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A Soap Maker and Single-Tax Zionism

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IN 1912, Joseph Fels, who had successfully promoted Fels-Naptha soap into a household commonplace, set forth his views to an acquaintance in Buenos Aires:

"I may not before have mentioned to you that being a Jew I am greatly interested in the future of my people, and for several years I have been co-operating with such men as Israel Zangwill, the author and dramatist, who is President of the Jewish Territorial Organization, its headquarters being in London. For several years, the organization has been on the lookout for a country in which the oppressed Jews of Russia and other lands might be invited to settle, where a measure at least of autonomy might be had. . . .

"My interest in this matter is

very great, of course, and grows as I see the constant cruelties which are heaped upon my people, they being defenseless under the Russian government. Whether or not autonomy could be gained by settlement in one or the other South American countries is a matter about which I would like to consult with you . . . Of course, I have in mind the right kind of landlords, and my interest is not unmixed with my obsession in the direction of the single tax."

Here was a curious juxtaposition of the ancient yearning of Jewry for a homeland with the single-tax philosophy of Henry George. It was characteristic of Fels to elevate the so-called land question above all others, even while advocating social progress on many fronts including Jewish nationalism. As Israel Zangwill

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recalled, in connection with his own purposes for the Jewish Territorial Organization (I.T.O.):

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

Born in 1854 near Richmond, Virginia, Joseph Fels was the fourth of seven children. His parents, Lazarus and Susannah Freiberg Fels, were Jews from the Palatinate, "forty-eighters" who had escaped to the United States together with their first three children from the hardships and turmoil which accompanied the collapse of liberal, revolutionary hopes everywhere. After an initial period of wandering from one place to another, they settled in Yanceyville, North Carolina, where Lazarus Fels operated the general store while doubling as village postmaster.

The defeat of the Confederacy forced the Fels family to move again, this time northward first to Baltimore and then to Philadelphia by 1873.

Three years later, Lazarus and Joseph Fels established Fels & Company, manufacturers of soaps, a partnership initially in which the son, now twenty-three, provided the forward thrust. Joseph's youngest brother, Samuel, likewise became a partner in due course eventually assuming re-

sponsibility for manufacturing, while Joseph continued to travel most of the time as the firm's chief purchasing and sales agent. On one of his forays into the hinterland, he married Mary Fels of Keokuk, Iowa, a distant cousin.

In 1893, the famous "saponaceous compound," as Joseph Fels liked to refer to his trade-mark, the familiar yellow, Fels-Naptha laundry soap, was added to the firm's line by the outright purchase of a technologically sound though bankrupt process. It proved such an instant success in American households that the Fels brothers were soon concentrating exclusively on this product, and they quickly became substantially wealthy by doing so.

Joseph Fels' home life had been that of a typically close-knit, immigrant Jewish family; its basic traditions those of Judaism interpreted through the German language.

His boyhood in Virginia surrounded him with the cultural patterns of the upper South, a stratified region of rich and poor, white and black, free and enslaved.

His instinctive nature blended an inherently democratic attitude with Jewish humanitarianism. He was individualistic, equalitarian, and compassionate from the beginning. Yet the passing years lured Fels away from the service of the synagogue, one outcome at least of his commercial traveling and its inevitable inconveniences

for formal devotions. More importantly, Fels began to respond to the extraordinary varieties of life and experience he encountered while his own world enlarged. So whatever faith he retained concerned religious orthodoxy not at all, but came to center about his conviction of an underlying brotherhood which binds all mankind.

Then, during the 1880's, Joseph and Mary Fels' home acquired a resemblance, later to become characteristic, to an eighteenth century *salon*, a soap-maker's center of expression and enlightenment, where novel ideas, talents, and panaceas competed with each other for welcome attention and flattery. And it continued thereafter, whether in Philadelphia or London, with Mary Fels presiding, that the Fels home gathered beneath its hospitable eaves thinkers, painters, sculptors, musicians, reformers, and refugees of many stripes and persuasions.

Until late in the 1890's, three viewpoints dominated the proceedings: (1) an idealistically romantic, democratic faith, as propagated by disciples of Walt Whitman from among his Camden bedside following; (2) social and economic cure-alls inspired in the main either by Henry George or Edward Bellamy, or the two haphazardly combined; (3) that higher morality divorced from theology as propounded by the Society for Ethical Culture and represented especially among its more

thoroughly assimilated Jewish adherents.

The earliest reform enterprises to attract Fels' support were the Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, which was instituted during the depression after 1893 to make idle land available for cultivation by the unemployed, and a single-tax demonstration colony in Alabama.

Nor was it coincidental that Fels persisted after 1900 in relating to the question of land monopoly the predicament of whichever individuals currently were enlisting his sympathy. Any just and worthwhile arrangement for human society, he became convinced, must remove the marginal classes from city slums to the healthful countryside as self-supporting agriculturists. This conviction was what brought him to the attention of Israel Zangwill, and enlisted his support for the I.T.O.

The Jewish Territorial Organization owed its existence to the split in the Zionist movement that developed over the East African or "Uganda" project.

In 1903, at the sixth Zionist Congress, Theodor Herzl had thrown the delegates into violent confusion by informing them of the British government's offer of the Uasin Gishu plateau for a Jewish homeland, some six thousand miles square in area, virtually unpopulated, and reputedly of healthy climate.

Herzl's determination to accept

Britain's proposal was denounced bitterly as a betrayal of the Zionist movement, and he was barely able to command support for his insistence that an expedition be dispatched to East Africa to explore its possibilities.

Herzl died, however, even before the expedition could depart, and at the seventh Zionist Congress in 1905, the East African project was summarily rejected on the premise that the area proposed was unsuitable. It was then that the I.T.O. was born out of a small minority of the delegates, with the stated objective of: "Saving the East African plateau for the Jewish people or else of obtaining other territories in response to the urgent need of Jewish emigration, which pouring from Russia alone at the rate of 100,000 a year, could find no welcome anywhere."

Israel Zangwill was chosen its president.

Before long Zangwill was sought out by Joseph Fels, who had been residing more or less permanently in England since 1901. Fels had moved to England to establish a European sales and distribution outlet in London.

By late 1903, his soap was selling satisfactorily, and he turned again to his interest in poverty and the land question, involving himself and his purse in a succession of back-to-the-land ventures as well as vacant land cultivation projects to relieve distress among Britain's unemployed. It

seems almost inevitable in retrospect that Fels should have called on Israel Zangwill and become a supporter of the I.T.O.

Zangwill vividly portrayed their first encounter: "I had never heard of Joseph Fels," he wrote, "until a shining-eyed little man walked into my office unannounced and unheralded, and offered me a hundred thousand dollars . . . What Mr. Fels wanted was that the state to be brought into being should be established on a single-tax basis."

The matter which brought Fels and Zangwill together in the first place was too profound to be discarded lightly, even when their ultimate objectives seemed so disparate.

Zangwill was concerned only that a self-governing homeland for Jews be established somewhere, with living room to spare and natural resources sufficient for civilization to flourish.

Fels desired above all to abolish poverty. To accomplish his goal, he believed, he must first demonstrate that the injustices of society originated in land monopoly, which permitted private individuals to expropriate the unearned or social increment of wealth.

Then it would become possible to educate all who would listen to the wisdom of Henry George's single-tax, or the confiscation for the collective welfare of that unearned increment which the monopoly of land afforded when pressured by social growth.

Zangwill hoped that I.T.O.'s Zion would construct its own body politic upon principles of social harmony, which necessarily admitted a fair system of taxation and an equitable sharing of the resources of the good earth. So it developed that Joseph Fels supported a number of I.T.O.'s colonization schemes for homeless Jews to prove his major premise. He even sought to promote some projects on his own initiative.

In 1906, Fels inquired of Zangwill if I.T.O. might be interested in "forming a community" within the United States based upon principles of "ownership of the land by the public or an association." Apparently Fels was thinking of locating such an experiment in the South.

Later in the same year, Fels proposed that "a few Jewish families, used to agriculture," be settled on certain small holdings he owned at Mayland in Essex, England.

By December, 1906, his imagination lighted upon South America as a possibility. To Zangwill, he wrote: "The more I learn about Paraguay, the more favorably that land appeals to me for your purposes." At the same time, Fels repeated that he was "earnestly concerned" to reap the benefits of a successful demonstration farm colony in England.

"Such an experiment would show right here at home," he emphasized, "that the Jew *will* take to agriculture under fair condi-

tions." Next he sought to learn as much as he was able about the chances of establishing settlements in Mexico or Cyprus. Also he threw his resources and energies into I.T.O.'s program of sponsoring immigration into the United States through the port of Galveston.

However, Zangwill was chary of many of Fels' enthusiasms, tax and reform issues notwithstanding. Too much was at stake to risk blundering. He was fearful, on the one hand, of frittering away the energies of the Jewish people on projects he regarded as insignificant for his larger purposes, or, on the other hand, of stirring up hornets' nests of nationalistic opposition.

"You know my own opinion," he wrote Fels, "that a real Jewish territory can only be acquired in a land like North Africa or Mesopotamia, where there is no dominant race with patriotic or chauvinistic ideas."

Zangwill's preference for a North African settlement led Fels to an unforgettable interview with Lord Rothschild late in 1907. It became Fels' mission to inquire from Rothschild whether his consideration had been given to North Africa for Jewish settlement, and if so, what did he think of Cyrenaica in particular?

Angrily afterward, Fels summarized Rothschild's reaction for Zangwill's benefit. "He replied that he would not listen to such a thing at all," Fels stated. "I then

asked him what his own ideas on the subject were, to which he clearly replied in as impatient a tone as he knew how, that there was no hope of the Jews forming a nation, as they had none of the elements in themselves to make a success of a separate country of their own! that those Jews from Russia who had emigrated to other countries wanted to go back, or, at any rate, the great majority did; and [he] further asserted that the only hope for the Jews was to emigrate to those civilized countries where they will be least objected to and become absorbed into such countries as parts and parcels thereof, like other emigrants. . . .

Exactly eight minutes after the interview commenced, Rothschild departed without ceremony, with the pre-emptory farewell: "That is all, Mr. Fels." Fels concluded bitterly: "If it were possible for any set of Jews to be of the same stripe as his lordship, then I would not wonder at the anti-Semitic feeling of the people around them."

Lord Rothschild notwithstanding, Cyrenaica continued to command close attention, because of "its magnificent situation on the Mediterranean . . . within a short sail of Palestine." I.T.O. prepared an on-the-spot investigation. Fels' interest actually proved so intense that he hastened with Zangwill to Folkestone, August 26, 1908, to meet the expedition upon its return from North Africa.

There and then Fels and Zangwill learned that the "vaunted land" of their combined hopes was in truth "a dangerous desert."

Fels and Zangwill continued their search for havens for the oppressed and uprooted. Mesopotamia was one such place with alluring possibilities. Fels continued to sound out travelers from the Levant about the Sultan's attitude concerning the establishment of locally autonomous settlements of Jews within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Brazil was discussed also. In September, 1908, Fels communicated reports to Zangwill of an offer of cotton lands there.

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

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

And again from Zangwill:

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

Fels also broached or consider-

ed Colombia, Rhodesia, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Mexico, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm or investigation. The Mexican notion brought him into contact with Daniel Guggenheim, whose mining interests had long familiarized him with the areas in question.

Guggenheim always insisted Mexico was too arid for substantial settlement, while Zangwill feared its revolutionary temper. Fels had to see for himself. He journeyed all the way to Mexico City to seek concessions from President Diaz.

Diaz was willing enough to facilitate the immigration of Jewish industrial and commercial workers, but he opposed Fels' scheme for a special colony of agriculturists. Another time Fels considered an idea for settling the region of the Pilcomayo River which forms the boundary area between Argentina and the Chaco region of Bolivia and Paraguay. Zangwill viewed it as impractical.

Neither did Paraguay itself prove any more fruitful, though Fels owned extensive tracts there, obtained during his original display of interest in South America. He had hoped to develop the production of vegetable, peanut, and palm oils for his soap manufacturing, and to employ Jewish pioneer immigrants in the process.

The sole bright spot was supplied by the stream of Jewish refugees entering the United States from Russia under the aus-

pices of I.T.O., in co-operation with the Jewish Immigrants Information Bureau which Jacob H. Schiff supported.

This program afforded immediate relief for many Jews whose plight was too acute to await the formation of a Zionist state. Galveston was selected as the port of entry to divert Jews to the western states, avoiding thereby what Zangwill termed the "self-made ghettos" along the eastern seaboard.

Even so United States authorities began to show signs of that growing nativist intransigence which eventually all but closed America's "golden door." Upon at least one occasion at Galveston, an entire shipload of Jewish immigrants was rejected on charges of "poor physique," whereupon Fels hurried off to Bremen with Zangwill to aid in relieving their distress.

With 1910, Joseph Fels began to spend a greater part of each year in the United States. Consequently he devoted an increased portion of his resources to single-tax reform projects for his native land. Fels began to drift somewhat apart from Israel Zangwill and the Jewish Territorial Organization.

I.T.O. had never been more for Fels than one of his "sideshowes," as Zangwill knew, albeit an important one. Now he discarded almost all else but the consuming passion for Henry George's single-tax panacea which had latterly

overwhelmed him. He traveled endlessly, preached constantly, and spent extravagantly to propagate his faith, for he was convinced that the hour was propitious "to put over the single-tax somewhere." An inevitable result of his zealotry was that Fels devoted much less attention than before to the Jewish Territorial Organization.

Still more significantly now, Fels edged away from territorialism and almost imperceptibly toward the mainstream of Zionism. Perhaps this was because in the United States he was geographically removed from Zangwill's personal influence, and due as well to his wife's gathering preference for Palestine as the Jewish homeland. I.T.O.'s Angola enterprise provided a case in point.

Fels himself had originally supplied no less than half the wherewithal for an expedition to investigate Angola on the west coast of Africa, when it appeared likely that Portuguese fears of German imperialism might result in a territorial concession to the homeless Jews of the world. Yet, on November 15, 1912, Zangwill was writing to Fels:

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

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

"Useless to send me newspaper articles about Palestine—I know

Life is a passing shadow, says the Scripture. Is it the shadow of a tower or a tree? A shadow that prevails for a while? No; it is the shadow of a bird in his flight—away flies the bird and there is neither bird nor shadow.

—The Talmud

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

In September, 1913, it became clearer where Fels stood.

"Is it not altogether possible that, if you secure Angola," he asked Zangwill, "the race question may arise there just as at present in the southern part of the U.S.; and would it not be running a risk of the Jews jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire? I would like to talk this over seriously. The suggestion really comes from Mrs. Fels, and she knows things."

And there matters rested. Joseph Fels died on Washington's Birthday, 1914, but the directions visible before his death continued for some time under the aegis of his widow. Ultimately, however, even the single-tax it-

self was surrendered as a primary objective, until Palestinian Zionism commanded most of her attention.

By 1920, the world of Joseph Fels was far distant, and a great deal that would have seemed important to him was being redesignated. The Joseph Fels Fund Commission, which had been created in 1909 to win over spectacularly some American community to the single-tax, passed away quietly into the reformers' limbo. In England, Mary Fels withheld any further financial support from the single-taxers' United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values to which her husband had donated at least L60,000 between 1909 and 1913. There, in this instance, her action virtually sounded a death knell for land reform agitation. Mary Fels herself chronicled that change, which was completed shortly after the end of the first World War.

"It was during my first visit to Palestine," she recalled in 1925, "that I awoke to the realization that the most beautiful spirit in Palestine was to be found among the older colonists who came there some fifty years ago inspired with a devotion to the Holy Land. Through their unflinching loyalty to the land which they loved beyond anything in the world, they endured their trials and tribulations without a thought of retreat. Their descendants are in *Eretz Yisroel* now, and five years ago Captain Alexander Aaronsohn or-

ganized them into a group called the B'nai Benjamin. It is on the people of this organization that I base my hope. From these, who are the finest type of beings, we may expect new light and learning."

True to her newfound convictions, Mary Fels established the Joseph Fels Foundation. Its stated objectives expressed her own faith in the Jewish people and their historic purpose.

"We have a mission to fulfill in Palestine," she announced. "We must achieve a real brotherhood of man, not only concretely, but also spiritually if we want to avert war permanently. It is from Palestine, where real brotherhood is achieved, that I look for the first proof of the oneness of God."

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

One last question must be addressed to Joseph Fels. What sort of Jew was he anyway?

First, Joseph Fels was openly proud of the race into which he was born.

"Oddly enough, in about every address I deliver," he once wrote Professor Deutsch of Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College, "clear mention is made by me, with the greatest possible pride, that I am a Jew. I go out of my way to rub it in to every audience I get before, and I do this because I am

proud of being a Jew, nor would I exchange that nationality for any other I know of, even though to escape the occasional side remarks of a fool, who may perhaps envy the actual status of the Jew!"

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

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

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

"My contention is that the code of morals taught by Jesus is a

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

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

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

Moses, Christ, and Henry George were the propagators of the gospel which Joseph Fels dedicated himself to preach, and more than once he ranged *Progress and Poverty* among "the Bibles of the world." All of which helps to explain, of course, the peculiar single-tax emphasis Fels placed on his Zionism. "My only interest in the Jewish Territorial Organization work . . .," he emphasized with finality, "is in the hope of the single-tax being put into operation in whatever country they acquire."

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

