

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910. By URI D. HERSCHER. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981. Pp. 197. Illustrations, notes, appendices, index, bibliography. \$15.95.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3j08h3p1>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 3(0)

Author

Welter, John F.

Publication Date

1982

Copyright Information

Copyright 1982 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910. By URI D. HERSCHER. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981. Pp. 197. Illustrations, notes, appendices, index, bibliography. \$15.95.

In Europe of the late 1800s no one was more familiar with Jewish stereotypes than the Jew himself. Even though laws in Eastern Europe and Russia forbade Jews from owning and farming land and forced them to live in villages as merchants, their neighbors still resented them for having prospered in the roles they were forced to take.

Uri D. Herscher, in *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910*, gives the reader a unique look into the attempts of some Eastern European Jewish refugees to break out of their stereotyped roles and make a new life for themselves as farmers in the United States. By becoming farmers these Jewish immigrants hoped to end the "stigma of parasitism" that had haunted them in Europe. In examining the establishment and, most often, the failure of Jewish agricultural communes Herscher brings to light a previously hidden chapter in American communal and utopian history. Experimental Jewish settlements have been universally ignored in histories of the more famous utopian communities like New Harmony, Brook Farm, or the Shaker colonies.

The story of Jewish agricultural experiments really begins with the great wave of immigrants fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe and Russia in the 1870s and 1880s. Jewish refugees settled in the United States with the help of immigrant aid societies that were formed in Europe and America. Two of the most active of these societies were the Franco-Jewish Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU), and the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (HEAS). Both the AIU and the HEAS and several other groups wanted to avoid duplicating in the United States the situations which were thought to have caused much of the problems for Jews in Europe--urban concentrations of Jews and "non-productive" labor. According to Herscher, the intellectuals and philanthropists who backed the aid societies found the answers to these problems in the theories of such people as Henry George which advocated the common ownership of land and the importance of individual manual labor. Thus, the founders expected the agricultural commune to give the Jews a new self-image and a new role in American agricultural society.

The story that Herscher tells of the Jewish communes is a consistent record of poor planning, hardship, disappointment, and failure. He provides a short history of several settlements but the experience of the settlers in Sicily Island, Louisiana, is representative of most of the communes. Founded in 1881, this settlement was established on swampy land four hundred miles north of New Orleans. Its residents were Russian Jews who were unable to cope with the unbroken swampy land and the heat and humidity of Louisiana. Weakened by these hardships in a strange and new environment, their commune failed as did others in Oregon, the Dakotas, Michigan, and Arkansas.

Herscher blames the failure of these colonies on poor planning and land selection, lack of authoritative leadership, and lack of a strong common ideal other than a sense of persecution. The two colonies at Alliance and Woodbine,

New Jersey, achieved some degree of success because they had strong leadership, and they grew to develop businesses in addition to farming.

This book is a well-written and well-documented study of a much neglected area of Jewish and utopian studies. It is easily readable in one sitting, yet it offers a sensitive description of the perils and the plight of Jews trying to create a new life and new world for themselves. In two helpful appendices Herscher includes documents which give an intimate look at the New Jersey communities. The first contains excerpts from *The Jewish Farmer*, a Yiddish-language journal that reported on the efforts at Woodbine and Alliance. The second is the memoir of the founder of Alliance, Sidney Bailey.

In spite of its many fine points and its groundbreaking uniqueness, this book has at least two serious deficiencies. First, there are several crucial issues that should have been addressed in more detail. How did the dramatic rise of interest in agricultural communes come about among Jewish intellectuals? Why did the immigrant aid societies not learn from their mistakes with the earliest communes and change their program? How were these failures interpreted by the Jews themselves? The second deficiency is basically an organizational problem common to several books on utopian communities. It is the problem of discussing the communal experience by writing short, anecdotal histories of a number of settlements without really synthesizing or adequately analyzing their motives, their means of operation, or their constituent make-up. Herscher has, nonetheless, provided the beginnings for a potentially rich area of inquiry.

John F. Welter
University of California, Los Angeles

The Peace Reform in American History. By CHARLES DE BENEDETTI. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. Pp. xvii + 245. Bibliographical essay, notes, index. \$18.50.

With the recent increase of concern in both the United States and Europe over the effects and dangers of nuclear war, *The Peace Reform in American History* has reached its audience at a very opportune time. One of a number of historians that has recently made the American peace movement an area of scholarly interest, Charles DeBenedetti develops a broad synthesis of the existing scholarship. Although his own perspective is evident throughout the book, it in no way detracts from a very thorough job of research. Both well-organized and clearly written, this survey covers Americans that have actively worked for peace from the early 1600s through the Vietnam War. It succeeds admirably in its attempt to fit the peace reform into the mainstream of American history.

The greatest support for the various peace