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**“Jewish Cowboys and Eskimos:
The Search For a Jewish Homeland”
by Alex Rawitz
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In the latter half of the 19th century, Jews were scattered across the globe with no fixed homeland. From North America to North Africa, Eastern Europe to Central Asia, there lived a people who had been cast out of their native soil in the ‘cradle of society’ in ancient Palestine, which is nestled between Africa, the Jordan desert, and the Mediterranean Sea. Victims of a massive dispersion that lasted over several centuries, Jews, with some exceptions, longed to return to where they came from as a people: Israel. When this longing was coupled with a global rise of anti-Semitism, it is no wonder that Zionism came into being. Zionism, a worldwide movement to form a Jewish state in Palestine, has, in theory, existed for thousands of years. It was not until the late 19th century, however, that Jews convened to act out their long-held wish. One of the many problems (or, perhaps, one of the few good things) was that there were many options for homelands, and, with all the obstacles facing the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, some of these other options were examined.

It is important to note that it was always the primary goal of the Zionist movement to establish a Jewish State in Palestine, and for many Zionists it was preferable to have no Jewish state anywhere than to have one that wasn’t in Palestine. One reason this was true is because in the Torah, Israel was the land promised to Jews by God, though this was not the reason touted by Secular Zionists; they argued that Israel was where great cultural advancements in Jewish society took place. The Torah, the Hebrew language, and Jewish festivals and holidays were all created in ancient Israel. A major tenet of Judaism is to not forget Jerusalem, as it is the location of the Western Wall of Herod’s Temple, a most cherished site. However, by the turn of the 20th century, making Palestine a Jewish state while desirable was deeply problematic.

By the time the Sixth Zionist Congress met in Basel, Switzerland, on August 26, 1903 Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism and the man who convened the Zionist Congresses, had already met with British leaders, discussing a safe haven for the thousands of Russian Jews displaced by pogroms. With literally the whole world before them, Zionists considered the possibility of Uganda, in Central Africa, which was then a British protectorate. Britain agreed to allow Jewish settlement in East Africa "on conditions which will enable members to observe their national customs."

Although Herzl stressed that Uganda would be temporary residence and not a substitute for Palestine, the proposal angered many Zionists and nearly led to a rift in the Zionist movement. However, in a vote of 295 to 178, the Zionists determined to send an expedition to examine the offered territory. One wonders what would have happened if Uganda was deemed suitable. At the time, Uganda was a mix of native Africans, a few European administrators and industrialists who built up the nation and an army imported from nearby India, then a British colony. Where thousands of impoverished Russian Jews would have fit in is anyone’s guess. It is fascinating to think about the development of Uganda with a large Jewish population transplanted primarily from Eastern Europe. What would the society have been like? What could have been the adaptations in language, dress and cuisine? Would Jews have assimilated in Africa? Most certainly an ‘Israel’ in Uganda would have faced serious trouble when

sadistic dictator Idi Amin came to power through a military coup in 1971. Considering that Amin threw all people of Asian descent out of Uganda in 1972 and blamed the action on economic turmoil, the fate of Jews in Uganda was probably bleak. The Uganda Proposal ultimately failed - it was deemed impractical and discarded by the 7th Zionist Congress in 1905.

Even though the Uganda Proposal failed, it sparked the formation of the Jewish Territorialist Organization, which was made up of the different groups that had aligned with Herzl on the Uganda proposal. An interesting phenomenon was that the group's membership increased in the aftermath of anti-Semitic events, such as the 1905 pogroms, but decreased when the possibility of a Jewish homeland in Palestine rose, such as in the aftermath of the Balfour declaration of 1917, in which Britain stated it supported a Jewish state in Palestine and would use its resources to achieve this goal.

The leader of the territorialist movement was Israel Zangwill, who proposed other locations, namely Canada and Australia after the Uganda proposal failed. But local opposition to the idea by a majority of the residents in both countries was deemed too strong, so both of those proposals failed as well.

Expeditions were then sent to Cyrenaica (Libya), Angola (in Southern Africa), and, most interestingly, Mesopotamia (Iraq). Again, the concept of the Jewish homeland established in these contentious areas makes for some intriguing imaginings: Libya is a military dictatorship and Iraq is in relative chaos thanks to a prolonged United States occupation, so neither option would immediately appear to be a positive place for a Jewish state.

Jews were spared from these potentially awful situations when nothing positive came out of those expeditions. There was, however, one other idea that was deemed possible by the Jewish Territorial Organization: a Jewish Homeland in the American Southwest, specifically: Texas. (Hey, at least they examined all options, right)? The Galveston Plan received support and funding from the prominent Jewish-American banker Jacob Schiff, and the Emigration Bureau of the Territorialist Organization helped 9,300 Jews settle into the area from 1907-1914. These Jews assimilated into Texas society (as others have written, they became "Lone Stars of David, deep in the Heart of Palestine"), but still worked toward a Palestinian homeland for European Jews, raising funds and awareness throughout the 1930's and 40's. A thriving Jewish community remains in Texas, today.

There was also a United States backed plan to establish a Jewish Homeland in Alaska. Because of local opposition to a Jewish state in what was at the time a US territory, as well as vocal anti-Semitic members of Congress, this plan also fell through. For anyone interested in a fascinating vision of a Jewish state of Alaska, I can heartily recommend Michael Chabon's novel, [The Yiddish Policeman's Union](#).

The United States and Israel are close allies, but one can only imagine how close they would be if they were physically touching. Perhaps Israel would have become America's 51st state, or perhaps the United States would not tolerate the likely terrorist attacks that would occur in an 'American' Israel (anti-Jewish terrorist attacks would probably occur in a Jewish State at the North Pole). There might have been Jewish cowboys and rodeo stars with a homeland in Texas, or a whole generation of children of Jewish-Inuit descent with a homeland in Alaska. The United States would probably have been the best alternative to a Jewish State in Palestine.

At the time that Zionism became a major movement, Jews were clustered across Eastern Europe, living in shtetls and speaking Yiddish. Because people tend to like what is familiar to them, an idea was formed to establish a Jewish, Yiddish-speaking state in Eastern Europe. There was, however, one continent-spanning problem: Russia. Throughout history, Russia conducted pogroms against Jews, and the early twentieth century was still a very anti-Semitic time. Also, because of later Soviet domination of much of Eastern Europe, it would seem impossible that an often violent, anti-Semitic country would simply allow a piece of land so close to it to be handed over to a hated race. Although an eastern European Jewish homeland was an appealing idea to Russian Jews, most supporters of a Jewish state were still Zionists, who aimed for a Jewish state in Palestine and *only* Palestine.

However, with a bit of imagination, one can see what might have happened if Russia had allowed a Jewish state to be formed in Europe. It most likely would not have been on Russian land, making the probable location either Austria-Hungary or the Eastern German Empire in the Kingdom of Prussia. A Jewish state might have survived the Russian Revolution and the rise of Communism, but World War I would have been difficult. If a Jewish state were established by 1914, it would probably not have lasted long enough to see the 1920s. It could also have caused a very different kind of World War I. American politicians had been supporting the establishment of a Jewish state since 1900, and the United States would have had a personal investment in Europe, if a Jewish state had been established there. However, America was largely isolationist at the time, and President Woodrow Wilson ran for and won reelection in 1916 with supporters saying “he kept us out of war”. But with a close ally in the middle of a chaotic Europe, America might have been forced to step into war at an earlier time.

The United States might have been too late if the Jewish homeland was established in Germany. While a power-mad, anti-Semitic, heavily armed Germanic Empire trying to take over Europe while targeting Jews sounds like World War II, this could have been the reality faced during World War I. Except in 1916, public sentiment in America was not solidly pro-war and Jews were even more heavily consolidated in one place. With the time it would have taken an isolated America to prepare its military for a World War, genocide could have already occurred.

One product of this altered war would most likely have been the same worldwide sympathy for the Jewish situation that had arisen after the Second World War. This might have led to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine thirty years before the Israel that exists today was formed. Palestine was, at that time, under the possession of war-ravaged Britain, a country sympathetic to Jewish needs. Alternatively, this sympathy would have been used to form a Jewish state in any of the places that have been mentioned earlier in this paper.

Either way, this would have been a turning point for Zionism: Zionists would have stood on the edge of seeing their dream realized and smiled upon by a sympathetic world, or have suffered being shuttled off to the United States, the Jungles of Africa, or the frozen U.S. territory of Alaska.

However, none of what is detailed above happened. There was never a Jewish state established anywhere until 1948.

Zionists continued to press their cause throughout the early 20th century, and although no Jewish state was formed, support grew. Then came World War II, and with it the Holocaust. The world saw this tragedy as an urgent and devastating wake-up call, and there was a multi-national outcry to help relieve displaced European Jews. This outcry reached a high point when on November 29th, 1947 the United Nations called for the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Yisrael and fully recognized the right of the Jewish people to build their own homeland in Palestine. The surrounding Arab states objected, but after thousands of years of waiting, the will of the Jewish people prevailed. On May 14th, 1948, British

control of Palestine expired, and the Jews officially established a Jewish state, known as Israel, in the Biblical Promised land, their spiritual home of Palestine.

In a fitting tribute to the founder of modern Zionism, the remains of Theodore Herzl, who died in 1904, were flown to Israel and reinterred on Mount Herzl, overlooking Jerusalem.

The alternate realities I've described can easily be interpreted as depressing, considering that most of the locations that have been examined most probably would have resulted in war and probable destruction of the substitute Jewish state. However, it is my intention that you all feel glad that what happened happened; that the Israel that exists today is probably the best Jewish homeland that Zionists could have hoped for. Israel has faced, and will face, great challenges, but nothing on the scale of what it could have faced if it were established in Libya, Canada, Uganda, or Alaska. It is an ultimately happy truth, then, that the goal of every Zionist - a Jewish state in Palestine - was also the most successful homeland that could have been established at all.