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Bad Axe, Michigan: An Experiment In Jewish Agricultural Settlement

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In the center of Michigan's Thumb district is a small town with a strange name—Bad Axe. It is the county seat of Huron County and is about 125 miles north of Detroit and 50 miles east of Bay City. Today's population numbers less than 3,000. Bad Axe owes its name to a broken axe found in the area by surveyors. The implement probably belonged to the neighboring Indians and was most likely abandoned by them. Before the United States Post Office Department banned "picture addresses", letters addressed with only a sketch of a broken axe were often delivered to Bad Axe from distant points.¹

1. Works Projects Administration, *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 476.

Prior to 1884 the district contained vast stretches of wooded areas, but in autumn of that year destructive fires drastically damaged the forests, and a scrawny brush and poplar covering grew over the ashes of Huron County. In 1900 the grindstone industry centered in Huron County, but the use of carborundum soon displaced this industry, and Bad Axe and its nearby villages became more agricultural. The area slowly became a marketing and shipping point for beans, chicory, sugar beets, hay, flax, wheat, and cattle.²

In neighboring Bay Port a colony of 288 Pennsylvania Germans attempted to establish a religious and socialistic "Utopia" in 1848 on 3,000 acres of land, but the colony was dissolved shortly after the Civil War.³ Forty-three years later another venture in agricultural colonization was begun about four miles east of Bad Axe.

In 1891 sixteen Russian Jewish immigrants purchased contiguous parcels of land totaling 640 acres. All sixteen had been in the United States less than four years and all were peddlers working out of Bay City, Michigan. Hard times had already set in by 1891 (the great national economic depression was to come two years later), and one of the peddlers, Herman Lewenberg, conceived the idea of a Jewish agricultural settlement in the "Thumb District" as a means of earning a livelihood.

It is possible that Lewenberg had read or heard about previous attempts in Kansas, North Dakota, and other states.⁴ While selling his wares in Bad Axe, he became acquainted with Langdon Hubbard and his son, Frank. The Hubbards were both bankers and land owners, and the three men entered into negotiations that resulted in Lewenberg and his group purchasing the 640-acre package at a price that ranged between eleven and twelve dollars per acre. The total down payment for the entire group was only \$200.⁵ Each buyer received a contract providing for payments to be made in five equal annual installments at an interest rate of seven per cent a year. The undercapitalization, high interest rates, and short term notes helped contribute to the colony's demise. Despite the shaky financial arrangement, Lewenberg and his associates took formal possession of the land on July 20, 1891.⁶

The Jewish settlers named their colony "Palestine" and set to work with energy.⁷ The original sixteen were Wolf Baerman, Joseph Beckman, Samuel Eckstein, Meyer Elias, Michael Elias, Noah Elias, Abraham Goldman, Moses Heidenrich, Aaron Kahn, Herman Lewenberg, Jacob Lipowsky, Joseph Malinoff, Louis Malinoff, Moses Rosenberg, Samuel Steinborn, and Uriah Steinborn.⁸ Unlike some

other Jewish agricultural settlements, the Michigan colony was started from the "bottom up"; that is, the settlers themselves purchased land without a sponsoring agency or group leading the way. However, the Palestine colony soon came under the mantle of protection afforded by the Detroit Reform Jewish community.⁹

The settlers hastily constructed five or six crude shacks built of new saplings and partially burned logs. During the construction of these flimsy buildings, the families were forced to live either in tents or in the open air. The bitter winter of 1891-92 caused great hardship, and some families decided to return to Bay City. Several settlers reverted to their previous occupation, peddling.¹⁰ Those who remained in Palestine during that winter were often hungry and ill and were almost completely dependent upon their fellow settlers in Bay City. A few more buildings were erected in preparation for the spring and summer season, but the colony, both physically and financially, was in "dire straits".¹¹

During this critical time in Palestine's history, word of the new settlement reached some of the more notable people in Detroit. Martin Butzel, a Detroit businessman, was the president of Temple Beth El's Relief Society. Beth El was the center of Reform Jewish life, with many members stemming from a German background. They were deeply concerned about the vast migration of Russian Jews to the United States, and they sought methods to absorb the newcomers into the American scene.¹² The Relief Society primarily assisted orphans, widows, and indigent Jews within Detroit itself, but under Butzel's leadership the Society became directly involved with the Palestine colony.¹³

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 455-456.

4. A. James Rudin, "Beersheba, Kan.; 'God's Pure Air on Government Land' ", *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV (Autumn, 1968), 282-298.

5. Gabriel Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 29 (1925), 62.

6. Letter from Paul D. Soini, former Bad Axe correspondent for the *Port Huron Times*, Bad Axe, Michigan, to Donald Chaput, Division of Michigan History, Department of State, Lansing, Michigan, December 8, 1971.

7. Irving I. Katz, "History of Jews in Michigan", *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, (1948), no. 71

8. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 62-63; Soini to Chaput, December 8, 1971.

9. Katz, *op. cit.*

10. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 63.

11. Leonard G. Robinson, "Agricultural Activities of Jews in America", *American Jewish Year Book 5673, 1912-1913* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1912), p. 93.

12. Rudolf Glanz, "Source Materials on Jewish Immigration", *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 6 (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute—YIVO, 1951), 73-156.

13. Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943), p. 236.

Emanuel Wodic served the Palestine colony, without pay, for over two years.



Martin Butzel turned to a long-time friend, Emanuel Wodic, for guidance in this new area of endeavor. Wodic, with twenty-five years of farming experience, was to have tremendous impact upon Palestine.

Born in Bohemia in 1836, he migrated to America at the age of 18. Wodic's first job was that of a sailor, but in 1856 he enlisted in the United States Army, seeing action during the Civil War at Bull Run, Petersburg, and Richmond. After the war he was discharged and purchased a forty acre farm in Macomb County, not far from Detroit. For the next quarter century he worked his land and became a prominent leader in the agricultural community.¹⁴ Wodic lived well into his eighties, and he remained a vital and active person until his death.

Butzel sent Wodic, a fellow Temple Beth El member, to investigate the Palestine settlement. The experienced farmer arrived at the colony in March, 1892, and immediately met with the settlers. Palestine had grown to a population of sixteen men, seven women, and thirty-four children.¹⁵ Because of the colony's primitive conditions, some of the wives remained in Bay City or in Europe. Only ten shacks had been built and not more than an acre or two had been cleared at each farm. Palestine had only seven horses and two cows, mostly bought on credit.¹⁶

Wodic returned to Detroit and gave his report to Butzel. The latter called a special meeting of the Beth El Relief Society, and the

sum of \$1,200 was quickly raised. Clothing, food, and Passover matzot (unleavened bread) were dispatched to the Bad Axe colony. In May, 1892, Wodic, already fifty-six years old, moved to Palestine and began to teach agricultural science to the former peddlers. Three plows, three drays, a yoke of oxen, seed, and groceries were brought to the settlement by Wodic. He installed a crude saw mill to cut burned timber into rough boards for use in construction. Acres of land were cleared, and the Russian Jews were instructed how to sow, cultivate, and harvest their crops of oats, peas, and potatoes. Wodic received no compensation for this task.¹⁷

Through the efforts of Butzel and his Relief Society, the news of Palestine's existence reached Jacob H. Schiff, a wealthy New York investment broker. Schiff had long been interested in Jewish agricultural efforts, and he appealed to the newly-formed Baron de Hirsch Fund for immediate financial aid.¹⁸ The Fund responded affirmatively to Schiff's request, and \$3,000 was granted to meet the settlers' urgent needs.¹⁹

In September, 1892, Butzel made a personal trip to Bad Axe to supervise the distribution of the de Hirsch monies. All but \$700 of the grant went to meet the payments due the Hubbards. The de Hirsch Fund considered the money a loan to the Jewish farmers, and, in return, they assigned their contracts to Butzel as trustee. Martin Butzel met with the Hubbards and pleaded in behalf of the settlers, obtaining a four-year extension of the payments. The Hubbards also moved the maturity date from the original July 20 to October 1, thus coinciding with the autumn harvest season. Butzel returned to Detroit in an optimistic mood, and he wrote to the Baron de Hirsch Fund:

These people, both men and women . . . through industry early and late, in all kinds of weather, seem to have accomplished all that could be expected in such a short time and thus given proof of their sincere intention and earnestness to become farmers in fact. Notwithstanding their present poverty, scanty food, and poor habitation, which would discourage others, these families seem to make sacrifices of all personal comforts and stick to farming.²⁰

14. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 64.

15. Emanuel Applebaum, "The Palestine Colony--An Agricultural Endeavor", *Michigan Jewish History*, 4, (May, 1964), 15.

16. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 238.

17. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 66.

18. For a discussion of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, see Samuel Joseph's *History of the Baron de Hirsch Fund*, published in 1936 in Philadelphia by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

19. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

20. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, pp. 240-41.

During Sukkot (the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles) in the autumn of 1892, the settlers' products were displayed at Detroit's Temple Beth El. Samples of the crops were sent to the de Hirsch Fund as a memento of the holiday.²¹ Soon the colony was augmented by two additional families, and it attracted widespread attention in the American Jewish community. With well motivated settlers, an experienced teacher, and a strong sponsor, it appeared that Palestine would succeed. Butzel, especially, was most hopeful:

. . . the colonists are a deserving assemblage of capable farmers . . . they have struggled against the difficulties which beset all farmers at the start . . . they have shrunk with commendable integrity from making any appeal for help and have existed for a long while already on the poorest food . . . they would rather starve than yield up their courage and self-respect . . . The Detroit Committee will aid them further with as much as is in its power.²²

Unlike the previous winter, all the settlers remained on their land during the cold season of 1892-93. Butzel was in close contact with the colony, and he continued to send vitally needed supplies. Kosher meat was delivered to Palestine from Detroit since the settlement did not have its own schochet (ritual meat slaughterer). Butzel wrote directly to the de Hirsch Fund and again praised the settlers: "It is almost miraculous with how little they get along".²³ Impressed, the Fund made a second loan of \$1,000 to the Palestine colony.

The new money was used by each farmer to meet the urgent needs of his family. Wodic continued to assist the colony, and over fifty acres were planted with potatoes. More buildings were constructed and even more land was cleared for future planting. However, in late 1893 Wodic's wife died, and his active participation came to an end. The years 1893 and 1894 marked the height of the Michigan colony's activity. Unfortunately, the potato crop failed, and the Bad Axe area suffered yet another damaging forest fire.²⁴ Despite these setbacks Butzel and the Detroit Relief Society continued to aid and support the settlers in the "Thumb District". During those years a small synagogue was built, and religious instruction was given to Palestine's children. The spiritual leader of the colony was Rabbi Charles Goodwin of Bay City who acted as cantor and teacher. Like Wodic, he, too, served without pay.²⁵

The final crisis came in the fall of 1895. For over four years the Palestine colony had struggled for its very life, and it had somehow survived. However, the Jewish settlers had often defaulted on their payments to the Hubbards, and they were in constant

danger of eviction. The colony owned over 800 acres and had a population of approximately seventy people.²⁶ Once more Martin Butzel represented the settlers in a confrontation with the Hubbards. He wrote to the creditors:

You must have patience with these poor farmers, be they Jews or Christians . . . You would not be so cruel as to set families with small children out of doors . . . Just think of the anguish, heartaches, sufferings, and disappointments of women and children . . . driven from what they have toiled for, for four years . . . would you insist to drive them from house and home just for the reason that each one of them owes less than \$100 for interest past due? I appeal to your . . . charity or humanity. Do grant them an extension . . . give them aid, comfort, and advice. This would give all parties peace of mind, satisfy the teaching of the Saviour and the God of Israel alike. The prayers of the oppressed have never been unanswered.²⁷

Despite this eloquent plea, the Hubbards pressed hard for the payment of past debts and interest. When they attempted to take the settlers' movable property as payment, Butzel again intervened

21. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 67

22. Katz, *op. cit.*, no. 72.

23. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 242.

24. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

25. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 69-70.

26. Rudolph Binder, "Jewish Colonies", *New Encyclopedia of Social Reform* (New York: 1908), p. 61.

27. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 71



Despite his unceasing efforts, Martin Butzel was unable to help the Palestine colonists attain success.

and wrote a sharp letter pointing out that movable property is exempt from such seizure under the law. He reminded the creditors that he was the trustee for organizations that had invested over \$6,000 in the Palestine colony, money that was not expected to be returned. Thus, Butzel maintained, he had a prior claim, and he also noted that the settlers, by clearing 165 acres, had actually improved the land for the Hubbards. He concluded:

I protest against such unlawful proceedings on your part or the part of your agent to take away property of whatever nature which is exempt by the law of the state. I shall be compelled to hold you accountable and responsible for all damage thus inflicted.²⁸

Butzel's strong stand was effective, and new contracts were drawn extending the period of payment to 1906, with principal payments of \$30 a year until then. However, Palestine's economic woes were far from over. When the 1897 potato crop failed, the Hubbards again initiated ouster proceedings against the settlers. The Baron de Hirsch Fund sent one of its agents to investigate the Bad Axe colony, and he, like Butzel, was deeply impressed by the Jewish peddlers-turned-farmers:

Some of them had to sleep on the bare ground, in weather and storm, with the animals of the field as their companions, but they braved it all with the ultimate expectation of possessing what they then began to toil for. It should not be difficult to convince you how almost insurmountable were the obstacles they had to contend with and it is surprising that they did not lose heart . . . they were industrious beyond measure . . . their own shoulders served as animals which they had not the means to purchase, and their Christian neighbors testify to their pluck, energy, and determination.²⁹

On the strength of the report and with Butzel's deep interest in the colony, the de Hirsch Fund sent an additional \$1,000 in 1898 to avert immediate eviction. But by this time Butzel was bed-ridden with an illness, and his personal involvement lessened. He was still able to prevail upon the Hubbards to settle for half their claim, and Butzel paid all interest through October, 1898. By such actions it appeared the Jewish settlers would not be bothered again until after the 1899 fall harvest. But it was not to be.

In early 1899 the Hubbards again badgered the Palestine settlers for payment, and at that point three families abandoned their farms. A year later, after continuing pressure, only eight families remained on the land, and in time these soon departed. All but three land parcels reverted back to the Hubbards, who then resold the farms to other immigrants. When Herman Lewenberg, the Palestine leader,

sold his property, it marked the end of the experiment. One of the settlers, Moses Heidenrich, realized a profit of \$35 for his years of work.³⁰ Two families moved to the small town of Bad Axe: the Ecksteins and the Heidenrichs. Samuel Eckstein was a fur dealer. He, too, left the area sometime after 1903.³¹ Heidenrich established a scrap iron business in Bad Axe with his son Louis. The business closed after Louis' death in 1967, and his passing marked the last connection with the Palestine colony.³²

Only the Elias brothers remained at the site of the colony, and in 1915 they obtained title to the property by completing the payments. It is believed that this family group left the Bad Axe area about five years later.³³

The problems of the Palestine settlement were many. A small group of peddlers, lacking agricultural expertise and experience, had chosen land that was swampy, cut over, and burned out. They possessed insufficient capital, and they were constantly battling their creditors who lived only a few miles away in Bad Axe. Success was almost impossible.

The gloom of the colony's story is relieved by the compassionate figures of Martin Butzel and Emanuel Wodic. Without their intensive efforts, Palestine's life would have been even shorter and more tragic. Bad Axe was one of the first colonies in America to receive funds from the estate of Baron de Hirsch, and although the \$5,000 was lost, the Fund's leaders learned many important lessons that were to be used in other, more successful agricultural settlements.

The colony's failure was due to five basic causes. First, the settlers' ignorance of farming as a science was devastating. Fred Gilbert's family came to Bad Axe in 1894 when he was five years old, but he still has a vivid recollection of the Jewish colony:

The people in the colony did little farming and were not very good farmers. The men did operate peddlers' wagons and either bartered or bought hides and rags from farmers in central Huron County. They carried a supply of dishes, mostly tinware, and sometimes traded them for hides or rags. They also paid money for hides and rags and sold their wares for money. All in all, they were pretty good fellows. They were well regarded and liked by their neighbors.³⁴

28. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 245.

29. Davidson, "The Palestine Colony in Michigan", 72.

30. Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers*, p. 248.

31. Soini to Chaput, December 8, 1971.

32. *Ibid*.

33. *Ibid*.

34. *Ibid*.

A somewhat different description appeared in the 1932 edition of the *Huron County Illustrated History*:

Outside of two survivors, all the marks this colony left is the synagogue (now a school) and the fact that some of the Gentile neighbors who learned to talk Hebrew are still talking with their hands [sic.]

Jewish and Gentile children attended the same public school and BATTLED. Some one said, "If the parents could have farmed as well as the kids fought, Bad Axe would now be next door to Jerusalem."³⁵

In 1959 another publication printed a similarly unflattering article about the Palestine colony:

As farmers, the Jews were not successful . . . planting crops whose harvesting was like solving a jig-saw puzzle, did not bring good results. Their efforts to farm were amusing to their Gentile neighbors . . .³⁶

35. Chester A. Hey (ed.), *Huron County Illustrated History* (Huron County Michigan: 1932), p. 21.

36. Chester Hey & Norman Eckstein, *Huron County Centennial History: Hi-Lights in 100 Years of Progress* (Huron County, Michigan: 1959), p. 20.

This deserted schoolhouse is all that remains of the Bad Axe Jewish agricultural experiment.



Wodic attempted to teach agricultural methods to the settlers, but his stay at Palestine was all too short. The Russian Jewish immigrants had come from a country where Jewish ownership of land was forbidden, thus precluding the possibility of farming experience.

A second cause of failure was simply insufficient means of support. The sponsors did not or could not invest the huge sums of money that were necessary to insure the colony's eventual success. The lack of support was especially keen in Palestine's first years of existence. Third, the colony had to borrow money at a high rate of interest in order to purchase seeds, implements, livestock, and building supplies. Fourth, Palestine was far from a convenient market and a railroad. Although the colony was close to Lake Huron, that part of the Great Lakes region was not an active trading area. In addition, the Bad Axe settlement was constantly beset by the problem of poor soil, drought, fire, hail, and other natural disasters. Finally, the settlers themselves, as we have seen, often left their farms to take more lucrative jobs or to start their own businesses in which they had previous experience. Almost all of the Jewish settlers at Bad Axe had a trade other than farming. America absorbed many of her immigrants without the need for planned agricultural colonies, and the newcomers generally found employment in the expanding urban areas of the nation.

There were also some important secondary factors that helped defeat the settlers. The dream of Jewish farmers on their own land in America did not strike a responsive chord among the established Jewish community nor among the newly arrived immigrants. The latter had too many other opportunities, while the former group never made the necessary financial commitment to such colonization schemes.

Social snobbery and class lines, both real and imagined, also hindered the healthy growth of the Palestine colony. It was ironic that German Reform Jews of Detroit sponsored Russian Orthodox Jews of Bad Axe. In time, the adjectives became more important than the noun. The economically comfortable, highly urbanized German Jews had ambivalent feelings about the Russian Jewish immigrants. On the one hand, the "old timers" sought to render all assistance necessary to provide their newly arrived co-religionists with the goods and services needed in America. On the other hand, the German Jews were sometimes fearful that the Russian Jews would undermine their own hard won, albeit precarious, place in

the American sun. This ambivalence was surely not lost upon the Bad Axe settlers.

The sense of Jewish isolation was also a factor in the failure of the Palestine colony. East European Jews tended to live in communities that offered synagogues, religious schools, kosher food stores, welfare agencies, Yiddish newspapers, and other resources. Palestine, Michigan, was miles from a large well established Jewish community, and it was difficult to construct a viable new one with a small population, terrible natural and financial problems, and a compelling need to learn a new and difficult occupation in a strange land. Jewish agricultural colonies were, however, highly successful in southern New Jersey, partly because of their close proximity to Philadelphia and New York City.

It must always be remembered that the Palestine colony started before the Zionist movement held its first organizing Congress in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. The highly motivated and expert Jewish farmer found on an Israeli kibbutz (collective farm) was unknown to the settlers and sponsors of Bad Axe. They were working without the psychological benefits that today's Jews have derived from successful farming in Israel. The writer who had described the farming efforts of Herman Lewenberg and his friends as "amusing" also acknowledged in the same article that in ". . . Israel, the dream of Baron de Hirsch came true, the Jew is a good farmer."³⁷

The Michigan settlers were truly pioneers, and from them came some impetus for later successes in America and throughout the world.³⁸ Partly as a result of the Bad Axe experience, the Jewish Agricultural Society was founded in 1900. This organization helped place Jewish farming on a more solid financial and scientific footing.³⁹

37. *Ibid.*

38. Leo Franklin, "Jews in Michigan", *Michigan History*, XXIII (Winter, 1939), 89.

39. Annual Reports, 1902-1924 (New York: Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society)