
Dealing with the Devil: Louis Marshall and the Partnership Between the Joint Distribution Committee and Soviet Russia

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At a time when the United States had no diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia and when the Soviets were still considered a menace to world political stability, what could wealthy, conservative American Jewish businessmen have had in common with the Bolshevik regime in Moscow? What could have united these two widely divergent groups in a partnership that lasted several years and involved millions of dollars? The answer was a common desire to help hundreds of thousands of destitute Russian Jews find a new way of life as productive farmers in Soviet Russia. This little-known project was probably the most constructive philanthropic plan ever attempted by private sources for adapting masses of Jews to new economic and political conditions in their native land.

The Origins of the Resettlement Plan

After the revolutionary Leninist regime prevailed in the bloody and destructive civil war of 1919–20, it imposed its Bolshevik political theory and economic policy on the devastated nation, purging nearly all traces of capitalism from the Russian economic structure and redesigning it to fit Marxist economic philosophy. One tragic result was that the bourgeois Jewish community, which had long been a commercial class engaged in shopkeeping, trading, and other small business activities, was now deprived of its livelihood. More than 800,000 previously self-sufficient Jews were suddenly uprooted and condemned as economic outcasts.¹

Although the new Bolshevik economic policy was not anti-Jewish in itself, the Jews suffered most severely by virtue of their traditional commercial role in Russian society. They were labeled *lishentsy*, or



Louis Marshall (1856–1929)

noncitizens, politically shunned, and officially designated as unproductive pariahs. Arbitrarily denied their civil rights, they could not occupy administrative positions and were excluded from all government social and medical services. Their children were not allowed to attend state schools. The terrible shock of being thus uprooted and condemned left many unable to adapt to the new economic realities.²

The Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), founded at the start of World War I, was the organization supported by wealthy American Jews hoping to help their Russian coreligionists. Since the beginning of the war the JDC had been the main source of relief in the wartorn Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. After 1921, when the American Relief Administration (ARA) came into being under the able direction of Herbert Hoover, JDC worked through ARA in Russia, dispensing food, clothing, and medicines. The early presence of the ARA in Soviet Russia would later provide respectability for JDC's own program to settle needy Russian Jews on farms.³

Louis Marshall (1856–1929) typified the JDC leadership. Although not a businessman, he was wealthy and assimilated, coming from a poor immigrant family in Syracuse, New York, and rising to a place among the elite Jews of uptown New York City. Well-known as a corporation and constitutional lawyer, Marshall had a brilliant legal mind and a willingness to work hard for worthy Jewish causes. The qualities propelled him into a circle of highly influential Jewish businessmen and bankers, including the venerable Jacob Schiff, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears Roebuck, Schiff's son-in-law Felix Warburg, and other notables. These men were universally viewed as the Jewish "establishment" of the time, and early in this century, they dominated not only the JDC but nearly all major Jewish philanthropic and defense efforts.⁴

The incongruous partnership between the JDC and the Leninist regime was based on the simple but brilliant idea of Dr. Joseph Rosen, a Russian-born agronomist. Exiled by the Bolsheviks, Rosen had trained at American agricultural institutes, and returned to Russia in 1921 as a nonpolitical scientist in the employ of the JDC. He realized that mere palliative relief to the poverty-stricken Jews of Russia would be an unending task, that it was increasingly difficult to raise relief funds in the United States for this purpose so long after the war, and that a more imaginative and permanent kind of help should be attempted.

As an expert agronomist who was familiar with Russian agriculture, Rosen developed the idea of establishing Jewish farming colonies on choice land owned by the Soviet government. The land would be donated to the *lishentsy* Jews, who would be retrained as farmers and would thus gain a more productive status and respect in their own eyes and in those of the Soviets. The plan would remove the despised *lishentsy* status from the Jews and eventually restore their civil rights.

From the Soviets' point of view, too, the new farm settlements would be a positive development. They would supplement the tight food supply, help solve the vexing and embarrassing problem of *lishentsy* status, provide hard Western currency, which was scarce, and lend much-needed respectability to the idea of a Western country doing business with the Soviets.⁵

The JDC viewed the plan as equally positive, even exciting. The Americans were required only to furnish the capital needed to purchase tools, seed, livestock, and equipment for the new Jewish farmers. Good farmland, the most expensive ingredient in the plan, would be given by the Soviet government. And beyond the financial considerations was the humanitarian idea of aiding large numbers of hopeless Jews, displaced from the commercial world they had known. Indeed, enabling them to learn a new trade was a form of self-help philanthropy, high on the traditional Jewish scale of charitable acts. The prospect of transplanting these poverty-stricken Jews onto rich farmland and restoring their self-respect and economic independence was a compelling challenge which Marshall and his circle could not refuse in good conscience.

Resettling Jews on farms was not a new idea. Since the 1890's the Baron Maurice de Hirsch Fund had helped economically distressed Jews who had emigrated from Eastern Europe to resettle in agricultural areas of various countries. The Jewish Colonization Association (ICA), an outgrowth of the De Hirsch Fund, was the world's best-known Jewish agency for establishing agricultural colonies of Jews in North and South America. (Among the most famous was the settlement in Woodbine, New Jersey.)

Rosen's idea, unlike the De Hirsch plan, was to resettle many persons on new farms in the same country in which they lived, thereby avoiding the troublesome problem of large-scale emigration. A pilot project was undertaken in 1924, involving 500 Russian Jews and fi-

nanced by JDC for \$100,000. It won enthusiastic support both from the Soviet authorities and the JDC representatives and resulted in a flow of anxious, displaced Jews to new farm areas.⁶

By 1925 Bernard Kahn, JDC's European director, provided the green light for an expanded project, based on his verification that the Russian Jews were willing to be trained and that good farmland was available. Kahn envisioned a substantial transformation of the Jewish economic structure in Russia because of the farm colonization.⁷

In 1926, JDC proposed that the experiment be enlarged into loans and investments of more than \$5 million over five years with the goal of settling more than 100,000 Jews on choice land in the Crimea and the Ukraine. Rosen's importation of seed corn from the United States had enabled 2.7 million acres in the Ukraine to be sown, a contribution that won him the confidence and respect of Soviet bureaucrats. His prestige increased when he imported several dozen American farm tractors, the first seen in Russia since 1914.

Opposition to the Plan

The expanded Jewish farm-settlement program was launched during this favorable set of circumstances. As a further source of encouragement to both sides, more than 10,000 Jewish farmers were still living in the old farm colonies of the Ukraine, founded long before the World War. They would be ready and willing to help the Jews coming from the cities and *shtetlach*.⁸ The situation was indeed promising, and the conclusion that the program should be expanded seemed a sound decision at the time.⁹ Indeed, up to one-fourth of all Russian Jews were projected as potential farmers in this program by the Soviet planning agency, KOZMET.¹⁰

Marshall changed his attitude toward the Soviets several times between the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the full-scale partnership developed by the JDC in 1929. After the 1917 upheaval and the overthrow of the liberal Kerensky government, he had no use for the Soviets, especially in 1920, when they ruthlessly dismantled the entire structure of Jewish religious and cultural life. Thereafter, he fervently hoped for their downfall.¹¹ During the brutal civil war of 1919–20, he believed that it might be better for the Jews if the White Russians prevailed over the Bolsheviks. But after the civil war and by 1921, he

realized that the Soviets were there to stay, and even wrote that the refusal to recognize the Red regime would only create bitterness against Americans among the Russian people.¹² After the passage of the first restrictive immigration law in 1922 and the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924, it became clear that there could be no significant emigration of Russian Jews to the United States. Moreover, few of them seemed interested in going to the undeveloped and rather primitive Palestinian Jewish community (*Yishuv*) of that time.¹³

In light of the new immigration laws and the developments in Russia, the JDC could see no other practical alternative for helping the Russian Jews. The Jews had to be helped *in* Russia, and that aid could be given only with the cooperation and encouragement of the Soviet regime. No matter how the capitalists of the JDC disliked the Soviet political system, they would have to overlook it if the plan to help the economically endangered Jews was to proceed.

As president of the American Jewish Committee, president of Temple Emanu-El, and chairman of the American Jewish Relief Committee (AJRC), the main fund-raising constituent of the JDC, Marshall would play a crucial role in forming this odd partnership. Although he initially favored the idea, he realized that raising \$5 million would not be easy and this effort would be in stiff competition with other Jewish overseas relief programs.

Opposition to the farm-settlement plan soon developed on both sides of the world. In Russia, ironically, the strongest opponents of the plan were the Jewish Communists, who felt threatened by the competition from the United States. Yevseksia, the Jewish section of the Communist Party, resented the outside interference and competition in its economic planning to restructure the Russian Jewish community. These party members, who were no longer even nominal Jews, were intent on demonstrating how efficiently and ruthlessly they could act in executing Marxist economic theory and policy. They wanted to destroy the agricultural scheme because it tried to combine "degenerate" capitalist elements with Bolshevik practice. Marshall castigated them as "unscrupulous politicians," and feared the Yevseksia would attempt reprisals against the JDC and the Russian Jews. "They would stop at nothing . . . they have no consciences," he said of the Jewish Communists. As late as 1928, Marshall considered them "our greatest enemies in Russia. They are infinitely more virulent than

the non-Jewish Bolsheviks. This is by no means a novel phenomenon."¹⁴

In America, Jewish opposition to the farm-resettlement partnership came almost exclusively from the Zionist camp. Fierce competition for Jewish charity dollars had existed since World War I; in the 1920's it grew even more intense, especially between the Zionists, who sought funds for Palestine, and those who wished to aid Jews all over the world, such as the JDC.

As soon as the JDC-Soviet plan was made public the Zionists began a noisy anti-JDC campaign, bitterly criticizing the notion of working with the Soviets and the alleged diversion of substantial JDC funds from Palestine. The Zionists' criticism was not altogether unexpected, but their stridency and distortions were surprising and unsettling. Leading members of the JDC were castigated as Bolsheviks by some Zionists, a particularly galling canard because these men were all conservative capitalists.¹⁵

The Soviets had taken a strong stand against the Russian Zionists and had even imprisoned a number of them on the premise that Zionism was not consistent with the Marxist-Leninist view that all Russians should remain in the motherland and work toward the ideal socialist society. The goal of political Zionism, however, was to develop Palestine as a Jewish homeland, if not a political entity, as rapidly as possible. The legal basis of the goal was the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations mandate in Palestine; the economic basis would be established by encouraging world Jewry to emigrate to Palestine. When Russian Zionists increased in numbers and promoted Palestine as the focus of Jewish welfare, this was viewed by the Soviets as a flagrant violation of Marxist theory and practice.¹⁶

The American Zionists' strong anti-Soviet stance was therefore quite understandable. They opposed anything that would promote the Soviet cause or give it respectability in world opinion. The JDC partnership, they asserted, would do just that; it would also assist the Soviets economically by infusing much-needed hard currency into the Soviet economy; finally, it would show that wealthy capitalists were unafraid to do business with the new regime in Moscow.¹⁷

Another reason for the Zionists' intense propaganda against the JDC-Soviet partnership was that none of the JDC leaders were Zionists. Several members of the JDC, in fact, leaned toward anti-

Zionism; others like Marshall, were non-Zionists. Marshall had been sympathetic with the general religious theme, the traditional Jewish idea of a return to Zion, long before Theodor Herzl's movement came into existence. In fact, he contributed to the Haifa Technicum and to the Experimental Agricultural Station operated by Dr. Aaronsohn, and supported the Brandeis' scheme for the Palestine Economic Corporation. But he viewed political Zionism as impractical; that is, he felt that the founding of a Jewish state would be impossible for several decades, even after the Balfour Declaration and the establishment of the British mandate in Palestine. Despite this strong feeling, Marshall would not speak out against the Zionist movement; he simply refused to become part of it. Even so, his position did not prevent him from making numerous gifts for the economic development of the *Yishuv*. More important, he was instrumental in blunting much of the anti-Zionist sentiment in the JDC and within the Jewish establishment as a whole.¹⁸

The term "non-Zionist" denoted a Jew who was not an anti-Zionist but who did not subscribe to political Zionism. Most non-Zionists like Marshall were emotional, cultural, or religious Zionists at heart and believed that politicizing and nationalizing the old religious concept might bring unfavorable results and reflect upon the loyalty of American Jews; that it would, indeed, damage their image as patriotic Americans. It should be recalled that only a few years earlier Jews were under attack in the United States from very vocal anti-Semitic voices such as the KKK, Henry Ford, and other nativist groups, all of which made American Jews extremely sensitive about any loyalty challenge leveled at them.¹⁹

Marshall's participation in schemes to develop Palestine economically was aimed at enabling the land to absorb larger numbers of Jews from Eastern Europe in future years through capital improvement projects similar to those first planned by Louis D. Brandeis. Marshall realized that the goal of Palestine becoming a haven could not be attained for several decades and therefore that it was a mistake to mislead masses of distressed Jews from all over the world into going to Palestine in the belief that they could enjoy a better standard of living. The economic facts indicated quite the contrary in 1925–29. At that time Marshall knew that the *Yishuv* was very small (less than 100,000 people) and quite undeveloped, even primitive. Agriculture was still new, and there was no economic basis for mass immigration.²⁰

The Compelling Need of Russia's Jews

In sharp contrast to the small *Yishuv* were the 2.7 million Russian Jews. It seemed only a matter of simple arithmetic and logic that the greater need was in Russia, where some 830,000 Jews had *lishentsy* status. In the last analysis Marshall regarded aid to the Russian Jews as the chance to do the greatest good for the greatest number. This belief did not preclude aid to Palestine by the JDC, but it did mean that assistance to Palestine would not be emphasized or made equal with aid to Eastern Europe.²¹

Despite the public debate within the American Jewish community, Marshall remained steadfastly in favor of the Soviet partnership, calling it "very promising" and noting that Russian Jews were clamoring for the chance to become independent farmers. In his enthusiasm he concluded that more than 200,000 Jews would be helped who otherwise would be utterly without hope. Besides, the Soviet government was clearly encouraging the scheme.²²

There is little doubt that before Marshall and the JDC finally approved the idea of working with the Soviets, they knew the kind of government with which they were dealing. In January 1925, Marshall had described to another Jewish community leader the terrible suppression and subjugation imposed upon the Russian Jews by the Soviets; the Russian Jews, he said, were all but forbidden from practicing their religion. He termed the Soviets "a tyranny of absolutism . . . bent on destroying all religions except their own insane fetish. They are as abhorrent to me as Tsarism."²³

Despite this realistic appraisal of the Soviets, Marshall and the JDC proceeded to expand the initial experiment of 1924. Dr. Rosen's influence and his expertise in the agricultural field held great sway with the American-Jewish leaders. Moreover, the alternative was to do nothing and to permit a large number of Russian Jews to continue suffering in abject poverty with no hope for a decent existence. Marshall believed that in the face of the opportunity to act constructively, such inaction would have been morally indefensible and contrary to every principle of Jewish charity. But other Jews thought differently.

Conflicts Over Fund-Raising

Marshall's old rival, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, leader of the pro-Zionist

American Jewish Congress, encouraged the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) to officially protest the JDC program. Under Louis Lipsky's direction, the ZOA passed a resolution at its Buffalo, New York, convention in 1926, condemning the JDC-Soviet partnership.²⁴

No concession seemed sufficient to the Zionists, not even when Marshall influenced the JDC into promising one-third of the proceeds of its 1924-26 campaign (\$5 million) for Palestine. When Henry Moskowitz, the well-known social worker, returned from a trip to Odessa and Kherson, where he viewed Jewish farm settlements, he reported that they were very worthwhile and impressive. He added that European Zionists saw no financial threat to Palestine's development from the Russian project.²⁵

Even so, American Zionist opposition continued. In their single-minded attention to Palestine's top priority for all overseas aid to Jews, the ZOA chose to overlook the pressing needs of Russian Jewry and to ignore the generous funds for Palestine which would come from the JDC campaign. Zionists claimed that any money going to Soviet Russia would surely be wasted and that it would be better spent in Palestine. Their strong opposition to the Soviet regime was directly affected by the Soviets' harsh treatment and suppression of Russian Zionists, some of whom had been imprisoned.²⁶

In spite of their strong opposition, however, the Zionists had no real answer to the JDC position that something had to be done and that there was no viable alternative to dealing with the Soviets. Zionists argued that the Russian project would promote Soviet trade, funnel much-needed hard currency to the Soviet regime, and lend respectability to Soviet tyranny. All these points would become remarkably familiar just six years later in 1933, an ironic twist of fate. It was then that Zionists worked out a special arrangement with Hitler's Third Reich to allow mostly well-to-do German Jews to emigrate to Palestine under the proviso that German-Jewish capital first be converted into Nazi currency and then resold in Palestine after a heavy flight tax was imposed. This financial mechanism, called the Transfer Agreement, saved a fair number of German Jews from a terrible fate, but it was the subject of bitter controversy within the world Zionist community as well as the general Jewish community. The arguments against the Zionists in that bitter debate were very similar to those the Zionists had used against the JDC-Russian project: it meant doing

business with a terrible tyranny, it lent respectability to that tyranny, and it aided the Nazis' economic condition by bringing in much hard currency. An additional criticism, emotionally debated within the world Jewish community, was that the Transfer Agreement was a lethal weapon used to kill the anti-Nazi boycott.²⁷

Domestic Considerations

Apart from the vexations of harsh anti-JDC propaganda, Marshall and his associates had a natural reluctance to become linked with the radical Bolsheviks. The Red Scare of 1919–20 was still a recent and vivid memory, a period when the canard “Bolshevik” was applied widely against Jewish immigrants in the United States. The conservative and highly respected Jewish leadership of the JDC must have been troubled at entering into such a close relationship which exposed them to charges that they were Communist sympathizers, or worse, that they were disloyal American Jews. This was so even though in 1927, Henry Ford's anti-Semitism was at least temporarily halted when he signed a public apology, dictated by Marshall, admitting that all the libels his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, had published, were in fact false. Against this sensitive and potentially dangerous background, Marshall and the JDC needed substantial courage to go forward with the Soviet partnership. Indeed, they knew they ran the risk of criticism not only from other Jewish groups (beside the Zionists) but from the general community as well, for the close association with the Soviets that would be projected in the minds of many people.

When Marshall realized that many leading Zionists were intent on ignoring the generous allotment of JDC funds to Palestine, he tried to meet the Zionists' objections head-on, stating that the Soviets were sincere in their desire to help the oppressed Jews, pointing out that American Quakers had sent money to their Russian coreligionists, and demonstrating that prominent American businessmen such as Ford and others were engaging in trade with the Soviets.²⁸ To these and other arguments he added the hope that the Jewish farm settlements, if successful and expanded enough, might eventually emerge as a Jewish republic among other Soviet socialist republics and rank with the other semi-autonomous ethnic provinces of Soviet Russia. Such a Jewish entity, he said, would give expression to Jewish culture and perhaps

even to Jewish tradition.²⁹ It was not a realistic hope. In any case, Marshall believed that whatever form of government evolved in Russia, Jews were more likely to enjoy a secure existence as farmers than in any other form of work.³⁰

Always the cautious lawyer, Marshall sought State Department approval for the partnership, especially because there was no diplomatic recognition of the Soviet regime by the United States government. The response was neither approval nor disapproval.

In the meantime the unrelenting Zionist attack on the JDC plan for farm settlements forced a more discreet arrangement. By late 1928 a plan was formulated to divert attention and criticism from JDC and its Agro-Joint subsidiary and to create an entirely new corporate entity called the American Society for Jewish Farm Settlements (AMSO-JEFS). The earlier use of the word "colonization," which had negative connotations, was dropped in favor of "settlements." The new corporation would assume the duties of Agro-Joint and ostensibly become an independent organization. However, in reality, it would be staffed by JDC executives and operated substantially as a JDC subsidiary. Under the new plan the real difference was that the funding no longer came from JDC money. Instead, selected wealthy individuals would be approached for a few large contributions.³¹ The principal donor was Julius Rosenwald, head of Sears Roebuck, who pledged \$5 million out of a total of \$10 million. The sponsors were to supply \$1 million a year for ten years for the purchase of farm tools and equipment, seed and livestock.

The money was not to be a gift to the Russian Jewish recipients, but would take the form of loans to be repaid to the Americans at a low rate of interest. The loans were to be collected and guaranteed by the Soviet government for up to 90 percent of their monetary worth. As the money came back to the lenders, it would go out again as new loans to more new farmers.³² These terms were especially favorable and attractive to the JDC. Marshall himself pledged \$100,000; Herbert H. Lehman pledged the same. Felix Warburg pledged \$1 million, and the Rockefeller Foundation made an outright gift of \$500,000.³³

Contract Negotiations

In his quest for funds from a select group of rich men, Marshall noted the generous gift from the Rockefeller Foundation, but Henry Ford,

whom Marshall solicited for money, was not impressed. Marshall had assumed that Ford would be more than willing to contribute, because at the time of his public apology in 1927, he had asked how he could make amends to the Jewish people. Later, when Marshall heard that Ford was building a plant in Russia, he renewed his efforts, but again there was no response, even though Marshall reminded the auto tycoon of his long-standing interest in agriculture and in self-help schemes.³⁴

As the legal expert of the group, Marshall reviewed the contract for the partnership and found it deficient and disappointing. The clauses dealing with the Soviets' obligations to furnish choice farmland and with the exact locations were quite indefinite. At first, however, he hesitated to object to the contract and said hopefully that if the Soviets were ever overthrown, a successor government would certainly honor it.

But as Marshall considered the flaws in the contract, he began to worry about the possibility of Soviet default. After further thought he feared that he and the other JDC leaders would look foolish if they entered into such an agreement. At least if the Soviets defaulted on a sound contract, he told Dr. Rosen, "we would have done our utmost to protect the interests of the contributors who have relied on our action."³⁵ Marshall's worries about a Soviet default were allayed somewhat in late 1928 in an address by Paul D. Cravath, a leading New York attorney, before the Council of Foreign Relations. Cravath asserted that the Soviets would be scrupulous in keeping their word with other countries in order to encourage much-needed trade.³⁶

Eventually the contract was rewritten, though less extensively than Marshall wanted. It was this agreement that launched the enlarged joint enterprise between the Soviets and the American Jews. Marshall received glowing reports from JDC field representatives. Men like his son-in-law, Jacob Billikopf, a well-known social worker, and some European Zionists, were quite pleased with the progress being made on the Russian farm settlements. In 1929 Marshall sent his son James, a lawyer, to inspect and report directly. The younger Marshall met with Peter Smidovich, chief of *Kozmet*, the main Soviet agency planning the farm settlements.³⁷

Pessimistic predictions for the project angered Marshall, especially when they came from Zionists. He retorted that "whenever the fate of hundreds of thousands of our brethren is at stake I shall always be

found ready and willing to take the gambler's chance for their sake so long as no better alternative exists. Do not for a moment believe that I am over-optimistic as to the future of Russia. My mind is not blinded . . . I would rather die fighting to take a chance with Jews than sit in sack cloth and ashes waiting for the blow to descend."³⁸ This sums up well Marshall's feeling about the Russian project and illustrates his realism.

After the expansion was approved, Marshall spoke expansively of settling up to 250,000 Jews on more than 2.5 million acres. However, the project never reached those dimensions. By the end of 1928 no more than 100,000 farmers had been settled (approximately the size of the *Yishuv* at the time).³⁹

The Plan's Ultimate End

In 1929, when Marshall died, perhaps another 25,000 persons were settled. Until late in that year there was every indication that the Soviets were sincere and fully cooperative. But when Stalin changed the emphasis in national economic planning from noncollectivized to collectivized farming and began to concentrate on urban industrial development, the entire farm- resettlement program became jeopardized. The new emphasis on industrialization began to attract large numbers of Jews from all over Russia. They gravitated to the new urban centers where factory jobs awaited them. Many started to leave the farm settlements for an easier existence as industrial workers. Marshall never lived to see this ironic and unforeseen change.⁴⁰

As events unfolded in Russia, it became apparent that Dr. Rosen had missed some important signs of economic and political change. He had mistakenly believed that the more moderate Mensheviks would prevail and that Stalin's influence was on the wane. As a result, the Americans in 1928–29 entered into the expanded plan with the Soviets. In 1929, however, Stalin's five-year plan began to change the whole situation, and by 1934, five years after Marshall's death, Rosen's advice had turned out badly. Yet it is a fair conclusion that as late as 1928–29, nobody could have foreseen that many of those Jews who had been settled on farms would later choose to migrate to the cities for more attractive industrial employment.⁴¹

After Marshall's death, the project was weakened further by the

stock market crash, the ensuing worldwide depression, and the death of Julius Rosenwald, whose estate was tied up in probate court for years, denying access to his large and critical contribution. These conditions made a shambles of AMSOJEFS finances.⁴² A final blow came as the Jewish Communists of Yevseksia gained more influence in the Soviet bureaucracy and its hierarchy. They were able to force the farm-settlement plan out of the Kherson area.

Although the project was abandoned in the mid-thirties, it should be noted that the \$16 million spent on the experiment with the Soviets was largely repaid by them and the investment was hardly lost or squandered.⁴³ The greatest difficulty faced by the project was a series of severe crop failures. Much later, in another cruel irony, those Jews who remained on the farms became the first civilian victims of the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941-42.

Zionist Views of the Project

The unusual partnership was a heroic venture; an attempt to rescue and restratify a large portion of Russian Jewry and change its commercial focus to productive agriculture. It was a unique effort, a philanthropic adventure by a handful of wealthy, well-meaning American Jews.

Leading Zionist groups seemed to be unable to view the Russian program as anything but an anti-Zionist plot, a conspiracy to undermine their movement to build a Jewish political entity in Palestine.⁴⁴ Many Zionist leaders did not accept the JDC scheme to help the Russian Jews for what it was: simple humanitarianism and traditional Jewish self-help philanthropy. They brushed aside hard evidence that the Russian Jews, for the most part, were uninterested in going to Palestine, even in the unlikely event that the Soviets permitted it. They ignored the negative aspects of the 1928 Palestine Survey Commission, which criticized much of the work being done under Zionist leadership and found an urgent need to acquire more land before large-scale immigration could be absorbed. Marshall knew all of this, and when Zionists pressured for more immediate immigration and settlement funding against the known economic facts of life, he became angry. Accusing Zionist leaders of letting politics, not economics, dictate their decisions, he said, "... they did not know the differ-

ence between a spade and a hoe, yet are ready to determine most important questions of agricultural science and industrial agreement.”⁴⁵

When Zionist predictions of Soviet treachery and violent retribution did not materialize, JDC leaders like Marshall could point to a more serious threat of violence in Palestine from the Arabs, who were beginning to respond to what they perceived as a Jewish threat from Zionist settlements. Thus the 1920's marked the start of violence in Palestine with numerous Arab riots, a problem glossed over by most Zionist leaders of the period.

Populist Views of a Return to the Land

It is likely that many key JDC leaders like Marshall had romantic ideas about a return to the soil for Jews. They viewed the life of the independent farmer as a noble existence. These ideas probably were drawn upon in their thinking about the Russian program. Such concepts of the worthy, honest, hardworking farmer had been seen as a model for Jews since the French Revolution. In Russia Alexander I also used this kind of thinking when he authorized a Jewish agricultural development in the Kherson area early in the nineteenth century.

These European ideas were transplanted to America and promoted in the days of Jefferson and Jackson. In the 1890's the Populist movement used similar concepts to promote the farmers' cause and to criticize Jews as unproductive middlemen who were too much a part of the American commercial and banking communities. Still later, Henry Ford took up the same Populist theme, but with a pronounced anti-Semitic twist.

With this ideological background, many JDC leaders may have thought that the return to the land by Russian Jews would disprove the long-standing myth that Jews could not be physically productive in modern society and would blunt anti-Semitic propaganda about the traditional role of Jews as solely middlemen tied to the commercial class. Some of the key JDC leaders, such as Warburg and Rosenwald, were active members of the Jewish Agricultural Society. It is easy to understand how they would lean toward an agricultural solution for the Jews in Russia, especially when the terms were so attractive. Indeed it was a compelling challenge to show leading anti-Semitic critics

that Jews could be successful farmers. In just such a spirit, the chairman of Agro-Joint, James N. Rosenberg, wrote, "I wish Ford might see the Jewish boys running Ford tractors."⁴⁶ Incidentally, Rosenberg had spoken out impartially about both the Palestine and the Eastern European causes, and said that both deserved the support of the Jewish community. He added that anyone who knew the conditions in Palestine (in 1926) had to understand that large-scale immigration there was impossible. Zionists were not pleased with this observation.

What Did the Project Achieve? A Balance Sheet

Evaluating the work of the farm-resettlement program is extremely difficult. Dr. Rosen concluded that if the JDC had not turned to farm colonization, great numbers of Russian Jews "would undoubtedly have literally perished."⁴⁷ The most intensive researcher on the subject agrees with Rosen's conclusion, but the exact numbers remain in question. Yehuda Bauer states that only 12,000 Jewish families (perhaps 60,000 persons) settled by Agro-Joint before the early 1930's were actually saved from starvation. Beyond that, he believes, tens of thousands of Jews were saved from economic disaster by being settled on the land before the program ended in 1938. Agro-Joint's very presence in Russia enabled it to accomplish other beneficial work. Medical institutions, trade schools, and various mutual aid societies were created to help Russian Jews in all sorts of occupations as a result of Agro-Joint efforts in the farm settlements. Moreover, the *lishentsy* status of most Jews was terminated about 1930, a great blessing in itself.⁴⁸ In any case, emigration from Russia was out of the question.⁴⁹ Finally, the first-hand farming experience provided to Russian Zionists was important.⁵⁰

The full story of the JDC farm settlements has not yet been told because the Soviets have not released, and may never release, all their records. There is little question but that in the mid-1920's, when the program was conceived, and in 1928-29, when it got underway, the Soviets were indeed sincere in wanting to aid the *lishentsy* Jews; it is also clear that they wanted to foster good relations with rich, influential American interests. However, because of unforeseen events (Stalin's new economic policy, the stock market crash, the worldwide economic depression, the Nazi invasion of Russian territory heavily pop-

ulated with Jews), the Soviet partnership brought few lasting results.

Although by 1934 or earlier, the development of farm settlements had come to an end, and those in existence began to shrink due to the absorption of Jews into new industrial work in urban areas, the program had filled a need. As mentioned by Bauer, there was no better purpose than saving Jews from starvation at the time. Indeed, he went further, saying that “a very good case can be made that this [spending of \$16 million in Russia between 1924 and 1929 to help rehabilitate Jews] was not only good but essential.”⁵¹ In fact, he believed that both sides had profited from the project, particularly in 1933, when Agro-Joint was relieved of the need to supply more money and the Soviets obtained firm control over the settlements and began to retrench their commitment in light of other economic developments.⁵²

A pertinent criticism of the JDC approach to the Russian Jewish problem was that it tended to view the situation too narrowly, almost solely in economic terms, without regard to Jewish culture or religion.⁵³ Yet if Russian Jews did not survive physically, then there could be no chance to preserve their culture or religion.

One thing seems very clear: the JDC partnership with the Soviets was never an anti-Zionist plot, as claimed by some.⁵⁴ It is impossible to measure accurately all the motivations of Marshall and the JDC leadership or to determine with precision how much was purely humanitarian concern, how much was romantic thinking about a return to the soil, and how much was the intent to rebut the economic anti-Semitic argument.

In summary, there is little doubt that Marshall and the elite circle of wealthy Jewish notables that made up the JDC leadership had formed the partnership with the Soviets for a number of valid reasons:

- It was a positive humanitarian project to save many Jewish lives that would otherwise be lost.
- It fit well with the traditional concepts of Jewish self-help philanthropy (*idyon shvuyim*—“redemption of captives”).
- The Russian Jews had to be helped in Russia because emigration was impossible.
- Although it was true that the Soviets would be aided by acquiring hard Western currency and would gain some respectability from dealing with wealthy American capitalists, these were minor con-

siderations when the lives of many thousands of Jews were at stake.

- The Soviets were sincerely interested in helping the displaced Jews in the 1920's because they wanted to minimize the social and economic problems that their policy had created. They cooperated fully until Stalin changed the basic economic planning, beginning in late 1929, after Marshall's death.
- The terms of the partnership were so favorable and the prospects for success seemed so good in the initial 1925–29 period that it all seemed too good to ignore. By the mid-1930's, when the program was terminated, the Soviets had actually paid back all or almost all of their obligations. Thus it cannot be said that the JDC funds or other contributions were wasted or squandered. In that sense, the Zionist criticism was unjustified.

The partnership marked the end of an era when a few rich, influential individuals could undertake the massive restructuring of a large Jewish community. Never again would a handful of Jewish notables attempt such an ambitious type of Jewish leadership.

Although the farm program had to be ended in the mid-1930's due to the substantial changes in Soviet economic planning, the unique partnership was neither a moral nor an economic failure. No one could have foreseen the strange turn of events in Russia, Germany, and Palestine between 1929 and 1933. History proved the Zionists partially correct, but historically speaking, we must judge the thinking of those who acted by the circumstances in which they acted. That thinking and those circumstances seem to fully justify the program.

Notes

Most of the source material for this article was found in the vast collection of papers and letters of Louis Marshall located at the American Jewish Archives on the campus of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. References to the Marshall Papers carry the abbreviation MP.

1. Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee* (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 62.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58, 61–62; Lionel Kochan, *The Jews in Soviet Russia Since 1917*, 3d ed. (New York, 1978), p. 28.
3. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 5–6, 9–10, 16–17.
4. Naomi Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: A History of the American Jewish Committee* (Philadelphia, 1972); Morton Rosenstock, *Louis Marshall, Defender of Jewish Rights* (Detroit, 1965); Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd* (New York, 1967); *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), vol. 1, cols. 822–831; *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1939), vol. 1, pp. 242–247, 253–256, vol. 6, pp. 170–176.
5. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 66; Guido Goldmann, *Zionism Under Soviet Rule, 1917–28* (New York, 1960), pp. 61, 103, 131.
6. Allan L. Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment: The Agro-Joint Project, 1924–37," *Jewish Social Studies*, Spring 1981, pp. 154–155.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 60.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
10. Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* (Princeton, 1972), p. 384.
11. Marshall to Jacob H. Schiff, January 27, 1920; Marshall to A. J. Sack, August 5, 1919; Marshall to Editor, *New York Times*, November 25, 1919 (all in MP); Goldman, *Zionism Under Soviet Rule*, pp. 56–57, 59–61.
12. Marshall to Benjamin Stolz, November 4, 1920 (MP).
13. Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment," p. 156; Jacob Frumkin et al., eds., *Russian Jewry, 1917–67* (New York, 1969), pp. 542–544.
14. Marshall to Dr. Cyrus Adler, September 5, 1928 (MP); Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 60, 87–88.
15. Marshall to Chaim Weizmann, May 28, 1926; Marshall to Emanuel Neumann, December 22, 1925; Marshall to James Becker, April 30, 1926; Chaim Weizmann to Marshall, January 17, 1927 (all in MP).
16. Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment," p. 156; Goldmann, *Zionism Under Soviet Rule*, pp. 4–5, 31–34.
17. Herbert Parzen, "The Enlargement of the Jewish Agency for Palestine: 1923–29, A Hope Hamstrung," *Jewish Social Studies* 39 (Winter–Spring 1977): 129–158; Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper* p. 66; Marshall to Rabbi George Fox, September 18, 1925 (MP).
18. Stuart Knee, "Jewish Non-Zionism in America and Palestine Commitment, 1917–1941," *Jewish Social Studies* 39 (Summer 1977): 211–213, 214–215, 217, 220; Marshall to Julius Rosenwald, February 9, 1927 (MP); Marshall to Felix Fuld, December 10, 1921 (MP); Marshall to Chaim Weizmann, May 28, 1926 (MP); Marshall to Daniel Guggenheim, November 24, 1909 (MP); Marshall to Henrietta Szold, March 3, 1910 (MP); Marshall to Editor, *American Israelite*, September 8, 1909 (MP); Marshall to Jacob H. Schiff, October 2, 1908 (MP); Marshall to Jacob H. Schiff, March 26, 1910 (MP); Marshall to Dr. Cyrus Adler, January 18, 1910 (MP); Marshall to Nathan Straus, January 20, 1914 (MP); Marshall to Edward Lautenbach, February 11, 1918 (MP); Marshall to Lt. James Marshall, April 27, 1918 (MP); Marshall to A. S. Ochs, April 29, 1918 (MP); Marshall to Max Senior, September 26, 1918 (MP); Marshall to Simon Wolf, March 4, 1919 (MP); *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 9, pp. 232–233; Moses Rischin, "The Early Attitude of the American Jewish Committee to Zionism, 1906–22," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, vol. 49, pp. 195, 199; Marshall to Rabbi David Philipson, April 29, 1918 (MP); Marshall to Rabbi David Philipson, September 15, 1918 (MP).
19. John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New

York, 1975); Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 102; idem, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860 to 1925* (New York, 1967), pp. 138–173, 264–330. Marshall to Julius Rosenwald, February 9, 1927 (MP).

20. Arthur Lehman to Marshall, March 23, 1923 (MP); Marshall to M. Gais, October 11, 1923 (MP); Marshall to Alfred W. Saperston, October 19, 1928 (MP); Marshall to Frank B. Kellogg, February 14, 1929 (MP); Marshall to Heinrich Stern, February 2, 1929 (MP); Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York, 1972), p. 72.

21. Marshall to Rabbi Morris Lazerson, November 19, 1925 (MP); Marshall to Bernard Flexner, June 30, 1926 (MP); Marshall to Robert Marshall, September 16, 1926 (MP); Bauer, *History of the Holocaust*, p. 72.

22. Marshall to Bernard Flexner, June 30, 1926 (MP); Marshall to Ludwig Vogelsang, February 15, 1926 (MP); Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 62, 66.

23. Marshall to Aaronsberg, August 31, 1924 (MP); Marshall to Oscar Straus, January 13, 1925 (MP); Marshall to Felix M. Warburg, August 26, 1924 (MP); Marshall to Dr. Cyrus Adler, September 5, 1928 (MP); Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews, Wars and Communism* (New York, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 376–377; Goldmann, *Zionism Under Soviet Rule* pp. 31–34.

24. Marshall to James N. Rosenberg, June 26, 1926 (MP); Marshall to Bernard Flexner, June 30, 1926 (MP).

25. Marshall to Henry Moskowitz, November 20, 1925 (MP); Marshall to Rabbi Morris Lazerson, November 19, 1925 (MP); Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment," p. 154.

26. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 60–61; Goldmann, *Zionism Under Soviet Rule*, passim; Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York, 1976), p. 327.

27. Edwin Black, *The Transfer Agreement* (New York, 1984), pp. xiii, 289, 295–297, 306–311, 316–319, 321; David Yisroeli, "The Third Reich and the Transfer Agreement," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6 (April 1971): 131–133. A comparison of the two humanitarian efforts in Russia and Germany, while not exhaustive, indicates that both were attempts to act in a crisis situation and, of necessity, to deal with brutal tyrannies. When the JDC exercised this humanitarian realism in the 1920's in Russia, it was loudly denounced. Yet no other alternatives existed. The same type of action was utilized by the Zionists in the 1933 crisis, which involved dealing with the Hitler regime and granting unavoidable economic benefits to the Third Reich in the process.

28. Marshall to Rabbi George Fox, September 18, 1925 (MP); Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 60, 62, 66, 71, 89; *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1940), vol. 1, p. 253.

29. Solomon Schwarz, *Soviet Jewry, 1917–50* (New York, 1950), p. 163.

30. Marshall to Judge Grover Moscowwitz, March 15, 1926 (MP).

31. Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment," p. 155.

32. Marshall to Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg, April 30, 1928 (MP).

33. Marshall to Felix M. Warburg, September 13, 1928 (MP).

34. Marshall to Henry Ford, December 14, 1928 (MP).

35. Marshall to Dr. Joseph Rosen, September 26, 1926 (MP).

36. Marshall to James N. Rosenberg, December 24, 1928 (MP).

37. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, p. 433.

38. Marshall to Dr. A. Margolen, March 16, 1929 (MP).

39. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 103.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–82.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., pp. 97-98.
44. Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment," pp. 156, 161; Szajkowski, *Jews, Wars, and Communism*, vol. 1, p. 377; vol. 4, p. 196.
45. Parzen, "Enlargement of the Jewish Agency," p. 154.
46. James N. Rosenberg, *On the Steppes* (New York, 1927), p. 66.
47. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 75-78.
48. Ibid., p. 71.
49. Ibid., p. 64.
50. Ibid., p. 61.
51. Ibid., pp. 103, 89.
52. Ibid., p. 89.
53. Ibid., p. 102.
54. See Parzen, "Enlargement of the Jewish Agency"; also Chaim Weizmann's autobiography: *Trial and Error* (New York, 1966), pp. 308-312, 314.

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