

The Jewish Agricultural Colony at Cotopaxi, Colorado

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Introduction

Jewish Agricultural Colonies in America (The Hamodia date, page) discussed the background behind the founding in America of almost 25 agricultural colonies for immigrant Jews. The history of one of these colonies, **The Sicily Island Colony**, which was founded in Louisiana not far from New Orleans, was dealt with in some detail. This article focuses on the Jewish colony founded in Cotopaxi, Colorado in 1882.

Shaul (Saul) Baer Milstein

Saul Baer Milstein was a well-to-do businessman and warehouse owner who resided in Brest Litovsk during the nineteenth century. During the 1860s and 1870s he witnessed short periods of brief liberalization of Russian policies toward the Jews that were invariably followed by increased government oppression. He came to the conclusion that the only solution for him and his family was immigration to America. Therefore, “in the late 1870’s, [he] sent his nephew, Jacob, to New York in order to scout out the political attitudes in America towards Jews, to find out about the Homestead Act, and locate land. In addition to this, a search was made to seek out interested relatives and friends for the eventual emigration. Saul Baer planned to sell his business in order to finance the endeavor once the appropriate arrangements were made.

“Funded by his uncle, Jacob arrived in New York City in 1878 to begin his investigation, but within the first year, he broke his uncle’s trust by coaxing Saul Baer’s daughter, Yente (Nettie), to join him in America so they could be married. Saul Baer was infuriated by this. Immediately Saul Baer cut off the funds to his nephew, and Jacob was forced to find work in a tin factory in New York City in order to survive.

“An accident in the tin factory caused the loss of an eye, and a lengthy recovery. It was during this recovery, in 1880, that Jacob became acquainted with Michael Heilprin a leader in the Jewish community who was instrumental in establishing the HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aide Society). This friendship was one of the factors that eventually led to the establishment of the colony at Cotopaxi.”

Cotopaxi, Colorado

Cotopaxi is today a small, unincorporated village located on the banks of the Arkansas River. It was given its unusual name by Henry Thomas, a nineteenth century prospector who was called “Gold Tom” by his contemporaries. When Thomas arrived in this area of the Upper Arkansas Valley in about 1872, he was particularly struck by one of the valleys. He felt it closely resembled an area of northern Ecuador where he had once prospected for gold. The dominant feature of this Andean region was a volcano called “Cotopaxi,” so Thomas gave this area of Colorado the same name.

Emanuel H. Saltiel

A second factor that led to the establishment of a Jewish agricultural colony at Cotopaxi was a letter from Emanuel H. Saltiel (Shaltiel) (1844/45 – 1900), a Jew of Portuguese (Sephardic) descent who had become a successful entrepreneur in Colorado during the 1880s. When he learned that Michael Heilprin of HIAS was trying to encourage Russian immigrants to leave the crowded urban areas such as New York City and settle in the west, “Saltiel wrote an eloquent and convincing letter to Heilprin, offering to construct houses and barns, provide farm implements, livestock and seed for the colonists. He would keep the cost under \$10,000 and all the colonists would have to raise would be living expenses and transportation costs en route to Colorado.

“The deal seemed like a perfect fit. Each family would be indebted for less than \$435, and because many of the Russians had experience in farming, the situation would be ideal. Heilprin sent his secretary, Julius Schwartz, to Colorado to investigate the situation and send back a report. During this time, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and under the new rule of Tsar Alexander III, a new set of repressive anti-Semitic laws were enacted, the worst of which were the May Laws of 1881.

“This has a strong impact on the [future] Cotopaxi colonists. What began as a well planned and thought out move, became an urgent necessity. The colonists left Russia and were thrown into a massive wave of immigration which flooded the HIAS office with thousands of requests for aide and money for which they were totally unprepared. Because of the new urgency, the colonists arrived in New York and were sent west without ever having gotten a report back from Julius Schwartz about the living conditions at Cotopaxi.”

Arrival in Cotopaxi

“The people who comprised the Cotopaxi Colony in the spring of 1882 were [Chassidic] Russian Jews from the provinces of Volhynia, Kiev and Ekaterinoslav. Sixty-three persons in all, there were twenty-two ‘heads of family’, each of whom were eligible to file on 160 acres of government land. Actually, most of the sixty-three were members of only three main family clans, consisting of several generations and relatives by marriage. Among these three families, too, there was much intermarriage and nearly every colonist at Cotopaxi was related to the others by ties of blood or marriage, the only exception

being close friends who had attached themselves to one ‘patriarch’ and were considered as ‘adopted.’ This aggregation had been well solidified in Europe, and the experiences of the pogroms, the emigration and the events at Cotopaxi served to weld it even more firmly together.”¹

These sixty-three observant Jews left New York on May 5, 1882 and arrived in Cotopaxi on May 12. “They thought they were leaving the hardships of Tzarist Russia behind, but as it turned out they were exchanging the privations of ‘home’ for new hardships, which included non-arable land, broken promises, and the difficulty of living in a culture where language, religion, and terrain were foreign and inhospitable.

“Upon arrival in Cotopaxi, the colonists found that not all of the promises had been fulfilled. Four houses had been constructed two miles south of town on an arid plateau above Oak Grove Creek, which was both dry and sandy during the summer or roiling with water during periodic spring flooding. Eight more houses were constructed above 8,000 feet on dry rocky soil where no irrigation water could be acquired. The houses were only about eight feet square with flat roofs and lacked windows, doors and chimneys. Twenty houses had been promised, but only twelve had been constructed. The houses were unfurnished, and only four of the houses had cooking stoves.

“The supplies, too, were inadequate. When asked about this, Saltiel explained that labor and building materials were in short supply and were not available locally. He said they had been sent for, but had been delayed. Shortly after that, Saltiel left on an extended business trip and was absent for several months, leaving the colonists to cope with little more than the personal belongings they had brought with them from Russia.

“Because of the immediate necessity of planting their crops, the colonists decided to move into the unfinished houses. The colonists borrowed plows, horses, seed and other equipment from A.S. Hart who was in partnership with Saltiel and the co-owner of the store. The Jews were extended credit for the purchase of food and personal supplies. Rocks were cleared and crops were planted, chimneys were built, and the door-less, windowless houses were made into homes. Even then, it was near the first of June before their first crops were sown on the wind-swept slopes below the Sangre de Cristo Mountains where a ‘good’ growing season was less than four months.

“There were a few happy moments during the first summer in Cotopaxi. A Sefer Torah was donated to the colonists by the New York Orphan Asylum and the colonists were able to locate an abandoned building north of the General Store to use as a synagogue. The dedication of the synagogue on June 23rd held a mystical and divine quality, and was described with these words in an account sent to the **Jewish Messenger**, 1882: “The young secretary (Julius Schwartz) opened the Ark, and after the chanting of several hymns placed the Torah in its place.... Later they danced in their peculiar Russian manner and the silent moon sent its silvery rays upon the dancing and singing Russians.”

The Colonists Encounter Difficulties

Unfortunately, the joy experienced by the colonists during the summer soon ended when with the onset of an early frost. This put an end to the growing season, the result being that the colonists did not have a profitable harvest. The colonists, already strapped for cash, were forced to turn to other work in order to pay off the debts they had incurred when they purchased farming supplies from the store owned by Saltiel and his partner Hart. They also needed to purchase food and clothing for the upcoming winter.

“Many of the men took jobs as laborers in Saltiel’s mines but saw not a penny from it. Instead they were paid in vouchers for use in Hart's store.

“In addition to the crop failure, the colonists were forced to use their winter supply of firewood for large bonfires to keep away the marauding bears. The extra houses, never having been completed, forced two families to set up camp in canvas tents and another family to spend their first year in an Indian dugout cave. During the first winter, the weather was severe, and starving Ute Indians frequently visited, begging for food.”

Eventually many of the men went to work for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, which was extending its line west from Salida. They received \$3 a day as track laborers. “This job held two benefits for the colonists, the first was that the railroad was happy to give them the Sabbath off in exchange for working on Sunday, and the second was that once the train firemen, conductors, and engineers learned of the colonists plight, they threw extra coal from the train along the tracks near Cotopaxi so that the women from the colony could gather it to use for heat throughout the long, harsh winter.”

“By the fall of 1882, it was clear that the colonists would need outside help. The promises Saltiel had made for the additional houses and supplies were never met.”

Word of the colony’s predicament reached Denver, resulting in visits by several interested groups. The Denver Jewish community provided as much help as it could, sending warm clothing, food, medicine and other necessities. “A number of reporters from the Denver newspapers appeared and interviewed the immigrants and the townspeople. They had heard of this unusual agricultural experiment in Denver and had come down to check certain reports of mismanagement and illegalities.

“The colony did manage to survive the first winter, but they faced the coming spring with determination not to make the same mistakes nor rely on Saltiel for any further assistance. They observed their first Passover at Cotopaxi that April of 1883 [some of the men traveled 26 miles to Salida to purchase the flour they needed to bake matzos], and immediately after the rites were concluded, again borrowed seed and equipment and sowed their second crop. But nature seemed to conspire against them, for scarcely were the seeds in the ground when a late spring blizzard ruined a large part of them. These late storms are common in Colorado but to the struggling and discouraged colonists, it seemed a special punishment directed at them alone.

As their harvest in 1883 was no better than the first, several families prepared to leave as soon as they received their share of the removal funds. For the remaining families, help and encouragement during their second winter was again supplied by their friends from Denver.

“Those who stayed on that winter earned their living expenses by working in neighboring mines and on the railroad. The colony celebrated its second Passover at Cotopaxi in 1884, shortly after which a number of families left for new locations. Only six families decided to remain and plant a third crop, but when another late blizzard destroyed it, too, they at last recognized the futility of persevering in this spot and made plans to abandon the site. Each head-of-family had paid a fee of \$50.00 into a common fund back in New York for the filing of deeds. When they prepared to depart the county, they checked with the county clerk in Canon City and could find there no record whatsoever of any such deed or conveyance. They had simply been squatters or perhaps at best, tenant farmers on corporation town-site land. They had wasted almost three years on Saltiel’s colony when they could have filed on public domain nearby as homesteaders.

“By June of 1884 the colony, as such, was formally dissolved. The Cotopaxi Colony had been a failure. But it had served to give its members valuable lessons in pioneering, and had taken them out of the crowded ghettos in the eastern cities and given them a glance at what was available on other farm lands in the West. Of the twenty-two families who lived through the bitter but edifying experience at Cotopaxi, only two failed to remain in the West. The rest used their hard-won knowledge to try farming on better lands in the West.”²

Who Was to Blame for the Colony’s Failure?

“Two completely different points of view emerged. According to Flora Satt in her master's thesis detailing the history of the colony, the **Denver Republican** pinned the blame on Saltiel emphasizing his unsavory character, and they blamed the HIAS for sending the colonists into a situation which had not been fully researched ahead of time. A second newspaper, the **Rocky Mountain News** downplayed the situation by saying that ‘all pioneers must endure some hardship.’ They believed the colonists were not facing anything more difficult than other settlers, and felt they were far better off than most.

“There has been much debate about why the Jewish colony at Cotopaxi did not succeed. Poor timing, poor preparation, poor weather, poor funding, the cultural and language barrier, and the role played by Emanuel Saltiel have all been questioned. If any one of these things had been different, would the colony have been a success?

“In a recent paper³ written by a descendent of the Saltiel family, Miles Saltiel defends Emanuel Saltiel as a somewhat ‘rumbustious,’ but well-intended benefactor. He points out that there are no other cases of successful agricultural colonies in the United States during that time period. Perhaps this is so, but if nothing else, Emanuel Saltiel influenced the placement of the colony with his letter to HIAS, extolling the virtues of Cotopaxi and

by promising to provide adequate housing and equipment to enable the colonists a good start. When asked for help, Saltiel at one point simply ‘shrugged.’”

Postscript

Saul Baer Milstein left Europe and settled in Denver in 1883 with his wife Miriam and their seven youngest children. Milstein became a leader of the religious Jewish community of Denver and a major contributor to many philanthropic causes. He went into the cattle business with two partners. As soon as he was able, he bought grazing lands near Denver and by the time his younger sons were grown, had built a stock-yard and packing house.

(Please note that there are a number of pictures related to this article at <http://www.arkansasrivertours.com/cotopaxi-history.htm>

For a striking picture of Saul Baer Millstein see <http://www.penlib.du.edu/specoll/Beck/ph051.cfm>)

¹ **The Cotopaxi Colony** by Flora Jane Satt, unpublished master’s thesis 1950. Parts of this thesis are available at <http://cotopaxi.250x.com/index.htm> This quote is from Part II – The People (<http://cotopaxi.250x.com/Part2ThePeople>)

² Ibid. Part III - The Events (<http://cotopaxi.250x.com/Part3TheEvents>)

³ **The Jewish Agricultural Colony at Cotopaxi, Colorado: Rebalancing the Record, Parts I & II** by Miles Saltiel, Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Notes, Volume 19, Number 3,4, Winter/Spring 2005 and Volume 20, Number 1, 2, Fall/Winter 2005. Published by the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society.