Stepmother Russia, Foster Mother America:
Identity Transitions in the New Odessa Jewish Commune,
Odessa, Oregon, New York, 1881-1891
By Theodore H. Friedgut

And

RECOLLECTIONS OF A COMMUNIST
By Israel Mandelkern
Edited and with an introduction and annotation by Theodore H. Friedgut

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Summary:
In the late nineteenth century, a group of radical Jewish youths from Odessa attempted to create an agricultural commune on the Oregon frontier, and in so doing developed from assimilated revolutionaries to American Jews. Theodore H. Friedgut relates the story of these youths and their creation, with special notice paid to the human encounters within the commune, the members’ encounters with America in acquiring land and equipment, and—importantly—their encounters with their neighbors, themselves immigrant farmers on the American frontier. Among the volume’s central sources is the memoir of Israel Mandelkern, which is here published for the first time. This study addresses hitherto neglected aspects of Jewish life in Russia and of the life of one of the more than a hundred Jewish agricultural colonies, and helps us understand the factors that influenced the young colony members in their transition toward becoming Americans. This is a microcosm of the experience of multitudes of immigrants.

About the Author:

Theodore H. Friedgut is Emeritus Professor of Russian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The most recent of his six books, The Lipton Jewish Agricultural Colony, 1901-1951: Pioneering Canada’s Prairies was awarded the 2009 Switzer-Cooperstock Prize in Western Canadian Jewish History.
Advance Praise for *Stepmother Russia, Foster Mother America*:

“A colorful portrait of the ups and downs of a small community of young Russian Jewish immigrants who set off in the 1880s from Odessa for what would become New Odessa (in Oregon) in pursuit of a secular, collective existence on the land. The book is enhanced by the inclusion of a previously unpublished vivid memoir by a member of the community decades after the New Odessa experiment had run its course.”

— Susan Gross Solomon, Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto

“Friedgut has given us a quite interesting historical account of how some Russian-Jewish youth, inspired by the Enlightenment, by Tolstoy and by early socialists like Fourier, Owen and others, responded to the pogroms of 1881-82, by pioneering a distinctive path to utopia: the formation of a Jewish agricultural commune in America a whole generation earlier than East-European Jewish youth who were engaged in similar projects in Palestine.”

— Irving Zeitlin, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto

“The Jewish farming communes in Louisiana, Oregon, and New Jersey are a testament to unique idealism; men and women in rugged jeans caked in dirt, exhausted after a day of labor under the sun, expressed their credo: rejection of private property, the embracing of vegetarianism, and debating sexual abstinence as against free love, though they adopted neither of these extremes. The iconic picture of Jews with plows is the kibbutz in Israel; but Jews also toiled in the fields of Southern Russia and then in America. Farming was supposed to reform the Jew, make him and her a ‘Mensch’—a healthy, strong, and moral spirit. For many Jewish intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century the farming idea went with Socialism and the creation of a new society based on equality, justice, and brotherhood. Professor Friedgut of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem tells us about the Jewish immigrants on US soil a century ago, but the echo rings to today. If one listens, one can feel the idealism and self-sacrifice of American Jews in inner city schools, rural towns, and in a passion for justice in Israel and worldwide.”

— Brian Horowitz, Professor of Russian and Jewish Studies, Tulane University

“As a native-born American who has been living many years on a kibbutz, I found the story of the New Odessa Commune captivating. There is so much in common between the idealistic young people who attempted to set up a commune in Oregon (as far off the beaten path as was my kibbutz when I first arrived) and those early pioneers in the Land of Israel who established the first kibbutz, Degania, more than 25 years later. The story makes fascinating reading. So too, the memoirs of Israel Mandelkern, one of the members of the commune, who draws a well-written portrait of life of young Jewish intellectuals in late-nineteenth century Russia, and of the atmosphere of the society of the commune.”

— Ariel Hurwitz, Open University, Israel
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