

IV

PIONEERS

I.

MUCH HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE Jewish colonies in the Crimea. Unfortunately, most of the information is buried under a mountain of statistics, historical data, and political arguments. And yet, for one who has seen the death of the Russian ghetto, it is easy to wax lyrical—yes, even grow sentimental over the new life that is being forged by Jews on soil.

The Crimea is a sunny and flowering peninsula, washed by the Black and Azov seas. It is a country, I was told by the colonists, "blessed with the best of climates and the most fertile of soils." About the size of Holland, it has vast, hitherto uncultivated and uninhabited steppes.

In these steppes, in 1924, small groups of Jewish pioneers decided to recommence life as tillers of the soil. They were assisted in this task by the Soviet Government as well as by the Agro-Joint (American Society for the promotion of agriculture among Russian Jews), headed by one of the most remarkable men I have ever known, Dr. Joseph Rosen.

It was a difficult task. The land was virgin; it had

to be cultivated. The land was arid; it needed irrigation. The process was slow and painful. Ten years have passed—years of hard toil. Not in vain. The collective farm, Horepashnik, for instance, has already become one of the most prosperous farms in the Crimea. A small group of pioneers pointed the way out. Thousands of Jews who would have slowly perished in the ghettos, followed them.

Today more than 29,000 Jews have settled on land in the Crimea. They are organized in 83 collective farms. The Freidorf district, the Jewish autonomous region in the Crimea, has 33 village Soviets composed primarily of Jews. The entire district is under Jewish administration. The colonists have more than 3,000 houses, 200 buildings for collective and agricultural purposes, several factories in which they manufacture various commodities out of their own raw materials, a number of hospitals, clubs, theatres, movies and various other social and cultural institutions, including 73 elementary schools, 14 high schools and two agricultural technical schools of which I shall speak later. Unlike the work of other farming nationalities in the Crimea, or even throughout Russia, the agricultural work of the Jews is more than 75% mechanized.

Some interesting incidents are related about the beginning of the Jewish colonization in the Crimea. When the first group of settlers arrived, they were met by strong opposition on the part of the local peasantry. This was, of course, attributed to the peasants' inherent anti-Semitism. Undoubtedly, the anti-

Semitic element was there. More important, however, I believe, was the peasants' extraordinary love and reverence for the land. They feared that the "holy land" was being desecrated.

"To whom are they giving land?" they asked in amazement. "What will they do with it?"

Indeed, the typical ghetto Jew, destroyed and demoralized, inspired very little confidence in his ability to work on the soil. It was necessary to have the daring inspiration of a revolution to transform these Jews into peasants. It was an experiment. It is now a reality. The ghetto Jew is gradually being transformed into a new man.

I say gradually, for it must not be imagined that the settling of the Jews on land in Soviet Russia has already been accomplished. It is only beginning. While there is nothing in the make-up of the East European Jew to prevent him from ultimately becoming a sturdy farmer, it will take perhaps more than one generation before he is freed finally from the destructive claws of the ghetto psychology. The Soviet Government, it is commonly assumed, is capable of accomplishing in a decade what it took other governments to accomplish in a century. That, in a sense, is true. That is the power of revolution. One, however, cannot rid himself so quickly of a heritage in which he has been rooted for centuries and centuries. Also, the fleshpot plays its historic rôle here, too. It will take many more years before the ghetto Jew will learn to become a free and productive member of society. For one thing, the Jew is traditionally

a city man. And for a city man to become a peasant, means that he has to free himself from his old habits and traditions. This process of transformation is usually slow and tortuous. Secondly, there is that "class conflict" within the Jewish race itself, which, even as among the Russian peasantry, is an obstacle in the path of Jewish colonization in Russia.

In its broader aspect, Jewish colonization is organically linked up with the agricultural revolution that has been taking place in Soviet Russia—the movement to collectivize Russian land. It is this movement which is undoubtedly the outstanding factor in the Soviet program.

From the very outset of the Bolshevik revolution, it was Lenin's dream to collectivize all Russian land. For it was in the private holdings of the peasants that he foresaw the future enemy of socialism. This, however, could not be done at once. In order to assure the success of the first stage of the Revolution—the conquest of power—the Bolsheviks needed the vast Russian peasantry as an ally. To the peasants, on the other hand, rich or poor, the Revolution meant that they would be given free land which they had so long coveted. Having achieved their dream, having gotten the land that was confiscated from the land-owners, they were satisfied. Their age-old peasant yearning was realized and as far as they were concerned, the Revolution was completed. Not so the Bolsheviks. To them the distribution of the land among the individual peasants was merely a tactical move. The final aim of the Revolution, they said, is

the creation of socialist society. Real socialism can only be established in a society where private property no longer exists. As long as the peasants own the land privately and not collectively where everything is produced and shared in common, so long will the final aim of the Revolution not be achieved.

Thus, on the second year of the Five-Year Plan in 1930, referred to by the Soviet leaders as the year of the "great break," the Soviet Government set out "to liquidate" private property. The movement to collectivize Russian land commenced. Superficially, the aim of this movement was to industrialize agriculture, to get control of the food supply of the entire nation and increase it by scientific methods. Fundamentally, as I have already pointed out, the issue was much deeper than that. It was the historic struggle between individualism and collectivism, between private enterprise and collective ownership. Because the Russian peasantry was the most individualistic and property-conscious element in Russia, this movement presents the most dramatic aspect of the Five-Year Plan.

As it was to be expected, the peasants did not give in without a battle to the Government's program of collectivization. They replied with a stubborn resistance. At first they stopped sowing. Much of the country's arable land became wasteland. The country was plunged into a period of hunger and starvation. But such forms of passive resistance were not the only methods they adopted in their fight against the Government. The kulaks—rich peasants—instituted

a reign of terror. Because of their tremendous authority in the village, they succeeded in inducing the poorer peasants who could only benefit through collectivization, to set fire to villages, to kill out their livestock and destroy all property that they could lay their hands on. Many Soviet officials were killed during this reign of terror.

The Government answered terror with terror. Rebellious peasants, particularly kulaks, were forcibly exiled to distant places in Siberia. During 1931 and even 1932, one could see whole carloads of such peasants all over Russia. They were a pitiful sight. Many of them lived under the most miserable conditions. A great number were killed in the fight or died of disease. It was a fierce and ruthless struggle. Cruel and unforgivable acts were committed on both sides. Whether they were justified or not, one thing is certain: private property no longer exists in Russia. At least 95% of its land is completely collectivized.

The instinct for private property, however, is still alive. That is what the Bolsheviks call "the class struggle in the village." Many of the peasants, particularly kulaks, have realized the futility of fighting the Soviet Government in the open. They have joined the collective farms and carry on sabotage activities secretly. Sometimes these acts of sabotage result in serious damage to Soviet agriculture and industry. How long the fight will go on I do not know, but it is a problem which, it seems to me, the Soviet Government will have to face for many years to come.

Strange as it may seem, particularly since the vast

majority of the Russian Jews were never permitted to own any land, this "class struggle" is also a problem in the Jewish colonies, although in a less violent and somewhat different form. This was related to me by Chaskin, the agronomist for the Agro-Joint, with whom I was traveling through the Jewish colonies in the Crimea.

2.

The sun had already set beyond the Crimean mountains, when we approached Horepashnik. Night was slowly descending upon the steppe. Suddenly, it was lit by numerous glittering lights.

"Look!" exclaimed Chaskin. "The steppe is being electrified." Indeed, the steppe was being electrified. Every few moments new lights would appear in the distance. They belonged to various collective farms. Chaskin, who knew the region well, could recognize each of them. The collectives Icor, Horepashnik, Molotov, all were casting their light upon the steppe.

"And if you look hard enough," remarked Chaskin smiling, "you may get a glimpse of Freidorf, the 'Jewish Kingdom,' where even the G.P.U. speaks Yiddish."

Yes, that was the steppe which I had longed to see. Only the day before I left Kiev, my host showed me, in the Yiddish newspaper *Emes*, a dispatch which read:

"The Jewish collective farms Horepashnik, Molotov, The Jewish Peasant and the commune Voyenovo,

have been electrified for the celebration of the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

"In Horepashnik the water power, too, has been electrified and the results are excellent."

An outsider could not realize why this dispatch should be cause for rejoicing. To an American, electricity is no longer a wonder. Neither, as a matter of fact, is it anything new to the Russian in the big city. But to the Jewish colonists its significance cannot even be measured. For them, this accomplishment signified that their survival was beyond doubt.

"It is an assurance of new life," said Chaskin, "for you must remember that only two years ago this was wilderness and wasteland. Ordinarily, to cultivate land like this would take many decades. You know the story of your own American pioneers. With the aid of electricity, however, we have taken a jump on history. The sooner we develop our colonies, the speedier will be the solution of the Jewish problem in Russia and perhaps over all the world."

Here a word ought to be said about Chaskin and the other Jewish agronomists who have played such an important rôle in the development of Jewish colonization.

During my visit to the Crimea, I often heard colonists remark: "What would we do without Chaskin?" What was true of Chaskin was also true of the other Jewish agronomists, not only in the Crimea but also in the Ukraine, Kherson district, Biro-Bidjan—wherever Jews are being settled on land.

The original task of the agronomists was pri-

marily technical in nature, to teach and train new farmers. But Jewish colonization in Russia is as much social in nature as technical. Thus, the agronomist soon became to the colonists not only an instructor in agriculture but also a counsellor, referee and friend.

Fortunately for the colonists, the majority of the agronomists, at least those whom I met, are of the stuff from which real leaders are made. Unknown to the outside world, it is they who carry the burden of Jewish colonization upon their shoulders.

Here is Chaskin, for instance: He was a medical student before the Revolution. Because of his revolutionary activities, he was expelled from the university and from the age of nineteen had led the precarious existence of a hunted animal. The Tsarist secret police were always on his trail.

After the Revolution he fought in the Red Army and when the civil war came to an end he began to attend agricultural school.

Tall, broadshouldered and dark, with naïve blue eyes and a face radiating confidence and sincerity, at the age of 37 Chaskin is as alert and alive as a man in his early twenties. He is still animated by the same ideal—the creation of a better and richer life for all who are exploited and persecuted—that inspired him and gave meaning to his existence when he was nineteen. During our trip through the Crimean steppes, I had long and intimate conversations with Chaskin. I discovered that he was not only an excellent agronomist but also an expert diplomat.

"You could qualify in America as a soul healer," I once remarked to him after I had seen the effect of his presence upon the colonists.

"What can I do?" he replied. "Sometimes I must even assume the duties of a worshipper when I am among religious colonists on a Saturday and there aren't ten men for prayer. I am everything around here. I also settle disputes between husbands and wives and between children and parents. You've got to understand the psychology of every person with whom you are dealing. There are former merchants here, village tailors, shoemakers and marriage brokers. Now conditions are becoming somewhat normal, but at the beginning it was real hell around here. Many Jews came from the villages expecting to find everything ready for them. Others came to seek a new field for business. When they discovered that they must build their new life by the sweat of their brows, they fled back to the ghettos or to the large cities. But not for long. In the town they faced a miserable existence. In the cities, without the knowledge of any trade, they were doomed to starvation. Of course, those who were experts in their fields—such as former grain and flour merchants, horse dealers, and so on, were given Government jobs. The others went back. They came and went, came and went. There was a continuous traffic around here. Now the majority are settled and satisfied."

"How about the former Jewish bourgeoisie?" I asked. "Is it true, as the *Emes* and other Yiddish

newspapers report, that they carry on sabotage activities in the collective farms?"

"Not quite. In order to emphasize that the Jews are no different than the rest of the national minorities in the Soviet Union, the *Emes* sometimes uncovers cases of sabotage where there was merely incompetence. Besides, there cannot be any kulaks among the Jews if by kulaks we mean rich peasants. On the other hand, the Jews are blessed with their own type of 'class enemies'—the typical village *gesheftsmen* who came here to continue their old professions."

"But one cannot indulge in private trading in the Soviet Union?"

"Theoretically, no, but actually, yes. That is what we call the transition stage. The collectives still retain a form of private property. Each worker, for instance, gets paid by the number of days he works. He is paid not in money but in products. The surplus of his products he is permitted to sell in the 'open' unofficial market where the prices are ten times as high as those in the official government stores. That is how speculation asserts itself all over again. Many of the *gesheftsmen*, instead of working, go about buying up the surplus products from the other colonists and sell it in the 'open' market. One evasion of the law leads to another. Thus, there are many instances where these speculators steal grain, flour, cattle and equipment. In some collective farms it became a real organized business. Through counter-revolutionary propaganda—and here is where

they are like the kulaks—they influence the discontented elements in the farms. They get themselves elected as managers and naturally under such management the farms usually go to pieces. But that is becoming less and less of a problem because once we uncover a person like that there is no mercy for him. By far the vast majority of the colonists are hard-working people who are eager to make a new start in life.”

Chaskin also explained to me the advantage the Jewish colonists have over the rest of the farming population in the Soviet Union. The Jews have no agricultural tradition. Thus, while the Government is still trying to wean the peasant away from his primitive agricultural methods, the Jewish colonists at the start learned to use the most modern agricultural implements. The Freidorf district, as an instance, has six “M.T.S.” (tractor stations) with 475 tractors. Some of the ablest men are in charge of these “M.T.S.” whose function, incidentally, is as much educational and political, as technical. Moreover, the Jewish farms from the very outset were organized as collectives.

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We arrived at the kolhoz Horepashnik.

“It may interest you to know,” concluded Chaskin, “that this farm, although organized in 1930, is already considered one of the best agriculture collectives in the Soviet Union.”