

Solomon Bibo, the Jewish Indian Chief

By Jerry Klinger

"If my path to God and life is different than the majorities, does that make it wrong?"
- William Rabinowitz

Periodically, the story of Solomon Bibo is sent out via the internet. Each time, it astonishes the Jewish world. Bibo was a Jewish man from Poland. He was a Chief of the Acoma Indians of New Mexico in the 1880's. Recently, his story was revived yet again and sent out by My Jewish Learning, a web site that disseminates tantalizing vignettes of Jewish history, culture and religious thought. The vignettes are unfortunately short or perhaps planned so. They leave the reader wanting more or simply deleting the contact and skipping on. A friend forwarded me their recent article on Bibo asking if I knew the story. I did.

I met members of the Bibo family at the Acoma Indian Pueblo south of Albuquerque, New Mexico more than ten years ago. I was involved with the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society.

"Solomon Bibo was born in Prussia in 1853, the sixth of eleven children. In 1866, two of Solomon's brothers ventured to America and settled in New Mexico, which in 1848 had become part of the United States after being first a Spanish colony and then part of Mexico. Initially, the older Bibo brothers worked for the Spiegelberg family, pioneer Jewish merchants in New Mexico, but moved on to the tiny village of Cebolletta, where they set up a trading post to exchange goods with the Navajos. In 1869, at the age of sixteen, Solomon Bibo left Germany for America. After spending some months on the Eastcoast learning English, he joined his brothers in Cebolletta.



"Governor" Solomon Bibbo #15 with Indians from Acoma

All three Bibbo brothers developed reputations for fairness in their dealings with the local Indian tribes, who used to bring the Bibos the farm produce they grew. In turn, the Bibbo's, under contract to the U. S. government, supplied the army forts in the area with this produce. The Indians were paid a fair price by the Bibbo's, which encouraged the Indians to improve their farming techniques. The Bibbos also became deeply involved in mediating the many disputes over land ownership that arose between the Indians and the Mexican residents of the area, who for centuries had coveted the Indians' lands. They also tried to intercede with local white Americans (Anglos) who tried to purchase Indian lands at below market prices. The Bibbos were considered pro-Indian and were not particularly embraced by either the Mexicans or their fellow Anglos.

None of the Bibbos became more endeared to the Indians than Solomon was to the Acomas. In 1882, he arrived at the pueblo and set up a trading post. He learned Queresan, the Acoma language, and helped the tribe fight its legal battles to restore its traditional lands. By treaty in 1877, the Acomas had been granted 94,000 acres of land by the U.S. government, far less than the Indians thought they were entitled to according to historical evidence. The Acomas were determined that they should lose no more than had already slipped through their hands.

To accomplish this end, in 1884 the tribe decided to offer Bibbo a 30 year lease to all their land, in exchange for which he would pay them \$12,000, protect their cattle, keep squatters away and mine the coal under the Acoma lands, for which he would pay the tribe a royalty of ten cents per ton for each ton extracted. Pedro Sanchez, the U.S. Indian agent from Santa Fe, learned of the deal and jealous of the success of the "rico Israelito" (rich Jew), tried to get the federal government to void the lease.

The Bibbo family fought back. Simon Bibbo petitioned the Board of Indian Commissioners in

Washington to the effect that his brother Solomon's "intentions with the Indians are of the best nature and beneficial to them--because the men, women and children love him as they would a father and he is in the same manner attached to them." In 1888, convinced finally that Bibo had acted honorably, the Indian agent for New Mexico wrote, "To the people of the pueblo of Acoma, having confidence in the ability, integrity and fidelity of Solomon Bibo...I hereby appoint [him] governor of said pueblo."

In 1885, Solomon married an Acoma woman, Juana Valle, granddaughter of his predecessor as governor of the Acoma Pueblo. Juana was originally a Catholic, but observed the Jewish faith and raised her children as Jews. In 1898, wanting their children to receive a Jewish education, Solomon and Juana relocated to San Francisco, where he invested in real estate and opened a fancy food shop. Their oldest son was bar mitzvah at San Francisco's Ohabei Shalome, and the younger attended religious school at Temple Emanuel. Solomon Bibo died in 1934, Juana in 1941. Solomon Bibo, governor of the Acomas, America's only known Jewish Indian chief, is buried with his Indian princess in the Jewish cemetery in Colma, California."²

The story is simple. It certainly is not the complete story and in numerous areas is disputed.

Bibo and his brothers migrated to the American West where they joined the "lantzman" network of Jewish pioneer traders in New Mexico is quite true. There they learned the skills needed to establish themselves as merchants dealing with Native Americans, Anglos and the Mexican American communities. Opportunities existed to the daring, the brave and the adventurous - of which the Bibos can certainly be included. Solomon Bibo did establish his trading relationship with the Acoma Indians of New Mexico.

"Acoma is, along with the Hopi town of Oraibi, the oldest inhabited settlement in the United States; it was already well established when the Spaniards first saw it in 1540. The ancient pueblo, known as the Sky City, is spectacularly situated like a medieval fortress atop its 600-foot-high rock, halfway between Gallup and Albuquerque in New Mexico. In the midst of the village stands the seventeenth-century Church of San Esteban with its wonderful polychrome altar, one of the great architectural treasures of the Southwest.

The Acoma Pueblo conversed in Keresan, a language unique to the Southwest. In the Keres culture of Acoma Pueblo, the cacique bore the title of Inside Chief, signifying his power within the village. Beyond the pueblo walls, power passed to one or more war leaders, or Outside Chiefs, who were responsible for constructing defenses and keeping watch against invaders.

They say the earth was formed when the Great Father Uchtsiti, Lord of the Sun, hurled a clot of his own blood into the heavens. In the soil of this new world, he set germinating the souls of two sisters, the Corn Mothers, who were raised to maturity by a spirit called Thought Woman. When the time was ripe, Thought Woman gave the two sisters baskets filled with seeds and showed them the way to the earth's surface. Corn was the first thing they planted. They learned to cultivate and harvest it, to grind and cook it, and to make daily offerings of cornmeal and pollen to their father, Uchtsiti. These lessons the Acomans would practice each day of their lives.

Drought in the 1100's to the 1200's was caused, as explained by Acoma storytellers, who say that one night the Horned Water Serpent, spirit of rain and fertility, abruptly left his people. No amount of prayer, no charms or dances of the rain priests, would bring him back. Unable to survive without their snake god, the people followed his trail until it reached a river. There they established a new home. The people of Acoma, so the elders recounted, once followed the Salt Mother's (an elderly matriarch who gave herself freely to anyone who sought her) trail far into the wilderness, trekking past dry gulches and sage-purpled hills for days on end.

Finally they reached a large salt lake. "This is my home," the Salt Mother declared. After that, all who traveled there read their fortune in the water, and if ailing in body they were made well again.

When the column of Spanish troops came into view on a cold winter afternoon of January 21, 1599, by European reckoning-the fighting men of Acoma fanned out from their village to guard the edge of the mesa. As the Spaniards drew closer, the defenders unleashed a barrage of insults, rocks, and arrows from more than 300 feet above. Just seven weeks earlier, a party of Spanish soldiers seeking food had been treated in a friendly manner until their demands turned aggressive and provoked a furious reaction. When it was over, almost all the intruders were dead, including their commander, Juan de Zaldivar, nephew of the military governor of New Mexico, Juan de Onate. Resolved to make an example of Acoma, Onate dispatched 70 of his best men under the command of Vicente de Zaldivar.

These were the troops approaching the seemingly impregnable "Sky City" that January afternoon, and with them arrived a harsh new reality. Over the next 3 days the Spaniards fought their way to the top of the mesa, where they rolled out a fearsome new weapon, a cannon that spewed thunderous blasts of small stones, tearing flesh and shattering bones. The battle became a massacre. As many as 800 Acomans soon lay dead in the rubble of their ruined city. Some 500 survivors were herded into dismal captivity: all males over the age of 12 were condemned to 20 years' servitude; those over 25 were also sentenced to have one foot cut off.

In time, some of the Acomans managed to escape and made their way home, there to begin the long process of rebuilding. The Sky City has been continuously inhabited since then, and never again has it fallen to an invader.

The Acoma 16th century pueblo-settlement still survives west of the Rio Grande in midwest New Mexico."³

Solomon Bibb did develop a trusted relationship with the Acoma Indians. He learned their language, customs, values and treated the Acoma people with respect and dignity. Curiously, he never learned to speak English well though he could speak Yiddish, Spanish and Queres with skill. The Acoma Indians soon turned to Bibb to represent their interests in the ever on going disputes with the American Territorial and Indian governmental organizations. He interceded and supported Acoma claims to their ancestral lands against Anglo, Mexican American and Laguna Indian claims.

But it is here that the historical record gets fuzzy. On one hand he was supportive of the Acoma Indians claims to their land, grazing rights, water and mining ventures. On the other hand he obtained an exclusive right for himself to these same rights for a very modest annual fee to the Indians. His critics said his claim of representing and protecting the Acoma people was self-serving and proved it when Bibo sold his interests in the Acoma land rights to a separate Anglo land company within a month after acquiring them for a tidy profit. He reserved for himself the right to graze his cattle on the land for 30 years and maintained his control of mineral rights.

Bibo was removed as a trader and trading representative by the Bureau of Indian Affairs when claims impropriety by his rivals centered at the Laguna Pueblo were recognized. In time the Laguna Claims were quashed. With support from within the Acoma Pueblo, Bibo was returned to his former relationship and status within the Acoma Pueblo. The evidence against him in Washington was never clear enough or strong enough to sustain him banishment. The split support, but still the majority support for Bibo within the Acoma Pueblo, tipped the scales in his favor.

Perhaps another factor also tipped the scales in favor of Bibo's reinstatement to position with the Acoma people. Bibo had married Juana Valle, a granddaughter of the Pueblo's Indian Governor. The term Governor meant Chief. It was a reference back to the Spanish occupation of the Pueblo. The Indians elected their Chiefs from within their own community as to who could best represent and promote their interests. Bibo was most likely married in the Catholic Church within the Pueblo community. He was accepted into the tribe by marriage but earned his status by reputation and diligence on behalf of the Acoma people.

Upon his return to Acoma, Bibo was appointed by Washington and then elected Chief of the Acoma Indians by the Pueblo. Acoma chose Bibo as their Chief on four different occasions. His decisions as leader of the Acoma Indians had long lasting impacts. Some of his decisions were good, some controversial and some are understood today were "progressive" but not maliciously, destructive. He meant well for the people.

The controversies surrounding Bibo and the Indian claim and counter Indian claims to the land did not go away after his return. They grew until Bibo retired permanently from his position of Tribal leadership.

The acrimony accelerated until he and his family chose to relocate to San Francisco. They did not move seeking a Jewish education for their children.

Jewish life in San Francisco had been active and dynamic since San Francisco's development as a major California Gold Rush port in the 1840's and 1850's. Jews flocked to the California. Many went to the mountains in search of the Yellow metal and economic heaven. Most, like almost all the starry eyed prospectors, did not find their dreams but stayed in California. Jews settled and helped develop San Francisco. The first synagogue, Congregation Emanu-El⁴, was established there in 1850. Their claim to historical to being first Synagogue West of the Mississippi is debated. It was not long before San Francisco had multiple Jewish communities and synagogues.

There is no solid evidence either for or against the claim that Solomon Bibo and his wife Juana had their son - Carl -sometimes said it was Leroy, Bar Mitzvahed at the Bush Street Synagogue. The implication was that Juana had converted to Judaism. In the fluid environment of the West, when the presence of a Mikvah and Beit Din were not available, it was not unusual for Jewish men to marry local women and convert them under the stars before God. Some of their children of these converted unions were in fact raised as Jews. Jewish and native blood lines crossed. Today, generations later, no one really knows for sure who is by traditional definition Jewish.

Carl (Leroy?) Bibo was said to have returned to Acoma for the Indian ritual of manhood after the Bar-Mitzvah. Solomon Bibo and Juana remained in San Francisco. He died in 1934 and she in 1941. They are buried together in the Jewish Cemetery of Temple Emanuel in Colma, California. They rest not far from the gravesite of Wyatt Earp, of the "Gunfight at O.K. Corral" fame, and his Jewish "wife" Josephine Marcus⁵.

Solomon Bibo, when he was lived with the Acoma Indians, was a liberal progressive, promoting Indian rights. He was a strong supporter of the predominant social thinking of how to bring the Indians into the 19th century as Americans.

From the beginning, even with Columbus, Native American relationships with Europeans had been characterized by subjugation, war, religious conversions, cultural destruction, and occupation of land and property usurpation. Indians had been enslaved by the Spanish and the Americans but turned out to be poor substitutes for the more successful use of Africans as slaves. Native Americans frequently joined with the aggressive Spanish and Americans to attack their traditional enemies only to fall victim shortly afterwards themselves to the same Anglo or Hispanic assaults. Native Americans were successively forced off of their traditional lands and moved to "reserved" lands farther to the West. The treaties of Whites with Indians, at times attempted to be honored, but were never enduring. The historic patterns repeated again and again. Civil War General, and Western Indian War Commander, Phil Sheridan⁶ said, "the only good Indians I saw were dead ones."

Not everyone thought that the only good Indian was a dead one. The idea of the Noble Savage had been long a part of American popular literary culture since Washington Irving's book, "Last of the Mohegan's." The Jewish equivalent was "Ivanhoe" written by Sir Walter Scott⁷.

By the 1870's and 1880's, the Native American was largely defeated, reservationized and controlled by the Government. More and more people no longer thought of exterminating the Indian. Progressive, liberal thought turned to civilizing the Indian. Taking the Indian out of the Indian and making them into Christian White men with Red skins but not American Citizens. American Indians did not become Citizens until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.⁸ Jews, having lived in Europe for over a thousand years, were not granted citizenship in many countries until the middle to late 19th century,

The liberal question remained how to bring the Indian up from his savage, barbaric state mired in the nomadic and semi-agricultural past of a culture largely unchanged for a thousand years. The solution was accepted and promoted by many well-meaning social reformers who dealt with Indian relations. If educational efforts on the Reservation failed to advance the Indian into the

19th century, the Indian children needed to be taken off the reservation and educated in the White Man's ways far from their homes. Solomon Biba was a strong advocate for raising the people of Acoma from their primitive existence. He was not alone. Many Acoma Indians supported the movement. It was a painful, difficult decision for all. They recognized the economic and social benefits that their children could obtain. Others in the Pueblo strongly opposed it. Biba's support for the "new" Indian re-education program was a significant factor in Biba's troubles in the Pueblo.

It Reform movement, today, is reminiscent of the 1880's Russian government's efforts to force the Jew out of the Jew, to become Russians. Kidnapping of Jewish children, for a lifetime of servitude in the Czarist armies, became a hated method of Jew Russification.



Lieut Richard Henry Pratt, founder and superintendent of Carlisle Indian School, in military uniform, 1879.

"Richard Pratt had served in the Civil War. After the war, Lt. Pratt led the 10th Cavalry Regiment, who became known as Buffalo Soldiers, in the southern plains of the United States. One of Pratt's jobs was to command Native Americans who were enlisted scouts for the 10th

Cavalry. In 1875, Pratt transported a small group of 72 Indian prisoners, to Fort Marion, an old Spanish fort in St. Augustine, Florida. The prisoners had been captured in the Red River War.

At Fort Marion, Pratt immediately set about improving physical conditions for the Indians. He soon set up an Indian self-guarding system and worked in other ways to help them preserve their dignity. The prisoners became the center of interest by northerners wintering at St. Augustine. They encouraged Pratt in his plans for education, and several participated as volunteer teachers. Some were teachers or had missionary backgrounds. Pratt believed language was critical and that it was easier for Indians to learn English, than for Americans to learn the great variety of Indian languages. He organized volunteers to teach the Indian prisoners language, religion, and customs as a form of cultural assimilation to prepare them for life after release.

When the prisoners were freed in 1878, Pratt encouraged them to seek more education. Seventeen went to Hampton University, a historically black college established soon after the Civil War for freedmen. Others were educated at private colleges in New York State. All funds for their education were raised by private benefactors. Based on their apparent success, Pratt and others thought such education could be useful for other American Indians, especially children.

Pratt believed a model similar to Hampton Institute would be useful for educating Indians, and worked to gain support for that purpose. The "industrial school", which included trade and farm skills, was seen as more practical for mass education than the classical academic college, which only a small percentage of students attended. US Senator Pendleton, whose wife had befriended one of the prisoners and supported his education in Syracuse, New York, pushed a bill through Congress to establish a school for American Indians.

The federal government authorized Pratt to use the Carlisle Barracks in central Pennsylvania as the site for the school. The first students came from the Lakota tribe. "Pratt saw his education program with the Native Americans as analogous to his domestication of wild turkeys." He was said to have taken a nest of wild turkey eggs to be mothered by his barnyard hen, and the fledglings became as assimilated as his best domesticated turkeys. They only needed, in Pratt's words, "the environment and kind treatment of domestic civilized life to become a very part of it." Pratt believed that the Native Americans should be uprooted from their tribal past to "achieve full participation." In practice, this meant erasing, as much as possible, any trace of Native American customs, culture, language and religion from the children at the school."¹⁰

Pratt wrote in the *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892) "The Indians under our care (on the reservations) remained savage, because forced back upon themselves and away from association with English-speaking and civilized people, and because of our savage example and treatment of them. . . .

We have never made any attempt to civilize them with the idea of taking them into the nation, and all of our policies have been against citizenizing and absorbing them. Although some of the policies now prominent are advertised to carry them into citizenship and consequent association and competition with other masses of the nation, they are not, in reality, calculated to do this.

..... When we cease to teach the Indian that he is less than a man; when we recognize fully that he is capable in all respects as we are, and that he only needs the opportunities and privileges which we possess to enable him to assert his humanity and manhood; when we act consistently towards him in accordance with that recognition; when we cease to fetter him to conditions which keep him in bondage, surrounded by retrogressive influences; when we allow him the freedom of association and the developing influences of social contact-then the Indian will quickly demonstrate that he can be truly civilized, and he himself will solve the question of what to do with the Indian."¹¹

Pratt persuaded tribal elders and chiefs that the reason the *washichu* (Lakota word for white man) had been able to take their land was because the Indians were uneducated. He believed that the Natives were disadvantaged by being unable to speak and write English and that if they had the knowledge, they may have been able to protect themselves. Many of the first children to be sent to Carlisle were sent voluntarily by tribal families. Descendants of Spotted Tail and Red Cloud were among the first sent to the Carlisle School.

As the decades passed, enrollment at the Carlisle School increased, with up to 1,000 students a year. The older students used their skills to help build new classrooms and dorm buildings.

As more schools were developed across the country, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) put pressure on Indian families to send their children to the boarding schools. To save their children from capture, some parents taught their children a hiding "game" to be used when BIA officers arrived. The Hopi nation surrendered groups of their men to prison sentences in Alcatraz rather than send their children to the schools. ¹¹



Carlisle Indian Industrial School

"Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1879-1918) was an Indian boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1879 at Carlisle, Pennsylvania by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the school was the first off-reservation boarding school, and it became a model for Indian boarding schools in other locations. It was one of a series of nineteenth-century efforts by the United States government to assimilate Native American children from 140 tribes into the majority culture. The goal of total assimilation can be summed up in the school's slogan: "To civilize the Indian, get him into civilization. To keep him civilized, let him stay."¹²

Pratt died in obscurity, still advocating his solution to the Indian Problem. The philosophical experiment turned into practical applications to civilize the Native American, begun with such strong advocacy by Presidents Washington, Jefferson and others, was a failure. It succeeded only in causing severe cultural and societal injury to the Native American. Bibb and the liberal progressives had meant well and did worse.