

GLENDALE, OREGON, THE JEWS AND NEW ODESSA



Jewish New Odessa Communal Settlers in New York

“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” Jeremiah 8:20

"Go west young man, and grow up with the country." ²

**“Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a
chosen people...”**

-Thomas Jefferson

By Jerry Klinger

Modern interstate I-5 follows along an old wagon road, climbing into the mountainous terrain from the Umpqua Valley. The highway cut off Glendale, Oregon, isolating it in time and location, much like it had been over a hundred years and thirty years ago before the railroad came through. Glendale was a booming lumber town and today is a sleepy, small lumber town. The history of the town, known and forgotten, is intimately linked to the Jewish American experience.

¹ Courtesy of the New York Public Library

² Controversially attributed to Horace Greely who popularized it in 1865. Some scholars attribute it to John Babsone Lane Soule in 1851.

Glendale is 224 miles from Portland. 47 miles north on the I-5 is Roseburg. Roseburg is the most populous city in Douglas County, which Glendale is part of.

October 1, 2015, Chris Harper-Mercer, a 26-year-old enrolled in Roseburg's Umpqua Valley Community College, fatally shot assistant professor Larry Levine. He killed eight students in Levine's classroom and wounded 8 others. Harper-Mercer asked each victim their religion before determining if they were shot in the head or the leg. If they answered Christian, he shot them in the head. Otherwise, he shot them in the leg. He never bothered to ask Levine if he was Jewish or not. Levine was simply murdered first. It was the deadliest mass shooting in Oregon's history.

Roseburg is a small community where Christian, Jew, freethinker, pagan, straight or gay, gets along easily. Roseburg was founded by Aaron Rose in 1872. Some associate Rose's name with being Jewish. He was not, Scottish perhaps, but not Jewish.

A second man is sometimes mistakenly credited with the founding of Roseburg, Solomon Abraham. Abraham was definitely Jewish. Rose and Abraham knew each other. Abraham lived part of his life in Roseburg. Abraham founded Glendale.

Solomon Abraham was born March 17, 1828, in Dobzyn, Poland. Dobjinsk, as the Jews spelled the Polish-Russian town, was directly across the Drweca River from the German town of Golub. A bridge spanned the river with German and Russian guards at either end. Dobjinsk was filthy, disorganized and run down. Golub was clean, organized and properly maintained. The Jews lived in Dobjinsk. They were not permitted to own farmland on the Russian side and struggled to make their living, one notch above absolute poverty. Commerce was centered on smuggling goods across the river downstream from the tax collectors at the bridge. Antisemitism grew in the soil of Dobjinsk. There was little opportunity for Jews.

Solomon Abraham and his younger brother Hyman left for America as soon as they could. The earliest record of Solomon Abraham and his brother was their emigration date to the United States in 1857. They made their way West by wagon train, along the famed Oregon Trail, arriving in Roseburg about 1859. Roseburg was little more than a few houses along the fertile plains of the South Umpqua River. The brothers purchased a lot from Aaron Rose and built a house. The site today is the Floed-Lane House; the Douglas County Historical Society has taken up residence there.

Like many early settlers who were encouraged by the U.S. Government to settle in the vastly underpopulated American North-West, Solomon Abraham took the opportunity to claim 160 acres in 1865. Abraham and his wife Julia (Hinkel) obtained the claim through the Cash Entry Land Purchase system near Grants Pass, at Hugo, Oregon. Abraham was not the only Jew in the wilds of the Southern Oregon Mountains. Another pair of brothers, Simon and Isidor Caro made Grants Pass their home.

The term "Manifest Destiny" was coined by John Louis O'Sullivan in 1845. His vision morphed into an America ordained by God from Sea to Shining Sea, bound together by ribbons of steel and incentivized by Congress during and after the Civil War with land grants, money, opportunity and greed.

Mania gripped the American mind after the Civil War, *Railroad Mania*. Domestic and foreign investors poured millions into railroad ventures. Railroads looked like a guarantee to become rich.

The initial completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 was East and West. Building railroads north and south, from California to Washington State, was a furious focus. Many efforts began. Many efforts failed. The Oregon and California Railroad, destined for bankruptcy and consolidation with the later Southern Pacific, reached Roseburg from Portland in 1872. It was easy going to that point. The land was flat with few natural barriers. It was another 15 years before the financially troubled road would be completed and linked to California. Solomon Abraham's advice as the Railroad's land agent heavily influenced the route the road took. The Oregon and California followed the I-5 corridor. It swung S.E. along Cow Creek. The route then returned to the I-5 Corridor and headed to Grants Pass.

Solomon Abraham had platted and founded the new rail town. He built a sawmill in the town with the intention of providing lumber to build the railroad. He named the town Julia after his wife. An angry disagreement with the Chief Engineer of the Railroad removed Julia from history. A quick excision, the Post Office's name was changed. Julia's name was removed and the town was incorporated as Glendale.

May 13, 1883, the Oregon and California came to Glendale.

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"The sun of freedom has risen above the fatherland, but for us it is nothing but a bloody northern light.

The larks of redemption warble in the sky; for us, however, they are the screaming harbingers of a terrible storm.... Because slavish hordes and petty merchants have failed to understand the spirit of freedom, we Jews just suffer.... To stand still and to wait, to wait patiently, until all who are now opposed to us will make peace with us, until the spirit of humanity is victorious? Or, since "we are not saved," to seek salvation elsewhere – and to move to America?

... But to all the others, the oppressed and persecuted, those who have been driven from their homes and plundered in the notorious communities, all those who have gained nothing but calamity from this "freedom," all those who feel in their hearts that it will take a long time before there is peace for them in the fatherland...to all those we say: we are not saved. Salvation can only be sought in America!" -Leopold Kompert³

Jews have lived in Russia since the 4th century. For over fifteen hundred years, toleration of the *eternal foreigner*, the Jew, ebbed and flowed from oppressive to passive. Late in the 18th century, Tsarina Catherine the Great's Empire pushed deep into Western Europe. Russia was suddenly awash with unwanted Jews. A solution was devised, restrict the Jew to live in certain areas and make their lives

³ Leopold Kompert, Austrian writer and enthusiastic supporter of the 1848 Revolutions.

The Jew in the Modern World, A Documentary History, edit. By Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, pg. 463-464

miserable. The Pale of Settlement was created in 1791. For the next 100 plus years conditions for the Jew grew worse and worse, to intolerable.

Russian Jews yearned; they hungered for acceptance, toleration and equality. They dreamed of a time when being a Jew in Russia was not a question of life or death. Limited liberalization during the latter half of the 19th century permitted small numbers of Jews access to education and university life. Their hopes were shattered by even harsher anti-Semitic restrictions after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Vicious pogroms followed. Jewish hopes plummeted. The Messiah still tarried. Jews needed a solution.

For many, it would be a tidal wave of voluntary deportation. Millions of Russian Jews left Russia for America, 1880-1920.

A particularly vicious Pogrom in Odessa blood let Jews May, 1881. Two new Jewish solutions emerged to the Jewish Problem. Both responses said there was no future for the Jew in Russia. One group knew they could wait for the Messiah no longer. They would immigrate to Palestine. They would return to the *Land* as farmers. They would rebuild a Jewish world that had been lost 1,900 years earlier. They were called the BILUIM, a Hebrew acronym for "Let the house of Jacob go." Their Jewish cultural and religious ties to the *Land* were central to their decision. The Messiah could meet them in Palestine. It was obvious to them the Messiah was not coming to Russia.

The second group was founded by two young, idealistic Jews, Moses Herder and Marya Bahal. They called themselves the Am Olam, the *Eternal People*. They too believed that life on the land as agriculturalists was redemptive. The land did not have to be in Palestine. A new social contract was evolved by the Am Olam, socialist, at times Marxist in economic thought, egalitarian and communal in structure. They dreamed of utopia. Both responses became widespread, though small, movements in Southern Russia.

America was willing to take Jews. America had the Homestead Act. America would give land in the West to Jews if they were willing to settle on it. Religion was not central to Am Olam thinking. For them, the Messiah was in the West.

January 1882, sixty Am Olam adherents, almost all in their late teens and early twenties, left Odessa for America. They had pooled their resources and arrived in New York that spring. New York was an urban jungle few had been able to conceptualize. They dreamed of land in the West. They dreamed of being redeemed as farmers.

The New York Jewish German establishment accepted their social responsibility to the human detritus, their co-religionists. Yet, they feared them. The establishment feared the very different type of Jew, the Russian Jew. They feared the Russian Jew would lead to a resurgence of latent antisemitism ruining their hard won acceptance in New York.

The Am Olam immigrants were different. They did not want to stay in New York. They did not know how or where to go out west but a remarkable Jewish humanitarian did, Michael Heilprin. Heilprin was a Polish Jewish American biblical scholar and respected journalist.

As the waves of desperate Jews washed into New York, Heilprin focused his life on helping them. Energetic, empathetic, connected, Heilprin worked from a small basement office in Lower Manhattan. His doorway was forever crowded with tales of need and frustrating inability to help more. Many decisions he made were proper and others horribly naïve and mistakenly trusting...

Henry Villard was a German American journalist, a wealthy financier, philanthropist and President of the Northern Pacific Railroad, 1881-1884.

Villard was German by birth, a radical liberal by temperament, pro-Union, antislavery and a pacifist. He moved back to Germany, 1870-1874, and was closely involved with American railroad investments and securities. He returned to the States to oversee German investments in railroad bonds that were going bad. Villard visited Portland in 1874. He was deeply impressed by the economic opportunity that Oregon offered. A year later, 1875, Villard assumed control and the presidency of the financially troubled Oregon and California Railroad.

When the Am Olam immigrants made their way to Heilprin office, he was already 60. He virtually was the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, the antecedent of HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

Heilprin advised them and guided them. They spread out to find work anywhere and then pooled their earnings for the future. Having no experience in farming was a serious shortcoming. One of the members hired himself out as a farm laborer. They lived communally, modestly, saving their money.

Heilprin reached out to the Jewish community for financial support for the Am Olam hopefuls. Heilprin's effort bore fruit, especially when the idealism of the young people became known that they planned to leave New York for the West and become farmers.

Heilprin made a key contact for the Am Olam dreamers. He wrote for the Nation Magazine. He knew Henry Villard, the owner of the Nation, personally and reached out to him about the plight of the would-be farmers. Villard was a generous man. He was also a practical businessman. Villard saw an opportunity to marry issues.

Oregon was not very populated. The area was very rich in land and resources. It was also very short on people and labor. Heilprin told Villard the Am Olam people wanted to go west. Villard offered to fund an exploratory committee to Oregon to seek proper land to buy for their Utopia. A committee of Am Olam members traveled to Oregon to investigate sites. Villard arranged for the committee to be met, guided and helped by a Yiddish speaking employee of the Oregon and California Railroad, Solomon Abraham.



New Odessa - 2017

Abraham directed the committee to Glendale. He worked out details and helped them make a decision to purchase 760 acres that he told them would be ideal for their home. A deal was made to buy the land. Abraham was the witness to the deed. The exciting news was conveyed back to New York.

Villard offered to fund, for \$20 a person, transportation to Glendale. Twenty-six Am Olam dreamers departed New York arriving in Portland in September. A contingent carried on by foot to Glendale to begin the work of creating their Utopian home they named New Odessa. More Am Olam settlers arrived in 1883 and soon the communal settlement had 60-70 men with a few women mixed in.

The New Odessa location was far from ideal. The Jews had hoped to exercise their utopian ideals as farmers. Only 160 acres of the hilly land was cleared. The rest was forested. They were far from any urban center and any Jewish communal support. Facilities on the land were seriously lacking. It would be very hard for the Am Olam settlers even if they were experienced agrarians. They could not make a living from the land. Solomon Abraham had a solution. The Am Olam settlers would make their living cutting ties and delivering them to the Oregon and California Railroad.

It was not the first time that Heilprin had unwittingly misdirected Jewish immigrants westward. Heilprin had been approached by Emanuel Saltiel, a Jewish philanthropist and mining developer from Colorado. Saltiel offered to bring Jewish Russian refugee families to Cotopaxi, set them up with homes, supplies and aid them as farmers.

The Jews arrived in Cotopaxi, high in the Rocky Mountains, trudged to between 7000 and 9000 feet of elevation to try and break rocky ground into farms with no housing, tools or assistance. Saltiel offered the men work in his mines instead. The Jews tried to make a go of it in impossible surroundings, in impossible conditions. The Cotopaxi effort failed. Sicily Island, Louisiana suffered a similar fate as did other farming dreams in Kansas, the Dakotas and other places.

The New Odessa brothers and sisters, as they liked to be called, quickly set up a communal home, a modified barn, where they all lived together. Privacy was a serious problem as were the challenges of the inexperienced agrarians in living off the land.

A written constitution was created immediately defining their governing philosophical principles. Ironically, a written constitution was a dream they all hoped for for Russia. They could not achieve a Constitutional government in Russia but they came to America where a Constitutional government had already been successfully in place for almost 100 years.

Work was communal, all resources were communal, personal property was communal, no commercial independent activity outside the community except by communal effort, equality of men and women was established. Men vastly outnumbered women, which created much tension within the community. Sexual liberalism was accepted. Women were free to choose single or multiple partners. Jewish religious practices were shunted aside. Philosophy and open group and individual criticism were undertaken to communally improve New Odessa. The individual was sublimated to the whole.

The brethren were uncomfortable. They were unsure and felt they needed structure in their lives and thinking. William Frey, a non-Jew, a son of a Russian aristocrat joined New Odessa in 1883 along with his wife and a second woman who was *also his wife*. He had a remarkable, charismatic personality that quickly induced the impressionable brethren to appoint him their leader. Frey was a vegetarian, a pacifist, an ascetic. Frey lived a philosophical religion of Humanity, Positivism, which he derived from the philosopher, August Conte.

Work schedules and life were systematized under Frey. Education and philosophical guidance devolved into almost daily lectures on Positivism. Frey pushed his religion until tension began erupting in the commune between him and some of the original founders, like Paul Kaplan.

A schism developed. Complaints of lethargy and emotional isolation developed as individual personalities began to emerge that ran counter to the rigid, ascetic life the brethren lived.

Little by little, social and work interactions occurred with the Glendale community. Russian style antisemitism was non-existent. The brothers and sisters realized the American world was more freeing than any utopian communal constraints New Odessa could provide. Philosophical conflicts between a group led by Frey and one by Paul Kaplan broke the unity of New Odessa. The groups split away; individuals drifted away and were not replaced by fresh Am Olam recruits.

New Odessa defaulted on its mortgage and the farm was taken. The brethren dispersed by 1887. Some followed Frey to London. Others moved to the cities in the West to begin new lives. A large group returned to New York with Paul Kaplan and attempted to create a commune. They established a laundry business in New York and lived strictly according to the economic principles of Karl Marx. In time that too failed.

The New Odessa brethren came to America to establish a utopian ideal of freedom. They found that the American pull of individual freedom was even greater. Members of the New Odessa experiment moved into the mainstream of American life. Three became doctors, two lawyers, two druggists, one a teacher, another an engineer and a few became individual farmers in Oregon. Paul Kaplan remained true to his Marxist faith. He became a physician to the poor in the Lower East Side tenements of New York. When

he died, his burial entourage was followed by thousands. Peter Fireman, one of the younger brothers, went back to school to study chemistry. His discoveries made him a multi-millionaire.

The Russian Jewish Am Olam immigrants found their Utopias. Their Utopias were not communal but as free individuals in the unique experiment, America.

October 2017, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation approached the city of Glendale with an offer. JASHP is willing to pay for a historic, interpretive roadside marker project that will tell the story of Glendale. Our conditions were simple. The marker must be placed in a public setting that can easily be seen. Second, the marker is to mention two historical facts about Glendale. Solomon Abraham, a Polish Jewish American immigrant, was the founder of Glendale. And... that Glendale was the site of the first Jewish communitarian agricultural effort in American history. The rest of the text and the story is for Glendale to write.

The city council considered the offer early November, 2017. They voted unanimously in favor of the project. The historic marker will be placed, prominently and proudly, in Glendale's Memorial Park, spring 2018.

Jerry Klinger is president of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation.

www.JASHP.org.

