

JOSEPH FELS AND HIS WORK

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● By MARY FELS

OF central importance in Joseph Fels' work was employment for men deprived of opportunity through no fault of their own. That this problem will urgently press for solution in the post-war period, is recognized by both of our leading political parties, whose presidential candidates in the campaign of 1944 promised sixty million jobs for demobilized men.

The question of unemployment began to attract Mr. Fels' attention about 1895, while he was still active in business; and his first effort in this direction was to assist men out of work by vacant lot cultivation. This was done through the Philadelphia Vacant Lot Cultivation Society, which gave help to many thousands of men who, after providing their families with vegetables, were able to sell the surplus and earn a little ready money.

The experiment with city lots proved that there is a real hunger for land. The Society from the start had always more applications than it could accommodate. While Mr. Fels did not hold that the plan offered any fundamental cure for unemployment, he was encouraged by the response to it on the part of needy persons; and his experience in this work gave point and direction to certain ideas which for some years had been uppermost in his mind.

About 1900, he began to form larger plans looking toward agricultural colonies for the unemployed. One hundred acres were purchased at a country place called Laindon. Here one hundred men were set to work. The second colony was at Hollesley Bay, where thirteen hundred acres were bought, and five hundred men were provided with work. The third colony was at Mayland in Essex County, about forty miles from London. Here Mr. Fels established twenty-one holdings, from five to ten acres each, equipped with the necessary buildings, tools, seeds, etc., entailing an expense of about thirty-five thousand pounds, or one hundred seventy-five thousand dollars.

This third colony was a turning point in Mr. Fels' approach to the problem of unemployment. Certain highly important facts came to light. The taxes paid at the start of the experiment at Mayland, when the population was fourteen, amounted to thirty pounds. But five years later, when the population had increased to one hundred seventy-four persons, the taxes came to one hundred fifty-six pounds. The land for the undertaking had cost eight pounds per acre at the start. But Mr. Fels now discovered that when he undertook to expand the colony by purchase of adjoining vacant space, he was seriously hindered by rising prices, which had reached the figure of fourteen pounds per acre instead of the original eight pounds.

In other words, the investment of capital in the colony, together with employment of labor, had the

effect of increasing land values for all the neighboring speculative holders, who had meanwhile done nothing, but who now demanded fourteen pounds per acre, or an advance of six pounds over and above what had been paid for the land on which the colony was built! Thus the philanthropy was in the anomalous and illogical position of blockading its own progress by raising an invisible wall of land prices, which went higher and higher as the population increased!

Mr. Fels thus became conscious of two difficulties: First of all, the local government authorities demanded higher and higher taxes from the colony as it grew more productive; and in the second place, these taxes were far heavier in proportion than the taxes which the speculative holders of adjacent unused acreage paid on their vacant land, which was all the time going up in value.

IT was now essential for Mr. Fels to reconsider the whole question of unemployment from the standpoint of his practical experience, since he found himself confronting facts and not theories. He felt it important to inquire whether agricultural conditions in Continental Europe would throw light upon, and assist the solution of, the problem in England.

The first impressions of one who visits the gardening districts of Denmark, Holland and Belgium during peace time, are likely to be very misleading. That enormous quantities of dairy and agricultural goods are produced and put on the markets goes without saying; and there has always been an appearance of great prosperity among the workers in these countries. But on closer inspection, matters do not turn out to be so satisfactory. The small holders in Denmark, Belgium and Holland receive scant benefits from their industry; and they have always lived, in a large proportion of cases, on the borders of privation.

The first fact that inquiry brings out is that there are many more would-be small holders than there are holdings available for them. In other words, there is perpetual and silent competition between prospective renters or purchasers of land—a situation which puts the highest premium on merely obtaining an opportunity to buy or lease a location. And the one who gets the land is the one who is willing to sacrifice in greatest measure the benefits of the holding by payment of an inflated rental or purchase price.

In some parts of Belgium the price of land had risen to several hundred pounds per acre before World War I. And in some parts of Denmark land prices have gone up by leaps and bounds; the result being that, after the peasant had paid his taxes on buildings and equipment, and his rent or his mortgage interest, little remained to compensate the actual worker on the soil for his arduous labor.

The cutting up of large estates into smaller parcels has the apparent effect of spreading ownership more widely through the community. But the little holdings are always acquired on terms which burden their new owners with ruinous mortgage and interest charges, along with heavy taxes on improvements. It is obvious, then, that even though small holders, by turning out vast quantities of products, may greatly help the prosperity of a country, the workers themselves do not share in that prosperity in proportion to their labor. And thus it becomes clear that small holdings, instead of relieving poverty and curing unemployment, merely swell these evils in the long run.

Mr. Fels, therefore, on the ground of actual experience and not by mere theorizing, began to reach fundamental convictions about the social problem. His perception of the underlying issue came to him slowly, after long and careful inquiry. He had begun with charitable work; had supported the labor movement; had established colonizing ventures; and finally, had investigated conditions in Continental Europe.

By such means, of a purely practical nature, he came to see clearly how taxation, by penalizing productive industry while encouraging speculation in land, is at the root of many economic and social ills. But even so, he did not believe that there would emerge any program or measure of reform which would be a panacea or cure-all for the ills that afflict the world. He knew too much about the complexity of social life to be thus unintelligent. Yet he became profoundly convinced that social readjustments were possible which would help to pave the way toward a new epoch in human progress.

THE nature of the proposal to which Mr. Fels now gave his adherence was very simple: Let a portion of the tax burden which, under our present regime, rests upon production, be shifted from improvements and then placed upon the value of both vacant and improved land. By this means, instead of penalizing production and promoting speculation, the tables will be turned: productive work would be encouraged and the merely speculative, unproductive holding of land penalized. Giving a greater incentive to production would employ more labor; and accordingly there would be a greater volume of purchasing power in the hands of the masses.

Mr. Fels did not claim that the new proposal would be readily understood at first glance by the general public, since people generally do not as yet realize the nature of the evils which make necessary a change in taxation. The system which prevails was established centuries ago, not by the plain working people, but by aristocratic land monopolists in Europe, whose heirs and assigns naturally wish to continue the old regime handed down from the past. It is precisely the landed nobility which, in all Europe, has been at the center of wars in those countries throughout history. It is not the common people, but the aris-

tocracy, which have gone to war again and again for one purpose; namely, to reach out and grab land.

Mr. Fels' activities can be pointed up interestingly by reference to the housing problem, which now presses for solution and which will be with us during the post-war period. America needs millions of new homes, the building of which would give employment, directly and indirectly, to many millions of workers in the housing trade and in accessory lines of business. But the price of unused land is so high, and the taxes on houses and the goods which go into the construction and furnishing of a home are so heavy, that there is a virtual blockade against home building. Short-sighted people seek to break the blockade by appealing to the government for subsidies.

This unhealthy condition could be quickly ended by a simple change in our tax laws: Let the tax on houses and on the goods which go into the construction of homes be reduced by a given amount (for example, twenty-five per cent), while at the same time the tax on the value of unused building sites all over America be increased in a corresponding degree. This would stimulate the construction of homes in two ways: first, the decreased burden of taxation on goods and improvements would encourage the flow of capital into these things; and second, the heavier tax on vacant land would make impossible the holding of unused sites on speculation all over the country; so that such land would be thrown on the market everywhere at a much lower price. The heavier tax on the land could not be added to the price of the land, because millions of unused lots would be competing for buyers.

It is easy to see that such a readjustment in our fiscal methods, by immensely stimulating production and breaking up speculation, would produce employment naturally, on a large scale, and would result in a vast expansion of purchasing power on the part of working people. The need for government revenue at present, of course, is very great; and while we cannot now advocate a "single" tax on land values to secure all funds necessary for public purposes, we should, as far as possible, reduce the tax on improvements and on goods, and correspondingly increase the tax on the value of both vacant and improved sites.

It was to this end that Mr. Fels relinquished all business activity and went forth into many countries, lecturing and distributing free literature. His ideals were a democratic system of taxation under which, instead of being exploited by speculation, the people would secure land for actual use, thus promoting the widest possible employment at the highest wages, with the greatest purchasing power distributed among the largest number. Mr. Fels was very conscious that the ancient prophets of his people, speaking in the name of Israel's God, had condemned the adding of field to field by the wealthy, until the plain workers lost their heritage and fell into economic slavery.

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What use now to work? Why strive or hope or achieve?

Completely subdued, his spirit broken, with bent head, feet dragging, he trudged back to his bush near the brook. He placed the garland of flowers into the knapsack. To him this wreath became the link over which he thenceforth dreamed and doted. To him it became the physical symbol of our entire indestructible past projected into the present and the future.

"FROM that time on, three years ago, he never did any more painting," Horin continued the narration. "Aimlessly he wandered through the land. Kind people helped him with food, but the cold ground under the open skies was his bed. By chance I met him three years ago when I was staking out the limits for this colony. He just happened to come along and helped with the surveying. I knew that very night, as we camped alone under the bright moon, that he was not an ordinary man; and that he had had experiences that do not come to the average person. In time I came to know him and the story of his life."

The leader paused. The listeners, however, remained silent and waiting—for they felt that there was more to be said. He continued:

"By all means, remember what I tried to impress upon you from the very beginning,— and there is that garland! Withered and crumbling, it is still in his knapsack. Can we account for it in any ordinary . . ."

A single gun shot interrupted him. All knew that this was the signal from their sentry that an attack was being launched upon them. Quickly it was followed by an uninterrupted fusilade from many weapons. This, no doubt, was the opening of the onslaught. And, to be sure, it was aimed at the guard who had discovered it.

All reached for their weapons and ran to where Zalmon had stationed himself. One of them miraculously managed to worm his way into the *tzrif*, which was really not much larger than a sentry box. There he found Zalmon crumpled on the floor. The enemy now kept up a concentrated fire on the entrance to this hut, so that no others could enter.

Horin, however, stealthily made his way to the wall opposite the door, from the colony side. Through the cracks in the boards he called to the men inside:

"Zalmon, Hayim. How are things with you?" There was deep concern in his voice. "Hayim—how is Zalmon?"

"I'm afraid he is hurt, *haver*."

"How badly is he hurt, d'you think?"

At that moment, the *halutzim* opened their own, answering fire upon the Bedouins. In the ear-splitting din which now filled the night, Hayim's reply had completely been drowned. Horin turned to join his men in the defense of Tifereth.

BUY MORE WAR BONDS

THE CABBALAH AND ISSERLES' CONCEPT

(Continued from cover 2)

wind, causing it great pain. So, also, he who does not think of his phylacteries deserves transmigration. One who is so recklessly daring as to light his pipe on a tallow candle, is guilty of eating tallow, and would have to transmigrate. If one be not particularly careful in pronouncing the vowels of his prayer, and if those above complain that he mutilated them, he would be sentenced to transmigration.

Isserles believed in all these theories; he himself was so imbued with them that he wanted others to share in them. The book known as the "Zohar" had just appeared, and a belief soon spread among the people that the mere scanning of the pages of the "Zohar" would suffice to bring about the earlier redemption of the world, and that the Jews were to be redeemed from their exile and all mankind with them.

Together with his philosophical investigations, Isserles was interested also in many Cabalistic works of his time, among them the Zohar, on which he wrote a commentary. He also wrote a book entitled "Yesode Sifre 'Hacabalah," "The Fundamentals of the Books of the Cabalah" on the same subject. However, it seems that, when he was asked to express an opinion on Cabalah, he refused to commit himself. Thus we find that, in one of his responsa to Solomon Luria, he said: "If I ever have a desire to break away from something, it is from the study of Cabalah. One must be extremely careful not to misunderstand some of its passages."

Very often he experienced the sensation that his philosophical mind was struggling against his own Cabalistic opinions, and this was always the case when his common sense would not enable him to grasp the subject. But Cabalah had already become too popular. Everybody took a hand in it, so that he finally became tired of his teachings, and more than once was about to come out publicly against them. But he did not give up his study. In one of his books he said:

"The world's existence has been fixed for a period of seven great Shemittahs, which will last until the great Jubilee, when all mankind will be redeemed. This is also the case when we consider the forty-nine gates of understanding, which are indicative of the 49,000 years the world will exist. This world can not exist forever, although it is impossible to conceive that time will ever end, just as it never began, because time existed before creation."

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Knowing that our present system of taxation was long ago devised by landed aristocrats, Mr. Fels' challenge to old fiscal methods was made on behalf of democratic progress; and it became for him a religious crusade looking toward economic liberty, inspired by a vision of broadening freedom more than ever before in the history of mankind.

Zalmon

(Story of a Palestine scene during the 1936 riots)
(Continued)

● By BARNET HIRSCH

IN AN ecstasy of joy, Zalmon raised the hand that still held his and kissed it. She said nothing—only sweetly smiled to him and he thought he saw a tear in her eye. She, too, was happy. So they sat and spoke nothing until they were rudely awakened from their reverie by a horn blast which summoned the absent to their homes. Unwillingly they arose and slowly walked back to the house.

As she was about to enter, she grasped both his hands in hers and, kissing him rapturously, began to weep bitterly. This time, he thought, it was not happiness. She must be oppressed by some painful recollection which it was his duty to dispel. Before, however, he had the opportunity of uttering a word, she ran into the house. For a long time he remained on the steps. He was bewildered at this inexplicable outburst of sorrow and now for the first time he realized that he could not look upon her least sorrow with indifference. In a restless, troubled state of mind he wandered back to the brook, to the spot where they had just now spent a happy hour. Here he stretched himself on the ground and thought. This time he did not indulge in speculation. Now he thought only of Miriam, of his love for her—and a happy smile illuminated his face. His thoughts soon carried him away and he imagined that they were already married and living in a little cottage on this very spot on the bank of this noisy brook; and that he was painting great works of art. Being extremely tired, he fell into a half-sleep and found no difficulty in reconciling the existence of this ancient place side by side with the present day world.

At last he fell asleep. The bracing night air made him sleep well and soundly without his stirring once, so that the garland of flowers which Miriam had placed on his head remained securely there.

At the first sign of sunrise he was up. Contentedly he stretched and yawned. When he glanced on the ground, he was surprised to see his knapsack at his feet, but he only thought:

"When are these mysteries coming to an end?"

He placed the knapsack among some bushes, putting the garland on top of it. He washed himself in the icy waters of the rivulet, then marched off to the village. Another surprise met him. As he turned a bend in the path and expected to see the houses before him, he was astonished to find nothing! He saw nothing but an empty slope. He rubbed his eyes; nothing before him but a verdant meadow. A fear gripped his heart; if the village has disappeared and all the people with it, where then was Miriam? Where has she gone? Where was she whom he loved and who loved him?

A cry of terror arose from the depth of his tortured soul. Where was he to search for her? Was all

this after all a horrible nightmare? No, he distinctly remembered every detail, every incident of the previous night—it all had been too vivid to be anything but real. And the garland of flowers—the flowers which she herself woven and had put on his head—was not that real?—But was it?

Quickly he ran back to the bush to verify this. Yes, there on top of the knapsack was the garland. Fearful lest it, too, vanish, he touched it, then timidly took it up and put it tenderly to his lips. Were these not the flowers that his beloved had woven expressly for him? Did she not with her own hands place them on his head for all the populace to see?

A new idea shot through his dazed brain. Perhaps he had gone in the wrong direction and had consequently missed the village. For a moment he stood still and hesitated, but the more he thought of it the more he was convinced that this actually must have happened. With a wild dash, he was off to the summit of the hill. From there he would orient himself. Out of breath, he reached the top and, with hungry eyes, looked about. Alas! there was no sign of a village—all about him only rolling pastures. He recognized the slope upon which the evening before he had first seen the village, for even now he was on the very spot where he had painted the picture and where he had met Miriam. Ah! Where was she now? Would she ever return to him?

His body was as if turned to stone. His eyes now lost that feverish fire and became glazed. Suddenly, they filled with tears and he shook with uncontrollable sobs as he whispered:

"Miriam, where art thou, Miriam?"

Subconsciously he was using the Biblical idiom, as if that would facilitate her return.

It was perhaps good that he wept, else he might have lost his mind. After a while, he calmed somewhat as another glimmer of hope came to him. The shepherd and his flock of the day before appeared upon the slope. He would go down to this man who doubtless knew every place and every one in the vicinity and who could tell him the meaning of the mystery.

The man knew nothing. He looked askance at Zalmon as at a madman who at any moment might become violent. A village here? The nearest one was several miles away. Miriam? There were dozens of Miriams in every settlement. Which one did the gentleman mean?

His last hope vanished; its last, uncertain flicker had been extinguished by this slow-witted rustic who only the day before had been his unwitting ally in the production of an exceptionally fine work of art. Before Zalmon now was only miserable emptiness.