

THE SINGLE-TAX ZIONISM OF JOSEPH FELS

By ARTHUR P. DUDDEN*

In August, 1912, Joseph Fels, who had successfully promoted Fels-Naptha soap into a household commonplace, set forth his views on a matter of deep concern. To an acquaintance in Buenos Aires, he wrote:

I may not before have mentioned to you that being a Jew I am greatly interested in the future of my people, and for several years I have been co-operating with such men as Israel Zangwill, the author and dramatist, who is President of the Jewish Territorial Organization, its headquarters being in London. For several years, the organization has been on the lookout for a country in which the oppressed Jews of Russia and other lands might be invited to settle, where a measure at least of autonomy might be had . . . My interest in this matter is very great, of course, and grows as I see the constant cruelties which are heaped upon my people, they being defenceless under the Russian government. Whether or not autonomy could be gained by settlement in one or the other South American countries is a matter about which I would like to consult with you . . . Of course, I have in mind the right kind of landlords, and my interest is not unmixed with my obsession in the direction of the single tax. I know you will understand.¹

Joseph Fels' confidence that all this would seem clear to his correspondent was perhaps justified. Although, to say the least, here was a curious juxtaposition of the ancient yearning of Jewry for a

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¹ Joseph Fels to C. N. Macintosh, Aug. 21, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers, in the author's safekeeping. Among the correspondence in the Joseph Fels Papers, in addition to the original materials saved by Mary Fels, are letters which have been included as copies from the following depositories: Stanford University Library; Fairhope (Alabama) Colony Archives; the Zionist Central Archives, Jerusalem; the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati; and the British Library of Political and Economic Science, the London School of Economics. For two versions of essentially the same biographical material by Fels' widow, see: Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels, His Life-Work* (New York, 1916); and *The Life of Joseph Fels* (New York, 1940). See also: Arthur P. Dudden, "Joseph Fels of Philadelphia and London," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. LXXIX (April, 1955), pp. 143-166; Arthur P. Dudden and Theodore H. von Laue, "The RSDLP and Joseph Fels: A Study in Intercultural Contact," *American Historical Review*, vol. LXI (Oct., 1955), pp. 21-47.

homeland with the single-tax philosophy of Henry George. Yet it was characteristic of Fels to elevate the so-called land question above all others, even while advocating social progress on many fronts including Jewish nationalism. As Israel Zangwill recalled, in connection with his own purposes for the Jewish Territorial Organization (yclept for short I. T. O.):

Our first business was to obtain a territory. For Fels the first business was to single-tax it. One could not know him for a single day without discovering that to him Henry George was Moses, and "single tax" all the law and the prophets.²

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It had not always been so.

In fact it was not before middle age during the depression years of the 1890's, when Fels was turning fifty and on his way toward great wealth, that he grew increasingly absorbed in social questions. His life previously was scarcely to be remarked, except as it afforded a traceable account of immigrant family life in the United States.

Born in 1854 near Richmond, Virginia, Joseph Fels was the fourth of seven children. His parents, Lazarus and Susannah Freiberg Fels, were Jews from the Palatinate near Kaiserslautern. They were "forty-eighters" who had escaped to the United States together with their first three children from the hardships and turmoil which accompanied the collapse of liberal, revolutionary hopes everywhere. After an initial period of wandering from one place to another, they settled in Yanceyville, North Carolina, where Lazarus Fels operated the general store while doubling as village postmaster. The defeat of the Confederacy forced the Fels family to move again, this time northward first to Baltimore and then to Philadelphia by 1873. Three years later, Lazarus and Joseph Fels established Fels & Company, manufacturers of soaps, a partnership initially in which the son, now twenty-three, provided the forward thrust. Joseph's youngest brother, Samuel, likewise became a partner in due course eventually assuming responsibility for manufacturing, while Joseph continued to travel most of the time as the firm's chief purchasing and sales agent. On one of his forays into the hinterland, he married Mary Fels of Keokuk, Iowa, a distant cousin whom he had met eight years earlier. In 1893, the famous "saponaceous compound," as Joseph Fels liked to refer to his trade-mark, the familiar yellow, Fels-Naptha laundry soap, was added to the firm's line by the out-

² Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 918.

right purchase of a technologically sound though bankrupt process. It proved such an instant success in American households that the Fels brothers were soon concentrating exclusively on this product, and they quickly became substantially wealthy by doing so.³

Henceforward the patterns of Joseph Fels' life of significance to historians would be those which detailed his remarkable business achievement when coupled with his gathering dedication to social reforms. In neither respect was Fels unique. For in America's gilded age of great fortune-making, philanthropy and reform proved often to be the by-products of material success. Nor was Joseph Fels an original, nor even a profound thinker on the social and economic questions troubling industrial society. Yet his purpose grew steadily that poverty ought to be eliminated from the list of ills besetting mankind, together with all its attendant woes. In this respect, his own role as a reformer was related to the philosophers of social change in the identical manner that his leadership of Fels & Company reflected the discovery of modern soaps and solvents. Fels was the promoter rather than the inventor. As such it became his function to supply many ingredients essential for human betterment, particularly enthusiasm and money. But whatever program he advocated originated in the mind of someone else.

Indeed the outstanding influences which shaped Joseph Fels' thinking can be identified. His home life had been that of a typically close-knit, immigrant Jewish family; its basic traditions those of Judaism interpreted through the German language. His boyhood in Virginia surrounded him with the cultural patterns of the upper South, a stratified region of rich and poor, white and black, free and enslaved. His instinctive nature blended an inherently democratic attitude with Jewish humanitarianism. He was individualistic, equalitarian, and compassionate from the beginning. Yet the passing years lured Fels away from the service of the synagogue, one outcome at least of his commercial traveling and its inevitable inconveniences for formal devotions. More importantly, Fels began to respond to the extraordinary varieties of life and experience he encountered while his own world enlarged. So whatever faith he retained concerned religious orthodoxy not at all, but came to center about his conviction of an underlying brotherhood which binds all mankind.

Then, during the 1880's, Joseph and Mary Fels' home acquired a resemblance, later to become characteristic, to an eighteenth century *salon*, a soap-maker's center of expression and enlightenment, where

³ Arthur P. Dudden, "Joseph Fels of Philadelphia and London," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, vol. LXXIX (April, 1955), pp. 144-147.

novel ideas, talents, and panaceas competed with each other for welcome attention and flattery. And it continued thereafter, whether in Philadelphia or London, with Mary Fels presiding, that the Fels home gathered beneath its hospitable eaves thinkers, painters, sculptors, musicians, reformers, and refugees of many stripes and persuasions. Until late in the 1890's, three viewpoints dominated the proceedings: (1) an idealistically romantic, democratic faith, as propagated by disciples of Walt Whitman from among his Camden bedside following; (2) social and economic cure-alls inspired in the main either by Henry George or Edward Bellamy, or the two haphazardly combined; (3) that higher morality divorced from theology as propounded by the Society for Ethical Culture and represented especially among its more thoroughly assimilated Jewish adherents.⁴

Not infrequently these variants could be found blended indiscriminately in single individuals. Notice has been taken already of Fels' inherent democracy, and Zangwill later insisted that Walt Whitman and Henry George molded him more than any other influences. Then, too, Joseph and Mary Fels for several years were prime movers behind Philadelphia's Ethical Culture organization. Hence it was not surprising that the earliest reform enterprises to attract Fels' support were the Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, which was instituted during the depression after 1893 to make idle land available for cultivation by the unemployed, and a single-tax demonstration colony in Alabama. Nor was it coincidental that Fels persisted after 1900 in relating to the question of land monopoly the predicament of whichever individuals currently were enlisting his sympathy. Any just and worthwhile arrangement for human society, he became convinced, must remove the marginal classes from city slums to the healthful countryside as self-supporting agriculturists. For Joseph Fels succumbed at last to the appealing cry of "Back to the Land!"⁵ Indeed this conviction was what brought him to the attention of Israel Zangwill, and enlisted his support for the Jewish Territorial Organization.

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As is well known, the Jewish Territorial Organization owed its existence to the split in the Zionist movement that developed over the East African or "Uganda" project. In 1903, at the sixth Zionist Congress, Doctor Theodor Herzl had thrown the delegates into violent confusion by informing them of the British government's

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-150.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-157.

offer of the Uasin Gishu plateau for a Jewish homeland, some six thousand miles square in area, virtually unpopulated, and reputedly of healthy climate. Herzl's determination to accept Britain's proposal was denounced bitterly as a betrayal of the Zionist movement, and he was barely able to command support for his insistence that an expedition be dispatched to East Africa to explore its possibilities. Herzl died, however, even before the expedition could depart, and at the seventh Zionist Congress in 1905, the East African project was summarily rejected on the premise that the area proposed was unsuitable. It was then that the Jewish Territorial Organization was born out of a small minority of the delegates, with the stated objective of

saving the East African plateau for the Jewish people or else of obtaining other territories in response to the urgent need of Jewish emigration, which pouring from Russia alone at the rate of 100,000 a year, could find no welcome anywhere.

Israel Zangwill was chosen its President.⁶

Before long Zangwill was sought out by Joseph Fels, who had been residing more or less permanently in England since 1901. Fels had moved to England to establish a European sales and distribution outlet in London. By late 1903, his soap was selling satisfactorily, and he turned again to his interest in poverty and the land question, involving himself and his purse in a succession of back-to-the-land ventures as well as vacant land cultivation projects to relieve distress among Britain's unemployed. It seems almost inevitable in retrospect that Fels should have called on Israel Zangwill and become a supporter of the Jewish Territorial Organization.

Indeed Zangwill vividly portrayed their first encounter: "I had never heard of Joseph Fels," he wrote, "until a shining-eyed little man walked into my office unannounced and unheralded, and offered me a hundred thousand dollars." It was literally too good to be true. "Unfortunately," as Zangwill knew, "it is not only the propositions of Satan that have strings to them. Even angels, whose visits are so few and far between, hedge their gifts with conditions, and what Mr. Fels wanted was that the state to be brought into being should be established on a single-tax basis." And for Zangwill, Fels' offer was simply putting the cart before the horse, even though

⁶ Israel Zangwill, "Zionism and Territorialism," *Living Age*, vol. CCLXV (June 11, 1910), pp. 663-667. For general accounts and bibliography of sources for the Jewish Territorial Organization, see Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety: the Story of Jewish Migration since 1800* (Philadelphia, 1948), pp. 134-138; and Leo W. Schwarz, ed., *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People* (New York, 1956), pp. 437-440.

he was himself "sympathetically disposed" toward Georgeist principles and more so toward capital gifts for his beloved I. T. O. "I was unable to pledge the organization to the Henry Georgeian principle," he decided, "because it was impossible to foresee the circumstances and conditions under which the desired tract of territory would become attainable — if, indeed, it would become attainable at all in a world ruled by unreason and the sword."⁷

But the matter which brought Fels and Zangwill together in the first place was too profound to be discarded lightly, even when their ultimate objectives seemed so disparate. After all Zangwill was concerned only that a self-governing homeland for Jews be established somewhere, with living room to spare and natural resources sufficient for civilization to flourish. Fels desired above all to abolish poverty. To accomplish his goal, he believed, he must first demonstrate that the injustices of society originated in land monopoly, which permitted private individuals to expropriate the unearned or social increment of wealth. Then it would become possible to educate all who would listen to the wisdom of Henry George's single-tax, or the confiscation for the collective welfare of that unearned increment which the monopoly of land afforded when pressured by social growth. Zangwill hoped that I. T. O.'s Zion would construct its own body politic upon principles of social harmony, which necessarily admitted a fair system of taxation and an equitable sharing of the resources of the good earth. So it developed that Joseph Fels supported a number of I. T. O.'s colonization schemes for homeless Jews to prove his major premise. He even sought to promote some projects on his own initiative.

In 1906, Fels inquired of Zangwill if I. T. O. might be interested in "forming a community" within the United States based upon principles of "ownership of the land by the public or an association." Apparently Fels was thinking of locating such an experiment in the South, perhaps not far from his boyhood home, because he expressed his belief "that a suitable tract of land of from 20,000 to 50,000 acres

⁷ Arthur P. Dudden, "Joseph Fels of Philadelphia and London," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, vol. LXXIX (April, 1955), pp. 155-162; Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 918. But Fels wrote differently:

If my memory serves me right, I first saw Mr. Zangwill at the home of a London gentleman, who had invited a number of people to meet him. During the evening, there was a good deal of discussion more or less informal as to the advantages of a special country for the Jews, as compared with the haphazard dissemination of the chosen tribe through all the civilized countries.

Joseph Fels, "Israel Zangwill: the Man and his Dream," typescript, Joseph Fels Papers. See also: Philadelphia *Jewish Exponent*, Aug., 24, 1906.

can be secured in the eastern part of the States within twelve hours railway journey from Washington."⁸ Later in the same year, Fels proposed that "a few Jewish families, used to agriculture," be settled on certain small holdings he owned at Mayland in Essex, England. "It would give us the benefit of a bit of experience," Fels urged, "and out of this perhaps would evolve a larger farm garden village of Jews mostly right here in England."⁹ By December, 1906, his imagination lighted upon South America as a possibility. To Zangwill, he wrote: "The more I learn about Paraguay, the more favourably that land appeals to me for your purposes." At the same time, Fels repeated that he was "earnestly concerned" to reap the benefits of a successful demonstration farm colony in England. "Such an experiment would show right here at home," he emphasized, "that the Jew *will* take to agriculture under fair conditions."¹⁰ Next he sought to learn as much as he was able about the chances of establishing settlements in Mexico or Cyprus. Also he threw his resources and energies into I. T. O.'s program of sponsoring immigration into the United States through the port of Galveston.¹¹

However, Zangwill was chary of many of Fels' enthusiasms, tax and reform issues notwithstanding. Too much was at stake to risk blundering. He was fearful, on the one hand, of frittering away the energies of the Jewish people on projects he regarded as insignificant for his larger purposes, or, on the other hand, of stirring up hornets' nests of nationalistic opposition. In the latter instance, he was openly skeptical of the possibilities either of Cyprus because of the "pro-Hellenic ardor of the natives" or Mexico where the cry "Mexico for the Mexicans!" was already being raised. "You know my own opinion," he wrote Fels, "that a real Jewish territory can only be acquired in a land like North Africa or Mesopotamia, where there is no dominant race with patriotic or chauvinistic ideas." Whereas, in the first instance, he was openly contemptuous of the kind of projects undertaken by the Jewish Colonization Association (I.C.A.), which, he once judged, though professing the same goals as I. T. O., "does not do its work, because it has many colonies scattered over the world instead of . . . one great territory." The basic distinction

⁸ Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, May 5 and Sept. 7, 1906, Joseph Fels Papers.

⁹ Joseph Fels to Clement Salaman, Oct., 28, 1906, Joseph Fels Papers.

¹⁰ Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Dec. 9, 1906, Joseph Fels Papers.

¹¹ J. R. von Millingen to Joseph Fels, April 15, 1907; Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Sept. 20, Dec. 12 and 18, 1907; Joseph Fels to Stanley J. Fey, Sept. 16, 1907; Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Oct. 27 and Nov. 4, 1907; Joseph Fels to Lord Rothschild, Oct. 29, 1907; Joseph Fels Papers. Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), pp. 921-922.

between I. T. O. and I. C. A., Zangwill added, is "one of size and concentration versus pettiness and dispersion." One had only to look at I. C. A.'s colonies in the Argentine. "These exercise no magnetism," Zangwill pronounced. "... The race is degenerating. It needs a centralized re-inspiration."¹²

In fact, Zangwill's preference for a North African settlement led Fels to an unforgettable interview with Lord Rothschild late in 1907. It became Fels' mission to inquire from Rothschild whether his consideration had been given to North Africa for Jewish settlement, and if so, what did he think of Cyrenaica in particular? Angrily afterward, Fels summarized Rothschild's reaction for Zangwill's benefit. "He replied that he would not listen to such a thing at all," Fels stated, "and that he had previously intimated his opinion on the subject, and it must have reached you. I then asked him what his own ideas on the subject were, to which he clearly replied in as impatient a tone as he knew how, that there was no hope of the Jews forming a nation, as they had none of the elements in themselves to make a success of a separate country of their own! that those Jews from Russia who had emigrated to other countries wanted to go back, or, at any rate, the great majority did; and [he] further asserted that the only hope for the Jews was to emigrate to those civilized countries where they will be least objected to and become absorbed into such countries as parts and parcels thereof, like other emigrants. I then asked his opinion of Mexico, whereupon he volunteered, 'If it is a civilized country, it is as good as any other.' " Exactly eight minutes after the interview commenced, Rothschild departed without ceremony, with the pre-emptory farewell: "That is all, Mr. Fels." Fels concluded bitterly: "If it were possible for any set of Jews to be of the same stripe as his lordship, then I would not wonder at the anti-Semitic feeling of the people around them."¹³

Lord Rothschild notwithstanding, Cyrenaica continued to command close attention, because of "its magnificent situation on the Mediterranean . . . within a short sail of Palestine" and the hope

¹² Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Nov. 12 and 13, Dec. 18, 1907, Feb. 22, 1909, Joseph Fels Papers; Israel Zangwill, "Zionism and Territorialism," *Living Age*, vol. CCLXV (June 11, 1910), p. 666.

¹³ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Aug. 14, 1907; Joseph Fels to Lord Rothschild, Oct. 29, 1907; Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Oct. 31 and Nov. 2, 1907. Zangwill was consoling in reply: "I am very sorry that he has behaved rudely, but this is his characteristic. In a book published some fifteen years ago on London society, it was stated that his 'It is not!' is only equivalent to another man's 'Is it?' " Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Nov. 1, 1907, Joseph Fels Papers. This was Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1840-1915), 2nd bart. and 1st Lord Rothschild.

that its ancient fertility could be restored. I. T. O. prepared an on-the-spot investigation. While Fels wrote to Zangwill:

I may be counted on to join such an expedition if it does not *too seriously* interfere with my American obligations, and I may be counted on for my fair share of the expenses of such a venture to look over the field.¹⁴

When the time came, Fels' interest actually proved so intense that he hastened with Zangwill to Folkestone, August 26, 1908, to meet the expedition upon its return from North Africa. There and then Fels and Zangwill learned that the "vaunted land" of their combined hopes was in truth "a dangerous desert." Although there was ample rainfall, the soil was somehow so porous as to be incapable of retaining adequate moisture, and so in the dry season "a perpetual menace of drought" would hang over the settlers and their fields. Even irrigation would be unavailing.¹⁵

Keen as their disappointment was, Fels and Zangwill continued their search for havens for the oppressed and uprooted. Mesopotamia was one such place with alluring possibilities. Neglected since ancient times, it had already attracted Zangwill's notice as a modern land of promise. In fact, his report to I. T. O.'s Geographical Commission in 1907 directed the attention of Zionists to certain irrigation and railway schemes for Mesopotamia which were capturing popular notice at the time. Meanwhile, Fels continued to sound out travelers from the Levant about the Sultan's attitude concerning the establishment of locally autonomous settlements of Jews within the borders of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ Brazil was discussed also. In September, 1908, Fels communicated reports to Zangwill of an offer of cotton lands there. Zangwill determined at once that the tropical climate would be an almost insurmountable drawback, but, he further reflected, "Brazil is always a stand-by with its three million square miles and its fifteen million inhabitants."¹⁷ By early 1909, however, the Mesopotamian project acquired first priority. Indeed this antique land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates was receiving more than passing attention from Zionist leaders the world over. To Fels, Zangwill wrote:

¹⁴ Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Nov. 30, 1907, Joseph Fels Papers. Fels' italics.

¹⁵ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Aug. 20 and 27, 1908, Joseph Fels Papers; Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 920; Israel Zangwill, "Zionism and Territorialism," *Living Age*, vol. CCLXV (June 11, 1910), pp. 668-669.

¹⁶ Israel Zangwill, "Zionism and Territorialism," *Living Age*, vol. CCLXV (June 11, 1910), pp. 670-671; Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, April 12, 1908, Joseph Fels Papers.

¹⁷ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Sept. 6, 1908, Joseph Fels Papers.

Oscar Straus has been prodding [Jacob H.] Schiff in the matter of the Mesopotamian project, and I am having correspondence with the latter At the same time, the President of the I. C. A. (who holds the Hirsch millions) told me when I was in Paris that they too are looking for a tract there. Everything, you see, points to Mesopotamia, and I am in hopes of a combination of all forces upon a concentrated colonization.

In truth, this Mesopotamian project showed promise for a time of inspiring unity among the divergent Zionist factions.¹⁸

Thus, more or less simultaneously, Fels was active on many fronts. Once he prodded Zangwill to purchase vacant land in Palestine for an experimental colony under I. T. O.'s auspices. But Zangwill replied that:

For the present you understand that Jewish immigration into Palestine is forbidden, and . . . this restriction is likely to continue for some time.

And again from Zangwill:

The Turks expressly refuse to sell tracts of land in Palestine to Jews. Otherwise the Zionists have lots of money to acquire a specimen tract, and I don't need yours. You could come in later, when they have shown the thing is humanly possible. As regards Mesopotamia, we are always working at that possibility.¹⁹

Fels also broached or considered Colombia, Rhodesia, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Mexico, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm or investigation. The Mexican notion brought him into contact with Daniel Guggenheim, whose mining interests had long familiarized him with the areas in question. Guggenheim always insisted Mexico was too arid for substantial settlement, while Zangwill feared its revolutionary temper. Fels had to see for himself. He journeyed all the way to Mexico City to seek concessions from President Diaz. Diaz was willing enough to facilitate the immigration of Jewish industrial and commercial workers, but he opposed Fels' scheme for a special colony of agriculturists.²⁰ Another time Fels considered an idea for settling the region of the Pilcomayo River which forms the boundary area between Argentina and the Chaco region of Bolivia and Paraguay. Zangwill viewed it as im-

¹⁸ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Feb. 22 and April 2, 1909, Joseph Fels Papers.

¹⁹ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, July 22 and Dec. 8, 1909, Joseph Fels Papers.

²⁰ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Sept. 20, Oct. 27, and 29, Nov. 5 and 13, Dec. 12 and 18, 1907, Jan. 10, 1908, June 6, 1910, Oct. 6 and 15, 1912; Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Nov. 4, 1907; Joseph Fels Papers. Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 920.

practical, though he was grateful for the suggestion. "The fact that it involves negotiations with three govts. is rather appalling to an elderly man," Zangwill wrote. "While having land that belonged to three govts. would complicate the political situation of Itoland unendurably, we should have our Jews citizens of three nations with their respective quarrels."²¹ Neither did Paraguay itself prove any more fruitful, though Fels owned extensive tracts there, obtained during his original display of interest in South America. He had hoped to develop the production of vegetable, peanut, and palm oils for his soap manufacturing, and to employ Jewish pioneer immigrants in the process. As Zangwill observed by way of epitaph: "It was a scheme that would have made both of his ends meet."²²

Actually the sole bright spot was supplied by the stream of Jewish refugees entering the United States from Russia under the auspices of I. T. O., in co-operation with the Jewish Immigrants Information Bureau which Jacob H. Schiff supported. This program afforded immediate relief for many Jews whose plight was too acute to await the formation of a Zionist state. Galveston was selected as the port of entry to divert Jews to the western states, avoiding thereby what Zangwill termed the "self-made Ghettos" along the eastern seaboard. Even so United States authorities began to show signs of that growing nativist intransigence which eventually all but closed America's "golden door." Upon at least one occasion at Galveston, an entire shipload of Jewish immigrants was rejected on charges of "poor physique," whereupon Fels hurried off to Bremen with Zangwill to aid in relieving their distress.²³

With 1910, Joseph Fels began to spend a greater part of each year in the United States. Consequently he devoted an increased portion of his resources to single-tax reform projects for his native land.²⁴

More to the point, a close reading of their correspondence suggests that Fels began to drift somewhat apart from Israel Zangwill and the Jewish Territorial Organization. I. T. O. had never been

²¹ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Oct. 15, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers.

²² Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Dec. 9 and 16, 1906, April 7, 1907; Joseph Fels to C. N. Macintosh, May 4 and Aug. 21, 1912; D. R. Stevenson to Joseph Fels, Feb. 18, 1907; C. N. Macintosh to Joseph Fels, Oct. 4, 1911; Joseph Fels Papers. Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 921.

²³ Israel Zangwill, "Zionism and Territorialism," *Living Age*, vol. CCLXV (June 11, 1910), p. 671; Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), pp. 921-922. Joseph Fels to Earl Barnes, Aug. 20, 1910; Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Sept. 22 and Oct. 27, 1910; Joseph Fels Papers. For a general account of the so-called Galveston Plan, see Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety*, *supra*, pp. 127-130.

²⁴ Arthur P. Dudden, "Joseph Fels of Philadelphia and London," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, vol. LXXIX (April, 1955), pp. 143, 162-166.

more for Fels than one of his "sideshows," as Zangwill knew, albeit an important one. Now he discarded almost all else but the consuming passion for Henry George's single-tax panacea which had latterly overwhelmed him. He traveled endlessly, preached constantly, and spent extravagantly to propagate his faith, for he was convinced that the hour was propitious "to put over the single-tax somewhere." An inevitable result of his zealousness was that Fels devoted much less attention than before to the Jewish Territorial Organization.²⁵

Still more significant now, Fels edged away from territorialism and almost imperceptibly toward the mainstream of Zionism. Perhaps this was because in the United States he was geographically removed from Zangwill's personal influence, and due as well to his wife's gathering preference for Palestine as the Jewish homeland.²⁶ I.T.O.'s Angola enterprise provided a case in point. Fels himself had originally supplied no less than half the wherewithal for an expedition to investigate Angola on the west coast of Africa, when it appeared likely that Portuguese fears of German imperialism might result in a territorial concession to the homeless Jews of the world.²⁷ Yet, on November 15, 1912, Zangwill was writing to Fels:

I am sorry you say "No" to Angola. I do not think there is a better possibility on earth.

Ten days later, another letter from Zangwill was further revealing:

Useless to send me newspaper articles about Palestine — I know more than all the newspaper fellows. There is an American atmosphere of romantic lying about Palestine by Jews who won't go there, which I see you have not escaped. The coolness of your telling me that Jews won't go anywhere except to Palestine, when America has 2,000,000 and Palestine 100,000!

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 162–165; Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 920. "Were Zangwill a woman," Mary Fels wrote long afterward, "there might trail through his consciousness the significance of Joe's interest in and kindness to him personally. Joe's interest, for instance, in the fortunes of Zangwill's play, 'The War God,' when it was being tried on the boards of His Majesty's Theatre. The drama was no more in Joe's line than propaganda of the Single Tax was in Zangwill's. Zangwill never even tried to understand the theory of the S. T. much less to help Joe's work in the least. Joe entered sympathetically into whatever interested Z. deeply or actively, and gave help all along the line, and it never occur [sic!] to Z. how many and how innumerable were the 'deviations from the single-tax principle.'" Undated memorandum in Mary Fels' handwriting, Joseph Fels Papers.

²⁶ "It is interesting to note," Mary Fels recalled of her husband, "that he grew the more interested in the movement as its possibilities verged more and more towards the historic birthplace of the Jews in Palestine. It is not, indeed, unlikely that he would, in the end, have become a Zionist." *Joseph Fels, His Life-Work*, *supra*, pp. 229–230.

²⁷ Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. CVII, n. s. (June, 1920), p. 920.

Zangwill continued:

The I. T. O., however, does not exclude Palestine from its purview, and would ask nothing better than to single-tax it! I have been agitating, too, for getting Jewish autonomy in Salonika.

Wistfully Zangwill concluded:

Re Angola, it seems to me a splendid country to be still lying around.²⁸

Although actually very slight indeed when all things are considered, the split between them continued, with regard both to Zionism and the single-tax. Zangwill reacted sourly to a letter from Bolton Hall that Fels forwarded to him. Hall, who was New York City's leading single-taxer, had written disquietingly to Fels about Zionist objectives. Zangwill replied heatedly: "After I have been looking seven years at an idea, a man comes and tells me another idea would be preferable. What do you expect me to say?" he asked Fels.²⁹ Then, in April, 1913, Fels took Zangwill sharply to task on grounds of economic heresy for advocating taxation based upon ability to pay. "This is pure treason," Fels wrote, "if you agree (as you have said you do a number of times) with the untaxing of industry and things produced by labour, and placing taxation where it rightly belongs — upon land values and franchises and privileges arising from the control thereof."³⁰ But Zangwill protested good-humoredly that his purpose had merely been to emphasize the justice of women's suffrage. "If you think I should have preached Henry Georgeism to prove that votes for women are necessary," he returned, "I should be glad to have the connection pointed out. I should also like to know whether Henry George is good for my gum boil. There is certainly an unearned increment in my cheek, but the community is welcome to it."³¹ Finally, in September, 1913, it became clearer where Fels stood. "Is it not altogether possible that, if you secure Angola," he asked Zangwill, "the race question may arise there just as at present in the southern part of the U. S.; and would it not be running a risk of the Jews jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire? I would like to talk this over seriously. The suggestion really comes from Mrs. Fels, and she knows things."³²

²⁸ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Nov. 15 and 25, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers.

²⁹ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Dec. 31, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers.

³⁰ Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, April 30, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers.

³¹ Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, May 1, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers.

³² Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, Sept. 11, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers. Fels' stand on Angola must have exasperated Zangwill who well knew such arguments first-hand. Indeed Zangwill had already noted publicly that Dr. Herzl's treatise favoring territorialism, *The*

And there things rested. Joseph Fels died on Washington's Birthday, 1914, but the directions visible before his death continued for some time under the aegis of his widow. Ultimately, however, even the single-tax itself was surrendered as a primary objective, until Palestinian Zionism commanded most of her attention.

At first, Mary Fels took over the leadership of the single-tax movement after her husband's death. She carried on his speaking, writing, and spending commitments. Many articles appeared in newspapers to the effect that the momentum given Georgeist principles by Joseph Fels would not be allowed to subside. "Why I am attempting nothing unfamiliar," Mrs. Fels told one interviewer, "I have always helped Mr. Fels — from the very beginning." And her spokesman added: "It is certain that no movement will be dropped, no cause forgotten, that had the support of Mr. Fels."³³ Yet by 1920, the world of Joseph Fels was far distant, and a great deal that would have seemed important to him was being redesigned. The Joseph Fels Fund Commission, which had been created in 1909 to win over spectacularly some American community to the single-tax, passed away quietly into the reformers' limbo. In England, Mary Fels withheld any further financial support from the single-taxers' United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values to which her husband had donated at least £60,000 between 1909 and 1913. There, in this instance, her action virtually sounded a death knell for land reform agitation. A. W. Madsen, the United Committee's Secretary, bitterly recalled Mary Fels' replacement of the single-tax movement by a brand of Zionism which attained spiritualistic proportions. "She said she had held long talks with Joe after he died," Madsen remembered, "and he told her that support for Zionism was the right thing to do. Her eyes burned as she told of talking to Joe. I protested," Madsen concluded sadly, "but Mary said all was changed now."³⁴

Jewish State (1896), "pointed out the grim law of all Jewish emigration that shirked colonization — that, following the line of least resistance, it flowed from lands of greater anti-Semitism to lands of lesser anti-Semitism, but that in so doing it soon brought up the level of anti-Semitism in the new land to the same level as in the lands left behind." "Zionism and Territorialism," *Living Age*, vol. CCLXV (June 11, 1910), p. 664.

³³ Quotations from *Philadelphia North American*, April 26, 1914, and *Colorado Springs Gazette*, May 17, 1914. See also: *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Nov. 19, 1914; *Daily Oklahoman*, Dec. 7, 1914; *Wichita Eagle*, Dec. 10, 1914; *New York Tribune*, Feb. 22, 1915; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, July 8, 1916; *The Maccabaeans*, Feb., 1917.

³⁴ Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1931), vol. II, p. 643; Arthur P. Dudden, "Joseph Fels of Philadelphia and London," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, vol. LXXIX (April, 1955), pp. 163–165; personal interview with A. W. Madsen, Aug. 11, 1953.

Indeed, Mary Fels herself chronicled that change, which was completed shortly after the end of the first World War. "It was during my first visit to Palestine," she recalled in 1925, "that I awoke to the realization that the most beautiful spirit in Palestine was to be found among the older colonists who came there some fifty years ago inspired with a devotion to the Holy Land. Through their unfaltering loyalty to the land which they loved beyond anything in the world, they endured their trials and tribulations without a thought of retreat. Their descendants are in *Eretz Yisroel* now, and five years ago Captain Alexander Aaronsohn organized them into a group called the B'nai Benjamin. It is on the people of this organization that I base my hope. From these, who are the finest type of beings, we may expect new light and learning."³⁵ True to her newfound convictions, Mary Fels established the Joseph Fels Foundation. Its stated objectives expressed her own faith in the Jewish people and their historic purpose. "We have a mission to fulfill in Palestine," she announced. "We must achieve a real brotherhood of man, not only concretely, but also spiritually if we want to avert war permanently. It is from Palestine, where real brotherhood is achieved, that I look for the first proof of the oneness of God."³⁶

So it was this Zionist cause in the end, not the single-tax or land reform or the cure of poverty, that attracted the residual fortunes of Joseph Fels.

* * *

But, in conclusion, one last question must be addressed to Joseph Fels. What sort of Jew was he anyway?

First, Joseph Fels was openly proud of the race into which he was born. "Oddly enough, in about every address I deliver," he once wrote Professor Deutsch of Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College,

³⁵ *Jewish Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1925. Mary Fels' transformation from a worker for the single-tax to a dedicated Zionist took place progressively from 1915 to 1920. By 1916, she was described as "one of the strongest members" of the Zionist movement. Yet she stated then, in words reminiscent of her dead husband: "If a Jewish nation is at any time ready to carry out the principles of single-tax, I should do everything I could to help." *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, July 8, 1916. Next year, she reiterated that: "... the single-tax principles must underlie the Zionist state." *The Maccabean*, Feb., 1917. But by 1919, though still professing her support for the single-tax, Mary Fels' emphasis was shifting toward Zionism and Jewish colonization in Palestine. Her agents were buying land there for her own residence as well as for Jewish colonists to settle. *American Jewish News*, June 13, 1919.

³⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, April 11, 1925; *Jewish Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1925.

"clear mention is made by me, with the greatest possible pride, that I am a Jew. I go out of my way to rub it in to every audience I get before, and I do this because I am proud of being a Jew, nor would I exchange that nationality for any other I know of, even though to escape the occasional side remarks of a fool, who may perhaps envy the actual status of the Jew!"³⁷

Second, Fels entertained no illusions of ethnic superiority. "As the Scotchman would say, 'I hae me doots,' " he observed to Doctor Solomon Solis-Cohen of Philadelphia, "whether there is not as much prejudice among the Jews towards their own race and other races as there is on the part of other races towards the Jews . . . My experience is that the Jews can cut each other's throats with as much beauty and despatch as Christians, Mohammedans, Chinese, or Americans!"³⁸

Third, he had little use for ministers of religion in general or theologians in particular. Upon one occasion or another, he severely rebuked both Jewish and Christian ministries. Again he wrote to Professor Deutsch:

Thank you for your not being a minister. At the same time that makes little difference because a minister should be a teacher, and you tell me you are the latter. I find the majority of Jewish ministers and teachers extremely obtuse upon this question of equal opportunity for all men and special privilege for none. They seem to refuse to read the authority upon this question: the Bible itself.³⁹

While in similar vein, he once seized the opportunity afforded by an appeal for endowment funds from the hapless Dean of a Christian theological school to issue a single-tax leaflet entitled "The Religion of Joseph Fels," and to circulate it by the thousands. In replying publicly to the Dean's request, Fels chose to explore "the relation between taxation and righteousness" while making various unfavorable comparisons between Jesus' teachings on the one hand and Christian society on the other, with the private expropriation of wealth's unearned increment representing not only original sin but the way of the Anti-Christ. His leaflet concluded:

I shall be glad to contribute to your theological school or to any other that gets down to the bedrock of that [Jesus Christ's] moral code, accepts it in its fullness, and trains its students to teach and preach it

³⁷ Joseph Fels to the Rev. Dr. G. Deutsch, Sept. 18, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers.

³⁸ Joseph Fels to Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen, June 30, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers.

³⁹ Joseph Fels to Prof. G. Deutsch, Nov. 27, 1912, American Jewish Archives.

regardless of the raiment, the bank accounts, the social standing or political position of the persons in the pews.⁴⁰

Fourth, Joseph Fels was nevertheless a spiritually religious Jew, though never a public worshipper either in a ritualistic or any orthodox sense. As was earlier noted, he believed that his was a faith of religious fundamentals, not of doctrines, prophets, or saints. "I believe in the Fatherhood of God and therefore in the Brotherhood of Man," he wrote. Then he added: "By 'Man' I mean all men." He also stated:

My contention is that the code of morals taught by Jesus is a code of justice, of right living and right doing; that the simple code of morals taught to the fishermen of Galilee by the Carpenter of Nazareth is all embracing and all sufficient for our social life.⁴¹

He was immensely proud of an unsolicited tribute to him from a Christian minister of Gloucester, Massachusetts, who concluded by writing to his *Farm and Fireside* readers:

My ideal Christian is Joseph Fels, and possibly it is not an accident that, like the First Christian, he is a Jew.⁴²

Moses, Christ, and Henry George were the propagators of the gospel which Joseph Fels dedicated himself to preach, and more than once he ranked *Progress and Poverty* among "the Bibles of the world."⁴³ All of which helps to explain, of course, the peculiar single-tax emphasis Fels placed on his Zionism. "My only interest in the Jewish Territorial Organization work . . .," he emphasized with finality, "is in the hope of the single-tax being put into operation in whatever country they acquire."⁴⁴ Upon another occasion, Lincoln Steffens acknowledged in Fels' presence that the Jews were the Chosen People. "But what are they chosen for?" he asked Fels. "The Jews?" Fels mused, with a careless wave of his arm. "The Jews were chosen to introduce Christianity."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Joseph Fels, "The Religion of Joseph Fels", (1912?), *passim*, Joseph Fels Papers. Fels was so proud of this effort that he circulated it broadcast. Wrote Zangwill: "But please do *not* send me your 'Christian' article again. I have already told you it is the best of all your pamphlets." Israel Zangwill to Joseph Fels, Nov. 25, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers.

⁴¹ Joseph Fels, "The Religion of Joseph Fels," pp. 2, 8.

⁴² Rev. Levi M. Powers, "My Christian," *Farm and Fireside*, July 20, 1912, clipping in Joseph Fels Papers.

⁴³ Joseph Fels, undated address to employees of Fels and Company; Joseph Fels to Rev. R. J. Campbell, Oct. 4, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers.

⁴⁴ Joseph Fels to Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen, June 30, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers.

⁴⁵ An undated and otherwise untraceable clipping in the Joseph Fels Papers identifies

Yet Joseph Fels' worldly mission was not to spread the gospel according to Jesus Christ, but the revelations of Henry George. The result was that Fels' Zion came to comprise all the surface of the earth, while the Word of God shone for him through the radiant message of the single-tax.⁴⁶

Lincoln Steffens as the interrogator, but this anecdote crops up elsewhere as in Herbert S. Bigelow's "Jew and also Christian: a Memorial Address on Joseph Fels the Christian," delivered at the People's Church, Grand Opera House, Cincinnati, March 8, 1914.

⁴⁶ These characteristics of Joseph Fels were precisely those which split the Central Conference of American Rabbis over the question of extending a resolution of sympathy to his widow. "I refuse to canonize the single-tax," one indignant rabbi proclaimed. Others noted that Fels' lifetime was spent largely out of sympathy with the synagogue. He was even denounced as anti-Semitic. But the resolution finally passed after all, noting that, with the death of Joseph Fels, "there has passed away a noted philanthropist and a lover of humanity." *Detroit News*, July 6, 1914; Joseph S. Kornfeld to Mrs. Joseph Fels, July 13, 1914, Joseph Fels Papers.