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# An American Jewish Family's Farm Odyssey

*Jacob L. Ornstein-Galicia*

When Joseph Ornstein passed through Ellis Island at the beginning of the twentieth century like many other Jewish immigrants, he made his way to New York's Lower East Side, where his brother Max, with true fraternal concern, tried to smooth his entry to the new land, insofar as this was possible, and *faute de mieux* secured work for him in a sweatshop as a pants presser.

It did not take long for Joseph to determine that neither the Lower East Side nor the clothing industry was to his liking. He had grown up in the little Ukrainian-Polish village of Wysocko, and his parents, in addition to their tiny store which sold knick-knacks, had about eight acres cut up in the East European fashion, with several acres to the north, several to the south, and some plots east and west. Unlike his peers, he loved the soil, and instead of seeking a "serious" vocation, preferred to drive horses, milk cows, and raise vegetables and grain. He demonstrated early that he could work as hard as any peasant, if not harder. Consequently, the Ukrainian farmers, he told us, would often say to him, "*Akh, Yoshko, ti robish jak pravdiviy khlop*" ("Ah, Joey, you work like a true peasant").

After some months at the garment factory, Joseph learned through a Yiddish newspaper that the Jewish Agricultural Society (JAS) was seeking to recruit able-bodied young Jewish men and women for work on farms.<sup>1</sup> Once they gained some experience, the JAS would supply guidance, and possibly loans, so that they might purchase their own farmsteads. Joseph hastened to write a letter in Yiddish to the JAS, and before long was working as a hired man on the Milton Grove farm, in Mount Gilead, Ohio, in the fertile north-central part of the state located in Morrow County.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph had thus joined a movement which was to involve some tens of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children in the United States, Canada, South America, and even the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, looked at historically, agriculture was hardly a new occupation for Jews, for as Gabriel Davidson, long-time executive director of the Jewish Agricultural Society, notes: "The Jews as they are pictured in Biblical literature, were overwhelmingly agricultural—and warrior people. The story of the wanderings of the tribes reveals a nomadic pastoral civilization that determined the nature of the people and had its effect on the character of their religion."<sup>4</sup>

It is too little known that Jews were excellent farmers in ancient Israel, making use of what were then advanced methods in irrigation, soil management, and tools.<sup>5</sup> As for grazing, and the raising of sheep and goats, these were also traditional specialties pursued in mountainous, stony terrain little adapted for the plow and grain cultivation.

At the time the Ornsteins became farmers, the Jewish Agricultural Society was able to provide advice and guidance, as well as loans, if these could not be obtained elsewhere. The JAS functioned with funds provided by the Maurice de Hirsch Fund. German-born Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a leading business tycoon and railroad builder in the Balkans, viewed with compassion the wave of bloody pogroms taking place in the early 1880's in Russia, particularly after the assassination of Czar Alexander II by revolutionaries in 1881. He, like other Jewish leaders and philanthropists, thought that an effective way to answer anti-Semitism was by breaking down the stereotype of the Jew as money handler and merchant, in favor of a "new man" willing to work on the soil like members of other ethnic groups, and to earn a living by the sweat of his brow.<sup>6</sup>

Returning, after the above digression, to the agricultural pursuits of Joseph Ornstein, we find him, as noted, installed as a hired man on the Milton Grove Farm in north-central Ohio, where he labored from dawn to dusk for the going rate of \$20 per month. In addition, and most importantly, he was gaining valuable experience in up-to-date techniques in dairying and grain production.

The Grove farm, several hundred acres, was devoted to grain farming and dairying, and possessed a large herd. The pay was modest, but board and room were furnished, and the experience proved invaluable to Joseph, as everything was on a much larger scale than had been the

case with the tiny plots back in Galicia. Joseph liked to relate that Mr. Grove, when asked what his hardest job was, replied, "Getting up every day at five o'clock in the morning."

Virtually none of the surrounding farmers in Mount Gilead had ever seen a Jew, much less worked with one. They would tell him, Joseph reported, that they expected a Jewish person to "look different," and were surprised that he resembled them, having, as it happened, a red mustache and dark brown hair. After Joseph had been in Ohio for more than a year, the Groves moved to California, where they bought a bean ranch in the Antelope Valley, in the Los Angeles area. Joseph's experience in California taught him enough about irrigation farming to convince him that he preferred the verdant expanses of the Midwest.

The Groves too did not like California, and they went back to Ohio. Joseph, however, remained behind to work on another ranch in Antelope Valley. On February 14, 1910, he received a letter from Mrs. Grove, while she and her husband were in the throes of seeking another farm, informing him that work was available in Champaign County, Ohio, for both him and David Kominisky, a Russian immigrant who worked on the same ranch in California.<sup>7</sup> But Joseph had other plans for the immediate future.

Before returning to Ohio, Joseph crossed the Atlantic to marry Bertha, a girl he had met before leaving the "Old Country." Following the week-long wedding festivities—which were *de rigueur* even for poorer families like his—the honeymoon couple set out for the *goldene medine*—America.

Like other brides, my mother hoped eventually to turn Joseph away from farming—an occupation entirely alien to her, a city girl. Upon arriving at Mount Gilead, where the Groves had purchased a new farm, mother was dismayed to see that their quarters were to be an "apartment" in a converted barn. She would refer to those days as her "Cowbarn Honeymoon." Not knowing English, surrounded by Gentiles, with no kosher facilities around, the bride, from a traditional Orthodox home in Poland, wept bitter tears. After a year or so she persuaded her husband to try his hand at making a living in Cleveland.

In Cleveland, Joseph drove a soft-drink and beer wagon, at least having the pleasure of driving a fine team of Clydesdale horses as he made deliveries. Mom worked part-time as a seamstress, a trade she

had learned back home. Unfortunately, as with many couples in which the husband was hungry for farm life, dissension and bickering were rife, and Rose, born in 1913, and I, two years later, were to remember the quarreling from earliest childhood, although in all else the couple was harmonious.

### *Vicissitudes of Dirt Farming*

Joseph finally prevailed, and with their modest savings and a loan from the JAS, the family purchased an 82-acre farm in Huntsburg, Ohio, some 35 miles east of Cleveland. Unfortunately, the farm, cut up by hills and a meandering creek, presented serious problems for cultivation. The land contract, as the purchase agreement was called, required a fixed payment every three months, and my parents' gnawing worry was that failure to meet the payment would cause them to forfeit all they had saved and labored for.

The Geauga County agricultural agent, testing the soil, found it excessively high in acid, and recommended massive dosages of lime, while fertility was low, due to neglect, calling for large amounts of natural manure and chemical fertilizer. Bills accumulated, and were somehow paid, as the small herd brought in a steady, though modest, income from the monthly milk checks. Repairs to the buildings were needed, as was the purchase of tools. Fortunately, pop was hard-working and positive, reflecting an air of honesty, and he was able to secure considerable credit. Sister Frances was to be born on the farm in 1926, making us five in all.

A fortuitous source of ready cash was found on the Huntsburg farm, whose woodlot abounded in Ohio's numerous maple trees. The sap gathered during the spring thaws, in March ordinarily, could be converted into a true gourmet delight—maple syrup. This represents an authentic true bit of Americana, as the white man had learned the art of "sugaring" from the Indians. Some of my earliest memories are of accompanying pop to the woodlot very early in the morning, when, using a horse-drawn sled, he gathered in the sap which had oozed through the inserted metal spouts into the attached buckets. A special shed in the forest was equipped with a large oven and vat, which hour after hour boiled down the raw substance—a tedious process, requiring about a hundred gallons of sap to produce a single gallon of syrup,

but one which filled the air with a tantalizing aroma. Enough syrup was sold each year to bring in between two and three hundred dollars—very handy grocery money.<sup>8</sup>

The tension between my parents grew, what with the rigors of farm life and mom's isolation from things Jewish. We were the only Jewish family in the town, and in a way "double strangers," classified first as foreigners, and again as Jews. Although the Ku Klux Klan was very active in Indiana and Ohio, they never troubled us, although crosses were sometimes burned in the area, usually before Catholic churches. Nevertheless, we were not spared occasional anti-Semitic remarks, sometimes proffered in the guise of "humor."

It was pop's turn to give in this time, and, after a decade on the Huntsburg farm, which was literally blooming in its productivity by then, we moved again to Cleveland. Mother thrived there, but father was unhappy in his dull job, which consisted of greasing machinery in an auto parts factory. He gained weight and developed stomach disorders, longing as he did for the soil. Troubled by his extreme unhappiness, mother consented once more to becoming a farm wife.

Our second farm, 124 acres, was located in Thompson, Ohio, 45 miles northeast of Cleveland, again in Geauga County.<sup>9</sup> Like the one in Huntsburg, this farm, though well laid out, with a stately front yard and driveway, was run down, for its previous occupants had only sought to "take out," without enriching the land. Well experienced by now in building up rundown farms, my parents improved it at a fair rate of speed, despite three crises within the space of a few years. Two were bovine epidemics—the first a wave of tuberculosis which decimated our herd, the second, an outbreak of Bang's disease, which caused the dairy to give impure milk. In both cases, Department of Agriculture agents tested the herd and condemned the majority of the cows to destruction, probably disposing of them in glue factories. Despite indemnification for the doomed cattle, each time we endured losses in time and income, and had, as it were, to start all over again. The problems were, of course, compounded by poor prices, caused by the worldwide depression which followed the stock market crash of 1929. For example, raw milk, our staple, brought 2 cents per quart at its destination in Cleveland, where it retailed for 10 cents. The nadir was reached when potatoes brought 25 cents a bushel. "*Got vet helfen,*" mom would say. "God will help."

It was not surprising that the Ornsteins, along with many of their neighbors, faced foreclosure—bankruptcy, in plain English. My parents reluctantly adopted a solution common in our area. We sold our two woodlots for \$600, a tidy sum at that time. Although we saved our farm, an unwelcome side effect was the condition in which the lumberjacks with their power saws left the cut area—tumbled tree-tops formed an impenetrable barrier to passage through the lots. I took on the project of clearing up the debris, receiving my first wages of 25 cents an hour (adult pay in those days was around 35 cents hourly), to work with the axe in whatever spare time I had. Excellent firewood was made from suitable branches, and the remainder was burned.

After this Job-like succession of reverses, life began to take on a rosier hue. Pop, who liked to quote in the various languages he spoke, merely commented: “*Jeder Anfang ist schwer*” (“Every beginning is difficult”).

### *The Lake Erie Jewish Community*

We were part of the Lake Erie Jewish Community (also known as the Geneva community), some thirty-five families in all, who had left Cleveland to seek a different life.<sup>10</sup> All were of Central and East European immigrant background, and, of course, Ashkenazic. We spoke Yiddish among ourselves, although the children switched to English except when speaking to *babeh* (grandma). A few Hitler-period refugees appeared, but were ill at ease among us, and left. A half-dozen counties were represented in the “community,” with Lake County, immediately adjacent to Lake Erie, accounting for most of the families’ viticulture, or grape growing, which, along with peaches, was the main specialty.

The Ornsteins were somewhat marginal to the community, being the only Jewish family in Thompson, and one of the few in Geauga County. Besides that, we were a rarity as dairy farmers, since only one or two other families were devoted to milk production.

The Lake Erie Jewish farmers were fine, robust, and healthy-looking. Exposure to the sun, the fresh air, and constant physical labor had removed the paleness so common in urban living, and had hardened flabby muscles—a decided fringe benefit of country living. At any

rate, if Baron de Hirsch<sup>10</sup> had seen them, he would most probably have approved them as the kind of yeoman farmers he had hoped to see in existence the world over.

Clevelanders began to settle around Geneva, the hub of the community, as early as 1909, and continued into the 1930's, although some, disillusioned, gave up and returned to the city. It took several years before grape vines and fruit trees produced, and prices, particularly during the depression, could be rock-bottom, while a constant battle had to be waged with insects and the vicissitudes of Mother Nature. One early frost could kill an entire crop, and the fruit farmer was forced to borrow from the bank for operating expenses, clothes, and groceries. The JAS helped more than one farmer, with emergency loans, to stay afloat. Even so, some farmers went under.

Despite the difficulties, and the newness of farm specialties, the Lake Erie community was eminently successful, proving to be innovative as well as hard-working, not shackled by traditional ways and old-fashioned approaches. At one time, Jewish farmers, a clear minority, produced up to 60 percent of the grapes in the Geneva area, finally setting up their own cooperative and cutting middleman costs.

Today one single grape grower remains. The Cohadas family still operates its own winery, and red, rather fruity wine from the blue concord grape is advertised on billboards and elsewhere, selling rather well in the area.

The Lake Erie community never succeeded in building a Jewish center, as occurred elsewhere—for example, in Farmingdale, New Jersey, described by the historian Gertrude Dubrowsky.<sup>11</sup> Efforts to build viable social organizations never materialized. Meetings were called when Sampson Liph, a kindly, eloquent man with a strong Lithuanian (“Litvak”) accent, came to exhort the farmers on behalf of the JAS, of which he was western manager in Chicago. For whatever reasons, loan payments to the JAS were often tardy.

Attempts to recruit a rabbi, or at least a *melamed*, or Hebrew teacher, aborted, although several candidates were interviewed. The solution, when enough families still lived in the area, was to hire a rabbi and cantor from Cleveland for the High Holiday services.

Memories of these services, Orthodox in nature, are still with me. Each year they were held in different homes. Male voices chanting prayers, and the melodies of the *chazan*, or cantor, combined to create

an atmosphere of religious fervor. The womenfolk supplied abundant culinary delicacies, including *flanken* (side of beef), boiled chicken, stuffed cabbage, knishes, *tsimmiss* (compote), and other favorites.

The lack of regular religious teaching facilities was a great minus in our Jewish community. Each family attempted to impart what teaching they could. And the spirit of the households was, in concrete and subtle ways, completely Jewish.

### *From Plowing to Reaping: A Typical Farm Agenda*

As the Ornstein farm was located at the eastern extremity of the Midwest, but actually in the Allegheny foothills, we did not benefit from the rich black soil of the prairies and plains stretching from west of Cleveland to the Rocky Mountains. Ours was sandy loam, a type of soil that required a great deal of coaxing with fertilizers for any decent yield, not to speak of plenty of sacks of lime to offset the high acidity.

We were only eight miles from Lake Erie, and the Great Lakes area is a cold one, so the growing season was relatively short, and one had to keep an eye to the sky to ensure planting and harvesting a single crop without loss. So then, no matter how one looked at it, if it wasn't chicken rustlers, Bang's disease, bovine TB, or European corn borer, some other variable could deal a blow that meant losing a crop. Jack Frost arriving before schedule was one of the most feared and most unwelcome of these.

One of the positive benefits of our farm experience, despite the vicissitudes described, was the closeness which we felt as a family. Sharing the good and the bad created a sense of interdependence and cooperation difficult to engender in a setting where members of the family may see one another briefly at dinner time, if then.

The passing of the family farm and its replacement by huge agribusinesses will be touched upon later. Nevertheless, the closeness of family ties promoted by the former is sorely missed in the present period of latchkey children and the independent interests of family members. While agribusinesses are extremely efficient economic and management units, the price exacted is a regrettable weakening of family ties and spirit.

On farms such as ours, the work was divided between soil preparation, the planting of crops, cultivation, including weeding and hoeing,

harvesting, and care of the cattle, including feeding and milking. Twice daily, as early as March, or possibly as late as May or June for some crops, plowing would occur, followed by soil preparation. All crops grow under the threat of hosts of diseases and insects, and constant vigilance had to be the watchword. In addition, in accordance with an admonition dating at least to Old Testament days, a sensible plan of crop rotation had to be devised, including, if need be, fallow periods.

Plowing, as noted previously, has since ancient times carried great symbolic meaning, immortalized in pictographs and cuneiform inscriptions, celebrated in prose and verse, as witness *Piers the Plowman*. Pop was proud of his straight furrows, admired and commented on by the neighbors. He utilized horse plows long after others, except sectarians like the Amish, had changed to tractors, which could also power harrows and discs, for example, simultaneously with plowing.

In soil preparation, several operations followed the plowing: (1) going over the soil with a flat metal or wooden plank to reduce large lumps, (2) running a disc, a tool consisting of a series of heavy cylindrical discs, over the land, (3) using a harrow, a square instrument with a number of metal spikes, to further smooth down the soil. In many cases, only two of the above operations were needed.

Strictly speaking, "planting" was a term used for crops which had to be "inserted" into the soil, and "sowing" for those which could be "thrown," or broadcast. Mechanical tools exist for these operations, although, if it is a small plot, a farmer may still go through it with a bag of, let us say, alfalfa seeds, broadcasting them, as is still done also in Third World countries.

Then came the period of watching over the sprouts and plants, necessitating hoeing by hand, or going through the rows of crops with a horse- or tractor-drawn cultivator, capable of weeding among the rows of growing corn.

Fortunately for farmers, but unfortunately for poetically minded individuals, harvesting has lost much of its romantic appeal. In my day, harvesters, usually drawn by tractors, cut the ripened grain, immediately binding the stalks into bundles. We would then arrange them into shocks, circular arrangements containing about eight bundles each. (One may recall illustrations of Old Testament stories, in which sheaves of grain were similarly arranged.) Someone with a threshing machine was hired, and neighbors, "changin' hands,"

would gather at different farmers' places for threshing—an exciting occasion. The bundles of grain were loaded onto a hayrick or hayrack, and hauled to the spot, near a barn, where the threshing machine crew waited for them. They were then thrown onto a conveyor belt feeding into the machine, which blew straw and chaff through one pipe and the kernels of grain through another. The straw was immediately arranged into a pile for use as cattle bedding, and the grain was sacked as it was blown from the other pipe, to be hauled for storage in a granary. It was all very exciting, and though hard, grimy work, there was a festive atmosphere about it, and a sense of community. Jokes, sometimes rather scabrous, and “friendly” gibes, sometimes eliciting sarcastic responses, were exchanged. The main event at each farmer's was the noonday dinner, each farmwife vying to outdo the others, with at least four main courses, two or three desserts, and all sorts of specially prepared delicacies. Many belts were loosened, and some *avoir-du-pois* gained.

Silo filling still retains some of its colorfulness. Corn was then cut by hand, or with a corn cutter. This was field corn for cattle fodder. The racks hauled the stalks to the place where a silo filler, a special machine, quickly cut it, blowing it up into the silo. As a matter of custom, the owner of the farm always took the grimmest job, under the straw blower in threshing, and under the pipe in the silo. The neighborhood crew shared this and other tasks.

Nowadays a highly advanced machine called a combine accomplishes the amazing feat of cutting the grain stalks, sacking the grain, blowing it, and ejecting the chaff and grain, all in one operation. Hay-making has also lost its allure. Instead of “changin' hands,” an individual doing custom work with his baler is hired. Very quickly the baler cuts the hay and automatically ejects it in the form of bales. Hiring an extra hand, or exchanging with a neighbor, the heavy bales, weighing over a hundred pounds, are thrown on a hayrack, hauled to a barn, and stored for consumption by the farm stock.

One of my favorite tasks was to help in the gardening. We could raise any vegetables that accommodated to a limited, cold growing season, and were rewarded with a fine supply of foodstuffs for the whole year, although the farmer was rare, even then, who did not supplement this with staples from the grocery.

Pop's old faithful was William Conrad, a graduate, in animal hus-

bandry, of the Ohio State University. He and pop shared especially their love for cows, although Bill didn't adore horses as much as my father, and preferred to change over completely to tractors, while pop still lovingly held on to his team, plus an extra work horse. Anyway, even-tempered, hard-working, and pleasant, Bill and pop must have clocked at least 30,000 hours working together on each other's farms.

It is impossible to be ethnic, especially Jewish, and not be the recipient of some sort of "humor," particularly if non-Jewish people start to feel at home and friendly with you. Certainly, pop was popular out there, even if he was Jewish, and the neighbors liked to kid him. It was well known in the neighborhood that pop would eat pork but mom wouldn't, and when pork was served at a threshers' or silo fillers' dinner, somebody, occasionally Bill himself, would turn to pop and say, "That's pork, Joe, but it's kosher." In the repertory of ethnic jokes that I have heard, jokes about pork involve Jewish listeners, while those about sex are aimed at Catholics and somehow relate to the celibacy of priests. This is, I realize, to tread upon dangerous ground, but coming from Poland, pop and mom were used to much worse, and all in all, living out in the country and being the only Jewish family requires some sense of humor—unless witticisms are pushed too far and are meant to hurt and slander.

Perhaps the most colorful was another member of pop's buddy network, whom I shall call Bruce Hunter. He was a longtime bachelor, certainly due to chance, since he was a close lookalike to Clark Gable, down to mustache and brimming masculinity. One of the young ladies who had rented a room one summer practically had a seizure on seeing Bruce, exclaiming, "*Gott in Himmel*. Vot a beautiful man! Vot muscles! Ven I vuz talking to him, I feel so protected."

Bruce was a mighty good worker and pleasant to work with, to a large extent because of his tremendous sense of humor. This made him all the more popular around the neighborhood, because he was always good for a couple of laughs. At the worst, however, he also had a bad temper, perhaps a result of his own frustrations as he struggled to find vocational fulfillment. I remember one nasty incident, which occurred because he had become angry with mom for some reason. She had prepared a fine threshers' meal, since oats were being threshed, but when she rang for people to come to the table, all turned around and went back to their own farms to eat. This was his way, a most humili-

ating one, of retaliating. He had told the other neighbors not to eat dinner at our place, because she had done something that he did not approve of. At this point it should be said that the Hunters, who were basically lovely people, and with whom I am still in touch, obviously had lots of local clout, and did not particularly like my mother. I don't think we always knew how to cope with those things, and certainly we were no match, being "foreigners," and Jewish besides.

Thank goodness, however, pop and mom had learned in Galicia to have a tough hide, no matter how much it hurt, and above all, to carry on with the job at hand. Here we can see in bold relief how Jewish people have had to swallow big, often unjustified, portions of bitterness, and by their own examples of integrity, hard work, and, yes, forgiveness of most insults and affronts, have gained the respect of the non-Jews around them.

### *All for the Love of a Horse*

How many are there in a farm family? Unless it's an agribusiness, you could answer by saying that a farm family consists of the primary family plus any and all animals and fowl with which they are in close touch. Close touch means either that they are in-house or out-house pets, or that they are being taken care of by one member or another of the family.

What I am driving at? Mom used to cry when a cattle dealer came and drove out a calf or cow to the slaughterhouse. For many people, meat in a rack at the neighborhood supermarket evokes feelings of sorrow for the departed animal, that gave up its life to improve our cuisine. Mom herself had little contact with our livestock, yet they were part of us, and, to a degree, it was like losing a family member or relative when they were dispatched for the "last ride." After all, the Torah admonished that one should feed one's animals before oneself, as they were unable to ask for food.

One day Dolly, one of our favorite draft horses, and the daughter of another favorite horse, Penny, was simply too old for work and was even having trouble getting around. The heartrending decision was made to sell her to a stock dealer who would in turn dispose of her to a glue factory. I think my parents regretted the decision, despite the few paltry dollars that her sale brought. We were betraying a friend!

The episode did not end here. First thing mom knew, pop was no longer his chipper self—the ready smile, the witticism or kind word, or even the mild expression of impatience at how long it was taking to complete the work. He seemed literally to be walking around in circles. Then he took to going from one outbuilding to another. Alarmed at this bizarre behavior, mom ran out to the granary (a storage for dry grain or corn) and exclaimed, “Joe, what’s the matter?” He stared past her and kept mumbling, “Where’s Dolly? Where’s Dolly?” A series of leading questions turned out to be useless, and she had to rely on her instincts. Taking pop by the hand, she led him to the bedroom. Helping him to lie down, she helped him off with shirt and overalls and allowed him to go peacefully to sleep.

Pop slept round the clock plus a couple more hours, and woke up as if nothing had occurred. He had no recollection of his “passing out,” as it were, and simply woke up fresh and restored, with a normal sorrow for the departed Dolly. This was an example pure and simple of psychological withdrawal symptoms due to the loss of something beloved—and proof that both animal and human blood are thicker than water.

Let it be recalled, too, that in primitive or early religions, ritual sacrifices demanded the offering up of animals—which are often most precious to a person next to his family members.

### *School*

To the Ornstein children, school was not the painful ordeal it was and is to many others. It was a heaven where we could excel and fulfill the American dream. Fortunately, our school was very good, given its size and location. The teachers were—for the most part—kind, intelligent, and dedicated to their work. Several went out of their way to help us and other students from culturally different homes. To those we owe a great debt of gratitude. Rose, our deceased sister, was a very good student, although not an outstanding one because of her problems with chronic ulcerative colitis which finally took her life. Usually, Fran and I were the honor students, receiving most of the available distinctions. In those depression days, honors and distinctions were not lacking, but scholarships were few and far between.

Sister Fran won numerous distinctions for essay and poetry writing.

As for me, my first heady victory was in the Ohio state championship for French in the first year, then again in the second year, much to my own surprise and that of everyone else. When pop bragged about this to a somewhat acerbic neighbor, the latter remarked, "There's a lotta things I'd rather be than state champion in French, but I'd at least like to be champion in something." A left-handed compliment indeed. This award, at any rate, kept a young Jewish farm boy "going" psychologically for a long time with visions of new fields to conquer or excel in.

Most important, however, was the fact that the school was for many children the passport to a better future, and to be utilized to the fullest. Speaking of Jewish people, considering that they make up less than three percent of the U.S. population, the proportion of our people who are Nobel Prize winners, and leaders in arts, sciences, commerce, and other fields is amazingly high. At any rate, the role of the school in the upward mobility of the immigrant, and particularly the Jewish group, is too well known to merit repetition here, as is our Nobel Prize track record.

As a specialist in ethnic studies and languages, I have often had occasion to read statements by Black, Hispanic, and Polish leaders holding up the Jewish devotion to learning as worthy of emulation by their youth. A footnote to my French award is that I little dreamed, when superintendent Mort Collen drove us the 50 miles to Kent State University, in the early part of this century, that it would ever be a household phrase in the sixties. The college was located amid peaceful pastures and cornfields of rural America, and nothing about it spelled "cosmopolitan." Not many yards from the hall where I had taken the French test, three students later died in the Vietnam protest era, when nervous National Guard soldiers fired upon demonstrating students on a grassy knoll.

Returning to Thompson School itself, there were plenty of both bitter and sweet moments in attending it. There were the usual divisions of castes: the "in-group" and the "out-group." Fran and I were looked upon as outsiders, although we made warm friendships and did not fare too badly. Our oldest sister, Rose, however, who, as has been noted, passed away in the early 1940's, somehow was made a part of the in-group, apparently matching up to their "requirements."

## On Periodicals—and Becoming a Citizen

The isolation of the old-time farm made newspapers and magazines a most welcome link with the outside world. The Ornstein family subscribed to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Rural New Yorker*, a conservative but informational journal, and that old standby of Yiddish readers in America, the *Forward*—or, as we called it in Yiddish, *Der Forverts*. Finally, there was the bilingual *Jewish Farmer*, put out by the Jewish Agricultural Society in both English and Yiddish.

I loved the rotogravure section of the *Forward*, with its caftan-robed scholars of Vilna and its sturdy Jewish workingmen from Odesa in boots and sailor-type caps. Pop and mom liked to read aloud interesting tidbits from the paper, and explained Yiddish vocabulary items to us. The writers, including B. Kovner (Jacob Adler) and, of course, the unforgettable Abraham Cahan, the feisty editor, set a high standard. Cahan was a socialist and an outspoken one, and in addition, he plumped for assimilation, feeling that too much ethnicity impeded the entry of Jewish and other immigrants into the mainstream.

On the human interest side, I would have given the *Forward* an A. Nothing was more fascinating than its *Bintel Brief* (“bundle of letters”)—a Yiddish counterpart of the Dear Abby column edited by B. Kovner. No matter the personal problem, Kovner was able to furnish some sage counsel. A “green” immigrant or one not so green could find enlightenment on a wide variety of puzzling situations as they were encountered in the *goldene medine* (“the land of opportunity”), and I remember some of the letters. A young woman wrote complaining about the stinginess of her handsome boyfriend. She worked, but made less than her assiduous suitor, who let her pay for her own dinners when dining out, and so on. “My heart tells me he is the sort of person who likes to take but not to give. He is so handsome, though.” The *Bintel Brief* answered something like, “Follow your heart. It’s a no-win situation for you, my dear.”

Conflicts were legion in the new land, where the *shtetl*’s tight control of mores no longer was the case. The problem of Orthodoxy in one partner and the *apikoiris* (“nonobservant”) nature of the other cropped up frequently. Usually Kovner cleverly but kindly threw this question back to the writer, advising him or her to consult their con-

science.

Beyond all this, the writers labored mightily to help their countrymen survive and thrive in the new land. Newspapers also carried information and announcements of social events and of the organizations of people from the same towns and areas, or *landsleit* (“countrymen”).

Amusing stories can be told about gaining citizenship. In the case of pop, he took his citizenship exam in the early 1920’s in Cleveland. When the judge who was examining him learned that he was a farmer, immediately after asking him who the first president of the United States was, he kept hitting him on the back and applauding him for his vocation. In mom’s case, she prepared herself for this purpose by self-study of a book. She went to Chardon, the county seat, and had an easygoing neighbor, Mr. Miller, come along. mom passed her questions with flying colors, top of the class. Then came the time for ascertaining from a witness whether mom would be a desirable citizen. As a routine matter, the judge asked Mr. Miller to testify for Mrs. Ornstein.

“Where were you born, Mr. Miller?” he asked.

“I was born in Ontario, Canada.”

“And when did you come to the United States, Mr. Miller?”

“I came in 1919.”

“Mr. Miller, that’s fine. Do you happen to have your naturalization certificate?”

Mr. Miller looked rather sick and pale. He couldn’t respond, for in fact he had never been naturalized.

“Do you mean, Mr. Miller, you have never become a citizen?”

The outcome, ironically, was that mom, born in Galicia, Poland, became a citizen earlier than Joe Miller. The fact was that Joe had come across to the United States at a time when borders were more open than they are now, and technically he went to South Dakota, and from there moved to Ohio. Being a native English speaker, he merged right into the landscape. When Mr. Miller applied for citizenship, Mom gladly served as *his* character witness!

### *A Bit of Rural Vice*

Not far from our first farm, there lived a couple that fascinated the whole neighborhood. They were an attractive East European husband

and wife (ethnic affiliation purposely not mentioned here). But they were ambitious and times were far from prosperous. A great deal of gossip centered around "that place." Mr. X worked in Cleveland and bought and sold merchandise at a modest mark-up—the things farm people needed from the city. We bought bags of Slavic-Jewish pumpernickel and rolls from him. These were usually "day olds"—very cheap and mostly in good shape. What we didn't consume was soaked and fed to the stock. One learned to make do.

What then was the secret of "that place"? It was in effect a part-time speakeasy of sorts. Bottled liquor was sold there, no other kind being available at that time, of course. This brought in some revenue to the X family. But most fascinating of all to us younger kids with regard to "that place" was that Mrs. X sold not only liquor (despite Prohibition), but also her body! Farmers are no angels, but in the country things are so much "in a fish bowl" that this was fantastically more daring than its counterpart in a city. Newspapers and magazines from time to time carry stories of middle-class housewives who engage in prostitution purely to "augment" the family income. In an urban or suburban setting, however, it would be much easier to conceal this type of activity.

We sometimes went over to buy rye bread, or Mr. X would stop by and deliver a half sack or so, which we had ordered. Our family referred to white bread as "cotton batting," and left no stone unturned to get the "European"-type loaves, complete with caraway seeds and a sour, chewy quality. This is by now very popular in all America, and although often called "Jewish rye," it was originally Slavic, and is eaten a great deal by Poles, Russians, and others.

Though a fairly young fellow at the time, I still knew about the birds and the bees, and would fantasize all sorts of things about rich men from nearby cities coming to avail themselves of Mrs. X's personal services. While no beauty, she was tall, with a full but attractive figure—quite vivacious and indeed no different in appearance from most younger matrons of the day. Did these men come under cover of night in gold-plated Cadillacs? Did they have chauffeurs? How much did they pay? All these questions, in a day still known for its Puritan pretensions, gave rise to endless conjectures, and people would slow down as they drove past to get a peek at the "scarlet woman" and her husband, the bootlegger. The facts were, however, unconfirmed. It

appears that the X's had received warnings from local lawmen, and did not wish to fall into legal messes or risk a visit from local vigilantes. Certainly, right after World War I, the Ku Klux Klan rode in many areas of the north as well as the south. It was rumored in various small towns that the "best people" in the respective villages belonged to it, and took part in the flogging of citizens whose behavior they deemed indecent. I had no first-hand proof of this, but during the twenties, in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and other points north of the Mason-Dixon line, a number of cross burnings took place, targeting Catholic churches and appearing in reliable reports. Being Jewish, we decried such actions, and of course feared that some trouble might come to us, but fortunately it did not materialize.

Returning to Mr. and Mrs. X, they had several young children and even a babe in arms. I have often wondered how this truly shocking avocation was handled when the kids began to understand such things.

Perhaps this should be chalked up as one of those countless unanswerable enigmas, and perhaps it doesn't really matter very much.

### *The Bottom Line*

While serving in the Office of Strategic Services as an intelligence officer in 1945, I succumbed to an epidemic of polio in Italy and returned to the farm in a wheelchair. The farm itself was as beautiful as ever, with pop, however, winding down, no longer able to keep up his former pace. Both parents were overwhelmed, and mom cried mightily over what had happened to their *ben yachad*, their only son.

The war years had worked a radical transformation of the countryside that I knew.

A tremendous blow had also been dealt to Baron de Hirsch's dream of numerous and thriving Jewish farm communities all over the world. Jewish personnel had participated in all areas of the war effort and, by *force majeure*, had been allowed to assume management responsibilities with which they had seldom or never been "trusted" before. Family farms of all ethnic backgrounds lost their allure and were abandoned almost en masse.

Advances in agricultural science have been, literally, Jules Verne-like, and the scope here hardly permits us to embark on a

description of the fascinating experiments in hybridization and the "creation" of new members of food and fiber species. Agribusinesses have replaced many an individual farmer, but these too have suffered from their own overextension. There are perhaps 2,000 Jewish farming families in the nation, and even those who are drawn to rural life would think twice upon learning that the minimum investment nowadays for a family is about \$60,000. "Marry a farmer's daughter" is the adage nowadays. Another issue is the foreclosure of a frightening percentage of large farms in the Midwest, again from overextension of bank credit in the past fifteen years. This is a picture far different from that faced by such admirable idealists as Baron de Hirsch and Jacob Schiff, and hardly one propitious for beginning farmers.

Mechanization and the experience of World War II demonstrated that American farmers could outproduce those of any nation, to the point that at present less than 4 percent of the population are full-time farmers. These produce enough for domestic needs, export, and a surplus to boot.

The Lake Erie Jewish Community disintegrated, particularly since almost no young people were willing to devote their lives to the idealistic dream of thriving Jewish family farms the world over. It was not much different with non-Jews. In Thompson, Ohio, where I grew up, there are now only a handful of full-time farmers left, where formerly hundreds tilled the land.

In retrospect, the question may be asked: Was it worth it? This is, of course, a question that can only be answered subjectively by the individual families and family members that put their shoulders to the wheel in the Jewish American "back-to-the-land" movement. For the Ornstein family, it was a mixed bag, as can be seen from the foregoing pages. Pop perhaps in later years regretted that he had so unselfishly served agriculture and had paid too little attention to other areas. Mom had a love-hate relationship with the land. Sister Frances looks with a certain nostalgia at her childhood and youth on the farm. I myself liked the picturesqueness, the wholesomeness of nature and generally of farm life, but wished rather to become a professor, which I did.

It is regrettable that so little is known about the back-to-the-land movement, and by now even the present Jewish generation may have only accidental knowledge that the American Jewish farmers ever ex-

isted. We have not had the benefit of bards who could immortalize the experience in epic terms, in the manner of Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border*, about homesteading in the upper Midwest, or O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. Perhaps that day may come.

On a more positive note, it is gratifying to say that, although few in number, with only some 20,000 during the peak years of the movement, Jewish farmers succeeded in making real contributions to American agriculture. It is, for one thing, a matter of fact that they participated in virtually every major branch of farming, including dairy,<sup>12</sup> poultry (chickens, geese, ducks, turkeys), truck gardening (vegetables), chinchilla rabbits, mushrooms, grain crops (wheat, oats, barley), fodder (corn, soybeans, and sorghum), hay and alfalfa, tobacco, grape-growing and oeniculture (wine-making), and still other specialties.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the furnishing of food to the nation's breadbasket, a number of Jewish farmers, or those raised on farms, made outstanding contributions to the agricultural and biological sciences. Selman A. Waksman, the discoverer of streptomycin and Nobel Prize winner, was professor of soil microbiology at Rutgers University for over a quarter century. Moses Naphtalison Levin, a renowned phytopathologist, was editor of the journal *Phytopathology* and author of several books on plant pathology. Jacob G. Lipman became a world-renowned soil scientist, and remained for almost thirty years director of the New Jersey Experiment Station and dean of the State College of Agriculture; Samuel Brody did important research on dairy physiology at the University of Missouri, David Lubin founded the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome, and so on. In addition, Herman J. Levine and Benjamin Miller, in their book *The American Jewish Farmer in Changing Times*, list a selection of some fifteen other individuals, raised on farms, who have distinguished themselves in research and teaching in various branches of agriculture at different universities. They also assert: "There are at present hundreds of Jewish scientists teaching agriculture or doing research work in the many agriculture colleges of the country, and scores of Jewish scientists are employed by the United States Department of Agriculture."<sup>14</sup>

Unexpectedly, in the Catskill Mountains area, about 80 miles from New York City, a rural sideline was turned into a thriving business.

Jewish farmers started by renting out rooms in their own houses, then specially built cottages; and finally, there evolved the modern, elegant resort facilities now collectively known as the Borsht Belt. These resorts, such as Grossinger's, the Concord, the Nevele, and Green's, became world-famous and at present are "ecumenical" in character, having become meeting places for national and world events, sports and activities of all kinds, and favorite convention sites. Resorts are especially clustered in the townships of Ellenville, Monticello, and Liberty.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of American Jewish farmers has been in the realm of poultry farming, especially in southern New Jersey, around Vineland and Farmingdale. A series of writings by Gertrude Dubrowsky cover this aspect with special insight and feeling, as she herself grew up in Farmingdale, where her family engaged in poultry farming. An exhibit developed by the American Jewish Archives and Dr. Dubrowsky is currently making the rounds in different American cities. In a pamphlet especially prepared for the exhibit, she notes that Jewish farmers "developed poultry farming into a major branch of U.S. agriculture, mechanized the industry, taking the chickens out of the backyard, and making eggs a money crop for farmers. New Jersey became known as the egg basket of America."<sup>15</sup>

The odyssey of the Ornstein family mirrored only one segment of the Jewish farm experience, which began apparently as early as the colonial period, saw the growth of idealistic utopian colonies during the entire nineteenth century,<sup>16</sup> and reached its zenith with the back-to-the-land movement in the wake of the bloody pogroms of the 1880's in Russia, Rumania, and elsewhere. With the assistance of the Jewish Agricultural Society, the Jewish farm movement increased in numbers and accomplishments, and proved that Jews from urban settings could hold their own, and more, as farmers in a very alien sociopsychological setting.

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The following vignettes are from my memoirs of growing up on a northeastern Ohio dairy farm. My parents, Joseph and Bertha Ornstein, immigrants from Galicia, then under Austria-Hungary, were among the pioneers in the Jewish back to the land movement in the New World. I hope, by presenting these materials, to help fill a serious and regrettable lacuna in the area of those individuals, mostly unknown and unsung, who strove to demonstrate to the non-Jewish world that our people did not fear the hard labor required to operate a "dirt farm," and could hold their own among those who worked the soil.

1. Although by now dated, the two most detailed descriptions of Jewish farming in the United States through the 1950's remain Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York, 1943), and Herman J. Levine and Benjamin Miller, *The American Jewish Farmer in Changing Times* (New York, 1956). It should be borne in mind, however, that these authors were all officials of the JAS, and their books are most informative regarding communities and farmers with which that organization had dealings. Another valuable source is contributed by the JAS, in the form of its *Annual Reports* (1905 - 1955). Altogether these also yield an impressive view of the role of the JAS as the main agency prepared to furnish financial, technical, and psychological assistance to individuals wishing to settle on a farm.

2. In 1981, shortly after beginning this memoir, I made a sentimental "pilgrimage" to Mount Gilead, Ohio, finding a peaceful country town amid thriving grain fields. (The *Funk and Wagnall World Atlas*, 1983 edition, gives the population as 2,911, placing it beyond the "village" category.) Farming was supplemented by work in the numerous small factories and firms in the area. All efforts to locate someone who, or whose relatives, had ever known the Milton Groves were unsuccessful. The problem was obviously compounded by the fact that they had been a childless couple.

3. The Jewish back-to-the-land movement, strongest in the United States but represented throughout the New World, badly needs treatment by modern historiographical techniques, both for its diachronic and its synchronic aspects. It seems clear that the first Jews to engage in agriculture in the New World did so in northeastern South America and the West Indies. In 1644, a Portuguese Jew named David Nassy led a band of coreligionists from Brazil to Surinam (Dutch Guiana); there they were welcomed by fellow Sephardim, already settled there. That area came to be known as the Joden Savanne (literally, "Jewish Savannah") in Dutch. At the same time, in Cayenne, later French Guiana, several Jewish farm colonies were set up on the Pomeroon and Monica rivers, again in Surinam, and another in Curacao—an island first under the Portuguese, then the Dutch. Many of the colonists apparently engaged in agriculture, and there is evidence that Jewish settlers were involved in introducing the planting of sugar cane and indigo—a plant from which dyes were extracted. In 1657 the colony of Essequiba, in Surinam, was founded, with several shiploads of colonists from Brazil settling there. Apparently, wide use was made of slaves, a practice which was to cost the settlers dearly. Jewish colonists were among the planters on the West Indies islands of Tobago, Guadeloupe, and French Martinique. Unhappily, violent slave revolts destroyed the colonies, although many of the settlers succeeded in escaping. About fifty years ago, explorers in Guiana made a fascinating discovery, running into black tribes who still spoke what they called Dschoe Tongo, or (in Dutch) "Jewish or Jew Tongo." The *New York Times* has occasionally carried news items on the handful of remaining Jewish poultry farmers in Santo Domingo, descendants of a once thriving colony. There is apparently no overall account of Jewish farming in Canada but cf. A. D. Hart, ed., *Jews in Canada* (Toronto, 1926), esp. essays by Belkin and Sack; A. Rhinewine, *Looking Back a Century* (Toronto, 1932); A. A. Chiel, *Jews in Manitoba* (University of Toronto Press, 1961).

4. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 46.

5. A fine summary and description of agricultural methods and tools in biblical days is to be found in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1974), vol. 2, cols. 374–415, s.v. “Agricultural Methods and Implements in Ancient Erez Israel.” In speculating how such a seemingly arid and small mountainous land could support several million people, who did often believe that they dwelled in a land of “milk and honey,” the writer says: “The mind of the Jewish farmer was always open to adopting new techniques and experimenting with new species of plants. Thus, Israelite agriculture progressed in biblical and especially in mishnaic and talmudic times. Crop yields reached levels that have only been approached in the modern era.” This parallels much of what happened with Jewish farmers in America, particularly those engaged in poultry raising, truck gardening, scientific dairying, and cultivation of field crops.

6. A standard biography of Baron de Hirsch (translated from German) is that of Kurt Grunwald, *Der Türkenhirsch: A Study of Baron Maurice de Hirsch* (Jerusalem: Scientific Translations, 1966).

7. I have in my possession a letter to my father, in care of his rancher-employer, George W. Frey, Linda Vista, Box 259, RFD No. 2, Pasadena, California. Postmarked St. Paris, Ohio, and dated Feb. 14, 1910, the letter from Mrs. Grove is friendly, but interesting for its somewhat old-fashioned style and wording. There is a tendency to capitalize common nouns, and some vocabulary is dated, such as “piked” for “paved”. Here it is:

Dear Joseph:

I presume you received the letter written to you some time ago, in which I wrote that Mr. Grove and I were going to take a trip. We are now in St. Paris, Champaign Co., visiting a lot of relatives. We were three miles out in the country yesterday at Joseph Pence's. He owns a fine farm, on a pike road, in fact all the roads are piked in this Co.; he had 12 horses, 95 hogs and some cattle, but intends to buy a load to feed for the market.

They have a fine house and are good people in every way. He wants a good man and says one of his neighbors had proposed to him to send to New York after some one to help and as we have not found a place yet; we want to look around a while yet, we've told him of you and he will give you as much as you are getting now, and more, afterward, if you are as good as we told him you are.

So if you can come at once, you can find employment. These counties in this part of the State are the banner counties. You will get a ticket from Mansfield to Newark, then change there for St. Paris, by way of the Pennsylvania R.R., known as the “Panhandle” that will bring you direct to St. Paris. When you arrive in St. Paris, go to the Central National Bank and enquire of Garwood G. Jones. He will let Mr. Grove know and we'll all go to the hotel and have a visit before you go to the Pence's.

We want to see you and hear about how you have been getting along this Winter. So if they will let you off at all, come right on.

Hoping you are well, we remain

Yours Sincerely

Mr. and Mrs. M. Grove

8. Geauga County, where we lived, if known at all to the outside world, was best known for its annual maple sugar festival held in Chardon, the county seat, in March. A more detailed description of sugaring may be seen in Jewie Ireland Green's “George Binning Taps the Running Syrup,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 1, 1979, p. 7a, complete with recipe for syrup cornbread. The Binnings lived about a mile from us. In all my experience, I have not known of another Jewish farmer engaged in maple sugar production, which may entitle my father to at least a minor “first.”

9. Both Huntsburg and Thompson, Geauga County, where we farmed, were approximately 40 miles northeast of Cleveland. The area was part of the New Connecticut or the Connecticut Western Reserve, explored and perhaps occupied by the French in the 1600's and early 1700's. The English defeated the French at Fort DuQuesne (Pittsburgh), Quebec, and Niagara, and seized the Western Reserve. Settlement began in 1800, mostly from Massachusetts and Connecticut, still reflected by the village square and peaked-roof houses. The population fluctuated between 700 and 900 in each township, and still does. We were the only Jewish family in either place. *Thompson, Ohio: Bicentennial Community* (Thompson, Ohio: Fourth of July Committee, 1976).

10. Jews from Cleveland began settling in the Lake Erie area, around Geneva, as early as 1908, devoting themselves mostly to viticulture and fruit raising. At one time, they produced at least 60 percent of the grapes, and much of the fruit, especially peaches, of that area. The Great Depression hit the Jewish community very hard, and despite emergency loans by the JAS, a number lost their farms. See Edward A. Goodwin and Herman J. Levine, *A Historical Review of Farming by Jews in New York 1955*, pp. 20–31. According to Davidson, in the middle of the 1920's the Lake Geneva Jewish community, though a fraction of the total farmers, produced over 60 percent of the grapes (and much of the fruit, especially peaches) of the area. "Neighboring banks and business regarded the new element as a strong factor in the upbuilding and progress of Geneva." Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 157–158.

11. See her unpublished manuscript "The Land Was Theirs: A History of Farmingdale, New Jersey."

12. Dairying was, however, strongest in New York State and parts of New Jersey. See Goodwin and Levine, *A Historical Review of Farming by Jews in New York*.

13. This enumeration does not begin to cover all the specialties cultivated by American Jewish farmers. For example, in Chamberino, New Mexico, David Brown and his wife raise cotton, onions, and Mexican peppers (chilies), often planting 60 acres or so of each. His father settled in the Mesilla Valley in the early 1900's. Extensive use is made of Mexican farm laborers.

14. Levine and Miller, *The American Jewish Farmer in Changing Times*, pp. 88 ff.

15. Gertrude Dubrowsky, "American Jewish Agriculture," in Abraham J. Peck, ed., *The American Jewish Farmer: An Exhibit*. (Cincinnati, 1986), pp. 5–7. See also her "Farmingdale, New Jersey: A Jewish Farm Community," *American Jewish Historical Review* 46, no. 4 (June 1977): 485–497; "Yom Kippur Among the Farmers of Farmingdale" *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1979, p. 33.

16. See, for example, Uri D. Herscher, "Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America: The Craving for a Great Ideal," in Peck, *American Jewish Farmer*, pp. 9–11, as well as Herman Rosenthal, "A History of the Communitarian Settlement Known as 'New Odessa,'" *ibid.*, pp. 13–17, a translation by Rabbi Gary P. Zola of Rosenthal's Hebrew-language article in the *Yalkut Ma'ariv*. 1904.