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Gerald Steinacher

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, gsteinacher2@unl.edu

Brian Barmettler

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Gerald Steinacher, Brian Barmettler

The University in Exile and the Garden of Eden¹

Alvin Johnson and his rescue efforts for European Jews
and Intellectuals

Alvin Johnson

Alvin Johnson was born in Homer, Nebraska, in 1874. The son of Danish immigrants, Johnson grew up in Nebraska a typical country boy whose values and work ethic came from farm life. He always “considered himself a bona fide pioneer and a Midwesterner to the core.”² His father was a strong believer in social justice and racial and social equality, and his mother was a feminist. About his father, Johnson once wrote that “pro-semitism was so firmly fixed in his blood [...] that it became, apparently, a transmissible acquired characteristic, which runs undiluted into the fourth generation.”³ This upbringing shaped him. According to U.S. sociologist Lewis A. Coser, Johnson “was imbued with the populist and progressive traditions of the Middle West.”⁴ German author Monika Plessner adds: “With his youthful creativity and his fighting dignity [Alvin Johnson] personified ... typical American culture. In his eventful life he always sided with the weaker ones, fought against majorities for minorities, and stood up against oppression in the name of the persecuted ones.”⁵

1 I would like to thank Dr. Jean Cahan, Director of the Harris Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for spurring my research interest in Alvin Johnson. Special thanks also go to Tracy Brown for her feedback and final edits of this paper.

2 Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 32.

3 Alvin Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress: An Autobiography by Alvin Johnson*, with a foreword by Max Lerner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 11. The first edition was published in 1952 by Viking Press in New York.

4 Lewis A. Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America: Their Impact and Their Experiences* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 102.

5 „Er verkörpert in jugendlicher Geisteskraft und streitbarer Würde ein Stück typisch amerikanischer Kultur. In seinem ereignisreichen Leben hat er immer auf Seiten der Schwachen gestanden, hat sich für Minderheiten mit Mehrheiten herumgeschlagen, im Namen der Unterdrückten und Verfolgten aufgebeht.“ Monika Plessner, „Die Deutsche ‚University in Exile‘ in New York und ihr amerikanischer Gründer“, Frankfurter Hefte Vol. 19, 1964,

As a boy, Johnson attended Nebraska public schools. When he was eighteen, he enrolled at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, where he studied economics as well as classical and German literature. Several years later, he served in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War (1898).⁶ He was always proud of his Midwestern roots, as illustrated by the dedication to his autobiography: “To my wife Edith Henry Johnson, pioneer’s daughter, bearer of the spirit that thrust resolutely westward from the New England coast and won a continent for the mightiest republic in history.”⁷

When Johnson was older and living in New York, he liked to say that he had experienced the best of two worlds – both his humble rural background and urban life in a big cosmopolitan city. He was known to reminisce at one moment about farm life in Nebraska, and a moment later to quote the German poet Friedrich Schiller in fluent German.⁸ American journalist and educator Max Lerner saw in Johnson “a multifarious man who is not by that fact a split man.”⁹ Like so many Americans and Europeans in the nineteenth century, Johnson admired German science and culture. Many U.S. scholars earned doctorates from German universities or had at least spent some time in Germany. Likewise, the faculty and students at the University of Nebraska, as well as the local population, had strong ties to Germany. German-speaking settlers from all over Europe (even Germans from Russia) were common in the state and German was widely spoken prior to 1917.¹⁰ Although Johnson acknowledged the many good qualities of the university system in German-speaking Europe, he also criticized certain negative characteristics – for example, the elitist attitude that was widespread among German-speaking professors. In his autobiography, Johnson hinted at his admiration for Germany’s liberal and open-minded traditions. He admired the revolutionaries of 1848 and the *Schleswiger*, who had made a

181–86, 181. All translations are the authors’.

6 Benita Luckmann, “Eine deutsche Universität im Exil. Die ‘Graduate Faculty’ der ‘New School for Social Research’” in M. Rainer Lepsius, ed., *Soziologie in Deutschland und Österreich 1918–1945*, Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Sonderheft 23/1981 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1981), 427–41, 427.

7 Max Lerner, foreword to Alvin Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress: An Autobiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960).

8 Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 32.

9 Lerner, foreword to Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, xii.

10 Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).

new home in the Midwest: “There was a Little Deutschland of Germans who hated Bismarck but loved beer and high voltage cheese.”¹¹

After receiving his Master’s degree, Johnson was accepted to Columbia University, where he earned a Ph.D. in economics in 1902. After graduation, he held academic positions at Columbia, the Universities of Nebraska, Chicago, and Texas, as well as Cornell and Stanford. In 1916, he took a yearlong leave of absence from Cornell in order to work for the *New Republic*, which was at the time one of the most influential liberal magazines in the United States. Johnson returned to Cornell, but when the United States entered the First World War in 1917, he resigned from his post to return to the *New Republic* as an assistant editor. According to Monika Plessner, the “driving force” in Johnson’s life was “to fight for a better world” and to make that world “materialize ... here and now.”¹² During and after the war, he tried – unsuccessfully – to sway public opinion in favor of a fair peace settlement for Germany. In the end, however, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson gave in to the demands of Great Britain and France to harshly punish the defeated enemy.

Part 1: Intellectuals in Exile

The New School

In 1922, Johnson became director of the New School for Social Research in New York, which would soon become a haven for a generation of scholars who had fled from Hitler and Mussolini. In the 1930s, Johnson’s New School became a major center for social research, almost unmatched in the United States.

The New School started from humble beginnings. It was first organized in 1918 and began as a project of dissident academics. In 1917, historian Charles A. Beard resigned from Columbia University together with his colleague and close friend James Harvey Robinson. Columbia’s president wanted to make the faculty duty bound to support the war politics of the U.S. Congress and President Wilson. Not only did Beard disagree with the official U.S. stance on the war, he saw this forced support as a threat to academic

¹¹ Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, 35.

¹² „Für eine bessere Welt zu kämpfen, die sich jetzt und hier verwirklichen muss, war der starke Antrieb seines Lebens“, Plessner, „Die Deutsche ‚University in Exile‘“, 181.

freedom. So he and Robinson gathered together a group of friends and fellow scholars, all of whom were associated with the *New Republic*, where Johnson was working. Johnson began taking part, along with Beard, Robinson, and others, in weekly sessions planning for a new school. Based on European traditions and the ideas of American educational reformer John Dewey, the New School for Social Research in New York pioneered a new model for adult education in America. Inspired by the German *Abendvolkshochschule* – a type of secondary schools for adults¹³ – Johnson wanted to make the New School a center for research and adult learning with a popular teaching program that would not only educate but also critically analyze U.S. society and politics and “educate the educated.”¹⁴ The New School was also meant to be a home for liberal and radical thinkers. As Claus-Dieter Krohn puts it: “One of [Johnson’s] convictions was that only a teacher with a mission could be a good teacher.”¹⁵ Fostering research was another part of the New School’s mission. As early as 1915, Johnson was arguing the merits of research requirements for professors. In his essay “In Defence of the Professor Who Publishes,” Johnson wrote,

If I were a university president, loving harmony, but forced by financial straits to pay my professors, in part, with promises, I should take pains to make the proportion of mere promise large in the case of men who are writing books. Those who never write at all I should endeavour [*sic*] to pay in hard cash. Thus could I barter justice, a great good, for peace, the greatest good of all. Or better, I should try to man the institution entirely with writers of books. Thus could I dispense altogether with justice – excellent, but expensive commodity!¹⁶

In 1922, Johnson got his chance to helm a university. He was elected director of the New School and remained in that position for the next eighteen years. Historians Peter Rutkoff and William Scott write:

When [Johnson] accepted the directorship of the New School, he immersed himself in its spirit and activities. Johnson expanded adult education, worked to reestablish the research division, and organized numerous programs to

13 Plessner, “Die Deutsche ‘University in Exile’”, 181–86, 182.

14 „Erziehung der Erzeugenen“, Plessner, „Die Deutsche ‘University in Exile’”, 181–86, 182.

15 Claus-Dieter Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 61.

16 Alvin Johnson, “In Defence of the Professor Who Publishes”, *Midwest Quarterly* 2:4 (July 1915), 343–56, 347.

train business executives, labor leaders, educators, and civic leaders. Similarly, he reaffirmed the New School's policy to act as a forum to address contemporary issues and propose solutions for social problems. And like the earlier founders, Johnson fervently believed in the possibility of human progress."¹⁷

By 1924, Johnson was basically making all the key decisions that shaped the institution in its formative years. Sitting on the New School's advisory board at this time were Nebraska-born Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather, jurists Felix Frankfurter, Roscoe Pound, and Learned Hand, journalist Walter Lippmann, *New Republic* editor Bruce Bliven, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and a former president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Julius Barnes.¹⁸

The University in Exile

In 1927, Johnson became the associate editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, an ambitious project with hundreds of contributors from the United States and Europe. Johnson was very impressed by German scholarship and thus made an effort to include many entries written by German scholars in the *Encyclopedia*. From this experience, he became personally acquainted with a number of German academics and was able to establish networks in Europe.

Soon after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, the Nazis purged the country's universities. In that year alone, 1,200 Jewish and socialist intellectuals lost their jobs. Some of these victims of Nazi persecution had been contributors to the *Encyclopedia*. Ultimately, the number of intellectuals barred from working as well as from participating in cultural and social life in Germany reached 12,000. Thus began the massive "brain drain" from the Reich. Some scholars went to Great Britain, some to Switzerland, and others to France. Thousands of intellectuals made their way from Europe to the United States, leaving an intellectual legacy that can be traced to this day.

Assistance for the refugee scholars was often left up to private organizations. The *Notgemeinschaft Deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland*, a German self-help organization based in Switzerland, was able to find jobs for thirty professors at the University of Istanbul. Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, Johnson was thinking about bringing such scholars –

¹⁷ Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 31.

¹⁸ Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 35.

particularly those whom he knew from the *Encyclopedia* – to the United States. Initially he seemed to have in mind only the Marxist economist Emil Lederer. Soon, however, he came up with the idea of establishing a “University in Exile” based at the New School and formed around a whole group of exiled scholars. He was especially interested in German sociologists and political scientists who worked in the tradition of Max Weber.

The Nazi expulsion of Jewish and socialist scholars from universities and public service had made it clear to Johnson that protests in the form of letters or public demonstrations would not be enough: “I, therefore, propose a protest which will arrest the attention of every person interested in scholarship, namely, the prompt establishment of an institution to be known as ‘The University in Exile,’” wrote Johnson. “The world is quick to forgive invasions of academic liberty by a forceful government. It long ago forgave Mussolini. It will never forgive Hitler as long as we have a working University in Exile.”¹⁹

Moreover, the University in Exile was Johnson’s means of protest not only against Nazi barbarism but also against anti-Semitism and ignorance in his own country. And it was through Johnson’s personal commitment that the first twelve scholars were invited to New York. As president of the New School, Johnson also had a secondary agenda. Up to that point, the New School had been a small experimental institution for adult education, but with the European brain drain, that could change.²⁰ In a bold bid to bring top European scholars to the New School, Johnson aimed to relocate an entire academic community. He was particularly interested in scholars from the *Hochschule für Politik* in Berlin. Founded in 1920, the Berlin institution had a guiding philosophy similar to that of the New School.²¹ Rutkoff and Scott point out how remarkable Johnson’s project was: “In a single stroke, Johnson transplanted a school of German social science to the United States and fulfilled his own pledge, made more than ten years earlier, to make the New School a center for social science research.”²² Krohn points out the deliberate naming of Johnson’s project: “In choosing the name ‘University in Exile’ ... he wanted to demonstrate publicly that the university tradition now suppressed in Germany was to

19 Quoted in Luckmann, „Eine deutsche Universität im Exil“, 427–41, 428.

20 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 59.

21 Luckmann, „Eine deutsche Universität im Exil“, 427–41, 435.

22 Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 85.

be preserved for an indefinite period.”²³ “For,” as Alvin Johnson wrote, “it was the university itself that was being exiled from Germany.”²⁴

But there were many obstacles to overcome. It was difficult to arrange visas for some scholars, as American quota regulations remained unchanged even during the war. The U.S. State Department often opposed the entry of certain émigrés on the grounds that they were Jewish or “radical thinkers.” And the economic hardship and high unemployment caused by the Great Depression made it even harder to secure entry for exiles. President Roosevelt sympathized with Johnson’s efforts but was unable to break the often xenophobic resistance of immigration authorities at the time. To make matters worse, anti-Semitism was also widespread on U.S. campuses. As Krohn writes: “When Alvin Johnson first broached his plan of setting up a university in exile for displaced scholars, many of his colleagues thought he could not possibly succeed in placing Jews in an American university.”²⁵ For this and other reasons, many universities sabotaged rescue efforts. The Austrian economist Joseph A. Schumpeter, who was by invitation teaching at Harvard University, attempted to create a committee to help refugees from Nazi Germany. Given the difficulties of bringing scholars with Jewish backgrounds to the United States in the face of pervasive anti-Semitism, Schumpeter too wanted to attract “as few Jews as possible.”²⁶

Luckily for Johnson and the scholars he was trying to help, New York was a more open-minded and diverse destination. The city remained very connected to Europe—little Italy was still Italian at the time, and immigrants from all over Europe preserved elements of their ethnic identities and kept close ties to their homelands. In 1933, New Yorkers elected as their new mayor the progressive politician Fiorello La Guardia, making him not only the city’s first Italian American mayor,²⁷ but also the first person with a Jewish background to hold the position.²⁸ La Guardia and other like-minded New Yorkers championed immigrants and ethnic minorities, and opposed fascism. Johnson could therefore rely on some support and sympathy from local politicians.

23 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 63.

24 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 338.

25 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 22.

26 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 23.

27 Luckmann, „Eine deutsche Universität im Exil“, 427–41, 429.

28 Although La Guardia’s father was an Italian Catholic and his mother was Jewish and from Trieste (which was, back then, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), the future mayor became a member of the Episcopalian Church.

Money was always a problem for the University in Exile. Johnson wrote endless appeals, but money trickled in very slowly. After the *New York Times* published an article about the project, however, things began to change. The Rockefeller Foundation donated a large share of the necessary funds, but a number of other foundations and industrialists also made generous contributions. Meanwhile, the faculty grew from twelve in 1933 to 26 by 1941, and continued to grow during the war years. The student body was expanding as well: By the fall of 1940, students numbered 520.²⁹ What Johnson accomplished with the University in Exile was no small achievement:

Almost every exiled scholar who can be counted among the reform economists found a haven at the New School for Social Research in New York. The importance of this institution for German scholarship in exile lies not just in its having accepted the largest group of expelled university faculty but also in its offering a place where the German tradition in the social sciences, having just being eradicated in its country of origin, could be carried on. The school's division of social sciences, staffed by an international faculty unique among American institutions of higher learning, would soon become the most significant center of its kind in the United States.³⁰

The "University in Exile" contributed to a fruitful dialogue between continental and American thought. Krohn lists 184 émigré scholars who were affiliated with the New School. Among them were Hans Kelsen, Claude Levi-Strauss, Gaetano Salvemini, Hannah Arendt and Max Wertheimer. For the New School's twenty-fifth anniversary, the renowned German writer Thomas Mann, who occasionally guest lectured at the institution, delivered the laudation "Alvin Johnson – World Citizen."³¹ Other prominent scholars including theologian Paul Tillich and philosopher Ernst Bloch also taught general seminars at the New School.³² Johnson was not always successful in his attempts to bring scholars over, however. He tried to get Marc Bloch out of Nazi-occupied France, but State Department hurdles stymied Johnson's efforts. Bloch stayed in France, joined the Resistance, and in 1944 was executed by the Gestapo.

29 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 104.

30 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 59.

31 Plessner, „Die Deutsche 'University in Exile'“, 185.

32 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 106.

Still, Johnson managed to save hundreds of others. With Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938, came the next big wave of refugee scholars. The Austrian Marxist Paul F. Lazarsfeld made his way to the United States and became one of the founding fathers of social research in the United States. Other Austrians included Erich Hula, a former assistant to constitutional lawyer Hans Kelsen, and Felix Kaufmann, an epistemologist and Husserl student who was initially a jurist of the Kelsen school.³³ The work of these scholars from Austria – where most of the contemporary economic theory had originated – made a huge impact on research in the United States.³⁴

Soon, Germans and Austrians were joined by other nationals from a long list of countries, including Algeria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Russia, Spain, and Switzerland. At this point, the New School might easily have developed into a broadly European university. But French and Belgian scholars, joined by Paris-based Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Polish academics, formed the *École Libre des Hautes Études* in New York – a project that was supported by Johnson in many ways. Classes at the *École* were taught in French, while lectures at the University in Exile were in English (although sometimes with a strong foreign accent). Because of the *École Libre des Hautes Etudes*, the faculty at the University in Exile remained mostly German and Austrian. The Graduate Faculty at the New School constituted “a little piece of Germany in New York,” as one émigré recalled.³⁵ Coser stresses this aspect:

Almost all of them came from Germany and Austria, even though somewhat later a few scholars from other countries were added to the [...] Faculty roster. Most of them had held prestigious academic positions in their native country; some of them had been academic Marxists, more of them had been fairly close to German social democracy, and several had been highly placed civil servants in the Social Democratic administration of Prussia. Their homogeneity of background and of age as well fostered a tendency among the refugees to seek out the companionship of like-minded men and women and to create what I have called a gilded ghetto in New York.³⁶

33 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 75.

34 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 45.

35 „Es war doch ein kleines Stückchen Deutschland in New York,“ quoted in Benita Luckmann, „Eine deutsche Universität im Exil“, 427–41, 429.

36 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 106–07.

The Graduate Faculty

Johnson realized that rescue would be a long-term project. The Nazis would not disappear overnight, and the permanent integration of scholars and other refugees into U.S. society was the logical consequence. The refugee scholars shared this view and saw themselves more as immigrants than as exiles. The sociologist Louis Wirth – himself a German who had emigrated to Nebraska as a boy – called the idea of “intellectual emigrants” a contradiction in terms because intellectuals are lifelong nomads in the universe of the mind.³⁷ According to Coser, “The term ‘University in Exile’ had been appealing as a fund-raising device during the formative period, but a number of the new faculty members resented the term *exile* and pressed for a name that would clearly indicate that the new institution was an integral branch of the New School and a permanent part of the American educational system.”³⁸ Thus in 1935 the University in Exile became the Graduate Faculty – a permanent research division of the New School that offered fully developed doctoral programs in philosophy and the social sciences.

Refugee scholars were dispersed widely across the United States. But some groups of scholars formed and maintained a collective identity, as was the case with the New School cohort as well as a group of social-science researchers at Columbia University that formed around the German scholars Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno.³⁹ “Indeed,” writes Krohn,

the New School acquired university status only through the “University in Exile,” staffed entirely by immigrants, and through the Graduate Faculty that grew out of it. In terms both of institutional structure and of personnel, the New York School more closely resembled the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, which found a home as a body at Columbia University; and there were many personal and intellectual connections between these two émigré centers.”⁴⁰

And indeed there existed also a certain rivalry between the scholars of the New School and the relocated Frankfurt School, which was now based at Columbia. The Frankfurt

37 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 179.

38 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 104.

39 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 102 ff.

40 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 5.

School had its own financial resources, whereas the New School's Graduate Faculty "was and always remained dependent on outside funding."⁴¹

During the first years of their tenure, the New School refugee scholars focused their research on the most important problem of their era: the rise of German and Italian fascism. As sociologists and political scientists, they worked hard to understand the causes and the nature of these regimes. During World War II, their knowledge and research was highly sought after by military and political decision makers in the United States. The Graduate Faculty included international-affairs experts and was considered "the academic group most frequently consulted by US government officials" on all aspects of German leadership as well as Germany's military and economy.⁴² The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the United States' wartime intelligence service, recognized that the most capable German intellectuals were based at New School.⁴³

Under Johnson's leadership, the Graduate Faculty started its own publication called *Social Research*. The new journal was to be published in English for an American audience, whereas the Frankfurt School's *Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft* continued to be published in German until the outbreak of the war – perhaps a sign that its editors "chose to continue in splendid isolation"⁴⁴ and resisted adapting to U.S. life. While this may have been true, they likely were also more at ease writing and expressing their ideas in their native tongue rather than in English. Many articles in *Social Research*, however, were translations from German and could be identified as such by native English speakers.⁴⁵ The European background of the refugee scholars was both an asset and a potential problem. Their fresh foreign perspectives probably helped to "de-provincialize" the academic world in the United States, but the "splendid isolation" of the recent emigrants on their intellectual island made the exchange of ideas harder. According to Coser, "All indicators point to the fact that the Graduate Faculty, even though functioning as an accredited American academic institution, was nevertheless not fully part of American cultural and intellectual life."⁴⁶ Hoping to change that, in 1943 Johnson proposed establishing a Bachelor of Arts program at the New School and lobbied the New York Board of Regents for its approval.

41 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 5.

42 See Arthur J. Vidich, foreword to Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, xii.

43 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 161.

44 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 105.

45 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 105.

46 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 106.

After the war ended, most of the refugee scholars stayed in the United States. Early hopes for a better world now rid of Hitler and Mussolini eventually gave way to harsh reality. Cooperation with German universities was sometimes uneasy, as many Nazi scholars remained on the faculties and continued their academic careers after 1945. (In the 1950s, Cold War politics would cover up their fascist pasts.) Moreover, plans to establish a school for democratic leadership at the New School were never realized, even as threats to American democracy, notably in the form of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist crusade – would not disappear. Alvin Johnson was very much opposed to McCarthy's search for "communists" and "communist sympathizers" – a witch hunt that was poisoning the country's intellectual, political, and cultural climate. Johnson officially retired in December 1945, and his departure left the future of the New School and its graduate faculty uncertain. The New School, of course, survived, and Johnson witnessed its ongoing success as emeritus at the school, with his own office and secretary.

What is the legacy in the United States of the New School refugee scholars? Opinions on this question vary widely. According to Coser, more than the émigrés themselves, it was their students who made the greatest impact on U.S. academia and contributed most to the "de-provincialization of the American mind."⁴⁷ The intellectual significance of the New School for both the American and European social sciences, although difficult to measure, should not to be underestimated. Nearly seventy years after its founding, Rutkoff and Scott described the New School this way:

Anchoring the northern edge of Greenwich Village at 66 West Twelfth Street, the New School for Social Research has become an established feature of New York's cultural life. New Yorkers from all five boroughs and the various suburbs gather here each evening to take courses on virtually every subject imaginable from Confucian philosophy to urban gardening. The adult education program has no admissions requirements and only modest course fees; its instructors are freelance intellectuals and artists. The students come to learn, drawn by what they have heard about the school: that it is a free place and eclectic place, a place where one is bound to meet interesting people. This reputation has enabled the New School to grow and thrive.⁴⁸

47 Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*, 109.

48 Rutkoff and Scott, *New School: A History*, xi.

Part 2: The Garden of Eeden

Alvin Johnson's ideals, together with his love for farming, which he developed as a child in Nebraska, led him to establish a farm settlement for refugees near Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1939. Johnson hoped that the settlement could offer those who had suffered the chaos and persecution in Europe a new home where they could make a living for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, the refugee farm, named Van Eeden, did not fulfill Johnson's high expectations, and none of the refugees found a permanent home there.

Johnson's academic work focused heavily on theory, but the Nebraskan never gave up his love and admiration for the soil. At his home in Nyack, a suburb of New York City, he had a small vegetable garden that continued to become more fertile under the professor's delicate care.⁴⁹ Alvin Johnson did not sanction all types of farming: His heart lay with the small farmer and the peasant. In his autobiography, *A Pioneer's Progress*, Johnson wrote, "The one growth of the soil I most cherish is the independent small farmer... He is my brother and his historic fate is mine."⁵⁰ It was this belief that largely informed his decision to start the settlement.

As the situation in Europe continued to darken, many refugees who had escaped persecution now faced material struggles in the United States. The situation was precarious. Johnson states: "New York was filling with Jewish refugees from Germany. There was no employment for them, and more and more of our 'humane' Congressmen were urging that we close our doors."⁵¹ On top of that, ordinary citizens adopted an even more hostile attitude toward the refugees.⁵² Johnson decided to watch no longer and started planning his second refugee project – this one based on his love of the land and located in North Carolina.

In Johnson's eyes, a farm settlement seemed most practical. His friend Hugh MacRae, who was born and raised in Wilmington, North Carolina, had already experimented with small farm settlements in and around Wilmington. MacRae had recruited farmers from

49 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 357.

50 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 357.

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

52 Letter from Alvin Johnson to Bernard M. Baruch, 15 March 1939. University of Nebraska Archive and Special Collections, The Alvin Johnson Collection (herein referred to as AJC), RG 15/8/13, B.15, F.1.

Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland.⁵³ Castle Hayne, a MacRae settlement where mostly Dutch settlers worked and resided, soon became a thriving business.⁵⁴ So when Johnson decided to launch his own farm colony, he chose one of Hugh MacRae's old farms, Van Eeden.

Van Eeden was named for Herr Van Eeden, the leader of the property's earlier Dutch settlement. Herr Van Eeden had moved to North Carolina in the early twentieth century and tried his luck at farming under the supervision of Hugh MacRae. Unfortunately, wrote Johnson, "Van Eeden was a gentleman, not a farmer, and the colony petered out."⁵⁵ There also seemed to be a drainage problem on the property, but Johnson, the confident Nebraskan was undaunted. He visited Van Eeden himself and found a ditch that could be used to drain the land.⁵⁶ The property otherwise appealed to Johnson, who appreciated the fact that there were already three-room cottages there (though they were in need of some repair). Johnson also had a few new four-room houses built to accommodate larger families.⁵⁷ Indeed, he thought that he had found the ideal location.

In 1939, Johnson began reaching out to potential sponsors for Van Eeden and selecting refugee families whom he thought would be suitable for his settlement. The Alvin Corporation was founded that summer to finalize the project and raise the necessary funding.⁵⁸ The Refugee Economic Corporation, which was run by Johnson's friends Charles Liebman and Bernard Flexner, invested US\$32,500 of the \$65,000 needed to run the settlement for a year and supply the new farmers with the necessary equipment.⁵⁹ Individual investors donated the remaining funds. By the end of the summer of 1939, the Alvin Corporation had purchased 150 acres of farmland and 100 acres of woodland from the Hugh MacRae Corporation. The entire Van Eeden contract including the 150 acres that the Alvin Corporation had already purchased consisted of 1,080 acres, which MacRae was willing to sell for \$50,000.⁶⁰

53 Susan Taylor Block, *Van Eeden* (Wilmington: Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, 1995), 6.

54 Block, *Van Eeden*.

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

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

57 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 365.

58 Report of the President of the Alvin Corporation on the Van Eden Settlement, Watha, North Carolina, February 1941, B.18, F.5, AJC.

59 Letter from Alvin Johnson to Bernays Heller, 1 March 1939. B.15, F.1, AJC.

60 Letter from the Hugh MacRae&Co to the Alvin Corporation, 3 August 1939. B.15, F.1, AJC.

The Alvin Corporation had ambitious plans for the settlement. Van Eeden (also referred to as Eden, which is what the settlement's small train station was called, for example) was to provide a home for fifty to a hundred families; each family would be entitled to one ten-acre plot.⁶¹ The settler families were given a credit, which they were to pay back at a small interest rate. Alvin Johnson had strict ideas when it came to whom he wanted to join the farm colony. Most important, the potential settlers needed to have experience in farming. Johnson was, however, willing to make exceptions: "I never believed that one has to come directly off the soil if he is to know the soil and love it. We are all sons of Adam: his hoe is on our shoulders."⁶² But Johnson was realistic and knew that previous farm experience would make life easier for him and for the settler. He expressed additional preferences in a letter to Ernst Elias, a potential unmarried settler who was turned down by Johnson, who explained: "We prefer as settlers married men with children. On a farm a man needs a wife to help him, and children to make life in the country pleasant and worthwhile."⁶³

The settlers were not chosen randomly from the arriving refugee boats, but rather were recruited by Johnson himself, who made use of his international network in order to get the best potential settlers. It is important to note here that Johnson did not plan to restrict Van Eeden only to German Jewish refugees. But he knew that until he managed to get non-Jewish funding, he would mostly have to settle Jewish refugees.⁶⁴ The recruiting process led Johnson to contact sources in Austria, England, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and beyond. He worked closely with the National Refugee Service, but also with other organizations including the *Notgemeinschaft Deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland*. By January 1939, word of Johnson's plans had reached London. It was there that the chairman of the Notgemeinschaft, Dr. F. Demuth wrote a letter to Johnson about a young trained agriculturist named Pietrowski.⁶⁵ The fate of Pietrowski is unknown, but one can say with certainty that he never set foot on the Van Eeden settlement. In another letter – this one to Johnson's friend Grenville Clark – Johnson confided that he wanted to "get two or three good Spanish agricultural families out of that miserable concent-

61 Report of the President of the Alvin Corporation on the Van Eden Settlement, Watha, North Carolina, February 1941, B.18, F.5, AJC.

62 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 365.

63 Letter from Alvin Johnson to Ernst Elias, 17 January 1940. B.17, F.2, AJC.

64 Letter from Alvin Johnson to Grenville Clark, 30 June 1939. B.15, F.1, AJC.

65 Letter from Dr. F. Demuth to Alvin Johnson, 28 January 1939. B.15, F.1, AJC.

ration camp in Spain. The Spaniards from Granada, particularly, are the best gardeners in Western Europe and I want our community to make some wine, at least enough for them to refresh me when I visit them.”⁶⁶ Unfortunately, Johnson was unable to settle any Spaniards on his farm and thus had to drink store-bought wine.

By the fall of 1939, Johnson had found enough potential settlers. Once initial housing and drainage problems were resolved, the Alvin Corporation settled four families at Van Eeden, giving each a cottage and a ten-acre plot, as outlined in the original plan. The following spring, four more families moved to Van Eden.⁶⁷ Each of the eight families was to farm its own plot individually, but Johnson knew that farming could be a discouraging task. Because he had recruited families with mostly urban backgrounds (although a few had some farm experience),⁶⁸ he hired a farm manager to supervise the settlers and give them advice when needed. In addition, Johnson relied on soil experts from the Agricultural Experiment Station in New Jersey. The first year of production at Van Eeden failed to yield the level of prosperity that was hoped for. Johnson still considered it a success, however, as 50 percent of the families were already more than half self-sufficient, and morale seemed to be high.⁶⁹ Thus the first year report proudly states: “The most concrete evidence of the morale of the settlement consists in the fact that [*of*] these eight families who have been with us for a year or more, not one wishes to leave us.”⁷⁰ The settlement was en route to success.

Though not part of Johnson’s original vision, the settlers came from diverse backgrounds. The original eight families were Jewish (or had been declared as such by the Nuremberg Laws) and came from Nazi Germany. The Heimanns, the Flatows, the Loebs, the Wolfs, the Ladenburgs, the Lewins, the Willmans, and the Collinses. Max Wolf was the only one who had a thoroughly rural background. The others came from academia or had professional careers ranging from accounting to architecture. Van Eeden was a *mélange* of social classes, generations, and ideologies.

66 Letter from Alvin Johnson to Grenville Clark, 30 June 1939. B.15, F.1, AJC.

67 Report of the President of the Alvin Corporation on the Van Eden Settlement, Watha, North Carolina, February 1941, B.18, F.5, AJC.

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

69 Report of the President of the Alvin Corporation on the Van Eden Settlement, Watha, North Carolina, February 1941, B.18, F.5, AJC.

70 Report of the President of the Alvin Corporation on the Van Eden Settlement, Watha, North Carolina, February 1941, B.18, F.5, AJC.

Despite the mediocre start, Alvin Johnson was not expecting Van Eeden to fail. But the settlers ignored major problems from the start. In Johnson's opinion, Van Eeden, with only eight families, was still too small. He believed that at least twenty-five were needed for it to succeed.⁷¹ Some families – such as that of Arthur Flatow, who had been a successful architect in Berlin – were used to a more luxurious lifestyle than what was available at Van Eeden. The farmer who cherished the land and did not care about financial ups and downs remained merely a figment of Johnson's imagined utopia. The main language on the settlement was German, and many families, to Johnson's dismay, did not bother to learn much English. The first and second farm managers – Mr. Mims, a native Wilmingtonian, and A.J. Bruman of the National Refugee Organization – seemed to have largely failed at bringing about speedy prosperity and harmony. In a letter to Leonard Heimann, one of the settlers, Johnson wrote: "It has been a principle of Mr. Bruman to discuss matters as little as possible."⁷² The third manager, H.M. Pinckney, was more successful than the first two, but by that point the various problems were too deeply rooted to be fixed.

The years 1941 and 1942 marked a turning point at Van Eeden. Nazi policy in Europe had shifted from forced emigration, plundering, and acts of violence to systematic mass murder, making it impossible for Johnson to recruit settlers from occupied Europe. At Van Eeden, multiple families found the hardships of the small farmer unbearable. Leonard Heimann contracted malaria, so the mosquitos in the southern summer gave him enough reason to leave Van Eeden in 1941. The Flatows left in 1942 hoping to find a better life in a big city than the one they had been leading, just barely getting by, in rural North Carolina. And neither the Lewins nor the Collinses nor the Ladenburgs stayed at Van Eeden longer than two years. Johnson was able to recruit a few more families, but by and large his settlement had failed.

Van Eeden was not without some success stories, however, as the case of the young Austrian couple Felix and Paula Willman illustrates. Before Felix's imprisonment at Dachau and Buchenwald, the couple had lived in a beautiful city apartment in Vienna.⁷³ Felix was a well-to-do accountant, and Paula was a teacher. After Felix was released from Buchenwald, he and Paula fled to the United States. Once they reached American shores,

71 Report of the President of the Alvin Corporation on the Van Eden Settlement, Watha, North Carolina, February 1941, B.18, F.5, AJC.

72 Letter from Alvin Johnson to Leonard Heimann, 29 May, 1940. B.16, F.5, AJC.

73 Block, *Van Eeden*, 25.

Johnson tried to dissuade them from moving to the settlement. As Johnson told it, he “urged that in their evening promenades around the Ring in Vienna, they had had no occasion to learn the difference between a vegetable plant and a weed.”⁷⁴ To Johnson’s great disbelief, the Willmans went to Van Eeden anyway. Despite some early problems with the weeds around their house, the Willmans were among the best settlers. Of Felix Willman, Johnson wrote: “Mr. Willman, who had never grown even a radish before he came to Van Eeden, was offered two managerial jobs at large dairy farms.”⁷⁵ Felix Willman turned down both offers. The pair stayed at Van Eeden until 1944, when they moved to New York. Johnson continued to guide them, however, getting Felix a job at the New School and Paula enrolled as a student.⁷⁶

The Van Eeden settlement never was able to provide a home for over a hundred families, as Johnson had originally intended. Over time, more and more families continued to leave Van Eden, and in 1948 the Alvin Corporation decided to sell the land to James Wilkins, who continued to farm the land with his son.⁷⁷ Alvin Johnson had tried his best to help the refugees. He was fully committed to the project and visited the farm every month. Johnson even took personal responsibility for the failure: “If I could have lived in the community,” he wrote, “I think it would have succeeded.”⁷⁸ Despite the unfulfilled expectations, Johnson and the Alvin Corporation did employ some fifty people on the farm. Regardless of the outcome, Van Eeden must be seen as the product of Alvin Johnson’s relentless efforts to make a difference at a time when many decided simply to stand by.

A Biography to Be Written

Johnson died in 1971 in Upper Nyack, New York. In 2012, he was inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame. Although still widely unknown among his fellow Nebraskans, a committed elite in his home state still remember him today. His relative obscurity is surprising given that the connection between the New School and Nebraska has

74 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 365.

75 Letter from Johnson to Dr. Jacob Billikopf, 23 March, 1943, B.15, F.7, AJC.

76 Block, *Van Eeden*, 27.

77 Block, *Van Eeden*, 70.

78 Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 365.

persevered. In 2000, the former governor and U.S. senator from Nebraska *Bob Kerrey* became president of the New School and therefore one of Johnson's successors.

As the Nebraska Hall of Fame Commission noted, Johnson "gained national and international recognition as an economist, educator, humanitarian, social activist, writer and editor."⁷⁹ Moreover, Johnson helped to save numerous Central European scholars – many of whom were Jewish or considered to be Jewish – from Nazi persecution. In addition to his academic writing, Johnson helped to author the nation's first nondiscrimination legislation and wrote two novels, three collections of short stories, and an autobiography. He received honorary doctorates from the New School for Social Research, the University of Nebraska, Brandeis University, Hebrew Union College, Yeshiva University, and the universities of Algiers, Brussels, and Heidelberg.

Johnson is best remembered all over the world as the father of the New School. Much less is known about his other activities, and to this day no biography about him exists. The authors of this paper are in the process of filling in this gap. Archival sources relating to Johnson are scattered all over the United States, with an important collection at Yale University. Unfortunately it seems that most of the New School's own records on Johnson have not survived. According to Krohn, "In investigating the University in Exile at the New School ... the researcher finds that most of the documents bearing on its history have been lost over the years."⁸⁰ In 1991 – encouraged by John Braeman, a history professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln – Johnson's surviving children donated his personal papers to the University's special-collections archive. Despite Alvin Johnson's high-profile career and his heroic efforts to aid refugees fleeing from Nazi persecution, his documents have yet to be thoroughly analyzed. Until they are, many aspects of Johnson's personal and academic life will remain elusive.

79 Nebraska Hall of Fame Commission selects Dr. Alvin Johnson as new inductee at 11-15-12 meeting at Nebraska State Capitol, copy of the text in possession of the authors.

80 Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile*, 7.

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