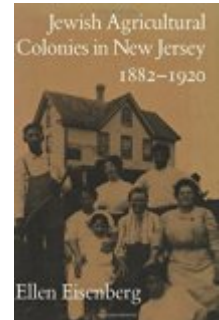


Ellen Eisenberg. *Jewish Agricultural Colonies in New Jersey, 1882-1920.* New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995. xxiii + 218 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-2652-7.



Reviewed by Pamela S. Nadell

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Historians of the East European Jewish immigrant experience in America are so fascinated by the utopian experiments that led tiny numbers of Jews to transplant themselves to America as farmers, that Ellen Eisenberg's *Jewish Agricultural Colonies in New Jersey, 1882-1920* is the third volume on this topic. Those Jews who turned to land—whether in the United States, Argentina, or the Yishuv—joined their lives to the notion of productivization voiced by so many of the major European figures advocating or examining Jewish emancipation. By and large, outside of the Yishuv, Jewish efforts to farm failed; yet historians of American Jewry remain intrigued by the endeavors. Eisenberg's monograph follows Joseph Brandes's *Immigrants to Freedom: Jewish Communities in Rural New Jersey since 1882* (in association with Martin Douglas; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), a lively, historical narrative exploring the founding of the colonies, the colonists' relations with their philanthropic benefactors, and the nature of this particular immigrant experience. Subsequently, Uri Herscher, in *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press,

1981) provided brief overviews of the founding and decline of the colonies, including those outside New Jersey, and printed Herscher's translation of the key memoir written by Sidney Baily, one of the founders of the Alliance colony in New Jersey.

Given the ample historiography on this uncommon aspect of the great migration, the chief question the reviewer must pose is how this new study differs from and refines the existing historiography. Reflecting the current tendency of American immigrant historians to try to use the pre-migration backgrounds of the immigrant groups to understand their experiences in America, Eisenberg opens by surveying the differences among the various regions within the Pale of Settlement. She then analyzes, as much as possible, the regional and ideological backgrounds of those who chose the pioneering path of agrarianism to settle in the southern New Jersey colonies of Alliance, Norma, Brotmanville, Rosenhayn and Carmel. (She deliberately ignores Woodbine, New Jersey, founded by the Baron de Hirsch Fund, which as a sponsor-led, rather than immigrant-led, colony

fell outside the scope of her study.) Eisenberg shows how the first wave of settlers were members of Am Olam, an East European Jewish movement predicated on the emancipation axiom that only through agriculture would the Jewish people become normalized. She then argues that, as subsequent settlers came from outside Am Olam and as the agriculturalists interacted with the philanthropists who assisted the colonies, the nature of the agricultural utopian experiments changed. In order to become economically viable, settlers experimented with a mix of industry and agriculture. Ultimately, the colonies failed, as in an industrializing, urban America, the settlers proved unable to instill in the next generation ideals which ran counter to the modernizing experience.

While Eisenberg's effort to apply to the New Jersey colonies the current methodological approaches of immigrant history is to be commended, the monograph suffers from a number of shortcomings. As a revision of her dissertation, it bears the hallmarks of an assiduous researcher determined to present all data. One example will suffice. In 1898 colonists' indebtedness included "10,571 dollars in Franklin Loan and Building Association mortgages and 3,170 dollars in Alliance Land Trust loans to Alliance colonists; and 10,246 dollars and 9,665 dollars in mortgages held by the Merchants and Mechanics Building Association for colonists of Carmel and Rosenhayn respectively" (p. 136). Yet, while including such details, the study conveys little sense of the experience of life for the colonists. For example, Brandes wrote of the immigrants' engagement with Zionism after Mary Antin had lectured on it during a visit. Eisenberg, however, gives no evidence of the colonists' engagement with this facet of American Jewish life.

A more serious concern surfaces in Eisenberg's choice of sources. For a background on the philanthropists who interacted with the colonies, she turned to Stephen Birmingham's *'Our Crowd,' The Great Jewish Families of New York* (New York:

Harper and Row, 1967). Naomi W. Cohen's *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830-1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984) does not even appear in the bibliography. Similarly, given her topic and her emphasis on the premigration--and therefore pre-English language--background of the settlers, Eisenberg utilized almost no Yiddish sources. She relied on Herscher for the Baily memoir; she used the translation of but the first two volumes of Abraham Cahan's *Bleter Fun Mein Leben* (5 vols., New York: Forward Press, 1926-1931); and she largely ignored the Yiddish press.

Thus, while *Jewish Agricultural Colonies in New Jersey, 1882- 1920* builds upon the existing historiography and raises new and important questions, the scholarly audience intended for this volume may be left wondering about the answers provided.

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