

Ancestral journey leads to Israel

Colorado family, descendants of Crypto Jews, follow conversion with *aliyah*

By CHRIS LEPPEK

IJN Assistant Editor

This week, Denverite Hadassah Grove completed a homecoming that was a long, long time coming.

It was not just a personal homecoming, but an ancestral one — a centuries-long circle that began when her forebears left Israel in the very

ed away in later generations.

Her discovery of that history — when her mother showed her a family heirloom that had fallen from the wall, an old Catholic-themed painting with a *mezuzah* hidden in the back — felt to Grove as if G-d had dropped a very obvious hint in her

Traveling by Grove's side this week were her husband Winston Grove, who was converted at the same time, and their two grandchildren whom they have adopted and are raising as their own children.

Her ancestors followed a classic Crypto Jewish pattern — fleeing to New Spain (Mexico), then to the American Southwest

distant past, flourished in Spain during the legendary Jewish Golden Age, suffered through the anti-Semitic violence and repression of the Spanish Inquisitions, fled Spain for Mexico until that nation declared its own Inquisition and, finally, in the guise of Roman Catholics, found peace and safe haven in New Mexico and Colorado.

Grove sees her decision, and that of her family, to make *aliyah* — which took place Monday, Oct. 12 — as the spiritual completion of that long and agonized journey.

"It's a consummation," Grove told the INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS shortly before making the big move. "I really feel that G-d has brought us full circle."

Grove sees the hand of G-d in several milestones that have dramatically changed her life and self-perception over the past several years.

She discovered from her mother roughly a decade ago that she descends from Crypto Jews, one-time Jews from Spain or Portugal who concealed their Jewish identity by outwardly practicing Christianity due to threats of death or expulsion.

Her ancestors followed a classic Crypto Jewish pattern — fleeing to New Spain (now Mexico) until increased persecution there forced them into the American Southwest where most — but not all — of their Jewish beliefs and customs faded

hand.

Her decision a few years later to convert to Judaism, through Denver's Rabbi Refoel Levitt, also seemed to Grove to be exactly what G-d wanted her to do.

Throughout her life, Grove — now in her 50s — sensed a mysterious inner knowledge, or at least harbored a strong suspicion, that she was Jewish. She never quite accepted the Christianity that most of her family practices, and had always been fascinated by Jewish people and Judaism itself.

Grove believes that the process of discovering her family's Jewish past,

Joining them on the trip was her brother, David Dale Honor, also a convert to Judaism, who lived in Israel from 2004-2011 and is now planning to reside there permanently.

Their destination is Beersheba, the largest city in Israel's Negev Desert, home to many Jews whose culture — like Grove's Crypto Jewish ancestors — is Sephardic.

The question of *aliyah*, Hadassah says, had been lurking in the back of her mind for years, although not necessarily as a pressing imperative.

"It came up here and there —

The decision to convert, then to make *aliyah*, are steps leading to the same pre-ordained destination

her decision to convert and, this week, the choice to spend the rest of her life in the Jewish homeland, have all been steps leading to the same pre-ordained destination.

"When I look back at my whole life and how things have happened — how the foundation of the past was set forth — for me I really believe that there was some divine intervention," she said in a 2010 interview with the IJN, not long after her conversion.

"All of this was meant to happen."

oh, we would like to move to Israel someday — but it really didn't hit me until three years ago."

The idea became more focused during an unsettled period, when the family was considering a move to Seattle. Their plans had gone so far that the family was packing for the move.

"All of a sudden," Grove says, "Hashem put a monkey wrench in our program. My husband said, 'Well, we're not supposed to go to Seattle. I think Hashem has greater plans for us.' I started thinking about it, and then my brother came back to Denver. He said, 'You know it would be really nice if we could all go back to Israel together.' I thought, hmmm — let's talk about it."

Grove had been to Israel once before, on a 2005 trip to visit her brother.

"It was great," she says. "We had a really nice time. And I remember not wanting to go home."

She felt an undeniable link to this country.

"I asked myself, 'Why do I feel so connected? What's going on inside of me?' It was so surreal for me to be there after dreaming about it and wanting to see what it was like for so long."

Later, when the idea of moving to Israel was becoming an actual plan, things began falling into place. The family figured out how Grove's husband — a veteran truck driver for UPS — could make a living by alternating between Israel and Colorado until he reaches retirement age.

Her brother David, who works in public relations, also devised a professional plan that he feels is likely to work in Israel. They researched locations and decided that Beersheba would be an ideal location for everyone in the family.

"It's funny how things work," Grove says. "Everything started to be put in place in terms of where we were going to go, what my husband was going to do, how we were going to make it out there."



The Grove family, including Hadassah (above), who is now a Jewish descendant of Crypto Jews, has moved to Israel.

Shari Valenta

"Then it became a living process. It started to happen. We made a conscious decision in our hearts and minds that this was going to happen and I know that we have definitely been guided by Hashem through all this."

None of which is to say that it has been easy.

"We started downsizing, purging," says Grove, who explains that the family enlisted the help of the *aliyah* organization Nefesh b' Nefesh once the decision to move was made.

"We ended up moving from house to townhome, to a smaller townhome, to an apartment, to a smaller apart-

ment. We put all of our belongings into a storage unit.

"There were times when I was falling apart. I cried and cried at night sometimes and my brother was right there with me, along with my husband. It's not easy. It's stressful, emotional. I didn't realize until I was in the middle of going through everything how emotional I would be."

The stress and worry, however, never caused Grove to doubt the decision itself.

"One of the biggest, most excit-

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Robert Speth runs for DPS at-large board position



Robert Speth

Robert Speth, a parent of two Denver Public School students in northwest Denver, is running for the Denver Public School Board at-large position.

The election will be Nov. 3 in Denver.

Speth has grown increasingly frustrated with what he calls the existing board's inability to improve education, often "rubber stamping" district recommendations without

much consideration and debate.

According to Speth, "Communities have lost trust in DPS. Ten years of failure is enough. It is time for a change."

Speth advocates for:

- *Strong neighborhood schools*, reversing the trend of outsourcing Denver's public schools to private corporations.

- *Support for teachers*. The trend of privatization means that many students are being taught by non-certified teachers. "It's critical that DPS hire top notch professional teachers and administrators who have experience working with children of varying needs and will work in tight partnership with the parent community."

- *Reduction of standardized testing*. Excessive testing narrows the classroom curriculum and has become the primary metric for judging our schools and teachers, Speth says.

- *Community collaboration*. Schools cannot be successful without the support of the community. Speth is determined to work with parents, school leaders and community members to collaborate and achieve the best outcome for DPS students.

'We don't want our children to be afraid of their own shadow, but they must be aware of the potential dangers in Israel'



'MEANT TO HAPPEN'

The Grove family: Winston, Hadassah, Yaakov and Yosef, in Beersheba

NEWS

Crypto Jews' descendants complete the circle

Colorado family now in Beersheba



'HANDLE WITH CARE'

Last summer, Hadassah Grove's brother, David Dale Honor, and mother, Annabelle Honor, visited the historic Temple Aaron synagogue in Trinidad, Colo., where Annabelle — who told her children of their Crypto Jewish heritage — grew up.

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ing, most fulfilling things that a Jewish person can do is to make *aliyah*. It's where we feel we should be to live free as a Jew. It has to be in your heart, it has to be in your head, because if it's not then it's going to be hard. You have to have a lot of *emunah*, a lot of faith. You have to be strong."

The family approached their impending move with courage that matches their faith.

Hadassah and her husband aren't worried about how well their grandchildren, whom they call "the boys," now 9 and 10, will adapt to their new homeland.

Their schooling at DAT prepared them very well, Grove says.

On the family's pilot trip to Beersheba earlier this fall, the boys, both fluent in Hebrew, spoke with the principal of their new school.

"She had a dialogue with the boys in Hebrew," Grove says. "I didn't realize until that day how fluent they really were. It was so encouraging. I was so proud and so happy. How we've been able to keep a thread of our Jewish roots in our family for so long is amazing."

They do not fear that some Israelis might be prejudiced toward them because of their unusual background, says Grove's brother, David, who says he experienced virulent and blatant prejudice from Israeli Jews when he lived in Israel several years ago.

"We get questioned about who we are," he says, "about our sincerity, about being converts."

Adds his sister: "We just let it roll off our shoulders. It's not us who has the issue, it's them."

"I'm not worried about that because growing up with my mother, being a minority in a minority,

we've had that all of our lives. We've learned how to deal with racism and criticism and people being judgmental. I'm not saying it doesn't hurt sometimes, but we know how to handle that pretty well."

Nor are they scared of rising Palestinian unrest or a malevolent and threatening Iranian regime.

"It doesn't scare me," Grove says. "We have to keep bringing in the Jews. We have to keep going in. If not, we're going to lose. That's not what Hashem has planned for us. I strongly believe that."

Grove says she is not in denial that Israel can be a dangerous place, but questions whether the danger is any greater than the school or theater shootings, not to mention the routine violence, that take place almost regularly in the US today.

"You just have to try to educate yourself in terms of your surroundings. You really do have to know where your boundaries are. This is what we've been teaching the boys for the last two years. We have told them that it's not going to be easy all the time. You are going to have some struggles, but we want them to know that it's going to be OK."

"We don't want them to be afraid of their own shadow, but we want them to be aware of the potential dangers that they can encounter."

Dangers and difficulties don't budge Grove's conviction that their *aliyah* is the right decision at the right time.

Grove mentions more than once that even though she considers herself modern Orthodox, her decision to move to Israel was really not inspired by religious or halachic considerations.

Rather, as the descendants of Crypto Jews, forced to hide, and perhaps eventually forget, their Jew-

ishness, Grove and her family feel the pull of Israel no less powerfully than do those Jews who immigrate for religious or nationalistic reasons.

Her niece, who studies and practices genealogy as a side career, has uncovered plentiful documentary evidence of the family's long and wandering history, tracing some Jewish ancestors all the way back to 15th-century Toledo and Barcelona, Spain. Their subsequent journeys to the New World and eventually Colorado are all well documented.

To Grove and her brother, an even more powerful beacon of their family's history is the Catholic painting that fell off the wall, revealing its hidden *mezuzah* and leading their mother, Annabelle Honor, to tell the story of the family's Crypto Jewish roots.

Although the siblings have so far been unsuccessful in convincing their mother, 84, to join them in Israel — Mrs. Honor feels steadfastly that she needs no official sanction or declaration of her Jewishness — she did allow her children to take the family's precious icon with them to the Holy Land.

Showing on one side the intrinsically Christian images of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and bearing on the other the essentially Jewish scroll in its hidden cavity, the painting is a perfect metaphor for the entire Crypto Jewish experience with its themes of professed Christianity and covert Judaism.

"My mother said to be very careful with it," Grove says of the icon. "She told me to handle it with care."

She smiles warmly, almost enough to obscure the tear in her eye.

"And I will."

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Israel's policy on Russia: neutrality

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sions in Syria.

Further high-level talks on Syria are scheduled to begin between Israel and Russia later this month, Israel's Army Radio reported last week.

Netanyahu's visit, and the understanding reached while in Moscow, speaks to his government's broader policy of neutrality on Russia, which has set Israel apart from most Western countries. Last year, the US, EU, Canada, Australia and Japan introduced several rounds of trade and other sanctions on Russia.

During the Crimea annexation,

Israel and parties with few or no Western contacts, such as the Assad regime and Hamas.

Russia's intervention in Syria comes as the US scales back its military presence in the Middle East as part of President Barack Obama's policy of emphasizing diplomacy over force.

But Putin's challenge to the West, observers say, lies not so much in its protection of the Assad regime but in his creeping influence with Iran and some American allies in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and even Israel.

In recent months, Russia has been wooing Cairo, Riyadh and Tehran

Vacuum left by US non-intervention opens space for Russia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt

and Russia's subsequent arming of pro-Russian secessionists in Ukraine, Israel remained conspicuously silent.

Roman Bronfman, a former Meretz party lawmaker in Israel and prominent Russia analyst who was born in what today is Ukraine, lamented Netanyahu's "recognition of Russian dominance by flying to Moscow, naming it the boss in another insult to Israel's true ally, America."

The Netanyahu trip to Moscow contrasted sharply with the US position on Russia's efforts.

Last week, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said that Russia's military moves were "pouring gasoline on the fire" because Russian strikes reportedly have targeted US-backed rebels — not the Islamic State terrorists that Moscow had singled out as the target of its operation.

To Bronfman, Russian deployment in Syria also means "opening a corridor for more presence on Israel's borders by Iran and Hezbollah." Syria, he explained, is after all a close ally of both the Islamic Republic and the Shiite militia.

The Netanyahu-Putin meeting demonstrated just how far ties between Israel and Russia have progressed since the Cold War, according to Mark Galeotti, a Russia analyst and professor of global affairs at NYU. Russia perceives Israel as a rare island of stability, he said.

To be sure Russia, which is the world's second largest weapons purveyor behind the US, is still arming Israel's enemies, Iran included. But now Russia also buys Israeli arms, including drones. It also acts as a mediator for dialogue between

— resulting in economic agreements on sharing nuclear energy and know-how with Saudi Arabia, and selling advanced weapons to Iran.

Putin also invited Egypt to join the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia's free-trade zone that now comprises only ex-members of the former Soviet Union.

"What is happening between Russia and Egypt, as well as Saudi Arabia, is indeed a new development that is meant to occupy the vacuum left by US non-intervention, or the perception of it," said Svetlova, the Israeli lawmaker and a former journalist specializing in the Arab-speaking world.

Netanyahu's meeting with Putin coincided with Russia's increased influence in some Arab countries with rulers who disapprove of Obama's support for the Arab Spring revolutions and the nuclear agreement with Iran.

Supporters both of Syria's Assad regime and Egypt's government led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in recent months have been displaying posters of Putin in Damascus and Cairo, where many now see him as a hero.

Meanwhile, the Saudi government criticized the US-led nuclear agreement with Iran before ultimately giving its lukewarm consent to the deal.

And Sisi has had harsh words for Obama, who supported the revolution that in 2011 toppled the regime of Hosni Mubarak, a predecessor of el-Sisi.

"You left the Egyptians, you turned your back on the Egyptians," Sisi said in 2013 of the Obama administration, "and they won't forget that."