

Sonnenfeld — Elements of Survival and Success of a Jewish Farming Community on the Prairies 1905-1939*

ANNA FELDMAN

A) Naissance et Nom d'une Colonie de Fermiers Juifs:

Les Juifs furent parmi les premiers à établir des colonies agricoles dans la partie Ouest du Canada. La plupart, telle que Sonnenfeld (connue premièrement sous le nom de New Herman) et se trouvant dans la partie Sud-Est de la Saskatchewan, furent créées par des Juifs qui luttèrent pour survivre de leur profession de fermier.

La plus répandue des versions veut que quatre jeunes diplômés du collège agricole de Slobodka Lesna (Philip Berger, Majer Feldman, Max Feuer et Israel Hoffer) prirent la décision à propos du site de la communauté. Les premières sources révèlent une divergence dans ce récit des origines de la colonie.

Berger, Feldman et Hoffer ne furent pas seulement les premiers Juifs à s'installer dans le district, mais furent aussi parmi les premiers à recevoir les lettres patentes pour leurs fermes.

Il n'y a nulle trace du motif du choix de "New Herman". Le changement de nom (i.e. New Herman puis Sonnenfeld) ne s'est pas fait du jour au lendemain. On appelle encore Sonnenfeld New Herman.

B) Les tous débuts: 1905-1911:

Face aux persécutions religieuses et l'injustice sociale qui prévalurent en Europe, Berger, Feldman et Hoffer, de même que d'autres Juifs émigrèrent vers le Canada, désireux de peupler l'Ouest. Les nouveaux venus voulaient de la terre. Les non-Juifs s'établirent également dans le Triangle Palliser. C'était

* This paper was presented at a session of the Canadian Jewish Historical Society, Learned Societies' Conference, Ottawa, Ontario, June 1982.

des gens venus de Scandinavie qui avaient effectué une migration des Etats-Unis au Canada.

La lutte contre les éléments naturels fut dure pour tous. Il n'y avait point de chemins de fer et lorsqu'il était question de se réapprovisionner, il était nécessaire de faire un parcours de 100 milles (aller-retour) à pied pour se rendre au lieu dit (Estevan). Les quelques colons, au tout début, ne purent se permettre d'encourir la dépense pour accéder aux puits. Outre ce fait, les marécages constituaient un autre problème: à part la horde de moustiques, ils hébergeaient des milliers de canards sauvages.

Le manque d'expérience ébranla sérieusement les Juifs. Les premiers Juifs n'avaient ni équipement (machines etc.) ni bétail et ils étaient essentiellement jeunes, sans sou vaillant et sans formation spéciale. Toutefois, les jeunes gens luttèrent afin de s'acquitter des exigences de la propriété et commencèrent à labourer leurs terres au printemps 1907. Les colons firent tous leurs efforts afin d'obtenir une terre cultivable. L'espoir d'un revenu à l'automne, était fourni par la semence du lin. A l'automne, les fermiers, afin de soulager leurs fardeaux financiers, travaillaient à l'assemblage des batteuses pendant la moisson. Mais même ainsi, il y eut insuffisance de fonds pour financer les opérations.

En 1909, il y avait 58 personnes sur vingt cinq fermes. Ils possédaient alors 6.400 hectares de terre.

En 1910, l'actif était de \$87,599 et le passif de \$13,662.

Un bureau de poste vint s'ajouter à quelques milles de là vers le Nord-Est de la colonie. La première réunion du conseil de la Municipalité No 7 de Souris Valley où se trouvait Sonnenfeld se tint le 3 janvier 1910. Cela constituait un précédent historique.

Des plans furent conçus afin de bâtir une synagogue. Moses Hoffer (Hoffer Sr) qui écrivit au J.A.C. fut informé que l'Association ne pourrait contribuer à de tels desseins et qu'il devrait obtenir des fonds de sources locales.

Une "kehilla"* fut mise sur pied et structurée afin de traiter des affaires de la Communauté Juive et Hoffer Sr. y oeuvra de son vivant.

Six années sont passées depuis l'Europe. Les premiers pionniers de Sonnenfeld avaient une ligne de chemin de fer sur à peine plus de 20 milles et des institutions communautaires en développement. Les pionniers savaient désormais qu'il était possible de survivre en tant que fermiers à Sonnenfeld.

*Kehilla: terme hébreu désignant la Communauté Juive (N.d.T.)

C) Période de consolidation: 1913-1925:

Au cours de sa période de consolidation, Sonnenfeld n'a pas toujours suivi les mêmes modèles de développement.

L'expansion de l'époque de la guerre fut accompagnée d'une augmentation des prix. L'apogée de cette prospérité survécut pendant la première moitié de 1920. Dans les Prairies, les pressions économiques du début des années 1920 furent plus aiguës en raison de la sécheresse prolongée. La moisson de 1916 à Sonnenfeld fut endommagée par la rouille et sa qualité baissa du même coup. Les difficultés avaient déjà débuté dans les années vingt. Les registres du recensement nous montrent la diminution de la population et une croissance de l'abandon de la ferme.

Le cycle sans fin d'établissement sur une ferme puis d'abandon de celle-ci, aspect typique du développement de l'agriculture dans le Triangle Palliser, constituait sans aucun doute un phénomène propre à la période allant de 1912 à 1925.

En 1920, la population de Sonnenfeld semble avoir été plus stable que celle du reste du Triangle. Le tronçon de voie ferrée du CPR parachevé en 1913, les colons pouvaient alors faire l'aller-retour en une même et seule journée. La vie familiale par ailleurs prit un essor important à Sonnenfeld. La vie communautaire progressa avec les nombreux mariages et sur l'impulsion des mères de famille.

Les institutions qui contribuèrent à la stabilité et à l'essor fructueux de Sonnenfeld furent organisées. Il en fut ainsi d'un édifice qui abritait la synagogue, l'école d'hébreu et le logement de la personne qui assumait une double tâche: professeur d'hébreu et shochet. La construction de cet édifice prit fin en 1912. La synagogue jouait également le rôle de centre communautaire. Grâce au concours du J.C.A., les pionniers mirent sur pied une autre institution importante: La Coopérative du Syndicat de Crédit des Fermiers Juifs de Sonnenfeld en 1917.

Cependant, et bien que des signes indiquaient que la civilisation imprimait sa marque lentement mais certainement, le piètre état des routes et des systèmes de facilités adéquats représentaient d'innombrables problèmes.

La Compagnie de Téléphone Tribune fut mise sur pied en 1916.

Avec l'essor des institutions de la communauté et de la vie de famille, le mode de vie des fermiers changea lentement.

La vie à Sonnenfeld vers la fin de 1925, bien que dure si on la compare aux centres culturels contemporains, n'était plus la vie ancienne des avants-postes de pionniers qu'elle fut vingt ans plus tôt. Ce furent les colons eux-mêmes qui

réussirent à bâtir des fermes et à accroître leurs biens. Le J.C.A. soutint certaines institutions et fermiers personnellement. Après 1925, le J.C.A. joua un rôle bien plus significatif à Sonnenfeld.

D) 1926-1939 — *Ere du J.C.A.* :

Deux des aspects qui dominèrent l'histoire de Sonnenfeld de 1926 à 1939 furent: "L'époque de la dépression" et le J.C.A. En 1925 le J.C.A. décida d'agrandir les principales colonies juives de Saskatchewan.

Le seul engagement de l'Association dans les transactions des terres à Sonnenfeld jusqu'en 1922 survinrent lorsqu'elle joua un rôle d'intermédiaire.

La confiance du J.C.A. dans le potentiel terrien fut renforcé par l'évaluation encourageante que fit en 1927 A. H. Joel, ancien Professeur en Sols à l'Université de Saskatchewan.

La catastrophe frappa après la moisson de 1926 alors que les éléments de la nature contribuèrent à la destruction des câbles téléphoniques isolant de ce fait les gens de Sonnenfeld. En 1928, une averse de grêle nettoya une récolte qui avait promis d'être bonne.

Des silos à céréales, des magasins et autres services virent le jour à Ratcliffe, Hoffer et Oungre, les trois hameaux qui se développèrent à Sonnenfeld le long de la voie ferrée du C.P.R. achevée en 1927. Le site d'"Oungre" reçut ce nom officiellement en l'honneur du Directeur Général du J.C.A., Dr. Louis Oungre.

Conformément au plan du J.C.A., trente et une familles venues de l'Europe de l'Est furent établies dans la communauté entre 1926 et 1928. Le gouvernement garda un oeil vigilant sur Sonnenfeld et la colonisation juive.

Les résidents de Sonnenfeld se divisaient en deux groupes: les anciens et les nouveaux venus. Bien que les premiers colons eurent, au fil des ans, à endurer un nombre incalculables de problèmes, ils avaient également obtenu une satisfaction suffisante de leurs efforts de pionniers et de leur labourage pour être attaché non seulement à la communauté juive et à l'ensemble de la société comme telle où ils vivaient, mais également à la terre.

Il y eut à un moment donné le stress de la dépression, la sécheresse et des tensions accrues entre les colons et le J.C.A.

La situation en devint à ce point insupportable et désespérée pour qu'un groupe câble au Ministre de l'Immigration et de la Colonisation un appel à l'aide. Ce qui eut pour résultat d'ouvrir une enquête.

G. Todd signala que le mécontentement et les troubles dans la colonie couvraient plusieurs secteurs. Todd souligna que bien qu'il aurait pu être possible pour le C.J.A. de réfuter certaines des déclarations des colons, il aurait été dif-

ficile pour l'Association de prouver comment ils assistaient les derniers arrivés qui, au moment de l'enquête, étaient lourdement endettés envers le J.C.A.

Le J.C.A. persévéra dans ses tentatives de sauver les Juifs d'Europe et de les faire venir en Saskatchewan. Il y eut résistance de la part d'Ottawa. F. C. Blair, alors Directeur de l'Immigration, fit état de plusieurs raisons pour lesquelles les familles juives ne pouvaient se qualifier pour accéder au Canada dans un aide-mémoire qu'il soumit au Gouvernement. Ce n'est pas un mystère que de dire que Blair ne fut jamais un ami des Juifs. C'est entré dans la légende.

L'abandon de la terre à Sonnenfeld ne fut pas aussi dramatique que dans le reste de la province. A l'exception d'une famille qui vint en 1939, il n'y eut point de colonisation à Sonnenfeld pendant les années 30.

Tout comme les autres, les colons devaient avoir recours auprès du Gouvernement pour aide et assistance. Les registres de la Municipalité Rurale de Souris Valley indiquent qu'en 1931, 1934 et 1936, de 99% à 100% des colons avaient besoin d'aide.

En 6 ans, conséquence de la sécheresse et de la dépression, une colonie ostensiblement indépendante était devenue totalement dépendante du J.C.A., de prêteurs sur gages privés et du bien-être du gouvernement pour survivre.

La synagogue devint trop petite pour les besoins de Sonnenfeld et avec l'aide financière du J.C.A., l'édifice doubla de grandeur.

En dépit du découragement, de nombreux résidents de Sonnenfeld ne partirent pas. En 1939, seul quatre des 26 fermiers avaient vécu moins de 9 ans dans la communauté. Cette colonie suivit le modèle semblable aux autres colonies juives de Saskatchewan.

Il est en fait remarquable de constater que les colons de Sonnenfeld s'accrochèrent de façon tenace à leurs fermes, survécurent et, si l'on s'en tient aux normes du Triangle Palliser, réussirent dans leur vie.

BIRTH AND NAMING OF A JEWISH FARM COLONY

Jews, who for many years were not allowed the privilege of farming in Europe, were among the first people to establish agricultural colonies in the Canadian west.¹ While some of these communities were founded and supervised by the JCA, most, such as Sonnenfeld (first known as New Herman), situated in southeastern Saskatchewan, were created in a new and strange land by individual Jews who struggled to survive in farming, an unfamiliar profession to all but the very few.

There have been several differing accounts on the founding of Sonnenfeld. The version which gained the widest acceptance described how four young

graduates of the Slobodka Lesna agricultural college,² Philip Berger, Majer Feldman, Max Feuer and Israel Hoffer, after some exploration made the decision respecting the community's site "because the land was pretty well vacant, the closest neighbours being twenty miles east, so that we could establish a Jewish settlement without difficulty."³ Primary sources reveal, however, a discrepancy in this account of the colony's origin: Feuer did not arrive in Canada until almost two years after Hoffer filed for his homestead in November, 1905.⁴ Berger made his application for entry on March 4, 1906⁵ and Feldman filed his on April 9, 1906.⁶ There were 16 Jewish farmers in the settlement at the end of 1906⁷ and Feuer was not among this group. He came to Canada in 1907.⁸

The community's nucleus is indicated by its first patents.

Name	Date of Patent	Land Description
Majer Feldman	July 7, 1909	N.E. 4-2-15-W2nd
Sussman Kostatzkof	August 20, 1909	N.E. 10-2-15-W2nd
Max Feldman (not related to Majer Feldman)	September 2, 1909	N.E. 14-2-14-W2nd
Samuel Braunstein	November 24, 1909	N.E. 16-2-15-W2nd
Israel Hoffer	December 27, 1909	N.E. 12-2-15-W2nd
Philip Berger	June 17, 1909	S.E. 10-2-15-W2nd ⁹

Berger, Feldman and Hoffer were not only the first Jews to settle in the district but were also among the first to receive letters patent for their farms. Feuer received his patent for S.W. 34-2-15-W2nd on July 19, 1914.¹⁰

Until conclusive evidence is found, it is, at the present time, only a matter of speculation as to whether Sonnenfeld evolved naturally, the result of chain migration, or as a consequence of a plan to organize another Jewish colony.

No record of the reason for the choice of "New Herman" has been found. The only mention of "Herman" was made in a note which told how, after completing the 1906 harvest in Hirsch, the JCA colony in southern Saskatchewan, some of the homesteaders, including Israel Hoffer, his brother Meyer, Sam Braunstein, a Mr. Herman and his little boy, went to the new location (70 miles to the west of Hirsch). There they remained until the early part of winter, when, running short of supplies, they decided to return to Hirsch. Herman and his little boy became lost in a storm. Although they eventually found shelter, both of the father's legs were frozen. The boy was unharmed. It is possible that the colonists wished to memorialize this event and did so by naming the community

“New Herman”’.¹¹

Included in the same note is the following statement concerning the name “Sonnenfeld”:

The colony was first named New Herman but when the old Moses Hoffer (father of Israel and Meyer) arrived (about 1907), he advised them to name the colony Sonnenfeld¹² as Herman did not do anything to deserve the honor of having the colony named after him.¹³

The change in name did not occur abruptly. A report of the Canadian Committee on the colony’s progress for the year ending December 31, 1912, makes no mention of the new name. It is still called New Herman.¹⁴

THE EARLY YEARS 1905-1911

Faced with religious persecution and social injustice in Europe and inspired with an enthusiasm for agriculture, not only as a means of survival but as an idealistic occupation, Berger, Feldman and Hoffer along with other Jews emigrated to Canada. Their arrival coincided with a period of active immigration. Canada wanted to populate the west and the newcomers wanted land. Under the Dominion Lands Act, a homestead applicant, on payment of a \$10 entry fee could receive title to 160 acres of land, on condition that certain requirements had meanwhile been fulfilled. The Act also provided for a privilege of pre-empting an adjoining quarter section.

While the agricultural college supported, educated and even assisted their students in the financing of their trip, Berger, Feldman and Hoffer, were nevertheless, responsible for themselves and their future life in Canada. Hoffer went directly to Hirsch where he laboured as a hired man. Berger and Feldman worked where they could as they made their way from Quebec to Manitoba and finally Saskatchewan where they also worked on farms. Eventually they each went to the Land Office to choose sites of their own within the Palliser Triangle.¹⁵

Non-Jews also settled in the area. They were, for the most part, people of Scandinavian origin, who had migrated to Canada from the United States.

Gentiles and Jews alike endured many hardships and battled the elements. The rigorous climate of very cold winters and blisteringly hot summers were not the only ordeals which the colonists had to face. There was no railway nearby. A walk to Estevan, 50 miles each way, was necessary, when supplies were needed. While there were few trees in the area, and none that had to be cleared, tons of rocks had to be removed from the land. Breaking the prairie and planting crops were arduous tasks. Drinking water proved to be a formidable problem for some of the homesteaders. Although wells several hundred feet deep were usually capable of yielding adequate supplies, few settlers, in the early days,

could afford the expense. Instead, it was the sloughs that furnished this need: a shallow hole dug near the edge collected water which seeped through the soil.¹⁶ The sloughs, in spite of encouraging the propagation of hungry mosquitoes in immense hordes, also harboured thousands of wild ducks. They and their eggs, along with prairie chickens, supplemented the food staples of flour, oatmeal, cornmeal, dried peas, sugar, syrup, tea and coffee which could be obtained in Estevan. Buffalo chips and bones were collected for fuel.¹⁷

Inexperience also took its toll of the Jews. Their neighbours, who had been established farmers in the United States, not only brought their families with them, but also machinery, livestock and experience. The Jewish farmers, on the other hand, started with neither machinery nor livestock and, although some were trained agriculturalists, they were basically young, penniless and unskilled. However, in spite of all their difficulties, the young men struggled to fulfil their homestead requirements and began to farm their own land in the spring of 1907.

Once established on their homesteads, the settlers expended their maximum effort into getting some land under cultivation. If prairie could be broken up early enough in the spring, hope for some revenue in the fall was provided by the seeding of flax. Land broken later would remain until the following spring for the planting of wheat. In the fall, the farmers, to help ease their financial burdens, would work on threshing outfits during the harvest. But even with this, there were insufficient funds to finance their operations.

Yet the colony continued and by 1909 the population had grown to 58 people on twenty-five farms. They owned 6,400 acres of land, 376 acres of which had been broken up. 187 acres were in crop that year and produced the following:

Acres	Bushels	Grain
39	510	oats
89	800	wheat
59	590	flax

In 1910 when there were 66 inhabitants living on 27 farms, the colony had 50 horses, 16 milk cows and 33 head of cattle. Assets totalled \$87,599 and liabilities totalled \$13,662.¹⁸

There were, in addition, other indications of progress. A post office was established a few miles to the northeast of the colony.¹⁹ The first council meeting of Souris Valley Municipality No. 7, in which Sonnenfeld was located, was held on January 3, 1910.²⁰

Plans, meanwhile were afoot to build a synagogue. Moses Hoffer (Hoffer

Sr.) who wrote the JCA requesting a grant towards the expenses, was informed that the Association could not contribute for such purposes and that he should secure money from local sources.²¹ Although primary sources, which would indicate a change of heart have not been found, secondary sources generally assume that the JCA eventually gave the necessary funds. A “kehilla” was organized to deal with Jewish community affairs and Hoffer Sr. served as “rosh” throughout his lifetime.

Thus six years after having left Europe, Sonnenfeld’s original settlers had a railway line slightly over 20 miles away and developing community institutions. They had their own homesteads, each with over 30 acres of land under cultivation, and although this was not enough on which to support a family, the pioneers now knew it was possible to survive as farmers in Sonnenfeld.

PERIOD OF CONSOLIDATION 1912-1925

During its period of consolidation, Sonnenfeld, although subject to many of the same forces as the remainder of agricultural southern Saskatchewan, did not always follow similar patterns in its development.

The wartime boom, following the excellent crops of 1912²² and 1913,²³ was accompanied by a rise in the price of wheat and other farm commodities in the months succeeding the armistice of 1918. The peak of the boom came during the first half of 1920 and a sharp recession thereafter carried price indices downward. From 1920 to 1923 the amount the farmers received for their products fell by one half and the price of wheat dropped by almost three-fifths. On the prairies, the economic pressures of the early 1920’s were rendered more acute by the prolonged drought. Climatic conditions had been irregular for a number of years after the bountiful crop of 1915. Rust impaired the quality of Sonnenfeld’s 1916 harvest. Moisture conditions were uneven in 1917, varying greatly from region to region. For a substantial portion of the semi-arid plains there were five crop failures in a row from 1917 to 1921.²⁴ The difficulties which faced the farmers in the “dirty thirties” had already begun in the twenties. Census records for the period offer striking evidence of its effect, the depletion in population and an increase in farm abandonment.²⁵

However, the endless cycle of settlement and then farm abandonment, a characteristic of agricultural development within the Palliser Triangle, was by no means a phenomenon of 1912-1925. It had been going on, without interruption, since the arrival of the first immigrants. With 70% of its farmers still remaining by 1920,²⁶ Sonnenfeld’s population appears to have been more stable than that of the remainder of the Triangle.

The following statistics indicate that the number of farms and their acreage in

Sonnenfeld peaked in 1916 and then declined, a development which did not follow the rest of agricultural southern Saskatchewan, where the number of farms increased rapidly in the years from 1911 to 1921.²⁷

FARMS AND HUMAN POPULATION IN SONNENFELD COLONY

Year	Population	Farms	Total Acreage
1912	98	34	8,320
1913	117	43	9,660
1914	118	39	9,600 or 9,600
1915	134	42	10,880
1916	147	45	11,040
1917	N.A.	36	10,160
1920	111	35	10,691
1922	125	33	N.A.
1923	108	31	9,900
1924	96	28	N.A.
1925	99	28	9,600 ²⁸

As was typical in the prairies, by 1925, the average farms size in Sonnenfeld had increased.

In spite of poor climatic conditions, some grain was harvested in Sonnenfeld each of the years from 1912 to 1925 and with the completion of the C.P.R. branch line through Tribune in 1913, the colonists could make the return trip to deliver grain and bring back supplies in one day.

Throughout the ebb and flow of the prairie's agricultural and economic conditions, family life in Sonnenfeld developed. The young men were anxious to find wives. Berger married Feldman's sister and Feldman married Berger's sister. Some of the pioneers went to other colonies in search of mates. Hoffer's wife, for example, came from the Jewish farm settlement of Lipton. Thus, although the colony started with essentially no women, the imbalance between the sexes corrected itself, as may be seen from the following figures:

Year	Men	Women
1913	43	34
1923	31	30 ²⁹

With the advent of wives and children, community life progressed and the institutions which contributed much to the colony's stability and success were organized. A building which housed the synagogue, Hebrew school and accommodation for the person who acted both as Hebrew teacher and shochet was completed in 1912. The children were given regular instruction in Hebrew, Jewish history and religion. Sonnenfeld's synagogue was also its community centre. It was there that charitable functions raised money; ladies held their afternoon teas, young people met for their box socials and meetings for the Young People's Cultural Club were convened. Everyone went to the dances. At this event, babies were put to sleep in their baskets and older children were placed on tables, chairs or on the floor.

While Sonnenfeld had the capacity to provide only a limited amount of monetary assistance to its needy farmers, the pioneers organized another important institution, a credit union. In 1917, with a modest capital fund of \$2,000 and the aid of the JCA, the Jewish Farmer's Co-operative Credit Union of Sonnenfeld was founded. On November 17 of the same year, Hoffer Sr., president of the credit union, wrote the JCA inviting Dr. Sonnenfeld to a proposed tenth anniversary celebration on Saturday, January 26, 1918. In the same letter he also mentioned that plans were afoot to construct a "mikveh" [ritual bath] and steam bath at the approximate cost of \$2,000. The anticipated expense for the water alone was at least \$1,000. Such a building was deemed necessary, not only for the orthodox colonists, but also for the shochet who was not content to remain where he could not carry out the ritual necessary for his religious life.³⁰ A report concerning the arrival of this letter stated that, while no outright request for financial assistance had been made, it was no doubt implied.³¹ What transpired as a result of this correspondence has not been discovered; however, neither the ritual bath nor the steam bath were built and no evidence has been found to determine whether or not the anniversary celebration was held.

While the amenities of civilization slowly made their appearance and neighbours co-operated with one another, poor roads and inadequate facilities still presented innumerable problems. Although a doctor established himself in Bromhead, some 30 miles away, tragic deaths still occurred.³² School districts were formed. Summit school opened in 1912 and Dravland in 1913.³³ The Tribune Telephone Company was organized in 1916.³⁴ Sonnenfeld residents, like other settlers in the region, participated as directors of the telephone company and trustees on the school boards.

With the growth of community institutions and family living, the lifestyle of the farmers slowly changed. When they first arrived and prairie had to be bro-

ken, oxen were used. As time went on, horses became more common. The colonists expanded into mixed farming and much effort was put into their home gardens. One-room shacks gradually disappeared and families now had houses. Water remained an ever-present problem.³⁵ Plumbing was non-existent and no electric power was available. Barns were changed from sod to wood. Each farm had one or two grainaries for storage. Many farmers began to have hired men to assist with the work in the summer and some of the colonists had children who could help with the chores. The Jewish farmers, who had been in the community for many years, were basically established.³⁶

Life in Sonnenfeld by the end of 1925, although harsh compared to contemporary cultural centres and primitive by modern standards, was no longer the remote pioneering outpost it had been twenty years earlier. While cultural tradition and strong family ties provided much of the strength needed to persevere and triumph over adversity, it was the settlers themselves, mainly through their own efforts who succeeded in building farms and increasing their assets.³⁷ The JCA, although instrumental in neither the founding nor the detailed management of the community, did assist some of the institutions as well as individual farmers. The representative's periodic visits also gave the settlers a feeling of unity and, to those who had graduated from the agricultural college, a sense of continuity. After 1925 the JCA played an even more significant role in Sonnenfeld.

THE JCA YEARS 1926-1939

Two of the features which dominated Sonnenfeld's history from 1926 to 1939 were the "dirty thirties" and the JCA. In 1925, after an unsuccessful attempt to find a suitable block of land in western Canada on which to settle some Russo-Roumanian refugees, the JCA decided to enlarge the principal Jewish colonies in Saskatchewan.³⁸ It is probable that the most significant reasons for their interest in these settlements were both the worsening European situation for the Jews and Canada's stringent immigration laws. These latter, however, led the JCA to encourage rural settlements since it was believed that some people could be brought onto farms in Sonnenfeld, as well as the other colonies, who would not otherwise be allowed into the country. Despite more than a decade of natural disasters, the JCA's philosophy appears to have had some measure of success.

The Association's only involvement in Sonnenfeld land transactions up to 1922 occurred when acting as an intermediary in the transfer of a pre-emption quarter section.³⁹ The purchase of 48 quarter sections radically changed the situation.⁴⁰

The JCA's confidence in the land's capacity to successfully yield crops was reinforced not only by the excellent wheat harvest of 1926, but also the encouraging assessment prepared in 1927 by A. H. Joel, a former Professor of Soils at the University of Saskatchewan.⁴¹

While there is no doubt that, under ordinary circumstances the report by Joel would have been correct, the year that preceded and those that followed its publication unleashed conditions that were far from normal. Catastrophe struck after the 1926 harvest when wet, heavy snow and sleet contributed to the destruction of the telephone poles and wires. For many years the people continued to pay off the debentures which had been issued to finance the system and there was no money to rebuild it. Isolation was again intensified by the lack of telephone service.

In 1928 a hailstorm wiped out a crop which had promised to be exceptionally bountiful. Trees in the shelterbelts, which some farmers had by that time planted around their yards, were stripped of leaves and small branches.⁴²

In spite of the reverses, this was an era of great optimism and activity in the community. Portents were good for the success of JCA's policy of vigorous intervention into Sonnenfeld's affairs. It coincided with a prosperous stage of Canada's wheat economy.⁴³ High prices and work on the long-awaited railway through the colony each contributed to the feeling of well-being.

Grain elevators, stores and other services appeared in Ratcliffe, Hoffer and Oungre, the three hamlets which rose in Sonnenfeld along the C.P.R. branch line completed in 1927.⁴⁴ The site of "Oungre" was officially given its name when, on August 6, 1928, the municipality accepted the JCA's offer of land for the new school, a community hall and \$500 for the hall's building fund in return for the favour of naming the new town in honour of the JCA General Manager, Dr. Louis Oungre.⁴⁵

In accordance with the JCA plan of gradually increasing Sonnenfeld's population, thirty-one east European families, none of whom had before encountered Canadian farming methods, were settled in the community between 1926 and 1928.⁴⁶ To provide accommodation and experience for the new farmers, the Oungre Farm Labourers' Hamlet was constructed on S.W.27-2-15-W2nd. Each of the six 25-acre lots had a house, barn and chicken house. An instructor was engaged to guide the beginners in their operations as well as teach them how to use modern machinery.⁴⁷

The government, meanwhile through its Field Supervisors, maintained a watchful eye over Sonnenfeld and Jewish colonization. N. A. Craddock, in his report of August 5, 1928, found that all family members, having no desire to

drift into the cities, engaged in agricultural work. With the exception of some children, no one spoke English. He also said that the scheme appeared to be making good

headway and perhaps settling up the land that would otherwise go unfarmed, as from the conditions and texture of the soil it is very evident that it would stand very little dry weather.

Soon after Craddock's assessment desert-like conditions, which had earlier attacked the United States, threatened the entire Palliser Triangle, including Sonnenfeld. In 1929 only the summerfallow produced wheat. The crops of 1931 and 1934 were complete failures while in 1930, 1932 and 1933 the income was frequently insufficient to pay for harvesting costs. Within the Triangle, crops that started to grow were soon cut off by the drifting soil which also turned day into night, buried fences and filled houses, eyes and lungs with dust. The devastation spread and had its effect on each member of the community.

Sonnenfeld residents at this time could be divided into two distinct groups: the originals and the newcomers. Of the latter, some had for many years lived in the JCA's Anatolian colonies.⁴⁹ They arrived, with no capital, in 1926 and were barely established before the onset of the "dirty thirties". To help get started, they had taken loans from the Association.⁵⁰ The second group came a few years later when hard times were already upon the community and others in the Palliser Triangle were leaving.

Unlike the original settlers, who for the most part had been young men entering an unoccupied land, the farmers who came towards the end of the twenties brought their families with them, along with all the concerns that such responsibilities entail, to a country that was settled. They were also heavily in debt to the JCA.⁵¹ Although the early colonists had, over the years, endured countless hardships, they had also achieved sufficient satisfaction from their pioneering efforts and their farming to form attachments not only to the Jewish and larger community in which they lived, but also their land. The newcomers were "greenhorns", probationers, who were immediately faced with a despairing set of conditions: poor weather, drought, unfamiliar scenes, a spartan lifestyle, isolation and no money.

The need for money made it necessary for the colonist to borrow, not only from the JCA, but any institution who would accommodate him. With the worsening situation the JCA became more involved, and in many instances, in spite of itself. On the other hand, their representatives had little or no understanding of the western farmers' hatred of banks and distrust of "city slickers".

Stress of depression, drought and pioneering increased tensions between the

colonists and the JCA, resulting in many serious disputes, some of which went to court. Though they were eventually dismissed, the grievances were indicative of a general feeling of dissatisfaction, frustration and disappointment. The situation became sufficiently desperate for a group calling themselves the Jewish Farmers' Association, Ratcliffe, Saskatchewan, to wire the Minister of Immigration and Colonization on May 9, 1939, in an appeal for help.⁵² In response, an investigation was launched.

G. Todd, who had previously visited the families, reported that unrest and dissatisfaction in the colony covered several areas. The later arrivals were compelled to rent land after having been promised long-term purchase agreements. Rental terms, in most cases, were much too high and the local unofficial representative was able to exert influences on the western officers of the JCA. Todd pointed out that while it might have been possible for the JCA to refute certain of the colonists' statements, it would be difficult for the Association to demonstrate how they assisted the later arrivals, all of whom had come to Canada with sufficient money to establish themselves, but by the time of the investigation were heavily indebted to the JCA.⁵³ Disputes of colonists and JCA, government investigations and problems resulting from a series of articles critical of its colonies' management notwithstanding, the JCA persevered in its efforts to rescue European Jews and place them in Saskatchewan.

However, there was resistance from Ottawa. In a memorandum discussing the Association's request for a quota of 30 Jewish families from Germany, F. C. Blair, Director, Immigration Branch, Department of Mines and Resources, listed various reasons by which they could not qualify for entry into Canada. They were not

strictly speaking agriculturalists but cattle-traders; [they will not] be able to bring out of Germany more than \$400 and probably not that much [and] the record of Jewish [farm] colonization in Canada is largely a record of failure.⁵⁴

He noted that the basis of the request is "the desire to get some more German Jewish families out from Under Hitler's yoke". Blair concluded the memorandum with

Sometimes our Jewish friends are inclined to criticize us for being too careful about the admission of Jews as farmers. Our carefulness is based on long experience in dealing with these people . . . these people generally leave the farms and they have themselves established the reputation they now enjoy in this regard.⁵⁵

That the Director of the Immigration, Department of Mines and Resources, was never a friend of any Jew is well documented.

Blair gave vent to his anti-Semitism by placing every possible bureaucratic encumbrance in the path of refugees.⁵⁶

Relevant to the statement that Jewish farm colonization in Canada “is largely a record of failure”, it is interesting to note that for the period from 1911 to 1931 approximately 6 out of every 10 homesteaders in Saskatchewan abandoned their claim before securing title to homesteads.⁵⁷ Compared with the aforementioned statistics, the abandonment of land in Sonnenfeld by fourteen of its original colonists and their families by 1936 (just over 50% of those 27 families who had been present in the founding years, specifically 1910) indicates a degree of success above the average for the remainder of the providence. Nevertheless, prejudice, drought and depression brought Jewish migration into Canada to a virtual halt in 1930. It was not resumed for the period under consideration. With the exception of one family which arrived in 1939, there was no colonization in Sonnenfeld during the thirties.

An insight into the extent of the natural disaster in Sonnenfeld is provided by an October 1931 inspection trip report of the JCA’s western representative.

An examination of all government records shows that such a complete [crop] failure has never previously occurred in Western Canada.

The Sonnenfeld Colony falls within “Relief Area A” designated by the government as a district which is in the direst need having suffered from three successive crop failures.⁵⁹

The colonists, like many others, had to resort to government relief.

To protect the soil surfaces from erosion, the farmers were advised to leave trash covers and strips of stubble, but they became incubation beds for new insect threats. Types of sawflies, caterpillars and cutworms never before seen in Canada were borne by the wind into the province and multiplied prodigiously. The ubiquitous gopher moved into abandoned fields by the thousands and into whatever crops were growing. By far the worst pest, however, was the grasshopper. Damage done to the crops in the Palliser Triangle in 1933 amounted to more than \$30,000,000.⁶⁰

With the depression, came the calamitous collapse of farm prices. Between 1930 and 1933, farm purchasing power was reduced to near zero. Livestock shipped to Winnipeg stockyards returned barely enough to pay freight charges. One of the measures the government took in 1937 was to pay the freight charges so that the farmer would have two or three cents a pound net for their animals.⁶¹ The government also placed a limit of animals any farmer on relief would be allowed to keep over the winter. For example, a family of five could keep 4 cows and 9 horses and larger families could keep an extra animal.⁶²

By 1937, in the ever-worsening situation the average net assets per farmer in Sonnenfeld, excluding Hoffer Brothers, was \$491.09.⁶³ Only two parcels of land in the settlement were not indebted to the JCA and it is probably reasonable to assume that the two parcels were also mortgaged to a bank or other institu-

tion. Records of the Rural Municipality of Souris Valley show that in 1931, 1934 and 1936 either 99% or 100% of all settlers were on relief; only in 1932 and 1933 was the number of families receiving relief as low as 50%.⁶⁴ What would have been Sonnenfeld's excellent crop of 1938 was ravaged by rust. Within 6 years, as a result of drought and depression, an ostensibly independent colony had become completely dependent on the JCA, private lenders and government welfare for its survival.

But despite all the circumstances, the JCA still persisted in its efforts to convince the Canadian government to allow, at least a small number of refugees into its colonies, and in a letter dated October 31, 1936 to Blair, the Chairman of the Canadian Committee, JCA argued that:

even during the depression years we paid our taxes regularly and in this way helped the municipality to maintain their services and in the Rural Municipality of Souris Valley we paid our taxes in advance thus helping to maintain medical facilities for the entire population of the district.⁶⁵

This continued pressure was, no doubt, at least partly responsible for another inspection on behalf of the Department of Immigration. In the opinion expressed by Harry Allam, the colony did not appear to be thriving. However,

The drought in the south at Sonnenfeld . . . has caused a situation which makes it difficult to criticize too severely . . .⁶⁶

He also observed that

One of the outstanding things noticed was the desire of the families to give their children the best education possible . . . [The children] are clean-cut and intelligent and can discuss various kinds of sports etc., the same as Canadian children. They do well at school, the only difference being that after 4:00 p.m. on certain days each week the Jewish people receive Hebrew instruction. The religious services are carried out in their own synagogue . . .

Within the colony, the synagogue became too small for Sonnenfeld's needs and with the JCA's financial assistance, the building was approximately doubled in size.⁶⁸ A strong sense of belonging and the continuation of ancient traditions helped to overcome the residents' feeling of impotence in the face of misfortune. While in the remainder of the Palliser Triangle there were many suicides and:

the mounties . . . were busier gathering up people who had been driven insane by the depression than by chasing crooks.⁶⁹

Only one of the colonists broke under the strain. He had to be hospitalized for a time after discovering that his "magnificent" crop of wheat was worthless due to rust.

Yet in spite of the discouragement, many of the Sonnenfeld residents did not flee. In 1939, only four of the 26 farmers (two of whom were widows) had lived

in the community less than nine years, while in 1936, 58.53% of the sons were still on the farms.⁷⁰ This settlement followed the patterns similar to other Jewish colonies in Saskatchewan. A 1938 newspaper article stated that:

One of the remarkable facts about Jewish farm life in Saskatchewan is that 62% of the present holders of land have retained it for 25 years without moving. In the same areas, only 16% of the total population have done the same thing. Only 40.4% of the Jewish farmers' sons have left the soil, while the figure for the total population is 43.7%.⁷¹

These figures must be viewed in the context of Sonnenfeld's history. The prosperous economy of 1926, the new railway, the high hopes and the JCA dream of expanding the colony to 150 families were suddenly followed by disaster after disaster. Hail, drought, grasshoppers, army-worms, cutworms, sawflies, dust storms, gophers were accompanied by economic depression, difficulties with the JCA and anti-Semitic prejudices of the Immigration Department. It is indeed remarkable that the colonists of Sonnenfeld tenaciously clung to their farms, survived and, by Palliser Triangle standards, at least, succeeded.

NOTES

1. Jewish farm colonization in the west, begun in 1882, pre-dates Ukrainian, Doukhobor, Russian, German and Hungarian settlement. Only the Mennonites and the people of Britain and Iceland came to farm before the Jews.
2. Sponsored by the Baron de Hirsch, the college in Slobodka Lesna, near the city of Kolomyia, Galicia, gave its students a four-year course in agriculture. Classroom studies took up one half of each day and the other half was spent working on the college's farms. This labour provided not only practical experience, but also paid for tuition, room and board.
3. *The Western Jewish News*, November 27, 1975, p. 12, col. 4.
4. *Ibid*, p. 13, col. 1.
5. Souris Valley Historial Club, *The Saga of Souris Valley R.M. No. 7*, Oungre, Saskatchewan, 1976, p. 258.
6. *Ibid*, p. 259.
7. March 8, 1937. Unsigned memorandum. JCA file. Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
8. April 4, 1908. *Report on Agricultural School Graduates sent during years 1905-6-7* prepared for the JCA by M. Heppner, Winnipeg. (PAC, Box 374, Microfilm Reel A 938).
9. *Souris Valley*, pp. 258-259.
10. *Ibid*, p. 259.
11. Updated memorandum *Re: History of JCA, Sonnenfeld Colony* by S. Belkin. JCA file, Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
12. Dr. Sigmund Sonnenfeld was one of the original directors and later manager of the JCA.
13. Undated memorandum *Re: History of JCA* by S. Belkin.
14. *Report of the Canadian Committee for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1912*. from Winnipeg to Chairman and members "Canadian Committee, Montreal." JCA file, Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
15. As a result of a study carried out in the 1850's, Captain Palliser concluded that the area now referred to as the "Palliser Triangle" was unsuitable for settlement. The base of the triangle lies roughly between Cartwright, Manitoba and Caraway, Alberta. The peak of the triangle is lo-

cated in the vicinity of Saskatoon.

16. *The Western Jewish News*, November 27, 1975. p. 15, col. 1.
17. *Ibid.* p. 13, col. 2.
18. October, 1909, *Report on New Herman*, (PAC, Box 374, Microfilm Reel A 938)
19. Souris Valley Historial Club, *The Saga of Souris Valley R. M. No. 7*, Oungre, Saskatchewan, 1976, p. 2.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
21. February 4, 1910. Letter from JCA, Paris to M. Heppner, Winnipeg. (PAC, Box 374, Microfilm Reel A 938).
22. The JCA annual report for the year ending December 31, 1912, confirms that Sonnenfeld, like the remainder of agricultural southern Saskatchewan, had an excellent harvest:
Once more a splendid crop has been harvested in this colony, and the farmers are progressing very favourably. The total value of their crop this year being \$14, 120 as compared with \$9,907 last year.
23. The JCA review for the year ending December 31, 1913 observes that:
A great deal of progress has been made during the past 12 months on the individual farms and their condition has been materially improved. The crop was a large one being an increase of more than 50% over that of last year and is valued at \$21,056.
24. The rust which Sonnenfeld suffered in 1916 was followed by dry years and some grasshopper infestation.
25. Vernon G. Fowke, *National Policy and the Wheat Economy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1957, p. 78.
26. Maureen Fox, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in Saskatchewan with Special Reference to the Colonies of Sonnenfeld and Edenbridge", Master of Arts Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1979, p. 120.
27. Marc-Adelard Tremblay and W. J. Anderson, editors, *Rural Canada in Transition*, Agricultural Economics Council of Canada, 1968, p. 267.
28. The table is a compilation of some statistical material Louis Rosenberg gathered during the years, 1919 to 1934, when he was the JCA western representative. JCA file. Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Letter, November 1, 1917, from Moses Hoffer, President, Jewish Farmers' Co-operative Credit Union of Sonnenfeld to the JCA. (PAC Microfilm A 938).
31. JCA report in French, single page, no date and unsigned. (PAC Microfilm A 938).
32. Feldman's father, who had in 1914 only recently arrived in Sonnenfeld to take up a homestead, was one of the victims. Although precise details are not known, it was felt that his appendix burst while bumping along the rough prairie (in a wagon box) en route to the doctor. He died when complications set in after the operation.
33. The first teachers were young university students who taught during their summer vacations. The students could not speak English and the teachers could not speak Yiddish.
34. *The Saga of Souris Valley*, p. 3.
35. The following, a free translation from the French 1923 JCA annual report, states that:
in order to encourage the Sonnenfeld colonists who were once again suffering from a prolonged drought, the JCA had authorized the drilling of six wells. They have been so situated as to make their benefit available to everyone.
36. The 1921 JCA annual report described:
a model farm which is an example to the rest of the colonists. The Hoffer Brothers own 1,600 acres of land, 39 horses, 57 cows, 1 stallion and agricultural machinery valued, perhaps, at \$72,800/
37. Sonnenfeld's total assets and total liabilities for the years 1915, 1920 and 1925 were as follows:

	<u>1915</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1925</u>
Total Assets	\$193,292	\$302,700	\$244,500
Total Liabilities	<u>49,855</u>	<u>105,310</u>	<u>84,000</u>
	<u>\$143,437</u>	<u>\$197,390</u>	<u>\$160,500</u>

38. Simon Belkin, *Through Narrow Gates*, Montreal, The Eagle Publishing Co., Limited, 1966, p. 163.
39. Maureen Fox, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in Saskatchewan with Special Reference to the Colonies of Sonnenfeld and Edenbridge", Master of Arts Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1979, p. 114.
40. *Ibid*, p. 125.
41. December 28, 1936. Memorandum initialled SB/RF, JCA file, Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal. Memorandum includes the following quotation from the assessment prepared in 1927 by A. H. Joel, a former Professor of Soils at the University of Saskatchewan:
 . . . the greater portion of lands examined are well suited to most crops adapted to the climate. . . The appearance of crops at the time of inspection would indicate a store of fertility productive of high yields and good quality of grain. My opinion is that by following farming methods already proven adapted to the district that farmers on these lands have better than average change for profitable farming in Saskatchewan . . . these lands are above average of Saskatchewan in drought resistance a very important factor in our sub-humid climate.
42. Reminiscences of Keiva Feldman. Personal communication. August 24, 1981.
43. Belkin, *Through Narrow Gates*, p. 162.
44. Souris Valley Historical Club, *The Saga of Souris Valley, R. M. No. 7*, Oungre, Saskatchewan, 1976, p. 366.
45. *Ibid*.
46. Undated, unsigned memorandum entitled, Excerpts "History of Jewish Colonization Ass'n., Canada", p. 2. JCA file. Archives of Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
47. Belkin, *Through Narrow Gates*, p. 165.
48. August 5, 1928. Field Supervisor's Investigation Report. (PAC, RG 76, Vol. 82, File 8520, Microfilm Reel C 4749).
49. Belkin, *Through Narrow Gates*, p. 165.
50. JCA correspondence. (PAC Devlin Papers, RG 30, Vol. 5631).
51. Unsigned summary of Sonnenfeld statistics, 1936. JCA file. Archives of Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
52. May 9, 1930. Copy of a telegram from Jewish Farmers' Association, Ratcliffe, Saskatchewan to Minister of Immigration and Colonization. (PAC RG 76, Vol. 82, File 8520).
53. June 23, 1930. Report by G. Todd, Travelling Investigating Officer, Department of Immigration and Colonization. (PAC RG 76, Vol. 82, File 8530, Microfilm Reel C 4749).
54. Memorandum. F. C. Blair, Director, Immigration Branch, Department of Mines and Resources, November 1936. (PAC RG 76, Vol. 82, File 8530, Microfilm Reel C 4749).
55. *Ibid*.
56. Irving Abella and Harold Troper, "The line must be drawn somewhere: Canada and Jewish Refugees 1933-9", *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. LX, No. 2, June, 1979, p. 204.
57. Vernon G. Fowke, *National Policy and the Wheat Economy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1957, p. 285.
58. Fox, *Jewish Agricultural Colonies*, p. 158.
59. November 6, 1931, Regina Letter #13,800. Report on Hirsch and Sonnenfeld Colonies. Inspection trip Oct. 14-23. JCA file, Archives of Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.

60. James Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, Saskatoon, Western Producer Book Service, 1967, p. 41.
61. *Ibid*, p. 3.
62. *Ibid*, p. 146.
63. Unsigned summary of Sonnenfeld statistics, 1936. JCA files, Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
64. Fox, *Jewish Agricultural Colonies*, p. 158.
65. October 21, 1936, letter from Lyon Cohen, Jewish Colonization Association to F. C. Blair, Department of Colonization and Immigration. (PAC, File 8520, Microfilm Reel C 4749).
66. Fox, *Jewish Agricultural Colonies*, Appendix.
67. *Ibid*.
68. JCA Annual Report for 1931. Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
69. Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, p. 167.
70. Unsigned summary of Sonnenfeld statistics for the years 1910, 1920, 1930 and 1936. JCA files, Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
71. *Montreal Standard*, December 3, 1938.