

Some notes on the essay Colony Novozlanopol by M. Stein

The essay "Colony Novozlanopol" by M. Stein is included in a collection published in Soviet Russia in 1926 under general editorship of the professor V.G. Tan-Bogoraz, a prominent figure in Russian revolutionary movement, a poet and an anthropologist. Unfortunately, nothing is known about the author of the essay, M. Stein. We don't know when exactly M. Stein visited Novozlatopol, however it couldn't have been earlier than the harvest of the year 1924 mentioned in the essay.

The essay is a fascinating snapshot of the life in the Jewish colony of Novozlatopol in or shortly before 1926, however just as fascinating is the subject omitted in the essay - the backdrop against which the snapshot is made. This backdrop was obvious to the eyes of the author's Soviet readers at the time the essay was written, but so many years later and in places so remote from Novozlatopol some explanations are necessary.

The 1920's were a very difficult period for the whole of Soviet Russia and the Ukraine and more so for the Jews living there and the worst was yet to come. M. Stein mentions the destruction of the colony Trudolubovka, still fresh in memory then, telling us that no trace remained of Trudolubovka; the place was plowed over.

Novozlatopol suffered relatively less than other colonies from bandits. This colony maintained a self-defense force 200 men strong, including teenagers and old men. This force provided an effective deterrent against bandits. "Reds" and "Whites" were satisfied with the colony's policy of armed neutrality and did not try to disarm this force. Remarkably, the force's rifles were provided by the infamous warlord Makhno himself, whose base of operation at Gulay Pole is within 25 km from Novozlatopol. M. Stein also mentions an episode when a timely order of Makhno prevented the complete destruction of the colony Nechayevka. Makhno posed himself as a theory-conscious Anarchist, not a genocidal anti-Semite, but his loosely controlled army, and other bands that sometimes only pretended to be under his command, were exactly that. Having avoided the worst Novozlatopol still had to pay a tribute to Makhno's army in the form of provision and clothing.

By the time of M. Stein's visit half of the population in two of the remaining 16 colonies was comprised of Russian villagers who took over the land and equipment from the Jews who escaped from pogroms to towns or died of starvation and epidemics. M. Stein writes that the land was purchased, but I suspect that sometimes no real deal was involved; the newcomers simply squatted on the abandoned properties. Of the total of about 2400 ha of arable land in all colonies about 800 ha lay waste, but authorities managed to recruit 200 Jews from the Vitebsk area and 12 families from the railway junction Polochy to settle in the colony Mezhirich. No new land was added to the colonies after the Revolution because there were no private estates or Church-owned land in the area to confiscate. This fact indirectly shows how ill suited for farming this area was. Only the will of a bureaucrat could found agricultural colonies there.

It is interesting to compare information from this essay to what Count Kankrin wrote about Novozlatopol in 1893. Kankrin noted the absence of drinking water in the colony, but mentions a pond with Crucian carp in the area at the time. However by the time of M. Stein's visit, probably as a result of drought, only a mud pool remained; the water had been delivered by a nearby farm over the distance of 5 km. M. Stein tells us how cold water brought in a barrel would quickly become lukewarm and how he was sometimes

offered a luxury treat of a glass of cold water, "Over there X. just has brought in a barrel. Let us stop by and have a glass."

Guerrilla and Civil wars were over, and the area had somewhat recovered from drought, famine, epidemics, and the so-called War Time Communism policy of the early twenties, but collectivization – creation of collective farms called Kolkhoz – lay not far ahead and would cause a new famine, terror, and persecution of religion and Zionism.

Lenin died on 21 January 1924. By the time when M. Stein visited Novozlatopol Stalin was already powerful and idolized enough to have some places renamed in his honor. M. Stein mentions a shtetle nearby Novozlatopol, called Yuzevo, which was renamed Stalin.

During the so-called War Time Communism period that lasted from the October Revolution of 1917 through March 1921 almost all of agricultural product was forcefully purchased from peasants by the state for prices set by the state. The peasant would be left with just enough to plant and survive until the next harvest. Free trade in grain was prohibited. At the beginning this system covered only grain, but later it was expanded to state procurement of meat, potatoes and other agricultural products. This system of provisioning of urban population and army was established before the October Revolution by the Provisional Government; it was bad then and became much worse as inflation started under the Provisional Government turned into hyperinflation under the Bolshevik government. Hyperinflation was so high that prices of everyday staples reached millions of rubles. Money became worthless, so purchase by the state became akin to confiscation.

Bolsheviks continued this policy. In the Ukraine this system was introduced after the end of German occupation following the end of WW I and the establishment of Soviet government in 1919. The peasants reacted by resorting to armed resistance and decreased production: what sense does it make to produce anything beyond direct needs if it will be confiscated? Those who collected provision from the peasants were concerned more about the amount collected than the amount left to a peasant for seeds and survival. These were the main causes of the famine of 1921-1922. Following the armed uprising of the garrison of the Kronshtadt fortress the Bolsheviks decided to soften this policy, and under the name of the New Economy Policy allowed some private trade and entrepreneurship. In March 1921 taxation in kind for farmers was established. In 1924 taxation in kind was replaced by monetary taxation. In theory this tax should have been about 20% of the whole product and was meant to be reduced later; however the catch was that the state still controlled the prices of grain. Those who were well off had to pay a higher rate and local administration arbitrarily decided who was poor, who was well off, and who was rich – what they called "kulak". M. Stein writes that there were no kulaks in Novozlanopol; there were 100 poor and 62 well-off colonists. Another catch of the system was that the amount a peasant had to pay in a particular year was determined by the local administration in the spring on the basis of the harvest projections and these projections could be made arbitrarily optimistic. There was not an opportunity for a recalculation of the taxes based on the actual income following the year or a possibility of a refund, a luxury Westerners may take for granted in modern times.

In October 1922 the new Farming Land Code was introduced. Private land ownership was abolished. Land also could no longer be purchased or sold. One could lend some of the land in his use for a season or in the case of three-field and four-field system of

crop rotation, respectively, for three and four years under the condition that all family members of the landlord who worked in the field before continue to do so. Hiring help was allowed under the same condition. M. Stein writes that there were no hired laborers in the colonies, unlike prior to the Revolution, when hiring help was common.

All who remember this change of policy agree that it brought some relief and stimulated production. At least from then on not everything was taken from farmers in exchange for worthless money. For the urban population it was definitely a relief. Some goods and services reappeared on the market. Industry and transportation started to recover. In 1923 a new currency backed by gold was issued. M. Stein mentions that until shortly before his visit rye was used as money and even after the appearance of the new currency some payments were still made in rye.

M. Stein writes that prices of consumer goods at that time were approximately three times higher than before the war but the state procurement prices of agricultural products fell a bit under prewar level. It was called "scissors of prices" - an expression invented by Trotsky. This was a tool for getting money from the peasants to finance the industrialization, but peasants were reluctant to sell grain for low prices and had been selling only as much as was necessary to pay taxes. "Scissors of prices" opened most wide by 1923. Bolsheviks had to compromise, stimulate production of consumer goods, and control prices in such a way as was necessary to somewhat close the "scissors". The next move of the Bolsheviks to get a firm hold of grain was the so-called total collectivization of agriculture, turning peasants into land-bound serfs of the state.

Local economy was not socialized yet, every family worked on its own (in the sense of "ownership" described above) land, but some elements of collectivism appeared: four tractors sent by Joint (Jewish American Joint Distribution Committee) in 1923 were shared between colonists. More ancient forms of cooperation, like harvesting for a share of the crop, also were in use.

Joint also provided loans to buy farming equipment. The Bank for Agricultural Development – Agrobank - also provided loans for that purpose. Loans from Joint were payable in installments within 12 month. Similar loans from Agricultural Bank were to be paid within 6 months. People preferred to deal with Joint because it was more lenient and usually was willing to wait longer in case of a poor harvest. Agrobank acted as most banks do: missed payments would result in confiscation of valuable property – a horse or a cow.

Other new things were the Consumers Cooperative and Cooperative Credit Partnership. By the time of M. Stein's visit they had been in existence for about a year. These two organizations competed with each other and were redundant. M. Stein talked to the chairman of the Partnership and to some other people about joining forces with Cooperative and they agreed that it would be a good idea, but Cooperative allegedly was against it. The system of financing of these institutions was complex and bureaucratic. In this period the Soviet government tried to create some economy model that would exclude such mortal sins of capitalism as hired not by the state labor, free trade, or interest on loans. The idea of cooperation and credit unions looked promising. Creamery was another collective enterprise. The colonists had a limited quantity of milk and would gladly consume it all, but they needed money to pay taxes, buy clothing and shoes, etc. It was difficult to bring milk to the market at Gulay Pole 25 km away,

especially in summer, so the colonists made cheese. Four men in two shifts operated the creamery.

M. Stein notes some changes after the Revolution: rye replaced wheat in cultivation because the land during the years of turmoil was not belabored well enough, and rye is less demanding; women worked in the fields, which was not common in the colonies before; deterioration of the diet occurred: the poorest people sustained themselves on rye bread and chicory. In the years 1921-1922 there was no bread at all. Survivors of the famine sustained themselves on potatoes, corn, and a byproduct of sunflower-oil production – oil-cake, which is the remains of sunflower seed after the oil has been pressed out. (From my father I've heard about cases of cannibalism in this area during this period.) During better years, in the spring when stores were depleted people ate almost exclusively dairy products. In the summertime vegetables and herbs were added. In the autumn meat appeared, but there was less dairy. There was no dairy in the winter, but salted meat and poultry were available. The situation with clothing and shoes was catastrophic, because industry was still largely paralyzed.

The harvest of the year 1924 was hanging in the balance. The weather was good in the spring, but there was little rain in the summer. Only one rain shower somewhat improved the situation and saved vegetables, potatoes, corn and sunflowers, but colonists' hopes to get some extra money for clothing, shoes, repairs, etc. were dashed. It may be added that the harvest of the year 1925 was also poor. The Soviet government did not get the expected amount of grain to sell abroad and finance industrialization with the profit, so it turned to the policy of total collectivization of agricultural production.

One may wonder: after the Revolution the Bolsheviks confiscated an enormous amount of property of every kind, the state should be awash with money! Couldn't they just buy some agricultural machinery, seeds, consumer goods, etc. from abroad to alleviate the situation and stimulate the economy without resorting to aid from organizations like Joint? The answer is that the land property was taken from the landowners and redistributed among peasants for free (only to be taken back from them and reorganized as collective farms a few years later); therefore no extra money entered the state coffers. The same applied to industrial property: the Bolsheviks removed former owners and administrators and destroyed the entire economy. Production stopped and stood still creating no value and being worthless until a new government installed a new management, which took time. The third kind of confiscated property – personal property of various kinds – was not so easy to turn into cash, there were no buyers within the country and abroad it was considered stolen.

Under The Old Regime the Jewish Colonies were exactly that: Jewish. They were established for the Jews, and had a separate administration. Under the new government the colonies became simply villages where most of the population happened to be Jewish. By that time a new administrative structure was not yet firmly established. M. Stein uses the term "uyezd" – an administrative unit of the old time, and Rural Council - "Soviet" - a new administrative unit and administrative body. The colonies were located in two uyezds: Mariupolsky and Zaporozhsky. The colonies Novozlatopol, Krasnosiolka, Mezhirich, Vesiolaya, Priyutnaya, Roskoshnaya, Gorkaya, Novodarovka were in the Zaporozhsky uyezd. Both uyezds belonged to the administrative region of Gulay Pole. All these colonies were divided into two Rural Councils with seats of administration in Novozlatopol and Priyutnaya.

Since each of the Rural Councils also included some non-Jewish villages, those also received a share of the aid provided by Joint. M. Stein also mentions the ARA (American Relief Administration) and the Nansen Committee as important sources of aid.

In the opinion of M. Stein the inclusion of Jewish and non-Jewish villages in the new administrative divisions helped to dampen anti-Semitism. He writes:

“Speaking about anti-Semitism of surrounding farmers, I have to admit that two years ago it was strong. Now it subsided noticeably. It can be explained by the following circumstances. Before farmers disliked Jews, including the colonists, for using labor of others, for their occupation with trade and brokerage, for tendency to move to towns, for what they consider effeminacy, like, for example, the habit of having a pillow under butt when riding a buggy. Now there are no such things in the colonies, so farmers see the Jews as equals, and respect and value their work. Beside this the following factors contribute to improvement of relations between Jews and non-Jewish peasants. 1) The colonists cultivate their land better, thanks to the tractors sent from America. 2) A part of aid the Jews receive from various American Jewish organizations and societies is shared by non-Jewish peasants. 3) Administrative structure is such that either a colony is attached to a cluster of non-Jewish villages, or a non-Jewish town is attached to several colonies. That was not a custom before. All these factors, especially the last one contribute to the extinction of anti-Semitism and growing of good neighborly relations. ”

I would say that M. Stein’s explanation of causes of anti-Semitism is silly and naive. His optimism about its extinction was premature. But we must not judge him too severely; it is easy for us to be wise knowing how this story progressed.

Before the Revolution authorities frowned upon non-colonists settling down in the colonies. After the Revolution some number of artisans and professionals came to Novozlatopol but mostly kept to themselves.

The new administration of Novozlatopol was organized in the following way. There was the Rural Council Board (Soviet) led by the Chairman and the Secretary, the Committee of Poor Peasants with its Chairman. The titles of these administrative bodies and offices were crazy-sounding acronyms. What exactly did these dignitaries do is not clear. Town hall meetings were held two or three times a month. These were noisy and disorganized events. In the wintertime the Council was very active with all kinds of mostly useless paperwork like record keeping, statistics, etc. In the summer people were busy and nobody could be found in the office building even at official business hours – from 9AM to 3PM. The Committee of Poor Peasants was a peculiar organ invented by the Bolsheviks. Their task was to support War Time Communism and the New Economy Policy measures in rural areas. They were empowered to designate their neighbors as kulaks, requisition their property and redistribute a part of the requisitioned products among local poor peasants – themselves in the first place. These committees were disbanded with the end of War Time Communism, but as can be seen not everywhere. They were called to arms again at the beginning of Collectivization.

The Chairman of the Council Board was a 26 year old party member. He was the only party member in Novozlatopol, a colonist from another colony nearby. He was married to a woman not from this area by civil marriage – the only such case in Novozlatopol. He was somewhat developed and educated. After having served in the military during the Civil War he was sent to Novozlatopol to serve as the Chairman of the Council Board.

When M. Stein wrote about him he probably did not realize the significance of these details: this person had not lived in this place for any length of time to become eligible for elected office. He was not really elected, but simply sent there, and M. Stein did not bother to explain by whom. Knowing Soviet political traditions and culture, I can imagine that he arrived to Novozlatopol accompanied by some party functionaries from a higher level and was recommended at a town hall meeting as a good candidate. He was elected, I'm sure, with no opposition, and with some sense of relief by those present for not having to serve themselves, because of the centuries old habit to stay away from all contacts with government and administration. So-called Soviet Government in fact never was the government of Soviets. Those played a mostly decorative and ceremonial role and implemented policies devised by the highest leadership of the Bolshevik party.

The Secretary of the Council Board was 40 years old, very educated, as M. Stein tells us without adding any details. He was not from the area, unmarried, and lived with his mother and sister. M. Stein writes that he grew grain, but did not work in the field himself because he was busy with communal work. According to M. Stein he was a very good worker. I think he only made himself look busy, leaving his mother and sister to do real work in the field.

The Chairman of the Committee of Poor Peasants is a local man. M. Stein writes that his work is insignificant. I would add – for now.

Religious life in the colonies was in decline. Bolsheviks at that time persecuted Judaism with less zeal than they did the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church before the Revolution was a part of government and was very rich. Judaism was neither. Bolsheviks padlocked most of Christian churches, confiscated most of Church property - first land, then movables – and imprisoned or executed many priests and members of the Church hierarchy. On the other hand, the Rabbi of Novozlatopol lived unmolested at the time of M. Stein's visit. He was 70 years old and came from Lithuania. He lived with his wife. One of his two sons served in the Red Army, another served as a clerk in some office in town. M. Stein tells us that this Rabbi was a worldly, secular man who respected science and liked to talk about politics (which caused him trouble later, I'm afraid). He subscribed to Der Emes – a Soviet Yiddish-language newspaper, "The Truth". The Rabbi in addition to his duties served as the Shohet. He was paid 15 pud (240 kg) of rye monthly and an additional amount for his duties as the Shohet.

The synagogue building was in disrepair, same as all other private and public buildings in the colony, and the religious community was disheartened. Life was too hard for the people to think about religious observances. Sometimes it was difficult to assemble the minyan on Shabbat. People, especially the young, smoked, worked on Shabbat, and did not observe kashrut laws or fasts – not surprising of the very hungry people. Of all religious rituals people still observed only Chuppah and Brit. The square in front of synagogue still served as a place of public gathering. People discussed all kinds of life's problems there then go – old people inside the synagogue, young – to the reading room, a feature of the new times. Officially the day of rest was Sunday, but most colonists observed Shabbat, so on Saturday offices were open, but the people rested, on Sunday people worked, but the offices were closed.

M. Stein mentions the language that the colonists spoke, a horrible mixture of Yiddish and Russian (and with admixture of Ukrainian, I suspect). He writes that an elementary school existed in the colony since about 1900, in addition to a heder. For some time

there was no school at all in the colony, but in 1922 the elementary school was reopened. By the time of M. Stein's visit there was a four grade elementary school for 135 little children and 15 teenagers. The school building had only two rooms, so the students attended in two shifts. The method of education used there was so-called heuristic – not through lectures, reading textbooks, and memorization, but through discussions.

It was a time of great optimism, idealism, impatience, and radical rejection of all historical experience of humanity. Those children were malnourished, clothed in rags and barefoot. The look of their eyes was like that of adults and many of them were orphans. Their school building was a dilapidated hut, built like all buildings in the colonies from sun-baked mud bricks. But they were taught by the latest method en vogue! M. Stein expresses regret about the total absence of physical education and team sports. I would respond that there were many much more urgent problems.

There was an orphanage organized by ARA for 50 kids in 1922 – 1923. Later it was moved to the Grafskaya colony.

There were about one hundred young boys and girls. 25 of them were members of the Young Communists Union, the so-called Komsomol. The spread of the Communist religion was very similar to the spread of Christianity; a solitary missionary coming to an indigenous people, teaching them new legends, new rituals, new rhetoric, new ways of life.

M. Stein writes that before VI Congress of Komsomol in 1924 only sons and daughters of poor peasants and proletarians were admitted to the organization. After that Congress young men and women from well-off families were also allowed to join. Communists/Bolsheviks imagined that a level of prosperity is naturally immanent to a person, strictly determining his world view and political sympathies.

I've attempted to present here a general background of M. Stein's essay and to expound on some aspects he did not fully cover. It is my hope that these notes are a useful supplement to the essay and help the reader better understand this part of Russian history.

I thank my son Mark for careful review of this text.

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