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ORTHODOX IN THE 'WILD WEST': SAMUEL ABRAHAM AND MIRIAM KOBAY

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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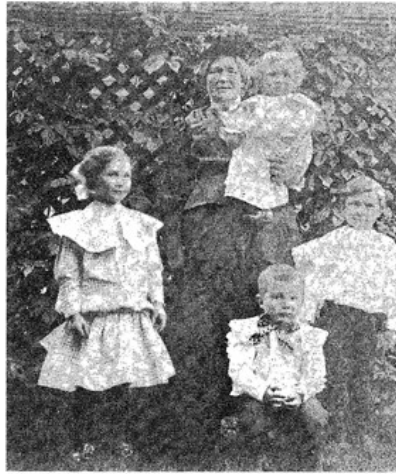
(Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Pioneers, Peddlers, and Tsadikim by Ida Libert Uchill, Sage Books, Denver, 1957.)

It was in 1859, according to the Central City Colorado History & Historic Facts website, that "John Gregory discovered 'The Gregory Lode' in a gulch near Central City. Within two weeks, the gold rush was on and within two months the population grew to 10,000 people seeking their fortunes. William Byers, founder of the Rocky Mountain News, and some companions pitched their tents on open ground squarely in the center of the mining district. Thus Central City was born and was soon the leading mining center in Colorado. It came to be known as 'The Richest Square Mile On Earth.'

"Not everyone in Colorado struck it rich, but those who settled in Central City were never [lacking] for wild times. In 1861 alone Central City recorded 217 fist fights, 97 revolver fights, 11 Bowie knife fights and one dogfight. Amazingly, no one was killed."

Many Jews traveled west in the mid- to late-1800s to seek their fortunes. Some of those who made new lives in states like Colorado had fled Russia to avoid service in the Czar's army, while others, particularly those suffering from tuberculosis, were drawn by the crisp mountain air.

Among those who settled in Colorado were Samuel Abraham and Miriam Kobey (Kubeski). Unlike virtually all their fellow settlers, they were Jews who maintained their Orthodoxy in an extremely difficult environment.



Miriam Rachofsky Kobey and grandchildren Silas, Rebecca, Philip, and Leon, Aspen, Colorado, c. 1905. (Courtesy of the Beck Archives, Penrose Library, and CJS, University of Denver.)

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Miriam (Mary) Rachofsky was born in Suwalki, Poland. At age sixteen she left her family's small farm to marry Samuel Abraham Kubeski, a yeshiva student.

The couple lived in Poland with their children, two girls and a boy. But economic hardships and pogroms soon propelled the Kubeskis to search for a better life in Manchester, England, where Abraham found a position as a Hebrew teacher and rabbi.

Miriam, who gave birth

to three more sons there, launched her career as a midwife, often earning as much as a pound for each delivery.¹

Miriam's uncle Alexander Rittmaster, an escaped prisoner of the Crimean War, had

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come to Central City in about 1860. Miriam's brother, Abraham, joined his uncle in 1867. The two of them soon became successful businessmen in the "Wild West." Therefore, it was only natural for Abraham to suggest to his sister that she and her family join him in Central City. The Kubeskis settled there some time during the 1880s. (They eventually Americanized their last name to Kobey).

Mary and her family were pious, observant Jews. Life in the mountains did not lend itself to the keeping of the minute traditions, but the Kobey's made every attempt. At first they had kosher meat shipped to them [from Denver], but it arrived spoiled so much of the time that the family simply became vegetarians. Before Rachofsky built the first bath [mikveh] in town, preparations for the Sabbath included a trip to the mineral baths in Idaho Springs, a short distance by mine tunnel, but fifteen miles by the Virginia Canon road.

The lonely, comfortless life was hard enough to endure, but the absence of young Jewish girls and women made it almost impossible for Mary Kobey. Her handsome sons attracted the gentile girls in the vicinity. As soon as they could [in 1888], the Kobey's left the mountain camp for Denver.

In Denver Abraham helped establish Congregation Agudas Achim and earned his living serving as its spiritual leader and *sofer*.

In 1901, when the ordered matzahs from Manischewitz failed to arrive, he [Samuel Abraham] and the local Jewish blacksmith constructed an enormous oven at the back of the shul. [Samuel] Abraham and the shames (caretaker) then supervised the baking of matzahs for the entire community.

In her charming memoir, *The Tale of a Little Trunk* (1977), Miriam's granddaughter recalled Shabbat visits to the Kubeski household, where her grandparents would be "dressed in their Sabbath clothes in the sitting room, both engrossed in reading from the Torah. Grandma would be reading what was called the *Teitch Hummish*, a Yiddish version of the Bible, and Grandpa the *Siddur* or the Hebrew Bible." The *yamim tovim* were celebrated with special enthusiasm, and Miriam would serve her family's favorite dishes, kishka and tzimmes. On Sukkot the family decorated their sukkah with colorful ripe fruits and vegetables.²

The Angel of Mercy

We mentioned earlier that Miriam had worked as midwife when the family resided in England. Her skills in this area were sorely needed by the poor members of the Denver Jewish community, most of whom lived in the West Colfax section of the city.

Over the protest of her children, who felt she was too old to engage in such strenuous work, the small, friendly woman, whose English was liberally sprinkled with Yiddish, became the most welcome sight to the young women of West Colfax.

Working alone, or calling in a doctor for a difficult case, she is said to have had "a healing power" that had the women clinging to her. Actually, she was a conscientious woman who cared for the mothers as though they were her own daughters. In one case, where she had delivered a normal child, the mother called her again to deliver another. When she arrived she found that the child she had previously helped bring into the world was not walking. After she delivered the baby, she took the older boy to a clinic where the offending ligaments were severed. For ten months she examined the child faithfully, until she was certain that he would walk normally. Many such stories are told about her - how she never completed her job with the delivery, but sometimes stayed on with the family, caring for the new baby and mother and helping the father.

In her role as midwife, Miriam earned the nickname "Denver's Angel of Mercy" for her selfless concern for poor new mothers in the immigrant Jewish community. Indeed, *gemilut chesed* appears to have permeated her life. She volunteered her services at no charge to those who could not afford to pay, and was frequently seen collecting money and clothing for baby layettes from merchants in the area and bringing her delicious homemade chicken soup to new mothers. Her granddaughter dubbed her "the Pied Piper of West Colfax," referring to the main street that ran through Denver's Eastern European immigrant enclave. She recalled that wherever Miriam went, wearing her trademark snow white cap, a spotless apron and a black bag prepared for a birth, she was trailed by a group of children - many of whom she had delivered - who affectionately regarded her as a surrogate grandmother.

Miriam's reputation soon spread far beyond the Jewish community. On one occasion, Dr. Henry Buchtel, one of early Denver's leading obstetricians, introduced her at a local medical convention as "the most famous midwife in Denver."³

While staying in her daughter's home over the High Holidays, the woman, who was now a grandmother, heard that a Jewish woman had given birth to dead Siamese twins. The babies had been delivered by students of the Gross Medical College, who took them to the school to preserve and study. The young mother, an immigrant, was unable to stop them. When Mary heard the story she went directly to the College, where she explained that the preservation of bodies was contrary to Jewish law and asked that the bodies be returned to the family for proper burial.

Samuel Abraham and Miriam Kobey stood out as models of unwavering piety. They arrived in Colorado in the late 1880s as observant Orthodox Jews and were no less so when they passed away. Miriam Kobey died in 1921, leaving behind an enviable reputation for doing *chesed*.

1 Orthodox Women in the "Wild West" by Jeanne Abrams, Jewish Action Magazine online, www.ou.org/index.php/jewish_action/article/43972/

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

Dr. Yitzchok Levine recently retired after serving for forty years as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at ilevine@stevens.edu.

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