Where Jews Prevent Speculation

[Excerpted from an unsigned manuscript]

THE transformation of the predominantly urban Jews of Europe into rooted-in-the-soil farmers of Palestine is a most astonishing feat.

Jews became a predominantly urban people only after their exile from Palestine. They were forced to that because most of the countries where they found refuge would hardly tolerate foreign agriculturists on their soil. The whole structure of feudal agriculture, represented by nobles and serfs, had no place for outsiders.

The general run of the Palestine settlers before 1914 was poorer in industrial qualifications and working experience than the Jewish immigration which went at the same time to the United States. In the townships of Poland they used to say at that time that dreamers are going to Palestine, while practical people prefer the United States. . . .

It is quite natural that the transformation of "dreamers" (who in most cases came from impoverished middle class families and had no working experience in the countries of their birth) into useful pioneers of a new and difficult country was a very difficult task. It required a great amount of practical training.

While the system of preliminary training of prospective pioneers before their arrival in Palestine provided an excellent human material for the upbuilding of the country, it left unsolved the financial problems involved in the establishment of a modern agriculture in a long-neglected land. As a general rule, the young pioneers had no means of their own, and even their passage had in certain instances to be covered by the Zionist Organization. There was, therefore, no chance of establishing them on land unless the costs of that were to be borne by some public fund.

With the continuous development of Jewish colonization the land prices went naturally up, and this created a basis for considerable land speculation. Would the Zionists consent to the land becoming an unlimited property of the farmers settled with their assistance and help, these farmers would be finally, with all their initial good intentions, drawn into the vortex of land speculation. The weaker of them would succumb to the temptation of selling their property for higher prices and establishing with the money received some kind of business in the city; while the stronger and more persistent would increase with time their farm holdings, and cultivate them in the typical colonial manner, by ruthless exploitation of backward "native" labor. Experience showed that in the conditions of Palestine an agricultural community based on farmers working with their own hands, instead of relying on hired labor, could not achieve progress and stability if a certain limitation on land ownership were not adopted.

Thus was established the Jewish National Fund, which buys land with money collected from contributions throughout the world, and makes it a perpetual property of the Jewish people. The farmer gets it on long leases (from 35 to 49 years), with the assurance that at the end of his contract the lease will be automatically renewed for another long period of time, provided he meets certain elementary requirements. These are the payment of a moderate yearly rent (about 2% of the value of the land), and the cultivation of the land with his own efforts without the continuous use of hired labor.

As a rule, the Jewish Agency, which represents the concentrated efforts of the Jewish people on behalf of Palestine, supports only those farmers who established themselves on National Fund land, and are willing to accept the above restrictions which ultimately work for their own benefit. There is a considerable number of communities composed of individual landholders established on the property of the Jewish National Fund. In case a farmer belonging to such a community is forced by weighty circumstances to leave the village and to settle in the neighboring city, he is entitled to a just compensation for the improvements he made on his farm. He may find another man who is acceptable to the community as his successor, and he may make arrangements with him concerning the above compensation. Usually, however, such successor is chosen by the village community, which fixes the amount of compensation by arbitration. In any case, *the settler is given credit for definite improvements made by his own labor or money. He cannot, however, expect to be paid because of the generally increased value of land.*

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tive, but will return to the soil what it borrows. Closer settlement will give rise to economies of all kinds; rural life will partake of the conveniences, recreations and stimulations now to be obtained only by the favored classes in large towns."

To me, there is no discrepancy between the decentralist and Georgeist hopes and goals—a society in which the determining majority of our families live and work on the land. After all these years of explicit and implied emphasis that Georgeism meant increased mass production and urbanism, it is good to note that Henry George so clearly identified the good life with the country. One of my Georgeist friends with whom I often discuss the relative merits of country and city living usually concludes the tilt with, "What does it matter which is better? Just let us have the freedom which social appropriation of land-values will bring, and people can then get whichever is best for them." Which is all right, except that we can become adjusted to anything, and so many people are now so conditioned to urban living that they actually believe it is good.