

The Jews of Steamboat Springs

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In the ski resort town of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, the late Professor Daniel J. Elazar, founder of the thirty-year, worldwide Study of Jewish Community Organization (and founder of the Jewish Political Studies Review), found a microcosm of the American Jewry now taking shape. In this town of 7,000 are several hundred Jews, ninety of whom are members of local Jewish organizations. They represent a community of Americans of Jewish descent for whom being Jewish is increasingly a matter of individual identification.

Some years ago, during winter vacation just before New Year's Day - I believe it was 1958 - tired of school and the flatlands of northern Illinois, I did what I did so often in those years, joined a couple of acquaintances from Colorado at the University of Chicago and rolled westward in their car for a few days in the mountains. I am an old Coloradan, having grown up there during the 1940s, from the age of six, while my father was the educational director of the largest Conservative synagogue in Denver, the Beit Midrash HaGadol, known universally as BMH (and colloquially as "bring money here"). Although we moved from Colorado, Colorado never moved from me and I have remained closely attached to the state ever since. After a hiatus of some years, beginning in 1955 I have managed to get to Colorado for part of the year, almost every year, for some combination of research and recreation.

So, late in 1958 I found myself heading westward from Denver on the Yampa Valley Mail, a train of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad that climbed up from Denver to the Moffat Tunnel, then and perhaps still today the longest railroad tunnel in the United States, through the Front Range of the Rockies and on through the coldest part of the continental United States, Winter Park and Fraser, into the Grand Valley where we paralleled the Colorado River until somewhere past Kremnoling, a lonely cow town, and the Gore Range. Then we crossed into the Yampa Valley and followed the Yampa River until the end of the line at Craig, the county seat of Moffat County in far northwestern Colorado.

The Yampa Valley Mail was one of those trains that, until the 1950s or early 1960s, served rural America, stopping at every small town to bring in or take out the mail, a train where a lonely rancher or his wife or children could drive up to the edge of the tracks on the dirt road that crossed them in the middle of some vast emptiness, stop with his pick-up, and wave the train down for an impromptu stop to take on a new passenger, and of course the passengers could disembark in reverse. This particular line of the D&RGW originally had been a separate railroad, built by David Moffat in an effort to establish a new line from Denver to Salt Lake City and the West Coast. The Moffat road had gone bankrupt when the tracks had only managed to reach Craig in any case and had been taken over by the Rio Grande.

Craig itself was a small town, perhaps 5,000 people at the time, founded sixty years earlier. It was the jumping-off point for such well-known attractions as Dinosaur National Monument and Brown's Valley, where Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, along with other outlaws, would hide or winter for many years. The latter were the area's greatest claim to historical fame. In a brochure put out in the early 1990s by the Moffat County Tourist Board, the only other historical items which they could dredge up were that one of John Charles Fremont's expeditions had passed through the area in the 1840s and that Davy Crockett had passed through in 1837. The only problem was that Davy Crockett was killed at the Alamo in 1836. There was, however, a Fort Davy Crockett used by the mountain men, built in the area between Brown's Hole and Craig about that time.

I was in Craig because I had never really been that far into northwestern Colorado, despite all my explorations of the state with my family, with friends, or alone. Northwestern Colorado was so far off the beaten track, so empty, so desolate, that I had only passed through it once on U.S. Highway 40 driving eastward from Salt Lake City to Denver past midnight one night in 1946 when we could not find accommodations anywhere along the road for 550 miles. This time I got off the train and found a small hotel, perhaps two blocks from the railroad tracks, and then proceeded to spend New Year's Eve in a local saloon along with a local schoolteacher, her husband, a stove-up cowboy who had broken most of the bones in his body at one time or another either ranching or rodeoing, and other assorted locals. We had a fine New Year's Eve. A few days later I returned to Denver by the same "Mail."

The point of this story is that both going and coming we passed through Steamboat Springs on the western end of Rabbit Ears Pass. Steamboat itself was a small ranching town, just under 7,000 feet above sea-level, about half the size of Craig, on the banks of the Yampa River at the base of a not very prominent mountain range that rose up to 10,000 feet, occasionally 11, and at Mt. Zirkel to the north, to over 12. It was the county seat of Routt County, named after Colorado's first state governor - 2,200 square miles and not that many more people in the heart of Colorado's cattle country. Steamboat Springs was 50 miles east of Craig and the same west of Kremnoling, 50 miles south of the Wyoming-Colorado line and the same north of that thriving crossroads, State Bridge. The reader can well imagine that nobody expected to find any Jews in all of northwestern Colorado other than a stray merchant or wanderer, or a visitor hopelessly in love with all the mountains in the state such as this writer passing through. None of us ever did in those days.

On the other hand, Steamboat Springs was already known as Colorado's oldest ski resort. Norwegians who had settled in the county back at the turn of the century had begun organized cross-country skiing there some time around 1904 and by 1914 there was already some downhill skiing. Thus the ski industry in Colorado was born in that unlikely, rather inaccessible place. By 1958 it had not gotten very far. The big boom was to come a decade later. I visited the area several times before and after but at no point did it ever make any sense to look for Jews and certainly not a Jewish community.

Then, in 1994, we at the Center for the Study of Federalism at Temple University in Philadelphia decided to hold our summer teachers' institute at Steamboat. We had checked other facilities and priced out the competition in Colorado and Montana, the two states in which we regularly find sites to hold these four-week-long workshop retreats for high school teachers gathered from around the country, and Steamboat turned out to offer us the best deal. This was our fourth such institute. I had hit upon the idea of going to ski resorts in the Rocky Mountains during the off-season where we could get accommodation at prices competitive with the prices of Eastern college dormitories and in much finer settings, and thus make the institute not only a learning experience but a vacation possibility for our faculty and for the high school teacher-students (and even their families if they chose to pay the extra amount to bring them).

I was less than ecstatic, not because I wanted a site with a Jewish community (neither Big Sky, Montana, or Copper Mountain and Breckenridge, Colorado, our three previous sites, had one), but because Steamboat Springs had always been the least promising of the ski resorts from my earlier memories. My wife Harriet, son Gidon, and I were thus all the more pleasantly surprised when we got to Steamboat and found it a very pleasant place with very nice accommodations. More than that, to our surprise we found a small but by American standards fairly vigorous Jewish community in this little town that had just crossed the 7,000 population mark.

It is not that we were surprised to find Jews there. At least one couple among my very good friends had a son who had been living there for the past several years to take advantage of the skiing, but we did not expect to find a Jewish community organization which claimed over 90 members among a population of several hundred Jews in Steamboat or its immediate area, that held services on the High Holidays and at least get-togethers on the others, had an organization, a mailing list, and was advertised regularly in the local newspaper under "Religious Services" under the name Har Hamishpahat (an attempt by its leadership to give the community the Hebrew name for mountain family, only they turned around the words Mishpahat HaHar).

As we probed a little more deeply, we found that the community was indeed a functioning one, that its sparkplugs were the Rombergs, a family originally from Denver and from old Denver stock (in Denver terms, people who had lived in Denver before 1945 were "old Denver" while those who

had come since, that is to say, in the postwar boom, were considered "new Denver"). Mrs. Romberg was from a family that were veteran members of Temple Emanuel, the original Jewish congregation in Denver which can be traced back to the first minyan held when the city was founded in 1859, although its formal establishment came in 1873. Mr. Romberg was born in New York but actually comes from a family of German Jews who had settled in Helena, Montana, during the Gold Rush of the 1860s and had then gone from Helena to Denver by covered wagon in the 1870s. He is a retired high school teacher, now president of the school board.

Both of the Rombergs had been born Jews. That is apparently rare enough in the Steamboat area, and many, if not most, of the members are intermarried. The community includes other locally prominent Jews, including Steamboat Springs' city manager and several other people holding voluntary or professional positions in the governments of the region. As everywhere, numerous Jews are prominent in business.

For example, there are three hot air balloon companies functioning in Steamboat. Two are owned and operated by Jews, one by a former camper at the Hebrew-speaking camp Massad Bet in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania who himself was originally from New York but who came to Colorado to go to college and then gravitated to Steamboat, and the other by a native Denverite who had spent six months in a kibbutz and also spoke a kind of basic Hebrew. Indeed, the amount of Israel experience at least among those identified with the Jewish community is not insignificant.

As I indicated, many or most of these Steamboat Jews are intermarried but, as is the pattern these days, have not in the least abandoned their Jewish identity in their own minds and are even willing to struggle to keep it, teaching their children the rudiments of Judaism, either themselves or by taking them to Denver periodically for lessons so that they may have a bar or bat mitzvah or be confirmed. If you ask them why they do not ask their partners to convert, they get very offended, indicating that this is an individual matter and, just as they would not like their partners to ask them to convert to Christianity, they have no intention of doing the reverse. Indeed, even the Jewish parents of children who have intermarried, whose children, either in Steamboat or elsewhere, have identified with the Jewish community without the conversion of the non-Jewish partner, get incensed if one suggests that perhaps conversion might be in order, on the grounds that this would be an unwarranted intervention in individual freedom of choice.

In other words, what we have in Steamboat Springs is a microcosm of the American Jewry that is now taking shape, a community of Americans, most of whom happen to be of Jewish descent, plus those of their non-Jewish partners who are willing to identify with Judaism in some way, although not by converting. These Jewish Americans do feel Jewish and want to preserve their Jewishness, but in the American way, as individuals. There is no sense of the family dimensions of Judaism that are so requisite for its survival. They are interested in Israel, sympathetic even, but what has brought them to Steamboat is a search for tranquility and Israel to them is far too untranquil a place to draw them more than modestly. Indeed, they, like other diaspora Jews, have gotten doses of Jewish experience to strengthen their Jewish identities by having visited or spent time in Israel (and I would dare say that more have actually spent time there than have gone for simple visits if the people that we talked to are exemplary), but that's that. I would guess that there is a good chance that their children will seek out Israel for the same purposes in turn, and with the same results in turn.

The Steamboat Springs community, as far as we could see, gets no support from the rest of the Jewish world, with two exceptions. One is that it is loosely and informally connected with Denver's Temple Emanuel and the rabbi of the temple comes out to Steamboat every so often, in part for vacationing and in part to provide some kind of religious booster shot for the community. The other connection is more curious and even surprising, at least to an older generation.

Every summer there gather in Steamboat a small group of several families of Orthodox Jewish Holocaust survivors who live in Israel, who have also found in Steamboat Springs the tranquility that they need - once a year. These families live permanently in Israel and are religious Jews. When they first came, they brought a Sefer Torah to Steamboat which the community keeps for them and uses during the year when necessary, while they use it for the weeks that they are in town in the summer for services every Shabbat - in their hotel since, of course, none of them ride on Shabbat. While this small group of observant Jews is connected, if tenuously, with the local Jewish community, they are far removed from the experiences or way of life of the locals, but it also is a kind of booster shot.

In all of these aspects, Steamboat Springs is a miniature of the Jewish world now being born, a Jewish world in which being Jewish is increasingly a matter of individual identification. It is an identification that seems, on its surface, to be primarily ethnic but which has no ethnicity. It perforce manifests itself in a society like the United States as religious but contains almost no religion. Jewish peoplehood is still present in some vague way but nobody knows exactly how.

It is part of a world in which those Jews who are traditional maintain their traditions in every corner of it, no matter how remote, and find ways to do so because the environment is not at all hostile to those who want that way of life, just as it is not hostile to those post-hippies who like to swim in the nude even in public (such as the two who dived into the pool of our respectable condominium one evening) or those who go to the many hot springs in the area where signs are posted attempting to regulate the times when nude swimming is allowed.

Steamboat, then, is a very modest reflection of the new world with which serious Jews interested in the continuity of Jewish life must contend, a world that by being safe for hedonism is also safe for the Jewish way of life and those who chose it.