

Pioneers Of The Plains

By FANNIE HOFFER

A LATE harvest, a heavy crop, a shortage of help and a deluge of rain storms combined to make last August and September the most difficult harvest season in the west in years. The signs of an early winter were ominous, and the Jewish farmers of Sonnenfeld colony in Southern Saskatchewan, as all farmers in Western Canada, were bucking down to the yearly business of bringing the crop into elevator and granary before time and the weather could strike their damaging blows.

It was because of my desire to be of use while home on my holidays that I volunteered to help my brother cut the 530-acre crop of wheat last fall, and it was because of the emergency that I accepted, though reluctantly.

With dad's and brother Schulem's assistance I learned to drive the W6 McCormick Deering tractor which drew a red combine of similar make around the crop as it cut, threshed and cleaned the grain in a single operation. Schulem engineered the combine.

So it was early to bed and early to rise. The sunrise, though not spectacular, was always lovely to watch. While the sky became alight with rose and purple hues and the shadows of the hills changed to a golden glow, there was a stirring of life among birds, man and beast on the earth. Presently, over the cool morning breeze would come the distant sounds of harvesting on other fields.

Though slightly rolling, our land swoops up in places to heights easily frightening to one as uninitiated in field work as I. Then it drops to deep ravines bedded with rock and thistle. My brother and I circled two such ravines, the tractor and combine wheels as close to the edge of the bank as I dared to take them, the combine canvas platform tilted up.

If we should tip . . . my heart pounded and I gripped the tractor wheel to keep it on a straight and safe course. Go slow, I had to tell myself, go slow. The stern permanence of these hills perturbed me. I looked back at my brother who was unconcernedly intent on catching every kernel of wheat while guarding the combine against plugging, and I was reassured. Schulem had grown up on these lands. He knew them as well as he knew his own hand. I was in good company.

Our farmyard home was plainly visible from where we were working. To dad, the comfortable house with its underground water system, the huge barn, the lovely orchard and the grove of trees, and his two and a half sections of land were the material substance of a boyhood dream.

"And what are you going to do in Canada?" my mother had asked him as the old boat carried them slowly away from Europe.

"Set up farming," he promptly replied.

"Farming? With what?"

"With this." And he spread out his firm, muscular hands.

I had time to think of this, and of the painful stages of growth through which the colony had passed from the year of 1907 when a group of boys, fresh from the Jewish Colonization Association agricultural school at Slovodka Lesna, Galicia, staked land 50 miles west of Estevan on township two, range 15. Of these, dad, Max Goren, Meyer Feldman, and Max Zalick are a few who have persevered to this day. The J.C.A. later came forward with financial aid, and through their efforts, the colony was expanded with families recruited from Poland and other European

Before he caught the words, he guessed. A prairie fire was approaching.

"Get on your horse and go, boy," the farmer shouted. "Save your hay and your crop if you can."

Dad's and Uncle Mayer's horses ran a valiant ten-mile race against the flames which were herded by a 40-mile-an-hour wind. They passed streams of howling coyotes and wild-eyed rabbits which were running side by side from the terror. When they brought their horses to a stop at the barn, they found their shrieking cattle huddled by the door. The flames, 30 feet high, were almost upon them.

Dad and his brother had stacked the crop near the barn until such time as the threshing outfit could be hired from the American farmer for whom they worked. Now, with the plow they drove wide fireguards around the yard, the stacks and the buildings, and burned the grass away from the edge of the furrows to prevent the flames from jumping over.

They managed to save the oats, the flax and the barley. But the 750-bushel crop of wheat was now in ashes. About \$1,000 had gone up in smoke.

In the grim days of drouth and grasshopper plagues which first struck in 1933, the carefree spirit which the colony had known began to droop and wither. Laughter died on men's lips and hope changed to dull listlessness in their eyes. The women took fright and manoeuvred to tear away from this land which had suddenly become sterile. Families, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, packed their bags and streamed to the large cities and to British Columbia and Manitoba farms, leaving their homes to the dust which sifted through the cracks to remain on the floors and walls undisturbed.

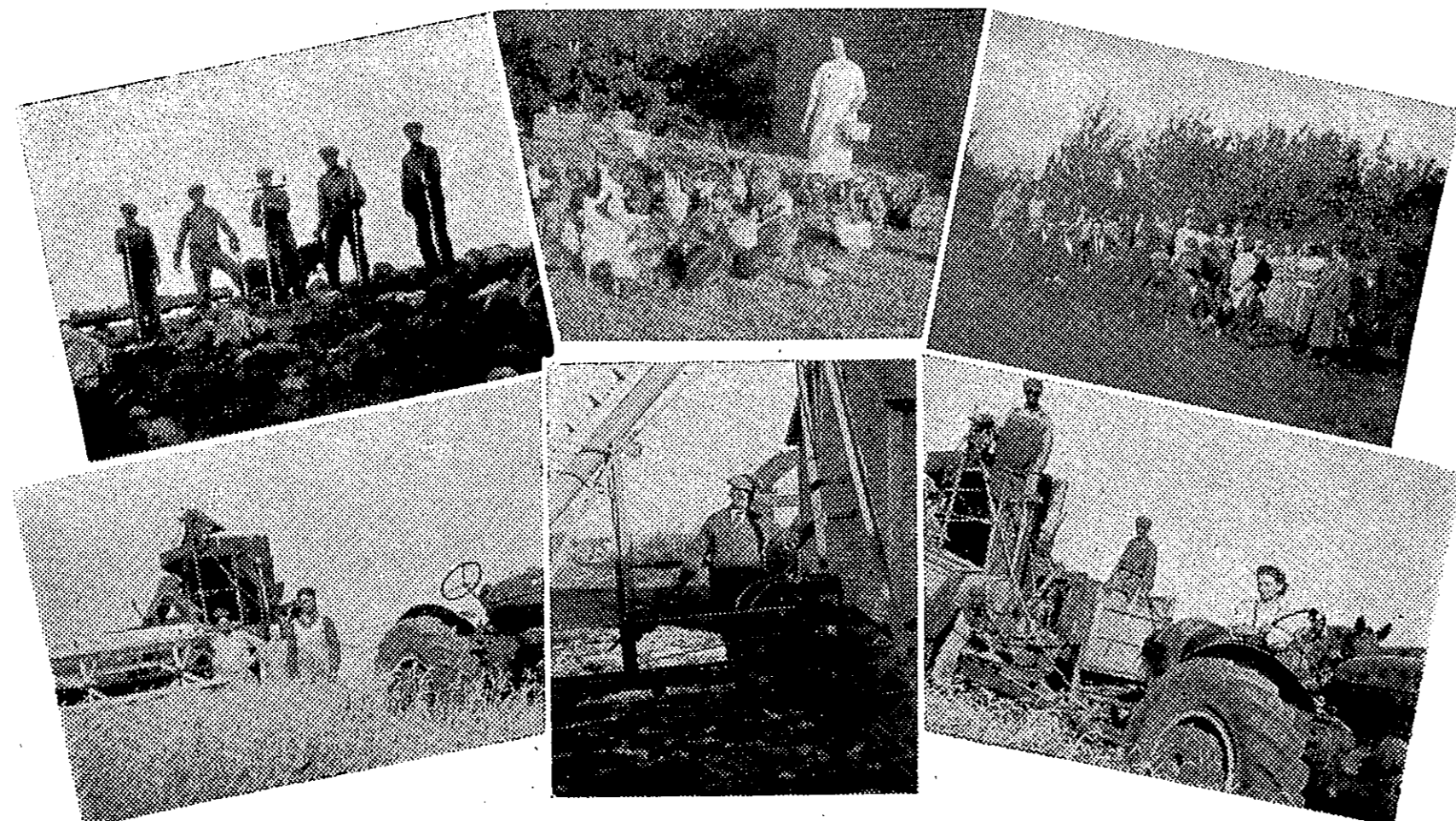
Dad was one of them who said to them, "Wait, this can't last. There'll be a change."

But the sky did not lose its feverish glare, and the empty deceiving clouds continued to gather and pass away without a trickle even to level the dust.

To mother, and to us who squirmed under the tension and strain, he said simply, "Let us wait." And we did wait, not because we had faith in the miraculous or the Divine, but because we had faith in this courageous man who could face such obvious hopelessness with unflinching optimism.

Of such stuff are pioneers made. The silence over the colony in the year of 1943 too was noticeable, but it was alive because it came from preoccupation with the "bumper" crop and the war.

The boys and girls I had grown up with had scattered. The synagogue, the community recreation centre situated in the heart of the colony, was mute while the ghosts of the past re-enacted (Cont. on Page 27)



The Sonnenfeld colony is today a thriving farming district composed of Jewish farmers and their families. The colony was started back in 1907 when a few hardy spirits, the writer's father among them, staked land 50 miles west of Estevan township. Their struggles and triumphs are described in the following article by a young girl who played her part in the development of the great venture.

Some of the difficulties encountered by the pioneers can be seen in the upper left hand picture which shows the men clearing huge rocks and boulders from the land. The progress made in spite of grasshoppers, drought, fire and many other handicaps with the vagaries of nature can be seen in the other picture which shows what can be accomplished with the will to win aided by modern farm equipment. In the centre picture at the bottom is Mr. Hoffer, the father of the colony, while at the left may be seen the author-ess at the wheel of a tractor with two of her brothers in the background.

countries. The association provided the newcomers with land, farm buildings, implements, and money. Here, as all over Canada, it has played a prominent part in the settlement of Jews on land.

Dad's first shelter on the fire-charred prairie was a grain wagon under which he lay nights. Around and above him the lightning would stab the night with its ghostly blinding light and the thunder would crash in its wake with great deafening rolls. It rained frequently, the summer of 1907, and it was with great difficulty that he and his friends broke the virgin soil while attending to such necessities as building a home and a barn for the stock.

The harvest of 1909 was unique for the widespread prairie fire which swallowed up a heavy crop in the latter part of October.

A very strong northwest wind had been blowing for three days, and a heavy smoke choked men's lungs.

Dad was pitching bundles from the hayrack into the threshing machine when, above the roar of the machine, he heard his name called. His employer, an old American farmer, was shouting and waving his arms at him.

A Passover Story for Children

I Sing Of Life

(DEDICATED TO YOUTH ALIYAH)

"For Lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth — the time of singing of birds is come." — (Song Of Songs)

IT WAS Seder night on Hadaar Hacarmel. The evening was clear and beautiful as we sat around the festive table, placed on the large verandah for the occasion. We sang the Haggadah in its quaint rhythm as the moon rose above the opposite hills, flooding the fertile country with soft mellow rays. Looking down on the surrounding colonies, we saw happy Chalutzim celebrating, and strains of joyful songs were carried on the gentle breeze, "Am Israel Chai!"

Stars like brilliant jewels studded the heavens. They glittered and whispered to one another, "Look down, and see how happy God's chosen people are tonight!" The mystic angels of Passover, who linger in the still shadows of night, spoke softly, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall again the second time recover with His hand the remnant of His people, which shall remain from persecuted countries, and He shall set up an ensign of the nations and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather them together from the four corners of the earth." . . . As though those words were spoken aloud, we murmured, "And we will give thanks unto Thee, oh Lord!" The waves of the sea dashing against the shore sang a lullaby.

Elijah, the prophet, had come and sipped his wine, because a holy radiance beamed when he smiled upon us. "An aroma of beautiful flowers filled the night. Dinner was over and prayers had been said, when the rabbi spoke, "The fragrance of flowers recalls to mind a beautiful tale which I remember being told to me when I was a boy." "Please tell it to us," we chorused . . . and this is the story. . .

"Long, long ago, when the Jews were in Egypt, a wicked Pharaoh decreed that all Jewish male children should be thrown into the Nile. Their mothers sorrowfully hid them wherever they could, but Pharaoh's soldiers (like the Nazi storm troopers of today) found them, and many of these children were lost. . . . Almighty God, let Thy mercy fall on these mothers whose tears flow to Thee. Save our children. Save them from the brink of destruction, is the fervent prayer from the depths of our broken hearts' . . . And God heard their supplication. All the children who escaped from the cities into the fields God turned into beautiful flowers by the roadside, and when over the wicked soldiers tried to pluck them, they

A Short Passover Story

By "AUNT EVA"

JUDAH

By E. G. (Age 16)

Ho, 'tis David, the King of the Jews, Who hath smitten the foe and broken the news, That the Temple of God stands as high as before, As the Kingdom of Judah, in days of yore.

'Tis King David, the King of Israel old, The leader of martyrs and warriors bold, Who defended their land with pride and with sword, To keep only holy the land of the Lord.

In defence of the Torah, in reverence of God, They planted their seeds and tilled the sod And paid homage and duty to the temple of old, So their souls unto bondage would never be sold.

They marched with banners of truth and right, Not of deceit, but of blue and of white, Their heads were high and their shoulders were straight, From love of Freedom and oppression of Hate.

Their children, happy, proud, and free, Bathed in the glory of true liberty, Their faces were sparkling, their eyes were bright, As their voices sang of eternal delight.

On the eve of the Sabbath the shofar would blow, The shofar would close and wine would flow From goblet to lips, and then to the soul, So the goodness of God, in their hearts would then mold.

The doors of the Temple would open wide, Revealing the glory of God in his pride, People would enter, prayer-book in hand, And pray to their God, for their people and land.

With the spirit of Judah the Youth would go forth, With spades in their hands to plant and to sort The seeds of their lives and roots of desire, To strengthen their homeland and kindle the fire.

When the parting of day, and the setting sun Would whisper to God that day was done, The sun would sink unto Galilee, Reflecting the ripples of true ecstasy.

And o'er the Dead Sea the stars would shine, Giving to Judah inspiration divine, To go forth to their land and build it from stone, With the sweat of their toil, and the pain of their bone.

To go forth from bondage, out from the night, And build up a land that would stand unto might, That the world may hear, that man may know, That Israel lives, her people doth sew!

eluded their grasp. Every strategy failed. The flowers sank beneath the sod at their approach, then rose when the enemy passed by and the danger was over. Plows were used to unearth them, but to no avail. As soon as the soldiers passed by in their search, the flowers grew up again in all their glory. Thus were they saved. . . . The rabbi paused, and with a sigh, spoke softly, "Yes, the story about the Jewish children is repeated again and again, even nowadays. That is why our persecuted children in enemy countries must be brought here, and like flowers transplanted in Palestine's fertile soil. They, too, must be born anew and lift their faces, like petals, toward the sun, and rejoice in all the glory of God. We have so much room here for our people, and Palestine is our home and must be speedily rebuilt for the time that will come . . . and it will come soon . . . to open the gates and welcome those who have fled from persecuted countries. It is up to you, and you, and you, to make this promise come true. When the long night, filled with gloom, is over, the dawn will pierce the shadows, and slowly the sun will rise on the Promised Land which is our very own."

"A sob was heard from a young refugee girl sitting at the end of the table. We glanced at her and noticed she sat as though alone and wrapped in deep thought. A far-away look was on her face and her eyes were turned to the stars which by now seemed almost within arm's reach. "And what are you thinking of, my dear?" gently asked the rabbi. "Why are you looking so sad this festive night?" Aroused from her thoughts she answered, "It is all true what you have just told us, rabbi. I have seen my people suffer at the hands of the anti-Semites, just as the wicked Pharaoh of old tortured the Israelites in Egypt. These stars bear witness to the nights spent fleeing from our native town. My mother suffered so, and God sent for her along with my little sister. Father and I were saved. Like the flowers in your story, we eluded our pursuers and survived. Thoughts of Palestine gave us renewed strength and hope, for we knew God was watching over us, while He hid us from the enemy. During that time, I composed a song to the stars who were our sentinels as we wandered through so strange lands. Father's greatest desire was to become watchman at the Gates of Jerusalem, when we reached this country . . . and God granted his wish. Tonight he is on guard, as Keeper of the Gate, like the stars. They shine on him too, in all their glory, bringing messages of good cheer and comfort while he keeps his lonely vigil. Did I say lonely? Ah, no, he is not alone. His thoughts are with us, and in the distance can be heard the tinkle of bells, which comes from the sheep sleepily grazing in the fields. Echoes of the celebration this night ring in his ears, and the slumbering earth absorbs the soft falling dew." "Sing for us," coaxed the rabbi . . . and then she sang:

THE SONG OF THE STARS

"Oh, shine, sweet stars, guide us aright tonight, But dim your glow when pursuers are in sight. Speed on the Present, unto Palestine's shore, For there we'll find rest with our long journey o'er.

(Cont. on Page 15)



Children who came to Palestine through the Youth Aliyah Movement happy at work on the land they now call home.