

University of North Carolina at Asheville

The Van Eeden Settlement:
Alvin Johnson's Attempt to Rescue Jewish Refugees and Turn the Tide
Of American Public Opinion in Favor of Jewish Resettlement
In the 1930s and 1940s

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Reflecting upon World War II, Alvin Johnson, a brilliant educator and active humanitarian, noted, “It may be true as the Moralists say, that a crisis brings out the best there is in an individual, but that is not true of a community, a nation, the world.”¹ This sentiment characterized American attitudes toward the question of how to handle the large number of Jewish refugees seeking entrance into the United States in the 1930s and early 1940s. Despite the desperation of the refugee situation, the United States provided minimal aid to immigrants who looked to escape Nazi Germany and insisted upon maintaining tight immigration restrictions. Consequently, many Jewish sympathizers sprang into action in the effort to ameliorate the plight of the Jew. One such supporter of the refugee cause, Alvin Johnson, established an agricultural settlement in Pender County, North Carolina designed as a refugee haven. Intending to prove to the world that Jews could be successful in agriculture, positively interact with the neighboring communities, function as an asset to the economy, and eventually become self-sufficient, Johnson’s commendable goals were only partially realized before the settlement’s eventual collapse and liquidation in 1943.²

As the refugee question became a problem in the United States, deep-rooted isolationism and anti-Semitism, combined with unfavorable economic conditions, resulted in an inhospitable and indifferent environment for Jews hoping to escape Nazi Germany. Historians agree that Jewish refugees seeking visas to enter the United States

¹ Alvin Johnson *Pioneer’s Progress* (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), 332.

² Heimann to Johnson, December 31, 1943, Box 3 File 8, Special Collections UNCW Wilmington, NC Van Eeden Collection (hereafter VEC). See also Alvin Johnson to Charles Liebman, January 23, 1951, Special Collections New School University New York, New York, Alvin Johnson Papers.

contended with numerous obstructions intending to restrict the flow of immigrants into America, especially the Jews.³

Researchers who have analyzed the cause of the constrained immigration flow cite the limitations caused by strict immigration quotas as a result of rising nativism and worsening economic conditions. Jewish historian Henry Feingold found that the immigration laws of 1921 and 1924 served to substantially diminish immigration into the United States. Because of the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover administered a directive known as the “likely to become a public charge” clause which required immigrants to either have enough assets to support themselves or documentation assuring that a friend or family member would be able to support them.⁴ This clause sought to eliminate the burden caused by immigrants. Furthermore, the National Origins Act of 1924 fixed the maximum number of immigrants at 15,000 per year, and was fully in force by 1929.⁵ These immigration laws proved devastating only ten years later when Jewish persecution was increasing along with the number of visa applicants. By spring 1939, the number of people from Germany and Czechoslovakia who had applied for visas was so great that they filled the quotas for their countries for the next four to six years.⁶ Both David Wyman and Henry Feingold claimed that the massive number of visa applicants far outweighed the number of immigrants allowed into the United States.

³ Henry L. Feingold *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995) see also David S. Wyman, ed., *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996); *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*, prod. Martin Ostrow, 87 minutes, Fine Cut Productions, 1993, videocassette; David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938-1941* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1968); Raul Hilberg *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992)

⁴ Henry L. Feingold *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 16.

⁵ David S. Wyman, ed., *The World Reacts*, 696.

⁶ David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 37.

Historians have concluded that despite the drastic imbalance between restraining immigration quotas and numerous visa applicants, the United States government responded with little more than sympathy to the Jews and failed to offer solutions or loosen tight immigration restrictions. A message sent from the German Foreign Ministry Office in 1939 notified America that the government intended to emigrate all Jews in German territory.⁷ The United States government was therefore fully aware that the Germans intended to use forced emigration to eradicate the Jewish population from German controlled areas. Roosevelt had delegated the responsibility for these refugee matters to the State Department who bore the task of addressing the possibility of an increased flow of Jews from Europe.⁸ However as Rafael Medoff notes, historians have concluded that in relying on the State Department to make these decisions, Roosevelt failed to offer a haven to prospective immigrants and allowed anti-Semitic State Department officials to hold back as many Jews as possible.⁹

The government was aware by August 1942 that the Nazis planned to annihilate the Jews of Europe.¹⁰ Michael Dobkowski and other researchers concur that despite the government's awareness of the Nazi's plan, they ignored and in some cases enforced the restrictive immigration quotas, which limited the United States' ability to serve as a haven for refugees.

David Wyman and Peter Novick infer that the anti-refugee policy sponsored by Roosevelt was actually a result of American popular opinion. The majority of Americans

⁷ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 35.

⁸ Michael N. Dobkowski, ed., *The Politics of Indifference* (Washington: The University Press of America, Inc., 1982), 145.

⁹ Rafael Medoff, *New Perspectives on How America, and American Jewry, Responded to the Holocaust American Jewish History* 84, no. 3 (1996) 256.

¹⁰ Dobkowski, 145.

regarded the Jewish population with suspicion and therefore supported government initiatives that limited the entrance of refugees into the United States. In fact, opinion polls taken between 1938 and 1944 revealed that thirty-three percent of the population was anti-Semitic and that twelve percent of those polled were willing to support an anti-Semitic movement.¹¹ Similar polls conducted during the same period revealed a common belief that Jews possessed “objectionable qualities” including greed, dishonesty, and aggressiveness.¹² These stereotypes, coupled with the stresses accompanied by rising unemployment rates, led the majority of Americans to oppose loosening the immigration laws.¹³

Additionally, historians stress the pivotal role the press played in relating the events in Nazi Europe to American society by failing to report and/or convey the importance of accounts of targeted Jewish persecution; therefore, providing a further cause of Americans reluctance to open their doors. Historian Laurel Leff found that between September 1939 and May 1945, the *New York Times* ran 1,147 accounts related to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, averaging a story every other day.¹⁴ However, during the 2,077 days of war in Europe, the hardships suffered by Jews appeared on the front cover only twenty-four times and never as the lead story.¹⁵ News of assaults and brutalities inflicted by Nazis specifically towards Jews became widely published beginning in 1939.¹⁶ Yet, Walter Laqueur reports that these stories were often

¹¹ Wyman, *The World Reacts*, 21.

¹² Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 22.

¹³ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 51. See also Dobkowski, 259.

¹⁴ Laurel Leff, *When the Facts Did Not Speak for Themselves: The Holocaust and the New York Times, 1933-1945* *The Harvard International Journal of Press Politics* 5, no. 2 (2000) 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's Final Solution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 93.

written off as exaggerations, hidden in the inner pages of the newspaper with only a few lines of coverage.¹⁷ According to Deborah E. Lipstadt, the press carries a great deal of blame for the “public’s skepticism and ignorance of this wartime tragedy.”¹⁸ Clearly, the press did little to impel the public or government to take an active role in the case of the refugee.

In light of the limited effort of the government to aid European Jewry, private agencies and individuals considered other resettlement schemes in attempt to make some difference in the refugee crisis. Henry Feingold discovered that some of these agencies discussed the possibility of establishing agricultural communities on idle lands, which could accommodate hundreds to millions of families.¹⁹ However, he found that only a minority of refugee advocates actually considered this idea because the immigration laws seriously limited the refugees’ ability to leave their homeland and enter these establishments.²⁰ As a result, few refugees actually found haven in such agricultural settlements and as time passed and the execution of the Final Solution to rid the Jews by extermination began, immigration became difficult and eventually impossible.²¹

Many refugee advocates were skeptical of these communities because it seemed unlikely that they would succeed. Strict immigration laws, difficulty in leaving Germany, and the thought of producing a ghetto psychology, all factored in to these advocates hesitation to accept this type of scheme.²² As a result, only a few ideas for agricultural communities were actually executed and have been largely overlooked by

¹⁷ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 244.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁹ Henry L. Feingold *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 94.

²⁰ Feingold, *Politics of Rescue*, 94.

²¹ Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, 94.

²² Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, 342.

historians who have neglected to investigate or analyze these small communities. The Van Eeden settlement has been acknowledged by some prominent Holocaust historians like Henry Feingold, but has never been fully evaluated. One historian, Susan Taylor Block, published an article with the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society on Van Eeden, yet the research mainly focuses on public interest issues like what happened to the families of Van Eeden and fails to truly investigate the settlement in the context of the refugee question in the United States. However, it is this type of analysis that will complement the larger picture of mid-twentieth century controversies over the refugee issue and provide answers for the cause of the ultimate failure of Van Eeden.

The founder of Van Eeden, Alvin Johnson, grew up on a farm in Nebraska where he gained a respect and knowledge for the land.²³ Yet, his desire to learn drew him to higher education where he obtained his doctorate in economics. With this degree, Johnson taught in many prominent universities including Stanford, University of Chicago, Cornell, and University of Texas.²⁴ During his education and teaching, Johnson developed friendships with a number of Jewish people but “at the time [he] never really thought of them as Jews. Nobody did...”²⁵

Besides teaching, Alvin Johnson began studying the economic and social conditions of land reclamation projects in 1928.²⁶ The purpose of land reclamation was to acquire unusable land and change the terrain by adding irrigation to arid lands or by draining flooded areas.²⁷ Reclamationists sought to recover land and make it habitable.

²³ “Dr. Alvin Johnson of New School Dies,” *New York Times* 9 June 1971, 1.

²⁴ Alvin Johnson *Pioneer's Progress*, 181-231.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁶ Dr. Alvin Johnson “Economic Aspects of Certain Reclamation Projects” *Economic Problems of Reclamation* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 1.

²⁷ North America Lake Management Society, “Lake and Water Word Glossary,” n.d., <http://www.nalms.org/glossary/lkword_1.htm> (3 November 2003).

A.J. Bruman who would become one of the managers at Van Eeden explained, “Much of the land occupied by the nations of the world has been neglected and abused through thoughtless exploitation and by careless unscientific farming. Still more of it, virgin and wild, lies idle and some unexplored begging to be developed and tended with loving care to benefit surplus populations.”²⁸ To address this concern, the United States established the Bureau of Reclamation in 1902 specifically to promote the economic progress of the West.²⁹ Through the Bureau and under the leadership of Elwood Mead, Commissioner of Reclamation, Johnson eventually met his associate Hugh McRae of Wilmington, North Carolina. In this setting, Johnson was introduced to functions of planned colonies and issues of land reclamation.³⁰ Johnson described his passion for reclamation in stating, “Loving liberty more than life itself, I have naturally attached myself to every movement for establishing small farms.”³¹ Accordingly, when the South was afflicted by poverty and food shortages as a result of the Great Depression, Johnson and four other men with a passion for reclamation, decided to use their experience and implement a plan to aid the impoverished South by setting up farm communities. Roosevelt’s election brought some of the assistance they requested and they were able to establish one agricultural colony for poor white families in Penderlea, North Carolina.³²

However, when Hitler rose to power in Germany in 1933, Johnson found another passion. With the rise of the Nazi regime, Johnson became especially concerned with the plight of the Jews and became a key refugee advocate. Johnson testified, “I was deeply

²⁸ A.J. Bruman *Resettlement: An Aid to Durable Peace* (New York: Refugee Economic Corporation, 1943), 6.

²⁹ Bureau of Reclamation, “What is the Bureau of Reclamation,” n.d., <<http://www.usbr.gov/main/about/who.htm>> (3 November 2003).

³⁰ Alvin Johnson *Pioneer’s Progress* (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), 359.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

³² *Ibid.*, 362.

disturbed about Germany, where Hitler with his poisonous propaganda against the Jews, the Allies, and peace appeared to be gaining ground.”³³ In 1933, Johnson took action to help the Jewish and liberal German scholars escape educational repression in Germany where they were terminated by the Nazis and replaced by Aryan scholars who supported Hitler. This concept materialized into the University of Exile, an extension of the New School for Social Research in New York, where prominent German academics found employment as professors and also found a haven far away from the Nazis.³⁴

Johnson also fought for the Jewish cause by campaigning for public awareness of the Jewish plight. In 1938, Johnson participated in protests with leading educators against the state of affairs in Germany. He urged citizens to be wary of the spread of anti-Semitism in the United States.³⁵ With the Jewish problem becoming increasingly important in world events, Johnson sought to educate Americans in a public forum where he implored the people to take a stand for the refugee cause.³⁶ In 1940, the *New York Times* acknowledged that “more than any man in the land Dr. Johnson [had] taken the lead in helping persecuted scholars” as well as other refugees. Aware of the problem caused by strict immigration restrictions, Johnson acknowledged that “the door has opened only reluctantly” for refugee scholars and even less so for the average refugee families.³⁷ It was in this context that the idea for a refugee settlement was born.

In response to the growing refugee problem, Dr. Alvin Johnson conceived a plan to establish an agricultural community to aid refugees. Rising unemployment levels and

³³ Ibid., 332.

³⁴ Ibid., 338.

³⁵ “Leading Educators Assail Nazi Terror,” *New York Times* 18 November 1938, 4.

³⁶ “Ask Home For Refugees: Forum Speakers Urge Effort to Assimilate Exiles,” *New York Times* 17 January 1939, 8.

³⁷ Benjamin Fine, “Urges Open Gate for All Scholars Fleeing Europe,” *New York Times* 7 July 1940, sec., D, 4.

the government's restrictive immigration quotas meant little hope for Jews attempting to flee Europe. Consequently, Johnson combined his knowledge of land reclamation, farming experience, and compassion for refugees to form an agricultural settlement. Johnson commented, "If a start could be made toward planting refugees on neglected soil, what American could fail to approve?"³⁸

In order to formally begin an effort to launch a farming community for refugees, Johnson founded the Alvin Corporation in the summer of 1939. The corporation intended to settle idle lands with refugees and provide them the opportunity to experience American life, free from persecution.³⁹ The refugees would be required to take an active role in building a prosperous community dedicated to successful farming.⁴⁰ Including members such as Charles Liebman, agricultural expert and president of the Refugee Economic Corporation, Hiram Halle, Granville Clark, W.K. Thomas, and Bernard Baruch, the Corporation boasted a number of influential refugee advocates who were willing to support this experimental settlement.⁴¹ Although beginning this sort of community was risky and revolutionary for the time, the Alvin Corporation was willing to support an experiment dedicated to improving the plight of Jewish refugees.

Van Eeden was not designed to be an entirely philanthropic effort, but was designed as a community, which would eventually become self-sufficient with the aid of some initial investors. One major financier, the Refugee Economic Corporation existed to "explore and implement the economic approach to the refugee problem" especially in an agricultural setting. The corporation provided half the funds necessary to sustain the

³⁸ Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 364.

³⁹ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 18, VEC.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴¹ Alvin Johnson to Bernard Baruch, March 15, 1939, Box 3 File 6, VEC.

proposed community.⁴² Board members provided the other half of the money and expected a return on their investment in order to rotate the money to future settlements.⁴³ These willing investors provided the means for Johnson to implement his ideas for Van Eeden.

With these funds, Johnson was able to purchase a tract containing 1080 acres of land in rural Pender County, North Carolina. The land was available through Johnson's former land reclamation associate, Hugh MacRae.⁴⁴ Previously, Frederick Van Eeden, a French doctor, owned the land. In 1912, he convinced twelve Dutch families to settle the area and although the settlement ultimately failed, Johnson's new community kept the name Van Eeden.⁴⁵

In the 1930s and 1940s only 10 percent of Pender County's land was developed and the county was largely agricultural. According to a 1940 census, the population totaled 17, 810 people and was the fifth largest county in the state.⁴⁶ Johnson chose this location because of the county's reputation for development, high levels of crop production, and favorable climate.⁴⁷ Johnson was able to acquire the land from Hugh MacRae at a price of \$50, 000 dollars, comparably lower than the cost of other tracts of

⁴² Refugee Economic Corporation *Quest for Settlement: Summaries of Selected Economic and Geographic Reports on Settlement Possibilities for European Immigrants* (New York: Ganis & Arnis, 1948), 9.

⁴³ Johnson to Arons, March 27, 1941, VEC.

⁴⁴ Hugh MacRae to Alvin Johnson, August 5, 1939, Box 3 File 6, VEC.

⁴⁵ Jimmy Tate Teriell *The Interpretation of the Cultural Landscapes of Pender County: The Architectural Heritage of Watha, St. Helena, Van Eeden, and Penderlea* (a thesis submitted to UNCW for the degree of master of arts), 2001, 24.

⁴⁶ Mattie Bloodworth *History of Pender County North Carolina* (Richmond, Virginia: The Dietz Printing Company, 1947), 7.

⁴⁷ Johnson to Baruch, March 15, 1939, Box 3 File 6, VEC.

land in the area.⁴⁸ Johnson recruited supporters and purchased the land, but finding suitable settlers was a daunting task.

Not just any refugee would be accepted into Van Eeden. With a large number of refugees clamoring at the doors of the United States, Johnson received applications from a number of refugees willing to take the risk involved in settling in his community. Johnson searched for refugees experienced in German farming and also looked for settlers who were specifically trained in certain handicrafts.⁴⁹ Yet, Johnson recognized that experience was not necessarily a prerequisite for skill in farming. He noted, “We are all sons of Adam, his hoe is on our shoulders.” Yet this optimism did not prevent Johnson from worrying about the “complete lack of soil consciousness” of the settlers.⁵⁰ Johnson understood that making Van Eeden successful meant finding qualified individuals who were hardworking and experienced in farming. Despite his sympathy for the refugees, Johnson did evaluate each prospective family in terms of their likelihood of success in an agricultural setting.

A prerequisite of farming experience was established in response to Johnson’s hope to eventually implement his ideas for a bigger picture. Johnson was not content in providing a refuge for only a few families, but hoped to ultimately establish a number of communities like Van Eeden. In his report on Van Eeden, Johnson commented, “Our great asset is an idea and an ideal, which every member of the settlement participates in more or less vividly, the ideal of building a type of independent and agreeable life on the soil for the world’s disinherited. Our individual settlers want to succeed themselves, but

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 2, VEC; Hugh MacRae to Alvin Johnson, August 5, 1939, Box 3 File 6, VEC.

⁴⁹ Johnson *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 2, VEC.

⁵⁰ Alvin Johnson, *Pioneers’ Progress*, 365.

they want the settlement to succeed.”⁵¹ The ideal of success was not intended just for individual prosperity, but for the good of the whole community and even the refugee population in general. The mission of Van Eeden was not daily survival, but an intention to make a statement to the world. In a letter to the settlers, Johnson proclaimed, “If I can show one refugee group that sets out manfully to make a success in farming, it is worth a million dollars worth of mere humanitarian propaganda. I am counting on you not to go back on the ground that you have to work harder and economize more energetically than you did in the land that cast you out...It’s not a matter of your standard of living...It is a matter of the Jews living at all, of bringing up their children in a hopeful world instead of a world of persecution. You are standard bearers for your people.”⁵² If the settlement succeeded, a gateway would be opened for a number of other families.⁵³

In order to achieve this level of success, Johnson scrutinized a number of applications to find the ideal settlers. The families all shared the characteristics of having little to no capital and were unable to find unemployment in their former occupations.⁵⁴ Johnson himself noted that they were an unusually intelligent group of people.⁵⁵ After carefully analyzing a number of applications, Johnson selected a few families who arrived as Van Eeden’s first settlers in late 1939.⁵⁶

A few of these settlers possessed farming experience, as Johnson had preferred. One settler, Mr. Lewin, was a farmer in Germany.⁵⁷ Mr. Wolf, the most experienced of the Van Eeden families, worked as a cattleman, wine grower, and vegetable cultivator in

⁵¹ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 8, VEC.

⁵² Johnson to Settlers, August 26, 1940, Box 3 File 4, VEC.

⁵³ Johnson to Flatow, January 14, 1941, Box 1 File 4, VEC.

⁵⁴ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 1, VEC.

⁵⁵ Johnson to Grenville Clark, June 30, 1939, Box 3 File 6, VEC.

⁵⁶ Loeb to Krawitz, December 10, 1939, Box 2 File 16, VEC.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 13, VEC.

Germany.⁵⁸ Interestingly, he was sent to a concentration camp in Sachsenhausen in 1933 until he found refuge at Van Eeden. He was able to escape because at this early date, the Germans still employed a policy of forced emigration to purge the Jewish population.⁵⁹ Furthermore, some of the settlers entered the United States under the preference quota as an “agriculturalist.”⁶⁰ Another man with experience in cattle farming, Leopold Collin, an expert on drainage was an ex-Prussian army officer.⁶¹ These settlers offered agricultural expertise to Van Eden.

However, these men constituted the minority who possessed the farming experience, which Johnson sought. The other settlers were primarily well-educated businessmen who demonstrated that the settlement was composed mainly of families who enjoyed a happy existence in Germany before Hitler’s ascension to power. Son of a prominent German businessman, Leonard Heimann studied political economy at Cologne.⁶² He was employed at the Anhaltische Kohlenwerke before he was laid off because of his Jewish background. His wife Henny was a schoolteacher who spoke German, English, and French.⁶³ Furthermore, another settler, Hubert Ladenburg boasted a doctorate in economics from Munich University where he graduated *magna cum laude*.⁶⁴ In Germany, he worked in banking institutions preparing financial statements.⁶⁵ Another settler, Felix Willman was an Austrian accountant who worked in his profession until he was sent to the Dachau concentration camp.⁶⁶ The settlers were a diverse group

⁵⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁹ Susan Taylor Block *Van Eeden* Lower Cape Fear Historical Society 1995 Bulletin XL 1, 4.

⁶⁰ Cecilia Razovsky to Johnson, November 22, 1939, Box 3 File 4, VEC.

⁶¹ Block, 14; Mrs. Collins to Johnson, September 11, 1940, Box 1 File 7, VEC.

⁶² Block, 11.

⁶³ Heimann Background, Box 2 File 11, VEC.

⁶⁴ Ladenburg Background, Box 1 File 20, VEC.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 13, VEC.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 13, VEC.

of cultured people who had previously enjoyed middle to upper class lifestyles in their German homeland. However, the Nazis changed their status and way of life dramatically before they ultimately landed in Van Eeden.

“As the train drops you off at Van Eeden the sound of cocks crowing, hens reporting eggs, geese talking politics, guineas shrieking protests, makes you forget that the world at large is oppressed by fear and dangers.⁶⁷ This melodious greeting, which Johnson described on one of his visits to Van Eeden, must have been similar to the welcome that the first four families encountered upon their arrival in the fall of 1939 and the winter of 1940. Each of the families settled in their own home and accepted the task of cultivating their own farms. The Corporation had divided the land into ten-acre farms, each with a cottage. The cottages were equipped with a kitchen and dining room, two bedrooms, a working porch, a bathroom, and wood-burning heaters but lacked the luxuries of electricity and running water.⁶⁸ One of the settlers reported how much he enjoyed his “very pretty little house.”⁶⁹

While living at Van Eeden, the settlers dedicated themselves to intense farm work. One of the first settlers described daily life at Van Eden:

We begin work at 7 a.m. and must mix manure for the field which is situated right behind the house. We fertilize by tractor or by mules. Then we chop wood and attend to all other necessary work. First everything was rather hard, but now it is alright. From 12 to 1 we have lunch and at 5:30 p.m. we call it a day.⁷⁰

According to Johnson, the farmers focused on “garden truck” intended for sale in the markets of Northern cities. They were also expected to produce vegetables, milk, eggs,

⁶⁷ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 1, VEC.

⁶⁸ David Loeb to Mr. Krawitz, December 10, 1939, Box 2 File 16, VEC; Alvin Johnson *Van Eeden*, November 18, 1939, Box 3 File 7, VEC.

⁶⁹ David Loeb to Mr. Krawitz, December 10, 1939, Box 2 File 16, VEC.

⁷⁰ David Loeb to Mr. Krawitz, December 10, 1939, Box 2 File 16, VEC.

chicken, and other necessities that would provide for their own family.⁷¹ In addition to routine farm work, some of the settlers determined to learn specialty areas in farming including dairy and poultry farming.⁷² The families were also given the communal task of renovating their community by adding flowers, berries, and grapes.⁷³ Each settler was responsible for their own farm, providing food for their family, and also contributing to the greater well being of the community.

The demands of farm life drained the settlers who tired themselves in an attempt to make a profit from the land. Oftentimes, the settlers ended up competing with their neighbors in the quest to be successful. Actually, a substantial number of the letters that the settlers sent to Johnson dealt with quarrels between the families at Van Eeden as well as the troubles settlers confronted in adapting to this type of farming life. Johnson noted that low morale resulted from disenchantment caused by lack of crop production and arguments among the various families.⁷⁴ Many of the settlers were too concerned about themselves to be worried about others or the good of the community as a whole. For example, Johnson admonished Arthur Flatow for being a rabble-rouser who was too self-centered for life at Van Eeden.⁷⁵ One settler, Hubert Ladenburg reported, “We had hoped that Van Eeden would develop along the ideas you have set before us; but the reality is alas, very different. No one wants to cooperate...I feel that at least some of the settlers are too interested in their personal success to be truly cooperative.”⁷⁶ During his stay at

⁷¹ Johnson to Loeb, May 30, 1939, Box 2 File 16, VEC.

⁷² Stein to Johnson, June 17, 1942, Box 1 File 1, VEC.

⁷³ Johnson to Heimann, February 5, 1940, Box 2 File 7, VEC.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 9, VEC.

⁷⁵ Johnson to Arthur Flatow, September 18, 1940, Box 1 File 3, VEC.

⁷⁶ Ladenburg to Johnson, July 31, 1941, Box 1 File 19, VEC.

Van Eeden a farming expert, Dr. Joffe, noted that envy, distrust, and rivalry all played a significant role in life at Van Eden.⁷⁷

In response to a number of appeals to mediate arguments, which occurred at Van Eeden, Johnson exhorted the settlers to focus on their work and not disturb the other settlers. He admitted, “There is a certain amount of friction at Van Eeden.”⁷⁸

Beleaguered by continual complaints, Johnson questioned the settlers, “Do you know why it is nearly impossible to settle Jews on farms? It is because the Jew is a fool with his tongue...one tells poisonous stories about one another...You are men and women. You have tasted the horrors of Nazi persecution. Can you be so crazy as to want to bring this persecution on yourselves again? For God’s sake, let me hear no more of this idiotic nonsense of quarrels.”⁷⁹ Internal conflict plagued the community and diminished morale causing disillusionment among the settlers as well as Johnson himself.

Johnson speculated that the change to farm life in America was difficult for many of the settlers. Despite their earnest efforts to be successful at Van Eeden, they were often discouraged by failures in farming.⁸⁰ In response to the numerous complaints he received, Johnson retorted with contempt for their lack of gratitude. “If you were an American,” he stated, “this would not be possible. The German culture does not encourage appreciation.”⁸¹ Apparently, Johnson had surmised from his experiences in Germany and from his relationships with German associates, that German culture did not foster a spirit of indebtedness, but rather a feeling of entitlement.⁸² Yet, one settler

⁷⁷ Dr. Joffe to Johnson, March 27, 1941, Box 2 File 23, VEC.

⁷⁸ Johnson to Judge Moore, June 8, 1943, Box 1 File 22, VEC.

⁷⁹ Johnson to Settlers, January 6, 1942, Box 3 File 4, VEC.

⁸⁰ Johnson to Unknown, April 18, 1941, Box 2 File 23, VEC.

⁸¹ Johnson to Konrad Halle, June 2, 1943, Box 1 File 22, VEC.

⁸² Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 333.

acknowledged, “We fully realize that not only our time and labor are at stake but also the funds so liberally invested and last [but] not least, your grandiose idea of proving that Jewish agricultural colonies can greatly contribute towards solving the Jewish problem.”⁸³ However, the colonists lacked the fervor and energy to mobilize in order to achieve Johnson’s goals. Thus Johnson was often frustrated by settlers who lacked the foresight to understand the larger purpose of Van Eeden, weighed down by the pessimism associated with quarrels and complaints.

However, in response to settler problems, Johnson frequently corresponded with the families, providing them with support and guidance. When they became preoccupied with disputes and routine difficulties, Johnson reminded them of the actual purpose of Van Eeden. He warned them that he would not have gone through all the trouble associated with the settlement if it existed only for the families who had settled there. He acknowledged that he actually wanted Van Eeden to serve as an instrument of propaganda. Johnson hoped that this sort of propaganda would prevent Congress from eliminating Jewish emigration to the United States altogether by showing that the Jewish refugees at Van Eeden functioned as successful members in their community. Consequently, he expected the settlers to “consider, along with their personal interest, the larger interest,” to put aside trivialities for the greater good.⁸⁴

Although daily life at Van Eeden certainly supplied a number of hardships, the settlers were able to positively interact with the outside community and combat many traditional Jewish stereotypes. Hugh MacRae, from whom Johnson had purchased the land, worked on establishing good community relations for Van Eeden before the

⁸³ Ladenburg to Johnson, November 15, 1940, Box 1 File 17, VEC.

⁸⁴ Johnson to Heimann, February 5, 1940, Box 2 File 7, VEC.

settlers' arrival.⁸⁵ The managers at Van Eeden were also required to foster relations with people who inhabited the area.⁸⁶ One of the settlers, Leonard Heimman reported his delight that the neighboring population was both friendly and welcoming.⁸⁷ In an interview with a resident of Watha, a nearby community, Jimmy Teriell Tate found that the people there embraced the Jewish families at Van Eeden while some even forged personal relationships with the settlers.⁸⁸

Furthermore, the children of Van Eeden attended school at the neighboring government project, Penderlea where they too found a hospitable group of peers.⁸⁹ The children rode the bus to school and participated in the classroom just as an average American student would.⁹⁰ Sarnia Marquand, Johnson's secretary at the New School University for Social Research in New York visited Van Eeden and went to school with one of the children, Ursula Flatow. She found that in general, the children managed very well at school, "but occasionally [the children were] suspicious and call[ed] them Germans or Jews." However, these infrequent cases did not impede Ursula from winning best all-around at school.⁹¹ Leonard Heimann was even invited by the local high school to speak on the situation in Germany.⁹² Johnson concluded that the conditions at Van Eeden were probably the best that one could hope for under the present circumstances.

⁸⁵ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 7, VEC.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁷ Leonard Heimann to Johnson, October 28, 1939, Box 2 File 6, VEC.

⁸⁸ Tate, 28.

⁸⁹ David Loeb to Krawitz, December 10, 1939, Box 2 File 16, VEC.

⁹⁰ Photograph Klaus Heimann in school, Box 2 File 3, VEC; Photograph of Klaus and boy From Watha in school bus, Box 2 File 5, VEC.

⁹¹ Sarnia Marquand Observations, March 25, 1941, Box 2 File 23, 2, VEC.

⁹² Leonard Heimann to Johnson, October 28, 1939, Box 2 File 6.

The local community expressed sympathy for the idea of resettlement, an outcome that Johnson had hoped for.⁹³

However, there was one case, which did demonstrate the predominance of anti-Semitic attitudes during this time period. A settler, Konrad Halle, was involved in an argument with one of the other settlers whom he deemed a menace to Van Eeden. In an outburst of anger he declared that men like that should be in Hitler's concentration camps. This quarrel reached the ears of a judge in Pender County who reacted with suspicion, worrying that Halle might be a Nazi sympathizer. In a letter to Johnson, Judge Clifton L. Moore warned Johnson that rumors of the argument could spread throughout the community and "the whole settlement might be blamed."⁹⁴ Johnson assured the judge that he would hastily put an end to "Nazi sounding talk at Van Eeden."⁹⁵ Despite this one instance, the settlers at Van Eeden were largely accepted members of the community who experienced few instances of bigotry at a time when anti-Semitism was common.

Ultimately, the last of the settlers left Van Eeden and the settlement collapsed in 1943. Information on the exact details on how the settlers disbanded is lacking, but as World War II ended, promising opportunities drew the families away and back to their fields of expertise.⁹⁶ After the settlement shut down, James Wilkins purchased the land from the Alvin Corporation.⁹⁷ At the settlements close, Johnson commented, "The losses

⁹³ Johnson, *Van Eeden*, Box 3 File 8, 7.

⁹⁴ Judge Clifton L. Moore to Johnson, June 5, 1943, Box 1 File 22, VEC.

⁹⁵ Johnson to Moore, June 8, 1943, Box 1 File 22, VEC.

⁹⁶ Johnson to Flatow, August 4, 1941, Box 1 File 4, VEC; United States Department of Justice to Johnson, 1944, Box 1 File 6, VEC; Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 365.

⁹⁷ Tate, 29.

did not weigh us down seriously. After all, there were some fifty souls for whom we had provided a refuge through the period of unemployment.”⁹⁸

Despite Johnson and the settlers’ continual efforts to make a difference and create a successful community, Van Eeden eventually failed in its long-term goals, yet did manage to earn a number of short-term successes. Dr. E.C. Branson, an expert on agricultural communities noted, “It is difficult to make farming a profitable business. It is even more difficult to make farming a satisfying way of life. Both ideals call for farm owners grouped in colonies ...solving together the economic and social problems of farm life and livelihood.”⁹⁹ The settlers at Van Eeden confronted these problems, yet were unable to overcome and create a viable community.

Initially, immigration restrictions made it difficult to find applicants with all the desired skills and experience which Johnson sought as well as the number of families, which he had hoped for. Once the settlement was fully functional, the amalgam of people expected to coexist peacefully often misunderstood each other and had individual goals, which interfered with the greater good of the settlement and resulted in sporadic squabbles. These disagreements acted as a destabilizing factor in the community and hindered even the hardest working, most peaceful families from focusing on Johnson’s larger purpose for Van Eeden.

Additionally, many of the settlers lacked the motivation to create the kind of community which Johnson envisioned. Johnson communicated and even visited the settlers quite frequently hoping to impart vision, wisdom, and confidence. However, it is questionable whether random families, although experienced with the horrors of Nazi

⁹⁸ Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, 365.

⁹⁹ Dr. E.C. Branson “Planned Colonies of Farm Owners”, *Economic Problems of Reclamation* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 21.

atrocities, could have banded together continually in an effort to succeed for others and not put themselves first. Some settlers had even been sent to Nazi concentration camps. Yet while living in the United States the Nazi threat probably seemed far away and they were unable to comprehend the significance Van Eeden could have achieved if it had been a success. Johnson's passion to see Van Eeden succeed for the sake of the Jewish population and refugee cause failed to provide enough motivation to persuade the families to cooperate towards that goal.

Experience or lack thereof proved to be another detriment to Van Eeden's potential to succeed. Half of the settlers lacked the experience necessary for successful farms, while even the settlers who had abundant experience in agricultural, had never worked under the conditions at Van Eeden with a climate much different from Germany or Austria.¹⁰⁰ Lack of skill among the settlers proved to be another issue that resulted in low morale at Van Eeden.

Finally, the implementation of the Final Solution made it impossible for additional Jewish refugees to enter the United States. Even if Van Eeden had become successful as late as 1942, Johnson would have been unable to recruit additional Jews outside the United States borders.

Could resettlement in agricultural communities have worked if the settlements had achieved widespread support? It seems doubtful and unlikely that even a wider support base could have assured success. Most of these settlers came from successful backgrounds and had achieved prominence in their fields. The shock of persecution combined with the difficulty in locating jobs may have been a humbling experience, but it seems inadequate in inspiring the settlers to work in an effort to make a statement. The

¹⁰⁰ Johnson to Dr. Jacob Billikopf, March 25, 1933, Box 3 File 7, VEC.

possibility of changing attitudes toward the refugee question became a remote concept to settlers who could not produce immediate results. These factors dictated the unlikelihood for farming communities to succeed.

The establishment of Van Eeden demonstrated the will of refugee advocates who tried to make a difference in an environment that opposed looser immigration restrictions and largely ignored the plight of the Jewish refugee. Alvin Johnson is an example of a man who tirelessly dedicated himself to an ideal, which had the chance of changing American indifference toward the refugee question. However, the often ambivalent and hostile attitudes, which typified American thought toward the refugee question, hindered Johnson's efforts to achieve his goal.

Although Johnson's aspiration to create a successful, world-changing community may have seemed attainable at its inception, this goal may have been too lofty. Despite Johnson's research efforts in finding the perfect location, intense analysis of potential applicants, and inexhaustible devotion to each family at Van Eeden, he failed to succeed in his long-term goals and the settlement eventually ended, never reaching the magnitude or level of success that he had anticipated. Difficulties in producing enough yield to continue without increased financial assistance, coupled with the low morale produced by frequent quarrels among settlers, made it difficult for Van Eeden to grow and prosper. However, in spite of the overall failure of the settlement, Johnson did accomplish the task of providing a refuge and also sustenance for the families at Van Eeden, while also helping to counteract Jewish stereotypes to the neighboring communities.

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