-

1 Moses Rischin, *The Promised City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 22.

2 Ibid., p. 22.

3 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 6.

4 Ande Manners, *Poor Cousins*. (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1972), p. 21.

formed the atmosphere into a yellow haze."<sup>5</sup> Sanitary conditions were lacking, water for household purposes often had to be carried long distances and crops usually produced very little. The marketplace was the center of shtetl society and the stalls were commonly run by women—men were engaged in studying the Talmud. The chief occupations included artisan practices like shoemaking, tailoring, lime burning and smithing. Existence was hand to mouth, the inhabitants living in abject poverty.

In addition to the marketplace and the hovels there were certain institutions common to all but the smallest shtetls. Of course, they financed their own *shul* (synagogue), rabbi and cemetery, but also a "khevreh kedisha (burial society), chedar (school), *mikveh* (ritual bath), shochet (ritual slaughterer), and a dozen or more charities that assisted orphans, dowerless brides, students and strangers."<sup>6</sup> Shtetl society was basically theocratic, and observance of social regulations helped to keep the community together. After all, unity was a necessity, they were under a continuous external pressure.

Historical events beginning in the 1880s set a mass migration in motion. The 1881 pogroms were significant; so were the May Laws of 1882, which forbade 1) new Jewish settlers outside the shtetls, 2) Jews from transacting business on Sundays or Christian holidays, and 3) Jews from owning or managing real estate or farms outside the cities of the Pale.<sup>7</sup> In 1886 Jews were almost completely refused admission to universities. Workers in cities, who had either previously been forced to leave the rural areas or drifted there in search of better times, found themselves involved in labor actions which were often brutally put down by the authorities. Further pogroms occurred later in the nineteenth century, spurred by the Black Hundreds, an anti-semitic organization, and in 1903 a massacre of Jews took place in Kishinev, in Moldavia. The unsuccessful revolution in 1905 also increased repression in Russia. Conditions being what they were, there was a resurgence of Zionist feeling. A place where Jews could at least feel secure, if not a Jewish state, was essential. And rather than looking east, the Jewish masses turned to the west, to the United States, where Jews had lived in complete security for over 200 years. In the United States and in western Europe there were both charitable organizations and money to help them. So they left, en masse, in greater numbers than the Jews in the west had anticipated. In leaving the Pale they set themselves free of autocratic oppression and pogroms, they looked with great expectations to the "Land of Columbus," "the Golden land." What they encountered did not always fill the bill of goods they were sold.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

## The Tenements and the Sweats

Although the Jews of Eastern Europe found their way into all the major cities of the United States and even entered the country through such an unlikely port as Galveston, Texas, New York City was their chief port of entry, the center of Jewish activity and culture in the country, and epitomized the problems and circumstances the new immigrants were confronted with. Naturally these problems and conditions existed in Jewish communities elsewhere—Mary Antin relates to her readers in *The Promised Land* the hardships her family endured in Boston after their arrival (this poverty, however, is played down so as not to interfere with her central theme: the benefits of America and Americanization) and Sidney L. Nyburg, in his 1917 novel *The Chosen People*, detailed the conflicts between German-Jewish factory owners and Russian-Jewish garment workers in Baltimore—but in New York everything was magnified.<sup>8</sup> Possibly this was due to the fact that the Jewish population of the city was so great, by 1915 totalling nearly 1.4 million, or approximately 28 per cent of all New Yorkers,<sup>9</sup> and for this reason I will concentrate on the situation of the Eastern European Jews there.

Like almost all immigrants, the first thing the Eastern European Jews faced was culture shock. America in the post-Civil War "Gilded Age" was highly materialistic; huge fortunes were being amassed as capitalists attempted to maximize profits while minimizing costs. And as most Jewish immigrants came from small rural shtetls, they had to adapt to urban life with its crowded living conditions, factory work and lack of spirituality.

Having passed through Ellis Island and all its accompanying inspections, they arrived at the tip of Manhattan, at Castle Garden. From here they made their way northward to the Lower East Side, where they sought members of their family or relatives (who often paid for their trans-Atlantic passage) or *lansleit*, neighbors or acquaintances from their hometown. They were dressed in the traditional garb of the shtetl: the men in long black caftans and wide-brimmed hats, totally bearded and sporting curly sidelocks in accordance with Orthodox prescriptions; the married women wearing *sheitels*, the traditional wig indicating their status. All this was what made the Americanized German Jews cringe, the new arrivals were all too visible, too alien, too different. They were no longer in backward, autocratic Russia, but in America, in New York, with a completely different style, tempo and emphasis—on success and making money. There was little place for the spiritual in America; many had heard this prior to departing, but had to see it to believe it. Howe quotes the

8 Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Sentry Edition, 1969. First published 1912). Sidney L. Nyburg, *The Chosen People* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986. First published 1917).

9 Richin, *Promised City*, p. 94.

recollections of an early immigrant in regard to this: "... dark tenements, filthy sidewalks; saloons on nearly every corner; sinister red lights in the vestibules of many small frame houses—all these shattered my illusions of America."<sup>10</sup>

Michael Gold, in his 1930 fictionalized childhood memoir *Jews Without Money*, runs together a slew of images to more graphically illustrate the misery of the ghetto. The Lower East Side was "a jungle, where wild beasts prowled, and toadstools grew in a poisoned soil—perverts, cokefiends, kid-nappers, firebugs, Jack the Rippers."<sup>11</sup> It was an area from which escape was seemingly impossible. Gold informs us that his mother never left the East Side. This is not unique in the fiction of the period; Henry Roth in *Call It Sleep* has Genya, the mother of the main character, insecure and uncertain in her world, say, "within this pale is my America, and if I ventured further I should be lost. In fact, ... were they even to wash that window [a shop window she uses as a landmark], I might never find my way home again."<sup>12</sup> Gold goes on to describe the ghetto as a "world plunged in eternal war,"<sup>13</sup> where there were no playgrounds; a garbage dump functioned as a surrogate and battle raged between the various gangs and ethnic groups for control of the "turf." The alternative playground (in my 50s childhood as well) was the street, the kids having to be fast enough to dodge express wagons to survive, something they were not always successful at. Roth's East Side is at the northeast end of the district; his streets are as crowded as Gold's but the description has less humanity, the crush of people being replaced on Avenue D by clattering horse cars.

Avenue D was thronged with beer wagons, garbage carts and coal trucks. There were many automobiles, same blunt and rangey, some with high straw poops, honking. Beyond Avenue D, at the end of a stunted, mined block that began with shacks and smithies and seltzer bottling works and ended in a junk heap, was the East River on which many boat horns sounded.<sup>14</sup>

The East Side is thus a wasteland but possibly the most crushing image is still to come, that of the tenement yard in *Jews Without Money*, built on old American headstones from the cemetery formerly occupying the block. The children had read the inscriptions and "were tired of weaving romances around these ruins of America;"<sup>15</sup> in essence, the graveyard for immigrants

10 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 67.

11 Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1984. First published 1930), p. 60.

12 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon Books, 1964. First published 1934), p. 33.

13 Gold, *Jews Without Money*, p. 42.

14 Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 143.

15 Gold, *Jews Without Money*, p. 62.

and their dreams. What is more, the graveyard of the East Side lacked all flowers save one, "the rose of syphilis, which bloomed by night and day."<sup>16</sup>

They had been forced into the tenements, often six to seven story buildings shaped like dumbbells. According to Jacob Riis, they were poorly ventilated and lighted, the long and narrow buildings (100 by 25 feet) built to house four families per floor were often inhabited by 150 persons or more.<sup>17</sup>

Moses Rischin quotes an 1888 magazine article describing tenement conditions in extremely vivid but much less objective terms:

They are great prison-like structures of brick with narrow doors and windows, cramped passages and steep rickety stairs. They are built through from one street to the other with a somewhat narrower building connecting them.... The narrow courtyard ... in the middle is a damp foul-smelling place, supposed to do duty as an airshaft; had the foul fiend designed these great barracks they could not have been more villainously arranged to avoid any chance of ventilation.... In case of fire they would be perfect death-traps, for it would be impossible for the occupants of the crowded rooms to escape by the narrow stairways, and the flimsy fire-escapes which the owners of the tenements were compelled to put up a few years ago are so laden with broken furniture, bales and boxes that they would be worse than useless. In the hot summer months ... these fire-escape balconies are used as sleepingrooms by the poor wretches who are fortunate enough to have windows opening upon them. The drainage is horrible, and even the Croton as it flows from the tap in the noisesome courtyard, seemed to be contaminated by its surroundings and have a fetid smell.<sup>18</sup>

Thus it should in no way be surprising that by 1900 the tenth ward on the Lower East Side was the most densely populated section of the city, having more than 700 inhabitants per acre, more than the worst sections of Bombay.<sup>19</sup> Manners notes that had the population density of the East Side been extended to cover the entire island of Manhattan, its population would have reached 150 million.<sup>20</sup> This gross overpopulation was caused in part by the exorbitant rents set by landlords, which in turn led to tenants sub-letting rooms in their apartments to either single boarders or entire families. And if overcrowding was not enough, there was that splendid New York summer with its daily temperatures of 35-40° C. Many a novelist or historian describes the use of the hot tarpaper-covered roof or fire escape as an open-air bedroom in seeking relief from stifflingness of the tenement. The summer also took its toll in another way; Samuel Ornitz in his 1923 *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* has a idealistic medical student sing the following praises to summer to an idealistic ghetto poet:

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Richin, *Promised City*, pp. 82-3.

<sup>19</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> Manners, *Poor Cousins*, p. 230.

Why does the poet rejoice with the coming of Spring? Is Summer far away? The Summer here in the Ghetto, in the slum, in the dirty, crowded city. What is there to rejoice over! Where is his imagination, his eye for beauty? Does he see the beautiful babies? What of the Summer that brings hell to our babies? Summer complaint—that is. Spring's beautiful promise to our babies. With the heat they'll die like flies. I know it is not beautiful to look ahead and see babies vomit and mess, turn blue with convulsions, became skinny and spavined, yellow and greenish, writhe and moan in distress, and fade and pass away under the eyes of agonized mothers.<sup>21</sup>

Babies were not the only victims of the heat. Overworked and underfed horses, too, fell down and died. And they were just left there to bloat and stink and rot, until the Sanitation Department came to haul them away and relieve the residents of the foul stench. There was a crying need to escape the misery of the ghetto tenements, to find a place in New York which did not seem like New York. Michael Gold describes his Mother's exhilaration at spending a Sunday in Bronx Park: "I'm so happy in a forest! You American children don't know what it means! I am happy!... it's like Hungary! There is much room, and the sky is so big and blue! One can breathe here!"<sup>22</sup> The most repeated and overwhelming image in the fiction of Anzia Yeziarska is that of the lack of light, the constant search for blue sky and fresh air. Young women, budding writers serving as her fictional alter egos in both *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts*, find themselves confined in airshaft rooms allowing them little breathing space; all they have is the freedom to live on their own and the loneliness and isolation of the intellectual striving for self-improvement, the only sure ticket out of ghetto misery.<sup>23</sup> Henry Roth picks up on this, too; young David's fear of the roof giving way to exhilaration, as he beholds "the immense heavens of July, the burnished, the shining fathom upon fathom ... to the west, the blinding whorl of the sun.... Flocks of pigeons wheeled ... they hung like a poised and never-raveling smoke ... they glittered like rippling water in the sun."<sup>24</sup> What a sense of freedom and light; a far cry from Roth's Avenue D wasteland! This idea of coming out into the light and, more importantly, breathing is crucially important in that the lack of fresh air coming into the tenements, in addition to the fact that they also served as garment factories keeping workers inside for twelve hours a day, led to a rise in the incidence of tuberculosis, which came to be known as "a 'Jewish disease' or 'the tailor's

21 Samuel Ormitz, *Allrightnik's Row "Haunch Paunch and Jowl"* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986. First published 1923), pp. 112-3.

22 Gold, *Jews Without Money*, pp. 155, 151.

23 Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 1985. First published 1925); *Hungry Hearts and Other Stories* (New York: Persea Books, 1985. First published 1920).

24 Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 296.

disease.”<sup>25</sup> And while not a disease, the suicide rate among tenement Jews was high, usually due to poverty and depression.

Most commonly the garment industry operated out of small units, *sweat-shops*. In 1913, in men's tailoring, of the 2779 factories 78 per cent, 2169, employed an average of five workers,<sup>26</sup> and the situation was similar in other branches of the trade. ~he sweats were everywhere in the area and operated around the clock, the workers constantly sewing or ironing. Howe provides this utterly dismal view of the conditions and perils involved in sweatshop labor:

... unventilated tenement rooms packed with teams of eight to twenty who pored over worktables and sewing machines.... By 1911 foot power was still prevalent in women's garment shops, as were twenty-five-pound hand-operated pressing irons (a common cause of spinal curvature), leaky illuminating gas tubes, high temperatures, and bad light and ventilation. Shop walls and floors were grimy, separate washrooms an exception, lunch areas ... non-existent. Water closets were often located in yards or halls ... and many, lacking windows, passed odors directly into work areas.<sup>27</sup>

These small units were often owned by contract tailors who sub-contracted their work from larger manufacturers and gave "employment to a single team of one sewing-machine operator, one baster, one finisher, and one presser.”<sup>28</sup> The team was given a weekly quota to fulfill and different wages were paid to the members of the team according to the skill required for the particular "section" each performed. Wages were low and were often held down through the use of greenhorns unaware of the conditions and willing to work for almost nothing. And the employers, to insure that production continued smoothly (read: the workers did not steal time away from their work or go to the toilet "too often") often locked the shop doors. Occasionally this had unforeseen and unfortunate repercussions. The inability to open locked doors, coupled with innumerable violations of the fire codes, caused the deaths of 146 sweaters, mainly women, in the infamous Triangle Fire of 25 March 1911.

25 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 149.

26 Richin, *Promised City*, p. 66.

27 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 156.

28 Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (New York: Dover, 1970. First published 1896 and 1898), p. 188.



## The Joys of Suburban Living

Jewish immigrants, despite being trapped on the Lower East Side, could get out. As transportation systems improved and with the opening of the Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges, Jews started to cross the East River in increasing numbers to settle in Williamsburg on the Brooklyn side of the river and further out in what seemed to be the more rural surroundings of East New York, Brownsville and New Lots at the other end of the borough (the extension of the elevated railroad also brought Jews into Harlem and the Bronx). Howe notes Brownsville being regarded as "a pastoral village in which 'Jews could live as in the old country, without any rush or excessive worries. Jews there didn't work on the Sabbath, and they went to *shul* three times a day.<sup>29</sup>" He reports a newspaper story praising this area, which, unlike the East Side, would "... never have tenements. The houses are three stories, apartments have four or five rooms, with a bathtub and other conveniences, and a yard for the kids."<sup>30</sup> One problem, however, was that it was a long trip into Manhattan and work and money had to be spent for carfares. And despite the glorious build-up, the section still was less than appealing to its inhabitants. There is nothing wonderful in the following Henry Roth portrayal: "... Back yards ... grey slabs of ice ... on the dead grass ... ended in a wall of clapboards, all painted a mud-brown, all sawing the sky with a rip-tooth slant of gabled roofs."<sup>31</sup> Nor are the critic Alfred Kazin's memories elegiac. His Brownsville was a prison at the end of the world, New York's back door, a place of rubbish, filth and emptiness, a trap he must escape.<sup>32</sup> He remembers the heat of the summer, the rooms a hell on earth with their smell of burning sulphur,<sup>33</sup> the air thick and hard to breathe. The yards the newspaper promised turned out to be encircled by tenements, Kazin's reality being "the two tenements rose up around you, enclosing you in a narrow circle littered with splintered crates, loose sheets of old newspaper, garbage cans, and the thin green ooze left behind by the cats."<sup>34</sup>

There was another escape, but only for the successful, "Allrightnik's Row." In Brooklyn, it was Eastern Parkway, a broad boulevard stretching east from Prospect Park, a vast expanse of green in the center of the borough. In Manhattan, it was uptown, miles away from the Lower East Side, on Riverside Drive, on the Upper West Side, geographically as well as diametrically

29 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, pp. 131-2.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

31 Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 102.

32 Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), pp. 93-4.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

opposed. While it offered physical and material comfort and demonstrated the achievement of the American dream, mainly for those Russian Jews who got rich in the garment industry, it often provided little spiritual relief. This is especially true in the fictional pictures drawn by Yeziarska and Ornitz. In her "Fat of the Land: Part 2" Yeziarska portrays the plight of an elderly women resettled uptown by her "allrightnik" children. She finds herself trapped, only the location of her prison has changed. Eventually she flees, back to the East Side, but only to find she has been away too long, that she has become too accustomed to her uptown comforts. Dislocated when she arrived in America, she is equally dislocated in her old age. Ornitz' protagonist Meyer Hirsch, a judge, has also made the move uptown, has achieved his life's goal, only to realize the emptiness "making it" brings. "Allrightnik's Row" only seems to isolate its inhabitants from the life and culture of the ghetto, and the security of living among their own, something essential to the immigrant Jew from the European shtetl.

These allrightniks sought to emulate their wealthy German-Jewish cousins who had long been established and assimilated into American society. As previously noted, the German Jews were more than a little uncomfortable at the arrival of so many of their Russian co-religionists. In what she calls the tsitterdik syndrome, Manners describes the fears of the American (German) Jews, many of whom were firmly entrenched in the Republican Party and Wall Street banking houses, about their position: "'tsitterdik' signified edginess about any Jew's behavior which might through glib generalization reflect badly on the position of all American Jews."<sup>35</sup> Irving Howe, in his *World of Our Fathers*, notes that this attitude on the part of the comfortable German Jews should not have been unexpected, writing:

what benefits could they foresee, what but certain embarrassment and probable burden, from the descent of thousands of penniless Jews whom they supposed to be steeped in medieval superstition when not possessed by wild radicalism?<sup>36</sup>

This mentality formed the basis for the conflict which arose between them and the Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

The thoroughly assimilated American Jews scorned their Eastern European cousins as inferior and backward, but at the same time they were forced to deal with them. There was a strong need to eliminate the threat posed by the Eastern Europeans, to quickly make them acceptable, to Americanize them. One form of Americanization employed was the attempt to settle incoming Eastern European immigrants outside the densely-populated New York area, to even make them into farmers.

<sup>35</sup> Manners, *Poor Cousins*, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 31.

## The Man with the Hoe

The massive wave of immigration from the Pale in the 1880s was accompanied by the rise of organizations seeking to place the newcomers on the land. Rousseau in the 18th century had preached the nobility of agriculture as Tolstoy and Turgenev were then doing in Russia. Making farmers out of Jewish shtetl-dwellers was thought to be a way of planting roots, dissociating Jews from traditional occupations like peddlers, middlemen and moneylenders. Tolstoy even believed this to be a means of reducing anti-semitism and making Jews more palatable to gentiles. This same attitude was held by the German Jews. They had made it, found their place in American society and left their mark in financial and industrial circles, even if they encountered some discrimination. They felt threatened, however, by the masses of Eastern European immigrants who it seemed had a long row to hoe before becoming Americanized. There were too many of them, the bulk settling in the ghettos of New York and other eastern urban centers, and they were all too visible, all too easily equitable with their proper American cousins. So the Yehudim took up the 'nobility of the land' philosophy and through their charitable organizations established colonies for the Yiden. One might even parallel this late 19th century colonization with the settlement of America 250 years earlier: the Puritans settling New England in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles—the dense dark forests, cold winter, wild animals and savage Indians. And all this with a mission; in the name of religious freedom to establish a 'city on the hill, a new Jerusalem,' in the words of John Winthrop. The Jews of the Pale also came in search of religious toleration, they fled the oppression of the Czar and the Cossack. The Yehudim were allowing them, too, to establish ideal communities where they could live in peace and harmony. Their official organ, the American *Isralite*, wrote: "The Russian Jew first and foremost needs physical restoration which they can find on the American prairie and forests. the atmosphere, the exercise, the food and feelings of security and liberty to be found there will restore and invigorate the immigrants."<sup>37</sup> This invigoration on the prairie would of course keep them out of sight and the Yehudim would not need to explain to gentile America that they were different from their seedy co-religionists.

The main organization among immigrants seeking to establish agricultural communities was Am Olam, or 'the eternal people.' Their intent was to curb the rootlessness of the shtetl or the urban ghetto Jews found themselves in after being evicted from the shtetl. Am Olam was a pre-cursor to the later kibbutz movement in Palestine/Israel. Co-operative, socialistic in attitude it had a fervor that matched the political activity of urban Jews in the 20th century. One

37 Manners, *Poor Cousins*, p. 161.

account of Am Olam notes that some of its members, on arriving in New York stayed there and later became active in socialist and labor politics.

Through such agencies as the Baron de Hirsch Fund, Jewish Colonization Association, Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Society, Hebrew Union Agricultural Society, and through a reading of the Bible glorifying ancient Jewish farmers, Russian-Jewish immigrants were sent to such unlikely places, considering the notion of Jewish settlement in America, as Sicily Island, Louisiana, eastern Arkansas, Cremieux, South Dakota, New Odessa, Oregon. What these settlements had in common in addition to Yehudim funding and Yiden colonists was their short life and total failure. Sicily Island was destroyed by Mississippi River floods. Touted by its sponsors as a paradise, a colonist reported the following: "They called it a 'Paradise,' but we found nothing thereunto pertaining save some poisonous serpents, much however of Hell. A viler spot on God's Earth it would be hard to find and there our unfortunate, much tried co-religionists were to learn a love of agriculture."<sup>38</sup> Many settlers fled to the nearest towns and returned to peddling. \$20,000 worth of equipment was lost.

The Arkansas colony was a fiasco of equal proportions. Settlers were unprepared for the tasks of clearing the dense forests, the profusion of poisonous snakes, mosquitoes and the malaria and yellow fever they caused. Nor were temperatures of 105-108° F in the summer of 1883 to the liking of the refugees from the Pale.

Cremieux, SD, seemed to offer improved opportunities for success as there was a better quality of soil and the weather was not as oppressively hot. The winters chilled the bones and fire and drought wreaked havoc. Practical organization left something to be desired: upon arrival colonists found themselves without water or shelter, wells had to be dug; their mortgage also took a heavy toll. The colony disbanded in 1889 due to improper work methods and low market prices.

New Odessa, funded primarily by the financier Jacob Schiff, was more communally-based and more loosely-organized. Factionalism and lack of privacy, to say nothing of the shortage of women, were the main problems there as many went off to do their own thing.

Irving Howe puts the failure of the Am Olam movement and the agricultural communities in general down to the following: it was economically unfeasible to employ socialistic co-operative methods under market economy conditions; idealism could not overcome the physical and psychological stress the immigrants endured. Financing was poor and the colonies were situated far from Jewish centers, settlers were cut off from relatives and friends; and finally the cultural and economic shift from shtetl to American wilderness was

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

too great.<sup>39</sup> How could these immigrants, with little or no knowledge of agriculture, be expected to succeed in an industrial area which was changing? Gilded Age America was a period of structural change. At a time when everyone else seemed to be backtracking east, these Jews were being settled in the spaces being abandoned. Not very sound economic logic?

There was one bright spot in the attempt to put the Jewish immigrant down on the farm. Like the failed communities, Alliance in Vineland, New Jersey, was organized on a co-operative basis: in addition to the small plots allocated to settlers by lot and with reasonable mortgage terms, a portion of the area was set aside for community use. All this allowed collaboration in the fields and the use of shared equipment, which kept down the price of capital investment. In its early years Alliance was forced to turn to subsidiary industry: the traditional immigrant industries of cigar-making and textiles were established to provide a livelihood. Farmers also hired themselves out to neighbors for this purpose as well as to gain the necessary agricultural skills. What made the colony successful, according to Manners it lasted until 1969, was its location. Situated on a rail line in southern New Jersey, it had good freighting possibilities and, probably most important of all in respect to the failed settlements, not far from either New York or Philadelphia, the home of many of their relatives and friends and centers of Jewish culture. Its final dissolution came about through the lack of children to carry on the work of their parents; agriculture was just too difficult and low-paying an occupation in comparison to the professions a college degree offered.<sup>40</sup> This of course is a universal trend.

There was one other "agricultural endeavor" among immigrant Jews at about the turn of the century. The location was Ulster County, New York, later expanding into neighboring Sullivan County, in the Catskill Mountains, in what has come to be known as the "Borscht Belt." Considering the conditions on the Lower East Side, Williamsburg and Brownsville, the overcrowding, lack of sanitation and disease, it is no wonder that the desire to flee the city for the fresh air and green grass of the 'mountains' was so strong. The region was originally worked by small farmers but mortgages and other economic considerations forced them to take in summer residents to make ends meet. So, just as tenement rents forced tenants to take in boarders, Catskill farmers turned to the boarding house trade. Economically, it also provided a market for their produce and saved them the expense and hassle of marketing in the city. I myself can remember the importance of a summer at a bungalow colony, or at a day camp in southern Westchester or on Staten Island, away from the oppressive heat of New York and the 'joys' of the open fire hydrant in the street. It was something that parents thought they owed their children and the weekend

<sup>39</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> Manners, *Poor Cousins*, pp. 181-6.

drive or bus trip for the husbands in the stifling heat and massive traffic jams was no blessing. And if this was the 1950s, one can easily imagine the situation at the turn of the century.

## **Conclusion**

The American ghetto was to some degree a new version of the shtetl but without the oppression and atrocities of Czarist Russia. The same shtetl institutions and similar occupations existed—women operated the same types of market stalls and men peddled and made shoes, in addition to the full-blown garment trades. In America, too, wives were the center of the household, often breadwinners who supported men living in a world of religious scholarship. At least through the early part of the 20th century there was little difference in living conditions, obviously "high-rise" tenements replaced the low-level shtetl hovels. For many, the shtetl mentality, the fear of gentiles and things goyish, remained. They really had not left the Pale, it had been transported with them; only now the Cossacks were chiefly Irish Catholics.

If nothing else, despite the poverty and conditions, they remained in America because there was no place to return to, nor was there any reason to do so. Jewish immigrants, like most other immigrant groups, persisted and looked to their children to achieve the dream that eluded them. It is fairly clear that now, nearing the end of the century, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, many with large suburban homes, have finally gained the land they were previously denied.