

## “GREAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE MANY OF SMALL MEANS”: NEW JERSEY’S AGRICULTURAL COLONIES\*

DEBORAH E. POPPER

**ABSTRACT.** Pogroms in the Russian Pale in 1881 set off a wave of immigration of Russian Jews to the United States. Most went to the cities, but an important group, with the support of philanthropic organizations, became part of an experiment in Jewish agricultural colonies. South Jersey’s Alliance and Woodbine were the most successful. Both were established on undeveloped land, and the landscape that emerged suggests the importance the funders placed on using landscape as a means of Americanization. *Keywords:* Jewish agricultural colonies, New Jersey, Russian Jewish migration.

The year 1881 was especially difficult for Russian Jews. Pogroms across the Jewish Pale in southwestern Russia set off a wave of emigration, and by 1915 more than 3 million Jews had left the region. The largest number went to the United States, where they accounted for the second largest group of new immigrants. New York City’s Lower East Side, with its intense crush of people, noise, and smells, became their new cultural landscape. My grandfather was a fairly typical member of this wave. A tailor, he arrived in New York in 1905 from Kiev, hoping for a better life. My mother remembered all the children sleeping in a bed in the kitchen at night, wandering through the pushcarts during the day, playing in the streets, and, after they had moved uptown, returning to the old neighborhood to reconnect, to shop and chat, and to eat knishes and pastrami in the familiar delicatessens.

This was a very American story—one that many waves of immigrants to America can tell—but with a difference. The narrative I absorbed growing up featured a form of Jewish exceptionalism within American exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> Waves of immigrants were drawn to America’s abundant, free, and productive land. With that land they produced other waves—amber waves of grain. These two different waves went together—except for the Jews—because, unlike other ethnic groups who came to America, Eastern European Jews were urban when they arrived and stayed urban afterward.<sup>2</sup> In most of Russia they had been prohibited from owning land and farming, so they worked instead as middlemen or craftsmen.

What I was taught, although it reflected much Russian Jewish immigrant experience, was incomplete and overdrawn both for Jews and non-Jews. Many non-Jewish new immigrants filled America’s cities. And although most Jewish immigrants headed to the cities, some became farmers. Alliance and Woodbine, two agricultural colonies formed in New Jersey at the end of the nineteenth century with sub-

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✉ DR. POPPER is an associate professor of geography at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, Staten Island, New York 10314, and a visiting associate professor at the Princeton Environmental Institute, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08540.