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The New, New Portlanders

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by Eric Gold

At the intersection of Killingsworth Street and Sandy Boulevard in Northeast Portland, the tiny Parkrose Triangle separates diverging lanes of traffic. The Pony Soldier Inn stands opposite an on-ramp to the I-205 freeway. To the south, in Columbia Pioneer Cemetery, rest Oregonians who settled this land in the 1850s and earlier. Today, the only occupants of the triangular traffic island are a lonely pile of stones and a sign pointing to Elmer’s Pancake House. In 2011, to mark the centennial of the Parkrose neighborhood, local businessman Joe Rossi hopes to erect a monument here, not to the pioneers across the street, but to those who followed them to the Portland area—immigrants.

Rossi points out that we’ve honored the pioneer contribution with the gold-plated statue on top of Oregon’s capitol in Salem, among other statuary. This captures everybody else that came to Portland,” he says. Rossi’s grandfather immigrated from Genoa, Italy, starting the agricultural enterprise that became Giusto-Rossi farms. The ethnicity of the man depicted in a life-sized bronze to be created by sculptor James Gion will be intentionally ambiguous. “He could be Russian, he could be Chinese, he could be African,” Rossi says. “The goal is to have everyone place themselves or their ancestor in that pose—when he’s just arrived and is stepping into America.”

The distinction between immigrant and pioneer is somewhat arbitrary. Oregon’s “pioneers,” after all, hardly settled an uninhabited region. Even Native Americans migrated to what is now the Portland metropolitan area from elsewhere. Still, immigration has been a contentious issue throughout Oregon’s history, and perhaps never more so than today, as the state confronts the challenges and opportunities of integrating one of the fastest-growing populations of foreign-born residents in the country. In 2005, 9.7% of Oregonians were immigrants born abroad; a 2009 study put the number at 367,000. Between 1990 and 2005, more Russians and Ukrainians...
nians relocated to Oregon and Washington than to any other region of the country. In 21 of Oregon’s 36 counties, the Latino population doubled between 1990 and 2000.

Rossi can’t help but notice a parallel between the experiences of Latino and other immigrants today and those of his ancestors. “I see these guys working on farms, saving their money, bringing their families up after a while,” Rossi says. “We look at every ethnic group like this is the first time this has ever happened, but it’s a continuing story,” he says.

During the last 100 years or so, various public and private entities have sought to help immigrants adapt to life in the metropolis, and to help native-born residents adjust to the presence of the newcomers. Ronault “Polo” Catalani, himself a native of Indonesia, directs the New Portlander program of the City of Portland’s Office of Human Relations. The initiative, Catalani says, grew out of the city’s Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, dating from the late 1970s. Back then, he says, an influx of families from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos prompted the city to create the office in response.

“In those days,” Catalani says, “25,000 Asians suddenly showing up was a point of panic—not a lot different from the kind of fear and shrill rhetoric you hear around Latinos today.”

Sokhum Tauch, from Cambodia, was one of those Southeast Asian immigrants to Portland in the ’70s. “When I first came to Portland,” he says, “people told me to go back home.” He didn’t. Instead, Tauch joined with fellow Cambodians, Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong and others to create the Indochinese Center, where he served as a translator. Today, Tauch is the director of the Northeast Portland-based Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), one of the largest immigrant integration nonprofits in the nation, which he and others founded in 1984.

IRCO’s goal, Tauch says, is to “promote self-sufficiency while acclimating to a new culture.” In the early ’80s, when Romanian and Ethiopian refugees started arriving in Portland, Tauch and the other Asians from the former Indochinese Center knew they could help. “These people are refugees, too,” Tauch says the Asians realized. “They’re not from Southeast Asia, but their needs are the same.” IRCO now seeks to serve every refugee, regardless of geographical origin, with outreach programs that help newcomers with le-
gal issues, employment, family services, and translation in 50 languages. IRCO also helps form mutual assistance associations (MAA’s) so that immigrants and refugees can help each other. IRCO aims to guide immigrants through the first five years. “For sure, they’re not going to have government or nonprofit help for a long time,” Tauch says, “so self-sufficiency is important—for economic, health, family, and community reasons.”

To buy IRCO’s current headquarters, a former lumber yard at 104th and NE Glisan, Tauch came up with a truly all-American solution—he and other immigrant volunteers sold hot dogs at Portland’s Rose Quarter, raising $13,000 through their 10% commission. He asked former clients to contribute, too. “It was just five or 10 dollars, but it meant a lot to me,” he says. Heads of various ethnic associations pitched in a bit more. Eventually, Tauch had $60,000. “I took everything to the Meyer Memorial Trust,” Tauch says. The foundation contributed enough to allow IRCO to buy the property with a low-interest mortgage from U.S. Bank. Tauch had to remind himself to take the elevator back down to the street. “I just about jumped out the window,” he recalls.

The old City of Portland office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs that had been around at IRCO’s inception was eventually closed, but was resuscitated in 2005 by Mayor Tom Potter, with Catalani at the helm. The city uses the term “New Portlander,” he says, because “the ‘I’ word just makes people want to argue.” Staff members also help city bureaus, “getting them to understand that Portland is not what it used to be.” Catalani hopes that, unlike the Portland Plan of the 1980s, which was “about a city as infrastructure, buildings, arterials, and water mains,” the new Portland Plan currently being drafted will be “about a city as people, not things. The last plan didn’t recognize half of Portlanders — they weren’t here.”

Of course, immigration to Oregon began long before the influx of Southeast Asians in the 70s that brought Tauch to Portland. The percentage of foreign-born residents in each of the metroscape’s six counties was higher in 1900 than in 2000—overall, the six-county area’s foreign-born population fell from almost 23% at the beginning of the twentieth century to less than 11% 100 years later (see Table 1). With each census, the percentage of foreign-born residents in each county fell steadily until 1970 or 1980, when it began to rise again. In each county, the percentage of foreign-born residents in 2000 was close to the corresponding value in 1940, except Columbia, which did not regain its former level, and Washington, which ended the century at over 14% foreign-born, significantly higher than its 1940 level of 8.7%.

Throughout the twentieth century (and earlier), then, both native- and foreign-born Portlanders have confronted the issue of how to integrate immigrants. Bob Bussel, director of the Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon, has studied this history. “We have this really political struggle going on now,” Bussel says, “which we’ve had forever, about how welcoming we should be.”

Bussel and coeditor Marcela Mendoza are
completing a book on the subject titled "Come Here, Don't Come Here": An Examination of the Immigrant Experience in Oregon. In a chapter coauthored by Bussel and Daniel Tichenor, the authors write, “As one of the most racially homogenous states in both the West and the nation, Oregon has had an especially volatile history in its relations with people of color,” including many immigrants. Many Oregonians “believed that their state was a special place whose pristine environment, pioneer ethos, and social harmony would be subverted by immigrants from unfamiliar lands.” Oregon’s leaders, the authors continue, have often sought to distinguish between “desirable” and “undesirable” immigrants, “resulting in a deeply ambivalent attitude toward immigration that has persisted into contemporary times.” A state Board of Immigration reported in 1887 that “Germans and Scandinavians make up the best of foreign-born immigrants.” Simon Benson, the Norwegian-American who built the hotel and drinking fountains in Portland that bear his name, epitomizes the opportunities for success available to members of such favored ethnic groups. Portland’s Jewish community had Philip Wasserman and Bernard Goldsmith, consecutive mayors of Portland from 1869 to 1873. Even for such relatively successful groups, though, integration into the Portland community was not without its difficulties.

For less “desirable” ethnicities, such as the Chinese who immigrated to Oregon in numbers between 1850 and 1870, the challenges were greater. Obstacles, legal and otherwise, met the Chinese immigrant, who nevertheless established a community in Portland’s
Northwest quadrant that persists today. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, or Jung Wah, was an early example of the pattern of ethnically-organized self-help groups. In his 1887 inaugural address, though, Oregon governor Sylvester Pennoyer described Chinese immigrants as “unassimilative with our people ... unappreciative of our institutions...debasing to morals and degrading to labor.”

The federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 led to a demographic shift in Oregon, with Japanese immigrants replacing the banned Chinese. The first Japanese immigrants arrived as “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” and Japanese were widely regarded as “unassimilable,” according to a history published by the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center. Still, a Portland Japanese population of just 20 individuals in 1890 had grown to 1,461 by 1910, when the Montavilla neighborhood, Gresham and Troutdale were centers of Japanese farming settlement. During the following decade, the Japanese female population increased from 249 to 1,349, as wives and children joined the men.

The Japanese Association of Oregon, headquartered in Portland, became the umbrella organization for groups representing each Japanese settlement in the region. The newspaper Oshu Nippo catered to the growing population from 1904 until 1942, when its equipment was confiscated, never to be returned. The area of Northwest Portland that was also home to Chinatown became Japantown, or Nihonmachi. The Japanese Association of Oregon (Nihonjin Kai), organized in 1911, still maintains a senior citizen lunch and cultural program today as the Japanese Ancestral Society of Portland (Nikkeijin Kai).

Restrictive state and national laws in the early 1920s barred further immigration and restricted Japanese immigrants’ business activities. Still, Japan- and Chinatown coexisted in Northwest Portland, though the Japanese invasion of China in 1930 resulted in some tensions between the two immigrant communities. Children from both groups attended the Atkinson School at NW 11th and Davis, but were discouraged by their parents from interacting with one another. Chinese children walked to school on the north side of the street, Japanese children on the south. “Since many were friends at school,” a Nikkei Center history records, “they would carry on conversations by shouting back and forth.”

Like other early immigrant ethnic groups in the Portland area, the Jews of South Portland formed institutions to facilitate newcomer settlement. Perhaps the most prominent of these was Neighborhood House, created in 1893 by the National Council of Jewish Women and inspired by Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago. In 1910 the House settled into a building on Lair Hill Park by noted architect A.E. Doyle (also the designer of the Benson Bubbler), currently home to the Cedarwood Waldorf School. The Neighborhood House of today, incorporated as an independent organization in 1955, moved to Multnomah Village in 1979, and remains a multifaceted social services agency.

Though founded by Jews and serving a neighborhood that was home to a sizable Jewish population, Neighborhood House sought from the beginning to address itself to the needs of all local residents, including Italians, Scandinavians, Chinese, and African Americans. In a 1923 history now at the Oregon Jewish Museum, Roza R. Willer records that
English classes at Neighborhood House constituted "the main and chief principle upon which the 'First Aid' is given to the foreigner. Thru this means of 'First Aid' the foreigner learns of his new country, and learning the new language he also learns to love his country." Students, Willer notes, "hail from Russia, Turkey, Poland, Roumania, Italy, Greece, France, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Austria, Czecho-Slovakia and Palestine."

Of course, the House's Jewish founders were particularly attuned to the needs of their co-religionists. A Hebrew school, in which the language was taught as a "living tongue," was established in 1905, offering a six-year course of eight classes daily, six days a week. Well Baby, Pre-Natal, Nutrition and Dental Clinics provided health care, complemented by classes in dancing, art, music, sewing, and sports. Perhaps echoing Neighborhood House's attitudes about immigrant integration efforts, Willer writes of the girls' basketball team, "though their success in winning the games was not great, the girls have not lost courage and look forward to the times when they will be victors."

A Penny Fund was established "to teach a lesson in thrift to the youth of the neighborhood and to discourage the spending of their pin money on candy, gum and other foods not conducive to good health." Concern over children accidentally killed by automobiles led to the formation of a Mother's Club in 1913, while a Neighborhood Community Club organized to protest, successfully, the location of a barrack for patients of influenza near the House.

Ellen Eisenberg, professor of history at Willamette University, studies Jewish immigration to Oregon. In the early part of the twentieth century, "there definitely was an Americanization program, and a sense that immigrants were uncouth and needed to be brought into middle class norms." In an upcoming book, Eisenberg notes that, as elsewhere in the United States, more established American Jews were alarmed by increasing Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. "Perceiving
the East Europeans as backwards, superstitious, and disturbingly foreign,” she writes, “they feared they might prove an embarrassment or a burden, and undermine the high status of the Jewish community as a whole.” This sentiment, along with a sense of compassion for their less fortunate co-religionists, motivated the women who initially founded and volunteered at Neighborhood House. “Quickly reforming the immigrants and assisting them in adopting American customs, language, dress, and decorum,” Eisenberg writes, “would help to inoculate the entire Jewish community against potential backlash.”

According to an oral history by Miriam Rosenfeld, a daughter of the Portland German-Jewish community, newly arrived Jews were taught “many things that the women of the Council of Jewish Women felt that these immigrants should know in order to become, I wouldn’t say assimilated, but more Americanized.”

“At Neighborhood House in particular, though, there was more of a balance,” Eisenberg says, between the values of Americanization and the preservation of the immigrant’s own cultural practices. Head worker Ida Loewenberg, she says, maintained the importance of traditional Jewish culture, even as immigrants were instructed in American ways. In the 1920s, Eisenberg says, there was great concern about the alienation of children from the culture of their parents, and its contribution to juvenile delinquency. Loewenberg, she says, “valued traditional culture as a way of minimizing the gap between parents and children.” Besides preserving family unity, Eisenberg says, native Jewish Portlanders valued traditional Jewish culture as “a repository of knowledge and tradition that carried the panache of ‘authenticity.’” However, “the interchange that took place was not on a plane of equality...The unequal relationship sometimes led to feelings of resentment.”

The Neighborhood House Hebrew School, Eisenberg writes, was the theater of a “balancing act between assimilationist and preservationist principles.” Progressives wanted a modern educational curriculum, while some immigrants felt this “had the effect of undermining traditional belief and practice.” As Loewenberg wrote, “[T]here will always be something fundamentally lacking if we neglect the culture of Judaism and ignore our religion.”

The tension between assimilation and cultural retention persists today. Contemporary organizations in the Portland metropolitan area seek to help immigrants adjust to life in the United States without being pressured to lose their language, practices, and heritage. Today’s immigrant communities confront the same issues debated at Neighborhood House a hundred years ago.

Wadji Said, director of the Muslim Educational Trust (MET) in Tigard, says his
organization grew out of an ad hoc committee founded to help settle refugees from Bosnia and Afghanistan. Today, he says, MET seeks to help new Muslim Portlanders to “accept and be accepted by the larger community and also the Islamic community.” The latter, he says, is diverse in “ethnicity, education, economic background, professional background and understanding of faith.” Said and MET partner with local Christian and Jewish groups to promote interfaith dialogue and increase sensitivity to, and understanding of, Islam in the Portland area. “Being Muslim doesn’t contradict your American identity,” Said tells new Muslim Portlanders, “it’s a complement. Take the best of both cultures and make a new American Dream.”

Pietro Ferrari, the Bolivian-born director of Hacienda Community Development Corporation in Northeast Portland, is acutely aware of this balancing act between Americanization and the retention of one’s native culture. As a result of his own personal journey, he says, he is seeking to move beyond the traditional CDC model, which provides low-income housing to immigrant populations. At Hacienda, Ferrari has begun developing a comprehensive approach, integrating educational programs and micro-enterprise training into the existing Hacienda housing developments.

Traditionally, he says, the first-generation immigrant makes great sacrifices to pave the way for the next. “The question is,” Ferrari says, “how do you make the sacrifice meaningful?” A first-generation immigrant often has one foot in the new country and one in the old. “Now, we can create institutions that bridge the two,” he says, “and not leave the first generation behind, disenfranchised.”

Hacienda’s housing units are home to 2,000 Latino and Somali immigrants. This housing is key to stabilizing families, Ferrari says. Furthermore, tenancy is long enough to allow community building from that point. Through Hacienda’s new Plaza Comunitaria (Community Space)
program, Latino adults who may not have had the opportunity to finish school in their native countries can graduate from sixth or ninth grade, and perhaps advance further. They can then pursue micro-enterprise training through Micro Mercantes, a tamale-vending operation. As at Neighborhood House a century earlier, Hacienda’s vision includes minimizing the gap between fast-acculturating children and their parents, reducing rates of juvenile delinquency and gang involvement.

Because of their sheer numbers, Latinos have become the focal point for controversy. Daniel Lopez-Cevallos, a professor of community health at Western Oregon University, studies immigration and the social safety net. He says that the argument that undocumented immigrants are a drain on social services doesn’t hold up. In 2007, for example, the percentage of uncompensated care provided by Oregon hospitals consumed by the undocumented was just 0.12%.

As for the perception that the children of immigrants are a burden to the school system, Lopez-Cevallos says, “in that group, we have to understand that for the most part, more than half were born here, and therefore are U.S. citizens who have all the rights to access all the benefits ... but still that population lags way behind in terms of accessing services compared to other U.S.-born children.” Immigrants’ children, he says, tend to “bridge the gap in terms of the language and education level. But, they hit a wall in terms of their employment and income.” In 2007, he says, the unemployment rate for U.S.-born Latinos over 16 years old was 12.6%, compared to 4.7% for foreign-born Latinos and 6.3% for non-Hispanic whites.

Lopez-Cevallos sees hope in the emerging trend of dual-immersion education, a model already in use in two elementary schools in the Corvallis area. In such classrooms, half the teaching is done in Spanish, and half in English. Both Latino and non-Latino students end up bilingual. High-income parents, he notes, “are actively pursuing getting their children to learn Spanish, French, German, because they recognize that this is a skill for success in the global economy.” Beyond language skills, he says, this kind of education produces students who are more open to other cultures, and prepared to succeed in the globalized world. “I know Portland tries to be very cosmopolitan,” Lopez-Cevallos says, “and understanding other cultures is a key.”

Refugees are perhaps the most vulnerable immigrants, facing some of the biggest challenges to integration. According to a report published by the University of Oregon, Oregon ranks 11th among U.S. states in terms of the number of refugees taken in, and Portland has the 12th-largest population of refugees among U.S. cities. Salah Ansary, regional director of Lutheran Community Services Northwest (LCSNW), attributes Portland’s success in integrating refugees to the goodwill of the city’s citizens. “We rely heavily on volunteers,” he says, “and for the most part, people are receptive and welcoming.” Along with Catholic Charities and the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, LCSNW serves as the first point of contact for refugees in Portland, meeting them at the airport and settling them in housing. These organizations administer the eight months of federal aid allocated to refugees, and then turn the newcomers over to agencies like IRCO for help finding work and other services. Oregon, Ansary says, was one of the first states, in
1984, to introduce a public-private partnership for refugee integration, which has successfully reduced welfare dependency and hastened refugee employment.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon operates several immigrant integration programs. Russian Oregon Social Services (ROSS) is the only agency in Oregon and Southwest Washington exclusively for the Russian-speaking population, which numbers about 100,000 in the region. Since about 85% of them are evangelical Christians, says program administrator Yelena Hansen, they have often been persecuted in the former Soviet Union. “Besides typical barriers like language, cultural differences, lack of knowledge and familiarity with American law,” Hansen says, “this community is very isolated. For mainstream providers, it is very difficult to reach.” For this reason, even though much of the organization’s current funding supports domestic violence counseling for women, “youth and elders still come to us, because they have no other place to go.”

Another Ecumenical Ministries program is the Portland International Community School (PICS), an alternative high school for first- and second-generation refugee and immigrant students. The school has two focal points, says Skip Adams, its director—learning English and “getting them through high school.” For students who may have come from a refugee camp and not ever been to school, both can be challenging. One female Muslim student, Adams recalls, was waiting in the lunch line at her neighborhood school, when “she got the comment, ‘hey raghead.’ Without thinking, she turned around and cold-cocked the girl behind her.” She was suspended, and ended up at PICS. “Teenagers can be so mean to each other,” Adams, says, “but she has fit in well here.”

Despite the challenges faced by its students inside and outside the classroom, the school, which has only about 27 students, maintains an 85% graduation rate. “It’s higher than you might think,” Adams says, because as a student at a school with so much individual attention, “you practically have Jiminy Cricket sitting on your shoulder.”

Caroline van der Harten, Immigration Program Manager, and her fellow lawyers provide legal services to refugees, who may come from a country “with or
without a strong, dominant legal culture. Once they get here, navigating our legal system is very difficult.” The program helps with obtaining work permits, green cards, or citizenship. Starting in October 2010, a federal grant from the USCIS began funding citizenship application assistance. “I see how excited people are,” van der Harten says, to be able to become citizens of the United States. “I think this grant is really going to help immigrant integration.”

“Portland had an ugly history at one time,” says IRCO’s Sokhum Tauch, referring to the region’s past of resistance to immigrants. “I don’t see that anymore. I want to credit a little bit IRCO existing, and all the people who have worked with us.” He recalls seeing senior citizens from around the world gather at one of the twice-a-week meals at the organization’s senior center. “A Russian senior would play the violin,” he says with a smile, “and Asians and Africans dance along.” When some ethnic groups first come to IRCO, he says, they want dedicated classes for their own people. “That’s not the goal of this agency,” Tauch tells them. “When you go to work,” he says, “you’re not going to be all the same. Better get used to it.”

In a workplace training class at IRCO headquarters, a teacher stands before a multiethnic group. “I work well without supervision,” the teacher says, and the class repeats after him. “I work quickly, without making mistakes.” Other classes introduce IRCO’s clients to the public transportation system, with a real TriMet bus and driver. “Personally,” Tauch says, “I got lost so many times when I first came to Portland.”

Tauch and the staff of IRCO, representing 36 ethnic groups, do their best to help new Portlanders find appropriate work, but they don’t always succeed. One client had been a Russian cosmonaut. “How can I find an astronaut job in Portland, Oregon?” Tauch says. Eventually, the man relocated to California. Another man, though, told Tauch he wanted to be a pediatrician. Tauch says he told the Afghani where to go to get started, but then lost touch. “Two years ago, he came back to show me his degree from Indiana University,” Tauch says. “That’s what keeps me going.”

The Parkrose Triangle is still empty, for now. But the pile of stones in the middle of this anonymous traffic island could one day be a pedestal. “We’re taught to think about ‘miserable’ immigrants and ‘miserable’ minorities,” says Polo Catalani, from the City of Portland. “We’re anything but. We’re unabashedly ambitious and optimistic — what America really longs for.”

“Our city is a national model in many things,” Catalani says, from neighborhood involvement to alternative transportation. “The problem is,” he says, “it’s really very, very white. This is not a critique. It’s just saying that it’s done very well—let me show you how to make it better,” he says, by including New Portlanders. “We like happy, healthy families, too,” he says. “The eight percent of Portlanders who are bicycle commuters have been able to change the ethos for the benefit of our whole community. The twelve percent foreign-born can do the same. I think Portland can be a national model of newcomer integration.”

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